



KRIS RIPPER

A NEW HALLIDAY STORY

*The Spinner,
the Shepherd,*



*and the
Leading Man*

THE SPINNER, THE SHEPHERD, AND THE LEADING MAN

Frazier Lane has wanted his roommate since the day they met—eight years ago. When Dom gets them jobs running a summer stock program in the sticks, Fraz thinks the time has come. He'll kiss Dom, Dom will realize they're meant to be, and they'll live happily ever after.

That's how it's supposed to go, anyway. Until they meet Pete. Pete's a wild card. He knows nothing about theater, is totally in the closet, and is one of the nicest guys Fraz has ever met. Unfortunately, Dom seems to think so, too.

Fraz decides he'll take one for the team and help Dom coax Pete out of the closet and into the light, even if it breaks his heart, but Dom and Pete have other ideas.

Three plays, ten weeks in Yurtville, not enough cigarettes, and way too many kids who think the local summer stock is Broadway. All Fraz wants is the leading man, but he might just get the shepherd, too.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE SPINNER, THE SHEPHERD, AND THE LEADING MAN

By Kris Ripper

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many

long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THE SPINNER, THE SHEPHERD, AND THE LEADING MAN

By Kris Ripper

Photo Description

Three young men in Navy uniforms stand on stage, arms outstretched, singing their hearts out.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Oh what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive...
– Sir Walter Scott (Marmion, 1808)

Three theater employees working on a production of your choice. One must be the deceptor, the loner, deceiving himself that he is straight. One must be the lure, the pretty one, the one the other two desire. One must be the spider, the catcher, the one to draw them all together into a tangled web of bodies and minds, hearts and souls.

Although my photo shows all three “on stage” you may place them anywhere within the scope of theater work: set construction, stagehand, understudy, etc...

M/M/M, everything else is up to you.

Good Luck,

Sincerely,

Alexis

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: theater, summer stock, poly mmm, coming out, coming of age, MC who drinks a lot, humorous, friends to lovers, performing arts

Content Warnings: the main character drinks way too much.

Word Count: 39,340

Dedication

For Alexis, who wanted to see the spider spin his web.

Acknowledgements

All right, mad props (ha ha ha, a Frazier-worthy pun) go to Jonathan Penn, who handed me these three plays practically gift-wrapped. He also held my hand through a great deal of theater-ignorance-related rending of garments and beta read this pup complete with translations to TheaterSpeak, where applicable. This story is a hell of a lot tighter for Jonathan's influence, and I'm hugely indebted to him.

Additional mad props (and greasepaint stains) to Wendy, who muddled through a first draft sent without a pivotal scene and still managed to be encouraging instead of murderous. As always, Wendy's minute fine-tunings clarified all the relationships; she's forever showing me how to write the book I meant to write, instead of the one I wrote.

Vicky Heysham and Anna Main also provided lovely feedback and snark, making this batch of revisions some of the least horrifying I've ever accomplished.

And a last huge tribute to the entire team at the Goodreads M/M Romance Group, who put on the incredible Don't Read in the Closet event every year. It's a tremendous amount of work, and loads of fun for those of us who participate!

**THE SPINNER, THE SHEPHERD,
AND THE LEADING MAN**

By Kris Ripper

Chapter One

The first thing you have to understand is yeah, sure, I wanted Dominic. But so did everyone else.

We're *roommates*, people. Platonic fucking roommates. Which is probably how I found myself sitting next to him in his crappy old-school VW Beetle holding my iPhone out the window trying to get the GPS to tell us where the hell we were going.

"Christ, Dom. Something tells me we aren't in Berkeley anymore. Hell, this ain't even Sacramento."

"It's off-Sacramento," he said, and grinned. Happy guy, my Dom. Always with the grinning.

"It's off-off-Sacramento, and you owe me for this."

"Hang on, is that a sign? Fraz, this is it."

"This is something, anyway."

Sure enough, a sign, at last. We'd been driving through open fields for miles. (Or, all right, at least a mile, maybe two, since we cut off the main road at the intersection of gas station and fruit stand.)

The Resort at New Halliday.

It had a scrolly little border around the edges.

"Jeez, pretentious much?"

"Neil said there was kind of a local *thing* about building it."

I resisted the temptation to tease him about his crush on Neil, who'd been our residence advisor freshman year but was apparently some flavor of schoolteacher out here in the sticks these days. It felt just a little too cruel, especially since Dom's the kind of pretty that can't tell the difference between *nice* and *flirting* because he gets so much of both.

"Hey, look, that's us." Cardboard and Sharpie, way more our style:

Summer Stock ==>>>

Dom eased his rusty chariot off the main drive and onto a little side road, which curved around the bottom of the hill the resort was sitting on. We'd only gone another quarter of a mile when lo, an angel appeared. Mm, a deliciously

dark-haired angel with heavy boots on. (I so wanted them to be cowboy boots, because hel-*lo* country boy, but they weren't. Just dusty black boots, rubbed clean in spots by the cuffs of his jeans.)

"Well, isn't he cute?" I said, leaning up in my seat to peer out the window. (Seeing a cute guy through a windshield always makes me think of going to the aquarium as a kid, pressing my nose to the glass and pretending I was swimming with the dolphins or whatever.)

This guy? Not a dolphin. Maybe a small shark. A small shark sitting in the shade of a tree, blinking at us like he was shocked anyone showed up.

"Be nice, Frazier," Dom mumbled, cranking his window down. "Hi there!"

Dom's the guy who's straight-acting enough to get hit on by girls all the time, but gay enough to make it clear once you hang out with him for a while that he's not. But the guy approaching the car was a fucking closet case if I ever saw one, wrapped in straight like it was a scratchy blanket, trying to insulate himself from the cold gay wind.

"Hi. You with the performers?"

"Honey, we *are* the performers," I called across Dom, who elbowed me.

Yeah, scored a hit. The guy—younger than us, but not by much—looked away.

"I'm Dominic Trujillo. This is Frazier Lane." Dom stuck his hand out the window, and the guy took it, shaking too hard.

"Pete Aurello."

I would have cracked a joke about their names being similar, but Dom elbowed me again.

Pete had his phone out and was scrolling through it. "So you're—the director?"

"One of the two. And actually, I think I hear the other one now."

Let me take you on a brief side-jaunt down "You Want To Hate Her But You Can't" Way. The other director/stage manager is Gracie Stone, and that bitch is super fuckin' talented (when I say *talented*, what I mean is she can make off-the-cuff slam poetry look like something people should actually do, not something that makes you want to stab yourself repeatedly in the junk to escape the agony). Also? She's this fantastically gorgeous mixed-race girl who

was adopted by... wait for it... two gay dads! Then, top it off with the fact that she isn't hateable. And god knows, I've tried.

Girl drives a blue Chevy pickup from some time mid-last century, before any of us were born. And, sure as hell, Dom was right. I watched her pull up behind us in the mirror, and okay, fine, I was actually happy to see her. I'd had enough country-chic driving through; Grace would be a breath of home.

Dom jumped out of the car, apologized to Pete, and ran back to meet her. I'd've watched his ass except I was watching something else.

Oh dear. Dear, sweet, closeted Pete. Can I call you Peter, honey?

Poor Pete was *riveted*. Which hey, I get it, Dom's got the kind of ass that begs for squeezing. Or fucking. Or, you know, *use your imagination*.

I cleared my throat and he jumped. Poor, poor dear. "That's Grace. They're partners. In theater, obviously, not in life." *And don't you be getting any funny thoughts either, mister. The boy is mine.*

"Oh. Um." Pete, whose dark hair was dusted over with dirt, blinked and looked back at his phone. "I think I saw her name here."

"Stone. Last name."

"Thanks."

"Oh, you're welcome."

Dark hair, baggy T-shirt, baggy jeans. *Come on, my cute little closet case. Where's your gay? You're too old to have no gay.* The jeans hid his socks. Socks are a good place to hide the gay because even straight guys are allowed a little fluidity when it comes to their socks.

Might be a nice body under all that fabric, too. He had the kind of shadow on his chin that meant he probably used an electric razor. Would he be hairy? Mm, a hairy cowboy—maybe this summer wouldn't be a waste after all.

"Jeez Louise, sorry I ran off." (I'm not even joking; Dom is the guy who can say "jeez Louise" without making you want to punch him in the nose.) "Is there anything I can do? Or do we need to register?"

True story: on the way up Dom promised like fourteen times that he wasn't going to act like a giddy jerk just because he and Grace were nominally in charge. I actually watched him blush, standing there with Pete.

They make such a cute—No. No, no, no. I'd made my own promises, and one of them was to myself: not gonna spend the whole summer pairing Dom up

with guys. I make the same promise pretty much every week and it never works, but this time we're out in the boonies doing theater. Really, what's the chance he's gonna find someone cooler than me out here? (Except Grace, but at least she had the decency to be born a girl *and* asexual, thank god.)

"I just need to get a picture of your license plate, if that's okay," Pete said. He moved to the side, like he was going around Dom, but Dom moved to the side at the same time, clearing the way for him to go straight. (Ha, go straight. Good luck, Pete.)

"Sorry!" Dom said, reaching out to hold on to Pete's biceps for a second while they did their awkward dance.

And did our little closet case spring back like he wanted to cut a mother? No. He didn't. He froze. Ohh, *that's* interesting. I made my mouth close.

Dom moved all the way to the side this time, still holding on, and Pete's body turned just slightly like he wanted to follow.

Shit. Right. Of course the closet case falls for Dom. Gay or straight, everybody falls for Dom.

"Looks like we're holding you up," Dom said, blushing darker. "Sorry, Pete. We just keep driving?"

"There are signs, but yeah. Yeah, drive through, take the right side through the parking lot, and you'll see where you're going."

"Great, thanks."

Shit. Everybody may fall for Dom, but Dom doesn't usually fall for them back. So why'd he hold on to Pete's arms for an extra beat, like he was waiting for Pete to say the next line?

Then it was over, and Dom was climbing back in the car and Pete was holding up his phone to take a picture of the plate on the Bug.

I waited until we pulled away to say, "Gay."

"You think everyone's gay, Fraz."

"I do not. A high percentage of guys who check out your ass happen to be gay, and CowboyPete totally just checked out your ass. Thus, my diagnosis."

Dom didn't say anything, but it was a slightly-more-annoyed-than-amused silence.

"Anyway, he's in the closet. Maybe we can be good role models." No response. Fine. Change the subject. "Does Grace look—okay?"

“She looks the same as she always looks. But better than the memorial, I guess.”

“That’s good.”

So for most of the time I’ve known Grace, I kind of wanted to be her. I wanted to be the hottie adopted by sweet, supportive gay dads. Then, like six months ago, one of her dads died. Of AIDS. Which is apparently something people still die from, shocker. (Didn’t they cure that yet?)

“You think she’s still gonna do the aftershow, Dom?”

“I didn’t ask. Hope so.”

I did, too, even though I wasn’t about to say it out loud. Grace puts on crazy fitness dance classes at night, mostly because she can’t stay still. It’s like a parody of CrossFit or P90X, musical theater edition, where she runs around screaming at people until they laugh and fall on their asses.

We navigated the parking lot (only valet up at *The Resort*, apparently), which is when we came upon Yurtville. There’s no other way of describing it. Signs directed us through the lot, past the little guard booth thing, around another damn hill, and to—Yurtville.

“Oh my fucking god. They said ‘room provided free of charge.’ These are not rooms, Dominic.”

“I guess they count. Maybe they’ll be better. It’s cute that they’re set up like a little circle.”

“Cute? Come on, Dom. Turn the car around. We’re going home.”

“We can’t. Subletters, remember? It’ll be fine.”

Fine? FINE? Have you ever seen a yurt? Picture a big piece of canvas slung up over a metal frame. It’s basically a tent, with a little more headroom.

“Look, they’ve clearly never been used. At least they’re clean... yurts.”

We pulled up, not in a space or anything, just stopping the car because *what the fuck*. A second later, Grace’s Chevy pulled up next to us.

All three of us got out and just stood there, on a patch of new lawn, browning at the edges.

“Are these yurts? Like at Yosemite?” I couldn’t tell from Grace’s face whether that would be a good thing or a bad thing.

“I am not living in a yurt all summer,” I said. “Where will I do my makeup? Don’t tell me there’s good lighting in those things.”

“They appear to have windows, at least.”

“Where the hell are we gonna put our stuff? It’s not like they lock.”

“There are supposed to be lockers in the bathrooms. And we do have one official cottage,” Grace said. “It’s technically for me and Dominic, but we could store computers and valuables there if people didn’t want to leave them in lockers.”

“Hang on—you two are sharing a cottage while I’m stuck in Yurtville?” I narrowed my eyes at Dom, since clearly he’d known about this and just not said anything.

“Hey, Dom promised it was all for me, Fraz. No take-backs.” She surveyed Yurtville again. “Okay, I think those two permanent buildings must be the bathrooms, right? Let’s go check them out.”

“How many people are supposed to be here again?”

“Thirty-six.”

I started counting, but Dom beat me to it.

“Ten yurts. So. Double bunk beds?”

“I am not sharing one of those things with three people, children. Not even gonna happen.” I punctuated with a double snap, which made Grace giggle.

“Well, you shouldn’t have to. Grace has the cottage, so that’s thirty-five, which means I think only a few of them will have four people.”

Grace and I looked at each other. “Summer stock virgins,” we said at the same time.

“Come on, guys, we said no hazing.”

“This isn’t hazing, it’s practical. The newbies will need support, Dominic.”

Dom sighed as if we were being extra immature, as opposed to just the usual amount. “Fine. You and I will share. Everyone else will group up in threes and fours.”

Thank god.

“Yurtville,” Grace said. “Hm. So here we are, boys.”

“You know what this is?” I said. “This is summer camp, only we’re supposed to be the adult supervision.”

“Oh my god.”

Another car pulled in on the other side of the Bug.

“And so it begins.” Dom rubbed his hands together. “Just got nervous. Gracie?”

“Nope. Cool as a cucumber, brother.” She waved both arms over her head and called, “Welcome to Yurtville!”

No, but seriously. Yurts. What the fuck did we get ourselves into?

Chapter Two

Okay, so, you've maybe never done summer stock on no budget with a bunch of college kids (who work for "pitiful stipend plus free yurt and board"), so let me describe it.

Picture a natural disaster, but the kind you can forecast. Like a hurricane. Don't picture the hurricane itself, picture the twelve hours leading up to it, when everyone panics and buys bottled water and people get killed for taking cuts at the gas line. Got it? Okay, now picture the first day at kindergarten, only the teacher's out sick, so the person stuck in charge is a substitute and they're just standing there while the kids go apeshit all over the place. Got that one?

Right. Summer stock is basically a mash-up of those two things, only add greasepaint, hormones, and alcohol.

Dom and Grace are the responsible ones, but I'm the one with the booze. Guess who's more popular?

I was really popular during Dom's irritating "Get to know you" circle jerk, though a few interesting things were learned. For one, I wasn't the only one who'd had my appendix out. (Though I was the only one who'd tattooed over the scar; I think Skirts was jealous of my spider web. Bet you anything if I see her again, she'll have something over hers.)

Also of note—and way the fuck more relevant than comparing scars or talking about our favorite roles, aww—CowboyPete wasn't just taking names, he was part of the show. Or specifically, he was playing hall monitor for the kids. Sorry, did I say kids? I meant *interns*, as in the four high schoolers getting credit for being underfoot all summer. Apparently Pete's family owned the resort, but he was staying in Yurtville with the riffraff to ensure that no harm came to New Halliday's finest young dramatists.

"Okay, but *why* is he staying in a yurt?" I demanded, hiding my single bottle of whiskey at the bottom of a cardboard box labelled *Scripts*, under two layers of highlighted discards from whatever show Grace was doing before this one. (*The Dying Tree*, how original.)

"Maybe he likes the great outdoors. *Do not* light that thing in here, Frazier."

"What? You think the yurt's flammable?"

"You're not smoking inside."

“We aren’t *in* anywhere.” But I put the stupid cigarette back in the pack. The name of the game would be to hide that I was smoking for as long as possible. The second everyone knew about it, I’d be a prime target for bums, and considering how far away we were from civilization, I didn’t like my chances of getting by if I had to share. I poked around and finally stashed the carton in a box of wigs.

“Oh, they’re singing. Grace must be doing the thing, Fraz.”

I promised my smokes we’d have some quality time later, when I found a few good hiding spots, and double-checked that I had my open pack with me. “Let’s go.”

Sure enough, Grace was up at the front of the group, and Dom went to join her, you know, in their position as camp leaders. (Jeez, sorry, I meant *Stage Managers/Directors*.)

“We’re off to see the wizard!”

The winding trail of drunken actors pounded grass in what would probably be a trampled path from Yurtville to the brand new outdoor amphitheater by the end of the summer, singing the whole fucking way. Yeah, the first night everyone was in love because the whole cast was oozing with opportunity. I didn’t need to worry about all that, because I already had my sights set on my man. I just had to keep up appearances by, y’know, ogling the rest of the goods. Even if a few of the adorable little new performers were eye-catching in their own rights.

What, you want names? Let’s see, there’s Shirtless (within ten minutes of landing in camp), and Mohawk, and StraightGuy (one in every show). Oh, and Goatee, who had real potential; in this sea of bright shiny suburban faces, Goatee was the only one sporting obvious ink. There were a brother and sister together (survey says *that* has the potential to get awkward), and Brother Bear had a nice roundness to him.

I scoped contenders and started playing Predict That Fuck, which is a game you can only play on the first day of rehearsals; even a less *residential* company moves from “Hi, how are you?” to “Do you have condoms?” pretty fuckin’ fast. I don’t actually know what the lesbian equivalent of “Do you have condoms?” is. “Do you want a key to my apartment?” maybe. Or “I’ve added you to my life insurance policy and got us a cat.”

And what do you know, Pete of the Resort Petes was also lingering at the back like he didn’t know how much he wanted to commit.

“Hey,” I said, letting my voice take on just a little more gay than usual. Closeted boys are fun to bat around. Like mice.

“Hey.”

I’d lost Pete in some of the chaos of the afternoon, and the chaos of the afternoon hadn’t really done anything for his hair. It had been slicked down and slightly dusty earlier; now it was fuzzy and more dusty.

“So, where are we going right now?”

“To the theater, darling.” I grabbed his hand, figuring he’d freak a little and try to pretend he wasn’t. But he actually looked over and smiled.

“Are you hitting on me? I don’t even remember your name.”

I gasped. “You cruel bitch. I’m Frazier.”

“Like—you mean like the TV show?”

“Well, with a ‘z’ because my parents were trying to be unique about it, but yeah. And it’s Lane. That’s my actual last name.”

“Okay.”

“No—” God, it was so stupid when I had to explain it. “The character in the show was Frasier Crane. My parents thought it’d be cute to name me Frazier Lane.”

Pete’s forehead crinkled. “Seriously?”

“Seriously, I know, they were high.” That was true, actually. The folks are potheads. Which is why their understanding of *clever* leaves a lot to be desired. At least I hope they were both fucking geniuses before they started smoking, because if I really just come from slow thinkers, I give up.

“So, do you pretty much know everyone here?” he asked, gesturing to the rowdy carolers ahead of us.

“Not even half of them. I know Dom and Grace, and I’ve seen a couple of these folks around, but this is a relatively young group.”

“Really? I guess I thought—everyone looks like they know each other.”

I shook my head. “Nope. Shared set of references, maybe, but mostly they’re strangers. Summer stock pulls in a lot of transient-types. This is mostly college kids.” *Because no one else would work for this stipend if they didn’t have to. Or—here. Wherever the fuck we are.* “Anyway, don’t you live around here? Why the hell are you staying in a yurt?”

“It’s better than sharing a bathroom with my sister.”

Not knowing his sister, I couldn’t argue, but it was hard to imagine sharing a bathroom with thirty-five people could actually be an improvement.

We finally made it to the theater, which was still looking somewhat under construction.

“Everybody up!” Grace shouted.

“What are we doing now?”

“Partying,” I said and recognized the song just starting on Gracie’s old stereo boom box. “This is the first number from *On the Town*, which is one of the shows we’re doing this summer. Have you seen it?”

“When did it come out?”

I shook my head. “You disgust me, boy. Technically there’s a movie version, though it’s nowhere near as good as the stage show. There’s a revival on Broadway, but it’s not on tour yet.” *Cool it with the theater, Fraz, the cowboy’s eyes are glazing over.* “Okay, fine, so picture these three sailors, just off their ship for a twenty-four-hour leave in New York City. They want to drink and get laid and live the high life for a single day.”

“I get that,” Pete said, watching the stage. (At least most of them seemed to recognize the song. I mean, there’s a freaking movie, right? And it’s Gene Kelly, so why *wouldn’t* you know this song?)

“Well, come on.” I gave him a little nudge. Still nothing on the homophobic freak-out front.

“But I don’t—”

“Doesn’t matter, Pete. You’re part of the show, come on.”

“But I can’t dance—or sing—”

“Come on!”

I dragged Pete up on the stage. (Actually, it was gonna be pretty amazing. Not so big that we were a totally separate universe from the audience, but not so small that it would feel like performing at the old people’s home.) He wasn’t willing to dance, but he found a wooden crate full of power tools to sit on while almost everyone else clowned around.

“New York, New York” turned into “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better,” which is one of Dom and Grace’s signature pieces, and they always did

it with the roles reversed. Dom did this stupid-cute thing where he fake primped his shaved head while singing that he could do his hair better than Grace. (Okay, okay, a lot of people were singing the song, but mostly I was humming it while I watched them. The three of us met during *Annie Get Your Gun* at the La Vista Rec Center when we were teenagers, and I do have kind of soft spot for it.)

I edged closer to straight-acting Pete. “You can sing this one, Pete!”

“I don’t know the words!”

“Who doesn’t know the words to ‘Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better’? The whole song’s in the chorus!”

“Is this another one from, um, whatever it was that you guys are doing this summer?”

“You are *kidding* me, right? Pete, Pete, Pete. This is from *Annie Get Your Gun*. Hello, Bernadette Peters?” Okay, so Peters was in the revival, but come on, she’s fucking amazing. “Fine! Never mind. Just sing along with the chorus!”

Go ahead and picture an amazing spontaneous choreographed dance number here. You know you want to.

Pete’s voice was passable, and he used it, even though he clearly felt like a fool. Our two leads did their usual push-me-pull-you dance along with the lyrics, and I grabbed Goatee for an impromptu do-si-do. (He had a nice laugh, I’ll give him that.)

“Anything You Can Do” became “Defying Gravity,” and Goatee was clearly a bigger *Wicked* fan than I am. When I turned back toward Pete and his trusty crate, Dom had beaten me there.

He was half-sitting, smiling at something Pete said and leaning forward to hear.

Dominic didn’t go for theater guys, a fact I’d been counting on while planning to seduce him this summer (finally; for once and for all). But Pete wasn’t a damn theater guy, was he? Shit. Still, he could be straight.

I pretended I needed a drink of water and studied the cowboy. Nah. He was flirting. Even if he didn’t know it, his body was flirting with Dom’s. Fuck everything.

“What’re you doing standing here, Fraz? Come dance with me!”

“No one can dance to this song!” I called back to Grace.

“It’ll be over in a minute and ‘Corner of the Sky’ is next!”

Bitch. She knows I can’t resist “Corner of the Sky.” Say what you want about *Pippin* as a play, “Corner of the Sky” is fucking amazing.

She laughed and pulled my hands so we were dancing closer. “Hey, you think Dom knows he’s in the closet?”

“How do *you* know he’s in the closet?”

“Spot ’em a mile away. He’s close, though, right?”

I shrugged and sang along with Idina Menzel, thinking about flying as a metaphor, and especially thinking about being alone. Damn.

Grace pulled my ear to her mouth. “You didn’t want any of the leads?”

“We’ve been over this, Gracie.”

“We still haven’t finished casting *Wizard of Oz*.”

“You want me to be the Tin Man?”

“No, Fraz. I want you to be the Lion.”

“You calling me a coward?”

“Oh, listen, your song’s on!”

See what I mean? I try so hard to hate her, but she’s just... not hateable. Anyway.

Depressingly, only a few of the kids knew “Corner of the Sky,” which we’d start rehearsing like tomorrow. Grace and I and Sister Bear had a good time singing it, though, and when I looked back to Pete, Dom was trying to teach him how to move his hips, which was basically the oldest trick in the book.

Sure, Dom. You’re not interested. Keep telling yourself that.

Grace’s thing was kind of our traditional way to end the first rowdy get-together of a new cast, and by the time the opening chords for “Seasons of Love” came over the speakers, I was pretty toasted. I didn’t see anyone carrying beer (I’d virtuously left my bottle of Jack Daniels back in the yurt, you’ll recall), but there it was, and when someone put a beer in my hand, I drank the fucking thing. And the next one.

But “Seasons of Love” always sobers me up a little, and Grace singing it sobers me up a lot. Last time I’d heard her sing it was at her dad’s memorial, so standing here, in the dark, on the first night of summer camp (oh, excuse me, summer *stock*), I probably would have started crying right away except Pete came up to stand next to me. And Dom came up to stand next to him.

The thing about a natural performer, the kind of person who can fuck you up just by standing on stage, is that you feel the energy change. And everyone there did, down to the greenest newbie (Pete), or the most self-obsessed (toss-up between the blonde princess I was calling Juliet in my head, or her Romeo—previously referred to as StraightGuy—a handsome young Midwestern-looking kid who was trying not to be too spooked by Goatee and Brother Bear getting it on).

Dom and I sang harmony for the chorus and let Grace take it away for the verses.

“This is from the AIDS show, right?” Pete asked, voice low, eyes never leaving Grace.

I looked over, past him, at Dom.

“*Rent*,” Dom said.

Weird thing about AIDS. On one hand anyone can get it, anyone at all, even lesbians (if they’re shady with their needles or born to a mom who’s positive, anyway). But on the other hand, I don’t know. I’m gay. AIDS feels like this thing that runs in the family, that even if I’m not gonna get it, it’s still in my blood more than it’s in a straight guy’s.

It’s hard to explain. But I waited for Pete to say something fucked up and Dom waited, too.

“Yeah, *Rent*. Why didn’t they just get jobs? God, her voice is like *amazing*.”

I exhaled. “Yeah. It really is.”

Maybe it would have been easier if Pete was *that* guy, the guy so fucking desperate to look straight he acts like a homophobic douchebag. Then Dom wouldn’t want him and I could rest on my laurels knowing they weren’t right for each other anyway. I should have been rooting for him to be a jerk, but what I actually felt was relief.

And when Grace sang “Seasons of Love” she sang *the way that he died*, changing the lyric to fit her dad. Even though they were standing there, I cried anyway.

Chapter Three

If you've never rehearsed a show to be up and running in four weeks, I don't know how to explain it. It drives you insane, and I'm only half-playing. You dream the play you're doing, like you can't escape it even when you're asleep. Even when you're eating or smoking or taking a shit, you're thinking about your blocking or rehearsing your lines. (I'd been cast as a Player in *Pippin*, which basically means "interchangeable member of the chorus," and had neatly avoided a real small role in the first half of *On the Town*; I could have done both, but hey, I'm always happy to get out of work.)

I like little roles. I like being off-book on the first day and running lines with everyone. If you run lines, you get to play all the roles without any of the pressure, which works for me. Most of our summer stock cast in New Halliday had done school plays, maybe local rep in high school, so they were all jangling nerves and Ativan.

Sometimes being the guy who read lines and helped out with lighting and hunted for props actually made me feel more connected to the show than being onstage, and that was especially true when Dominic was directing. He was different as a director, and way more nervous about it, which was charming. Dom the leading man was a decent guy, but DirectorDom worked a hell of a lot harder.

The *Pippin* opening night would be the opening night for the summer, and because the cast was so damn green, the pressure was getting to a lot of them. Juliet and Brother Bear got in a spat (awkward, considering they were the leads), and Goatee, who was playing the Leading Player, had burned through his entire carton of cigarettes (and a good portion of mine) in the first week, he was so stressed over the role.

By Thursday, exactly a week before opening, we had a whole insane pressure cooker on the verge of blowing up. Dom used this as an excuse to call Neil.

"Hey, I need to get my cast away from the resort for a few hours. Any good places to go in town? Really? Oh, you don't have to—No, but there's thirty-six of us—Neil, really—"

A few more protests before he got off the phone. Damn Dom for always being attracted to decent guys. If he had the good sense to go after bad boys I

could at least fight with him on it. (Not that he'd ever gone after Neil, which is for the best, because Neil would not have hit that. I don't know what Neil's type actually is, but it wasn't UndergradDom.)

"So?" I asked, standing at the zipper to our yurt.

"He says there's a bowling alley and he'll pay for a couple of lanes."

"Good. That's cool." Resident advisor of the century, still doing programming.

"We shouldn't let him pay, Fraz."

"Why not? He's got a job, unlike us."

"We have a job," Dom said, waving his hands. At the yurt.

"Yep. That's pretty much my point. Anyway, should I start rounding people up?"

"Neil said to meet him there at seven."

"Got it. I'll tell Grace."

I found Grace, Pete, and the interns (AKA Pete's charges) onstage with about half the cast of *On the Town*, everyone doing different things. (They'd decided to cast the greenest actors in *On the Town*, which had the longest rehearsal time. I was pretty sure Grace could pull it off, but at the moment I definitely did not envy her trying.)

Grace caught my eye and casually made her way over, so casually I couldn't wait to see what she said, because whoa, lay it on thick, Gracie.

"I need your help babysitting the interns."

"Dom's fake boyfriend is taking everyone bowling at seven," I said.

She hit me. "Don't be a jerk, Neil seems nice. Actually, bowling could work. But tomorrow, will you help Pete? He's trying, but he has no idea how to set anything up, and—"

"I'm your man, Gracie." I kissed her cheek. "I'll call over and get them to bring dinner at six so everyone will be in Yurtville already and we'll just load them into cars."

"You're the best, Fraz."

"Sure am."

"Is it six yet?"

“You wish, sister. Get back to work!” I raised a hand to Pete and backed away from the stage. The interns were playing extras, filling out New York City in the background, which you’d think would be easy, except you basically have to know everyone’s blocking at all times so you don’t get in anyone’s way. I thought we could just have them sitting in the same corner for the whole play like a Greek chorus, changing their outfits to blend into the set, but Grace had *A Vision*.

God help the director with *A Vision*, but whatever. I hoped like hell they’d be less nervous when we started rehearsing *Wizard of Oz* in a couple weeks. (Interns? Can you say, Munchkins?)

Fucking *Wizard of Oz*, which Grace and Dom still hadn’t actually cast, despite promising each other they’d get it done the first night, after meeting everyone. Because apparently you know people a lot better after four hours than you did after their audition, which is only partly true.

I could probably cast it myself, but fuck it. They’d be fine. Plus, all that work would get in the way of drinking and potentially making out with Goatee later. Hey, don’t give me that look. I have a plan, and that plan is to seduce Dom on opening night. Got it? I’m a free agent until then.

Contrary to all the musicals on the planet, there were no spontaneous dance numbers at the bowling alley. There was, briefly, a sudden chorus of “New York, New York” only with “New Halliday” instead, which didn’t work on a basic rhythm level, but did please the crowd. Neil was sweet and seemed genuinely happy to see us and meet everyone, and bowling was actually perfect. By the time we were sorting out rides back to the resort, tempers had fizzled and my early Predict That Fuck theories—the ones that hadn’t already been, ahem, *consummated*—were back on track.

“You seen Pete?” Dom asked me, herding two of the interns into Grace’s truck.

“Not for a while.”

She drummed her fingers on her steering wheel. “You guys find him, okay? He didn’t bring his car.”

Both of us saluted.

“There’s my good little sailors. We should’ve cast you as my leads!”

“Bite your tongue, Gracie,” I said.

She drove off and we waved good-bye to everyone else before turning to go back inside.

“He probably just wanted an indoor toilet before heading back to Yurtville.” I led the way toward the bathrooms, but we didn’t get that far before we heard his voice coming out of a cordoned-off dining area.

“That’s not what it is, Lex, and you know it—”

“I know you were all over *that guy* tonight, like I didn’t even matter—”

“I wasn’t all over anyone—”

Dom grabbed my arm. “We shouldn’t be listening to this.”

“Bitch, are you fucking crazy?” I whispered. “You want to write drama? Well, here’s your drama.” I leaned up against the wall, all casual. “Just pretend we’re the lookouts.”

He wasn’t thrilled, but he was also fucking curious. Sometimes Dom needs me to, you know, urge him out of his ethics comfort zone. That’s what friends are for.

“I waited for you!” the voice that wasn’t Pete’s said, sounding teary.

“I told you not to do that! Lex, don’t—don’t make this harder than it is.”

“You said you weren’t—that you didn’t know—but you were *all over* that guy—”

Poor Lex, whoever he was. Pete really hadn’t been all over Dom (since Dom was the only person he’d even been near, he was clearly *that guy*), but my own hackles were up every time they sat down together. Lex was too new to know that he was projecting; thank goodness I had all those years of practice.

“I wasn’t! I didn’t mean to be!”

“But you like him. I could see it. I lied to people for you, Peter!”

“Lied to who? We didn’t do anything, Lex! Stop acting like I owe you something!”

And: scene. Shit! Not a play, real people. I grabbed Dom and dragged him into the bathroom, anticipating a hasty retreat on the part of our leads.

“That was horrible,” Dom muttered, cheeks pink.

“Oh, shut up.” I opened the door just a crack and peeked through it. “He likes you, he really likes you, move on.”

“*Me?* Fraz, he sat between us like all night, I think they meant—”

Hell. Pete ducked under the cordon and stormed out, but Lex, a minute later, turned toward us.

“Fuck! Wash your hands. Quick—”

We’re just guys who like taking a piss together, that’s all, I thought, scrubbing my hands and waiting for the door to open.

I met Lex’s startled eyes in the mirror. He knew. He knew who we were, and he was pretty fucking sure what we’d heard. Dom kept his head down, but I nodded. “Hey.”

His mouth opened like he’d say something, but then he didn’t. He locked himself in a stall while we dried our hands and got the fuck out of there.

“Hey, Pete! We’ve been all over looking for you!” He was standing by the Bug with his hands deep in his pockets.

“Sorry, saw someone I knew in high school.”

“Catching up with old pals, sure,” I said, clapping him on the back. “Get in.” I willed Dom to act normal, but Dom’s only a good actor on stage.

“Fraz, do you have a cigarette? I hate to bum—”

Oh, I’d say you earned one. “Here.” I gave him the last of the pack, which had three in it.

He frowned. “I only need one.”

Damn. Exposed by my own sense of tobacco-based altruism. He narrowed his eyes, took a cigarette, and handed the rest back.

“Whew, I almost fucked myself there. Thought that was the last one.” *Please disregard my reputation for knowing exactly how many smokes I have at all times. I’m not really a mob boss.*

“Let’s go,” Dom mumbled, unlocking both doors.

The ride back was silent. Pete brooded about seeing his ex-old pal, Dom brooded about eavesdropping on Pete and his ex-old pal, and I just brooded.

Dom took this job in February. For months I’ve been waiting to finally tell him I’m the fucking *one*, screw all the decent guys out there, I’m the fucking *one*. I checked the rearview mirror, where Pete was huddled into his jacket, even though it wasn’t cold.

Shit. I started playing out *Pippin* in my head as a distraction. Screw it.

Chapter Four

Pippin's opening night was upon us. The night all my hopes and dreams would be on the line. The make-or-break night for every stupid moment I'd spent obsessing over Dominic since we met.

You know where this is going, right? I can just skip it? It's weird how fucking obvious everything is in retrospect.

Fine, I won't skip it, even though it's humiliating as hell.

I did my piece in the show, and aside from a few minor flubs, one totally missed cue, and a little weirdness with the lights (lighting was being volunteered by the high school theater department, which was a load off my mind; trying to teach our baby performers about composition and mood sounded like a living nightmare), it had gone spectacularly well. Mrs. Aurello—the elder, whom I assumed was Pete's grandmother—had come up to Dom personally to tell him how incredible it was and to confess that it was her favorite of our three shows.

Dom grinned ear to ear from the second the curtain dropped until one o'clock in the morning. Yurtville partied around him, but he was all over Goofball Dom, silly and sweet.

"I didn't think the sets would be done in time!" he called to Grace and I (for at least the third time). "Thank god, right?"

Grace rolled her eyes. "Babe, I think it might be time for you to get some sleep! Remember, we have another show tomorrow."

"I know! I can't wait!"

Perfect. This was perfect. I was only a little bit drunk. (Oh, okay, maybe I had more than I'd meant to, but I was fucking nervous, all right? I wasn't *stumbling* or anything.) Dom was giddy and happy and drunk, but not wasted. And he really hadn't stopped smiling. If ever there was a perfect opportunity, this was it.

"Let's go, big boy," I said, putting an arm around his shoulders. "To bed with you."

"G'night, boys!" Grace kissed our cheeks and waved us to our yurt, practically a blessing, nearly throwing us into each other's arms.

Everything was going to be great. I could feel it. I didn't stop to smoke, and I left my drink next to the boom box currently playing the entire *Rocky Horror Picture Show* soundtrack.

Even that was perfect. We'd done *Rocky Horror* a few years ago. And of course, Dom had been Brad, because he's just that blissfully naïve.

We passed Juliet, who was apparently hitting on Goatee (poor Juliet; her Romeo was deep in an argument with Pete about something-something-sports-talking-heads on the other side of Yurtville, thank god).

And then: this was it. This was the moment we'd all been waiting for. This, right now, was the moment that would change everything.

"Tonight was so amazing, Fraz. I'm so glad we're here. This is, like, life-altering awesome, don't you think?"

Oh my god, yes. Yes, I do.

"Yeah," I said, leaning in. "Yeah, it's incredible."

I kissed him. I kissed Dom, my best friend, my roommate. The love of my freaking life.

He pulled back, and the look on his face made me want to die. "Fraz, don't."

The thing that made it worse was his tone. Because he wasn't horrified, or amused, or anything that would have let me blame him. He was—gentle.

"Why not?" We were still really close, close enough so I could feel the heat from his breath. "Dom, why not?"

"Because we shouldn't."

"We should! Of course we should. I'm hot, you're gorgeous, we get along, we love each other—"

"It's too big a risk, Fraz." He touched my face. "I love you. Let's leave it there, okay?"

"No. No, that's not—that's not fucking okay—what do you mean, leave it there?" I stood up, and I would have backed away to a wall if we'd had walls, but we were in a yurt, so I just stood there like a fool. "How can you say that?"

"Fraz, come on. Hey, I can't be your show crush, we already live together."

Oh fuck. He was trying to lighten the mood. "I'm serious, Dom. What the hell is the problem? You don't want me?"

“Please don’t do this. I love you. But Fraz, that’s why we can’t do this. Name one ex you’re still friends with.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“What does—are you joking? You and I hooking up would be like taking the fucking bullet train to you hating me. So no.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, digging my fingernails into my shoulders. “Why are you saying that?”

“Because I know you. I’m not willing to throw away our friendship because you want to get laid on opening night, Fraz. Listen, I’ll stay with Grace for a few nights, okay?” He forced himself to smile. I could see the work he put into it. “You’ll have the yurt to yourself, right? The only single in Yurtville.”

“No. Dom—I’m not—I’m not trying to get laid.”

“Well, I definitely need to get some sleep. G’night, Frazier.”

He left. That’s how my fantastic plan worked out. I kissed my best friend, and he told me he couldn’t have sex with me because he needed to go to bed. *I* might be drunk enough to pretend it hadn’t happened, but Dom looked pretty fucking sobered up by the time he walked out.

I smoked in the yurt out of spite and was on the verge of stumbling outside to take a piss when the door flap opened again. I had just enough time to think *Oh thank*—before I realized it was Juliet.

“Heyyyyyy, Frazier. Heyyyyyy, how are you?”

“Fine.” I watched her slither to Dom’s bunk and kind of half-lean, half-fall onto his bed. “How’re you?”

“I’m goooooood. So goooooood.”

“You probably shouldn’t be this drunk, Juliet. We have a show tomorrow.”

“Why do you call me that? It’s not my name. And we’re not even doing that play.”

“Because it fits. Shouldn’t you be in your yurt?”

“Can’t. My roommates are *having sex*.” She giggled. (How old is too old with the giggling? She had to be twenty.)

“With each other?”

She giggled again. “I know. They so don’t seem like lesbians. Ha ha ha ha ha. Hey, you know, Frazier, you and me, we should have sex, right? Because that’s cool, isn’t it? Just to see what it’d be like?”

Here's the thing about being propositioned by women: I know it shouldn't make me feel grossed out, because that's, like, probably kind of misogynistic or something, but the thought of a vagina is just... like, ew. I'm not joking. That's my entire response.

"I mean, come on, Frazier. Aren't you a little bit curious?"

I didn't know what I should be more offended by—that she assumed I'd never had sex with a girl, or that she assumed I'd want to have sex with *her*.

"Come onnnnnn," said the drunk girl in my room. (And yeah, wow, there's a line I never imagined thinking.)

"Get out of here, Juliet. Go find your Romeo and seduce him. I'm not interested."

"Why? You don't think I'm pretty?"

"Are you *pouting* right now? Jesus. I'm gay, stupid. Go away." Also, god, it was creepy. Because, um, had I pouted? I had, hadn't I? And anyway, I hadn't said "you don't think I'm pretty?" to Dom. It was totally different.

"I think my roommates are straight, but they're still—"

"Good for them. I'm gonna go take a shower, and it'd be really good if you were gone before I get back."

She was still pouting, but I grabbed my towel and got out of there.

Someone else was taking a shower, but I didn't know who. I stood under the hot water for a long damn time, and when I got back to our yurt, Juliet was asleep in my bed. I probably should have grabbed a blanket and slept on one of the top bunks, but I didn't. I did the stupidest, most masochistic thing I could do, and curled up in Dom's bed.

I loved him. I'd loved him since we were teenagers. I'd been waiting for him to notice me for years, and when I finally took things into my own hands, he was supposed to find me irresistible. He was supposed to realize I'd been right there the whole time and that, you know, we were meant to be.

Dammit. I've seen all the shitty movies, and that's how it should have gone. We'd have the rest of the summer together, and when we went back to our actual lives, with work and bills, we would be so cemented that we'd be unbreakable.

I had it all planned out. I should have been lying here smelling him on his skin, not his stupid pillow. Not lying in his bed alone, listening to Juliet's snoring.

I quit. I allowed myself a brief fantasy of stealing the Bug and driving home. Then I gave it up and started fucking with the blocking for the final number in *On the Town* in my head until I eventually fell asleep.

Chapter Five

I was too fucking busy to pout, and by busy I mean I was trying to covertly stay drunk all day. A plan largely thwarted by the interns I was helping babysit. It's hard to keep up a good drunk when you're corralling teenagers who think the local summer stock is Broadway. I lasted a day and a half, hiding out with Grace, and then Dom sat down next to me at lunch and handed over a carton of cigarettes he must have actually left the resort to buy.

"Thanks."

"I'll stay with Grace in the cottage. Give you the place to yourself, Fraz, you know?"

"I have no fucking clue what you're talking about." God, it's so embarrassing when Dom tries to smirk.

"And anyway, don't smoke those in the yurt, it's a fire hazard."

"Whatever."

I know, it's a touching, touching reconciliation, isn't it? He bought me cigarettes and ordered me around, and now we're good.

Still, Grace needed me a lot more than Dom did. Once a show starts, you can breathe a little, and *Pippin* was going great. We'd worried that New Halliday was too isolated to really pull in a lot of people all the time, but my mom had texted me that she'd just seen an advertisement for the performances, so at least someone was paying attention to marketing or whatever. (It was nice just being the schmucks hired to put on the thing, not the schmucks financially responsible for it. I had no desire to produce, but Dom and Grace were ambitious types, and I've definitely zoned out during more of their business meetings in the wee hours than were really necessary.)

I could sing chorus for *Pippin* in my sleep, so I helped Pete and the interns with all the random last minute *On the Town* stuff. You know, like arguing about which of the main characters is totally gay.

"Ozzie's the only one who isn't gay. I mean, Chip? Come on. All that 'sight-seeing' stuff." I did air quotes with my fingers.

"I don't know, wasn't that a clever reversal of roles? Hilde is super aggressive and Chip is evasive, but we're supposed to think he secretly wants her the whole time? He was the girl. I mean, not a real girl, he was in that role."

“Excuse me?” I pointed a finger at him. “What are you talking about?”

The real problem was Pete. I liked him. Which was such a bitch.

“They made him the girl, not the gay guy.”

“Okay, well, one, making a guy play ‘the girl’ is pretty much the same as making him ‘the gay guy.’ And two, what *the fuck* do you know about it, Pete?”

“I know Chip didn’t have sex with men in the show. And so: not gay.”

“Oh, so if I don’t have sex with men, it makes me not gay?” *Don’t mess with me, princess.* “Is it the sex that makes you gay, Pete?” Emphasis on *you*.

“Maybe not. But you don’t think it’s anachronistic to apply a modern label to the characters in this play?”

“Because there weren’t gay men in the time period of the show?”

“Well, of course there were, but—”

“You two are scaring the children,” Grace said, eyeing me more than Pete.

“Spill, Gracie. Chip and Gabey are gay, right?”

She grinned. “The best part about Chip being so obvious is how much of a homophobe Sinatra was.”

“And Gabey is clearly queer. Oh, he’s so lonely. Oh, he lost his great love. That’s backstory, he’s not talking about Miss Turnstile.”

“Does it matter?” Pete asked.

“Does it matter? Yeah, in a time when gay men had to be undercover, when everything was coded, when productions made money off closeted men who went to see shows like *On the Town* because they understood the subtext and related to it? Yeah, it fucking matters. Unless you’re gonna stand there and tell me we’re done with the closet because everyone’s out and proud, Peter.”

His eyebrow twitched. I probably shouldn’t have used his name like that, not after the guy we’d heard him talking to, but I was a little bit pissed.

“And everyone acts,” Grace added. “Everyone, in some sense, is acting to uphold other people’s expectations. That’s a universal theme, and at least one of the reasons the play is so popular. Well, that and how hot the women are.”

Most of the cast was still doing whatever they were supposed to be doing, but the interns were watching us like we were about to come to blows.

“Anyway,” I said, “both of them are queer, Claire’s pretty obviously kinky, and Hilde might be a nympho. They were really hitting all their bases.” I held

out my hand, which he shook. “Now, the Tin Man, the Lion, and the Scarecrow are all banging. I’m pretty sure there are cut scenes with a mad threesome. Whoever finds that footage is gonna make a mint on eBay.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “And? Where was Dorothy when all that was going down?”

“Please,” Grace said. “Dorothy was having sex with Glinda, because who wouldn’t?”

“I wouldn’t,” I said. “But I would if I was Dorothy.”

We shifted back into rehearsal mode, everything cool, everything chill. A week into *Pippin*, a week out from the *On the Town* opening, which meant they better cast *Wizard of Oz*. Like now.

Chapter Six

On a normal production, you get sick of people. It's a fact of theater. You spend a lot of time together, and by the end you just can't watch the irritating way the leading woman drinks water, or listen to the same rant about how so-and-so lost their wig again. You just can't.

But summer stock in New Halliday was a hundred thousand times worse. We saw each other in the bathrooms, at meals, on the way to bed. It's just impossible to get away from everyone. You want a break, you have two options: hide in the shower, or try to take a walk where no one else is taking a walk.

I set off through the parking lot, figuring once I'd passed our little Yurtville parking area, I'd be good to go as far as not seeing actors. Which was both true and not true, because I saw Pete instead.

He spotted me before I could run away.

"Hey, Pete."

"Hey, Fraz. Can I ask you something?"

My brain supplied a lot of really unhelpful suggestions. (*How big is Dom's dick? Tell the truth: taking it up the ass hurts like hell, right? How do you know wanting to blow guys isn't just a phase?*) "Sure."

"That last scene in *On the Town*—doesn't it feel unresolved? I mean, they're getting pretty decent and almost everyone's in there without their scripts, you know, but still. I don't know. I feel like something's missing."

I laughed. Mostly at myself. "You and Hollywood. When they made the movie, they took out the minor chord stuff and added a car chase."

"Wait, what minor chord stuff?"

"'Lonely Town,' for a start."

"Shit, really? That's my favorite part of the whole thing."

I just bet it is, my closeted little waif. "Yep. Too much of a downer, so they took it out."

"But that song gives Gabey so much depth! Without it he's just this creepy stalker."

“What, you tellin’ me you don’t believe in love at first sight, honey?”

He narrowed his eyes. “How about we agree that you don’t call me ‘honey.’”

“Too gay for you, Pete?”

“My grandma calls me ‘honey,’ and she’s definitely not gay.” He shuddered. “I’m sure it’s really sweet that she still has the hots for Grandpa, who’s been dead like twelve years, but it’s mostly gross.”

Stop being so likable, you bastard. “Well, I think the point isn’t so much that he’s stalking her but that he pinned all of his hopes for his shore leave on her. She’s the one who will make his leave worthwhile, and he’s looking at a long time before he’s got another opportunity to hook up with a woman.”

“I thought you said he was gay?”

“Yeah, and trying to prove that he can be with a girl. I mean, you’re on a ship full of guys, you spend all day with them, you want to have sex with at least a few of them—basically the only thing that makes you feel okay about that is if you’re fucking girls when you have the chance. Then you can tell yourself it’s okay you spend the rest of your time fantasizing about the crew.” God, how depressing.

“You weren’t just messing with me, were you? All that stuff about Gabey being gay. You really think he is.”

“Well, I think Leonard Bernstein was gay and closeted, and yeah, I think that came through in a lot of his work. But anyway, yeah, I wasn’t *just* messing with you, Pete.” Shit, should I say something right now? I mean, if he was in the closet then maybe this is where I say something encouraging, or accepting, or heartfelt. Or something.

“Listen, is there any chance you can drive me to the store? I need a fuck of a lot more cigarettes.”

Pete blinked. “Sure. I mean, in about five minutes. I’m covering for the guy who’s supposed to be here right now.”

“Great. Thanks.” I should have demanded a copy of the Bug key just to avoid moments like this. Since I now had a ride to a cigarette restocking station, I lit up and offered Pete one, too.

“Thanks. I keep trying not to smoke, but it feels like everyone’s either smoking or drinking here, and most people are doing both.”

“Yep. Fucking bohemian lifestyle. We’re all nihilists.” I blew smoke into the air.

“Nihilists?”

“Not really. Well, *I’m* a nihilist, but the rest of them are just musical theater. And young. No one here is older than twenty-three. God. Now I feel old.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.” I bowed, sweeping my cigarette across my body. “You?”

“Twenty.”

“You in college?”

“Davis. Oenology.”

“That sounds dirty.”

“Wine making. My mom’s big thing. You may have noticed the vineyards?”

“Huh.” Not exactly what I’d pictured for CowboyPete. “You into it?”

“Nope. And the idea of coming back here and spending the rest of my life in New Halliday pretty much makes me want to scream and fake my own death.”

“So why do it?”

Pete shrugged. “I didn’t have a better plan. Anyway, we can take off.” He waved at a guy coming down the hillside. (From where? I made a mental note to explore later.)

“Oooh, I bet you’re not allowed to be smoking that, Petey.”

“Shut your trap, Alvarez.” But they punched each other companionably. “See ya. You coming out to see the show this weekend?”

“The gay sailors? Nah, man. Maybe *Wizard of Oz* if my baby sister wants to go. Your mom offered me a couple of tickets.”

“Yeah okay.”

“A fine grasp of subtext,” I murmured, following him to his car. (A very reliable little boxy thing, clearly used, probably really well maintained. What do you want to bet Pete always gets his oil changed on time?)

“Yeah, well, it’s a show about three guys in the Navy hanging out all night long.”

“Uh huh.”

“You ever met a horse, Fraz?”

“A horse?”

Pete turned off the main side road (not to be confused with the main driveway), and we bounced down a dirt track long enough for me to start wondering if he knew I’d heard him with his friend at the bowling alley and now he was gonna hate crime me so I couldn’t tell anyone his secret.

Listen, I have a really good imagination. Shut up.

We pulled alongside a fence and Pete got out. I got out a lot more slowly, looking for weapons (just in case).

Then Pete whistled, and sure as hell, a couple of horses came galloping across the field. Horses, right, as in big huge fucking animals that neigh.

“The brown one with the white star on her forehead is mine.”

“What’s her name?” I asked, to be polite. And also because now the horse was nosing his hand, and he was scratching her neck and brushing hair out of her face and generally looking happier than I’d ever seen him.

“Er—Hedwig.”

“Hedwig. For the owl, or the angry inch?”

“The first one, Frazier. If I’d known about—never mind. I was a big Harry Potter fan when I was ten, okay?”

“Sure, it’s okay. It’s dandy. Hi, Hedwig. Nice to meet you. No offense, but I think I’ll stand right over here if you don’t mind.” With the car between us. Just in case.

“You want to ride?”

“A *horse*?”

Pete laughed. “No, a dog. Yeah, a horse, Fraz. You want to ride?”

“I have a meeting.” Not a lie. I did have a meeting. Sure it was for six o’clock, but whatever.

“It won’t take that long. Come on. You look like you could use a good walk.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hedwig, barn. C’mon.”

Since I didn't really know what else to do—and standing there at the car in the beating-down sun seemed like a stupid plan—I followed him.

The barn was actually red, for real, and there was a cute little ranch house beyond it, white with green trim and a sprawling curved driveway that swept off in the opposite direction from the resort.

“Is this where you live?” Because cute Pete in this cute house with his horses was so idyllic it made my teeth hurt.

“I don't really live anywhere. It's where I grew up, anyway. I stay here during the summers so I can work and not pay rent.”

“You going into your junior year at Davis?”

“Yep.”

Junior year of college, one more summer, then he'd go back to school and graduate. Right, yeah, I remembered that feeling. The constant pressure to do... *something*.

I almost asked him. I almost said, *Seriously, Pete, you're gay, right?* But if he wasn't really ready yet to say it, that might be the worst possible thing to ask.

“Sweet. Here, check it out, you can ride Lollipop.”

“Lollipop?”

“My sister's horse. Lolli! C'mere, Lolli!”

I watched him put saddles on the horses, doing my best to look unimpressed, and also trying to figure out how I could covertly record the whole thing because it was basically the start to an excellent cowboy porn movie. He wasn't wearing plaid or a cowboy hat or anything, but he was dusty, and sweating, and kept running his hands all over the horses and talking to them.

Shit. You know what's worse than Dom turning me down because he was hot for someone else? Being hot for the same guy.

I don't know why I went along with it. It was a moment. Pete seemed to think I could ride a fucking horse, like this was a normal thing people did, so for whatever reason I just... did it. How hard could it be? You jump up, you sit there, you ride around, you get back off again, right? Plus, cowboys are trustworthy. Pete wouldn't put me on a horse if it was *dangerous*.

Okay, first of all, that horse nearly killed me. Lollipop my ass, that horse was a murderous bastard, and it almost shook me off its back while going a thousand miles an hour. (I could picture the glee with which it planned to trample on my rag doll body.)

Second—second—oh my fucking god, it hurt. I was going to die, and I was going to die in the worst pain of my life aside from appendicitis. I'm not in bad shape, but apparently horseback riding requires some bizarre combination of muscles that shot my body into shock, because while I was thinking about death (and hanging on for dear life), my legs locked, my thighs burned, and somehow every muscle in my back decided to just fucking go on strike.

It was a nightmare. I have no idea why anyone would want to ride a horse more than once. It was fucking awful and every single second of it was agony.

“Man, I love riding,” Pete said, wiping sweat out of his eyes. “Isn't it—Frazier? You all right?”

All right? ALL RIGHT? I glared at him from my position hunched over the saddle and tried to find words to express how *all right* I was.

“Whoa, okay. Hedwig, let's go home. No, no, sorry, girl, let's walk.”

Walk. Walking. Walking was better than galloping or whatever the fuck we'd been doing, but not by much. Walking made me feel less like I was dying, but because my mind wasn't as focused on death, all of my bodily systems reported in about their woes at the same time.

If I could have opened my mouth, I would have told Pete just exactly how I planned to kill him once we got back to the barn. If I survived the ride back to the barn. But I couldn't open my mouth because my teeth had welded together.

Anyway, if I'd been able to open my mouth, I probably would have puked.

I needed help getting off. Dismounting? Yeah, fucking dismounting. I kind of slid into Pete's arms, and I wasn't playing; I'd've fallen down if he hadn't caught me. I was shaking and my legs wouldn't work.

“Okay, um, here.” He led me over to the side of the barn and set me gently on the ground where I could prop myself up against the wall. The sun felt good. The ground not-moving felt good. My body felt wrecked.

“I thought I was going to die.” I couldn't take full breaths because my muscles were still braced for impact and trampling.

“Sorry. I didn't realize you were afraid of horses.”

“I *wasn't* afraid of horses. Now I'm afraid of horses. Oh my god, Pete, you can have Dom, you don't have to kill me to get him.” I let myself tip over, right there on dirt and bits of hay or grass or whatever the hell was everywhere. “Dying.”

“I'll be right back.”

Great, thanks, dying alone in a barn—a *barn*—while the horses went right back to their regularly scheduled eating-of-clover or whatever.

I couldn't make the muscles in my thighs stop twitching. I know it seems like that might be sort of suggestive and hot, but it wasn't.

An hour later (or maybe it was fifteen minutes), Pete came back and sat beside me. With a bottle of water and a joint, oh, bless his heart.

He lit it and passed it over. I even managed to push myself upright, after a few fortifying tokes.

“I wasn't trying to kill you. I thought it'd be fun and you'd probably never been on a horse.”

“Uh huh.” I love marijuana. And I don't smoke it that much (pothead parents, remember), but that makes it even better when I do.

“Why'd you say that? About Dom?”

I held the gorgeous, amazing, transformative smoke in my lungs and passed him back the joint.

“Joking. About you killing me.” Sweaty Pete, Peter to his unrequited lovers, inhaling and not looking at me, pretending the clouds were really interesting today. “It's not a thing. Almost everyone wants to fuck Dominic. It's the curse of being beautiful, charming, and kind.”

“You think Dom's beautiful?”

“God, you don't?”

“I don't know if I look at men and think the word *beautiful*.”

He wasn't denying he looked at men, though. Aw. Was this gonna be Pete's big coming out scene? I prepared myself to be honored.

“Anyway, I'm sorry about the horse. I should have taken it slower.”

“Never again,” I said. “Give me that.”

We finished the joint, drank the water, Pete did not come out, and after he begged his sister to do whatever it was with the horses (put them away? park

them?), we drove to the store. Pete even bought my carton, no cheap gift, to make up for the horses, and also because I was having trouble moving from the passenger seat.

Horses. Never again.

Chapter Seven

The reason they'd held off so long casting *Oz* was apparent to me the second I saw the list.

"The Wizard? The fucking Wizard?" I actually, literally, waved the script in Dom's face. "Hi, have we met? I don't play the fucking Wizard, Dominic!"

"But you could. Why not, Fraz? You know how insane this is. We've got a limited pool of mostly inexperienced actors. Plus, you could do the role in your sleep, couldn't you?"

"I could do a lot of roles in my sleep, but that doesn't mean I want to!" Crap. I sat down on one of the benches. "Dom, you know this isn't really my game. I'm just here for the blowjobs and, y'know, fresh air."

He looked at me over the top of his reading glasses, then took them off and dropped them on a pile of scripts. "Why don't you want to play it? It's not that much work. It's an important role, Fraz, I can't give it to just anyone who can read."

"Ding ding ding, give the man a prize. I don't want an important role. Blowjobs, remember?"

"You haven't slept with anyone all summer, don't be a dope. What's the real reason?"

"Hey, you don't know that!"

"I don't know what you look like when you're getting laid? Hi, I'm Dom, I've lived with you for the last three years."

"Shut up."

"Come on. Do me a favor. Grace, too, or we'll have to make one of her leads double up."

"You just said it's not that much work."

"God, Fraz." He shook his head. "Fine, if you flat-out refuse, we can plug Jason in."

I grimaced. "Romeo? Come on, you can't give the Wizard to Romeo. No way he pulls off that kind of gravity. Why don't you do it, Dom? Or—" Wait. Stop. Maybe this isn't the best idea. "Or Pete. Have Pete do it."

“Pete didn’t audition for us.”

“So? He’ll be fine.”

“Why are you doing this? Why Pete?”

“It’d be good for him,” I said, watching his face. “You trying to say you don’t like him for the part?”

Dom just sat there for a long moment, thinking. Then he shook his head. “No. I don’t like him for the part. I’d like him for something, maybe, but this is too much, and it’s his mom’s favorite book, so I don’t think he’d want to be in it.”

His mom’s favorite book. I played out a whole scene in my head where the two of them were in bed, Dom pushing hair out of Pete’s eyes, low lights, bare chests, voices husky, talking about books.

“I want you,” Dom said. “If you’re refusing, tell me now, but you’re the one. You’re my Wizard, Fraz.”

Dammit. *I hate myself so much right now.* “Fine, but this is pretty stupid, even for you.”

And yeah, I stormed off. Fuck Dom. Fuck *Wizard of Oz*, fuck the entire summer.

Hey, I never said I was mature.

Oz rehearsals started the day after *Pippin*’s performances ended, but out of the kindness of his heart, Dom let his exhausted cast (nearly all of whom were continuing on to *Oz*) sleep in.

I hadn’t gotten drunk enough to sleep in, so I figured I’d help out with *On the Town*, since pretty much everyone was about to lose it rolling into the last week of rehearsals before a Thursday night open. I headed over to the amphitheater after scrounging not-quite-the-last-cup of coffee out of the big industrial brewer. (If you get the last cup, you gotta rebrew, so I’m always careful to not quite empty it out. What, like you’ve never walked away from an empty coffee pot before and hoped no one noticed? Please.)

Since our path from Yurtville came in around the back, I didn’t see the two of them immediately. The props table was suffering from an unfortunate “cleaning” incident perpetrated by someone from the resort staff, who’d tidied it up in between us leaving after the show last night and Grace arriving this

morning. My main role during crises like this one was to disarm the nervous nellies with delightful stories of past (worse) fuckups, so I was filling them in on an unfortunate production of *Cats* during which the costumes became irrevocably tangled by a pissy former cast member just before the first performance.

In the very middle of the climactic directorial pep talk (“We will perform in our underthings if need be, and they will love us!”) I happened to look over at the lawn and nearly lost my train of thought.

Dom and Pete were lying there facing each other on a discarded piece of cardboard. Close enough to kiss, though they weren’t.

I hyped up the pep talk and wrapped the story (if me and a couple of the understudies didn’t have damn nimble fingers, they would have gone on in their underwear, no joke; it takes a lot of spite to tie that many knots in that many tails), then stood back and let the slightly less nervous props people reassemble their table. At least the tape lines were still down, so it was just a matter of organizing, but still. If this had happened Thursday morning, people would be crying.

Another look at the lawn. Shit. Dom was gesturing with his left hand, and Pete was looking at him all adoringly. It was disgusting. It was sick. It was... cute. If I didn’t know them, it’d make me happy to see two guys my age so obviously into each other and not afraid to show it. They weren’t making out. They were talking. And oh god, laughing.

My heart twisted.

Dom touched Pete’s hand, spreading out his fingers, demonstrating something using the edge of the cardboard and Pete’s thumb. Pete bit down on his lower lip, watching every move. Was his heart pounding? I should probably stop staring at his lips now.

I should probably stop staring altogether now, except something rolled off the props table and shattered, so both of them looked up at once. I turned away quickly, but probably not quite quickly enough. I know I saw their eyes before I shifted toward the new crisis, half a step behind everyone else, already coming up with a new story to tell them.

Had I been busted staring? I had no fucking clue. But the two of them were up and helping out now, moment over.

Shit.

Chapter Eight

Opening night, *On the Town*. I had no new plans to make a fucking fool of myself, so I got only drunk enough to take tickets.

The citizens of New Halliday showed up in droves, sporting their finery (“fancy” blue jeans and “no wrinkle” polo shirts galore), parking their SUVs and pickup trucks in the amphitheater lot and lugging their Igloo coolers to their seats. The “open seating” lawn became home to families with big blankets and young, bored-looking kids.

Grace was doing her usual cool-as-a-cucumber thing backstage, but I figured she had to be nervous. I was glad as hell I recognized her dad when he walked up.

I took his ticket and leaned forward. “Do you want me to tell her you’re here?”

“No, no, thank you. She knows I planned to come tonight.” He reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “I’ll catch up with you after the show, Frazier.”

“Enjoy, Joe.” (Yes, I actually remembered the man’s name. Hey, I have my gifts. Remembering people’s names is on the list, even if they’re not as cool as the nicknames I come up with. I’m also good at remembering blowjobs, even if I can’t always match blowjobs to names.)

I abandoned ticket taking when the music started and left a sign up just outside the gate that read:

Come right in! Out of respect for the performers, please find your seats quietly.

Abandoning my station, yeah, but there was no way I planned to miss “New York, New York.”

Summer stock was the first run for the new amphitheater, and the upper decks of seats hadn’t been opened yet. Big dark blue sheets of heavy plastic were stretched over the top of them (it sounds tacky, but it worked well to kind of subtract the three upper sections from your awareness). I found Pete standing dead center at the railing of the closed sections.

“I might puke, Fraz, so fair warning.”

“‘I *might* puke’ isn’t fair warning, Pete. Should I be standing on the far side of the trash can?”

“You actually like this feeling? I’m nervous and I’m not even going on stage.”

“Actually, that’s worse. You don’t get the high of going on, doing your thing, coming off, and feeling relieved.” Oh god. Dom slipped into the amphitheater with a big bouquet of roses, sighted us, and started climbing up the side path. (The place was built into a hill, which made the sound richer and fuller than it would have been if it had just been seats on a flat field. It was an outdoor theater that echoed the way sound carried inside. Not that I’m all that interested in amphitheater construction, but still, it was pretty cool.)

“What if one of them screws up? I mean, they’ve only been rehearsing for a few weeks, Fraz. They barely ever get through a scene without moving wrong or making noise.”

The interns. Pete’s charges. “You know what your problem is?”

He glanced over. “No. What?”

“You failed to do one important thing every babysitter should do before sending their kiddies on stage.” I mimed smoking a joint.

“Shut it, Fraz. Is that Dom?”

Please, sister. Like you don’t know. “Yep.”

“Who’re the roses for?”

“Gracie. She bought him roses for the opening of *Pippin*.” I remembered smelling them as I lay in our yurt after my indecent proposal ended in humiliation.

Dom reached us just as our three Navy boys were stepping off their ship. (As in, descending a stepladder out of a cutout in the backdrop “ship,” which was already becoming the distant Emerald City on the other side.) He set the roses down carefully on top of the stretched plastic sheet and moved up to stand between us while the opening number rolled over the stage.

“I thought I was going to be late,” he murmured. “They’re looking all right up there.”

“A little unsteady, but none of them have been in front of this many people before.” Mohawk, Romeo, and Shirtless, arms around each other, singing loudly, but not fully committed quite yet.

We’d unconsciously mimicked them, standing shoulder to shoulder, and I wasn’t the only one who noticed. A second later Dom threw an arm around

each of us. “This is great. This is fantastic. I’m *so* excited to watch the show from out here.”

Another difference between LeadingManDom and DirectorDom; when he was acting, he was only happy on stage. But right now? He was glowing from all the excitement, even though this wasn’t his show.

“Have you guys ever actually been to New York?” Pete whispered.

“No,” I said. “But Gracie assures me that in fact the Bronx *is* up, and the Battery *is* down.”

Dom’s arms squeezed, and I couldn’t help leaning into him. “They look great. Don’t they look great? And they’re starting to feel it a little.”

“I want to go.”

“To New York? Oh yeah.” Another squeeze from Dom, and the idea—almost certainly true—that he was doing the same thing to Pete sent an electrical pulse to my nuts. He laughed softly. “The three of us could go and sing this song, like assholes. It’d be amazing.”

Shit. Shit, god, no, stop. Amazing? Yeah. Dancing around Manhattan like three idiot fairies, singing campy musicals to each other. For a second it was so clear to me it felt like I was seeing that superimposed onto our hastily painted set, that I could smell it—hot dogs and exhaust and dog piss, or whatever the hell New York smelled like.

My chest felt tight. I was no longer riding a performance contact high. Now I felt simultaneously trapped and buoyed by Dom’s arm, not sure if I wanted to step away more or kiss him.

Okay, yeah, that’s a lie. Obviously I wanted to kiss him. Stupid Dom had no fucking idea what he did to people, all people, but especially me.

There should have been a moment when he realized it was awkward having his arms around us, but he didn’t. Dom held the three of us together while we watched the entire first act, and it still felt like a loss when he moved away.

Chapter Nine

I gave up. I know that's not pretty, but it's real. I came along for the summer mostly to seduce Dominic (for once and for all), but he'd gone and fallen for the cute, straight-acting, one-foot-out-of-the-closet guy and rejected me.

So I gave up.

Actually, I thought I'd given up before, but I hadn't. That was a bullshit lie I told myself. The entire time I'd still been waiting for him to figure out that I'm the one. Even when I was flirting with Mohawk (nice arms, Mohawk) or dancing with Goatee at one of Gracie's little get-togethers. (Goatee was still damn hot, even if he was having some kind of fling with Brother Bear that both of them appeared to think was more undercover than it was.) None of that really touched me because I was waiting, still, for Dom. As usual.

This time I gave up in a concrete way, with a plan. A simple plan. Since the two of them were too damn stupid to do it themselves, I'd get them together. Dom and Pete. The leading man and his cowboy. I'd put them on horses and send them into the sunset if I had to, but come hell or high water, the two of them were hooking up before the end of the summer, which gave me approximately four more weeks.

But seriously, dig that. Four more weeks until the whole fucking thing was over. And what did I have to show for it? A reservation for a very long ride home in the Bug, listening to Dom talk about how sweet his new boyfriend was.

It might kill me a little, but it'd be good for them. I could make it happen.

Thanks to Dom being a damn meddler, I was stuck playing the fucking Wizard. Okay, it's two scenes, yes. But it's the fucking *Wizard*, you know? You can't phone in the Wizard of fucking *Oz*. My least favorite kind of role.

Also, I was really applying myself to being drunk. I caught another ride to town, but the bitch is that when you buy a case of beer, whoever drove knows you are now in possession of a case of beer. (Okay, okay, the beer was just a decoy. I also picked up a fifth of whiskey, which I immediately hid when I offered my ride a beer back at Yurtville. I didn't think I'd burned through the first bottle, but I sure as hell couldn't find it, and desperate times call for lots of whiskey.)

I don't want you thinking I'm a lush, it's more just a way to get through the day, and also Sister Bear was shaping up to be a Dorothy on the edge of a nervous breakdown, which is what I was contemplating (with a drink) when Grace slipped into my yurt to ask how rehearsals were going.

"Your star has half a brain cell, your Cowardly Lion has a problem projecting his voice, and the Tin Man is the best of the lot, but I almost guarantee he's gonna come down with a serious case of the stage frights."

"It's your optimistic outlook that really reassures me, babe." She stretched out on Dom's bunk. "My interns have shaped up. They're so proud of themselves. It's adorable."

"And how's Pete?"

"Mm, Pete's a fun puzzle." She looked over. "He wants to act, you know. I can feel it."

"Oh, what, he puts off vibes?"

"No, he looks longingly whenever he thinks no one's watching him."

"You mean, at Dom? Because that's not wanting to act, honey, that's wanting to do something else."

"You should know, Fraz."

"What the hell does that mean?"

The look she gave me? Pity is so ugly.

"Leave it, Gracie."

"Did I bring him up? No. You did."

"Well, it's done. He's not interested in me. And anyway, they make a cute couple, so whatever."

"Not interested? Did you actually put the moves on Dominic, Frazier Lane?"

"Put the moves on'? What is this, 1989?"

Grace sat up. "What happened?"

"How do you not already know this? He didn't tell you?" I waved my hand at the bunk. "Did you miss the part where he moved in with you?"

"Yeah, he said he was cramping your style and since he couldn't really hook up with anyone, you might as well."

“Cramping my—Jesus.”

“Fraz, what the hell happened?”

I lay back on the bed and covered my eyes with my arm, like Scarlett O’Hara on a fainting couch. “Don’t make me relive it. God. He was very noble. And I was a little drunk.”

“A little?”

“I wasn’t *that* drunk,” I said. She narrowed her eyes at me. “Well, I didn’t mean to get that drunk. Anyway.”

“Way to blow it there, Casanova.”

“Shut up, Gracie.”

“No, I’m serious. You wait eight years to say something, and you do it when you’re wasted. Why’d you do that?”

“You think rejection would have hurt less if I wasn’t drunk?”

“You think he would have rejected you if you weren’t drunk?”

I rolled to the side and glared at her. “Obviously. It’s fine, Grace. He likes the straight-acting guys, not the theater guys. That’s why I thought, you know, this summer I wouldn’t have competition.”

Grace’s face did this thing, this crazy thing, where her forehead got all these lines in it and her eyes squinted. “This is why you’ve been moping around for the last three weeks? Babe, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I’m pathetic.” I pulled the pillow over my head so I couldn’t see anymore. “Because every time I see him, it hurts. And—*and*—Pete is a good guy. If I could hate him, that’d be better, but I can’t. He’s perfect for Dom.”

“Dom’s not going to date anyone in the production.”

“That’s the point.” Go away, pillow. I pushed up on my elbow. “He’s not in the production. He’s just babysitting the interns so they don’t come under our bad influence. He’s totally available, he acts straight so hard he rides horses, and he’s hot for Dom. They’re perfect, Grace. I mean, who else would you rather come out for than Dom? He’ll be sweet and gentle and take everything all slow—”

“Fraz, stop.”

“Fine, but the point stands. They’re perfect for each other.”

She stared at me for a long, uncomfortable minute. “Get your ass out of bed, let’s go dance.”

“Aw, do I have to?”

The nightly gatherings at the amphitheater were still the highlight of the day for a large part of the cast. Enough booze to get everyone dancing, enough sex to get everyone interested. (Skirts was currently making out with Brother Bear while they danced to Scissor Sisters, which was sweet. Brother Bear appeared to be working his way through the cast with no qualifications. It’s nice to see a good, healthy slut in his element.)

Scissor Sisters turned into Lady Gaga, who I normally don’t dance to when I’m with people I know (because she’s so tacky, and also, when I want to dance to Madonna, I dance to Madonna, thank you very much), but Grace had my hand and pulled me into the fray.

And seriously, if you’ve never danced the Lindy Hop to “Just Dance,” you’re missing out.

“You’re wrong, you know!” Grace said, pulling my ear closer. “Try it again when you’re sober, Fraz.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Life is short. Talk to Dom when you’re sober, dummy.”

I steered us around so she could see what I’d been trying hard not to look at for the last few minutes. “You still think so?”

Pete, in his baggy blue jeans and his T-shirt, and always with the same pair of busted-up boots, standing with Dom at the edge of the stage. Their heads were bent together like they were having a deep conversation, but they were standing side by side, arms pressed against each other.

So intimate, like they didn’t even remember everyone else was there.

“Babe,” Grace said.

“You see what I’m saying? Never mind.” I swung her around. “I’m a good little monk this summer, Gracie!”

She smiled, but I could still see the pity, so I looked away.

Chapter Ten

Pippin had ended its run with a decent show, which was good because it meant the cast was a little more stable for *Wizard of Oz*. Still, most of the time it was too fucking much to be around, and the less structured non-rehearsal time wasn't much better. All the same people, the same voices, the same laughter. Summer stock's like chaos in waves; just as *On the Town* reached its big peak at opening night, *Pippin* was crashing to the shore and *Oz* was just beginning to build in the background. I figured it was as close to a break as I was gonna get, since Dom planned to have me performing the *Wizard* four nights a week from the day we went on until we left.

So I started taking walks. I'm a city kid, okay? I don't actually like seeing the stars and feeling the breeze. But since Yurtville and the amphitheater dance parties were my alternatives, walking around the resort at night seemed like the thing to do.

There was a golf course, which I didn't know. I occasionally passed other people, or saw them in the distance (probably actual resort guests, considering it was a good fifteen-minute hike from Yurtville). We weren't exactly forbidden from being on the grounds, but I didn't think anyone else had really ventured forth, which was kind of a pity. The place felt like it had been designed by someone playing Sims who really liked fountains; you'd be walking around a hedge and boom, another fountain. Or randomly, in the middle of the golf course, you'd find a bathroom. And outside the bathroom? Decorative fountain.

Not that I care about water features. But the place was pretty, and I could see taking a vacation there, if you were into that sort of thing.

Also, wandering around was good for spying, which has always been a hobby of mine.

The night clerk, or concierge, or whatever you call them, was clearly having an affair with the head chef. How do I know that, you ask? Well, when I followed the path behind the parking lot—the one Pete's friend Alvarez had come down—it led to this little bungalow thing for employees. (Cute. Locker room, decent bathrooms, lounge, kitchen, covered patio for smoking.) I went up there sometimes just to hang out with people who weren't actors, and got to know a few of the guys who worked in the kitchen.

(I was playing Dom in my head. Not too swishy, but not trying to be uber-but. Charming and unthreatening. Playing Dom always makes it easier to meet people.)

About the fourth time I hid—I mean hung out—on the smoking patio, one of the guys floated this theory, about the head chef and the night clerk. So naturally, I had to investigate.

I got a little creepily wrapped-up in the ballad of the head chef and the night clerk. The head chef turned out to be a woman, which was A) disappointing, because the covert gay affair is always more interesting than the covert straight affair, no offense to straight people, and B) kind of disheartening because when I heard “head chef” I just assumed the head chef would be a dude. I might be a sexist! For a brief moment I held out hope that the night clerk would also be a woman because see item A, but nope.

And the answer was yes, they were totally screwing.

I planted myself in the lobby with a book one night when the kitchen boys said the chef was working late, just kind of eased myself behind a plant and settled in. Sure enough, right after midnight the head chef comes up from the back, still in her white chef outfit, and starts talking to the night clerk. You know, casually, leaning against the counter, no big deal. (So I tried to stay very still and hoped they didn’t notice I was there behind the plant.)

I couldn’t even hear what they were saying, but I didn’t have to. She put her hand on the counter, he moved his closer. She shifted around the side; he shifted toward the side. They spoke in low voices, laughing quietly, and after maybe twenty minutes of this whole elaborate flirtation, she told him good-bye and walked out the front door. He maybe waited ninety seconds before following her.

No, pervert, I did not go after them. If I wanted to watch straight people have sex, I’d get Showtime.

Mystery solved!

Which meant I was bored again.

Even rationing my whiskey carefully left me pretty dry by end of the first week of *Oz* rehearsals, so I went looking for Pete again. Well, I went looking for anyone who had a car, but since Dom was locked up rehearsing, I figured Pete was my best bet.

The first thing you should know: it was the middle of the day. A totally innocent time of day to look for someone in Yurtville, since the interns said that's where Pete was.

Also, an innocent time of day to go poking around someone's yurt. Bright sunshine. Heat. Way too hot to have your yurt all closed up. I hesitated outside because Pete shared with the male intern (who I'd just seen) and one of the guys rehearsing with Dom right now, so what the hell was he doing in his closed up yurt in the middle of the day?

Sure, he could be doing *that*, but I took Pete for a shower man. Especially in shared housing.

I hesitated. And heard voices. And probably should have walked away, but of course, I didn't.

"You don't think I'm pretty?"

"Sure, you're pretty. Listen, could you unzip the door? It's really hot in here."

"I'm not saying we should get married! I just want to not be a virgin anymore, Pete, come on, please?"

I bit down on my fist. God, again? Poor Juliet. Poor Pete!

"Yeah, that's—um, that's a nice offer, Megan, but no thank you."

"I thought guys were supposed to be into virgins! But I can't get anyone here to have sex with me!"

Step one to losing your virginity, honey: maybe hang out with a higher ratio of straight guys. I mean, I've never had sex with a girl. Gold star all the way, baby. But Dom? Claims it's not that big a deal, except in the end he'd rather be with a guy. (He's so... egalitarian. It's so unattractive.)

"Well, everyone's pretty busy, Megan, so—"

"You aren't busy! You're right here."

"I only came back for—" Muffled sounds. "Stop doing that!"

Crap. I was going to have to barge in there and save him from the poor desperate virgin's clutches.

"But all I want is to have sex one time! That's all I want!"

"Stop. I can't."

“Why not?”

“I’m gay, Megan, okay? I’m gay. Please leave me alone now.”

“Why is *everyone* gay?” Cue: violent sobbing.

“Shit.”

Yeah, me too.

Mostly I wanted to get the fuck out of there, but the thought I might be able to at least extract the two of them did cross my mind. I sneaked back to the outskirts of Yurtville and called, “Pete! I’m out of fucking cigarettes again! Are you here? I need a ride to town!”

Zippering, flapping, muted sobs as Juliet ran to the bathroom.

“You here?” I called again, approaching his yurt slowly.

“I’m here. Let me get my keys.”

I wanted to make a joke about him jerking off in his yurt in the middle of the day, but he looked so gray I decided to be merciful instead. “You’re saving my life. I’m low on whiskey, too, and I definitely can’t go into more rehearsals for *Oz* sober.”

“Don’t make me plan an intervention, Fraz,” he said, glancing back at the bathrooms as he slid his shoes on.

“Whatever. I’m a fantastic drunk.”

The first time I came out, it was to a teacher. The US Civics teacher who sponsored the Gay-Straight Alliance. (He wasn’t actually gay, but I didn’t know that then.) And I didn’t say “I’m gay.” I said, “I think I might be bisexual.” He was really cool about it and sat with me for like an hour after school, letting me freak out a little.

I walked with Pete to his car and talked shit about the Cowardly Lion, but mostly I was wondering if that was the first time he’d ever said “I’m gay” out loud. Because if it was, that sucked.

If I could have figured out how to have some kind of confessional conversation without letting on that I’d been eavesdropping, I would have. But me saying, “Hey, you wanna hear about how I came out to Mr. Jespers after fifth period because I was afraid I was gonna end up like one of those poor suicide kids on the evening news?” didn’t seem like the kind of thing I could just slip in somewhere. So I tried to draw him out a little about what he wanted

to do after college (go anywhere that wasn't here), and whether or not he'd ever thought about acting ("C'mon, Fraz, you know I can't act, don't be a jerk.").

When we got back to Yurtville I offered wee Pete a sip of whiskey. He took it.

Chapter Eleven

It may not, at this point, surprise you to learn that my motto in life is basically *When the going gets tough, the tough get drunk*. It's a philosophy that has served me well many times, and I assumed that the opening night of *Wizard of Oz* would be yet another example of the positive effects that alcohol has on society.

All right, my judgement going in may have been impaired, just a little. Unrequited love will do that to a man.

Still, there was no reason why I shouldn't get massively drunk the night before the show opened. The cast of *On the Town*—at least, the ones not dropping directly into supporting roles for *Oz*—were relieved to not be in the spotlight (give them a day or two to be jealous), the *Oz* cast, who'd already staged two weeks of performances in *Pippin*, were raring to go, and Dom and Grace were hitting all their high notes at the after party.

The only real downside was the fucking last minute tech rehearsal Dom had called for eleven a.m. the next day to go over the damn sound effect cues again. Final Dress had gone great, but the tech kids were still struggling to nail their timing. All I had to do was show up and say my lines, so I wasn't gonna let DirectorDom's control issues get in the way of me having a good time.

I wasn't the only one. Everyone was feeling good. Even Pete was dancing a little. So I had a shot of whiskey and a beer chaser. Don't you love that phrase? Beer *chaser*, which conjures simultaneous visions of a bottle of beer with flailing arms and feet chasing a shot of whiskey down the street, and also of a crowd of people pursuing a desperate bottle of beer as it tries to escape.

("What're you doing Friday night?")

"Chasing beer. You know, the usual.")

Beer chasing, the new fitness fad of the century! I guess you'd probably have to chase a lot of beer a long distance to lose weight doing it, though. Maybe you'd engineer special low-calorie fitness beer for chasing. Who cares what it tastes like at the end of a run? As long as it's cold, people will drink anything.

In fact, if you're talking about me the night before a show opens, it doesn't even have to be cold.

So I had a few shots and chased a few beers. Then I had a few more shots, because I started thinking about those long fucking speeches the Wizard has to make.

In less than twenty-four hours. I drank another shot and toasted Dionysus.

After that, things got a little fuzzy. I'm pretty sure I ended up in the middle of a hot frottage scene with Goatee and Brother Bear, but past a certain point if I'm lit enough, I kind of project myself into other people's bodies. I might have just been watching them and feeling what they felt. It's hard to say.

I did wake up in bed. Which was good. But I woke up in bed with Grace shaking me, which was less good.

"Oh my god, Frazier, you dope. Get up."

"I'm up. Stop. Too much." My head, shit, my head felt like someone had taken a lead pipe to it. "Gracie." Only I was a little slurry, so it was more like "Graaaaaaacieeeeeee."

"Fraz, babe, you gotta get up. And hydrate. And eat something."

I groaned. "No way." God, big pan of yellow eggs and burnt sausage? "Oh, vomit, Grace, no eggs."

"You slept way past eggs, Fraz. What time did you pass out?"

"Mm, dunno. Sometime after Goatee came, I think? But then, wait, that was on the grass." That was on the grass. And yeah, I'd been involved, which was nice. But I hadn't come because by then I could barely feel my legs, which was less nice. "Aw, I didn't come, Gracie!"

She actually laughed, even as she was tugging my shirt over my head like a little kid. "That's a tragedy. You need to take a shower and get some food into you before Dom sees the state you're in."

"I love that song. Mm, Belle and Sebastian, you know? Stuart's cute."

"Frazier, look at me."

"Hm?"

"Shit, you're not even fully hungover yet, are you? Did you drink all night?"

"Where's my whiskey? You should be able to—to measure—it was almost full before."

"Well, it's empty now, so that's not much help."

“Empty? No, no, Grace, it can’t be empty, it was almost *full*.”

“Your head hurts, but you still feel goofy, Fraz?”

“I *am not* goofy.” But that was a funny word, so I giggled.

Grace sighed. “Right, okay, babe, up you go.”

“Aw, c’mon. I wanna go back to sleep, Gracie.”

“You’re going to shower, and eat a granola bar, and drink as much coffee and water as you have time to drink before you go on stage.”

“I’m not going on stage. I’m *the Wizard*. I don’t go on until, like the end. Plus, this is a fake rehearsal, Grace. I can be late. Dom’s just trying to make sure the high schoolers stop fucking up the end of the show so much.”

She glanced at her watch. “I’m aware of that, dummy. Get. In. The. Shower.”

“But—”

No buts. Grace propelled me all the way to the bathroom and didn’t quite toss me in with my clothes on, but she didn’t exactly make the water inviting, either.

“Shower. Wake up. I’ll have coffee for you when you get out.”

“But—”

The shower completed my journey from drunk to hungover, and I felt ten times worse on the other side.

“I think I might puke,” I muttered, sitting on the bench in the narrow shower stall, facedown in a mug of coffee.

“If you’re gonna puke, do it now.”

“What time is it?”

“T minus seven hours until showtime.”

I groaned. “Don’t make me do math, Gracie.”

“It’s one.”

“But—isn’t Dom’s tech thing at eleven?”

“It got a late start, but it took me a while to figure out you weren’t at the amphitheater. You need to move your ass, Fraz.”

“Shit.” I sipped coffee and tried to decide if I’d be better off voiding my guts first. Did I really want to go on with all this shit sitting in my stomach?

“Strategic puking,” I mumbled, and once the decision was made, I barely managed to get myself to a toilet before losing everything.

Beer chased itself right into the bowl and I flushed three or four times as I continued retching, because the only thing worse than puking in a public bathroom is puking on top of puke in a public bathroom. Wait, no, puking on someone else’s puke is worse than puking on your own puke. Ugh. Excuse me for a minute.

Then I went back into the shower, dialed it colder than Grace had, and felt slightly more human when I picked up my coffee again.

“I know it’s hard to contain yourself,” I joked weakly, standing there shivering with a towel wrapped around my waist, dripping shower water into my mug.

“Fraz—about Dom and Pete—”

“No. There’s nothing to say. Stop looking at me like that.”

She shook her head, and I only just noticed that she was all done up in this gorgeous African dress-thing, all blocks of bright colors playing off her skin.

“Grace, you look fantastic. Shit, I didn’t get puke on you, did I?”

“No. Okay, listen, just—I’m gonna say this, and you’re gonna shut up, and then we’ll never talk about it again.”

I sat back down on the bench and swished coffee around in my mouth to get whatever traces of puke lingered after I’d rinsed in the shower. “Okay.”

“My dad used to say HIV was the greatest thing that ever happened to him.”

Oh fuck me.

“And I know that whole ‘live like you’re dying’ thing is a cliché, but for him? It was real. He lived for twenty-one years knowing that no matter how good he was feeling, the next time he went in for blood work, his levels might be off, and there was no guarantee. It’s why he hooked up with Joe, after my mom.”

“Wait. Hang on. Your mom? I thought you were adopted?”

“Technically, Joe adopted me.”

Did I just assume that? I tried to think about it, but my brain was running on whiskey fumes.

“I let people think whatever they think, because whenever I used to tell the story people acted like Nate was my ‘real’ dad, and Joe was just the guy he married.”

Dammit, I wished like hell we weren’t having this conversation while I was hungover.

“Nate found out he was positive when I was a year old, and it pretty much changed everything. Because he said he’d been figuring maybe he’d wait until I went to college to come out. He thought it’d be this big horrible melodrama and I’d have to go to therapy because I had this gay dad. But then he found out he was positive, and he didn’t want to die in the closet.”

It’s kind of hard for me to imagine being a grown-up in the closet. I mean, everyone’s kind of born into their closet, right? But coming out is a rite of passage, you do it, you deal with it, it’s over. Thinking about it like, *Oh, sure, I’ll just pretend I’m straight for the next twenty years until it’s convenient to come out* is freaky and unsettling. My stomach lurched again, this time not just from the booze.

“Gracie,” I murmured. “I’m really, really sorry about your dad.”

“Me too. But on the other hand, how can I be? If he hadn’t tested positive, he wouldn’t have made friends with Joe. He wouldn’t have come out. And that’s—I have my family because of that, Fraz. Anyway, that’s not really my point.”

“Carpe diem, I know. But I already tried that and failed.”

“You didn’t, though. You did it the way you do everything else, half-assed, like you were making sure it couldn’t hurt you too badly if you fucked it up.”

“You think it could have hurt me worse?” I gestured—whoa, no more with the gesturing.

“Yeah. I think if you actually had a conversation with Dom and he let you down easy, that would hurt more. But that’s not what you did. Come on, Fraz. You waited until you were drunk enough to have an excuse.”

“I did not! And anyway, it’s fine, he’s with Pete now. I hope they’re very happy together.”

“Pete commandeered a golf cart and rode around the grounds last night, worried you’d gotten lost.”

I swallowed thickly. “See? He’s a good guy. Way better than I am. He’s perfect for Dom.”

“I think you’re misreading that a little, Frazier. Take a step back for a second.”

“You think they aren’t hot for each other? Because I’m pretty sure they are.”

She shook her head again, and shit, her hair was up, how the hell did she get her hair to do what it was doing right now? Bobby pins and hairspray could only go so far. “I agree that they’re hot for each other, I just think they’re not hot *only* for each other. Pete hides in the cottage sometimes when he wants to escape Yurtville. You don’t know everything, Fraz. Anyway, drink that faster, we gotta start moving.”

“Are you talking in riddles, or am I just still drunk?”

“Up, Wizard. Get moving.”

Fuck it all. I managed the rest of the coffee and about half a granola bar (one of the healthy ones, so it wasn’t that sweet). Puking was a good call; now I could actually stand up without the horizon wobbling.

And wouldn’t you know it, Pete arrived with his trusty golf cart just in time to *cart* my ass over to the amphitheater.

“You okay?” he asked, shooting a glance in my direction as I carefully braced myself for the ride.

“If I’m gonna puke again, I’ll warn you,” I promised.

“Again?”

Chapter Twelve

Pissing off Dom hadn't actually been my goal, but I felt bizarrely satisfied to have managed it anyway. I've lived with him for three years, and I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen him as angry as he was when I came rolling in (and then had to wait until the ground stopped moving before I could walk, with Pete hovering close by just in case).

I stumbled a little in rehearsal, but no more than anyone else. Quite the feat for the guy who'd only been conscious for—yeah, no, never mind, time, I'll read you later when the numbers stop playing leapfrog.

What is it about being hungover that makes motion so nauseating? I'm sure there's a physical reason for it. I might have looked it up if A) we were somewhere with a data connection and B) I could actually concentrate on letters without them taking an unsanctioned swim across the screen.

I expected to get the full force of SeriousDirectorDominic after rehearsal, but instead Pete loaded me back into the cart and drove me to Yurtville, where lunch had appeared.

Food. Ugh. I went back to bed and didn't come out until dinner.

Goatee and Brother Bear sat with me while I tried to choke down some garlic bread with the garlic scraped off. Apparently, I'd been magnificent the night before (*thank you, thank you, don't mind if I do take another bow, please direct all future enquiries to my agent, thank you again*), and they would be so open to taking on the Wizard in private later, if I was feeling up to it. (Oh, ouch, *up to it*; if they were more clever and/or mean, that would have been pointed. But maybe they'd been so intent on each other that they hadn't noticed my unfortunate... lack of completion.)

I ignored the violent energy coming my direction from Dom at the other end of the table and promised them *later*, eyebrow waggle and all.

For a guy who could barely think three minutes into the future to take a piss, I was doing pretty damn well.

Even hungover, I could still ride along the tide of excitement, waiting for the curtain to go up. In fact, I was probably doing better than I would have been sober. The hangover was a pleasant distraction from my nerves, which still yammered at me about being the Wizard, but the chorus was a little removed from the rest of the show (AKA my life), so I didn't have to pay attention to it.

I didn't flub my lines or miss my cues. I was fucking *flawless*. No joke. Grace gave me a huge hug backstage, and her dad Joe (so that's why she was so dressed up) shook my hand and grasped my shoulder and generally made me feel like the greatest actor who'd ever graced the stage.

It was a fucking triumph. Look at me, playing the Wizard hungover, nailing it, being a goddamn theatrical genius! That's right. Can't keep this kid down, no sir. Time for another drink. I definitely earned it.

Except Dom was still shooting stupid looks in my direction, even as he accepted his roses and debriefed and made polite small talk with Mrs. Aurello-the-younger, who was standing with Pete and gushing over how amazing the show had been.

Her favorite book, right. I remember now.

Pete caught my eye and for a moment we were the only people I felt, the only ones I was aware of at all. He, trapped by his mom's hold on his arm, trapped by her expectations. I wasn't trapped by anything, dammit. So why did it seem so obvious that he looked how I felt?

We didn't even pretend to clear out after the show. It was the beginning of the end, and the most insane parts of the summer were past. We'd staged three shows, successfully, in two months. Everyone was in love again tonight, everyone flying high on the last two weeks. The people who didn't have roles in *Oz* were doing props and assisting with costumes and being understudies. The people in the show were high on performance, which is the best kind of drug, right until it drops you on your ass.

And despite the shitty start to the day, I felt great. Fantastic. Absolutely wonderful.

Which is when Dom grabbed my arm and started dragging me away.

Chapter Thirteen

The amphitheater's pretty well lit, and the little gates where I'd stood to take tickets were part of a larger hedge-and-fence system designed to hide the parking lot from the theater and generally dampen noise. It was a pretty good place for a snog, and I actually clapped when we stumbled into Juliet and her Romeo at last.

"You get him, girlfriend!" I called, and I recognized my drunk voice, even though I'd only just started on a beer before Dom decided it was time for my spanking.

Oh god, seriously. Spank me, Dom.

Perish the thought. Shit.

"I can't believe you did that! What the fuck were you thinking, Frazier?"

I made puppy eyes at Juliet, who was not about to lose her sure thing, not even for good gossip, and was tugging Romeo away back toward the dancing and carousing.

"What the fuck was I thinking when? When I gave *the best performance of my life* even though I could barely walk in a straight line? Oh, jeez, Dom, I don't know. I guess I'm just that good!"

"That was not the best performance of your life, and you actually *can't* walk in a straight line, or did you miss the part where you almost fell off the stage?"

"I did not! I barely tilted." Actually, I thought no one noticed that. Huh.

"You nearly *fell*, and then what would we have done?"

"I nearly fell three feet onto a soft patch of grass, yeah, I could have died, Dom. Quit being so hysterical."

His eyes narrowed, and I would have been worried about it, but I couldn't care. "I need a Wizard I'm not worried about, Fraz. Is this how you're gonna be for the rest of the run? Are you planning to throw a tantrum for the next two weeks?"

"I'm *not*. The show was fine, Dominic. The show was good. Grace said it was good, Joe said it was good, Pete's mom was *crying* it was so good. What the fuck is your problem?"

“You! You’re my problem! What the hell were you thinking last night?”

“I was thinking that I didn’t want to be the Wizard, but my best friend tricked me into it, and I might as well self-medicate a little before I had to go on.”

“So you got wildly drunk and had sex with guys you don’t even call by their actual names?”

“You saying Goatee’s mom didn’t name him ‘Goatee’? That’s weird, since it fits him so well.”

A different guy would have hit me, or at least shoved me. Dom took two steps back and clenched his fists, which was kind of hot in an intense sort of way.

“Frazier. I was worried about you. You disappeared and we had no idea where you were.”

“I was in my yurt! At least, I ended up in my yurt. I’m not exactly sure how, but I’m sure it was lovely, whatever it was.” Kind of a sad thing, actually, missing all those memories.

“Are you kidding me? You don’t remember?”

“Um, no?”

Dom shook his head. “Damn you, Fraz. We found you passed out on the grass halfway to Yurtville and got you to bed.”

“We who?” Oh fuck me, come on, cruel fate, this is just too much.

“Me and Pete. You don’t remember? You kept telling Pete that it was good he came out, and—Anyway, are you really saying you don’t remember that? Fraz, maybe we should get you checked out by someone.”

No, no, no. Unfair. The elation of the evening deserted me. And fuck, Dom with his serious face on, no, no, no.

I pushed past him. “I’m fine. I’ll be less hungover tomorrow, so if I fuck up the whole show you have only yourself to blame.”

“Fraz, wait—”

“No, you did your job. I’m done. I get it, Dom. You guys saved me and now I owe you. Thanks so much.” I didn’t even know what I was saying, not really, and I was walking away so he probably didn’t either.

Of all people, seriously, I was saved by Director Dom and his trusty sidekick Cowboy Pete. They *put me to bed*. Oh god, come on, that's not fair at all. The two of them bonded over tucking my drunk ass in. Fuck.

I went back up to the stage, intending to dance with the kids ("Summer Nights" from freaking *Grease*, of course, because that's the kind of timing I have), but sitting on my ass seemed like a better idea. I sat up against the backdrop and watched them as if I wasn't a part of them, dancing with each other, laughing, playing. I probably wouldn't have cried, except "Music of the Night" came on (clearly not one of Grace's mixes; she would have never followed *Grease* with *Phantom*), and I couldn't stop myself.

Everyone was so happy. I couldn't be. I wanted to believe it was the booze hangover, or maybe the performance hangover, but really it was just me. I only wanted one thing, but unfortunately when the one thing you want is a person (who already rejected you), you can't make that happen. You're stuck.

I was stuck. I was so stuck that while everyone else acted out little Phantom-and-Christine mini dramas, I sobbed into my hands like a little kid.

Scared the hell out of me when Dom touched my shoulder.

"Come on, Fraz. You don't need to be here right now."

Which was good, because I didn't want to be here right now. I didn't want to be in the middle of nowhere. I wanted to be home, where I could hit a bar, or maybe a club, a real rowdy one, go into San Francisco and hit Powerhouse and not care for the rest of the night.

"Fraz, get up."

I got up.

Of course, then I saw Pete and remembered that Dom had a team, a team I wasn't part of, and apparently their team mission was to put me to bed when I was too drunk or stupid to do it myself.

Instead of pulling away or fighting, I just cried a little bit harder. I must have had more of that beer than I thought. Also, "Music of the Night" is like that, you know? It kind of gets under your skin, makes you feel all yearning even if you don't know why.

Pete dangled keys from his fingers. "Ride?"

I sat in the middle. Of course I did. As the fragile guy, I sat between my two friends who wanted—if they hadn't already—to have sex with each other. And that's exactly how it felt.

I wanted to be chatty, to plaster over my embarrassment from the night before and my tears listening to *Phantom*, but I had no chatty in me. I was wrung out. I wanted to be home, not in a yurt. I wanted to listen to self-indulgent music and read Augusten Burroughs books and try to come up with genius one-liners that would get me laid, preferably scribbling them in the margins of notebooks filled with other things, because that's where all genius one-liners belong.

I very much did not want to be sitting in between Dom and Pete in a golf cart, bouncing along a path back to Yurtville.

When we got there, I excused myself to the bathroom, mostly to give the two of them cover so they could leave together and not feel self-conscious about it. So they could go back to the little cabin (Gracie was spending the night with her dad in a different little cabin, with a plan to stay up late watching Audrey Hepburn movies and eating terrible food... actually, that sounded kind of nice, maybe I could text her and beg for shelter).

I couldn't decide if Dom and Pete had fucked yet, but since time was running out, they'd better start now if they hadn't. I should have told them that. I should have tapped my watch and waggled my eyebrows and made suggestive comments. Yeah. Oh well, hopefully they got the message all on their own. They could read a calendar.

Except they were still there. Not just there. They were in the yurt. My yurt. *Our* yurt, technically.

"Hi," I said, standing right inside the door flap.

"How're you feeling?" Dom asked.

He was sitting on his bed. Pete was standing against my bunk, looking awkward as fuck.

"Fine. Splashed water on my face, sniffed some smelling salts, you know. The usual." Right, so, how to get rid of them. "You guys need condoms? I came prepared, so, you know, if you want some—"

"Fraz, would you sit the fuck down, please?"

"Is this an intervention?"

Dom ran his hands over the top of his head. "Yeah. I've been thinking, Frazier."

"Because I don't need a fucking intervention, so you can go now." I even waved my hands. "Go away, now."

Instead of going away, my roommate lay back on his bed and stared up at the bunk above him, crossing his hands over his (flat, lickable) stomach. “I’ve been thinking about you kissing me, Fraz.”

“I was drunk.” Since Dom wasn’t looking my way, I explained it to Pete. “I was drunk, it was opening night, and I actually like getting laid on opening night. Which, by the way, the two of you being here pretty much makes impossible, and I have a fake date with Goatee and Brother Bear later, so, you know, feel free to go away.”

Pete glanced at Dom, and even in the yellow light from the little camp lamp, I could tell he was blushing. “Um, Dom, maybe now isn’t—”

“You don’t know him as well as I do. Now’s the only time. Fraz, c’mere.”

“Or not,” I said, sitting on my bed just to make the point.

“That works.” And damn him, damn Dom for being so sexy, for swinging his legs to the ground and standing up in one long movement, like a dancer, all masculine and self-assured and totally hot.

“What’re you doing?” My whole body tensed up as he got closer. When he knelt in front of me, I literally felt light-headed.

“This,” Dom said, and I knew he was going to kiss me—all the signs were there—but it still felt like an electrical shock when our lips touched.

I couldn’t help closing my eyes. The shock melted into a buzz, and Dom’s lips shifted mine, parting them just a little. I expected tongue, but no, this was just Dom kissing, sweetly, only hinting at intensity.

Crap, crap, crap. This was not happening. This could not be happening.

“I keep thinking about you kissing me,” Dom said softly. “I thought we should try it again.”

“Why? Why’d you do that? You said you didn’t want me. And I know you want Pete, so why—why did you do that?” My voice was all kinds of freaked out, and it was still only a fraction of how freaked out I felt sitting there, looking at Dom, tasting him, even as Pete shifted on his feet.

“I should go—”

“Huh uh. We’re having an intervention. Sit, Pete. Please.”

“Oh, Pete even gets a *please*,” I mumbled, trying for a joke.

“Pete responds to politeness better than you do.” Oh god, oh fuck, he reached out to hold my jaw so I couldn’t turn away, so I had to look down at him. “I never said I didn’t want you, Fraz.”

“Then why—why didn’t you—”

“Because if you have to get drunk to kiss me, that’s not what I want.” His eyes went to the side. “Pete, come on.”

“This is kind of too much. I mean, I’m not so sure—”

“I told you I can make this work. I swear. Sit here, with Fraz.”

Yeah, sure, it’s fine, I’ll just sit here trying not to be turned on by Dom teasing me, good plan.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want you, I said I didn’t want to lose you. And I don’t. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to kiss you, Frazier.”

Pete tried to stand up, but Dom pulled him back down again, hard, and kept a hand on his wrist.

“And you. I want to kiss both of you. This is an intervention for me, because I can’t keep pretending I don’t want to do that.”

And then—you know what happened then—then he kissed Pete and god, it was hot, it was beautiful, a beautiful thing, the two of them kissing. Pete closed his eyes and leaned in, but Dom? Dom watched.

“Oh god,” I whispered.

This time Dom didn’t pull away, but he did let go of Pete’s wrist. “Was that all right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I mean—yeah. Um.” Pete looked away, like something really fuckin’ fascinating might be going on in some other part of the yurt.

“Pete,” Dom said, more insistently.

“I’m okay.”

“Wait, hang on. Was that—you guys have kissed before, right?”

“No.” Dom’s hands moved up to Pete’s neck. “Hey, is this all right still? I want you to stay, but you don’t have to.”

“I don’t want to be in the way.”

“Fraz, tell Pete he’s not in the way.”

“Technically, his ass is in my bed. Kind of depends on what we’re planning on doing. He’s in the way if we’re going to sleep, but he’s right the fuck where he should be if we’re doing something else.” *Please let us be doing something else.*

I’ve never had a real threesome. I mean, I’ve fucked around and made out with more than one guy, but not formally, not like this. But I sure as hell wanted to, right now, with Dom. And Pete.

Pete, who’d never kissed Dom before. Oh shit.

“Dom, back off. Hey, so, Pete, are you a virgin?”

“No! I mean, I’ve had sex with girls, does that count?”

“No,” I said, just as Dom was saying, “Yes.”

“The hell? It does not count, do you see any girls around here?”

“If Pete’s a virgin for only having sex with girls, you’re a virgin for only having sex with guys, Fraz.”

“Only if I wanted to suddenly have sex with a girl!”

“Don’t listen to him,” Dom said. “It’s not that different.”

“So you—you mean—you’ve done it with girls, too?”

Aw, Pete was even cuter when he was befuddled.

“Sure.”

“But—” Pete frowned. “I mean, you can get it up when you’re with girls?”

Great, activate TeacherDom. So not sexy.

(Shut up, fine. Only *a little* sexy.)

“I can get it up, it’s just not quite as—I don’t know. It’s not bad, but I can’t totally get into it the way I can when I’m with a guy.” One of his hands dropped to my thigh. “So Pete and I talked a little about this, and I was pretty sure you’d be into it, Fraz, but you can always say no.”

“Yeah, but that’s not fair.” Pete turned on the bed so he was facing me. “It’s not either-or. Like, I can just leave. I know you’re into Dom, and it’s not like I have to be here.”

“You’re so fucking *kind*. Stop it. It’s annoying.” I wanted to pluck Dom’s hand off my thigh—where it was doing a good imitation of one of those

“massagers” everyone knows is really a sex toy—but then again, it was acting like one of those sex toy massagers on my thigh, so I didn’t.

“I thought you’d decided I was an attempted murderer.”

“Only when you have a horse handy. Horse handy, that’s a funny phrase. Handy horse isn’t as funny, but—”

Pete kissed me. Kissing me to shut my blabbing mouth isn’t as rare as you might think.

“Yeah,” Dom said, and his little thigh massage ramped up. “Fuck yeah.”

I hit his hand and broke the kiss. “Pete—”

“You heard me talking to Megan.”

Blue eyes—honest, blue, farm boy eyes. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“You said that last night. It’s okay.”

Last night, when I was shitfaced. Awesome. I think real deep thoughts when I’m so plastered I can’t find my yurt without help.

“You blew our cover at the bowling alley, too, Fraz. You’re a security risk when you’re drinking.”

I winced. “Sorry. That time—that time wasn’t an accident.”

“I never actually did anything with him. I knew he wanted to, but I wasn’t there yet, in my head. I still kind of thought it would pass.”

Had I ever seriously thought being gay would pass? If I had, I didn’t remember it.

Pete cleared his throat. “Uh, Dom said—Dom said you thought that was about him. Lex didn’t even notice Dom, Fraz. He thought I was all over *you*.”

What the fuck? “But you didn’t deny it. I mean, if it was about me, you should have said—you should have—” What the hell was going on here?

And god, that poor kid, Lex, or whatever. Because then he walked into the bathroom and we looked right at each other and he *knew*. He knew I’d heard all that. That’s awful.

“Anyway,” Pete muttered.

Dom sat back and quit it with my thigh. “The first time I had sex with a girl, I thought it confirmed that I was straight enough. Or at least bi enough. Like

hey, I can do this, I have this skill. Maybe all that other stuff was just—fluff. Extra.”

“Then what happened?”

Dom grinned at me, then looked back at Pete. “I blew this amazing guy the morning of the final dress rehearsal for *Little Women* at the rec center we used to go to.”

“He played Laurie,” I added, like it mattered. “The guy, not Dom.”

“Matt. So hot.”

“He wasn’t that hot.”

“Shut up, Fraz.”

He’d been hot. Matt, I didn’t remember his last name, but he’d been maybe nineteen, so just old enough to seem so much cooler and more sophisticated than we were.

“So? Blowing a guy turned you off women for good, really?”

Dom smiled a little lopsided, leaning back on his arms. “Nope. But blowing a guy made me want to blow more guys. And having sex with women made me feel sort of intrigued and detached, like an anthropologist on expedition.”

“Shit. I know *exactly* that feeling.” Pete swallowed, looking away again, body tense.

“I’d offer to let you ride me like a horse, but I’m not really into ponyplay,” I said, trying to be funny.

“Huh?”

“Just, you look like you could use a ride on Hedwig right now.”

“Oh. Yeah, actually. God. It’s just—” He shook his head. “I really, really want to not feel like an idiot in the morning.”

“Do you feel like an idiot now?” Dom asked.

“No.”

“Good. Kissing passes the test. You guys should kiss again.”

Pete opened his mouth to protest, but I chose to take it as an invitation. And he’d kissed nicely, decorously, but I took it a little further, letting my tongue slip across his lips.

His hands clamped down on my shoulders, not to push me away but to hold me in place.

Both of us were breathless, panting a little as we pulled apart.

“Sorry,” he murmured.

“Don’t apologize,” Dom said, kneeling again. The same hand, starting at my knee, working inward. “Don’t apologize for kissing Fraz hard because he liked it.” Pete was looking down at Dom’s hand, and I held my breath, waiting, watching, bracing for contact. “See?” Dom cupped me through my jeans.

“You’re a fucking tease, Dominic.” *Do not thrust into his hand, do not thrust into his hand, do not let him win, dammit.*

“You like that about me.” Stroke, stroke, squeeze.

“You’re such a bastard,” I said.

“Kiss him again, Pete.”

This time I was the one who closed my eyes. Pete’s lips, Pete’s hands on my shoulders, Dom’s hand on my cock through my clothes. Was I Gabey right now, giving in to my shipmates? Or Pippin in some kind of meta orgy with the Players in my head?

Or maybe I was the Cowardly Lion.

I reached out, running my hand up Pete’s back. The kiss faltered for a second, then resumed, so I kept going. He was strong, wiry, and his back was a firm plane of muscle that I wanted to feel without his shirt. (Could I get him to ride Hedwig with his shirt off? I wasn’t going anywhere near a horse, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy the view.)

Dom’s hand drifted toward my fly, and I stopped him.

“What’re we doing here, Dominic?”

“Relaxing. Enjoying each other’s company.”

I gave him a look (and left my hand at Pete’s neck, tensing and releasing).

“I don’t know, Fraz. What do you want?”

“Maybe I just want sweet summer evenings.” *Or to share your bed. No. No more song lyrics.*

He hummed a few bars of “Magic to Do.”

“That’s the wrong song.”

“It’s the perfect song. Let me prove there’s magic here, Fraz. Tell me what you want.”

The Wizard is the biggest coward of all, you know. It’s not the lion, or Dorothy, and it’s not even the Wicked Witch. It’s the Wizard.

“I want you to fuck me,” I said. “It’s what I’ve wanted since we were fifteen years old.”

Dom’s hand slid under my shirt, resting on my stomach. “You never said anything.”

“Because you’re the guy everyone wants, Dom. And I didn’t want to be another one of your cheerleaders.”

“You think that’s how I see you?”

God, his hand was warm. “You don’t know what you see. You never know.”

“Fraz, we’ve known each other for years. I see *you*.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and when Dom reached up to kiss me, one of Pete’s hands disappeared but the other stayed on my shoulder, like he was keeping me in place for Dom, so I couldn’t run away.

“I see you. I always saw you. You pretend like everything’s meaningless, but you make sure it’s all perfect. You’ve always done that.” His fingers slid just under my jeans on the right side, drifting across my spider web. “You see all the connections. You were everyone’s understudy, Fraz. You knew all the lines, all the cues, all the blocking, all the lights. Fraz, come on. I tried to be like you. Half the time I still do that. I’m directing, but what I’m really thinking is what little tweak would Fraz suggest right now to make this play better?”

“Shut up, Dom.”

“I don’t think so.” But he did shut up, at least a little; he kissed me again, and this time it was serious. This time we kissed like men, with tongues, and lips, and teeth.

“I should go,” Pete said, again.

“You should lie down. Fraz, will you take off your shirt?”

Shit. “I will if you do.”

Dom grinned and shucked his shirt vaguely in the direction of his bed, so I did the same.

Mm. Dom. I've seen him naked hundreds of times, but not like this. None of those times even approached the way he was looking at me right now.

"I really wish we didn't have bunk beds," he said, and pressed his palms over my chest.

"Actually, you can kind of rig the mattresses on the ground." Pete stood up, and I'm not sure if he was actually uncomfortable or I was projecting. He grabbed the top bunk mattress from my bed, then the top mattress from Dom's and arranged them on the floor of the yurt. "If you can move the bunks a little to the sides, it'll keep them together in the middle."

We will now pause this almost sex-fest to do some kind of elaborate floor-bed design session with CowboyPete.

"Perfect," Dom said, lying back across both mattresses, stretching out, chest hair dark against his skin.

Pete and I glanced at each other. He was way overdressed. He hadn't even taken off his shoes.

"How'd you know the thing with the mattresses?" I asked.

"I came in one day and Gerry was putting them back. I actually helped him out before I realized, you know, why they'd been on the floor."

"Nice. Very polite, helping him clean up after sexing—wait, who was he sexing?"

"I have no idea. And don't want to know."

Cue awkwardness. Right. Don't be a coward, Frazier.

I stepped in closer and pulled his hands to my waist. "I'm kissing you again, okay?"

"Okay."

Kissing standing up doesn't get enough credit in the world. If you have a decent height match, kissing standing up is one of the greatest ways to kiss. You can rub up against each other without thinking about who's taking whose weight, whether you need to shift an arm this way or that way, or all the weird little complexities that come with kissing lying down. Kissing standing up feels a little wholesome and a little dirty all at once.

I was already hard from Dom fucking with me, but Pete was definitely catching up. I ran my hands up under his shirt this time and kissed him deeper, waiting to see if he was good with that, or if he wanted me to back off.

Nope, *back off* was not the vibe our boy was putting out.

I broke away from his lips and started kissing his jaw in a line to his ear. Pete was breathing raggedly and his hands were gripping my sides like he was drowning, so I dialed it back a little, nuzzling more than chewing. Yeah, better. He started relaxing again.

“This is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” Dom said. “You two are the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“We aim to please,” I muttered. Pete laughed lightly.

“I’m taking off my pants,” Dom replied, like that made sense.

Pete and I both looked over way too fast, and I don’t know if he almost broke his neck, but I was definitely gonna feel that later.

“Unless one of you wants to help me out.” Dom’s fingers played with the top button of his slacks. (Black slacks, black shirt, black tie, very serious clothes for DirectorDom.)

“Get your ass up here,” I told him. “God. You’re so fucking needy, Dom.”

“I aim to please.”

“Pete, I don’t know if you’ve met FlirtyDom. FlirtyDom has mostly been on vacation this summer. FlirtyDom, this is Pete.”

“Oh, we’ve met.” Dom slid in between us, kissing Pete, draping his arms over Pete’s shoulders. “You good?”

“I’m good. Or maybe Fraz is good. I’ve never felt that turned on just from kissing.”

“I’ve observed his technique in the past. He’s all right.”

I slapped his ass. “Excuse me?”

“We’ll let Pete be the judge.”

Kissing noises, come on, I really needed more than this. I rubbed up against Dom, reaching around to work open his fly as they kissed, and he shoved back into me.

Dom. My Dom. Dominic, who’d announced blowing Matt with smug pleasure, then immediately rehashed every second of it with me and Grace so we could give him a critique, as if it’d been an audition he hadn’t quite nailed.

Dom, whose ass now pushed back into my dick. I shoved his slacks down and gripped him through his shorts. He groaned.

“This is no longer an objective comparison,” I whispered in his ear, stroking him.

“I didn’t distract you this badly. Oh god, Fraz, keep doing that.”

“Keep doing what?”

He groaned again and put his head down on Pete’s shoulder. “Mm. You feel so fucking good.”

“You feel so fucking good,” I countered, slipping my hand inside. Skin on skin made both of us moan.

“Ah, Fraz, don’t—*Oh my god.*”

I stopped and just held his dick in my hand for a long minute while he shuddered, hoping I’d timed it right and not pushed him over. “Don’t blow your load yet, Dom. Pete hasn’t even taken off his shirt.”

Shit, maybe I shouldn’t be acting like this was a sure thing. But Pete’s eyes were a little glazed like he was hella turned on, so maybe it *was* a sure thing.

“Tag out.” Dom took a deep breath, still trembling. “I need a minute. Can I blow you? I’ve wanted to blow you every day since we moved into the apartment.”

Then my head exploded and I died happy.

Wait.

“You *what?* What the fuck, Dominic?” I shoved him down on the mattresses.

“What the fuck what?” He wiggled out of his slacks and left his shorts on.

“Why the hell did we never do anything, then? I thought you were into big butch guys?”

“You can be plenty butch when you want to be, Fraz. And I’m not into anyone.”

“Until right the fuck now you weren’t into *me.*”

“That wasn’t—it wasn’t like that. I told you. I didn’t want to be another notch on your, you know—”

“My lipstick case? You bitch!”

“Shut up, Frazier. I didn’t want to be another throwaway guy you never spoke to again when you were through with me. Anyway, can we move on now, please?”

Pete's hand twined into mine, fingers weaving into each other. "You guys are Romeo and Juliet. That's cute."

"Who're you, Mercutio?"

Blank look.

"Have you ever seen *Romeo and Juliet*?"

"Does the movie count?"

"No," I said, while Dom was saying, "Only kind of."

We looked at each other. And laughed.

"Come on." I tugged Pete down until he was in between us. "This isn't really happening right now. Is this a joke? Are you guys setting me up for something?"

"Yeah, Fraz. It's X-Rated Gay Candid Camera, I'm inventing it."

"Ha ha ha. Pete, you want us to undress you?"

"Um... I don't know."

"Cool." Dom leaned over him for a kiss. "But do you want to watch me blow Fraz? That's the real question."

"Yeah. That'd be really hot."

"Look, we voted. Lie back, Frazier."

Still, I hesitated, looking at him. I mean, you'd think *I* was a sure thing, but for some reason I was nervous, too. Maybe more nervous than Pete.

I've had sex with friends and had it work out fine, like no big deal. I've had sex with friends and had it go pretty pear-shaped. But neither of those situations really felt like this one.

"I'm in love with you," I said, breathing fast.

Dom's smile widened, and he shifted up to his knees. "I know. Thanks for being the one who said it first."

I wanted to ask what the hell that meant, but then he was kissing me again, both of us on our knees, reaching across Pete to do it.

When Dom guided me back, I went. And when Pete took my hand again, I held his tightly in return. I thought it was gonna be quick, but Dom acted like we had all night (and actual walls separating us from the rest of Yurtville,

where any time now the entire camp was going to come caroling back). He tugged off my socks, my jeans, my watch, even. He played with my dick through my briefs until I thought I was going to come just from that, then he took those off, too.

“Fraz,” he said softly, kissing along my webs.

Not everyone can pull off licking my tattoo. Some try too hard to trace the lines, some don’t try hard enough. Of course Dom was perfect; his tongue pointed and dragged right along the edge, and we watched it, Pete and I. We watched him draw a wet trail all the way to my dick.

And pull back.

“So,” Dom said. He reached out to my nuts and started playing with them, fingertips only, little pulses, little touches. “Tell us more about horses, Pete.”

“Unless you’ve got an equine kink I don’t know about, shut the fuck up about horses.”

“How would I know if I had an equine kink?” Pete asked.

“Both of you shut up. Dom, get back to what you were doing.”

“I’ve lost my train of thought. I think you’d know if you got turned on by the sight of horses.”

“Oh. No, no equine kink. I mean, sometimes I’m in the saddle and—”

I reached down for Dom’s hand, but Pete just as quickly reached for mine and held it.

“Ha,” Dom said. “Yeah. Hold Frazier down. Force him to let me take him slowly. I knew three people could be convenient. Tell us more about being in the saddle, Pete.”

I groaned.

“I used to have this riding instructor who was really hot. Like should-be-in-porn hot. I came up with all these really stupid stories about why it looked like I was riding with a hard-on just in case he ever noticed, but what was he going to say?”

Can’t resist that opening. “How about ‘Hey, sexy, can I give you a hand with that?’”

“Or no, even better,” Dom said, still touching me so lightly I could barely feel him. “Maybe he would have come over and groped you, like, ‘Pete, I think you have something here screwing up your position.’”

“My seat.”

“Wouldn’t that be somewhere else?”

“No, how you sit on a horse is called your seat. That really is what I thought he’d say. I was so sure it was obvious, but it probably wasn’t.”

“No equine kinks, check. God, Fraz, I can’t even believe I’m touching you right now.”

“I can’t believe I’m the only one naked. I still think this is a prank.” But I didn’t. Not with how clammy Pete’s hands were. “Pete, cut a guy a break and kiss me, okay?”

“Oh, good. Yeah, kiss him, then tell us who kisses best under pressure.”

“I’m not telling you who kisses best.” Pete leaned down, and this time he kept his eyes open a little longer, which was wild. “I like kissing you,” he said softly.

“I knew it. I’m the best, Dom, Pete just—” I sucked in air when Dom sucked in *me*.

“Whoa. That is—whoa.”

It took me by surprise. He’d been so slow and torturous, but now he was sucking me like a damn vacuum. I arched again, crying out, and Dom let me go.

“What *the fuck* was that? I’d kill you but I can’t right now, you fucking asshole.”

“That was how I blew Matt backstage.”

“And you never blew him again, yeah, I’m seeing that now.”

“Shut up, Fraz.” His hand returned to my sensitive dick and started jacking it, but reasonably, like a sane person. “I just want to see how many reactions I can get out of you, that’s all.”

“Maybe you should just fuck me already.”

“I think we should take things more slowly than that, Frazier.”

“Or you could bite me. The hell are you talking about?”

Dom shook his head. “Don’t get pissed. Just, I really do not want to be your used tissues on the floor next to the bed, which is basically how you treat everyone you have sex with.”

“Ouch,” Pete said.

“I do not.” I searched for anger, since that was a pretty screwed up thing to say, but mostly I only felt sick. “I don’t treat people like that.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t, Dominic. Stop fucking saying that.”

Dom stopped touching and lay down. On top of me. Dick to dick (with his shorts still on, the bastard). Lips to lips. He kissed me, but I looked away.

“I don’t do that,” I said.

“Well, whatever you usually do, it’s not good enough for me. Hey. Frazier.” He kissed my neck and thrust gently. “I want everything.”

“I should go—”

Both of us said, “No.”

I elbowed Dom off me, even though I liked that he was there, and turned to Pete. “You can’t leave me here with him. He’s insane. If he gets really obnoxious I might need you to tie him to Lollipop and make them go for a walk so I can take a break.”

“Lollipop?” Dom said from behind me.

“Pete’s sister’s horse. Don’t let the name fool you, she’s a beast.”

Pete shook his head. “Yeah, but the two of you obviously feel strongly about each other, and I’m totally just in the way right now.”

“Are you?” I kissed him lightly. “You aren’t in the way. But will you take your shirt off? Do people ride horses shirtless? Because that would be seriously porn-worthy, Pete.”

“Um. Okay. Er. You’re—totally naked.”

“Fraz is naked?”

And oh, god, Dom pressed against my back, his hand seeking out my dick.

“Yep. Definitely naked.”

I wanted to say, “I forget how cheesy you are when you’re trying to flirt,” but I couldn’t put all the words together while he was stroking my dick from behind me. Or nudging his, hard, against my ass.

“Wow, um, that’s hot.”

“Take your shirt off, Pete. And kiss Fraz.”

I wanted to say, “You really still in director mode right now?” Instead, I closed my eyes and leaned back into him.

“You’re missing Pete taking off his shirt,” Dom whispered against my ear. “He looks so good, Fraz. I can’t wait to see you licking his chest.”

“Uhhhm—”

“Kiss. Please.”

I smelled Pete in the air before I felt him. He kissed one side of my lips, then the other side. It was so sweet I couldn’t keep from looking at him.

He had really nice eyes. And yeah, the chest, the stomach, all tight muscles, but not gym muscles. Work muscles. Pete’s body was the result of labor, not scheduled repetitions and CrossFit sessions.

“You all right with this?” I asked him, running one of my thumbs over his nipples.

“No one’s ever touched me there.”

“How does it feel?”

“Good. Is that weird? I kind of thought nipples were a girl thing.”

“Not weird,” I said. Dom’s hand, which had defaulted to rubbing my thigh unobtrusively, slid back down again to cup my balls. “Shit, Dominic.”

“Kiss Pete while you play with his nipples,” Dom whispered, kissing my neck again.

“Bossy, bossy, bossy.” But when I leaned up, Pete leaned in.

He was a good kisser, only a little tentative, and when I pinched a nipple, he gasped right into my mouth, which was sexy as hell.

Then Dom took up stroking again and I closed my eyes.

“Frazier’s been trying to get us together for days now. All the time we spent talking about him, he spent thinking about how to glue us to each other. Isn’t that funny? He wanted us so badly that he tried to cockblock himself.”

“Why?”

“Because Fraz thinks he’s a joke.”

I was torn between telling him to shut up and begging him to keep going, because his hand wasn’t picking up the pace, wasn’t working out a rhythm. His hand was *dallying*, and that’s fucking cruel, man.

Hold up—they talked about me? What did that mean? Oh god, his hand—I reached backwards to pull him in tighter against me and his laughter tickled my skin.

“You’re so impossible. You’ve always been so impossible. I want Pete to kiss you this time, Fraz. I want you to let him.”

What the hell had I been doing before? Fighting him? But Dom wrapped himself around me, one leg coming over mine, his arm crossing my chest, and I thought I understood.

Dom was a lot more *dominant* than I would have given him credit for. He restrained me and embraced me simultaneously, and when Pete kissed me this time it felt like my bones were liquefying, like I was melting into both of them at once.

Cowboys are trustworthy, sure. Good kissers, too.

“You can touch him.”

“I don’t know how.”

“It’s not complicated. Keep doing the things he likes and stop doing the things he doesn’t like.”

“But how will I know if he likes it?”

I was *he*. I was the body. The medium. Dom held me close and talked like sex was one more production he had to coax his enthralled but inexperienced cast through.

“I’ll like it,” I said and opened my eyes.

“I’ve never done this before.”

“It’s opening night,” Dom said. “Everything that happens on opening night stays on opening night.”

“That makes no sense,” I told him, arching my neck, trying for a kiss.

“Anyway, I take it back. I want to keep doing this way after opening night.”

Pete rolled his eyes, a move arrested mid-roll as he looked down my body. Uh huh. Never done it before, but thought about it, oh yeah.

I don’t have a huge dick. I mean, it’s solid, and I’m not complaining—it’s a hair on the high side of average, I’m just saying—but for Pete’s first hand job, you know, I was feeling some pressure.

In my nuts.

“Pete,” I managed. “Do it already.”

“Sorry.”

His hand moved in fucking *slow motion*, I’m not kidding. Slowly, slowly, moving through air, moving through space, moving through time like a fucking snail, and then—there.

I don’t get off on virgins. Like, that’s not something I think is especially hot. But Pete? Pete bit his lip and narrowed his eyes and touched me like he was playing with electricity, and my dick might be a live wire. I wasn’t looking at my dick. I was looking at the bright white of his teeth clenched down on his lip.

“Shit, yes.” I swear Dom’s cock swelled at my ass. “God, Pete, yeah, take it slow. Really make him want it.”

I slid my hand under his shorts and dug my nails into his skin. “You’re a fucking jerk, Dom.”

“Keep doing that.”

Was he talking to Pete? To me? I didn’t know, but it wasn’t much of a hardship to knead my nails into his butt cheek while he flicked my nipples and Pete—god, Pete—explored my dick.

“This is awesome,” our little cowboy virgin said. “Wow, Frazier, this is awesome. Your dick is awesome.”

“Thanks. Maybe you could show your appreciation by, I don’t know, *actually getting me off.*”

“No one’s getting off on the floor of the yurt,” Dom said. “This is just foreplay. We have a whole cottage, with a bathroom and everything.”

I groaned. “You prick. Then what’re we doing here?”

“This is the seduction part, Fraz. Plus, you guys wouldn’t have come with me if I’d have proposed it before.”

Before? *Before* was such a hard concept to comprehend at the moment. Had I been the Wizard a few hours ago? Was that days ago? Another lifetime?

Pete’s fingers began actually jacking me, finally, at last, and I tried to thrust into his hand, but Dom’s leg clamped down and I couldn’t move.

“Do you want him to keep going, Fraz? I’ll let him, but it’ll only be worse for you when I make him stop so we can put our clothes back on.”

“What the hell are you—Oh, god, Pete, do that, yeah, faster.”

“Your choice. Go faster, Pete, but stop when I tell you to stop.”

“Okay.”

Good little boy, takes orders well, very polite. Dom tilted my head to the side and attached himself to my neck again and oh my fuck, between them I was putty, almost sobbing with need, unable to take a deep breath. Dom’s lips seemed connected to Pete’s fingers, and I was just an innocent bystander.

“Stop,” Dom said against my neck.

“Noooo, come on, come on—”

“No one’s coming tonight.”

I fought arousal, my dick now twitching like it was begging Pete for more.

“No one’s coming tonight?” Pete echoed, sounding exactly as flummoxed as I felt. (Oh, all right, maybe not *exactly*.)

“Yep.” Dom, cheerful as fuck, released me. “But seriously, the shower in the cottage is way better, so we should go.” He disappeared, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Oh my god. Tell me he’s not putting his clothes on right now.”

“Um, yeah.”

“He’s such a fuck. Hey, Pete.”

Pete looked down at me, bashful now that he’d jerked me off a little.

“Thanks. That would have been good if DominantDom hadn’t stopped it.”

“Good. I mean—thanks.”

“Get up, get dressed. I want to get out of here before the place is crawling with peep.”

I grumbled as I got dressed. None of this made sense. And *no one’s coming tonight* couldn’t possibly be true.

Also, seriously, when did Dom get so fucking kinky? It was freaking me out. And turning me on.

“Wait a sec, Fraz.”

“Yeah, you know, you’re not the boss of—”

You can boss me around anytime. God, he could kiss. It wasn’t fair that someone so charming, so well liked, could kiss so well. Was he really just that good at everything? Not fair.

Pete giggled, and I realized I’d unintentionally closed my eyes.

“You just giggled,” I said.

“You just *swooned*.”

“Shut up, Peter.”

“Let’s go.”

Dom’s the most irritating person I’ve ever known, and no matter how much I didn’t want to follow orders—

Come on. Sexy shower scene, incoming. I don’t *only* watch musicals.

Chapter Fourteen

I hadn't been to the cabin, but it was sweet. It was freaking awesome. The sheets were really soft, the blankets were thick, the towels were incredible.

"I'm moving in. How much does it cost to rent one of these for the month, Pete?"

"It's \$245 a night."

I froze in the process of hugging one of the towels. "Are you shitting me? Oh my god. No offense, Pete, but who the fuck wants to spend that much money to stay out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Pete shrugged. "You couldn't pay me that much to stay in New Halliday if I didn't have to."

"You don't have to," Dom said, sticking his head out from the bathroom. "You can leave anytime. Shower, anyone?"

"Yes. Gay porn shower scene!" I shoved Pete. "You gonna take off your clothes for the shower?"

"Um..."

"Just come in with us," Dom told him. "To the bathroom, not the shower, unless you want to."

"Um. You want me to watch you shower?"

"And make out." I shucked the last of my clothes and pretended to be a lot more relaxed than I actually felt. I brushed past Dom and started the shower running. Even the bathroom was great. The little soaps were round and luxurious-feeling, there was a shower cap, and wow, the shampoo and conditioner were in fancy narrow containers that did not look like crappy hotel shampoo. And I've already mentioned the towels, but I'll mention them again. They were amazing.

"Hey," Dom said from just over my left shoulder.

I swallowed and made my voice light. "I feel cleaner just standing in this bathroom than I feel getting *out* of the shower in Yurtville."

"I know." His hand trailed down my spine. "You all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be? I'm about to fuck the hottest guy at camp. Oh, and you're here, too."

A kiss, left cheek. I closed my eyes.

“I’ve loved you for so long it’s like a groove inside me, Frazier.”

He shouldn’t even be able to say things like that to me, especially when I’m naked. I shrugged him off and got into the shower, hiding my face in the spray.

You know what happened then, right? Because even before he touched me with soap-slick hands, I knew what he was gonna do. Dom with his crazy caregiving energy, soaping my back, my neck. It was amazing. It was a fucking beautiful moment.

“You missed a spot,” I muttered.

He laughed.

“So, Pete,” Dom said, running his hands down my arms. “How’s your Yurtville experience been? Your mom asked me the other day how the yurts were holding up, and I told her I thought pretty well.”

They talked. About fucking *yurts*. While I was naked and soapy. Then again, Dom was behind me. He must be naked, too.

I turned around and he grinned, running his hands over my chest. “Damn, Fraz. I could kiss you all freaking night.”

“The fuck is stopping you?” And oh, oh, kissing Dom was incredible. He tasted good, a little like himself, a little like Pete. I grabbed him by the ass and pulled him in tighter, rubbing myself against his cock.

“Really? No one’s gonna come tonight?”

“Really.”

“You think you’re in charge?”

“I’m a professional director, I don’t know if you know that.”

“You saying Pete’s mom is paying you to have sex with him? Because that’s a little creepy, Dom.”

“A *lot* creepy,” Pete said. “Oh god, now I’m *thinking*—”

“Don’t think. Stop thinking. Suspend all thoughts,” Dom said, kneading my side a little as he spoke.

I fought pleasure and tried to find a stern tone. “I’m still stuck on this not coming thing. I demand an explanation!”

“Trust me, Fraz. Just let me show you all the other ways we can have sex.”

“I realize there are other ways to have sex. I could also be a vegan or run marathons. But what’s the point? Why the hell would we make a ‘no coming’ rule?” I could feel myself funneling my anxiety into anger, and usually that’s a decent place for it—I’d always rather feel angry than anxious—but right now I was naked, in a hot shower, with Dominic, and Pete was standing against the wall looking flushed.

“Okay, it’s not a rule. But I’m not gonna come tonight. I’m gonna save myself for tomorrow morning.”

Damn him. “But *why*? Why don’t you just tell me—”

“Because of me. Right? You’re trying to take things slowly for me.”

I looked over.

“I mean, I’m not even—I’m not even sure I should be here right now.”

“I’m not making a ‘no coming’ rule for you, Pete.” Fuck Dom and his sweet hazel eyes. “I’m making it for all three of us, because this is way too good to have waited all summer for, then just *do* like it was nothing.”

“Thought you said it wasn’t a rule,” I murmured, losing myself a little between his hands and his eyes.

“I’ll make it worth your while. Now stand still, you’re only half clean.”

I felt shaky, and nothing I could think of to make into a joke would fix how screwed up it was that Dom was soaping my legs, my thighs, and he’d decided no one should come.

It hurt. I know that sounds ridiculous, but I ached thinking about it.

“I still think he’s trying not to scare me.” Pete’s voice was closer than it had been. He was closer, reaching up to tilt the showerhead a little so he could stand beside me without getting too wet.

He kissed me and I leaned into it, squeezing my eyes shut while Dom lifted each foot.

“Is Dom always a tease like this?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. He must hate us.”

“Or like us a lot.”

“Or maybe he’s got an orgasm deprivation kink.”

Pete huffed a laugh. “God, I really hope not, Fraz.”

“We’ll just make him stand in the corner and watch, if he does. You’re a good kisser, Pete.”

“Hedwig taught me a lot.”

I punched him in the arm. “You’re disgusting. New rule, no bestiality. No discussion of bestiality.”

Dom’s soapy palm slid over my webs. “There goes half of my plan.”

“I will knee you in the nose.”

Both of them laughed.

“Spread your legs a little, Fraz, I’m not done yet.”

“I can—”

“I know. But I want to. Please.”

Shit, shit, shit.

“Kiss Pete again. Feel his lips. Feel my hands.”

“If this is some kind of bullshit thing where Frazier learns to feel—”

“Yeah, it definitely is.” His hand slid over my nuts, and god, that was wild. The soap-slide was wild, the water rinsing in little rivers down my skin was wild, and Dom’s hand on my balls, my dick, the head of my dick—I breathed into Pete’s shoulder, even though I was getting him wet. I couldn’t look down.

When he turned me gently and started on my ass, I went stiff.

“Shh, Fraz. This is a really old jerk-off fantasy I’m living right now, come on.”

“You jerked off to the idea of washing my ass?”

His fingers slipped down my cleft, then back up. “Oh god, my heart’s pounding. I love you so much, you have no idea.” Fingertips now, uneven pressure. Pete was nearly panting.

Watching. Pete, still dressed, was holding me up and watching Dom play with my ass.

I groaned. One of his fingers pressed against me at just the right spot, and I groaned again.

“This okay?”

Idiot. I didn’t bother answering, but I did push my ass back at him.

Pete giggled.

“Ugh, god, Fraz—” Dom’s finger slid inside. “Fuck, you’re so hot.” In, out, in, out. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

I gathered my breath. “You’re a lousy director. I’ve always said so.”

He retaliated by sliding his finger out.

“Hey!”

“More soap. I never thought about how easily soap rinses. Two fingers okay, Fraz?”

“Your dick would be better.”

“Oh, we’ve got time.”

Two fingers and I leaned more of my weight on Pete while Dom stroked in and out, his other hand higher up on my ass, just slightly pulling me open. I couldn’t stop trembling.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered.

He tried to rinse me, but eventually I made myself straighten up again so I could do it. I couldn’t look at either of them. Usually being fingered kind of grounds me in my body—feels like being *done to* more than sex, which is always *done with* no matter how you frame it; if a guy’s got his dick in you, he’s experiencing strong sensations, right? But if it’s just a finger or two, not so much.

Right now, though, I couldn’t get myself to come down off the feeling of Dom’s fingers, and it left me shaky.

“Is that a service you offer to anyone?” Pete asked.

“Anyone in this room, yeah. Why? You interested?”

“I’m definitely interested. I’m just—also a little freaked out.”

“Why don’t you come in with us and kiss Fraz some more. If you want us to get out so you can shower, we will, Pete, you know? Nothing’s a deal breaker. We’re just figuring stuff out right now.”

“Fraz looks like he’s about to fall asleep.”

Dom pressed up against my back, reaching his arms around me in a dripping embrace. “I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, um, okay. Just, I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” He nuzzled into my neck. “Our cowboy’s bashful, Fraz. You all right? Did I overstep?”

“With your fingers in my ass? No, Dom.”

His hands moved over my belly, my chest, and back down again. “I love being pressed against you like this, Frazier. I love feeling your entire body against mine.”

I couldn’t find a single snappy comeback to that, even though I’d probably have a list at three a.m. when I could no longer use them.

Enter: the cowboy. Oh my god. Look at that chest, those thighs. That totally uncut dick.

“Swoon, swoon, swoon,” I said. “Pete, you hot beast, get your ass in here. Oh my god.”

“Yeah, okay, is it weird my heart’s pounding right now?”

“No,” Dom said. “You want us to pretend we’re not drooling?”

“Ha.” Pete climbed in on the far side of the spray, and Dom turned us so I was still facing out and he was behind me.

“What am I, your shield?”

“I caught you by surprise this time. If I let you go, I’m not sure you’ll let me cuddle again.”

I pinched his forearm, and he backed off. “Jerk. Hey, Pete, you’re in the cold part of the spray over there.”

“It’s crowded in here.”

“It’s doable. Come on.” I stood sideways and he tried to pass me without touching, but he couldn’t quite manage, brushing an arm against my stomach, and pausing.

“Wow. This is so much more intense than being naked with girls.”

“Well, you gotta remember Dom’s been teasing you all summer.” I risked reaching out to his side, honorably keeping my eyes on his face even though his dick (hard, totally not worried about the intensity) really wanted my attention. “I’ll stand on the outside this time and we’ll kiss while Dom does his thing.”

“Does he have a shower fetish?”

“Actually, he really might. You should see him in the Target body wash section. I’m just saying.”

“Frazier secretly wants to be a gourmet chef,” Dom shot back. “He fondles all the kitchen stuff.”

“I want to know how to cook, you jerk. I don’t, like, get off on it.”

Pete grinned. “Do you really? I’m a pretty good cook. I love the kitchen section.”

“You guys can cook for me. Good plan. Now kiss so I can start washing my cowboy now.”

“Hey, he’s not *your* cowboy, jerk.” I pulled Pete in and kissed him. “This cowboy belongs to both of us.”

“I’m really not a cowboy. I mean, technically you’d probably have to say shepherd, since we used to have sheep—”

Dom pressed in close and caught my eye while he kissed Pete’s neck. “Our shepherd. Got it.”

“Really, though, shepherds don’t have the same reputation for hotness.”

“Obviously they should, judging by Pete.”

“True,” I said, and kissed him again. “True.”

We soaped Pete and rinsed him, not quite as thoroughly as Dom had done me, but I still got to feel his dick—mm, thick and solid and did I mention uncut? Because blowing Pete was gonna be amazing. He mostly kept his eyes closed, only fluttering open when I kissed him. Which I did. You know, just to make sure everything was okay. For medical reasons, yeah. A medical check-in. With lips. And sometimes tongues.

Dom washed himself quickly, and by then I was chilled and mostly just wanted out of the shower. He probably did, too.

And oh, the towels. The towels. They were like thick, warm, absorbent blankets. I wrapped myself up in one and jumped on the bed, waiting to see what Dom would do next.

He wrapped his towel around his waist (think Greek god), and stepped up to Pete. “I’m gambling that you’re more excited than nervous. And that you really like us, you’re not just trying to do a guy so it’s out of the way.”

“Listen to him,” I muttered.

“Kind of why I’m making it a point, yeah. Because my first time with a guy was okay, but I really just wanted to check it off the list, you know?” He rested

his fingers lightly on Pete's jaw and I held my breath. "Because I like you way more than that, Pete. So does Fraz."

Insert joke about how I'm just here to get laid. Except I was still holding my breath, waiting for Pete to make a call.

"Yeah, uh, I didn't even know I should have 'threesome in the shower' on my list, so I think we're pretty much beyond that, Dominic."

"Good. And anyway, I was serious about not coming."

"It's a rule," I added.

"Just, if we sleep together, if we brush against each other all night, if we kiss and touch and breathe each other in for hours—that sounds so fucking sexy to me."

"Okay," I said. "But what I'm missing here is how orgasms would make it less sexy."

"I think we've got, like, days and days for orgasms. But you only get this little bit of time for the anticipation, for the lead-in, and I want to feel it."

I sighed, as loudly as I could. "God, you're really obnoxious. DominantDom is really obnoxious. Maybe even more than FlirtyDom."

Dom grinned and kissed Pete's cheek. "Fraz is hogging the bed, come on."

They climbed in on either side, and Dom turned me toward Pete again.

"Go ahead. Kiss."

"He's such a jerk."

But Pete looked like he'd bought Dom's whole shtick, and I could hardly complain. I had, too.

We kissed, and this time it was gentle, like first kisses only not. Both of us tasted like the shower and I could feel Dom behind me, kissing my neck. Pete reached out, pulling himself into me, and guh, his dick, come on, I couldn't sleep beside two naked men all night and not fuck, it was cruel.

"I like kissing you, Frazier."

"I like kissing you, too, shepherd."

He laughed softly.

Dom kissed up to my shoulder, then leaned up to capture Pete's lips, kissing right in front of my ear. "I like kissing both of you. If you're the shepherd, what am I?"

“You’re kind of the leading man, aren’t you?” Pete asked. “I mean, that’s what it seems like.” He glanced at me.

“I was gonna say ‘control freak,’ but leading man works, too.”

Pete’s lips, recently the epicenter of Dom’s kisses, curled in a smile. “What does that make you, Fraz?”

“Oh, Fraz is the reason we’re here.” They kissed again, then both of them kissed me. “Fraz spins the web. He makes sure all the threads end up in the right places.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. More kissing, less talking.”

“He pretends to be insignificant, but really he’s indispensable.”

“Like condoms and lube. Speaking of—”

“Tomorrow.”

“Happy fuckin’ Christmas.”

“I think you’re uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, in the dick, you jerk.”

Pete kissed me more deeply, “You’re not insignificant.”

“Blow me, shepherd.”

They laughed.

I rolled over the top of Pete (disappointed/relieved to be out of Dom’s grasp) and nudged him in between us. “Fine. I’ll blow you instead. You want?”

“Um. If our goal is no orgasms, maybe that’s not such a great idea.”

I groaned, or maybe whined. “Oh my god, Pete, you have to let me taste your dick, it’s gorgeous.”

“My—it’s gorgeous?”

“Are you joking?” I reached out, watching his eyes to make sure that was all right. When he didn’t pull away, I touched him, little strokes with his foreskin. “Oh my god. Right, Dom?”

“So beautiful.”

“*Beautiful?*” Pete inhaled sharply. “Oh boy, Fraz, that feels really good.”

“Damn right it does, you sexy thing.” I started to duck my head down, but Dom poked me. “Aw, c’mon! I promise I’ll learn my lines tomorrow, but right now I gotta—”

“Lick Pete’s nipples,” Dom suggested.

Which hey, all right, not like I’m gonna argue with that.

“What’re you gonna do while I do that?”

He smiled, one hand resting over Pete’s belly, the other propping him up. “I’m going to hump his ass from behind and revel in the knowledge that we have all night to play like this, and all tomorrow morning to keep going.”

I rolled my eyes.

And yeah, Pete liked it when I touched his nipples, but he went freaking insane when I sucked on them. He got so turned on Dom made me stop.

Listen, I wouldn’t have believed it either, about all three of us being in bed, naked, and not coming. Even as I was falling asleep, I was still waiting for someone to crack. But really, the tension made it a little wild, a little reckless, a little crazy. I had strange dreams, dreams where we were standing under a waterfall, all of us somehow kissing at once, dreams of Pete riding a horse, not Hedwig, that turned into a dragon. One memorable dream of Dom as a centaur with the biggest cock you’ve ever seen on man or beast, getting ready to fuck me with it.

Uh, I’m not actually into centaurs or anything. But shit. CentaurDom’s dripping dick made me so hard that when I woke up I was actually rutting into Pete’s leg.

He pretended not to be awake, but I figured I’d bring it up later and hope he blushed. He seemed like just the type of guy to blush at someone else’s embarrassment.

No one came. I swear to god.

Chapter Fifteen

Dom had seen one too many porn movies.

“No,” I said. “Can we please just have sex and quit it with the whole thing where you’re showing us where our marks are?”

“Um—yeah. Sorry, was I doing that?”

“Have you always been this dominant with people you’re banging?”

At least he looked away. “Actually, I’ve never had the balls to say anything like this.”

“Wait, really?”

Dom may or may not have answered, except Pete said, “I like it.”

“Oh, listen to the closet case. He *likes* it when the control freak orders him around.”

“I’m not a closet case. It’s been, like, a few days since I came out.”

“True.” I kissed him as an apology, because that shit wasn’t actually funny.

“You don’t like it when Dom, y’know, tells us what to do?”

“Ugh.” I shuddered, or at least tried to shudder. “He’s a control freak.”

Pete kissed me. “Yeah. Um, so, are you guys really gonna do this now?”

Jeez, did I forget to mention this whole conversation went down *after* Dom had three fingers in my ass, stretching me? Yeah. Yeah, just go ahead and sit with that. Or stand with it, which is what I was doing after he told me exactly where on the bed he wanted me, and with what pillow, and blah blah blah control freak.

My ass was slippery. Also, he’d put a condom on, so now—

If it’s possible to feel *hungry* for sex, that’s how I felt. The whole night, the whole day before, the weeks before that, not to mention years of living with him.

I sighed and got back on the bed. “I’m not letting you win,” I said. “I just want you to know that.”

“Noted. Will you turn over so I can look at you?”

Face-to-face, of fucking course. I flipped and glared at him. “Any fucking time now, Dominic. Did you forget how to fuck? Should we look up a YouTube instructional video for you?”

His hands smoothed up my thighs. “I love you, Frazier. Please.”

Please what? But I shut my mouth and tried to relax.

“This is so intense,” Pete murmured, lying beside me.

“Yeah.” Dom knelt up, got into position, held his dick and guided it—

Ohhhhh fuck. I had to remember to breathe because otherwise I’d just lie there and lose all of my involuntary everything while my brain shorted out.

“Oh my god.”

“Fraz, Fraz, you feel so fucking good.”

I should have said something, but I couldn’t. I could only look up at him, skin flushed, eyes wide.

He pushed all the way in, and I groaned. It was so fucking good, so deep, so full. I grabbed his shoulders and strained up, and he leaned down to meet me.

“You’re so fucking hot, Fraz,” he said against my lips.

“You too.”

Dom fucked me slower than I would have wanted, except it turned out to be perfect, completely everything fairy tale perfect. He fucked me until both of us were sweating bullets, and Pete couldn’t stop himself from jerking off next to us, which was sweet and wholesome, just like Pete.

He came long before we did and took up kissing after that. The orgasm relieved our shepherd of a few inhibitions. He kissed everything he could reach, and when it was the only thing he hadn’t yet touched, he lapped the head of my dick and I almost exploded.

“Oh, shit, Pete—Pete—” *Stop, keep going, too close, KEEP GOING*—Pete sucked lightly on the head of my dick, and I went tense everywhere, throwing my head back, balls tight, toes curled.

“Yes, yes, yes, oh fuck, you’re so tight, do it, Pete, get him off—”

Pete was a good boy, but he didn’t know how to swallow all that pent-up spunk, which was sexy anyway. Dom slammed into me, Pete licked jizz off my stomach (oh my fuck, *I know*), and I’d wanted to claim Dom’s orgasm, I’d

wanted to tell him to pull out and ditch the condom so I could taste him, but the best laid plans are nothing to a guy licking jizz off your stomach.

“I’m coming,” Dom said, slamming into me one more time and going still.

Which made me feel a little better about coming so fucking fast. I mean, come on, right? Pete’s excuse was *BOYS*, but we should have been able to hold back a little more. Or not.

“Kiss me, Pete. Get your ass up here and—”

Swap Fraz’s semen, right, sure, that’s totally how you finish that sentence. *Oh my god*, they were killing me.

I groaned. “I’m a puddle. I can’t be the Wizard tonight. Someone else has to do it. I’ve already melted, and I can’t come out to play. If you’d let me come last night like a normal person, I’d be recovered by now.”

“Mm. You taste good on Pete’s lips.”

Obviously I could kill him in his sleep for being a control freak, but then who would say shit like “You taste good on Pete’s lips”?

“Shut up,” I mumbled.

“You good, Pete?”

Pete hit the bed beside me, on his back, limbs loose. “Wow. I just sucked you off. While Dom was, like, you know.”

“Fucking me.”

Dom made a *tsk* sound. “I prefer to think of what the three of us just did as making love.”

“You’re such a nerd.”

“I prefer to think of myself as a romantic,” he said, tossing the tissue-wrapped condom into the trash.

I hit him with the pillow, and he laughed, falling down in between us.

“Seriously, though. That was amazing. Thanks for not beating me up last night, you guys.”

“You’re not gonna get away with that shit again, mister.” I rolled to my side, looking at both of them. The shepherd and the leading man. And so hot. Pete had mopped himself off, but you could tell just looking at his dick that he’d come recently. Dom was still half-hard, just easing back from orgasm.

I could fuck both of them again. Right now.

“Breakfast,” Dom said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking about sex. I know what your face looks like when it’s thinking about sex, Fraz.”

“I object to the idea of my *face* thinking about anything. Try to be a little more precise with your words, would you?”

From his other side, Pete sighed. “I’m definitely thinking about sex. Is this—maybe this is a stupid question—but is this a one-time thing for you guys?”

“Are you *joking*? Pete, in all honesty if Dom says it’s a one-time thing, I’m tying his ass to the bed until it’s time to drive home.”

“So it’s a summer thing. Right? I mean, with me. Since you guys actually live together.”

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” Dom said, touching his hand.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s not like we have much of a choice. I’ve got to go back to Davis and you guys are going back to Berkeley. So I guess that makes this a summer thing.”

Do not sing Grease right now. Do not sing Grease right now.

“I don’t think we should decide what it is or isn’t this morning. The question is, do you want to do it again?”

Pete turned his head to look at us. “Yeah.”

“Perfect. Then it’s settled.”

“Hey, maybe *I* don’t want to do it again,” I said, pretending to be offended. “Maybe you’re not a very good lover, Dominic!”

He rolled his eyes. “Fraz, we already covered this. You’d have sex again right now. You’re a sure thing.”

A sure thing. Yep. That’s me.

“I knew the second I let you touch me in my special place you’d stop respecting me,” I huffed.

“*I* respect you,” Pete said. “I mean, that didn’t hurt? Because I’ve never, um, it just seems like that’s a hole that doesn’t—you know.”

“I knew it! Pete, Pete, Pete. We’ll show you everything you need to know.”

“And next time you can stretch Fraz. Or me. It’s a little easier to imagine when you’ve done the stretching.”

My ass was up for it immediately. “Maybe we have time—”

“No,” Dom said again. “Breakfast.”

“Showers,” Pete added.

“You guys are no fucking fun.”

Dom kissed my cheek. “Oh, I think we’re at least a little bit of fun, Fraz.”

I had sex. With Dom and Pete. The leading man. And the shepherd.

Oh my.

Chapter Sixteen

Friday. Friday sailed by, smooth as taffy. I sat with Dom and Pete at lunch, the three of us sitting close enough to communicate something, though no one seemed sure exactly what.

“This is fun,” Dom murmured.

I nudged Pete, since his interns were still there. The interns connected him to New Halliday, where he was very much still in the closet. I couldn’t tell if he was taking it all right. “You cool?”

“Yeah. But is Grace gonna want the cottage tonight? I’m a little stressed about where we’re sleeping.”

“We’re gonna double up the mattresses on the floor of the yurt,” Dom said, like he’d already planned for it. “No problem.”

Right, sure. No problem. Pete and I glanced at each other.

“I think what our sexy cowboy means is, too bad we can’t get laid in the yurt because everyone will hear us,” I clarified, keeping my voice low.

“Can everyone hear you now?” Dom whispered back.

“What’s your fucking point?”

“My point is, we’ll be quiet. Don’t worry about it. And he’s a shepherd, Fraz. Get it right.”

I wasn’t worried about it. Not completely. Except I still hadn’t gotten to taste Pete and I still hadn’t gotten to see Dom’s ass, so I was pretty invested in the three of us having a private place to sleep.

We say two weeks of performances, but performances run Thursday-Sunday. We had to clear out by Monday afternoon, so it was more like twelve days. Eleven nights. And one of them was already gone.

Yeah, I wasn’t really seeing us sleeping on the floor of the yurt for the next ten nights.

I found Grace leading group yoga on the stage after lunch.

“Can I talk to you after this?”

“Sure. Pull up a mat.” Which didn’t sound like a suggestion, so I did it. And wondered if I’d always been so susceptible to orders. I never really thought of

myself as submissive, but I might have to reconsider if I keep doing what everyone tells me to do.

I managed to mostly not fall over for yoga (I'm in shape, so I don't get why yoga makes me feel like a toddler learning to walk, but it totally does) and waited for her to be done chatting with her fan club.

"What's up?"

"Did your dad head back to civilization?"

"I like New Halliday. And yeah, he took off before breakfast." She raised her eyebrows. "What's up?"

"So, about your cabin."

"They call it a cottage." But now Grace was kind of smiling at me. "Yes?"

"You know, Gracie, I don't think you've fully embraced yurt living, do you? The crick in your neck from sleeping in a bunk bed, the chill of morning dew all over everything, the ability to hear all the sex happening everywhere else in Yurtville. Don't you think you've missed out this summer?"

"On yurt life?"

"Right, yeah. On an essential part of the *summer stock at New Halliday* experience."

"Oh god, please tell me it was all three of you."

"Shhh, Grace."

"I saw you sitting with each other. This is so good." She winked. "Anyway, if I need the second bed, I'll bring headphones and face the wall, Fraz."

"Gross, Gracie! You're disgusting." I kissed her cheek. "Really, you sure you're okay with this? We can have sex in the yurt like everyone else, it was just an idea."

"Oh no, no way, I want to facilitate my friends getting it on in comfort and style."

"What about those towels?" I added.

"I know! It makes me want to go out and replace all my towels, sheets, and blankets. You ready to go on tonight, Fraz?"

Weird that so little time had passed since we stepped off stage the night before. It felt like days.

“I’m ready. Thanks for sobering my sorry ass up yesterday.”

“Sure, babe. Yesterday you were lovesick.”

“Grace—”

“Today, you’re full of love. Funny how you’re not drunk.”

“Shut up. I could still get drunk.”

“Not if you want to get laid, you won’t. Ha. Trapped yourself there, Fraz.” She grabbed my hand. “Happy for all three of you.”

“How’d you know?”

“What, you don’t think I have the preternatural ability to sense things like this?” She raised herself on her toes and stretched out her arms, emphasizing her length. “I’m very exotic, Fraz. We exotic women can sense these things.”

I pretended to gut-punch her and she doubled over. “Uh huh. How’d you know?”

“I watched the two of them drag your butt home the night before. I’m not saying they were handsy, but—”

Another lie, but a lie that was closer to the truth. “Shut it, Gracie.”

“Only answering your question, Mister Lane.”

This time I really punched her, but lightly. “Shut it.”

“I’m glad you took a chance, Fraz. You deserve happiness just as much as they do.”

“Whatever.” But when she grabbed my arm, I didn’t resist. “And oh my god, Pete’s hot as hell. Mm.”

“Thanks for that. Should we go find your, um, roommates?”

“My roommates, yeah. You’re really okay with the yurt?”

“I’m great. It’s an opportunity. An adventure.”

“Adventures in Yurtville, I can see the Playbill now.”

She laughed. “Really, though. Someday we’ll write a famous play about summer stock... wait. That’s familiar.”

“Movies don’t count.”

We went back to Yurtville arm in arm.

I'd secured a private room for the three of us. Ten nights. Life is good.

Chapter Seventeen

We spent almost every second together. It was really kind of sick. If I'd been on the outside, I would have definitely been disgusted, but I've never been on the inside of something like that, and from the inside—it was amazing.

We slept together every night, all three of us. And by the third or fourth night, Pete was confident enough to make suggestions. Maybe two nights after that he asked Dom to rim him, and shit, we hit new highs of fucking awesome that night. It was absolutely incredible.

I don't know about the two of them, but I lived for the moment we closed the door to the cottage and locked it. Performances were great; I wasn't gonna sign up to play big roles any time soon, but the Wizard was fun. He was perfect. He isn't the star, but if you don't play him right he either fades into the scenery or takes over. You gotta play the Wizard so his lines reflect back on the other characters, and you can't let yourself get in the way of that.

It was a rush. But it was nothing compared to the first time Pete stuck his hands in my pants without Dom suggesting it. It was nothing compared to Dom saying, "Tell me what you want." And Pete replying, "Can I fuck you?"

There are no words, people. No words.

We did a lot. And no, nosy, I'm not gonna detail it all out for you. But trust me, it was *amazing*.

Ten days, seven days, less than a week, three days—

I don't always think time flies when you're having fun. But time definitely flies when you're having mind-blowing sex with two hot guys and you're on a deadline.

On the second-to-the-last night, Pete grabbed us after the show and loaded us into his car with a couple of towels and some other stuff underneath the towels.

"Where're we going?"

"It's a surprise." And our bashful shepherd was grinning.

I leaned up between the front seats and groped him. "No, really, where are we going?"

"You want to make me crash into the vineyards?"

Even touching his dick through jeans made my mouth water. “I’m at a really bad angle for a driving blowjob. I should have sat up front. Or Dom—”

“No. Are we going to your house?”

“Shh. You guys suck at surprises.”

“I’d really *like* to suck at *something*—”

“We’re almost there.”

“If this is gonna be a romantic moonlit horseback ride, count me out. You guys do that with as few clothes as possible, and I’ll be in the car, jacking off.”

“No horses.”

Pete had taken us to his house once, covertly, and kept a strict hands-off policy for the entire time, even though we were alone. His bedroom was full of pictures of Hedwig and plastic sports trophies. And it was very, very blue. Blue walls, blue curtains, blue bedspread.

I’d almost cracked a joke about adding a couple of rainbows to break things up, but stopped myself. I mean, when I told my parents I was gay they kind of already knew. Pete’s folks might actually be, I don’t know, shocked or something.

We drove around the barn, and at first, I didn’t know why he’d driven us to his folks’ backyard.

“Wait,” Dom said. “Is that a pool?”

“Yeah. Should be pretty warm, too.”

My eyes might have bugged out of my head. “Oh my god. A pool? You’ve been holding out on us! We sweated through an entire dusty summer in Yurtville when a mile away we could have been *swimming*?”

“Not really. I mean, it’s not open to the public or anything.”

“Pete,” I said, keeping my voice even. “I have sucked your dick. I am not ‘the public.’”

“Can we get out?” Dom asked.

“Yeah. So my sister’s at a slumber party and my parents are out at some benefit dinner or something. We probably have an hour, maybe two.”

“Awesome, let’s go.”

I still wanted to rail on him about his secret pool, but then again, I could do that while actually *in* the pool, which was a way smarter idea.

And the water was just lukewarm: easy to get in, but still refreshing.

“It’s not as good during the day as you’d think, because it gets so hot. It’s kind of like swimming in a bathtub.” Pete, in his boxers, moved through water like a damn dolphin, cutting right through, no wake.

I lumbered about for a minute, but then I gave up and just kind of swished around in the shallow end. Dom, naturally, was a beautiful swimmer. Sometimes he’s so fucking annoying.

After a couple of laps, Dom moved to the side, panting, and gestured to the car. “What’s under the towels?”

“Um. I kind of thought we could have a picnic. Is that really stupid?”

My stomach went tight. Not a single joke came to mind.

“Are we not kissing right now? Because I’d really like to kiss you, Pete.”

Pete glanced up, over Dom’s head, at the dark house. (We hadn’t turned on a single light.) “It still freaks me out. Sorry—”

“Totally okay. And yeah, a picnic sounds great.”

Shit. One more day, one more night, and then we get up and go. I decided to stop ragging him about shit.

“High protein snacks, if you have any,” I said. “I have kind of a long night of physical exertion ahead of me, I don’t know about you jerks.”

A blanket for spreading on the lawn, three sparkling lime waters (in glass bottles: fancy), a store-bought tray of precut cheese chunks, crackers, grapes, pears.

“What’s this?” I held up another bag to the light. “Oh my god, Pete, are these *Kisses*?”

He had to be blushing. “You don’t like *Kisses*?”

“Oh, I like all your kisses, baby.” I ripped the bag open, spilling silver-wrapped *Kisses* everywhere. Obviously I had to seductively unwrap one and make love to it with my tongue. It was only right.

“Frazier, that’s obscene.”

“You started it. Mm.” I ran the now-melting chocolate all over my lips before popping it inside and making sex faces. “Oooh, baby, you sure know how to impress a guy. Mm.”

Dom laughed. Loudly. Like, crickets actually stopped chirping, or whatever. He covered his mouth, but by then it was too late, he couldn’t stop. Then I started, because I’d basically just had sex with a Hershey Kiss, and Pete couldn’t really help himself.

“I hate you guys. Stop! Shut up!”

We couldn’t shut up. We were hysterical—Dom was actually rolling on the blanket, holding his stomach—right up until a light came on.

“Oh *shit!*”

“Who’s there? Peter? Is that you?”

“Mom?” Pete stood up, and boy was I glad he was so paranoid. I would be naked right now if Pete hadn’t threatened to withhold sex if I tried to skinny-dip.

“Honey? What’re you doing? Who’s that with you?”

“Just—just Dom and Frazier. Mom, I thought you guys were at dinner tonight?”

Mrs. Aurello (the younger) wrapped her bathrobe closer around herself and walked out onto the patio. “We were supposed to, but your father wasn’t feeling well. Hello, boys. Goodness, are you having a picnic?”

Oh, Pete. His face crashed, and I could feel how scared he was, how quickly his brain was trying to figure out exactly how bad this looked.

“Well, it got a little rowdy for us back at, um, camp,” I said.

“So we thought we’d take some snacks and run,” Dom added. “Pete suggested the pool, but we absolutely didn’t mean to disturb you—”

“Oh, don’t be silly.” She walked a few more steps, then stopped. “Don’t be silly, of course you aren’t disturbing us. And anyway, I’m the only one still awake. Would you like to come inside?”

“No, no. It’s really beautiful out at night here, and Fraz and I have to go home in a few days. We’re getting our fill of the country.”

“The country.” She laughed lightly. “When I first moved here, I hated it. I thought it was the most boring place on earth.”

“Really, Mom? I didn’t know that.”

“Well, I don’t talk about it because it used to drive your grandfather crazy. I love it now, of course, but at the time I thought I could feel myself losing brain cells every day I spent looking at fields instead of cars and people.”

“Mom, you want to—I mean, we only have cheese and crackers, but—”

She waved a hand. “No, no, go back to your picnic. Enjoy your time here, boys. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” we chorused.

Pete kept standing there until she closed the door (and turned the light back off). Then he collapsed. “I’m gonna puke. I’m seriously going to puke.”

God, the closet is so fucked. And probably Pete’s mom would be okay with it—let’s be real: she guilt-tripped him into babysitting high school theater nerds all summer, she had to know *something*—but it was so damn awkward and terrifying.

I tossed a Kiss at his head. “I’ll give you a real one later.”

Dom reached for one and pressed it into Pete’s palm. “I will, too.”

“Shit. Sorry. I had no idea they’d be here. They were supposed to be—”

“It’s okay. Do you want to go back to the cottage?”

“We barely got to swim.”

“Yeah, but will you be able to relax now, knowing your parents are home?”

Pete sighed and flopped on his back. “Shit. No. Even though she’ll totally stay on the other side of the house. She definitely knows something’s up.”

“You don’t think she’d spy?” I asked, mostly to keep him talking.

“No way. No way, no way, no way. I really wanted to take you guys swimming.”

“You did. So we’ll finish our picnic and head back.” I tossed another Kiss on his chest. “We are definitely saving some chocolate for later.”

“You’re kind of a perv, Fraz.”

“Bet your cute cowboy ass I am.”

“It’s shepherd.”

“But that doesn’t sound as good. ‘Bet your cute shepherd ass’?”

“Bet your sweet shepherd ass?” Dom suggested.

“That could work.”

Silence. Crickets, leaves, water lapping the sides of the pool.

“Just, you know, I could probably tell her. I think she’d be okay with it. But I can’t. I don’t know what the problem is. Partly it’s my dad, because he’s kind of a man’s man, so I think he’ll—you know. I think he’ll be a little upset his only son’s gay. But partly it’s just I can’t. I try to find a way to say the words, but when I do it’s like I can’t speak, I can’t breathe.”

“You don’t have to. At least, you don’t have to for us.”

“I know. But I kind of do have to for me. Now that I—now that I really know.”

“I came out to my mom while we were making a salad one night,” I said, lying down on my side and reaching for a grape. “Literally. Because I kept trying to have these *moments* with her, but I never actually pulled the trigger. So one night we’re standing next to each other at this huge cutting board my parents have had since before I was born, and I go, ‘So I’m gay.’”

“Really?”

“I couldn’t even believe I’d done it. I like couldn’t even believe I’d actually heard my own voice say the words.”

“What’d your mom say?”

“She told me she loved me and that I had to tell my dad right now, while I had the nerve. My parents are kind of assholes. I think they might have had a bet going about how long it would take me to come out, but I’m afraid to ask.”

“So did you tell him?”

“Well yeah. I mean, we didn’t even finish making the salad. She dragged me into the living room where Dad was watching baseball and muted the TV so I could tell him.”

“If I muted baseball so I could come out to my dad, he’d kick me out of the house. For muting the game. Probably.”

“Well, my dad’s kind of a manhood groupie. He tries, but he’d genuinely rather watch *Friends* than baseball. He was probably relieved.” I’d stood there, and he’d looked up at me, curious, expectant, and waited. “So I said, ‘I’m gay, Dad. And we’re putting carrots in the salad.’” Pete giggled softly and Dom

smiled. Dom had heard it before, obviously. Dom heard the whole thing a few hours after it happened, when I was so high and freaked out and delirious I could barely put words together.

“What’d your dad say?”

“He whined about the carrots. Then he stood up and gave me a hug and asked if we needed help in the kitchen.” I didn’t tell him the part about the two of them looking at each other like they’d always known. That would have sounded too moral-of-the-story. “Then we ate and they smoked me out, which they’d never done before, and that’s the end of my coming out rite of passage. Getting high with Mom and Dad in the basement, then going up to my room to call Dom like a stoned asshole.”

“You were so cute and giddy,” he said. “It was adorable.”

“Shut your ugly trap.”

“What about you, Dom? Did you come out over salad, too?”

I eyed Dom to see what he’d say. Dom’s folks, you know, they’re not exactly your shining stars of coming out stories. They didn’t kick his ass or anything, but still, Dom doesn’t tell that story when he’s trying to be encouraging. Dom doesn’t tell that story ever.

“I made it super formal and intense. And they didn’t really say anything, but my mom cried, so I went to Fraz’s place and spent the night.” He forced another smile. “And Fraz’s folks smoked me out, so that was cool.”

“Yeah, that’s a funny parenting quirk of theirs. Tell them you’re gay, they bust out the bong. So the next time you want to get high, Pete, you know what you gotta do. You just knock on my folks’ door, tell them you’re a friend of mine, and come out. Bam! They’ll invite you in for a lovely relaxing evening of marijuana.”

“I really can’t imagine my parents high. That’s just too fucking weird.”

“I wish I could imagine my parents *not* high.”

Pete nudged Dom with his foot. “So, do you talk to them now?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, you know, they’re okay. They still kind of think I could probably fight it and be straight, but we just don’t talk about it, so it’s okay. They hate Fraz, though.”

“I’m a very bad influence.” I wanted to hug Dom, but since we were still on no-touching rules, I didn’t.

“I think my mom will be really good about it. My dad, though, I don’t know. I just don’t want to disappoint them.”

“I disappointed my parents,” Dom said. “I knew going in that me being who I am would disappoint them. I mean, I figure it’s probably why I always tried so hard to be perfect, because I knew that one day I’d disappoint them so much they’d never really get over it. But it’s still better than hiding it from them was. Not that I’m saying that means you should come out to your parents, just that I’m glad I did, even though it sucked. Even though it still kind of sucks.”

“Sorry,” Pete said softly.

“Can we take another quick swim before we go? Just really fast? I could use—immersion, for a few minutes.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

Dom got up and dove in from the second step down, his body shooting through the dark water to the other side.

“I feel kind of shitty now.”

“Nah,” I said. “He’s okay. We’ll let him order us around and he’ll feel just fine.”

“Yeah. I, uh, really wish you guys weren’t leaving in two days, Fraz.”

“When do you go back to school?”

“The twenty-fifth.”

I shoved his arm. “Come with us. A vacation at the end of your vacation. We can bring you back in a week or two.”

“I couldn’t—I mean, there’s stuff to do—work—and I—I couldn’t.”

“Right, never mind. Just an idea.” I stood up. “C’mon, shepherd. Do shepherds have a reputation for being good swimmers? Now cowboys, I bet cowboys can ford rivers and shit.”

“Are you calling my masculinity into question?”

“I’m just wondering about your people, Pete. The people of the sheep.”

“Oh, you’re asking for it, now, Fraz—”

He side-tackled me into the pool and both of us went down grappling. When we emerged, sucking in breaths, Dom was laughing.

“You guys are ridiculous.”

“Fraz thinks shepherds can’t swim.”

“I didn’t say that. Wait, can sheep swim? You’d think all that wool would really bog them down.”

“In fact, wool’s one of the fastest-drying natural fibers,” Pete shot back.

“*Oh*, well, in that case.” I stood up and turned to Dom. “Wool is one of the fastest-drying natural fibers, don’tcha know.”

Pete dunked me, as expected. We played a little longer, then packed up and went back to the cottage.

It was the best night of the summer. We had sex for hours, ate the rest of the picnic, and fell asleep in a heap like puppies.

Chapter Eighteen

And then it was over. Everything was over.

We put on the best show of the season for closing night, everyone throwing themselves into their roles, no matter what they were—props were perfect, small costume issues were immediately repaired, the interns seemed to have grown a foot over the summer and now executed their tech jobs as if they'd been born to them.

Dom and Grace had talked to everyone over the course of the day, taking a few minutes here and there to express their appreciation, their gratitude, to recall some shared memory. It was a little cheesy, but it did seem to make everyone draw together at the exact moment it was most likely they'd fly apart.

Pete's parents and grandmother and great-uncle or something invited us back next summer, promising to stay in touch. They congratulated Dom and Grace on managing a huge job so flawlessly, and told them that the New Halliday Summer Stock was the talk of the town. (I bit my lip. I mean, what the hell else would be the talk of the town? Nothing else happened here.)

It was sweet, and they meant it. Pete's mom, especially. She shook hands with Grace, then Dom, and pulled him in just long enough to say something to him that no one else heard. It was such chaos, packing things away, striking the set, that we hardly even saw each other for the next hour.

Then: oh fuck me, the afterparty.

The three of us didn't really want to be there. We had so few hours left, and no desire to spend them with the rest of the cast. (Even though Juliet was now making out with Sister Bear while Romeo watched, and Goatee and Brother Bear were basically having sex rubbing against each other with their clothes on. Okay, okay, I'd ended up liking almost everyone, and I might even kind of miss them.)

But we couldn't leave the party until Grace did her thing.

I've seen Grace sing "Seasons of Love" maybe a few dozen times. I've stood beside her, I've stood behind her, I've sat off on another part of the stage and sung along from there.

On the last night of summer stock in New Halliday, the entire cast lined up in front of her, shoulder-to-shoulder, and sang the chorus back. Even the

interns. Even Pete. Because the only thing you really have to know is how many minutes are in a year; everyone else can fill in the rest.

I held Dom's hand and sang as clearly as I ever have. Grace cried, voice never wavering, and gave it right back.

Yeah, pretty much everyone was crying by the end. It's not like a sad song, but there's something about it, you know? There's something about the idea of measuring time that's really unsettling.

And especially considering that our time together, as a company, was basically over. I'd done a lot of different productions, but I've never regularly seen my cast and crew while brushing our teeth or before showering. (At least, not until final rehearsals.) I knew how Skirts's hair looked in the morning before she gelled down her cowlicks, and I knew how Goatee liked to trim his goatee. I knew who was allergic to egg, and who didn't eat meat, and who had a weird aversion to carbonated drinks. (Seriously, Shirtless was an odd kid.)

I knew how Pete's dick tasted before he showered, when he was all self-conscious and trying not to be so turned on by me sucking him.

We left the sob fest with hugs for Grace, who promised she'd call if she needed help looking after anything. But man, we were three depressed amigos when we finally got to the cottage.

Go ahead and imagine a gorgeously choreographed sex scene, with swelling music and artistic shadows. Long shots of lean muscles and glowing sweat that looks sexy instead of sweaty.

Really we just showered and kissed and cuddled and felt sorry for ourselves. And kept Pete between us, because he felt worst of all. Dom and I could have sex tomorrow when we got home, without Pete, even though that thought twisted my guts. But Pete was gonna be sitting in his blue bedroom, surrounded by his trophies, alone with his secrets.

We kissed and cuddled, and at some point in the early morning we had sex, the kind of sex where you don't fully open your eyes, you just kiss the skin in front of you, and push into the hands touching you, and open when you feel pressure. It was a little sad, a little melodramatic, but it was also perfect. After all the directions and positioning and planning, we just melted into each other until we fell back to sleep. I think all of us came, but I don't even know that for sure.

We couldn't hide out in the cottage in the morning. Not with everyone moving out and Yurtville shutting down.

By nine, almost everyone was up drinking coffee or energy drinks. By nine fifteen, most people were able to say things like “good morning” and “Jesus fuck, the sun’s like extra bright today, right?”

I wanted to sit on my bench—*my* bench, my morning coffee bench, on the far side of one of our long tables—and not move, but when Dom started packing up the yurt, I made myself help.

“Remember when we first saw this place? You wanted to turn around and go home.”

“Fuckin’ Yurtville.” I patted the canvas wall. “Good times, yurt. Good times.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Dom scrounged around in the bottom of a box of scripts. “Huh. Hey, you missing something?”

Whiskey! I hugged the bottle to my chest. “Where have you *been*? I looked everywhere for you! Don’t scare me like that, mister!”

Dom shook his head and dove back into the box. “Here. Ha. Knew this was in here somewhere.” He emerged with a Sharpie, which was nowhere near as cool as my unopened bottle of whiskey.

“What’s that for?”

“Just in case we come back next year, I want to be able to find our yurt again.” He sat down on the floor and thought for a long moment, then bent over and reached for the bottom seam.

“What’re you doing? Dom, if you vandalize the yurt, it’s coming out of your deposit, not mine.” I leaned over to see what the hell he was writing.

Tiny block letters. They’d probably just look like a smear to someone standing up.

The spinner, the shepherd, and the leading man.

“I’m not a spinner.”

“Then why do you have a web?”

“It’s a spider web, jerk.”

“What does a spider do but spin? And catch things. You’ve definitely caught a few things this summer.”

“If this is your way of telling me you have an STI, Dominic—”

He stood up and stepped in close. “I love you, Fraz.”

I wanted to look away. Or shove him. Or drink my whiskey. But I didn’t do those things.

“Yeah, I love you, too. What the fuck’re we gonna do about Pete? I guess I didn’t catch him well enough, Dom, because in like two hours we’re getting in the Bug and we’ll be gone.”

“I know. Maybe he’ll let us visit before he goes back to school.”

“Dom. He doesn’t even want his parents to know we’re friends.”

He shrugged, even though I could see he was hurting. “Yeah, well, I don’t have a plan for that yet. Come on, let’s pack up so we can go find him.”

We finished packing, and the first few people started leaving. Goatee had to drive all the way down to San Luis Obispo, so he was already getting a late start. He and Brother Bear cried, which was sad. Then Juliet and Romeo left at the same time, with their phones on and their headsets in so they could drive together until they hit the 5 freeway and had to go opposite directions. (They’d probably stop for a quickie in a parking lot, bet you anything.)

Pete was nowhere. He’d shuffled the two car-less interns up to wait for their parents in front of the resort, but after that no one had seen him.

We cleared out of the cottage, and Grace did a final sweep before returning the key. Then the three of us stood there, like the first day in reverse, saying good-bye, watching Yurtville empty out until it was just a circle of yurts again.

“Let’s get pizza tonight,” Grace said, waving as Brother and Sister Bear drove away until all we could see was the dust storm they left in their wake. “My treat.”

“Sounds good.” Dom checked his phone, but Pete still hadn’t returned his texts.

Was he hiding? Shit. Was he just going to hide until we were gone? Because saying good-bye sucked, but not saying good-bye was so much worse.

“You should just stop by his house,” she said. “Maybe he took his stuff home and lost track of time.”

“We aren’t really the people he wants to see at his house, Gracie.”

She kissed my cheek, then Dom’s. “But you’ll regret it if you don’t even try. Let me know when you’re home and I’ll stop by Lanesplitter.”

“Okay. Drive safely.”

“You too.”

Then it was just the two of us.

“I think she’s right,” I said. “I mean, all we have to do is drive up and knock. He doesn’t want to see us, or if he’s not there, we’ll leave, Dom. Saying good-bye after we spent all summer together doesn’t out him, you know?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

We bade good-bye to Yurtville (I knocked out a shot of whiskey into the barbecue we’d never actually used for anything but marshmallows) and got in the car.

The dirt road to Pete’s place was even bumpier in the Bug, and we had to keep the windows up because of the dust, but the Bug doesn’t have functioning air-conditioning, so by the time we pulled up at the house, we were drenched in sweat.

And nervous. I was definitely nervous. Dom looked pale.

“Maybe we should just call him.”

“Good idea.” I got out my phone, since he wasn’t moving. *Ring, ring, ring, pick up, you bastard. Don’t fucking wimp out on us at the last minute. Pick up—*

The front door opened.

Pete stood there, in the doorway, and stared at us for the longest fucking minute of my entire life. Then he stepped out, closed the door, and started running.

I opened my door and he tumbled into the back seat, falling on backpacks and boxes, eventually coming to a precarious crouch, half-leaning in between us.

“Oh my god, I thought—I didn’t think—” He kissed me, then Dom. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I just—I didn’t know what to say and—” He kissed me again. “I’m sorry.”

“Pete—” Dom said.

“No, I’m really sorry, I shouldn’t have disappeared, but—”

“Pete, your mom—”

He froze in mid-kiss.

Oh shit. Right, all the kissing, from the guy who didn't even want to stand too close if there was a chance word might get back to his parents.

Mrs. Aurello was standing on the front porch, squinting in our direction.

"I don't care. Fuck all of it. Can I come with you? Please say I can come with you. Please say you really meant it." His eyes drilled into mine. "You meant it, didn't you?"

"Don't be an idiot, of course I meant it. Come with us."

"You don't mind driving all the way back here—I mean, I could just take a bus, then you'd only have to drop me off—"

"Pete," Dom said. "We'll bring you back whenever you want. But you should go tell your mom."

"Yeah. Yeah, I should." His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were red. "I didn't think you'd come here. I thought you'd just leave if I didn't go back to Yurtville."

"What, and find another shepherd? Are you trying to say we're sluts for just any old shepherd we happen to meet, Pete?" I pinched his arm. "Plus, you should have seen Dom defacing our yurt like a lovestruck little girl."

"Did you, Dom?"

"We'll tell you about it on the way. But if you stay in the car too much longer, she's definitely gonna come over here."

"Right. Okay. All right. Um, Fraz, you gotta let me out again."

I didn't want to open the door. I wanted to yell "Gun it, Dom!" and peel out of Pete's driveway like madmen. I even pictured the cloud of dust and Pete's face turned back toward her, pale in the tiny window of the Bug.

Then I opened the door and let him out.

Pete trudged back up to his mom, who was now standing with her hands on her hips like she was so not amused.

"What do you think he's gonna say to her?" I asked.

"Not sure. But last night she hugged me and said she was really really glad to meet me, emphasis on the *really*. So it might not be too bad."

I pondered that while we watched. Whatever he said, it pissed her off, and she looked back at us again. Then he said something else and she just...

stopped. She just stopped being angry. She pulled him in for a big hug (his arms were limp at first but then came around her, like he couldn't even believe it was happening).

"I guess you caught him after all, Fraz," Dom murmured as Pete jogged toward us. Behind him, his mom waved. We waved back.

"Just let me throw some shit in a bag, give me ten minutes."

It only took seven, but the only movement in the car was me chain smoking out the window, which I guess Dom let me get away with because it was a very fragile seven minutes, waiting to see if Pete would come back to us.

I think both of us literally sighed in relief when he opened the door again, weighed down by a backpack and a little cooler.

"You know we don't have room for all this stuff," I said.

"We'll make room."

I crammed as much shit at my feet as I could, and Pete still ended up with the cooler on his lap.

"Mom packed us a picnic. She told me to have fun."

I turned in my seat. "Did you tell her?"

"No. I mean, I probably could have, but I didn't. And anyway, I'm pretty sure she knows. She doesn't hug me that tightly when I'm leaving for the whole semester." He frowned. "This is really okay, right? I mean, does your place have enough room for me? Because I don't want to be a burden—"

"This is a good time to tell you that Dom carved 'The spinner, the shepherd, and the leading man' into one of the walls of the yurt," I said. "Because, as mentioned, he's a lovestruck little girl."

"Carved?"

"Wrote," Dom corrected.

"In permanent marker. It's basically equivalent to carving, but for yurts."

Pete grinned. "So are we a love story now?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Yeah, definitely. We're one of those disgusting romances where everyone leaves happy and the sex is always perfect."

"But the sex *is* always perfect."

"I rest my case."

We made it back to the main drive of the resort and rolled the windows down again.

“So. A journey back into civilization commences.”

“Is this crazy? You guys, is this crazy?”

I turned in my seat and pulled Pete into a kiss, craning over the cooler. “Trust me, you coming home with us is a lot less crazy than living in Yurtville for ten weeks, putting on three plays, and falling in love. Twice. At the same time.”

“Ha.” He kissed me back, lashes fluttering. “I feel like I’m floating.”

“Me too. You know what’s sad for Dom? He’s gotta drive. We could basically have sex all the way back to Berkeley, but poor Dom’s gotta drive.”

“Don’t make me pull this car over, Frazier.”

We laughed. And kissed. And laughed more.

A hell of a summer. And it wasn’t even over yet.

The End

Author Bio

Kris Ripper lives in the great state of California and hails from the San Francisco Bay Area. Kris shares a converted garage with a toddler, can do two pull-ups in a row, and can write backwards. (No, really.) Kris is genderqueer and has no pronoun preference, but the z-based pronouns are freaking sweet. Ze has been writing fiction since ze learned how to write and boring zir stuffed animals with stories long before that.

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