



MIKE GREYSEN

SACRIFICES WORTH MAKING



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Eighteen-year-old Shane Larson has just two goals in mind when he moves from his hometown of Telluride, Colorado, to nearby Denver: surviving his freshman year of college and gearing up for a return to competition as a professional snowboarder and skateboarder. An injury has kept him sidelined from both sports for nearly a year, but now, fully recovered, he's anxious to get back on the slopes at the start of the winter season. Public interest is great, not just because of his past successes but also because he remains the only openly gay athlete in either sport. He's used to being talked about, and he's used to being stared at.

But when he catches fellow student Nathan Pearce staring at him on the first day of classes, it's for an entirely different reason. Nathan doesn't know anything about Shane; all he knows is that he wants to change that, because he's far from home and could use a friend. Shane could, too, but he's fresh off a painful breakup, with no interest in dating again anytime soon. Luckily, that's okay with Nathan—he wants a [best] friend more than a boyfriend, anyway...

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SACRIFICES WORTH MAKING

By Mike Greysen

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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SACRIFICES WORTH MAKING

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Photo Description

Sunlight streams through an open bedroom window, illuminating two young men. One, seated on the floor with his back against the side of the bed, sports short brown hair and a trimmed beard. The other, lying horizontally across the top of the bed, has short black hair and a smooth face. The back of his neck and head rest against his partner's shoulder and chest, respectively. Eyes closed, they both look perfectly content.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I think I might be in love. No. I am in love with that man beside me. And I'm pretty sure he's in love with me. Don't think he'd have moved across country with me, if he wasn't. So, we're in love. And it's great. Really.

Except the sex...

Don't get me wrong, the sex is damn awesome. The things that man can do with his tongue... But I can't help but feel that he misses it, that whole shoving his cock into some dude's ass, thing. And we—I—tried. God knows I tried. I thought maybe it would get better... that I would get better. So we switched positions, we tried toys, watched more porn than was probably healthy... but it never stopped feeling wrong. I hated feeling that wrong when he was looking at me like I was everything.

So I told him the truth. And we stopped.

He still looked at me like I was everything—except I didn't feel like I was lying when I looked back.

But there's some part of me that wonders if he still wants it. Or, gods, if he needs it. 'Cause I can't be that for him, and that kills me. What do I do if the man I love needs something I can never give him?

Requirements: no BDSM, and the lack of anal sex isn't because of a trauma. They have a good sexual relationship, they just don't engage in anal sex.

Sincerely,

Carissa

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: professional snowboarder/skateboarder, artist, college years, friends to lovers, slow burn/UST

Word Count: 144,665

Acknowledgements

I am fortunate enough to have an incredible amount of people to thank (in no particular order):

Carissa, whose unique prompt immediately grabbed my attention and sparked my imagination. The accompanying photograph was great, but the prompt itself was what really sealed the deal for me. It was then, and remains now, my favorite prompt of the entire event, and I'm so glad I was able to claim it as my own before anyone else could. Carissa, thank you for introducing me to these two young men, and for giving me the opportunity to tell their story.

Gillian, who generously sponsored the contest that gave this book its fantastic cover, and Bree, the talent behind said cover. Thank you both for the wonderful gift.

My Beta readers, Armi and Yrisa, who each provided helpful feedback while never getting too upset with me for sending them just a bit of the story at a time, then making them wait weeks for another taste. Thanks for being okay with a rather unconventional Beta process.

Those who offered support along the way in the prompt thread: Breann, Gabi, Verity, Viv, Lisa, Jay, Tully, Kathleen, Samantha, Calila, and Jessa. Thanks for taking the journey with me! Thanks, also, to everyone who kept the Support Group thread lively throughout the event, giving me something to read every time I needed a quick break. And a special thanks to A.L. Boyd, who got in touch with me when I was looking for someone to answer questions about Breckenridge and Denver. I never actually got around to asking any of those questions, mainly because I didn't know what to ask, but nevertheless, A.L., I appreciate your willingness to help out.

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obscure things, like which films were available on Netflix on specific dates.

Raevyn, whose patience I tested throughout this process. Thank you for giving me the time (so much time!) to write the story that needed to be written, and for not finding a way to reach through your screen and throttle me every time I said, “It’s not done yet, but soon!”

Barb, the proofreaders, the QA team, and the formatters, who collectively made the editing process a painless experience. Thanks for your support as well as your suggestions—especially the ones I chose not to take, because they gave me things to think about.

Author's Note

While I have tried to keep this story grounded in reality, liberties have been taken in choosing the snowboarding tricks described within. The progression of the sport occurs a bit more rapidly in Shane's world than it does in our own, but none of the tricks mentioned in the story are impossible to do. It just took real snowboarders a bit longer to get around to doing them.

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FRESHMAN YEAR

Chapter One

As I stopped to study my map for the fifth time, I became aware of three things: I hated maps, I was going to be late for the first class of my college career, and someone was staring at me. I didn't worry much about the third realization; I was used to it by now.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to stare," he said as he approached.

This, however, was new. Strangers had been staring at me my whole life, but they usually didn't have the balls to admit they had been staring, let alone apologize for doing so. "No problem," I assured him.

"It's just—well, I hope you don't mind me saying so, but your eyes are amazing. You probably get that a lot, though."

"Yeah." I had also gotten *strange* and *freaky* and *unnerving* more than once, but he didn't need to know that. "Thanks."

"Nathan Pearce."

I shook his outstretched hand. "Shane Larson. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. So, can I ask—I mean, are you wearing contacts, or...?"

"No, they're really two different colors. It's called heterochromia iridum. I was born with it." I gave the answer in my patented "I've had this conversation hundreds of times before but don't mind having it again *at all*" tone. I couldn't begrudge his curiosity. Having a green right eye and a blue left eye *did* make me stand out, especially in direct sunlight, where the difference was particularly noticeable.

"Cool." His eyes darted down to the map. "Where are you headed?"

"Daniels. I think it's nearby, but I haven't found it yet."

He was at my side in an instant. After studying the map for about five seconds, he leaned in a bit closer and brushed his arm against mine as he reached out to tap his index finger on the small icon that indicated the building I was looking for. "This place? It looks like it should be just up ahead and to your left. You can't see it from here because that big white building is in the way."

"Thanks."

He stepped forward to face me again. "Consider it penance for my nosiness. Anyway, you looked like you were in a hurry earlier, so I won't keep you any longer. See you around."

I doubted that, but I didn't have time to express my skepticism. Instead, I just said a quick goodbye and rushed off.

I had planned to ride my skateboard to my *TransWorld Snowboarding* interview, but being late for class had left me a bit concerned about how the rest of the day might turn out, so I decided to drive to the meeting instead. Leaving directly after class dismissed, I arrived at the diner with fifteen minutes to spare. When I walked inside, someone immediately stood and called out to me.

"Terry," he said when I joined him at the booth farthest from the entrance.

Terry extended a hand, and I shook it before taking a seat opposite him. "Good to meet you. Don't tell me I got the time wrong."

"No, we're both early." He tossed a receipt between the pages of the John Grisham novel he had been reading and shoved it aside. "Bad day?"

"Too soon to tell, I guess. I just hate being late, and I've already been late once today."

"First day of college, right? I think you're entitled."

"Yeah, I guess. It's like I suddenly forgot how to read maps or something."

"You'll get the hang of it." He flagged down a passing waitress. "I already ate, but feel free to order anything you'd like. I've got it covered."

"Thanks." I flashed the waitress a quick smile. "I'll just have a glass of ice water and a plate of fries, please."

"And I'll take a refill when you get a chance."

"Coming right up!"

"That girl is way too happy for a Monday afternoon," Terry muttered as he watched the waitress walk back to the counter. "Shall we get started?"

"Whenever you're ready."

After flipping a switch on the recorder that was lying in the center of the table, he tapped the screen of his iPhone a few times and set it aside on top of

the napkin holder. I wondered what kind of horrific experience had caused him to get into the habit of having a backup recorder running during interviews.

“First, thanks for agreeing to talk to *TransWorld Snowboarding*, Shane. From the chatter I’ve been hearing, it seems like you’ve been getting a lot of requests for interviews since you confirmed last week that you would be returning to competition this winter, and we’re thrilled that you chose to give us the exclusive.”

“Yeah, the interest really has been overwhelming. In hindsight, though, making that announcement right before starting my freshman year of college probably wasn’t the smartest move. I’ve had to turn down most things because they just don’t fit my schedule right now, but *TransWorld*—and you in particular, Terry—were great about working around it, so thanks for that.”

“We aim to please. I just can’t believe it’s taken us this long to arrange a proper interview with you. I checked our archives, and the only thing I could find was an interview you did for our sister magazine, *TransWorld Skateboarding*, when you were fifteen. Does that sound right to you, or did I miss something?”

“No, that’s right. *TransWorld*’s always been really supportive of my career in both sports, though. I’ve never done a one-on-one interview for *TransWorld Snowboarding* before, but I’ve been featured in the magazine in other ways.”

“Well, this seems like the perfect time to rectify that oversight. Fans can’t wait to see you start competing again, and with good reason. Your list of accomplishments speaks for itself.”

So do we really have to talk about it?

“Since turning pro at just fourteen years of age, you’ve been a fixture on the podium at practically every event imaginable. Your edits are consistently among the most popular ones available online. Your skateboarding prowess gives you true crossover appeal few others can match. And, perhaps most importantly, you’ve solidified yourself as a pioneer for your sports, bravely becoming the first—and still, to this day, the only—openly gay pro snowboarder and skateboarder in the world.”

Guess that’s a yes, then. I forced myself to stop bouncing my left leg and at least *try* to look comfortable.

“And this is all made even more impressive by the fact that—”

Mercifully, the waitress returned before Terry could continue singing my praises. I salted my fries as she filled his coffee mug.

“If you need anything else, just let me know!”

“Seriously. Way too happy,” he muttered again, shaking his head as he watched the waitress greet a family of five who had just squeezed into a booth near the entrance. “So, where was I?”

I would have answered that if I’d had any idea where he had been headed with his question—assuming, in the interest of fairness, that it had actually been evolving into a question in the first place. Instead, I just bit into a fry and waited for him to remember on his own.

“Oh, right. Your list of accomplishments seems even more impressive once we take into account the fact that you’ve done all of it in just four short years, and you took one of those years off to recover from an ankle injury and prepare for the beginning of your college career at the University of Denver. A college career that isn’t even really necessary for someone with your natural talents; you could easily just stick to being a professional athlete and be set for life.”

“But enough about me, Terry—what we should really be talking about is how impressive these fries are,” I said, popping another one in my mouth.

“And humble, too. It’s no wonder you’re so popular.”

I glanced at my plate while taking a sip of water. *I’ll be done eating before you get to the point.*

“You don’t like talking about yourself, do you?”

Finally, a question. “How’d you guess that?” I hoped his smile meant I hadn’t offended him yet. “No, don’t get me wrong—I’m proud of my achievements, and I’m grateful for all the support I’ve received from my sponsors and fans. But at the end of the day, I’m doing this because it’s my passion, not because I want to rack up a list of stats I can rattle off to impress people. I do prefer to just let that list speak for itself. Either it impresses you or it doesn’t, and if it doesn’t, that’s cool with me, because I don’t feel defined by it.”

“Presumably, you don’t feel defined by your sexuality, either, but you had to know, on some level, that when you came out on national television in December of 2008—at just sixteen years of age—by thanking an unnamed boyfriend while making an acceptance speech after winning a gold medal, you were effectively condemning yourself to a lifetime of being known as ‘the gay

snowboarder’ above all else. What made you decide to go ahead and take that step anyway, consequences be damned?”

Wow. If questions could drink, that one would be more loaded than a frat guy during Rush Week. “Well, I’ve never thought of being open about my sexuality as a condemnation, and I think the jury’s still out on whether I’ll spend my entire life being known as ‘the gay snowboarder’ above all else. I’ve already seen the tide turn a bit, just in the eighteen years I’ve been alive—although, granted, there have been setbacks, too.” I paused to take a drink, holding up a hand to let him know I wasn’t finished yet.

“One of those setbacks,” I continued after setting the cup aside, “was the catalyst for what I said during that acceptance speech. Prop 8 had just been passed, and that was on my mind when I won that gold medal. I felt for the LGBT community in California, even though I wasn’t a part of it. Like I said in my speech, medals are nice, but being able to be yourself and get treated like everyone else—that’s priceless. I came out to my friends and family when I was fourteen, and the response was generally positive, so at that moment, with Prop 8 weighing on my mind, I really just wanted to thank the people who had stuck by me and treated me like everyone else when I had decided to be myself at fourteen. And if, in doing so, I also did my part to turn the tide in our favor again after the setback of Prop 8, even better.”

I picked up a fry and tapped it against the plate to get some of the salt off. “Anyway, twenty years from now, people might not feel the need to treat homosexuality as the most noteworthy thing about individuals who are so much more than who they are attracted to and share a bed with. Forty years from now, people might struggle to remember why it was ever thought of as a big deal in the first place. I choose to hold out hope that I’ll see such strides made in my lifetime. But even if ‘gay snowboarder Shane Larson’ somehow ends up being the way my obituary begins, I’ll never have any regrets about being completely honest about that part of myself. The positives will always outweigh the negatives. And while I never set out to be a pioneer or a gay icon, there are worse things to be remembered as.”

“What was the reaction to your announcement like?” he asked once he was sure I was done answering his previous question.

“Overwhelmingly positive.”

“So there was no backlash?”

“I didn’t say that. I received some hateful tweets, and the occasional homophobic remark can be found in the comments section of practically every

single one of my edits now. But I was prepared for that, and the good easily outweighs the bad. It doesn't take much effort or imagination for some random, anonymous troll to send me a tweet that contains a gay slur, but when someone takes the time to send me a handwritten letter to thank me for inspiring them or giving them that last little push they needed to come out of the closet, that makes every bit of vitriol worth it."

"And you get a lot of letters like that?"

"Well, I get more than I ever expected I would, let's put it that way. I keep them in a scrapbook, and I've recently had to buy a second one because the first was overflowing."

"What about your sponsors? Did any of them have a problem with you announcing to the world that you were gay?"

I had forgotten how dry my throat could get during these things. "Not a single one. But again, I was openly gay long before I made that speech, so it didn't come as a shock to any of my sponsors." I paused to gulp down some more water before continuing. "Now, have I missed out on some new sponsorship deals as a result of my announcement? Probably. But I wouldn't want to be associated with any company that wasn't comfortable sponsoring an openly gay athlete in the first place, so it's best for both of us if they know who I am and what I stand for from the very beginning. And on the flip side of that coin, I gained two great sponsors as a direct result of that speech. Those were companies that had never had anything to do with snowboarding before but had always been staunch supporters of the LGBT community and had decided to get involved after learning I was a representative of that community." *Still not sure how to take that condom manufacturer's offer, though. Accepting that would have been weird. None of the straight guys ever got an offer for a condom sponsorship.*

"You posed for the NOH8 campaign earlier this year. What was that experience like?"

"It was great. That's such an awesome campaign—so simple, yet so effective. I'm honored they wanted me to be a part of it."

"Just last month, a judge ruled Prop 8 unconstitutional. Is the tide turning again?"

"Let's hope so. We'll have to wait and see what happens with the appeals, but I'm cautiously optimistic."

"If Colorado ever legalizes gay marriage, would you be interested?"

“Well, I’d have to find someone I would actually be willing to consider marrying first.” *Wait for it...*

“So you’re no longer with the boyfriend you mentioned in your 2008 acceptance speech?”

Right on cue. “No, we’ve since parted ways. It was mutual, though, and we’re still friends.” Better to just throw that lie out there and move on than risk giving a reporter—even a seemingly nice one—the impression there was more to the story. Not even Marco deserved to be badmouthed in the press.

“So, just to clarify for all the guys out there who are interested, you’re single now?”

Well, that was surprisingly easy. “Yeah. I just moved here, so I haven’t really had a chance to meet anyone new yet. And between going to classes, doing schoolwork, and traveling to competitions, I probably won’t have much time left for dating during the next few months, anyway.”

“But when you *do* find the right guy...?”

“Sure, maybe,” I said with a shrug. “I’m not opposed to the idea of getting married, I’m just not sure I’d ever *want* to. But I hope when I get to that point in my life, I’m actually free to make that choice instead of having it decided for me by some archaic document with outdated wording. Everyone should have the right to make that decision for themselves.”

“Let’s get back to talking about snowboarding for a bit.”

A novel idea.

“What can we expect from you this season? Do you have any new tricks up your sleeve?”

“Maybe one or two. Will I be able to bust them out? I don’t know. That will depend on what the conditions are like on the day of each contest, as usual.” *Sorry, man, that’s all you’re getting from me on that one. A guy has to keep some secrets locked in the vault.*

“Any particular contest you’re really looking forward to this season?”

“The X Games and the Dew Tour are always sick comps, but honestly, more than anything else, I’m just looking forward to getting out in the backcountry again and filming clips for a new edit. That’s where I feel most alive, and it’s been far too long.”

“And we can’t wait to watch that. But maybe you’ll want to disable the comments this time to keep the trolls at bay.”

“Nah. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.”

“Fair enough. When can we expect that to drop?”

“Well, I’ll have to start filming it first. Or, rather, Coop will. He’s my filmer; be sure to give him a shout-out, will you?”

“What’s his full name?”

“Cooper Mason. But everyone just calls him Coop.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thanks. He’s been with me from the beginning, and he always does an amazing job. I really can’t take all the credit for my edits—he makes me look good and brings it all together in the end, making sure everything flows well and fits the beat of our selected music perfectly.”

“Selecting music for edits seems to be an art form in its own right.”

“It really is. And sometimes we have music in mind but end up being unable to use it due to licensing issues, so we have to go back to the drawing board and redo the edit to fit an entirely different vibe.”

“I’ve seen all your edits, though. It seems like you always manage to make it work in the end.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. But again, Coop deserves a lot of that credit.” He nodded as I took another sip of water. “Anyway, we can’t begin filming again until snow starts falling.”

“Oh. Right. So... December?”

I chuckled at his obvious enthusiasm. “Let’s say the first quarter of 2011.”

“I’ll take it. Any ideas for it yet?”

“A few. I’ve been anxious to get back out there for a while now, so yeah, it’s been on my mind a lot lately. And as for the music, I’m always on the lookout for fresh beats to set the clips to, and I think I’ve already got it narrowed down to a few people will really like.”

“I like the sound of that!” He winced and shook his head. “Sorry, that was a terrible pun. And completely unintentional. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”

“Whatever you say.” I gave him a teasing grin. “Hey, look on the bright side: you can always just cut that part out.”

“True...” It almost sounded like Terry was just considering the idea for the first time, as if he had needed my permission to allow himself to resort to that solution without feeling guilty about it. “Anyway. Where was I again?” He cleared his throat and glanced at his watch. “Ugh. I’ve taken up way more of your time than I said I would. Sorry about that.”

“It’s cool.”

“One more question, then I’ll let you go. Any truth to the rumor that you’ll be skipping Big Air this season?”

“Why, because that’s where I got injured last season?”

“That’s the gist of it, yes.”

“First I’ve heard of that one. But no, I’m not worried about that. Injuries are just part of the game, man. I’d never get anywhere if I let myself dwell on the risks all the time. Besides, if anything, that just makes me want to hit the Big Air course even more than before, just so I can have my revenge on it.”

“I’d wish you luck with that, but I doubt you’ll need it.” He turned off the recorder and stuck it in his pocket, then did the same with his phone. “Thanks again for doing this, Shane.”

“My pleasure, Terry. Anything else you need from me?”

“No, you’ve answered plenty of questions, and you already sent me a few pictures to use, so I’m good. Although...” He paused, giving me a sheepish grin as I stood and took one last sip of water. “Not to be *that guy*, but could I trouble you for an autograph for my son, Danny? He’s a big fan. Even named his dog after you.”

“That’s cool. What kind?”

“A husky, of course.”

“Of course. Yeah, I’d be happy to. How old is he?”

“He’ll be nine in October.” Terry tossed a twenty on the table and sat his coffee cup on top of it.

“Nice. I’ve got a pair of goggles in my car I could sign for him, if you think he’d like that.”

“Are you kidding? He’d *love* that! Thanks.”

“No problem. And if you have room on your phone, we can also do a quick video for him.”

He chuckled as he followed me to my car. “You’re better at this than I am. To be honest, I was just going to get you to sign a piece of paper, but you’re going to win me Father of the Year for sure now.”

“It’s really no trouble at all.” I unlocked my car, popped the trunk, grabbed the goggles, and fished out the permanent marker I had learned long ago to always carry in my pocket. Terry filmed me signing the lens and wishing his son a happy birthday, and afterward, I found a spare skate deck in my trunk and gave that to him, too.

“Thanks again,” Terry said as he shook my hand once more. “For this, and for the interview. Which, by the way, will be in the November issue.”

“Just in time for the start of the season.”

“Yep, that’s the idea. We could get it ready in time for the October issue, but waiting seems to be the better option.”

“You can safely assume my mom will probably count down the days and buy at least twenty copies herself.”

“Mothers can be scary. I’d better do your article justice.”

“Yes, you’d better,” I agreed, unable to resist pouncing on the hint of nervousness I had heard in his voice, “or *you* might be the one who ends up being tempted to disable comments.”

Chapter Two

The rest of the school week was a bit of a blur, but somewhere along the way, I regained my ability to read maps, and navigating the campus became much easier at that point. I familiarized myself with the boring syllabus I received in each hopefully-not-boring class I attended. I discovered, to my surprise, that some of the campus food actually wasn't terrible. I checked out the fitness center, conveniently located right across from my dorm, and practiced some flips on its trampolines. And I took tentative steps toward building a friendship with—or, at least, a tolerance for—my roommate, Kevin. More precisely, I *tried* to; it wasn't particularly easy to get to know someone who was hardly ever around. He seemed nice enough, but he was one of those local students who just kept up the appearance of living on campus simply to meet the first-year residency requirement. I knew I couldn't exactly complain about having the place to myself most of the time, but it still felt weird, like I was somehow missing out on a mandatory part of the college experience: the pain of dealing with a roommate in cramped living quarters.

By Friday evening, I had amassed a grand total of three conversations with Kevin that had lasted longer than five minutes, which is why I was more than a bit surprised when he poked his head into our dorm room and invited me to an off-campus college kickoff party he was headed to. I had been thinking about traveling back home for the weekend; I hadn't really made any friends in Denver yet, and I was longing for my old ones in Telluride—the ones not named Marco, anyway. But I decided to accept the invitation, knowing I couldn't just escape to my old, familiar world every weekend. If nothing else, I'd at least get some free beers out of the deal. As an underage college student who desperately needed to unwind after a stressful first week of classes, I couldn't really ask for much more than that.

The party was held at a large two-story house a few miles off campus, one that was far enough away from other residences for excessive noise to be of little consequence. The place was already packed when we arrived shortly after eight. I briefly wondered whose parents were out of town—and whether they had any idea that a bunch of college students were likely about to trash their nice home—but I stopped caring once someone handed me a Jell-O shot. Kevin soon abandoned me to flirt with a group of girls who were hanging out in the dining room. I tried not to take it personally. I was determined to have fun, and apparently he was, too, although he undoubtedly had a different kind of fun in mind.

“Hey, Shane!” someone called out as I weaved through the crowd of people in the living room. I turned and spotted the guy I had caught staring at my eyes on the first day of classes. *Shit, what was his name? Think, think...*

“Nathan,” I replied, inadvertently stressing the first syllable in a way I hoped wouldn’t betray my lack of certainty. I had never expected to see the guy again, let alone be challenged to recall his name.

“Good to see you again.”

Guess I got it right, then. “Likewise. I might need help navigating *this* place, too.”

I was pleased to get a laugh from him, one that at least didn’t sound forced. A group of people began elbowing past us, offering canned apologies we could barely hear over the rock music blaring through a surround-sound system that was obviously quite good at its job. When Nathan tilted his head toward the kitchen, I followed his lead. We each grabbed a couple Jell-O shots and a couple beers before exiting the house through the terrace. With all aspects of the party—including the most important aspect, the alcohol—being stationed inside the house, the backyard was surprisingly peaceful, and we had it to ourselves, at least for the moment. We walked to the far end of the pool, as far away from the house as we could get, and climbed atop the chest-high decorative stone wall that bordered the property. It wasn’t as uncomfortable as it looked.

“I figured we’d have better luck talking out here.”

“Good thinking. Have you been here before?”

“No, but every house has a backyard, right? Especially one this big. Just a matter of finding out how to get to it.”

We ate our Jell-O shots and opened two of the beers. The music changed inside the house, but I wasn’t able to make out the lyrics. Nathan cleared his throat as a medical helicopter passed overhead. He turned and straddled the wall to face me. After taking a sip of beer, I adopted the same position. Preoccupation had kept me from noticing during our first meeting, but he was quite good-looking. We were at eye level with each other, so I guessed he was somewhere between five eleven and a half and six feet—basically my height, maybe a sliver of an inch shorter. Or maybe I was just sitting up a bit straighter than he was. He had short black hair, and even in the moonlight, I could tell his eyes were a dark, piercing brown. He was clean-shaven, without even a hint of

a five o'clock shadow. I couldn't remember the last time my face had looked that smooth. Probably right before puberty, if I had to guess.

He took a sip of beer. "So, you from around here?"

"Telluride. It's a few hours away. Nice, but kind of secluded. Nothing like Denver, really. You?"

"Pittsburgh."

"Damn. You're pretty far away from home, then. What made you decide to move here?"

"I wanted the experience of attending college in a different state. And UD—DU—has a good graphic design program."

I smiled at the correction. I was used to referring to the University of Denver as DU instead of the more logical UD, but it had to be hard for people from other parts of the country to adjust to the quiriness of university initials in the Rockies. "How long have you been interested in art?" *Guess that explains why you're so good at reading maps.*

"As long as I can remember. But I think second grade was when I first realized I wanted to make a career out of it one day. The teacher asked the standard 'what do you want to be when you grow up' question, and I was the only kid who didn't come up with a typical dream-big answer. I just said I wanted to draw. Then I spent the rest of the time drawing a picture of Buzz Lightyear from memory because I had just watched *Toy Story 2* the previous night. Not my best work, but it was apparently good enough for the teacher to take my answer seriously. What about you? How long have you been into business?"

"Not as long as—wait, how did you...?"

"You were headed to Daniels the other day. That's for the business students, right?"

Damn, you're good. "Oh, right. Not that long. It's more like I've always known I want to move to Breckenridge after college. I've been in love with that place since the first time I visited it with my family years ago. And lately I've just had this idea that it'd be cool to start my own business there. Like a nightclub or something."

"I'm sure it'll be awesome."

The statement sounded effortlessly sincere, even though I knew he was likely just being polite. "Well, I have to survive college first."

“Look on the bright side: you’re not the only one.”

He gulped down the last of his beer and set the empty bottle aside before opening his second one. I took another sip of my own, unsure where to take the conversation next. Strangely, I didn’t really feel the need to say anything at all. I barely knew the guy, but I felt completely at ease with him.

“So, have you gotten homesick at all yet?” he asked before I could think of anything to fill the silence.

“Not really. I mean, kind of, but I could be home in a few hours if I ever really wanted to be, so it’s nothing like what you must be feeling.”

Instead of responding, he opted to take another sip of beer.

“Actually,” I continued, sensing he wanted to move on, “I thought about going home for the weekend, but I decided to come to this instead.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“Me, too.” *Really glad.* “So, how do you like Denver so far?”

“The altitude’s been a bit of a bitch to get used to. Probably why the shots and beer have gone straight to my head.”

“I’ve never really known anything else, but you’ll get used to it. Everyone does eventually. Breck is even worse.”

“Then remind me to take it easy when I visit your nightclub in a few years.” He put the bottle to his lips again and tilted it upward, swallowing as he lowered it. “Even if I never get used to the altitude, the low humidity has already won me over.”

“Another thing I have to admit I take for granted. Just remember to drink plenty of water and beware of dry skin. That’s what we tell the tourists in Telluride, anyway.”

“Pittsburgh’s kind of rough on skin, too, so nothing new there.”

“Anything you miss about it?”

“My friends and family, of course. But I keep in touch with them. I really miss the ice cream. Pittsburgh has some amazing ice cream parlors, and many of them offer unique, homemade flavors you can’t really get anywhere else—to my knowledge, anyway. Teaberry, peach cobbler, chocolate-covered pretzel, white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero—”

“Wait, what?”

“White chocolate cinnamon habanero. Trust me, it’s delicious. Then again, I kind of have a weakness for ice cream.”

“I never would have guessed that from looking at you,” I blurted out without thinking.

He didn’t seem to mind, if his laugh was any indication. “I suffer for my cravings. You look like you’re in pretty good shape yourself, so I guess I won’t be getting any local ice cream parlor recommendations from you.”

His eyes were locked on mine. I hoped it was too dark for him to see my face reddening. “I’ll see what I can find out and get back to you.”

“Good deal. What do you miss about Telluride?”

“Aside from the usual? Having a dog. This is the first time I’ve not had one since I was five years old. After I graduate and move to Breck, I’m going to make adopting another one my top priority.”

“What kind?”

“A Siberian husky. That’s *my* weakness. No one else in my family has heterochromia iridum, but it’s common in huskies, so my parents got me one for my fifth birthday because they didn’t want me to feel like there was something wrong with me when I entered kindergarten and started spending more time around kids my own age. They managed to find a Siberian husky puppy with a green right eye and a blue left eye, just like me.”

“That must have taken some effort.”

“I don’t know, but it did the trick. I fell in love with him instantly; I had never seen another living thing with *my* eyes before. I named him Ash. He died right before I started high school.” I paused and spent a few seconds peeling the label off my second empty beer bottle. Finally, I cleared my throat. “Anyway, I adopted another one after that. He had a blue right eye and a brown left eye, and I named him Kane. But I had to give him away before moving here. My parents are too busy to give a Siberian husky the proper attention; it’s a pretty active breed of dog. Giving Kane away was the best move for him, but it was still one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.”

“I can only imagine.”

“What about you? Did you have any pets growing up?”

“I had a gargoyle gecko named Igor for a while. I’m allergic to dogs and cats, so my parents had to go the reptile route with me.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah, he was fun, but he died when I was sixteen. And I had just gotten my license, had just started dating my first boyfriend, and was less than two years away from heading off to college, so it didn’t seem wise to bring another pet into the mix at that time.”

“Maybe you’ll be able to get another one after college.” If he had expected a reaction to his casual mention of a boyfriend, he wasn’t going to get it from me.

“Yeah, maybe. Any siblings?”

“No, I’m a spoiled brat—I mean, an only child. You?”

“Same. Including the spoiled brat part. Play any sports, or did that physique come naturally?”

I felt my face heating up again. “I’m a pro snowboarder and skateboarder.” I tried to make it sound like no big deal, because to me, it wasn’t—not really. It was just one facet of my identity, just like my sexuality. But, just like my sexuality, people sometimes treated me differently once they found out about it. I hoped Nathan wouldn’t be one of those people.

“What, like a *professional* professional?”

I couldn’t help chuckling at his obvious surprise. “Yeah, for a few years now.”

“So you compete and shit?”

“Yeah, I compete and shit.”

“Huh.” His eyebrows, which had been perched high above his widened eyes seconds ago, now lowered until tiny creases appeared between them, right above his perfectly straight nose. “Why have I never heard of you before?”

I laughed again, a deeper laugh I turned into a cough after placing a fist in front of my mouth as a courtesy.

“Oh, I didn’t mean... Shit, that must have sounded—”

“It’s cool,” I assured him, dismissing his concerns with a flick of the wrist as I relaxed my fingers and lowered my arm. “A refreshing reaction, actually.”

“It was more about me than you. I thought I had learned a lot about snowboarding in the buildup to the Vancouver Olympics. I just feel silly for not recognizing you—or at least your name—earlier.”

“Don’t. I broke my ankle during a competition last December, so I had to miss the Winter X Games. And only halfpipe snowboarding is in the Winter Olympics right now. Well, as far as freestyle events are concerned, at least; racing is a completely different matter, but I don’t race. Anyway, I do slopestyle, Big Air, and backcountry snowboarding. Basically everything *but* halfpipe.”

“That explains it, I guess. Why don’t you do halfpipe snowboarding?”

“For me, it’s just not as fun as the other freestyle disciplines. And I’d rather focus on what I like than be a jack of all trades and a master of none.”

“Makes sense.”

“What about you? How do you work off your ice cream indulgences?”

“I ran track and played soccer in high school. But I won’t be winning medals anytime soon.”

“I never said anything about winning medals.”

“Exactly. That’s how I know you’re good—you didn’t try to convince me you are.”

“We barely know each other, and you can already read me? Remind me never to play poker with you.”

“Probably a good idea, especially since you have a tell.”

“What? I do not!”

“Yeah, you do. You narrow your right eyebrow—and only your right eyebrow—when you’re skeptical about something. You did it when you were trying to decipher that map the first time I saw you. You did it when you were trying to remember my name tonight. You did it when I mentioned the white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream, and again when I told you I had a weakness for ice cream in general. And you’re doing it right now.”

Realizing he was right, I relaxed my facial muscles. “And you got all that just from staring at my face for a few hours?”

He flashed me a playful grin. “I can think of worse things to stare at for a few hours.” There it was again: sincerity so effortless it almost sounded cheesy. Even though I now knew he was gay—and I knew, now more than ever, that there was at least a chance he was perceptive enough to suspect I was gay, too, especially if I also had cues I wasn’t aware of that pinged his gaydar—I still got the sense that he was just being himself, not trying to flirt with me.

“I don’t know whether to be impressed or frightened.”

“Eh, you’ve got a captivating face. Take it as a compliment from someone who likes to think of himself as an artist.”

“Okay, then. Take this as a thank-you from someone who likes to think of himself as a snowboarder.”

“And skateboarder, from what I hear. Don’t forget that part.”

“Only when there isn’t snow on the ground.” His nod kept me from elaborating, suggesting that he understood exactly what I meant without needing to hear the part about how I felt most at ease on a mountain—*any* mountain—with a board strapped to my feet and a fresh blanket of powder stretched out in front of me, just waiting to be shredded.

“I’ve always wanted to learn how to snowboard. You’ll have to teach me sometime.”

“Be happy to.” It hadn’t escaped my notice that he had, on more than one occasion, made the assumption that we would be in each other’s lives for a while. It was an idea I certainly wasn’t opposed to. I needed a friend in Denver, and he was incredibly easy to talk to.

“When did you learn?”

“To snowboard? When I was five. Well, first I asked for a skateboard after seeing someone riding one on TV. For some reason, I just *knew* I had to try that. So, for my fifth birthday, that husky I told you about, Ash? My parents put him on a skateboard and gave it a gentle push into my bedroom.”

“Awesome.”

“Yeah, it was cool. He actually wasn’t scared at all. Or maybe they were just smart enough to wait until he was tired before doing it. I don’t know. But he stayed on the board until it stopped at my feet.”

“Sounds like he was a pretty cool dog.”

“Yeah, he was.” I smiled, still able to remember that day quite clearly. “Anyway, I took to the skateboard right away. I rode it every day, and it was pretty worn out by the following winter. Then my parents took me to Breck for the first time, and one of the first things I saw there was someone riding a snowboard. Telluride has its own ski resort, so I had probably seen snowboards before then, but that was the first time it really registered. And again, I just *knew* I had to try that. I mean, it’s basically a combination of two of my favorite things in the world: skateboarding and snow.”

“What’s not to love?”

“Exactly. So I got my first snowboard during that trip, and I figured out how to ride it before we left at the end of the week.”

“And the rest is history?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess you could say that. I still loved skateboarding after that trip, but snowboarding has been my true passion since the first day I strapped myself into one.”

“No wonder you fell in love with the place, if it’s where your snowboarding career began.”

“Yeah. It’s also the first place I competed at after turning pro. And the first place I won at.”

“Probably that same day.”

My cheeks reddened again. He was right, but I wasn’t going to admit that. “So, where are you staying?”

“Towers, so I can stay on campus during winter break if I need to. You?”

“Same place, different reason. I just wanted a semi-private bathroom.”

“North or South?”

“South.”

“I’m in North. Still, we’re practically neighbors. Sweet.”

“How’s your roommate?”

“Eh, he’s a roommate. His name’s Byron, but apparently everyone just calls him B. If his middle name isn’t Slob, it should be. But he’s all right, I guess. Yours?”

“Kevin. Can’t complain; his middle name might as well be Absentee. Actually, he’s here somewhere. Or was, anyway. Last I saw him, he was trying to decide which girl to hit on first.”

“Probably a lot of that going on inside right now. So, what’s *your* middle name? Your real one, I mean. If you have one.”

“Thomas. Yours?”

“Andrew.”

“So... NAP?”

He smiled, as if he had been expecting that. “My parents were hoping it would act as a subliminal message, but it backfired. I’ve never been much of a sleeper.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, my parents wanted my initials to represent St. Louis, where they met and fell in love.”

“Seriously?”

“No, I’m just fucking with you.”

“Asshole,” he said as he gave me a playful shove. No one had ever called me an asshole with more affection in their voice.

“They’ve done stranger things, though, so it wouldn’t surprise me. They still dress up and go trick-or-treating every Halloween.”

“Okay, *that* makes me feel better.”

“So...”

His phone chimed. “Sorry. It’s probably my mom. Hang on a sec,” he said as he pulled it out of his pocket. “Yep. Worried as usual.”

“Your mom sends text messages? Mine finds opening a flip phone difficult.” I hoped Mom wouldn’t mind me throwing her under the bus to keep the conversation flowing. I was only speaking the truth, anyway.

“Mine’s in real estate. Drug dealers use phones less often than she does.”

“What’s she worried about?”

“Everything. But right now, she’s worried I’ve suddenly forgotten how to feed myself.”

“Jell-O shots count, right?”

“They do in my book.” After sending a reply, he turned his phone off and put it away. “No more interruptions. So, you ever been to the Denver Art Museum?”

“Once, a few years ago. It’s fucking huge.”

“You’ll have to show me around sometime. It’s one of the things I’ve been most excited about seeing since moving here.”

“Sure. There’s also a gallery in Telluride I can take you to.” Two could play this plan-for-the-future game.

“Really? Sweet. Pittsburgh’s art scene is incredible, but I’m anxious to see some new stuff.”

“Judging from the fliers I’ve seen around campus, Denver’s music scene is worth checking out, too.”

“Sounds like enough to keep us busy for a while.” He clutched his stomach. “Want to get out of here, grab a bite to eat somewhere? My mom’s mention of food managed to make me kind of hungry, damn her.”

“Yeah, what kind of trickery *is* that? Mine can do the same thing.” We headed back inside to discard our trash, then left through the front door. Kevin was nowhere to be found, as usual, and I certainly wasn’t going to check the bedrooms for him. Instead, I just sent him a text message I figured he’d likely ignore.

“What do you like to listen to?” Nathan asked as we walked back to campus.

“Mostly hard rock. You?”

“Same. I got to catch the Uproar Festival just before moving out here.”

“Nice. How was it?”

“*Awesome*. I was already a huge Disturbed fan, but the others really impressed me. Especially Halestorm.”

“I’m jealous. They were just here on Tuesday. Well, in Greenwood. It’s maybe half an hour away. I was tempted to go, but the timing kind of sucked, so I decided not to.”

“Probably wise.”

“Painful, though. I’ve seen Disturbed a few times already, but I really wanted to see Avenged Sevenfold.”

“We’ll add it to the list.”

“It’s getting a bit long already.”

“There’s plenty of time.”

When we made it back to campus, it was past one in the morning. I only accepted that because every clock we passed confirmed it. It felt like Nathan and I had just started talking a few minutes earlier, not five hours earlier. I would have happily continued the conversation for five more hours.

We each grabbed a couple slices of pizza from an all-night diner before heading back to Towers.

“Wait,” he said when it was time for us to part ways. “Let me get your number.”

I typed my number in his iPhone and handed it back to him. He immediately called mine.

“Just checking.” He gave me a wink before heading into the North Tower.

When I got back to my dorm room—which, of course, was empty—I sent Jess a text message, even though I knew she’d be asleep.

Think I just made my 1st new friend 2nite.

Chapter Three

Jess's predictably straightforward reply was waiting when I awoke around noon.

Is he cute?

I grinned and rubbed my eyes before looking around the room. Kevin was already gone. Or had never returned. Probably the latter. I sent Jess a response.

Not that it matters, but yes.

She replied right away.

Gay?

Think so. Had a BF in HS.

Then of course it matters!

No. 2 soon. U know that.

I tossed my phone aside and went to take a shower, making it quick because the water barely qualified as lukewarm. Kevin and I shared a kitchen and bathroom with two other people who lived in the adjacent room, one of whom had obviously showered shortly before I had woken up. Afterward, I wrapped a towel around my waist, brushed my teeth, and gave my beard a quick assessment. *Eh, it can wait until tomorrow.* I plugged my beard trimmer in an empty socket and headed back to my room.

My phone chimed again while I was getting dressed. I expected another text message from Jess, but it was actually from Nathan.

Want 2 hang out?

Sure. What'd U have in mind?

Lunch & a movie?

Sounds good. Meet U outside in 15.

I went back to the bathroom. My beard trimmer had just enough juice left in it from when I had used it the previous week. After getting my beard back down to the short, neat length I preferred, I changed my clothes, grabbed a pair of sunglasses, and headed downstairs. He was already waiting for me outside.

"Nice shades, St. Louis. Remind me to invest in a decent pair of those," he said, squinting as I approached him.

“We do get a lot of sun here, Napster.”

“Not even my friends call me Napster.”

“Not even my friends call me St. Louis.”

“What’s that make us, then?”

“Guess we’ll have to wait to find that out.”

Nathan grinned. “Waiting has never really been a strong suit of mine, but I’m willing to make an exception.” Falling in step beside me, he added, “I figured we’d head off campus for food.”

“Yeah, I’d prefer that. My car or yours?”

“Doesn’t matter. We can take mine. I need gas, anyway.”

We headed to the nearby parking garage, and when we passed my car, I stopped to grab the spare pair of sunglasses I kept in my glove compartment. “Here, you can have these.”

“Oh, thanks.” He slipped them on while facing me. “Don’t let me forget to give these back—”

“No need. They look better on you, anyway.”

I thought I saw his cheeks redden a bit before he turned to lead me to his car. *Payback’s a bitch.*

We stopped next to a black Corvette convertible, and it chirped when he pressed a button on his keychain to unlock the doors.

“Sweet ride,” I said as we got in.

“Thanks. It was my grandfather’s.” He started the engine and backed out of the parking space. “I always loved riding in it. Even convinced him to let me take it to my senior prom. He gave it to me as a graduation gift. When I got home from the ceremony, it was waiting in the driveway with a big red bow on the roof. Mom tried to protest, but he said, ‘Damn it, Jeannie, it’s my job to spoil the boy, so let me do it!’”

“Sounds like a pretty cool guy.”

“Yeah.” He paused and took a right at a stoplight. “He died a few weeks later. Bad heart. I think he knew. I mean, I think giving me this was one of his ways of getting things in order before...”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Me, too.” Another pause. “I’m glad I told him before he died. That I’m gay, I mean. I was so worried about how he’d react, but he just shrugged and said, ‘And any guy you choose to date will be the luckiest son of a bitch who ever lived. Now, pass me the paper, will you?’”

“Nice. What was his name?”

“Walter Hendley—but, to me, he was simply Pap.”

“Well, it sounds like he really loved you.”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway. Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring down the mood.”

“It’s cool. This car must mean a lot to you. What year is it?”

“’99. C5. Barely had any miles on it when he gave it to me.” He pulled into a gas station. “Surprisingly good gas mileage. Useless for hauling shit, though. Good thing I wasn’t able to bring much to the dorm.”

I waited while he filled the tank and paid. I had to admit I was flattered he had trusted me enough to open up about his grandfather, though I wasn’t sure what I had done to earn that trust. As I kept reminding myself, we barely knew each other. But I felt like I could trust him, too, even though recent experiences had left me inclined to be suspicious of people.

“Okay, what are you in the mood for?” he asked when he returned.

“I’m guessing you’re probably in the mood for ice cream.”

“Always. But we’ll save that for later.”

“I know of a good sub joint nearby.”

“Subs it is, then.”

I directed him to the restaurant, and as we ate, we talked about movies we might enjoy seeing. I wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about the idea of having to spend two hours *not* talking to him, though, which is why I was pleased when he suggested we would probably be better off just spending the day watching movies back at Towers. I invited him over to my room; I knew Kevin probably wouldn’t be around all day, and I had a Netflix subscription. On the way back to campus, we stopped at a general store and bought a box of microwavable popcorn and a pint of peanut butter cup ice cream.

We had the place to ourselves, just as I had expected. “Cool photo,” Nathan said, stepping toward my bed to get a closer look at a poster hanging on the wall. “Great composition.”

“You into photography?”

“Absolutely. Anything visual, really.”

“Cool. You’ll have to show me some of your stuff sometime.”

“Sure. Is that you?”

“I wish. One day, though.”

“Where was it taken? Someplace around here?”

“No, it’s in Washington. It’s called the Mt. Baker road gap. One of the most iconic kickers in the world.” The poster showed a snowboarder jumping over the gap, doing a stylish method air as a car passed on the road more than fifty feet below.

Nathan turned to face me. “I couldn’t imagine doing something like that.”

“I can’t imagine not doing it.” I pointed him to my laptop before heading into the kitchen. “Go ahead and pick out something while I pop the popcorn.” When I returned ten minutes later with a heaping bowl of popcorn—three bags’ worth—and two spoons for the ice cream, he was still weighing his options.

“I’m getting a lot of *Doctor Who* recommendations.” He was probably getting a lot of gay-themed recommendations, too, but he was too polite to say anything about those.

“Netflix knows me well. Sometimes, anyway.”

“Best episode?”

“Has to be—”

“‘Blink’?”

“Yes! Is there really any other acceptable answer?”

“No. I would have had to exterminate you if you had said anything else,” Nathan replied, his voice adopting a robotic quality in imitation of the show’s most iconic race of villains. “And I’d hate to do that when we were just starting to become... whatever it is we’re becoming,” he added, returning his voice to its normal smooth, deep tone.

I grinned as I took a seat next to him on my bed. We leaned against the wall, and I positioned the bowl of popcorn between us and opened the pint of ice cream as he started the episode.

Doing a *Doctor Who* marathon turned out to be the perfect choice. We started with “Blink” and continued from there. We had already seen all the

episodes before, so they just became background noise, leaving us free to talk when we wanted to. And, more often than not, we wanted to. We complained when Netflix suggested we should watch the particularly weak “Love and Monsters” episode, then decided to take the advice just so we could make snarky comments about it throughout, as if we were producing our own episode of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. We discussed our favorite movies—classics like *Taxi Driver* and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, newer greats like *The Dark Knight* and *Brokeback Mountain*—and discovered *Fight Club* was at the top of both our lists. We spent a bit of time talking about *House of Leaves*, a complex and innovative novel we had both read and loved. Nathan was also a fan of a book called *Shogun*, and I made a mental note to check it out sometime, offering *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as my own recommendation.

At some point after the remnants of popcorn and ice cream had been abandoned, my phone chimed. I wasn’t going to check it, but Nathan encouraged me to. The text message was from Jess.

Free nxt wknd?

Not sure. Y?

Might visit.

“It’s my friend Jess,” I explained. “Her birthday’s next weekend, and she’s thinking about visiting. Want to maybe do something with us?”

“Sure, sounds like fun.”

“You say that now, but be warned, she’ll probably want to go clubbing. It’s kind of been her thing lately.”

“Fine with me. If nothing else, I’ll have you to talk to.”

I sent Jess a response.

We’re game.

Who’s we?

Don’t play coy. I know U just want 2 meet my friend.

U see right thru me. Talk more later.

I set my phone aside.

“So, when’s yours?” Nathan asked.

“My what?”

“Your birthday.”

“Oh. February twenty-fourth, 1992. Yours?”

“May tenth, 1992. You’ve got me beat by a few months.”

“Jess has the edge on both of us. She’ll be turning nineteen.”

“What’s she like?”

“She’s great. Fiercely loyal, extremely protective. When I found out a few months ago that my boyfriend had been cheating on me, I’m honestly not sure who was more pissed off about it, but I do know only one of us kneed him in the groin so hard he ended up on the floor in the fetal position, and it wasn’t me.”

“I’m not really a violent person, but it sounds like he deserved it.”

“Oh, he definitely deserved it, but I had resolved to take the high road, so she took matters into her own hands. Knee. Whatever.”

“Remind me never to get on her bad side.”

“I think the easiest way to stay off her bad side is to stay on my good side.”

“Then I have nothing to worry about, because I intend to do just that.”

I turned my attention back to the computer screen. David Tennant and Catherine Tate were sharing a scene with a ridiculous-looking giant CGI wasp. “Then you’d better say you hate this episode as much as I do,” I said, hoping he wouldn’t notice the way his remark had made me blush.

After watching a couple more episodes, we decided to call it quits for the night, ending our first impromptu *Doctor Who* marathon at around the ten-hour mark. Before Nathan left, we made plans to meet for lunch the following day.

By the end of the week, our lunch dates had become a regular thing. I found myself looking forward to lunch each afternoon, knowing I could count on that hour or so I spent with Nathan to be one of the best parts of my day. We didn’t hang out as much in the evenings because we were busy with schoolwork, but we kept in touch via text messages.

Jess arrived in Denver around nine Friday evening, and she came bearing gifts of vodka and whiskey, which was a nice display of planning on her part. She had a fake ID, but Nathan and I didn’t, and it was cheaper to get buzzed before going to the club, anyway. She had booked a room at a hotel within walking distance of our dorms, so we met her there and did a few rounds of

shots before taking a cab to a place she had read about online. It was easy to see why she had chosen it; after all, there was a certain irony to be found in partying inside what had once been a church, especially with two openly gay men. The Church, as it was aptly named, was stunning, with stained glass windows, Gothic architecture inside and out, and a dramatic cathedral ceiling I couldn't resist craning my neck to admire.

We took a quick tour of the place. A live band was playing industrial music on the main floor; in the basement, the DJ in one room was spinning hip-hop beats, while the DJ in the other room was offering depressing '80s goth rock. Circling back upstairs, we found a sushi bar we hadn't noticed earlier, and Nathan managed to charm a guy behind the counter into giving us each a free sample of green tea ice cream. It wasn't bad, but even good green tea ice cream is still green tea ice cream.

Opting to skip making a visit to the smoky outdoor patio section for the sake of our lungs, we weaved through the crowd and claimed a decent spot at the edge of the dance floor, where we could watch the band and sway to the music while also having room to breathe. A cowardly strategy, perhaps, but we weren't drunk enough to insert ourselves in the middle of the action. The pair of scantily clad go-go dancers framing the stage apparently had no such qualms, though, and while they did nothing for Nathan and me, they seemed to be making quite a few other men happy—and perhaps some women, as well.

After we had been dancing for about thirty minutes or so, I caught someone watching us. Watching Nathan, to be precise.

"Surfer dude's checking you out," I said, pointing the guy out to Nathan with a barely perceptible nod.

Nathan shot an equally subtle glance in Surfer Dude's direction. "Think he got lost on his way to the ocean?"

"Nah. Probably hasn't paddled a surfboard a day in his life."

"He definitely has the look nailed down, though. Not the worst guy to have scoping me out in here."

"So go talk to him."

"I'll pass. I came here with you, and you're the only person I want to hang out with tonight." Nathan looked at Jess and flashed her a sheepish smile. "Well, you, too, of course."

"Understood." Jess gave him a wink.

“And we want to hang out with you, too, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be able to flirt with a hot guy for a few minutes if the opportunity presents itself. If you’re interested, go for it. We won’t mind. Right, Jess?”

“What? Oh. Right.” She forced a smile while shooting me a glare even someone as perceptive as Nathan could have easily missed.

Nathan hesitated and took another quick look at Surfer Dude. “Well, he *is* pretty hot,” he finally conceded, able to see the obvious even behind the distorting effects of the strobe lights, green lasers, and fog. “If you’re sure...”

“We’re sure,” I said.

“Okay, but I won’t be gone long.”

“What the hell was that?” Jess asked after Nathan was out of earshot.

“What the hell was what?”

“You practically shoving Nathan into the arms of another man.”

“We’ve been over this, Jess. Nathan’s just a friend. He’s allowed to talk to other guys.”

“Come on, Shane, remember who you’re talking to. I can tell you like him.”

“Of course I like him. And he likes me—at least, I think he does. We like each other. *As friends.*”

“Friends who can make each other blush, from what I’ve seen tonight. Sounds like a good start to something more, if you ask me.”

I sighed and gave her a look that probably showed more pain than I ever would have shown if I’d had a choice in the matter. Others might not have noticed it, but I knew Jess would. “You know I’m not ready for *something more* right now, Jess. And I don’t know when I will be.”

“I seem to recall you hooking up with Aaron plenty of times over the summer.”

“That was just meaningless sex.”

“And? What, you think Nathan’s the only guy on the planet who wouldn’t be okay with settling for that until you’re ready for something more?”

“No, I think Nathan could turn out to be a great friend, and I don’t want to complicate that friendship with sex.”

“How do you know things would get complicated if you added sex to the equation?”

“I don’t. That’s the point. I don’t want to take that risk.”

“I’m not sure Nathan’s on the same page.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve spent more time with him than you have, and he hasn’t given me any indication that he wants to be anything more than my friend.”

“And if he does?”

“If he does—and, for the record, I doubt he will—I’ll let him know I’m just not ready for anything more than that right now, even though I think he’s a great guy.”

Jess shot me one skeptical look too many.

“Damn it, Jess, why are you busting my balls about this? Sure, I could try to start something more with Nathan, and it might even be great for a month or two, but when it inevitably crashes and burns, what will I have left to show for it—another name to add to the list of guys I’ve slept with? I’d rather have a best friend.”

“I thought *I* was your best friend,” Jess muttered as I checked to make sure Nathan was still too far away to hear what I was saying to her.

“You are, Jess, but *you’re not here*. I’m alone here, and after what I’ve been through these past few months, I need another best friend more than a fuck buddy or even a boyfriend, okay? I can come to a place like this any time I need a quick hookup, but it’s much harder to find someone like Nathan—someone I actually have things in common with, someone I feel like I can trust, someone who doesn’t have a fucking agenda. Do you know how many people know who I am around here before I know a single thing about them? And it’s only going to get worse once I start competing again. Sponsors are already sending in requests for photo shoots. By the time the season starts, my face will be plastered on posters and billboards all over this town.” I paused, took a breath, and glanced around to see if anyone was listening. I didn’t have to worry about Jess taking my comments the wrong way, but I couldn’t be sure about how anyone else might take them. “Not that I’m complaining, of course,” I added, just in case.

“Of course.”

“Look, the point is, Nathan didn’t know who I was until I told him. I don’t know what made him want to get to know me better, but I know it wasn’t the fact that I’m a professional athlete, and that means something to me.”

“All right, all right.” Jess held up a hand, accepting defeat. “Forget I said anything.”

“Gladly.”

“Besides,” she added, lowering her voice until I could barely hear it over the music, “who says things will work out between Nathan and the surfer, anyway?”

I opened my mouth to object, but she stopped me with a look. Following her gaze, I saw that Nathan had parted ways with Surfer Dude and was walking toward us. I looked back at Jess and shook my head when she flashed me a teasing grin. She had wanted the last word, and she had gotten it.

“So?” I asked Nathan when he rejoined us.

“Seems nice enough. Name’s Gabe. I got his number. Maybe I’ll call him sometime, when I haven’t been drinking. If he’s just looking for a quick fuck, he’ll have to look elsewhere.”

“Does he talk like a surfer, too?”

“No, but he looks even more like one up close, right down to the white puka shell necklace.”

“Seriously?”

“I shit you not.”

“Nice.”

I didn’t get a chance to say anything else. Something was happening in the middle of the dance floor; people were backing away, giving a woman room. Two long strips of fabric fell from the ceiling, and she grabbed them and began to climb, performing various tricks while suspended high above us. I had seen Pink do a similar act during the Grammys telecast earlier in the year, but witnessing it in person was even more impressive. Along with everyone else in the room, we watched in awe as she spun, suspended herself upside-down in midair, and even did free falls from one end of the silk to the other with dizzying speed and unbelievable grace. The show went on for about five minutes or so, and when she finished, we cheered just as loudly as all the other spectators.

We decided that was as good a time as any to leave; it was just past midnight, and we still had two bottles of alcohol calling our names. During the cab ride back to Jess’s hotel, we ordered a pizza. While waiting for it to be

delivered to her room, we did a round of shots and flipped through the channels on the television.

“All right, say it,” I said to Jess after we finished a second round of shots.

“Say what?”

“Whatever it is you’ve been dying to say to me all night.” We might have gotten the conversation about Nathan out of the way earlier, but I could tell she had something else on her mind, and I was pretty sure it had nothing to do with him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on, Jess. You’ve been biting your tongue so hard I’m surprised blood isn’t dripping out of your mouth.”

She hesitated, glancing at Nathan.

“Whatever you want to say, you can say it in front of Nathan. I have nothing to hide from him.”

A knock saved Jess from having to respond right away, but as soon as I finished paying for the pizza and tipping the delivery guy, I shot her a look that made it clear I hadn’t forgotten what we had just been talking about.

“You don’t have to pay for everything, you know. I’ve got money,” she said as I rejoined her and Nathan on the bed and opened the pizza box.

“It’s your birthday. Of course I’m going to pay for everything. Stop trying to change the subject.”

“Fine.” She forced a “don’t forget you asked for this” sigh that conveyed the desired message to me but probably made Nathan think she was genuinely pissed. “It’s Marco.”

I tensed. “My ex,” I told Nathan. “What about him?”

“He’s been asking about you.”

“So?”

“So maybe you should respond to his text messages.”

“You *do* remember why you kicked him in the balls, right?”

“Okay, so he was a shitty boyfriend. I’m not saying you should get back together with him. But do you really want to write him out of your life entirely?”

“Like you wrote Steve out?” A low blow, perhaps, but true nevertheless.

“Fair enough. But Steve and I weren’t friends first. You and Marco were.”

“Barely. And that didn’t stop him from fucking other guys while we were together, so I’m not sure we ever had a friendship worth salvaging in the first place.” I grabbed a slice of pizza, resisting the urge to ask if Jess had already forgotten everything I had confessed to her at the Church. “Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, and I’m not angry. After all, as that sigh of yours so helpfully reminded me, it’s my fault we’re talking about this in the first place. But our food’s getting cold, and I really don’t want to let Marco ruin yet another one of my nights, so can we just talk about something else—*anything* else—instead?”

Jess grinned as she claimed the smallest slice. “Sure. Which would you prefer: religion or politics?”

“Okay, maybe not *anything* else. We’ve already made things awkward enough for Nathan.” I looked at him. “Sorry about that. Bet you’re wishing you had chosen to go home with Gabe instead right about now.”

“Right, because a semi-drunken hookup with a stranger I met at a club couldn’t possibly end awkwardly,” he replied, reaching for his own slice. “Don’t worry about it. I’m right where I want to be. Really.”

I nodded and turned back to Jess. “You have a deck of cards in your purse, right?”

“Always.”

“Then I think it’s time to stop talking and start playing drinking games.”

Chapter Four

We awoke the next morning feeling less shitty than we had anticipated, which was an accomplishment not just because of the alcohol we had consumed the previous night but also because we hadn't fallen asleep in the most comfortable positions. Sprawled out at different angles on the one bed in the room, fully clothed and even still wearing shoes, we were a bit sore, and we definitely didn't feel well rested. We had, however, somehow managed to avoid having nasty hangovers, perhaps because we had incorporated water into the drinking games.

Jess just barely managed to check out of the hotel before the deadline. After joining us for lunch at a nearby restaurant, she got in her car and headed back to Telluride, and Nathan and I walked back to the dorms so we could shower and change our clothes. "Thanks for including me last night," he said on the way. "I'm glad you felt comfortable talking about Marco while I was around. I wouldn't blame you if you felt like you couldn't trust people after his betrayal."

"I thought I felt that way, but then I met you." The words escaped my lips before I could give much thought to whether it was wise to say them, so I just forged ahead. "I feel like you're worth taking a chance on."

He put a hand on my shoulder to stop me, forcing eye contact. "I'll make sure you never regret that."

"See, that's how I know I can trust you."

"How?"

"Who would make a point of looking someone straight in the eyes just to lie to them?"

"Maybe I just like looking at your eyes."

"Maybe, but I think there's more to it than that. Face it, Napster—you're one of the good guys."

I caught him blushing as he turned away from me and started walking again. "Don't let that get out, St. Louis. You'll ruin my reputation."

"Wouldn't want to make it harder for you to pick up guys at clubs," I agreed, staying at his side. "Are you going to call Gabe?"

"I don't know. Haven't really given it much thought yet. Think I should?"

“Sure, if you’re interested. What do you have to lose? But he probably wasn’t drunk enough last night to forget what you were wearing, so just don’t agree to meet up with him until after you’ve showered and changed.”

“Kind of sounds like you’re trying to tell me I reek.”

“I think we’re probably both pretty ripe right now.”

He leaned in close and inhaled deeply. “Nope, you smell perfect. Giorgio Armani could bottle that shit up and make millions off it.”

I looked at him and shook my head before pushing him away. He actually didn’t smell bad himself, but I wasn’t going to admit that. I could feel my ears burning already, and I didn’t want to make things worse for myself. Jess was right; Nathan *did* have this annoying talent for making me blush. I guess my consolation was that I seemed to have the same power over him. “We need to get you to a doctor and get your nose checked out. Clearly it’s busted.”

“Maybe some other time. I’ve been told I need a shower first.” We stopped in front of Towers. “Talk to you later?”

“Definitely,” I said before heading inside.

When I got out of the shower, a text message was waiting for me.

Meeting w/ Gabe tmrw. Free 2day if U want 2 do something.

Sure. Could take U 2 the doctor...

I looked at the clock. It wasn’t even two yet. My phone chimed. *Doubt they take walk-ins.*

Want 2 go 2 DAM?

I knew Nathan would understand what I was asking. And I was pretty sure I knew what his answer would be.

Hell yeah, I’m down 4 that.

Meet U outside in 15.

The Denver Art Museum closed much earlier than I had expected; the hours of operation would have made sense to me for a Sunday, but closing at five on a Saturday seemed so strange I had to do a double take to make sure I hadn’t misread the sign. We didn’t get to see everything the place had to offer, but

given its size, that might not have been possible even if we had been the first ones in the door that morning. Nathan enjoyed the tour, though, and I enjoyed spending time with him, so it was worth the trip regardless. We learned the museum offered free admission on the first Saturday of every month, so we resolved to return in October.

After leaving the museum, we grabbed a pizza and took it back to my dorm room, where we spent the rest of the day watching Netflix. Kevin actually made an appearance at one point, staying just long enough to change his clothes and put on some cologne before heading to an off-campus party. He invited us to join him, but we declined. We had partied enough for one weekend, and Nathan had to get up at a reasonable time the following day for his date with Gabe. We knew we'd likely have more fun hanging out together all night, anyway.

"Someone's hoping to get laid tonight," Nathan said after Kevin left.

"What gave it away?"

"I think it was that last spray of cologne he went back for. Because the first five sprays obviously weren't enough."

"See, I thought it was the condoms—plural—he stuffed in his pocket."

"Those were pretty telling, too, I'll agree."

As I resumed the movie we had been watching before Kevin's arrival, I noticed the time and realized I hadn't even bothered to check with Jess yet to see if she had made it home safely. I probably should have felt guilty, especially since things between us had gotten a bit tense a couple times the previous night, but I had a feeling she would understand. While I had enjoyed her visit, it hadn't been difficult to say goodbye to her—not like last time, anyway—because I had a new friend to keep me company in her absence. A friend I hadn't even known a week ago. A friend I already, in some strange way, felt almost as close to.

What a difference a week made.

After Nathan left, I called Jess, feeling too lazy for an extended conversation via text messages.

"So, what are you and Nathan doing tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure what I'm doing, but he's going on a date with that guy from the club."

“And I guess you’re okay with that.”

“Totally.”

“Okay, then. It occurred to me on the drive home that he’s not really your type, anyway.”

“I don’t have a type. Unless you consider *hot men* a type, in which case he *is* my type, along with plenty of other guys here.”

“Marco was Hispanic.”

“And Aaron was a stereotypical blond-haired, blue-eyed, all-American poster boy. What’s your point?”

“Okay, okay. I’m just saying, maybe if you find someone—”

“What, more like Marco? No thanks. In case I didn’t make it clear enough earlier, I’m not ready to get back into the dating scene yet—with a Nathan, a Marco, an Aaron, or any other type of guy. Rejecting your idea to hook up with Nathan had nothing to do with how he looks. Besides, what’s with the meddling all of a sudden? That’s never been your style before. Don’t start now just because Marco hurt me.”

“I just want you to be happy again.”

“Couldn’t you tell last night, Jess? I already am.”

Chapter Five

Nathan and Gabe hit it off, and by the end of October, they were officially dating. I had only met Gabe once, and that had been nothing more than a brief introduction when I had crossed paths with him and Nathan on campus one day, but he seemed to make Nathan happy, and that was all I really cared about.

Nathan, on the other hand, was determined to get the three of us together as a group. I was up for it, but I got the feeling Gabe wasn't. Nathan and I were still having lunch together between classes every weekday, but Gabe's schedule kept him from being able to join us. He declined to tour the Denver Art Museum with us at the beginning of October, and he found reasons to back out of a few other planned events, too. I encountered him on campus one day, and when I said hello, he just kept walking, not even looking at me. He might not have heard me, but I couldn't help wondering if there was more to it than that.

In fairness, with finals fast approaching, we were all pretty busy. I had a bit of a love-hate thing going on where the University of Denver's quarterly scheduling system was concerned. On one hand, being able to finish the winter quarter right before Thanksgiving and have the rest of the year free to spend with family and friends in Telluride seemed like a pretty sweet deal. On the other hand, though, being away from Nathan for such a long period of time sounded like some new and effective form of torture, and with most of my other friends working or attending colleges that used the more common semester system, I wasn't sure how much time they'd have to hang out with me, anyway. I was glad I had snowboarding to keep me from getting bored during the break.

The days flew by, and before I knew it, I was turning in my last exam of the quarter. I went back to my dorm room afterward to pack a few essentials for the trip home. My phone chimed while I was stuffing my laptop in my backpack.

U in ur dorm?

Yeah.

Mind if I stop by?

Of course not.

Nathan arrived a few minutes later. "I wanted to give you this before you left," he said as he handed me a box covered with *Doctor Who*-themed wrapping paper. "Since we won't get to see each other for Christmas."

I had known for weeks that we would be apart for the holidays, but hearing the words was still like a punch in the gut. I couldn't believe how much I was going to miss a guy I hadn't even known three months ago. Hell, I couldn't believe we had really only known each other for less than three months, period.

I admired the wrapping paper for a few moments. "Did you make this?" It looked homemade, but not in a bad way. The paper itself was white, and it was covered with various images that were somehow significant to the show: a scarf, a blue police box, several of the show's most notorious villains, and the more-or-less trusty gadget known as a sonic screwdriver. They all looked hand drawn, and expertly so.

"Yeah. I couldn't find any premade stuff online."

"It must have taken you hours to do this."

"If you like it, it was worth every second."

"Like it? Nathan, it's incredible."

His cheeks darkened as he ran a hand through his hair and idly scratched the back of his neck. I thought I detected a grin, but if I was right, it was barely perceptible. The combination of his modesty and embarrassment was endearing, especially since the artistic talent on display in the wrapping paper was something to be extremely proud of. He hadn't created it to show off, though, and he apparently hadn't expected to receive any praise for it, either. He had done it simply for my benefit, and I loved it.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"Oh. Right. Sorry." I realized I might have been staring at him, making him self-conscious. I held the box next to my ear and shook it gently, which had the desired effect of making him laugh—and hopefully putting him at ease again. Carefully, I peeled the edges and folds of the paper apart, not wanting to cause any tears. As far as I was concerned, it was a gift in itself, and I planned to keep it.

Under the paper, I found a remote control version of K-9, the robotic dog from *Doctor Who*.

"Since you can't have a real dog right now," Nathan explained.

When I pulled the toy out of its package and turned it on, I noticed he had modified it. K-9 was supposed to have a red panel where his eyes should have been, with a light bulb inside to illuminate the panel when the robot was operational. My K-9, however, had a clear panel with green and blue contact

paper dividing it into two halves, giving it a green right eye and a blue left eye. Like Ash. Like *me*.

“You know you just gave yourself the insurmountable challenge of finding something to top this next year, right?”

“Eh. I’ll think of something.”

“Somehow, I don’t doubt that. Thanks, Nathan. I love it. Really.” He flashed another smile, this one more apparent than the last. To keep from staring at him again, I set the toy, box, and wrapping paper aside on my bed and went to my desk to retrieve his gift. “I’m not much of an artist, I’m afraid,” I said as I handed him the decidedly less impressive plain white envelope that had only his first name scrawled on the front. He seemed surprised as he took the envelope from me. We hadn’t discussed exchanging gifts, and he probably hadn’t expected to receive one. I certainly hadn’t. I had just known I wouldn’t be able to resist getting him one.

He opened the envelope and pulled out the card tucked inside, blinking a few times as he read it. I couldn’t take credit for the words or the card itself—the American Heart Association had chosen both, its way of informing a person that a donation had been made to the organization in memory of one of their loved ones—but I, too, had modified my gift, punching a hole in the top right corner so an oval silver keychain could be attached. With the words on the card commanding his immediate attention, he didn’t even notice the keychain at first, and when he finally did, he still couldn’t tell exactly what it was, thanks to my cruel decision to loop it through the hole with the back facing out to prolong the mystery. He carefully removed it from the card and turned it over in his hand.

“I hope I spelled his name right,” I said as he read the front of the keychain. I still wasn’t sure getting *Walter Hendley* engraved above the Corvette emblem had been the right decision. Putting the name on the donation card had been risky enough on its own; I had only heard it once, and there had been no way to be certain about the spelling without ruining the surprise. But the keychain had seemed somehow incomplete with just *Nathan Pearce* engraved below the emblem, so I had decided to take my chances. “If not, I can—” I started to add, but he interrupted me, stepping forward and wrapping his arms around me tightly. I guess I couldn’t have hoped for a better reaction.

After a few seconds, he pulled away and made eye contact. “I can’t believe you did this, Shane. It’s one of the most thoughtful things anyone has ever done for me. Thank you.”

“So, I guess I got—”

“Yes, you got the name right. I don’t know how you even managed to remember it, but it’s perfect.” He shook his head as he looked at the keychain and card again. “You know my mom’s going to cry when I show her, right?”

I hadn’t thought about that, actually, and I didn’t want to upset anyone. “Maybe you shouldn’t?”

“Are you kidding? You *do* understand the concept of brownie points, right? These are going to earn you enough to fill a whole damn bakery, trust me. You’d have to be crazy not to let me cash them in for you.”

Now it was my turn to get embarrassed. “That’s not why I—”

“Oh, I know,” he assured me, locking onto my eyes again. “I know.”

I nodded. “So, when’s your flight?” Even as I was uttering the words, I was kicking myself for letting them escape my lips. In my haste to change the subject, I had chosen to bring up the thing I was least interested in talking about.

He checked his watch. “About two hours from now.”

“Still upset with your parents?”

“Eh, it’s their money. If they want to use it to fly me back home for the holidays, I guess I can’t really complain about it. It just sort of defeats the purpose of choosing a dorm I could stay in during the break, you know? But I get it. It would have been my first time away for the holidays, and they weren’t ready for that yet, especially Mom. Not after losing Pap this year.”

“I’m sure it’ll be nice for you to see them again. Your friends, too.”

“Yeah. I’m going to miss you, though.”

“I’ll miss you, too.” After a pause, I added, for myself as much as him, “January isn’t that far away.”

To my surprise, despite missing Nathan, it actually didn’t take long for me to start genuinely enjoying the winter break. It was nice to spend time with my parents again after a few months away from them, and Jess was around to keep me company, too. As an unexpected bonus, Aaron returned home for Thanksgiving and ended up extending his stay once he realized I was in town. His acting pursuits in Los Angeles hadn’t paid off yet, leaving him with no

reason to return to the city until January, when pilot season auditions were set to begin. We were both single, and he was a safe, familiar option for no-strings-attached fun. I hadn't had sex with anyone since before moving to Denver back in September, and there was only so much satisfaction to be had from taking matters into my own hands all the time. My frequent hookups with Aaron during the break were a welcome relief after the longest dry spell I'd had in years.

With the first contest of the season set to take place in early December, I needed to get reacquainted with my snowboard in a hurry, so the day after Thanksgiving, I woke up early and headed to the Telluride Ski Resort to finally end an even longer dry spell. Frankly, it was an orgasmic experience in its own right. I had gotten back on my skateboard months ago, but it had been nearly one whole year since I had last ridden my snowboard, and although they shared some basic similarities, skateboarding and snowboarding were essentially two completely different sports. I loved both, but while the former made me happy, the latter made me complete.

I told Coop not to bother joining me right away, assuming I wouldn't be doing anything worth filming the first few days anyway. He was just as anxious to get back to work as I was, though. It soon became obvious that his decision to ignore my advice had been the right one to make. When it came to snowboarding, the concept of taking things slowly was one that had never really been in my DNA. Once we hit the slopes, it took less than an hour for me to find my groove and start acting like my old self, and Coop managed to end the day with a surprising amount of solid preliminary footage for my next edit.

Things progressed nicely from there, and by the end of November, I was hard at work on a new trick that had never been done before, a switch backside double cork variation that involved a double-grab combination and five full rotations. I threw up immediately after landing it for the first time, but I think food poisoning was to blame for that, not the trick itself. Either way, it provided Coop with some interesting footage. Fortunately, subsequent landings were less disgusting, and I ultimately decided it would be safe to try the trick during a competition if the opportunity presented itself.

My first chance came a few days later, at a slopestyle contest held in Breckenridge the first weekend in December. The course was fast and technical, with three jib sections at the top and four jumps at the bottom, and practice runs seemed to indicate I would have plenty of speed to attempt my new trick on the final jump, which gave me over seventy feet of air time from the lip of the kicker to the sweet spot of the landing.

By the time the competition began, though, snow had started falling, slowing things down a bit. With the three-run format giving me some breathing room, I did a safety run my first time through the course, just to gauge how the weather was affecting things. Despite a squirrely landing on one of the jumps, I managed a full pull and got a solid score under my belt, but it was only enough to put me in third place at the end of the first round. I stepped up the difficulty in my second run, padding my score and putting myself in first place. I didn't think that score would hold up, though, so on my third run—while still in the lead—I decided to go for broke. The conditions weren't perfect, but after being sidelined for such a long time, I had something to prove, and I wasn't trying to prove it to my fellow competitors, the judges, my fans, or even my haters; I was trying to prove—to myself—that the wait hadn't been for nothing.

Getting through the jibs and the first three jumps was easy enough. I came in hot to the final jump, traveling backward—switch, as we snowboarders liked to call it; commentators, meanwhile, loved to compare it to the difficulty of throwing a baseball with the less-dominant hand, because we were likewise leading with our less-dominant foot. At the takeoff point, I initiated my new trick, twisting my body and dipping my shoulder as I reached first for the nose of my board, then for the tail of it, holding the grab for as long as possible to demonstrate that I was in complete control while in the air. Spotting the landing, I finished the second off-axis flip and stopped rotating just as my board hit the ground. I stomped the landing and rode away cleanly, staying on my feet all the way to the finish corral at the bottom of the hill, where spectators and fellow athletes greeted me with a roar of approval I could hear even over the rock music blaring through my earbuds. I lost sight of the scoreboard once one of my fiercest competitors tackled me to the ground in a congratulatory hug, dislodging the earbuds from my ears. Even then, I still couldn't hear the announcer's voice over the cheers of the crowd, but I was barely interested in the score I was about to receive, anyway; whether it turned out to be good or bad, all that mattered to me was that I had landed the trick.

And there was a chance the score *would* be bad. The faces changed from contest to contest, but generally speaking, each panel of snowboarding judges scored runs based on the same basic criteria: progression, amplitude, variety, style, difficulty, and overall impression. The idea was simple enough—the rider who was doing the biggest, most difficult tricks should get the best score—but judges weren't infallible, and they typically didn't have time to watch replays before posting their scores. With the speed at which we snowboarders soared through the air and executed our tricks, it was easy for judges to miss things from time to time, especially when a rider unveiled a brand-new trick only a

handful of people had ever heard about, let alone seen. Maybe they wouldn't notice I had done a double-grab combination; spotting a single grab could be hard enough sometimes. Maybe they wouldn't realize I had been traveling switch, especially since I had, on more than one occasion, been accused of making that look just as easy as traveling in my natural stance—more of a compliment than a condemnation, but still something that could potentially work against me at times. Or maybe they just wouldn't get the trick at all, or they wouldn't like it, even if they *did* get it. “Overall impression” left plenty of room for subjectivity, and every snowboarder could think of at least a time or two when they had arguably been underscored.

After a couple of the other guys helped me to my feet, I removed my goggles and found the scoreboard, which showed I was now in the lead by an additional five points over my previous score. A member of the broadcast team rushed over to ask if I felt good about my chances of winning the event with that score, and I told her the truth: with two talented riders left to drop in for their third runs, I only felt good about my chances of ending up in at least third place when all was said and done. I would have been perfectly happy with that, too, considering just how long I had been out of commission. In the end, though, with a score of 97.5 out of a possible 100, I found myself on the top step of the podium, holding a trophy and a cardboard check for twenty-five thousand dollars that was almost as tall as I was.

After doing a few interviews and giving shout-outs to all my sponsors, some of whom would be matching that prize money as part of my deal with them, I found time to call my mother and assure her I was fine, since seeing the proof on her television screen was never good enough for her. A bunch of text messages were waiting when I turned on my cell phone, and two of them were from Nathan—an hours-old one wishing me luck, which I hadn't seen earlier because it had arrived right after the competition had begun, and a more recent one congratulating me and telling me to call him when I got a chance. After talking to my mother, I did just that.

“That LarSpin was insane!” he said when he answered his phone.

“LarSpin? Is that seriously what they're calling it?”

“Yeah. Get it? Larson. LarSpin. Funny guy, that announcer.”

“Ugh.”

“I know, right? How does that work, anyway? Aren't they supposed to ask you what you want to name it? I mean, it's your trick, after all.”

“Just for now. Others will start doing it soon enough—that’s the beauty of snowboarding. No one has exclusive rights to a trick—it’s all about putting your own stamp on things.” Which was exactly why I hated the idea of having a trick named after me. As far as I was concerned, I hadn’t done nearly enough for the sport to deserve such an honor, especially since some of my heroes, despite being true legends of the sport, didn’t even have tricks named after *them* yet.

“But still,” Nathan said, “it has to have a name, right? Besides that double-cork-double-grab-way-too-many-rotations name, I mean.”

“Switch backside double cork eighteen hundred nose-to-tail grab,” I said, laughing as I corrected him.

“Yeah, that. What a mouthful! Is that really what you call it all the time?”

“Well, I might shorten the middle part to ‘double eighteen,’ depending on who I’m talking to, but basically, yeah, that’s what I’d call it if I were trying to break the trick down for someone. Otherwise, I’ve just been calling it the Upchuck because I threw up the first time I landed it.”

“See, *that’s* what I’m talking about! The Upchuck—now *that’s* a cool name!”

“We each have a sick sense of humor, though. LarSpin’s a more sanitary name for television audiences, unfortunately.”

“Oh well. I’ll keep the Upchuck hopes alive. It would be awesome to hear an announcer say ‘Shane Larson just threw down the Upchuck!’ on national television at least once.”

“Yes, it would be,” I agreed, laughing again.

“Anyway, you probably have some celebrating to do tonight, so I’ll let you go. I just wanted to properly congratulate you.”

“Thanks.”

“Good luck finding a place that will cash that giant check, by the way.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t fit in my wallet very well for some reason.”

“Eh, just buy a bigger wallet. Problem solved!”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Later, Napster.”

“Later, St. Louis!”

I won another slopestyle contest the following weekend in Snowbasin, Utah, and a Big Air competition the weekend after that in Innsbruck, Austria. When I talked to Nathan after the latter, it was hard to tell which he was more excited about: the fact that I had won or the fact that I was in a foreign country. He had never even been to Canada, let alone crossed the Atlantic, so he made me promise to take lots of pictures for him.

By the time I got back to Telluride—over three hundred thousand dollars richer, once matched earnings from my very satisfied sponsors were taken into account—Christmas was right around the corner. Winning contests was great, and I certainly couldn't complain about the way I had started the season, but that part of my life was about feeding my competitive side and making my sponsors happy; edits, on the other hand, were about more than just those things. They were true labors of love, one- to three-minute expressions of my personality and style that wouldn't necessarily win me any awards but would hopefully at least have some sort of lasting impact on the sport that would ultimately eclipse everything I did or didn't achieve during competitions. I tried to make at least two each year—one for snowboarding and one for skateboarding—and I was proud of all of them because they told a story—*my* story. Whether linked together or viewed individually, they charted my progression as an athlete and, more importantly, as a man.

With only a few days left before the end of winter break, I was anxious to finish all the lines I had been dreaming of including in my next edit so Coop could start putting it together as soon as I returned to Denver. We would be cutting it close, but we made a pretty good team. I figured we could manage it one way or another. We spent a couple days filming backcountry clips in Telluride and Breckenridge before enlisting the help of the other members of our crew so we could switch to urban features. Arguably the harder part of our task, filming in urban settings always involved much more labor-intensive activities. Hauling snow from one place to another in the bed of Coop's truck so we could use that snow to build a ramp against the side of a building I planned to wall-ride. Tying ropes to the back of a snowmobile and having someone drag me along on it so I could build up enough speed to launch myself down a massive staircase after letting go at just the right moment. Those sorts of things. I tried to avoid using a snowmobile when a bungee cord would do the trick instead, but sometimes that just wasn't possible. And if they weren't released in just the right way, bungee cords *hurt*. I often had the welts to prove that.

By the thirtieth of December, I was bruised and tired, but it had all been worth it, because Coop had acquired all the footage he needed to create a banger of an edit. And just in time, too; with classes scheduled to resume the first Monday in January, Nathan and I had made plans to be back in Denver on the last day of December so we could ring in 2011 together. He spent New Year's Eve with me in my dorm room, and we watched the ball drop while getting drunk off whiskey and Jägermeister, Christmas gifts from Jess. Nathan had to be careful because his body needed time to readjust to the city's altitude after being gone for a month and a half, but he still managed to keep pace with me, more or less. At midnight, we paused to send text messages to friends and family, including, on Nathan's end, Gabe, who was with his own family in Boulder. Then we spent the rest of the night watching movies on Netflix. I'm not sure when we fell asleep—somewhere in the middle of *The Fifth Element*, I guess—but when I woke up the following morning, I was still sitting upright on my bed, leaning against the wall, with Nathan sitting next to me, his head resting on my shoulder. I kept my body still, not wanting to disturb him, but he stirred the moment I made the mistake of turning my head to work a kink out of my neck. *Damn, Napster—you really are a light sleeper.*

“Sorry,” he muttered as he lifted his head.

“Don't be. You didn't drool on me, so it's all good.”

“Oh, so that's where you draw the line?”

“Yep. Snore all you want, but only dogs and boyfriends get the privilege of drooling on me.”

“Good to know.”

“First day of 2011. How should we spend it?”

“Well, for starters, I really want to see all this footage your filmer shot during the break.”

I turned on my laptop, plugged in a USB drive, and opened the folder containing the videos.

“And, just so you know,” Nathan added, “it won't be easy to impress me. I saw some dude throw down the first-ever Upchuck a few weeks ago. That's some serious next-level shit, Shane. It's going to take a lot for you to match that guy's game.”

I laughed and shook my head as I gave him a playful shove. “Oh, how I've missed you, Nathan.”

He frowned and shoved me back. “Don’t get sentimental with me, St. Louis. If you think that’s going to score you any points with this judge, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“Then I guess I won’t bother trying to sway you with a pint of ice cream later, Napster.”

“Now, wait a minute—I never said I was *entirely* above bribery.”

I grinned and started the first video. If I had been the least bit worried about Nathan getting caught up in all the hype and treating me differently than he had before I had stepped back into the spotlight, I now knew I could safely put those fears to rest. I was still just Shane to him—the St. Louis to his Napster, whatever the fuck that was supposed to mean—and that was perfectly fine with me.

Chapter Six

Soon, Nathan and I were back in the college groove, attending classes during the week and fitting studying in between parties every weekend. Aside from Nathan and Kevin, I had kept myself pretty isolated the previous quarter, but Nathan's friendship had gone a long way toward helping me finally move past what Marco had done to me, and returning to my old way of life as a professional athlete had pushed me even farther down that path. I resolved to be more open to widening my circle of friends over the remainder of my freshman year.

It was a good thing I came around to that way of thinking when I did, because I probably wouldn't have had much of a choice in the matter either way; being back in the public eye again, I was now getting much more attention around campus than I had the previous quarter, whether I wanted it or not. Things only got crazier as the season progressed. After I won two more contests in January, people started speculating about—and even placing bets on—whether I could pull off a perfect season. As far as I was concerned, my season had already been more than I ever could have hoped for, and I could walk away feeling proud at the end of it regardless of how the rest of the competitions went, but it was still hard not to feel at least a bit of the mounting pressure, especially after Coop finished my edit.

We decided to wait until the day after my birthday—a Friday—to release the edit, and when I spread the word to my sponsors, one of them insisted on throwing me a joint birthday-slash-launch party and really hyping up the release as a big event. The idea was perhaps a bit excessive for something that clocked in at exactly three minutes in length, but in the world of action sports, edits were like Hollywood blockbusters, and the return edit for the first openly gay pro snowboarder and skateboarder, who was well on his way to having a perfect season after being sidelined with an injury for almost an entire year? That script practically sold itself.

By mid-February, even I was getting sick of seeing my face on television, in print, and on various advertisements plastered around the city. Thankfully, Nathan remained more or less unfazed, and he helped keep me grounded and focused on schoolwork and future contests. He was, however, looking forward to the party, although one person he wanted in attendance was apparently going to be absent. I was determined to change that.

I still hadn't really interacted with Gabe much, but I had, on more than one occasion, spotted him on campus while skating from one class to the next—always on the same days, always at the same time. Since our schedules seemed to align pretty well on those particular days, I decided to keep an eye out for him and flag him down if the opportunity presented itself. And if he ignored me again—well, he couldn't outrun me on a skateboard. One way or another, we were finally going to talk.

Of course, as luck would have it, once I started looking for Gabe, I stopped seeing him. I was beginning to think I was going to have to come up with a different plan—perhaps find his phone number or contact him on social media—when finally, just a few days before the party was scheduled to take place, I skated past a building and turned my head at just the right moment to catch him passing it from the other side, headed in the opposite direction. Without stopping, I repositioned my board and pushed my back foot against the ground a few times to pick up speed, keeping him in my line of sight. Once I got close enough, I called out his name, and he stopped when he saw me heading toward him.

“Hey,” I said, slowing to a standstill in front of him and kicking my board up to my hand after dismounting. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure, I guess,” he replied with a shrug.

“I'm sure you've heard about the party on Friday night.”

“Nathan told me about it,” he said, nodding as he shifted his backpack on his shoulder. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. I'd love to have you there, if you can make it.”

“I can't.”

I'm not sure what I had expected him to say, but his abruptness definitely threw me off. “Are you sure? I know we don't really know each other well yet, but I consider Nathan one of my best friends, and it'd be great if we could all start hanging out more together.”

“Like I said, I can't. Maybe some other time.”

I'd heard *that* before. “You wouldn't have to stay for the whole thing, you know. I'd understand if you got bored and wanted to leave early—honestly, sometimes I feel the same way at these things—”

“Look, I said I can't go to your stupid party, okay? Would you just *back off?*”

Where the hell did that come from? “Have I done something to offend you? Because if I have—”

“Oh, my... Not everything is about *you*, Golden Boy! Some of us aren’t lucky enough to have sponsors lining up to throw money at us all the time. Some of us actually have to work to put ourselves through college because we weren’t lucky enough to hit the only-child jackpot and have everything paid for by Mommy and Daddy. And some of us have to work *more* than one job because student loans don’t pay themselves. And if you were one of *us*, maybe you’d understand why *we* don’t have time for things like museum tours or launch parties, let alone money to pay for them!”

Nathan’s an only child, too. “Look, I don’t know where all this is coming from, but you don’t know anything about me, Gabe. And I would have known that stuff about you if you had just bothered to tell me instead of being all evasive about it for the past five months.” I paused, putting my board back on the ground and planting my left foot on it. “But whatever—I tried. Forget I asked. We don’t have to get along or anything; as long as you keep making Nathan happy, that’s all I really care about.”

“Wait,” he said just before I skated out of range.

I pivoted and stepped off my board again.

“You’re right,” he said, squinting as he walked toward me. “Sorry for being a dick.”

“Bad day?” I took a couple steps to the left to allow Gabe to turn and get the sun out of his eyes.

“I’m just running on about three hours of sleep and way too much coffee. But that’s no excuse for going off on you like that.”

“Well, it seems to have woken you up a bit, at least.”

He chuckled as he played with one of the small gold hoops adorning his earlobes. “Yeah, I guess it did.”

“Let’s just forget about it and move on.”

“Thanks.”

“Does Nathan know you’re working two jobs to pay for college?” That seemed like something Nathan would have mentioned to me at some point, but I could only recall hearing that Gabe hadn’t been able to join us for lunch every school day last quarter because his class schedule hadn’t aligned with ours. And

even if Nathan had felt like it wasn't his place to say anything about the additional pressures Gabe had to deal with on a daily basis, I was pretty sure he would have at least been sensitive of Gabe's busy schedule when trying to arrange for the three of us to hang out together.

Gabe shook his head, suddenly becoming more interested in staring at my skateboard than at me. "He just thinks I study a lot." Looking back up at me, Gabe added, "Are you going to tell him?"

"I don't keep things from Nathan, but this isn't really my story to tell. *You* should tell him, though. He'd understand, and it's much easier than constantly having to find ways to explain why you can't hang out with us when he asks you to."

"It's embarrassing, though."

"Why? Nathan won't judge you, and just for the record, I think it's awesome that you're willing to do whatever it takes to put yourself through college."

"Yeah, being poor is really awesome. You and Nathan should try it sometime."

I chuckled at his obvious sarcasm. "No, being driven and focused is awesome, and you're obviously both."

"I guess," he said, shrugging again.

"How many siblings do you have?"

"Four. And our parents don't make enough to comfortably send one kid to college, let alone five."

"And to a private school, no less. What are you majoring in?"

"Ecology. I want to be a marine biologist. But it's hard because—what?"

I had hoped he wouldn't notice my smile, but apparently he had. "Sorry, it's just kind of perfect that you want to be a marine biologist, of all things."

"Oh, because of my surfer image?"

"I guess Nathan told you about that, then?"

"Yeah. It's okay. You two aren't the only ones who have called me Surfer Dude at some point."

"Only until we knew your real name. And we didn't mean it as a bad thing."

“Good to know.”

“Anyway, go on—you were saying you want to be a marine biologist, but it’s hard because...?”

“Oh. Because I suck at math, basically. So between work and studying, I really am busy most of the time. It’s a wonder I manage to find any time to spend with Nathan at all.”

“At least think about telling him, okay? Seriously, you have nothing to be ashamed of.” After glancing at my watch, I put my board back on the ground again. “I need to get going, or I’ll be late for my next class. I hope we get a chance to hang out together eventually, but no pressure.”

“Thanks. I’d like that, if we can ever make the timing work. And yes, I’ll think about telling Nathan the truth.”

I gave Gabe a quick nod before skating off to class.

Generally speaking, my sponsors didn’t get a say in what my edits looked or sounded like, nor did they get to control what I did during those few precious minutes of footage. Their logos were prominently displayed on my board, and, in the case of clothing sponsors, their gear was prominently displayed on my body. That was all they really cared about—provided, of course, that I wasn’t doing anything in the edit that would make them look bad, like beating up old ladies or mainlining heroin. I hadn’t shown the edit to any of them beforehand because I was under no obligation to do so; in fact, aside from Coop, Nathan was the only person who had seen the finished product. I figured everyone else could just watch it together at the party. If it bombed, at least it would bomb in a really big way.

In the hours leading up to the party, I felt like doing the Upchuck, but not the kind that would win snowboarding contests. Although I was proud of how the edit had turned out, I was still nervous about showing it to the rest of the world, and more than a little uncomfortable about doing it in such a public manner. The party was being held in a theater one of my sponsors had rented out for the night, and many of the invited guests were involved in the industry in one way or another. The edit would be posted online at the exact same time it was shown in the theater, so the whole world would be watching, more or less—the members of the world who cared about that sort of thing, anyway.

Luckily, when the credits rolled at the end, the reaction in the packed theater was overwhelmingly positive. The reaction from the rest of the world, on the

other hand, remained to be seen, but it was out of my hands now, so I decided to stop worrying about it and start enjoying myself.

“Congratulations,” Nathan said when he finally got a chance to steal me away from the crowd for a minute.

“Thanks. It’s a relief to have that out of the way.”

“Yeah, I figured it would be. Try to enjoy it for at least a day or two before you start thinking about what you’re going to do in the next one.”

“You know me so well,” I said, laughing as I reached for a bottle of water. Officially, because I was underage, this was an alcohol-free party; unofficially, however, there was plenty available, and if I wanted to get drunk, there wasn’t a single person in the room who would make an effort to stop me. I was trying to be a good host, though, and I wasn’t entirely sure my stomach was back to being able to handle liquor yet, anyway. “Sorry Gabe couldn’t make it.”

“Yeah, me, too. But he finally told me why earlier today, and I guess I have you to thank for that.”

“I just gave him some encouragement. It was his call to make.”

“Still, I really appreciate it. I just wish he would have told me the truth from the beginning.”

“Yeah, I know, but hopefully now he’ll feel more comfortable being straight with you in the future.”

Nathan grinned, giving me a sense of what he was about to say even before the words escaped his lips. “If he starts being *straight* with me in the future, honesty might not be our biggest problem anymore.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’d be able to help him out of *that* dilemma with a few words of encouragement.” A representative for one of my biggest sponsors was standing nearby, clearly waiting to talk to me. “Anyway, I need to get back to mingling, so I’ll catch up with you later. Go have some fun! And if you decide you want a drink, just ask around—I’m sure someone will point you in the right direction.” I was pretty sure Nathan wouldn’t drink, since he was underage and wouldn’t want to do anything that could reflect poorly on me, but I wanted him to know I wouldn’t mind if he decided to take advantage of a golden opportunity to get a bit hammered.

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.”

I went to talk to the man I had just seen watching me, and after he finished raving about my edit and expressing his firm belief that I would achieve a

perfect season, I worked my way around the room, talking to other people I had missed earlier. While *I* was trying not to think about it, the possibility of a perfect season was something practically everyone else seemed eager to discuss with me. Even some of the other athletes were grudgingly supportive; they knew just how difficult it was to accomplish that feat once in a lifetime, let alone twice, so they were stuck between wanting to root for me and wanting to take me down.

Some people were always quick to put an asterisk next to my first perfect season, suggesting it had simply been a fluke. It had been my first professional season, period, and I had burst onto the scene in a big way and at a dizzying speed. Some had accused the judges of getting caught up in the hype and pandering to the fresh-faced fourteen-year-old phenom. They liked to argue that I had won by default, that things would have been much different if two of the men who would have been my biggest competitors hadn't been sidelined with injuries that season. I had since silenced many critics by proving I could compete against those two men and still come out on top in the end, but four years later, there were still those who seized any opportunity to point out this caveat.

This season, however, things were much different. I still had a lot of hype surrounding me, and snowboarding was still a judged and subjective sport that wasn't immune to favoritism, but all of my biggest competitors were healthy and on a level playing field with me, and I had a unique trick on lock that no other rider was capable of doing yet. Even my loudest critics were finding it increasingly difficult to dismiss my success as a fluke this time. And by the end of March, it was official—I had managed to achieve a perfect season for the second time in four years.

Now I just had to do it all over again next season.

SOPHOMORE YEAR

Chapter Seven

“Welcome back, St. Louis!”

Scanning the crowd, I located Nathan and started walking just a bit faster in my eagerness to give him a hug. It had been a long day, but seeing his face never failed to put a smile on mine. “Good to see you again, Napster.”

“I know, right? It’s been far too long! How was your flight?”

“Let’s just say I’m glad it’s finally over.” I had made it back to Denver with less than a day to spare before my first class of the fall quarter. I wouldn’t even have time to see my parents until next weekend, much to my mother’s dismay. It had been a great summer, though, so I couldn’t complain too much.

“I can’t wait to hear all about Japan and New Zealand. You *did* remember to take lots of pictures, right?”

“If I had taken any more, I would have needed a bigger hard drive.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

“Have you seen B yet?”

“Yeah. We’re already unpacked and everything.”

“Ugh. Please don’t say the P word.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“It’s cool. We need to hang out with B more this year.” I had finally gotten to know Byron a bit better near the end of freshman year. Aside from being the messiest guy I had ever met in my life, he seemed pretty cool, and I wanted to try to make him feel more included this year.

“I’m sure he’d be down for that.”

“How did things go with Gabe?”

“Haven’t seen him yet. He should be getting in tonight. We’ll talk then.”

“Good luck.” Nathan and Gabe had broken up right before the start of summer break. It had been a mutual decision, one that had made perfect sense for both of them. They had spent the summer thousands of miles away from each other, and they had both wanted to be free to hook up with other people. I wasn’t sure about Gabe, but I knew Nathan had taken advantage of that

freedom more than once. Now, however, they had to decide whether they were going to pick up where they had left off or go their separate ways for good.

“Thanks. Need help un—Need help emptying your cargo?”

“Nice save. You didn’t even need to consult a thesaurus for that one.”

“Impressive, right?”

“Very. Let me get checked in, then we’ll go grab the rest of my stuff.”

Nathan and I were both back in Towers for a second year. All things considered, it was a pretty nice place to stay, and I loved the fact that it was right next to the fitness center, giving me easy access to trampolines whenever I needed them.

Kevin was actually chilling in our room when Nathan and I arrived, and it didn’t take much effort to convince him to help us haul my suitcases, boxes, and gear from my car to the dorm room. Between the three of us, we managed to do it all in just one trip.

After we finished unpacking my stuff, Nathan went to see Gabe, Kevin headed off to some girl’s place, and I crashed on a bed that couldn’t have possibly felt more comfortable at that moment. Jet lag hadn’t even fully set in yet, and I was already exhausted. Surviving the first week of classes was going to be a challenge. I needed all the rest I could get.

“Still feeling jet-lagged?” Nathan asked when I tried to stifle a yawn while we were eating lunch that Thursday.

“A little, but it’s getting better.”

“You’re making me rethink any plans I might have had to travel one day.”

“Don’t. It’s worth the annoyances. And, actually, I was thinking you might want to do some traveling this weekend. No jet lag involved. But only if you haven’t already made plans with Gabe, of course.” Nathan and Gabe had decided to get back together but hadn’t had a lot of time to spend with each other yet. I didn’t want to interfere if they were actually going to be able to do something together over the weekend.

“Gabe has to work all weekend. He’s off on Tuesday, so we’re going to do something then. What did you have in mind?”

“I figured you might want to come with me to Telluride and check out the art district. Keep in mind, it’s nothing compared to the DAM, but you’d

probably still like it. And there's this cool local band playing a gig on Saturday night, if you want to get an early start on YotC." Dubbing sophomore year the Year of the Concerts—YotC for short, with a pronunciation that would lead the uninitiated to assume we were talking about the dice game known as Yahtzee—hadn't exactly been our most inspired decision, but it was nevertheless an appropriate name. Despite our shared love of music, we hadn't gotten to attend many concerts at all the previous year, so we were determined to remedy that problem in a big way this year.

"I wouldn't want to intrude on your time with your parents. It's been months since you last saw them."

"Mom wouldn't mind. She's been wanting to meet you for a while now, anyway."

"In that case, how could I possibly say no?"

"Exactly."

"When were you wanting to leave?"

"I've just got one class tomorrow, and since you're already done for the week, I figured we could just leave right after lunch, if that's cool with you. And we'll be back by Sunday night."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll get a few things—is it safe to start saying the P word again yet?"

"Sure. I've got clothes at home, so you're the only one who has to do any packing this time, anyway."

"I'm sure that's breaking your heart."

"You have no idea."

"Okay, so I'll pack a bag tonight and bring it with me to lunch tomorrow."

"You shouldn't need much. And if you forget something, I'm sure my stuff will fit you."

"Is it weird that I'm already feeling nervous about meeting your parents?"

"Not at all. Who wouldn't feel nervous about meeting the people who managed to produce this fine specimen of humility?"

Nathan snickered and threw a grape at me, which I caught and stuffed in my mouth. "I don't think you want me to ask them how they accomplished that."

"Not while I'm in the room, anyway."

“Maybe I can convince your mom to bust out the family photo albums and show me embarrassing pictures of you as a baby.”

“I destroyed those years ago.”

“Shit. There goes half the incentive to go with you to Telluride in the first place.”

“Well, there’s still the art district, at least.”

“That wasn’t the other incentive I was talking about, St. Louis.”

“You’re more excited about the concert than the art?”

“No, I’m excited about spending the weekend with you after a long summer away from each other. Everything else is just a bonus.”

We arrived at my parents’ house a little after seven Friday night. Mom was busy preparing lasagna for us when I led Nathan into the kitchen and introduced him to her.

“It’s great to finally meet you, Mrs. Larson.”

“Likewise, dear. Please, call me Tammy.”

“Your home is beautiful, Tammy.”

“Thank you. Our tastes are a little eclectic, but it works for us.”

“Eclectic, eccentric—at least you got a few of the letters right, Mom.” I jumped out of range before she could swat me with a towel. It wasn’t the first time I had teased her about her offbeat personality, and it wouldn’t be the last, either.

“I’ve made up the guest bedroom for you, Nathan. Shane can show you where it is. Dinner will be ready shortly.”

“It smells amazing,” Nathan said. I thought I heard his stomach growling.

“That’s sweet of you to say, dear. Shane told me you like lasagna. Oh—and ice cream, apparently? I have some homemade white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream in the freezer.”

Nathan looked at me, but all I could do was shrug. I had mentioned his fondness for ice cream to my mother in an offhanded manner almost a year ago, but I had never realized she owned an ice cream maker, let alone knew how to use it to make white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream, of all things.

“Okay, your mom’s the best,” Nathan said when we got to the guest bedroom a couple minutes later.

“Yeah, she is. I knew she’d be making lasagna, but the ice cream was a surprise.”

After showing Nathan where everything was in the adjoining bathroom, I gave him a quick tour of the rest of the house. He took a particular interest in the various trophies on display in the gym, a history of everything I had achieved as an athlete. Most people never got to see them—not on my watch, anyway—but Nathan wasn’t most people.

When we returned to the kitchen, Dad was setting a basket of garlic bread next to a bowl of salad on the table, and Mom was just pulling the lasagna out of the oven.

“Perfect timing. Hope you boys are hungry—Tammy went a little overboard, I think.”

“We’re starving. Dad, this is Nathan. Nathan, Dad—Doug. He’ll tell you not to call him Mr. Larson, so you might as well not even bother.”

Dad reached out to shake Nathan’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Nathan.”

“Likewise, Doug. As I told your wife, your home is beautiful.”

“Thanks. Our tastes—”

“Mom already covered that, Dad.” I glanced over my shoulder at Nathan. “Made for each other, these two. They even share a brain sometimes.”

“I know what that’s like.”

Mom carried the lasagna over to the table, and we each claimed a seat and started to dig in.

“So, what are you boys planning to do this weekend?” Dad asked while reaching for a piece of garlic bread.

“I guess Shane’s planning to show me the art district tomorrow. This is incredible, by the way, Tammy.”

“Yeah, Mom—you’re tearing it up in the kitchen, as usual.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Don’t let her fool you, Nathan. She likes to act like she doesn’t understand snowboarding lingo, but the truth is she’s fluent in it.”

Mom smiled as she cut into a corner of her lasagna. “Yes, well, it’s hard not to pick up a thing or two after hearing you speak it for most of the past nineteen years, dear.”

Unable to argue with that, I changed the subject instead. “We’re going to a concert tomorrow night, too.”

“That sounds nice,” Dad said. “Like the boys said, Tammy, this is delicious.”

“Thank you, dear. So, Shane, did you get everything you needed during your trip?”

“Yeah. Actually, with the flight delays and cancellations, I even got to film a few extra things I hadn’t planned on doing, so I was pretty stoked about that.”

“And when’s that being released?” Dad asked before taking a bite of salad.

“Coop has to finish putting everything together first, but I’m hoping to release the skate edit sometime next month. Maybe even this month, if he gets it done in time. I’ll probably hold off on releasing the snowboarding edit until the season is well underway, but I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Did you do any skating in New Zealand, or was it just snowboarding?”

“Backcountry snowboarding in New Zealand, street skating in Japan. But then we got bored while we were waiting to get a flight out of New Zealand, so I decided to skate a few spots near the airport. We’re going to save that footage and release it as a separate edit some other time. So I actually got three edits out of the trip instead of just two.”

“That might be my favorite one, just because of how it came together at the last minute,” Nathan said, pulling apart a piece of garlic bread.

“Yeah, I think Coop’s planning to find a way to incorporate that into the edit. Show footage of our travel itinerary, clocks, us waiting impatiently at the airport—that sort of thing. Make it clear that it was all impromptu without people having to read a lengthy description to get the backstory. Which would be cool, if he can pull it off. And I’m pretty sure he can.”

“Well, I hope you’ll let yourself get a bit of rest now. You’ve been going nonstop for months, and now you’ve got classes to deal with *and* a new season of competition looming.”

“No rest for the wicked, Mom, remember?”

She gave me a look of concern, then turned to Nathan. “Help me out here, would you, dear?”

“I’ll keep an eye on him, Tammy, don’t worry. I couldn’t let anything happen to my best friend, after all.”

“No need to keep pouring on the charm, Nathan. In case you couldn’t tell, they already like you. Mom’s never made *me* homemade ice cream.”

“Speaking of which...” Mom stood and walked over to the refrigerator. I felt like we had just barely started eating, but maybe that was just because I had been doing most of the talking. I managed to scarf down a few more bites of food before she returned to the table with four bowls of ice cream.

“You really didn’t have to go through all this trouble for me, Tammy.”

“Nonsense, Nathan. It was no trouble at all.”

Nathan sampled the ice cream and gave a thumbs-up of approval. “All we need now is a miniature golf course, and I’d feel like I was back in Pittsburgh. Well, minus the humidity and air pollution, of course.”

“Wait, what?” This was going to be one story I hadn’t heard Nathan tell yet.

“Some of the ice cream parlors in Pittsburgh feature miniature golf courses or even petting zoos. I have no idea why, but like I told you before, ice cream’s sort of a big deal in Pittsburgh.”

“Huh. Okay, that definitely needs to be a thing here, too. You heard him, Mom—next time he comes to visit, we need to have a miniature golf course in addition to the homemade white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream.”

“Sure, dear. As long as we can use your money to pay for it.”

I shot her a grin before focusing my attention on the bowl of ice cream sitting in front of me.

“Don’t look so skeptical, Shane,” Nathan said, making me realize I was doing that thing with my right eyebrow he always seemed to pick up on. “Trust me, you’ll like it.”

He was actually right. White chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream was surprisingly good. Not as good as peanut butter cup ice cream, of course, but much better than green tea ice cream. I would definitely eat at least one more bowlful of it before we returned to Denver on Sunday, and my parents both seemed to enjoy it, too.

“Okay, I have to admit, that *was* pretty good,” I said after scraping the last spoonful out of the bowl. “Want to help me do the dishes?”

“Absolutely not,” Mom said before Nathan could respond. “Thanks for the offer, but your father and I will take care of the dishes. You go have fun with Nathan. Or get some rest so you can get up early tomorrow to show him around the city.”

Hopefully she hadn’t been expecting an argument, because I certainly wasn’t about to give her one. I led Nathan down to the den, and we played video games for a few hours before going back upstairs to get some sleep.

We made it back to Denver just before eight Sunday night. I was pretty happy about how the weekend had gone. I had gotten to show Nathan around the art district, and he had particularly enjoyed seeing the Telluride Gallery of Fine Art and the historic Sheridan Opera House. We had gone to Bridal Veil Falls, the tallest free-falling waterfall in Colorado, measuring a stunning three hundred sixty-five feet in length. We had taken the thirteen-minute ride on the gondola that offered free public transportation between Telluride and Mountain Village. We had gotten YotC off to a nice start with a great concert, and Jess had even joined us for it. And, most importantly, my parents had obviously gotten along well with Nathan, although I had never really doubted they would.

After all, it was hard to find a single thing to dislike about Nathan.

Chapter Eight

By October, I was finally ready to do something I hadn't done in over three years—ask someone out on a date.

It was actually kind of hard for me to believe I had been out of the game for that long, but every time I ran the numbers in my head, I came up with the same result, so it had to be true. Of course, I hadn't been a monk since breaking up with Marco, but my flings with Aaron and the guy I had met in New Zealand had been completely and purposely meaningless, and there certainly hadn't been any dates involved in either.

I didn't want to be bitter and jaded about relationships anymore. I didn't want to close myself off from the idea of finding love—*real* love—just because of some silly high school relationship I had *mistaken* as love once upon a time. Meaningless sex was fun, but I ultimately wanted more than that, even if it meant I'd have to risk getting hurt again in order to eventually find what I was looking for.

There was a guy in my business class who had been sending me some obvious signals lately, and I was seriously considering asking him out. It wouldn't be a big deal, really—just a coffee date—but it would be a start, at least, and a start was better than nothing. Nathan, of course, encouraged me to go for it, but I knew I needed some closure first. I needed to put what had happened with Marco behind me for good, and in order to do that, I was going to have to actually talk to the guy again. In person. Which sounded like it would be about as fun as hitting my balls with a sledgehammer.

Nevertheless, I forced myself to go to Telluride one weekend so I could talk to Marco in person. It didn't take much effort to get him to agree to the meeting; he had asked Jess about me from time to time since our breakup, and I guess he jumped at the chance to finally say what he had obviously been wanting to say to me for a while now. When he suggested meeting at the park, I agreed without any real hesitation. I was apprehensive about meeting with him in general, but beyond that, the park seemed like as good a place as any to have our discussion. It didn't even occur to me until later that the park was where I had said "I love you" to him for the first time. The fact that it took me a while to remember that had to count as some sort of progress, I suppose.

I didn't really go into the meeting with a plan or any real expectations beyond just wanting to tell him I was ready to put the past behind me and move

on. I didn't expect him to apologize for the way he had treated me. I didn't expect to tell him I forgave him for everything, even though that was basically what the meeting was all about for me—symbolically, at least. I didn't expect him to congratulate me on all my recent successes. I didn't expect us to wish each other well. And I certainly didn't expect to hug him and tell him I wouldn't ignore his attempts to contact me anymore, if he tried to do so in the future. But all those things happened, right down to the embrace.

With that out of the way, I returned to Denver and asked Business Dude out the following Monday. He accepted the invitation, but after a few dates that didn't really go anywhere, we both agreed it would be best to go back to being classmates—possibly friends, but definitely nothing more than that. He was nice enough, and I had given him a fair chance, but I had never really felt a connection with him, and obviously the feeling had been mutual. The good news, though, was that I had gotten over the first hurdle. Now I just needed to find the right guy.

I released my skate edit on All Hallows' Eve, as my parents liked to call it. Thankfully, none of my sponsors expressed interest in throwing another launch party to celebrate the event. Others might have seen that as a bad thing, but I was glad I wouldn't have to worry about everyone making a fuss about me again. I had a feeling I wouldn't get off that easily when I decided to release my snowboarding edit, though.

As soon as winter break began, I went back to Telluride and started prepping for the first snowboarding contest in December. As the reigning champion of literally every single slopestyle and Big Air competition in existence, the hype surrounding me was even worse than it had been the previous season, and everyone who was invested in the sport was anxious to find out if I could continue the streak for another year. I definitely wasn't feeling any pressure *at all*.

I had a few new tricks hidden in my proverbial back pocket, one of which was a triple cork I would probably only have enough speed to pull during Big Air competitions for now. I also had a new double-grab combination for the Upchuck, which I could now do as either a frontside or a backside double. Being able to spin a trick in both directions was important because it showed versatility, one of the things judges took into account when determining a rider's score. And none of my new tricks had been landed in a contest setting yet—as far as I was aware, I was the only person who was doing them, period. I

was hoping to debut at least some of them over the course of the season. Progression was an important aspect of snowboarding, too, and I was always eager to do my part to keep the sport from getting stagnant.

The first two contests of the season were slopestyle competitions, and the conditions unfortunately weren't right for me to unveil a new trick during either. I did, however, still manage to win both events, although I pushed things all the way to the wire during the second contest, falling on my first two of three runs in my efforts to fight the weather and gain enough speed to try something different. Once I abandoned that idea and went back to the run I had on lock, things fell into place as usual. I was happy with the wins, but I was also getting increasingly hungry for a change of pace. I had spent most of the previous season—the slopestyle portion of it, anyway—doing variations of that run. I didn't want to keep doing it for the duration of *this* season, too.

I got my first real chance to try something new at the third event, a Big Air contest held in Beijing, China. Big Air differed from slopestyle in a few ways. While I loved them both for different reasons, Big Air was where I really got to embrace my daredevil side each season. Basically, it was just one big fifty-plus-foot ramp that ended with a jump over a gap. Unsurprisingly, the speed, height, and distance achieved on a Big Air ramp allowed bigger tricks to be performed, but only one trick was possible per run. Big Air competitions were usually held in a jam format over the course of twelve to fifteen minutes or so, and contestants had to fit in as many tricks as possible before time ran out. Typically, five or six riders would be competing back-to-back in the final, and they would each get somewhere between six to eight runs down the ramp, depending on how long it took to get back up to the top after each one. The best two scores—on a scale of one to fifty—would count, with a combined total score of one hundred being the maximum a rider could achieve. In addition to snowboarders, skateboarders, skiers, and BMX riders also regularly competed in Big Air contests, so I actually rode the ramps in the summer as well as the winter.

During the Big Air final, I ended up stomping not one but two new tricks that had never been done before in a competition: a backside triple 1440 and a frontside triple 1440. The tricks earned me a combined perfect score of one hundred and sent social media into a frenzy. Everyone had known I could now do those two triple variations—the news and footage had broken out months ago, during my trip to New Zealand—but no one had expected to see them in a contest setting quite so soon.

It seemed like the perfect time to let everyone see my snowboarding edit. People had already started figuring out that I was working on one anyway, and interest was at an all-time high in light of how my season had started. Besides, if I scheduled it at the last minute as a quickie release, none of my sponsors would have time to plan a launch party to coincide with it. And, considering what I was planning to release this time, that was probably the only way I was going to be able to stop them from making a big deal about it again.

No one was expecting more than a standard one- to three-minute edit from me. Longer ones existed, but they were the exception, not the norm. Nathan, Coop, my parents, and my sponsors were the only ones who knew I actually planned to release a sixty-minute documentary instead. I had strongly considered making my last edit a documentary but had talked myself out of the idea in the end. There had been too much potential for it to turn into one of those cheesy “athlete overcomes adversity and makes a comeback” documentaries, and I had wanted it to be about the riding, not my injury and so-called comeback. After all, I had only broken an ankle; in the grand scheme of things, that was a pretty minor injury for a snowboarder to overcome. It wasn’t like I had blown out both ACLs and undergone months of painful surgeries and rehab to repair the damage.

Coop had really liked the idea of putting together a documentary, though, and the New Zealand backcountry trip had provided the perfect opportunity to bring the idea to life. We had gotten hundreds of hours of footage over the summer, and it had seemed like a shame to pare all that down to three minutes or less. Even sixty minutes didn’t necessarily do the trip justice.

I had been encouraged to charge between seven and ten dollars for the privilege of downloading the film, but I thought it would be nice to provide it for free as a Christmas gift for those who were interested in watching it, and Coop agreed. We released it on Christmas Eve, and within twenty-four hours, it had already received five hundred thousand views. Due to popular demand, we soon started offering a DVD version for ten dollars, with a portion of the money being used to pay for the production and distribution of the DVDs and the rest—the majority—being donated to the American Heart Association. It ended up being a Christmas gift for fans *and* Nathan and his family—a win-win if ever I saw one.

Chapter Nine

Nathan and I both returned to Denver on December thirty-first to continue our tradition of ringing in the New Year together—this time at YotC concert number fifteen, one of the best ones thus far. The winter quarter began a few days later, and I quickly returned to the classes-and-contests cycle.

A guy in one of my electives asked me out after class one day. I accepted the invitation on a what-the-hell whim, and while I never got past the fooling-around phase with Elective Dude, I did get a decent fuck buddy out of the deal, a welcome addition to my contact list because my options for sexual relief in Denver had been painfully lacking for far too long.

Nathan and I celebrated my birthday with two concerts over the course of one weekend, and Kevin and B actually joined us at both for a change, along with Jess, who had their undivided attention right from the start. I knew neither guy would have a shot of getting anywhere with her, but it was fun to watch them try regardless.

While I was eating lunch with Nathan the following Monday, I asked if he had made any plans for spring break yet.

“Not really. You’ll be at Breck, and Gabe will be working most of the time, so I’ll probably just chill and catch up on some reading or something.”

“There’s room in my car for a stowaway, if you’re interested.”

“Seriously?”

“Sure, why not? You said you wanted me to teach you how to ride eventually. Might as well be this year.”

“You’ll be busy competing, though. I wouldn’t want to bother you.”

“Nathan, when have you ever been a bother to me? Besides, I won’t be competing until that weekend, and even then, I’ll only be busy for a few hours at a time. Trust me, we’ll have so much time to spend together, you’ll probably be sick of me by the end of the week.”

“Shane, when have I ever been sick of you?”

“Can I take that as a yes, then?”

“It sounds fun, but aren’t you forgetting something? I don’t have any gear.”

“You can have some of mine. It’s not like I don’t have plenty. And we’re basically the same size, so it should all fit you.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought of everything.”

“More or less. So, what’s it going to be, Napster? Are you in or out?”

“Hell yeah, I’m in!”

“Sweet. Come over later and we’ll find some gear for you to wear.”

“Sure. Just promise me one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“That you’ll win the contest.”

“Why? You’ve never cared about whether I win or lose before.” Nathan was one of my biggest supporters, but he was also the last person on earth I ever expected to have pressuring me to perform a certain way.

“And I still don’t. Well, that sounds harsh, but you know what I mean.”

“I do. What I don’t know is why you asked me to promise you I’d win the Breck contest.”

“It’s a purely selfish request, honestly. You’ve got a perfect season going here, and the only thing that’s going to change at the next contest is that I’m going to be with you for it. If your winning streak ends then, out of all the times it could possibly end, and your fans somehow manage to find out *I* was the bad-luck charm responsible for the loss, they’ll be out for blood—*mine*.”

Now *that* was more like the Nathan I knew. “Don’t worry. If I lose, I’ll give you a head start before I tweet out an explanation for the loss and tell my pitchfork-wielding followers where to find you.”

“Thanks, St. Louis. You’re too kind.”

“Damn. That’s a lot of gear.”

Everything Nathan would need was lying on my bed. Brand-new packets of thermal long-sleeve body shirts, thermal underwear, and thermal snowboarding socks would provide him with a week’s worth of base-layer clothing. A couple fleece jackets, a couple pairs of thermal pants, and a pair of snowboarding boots would serve as his main and backup set of second-layer clothing. He would also need a main and backup set of outer-layer clothing; a brand-new packet of beanies, a couple pairs of goggles, a couple pairs of gloves, and a

couple snowboarding jackets took care of that issue. The final touches, of course, were a helmet and a snowboard.

“Well, you won’t be wearing it all at once, of course. The extra stuff is just there in case you need a dry set of gear to change into sometime.”

“What are you trying to say, St. Louis—that my gear could get pretty wet because of all the falling I’ll be doing?”

“Well, I’m definitely *not* saying that my followers are placing bets on how many times you’ll fall during the week. I’m definitely not saying that *at all*.”

“Damn. Remind me to get in on that action.”

“What action? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Whatever you say, St. Louis. Just don’t expect me to share my prize money with you, in that case. A contest that involves falling down repeatedly is a contest I can easily win.”

Speaking of which, there was one thing I still hadn’t settled. “Brace yourself. And sorry in advance.”

Before he could respond, I shoved him from behind—hard.

“What the hell, man?” He spun to face me, actually looking slightly pissed off for once. If I had been anyone else, he probably would have taken a swing at me. In some sick way, it was kind of nice to know I had the luxury of being able to push him further than others could before he’d lose his temper.

“I wanted to see which foot you caught yourself with. For the record, it was your right foot. Which was what I expected from watching you do other things, like climb stairs. I’m pretty sure you’re goofy footed.”

“Hey!”

“Oh, come on. You know enough about snowboarding to know that’s not a bad thing.” All it meant was that Nathan was naturally inclined to lead with his right foot at the front of a board instead of his left.

“Says the regular-footed rider.”

“Well, we can’t all be perfect.”

Grinning, he shoved me onto my bed. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him down with me, and we stayed like that for a few seconds, our bodies pressed lightly together.

“Damn,” he said finally, holding my gaze and warming my face with his breath. “We’ve known each other for well over a year now, and I still can’t quite seem to get used to just how stunning your eyes truly are.”

Yours aren’t bad themselves. “You’d better go try that gear on so we can make sure it fits,” I replied, clearing my throat and pushing him off me.

Chapter Ten

Teaching Nathan how to ride was my first order of business in Breckenridge. Normally, I would have advised against trying to teach a friend or loved one how to snowboard, but I had successfully taught others and was confident I could teach Nathan as well—*without* destroying our friendship in the process.

After swapping the bindings on his board from regular to goofy stance, I spent the first day teaching him the basics of snowboarding: how to move around while one or both feet were strapped to the board, how to turn, how to stop, how to fall properly, how to get on and off a ski lift. He was nervous and unsteady at first but eventually got the hang of everything I taught him.

Breckenridge was renowned for its incredible nightlife, and while Nathan and I couldn't fully enjoy it because we weren't old enough to legally drink yet, we wanted to at least take advantage of the opportunity to add some more concerts to our YotC list. We ended the first night at a club that featured live music, and while we were there, a group of locals asked me to autograph a few things. After I complied, they offered some advice about other concerts to consider attending throughout the week. It seemed like we would probably be able to catch at least one concert per night, which would boost our YotC total nicely.

The following day, Nathan and I hit the slopes again. I took him to the beginners' course on Peak 8, where he could continue honing his skills in relative safety. After just a few hours on one of the green trails, I felt comfortable moving him to a blue trail. He wasn't ready to try hitting the jibs on the terrain park yet, but his freeriding was getting pretty consistent.

He seemed to be enjoying himself, too. I offered to find something else for us to do on the third day, but he said he wanted to stick to the slopes. I took him to a different blue trail, and by the end of the day, he had found the courage to start doing straight airs and simple jumps over small obstacles.

"Nice progress, Nathan!"

"Eh, I had a good teacher. Name's Shane Larson. Maybe you've heard of him? He's kind of a big deal. Not to mention he's my best friend, too. Go ahead—be jealous."

My cheeks were flushed, but at least I could blame it on the cold weather for once. “Yeah, well, I think he’d agree you’ll be able to handle being on your own tomorrow while I’m busy checking out the slopestyle course.”

“I’d rather just go with you, if that’s okay.”

“Are you sure? It could get pretty boring.”

“Watching you ride never gets boring. Yes, I’m sure.”

“Okay, then. You can hang out in the athletes’ lounge while I’m on the course. I shouldn’t be too long—two or three hours, tops. I just need to scope out the jibs and jumps so I can figure out my lines and decide if a switch back triple fourteen will be possible off the money booter.” I was certain triple corks could be done in more than just Big Air contests, and it was only a matter of time before I would find the right course to put my belief to the test.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me with that snowboard jargon, St. Louis, but you’re losing me here.”

“Sorry. I just need to check out the features on the course so I can plan my run and decide if it’ll be possible to do a new trick on the bottom jump.”

“Oh. Right. That’s exactly what I thought you said.”

After previewing the slopestyle course on Thursday, I started feeling pretty good about unveiling a new trick during the contest. The course was perfect, and so was the weekend weather forecast. With my wax technician’s help, I suspected I would have enough speed to break out a triple in one of my runs, but if not, I had something else up my sleeve that might still manage to surprise people.

First, though, I had to get through a Friday packed with press obligations and photo shoots. Nathan asked to tag along, and I saw no reason to deny the request, despite suspecting that even his interest in photography wouldn’t be enough to stop him from being bored out of his mind in the end. He never complained, though, and he certainly seemed to be enjoying himself the whole time.

We went to another awesome concert that night, and the following morning, I woke up early and started getting ready for the contest. While nerves were a natural part of the game, I was feeling particularly nervous about this specific competition. It would have been easy for me to blame that on the even-more-

impressive-than-usual field of competitors or the pressure of the whole perfect-season thing, but I was pretty sure it actually had more to do with Nathan's presence than anything else. I always felt most nervous when I knew certain people were in attendance at a contest, such as my parents or sponsors. People who mattered. And Nathan? Nathan mattered.

My first of three runs was my safety run. It garnered a decent score, but I came in a bit too hot on my final jump and ended up scrubbing the landing after overshooting the sweet spot, leaving room for improvement. My second run took me from third place to second, but again I left some points on the table, being forced to jump off one of the rails a bit early when I started to lose my balance during a boardslide.

The third round was one of the best the sport had seen all season. I wasn't going into the round in first place for a change, and my competitors all seemed to sense the opportunity to try to pull off what people would undoubtedly describe as a major upset. The leaderboard changed six times during the first nine competitors' final runs. Being the top qualifier had earned me the dubious honor of going last in each round—tenth of ten riders in the field. When the scores came in for the Canadian rider who was ninth in the run order, I wasn't just off the top step of the podium, I was down in fourth place, off the podium entirely.

With less than a minute to go before I would be given the signal to drop in for my final run, Nathan pulled me aside in the athletes' lounge.

"Time to go out there and win this thing, St. Louis."

"All I can do is land my run. The rest is in the hands of the judges."

"So give them something that will make it impossible for them to deny you the top score."

That *was* my plan, but I was surprised to hear Nathan echoing it. "And how do you propose I do that?"

"Come on. You know perfectly well you have enough speed for a tougher trick at the bottom. That's why your first run wasn't as clean as you wanted it to be."

He was right. During my first run, I had scrubbed the landing on the final jump because I had carried too much speed for the trick I had committed to. I had stuck to that same trick in the second run, hitting the brakes a bit during the transition from the third jump to the fourth to compensate for the speed factor,

because I had messed up the rail section. But if I landed everything cleanly and changed that last trick to a triple, I'd almost certainly climb back up to first place. No one else seemed to believe triples were possible in a slopestyle setting yet. It had barely been a year since I had landed the first-ever Big Air triple, and that kind of speed, height, and distance simply couldn't be matched in a slopestyle course, leading most to assume there wouldn't be enough time to complete all those flips and spins. But I had done triples in the backcountry, too. I knew they could be done in slopestyle, given the right conditions. And this course seemed to meet the requirements.

"Impressive observation, Napster."

"Like I told you before, my teacher's the best."

From the starting gate, a race official signaled that I had been cleared to begin my run. I wasn't even strapped into my board yet. Luckily, slopestyle wasn't a timed event. No one would complain about the wait, provided I didn't take too long to start.

Nathan gave me a fist bump. "You've got this, Shane."

I stepped into my bindings, locked my feet in place, jumped a couple times to make sure everything felt okay, then pushed out of the starting gate and entered the course.

Clearing the jib section was the first challenge. I took the rainbow rail in the first set of obstacles—a feature more than one person had used over the years as an excuse to joke about my sexuality. At the second set, I opted for the cannon-to-wall-ride feature. After clearing the first two jumps, one final set of jib options awaited me. I chose to hit the hitching post, creating a satisfying metallic clang as I tapped it with the tail of my board while doing a 540 over it. On a whim, I threw down the Upchuck on the third jump. Crouching to maintain speed, I came in switch for the final jump, prepared to try a triple even though I hadn't practiced the trick a single time on the course. Go big or go home, as we say in this sport.

Popping off the lip of the kicker, I initiated the trick, dipping my shoulder one, two, three times while completing four full counterclockwise rotations. Stomping the landing right at the edge of the sweet spot, I rode away cleanly and braked at the bottom of the hill, spraying snow into the cheering crowd of spectators.

My fellow competitors immediately started congratulating me. There was a camaraderie among snowboarders that was hard to find in competitive sports,

perhaps because we were such a small, tight-knit community. We all wanted to win contests, but most of us were friends first, competitors second, and snowboarding fans above all else. I wasn't the only one who was passionate about progressing the sport; we all were, and everyone knew the significance of what I had just done. Even the person I was about to knock off the top step of the podium couldn't help being excited about it, if perhaps a bit upset that he hadn't thought to try it himself. There hadn't been even a hint of suspicion that anyone would be trying a triple at this contest, but now it was clear to everyone that triples weren't just Big Air tricks anymore. Just a few years earlier, double corks had changed the game when competitive snowboarding had been on the verge of getting stagnant, and now the game had just been changed again.

I received a perfect score of one hundred, something that had been a long-term goal of mine. Getting a perfect score in a Big Air competition had been one thing, but due to the differences in the two contest formats, getting one in a slopestyle competition was arguably harder. Before I had time to finish processing the fact that I had just achieved two big goals in one quick run, a woman from the broadcast team was at my side, eager to do an interview with me.

"Shane, you weren't even on the podium going into this run. The pressure to continue your winning streak and end with another perfect season has to be tremendous, and you must have really been feeling it up in the starting gate. Tell me, how did you manage to block all that out and not only clean up your run but also completely change it at the last minute—and oh, yeah, add a *triple* as well?"

Chuckling, I glanced back up the course, knowing Nathan was still standing somewhere at the top of it. "Turns out *some* good-luck charms give great pep talks."

Chapter Eleven

We capped off the week with one last concert—and, admittedly, some drinking to celebrate my win—before driving back to Denver Sunday afternoon. People were still buzzing about the triple I had stomped during the slopestyle contest, and over the course of the next week, I found myself getting a lot more attention from certain guys on campus.

Not that I had much time to focus on that before gearing up for the final contest of the season, a Big Air event in Park City, Utah. It, too, came down to the wire, but after an intense head-to-head battle with one of the Norwegian riders, I managed to secure another victory. More importantly, I managed to achieve another perfect season.

My sponsors, of course, were thrilled. Some of my contracts were set to expire soon, and it was safe to assume they would all be renewed, probably with better terms to boot. Not that I could ever complain about what I already had. For the second year in a row, my combined winnings and earnings for the season would be in the seven-figure range when all was said and done. And that wasn't even counting all the freebies I received on a regular basis, or the brand-new truck I had won at one contest, or the trophies, medals, and other accessories—such as watches and rings—I had won at others.

I would make a terrible negotiator. No matter how many people tried to tell me I deserved all the money and accolades—because of my talent or because of my hard work and dedication to my sports or even because I was the first and only openly gay athlete in either of them—it never stopped seeming like an embarrassment of riches to me. But because I left the negotiating to my agent while I stuck to doing what *I* did best, I would soon be even richer.

Ending the season on a high note had been a relief, but while the contests were behind me, requests for interviews and appearances were now pouring in at an alarming rate. I tried to accommodate as many as possible, feeling guilty every time I had to decline a request due to my busy class schedule. Fortunately, with less than two months left in the college year, I would soon have more free time for such things.

Unfortunately, with less than two months left in the college year, I would soon have to say goodbye to Nathan for the summer.

“Have you made any plans for the weekend yet?” Nathan and I were in the middle of eating lunch, and I had held off on sharing my big news with him for as long as I could stand.

“Not really. Gabe will be working most of the time—I know that much. Didn’t we already have this conversation once? A few weeks ago, maybe?”

“I’m pretty sure I said ‘spring break’ then, not ‘weekend.’ And I’m positive I didn’t say ‘want to go to Coachella with me?’ then.”

“Okay, so completely different, then.” He started to jab into his salad before dropping his fork and looking up at me. “Wait, what?”

“Want to go to Coachella with me?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. One of my sponsors heard me mention YotC at some point, and I guess they made a mental note of it, because they contacted me last night and offered to hook me up with tickets. I told them I wouldn’t go without you, so now they’re just waiting to hear back from me before making all the necessary arrangements.”

“‘Necessary arrangements’ meaning what, exactly?”

“Everything—hotel, airfare, meals. All expenses paid.”

“Damn, St. Louis. Your sponsors are awesome.”

“Tell me about it. The lineup’s pretty sweet, too: Radiohead, Dre, Snoop, tons of others. So how’s this for déjà vu—what’s it going to be, Napster? Are you in or out?”

“Hell yeah, I’m in!”

“Yeah, I thought that was how I remembered this conversation going last time.”

“So, how’s this going to work? With our class schedule, I mean.”

“We’ll probably fly there sometime Thursday evening and fly back here late Sunday night or early Monday morning. Shouldn’t miss more than a day of classes, tops. Maybe none at all.” The University of Denver’s penchant for not offering many classes on Fridays could come in handy at times. “Gabe’s welcome to come, by the way, if he can manage to take some vacation days or something to make it work.”

“I doubt it, but I can check. Although I guess he might prefer not to know that offer’s on the table. Might make it really hard to resist just blowing off work all weekend.”

“Yeah, good point. Well, if you do decide to tell him, and he’s somehow able to join us, let me know. I’ll be calling my sponsor back later today to give them the go-ahead.”

“Is it just the two of us right now?”

“Yeah. I was going to invite Jess to join us, but I haven’t been able to reach her.”

“Still? What’s it been now, two months?”

“About that long, yeah. Since my birthday concert.”

“I hope everything’s okay with her.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

The first weekend of Coachella—which was, as of this year, a two-weekend event—ended up being colder than expected, with rain even making an appearance at one point. I had never been one to complain about cold weather, though, and it didn’t seem to bother Nathan much, either. Of course, it didn’t hurt that we were given the VIP treatment during the event and could retreat to the comfort of a five-star hotel each night. That felt sort of like cheating in comparison to some of the more grueling experiences of other festival attendees, but we somehow managed not to feel terribly guilty about it.

All in all, it was an awesome experience, one even Tupac briefly came back from the dead to enjoy on the final night—with a little help from modern advances in holographic technology, of course. I was glad my sponsors had managed to score tickets to the *first* weekend of the music festival; the lineup was the same either way, but those who had tickets for the second weekend had already had the surprise Tupac appearance spoiled for them. He would probably still be there, but they would know to expect him now, since word of his holographic revival had spread quickly on social media and in the news. The trick had come as a complete shock to Nathan and me, though, and that was why we had decided that if we ever got another opportunity to attend Coachella, we would always pick the first weekend over the second.

We flew back to Denver on Monday, each missing only one class that day. With Coachella out of the way, I moved on to my next order of business:

planning Nathan's birthday party. After finding a few options for concerts within the proper time frame, I coordinated with Gabe to choose one he would definitely be able to fit into his schedule. He was forced to miss out on a lot due to work, but he wasn't going to miss out on this—not if I could help it.

I also invited Kevin, B, and a few of our other friends, including Elective Dude, who wasn't a bad guy, just a guy I had very little in common with. He could appreciate good music, though, and Nathan's birthday party would have that covered. I had been worried about finding something that could possibly compete with Coachella, but I had lucked out in a big way—Drake was playing in Englewood on the Sunday following Nathan's birthday, along with J. Cole and Waka Flocka Flame, saving me from having to resort to one of the other options I'd had for that weekend: the Fray. Talk about relief. They might be Denver natives, but that didn't mean we had to like them.

I covered all the costs to make sure everyone would be able to attend the concert. Our group consisted of ten people, including Nathan and me. Conspicuously absent was Jess; hard to invite her when she wasn't answering my calls, text messages, or emails.

Nathan and I managed to fit a few more concerts in before the end of the school year. As we finished packing, our total sat at sixty-nine, always a fun number but also one that exceeded even the wildest expectations we'd had for YotC back at the start of the fall quarter. Of course, being who we were, plans to try to top that number next year were already in motion even before we went our separate ways for the summer.

But as I drove away from the University of Denver, I had a more immediate goal in mind: finding out what had happened to Jess.

JUNIOR YEAR

Chapter Twelve

My search for answers quickly hit a dead end. When I went to Jess's parents' house in Telluride, I discovered that they had sold it a couple months earlier. The man who answered the door was only able to tell me that the previous residents had moved to South Carolina, along with their daughter. I knew Jess had some family near Myrtle Beach; in fact, her older brother had moved there right after high school, having grown sick of the same snowy conditions I couldn't get enough of. It was surprising, though, to learn that her parents had decided to join him—and that she had chosen to go with them. She had never mentioned anything to me about the possibility of a relocation, for them or for her. But the man had been quite positive that “the girl with the blue streak in her hair” had gone with her parents to South Carolina.

I still wasn't sure why Jess had suddenly stopped talking to me—as far as I knew, we had parted on good terms after my birthday concert—but it was a relief to at least have confirmation that she was okay, if nothing else. Unlike me, she had never been much of a social media person; consequently, I hadn't even been able to troll her Twitter feed for the past few months to reassure myself that there was nothing to worry about. Her last activity there had been back in December, when she had responded to one of those contests where entrants had to retweet a message for their chance to win a prize. And she hadn't even won. I knew that because, back then, we had still been talking to each other on a regular basis.

I thought about trying to find her brother's contact information, but I decided not to. Her cell phone hadn't been disconnected; emails sent to her weren't being bounced back to me from the ominous Mailer Daemon. And, apparently, she was all right. I could only assume that she was receiving my messages and choosing, for whatever reason, not to respond to them. That hurt, especially since I didn't know *why* I was being ignored, but I figured I needed to respect her privacy. She knew how to get in touch with me if she wanted to. And I hoped she would one day. But if she didn't...

Well, I could take a hint.

Competitively speaking, I had a good summer but not a spectacular one. I only won two of the four skate contests I entered, but replicating the success of my last two snowboarding seasons on a skateboard had never really been a goal

of mine anyway, so the mixed results didn't bother me. Skate contests were just fun distractions for me; traveling to various places with Coop and the rest of my crew to get footage for new edits was my main priority for the summer. Two weeks spent skating in Barcelona, Spain, and snowboarding in Tignes, France, gave Coop plenty to work with.

Even overseas, there were people who knew who I was and what I had achieved. Months away from the start of the next season, it was already getting increasingly difficult to escape talk of a three-peat. Most people seemed to think it was possible, which was simultaneously flattering and daunting. I was now routinely being called things like "the most dominant rider in the sport at the moment" or "a true force to be reckoned with" or "one you should never bet against." One journalist even dubbed me "Mr. Perfect"—a nod, of course, to the perfect seasons I already had to my credit. At least, I *assume* that's what he was nodding at, anyway.

I didn't really think in terms of things like domination or perfection, though. I never had. What I thought about was this: streaks were made to be broken.

I had to be heading for a fall eventually.

There were a few things in life that ranked—in no particular order—as the best feelings in the world, at least in my book. Claiming first tracks on a blanket of fresh powder. Landing a new trick for the first time. Stomping a contest run. Snowboarding in general. Being told you inspired someone to come out of the closet or helped change someone's views about homosexuality. Receiving unconditional support from family and friends. Sex. The love of a good man—although, granted, I really couldn't vouch for that one with any certainty yet.

And reuniting with Nathan after being away from him for an entire summer. That definitely ranked as one of the best feelings in the world. The smile on my face as we embraced was proof of that.

"Ready for another year, St. Louis?"

"Hell yeah, Napster! How are the apartments?" Nathan and I had each snagged a fully furnished single-bedroom apartment on campus this year, available only to upperclassmen.

"Not bad. It'll be nice to not have to share a bathroom with anyone anymore."

“And always be guaranteed a hot shower.”

“And be able to actually walk across the floor without tripping over B’s shit all the time.”

“Kind of funny that he and Kevin ended up deciding to room together this year.”

“I know, right? They’re kind of perfect for each other.”

“Have you seen B yet?”

“No, but I think he’s around here somewhere.”

“Kevin probably won’t check in until the last possible minute. What about Gabe?”

“Yeah, I saw him earlier. We talked for a few minutes before he went to work.”

“Picking up where you left off again?”

“Might as well, I guess. Want some help unpacking?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

YotC 2.0 got off to a slow but decent start with some local bands, but by the end of September, Nathan and I were ready to really get things going with a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert. Cock socks optional, thankfully.

Coop finished my skate edit in mid-October, just in time for another All Hallows’ Eve release date. We hadn’t planned it that way, but it felt strangely appropriate for something that had been filmed in Spain, where the Day of the Dead was a pretty big deal. Of course, while my skate edits were typically well received, the thing people usually seemed to like most about them was the fact that they generally meant a new snowboarding edit was right around the corner. They got pretty excited about this particular edit, though. For one thing, Barcelona, with its abundance of smooth stone and marble structures featuring just the right angles and shapes, was a city that seemed tailor-made for skateboarding, making anything filmed there an automatic crowd-pleaser. For another, it included a few extremely difficult and technical tricks, such as the switch double 360 flip, that most outside of my inner circle had never even known I was capable of doing in the first place.

My class schedule, which had seemed easy enough at the start of the quarter, soon got a bit hectic. Based on what I knew about Nathan’s schedule

and what I had heard from Gabe, Kevin, and B about their respective schedules, I assumed it was just one of the dubious perks of life as an upperclassman. We still found time to get together as a group occasionally, though. And, of course, Nathan and I continued to hang out together on a daily basis, fitting our regular lunches and Netflix marathons in between class lectures and study sessions. Parties, too—we could always make time for a party.

I also made time to go on a few dates with a guy I met at the gym. Unfortunately, aside from the fact that he knew how to do a few basic flips on a trampoline, it soon became clear that we didn't have a lot in common with each other. He was fun to hook up with once in a while, but trying to hold a conversation with him for any significant amount of time was a painful experience.

Coop started working on my snowboarding edit in mid-November, just before winter break was set to begin. We ran into some licensing problems while trying to find the right music to use; the owners of the first song I chose refused to give us permission to use it, for reasons they never really made clear to us. It was something we had grown accustomed to dealing with over the years, but it was still kind of disappointing, because the song in question had seemed perfect for what we'd had in mind for the edit. As luck would have it, though, we ended up finding something even better in the end. The unexpected dilemma pushed back our timeline a bit, but Coop was still pretty confident he would be able to have it ready for release before the end of the year.

After finals, Nathan headed back to Pittsburgh, and I returned to Telluride. I spent the first week or so of the winter break catching up with family members and relieving tension with Aaron, who was now a series regular on one of those cheesy but popular teen dramas where twentysomethings were expected to pass as high school freshmen. As soon as the Telluride Ski Resort opened for the season, I returned to the slopes to practice my old tricks while also working on new ones.

Maintaining the previous year's momentum, I won the first two contests—slopestyle events held in Killington, Vermont, and Copper Mountain, Colorado—before making the trip to Innsbruck, Austria, for the first Big Air competition of the season. As always, I was competing against a field of talented riders who were all hungry for their own wins. Some of them even now had versions of the tricks only I had been doing before, although they weren't able to do them as consistently as I could—yet. I knew it would be just a matter of time before I would have to step things up again, which was exciting, not

just for me but also for fans of the sport in general. I treated Innsbruck's Big Air event as my first chance to do that, unveiling a new triple backside 1800 that gave me a comfortable lead over my competitors and secured my third win of the season.

The prospect of a three-peat was looking pretty promising, if you asked practically everyone but me. It had long been my practice to never look further ahead than the next contest. After all, the season had barely begun, and I knew things could change in an instant. But by the time I returned to Denver to continue my tradition of ringing in the new year with Nathan, my face was once again plastered all over the town, my newly released snowboarding edit was racking up hundreds of thousands of views, and the buzz surrounding me was greater than it had ever been before. So, too, was the pressure.

Chapter Thirteen

When I opened my apartment door and saw Nathan standing outside, I knew something was wrong, even before he seized a hug from me.

He clung to me for a good thirty seconds before finally pulling away. The look on his face made me want to grab him and start the process all over again, but I held back, fearing he would crumble if I made the wrong move. Better to just follow his lead right now and let him be in control of at least that much. Just a few short hours earlier, we had been in a movie theater, laughing at the on-screen antics of some stupid actor in some stupid comedy I could no longer be bothered to give a shit about. The man standing in front of me was a world removed from the man who had sat next to me in that theater. He wasn't crying, but I suspected he recently had been.

"Sorry." Even his voice—what little I could hear of it in that one sad word—sounded foreign.

"Nathan, you know you never have to apologize to me." I shut the door and led him to the couch. "What happened?"

"Gram..." He cleared his throat, then swallowed hard and forced out the rest. "Gram died last night."

"Oh, Nathan. I'm so sorry."

"Natural causes, I guess. She seemed fine last time I saw her. Kicked my ass in a game of chess while Mom was cooking Christmas dinner."

"Are you going back home?" I stopped short of saying "for the funeral"—he didn't need to hear that.

"I don't know. I didn't get that far when I was talking to my mom earlier. Actually, I hung up on her, more or less. Told her I'd call her back later, then turned off my phone just as she was trying to ask if I was all right. Thanks for that, by the way."

"For what?"

"Not asking if I'm all right. What a stupid question."

I couldn't argue with that. I hadn't asked because I knew he wasn't. It was the one thing I had known all along. I had never seen him so sad, so defeated, so numb. It was taking all my strength to resist the urge to hand him a bottle of

alcohol and let him drink until his heart stopped aching. It would be as easy as taking a few steps over to the kitchen and opening a cabinet door to let him have his pick of whiskey or vodka, but I knew that was the last thing he needed right now. I would do anything to take away the pain in his eyes—anything but send him headfirst into an oblivion he might never emerge from.

“I honestly don’t know if I even bothered to lock up when I left my apartment.” He frowned and paused for a moment, obviously trying to mentally retrace his steps, before shaking his head and shrugging. “Doesn’t matter. Anyway, I hung up on my mom and just started walking. The next thing I knew, I was knocking on your door. I guess I just didn’t want to be alone tonight.”

“Gabe wasn’t with you when your mom called?”

“What? Oh. No. I haven’t told him yet. He’s probably still at work.”

“Do you want me to call him for you?”

“I don’t really want to talk to anyone else right now. Gabe’s great, but he’s...” His voice trailed off just long enough for me to think he wasn’t going to say anything else. “He’s not you. I couldn’t imagine sharing this with anyone else first. You’re the only thing that’s keeping me from completely losing it at the moment. Even when my body’s moving on autopilot, I always seem to find my way to you.”

I knew exactly how he felt. If I were in his shoes, he’d be the first person I’d turn to for support. But I also knew I wouldn’t want him to make a big fuss about such an admission, so I pretended he hadn’t just tugged at heartstrings I didn’t even know I had.

“I guess I should probably call my mom back.”

I got the impression he would rather have a root canal done without anesthesia. He cleared his throat but didn’t move. Finally, I asked for his phone. I think a full minute must have passed before he finished fishing it out of his pocket. After he handed it to me, I found his parents’ number in his contact list and told him I was turning on the speakerphone. I didn’t want to intrude on such a private moment, but I wasn’t sure he would actually pay attention to anything his mother said during the conversation, and one of us needed to know all the necessary information about the funeral so he could make travel plans.

“Nathan?” Mrs. Pearce asked when she answered the call.

“Yeah, Mom, I’m here. Shane’s with me.”

“Hi, Mrs. Pearce. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, Shane. Knowing that you’re there for Nathan right now means a lot to me.”

“Always,” I assured her—and him, although I guess if I had learned anything in the past half hour, it was that he already knew that.

“Now, we’ve got some Reeds coming up from Florida—that’s Mom’s side of the family, Shane—so we’re going to wait until Friday to do the visitation, and the funeral will be on Saturday.”

There it was—that word I had carefully avoided. It came out of her mouth and charged into my living room like an angry bull, headed straight for the red shirt Nathan was wearing. Absorbing the impact, he closed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and covering his ears with his hands. His mother kept talking, oblivious to the carnage. I could see why he had been reluctant to call her back. She wasn’t being cold, just efficient. She was obviously at a different stage of the grieving process than he was, and he wasn’t prepared for her matter-of-fact way of talking about and dealing with the situation.

I’m not sure how much Nathan heard afterward, but I know he heard this: “You don’t have to worry about coming back home, Nathan. Just stay there and finish your classes. Everyone will understand.”

“No.” Nathan said the word firmly, sounding like himself again, if only for a second. “I want to be there. I have to say...” He looked at me, his eyes practically begging for help. I could tell he didn’t want his mother to fight him on this one.

“I’ll help get the word out to his professors, Mrs. Pearce. I’m sure they’ll understand if he has to miss a class or two.”

“Well... if you think they’ll be okay with it... then all right, Nathan, if you insist. Just book a flight and put it on your credit card. Let us know when you’ll be arriving, and one of us will pick you up at the airport.”

Nathan nodded but didn’t say anything. “We’ll call you back once everything’s finalized, Mrs. Pearce,” I said for him.

“Okay, Shane. Thanks again. Talk to you later.”

“Thanks,” Nathan said after I ended the call. “I have to be there, Shane.”

“I know. You will be.” I started to hand his phone back to him, then stopped myself. “Should I call Gabe now?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I dialed Gabe’s number and handed Nathan the phone. “I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

“No, stay. Please.”

I tried not to listen to the conversation, but it was hard to tune it out from just a few feet away. “Sorry to bother you at work... No, I can’t come over tonight... I have to fly back home for a few days... My grandmother died... I don’t know, probably until Monday or Tuesday... No, I understand... Yeah, I’ll let you know... Anyway, I have to go... Thanks. Bye.” He tossed the phone on the coffee table and took a deep breath as he rubbed his eyes. “Okay, that’s done.”

I reached for my laptop. “Let’s see if I can find us an available flight for tomorrow.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. I’m going with you.”

“I could never ask you to do that.”

“I know. That’s why I’m offering—so you don’t have to ask.”

“No, Shane. You can’t. You’re supposed to compete on Saturday, remember?”

Actually, I had forgotten all about that, but it didn’t matter. “This is more important.”

“You’ve got the three-peat at stake.”

“You think I give a shit about that right now?”

“Your sponsors give a shit. It’s a really big deal.”

“My sponsors know where my priorities lie. They’ll understand.”

“Your fans give a shit. They’ll break out the pitchforks again.”

“My fans should know where my priorities lie, too. And the haters have been complaining for months now that seeing me win all the time is extremely boring, so if I bow out, that will actually make some people happy. That’s a bonus, right?”

“I give a shit, Shane, okay? I don’t want to be the reason you lose out on the three-peat.”

“You won’t be. This is *my* decision. You mean more to me than continuing some silly winning streak that was always going to end, one way or another, eventually.”

“It’s not just about that, though. You’re turning twenty-one this weekend, too. You were going to celebrate by jumping the Mt. Baker road gap after the contest. You’ve been wanting to hit that for longer than I’ve known you.”

Another thing I had forgotten about. Another thing that didn’t matter. “I’m pretty sure the Mt. Baker road gap’s not going anywhere. And I can turn twenty-one in Pittsburgh just as easily as I can in Washington. Hell, I’ll turn twenty-one three hours earlier! Another bonus.”

“I’m serious, Shane.”

“So am I, Nathan. You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

“I’ll only be alone for a few hours on the way to Pittsburgh. I’ll survive.”

“I’m sure you will, but I’m still going to be there for you regardless.”

“I don’t want my loss to cause yours. You don’t deserve that kind of burden.”

“Hey, you’re not a burden to me, okay? Ever. And this really isn’t up for debate, anyway. Unless you tell me our friendship will be over for good if I dare to accompany you to Pittsburgh, I’m going to be there to support you, period.”

I caught the tiniest hint of a smile creeping across his face. There was a spark in his eyes that had been painfully absent all night long. If nothing else, at least I was getting him fired up about something, taking his mind off his sorrow for a few minutes. Better me than a bottle of booze.

“We both know I’d never be able to make good on that threat, so it’s pointless for me to even try. Guess you’ll be meeting the family. My apologies in advance.”

With that settled, I convinced Nathan to let me step outside for a few minutes. I needed to make about a dozen different phone calls, each for the sole purpose of informing someone that I would be accompanying Nathan to Pittsburgh for his grandmother’s funeral. Some of those phone calls might go smoothly, while others might involve opposition, but I didn’t want him to hear any of them.

One by one, I contacted each of my sponsors. As predicted, they all understood, more or less. Some of them probably didn't particularly like the idea of me pulling out of a competition to deal with a death in *someone else's* immediate family, but I was no one's slave. It was ultimately my decision to make, and I think they all knew me well enough to know I had already made up my mind. Besides, most of them had even met Nathan a handful of times, and they were aware that he was more important to me than the three-peat. I had to do this for him. I *wanted* to do this for him. There was absolutely no way I could allow myself to compete in a contest and pretend it actually *mattered* in the grand scheme of things while he was thousands of miles away, saying goodbye to his grandmother.

After getting my sponsors up to speed, I called the event organizer and explained the situation all over again. I think he actually might have been more disappointed than any of my sponsors had been; whether I wanted to admit it or not, the fact of the matter was that my absence would change the dynamic of the contest and could even cause lower-than-projected revenue and attendance totals. I felt bad about that, of course, but it couldn't be helped, and it wasn't like I was pulling out of the competition to spite anyone. I was sure fans would still be treated to a great show regardless.

Next, I contacted Coop and told him we would have to reschedule our trip to Mt. Baker. He completely understood, to the point of refusing to let me reimburse him for the cost of the plane ticket and hotel room he had already purchased. He said he would still make the trip out there as planned, just as a rider instead of a filmer. I was pretty sure he would be staying far away from the Mt. Baker road gap without me around, though. The idea of hitting it had always terrified him.

Finally, I called my parents and let them know what was going on. As soon as I told them Nathan's grandmother had died, they knew I would be bowing out of the upcoming contest, before I even got around to saying the words. They liked Nathan and knew how close we were, so they had no trouble supporting my decision, although I'm sure they would have been just as understanding if it had been any one of my other friends.

When I reentered my apartment, Nathan was still sitting right where I had left him, staring blankly at a television screen that wasn't even on. I didn't bother to turn on a light before making my way into the kitchen, knowing he would probably prefer to remain in the dark for a while longer. I couldn't give that to him in the figurative sense, but I could at least make sure he got his wish in a more literal way.

“I’m glad you’re back.” His voice still sounded raspy and hollow, not at all like the voice of my best friend.

I filled a couple glasses with water and carried them into the living room, placing one on the coffee table in front of him before taking a seat on a chair next to the couch. “Sorry I took so long. I swung by your place and locked it for you while I was gone. Nothing was missing, as far as I could tell.”

“Thanks.”

We sat in silence as I booked our flight online. I thought about paying for his ticket myself, but I didn’t know if that would be appropriate. Just to be safe, I asked for his credit card and made two separate payments. Afterward, I reached for his phone so I could call his mother to let her know when we would be arriving in Pittsburgh. I turned on the speakerphone again, and when Mrs. Pearce answered by saying Nathan’s name, he shook his head at me.

“Sorry, Mrs. Pearce—it’s just me this time. Nathan fell asleep on my couch, and I didn’t want to disturb him. I wasn’t sure you’d answer a call from a number you didn’t recognize, though, so I’m using his phone.” Hopefully that lie sounded more convincing to her than it did to me.

“No problem, Shane. I’m glad Nathan’s getting some rest. He usually isn’t a very good sleeper, even under the best of circumstances. Did he get a flight booked before falling asleep?”

“Yeah. We should be arriving around three tomorrow afternoon and staying until Monday. I hope you don’t mind—I insisted on accompanying him.”

“Of course not, Shane. It will be nice to finally meet you, even if it’s not the way any of us would have chosen for your first visit to happen.”

“Definitely not. Anyway, I’m sure you’re busy, so I’ll let you go, and I guess we’ll see you sometime tomorrow.”

“Okay, Shane. Thanks for calling, and have a good night.”

I tossed Nathan’s phone back on the coffee table. He waited until it stopped spinning before looking at me. “Sorry to put you in that position. I just couldn’t deal with talking to her again right now. Seeing her tomorrow is going to be bad enough. I mean, I love her, but...”

“It’s cool. I get it.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m going to go pack a few things, okay?”

He nodded but didn't say anything. After packing everything I would need for the trip, I returned to my seat in the living room and grabbed my laptop. He remained silent while I composed a statement to let the public know why I would be missing Saturday's contest.

Due to the death of a woman who meant a great deal to my closest friend, I have decided to bow out of this weekend's slopestyle competition at California's Mammoth Mountain. This is the part where I should probably say this was an extremely difficult decision to make, but that would be a lie. This, to me, was a no-brainer. While I love competing, my heart just isn't in it right now. It's with a friend who is grieving, a friend who will be thousands of miles away from Mammoth Mountain on Saturday, saying goodbye to a beloved family member. I need to be with that friend. I am fortunate enough to have supportive sponsors who understand and respect my decision, and I hope the rest of you can do the same.

There are still a few more contests left this season, and you will probably see me at those, but my absence from Saturday's event will, of course, mark the official end of my three-peat chase. It has been fun having that carrot dangling in front of me all winter, but some things are just more important. I wish everyone who will be competing this weekend the best of luck, and I look forward to going head-to-head with each of you again in the near future.

I read over the statement, unsure if it would be wise to release it in its original form. It sounded good to me, but I was concerned about bringing unwanted attention to Nathan, not to mention the rest of his family. I had no way of knowing how people would react if word got out that he was the friend I was referring to. There was a good chance that someone would make the connection eventually—after all, our friendship wasn't a secret, especially in Denver—and if they did, they might blame him for my decision. “*Your fans give a shit. They'll break out the pitchforks again,*” Nathan had warned me earlier. If they did, I could handle it, but I didn't want him to have to do the same.

I started typing again.

Due to the death of someone who meant a great deal to someone who, in turn, means a great deal to me, I have decided

to bow out of this weekend's slopestyle competition at California's Mammoth Mountain. This is the part where I should probably say this was an extremely difficult decision to make, but that would be a lie. This, to me, was a no-brainer. While I love competing, my heart just isn't in it right now. It's with a friend who is grieving, a friend who will be thousands of miles away from Mammoth on Saturday, saying goodbye to a beloved family member. I need to be with that friend.

There are still a few more contests left this season, and you will probably see me at those, but my absence from Saturday's event will, of course, mark the official end of my three-peat chase. It has been fun having that carrot dangling in front of me all winter, but some things are just more important. I wish everyone who will be competing this weekend the best of luck, and I look forward to going head-to-head with each of you again in the near future.

I am fortunate enough to have supportive sponsors who understand and respect my decision, and I hope the rest of you can do the same. I am, however, prepared for any and all blowback that might occur as a result of this decision. That blowback should be directed solely at me. I made this decision on my own, and I ask only that you let me deal with the fallout on my own, as well. My friend already has enough to deal with right now, as does everyone else this sudden loss has affected. Please respect their privacy during this difficult time.

The repetition of the word *decision* in the final paragraph made me cringe, but *choice* just didn't feel right. If anything, bowing out of the competition was a necessity, not a choice. Otherwise, though, the second draft seemed like the safer bet for an official statement about the situation. Now I could be talking about any one of my friends instead of just my closest one, and I was practically begging people to blame me—and only me—for any trouble my decision caused them. Hopefully that would motivate the gamblers to go after me with their pitchforks when they lost money on this weekend's contest, not Nathan. With any luck, no one would ever realize he was the friend in question, period.

I took a screenshot of the typed statement and posted the image on my Twitter account, hoping for the best while prepared for the worst.

Nathan's mother had needed to hear that his professors would be on board with the idea of him missing a few classes due to the circumstances, but I didn't think it was really necessary to let them know what was going on. Attendance had never been tracked in any of my classes. I assumed the same could be said for his, as well. We were only going to be gone for a few days, and we didn't have any tests scheduled in that time frame. We probably wouldn't even be missed. I figured we could just grab lecture notes from classmates and explain ourselves only if asked to do so. Besides, I technically couldn't offer a valid reason for my absences, anyway; it wasn't *my* grandmother who had died.

A quick review of my mental checklist confirmed that I had taken care of everything—or, at least, everything I had thought to take care of, anyway. I started to let Nathan know, but when I looked up from my computer screen, I saw that he was sprawled out on the couch, already asleep. After turning off my laptop, I dragged a pillow and blanket from my bedroom to the living room and curled up in my not-completely-uncomfortable chair, eager to get some rest myself.

The following morning, while I was stretching to relieve some stiffness in my back, Nathan started thrashing around on the couch. After a moment of hesitation, I decided to wake him. He hadn't even packed yet, and it was almost seven already. We didn't have any time to waste.

"Shane?"

"Yeah, it's me, Nathan."

"What are you doing here?" He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then looked around the room, eventually spotting my luggage. "Oh."

I watched his heart break all over again in that one devastating moment of sudden realization.

Fuck it.

I knew there was a reason I had been resisting the urge to give my grieving best friend a hug, but it no longer seemed like a very good reason. Maybe it never had been to begin with. Extending a hand, I waited for Nathan to latch on, then pulled him to his feet and wrapped my arms around him. If he crumbled, so be it. I would be around to help him pick up the pieces.

"Thanks for last night," he muttered, maintaining the embrace. "You were right. I don't want to do this alone."

“It’s okay. You’d do the same for me.”

I felt him nod against my shoulder. A few more seconds passed before he pulled away and locked eyes with me. “Still... not to sound cheesy, but sometimes I honestly don’t know what I would do without you.”

Given the circumstances, I couldn’t really promise he would never have to find out. We both knew things could change in an instant. “Only sometimes?”

One corner of his mouth rose slightly upward, telling me I had said exactly the right thing. It wasn’t even close to being a legitimate, teeth-baring smile, but I’d still take seeing it over seeing him crumble any day.

“You’d get the window seat on the plane, for one thing,” I added.

“Oh, well, in *that* case...”

I chuckled and gave him a playful shove.

“All right, St. Louis. I guess I can sit in an aisle seat if you’re the person I’ll be sitting next to.”

“Better me than a crying toddler, right, Napster?”

“Damn straight.” He checked his watch. “Anyway, guess I’d better go take a shower and figure out what I need to pack.”

“Want me to go with you?”

“Nah, I’ll be okay. Thanks, though.”

Despite the lighthearted moment I had just managed to pull out of him, I knew he wasn’t okay, but I didn’t bother trying to change his mind. I figured he could probably use a bit of space before he officially started the process of returning to his hometown to say goodbye to his grandmother. “Don’t forget your phone.”

He retrieved the device from the coffee table and stuffed it in his pocket. “Meet you back here at nine?”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

Chapter Fourteen

Nathan's parents were waiting for us at the airport when we arrived in Pittsburgh that afternoon. Nathan went to greet them while I stayed behind to collect our luggage from the baggage carousel, wanting to give him at least a few minutes of privacy with them before they felt obligated to start playing host to me. I needed to call my mother and let her know we had landed safely, anyway.

Nathan's small suitcase rolled past just as I was telling my mother goodbye, and my own larger suitcase wasn't far behind. After grabbing both, I rejoined Nathan, easily locating him in the crowd of otherwise unfamiliar faces. A man and woman were flanking him, and while I knew they had to be his parents, I couldn't really see much of him in either of them.

"So, you must be Shane. Nathan's told us a lot about you."

"Good to meet you, Mr. Pearce." I placed my suitcase on the floor so I could shake his hand, then turned to Nathan's mother and gave her a nod. "Mrs. Pearce."

"Jeannie."

"And I'm Robert."

"Formalities are reserved for those of Nathan's friends who *aren't* willing to drop everything at a moment's notice and travel across the country to be there for him when he needs them."

"He'd do the same for me."

"It means a lot to Jeannie and me that you're here, Shane."

"And me," Nathan added.

I wasn't really comfortable receiving praise for doing something that felt like such a no-brainer to me, but I let it slide with another nod. If Nathan's parents needed to thank me, it wouldn't hurt me to let them. Hopefully it would only be a one-time thing.

Robert picked up my suitcase and extended his free hand to take Nathan's from me, stepping right into host mode. "We're parked in short-term parking, so we'd better get going."

I walked alongside Nathan, following his parents out of the airport and to their car. As Robert drove eastbound on I-376, I got my first real glimpse of

Pittsburgh. It was much more scenic than I had expected it to be; in fact, for the first few miles of the journey, the place seemed downright rural, a landscape of rolling hills and bare trees that probably painted a breathtaking picture throughout summer and fall. The countryside views were soon replaced with the standard details of suburban life: shopping plazas, hotels, restaurants, car dealerships, and eventually even residential areas. Still, nothing really screamed “one of the largest cities in the United States!” to me.

Then we approached a modest mountain, situated not to our left or right but directly in front of us, with a tunnel leading straight through it. Big block letters hanging above the entrance gave me a name to associate with the feature: Fort Pitt Tunnel. Nathan had told me a bit about it as we had passed through Eisenhower Tunnel on our way to Breckenridge last year, but I hadn’t realized it was actually located *in* Pittsburgh. A tunnel leading through a mountain in the Rockies wasn’t all that unusual, but a tunnel leading through a mountain in a place I had heard Nathan describe as the Steel City? That, like everything else I had seen of Pittsburgh so far, defied expectation.

While no other mountain tunnel in America could compete with Eisenhower Tunnel in terms of length, Fort Pitt Tunnel seemed to be the mountain-tunnel version of the size-doesn’t-matter argument. It took only a minute to get through the tunnel, but when we emerged, the Pittsburgh I had been expecting to see all along suddenly came into view: bridges, rivers, and a stunning city skyline I imagined would look even better as a cluster of lights in the night sky. Here, it wasn’t about the length of the tunnel, it was about how the tunnel was being used as a way of dramatically transporting visitors right into the heart of Pittsburgh.

“Nice.”

“The only city in America with an entrance, as one reporter once put it,” Nathan replied.

“I was beginning to wonder if we were even in Pittsburgh at all.”

“We were in the western outskirts of Pittsburgh. Now we’re passing Downtown Pittsburgh, obviously.”

Robert veered to the right, exiting the Fort Pitt Bridge. I had a clear view of Downtown Pittsburgh to my left; to my right, on Nathan’s side of the car, a river stretched out ahead of us. After traveling another mile or two, Robert took a second exit. No longer on the interstate, and with land now on both sides of us, we entered another residential area.

“A bunch of this is university property,” Nathan explained. “Carnegie Mellon is just up ahead on my side of the road, and the University of Pittsburgh is just a few blocks left of us.”

Several minutes after passing Carnegie Mellon University, Robert pulled into a driveway and parked the car.

“Welcome to the neighborhood known as Squirrel Hill—or, as we like to call it, home,” Nathan said, stepping out of the car and turning to face me.

I had already deduced that we were in one of the more affluent areas of the city, but most of the houses we had passed had been packed together pretty tightly; in many cases, they were so close to each other that there wasn’t even enough room for an adult to squeeze between them sideways. The Pearce residence, however, was a nice three-story brick house on a piece of land that was relatively spacious in comparison, with a proper yard and plenty of room to breathe on each side. Neighboring houses were close but not close enough to literally reach through a window and touch. Leave it to a real estate agent to find one of the best properties in the area.

Robert tossed his keys to Nathan. “Go ahead and show Shane around. I’ll get the suitcases.”

Unsurprisingly, the interior of the house was just as nice as the exterior. Touring the place wasn’t really a top priority for either of us, though; after spending the last few hours traveling, we had a more pressing concern weighing on our minds. And on other parts of our bodies. Nathan pointed me toward a bathroom on the main floor, then headed upstairs to a second bathroom.

A few minutes later, we reconvened in the kitchen, where Jeannie and Robert were discussing dinner plans.

“What would you two like to eat tonight?” Jeannie asked.

“I don’t really have much of an appetite right now.”

“You have to eat *something*, Nathan.”

“So you’re always reminding me, Mom. Don’t worry, I will. Just... not right now, okay?” Nathan picked up the keys he had tossed on the kitchen table earlier. “I’m going to show Shane around the city a bit. We’ll grab something while we’re out.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t come here to sightsee, Nathan. You don’t have to play host to me.”

“I *want* to. Besides, it’s a nice distraction.”

“Have fun, guys. Nathan, remember to put gas in the car before you come back.”

“Sure, Dad.”

“Shane, please make sure he eats something, will you?”

“He’s not starving on my watch, Jeannie.”

“You really don’t have to do anything special for me this weekend, Nathan.” I went ahead and buckled my seat belt, knowing my objection wasn’t going to change his mind. “You should be with your family right now. I don’t want to intrude on that.”

“Yeah, because spending time with my family is a *great* way for me to regain my appetite.”

“Come on. You get along great with your parents.”

He started the car and backed out of the driveway. “I wasn’t talking about them. It’s the Reeds I’m not looking forward to seeing.”

“Your grandmother’s side of the family?”

“Yeah. I can only take them in small doses. If they try to start in on me with their fucking religious bullshit this weekend, I swear I’ll lose it.”

“So, I’m guessing they’re not exactly flying the PFLAG?”

“They don’t really say anything to me about it anymore—Gram took care of that—but it’s obvious they don’t approve.”

“Your grandmother came around, though?”

“She didn’t have to. She never had a problem with me being gay. It’s probably not a coincidence that she also just happens to be the only person in her family who *isn’t*...”

I knew why he had stopped, even before he corrected himself.

“...*wasn’t* religious. I was never worried either of my grandparents would have a problem with me being gay for religious reasons; it was the generational-gap thing that made me worry about coming out to them. Well, that and the fact that I was their only grandchild. I figured I’d be disappointing them by not giving them great-grandchildren one day. Ironic, huh?”

“What?”

“I never considered the possibility that they’d both be gone before my twenty-first birthday. Even if I were straight, I would have had to start having kids pretty early to meet *that* deadline.”

I wasn’t sure whether to take his ability to make such a grim observation as a good sign or a bad one. It *was* ironic, though. I couldn’t argue with him there.

“Damn, Shane. You’re a popular guy today.”

“What?”

“That’s the third time I’ve heard your phone vibrate since we got in the car.”

“Oh.” I had stopped noticing about twenty vibrations ago.

“You can check your messages if you want, you know.”

“I know. They can wait.”

“How do you know they’re not important?”

“If you were trying to contact me about something important, would you call or send a text message?”

“I’d call. I wouldn’t tell you something important in a text message.”

“Exactly. If my phone rings, I’ll answer it. But right now, people are just blowing up my phone with text messages and tweets about my announcement, and those can wait.”

“What announcement?”

“I sent out a tweet last night to let everyone know I wouldn’t be competing this weekend. You fell asleep before I finished it.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry, I kept your name out of it.”

“I’m not worried. I know you would never mention my name in something like that. What has the response been like?”

“No idea; I haven’t checked yet. That’s the last thing on my mind right now. But I’d imagine it’s a mix of good and bad, with the majority probably leaning slightly toward good.”

“It’s not too late to change your mind, you know.”

“You have a better chance of convincing me to fuck a girl, Nathan. So, where are we headed, anyway?”

“I guess we’ll go get something to eat first. I might not have much of an appetite, but I’m sure you’re starving.”

“I’m getting there, yeah.”

“Craving anything in particular?”

“How about someplace that has some of that famous Pittsburgh ice cream you’re always raving about?”

“Damn. You weren’t kidding when you promised my mom you’d find a way to get me to eat something.”

“Ice cream counts, doesn’t it?”

“It does in my book.”

“So, after we eat, then what?”

“I don’t know. I just want to drive around with you for a few hours and hopefully make it back home after the Reeds have already arrived and gone to bed for the night.”

“Are they going to be staying at your parents’ place?”

“I’m assuming at least some of them will, yeah. We have the room, so I’m sure Mom insisted, knowing her.”

“It’ll be hard to avoid them the whole weekend, then.”

“Easier with you here, though. Everything’s going to be easier with you here, Shane. Seriously... thank you.”

“You don’t have to keep thanking me, Nathan. You’re my best friend. I don’t need thanks for supporting my best friend when he’s going through a tough time. You’d do the same for me.”

“Well, if I can’t thank you, and I can’t try to convince you to change your mind, we’re going to run out of things to talk about pretty soon. Good thing the radio works.”

“When have we ever run out of things to talk about, Napster?”

“There’s a first time for everything, right, St. Louis?”

“Well, maybe not *everything*. And if that’s a prelude to you trying to convince me to fuck a girl...”

“Like I said: good thing the radio works.” Hard rock filled the car before I could respond, courtesy of our favorite SiriusXM channel.

Nathan parked along the curb outside a place called Primanti Brothers, just a few minutes away from his parents’ house.

“You can grab something to eat here. It’s kind of a Pittsburgh staple; they have a bunch of restaurants located throughout the city. They’re known for putting coleslaw and fries on their sandwiches.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Can’t say I’m a fan of the combination myself, but you might like it, though I’ve never known you to eat coleslaw.”

“That’s because I don’t.”

“Well, you can order a sandwich or burger without the signature toppings, if you’d prefer. That’s what I do when I eat here. The food’s pretty good, in any case. And there’s an ice cream parlor nearby that we can go to afterward.”

“Cool.”

I ordered a burger and fries, stressing that I wanted the latter on the side. Nathan refused to order anything but agreed to eat some of my fries, a compromise I chose to think of as a personal victory. Afterward, we walked to Dave and Andy’s, an ice cream parlor located a mere block away from Primanti Brothers. I smelled it before I saw it; the inviting aroma of freshly baked waffle cones wafted down the street, emanating from a small shop with an ice cream cone-shaped sign hanging overhead.

“Last I heard, I think this place had over three hundred different homemade flavors of ice cream in its repertoire. They offer a few staples all the time and rotate through the rest on a regular basis, so it’s basically a different menu every day.”

On this particular day, the ice cream parlor’s five standard flavors—chocolate, vanilla, cookies and cream, chocolate chip cookie dough, and birthday cake—were featured alongside more unique flavors, including cinnamon toast, ginger, burnt honey, rum raisin, sweet cream, and Thai iced tea. Nathan at least still had an appetite for ice cream, and with the white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero flavor unavailable, he chose the Mexican chipotle-chocolate flavor, assuring me it was the next best thing when it came

to spicy-sweet goodness. I was tempted but opted for the oatmeal-raisin-cookie flavor instead. We each ordered two scoops of our chosen flavor in a waffle cone, sampling the other's choice for good measure. Nathan warned that I would find a surprise at the bottom, but he wouldn't elaborate. It turned out to be a single M&M, inserted to prevent the ice cream from dripping. Not that we needed to worry about that much in the middle of February.

As we were finishing our dessert, a woman entered the shop with a young boy. His jaw dropped when he saw me. Before the woman could stop him, he broke free from her grasp and rushed over to our table.

"Hi! I'm Bobby. Are you *the* Shane Larson?"

"That's me. You into snowboarding, Bobby?"

"It's my *favorite*! Can I have your autograph?"

"Bobby!"

"Sorry. *Please*, can I have your autograph?"

"That's not what I meant, young man. I'm sure these guys would like their privacy." The woman looked at me and mouthed an apology.

"But, *Mom*!"

I smiled and gave her a subtle nod, hoping she would get the message. I was happy to accommodate the request but didn't want to do anything to undermine her authority in front of her son. The ball was in her court.

"Well, as long as Mr. Larson is okay with it..."

"Please, call me Shane. And it would be my pleasure to sign something for such a well-mannered young man."

"All right, then."

"Thanks, Mom!"

She mouthed a thank-you as Bobby turned to face me again.

"Bobby, this is my good friend, Nathan." I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out a beanie, emblazoned with the logo of one of my sponsors. It was the only thing I had on me that I could offer the boy.

"Hi, Nathan! Are you a snowboarder, too?"

"No, I leave that to this guy." Nathan patted my shoulder as I fished a permanent marker out of my pants pocket.

“He’s the *best*!”

“I think so, too, Bobby.”

The black ink showed up nicely on the beige fabric. After applying my signature, I handed the beanie to Bobby. “There you go, Bobby.”

“*Cool*! Thanks!”

“No problem.” Behind him, his mother waved her cell phone at me, a silent question I was quite familiar with. Nodding, I knelt beside Bobby. “How about we let your mom take a picture of us, too?”

“Yeah!”

I pulled Bobby a bit closer and turned him toward his mother, who snapped a couple quick photographs before lowering the device. “Okay, Bobby, let’s get your ice cream cone, and let Shane and Nathan get back to their evening. What do you say to them?”

“Thanks, Shane! Thanks, Nathan!”

“Anytime, buddy.” I rose to my feet as Bobby rushed back to his mother’s side.

“See you later, little man.” Nathan stood and joined me after pushing his chair back under the table.

Our interaction with Bobby had, of course, attracted the attention of the others in the ice cream parlor, three of whom asked for an autograph and a picture of their own. Nathan waited patiently while I accommodated the requests. The rest of the patrons, as well as the two people working behind the counter, refrained from asking, either because they weren’t interested or because they were embarrassed that they hadn’t recognized me themselves before Bobby had entered the shop.

The sun had already set by the time we got back to the car. I buckled my seat belt as Nathan pulled away from the curb. “Thanks for bringing me here. The food was delicious, and the ice cream was even better.”

“No problem. I’m glad you liked it. I wish I could also take you to this other place called the Windmill; they don’t have any particularly unique flavors of ice cream there, but they *do* have a miniature golf course. It’s especially cool around Halloween, because they do a haunted-golf-course theme to celebrate the holiday. Creepy decorations, live actors, strobe lights, glow-in-the-dark golf balls—the works. I bet your parents would love it. But it’s not open year-round like Dave and Andy’s is.”

“Eh, probably for the best. Wouldn’t want to make my parents jealous.”

“Speaking of which, Bobby’s probably going to make some of his classmates pretty jealous when he shows off that beanie you signed for him.”

“I love seeing kids get that excited about snowboarding. Reminds me of myself when I was that age.”

“You *still* get that excited—”

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I probably shouldn’t have agreed to take all those pictures. If one of them somehow ends up online—if someone posts one in a thank-you tweet or something—someone could recognize the location and figure out where I’m spending the weekend.”

“So?”

“So, that could lead to someone figuring out you’re the friend I was talking about in my announcement about pulling out of the contest.”

“Again... so?”

“So, I was trying to respect your privacy—respect your family’s privacy—but I might have just fucked it all up.”

“How? You kept my name out of your announcement. If—*if*—word gets out that I’m who you were talking about, it won’t be your fault. I’m the one who wanted to go out in public tonight, remember? You get recognized when you’re out in public; you can’t help it, and I wouldn’t want you to start saying no to requests for autographs or pictures just for my sake. I know you hate saying no to fans.”

“Still, I’d never forgive myself if—”

“Shane, don’t. Look, I know what you’re worried about, but if people realize I’m the reason you decided to pull out of the contest, so be it. You can’t control how other people react, and you certainly can’t blame yourself for it. Besides, someone could have already snapped a picture of us together on the flight here, for all we know. Or someone could tweet about seeing you in Pittsburgh, even without a picture to offer as proof. It’s impossible for you to *guarantee* my privacy, and I would never ask that of you. You did the best you could. What happens next is out of your hands.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come, after all.”

“Oh, you definitely shouldn’t have come—for your own sake, not mine. I mean, you *did* give up your chance at the three-peat for this. But, selfishly, I’m really glad you came. I just hope...”

I waited for him to continue, but he remained silent as he slowed to a stop at an intersection. “What?”

“I just hope you don’t end up regretting your decision later. Or worse—resenting me for being the reason you had to make such a decision in the first place.”

“Look at me, Nathan.” I waited for him to comply before continuing. “That’s *never* going to happen, okay? *Never*. Like I told you before, this was *my* decision, and I would never hold it against you.”

He held my gaze for a couple seconds before turning his attention back to the road, waiting to respond until after we started moving again. “Okay.”

“‘Okay’? Just like that?”

“Yeah. Just like that.”

“Wow. That was surprisingly easy.”

“Well, as someone once pointed out to me, people generally don’t make a point of looking someone straight in the eyes just to lie to them.”

“Maybe I just like looking at your eyes.”

“Nah. You’re the one with the captivating eyes, St. Louis, not me. Besides, you don’t have to look me in the eyes for me to know I can trust you. I’ve known that all along.”

Without waiting for a response, Nathan turned on the radio and started tapping his fingers against the steering wheel, drumming along to the beat of a Shinedown song.

Headlights illuminated the yellow frame of the bridge we were crossing, one of many I had observed during our drive through the city. “What’s with the yellow bridges?”

Nathan chuckled. “Technically, they’re supposed to be gold, but it’s kind of hard to tell the difference. The city’s colors are gold and black, and Downtown

is sometimes referred to as the Golden Triangle because of how it's shaped between the three rivers that meet here."

"Ah. I just figured it had something to do with the Steelers."

"Well, there's that, too."

More bridges were visible on either side of us, part of a lit-up nighttime cityscape that looked even better than I had imagined it would. "So, just how many bridges are in Pittsburgh, anyway?"

"Over four hundred at last count. They don't call it the City of Bridges for nothing."

"I wonder how many of them we've seen and crossed tonight."

"A lot, but probably not as many as you'd think. We've crossed a few bridges more than once; I've been driving us around pretty aimlessly. Hope I'm not boring you too much."

"Are you kidding? I'd take an aimless car ride with you any night." If it was possible to become bored in Nathan's presence, I hadn't figured out how yet. The very idea seemed as absurd to me as the idea of snowboarding suddenly becoming boring.

"Cool. I didn't really know what else to do to kill time tonight. We'll do some proper sightseeing tomorrow, when we can get an earlier start."

"The visitation's tomorrow, though."

"Yeah, I don't do visitations. I didn't go to my grandfather's visitation, and I'm not going to my grandmother's visitation, either. I'll go to..."

He idly messed with the volume controls for a few seconds, increasing then decreasing the volume before finally returning it to its original setting. I wanted to tell him he didn't have to finish the sentence, but I figured he needed to, for his own sake. He was testing the waters, slowly getting accustomed to saying painful things he had never expected to be saying this early in his life.

"I'll go to the funeral on Saturday, but visitations make no sense to me. That's not exactly the last image I want to have of a loved one. I'd rather remember Gram as the woman who laughed while kicking my ass in a game of chess during Christmas break."

"Okay, then. I look forward to seeing more of Pittsburgh with you tomorrow."

“Thanks. Hopefully you’ll enjoy what I have planned.”

“I’m sure I will. We always have fun together.”

We sat in silence at a stoplight. When it turned green, he took a right. It was kind of impressive, the way he knew the city; the Pittsburgh roadway system seemed a bit confusing to me, but he always acted like he knew exactly where we were.

“Have you ever been to a visitation?”

He asked the question just as I was beginning to think he had dropped the subject for good. “For friends of the family. Never for anyone I was actually close to.” I felt a twinge of guilt; Nathan had already lost at least two people he had been close to, and we were the same age. Morbidly, I realized I had some catching up to do. “I’m like you—I don’t really see the point.”

“Maybe people just do it for the sake of tradition. Or maybe it’s different for people who are religious. I’m sure the Reeds will all want to be there. For closure or whatever. I don’t know. I just don’t see how viewing... I just don’t see how *that* offers closure.”

“How did you find closure after your grandfather died?”

“I’ll let you know when I do. But I’m pretty sure it’s a myth.” He made another right-hand turn, bringing a gas station into view just ahead of us. “It’s almost midnight; guess we can go ahead and get some gas and head back home. Any Reeds we have staying at the house are probably asleep by now. They have a busy day ahead of themselves tomorrow.”

It was just after midnight when we got back to his parents’ house. His mother was still awake, watching television in the living room.

“Did you enjoy your tour of the city, Shane?”

“Yeah. I can see why Nathan likes it so much.”

“I took him to Primanti Brothers. He passed on the extra toppings.”

She smiled at me. “No wonder you and Nathan get along so well. Robert could never get him to try it, either.”

“It looks disgusting. I don’t know how he and practically everyone else in this city manages to eat it all the time.”

“Yes, well, no one ever said Pittsburgh doesn’t have its quirks.”

“Heh. I wanted to show Shane one of the Pittsburgh parking chairs, but there wasn’t enough snow on the ground for people to have those out.”

“No, we haven’t had much snow since the beginning of February. An inch or two here and there, but that’s about it. We got a bit yesterday, and a bit more before you arrived today, but it didn’t really amount to anything.”

“Are all the Reeds here yet?”

“Yeah, they’re all upstairs—sleeping, I assume. They were pretty exhausted after driving all day. I tried to tell them they should have just flown here instead, but they wanted to save money, I guess. Dave said he was already going to be losing enough money this weekend as it was.”

“Too bad Gram couldn’t have died at a more convenient time for him.”

“Mm-hmm. Well, anyway... I take it you’re not going to the visitation tomorrow?”

“No, I’m just going to do some stuff around the city with Shane. You won’t need both cars tomorrow for any reason, right?”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine with one. I left some extra pillows and blankets downstairs for you.”

“Thanks. See you in the morning, I guess, unless you’re already gone before we wake up.”

“Will you want some breakfast?”

“Nah, we’ll just get something while we’re out.”

“Okay, then. Have a good night, you two.”

I gave Jeannie a nod before following Nathan to his bedroom, located in the basement. Robert had left our luggage sitting at the base of the stairs.

The room was open and spacious, spanning the entire length of the house. A circular floor-to-ceiling wall partition protruded from the corner of the room farthest from the staircase; a sink and mirror were visible through the open doorway, making it obvious that a bathroom was hidden within. A king-size bed, nightstand, and floor lamp were centered in the middle of one wall. On the other side of the room, a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table were arranged around a large, wall-mounted flat-screen television. A pool table stood behind the couch, with hinged panels that allowed it to be converted into a flat surface for dining or, as was probably more often the case with Nathan, drawing

purposes. A couple stools were tucked underneath. At first glance, it looked like the perfect man cave.

And then there were the walls.

Elaborate murals adorned every inch of every wall. The Pittsburgh skyline stretched across one, as seen at nighttime, with a silhouette of two guys kissing on a bridge in front of it. A black Corvette convertible appeared to be driving straight through another. Sheet music and lyrics from two of Nathan's favorite songs, Incubus's "Drive" and Linkin Park's "Somewhere I Belong," had been replicated alongside a guitar. Sprinters raced toward a finish line as a crowd cheered behind them. A roll of film led straight to the television, with a different movie poster recreated in each of the ten visible frames. A gargoyle gecko was perched atop a soccer ball. A young man was captured midstride, exiting a closet. Clothes could be seen hanging on a rack behind him. An equality symbol added character to the open door his hand was resting on, along with a date: 10-11-2008, which I recognized as National Coming Out Day as well as the day Nathan had told his parents he was gay. Elsewhere, a snowboarder soared above a mountaintop, doing a stylish method. On the circular partition, the silhouette of a man could be seen in a shower, his head bowed under the stream of water as he braced himself against the shower wall. Stars dotted the blackish-blue ceiling, realistically recreating familiar constellations. Even the wooden panels between the stairs were covered with artwork, creating the illusion that books were shelved under each stair.

"Wow. Nathan, this is incredible."

"What? Oh. Thanks." He blushed as he turned away from me. "The snowboarder's a relatively new addition. I think you can guess who inspired that one."

I wondered if he had said that specifically so he wouldn't be the only one blushing. "Is there anything you *can't* draw?"

"Hands are always a bitch."

Pool balls were visible on the open panels of the pool table. Flipping them up, I discovered that the tops had been painted to look exactly like the pool table housed underneath, right down to the balls that were racked and waiting for the break shot. Some sort of clear, protective finish had been applied to both sides to preserve the paintings. A drawer, built into the table itself, provided storage for accessories such as chalk, cue sticks, and racks. "You made this?"

“Yeah. Doing homework on a felt tabletop wasn’t exactly ideal, so I made some modifications.”

I rubbed my hand over the glossy surface. “Epoxy resin?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“It’s used to repair gashes in snowboards.”

“Like you need to waste time doing that. I’ve seen how many spare snowboards you have lying around.”

“True, but I didn’t always have sponsors throwing boards at me. I know what the stuff looks like.”

Nathan’s personal artistic touch was on practically everything in the room. Even the things that hadn’t been painted were custom-designed pieces. A forest of barren trees had been seared onto the large wooden headboard. Perched high on a tripod, an old camera served as the outer shell of the floor lamp. In the heavy wooden base of the coffee table, LED lights illuminated the remains of shattered CDs and torn album covers and liner notes, all arranged beneath a circular glass top to form the image of an iPod. I couldn’t resist taking a closer look at it.

“How many CDs did it take to make this?”

“Fifty.”

“I love how you chose to use them to depict the transition to digital media.”

“Thanks. Not everyone gets that.”

I could have gotten lost in Nathan’s artwork for hours. Sitting on the floor below the television, a small entertainment center held an Xbox and a PlayStation, looking more badass than anything made entirely out of DVD and video game cases had a right to. At the foot of the bed, a wooden storage chest doubled as a bench, with a checkered leather top in shades of black and brown. Deep, jagged decorative notches had been carved in the three visible sides, and each contained a different word, written using pieces from popular board games—chess, Monopoly, Clue, and Risk, among others—that were held in place with epoxy resin that completely filled in the gaps. On the left and right sides, words like *lies*, *manipulation*, and *flirtation* were visible, and three separate crevices on the front side contained the words that, when combined, tied everything together: *games*, *people*, and *play*.

“Damn. That looks more like something *I* would have made during my post-breakup-with-Marco phase. If I were actually artistic, I mean. When were *you* ever that cynical?”

“I guess I wasn’t, really; I just wanted to make something using game pieces, and that’s what I came up with.”

“Well, it looks awesome, of course, but you know you could have just used Scrabble tiles, right?”

“Too easy, St. Louis. Too easy.”

Grinning, I stepped over to the nightstand. The black metal top, shaped like a bullet, contained hundreds of empty shell casings in its hollow center, all visible under a piece of glass that had been cut to fit perfectly inside the frame. Gold casings surrounded silver ones, with the contrast between the two creating the phrase *words are weapons*. The base was hidden inside a bulletproof vest that had a triangle of three bullet holes embedded in it, right where the wearer’s heart would have been. Printed derogatory words were barely visible inside each hole: *retard*, *loser*, *bitch*, *nigger*, *bastard*, *slut*, *fat*, *ugly*, and, yes, even *faggot*. I hoped no one would ever call Nathan that, especially not in my presence; just thinking about it was causing me to clench my fists.

“I’m almost afraid to ask how many shell casings are in this.”

“A little over a thousand.”

“Damn. Where did you get them?”

“From a local shooting range.”

“And the vest?”

“Surprisingly affordable online, actually.”

“Good to know. Legal?”

“Perfectly.”

An alarm clock was sitting at the back of the nightstand, next to a framed photograph of a man and woman holding a baby. I couldn’t make the couple look like Robert and Jeannie.

“Your grandparents?”

“My paternal grandparents, yeah. They died before my first birthday. Drunk driver. This is the only picture I have of us together; the only one I’ll ever have.”

Turning away from the nightstand, I made eye contact with him, suddenly feeling guilty—and yet also incredibly fortunate—for still having all four of my grandparents. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s in the past.”

“Doesn’t make it hurt any less. How did I not know that about you, after all this time?”

“It never came up, I guess.”

“Any pictures around here of your other grandparents?”

Nathan nodded toward the nightstand. “There’s a shelf hidden inside the vest. I have a photo album tucked in there.”

Peering through the arm hole on the right side of the vest, I spotted the wooden surface of the shelf. “Do you mind?”

“Nothing is off-limits to you, Shane.”

I reached for the photo album. “This nightstand is really cool, by the way. Everything in here is.”

“Thanks. That was Pap’s favorite piece. Gram’s was the storage bench; she always loved board games.”

Nathan stepped into the bathroom while I flipped through the pages of pictures, each presenting a new reason to admire his skills as a photographer. I had known for a while now that Coop wasn’t the only guy in my circle of friends who could expertly operate a camera, but never before had I gotten to see so much evidence of Nathan’s talents all at once. He had an innate, natural ability that couldn’t be taught; it was like he instinctively, effortlessly knew *the* way every single photograph *should* be taken. His attention to detail, his use of light and shadows, the way he framed an image, a bunch of other technical details I didn’t really know much about but could nevertheless just *tell* were present—all of that was in every candid shot of a loved one, every panoramic view of breathtaking scenery, every haunting glimpse of nature’s wrath, every picture of a Pittsburgh landmark that almost made me feel like I was seeing it in person. And I was viewing it all in the middle of a room filled with incredible things he had crafted with his own hands and a healthy combination of imagination and creativity. There was no doubt about it—my best friend was a gifted artist, in more ways than one.

And I wanted to tell him all that and more, but I knew it would make him uncomfortable, just like it made me uncomfortable to hear people gush about

my snowboarding and skateboarding talents. A compliment here and there was one thing—and, frankly, bad enough on its own—but a lengthy monologue about how great a person was? That was another matter entirely. I had never managed to figure out how I was supposed to respond to such over-the-top praise, and I doubted Nathan had been any more successful in determining the answer.

So, when he emerged from the bathroom, I just said, “Nice photos.”

And he just said, “Thanks,” because it’s easy to know how to respond to *that*.

I turned back to a page I had stuck a thumb under. “So, these are your other grandparents?”

“Yeah. I took that when we all went to Kennywood one year. It’s an amusement park near here.”

“They look happy. I wish I had gotten an opportunity to meet them.”

“So do I. They would have liked you, I’m sure. Actually, I told Gram about you when I came home for winter break freshman year. She wanted to see what your eyes looked like, so I showed her a picture of you I had on myphone. She said your eyes were magical. I told her that was an understatement.” Flopping down on the couch, he started going through the stack of blankets and pillows his mother had left for us. “I’ll take the couch; you can have the bed.”

I looked at the bed, then at the couch, which definitely wasn’t long enough to comfortably fit Nathan’s entire body. “The bed’s big enough for both of us. And it’s probably a hell of a lot more comfortable to sleep on than that couch.”

“No, it’s cool. I’ve fallen asleep on it before, and it’s really not as bad as it looks.”

“Maybe not, but I’m sure the bed’s still better. And it wouldn’t be the first time we’ve slept in the same bed together, so what’s the purpose of staying on opposite sides of the room? It’s not like I’m some straight dude who’s worried the gay guy’s going to make a move in the middle of the night or anything.”

“Well, if you’re sure...”

“Positive. Now, do you have any board games down here? We might as well do something to pass the time until we fall asleep.”

He walked over to the side of the staircase and pressed against the bottom of the wall panel covering the space underneath, revealing a door he swung open.

While inspecting the room earlier, I had vaguely noticed the distinct lack of storage, but I never would have guessed that it was all hidden behind that wall, with the faint seams expertly blended into his rendering of a guitar and sheet music. Three shelves came into view. As he knelt to reach for something on the bottom shelf, I scrutinized the remainder of the wall. It looked like it consisted of at least two more false panels, one of which stretched from the floor all the way up to the bottom of the uppermost stair, but I could only tell that because, like a magician, he had let me in on the secret behind the illusion.

“Did you make that, too?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want a lot of furniture in here—at least not against the walls—because I wanted to cover the room with murals. And there was all this empty space under the stairs, of course, so I just put shelves and a closet in there and built a false wall to cover it all. That gave me plenty of storage space *and* an additional wall to cover with artwork, so it was a win-win.”

“Genius.” Okay, so I couldn’t *always* resist gushing.

I caught the hint of a smile as Nathan shook his head and turned his attention back to the shelf that had swallowed his right arm. With his free hand, he fished his phone out of his pocket, turned on the camera flash, and pointed the light into the abyss. “How about Scrabble?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Nathan pulled the game box out and shut the door. After carrying it over to the bed, he turned off the flash and opened his phone’s notepad app so he could keep score.

“I’m going to go brush my teeth while you’re setting everything up.”

Nathan nodded as I placed the photo album back on the nightstand shelf and walked over to the staircase to grab my suitcase. Pulling a small travel bag out of it, I retreated to the bathroom and shut the door. Nathan had, of course, painted the bathroom as well; proving he had a sense of humor, this mural was an homage to everyone’s favorite cautionary bathroom flick, *Psycho*, complete with a silhouette of a guy holding a knife, hovering just outside the glass door of the shower—which, of course, was situated exactly where the mural on the other side of the wall had suggested it would be.

After taking a piss and brushing my teeth, I joined Nathan on the bed. He drew a C out of the bag, then handed it to me. I selected an F. “Looks like you’re going first.”

He yawned as he reached into the bag again and began pulling out tiles. We probably wouldn't make it through an entire game before falling asleep. After removing my shoes, I stretched out on the bed and propped myself up on my elbows. "Hey, Nathan?"

"Yeah?"

"What the fuck is a Pittsburgh parking chair?"

Laughing, he reached for another tile. "Around here, as you probably noticed earlier, a lot of people in residential areas don't have the luxury of a driveway or a garage; they have to park right on the side of the street, along the curb. When there's snow on the ground and they have to give up their parking space to go to work or whatever, they'll often leave some sort of furniture behind—like a cheap folding chair, for instance—to save their spot."

"And that actually works?"

"Usually, yeah. I mean, *technically*, it's public property, and no one can claim it as their own. But the cops generally allow it. The idea is that someone took the time to clear the snow out of that space so the city wouldn't have to, and, in doing so, they earned themselves the right to keep that space for their own personal use."

"But they had to clear the space to get their car out anyway, so they weren't exactly doing it just as a favor to the city."

"Maybe not, but that's just the accepted practice around here. So much so that some stores actually sell 'official' parking chairs as novelty items."

"I guess that's great for the people reserving those spots, but what's stopping everyone else from just moving the chairs?"

"Fear of retaliation, basically. If you steal someone's spot, you might just return to your car to find that it's been keyed, or a taillight has been busted out, or it's been buried under a pile of snow. Even if you can get in and out before the person who claimed the spot returns home, a neighbor might mess with you on their behalf. It's kind of like an honor system."

"Except for the vandalism part."

"Right. Except for that."

"And the police are okay with *that*, too? Isn't that essentially vigilante justice?"

“Sure, but who are they going to arrest? It’s not like anyone’s going to key their name and address into a car to let everyone know who to blame.”

“You Pittsburghers sure take your parking spaces seriously.”

Grinning, he gestured toward the board. “Your move, St. Louis.”

Suddenly remembering we were supposed to be playing a game, I looked down to see what he had spelled out.

The word on the board was *gram*.

Chapter Fifteen

When I woke up the following morning, the first thing I saw was the Scrabble board—not surprising, since I had fallen asleep right in front of it. At the foot of the bed, Nathan was stretched out horizontally, lying on his side. He, too, was facing the board. We had only covered about half of it.

I went to take a piss, moving as quietly as I could but knowing it was probably pointless to bother trying not to wake Nathan. Sure enough, when I left the bathroom a couple minutes later, he was awake. Even in his own bed—which I could now confirm was pretty damn comfortable—he was the lightest sleeper I had ever known.

“What time is it?”

I glanced at the clock on his nightstand, which I was blocking from his view. “Just after ten.”

“So much for getting up early.”

“It’s not even noon yet. For us, this *is* early.”

“True. Well, at least everyone’s probably already gone for the day. And we still have plenty of time to do some sightseeing.”

“Sounds good.”

“You can go ahead and shower down here. I’ll use one of the other bathrooms. If you get done before I do, just make yourself at home.” He stood and stretched. “Oh—towels are behind the mirror.”

After grabbing some clothes, Nathan dashed up the stairs and disappeared behind the door. I selected a few things from my suitcase and returned to the bathroom. The framed mirror, hung flush against the wall, swung out to reveal four deep shelves. All the essentials fit neatly inside the compartment. On the top two shelves, a number of hand towels and bath towels were available for selection, each thick and brightly colored. A can of shaving cream, a battery-operated razor, and some replacement cartridges were sitting on the third shelf, along with a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, and a bottle of mouthwash. On the final shelf, common over-the-counter medications were within reach for fighting headaches, muscle cramps, allergies, and other ailments.

I grabbed a dark-blue bath towel and pushed the mirror back against the wall. Body wash—the kind that doubled as shampoo and smelled like

cologne—was sitting on a shelf built into the shower wall. I applied some to my body, then used a bit more on my hair and face. After rinsing away the lather and drying off, I brushed my teeth, sprayed some deodorant under my arms, and got dressed. Checking my hair and beard in the mirror, I decided to plug in my beard trimmer, knowing I would need it the following day. Then I stepped out of the bathroom. Nathan was sitting on the couch, tying his shoes.

“Find everything okay?”

“Yeah. Hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“Nah. Just finished myself. Ready?”

“As soon as I put my shoes on, yeah. Where are we headed?”

“You’ll see, St. Louis. You’ll see.”

We ate at a place called Pamela’s Diner. Nathan described it as another Pittsburgh staple; apparently, it was widely considered to be one of the best places in the city to go to for breakfast. I was amused to see they had a menu option called “The ‘Morning After’ Breakfast Special,” but it sounded like it would be too much food for me, so I just ordered an omelet and toast instead. Nathan legitimately joined me this time, ordering an egg-and-cheese sandwich with a side of bacon. I was glad to see his appetite had returned, but I expected it to go away again tomorrow.

Afterward, Nathan took me to Phipp’s Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, a huge tropical greenhouse located in Schenley Park, just a few miles away from his parents’ house. As he explained, it was the second-largest park in Pittsburgh, consisting of more than four hundred acres of land to explore. Going at a leisurely pace, it took us over two hours to tour the entire conservatory. We spent at least as much time hiking one of the trails that led through the park. The conservatory had been pretty crowded, but with temperatures hovering in the low- to mid-thirties and a slight breeze that made it feel like an even chillier day, we didn’t have many people to contend with in the outdoor section of the park.

Around five, we went to a pizzeria called Piccolo Forno, which featured delicious pizzas cooked in a wood-fired oven. Then Nathan took me to the Andy Warhol Museum, a seven-floor archive of the Pittsburgh native’s work. The place was open late on Fridays, during which it offered more of an art-house vibe from five in the evening to ten at night, complete with a cash bar I

was just a couple days too early to enjoy. It was because of this special weekly event, officially known as the Good Fridays program, that we got to add another concert to our YotC 2.0 list. A live band was part of the entertainment the museum had lined up for the night, and, while we had never heard of them before, they were actually pretty good. After touring the museum and watching the thirty-minute film about Warhol's life that played on a never-ending loop in the on-site theater, we spent the rest of the evening enjoying the music and mingling with our fellow attendees. Some of them recognized me but were nice enough to wait until after the concert to ask for autographs and pictures.

When the place closed, we started riding around the city again.

"You up for doing one more thing before we head back to the house?"

"Of course."

"Cool. I'd like to kill a bit more time, and there's something else I want to show you, anyway."

Nathan drove us north, away from Downtown. After thirty minutes or so, we ended up at a stop sign on a remote two-lane, downward-sloping road. At night, with trees surrounding us and no other vehicles in sight, the place had a satisfyingly creepy atmosphere to it.

Nathan parked the car and turned off the radio. "Ever heard of a gravity hill before?"

"No. What is it?"

"Just watch." He put the car in neutral, and we actually started rolling *back up* the hill.

"Heh. What the fuck?"

"Neat, huh?"

"My parents would love this, especially around Halloween. But seriously, what the fuck?"

Nathan put his foot on the brake. We were now a good distance away from the stop sign. "There are a bunch of theories floating around to explain it—urban legends, really. The most popular one basically claims that a school bus broke down here years ago, just past the stop sign, and when the kids got out and tried to help push it back so it would be safe from oncoming traffic, it rolled forward again, running over and killing all of them."

"Gruesome."

“Yeah. Sometimes people even name the kids when telling the story, just for added effect.”

“What about the bus driver? Shouldn’t he or she get a name, too? For the sake of authenticity, I mean.”

“Ghost kids are creepier than ghost bus drivers, St. Louis.”

“Tell that to the person being haunted by the bus driver.”

“Fair point.”

“So, tell me the names of these ghosts.”

“Seriously?”

“Sure, why not? I need to be prepared in case some of them join us in the car. It’s easier to bargain with ghosts when you know their names.” *And it will keep you distracted for a while longer.*

Nathan chuckled. “I don’t know. Timmy? Sammy? Sally? Susie?”

“And the bus driver?”

Shrugging, he said, “Ellie?”

“I’m sensing a pattern here.”

“Yeah, well, I never said the storyteller was imaginative.”

“You didn’t have to. I know he is.”

Nathan cleared his throat. “Okay, so anyway, the ghosts of those kids—and I guess the bus driver, too—supposedly still linger here, pushing vehicles back up the hill every chance they get. The legend says that if you sprinkle baby powder on your bumper before putting your car in neutral, you can actually see tiny handprints on it when you get out to check it after being pushed back up the hill.”

“Maybe the bus driver’s hands were shattered in the accident, and that’s why she doesn’t help the kids push the cars.”

“And you say *I’m* imaginative.”

“Or maybe she’s just easily distracted. I knew someone named Ellie in high school, and she was like that. Couldn’t focus on one subject even if her life depended on it.”

“You do see the irony in what you’re saying, right?” Shaking his head, Nathan quickly added, “Never mind; of course you do. So what happened to her?”

“Well, she didn’t get hit by a bus, if that’s what you’re asking. I think she’s off at some college in Florida.”

“Nice.”

“Not really. There’s a distinct lack of snow and mountains in Florida.”

“True. You wouldn’t last a week there. And neither would I, since the Reeds live there.”

“Exactly. So, that urban legend—it’s a fun story to tell to freak people out, but you and I don’t believe in ghosts, so what’s the real reason cars roll uphill here?”

“It’s an optical illusion, basically. We’re not really going downhill on this road; we’re going uphill. It just seems like we’re going downhill because it’s a very slight incline, and the landscape around us suggests we’re going downhill, so that’s what we perceive. Because we’re actually going uphill, when the car is placed in neutral, we begin rolling back downhill again.”

“See, that makes much more sense.”

“To us, maybe. To the Reeds, it’s proof of life after death.” Nathan put the car back in drive and eased back down—up—to the stop sign as headlights appeared behind us. “Anyway, there are a few other gravity hills around the world, but as far as I know, there aren’t any in Colorado, so I figured you might enjoy seeing this one while you’re here.”

“You were right.” I had a feeling that wasn’t the only reason Nathan had taken me to a supposedly haunted place on the eve of his grandmother’s funeral. I knew he wouldn’t tell me something unless he believed it was true, though. It was probably the only reason he was consciously aware of, and I couldn’t think of a single good reason to make him question whether there was more to it than that. “Thanks. It’s been a fun day.”

“Yeah, it has. Tomorrow, on the other hand...”

He didn’t bother to finish the sentence. Turning the radio back on seemed like a much more pressing matter to attend to.

We got back to Nathan’s parents’ house about half an hour later than we had the previous night, but, once again, his mother was still awake, reading an Agatha Christie novel in the living room.

“Gram’s favorite.”

She looked up and stuck a thumb between the pages of the book. “Yes, well, I couldn’t find anything to watch, and the book was just sitting on the coffee table. I’ve probably already read it at least half a dozen times.”

“And she probably read it at least twice as many as that.”

“Probably. Well, anyway... What did you two get into today?”

“I took Shane to Phipp’s and the Warhol museum. And we hiked through Schenley for a while.”

“In this weather? Well, then again, I guess you’re probably used to it, aren’t you, Shane?”

“Yeah. I’ve always preferred cold weather.”

“Can’t say I care for it myself, but I’ve learned to tolerate it after living here for so long.”

“What time are we leaving tomorrow?”

“The funeral’s at eleven, so we’re leaving for the cemetery at ten thirty.”

“Okay. Is it going to be like Pap’s was?”

“Yes, that’s what your grandmother wanted.”

“Good. Guess the Reeds probably aren’t too happy about that.”

“Well, it is what it is.”

“It’s okay, Mom—you can say it: tough shit for them.”

“Not exactly where I was going, Nathan, but I suppose that will suffice.”

“Guess we’ll see you in the morning, then.”

“Okay. Good night, you two.”

Jeannie returned to her book as I followed Nathan to his bedroom. He flopped down on the couch, and I claimed the chair closest to him.

“So, just to clarify...” Kicking off his shoes, he leaned back and rested the heels of his feet on the coffee table. I must have shown some sort of reaction to his cavalier treatment of the piece of art. “Oh, don’t worry, St. Louis. I designed it to be fully functional. It’s been through worse than having a couple pairs of feet propped up on it.”

Tentatively, I followed his lead. “Now I want to know what else this thing has been through, Napster.”

“Let’s just say I wouldn’t recommend shining a black light on it.” He grinned and gave me a wink. “Anyway, just to clarify, Pap requested a nonreligious funeral, and Gram did the same. That’s what Mom and I were talking about earlier.”

“Oh, okay. So, how does that work, exactly? I mean, I get the general idea, obviously, but...”

“Basically, no church, no pastor, no prayers, no scriptures, no ‘Amazing Grace’; just a quick, simple graveside service to celebrate her life. Then she’ll be buried next to Pap. They would have been fine with cremation, to be honest, but Pap inherited some burial plots from his parents, so he figured they might as well use them.”

“Sounds pretty close to what I’d want, except I’d prefer cremation. Just spread my ashes in the backcountry at Breck and—”

“Okay, time to change the subject.”

“Shit. Sorry, Nathan—I didn’t mean to—”

“No, it’s okay, Shane. No need to apologize. I’m the one who brought it up. But thinking about my grandmother’s funeral is bad enough; I really can’t bear to think about *yours* right now, too.”

I could relate; I didn’t even want to think about thinking about Nathan’s funeral. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I plan to stick around for a while.”

“Good. I’m going to hold you to that.”

Someone knocked on Nathan’s door before I could think of something else to say.

“You can come in, Mom.” Lowering his voice back down to its normal tone, Nathan added, “She always knocks that way. Dad’s is completely different.”

Jeannie turned to face us when she reached the base of the stairs. “I forgot to give these to you earlier, Nathan.”

She handed a small manila envelope to him. Tentatively, he pinched the silver prongs together, lifted the flap, and upended the envelope. His face changed the moment he saw what landed in his hand. With a sharp intake of breath, he closed his eyes and ran the thumb of his other hand over the items, tracing their contours.

“Your grandfather wanted you to have them, but your grandmother wasn’t ready to part with them right after his death, so she held on to them for a while. She had been planning to give them to you for your twenty-first birthday. I figured you might like to have them for tomorrow.”

Nodding, he opened his eyes and cleared his throat. “Thanks.”

“All right, I’m off to bed.” Jeannie turned and started back up the stairs, then stopped and craned her neck back toward us again. “Oh. Shane, if you’re curious, be sure to ask Nathan to tell you about the awards he won for his artwork.”

“Nice, Mom. Real subtle.”

Jeannie gave me a mischievous wink before retreating from the room.

“Your artwork won awards?”

“Yeah.”

“Which piece?”

“Pieces, actually.” He was starting to blush. “The coffee table, the storage bench, and the nightstand.”

“Well deserved in all three cases. Guess I’m not the only one who doesn’t like talking about his accomplishments.”

“It’s a much longer conversation in your case.”

And now it’s time for me to change the subject. “You okay?”

“What?”

I nodded at the items he was still holding in his hand.

“Oh.”

He leaned forward and handed them to me: a ring and a pocket watch. The former was obviously worth a lot of money. An inlaid row of ten square-cut emeralds stretched across the top of the thick gold band. Centered just below them, two decorative horizontal lines had been cut straight through the front side of the band and mimicked on the back side, leaving perfectly symmetrical empty spaces in the otherwise solid piece of jewelry.

“That was Pap’s wedding band. Well, not his original one; Gram got him that one for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Did I ever tell you he and I shared a birthday?”

Shaking my head, I looked up and locked eyes with him. “No, you never did. That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah. Mom went into labor on the ninth, but I took a while to come out.” He winked as I chuckled at the double entendre. “Anyway, emerald’s our birthstone, so, naturally, I’ve always loved the ring for that reason alone. But as I got older and began to realize I was gay, I started thinking of those decorative etchings in the sides as equality symbols. They’re not, of course; the ring’s too old for that to be the case. But that’s what they grew to represent in my mind, and that just made me love the ring even more.”

I handed the ring back to him and watched as he slipped it over the ring finger of his right hand. It was a little loose for that finger, but it fit perfectly on the middle finger. After flexing his fingers a few times, he lowered his hand and looked up at me again.

“What about the pocket watch?” I turned the circular object over in my hand. It had the look of an antique, with ornate Celtic etchings on the front, surrounding a large circular emerald set in the center. Attached was a chain that looked equally old. Pressing a button at the top caused the front to flip out, exposing the timepiece underneath. The mechanism was surprisingly responsive, considering the item’s apparent age.

“A gift from *his* grandfather, who found it many years ago in an antique shop. He wore it all the time. Actually, I kind of always just assumed it had been buried with him.”

I closed the cover and handed the pocket watch back to Nathan. “I’m glad it wasn’t. I can tell it and the ring both mean a lot to you.”

Nodding, he idly spun the ring around his middle finger. “You’ll be there tomorrow, right? For the funeral, I mean.”

“I was going to go, but if it’s just going to be a small service, maybe I shouldn’t intrude.”

“No, I want you there. If you want to go, that is.”

“As long as you and your parents are okay with me being there, I’d hate to see anyone try to stop me.”

“Okay, good.” He managed a slight smile. “I’ll save you a seat.”

Chapter Sixteen

We fell asleep playing checkers—well, I did, anyway. When Nathan’s alarm woke me at nine thirty, he was already awake and dressed. I knew he wasn’t particularly comfortable in the suit he was wearing, but it looked good on him, at least. I rubbed my eyes and chuckled as I watched him try to fix his tie in the bathroom mirror. “Here, Napster, let me help.”

He dropped his arms to his sides without complaint. “Gladly. I’m useless at this.”

Standing, I joined him in the bathroom, raised his shirt collar, undid his tie, and started retying it properly. “I know.” I grinned and gave him a wink as he playfully shoved me. “Did you get any sleep at all last night?”

“Not much. Can’t say I expected to, though.”

With a nod, I finished his tie and lowered his shirt collar, my hand brushing against the side of his neck in the process. He shuddered as I shifted the knot slightly to the left, getting it perfectly positioned between the contours of his chest. “Sorry.”

“It’s cool. Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

He stared at me for a couple seconds before turning away, clearing his throat as he took one last look at himself in the mirror. “I’ll let you get ready.” He stepped out of the bathroom and started to close the door.

“Nathan?”

“Yeah?”

“I need my suitcase.”

“Oh. Right.” Walking over to the staircase, he grabbed my suitcase and carried it back to me. My hand touched his when I reached for the handle. Slipping his hand out from under mine, he turned away from me again. “If I’m not here when you get done, I’ll be upstairs.”

“Okay. I won’t be long.”

“Take your time.” He glanced over his shoulder at the clock. “Well, you know, as long as you don’t take more than forty minutes.”

I lowered the suitcase to the floor and let go of it. “Oh, and Nathan?”

“Yeah?”

I wrapped my arms around him and immediately felt him respond, holding on tightly. “Whatever you need today, okay? Just say the word, and it’s done.”

“Thanks.” He pulled away and locked eyes with me. “But you’ve already given me everything I need to get through today.”

He pulled the door shut before I could respond, leaving me alone in the bathroom.

I started the shower and stepped over to the toilet to take a piss while the water heated up. After showering, I did some quick beard maintenance, bringing it back down to the length I preferred. Then I brushed my teeth, applied some deodorant, and put on my own suit and tie.

When I emerged from the bathroom, I found Nathan kneeling in front of the closet hidden under his staircase. He grabbed a pair of dress shoes from a shelf under the clothes rack, then turned to face me. “Seventeen minutes to spare, St. Louis.”

“I would have been quicker if I had known I was being timed.”

“Oh, did I forget to mention that? Oops. My bad.” Winking, he stood and slipped one foot inside a shoe. I tossed my suitcase on the bed and turned away from him so I could retrieve my own dress shoes. “You brought a suit?”

“Of course I brought a suit. What did you think I was going to do, wear jeans and a T-shirt to your grandmother’s funeral?”

“You could wear a donkey costume, for all I care. All that matters is that you’re here.”

“Oh, so you’re saying I could have gone as a jackass instead? Damn it, Napster, why didn’t you tell me that earlier?”

“Sorry, St. Louis. Must have slipped my mind. You look good in the suit, though.”

“Guess it’ll have to do, then.”

He watched as I finished tying my shoes. “Ready?”

“Whenever you are.”

As I followed him up the stairs, I noticed he was wearing his grandfather’s ring. The chain of the pocket watch was peeking out of his right pants pocket, connected to a belt loop.

“I wasn’t able to say anything at Pap’s funeral. It hurt too much, and I was afraid I’d break down if I tried. I don’t really regret that, because I know he would have understood... but if I *could* have said something, I would have.”

Standing in front of the small crowd at Vivian Patricia Hendley’s funeral, Nathan’s voice sounded a bit drier than usual, but he was otherwise composed. He fixed his eyes on me before continuing.

“This hurts, too. But I’m a bit older now, and I’m also a bit stronger. I guess dealing with his death helped make me that way, but... I’m pretty sure other things have contributed, as well.”

After staying locked on me for another couple seconds, Nathan averted his eyes and started scanning the crowd, looking at nothing in particular.

“Gram loved board games. Always did—for as long as I can remember, at least. And someone made me realize a couple days ago that Scrabble was her favorite. I had always assumed it was chess—she did enjoy kicking my ass at that game.” Some people began laughing, including Nathan’s parents. He stopped and waited until they were done. “But the more I think about it, the more I’m sure she would have picked Scrabble if I had ever asked her to choose a favorite. And I think she liked it so much because, for her, half the fun was spelling out cheesy messages for me while we were playing. *Friend. Grandson. Family. Special. Handsome. Precious*—I always hated that one.” That drew more laughter, which got louder when Nathan added, “*Homework*—as in, ‘do yours.’”

He reached into his left pants pocket and pulled out a Scrabble tile rack. After placing it on the podium, he stuck his hand back in his pocket and retrieved a handful of tiles. One by one, he added them to the rack, spinning it around to face the crowd once he was done.

“*Love.*”

Leaving the rack on the podium, Nathan transferred the remaining tiles to his right hand before stuffing his left hand back in his pocket.

“So it’s only fitting, I guess, that when I started to play the game with my best friend a couple days ago, these were four of the first seven letters I pulled out of the bag.”

He pushed the first rack off to the side of the podium, pulled a second rack out of his pocket, and started filling it with more tiles.

“*Gram.*”

He looked to my far right, where the Reeds were huddled together as a group. “She loved it when that sort of coincidence would happen during a game.”

I grinned, knowing exactly what he was doing. The Reeds could believe whatever they wanted to believe, but he wasn’t going to let anyone assume *he* believed divine intervention or the ghost of his dead grandmother had put those particular tiles in his hand during our game. It had simply been a coincidence—nothing more and nothing less. His grandmother would have agreed, and it was, after all, her funeral. It wasn’t going to turn religious on his watch.

“It usually didn’t score her the most points, but she could never resist acting on the opportunity to play a word that sent a message. I was always a bit more practical; I would play only the tiles that would earn me the most points per round or make the most sense from a strategic standpoint. *Gram* is only worth seven points—grossly undervalued, if you ask me. And, as an opening word, it’s too short to make it to one of the double-letter-score tiles, where that M could suddenly become worth six points instead of three. But *love* is another four-letter word that’s only worth seven points, so I guess *Gram*’s in pretty good company there.”

Nathan turned the racks back around and pushed them together. The unmistakable crackle of separating strips of Velcro broke the silence as he began rearranging the tiles and adding the cluster that still remained in his right hand. “I bought a bunch of extra Scrabble tiles, racks, and boards online about a year ago. I got a good deal on them, and I figured I could use them for an art project of some sort. But I forgot to change the shipping address on the order, so they were sent to my parents’ house instead of my dorm. I guess Mom never thought to forward them on to me.” He gave Jeannie a teasing wink. I caught her smiling as she shook her head at him. “But that’s okay, because now I know the perfect use for them.”

He spun the combined racks toward the crowd again, revealing a phrase that wouldn’t have fit on just one: *I love you, Gram*. A comma had been drawn on one of the blank tiles.

“When Pap died, I went through some of my artwork, selected one of his favorite pieces, and gave it to the funeral director so it could be buried with him. *Gram* told me after the funeral that she really liked that idea, so I’m going to do the same thing for her. But this time, the artwork will be a collaborative effort.” Reaching down, he lifted a large gym bag off the ground and hung it on

the side of the podium. “I left out the boards, but if you keep things brief, there should be enough tiles and racks for each of you to make your own message, if you’re interested. There are also some blank tiles you can write or draw on. I ask only that the messages and drawings are respectful of her and her wishes, of course. We reserve the right to leave out any that aren’t.”

That, too, seemed directed at the Reeds. It was highly doubtful that any religious messages or drawings would make their way into Vivian’s casket.

Nathan rejoined me as the funeral director returned to the podium and started speaking again.

“Let’s get out of here,” Nathan whispered in my ear.

Not wanting to disturb the proceedings, I followed him to his parents’ car before asking, “Are you sure you want to leave already?”

“Positive. I didn’t watch Pap’s burial, and I won’t be watching Gram’s, either. We’ll just head back to the house, change out of these clothes, and go get something to eat. If you’re hungry, that is. Then we can do some more sightseeing afterward.”

“You’re not going to spend the day with your family? I mean, I know the Reeds aren’t your favorite people, but what about your mom?”

“I already talked to her while you were in the shower this morning. I’d rather spend the day with you, and she’s cool with that.”

He turned left at a stop sign, one of only a few we would have to pass on the short drive back to his parents’ house.

“Besides, we might have managed to stop the Reeds from spewing religious platitudes during the funeral, but I doubt they’ll be as reserved the rest of the day. And I really don’t want to hear nonsense like ‘she’s in a better place’ right now—assuming, of course, that they can still find a way to make themselves believe that even though she wasn’t religious herself. According to the rules of their religion, that should mean she’s in a worse place, not a better one. But, really, she’s not anywhere right now. She’s just gone.”

“You know you did them a favor earlier, right?”

“What, with the story about how I was able to spell out the word *gram* during our game? Yeah, I know. But if they want to take that as some sort of sign, that’s their prerogative. I wasn’t about to let that stop me from saying what felt right to me.”

“Based on what you’ve told me about her, I think your grandmother would have liked what you said. You were respectful but still managed to get your point across.”

“Thanks. I doubt they bothered to listen, but it doesn’t really matter. They can believe whatever they want to believe, as long as they don’t try to talk to me about it. Kind of hard for me to bring myself to give a damn about their belief system when I know it’s that same belief system that is giving them a reason to condemn us for being who we are.”

“Yeah. I get it. We try, but it’s hard to give respect when you aren’t getting it in return.”

“Exactly. I’m cool with the religious people who are cool with us. The ones who aren’t hypocrites. Unfortunately, the Reeds don’t qualify. They made that abundantly clear when I came out.” He pulled into his parents’ driveway and turned off the ignition. “I’ll give them this, though: I can see why they cling to their beliefs so damn tightly. Yes, they’re hypocritical as fuck, but even so, as beliefs go, they’re a hell of a lot more comforting than mine.”

“Meaning?”

Stepping out of the car, he turned to face me. “Just that while I have a whole list of reasons for not wanting to have anything to do with religion, I guess it *would* probably be pretty nice to live in their idealized version of the world and believe what they believe—at least about the existence of an afterlife. Especially on a day like today. They firmly believe they’ll get to see their deceased loved ones again one day. I firmly believe I won’t. Sometimes, rational thinking can be a real bitch.”

After changing our clothes, we headed to a local sub joint Nathan liked. As expected, his appetite had decided to take the day off, but he did steal the occasional fry from my plate. I was about a quarter of the way through my sandwich when Nathan’s phone rang.

“It’s Gabe.”

“Go ahead and answer it. Not like you have to worry about your food getting cold or anything.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.”

Answering the call, Nathan scooted his chair away from the table and stood, greeting Gabe while on his way out of the restaurant. I finished a few more bites of food before he returned.

“Gabe said to tell you hello.”

“What’s he up to this weekend?”

“Studying at the moment, but he has to work later today.”

“Nice of him to call and check on you.”

“Yeah. I haven’t talked to him since that night.”

Nathan didn’t have to tell me which night he was referring to. He seemed okay—as okay as anyone in his situation could be on such a day, anyway—but I still figured it would be a good time to change the subject. “So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“Spoilers, St. Louis. You’ll find out soon enough.”

Chuckling at the *Doctor Who* reference, I bit into a fry. “Napster, if you start consulting a blue diary and making cryptic warnings about my future, River Song-style, I’m going to get a bit worried.”

“Nah. That’s too old-school. I keep notes about your future on my phone. And don’t bother trying to sneak a peek at it while I’m sleeping tonight; only my best friend would be able to figure out the password.”

“That’s ironic. I’d expect your best friend to be the one person you could trust to not try to snoop through your phone in the first place.”

“Which is exactly why the password is something only he would be able to figure out.”

He placed his phone on the table, right next to my plate. Staring at me intently, a corner of his mouth curled upward in a sideways grin I could tell he was trying to suppress, he tapped a finger against his right eyebrow. I knew what that meant: I was doing that thing I did when I was skeptical about something.

“Bet he wouldn’t even need more than one attempt to get it right.”

When that sort of thing is said to a competitive person, *of course* it’s going to be taken as a challenge. Nathan was smart enough to know that. He was deliberately testing me.

“Bet he wouldn’t need more than a minute, either.”

I shook my head, set aside the last piece of my sub, and wiped my fingertips on a napkin. I ruled out *Napster* right away, as well as *StLouis*. We usually only used those nicknames privately, and no one else knew the story behind them, but there was always a chance someone could overhear us referring to each other that way and make a mental note of the oddity. Using a birth date as a password would be boring, and Nathan was anything but; besides, he had specifically said “password,” not “passcode.” *Snowboard* was too easy. *Heterochromia* was too long. It would probably be something that consisted of around eight characters, since that was the standard for passwords. One of those characters would likely be a number or symbol, just to add an extra bit of challenge to the equation. And Nathan hated changing his passwords, which meant he had probably been using this one for a while. It had to be some sort of inside joke from the early stages of our friendship, and Nathan had a sick sense of humor, just like I did...

Chuckling softly, I picked up Nathan’s phone and pressed the Home button. Sliding my thumb across the bottom of the screen, I typed *Upchuck!* when prompted for the password, then turned the device to face him—unlocked.

“Forty-two seconds to spare, St. Louis. Kind of appropriate, don’t you think?”

“How so?”

“Took you eighteen seconds to get in, and that’s a switch backside double *eighteen* nose-to-tail grab trick.”

“Interesting observation, Napster. So, where are the spoilers?”

“Open the browser and check my history.”

Shaking my head again, I tried to hand the phone back to him. “Joking around with you about it is one thing, but I’m not going to *actually* go through your phone.”

“No, seriously—go for it. I’m an open book where you’re concerned anyway, so what’s the big deal? It’s not like you don’t already know about and accept my shameful addiction to midget porn.”

Despite being in the middle of a crowded restaurant, with people surrounding him on all sides who wouldn’t necessarily get that he was kidding, Nathan didn’t even bother to lower his voice before uttering that sentence. That boldness was one of the things I admired most about him. Hell, it was what had made him walk up to me and ask me about my eyes the first time we ran into

each other. Without that boldness, we might have never become friends in the first place.

“Open the browser and check my history. What’s the last thing I searched for?”

I followed his instructions, still feeling like I was doing something that made an addiction to midget porn seem about as shameful as an addiction to exhibiting good manners. “Mattress factory hours? What the fuck does that have to do with my future?”

“My bad, St. Louis. I never said the spoilers would actually make sense.”

Shortly after we—well, I—finished eating, Nathan’s cryptic hint became clear. The Mattress Factory, so named because one of its two buildings had once been an actual mattress factory, was an art museum that featured works of contemporary installation art. In other words, every room or series of rooms in the two buildings was sort of like Nathan’s bedroom: a space one artist had claimed and stamped with their own unique artwork, actually living on-site while completing their project. Most of the installations were permanent exhibits, but a small revolving set of temporary exhibits gave people an incentive to keep coming back to the place again and again.

One artist had covered the walls and ceiling of her two rooms with mirrors. In one brightly lit room, three white mannequins stood in different poses, with big orange polka dots covering them as well as the white floor. By contrast, the other room was dimly lit, the glow of its black lights illuminating polka dots of various sizes and colors. According to the artist’s biography, she was obsessed with polka dots and was living—by choice—in a psychiatric institution to deal with the hallucinations that plagued her, which were often polka dot-filled. I couldn’t decide if that meant she would probably feel right at home in her rooms at the Mattress Factory or if they were actually the last places on earth she’d ever want to spend time in, with their infinitesimal, almost disorienting sea of inescapable polka dots. The mirrors created the feeling that each visitor was temporarily becoming a part of the artwork, and that was fitting because the Mattress Factory itself seemed to revolve around that concept, to the point of boasting a slogan that said it all: “art you can get into.”

In a room on the fourth floor, an artist had cut a hole in the floor and funneled an aircraft-grade plywood chute through it. Stretching diagonally into the room below and out through that room’s window, the chute provided an

interesting new perspective of a neighboring yard across the street—a literal sort of tunnel vision. Another artist had filled the bulk of his room with a giant concrete structure, shaped like an egg and featuring contours that reminded me of the surface of the moon. Yet another had decided to play with sensory deprivation in one of his three installations. With the help of a handrail, visitors were asked to walk, in groups of no more than two at a time, through a completely dark, inclined corridor to a room that was just as black, then sit or stand there and wait for something to happen. The process was supposed to take about fifteen minutes, but for Nathan and me, whatever was supposed to happen never did.

Those were just some of the permanent exhibits. In the basement, an artist had created a temporary exhibit that was a tribute to the rivers of Pittsburgh, with irregularly shaped stones spread across the floor so visitors wouldn't have to step in the shallow pool of running water seeping into the concrete. Elsewhere, another artist's temporary exhibit was a very pointed critique of society's objectification of women's breasts, in which a parody of the Black Eyed Peas song "My Humps" was being projected onto a Venus de Milo statue with exaggeratedly massive breasts. The artist herself was featured in the parody, using her own breasts to paint on a canvas. Far from being subtle, it was probably the only piece of artwork in the entire museum that had a message that was practically impossible to misinterpret.

After Nathan and I finished touring the Mattress Factory, he took me to the Carnegie Museum of Art and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, conveniently located right next to each other. Compared to what we had just seen at the Mattress Factory, the Carnegie museums were much more conventional but nevertheless still quite interesting in their own right, featuring extensive collections of fine art and some of the most impressive dinosaur skeletons in the world, among other things. Unfortunately, we had just under four hours to tour the two massive places before they closed for the day; a couple years ago, the Denver Art Museum's hours of operation had seemed quite strange to me, but now I was beginning to realize it was apparently quite common for museums to close at five. It took some effort to fit everything in, but we managed to make it work, and it proved to be well worth the trouble.

Once the Carnegie museums closed, we headed to Primanti Brothers for dinner. Nathan again ate only a few bites of food, but the main purpose of going to Primanti Brothers was being able to get dessert at Dave and Andy's afterward, and there, Nathan's appetite happily returned. White chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream was on the menu this time, so we each ordered

two scoops of that in a waffle cone. Since I now knew what the surprise at the bottom of the waffle cone was, Nathan and I played a game of “guess the color”; when I guessed blue, he guessed green, grinning as he stared at my eyes. We were right about the colors but wrong about the distribution.

To end the night, Nathan took me to an improv show. Apparently, Pittsburgh had quite the improv scene developing, and the show we saw didn’t disappoint at all. Watching a group of actors play an improvisational game of Dungeons and Dragons based entirely on audience suggestions turned out to be more fun than it had any right to be. Nathan and I had never played the game ourselves, improvised or otherwise, but by the end of the show, we kind of wanted to. Well, as long as we could drink during it, like the actors—and many of the audience members—had.

When we got back to Nathan’s parents’ house, he parked the car but left it running.

“Okay, I know you’re not a huge fan of this song, so what’s going on? Do you think the engine’s making a weird noise or something?”

“No. I’m just waiting.”

I couldn’t help chuckling. “Oh. Of course. Because if there’s one thing you love doing, it’s waiting.”

“I can be patient when I want to be, St. Louis.”

“Which isn’t often.”

“But this is one of those rare times.”

“Okay, Napster. So, you’re waiting. Waiting for...?”

Nathan stared straight ahead, not bothering to answer me. I kept my eyes fixed on him, growing more curious with each passing second.

“That,” he finally said, tapping a finger against the dashboard clock. It was now midnight. “Happy birthday, Shane.”

“Oh. Thanks. But you could have just told me that tomorrow, you know.”

“Like you said, waiting isn’t exactly one of my strong suits.”

Nathan turned off the ignition, and I followed him into the house, noticing that the Reeds’ cars were nowhere to be seen. Jeannie was stretched out on the couch in the living room, well into the second half of the Agatha Christie novel she had started reading the previous night.

“Hey, Mom. How did things go today?”

“Not bad. Way too much food, though. We donated most of it to a soup kitchen. Everyone really liked your eulogy, by the way. And the Scrabble idea went over well.”

“Cool. What were the messages like?”

“‘We’ll miss you,’ ‘I love you,’ ‘you were a great friend,’ ‘thanks for the advice’—that sort of thing. Nothing even remotely religious. Well, that’s not entirely true—one person wrote ‘rest in peace,’ and another drew a cross. But I left those out. Some people drew hearts, a couple drew teardrops. I drew a magnifying glass; your grandmother did love her mysteries.” Jeannie lifted her book, giving me my first good glimpse at its title: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. “Case in point.”

“Wait—you drew a magnifying glass?”

“Well, that’s what it was supposed to be, anyway.” Jeannie looked at me. “I can barely draw a stick figure, Shane, let alone anything else. I don’t know where Nathan got his artistic talents from.”

“I don’t look like them, either. Clearly, I’m adopted.”

“Thirty-five-and-a-half hours of labor suggest otherwise.”

“She loves to throw in that ‘and a half’ part.”

“You’re lucky I don’t just round it up to thirty-six hours.”

“Eh, what’s one more half hour added to the guilt trip?”

“Thirty-six hours it is, then.”

Nathan chuckled. “Did the Reeds leave already?”

“Yeah. Dave decided he didn’t want to wait until tomorrow.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised. Or disappointed, for that matter.”

“So, did you get to see everything you wanted to see today?”

“Basically, yeah. Didn’t have a whole lot of time to stay in any one spot, though. Except that damn *Pleiades* exhibit at the Mattress Factory. Fifth time I’ve sat in that pitch-black room and waited for something to happen, and it never does. Didn’t happen for Shane, either.”

“Yes, well, it does require a certain degree of patience.”

“We waited for twenty minutes. Isn’t that patient enough? And all for some red dot that’s supposed to magically emerge from the darkness. As much as I

love art, I have to say I'm not really convinced that piece could possibly be worth the trouble, even if it did work."

Jeannie flashed Nathan a teasing smile. "It works for *some* people, remember."

"Oh, right. How could I forget? See, Shane, Mom here has seen the fabled red dot."

"Yes, well, it's not all it's cracked up to be, I'll admit. Something to do with cones and rods aligning as your eyes adjust to the darkness." Jeannie shrugged. "Or maybe I just imagined the whole thing."

"I didn't mind the artist's other exhibit—the one with the blue rectangle. That one was kind of cool."

Jeannie nodded at me. "And that one with the red light in the corner—is that exhibit still there? I never really got that one."

"Yeah, it's still there." And it hadn't really impressed me, either.

"Hmm. Well, anyway..." Jeannie glanced at a clock on the wall. "Oh—happy birthday, Shane."

"Thanks."

"And, on that note, we should probably head downstairs and get some sleep. We have to get up early tomorrow."

"Okay, you two. Have a good night."

"You, too, Jeannie."

I followed Nathan to his bedroom. "We have to get up early tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Around seven or so. Hope you don't mind." Nathan kicked off his shoes and flopped down on the bed.

"Of course not. But why?"

"Spoilers, St. Louis."

"Heh. For someone who doesn't like waiting, you sure do enjoy making *me* wait."

"A man has to have his sources of entertainment."

"Board games aren't enough?"

Nathan shook his head and walked over to the staircase. "Not even close. Speaking of, how does Othello sound for tonight? For our sleep aid, I mean."

“Works for me.”

Nathan opened one of the wall panels and retrieved the game. “Thanks for keeping me busy today, by the way. I can’t believe how quickly the day flew by. The day of my grandfather’s funeral felt like the longest day ever.”

“Anytime, Nathan. You know that.”

Nodding, he shut the panel and rejoined me on the bed. “So, who do you think won the contest?”

“Hard to say. It was a pretty stacked field.”

“Aren’t you going to check?”

“Honestly, aside from the times people stopped us today to get an autograph or a picture, I haven’t given it a single thought. But yeah, I guess I can.”

Nathan began setting up the game as I turned on my phone. I had barely looked at it all weekend. Hundreds of unread text messages and thousands of unread Twitter mentions were waiting to be given attention. They would have to wait awhile longer.

It didn’t take long to search for the results of the contest. “Looks like Gunnar won.”

“Really? Cool. He seemed nice enough when I met him. For a Norwegian, he speaks English better than a lot of Americans I’ve met.”

“Heh. Yeah.” Gunnar could probably pass as an American around anyone who didn’t know who he was. He was a pretty chill, laid-back dude; I was happy to see he had won the contest. As far as I was aware, it was his biggest win to date.

I sent him a quick congratulatory message before turning my phone back off and setting it aside.

“Ready to get your ass kicked, St. Louis?”

“Eh, who are we kidding, Napster? We’ll probably fall asleep before we get halfway through the game, anyway.”

Chapter Seventeen

Nathan was great at planning and executing things. Fallingwater's gates opened to the public at ten in the morning, and we arrived there with five minutes to spare.

We had to settle for taking a self-guided tour of the grounds because guided tours of the house itself weren't offered in February, but it was still worth the two hours or so it had taken us to get to the place. The stories I'd heard and the pictures I'd seen hadn't done Fallingwater justice. The Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece, built over a thirty-foot waterfall, was truly, breathtakingly stunning. I couldn't imagine that it would be practical to actually *live* in it, though. The constant roar of the waterfall would probably drive me mad.

We stayed for a couple hours, then made our way back to Pittsburgh. After eating at Primanti Brothers, we went to Dave and Andy's for dessert. As we checked out the day's special flavors, an interesting one caught our attention: beer-and-pretzel ice cream. Available, coincidentally, on my birthday. We couldn't resist ordering it, and the employee who took our order had no problem serving it to Nathan. Because the ice cream was created using unfermented wort, it was impossible to get drunk from consuming it, so the staff was under no obligation to verify customers' ages. The ice cream was delicious, just as I had come to expect, but we both failed to correctly guess the color of our respective M&Ms.

After leaving Dave and Andy's, Nathan took me to a nearby liquor store and handed me a fifty.

"I think it's an unwritten rule that you have to buy *something* alcoholic on your birthday, just to say you did. Just pick out whatever you want, and we'll drink it when we get back to the house later tonight."

"You're not coming in with me?"

"Nah, I'll wait here, just to be safe. I'm not sure if they'd be okay with you shopping for alcohol with someone who's still underage. Oh, and by the way, feel free to splurge. You only turn twenty-one once."

I got out of the car, then turned to face Nathan again. "Considering the fact that I'm their guest for the weekend, I feel like I should probably ask: you sure your parents won't mind this? I mean, your mom's always awake when we get back to the house, so unless you want to sneak the alcohol in after she goes to sleep..."

“Nah, that won’t be necessary. I’ve never been a choirboy—in any sense of the term. My parents got used to the idea of me having the occasional drink years ago. And I’m practically twenty-one myself at this point. They’ll be fine with it.”

Nodding, I headed into the liquor store. After browsing the aisles for a few minutes, I found a bottle of Breckenridge Bourbon that was just under fifty dollars. A bottle of Jack would have been fine with me, but Nathan *had* told me to splurge, and we had heard good things about Breckenridge Bourbon but had never had a chance to try it before. The guy behind the counter recognized me and, after checking my ID, wished me a happy birthday. I took a picture with him and autographed a bottle of vodka that was shaped like a skull—definitely one of the most unusual items I had ever been asked to sign.

Back in the car, I stuck Nathan’s change—less than a dollar—in a cup holder. “I went with Breckenridge Bourbon.”

“Sweet. I thought that was only available in Colorado.”

“Apparently not. Didn’t see any Stranahan’s in there, though.” Stranahan’s Colorado Whiskey was another Colorado-bred whiskey Nathan and I were eager to try one day. “Oh, get this: the guy who was working the register wanted an autograph, so he grabbed this cool-looking bottle of vodka off the shelf and gave it to me to sign. It was shaped like a skull.”

“Oh. Nice. Maybe I’ll have to get one of those for myself one day, just to use the bottle as a piece of art.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you could do something awesome with it.” Knowing Nathan, he would probably find a way to make the bottle look ten times cooler than it did on its own. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you about this, but I’ve always had you with me before to act as a translator, so it keeps slipping my mind.”

“Sure, shoot.”

“What’s with the way some people talk here? I mean, I’d understand them having an accent, even though you don’t really have one yourself. But it’s like they’re speaking an entirely different language sometimes. That guy said something about a gnat, and I just had to pretend like I knew what he was talking about.”

Nathan laughed. “That’s Pittsburghese. He was saying ‘and that’—he just sort of smashed the words together. Another common one is ‘yinz’—that’s

basically like the Southern ‘y’all,’ but in this case, it’s more like a combination of ‘you ones’ than ‘you all.’ And ‘gumband’—that’s a rubber band.”

“So why don’t you talk like that?”

“Some of us don’t. My parents don’t, and my grandparents didn’t, and a lot of people around here who are our age don’t—unless they’re doing it to be ironic—so I was never really exposed to it enough to pick it up myself. Any time you need a translator, though, I’m your guy.”

“Good to know.” I’d trust Nathan over the translator app on my phone any day. “Oh, and he also told me he was sorry that one of my friends had recently lost a loved one. Guess he read my announcement. Anyway, I thought you’d like to know.”

“Thanks. That’s pretty surreal. Nice, though.”

“I’m guessing you’ve probably received a lot of well-wishes from people who have tweeted me this weekend.” And, hopefully, not a single complaint about me missing the contest to be with him.

“You’ll have to thank them for me the next time you’re on Twitter. I mean, most of those tweets will probably be of the generic ‘keeping him in my prayers’ nature, but that’s just what religious people say in this sort of situation, so whatever. I can appreciate the general sympathetic sentiment, at least, even if hearing I’m in someone’s prayers does absolutely nothing for me. Except make me wonder if anyone ever *actually* adds a person to their prayers when they say that sort of thing, that is.”

“I’m guessing some do, but most don’t. But I don’t know; maybe they all do. Sure, though—I’ll thank them for you the next time I’m on there.”

Our next stop was the Monongahela Incline, a cable-powered railway system—also called a funicular, according to Nathan—that transported passengers up and down Mt. Washington. Two parallel tracks ran diagonally up the side of the mountain, and a tram car was attached to each. The two cars counterbalanced each other, with a pulley system bringing one car up the mountain while simultaneously sending the other car down. In a way, it was basically Pittsburgh’s version of Telluride’s gondola system.

Because the incline faced Downtown, we were treated to a spectacular view of the Pittsburgh skyline as we rode up the mountain. At the top, we got out and began exploring the neighborhood, another of the more affluent parts of Pittsburgh. We soon came across a circular observation deck that extended out

from the side of the mountain; from there, Nathan pointed out various city landmarks to me. I had seen them all before, but seeing them from a more bird's eye-like view was a completely different experience.

We stayed on the mountain long enough to enjoy the sunset. Afterward, we headed back down the mountain via the Duquesne Incline, the only other funicular left in Pittsburgh, which had once boasted a total of about fifteen or so. When we got back to the car, it was nearly seven. It didn't take long for us to make it to our next stop: the Consol Energy Stadium.

"Ready for some hockey?"

"Seriously? How'd you manage to get tickets to a hockey game on such short notice?"

"One of Dad's friends has season passes. He owed Dad a favor, and Dad cashed in so we could do something fun for your birthday."

"That was nice of him. Although I was already having fun, anyway."

"Me, too, but now we'll have even more fun."

The Pittsburgh Penguins were playing the Tampa Bay Lightning, and we had premium seats, putting us as close to the ice as we could possibly get. The stadium was packed with spectators, most of whom were obviously more serious about the sport than Nathan and I were. Even so, we liked most sports well enough, and watching something live always seemed to make it more enjoyable—especially something like hockey. It didn't take us long to get just as into the game as the diehard fans who were decked out in Penguins gear, and when "our" team won after leading from the very beginning of the game, we cheered just as loudly as they did. The final score: five to three.

Afterward, we made the short trip back to Mt. Washington, traveling up the Duquesne Incline this time so I could get a nighttime perspective of the skyline from atop the mountain. Once again, we stopped at the observation deck to take a look around. No one else was nearby.

"Well, this basically concludes our sightseeing weekend, Shane. Hope you enjoyed it."

"Are you kidding? It's been great, Nathan. Really. Thanks for taking me to all your favorite places this weekend."

Nathan turned to face me. "No, Shane—thank *you*. Look, I know you said I didn't need to keep thanking you, and this is the last time, I promise. But you did me such a big favor by coming with me on this trip. And I know you don't

see it that way, and I appreciate that, but it's true. Without you here, I wouldn't have had any reason to go to any of the places we went to this weekend. And they're all places I've been to before with my grandparents, so just revisiting them with you brought back a lot of great memories. And then there's the board games we've been playing all weekend. I mention on Thursday that Gram always loved board games, and a few minutes later, you just *happen* to suggest we should play one to pass the time? I know that wasn't a coincidence; you did that for my benefit."

"Damn. Busted."

"And I probably wouldn't have come up with the Scrabble artwork idea if you hadn't been here for me to play Scrabble with, and I probably wouldn't have said anything at the funeral, either. And you know how you asked me how I had found closure after Pap's death, and I told you I'd let you know when I did? Well, I still don't know if closure's a real thing or just a myth, but I know this is the closest I've ever been to it, in any case. And just... Just in general, Shane. You've made this weekend bearable. It was still hard, but it was a hell of a lot easier with you here than it would have been otherwise. Hell, I *laughed* this weekend, Shane. More than once. You didn't see what I was like after Pap's death, but trust me, being able to laugh while coping with Gram's death is a *huge* improvement. So, like I said, for the last time... thank you."

He wrapped his arms around me, and I held on until he pulled away. "You're welcome, Nathan. But it's really not a big deal. You would have done the same for me."

"See, you keep saying that."

"Because I know it's true."

"Of course it is. But it's not a fair comparison. You had to choose between coming here with me or going to Mammoth to compete, knowing that if you chose me, you'd lose your chance at a three-peat. I would never have to make that sort of decision."

"That doesn't mean what you'd do for me somehow means less than what I did for you."

"Maybe not, but still..."

"What do you want me to say, Nathan?"

"That's just it—you're saying *exactly* what I've come to expect you to say. Your response is so... *you*. I guess I just wish I could somehow get you to see that what you've done for me *is* a big deal. It's a really fucking big deal."

“Would it help if I patted myself on the back?”

Nathan grinned. “A little, St. Louis.”

I reached over my shoulder with my right hand and gave myself a quick pat on the back, right between my shoulder blades. “Better?”

“It’s a start.” He turned to take another look at the skyline. “Ready to head back to the house and break open that bottle of Breckenridge Bourbon? We can grab a pizza on the way back. Probably best not to drink that stuff on an empty stomach.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

When we got back to the house, Nathan’s parents were sitting in the living room, watching television.

Robert reached for the remote and muted the newscaster. “Hey, guys. Happy birthday, Shane.”

“Thanks. And thanks for getting us those tickets to the game. It was really fun.”

“We heard they won.”

“Yeah. Wasn’t even close, really.”

“What else did you two do today?”

Nathan took a seat on the other section of the couch, inviting me to join him as he placed the pizza box on the coffee table and opened the lid. “Went to Fallingwater, then walked around Mt. Washington for a while. I hadn’t shown Shane the inclines yet this weekend.” Gesturing toward the brown paper bag I was holding in my right hand, Nathan added, “Oh, and I sent Shane in for his requisite first legal purchase of alcohol.”

Robert glanced at Jeannie. “Can you believe our son will be old enough to do that himself soon?”

“I’d rather not think about it.”

Chuckling, Robert turned to face us again. “Good thing the liquor stores around here aren’t closed on Sundays, eh?”

Nathan nodded, pulling apart one of the slices of pizza. “Yeah. That would have sucked. If either of you want some of this, help yourselves. We ordered extra, just in case.”

Jeannie shook her head. "I'm good, thanks."

"Me, too." Robert nodded toward the bag. "What'd you get?"

"Shane found a bottle of Breckenridge Bourbon. It's supposed to be really good."

"Can't say I've heard of it, I'm afraid."

"You can try some when we bust it open, if you want."

"Maybe just a sip. I'm not as young as you two, so I'd better not drink too much. When's your flight leave tomorrow?"

"Ten thirty-five," I said when Nathan turned to me for the answer.

"So we'll want to get up around seven."

"Yeah."

"See, you and Nathan can handle getting up that early after drinking the previous night, but if I tried it, the result probably wouldn't be pretty."

Jeannie gave Robert a teasing smile. "If you tried it, the result *definitely* wouldn't be pretty. Come on, let's let Nathan and Shane finish their food in peace." Nodding, Robert followed Jeannie out of the room.

Nathan grabbed the remote and started browsing through the on-screen guide. "*SportsCenter* okay with you?"

"Sure."

He changed the channel and restored the volume before tossing the remote aside again. "I just figured you might not want to watch it so soon after a contest. You know, in case they happen to mention you."

"Eh, it can get awkward sometimes, but that was yesterday, so we should be safe."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, devouring the pizza while getting caught up on the latest news from the world of sports. Jeannie and Robert returned while I was finishing a piece of crust. Plates, forks, napkins, and four glasses of milk were arranged on the tray Robert was carrying. Jeannie, meanwhile, had a knife in one hand and a cake stand in the other. A small cake was sitting on top of the stand, covered with a creamy chocolate icing and a cluster of sliced miniature peanut butter cups. Two lit candles were buried in the center, shaped like the numbers two and one.

Nathan and Robert joined in when Jeannie started singing “Happy Birthday” while carefully lowering the stand onto the coffee table in front of us. My ears were burning by the end of the song. After I blew out the candles, Jeannie started cutting into the cake. “Nathan told me you love peanut butter cups, Shane, so I hope you like this.”

“It looks amazing, Jeannie. Thanks. You didn’t have to go to all this trouble for me.”

“It was no trouble at all. You’ve been making sure Nathan gets an ice cream cake on his birthday for the past two years. I wasn’t about to let you go without one on yours. Besides, after everything you’ve done in memory of my father, this is the least I can do.”

“*That’s* no trouble at all. And you’ve thanked me for that before.”

“And now I’m thanking you again.” Jeannie gave me a wink as she handed me a generously large slice of cake. I waited for everyone else to receive a slice, then we all dug in together. The cake consisted of two layers of peanut butter frosting sandwiched between three layers of chocolate cake, with bits of peanut butter cups mixed in with the frosting. It was the kind of dessert that was rich enough to make a person’s teeth hurt and delicious enough to make them welcome the pain.

After finishing his slice, Nathan retrieved three tumbler glasses from the kitchen. I opened the bottle of Breckenridge Bourbon and poured a bit in Robert’s glass, then Nathan and I retreated to his bedroom. Regardless of how understanding his parents were, drinking in front of them still would have been weird.

My mother had tried to call me earlier to wish me a happy birthday, so I called her back while Nathan was in the bathroom. Knowing I had an early flight tomorrow, she kept the conversation brief. Nathan emerged from the bathroom just as I was ending the call. I handed him a glass of Breckenridge Bourbon, then poured some into mine. After setting the bottle down on the coffee table, I tapped my glass against the side of his. “Cheers.”

“Happy birthday, Shane.”

“Thanks. It was definitely one of my best.”

We each downed our first shot in one gulp.

Nathan nodded in approval. “Nice.”

“Yeah. I can see why it won a bunch of awards.”

“Me, too. Definitely worth the cost.”

Nathan stood while I was refilling our glasses. “Better set the alarm while I’m still clearheaded enough to remember how to operate simple electronic devices. Want to go ahead and break out the Scrabble board? It’s behind the lower-left wall panel.”

“Sure.” I set the bottle aside on the coffee table and went to retrieve the board game, marveling again at the design of Nathan’s hidden storage system.

When Nathan returned to the couch, we did another round of shots. Selecting tiles from the bag, we determined that I would be going first this time. Nathan carried our glasses into the bathroom and filled them with water while I was contemplating my opening move. The last thing either of us wanted to deal with tomorrow was a hangover.

“Kind of ironic, isn’t it?”

Looking up from the tile rack, I accepted my glass from him. “What is?”

“You had to come all the way to Pittsburgh to try a bourbon that’s made in Denver.”

Grinning, I reached for a tile. “Thanks for giving me my first word, Napster.” Spelling out the word *very* gave me ten points.

“Oh, *very* ironic, huh? I stand corrected.”

“Think we’ll actually make it through a whole game for once?”

“Depends on how much of that bottle we decide to drain.”

“Doubt they’ll let us take it on the plane, so we might as well drink as much as we can tonight.”

Nathan gulped down the rest of his water and handed me his glass. “Then what are you waiting for, St. Louis? Hit me again.”

Chapter Eighteen

The alarm woke us both up at the same time. With no time to waste, Nathan grabbed some clothes and headed upstairs to take a shower, and I stepped into his bathroom to do the same.

About two-and-a-half shots' worth of Breckenridge Bourbon remained from the previous night, and we finished that off right before it was time to leave for the airport. While Nathan was putting the Scrabble set away, I wrapped some dirty clothes around the empty bottle and stuffed it in my suitcase. We had again failed to get through an entire game of Scrabble, but we probably would have managed it if we had focused more on playing the game than we had on talking to each other. Of course, with all due respect to Scrabble, talking to Nathan was always more fun anyway—sober or otherwise.

When we arrived back in Denver early that afternoon, we went to a diner on campus for lunch. While we were there, I called my mother to let her know we had made it back safely, and Nathan sent Gabe a text message to see what he was up to. They arranged to meet after Gabe's next class so they could spend some time together before Gabe had to start his night shift.

Nathan and I parted ways outside his apartment, and I headed back to mine to unpack and spend the rest of the day relaxing. It had been a fun weekend, but it had also been a busy one, and I was looking forward to spending the rest of the day doing absolutely nothing at all.

Well, nothing except reading and responding to thousands of unread text messages and tweets, of course.

The snowboarding season wasn't over yet, and I wasn't going to start taking it less seriously just because I no longer had the three-peat to chase. As with any sport, momentum can be a powerful force in snowboarding, and Gunnar's win at Mammoth had boosted his confidence and left him hungry to repeat his success. He made things interesting, but I managed to win the next contest, and I went on to win the remaining two contests of the season, as well. That left some people arguing that I had *technically* managed a three-peat because I had won every contest I had participated in, but I wasn't interested in using semantics to find a way to justify adding something to my list of achievements. I *hadn't* secured the three-peat, and I would probably never get another chance

to do so. And that was okay with me. The memories I had made with Nathan in Pittsburgh were worth more to me than any random stat in a record book ever could have been.

And I won a brand-new Harley-Davidson motorcycle at the last contest of the season, so I guess that was a pretty sweet consolation prize.

Thanks to my awesome sponsors, Nathan and I got to attend Coachella for the second year in a row, again receiving VIP treatment the entire weekend. The Red Hot Chili Peppers were there, as well as a slew of other artists, but the highlight for me had to be seeing Sigur Rós, an Icelandic band I had gotten Nathan into during freshman year. I had always wanted to see them live, and their show exceeded my expectations. In the end, as it had the previous year, the trip to Coachella gave us some much-needed padding for our YotC 2.0 list. It also served as a nice little break from college before entering the home stretch of the spring quarter.

I was doing well in all my classes, but, just for fun, I agreed to start doing study sessions with a guy I shared an elective with. He was nineteen, kind of hot, and quite obviously interested in me. We met in my apartment for an hour or two a couple times a week but never really got much studying done. He was a cool guy, but with summer being just around the corner, I wasn't interested in anything more than a quick, meaningless fling. Luckily, neither was he.

Of course, most of my time was still being spent with Nathan, meeting him for lunch every weekday and partying with him every weekend. I organized another concert gathering for all our friends so we could celebrate his twenty-first birthday, making sure Gabe would be able to attend it. Some of our friends, including Gabe and B, were still underage, so we did a few rounds of shots at Nathan's place before the concert, then returned there afterward to continue partying.

Counting that one, Nathan and I ended up attending seventy-one concerts during YotC 2.0, breaking the previous year's record by two. As we helped each other pack after our last final of junior year, we made plans for YotC 3.0, vowing it would be the best one yet.

After all, it had to be. Only a few short months separated us from our last year of college, and we had to go out with a bang.

SENIOR YEAR

Chapter Nineteen

“So, you *are* going to do it, right?”

Nathan was standing in the kitchen of my apartment, helping me unpack some dishes. I had just gotten back to Denver after spending some time filming in Chile with Coop and the crew. Nathan and I had kept in touch over the summer, but there was still a lot for us to catch each other up on. For his part, Nathan was trying to get everything unpacked as quickly as possible so he could see the footage and pictures from my trip.

“Of course I’m going to do it.”

It being the 2014 Winter Olympics, which were just a few months away. In 2011, the International Olympic Committee had announced the addition of slopestyle to the list of snowboarding disciplines that would be featured in 2014. It was a huge moment for the sport, and it meant I would finally get a chance to participate in the Olympic Games myself. Like most athletes, I had always dreamed of competing in the Olympics, but because I wasn’t a halfpipe, slalom, or boardercross competitor, it had never been an option for me before. Now it was, and I was pretty excited about it.

There was just one problem: the event was being held in Sochi, Russia. The country had a history of unfavorable views about homosexuality, and a law they had recently passed, forbidding the distribution of so-called “LGBT propaganda” among minors, had rightfully been met with outrage in more forward-thinking parts of the world. There were growing concerns about the safety of openly gay athletes at the 2014 Winter Olympics, and some people were even suggesting that a boycott was in order.

While I shared those concerns and found Russia’s anti-gay policies appalling and disturbing, I didn’t think boycotting the Olympics was the answer. The Olympics weren’t the problem; the Russian government was. Boycotting the Olympics would just punish me and all the other athletes who worked hard, year after year, to be able to compete at the highest possible level in our respective sports. Besides, I had never backed down to a bigoted bully before, and I wasn’t about to start now just because the Russian government happened to be bigger and more powerful than most bigoted bullies.

“But I have to qualify first, you know.”

“I know. There’s not a doubt in my mind that you will.”

“Heh. But no pressure or anything, right?”

“From me? Never. You know I won’t care if you don’t make it. But I’m also confident you will.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.”

Nathan pulled a stack of plates out of a box and placed them on the bottom shelf of one of the cabinets. “I’m glad you’re not going to let what’s going on over there stop you from participating. I mean, I didn’t think you would, but I wouldn’t have blamed you if you had. You’ll be one of the only openly gay athletes there. You might as well just paint a rainbow-colored target on your back.”

“I think the IOC would probably consider that a uniform violation or something. From what I’ve heard, they’re pretty strict about a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for one thing, athletes aren’t allowed to talk about or show support for their sponsors during the Games, unless those sponsors are also sponsoring the Games in general. So, for snowboarders, that means we can’t cover our boards with stickers showing our sponsors’ logos, like we usually do. And there are rules restricting the size of logos on articles of clothing and items like goggles, too.”

“Damn. Harsh. But worth the hassle, right?”

“Guess I won’t really be able to answer that until after I’ve had a chance to participate in the Games. But yeah, it’s probably worth the hassle. It’s a big deal for an athlete to be able to represent their country on such a global scale. Granted, I think some of the other athletes put the Olympics on a different sort of pedestal than snowboarders do. The ones from sports that have been a part of the Games for much, much longer, I mean—like figure skating and speed skating. Historically, we’ve had to think of other events as ‘our’ Olympics, like the X Games. But even for us, there’s really no denying the importance of the Olympics.”

“Yeah. It’ll expose you to a whole new audience.”

Nodding, I opened a drawer and placed a tray of silverware in it. “I just hope being featured in the Olympics won’t cost slopestyle snowboarding its identity. It’s not as standardized and regulated as a lot of the other Olympic disciplines. It’s really kind of more like a culture than a sport. We basically get to do whatever we want. That’s one of the greatest things about it, and I’d hate to see that change.”

“I’d hate to see that change, and I’m just a spectator. Hopefully the IOC respects that that’s part of what makes the sport so unique and appealing.”

“Yeah. Guess we’ll just have to wait and see.” After adding the last of a dozen tumbler glasses to one of the cabinets, I tossed my empty box aside and turned to face Nathan. *“Looks like that’s the last of it. Ready to crack open a few beers and see what I’ve been up to all summer?”*

“I thought you’d never ask, St. Louis.”

Things got off to a slow start in each of my classes, but I had a feeling that wouldn’t last long. I had decided to fill my schedule for the fall quarter with my toughest remaining classes so I could go ahead and get them all out of the way. Assuming I qualified to be part of the Olympic slopestyle snowboarding team the United States chose to send to Sochi, I would have to miss at least a few classes while out of the country, so I really needed my winter quarter to be as easy as possible. By October, I would probably be kicking myself for making such an insane decision, but hopefully it would pay off in the end.

I agreed to participate in a new event called Snowboard on the Block, a film festival that showcased only snowboarding edits. Held across three blocks of Downtown Denver at the end of the first week of classes, the event doubled as a one-day music festival and also featured a rail jam competition, which I helped judge. The whole thing ended up being a huge success, with thousands of people in attendance. Coop even managed to get a sixty-second teaser clip ready in time for the event. It closed out the evening, giving everyone a taste of what they could expect in my next edit.

For Nathan and me, the festival served as our official YotC 3.0 kickoff event, adding twenty-two bands to our list in just one day. I had some other commitments to attend to throughout the day, including a skate demo and an autograph-signing session, but Nathan was always close by. Gabe, Kevin, and B kept him company while I was busy, although Kevin and B were also busy trying to find attractive women to take back to their apartment after the event. Gabe, meanwhile, was taking full advantage of a rare Saturday off. He and Nathan were back together again after another summer spent living as single men. I knew Nathan had hooked up with a few guys over the summer, and I was guessing Gabe had, too. Their arrangement had worked out well enough the previous three years, allowing them the best of both worlds—a committed relationship when together and the freedom to do whatever they wanted to do when apart. Neither saw any reason to suddenly change it now.

The following Tuesday, Nathan and I added another concert to our YotC 3.0 list. The timing wasn't perfect; we both had early classes the following day, and none of our friends were able to join us. Still, we made it work. It was impossible for us to pass up the opportunity to see Muse live.

A couple weeks into the fall quarter, I met a new guy—at a liquor store, of all places, which should have given me a hint about what our one and only date would be like. He came over to my place to watch a movie, and I ended up getting drunk just to make him slightly interesting. To make matters worse, he wasn't just a colossal bore, he was also a horrible kisser. I tolerated him until the movie ended; unlike me, he had never seen *Now You See Me* before, and while it wasn't a particularly great movie, I figured he at least deserved to watch it all the way through so he could see the twist ending. The urge to just spoil it and send him on his way was great, but I resisted it. As soon as the credits started rolling, though, I got rid of him and invited one of my fuck buddies over instead. Sometimes dating just wasn't worth the trouble.

Like a well-oiled machine, Coop once again managed to get my yearly skateboarding edit ready in time for the now-traditional All Hallows' Eve release date. Knowing it would be difficult to top my Barcelona edit, I had decided to go a different route instead, filming in Los Angeles this time while there to skate in a few of the Summer X Games competitions. It wasn't as exotic as Barcelona, but it was still one of the best cities in the world for skateboarding, with plenty of great spots to hit. Perhaps I would do another flashy overseas skateboarding edit next year, but after two such edits in a row, I was happy with releasing something that was a bit more low-key for a change. And, as an added bonus, I left the city with a bronze medal and a silver medal, so it ended up being a pretty good trip.

I was anxious to release my snowboarding edit, but that was just because I was anxious to start snowboarding again, period. The inclusion of slopestyle in the Olympics had created an element of uncertainty that hadn't really existed in the sport before. Normally, I just had to worry about qualifying to compete in each individual contest. If, hypothetically, I ever failed to do so, I would just be unable to participate in the final round of that particular contest; my poor performance wouldn't affect any other ones. And I was usually lucky enough to be able to skip that process entirely because of my history of good results. Now, though, there was a competition on the schedule that essentially had *two* qualifying rounds. I would have to do well at the first few contests of the season just to be invited to Sochi, and even then, I wouldn't be guaranteed a chance to actually compete in the Olympic Games. To earn that honor, I would have to go

through a second round of qualifying during the Olympics. Essentially, I was about to be facing a process in which I would be trying to qualify for a chance to qualify.

For his part, Nathan did what he could to keep my mind off the matter, distracting me with Netflix marathons and parties—and sometimes even Netflix marathons about partying, as was the case when we discovered a hilariously over-the-top frat-life show called *Blue Mountain State*. Schoolwork also kept me busy, and I passed the rest of my waking hours skating or working out at the gym. If I couldn't start the snowboarding season yet, preparing for it was the next best thing.

Right before the final week of the fall quarter, Nathan and I finally got the chance to attend a Nine Inch Nails concert. It, too, was inconveniently held in the middle of the week, but if we could make it work for Muse, we could *definitely* make it work for one of our top ten favorite bands of all time. It was easily one of the best concerts we had seen in the three-year history of YotC, well worth the exhaustion we each suffered while attending classes the following morning. We both went on to ace all our finals, though, so I guess we managed to stay focused enough between our yawns.

For me, it had been the toughest quarter of my college career, but it hadn't ended up being as bad as I had initially feared it would be. Each class had consisted of a heavy workload that had kept me busy most of the quarter, but none of the work had been particularly challenging. I was glad to have it all out of the way; now I had an extremely easy winter quarter to look forward to, and my spring quarter didn't look particularly bad, either.

Which was a good thing, because qualifying for the Olympics would probably be anything but easy.

Chapter Twenty

The rules used to determine who would qualify for the Olympics were complicated, to say the least. I had already met the first requirement: finishing in the top thirty in at least one World Cup competition held between July of 2012 and January of 2014. From there, I would need to achieve a top-four finish in at least one of five separate contests that had been designated as Olympic qualifiers. Once that requirement was achieved, I would officially be in the running for consideration as a member of the United States Olympic snowboarding team, where a maximum of four spots would be up for grabs on the men's side. In order to determine which Americans would fill those spots, the candidates would be judged on a points-based system, using their two best results from the five events to determine their total out of a possible two thousand points. Up to three of the four spots could be filled using that so-called "objective criteria" alone. The fourth spot, as well as any spots left unfilled due to a lack of candidates meeting the objective criteria, could be filled using coaches' discretionary selections—and there weren't really any rules there, so the United States' head coach could essentially pick whomever he wanted at that point, regardless of their performance during the five qualifying events.

In other words, even if I completely sucked during each of the five qualifying events, I could still theoretically be added to the team as a discretionary selection based on my overall history of good results. But I didn't believe in leaving things to chance like that, and, of course, I always wanted to do my best at any given contest. By contrast, if I took first place at two or more of the five qualifying events, I would mathematically guarantee myself a spot on the team. Obviously, that was what I intended to do.

Naturally, I didn't make it easy on myself. At the first qualifying event—the Winter Dew Tour, held at Breckenridge—I fell on the next-to-last jump during my first of two runs, over-rotating a double cork I could practically do in my sleep most of the time. Meanwhile, some of my fellow competitors threw down bangers that gained them scores in the nineties. As the top qualifier, I would be the last rider to take a second run down the course, and when the second-to-last rider started his own run, I was sitting in eighth place.

While waiting at the starting gate, I pulled out my phone to select a good song to listen to during my run. A text message from Nathan was waiting for me.

Go big or go home! But either way, HAVE FUN!

He had attached a link to a YouTube video, and when I opened it, Queen's "Under Pressure" began playing. Grinning, I stuffed my phone back in my pocket, just as one of the contest officials gave me the okay to start my run whenever I was ready.

Gunnar was in first place, with a score of 95.75. I couldn't afford to be conservative. If I wanted to top his score, I would have to do more than just a safety run. Gunnar had included a triple in his run, and it had been a really clean one, at that. But he hadn't included *two* triples. And over-rotating the next-to-last jump had shown me I could do something bigger there. Something like a triple, which was usually reserved for the final jump. *Go big or go home.*

Pushing out of the starting gate, I made a last-minute decision to change up my line entirely. There wouldn't be a single thing about it that would be the same as my first run—well, unless I fell again, anyway. Might as well keep people guessing all the way down the mountain.

There were two jib sections at the top, each with three different rail options to hit. I had stuck to the rail at the far right of each section previously, but this time, I hit the down rail in the middle of the first section, then veered to the left to hit the wall-ride feature in the second section. So far, so good. Tackling the first two jumps was the next order of business. Fifty-five feet in height, they were perfect for doing any number of tricks, but this time, I chose to do two different Upchuck variations on them, spinning one way on the first jump and spinning the opposite way on the second while switching up the grabs on each. On the second, I even tweaked my board a bit, adding some extra style to the trick. Nathan *had* told me to have fun, after all.

Next up was an unusual jib feature my fellow snowboarders and I had been referring to as the chicken coop. I couldn't switch things up too much there because both sides were identical—just two gap-to-wall-ride features over angled wooden structures that looked sort of like, well, chicken coops—but I hit the right one this time instead of the left one, then veered to the left to hit the final jib section, where I opted for the A-frame rail instead of the rainbow rail I had hit during my previous run. Now I just had to clear two more jumps, each sixty feet in height. As Freddie Mercury and David Bowie sang about the injustices of the world—okay, so aside from the opening few lines, "Under Pressure" wasn't exactly the most appropriate song to use as background music during a contest run—I initiated the first triple, my backside triple 1440. I usually did a Japan grab, but this time, just for fun, I did a truck-driver grab instead. After landing it cleanly, I crouched to maintain speed as I approached

the final jump. Traveling the opposite direction, I did a frontside triple 1620, pulling out the Japan grab I had just forsaken on the previous jump. A small cloud of snow formed at my ankles as I stomped the landing.

Braking at the finish corral, I stepped out of my bindings and stood my board up, showing off the names of my sponsors while waiting for my score. The crowd was going crazy, and Gunnar was comically bowing down to me. I knew he meant it with respect, and if I hadn't been wearing mittens and facing multiple cameras, I would have comically flipped him off in response—again, with respect. Removing my earbuds, I heard the announcer scream “What. Just. *Happened?*” and “I think my brain just exploded.” It reminded me why I had always preferred not being able to hear the announcers.

This was always the worst part for me—the part where I had to wait for a score from the judges amidst an onslaught of exaggerated praise I never really felt like I truly deserved, all while trying not to look too embarrassed, too proud, too dismissive, or too unappreciative. Walking that tightrope after a run could sometimes be more exhausting than the run itself. Sometimes I delayed the process of removing my goggles and helmet just so I'd have things to hide behind. Hearing people make a fuss about me never stopped being extremely fucking awkward, even when I landed runs that progressed the sport and were arguably worthy of such praise.

I received a perfect score of 100 from the judges, who could afford to go overboard now because the contest was over. Gunnar gave me a high-five, then stepped aside so someone from the television crew could interview me.

“Shane, what was it like standing up there in the starting gate, in eighth place, knowing you only had one run left and needed to better a 95.75? That's not a position you often find yourself in. Did you feel any pressure?”

“Oh, I felt some pressure, sure. Heard it, too.” No one else would understand my answer, but I knew Nathan would.

“I mean, it was okay, I guess. You could have held that Japan grab a bit longer.”

Chuckling, I transferred my phone to my left ear and fished my hotel key card out of my right pocket. At least I could count on Nathan to have the appropriate reaction. And he was right; I *could* have held that Japan grab a bit longer.

“The announcer yelled ‘NBD’ at the end of your run but never explained what it meant. Translation?”

“Never been done.”

“Oh. Well, guess that could apply to a lot of things about that run. I think it’s safe to say no one has ever won a snowboarding contest while listening to ‘Under Pressure’ before. Although I’m not sure there was actually a need to change that.”

“Hey, it wasn’t my idea. You’re the one who sent me the link.”

“I didn’t expect you to make it your personal anthem for the run. Shit, you should be given another one of those cups just for managing to land a run while listening to *that*, of all things.”

The cup he was referring to wasn’t the protective kind that was meant to be tucked in a jockstrap, although that *would* be an interesting trophy to receive. It was the Dew Cup, a wood-and-metal trophy that came up to my knee and was shaped, unsurprisingly, like a drinking cup. Actually, it looked different every year. The wood-and-glass one I had received the previous year hadn’t been a cup at all, even though it had still been called the Dew Cup. The two I had received prior to that had been large metal chalices I could have actually sipped champagne out of, if I had been old enough to legally drink champagne at the time of those wins. This year’s win had also netted me a pretty sweet custom watch and a Viking helmet, the latter being a nod to Breckenridge’s long-standing tradition of holding a weeklong Viking-themed festival at the beginning of every year, centering around Ullr, also known as the “Norse God of Snow.” Oh, and I had also pocketed twenty-five thousand dollars, which most of my sponsors would be matching. And, of course, I was one step closer to securing my spot on the United States Olympic snowboarding team. All in all, not a bad day.

“We’re going to have to find something better for you to listen to at the next comp. I mean, if you were going to listen to Queen, you could have at least chosen ‘We Are the Champions’ or ‘We Will Rock You’ instead.”

“And if I were going to listen to David Bowie?”

“I think ‘Under Pressure’ is probably the only David Bowie song you’d ever listen to. And it’s about the only one I know of offhand, too. Oh, and that one about life on Mars. What’s the name of that one?”

I chuckled, knowing he was being sarcastic. “I think it’s called ‘Life on Mars?’”

“Really? Doesn’t sound right to me. Anyway, yeah, that’s about the extent of my knowledge of David Bowie’s discography.”

“Maybe I should just stick to hard rock.”

“Some hip-hop thrown in now and again never hurt anyone, either.”

“That’s not what the politicians say.”

“Eh, they don’t get a vote. Speaking of hip-hop, though, I’m hearing a distinct lack of it in the background.”

“That’s because I’m in my hotel room.”

“Shouldn’t you be out celebrating with everyone right now?”

“I’m going to meet up with them in a bit. I wanted to talk to you first. And I had to drop off my board and get changed, anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess your snowboarding gear isn’t exactly the ideal attire for a party.”

“A costume party, maybe. But not the type of party I’ll be attending.”

“And if you went to a costume party dressed as a snowboarder, most people probably wouldn’t find it ironic; they’d just think you were missing the point.”

“Ironically.”

“Exactly. Anyway, go have fun! We can talk more later. And if you end up having too much fun, try not to do the Upchuck in that nice new trophy of yours. Find a trashcan or a toilet instead.”

“Heh. I’ll keep that in mind. Later, Napster.”

“Later, St. Louis!”

The second Olympic qualifying event was held at Copper Mountain the following weekend. Slower conditions prevented me from being able to throw down the same run I had won the Dew Tour with, but a more conservative run still put me at the top of the podium at the end of the first round. During the second round, Gunnar threw down a run I thought was good enough to best my score, but the judges disagreed, slotting him into second place instead—and consequently securing me the win.

Taking advantage of my victory lap, I switched up my run with a few tricks that were a bit less technical and a bit more stylish, just to see how they would

score. Back-to-back Upchucks and a triple were still included, but I dropped the third double I had done in my first run in favor of a switch method, one of my favorite tricks of all time. I also changed up my line in the jib section a bit. Surprisingly, the new run actually bumped my score up a point.

When the score came in, it actually excited me more than winning the contest had. Usually, I couldn't afford to take such a risk, especially when I only had two runs to play with. The common assumption among snowboarders was that judges thought of tricks like the switch method as throwaway tricks: ones that should only be done during runs that, for whatever reason, were going to essentially be thrown away. If a rider fell in the jib section of a course and wanted to just put on a show for the crowd on his way down the slope, that would be an appropriate time to bust out tricks like the switch method and the laid-out backflip; after all, he wasn't going to get a good score for a run that included a fall, anyway. Likewise, if a rider was taking a victory lap, that would also be a good time to bust out such tricks, because there was no need to bother trying to improve upon a score that had already solidified a win. But anytime a rider was actually trying to get a good score on the board, he had to bring his most difficult tricks to the table, and that meant always choosing doubles and triples over methods and backflips. With only three or four jumps available on any given course, "wasting" one on a trick that was more stylish than technical was generally understood to be just a small step up from skipping that jump entirely—as far as the judges were concerned, at least. But *this* team of judges had just proven that a winning run could indeed include both, and I couldn't have possibly been more stoked about that.

I loved doing things like doubles and triples. They were undeniably fun, and I enjoyed the challenge of trying to come up with new ways to progress the sport. But I didn't want to do the spin-to-win thing all the time. I didn't want the *style* part of slopestyle to become an afterthought. Style was such an important element of snowboarding, and I tried to make sure that element was always incorporated in my runs. A run could be infused with style in a number of ways—unique grabs, board tweaks while in midair, interesting line choices—and it wasn't really the kind of thing that could be taught or mimicked. But methods, in particular, were stylish in a way that made them almost like the snowboarding equivalent of fingerprints. I could watch the silhouette of a friend doing a method and just *know* which friend it was, based solely on the style of the trick. It was also, however, one of those tricks that looked really fucking easy. So easy, in fact, that it had probably inspired more than one couch potato—the kind who had never even seen a snowboard up close—to think "I could do *that*!" without realizing just how difficult it actually

was to control such a trick and make it look good, especially when doing it switch. If I could actually win contests with a run that included tricks like the switch method, which I usually reserved for edits and times when I was just leisurely cruising down a slope with no judges in sight, I was definitely going to start throwing them more often.

Then again, maybe this judging panel was just high. We *were* in Colorado, after all; it was a distinct possibility.

“So, how does it feel to know you’re officially an Olympian now?”

Oh, right. I was officially an Olympian now. It had taken Nathan saying those words for the truth to actually sink in.

“Honestly, I hadn’t really even thought about it until you said that just now.”

“Well, get used to it, St. Louis. I have a feeling a lot of people are going to be acting like it’s a pretty big fucking deal for some strange reason. So, what did you listen to during your run?”

“‘Everything in Its Right Place’ for the first run and ‘Battlestar Scralatchtica’ for the second.”

“Radiohead and Incubus. Nice. A bit mellow, though. In both cases.”

“Eh, with the conditions, it just felt like that kind of day.”

“Hey, I’m not knocking it. Anything’s better than ‘Under Pressure.’”

“Well, maybe not *anything*. That would include country music. And gospel. And Lady Gaga.”

“Ugh. Okay, yeah, you’re right. *Most things* are better than ‘Under Pressure.’ Sweet trophy, by the way. It’s like they made it just for you.”

“I know, right? How weird is that?” Snowboarding events typically offered some pretty interesting and unique trophies, and the Sprint U.S. Snowboarding Grand Prix was no exception. The previous year, I had won a guitar, which I had subsequently learned how to play. This year, I had been presented with, of all things, a skate deck.

“Very weird. You never win contests.”

Chuckling, I nodded at a reporter who had just made eye contact with me from the other end of the hotel lobby. “I’m being summoned for an interview, so I’ll call you back later.”

“I’ll give you a hundred bucks if you can convince him you were riding to Tool’s ‘Hooker With a Penis.’ Or her, I guess. In which case, even better.”

“Him. And you’re on, Napster.”

“I figured you wouldn’t be able to resist that offer. I know you need the money. Just keep the call going so I can listen in.”

“Sure. Talk to you again afterward. Better be ready to cough up that Benjamin.”

I left the phone on and tucked it in a pocket of my snowboarding jacket, where it would be as close to the reporter’s mouth as I could possibly get it. Then I approached and shook his hand.

Less than ten minutes later, I was one hundred dollars richer. Luckily, the reporter somehow “ran out of room” and ended up having to omit “unnecessary details” from the article he published a day after our interview. Apparently, my playlist information was the only thing that qualified as an unnecessary detail. I wouldn’t have minded if he had included it, but it was probably for the best that he hadn’t had the balls to do so. Can’t have the gay snowboarder mentioning penises, after all. Think of the children.

As usual, Nathan returned to Denver in time to ring in the new year with me. The winter quarter began the following Monday, the same day my week-old snowboarding edit passed the two-million-views mark. A few days after that, I was back in Breckenridge for the third Olympic qualifying event.

The event might have been held at the same place I had competed at just a month earlier, but things couldn’t have been more different this time. Weather was an issue the entire weekend, with storms producing heavy winds and dumping plenty of fresh snow on the course. After the qualifying round, officials made the decision to cancel the event, and, controversially, they also decided not to use the results from the qualifying round as the final results. Instead, we were all right back where we had started at the beginning of the week. For me, that wasn’t a big deal, but the same couldn’t be said for the other guys, all of whom were still trying to secure a spot on the team. The women weren’t much better off; only one woman had punched her ticket to Sochi so far. We all banded together to appeal the decision, and the officials ultimately opted to reschedule the event for the following weekend at Mammoth Mountain. The catch was that a doubleheader of Olympic qualifying events had already been scheduled to take place at Mammoth that weekend, so now the

schedule was going to be even more hectic. Ironically, the third Olympic qualifying event had originally been scheduled for Northstar but had been moved to Breckenridge due to a lack of snow in that part of California.

I had already decided to bow out of the Mammoth events. I had that luxury, after all, and with the events taking place in California, I would have had to miss at least one day of classes in order to attend. I was already going to have to miss quite a few classes while at the Olympics. I didn't want to make matters even worse with a trip to Mammoth that wasn't exactly necessary. For my fellow snowboarders, though, it was one of the craziest, most jam-packed weekends of competition ever. After watching the live stream of the events and hearing them talk about it, I was kind of bummed that I had missed it.

That Sunday, the remaining three slots on the United States Olympic snowboarding team were filled. It was a strong team that left me—and practically everyone else in the country—feeling really good about our chances at Sochi. My teammates were guys I had known and ridden with for years, and we were pretty close to each other. Two of them were actually brothers: Cody and Casey. The third, Eli, was a baby-faced eighteen-year-old, making him the youngest on the team in terms of age *and* looks. We affectionately treated him like our kid brother, but he wasn't to be underestimated; the dude could shred. In fact, all three of them knew what it felt like to stand on one of the steps of the podium, with Cody and Casey each making their way to the top step at one of the three events at Mammoth. The Canadian and Norwegian teams were also solid, though. A Canadian snowboarder had just barely edged Casey out of first place at the third Mammoth event, and Gunnar was always a threat. The first-ever Olympic snowboard slopestyle contest was shaping up to be a pretty exciting event.

I had thought the demand for interviews and photo shoots had been insane during previous seasons, but with this season leading into an Olympics debut, things were even crazier than usual. I accommodated as many requests as possible, either alone or with the other guys. Invariably, my sexuality would come up as a topic of discussion before the end of each interview or photo shoot I attended. It was also a frequent topic of discussion on social media. I was the only openly gay athlete the United States was sending to Sochi. Hell, I was one of only eight openly gay athletes who would be competing in the Olympics, period, and I was the only male in that group. Everyone seemed eager to hear if I was worried about my safety in the weeks leading up to the event. It probably would have made for a better sound bite if I had said I was worried, but the truth was that I was really just sad—sad that, in 2014, I even

had to be asked such questions in the first place. I didn't mind talking about my sexuality, but talking about the Olympics, and snowboarding in general, would have been much more appropriate. Not that I could completely blame the media, of course. After all, the Russian government had started the conversation. The media was just continuing it.

More importantly, though, it saddened me to know that the LGBT community in Sochi had a mayor who had claimed his city was entirely devoid of LGBT citizens. I just had to visit the place; they had to live there. And, from what I could gather, it wasn't much of a life at all. Still, I really didn't have any fears about my safety. All eyes were going to be on Russia during the Olympics, and, presumably, Vladimir Putin would want his country to be seen in the best possible light during the event. From a political standpoint, it would pay for him to at least pretend to be tolerant of gay people. And if there was one thing Vladimir Putin seemed to care about, it was politics.

Chapter Twenty-One

I arrived in Sochi on January thirtieth. The day before, I had preemptively tweeted out my thanks to all my sponsors for their continued support. Due to one of the rules of the IOC, I wouldn't be able to talk about them again until the end of February, and they wouldn't be able to talk about me, either. Athletes who failed to adhere to the rule, known as Rule Forty, could be disqualified from the Games or even have any earned medals stripped from them, depending on when the violation occurred. It was lame, but beyond voicing our dissent—as many athletes had during the 2012 Summer Olympics in London—there really wasn't anything we could do about it.

Snowboard slopestyle was one of the first events that would be held during the Games, and as my fellow competitors and I started doing practice runs on the Rosa Khutor Extreme Park course where the event would be contested, one thing quickly became clear: it was gnarly. The rails were slick, the kickers were high, and the course was just fast in general. Many of us had concerns that, in all three cases, the course designers had overshot the mark. Admittedly, snowboarding was an inherently dangerous sport, but we were professional athletes who were used to pushing the limits. It wasn't easy to intimidate us. This particular course, however, seemed unnecessarily risky, as if it had been designed to do just that. Gunnar overshot a jump on the first day of practice and fractured his pelvis, abruptly ending his Olympic experience days before the Opening Ceremony was scheduled to occur. A Swedish rider got hung up on one of the jibs and broke his wrist. Others fell but managed to walk away with only bumps and bruises. When I talked to Nathan that night, I joked that the Russian government had found a way of ingeniously endangering the life of the openly gay snowboarder without really getting their collective hands dirty. It was ironic that everyone had been concerned about my safety because of my sexuality but had completely forgotten to acknowledge the fact that I was willingly putting my life in danger every time I hurled myself through the air at breakneck speeds on a slopestyle or Big Air course.

We voiced our concerns about the course at the end of the first day of practice. One rider from Finland described the sensation of hitting the jumps as “leaping out of a plane without a parachute.” That seemed like hyperbole to me, but I did agree that some changes needed to be made to the course. It didn't really *scare* me, but the bottom line was that I didn't want to see anyone else get injured, and, obviously, I didn't want to get injured myself, either. We could

ride the course in its original form, but it wouldn't hurt to make some changes to it, and doing so would make the event safer for everyone, so there was really no reason *not* to modify it. The course officials promised to make some changes to the rails, provide a smoother transition to the jumps, and reduce the height of the kickers by a few feet. The following day's practice session gave us a chance to test out those changes, and, while a few riders still had concerns afterward, most of us agreed that the course was now in much better shape overall.

The qualifying round was held over two heats the day before the Opening Ceremony, with two runs for each rider per heat. I was in the second heat, and my first run, while purposely a bit conservative, was enough to secure me one of the four available slots for riders who would be advancing straight to the finals. Casey outscored me with a banger run, also advancing straight to the finals. Cody and Eli, who had both competed in the first heat, fell just short of top-four finishes. They would get one last chance to make it to the finals, but they would first have to get through the spectacle of the Opening Ceremony.

Unfortunately, for those of us on the United States Olympic team, getting through the spectacle of the Opening Ceremony meant wearing a truly hideous uniform, complete with a knit American-flag-emblazoned cardigan that was far too loud and busy for its own good. And a turtleneck. And sweatpants, of all things. Oh, and a reindeer hat. I didn't even want to know what a reindeer hat was, let alone wear one during an event that was being broadcast to the whole world. When I sent Nathan a picture of myself sporting the uniform, he quickly responded.

2 bad Ugly Sweater contest isn't Olympic sport. Our country would B shoe-in 4 gold.

I could always count on Nathan to bring the snark.

Despite the ridiculousness of the uniform, marching in the Opening Ceremony filled me with an overwhelming sense of pride. Walking across the Fisht Olympic Stadium with my teammates, I waved to the crowd and the cameras, holding six fingers high above my head. Earlier, I had tweeted a picture of myself holding up those same six fingers, along with a link to an article about Principle Six, a section of the Olympic charter that basically stated that all forms of discrimination were incompatible with the spirit of the Olympics.

I had wanted to ask Nathan to make me a rainbow-flag pin to wear while in Sochi, but I had figured he might not be comfortable making something that

could potentially put me in danger. Besides, one of the IOC's strict rules prohibited anything that could be misconstrued as a political, religious, or racial statement. Honestly, I doubted they would ever dare to kick an openly gay athlete out of the Games for simply wearing a rainbow-flag pin—not in 2014, when it was basically impossible to keep such things hidden. That seemed like a perfect way to start a public relations shitstorm they'd probably prefer to avoid having to deal with, especially since it was common knowledge that they had already bent the rule in the past to allow athletes to openly observe religious practices during the Games. But I couldn't be sure of that, and they had dodged direct questions about the matter.

Ultimately, I decided it would be best to find another way to show my support for the LGBT community. Nathan had pointed out that just being openly gay was an obvious show of support, but that didn't feel like enough to me. Holding up six fingers as a nod to Principle Six seemed like the perfect solution; the Russian government couldn't possibly consider it "propaganda," and the IOC couldn't exactly reprimand me for making a political statement when I was simply alluding to a section of their own charter. Granted, not everyone would notice or understand what I was doing, but that was where the tweeted picture and link came in. Scanning the crowd, I saw some people waving back at me, holding up six of their own fingers.

Great. I was starting the gay version of the *Hunger Games* salute. If this went viral, Vladimir Putin would be so fucking pissed.

It did go viral, but my salute ended up being the least of Vladimir Putin's problems during the Opening Ceremony. A malfunction had prevented a snowflake from turning into the fifth Olympic ring. Two Olympic officials had alluded to—and subtly condemned—Russia's LGBT propaganda law during their respective speeches. Concerns about Sochi's treatment of stray dogs had rightfully arisen, providing another reason for outrage. And, perhaps worst of all—for Vladimir Putin, anyway—people across the world were pointing out that, for a country so adamantly opposed to homosexuality, Russia's Opening Ceremony had been pretty gay. Generally speaking, I was opposed to the practice of declaring things "gay," but in this particular case, the irony was so great that I was willing to overlook the implied negative connotation. And the basic sentiment was true, after all; the Opening Ceremony had celebrated several notable gay Russians and could have easily been described as flamboyant and over the top, two descriptors commonly assigned to stereotypically gay men. Hell, for that matter, much of the Winter Olympics

was inherently flamboyant and over the top. One of the sports did, after all, rely heavily on a move called the twizzle.

The snowboard slopestyle semifinals were held the following day to determine who would take the remaining four spots in the finals, which were scheduled to take place just a few hours after the semifinals concluded. I awoke that morning to a text message from Nathan.

U got this, St. Louis! Can't w8 2 watch U show 'em how it's done! NO PRESSURE! HAVE FUN!

It would be nearly two in the morning in Colorado by the time the finals began, but I knew Nathan planned to stay up to watch a live stream of the event, anyway. My parents had said they were going to, as well. I was about to compete on the biggest stage the world of sports had to offer, and everyone who mattered to me would be watching live. Then, no matter how I did, the whole thing would be replayed in the United States later that day, when millions more would watch it on national television. Yeah, no pressure.

Cody and Eli managed to secure their places in the final, in which the United States would have four representatives, the most of any country. A combination of snowboarders from Canada, Norway, Great Britain, Sweden, and Japan rounded out the roster of twelve competitors who had made it all the way to the end. Three riders, including Casey, had scored higher than I had during the previous rounds, due in part to the fact that I had chosen to play things conservatively in my qualifying heat. I would be the ninth rider out of the gate, with the remaining three riders going after me, concluding with Casey. Admittedly, it was an unfamiliar position for me to be in, but there was a method to my madness—no pun intended. I had taken a conservative run in my qualifying heat to gauge how more stylish tricks like the method would be scored.

Unsurprisingly, I continued my habit of making things harder on myself during my first run, messing up a trick in the jib section that threw me off my line and forced me to skip the jump section entirely. I would have to rely on my second run to get the job done, and that meant I had a choice to make. Conventional wisdom suggested it would be best for me to throw down the most difficult run I could possibly do. If I went with a more stylish run instead, I would risk leaving valuable points on the table, and that was never a good idea. But stylish runs were more fun. And, once again, Nathan *had* advised me to have fun.

There was a third option, though: I could combine the two ideas. Of course, conventional wisdom would also suggest that I would have to be insane to do what I was considering doing. Or stupid. Or both. But conventional wisdom had also suggested that telling the world I was gay back in 2008 would have been the end of my professional career. Screw conventional wisdom. Go big or go home.

The course was made up of four separate sets of jibs and three jumps. On my second run, I capped off three of my most difficult rail tricks with a stylish method over the last jib. Gamble number one. Moving on to the jump section, I did a switch double backflip on the first jump. Always a crowd-pleaser, the trick was also known as a switch double wildcat and was not to be confused with a switch double cork. As I executed it, I did a bloody Dracula grab for extra style points. Gamble number two. Hitting the kicker of the second jump, I did a switch frontside triple 1620, grabbing roast beef. Stomping the landing, I continued on to the third jump. So far, so good. Launching off the kicker, I was already committed to my third gamble: a switch backside triple 1800 nose-to-tail grab, a triple-cork version of the Upchuck I had invented a few years earlier. I had been planning the trick in my head for a while now but had never tried it before—in a contest or elsewhere. In theory, it was easy enough; all I had to do was dip my shoulder a third time before landing and let muscle memory take care of the rest. But executing a trick was rarely as easy as dreaming it into existence. I thought I had enough speed to add that third cork, but the fact of the matter was that I wouldn't know until I tried. And choosing now, of all times, to take my first crack at the trick could easily cost me first place—or a place on the podium, period.

Luckily, I did have enough speed. After dipping my shoulder the third time, I spotted the landing, released my grab, and opened up at just the right time to stomp the trick and ride away cleanly. The crowd went crazy. So did the other snowboarders who were waiting at the finish corral. Lifting my goggles, I turned toward the large television screen mounted at the bottom of the course, waiting anxiously for my score.

The judges took their time trying to decide where to put me. It was hard to guess whether that was a good sign or a bad one, so I tried not to think about it at all. Finally, the score came in. I registered the roar of approval from the crowd before I realized what my score was: a 98.25. Just like that, I jumped from tenth place to first, bumping Cody down to second. But it was too soon to tell whether the gambles had truly paid off. There were still three competitors left to worry about.

The first of those three, a Japanese rider, fell doing a trick I had seen him execute perfectly hundreds of times before. He had messed up the same trick on his first run, and I could only assume it was because the pressure of the Olympics was getting to him. He ended up in last place, a spot that wasn't the least bit indicative of his true skills.

The second-to-last rider, hailing from Canada, landed his run but missed a grab on one trick and dragged a hand when he landed another. Both mistakes cost him; he ended up in fifth place.

That left Casey. One thing was now certain: one way or another, the first gold medal of the 2014 Winter Olympics would be handed out to a snowboarder from the United States. Casey was definitely capable of knocking me off the top step of the podium. His run was solid from top to bottom, including back-to-back doubles with difficult grabs and a switch backside triple 1440 stalefish. Stopping next to me at the finish corral, he high-fived me and leaned in to shout something in my ear over the cheers of the crowd. "Congratulations, man—that was so fucking sick!"

Again, the judges took their time deliberating. They had obviously liked my run, but Casey had done two doubles and a triple, whereas I had instead opted to stick to doing just two triples. Casey had also done a more difficult trick on the final jib. Both of our runs had been clean, and both of our runs had included difficult grabs. This could really go either way—it would depend entirely on whether the judges preferred style or spins.

Finally, the score came in: 96.75. It was enough to bump Cody down to third place but wasn't enough to edge me out of the top slot.

I had just won a gold medal at the Olympics.

Before that could fully sink in, someone from the American television crew rushed over to interview me. "Shane, you seem to pride yourself on being unpredictable. I can't remember the last time I saw you do the same exact run at two contests in a row. This run was no exception. What was that—three tricks we had never seen before? Four?"

"Four, yeah." They weren't all entirely new tricks, but it *was* the first time I had busted some of them out during a contest, so she was partially correct, at least.

"And one was a trick you invented, if I'm not mistaken? It reminded me of your LarSpin."

Ugh. I still hadn't been able to escape that name. "Yeah, except it's a triple, not a double. Otherwise, it's the same thing."

"And what do you call it?"

My attempt to suppress a grin failed miserably. "Well, it's a switch backside triple eighteen nose-to-tail grab, but I call it the Triple Upchuck." *You asked.*

"The Triple Upchuck?" Shuffling over to my side, she turned to face the camera, seemingly unaware that she was wrinkling her nose. "You heard it here first, folks. Shane Larson just threw down the Triple Upchuck to secure himself—and the United States—the first gold medal of the Olympics."

My grin widened as I thanked her. Once the camera was off me, I retrieved my phone from my jacket pocket and sent Nathan a text message.

Took a while, Napster, but U finally got ur wish. Some1 just said 'Shane Larson just threw down the Upchuck' on nat'l TV. At Olympics, no less. They added 'triple' 2 sentence, but I'm sure U won't mind.

Chapter Twenty-Two

With our sole Olympic event behind us, Casey, Cody, Eli, and I soon returned to the United States, weeks ahead of the Closing Ceremony. Aside from just wanting to get the complete Olympic experience, none of us could really think of a compelling reason to stick around for the remainder of the event. We didn't really have anything else to do in Sochi except watch the rest of the Games live, and staying all that time just to walk in the Closing Ceremony seemed silly. Practically every member of the American media wanted to talk to "the openly gay American snowboarder who won a gold medal just one day after boldly defying Russia's anti-gay propaganda law with a six-finger salute to equality," as well as "the two American brothers who helped him sweep the podium." Returning home and getting the press obligations out of the way while interest was still high seemed like the best thing to do. Besides, I needed to get back to Denver so I could start attending classes again. And reuniting with Nathan didn't sound like a bad idea, either.

Poor Eli was kind of cast aside and forgotten in the wake of the event, but he hadn't done poorly in Sochi by any means. Making it into the finals and ending up in seventh place was nothing to be ashamed of. I made sure to give him a shout-out at every stop Casey, Cody, and I made on our week-long press tour. I also managed to work "Triple Upchuck" into every interview, to the never-ending amusement of Nathan and the never-ending embarrassment of my mother. Nevertheless, both of my parents were extremely proud of me and made sure to tell me that to the point of exhaustion. Mine, not theirs.

Once the press obligations died down, I resumed my classes and started getting caught up on the lectures I had missed. My professors would have happily worked with me if I had missed any exams—an Olympic gold medal was essentially the ultimate doctor's note—but, luckily, that ended up not being an issue.

I still couldn't talk about my sponsors publicly, but Nathan surprised me with a party the Saturday before my birthday, and all my sponsors were in attendance, giving me the chance to at least thank them personally. During the party, Nathan wore a T-shirt he had designed himself, which read, "My best friend went to the Olympics and all I got was this lousy shirt." I was quick to assure him he could also have the ugly sweater, if he wanted it. Surprisingly, he didn't.

After taking time to talk to each of my sponsors—and most of the other guests in attendance, including my parents—I managed to sneak away for a few minutes to talk to Nathan privately. “Thanks for doing this for me. You didn’t have to go through all this trouble, but I appreciate it.”

“My pleasure, St. Louis. You deserve it. And I know it’s always easier for you to put up with people making a fuss about you when you’re drinking the whole time.”

“Damn straight.” I drained the rest of the glass of Stranahan’s I was holding, just to stress the point. “Who knew you could organize such a huge party on such short notice?”

“Who said anything about short notice? This was in the works before your Sochi-bound plane even left the tarmac.”

“Seriously? You started organizing a party before even knowing if there would be a reason to celebrate?”

“Becoming an Olympian is enough of a reason to celebrate, Shane. And besides, there was never a doubt in my mind that you would bring back the gold. I wasn’t going to waste precious days of planning and preparation waiting on a formality.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Confidence had nothing to do with it. More like common sense. It didn’t even have anything to do with how well I know you. There was never a doubt in *anyone’s* mind. I’m sure General Mills already had the Wheaties box planned days before the contest took place.” Aside from my parents, Nathan was the only person who knew I was going to be featured on the Wheaties box. General Mills couldn’t announce it yet because Rule Forty was still in effect. “And even when you messed up your first run, people were like, ‘Nah, that’s just Shane’s way of giving us a good show.’”

My face was burning, and it wasn’t just because of the alcohol. “Okay, you can stop at any time.”

Nathan flashed me a wide grin. “Sorry, St. Louis. See, that’s the real reason I threw this party for you: so I could get you liquored up and take advantage of a rare opportunity to tell you just how awesome I think you are. After all, you probably won’t remember this conversation tomorrow, anyway.”

“Oh, I’ll remember. And the next time you win some big award for your artwork, just be ready for me to return the favor.”

His grin grew even wider. “Eh, I’ll have no one to blame but myself.”

“Damn straight.”

“It’s okay. I got used to you making me blush years ago.”

Guess I could say the same thing.

He kept his eyes locked on me as he knocked back the rest of his drink. Back inside the club my sponsors had rented out for the party, the band was playing the opening riff of a well-known rock song. “Your sponsors really came through on the entertainment.”

“I know, right? I can’t believe these guys actually agreed to do a private gig just for me.”

“I can.” He idly spun his glass between his hands as we listened to the rest of the song. “Decided whether you’re going to get that Olympic Rings tattoo yet?”

“Nah. I probably won’t, though. I know it’s sort of a tradition among Olympians, but I’m not really sold on the idea.”

“Eh, fuck tradition. Do whatever you want to do. You always have in the past. And I mean that as a compliment, you know.”

“I know. Thanks.”

“Too bad, though. For them, I mean.” He nodded toward the entrance. “It would have made for some great entertainment if I had hired a tattoo artist to do your tattoo tonight so they could all be witnesses to your pain and suffering.”

“Probably would have gotten even more people to come if you had been able to list that as a selling point.” The band launched into another popular song, eliciting cheers from the crowd. “I’m still not sure how you managed to pull all this off without me finding out about it.”

“Well, I *can* keep a secret, you know. Even from you. But only when I have a really fucking good reason to do so. I’d say this qualifies.” He tapped his glass against my shoulder. “Come on, let’s get back inside. Looks like we could both use a refill, and they’re playing our song.”

“Since when do we have a song?”

“Work with me here, St. Louis. I’m trying to go for that perfect-closing-line thing.”

“Sorry. I couldn’t tell without the David Caruso–style sunglasses and the Who screaming in the background.”

“Unfortunately, my pull isn’t as great as yours is yet. I can’t get famous rock bands to agree to follow me around and play me out like you can.”

“See, now *that’s* a perfect closing line.”

“And now you’ve ruined it.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Nathan had been helping me pack, but now he was just staring at me, mouth agape, holding a pair of my goggles in his hand.

“I mean, you have to be kidding. Right?”

“No, I’m not kidding. It’s the perfect solution.”

“Shane, I can’t go with you to Switzerland. I mean, it’s really cool that you would even ask me to, but seriously, there’s no way I could do that.”

“Give me one good reason why you can’t. So I can shut it down, I mean.”

“Well, for one thing, I don’t even have a passport. I’ve heard they’re kind of mandatory for overseas travel. And they take weeks to obtain. We don’t have weeks.”

“Let my sponsors worry about that. Next?”

“I’m not a filmer.”

“Oh, come on, Nathan. If that’s the best you can come up with, this is going to be easier than I thought. I’ve seen what you can do with a camera. ‘Not a filmer,’ my ass.”

“You’ve seen my *photography*. I haven’t exactly been sitting in a director’s chair all this time.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t. Besides, I don’t need a director. I just need a filmer.”

“Which, again, I’m not.”

“So your pictures will move for once. Big deal. I’m sure you’ll adapt quickly.”

“I don’t even have the proper equipment for that sort of thing.”

“Again, let my sponsors worry about that. Any other concerns you want me to dismiss before you give in and agree to this?”

“Shane, I’m not Coop.”

“Oh, I know exactly who you are, Nathan. And I’m not asking you to be anyone else. Look, the bottom line is that Coop won’t be joining me on this trip. Apparently, the dude thinks he needs more than a day to recover from appendicitis. Ridiculous, right?” I had gotten the call less than half an hour ago. Inviting Nathan to accompany me on my spring break trip to Switzerland, where I would be filming some new stuff for my sponsors, had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, but probably one of my most inspired ones. Now I just had to get *him* to see that. “But he’s made up his mind, and it’d be a waste for me to cancel this trip after my sponsors have spent who knows how much money arranging it. You wouldn’t want me to have to disappoint my sponsors, would you?”

Nathan chuckled and shook his head. “Are you seriously trying to guilt-trip me right now?”

“Well, I mean, my sponsors *did* help you plan that party for me. Returning the favor by taking over for Coop seems like the least you could do to thank them.”

Grinning, Nathan stuck my goggles inside my helmet, then tucked the helmet in my gear bag, right between the bindings of my board. It wasn’t the first time he had helped me pack. He knew the drill. “You play dirty, St. Louis, you know that?”

“Is it working?”

“All right, you’ve got yourself a filmer.”

“Sweet. I knew I’d wear you down eventually.”

“Yeah, well, I should know by now that it’s impossible for me to say no to you. Still not sure how you plan to get around the passport issue, though.”

“Like I said, my sponsors will handle it. Passports can be obtained quickly under the right circumstances. You just have to know someone who can pull some strings to make it happen. They did it for Coop once when he forgot to renew his passport. I’m sure they can do it for you, too. But I’d better call them now so they can get the ball rolling before it’s too late.”

“All right. I’ll finish packing your bag while you do that. But you know you’re going to have to help *me* pack now, too, right?”

“Eh, it’s a small price to pay to have the perfect travel companion.”

“You’re just saying that so I’ll let you have the window seat again.”

“Damn. Busted.”

“No need for flattery, St. Louis. As we’ve already established, it’s impossible for me to say no to you. I think it’s those eyes of yours. My grandmother was right when she said they were magical.”

To Nathan’s surprise, one of my sponsors did indeed manage to get him a passport in less than forty-eight hours. Even after I placed the passport in his hand, he still had trouble believing it was real. Once we landed in Switzerland, though, it finally started to sink in. We spent the first day of the trip recovering from the long flight. Since we couldn’t get any filming done that day, I took Nathan to the Kunsthau Zürich museum instead. We spent a few hours there, then returned to our hotel to get some much-needed sleep.

The following day, we made the short trip to Laax, the resort we would be filming at. Nathan was still kind of nervous about acting as my filmer for the week, but once I watched his footage of my first few tricks at the terrain park, I knew I had been right to entrust him with the task. Sure, he wasn’t as experienced as Coop was, but he had natural talent on his side, and that was worth at least as much. Besides, Coop could still help put together the actual edit if necessary. He just couldn’t handle the filming himself this time.

Things went well the first two days; between Laax and its adjoining kid-brother of a resort, Flims, we got plenty of great footage to play with. But on the third day—the last before we planned to move to another nearby resort, Davos—I got tangled up in the air while trying a new grab that messed up my rotation and kept me from clearing the knuckle of the landing. The compression threw me off-balance, and as I fell backward, my head slammed hard against the ground. I heard Nathan shouting my name, then caught a glimpse of him tossing his camera aside and running toward me as I tumbled head-over-heels down the hill. Then it was lights-out time.

“Shane! Shane! *Wake up, Shane!*”

As I slowly opened my eyes, two Nathans merged into one. The color had drained from his face. He looked like he was about to throw up. And he wasn’t even the one who had crashed.

“Shane! Can you hear me?”

“I think people in France can hear you, Nathan.”

His right hand was resting on my chest. When I tried to sit up, he applied some pressure to stop me.

“Don’t move. Paul’s on his way.”

Paul was a doctor who always joined Coop and me when we went to film in the backcountry. Essentially, he was part of my crew, paid by my sponsors to keep me safe. He didn’t follow me around like a shadow, but he was never far away, just in case something happened. I had given Nathan his number before we had left Denver on Friday, hoping he would never have to use it.

“How long was I out for?”

“A good minute or so. Shane, I was so scared that...” He shook his head, refusing to finish the sentence.

“Nathan, I’m fine. Really.” I had a nasty headache, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle. “I wasn’t out for very long. I might have a mild concussion, but that’s about it.” This wasn’t my first rodeo. I knew how these things worked.

“A *mild* concussion?! Isn’t that a—damn it, what’s the word?—an oxymoron? That’s a *brain injury*, Shane. There’s nothing *mild* about it.”

“And yet that’s what they call it.” When I tried to move my arm, Nathan pressed even more firmly against my chest. “Relax. I’m just going to remove my helmet.”

Nathan relaxed his arm but kept his hand in place. Lifting my head, I reached up and carefully pulled my helmet off. The little bit of color that had returned to Nathan’s face immediately disappeared again.

“Fuck! Still want to try to convince me you’re fine?”

Turning the helmet over, I realized what he was talking about. The impact from my fall had split the back of my helmet in half, all the way through to the padding underneath.

“Well, I’m doing better than my helmet is, don’t you think?”

“This isn’t funny, Shane. Look at that thing! If anything ever happened to you...”

I tossed the helmet aside and locked my eyes on his. “Nathan, I’m fine, okay?”

“I’ll let Paul be the judge of that, if you don’t mind. Hell, even if you do, too bad. Damn it, where the fuck is he, anyway?”

“Right behind you.”

Nathan followed my gaze to Paul, who dropped a medical bag on the ground as he crouched beside us. “Finally. Convince Shane he isn’t invincible for me, will you?”

“How long was he out for?”

“About a minute.”

Paul turned to me. “How do you feel?”

“I have a headache, but I’ll get over it.”

“No nausea?”

“No.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I got hung up on a jump and hit the knuckle. Nathan shouted my name and ran toward me, then I blacked out.” Glancing back at Nathan, I added, “Hope the camera still works.”

“Fuck the camera. I’ll pay for the damage myself if I have to. All I care about is making sure you’re all right.” Nathan looked at Paul with worried eyes that were practically begging for good news. “*He is* going to be all right, right, Paul?”

Paul gave me one more quick inspection. “I’ll keep an eye on him, but everything seems okay. If he suffered a concussion, it was a very mild one.”

I flashed Nathan a grin. “See? Told you mild concussions were a thing.”

“Shouldn’t you do a CT scan or something?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary in this case. Aside from the brief loss of consciousness and the headache, he’s not exhibiting any symptoms of a concussion.”

“*He* is right here, you know.”

Paul chuckled. “Okay, add irritability to the list of symptoms. Still, I think your friend here is going to be just fine.”

Nathan exhaled sharply, his shoulders visibly relaxing. His hand was still on my chest.

“Can I get up now, or do you want me to lie in the snow until it soaks through *all* the layers of my clothing?”

He removed his hand and helped me to my feet, then almost knocked me back down again with the force of his embrace. “I’ve never been so happy to have someone snap at me in my life.”

I was done riding for the day. My helmet obviously needed to be replaced, and if I had tried to take another crack at the jump I had attempted earlier, Nathan probably would have broken my board, too. He insisted on taking me back to the hotel so I could get some rest.

After leading me to my bed, Nathan went to get me a glass of water. When he returned a couple minutes later, he also had two tablets of acetaminophen cupped in one hand.

“Take these.”

I shook my head. “Nathan, I told you, I’m fine. I can handle a headache. This is what I do for a living. It’s not the first time I’ve fallen.”

“Just humor me, okay?”

Chuckling softly, I held out my hand. Nathan gave me the pills, and I stuffed them in my mouth before seizing the glass, taking two big gulps of water, and handing it back to him. He seemed satisfied as he set it aside.

Turning off the bedside lamp, Nathan rose from the bed and walked to the other side of the room, where his backpack was hanging on the back of a chair. “Get some rest. I’ll just read for a while.”

“Turn on the TV. I’m sure we can find something to watch.”

“It says online that you’ll heal faster if you avoid stimulation from things like television shows and video games.”

“You actually researched concussions?”

“Of course I researched concussions, Shane! Damn it, you scared the hell out of me today with that crash! When I got to you, and you were just lying there, unresponsive... I don’t think I’ve ever been more scared in my entire life. In fact, I know I haven’t. I thought you... Well, anyway, you insisted on taking care of me last year, even after I tried to assure you it wasn’t necessary. Now it’s your turn to let me repay the favor. And unless you tell me our friendship

will be over for good if I dare to help you, that's exactly what I'm going to do, period."

Smiling, I carefully leaned back against the stack of pillows on my bed. "Now who's acting irritable?"

Nathan sighed. "Shane..."

I held up a hand in defeat. "Okay, Napster, you win. We both know I'd never be able to make good on that sort of threat, anyway. But you *did* hear Paul, right? I probably don't have a concussion, so there's really no reason for you to worry."

"I'm sure Paul's good at his job and everything, but you'll have to forgive me for being skeptical of his diagnosis. *You* might trust him, but I'm not about to let my best friend's welfare hinge on a 'probably' from a guy I barely know."

"All right, Dr. Pearce. You're forgiven."

He shook his head and turned away from me. "Very funny."

"Nathan, look at me."

When he turned back around, he was clutching a paperback book he had just retrieved from his backpack, gripping it so tightly it was bent in the shape of an S.

"Hey, relax, okay? That book didn't cause my crash."

Looking down, he loosened his grip on the book and tossed it on his bed. "You know, I know you think I just had my hand on your chest out there to keep you from moving, but that's not true. I had my hand on your chest so I could feel your heartbeat. When you were unconscious, that's all I had to cling to."

"Look, I'm right here, okay? We're having a normal conversation. Granted, maybe it's a bit more tense than our usual conversations, but given the circumstances, I think that's understandable. I can count to ten. I know what day it is. I only see one of you, so my vision is fine. *I'm* fine, Nathan, okay? You don't have to worry about me."

"Easier said than done, Shane."

"You've seen me crash before, Nathan. What's different about this one?"

"What's different is that I've never been *right there* at the time of the crash before. That minute you were out for was the longest fucking minute of my life, Shane."

“Funny. For me, it went by in an instant.”

The look of exasperation on his face wiped the smile off mine.

“Sorry. Look, all kidding aside, if I haven’t made it clear yet, I really *do* appreciate your concern, okay? I’m still confident that I’m fine, but it’s nice to know you care.”

“Of course I care. You didn’t already know that?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m just saying...” Sighing, I shook my head and ran my fingers through my hair. “Damn. So this is what it feels like to actually not be on the same page as you for once. Can’t say I like it. Good thing we have a head injury to blame.”

“You were saying...?”

“Oh. Right. Yes, of course I know you care about me. I’ve always known that. It’s just... It’s not just that you don’t *have* to worry about me, it’s also that I don’t *want* you to worry about me. Because I care about you, too, and I don’t want to be the reason you go through that sort of stress. The longest fucking minute of your life? The scariest moment of your life? I don’t want to be the impetus for moments like that in your life.”

“Ooh, impetus. Good word. Maybe you really *are* fine, after all.”

“As I’ve been saying all along. Anyway, look, my life is inherently risky. Every time I strap into my board, I’m putting myself in danger. I thought you understood that already.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that, trust me.”

“Then why are you suddenly worrying about me now?”

“*Now*? Shane, I’ve worried about what you do for a living since the moment I saw that Mt. Baker road gap poster in your dorm room freshman year. That thing’s fucking insane, and you just told me you want to hit it one day like it was the most natural thing in the world. That’s when I realized you’re not like me. I mean, we’re similar in so many ways, but you’re fucking fearless, Shane. And I’m always worried that’s going to get you into trouble. I just usually manage to hide it better.”

“So why have you never said anything to me about it before? Your concerns, I mean?”

“What would be the point? I knew it would just make you feel bad. Which is exactly what I’ve done now. I never meant to make you feel guilty when I

said those things about how scary today was for me. I was just too shaken to control the things I was blurting out of my mouth.”

“You can tell me anything, though. Even if it makes me feel bad.”

“I know. But snowboarding is your passion. It’s what you love. It’s who you are. I would never try to take that away from you. I’m a big boy, St. Louis. I can suck it up and deal with a bit of stress on the days you’re riding. It’s a small price to pay for your friendship.”

I smiled at him, feeling a bit better. For some reason, hearing him call me by that silly nickname made me feel like things were suddenly back to normal. I’d take silly over life-and-death serious any day. “And I guess living with the fact that you worry about me is a small price to pay for your friendship, Napster.”

“Good. Now that that’s settled, will you please get some rest? You’re supposed to be giving your brain a break, not stimulating it by coming up with words like *impetus* to use in a conversation.”

“As words go, *impetus* really isn’t *that* unusual. But sure, I’ll get some rest. Who am I to ignore my doctor’s orders?”

“Well, if I’m going to play doctor with anyone, I guess it might as well be you.”

After donning a pair of imaginary sunglasses and imitating the primal “*YEAH!*” from the Who’s “Won’t Get Fooled Again” in response to Nathan’s one-liner, I closed my eyes and quickly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Paul checked on me again the following morning—at Nathan’s insistence—and gave me a clean bill of health, now more convinced than before that I hadn’t suffered a concussion, after all. Nathan seemed more willing to accept the diagnosis this time. Maybe it was because of the talk we’d had the previous night, or maybe it was just because sleep had calmed his nerves a bit. Whatever the reason, I was glad he was feeling less concerned about my health now.

Even so, I decided to cut the snowboarding portion of our trip short. I figured Nathan could use a few more days’ worth of distance from my crash before being forced to think about me putting myself in that kind of danger again, and I knew it would be risky—well, riskier than usual—for me to hit my head a second time so soon after the previous day’s injury. Besides, we had gotten plenty of footage during our first two days of filming, so it wasn’t like the trip was going to end up being a total bust. I was sure Coop and I could salvage an edit out of what we had to work with. And there was something else I wanted to do during our trip, anyway.

After Paul left our hotel room, I told Nathan to pack his stuff so we could go.

“Go where?”

“I’m done snowboarding for the week. We don’t have any reason to stay here any longer.”

“Oh. So we’re going back home?”

He tried to sound neutral about the idea, but I could tell he would be disappointed if his suspicion turned out to be correct. Luckily for him, it wasn’t.

“Hell no. There’s no way I’m going to let a little crash ruin our spring break.”

“Oh. Cool. So where are we going, then?”

I had planned to keep it a surprise—just smile and coyly say “spoilers,” delighting in teasing him the same way he had delighted in teasing me during our trip to Pittsburgh—but I couldn’t resist telling him right away. Not after I had spent the previous day being deprived of his infectious smile. “You didn’t honestly think I would get you this close to Paris and not take you to the Louvre, did you?”

“Wait, what? You’re taking me to the Louvre? Seriously?”

“Well, I mean, *if* you want to go, that is.” Taking Nathan to the Louvre had always been part of my plan for the week. I was just moving up the timetable a bit. The extra time would come in handy, because there were plenty of other museums and landmarks to visit in Paris, and I wanted Nathan to get to see as many of them as possible.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Yeah, on second thought, never mind. I’m not sure what I was thinking. You couldn’t possibly be interested in seeing a stuffy old art museum, right?”

Nathan gave me a playful shove—and that smile I had been waiting for.

“Was that a yes, Napster? I’m never quite sure how to interpret shoves, playful or otherwise.”

“Hell yeah, it’s a yes, St. Louis! I’ve dreamed of visiting the Louvre for as long as I can remember.”

“Yeah, I had a feeling that might be the case. Guess you’ll have to find something new to dream about now.”

We took the train from Laax to Paris. I had been tempted to book us a flight there instead, but between the travel time from Laax to Zürich Airport and the additional time it would have taken to get through airport security and fly to Paris, we wouldn’t have gotten there much earlier if we had gone that route, and it would have been at least twice as expensive.

When we arrived in Paris—sans Paul, who was no longer needed—it was too late to go to the Louvre, so we checked into a nearby hotel, then visited the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower. Getting to see the iconic landmarks through Nathan’s eyes made me appreciate them even more than when I had visited them for the first time years earlier.

The following day—Thursday—we woke up early to see what was, for us, the main attraction. The excitement of a kid in a candy store would have been nothing compared to the excitement of Nathan in the Louvre. Every single piece of artwork sparked his interest for one reason or another. On my first visit to the Louvre, I had rushed through the place, barely stopping in front of many of the exhibits. I had wanted to get through the whole museum before it closed, and that goal hadn’t left me with much time to stop and smell the Mona Lisas,

so to speak. Nathan, on the other hand, savored everything. He wasn't worried about getting through the whole museum in one day because he couldn't allow himself to think beyond whatever piece of artwork he was admiring at any given time. And seeing that artwork with Nathan, whose knowledge of the Louvre's exhibits was vast, made it all instantly more interesting.

Paris had more museums than we could possibly visit in the time we had remaining, but that night, while strolling through the Luxembourg Garden, we made a plan of attack for the ones Nathan was most interested in seeing. Friday was spent at the Musée de l'Orangerie, the Musée d'Orsay, and the Musée Rodin, while Saturday was dedicated to the Centre Pompidou and the Petit and Grand Palais. We also managed to fit a nighttime boat cruise on the Seine River into our schedule, as well as a visit to the Notre-Dame Cathedral, which we could appreciate as an architectural masterpiece if not as a place of worship. And, of course, we had to treat ourselves, from time to time, to the great food Paris had to offer.

On Saturday night, we reluctantly packed our suitcases in preparation for our flight back to Denver the following morning, then went out for a drink and one last walk along the streets of Paris.

"This trip was amazing, Shane. Well, aside from your crash, of course. Thanks for bringing me along."

"There's no one I'd rather travel to a foreign country with, Nathan."

"Not even Samuel L. Jackson?"

I had to laugh at the random absurdity of the question. "What?"

"Well, I mean, who wouldn't want to travel to a foreign country with Samuel L. Jackson, just to see if he would yell out 'I've had it with these motherfuckin' snakes on this motherfuckin' plane!' during the flight? I couldn't possibly top *that*, right?"

Chuckling again, I shook my head. "And yet somehow you do, Napster. Yes, I'd even rather travel to a foreign country with you than with Samuel L. Jackson."

"Huh. I outrank Samuel L. Jackson on something. That might just go down in history as my single greatest achievement."

"Maybe *you* should yell out 'I've had it with these motherfuckin' snakes on this motherfuckin' plane!' during our flight instead."

“Don’t tempt me, St. Louis. That could be my ‘Hooker With a Penis’ moment.”

“Well, everyone needs a ‘Hooker With a Penis’ moment, if you ask me.”

We were drawing some odd looks from people within earshot, but we didn’t care.

“Does that mean there’s a Benjamin on the table?”

“Sure, Napster. Yell out ‘I’ve had it with these motherfuckin’ snakes on this motherfuckin’ plane!’ during our flight and you’ll get that Benjamin. You might get arrested, too, but at least you’ll have one hundred dollars’ worth of the bail money covered.”

“Done.”

Parting with one hundred dollars had never been more enjoyable.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The spring quarter began the day after we returned to Denver, leaving us with very little time to recover from jet lag before getting back to work. I was as used to the problem as a person could get, but it was a new experience for Nathan, who had never crossed more than two time zones before. He agreed, though, with what I had told him sophomore year: jet lag was a small price to pay for the joys of visiting foreign countries.

Between classes and parties, we added a few more concerts to our YotC 3.0 list, which also got a big boost when my sponsors sent us back to Coachella for the third year in a row. The lineup didn't appeal to us as much as the previous two years' lineups had, but we still found plenty to enjoy. Honestly, the trip would have been worth it for Muse alone.

At the beginning of May, I started planning Nathan's birthday party. As usual, the first order of business was figuring out Gabe's schedule so I could work around it and ensure he would be able to attend. When I stopped him on campus to ask him about it, though, he told me not to bother going out of my way to plan the party around his schedule.

"Of course I'm going to plan it around your schedule. You're Nathan's boyfriend. He'd want you there. *I* want you there."

"Guess you haven't talked to Nathan lately."

"Not since yesterday. Why?"

"We broke up last night."

"What? Why?"

"I'm sure he'll tell you all about it the next time you see him."

Gabe turned and walked away before I could think of anything else to say.

When I met Nathan for lunch later that Monday, the first thing he said was that he had something to tell me.

"I know. I saw Gabe earlier."

"What did he tell you?"

"Just that I didn't have to worry about planning your party around his schedule because you weren't together anymore. He said you'd tell me the rest."

“Oh. Well, that’s basically all there is to tell. Anyway, how’s your day been?”

“Not so fast, Nathan. How are *you* doing? You two were together for almost four years.”

“Eh, it is what it is, as my mom likes to say. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure it’s final this time? I mean, you’ve taken breaks from each other before, and you’ve always gotten back together after a few months. Maybe this is the same as—”

“It’s not, Shane.”

“But how can you be sure of that?”

“I just am. It’s over for good. Trust me.”

I watched him casually bite into his sandwich, as if he had just given me the weather report. “I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me.”

He dropped the sandwich onto his plate and slowly chewed, reluctant, as always, to talk with his mouth full. Finally, he swallowed and took a sip of water. “Okay, look, I broke up with Gabe because I’m sick of putting up with his jealousy. He’s a good guy, and I wish him well, but I just don’t want to deal with his drama anymore.”

“What drama? What does he have to be jealous about? Is this about the flings you’ve had every summer? Because I thought you two had an understanding about that.”

“We did. That’s not what this is about.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

Nathan took another bite of his sandwich.

“Okay, clearly you don’t want to talk about this. Just know that if you ever *do* want to...”

Swallowing, Nathan reached for his cup of water again. “I know.” He took a sip, then set the cup aside and looked at me. “It’s not that I don’t want to talk to you about it, okay? It’s just...”

I waited as long as I could, but he just left me hanging. “It’s just what?”

“I don’t want you to feel bad.”

“How did this suddenly become about me?”

“It’s about *us*. Our friendship. That’s what Gabe’s jealous about.”

“Since when?” I thought Gabe had long since gotten over whatever problems he’d had with me freshman year.

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s always been jealous of it, and he just hid it for as long as he could. But ever since our spring break trip, it’s really become an issue for him.”

“I’m sorry, Nathan.”

“See, that’s why I was reluctant to tell you. Don’t be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry about. Gabe’s insecurities are his problem, not mine and certainly not yours. You’re my best friend. You’ve been my best friend for longer than I’ve known Gabe. He knew what you meant to me from the very beginning. And if he expects me to choose between you and him now, after all this time... Well, I’ve made my choice, and it was a very easy one to make.”

“Want me to try to talk to him?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. It’s done. I’ll be okay. Hell, I’ll be graduating and moving back to Pittsburgh soon, and he’ll be moving to California, so this breakup was probably inevitable, anyway.”

“Your grandfather was right, you know. Any guy you choose to date will be the luckiest son of a bitch who ever lived. If Gabe can’t see that, he’s a fool, and I’m sure you’ll find someone else—someone who *can* see that—in no time.”

“Thanks. I could say the same about any guy you choose to date, you know.”

“Yeah, well, I’d have to actually get to that point first.”

“Bound to happen eventually, St. Louis.”

Despite what Nathan had said about not talking to Gabe on his behalf, I couldn’t resist doing so when I ran into Gabe on campus Thursday afternoon.

“Look, Gabe, you have to know, Nathan and I are just friends. You have nothing to be jealous about where we’re concerned.”

Gabe smiled and shook his head. “Yeah, keep telling yourselves that.”

“It’s true. Nothing has ever happened between Nathan and me. Nothing ever *will* happen between us.”

“Maybe it should.”

I wasn’t sure how I had expected this conversation to go, but Gabe was taking it in a direction I never could have anticipated. “What are you saying, Gabe?”

“Wow. You know, I honestly didn’t expect you two to hold out this long, but you’ve really dug yourselves into this ‘just friends’ delusion pretty fucking deeply, haven’t you?”

“Seriously, Gabe, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“Nathan and I were never going to work out as more than just a college fling. For one thing, he’ll be leaving soon, and I’m sure you know what we tend to do when we’re apart from each other for more than a few days.”

“If you’re implying that Nathan and I hooked up during spring break, I already told you—”

“I know, I know—nothing ever happened between you two. I get it. And I know Nathan would never cheat. He’s not that kind of person. That’s not what I was implying.”

“Then what *are* you implying?”

“Nothing. I’m outright saying Nathan’s heart was never with me. Why do you think it was so easy for us to just split up every summer and hook up with other guys?”

“I don’t know. I never really gave it any serious thought. You both seemed okay with that sort of arrangement, so it was really none of my business.”

“Well, I’ll tell you why it was so easy for us to do that: because we were never in love with each other.”

“Bullshit. You were together for almost four years.”

“Shane, did you ever once hear Nathan say he loved me? Because I sure didn’t.”

Now that he mentioned it, neither had I. How had I managed to miss that until now?

“And I never said it to him, either, because I knew. I always knew.”

I was getting really sick of Gabe’s riddles. “Knew *what*, Gabe?”

“That his heart was never with me. Try to keep up, Golden Boy.”

Aware my fists were clenched, I stuffed them in my pants pockets, just to be safe. “Back to being a dick again, I see.”

“Sorry. Force of habit.”

“You know, I really thought we were cool with each other all this time.”

“We were. But then you became a fucking Olympian, of all things. And then you and Nathan went on that spring break trip. And then there was that damn artwork, and that’s when I knew—”

“What artwork?”

“Oh, he hasn’t shown it to you yet? Damn, you two really *are* moving slower than I thought you would.”

“Are you ever going to start making sense?”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure he’ll show you soon enough. Anyway, the point is, I finally realized my relationship with Nathan was never going to go anywhere. We just kept getting back together every fall because it was easy and familiar. One of us had to end the cycle eventually—for good, I mean. Maybe the fights I’ve been picking with him lately about his friendship with you were just my way of getting him to do the inevitable. Rip the fucking Band-Aid off already.”

“You’re still not making much sense.”

“Fuck, do I really have to spell it out for you? Things between Nathan and me were never going to work out because I’ll never mean more to him than you do. I don’t think *anyone* ever will. Maybe you two can’t see that, but it’s been clear as day to me ever since you returned from spring break. You can keep fooling yourselves into thinking you’re just friends if you really want to continue being that stubborn and naïve, but maybe you should instead start asking yourselves if that’s still what you really want. Or why you ever wanted that in the first place.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. Luckily, I didn’t have to bother trying to think of something to say, because Gabe turned and walked away as soon as he finished talking. Normally, that would have annoyed me, but this time, I was just glad the conversation was finally over.

He was wrong. Nathan and I *were* just friends. We had known each other for nearly four years, and we had never shared so much as a drunken kiss on the cheek. Gabe was the delusional one. And stupid, too, if he was really willing to throw away his relationship with Nathan based on something that wasn’t the least bit true. Gabe was being paranoid. Nathan and I were just friends.

Damn it, what artwork?

That night, Nathan came over to my apartment. I hadn't been expecting him, but I didn't think much of it. We paid each other visits all the time without advance notice.

"What's in the bag?"

"Something I've been working on. Here, open it."

I took the gift bag from Nathan but didn't look inside it right away. Studying my face, Nathan smiled and tapped a finger against his right eyebrow.

"Yeah, well, of course I'm skeptical. You're the one who has a birthday coming up, Napster, not me."

"Just open it, St. Louis."

Nathan followed me over to the couch, leaning against the side as I took a seat on the middle cushion. Peeking inside the bag, I saw what looked like a helmet. After giving him one last look, I reached in and pulled out the item.

"I wanted to give this to you days ago, but the paint took forever to dry. And then I still had to coat it with epoxy."

Nathan had painted a map of the world on the back of the helmet, turning it into a globe of sorts. It wasn't just any helmet, though. A jagged crack ran down the middle of it, splitting the world in two. Words had been painted on the exposed padding: *How the world stopped spinning*.

"I thought we left this back in Switzerland."

"I couldn't just throw it away. That thing saved your life, Shane. It deserved to be shown some love."

"Nathan, the detail is incredible. How long have you been working on this?"

"Since we got back from our trip."

"This must be what Gabe was talking about."

"You talked to Gabe?"

"Earlier today, yeah. I ran into him on campus and couldn't resist. He said something about 'that damn artwork' but wouldn't tell me what he meant. Said I'd find out soon enough."

"Yeah, I don't think he's a fan of modern art."

Turning the helmet over in my hand, I stared at the words in the crack. “How the world stopped spinning?”

“Too dramatic? Well, that’s what it felt like to me—like the world stopped spinning from the time you hit the ground to the time you finally opened your eyes. My world, anyway.”

“It’s not too dramatic, Nathan. It’s perfect. Thank you.”

I stood and wrapped my arms around him, taking another look at the helmet as we embraced. “Now I have another Nathan Pearce original to add to my collection.”

Chuckling, Nathan pulled away from me. “Yeah, Gabe was quick to point out that I had never made *him* anything.”

Gabe’s words echoed in my mind: “And then there was that damn artwork, and that’s when I knew—” I wondered what else he might have said if I hadn’t interrupted him.

“Anyway, I just wanted to drop by and give you that. I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“I know how you hate waiting.”

“Of course you do. You know everything about me.” Nathan locked eyes with me and held my gaze for a few seconds before clearing his throat. “Anyway. See you at lunch tomorrow?”

“Of course, but you can stick around for a while if you want.”

I expected him to agree, like he always did, but he just shook his head. “Nah. I should get going. Homework.”

“Oh. Okay. Tomorrow, then. And thanks again. For the helmet, I mean. I love it.”

“Later, St. Louis.”

“Later, Napster.”

“A helmet, Gabe? Really? You were jealous over a helmet?”

I hadn’t planned on confronting Gabe. He just made it so hard to resist. And catching up to him when I had seen him on the other side of campus had been so easy. My skateboard had a habit of getting me into trouble sometimes.

“Oh, so he finally gave it to you? Let me guess—you think it means nothing.”

“Yes. Well, no. I mean, of course it means *something*. Just not what you think it means.”

“Right. *Of course*. Well, to answer your question, no, I wasn’t jealous over that helmet. I was jealous over what it represented.”

“Speak English for a change, Gabe.”

“I already explained this all to you yesterday, Shane. You just weren’t listening, obviously. Nathan poured his heart into that helmet. I’ve never seen him like that before. And *you* brought out that passion in him, Shane. Not me. *You*.”

“Look, it’s not what you think. You don’t understand what it was like for him when I crashed. That helmet is just a painful reminder—”

“People throw away painful reminders, Shane. They don’t fucking pour blood, sweat, and tears into them, turning them into perfect pieces of fucking artwork. He practically worships that thing because it saved your life. *That’s* why he turned it into a piece of art. And I *do* understand what it was like for him when you crashed. Trust me, I’ve heard the story from his perspective plenty of times. And if that had happened to someone *I* loved, I’d be a wreck, too.”

“Nathan doesn’t love me. Not in the way you’re talking about, anyway.”

“How is this not clear to you two? Think about it, Shane. If Nathan had been the one who had crashed, how would *you* have felt?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came out.

“Actually, no, don’t answer that. Forget it. I didn’t sign up to be your fucking matchmaker. If you can’t see what’s so obvious to the rest of us, that’s your problem, not mine. Just go ahead and let Nathan start another relationship he’ll never fully commit to, while you continue your cycle of going on the occasional date with a guy and then finding some reason to dump him. Because clearly that’s working out so well for both of you.”

Gabe turned to walk away, then stopped himself and spun back around to face me again.

“Answer something for me, will you? Because I’ve never understood it. Why didn’t you hook up with Nathan when you first met him? He’s hot, and

you have more chemistry with him than I ever did, and I know you're not opposed to casual sex. So what stopped you?"

"How is that any of your business?"

"It's not. I've just always wanted to know, and now I can finally ask you without worrying about Nathan getting upset about it. But if you don't want to tell me, fine. At least answer the question for yourself. I have a feeling whatever stopped you then isn't really relevant now."

After giving me a few seconds to respond, Gabe shrugged and turned his back to me again.

"Enjoy the helmet, Golden Boy."

I skated aimlessly around the city for at least an hour, imagining Gabe's face on the pavement every time I pushed my back foot against the ground to gain speed. He was really starting to piss me off. My friendship with Nathan was none of his business, and I didn't appreciate the way he was trying to turn it into something it wasn't just to justify his own insecurities.

He was *wrong*. If anything, the things that had stopped me from thinking of Nathan as a potential hookup during the early stages of our friendship were even more relevant now than they had been back then. I might have gotten over Marco and stepped back into the dating game long ago, but Nathan was firmly established as my best friend now. I was closer to him than I had ever been to anyone else in my entire life, including Jess. Even if we could have been more than just friends in the beginning, that ship had sailed around the world at least a couple times since then. Besides, we had less than a month left to go before college ended. He would be back in Pittsburgh soon, and then we would probably only see each other a few times a year at best. This was no time to be making drastic changes to our friendship. Especially since it was just fine the way it was.

Then again, I had to admit that Gabe wasn't wrong about *everything*. If Nathan had been the one who had crashed, I would have been absolutely devastated. Luckily, paint fumes were generally the most dangerous part of *his* passion. I didn't even want to think about the possibility of something bad happening to him.

But that didn't mean I was in love with him. He was my best friend. I *couldn't* be in love with him. I had already lost one best friend; I couldn't risk losing another. If we crossed that line and things didn't work out...

Gabe's face materialized on the pavement again, and I stomped my foot against his nose as I continued cruising around Denver.

Nathan was waiting outside my apartment when I got back to campus.

"Heard you had another run-in with Gabe today."

"Guess that's one way to put it."

He followed me inside and shut the door as I propped my skateboard up against the wall.

"How long have you been waiting here?"

"Not long. I would have called first, but I figured you'd be here."

"I would have been, but I had to blow off some steam after my encounter with Gabe."

"That bad, huh?"

"You have no idea." Stepping into the kitchen, I grabbed a glass from one of the cabinets. "Want some water?"

"Sure. I'll get the ice."

"Wait, don't—"

Too late.

"Shit. You weren't supposed to see that yet."

Nathan pulled the large circular container out of the freezer and placed it on the counter. Scrabble tiles made out of whipped-cream frosting spelled out the phrase *Happy Birthday, Nathan* on the top of the ice cream cake.

"They got the date wrong. It wasn't supposed to be ready until tomorrow, but they made it a day early. Guess they didn't realize you took a while to come out."

Chuckling, Nathan turned away from the cake to look at me. "Shane, I love it."

"Guess I might as well give you your gifts now, too."

Letting my backpack slip from my shoulder, I unzipped the side pocket and retrieved the book I had been carrying around for the past few days. "Sorry it isn't wrapped. I wasn't planning to give it to you today, obviously."

I stuck the cake back in the freezer as Nathan inspected the book: a signed, first-edition hardcover copy of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, still in excellent condition.

"Shane, this must have cost you a fortune."

"Eh, it wasn't that bad." It *was* the most expensive book I had ever purchased, but it had been worth every penny, just to see the smile it had put on Nathan's face.

"How did you even manage to find this?"

After dropping a few ice cubes in each of the two glasses, I filled them with water and placed one within Nathan's reach. "It wasn't easy, I'll admit. I wanted it to be your birthday gift *last* year, but I was only able to find one copy in time, and it was in pretty bad shape, so I decided to pass on it. I figured I could eventually find a better copy if I looked hard enough."

As Nathan flipped through the pages, he found the envelope containing his other gift. Tucking the book under his arm, he lifted the flap and pulled out the card from the American Heart Association.

"Granted, I'm repeating myself a bit with that one, but I wanted to do something for your grandfather, too. After all, you aren't the only one whose birthday is tomorrow. And that one is recurring; from now on, a donation will be made to the American Heart Association in your grandfather's name every year on May tenth."

Nathan tucked the card back between the pages of the book and set it aside on the counter. Then, without saying a word, he wrapped his arms around me, holding on tightly for a few seconds before pulling away. Chuckling, he shook his head. "You really don't make this easy, St. Louis, you know that?"

"What?"

Nathan just shook his head again, his eyes fixed on mine.

"Nothing. Never mind. I should go."

He reached for the book, but I put a hand on his arm to stop him.

"What's wrong, Nathan? Look, I didn't mean to upset you with the gifts. If they brought up painful memories or something, I'm sorry—"

Nathan pulled his arm away and caught my gaze again. "Stop, Shane. That's not the problem."

"Then what *is* the problem?"

He stared at me for a few more seconds, then shook his head a third time. “Fuck it.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but he stopped me, planting one hand on the back of my head and the other against the side of my neck as he leaned in and pressed his lips against mine. Instinctively, I closed my eyes and started to respond. And just like that, I was kissing my best friend.

Shit. I was kissing my best friend.

I shoved him away, perhaps a bit too harshly. “What the hell, man?”

Nathan looked embarrassed, but there was something else under the surface, something I had only seen contorting his face two other times: pain.

“Sorry. Like I said, I should go.”

Sidestepping me, he headed out of the kitchen, forgetting the book.

“Nathan, wait.”

He stopped but kept his back to me.

“Look, I’m not angry, okay? I just don’t understand. Where did that come from?”

Spinning back around, he reached for the book. “Let’s just forget about it, okay? I said I was sorry. Please, can we just leave it at that?” He turned to leave again, and I thought he was actually going to this time, but he paused with his hand resting on the doorknob. Finally, he looked at me again, his face now burning red.

“No, you know what? I’ve never lied to you before, and I’m sure as hell not going to start now. I’m *not* sorry. I’ve wanted to do that since Monday, and I’ve tried to resist because I don’t want to ruin our friendship, but you make it really fucking hard when you do things like—like *this*.” Holding up the book, he shook his head again. “And then I make the mistake of looking in those eyes of yours—I swear, it’s like I’m in the romantic version of *The Tell-Tale Heart* or something here. I can’t be held responsible for my actions when I get locked on those things.”

“Look, this is Gabe’s fault, all right? He’s been messing with your head, just like he messed with mine earlier. Don’t worry about it. We’ll just—”

“Gabe has nothing to do with this, Shane. Well, I don’t know—maybe he *does* have something to do with this. Yes, he’s the one who first put the idea in my head that you and I could be more than just friends, but that doesn’t matter.

I had no problem dismissing his comments back then because I knew what I felt. I knew we really *were* just friends, and I knew neither of us wanted to be anything more than that to each other. Or, at least, I thought I knew that. And then you had to go and be... Well, *you*."

"So this is *my* fault now?"

"Well, you *are* the one who said it."

"Said what?"

"The comment that changed everything. For me, anyway."

"And what comment was that?"

"The one where you told me my grandfather had been right to say that any guy I chose to date would be the luckiest son of a bitch who ever lived, and if Gabe was too foolish to see that, I'd just find someone else who *could* see it soon enough."

"I remember. What about it?"

"It made me realize something. Well, two things, actually. First, Gabe never could have said something like that to me. About my grandfather, I mean. No one could—no one except you, of course. No one else knows the things you know about me, Shane." He held up the book again. "No one else could know to get me this particular book." Then he pointed toward the kitchen. "No one else could design a cake like *that* for me. Gabe might have been my boyfriend all that time, but *you're* the one I've shared everything important with, not him."

"And the other thing?"

"The other thing—the more important thing—it made me realize is..." Nathan took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "Maybe I don't *want* to find someone else. Maybe I already found the right person four years ago. Maybe he's been staring me in the face with green-and-blue eyes all this time, and I've just been too dense to realize it until now."

"Nathan..."

"You don't need to apologize, Shane. I get it. That kiss told me everything I needed to know—about my feelings *and* about yours. We've obviously managed to find one of those rare things we're not on the same page about."

The pain wasn't just written all over Nathan's face now; it was coating his voice, too. I knew this was my cue to say something that would make him feel

better, but I just stared at him in stunned silence because I had no idea how to respond. He wasn't wrong, after all—we *weren't* on the same page. We weren't even reading the same fucking book.

Finally, he closed his eyes and nodded, a sad gesture of acceptance that seemed devastatingly final. Then, to make matters worse, he tapped a finger against his right eyebrow. I relaxed my traitorous facial muscles immediately, but it was already too late. I really needed to learn how to control that tell better.

“Right. That’s what I thought. And now I really should go.”

“Nathan, wait.”

“Waiting has never exactly been a strong suit of mine, Shane, remember?”

“I know. It’s just... Look, you know I care about you, right?”

Nathan groaned. “No offense, Shane, but that’s really not the response I was hoping to receive when I kissed you.”

“I know, but—”

“But what? There’s really nothing else to say about this, is there? Just promise me one thing, okay? Just promise me I haven’t just fucked up our friendship. This is hard enough, but *that*—I couldn’t take that.”

Now we were catching up to each other. “Damn it, Nathan, don’t you get it? That’s precisely my point.”

“What?”

“You’re my best friend. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. I don’t want to...”

I tried to think of the right words to finish the sentence with, but none came to mind. There was a reason I didn’t want to try being more than just Nathan’s friend. A perfectly good, valid, *rational* reason. And if only I could remember what it was, maybe I could explain it to Nathan and get him to understand why we could never be anything more than just friends. We *were* usually on the same page about everything. There was no reason we couldn’t end up on the same page this time, too. A few carefully chosen words were all it would take to get us there. And I could find those words, if he would just stop staring at me with that rarely seen look of pain that made me want to wrap my arms tightly around him and assure him everything was going to be okay... If he would just hide those lips from view so I could stop looking at them and remembering what it had felt like to have them pressed against mine... If he would just...

“Neither do I, Shane. But... I don’t know. I just thought this could work, I guess. But if you don’t feel the same way about me that I feel about you, then I guess it doesn’t matter what I think.”

Oh, good—something I knew how to respond to. “Of course it matters what you think, Nathan. It *always* matters what you think. Tell me.”

“I think I’ve already humiliated myself enough for one day, thanks.”

“You haven’t humiliated yourself at all, Nathan. I still see you the same way I always have.”

“I know you mean that as a good thing, but it really just feels like a punch in the gut right now.”

“Nathan, please, just tell me what you’re thinking.”

Sighing, Nathan shook his head and tossed the book on the couch. “Fine. Might as well finish digging my own grave, right? Cat’s out of the bag already, anyway. What I’m thinking—what I’ve been thinking since Monday—is that you’re the first person I think about every morning and the last person I think about every night. What I’m thinking is that you get me in ways no other guy ever has or probably ever will. What I’m thinking is that you’re the first person I want to tell about every single thing that happens in my life, good or bad. What I’m thinking is that every day spent with you is better than any night spent with any other guy. What I’m thinking one minute is that I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize our friendship because it means more to me than anything else in the world, and what I’m thinking the next minute is that I’m already jeopardizing our friendship just by trying to keep this all to myself. What I’m thinking is that you’re the only guy who has ever been able to make my world stop spinning. What I’m thinking is that the helmet that saved your life holds more sentimental value to me than even my Corvette or my ring or my pocket watch. What I’m thinking is that feeling that way about an inanimate object means something I shouldn’t ignore. What I’m thinking...”

Nathan’s eyes were fixed on mine again. Taking another deep breath, he ran his fingers through his hair. “Fuck, those eyes... What I’m thinking... What I’m thinking is that I love that helmet because I love the person it protected. And what I’m thinking is that I don’t just love you the way you love me—as a best friend. What I’m thinking is that I’m *in* love with you, Shane Thomas Larson. What I’m thinking is that you’re the one for me, that it’s always been you, and it always will be you.”

Blinking, I stared at him in disbelief. It seemed like he was done talking, which meant it was my turn now. This was my second chance to find the right

words—the ones that would convince him this was a bad idea, the ones that would put everything back to the way it was supposed to be. If only I could think of them.

Of course, I knew we would never really be able to go back to the way things had been before. Nathan had said it himself: the cat was already out of the bag. How could things ever be the same between us again, now that I knew he was harboring these feelings for me? I wanted to be pissed at him for doing something that could easily end up ruining our friendship, but it was impossible for me to be pissed at him about *anything*. And besides, he had simply told me the truth, just like he always had. I couldn't be pissed at him for that. Gabe, on the other hand—I could easily be pissed at *him*. But Nathan had said *I* was the one who had made him realize he had feelings for me, not Gabe. Guess that meant I needed to be pissed at myself.

Was the idea of being with Nathan really such a bad thing, though? Everything he had just said about me echoed the way I felt about him. I got along with him better than anyone else I had ever known. I trusted him more than anyone else I had ever known. I could talk to him about anything, yet I was also completely comfortable sitting in silence with him, not talking about anything at all. He was one of the few people in my life who had never treated me a certain way just because I was famous. Shallowly, I had to admit he was hot, even if I had never really allowed myself to think of him that way before. We definitely had chemistry, whatever the fuck *that* was supposed to mean. I was single. He was single. And that kiss...

But I wasn't in love with him. I mean, I loved him as a best friend, obviously, but I wasn't *in* love with him.

Was I?

Frankly, I had no idea what the difference was. Contrary to what I had believed while dating Marco, I had never been in love before—not really, anyway. And I definitely had deeper, stronger feelings for Nathan than I'd ever had for Marco. If I were actually *in* love with Nathan, would I even be able to recognize the signs?

It didn't matter. Either way, the timing was terrible. Nearly four years of friendship were at stake, for one thing; for another, we would soon have thousands of miles separating us, and it was hard enough to make a relationship work *without* adding distance into the equation. If I had been in a better place when we had met at the start of freshman year, maybe we could have made this

work, but *now*? It seemed so impossible, so crazy, so... *risky*. Then again, my whole life had been about taking risks. Was this really the best time to start being afraid to do so?

I'm not sure how long I stood there, silently staring at Nathan, but he finally snapped me out of my thoughts with a sigh of defeat.

"What I'm thinking is that I've crossed the line. What I'm thinking is that I've blown things with you now. What I'm thinking is that I really should have left earlier instead of kissing you. What I'm thinking is—"

Fuck it.

"What I'm thinking is that you should shut up now, Nathan."

Closing the gap between us, I grabbed Nathan and pulled him into another kiss, making sure it qualified as a real one this time—long, probing, passionate. I needed to see what it *really* felt like to kiss my best friend. He responded feverishly, running one hand through my hair while tracing the other up my spine, sending chills through my body. *Okay, I could definitely get used to this.*

When I finally started to pull away, he held on tightly for a few seconds before reluctantly loosening his grip. I shook my head and chuckled softly as the reality of the situation started to fully sink in. I had just kissed my best friend. Again. "Are we really going to do this?"

"I think we just did. But what changed your mind? Because I really wasn't expecting that at all."

"You try listening to the things you just said and having any other reaction than the one I just had. Believe it or not, I'm only human."

Pulling his hands away, he took a step back, his smile quickly fading from view. "Great. So, basically, I just seduced you. That wasn't exactly my intention."

"No, Nathan. You didn't seduce me. You gave me something to think about."

He tried to lean in for another kiss, but I held him at bay.

"But we should talk about some things first."

Nathan groaned. "As much as I love our conversations, Shane, haven't we already talked enough over the last four years?"

Chuckling, I rested a hand on the back of his neck. "You'd think so, Napster, but this is one conversation we've never had before."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“What?”

“You just called me Napster.”

“So? I do that pretty frequently. It’s sort of our thing.”

“Which is exactly my point, St. Louis. That’s normal for us. You have no idea what a relief it is to know you’re still able to treat me the same way you always have before.”

“Well, maybe not *exactly* the same way.” Smiling, I gave him a wink. “But that’s why we need to talk, Nathan. I can’t lose you as a friend, okay? I can’t—I *won’t*—do this if it’s going to affect our friendship. Until we know more about what *this* even is, we need to take things slowly. *I* need to take things slowly, because if we just jump into this thing headfirst, and it ends up not working out...”

Nathan nodded, his eyes still focused intently on mine. “Can we at least kiss again?”

I laughed. “Sure.”

“Good, because I really like kissing you.”

Leaning in, Nathan slipped his tongue between my parted lips. I had to admit, I really liked kissing him, too. It felt different than any other kiss I had ever shared with a guy. It felt *better* than any other kiss I had ever shared with a guy. It felt *right*.

Pulling away, Nathan looked at me again and smiled. “Okay, I’m really going to go now. I don’t want to put any pressure on you, and if I already have tonight, I’m sorry about that. Really. I’ll give you all the time you need to decide what you want to do and where you want to go from here. But Shane?”

“Yeah, Nathan?”

“I’m not worried about what will happen to us if this doesn’t work out.”

“Yeah? Why is that?”

“Because I know it will.”

He was looking me straight in the eyes again. According to my own rules, I was pretty sure that meant I had to believe him.

After a few seconds, he turned away and opened the door.

“Hey, Nathan?”

“Yeah?”

I nodded toward the couch. “You forgot something.”

“Oh. Right.” Leaving the door ajar, he walked over to the couch and picked up the book. “Best birthday gift ever, by the way.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

He pointed at the book with his free hand. “This? Yeah, I love it. But that’s not what I was talking about.”

He turned and took a few steps toward the door again, not waiting for a response.

“Oh, and Nathan?”

“Yeah?”

“If...” I paused, weighing my options. He was facing me again, waiting patiently beside the door. I knew what I wanted to say to him, but I wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to say. I guess there was no way to ever be sure of such a thing; it was just something I’d have to commit to and go for, just like a trick on a slopestyle or Big Air course. If I crashed, I crashed, but I had to at least *try*.

I didn’t want him to get the wrong impression, though.

“Okay, look, first of all, I need you to understand that this isn’t a pity thing. I could never pity you, and I would never tell you something I didn’t mean. I wouldn’t be saying this right now if you hadn’t said what you said earlier, but that doesn’t mean I’m just saying it out of some sense of obligation, okay?”

“Okay.”

So far, so good. “Okay, so, I don’t know about you, but, personally, I don’t really know what being in love feels like. I’ve never been in love—not really. I thought I was in love with Marco, but that was all based on a lie. And... well, you know none of the relationships I’ve had with guys since then have been the least bit serious. And I guess you and I have never really talked about love much before. I always just assumed you were in love with Gabe, but he told me yesterday that wasn’t true.”

“He’s right.”

“Okay. Well, anyway... Look, I know I’m probably not making much sense here. You’ve had more time to process this than I have, so you’ll have to

forgive my rambling. But the bottom line is that, like I said, I don't really know what being in love feels like, and I'm not going to lie to you and pretend I do. But I know how I feel about you, and I know what you said earlier about being in love with me."

"Shane, I meant what I said before. I really wasn't trying to pressure you earlier into saying something you don't mean. I don't want that. I know you don't feel the same way about me—at least not yet—and I'm okay with that. Well, I mean, I wish that weren't the case, obviously, but you can't help how you feel, just like I can't help how *I* feel."

"I know you weren't trying to pressure me, Nathan. Like I said, this isn't a pity thing. Just hear me out, okay?"

"Okay. Sorry. Go on."

"Everything you said earlier, about how I'm the first person you think about every morning and the last person you think about every night, and I get you in ways no other guy ever has or ever will, and all that other incredible stuff? I feel the same way about you, Nathan."

Pausing again, I took a deep breath, my eyes still locked on his. This was the point of no return. There would be no going back from here on out. As soon as I walked across this bridge, it would fall into the canyon, stranding me on the other side for good.

"So I guess what I'm trying to say—for the third time—is... I don't really know what being in love feels like, and I'm not going to lie to you and pretend I do. But you say you're in love with me, and I believe you because I know you would never lie to me, either. And if all those things you said earlier—if *that* is what being in love feels like... then I guess I'm in love with you, too, Nathan Andrew Pearce."

He was back at my side in an instant, his arms once again wrapped tightly around me, his lips once again pressed firmly against mine, our tongues once again exploring each other's mouths.

Grinning as he pulled away from me, he backed toward the door, keeping his eyes locked on mine the whole time. "Like I said before: Best. Birthday gift. *Ever.*"

And then he was gone.

With nothing left to distract me, I quickly became aware that I was hard. I couldn't really say when I had gotten to that state. All I really knew was that I

had never been happier about a random wardrobe choice. Because I was wearing bikini briefs and a pair of jeans that were just a bit loose in the crotch, it was highly unlikely that my bulge had caught Nathan's attention. Knowing he had spent most of his visit staring at my eyes made me even more confident I was safe.

Stepping back into the kitchen, I gulped down my glass of water, then drank the contents of Nathan's untouched glass, too. I still couldn't believe what had just happened. I certainly hadn't expected it. Looking back, though, there *had* been signs that Nathan had been struggling with something, like when he had rushed off after giving me my helmet the previous day. It wasn't like him to choose homework over pizza and Netflix.

I hadn't thought about the possibility of Nathan being anything more than my best friend since early freshman year, when Jess and I had discussed it at the Church while Nathan had been talking to Gabe. And even then, I hadn't actually been entertaining the possibility, I had just been turning down Jess's suggestion. My reasoning had been sound, and I had never regretted my choice. Even now, I had a pretty good feeling that if I had tried to develop anything more than a friendship with Nathan back then, when I had been extremely cynical about relationships in general, we wouldn't still be friends today.

But when had we started caring for each other as more than just friends? When had we started falling in love with each other? Assuming, of course, that we really were in love with each other. Obviously, Nathan had realized his feelings for me ran deeper than friendship sooner than I had, but how long had he ignored the signs before coming to that conclusion? Given how he had talked about my helmet, it seemed likely he had been harboring those feelings since before my crash, even if he hadn't been aware of their presence until just a few days ago.

How long had *I* ignored the signs? Even during freshman year, saying goodbye to Nathan at the beginning of the winter quarter had been incredibly tough. And then I had started competing again, and he had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt what I had suspected from the very beginning: he didn't care about the fact that I was a well-known professional athlete, he just cared about *me*. Had I been falling in love with him, even back then? Or when I took him to Telluride to meet my parents? Or when I went to Pittsburgh to help him say goodbye to his grandmother? Or when he showed such genuine concern for my well-being after my crash?

Maybe it was impossible to pinpoint when we had started developing feelings for each other that went beyond friendship. Maybe love didn't work

like that. Maybe college had just been one long, gradual journey toward love that I had unwittingly taken with my best friend. Maybe that was the real lesson we had been learning over the past four years: how to love each other.

But why were we just figuring this out *now*, when we had less than a month left to spend with each other? And how could I be sure this wouldn't end up being a complete disaster? And if it did, would we really be able to just go back to being friends again? That seemed pretty doubtful, especially if we added sex to the equation. And what if we *did* add sex to the equation, and it turned out we didn't have any sexual chemistry whatsoever?

Of course, the boner refusing to subside in my pants suggested *that* wouldn't be a problem.

Sighing, I stripped off my shirt as I headed toward the bathroom. Whacking off wouldn't be an option tonight. Not with Nathan on my mind. I wasn't prepared to cross that line yet. Things were already likely to be awkward enough between us tomorrow as it was. A cold shower would have to suffice.

Luckily, things between Nathan and me weren't nearly as awkward the following day as I had feared they would be. True to his word, he didn't put any pressure on me; in fact, he didn't even mention what had happened the previous night at all. When we joined up with Kevin and B to celebrate Nathan's birthday, Nathan acted like everything was normal. That was a relief, but it was also a concern.

After the concert, we went back to my place for drinks and ice cream cake. Kevin and B stuck around long enough to get a good buzz going, then stumbled off to try to find some girls to bang, leaving me alone with Nathan. For the first time ever, being alone with him made me feel a bit nervous. I couldn't figure out if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but it hammered home the point that everything *wasn't* normal at all.

"Okay, I know you're just doing what you promised you'd do, but I really think we should talk about what happened last night."

Having this conversation while drinking was either going to end up being an inspired idea or a foolish one. I had a feeling the latter was more likely, but I wanted to go ahead and get it out of the way. I would just have to tread carefully.

"Sure. What about it?"

“Well, first of all, just in case I didn’t make it clear last night, those things you said about me? *Wow*.”

“I meant every word, Shane.”

“I know. And I really do feel the same way, Nathan.”

He smiled but remained silent.

“And I appreciate that you’re trying to give me all the time I need to figure things out. But I’m not sure that’s the right way to go.”

“I thought you wanted to take things slowly.”

“I do. And I’m not saying I don’t still have concerns about how this could affect our friendship. I definitely *do* still have those concerns. But if we keep acting like nothing has changed, the way we tried to today, then I think it’s pretty likely that nothing *will* change. Either way, I mean. I can’t start warming up to the idea of thinking of you as more than just a friend if you’re still behaving like you’re nothing more than just a friend. I can’t see this working unless we go all-in on it and commit to trying to make it work.”

“So, what are you suggesting, exactly? Because that sounds like the opposite of taking things slowly.”

“What I’m suggesting is that we stop being afraid to treat each other like we would treat any other guys either of us tried to develop something more than friendship with.” Intertwining the fingers of one hand with his, I pulled him closer to me. “For instance, I don’t know about you, but if *I* were trying to develop something more than friendship with a guy, there would definitely be some kissing involved, to see if there were any sparks between us.”

Grinning, he met me halfway as I leaned in to kiss him.

“So?”

“I don’t know. I might have seen a spark or two way off in the distance, but I think we might have to try a few more times, just to be sure. Could have just been something in my eye.”

“We can try as many times as you want, Shane. Pretty sure I saw them, too, though.”

I kissed him again, making it last longer.

“Oh, yeah. I definitely think that was more than just something in my eye.”

“Good. We have to protect those things. They’re works of art.”

“I’m not sure about *that*, but I guess you would know.”

“And you have to believe me, because I said that while looking straight in your eyes.”

“Straight? Can’t have that in someone I’m considering being more than friends with.”

I was teasing him now, but the next kiss I gave him was anything but teasing. I made it long and passionate, if for no other reason than to prove the point I was teasingly making.

“Okay, yeah, never mind. Definitely gay.”

And I guess it did the job.

“Good. Now that we’ve got that cleared up, back to my suggestions. How does dinner and a movie tomorrow night sound?”

“Sounds like a typical Sunday for us.”

Chuckling, I gave him a playful shove. “You know what I mean.”

“Oh, like a proper date?” A smile was creeping across his face now.

“Yeah, like a proper date. On me.”

“Sounds great, but only if I get to pay for the movie.”

“Given the prices at theaters these days, I might end up getting the better part of that deal.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re worth the splurge.”

“We’ll see if you still feel that way *after* we compare each other’s bills for the evening. I mean, that *was* a yes, right?”

“Yep. You’ve got yourself a date, Shane.”

“Sweet. Pick you up at eight?”

“Can’t wait. I’ll see you then.”

After gulping down the rest of his drink, he stood to leave. I rose to my feet with him. “That doesn’t mean you have to go now.”

“Sure it does. We haven’t even had our first official date yet, and I’m already standing in your living room. What kind of guy do you think I am, St. Louis?”

I laughed and walked him to the door, where I gave him one last kiss. I could taste the whiskey on his lips, but that definitely wasn't what was causing me to feel light-headed.

"See you tomorrow, Shane. Oh, and by the way: this is still the best birthday ever."

Smiling, I watched him walk off into the distance. Once he was out of sight, I shut the door and leaned against it, exhaling sharply. As Nathan had pointed out, I had just proposed doing something with him tomorrow night that was pretty similar to what we did most Sunday nights. Sure, it would be the first real test to determine if dating each other would be the least bit feasible, but aside from the potential for intimacy, there was really no reason for tomorrow to be any different than any other time we had hung out together. It would just be a typical Sunday night with my best friend—now with extra perks like kissing, hand holding, and cuddling.

So why did I feel so nervous about it? Why was the idea of transitioning from being Nathan's best friend to being his boyfriend so terrifying? We already spent most of our time together. We already knew practically everything there was to know about each other. We had already met each other's parents. We had already faced major life events together, like the death of a loved one. We had already logged many miles of travel time together. We had already visited the most romantic city in the world together, for fuck's sake. So we were now about to go on a real date together. So what? After everything we had already been through together, what was the big deal?

Without thinking, I reached down and adjusted my hard cock.

Oh, right. *That* was the big deal. Well, not *that*; sex. Sex might be on the table eventually now, and *that* was a big deal. Having sex with Nathan would change everything between us, even more than declaring our love for each other. If necessary, we could always just backpedal and chalk that declaration up to being about an inability to differentiate between the love two inseparable best friends shared for each other and the love boyfriends shared for each other. But if we had sex with each other, there really would be no going back afterward. I definitely wasn't ready to cross that line yet, even if my cock didn't exactly share my trepidation. I already felt like things were moving pretty quickly, even though, as Nathan had pointed out, what had happened last night had been nearly four years in the making. He had said he would be okay with letting me control the pace, but just how long would he really be willing to hold out? Given the fact that he was the one who had been in a serious relationship,

off and on, for nearly four years, he was probably used to having sex a lot more frequently than I was—and I wasn't exactly a monk myself. I knew he would never try to pressure me into doing something I wasn't ready to do, but I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to get away with asking him to wait for me before he would decide to give up and move on.

And then there was the matter of anal sex...

But I was getting ahead of myself, in any case. First, Nathan and I needed to get through our date tomorrow.

And before that happened, I needed to get through another cold shower.

I didn't want to do anything too fancy for a first date, so I just took Nathan to a local Italian restaurant we had never been to before but had been meaning to visit for months. It was a safe, middle-of-the-road pick, better than a fast food joint but not nearly as upscale as a five-star, reservation-required establishment. In other words, it was perfect.

He ordered lasagna, of course, and I opted for fettuccine alfredo. We passed on wine, since I had to drive, and it wasn't really our thing, anyway. My meal was delicious, and the bite I had of Nathan's confirmed that his was, too. As always, the company was great. The first few minutes of the date were admittedly a bit awkward, but I guess that was to be expected when trying to turn nearly four years' worth of platonic friendship into a romantic relationship almost literally overnight. We soon found our groove again, though, and at that point, things got a lot more comfortable. Different, but comfortable. Carrying on a conversation with Nathan was still just as easy as it had always been. Making references to inside jokes still felt effortless. Flirting with each other in public felt surprisingly natural, and we weren't at all embarrassed to be seen doing so. Of course, our flirtatious banter wasn't much different than our normal banter. During the dinner, I wondered, for the first time, if we had ever been mistaken for a couple before.

Afterward, we went to a late showing of *Neighbors*, a frat-guy-versus-family-guy comedy starring Zac Efron and Seth Rogen that had just hit theaters two days earlier. It ended up being the perfect first-date movie for us: not too long, not too sappy, not too awkward to sit through with a date. It was just a safe, middle-of-the-road movie choice to go along with our safe, middle-of-the-road restaurant choice. And it actually turned out to be a pretty decent movie, so that was a bonus.

It would have been a crime to treat Nathan to a date without making ice cream part of the agenda. With that in mind, I took him to one of our favorite local ice cream parlors, Little Man Ice Cream, after the film ended. Housed inside a giant cream can that was purported to stand twenty-eight feet tall and weigh fourteen thousand pounds, we liked the place because it boasted some unique homemade ice cream flavors, just like Dave and Andy's in Pittsburgh. We also liked it because the owners donated one scoop of rice to a developing country for every one scoop of ice cream purchased, which was usually our excuse to purchase an extra scoop. This time, Nathan ordered two scoops of espresso-fudge ice cream. It occurred to me that it might be a good sign that he hadn't picked the rocky-road flavor instead. I opted for two scoops of salted-caramel-peanut butter cup ice cream. We each sampled a bite of the other's flavor of choice. His was good, but mine was better. Well, as far as I was concerned, anyway.

I was asked to sign a few autographs and pose for some pictures while we were eating our dessert. Always a good sport, Nathan happily served as the photographer each time, never once complaining about the interruption. That didn't really surprise me; he had always been extremely patient with my fans in the past. In fact, I sometimes got the impression that seeing fans approach me filled him with the same sense of pride my parents felt every time *they* witnessed such encounters. And the only thing that was different now was that fans were unknowingly interrupting a date. Still, it was nice to know Nathan could take the interactions in stride just as easily either way.

When we got back to campus, I parked in the nearest parking garage, then walked Nathan back to his apartment. Along the way, without saying a word, he reached for my hand. As our fingers entwined, I leaned in to kiss him. It was our first public kiss, and some people definitely saw it. Of course, in the darkness, it was unlikely anyone could tell who we were, but darkness couldn't protect us forever.

"You know one of my followers is probably going to eventually capture a picture of us together and tweet it out for the whole world to see, right?"

"I don't care. I'll tweet it out myself right now if you want to control the narrative, so to speak. 'Attention, people of Twitter: @ShaneLarson just kissed me. In public. With tongue. Go ahead—be jealous.'"

"I wouldn't be too quick to give up my relative anonymity just yet if I were you, Napster. They'll find out soon enough. And I'm not saying they're

overprotective of me or anything, but I *am* saying you might want to start worrying about pitchforks again.”

Grinning, he released my hand and wrapped his arms around my neck. “You do realize what you’re implying, don’t you, Shane?”

“That you’d better hope my followers like you unless you want to get vilified every day on social media?”

“Ooh, vilified. Nice word.”

“Probably worth at least twelve points in Scrabble.”

“Oh, at least. Anyway, no, that’s not what I meant. You’re talking like there’s going to be something to find out. Like this is going to go on for a while.”

“Oh. Caught that, did you?”

“Nothing gets past me.”

“Well, yeah, you’re right. Tonight was great, as far as I’m concerned, and I do want to do it again sometime. Assuming you’re interested, of course.”

“Maybe just a little bit.” He gave me a wink and leaned in to kiss me, but I put a hand on his chest to stop him.

“I still want to take things slowly, though. There’s still a very big problem we have to take into account here.”

Groaning, he took a step back. “I already don’t like the sound of that. What is it?”

“Less than a month from now, we’re going to be living on opposite ends of the country, thousands of miles away from each other. And not just for the summer this time.”

“Pretty sure it’s not *thousands* of miles. I think it’s closer to fifteen hundred or so.”

“Oh, well, never mind, then. That’s nothing.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to stay positive here, St. Louis.”

“And I appreciate that, Napster, but I’m positive, too—positive one or both of us could start to feel different about this whole thing once that sizeable amount of distance becomes a factor. It’ll be hard enough to maintain a *friendship* from fifteen hundred miles away from each other, let alone a

relationship. I think we should be careful about getting in too deep right now. I think we should probably stick just our toes in the water for now and see how it feels first.”

“Okay.”

“Well, that was surprisingly easy. Especially given the fact that patience isn’t exactly your strong suit.”

“I can be patient when I want to be. You know that. And I told you before, Shane: you’re in the driver’s seat here. I’m not going to push you into anything you’re not ready for. Besides, I can’t exactly be upset about you wanting to protect our friendship at all costs, can I? I completely agree—it’s more important than anything else. But remember, I also said I wasn’t worried because I’m confident this will all work out in the end. And I meant that.”

“I wish I knew how. Some spoilers would be helpful right about now. But I hope you’re right.”

We finished walking to his apartment in silence, holding hands. When we got to the entrance, he gave me another kiss.

“See you at lunch tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“Cool. Later, St. Louis.”

“Later, Napster.”

I turned and started to walk away as he stuck his key in the lock, but then I turned back around to face him again. “Oh, and Nathan?”

“Yeah, Shane?”

“If I haven’t said it yet, I could definitely get used to this. All of it.”

He flashed me a smile, pulling the key back out of the lock and swinging the door open. “Best day after my birthday ever.”

Chuckling, I gave him a nod, then headed back to my apartment.

I was relieved that my first date with Nathan had gone well. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had such a great time on a date. But it almost seemed like things had gone *too* well. Could it really be this easy to make the transition from thinking of Nathan as a best friend to thinking of him as a boyfriend? It almost felt like we were somehow cheating, like we were pledges who had found a way to skip the initiation round everyone else had been forced

to go through in order to get into the Phi Beta Couples fraternity. The secret to having a great first date, obviously, was prefacing that date with nearly four years' worth of friendship.

For some reason, though, I had a feeling people wouldn't exactly be clamoring to read *that* self-help book. Hell, Nathan and I probably wouldn't have been able to hold out that long ourselves if we had planned it that way from the beginning. As much as I hated stereotyping, I was pretty sure there were a lot of gay guys our age who believed one year in the gay dating scene was like one year in a dog's life: really more like seven years. By that logic, Nathan and I had held out for what effectively amounted to nearly twenty-eight years before sharing a single kiss. I didn't even want to think about the number of relationships that had likely begun, progressed to marriage, and culminated in divorce in the same amount of time it had taken Nathan and me to just get from our first meeting to our first kiss. The answer would probably be really depressing, and this wasn't exactly the best time for me to start getting cynical about relationships again.

We went on a handful of additional dates in the short amount of time we had left together before graduation. Each one went surprisingly well. Netflix marathons turned out to be more enjoyable when we spent the whole time huddled together on the couch, wrapped in each other's arms. Concerts turned out to be more intimate when we could actually join all the other couples in slow dancing to the ballads. Even our lunch dates turned out to be more fun when we treated them like actual dates, stealing the occasional kiss from each other instead of just stealing the occasional bite of food off the other person's plate.

It was after one such lunch date that we ran into Gabe while walking hand-in-hand through campus.

"Took long enough, but I see you two finally came to your senses. Congratulations."

"Gabe..."

"No, really, I mean that sincerely, Nathan. I wasn't really invested in our relationship any more than you were. It's better for both of us that we went ahead and ended it. Well, that *you* went ahead and ended it."

"With some nudging from you, of course."

“Yeah, well, pissing you off so you would end things was easier than just ending things myself, I guess. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.”

“I was really just trying to get you to confront your feelings for Shane, but from what he told me, that didn’t exactly work out like I had planned. So what finally changed your mind?”

“Something Shane said. He had no idea how it impacted me, but it made me realize you were right. And even then, I struggled with the matter for a few days before doing anything about it.”

“Because you didn’t want to risk losing him.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Guess worrying about *that* obviously turned out to be a waste of time. How are things going now?”

“So far, so good.”

“The timing kind of sucks, though. Nathan will be heading back to Pittsburgh soon.”

Gabe nodded. “I’m sure you’ll find a way to make it work. Again, I mean that sincerely. The kind of connection you two have is hard to find. You’re insufferable—kidding; I mean inseparable.”

I chuckled. “Thanks, I think.”

Gabe extended a hand toward me. “No hard feelings, by the way. Believe it or not, I’ve actually kind of been rooting for you to finally open your eyes and figure out what’s really going on between you and Nathan. I was always just his placeholder boyfriend.”

As I shook Gabe’s hand, he glanced back at Nathan. “And I’m not saying that to make you feel bad. I know you weren’t consciously aware of what was developing between you and Shane until it was too late. There are no hard feelings between us, either. I know I can be a dick sometimes, but you were good to me—you both were, actually—and I just want you to be happy.”

Nodding, Nathan also accepted a handshake from Gabe. “Thanks. I’m glad to hear that. And thanks for trying to get us to see the truth in your own... unique... way.”

“Heh. No problem. Sorry I missed your birthday, by the way. I figured that would be best, given the circumstances.”

“It’s cool. I get it.”

“Okay, well, guess I’ll let you two get back to making up for lost time. See you around.”

“Later, Gabe,” Nathan and I said at the same time.

“See? Insufferable.”

We ended up with one hundred four concerts on our YotC 3.0 list, thanks in large part to the two music festivals we had attended during the course of the year. It was nice to get into triple digits for what might, sadly, mark the end of the YotC tradition. There would be no point in starting YotC 4.0 if Nathan and I weren’t going to see each other enough in the following year to add more than a few concerts to the list.

Coop had recovered nicely from appendicitis, and, luckily, his editing skills hadn’t been housed in his appendix. He managed to get my Switzerland edit ready for release just before the end of the school year. Even though the trip had been cut short, I was still quite happy with the finished product, and my sponsors were, too. Nathan was surprised to see his name prominently displayed in the credits, but he definitely deserved the recognition. Coop agreed that the quality of Nathan’s footage was top-notch. No one could have possibly guessed that it wasn’t the work of a professional filmer.

The first weekend in June, the Summer X Games were held in Austin, Texas, a city and state that had never before hosted the event. I had to decline my invitation to compete in the skateboarding contests because Nathan and I had something more important to attend that same weekend: our graduation ceremony. Or, rather, our *commencement* ceremony; technically, it would be a few more weeks before we would receive our diplomas and *officially* graduate.

Perhaps unavoidably, it proved to be a bittersweet occasion. Nathan’s parents came in from Pittsburgh, of course, and my parents got to meet them for the first time. Afterward, we all went out to dinner together, then Jeannie and Robert took a late flight back home. It was nice to see the four of them getting along with each other, although Nathan and I had never really doubted that they would. We hadn’t said anything to them about the change in our relationship yet because things were still kind of up in the air. Whether they realized it yet or not, though, there was a good chance this wouldn’t be the last time we were all together. It was comforting to know they could probably get through a

holiday or some other sort of special occasion with us without feeling the urge to kill each other at some point.

My parents surprised me with a brand-new BMW 435i convertible as a graduation gift. I really didn't need a new car—my BMW 335i coupe was only around six years old, and I had a truck and a mini I had won in contests but had barely used since, not to mention the Harley-Davidson motorcycle I had won—but they insisted. My college costs had been paid in full with a scholarship, and I had been fully supporting myself financially since I was fourteen. Buying a new car for me was apparently my parents' way of spending all that money on me that they would have already sunk into my education if I had been practically anyone else. I guess they felt obligated to give it to me one way or another. The years I had spent saving them money had apparently made them forget the years they had spent paying for everything I had needed to get to that point in my career. Despite my concern that they had spent way too much money on the gift, which had been tricked out with every extra feature imaginable, I gratefully accepted it. I even felt slightly better about the matter after they told me the car was also their way of rewarding me for winning the Olympics. Guess it's easier to justify splurging to commemorate something as rare as that.

Nathan and I stuck to our familiar routine on our last night together, watching Netflix and falling asleep on my couch. Aside from a few kisses, nothing happened between us that night. Nathan had been great about respecting my boundaries the whole month, never once trying to so much as stick a hand under my shirt to rub my chest. I was definitely going to have to be the one to initiate sex, whenever I decided I was ready to cross that line. If I *ever* decided I was ready to cross that line.

The following morning, I helped him carry boxes to his car, moving slowly because I knew he'd be gone once the task was completed. This wasn't like saying goodbye to him at the end of a quarter, knowing we'd see each other again at the start of the next; college was over for good now, and it was time to get back to reality, just when our friendship was finally starting to develop into something more.

I thought about Jess as I paused to open a bottle of water, thirsting for a stall tactic. We had once promised to be in each other's lives forever. Hard to believe it had been over two years since I had last seen or even talked to her. Nathan and I could say we'd keep in touch and visit each other on holidays—we could even mean it—but in the end, would we just be like the many others before us who had let distance—*life*—get in the way?

“Don’t worry, St. Louis,” he assured me, as if reading my mind. “Lollapalooza’s only a little over a month away. You’re still coming with me to that, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Napster. Any excuse to use a porta-potty.” I exhaled, my shoulders relaxing as the worry evaporated from my body. He was right—we wouldn’t have to wait until Thanksgiving or Christmas to find an excuse to get together. We’d see each other again in a little over a month. I could handle that. At least, I *thought* I could.

BRECKENRIDGE

Chapter Twenty-Five

As it happened, we saw each other again exactly one week later, when he unexpectedly showed up on the doorstep of my new apartment in Breckenridge.

“Damn, the look on your face right now is priceless,” he said as he snapped a picture of me with his phone.

“What... how... what are you doing here?” *Start with the obvious.*

“I needed a place to stay. Have you seen the prices of hotel rooms these days?”

“How did you even find me?”

“GPS tracking is a beautiful and frightening thing.”

“How long are you here for?” This was starting to sound like a game of Twenty Questions.

“That depends on you, I guess.”

“As if I weren’t already confused enough. What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I just took a one-way flight here from Pittsburgh. Sold my car and a bunch of other things to pay for the plane ticket and give myself some money to get started here. Once that money’s gone, I’m out of luck, so I’d prefer not to spend any more of it on airfare, if that’s okay with you. Hotel rooms aren’t the only things that are ridiculously priced these days.”

Is he saying what I think he’s saying? “You’re moving here? You don’t even know anyone here.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, where are my manners? Hi, I’m Nathan Pearce. Nice to meet you. Mind if I crash here for a while?” He extended a hand, but I ignored it.

“You know what I mean. I couldn’t ask you to just pick up and move across the country for me. Pittsburgh’s your home. Your whole family’s there. All your friends. Everything and everyone you’ve ever loved.”

“Not everyone. And don’t flatter yourself, St. Louis. Who said I was doing this for you?”

“Well, I just... wait, then why *are* you moving here? *Here*, of all places? Did you get a job here or something?”

“No job. I’m here for purely selfish reasons.”

“Heeding the siren call of the legalized marijuana business?”

“There’s that. There’s also the fact that I knew if I didn’t do this, I’d risk spending the rest of my life thinking of you as the one who got away.”

A backpack was hanging on his right shoulder. I shifted my gaze from its padded black strap to the two suitcases he was holding. “Anything else?”

“No, I travel light.”

“Good.”

Grabbing a fistful of his shirt, I pulled him inside and kicked the bottom corner of the door, which slammed shut as I pushed him up against it. Our lips met, and I heard the suitcases fall to the floor with a thud just before he shrugged off his backpack. I rested my free hand on the back of his neck and started running my fingers through his hair, twisting the front of his shirt around my other hand as I kissed him with more abandon than I ever had before. He responded in kind, wrapping his arms around me while parting his lips to allow my tongue to slip into his mouth. He slid one hand up to my shoulder and squeezed it, leaving his other hand resting on my lower back, just above my ass. I knew he would never move that hand any lower—not without permission. He had never once tried to do anything below my waist, and I saw no reason for that to suddenly change now. He understood that I wanted to take things slowly; in fact, he didn’t just understand it, he seemed perfectly content with it. Our bodies weren’t even fully pressed together. They never were. We could continue kissing for hours, as we had multiple times before in the past month, and he would never make a single attempt to take things further. He had promised to let me dictate the pace, and he was committed to keeping that promise, making sure both of his feet stayed firmly planted on first base until I indicated that I was ready to do more.

And now, as I continued kissing him with intense desire that surpassed anything I had ever felt for anyone else, I was ready to do much, *much* more.

Releasing his shirt, I moved my hand from his chest down to his waist and slipped my fingers inside the waistband of his jeans. Hair tickled the back of my hand as I gently grazed it against the skin just above the waistband of his underwear, caught between the two barriers separating me from something I suddenly couldn’t stop thinking about. I gripped the waistband of his jeans and pulled him closer to me. Then I started grinding into him as I tucked my hand under his shirt and moved it back up his torso.

He pulled back and gave me a look of surprise. Nodding, I leaned in to kiss his lips again, then worked my way over to the side of his neck, still grinding into him as I tweaked one of his nipples between my thumb and index finger while grabbing a fistful of his hair with my other hand.

“Fuck, Shane.”

His voice was hushed and thick with desire. His breath felt hot against the side of my neck. With our bodies pressed together, I could feel the unmistakable firmness of his hard cock rubbing against my inner thigh. Mine wasn't fully hard yet, but it was getting there; he would begin to feel it soon enough, if he hadn't already. And yet he kept his hands locked on parts of my body he knew he could safely touch, as if he feared I could still change my mind about this at any moment. In a weird way, that just made me want him even more. His grand gesture of commitment to our relationship hadn't just been an elaborate attempt to get in my pants. My reaction had come as a complete surprise to him. Obviously, he had never been on the receiving end of such a gesture. If he had been, he would have known there was really only one way to respond when a guy sold most of his worldly possessions, uprooted his entire life, moved across the country, and ended up on your doorstep, declaring that he had done it all because he simply couldn't risk letting you slip through his fingers. Well, okay, there were two ways to respond, but I definitely didn't need a restraining order to protect me from Nathan.

“I want you, Nathan.” I whispered the words in his ear, then bit his earlobe as I started clawing at his shirt with both hands. I had it halfway up his torso before he finally got the hint and lifted his arms above his head to allow me to finish tearing it off his body. Tossing it over my shoulder, I fixed my eyes on his. “We're done taking things slowly now.”

The change was instantaneous. With the speed at which an impatient driver reacts to the changing of a stoplight from red to green when he's at the front of the line and already late for work, Nathan immediately stopped acting like a perfect gentleman the moment the last of those words escaped my lips. After freeing me of my shirt, he slipped his hands inside my jeans, grabbing my ass through my bikini briefs and pulling me toward him again. My crotch crashed against his, causing him to release a throaty grunt of pleasure, mixed with perhaps just a hint of pain.

I went back to kissing him, first on his lips and then on his neck, as I slid my hands from his shoulders down to his forearms. Brushing my right hand across his stomach, I blindly undid the top button of his fly, then yanked hard to separate the worn-in fabric from the rest of the buttons. He shuddered and

moaned when I reached through his loosened jeans, found his rock-hard cock, and gave it a quick squeeze. I lingered there, relishing the feeling of him throbbing through the fabric of his underwear every other second or so. Gripping his right wrist with my other hand, I pushed his arm up above his head and pinned it against the door, intertwining my fingers with his. When I moved my lips from his neck to one of his nipples, he moaned again, grazing his teeth against my ear. I sucked, licked, and gently bit the nipple before moving on, leaving it hard as I turned my attention to his exposed armpit. Inhaling deeply, I leaned in and started licking the thick black hair. His natural, musky scent was intoxicating, turning me on more than an overdose of deodorant or cologne ever could.

His moans grew louder as he simultaneously tightened his grip on both my ass and my hand. “Wow. That’s new.”

“I have a bit of an armpit fetish.” I sounded more sheepish than I had intended. It really wasn’t something I was ashamed to admit, but I guess revealing such things to Nathan still felt a bit weird even now, with one hand wrapped around his cock.

“And I’m really fucking glad you do.”

“Good, because yours is too damn sexy to resist getting a taste of.” I dove back into his armpit and licked it again, more playfully this time. I wanted to see if he was ticklish there, and the quick succession of laughs and gasps I easily drew from him confirmed that he was. *Good to know.*

His cock throbbed in my hand again. “Fuck, Shane, you’ve got me dripping.”

I brushed my thumb against the head of his cock and immediately felt the wet spot pooling in his underwear. Shuddering, he kissed the side of my neck as he squeezed my ass again. I licked his armpit once more, then pulled away and turned my head toward him. Our eyes met, and his lips parted in anticipation even before I leaned in to kiss him.

When I started to pull away, he bit my lower lip. I grinned as I let go of his hand and began slowly kissing my way down his torso. Once I got to my knees, I released his cock and used both hands to yank his jeans down to his ankles in one quick motion. His bulging yellow-and-gray bikini briefs, now directly in my line of sight, showed off his package in that way only designer brands seemed capable of. I was glad to see I wasn’t the only one who was willing to invest in decent, sexy underwear instead of settling for the cheap stuff. Not that I planned to let him keep them on for a longer period of time just because he

looked incredibly hot in them. I had a feeling he would look even better out of them, and I was beyond ready to put that theory to the test. Slipping two fingers inside the waistband, I leaned in to give his cock a kiss through the bulging fabric before letting it spring free.

“Not so fast, St. Louis.” Nathan’s hand was under my chin in an instant, coaxing me back up to my feet. I hadn’t even made it halfway to his crotch before the interruption, let alone managed to see what he was packing in his briefs. He wrapped his arms around my waist, grabbed my ass with both hands, and kissed me as he spun us around. Now *I* was the one pressed firmly against the steel door, which had absorbed his body heat and felt warm against my bare back. “I’ve been dreaming about this for over a month now, so you’re going to have to just lean back and wait while I take care of you first.”

“Well, if you insist...”

Chuckling, Nathan kicked off his shoes while kissing my neck, then stepped out of his jeans and dropped to his knees. With one hand, he shed his socks; with the other, he explored the contours of my torso. Then he moved both hands back to my waist, unbuttoned my fly, and tugged my jeans and briefs halfway down my legs. My rock-hard cock sprang up in front of him, and he wasted no time before aiming it down toward his mouth and wrapping his lips around it.

Moaning, I rested a hand against Nathan’s shoulder for balance and pushed my jeans and briefs to the floor with my other hand, then stepped out of them after kicking off my shoes. He continued sucking me while removing my socks, leaving me completely naked in front of him. After going up and down on my cock a few more times, he pulled away and looked up at me, taking in my whole body.

“Fuck, Shane.” He rubbed one of his hands over my pecs, abs, and V muscles while stroking my cock with the other. “I’ve always known you had a good body. Kind of obvious, really. But I never imagined *this*. You’re fucking *ripped*.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, Nathan.” It occurred to me that, despite all the time we had spent together over the years, we had surprisingly never even seen each other shirtless before, let alone naked. We weren’t shy; at least, *I* wasn’t, and I was pretty sure the same could be said about Nathan, who had played a team sport in high school that likely would have required him to shower and change in front of other guys on a regular basis. There had just never been a reason for us to disrobe in front of each other before, even during the trips we

had taken together. “Well, what I can see of you, anyway. I’ve never hated an article of clothing more than I hate your briefs right now. Not even that ugly sweater I had to wear during the Olympics.”

“You’d prefer them to be boxers? What kind of self-respecting gay guy are you?”

“I’d prefer them to be on the floor.”

Grinning, Nathan stood to kiss me as he hooked his thumbs inside the waistband of his briefs and lowered them to his ankles, then stepped out of them and kicked them aside. “Better?”

“Much.” I reached for his cock and spread his precum over the tip, making him moan.

He wrapped his hand back around the base of my cock. “Yeah, well, compared to yours...” He covered the top half of my shaft with his other hand, which still left the head exposed. “Damn, St. Louis. I never realized you were packing such serious heat in your pants. How big is this thing, anyway?”

Blushing, I shrugged as I followed his gaze down to my crotch. “Never measured it.”

Nathan gave me one more kiss before sinking to his knees again. He started playing with himself as he took my cock in his mouth, gagging before he made it halfway down the shaft. Forced to pull back, he coughed and took a deep breath before trying again. His second attempt was thwarted at basically the same exact spot. After taking another moment to recover, he went back to work.

Years of experience had taught me to expect that he would never be able to get more than half of it down his throat. In fact, guys usually gave up after a while and just focused on playing with the tip instead. I would have been perfectly content with that, especially in this case, with Nathan being the one performing the blowjob. Completely unprepared for the possibility, not to mention the sensation, of being deepthroated, I actually doubled over in pleasure when, after ten minutes or so, he finally closed his lips around the base of my shaft. I grabbed the back of his head as I leaned over him, not to hold him in place but to keep myself upright. My legs, so used to absorbing the impact of hard landings at the end of seventy-plus-foot jumps, threatened to turn to Jell-O and give out from the simple but intense gratification of mind-blowing oral sex, and they didn’t start to recover until after he pulled away.

“Fuck, that’s a big dick. Thick, too. Damn.”

My face was still burning, from pleasure as well as minor embarrassment. It was nice to know he liked what he saw, of course—not just of my cock but of the rest of my body, as well. I had no idea how to respond to such praise, though. If this had been some random hookup, I wouldn't have really cared either way, but this was *Nathan*, and I wanted to say just the right thing to him. “Thanks” seemed like a dumb thing to say. “Yeah, I know” was the kind of arrogant thing one would expect to hear in a cheesy porn film. “You think so?” would sound like a desperate ploy for more compliments. “I didn't realize it was that big” would be an outright lie, and a pretty obvious one, at that. “Yours is nice, too” would be true, and I certainly planned to tell him that at some point, but it would just sound like pity if I said it now. I knew how competitive guys invariably became when comparing cock sizes, even if I had rarely been on the losing end of the competition myself. While his cock seemed to be above average in its own right, mine *was* bigger—not just longer but noticeably thicker, too—and there was no point denying that. He had already sized us both up and declared me the winner. He didn't need a second opinion.

“No one has ever been able to take it all before.”

There. Turn it into praise for his cock-sucking skills. Perfect. And completely true, too.

“Yeah, well, I had to get myself ready.”

“For what?”

“For when you start face-fucking me.”

Before I could respond, he took my cock in his mouth again, all the way to the base. I ran my fingers through his hair as a moan escaped my lips. After pulling away, he pushed my cock up against my stomach and sucked on my balls for a while, encircling the head of my cock with his thumb the whole time. Then he released my balls and stuck my cock back in his mouth, but he didn't go all the way down on it this time. Instead, he began teasing it with his tongue, which he swirled around the tip and flicked, in a stunningly rapid-fire manner, against the particularly sensitive part on the underside of the head. I knew there was a name for that part of my cock, but I was no longer coherent enough to remember it.

“Fuck, Nathan.” My toes curled as I arched my back and grabbed a fistful of his hair, thrusting my cock deeper into his mouth. He kept working his tongue over it while tightening his lips and adding some suction, making my eyes roll back in my head. If his goal was to convince me he possessed one of the most

talented tongues—*mouths*—in the world, he had succeeded. If his goal was to make me come, he was getting close to accomplishing *that* mission, too. I couldn't think of a time when I had been more turned on than I was right now. "You're so fucking good at that."

Forcing my eyes to stay open and focused, I looked down and started fucking his mouth, which he kept wide open to accept every inch of my cock. A long string of precum stretched from his own cock to the floor as he continued to play with himself. He gagged occasionally, and his eyes got a bit watery as he kept them locked on mine, but he took my face-fucking better than anyone else ever had.

I held out for as long as I could before finally pulling away. "You're going to make me come if you keep that up."

"Kind of the point, St. Louis."

I pulled him to his feet and gave him a couple quick kisses. "Not yet, Napster." I stole a few more kisses from him as I led him over to the couch and pushed him onto it. "Lie back."

He stretched out horizontally on the couch, giving me a much better view of his naked body than the one I had gotten over by the door. And what a body it was. He wasn't as muscular as I was, but he was still toned; unsurprisingly, he had the look of a guy who got a lot of cardio exercise but didn't really hit the gym very often. His skin was flawless, with pale tan lines around his crotch. Like me, he didn't seem to be a very big fan of manscaping; I guessed he had never taken a razor to anything other than his face. He had the perfect amount of body hair: it was there but wasn't even close to being heavy enough in any given place to obstruct my view of the good stuff underneath. There was just a small patch of hair between his pecs, and his stomach was hairless except for a treasure trail that led into his pubes. His legs and forearms were moderately hairy, but his upper arms and shoulders were bare. I knew from having my arms wrapped around him earlier that his back was probably also hairless. I would have learned to like back hair if Nathan had been one of those guys who possessed it, but it was nice to know that wouldn't be necessary. His cock, still rock hard and glistening with precum, was just as straight as mine but had a slightly darker circumcision scar. His big, basically hairless balls hung low between his thighs. His package just looked perfect in general. *He* just looked perfect in general.

"I love watching you play with yourself."

I hadn't even realized I had been idly stroking my cock until he pointed it out.

"Don't stop on my account. I'm just enjoying the view."

"You're not the only one."

Joining him on the couch, I leaned forward and started grinding my cock against his as I kissed him. Too close to the edge to handle much of that, I soon shifted to the side and started kissing various spots on his torso, enjoying the chance to leisurely explore his body. He lifted his arms above his head, and I seized the opportunity to lick his armpits again. Then, unable to resist any longer, I worked my way down to his cock and began teasing it with my tongue. He moaned and propped himself up on his elbows so he could watch me. I licked up and down his shaft a few times before moving on to his balls, sucking on one for a few seconds before releasing it and turning my attention to the other one. Finally, I carefully took both of them in my mouth at once and proceeded to massage them with my tongue. He moaned again as I released them.

"Fuck, Napster, you've got a big set of balls. They definitely put mine to shame." If I couldn't compliment his cock just yet without sounding insincere, I could at least compliment his balls, which were just as hot. I sucked on them again, causing him to shudder. "I'm going to have fun playing with these."

Nathan laughed. "Never thought I'd hear anyone tell me I have a bigger set of balls than Shane Larson. Especially not Shane Larson himself."

"It's true. As you can clearly see for yourself."

"Literally, perhaps. Figuratively, you've definitely got me beat."

I sucked on his balls one last time before going back to his cock, where another drop of precum was waiting for me. He definitely seemed to produce the stuff more easily than I did. I flicked my tongue against the head of his cock to lick it up, savoring the salty taste, which wasn't even remotely unpleasant. Then I finally took his cock in my mouth for the first time, keeping my eyes locked on his while it slowly disappeared down my throat. When my lips reached the base, he released another moan and fell back against the couch, running a hand through his hair. His other hand came to rest on his inner thigh, and I grabbed it as I continued to suck his cock, intertwining my fingers with his.

Another moan escaped his lips when I started sucking his cock a bit faster and harder. I hoped I was making him feel at least half as good as his blowjob

had made me feel. If nothing else, the drops of precum I occasionally tasted on my tongue certainly seemed like good signs. He let me continue for just a few more seconds before moving his free hand to my chest and pushing me off him, rising to meet me as I leaned back on my heels. He kissed me and stroked my cock with one hand as he moved the other down my back, resting it just above my ass, which he gave a good squeeze. Then he pushed me back farther, until I was now the one lying on the couch. I stretched my legs out as he turned around and settled on top of me so we could suck each other off at the same time.

We held out for a few more minutes before finally shooting our loads in each other's mouths, practically at the same time. Neither of us even bothered to issue a warning to the other before doing so. Like me, Nathan probably hadn't seen the point, since we had each known exactly what we had been striving to get from the other in that moment. Still, I managed to collect every last drop of his cum in my mouth, and from what I could tell, he hadn't missed a drop of my cum, either. He was still holding all of it in his mouth when he pulled away from my cock and turned to kiss me. I hadn't swallowed any of his yet, either. We passed our combined loads back and forth while grinding against each other, both of our cocks still rock hard. Eventually, we each swallowed half the snowball. I had never swapped loads like that with someone before, and I wasn't sure what had possessed me to do it with Nathan our first time out of the gate, but I was really glad I had.

I pulled away and made eye contact with him, my nose pressed lightly against his. "You're so fucking sexy, Nathan."

"Right back at you, Shane." His voice, like mine, was breathless and quiet.

After a few more kisses, Nathan turned his attention back to my cock, just as ready for round two as I was.

When our cocks finally started softening after three straight rounds of orgasms each, it was dark outside. I had no idea how long we had been at it, but I did know Nathan had shown up on my doorstep in the middle of the afternoon. We had never even made it to the bedroom.

"Wow." Still breathing heavily, he curled up beside me on the couch and rested his head against my chest. I adjusted my arm to accommodate him, finding his hand and locking my fingers between his. "That was... Wow."

"Yeah. Wow."

Considering what had just happened—over and over and over again—I thought we were actually being surprisingly articulate. After giving him a quick kiss on the top of his head, I closed my eyes and wrapped my other arm around him, feeling more content than I had in a very long time. Using his free hand, he idly played with my right nipple, keeping it hard and sending shivers through my body. I definitely wouldn't be falling asleep any time soon if he kept *that* up.

After a long silence, he shifted in my arms so he could look at me. “So, are we really doing this?”

“I think we just did, Napster. Three times, as I recall. Nice to know it was just as memorable for you as it was for me.”

“You know what I mean. Was that a yes?”

“Oh. That. No, sorry—that was just ‘sorry I don’t want you to live with me, but I’ll give you a few orgasms before kicking you out on your ass’ sex. You can leave now.”

He grinned and playfully shoved my arm away. “Asshole.”

Chuckling, I leaned forward to kiss him. “Of course that was a yes, Nathan. A very emphatic yes.” *Oh, good, my vocabulary is returning.*

“Are you sure? Because—”

I stopped him with another kiss. “I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life, Nathan.”

He flashed me another one of those amazing smiles I loved putting on his face. As we kissed again, I felt his hard cock flex against my hip.

“Ready for round four?”

His stomach growled. “Well, part of me is, but another part could use some food first.”

“Three loads of cum wasn’t enough?”

“You’d think so, but apparently not.”

“We could order a pizza.”

“Sounds good. Mind if I take a shower while you do that?”

“You don’t have to ask, Nathan. This is your place too now. Towels are in the bathroom closet, which you should have no trouble finding; it’s not hidden behind a mirror like yours is.”

He kissed me one last time before rising to his feet. "I'd invite you to join me, but..."

"Yeah, that's probably not a good idea." Realizing food wasn't the only thing we had gone several hours without, I went to the kitchen and filled two glasses with ice and water. "We'd likely just forget all about the pizza and end up passing out in the shower from hunger and exhaustion. Then again, on second thought, what a way to go."

"No argument there, but I just got you. I'd prefer to keep you for a while." He took one of the glasses and drained it in three quick gulps before heading to the bathroom.

After he started the shower, I called the best pizzeria I knew of in Breckenridge and ordered an extra-large pizza, receiving an estimated delivery time of twenty-five minutes or less. I made another phone call and tossed an old newspaper in the kitchen trashcan. After draining my glass of water, I went to take a piss in the other bathroom, then began looking for my clothes.

I had just finished getting dressed when the delivery guy knocked; obviously, the emphasis had been on the "or less" part of that estimated delivery time. I grabbed my wallet and opened the door, not realizing the shower was no longer running until it was already too late. The young guy—I hoped he was at least eighteen—stammered out my total as he stared in wide-eyed surprise at a very naked Nathan, who ducked back in the bathroom when he realized we had company. I hadn't had time to minimize the sex-hair look I was pretty sure I was sporting, and between that and the sight of Nathan's junk, it didn't exactly take a porn addict to figure out what we had been up to.

"Have fun—I mean, enjoy!" the delivery guy blurted out when I handed him a twenty and told him to keep the change.

"Way ahead of you, man." I gave him a wink as I closed the door. "You can come out now," I told Nathan, raising my voice slightly.

He emerged from the bathroom, still completely naked. "Already did that years ago, St. Louis."

"And I'm really glad you did." Pointing a thumb toward the door, I added, "Sorry about that."

"Are you kidding? That was hilarious! That dude's face was as red as the pizza box."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't realize how lucky he just got. It took me almost four years to get to see you naked. It barely took him four seconds."

“Took me just as long to see you naked, and he missed out on that one, so he can’t be that lucky.”

Wedging the pizza box between my arm and my side, I reached for him with my free hand and pulled him toward me to give him a kiss. “Guess it was worth the wait for both of us.”

“Definitely was for me. But now we need to make up for lost time, so let’s hurry up and eat so we can get back to the fun stuff.”

“You should probably put something on, or I’m going to be too distracted to do much of anything other than the fun stuff.”

Chuckling, he found his briefs and pulled them back on as I slid the pizza box onto the coffee table and went to the kitchen to grab a couple bottles of beer. I opened both and handed him one before taking a seat next to him on the couch and gulping down a generous portion of my own. We ate in silence for a few minutes; I hadn’t realized just how hungry I was until I had opened the box and smelled the pizza.

“So, what have you been doing while you’ve been here by yourself the past week?”

“Just settling in, mostly. Unpacking—you know how much I hate that.”

“I do seem to recall a complaint or two about the P word over the past few years.”

“I promise you won’t hear a single complaint from me when we get around to unpacking your stuff.”

“You’re just saying that because I didn’t bring much with me, St. Louis.”

“Don’t ruin the moment, Napster.” He grinned as I popped a piece of crust in my mouth. After washing it down with a sip of beer, I reached for another slice of pizza. “I went around town and grabbed a bunch of takeout menus from various restaurants, just so I’ll have them when I need them.”

“I’ve always admired your foresight, St. Louis.”

Chuckling, I bit into the slice, trying to think of other things to tell him about. “Did some skating, of course.”

“Of course. I’d imagine there was a Netflix binge in there somewhere, too.”

“Nah. I haven’t even logged in to Netflix since that last night we spent together on campus. I didn’t want to start anything new without you around to watch it with me. I never really watch Netflix alone anymore.”

“Guess it *is* harder to go all *MST3K* on a show without a partner in crime to share the snark with.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the only reason, Nathan. We’ve been binging on Netflix together since the very beginning. Watching it without you would have just made me miss you more than I already was.”

“Keep saying things like that and we won’t get the rest of this pizza eaten, Shane.”

“Noted, although you’re not the one who has to try to concentrate on eating while staring at a hot guy who’s practically naked.”

“Sorry, St. Louis. Want me to put my shirt back on?”

“Don’t you dare, Napster. This is the best kind of torture.”

Blushing, Nathan idly scratched his chest before grabbing another slice of pizza and biting into it.

“I *did* start reading *Shogun*, though.”

“Funny. I started reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.”

“Okay, that’s a bit weird, even for us.”

“Sharing a brain isn’t weird, St. Louis. Just ask your parents.”

“Not the best example, Napster. My parents *are* a bit weird. And if you bring them into this, you won’t have to worry about us having a problem finishing this pizza without interruptions.”

“Parents? What parents?”

Chuckling, I bit into my slice of pizza again. “That’s better.”

“So, what else have you been up to?”

“Well, I already told you I hung out with Cody and Casey on Friday. Their place isn’t far from here.”

Nathan nodded as he swallowed another bite of his own slice. “It’ll be cool to have some other people around here to hang out with. I mean, if we ever actually leave the apartment, that is.”

“I think we might be able to find a way to keep our hands off each other long enough to socialize occasionally.”

“Emphasis on *occasionally*, right?”

“Damn straight, Napster.” I took another sip of my beer. “Oh, and one afternoon, I just drove around for a while, checking out back roads and shit. Things I never really got to appreciate before, when I was just visiting Breck for contests or edits. Found an amazing one I’ll have to show you sometime. Probably the longest possible route from a grocery store to here, but it’s worth the detour. The views are incredible.”

“Cool. Can’t wait to see it.”

We ate in silence for a few more seconds. “And I guess that’s about it. Basically, things have been pretty boring without you around.”

“Yeah, well, I know the feeling.”

“So, what did you get into while you were back in Pittsburgh?”

“Nothing, really. I spent all my time looking for people who were interested in buying my shit. Let’s just say I was really motivated to move here as quickly as I possibly could.”

“How long have you been planning this, anyway? I mean, when we said goodbye in Denver, did you already know then that it wouldn’t be for very long?”

“No. But it was a long drive back to Pittsburgh, and every passing mile just made me miss you even more. I started considering this before I reached the halfway point. Once the thought crossed my mind, it was all I could think about the rest of the way back to my parents’ place. By the time I pulled into their driveway, I knew I’d be returning here soon. It was just a matter of finding a way to make it happen.”

“So, you really sold your...” I stopped, realizing what I was staring at. His right hand was holding a slice of pizza to his mouth, right in my line of sight, but all five fingers were bare. I checked his left hand, just in case, but it was bare, too. “Wait, where’s your ring?”

“Yes, I really sold my Corvette. Sold my ring, too.”

Feeling a sudden ache in the pit of my stomach, I tossed the remnants of my fourth slice of pizza back in the box. “But you loved that ring. And that car. They both meant the world to you because they were from your grandfather.”

“They’re just things, Shane. I’ll always have my memories of Pap, and those are more important. Besides, as much as I coveted that ring when it was on his finger, it never felt right on mine. When I told Mom what I was planning to do, she was totally fine with it. Dad was, too, but Mom was the one I was

really worried about because so much of my plan hinged on selling things that had once belonged to her father. But she just said it was about time I made my move on you. Apparently she's been Team Sate—her words, not mine—since meeting you after Gram's death. She just never said anything because she didn't want to be seen as the kind of mom who meddles in her son's love life.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Ironic, right? She meddles in every other aspect of my life, but the one time her meddling could have helped, she decided to get all self-aware and resist the urge.” He shook his head and took another bite of pizza.

“Still, Nathan, I could have helped pay for you to move out here. You didn't have to sell a family heirloom to do it.”

“No, Shane. I appreciate that, and I know you would have been happy to give me the money, but I would never take advantage of you like that. I'm the one who wanted to move out here, so I'm the one whose responsibility it was to find a way to pay for it.” I opened my mouth to protest, but he stopped me. “And before you say anything, yes, I know you would never think of it as me taking advantage of you. But *I* would. I always pulled my own weight with you before; I'm not going to suddenly stop now.” He drained the last drops of beer from his bottle and set it aside. “Besides, asking you for money would have ruined the surprise. And I think Pap would have approved of my decision to sell those things, anyway. It's not like I did it to pay for drugs or anything. I did it to start a life with the man I love.” He looked me straight in the eyes. “You *do* know that, right, Shane? I love you.”

“I love you too, Nathan.”

It was the first time we had said those words to each other since the night Nathan had admitted his true feelings to me. Hearing them again made me feel like a kid on Christmas morning.

Nathan's smile seemed to indicate he felt the same way. “That's the first time you've said it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like it's a fact.”

“First time you've said it like that, too.” Before, we had discussed our love for each other as something we assumed was true. Now, it was something we *knew* was true. “And it *is* a fact, Nathan. It's as much a fact as ‘I'm a

snowboarder' or 'I have heterochromia iridum.' I love you, Nathan Andrew Pearce. I might not have been sure back then, but I'm damn sure now."

He didn't even bother to drop his half-eaten piece of crust back in the box before pouncing on me, already tenting his briefs. We kissed as he tossed the crust over his shoulder, and while he missed the box, he did manage to get it onto the coffee table. I caught a glimpse of it spinning in place as he unbuttoned my jeans and took my cock in his mouth. After letting him blow me for a minute or so, I pushed him back and turned around so I could suck his cock at the same time.

If we were in an unspoken race to see who could make the other come first, he definitely won, but I'd be prepared to present his tongue to any judging panel as an obviously unfair advantage. He filled my mouth with his load shortly after taking mine. When I turned to kiss him, both of our mouths were empty, but I could still taste myself on his lips and tongue.

"You know, that was round four, and we still haven't made it to the bedroom."

"Walking takes valuable time away from sucking cock, Napster. But now that we have that out of the way, I can give you the tour. As soon as my legs start working again, that is." Resting my head against his chest, I kissed his nipple while waiting for my body to stop tingling. "Team Sate? Really?"

"I know, right? We even have our own hashtag."

"Well, as portmanteaus go, I guess it's one of the better ones."

"Ooh, portmanteaus. Nice one."

"Yeah, well, I have no idea how I managed to think of that word in my current state."

"Guess I'll just have to try harder to turn your brain to mush next time."

"Please do."

Chuckling, Nathan pulled me toward him and gave me a kiss. "Ready to give me that tour, St. Louis? I don't feel entirely sated yet."

Shaking my head, I groaned at the horrible pun as I stood and helped Nathan to his feet. We were both still hard. Nathan's briefs automatically fell to his ankles when he straightened his legs, and he stepped out of them as he helped me remove my own clothing. I started kissing him and stroking his cock as I blindly stumbled backward down the hallway with him in tow. When we got to the bedroom, I pushed him against the doorframe and fumbled for the

light switch while grazing my teeth across his neck, making him moan. Once the room was lit, I led him inside and shoved him onto the bed.

“A mini-fridge?” I had one tucked under a four-legged nightstand with double drawers. “Good, because I have a feeling I won’t be letting you leave this room for the rest of the night.”

I climbed on top of him and started grinding against him as we went back to kissing. When I finally moved down to his lap, he leaned back, put his hands behind his head, and watched as I teased him with my tongue, alternating between sucking his balls and licking his cock. I took my time, drawing out the blowjob because it had probably been less than fifteen minutes since our last orgasms. I rubbed his chest and played with his nipples while deepthroating his cock, occasionally eliciting sounds from him that only made me want to take things even slower, just so I could keep hearing them.

Eventually, though, I could tell he was getting close, so I increased my speed and soon had him pumping another load down my throat. I kept his cock in my mouth for a while, making him shudder every time my tongue grazed his sensitive head. When it finally started softening, I reluctantly released it from my mouth and gave him a kiss. He pulled me forward until I was straddling his chest so he could return the favor. I had expected him to go slowly—turnabout being fair play and all—but he clearly had other ideas in mind. Hungrily alternating between sucking my cock and sucking my balls, he pushed me over the edge in practically no time at all.

I rolled off him and rested my head on his chest as I struggled to catch my breath. He stroked my arm and ran his fingers through my hair. “So... this is the bedroom.”

He chuckled, looking around the room as if he had barely even noticed where we were until I had pointed it out to him. “I like it. The bed’s comfortable. And the view’s incredible.” There was a full-length window in the door leading out to the adjoining private terrace, and it *did* offer an incredible view of the mountain, but he wasn’t looking at it—he was looking at me, at my naked body resting in his arms.

“Oh, yeah, the view’s a real selling point for me, too,” I replied, returning his gaze. I rolled over and grabbed a couple beers from the mini-fridge. After opening them, I handed him one, then turned to toss the caps in the small trashcan next to the appliance. “There’s water in there, too, if you’d rather have that.”

“Maybe later. This is great for now.”

Somewhere in the living room, a phone started ringing.

“It’s mine,” Nathan said. “Probably my mom. At least she didn’t call a few minutes earlier.”

“I’ll go find it for you.”

“You’re not going anywhere, St. Louis. I told you I wasn’t going to let you leave this room for the rest of the night, remember? Besides, I wouldn’t be able to talk to her with you lying here all sexy and distracting, anyway.” He gave me a quick kiss before rolling over and getting out of bed on the other side. “Be right back.”

I propped myself up on my elbows and admired his backside as he walked away. As I had suspected, his back was completely hairless, as was his ass—what I could see of it, at least. He disappeared from view far too quickly. Sighing, I took a sip of beer, then leaned back against the headboard. The ringing soon stopped; based on the sound of Nathan’s footfalls, I had to assume he hadn’t made it to his phone in time to prevent the call from going to voicemail. Of course, if his phone had been in his pants pocket, where he usually kept it, then it was hard to guess where it had ended up after we had started flinging clothes around. With nothing to distract me, I started thinking about how I had pulled Nathan into the apartment earlier and slammed him up against the door. His backpack had absorbed most of the impact, and unless he had sold them, too, he probably had some breakable things in there, like his laptop and iPad. Hopefully they—and his phone—had managed to escape round one unscathed.

A minute or two passed before I heard him start talking. “Hey. Sorry I forgot to call you earlier... Yeah, I made it to Breckenridge safely... Shane’s place... He says hi... Not much, just hung out all day... Yeah, he said yes... Thanks. Me, too... Yeah, please don’t ever say that again, Mom... Because it’s just *weird*, okay? ...Yeah, I know... Okay, love you, too... Bye.”

He returned—still naked—with a slice of pizza in his hand. “Thought we could share it.” Flopping down on the bed next to me, he took a bite, then held the rest near my mouth so I could do the same.

“Need another beer?” I assumed he had finished his while talking to his mother.

“Sure.” He bit into the pizza again as I reached for the mini-fridge. After opening the bottle, I handed it to him in exchange for what remained of the

slice of pizza. “So, here’s a question for you to ponder: how the fuck did my phone end up in the kitchen, of all places?”

“Beats me. Maybe it fell out of your pocket, and then we kicked it at some point?”

“Maybe. Not like we would have noticed if we had.”

“Yeah, we *were* a bit distracted earlier.”

“Just a bit. Anyway, there wasn’t a scratch on it, so it’s not a big deal. Just weird.”

“Yeah. How’s your mom doing?”

“Okay, I guess. Said to tell you hi. And that she was happy for us. She squealed when I told her you’d said yes, Shane. She fucking *squealed*. My mom doesn’t squeal. Ever.”

“That *does* sound more like something *my* mom would do.”

“I know, right? Oh, and I haven’t even told you the best part yet. After I gave her the news, she said she was going to let me go so we could get back to our sexy time.”

I nearly choked on the piece of pizza I was chewing. Between coughs, I gulped down the last of my beer.

“My reaction exactly.”

“Well, she’s not wrong. But if it were my mom, I’d prefer not to know she knows I’m having sex.”

“Right? I mean, she’s not stupid. If we’re going to be living together in a one-bedroom apartment, it’s safe to assume we’re going to be sleeping together at some point. I get that that’s pretty obvious. But there are some things you just don’t want to ever hear your mom say, and ‘have fun sexing up your boyfriend’ is definitely one of those things.”

I tore the crust and handed him one of the halves. “It *was* pretty fun, though.”

“Let’s not tell her that, okay? And wait a minute—just ‘pretty’ fun?”

“I was being generous. Frankly, I think you need a lot more practice. Fortunately, I’m a very willing test subject.”

“Hopefully a very patient one, too. I feel like this could take me years to master—decades, even.”

He popped his last piece of crust in his mouth and chewed it as I ran a hand up his thigh and rested it under his balls. I swallowed the final bite of my own crust, and he handed me his beer so I could wash it down. When I returned the bottle to him, he gulped down the last of its contents, reached over the side of the bed, and let it fall to the floor.

Then he cleared his throat. “So, um...”

I waited as long as I could stand, but this wasn’t just a long pause for dramatic effect. Nathan didn’t do pauses for dramatic effect, anyway. This was something else, and I was afraid I knew what. I pulled my hand away, suddenly wishing I hadn’t had that last drink of beer. The weeks I had spent dreading this moment still hadn’t prepared me for the feeling I’d get in the pit of my stomach when it finally arrived. I fixed my eyes on the ceiling; it was easier than looking at his. “So, what, we have sex and now you suddenly find it hard to talk to me? For the first time ever?”

“What? No!” Turning onto his side, he propped himself up on his elbow and reached for me with his other hand, turning my head to face him so he could look me straight in the eyes. “*No*. That’s not it at all, okay? It’s just... on the list of things I never thought I’d be asking my best friend—and that’s a *very* short list, Shane—this is right at the top.”

The ache began to subside as my heart cautiously left my stomach and returned to its normal location. “Well, we’ve already said quite a few things today that I never thought we’d say to each other. Hell, I never thought I’d be able to accurately describe the taste of my best friend’s cum, and I’m assuming you’d agree that turned out pretty well for both of us.” Perhaps I was being inappropriately crass, given the fact that I still didn’t know what Nathan was trying to ask me, but I was in recovery mode, and crassness was a convenient coping mechanism. “We’ve always been able to talk about anything and everything with each other. I don’t want that to ever change, okay? So whatever it is, go ahead, ask.”

Another pause. Finally, he took a deep breath. Now it was his turn to stare at the ceiling. “Okay. How do you feel about...” He cleared his throat. “How do you feel about anal sex?”

In the back of my mind, I had always known that if Nathan and I decided to add sex to our relationship, this conversation would have to happen eventually. I just hadn’t expected it to happen *now*, of all times. “I don’t have much experience with it either way, to be honest.”

“That’s okay. Do you... you know, want to try it?”

“Sure.” Of course I wanted to *try* it. This was *Nathan*, after all. I wanted to be with him in every possible way. *Trying* it wasn’t really the problem. “But I wasn’t really expecting...” I let my voice trail off, hoping he’d get the gist.

“That’s cool. Some other time, then. Unless you want to try fucking me.”

“Sure, I guess—wait, you bottom?” I had never really given a whole lot of thought to Nathan’s sex life in the past, but I had always just assumed he was likely a top. And that assumption had nothing to do with the widespread, offensive stereotypes about how tops were typically more masculine than bottoms. I just knew Nathan was an ass man; I had certainly caught him staring at enough of them over the years to figure that much out.

He locked eyes with me again. “Only for the right guy.”

“So, Gabe...?” I blurted the question out before I could stop myself. *Nice, Shane. Bring up the ex—perfect way to kill the mood.* “Sorry. That’s none of my business. Forget I asked.”

“Remember what you just got done saying about us being able to talk about anything and everything, Shane? And it absolutely *is* your business, by the way. No, I never bottomed for Gabe. Not even once. He never asked to top, and I wouldn’t have let him if he had. I’ve only bottomed for one guy before—Kyle, the guy I dated in high school. And only a few times then.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say. Even if Nathan was cool with it, talking about his exes while naked in bed with him was still pretty weird.

“Just go slow, and it’ll be fine. You’re bigger than Kyle was, and it’s been years since I last had anything up my ass, regardless.”

“We don’t have to—”

He climbed on top of me before I could finish the sentence. Straddling my waist, he leaned forward until his face was inches from mine, holding my gaze. My cock rested comfortably against the crevice between his ass cheeks, already rock hard. “Shane, I want this. I’ve wanted this since the first time we kissed back in Denver. Hell, maybe even before then, if I’m being honest.” He started grinding his ass against my shaft as he kissed me, his stiff cock rubbing across my abs. I wrapped my arms around him, quickly getting lost in our make-out session. Kissing was something I understood, something I could be sure I liked, wanted, and knew how to do. Anal sex, on the other hand...

He pulled away and looked me in the eyes again. “You have condoms, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we can try. Unless you don’t want to.”

I stared into his piercing eyes—eyes filled, in that moment, with nothing but desire for me. How could I possibly say no? *Maybe it’ll be different with him.*

Kissing him again, I blindly reached for the top drawer of the nightstand, opened it, and fumbled around until I felt the unmistakable ringed bump of a condom wrapper, not far from the slightly slick label of a travel-size bottle of lube. Pulling both from the drawer, I tore my lips away from his just long enough to bite open the wrapper and remove the condom. He went back to kissing me as I stretched the latex over my cock. I coated my hand with several drops of lube, and he reached out to get some for himself. After I tossed the bottle onto the nightstand, I slicked up my cock while he did the same to his ass.

I suddenly remembered I had forgotten some crucial steps. Resting a finger against his hole, I said, “Wait, do you need me to...?”

“No, I don’t want to wait. I want you right now, Shane. Just go slow.”

He started kissing me again as I guided my cock to his hole and carefully started to penetrate him. Nathan gasped as the tip of my cock slipped inside him.

“You good?”

“Yeah. Just keep going slowly.”

I waited a few seconds before pushing farther into his ass. As we continued kissing, I stayed focused on his body language, ready to pull out at the first sign of discomfort. Hurting him was the last thing I wanted to do. He gasped a few more times as I continued entering him, but he never seemed to actually be in much, if any, pain. After what seemed like at least a few minutes, I finally found myself balls-deep inside him.

“*Fuck*, Shane.”

“Still good?”

“So good. Just give me a minute. *Fuck*, you’re big.”

We resumed our make-out session as he got used to having my cock in his ass. Eventually, he started grinding back and forth on it, gradually picking up

speed after a tentative beginning. He was incredibly tight—which, given the fact that he hadn't bottomed since high school, shouldn't have surprised me. His ass felt good wrapped around my shaft, and a few moans escaped my lips between kisses as he continued slowly grinding on me. Finally, with my cock once again buried all the way inside him, he whispered in my ear, "Fuck me, Shane."

I knew what to do, of course. I might not have had much practice fucking ass, but every guy past the age of puberty knows what to do when his cock is in a tight hole, and I could fuck face with the best of them. I grabbed his ass with both hands and started thrusting into him as we continued kissing. When he pulled away and turned his head to the side to let out a deep, sexy moan of unmistakable pleasure, I sucked his earlobe into my mouth and teased it with my tongue. Gasping, he planted another kiss on my lips, then put his hands around my neck and gazed into my eyes as I kept thrusting into him, maintaining a steady, moderate pace.

After fucking him like that for a few minutes, I wrapped my arms around him and rolled him onto his back, staying inside him as we settled into the missionary position. When I started thrusting into him again, he moaned and ran a hand through his hair, resting the other one on the back of my head. I kissed his lips, nibbled on his neck, licked his exposed armpit, then went back to his lips to repeat the process.

"Fuck, Shane, you're giving me goose bumps."

I looked down. His arms were indeed covered with tiny bumps of flesh. There was a small pool of precum accumulating near his navel. I scooped it up and licked it off my finger as I continued fucking him. Then I grabbed his cock and started playing with it.

"Damn, Nathan. Your cock is so fucking hard."

"How could it not be?"

Breathing heavily, he gazed up at me, his face contorted in an expression of total ecstasy. I leaned down and took a few inches of his cock in my mouth while still inside him, a trick I was flexible enough to pull off for short stretches of time, without discomfort, as long as I was fucking someone whose cock was above average in length. He interrupted the blowjob almost immediately, resting a hand on either side of my face and pulling me forward for another kiss. I tried stroking his cock instead, but he soon pushed my hand away. I waited thirty seconds or so, then wrapped my hand back around his cock.

Again, he quickly stopped me. After another minute or two, I went back for a third attempt. This time, he not only pushed my hand away, he also intertwined our fingers to hold it in place. *Okay, guess he doesn't want to come yet.*

Incredibly, his moans seemed to get deeper and sexier as they became more frequent. I realized I was sweating, but I couldn't be sure if that was a new development or if I had been sweating all along. I gave him a quick kiss, then locked eyes with him again. He grabbed my ass with his free hand and dug his fingers deep in the flesh. Taking that as a hint, I started fucking him harder.

"Fuck, Shane, that feels so fucking good."

It felt good on my end, too. *Of course* it felt good. My boyfriend's hot, tight ass was wrapped around my extremely hard, sensitive cock. That it would feel good had always been a foregone conclusion. And I loved hearing Nathan moan as I fucked him. I loved getting those intense looks from him as my cock filled his ass. I loved seeing him covered in goose bumps I had caused. I loved knowing he was too close to the edge to handle more than a few quick strokes of his cock. I loved making him feel *so fucking good*.

But, as always, I wasn't into it; not really. Certainly not in the way he was. For me, it was all just mechanical, a means to an orgasm. Honestly, of all the things we had done since he had shown up on my doorstep earlier, I was enjoying this the least. The fact that I was actually ranking our sexual activities in my head—that I was thinking, period—while thrusting into him said it all, really. Why couldn't I just be in the moment and enjoy fucking the man I loved?

As I kissed Nathan again, I realized his hand had moved from my ass to the back of my head at some point. I wondered if he had been trying to pull me in for a kiss—and, if so, how long it had taken me to respond. But as I forced myself to focus on his body language again, it quickly became clear he hadn't noticed how distracted I had just gotten while fucking him. Perhaps he was simply too deep in ecstasy to read me as well as he usually did, or perhaps I was really that good at fucking on autopilot. But I knew the truth, even if he didn't. I had never been closer to Nathan, and yet I had never felt farther away from him, either.

Determined to rid the terrible thought from my mind—to rid *all* thoughts from my mind—I started fucking Nathan harder, drawing louder moans from him. Breathing heavily, he slid his hand from my head to my back, his trimmed fingernails raking into my skin and probably leaving scratch marks behind, if

the faint burning sensation I felt was any indication. His eyes rolled back in his head as he bit my lower lip.

“Fuck, Shane...”

Suddenly, Nathan’s ass tightened around my cock. The unexpected change sent me over the edge, and I shot my load in his ass as I continued to thrust into him. Once my orgasm subsided, I gradually slowed my pace, giving him a few more kisses before allowing my cock to slide out of his ass, causing him to shudder under me.

I pulled off the condom and tossed it in the trashcan. I was about to collapse on his chest when I realized he was covered in cum from his stomach to his neck. Not a big deal—he would probably want a shower anyway, and I could always just join him if I got his cum all over me—but I opted to stay sitting up instead, admiring the view. Since I had taken all his other loads directly in my mouth, this was my first chance to get a good look at his thick, milky-white cum. I was surprised he had managed to produce so much for his sixth orgasm of the night.

“Fuck... that was... *wow*.”

“Yeah, *wow*.” *I guess*.

“I had no idea bottoming could feel that good. Fuck, my legs are still trembling.”

They were, and noticeably so. “When did you come?” I thought I knew the answer already; I just couldn’t really believe it.

“Sometime after you went into overdrive on me and made me literally see stars. I wasn’t even touching myself, Shane. Actually, I haven’t touched myself since we started. Since *before* we started.”

That confirmed my suspicion. I had been pretty sure one of his hands had been intertwined with mine, and the other had been scratching my back, leaving nothing for him to touch himself with. But I still found it hard to believe he had actually had a hands-free orgasm. I knew that sort of thing was possible, but I had never actually seen anyone come just from anal stimulation before. It kind of made me feel even worse about not enjoying the sex as much as he clearly had.

I reached down and touched his cock, causing him to shudder again. He quickly pushed my hand away. “Damn, you’re sensitive all of a sudden. You weren’t this jumpy after any of your other orgasms.”

“You kind of had me right on the edge of this one for quite a while. For someone who doesn’t have much experience with it, you sure know how to fuck.” He sat up and gave me a kiss. “Want to join me in the shower? We don’t have to worry about taking too long and missing the delivery guy this time.”

“Ready for round seven already? You’re insatiable.”

“You’re the one whose dick is still hard.”

Looking down, I realized he was right. My cock was no longer rock hard, but it was definitely still hard enough. “Guess we’re both insatiable.”

“Honestly, after four years of buildup, I’m not sure we should have expected anything less.”

“It wasn’t quite that long, Napster. More like three years and nine months.”

“I’m rounding up, St. Louis. Extra days for every cold shower I’ve had to take over the past month or so. I was happy to give you all the time you needed to decide if this was what you really wanted, but damn, the wait was fucking *torturous*.”

“If it makes you feel any better, you’re not the only one who had to take the occasional cold shower.”

“Seriously?”

I chuckled at his obvious surprise. “Yes, Nathan, seriously. My brain and heart might have wanted to take things slowly to make sure we didn’t end up hurting our friendship, but that doesn’t mean my libido was always on board with the idea. You’re not exactly an easy guy to resist, you know.”

“Look who’s talking.”

I leaned forward and kissed him, and he pulled me closer, making me sticky with his still-drying cum. Now it was official: I was definitely going to have to join him in the shower. I wrapped my arms around him and guided him off the bed with me, feeling his cock stiffening against my thigh as we continued to kiss. We stumbled toward the bathroom, turned the shower faucet on, and kissed some more as we waited for the water to get hot. After we rinsed each other off, he dropped to his knees, and I moaned and leaned back against the shower wall as he began deepthroating me, tonguing the head of my cock while rubbing his hands over the contours of my torso. When he raked his fingernails down from one end of my V muscles to the other, I shuddered and grabbed the back of his head to steady myself.

“Fuck, Nathan...”

He released my cock from his mouth and looked up at me. “Sorry, St. Louis. I kind of have a thing for V muscles. Someday, you’ll have to show me how you managed to get such deep ones.”

“Sure, if you really want me to. But for the record, your body’s already sexy as hell, just the way it is. I wouldn’t change a thing about it. Including your V muscles.”

“Never said I’d actually start doing the exercises once you showed them to me, St. Louis.” Giving me a wink, Nathan added, “Just curious, that’s all. And I won’t pretend I don’t also just want to watch you work out sometime.”

Chuckling, I bent down to kiss him, then pressed my back against the wall again as I put my cock back in his mouth. It only took a few more minutes for him to work another load out of me, although I doubted there was much to it. He continued sucking my cock until it finally started to soften. Pulling away from my crotch, he stood and gave me a kiss, allowing me to taste myself on his tongue when it entered my mouth.

After making out with him for a while, I dropped to my knees and began to return the favor. He braced himself against the shower wall and started fucking my face as I played with his balls and ran my hands over his wet body. His orgasm didn’t occur quite as quickly as mine had, and if he shot any cum during it, it was barely detectable; not surprisingly, it seemed like milking his prostate with my cock had completely drained him of everything he’d had left in the tank. But if what I’d heard about dry orgasms being painful was true, he didn’t seem to mind. He moaned as I continued sucking his cock, and once it softened, he pulled me toward him for a kiss.

After stepping out of the shower, we dried each other off, then continued making out as we stumbled into the bedroom and flopped down on the bed.

“Okay, I think I’m finally sated,” Nathan said, resting his head on my chest.

I ran my fingers through his hair, which was still a bit damp. “Me, too.”

After a few seconds of silence, he jerked upright. “How did I miss the fact that you have another bathroom in here?”

I laughed as he stared at the toilet that was just visible past a door on the opposite wall. “You had other things on your mind earlier, I think.”

“Oh, right—it’s all coming back to me now.”

“Anyway, it’s just a half bath. I think the point is that having a detached bathroom lets you keep guests out of your bedroom.”

“Oh, so we don’t have to worry about whether the lube and condoms are hidden when friends and family come to visit. Nice.”

“Yeah, that’s probably *exactly* why the contractors designed the apartments that way. Kinky bastards wanted to be able to hide their sex toys from nosy neighbors.”

“Sounds plausible to me. By the way, while we’re on the subject, nice choice of lube. When you said you didn’t have much experience with anal sex, I wasn’t sure you’d have any lube at all, let alone the expensive premium silicone shit.”

“I wouldn’t whack off with anything less.”

“I suspect you’re going to be doing a lot less of that from now on.”

“I suspect we both are.”

He settled his head back on my chest, closed his eyes, and yawned. I looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost four in the morning. Good thing neither of us had anywhere to be tomorrow. Today. Whatever.

He pulled me closer. “I love you, Shane.”

“I love you, too, Nathan.”

So much had happened in the last twelve hours or so. My life had completely changed, and I couldn’t have possibly been happier about the unexpected development. Still, in the back of my mind, I knew I would eventually have to figure out what to do about my anal sex dilemma. I hated being less than completely honest with Nathan about it, but I wasn’t ready to tell him yet. I *wanted* to enjoy anal sex, and maybe if I tried hard enough, I could eventually find a way to do just that. But in order for that to even be possible, Nathan would have to stay in the dark for now. I knew him well enough to know that if he found out I didn’t enjoy anal sex, he would immediately stop asking me for it, ignoring his own needs in the process. Working through the matter on my own seemed to be my best option, even if it was an option that was already making me feel pretty shitty. But it was only temporary; I would give myself a few weeks or so to see if I could find a way to turn things around, *then* I would tell Nathan, one way or another. And I wouldn’t outright lie to him; if, for whatever reason, he ever came out and asked me to tell him exactly how I felt about anal sex, I would be honest with

him. Just like I was being honest about loving him. That, at least, was an incontrovertible truth.

I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When I woke up, I was still in Nathan's arms, with my chest serving as his pillow. A smile was plastered on his face. I stared at him for a few minutes, admiring every inch of his naked body in a way I hadn't truly been able to the previous night, when everything had been an overwhelmingly intoxicating blur of frenetic first-time experiences. Or maybe that wasn't true. Maybe I *had* gotten to fully appreciate it then. Maybe the truth was that the rest of my life would be spent constantly looking for excuse after excuse to take it all in again and again.

The rest of my life. With Nathan.

I smiled at the thought. Part of me still couldn't believe we were really doing this. Another part of me was wondering why we hadn't done it sooner. *Every* part of me, though, was now oddly certain that being with Nathan could really work. I had been worried before, but our friendship hadn't suddenly deteriorated after we had kissed or after we had declared our love for each other, and it hadn't suddenly deteriorated after we'd had sex with each other, either. That alone would have made me feel pretty confident about our future, but it also helped to know distance was no longer an issue. In fact, the only thing I could possibly see being a threat to us now was me—me and my ridiculous inability to just relax and enjoy anal sex the way most gay guys seemed to enjoy it, including Nathan.

A sudden urge to piss distracted me from my thoughts. I couldn't just ignore it, but I really didn't want to disturb Nathan, even though I knew it would probably be impossible not to. Still, always up for a challenge, I slowly lifted his arm off my stomach and rested it at his side. Surprisingly, he didn't stir. But moving his arm had been the easiest part of my task. I still had to take away his pillow, and that would be much more difficult.

After carefully slipping my right hand under his neck to lift and support his head, I inched my upper body to the left, keeping him as still as possible as I lowered his head onto the mattress. Again, he didn't stir. I thought about giving him a real pillow, but I didn't want to push my luck, so I just kissed the top of his head and slowly worked my way out of bed. Then I watched him for a minute, waiting for him to wake up. He didn't.

So much for you being a light sleeper, Napster. Apparently all you needed was a day of travel and a night of marathon sex to cure you of that problem.

It was nearly three already. After taking a piss, I showered, brushed my teeth, and did a bit of beard maintenance. Then I went to the kitchen to try to find something to eat. The pizza box was on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator; Nathan must have put it there while talking to his mother the previous night. I pulled it out and opened the lid. He had apparently either finished off or thrown away the half-eaten slice I had abandoned in favor of sex the previous night, but three uneaten slices remained. I transferred them to a plate and placed it in the microwave.

While the leftovers were being nuked, I poured two glasses of orange juice and tossed the empty carton in the trashcan. Then I filled another glass with ice and water, gulped down about half the contents, and filled it back up again. After setting the glass aside, I located my jeans and retrieved my phone, which, unlike Nathan's, had stayed tucked inside one of the front pockets despite the chaos of the previous night. Several missed calls had accumulated since the last time I had checked it, including one from my mother.

The microwave beeped as I pulled my jeans on and stepped outside. After a brief phone conversation with my mother, I checked my other messages but only bothered to immediately respond to two important ones from a sponsor. Back in the kitchen, I took the plate of pizza out of the microwave, placed it and the three glasses on the lid of the pizza box, and carefully carried it all to the bedroom. Nathan was still asleep. After sliding the pizza box onto a corner of the bed and moving the glasses to the more stable nightstand, I climbed into bed next to him and gave him a kiss.

He smiled at me as he blinked and stretched. "Morning."

"Afternoon, actually. Not far from evening."

"Seriously?"

I nodded, gesturing toward the clock. "I haven't been up long myself. But you had a busy day yesterday, to say the least, so I didn't want to wake you right away."

"How the hell did I manage to sleep through you getting out of bed?"

"Good question. I mean, I was careful, but still, I had to move your head off my chest, and even *that* didn't wake you."

"Damn. Okay, that settles it. Sorry, St. Louis, but we're just going to need to keep having sex multiple times a day for the rest of our lives. My ability to get deep, restful sleep apparently depends on it."

I laughed and shook my head. “Sounds like a real burden, Napster, but I *guess* it could be arranged. For your sake, I mean.”

“Thanks. You’re too kind.”

“It looked like you were having a pretty good dream earlier, if the smile on your face was any indication.”

“That’s the beauty of it, actually: it wasn’t just a dream.” He pulled me closer and gave me a kiss.

I pulled away when I felt his cock stiffen against my thigh. “Whoa. Down, boy. Your food’s getting cold.”

He noticed the plate of pizza for the first time. “Damn, St. Louis. When you serve a guy breakfast in bed, you really put a lot of effort into it.”

“Breakfast of champions, Napster. Nothing but the best for you.”

He got out of bed and went to the bathroom to take a piss, leaving the door open. That shouldn’t have surprised me after everything we had done the previous night, but for some reason, it did. I realized I had done the same thing when I had been in the other bathroom earlier. On the surface, it wasn’t really a big deal; guys usually grew accustomed to pissing in front of other guys at a young age, after all. But we had never lived together before—had never even stood next to each other at a wall of urinals—so watching him piss was kind of symbolic. Right before my eyes, the last barrier of privacy we had kept in place as best friends was literally being flushed down the toilet.

He returned to bed after washing his hands. I gave him a slice of pizza and took another slice for myself. After swallowing a bite, I cocked my head toward the nightstand. “The glass of water is for you. We probably should have had more last night. You’re back at high altitude now—even higher than Denver. I know you were only gone for a week, so it probably won’t be a big adjustment this time, but still, I don’t want you to get sick.”

“I’ve never felt better, but I’ll take the water anyway.” He glared at my jeans as I handed him the glass. “You’re wearing clothes.”

“Mom called while we were asleep. I stepped outside to call her back so I wouldn’t disturb you.”

“Didn’t want to give the neighbors a show?”

“Figured I’d leave that to you. The delivery boy sure seemed to enjoy the one you gave him last night.”

“Their loss.” Nathan finished eating his slice of pizza, then gulped down the rest of his water and handed the empty glass back to me. As soon as I set it aside on the nightstand, he grabbed the waistband of my jeans and pulled me toward him for a kiss. “How about just giving me a private show instead?”

He reached into my pants and wrapped his hand around my cock, which began to stiffen in response to his touch. After glancing over my shoulder at the clock, I reluctantly stopped him, feeling a twinge of guilt when I noticed he was already rock hard again.

“We can’t right now. It’s already four, and we have things to do today.”

“I know. I was trying to do them just now.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “Not those things. We need to go shopping. You’re going to need some stuff, and as you might have noticed last night, our fridge situation is pretty sad at the moment.” Funny how quickly *my* could become *our*. He must have been thinking the same thing, because he grinned in spite of his predicament.

“You’re killing me here, St. Louis.”

“I know. I’ll find a way to make it up to you.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” He gave me a wink before heading to the bathroom to take a shower. I hoped it wouldn’t have to be a cold one.

After returning the three glasses to the top of the pizza box, I carried everything back to the kitchen, where I drank one of the glasses of orange juice and ate half of the remaining slice of pizza. I put the other half on a plate and left it sitting on the counter for Nathan, right next to the remaining glass of orange juice. Then I began making a mental checklist of all the things we would need to buy while we were out. Meanwhile, I returned to the bedroom and put on a shirt and a pair of socks. Back in the living room, I grabbed my phone and found my wallet and keys.

As I was putting my shoes on, Nathan emerged from the bathroom, still naked, and joined me in the living room.

“There’s a bit of pizza left in the kitchen, if you want it.”

“Be a shame to let it go to waste.”

Pizza in hand, Nathan began retrieving some clothes from one of his suitcases. After swallowing the last bite of crust, he got dressed, stuffed his wallet in his back pants pocket, and located his phone. He smiled as he checked the latter while drinking his glass of orange juice.

“What’s the smile for?”

“Hashtag NBH: never been happier. Feels even better than a hashtag NBD,” he said, still staring at his phone. I knew he was reading my latest tweet, the one I had sent out after talking to my mother earlier.

“Oh. That. Since when do you follow me on Twitter?”

“Since the first weekend of freshman year, St. Louis, and you know that. Stop trying to change the subject.”

“Well, it’s true,” I said with a shrug. “Just felt right to tweet it out. Too soon?”

Nathan tapped his thumbs against his phone screen a few times, obviously typing something. Then he put it to sleep and dropped it into his right pants pocket. “Check your phone.”

Following his instructions, I smiled when I saw a Twitter notification on my lock screen that had just been received a few seconds earlier: #NBH. It was from Nathan’s Twitter account.

“So... not too soon, then?”

Nathan closed the gap between us and gave me a kiss. “You’d better hurry up and drag me out of here, Shane, because I won’t be able to resist ripping your clothes off much longer.”

I stole a quick glance at Nathan while driving us to a nearby shopping center. “Looking hot as always, Napster.”

“Right back at you, St. Louis. So, how’s your mom doing?”

“Okay, I guess. I told her you moved in with me.”

“Yeah? How did that go?”

“She was surprised, of course, but she’s happy for us. Actually, I don’t think *happy* is a strong enough word to describe how she feels about this. *Elated* would probably be more appropriate. And Dad’s cool with it, too. You know they’ve both always liked you.”

“Likewise. Guess that means we have the support of everyone who matters, then.”

“Looks that way to me. Kind of funny, isn’t it? A week and a half ago, our parents didn’t even know we were dating.”

“And then I spring that news on my parents right before telling them I want to move here to be with you, and you spring the same news on your parents right before telling them we’re living together. Talk about dropping back-to-back bombshells.”

“Eh, we’re just keeping them on their toes.”

“Keeps them young, right?”

“Exactly. Oh, by the way, Mom wants to have us over for dinner sometime soon, if you’re interested.”

“In having another one of your mom’s home-cooked meals? Hell yeah, I’m interested.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that. And while we’re there, you can decide whether you want the truck or one of the cars.”

“Okay, you just lost me, St. Louis. What are you talking about?”

“You’re going to need a new vehicle, since you sold your Corvette.”

“Oh, right. I hadn’t really given that much thought yet, but I was planning to start looking for something once I got settled here.”

“Or you could just have one of mine instead.”

“Shane, I couldn’t—”

“Nathan, before you say no, just hear me out, okay? I know you said you didn’t want to take advantage of me, but you shouldn’t think of it like that. I’ve got my old BMW and the truck and mini I won from contests, and they’re all just sitting at my parents’ place, collecting dust. It’d be a waste for you to spend money on a vehicle when I already have three perfectly good options to offer you that are free. And whichever one you choose could still be your responsibility from here on out, if that’s what you want. We could transfer it into your name, and you could take care of the insurance and maintenance on your own. You just wouldn’t have to pay anything for the vehicle itself. You could keep that money and spend it on something else instead. Art projects or whatever.”

Nathan remained silent for a few seconds, considering the idea. “Okay, St. Louis. When you put it that way, I guess it *would* be pretty dumb to say no. Thanks for the offer.”

“No problem. I realize each one is a far cry from a Corvette, but—”

"I don't care about that, Shane. I don't need to drive a Corvette to be happy. I already have the only thing I really need."

"Stunning good looks?"

"No, this guy who denied me sex twice today."

"Oh. Sounds like a real jerk. Why would you want him?"

"I have my reasons."

I was pleased to see our destination up ahead, because at that moment, I wanted nothing more than to stop the car and kiss him.

"So, aside from groceries, what are we looking for here? What did you mean when you said I'd need some stuff?"

I grabbed a shopping cart as we entered the store. "Well, I'm not sure if you've noticed this yet, Nathan, but our apartment isn't exactly furnished to accommodate *two* people at the moment."

"Hmm. Okay. Let's assume I've been too preoccupied to notice, Shane. Let's assume I'm not just asking because I like hearing you say things like '*our* apartment.' What, exactly, does *our* apartment need that it doesn't already have?"

Chuckling, I steered the cart toward the back of the store. One of the wheels squeaked in a way that probably would have been annoying on any other day, but with Nathan at my side, keeping pace with me as we talked casually about *our* apartment, it was going to take much more than a squeaky wheel to ruin my good mood. "*Our* apartment needs more pillows, for starters. I doubt you'll want to fall asleep on my chest *every* night. Not that I'd complain if you did."

"Maybe I should. I mean, it *was* the best sleep I've had in years..."

"Glad to hear it, but that probably didn't have much to do with me."

"Oh, I think it had *everything* to do with you."

"Well, either way, we should probably pick up a few more pillows, just to be safe."

"Okay. What else?"

"Another nightstand for your side of the bed. And maybe a lamp to put on top of it, if you want one. And a bigger dresser, so we can actually fit your clothes alongside mine. The one we already have might not look that small, but

its drawers are pretty shallow.” We stopped in one of the aisles that comprised the bedding section. “And we’ll need extra sheets and pillowcases. Maybe a few extra blankets. And hangers for your clothes, and more dishes, and—”

“Okay, stop. You don’t have to go through all that trouble for me.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Nathan. I want you to feel at home.”

“I already do, Shane.” He gave me a quick kiss, but when he pulled away, he looked concerned. “Shit.”

“Okay, clearly I need to add breath mints to the list.”

“What? Oh! No, that’s not what I meant.” No one was around, so Nathan gave me another kiss, one that lasted a few seconds longer. “Sorry. You taste great, as always.”

“Likewise. So what *did* you mean, then?”

“Well, you said it yourself. The apartment is furnished for only one person right now.”

“Right, which is why we’re here.”

“I know, but isn’t there a *reason* it’s furnished for only one person right now? The landlord thinks only one person is going to be living there. They might not be okay with me moving in.”

“Don’t worry about that. I haven’t talked to the landlord yet, but I’m sure he’ll be okay with it. At the risk of sounding arrogant—”

Nathan laughed. “You? Seriously? I don’t think you have a single arrogant bone in your entire body.”

“Does anyone? Well, maybe the funny bone. Depends on whether it gave itself that name, I guess.”

He gave me a playful shove. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. But seriously, at the risk of sounding arrogant, I think the landlord will basically let me do whatever I want with the apartment. He seemed like a pretty big fan.”

“Oh, so even if you trash the place, at least he’ll be able to say it was trashed by *the* Shane Larson?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Being awesome does have its perks, I guess.”

“You would know.”

We picked out some new bedding, then moved on to the next aisle to look for pillows. By the time we finished selecting new furniture, our cart was quite full, and we still needed groceries. After sliding a boxed-up dresser onto the shelf under the cart, I handed control of it over to Nathan.

“I’ll go get another cart and meet you over in the grocery section in a bit. I need to take a piss anyway.”

About fifteen minutes later, I found him in the liquor aisle. “Somehow I knew this was where you’d be.”

“I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me.”

“Never.”

“So, what do we need here?”

“You tell me. We can’t just stock the kitchen with stuff *I* like.”

“Well, let’s start with something we both like.” He reached for a twenty-four pack of our favorite beer and placed it in my cart. We continued shopping, grabbing all the essentials we’d need to get us through the next couple weeks or so. We were careful not to go overboard, especially on perishable items, because we knew we would just end up being lazy and ordering takeout food more often than not. I was recognized several times as we made our way through the store, and each time, I stopped to sign autographs and pose for pictures. Nathan patiently took each interruption in stride, just as he always had.

Once we were satisfied that we had everything we needed, we headed to the nearest available self-checkout station. Our total was just over six hundred dollars, which wasn’t really surprising, considering the number of items we had stuffed in both carts. The furniture accounted for a large chunk of the cost, though, so that was a small consolation. It would be a while before we would need to buy things like dressers and nightstands again.

He fell behind me as we exited the store. “Traffic on the highway is probably going to be a bitch. Let’s take the long way home. Show me that quiet back road with the amazing views you were telling me about.”

I checked my watch. He was right, of course—we’d get stuck in rush hour traffic if we took the highway home. I certainly wasn’t going to object to the idea; there was plenty of gas in my car, the views on the route I had discovered a few days before his arrival really *were* amazing, and I was happy to show him

around Breckenridge and the surrounding area. I wanted him to love it just as much as I did.

I had been worried—especially about the dresser—but we managed to fit everything in my car. I started the engine and backed out of the parking space as he deposited the cart in a nearby corral. He jogged back to the car and got in on the passenger side.

“Trying to leave without me?”

“I thought about it, but then I wouldn’t have anyone to help me eat all that food in the back.”

“Yeah, that’s how I keep guys on the hook: get them to buy more food than they could possibly eat alone, then they’re stuck with me.”

“Clever.”

“I like to think so. It lets me keep you for a couple more weeks, at least.”

“Then what?”

“Hopefully by then I’ll have found adequate blackmail material to use against you.”

Grinning, I made a right at a red light. He reached over and turned on the radio as we headed toward the scenic route that would, in probably the most roundabout way possible, take us home.

“Just keep driving.”

I wasn’t sure I had heard Nathan correctly over the music blaring through the speakers, but I felt his hand on my crotch before I could even open my mouth to ask what he was talking about. He deftly unbuttoned my jeans, pulled out my cock, and went down on it, obviously not the least bit concerned about the car coming toward us in the other lane. The driver—a young guy—gave me a thumbs-up as we passed each other. I shuddered but somehow managed to keep my eyes open and focused on the road as my cock hardened in Nathan’s mouth, responding almost instantly to the skillful maneuvers of his amazing tongue.

“Fuck, Nathan, that feels so good.”

He slid one hand up my torso and started tweaking my nipples as he used his other hand to play with my balls. My moans and his occasional slurps and

gags mixed with the music to create a much sexier soundtrack, one I vastly preferred over what we had been listening to moments before. He took his time, and I was content to let him; still miles away from home, there was no reason to rush. I felt a slight, thrilling twinge of danger every time a car passed us, even though I knew it was unlikely that anyone else would realize what our first spectator had.

Eventually, I couldn't hold back any longer, so as soon as we hit a straight stretch of road where no one else was around, and I was relatively sure I wouldn't send us careening into a ditch during the throes of my orgasm, I gave him a quick warning and shot off in his mouth. He swallowed every last drop, but he didn't stop there; he kept sucking my cock long after my orgasm ended, teasing me as I slowly came down from the high he had just delivered. When he was finally done, he tucked my cock back in my briefs and rose to kiss my cheek, leaving my fly wide open.

"Guess the view wasn't working for you anymore?"

"Oh, the view *always* works for me, St. Louis. Just not the one you're talking about."

"Was *that* why you wanted to take the long way home?"

"You're lucky I didn't jump you right in the middle of the store. I thought about it."

"Maybe next time." I licked my lips in anticipation as we passed a sign that indicated we'd be home soon. It might have just been the result of horny delirium, but I could have sworn the sign read "Round Two: Five miles ahead."

We carried the perishable items into the apartment first. Between the two of us, we were able to do it in one trip. He helped me put them in the refrigerator, then turned to head back to the car. I grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him into my arms. "The rest can wait."

I spun him around and gave him a kiss. We stumbled into the bedroom and fell onto the bed as we continued making out. After we kicked off our shoes, I unbuttoned his jeans and freed his cock from his briefs. It was already hard, and I went down on it with a hunger that had been building for hours and could no longer be ignored.

"Fuck, Shane. You're so fucking good at that."

He leaned back and propped himself up on his elbows, watching me as I sucked his cock and played with his balls. After a few minutes, I moved forward to kiss him again. I bit his lower lip as I pulled away, then grazed my teeth along the side of his neck and nibbled on his earlobe. With one last gut check, I made my decision.

“I want you to fuck me.”

I whispered the words in his ear, trying to make them sound as natural and genuine as I possibly could. That didn’t stop Nathan from turning my head back toward him again, forcing me to look him in the eyes so he could ask, “Are you sure?”

I nodded and gave him another kiss, hoping my treacherous right eyebrow wasn’t telling him a different story. I *was* sure, after all, even if I was possibly suggesting otherwise in ways I couldn’t completely control. I had been thinking about this since my shower earlier. I didn’t want to wait. I didn’t want to spend days worrying about bottoming for him because I didn’t want to risk making him feel like he was somehow doing something wrong—or worse, making him feel like I didn’t want him just as much as he clearly wanted me. I had to—*wanted* to—try bottoming for him eventually, and now was as good a time as any. Maybe it would be different with him than it had been the handful of other times I had tried it. I had never been in love with Marco or Aaron—not really—and they had certainly never loved me the way I could tell Nathan did. Maybe it would go better than topping him the previous night had gone. Maybe topping just wasn’t my thing. Maybe I would enjoy bottoming just as much as he had, if not more. I hoped that would be the case. I desperately *wanted* that to be the case. It would be such a relief. But I wouldn’t know until I tried.

Within a matter of seconds, he had us both completely naked. I moaned as he took my cock in his mouth and started teasing the head with his tongue. After getting me hard, he moved to my balls and gave them some attention, then went back to sucking my cock. Eventually, he started kissing his way from my crotch to my lips. We made out for a while as his cock, wet with precum at the tip, rubbed against mine. Then he just stopped and looked me straight in the eyes, his body frozen in place except for the thumb that was gently stroking a patch of my beard.

“I love you, Shane.”

I couldn’t help smiling. His cock was dripping precum, and he had an open invitation to fuck me, but it was like he had suddenly decided that would just

have to wait because nothing was more important in that moment than telling me he loved me. “I love you, too, Nathan.”

He gave me one last long, passionate kiss before heading south again. He flicked his tongue over my nipples, abs, cock, and balls before pushing my legs forward, spreading my ass cheeks, and licking my hole. I shuddered and moaned, my eyes rolling back in my head as he continued to rim me. *Is there anything this man can't do with his tongue?*

“Fuck, Nathan, that feels *amazing*.”

He didn't bother to respond; instead, he just started tonguing my hole with even more enthusiasm. After spending several minutes rimming me, he pulled away and gave me another kiss. I felt a mixture of disappointment and hopefulness. I had never enjoyed getting rimmed quite that much before, and that seemed like a promising sign to me.

“Top drawer.”

I said the words a bit more breathlessly than I had expected. He sat up, opened the drawer, and retrieved a condom from it. But instead of tearing open the wrapper, he just stared at it.

“What's wrong?”

“I think this is going to be too big for me.”

I resisted the urge to joke that, as the bottom in this equation, that was supposed to be *my* line. I only had extra-large condoms, and I had never really thought about other guys being unable to wear them. When I had bottomed for Marco and Aaron, they had used their own condoms. I knew the length of my condom of choice wouldn't really be an issue for Nathan; he could always just unroll less of it than I had to. But it might fit too loosely around his cock. I felt a twinge of guilt, hoping this wasn't making him feel inadequate. His cock wasn't small by any means. It just wasn't as big as mine.

“Oh. Shit. Sorry, Nathan. I didn't think about that.”

Nathan grinned and tossed the condom aside. “What are you sorry about? It's not your fault you're huge. And trust me, I'm not complaining about that *at all*.” He stood and pulled me to my feet, then reached for the bottle of lube I had left sitting on the nightstand the previous night. “It's okay. Just come with me.”

We started making out again as he led me into the living room, tossing the lube on the coffee table as we passed it. He pushed me up against the front

door, right where things had started the previous day. Dropping to his knees, he began sucking my cock while unzipping his backpack, which was within arm's reach of us. After blindly rummaging through the front pocket for a few seconds, he pulled out a condom and rose to kiss me again. Then he led me over to the couch and pushed me onto it.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, Shane. I honestly wasn't expecting anything from you when I came here. I just always carry condoms with me, just in case." He paused for a moment, then shook his head as his eyes widened. "Shit, that sounded... I didn't mean... Look, I haven't been on the lookout for other guys to—"

I laughed and pulled him toward me for a kiss. "I know what you meant, Napster. Now shut up and fuck me, okay?"

He tossed the condom on the coffee table and reached for the lube. Pushing my legs forward again, he rimmed me for a few more minutes, then slicked up his fingers with a few drops of lube. After rubbing it over my hole, he applied a second coating and slowly, carefully inserted his index finger. I moaned when he found my prostate and started expertly teasing it. The tip of my rock-hard cock was soon glistening with precum. Eventually, he removed his finger and covered it with more lube. Then he reinserted it and began adding his middle finger, progressing just as cautiously as before. My toes curled and my eyes rolled back in my head as he continued tweaking my prostate. I actually gasped when he suddenly licked the precum off my cock while his fingers were still inside me. By the time he started slipping a third finger in, I felt like he had been toying with my ass for at least twenty minutes.

"Fuck me already."

Another promising sign. I had never actually begged to be fucked before. And they weren't just words; I really did want him to fuck me. He had prepped me with more patience than I had any right to expect, and I was more turned on than I had ever been from anal penetration in the past. I was ready.

After slowly removing his fingers, he reached for the condom. For the first time ever, I felt the ache of wanting something back inside my ass right away, an ache I had never understood before. He tore the condom wrapper with his teeth and tossed it aside, then rolled the condom over his cock and applied some lube to it. I pulled my legs forward and wrapped my arms around him as he leaned in to kiss me, his cock resting against my hole. When he locked eyes with me, I gave him a nod. He held my gaze as he cautiously started easing his cock into my ass until, after a few minutes, every inch of it was inside me.

“You okay?”

He was still staring at me with that look of pure love I had already grown addicted to. I nodded and pulled him toward me for another kiss. I *was* okay. He had entered me with an almost ridiculous amount of care and tenderness. It hadn't hurt; it *didn't* hurt. Not at all. Then again, pain had never been my concern, anyway. More than once, I had landed balls-first on a rail when a skateboarding trick had gone wrong. We skaters called it sacking the rail or getting racked—and it wasn't customary for us to wear cups, so when we took a hit, we *really* felt it. Compared to that, taking a cock up my ass wasn't a big deal. And besides, if Nathan could take *my* cock up *his* ass without complaining, the least I could do was return the favor.

What I had been worried about was the possibility that, as with topping, I just wouldn't be that into it. And as Nathan slowly started fucking me, I realized with a twinge of disappointment that my concern had been quite warranted. Already, I could feel my cock softening. Internally, I begged it to cooperate, but that seemed to just make it go limp even faster, as if my body were telling me to fuck off in the clearest possible way.

It wasn't Nathan's fault. I had never been able to stay hard while getting fucked. Of course, I had watched enough porn and done enough research to know an erection wasn't necessary in order to enjoy anal sex. It wasn't unheard of for a bottom to have trouble staying hard while getting fucked, but still manage to get off on the experience in other ways. I realized that, at least from a logical standpoint. But that was about the only thing that having a cock up my ass ever seemed to do for me: kill my boner. I never felt the pleasurable sensations Nathan had obviously felt when I had fucked him the previous night. I never even felt the pleasurable sensations I had felt just a few minutes earlier, when he had fingered and rimmed me. It was like my prostate, which he had found and toyed with so easily then, was now hiding from him just to spite me. The man I loved was fucking me, and although I was enjoying the level of intimacy we were sharing with each other, the penetrative sex itself just wasn't really doing anything for me. And, just as I had been when I had topped him, I was once again in my head while he was focused entirely on me.

Maybe that was the problem. He was still kissing me—had never stopped kissing me—so I tried to focus on that and forget about everything else. That strategy put me back in the moment, but it didn't really make the sex any better. He was still thrusting into me at the same slow, steady pace he had started with, so I moved my hands to his ass and dug my fingers into his cheeks. When he

made eye contact with me again, I nodded and gave him a smile. He kissed me one last time, then propped himself up on his hands and started fucking me harder, keeping his eyes locked on mine. It still didn't hurt, but it still wasn't really doing anything for me, either.

"Fuck, Shane. Your ass feels so fucking good."

He was obviously loving it, though, and he looked and sounded incredibly sexy as he thrust into me, so that would have to suffice for me. He could enjoy it, and I could just enjoy the fact that he was enjoying it. I started exploring his body with my hands as he continued fucking me, determined to make him feel as good as I possibly could. Occasionally, I pulled him in for a kiss before letting him get back to fucking me. At one point, I started wondering if he had noticed I wasn't saying much. But after worrying about that for a minute or two, I pushed the thought aside, realizing I was letting myself get distracted again. He didn't seem to say a lot during sex either, so, with any luck, my lack of a response to his earlier comment would never even register. I just didn't want to outright lie to him, so I was trying not to say anything at all, hoping the occasional genuine moan would be enough.

Eventually, he rose to his knees and started stroking my cock while thrusting into me at a slower pace. I thought I knew what he was doing—delaying his orgasm, hoping to get me off first—but not even his direct manipulation of my cock was enough to get me hard. And playing with a cock that refused to get hard was like calling out to a cat that refused to show interest: no matter how hard you tried, you were never going to be able to get it to come. I let him stroke it for a while, then pulled him toward me for another kiss and wrapped my arms around him to hold him in place.

When I had fucked him the previous night, his cock had stayed hard the whole time. And not just hard—*rock* hard. I could still remember how stiff it had felt in my grip during those brief seconds I had spent touching it before he had pulled my hand away. I had even marveled at how fucking hard his cock was, and I could still hear his breathless response echoing in my mind: "How could it not be?" Well, mine had apparently found a way. And I felt guilty about that, even though it wasn't really something I could control. I feared it would send the wrong message to him. A rock-hard cock was the most unmistakable, undeniable evidence of arousal a man could possibly display for his lover. And he had gone beyond even that; he hadn't just been rock hard for me, he had been dripping precum and had eventually had a hands-free orgasm. He had even told me afterward that I had kept him right on the edge practically

the whole time. And now, in pathetically stark contrast, my cock was just lying limp against my stomach as he fucked me, refusing to show any signs of arousal regardless of what he tried to do to bring it to life. It was beyond frustrating. I didn't need to be hard for myself. I *wanted* to be hard for *him*. Gabe had probably never had any trouble staying hard for him.

As I had hoped would be the case, his basic needs eventually began to trump his desire to be a perfect gentleman. He stopped kissing me so he could gaze into my eyes instead. Running his fingers through my hair, he whispered, "You're so fucking sexy," then started thrusting into me harder and faster, building toward an orgasm he had held at bay long enough. I moved my hands to his chest and started tweaking his nipples, drawing a gasp from him. I wrapped my legs around his waist and clenched my ass muscles, trying to be at least somewhat useful as a bottom. He leaned in to kiss me again, and the way he hungrily bit my lower lip told me he was getting close. I grabbed a handful of his hair and gave it a gentle tug as I grazed the side of his neck with my teeth. Breathing heavily, he shuddered and began fucking me hard, his balls slapping against my ass and his fingers digging into my shoulders as he got off inside me. I could feel his cock getting even harder as he pumped his load out, grunting every time his hips slammed into me. My cock just seemed to get even softer in response. I hadn't thought either was possible.

"Fuck, Shane. I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too, Nathan."

He pulled out and disposed of the condom, then gave me another kiss before working his way down to my crotch. When he took my soft cock in his mouth, it immediately began stiffening in response to his incredible oral skills. I was annoyed but not surprised. It had always been this way, like there was an off switch inside my ass that was connected directly to my cock, making it physically impossible for me to stay hard while getting fucked. As soon as the top pulled out of my ass, my cock always managed to spring to life again. I shot the base of my shaft a futile glare right before it disappeared down Nathan's throat, wondering why it couldn't just fucking *cooperate*.

"Fuck, that feels good, Nathan."

It was a stupid thing to say. I hadn't uttered anything of the sort the entire time he had been inside me, and telling him how good he was making me feel *now* would probably just draw attention to the fact that I hadn't exactly felt good *then*. That wasn't his fault, of course, but he might take it the wrong way

regardless. Still, I wanted to be able to say such things to him, to let him know just how much I loved being with him. I had seen an opportunity to tell him without the possibility of it sounding like a lie, and I had pounced on it without thinking it through first. I hoped he wouldn't give it too much thought. I hoped I was the only one who was doing a lot of needless thinking during sex.

It didn't take long for him to get me off. When he kissed me afterward, my load was still in his mouth. We swapped it back and forth for a bit, then he swallowed it and gave me one last passionate kiss before rolling onto his back next to me.

"Sorry."

He turned his head to look at me, still breathing heavily. "For what?"

I was already regretting opening my mouth, but it was too late now. My eyes darted to my crotch, but I didn't say anything else.

"What, for losing your boner while I was inside you? Why would you feel the need to apologize to me for that? It's not like you could help it."

Of course he would be perfectly understanding. That didn't stop me from feeling like shit about the whole thing. "I know, but then you felt obligated to blow me when you probably would have preferred to just collapse and take a nap."

Nathan chuckled. "Shane, when I'm with you like this, the idea of taking a nap couldn't possibly be farther from my mind."

I smiled and rested my head on his chest, feeling it rise and fall under me. "You know it didn't mean anything, right? Me losing my boner, I mean. You know it had nothing to do with you, right?"

"You don't have to tell me how a dick works, St. Louis. I have one of my own."

I laughed in spite of myself. Somehow, Nathan always knew just how to make me feel better, even when I was trying to make *him* feel better. "Just making sure, Napster."

He kissed the top of my head as he ran his fingers through my hair. We stayed that way for a while, basking in the afterglow. I hoped things would go more smoothly the next time we fucked. And there *would* be a next time. There were plenty of other positions we hadn't tried yet. There were plenty of other things I could still try to hopefully get my body to start responding favorably to

bottoming *and* topping—or at least one, if not both. Maybe I had just put too much pressure on myself leading into these first two attempts at having anal sex with Nathan. Maybe it had been unrealistic to expect our first times together to go any differently than they had gone. Now that we had them out of the way, maybe things would start getting better. Maybe *I* would start getting better.

Practice makes perfect, right?

Nathan's stomach growled, a welcome distraction from my thoughts. "Sounds like you worked up an appetite."

"And what a way to do it."

"Want to order in again?"

"Sure. Gives us more time for other things."

"And there are plenty of delivery boys in Breck you still need to flash."

"Yeah, we're going to need to make a checklist to keep track of those."

Thirty minutes and a set of blowjobs later, we emerged from the shower. I watched Nathan get dressed while I ordered subs from a place Cody and Casey had introduced me to when we had hung out together a few days earlier. After I put my own clothes back on, Nathan and I carried the rest of our purchases from the car to the apartment. Thanks to the furniture, it took five trips to get everything inside, but we still managed to finish before our food arrived. I stripped the bed and carried the sheets and pillowcases to the kitchen.

"We have a washer and dryer? Sweet!"

I laughed as Nathan followed me into the laundry room. "I really didn't do a very good job giving you a tour of this place last night, did I?"

"You don't hear me complaining, do you?"

I tossed the bedding in the washer, along with some other things. "For some strange reason, no, I don't."

"You showed me the most important room. That's all I really care about. Although this is pretty cool, too. Carrying laundry back and forth on campus was a pain in the ass."

"Yeah, that's why having a washer and dryer in the apartment was a requirement for me. Speaking of that other room, though, we also have a hot tub out on the terrace."

“We have a terrace? Sweet!”

Laughing again, I started the washer and turned toward him, pulling him into my arms. Someone knocked just as I was leaning in to kiss him.

“And you were *this close* to being naked again. Guess you won’t be flashing any delivery boys tonight.” I gave him a wink as I pulled away and fished my wallet out of my back pocket. “To be continued.”

I decided to make the suggestion while we were eating—and, more importantly, fully clothed. It had been on my mind since the previous night, but I had held off on bringing it up because I had wanted to wait for a time when he would be clearheaded enough to give it the proper consideration.

“So, mind if I ask you something? Fair warning: it’s about your past relationships and hookups.”

“I told you before, Shane, you can ask me anything.”

“I know. And the same goes for you. It’s just that some things are a bit more awkward to ask than others.”

“Nah. Nothing has to be awkward unless we make it that way.”

“That simple, huh?”

“That simple, St. Louis. Ask away.”

“Okay. When you were with other guys, how often did you use protection?”

“Always. Well, I mean, I never used a condom for a blowjob. But for anal sex? Always. And I try to get tested at least once a year.”

“Same here, on all counts.”

“You know if I were going to bareback for anyone, it would be you, right?”

“Well, that’s basically what I’m getting at here. I was thinking maybe we could call the clinic tomorrow and schedule an appointment to get tested as soon as possible. I mean, as far as I’m concerned, you getting tested would basically just be a formality for me, considering how well I know you. I’m already as sure as I possibly can be that there’s nothing for me to worry about when I’m with you. That’s why I didn’t bother talking to you about this *before* we started having sex. And now that I know you’ve always been careful in the past, that just makes me even more sure that there’s nothing to worry about. But since we don’t use condoms for blowjobs—”

“Does *anyone*?”

“Good question.”

“But yeah, I know what you mean. There’s always that slight possibility.”

“Exactly. So we could get tested, and once we each get a clean bill of health, we could ditch the condoms. I mean, if you’re comfortable with the idea, that is.”

“If you are, I am. Honestly, I was really tempted to suggest barebacking earlier, when I realized your condoms were too big for me. I just didn’t want to bring that sort of thing up in the heat of the moment like that.”

I chuckled. “We really *do* share a brain sometimes. That’s precisely why I chose to have this conversation now, while we’re both fully clothed.”

“Yeah, I had a feeling that might be the case.”

“So, we’re going to do this?”

“Sounds that way to me.” He reached down and adjusted himself. “Honestly, the idea kind of turns me on.”

I could tell he was sporting at least a semi. I gave my own hard cock a quick squeeze. “You’re not the only one.”

“I never even considered the idea with Gabe, and I definitely wouldn’t consider it with a random hookup. But with you, using a condom is really more about habit than peace of mind because I know you so well. And honestly, maybe I shouldn’t think of it this way, but using a condom with you sort of feels like an insult to our relationship. Condoms are to protect me when I hook up with guys I don’t know or don’t trust. I know you better than anyone else. I trust you more than anyone else. I *love* you. I know you would never cheat on me.”

“And I know you would never cheat on me.”

“Right. So if we’re both clean, and we’re in a monogamous relationship, I don’t really see a need for condoms to be part of our sex life. I don’t agree with the idea that gay men should *always* wear condoms just because they’re gay.”

“Yeah, neither do I.”

“Okay, so it’s settled, then. Condoms for now, but once we each get that clean bill of health...”

“Skin is in?”

He smiled and nodded. “Nice innuendo, St. Louis.”

“I have my moments, Napster.”

“Yes, you do. Quite frequently.”

We finished eating—luckily, subs didn’t get cold during lengthy conversations about unprotected sex—and drank a couple beers each while watching an episode of one of those generic police procedurals that always seemed to be playing on one channel or another regardless of the time of day. I was relieved that our talk had gone well. I really did want to try barebacking with Nathan for all the reasons he had mentioned. But there was more to it than that. I was also hoping that ditching the condoms would make anal sex better for me. Perhaps that was another unrealistic expectation, but I had to be sure. I had to try every single thing I could possibly think of to fix my problem, including this. If nothing else, at least it would allow us to be more spontaneous. And Nathan would probably love it, even if it ended up doing nothing for me.

After the show ended, we cleared the old dresser out, leaving my clothes stacked high on the bare bed. Then we carried it into the living room so we could set up the new dresser in the bedroom. It had at least twice as much storage space, more than enough to accommodate Nathan’s clothes as well as my own. I helped him unpack his luggage, hanging shirts in the closet while he transferred socks and underwear to dresser drawers. When only a few pairs of shorts and pants remained, I realized just how little he had brought with him. He didn’t even have any winter clothing.

“Looks like we’re going to need to do some more shopping soon.”

“Yeah. Although Mom did say she’d ship some stuff to me if I told her what I wanted, so that’s an option, too.”

“Just not nearly as much fun.”

“Exactly.”

We added my clothes to the new dresser, then made the bed, using the new sheets and pillowcases we had picked out at the store. The new nightstand matched the old one and fit nicely against the wall on the other side of the bed. The lamp we had selected would be perfect for reading.

“Which side of the bed would you prefer?”

“Doesn’t matter to me, St. Louis. I have a feeling we’ll have trouble staying on our designated sides anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that, Napster.”

“I’ll just take the empty nightstand, since that’s easier than transferring your stuff over to it. Doesn’t necessarily mean I’ll be on that side of the bed all the time, though. Just means that’s where my stuff will be.”

“Works for me.”

“Personally, I think the middle of the bed looks like the most inviting spot.”

“Funny, that’s exactly the spot I was eyeing for myself.”

“Guess we’ll just have to share it, then.”

Of course, he didn’t have much to fill the drawers with yet, but he did transfer his copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* from his backpack to the top drawer. He also threw his box of condoms in there, along with a bottle of his—and, by extension, my—favorite cologne. Luckily, I hadn’t shattered it when I had put his backpack through some abuse the previous night. I also hadn’t damaged his laptop or his iPad. He moved both of those to the nightstand and plugged them into their respective chargers, along with his phone. He left most of the other items in his backpack, including his checkbook, a hat, a beanie, some art supplies, and his camera. He did, however, remove two framed photographs—one of his paternal grandparents and one of his maternal grandparents. He perched one on each side of the nightstand.

“Damn, you had a lot of breakable shit in there. I can’t believe none of it got damaged when I slammed you up against the wall yesterday.”

“I wouldn’t have complained even if you had broken all of it. That was *hot*.”

“Oh, so you like being manhandled, Napster?”

“Only when you’re the one doing the manhandling, St. Louis. But just to warn you, I can give as good as I get.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He reached into the backpack again and pulled out one more thing: his pocket watch.

“I’m glad you kept at least one of your grandfather’s things.”

“Yeah. This wasn’t valuable enough to justify selling. That probably sounds really bad, but you know what I mean. And it’s more my style, anyway. I always felt obligated to wear the ring, even when wearing it didn’t really feel

right. And it usually didn't. But I've never had that problem with this. I don't feel obligated to carry it with me everywhere. I'm okay with just leaving it out somewhere and looking at it from time to time."

"If you want, we can get a special shelf for the living room, and you can display the pictures and pocket watch in there. Or, even better, you could make your own shelf."

"Thanks. I'd like that."

I looked around the room. "Looks like we're done."

"The walls are pretty bare, but I can probably think of a way to fix that."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

I sank to the floor and reclined against the side of the bed to rest for a moment. Nathan stretched out on the mattress and settled his neck on my shoulder, resting the back of his head against my chest. He closed his eyes, and I smiled and did the same. If he still wanted to use me as a pillow, even after we had just finished putting a pair of brand-new ones on the bed specifically for him, I certainly wasn't going to object.

I reached in my front pants pocket and retrieved his surprise. Supporting his head with my free hand, I turned to face him and placed my balled fist on his chest. "You know, the room looks good, but there's still one thing missing."

He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Yeah? What's that?"

"This." I relaxed my fingers and moved my hand away from his chest, leaving something behind. He lifted his head and reached for the item. "Okay, technically it's three things, but I'm counting it as one thing with attachments."

He rubbed his thumb over the inscription on the gunmetal-black rectangular keychain: *Welcome Home*. Turning it over, he found a compass encased in glass on the other side. There was a small black button below the compass, and when he pressed it, an LED bulb cast a circle of bright light on the wall. He lifted a distinctly thick key that was dangling from the ring. "For the apartment?"

I nodded. "And I guess the other is pretty self-explanatory."

He inspected the spare key fob for my BMW. "You did this earlier?"

"You don't really think it takes me fifteen minutes to piss and walk from one end of a store to the other, do you? I just needed time to get the apartment

key made and get the keychain engraved. I was afraid they might not be willing to duplicate the apartment key, but they didn't seem to have a problem with it."

"But isn't this type of car key really expensive? And a bitch to get programmed? And basically only available at a dealership?"

"A spare came with the car. It's just been sitting in my nightstand. I grabbed it when you were in the shower earlier, before we went to the store. And there's room for the key to your own vehicle, too, once you decide which one you want."

He smiled as he ran his thumb over the inscription again. "I love it, Shane. Thank you."

"Welcome home, Nathan."

I gave him a kiss, and when I tried to pull away, he grabbed the back of my head and held me in place. Locking eyes with me, he whispered, "I want you in me, Shane. Now."

There was a desperation in his voice that simultaneously turned me on and filled me with regret. He didn't even want to bother with foreplay this time. That was how badly he wanted me right now. And I wanted him, too, but not in the same way. As we ripped each other's clothes off, I wondered if I would ever stop feeling guilty during our sexual encounters. It was a feeling I had already grown to dread and despise, and we hadn't even been together, in that way, for thirty-six hours yet.

I grabbed a condom from the drawer and tore it open with my teeth. After tossing the wrapper aside and rolling the condom over my rock-hard cock, I reached for the lube.

"Shit."

"What?"

"We left the lube in the living room. Give me a second. I have the bigger bottle in the closet for refills."

Nathan wrapped his arms around me and gave me another kiss. "You're not going anywhere, St. Louis. Just use spit this time."

I couldn't help laughing. "Spit? You're kidding, right?"

"Dead serious. Why are we still talking?"

"Nathan, I don't want to hurt you."

“I know, Shane. But let’s be realistic here. We’re not always going to have lube available when we want to fuck. And you’re huge. It’s probably going to hurt sometimes. That’s not your fault; it’s just a fact. I can handle it. And I don’t want to wait another second for you to fuck me, because if last night told me anything, it’s that the pleasure of having you inside me makes any pain worth it.”

I couldn’t say no to him when he said things like that to me. After kissing him again, I spat in my hand a couple times and applied the spit to my cock while feeding him the index and middle fingers of my other hand. He sucked on them hungrily as I coated my cock with two more mouthfuls of spit. Pulling my fingers out of his mouth, I rubbed them over the outside of his hole and pressed my cock against it.

“Just promise you’ll stop me if it hurts too much, okay?”

“Deal.”

“I don’t just mean this time. I mean *anytime*. Promise you’ll stop me anytime it hurts too much, okay?”

“Deal.”

Nodding, I carefully started to enter him. He gasped when the head of my cock disappeared inside his ass. I froze immediately.

“It’s okay, Shane. I’m okay. Just keep going.”

He was looking me straight in the eyes, so I had to believe him, even though hints of discomfort were written all over his face. I gave him another kiss as I pushed my cock deeper into his ass. Luckily, I never seemed to have trouble staying hard when topping someone, and that was especially true with Nathan. It was a small victory, but one I was quite grateful for. Losing my boner when he had penetrated me earlier had been bad enough. The only thing worse would be going limp while trying to fuck him. If nothing else, I needed to at least be able to keep it up long enough to give him what he wanted whenever he wanted it. He deserved that much from me.

Despite any pain he might have been feeling, Nathan’s cock was actually leaking precum. I scooped it up and applied it to my shaft as I continued entering him. When I got the last inch of my cock inside his ass, I went back to making out with him, giving him some time to get used to it.

“Fuck me, Shane.”

I wasn't sure how much time had actually passed, but I was sure I had expected him to need more. When I looked at him, though, he seemed relaxed; his breathing was normal, and his facial muscles weren't contorted in pain. He was gazing at me with that familiar look of love and desire that made me feel like I was the most important person in his world. He gave me a nod and wrapped his arms around my back as he kissed me again. I started thrusting into him, moving tentatively at first but soon finding myself increasing speed in response to his throaty moans of pleasure.

Eventually, I considered changing positions, but he seemed to be enjoying things just the way they were, so I decided not to. When I reached for his cock, he grabbed my hand and laced his fingers between mine before I could even touch it, let alone stroke it.

"Just keep fucking me. I'm so fucking close."

More precum oozed out of his cock as I started thrusting harder. He threw his free hand back over his shoulder and gripped the headboard, exposing his armpit. I leaned in to lick it, drawing another moan from him.

"Fuck, Shane..."

I felt his ass tighten around my cock as I pushed him over the edge. He shuddered and gasped while coming on his stomach, and I immediately started shooting my own load inside his ass. I held him in my arms for a while as we kissed, our breathing slowly returning to normal. After I finally pulled away from him and disposed of the condom, I licked up the trail of cum that was covering his torso. He beckoned me forward for another kiss, and we swapped his cum back and forth a few times before I swallowed it. Then I collapsed on top of him, my head resting on his chest.

"Fuck, Shane. That's twice now. How do you *do* that to me?"

"I don't think I can really take any of the credit myself." Actually, I suspected Nathan's hands-free orgasms were only happening because everything was still new and exciting right now. We were both hypersensitive due to the fact that we had been starved for physical contact with each other for over a month, wanting to be together but abstaining because of my desire to protect our friendship. Now we were finally together in every sense of the word. I could see how that could turn Nathan on enough to make him come a couple times without touching himself, especially since my cock seemed to regularly hit the right spot when it was inside him. I didn't think the phenomenon could possibly last much longer, but he didn't need to hear that. It would just ruin his fun.

I smiled, enjoying the sound of his steady heartbeat. “We should probably go take a shower, but I don’t want to move.”

“I don’t think I *can* move.” He wrapped his arms tightly around me and started playing with my hair. “So this is what they mean.”

“Huh? Who’s ‘they’?”

“No one in particular. Just... people. When they say that sex is different when you have it with someone you’re in love with. This is what they mean. I knew being with you would be amazing, Shane, but the reality is seriously so much better than what I was imagining.”

“Yeah, it *is* pretty amazing.” I truly meant that, too. I just wasn’t referring to the same kind of sex he was referring to.

He kissed the top of my head. “I love you, St. Louis.”

“I love you, too, Napster.”

Nathan yawned, causing me to yawn. He stopped playing with my hair, and the comforting sound of his beating heart lulled me to sleep right along with him. The shower would have to wait.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Damn, Napster. Do road trips *always* make you horny, or am I just lucky?”

Nathan tucked my cock back in my briefs and wiped a drop of cum off the corner of his mouth. Instead of licking it off his finger, he fed it to me. We were nearing the end of our five-plus-hour drive to my parents’ house in Telluride, and I was still recovering from the amazing blowjob he had just given me—the second one I had been treated to during the trip. He really knew how to take advantage of times when we were practically the only ones on the road.

“It’s not about the road trip, St. Louis; it’s about the company. Although I will admit that watching you work a stick shift turns me on.”

“Yeah, well, if you keep this up, my next car might have to be an automatic. One less thing to focus on while you’re giving me road head.”

“I don’t know. You seem to do a pretty good job of multitasking. And I have to choose my moments, anyway. Can’t have you getting into an accident on my account.”

“So what you’re saying is that I shouldn’t get used to you getting horny on our road trips?”

“No. What I’m saying is that you should get used to having to pull over a lot during our road trips so we can take care of more important matters without things getting too dangerous.”

I stole a quick glance at his crotch, confirming my suspicion that he was hard. Making a split-second decision, I took a right down a road I knew led to a nice, private place we could park the car for a few minutes. I had already gotten off twice today, but Nathan had some catching up to do. Dinner with my parents might be more interesting if he were sporting a raging boner the entire time, but I wasn’t convinced it would be more interesting in a *good* way.

“What are you doing?”

I parked the car behind an abandoned building and unbuckled my seat belt. Shifting in my seat, I dipped my head down to his lap as I replied, “Taking care of more important matters.”

My detour almost made us late for dinner, but we arrived with three minutes to spare.

“Sorry, Mom. Traffic was a bitch.”

“That’s okay, dear. I figured you just got held up.”

Guess that’s one way of putting it.

Mom smiled at Nathan. “Hello, dear. Good to see you again.”

“Likewise. Everything smells just as good as I remembered it.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, dear. I really can cook other things, you know, but Shane insisted on me making lasagna for you again.”

“It’s not like you just made it for him a week ago, Mom. It’s been over two years since he last had your lasagna.” And so much had changed since then.

Dad stepped into the kitchen and walked over to the sink to wash his hands. “Oh, good, you made it. Did something come up?”

Two things, actually.

“Traffic,” I repeated.

“Ah. I thought maybe you ran into construction on the way.”

That would have been a good excuse, too.

“Tammy went overboard again, so I hope you boys worked up an appetite on the drive over here.”

You could say that.

“Does Mom ever *not* go overboard?”

“Yes, well, better to have too much than too little, right, dear?”

Damn it, stop with the double entendres already. One glance at Nathan confirmed that he, too, was struggling to maintain his composure.

Mom pulled the lasagna out of the oven and carried it into the dining room. “Besides, this is a special occasion.”

“Yeah, I understand you boys have something to celebrate.”

I groaned. “Brace yourself, Nathan. Here comes the part where things get awkward for us.” As if they weren’t already.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Shane.”

“We just want you boys to know we’re happy for you, that’s all.”

“Don’t believe them, Nathan. They’re just trying to lull us into a false sense of security before the interrogation starts. Do these lights seem brighter and hotter than they were the last time you were here, or is it just me?”

I started fanning myself with my shirt while wiping my brow with the back of my free arm. Mom pursed her lips and tried to swat me with a potholder, but, as always, I was too quick for her.

“No need for an interrogation, Shane. We’ve known Nathan for years, and all that really matters to us is that he makes you happy.”

Dad extended a hand, and Nathan smiled as he shook it. “Thanks, Doug. Shane makes me happy, too.”

“Come on, Nathan. You’re not really buying this, are you? Just wait. You’ll see.”

We each took a seat at the table and started filling our respective plates.

“Really, Mom? You had to break out the weird dishes?” I turned to Nathan. “Most moms have fine china for special occasions. Mine has dishes covered with bad abstract artwork.”

“I thought Nathan might like them.”

“Trust me, Nathan’s a much better artist than the hack who drew this crap.”

“They’re cool, Tammy. Very interesting conversation pieces.”

“Traitor.”

Nathan gave me a wink as he reached for a slice of garlic bread.

Mom looked down at her plate and started adding bits of salad to her fork. “So...”

Grinning, I leaned over to Nathan and mouthed, “Wait for it...”

“...how did this all come about?”

“And there it is. See, Nathan? Told you it was just a matter of time. Nice show of restraint, though, Mom. You lasted a whole five minutes before starting the interrogation.”

“I’m just making conversation, dear.”

“Oh, right. Because once we start stuffing our faces, all lines of questioning automatically become parts of a polite dinner conversation and can no longer be considered forms of interrogation, right?”

“I don’t make the rules, dear.”

Shaking my head, I turned to Nathan again. “What do you think, Nathan? Should we allow this blatant abuse of a technicality?”

Nathan shrugged. "I mean, she *did* make this delicious meal for us."

"Well, mainly for you. But all right, Mom. Nathan says we can allow it. You're lucky you're a good cook."

Mom smiled at Dad. "See, dear? I told you waterboarding wouldn't be necessary."

"Too bad. I bought a new hose and everything."

I sliced into my square of lasagna. "You want to do the honors, Nathan? Tell them how this all came about, as Mom put it." Glancing at Mom, I added, "Fair warning, though: you're not going to like the story."

Mom nodded. "Oh. So it involves a crash, then."

Nathan looked at me. "You never told them about the crash?"

"He doesn't tell me about half his crashes, dear."

"At least."

"I'm used to it by now."

"Good thing Nathan isn't."

Nathan laughed. "Yeah. Shane had a pretty nasty crash while we were in Switzerland. He was out for a good minute or so, and it scared the hell out of me. I guess that was the start of me realizing just how much he meant to me."

"Clearly, I should crash more often."

Mom and Nathan both glared at me, but Dad chuckled, proving once again that I had him to thank for my twisted sense of humor.

"Anyway, I tried to deny my feelings at first, for the sake of our friendship, but your son makes it pretty hard to resist his charms sometimes."

"Tell us about it," Mom and Dad said simultaneously.

"So I ended up spontaneously blurting everything out one day."

"That was right before his birthday. And after I got over my initial shock, I realized I might feel the same way about him. But I was really concerned about protecting our friendship, and I knew he'd be heading back to Pittsburgh soon, so we decided to take things slowly."

"But I didn't even make it halfway to Pittsburgh before realizing I wouldn't be satisfied with seeing Shane just a few times a year."

“He actually sold his Corvette so he could afford to move to Breck to be with me.”

Dad’s eyes widened. “Seriously? I’m not sure even *I* would choose you over a Corvette.”

“Thanks, Dad. Right back at you.”

“It was an easy decision. I wasn’t sure if Shane would be ready for us to live together yet, so I needed to be prepared to start paying for a place of my own right away, just in case.” Nathan dropped his fork and raised a hand as he added, “Not that I’m going to let Shane pay for everything now that we *are* living together, of course.”

Dad laughed. “It’s okay, Nathan. We know you’re not after Shane’s money.”

Mom nodded. “And we also know Shane can look out for himself. He trusts you, and we can see why.”

I shook my head. “Okay, this is officially the lamest interrogation ever. Aren’t you supposed to hate my boyfriend, just on principle? Where’s the conflict? Where’s the drama? Where’s the food fight?”

Mom tossed a slice of garlic bread at me. I caught it and dropped it on my plate. “That’s better. Although I think you’re supposed to throw it at Nathan, not me.”

“You know my aim is terrible, dear.” Mom turned to Nathan, who was taking a sip of water. “What about your parents, Nathan? Are they okay with you being back in Colorado so soon after graduation?”

“Yeah, they were surprisingly cool with it, actually. Mom has apparently been rooting for me to get together with Shane since she met him at Gram’s funeral. She just never bothered to say anything to me about it.”

“I can understand that. If we mothers show too much interest in our sons’ love lives, we get accused of being interrogators.”

Mom gave me a wink. I shook my head at her. “Any other questions, Detective Larson, or is Nathan free to finish his meal in peace?”

“I have a question.”

“See, Nathan? I knew it was too good to be true. Mom did the Good Cop routine, and now Dad’s going to step in and play Bad Cop.”

“No, this question is actually for you, Shane, and it’s about a completely different subject.”

“Okay, I’m intrigued. Shoot.”

“Have you decided where and when you’re going to film your next edit yet?”

“Nah. In light of recent developments, I’ll need to reevaluate things.” I winked at Nathan. “Of course, you’d be welcome to come with me, in any case.”

“Where you go, I go.”

I flashed him a smile. “Why do you ask, Dad?”

“I was just going to suggest that you might want to wait until after your trip to start looking for those properties you want to buy. I’d hate to see a deal fall through on you just because you had to take a trip right in the middle of the negotiation process.”

“Yeah, that would suck. But I’ll have my sponsors to help me finalize everything if I need them to. Just ask Nathan how useful they can be when it comes to getting things done in a hurry.”

“Yeah. They managed to get me a passport in less than forty-eight hours so I could go to Switzerland with Shane. Still not sure how they pulled that off, but I’m really glad they did.” Looking at me, he smiled and added, “For many reasons.”

I smiled back at him. “Me, too. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves, anyway. First, I have to actually find the right properties to buy. That could take a while.”

“You’re still planning on looking for two different spaces, right?”

“Yeah. One for the nightclub and one for the indoor skatepark. My sponsors will be footing the bill for that one, so I can essentially do whatever I want with it.” The indoor skatepark would basically be for me, but I planned to make it open to the public, as well. It, like the nightclub, was something I had wanted to build for years. It would provide me and the rest of the Breckenridge community with a place to skate at any time, in any type of weather. It would also eventually serve as the venue for a skate contest I planned to host each year. But I would need to find the perfect spot for it—preferably one that consisted of at least ten thousand square feet. And I would need to find another large space to serve as the nightclub. I didn’t expect either search to be easy.

Mom glanced around the table, surveying our plates. They were all empty, more or less. “Ready for dessert?”

Without waiting for an answer, she stepped into the kitchen and retrieved a container of ice cream from the freezer. I knew exactly what it was; I was the one who had asked her to make it.

“Nah. I don’t think Nathan has any room left for your homemade white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream, Mom.”

Nathan gave me a playful shove. “You know I always have room for ice cream.”

“Oh, right. My bad. Guess that’s a yes for both of us, then.”

Mom carried the bowls of ice cream over to the table and set them in front of each of us.

“Thanks, Tammy. You didn’t have to go to all this trouble for me.”

“Actually, she kind of did. I insisted.”

“You did?”

“Of course. Like Mom said, this is a special occasion. One that calls for your favorite ice cream.”

“And it was no trouble at all, dear. Besides, Doug and I quite like it ourselves.”

“What’s not to like? It’s the best thing since peanut butter cup ice cream.”

“I wonder what they would taste like together?”

“I’m not sure the world could handle that sort of greatness, Nathan, but we should try it sometime and find out.”

“Sure, but if it causes the world to explode or something, just know that I’ll be okay with you taking credit for the idea yourself.”

“Thanks, Nathan. You’re too kind.”

“Speaking of special occasions, I almost forgot: Doug picked up a bottle of champagne for tonight, if you and Nathan would like some.”

“Thanks, but we’ll pass for now. I’m going to go show Nathan my vehicles so he can decide which one he wants, and we’ll probably end up taking at least one of them for a test drive.”

“Yeah. Thanks for doing that for us, though. That was really nice of both of you.”

“Don’t give them too much credit, Nathan. Their plan was probably just to get us liquored up to make the next phase of their interrogation easier.”

Mom shot me another one of her looks, pursing her lips in an attempt to convey annoyance. Not buying it for a second, I gave her a wink and a teasing grin in return.

She turned her attention back to Nathan. “Our pleasure, dear.”

“Yeah, don’t mention it. We’ll leave it out so you boys can enjoy it when you get back, if you’d like.”

“If not, you can just take it home with you.”

I didn’t bother offering to help Mom with the dishes after we finished eating. I knew she would turn down the offer, just like she had the last time she had made dinner for Nathan and me. And I was eager to show Nathan the vehicles he had to choose from, anyway. I wanted him to have plenty of time to test-drive all three of them, if he wished to do so. Although I was pretty sure the mini wouldn’t appeal to him. Hell, it didn’t even really appeal to *me*. I just felt obligated to keep it because it had been a prize. And it never hurt to have a spare car on hand, just in case—especially one that hadn’t cost anything. After all, one never knew when a boyfriend might suddenly find himself in need of a new vehicle.

“Thanks again for dinner, Mom. I’m not sure when we’ll be back, so just call me if you need anything.”

“Okay, dear. Have fun.”

“Later, Dad.”

Dad nodded at me. “You boys have fun.”

I glanced from Mom to Dad and shook my head at both of them. “Okay, seriously? You’re not going to do any more interrogating before we leave? This might be your last chance tonight. Oh—unless *that’s* it: you want to continue the interrogation tomorrow morning, when we’re still groggy and disoriented. And maybe a little hungover, if we decide to break open that bottle of champagne later, right?”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Shane. Did you really think we wouldn’t approve of you dating Nathan?”

I flashed Mom another smile. “Nah. Not even for a second. I just like messing with you.”

Two leftover slices of garlic bread sailed over my head as Nathan and I left the dining room. Mom really did have terrible aim.

“Yeah, I think this is the one I want.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that.”

We had just pulled back into my parents’ driveway for the fourth time in as many hours. After inspecting each vehicle, Nathan had chosen to take the truck for a spin first, then the BMW. We had also driven the mini around for about an hour or so, but only because it had been a while since it had last been moved. Finally, Nathan had decided to take the truck out again. Now we were back from that trip, and he had made up his mind, choosing the 2012 Toyota Tundra I had won at a contest the manufacturer had sponsored.

“It couldn’t be more different than the Corvette, but I still like it.”

“And you look hot driving it.”

“Right, because that’s all that really matters.”

“Damn straight, Napster. Although you somehow manage to look hot even when you’re driving a mini, so I guess it’s a good idea to have other criteria in mind when trying to decide which vehicle to choose.”

I removed the truck’s key from my keychain and handed it over to Nathan. “It’s all yours. There’s a key fob, too, but it’s back at the apartment.”

Nathan attached the key to the keychain I had given him the previous day. “Thanks, Shane. This is awesome.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

When we reentered the house, we found the bottle of champagne sitting on the kitchen counter. My mother had left a note propped up against the bottle, letting us know she and my father had gone to bed around eleven. It was now after midnight. I grabbed the bottle and led Nathan to my bedroom. Inside, I shut the door before pulling him toward me for a kiss.

“Sorry. No guest bedroom for you this time. I think it’s closed for the summer or infected with bedbugs or something.”

“Too bad. As I recall, that bed was pretty comfortable.”

“Yeah, well, hopefully you’ll like mine just as much.”

“It could be a slab of concrete, and I’d still never want to get out of it as long as you were lying next to me.”

“You say the cheesiest—I mean, the sweetest—things to me, Napster.”

He grinned and playfully shoved me away.

“No, really, that sounds like the beginning of a great love song.”

“Hey, if Aerosmith can make millions off a song that opens with a line about staying awake all night just to hear someone breathing...”

“My mom hates that song. She always says that line creeps her out.”

“I can understand that. Even though it’s supposed to be romantic, Steven Tyler *does* come off as a bit of a creeper in the song. Who wants to think about someone watching them while they’re sleeping? Sounds like something a stalker is more likely to do than a lover.”

“Yeah, that’s basically how she feels about it, too. And it reminds her of that song Sting sings, ‘Every Breath You Take,’ which she hates just as much. That one really is about a stalker, but it still gets played at weddings and shit.”

“Yeah, I can see the similarities. Personally, I’d be happy to stay awake all night listening to you breathing, but it wouldn’t be the kind of breathing you do when you’re sleeping.”

“Oh, yeah? What kind of breathing would it be?”

Nathan dropped to his knees, removed my cock from my jeans, and took it in his mouth, all in the span of about five seconds. I released a quiet moan as I leaned back against the wall, keeping a tight grip on the neck of the champagne bottle. With my free hand, I reached back and blindly searched for the doorknob so I could lock the door, just in case. My cock hardened and my breath quickened in response to the amazing blowjob Nathan was giving me.

“That kind,” he said when he came up for air. Then he took the full length of my cock in his mouth again and went back to work.

I let him continue for a few minutes before putting my free hand under his chin and pulling him upward to give him a kiss. Steering him toward the bed, I set the bottle on the nightstand and pushed him back onto the mattress. He stripped off his shirt as I unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them and his briefs down to his ankles. From there, I let him kick his way out of them and his shoes while I tore off my own clothes.

Climbing on top of him, I turned to face his rock-hard cock, and he quickly started sucking mine again. Trying to be quiet made me feel like I was back in high school. When I had fooled around with guys back then, every noise that had risen above the decibel level of a whisper had always made me instinctively hold my breath for a beat or two, and now I found myself doing the same thing again. Rationally, I knew Nathan and I would have to be *really* loud in order for my parents to hear us from their bedroom on the opposite side of the house. And, of course, the door was locked, anyway. But even so, nobody ever wanted to be able to have a story to share with their friends about the time their parents had walked in on them having sex.

When we finished, I rolled onto my back, and Nathan gave me a kiss before resting his head on my chest. I wrapped my arms around him, and he ran his fingers through my damp pubes as his breathing slowly returned to normal.

“Yeah. I could definitely stay awake all night listening to that.”

“So could I. But not tonight. We’ll have to get *some* sleep if we want to make it back home tomorrow.”

“‘Home.’ I’m never going to get tired of hearing you say that and knowing you’re talking about *our* home.”

“You don’t have to get tired of it, Napster, but you’d better at least get used to it.”

Nathan looked up at me and smiled. “And you called me your boyfriend earlier.”

I kissed his forehead. “That’s what you are, Nathan.”

“I know. But that’s the first time I’ve heard you tell someone that’s what I am. And you said it so effortlessly.”

Laughing, I asked, “What, did you expect me to choke on the word?”

“No, I just... didn’t expect to hear it at all, I guess. This soon, I mean. It just made me feel like...”

“Shit just got real?”

“Exactly. But in a good way, of course. I liked the sound of it. A lot.”

“If it wasn’t clear before, Nathan, hopefully it is now. I don’t have any lingering doubts about us working out anymore. The last of those vanished when you showed up on my doorstep two days ago. Being with you feels right.

Actually, aside from snowboarding and skateboarding, nothing has ever felt more right to me in my entire life.”

And just like that, without meaning to, I ensured that we would be getting each other off one more time before busting open that bottle of champagne.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The alarm clock started blaring at precisely nine the next morning. Groaning, I reached out and slapped the snooze button, wondering what had compelled me to give Nathan and myself less than six hours of sleep after a night of great sex and delicious champagne. Nathan stirred as I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand. I lowered my chin and kissed the top of his head, which was resting on my bare chest. His hair tickled my lips, sending a shiver down my spine. “Hi.”

He shifted and flashed me a sleepy smile. “Hi.”

“Sorry about the alarm clock.”

Why did I set that stupid thing in the first place? I’m not competing today. We’re done with college. We’ve got all day to get back home...

He settled against my chest again. “Does that mean we can go back to sleep?”

Oh, right. Today’s the day.

“Afraid not, Napster. We have to be back in Breck by five.”

“What time is it now?”

“Nine.”

“And it takes just over five hours to get from here to there, right?”

“Give or take, yeah.”

Nathan reached for my cock, already stiff with morning wood. “Then we’ve got plenty of time.”

I pulled him toward me for a kiss. “Have I ever told you how much I appreciate your math skills, Napster?”

“Pretty sure you haven’t, St. Louis. But how about showing me instead?”

By the time Nathan and I emerged from the shower, we had already sucked each other off twice. According to the clock on the wall, we hadn’t even been awake for a full ninety minutes yet. I handed him a towel and wrapped another one around my waist before stepping over to the sink to search for a spare toothbrush he could use. Before leaving our apartment yesterday, I had told

Nathan he could just borrow some of my stuff if he didn't want to deal with the hassle of packing an overnight bag for himself. Unsurprisingly, it had taken him less than two seconds to accept my offer.

He caught me staring at his reflection in the mirror as he dried himself off, and it made him smile.

"You have such a great smile."

He blushed, which just made him look even sexier. My cock still hadn't fully softened, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap him in my arms and fall back into bed with him—if we even made it that far. Unfortunately, we had already used up all the time we could spare.

"Are you nervous?" I had to distract myself somehow. Idle conversation seemed like my best option.

"About getting tested? Nah. Nothing I haven't already been through before. And like you said, it's basically just a formality."

Remembering why I was standing at the sink, I retrieved an unopened toothbrush from one of the drawers. "Yeah, I'm not nervous, either. Actually, I'm kind of looking forward to it, oddly enough."

Still naked, he walked over to me and started drying my back with his towel, pausing occasionally to kiss my neck and shoulders. "Oh, yeah? Why is that, St. Louis? Hoping you'll get a sexy, young male doctor or nurse who will insist on performing a full-body exam that will fuel your fantasies for years to come?" He gave me a teasing wink I only saw with the help of the mirror.

"You're already fueling plenty of my fantasies, Napster. There isn't really room at this point for ones that involve other guys. And it's probably not a good idea to use the C word when I'm sporting a semi, by the way."

He turned me to face him, loosening my towel and letting it fall to the floor. Our lips met as he reached down and began stroking my cock. I bit his lower lip in protest when he pulled away from me. "Feels like more than just a semi to me, St. Louis," he whispered, his breath hot against my skin as he held my gaze.

"Yeah, *now* it is. You kind of have that effect on it. Me. Us."

"Sorry, St. Louis. Maybe I should do something to fix the problem I caused."

I groaned and pulled his hand away. "We have to get ready, Nathan."

He pressed our cocks together with his free hand and started stroking them. I wasn't the only one who was rock hard. "Pretty sure we already are, Shane."

Stopping him again, I maintained a firm grip on both of his wrists, keeping his hands away from my cock for the sake of my own resolve. "You know what I mean, Nathan. We haven't even had breakfast yet."

He inched closer and began grinding against me. "I think I read somewhere that drive-thrus were invented for this exact reason, Shane."

Stuck between Nathan and the sink, I spun us ninety degrees and released his hands as I backed away from him. "It'll be after eleven before we even get on the road. We're going to be cutting it really close as it is."

"Did I really just hear adrenaline junkie Shane Larson insist on playing it safe?"

Well, he had me there. And he knew it, too, if the grin on his face was any indication.

Dropping to his knees in front of me and stuffing a towel under them, he added, "I'll make it quick, I promise."

I grinned as I stepped forward and fed him my stiff cock. "All right, Napster. Let's see what you can do."

As if I didn't already know.

Nathan spat a mouthful of toothpaste in the sink and turned on the faucet. "Thanks for the toothbrush."

"No problem. When you travel as much as I do, you learn to buy certain things in bulk."

After tapping the handle against the edge of the sink a couple times, Nathan tucked the toothbrush back in its box and tossed it to me. I caught it and stuffed it in the front pocket of the old backpack I had found in my closet and was in the process of filling with our dirty clothes. With round three behind us, we were both finally spent, and now we were scrambling to get ready so we could be on the road before eleven thirty. Hopefully we wouldn't run into traffic on the way back to Breckenridge. We *really* didn't have any time to spare now.

I nodded toward an open dresser drawer when he joined me in the bedroom. "Take your pick."

He started browsing through a pile of my underwear as I stepped into the pair I had selected. I kept my eyes focused on him while reaching for my jeans, which had landed against one of the bedposts when I had hastily tossed them aside the previous night. They offered a bit of resistance as I tried to pull them toward me, and I nearly ripped a belt loop before forcing myself to look away long enough to figure out that it had somehow gotten hooked around the knob of the bedpost. I tucked a finger under the loop and lifted it before turning my attention back to Nathan. The jeans were comfortable enough, but given the circumstances, I wouldn't have been too upset if I *had* ripped them. I hadn't found many opportunities to admire Nathan's naked body in its completely natural state yet, limp cock and all, and I wanted to take advantage of this one.

"I love you, Nathan."

He glanced at me and smiled. "I love you, too, Shane." He chose a pair of red bikini briefs I knew would look great on him. "Should I even bother to put these on?"

"What, are you feeling like freeballing it instead?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Okay, then what *did* you mean?"

"You're staring at me like you want to start round four already."

"Oh. No, I'm good for now. I'm staring at you because I can."

Arching his eyebrows slightly, Nathan stared back at me with an intensity that hadn't been present a second earlier. "Oh, yeah?"

I held his gaze. "Yeah. You're hot, and I just love looking at you. That's all."

His face reddened as he smiled at me again. "Keep saying things like that, and *I'll* be ready for round four."

"I wouldn't exactly complain, Nathan. But if we're going to do that, we might as well just call and reschedule our appointment."

"No, I want to go today. It's important."

"I agree."

Nathan put the briefs on and adjusted himself. They looked even better on him than I had imagined they would. "And besides, we *are* still at your parents' place. If we stay in bed all day, they'll probably start to get suspicious eventually."

I pulled him toward me and gave him a kiss. “Okay, then it’s settled: there won’t be a fourth round. Yet, anyway. Can’t guarantee I won’t want to revisit this conversation later.”

“I can pretty much guarantee I *will* want to revisit this conversation later.”

I kissed him again, then pulled away and put a leg through my jeans. “I think your jeans are on the other side of the bed.” After buttoning my fly, I walked over to my closet to select a shirt. “Again, take your pick.”

Nathan glanced over his shoulder as he picked his jeans up off the floor. “Damn, St. Louis. You have a lot of clothes.”

“Yeah, my clothing sponsors get carried away sometimes. I’ve never even worn some of this stuff. I give a lot of it away every year, but even that doesn’t seem to make much of a dent.”

I was under no obligation to outfit myself as a walking advertisement for my sponsors *every single day*, and none of them expected me to. I had my own style, and there were plenty of things in my main wardrobe in Breckenridge that I had purchased myself, none of which had anything to do with the companies that sponsored me. On days when I wasn’t competing or filming, I was free to wear whatever I wanted to wear, and I always did. But that never stopped my sponsors from keeping me fully stocked with their latest products in the hope that I would sport their logos from time to time in my day-to-day life. When they sent me things I liked—things I would actually buy myself—I was happy to occasionally wear those things, especially when attending an event like Coachella, where I knew plenty of people would see and photograph me. Other things—especially things that didn’t suit my taste, like camouflage prints—I donated to clothing drives or signed and sold to raise money for LGBT youth programs or the American Heart Association.

Nathan started thumbing through my collection of shirts while I picked a clump of lint out of one of the ankle-length socks I had pulled from a drawer filled with them. “Not the worst problem to have, though.”

“Can’t argue with that, Napster.”

“So, you never told me earlier. Why you’re looking forward to getting tested, I mean. Granted, I’m to blame for that; I kind of got us sidetracked.”

“You did, but I’m not complaining.” I finished tying my right shoe and moved on to my left one. “I don’t know; I guess getting tested just feels kind of symbolic to me this time. It was always something I did for myself before. Now it’s something I’m doing for someone else. That’s...”

“Heavy?”

“Yeah, exactly. But in a really good way, though. And we both know what’s going to happen once we get a clean bill of health.”

Nathan grinned as he put an arm through a sleeve of the two-toned blue shirt he had selected. “Skin is in?”

Chuckling, I nodded at him. “Skin is in. I’ve never even considered barebacking before, especially after what happened with Marco. I didn’t think I’d ever trust someone enough to put my life in their hands like that, even if we were in a long-term, supposedly monogamous relationship. It’s just too risky. But with you, I don’t even have to think about it. Right from the start, I’ve always known you were the one person I could count on to never hurt me. I know I can trust you. With my heart *and* with my life. I just... *know*.”

“And I know, too, Shane.” He leaned over the bed and grabbed the front of my shirt, pulling me toward him for a kiss. Then he walked over to the dresser and grabbed a pair of socks from the drawer I had left open for him. “Guess we’re almost ready now?”

I put the empty champagne bottle in the backpack and closed the zipper. Nathan wanted to keep the bottle because my parents had given it to us as a way of celebrating the start of our relationship. I had a feeling he would somehow turn it into a work of art eventually. “Looks that way. Only took us two hours.”

“Yeah, well, these things take time, St. Louis.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining. I don’t know about you, but it was certainly the most fun *I’ve* ever had getting ready for something.”

“Same here. Think we can still make it back to Breck in time for our appointment?”

I grabbed the backpack and slung it over my shoulder as Nathan finished tying his shoes. “If we leave soon, yeah. How hungry are you?”

He rose from the bed and grabbed his stomach. “I could eat. Why?”

“So could I. We’ll pick something up on the way. Apparently, drive-thrus were invented for this exact reason.”

Nodding, Nathan solemnly intoned, “It is known.”

I chuckled at the *Game of Thrones* reference. “You know, it’s weird to think that when we were talking to each other on the phone while watching the finale

together, you knew the whole time that you'd be seeing me the very next day. I don't know how you managed to keep that to yourself—"

"It was torture, trust me."

"—but I'm really glad you did. That was the best surprise ever."

"Yeah, well, the downside is that now I have the difficult task of trying to come up with something even better for the next time I want to surprise you."

"I'm sure you'll think of something." Unlocking my bedroom door, I looked over my shoulder at Nathan and added, "Ready to say goodbye to my parents and try to pretend like we didn't just spend two hours doing what we just spent two hours doing?"

He gave me a quick kiss. "Ready, St. Louis. Hopefully they won't make as many unintentionally dirty comments as they did last night."

"I know, right? I guess if we were able to get through *that* without laughing, this should be a piece of cake."

Nathan clutched his stomach again. "Ugh. Please don't mention food right now."

"Sorry, Napster. Come on, let's go fix that problem."

Nathan followed me to the living room, where my parents were watching the news. Mom smiled when she saw us. After muting the television, she said, "We were wondering if you would wake up in time for lunch."

"Yeah, after drinking that bottle of champagne you and Dad got for us, we didn't feel like waking up early." Which was true, even if it didn't tell the whole story.

"Glad you boys enjoyed it."

"What would you like to eat?"

"We're good, Mom. We've got an event to attend later in Breck, so we need to get going soon." Again, true. Kind of. "We're just going to stop at a drive-thru on the way back."

"Thanks for the offer, though, Tammy."

"Anytime, dear. It was good to see you again."

"Likewise. You, too, Doug."

"Shane, I put the rest of the ice cream in a cooler so you can take it home with you. It's in the kitchen. Just be careful handling the dry ice."

“Sweet. Thanks, Mom.”

“Yeah, thanks, Tammy. For everything.”

“My pleasure, dear.”

“You boys enjoy your weekend.”

“Thanks, Dad. We will.” At least *that* was completely true.

Outside, I put the cooler in the trunk of my car and tossed my backpack in the backseat. “I’ll stop at a drive-thru on the way. Just follow me in.”

Nathan nodded as he unlocked his truck. “Sounds good, St. Louis. See you in a few hours, then?”

“Count on it.”

Nathan looked at me expectantly as we stood outside our apartment.

“What? I’m not the only one with a key to this place, remember?” Nodding toward the door, I added, “Do the honors, Napster. Let’s make sure yours works.”

He grinned as he stuck his apartment key through the keyhole and turned it. “Looks like it does, St. Louis.”

“Good to know.” I stepped inside and tossed my backpack on the couch. Stopping in front of the kitchen trashcan, I removed the piece of gauze that had been taped to my arm after my blood had been drawn at the clinic earlier. The pleasant, middle-aged nurse who had taken it had been neither sexy nor male.

After discarding the gauze, I set the cooler on the kitchen counter. “So, what do you feel like eating tonight?”

Nathan was pressed up against my back before I even realized he had joined me in the room. His lips grazed the back of my neck as he slid a hand from my hip to my crotch and held it firmly in place there. “Eating can wait.” With his free hand, he took mine off the lid of the cooler. “And so can that.”

Turning to face him, I put my hands on his ass and pulled him closer. “And apparently, the matter of getting the door shut and locked is another one of these things that can wait.”

“Priorities, St. Louis.”

I chuckled as I moved a hand to his cock, which was already rock hard. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“What can I say? There’s just something sexual about the act of inserting a key in a lock.”

“Really?” For once, even *I* could tell I was doing that thing with my right eyebrow that always seemed to convey my skepticism—to Nathan, at least.

Laughing, Nathan shook his head. “No, not really.” Locking eyes with me, he added, “I just want you, Shane. You have a problem with that?”

“No problem at all, Nathan.” Holding his gaze, I planted one of his hands back on my cock, letting him feel how stiff it was. “I want you, too.” He leaned in to kiss me, and I responded hungrily, making out with him for a few seconds before reluctantly pulling away. “Seriously, though, we really should at least shut the door first.”

Nathan groaned and took a step back, releasing his grip on my cock. I wasn’t sure when he had disposed of his own piece of gauze, but both of his arms were now bare. He turned his back to me and stripped off his shirt—*my* shirt, really, although I was fine with letting him keep it, and I doubted I would get a choice in the matter, anyway. He tossed it over his shoulder to me as he walked out of the kitchen. “Fine, St. Louis. But if you’re not in our bed in fifteen seconds, I’m starting without you.”

I saw his jeans fall to his ankles just before he left my field of vision. Shaking my head, I dashed over to the door and kicked it shut. Without bothering to lock it—priorities!—I rushed off to the bedroom, getting there just as Nathan flopped down on the mattress. He rolled onto his side and removed his left sock—his last remaining article of clothing. I caught it when he tossed it at me.

“What took you so long?”

“You’re the sprinter, Napster, not me.”

“*Former* sprinter. These days I prefer other forms of cardio exercise.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

“Get over here, and I’ll show you. Fair warning, though: you might end up getting more of a workout than I do.”

So that confirmed it: he wanted me to fuck him. I wasn’t surprised. It had been two whole days since we had last fucked, and while I was content with blowjobs, I knew he would always want more than that.

I unbuttoned my jeans as I glanced at my nightstand, reassuring myself that the bottle of lube wasn’t still in the living room; it was right where I thought I

had put it before we had left for Telluride the previous day. At least Nathan wouldn't have to take my cock with the aid of only a few coats of spit and some precum this time.

After kicking off my shoes, I pushed my jeans down to my ankles and stepped out of them. Nathan licked his lips as he stared at me. "Damn, St. Louis. You're more than that poor pair of briefs can handle."

Looking down, I realized what he was talking about: I could see straight into my bikini briefs. My hard cock had stretched the fabric to the point where the front of the waistband wasn't even touching my skin anymore, leaving my pubes and the base of my shaft exposed.

"Better hurry and put them out of their misery. Then hurry over here and put me out of mine."

I chuckled as I removed my briefs, balled them up, and tossed them at Nathan. He had, after all, thrown twice as many articles of clothing at me in the last two minutes. Of course, being Nathan, he took my payback in stride, catching the briefs and pressing them against his nose so he could get a good whiff of my scent. A drop of precum oozed out of his cock when he inhaled.

"Should I leave you two alone?" Not that I didn't understand the impulse. I probably would have done the same if he had thrown his briefs at me.

He took one more deep breath, and the drop of precum inched a bit closer to his stomach as his cock flexed upward. Flinging the briefs across the room, he looked at me with intense hunger and said, "Just take that shirt off and get over here already. Or leave it on and get over here already. Either way, just get over here already."

"I feel like such a sex object right now." I lifted my shirt over my head and let it fall to the floor. "Not that I'm complaining."

Nathan shrugged. "I'd apologize, St. Louis, but that's just the price you have to pay for having that body. And that dick. And those eyes. And for making me fall hopelessly in love with all of you."

And now *my* cock was dripping.

"You're still not over here." He sounded as disappointed as I always felt every year on the last day of the snowboarding season. "Why are you still not over here?"

Laughing, I reached down and pulled off my right sock. "Relax, Napster. I'm coming."

“Not yet, I hope.”

“Talk about mixed signals.” I removed my left sock and tossed it and the other one across the room.

“Sorry. *Do* come. Just don’t *come*. Yet, anyway.”

“That’s so much clearer.”

“You try making sense while staring at your naked body.”

“I’d have to be pretty narcissistic for it to have the same effect on me that it has on you.”

“Ooh, narcissistic. Good word. Sounds familiar. No idea what it means right now, though. That brain has stopped working. And you’re still not over here, damn it. Look, St. Louis, if you’re trying to get me into that tantric shit I’ve heard about, this isn’t really the best time, okay? Not that I haven’t sometimes thought I could come just from staring into your eyes, but...”

His voice trailed off when I took a step forward, and as I continued to approach the bed, he grabbed my cock as soon as it was within reach. “Finally.” He grazed the tip with his thumb, then brought his hand to his mouth so he could taste the drop of precum he had just harvested. “Can we shut up and fuck now?”

I chuckled as I climbed onto the bed and settled on my knees between his legs. “Sure, Nathan. We can shut up and fuck now.”

I leaned forward to give him a kiss, intending for it to be a quick pit stop before traveling south, but when I tried to pull away, he grabbed the back of my head with both hands and held me firmly in place. We made out for a few minutes, then I pulled away again, pinning his arms above his head so he couldn’t stop me this time. After nibbling on his ear and the side of his neck, I turned my attention to his exposed armpits. He shuddered when I licked his left one. He shuddered again when I licked his right one.

“Fuck, Shane. I love it when you do that.”

I continued licking his armpits for a couple more minutes before moving on to his nipples, alternating between tonguing, sucking, and outright biting them. The bites, in particular, caused him to release throaty moans of pleasure I loved hearing.

I kept playing with his nipples until even the slightest touch made him shudder. When I finally abandoned them to focus on other parts of his body,

they were both quite hard. I had a feeling they would remain that way until we were done. Making a mental note to return to them later for more fun, I began licking and kissing my way down to and across his stomach. He gasped quietly when I grazed my teeth along the side of his right hip.

“Fuck...”

I got the same response when I repeated the process on the other side of his body.

“Fuck, Shane. How do you keep managing to find these spots I didn’t even know I had?”

“Good question, Napster. I mean, exploring every single inch of your hot body is such a *chore*. How *do* I ever manage to find the patience for it?”

He chuckled when I looked up at him and gave him a wink. Then I grazed my teeth along the side of each hip again—to make sure the earlier responses hadn’t been flukes, of course.

“Fuck, you’ve got me dripping. Again.”

Okay, so that’s definitely one of your spots. Good to know.

After doing that once more on each side, I moved on to Nathan’s inner thighs, then sucked on his balls before finally taking his cock in my mouth, all the way down to the base. His precum coated my tongue, and I savored the familiar taste of it as I slowly worked my way back up his shaft.

“You taste really good, Nathan.”

“Yeah? Show me.”

I moved forward to give him another kiss, and he started grinding into me as we made out.

“I want you inside me, Shane.”

The words were whispered and thick with desire. I put a finger to his lips and flashed him a grin as we made eye contact. “Patience, Napster.”

Nathan groaned. “You know that’s not one of my strong suits, St. Louis.”

Nodding, I leaned in closer to him and whispered back, “I know.”

He started grinding into me again as he stole another kiss from me. When I pulled away to retrieve the bottle of lube and a condom from the nightstand, he bit my lower lip in protest, sending a chill down my spine.

“Relax, Nathan. I just want to get you ready first.”

“I’ve been ready since the moment we walked in the door, Shane.”

“Okay, then I just want to get you readier.”

“Is that even a word?”

“I don’t know. I think so? But you’re not the only one whose brain has stopped working.”

After setting the lube and condom aside on the bed, I sprawled out on my stomach between Nathan’s legs and started sucking his cock again. I really wasn’t stalling; if he wanted—needed?—me to fuck him, then that was what I was going to do. But I had fucked him twice already, and he had wanted me with such urgency both times that I still hadn’t gotten to treat him to any proper prep work first. This time, I wanted to get his hole ready for my cock before shoving it in.

Using my tongue, I coaxed one more drop of precum out of the tip of his cock before releasing it from my mouth. Then I pushed his legs forward and started putting my tongue to use elsewhere.

“Fuck, that feels amazing, Shane.” Nathan hooked his arms around his legs to hold them in place for me. “I love the way your beard feels against my skin.”

I wasn’t squeamish about ass play. I never had been, but that was especially true now that I was with Nathan. There wasn’t a single part of his body that I was afraid to explore. I wasn’t even into feet—I generally just ignored them entirely during hookups—but I would give his hours of attention if he asked me to. I knew he took care of himself. I knew he practiced good hygiene. I knew he was the man I loved intensely, and I knew he felt the same way about me. I had no problem eating his ass out.

Which, in a way, was unfortunate. If my lack of interest in anal sex had been the result of hang-ups about the realities of the act itself, I could have fixed the problem long ago, or it would have fixed itself the moment I had fallen in love with Nathan. Instead, I was struggling to overcome a much less generic problem—one I didn’t even fully understand, let alone know how to solve. I loved ass play. I loved rimming and getting rimmed. I loved fingering and getting fingered. I might not be in the same league of ass men that Nathan was in, but I loved looking at his, just like I loved looking at every other part of his body. I definitely had a prostate; Nathan had found it easily enough the first time he had fingered me, and he had proceeded to prove it was in working

order. I didn't have any negative experiences that I associated with anal sex. I didn't find it painful. *I simply wasn't into it.* Practically everything else about sex—especially sex with Nathan—turned me on, but regardless of whether I was topping or bottoming, the actual act of anal sex itself—the penetration, the thrusting, the stuff I should have found hottest of all—never seemed to do a single thing for me. It was easy to guess why someone—even someone who was gay—might think anal sex was gross. But why would someone who *didn't* think that—*especially* someone who was gay—just not enjoy it, period? Some things just couldn't be answered with a quick Google search.

Nathan moaned as I slowly worked my middle finger up his ass and started massaging his prostate, causing more precum to leak out of his cock. The tip got even wetter when I added my index finger. I resisted the urge to lick it, not wanting to send him over the edge yet. Instead, I stayed focused on teasing the outside of his hole with my tongue while teasing the inside with both fingers. After toying with him like that for a while, I carefully removed my fingers, spread his ass cheeks, and stuck my tongue in his hole. When I stole a quick peek at him between tongue flicks, I was treated to the sight of his eyes rolling back in their sockets as his head lolled against the pillow he was gripping tightly with his left hand. It would have been enough to send *me* over the edge if I had been playing with myself.

“Fuck, you turn me on so much, Shane.”

Granted, we hadn't even been together, in this way, for a full week yet. But, based on my initial findings, I felt safe saying that one of the things that turned *me* on the most about pleasuring Nathan was the way he reacted to the things I did to him. Even when bottoming or topping for him, I could at least get off on seeing how good I was apparently making him feel. He never acted like he was auditioning for a porn film while we were having sex. Nothing ever seemed exaggerated or fake, even when he was deep in the throes of an orgasm. When he moaned, it was because I had just done something that was worth moaning about, not because he was simply trying to fill the silence.

Which just made hearing him unleash a quiet, raspy, primal, *legitimate fucking growl* even hotter. That was a new reaction, one I had never gotten out of him before. It was like my own sexual version of the NBDs I strived for in snowboarding. The Growl had never been done before. I might not be as good with my tongue as he was with his, but if he had reached the point where moans simply weren't enough anymore, I had to be doing something right.

“Fuck, Shane, I want you so bad.” The words came out as staccato whispers between heavy, ragged breaths. “Fuck me already.”

I continued rimming him as I rolled the condom over my shaft and applied a generous amount of lube. Then I added more to my index and middle fingers and rubbed them around and inside Nathan’s hole. He moaned again when I found his prostate and started tweaking it. Finally, after circling his hole with my fingers one last time, I removed them, rose to my knees, and settled the tip of my rock-hard cock between his ass cheeks.

“I don’t know, Nathan. Think you’re readier yet?”

“Fuck...” He lifted his head off the pillow and made eye contact with me, gasping for breath. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead. “I’m readier-er. I’m so fucking readier-er.”

Chuckling, I rubbed my cock up and down his crack as I said, “Yeah, your brain has definitely stopped working.”

“Your fault.” His head fell back against the pillow. “All your fault.”

I leaned forward and gave him a kiss. He bit my lower lip when I pulled away, but it was a small price to pay. It felt like it had been an hour since I had last kissed him. When I glanced at my alarm clock, I realized I wasn’t far from the mark; I had noticed the time when I had pulled away from our last kiss to grab the bottle of lube and condom from the nightstand, and over thirty minutes had passed since then. I felt a sudden twinge of guilt. I really *was* torturing Nathan.

But one look at his face proved he believed it was the best kind of torture.

Reconsidering, I gave him another kiss, one I kind of got lost in. When I finally pulled away again, he appeared too content to bother protesting with his teeth.

“I love you, Shane.”

“I love you, too, Nathan.”

“You’ve got me so fucking close, and you haven’t even put it in yet.”

I held his gaze as I pressed the tip of my cock firmly against his hole and applied some pressure, opening him up but stopping just shy of penetrating him. He groaned when I repeated the process while tweaking one of his still-hard nipples. He wasn’t just dripping precum anymore; there was an actual pool of it on his stomach, just below his navel.

“Fuck, Shane...”

I did the same thing again, but this time, I let the tip of my cock slip inside his ass, pulling back out as soon as the head disappeared from view.

“Fuck. Quit teasing me, Shane.”

I nodded at him. “Readier-er, huh?”

“Readier-er. So. Fucking. Readier-er.”

“Okay, then.”

I pressed my cock against his hole again and slowly eased it in, all the way down to the base.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking big.”

“You okay?”

Nathan looked at me. “You’re kidding, right? I’m not sure I’ve ever been better.”

Great. That’s what I was afraid of.

Holding my gaze, Nathan wrapped his legs around my waist and laced his fingers between mine. “Fuck me, Shane. And don’t stop when you fuck the cum out of me. Because I know I’m not going to last long, but I want this to.”

He was in luck there, because if there was one advantage to my problem, it was that I never had to worry about coming too soon. I knew he appreciated my stamina, but I really couldn’t take any credit for it. Anal sex just didn’t turn me on enough to get me off right away.

The same obviously couldn’t be said for Nathan, though. I grabbed his hips and started fucking him hard, because that was what he wanted, and I was starting to accept that if he was in pain, it was the good kind of pain—the kind of pain that ranked right up there with hair pulling and nipple biting. I had made him promise to stop me if I ever hurt him, and I knew he would keep that promise. Besides, the smile on his face certainly didn’t scream “*Ouch!*” to me, nor did the goose bumps dotting his flesh.

“Fuck, Shane, you’re going to...”

He didn’t even manage to complete the sentence before the initial shot of cum burst from his rock-hard cock. I kept thrusting into him, and he dug his fingers into my ass cheeks and bit his lip as he rode the waves of another hands-free orgasm, the first one I had actually gotten a good view of. It was ridiculous

that he had managed such a feat once, let alone three times in a row. And I hadn't even been fucking him for a full two minutes yet.

By the time his orgasm ended, Nathan's chest and stomach were glistening with a sexy mixture of cum and sweat. His cock flexed one last time, then settled against his thigh, already starting to soften. He looked completely spent and totally satisfied.

"That was hot, Nathan."

"You're hot, Shane." He was still trying to catch his breath, but he managed to add, "Kiss me. And keep fucking me."

"Oh, if you insist..." I gave him a wink and leaned forward to kiss him, but I stopped short of his lips, locking eyes with him as our noses pressed together. "I love you."

He smiled as he ran his fingers through my hair. "I love you."

Our lips met, and after wrapping my arms around him, I started thrusting into him again, adopting a slower, gentler pace now that he had gotten the release I had kept him waiting over an hour for. We didn't stop kissing after that, not even when I rolled him on top of me a few minutes later, while still deep inside him, and continued fucking him from below.

Finally, he broke away from my lips and released a quiet gasp. "Fuck, I love it when you fuck up into me like that."

He reached forward and gripped the headboard with both hands, and I craned my neck so I could lick his armpits. His intoxicating, unmistakable scent turned me on, and when he clenched his ass muscles around my shaft, I felt my orgasm starting to build. But he was rock hard again now, and I wanted to try something, so I rolled him onto his back again and slowed my pace, kissing him as I blindly reached for the top drawer of his nightstand. After opening it, I fumbled around inside for a few seconds before finding one of his condoms.

"Your turn."

I ripped open the condom wrapper with my teeth and tossed it aside. After rolling the condom over Nathan's cock, I grabbed the bottle of lube and applied some to it, then added more to my ass. I thrust into him a few more times before slowly pulling out and disposing of my used condom. Straddling his waist, I gradually lowered myself onto his cock, not stopping until I felt his pubes tickling my balls.

"Fuck, Shane, you feel so fucking good."

Leaning forward to kiss him, I whispered, “Fuck me, Nathan.” Then I started stroking my cock as he began thrusting up into me. It had been rock hard when I had climbed on top of him, and I had been really close to the edge then, too. I had hoped that giving myself that head start would allow me to enjoy bottoming for once, at least long enough for him to fuck a load out of me. Not a hands-free one, of course; given the circumstances, the idea of me achieving a hands-free orgasm was too far-fetched to even bother to entertain. But just achieving a manually induced orgasm with a cock up my ass would have been a noteworthy feat for me. I had hoped that under the right conditions, *that* might not be too much to ask for.

But, obviously, it was. My cock was already starting to get limp in my hand, and the rest of my body wasn’t much more into the experiment than my cock was. *So much for that idea.*

Nathan, on the other hand, was enjoying himself, and I was content to let that be enough for me. Releasing my cock, I shifted my legs and started riding him.

“Fuck, you’re good at that.”

I didn’t *feel* like I was good at it. I didn’t feel like I was good at anything about bottoming. Topping, maybe. But bottoming? I couldn’t even manage to stay hard while bottoming. I wanted to be good at it; for him, I desperately wanted to be good at it. But I knew I wasn’t. I accepted, however, that *he* believed I was, because I knew he would never lie to me, and even if that was just one of those things people said during sex, that didn’t explain the look he was giving me—the familiar one that seemed to suggest I could do no wrong in his eyes. So, yes, I was good at bottoming. In Nathan’s opinion, at least. And his was the only one that mattered.

Of course, it was impossible to guess how he would feel about the matter once I told him about my problem. But maybe I could still fix it on my own before then.

Figuring out how to stay in the moment while bottoming would be a great place to start. Once again, I was thinking too much. But, apparently, I could ride a cock on autopilot, so that was good to know.

I pulled Nathan forward for a kiss. He pushed me back against the other end of the bed, then propped my legs up against his shoulders and continued fucking me. His cum was still drying on his sweaty chest and stomach, and it added a sexy sheen to his body. I tweaked his nipples as he played with my

limp cock while massaging that space between my balls and my ass, which had to be the part of the male anatomy that possessed the worst set of names. It was hard to get people to agree on whether *taint* should belong exclusively to women, *gooch* sounded like the kind of thing one should only say in a baby-talk voice—“Goochie goochie goo!”—*grundle* sounded like a name for a troll, and *perineum* was just too clinical. *That space between the balls and the ass* was long and impractical, but at least I could say it without feeling ridiculous.

Focus, Shane.

I sat up and gave Nathan a kiss. When I fell back against the bed again, he started rubbing his hands over my abs.

“Fuck, you’re hot, St. Louis.”

I stroked his arms. “You’re hot, too, Napster.”

I smiled as he continued fucking me. I had always loved hearing him call me “St. Louis.” Our silly nicknames had been with us from the very beginning, and we had always had these unspoken rules about using them. They were private, first of all; we didn’t use them around other people, and we were the only ones who knew the story behind them. And just as importantly, they weren’t meant to replace our real identities. They were silly nicknames for silly times, used only when the mood was light or needed to be lightened. We were still Shane and Nathan when it really mattered. But the nicknames bound us to our past, to that time when we had been nothing more than best friends, and they were a reminder that, while our relationship had changed since then, *we* hadn’t. We were still best friends. We just also happened to be in love with each other now. And, thankfully, being in love hadn’t turned us into guys who called each other things like *babe* or *hun* or *boo*. I couldn’t think of any two terms of endearment that were better than ours.

Focus!

I was about to pull Nathan toward me for another kiss, but before I could do so, he slipped out of my ass and took my limp cock in his mouth. After getting it fully hard again, he wrapped a hand around the shaft and stared at it.

“Fuck, I love your dick.”

He went back to sucking my cock, making me moan when it hit the back of his throat. I played with his hair as he wrapped his lips around the base of my shaft and rubbed his tongue against the underside of it. “And I love what you can do to it with your mouth.”

He slowly released my cock from his mouth, keeping his lips wrapped tightly around the shaft as he slid them back up to the tip. Looking up at me, he kissed the head and said, "Feeling you get hard while I'm sucking you is so fucking hot."

Good thing you think so, because I'm probably going to need the help every time you fuck me.

"Fuck my face, Shane."

He took my cock in his mouth again, and I grabbed the back of his head and started fucking up into him. I soon felt his drool trickling down my balls, and although I had no problem staying in the moment during a blowjob, the sensation still made me think of something I'd told him freshman year: "only dogs and boyfriends get the privilege of drooling on me." Well, now he could drool on me as often as he wanted.

Nathan eventually wrapped a hand around the base of my cock again, and I let go of his head, taking that as a hint that he wanted a break. He made some sexy slurping noises as he worked his way up my shaft and released it from his mouth. He smiled as we made eye contact. "I'm allowed to drool on you now, right, St. Louis?"

I chuckled. "I was just thinking the same thing, Napster."

Nathan turned around and grabbed a fresh condom from my nightstand. After biting into a corner of the wrapper, he tossed it aside, put the condom over the tip of my cock, and used his mouth to roll it down to the base. As if I needed more proof of his oral skills.

After adding some lube to my cock, Nathan rolled onto his side and backed up against me, pressing the tip against his hole. I wrapped my arms around his chest and gave him a kiss, slowly easing into him. After spooning him for a few minutes, I shifted us onto our knees so I could fuck him from behind, one of the positions we hadn't gotten around to trying yet. I reached for his hard cock as I started thrusting into him, but he quickly swatted my hand away.

I chuckled. "Really? Again?"

Nathan shrugged as he looked back at me. "Can't hurt to try. You've already got me right on the edge again."

"You're unbelievable, Napster."

"But in a good way or a bad way?"

"In the best way."

I pinned his hands behind his back and started fucking him harder. I quickly decided that I wasn't a fan of the position, which lacked intimacy and kept me too far away from Nathan, but it had been worth a shot, at least. If there was a position out there that would make me magically start to enjoy anal sex the way Nathan did, I was determined to find it. I owed him that much.

Perhaps feeling the same way about the position, Nathan pulled away from me and flopped onto his back. "Fuck the cum out of me, Shane."

Yeah, right. No way that's happening twice in one hour.

But as I reentered him and picked up where I had left off, I felt his orgasm building, and before long, it *was* happening again. It wasn't as dramatic as his earlier orgasm, but it seemed just as pleasurable for him, and he did indeed shoot a bit more cum without touching himself. I still wasn't ready to come, so when a wicked thought entered my mind, I decided to embrace it.

Pinning Nathan's wrists above his head, I grabbed his cock with my free hand and started stroking it as I continued fucking him. He was still hard, and damn sensitive, too. He squirmed a bit in protest, but when we made eye contact, I could tell he was enjoying it more than he was hating it. Knowing he would have asked me to stop if he had really wanted me to, I released his wrists and began fucking him harder as I played with his cock.

"Fuck, Shane..." Nathan gripped the headboard as he held my gaze. "Fuck, those eyes. Don't stop..."

Close to coming myself, I tweaked one of his nipples with my free hand.

Nathan groaned and arched his back. Leaning forward, I put his cock in my mouth and continued fucking him.

"Fuck, Shane..."

It was safe to say he hadn't expected that. His hands gripped the back of my head and tugged at my hair as he started shooting his load in my mouth, just as I began shooting mine in his ass. Once we were both done, I collapsed on top of his chest and kissed him, letting him taste himself on my tongue. Then I rested my head on his shoulder and held him as our breathing slowly returned to normal.

"What. Just. Happened?"

Without looking up, I murmured, "Pretty sure it's called sex, Napster."

"No, Shane. That was more than sex." Turning his head so we were facing each other, Nathan rested a hand on my cheek and stroked my beard with his

thumb as he looked me straight in the eyes. "It's *always* been more than sex with you, Shane. You know that, right?"

I nodded. "I know, Nathan. I feel the same way." *Which is why it would be so hard to take it away from you.* "You really think you could come just from staring into my eyes?"

"Shane, I think your eyes could make me do just about anything under the right circumstances. Like my grandmother said, they're magical. Just like the guy they're attached to." He gave me a tender kiss. A few seconds passed before he broke the silence again. "You're still inside me."

"Oh. Sorry."

I started to move, but Nathan held me in place with his legs. "No, it's okay. I wasn't complaining. It just took me a while to realize it, that's all. I think my whole body might have been numb by the time you were finished with me."

"Well, I mean, three orgasms in, what, one hour? Less than one hour? And the last two within minutes of each other? I'm surprised you can even string together sentences right now."

"The blood is finally returning to my other brain."

"You know, speaking of which, I've noticed you say 'fuck' a lot more often when you're turned on."

"Yeah, well, sometimes 'fuck' is the only appropriate word to say in response to the things you do to me in bed. And in the bathroom. And in the living room. And..."

"Hmm. We haven't christened the kitchen yet. Or the laundry room."

"Bet it'd be fun to fuck on top of the washer during the spin cycle."

"Let's find out."

"Yes, please. Just not right now. I don't think I can even move right now."

"You don't have to, but I probably should."

Nathan relaxed his legs. "If you must."

"Just for a second." I slipped out of Nathan and rolled onto my back. After removing and discarding the condom, I wiped myself off with a corner of the sheet. "Looks like we'll be putting the washer to use again soon, anyway."

"At this rate, we're going to be changing the sheets every other day."

"Why do you think I bought extra bedding?"

“Like I told you before, I’ve always admired your foresight.” Nathan rested his head on my chest, and I traced circles through his hair with my fingers as he released a yawn. “The hot tub.”

“What?”

“You said we have a hot tub, right?”

“Yeah, on the terrace. So?”

“So that’s another place we haven’t christened yet.”

“Damn, Napster. I didn’t know you were an exhibitionist.”

“It’s only exhibitionism if you get caught.”

I chuckled. “Fair point. But we should probably wait to christen the hot tub until after we get our test results back.”

“Okay. That’s just a week away.”

“If that.”

“If that. I think I can wait that long.”

“Gives us time to christen the other places first.”

“Now you’re talking, St. Louis.”

“Just not right now.”

Nathan nodded and yawned again. “Just not right now. Right now we sleep.”

My eyelids quickly started drooping. Sleep sounded nice, but in the back of my mind, there was a nagging feeling that was keeping me awake. I couldn’t quite shake the sense that I was forgetting something important. I knew I had left the cooler of ice cream sitting out on the kitchen counter, but the dry ice would keep it cold for a while longer—actually, it was probably as hard as a rock right now—so that wasn’t a big deal. But there was something else...

“Shit.”

Nathan lifted his head and looked at me. “What’s wrong?”

“I left the apartment door unlocked earlier.”

“Why?”

“Priorities, Napster, remember?”

“Oh, right.” He flashed me a sheepish smile. “Sorry. I’ll go lock it.”

I gave him a quick kiss. “No, that’s okay. I can get it. I need to move the ice cream to the freezer, anyway.” When I sat up, he did the same. “You don’t have to get up. I won’t be gone long.”

“Eh, if my pillow is leaving the bed, I might as well leave it, too. Besides, I’m kind of hungry now.”

“Guess I’ve worked up a bit of an appetite myself, now that you mention it.” As Nathan got out of bed, I couldn’t help thinking about what we had just done. The evidence was all over his torso. “But if we’re going to stay awake for a while, we should probably get cleaned up before we do anything else. As sexy as that look is on you, it might get a bit uncomfortable as the night goes on.”

Nathan looked down at his chest, then looked back up at me and nodded. “And reek, too, I’m guessing.”

I pulled him into my arms and gave him another kiss. Inhaling deeply, I shook my head and said, “Nah. You smell as sexy as you look, Napster.”

“If I could do that eyebrow thing you do, St. Louis, I’d be doing it right now.”

After narrowing my right eyebrow, I gave him a wink and pushed him away. “Go get the water ready. I’ll join you as soon as I lock the door.”

“Okay, but if you’re going to mess with that ice cream right now, you’d better put some pants on first. I’d hate to see that dry ice get anywhere near your dick.”

I cringed at the thought. “Thanks, Napster. Nice of you to look out for the parts of my body that *really* matter.”

“Priorities, St. Louis.”

“Clearly. But the ice cream can wait until we’re done showering.”

Nathan followed me into the hallway and stopped in front of the bathroom entrance. “I was hoping you’d say that. See you in fifteen seconds?”

“Let’s shoot for ten.”

“Ambitious as always. But five would be even better.”

I heard Nathan start the shower as I raced into the living room. After locking the apartment door, I rejoined him in the bathroom.

“That was seven, by my count. Not bad, but I see definite room for improvement. Especially from an Olympian.”

I chuckled as I opened the closet door. "I had to navigate some furniture."

"Jump over it next time. I've seen what those legs of yours can do."

"Yeah, I guess you have." I slung a couple towels over the shower door, then tested the water. "I'll scrub your back if you scrub mine?"

"Sounds like a plan, St. Louis."

The water was lukewarm by the time we finally emerged from the shower. After handing Nathan one of the towels, I started drying myself off with the other. "Think we'll ever manage to take a shower together without it turning sexual?"

"I sure hope not."

"Me, too." I tossed my towel in the hamper, then pulled Nathan toward me for a kiss. "Ready for me to return the favor?"

"Nah, I'm good for now. I just wanted to get you caught up. Although I'm still ahead by one orgasm, so it looks like I have some more work to do later tonight."

Chuckling, I ran my fingers through his damp hair and gave him another kiss. "I'm not keeping score here, Nathan."

He dropped his own towel in the hamper as he followed me into the bedroom. "I figured as much, but I'll take any excuse to go another round with you."

I stopped in front of the dresser and opened one of the drawers. He pressed himself up against my back and started kissing my neck and shoulders while running his fingers up, down, and across the grooves of my torso. I could feel his stiff cock resting between my ass cheeks, but he wasn't grinding against me in an effort to stimulate it. He seemed more interested in exploring my body with his hands and lips.

"Rethinking your decision to turn down my offer?"

"No, I just find it incredibly difficult to keep my hands off you."

I reached back and began playing with his hair as he continued kissing and rubbing my upper body. "I know the feeling."

"But I really am good for now. I'm still recovering from that last mind-blowing orgasm you gave me."

“You’re pretty hard for a guy who’s still recovering.”

“Didn’t say I *couldn’t* go again, St. Louis. It doesn’t take much to get me going around you. But I can wait. We really should come up for air occasionally, if for no other reason than to refuel and rehydrate. You know we haven’t eaten since we left Telluride, right?”

“My stomach does remind me of that from time to time.” Glancing at the clock, I realized that had been just over nine hours ago. “All right, Napster. Guess I can’t have you starving on my watch.”

“It probably wouldn’t be a good look on me.”

“Eh, you’ve got good looks to spare.”

“You say the cheesiest—I mean, the sweetest—things to me, St. Louis.”

He kissed my neck again as I pulled a pair of basketball shorts out of the dresser drawer. “Do you need a pair of these? Or something else to wear? I can’t imagine jeans being particularly comfortable in your current state.” I could tell he was still hard, even before I reached back with my free hand and gave his cock a quick stroke.

“I brought one pair with me. They’re mixed in with my socks and underwear.”

I opened another drawer, found Nathan’s light-blue basketball shorts, and handed them to him. “We should definitely do some more shopping tomorrow.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Nathan backed away from me as I closed both drawers. When I turned to face him, he was already wearing his shorts, which were tenting under the strain of his still-hard cock. “Nice look, Napster.” I gave him a wink as I stepped into my own pair of shorts.

“Eh, it’ll go down eventually.”

“Try to think about dry ice getting in contact with it. I know that lovely thought is going to give *me* nightmares tonight.”

“Well, if it does, I promise to comfort you with a late-night blowjob. It’d be the least I could do after putting the thought in your head in the first place.”

“Hell, in that case, bring on the nightmares!”

Chuckling, Nathan shook his head and gave me a playful shove, his movements causing his cock to bounce enticingly beneath the loose-fitting fabric of his shorts.

“You might want to just take those back off for now. I think that silky material is just going to make matters worse.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Nathan hooked his thumbs under the waistband of his shorts and pushed them to the floor, then stepped out of them and slung them over his right shoulder.

“You sure you don’t want me to just take care of that for you?”

“I don’t know, St. Louis. If you take care of me, then I’m going to want to take care of you again, and it’s just going to be this vicious, never-ending cycle of sex.”

“Sorry, Napster, was there supposed to be a downside in there somewhere that I missed?”

“Fuck, I don’t even know anymore. You make it really fucking hard to resist you, Shane, you know that?”

“So stop trying.”

Nathan pulled me toward him and gave me a kiss. I barely had time to wrap my arms around his waist before my cell phone started ringing. Ignoring it, I kept kissing him.

After the third ring, Nathan broke away from my lips long enough to ask, “Aren’t you going to answer that?”

“Answer what?”

I leaned in to kiss him again, but he pressed a finger against my lips to stop me, laughing as he traced circles along them. “Seriously, St. Louis. It could be your mom, wondering if we made it back here safely.”

Groaning, I took a step back from him. “Well, if talk of dry ice in the nether region doesn’t kill the mood, bringing up a parental unit certainly will.”

Nathan chuckled as I sidestepped him. “Hey, if anyone’s going to complain about this interruption, it should be me. After all, I *am* the one who’s sporting the raging boner.” While I picked up my jeans and retrieved my now-silent phone from one of the front pockets, he added, “Hell, you’re still clearheaded enough to conjure up phrases like *nether region* and *parental unit*.”

“And you’re still clearheaded enough to conjure up words like *clearheaded* and *conjure*, so I guess we’ll both survive the interruption.” I gave him a wink before checking my missed calls. “Weird.”

“What?”

“It was Kevin. If all his fingers were broken, he’d probably tap out a text message with his toes before resorting to making an actual phone call.”

“Hopefully everything’s okay. Go ahead and call him back.”

I glanced at Nathan’s crotch. “You sure?”

“Of course. Like I said before, it’ll go down eventually. And I know you won’t be able to focus on anything else until you’re sure Kevin’s all right. Neither will I.”

“All right, but I fully intend to pick this back up later.”

“And I fully intend to hold you to that.”

I nodded and dialed Kevin’s number.

“Shane!” Wincing, I pulled the phone away from my ear and decreased the volume. There was some background noise on Kevin’s end, but not enough to justify the decibel level of his greeting. “Yo, where were you, bro?”

“In the shower. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, for starters, you called instead of sending a text message.”

“Oh! Naw, bro, everything’s cool. I’m just driving right now. Pimped my whip out with this sweet new stereo system earlier today and figured I’d test out the Bluetooth to make sure I set it up right. And I needed to talk to you, anyway.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m going to a concert with B tomorrow night, and we thought we’d invite you to join us. Should be fun, and we’ll even let you use our couch if you want to hook up with someone while you’re here.”

I chuckled as I looked at Nathan, whose boner was finally starting to subside. “Hang on a second, Kevin. I’m going to put you on speaker.” After muting the call, I told Nathan, “Kevin and B are going to a concert in Denver tomorrow night. Interested in joining them?”

“Sure, sounds like fun.”

I unmuted the call and turned on the speakerphone. “Okay, Kevin, I’m actually with Nathan right now. You’d be cool with him tagging along, right?”

“Sure, bro, that’s cool. Yo, Nathan!”

“Hey, Kevin.”

“You might have to share the couch, though.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will be a problem.” Nathan shot me a look of confusion when I winked at him. “Sorry, Kevin. Give me another second.” I muted the call again. “Kevin was just telling me that he and B would be cool with me using their couch if I wanted to hook up with someone after the concert.”

“Oh.” Nathan grinned at me. “Might as well fill him in, right?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.” After unmuting the call, I said, “Okay, I’m back.”

“So, what are you bros doing together, anyway? I thought Nathan moved back to Pittsburgh.”

“Yeah, about that...”

“Change of plans, Kevin. I’m living with Shane now.”

“In Breck? That’s cool. What made you decide to move there?”

“Well, for one thing, I figured it would be much easier to date Shane if we were both living in the same zip code.” I stifled a laugh when Nathan gave me a wink.

“You and Shane? No way, bro. You’ve got to be shitting me.”

I couldn’t hold back my laughter any longer. “Thanks, Kevin. It’s nice to know *someone* is surprised. The response from everyone else has basically been, ‘What took you so long?’”

“Wait, so this is for real?”

“Yep, this is for real.”

“Damn. For how long?”

“A little over a month now. We didn’t want to say anything at first—”

“Well, Shane didn’t. I wanted to shout it from the rooftops.”

“—because we weren’t sure it would work out—”

“Again, Shane wasn’t. There was never a doubt in my mind.”

I grinned as I shook my head at him. “—but then Mister Confident decided the best way to address my concerns about making a long-distance relationship with him work was to pack up everything—”

“Well, everything I could carry in two suitcases and a backpack, anyway.”

“—and move here so it wouldn’t have to be a long-distance relationship—”

“Go big or go home, right, Mister Olympian?”

“—so, as of a few days ago, we’ve made it official.”

“And now I can finally shout it from the rooftops.”

“Hang on, bros. I have to pull over. I’ve got something in my eye.” Nathan and I both laughed. “Seriously, though, congratulations. I definitely wasn’t expecting to hear that, but I can understand why everyone else is wondering what took you so long. And now B and I will get to see you more often, Nathan, so that’s cool.”

“I missed you, too, Kevin. Actually, that’s the real reason I moved here. Just don’t tell Shane that.”

“Your secret’s safe with me. Guess I’ll see you bros tomorrow, then?”

“Yeah, we’ll be there.”

“Cool, Shane. I’ll text you the deets later.”

“With your fingers or your toes?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Tell B we said hey.”

“You got it. Later, bros!”

“Later, Kevin,” Nathan and I said in unison.

“So, why *did* he call instead of sending a text message, anyway?”

“He wanted to test out the Bluetooth feature in his car’s new stereo system.”

“He finally upgraded it? He’s only been talking about doing that for the last year or so.”

“I know, right? He sounded like he was pretty happy with it, though.”

“Cool.”

“I see your problem has finally gone away.”

Nathan looked down at his crotch, then back up at me. “Yeah. Told you it was just a matter of time.”

He pulled his shorts off his shoulder, and I watched him put them on before turning my attention back to my phone. “Might as well call my mom now so we don’t have to worry about getting interrupted again later.”

“I like the way you think, St. Louis.”

“Have you decided what you want to eat yet?”

“Let’s just go with pizza again tonight, if that’s cool with you.”

“Sure, that’s fine. It’s the key to every good diet, right?”

“Damn straight, St. Louis. Although you wouldn’t be able to tell that just by looking at your body.”

“Or yours, Napster.” I licked my lips as I took a long look at his naked torso. “I’ll make the call. Oh, and speaking of keys...” Crossing to the other end of the room, I stopped in front of my nightstand and opened the top drawer. After finding one of the two key fobs that had been included with the Tundra, I turned and tossed it to Nathan. He caught it as I closed the drawer.

“Thanks.”

“Now we just have to get it transferred into your name and get your insurance and driver’s license updated.”

“That would sound so simple if I didn’t know it involved a trip to the DMV.”

Chuckling, I pulled him toward me for a quick kiss. “Hopefully it won’t be too bad. We’ll look into everything while we’re out shopping tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. But let’s stop talking about the DMV until then, okay? I’m pretty sure it’s another one of those surefire mood-killers we were discussing earlier.” Nathan kissed me again, then added, “Although I could probably get in the mood under any set of circumstances around you.”

He leaned in for another kiss, but I pulled away and cleared my throat. “Food, Napster, remember?”

“Right. Food.” He took a step back, twirling the key fob around his index finger. “You make the call, and I’ll go add this to my keychain. Assuming I can find my keys...”

I watched him walk into the living room, licking my lips again as I admired his backside. Once he disappeared from view, I ordered an extra-large pizza from the same place I had chosen last time, again receiving an estimated delivery time of twenty-five minutes or less. Then I contacted my mother and had a quick conversation with her before ending the call and plugging my phone into the charger on my nightstand, hoping I was done using it for the night. After putting my shirt back on, I grabbed my wallet and stuffed it in the

right pocket of my shorts. They hung loosely on my hips, and the extra weight caused them to sag a bit on the right side. It didn't feel like they were in danger of falling off, though, so I decided not to bother tying the drawstring. I only needed them to stay on long enough for me to pay for the pizza, anyway.

When I joined Nathan in the kitchen, he had just finished pouring two glasses of whiskey and two glasses of ice water. We gulped down the alcohol right away, then carried the glasses of water over to the coffee table in the living room. He followed me back to the kitchen and helped me put away the ice cream. I heard him open the refrigerator as I took the cooler out to the terrace, where the dry ice could safely finish sublimating. I had dealt with dry ice before; I knew the drill.

When I got back to the living room, Nathan was sitting on the couch, opening one of the two bottles of beer he had just added to our collection of drinks for the evening. His jeans and shirt, which had both been lying on the floor less than two minutes earlier, were now draped over one of the armrests. Admittedly, since we were expecting a guest soon, that was probably the better place for them. My old backpack—the one I had brought back from Telluride—was lying next to Nathan on the couch, still waiting to be unpacked. I unzipped it and handed the empty champagne bottle to him.

“So, what do you have in store for that?”

“Haven't decided yet.” Nathan stood and carried the bottle into the kitchen. “But I might as well go ahead and get it rinsed out, at least.”

He turned on the faucet as I pulled our dirty clothes out of the backpack. After dropping them off in the laundry room, I took the backpack to our bedroom and tossed it in the closet, causing something to rattle inside when it landed on the floor. Remembering that Nathan's toothbrush was in the front pocket, I pulled it out and left it on the sink in the adjoining bathroom.

When I returned to the living room, Nathan was back on the couch, flipping through the channels on the television. I opened the coat closet and retrieved one of my signature skate decks from the top drawer of the old dresser, which was now serving as a place to store my skateboarding supplies.

“Is it that time again?”

“Yeah. I split the last one in half the day you got here. Probably while you were in the air, actually.”

“And you're just now getting around to putting together a new one?”

I selected another one of my custom decks, this one sporting a different design on the bottom. “Well, I had already given my spare deck to a kid I’d met earlier that day, and I was kind of hungry by the time my board broke, so I just decided to call it quits for the day and head back here for lunch. And then you arrived not long after that, and I’ve kind of had other things on my mind since then.” I gave him a wink as I turned the two boards so the bottoms were facing him. The one in my right hand was a replica of one of my earliest pro snowboard designs, even featuring drawn-on bindings to complete the look. The one in my left hand was a comic book–style action dialogue bubble with my name written inside. Nathan had seen both before, along with all my other designs. “Which one?”

“You know I like both of them, but I’m feeling the snowboard deck more tonight.”

Grinning, I set the chosen deck aside on the couch. “Figured you’d pick that one.”

“What can I say? I do have a weakness for the green-and-blue color scheme. I wonder why that is.”

I shrugged as I propped the rejected deck up against the wall next to the apartment door, where I would be sure to see it the next time I headed out to my car. I still needed to replace the spare deck I had given away earlier. “Beats me.”

“Plus, I just really like the whole ‘skateboard on the top, snowboard on the bottom’ design.”

Nodding, I turned my attention back to the dresser and reached for a pack of wheels. “Yeah, I like it, too. And it’s been a while since I’ve ridden it, so good choice.” After closing the drawer, I glanced back at Nathan and added, “Predictable, but good.”

He chuckled and shook his head as I gave him another wink. “Glad to be of service, St. Louis.”

I opened the second drawer and retrieved a sheet of grip tape and a pack of bearings. “Anyway, I think I might work out and do some skating before we go shopping tomorrow.” After carrying the supplies over to the coffee table and setting them down next to the drinks, I went back to the closet to grab a razor blade from the dresser drawer. “If I wake up early enough, that is.” I closed the drawer, then picked up my other backpack—the one I normally used—and shut the closet door.

Nathan flashed me a mischievous grin as I tossed the razor blade onto the coffee table. “Guess I should make sure you’re in bed at a decent hour tonight, then.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think going to bed at a decent hour will be a problem. Going to sleep at a decent hour, on the other hand...” After leaning the backpack against the side of the coffee table, I took a seat next to Nathan and gave him a quick kiss. “I’m just going to play it by ear, though. I probably won’t even set the alarm. If I end up sleeping in, no big deal, but if I do wake up early enough, I want to have a new board ready to go.”

“You should start keeping the broken ones. Bet I could make something out of them.”

Nodding, I swallowed a mouthful of beer and put my bottle back down on the coffee table. “I’m sure you could. Consider it done.”

“Cool.”

“In fact...” After fishing my skate tool and a stack of stickers out of the front pocket of my backpack, I unzipped the main compartment and pulled out the two broken pieces of my last board. “I haven’t gotten around to removing the trucks yet, so you’re in luck.”

“Sweet.” Nathan picked up the new skate deck when I pushed it toward him to make room on the coffee table for the rest of my supplies. While inspecting it, he added, “Actually, would you mind if I used a few of these?”

“The decks?”

“Yeah.” He handed the board back to me after I finished sorting through the stickers. “And maybe some snowboards, too.”

“Of course I wouldn’t mind. You’ve seen how many boards I get each month. I think I can spare a few.”

“Cool.”

Nathan went back to channel surfing as I began the process of assembling my new board. As always, applying stickers to the bottom of the skate deck was the first step. I wasn’t sure if I would be competing or filming with this particular board—I could easily end up breaking it before the next contest or film session—but I still liked to make sure my sponsors’ logos were prominently displayed on my board at all times, even when I was just riding around town for fun. The bottom of a skateboard was visible more often than one might expect, especially when that board belonged to an experienced rider

who wasn't afraid to get airborne. Every time I executed a trick, there was a chance that an attentive spectator could catch a glimpse of the bottom of my board. If they thought that what I was doing was cool, they might just be inspired to purchase something from one of my sponsors. In most cases, I'd never know either way, and neither would the benefiting sponsor. But adding a few stickers to my setup wasn't the least bit detrimental to my skating, and it only cost me a minute or two every time I assembled a board. It was the least I could do.

"Well, don't keep me hanging, Napster. Tell me what's brewing in that incredibly creative brain of yours."

"I'm just thinking we've found our shelves for the living room, that's all."

Chuckling, I peeled one of the stickers off its backing paper and applied it to the nose end of the board. "Oh, that's all, huh?"

Nathan was lucky that someone knocked on our apartment door before I could continue. Without such an interruption, I might not have been able to resist gushing about how brilliant he was.

"You're busy. I'll get it," he said before I could get up.

I leaned to the left as I began adding another sticker to the board. "My wallet's in my right pocket."

Instead, Nathan reached for his jeans and fished his own wallet out of the back pocket. "As much as I'd enjoy feeling you up, Shane, that's not necessary. You paid for the last one. It's my turn now."

I reached for another sticker, watching as Nathan put his shirt on. "Aren't you a little overdressed? Assuming it's the same guy, he might think he's at the wrong place if you open the door looking like that." I was pretty sure the person who was waiting outside couldn't hear us, but I knew Nathan wouldn't mind either way. He hadn't even bothered to lower his voice while talking about feeling me up. He did, however, give me a playful shove before going to open the door.

It was indeed the same guy. He smiled awkwardly but managed not to stammer this time as he told Nathan the total.

"Sorry about last time, man," Nathan said as he opened his wallet.

"It's all good. Wasn't the first time I've seen... well, you know."

Nathan chuckled. "Yeah, I know." After handing over a twenty, he added, "Keep the change."

“Thanks.”

The guy handed Nathan the pizza box but couldn't quite bring himself to make eye contact during the exchange. I gave the guy a nod when he glanced at me. Then he looked down at the skateboard that was sitting in my lap, and when his eyes met mine again, I realized I, too, had just been recognized.

“So you're *that* Shane Larson?”

“Yeah.” After setting the board aside on the couch, I removed my wallet from my pocket and tossed it on the coffee table. It created an obvious bulge in my shorts, and I didn't want to give the poor guy the wrong impression about what that bulge was. It was bad enough that I was freeballing.

I joined Nathan at the door and shook the guy's hand. “And this is my boyfriend, Nathan.”

“Zack.”

Nathan transferred the pizza box to his left hand, then extended his right one. “Nice to meet you, Zack.”

Zack nodded as he released Nathan's hand. “Yeah, same here.” Turning his attention back to me, he added, “I recognized your name last time, but I didn't realize you lived here. In Breck, I mean.”

“Just moved here last week.”

“Oh. Cool. Guess I'll be seeing you both around, then.”

“If nothing else, you'll probably get sick of delivering pizzas here.”

“Nah. You tip well. Have a good night!”

“You, too, man,” Nathan and I said in unison before closing the door.

“Surprised he didn't ask for your autograph, or at least a picture.”

“Give him time. I think he's still trying to recover from our first meeting.”

“At least we were both clothed this time.”

I took a seat on the couch and started clearing some space on the coffee table for the pizza box. “What's this ‘we’ business, Napster? Don't rope me into this. You're the one who likes to flash delivery boys, not me.”

“Yep. It's right up there with my addiction to midget porn. I'm such a pervert.”

Nathan circled the coffee table and joined me on the other side of the couch. As he placed the pizza box in the center of the coffee table, I said, "On the bright side, though, at least it wasn't the first time he'd seen... well, you know."

Chuckling, Nathan opened the lid and claimed one of the slices of pizza. "Guess not. He *is* a guy, after all. A barely legal guy—"

"You hope."

"—but a guy nevertheless."

"So what you're saying is that you have no qualms about flashing guys because it's nothing they haven't seen before."

Nathan sniffled. "You get me, St. Louis. You really get me."

I laughed and shook my head as I gave him a playful shove.

"It's a real problem," he continued. "My therapist said it could only be cured by having lots and lots of sex with my boyfriend."

"Oh, really? Well, who am I to argue with a therapist's advice?"

Grinning, Nathan took a sip of beer and returned his bottle to the coffee table. "Kidding aside, I'm glad I didn't scar the poor dude for life. As far as I can tell, anyway."

"Yeah. One day, he might even be able to look you directly in the eyes."

"His face wasn't quite as red as the pizza box this time, so that's already *some* progress, at least."

"Baby steps."

"Exactly." Nathan popped a piece of crust in his mouth and reached for another slice of pizza. After swallowing, he grabbed the television remote. "So, what do you feel like watching tonight?"

"Well, you've flipped through the channels enough times that I think it's safe to say there's nothing on right now that's worth watching."

"Basically, yeah."

"Netflix to the rescue, then."

Chuckling, Nathan pushed a button on the remote, switching the television to the integrated Netflix interface. "I feel like I should be singing the old-school *Batman* theme song while browsing Netflix now. Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-Netflix!"

I got up and headed into the kitchen to grab a few paper towels. “My parents would cringe if they heard you refer to it as ‘the old-school *Batman* theme song.’”

“Too soon?”

“No, it’s definitely old-school at this point. They’d just hate to admit that.”

“Because it would make them feel old?”

“Nah. Because, to them, that’s still the definitive version of Batman.”

“They’re not fans of Nolan’s version?”

I shook my head as I rejoined Nathan on the couch. “Too serious.” After handing him one of the paper towels, I tossed the rest on the coffee table. “Not enough camp.”

“I like how you refrained from making the obvious ‘Why so serious?’ joke there. But yeah, that makes sense. I can see your parents being fans of campy stuff.”

“They’ve actually seen Bette Midler in concert. Willingly. More than once.”

“This is where I’m supposed to perpetuate stereotypes by asking if you’re sure they’re really straight, right?”

“Heh. That same stereotype would suggest that we’re not really gay because we don’t like Bette Midler.”

“Which is why stereotypes are lame.”

“And this after-school-special message was brought to you by...”

Nathan gave me a playful shove before reaching for his bottle of beer. After draining the last of its contents, he set it aside on the coffee table and nodded toward the television. “See anything you’re interested in watching yet?”

“Let’s pick something we’ve already seen before. I have a feeling we won’t pay much attention to it, anyway.” As Nathan browsed through the available movies, one caught my eye. “How about *Kill Bill*? We can start with the first one and move on to the second afterward, if we actually make it that far.”

“Works for me.”

Nathan started the movie, then carried his empty beer bottle into the kitchen and tossed it in the trashcan. He returned a few seconds later with two new bottles of beer. I finished off my first one and handed it to him in exchange for both of his, opening them while he was disposing of mine.

We watched the first few minutes of the film in silence while we finished eating. Then I took the last two slices of pizza to the kitchen, transferred them to a plate, and stuck them in the refrigerator. After returning to the couch, I grabbed my skate deck and resumed the task of applying stickers to the bottom of it.

“So, how’s the skating around here?”

“It’s certainly not the best place in the world for skating, but it’s okay. You know I’ll skate just about anything.”

“Right up to the moment the cops arrive to kick you out.”

Grinning, I smoothed out the last sticker and flipped the board over. “Exactly.”

Every street skater eventually found themselves in conflict with the police. I had never been arrested, but I had, on more than one occasion, been politely—or, in some cases, not-so-politely—asked to leave a spot. Some businesses were cool with skaters grinding their rails or jumping over their benches, but others weren’t particularly happy about it. Sometimes, guards were even installed on otherwise-ideal skate surfaces, such as handrails, to prevent skaters from being able to use them. Encountering that sort of deterrent was always annoying, but I couldn’t blame business owners for resorting to such tactics. To be fair, skating *could* cause damage to certain surfaces. Grinding across a painted rail, for instance, could chip the paint away over time, and the impact of a human body landing on that rail over and over again could eventually create a bend or even a break in it. Even business owners who weren’t concerned about property damages might be worried about liability issues, since skating could be dangerous at times. I was always respectful when a business owner asked me to skate elsewhere. The ones I respected the most, though, were the ones who asked me themselves instead of getting the cops involved. Unfortunately, many preferred to avoid confrontation, so street skaters usually learned how to deal with law enforcement pretty quickly.

I grabbed the sheet of grip tape and peeled off the backing paper. “There’s actually an outdoor skatepark in town, but it’s being renovated right now. I think it’s going to be more of a bowl than a street course when it’s finished, but it’s something, at least.” Unlike street skating, bowl skating relied less on urban obstacles and more on deep concrete bowls designed specifically for skating. Essentially, skating a bowl was like skating inside a big, empty, curved inground swimming pool. I preferred street skating, but bowl skating was fun in its own way.

“Just means your indoor skatepark will be filling a gap when it opens, in more ways than one. It won’t just be the only indoor skatepark around here; it will also be the only street skatepark around here.”

“Yeah.” Centering the grip tape over the top of the skate deck, I lowered it onto the board, then pressed down in the middle with both hands and started working my way outward. “You know, when it’s ready, my skatepark is going to need some artwork. You interested?”

“Seriously?”

Chuckling, I placed the backing paper over the gritty surface of the grip tape. There were a couple air bubbles that needed to be smoothed out, and it was much easier to do that with a layer of protection keeping my palms from being cut up. “Yes, seriously. I can’t think of anyone better for the job.” As I rubbed my hands over the paper, I added, “And it *would* be a job, of course. My sponsors will see to it that you get paid for doing the work.”

“For you, I’d do it for free.”

“I know you would, and I appreciate that, but I wouldn’t want you to. Any other artist I brought in would get paid a nice chunk of change for their time and talent. You shouldn’t be expected to do the work for free just because you’re my boyfriend.” I tossed the backing paper aside and reached for my skate tool, a T-shaped all-in-one instrument that included almost everything I needed to put together a skateboard. At each of the three end points of the T was a socket to handle one of the three different sizes of nuts used in skateboard components: half inch, nine-sixteenths inch, and three-eighths inch. Tucked inside the T was a removable, L-shaped tool, with a Phillips screwdriver on the longer end and an Allen key on the shorter end. Across the top junction of the T was a file, which I was now rubbing against the outer edges of the board to create an outline in the grip tape. “It’d be a big job, though. If I manage to find the kind of space I want for the skatepark, you’ll have a lot of real estate to cover.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, St. Louis. I’ll start complaining about canvases being too big right around the same time you start complaining about jumps being too big.”

“So never, then.”

“Exactly.”

I dropped the skate tool on the coffee table and reached for the razor blade. “Does that mean you’ll do it?”

“Hell yeah, I’ll do it.”

“Sweet.” After cutting a notch in the grip tape, I started dragging the razor blade along the outline. “What about the nightclub?”

“What about it?”

“It’ll need artwork, too. And a logo, once I figure out what to call it.”

“Damn, St. Louis. Trying to turn me into a legitimate artist or something?”

“You already are a legitimate artist, Nathan. I just want the rest of the world to know that.”

I tossed the razor blade onto the coffee table, then separated the excess grip tape from the board and folded the corners together, creating a piece of makeshift sandpaper. Nathan gulped down some of his beer as I began sanding down the edges of the grip tape left on the board, ensuring that it wouldn’t start peeling away later.

“Do you have a pen in your backpack?”

“Yeah.” After setting aside the excess grip tape, I fished a pen out of the front pocket of my backpack and handed it to Nathan.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Nathan reached for one of the pieces of backing paper I had tossed aside. Meanwhile, I flipped the board over and poked the Phillips screwdriver through the holes the grip tape had hidden on the other side. Then, with the help of the skate tool, I removed the trucks from the broken board and transferred them to the new one. Trucks—the front and rear axle assemblies that held the wheels in place and allowed a skater to turn the board—had a fairly decent shelf life and were a bitch to break in. They were, therefore, typically the only parts I recycled when changing to a new board.

Once the trucks were tightly attached to the board, I started pushing the new bearings into the new wheels. One bearing was needed on each side of a wheel to enable it to spin on its axle. Once they were all in place, I added the wheels to the trucks and used the skate tool to tighten the nuts that held them on.

I stuck the skate tool back in my backpack and propped my new skateboard up against the side of it. Then I took my small pile of trash—the excess grip tape, the backing papers, the old wheels and bearings, and the packaging for the new ones—into the kitchen and tossed it all in the trashcan. Rejoining Nathan on the couch, I grabbed my bottle of beer, leaned back, and propped my feet up

on the coffee table, ready to finally start paying attention to Quentin Tarantino's revenge film.

"Corkscrew."

I glanced over at Nathan. "What?"

"You could call your nightclub Corkscrew." Nathan handed me the piece of backing paper he had grabbed earlier. He had drawn a corkscrew on it, with a snowboard and a pair of skis trapped inside the helix. "And that could be your logo."

I smiled as I considered the idea. Corkscrews were an invaluable part of any nightclub that served alcohol, and mine would be that kind of nightclub. And the double and triple corks that were now common in snowboarding and skiing had been named for the off-axis, corkscrew-like rotations riders had to execute when performing them. With Breckenridge being a mountain town, both references would likely be immediately obvious to most, if not all, of its residents and tourists.

Looking up from the paper, I turned to face Nathan. "Okay, I tried to resist earlier, when you were talking about making shelves out of my boards, but I can't hold back any longer. You're fucking brilliant, Nathan. And I know you hate hearing people gush about you just as much as I hate hearing people gush about me, but as your boyfriend, I think I should be entitled to do so at least once a week."

"As long as I get to gush about your talents just as much."

"That's only fair. Deal."

I leaned forward and gave Nathan a kiss.

"So, you like it, then?"

"*Like* it? Nathan, it's genius. It's absolutely perfect."

"That makes three times."

"Yeah, well, the rules aren't set in stone yet." After kissing him again, I shook my head and chuckled. "How do you come up with these things?"

Nathan shrugged. "Same way you come up with lines and tricks no one else is thinking of, I guess."

Nodding, I set the drawing aside on the coffee table and reached for my bottle of beer. "So, a giant rabbit named Frank comes to you in visions and gives you the ideas, then."

Nathan narrowed his eyebrows as he looked at me. “*Donnie Darko*?”

I drained the bottle and nodded again. “*Donnie Darko*.”

“We should watch that together sometime.”

“Sure. Maybe we’ll even pay attention to it.”

“Probably not. We usually only manage to pay attention to things we’ve never seen before.”

“True.”

After finishing off his own bottle of beer, Nathan asked, “Done gushing for the night, or should I get some more alcohol?”

I laughed and kissed him again. “I think I’m done for now. Wouldn’t want to drive you to the bottle with this deal of ours, so I’ll try to keep the gushing in check. Let’s just watch the movie.”

“Works for me.”

To my credit, I actually managed to focus on the movie for about five minutes before stealing another kiss from Nathan, this time pushing him into a horizontal position in the process. I straddled his waist and started grinding against him as we continued kissing.

He pulled away from my lips and kissed my neck. “Thought we were supposed to be watching the movie, St. Louis.”

“Never said how much we had to watch, Napster. But if you’d prefer—”

He shut me up with another kiss, clawing at my shirt until I sat up and removed it, as well as his own shirt. I tossed them both on the floor, soon piling the rest of our clothes on top of them. Feeling his hard cock pressing against mine, I wrapped my right hand around both and started playing with them while propping myself up with my left hand. I kissed his lips and neck as I continued stroking our cocks, coating them with our combined precum. Nathan ran his fingers over my spine and through my hair, his occasional moans making it easy for me to ignore the less-than-sexy background noise being projected from the television speakers.

“I’m getting close,” Nathan eventually whispered in my ear.

“Me, too.”

Gripping the armrest tightly, I stared into his eyes while stroking our cocks faster, sending us both over the edge at the same time. He shuddered as I

continued rubbing our sensitive cocks together until our orgasms subsided. After letting go of them, I licked our cum off his stomach and kissed him while it was still on my tongue, giving him a taste of it.

“Fuck, Shane, that was hot. Not sure if I should be concerned about how easy it was for you to get turned on during a violent movie, though.”

“It’s not my fault you’re irresistible, Napster.”

I gave him another kiss as I stroked our still-hard cocks again, causing him to moan.

“If you’re still planning to get up early tomorrow, we should probably go to bed now and finish the movie some other time.”

“Eh, we’re already past the halfway point now. Can’t hurt to go ahead and watch the rest. Besides, I don’t know about you, but for me, falling asleep with a raging boner is easier said than done. I’m going to need to give it some time to go down first.”

Nathan reached for the remote and turned off the television. “Never said we’d be going to sleep anytime soon, St. Louis.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The following Wednesday, I was doing some push-ups in the living room when I caught a glimpse of two bare feet in my peripheral vision. Dropping to my knees, I sat up and removed my earbuds as I turned my head toward Nathan. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“How long have you been standing there?”

Nathan glanced down at his crotch, then focused on me again and licked his lips as he rubbed a hand over the bulge in his green bikini briefs, the only article of clothing he was wearing. A dark spot was visible near the head of his rock-hard cock, where some of his precum had soaked through the fabric. “Long enough, as you can see.”

Chuckling, I stood and reached for my glass of water. “That’s probably just morning wood.”

“Nope, this is all your doing, St. Louis.”

“So, watching me work out turns you on, huh? Good to know if I ever want to get you in the mood, all I have to do is drop and give you twenty.”

“Shane, if you ever want to get me in the mood, all you have to do is look at me.”

“Even easier.”

“The fact that you’re half-naked and sweaty right now is just a bonus.” Nathan took a couple steps forward and rubbed a hand across my abs as he gave me a kiss. “And, of course, looking damn good, as always.”

“You’re looking pretty hot yourself, Nathan. As always.”

My phone rang as we continued kissing, our bodies pressed together. I tried to ignore it, but then Nathan’s phone started ringing shortly after mine stopped.

Groaning, Nathan pulled away from me and turned his head toward our bedroom, where the sound was coming from. “That can’t be good.”

I fished my phone out of the right pocket of my basketball shorts. “Actually, it might be. The clinic’s trying to reach us.” After listening to the voicemail message, I added, “Our test results are in.”

“Cool. Guess we know how we’ll be spending our afternoon.”

“Yeah, but I need to take a shower first. And I guess you do, too, now that I’ve gotten my sweat all over you.”

“It’s not the first time, St. Louis. And, trust me, it won’t be the last, either.”

“Again, good to know. Want to join me?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

We fooled around a bit in the shower but ended with a blast of cold water instead of blasts of cum, teasing ourselves in anticipation of what we both knew would be happening when we got back from the clinic. Too late, we realized that we could have skipped the chilling-ourselves-to-the-bone step. It served its purpose, but only temporarily. We couldn’t resist torturing ourselves further after stepping out of the shower, drying each other off and then watching each other get dressed. By the time we were ready to leave, we were right back at square one again. Worse, actually, because now our boners were trapped inside restrictive pairs of bikini briefs and jeans.

I adjusted myself as I followed Nathan out of the bedroom, trying not to think about how hot he looked in the clothes he had chosen to wear. I needed more than a cold shower right now; I needed one of the ice baths I sometimes had to endure after particularly grueling snowboarding sessions. “Oh, by the way...”

Nathan stopped in the middle of the living room and turned to look at me, but I didn’t bother to finish the sentence as I passed him and headed into the kitchen, noticing that he was in no better shape than I was. Even his nipples were hard.

“Yeah?”

Remaining silent, I picked up an envelope that was lying on the kitchen counter, then handed it to him before reaching for a glass from the dish rack. Even if this didn’t distract us to the point of allowing our boners to subside, at least it would put a smile on his face.

“Sweet!”

Grinning, I opened the freezer and grabbed some ice. “Thought you might be happy to see that.”

Nathan ripped open the envelope. “My first piece of mail at my new home. I’ve never been happier about receiving a bill in my life.”

We had gotten a lot accomplished the previous Friday. Nathan had obtained a temporary, paper version of his Colorado driver's license, and he would hopefully be receiving his permanent one in the mail within the next week or so. He had registered to vote in Colorado's upcoming general election. He had updated his contact information at the Breckenridge branches of his bank, phone carrier, and insurance company. The latter had also been informed of his new vehicle, the ownership of which had been transferred into his name. And he had filled out a Change of Address form at the post office, resulting in the forwarded phone bill that had just been delivered to our apartment today. I understood—and shared—his excitement. There was nothing left to do. He was now officially a resident of Breckenridge, Colorado. Even our apartment was, in fact, *our* apartment; his name had been added to the lease on Friday. Our landlord hadn't even asked for more rent, although he had, at my insistence, at least accepted a signed snowboard as thanks for being cool about everything.

All that, and we had still found time to do some shopping before heading to Denver to meet up with Kevin and B for the concert. As Fridays went, it had been a pretty productive one.

“The first of many, Nathan.”

I gulped down some of the ice water, then offered the rest to him.

“Thanks. I'll drink to that.”

I groaned as I walked into the living room. “I set you up perfectly for that one, didn't I?”

“You really did, St. Louis. I had to take it.”

After grabbing my keys, I checked my phone and noticed that my number of unread Twitter mentions had stabilized a bit since the previous night. I was still receiving a lot, but no more than I had grown to expect on an average summer day, when I wasn't competing or otherwise garnering extra attention. “Looks like the Team Sate stuff has finally died down. For now, at least.”

During the concert, someone had snapped a picture of me kissing Nathan, which they had then posted on Twitter, along with the caption “Who's Shane's mystery man?” It hadn't taken long for one of my fans to recognize Nathan as a University of Denver alumnus I had often hung out with during my time there. A quick check of his Twitter account had revealed his recent “#NBH” tweet, and when people had started realizing it had been sent just hours after mine, they had quickly put two and two together, speculating that we had been tweeting about each other. By the end of the weekend, “#TeamSate” had

become a trending topic, the picture had been featured on sites like *TMZ* and *People*, and Nathan had gained more than thirty thousand new followers. Unsurprisingly, he had taken it all in stride, even encouraging me to go ahead and confirm everyone's suspicions about the nature of our relationship. On Monday, I had tweeted out a close-up of my hand resting on top of Nathan's, and he had tweeted out one with his hand resting on top of mine. In both pictures, our fingers were entwined, and the letters N, B, and H were painted in the three dips between the knuckles of the hand on top. We hadn't said anything else; that had been enough. Nathan, of course, was the one who had thought of the idea. I had wanted to do tongue-in-cheek "go ahead—be jealous" tweets, but we had both been concerned that the inside joke might come across as smug instead of funny. All things considered, my fans had been pretty respectful of Nathan, and I hadn't wanted to give them any reason to break out the pitchforks.

"I'm still not convinced my mom didn't start that whole thing."

I knew Nathan was kidding, but Jeannie *was* the one who had alerted us that our kiss had become a hot topic on social media. Thankfully, she and Robert hadn't minded the sudden invasion of their son's privacy. They had already prepared themselves for that eventuality, knowing Nathan would never want to hide his relationship with me. As Robert had put it, "He's out of the closet for a reason, after all." He and Jeannie had both assured me that if Nathan was okay with it, they were, too. "Besides," Jeannie had pointed out, "I was Team Sate before even you two were Team Sate."

"Well, we know it wasn't *my* mom. Unless she got someone to help her figure out how to send tweets."

Nathan joined me in the living room as I stuffed my phone in the right pocket of my jeans. "Maybe they were in on it together."

"Interesting theory. My mom could have taken the picture, and your mom could have made it go viral. But we still need a motive."

"Well, clearly, they're planning to cash in on this with a book deal and a Hollywood script."

"Sounds like as good a reason as any."

"Granted, it makes them both sound creepy as fuck, but maybe they'll use some of the money to get themselves the help they need."

"We can only hope."

Chuckling, Nathan gave me a quick kiss. “Seriously, though, whoever’s responsible, I’m grateful to them. It’ll be easier to blackmail you into letting me stick around now that you know any embarrassing pictures of you I threaten to tweet out will actually be seen by more than a handful of people.”

“Good point.” Sighing, I added, “Shit. Guess I really am stuck with you for good now, Napster.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Honestly, I can’t think of a better—I mean, worse—fate.”

Nathan smiled and gave me another kiss. “Ready?”

“Whenever you are.”

“Good, because the sooner we leave, the sooner we can get back here and pick up where we left off earlier.”

Nathan pushed me up against the apartment door as it slammed shut. “Finally,” he whispered in my ear, grinding into me while kissing the side of my neck.

“Yeah,” I whispered back, chuckling as I wrapped my arms around his waist and grabbed his ass through his jeans. “Finally.”

“Remind me again why we decided to eat before coming back here?”

“So we wouldn’t have to worry about it later.”

“And because we’re gluttons for punishment, right? I mean, we must be. We could have been on round two by now—”

“At least.”

“—if we had just come straight back here after leaving the clinic.”

I lifted Nathan’s shirt above his head and tossed it across the room. “The food was good, though, right?”

“I guess.” Nathan unbuttoned my jeans and pushed them and my bikini briefs down to my ankles as he added, “Honestly, I had other things on my mind the whole time.”

“Funny. So did I.”

Dropping to his knees, Nathan took my rock-hard cock in his mouth, all the way to the base. I kicked off my shoes and stepped out of my pants and

underwear as he massaged my shaft with his tongue, making me moan. After letting him blow me for a few minutes, I put a hand under his chin, coaxing him upward so I could make out with him.

Eventually, he pulled away and locked eyes with me. “Bedroom. Now.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

“You’d better be.”

Nathan gave me one more kiss, then turned and headed toward the bedroom while unbuttoning his jeans. I stripped my shirt off and let it fall to the floor as I stepped into the kitchen. After grabbing a bottle of champagne we had splurged on the previous week, I joined Nathan in the bedroom. He was sprawled out on the bed, naked and rock hard.

“Champagne?”

I shrugged as I approached him. “Can’t think of a better reason to crack it open.”

“Neither can I, now that you mention it.”

I removed the cork and tossed it on my nightstand, then held the bottle over Nathan’s chest as some suds spilled out, dripping onto him. After licking my way up his wet torso, I gave him a kiss.

“Yum,” Nathan said, sitting up as he licked his lips.

“Yeah. Yum.” I gave him another kiss before adding, “And the champagne’s not bad, either.”

Nathan chuckled and gave me a playful shove. “You forgot the glasses, St. Louis.”

“It’s more fun this way.”

I poured some champagne in Nathan’s mouth, then handed him the bottle so he could do the same to me.

“Can’t argue with you there.” After we each gulped down another mouthful of champagne, Nathan set the bottle aside on my nightstand as he added, “But I’m more interested in a different kind of fun right now.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me into his arms, then pushed me onto my back and climbed on top of me, straddling my waist. I rubbed our cocks together while he began kissing my lips and neck, both of us leaking precum. Glancing over at my nightstand, I reached for the bottle of lube with my free hand, being careful not to knock

over the bottle of champagne in the process. Then, without thinking, I started to open the top drawer, stopping before pulling it out far enough to stick a finger inside. More precum oozed out of my cock as I reminded myself that I wouldn't be needing a condom this time.

I wrapped my arms around Nathan's waist and rolled him onto his back, then sat up and started applying some lube to my cock and his ass, opting not to bother rimming him because we were both too excited to wait any longer. I desperately wanted barebacking to be the thing that magically made anal sex enjoyable for me, but regardless of whether it turned out to be the solution to my problem, I was still looking forward to the experience, and I knew Nathan was, too. Perhaps it was wrong of me to be romanticizing the idea of unprotected sex, given the fact that many people viewed me as a role model, particularly for young gay men. That wasn't a responsibility I took lightly, after all. But I was an adult in a committed, monogamous relationship, privately making an informed decision to start barebacking with the man I loved, knowing that we were both free of all STDs. I didn't think I had anything to feel guilty about. It wasn't like I was going to be tweeting about this later, encouraging everyone else to give barebacking a try.

Tossing the bottle of lube aside, I leaned forward and kissed Nathan, then pulled away and made eye contact with him. "Ready?"

"Been ready all day, St. Louis."

After giving him another kiss, I sat up and pressed the tip of my cock against his hole. As I slowly eased forward, he wrapped his legs around my waist and grasped my arms, goose bumps already forming on his skin. I ran my fingers through his hair, gazing into his eyes as the last inch of my shaft disappeared inside him.

"Fuck..." Nathan pulled his legs back toward his chest, allowing me to go even deeper. I leaned forward to kiss him again, giving him some time to adjust to my cock. I didn't have to wait very long before he whispered in my ear, "Fuck me, Shane."

I started thrusting into him, experiencing the sensation of skin-on-skin anal sex for the first time. It definitely felt better than fucking him with a condom, and I was more turned on than I had been during any of the other times I had fucked him, not just because of the "forbidden" aspect of what we were doing but also because I knew it was something neither of us had ever done—or even considered doing—with anyone else. It hammered home the point that Nathan was the guy I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. No one else would do.

But I knew, almost immediately, that barebacking wasn't going to change anything for me, at least not as a top. Sure, it would always feel better than wearing a condom. And, as a symbol of how much Nathan and I trusted each other, it would always mean something to me. But I would get used to the sensation soon enough—I was *already* getting used to it, in fact—and then I would be right back at square one, just going through the motions.

Maybe bottoming will be better.

Nathan gripped the headboard tightly, moaning as I continued fucking him. I bent down and gave him a kiss, then licked his exposed armpits and grazed my teeth across his hard nipples, smiling as I watched him shiver with pleasure. If nothing else, I did love getting him off. *That* would never get old.

Moving a hand down to my ass, Nathan dug his fingers into my skin and breathlessly whispered, “Harder.”

I gave him one last kiss before pulling away and grabbing his hips, increasing speed as we locked eyes with each other. Soon, I felt his ass muscles clenching around my shaft. Knowing he was right on the edge, I started fucking him even harder.

“Fuck, Shane...”

He gasped and arched his back, enjoying another hands-free orgasm. Cum was still dripping out of his cock when I began shooting my own load. He grabbed the back of my head and pulled me toward him, holding me in his arms and kissing my neck while I shuddered and moaned, filling his ass with my cum and appreciating the new sensation it created. Finally, I stopped moving, leaving my cock buried deep inside him as we continued making out, our breathing slowly returning to normal.

“Fuck,” Nathan finally whispered, staring into my eyes as he wiped away a bead of sweat that was trickling down my cheek. “I don’t know how you manage to keep making me come without touching myself, but it always feels so fucking good.”

I can tell.

“Ready to see how it feels to come in my ass?”

“Not yet. I just want to stay like this for a bit first, if that’s okay with you.”

I smiled as I stroked his cheek with my thumb. “Sure. Whatever you want, Nathan.”

I settled on top of him, resting my head on his chest. My cock was still hard, and I thrust my hips into him occasionally, without even really meaning to.

“Keep going,” Nathan eventually whispered in my ear.

I did, but at a much slower pace than usual. We were both in that blissful post-orgasmic state where we were simultaneously ready for a nap and ready for round two, so I chose something in the middle, sleepily rocking back and forth as I held him in my arms.

“Fuck, you’ve got me dripping again. Ready for me to fuck you?”

I locked eyes with him, feeling his cock flex against my stomach. Reaching for the bottle of lube, I nodded and whispered, “Ready, Napster.”

After applying some lube to his cock and my ass, I slipped out of him, wiped myself off on the sheet, and straddled his waist, leaning forward to kiss him as he entered me.

“Fuck...” Nathan bent his knees and grabbed my hips while lifting his ass off the bed, slowly filling me with every inch of his cock as my own quickly softened. “Feels so good,” he whispered, pulling most of his shaft back out of my hole. As he started to fuck up into me again, I pinched one of his hard nipples and grazed the side of his neck with my teeth. “Fuck, Shane, you’re going to...”

That was all he managed to choke out before I felt his cum in my ass for the first time. He shuddered and moaned as he continued shooting his load, goose bumps appearing on his flesh again. He looked a bit shocked, like he couldn’t believe he had gotten off that quickly, but it didn’t seem particularly odd to me. I just wished I could find anal sex even half as pleasurable as he did, and not just for my own sake.

“That was so fucking hot, Nathan.” I meant that; seeing him get that overcome with pleasure that quickly *had* been hot, not to mention flattering. But, more importantly, I wanted to throw that out there right away, to reassure him in case he was feeling embarrassed about coming earlier than expected. I knew I would be if I were in his shoes.

“*You’re* so fucking hot, Shane. Fuck, you’re turning me into a one-pump chump here.”

“I definitely felt more than one pump, Napster. And don’t you dare call my boyfriend a chump, ever again.”

He laughed and playfully shoved me back a bit, his cock still inside me.

“Sorry, St. Louis. My bad.” He pulled me toward him again and gave me a kiss. “Seriously, though, I’ve never come that quickly before, Shane. I don’t know what you’re doing to my sexual prowess. I can’t even control myself anymore.”

At least you can stay hard.

“Your sexual prowess seems just fine to me, Nathan. In case you haven’t noticed, you’re still rock hard.”

Nathan glanced down at the base of his cock, barely visible beneath my ass. “Oh. Right.”

“And now you have some extra lube in my ass, so you probably shouldn’t let it or your boner go to waste.”

Grinning, Nathan gave me another kiss, then wrapped his arms around my waist and rolled me onto my back, staying inside me as we settled in our new positions. He played with my limp cock and massaged my chest while thrusting into me, his eyes locked on mine the whole time. I hoped I didn’t look disappointed. Aside from the fact that it *felt* better, bottoming without a condom was doing nothing more for me than bottoming with a condom ever had.

After a few minutes, Nathan straddled my left leg and pushed my right one to the left, turning me onto my side. He fucked me like that for a bit, then continued rolling me over until I was on my stomach. He kept thrusting into me, and when I looked back at him, he pulled me up to my knees and gave me a kiss. Then he spread my ass cheeks as he began fucking me doggie style.

“Fuck, Shane...”

I could tell he was getting close, even before he increased his speed.

“I love your ass.”

I know. That’s the problem.

He reached for my cock with one hand while wrapping his other hand around my neck, pulling me toward him for another kiss. I stayed upright, my back pressed against his sweaty chest, and locked eyes with him, putting a hand on the back of his head and grabbing a fistful of his hair as he continued fucking me.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Nathan.”

I kissed him again, and he bit my lower lip just before I felt his cock getting harder in my ass, filling me with another one of his loads. Moaning, he pushed

me against the mattress and collapsed on top of me, holding me in his arms as his thrusts gradually slowed to a stop. I intertwined my fingers with his, and he began kissing my neck between gasps for breath.

He slipped his cock out of my ass when it started softening, and I rolled onto my back as he wiped himself off on the sheet. Then he gave me a kiss and settled next to me on the bed, resting his head against my chest. “I love you, Shane,” he whispered while I ran my fingers through his hair. “I’ve never felt closer to anyone in my life.”

I closed my eyes, grateful that Nathan hadn’t said that to my face. I might not have been able to hide my guilt if he had. With his cum in my ass and mine in his, it was true that I had never *been* closer to anyone in my life. But I still *felt* just as far away from Nathan as I always did when we had anal sex. How could I not, knowing I was keeping something major from him? I had hoped to tell him the truth, one way or another, after we tried barebacking for the first time. But now that we had, I just couldn’t bring myself to say the words. If anything, he loved topping and bottoming for me bareback even more than he loved topping and bottoming for me with condoms. I couldn’t take that away from him; not yet. There had to be other things I could try first. Surely there was *some* way for me to flip that mythical switch that would suddenly get me into anal sex just as much as he was. I just had to find it.

The only problem was that I had no fucking clue where to look next.

“I love you, too, Nathan. So much.”

Great. Now what?

I lasted another week. It was a great week, filled with plenty of hot sex. Sex in the kitchen. Sex in the hot tub. Sex in the laundry room during the spin cycle. Sex in the shower. Sex in the hallway up against the wall. Sex in every position I could think of. Nothing ever changed, though. I couldn’t get enough of Nathan, and I loved being with him, but no matter how hard I tried, or how desperately I wanted to, I just couldn’t seem to get into *that* part of our sex life. All I was managing to do was make myself feel even more like shit with each passing day. I had never outright lied to Nathan about liking anal sex, but my silence on the issue was implying that I did, and I couldn’t stand misleading him like that. It was killing me not to open up to him about the whole thing, especially since he was the one I always opened up to about *everything*. And I had never felt more like shit than I did when, exactly seven days after our first

barebacking experience, he slipped out of my ass, rolled onto his back, and breathlessly declared, “Sex with you just keeps getting better and better, Shane.” So I made a decision. *I can’t do this anymore.*

“That’s okay,” Nathan said, releasing my limp cock from his hand just seconds after he had started playing with it. “You have so much stamina; I sometimes forget that you’re only human. Round four can wait.”

Shit. Either he was learning how to read my mind, or I had actually blurted the words out instead of just thinking them.

“No, Nathan.” I closed my eyes, already wanting this conversation to be over. “I mean I can’t do *this* anymore.”

Nathan sat up and turned my head, forcing me to make eye contact with him. The look of concern on his face just made me feel even worse. “What are you trying to tell me here, Shane?”

I took a deep breath, struggling to find the words. I had rehearsed this scene in my head hundreds of times since our first night together, and now I couldn’t remember the first thing about how it was supposed to go. “*This*. What we just did.”

I hadn’t realized Nathan had been holding his breath until he exhaled, his facial muscles relaxing as the color returned to his cheeks. “Had me scared for a second there, St. Louis.” Laughing, he shook his head and wiped some sweat off his brow with the back of his hand.

“*St. Louis*? Really?” It wasn’t his fault, but I was starting to get a bit annoyed. I was naked, covered in cum and sweat, and barely making any sense, and he was laughing and calling me St. Louis, like I hadn’t just changed—and possibly ruined—everything between us. The one thing I *could* remember about my rehearsals was that none of them had gone like this. “I’m being serious here, *Napster*.”

Nodding, Nathan stopped laughing and focused on me again. “I know. Sorry. It’s just that when you said you couldn’t do *this* anymore, I was afraid you meant *us*. Like you were about to break up with me, or ask me to move out, or something.”

“What? No!” I gave him a kiss, then pressed my nose against his as I stared into his eyes. “Nathan, I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. That hasn’t changed. That will *never* change.”

“NBH?”

“NBH.”

Nathan smiled and nodded. “Glad to hear it, Shane.” He kissed me before adding, “I feel the same way. And don’t worry. I’m fine with being the bottom in this relationship.”

Great. As if I didn’t already feel bad enough.

I pulled away from him, sighing as I shook my head. “No, Nathan, that’s not what I meant, either. I was talking about...” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then forced myself to look at him again. “Look, I’ve been lying to you, okay? *That’s* what I can’t keep doing. The truth is, I’ve never really been into anal sex. As a bottom *or* as a top.”

“Oh. Okay, then we won’t have anal sex anymore.” He looked me straight in the eyes and even shrugged as the words flowed out of his mouth, without any hesitation whatsoever. It was the best reaction I could have possibly hoped for—and the one I had dreaded the most. My biggest fear hadn’t been that he would leave me after learning the truth; it had been that he wouldn’t. More than anything else, I was worried that he would be a perfect gentleman about the whole thing, putting my preferences above his own without ever voicing a single complaint, and the sacrifice he had made for me would slowly begin to eat away at our relationship until one day, without even knowing when the resentment had started to build, he would realize that it was there—and it was never going to go away. That wouldn’t just ruin our relationship, it would ruin our friendship as well, and I couldn’t bear the thought of that.

“No. We don’t have to stop.”

“Shane, if you’re not into anal sex, then I’m not going to make you keep doing it. I don’t want our sex life to become a grin-and-bear-it thing for you. It needs to be enjoyable for both of us, not just me.”

“It’s not like it’s a chore, Nathan. Or like you’re hurting me or whatever. It’s just not my favorite kind of sex. I know you think I have incredible stamina, but the truth is that it just takes me a while to get off when I’m fucking you because anal sex just doesn’t do that much for me. And that has *nothing* to do with you, okay? It’s just how it has always been for me. I don’t know why. I’m just not wired for it, I guess. I wish I were.” *You have no idea how much I wish I were.*

“But you like everything else, right?”

“Are you kidding? Nathan, I *love* everything else.”

“Even rimming? And fingering?”

“Even rimming and fingering. Being with you is amazing, Nathan. *You’re* amazing. It’s just... I don’t know. I can’t really explain it, because I don’t even understand it myself. It’s not like I have any hang-ups about any of that stuff. But you’ve seen how my body reacts when you’re topping me. You can have me rock hard and dripping when you’re eating my ass and fingering me, but as soon as you start fucking me, I lose my boner.”

“I told you before, Shane: I don’t care about that.”

“I know. And if this were just about my inability to stay hard while you’re fucking me, I wouldn’t even be bringing it up. But it’s more than that. I can stay hard when I’m fucking you, but I’m still just going through the motions. It doesn’t really turn me on. *You* turn me on; you turn me on so fucking much. But anal sex doesn’t. I keep trying all these different things in an effort to somehow get over whatever it is that’s keeping me from truly enjoying it, but nothing’s working. And I can’t keep lying to you and letting you believe I feel the same way you do about anal sex. It’s bad enough that I’ve been lying to you about it for this long.”

“Would you stop saying that? You’ve never lied to me. About this or anything else.”

“Nathan, I just told you—”

“I know what you said, Shane. I heard all of it. Did *you*, though? I mean, at worst, you essentially just told me you’ve been struggling with something but kept it to yourself for a couple weeks *so we could keep having sex*. And, what, you expect me to be upset about that? Like any guy would be. Especially the guy who is hopelessly in love with you.”

“I still kept something from you, Nathan.”

“Don’t give me that ‘lie by omission’ bullshit, Shane. And don’t think I’m just letting you off the hook because I don’t want to believe you lied to me. Answer me this: did you feel like I had been lying to you when you found out I had been planning a surprise party to celebrate your win at the Olympics? Or when you found out I had been planning to move here?”

“Of course not, but that’s—”

“Different? How, exactly?”

“Telling me those things would have ruined the surprise.”

“And telling me you’re not into anal sex would have ruined your efforts to find a way to change that. Something I’m guessing you were doing for my sake more than your own. And for the record, this isn’t exactly a total surprise to me. Maybe you’re forgetting just how well I know you, but I could tell something had been bothering you lately. I figured maybe you were just embarrassed about not being able to stay hard while bottoming, but I never doubted that, whatever it was, you’d open up to me about it eventually. And that’s exactly what you did. You told me when you were ready to tell me, just like I told you my secrets when I was ready to tell you. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s not like I just caught you in a lie and had to pry the truth out of you or anything.”

“So you still trust me, then?” It sounded like he was saying that, but the possibility seemed too good to be true.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now, Shane?”

“Great, so I *did* fuck things up. Look, Nathan, I’m—”

He shut me up with a kiss before I could finish my apology.

“Shane, from the moment we met, you have been the most truthful thing in my life. *Of course* I still trust you. There’s no one in the world I trust more.”

I wrapped my arms around Nathan’s neck and kissed him again. “I love you, Nathan.”

“I love you, too, Shane.” He stole another kiss from me before adding, “Does this mean we can start round four now? Without the anal sex, of course.”

“Not so fast. We still need to talk about that.”

“Talk about what? Round four? I’d rather just act it out for you, if you’re wondering how it’s going to go.”

I chuckled and gave him a playful shove. “Not what I meant, Napster. I can’t ask you to give up anal sex for me. I especially can’t ask you to give it up like this, with no prior warning. What we just finished doing can’t just be the last time you ever get to have anal sex with me. You didn’t even get to savor the moment or anything.”

“It’s just anal sex, St. Louis. We’re not going to throw it a farewell tour.”

I couldn’t resist laughing again, even though I was trying to be serious. “Come on, Nathan. *Just* anal sex? I know how much you enjoy it. The only thing I’ve ever really loved about it myself is seeing how much it turns you on.

Whether you're fucking me or I'm fucking you, the look on your face always says it all."

"Shane, you know I'm not a masochist, but you could jack me off with the gritty side of one of your sheets of grip tape, and I'd probably still look at you that same way. It has nothing to do with *how* I'm having sex with you, and everything to do with the incredible fact that I'm having sex with *you*—my best friend; the man I'm in love with. It doesn't matter how we have sex because, as I've told you before, it's always been more than sex with you."

"Okay, so it's settled, then: round four will involve me getting you off with a sheet of grip tape. Never realized you had such a kinky side, Napster, but I'm willing to roll with it."

Nathan laughed and shook his head, returning my earlier shove with one of his own.

"Seriously, though, do you really think you can live without anal sex for the rest of your life?"

He put a hand on my cheek, locking eyes with me as he stroked my beard with his thumb. "Shane, the list of things I can live without is incredibly long, and anal sex is so far down that list that it probably wouldn't even come close to breaking into the top one thousand. But the list of things I *can't* live without is incredibly short, and aside from the obvious things like food and shelter, *that* list begins and ends with you."

I smiled and kissed him as I reached for his cock. "If you're just saying that to get me in the mood to start round four, it worked."

"I'm saying it because it's true. That it got you in the mood to start round four is just an added bonus." He kissed me again, his cock quickly stiffening in my hand. "One more thing, though, Shane: don't you dare call my boyfriend a liar, ever again."

Chuckling, I gave him another shove, and he grabbed my arm as he fell back against the mattress, pulling me down on top of him. After making out with him a bit more, I straddled his waist and began rubbing our cocks together. Moaning softly, he gazed into my eyes while running his fingers through my hair, then down my spine to my lower back. When I felt one of them pressing against my hole, I tried not to read too much into it; after all, I *had* told him I liked getting fingered. It didn't have to mean that he wanted his cock in my ass. *But it could mean that.*

A few minutes later, while Nathan was kissing my neck, he tensed and whispered, “Fuck, Shane...” I was close, too, so I started rubbing our cocks together faster, pushing us both over the edge simultaneously. And, for the first time ever, I realized that what he had told me earlier really was true: he looked at me the same way every time we had sex, no matter how we went about it.

He pulled me toward him for a kiss as I continued playing with our cocks. “That was hot, St. Louis.”

“Can’t take all the credit, Napster.”

Nathan chuckled and kissed me again. “Want to go take a shower now? If you play your cards right, maybe we can start round five while we’re in there.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I released our cocks as I gave him one more kiss. For the first time since we had started having anal sex, I wasn’t keeping anything from him, and it seemed like nothing had changed between us in the wake of my confession. He looked genuinely satisfied, and I definitely was. Best of all, he didn’t feel like I had been betraying his trust for the past two weeks. I couldn’t have hoped for a better outcome.

So why did I still feel like shit?

Chapter Thirty

The YotC tradition lived on, having escaped the fate of early retirement when Nathan had decided to move to Breckenridge. A new YotC list would now begin every year on June sixteenth, the anniversary of the day Nathan had arrived in Breckenridge. We had kicked off YotC 4.0 with the concert we had attended with Kevin and B in Denver. By the time we returned from Chicago after attending Lollapalooza the first weekend in August, we had over thirty artists on the list, including OutKast, Skrillex, Arctic Monkeys, and AFI. My sponsors had come through yet again, hooking us up with VIP tickets and accommodations, but the best part about the trip had been knowing, the whole time, that Nathan and I would be traveling back to Breckenridge together at the end of the weekend. Two months ago, we had assumed that Lollapalooza would be a bittersweet experience, offering us a chance to briefly reunite before having to part ways again once the last concert ended. But everything had changed since then. Lollapalooza had instead turned out to be the first music festival we ever attended as a couple.

The first, we hoped, of many.

The Friday after Lollapalooza, I got out of bed early, planning to do some skating before Nathan woke up. But I changed my mind as I was taking a piss. He was rock hard in his sleep, and I was still feeling guilty about what had happened the previous night, when, post-orgasm, I had drowsily started grinding into his ass while spooning him, not even really aware of what I was doing—or the fact that the tip of my cock was pressing right up against his hole with each thrust of my hips. He had eventually reached for my shaft and repositioned it between his ass cheeks, jolting me back to full awareness in the process. I couldn't even be sure I hadn't actually entered him at some point. When I had tried to apologize, he had assured me that it hadn't been a big deal, but his rock-hard cock, wet with precum, had suggested otherwise. As did the fact that he was still rock hard now.

Wanting to do something for him that would hopefully make up for the way I had left him unfulfilled the previous night, I grabbed some things from the kitchen and moved them to the mini-fridge, then quietly rummaged through dresser drawers until I found the other items I would need. Using a canvas double-D-ring belt that had been included with a pair of khakis I rarely wore, I

carefully tied his wrists to one of the bedposts, managing not to wake him in the process. Then I wrapped one of my silk ties around his head, covering his eyes. Once everything was secured tightly, I stepped back and watched him for a few seconds, waiting to see if he would wake up. He didn't.

Damn, Napster. You really do sleep more soundly these days.

I opened the clock app on my phone and put four hours on the timer, cringing on his behalf as I considered the implications. *Sorry, Nathan. Blame those erectile dysfunction commercials.* After starting the countdown, I gave him a kiss, causing him to finally stir and respond to the invasion of my tongue in his mouth.

"Hey." His voice had that raspy quality it sometimes adopted when he first woke up. After attempting to move his arms, he lifted his head off his pillow. "Shane?"

"Just relax, Nathan," I whispered in his ear, moving one of my hands down his torso to his cock. "You've got a problem that needs to be taken care of." When I reached his shaft, a drop of precum was already waiting for me. He moaned as I rubbed it into the head of his cock, right along the particularly sensitive part on the underside of it.

And we're just getting started.

I sucked his left nipple until it was hard, then moved on to his right one. I licked his exposed armpits, making him squirm when I remembered he was ticklish there. I massaged his arms, chest, and legs. I planted kisses all over his body. I grazed my teeth along the sensitive spots I had previously discovered on both sides of his hips. I made out with him for a bit.

Then, finally, once a nice little pool of precum had accumulated on his stomach, I turned my attention to his crotch, playing with his balls and teasing his hole for a while to coax even more precum out of his cock. I licked it all up and began kissing him again, letting him taste himself on my tongue. He bit my lip when I pulled away from him.

"Want me to suck your cock, Napster?"

He shivered as I whispered the words in his ear. "Do you really have to ask, St. Louis?"

"You're right. Stupid question. Of course you don't."

The smile on Nathan's face belied the groan of protest that escaped his lips. He was definitely enjoying this.

I moved my right hand from his chest down to his pubes, then slowly raised it from the base of his shaft to the head of his cock before reversing the movement, bringing my hand back up to his chest again. After pinching and gently twisting one of his nipples, I did the same thing to the other one. Running my fingers through his hair, I began kissing his neck and nibbling on his earlobes.

“Fuck, Shane...”

“*Now* do you want me to suck your cock?”

“Fuck yeah.”

I kissed his lips, then began kissing my way down to his cock. After teasing it with my tongue for a while, I finally took it in my mouth, all the way to the base. Then I started sucking him off until I sensed that he was getting close. I could usually tell when he was ready to come, just as he could usually tell when I was, and that was going to prove to be a useful skill over the next few hours.

He groaned when I released his cock from my mouth. I flicked my tongue across his balls as I slowly stroked his cock, waiting for him to cool down a bit. Once I was sure it was safe, I started sucking him off again, bringing him right back to the edge of an orgasm but not letting him go beyond that point.

After repeating the process a third time, I pushed his legs up in the air and began rimming him.

“Fuck, that feels good,” Nathan breathlessly whispered between moans.

I moved back to his cock and brought him right to the edge again, then released it from my mouth and started kissing my way up to his lips. I did another sweep of each of his specific pleasure points, deepthroating his cock again after I finished grazing his hips with my teeth and fingernails. When I pulled away after getting him dangerously close to coming yet again, he groaned and bit his lower lip, futilely tugging at his restraints.

“Fuck, St. Louis, you’re killing me here.”

“But in a good way or a bad way?”

“In the best way.” He shuddered as my warm breath hit his shaft. “You should let me suck your dick.”

“This is about your pleasure, Nathan, not mine.” I *was* rock hard—and leaking precum, too—but I was having too much fun teasing Nathan to care.

“Clearly, you don’t realize just how much I enjoy sucking your dick, Shane.”

Chuckling, I straddled his chest and rested the head of my cock on his lips, coating them with my precum. He swirled his tongue around the tip, then tilted his head forward so he could take it in his mouth. I let him suck me off for a few minutes but pulled away as soon as I felt my orgasm building. It wouldn't be fair for me to come already, not when I planned to tease Nathan a lot more before letting *him* come.

Opening the mini-fridge, I removed the items I had grabbed from the kitchen earlier: chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and a bowlful of the white chocolate-cinnamon-habanero ice cream my mother had given us when we had gone to Telluride a few weeks ago for my father's birthday. Bracing myself for the chill of the ice cream, I spooned some onto my cock, feeling a bit silly but knowing Nathan would love it. I put a hand on the back of his head and guided him toward my crotch, grinning as I watched him hungrily clean my shaft after realizing what I had done.

I fed him a bit more of the ice cream via my cock, then squeezed some chocolate syrup onto his chest and licked it off of him. Moving on to the whipped cream, I shook the can and sprayed some on both nipples before adding a bit more to his armpits. He squirmed and laughed as my tongue moved across his body, cleaning it up again. Next, I put a spoonful of ice cream in my mouth, and before it had a chance to melt, I began sucking his cock, sending a chill through his body when his shaft made contact with the dessert. Like me, he managed to stay hard despite the rush of coldness.

I used up about half of the ice cream, then stuck the rest back in the mini-fridge, along with the chocolate syrup and whipped cream. Reaching for the bottle of lube on my nightstand, I added some to Nathan's chest and began rubbing it into his skin, continuing to massage him with it until the entire front side of his body was glistening. Then I slowly inserted a finger in his ass and teased his prostate for a while, milking more precum out of him. Eventually, I added a second finger, flicking my tongue against his shaft to toy with him even more.

"Fuck, that feels amazing."

Nathan arched his back as another sexy moan escaped his lips. Removing my fingers from his ass, I straddled his waist and wrapped a hand around both of our cocks, rubbing them against each other. Every time one of us got close to coming, I stopped and turned my attention back to another part of his body, resuming the frottage only when I was sure it was safe to do so.

“Fuck, Shane. I’m so fucking close.”

Glancing at the clock, I felt a twinge of guilt. He still had two hours left.

Six.

That’s the number of times Nathan ended up coming in the last hour of his edging session. By the time the alarm began blaring, he was covered with cum and sweat, and he could barely talk. His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath, still tied up and blindfolded. I was breathing a bit heavily, too, having just finished feeding him my load after an intense few minutes spent face-fucking him. Unlike him, I had only come once, but it had been a very satisfying orgasm. More importantly, though, I was pretty sure I had more than made up for leaving him unfulfilled the previous night, inadvertently teasing something that had been taken off the table weeks ago.

“This is a nice look for you, Napster.”

Chuckling, Nathan shook his head. Between breaths, he managed to say, “You’re lucky I’m tied up and can’t pull you down on top of me right now, St. Louis. Otherwise, you’d have this all over *your* chest, too.”

I collapsed on top of Nathan and gave him a kiss. “Fine by me. Our next stop is the shower, anyway.” Wiping some sweat from his brow, I whispered, “I love you, Nathan.”

“I love you, too, Shane.”

We continued making out as I blindly freed his wrists and removed the blindfold. Once his eyes adjusted to the natural light in the room, he pulled away and gazed into my eyes.

“Hi.”

I smiled at him. “Hi.”

“That was the most torturous part, you know.”

“What was?”

“Not being able to stare into those sexy eyes of yours.”

“Yeah, well, that’s your own fault. You’re the one who told me you could probably come just from staring into my eyes. I couldn’t take the risk.”

“Fuck. Me and my big mouth.” After giving me another kiss, Nathan added, “Seriously, though, that was... *Wow*.”

“Glad you liked it. It was fun for me, too.” I ran my fingers through his hair, feeling his heart beating in his chest. “Ready for that shower now?”

“Give me a few more minutes. I don’t think my legs are functional yet.”

Reaching for the door of the mini-fridge, I grabbed a bottle of water and poured a bit of it into Nathan’s mouth, then gulped down some myself. “I’m guessing you’ve worked up quite an appetite after all that.”

“I could eat. You?”

“Definitely. Pizza?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Nodding, I settled against Nathan’s shoulder and closed my eyes, waiting for him to recover. With nothing to distract me, I realized I still felt like shit about what had happened the previous night. He hadn’t said a word about it, but that was nothing new; we never talked about what I had taken away from him. I couldn’t help wondering, though, if he ever missed it. It had been over a month now since we had last had anal sex. Telling him the truth should have made me feel better, but I still got twinges of guilt from time to time, knowing the sacrifice he had made for me. And now I was unintentionally giving him reminders of the old days, when he could still experience hands-free orgasms and come in my ass. It was bad enough that I had taken those pleasures away from him, but continuing to dangle them in front of him was just cruel. Sure, I had just finished spending hours torturing him, but the difference was that, in that case, I had always intended to ultimately follow through with what I had been teasing. He didn’t have anything to look forward to when I teased him with the promise of anal sex, and I couldn’t guarantee I would never do that again, because I had never meant to do it in the first place. If it continued to happen, how long would it take before he would get fed up and start to resent me for it?

I have to do something, before this eats away at our relationship.

But what?

That night, we went to a club with Cody and Casey. We ran into Zack while we were there, and he introduced us to a few of his friends. One of them, Eric, got pretty flirty with Nathan and me as the night progressed. Watching him hit on Nathan didn’t really bother me; I knew I could trust Nathan, and I also knew

how hot he was. It was a given that people were going to hit on him from time to time. It did, however, give me an idea—one that scared the shit out of me, especially when I realized I was actually considering it.

When Nathan and I returned home a few hours later, I decided to go for it, before I lost my nerve.

“So, Zack’s friends seem nice.”

“Yeah.”

“Eric was obviously into you.”

“And you.”

“Think he’s someone you’d want to get to know better?”

“Okay, why does this conversation feel so weird?”

So much for my attempts to be subtle.

“I’ve just been thinking...” After taking a deep breath, I added, “I’ve been thinking we should start having an open relationship.”

Laughing, Nathan shook his head and gave me a playful shove. “Good one, St. Louis. I almost believe you’re being serious.”

“*I am* being serious, Nathan. If we had an open relationship, you could keep having anal sex whenever you want to.”

“Shane—”

“I mean, you’d have to start using condoms again, of course, but—”

“Shane, I—”

“—I trust you to do that, and—”

“Shane, there’s—”

“—it’s not like we’re barebacking anymore, anyway. And—”

“Shane—”

“—if you’re worried it will affect our relationship—”

“Shane, that’s—”

“—don’t be, because I just—”

“Shane, *stop!* Just *stop*, okay? There’s no point talking about this, because it’s never going to happen.”

“Well, if you’d rather try threesomes—”

“*Shane!*”

It took Nathan shouting my name to finally shut me up. I had always had the luxury of being able to push him further than others could before he’d lose his temper—an end result he had never even really reached with me, although I had tested his limits a few times. Now, as we stared at each other in silence, I held my breath, hoping I hadn’t finally pushed him too far.

Sighing, Nathan shook his head again. “You know,” he said, his voice settling back down to its normal tone, “this is the most uncomfortable I’ve ever been during a conversation with you.”

Looking away, I muttered, “Sorry. Just forget I mentioned it, okay?”

“No. I’ve told you before that you can talk to me about anything, and I meant that. I just didn’t exactly have *this* in mind when I said it.” Closing the distance between us, Nathan rested a hand against my cheek, forcing eye contact. “Answer me one thing: is this something you really want?”

“I’m not suggesting this for myself. I’m suggesting it for you. I already get everything *I* want out of our sex life. You’re the one who doesn’t.”

“I don’t? That’s news to me, Shane.”

“Come on, Nathan. I know how much you enjoyed having anal sex with me. You can’t honestly tell me you don’t miss it.”

“You’re right. I enjoyed having anal sex with you. With *you*. But...” Removing his hand from my cheek, Nathan took a step back. “Where is this coming from, anyway? I thought we settled this weeks ago.”

“I know what you said then, Nathan. And I’m sure you meant it at the time. But what was true then may not still be true now—”

“It is.”

“—or in the future.”

“It will be.”

“You can’t know that for sure, Nathan. Look at what happened last night. I almost stuck my cock up your ass while we were spooning, without even realizing it. Hell, maybe *I did* stick it in, for all I know.”

Hesitantly, Nathan admitted, “Just the tip.”

“See? And I can’t guarantee that sort of thing will never happen again. Especially considering how much we both love spooning and grinding. How long can you take being teased like that?”

“More than four hours, apparently.”

“That was different. There was a light at the end of that...” Nathan grinned as I stopped myself. “Okay, poor choice of words. The point is, when I was teasing you earlier, you knew I’d eventually stop. But there won’t be an end to this anal-sex thing. And as much as it would hurt to know you’re hooking up with other guys, I’d prefer that to the alternative: you waking up one day and realizing you’ve grown to resent me for taking away what should be a major part of your sex life.”

“Shane, I could never resent you. I love everything about you, from your eyes, to that eyebrow thing you do when you’re skeptical about something—you’re doing it right now, by the way—to the way you devote a bit of time every day to interacting with your fans on Twitter, even when you don’t feel like it, to the way you always save a blue M&M for last when you’re eating a bag of them. I could *never* resent you. This uncomfortable conversation, maybe, but not you.”

“You say that now, but it’s only been a month. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And, for the record, I plan for it to be a very long life, Nathan. How are you going to feel a year from now? Five? Ten? Twenty?”

“Hopefully, I’ll feel grateful that this was the last time we ever had this discussion.”

“I’m being serious here, Nathan.”

“And so am I, Shane.” Chuckling in spite of what he had just said, Nathan added, “You know, it’s kind of ironic that the only thing in this world that you seem to be afraid of is the possibility of losing me, since that’s the one thing I can guarantee you’ll never have to worry about. There’s only one thing that can make that happen, and, for the record, *I* plan on having a very long life, too.” Nathan sighed and ran his fingers through his hair before adding, “Look, I get it, okay? I felt the same way when you gave up your chance at a three-peat so you could go to Pittsburgh with me for Gram’s funeral. I was worried that you’d eventually grow to resent me for that. Have you?”

“No, of course not. But that’s different. I gave up a chance at getting an entry in the record books that doesn’t really mean anything in the grand scheme

of things. You're giving up a very big part of your sex life. For good. At only twenty-two years of age. I'm not sure you've really stopped to consider the magnitude of that decision yet."

"Maybe you've just never really stopped to consider just how little I care about anal sex. Or, for that matter, just how much I'm willing to do for you because I love you."

"I know you love me, but... Damn it, Nathan, you shouldn't be the only one who ever has to make sacrifices in this relationship!"

"Wait, what? We literally just got done talking about a sacrifice you made for me."

"And I literally just got done explaining why that doesn't count."

"It does in my book. But fine, if you don't want to count that, then how about the fact that you sacrificed your freedom when I showed up here without warning and asked to stay with you?"

"Oh, right. That was *such* a huge sacrifice. It's been *such* a burden having you around, and I'm getting absolutely nothing out of the deal myself."

"No, seriously. You didn't have to let me move in here. I could have found my own apartment nearby. We don't have to live together in order to be together. Lots of couples don't."

"Okay, but the fact remains that I wanted you to move in with me. I didn't sacrifice anything I wasn't totally willing to sacrifice. Now, what about you sacrificing your Corvette and your ring to get the money to move here?"

Nathan shrugged. "What about it? I wanted to move here, and I needed money to make that happen. How did you put it? 'I didn't sacrifice anything I wasn't totally willing to sacrifice.'"

"Okay, forget about that stuff, then. You've sacrificed your privacy for me. You've sacrificed anal sex for me. You can dismiss all the other sacrifices as trivial things, but those two things are actual lifestyle changes you've made to be with me. I've never done anything like that for you."

"I've never asked you to. And, for the record, you never asked me to do those things, either. But you *have* made a lifestyle sacrifice for me, Shane."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"During our first real conversation freshman year, you told me how much you loved huskies, and how much you missed having one. You told me that

adopting a husky would be one of your top priorities after moving to Breck.” Nathan looked around the room. “You’ve been here for two months, and I still don’t see a husky anywhere. And I know why: because I’m allergic to dogs.”

“I could have changed my mind about getting one before you moved here, you know.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t. I saw the ad.”

“What?”

“I saw the ad. The day I moved here, my mom called, and you stayed in bed while I came out here to look for my phone. While I was talking to her, I tossed some of our half-eaten pizza slices in the kitchen trashcan, and I saw the newspaper ad you had thrown away. You had scheduled an appointment to adopt a husky from someone the following day. It even had a green right eye and a blue left eye, just like you and Ash. I know you never went to that appointment, so I’m guessing you canceled it, probably while I was in the shower that night.”

He was right, of course. About all of it.

“Why didn’t you say anything to me about it?”

“What was there to say, Shane? I’m allergic to dogs. I can’t do anything to change that. Just like you can’t do anything to change the fact that you’re not into anal sex. And you’ve clearly decided that you’re okay with giving up dogs in order to be with me, just like I’ve decided that I’m okay with giving up anal sex in order to be with you.”

“But I’ve been trying to tell you, Nathan: you don’t have to give it up if you—”

“Start hooking up with other guys on the side? You have a better chance of convincing me to fuck a girl, Shane.”

“Well, I mean, you *could* still have anal sex that way...”

“Funny. Seriously, there’s only one guy in this world I’m interested in having sex with, and I’m looking at him. So you can quit trying to convince me to go along with this open-relationship bullshit, because it’s never going to happen. And neither is your threesome idea, for that matter. Okay?”

“Okay.” Instantly, I felt less tense. I would have found a way to be okay with the arrangement if Nathan had agreed to it, but it was a relief to know I wouldn’t have to.

“Now, as for your concern that I’ll one day begin to resent you, don’t you think I have just as much of a reason to worry that you’ll one day begin to resent me for stopping you from being able to adopt huskies?”

“Nathan, I could never...” A smile crept across his face. “Okay, fine. Fair point.”

“Look, maybe giving up anal sex in order to be with you *is* a sacrifice, even though it has never felt that way to me. But if it is, then it’s a sacrifice worth making. And it’s not like our sex life isn’t already hot enough without throwing anal sex into the mix. You *do* remember how we started today, right? That was easily the hottest sex of my entire life, Shane, and it didn’t involve anal sex at all. Hell, I could make a top-ten list of our sexual encounters right now, and nothing on that list would involve anal sex. I’m not saying I didn’t enjoy it when we were doing it. You know I did. But we’ve done plenty of other things that I have enjoyed even more. I mean, you can get me rock hard and dripping wet with a single kiss, for fuck’s sake. You turn me on more than anyone else ever has. Do you really think I give a shit about how you do it?”

He looked at me, waiting for an answer, but I just grabbed his arm and pulled him in for a single kiss. Then I planted a hand between his legs, feeling a bulge I knew hadn’t been there a minute or so earlier, when I had stolen a quick glance at his crotch while listening to his speech.

“Just checking,” I said, giving him a wink.

Nathan chuckled. “So, are we good, St. Louis?”

“We’re good, Napster.”

“No more talk about open relationships, or threesomes, or me growing to resent you eventually, or anything else that’s never going to happen?”

“Promise.”

“Good, because I’m sick of talking.”

“Oh, yeah? What would you rather do?”

“Start round... wait, what round *are* we up to for today?”

“Seven for you, four for me.” Nathan had gotten me off a couple more times before we had left for the club, but he hadn’t come since his edging session.

“Sounds like you have some catching up to do then, St. Louis.”

Nathan dropped to his knees and unbuttoned my jeans, making me moan as he played with my rock-hard cock through my bikini briefs. By the end of the night, I had indeed caught up to him.

And as I drifted off to sleep with my arms wrapped around him, I realized that only one thing was missing from our relationship now: guilt.

EPILOGUE

“A little help, St. Louis? I’m useless at this.”

“I know.”

I gave Nathan a wink as I raised his shirt collar, undid his tie, and started retying it properly.

“Looking good, as always,” he said, running his fingers through my freshly trimmed beard.

Smiling, I stroked a thumb down the side of his smooth face. “You’re not so bad yourself, Napster.”

“Almost ready?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Just need to figure out where my phone landed when we were ripping each other’s clothes off earlier.”

“Seems like just yesterday we were doing that for the first time.”

“Ripping each other’s clothes off?”

“That, too. But I was talking about trying to figure out where our phones had landed in the process. Can you believe that was over a year ago?”

“You know what they say: time flies when you’re in love and having hot sex every day.”

“For some reason, I don’t recall the saying going quite like that.”

Shrugging, I said, “Maybe I’m thinking of something else, then.”

“Maybe. Excited about tonight?”

“Very.”

Stepping up to the podium, I scanned the packed crowd, recognizing many of the faces that were staring back at me. My parents were standing in the front row, right next to Jeannie and Robert, who had flown in for the occasion. Kevin and B were hitting on a couple of sorority girls who were both showing a promising amount of interest. Gabe and Aaron were off to the right, holding hands. When Gabe had moved to Los Angeles to work on his graduate degree and pursue a career in marine biology, I had put him in touch with Aaron so he'd have someone to show him around. They had hit it off and were now about six months into their relationship. It was a bit incestuous—Nathan's ex being with my ex—but we had all gotten over the weirdness pretty quickly. On the opposite side of the room, a bunch of my snowboarding friends were huddled together, including Cody, Casey, Eli, and Gunnar. Coop was roaming around, filming the event. Zack was with a group of his friends in the back corner. My sponsors were scattered throughout the room. Even Marco was standing in the crowd.

Jess was nowhere to be seen. I had come to accept that I was probably never going to hear from her again, or know more about what had happened to her than I already knew. *Guess some friendships just aren't meant to last.*

I smiled as I locked eyes with Nathan, who was standing off to the right side of the podium, just a few feet away from me. *Luckily, ours did.*

"First of all," I began, facing the crowd again, "I want to thank each of you for coming out tonight for the grand opening of Corkscrew." After waiting for the cheers and applause to subside, I added, "I hope you're enjoying yourselves. If not, this was all Nathan's idea." I paused again, letting the laughter die down. "Seriously, though, I couldn't have done this without his help. Many of you already know him, but for those of you who don't, he's the incredibly talented artist behind... well, practically everything you see in here, including the logo. And he's taken, so go ahead—be jealous." I winked at Nathan while more laughter filled the room.

"I also couldn't have done this without the help of my generous sponsors." I ran through the list of names, then added, "They're collectively covering the drinks tonight, so if you still need a reason to like them, there it is."

The crowd roared its approval as I glanced around the room again. I had really lucked out when choosing the venue, managing to locate two adjacent units that were large enough to accommodate my nightclub as well as my skatepark. The latter had opened the previous weekend and was already proving to be pretty popular with my fellow skaters. I loved the convenience of having it right next door to Corkscrew, not to mention just a few blocks away from the

apartment Nathan and I shared. I really couldn't have asked for anything more from either of the spaces. And, as an unexpected bonus, the unit I had chosen for my skatepark had been big enough to add a private section that was for my use only, complete with a gym and trampolines, the latter of which were essential to my training but surprisingly hard to find elsewhere in Breckenridge. Now, in addition to essentially having the slopes right in my backyard, I also had the perfect place to go whenever I wanted to practice tricks, work out, or skate. And that would all come in handy, especially a couple years from now, as I began gearing up for the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, where, in addition to the returning snowboard slopestyle competition, I would also have the debut of the snowboard Big Air competition to look forward to.

"And, finally, I want to thank my friends and family—and especially my parents. I could give you a list of reasons why, but we're only open till three." I nodded at Mom and Dad while a swell of *awws* filled the room. "I'll just say this much: they have always allowed me to be myself, and that's the greatest gift they could possibly give me."

I was still the only openly gay pro snowboarder and skateboarder in the world. But the tide seemed to be turning again; while same-sex marriage had already been legal in some states, including Colorado, the Supreme Court had recently declared it legal in *all fifty* states. I could only hope that, in the future, all LGBT youth would get to experience the simple freedom to be themselves. And Nathan and I were doing what we could to help make that a reality.

"Enjoy the band, and if you need anything, let me know. Also, just as a reminder, all the proceeds from our rainbow-colored Corkscrew T-shirt go toward helping LGBT youth, so be sure to check that out." Nathan had designed the T-shirt, which was also available online—and was already quite popular. He still had a hard time believing that people all over the country were wearing his artwork. I still had a hard time believing it had taken this long.

Leaving the podium to a round of applause, I joined Nathan and gave him a quick kiss.

"Nice speech."

"Thanks."

"So, how does it feel?"

"How does what feel?"

"Being done. Having your nightclub—"

“*Our* nightclub.”

“—*our* nightclub open, and knowing that it’s already a huge success.”

“Well, I’m not sure it’s safe to go *that* far just yet. People might just be here tonight for the free booze. But it feels great to be done.”

“Glad to hear it. And trust me, people aren’t just here for the free booze. We’re getting rave reviews on social media. Hashtag Corkscrew is even trending on Twitter.”

“Yeah, well, we can probably just thank my awesome followers for that.”

“It’s more than that, Shane. You’ll see. This place is a hit.”

“Well, if it is, you deserve at least as much credit as I do, Nathan. We did this together.”

“Just like everything else.”

“Exactly.” Scanning the crowded dance floor, I asked, “So, ready to have some fun?”

“With you? Always.”

After doing a round of shots at the bar, we stepped onto the dance floor, settling in next to Gabe and Aaron. I smiled as I looked around the room again. It really did feel great to be done. I had been planning this business venture for years—since long before meeting Nathan—and the final result had exceeded even my wildest expectations. Best of all, I had done it with Nathan at my side every step of the way. And there had certainly been a lot of steps. Getting the nightclub ready could have been a full-time job by itself, but we had also spent the year working on getting the skatepark ready. And we had hashed out the plans for the T-shirt we were selling to help raise money for LGBT youth charities. And I had, of course, spent the winter competing, with Nathan as my constant travel companion. I had even entered a few skating contests, and, during the filming on an edit, I had become the first person to land a quad cork, a trick that I was pretty confident about being able to throw down in a Big Air competition, if not a slopestyle competition, during the upcoming contest season. For my twenty-third birthday, Nathan had surprised me with a trip to Mt. Baker so I could finally jump the road gap. For our anniversary, he had surprised me with a surfboard he had painted with the logo for the infamous late-nineties-music-sharing program, Napster, below the St. Louis skyline. It now hung above our bed.

All that, and we had still managed to find time to just hang out together, watching Netflix, going on dates, doing outdoor activities, and passing the time in any other way we could think of.

Like having sex.

We still had an amazing, incredibly active sex life. And anal sex still didn't factor into that sex life at all, ever. We both knew it never would. But I had stopped feeling guilty about that fact the night I had suggested starting an open relationship with Nathan. And I wasn't even angry with myself anymore for inexplicably being unable to enjoy anal sex the way a lot of other gay guys, like Nathan, did. Focusing on what we *didn't* have wasn't important, especially not when compared to the list of things we *did* have. We had our health. We had our businesses. We had financial security. We had the ability to travel the world together. We had friends and family members who loved and supported us unconditionally. We had the freedom to be ourselves. Nathan had his art, and I had snowboarding and skateboarding. We had a gargoye gecko named Ivan. We had pizza, beer, and Netflix. We had music. We had our senses of humor. We had our inside jokes. We had trust.

And, most importantly, we had each other. Nathan says that, alone, is more than enough for him.

It's more than enough for me, too.

The End

Author Bio

Mike Greysen has been writing stories since the second grade, when, like Nathan, he was challenged to answer the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” His teacher took him seriously when he said he wanted to be an author, not just because he knew the word “author” but also because he had a ten-page story to go along with his claim. (His handwriting wasn’t as neat and small back then.) Like Shane, he loves snowboarding and skateboarding but kind of hates talking about himself. He can be reached via email as well as social media, the latter of which he plans to make an effort to use more often now that he’s not spending every free moment working on getting Shane and Nathan’s story ready for publication.

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