



Marketing Beef

Rick Bettencourt

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
Marketing Beef – Information	5
Marketing Beef	7
Chapter One	8
Chapter Two.....	16
Chapter Three.....	22
Chapter Four	30
Chapter Five.....	34
Chapter Six.....	45
Chapter Seven	49
Chapter Eight	56
Chapter Nine	62
Chapter Ten.....	67
Chapter Eleven.....	72
Chapter Twelve.....	79
Chapter Thirteen	83
Chapter Fourteen.....	88
Chapter Fifteen.....	94
Chapter Sixteen.....	98
Epilogue	103
Author Bio	105

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

MARKETING BEEF

By Rick Bettencourt

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

Photo is an advertisement for an oversized hot dog smothered in mustard and hanging a bit over the side of its bun. To the right of it, in white-lettering are the words, "I'm stretched and ready. Let's do this." The ad continues, "New Footlong Quarter Pound Coney."

Story Letter

Dear Author,

*So, one day during lunch, I was walking and just happened to look up and saw this billboard. It cracked me up. But I didn't think much of it; it made me laugh and thought that was it. Well, I saw another one the next week, and the week after that, and well, you get the picture. I was all, man, did the advertising world get a sense of humor all of a sudden? Then it hit me, all these billboards had one thing in common, these are my accounts in our ad agency. Obviously I wasn't the one that were coming up with these one-liners because I'm not that oblivious, come on now, give me some credit! They were the accounts that I was handling the accounting for. Yes, I am an accountant for an ad agency. But I really keep to myself. I mean, I smile and say hi to people when they say good morning but I don't go to bars after work to socialize if you get what I mean. I am a pretty happy guy, no drama really, but maybe a bit lonely. My last relationship ended in college and I get attached easily so there hasn't been anyone for a very long time. Am I making too much out of these billboards? I thought I was until one day, I saw one that was directly addressed to me... it was quite clever because they managed to work my name on it and the ad was freaking hilarious but it was like a **BIG HELLO**. Those **WERE** for me but who? How are they getting away with them? Why do they want my attention? And really, **WHO WOULD DO THAT FOR LITTLE OLE ME?***

*Hi, dearest author, as you can see, I would love lots of humor, lots of **EPISTOLARY** elements (those are in caps because **PLEASE, PLEASE, CAN I HAVE SOME?**), and generally just a feel good, **HEA** story. I want to smile and laugh when I read your story!*

Thanks so much,

Rissa

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: humor, tender, journal, ad agency, accountant, job loss, betrayal, self-growth

Content Warnings: Like a good relationship, the sex is worth the wait. It comes. I promise.

Word Count: 32,721

MARKETING BEEF

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Chapter One

Dear Journal:

Last night, I took a bath with Mr. Bubbles. I haven't done that in years but I was sore from my workout. It felt good.

This morning I ate a bowl of granola, a banana, and a glass of pomegranate juice. (I'll have to log this in my spreadsheet when I get home.)

Oh, I also walked Mrs. Johnson's dog from 5:30 a.m. to about 6:00 a.m.

What else?

God, am I really that boring? (Please don't answer that.)

It's just that... that... Oh, I don't know!

Okay, today marks the seventh anniversary of Gary and me splitting up. It's not that it's a bad thing. I'm glad we're no longer together.

It's just that... seven years! Who... What have I done during that time?

Alright, I'm not going to get myself depressed. I need to focus on my accomplishments. And there have been many.

Evan Capri McCormick's Septenary Achievements:

Obtained job at Thoroughbred Marketing and recently vested with five years of service.

Promoted to senior accountant with a 15% increase in salary—after only three years!

Removed dairy from my diet and have no more indigestion. (Thank God!)

Bought the house in Conant for 50% below (the Great Recession) market value. (And through scrimping, saving, making accelerated payments, and a rebound of the economy, I have over \$285,000 in equity.)

Increased chest measurement by ~5% (note: check BMI spreadsheet tonight for exact proportions).

Increased pushups from ~35 per minute to ~55 (also check values in spreadsheet for exact time span... believe it was 10% per year).

Decreased number of times I masturb...

“Hey, Evan.”

I slammed shut my leather Moleskine and looked up.

“Looks like accountant-boy is working through lunch again,” said Madeline, from Account Services. She was out for her lunchtime walk.

I pulled a folder out from under my lunch tote. “Oh, hey Madeline.” I slid out the company’s revenue report and glanced at it. I didn’t want to get into any small talk but she had a way of getting me chatting.

“All work, no play,” she said, now standing with her hands on her hips in front of me. She was wearing some pink and black, tight-fitting gym outfit. She looked like a black raspberry ice cream cone, her well-endowed chest being scoops of dairy, which I now avoid. “At least you’re out in the sunshine, instead of eating at your desk like you usually do.”

I chuckled and fidgeted a bit. Leaning back on the park bench, I held up a hand to shield the sun. “Nice day, huh?” I wasn’t very good at striking up a conversation.

“It is, Evan. It is.” She looked out toward the river behind me. “Well, I’m going to walk off my spinach salad,” she said, without moving. She looked down at me.

“Enjoy.” I pushed up the bridge of my brown-rimmed glasses, hoping to get rid of her, and studied the report in my lap, *Thoroughbred Marketing, Inc. EBITDA Report*.

She huffed. “I’ll let you get back to your numbers.”

I looked up again, but she already had her back to me and was waving to Jenny, the blonde, from Human Resources. “See ya,” I said but I don’t think she heard me.

Madeline Alvarez was an attractive, single woman about my age, early thirties. I don’t think she suspected I was gay. In fact, I would say many of my office colleagues knew zilch about me. I pretty much kept to myself.

I took the last bite from my ham and tomato sandwich and thumbed through the EBITDA. My journal could wait. "Hmm. The fund account is off again," I mumbled to myself.

I could have read the report at my desk but after a week of gloomy New England rain, outside was a welcome respite.

After a few minutes of reviewing numbers, I pulled my journal out from under my thigh, where I had shoved it when Madeline approached. Its pages were nearly full. *Need to go to Barnes soon and pick out a new one.*

I threw my water bottle in my tote, packed up my briefcase and got up from the bench. As I walked the graveled sidewalk back to the office, I heard a commotion over by Lynch Street.

Madeline and Jenny, along with a handful of other people from the office, had congregated near the billboard that hung across from the Stop & Shop. I knew the sign well. Over the years, the firm had leased many spots on it. In fact, I was the one who had measured the potential advertisement yield based on variables such as traffic patterns, time of year and demographics for the surrounding neighborhood.

I walked closer to them. From inside the park, it was hard to see what they were looking at. As I approached, there was chuckling and shaking of heads.

"Did we lose the Yankee account?" Sam, from IT, asked another colleague.

I looked up at the advertisement. "Wow." Yankee Neighborhood Beef Co. had been one of our biggest clients, but we had seen revenue from them dip recently.

"We didn't do it," I heard someone else say. "I would know. I would have seen it come across my desk."

I looked back at our little crowd. There were a few more spectators joining our assembly, even shoppers from the grocery store across the way were staring at us and then up at the sign.

Madeline looked behind me, toward the office. "Shh. Don't look now but here comes Dave."

I turned. Dave was the head of Creative and pretty much had his hand in every piece of copy written by the firm. Behind him were a couple of his team members, including the guy I had a little thing for. His name was Dillon.

Dillon Deiss was known around Boston as a hotshot copywriter. The firm hired him about three or four months prior. He and Peter—a colleague of his from Corridor, our competitor in Boston—were hired around the same time.

The three of them walked across the parking lot, but my eyes were locked on Dillon. His suit jacket blew back, and the buttoned shirt he wore revealed a bit of skin beneath. I gasped audibly and then quickly looked around to make sure no one had heard me. I scratched my ear and cleared my throat to cover my reaction.

I tried to look away, but I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was smiling and chatting with Peter. The sheen on Dillon's gray suit suggested it could only have been made from the finest of material. What, I wouldn't know. I've never been much into fashion."On clearance" was the only qualifier I used in purchasing my clothes. His light blue shirt was opened at the collar and hugged a toned torso. Underneath it I imagined a solid set of pecs and firm abs that no doubt rivaled mine.

I touched my stomach and looked away. I was afraid I was becoming too obvious. Dillon looked polished. His outfit probably cost more than the new set of tires I had recently thrown on my Explorer.

He was probably a couple of inches shorter than me—not that I would have really known. We hadn't stood close enough to tell. He had thick, dirty-blond hair. The type that would stand on end when he got it cut short, like he had a few weeks back. I had admired the square cut neckline of his new haircut while he was walking down the hallway to the cafeteria.

My hair was a couple of shades darker than his but didn't look good short. I kept it on the long side, which meant it was forever falling in my eyes and needing to be tamed with a comb or even a baseball cap.

As Dillon approached the gathering, he smiled at me. I tightened up and averted my eyes downward. My briefcase's strap fell off my shoulder, and I yanked it back up.

He and Peter stood next to me and looked up at the advertisement.

He smiled at me? No. He doesn't even know you exist. That was just a courtesy. I was forever having internal conversations with myself; a result, no doubt, of living alone for so many years.

He put his hands in his pants pockets, and his suit coat draped behind his forearms. "Not bad," he said studying the sign. He turned to Peter and said,

borrowing from the billboard's slogan, "Never underestimate the power of advertising."

Peter chuckled and nudged Dave, their boss. "It's got to be Corridor," he said, eyes still trained on the billboard. "Dick, my old boss over there, has a bit of a phallic fixation."

Dillon laughed. His teeth were as white as my shirt. He caught my eye and quickly looked away.

Oh, God. He saw you staring at him. Quick! Look at the billboard, you fool!
I looked up.

The advertisement displayed a woman standing in a kitchen. Shiny copper pots dangled from a pan rack above her. In her hands, she held a large piece of kielbasa. One hand grasped the tip of it and her left eyebrow was raised. Behind her a man and two teenage boys—presumably her husband and children—sat at the kitchen island. They were a little out of focus but were whooping it up, apparently joking around while waiting for dinner. Underneath her was the text:

Never underestimate the power of the sausage.

Madeline pointed back toward the office. Mr. Whitfield, the firm's president—with his head of stark white hair—stood in his office window, taking in the scene. The crowd dispersed.

Jonathan William Whitfield, CEO

Thoroughbred Marketing Inc.

1150 Beacon St.

Beverly, MA 01915

Dear Mr. Whitfield,

I am writing to inform you of some concerns I have regarding the firm's finances.

As senior accountant at Thoroughbred, I have been monitoring the investment portfolio for nearly three years. As such, I have watched the Firkins Fiduciary Fund (FFFX) balloon to unprecedented highs. A 650% average return is—as I'm sure you know—unheard of in such an investment vehicle. I realize this high yield has provided the firm the ability to expand and

offer many perks to the staff, from which even I have benefited. However, I feel it is my duty to...

I rolled my office chair back and nearly hit the wall on the opposite end of my small, makeshift home office. "Uh! I can't send this." I spun around. "Especially in writing." It was getting late. I stretched. "Something like this needs to be done face-to-face."

I stood up, turned off the desk lamp, grabbed my mug of water, and headed to the bedroom. "Face-to-face, by someone other than me."

The light from the summer moon shone through the window and cast a couple of squares from the windowpanes onto my bedroom floor. I pulled off my T-shirt, threw it on the scatter rug, climbed into my bed, and pulled up the comforter.

I lay there awhile with my eyes open, hands locked behind my head. I looked at the journal, lighted by the moon's glow on my nightstand. I had finished the day's entry, adding to my list of achievements.

The air conditioner clicked on. The wall vent by the master bathroom blew, and the window curtains on the other side of the room started to sway.

I watched the gentle fluttering of the sheer curtains and thought about my accomplishments. *There was no relationship on that list.* I got up and went over to the window to look out at the lake. The house was so secluded I didn't worry about anyone seeing me dressed only in a pair of blue boxer briefs. Nor did I care that anyone could see the large wine-stained birthmark I had over my upper body. No one saw that.

I took in the beauty of the lake. The moon's reflection glistened upon it. "A shimmering dance," I said. It was how my mother described the lakes in Michigan when we would go camping.

My view of the water—now that I had one after cutting back all the dead brush—was one of the reasons I had bought the house. It reminded me of my childhood.

Conant Lake, as it was commonly referred to, was really an oversized pond. But the name stuck. It was fed by various rivers and streams coming out of the much larger Wenham Lake to its north.

I stood there, mesmerized by the moon dance, for what felt like hours, while I thought about my childhood, my mother's death, my move to Massachusetts for school and ultimately meeting, and separating from, Gary.

“It’s hard to believe it’s been seven years,” I thought aloud. “Seven years and practically no one else.” There had been a couple of one night stands—actually, exactly two.

Gary and I split up the summer after we graduated from Salem State. Apparently, to him, our little college romance was something akin to a series of “dorm biffs” and being really good friends. I had been eyeing apartments for us to move into together, while he was enjoying Boston’s nightlife.

During that summer, he got a job with a high-profile law firm that liked his economics and legal background, and so he moved to Boston. He found a boyfriend who was a lot more muscular than I—and, I’m sure, didn’t have a birthmark swashed across his chest.

The hoot of an owl shook me from my reverie. I looked up and spotted the Big Dipper, followed its base up to the North Star, and then to the Little Dipper. I still remembered star navigation from Boy Scouts.

I went and sat back down on the bed, turned on the lamp, took my now full journal from the top of the nightstand and thumbed through it. I liked the feel of the weighted pages, and its fullness felt like an achievement.

I opened the bottom drawer, placed the journal on top of all my others, and selected an old one at random.

I took the job with Thoroughbred Marketing! I just got off the phone. I might be able to get that old summer cottage in Conant after all.

I thumbed through some more.

I’ve decided to put the data related to my workout routines, calorific intake and finances in a spreadsheet, instead of clogging up my journal with numbers. Plus, it’ll allow me to run better analyses...

The original intent of my journals had been to log my physical fitness and finances. But as they morphed, I found the writing part, not just logging of numbers, to be the most rewarding. The facts were better tracked elsewhere.

I flipped to another page.

I spent a good part of the day clearing brush and cutting back overgrown trees in the backyard. I felt a bit like Thoreau. Later, I went for a hike around the lake and happened upon a loon’s

nest. And I met a neighbor, an older lady named Ann Johnson. She lives on the opposite end of the lake. With the brush cut, I can now make out the tip of her cottage. Her dog, Detritus, is cool. Her husband died years ago. She lives alone too and said we should...

I leafed to the back of the journal.

By couponing, making my own lunches and not eating out, I've added an extra \$100 a month to my debt payoff fund. At this rate, I'll be mortgage free in only five more years. At that point, I'll be able to...

I threw the journal back into the drawer, closed it with my foot, shut off the light, and lay back down. I put my hands behind my head again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the bulge of my bicep. It was bigger than when I had split with Gary. I had certainly achieved a better body. I looked down at my chest. In the moon's glow I could still make out my birthmark, the large wine-stained swath across my left breast. I tightened my abs and let out a sigh.

I turned toward the empty pillow beside me and went to sleep.

Chapter Two

I pushed the button for the third floor. I normally would have taken the stairs, but I was running a little late for the meeting. The elevator doors closed.

I took in a deep breath and let it out. I was a little nervous. I hated board meetings. I didn't usually have to attend them but every once in a while I got asked to present some charts and explain a few figures to the higher ups. "This one should be no different from the others." I fidgeted with the spiral binding on my notebook. "You'll be fine."

The doors opened, and I rushed down the hall to try and make it before old man Whitfield got there. No one wanted to show up after the CEO.

"Shit," I muttered, as I hurried past HR and saw his head of full white hair over the top of Cynthia Hanford's cubicle. I dodged down her row to try and cut him off and get to the conference room before he did.

I caught Madeline Alvarez's eye, and she turned to Whitfield. "Good afternoon, Mr. Whitfield," she said. "How are you today?"

I neared the printer called Salem. We named our copy and print stations after North Shore cities and towns.

"Oh, Ms. Alvarez, just splendid, thank you," Mr. Whitfield said. I could see him pausing by her cubicle.

Madeline, I owe you.

"Well," Mr. Whitfield said, "isn't that a pretty new plant you have?"

"It's a New Guinea," Madeline said and winked at me.

I slinked around Salem.

"Ah, new what?" I heard him say.

"A NEW GUINEA."

"Yes, I know Ginny," Mr. Whitfield said. "Poor thing."

I ducked into the conference room and heard him start to explain Ginny, the marketing manager's illness to Madeline.

I took a seat next to Barry from Sales. He moved over a little. A few minutes later, in walked Mr. Whitfield.

“Good morning, Mr. Whitfield,” said the group, nearly in unison.

A bunch of brown-nosers.

Mr. Whitfield nodded, shuffled over to the head of the table, and sat down.

Peggy, the head of Operations, started the PowerPoint presentation. The pitch was a monthly update on the various goings-on within the agency. I, thankfully, didn't have to say much. I was there mainly to answer questions and speak about one slide on the financials in my boss' absence.

Peggy was two slides into the presentation—a section about a new client in New Hampshire—when Dillon Deiss slipped into the room and slowly shut the door behind him. He was wearing a stunning, teal suit and had gel in his hair that made it look wet... and sexy.

Mr. Whitfield turned and glared at him.

The room fell silent.

“Mr. Deiss,” Whitfield said, “how nice of you to join us.”

Everyone giggled. I kept my eyes on my notes.

“I'm sorry, sir,” Dillon said and started over toward me and the only available chair. I was glad he offered no lame excuse, like the elevator being slow or his Outlook not reminding him.

Mr. Whitfield watched him sit and then nodded to Peggy who continued with her outline of the New Hampshire client—a pool company in the summer, landscaping in the fall and snowplowing in the winter. As we had learned prior to Dillon's entrance, the firm was yet to come up with a catchy slogan, a new name, and a radio spot.

Whitfield turned our way and cleared his throat. His eyes were enormous through the thick lenses of his black-rimmed glasses, and his threatening gaze settled on Dillon. “You listen to Kiss 108 radio, Mr. Deiss?” he interrogated.

Dillon fidgeted in his seat. He had been pulling some notes from a folder and, from the looks of his blank stare, hadn't been listening. He looked at the presentation on the screen. Peggy had moved on to another slide.

Section II: Financials

“Um.” Dillon scratched behind his ear.

I slowly turned my back to Whitfield, leaned into my hand and whispered to Dillon, “We're picking up a New Hampshire pool, landscaping and plow company. They want a spot on Kiss 108.”

Dillon grinned at me and looked back to Mr. Whitfield. "Yes, sir," he said. "I do happen to listen to the station. I think their demographics would work well with New Hampshire Pool, Landscaping and Snow's needs."

Mr. Whitfield's head quivered a bit. "The what?" he barked.

Dillon repeated himself.

Mr. Whitfield took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I like it." He nodded and put his glasses back on. "New Hampshire Pool, Landscaping and Snow. Good name."

Dillon's Adam's apple gulped.

Mr. Whitfield threw in another throat-clear, which Peggy jerked at. "It's a simple name," he added. "But it's what they do." He motioned to Peggy for her to go back a few slides. "Wait, wait... one more. That one!" Mr. Whitfield pointed and then took a moment to re-read the slide.

Dillon jotted down a note and pushed his legal pad my way.

THANKS!

My pulse quickened. And I smiled and nodded.

Peggy adjusted the lapels of her red suit jacket. "They go by McLaughlin & Son now." She looked over to Dillon. "It doesn't really speak to what they do. I like the idea of adding New Hampshire to their name, since it is their locale."

"Me too," Mr. Whitfield said. "We may need to shorten it a bit but, Mr. Deiss, I like the suggestion."

"Well..." Dillon started, and looked to me, "it was actually not—"

I shook my head. I felt like he was going to say it was my idea, and I didn't want the credit or to explain.

Dillon went on without taking his eyes from me, "It wasn't my best impression but it's a start."

Mr. Whitfield waved his hand at Peggy. "All right. Let's proceed."

"Hey, buddy. Wait up," Dillon said, from behind me. I knew it was him by the smoky tone of his voice.

I was just about to open the stairwell door, but instead I turned around, feeling a tightening deep inside me.

He smiled. "Evan, thanks." He walked at a hurried pace toward me. The pages of his legal pad flapped with each step.

I propped the door open with my back. *He knows my name?* I tried to think back to the meeting to see if they had mentioned me by name.

Dillon leaned into me and pushed the door open more. "You saved my ass in there."

I nearly fell into the stairwell but caught myself. "Oh, no problem." I started toward the stairs, my head down.

He bumped my arm with his elbow. "Hey, if you're not doing anything tonight..." he said and then threw his head back with a soft laugh. "God, that came out wrong. It sounds like I'm going to ask you out."

I stopped with my hand on the rail and looked up at him. I swallowed and then grinned nervously.

"What I was going to say," he said, shutting the door, "is that a couple of us are getting together after work tonight, for a beer over at Sylvan Street."

Sylvan Street was a pub over by the mall. A lot of people from the office liked to hang out there. I only went when it was for a company function.

I picked at my notebook's spiral binding. "Oh, um, thank you but I have plans tonight." The clip on my pen sprung free and it fell to the floor. I bent down to grab it but Dillon beat me to it. As we started back up, we stopped in awkward silence with our faces inches apart. He handed me the pen, and I nodded in gratitude.

He eyed the exit to the second floor. "Too bad you can't come..." He blushed and looked back at me. "...t-tonight. I owe you a beer." He walked down a few more steps to the landing and stopped at the door. "Raincheck?" he suggested.

I went down another step, stopped to look back at him, and was momentarily thrown by what I saw. His crew-cut blond hair, brown eyes, and taut waist reminded me of an actor I had a crush on from one of the soap operas my mother used to watch. I repeatedly clicked my pen. "Sure." I smiled.

He opened the door to the second floor, winked at me and left.

I stood there for a moment. *Did he just wink at me?*

He did.

A few steps down, doubt kicked in. *No, he was just being friendly. After all, Evan, you can be rather gullible.*

That night, after twenty minutes of core-strengthening planks, push-ups, and body extensions, I headed out for a jog. I was wearing the blue Adidas shorts I'd picked up at T.J.Maxx. I had them on over a pair of black spandex compression shorts, which helped to keep everything from bouncing around down there. I would love to jog shirtless but... the wine stain.

I locked the house, threw the key under the mat, and headed out onto my little dead-end street for some cardio. I didn't like to measure miles. I preferred timing myself instead. I clicked on my stopwatch and started at a slow pace.

By the time I got to the end of the road, I was jogging at a good clip. Mrs. Johnson, my elderly neighbor, was out weeding her flower garden. She waved. "Go get 'em, Evan!"

"Hi, Mrs. Johnson!" I waved back. Despite her eccentricities—hundreds of cheesy paintings of Conant Lake—there was something about her I liked.

A dog barked behind the fence of the Matthews' home, which used to be a small cottage—similar to mine—but had since been bulldozed and a much larger colonial built in its place.

The cool, dusk air felt good. The perspiration from my core-strengthening workout helped to cool me down as the wind whipped past. My nipples chafed against the inside of my T-shirt. I checked for a spot of blood on my shirt like last time, but there was none.

I turned the corner onto Cedar Street and jogged a little longer, 'til I got to the town line of Wenham. There, I started sprint cycles. I went all-out for thirty seconds, stopped for ten, and repeated. This went on for several rounds, 'til I was panting and drenched in sweat.

With my hands on my haunches, I stopped to catch my breath about a mile down the road from my street. It started to rain. I headed back in a slow jog.

The rain felt good, except for it slushing around inside my sneakers. As I made my way back, I thought about Dillon. A car like his passed me. I had visions of it pulling over, him coming out with an umbrella, and giving me a ride home where we would...

Alas, no rescue.

When I got closer to the Conant town line, I could see the highway in the distance. There was another Yankee Neighborhood Beef Company ad near the on-ramp. I stopped.

Don't let your meat loaf.

I chuckled.

The billboard had a picture of a rather handsome man, shirtless under an apron. He was holding a delicious looking meatloaf in front of him and wearing a pair of oven mitts. The Yankee logo was imprinted to the right. A woman, who looked similar to the model from the other ad, sat in the background at a table. She fondled the petals of a long-stemmed rose in a vase in front of her.

Chapter Three

The Barnes & Noble at the North Shore Mall was always a little crowded on Saturdays. I was sipping a black coffee in the café, reviewing my planned purchases. I had picked out a nice leather-bound journal to start my new entries. The one I wanted from Moleskine was discontinued.

Beside the journal were several books I had gathered to peruse to while away a rainy summer afternoon.

Harry Potter. I never did read the last one.

There was a book on native New England plants that caught my attention. It was written by a lady I had seen speak at an Environmental Defense Fund conference.

I had shoved a book called *Biological Exuberance*, about homosexuality in nature, in the middle of my stack. I looked over my shoulder and slid it out, cracked it open, and sipped my coffee.

I read about this tribe of monkeys, the bonobos, who were gayer than the Village People. Bonobos were a horny bunch and, as of recent, I could relate.

By the time I had nearly finished my coffee, I felt more bonobo than human. *Maybe I just need to have sex more often.*

I put *Biological Exuberance* down, rubbed my eyes and combed back my hair with my hands. I thought about heading home, but it was still raining. I looked over at the magazine section, near the entrance. *Maybe I should grab a copy of Economy Today.*

The automatic doors parted and in walked a hot set of legs wearing khaki shorts, topped by a tight T-shirt speckled from the rain, and a Red Sox baseball cap. The bonobo in me began to rise.

As the man shook the rain off, removing his cap in the process, I sat up. "Holy shit," I muttered. It was Dillon Deiss.

A lady sitting next to me looked up from her book; she glanced over at Dillon and then back to me.

I cleared my throat and took a sip of the cold remnants of my coffee.

The lady went back to her book, and I back to Dillon.

Who would have thought he could look just as hot dressed down as gussied up for work? The way his dirty-blond hair stuck out from under his cap made me smile. He looked ten years younger. He walked toward the cash register and asked the clerk something. The khakis contoured his buns perfectly.

My inner bonobo was rearing its... head. The small of Dillon's back formed the bottom of a V-shape, supporting a pair of broad shoulders that were not overly muscular. Just right, the way I liked them. I couldn't believe it, but I was becoming aroused. I fidgeted in my seat. These days, it didn't take much for me to get excited. I had been holding back on... pleasuring myself—another one of my supposed accomplishments that I chalked up to having gained better control of my impulses.

Evan, stop!

The clerk, a tall, lanky boy most likely just out of high school, laughed as he talked to Dillon. I raised an eyebrow. He then pointed to the back of the store, and Dillon went in that direction. The clerk watched him walk away.

As if on instinct, I started to get up to chase after Dillon but then I realized the predicament in my pants and quickly sat back down. *Where the hell do you think you're going, anyway?*

I pulled out the plant book, thinking it would divert my arousal.

What are you? A teenager?

It continued to throb and was at full mast.

I took a sip of cold coffee. "Dead nuns, dead nuns," I muttered, trying to think of something awful to distract my libido. After a few seconds thinking about bloodied habits, the tightness in my jeans subsided. I breathed a sigh of relief and pushed back my chair. *I should just buy the journal and leave.*

"Evan," said that alluring voice.

I jerked around. Another audible sigh. I felt my face flush.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," he said. He was holding a book called *Signs of Opportunity*. "You weren't leaving, were you?"

Yes. "No! Not at all." My hand pointed toward the seat next to me, offering it up. *What are you doing?*

He pulled it out and sat down. With a scuff or two, I dragged my chair back in before the thing in my pants decided to reappear.

Dillon smiled. "So... you come here often?" His smile quickly vanished, and he blushed. He took off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. "Dude, I didn't mean it like..." He scraped his face with his hand and looked over his shoulders. "Sounds like another fucking come-on."

I chuckled. "That's okay." *It is?* "And, as a matter of fact, I do come here often."

He went on to tell me that this was his first time at the Peabody store. I just watched his lips and mouth move, barely hearing a word. He continued on about the store in Boston's Downtown Crossing. I got lost in the softness of his brown eyes, which in the light had just a hint of green.

"They sell ice cream and sushi now," he said, through those pearly whites.

I arched my brow, and my mind wandered again as he rambled on. It was odd, but it was as if I felt this inner tug toward him. The tightness *down there* returned.

I shook off the reverie. *For God's sake. What, are we in high school? Enough with the spontaneous erections.*

"You have one?" he asked.

I coughed and quickly rewound the memory banks to recall his question: something about everyone having a Kindle or a Nook. "I do," I said, "but I don't use it often."

"Is it full-size?" he asked holding out his hand in measurement.

I blinked. "It's decent."

He nodded. "You'll have to show me someday."

We stared for a moment. I think my mouth was agape. He opened his book and began to read.

I pushed my stack of books away. I was afraid the page opened at the horny bonobos would send the wrong impression. "What are you here for?" I asked.

He held up his book. "For work. Got to keep the ol' noggin up-to-date. A friend of mine back in Seattle recommended it."

I rubbed my hand along my pant leg. "Seattle? Is that where you're from?" *A little small talk won't kill you.*

He looked up from the book. "I am. Born and raised just outside of Tacoma, Washington, in a town called Renton."

I picked at the denim bunched at my knee. "I heard it's nice there." *You have?*

He thumbed through his book and put it down on the opened pages. "Washington's not bad. But I like it better here." He turned around, looking thoughtfully at the ordering area. He got up, rubbing his stomach. I saw a hint of flesh under his T-shirt. "You want anything? I'm starved."

I pointed to my mug. "Oh, no. I just had some coffee." I tipped the cup toward me. "Thank you, though."

He leaned over, took my empty mug and went over to the counter.

I watched him walk away. *Evan Capri McCormick. Stop ogling.* But I couldn't help it. That damn tug was pulling me in again. The way his butt filled his shorts, the soft-looking hair on his legs, his thick calf muscles, the fitted cap hugging the back of his head. "Dillon," I said, and he turned. *Oh my God. I said his name out loud!* I faked a cough. *You're a hot fucking mess.*

"You need something?" Dillon asked. He was next in line.

"Oh, no. I'm good." *You're a fool. Control yourself.*

Dillon ordered. He reached into his back pocket to get out his wallet and then into his front pocket for change. My mind flashed to a naughty image of what might be in those pants. *Don't let your meat loaf.* I looked down at my crotch and crossed my legs. I was at full mast again.

"Hey, Evan," Dillon said. "You don't happen to have an extra one, do you?"

"Um."

He stood there waiting. The guy behind him looked at his watch.

The cashier put down two coffees and Dillon took them.

Two coffees?

She put out some sort of pastry.

"You mind?" Dillon said with a flick of his head, motioning me to come over.

With the palm of my hand, I pushed my erection down, wincing. I tried to confine it against my inner thigh, tucked away as best I could. *This is the height of embarrassment.*

I got up, staying bent at the waist, and winced again.

Dillon met me halfway. “Thanks, man.”

I handed him a one from my wallet, took a coffee, and walked, bonobo-like, back to the table.

“You all right?” he asked as I sat down.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. “Oh, just hurt my back a little.”

“Oh, dude, sorry. That sucks.” He went back to the counter, grabbed the pastry and rejoined me at the table.

Dead nuns, dead nuns, dead nuns.

“I got you a refresh. I thought you’d like a little more caffeine,” he said.

I couldn’t look him in the eye. “Well, thank you,” I said to his shoulder. “You didn’t have to.”

He looked behind him, where I had been staring, and then back at me. “But I still owe you a beer. A promise is a promise.”

I snickered nervously. “All right.” *Oh my God. You’re a fucking case. No wonder you’re single.*

He cut the pastry—a muffin of sorts—in half, took one and pushed the plate toward me. “Have some.”

I held up a hand. “Oh, no. I’m good.”

He leaned his head back and dropped a few granola crumbs he had pulled off the top of the muffin into his mouth. He looked back at me. “I’m sorry.” He covered his mouth with the back of his hand. “I haven’t eaten all day. I’m ravenous.”

“That’s fine.” *Was I staring again?*

“You avoid empty calories. Good man. Now I know how you keep your hot...” He turned red, cleared his throat and looked down. He pinched off some more muffin. “Now I know how you keep your fit body.”

He just said I was hot.

There was an awkward silence.

I’m hot?

“So what are you reading?” he asked and pulled the bonobo book from my table.

Oh God! “Oh, nothing. That stack was here when I sat down.”

He looked over at me and frowned. “You come to a bookstore and don’t look at books?”

I grabbed the journal and held it up. “I was here for a journal and a cup of coffee.”

He nodded. “So you’re a writer?” He pulled the plate closer to him.

“Not really. I just use it for record keeping.” I picked at the cardboard that the journal was wrapped in. I wasn’t good with this casual conversation thing, and this was getting a little too personal.

He leaned back in his chair. I could see his nipples protruding through his shirt. He patted his stomach. “I don’t mean to be scoffing down in front of you.” He pushed his plate away. “It’s very rude.”

“No, it’s not.” I took a piece of his muffin and ate it.

He smiled and wiped his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. “I’m glad I came.”

When I got home, I whipped off my shirt and stripped out of my jeans. I cranked out fifty pushups, did five minutes of planks, and a round of body extensions, before going back to another set of pushups. Vigorous exercise helped me burn off excess energy.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four...!” I collapsed. I rolled over onto my back—on the living room floor—and stared up at the ceiling trying to catch my breath.

After Dillon and I had sat in silence at Barnes & Noble for a while, he said he had to go off and meet some buddies for a bite to eat at what sounded like a trendy bistro on the Waterfront in Boston. I had told him my Saturday night plans were to coordinate a camping trip to Maine. *Loser*. But it was really just a night alone deciding which package to select from the L.L. Bean website.

Secretly, I had been hoping Dillon was going to ask me to join him and his friends. Not that I would have gone. I knew myself. I would have used the camping trip research—or some other lame excuse—to avoid going. But I still wanted him to ask.

I got up from the living room floor and grabbed my T-shirt. I was soaked and wiped the perspiration from my underarms. I hadn’t turned on the air

conditioner. The heat was good for sweating out any toxins. I threw the shirt in the hamper. "I need a shower."

Funny thing about living alone, you talk to yourself more.

As a kid, I considered myself more outgoing. Then my mother died of breast cancer when I was twelve. My dad was not much of a talker to begin with, but after her death he fell into a depression. He'd leave early in the morning to work the assembly line at the Ford plant, come home late, eat, and then go to bed. Those were pretty much my teenage years.

I turned on the shower and stepped out of my boxer briefs. As the room filled with steam, I went over to the mirror and looked at myself.

"Dillon Deiss, would you ever want a boyfriend like me?" I covered my birthmark, as best I could, using two hands. "I'm not bad looking. Am I?" The wine-stain mark spanned part of my chest and traversed underneath my left side.

"You should be lucky it's not on your face," my mother used to say. "Some kids can't hide theirs under a shirt."

I went over to the toilet, peed, flushed, and stepped inside the shower. The hot water felt good on my sore muscles. "Not a bad workout," I said and rubbed my abs.

The Pretenders' "Middle of the Road" came to mind. I had played it in the car on the way home. The Pretenders were my favorite band. I began to sing while I lathered up with a bar of the oatmeal soap I picked up at Whole Foods. When I started washing my groin, Dillon came to mind and soon my erection returned.

"Again," I said and looked down at it. "Well, it has been a while. Maybe if you... you know... you'll stop popping wood at the thought of a bulge in a pair of khaki shorts."

I had one hand against the cold tile and the other... well, down there. It felt so good; I couldn't stop. I tried to—just a few little tugs and hold back—but I just couldn't. Not anymore.

The next thing I knew, I was in an all-out fervor. My knees began to quiver. The water sprayed against my erection and sent a shiver up my spine.

"OH GOD."

I continued. Part of me wanted to stop, but it felt too good, and my hand just took over. It was a blur. "Stop, stop."

I felt the wave. I was too late. I screamed. My knees buckled, and I fell onto the shower's tiled floor.

I leaned forward and let the water pulse against my shoulder blades. My semen washed down the drain. "Jesus Christ." I sat back and let the spray hit my chest, trying to catch my breath. "Dillon."

Chapter Four

The next day, as the rain came down in sideways sheets, I planned out the rest of my camping trip to Little Point, Maine—for a kayak and camping adventure given by L.L. Bean.

“Yeah, next weekend,” I said, into the phone, to Ron. He and I had come to know each other from previous L.L. Bean trips.

He told me he had booked the same weekend, and started on about his investment firm. Both of us being in finance was something else we had in common. I think one of the reasons I connected with him was because I felt I could talk shop without needing to get too personal. Yet he had this way of pulling things out of me.

I looked out from my screened porch while he went on about a recent stock run for Ogle Inc. The lake was barely visible through the rain. “Yeah, I still got about half the shares I bought back in 2002. They’ve seen a good run lately.”

“Good?” he said. “Hundred fifty percent is more than good.”

Years ago, before college even, I received a small inheritance from my grandmother, and I invested it in the market.

In a moment of weakness, I had shared this with Ron. He would sometimes bug me for information on solid growth stock and was forever trying to calculate my net worth. “You a millionaire yet?”

“Hardly,” I said and changed the subject. “So I’m going up Friday night after work.” I leaned up against my porch’s wooden column. I could smell the ozone in the air. “I should get to Little Point around eight.”

“I’ll stake out a spot for our tents,” he said. His voice sputtered from having me on speaker in his car. “I’m leaving work early and should be there by five.” Ron lived in New Hampshire and was closer to the site.

While our friendship had been platonic, last summer when we had camped together things got a little *heated*. We had had a few beers at Woody’s, the tavern near the campsite. It was our last night camping. A rainstorm came through, and Ron’s tent sprung a leak. He wound up staying with me. I was in a spell of self-inflicted abstinence and was apparently pent-up. One thing led to another, and we wound up masturbating together, each of us in our own sleeping bag.

He got naked, pulling off his shirt and shorts, and waving his wand about for me to see. "So fucking horny," he had said.

We popped off together in a series of masculine grunts and groans.

I, of course, had kept my shirt on and made a mess of it. Afterward, I had to change it discreetly in the dark. Gary has been the only one to see me completely naked.

While I've never really been one to mess around much, that one time in the tent, was just that.

Well, until the next morning...

Around five a.m., it got really cold outside, and he climbed inside my sleeping bag. The next thing I knew I was on top of him, fucking like I was in a remake of *Brokeback Mountain*.

Even though I enjoyed it—he had a solid body from years of rock climbing and felt good pinned underneath me—I wasn't one to have sex without emotion, but for whatever reason my guard had been down.

Ron and I haven't talked much about it. But I think he too felt it was a no-strings-attached biff. "God, I needed that," he said when I rolled off him. "Thanks," he added.

It was like I had let him borrow a power tool or something. I felt a little guilty. "You're welcome."

Even though, as of late, I've been as horny as a sex addict at a porn convention, I'm hoping this time his tent is waterproof. I think we work better as *just* camping buddies.

"The weather is supposed to be nice," he said, to which I concurred. We said our goodbyes and hung up.

Since it was raining, and I didn't have much to do indoors, I decided to go to the office. It would be quiet, and I'd be able to catch up on some reports.

The wipers on my Explorer were on full speed when I pulled into the parking lot. "Glad I didn't choose this weekend to go to Maine," I said, as I pulled in next to an Accord, the only other car in the lot. I got out and ran to the door of the building.

Surprisingly, I didn't need my badge to get in. I wiped my feet on the rug in the lobby and headed for the Finance section.

"It's in the bag. Not a problem." I heard a voice say from the second floor's walkway that overlooked the lobby's courtyard. "The media's going to have a frenzy with this thing."

I heard the elevator door open and tried to catch a glimpse of the speaker, but the voice trailed off. "Who the hell was that?" I shrugged my shoulders and went through my department.

When I got to my desk, I flipped on my computer and started to settle in. A clap of thunder roared overhead. "Definitely glad I didn't go camping this weekend. Next weekend will be so much—"

My computer wouldn't log me in.

"Hmm." I tried my password again. "Account does not exist. Huh?" I typed over my username to make sure I had had it right, entered my password again and hit enter. "What the...?"

I picked up the phone to dial the help desk but there was no dial tone. I huffed. "Great. Must be the weather." I spun my chair around, opened my file cabinet drawer, and took out a hard copy of my report. "Back to ancient times," I said and sat reviewing it with my mechanical pencil and a calculator.

After an hour, I stood up and stretched. My abs were killing me from the prior day's workout. I bent backwards and winced in pain. The lights went out. "Oh, come on!" It was late afternoon, so it wasn't really dark inside, but with the storm going on outside I at least needed my overhead light in order to go over the EBITDA report. "All right, this is just a waste of—"

A loud bang came from what sounded like the other side of the wall in front and to the right of me—which was where the IT department kept their servers. I started to walk toward the sound, but out of the corner of my eye I saw a small fleet of black SUVs pull into the parking lot.

I walked over to the window. "What the hell is going on?" They pulled up front and parked in the handicap spots and got out. "The FBI?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know what happened," I said to the man who had showed me his badge and made sure the lights went back on.

"And you're the head accountant?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not the *head* accountant, but I am an accountant." My stomach felt queasy. I was nervous, even though I knew I hadn't done anything wrong.

“Okay, Mr. McCormick. Just stay there.” I was sitting at a table by the Danvers printer.

The door to the department opened. Mr. Whitfield walked in and, behind him, Bill—the Vice President of Finance. My boss.

I stood up.

My boss looked at me. “Evan. What are you doing here?”

“Uh, I just came in to run the EBITDA report.”

He shook his head.

I picked at my fingernail. “What’s going—”

The FBI officer, a tall man with a five o’clock shadow, was suddenly by my side. “Let’s keep it down, Mr. McCormick.”

A couple of other officers came over. They huddled in discussion and then brought Whitfield, my boss, and me into a conference room—the one by the door, we used to prepare for board meetings. They left us alone, with a guard at the door, and went back to moving file cabinets about and unplugging more computers.

Mr. Whitfield’s face was white. My boss avoided eye contact.

I stood up and started pacing. I looked out the window and into the department. “Does this have anything to do with—?”

“Shh,” said Bill. “The place is probably bugged.”

Mr. Whitfield cleared his throat. “Bill, you’re going to be the death of me.”

Chapter Five

“Evan, this place is beautiful. I feel like I stepped into Pottery Barn,” said Madeline when she walked into my house. “I didn’t know you had such flair.”

I scratched the back of my neck.

Dillon looked around. “Wow, it is nice.”

“Well, it *is* Pottery Barn furniture,” I admitted. “But I got it at an estate sale—nearly furnished the whole house for the price of what that leather couch,” I pointed to the living room, “would go for at retail.”

Dillon shook his head. “Leave it to the finance guy to bargain hunt.”

Being that my house was the closest to the office, I had invited a small group of us over. It was unlike me to do so, but these were unlikely times.

While the rainstorm had passed Monday morning, I knew Thoroughbred would be closed, but it felt weird to not at least show up at my usual time.

Sure enough, the doors had chains around the handles. There were a couple of news crews, and the television was abuzz with talks about the Ponzi scheme along the North Shore. Whitfield and my boss were arrested. I was mentioned as an “unnamed party that was released and had just happened to come in on a Sunday to catch up on work.”

Dillon sat down on my leather couch. “It must have been nice living so close to the office.” And it had been. Many days I would walk, bike, or jog to work.

Peter, Dillon’s buddy from Corridor Marketing, came to the door with a coffee-box from Dunkin’ Donuts and behind him was Barry from Sales, carrying bagels. “Nice digs,” Peter said, and put the coffee on my granite island.

I felt a little strange having so many people at my house. In the five years I had lived there, it had never seen so many visitors. I went to the kitchen, while my colleagues admired my little two-bedroom, two-bath home.

As I rummaged through the cabinets for some plates and napkins, I felt the need to apologize for my house’s rich appearance. “I bought it at the right time. It was a foreclosure. The previous owner had put in the granite. It just needed some finishing touches.”

Dillon and Madeline were in the guest bath admiring the décor. Peter opened the coffee and took the first pour, while Barry opened the bagels.

I put down some plates on the island.

Barry pulled apart a sesame bagel. "I would have put this on my expense account but that's been ceased."

"Oh, I don't mind chipping in," I said.

Barry took a bite of his bagel and put up a hand. "No, no." He spoke with his mouth full.

Madeline walked up with Dillon behind her. "Well, you've certainly done well for yourself, Evan," she said and poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Thank you."

Barry licked cream cheese from his finger. "Who would have thought Whitfield and Cheevers were scamming people." He shook his head. The buttons of his blue shirt looked as if they were going to pop.

Madeline stepped closer to me as Dillon grabbed a cup and started to pour. "These guys are bigwigs. You'd think they'd be smarter than to get involved in something like this."

"Well, we don't know the extent of their involvement," I reasoned. I didn't want to get into the Firkins Fiduciary Fund and took the cup of coffee Dillon poured and handed to me. "Thank you." I leaned against the countertop.

Madeline blew into her cup, glancing over at the wall by my refrigerator. "Oh, Evan. I just love that picture." She went over to it and looked back at me. "Is that from Pottery Barn too?"

Dillon moved closer to me. "The man's got taste." He elbowed me slightly. "Who would have known our head accountant had such fabulous interior design skills?"

I smiled nervously. "Senior, not head."

"Of course," Dillon said. He pulled me into a side hug. "Dude, you got nothing to worry about." He let me go. "They released you, free and clear."

I nodded and then said to Madeline, "I picked that up at an antique store in Essex a few years ago."

She touched the frame. "It's just divine."

I walked over to her. Dillon followed. “The dealer told me it was Conant at the turn of the century, before it became a vacationer’s hot spot.” I put a hand in my pocket and took a sip of my coffee, trying to be casual.

“Vacation hot spot?” Dillon asked. I hadn’t realized how close he was to me, and I flinched slightly when he spoke. “Sorry,” he said and touched the small of my back. I nearly melted.

Barry came forward. “Oh, sure. All these cottages were for the wealthy who lived in Boston and would come here during the summer.” Barry was the oldest of all of us. He was probably in his mid-to-late forties, and had been with Thoroughbred for fifteen years. I knew because Whitfield made a point of recognizing his service at our last all-employee meeting.

Peter stepped in. “What you all looking at?”

“Conant,” we said in unison and laughed.

Someone once told me all good parties happen in the kitchen. I had never had a party, but under the circumstances the gathering seemed to be successful.

We chatted for nearly an hour, until we went into my living area to switch on the television—which I hardly ever used—to see if any updates had come in on the scandal.

It turned out Thoroughbred wasn’t the only firm involved. There were a few other small and mid-size businesses impacted, “From Beverly, Massachusetts, to Southern New Hampshire,” said one of the newscasters.

By lunchtime, my little impromptu get-together started to disperse. Dillon was the last to leave.

After walking Madeline to the door, I busied myself with crushing the cardboard from Dunkin’ Donuts, to prepare it for recycling, and cleaning the kitchen counter.

Dillon went back to the couch to get the coffee cup he had left on the coaster.

“You don’t have to leave,” I said.

With the cup in hand he stopped and looked back at me. “No?”

I suddenly lost my confidence. “I mean if you have to... you have to... I just meant...” I swallowed and dropped the dishrag. “I wasn’t pushing you out.”

He smiled and lifted his cup to me, as if in a toast. "Well, my coffee is still warm."

I walked around the island, technically into the dining area, and leaned up against the countertop.

He sat back down on my couch. Its burnt sienna leather seemed to accentuate the golden brown in his hair. "It was awfully nice of you to offer up your home," he said. He put his arm on the couch's back and crossed his leg, ankle at the knee.

"Oh, it was nothing." I waved a hand dismissively.

He started bouncing his leg. "So, what are you going to do?"

I crossed my arms at my chest. "About Thoroughbred?" I sighed. "Don't know."

He looked at the TV, which was turned off. "It was a surprise to us all. But like Peter said, we'll get unemployment... you just don't want to be on that too long."

I too trained my eyes on the blank TV. "I've got a little bit saved, enough to get by for a while..." I shrugged.

He got up and pulled at the inseam of his dress pants and came over to the dining room table. "You ever think of going into business yourself?"

I uncrossed my arms and pushed away from the countertop. "Me? What do I know about running a business?" I grabbed the cardboard I had folded for recycling.

"You know more about the finances than any of us."

I turned. "What are you getting at?"

He put a hand on one of the dining chairs. "Peter and I came to Thoroughbred... with an ulterior motive."

I raised an eyebrow and set the cardboard down again.

He leaned into the chair, his butt sticking out. "We had only planned on staying a year before going out on our own. Maybe this just moves up the plan." He looked at the floor. "We could use a good finance guy."

I bit my lower lip. "Really?"

He stood up and came closer to me. I backed up and put my hands on the counter behind me.

We stared at each other for a beat. I couldn't look away.

He smiled. "It's just something to consider."

My heart beat faster. "I'll consider you. Ah, it!" I felt my face flush. "I'll consider it." I wanted to jump him. He looked so hot with a few shirt buttons undone and those dress slacks, which hugged all the right places.

He chuckled. "Give me some thought."

A strange hot and cold sensation boiled up inside me. It took all I had to pull back from kissing him. I broke my gaze and looked out at the lake through the screened porch. "You want to go for a walk?" I turned to find he had moved closer to me.

"Sure," he said. I could smell the coffee on his breath, but I didn't care. "Oh, sorry," he said and stepped back. "It's just..." He looked down and shook his head. "Never mind."

Halfway around the lake, Dillon took off his dress shirt and continued the rest of the way in a tank top. I tried not to look but found it almost impossible. The ribbed cotton shirt embraced what seemed to be a ripped-looking torso. His upper arms had nice definition, but not too much. I licked my lips. Miraculously, I was able to keep my arousal from sprouting.

"What do you like about camping?" Dillon asked me.

I clipped a dead branch from a mulberry bush. "Well, I like being outdoors." I threw the twig into the woods. "I grew up in the city... Detroit. My grandmother owned a cottage on Lake Michigan."

Dillon stepped behind me. We had been walking side by side, but along the eastern side of the lake the path narrowed. "Your mother died when you were a teen and your grandmother when you were how old?" he asked, inferring from an earlier conversation.

"Eighteen."

He didn't say anything at first. I just heard his footsteps behind me. "My mom was a single parent. My dad left us when I was a baby and later died."

I stopped and turned around. He had his dress shirt wrapped around his waist. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be." Dillon grinned, then pulled off his tank top and started to undo his pants.

My look must've been one of wonder, for he stopped when he started to unzip. "Just thought I'd go for a swim." He wiped his underarms with his tank, and we walked to the end of a little dock, nestled in a crop of tall grass. "Aren't you hot?"

I swallowed. I didn't want to take off my shirt. "I'm okay." I looked into his soft brown eyes and down to the ground. He was kicking off his shoes. "I've got an extra bathing suit, you can use, back at the house."

He was back to undoing his pants. "I'm fine." He kicked them off revealing a light blue pair of boxers. He folded his clothes and placed them on the edge of the dock. He snapped his underwear's waistband and said, "These will do."

His body was amazing—a nice, soft patch of hair on his chest that travelled down the middle of his abs. His stomach was solid. I could see the outline of his abs. A soft patch of brown went down into his blue boxers. I began to get stiff in my pants. *Evan, you've been so good. Control yourself.* I put my hand in my pocket and adjusted.

Dillon walked out onto the small wooden pier. Even his feet looked strong and sexy. He was careful to step over the missing slats in the middle. "You should come in," he said, looking back at me.

"Maybe later." I walked out after him. I had never seen anyone use this dock. From here I could see my cottage on the opposite side.

"Later?" He knelt down and felt the water. "Oh, man, that's cold."

I sat down and took off my shoes.

He looked back at me. "Toe dipper?"

I smirked. "Someone's got to stay back and watch for the lake monster. We wouldn't want it to eat you up."

He rubbed his chest. "Stop." He looked out at the water and back at me. "There ain't no lake monster."

I put my foot in the water. It was cold. "Legend has it," I chided.

"Well, I've never been one to let something stand in the way of what I want." He balanced himself while he stood and dipped a foot into the water. "Jesus! You wouldn't think it's ninety degrees out. How does this water stay so cold?"

"Must be the monster. He churns out ice."

He shrugged and then dove in.

I chuckled and watched the water ripple where he went under. Suddenly, he popped up.

“Woo! Talk about refreshing.”

I took off my dress shirt. I had a T-shirt underneath.

“C’mon in, chickenshit.”

I stood up and moved to the edge he had dove off. My wet feet left footprints on the wood. “No. You enjoy. Remember, the monster. Someone’s got to look after you.”

He started to swim toward me. He had a devilish grin on his face.

I stepped back.

He stopped swimming. “Hey, watch out for those missing slats.”

I turned just as I was about to step through a hole. “Oh, wow. Thanks.”

He put his hands on the pier and pulled himself up. The water slid off his body. I could see the outline of his penis in his underwear, and maybe he saw me looking at it, for he pulled away the cotton from clinging to him as he sat and chuckled. “Damn water’ll make it shrivel up. I’m not that small, normally.”

I laughed nervously and put my hand in my pocket to stop anything from sprouting.

He leaned back on his elbows, closed his eyes, and pointed his face to the sun. “Oh, that feels nice. I love the warm sun on my body.”

I sat down next to him. My attempt at thwarting a rise was failing. “You’ve got a nice body.” *Evan Capri McCormick! Control your—*

He turned to me, eyes wide and mouth agape. A grin came over his face. “The lake monster did it to me.”

I furrowed my brow.

“The lake monster made my body... Oh, I don’t know.” He blushed and looked the other way.

Smitten, I edged closer to him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you nervous.”

“That’s not it.” He turned, and his head jerked back ever so slightly, seemingly surprised that I was closer still.

I felt stupid for being so forward and leaned back.

He sat up. "You know, Evan." He kicked at the water. "I really think you're... You say *I* have a nice body." He was looking toward my house. "You look pretty rock hard yourself."

I cleared my throat and adjusted my crotch.

He chuckled. "Not like that. Oh, God, Dillon, you couldn't speak if they taught you how." He looked at me. "What I meant was, I can tell you work out. You've got good tone, from what I can see." His foot splashed in the water. He leaned forward, put his hand in and washed off some dirt on his knee. "But you're always covered up in dress shirts and whatnot, so it's hard to see."

My cuticle was stinging from picking it so much. I was still wearing my dress slacks, meant for the office, yet rolled up to the knee.

He touched my calf with his foot. "Look at those calves." He started to kick playfully at my leg. "Damn, those muscles will break my toe if I kick any harder."

I laughed. I loved the attention. I hadn't had this in so long. But then something happened. It wasn't about sexual attraction. In fact, I probably still had an erection, but it didn't matter. I didn't notice. It was as if a switch had flipped on, a warm flow filled me and a soft buzz took over. Something tugged at me inside. I kicked back at his calves. "Ouch," I said. "Damn, you're just as hard."

We held each other's gaze for a moment and then burst into laughter at the same time.

"I think you need to get wet," he said. "You're looking pretty hot."

I could feel my face turning red and looked away. A clump of lake grass swayed in the ripples our feet were making. Suddenly, I felt a couple of droplets on my neck. I turned.

Dillon had his wet hand above me. He reached down and got some more.

"Hey, hey!"

"Oh, yeah? Too much for you?" He reached and got more water and splashed me.

I felt my dimples nearly crack. The grin on my face must've been so big. "Dillon!"

Then, he soaked me.

I got up on my knees, reached down into the water, and splashed him back. "Ah, it is cold!" I yelled.

He was laughing. He jumped off the pier and, in midair, pulled himself into a cannonball. He landed in front of me and I got completely drenched.

"You son of a..." The grin hadn't left my face, and I found myself taking my pants off, kicking them to the side and stripping off my... I stopped. Another splash of water came my way and I pulled off my shirt, threw it behind me and jumped in.

On the walk back, I covered up in my dry dress shirt. Dillon just strutted bare-chested. We were both in our wet underwear. The woods were so thick and overgrown, I doubted my neighbors could see. Besides, I didn't care.

"Damn, that felt good," Dillon said.

I was barefoot and stepped gingerly to avoid the rocks. "The water was refreshing, after all."

The path was wider on this side. He walked beside me and clasped his pants under one arm while he adjusted his shoes in his other hand. "That's not what I meant."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

He snickered and looked back at the lake. "Never mind."

We walked further. My boathouse was approaching on our right and my house just to the left of it, around the bend.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing his shoes at the two-story structure.

"That's my boathouse. I use it for storage."

He looked at me. "No boat?"

I pointed with my chin up to the hill in front, next to my parked Explorer. "My kayak. I stand it up in there in the winter."

"Ah. I see."

"I don't really use it much." I turned in the direction of Mrs. Johnson's place behind us. "Some of my neighbors have converted theirs into little studios. Mrs. Johnson, up the road, has a watercolor studio in hers. And my neighbors on the other side," I said, pointing my thumb behind me, "actually rent theirs out as a studio apartment."

He started around the front and climbed up the small dirt step, steadying himself with shoes and pants out to his sides for balance. "This is pretty cute." He looked up at the second story. "And tall."

I stepped up behind him, noticing his little butt jiggle in the dampness of his shorts. "I like it."

"It's nice. You could convert this into a great little place and probably get a nice rent check."

I nodded. "I could. It's just the initial investment. There's no electricity, and I'd have to put in plumbing."

"Hmm." He opened the door and went inside.

I went in after him. It was pretty empty, save my mountain bike, some yard tools, and a box of Christmas ornaments.

He put his shoes and clothes down on the ledge by the window.

I brushed away a cobweb from the rafter.

Dillon started to climb the ladder that went to the second floor loft.

"Careful. You're barefoot... splinters."

"Meh."

I got a peek up his shorts but quickly looked away. I felt a little perverted having peeked.

He hoisted himself up and sat with his legs dangling over the side. "Hot up here."

I looked out the window. "Heat does rise."

"Nice view," he said.

I looked up at him.

He switched from staring at me to looking out the window. "That too."

I chuckled and went over to where he had placed his clothes, to put mine down as well, and was about to climb up with him, but he had started back down.

"It is hot up there." He was looking over his shoulder while he descended. "Mr. McCormick says I should look out for splinters."

"He does, does he?"

He jumped off the third rung. “Well.” He put out his hands and then clapped his thighs, which made a wet slapping sound.

“You want to get out of those wet clothes?” I asked. I cleared my throat. “I mean...”

He laughed. “Sure.”

I went to the door. “I’ve got some you can borrow. You’re probably my size. Medium? Thirty or thirty-two inch waist, if I were to—” I turned around.

His back was to me. He was pulling up his tan dress pants over his naked butt. His wet boxers were on the floor. He turned around and put his arms out by his sides. “Ta da.”

I could see the weight of his penis flap in the looseness of his pants. I licked my dry, lower lip and bit it.

“No bother. I don’t mind freeballing it once in a while.”

I felt myself get hard, almost instantly. Dressed only in boxers, with an airy fly opening, it wasn’t easy to conceal. I turned around. “I should get dressed.”

Chapter Six

“Holy shit,” I said. There was a little spit that had come out of my mouth where I had been biting the pillow. “What the fuck? Is someone slipping me Viagra or something?” I rolled onto my back and edged away from the stain I had made on my sheets. I sat up to catch my breath and leaned against the headboard.

I had wanted to call Dillon—it had been two days since our swim in the lake—but I was so wound up, I didn’t think I could have an intelligent conversation without wanting to leap through the phone and jump him.

“Okay,” I exhaled. “Now you can call and be a little more levelheaded.” I took my cell phone off the nightstand and pressed his name to call him. It rang four times. I was expecting it to go to voice mail just as he answered.

“I was hoping that was you.”

I smiled. “Your wish just came...” I looked down at my sheets. “Came true.” I put my face in my hand and shook my head.

“You still going to Maine? Camping?” We had talked about my upcoming trip before he left.

“Why? You wanna come?” I asked. I put my hand down on the mattress, accidentally sliding it into my mess. “Oh, God.”

“What’s wrong?”

I pinched the phone between my cheek and shoulder, picked up my gym shorts—the ones I had desperately shucked when I had entered my bedroom—and wiped my hands. “Oh, nothing. I just... never mind.”

“Well, I’d love to come.”

I threw the shorts onto the floor and stood up. “You would? Really?”

“You can teach me how to kayak.”

“I could.” I looked at myself naked in the mirror.

“Cool.”

I brushed at the birth mark. “A buddy of mine is going to meet me there.”

“Oh.”

I suddenly got the impression that maybe Dillon wanted it to be just him and me. "He was going to leave work early but now that we don't have to work, I could get there before him." *And get him a separate lot.* I didn't want to be rude and blow off Ron, but I really wanted time alone with Dillon.

"That's cool. I'd like to meet your friends."

I smiled. *That's sweet. He doesn't need to know Ron and I fooled around once... well twice.* "I don't have a ton of friends," I said and turned away from the mirror.

"Neither do I. Me; I'd rather have one or two deep, meaningful relationships than three-hundred fifty-six Facebook connections."

I sat down on the edge of the bed. "Three-hundred fifty-six?" I put my T-shirt back on, being careful not to take the phone away from my ear too long to miss a word of his.

He laughed. "Actually that *is* about how many connections I have on Facebook—at least, last time I looked."

"Wow." I put my feet on the bed rails. "I'm certainly not that popular."

"You sure you still want me to go to Maine with you? My entourage of Facebook friends might follow us," he joked.

I lay down on the bed and put my hands up inside my T-shirt. There was a gob of my goo glued to the hair on my stomach. I pulled at it. "I'd love it if you came." The doorbell rang. I shot up.

"Someone at your door?"

"Yeah."

"Call me later."

We hung up. I grabbed my gym shorts and jumped into them.

"Evan?" said a female voice.

I went out into the living room, through to the foyer and opened the front door. Wearing a sun hat and a large grin on her face, Mrs. Johnson stood on my front porch with her black Lab, Detritus, by her side. "Oh, hi."

"Hello, Evan," she said through the screen door. "Detritus and I were walking about, and I remembered I hadn't yet invited you to my art show next weekend."

I opened the screen door. "Hey, buddy," I said to Detritus as he plunged his way in. When Mrs. Johnson had had surgery I walked him for her.

As per usual, Detritus immediately went for my crotch.

I pushed him away. "Art show, huh?" Detritus was persistent and nudged me in the balls. I balked.

"Detritus!" Mrs. Johnson furrowed her brow and looked down at him. "Yes, I'm having a little show..." she said without taking her eyes from her dog. "What in God's name are you—"

I suddenly felt the slobber of Detritus' warm tongue wetting my shorts. "Oh, goodness." I pushed him away.

"Did you spill something on your shorts? He's found something he likes." She chuckled.

My shorts! I looked down and wiped the dog spit and other fluids from my thigh. "Oh, Jesus. I... I... I spilled some milk when I was eating cereal." My face must have been fifty shades of red.

"That explains it. Detritus loves dairy." She handed me a colorful postcard-invitation with a photograph of one of her paintings. "It'll be not this Saturday afternoon, but the next. I'll have some wine and cheese, nothing fancy. Just a few friends in the backyard to check out some of my latest creations." She pulled Detritus by the collar. He was still going for me. "I just put the finishing touches on a really beautiful one of our lake." She clasped her hands together and smiled. "You're going to like it."

All of Mrs. Johnson's paintings were of the lake. "Oh, this will be great," I said, reading the dates on back of the card.

"It's a week from Saturday."

I looked up. Detritus was by her side and away from my crotch. "I'll be there. Can I bring a friend?"

A smile pulled at her lips. "Evan," she said with a rise in her voice. "I'd be honored to meet... him?"

I could practically feel my eyes snap open. *I had never told her I was gay. Why did she assume?* "My friend, Dillon. He likes art." *He does? And how do you know he'll even go?*

"Oh," she put a hand to her chest. Her smile never left her face. Detritus started forward, but I held him back. "Splendid! I'd love to meet him."

She repeated the date and time, and left. I shut the door, locked it, and walked away shaking my head. I looked down at my pants. "Unbelievable."

Chapter Seven

Dillon asked me to dinner at a place called 62 of Salem. We still hadn't discussed being gay. But it didn't matter. Being asked out to dinner, I felt it was understood. Besides, not bringing our sexuality into play made it more about us and less about sex, though the bonobo in me was threatening to make an appearance.

That afternoon, I splurged and went to an expensive men's clothing store at the mall. I dropped a hundred bucks on an indigo Henley, twill pants—which, to me, looked like offspring from a pair of jeans and khakis—and canvas shoes. I told the clerk I needed something trendy and let him pick it out. He put the medium-sized shirt I went for back on the rack and took out a small. "You're ripped. Show it off." He told me bicep cleavage was the rage, squeezed my upper arm and nodded as if confirming his decision. "And the shoes..." he said, I should wear without socks.

I did as I was told.

"You look very handsome," Dillon said. He took his napkin from the table. "Has anyone ever told you that you have great facial features? A nice, angled jawline." He drew his finger alongside his chin.

I think I blushed a shade darker than my wine stain. I, too, placed my napkin on my lap.

We sat at a two-top by the window. There was a view of the brick sidewalk and an occult shop—common in the city, as it's known for its acceptance of witches—across the way. The restaurant's décor—contemporary with bold colors, bottles of wine displayed A nice, angled jawline settings—matched its choice in food.

Dillon looked at the wine list. "I heard about this restaurant from a client. They supposedly have phenomenal food, a real eclectic mix."

I looked at the menu. "Great variety."

"I'm glad you wanted to have dinner with me."

I looked up. He was staring at me, and I smiled. "I'm glad you asked me."

We shared an appetizer of chickpea fritters, and he ordered us a bottle of pinot noir. We sipped, ate, and talked. After what was probably an hour or more, we finally ordered our entrees.

The waitress refilled our water goblets, and Dillon drank his. "Oh, I meant to tell you. I saw another Yankee billboard today."

I put down my glass of water. "Oh?"

He looked out the window. "The guy on it kind of reminded me of you."

I thrust my head back. "Me? Not the 'Don't let your meat loaf.' one?"

His eyes widened. "You've... no. That's another one."

"God, how many are there?"

He sat back, picked up the linen napkin from his lap and wiped his mouth. "You should model. You got the looks."

I touched my chest. "Ah, no."

The waitress dropped off our arugula salads, and we ate them while bandying about nothing specific. It didn't matter so much what we were talking about. It was the feeling I had for him that seemed to grow. That warm sensation I had felt deep inside, when we were sitting on the dock, felt like it was beginning to boil over. As the night went on, the more it seemed to percolate.

My scallops and his duck arrived as I sipped the last of my wine. Dillon asked if I wanted more. "Water's fine," I said.

We topped off our meal by sharing a fresh berry Pavlova.

"This was splendid, Dillon." I put my napkin on the table. "Thank you."

Dillon signed the credit receipt. "You don't have to thank me." He put his gold card back in his wallet.

I sat there with my chin resting on the top of my hands.

He sat back and slowly rubbed his stomach. "I'm full." He was wearing a slim-fitting, vibrantly blue dress shirt—one he told me earlier he had picked up at some French boutique in Boston. His hands made a slight rubbing noise against the material. "I don't think I could eat for a week." I tried not to look down further to the form-fitting, gray jeans he had on.

We got up.

"Thank you, gentlemen," the waitress said, as we walked toward the front door.

“My pleasure,” Dillon replied, touching my back as he held the door open for me.

We strolled about Salem's Pickering Wharf for a while, watching the boats rise and fall in the wake of the harbor's current. After that, we meandered over to the Common, where Dillon had parked his Passat and drove a few miles to route 128, listening to The Pretenders. He knew I liked them and played a shuffle for me on his iPod.

“There,” he said, pointing out my window, toward the advertisement. “That one.”

I looked at the billboard and read the slogan, “We're bigger than you think.”

“The one on the end. The good-looking one with the sandy brown hair.”

I caught another glimpse as we passed it. “He's practically naked, except for the gym shorts.” The photo had been of a diverse group of men standing beside one another, each scantily dressed and holding or eating Yankee beef products.

“What's particularly effective about these campaigns is that they take a humdrum product, sexualize it and strike a chord with the shopper in the household.” Dillon shifted the car into a lower gear. His silver and black bracelet slid down his wrist. “They speak to straight homes—with two point four children—as well as gay homes, or even people living alone. They've got everyone in the industry talking about them.”

“Corridor still has the campaign?”

He looked over his shoulder and got into the passing lane. “Does it matter?”

I shrugged. “Madeline told me they've absorbed quite a few of Thoroughbred's accounts with the fallout.”

He passed a BMW and cut in front of it. He put on his directional to get off at my exit.

We pulled off the highway and started onto the back-roads into Conant. It suddenly got dark and quiet. There were not a lot of streetlamps in Conant.

“So what makes a Detroit city boy pick the sleepy little town of Conant, Massachusetts to settle down in?” He shifted into third.

“Oh, I don't know. I guess I like the country feel. After living in the inner city as a kid, I sort of wanted the opposite of it all.” *Back on the Chain Gang*

came on the radio. "Conant has that rural feel, yet isn't too far from civilization."

Dillon turned up the radio. "I like this one. It's an oldie."

"It came out the year I was born."

He looked at me. "Eighty...?"

"Eighty-three."

"That's right. I was eighty-four."

We continued onward. The houses got bigger and more expensive looking. Conant had seen a lot of development in the early 2000's and, despite the recession, had weathered it okay.

I rolled down my window as he turned onto my street. Mrs. Johnson's lights were out. We drove a little farther, and he pulled into my lot. His tires popped along the gravel as he parked behind my car. My kayak was upturned in front of it.

Dillon shut off his engine, and his emergency brake made a clicking noise as he pulled it up.

We sat in the dark for a moment.

He turned toward me. His knee pressed up against the stick shift. "I had... I had a good time tonight."

I had my hand on the door latch. "You're not coming in?"

He grinned. "I didn't want to be—"

"Presumptuous?" I answered.

He nodded and slowly leaned forward. I felt drawn and met him somewhere above the emergency brake. He licked his lips. "I probably smell like Moroccan-spice and—"

I kissed him. I couldn't hold back anymore.

"Wow," he said. Then he kissed me.

"It's not Bolognese," I said, without taking my mouth off his.

He slowly pulled back. "Fresh berry Pavlova?"

I shook my head. "Heaven." I kissed him again.

His hand went around my waist, as he continued to kiss me, and through it said, "And you..." He tenderly bit my lower lip and went back to kissing me.

“You taste just like...” He pulled back just enough to utter it softly. I could feel his breath against my mouth. “Like magnificence.” The tip of his tongue touched mine. He moved away, and I looked into his eyes. “And a hint of wonder.”

I put my hand on his back and pulled him closer, kissing him deeply. My hand went up to the nape of his neck and caressed the soft buzz of his hairline. “Wonder, huh?”

He shivered, closed his eyes and his head fell back a bit. “I wonder what I’m getting into.”

I kissed his Adam’s apple and worked my way back up to his mouth, taking his upper lip gently between my teeth.

He moaned, and our tongues met. He nearly climbed over the center console to get to me.

I clawed at his shirt and reached up the back of it. It had pulled loose from his jeans. “Maybe we should head inside,” I said.

He leaned back, exhaled, and nodded. The crotch of his jeans was bulging.

When we got inside, we had calmed down enough to have an after-dinner drink. But our passion soon returned, and I brought him into my bed, where we made love.

Foreplay, sex, afterglow. I like them all, but to me—if the bookends aren’t strong, the sex doesn’t hold up.

We lay in bed. My head was propped against his upper arm, and he was tracing random patterns along my jawline. I shivered and arched my neck.

“You know, it’s been a while for me,” he said and started to rub my chest.

“Same for me.” I took his hand, and he clutched my thumb.

He leaned over and kissed the tip of my nose. “You’re so friggin’ adorable.”

“Because I haven’t had sex in four-hundred years?” I leaned back so I could see him better.

He chuckled and a dimple appeared. “No, not because you’ve been so hard up.”

I elbowed him jokingly. “I didn’t say I was hard up.”

He shrugged a shoulder. "There I go again, not saying the right things." He pulled the sheet up from my waist and covered our still-clutched hands. "What I meant was, you're cute because... I don't know." He let his head drop back down onto the pillow and threw up his free hand. "You just are. I can't put my finger on it."

I leaned over and onto his chest, curling the sheets up over me, leaving his lean stomach exposed. I started tracing lines up and down his abs.

He ran his hands through my hair.

I got up and kissed my way down to his navel. "You know, there really haven't been a lot of men for me." I looked back at him. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not the most outgoing of sorts."

"That's one of the reasons I like you so much." He gave a tender tug at my bangs. "You don't even know how fucking hot you are. Quietly strong and... in bed, holy shit."

I rested my head on his stomach. The sheets below his waistline began to stir. "Can I ask you something?" I said.

"At this point you could ask me anything."

I brushed my hand along his growing erection under the sheets. "You never said anything about my birthmark."

He got up on his elbows, and I knelt on my haunches covering my own erection with the sheets.

He looked down at my chest, then to my eyes. "What's there to say?"

I smiled and gazed out the window. "You're just..." I turned to him, pointing at my chest. "You don't find this a turnoff?"

He came closer and grabbed my hand. "Are you high?" He shook his head. "Of course not. In fact..." He raised his eyebrows and with a much lower voice said, "I think it's kind of sexy."

I guffawed and looked away. "C'mon."

He yanked at the sheets, and my penis flopped out from the confines. "No, really. It makes you..." He sighed. "I'm gonna screw this up again." Then he said much faster, "It makes you real. It makes you... flawed, but in a good way." He put his head down. "That didn't sound right."

I got up on my knees, went over to him, pushed him onto his back and straddled him. "It's perfect. You're perfect." And I bent down and kissed him.

He opened his eyes. "Oh, one more thing."

I sat up and grimaced. "Yeah?"

"Are you gay?" he asked with a smile.

I laughed.

"I'm just asking." He put his arms out. "We never really got that out in the open. You just attacked me in the car and then fucked me so hard I went cross-eyed."

I laughed even louder. "They did cross a little, you know."

He sat up and pushed me gently on the shoulder. "They did not."

I didn't say anything.

"Did they?"

I crossed my eyes and started a fake moan.

He pushed me down onto the bed and hovered over me. "Evan Capri McCormick. I'm going to give you an orgasm that'll make you scream." He looked over his left shoulder. "Oh, wait a minute. I already did that, didn't I?" He started these high-pitched screams, as if imitating me. He looked back at me, and we both burst into laughter.

Chapter Eight

“The wonder of it all,” I sang. I was zipping about the house with my vacuum. I like to clean prior to going away, so that when I come back I don't walk into a mess. “Love and Dillon... me and Dillon, yeah,” I continued singing, off key, making up lyrics to the hum of my Dyson. “Isn't love grand, yeah.”

I shut the vacuum off and wheeled it back into the laundry room, off the foyer. While in there, I took out the load from the dryer, brought it back into the bedroom, and had just begun to fold when my cell phone rang.

I looked at the screen. “Ron.” I picked it up. “Hey. What's up?” I sat down on the edge of the bed. “I was just going to—”

He went on about having pulled his back while working out at the gym.

“I told you bodyweight exercises are the way to go. No equipment and you get a better—”

He interrupted and said he wasn't sure if he'd be able to make it.

“Oh?” I smiled slightly, then shook my head to wipe it from my face. “I was going to head up early and stake out a spot for us.”

He said that he might try to come up Saturday night or Sunday morning for the kayak trip, if he was feeling better.

I pulled a pair of Dillon's underwear from the laundry pile and smiled. “Oh, no problem. I'll be bringing a... buddy of mine.”

He muttered something, with an air of surprise.

“Yeah. A lot's happened since we last talked. Work...” He interrupted and said something about the scandal. “Yeah, I figured you'd have heard... I know, it's been all over the—”

He asked me if I had heard the latest about Whitfield.

I bolted up. “What?”

I hung up with Ron, ran to the TV and flipped it on.

“We continue to bring you this developing news,” the blonde newscaster said—she was a pretty thing who looked older than me but was probably fresh out of college. “Thoroughbred Marketing of Beverly, Massachusetts, was dealt

another slap today. CEO and founder, Jonathan Whitfield, seventy-eight, is said to have died in his Marblehead home. No further information is available at this time.” Mr. Whitfield’s headshot from the company’s website, of him dressed in a gray suit and a red tie, flashed above the newscaster’s left shoulder.

My cell phone rang again. It was Dillon.

“Did you hear?” I asked upon picking it up.

“Holy shit. What happened?”

I shut the TV off. They had moved onto the weather. “I don’t know. The last I saw of him was Sunday.”

“You think he was murdered?”

I sat on the edge of my Pottery Barn chair. “I... I would hope not. He was old. Maybe just the stress of it all?”

“What a time to go!”

I leaned back in the chair and exhaled. “I feel bad.” I gave a slow, disbelieving shake of the head. “I don’t think he knew about it.”

“The scandal?”

“He was too old, nearly ready to retire. I think he had the wool pulled over his eyes.” I almost forgot I was talking to Dillon for a second. “I should’ve warned him.”

“Huh?” I could hear fumbling in the background, like he was getting out of bed, or something. “Did you know about it, Evan?”

I got nervous flush and felt a bit tingly. “No!” I sat up. “Why would you think that?”

The silence on the other end seemed like it lasted forever. He huffed. “Anyway...” Then his voice got that smoky, low tone and he went on, “I was just thinking about you.”

I grinned, any nervousness I had about the scandal suddenly vanishing. “You were?” I bit my lower lip and asked, “And something popped up?”

The doorbell rang.

“Hold on,” I said to Dillon. “It’s probably Mrs. Johnson wanting me to walk her dog or something. I’ll call you later.”

We hung up, and I went to the door and opened it.

My mouth fell open. “What?”

There was a delivery man, holding a beautiful bouquet of yellow roses. "Mr. McCormick?"

"Yeah." I opened the screen door. He handed me the flowers, and I signed a delivery slip.

He nodded. "You have a great day," and headed back to his truck.

Dillon stood in my living room. He was dressed for hiking, in a pair of Levis, North Face hiking boots, a Kings of Leon concert T-shirt, and his Red Sox baseball cap. He had arrived right on time. "I didn't want to send them after we got back from camping," he said. "I couldn't wait. They'll still be fresh when we get back Sunday."

I looked over at the display I had put on the island between the dining area and the kitchen. I had never had anyone buy me flowers before, let alone have them delivered. "Dillon, I don't... I was so shocked." I looked back at him, reached out and kissed him. "Thank you. You're... you're the best."

He gave a dismissive wave. "Ah."

I looped my finger into the back of his pants and led him into the kitchen. "I have a little surprise for you, too." I held out a hand. "Nothing fancy."

"A surprise for me?"

I pulled out a seat for him to sit down at the café table. "It's not much, but..." I went to the counter and grabbed a bag of still-warm muffins and some coffee, which were away from his view, on the other side of the refrigerator. "I know you like blueberry muffins." I walked over and put them down on the table. "There's this little bakery up the street that makes them. They're to die for. They just came out of the oven."

He patted his stomach. "I thought I was watching my girlish figure."

I peeked over the table, in obvious exaggeration, and looked down at his crotch. "There ain't nothing girlish about you."

He chuckled, pulled the bag closer, opened it and sniffed. "Ah, heavenly." He put his nose in the bag and took another whiff. "Umm."

"Well, we could sit and smell them." I sat down. "Or eat them."

He looked up. "How about both? Why don't we take them in the car and eat along the way? I want to get up there."

I pushed my seat back and slapped my thighs. "Great idea."

I went over to the television to shut it off. "You heard, right?"

"Heart attack."

I turned. Dillon was right behind me. "Poor guy," I said.

"Poor?" he asked.

"You know what I mean."

We crossed the Piscataqua River Bridge into Maine around eleven. I was driving my Explorer. Dillon sat in the passenger seat, looking very sexy.

"You're too much of a distraction," I said.

He chuckled and grabbed the muffin bag. "Keep your eyes on the road."

"I don't think there's anything left."

He opened the bag and poured the remaining contents in his mouth. "There were a few more crumbs."

I pushed the glasses I wore for distance up on the bridge of my nose. "God, you eat like an ox. You want me to stop for lunch?"

"Nah. I'll be fine. I can wait." He pulled at the inseam of his jeans, scooting himself up in the process. "Though quite honestly, I can't wait to get you in that tent."

I glanced over. He was fidgeting with his crotch, which instantly got me hard. "Neither can I."

We drove a little longer, listening to more of Kings of Leon's "Mechanical Bull." I came upon a rest stop.

"Oh, thank God," Dillon said. "I really gotta go."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would've stopped earlier." I turned on my blinker and pulled off the exit.

Dillon unplugged his iPod, and The Pretenders' CD I had in started. I parked next to a Vanagon with a Human Rights Campaign sticker on its bumper. Two women got out.

Dillon opened the door. "You have to go?"

"No." I smiled and changed the track.

"What are you? A fucking camel?"

I snickered. "I'll wait here." And I did.

"Lover of Today" changed to "I'll Stand By You" and I hummed along. I was grateful for Dillon being in my life. "Thank you, God," I muttered.

The lesbians came back. Dillon was walking several feet behind them. The girls were chatting and laughing. The heavier one grabbed the tip of the blonde's fingers and helped her toward the car. Dillon smiled at me. The girls got in their van.

"What's the matter?" Dillon asked, with the passenger door open.

I turned my head and wiped a small tear from my eye. "Nothing. Why?"

He got in, grabbed my hand and we drove off.

Around one, we got to the campsite, which sat on a bluff overlooking the bay.

Dillon stretched his back, wandered over to the edge, and took in the view. "This is awesome."

I walked around the front of the car. "This is my favorite spot." I kicked at the ground where I usually put up the tent and then looked out at the ocean. "Great view, huh?"

He turned back. "I never knew camping could be so nice."

I kicked away a few pebbles. "If we waited another hour, all the good spots would be taken."

"Is that why you wouldn't let me pee again?" he said, walking over to a clump of bushes.

"Not there!"

He turned around with his zipper part way down.

"There's an outhouse down that path," I said, pointing.

He sighed, zipped back up and headed down the trail.

When he got back, he helped me finish setting up the tent. We had the entrance face the water, so we could sit inside and look out at the view.

He climbed inside. "I love the smell of a tent."

I scooted in behind him. "You and your smells."

“I love smells.” He leaned into me and sniffed slowly. “Like you.” He kissed my neck.

“Dillon.” I pushed him away. “Not yet. There are kids around.”

He leaned back on his hands. “All right, all right.”

“So,” I said, with a clap of my hands, “now that we’re staked, why don’t we get some lunch?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“You are a ravenous fella.” I leaned in and kissed him.

He kissed me back and sat up. “I thought we were waiting.”

“We are,” I husked into the side of his neck.

He moaned. “Okay.” He returned the kiss. “If this is waiting...” he grazed his hand along my neck, as I leaned my head back, “...then waiting is awesome.”

Chapter Nine

Woody's was a burger joint on the outskirts of Little Point, Maine. A lot of people from the campground went there, as it was within walking distance. I had been there a couple of times with the L.L. Bean group, but I usually just hung back at my site and cooked up something on my propane grill.

In the middle of Woody's sat a bar. A woman, probably in her mid-forties with a ruddy complexion and dyed blonde hair, poured draft beer from a tap. Guys with big bellies and bushy beards played darts in front of her. Behind her was a pool table with a small group of men and women surrounding it.

"Merle!" she shouted. "Here's your Bud." She slid a beer down the bar. A dart player with a Harley Davidson bandana put out a hand, caught it and winked at her.

Dillon and I brushed our feet on the foyer's mat. The pool table group looked up, stopped talking for a bit and then went back to their business. We stepped in further and took a small table near the head of the bar, between the dart players and pool table. "This good?" I asked Dillon.

He pulled out a chair. "Good as any," he said, sat down and pulled a menu out from between the condiments and napkin dispenser.

I sat, took out a menu and looked at it. The corner of the menu had a little burn mark on its plastic covering that went through to the paper underneath, which claimed the fame of having Sagadahoc county's best burgers. "The place looks worse than—"

"What'll it be, fellas?" said a deep voice. "Something from the bar?" he added, with a drop of the *r*, as did a good many New Englanders. He was a large man, balding, unshaven, and wore a stained apron around his rotund mid-section.

"I'll have a Bud Light, please."

He looked over at Dillon and pointed with his chin.

"Same," Dillon said and watched him leave.

I grabbed a napkin to dry a spot of wetness that I hoped was left from someone wiping the table down. "The service may not be the best either, but I promise the food is decent." I balled up the napkin and put it aside.

“No worries,” Dillon said, without looking up from his menu.

I wiped at a spot in front of him, and he smiled at me.

“This place is fine.” He touched my hand with the tip of his finger and made a couple of soft little scratches.

I leaned back and let out a small sigh of relief. I wanted him to have a good time.

A tall woman, in a red uniform and nylons, made her way out of the kitchen, skirted past the group by the pool table, and came toward us. She was carrying a tray of burgers, and a pencil stuck out from the jet-black bun on top of her head. She stopped at our table. “Did Billy get you some drinks?” she asked, with an infectious smile.

Dillon looked up from his menu. “Oh, yes.”

She winked at him and snapped her gum. “Great. I’ll be back in a bit. It’s crazy tonight.” She walked away.

“No rush,” I said, but I didn’t think she heard me.

“Hey, look.” Dillon held out his menu and pointed to the back of it. “They serve Yankee Neighborhood Beef.”

I flipped my menu over and saw their logo on the bottom of it, next to another burn mark. “Hmm.”

We perused the dinner options a little while longer. Billy brought us our beers and took our order for the waitress, as she was still “in the weeds,” as he put it.

We both ordered burgers and were halfway through our beers when one of the bearded dart players approached us.

“You the branded one?” he asked me and made a horizontal line across his chest.

I looked down at my shirt. I was wearing a non-descript blue T-shirt I bought at Target years ago. *Is my wine stain showing?* I pulled at the bottom of my shirt.

“I’m sorry?” Dillon said, sat up and stuck out his chest.

The man stepped closer. “You’re not the cut one?” He held his beer up and listed a bit. A tall, trim man came up behind him.

I looked at Dillon. He was red in the face. I shook my head at him, so as not to start anything.

The waitress with the pencil still in her bun stepped between them and our table. "Jerry, you bothering these handsome fellas?"

"No." He wobbled a bit. He pointed at me, "I just thought he was that Yankee Beef guy."

I jerked my head back.

Dillon laughed loudly, putting his hand on the table and pushing back in his chair.

The waitress took a hard look at me, then waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, no." She pointed at me. "This guy's much cuter." And she walked away.

I squinted. "Huh?"

"You'll have to excuse my pal here," said the trim man. He was wearing an untucked, long-sleeve red-checked shirt rolled up at the sleeves, a pair of jeans, and work boots. He held Jerry up by the shoulder. "He's had a little too much."

I looked at Dillon, then back at the guy and laughed nervously. "That's okay." I furrowed my brow.

Jerry headed back toward the dart board, using the bar stools for support along the way. His friend watched him and then turned back to us. He shook his head. "Man's been here all afternoon. Doesn't know when to say 'when'."

Dillon took a sip of his beer. I grabbed my mug.

Jerry's friend rubbed his chin. I could practically hear the scrape of his stubble. "If you're up for some darts," he said, and then scratched at his jaw. "I could use a partner or two." He snickered and put his hands on his hips. "Jerry's beer goggles have him seeing double. I can't win for losing." He shook his head and extended his hand. "Name's Pike."

Pike slapped me on the back—in his chummy way. It was a little harder than the last time. The beer must have been affecting his sense of touch.

We had beat Ireland's Trio, as our opposing dart team called themselves. They were huddled in the corner, drinking away their shame from being beaten by the "Pretty Boys," as they called us.

Dillon came over with another pitcher of Bud Light and sat down at the new table we had grabbed—this one a little closer to the dart board.

“You do kind of look like him,” Pike said. He took the pitcher and started to refill my glass.

“I told him that,” Dillon said. “It’s uncanny.”

I shook my head.

Dillon pushed his glass closer to Pike. “But he hasn’t seen the ad Jerry was talking about... with the brand marks on the model’s chest.” He watched Pike fill his mug.

Pike slowed his pour as the beer head in Dillon’s mug began to rise. “There’s a billboard over by the Sagadahoc Bridge,” he said. He got his own mug and started to pour. “You should check it out.”

I grabbed my beer.

Pike put the pitcher down and raised his mug. “Thanks for the win, boys. The Pretty Boys.”

We spent the next morning kayaking. Dillon took to it quite well.

We paddled our way around a cove of black rock, and then made our way to a little beach by the bridge. A small wake of waves from the other boats about the bay splashed the sandy shoreline. Hanson Bay was so far inland that it didn’t have crashing waves like the coastline.

I could hear the flop of Dillon’s paddle behind me. “I kind of like this kayaking thing.” A flop came from my other side. “See? We didn’t need to do a test run out on the lake. This is easy.”

“It is. The bay is calm. It’s a great place to learn.”

“In other words, I ain’t seen nothing yet?”

I nodded. “In other words.” I looked back at him and he stuck out his tongue. “You might need that later,” I said, turned back around and paddled. “You might want to keep it in your mouth for safekeeping.”

The boat rocked, and I felt a splash of water on my neck.

“You’re gonna tip us,” I said, shimmying my hips to exaggerate the rocking. He had admitted earlier to being a little afraid of capsizing.

“All right. The tongue’s back in my mouth.” He paddled. “But only ’til I get you back in that tent.”

As I thought back to our morning romp—Dillon pinned under my arms and groaning as he thrust himself deep inside me—my paddle scraped the bottom of the shore.

Dillon pulled us closer by sticking his paddle in the ground. “We’re here,” he said and started out.

My mind was still stuck on him grunting and groaning under my downward thrust.

He waded in the water and pulled at the head of the boat while I sat inside. His biceps flexed, and the little tribal tattoo he had stretched with the flex of his arm. He stood, holding the throw rope in his hand. The *Star Wars* vintage, red T-shirt that he told me he had picked up at Target—hugged his chest. *Oh boy. He’s doing it to me again.*

He wore his Red Sox cap backwards, the little logo sat just above a tuft of blond hair. “What?” He put his hands on his hips. His tan corduroy cutoffs stretched tight along the zipper’s seam. “You gonna sit in there all day?”

I looked over my shoulder. “I can’t get out.”

“Huh?”

I looked down at my crotch and then back up at him.

“Again?” He shook his head and laughed. “You’re worse than a teenager.”

“I can’t help it. I was thinking about this morning, and...” I shrugged and then in a lower, more gravelly voice said, “You just really get me going.”

He dropped the rope, put a hand in his pocket and turned around. “You’re gonna get me worked up again. Stop.”

“All right, all right.” I stuck my paddle in the sand for leverage and scooted out.

He turned around, adjusting his crotch. He looked at my waistline. “Evan!”

“I told you. I can’t...”

“My God. You’re apt to have a hawk come down and perch on that thing.”

Chapter Ten

We hiked for several hours along the Piscataqua trail and stopped at a rest spot before we went back to the kayak. The shade felt good, and the scent of pine was enchanting. I closed my eyes to take it in.

“Next!” Dillon said and shut the door behind the outhouse, which had a sticker from the servicing company, *Blow Family Portables*. Dillon tapped a finger to the sticker. “That’s a marketing faux pas if I ever saw one.”

“Did you get a good one?”

He grimaced.

“You know. The Blow family. I thought maybe you got one while you were in there.”

“Oh, yeah.” He moaned. “It felt really good too.”

“Hmm. I’m a little jealous of this outhouse.” I started toward it.

“Are you going in there? You mean the camel has to pee?”

I turned, smiling, and went in.

I hated the smell of portable toilets—not that anybody likes them. I pulled my T-shirt up over my nose and did what I needed to. I didn’t like going to the bathroom in the bushes, like Dillon was ready to do again ’til I stopped him. The environmentalists said that it could damage some of the endangered flora. I finished up and was using the hand sanitizer when I heard Dillon talking to someone. I unlatched the door, stepped out, and saw Pike chatting with him.

“Hey, chum,” Pike said to me. He was wearing cargo shorts, hiking boots similar to Dillon’s, and carried a daypack on his back, strapped along his naked torso. I was a little taken aback at how good-looking he was. Not that I was interested—I had Dillon—but one couldn’t help but notice. I hadn’t realized as much when we were at Woody’s.

He rolled an arm out of his backpack. “You mind watching this?” he asked Dillon and leaned it up against the pine tree.

“Not at all.” Dillon stepped closer to it.

Pike walked past me, punched me lightly on the shoulder, and went into the portable.

I walked over to Dillon. "The smell in there is awful." I went to the pine tree, caressed its needles, and smelled my hand. "Much better."

Dillon took a swig from the water bottle he had had strapped on his belt loop and then offered me some.

I touched my own, nearly full one, on my belt loop. "All set."

"You are a camel."

"You've got to conserve."

"Mine's nearly empty."

"Well, you can have some of mine, if you need it. We're heading back soon, anyway."

There was a rustle inside the portable. "Oh, man, this thing reeks!" Pike's voice echoed. The door kicked open. He was wiping his hands as he jumped down from the steps. He walked toward us and swept a flap of dark hair from his eyes with a flick of his head. He was still rubbing his hands clean. "Thanks." He pointed with his chin to his backpack. "I could've pissed in the woods, but those environmentalists..."

I smiled. "It's better if we go in the toilets. The acid in our urine does a number on the plants."

He looked at me as he bent down to grab his backpack and snickered.

"What's with the Blow Family?" Dillon asked.

Pike looked over at the toilet as he shimmied back into his day pack and chuckled. "Joe Blow, believe it or not, is the owner."

"Blow is a real name?" Dillon said incredulously. He had just clipped his water bottle back on his belt loop.

Pike nodded. "Went to school with them. Come from Bath."

"The Blow family from Bath, Maine," I said. "Hmm."

Pike started toward the trail. Dillon followed.

"That's Maine for you," he said.

Pike was heading back in our direction, and the three of us walked the mile back to the beach. At one point, I thought I caught Dillon staring at Pike's ass a little too long and felt a jab of jealousy, but I let it pass. The little tear along Pike's shorts revealed a bit of his right butt cheek. It was hard not to take notice.

“Guys,” Pike said, turning around and continuing to walk backward for a bit. “This way.” He started up an incline, taking long strides along his way.

Dillon looked at me, shrugged, and followed him. As did I.

We hiked a few feet up the side of a small hill, which was overrun with brush. He stopped, and we huddled between the leaves of a buttonbush and some invasive knotweed. I could smell Pike's sweat.

“I wanna show you something,” he said. He grinned and hiked up his shorts.

I swallowed. The hum of the street above us whirred.

Pike climbed up a little further. An empty plastic bottle of water fell down the hill. I was tempted to pick it up, but it slid down the embankment with Dillon's step.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

Pike got up to the top, waved us on, and disappeared on to what I assumed to be our destination.

When I got up there, Dillon was climbing over a small metal guardrail. Pike was in the distance with his hands on his hips and was looking up. The Sagadahoc Bridge was a few hundred feet away.

“There she is,” Pike said and pointed.

I looked up at the billboard. The guy I assumed looked like me had a sly grin on his face, a woman stood beside him, holding a barbecue branding iron that sort of resembled something you'd use on burgers. Stamped along the man's chest were the words, *Cut above the rest*. Below the couple was a plate full of hot dogs and hamburgers on top of a picnic table. A green field behind it faded off along the ad's edges.

Yankee Neighborhood Beef—Our Meat Beats... the Rest.

I stepped closer to Pike and Dillon to get a better look at the ad. “Wow. That's pretty suggestive. Beat... meat. But I still don't think I—”

Suddenly, Pike reached over to me, pulled my shirt and yanked it up. “Woah!” He stepped back.

“Pike, what the hell!” Dillon yelled.

He saw my birthmark! I pulled at the bottom of my shirt, as if trying to hide behind it further. “What'd you do that for?!” I turned and walked hastily away.

“Dude, I'm sorry. I was just—”

I turned around. "Well, don't!"

"I was just joking," he said, in a more hushed tone, apparently to Dillon, but I wasn't sure. I was heading back toward the hill, into the woods.

"I was looking for the brand... mark," Pike added. "It was a joke!"

I jumped the guardrail and tore down the incline. I took it a little too fast and scraped up against a couple of thorn bushes, nearly tripping over a discarded hubcap. When I got to the bottom, I was out of breath. I leaned against a pine tree and took a couple of deep breaths.

"Evan! Evan!" I heard Dillon yelling. He was traversing through the same clump of thorn bushes as I had, as was evident by his curses. There was a rustle, and out he popped. "Jesus. It didn't seem that thick going up."

I was breathing less rapidly and stood up straight.

He came closer. "I didn't know you were that sensitive—"

"I am." I started toward the path that went back to the beach.

"He didn't mean any—"

I spun around. "He lifted my shirt up, Dillon! The whole street could've seen me."

Dillon stopped.

I turned back around and started walking again.

"Evan, you're fine," he said. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

I stopped. *Embarrassed? I'm not embarrassed.* I turned around. He was still standing in the same spot. "Is that what you think I am?" I started toward him. "Embarrassed?"

Dillon put up his hands and shrugged his shoulders. He shook his head, opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, and then stopped.

When I got closer to him, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and sighed. When I opened them, Dillon was in my face. He kissed me.

"You're fine," he said and kissed me again. "I don't know the right words... I'm a writer not a... not a good talker. I fumble. I didn't mean you were embar—"

"Shh." I put a finger to his lips and kissed the tip of his nose. "You're right. I am embarrassed." I looked away and then back into his eyes. "And I shouldn't be. I'm thirty-one years old and having temper tantrums like a little teenager."

He grinned. "And that ain't the only thing that keeps you acting like a teenager." He put his hand on my crotch, and I instantly threw an erection.

"Umm. You keep that there, and you might just get a little surprise." I put my hand on his chest and tweaked his nipple through his shirt.

Suddenly, Pike jumped down from the embankment. "Shit!" he said and put his hands out.

Dillon and I pulled away from each other.

Dillon was looking at the ground. I was wrestling with my shorts to make my excitement less noticeable, though the scare had done a pretty decent job at its abatement.

"Dude," Pike said, "I don't... do what you need to. I didn't mean to scare you." He looked back up the incline and then back at me. "And Evan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." He came forward. "Damn, you have hot abs!" He grinned.

I laughed. Dillon snickered, took off his baseball cap, scratched his head, and put it back on with the brim forward.

Pike stepped between us, put his arms on our shoulders and we walked a bit further. He still smelled sweaty. "Did you know I was the only kid in my class to stand up against the bullies that were picking on Jenn Sandown?"

Dillon looked over to me and furrowed his brow. "Pike, who's Jenn Sandown?"

"Jenn Sandown used to be Jim Sandown."

I looked over at Dillon and shrugged.

"Look, I know it's not the same thing," Pike said, taking time to address us both. "Trans, gay." We took a few more steps, and he took his hands off our shoulders. "It's just that it's... it's not a big deal to me." He started down another trail that went further inland and turned around. "Well, see you at Woody's?"

"Thanks, Pike," I said. "And sorry if I was an ass."

Pike scrunched his face and waved a hand dismissively. "Not a big deal." He turned and started to walk away, but then stopped and turned. "And I mean it. Killer fucking abs." He slapped his naked stomach. "You gotta teach me your secret sometime." Then he spun around and ran off.

Chapter Eleven

Dillon's hands were pressed against the small of my back. The cool metal of his dog tags dragged against the space between my shoulder blades as he pounded into me.

The night was cool but we were dripping sweat inside the tent. The campfire outside continued to roar. We had just finished watching the sunset, eating a dinner of sausage and shrimp paella, which I had made using a skillet over the flame. The bottle of wine we shared was left on the ground. I'd recycle it later.

We couldn't keep our hands off each other any longer and wound up naked in the tent, finding the dark of night best to avoid notice from the other L.L. Bean campers nearby.

"Jesus," I muffled into my sleeping bag, which I was biting. I lifted my butt to thrust harder against his drive.

He leaned down and bit the nape of my neck. My erection oozed as it slid across the flannel of the bag.

"Evan?" I heard.

Dillon got up, his hands grabbing hold of my waist again. I turned around, for I liked to see his face in ecstasy. His teeth were clenched around one of the stainless steel pendants of his dog chain, like he was trying to hold himself back from being too loud.

"Evan?" a voice said again.

I quickly flipped over on my back. Dillon's condom nearly ripped off. He fell over to the side.

"Evan? Are you here?" It was Ron. I could tell by the voice.

"Oh my God," I whispered. "It's my friend, the one that was supposed to come camping with me." I cleared my throat and then said, in a much louder voice, "Oh, hey, Ron. We'll be right out." I put my hands on my head.

"No rush," Ron said. "We'll just set up over by your car."

I looked over at Dillon and mouthed, "What? And who's we?"

Dillon was already grabbing his shorts from the bottom of the sleeping bag. He had pulled the *Star Wars* T-shirt back down from being crimped behind his

neck. He pulled off the condom from his semi-hard cock and threw it into the corner of the tent. "I thought he wasn't coming," he said, in a hushed tone.

"I thought so too." I put my feet through my shorts. "He said he'd pulled his back." I lay down to pull up and fasten my cargos. "He mentioned potentially coming, but I didn't think..."

Dillon threw my shirt to me. I sat up and put it on.

Ron's car was parked behind my Explorer. It looked like a BMW, but it was bigger than the one he had had last summer. I don't know much about luxury cars but it looked expensive. Ron spent money as fast as he earned it. And lucky for him, he earned a lot. The trunk was open. I walked around the back, but he was already putting his tent and belongings in the small space on the other side of our tent. "Hey, Ron," I said.

He turned around and smiled.

I put out a hand. "I see your back is better."

"It is," he said. He got down on his haunches and dropped the small cooler he had been carrying onto the ground.

There was somebody else, face first, inside their half-raised tent. Ron looked over at him and then back at me. He got up. "I tried calling you, but the reception sucks here."

"Oh, that's okay." *It is?*

The man in the tent popped out. "Evan? Evan McCormick?"

I felt like my eyes were going to bulge out of my head. "Gary?" I stepped back, and my shoulder hit the side view mirror of my Explorer. It was my ex.

Dillon came up along my left and put his arm around me. He had his baseball cap back on and looked as if he had spent a little time making himself presentable again.

Ron looked to Dillon, to Gary and then back to me. "You guys know each other?"

Gary stood up and came closer. "Well, yeah."

I looked at Dillon, then back to Ron. "Uh, we dated." I looked over to Gary. "We were... in college."

"Oh my God. I didn't—" Ron started.

Gary put his hands on his hips. "When you said his name was Evan it didn't occur to me." He shook his head. "What a coincidence."

I swallowed. "Yeah," I said, as Gary came over and gave me a hug.

"The gay world's a small one," Dillon remarked.

Gary and I had had fleeting contact over the past seven years. A few years back, we had bumped into each other in Boston and ended up having a beer at Faneuil Hall. He was out shopping for a suit, and I was walking to the train, on my way back from an Environmental Defense Fund lecture at the Boston Public Library.

It was so long ago that we had been together that there was nothing romantic between us. The distance of time had allowed us to talk, as friends, without an ugly past rearing up.

Ron stepped forward and extended a hand to Dillon. "Ron. Ron Beckham."

"Dillon. Dillon Deiss."

Dillon and Gary exchanged greetings, and I felt a sudden sense of awkwardness in knowing that every man I had ever had sex with was present before me—well, except for that circle jerk in high school.

I opened my mouth to say something, but hesitated. I wanted to say Dillon was my boyfriend; yet, despite our obvious attraction to one another, we hadn't quite established that, and I didn't want to initiate such an announcement in the company of my former sex partners.

"You're looking well, Evan," Gary said and then looked to Dillon who had removed his hand from my shoulder. "I mean... not like... well."

"Thank you," I said. "I am doing well." I looked at Dillon and said, "Really well."

Ron put a hand on my shoulder. "Money Bags, why don't we exchange something other than bodily fluids and have a toast?"

I choked on some spit.

We sat around the campfire. Ron pulled out a bottle of vintage Cabernet from Northern California, which he told us he had picked up on a trip to Napa a few months back. We sipped from metal coffee mugs I kept in my picnic basket. Ron wasn't too pleased that Gary forgot to pack the wine glasses, but the mugs were fine.

“The firm opened a location in Portsmouth, New Hampshire last year, and I’m heading it up,” Gary said. “Last time I bumped into you,” he glanced over at Dillon and then back at me, “I was picking out that suit from Brooks Brothers in Boston.”

Dillon took a sip of his wine and rested the mug, in hand, on his knee. “Love Brooks Brothers,” he said, and his face flinched. His legs spread as he leaned forward. His upper back expanded as he took in a deep breath and exhaled.

I raised an eyebrow.

The fire crackled and popped. Ron leaned back and rubbed an ember into the dirt with his foot. “Gary and I have been seeing each other for a little over three months now.” He took a sip from his mug.

Gary pointed a wavering finger at Dillon and me.

I nodded and crossed my legs. “Yeah.” I looked over at Dillon. “We’ve been hitting it off pretty good. We work... worked together.”

Dillon smiled, closed-mouthed, and went back to hang his head as he leaned into his haunches.

Ron took a sip from his wine, swirling the metal mug in small circles—presumably a form of aeration. “I heard about your former CEO.” He shook his head. “Shame. You two alright?”

Dillon sat back. “We are.” He looked over at me. “We’re thinking about opening our own agency.”

Ron stiffened momentarily, but then let out a slow smile. “Really?”

I picked at the sandal strap around my heel and nodded. “We’re... we’re looking into it.” We’d only talked a little about it during our hike, bandying about the idea of converting my boathouse into a little office, but nothing was set in stone. However, we were evidently both on the same wavelength.

Dillon sipped the last of his wine and put his mug on the ground.

Ron reached over and filled it. Gary fished into a pocket, took out a set of keys and clicked a button. The trunk of the car popped open. “Looks like we need another bottle.”

“Gary, is that your car?” I asked.

“It is.” He stood and started toward it.

I looked over at Ron. "I thought that was yours."

"No, I have a Land Rover now, but it's at home. Gary wanted to drive his new BMW."

Dillon leaned back against the log. He spread his legs and exhaled. His face flinched again. I looked down at his crotch. His junk was bunched up, and he pulled at the leg of his shorts. I could see a bit of a wet spot that had stained the crotch of his corduroys.

I grimaced. *Oh, God, he must have blue balls.*

Ron rolled the empty wine bottle next to the one Dillon and I had consumed earlier. "We get along well, Gary and I. I'm sorry if this is awkward."

"Oh, no problem," I said, not taking my eyes off Dillon, whose pained expression grew on his face. "Gary and I are friends now. The past is the past."

"Looks like you may have pulled your back too," Ron said to Dillon.

Dillon chuckled and glanced my way. "Yeah, a little too much... working out." He breathed slowly.

I put my mug down. "I should get him to bed. We had a big hike today and tomorrow is surf kayaking." I stood up.

Gary stepped back into the light of the campfire. "You guys off to bed?"

I nodded.

Dillon stood gingerly, saying, "Yeah, I'm wiped and wined out."

Gary held out the new bottle he had retrieved to Ron. This one had a different label than the one we had just drunk. "Looks like it's just you and me."

I could hear Gary and Ron chatting while Dillon and I lay atop our sleeping bags. We had tried to sleep but couldn't. I heard what sounded like an empty bottle clink against another.

"You okay?" I asked Dillon.

He looked over at me and smiled. The whites of his teeth and eyes stood out against the dark of the tent. "I'm fine." The outline of his tanned skin faded into the edges of the night.

“Thank you for... for being you.” I reached over and brushed back his bangs. His hair had grown out a bit—the normal spikes starting to droop. “Thank you for being cool with being around my ex.”

He put his arm behind his head. “What’s in the past is in the past. I’m cool with it. We all have exes.”

I reached under the bag to touch him below and rubbed his inner thigh.

He spread his legs, flinched and exhaled. “Uh, I’m sore.”

“Man, you really tighten up.” I massaged his scrotum, moved a bit closer to him, and whispered in his ear, “You poor thing. I hate to see you hurting.”

He bit his lip and moaned softly.

I grazed my hand up, touched the tip of his penis and it started to pulse in my hand. “I’m sorry we got interrupted,” I said, still in a hushed tone. “I promise to make it up to you.” I started stroking him.

He put his hand back down and closed his eyes.

I kissed his lips.

He leaned over and buried his face in my neck and bit tenderly on my ear lobe. He exhaled heavily. “Oh, God. That feels nice.”

I continued to palm him while he thrust up into my hand. I kissed his neck and with my free hand, which was pinned behind him, I reached around and tweaked his nipple.

Faster and faster my other hand went.

He held his breath, as if trying to stifle any noise.

I slowed my tempo and stopped. He bucked, forcing himself into my soft grip. I took my hand back, spit into my palm and returned to pleasuring him.

He moaned something inaudible. His eyes rolled back, and he bit his lower lip. I loved seeing the look of ecstasy on his face. I felt myself seep a bit against his thigh.

I gripped him harder, my pace quickened.

His head slammed against the ground, and his hips thrust up. His face contorted and reddened. He was still holding his breath, and from the puff of his cheeks I thought his head might explode. His mouth finally fell open, and he let out a sigh that was quickly restrained with pursed lips as bits of his spunk hit him in the face, me in the ear and then more thumped onto the back of the tent.

He tried to catch his breath in slow, soft blows and turned to me, still panting. He wiped the spunk from his abs and with it slobbered in his hand, grabbed the stiffness between my legs.

I groaned quietly, and he kissed me. I writhed in joy as he brought me near completion. The excitement I had received from pleasuring him already had me on the brink, and his wet grip wasn't helping to bring me down.

But it was more than just his hand that made love to me. It felt like he stroked a cord deep inside me. I shivered and felt like a ball of yarn coming undone. I could taste his seed, which had splattered on his lips and now mine, as he muted my cries by covering my mouth with his.

When I came, I felt like each cell in my body burst from every crevice inside. The force appeared to warp time. I don't know if the intensity was from trying to hold back and be quiet or from having been pent up from our interrupted session—an unintended foreplay—or something else entirely. But it rippled out in wave upon wave of something more than just ecstasy. In it all, I felt the hum of a connection, an invisible tether between us. I could sense it. It was palpable. I could feel the power of something deep within him on the other end.

“I love you,” Dillon whispered, as he continued to kiss and nibble my lips. I continued to thrash beneath his grip, unable to speak. “God, I love you,” he said.

Chapter Twelve

We had just finished breakfast at Woody's and were in the dirt parking lot, when Pike pulled in. He was driving a faded red Nissan with a plastic sheet over the driver's side rear window.

I had my door open. Dillon was walking over to the passenger side and stopped. Ron and Gary were already pulling out of the lot. We were all heading out on a short ride to the beach to meet up with the group for our surf kayaking adventure.

Pike pulled into the empty spot beside us. A cloud of dust billowed behind his car. I went around to greet him. The door opened, and a loud rock song quickly silenced. "Dudes!" He was wearing a tank top and the same pair of cargo shorts from the day before, but was clean-shaven.

"Look at you," Dillon said. "You finally met up with a razor and some shave cream."

Pike rubbed his chin. "Once a week. Whether it needs it or not." He shut his car door. "Where you guys off to? You just eat?"

I clicked my keys to unlock the passenger side door. "Out for some surf kayaking."

Pike nodded. "Nice. The surf's rough today." He leaned and looked over my left shoulder.

"Great," Dillon said. "The novice over here doesn't need to be tipped into the cold Atlantic."

"Dude," Pike said, and pulled at his ear, "Did you dive into your breakfast?"

"Huh?"

He wiped the tip of his ear. "Looks like you got dried up egg on the side of your face and in your hair."

I felt my face go red. I touched my hair and felt the crust around my ear. *Oh, God. Dillon's...*

Dillon cleared his throat. "Well, we should get going." He put his arm around me and moved me back toward the truck. "We don't want to be late!"

“Oh my God. Do you think Gary and Ron saw it?” I asked, looking in the rearview mirror and wiping my ear with a napkin from the glove compartment.

Dillon was laughing, with his head tipped back, and holding his stomach.

“It’s not funny,” I said, put the napkin down and started picking the crust off my ear with the tip of my fingernails. “Jesus Christ, it’s like glue,” I chuckled. “What the hell do you eat? You shoot cement.”

He laughed even more. “I’m sorry,” he said between spurts of snickering. “I promise. I didn’t see it...” He snorted. “Or I would have said something.”

“Jesus, I must look like the whore of Maine.” I shook my head.

Dillon took off his baseball cap and gave it to me. “You need it more than I do.”

I put it on, backed out of the parking spot, and we left.

The five hour kayak trip ended in Bath, Maine, where we had dinner at a camp site and then were to be bussed back, in an hour trip, to our cars.

Gary and Ron sat in the rear of the bus. Since Dillon and I were late—we got talking during dinner—we had to sit in separate seats near the front.

We were still a little wet after flipping the kayak a couple of times. The first time, Dillon panicked, as he told the group at dinner, but afterward we worked well together and righted it in no time.

I was sitting next to a banker from Boston. His wife was sitting in the seat in front of us with a friend. Dillon was two seats behind me. Once I told the banker I had worked for Thoroughbred, he started in on me. I tried to tell him I was under order of the authorities not to reveal anything, but that didn’t seem to stop his inquiries.

After several minutes of inquest, I turned around to look at Dillon, who was in the back, standing by the bathroom. Gary must’ve been inside, as Dillon was talking to Ron, who was sitting by himself. Ron caught my eye and went back to talking to Dillon.

“Ponzi schemes,” said the banker, “in this day and age. You think they would have been a little smarter than that.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Dillon asked.

We were on I-95 heading home. It was getting dark.

“I didn’t think... it was just once. It wasn’t anything.”

He looked out the passenger window. “What?”

“You haven’t had one-night stands?”

He let out a sigh. “I’m not talking about you messing around with him.” He let out another sigh. “Now I don’t know what to believe.”

I put my head back. *Oh, God.* “I’m confused, Dillon. What did he tell you?” I was trying to think back to what I had told Ron that would have gotten Dillon so upset. “All right, I fucked him! We messed around, and then I fucked him! Does that make you feel any better?”

He leaned his elbow on the door, put his hand to his mouth and shook his head. “Well, that is certainly a surprise. But not really any of my business.”

Oh, God. What the hell is he getting at? “Dillon, I don’t... I don’t understand.”

“Evan, I don’t care so much who you’ve fucked in the past. Though I thought you told me you had only done Gary.” He spread out his hands. “But let’s just let that go. We’ve all had relationships. I don’t know why you had to hide it.”

“I didn’t mean to hide it.” I nearly swerved into the other lane, and the car beside me beeped. “I just didn’t think it was important?”

He crossed his arms. “Evan, I understand our relationship is new. We’re still learning about each other. But we need to be upfront and honest. It’s not about you fucking Ron.” He took a moment then went on, “Are you hiding something from me?”

The highway’s white lines flashed by at breakneck speed, while I tried to think up something encouraging to say but, instead, I laughed nervously.

“You know, I’m scared about this just as much as you are.”

I looked over at him. I felt a bit nauseous.

He looked me straight in the eyes. I had to look away to avoid veering into the other lane again. “You knew about the Ponzi scheme, Evan. Didn’t you?”

My mouth fell open. I took a quick glance at him and then went back to the road. *Ponzi scheme?* I shook my head.

“Evan, Ron said that not only did you know about it, but that you’re practically a millionaire.”

I swallowed. The truth was, I did have a decent net worth for my age—not quite a million. The Ogle stock helped me launch, literally, a small fortune. But I didn’t like people to know about it. I was afraid they might think differently of me. Like when I told Ron, after a few beers, that I was broaching the three-quarter-millionaire mark.

Dillon went on, “He thought I knew about the scandal too... that I was reaping benefits from it... my affinity for a good suit, for instance.” He sighed. “Then he told me you liked to cry poor mouth, so people didn’t know about your money.”

I jerked my head toward him. “What! I never said that.” I looked back at the road. “I’m not... I never took anything from Thoroughbred.” I slammed my hand down on the steering wheel. “I DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT IT!” My heart was racing.

He was silent.

“HE’S A FUCKING LIAR! I’m not that... wealthy.” I clenched my hair in a fist. I closed my eyes for a second but was afraid I’d get into an accident. I just wanted it all to go away. “I suspected the fund was... off... but never said anything.” I glanced over at him. “I had nothing to do with it.”

He sighed, looking out the window then turned to me. “Did you not joke with him last year about which was growing faster, the fund or your stock holdings?”

I pulled back into the lane I was veering out of, sighed and admitted, “I did.”

He looked away again. “This is just...” I could sense him shaking his head—*sense* because I was avoiding looking at him. “It’s too much too...”

Chapter Thirteen

Dear Journal,

Being raised with hardly any money, I guess I feel guilty for having some. My parents worked so hard, for so little. While I know my mom would be proud of me, I can't help but feel a bit of shame sometimes regarding my wealth.

I downplayed my net worth to Dillon and as a result broke his trust.

Everything had been going so well. We had a great time in Maine... until the end.

He said he needed time to think about things, which ultimately means we're on a hiatus.

God, please. I love this man. I would never hurt him. I would never lie to him. I just... I just didn't think it was necessary to tell him about Ron, for one. And then the other thing—well I can't even write about it for fear the Feds will steal my journal. But I didn't know about any wrong doing at the firm. I only suspected. I only had an inkling. Ugh!!!!

I told this to Dillon.

Now he's not sure he can trust someone that lies about his wealth, knew about—or at the least suspected something was amiss. Maybe he's right. Why should he?

I took the page from my journal, ripped it out, tore it to shreds and threw it in the fireplace. I didn't want any evidence of my suspicions left behind. I had reformatted my hard drive to get rid of the letter to Whitfield I had started. The one thing I couldn't get rid of was the conversation I had had with Ron the previous summer—the one about unprecedented gains and my sneaking suspicions. “Friggin' traitor.” He was so damn conniving. Someone once told me, “He could talk a dog off a meat wagon.”

When I got home that night, after coming back from Maine, I called Ron, but he didn't pick up.

It had been five days since I had heard from Dillon. The roses he gave me were beginning to wilt.

When I meandered into Mrs. Johnson's backyard, her wine soiree and art show was in full swing. All five people were there.

Mrs. Johnson's art was definitely something she did out of love—they were sort of tacky. Her husband, who had passed away long before I had moved there, had left her well off, and her dabbling with paint was her new passion.

"Oh, Evan!" she said, coming over to me in a white gauze-like gown with sleeves that flapped behind her. She gave me a hug. She smelled of lilacs and alcohol.

A tall man, wearing a black vest, white shirt and pants that matched his vest, offered me a fluted drink of some bubbly-looking thing. I took it.

"You're just in time." She grabbed me by the arm and led me toward the boathouse she had converted into her studio. She stopped midway and leaned into me. "Where's your friend?"

I shook my head with tightly pursed lips.

She patted me on the shoulder. "Oh, dear." She gave me a sideways hug.

I took her arm, and we walked toward the studio.

Mrs. Johnson's studio was quite eclectic. It was painted yellow to match her house and the inside was stuffed with not only her paintings, but little tchotchkes she had picked up in her travels and couldn't find a place for in her house. There were also painted placards with witty and inspirational sayings on them.

I stepped inside. On the wall hung what looked like a roofing slate, painted with white and blue lettering.

Men are like chips... you can't have just one.

I chuckled. I hadn't seen that one before. Mrs. Johnson waved to someone nearby and went over to them. I headed to the window overlooking the lake. Another slate hung to the left of the window. This one was in purple letters, with a bottle of wine painted to the side.

Like a good wine our friendship grows stronger as we get older.

I reached out and touched it.

"You like it?" said a voice behind me.

I turned around. The waiter who had served me the champagne was holding out a plate of hors d'oeuvres. "Oh, I'm all set, thank you."

He shifted his weight on his hip and smiled. "I was asking about the sign."

I looked back at it and then back to him. "Oh, yes. You're cute." I put out a hand and spilled some of my drink. "I mean!" I shook my head. "The sign is very nice."

He snickered and walked away.

I downed my glass of champagne. *Eck!* I grabbed a glass of red wine from the makeshift bar behind me. *Evan, he's not even that cute. Why the hell did you say that?*

Mrs. Johnson appeared and took my arm while I took a swig of my wine. "Oh, you're onto the Grenache, I see," she said.

I shrugged my shoulder and let her lead me.

We walked toward the back room. It was small. She went in, and I hung out at the entranceway while people went through. I could see an easel in the middle of the room with a canvas draped over it. Mrs. Johnson went over to it and waited for people to gather. "Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you all for coming."

I looked around. Maybe there were ten people.

Mrs. Johnson clasped her hands together, and her bracelets jingled. "Oh, so lovely to see you all." She held out her hands. Her sleeves waved like the seventy-two inch sheer curtains I had in my bedroom when the window was open. "The Awakening at Conant Lake." She pulled the canvas from the easel.

The audience gasped, which I assumed to be more out of respect than anything else. A few folks moved closer and blocked it from my view. "Oh, Ann, this is your best work yet," said someone. "Stunning," said another. And several more words of praise spilled forth.

I gulped back my wine. Waiter boy stood next to me holding out another. I took it. "Thanks."

"Anytime." He winked and didn't leave.

"Is it another lake picture?" I asked him.

He lowered his chin. "What do you think?"

I took another sip of my wine.

"Evan!" Mrs. Johnson called. "Evan!"

“Excuse me,” I said to waiter boy. I went into the back room. The handful of people in it made it crowded.

“There you are,” she said, raising her arm and jiggling her hand over the head of a lady with whipped-up hair the size of a Fiat.

No wonder no one can see. Her hair takes up the entire—

Mrs. Johnson grabbed my hand and pulled me in front of Fiat head.

I looked. My mouth fell open, and I put my free hand over it. I thought I might drop my wine, so I placed it on the counter next to me.

“You like?”

“It’s beautiful, Mrs. Johnson.” I felt a lump in my throat. “How did you...”

She leaned her head against my shoulder.

It was a picture of the lake, of course, but it was unlike any of her other paintings. This one’s colors were much more rich and vibrant than her other works. The blues feathered into bursts of purple in resemblance of the water and looked, quite honestly, like something I’d seen at the museum. But that wasn’t all. I could see my roof and my boathouse in the distance. She pointed to it and nodded. And then, most importantly, in the forefront was the dock with its missing slats. Sitting down with their feet in the water were two men. They looked just like Dillon and me.

“I hope this doesn’t upset you too much,” she said, as I dabbed away a tear from the corner of my eye.

“Oh, no.” I swallowed. “Not at all.” Behind the canvas, I looked out the window. I could see the pier and the roof of my house in the distance. I bit my lower lip as it began to tremble. I could picture Dillon and me sitting with our feet in the water—him kicking at my calf, as her picture had captured. I thought I might burst into tears.

I stood outside trying to collect myself.

“Evan, I want you to have it,” Mrs. Johnson said, as she emerged down the two steps and out into the yard. The gathering inside were whooping it up over God knew what.

“Oh, I can’t, Mrs. Johnson. It’s your best work.” *They were right. It was her best yet.*

“I’m old, Evan.” She sat down on a rusted bench that looked over the water. “Nobody wants my paintings.”

I sat down next to her and heard Detritus bark from within the main house. “Mrs. Johnson, that’s not true. You—”

She tapped my thigh. “It doesn’t matter.” She put her hands out, palms up, toward the lake saying, “I don’t need anyone. I have this.” And then she clasped her hands together across her breast. “Except maybe for Detritus. Did I ever tell you why I named him that?”

“He was discarded on the side of the road like a piece of trash.”

“I guess I have told you that story.” She tapped my knee. “See, I am getting old.”

I chuckled and put my arm around her. “Thank you. Thank you for painting it.” I nodded and looked out at the lake. The sun was beginning its descent behind the trees.

She got up. “My dear, you’re very welcome. Now hopefully one day I’ll get to meet that fine gentleman.”

Chapter Fourteen

As I walked back to my house, I thought of Dillon and how Mrs. Johnson had managed to capture the moment when I fell for him. While the painting was wonderful, it couldn't fix the broken tether between Dillon and me. I wanted to call him, but from the way we had left it he needed the time.

"Hey, stranger," said a voice from the woods at the end of my road.

I walked toward it. *Dillon?* My skin began to tingle. I quickened my pace.

Then into the flood of the streetlight, stepped the waiter from the party.

I stopped.

He was smoking a cigarette, flung it to the street and ground it in with his foot. He blew smoke into the air. "I know. It's a bad habit." He stepped forward and extended his hand. "Name's Jacob."

I hate smokers. "Evan." I shook his hand.

"I parked down here." He tilted his head toward a silver thing at the end of road. "Mrs. Johnson wanted me to leave room for her guests."

I nodded. I didn't feel like making small talk. Besides, I still wasn't very good at it.

"She's sick, you know."

I grimaced. "Mrs. Johnson?"

He nodded. "Cancer."

I touched my lips. "How do you—"

He put his hands in his pockets. "I heard her telling someone before the guests arrived."

I turned and looked down the street, toward where her house would be, if I could have seen it from that vantage point. "I had no idea." I turned back to him. "Why are you telling me this?"

He shrugged. "I thought you'd want to know."

I rolled up a sleeve of the white cotton shirt I had on. "If she wanted me to know, she would have told me." My stomach tensed. "She would divulge it to me if she wanted to." I rolled up my other sleeve and stepped forward.

Jacob put out his hands. "Easy! Easy." He started toward his car. "I was just striking up a conversation. God, people are so touchy."

I stood my ground, watched him get in his car and leave. "Asshole," I said, as he drove down the street.

When I got inside I checked my messages. *Nothing*. I flipped on my computer to see if I had gotten an email from Dillon. *Spam*. I double checked my cell phone to see if I missed a call. *Nope*.

I whipped off my shirt, stripped down to my underwear, and began doing pushups. I was nearing one-hundred, my triceps were screeching, my chest aching, and my stomach cramping when my cell phone rang. My arms gave out and I fell face first onto the floor. I rolled onto my back, rubbing my chin. I could hardly get up, my muscles were so tense.

I crawled to the coffee table and grabbed my cell phone from it. I didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

By the time I got to New Hampshire, it was nearing midnight. I pulled into the Portsmouth police station, just south of Mill Pond, and parked beside Gary's BMW. I got out and went inside.

Gary was arguing with a police officer at the front desk. "He's my friend." The police officer asked him to sit back down. Gary flung his hands into the air and then saw me. "Evan!" He came toward me. "Thank you for coming. I didn't know who else to call." He looked over his shoulder, then back at me. "They won't tell me what's going on."

"But he called you?"

"He did. I was his one and only call." He put his hands on his hips. "Go figure. I didn't know what to do."

Suddenly a camera crew burst through the front door.

A police officer jumped from his desk. "YOU CAN'T COME IN HERE! There's nothing to report."

Gary and I looked at one another.

The reporter started toward me. "Mr. McCormick!" she looked back at the camera crew. "It's the guy from Thoroughbred."

Gary put his arm on my shoulder.

“Mr. McCormick, we hear Ron Edelman was the conspirator behind the Ponzi schemes plaguing the North Shore.”

“What?” I stepped back.

Gary held out a hand to stop them from approaching.

I continued, tripped over a bench, and everything went black.

When I awoke, I was lying in a hospital bed. Gary was by my side. He said something about a concussion and grabbed my hand.

“I’ve never been in a hospital, as a patient, before.” I looked around. Then it started coming back to me. “Ron... what happened?”

Gary leaned forward and held my hand tighter. “Ron was... He was the chief architect of the Ponzi scam. The one your office fell under.”

I sat up, my head pounded. I didn’t know what to say and just shook my head.

“Evan, I think that’s why he befriended you. And me too. Looking back on it, he was fascinated with my white-collar crime experience.”

I lay back in the bed. The room was beginning to spin. “Last year, he asked me if Whitfield and my boss had suspicions about the fund.” I grabbed the metal railing on the side to hoist myself up. “I said I had my own suspicions...” I gazed out the window. “They were clueless. They just liked seeing the fund grow.”

Gary handed me a cup of water. “You’re okay. You have nothing to worry about it. You just monitored the reporting. You never funded it did you?”

“No!” I took a sip from the straw he held out. “They had opened that account when I was still in high school.”

“It was all a sham.” He put the cup back down on the table.

“Apparently, funded by Ron’s lies.”

I was released from the hospital the following morning. Gary drove me back in my Explorer. He said, he could take a cab back to Portsmouth to get his car later.

“You’re not going to take a cab,” I said. “I can drive you in the morning. In fact, I can probably drive myself back now but someone,” I said, emphasizing the last word and looking at him while he drove my Explorer down I-95, “won’t let me.”

“Evan, I’d feel better if I did this. Besides, the doctor said little activity today.”

I leaned my head into my hand.

“All this time, he was trying to get me involved in his business.” Gary huffed. “I told him I was too busy at the firm.” He looked over at me. “Thank God.” He went on and on. “Should’ve known... player... never bought me anything... teeth got in the way when he... not that great in bed—”

“I’m getting a headache.”

“He’d just lie there. Sometimes he’d get me good, if he had a few pops in him.” He slowed down. “Wait. What’d you say?”

“Gary, you’re giving me a headache.” I was remembering why we hadn’t worked out.

“You think it’s the concussion?”

“No, it’s your mouth.” I flipped the radio on to classical music. “Can we just have some peace and quiet for a bit? We’ve both been through a lot. I know. It’s a lot to process.”

He was silent. Debussy filled the air.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.” I turned the radio down, but I loved Debussy, so I kept it on just a tad.

“You still like that classical shit, huh?”

“I do. You still like rap?”

“Uh huh.”

I rolled my eyes and was grateful when I saw the sign for Massachusetts.

“Can we put on 94 point—?”

“No!”

My cell phone rang and vibrated inside my pocket. I had a hard time getting at it, with the belt around my waist, but managed to take it out before it went to voice mail.

“DILLON! Oh my God.” I picked up the call. “Dill?” I didn’t even hear what he was saying. I didn’t care. I just listened to the sound of his voice.

“I’m sorry, Evan.”

I couldn’t wipe the grin from my face. I could see it in the reflection of the window.

“Evan, you there?”

“I’m here. I’m here.”

“Can you believe it?”

“No, no I can’t.”

“Cock whipped,” I heard Gary mutter.

I reached over and slapped him in the stomach.

“Ow.”

Dillon went on offering more apologies, and how he felt foolish for doubting me. I just heard bits and pieces; I was more excited to hear his voice. *Ron this... Scandal... Ron that... Front-loading stocks...*

“Can we get together?” he asked.

“Yes! When?”

“Tonight?”

Suddenly the car swerved into the right-hand lane. “Gary! Jesus!” I fell against the door. “What in the name of Christ are you doing?” I pushed the hair back from my eyes and huffed. “Not you, Dill. And yes, I would love to get together with you tonight.”

Gary came to a stop on the shoulder. He bent down to look out the window.

I shook my head. “Dillon, I’m sorry. Gary has suddenly lost it or some—” I looked out the window. My mouth fell open, and I dropped the phone onto my lap.

Gary got out of the car first. He looked up at the billboard, then back at me. “It’s you,” he mouthed. The cars passing by shook the car. I got out, taking my phone with me. “Dillon?” I said into it. “You’re not going to believe this.” I looked up at the billboard. It was the model that supposedly resembled me. In his hand was a hot dog. His chiseled torso was shirtless, his hair neat and

combed, except for a spit of it that rose up prominently on the side. The message read:

Something about Evan... It's not just the cowlick that makes him cute.

Yankee Neighborhood Beef - Get Your Protein from the Meat That Can't Be Beat.

Chapter Fifteen

Dillon and I sat next to each other on my leather couch.

"I still can't believe you wrote those ads," I said.

He scratched his ear. "You're not mad?"

I rubbed my chin. "No, I'm... I'm not mad." I shook my head. "I'm just shocked. All this time." I rubbed my temples, my headache was returning.

"I told you. Peter and I had planned on starting our own agency."

"I know. I get it." I rested my head onto the back of the couch. "It wasn't Corridor Marketing. It was Peter and you."

"You're mad."

"I'm tired."

"I'm sorry, Ev." He grabbed my hand. "Sorry for not believing you... about Ron."

I shook my head. "Don't worry—"

"No, no I... Part of it was me feeling guilty about hiding my involvement with Yankee." He gazed at his lap. "I transferred my mistrust, and when you told me..." he lowered his voice, "you had been with him. I just—"

"Shh. I'm sorry." I brushed his hair. He had it cut again. It felt bristly under my touch. "I should have told you."

He gazed into my eyes.

"Dillon, I do have quite a bit of money. But..." I put my hand over my heart. "God's truth, I invested well. I got some money from my mother and my grandmother—twelve-thousand dollars to be perfectly honest—when I turned eighteen. And with it, I bought into Ogle during their IPO."

The toilet flushed and out walked Gary. "Well..."

I leaned onto the arm rest. "You sure you don't want to stay? We'll sleep on—"

He put his hand out. "You two lovebirds have some making up to do. I'm gonna go get my dick sucked at—"

“Gary!” I put a hand up. “We don’t need the details.” *Another reason why we split up.* “Just not in my car, please.”

He chuckled. “I’ll leave your car for you at the police station. It’ll be there tomorrow afternoon.” He dug my keys out from his jeans’ pocket. “You never know, I might get lucky at the club.”

I grabbed the cup of green tea Dillon had made me. “Just text me when it’s there. We won’t go up ’til later, anyway.” I stood up. Gary gave me a hug and tapped Dillon on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Gary,” Dillon said.

He smiled, opened the door and left.

Dillon and I moved to the kitchen. We were hungry, and he wanted to make us something.

He leaned into the fridge. “I suppose you don’t want any eggs?” He turned around and grinned at me.

“What the hell—I could always use it as hair gel.”

We didn’t wake ’til ten o’clock the next morning. Dillon was cuddling up against my chest when I awoke. The sun shone in at the edges of the window where the shades didn’t meet.

I stretched. Dillon mumbled something, drooled on my stomach, and put an arm around me. I kissed his head. His hair still smelled like he had freshly shampooed it. I probably smelled like a hospital and decided to shower before he got up. I lifted his arm off me and slowly eased his head from my chest. He snored and fell over onto his side of the bed.

I got out, stepped quietly into the master bath, slid the door shut and started the shower.

The hot steam felt good. I lathered, shampooed and rinsed, and sat on the bamboo shower seat that folded down from the wall. I let the hot water pulse against the back of my neck and shoulder blades, as I leaned on my haunches with my head hanging down.

The master bath door slid open.

I rubbed the steam off the glass shower door. “Morning.”

He scratched at the crotch of his Andrew Christian underwear. “Were you going to let me sleep all day?”

“You needed the rest,” I said, my voice echoing.

He held a finger up to me—as if to wait a minute—went back out to where the sink was and closed the sliding door. After a few seconds, he opened it and came back in.

“What was that all about?” I asked. He went to the toilet.

“I had a little gas. I didn’t want you to hear.”

I laughed. “You are the cutest damn thing.”

He stood over the toilet and started to pee. His underwear was down around his thighs, and he held his hands on his hips. He yawned. “You should be the one that overslept. You need your rest, Mr. Concussion-Man.”

“I’m fine.” I turned slightly toward the wall. Even though the glass was foggy, I didn’t want him to see the rise he was giving me.

He flushed. “You got any mouthwash?”

“Under the sink.”

He left and went back out to the sink area.

I shut the shower off, slid open the door and grabbed a towel.

He gargled and then came to me. He kissed the crook of my neck as I wrapped the towel around my waist.

“Dillon.”

“What?” he husked and pressed his crotch against mine.

The towel didn’t stay wrapped around me long.

We didn’t even make it to the bed. We started toward it, with our lips locked and hands groping against hardened muscle, but only got to the sink before we had to do something about it.

We wound up making love on the granite countertop with a towel ripped from the wall and placed under me. I leaned back on it while he penetrated me. He didn’t even get to pull his underwear all the way down. I watched him thrust into me—his reflection in the full-length mirror on the opposite wall. His butt flexed over the strap of his blue Andrew Christian underwear. I clawed at his glutes and pushed him deeper into me.

We came together—our lips locked and my legs wrapped around his waist.

I was so sweaty, I needed another shower. We took one together. I washed the semen from his penis. The condom—hanging over the edge of the waste bucket—held the rest.

It didn't take long for him to get worked up again. I pushed him up against the wall, then down into the bamboo shower seat and took him in my mouth.

When he shot, he screamed so loud I thought I felt the sliding glass doors vibrate. And I came without touching myself.

We were ravenous afterward.

I made us blueberry quesadillas with fresh berries I had picked along the lake the day before. The blueberries sat on a thin layer of cream cheese that I spread on top of the quesadilla. I seared it all in a frying pan. Dillon ate three. I had one, and cheated on my non-dairy diet.

After breakfast, we went for a walk along the lake. Halfway around, we stopped at the dock that Mrs. Johnson had painted with us on it. I told him of her portrayal of us. He wanted to see it, so we went through her little white gate and into her backyard to visit.

Detritus was happy to see me. Mrs. Johnson was out watering her flowers. She was wearing a green robe and her hair was up in a bandana. I thought about what Jacob, the waiter, had told me about her illness. She did look thin and frail, but I wasn't sure if that was just me reading into something that wasn't there, or Jacob's gossip actually being true.

"Oh I'd love for you to see it, Dillon," she said. Dillon helped her down the short path to the rear of the cottage.

The picture still leaned against the easel that held its debut; the canvas draped behind, with its edges resting on the floor.

Dillon put a hand to his heart and told Mrs. Johnson how much he loved it. I thought I heard his voice crack when he mentioned the kicking of the calf.

Mrs. Johnson tried to give it to us, but I couldn't take it. I told her I'd prefer to see it there. And she elbowed me in the side and made me promise to visit more often.

Chapter Sixteen

A few months had passed and fall fell over New England. I pulled up to the house. I loved autumn in Massachusetts. For some reason, it didn't seem as dreary and cold as Michigan was this time of year—or perhaps the reason I felt better was because the situation with Thoroughbred was no longer lingering. The news had finally died down about the Ponzi scheme. My boss was indicted, along with Ron, and both were serving fifteen year prison sentences for fraud and illegal banking. Apparently, Ron's brother had turned them in to the authorities. Ron purportedly confessed to him, in private, that the fund was really “one big scheme.”

Dillon's car was parked out front. The hood was up. “Will wonders ever cease? Mr. Marketer is taking a crack at changing his own oil.” My penny-pinching efforts were beginning to rub off on him. Before I had left for the market, he told me he was going to “look into” changing it himself, instead of paying the dealer. I offered him a coupon from the SpeedyOil down the street, but he refused. “Honestly, doing it yourself is a waste of time. You could make more from writing ads...” I started, but he put up a hand saying it was good for him to learn.

I took the groceries from the back of the Explorer and walked toward his car. He was practically inside the engine. I admired his butt sticking out. He had a foot up on the bumper. “Look at you, being all manly and butch,” I said and threw the bag on my hip to free my hand. I looked around and then squeezed his crotch.

“HOLY SHIT!” He jumped and slammed on something inside the engine.

“What's going on?” Dillon asked. He was standing on the front porch.

I looked back over to the car. Pike was holding his head, blood dripping from the top.

I dropped my bag of groceries.

I stood over the kitchen sink. The eggs I had bought for Mrs. Johnson were smashed. I pulled them from the bag to get at the loaf of wet bread.

Pike sat on the living room couch with an ice pack on his head. Madeline—the busty, woman from the office—sat next to him. Since Pike had gotten us the Blow Family account, Madeline and he had been seeing each other.

“Pike, I’m really sorry,” I said, again.

“Don’t mention it.” He dabbed a couple fingers to his forehead and looked at them. “It’s stopped.”

Madeline’s shoulders quivered. “I just hope his grip wasn’t as good as mine, otherwise I might be out a boyfriend.”

Pike laughed. “Hmm. Now that you mention it.”

Madeline slapped him playfully.

Dillon brought the trash barrel over to the sink. “I’m sure he could teach you a thing or two.”

“Dillon!”

Just before Christmas, Dillon moved in. The lease for his apartment in Danvers was about to expire. He had been spending most of his time at my place anyway.

I looked down at Dillon’s credit card statement and sighed. “You owe five thousand dollars to Brooks Brothers?”

“Four-thousand nine hundred...” He peered over the edge of the statement I still held.

I pulled it back. “Seventy-eight dollars and sixty-three cents,” I added and walked toward my computer. I looked down at the bottom of the statement. “At twenty-one percent interest!” I turned and glowered at him. His eyes were reminiscent of Detritus when he wanted a cookie. I sighed and dropped the statement to my side. “I’ll pay it.”

“You’re so good with money, Evan.”

I sat down at my computer. “I’m an accountant, remember?”

He was leaning against my chair.

“You know how much credit card debt I have?” I started to hold up my hand to make a zero but stopped. I knew I needed to restrain from criticism. I knew I could be a little too extreme when it came to saving. I turned around in my chair. “It’s not that you can’t afford it, Dillon. You make excellent money.”

“We...”

I chuckled. “We. We make good money.”

He tousled my hair. "You better be careful, or I might just give you another shot of hair gel."

I patted my hair back down. "Don't get me going again."

The back door opened and in walked Madeline. "Oh, hey, boys. I've got to use the little girl's room." She walked down the hall and into the bathroom.

"No problem," I said. The phone rang, and I picked it up. "Conant Marketing. This is Evan." Dillon sat down, spread eagle, on the chair next to me. "Oh, hi, Mr. Blow." I leaned on Dillon's knee. He was wearing a gray suit and looked very handsome. "Oh, yes, the team will be out next week." I hit my keyboard so the screen would unfreeze and looked at the spreadsheet I had been working on. "We're just running the numbers now."

The other line rang. Dillon got up. "Madeline!"

"I'M IN THE BATHROOM!"

I covered the phone and mouthed, "Dillon."

He shook his head and picked up the other line. He didn't like answering calls.

I talked to Joe Blow—the founder of the portable toilet outfit in Maine—about the team's plans for the following week, wrapped up our conversation, and hung up.

Dillon was walking with the phone crimped between his ear and shoulder. He grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl and started to peel it.

Madeline burst out from the bathroom. "I'll be glad when you get the cottage plumbed."

"I know," I said, clicking at the computer. "In the spring, I promise." The phone rang again.

Dillon shot Madeline a glare.

I waved a hand at him dismissively, to which she laughed. "Don't let him boss you around," I said.

"You kidding me?" She blew Dillon a kiss as she opened the door. "He ain't gonna get my panties bundled," she said and left.

"Conant Marketing." Through the window I watched Detritus gallop beside Madeline. He loved playing in the backyard. "She is. Hold on for one second, and I'll transfer you."

Using only her finger and thumb, Madeline tried to grab the tennis ball out from Detritus' mouth. His slobber no doubt encased it. He wouldn't let go. She wiped her hands together gingerly and started to walk away. He finally dropped it in front of her and ran away. He looked back, as if to make sure he still had her attention. Madeline picked up the ball delicately and threw it toward the shore. Detritus went after it.

I banged on the window. She looked up. I pointed to the receiver I had in my hand, and she went inside.

"That was the hospital," Dillon said behind me.

I spun around in my chair.

"Chemo treatment is done. She'll be ready at two."

I nodded.

Mrs. Johnson died on a surprisingly warm afternoon in late January. Her sister had flown up from Florida and had spent the holidays with her.

She didn't want a service. Her request was to have her ashes mixed with her husband's—which she had kept in an urn on top of the mantle—and sprinkled into the Conant Lake.

Despite our January thaw, the lake was frozen. We promised Mrs. Johnson's sister that we'd keep the ashes until she returned in the spring.

I took *Awakening at Conant Lake* out from her bedroom. I had put it in there so she could see it from her bed. She made me promise her I would take it when she passed.

Dillon locked up her house and we drove the short distance to the end of the street. We had just come back from dropping Millie, her sister, off at the airport.

Peter and Madeline's cars were parked at the end of the road. Dillon needed to get in to join them on the conference call with Yankee Beef. It wasn't necessary for me.

Detritus greeted us at the door.

A year and a half after we sprinkled Mr. and Mrs. Johnson's ashes in the lake, Dillon began acting a little funny. One afternoon he decided we needed to go shopping at the grocery store, near the old Thoroughbred office.

We were driving in his new Audi—new to him, anyway. The lease on his Volkswagen had expired, and I refused to go into debt for the Jaguar he was eyeing. I suggested a Ford Hybrid that I had read about in *The Environmental Consumer*. We settled on a year-old Audi Diesel.

“Dillon, why are we going here? You know I like Henry’s Market much better.”

“They have a sale on... on the granola you like.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Granola? Since when are you a penny pincher?”

He glanced at me. “Since you taught me.” He pulled into the parking lot. “Now that we have a new car, I guess we should be saving more.”

“Mm hmm.”

We got out of the car, but instead of going in, he started toward the street.

“Dillon.” There was a small group of people gathered with their backs to me. “What are you up to?” I followed after him.

He turned and waved me on. “C’mon, slow poke.”

I noticed Madeline first, then Pike and Peter. “This isn’t making any sense,” I said to myself.

They looked up at the billboard—the same one where I had seen the first Yankee ad—then back at me.

Dillon walked back and grabbed my hand.

As the billboard came into view, I put my hand to my mouth and choked back the lump in my throat.

This just keeps on getting better. Marry me, Evan?

I looked back at the ad. The words were cast over a larger-than-life replica of Mrs. Johnson’s painting.

Madeline was wiping her eyes.

Dillon got down on one knee.

I could hardly see him through the tears in my eyes. “Yes, Dillon. Of course.”

Epilogue

The beach's water was cool for Florida. I strolled along the shore. The Gulf's waves crashed at our feet. Dillon walked beside me. He had his shirt off, mine was still on.

"The weather is perfect this time of year," he said.

"It is, isn't it?"

We walked further. There were throngs of people, seemingly enjoying the escape from the North's brutal winter.

I bent down to pick up a beach rock. "Look how smooth—" I felt a dribble of cool water slide down my neck. I arched an eyebrow at him.

Dillon shrugged a shoulder. "What happened?"

"Mmm. Hmm."

"Hey, look at that one." Dillon bent and picked up a shell.

"It's alive. Let it be."

He whipped it back into the ocean. A group of kids played in the distance.

We happened upon a sandcastle being destroyed by the incoming tide.

"God, I used to love making sand—"

I kicked a little water at him as he bent down to inspect it.

"Mr. Evan Capri McCormick-Deiss."

I shrugged a shoulder. "What?"

He shook his head.

We got back to our spot. The tide had come in and was threatening to wet the hotel's oversized towel we had been using to lie on. I moved it out of the way while Dillon re-staked the umbrella. From the couples' boom box behind us, The Pretenders' "I'll Stand By You" started. I smiled and kicked off my sandals.

Dillon chatted with them, something about living in New England and being glad to be out of the snow.

I sat under the shade of the umbrella, hugging my knees.

As the song moved into its final chorus, Dillon walked over, pointed with his head to the water, and waded in.

I followed after him. We stood with the water slapping at our shins.

A group of kids frolicked on a raft, and Dillon started toward them, in exaggerated kicks, that sent water my way.

I flinched slightly as the spray wet my T-shirt. "Hey, hey!"

"Hey, what?" He splashed me again, with a grin.

"You're asking for it." I placed my hands on my hips.

He came a little closer, and I kicked water at him, hitting him in the face. "Ah! Bull's-eye!" I laughed.

He bent down and with his cupped hands he drenched me.

Suddenly we were in an all-out water brawl. We must've looked like we were having fun, because the next thing I knew the group of kids on their raft joined in.

"Mr. Deiss, you're in for it," I said. The kids took my place soaking him while I stepped back, peeled off my wet and clinging T-shirt, heaped it onto the sand, and ran back to join them.

No one seemed to notice the birthmark on my chest. Why should I?

The End

Author Bio

*Rick Bettencourt hails from Boston's North Shore where he learned to speak without pronouncing the letter "r"—and say things like "tonic" when he wanted a Coke, or "bubbler" when getting a drink from the park's water fountain. A few years ago, Rick was adopted by a Cairn Terrier named Bandit. Recently, Bandit moved Rick, and his husband of several years, to Florida to escape the New England winters and avoid being engulfed by snow drifts when going about their business. When Rick is not being walked around the block by Bandit, he might be found working on a story about gay men or some underdog character triumphing over adversity. Or you might catch Rick watching *The Walking Dead* or *Once Upon a Time*, reading something like *Running with Scissors* or some personal development book, or writing to a group of folks—he likes to call them fans—from his mailing list. In addition, Rick enjoys theater, art, old postcards, and amusement parks. He also loves to hear from his readers.*

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