



DEV BENTHAM

**BREATHING  
SNOW**

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## BREATHING SNOW

**By Dev Bentham**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, 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.

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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# BREATHING SNOW

By Dev Bentham

## Photo Description

Two men stand whisper-close, one second from a kiss.

## Story Letter

*We've hated each other for three years. Since we were supposed to be rivals and everyone expected us to fight, we just did it. But then we met under completely unexpected circumstances and realized that neither of us is the prick we thought the other one was. Eventually, we became friends and now I cannot imagine a life without him. Just a few people know that we only fight for publicity now and actually like each other very much.*

*But during our last "fight" something went awfully wrong. He grabbed me in front of the cameras and kissed me! And I liked it! Now, everyone asks me if we are gay or if that was some kind of prank. But I really don't know! I need to talk to him but he doesn't react to my phone calls. The only thing I know is that I don't want to lose him.*

*Dear Author,*

*It's up to you if these two are movie stars, athletes or some other kind of famous people. You can also decide if the story starts with their first meeting or the first kiss or at another point. I just want some hot and sizzling sex, but also tender moments, a little angst and a sweet HEA or HFN, but please no BDSM.*

*Thank you very much! :)*

*Sincerely,*

*Fina*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** athlete, enemies to lovers, sports, coming out, in the closet, oral sex

**Word count:** 15,564

*Dedication*

For Fina

### *Acknowledgements*

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# BREATHING SNOW

**By Dev Bentham**

JUNIOR NATIONALS

*Alaska*

Cory's heart pounded. His breath grew uneven. Two more turns. Ignoring the ache in his thighs, he punched it, focusing on the swishing of his skis and the perfect plant of each pole. Push, glide, push. This was it, what he'd been working for all year, through the sweaty summer runs and winter skis, through every hour of every day he'd worked to save for this trip. Not to mention the money other people had raised to help him. He thought about his coach earnestly pressing a hundred bucks in his hand and his mom taking on extra hours so she could buy his plane ticket. There were other events, but the sprint was what he was best at, going all out, no reserves for three and a half minutes, then doing it again and again until here he was at the finals and he wasn't going to let everyone down. Cory sucked in a deep breath and pushed harder. The number two on Mackinac Mike's back seemed closer. Cory glanced up, gauged the curve—sharp and steep. During the practice run several skiers had ended up in the snowbank on this turn. Mike Sanders from Mackinac Island, who'd earned his number two by going damned fast in the qualifier, slowed slightly and Cory grabbed that millisecond advantage and pushed past him, flying around the curve, pumping up the hill. Behind him he could hear the thwack as Mackinac's skis slapped the snow in relentless pursuit. Cory leaned into the cold, empty space in front of him. From the crowded sidelines, cowbells rang, someone called his name. His lungs burned, his shoulders ached and his thighs screamed, but he kept his gaze focused on the red line painted in the snow. With one last, hard shove he threw himself across it.

He was still gulping air when Mackinac pounded him on the back in that good old boy way that straight guys seemed to like. "Good race."

“Thanks.” Cory smiled. He’d envisioned this moment for a lifetime, had known that if he could compete at Nationals, he’d win. Now he’d be taking home the gold in the *J1* Junior Men’s Sprint.

Mackinac shook his head. “You know, this shit was much easier when you used to stay home.”

Cory felt his smile falter. Two thousand dollars. That’s what had stood between him and Nationals the year before. Mackinac, who Cory’d beaten by almost five seconds in regionals that year, had gone on to win. Cory straightened his shoulders. “Not going to happen again, so you better get used to seeing me around.”

“Glad to hear it. Gives me a chance to pummel your ass next time.”

They were engulfed by a crowd of coaches and the rest of the Midwest team.

When the hubbub subsided, Mackinac nodded toward the back trails. “How about a cool down. Unless you want your legs to cramp up while you’re lapping up everyone’s praise.”

“You’re on.” This time Cory let Mackinac lead the way. After a couple of easy loops, they were back at the finish line. They left their skis by the lodge and walked toward their teammates.

Cory didn’t know anyone at the race outside of the Midwestern skiers whom he’d competed against in regionals. He noticed a cluster of older guys standing by the Northeast region’s tent waiting for the *Under 23* events. His attention was captured by one in particular, a tall, thin redhead who leaned on his poles with a grace that took Cory’s breath away.

Mackinac nodded in their direction. “There’s Teag, Robert McTeague. He almost medaled at the World Cup this year.”

“The redhead?” Cory watched a blonde girl say something to the guy, who threw back his head and laughed.

“Yeah, with the blue bandanna. He pulls it up over his mouth when he skis. Even when it isn’t very cold. Sort of like a trademark, I guess. Like he thinks

he's Billy the Kid or something." Mackinac stared at Teag for a moment, then continued, "Word is he's rich as all get out. His father's CEO of some sports franchise. Teag spends his summers skiing in Chile, went to a prep school that's all about training pre-Olympic skiers and now he's skiing for some fancy college out east, when he's not jetting all over Europe for the cup. Some guys get all the luck."

Cory looked away in disgust. Who wouldn't win medals with help like that? Instead of training in Chile last summer, Cory had sweated through his days washing dishes in a steamy kitchen, squeezing workouts in before and after his shifts. Even after all that, Cory's high school had to hold a fucking bake sale to help get him to Soldier Hollow, where he was sleeping on a lumpy couch at the house of a guy who was a friend of a friend of his coach. While McTeague was getting elite training, Cory had been lucky to get any coaching at all. If it weren't for the nearby Nordic center where an ex-Olympian ran the ski shop, he would've been shit out of luck. As it was, he had to work at the ski shop while he sandwiched in training sessions in-between customers. Even now, Cory had no idea where he'd find the money for the Junior World Cup tour if he made the team. He had no use for a guy born with a golden ski.

"Fuck him. Let's get something to eat." Cory nodded toward the local Rotary Club's table of free snacks.

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Teag watched Robert "Bob" McTeague Senior swirl Rémy Martin in his glass. Teag hated it when Bob came to the race and insisted on taking him out after the awards banquet, away from his teammates and friends and having what Bob called "serious father-son time". His mother thought it was a sweet bonding exercise. In reality, the conversation always devolved into a long discussion of everything Teag had done wrong in the race, or if he won, everything else that was wrong with him and all the reasons he should give up the sport entirely. Even thinking about these little moments made Teag's stomach churn.

This time he'd won in his best event, men's freestyle sprints, come in second in the long race, and placed in the top ten in his least favorite, the mass

start classic. As he waited for his father to speak, Teag wondered which direction it would go this time, skiing or life.

“Have you considered Patterson’s offer?” Ah, it was to be life then.

“Yes.” Teag took a sip of beer to remind himself he was an adult now. He had a right to make his own choices. And a desk job wasn’t something he wanted, ever. “And it’s a generous one. But—”

Bob’s eyes narrowed. “I cashed in a lot of favors to get you an offer at that firm.”

“I realize that. Thank you.” Teag took a deep breath. “But I want to concentrate on my skiing.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Bob’s glass hit the table hard, splashing amber liquid over his fingers. “You wanted to ski and I supported you. I’ve poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into this extracurricular activity of yours.”

It wasn’t worth engaging in the argument. They’d had it too many times before. Teag would offer to pay Bob back and Bob would counter that that wasn’t the point and Teag would ask what the point was and... Teag clenched his jaw to keep his mouth shut.

His father continued, “In a few months you’ll be a college graduate, for God’s sake. Quit now, before you turn twenty-three and age out of the junior circuit. No one will question why you don’t go out for the senior team. It’s time to buckle down, get a job and live up to your responsibilities as a man. Besides, you know how your mother worries about your health.”

Teag unclenched his teeth and took another sip before answering. “I have a good shot at making the Olympic Team.”

“So what.” Bob waved his hand dismissively. “You’re not going to win. The Scandinavians and Italians take all the medals. Even if you did, by some miracle, earn a bronze, it’s not like anyone would know. It’s a marginal sport. The only thing being an Olympic Nordic skier is going to get you is a job teaching people to ski. And what kind of money can you make doing that?”

“I’ve made up my mind.” Teag drained his beer. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I had a long day and I’m tired.”

“Oh don’t get your panties in a bunch.” Bob signaled to the waitress for another round. “What does Lora say about all this?”

Lora, his best friend. And the pretend girlfriend who helped Teag keep up his facade. So much for manning up. Teag shrugged. “She’s a damned good skier and hopes to make the team herself.”

“I guess that explains it.” Bob accepted his drink from the waitress. His expression softened as he considered Teag. “I suppose a few more years won’t hurt. But don’t leave it too long or you’ll end up an underemployed has-been.”

It was typical of these little chats that Bob threw the worst zingers as Teag started to relax. Maybe someday he’d learn, but it hadn’t happened yet.

Bob brightened and changed the subject. “How about that J1 sprinter, Cory Miller. Now that kid’s fast. Only seventeen and he skied a perfect race. We’ll be hearing about him for the next few years, you can count on that. We’re going to offer him a few sponsorship dollars. Always better to sign them young, builds athlete loyalty.”

“It’s your money.” Why the fuck wasn’t he ever worried about Teag’s loyalty? What was so special about some kid from Wisconsin? Teag had never once worn his father’s company’s name on his sleeve. *Can’t have the stockholders accusing us of nepotism*, as Bob had patiently explained, *and where did Teag think he got the money for all those fancy training camps anyway?*

It didn’t really matter. Teag had plenty of equipment sponsors providing him with everything he needed to ski, and God knew he could afford the travel costs. Still, he hated hearing his dad crow about his prodigies, and hated the poor suckers who fell for it.

Teag drained his second beer and said good night. He didn’t want to endure another minute in his father’s presence. He had a date with Lora. After he finished complaining to her about Bob, they could spend the evening mooning about boys. Together.

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## THREE YEARS LATER

*West Yellowstone Super Tour*

“Trying your luck with the big boys this year?”

Cory turned to see Teag leaning against the doorway of the waxing hut. Teag was wearing a black racing suit that showed off the bulge of his thigh and shoulder muscles. Auburn stubble outlined the sneer of his lips. If he wasn't such an asshole...

“Right. This from the guy who competed in the Juniors until he aged out.” Why was McTeague getting in his face? It was bad enough that Cory had to pimp for his old man's company.

“Touché.” Teag's eyes wrinkled in amusement.

Mackinac called out from the corner where he was scraping his skis, “Don't let him get you, Cory, he's just jealous. We can't all be famous models.”

Cory shot back, “Enough with the model shit, okay?”

Teag looked disconcerted. After a moment he furrowed his brow and frowned at Cory. “You're a model?”

“The underwear ad for the sportswear catalog?” Mike sounded incredulous. “Don't tell me you didn't see it. One of the guys sent a scan of it to everyone on the team.”

Teag shook his head. “Sorry. Must have ended up in my spam filter.”

“It's no big deal. Some of us have to work.” Cory bit out the words but could feel the burn of embarrassment lighting up his cheeks. That shoot paid his way to tour with the junior ski team last winter, but that didn't mean he liked having pictures of himself in tight long underwear floating around.

He was going to kill Mackinac.

The smell of hot wax was thick. Cory focused on the skis as he used the iron to smooth melted wax along the bottoms. He wanted to get out and tour the trail before tomorrow's race. What he didn't want was to look into Teag's gorgeous, but disdainful face.

"The lack of governmental support is criminal." Cory was startled by the anger in Teag's voice. "How are we ever going to medal when our athletes have to spend half their time begging for corporate dollars?"

Cory looked up. Teag's cheeks were flushed. With that skin he probably blushed easily. Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy.

Teag spat. "Prostitution, that's what it is."

Or maybe he was. Cory ignored him and squinted down at his skis. When he eventually looked up again, Teag was gone.

\*\*\*\*

"Yoo-hoo, anybody home?" Lora poked her head around the door, her long blonde pigtails swinging. "A bunch of us are heading down for food, you want to come?"

Teag looked up from where he sat on the bed, laptop balanced on his knees and shook his head. "Not yet. You go on ahead."

"Whatcha doing?" She threw herself onto his roommate's bed. The bed frame squeaked as the mattress released a cedary puff.

Teag nodded at his laptop. "Blog."

"Oh man, I forgot again. Do you have to show me up in everything? How's your breathing?"

Teag shrugged. "Okay I guess. They've got me on something new."

Before he thought to stop her, she picked up the catalog he'd left open on the bedside table. "Underwear shopping? Hey, I know that guy. Someone sent this around in an email. Isn't that Cory Miller, the one who came in fourth at the Junior Scandinavian Cup last year? Word is he's a hell of a sprinter, might even give you a run for it."

“Uh huh.” Teag pretended to concentrate on his computer screen. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her studying the picture of Cory bare-chested, his bottom half clothed in shiny black thermal tights. The photographer had captured Cory’s dark sexiness perfectly. His big brown eyes and the way he tilted his left shoulder toward the camera, the jut of his hip—Teag closed his eyes like that would make him stop seeing it.

“He’s cute.” She glanced at Teag. “You think he’s gay?”

“How would I know?” He’d been aiming for nonchalant and overshoot into something closer to petulance.

“You want me to ask around, see if anyone’s seen him with a girl?”

“No.” Teag shook his head. “He’s a self-absorbed prick who thinks he’s better than me, full of all that self-made crap, like we aren’t all dependent on luck and good coaching.”

She looked back at the picture with a theatrical sigh. “Too bad. Nice shoulders.”

“Thighs aren’t bad either,” Teag muttered, his eyes glued to his screen. He gave her a sideways look. “If you’re interested in him, you know we can ‘break up’ anytime.”

“Not my type.” She threw the catalog down on the bedside table, scooted around until she lay facing him and put her legs up the wall. “I’m holding out for a European who’ll want to make little gold medal babies with me.”

Teag typed in a description of the light ski they’d done in the afternoon, how the poles had made the snow squeak in the cold and about the herd of deer they’d come across around a bend in the far loop. He uploaded a picture of Lora posing with an Italian sprinter they knew from the World Cup Tour. He turned the computer so Lora could see it. “Just link to this and you’ll be fine. Take you two minutes tops. Do it now, if you like.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, sat up and reached for the laptop. “When you eventually decide to come out, I’m going to miss the perks of being your girlfriend.”

Teag leaned back against the pillows and looked up at the knotty pine of the ceiling. Pretending they were dating was chicken-shit crazy. But talking with Lora was what kept him sane.

Lora's attention was too easily diverted, so Teag waited while she posted to her Web site. Since she'd soon be raising money for the World Cup Tour, she couldn't afford to neglect her social media, no matter how much she hated it. Teag had been helping Lora through the more academic parts of their lives since they'd skied together in school. She, in turn, helped him maintain his lie.

She quit typing and set the laptop beside her. "Can we eat now? I'm starving."

He nodded but didn't move. "You think I'm a coward, don't you?"

"What?" She slid over to his bed. Teag scooted over and Lora lay down and wrapped her arms around him. "No, I think you're the best friend I've ever had. And I'm serious that I'll miss you when you finally do decide to brave the media storm and come out."

He squeezed her close. "You won't need to miss me. We'll always be friends."

They lay quietly for a few moments.

Teag whispered, "I don't want to be a gay athlete."

"You are a gay athlete."

"You know what I mean. I don't want my sexuality to become more important than how fast I am on skis."

"Which is pretty darned fast."

"You bet your ass it's fast, young lady."

"And you know what makes you keep going fast?" She patted his belly. "Food."

With a groan Teag sat up. When she was right, she was definitely right.

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## THE FOLLOWING SUMMER AND FALL

*Olympic Training Center, Park City, Utah*

The whirl of grasshoppers, buzzing bees, the clatter of dozens of rollers and pole tips on pavement and breath—his own loudest in his ears. In the brutal August sun Cory could smell his sweat mingled with the chemical scent of the suntan lotion he'd slathered on before starting the climb, a five-mile-long mountain road that looped up through this meadow and disappeared into the forest somewhere up ahead. They couldn't be more than halfway up and already he could feel the strain in his quads and shoulders.

They'd all started together, but by now the team was spread across the hillside in little clumps of moving men. Mackinac and a few of the other long distance guys were making the next curve. Behind him, Cory could hear the huffed breath and rhythmic clicking of the larger group. Cory and Teag were alone in their own bubble of movement. Cory kept pace a few feet behind Teag. It was too early to try to push ahead of him and besides, he had to admit it was pleasant to watch Teag's back muscles grip and release. No doubt about it, the guy had a great body. Cory let his gaze drift down to Teag's ass, watching the clench of his glutes beneath thin nylon shorts. Too bad he was an asshole. Cory's roller ski hit a rock and for a second he lost his rhythm. He forced himself to look away from Teag's ass and focus.

"Having trouble keeping up, kid?" There was only a hint of breathlessness in Teag's voice.

"Fuck you."

Teag laughed. Cory growled and pushed harder, determined to pass the smug prick.

\*\*\*\*

Teag relaxed into the familiar clang of weights, the hum and thump of the treadmill, the muffled grunts and indistinct conversations. Ever since his first semester at boarding school, the rubber and sweat smell of the gym had

calmed him. Twelve years old, lonely for his mother and relieved to be away from Bob, he'd found his home with the other exercise-addled boys. Two years later, when he'd fallen in love with skiing and talked Bob into letting him transfer to Stratton Mountain School, the weight room had still been his second home. Skiing, he loved the wild rush of competition—with other people, the elements, breath and himself—and the feeling of abandon as he plunged forward, sliding along the snow with a combination of awkwardness and grace that felt like magic. It was exhilarating and terrifying. But here, in the gym, he could soothe himself with steady repetitions and precise movements. He'd been to a shrink once, a bald man with an annoying habit of asking questions Teag didn't want to answer. When he'd asked Teag to imagine his safe place, the image of his high school gym had sprung to mind. Teag had walked out of the psychiatrist's office and hadn't gone back. Instead, whenever he was anxious, he found safety where he always had, in pushing himself to the limit.

This morning the gym was crowded. All the treadmills were in use as athletes warmed up, preparing for the coaches to arrive and start doling out workout plans. The August training camp brought out dozens of athletes hoping to move to the next level on the development pipeline. Teag had been at the top of that pipeline since he was twenty-three. And as long as he stayed at the top, the pressure from Bob to leave the sport and get his MBA stayed at a dull roar. Teag had no intention of going into business. Coaching, teaching, those were the occupations that drew him. Still, the longer Teag could stave off that argument, the easier it was on everyone.

He looked across the gym at Cory, Bob's latest golden boy. It was weird how much contempt his father had for professional athletes, considering how much he paid them to endorse his products. The whole enterprise felt morally bankrupt. Lora claimed Teag was jealous of Cory. That wasn't it. The problem was the kid was good. Too good. There were only four spots on that A team. After an injury and a retirement, two of those spots were open for the next season. Teag was confident this year he'd keep his place. But the one thing he could predict about the future was that at some point, his body would betray him and someone younger and stronger would slip in to take his place. Right

now, his money was on Cory and that didn't make him like the kid, no matter how great he looked in running shorts.

Teag shook his head in self-disgust. He was only twenty-seven and had plenty of time left. He adjusted his gloves as he strode toward the bank of chin-up bars. Today he owned this gym. There were at least a dozen guys in here who'd ask him for his autograph when it became clear they wouldn't make the A team and that he would again. He leapt up and grabbed the bar, at the same moment hearing a clang as someone hit the bar beside him. He looked over. Cory hung straight armed, staring at Teag. Teag took in the glint of challenge in his gaze. If the fucker wanted a piece of Teag—good luck.

Teag pulled his chin over the bar and lowered himself back down. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cory do the same. Teag continued. Cory stayed with him, keeping perfect time. Two, three, four. At ten Teag glanced over to see if Cory was slowing down. At fifteen he looked again. By twenty a small crowd had gathered. Teag could hear the bet-making. It sounded like even odds. He blinked sweat from his eyes. His arms were burning. Cory showed no signs of slowing down. Teag gritted his teeth and kept going. Someone was counting aloud, which was good because Teag had lost track. His entire focus was on the curl up and the release down. His fingers started cramping. His shoulders ached. He flexed his toes, hardening his entire body as if that would help. He was going to lose. The thought made him crazy and he pulled harder, not bothering to look over because he could feel Cory rising and falling beside him like a piston, could hear it in the rhythm of the counting down below.

“What the fuck is going on?”

At the angry sound of the head coach's voice, the counting stopped. The crowd parted for him, like the red sea around Moses. At the sound of his name, Teag let himself hang, then dropped to the ground, his feet hitting with a thump that seemed to echo as Cory thudded down beside him.

Teag rubbed his arms as the coach glared at them.

“If you think this little stunt is going to get you out of a complete workout today, you are both sadly mistaken.” He thrust a workout plan at Teag and

another at Cory. He turned to the rest of the team and began passing out the sheets. “We’ve gone to a great deal of time and expense to develop these individual plans. I will not have you changing them without permission. Is that understood?”

As the others mumbled their acquiescence and moved away, Teag caught Cory’s eye. Cory gave a slight shrug, a laugh playing at the edges of his mouth. Teag couldn’t help but smile back.

Coach cleared his throat. When he had their attention he said, “Gentlemen, I’ll personally supervise your training today. As long as you’re in the mood for extra work, why don’t you start with two sets of a hundred sit-ups.”

Everyone else was done by noon. Coach chewed his sandwich and barked orders at Teag and Cory. At one, Cory puked into a waste basket. Teag followed suit half an hour later. By the time Coach released them, Teag was slippery with sweat and every muscle ached. Cory collapsed onto a mat.

Teag looked down at him. “Can we declare it a tie?”

Cory frowned. “I guess.”

With a shrug, Teag shuffled out of the gym and headed for the dining hall to see if there was anything left from lunch.

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They said it was just a test, that the final decision would be made based on his record from last season, but Cory wasn’t leaving anything to chance. All he wanted was to compete with the best and if he was going to be able to train full time, he had to make the A team, which meant he had to be stronger, fitter and faster. There were four men’s slots and one of them had to be his.

Standing on the wide testing treadmill, he balanced on roller skis while a trainer strapped on an oxygen mask, connecting him to a computer that would record his VO2 max, a measure of lung capacity that required taking the athlete to and beyond his ability, the ultimate endurance test accomplished in under ten excruciating minutes. The technicians fussed with the straps holding

him in and did last minute checks of their equipment. Cory bounced on his roller skis impatiently. The mask had a minty plastic smell. He hated waiting.

The people crowding around him moved off the treadmill. The guy at the computer screen gave him a nod and flipped a switch. Cory started to skate as the belt moved beneath him. He concentrated on his breath. Slow and even. With a loud clunk followed by the whir of cables, the angle changed and he was skiing uphill. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the green line of his oxygen consumption start to climb the graph on the computer screen. His focus shifted abruptly back to his legs as the machine moved again and the slope got steeper. He pumped his arms and legs, finding that grace he loved, the flex and push of muscles orchestrated by breath, his whole body engaged, alive.

The machine whirled again and Cory leaned in to the artificial hill. His breath echoed in the mask, amplified so that it almost drowned out the pounding in his ears. He imagined snow, the rustle of wind in the trees. This was a race, too. Not for time, but for breath. He envisioned the alveoli in his lungs opening wider, taking in more oxygen to feed hungry muscles. His legs and shoulders started to burn. He pushed harder, climbing the endless treadmill hill. His attention narrowed to glide, push, glide, push. Blackness at the edges of his vision. The body could only go so far, after that the mind took over. Strength of character was more important than muscle strength. He felt himself slowing and leaning into the effort. Cory's vision had compressed to a single spot of shiny medal ahead of him. He couldn't feel his hands anymore but it didn't matter. He'd trained them to hold on to the poles, trained his arms to swing forward, plant and push, his legs to lunge and thrust. Keep moving. That was all that mattered. Plant, push, lunge, thrust—

“Jesus.” He heard it from somewhere far away and then the belt around his waist jerked hard and then nothing.

When he came to, the treadmill was level again and the mask was off. Someone unfastened the safety belt and someone else took off his roller skis. Cory sat up, confused and embarrassed.

“You passed out.” One of the coaches smiled down at him. “It was an impressive effort.”

Cory looked over toward the computer screen. “How’d I do?”

“Good.” Another smile from the guy at the controls. “There’s a reason they call you guys the fittest athletes around.”

Cory didn’t feel fit. He felt wasted to his bones.

The coach reached a hand out to help him up. “We’ll get a blood sample, then you can take a break. After lunch we’ll hit the weight room.”

Cory winced as a tech poked his finger.

Mackinac stood a few feet away, preparing for his own VO2 max test. He smiled. “You’re a tough act to follow, Miller.”

Cory stepped off the treadmill with a smile. “The key word being follow. Face it, that’s all you’re ever going to do.”

“Why do you think I became a distance man? You were killing me in the sprints.” Mackinac nodded toward the treadmill. “Is that as bad as it looks?”

“Worse.” Cory patted Mackinac’s shoulder. “Have fun.”

Mackinac rolled his eyes.

Life was slowly coming back to his limbs as Cory walked toward the front door. He still felt exhausted, but at least feeling was coming back.

Cory squinted as he stepped into the sunlight and inhaled a deep lungful of pine-scented air. He sent a silent prayer to anyone who was listening. Maybe he was only twenty-one, but he’d been in the USSA development pipeline since eighth grade. As a member of the Junior US Ski Team, he’d had some of his costs taken care of, but had still had to fund his own travel—and flights to Italy and Norway weren’t cheap. Modeling, sponsorship, fundraising and giving ski lessons back home had helped, but they took energy and time. Now, with only one season before the Olympic team was chosen, he needed to focus. No matter what, he’d still need to raise some money. But it would be much less if he made the A team. He really needed to make it.

Unlike that gorgeous rich prick, Robert “Teag” McTeague, who’d anchored A team for the past few years even though he didn’t need the support. It wasn’t fair that Teag, who could have flown first class to every event, had his ticket paid for, while Cory’d had to scramble for every dollar, fitting workouts around work. Cory’s time had been seconds behind Teag’s all last season. If Cory could focus only on skiing, he was sure he could win. He just needed half a chance.

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Teag sat alone on a picnic table overlooking the obstacle course. During his morning run, the chill air had been a reminder that winter was just around the corner. Now the sun felt hot enough to make him strip off his shirt. The air smelled of pine and dust. Teag unfolded the letter from Tom, indulging in a rare bout of self-pity as he skimmed over the passages about Tom’s children, his lovely wife. It was crazy to feel sad. His affair with Tom, if you could call the secret groping of adolescent boys an affair, had been over before they graduated high school.

At the distinctive sound of sticks crackling under boots, Teag folded the letter and set it on the table. He looked up. It was only Lora, trudging up the hill, a sheet of paper fluttering in her hand.

When she got closer, she waved. “Thought I’d find you up here.”

Teag shrugged. “I felt like being alone.”

“Saw you dart out after mail call.” Lora stopped a few feet from the picnic table. “Who’d you hear from, you dad or Tom?”

“Tom.” He looked away from the compassion in her eyes.

“Asshole.” The table jostled as she hoisted herself up beside him. “He never treated you right, you do know that, don’t you?”

Teag gestured to the paper in her hand. “Is that the team roster?”

She passed it to him. “Posted a few minutes ago. The press conference is this afternoon. Your underwear model made the A team. So did that long-distance guy, Mackinac Mike Sanders.”

Teag read through the list, four men, four women, four bedrooms reserved at each event. Cory Miller was infuriatingly gorgeous and it would take a lot of maneuvering on Teag's part to make sure they never shared a room.

"You never know, he might be gay." Lora leaned her head against Teag's shoulder. "A couple of the women have tried, but he always says he wants to concentrate on racing."

"And that's probably exactly what he's doing." Teag folded the team roster and ran his fingers along the crease. "You don't get that fast by fucking around."

"You're that fast."

Teag snorted. "And you don't see me having sex with anyone, do you?"

Lora sat up and inhaled deeply. "I love the way it smells up here, don't you? I love the smell of pine. Do they make a pine-scented aftershave? I swear if they did, I'd be a goner."

"I'll tell that Italian sprinter you were flirting with last season. If there isn't an aftershave, maybe he could douse himself in floor cleaner."

She slapped his arm. "Not the same thing. And what makes you think he'd care?"

"He'd be a fool not to." Teag wrapped an arm around her and squeezed her close. "What do you say we break up this winter? Give the Italian a chance."

"You're in a weird mood. What did Tom say?"

"Nothing." Teag kissed the top of her head and released her. He picked up the letter and passed it to her. "He and his wife couldn't be happier. They're expecting their second child, yada yada. I'm glad for him. Really. I mean, if he's happy."

"But..." She was looking at him, not the letter.

Teag shrugged. He looked out at the distant snow-capped mountains. In a few weeks, there'd be enough snow up high for the team to start practicing. After that the season would unfold and he'd be caught in the flurry of races,

wins and finishes, collecting points and scrambling to be good enough to make the next Olympic team in a sport where the US hadn't won a medal in his lifetime. Maybe Bob was right. It was a futile, silly thing to do.

"Teag, what is it?"

He sighed. "Don't you sometimes wonder what we're doing? I'm twenty-seven years old. Other people our age are getting married, making families and I'm still busting my ass in a sport I can't win and jacking off to sportswear catalogues."

"I knew you liked him." Lora jumped off the table and faced Teag. "You just need to get laid. Next time we get a weekend off, we'll go down to Los Angeles, stay with my brother and you can hit the bars."

Teag shook his head. "Thanks, but a one-night stand isn't going to fix this. Sorry. Didn't mean to get you involved in my pity party."

"He might be gay, Teag. You never know."

"No. He's not. And it wouldn't matter if he is. He hates me. And I don't blame him, I'm the one he has to beat."

Lora frowned. "Men."

Teag slapped her knee. "Let's go. I'll race you. Last one down the hill buys the beer."

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## NEXT WINTER

*World Cup Tour Switzerland*

As the wheels touched the ground, Cory woke with a start. It took him a moment to remember where they were. Zurich? He unfastened his seat belt and stretched. His shoulder was still bothering him from his fall in the quarterfinals in Val di Fiemme. He'd need to get one of the volunteer physical therapists to take a look at it again.

The plane came to a stop. The pilot announced in three languages that they were waiting for a gate. He apologized—there would be a short delay.

Someone tapped Cory on the shoulder. He looked up to see Lora holding out a granola bar. A big sack of them hung from her other hand.

“Coach says everyone has to eat something. Looks like it'll be at least an hour before we can get through customs and have breakfast.”

“Thanks.” Cory frowned at the bar but took it anyway. “I'd kill for some bacon and eggs, but I suppose we're more likely to get pastries and café au lait.”

She laughed. “You sound just like Teag. Neither one of you has any culture.”

“You guys broke up, right?”

She leaned against the seat, looking down at him with a playful smile. “Why? You interested?”

“No.” Cory could feel the blush climbing up his cheeks. Of course he wasn't interested. At least not in Lora. He looked away and stumbled through his practiced excuse. “I mean, you're great, or at least you seem really nice, but I'm concentrating on my skiing.”

“That's what all the boys say.” Her laugh was musical. “Glad you think I'm nice. I think you're nice, too.”

When he looked up, she gave him a sisterly smile.

It had been a lonely start to the tour, and it might be good to have a friend. He wondered what a pleasant woman like Lora had been doing with a stuck-up ass like Teag. So what if he was handsome, rich and super-hot? That wasn't enough for a relationship, was it? Like Cory was an expert? Hardly. His one relationship had lasted a only few months during his one year as a college student skiing for the University of Montana, with a guy who resented Cory's need to stay deep in the closet and who cheated on him whenever the team went out of town.

He smiled at Lora. "Thanks for bringing me food."

"Welcome." She glanced back, shook her head at someone, smiled again at Cory and moved forward to offer one to another athlete.

Cory ripped open the package and bit into the overly sweet, gooey mess.

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## CANADA

Cory stared at the event roster for the Alberta races. In Italy, for the first week of the World Cup season, he'd finished a respectable thirty-sixth in the 15 km and picked up a few seconds for the team in the four-man relay. The next weekend in Switzerland at the first sprint race, he'd finished in the top twenty-five, behind what seemed like a million flying Finns, and less than a second after Teag. Now they were headed back across the Atlantic for the Alberta races, where it looked like he was scheduled in the team sprint, a two-man relay, with Teag, the one member of the A team who Cory had never gotten along with. After their showdown in the gym, Cory could count on one hand the number of times they'd spoken.

Even though, weirdly, Cory found him attractive, he didn't actually like Teag. He was too slick and rich. Clearly the feeling was mutual. Teag barely acknowledged his existence. Cory had no idea what Teag's problem with him was. Couldn't be that he'd figured out Cory was gay—that was a secret Cory planned to keep until he'd quit skiing. Or until he had an Olympic medal swinging from his neck. Then it wouldn't matter because he'd be one of the first Americans to medal in the sport in over three decades.

And Teag couldn't be jealous. He was half a second faster in every race. Probably just had a stick up his butt and Cory'd never know why. He'd decided the first week of training that the best strategy for dealing with Robert McTeague was to ignore him.

Which wouldn't be easy if they had to share a baton.

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Alberta wasn't supposed to be this cold. Teag ran a finger across the bottom of his practice skis, checking the wax. Soon he'd need to start the complicated mix of medication and warm-ups that kept his asthma at bay. He hated when the temperature dove this low. Even through his mask, cold, dry air bit into his lungs. He stared at the digital temperature gauge. If it dropped even a few degrees they'd need to cancel the race.

When it was this cold, timing made all the difference for Teag. For sprints it didn't matter so much. The thirty-minute window his routine earned him was more than enough to take him through a four-minute race. But the team relay was a twenty-minute event. Cory was slated for the first and third legs, which left Teag to sprint the middle and last. On a regular day the order made sense—Teag was a fractionally faster skier and had more experience plunging toward the finish line on this track. If everything went smoothly, he'd finish with a few minutes left before his chest tightened and the cold sucked his breath away. He glanced at the clock. Almost time to start warming up.

Usually Canmore, an hour's drive west of Calgary, was one of Teag's favorite race venues. The course started with a long rise, so stamina counted. Then around the first turn a vista opened up, revealing craggy mountain peaks. The first time he'd skied this course, the sun cresting over snow-covered mountains had cracked his heart open. He loved coming back.

Teag glanced at Lora, who was chatting with her relay partner as they watched the groomers prepare the course for the men's race. The two women were laughing, their heads bent toward each other, their body language that of old friends happy to be together. Teag looked at Cory, who stood staring out at the course and frowning, his arms folded across his chest. When he noticed Teag watching him, he nodded, his scowl etching deep lines around his beautiful mouth. Teag sighed. This intense sense of competition and dislike they had for each other couldn't be good for the team. But he had no idea how to rein in his own jealousy, much less find a way to temper Cory's.

It was time. Teag dropped his practice skis, clipped his boots into them and headed for a side trail to warm up. When he was out of sight of the lodge, he pulled his inhaler from the pocket of his windbreaker. Trying to keep his asthma secret was silly. Half the team knew. The officials had to in case the steroids showed up in a drug test. And there was no shame in being asthmatic, at least that's what Lora always told him. But he couldn't help feeling it was a sign of weakness that he was dependent on drugs to keep breathing in the sharp cold air. He didn't want anyone else to see him. Certainly not Cory.

He made it back to the starting area with a few minutes to spare. There was something wrong with the crowd. No one was lining up. Teag slid over to Cory and stepped out of his skis.

Cory glanced at him and went back to staring crossly at the course.

“What’s up?” Teag leaned his skis against the team van.

“Some asshole drove an ATV across the track. They’re regrooming. Everything’s delayed ten minutes.”

Ten minutes. His time cushion evaporated and Teag could feel himself beginning to panic. Should he start his warm up again? Even at a sixty percent effort, if he skied too long before the race he could tire. Teag looked at Coach, who knew the time frame as well as he did. He was approaching one of the B-team sprinters. Teag did not want to sit out this race.

He turned to Cory. “I need to take the first and third. Can you anchor?”

Cory gave him a suspicious look. “Why?”

Teag felt his fear turn to anger, fueled by the shaky, light-headed feeling his inhaler always gave him. “It doesn’t matter why. Can you do it?”

“Of course I can do it,” Cory spat. “You think I can’t?”

“Well, whether you can or not, you’re going to have to.”

“Fine.”

An official was waving the first leg athletes to the starting line. Out of the corner of his eye, Teag saw Coach and the B-team sprinter approaching. He pulled up his mask, grabbed his racing skies and headed over, not bothering to look back to see what Cory was doing. What was it about that kid that got him so riled up and why the fuck couldn’t they have a normal conversation? Teag flashed on Lora and her teammate laughing. Maybe it was a guy thing. All he could think was that Cory better not fuck up the final leg. They’d be in enough trouble from Coach as it was.

As he slid back and forth in the tracks waiting for the signal along with fifteen other guys, Teag spared one last look at the sidelines where an

especially red-faced Coach stood glaring at him. Fuck it. Teag hadn't backed down when his parents insisted he give up racing, he wasn't about to step out of this race because his asthma made it hard to ski in the cold. He'd done lots of hard things before. He could do this. He wouldn't back down. Not in front of Cory.

And then they were off. The weather had kept most spectators away but a few cheered and cow bells clanged as Teag and the others scrambled up the first hill. Teag concentrated on the slide of his skis, the bite of the edges and the clatter of poles and skis as he climbed his way past a dozen other skiers. Despite his mask, the air felt biting cold. He pushed hard. He needed to get out front early, just in case.

Rounding the first corner, Teag slid past the German team. The sight of sunlight gleaming off the far mountain peaks lifted his spirits and going downhill, Teag flew past the Swede. By the next curve he was a length behind but keeping pace with Finland and Italy. His shoulders were burning, but he pushed past the halfway mark. Another uphill and it felt like sucking knives. He could see the hand-off area. Cory was sliding in the tracks, watching over his shoulder as Teag approached. Teag entered the hand-off zone and Cory started forward, slowly accelerating until Teag brushed his back and Cory took off, his legs and arms pumping.

Teag got out of the zone and sank to the ground. He pressed a gloved hand over his mouth, hoping to warm the air. Someone pushed an arm beneath his shoulder and helped him stand. Teag looked at Coach, who was shaking his head, an exasperated frown on his face.

"You gonna be okay for the next leg? I can call it. The hospital in Calvary is a long drive."

Teag shook his head. "I'm fine."

Coach nodded toward the temperature sign. It was even colder than when the race started. "Looks like this is the last race of the day."

"Guess I better make it a good one." Teag skied back to the hand-off area. Cory would be coming around that last turn soon.

Cory's hand-off to Teag went smoothly enough and Teag charged up the hill again, this time right behind the Finn. Cory must have passed the Italian. Silver was better than any American had done in a World Cup race in years. Teag put his back into it. He ignored the scream of his lungs as he sucked in icy air. He could do this. Willpower, that was all it took. Teag could hear the Italian behind him. The Finn was three lengths ahead. Teag poled hard on the downhill and hit the last uphill with his jaw clenched. The Italian was gaining on him as he hurtled toward the hand-off zone. His chest was tight and his breath was disappearing. He tried panting, willing oxygen into his legs even as they slowed. A few hundred feet. Cory was starting to accelerate and Teag wanted to yell to him to stop, to wait, wait... Teag threw himself forward, trying to move faster than his skis, beyond his body. His ski hit something, throwing him off balance. Just a little wobble, the type they'd drilled for in practice over and over again and that would normally take him only a millisecond to correct.

His oxygen starved muscles wouldn't react. The moment before he hit the ground, Teag saw Cory staring at him in horror. And then he was down, still sliding toward Cory, who had stopped at the edge of the zone and was waiting. It took everything Teag had to get up and slide slowly over to Cory and pat him on the back so that Cory could start skiing. Teag watched Cory climb the hill, dead last, before he let Coach help him off the course and into the first aid tent.

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It wasn't the fall that bothered Cory, anyone could fall. It was the look in Teag's eyes and the way his open mouth stretched that blue face mask. Cory'd found himself fascinated by the fast in and out of the material as Teag panted. That look haunted Cory as he climbed the hill. He pushed hard, wanting to chase away the memory of Teag's fear and a vague guilty feeling that maybe he'd been unfair.

Shit. Cory pushed past a couple of skiers. Was Teag okay? Cory's muscles warmed. It had felt too cold to stand around in a flimsy racing suit but as his thighs and arms pumped, he could feel himself start to sweat. One more turn.

Legs and arms pumping, he passed more skiers. The exhilaration he'd felt on his last loop, that feeling of making history, had hardened to grim determination to earn a respectable finish and avoid humiliation. Cowbells rang. A whistle blew. Cory looked up in time to see the Finnish skier glide across the line followed by the Italian. Cory put his head down and leaned into the final stretch. His bad shoulder ached and his stomach clenched. He lunged forward, passing one more skier before crossing the finish line, right in the middle of the pack.

Mackinac appeared while Cory was still catching his breath. "Nice pickup. You really slammed that last leg."

Cory shrugged. "Not that it matters."

"Hey, you made the top ten."

"We came in tenth. Not the same thing." Cory looked around at the dwindling group of skiers and spectators. "Where's everyone going? Doesn't the women's relay start soon?"

Mackinac gestured toward the temperature display, which read:  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}/-4^{\circ}\text{F}$ . "Game over."

Cory kicked out of his skis. "How's Teag?"

Mackinac shook his head. "Medic shot him full of epinephrine and he's shaking like a leaf. Coach is pissed as hell at both of you."

"Me? What did I do?"

Mackinac shrugged. "Something about how you should have stopped him. Guess he's not supposed to race when it's this cold. Triggers his asthma."

"Teag has asthma?"

"You didn't know that? He's like a fucking poster child for overcoming that shit." Mackinac turned toward the warming hut. "Let's go. It's freezing."

Cory trailed him inside, wondering how he'd missed that crucial piece of information about Robert McTeague. Coach was right to be mad. Cory hadn't been paying attention and that was unprofessional, not to mention self-

absorbed. He pictured Teag's face right before he fell. Whatever else Cory thought about him, the guy had guts.

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Teag convinced everyone that he didn't need to be driven to the hospital in Calgary. This wasn't his first attack. He endured Coach's twenty-minute lecture about how much his country had invested in him and how he could have done real damage and for what—a moment of ego. Teag kept his head down and nodded until Coach left. He'd stopped shaking but still felt jumpy. He ached all over and had the beginning of a roaring epinephrine headache.

Lora poked her head into his room to ask if he wanted to go down to dinner. He declined. Food, light and sympathy sounded even more painful than self-recrimination. It wasn't the asthma attack that bothered him, those he thought of as part of the price he paid to ski. What kept making his stomach clench was that stupid fall. He'd messed up. No other way to think about it. Cory'd done more than his share in the race and Teag had blown it.

He coughed up another lungful. The next week was going to suck. Teag grabbed a towel. This lodge was supposed to have a sauna somewhere in the basement. With everyone at dinner he should be able to use it in peace.

The brightly lit hallway had that wet-dog smell he associated with ski vacations as a child, back when skiing was a family activity and Teag was Bobby, the wild child. The Finns and Italians would be staying at fancier accommodations down the road, but Teag was fine with the more modest rooms reserved for the underfunded US team. He could barely hear his own footfalls on the soft aging carpet. In Europe the places they stayed were often spartan, with clean lines, blond wood and starched sheets. The crowds there were bigger but the rooms were smaller—funny that. A varnished wooden sign had the letters FITNESS ROOM AND SAUNA burnt in black with an arrow pointing down the stairs. A door opened somewhere. Teag felt like a fugitive as he ducked down the stairs, hoping whoever it was wouldn't see him.

The lower-level floor was linoleum rather than carpet. Another sign pointed down a dimly lit hallway. Teag swiped his key in the lock of the

marked door. Inside, a TV blared in an empty room fitted with three ancient exercise bicycles, a worn treadmill, and a rack of mismatched weights. Twin wooden doors marked by gender pointed the way to the sauna. The men's room turned out to consist of a corridor festooned with hooks at the end of which was a cedar doorway. The hooks were empty except for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. Teag considered turning back. He really didn't want company. But then another cough racked his chest and he decided what the hell, peeled out of his clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist, and opened the sauna door.

A blast of hot air and the acrid smell of cedar and sweat hit him as Teag stepped in and closed the door. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust in the dim light. The vague premonition that had started when he'd seen the familiar T-shirt coalesced as the man seated on the top bench took shape.

"I thought everyone would be at dinner."

Cory shrugged one naked, sweaty shoulder. "Wasn't in the mood for company."

"Know what you mean. The sympathy can be hard to take." Teag hoisted himself up on the opposite shelf. "But you don't have anything to feel bad about. You skied a damned fine race. Too bad your partner let you down."

Cory stared into the corner where the heater glowed red beneath fake coals. He spoke softly. "Coach is right. I should have known, should have talked you out of racing in the cold like that. He says you might have done permanent damage."

As if in agreement, Teag's lungs spasmed into a wracking cough. When he could look up, Teag saw Cory watching with concern. Teag shook his head. "It'll take a couple of days but I'll be fine. I always am."

"Still, I should have known. I wasn't paying attention and I'm sorry."

From this distance and in this light, Cory's dark eyes looked black. Teag focused on them to keep from staring at Cory's bare torso, which was even more enticing in person—bulging muscles glistening with sweat—than in the

underwear ad photos Teag kept in the bottom of his duffel. Pathetic, really, having a physical crush on his teammate.

“No reason for you to be sorry. It’s not like I go around advertising my ‘condition’.” Teag made ironic air quotes around the word. “Besides, you switched positions with me and that’s all I wanted. I wouldn’t have let you talk me out of it anyway. I really thought I’d be okay as long as I was fast. A miscalculation on my part. Not your fault.”

Cory played with the fabric of his towel and Teag had one breathless moment wondering if he’d toss the cloth off and stand naked in the sauna. When Cory didn’t move, Teag wasn’t sure whether he was disappointed or relieved. The last thing he needed was to humiliate himself even further by popping a stiffy in the sauna at the sight of his race partner’s ass. More proof that he couldn’t control his body.

Cory cocked his head and considered Teag. “One thing I don’t get. Why aren’t you a spokesman for your dad’s company? I mean, I know you don’t really need the money, but I’d think he’d want to keep it in the family.”

“He hates that I race.” Teag winced internally at the bitterness in his voice. He took a deep breath and started again. “He and my mom are convinced that skiing hard in the cold gave me asthma.” He shrugged. “Maybe they’re right. It didn’t show up until my third year on the Junior circuit. Sponsoring one of my teammates is his little way of letting me know he wants me to quit.”

Cory’s eyebrows rose. “Whoa. That’s heavy.”

Teag gave him a wry smile. “You should be flattered. He always picks the ones he knows might actually beat me.”

Cory didn’t laugh. He looked very serious as he said, “I can’t imagine what it would be like if I didn’t have my mom’s support. She’s been amazing. She even organizes a lot of my fundraising.”

“Money. It’s fucking crazy that it costs so much to race.” Teag leaned back against the cedar wall, breathing through the sting until his skin got used to the heat. “I envy your independence. My folks are always threatening to cut me

off if I don't stop. So far, they always fold, but I can never be sure about the next year."

Cory snorted. "I spend half my time hustling. Doesn't feel independent to me."

"If my folks do ever cut me off, I'll know who to come to for advice."

Teag closed his eyes and focused on inhaling and exhaling the hot air.

He opened them again when Cory said softly, "I've been hating you for how easy you have it."

Teag smiled. "And I hate you for being Bob's golden boy."

"You call your father Bob?"

"He's not the daddy type."

Cory nodded.

Teag sat forward and stretched out his hand. "If we're going to be relay partners, we should act more like we're on the same team."

"Deal. On the same team starting tonight." Cory smiled and shook Teag's hand. "Who knows, maybe we'll end up friends."

"Don't push your luck." Reluctantly, he released the handshake. "Let's go see if there's any food left."

"Good idea." Cory jumped down from his bench and moved toward the door. "I'm starving."

Teag followed him out, his hand still tingling from their touch. Friends. Just friends.

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## FINLAND

In Kuusamo, Lora made the top ten in the women's 10 km and, with a personal best, Mackinac made the top fifty in the mass start. There hadn't been a relay scheduled so Cory and Teag competed against each other in the 5 km sprint, earning eighth and sixth respectively. Overall it was the best a US team had done in years and the four decided to stay on for a few days to celebrate, relax, and enjoy the legendary ski trails—500 kilometers through the sparse woods overlooking the Lake District.

With its pedestrian village and signs for reindeer sleigh rides advertised in five languages, the little town of Ruka at the base of the alpine ski slopes had the dollhouse feel of a place built for tourists. Even sharing a room with Mackinac, Lora and Teag, the expense was going to set Cory back for a while. But it was beautiful and between racing and working out, he'd barely seen any of the European cities he visited the year before, so he gritted his teeth and put it on a card.

It was worth it. Over breakfast Teag and Lora pored over trail maps while Mackinac lingered by the coffee station flirting with a waitress. Cory concentrated on the buffet. He didn't have any information to add to the route discussions and wasn't interested in the women, so he focused on trying different fish dishes. Other than bluegill fried over a campfire, fish hadn't been on his breakfast menu before. But he found he liked the sweet relish-like taste of pickled herring, and smoked cod on toast was surprisingly good. And it was all included in the room fee, so he figured he'd better eat his fill.

Teag gave him an amused glance the third time he returned from the buffet. "They're losing money on you."

Cory smiled. "I hope so."

A group of Italian racers entered the dining room. The sprinter who had finished between Cory and Teag spotted them and smiled. Teag glanced at Lora, who seemed to be blushing as she studied the map. He caught Cory's eye and nodded toward the Italians, who'd taken a table across the room.

“You know what they call us? *Gitani*. Gypsies. Have you seen the entourage they travel with? Doctors, masseuses, physical therapists, wax technicians—not to mention you don’t see them schlepping equipment. It all comes down to funding. They have it, we don’t.”

Cory considered the group of tall, very fit men. “It must drive them crazy when we do well.”

Teag laughed. “I suppose you’re right. Still, I’d like a team doctor who stayed for more than a week.”

“I like our doctors.” Lora looked up from the map. “They’re nice people, why else would they volunteer?”

“To pad their resumes?” Teag suggested.

She shook her head and went back to the map. “You are such a cynic. What do you guys think of starting with a long climb to warm up?”

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Cory fell in at an easy pace behind Teag. The temperature was perfect, cold enough to keep the snow firm while the sun warmed his back. He’d stripped down to one layer on top and tied his windbreaker around his waist. It felt amazing to ski like a man on vacation rather than pushing himself until he puked. He could almost imagine a life after skiing, one where he worked all week and only went to the mountains on weekends. In a life like that there’d be room for someone else, someone who loved to ski and who understood the call of the woods on a cold winter day. Whoever he was, he’d need to be strong, fit, able to keep up with Cory, even challenge him. He’d need to... Cory realized he was staring at Teag’s ass, watching the muscles tighten and release as he skated ahead up the hill. Cory forced himself to look away.

“How’s your shoulder?” Teag called back.

Cory checked in. He’d forgotten all about the injury. Funny that Teag remembered. “It feels fine. Thanks.”

“Good. Keep it that way. We’re gonna surprise them in Milan on Saturday.”

“Go team.” Mackinac called from behind Cory.

Teag glanced over his shoulder. “Of course the big surprise in Milan is that Lora has a date.”

“No shit?” Mackinac’s voice grew fainter as he looked back at Lora. “You and Teag getting back together?”

“No.” Lora’s voice rang out clearly. Cory was disgusted with himself for how pleased that simple declaration made him.

As he came to the top of the hill, Teag paused and let the rest of them catch up. He smiled down at Lora. “She’s moved on from skinny redheads and is looking for someone tall, dark, and Italian.”

“Fascinating as it is, can we drop the subject of my love life?” Lora gestured to the valley below where snow covered lakes dotted the forest. “What do you think it’s like in summer?”

“Beautiful.” Teag said softly. Cory glanced at him and Teag smiled back. It was dangerous to fantasize. Made you imagine you were seeing things that couldn’t be there. Cory looked away.

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## ITALY

With its flat relay track circling through a park in the center of town, this venue was the opposite of the remote hamlets they usually skied. An actual goddamned castle towered over the start and finish line. The team was bunked four to a room in a hotel on the outskirts of Milan, and it had taken them a full hour for the van to make its way haltingly through the busy city streets. Now, on race day, a noisy crowd stood on bleachers beside the track. Temperatures hovered at freezing and the snow was wet and slick. Breathing wouldn't be a problem today.

Teag watched Cory bounce on his skis as he waited at the starting line. When the announcer called his name, he raised a pole in salute. In his form-fitting white ski suit, watch cap and goggles, Cory looked focused, confident and powerful. Of course, the Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, Italians and Germans looked good too. No slopes and wet snow meant that everyone would be fast today.

A word from the official and Cory's arms went up in expectation. He leaned forward, every muscle in his body telegraphing his readiness to bite into the snow and be off. When the signal came, Cory's start was flawless. Teag watched as he disappeared around the bend. Teamwork was much easier now that Teag didn't have to pretend to hate him. In the past few weeks they'd edged toward friendship and it felt good.

Each leg of the relay involved two loops of track. There was no way for Teag to know what was happening on the far side so he watched the corner where they'd appear and when they did, he cheered with the rest of the team to see Cory only a few lengths behind the Finn, the Swede and the German, who were tied for first. The crowd roared and cowbells rang as they flew past. Teag made his way to the hand-off zone to be ready for the slap on the back that meant it was time to ski.

When he saw Cory round the bend, Teag started moving forward, confident that Cory would catch him and tag him before he left the zone. His back tingled with awareness, waiting for Cory's tap. He heard him before he

felt him, the sound of his skis and his breath as distinctive as footsteps—then the brush of Cory’s hand down Teag’s spine which propelled him forward like a shot. Teag concentrated on the push of legs and arms. He felt coordinated and graceful and his skis sang. The Swede had fallen back a length, but the German and Finn were still battling for first place and Teag stayed a pace back. He could feel someone behind him on his left. He didn’t dare waste a fraction of a second looking back and it didn’t matter anyway. It was probably Lora’s Italian, who was fast enough to make Teag want to stay ahead of him. Another turn and they’d be passing the castle again. Teag let himself push a little harder. The crowd sound, never absent on this urban track, swelled as he passed, then faded as they rounded the corner again.

In the back stretch of his second loop, Teag unfurled. He wanted to give Cory the opportunity for glory. If he climbed closer to the lead, Cory might be able to pass. Gold, silver or bronze, it didn’t matter. Teag pushed hard, gaining on the Swede so that they rounded the final corner with Teag only inches behind. Cory spotted him and started off slowly. Teag hit his back at the very end of the pass zone, then watched Cory’s body fly into magnificent motion. Teag navigated off the course and bent double, sucking air in big gulps. He heard Coach ask if he was okay and nodded without looking up, concentrating on replenishing the oxygen leached from his muscles.

Once his breathing slowed down, he straightened and smiled. “Just catching my breath.”

“Speaking of catching...” Coach was staring over Teag’s shoulder.

Teag looked around to see the racers coming around again. Cory’d passed the Swede and was bearing down on the German. Teag smiled. “I knew he could do it.”

Coach patted him on the shoulder. “You’d better get out there. Go make some history.”

Cory slapped his back seconds after the Finns passed off. Teag flew. He could feel his heart expanding, encompassing the entire park, the city, the globe. It wasn’t like anything he’d felt before. The first loop spun by almost in

a dream and he was still feet behind the front runner. As he passed the castle, his glance fell on Cory. Teag couldn't have seen him for more than a split second and yet that image of Cory shouting from the sidelines and pumping his arms in the air seemed to fill his vision and gave him an extra boost of energy he hadn't known he possessed.

He leaned forward, ignoring the screaming of his muscles, pumping harder than he ever remembered. The Finn looked back over his shoulder and Teag knew he had him. Teag lunged forward, plunging through the final turn and into the din of the crowd. His vision narrowed so that all he could see was the finish line, a dark line in the snow. He dove toward it, each step a jump and lunge, his skis leaving the ground as his poles dug in, landing and shooting him forward as he raised his arms again. Adrenaline made his muscles tingle and air seared his lungs. He knew he'd be coughing for days but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that last extra inch he needed to push past the Finn and... Cowbells clanged, a horn blew and Teag collapsed on the snow as his leg muscles gave out. Every part of him hurt. He forced himself to get up, step out of his skis and walk toward the sidelines. Cory was running toward him with a smile cracking his face in two. In spite of the pain and the breathlessness, Teag couldn't help his own answering smile.

Cory slammed into him and wrapped his arms tightly around Teag.

"Did I pass him?" Teag looked down into Cory's gorgeous brown eyes which were ringed with red marks from his goggles and shining with happiness.

Teag flipped his own goggles up.

Cory was nodding wildly. "You did it."

"We did it." Teag rested a hand on Cory's cheek.

Cory tipped his head back and looked up at Teag. Teag held Cory's gaze, spellbound. He forgot where he was, who he was, and everything around them. Suddenly he was kissing Cory, who stayed very still for a microsecond, long enough for Teag to come to his senses and start to pull away. But then Cory opened his mouth and Teag lost himself in the play of tongues and lips.

Someone gasped.

Teag jerked back. He looked at the bleachers where the once noisy crowd had turned silent. Hundreds of eyes stared back. Teag blinked. He looked at Cory, who stood there looking shell shocked. A few feet away Coach gaped openmouthed. Behind him Lora tried to look encouraging.

Teag turned and strode toward the entrance. Cory tried to follow but Teag waved him away. He didn't want to see the pity he was sure would be in Cory's eyes when he recovered from the shock. Teag had humiliated them both and needed to get away, to be alone. The team had staked out a spot near the castle. Teag snatched his bag and started running toward the city streets. Somewhere deep in his bag, his phone trilled. He ignored it. He'd return in the evening for the podium ceremony. He owed Cory that. But for now he needed to disappear.

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Reporters surrounded Cory. "Are you and Robert McTeague lovers?"

"Is this some sort of publicity stunt?"

"How long have you..."

It was not how Cory had imagined coming out. He waved away their questions. With Coach on one side and Mackinac on the other, he pushed through the crowd. With a baffled look and an uncertain pat on Cory's back, Coach turned back toward the course. It was almost time for women's sprints.

Mackinac started to say something but Cory cut him off. "I need to talk to Teag."

"So are you two—"

"Don't you start."

"Sorry, man." Mackinac threw up his hands in the universal gesture of men backing off from an argument.

Cory pulled off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. "No. It's okay. I shouldn't have jumped down your throat."

Mackinac's expression turned into a sly smile. "Wasn't my throat you were jumping down in front of hundreds of spectators and a couple of TV cameras."

TV. Cory groaned.

Mackinac shrugged. "Of course, the good news is that you're the first men in thirty years to win a World Cup for the good old US of A Cross Country Ski Team. All those reporters were gonna want to interview you anyway—this gives you something to talk about."

"Oh fuck." Cory rummaged in his bag until his hand closed on his phone. He thumbed in Teag's number. No answer. He bit his lip and tried to imagine where Teag might have gone.

"You don't think he'll skip the podium ceremony, do you?" Mackinac looked alarmed for the first time. Apparently sexual peccadillos among teammates didn't begin to compare with blowing off the gold. Actually, if it had been anyone else's love life, Cory would have felt the same.

"Teag's a responsible guy. He'll be back. But I need to talk to him before that." As his sweat dried, Cory started to shiver. He kicked out of his ski boots, pulled a fleece and a pair of sweat pants over his racing suit and shoved his feet into snow boots. "I'm going looking for him."

Mackinac frowned. He looked at his watch. "Okay, but take your phone and don't get lost. You need to be back here in three hours at the latest."

Cory nodded. He glanced toward the castle. Would Teag have gone in there?

"Maybe he went sightseeing." Mackinac gestured toward the city. "He kept talking about that church we passed on the way in. Late Gothic, early Romanesque—I tuned him out."

Cory straightened. The Duomo. It was a start. And it would take him away from the damned reporters until he could talk with Teag.

It wasn't until he rounded the castle and found himself on a busy modern street that the enormity of it all hit him. They'd won the gold. And Teag had kissed him. Really kissed him. Away from the rest of the team, from the press

and from everyone who thought they knew him, Cory let himself remember that kiss. Teag had tasted of snow and victory. His tongue, his lips. Cory hoped like hell it wasn't a publicity stunt because that was something he wanted again. And again.

In the distance he could see the cathedral spires. He pushed through the crowd of shoppers, fear and excitement and need propelling him toward what he hoped might be the future.

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The phone in Teag's bag rang again. He ignored it. The cathedral rose above him, a stone giant decorated as delicately as a wedding cake. Tourists flowed past Teag in groups of two and five and twenty. No one paid attention to a red-haired man wearing a ski team windbreaker over a stretchy jumpsuit. It was Milan after all, Italy's fashion center, perhaps they thought he was making a statement. Was he?

He knew he should move, if only to keep his thigh muscles from stiffening. Other than understanding that shame lingered a breath away, Teag felt numb. He'd thought so long and hard about coming out, about being the first gay cross country skier and always stopped himself, not wanting his sexuality to outshine his athleticism. All things considered, that was a laugh, wasn't it?

Every time he remembered the kiss, his mind skittered away. Cory would be thinking... Oh God, he didn't want to think about what was going through Cory's mind. Poor kid had had his win ripped away by his predatory teammate who should have known better.

The phone rang.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

Teag started.

Cory was standing beside him, staring up at the cathedral. "Is the architecture Gothic or Romanesque, Mackinac couldn't remember."

"Both." Teag scanned Cory's face, looking for the anger he deserved. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be.” Cory met his gaze. His big brown eyes softened and a smile played around his lips.

“You aren’t angry?”

Cory shrugged. “Your timing was interesting.”

They’d turned to face each other. Teag held his breath, waiting for Cory to back away.

Instead he stepped closer. “You definitely got my attention. Maybe we can try it again without the audience.”

“Are you serious?” Teag watched Cory’s mouth.

Cory licked his lips, with a slow grace that made Teag’s cock stir. Teag blew out air and looked away. If he didn’t calm down the whole square would know how he felt about Cory. “We should talk.”

“I agree. We have a podium to stand on in a few hours. Can we find somewhere private?”

Teag looked back sharply.

Cory smiled. “To talk.”

As Cory held his gaze, something in Teag let go. He gave a short nod. “Last year I stayed on in a hotel near here for a few days after the race. Let’s see if they have a room.”

“So we can talk.” Cory ran his hand along Teag’s bicep.

Teag shuddered. He picked up his bag and led Cory down a side street. A few blocks down and Teag spotted the hotel marquee. He pulled Cory through the glass door into the lobby, which must have been elegant thirty years before when it was last remodeled. Now the velvet upholstery and dark woodwork exuded a worn-at-the-heels charm.

Cory whispered. “Teag, I can’t afford this.”

“Let it go, Miller. I just ruined your life. The least I can do is pay for the room.” Before Cory could object again, Teag bellied up to the ancient walnut reservation counter and negotiated a room.

“Yes, one bed, thank you, we’ll be bringing the bulk of our luggage this evening.”

Clunky key in hand, Teag started up the stairs. Cory followed, his earlier brashness gone. He looked a little embarrassed. Maybe they really would just talk.

The room had the musty smell of old carpets. A starched white linen bed with primly spaced pillows filled the room, leaving a narrow pathway to a small wooden desk and the window above it. Teag stepped inside, suddenly sure this was the wrong choice, that he was making an even bigger fool of himself, that Cory would run away. He heard the door close.

Cory cleared his throat. “I could use a shower.”

Teag turned to him. In the small room there was nowhere to stand but close. Cory didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. After a moment, he rested them on Teag’s chest.

Teag smiled down at him. “You don’t have to do this. I know you’re a sweet guy and all but—”

“Don’t be an idiot.” Cory pulled Teag down into a kiss. His lips were warm. With no crowd or cameras, Teag could let himself fall into the kiss. He cradled Cory’s face in his hands. Cory tasted like peppermint and smelled of the winter air and sweat. He opened to Teag’s tongue and pressed himself close until Teag could feel the fist of Cory’s erection against his thigh.

Cory ran his hands down Teag’s back and squeezed his ass. He pushed his thigh between Teag’s and pulled him closer. Cory’s hand slid around to caress Teag through the thin fabric of his suit. Teag groaned and ground into him. Cory was wearing sweatpants over his racing suit. Teag snaked his hand down the front of Cory’s pants. It was like skiing through fog, everything shiny, slippery and undefined. Teag leaned back, letting himself fall onto the bed and bringing Cory down on top him. The bed frame thudded against the walls and the bedsprings squeaked.

The scrape of Cory’s stubble sent shivers of excitement through Teag. He caressed Cory’s shoulders, feeling their strength through the sweatshirt. It was

like a dream and he let the kiss go even deeper to assure himself it was real. Cory's fingers dug into Teag's sides. Teag dragged down Cory's sweats so that they were racing skin against racing skin, cocks dancing together against the Lycra. It had been so long since Teag had felt the wrestle of real muscle, been overwhelmed by the strong smell of another man's sweat, the taste of his tongue and the rasp of his cheek. It didn't matter they weren't naked. Maybe that would come later, maybe it wouldn't, but the pant and groan, the huff of breath and warmth and wet—this was now. His racing skin was damp where his cock leaked against Cory's.

“Oh Jesus.” Cory broke the kiss and groaned. His ass muscles stiffened beneath Teag's hands. He threw back his head. Teag watched his face contort in glorious ecstasy. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and in that instant, as his own body responded with a wave so strong, it left him breathless. In that moment, Teag knew this was what he'd always wanted.

They lay together catching their breath. Eventually Teag whispered, “We'd better get cleaned up. We've got a medal to collect.”

“Oh that old thing.” Cory rolled off him, sat up, stretched and sloughed off his sweatshirt.

Teag pulled the zipper down the back of Cory's suit. “The showers in this place are too small for company. You can go first.”

Cory looked over his shoulder at Teag as he peeled out of his suit. “You bring guys here on a regular basis?”

Teag laughed. “You'll see. They're barely big enough to fit one person.”

Cory dropped his suit and stood. His back looked smooth and strong and his ass was as defined as Teag had imagined. Teag watched the play of muscles as he walked away. God, he was sexy.

“I see what you mean.” Cory's voice echoed from the bathroom and the shower spurted to life. Teag swung his legs off the bed and started climbing out of his clothes. He could feel his thighs and shoulders stiffening. He'd be achy tomorrow. A hot shower began to sound pretty good.

Naked, he stepped into the tiny bathroom, which consisted of a sink, toilet and shower wedged into a remarkably few square feet. Teag leaned against the sink and watched Cory through the smoked glass of the shower. This domesticity was something he could get used to. He hadn't realized how lonely he'd been.

The shower stopped and Cory stepped out. Water glistened on his strong chest and his curls lay flat against his head. He grabbed one of the soft white towels. Teag watched him dry off. He looked even better in person than he had in the ad.

Cory stopped toweling his hair and looked Teag up and down. "I wondered if you were a redhead all over."

"You think about my pubes often?"

"Occasionally." Cory smiled. "I will even more after this."

Teag laughed and pressed past Cory to the shower. He washed quickly. They really did have to talk.

When he stepped out there was Cory, leaning against the sink holding out a towel. Teag took it gratefully and dried quickly. Cory was still looking at him.

Teag dropped the towel. All the questions he'd planned in the shower—where do we go from here and what do we tell the world—dissolved in the face of Cory so close, naked and half-aroused. Teag stepped forward so they were real skin to real skin. He stroked his hands up Cory's arms, kneading the muscles. Cory let his head fall back as Teag kissed his neck. Teag slid his hands across Cory's pecs, the chest hair soft against his palms. He flicked a thumb over a nipple, relishing Cory's sharp intake of breath. Cory caressed Teag's back as Teag licked and kissed his way across Cory's shoulders and down his chest. Teag bent low and tongued Cory's right nipple until it puckered and then he did the same with the left. Steam made the bathroom air warm, like a comforting bath across Teag's lungs. He thought that the smell of this hotel's shampoo would always make him think of the moment when he sank to the floor, his knees cushioned by the wet towel, and met Cory's cock for the first time.

It was thick and earnest, like Cory himself, and surrounded by a bed of dark hair. Teag leaned close and inhaled soap and musk. He ran his hands up the inside of Cory's thighs. Cory gripped the edge of the sink as he leaned back and let his legs open. His cock stiffened as Teag flicked his tongue along the length. Running his hands up Cory's torso, Teag took him into his mouth. Cory's breath quickened. Teag blindly traced the muscles of Cory's chest. He opened wider, letting Cory's cock slide across his tongue and fill his mouth. Teag closed his eyes as he replayed the well-worn fantasy. Only this was the real thing, Cory's real skin beneath his fingers, Cory's real cock filling his mouth, Cory's fingers tangled in his hair. And it was better. God, he wanted this. Teag brought one hand down to stroke his own rock-hard cock. Cory banged against Teag's throat. He gagged, recovered and dove forward for more. Cory rocked forward and back, moaning. Each thrust sent a bolt of excitement through Teag. He could taste salt. Teag opened his eyes and looked up to see Cory tossing his head back.

Yes. This.

Cory's cock pulsed in his mouth. At the first sweet salt taste, Teag's heart blew open and he came hard, wetting the black and white tile floor. He sucked every drop out of Cory before reluctantly letting go. Teag sat back on his heels and looked up at Cory.

"Will you come back later and spend the night with me?"

Cory's eyes crinkled. "You think you could keep me away?"

Teag smiled. "I hope not."

Two hours later, still not having talked, they climbed the podium to the very top. A group of reporters stood to one side, perhaps more of them than usual, it was hard to tell. Smiling women held flowers to give to the racers. As the official approached with their medals, Cory leaned toward Teag and whispered, "Let's make history."

Teag smiled as Cory's hand curled in his and cameras flashed.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Dev Bentham is the author of several m/m contemporary romances, including Moving in Rhythm—2013 DABWAHA finalist, Tarnished Souls—a Jewish holiday series and August Ice—an Antarctica story. She has two new stories coming out soon—Bread, Salt and Wine from Loose Id (6/11/2013) and Painting in the Rain from Amber Allure (6/16/2013).*

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