

a Love's Landscapes story

# A THOREAU AFFAIR



HUNTER FROST

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## A THOREAU AFFAIR

**By Hunter Frost**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

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's Landscapes*.

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.

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

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## Photo Description

Two men dressed in heavy coats and printed scarves stand together in a secluded forest with snow on the ground. One man, who faces the camera, has short, light brown hair, and wears thin-rimmed glasses. He has a dimple in his chin and he is smiling slightly. The other man, with darker hair, rests his head on the other man's shoulder. His eyes are closed and he wears an expression of contentment.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I became a writer-hermit after I retired as a university professor. I prefer living alone in my small forest house and I feed my muse with my observations and thoughts. No one disturbed me here in almost two years and now I have an unexpected guest—one of my former students. He said it was a coincidence he found me, his car broke down and other reasons. But I feel it is not quite true. I'm sure he wants to tell me something and in fact I want to tell him something too...*

*\*Please let it be HEA, no angst, GFY or sad themes, just love and peace, as it must be in life. :)*

*Sincerely,*

*vessto*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** teaching, writers, age gap, friends to lovers, reunited

**Word Count:** 11,108

*Acknowledgements*

To all of my wildly supportive, encouraging, and whip-cracking friends. I couldn't have done this without you.

# A THOREAU AFFAIR

**By Hunter Frost**

*"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."*

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods*

Movement outside the kitchen window caught my eye.

I straightened, drying the dish in my hands as I gazed out into the wintery landscape. Snow blanketed the tall pine and fir trees down to the lowest brush and rock. The sun might have blinded me to any disturbance over such a sea of white, but today its rays were completely hidden by a dark, overcast sky; a sky which threatened to let loose a massive storm in the coming hours.

I dismissed the commotion outside as some mountain animal. There were any number of them here—birds, bears, squirrels, and deer, to name a few. The wildlife had been only one of the reasons I bought this cabin nearly two years ago. As a writer, I had wanted a home where I could self-reflect as well as harness my creativity. My muse thrives in nature—in quiet, peaceful surroundings that can calm my typically noisy mind. Without this environment, the artistic voices had a tendency to overwhelm me; at times to the point of paralysis.

I had already written two bestselling novels since moving here, outside Lake Tahoe, tucked away in the tree-laden slopes. The wildlife and a couple of remote ski lodges were my only real neighbors. I didn't get many visitors. Occasionally a wayward skier or the UPS delivery driver might come around, but I wasn't lonely. I preferred the solitude... mostly.

Returning the dish to the cupboard, I turned back around to see something move past a cluster of trees way down the path that led in from the road. It didn't move fast enough to be a car, but it pushed forward through the foliage at a solid pace. I leaned forward to get a better look. It didn't have the bulk to be a bear and it moved too steadily to be a deer. I knew I would see whatever it was when the trees thinned out on the lane.

I waited with patient curiosity as my visitor slowly came into view.

And my heartbeat swiftly set to pounding in my ears.

I recognized him immediately, his gait and lean limbs easily identifiable, even as he trudged through the heavy snow in his black knee-length coat. But it was his messy, untamed dark hair that truly gave him away.

Alex Hughes.

Alex had been my student for an American Poetry class when I taught English Literature at the University of San Francisco. He had been one of my best students, with the most talent and potential. And yet his innocent charm and artistic mind made him a verifiable force of nature—and absolutely irresistible. This had made him exceedingly dangerous to a simple professor like me, one who found himself smitten from the moment Alex spoke in class.

When the path led him behind another cluster of trees, I pinched the bridge of my nose, rubbing the spot where my glasses rested.

*How did he find me? What was he doing here?*

By the time I glanced up again, he was already rounding the driveway, and I suddenly felt guilty for neglecting to shovel the front walk or the path to the door.

Three knocks sounded on heavy oak. The same staccato pattern he used back when he'd come to my office to discuss the assignments for my class, and then later just to talk whenever he was on campus.

I briefly considered not answering; a fleeting thought that churned my stomach knowing I could conceive of it. How could I turn him away? No matter what my feelings, he was obviously alone. I couldn't leave him to slog back to wherever he came from with a considerable storm on the way. I wouldn't be able to do that to anyone, let alone Alex.

I folded the dishtowel on the counter and ran a quick hand through my hair as I walked over to the door. I opened it to find him facing the other direction.

“Alex?”

He turned around and a cell phone slipped from his grip, landing by his feet. He didn't bend to retrieve it. “Professor Stevens,” he said, a smile barely reaching the corners of his mouth—a mouth I had tried not to focus on whenever he spoke. It was a challenge pretending not to notice the subtle swell of his lower lip after he had worried it with his teeth, as he had the habit of doing, or watching his lips curl so sweetly right before he broke into laughter.



“Professor?” he said again, this time as a question. “This is *your* house?” He shook his head and finally bent to get the cell phone from the stoop. “My car broke down off the main road and this was the first house I found!”

“Really? Where did your car break down?”

“Right off River Road, at the bridge.”

“You walked all the way here from Highway 89?”

He nodded, his cheeks pink, probably from exertion. “I know. It was a trek. But I counted on there being homes here.”

I had a hard time believing that of all the places to break down, Alex would be nearest to *my* home. Why was he even in Tahoe, anyway? Alone? Driving through some of the worst weather of the season? I had a slew of questions, but I could ask them once inside. The material of my flannel shirt wasn't enough to keep the cold from chilling my skin, and I could see our breath in the frigid air.

Alex swallowed and fidgeted as if he wanted to say something, but he only blinked at me with those familiar amber eyes.

“Come in, Alex. We can figure this out in the cabin, where it's warm.” I stepped back from the doorway and gestured for him to enter.

“Thank you, Professor.” He walked past me and smiled. He seemed nervous, unsure of what to do with himself as he stood there. It was unusual for Alex to be anything but confident and comfortable. I was always the one wound up tighter than an eight-day clock.

He began to shrug out of his coat, and I offered to take it. He thanked me and unwound the scarf from his neck, and I hung both on the rack near the door. He looked incredible in a pale blue cashmere sweater and low-slung jeans. He always looked incredible. That was part of the problem, *my* problem.

His eyes scanned the room, coming back to settle on me. “This place is stunning.”

“Thanks, I—” I had been about to tell him about the cabin and how I acquired it, but I had forgotten why I had moved out here in the first place. “Why don't you have a seat?” I led him over to the couch in the living area. “Can I get you something?”

He sat down and gazed up at me with those soft, golden-brown eyes that could bring me to my knees in moments. My cheeks burned and I cleared my throat. Alex had only been here five minutes, and I was already losing it.

"I'd love a hot cup of coffee. It's brutal out there." He smiled and rubbed his palms over his thighs.

"Of course." I had to tear my eyes away from the motions of his hands. Luckily, I had a freshly brewed pot. I had been writing for most of the day and had just taken a break to start dinner when Alex showed up. I poured him a cup and added a spoonful of raw sugar.

"You remembered," he said, once he tasted it.

"So I did." I didn't even have to think about how he took his coffee. I knew. "We sure had enough of the stuff during your office visits." I perched on the edge of the recliner across from him. Sitting too close wouldn't be wise. "So what's wrong with your car?" I asked, before we could dwell on my thorough knowledge of his coffee habits.

He wrapped his hands around the mug and stared into it. "Not sure. The check engine light came on and it coasted to a stop. I couldn't get it started again."

"Did you call someone?"

"I would have, but my phone's dead. That's why I set off on foot."

"You probably would've had better results had you stayed near your car and flagged down traffic."

"I'd agree if I hadn't found your house instead." He grinned.

I chuckled. His smile was contagious. "I still can't believe you're here."

He choked as he took another sip, and coughed.

"You okay?" I jumped up to grab some napkins. He nodded and coughed a few more times, taking the napkins from me.

"Wrong pipe," he croaked.

Something was amiss. Tension oozed off of him. In two years, Alex couldn't have become the bundle of nerves sitting before me now.

"You need a phone," I offered.

"One that isn't dead, preferably."

I smiled and got up to fetch my cell phone off the kitchen counter. How surreal it was to have Alex here in my cabin completely by accident. If I believed in kismet or any type of fate, I might have said this was it. However,

years of studying classic literature had made me a cynic, and I worried this was more likely some form of tragic irony.

I handed him my cell and went to get myself a cup of coffee while he made the call.

"I'm actually at a nearby home of... a friend," he said, glancing up at me as he spoke on the phone. "Well, I'm not—Yes, I understand but—Can you hold on for a moment? Thanks." He covered the phone with his palm. "Roadside service doesn't want to come out until tomorrow due to the storm."

Tomorrow? That would mean...

Alex's eyes fell. "I'm sorry to put you in this position."

I sighed. "Tell them that's fine."

"But—"

"Alex..." I said in my best professorly tone, peering at him over my glasses. It worked on my most unruly students. It didn't fail me this time, either.

He gulped and nodded.

"Okay, tomorrow," he said into the phone. "Yes, please call me to let me know. No, this number belongs to Dr. Lane Stevens. Let me give you my number. My cell should be charged by then." Alex gave his number and hung up.

I didn't know what to say. A myriad of thoughts filled my mind, even more than usual. Alex would be staying here—with me—overnight. I'd have to watch him as he bit his lip, hear him as he sighed, smell him as he came close, and listen to him as he spoke of how I had left without a word two years ago. Because I'm sure we'd come to that.

"You could drive me to one of the lodges. You know, if staying here is too much... of an inconvenience."

Did he read that on my face? In my body language? He had always been perceptive to my moods, and unfortunately, my thoughts. I both loved and hated that about him. "I don't want to press our luck getting stuck on the road out in that storm."

"Okay." His gaze went back into his coffee mug.

"You can stay here tonight, Alex. I have a guest room. But tell me how you ended up all the way over here in Tahoe? You still live in San Fran, right?"

He shifted in his seat. There were those nerves again. And they weren't mine for once.

"I do still live there. I was visiting friends in Tahoe City this week. I have a meeting with a couple musicians in Reno on Friday and was driving up a day early so I could enjoy the scenery."

Alex was a lyricist. An excellent one, to be honest. He had begun writing poetry prior to my class, but something held him back from really feeling the words, or so he told me. He wrote well, yet his words seemed stilted and forced. He said music had helped him compose stanzas more true to his style and voice. I encouraged him to follow his muse and listen to what it wanted him to do.

After he had found a few local bands that needed his help, he began writing lyrics for numerous musicians who admired his work. Word of mouth in the business made him somewhat of an overnight success. Thankfully, he had finished his college degree. I wished I could have seen him walk across that stage for his graduation, but I had already left UCSF, and I figured it was better to stay away. I had my contacts at the university tell me about his graduation and accolades. I continued to keep track of his work, and my sources proved he remained in high demand. It made me proud, and a little wistful.

Of course, this meant his explanation for why he had been driving up Highway 89 didn't sound unrealistic at all. He had a perfectly legitimate reason for being in the area. So why was there a nagging doubt in the corner of my mind?

"You have an overnight bag in your car?" I asked.

"Yes, but I stuffed all the important things in my coat. I didn't know what I'd run into on the road, and I didn't want to be weighed down by a bag. I have a change of underwear and socks, my toothbrush, and my wallet, phone, and keys. That's all I need."

"You travel light."

He smiled. "You know how I feel about dependency on material things."

"I know. You rarely had your books for class and you'd only submit your work digitally."

He laughed. "I'm eco-conscious! Besides, remembering to bring books and papers to class would have seriously ruined my workflow. I also thought it

would save you time.” He ruffled his hair, and I wondered if he still used the same jasmine-scented shampoo.

“I didn’t mind. Like I told you every time you asked.”

“I know.” He took another swig of his coffee, contemplating me over the rim of the mug. Damn, his amazing eyes had the strength to draw me in within seconds. I shook it off, realizing that I was staring.

“Let me make you dinner to repay you for your hospitality?” he asked.

“That’s very kind of you, Alex, but I’ve got that covered.”

“Please. It would make me feel better about all this.”

He gave me that look that had the potential to charm the pants off any respectable man. “How about you help me with dinner?”

He beamed. “I can do that.”

I got up and walked to the kitchen with Alex in tow. He washed his hands while I grabbed various vegetables from the refrigerator and pantry, and a saucepan for some soup.

“Why don’t you cut up some tomatoes, mushrooms, carrots, and onion for a salad, and I’ll heat up a can of soup and wash up the lettuce?”

“Sounds good to me. I can use the knives in this block?” He pointed to the knife block near the cutting board.

“You always were the smartest one in the class,” I said, turning back to the sink.

He laughed. “You’re biased.”

I nearly dropped the head of red-leaf lettuce in my grip. “How so?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

“Come on, Professor. I enjoyed your class and use much of what I learned every day. How many of your students can say that?”

I exhaled the breath I realized I was holding and tore lettuce leaves into the spinner. “Oh, right.”

I heard the repetitive knock of the knife against the wooden board behind me.

“How is business these days?” I asked, attempting small talk. I didn’t want to tell him I already knew how great it was, that I had made sure to keep up

with his career since I had left the university. Surely he would think me a stalker. And I don't think I could give him a satisfying explanation as to why I wasn't; except that I'd never planned to see him again, let alone be near enough to touch him.

"Business is booming. Sometimes I wonder if I made a mistake in putting myself out there. I'm always working. Even this week visiting friends, I still needed to write. I hoped the mountains would serve as some inspiration."

"And?"

"I got a lot done. More than usual."

"That's great. I'm glad your muse feeds off them."

"Like yours does?"

I kept forgetting how much he knew about me. We had spent quite a bit of time together, and while never outside of school, we'd talk for hours about everything. Alex was different from other students—mature for his years, comfortable in asking controversial questions, effortlessly artistic, and the most attractive man I'd ever met. Soon I had a hard time remembering who we really were: a teacher and his student, nearly twenty years apart in age, one tame and uptight, the other wild and carefree. Those moments when I found myself overlooking such things were when I panicked the most.

"I'm not sure why the mountains, the trees, the air, and everything wild here affect me like they do. I have theories of course, but you know I could write them better in a thesis than tell you outright." I tossed the lettuce into a big bowl.

"Some things don't require words," he said, as I turned toward him to fetch the can-opener for the soup. He winked. "But we probably shouldn't spread that around, considering both of our careers depend on the pesky things."

I laughed. I had missed that light-hearted wit of his.

I set about opening the can of soup and pouring it into a saucepan. The gas clicked as I turned it on. "So tell me the truth, Alex—" I began, but a crash sounded behind me, followed by a curse. I spun around to see him holding his finger. "What happened?"

"Cut myself." He grimaced, studying his fingertip.

"Is it really deep?"

"I don't think so." He popped the finger in his mouth and I made the mistake of watching him as he sucked on it. Dark pink lips closed around the lone digit, sending tendrils of heat spiraling through me. I'd be perspiring soon. Glancing up, he caught me staring. I froze.

He didn't move or try to speak. He rarely did when he would catch me losing myself in him back when it happened at the university. Conversations in my office would turn into moments of silence, words completely failing me—a highly unusual phenomenon, considering words were my life. What most people didn't know was that words were a constant in my chaotic head. I knew nature calmed and harnessed the chattering muses, but Alex could shock them into silence. He would track me with his gemstone eyes, his lips parted enough to make me sweat. I craved to know what he was thinking when I lost control like this and yet, at the same time, I prayed he'd never tell me.

I inhaled slowly. Having him here was already proving to be a bad idea. I had to push myself to speak. "I'll get my first aid kit. You wash up."

When I returned, he was at the sink, and I opened the kit, placing it next to him. "There's anti-bacterial wash and Band-Aids in there."

Alex smiled as he dried his hands. He thanked me, but continued to eye me as if he wanted to say something. I knew that look well, because I'm sure I wore it nearly every moment around Alex. The man stirred my soul to the very core.

He turned back to the kit to attend to his wound.

"How about I finish up the vegetables?" I asked, checking the cutting board and knife for blood.

He pivoted to glare at me. "Don't coddle me."

The glare made me chuckle. "I just thought I'd offer." I stood next to him at the sink and cleaned the knife.

He finished with the bandage. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you."

I dried the knife and gave it to him. "I might have been coddling. I apologize."

He smiled, but his brow furrowed as he turned back to slicing mushrooms.

I finished drying the lettuce and stirred the soup. "What were we talking about again?" I asked, as I opened the cupboards to retrieve some bowls. I hoped to revive the momentum of our conversation.

"You were going to tell me how much you're enjoying living out here," he said, and chopped the carrots.

That didn't sound right, but I honestly couldn't recall what we had been talking about before he cut himself and I got lost in him. "I've written two books, and I'm almost finished with the third. This place has done wonders for my writing. I'm ecstatic."

"I read your books," he said, and my heart swelled. I didn't think Alex had the time to read them with his busy life.

"I'm flattered."

"Please. You know how much I love your writing. I was your biggest fan when all you had written was *Juxtaposed*. You keep getting better. I'd say this place has been good for you." He finished with the vegetables, and I began assembling our salad bowls, riding high on his compliments.

"Thank you, Alex. I believe it has been good for me." I smiled. Then the guilt set in.

I knew he had asked about me at the English department after I had left so abruptly. The department's head administrative assistant, Shannon, let me know. I left strict instructions that no one, except for her, should have my address. I changed my email and phone numbers as well. I wasn't trying to be cruel. I believed it in our best interests to part ways, especially after the last time we were in my office.

He had asked me to the opening of a new exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art with dinner afterward. I politely declined. He seemed disappointed and inquired if we could try it some other time. I told him I'd think about it. Three days later, I had packed up and left. I had been planning to come out to this place for a while, but when Alex took that step, I knew it was the right time. I knew it was harsh, but deep down I wanted him to forget me and move on with his life. The life I knew would be amazing.

I set the table and had Alex open a bottle of Chardonnay. We sat across from each other at the small dining table that had never been used by anyone other than myself. Alex poured us each a glass.

"To old... friends," he toasted.

I pressed my lips together and smiled hesitantly. "Cheers," I replied and clinked my glass to his.



We both studied each other as we drank, unspoken words piling up against some invisible barrier. He had to have questions and I had my own. But were we really prepared for the answers?

\*\*\*\*

*“In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood”*

—Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

We chatted over our dinner, deftly avoiding difficult subjects. I asked him about his work, and I found he spoke about it with such reverence I could have burst with pride. It thrilled me knowing how much he loved composing and how successful he had become. He flattered me with more compliments and asked me about my books; deep and probing questions that only Alex could ask. I had missed our conversations, whether about academics, literature, current events, or anything else we could dream up. He had such an inquisitive and constantly questioning mind—he reminded me so much of myself when I was his age, it was uncanny. I wondered what he did to quiet the muses in his head. He mentioned they could get loud at times. I found nature, solitude, and simplicity—following in the footsteps of my mentor, Henry David Thoreau. But where did Alex find his calm?

When we finished our meal, he insisted on washing the dishes, despite my protests. We ended up working together, and it didn't escape me that we made a good team. We always had.

“I'm guessing you don't have a television,” Alex said, once we had finished.

I stared at him like he had gone mad, and he laughed, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket and tossing it on the coffee table.

“You want to charge that?” I asked, glancing at his phone. It lit up briefly before it went dark. It was then I saw something.

“Yes. Please.” He jumped up and went to his coat at the front door. He came back to the living room with his charger, and I showed him the outlet under my writing desk near the window.

I sat down on the couch. “I have my computer if I need to watch anything. I stream music and surf the net, too. I'm not completely ‘unplugged’.”

"I never implied that extreme. But even Thoreau left Walden Pond after a couple of years. He couldn't take living off the grid forever." He sank into the recliner.

I squinted. I thought about his phone. Then I remembered what I had said in the kitchen before he had cut himself. Something about telling me the truth. I had merely wanted to ask him about life after college. Had that simple statement distracted him enough to make him cut himself? Alex wasn't clumsy, usually. He had to be lying to me. The nervousness, the casual demeanor, it all made sense.

"Who told you where I lived?" I asked.

His eyes widened and he opened his mouth. I waited for him to deny it or say something in protest. Instead, he took a breath and averted his gaze, rubbing his palms over his knees. "Shannon." He bit his lip, and my heart thumped against my chest. "Don't get her in trouble. She only gave me the city, and I had to work on her for a while for that."

I scratched my chin. I knew it was too much of a coincidence.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Your phone flashed a ninety-five percent charge. It's obviously not dead." I leaned back and studied him as he toyed with the edge of his sweater. "You didn't have to lie to me, Alex."

"I didn't plan on it. But when I saw you, I panicked and lost my nerve."

"What do you mean?"

His eyes jerked up to meet mine. "Considering how you left things, I was afraid to say anything that might cause you to shut down and head for the hills. However, seeing as you've already done that—" He paused to gesture around the cabin. "I wanted to tell you the truth. It didn't go as planned. Then this storm mucked things up even more."

I swallowed, unable to stop myself from asking my next question. "What is the truth?"

He inhaled deeply and held my gaze. "I'm in love with you."

I didn't think my heart could beat any faster or harder than it was already, but I was wrong. Instinctively, my hand came up to clutch at my chest. I slid it up to massage my shoulder, hoping Alex wouldn't think he had given me a heart attack.

"I..." I began, but words left me. Again. I just stared at him, dumbstruck. I had thought Alex's feelings were that of a simple crush. But to know they had gone as deep as... love?

"Let me guess, you don't know what to say," he said, and the dejected expression on his face nearly did me in. "Fine, I'll talk then," he continued, his voice gaining strength. "I asked you out and within three days you packed up and left, without telling those who cared about and respected you where you had gone. It's like you vanished into thin air." He ran his hands through his hair, leaving it to stick up straight. "It was the *most* epic of rejections."

An ache throbbed in my head, and I forced myself to speak. "Moving here when I did wasn't all over you." At least that was what I had been telling myself, repeatedly, for the last two years. "I had mentioned leaving the university before. I didn't have any classes over the summer, and I figured it was time to go." That explanation sounded lame, even to me.

"Without a going away party, a forwarding address, or an email or phone number? I may be young, but give me some credit."

"Alex..."

"I'm not a child. You could have talked to me. I would have been disappointed, but if you didn't want anything more than friendship I'd have accepted that. Once you left, I wondered if we ever really were friends."

"We were friends. We *are* friends."

"Friends don't leave without saying goodbye." His soft voice wrapped around my heart and squeezed it like a vise.

I closed my eyes for a moment, hoping to quiet the screaming in my head. When I opened them he was staring at me, those amber eyes penetrating my very core. "I thought it would make it easier."

"Easier for whom?"

I had thought leaving the way I did would force Alex to forget me quickly. He'd be angry enough to think I wasn't worth his time. I assumed his self-confidence would stomp all over me. Could I have been wrong? Every moment next to him made me second-guess my motives. Hell, he made me second-guess everything.

Alex sighed. "I thought I might hear something from you one day, but here it is, nearly two years later, and nothing. Not even a word for my graduation."

He shook his head, folding his arms over his chest. "Yet, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to hate you. I wanted an explanation, and I wanted to hear it directly from your lips before I gave up. I refuse to believe you never had any feelings for me. For God's sake, you'd look at me like you could devour me in one bite. You still do! But if you tell me you want nothing to do with me from now on, I'll deal with it. As long as you promise you'll be honest with me... and yourself."

I took a breath. Alex wanted answers. And after what I did, and what he'd gone through, I owed him that much. This was the determined Alex I remembered. "I promise."

He leaned back in his chair. "Talk to me."

I rubbed my temples. I wouldn't prolong the inevitable. "I didn't want to get in your way."

His brow furrowed. "I'm not following."

"You're young and brilliant. You have a blossoming career and a life full of opportunities ahead. Having me in your life would hold you back. Eventually you'd end up resenting me. I would prefer you hate me for leaving before anything happened, rather than years later, when you realized how much time you had wasted."

"Why would you think that?"

"I'm too old for you, Alex. I thrive in the quiet, I enjoy simple living in the middle of the woods, and I'm not about to go traipsing around the world with a sexy young thing, no matter how much I care about him."

He began to reply, but stopped. "Sexy young thing?" He almost smiled.

I nodded. "And I care about you a great deal."

He hesitated, as if trying to remember what he was saying. "You make it sound like you're at death's door. You're like, what, forty-five?"

"Thirty-nine, and thank you for making my point," I deadpanned.

"I'm not making your point. If anything I'm showing you that the difference between forty-five and thirty-nine is inconsequential."

"It's the difference between twenty-two and thirty-nine that's the issue. Seventeen years! Our lives are at completely different stages. You're embarking on a new career, exploring new and uncharted paths, ready to see

the world with fresh eyes. And I... I retired from teaching to live here and write my books. I'm content to spend my days walking in the woods and tapping into the creative outlet in my head. That's what I want."

"And to do this you need to be alone?"

I hadn't thought about it since I'd arrived at the cabin, but then I hadn't given myself permission to dwell on it for long. "Yes, if that's where my path takes me."

"Sounds like a cop-out, if you ask me." His palms were back on his knees. "It's mighty convenient that you moved out here right when things got complicated."

"Life doesn't have to be difficult. Sometimes it works out the way it should."

"You ran away! How can you justify that as 'working out'?"

I didn't have a decent response to that. Was I running away? I guess I was. But it was for the best, right? Somehow, he had managed to turn my logic, and my best intentions, upside-down.

Alex sighed. "I know how you get stuck in that head of yours; I only wish you'd give your heart a listen once in a while. I bet you'd be surprised at what you hear."

"Sometimes what feels right isn't always the best choice for all those involved."

Alex's eyes flickered in the firelight. "No, but 'all those involved' never got a chance to weigh-in on the matter. How fair is that?"

How did this twenty-two-year-old get to be so wise? Emotionally, he could run circles around me. I heard the rampant wind outside, but it was nothing compared to the sound of the blood in my head. My own storm raged inside me. "It's not fair at all," I whispered, closing my eyes.

After a moment, he spoke, low and even. "Keep your eyes closed. And do your best to shut out the voices in your head. Focus on the one in your heart. I know it's there. You just have to listen."

Normally, I'd go outside to shut them up, the natural sounds of the earth and wind absorbing them like a sponge. But heading out wasn't an option with the storm in full affect. I focused on my heart, but it was no use. The noise in my head triumphed, and my heart sighed in defeat.

"I'm sorry, Alex. I can't." My eyes fluttered open.

His hands were back in his hair, his expression grim. "If you can't, I can't either." He got up from the recliner. "Which room is mine?"

I blinked and pinched the bridge of my nose. "On the right."

"You can relax now. I'm done," he said, and the words sliced deep into my gut. He turned away to take his phone and charger. "I'd leave, but I don't want to kill myself in this storm. I'll be gone in the morning. And you'll be alone again, just as you wish, Professor." He reached for his coat from the rack and strode into the guest room, closing the door soundly behind him.

I stared after him for what seemed like an eternity.

What was I doing? Alex had searched me out, coming all the way here to tell me he loved me, and I sat here like a fool, blaming anything and everything for turning him away—our age difference, his talent, my path, the sun, moon, and stars... Then there were the muses. How did I ever allow them to take complete control of my life?

As the fire crackled and popped next to me, I had a moment of complete clarity.

Somehow the muses had become something else.

Fear.

Fear of losing that control I thought I had over my simple life. Fear of chaos. Fear of the future. Fear of repressing Alex and losing his respect and love, when that's exactly what I was losing right now. I had sabotaged my happiness in order to protect myself from any possible conflict.

I was a coward. And I had hurt the one person who could give me everything I had ever wanted.

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*"The only remedy for love is to love more."*

—Henry David Thoreau

My hands balled into fists, and I got up, marching to the door of the guest room. I barged in without knocking.

He stood at the side of the bed, his head hung low. He sniffed and raised his head up, wiping his eyes as I entered. He was crying. Alex was crying because of me. The sight ripped my heart in two. And I snapped... into action.

I closed the distance between us in a flash and took hold of his tear-streaked face, drawing him into the kiss I had been yearning to give him since the first day we met. There would be no holding back. Never again.

I thrust my tongue between his sweet lips, and he opened them to me with a surprised moan. At first he sagged against me, but within moments he clawed at my back, shoulders, and buttocks, whimpering into my mouth. I shook with need, my moans raw and hoarse, as he tugged at my shirt. I threaded my hands into his wild hair, trembling at how it felt, entwined with my fingers. I had wanted this for so long. I tightened my grip, aware I had surrendered everything to my desperate desire.

I tore my mouth away from his. “Forgive me. I tried to resist and convince myself otherwise, but I’ve never wanted someone more.”

He pulled off my glasses and tossed them on the nightstand. “Prove it,” he whispered, his mouth swollen and wet from our kisses.

I pushed him onto the bed, and he gasped at the shock of it. I was just as shocked at my own behavior, but Alex’s grin spurred me on. As I crawled on top of him, I melded our bodies together, reconnecting our mouths, hungry to explore and taste. He was fresh and crisp, like mountain rain mixed with the tangy bite of the white wine he drank at dinner. I couldn’t get enough.

My length already throbbed, hard and ready to burst with the slightest of friction. He wrapped his arms around me tight, hands fisting in my clothes. The kiss was that of a man starved, his frantic sucking and biting driving me wild. He thrust upward with his hips, locking his legs around my waist—and I felt the spark before the explosion.

“Oh god... Alex, I’m coming,” I choked into his mouth as my orgasm blasted forth, my body jerking and pulsing against his.

“Hell,” he croaked. “Me too.” He gave a loud grunt and convulsed under me. I latched onto him for dear life.

Unintelligible words fell from our mouths as we rode out wave after wave of pleasure. I lay there on top of him, my body wet and spent, trying to catch my breath. I worried I might be crushing him. But worry turned to giddy exhaustion, and I chuckled at the absurdity of it all. I laughed harder, and it felt good.

Alex soon joined in, laughing along with me.

“We sure are a pair,” I managed to say.

“That was...” Alex shook his head and grinned.

“Both mind-blowing and comical at once,” I said, placing a kiss under his ear.

He nodded and laughed. “I haven’t come that fast or that hard since... since high school.”

“Same here, but that was eons ago for me.” I pushed myself up to look at him. His face was shadowed, but I saw the flash of white teeth as he smiled up at me.

“Damn, if I had known you could kiss like that I would have made the trip out here much sooner.”

I smirked, but my cheeks burned.

His brow pinched. “You’re bleeding.” He ran his thumb over my bottom lip and it stung. “Did I do this? I’m sorry, Professor.”

“I’m more than willing to pay the price of passion with you in my arms.” I licked the pad of his thumb. “And you better call me Lane from now on.”

“Lane...” he whispered, and my length stirred.

I rose up onto my haunches. “Alex, I want to tell you.”

His breath hitched. “You don’t have to rush—”

“Hush. You told me to be honest. And I’m tired of denying it. I love you.”

Alex smiled, and it rivaled the most vibrant sunset. Thoreau might have attempted sonnets if he had seen it.

He went to the buttons on my flannel shirt, anxiously undoing them. He kept his eyes on mine as he did, his sexy, swollen lips parted. He was down to the last few when I stopped him.

“I have an idea,” I said.

He raised one eyebrow suggestively. “Do you now?”

I held his hands in mine and stood, hauling him up with me.

He pressed his amazing body against me, sliding his fingers into my hair. “Tell me.”

I groaned at the crush of his already massive hard-on. “Back to the living room,” I said, unable to resist grabbing his tight behind. He let out a strangled



cry. Before I was drawn back into those tempting lips, I tugged him behind me and walked out of the guest room.

“Help me move the coffee table over,” I said.

He smiled, and we moved the table aside quickly. I grabbed two thick blankets, flaring them out onto the rug before the fire, and I tossed a few couch pillows with them as well.

“I’m impressed,” Alex said, and toed off his boots. “In front of the fire? This is pretty wild for you, isn’t it?”

I slid out of my shoes. “Extremely.”

He pulled his sweater over his head, throwing it on the couch, while I undid the remainder of my buttons. He reached for me, dragging me toward him by my opened shirt. “Let me do the rest. I fantasized about you during every class, hoping to get a glimpse of naked skin.” He pushed my unbuttoned shirt off my shoulders and ran his palms over my T-shirt. “I nearly lost it the first time I saw you in short sleeves. All that exposed forearm and bicep.”

I chuckled, but my breathing was ragged. His fingers found sensitized spots, even under a layer of cotton. “And yet, even with those distractions, you still managed to get an A in my class. How did you do it?”

His fingertips slid up my arms, caressing. He shrugged. “Multi-tasking?”

I laughed. “I may have to rethink your grade.”

“I’ll stay after class for extra credit.” He grabbed the edge of my tee and jerked it up over my head, whipping it aside. His gaze fell to my chest. He licked his chops like an animal. “I’d do anything for you, Professor.”

“You’ll give me an ego,” I rasped, the way he eyed me giving me chills.

“Impossible,” he whispered against my lips, as his hands rolled over my shoulders, and then brushed over my chest, teasing my nipples. As his fingers traveled down my stomach, my gut clenched with excitement. He kissed me lightly, hovering there, watching my reactions as he touched me, a smile always a hint away.

He began undoing the fly on my jeans, the sound of the unfastening zipper forever etched on my brain. Soon the jeans were in a pool at my feet, and I stepped out of them, leaving me in my boxers. I was sticky and wet—the previous orgasm, my current pre-excitement, and the heat of our bodies—coming together in one hot mess. And I loved it.

Alex cupped me through my boxers, and I moaned near his mouth. He pressed up against me, his fingers slipping under the waistband of my shorts and grasping my behind. I breathed heavily into his mouth, and he kissed me deeply. In seconds, my boxers were off, and I was completely naked.

“Floor,” he broke the kiss to demand.

We both fell to our knees, and I went to pull his shirt up.

“No.” He stopped and pushed me down so I was on my back. “I need to taste you first.”

I could have come again in an instant from just those words and the hungry look on his face. I moaned as he nipped and kissed my jaw and neck, continuing over my chest to lap at my nipples. I gasped. His tongue dove into my navel, and I arched, my straining length jealous of the attention.

“Look at me, Lane,” he said.

I rose up onto my elbows in a sexual haze.

His eyes were dark and the firelight danced over his beautiful features as he curled his palm around me and kissed the glistening tip.

“Oh...” I watched as his tongue darted out to lick me and swirl around the head. My breath caught in my throat.

His eyes closed as his mouth took me inside, and a deep guttural moan resounded in my chest. My head fell back and verged on sensory overload.

He slid off momentarily to tell me how much he loved the taste of me, how he had dreamed of giving me every kind of pleasure since we had met. He made me shake with an unnamed emotion that spread from the tips of my toes up through the top of my head. My groin buzzed with every movement of his mouth, his tongue and lips driving me slowly insane.

Within moments, the building pressure had come to a crescendo.

“Stop. Alex. Not yet.”

He withdrew quickly, and I groaned dragging him up and on top of me. “I’ve told you before that brilliance is in your bones. Apparently, it seeped into your mouth and hands, too.”

He smiled and stroked the dimple in my chin. “I’m only as brilliant as the inspiration. You’ve always been my muse.”

“What?”

“You asked me once what drove me to write my lyrics. I didn’t want to scare you back then. You have Thoreau. I have you.”

I’m sure my eyes were wide.

“When you were gone, I summoned you in my head whenever I wrote. Every lyric I’ve composed has been with you in mind. You’ve always moved me.” He smiled, and I watched the light in his eyes grow. He went to wipe something from my cheek, and I realized it was a tear.

“I can’t...” I said, my voice shaky. My heart wept with happiness.

“Don’t try. I only wanted you to know.” He kissed where the tears fell.

I rolled him over so that he was under me and kissed him as if it were my last day on earth. When I finally came up for air, I gripped the hem of his shirt and shoved it up, dipping my head to kiss his stomach, his chest, and suck on his stiff nipples. I wanted my mouth on every part of his delicious body, and he spurred me on with words of pleasure as he writhed and moaned beneath me. I lifted him briefly to strip the shirt over his head, and I kissed him again, already addicted to his mouth. I licked his neck, under his hairline, behind his ear, down the thick column where his heart pulsed and across his Adam’s apple.

His head fell back and to the side as I pressed closer to him, our naked torsos colliding in sensual friction. He kneaded my muscles as I kissed up to his jaw, finding his mouth once more.

Now that I had Alex in my arms, his mouth nipping and sucking on mine, I didn’t want to let him out of my sight, let alone out of my life. Such strong feelings usually frightened me, but surrendering to them had me feeling like a caged bird set free.

I slid my palm across his youthful, beautiful chest, over the muscles of his flat stomach, relishing in how they contracted under my fingertips. His breathing came fast and ragged near my ear, and I nipped at his cheek. I undid his fly, ready to feel his length in my hand and in my mouth.

“Lane...” Alex whispered, as I squeezed him under the cotton of his boxer briefs. He growled. “More. Please.”

His urgency echoed my own, and I tugged at his underwear until I got it to his thighs. He pulled them off the rest of the way, and my hand wrapped around him. His moan was loud enough to startle me. I stroked him, sliding easily over his rigid length covered in the slick of his excitement.

When I couldn't wait any longer, I took him entirely in my mouth. He cried out, clutching my head.

He tasted like heaven. I savored every ridge and every contour, my tongue anxious to feel his throbbing pulse and velvet flesh. His hips rose to meet me with each stroke, and we moaned together. I lost track of whose breathing and moaning was whose. I reached under to caress him, and he shuddered, the sounds he made as I touched him there, encouraging me onward.

Soon, he was pushing at my cheek to stop me. "Hold up, Lane."

I pulled off him. "You okay?"

He chuckled as he caught his breath. "Are you kidding? You're *too* good at that. But I want you inside me before I come again."

"Oh, Alex..." I said, and he reached for me. I came back up to settle on top of him. "I don't have any protection."

He raised his eyebrows seductively. "I have some in my coat."

I shook my head. "A little presumptuous, Mr. Hughes, don't you think?"

He ran his hands sensually up my back. "I'm always prepared when it comes to you, Professor."

I pursed my lips. "I'll get it."

"Such a gentleman." He rolled up onto his elbow and rested his head on his palm, back to the fire. "Front left pocket."

I got to my feet, acutely aware of his eyes on my body as I walked out of the room. I found his coat and grabbed a roll of condoms, along with a small tube of lube. He wasn't joking about being prepared.

I came back to find him on his stomach, resting his chin on his folded hands, his perfect rear end before me. I groaned and lowered myself next to him. "You did this on purpose." I couldn't resist gripping his rounded cheeks, caressing and massaging.

"If this is what it gets me, I made the right choice." He sighed.

I leaned down and bit him on one pert buttock. He yelped, and I licked the reddening spot until he moaned. I gripped the bottle of lube and squirted it on my finger before sliding it into his crack and over his puckered entrance.

Alex's breathing quickened.

I circled around his opening and over it, making him arch into me. Next time, I'd taste him there, but for now, I slid my finger slowly inside.

"Lane..." he whispered, lifting up on his knees and elbows, taking my finger in deep. I added another, angling my strokes until I felt him tremble. "No... wait," he gasped, writhing.

I removed my fingers and snagged a condom, finding the wrapper impossible to open while lubed up. I used my teeth to tear it open.

Alex chuckled, and I found him watching me, a huge grin on his face. "You're adorable when you're excited."

I spit the wrapper out of my mouth and smirked as I rolled the condom over myself.

His eyes darkened and he bit his lip. "That's hot."

I knelt up close behind him and let myself rest between his incredible cheeks. "*This* is hot..." I breathed, before adding more lube and pressing my tip against his taut entrance.

"Yes. It. Is," Alex said, his breathing heavy. He pushed back, and I slid into him, inch by sweet inch. He was so tight, it made my hips ache. Every movement threatened to undo me. When I looked down, buried within him to the hilt, I wanted to cry out.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I'm... wonderful," he said, staring back at me with those penetrating eyes, a kaleidoscope of oranges, browns, and reds highlighted by the fire.

I began to thrust, a slow, deep rhythm that had us both moaning.

"You feel amazing." Alex arched back into me, and I grabbed his flanks, driving into him steadily, hoping to hit that spot that would have him combust. He groaned, burying his head in the crook of his arm, biting at his flesh. It was the most beautiful sight to see him crazy with pleasure.

"*You* are amazing. All of you." I changed my angle, leaning over him and he seized me, threading his fingers with mine.

"Oh, Lane! I'm..." he managed to say, before screaming his release, his body squeezing and stroking me with its contractions.

I couldn't hold out after that. My climax blurred my vision, sending waves of pleasure to every nerve ending to the point of exhaustion. My hand still

connected with his, we came down from our orgasms, our bodies wet with perspiration and seed. I slid out of him and removed the condom. I crawled next to him, and we entwined our naked, fire-soaked bodies. He snuggled into my shoulder, and I kissed his sweaty forehead. It felt almost too perfect, lying there in each other's arms.

"That was awesome—in the most literal sense of the word," Alex said, trailing his fingers across my arm.

"You bring out the most passionate parts of me—mind, body, and soul."

He sighed. "How did you get wrapped up in Thoreau, when it's the romantic poets that bleed from your veins?"

"I never understood what they meant before."

"Liar."

I chuckled. "Okay, maybe I needed someone to inspire the romantic in me."

"I'll make it my duty to seduce that part of you as often as possible." He grasped my chin playfully.

"You have such a kind and giving spirit."

He grinned. "And here I thought you loved me for my intellect."

"I do. Don't you know I fell for you the moment you opened your mouth?"

"Professor Stevens!" Alex gasped, mocking me. "I can't believe you said that."

I pushed him onto his back. He gave me a mischievous smile as I ran my thumb over his top lip, then bottom. "Though your mouth is superb, it's what came out of it that impressed me."

"My tongue?"

I rolled my eyes. "That's it." I slung my leg over his thighs to pin him and tickled his ribs and belly.

"No!" he howled. "Stop! Lane!" He struggled under me, writhing in fits of laughter. He attempted to block me at first, but soon he was attacking my stomach, and I was laughing right along with him. When he finally bested me and turned me over, pinning my wrists out to the side, I realized there was nowhere I'd rather be. I smiled up at him, and he kissed me with one of those breath-stealing kisses that left me exhausted and yet completely satisfied.

“I want you,” I said, when he finished.

“Again?”

“No. Always.”

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*“You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island of opportunities and look toward another land. There is no other land; there is no other life but this.”*

—Henry David Thoreau

I awoke to soft, steady puffs of air to the hollow of my armpit. I blinked, coming to the hazy realization that I was on my back in my living room, amid a pile of rugs and blankets. And next to me lay Alex, fast asleep under my outstretched arm. The fire had dwindled to glowing embers, but we had been warm for most of the night. When we weren't making love, we were cuddling, a mass of heated flesh and tangled limbs.

Recalling everything we had done last night made me stiff yet again. I had lost count of how many times we had succumbed to our desires, but the handful of empty condom wrappers had given me a ballpark. I was beyond satiated. Yet, even in my contentment, the cadence of Alex's breath almost hypnotizing, the muses began to wake. I needed to get up and take my morning walk. It had become a daily habit. My body itched to be outside, feeling the sharp, crisp air on my cheeks and the crunch of the fresh snow under my boots.

I carefully removed myself from the floor, unable to stop smiling at how beautiful Alex looked with his mouth agape and his hair a tousled mess. An angel.

Soon after putting on my clothes and fetching my glasses, I was making my way down the familiar path through the snow-covered trees, my lungs burning from the cold air. It stung, but it made me feel alive and soothed the loudness in my head.

It was so striking out here after the storm—the birds chirping and rustling bits of snow off the branches from which they took flight. The wind barely rushed by my ears, but it was like a familiar song. And now it sung about Alex. He consumed me in a way I never thought he could. I thought it would drive me mad, having him locked in my head with all the noise. But he seemed to

quell the incessant chatter with something pure and clear. I felt good. Peaceful. Renewed.

All because Alex came here looking for answers and hoping for miracles. When in fact, he was *my* miracle.

Slushing footsteps sounded as someone approached from the path. A bundled-up figure, scarf billowing around his neck, smiled back at me. Alex's dark hair stuck up and outward, announcing to the world that he had made love all night. I felt a surge of pride and possessiveness.

"How are you doing?" he asked as he came over to me. Just his musky scent mixed with the fresh, clean air made me want to devour him.

"I'm better than I thought I'd be." I was finished hiding things from Alex.

"That's good to know." He stood beside me and stared out in the direction of my gaze. "Absolutely stunning, Lane."

"I'm glad you like it." There was a pause as we both looked out into the snow-covered landscape.

I let the air fill my lungs and strengthen me. "Did you really think I was forty-five?"

Alex snorted and glanced sideways.

"You did!" I sighed, shaking my head.

"Maybe, but after last night, I'm thinking you might be younger than me." He smirked and nudged me with his elbow. "I like that you're mature. And that gray on your temples is mega-sexy."

I might have blushed at that, and avoided his eyes. He chuckled and surveyed the snow again.

I cleared my throat. "I wanted to go to your graduation, but I didn't have the courage. I had Shannon tell me all about it."

"I know," he said, smiling. "She told me."

I laughed. "If I wasn't so pleased with the results of her meddling, I'd be upset."

"I owe her a gift."

"We owe her a gift," I said, and reached into my coat pocket. "Speaking of gifts..." I removed a small box and handed it to Alex.



He arched one dark brow. "It's a little soon to be proposing marriage, don't you think?"

I pursed my lips. Surprisingly, the idea didn't fill me with dread. "It's your graduation present."

"Really?" He blinked.

I nodded. "Open it."

He popped open the box and inhaled. "Lane, these are gorgeous."

I had seen the cufflinks in a local artist's shop. One quill and one music note, both in silver. "They made me think of you." Honestly, there wasn't much that didn't make me think of Alex on a regular basis. But the cufflinks had haunted me. I told myself I would have sent them to him anonymously one day. I'm glad things turned out differently.

"Thank you, I'm..."

I searched out his hand with my own and held it between us. He seemed taken aback, looking at our hands then up to my face. "I'm kind of overwhelmed here. You said some pretty incredible things last night. I'm hoping I'm not still dreaming."

I smiled. "You're not dreaming."

Alex didn't have to ask. I heard the question in his breathing.

"I meant everything I said." I drew him against me.

He sighed as he rested his head on my shoulder. "What do we do now?" he asked, after a few moments.

"I want you here with me."

"What if I have to be elsewhere for a while?"

"We can handle that. And if we can't, I'll stay wherever you may be for the time being."

Alex wrapped his arms around my neck. "You said you wouldn't go traipsing all over the world with me."

"That was when I thought I'd be inhibiting you."

"You've only ever supported me, Lane. When you left, I scrambled to find anything else that could replace you. It was a lost cause."

“I won’t ever leave you again,” I said, staring into his shimmering eyes.

“I believe you.” He kissed me chastely. “Now, you’re welcome to stay out here as long as you like, but I’m going back inside. I made coffee, and I built the fire back up.”

The muses in my head were all in agreement. I should definitely keep this man.

“Let’s go in.” I held his hand tight as we walked along the path.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Hunter lost a bet at a blackjack table and begrudgingly traded temperate Southern California for the sweltering heat of Las Vegas. There she resides with an extremely tolerant boyfriend and two cats, Latte and Java. When she's not dreaming of returning to coastal living, Hunter works on her MA thesis in British history and at her government day job. In order to appease her muse, she writes the kind of fiction that keeps her sane. She adores romance in all forms, but prefers her stories with two heroes that find their happily-ever-after with each other.*

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