

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**A SINGLE STEP**

**Vicky Heysham**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## A SINGLE STEP

By Vicky Heysham

### 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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## Photo Description:

A cheeky young lad, reminiscent of Just William, sits on Santa's knee, clutching a long list and apparently in midrecital. The caption reads: "Dear Santa: This year I want your list of bad boys and their phone numbers. Thank you."

## Story Letter:

*Dear Author,*

*I was looking for something and came across this tumblr. I laughed so hard and spent the rest of the night looking at the whole blog. It was full of this goodness that I had to get to know who ran this blog! We started getting to know each other...*

Dearest Author, this is super open. All I request is a definite HEA, humor, and EPISTOLARY. I know. Sorry, I just really want that. There aren't enough of these in the world! ;) So, go nuts! )

*Sincerely,*

*Rissa*

## Story Info:

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** epistolary, friends to lovers, Internet relationship, long distance, emoticon abuse, sweet/no sex, illness/hurt/comfort

**Word Count:** 9,341

*Dedication*

For Cari, whom I never would have met if I hadn't found her blog first; and for Kris, who wouldn't take no for an answer.

*Author's Note*

I've taken one large liberty with this story— a B2 tourist visa only allows you stay up to six months in the US, not Millar's hassle-free twelve. As for Jake, the technical details should be correct, thanks to my brother-in-law's generous input— any errors are thanks to me.

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# **A SINGLE STEP**

**By Vicky Heysham**

## Part One

*August 2014*

**Started my Christmas shopping already ;-)**



*PerryMacD:* Aw, did Channing take out a restraining order?

*NotDavidMillar:* Yeah, against your wife

*ClaireMacD:* Dammit, Millar, you promised not to tell him!

\*\*\*\*

*July 2014*

**On the road again...**

Just done my first bit of genuine road-tripping (point and drive, nothing booked in advance), covering just over 1,100 miles from Washington DC to Miami. I took the coast road, and it turns out that part of the country is surprisingly wealthy, although I wouldn't fancy being there when a hurricane comes in.

Now I've got five days in art-deco splendour in Miami Beach— I don't know what I did to deserve it (and I'm not asking), but they've upgraded me to a suite bigger than my last flat. It's got two bathrooms! I could get used to this...

*EmLassiter:* Perhaps it's the accent. Maybe they think you're Ewan McGregor travelling incognito?

*NotDavidMillar:* I wish! And I'm probably a bit too tanned to look properly Scottish right now. And on that note, I'm off to the pool ☺

\*\*\*\*

*June 2014*

### **Philadelphia: not just Stallone, AIDS, and cream cheese**

There's also loads of historical stuff— who knew? It's a surprisingly lovely city; lots of parks and riverside walking (useful for burning off the obligatory Philly-cheesesteak experience), and more museums than seems strictly necessary.

Today I learned about the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which has inspired me: I reckon if I can list all 50 states\* then I can learn the 44 presidents and something to remember each of them by. I thought I'd start with the easy ones: Lincoln (abolished slavery, assassinated), JFK (space race, assassinated), Reagan (ending the Cold War, almost assassinated). Who next?

\*I always forget one, but it's a different one each time— so by my rules that doesn't count ☺

*PerryMacD:* Gee, let me think... Obama. Although I don't think he's famous for anything much...

*AndyJ78:* Grover Cleveland, the only one to serve two non-consecutive terms.

*EmLassiter:* I've always thought Teddy Roosevelt sounded like a good bloke

\*\*\*\*

*May 2014*

### **Smoke me a kipper, I'll be back for breakfast**

This is it— bags packed, boarding passes printed, farewells to family and friends all made... It's really real! This time tomorrow I should be about ready to land at JFK, for twelve months of bumming about the place and generally behaving like a total tourist. Mantra to self: Have not forgotten anything vital. Have not forgotten anything vital.

See you all next April (unless I'm planning to visit you en route, in which case I can't wait to see you!) One last question— can I count a state if I just drive through it, or do I have to get out of the car?

*KirkMacDonald:* You've got to get out of the car! Although I wouldn't bother in Kansas ;-)

*MoirMacDonald:* Safe trip, sweetheart— let us know you've landed safely. Love you lots, Mum xx

*DavewhoisthisDave:* Passport, credit card, phone, charger, Kindle, spare pants. Done.

*NotDavidMillar:* Pretty much— add a visa and swap the phone for a tablet, and that's about all I'm taking. It's not like I can't go shopping, right?

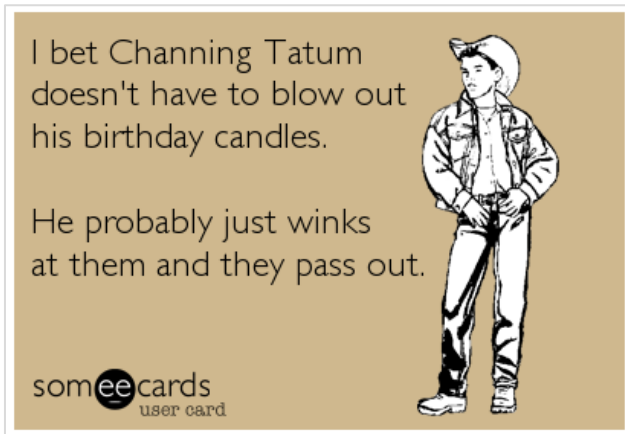
*PerryMacD:* Are you planning on peeing on each state to mark your territory?

*ClaireMacD:* Trust you to lower the tone!

\*\*\*\*

*April 2014*

**Happy Birthday, future husband!**



*PerryMacD:* You're my baby brother and I love you, but I swear if I see one more CT post on here I'm going to unsubscribe

*NotDavidMillar:* But then how will you know what Claire looks for in a man? ;-)

\*\*\*\*

*March 2014*

### **The countdown begins!**

They said yes! I'm now the proud owner of a B2 visa, which means I can finally say I'm going to America ☺ So relieved!!

Am off shopping for tickets!

*DavewhoisthisDave:* You could have still gone for 90 days on an ESTA though?

*NotDavidMillar:* Nope— if they turn your visa application down they'll most likely also refuse you an ESTA for at least a year. Only one roll of the die.

*EmLassiter:* Whoop whoop! Awesome news, hon.

*NotDavidMillar:* I know! D'you want me to bring you back a cute cowboy?

*EmLassiter:* Pleasepleaseplease

\*\*\*\*

*February 2014*

### **Right— I have A Plan**



I'd like to think thirty-two isn't too old to still be figuring out what I want to do with my life.

But while I ponder life's eternal questions, I thought maybe I'd go travelling for a bit. You know, clear my head, that sort of thing. And yes, I know I went travelling six years ago, and three years before that, but decisions like this shouldn't be rushed. ☺

Or, \*Keanu Reeves face\* maybe what I want to do with my life *is* to go travelling, and actually I've been completely sorted all this time without realising?

I've got a couple of ideas about where I could go, but does anyone have any suggestions?

*NicoleH:* Come to Montana; stay as long as you want! Seriously, we'd love to see you.

*NotDavidMillar:* Aw, thanks guys

*AndyJ78:* Yeah, come to the US. We've got some great hiking here in Tennessee, you'd love it.

*ClaireMacD:* America gets my vote too— if I could only ever go on one more trip it'd be back to Boston. Go!

*NotDavidMillar:* Hmm, I'm sensing a theme here. Time to get the atlas out...

*PerryMacD:* I'll even pay for your ticket ;-)

*NotDavidMillar:* Thanks bro! Wait— you did mean that in a nice way, right?

\*\*\*\*

*January 2014*

### **I am such a cliché**

I really am. Not only did I cut all my hair off after Chris (*so* much better, I can't believe you didn't all tell me to do it years ago) but this year I'm going to have a go at some New Year's Resolutions. There's a first time for everything! So here goes— in 2014 I will:

1. Stop teasing Perry about his bald patch
2. Remember Mother's Day in time to send a card

3. Listen to Claire when she tells me I have to start dating again (preferably someone so gorgeous Chris shrivels up and dies of jealousy mwahahahahahaha)

4. Also listen to Claire when she says that hotness doesn't make up for a personality you could strip paint with (aka Chris, sigh)

There. That can't be too tricky, can it?

*ClaireMacD:* Oh thank goodness, normal service is resumed. We were worried about you! When can you come visit?

*NotDavidMillar:* Current contract finishes on the 18<sup>th</sup>— any time after that

*ClaireMacD:* Spare room is yours from the 19<sup>th</sup>

*PerryMacD:* Is this where I'm supposed to say that I'd like to see you too?

*MoiramMacDonald:* Perry, be nice to your brother. And Millar, Mother's Day is March 30<sup>th</sup>. Love you both, Mum xx

*EmLassiter:* \*grabs popcorn\* Or is that unsupportive? :-P

*NotDavidMillar:* Very! But it's no more than I've learned to expect xx

\*\*\*\*

*December 2013*

**Says it all really**



*MoirMacDonald:* Chin up, sweetie— onwards and upwards.  
Love you always, Mum & Dad xx

*NotDavidMillar:* Aw, thanks Mum. Love you guys too x

\*\*\*\*



## Part Two

*August 2014*

**To:** Millar MacDonald

**From:** Jake Reid

**Subject:** Started my Christmas shopping already ;-)

Hi Millar, I hope you don't mind a total stranger emailing you. I just wanted to say I was having a shitty day yesterday, and your post was the first thing that's made me laugh all week. So thanks!

*Millar:* Hi Jake, and thanks— of course I don't mind. You've singlehandedly increased my fan base by 5% ☺ I'm sorry you were having a bad day, but I'm glad I made you laugh. All the best, Millar

*Jake:* Am I really only your 21<sup>st</sup> follower? Your blog's great— you deserve way more fans than that!

*Millar:* It's okay, I quite like being low-key. I started blogging a few years ago when I was in Australia— it seemed the easiest way to let my family know I was okay, rather than trying to talk to them all separately (although I have \*a lot\* of family, and if I don't post at least once a month they all assume I've died in a stupid accident somewhere...) And it gives me a permanent record of what I've been up to— a bit like an interactive diary.

*Jake:* Does that mean you'd rather I didn't follow you? I don't want to intrude if it's a family thing (I only read back to the beginning of this year)

*Millar:* No, it's fine, honestly! You won't find anything incriminating— apart from my everlasting crush on Channing Tatum, obv.

*Jake:* ☺ That means I can stop worrying about this...



*Millar:* Haha, that’s brilliant. I’d love to chat, but I’ve got to get some sleep—early start tomorrow. Stay in touch!

\*\*\*\*

*September 2014*

## **Nomenclature**

I love my parents— I’d just like to put that out there— but all the same, I spent most of my childhood wishing they hadn’t named Perry and me after sportsmen (Fred and Robert, if you’re wondering). Perry didn’t have it too bad, but there are still people who call me Windy ☹️ That kind of thing leaves scars!

Anyway, for the first time in my life I’m surrounded by people who have dafter names than me. I got chatting last night to a real manly man— whose name was Ruby. Short for Reuben is my guess, but I’m in New Mexico, where basically anything goes...

Best bit? They’ve never even *heard* of *Camberwick Green* over here 😊

*PerryMacD:* Didn’t have it too bad?? \*You\* weren’t known as “Pez the Penis” all through school!

*NotDavidMillar:* Fair point. Did Claire know that before she married you?

*ClaireMacD:* I know everything

*KirkMacDonald:* Clint Eastwood was born Marion— you’re in good company.

*PerryMacD:* That was John Wayne, Dad. Not all cowboys are the same— I'm sure Millar can vouch for that.

*PerryMacD:* I cannot believe I just said that.

*NotDavidMillar:* Chance'd be a fine thing \*sigh\*

*JakeReid:* Try working with a bunch of Twihards when your first name's Jacob— if I never hear another wolf joke it'll be too soon ☹

\*\*\*\*

*Millar:* Hey Jake, good to hear from you again! Tell me, what is it you do if you're hanging out with teenage girls at work? Let me guess, teacher?

*Jake:* Haha, close— I'm a self-employed careers adviser and tutor in Birmingham (that's the UK Midlands, not Alabama). Schools hire me to talk to sixth-formers about university and apprenticeship courses, and their parents hire me to coach them through their A-level exams.

*Millar:* God, I wish we'd had someone like that when I was at school— I had no idea what I wanted to be or how to get there. Still don't, if I'm honest, which is why I'm bumming around New Mexico when I should probably be behind a desk somewhere...

*Jake:* New Mexico sounds a lot better than any desk I can think of, although I've never been to the US. I've never been outside the UK, actually, unless you count a French exchange trip when I was twelve.

*Millar:* Seriously? Wow. The first time I left the UK I was five, when Mum took me to Germany with her. I can't remember now why we went, but I remember they let me go up into the cockpit and meet the captain. Can't imagine that happening these days :-/

*Jake:* No, I suppose not. So where else have you been?

*Millar:* Oh god, everywhere. Well, not everywhere— that's the thing, every time you look at a map of the world you spot somewhere new to visit. But quite a bit of Australia, some of the less scary parts of Africa, a handful of European cities... I'm not that adventurous though, I only really choose places where I can stick to speaking English and get away with it.

*Jake:* That sounds pretty adventurous to me! I really haven't got the travel bug— I'm much more of an armchair traveller. I love a good documentary or a

book about life in Mongolia or the Inuit or something like that, but I can't get excited about actually going to see it myself. It's all on the Internet anyway ;-)

*Millar:* Uhuh. Next you'll be telling me watching sport on telly's better than going to the event, and you'd rather listen to an album than go to a gig.

*Jake:* I thought that went without saying ;-). Have you *heard* One Direction live?

*Millar:* I don't think I've ever had that pleasure, no.

*Millar:* Now I'm not sure whether to ask about your daughter or just back away slowly from the crazy person...

*Jake:* No daughter! No wife either, or girlfriend. Although I was sort of dating a guy called Algernon (horrible name, lovely person) up until about six months ago. It was an amicable enough split— he was offered a job in London and I couldn't leave Brum.

*Millar:* ☺ So why 1D?

*Jake:* It was my best friend's daughter— I owed him a favour, and she and her friends worked out that a chaperone in a wheelchair would have to go up the front. They took ruthless advantage of my infirmity, all for the sake of being within twenty feet of Floppy, Cutie, Dopey, Moody & Moppet and their auto-tuned warbling. It's four hours of my life I'll never get back ☹

*Millar:* Wheelchair?

*Jake:* *That's* what you got from that story? It was just a temporary thing— more of a gimmick, really. Your turn: what's the worst thing you've ever done for a best mate?

*Millar:* Hm, most of the stuff Em and I got up to at uni should never be spoken of! But I do (vaguely) remember one night letting her egg me into a drinking competition with a guy she fancied. We were in this pub in Bristol where the cider's so strong they only sell it in half pints... I had an exam the next day, and I think I lasted about long enough to write my name before I had to bail. Happy days!

*Jake:* I haven't drunk cider in years— not since I tried scrumpy. Never again \*shudder\*

*Millar:* You'd be all right over here, then ☺ If you want alcohol you have to look for "hard cider", and even then most of that's only about 5%. I'm pretty

sure the locals think I've got a drink problem— which I haven't, I'd just like to point out!

*Jake:* And I bet your twelve-step group agrees with you ;-)

*Millar:* They do :-P

\*\*\*\*

*Millar:* Hi Jake, how's it going? I'm on a train right now and we're going through a boring bit, so I thought I'd make the most of the free Wi-Fi and say hallo. I'm on my way to Chicago for a quick look-see round the city before I head up to Milwaukee (I can only ever hear that word in my head the way Alice Cooper says it— “mill-e-wah-que” ☺) and then back across west to Wyoming. Anyway, I couldn't face the thought of all that driving, so I ditched the hire car at Albuquerque and now I'm on the Southwest Chief, which sounds like it should be racist but probably isn't. It takes twenty-seven hours— twenty-seven! I had to check the numbers twice... I've just looked it up, and I could almost drive from London to Moscow in that time! You're missing out on this whole America thing— it's great. And big.

*Jake:* Whatever did happen to Mike Myers? I'm good, thanks, although you only just caught me— I'm off out in a bit to see *Pride*. A friend of mine was part of the script editing team, so a bunch of us are in London for the premiere. Twenty-seven hours does sound a bit mad, although maybe not as mad as *127 Hours*. Did you see it? I had to watch the cutting scene through my fingers...

*Millar:* Oh god yes, I made myself watch that bit, but I wished afterward that I hadn't! I don't think I could have done it— I'd probably have died still convinced I could move the boulder somehow.

*Jake:* I know ☺ I think I'd probably be the same. Talking of being trapped in small places, do you have to sleep in your seat, or have you got a cabin? When I was a kid I always wanted to cross Eastern Europe overnight on a sleeper train— I think I must have watched too many Bond films ☺

*Millar:* So what's stopping you? I've always wanted to hike the Moonstone Trek in Peru— it's been on my list for years but hasn't quite made it to the top yet. Most people do the Inca Trail and Machu Picchu, but I reckon the Moonstone route actually looks more spectacular, and it's a lot quieter. It's meant to be pretty tough, though— all the reviews talk about altitude sickness, which doesn't exactly sound like fun!

*Jake:* Hm, it sounds almost as safe as going off canyoneering in the desert by yourself :-/ I've always suspected travel's dangerous— now I'm convinced! And it's expensive, and you'll probably get food poisoning, or get arrested at the border for being an unwitting drugs mule and sentenced to death by firing squad...

*Millar:* Oh my god, what documentaries have you been watching?! You sound exactly like my brother Perry's first girlfriend (she didn't last long— my family are all a bit *carpe diem* about stuff). Travel's only dangerous if you're an idiot or super unlucky— I've been down in a shark cage and bungee jumped at Victoria Falls, and I reckon I was probably safer both times than crossing the road back home.

*Jake:* Probably, especially given the bus drivers near where I live! So are you a complete adrenaline junkie? Should I expect to read a blog post about you slack lining across the Mississippi while you're there?

*Millar:* Ooh, thanks for the suggestion— next stop: Baton Rouge! Nah, I'm not that bad really. I might have been a bit overexcitable maybe when I was younger, but not so much now. These days I casually drop the shark cage story into conversation mostly just to impress guys ;-)

*Jake:* You're trying to impress me, then?

*Millar:* Is it working?

*Jake:* Could be... ;-) But you do know my life's really dull compared to yours, don't you?

*Millar:* I couldn't say— I don't really know much about your life. You might actually be an MI5 agent, and the sixth-form tutor thing is an elaborate cover to give you access to a Middle East dictator who's sent his son to Birmingham to receive a western education.

*Jake:* And there was you thinking *I* was the crazy person ☺ No dictator's sons, I promise.

*Millar:* \*snigger\*

*Jake:* Okay, that ~~came out~~ sounded wrong, but you know what I meant! And, much as I'm enjoying this, if I don't make a move I'm going to be late ☺

*Millar:* Ooh yes, have fun!

*Jake:* ☺

October 2014

## I'm back!

Yep, I managed to survive my week on the ranch, despite there being no Wi-Fi and even less phone reception than usual. And I didn't get heatstroke, or fall off, or get bitten by a rattlesnake, or trampled by a bull, or... Well, you get the idea ☺

I did, however, learn some genuine cowboying skills— check out the photos. (I'd just like to point out that I'm not actually a hobbit— that particular horse was enormous!)

I also met some lovely people, most of whom were German. There's a strong link between Germany and this part of Wyoming, although no one seems quite sure why. And I spent lots of one-on-one time with the resident cowboy, Casey, who was single, had a surprisingly good sense of humour, and was devastatingly gorgeous.

And also 100% straight. Still, you can't win them all, hey?

*EmLassiter:* Ooh, you bugger, you could have given Casey my number!

*NotDavidMillar:* Haha, sorry hon! But he'd never survive life in the UK, I don't think. He reckons Gillette (the nearest "city") is too crowded for him. Population: less than 20,000

*MoirMacDonald:* I don't like to ask, sweetheart, but you are being careful, aren't you? There are some terrible things have happened to gay men in Wyoming— we really don't want any of them to happen to you. Lots of love, Mum & Dad xx

*NotDavidMillar:* Yes, Mum, I'm being careful. You don't need to worry, although I love you for it. x

\*\*\*\*

*Jake:* So... you playing cowboy, eh? Or was it more playing *with* cowboys? Should I be jealous? ;-) Sounds like you had fun, anyway.

*Millar:* So much fun! It was a proper working ranch— you can be a total tourist if you want, but if you can ride a horse they'll let you help out just like one of the locals. I am proud to say that, should you ever have the need for it, I can now herd cattle ☺ And castrate them ☺

*Jake:* Hm, I'm more about riding a bike than a horse— although my Bianchi and I aren't on speaking terms at the moment.

*Millar:* ??? What's a Bianchi, and why aren't you speaking to him/her/it?

*Jake:* I'd have thought with your name you'd know a bit about bikes ;-). It's my road bike, which had a disagreement with a rogue patch of gravel on Tuesday. It went one way and I went the other— about ten yards up the road, to be precise. The flying part was great, shame I can't say the same about the landing! So here I am, laid up with a hairline fracture of the femur and looking forward to six weeks on crutches.

*Millar:* Ouch, that sucks— and not in a good way! I hope the NHS is looking after you properly?

*Jake:* Yep, hot and cold running nurses and all the painkillers they can pump into me. Well, not quite, but they're keeping a close eye on me. Talking of which, my surgeon's due in a few minutes for today's update. Talk to you again soon?

*Millar:* Of course. Get well soon!

\*\*\*\*

*November 2014*

*Millar:* Hi Jake, how's the leg coming along?

*Jake:* Not too bad I suppose... Although it's been three weeks and I'm fed up with being feeble. I feel like a doddering old man ☺

*Millar:* You're just ahead of your time ☺

*Jake:* Haha— I'll tell myself that when I'm letting my students open doors for me and carry my files.

*Millar:* You're back at work already? That's dedication.

*Jake:* No, not quite yet, but I will be as soon as I can. The joys of being self-employed! Plus, to be fair, I love my job. Which reminds me— what do you do?

*Millar:* Hm, avoid answering that question, mostly ;-). There's not really a description for what I do, which is usually whatever catches my eye and pays the most for my random collection of workplace skills. I did history & politics at university, which prepared me beautifully for a career of working in an



office, but I wasn't very good at it. So after a few years I packed it in and went to Australia for a bit, on the grounds that if I was going to be a bum, I may as well do it where the weather's better. And I've never really settled on anything properly since.

*Jake:* I think I might be jealous ☹

*Millar:* Hey, being a slacker isn't all round the world trips and messing around on Wyoming ranches, you know ☺ I've got no long-term savings, and at some point I'm going to have to get A Real Job...

*Jake:* I suppose there is that. But you'll have much better memories to look back on than I will when we're both old and grey. I wish I had something to compare.

*Millar:* Blimey— you're not dead yet! You're self-employed— take some time off, go exploring. Even just a week. Ooh, I know, you could come to the States! I'd love to show you some of my favourite bits. How d'you fancy trekking the Grand Canyon?

*Jake:* \*waves crutch\* ☺

*Millar:* So that's also a "no" to yomping up the Rockies, then? Spoilsport.

*Jake:* I think right now all I'm fit for is a retirement complex in Florida... Do you reckon I could get one of those sit-on buggies to pootle around on?

*Millar:* I'll ask ☺ Seriously— as soon as you're back on your feet go and find the cheapest flight to the US. I'll meet you anywhere you like. No strings, no catch— just two guys spending a few days together. What's the worst that could happen?

*Jake:* Hmm... off the top of my head: the plane crashes before we even leave Heathrow

*Jake:* They don't let me in at Immigration

*Jake:* They do let me in, but only after a very *thorough* inspection

*Jake:* You turn out to be an axe murderer

*Jake:* We hate each other on sight

*Jake:* I break my other leg and spend my life savings on medical bills

*Jake:* I turn out to be an axe murderer

*Millar:* Wow, that's cheerful. You sure you didn't miss one there? ☺ And I don't know about how thorough Immigration are, but I'm pretty sure you're not an axe murderer. (I might be— you'll just have to risk it ☺) Will you at least think about it?

*Jake:* I will, I promise. And in return, promise me you won't get your hopes up. I'm really not as interesting as you seem to think.

*Millar:* You'd be surprised what I find interesting ;-)

*Jake:* I'm beginning to wonder just what I'm letting myself in for...

*Millar:* \*indignant face\* Hey, I'm completely unthreatening and totally easy to get on with.

*Jake:* I'll take your word for it, Jack Torrance ☺

\*\*\*\*

### **Sage and onion stuffing? Face-stuffing, more like**

Thanks to everyone who sent a card or a message— Mum & Dad, your parcel arrived safely, thanks a million for that. I have teabags! ☺ And it was lovely to talk to you, too.

So anyway, as well as now being a year closer to the dreaded four-o, I also survived my first Thanksgiving. It was a bit strange having a national holiday to celebrate my birthday, but I could get used to it, UK take note ☺ I think I may have put on about half a stone— no more pigging out until... oh, wait, Christmas...

If I'm honest, I was a bit worried about being a Billy No Mates, but Nicole and Nathan couldn't have made me feel more a part of the family if they'd actually adopted me. And they have so much family— I thought there were a lot of MacDonalds, but this was crazy! Three kids plus partners, eight grandkids (from six months old to teenage) plus a handful of random cousins. I think there were 25 of us at dinner! Thank god for dishwashers, that's all I'm saying.

There's no snow here yet— apparently this side of the mountains usually gets more than on the east, although it also stays warmer. (Perry, you're the expert— can you explain why?) Either way, I think I'll be leaving any hiking in Glacier National Park until we're safely into spring— frozen to death is *not* a good look.

*MoirMacDonald:* I'm glad you had a good day, sweetie—thank Nicole for us again, won't you? Mum xx

*KirkMacDonald:* I'm glad the parcel got to you in one piece. I was a bit worried I should have used more tape!

*NotDavidMillar:* Trust me Dad, the one thing it didn't need was more tape. It took me twenty minutes to get it open as it was. But thanks, it was awesome xx

*PerryMacD:* Basically the cold air comes down from Canada and gets trapped east of the Continental Divide, so the west stays warm. I suspect the west gets more snow because it's generally wetter?

*NotDavidMillar:* I knew you'd know ☺ And I'd say Kalispell's definitely the dampest place I've been to yet in Montana, so your theory seems about right.

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### *December 2014*

*Jake:* Hi Millar, and a belated happy birthday. You kept that quiet! Did you do anything nice for it?

*Millar:* Hi Jake ☺ I had a great birthday, thanks. It was on the 26<sup>th</sup>, so the family I'm staying with (Nicole and my mum were friends at university) just kind of rolled the two celebrations into one. I have never eaten so much in my life!!

*Jake:* And you're doing it all again at Christmas? Blimey. Having said that, I'd give quite a lot for a decent feed at the moment—hospital food really is as bad as the cliché says!

*Millar:* Hospital? Didn't you say you'd only be on crutches for six weeks? I thought you'd be back out on the bike by now.

*Jake:* I thought so too, but there were a couple of technical setbacks. Nothing major, but the surgeon wants to check how things are going, so I'm in for another MRI.

*Millar:* Bummer!

*Jake:* Yeah. I wouldn't mind so much but I hate the MRI scanner— it's a bit like being inside a noisy, cylindrical coffin ☹️ I usually try to distract myself by trying to recite the periodic table, but I always get stuck after radon.

*Millar:* I'm building quite the mental image of you— cyclist, film buff, seriously brainy... I'm imagining a sexy Brummie librarian version of Bradley Wiggins. I bet you wear glasses, don't you? ☺️

*Jake:* Haha— that made me laugh so loud a nurse came to check I was okay! No, I don't look anything like Brad, and I only wear glasses at work, when I'm trying to look cleverer than I am ☺️

*Millar:* Aha— your youthful looks mean the kids don't take you seriously?

*Jake:* Pretty much ;-) And I've got to be able to convince those parents I'm capable of educating their precious darlings.

*Millar:* That doesn't really contradict the sexy librarian idea...

*Jake:* I'm totally ordinary looking!

*Millar:* Mmhmm— photos or I don't believe you ;-)

*Jake:* What a shame, I don't have any with me.

*Millar:* There's this new thing, all the cool kids are doing it... you have heard of selfies, right? :-P

*Jake:* I'm in a hospital bed!

*Millar:* Hey, I posted photos of me after a day on the back of a horse when I was filthy, knackered and sunburned— you can't possibly look worse than that.

*Jake:* I can, trust me, but okay... give me a sec.

*Millar:* Ooh, nice! Not so much Bradley as Jason Statham! Or, what was the name of the guy in Sherlock? The baddie.

*Jake:* Andrew Scott?

*Millar:* No! Although, yum...

*Millar:* ...

*Millar:* ...

*Millar:* Sorry, having a little Moriarty moment there. But I meant the film— Mark Strong.

*Jake:* I starting going bald early ☹️ The only answer is to shave it all off, otherwise it's a bit tragic.

*Millar:* Not so much tragic as hot 😊

*Jake:* \*blushes\*

*Millar:* So now we know we don't find each other physically repugnant...

*Jake:* \*braces himself\*

*Millar:* Have you thought any more about that holiday?

*Jake:* Sort of... I'm not even sure I have a valid passport. I did buy a US guidebook though.

*Millar:* It's okay— they say a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, so that was yours. You're on your way.

*Millar:* Or if that's too insensitive for a man laid flat on his back right now, how about, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." Gotta be better than NHS food, right?

*Jake:* I'm prepared to believe they are actually serving elephant here— some of the meat is grey enough!

*Millar:* So you've taken your first few bites as well 😊

*Jake:* But I literally have no idea where I'd like to go.

*Millar:* Well, let's narrow it down a bit. City break or country retreat? Cold or hot? Mountains or beach? Luxury hotel, self-catered apartment, or cabin in the woods?

*Jake:* Um, city, I think. I'm not too fussed about weather as long as I'm not actually shivering, and a self-catered apartment sounds kind of fun. And I'd guess you'd prefer it if I chose the Rockies or somewhere suitably dramatic, but I've actually always wanted to see the Pacific.

*Millar:* I don't care— this is about what you'd like. Hipsters or hippies? Grunge or pop? You don't speak Spanish, do you? And do you have any strong opinions on coffee?

*Jake:* Coffee? Is this a "I like my men like I like my coffee— three sugars and in a paper cup" thing? I'm not keen on either hipsters or hippies, and I love pop but I also own all three Nirvana albums (no Pearl Jam though). *No hablo español* 😊

*Millar:* Okay, computer says... your expertly tailored personal travel solution is: Seattle.

*Jake:* Hang on, I've got the book here— thought I might as well make use of all this reading time.

*Jake:* Okay, Seattle looks like it might be fun 😊 Once I'm off these damn crutches... Just give me some time to sort myself out first.

*Millar:* Awesome!!!

*Jake:* Can we go up the Space Needle?

*Millar:* Of course!

*Jake:* Shit, I've got to go— my sister's just arrived. She offered to come and keep me company, and she gets pissy when I'm "ignoring her".

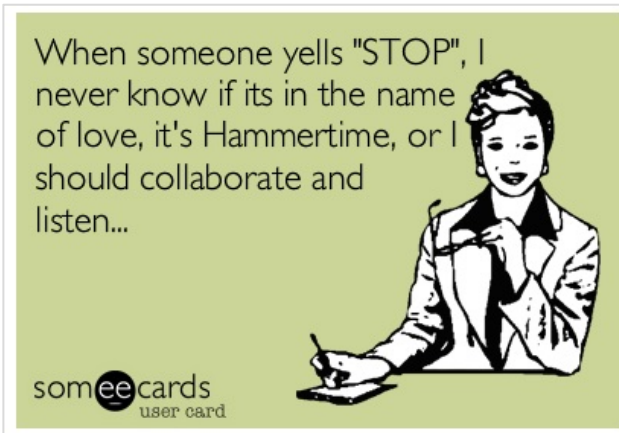
*Millar:* Oops, you best had then. Take care, and I'll look forward to seeing you in Seattle 😊

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**To:** Jake Reid

**From:** Millar MacDonald

**Subject:** Something to make you laugh when you get out of the coffin 😊



\*\*\*\*

**To:** Millar MacDonald

**From:** Jake Reid

**Subject:** Please don't take this personally

Dear Mr MacDonald

This is Jacob Reid's sister. I'm sorry to have to write to you like this, but you should understand that it was quite a surprise this afternoon to see Jacob reading about the USA. He's never expressed any desire to travel before, and frankly I believe that's always been for the best.

It's evident from what Jacob tells me that he hasn't been entirely honest with you. He has arthritis, specifically rheumatoid arthritis in both hips. To make it clear what that means, he takes medication on a daily basis, and will have to do so for the rest of his life. At their worst, the flare ups have been so bad that he's been unable to walk—and they can last for several weeks at a time, meaning that he's certainly not in any position to “trek the Grand Canyon” or “yomp up the Rockies.”

In 2009 he had a double hip resurfacing, which is virtually unheard of for someone in his twenties. Obviously that made a huge difference to Jacob's quality of life, but one of the reasons he's back in hospital this week is that the fracture in his femur is dangerously close to the implant, and if the bone doesn't heal properly the worst-case scenario is that he could end up in a wheelchair—permanently this time. The surgeons are assessing the issue, and Jacob really doesn't need any distractions, however well meant.

I'm sure you didn't intend to fill his head with impossible pipe dreams, but I thought you should know the full situation. It's doubtful that Jacob will ever be well enough to live the sort of life you seem to consider normal, and I suggest you forget the idea. I'm sure you understand.

\*\*\*\*

*Millar:* So... That wasn't quite the response I was expecting.

*Jake:* I apologise for my sister— she must have used my phone while I was in the lab. We've already had words about invasion of privacy.

*Millar:* It was more the content of her email that surprised me. Were you planning to say anything about having arthritis?

*Jake:* Probably not.

*Miller:* And are you really too ill to travel?

*Jake:* Probably.

*Jake:* I don't know. Maybe.

*Millar:* So what, you were just going to string me along until I gave up?

*Jake:* Not string you along... But you wanted to hear me say yes, and I got carried away.

*Millar:* WTF, Jake? One minute we're talking about the NHS feeding you elephant—the next I'm being shouted at for apparently pressuring you into something you can't do. How am I supposed to know you're ill if you don't actually bother to tell me?

*Jake:* FFS, I'm not ill, I'm disabled. A cripple, for want of a better word.

*Jake:* Yes, I have arthritis. I also have two fake hips, and upper body strength you wouldn't believe, because I spent half my twenties on crutches. I *also* have a medicine cabinet the size of a suitcase, and I'll be taking tablets every day for the rest of my life. The meds mean I can't drink, I'm losing my hair, and I'll probably never be able to have kids. Oh yeah, and— unsurprisingly, I think, under the circumstances— I have issues with depression. I'm a real fucking catch.

*Millar:* Jake...

*Jake:* So forgive me for having spent the last few months enjoying being able to pretend that I'm normal, rather than having to explain my limp, or call a taxi to go a mile down the road, or explain why I'm drinking Coke instead of beer, or just deal with any one of the million ways most people in my life pity me.

*Millar:* I don't pity you

*Jake:* And yes, given time, I probably would have told you the truth, and admitted that I wasn't coming— and you would have nodded and said you understood, and just as soon as you realised quite how pathetic my life really is you'd have stopped messaging and moved on to someone more normal. That's what happens.



*Millar:* Shit, Jake, listen. Look, that's rough, and I'm really sorry to hear all that. I can't imagine what it must be like. But here's the thing— you can't know how I might or might not have reacted, and assuming that you can is pretty rude.

*Millar:* You've told me you've got your own place and a great job. You're clearly coping— really well, by the sound of it. And I did some research after I got your sister's email. Arthritis doesn't have to stop you from doing stuff— not if you actually want to do it in the first place. I thought you wanted to come to the States?

*Jake:* I did. I do. But it's not possible.

*Millar:* So come! Of course it's possible! Obviously we're not going to go running ultramarathons across Death Valley, but we can still spend a few days pottering around a city. There are loads of things we can do in Seattle that shouldn't be too taxing, but even if all you wanted to do was sit in a coffee shop on the seafront and look at the view then I'd be totally okay with that too. We can do whatever you want. Be brave, Jake.

*Jake:* Fuck you, Millar. My sister didn't have any right to go through my phone and message you, and you don't have any right to tell me to "be brave". You have no idea what my life's like.

*Millar:* I'm sorry, I apologise unreservedly.

*Millar:* Look, I really don't want to fight— maybe we should just call it a night and pick up again when we're both a bit less stressed. How's that sound?

*Jake:* Or maybe we should just acknowledge that we want different things out of life.

*Millar:* Okay...

*Millar:* What exactly are you saying, Jake?

*Jake:* My leg's healing okay, but I'm going to be busy with physio and rehab for a while, so I'm not going to be able to message you any more. It's been fun, you're a great guy, but this was a bad idea. All the best.

*Millar:* C'mon, don't be like that.

*Millar:* Seriously— forget all the travel stuff, that's not important. Just talk to me. Please?

*Millar:* Jake?

\*\*\*\*

*January 2015*

### **Another unhappy New Year**

Some of you have been asking where I've been and if I'm okay—to which the answers are nowhere in particular and not really.

The new year is traditionally a time for reflection on the past twelve months and making plans for the ones ahead. Those of you who remember that far back will know I made four resolutions for 2014, and I'm pleased to say that Mum got her card on time, and I didn't once remind Perry that the last man to rock a bald patch like his was Friar Tuck ;-)

So that just left starting dating again... And, well, I did kind of meet a guy. I say kind of because it's been an online thing and we never actually met, although I have seen photos. (Well, one photo. And with reference to resolution number four, he's got a personality that would make up for looking like Marilyn Manson, which he definitely doesn't.) We spent most of the past five months chatting back and forth, and got to the point where we were talking seriously about him coming out here for a week's holiday to meet up.

All good, right?

Very good—up until a couple of weeks ago, when I found out that he's got rheumatoid arthritis (he didn't say much about it, but it sounds pretty serious) and seems to consider himself basically crippled and undateable. And then he stopped answering my emails.

I'm not going to pretend I'm any kind of medical expert, or that I know more about his life than he does, and I don't know exactly why he went away. But I'm hoping he's still lurking somewhere here on this blog, and I just wanted to say that I miss him and I wish he'd get back in touch. And I guess if he doesn't want to or feel he can, then I want him to know that I wish him all the best for whatever life has in store for him.

That's about it really, so if you'll excuse me I'm off to do some more feeling sorry for myself. Love you guys.

*MoirMacDonald:* Happy New Year sweetheart, and to your friend as well, if he's reading. When I was a girl we were all

scared of catching polio, and I remember you being terrified by those wretched AIDS adverts in the 80s— now look how things have changed. You never know what the next generation of whizz-kids in a lab will produce... Mum xxxx

*ClaireMacD:* Happy New Year hon, lots of love from all of us (including Friar Tuck!) xxxx

*PerryMacD:* HNY buddy ☺

*NotDavidMillar:* Thanks buddy ☺

*PerryMacD:* \*manly shoulder slapping ensues\*

*AndyJ78:* A story for you: one of the guys in our Kili group had a bit of a limp— nothing major, but I was walking behind him for a couple of hours the day we summited and I couldn't help noticing. I asked him if he was okay and he said something vague about being a bit stiff, so I didn't really think about it again. When we got back to Arusha a few days later the whole group went drinking, and about halfway through the evening he put his foot up on the table— literally his foot. Turns out he'd got frostbite climbing in New Zealand a few years before and they ended up having to amputate. Apparently the only thing he couldn't do very well anymore was swim— he said the chlorine made the hinges rust up ;- ) So yeah, nothing's impossible.

*EmLassiter:* That's a great story, but you can't say nothing's impossible. In the immortal words of Pratchett: "Try striking a match on jelly, mister."

*KirkMacDonald:* Before this turns into an argument, I think it's worth remembering that everyone has to follow their own path. Millar, yours has always been the less-trodden one, and I think sometimes you forget that not everyone sees the world the same way you do. Just because there are people out there doing incredible things under difficult circumstances, that doesn't mean your guy has to be climbing Everest to prove he's a valid person. He's doing what works for him, I'll bet. Be kind to him, and to yourself. Love you, kid. Dad xxx

*NotDavidMillar:* Aw, Dad \*hugs\*

\*\*\*\*

*February 2015*

### **No pancakes this year ☹**

The good lord giveth, and the good lord taketh away. America kindly laid on a holiday for my birthday, but they don't do Pancake Day! Well, okay, they do Mardi Gras, which I concede might be a bit more spectacular (note to self: should have gone to New Orleans) —but no Jif Lemon?! I'm sulking.

*AndyJ78:* You want to have a word with Obama about that. Shocking stuff, mate.

\*\*\*\*

*Jake:* Hey Millar, I didn't know if you'd want to hear from me

*Jake:* I've been doing a lot of thinking, and talking to a few people

*Jake:* And then I read a story where the two main characters go on a road trip to New Mexico fuelled mainly by Denny's waffles, and then you posted about pancakes

*Jake:* And it felt like maybe the universe was giving me a nudge.

*Jake:* So, um, hello again. How are you?

*Millar:* Jake! Oh my goodness, it's so good to hear from you! I was in the shower or I'd have replied sooner. I'm good— how are you? Did the break heal up properly in the end? I've been worried!

*Jake:* Yeah, I'm in one piece and back to my usual schedule, thank goodness. Panic over.

*Millar:* What happened? You vanished...

*Jake:* I'm really sorry. I don't know what else to say.

*Jake:* I just lost it a bit, I guess.

*Jake:* I was feeling really positive when we were chatting— I genuinely meant it when I said I'd fly out. But the MRI was a nightmare— I was in there nearly an hour and I got a bit freaked out, and then my sister started on at me about you and "accepting my limitations," and we got loud enough that a nurse had to come in and ask her to leave... So that didn't exactly put me in the best mood for talking to you— I'm so sorry.

*Millar:* Apology accepted! I don't suppose me hassling you helped, either. I'm just glad you're okay.

*Jake:* I'm a lot better now you've not told me to sod off! I've been meaning to message you since I saw your January post, but I kept wimping out... Your Dad's comment was great.

*Millar:* It was, wasn't it? My whole family's pretty awesome, actually ☺

*Millar:* So, am I allowed to ask how it's going? For you in general, I mean, not just your leg. You're back at work, I assume?

*Jake:* Actually, no. I'm taking a break for a few more weeks—I've got savings and I needed a time out. Nothing major, but it's been nice to have no responsibilities ☺ What are you up to? Where did you get to on your trip?

*Millar:* Ah yes, responsibilities. Remind me what they are, again? ;-)) I'm in a tiny little town called Cayucos on the California coast— it's a village really, except that to me the word "village" means a green and a duck pond, and this place has a highway and the ocean (and no Denny's, so no pancakes (or waffles)). I'm literally about five yards from the beach right now ☺ I was actually thinking about going for a run, but talking to you is the perfect excuse not to!

*Jake:* I'm not sure I can condone you using me as the excuse to skip your cardio. It's tipping it down here— I'd much rather be by the ocean.

*Millar:* Aw, do you enjoy long romantic walks along the beach, Jake?

*Jake:* :-P Nah, I'm more of a "sit on a rock and watch the surf try to destroy the cliffs" kind of guy. I went down to Newquay last week; just to see the storms come in over the Atlantic.

*Millar:* Cornwall in February? I think I'm glad I'm here! It's been in the 20s all week ☺

*Jake:* I kind of had a yen for staring out over the water

*Jake:* Talking of which

*Millar:* Go on?

*Millar:* Jake? Don't disappear on me again, buddy.

*Jake:* I'm not disappearing \*takes deep breath\* One of the things I did while I was away was renew my passport. And get an ESTA.

*Millar:* Which means...? \*cautiously hopeful face\*

*Jake:* Exactly how far away from Seattle are you?

*Millar:* Hang on

*Millar:* Google says one thousand miles, which is apparently fifteen hours of driving. Can you give me two days?

*Jake:* I was going to say two weeks! Although I could come sooner, if you like?

*Millar:* I like! I'll pack now!

*Jake:* I haven't bought a ticket yet! But I will— this afternoon. Should I message you from the travel agent's to make sure I get the dates right?

*Millar:* Yes!

*Millar:* WOOOOOO! ☺

*Millar:* WOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!! ☺ ☺

*Millar:* Seriously, you're sure about this? I don't want to have hassled you into anything.

*Jake:* No hassling, I promise. Just, like I said, I've been rethinking a few things. And I talked to a couple of consultants about what's feasible— they both said a ten-hour flight should be absolutely fine as long as I'm sensible. So Seattle is totally doable ☺

*Millar:* ☺ I'm going to have so much fun showing you around!

*Jake:* I can't wait ☺

*Jake:* And Millar?

*Millar:* Yes?

*Jake:* Thanks

\*\*\*\*

## Part Three

*October 2016*

**Dear Channing...**

I know I've always said you were my future husband, but here's the thing: I've changed my mind.

I'm sure it's a shock—you must have been pining over me for years (let's face it, who wouldn't?)—but I got married three weeks ago, to the most amazing, gorgeous, adventurous man. He didn't realise he was all of those things until he had me to tell him, of course—he's also pretty darn modest. Also intelligent, funny, and did I mention gorgeous?

Generous too—he's with me right now, in an Internet café in Cusco of all places, because I once said I'd always wanted to come to Peru. Turns out, if you get the prep right and you take it easy (and you've got someone to share the load with), you *can* do pretty much anything, even if you do have two bionic hips. So once I've hit "post" and logged off we're heading out to join the rest of our group for dinner—epic four-day treks don't just celebrate themselves, you know.

Here's hoping you're enjoying your own happy ever after ☺

Millar & Jake xx

## The End

## **Author Bio**

*Vicky Heysham has lived all over southern England, although she not so secretly dreams of running away to the Colorado mountains. Until that plan comes to fruition, she calls Bath home and tries not to miss the London Tube network too badly. She's new to the world of published fiction, and has been amused to discover that wrangling plot bunnies can be tougher than her day job. She likes to think of herself as a writer of contemporary m/m romance, but suspects she's not disciplined enough to have a speciality just yet.*

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