



A Christmas for Beck (Farthingdale Valley)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Bad Boy Beck, here, doing my best to get over my old friend Jonah ditching me for another guy.

I hate Christmas, boy, do I hate Christmas! I also hate being a third wheel, so instead of joining Royce and Jonah on their romantic tropical cruise, Im going by myself into the mountains to stay at a resort hotel in one of those ski towns.

Do I ski? No, I do not. But Ive got a nice room at a fancy hotel (complete with time reserved in their rooftop hot tub), and plan to enjoy a little me time.

While making my way up to Steamboat, the only thing Ill have to watch out for is other idiots who have no idea how to drive in a blizzard. Oh look, theres one now! Some dumb guy in an Audi. Hes about to go off the road and into a frozen lake. Guess I better stop.

Do I save him? Yes, I do. Does it get complicated from there because the guy I saved is handsome and smells like a dream? Yes, it does. Does it get even more complicated because that same guy has a whole family waiting for him to show up? Yes, it does.

Gah, I hate Christmas!

A Christmas for Beck is a gay, m/m Christmas romance complete with mutual rescue, only one bed, a rooftop hot tub, a bit of a meddlesome family, and tons of Christmas cheer, in spite of Beck's bah humbug attitude. It is part of the Farthingdale Valley universe, and is best read after The Cowboy and the Hoodlum, though it can be read on its own.

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Page 1

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I was never into Christmas. I wasn't into Santa, or holiday greetings, or presents, or any of it. Never had a family that was into it, never really had a family, except for my best friend Jonah, and he wasn't into Christmas either.

Sure, I could down a quart of eggnog, if you put some rum in it, but otherwise count me out. I didn't mind the snow, though. If it fell on Christmas morning, it was kind of pretty, in a wholesome way.

Jonah, my best friend, was the same as me. I'd known him since we were kids. We could both take it or leave it. At least that's how it used to be, back in the day.

At Christmas, we'd walk down the 17th street mall in Denver, half drunk, looking for office parties to crash, so never in my dreams did I imagine he'd want to celebrate Christmas the year after he got out of jail—celebrate it without me.

Yeah, he had been behind bars. Not sure for how long (a year? Two? Jeeze), but it was long enough. I visited him as often as I could so he wouldn't forget me. I was half in love with him, you see. My best buddy from kid hood. My dark-haired, wild-eyed Jonah.

We were there for each other, starting with fights in the schoolyard, and then working together in our little business, tearing down stolen cars and selling them for parts.

What a life. We lived above the garage and shopped at the bodega down the street, guarded our turf and each other's secrets.

We were more than brothers. Sometimes, we were lovers. I had always thought that it

was me and him. Him and me. Together forever.

Except when Jonah got out of jail, he didn't come home. He went into a parole program. A sort of halfway house for ex-cons in Wyoming, in a place called Farthingdale Valley. Miles from Denver and everything he knew.

I think he wanted to get rid of me. I guess I wouldn't blame him, looking back, cause maybe I was dragging him down a little bit. I never meant to, but love makes you stupid.

The benefit to doing the Stupid Fresh Start Program was that Jonah's parole would be finished much quicker. The downside was Royce, one of the team leads there.

Oh, I hated Royce from the beginning, with his fussy ways and gentle nature. That perfect head of golden hair and angelic blue eyes. Not Jonah's type at all, in my book.

I did my best to get Jonah away from that place, even to the point of getting Jonah drunk and driving off with him at midnight. I guess he threw himself out of the car roaring down that country road and managed to find his way back to Royce.

The problem was, Royce took Jonah back with open arms. They were so in love—it took me a while to realize it. That I might be standing in the way of Jonah getting what he needed.

If what he needed wasn't me? Then so be it. Not saying it didn't hurt. Not saying that at all. It hurt like getting my insides ripped out.

But eventually. Yeah, I figured out that Royce loved Jonah with all the fire of a blazing suns. Fuck me. Just fuck me. No way I could match that. Jonah looked at Royce like he never looked at me. It took me a while to pull my head out of my ass, but I did it.

Royce was a good guy, I finally figured out. He was also very rich and could give Jonah everything he wanted. Money, cars, sex.

As for Royce himself, he was good looking, in a soft rich guy kind of way, with his blue eyes and blond curls and a self-assurance I'd seldom encountered on the rough streets around Five Points in Denver.

I tried to smack him down once, all brawn and bluster, my fists raised. All of that usually would have gotten the desired results. People stepped out of my way in my old neighborhood, but not Royce.

It would have been easier if all Royce gave Jonah was sex. I could have taken the back seat to that. What I couldn't do was take a back seat to them truly being in love. All goo-goo eyes when they looked at each other. Hearts and flowers in every word and gesture. Just about made me sick.

Okay, sure I came around. Even moved up to the family ranch-a-roo in Montana, where each horse was worth ten grand, and each square inch of land was worth almost as much.

Royce's grandad, Grandad Thackery, gave me a job in his garage, and I got my own apartment above that garage. Sold my shop in Denver and plain up and moved to Montana, if you could ever imagine such a thing. I never could.

It was fine. A country life for a city boy. I got up to work early, worked a good many hours (cars were always fun for me). I even stopped smoking, can you believe it?

Sometimes I missed the feel of it, the how-cool-am-I air of it as I blew out a series of perfect smoke rings, one, two, three. But without the cigs clogging up my lungs, it was easier to laugh, so there was that.

Okay, so there's me, working at Grandad's garage, keeping up with his car collection. Living as a third wheel to Jonah and Royce. It was so pleasant until it wasn't. That first year Christmas rolled around—or just-before Christmas—which was when I realized how much of a third wheel I was.

Royce's idea was that me, him, and Jonah would go on a Christmas cruise in the Caribbean. We could share a cabin, or get two attached cabins, he said, and that's when it occurred to me.

I'm not stupid. In fact, I'm pretty smart. I know what a velvet box looks like when it's got a ring or two in it. I've pawned a few and stole a few. I know exactly what it looks like. So when that box showed up peeking out of Royce's jacket pocket, I knew what the cruise was for. He was going to fucking propose to Jonah.

No way was I going to be a hanger-on for that. Sure, I'd be happy for them both. I'd be at the wedding, Jonah's best man, I hope, but I wasn't going to travel along like a poor relation.

I said no. Thank you, but nope.

"But we want you there," said Royce, in his wide-eyed, sweet way. He'd stopped me in the hall after dinner, just the week before Thanksgiving, when all the planning was getting underway. You have to book a cruise in advance, I found out. "Don't think for a moment that we don't."

I looked at Royce with my hardest glare, the kind that would make any thug back down, and said, "I won't tell Jonah, but I see the ring in your jacket pocket. When you hung it up on the hook just now. I'm not stupid, you know."

"I never imagined for a minute that you were," said Royce. He didn't back down, but his voice wobbled. He also looked troubled, because if there was anything Royce

hated more than anything else, it was to have his plans be, as he would say, disturbed . “You won’t tell him, will you?”

“Course not,” I said, pushing my hair off my forehead, because in that moment, my heart was beating hard and I was hot all over and I wanted to hide it. Jonah get married? Then I’d really be a third wheel. That life was not for me, and it was wild that it took me until that time to realize it. “Spoil it? Not me, man.”

“And you won’t come on the cruise?” His sweet face was tight with worry.

“No, man,” I said. “You two go. I’ll be fine with Grandad.”

He contemplated this as he looked down the hallway to the dining room, the casual one. (There was a fancy one and a breakfast one and a casual one. For fuck’s sake. Who needed three dining rooms?)

“Grandad’s going to Florida to go golfing,” he said. “I’d hate to leave you all alone here.”

“House full of servants,” I said stoutly, though I shuddered to think of those folks with nothing to do but wait on me all night and all day.

“What about this?” asked Royce. And then he paused. I waited because, as I’ve learned, Royce’s ideas are usually good ones. “I give you the credit card and you book yourself any vacation that you’d like.”

I laughed because there was more than one credit card floating around. I’d only ever asked for it once, when the compressor in the garage busted. Grandad said to order a new one and put it on account. He wanted me to call up the local grange and order that compressor and just say, Put it on the Thackery account . Holy crap. Having access to that much money must be fun.

“Anywhere?” I asked.

“You could go anywhere,” said Royce. “Fly, drive, take the train. Anywhere, stay a week. That way, I won’t feel bad about leaving you on your own. You have carte blanche.”

The writing was on the wall. When people get married, as far as I could tell, they wanted to be alone. Alone together. They certainly don’t want to have a garage mechanic with a couple of tattoos and not enough good breeding to not wipe his hands on his jeans all the time. It was time I got used to thinking about making a life of my own.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll book something.”

Royce handed over the credit card then and there, though, to be honest, I know he really had wanted me to come with him and Jonah on that cruise. He just had a credit card on him at all times, and I was kind of flattered that he’d trust me with it. I’ll admit I had to look up what carte blanche meant.

We got through Thanksgiving without any fights, but then, the Thackery were not only rich, they were polite and not prone to throwing mashed potatoes at each other. Also, I waited too long—never having booked a fancy vacation like that, you see—because by the time I sat down at the computer in the den (there was only one of those), it seemed every trip, every package, was booked for Christmas.

I scrolled for hours. Hours till I got a cramp in my hand, and Royce was starting to talk about booking the adjoining cabin on that cruise, against my protests.

All the cruises, the tours through some swampland down in South Carolina, the gala Christmas market somewhere in Germany, even a crappy, low budget Chicago City Tour and Show Package—all booked.

So I figured I'd put together something of my own and booked five nights at some fancy hotel at some ski resort in the Colorado mountains, in a town called Steamboat Springs. Far enough away to make a nice drive, close enough that I could drive there in a day.

I got rooms at a hotel called The Anchorage at Steamboat Springs. One night cost four hundred dollars, and that was just a single queen room, so the hotel bill alone was two thousand.

Add to that a thousand bucks on a mountain-worthy car rental, a Volvo V90 Cross Country in a deep green color. It had good ground clearance, all wheel drive, and heated wipers, seats, steering wheels, climate control, and remote start.

It wouldn't be as grumbly and sexy as Olive, my green 1968 Pontiac GTO, but it'd be a nice luxury ride, something I seldom got. A good long drive with only my handpicked playlist on Spotify and my own thoughts to keep me company.

I also booked a huge spa package, that was another thousand, though I figured I might get more use out of the hotel's secluded hot tub, soaking with a G &T while I looked up at the stars.

As for skiing, fuck that shit. I might go for a walk in the woods, but there was no way I was strapping skis to my feet just so I could barrel down an ice-covered hill at a billion miles an hour. Count me the fuck out. Hot tub and me, yes. Ski, no.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:31 am

There were two routes from Montana to Steamboat Springs open to me. The first one took me through Billings, and down I-90 East, and on down through back country mountain terrain along the 120 to Craig, Colorado. From there, it'd be an easy hop to Steamboat Springs and the hotel.

Then I saw I'd save an hour heading down along the I-25, and then cutting over the 30 and then the 40 and through the mountains to Steamboat. Plus, when I checked the weather, it looked like it might snow, so it'd be smart to save as much time as possible.

I was a good driver on snow, and the Volvo would make me the safest thing around. All I had to do on the drive was to avoid any idiots, and I was very good at that. I packed the front seat with beef jerky and string cheese. Plus a few bags of Bugles, and a large four-pack of giant Reece's peanut butter cups. I didn't bring along any soda because Royce had told me over and over again that soda was bad for me and frankly, I was not up to hearing it again. So I packed a cooler with bottles of water and iced tea.

I was all set, and said goodbye at seven in the morning to the two lovebirds, who were headed to the airport to catch a small plane to DIA in Denver. From there, they'd be in first-class seats to Miami, where they'd catch their cruise.

I kissed Jonah and hugged Royce, and wished them both well. Waved goodbye to Grandad, who used his nine-iron to wave back at me, hopped in the Volvo, and blasted out of there. I hate long goodbyes, so it was good to be on the road at last.

The only problem with a six-hour drive, with the clouds coming down like a flat, gray

slate, was that I had too much time to think. Sure, I hummed with the songs, and jumped in and out of audio books (Royce had turned me on to Bill Bryson's *In a Sunburned Country*, and while I listened, sometimes I laughed so hard I almost peed myself).

Sometimes I just listened to the sound of my tires on the damp highway. Damp because it was starting to snow, light flakes that seemed to promise no harm.

In spite of the promise of no harm, the Rocky Mountains were a bunch of capricious bitches, and they did what they wanted, when they wanted. So as I drove up the highway, going toward Walden, it started to come down with a purpose, as if the clouds meant to bury everything hip-deep in snow.

I kept the wipers going double time, turned up the defogger on the back window and turned the blower on extra hot on the windshield. It barely made any difference, and for a good hour, I was looking through a sheet of snow that was only getting thicker as it came down.

Still, with part of my attention on the red-topped warning poles by the side of the road, I kept on the road. With the other part of my attention, my hands on the sturdy steering wheel, I kept my eye on the other cars. They were the real danger.

I was coming up to a slow driver in a dark Audi A8. The car was a high end rental, and I could tell that it was high end because some asshole coming from DIA in Denver didn't have enough sense to drive into the mountains in a car with more ground clearance.

The road going over Rabbit Ears Pass was two lanes on the climb, so I eased around the Audi, intending to overtake in a gentle way so as not to piss him off. Guys in Audis tended to have big balls, dreams of having a big dick, and very little sense.

I pushed on the gas and sped up, slipping a little. Behind me, there was a line of cars just aching to stomp on the gas and go past the Audi.

Only just when I'd come alongside of him, the Audi veered to the right, sliding, doing a 180 before banging rear-first into the nearest pine tree. A ton of snow slipped from the trees and covered the hood, sliding like melted ice cream down his windshield.

To stay out of his way, I eased left, but then I had to ease right because that line of cars, so impatient to get to the slope, wasn't going to wait for me any more than they'd been willing to wait for the Audi.

They all zipped past, using the left lane and whooshing like the devil. The Volvo, solid as it was, shuddered in the wake of all those cars.

I won't say I lost control, because I never do, but I suddenly found that I was also doing a 180, just like the Audi had, slipping on a patch of almost invisible ice. I came to a stop without hitting anything, except I was facing backwards, half on the road, half on the shoulder, a slope of snow that led toward a frozen lake.

At least I was in one piece, and the Volvo was intact. The line of cars had all gone past, leaving everything still, except for the eerily silent and constant snowfall.

I looked at the snow piled on top of the Audi, waiting for somebody to get out. Nobody did.

I wondered if Highway Patrol might be along soon, because even though me and the law don't get along too good, I'd be glad to see them. Maybe they could help the guy in the Audi.

But after a few minutes, the highway stayed still, except for the damn snow, and it looked like nobody was coming. My luck.

Nobody was coming so in spite of wanting to bet a move on so I could arrive at the Anchorage Hotel before midnight, I put the Volvo in neutral, left it running, double checked the parking brake, and got out.

The snow was soft, yet insistent as it came down. Inside of a minute, I had a layer of snow all over me. Shaking myself like a dog, I stalked in my big black Doc Martens over to the Audi.

I was about to go to the driver's side, when I realized that the car was on an incline which turned into a drop-off. Below was Muddy Pass Lake, which I'd seen on the Google map I checked out before I left.

If the driver tried to get out on the driver's side, he'd get roughly tumbled into the half-frozen water. Bending down, I could see the gap between car and sky, with one of the car's tires hanging precariously in the air.

I yanked open the passenger door and said, "Get out this side buddy, or you and this car are gonna tumble into the lake."

"What?" the man asked. He was drowning in an air bag, his hair messed. He had blood on his forehead, like had hit his head, though I couldn't see where. And he was squinting at me, still coming down from the shock of the accident.

Old me would have left him there, I sure would. And I have to tell you I was running on empty, still mourning the fact that Jonah was marrying someone else—and I didn't really have it in me.

But I was new me. Having been exposed to a whole shitton of Royce's words of wisdom, having been a part of the Farthingdale Valley Fresh Start Program, which taught ex-cons (and me) the value of honesty, hard work, and perseverance, along with a whole bunch of other stuff that raised its ugly head, there wasn't anything else

I could do but the right thing.

“You got three wheels on the ice and one wheel in the air,” I said with just about all the patience that I had. “You move your weight that way?” I pointed past his shoulder, watched him watching me like I was a puzzle he didn’t want to solve but was realizing that he had to. “You will go into Muddy Pass Lake. It’s deep, so there will be no coming up for air before you freeze to death. Or.” I shrugged as if this was the least of his worries. “Or you get crushed by your car on the way down to the bottom. Your choice.”

“I’m—”

He paused, pushing the airbag away, the little that he could. Then he took a deep breath, sat up, and straightened his shoulders. Which looked very broad and impressive in that thin citified wool coat he was wearing. Totally not suitable for the weather or the terrain.

What was it with rich folks? Did they think the weather didn’t apply to them? Why did they always dress like they were only going as far as the taxi waiting in the street?

“I’m going to come out that way,” he said, like it’d been his idea all along. “Slowly.”

I nodded, and I didn’t know whether or not my hand on the door helped anything, like was it just enough of a counterweight to keep him from sliding into the lake, but I kept it there. Held on tightly while he crawled over the middle console and onto the leather passenger seat.

The interior of the Audi smelled like new leather, and from what I could see, the car was a beaut. But the back end was smashed and, the way it had crumpled, maybe the back axle was broken, as well. There was no repairing any of it. The car could only be sold for parts, if anyone cared to drag it out of the lake, that is.

For now, the car stayed stable while the man clambered out—he was pretty nimble for all he was so muscled and tall. I held onto the car while he grabbed a fancy black leather duffle bag and a matching overnight bag. You know, the kind on rollers that folks are sure is not too big to stuff into the overhead. But then, he would have travelled first class, and it wouldn't have mattered how much luggage he had, as those overheads are enormous.

“Everything?” I asked. My hand was turning into one giant cramp and was turning blue on account of I didn't have any gloves.

He looked at me. “Everything that matters.”

Obviously, the car didn't matter at all. It was a rental and he could probably afford another one just like it and then some.

The second he was out of the car, I let go of the door, and yanked him back, grabbing onto his elbow, cause he was kind of standing there like a dumb fuck watching the Audi slide slowly, slowly along the icy shoulder, and over the edge. When it fell, there was a loud crack and the sound of metal crumpling, both sounds echoing across the frozen lake.

He looked at me, as white as the snow all around us.

He also looked like he wanted to barf, but he was way too manly for that. Then he got this I'm-in-charge expression that I wanted nothing to do with, cause he wasn't the boss of me.

So I bent and grabbed a fresh clump of snow in my very cold hand, lifted my arm, and placed it on his temple, where it was bleeding.

“What the hell?” He clamped his hand over mine and there we were holding hands,

kinda sorta, with my hand to his face like we were in a scene from some crazy gay holiday rom-com, and after a second he took his hand away.

“You’re bleeding a little bit,” I said. “Maybe you smacked your head. It doesn’t look bad, but you are bleeding, and I don’t want you to get any nasty stains on that fine collar of yours.”

With a nod, he bent and picked up some snow, pushed my hand away with the edge of his wrist, and put his own snow on his own head. I flicked bloodstained snow from my hand, leaving red circles on the white, and then he took his hand away and did the same.

“It’s fine,” he said, looking around as he pushed his shoulders back in a determined way. Red-tinged water slid down the side of his face. The collar of his coat was a darker wool than the rest of it. He kind of looked like he’d once been wearing a silk scarf, but that was probably at the bottom of the lake. “What do we do now?”

It wasn’t really a question. It sounded more like he was starting a to-do list that only he knew the contents of.

I looked up the road and squinted through the snow that batted at my eyelashes. For some reason, it’d taken me until now to realize there were no other cars on the road. That is, except for one snow-laden state trooper car coming slowly in the single lane going down hill.

The trooper went right across the uphill lanes like he had the whole planet to himself and was unconcerned that he might get sideswiped by some asshole who didn’t see him. That was because there was nobody else on the road.

My suspicion that the road was getting shut down was confirmed when he walked over to us in his state trooper snow boots and his brown jacket with the Colorado

state emblem on it.

There was the same emblem on his state trooper hat, complete with plastic snow guard, and also there were a string of electric Christmas lights around the brim. I could see the single black cord going inside his jacket, like that's where the little battery was. The lights blinked on and off, then blinked on and off again, red, green, blue, white, gold. Over and over. Ho-ho-ho.

The trooper shook his head, sending flakes of snow everywhere, and tugged on the edges of his super state trooper mittens.

"Looks like you had an accident," said the state trooper, stating the obvious.

"I hit some ice, I think," said the guy, not mentioning my thwarted attempt to pass him, which might or might not have added to the accident. Nor did he mention that all the other cars on the highway had been racing past him like they'd been shot out of a cannon.

"Let me get your info, sir, just in case." The trooper pulled out his pad, and I had no idea what just-in-case was all about, or maybe he was just bored and wanted to fill out paperwork for a car that was most obviously at the bottom of a frozen lake and of no use to anybody.

The guy pulled out his wallet and handed his driver's license to the state trooper. Then he snorted a laugh and said, "My registration and insurance are at the bottom of the lake, sir."

This made me laugh too, though it wasn't my joke.

The trooper wrote some stuff down, then paused to read the name on the driver's license. "Alexander James Westmore. Where you headed, sir?"

“Up to Steamboat Springs,” said Alexander-James-Freaking-Westmore. “Call me Alex, please.”

“And you, sir?” the state trooper asked me. “What’s your name? Is that your Volvo?”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s my rental.”

“Your name?”

“Beck,” I said, not sure how long I wanted to humor him for.

“Beck?” asked the trooper with a wince and a squint, like he’d suddenly thought he’d heard wrong.

“Malachi Beckett,” I said. “Do you need my license?”

“Were you part of the accident, sir?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Then where are you headed?”

“Same as him,” I said. Then I added, “Sir,” for good measure. “Got a little resort package reserved at the Anchorage.”

I noticed that Alex shot me a glance, but then he focused his attention on the state trooper, who was giving his driver’s license back to him, as well as a quickly filled out accident report. Alex’s wallet was thin and shiny, and made of good leather.

“Well, I hate to tell you,” said the trooper. “The snow and dangerous road conditions have closed down the top of Rabbit Ears pass,” he said. “You folks are going to have

to head on down the mountain, as they are restricting access.”

“But I need to get to Steamboat Springs,” Alex said, because of course he would. Rich people had to get where they needed to go and to hell with Mother Nature. “My sister’s Lottie’s there with her new baby. My mom and dad. My brother. We were going to have Christmas together.”

I wasn’t expecting that to be the reason for his urgency. He didn’t mention some high power meeting. Or a date with a big bosomed lady. No, it was because of family.

I didn’t really have a family besides a crooked uncle, and Jonah and Royce, but I got it, I really did. I felt bad for him, but I wasn’t going to tell him that, because what was going to happen to my high-dollar room and expensive spa package? Not to mention the G&T I planned to have in that hot tub.

Looked like the trooper got it too, for he smiled in sympathy, but he was still shaking his head.

“How about this?” he asked. Then he pointed with his mittened hand across the three lands to a little sign next to what looked like an opening into the woods. “That’s the 307. Used to be the cutoff to the 14 before they decided it was easier to come around this hill. There’s a place called Whispering Pines Lodge. Maybe they have a room. If you can get one, you will be first in line when the road opens to Steamboat. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day. Otherwise, you’re going to have to head down the 40 and pretty much go all the way down to Denver.”

“That sounds good,” said Alex, not at all pleased, but being super polite.

“How are you going to get there?” asked the state trooper. “Looks like your car is underwater. Anyone else in the vehicle?”

“No.” Alexander snapped the word, as though affronted at the insinuation that he’d be standing around while his passenger was drowning.

“I’ve got your information,” said the state trooper. “But you and your friend here are going to have to skedaddle off this mountain.”

I wasn’t his friend, and I didn’t feel like skedaddling. What I had wanted was to get to Steamboat so I could put up my feet, and have a drink of alcohol in a frosted glass while I watched the snow come down. But that didn’t happen, of course, as I realized that the only way Alex was getting anywhere was if I took him.

Sure, old me could have left him by the roadside to freeze to death or whatever. But I was new me, wasn’t I.

“I’ll take you,” I said to Alex’s very broad back as the trooper walked back to his SUV.

“What?” Alex asked, turning on me like I’d been impertinent and interrupted a far more important conversation.

“I want to get to Steamboat as fast as I can, mister,” I said. “Sounds like Whispering Pines is the closest thing to a good place to wait for the road to be open. They’ll have rooms.”

I didn’t know whether they would, but I spoke confidently, like I knew all about it. The snow wasn’t stopping, and my hands were freezing.

Alex’s head had stopped bleeding, but he looked like he’d been in a fight and very much wanted all the bad things to stop happening to him. Only there wasn’t enough money in all the world to make that happen. All he had was me and my Volvo for rescue.

“We need to get out of the snow,” I said, slowly and carefully, as though he was much younger and very foolish. “I’ll drive. We can figure it out when we get there.”

“Okay.”

He tightened his mouth after he said this one word, like he’d just signed a contract with the very devil. I looked down at myself, at my black Doc Marten’s, my black jeans with the hole in the knee, and the ratty hem of my black t-shirt. The t-shirt hem draggled below the hem of the only nice thing I was wearing, a blue fleece jacket that Royce had gotten for me against my protests.

“I know I’m not much to write home about,” I said with a bit of a snarl. “But I am your rescuer here.”

For a moment, he looked me up and down, his eyes dark as they appraised me. What color were those eyes, anyway? Deep blue? Some kind of hazel?

I’d find out soon, not that it would make any difference. He wasn’t my type, and guys like Alexander James Freaking Westmore did not go out with guys like me, guys from Five Points, with no college education, and no bank account to write home about.

“So?” I asked. “Alexander James Westmore, you want me to leave you here or are you coming with.”

“Coming with,” said Alex. “But call me Alex, if you would.”

Ooooh, he had manners, too. Royce would have liked this guy, and Jonah, by association, would have liked him, as well. Too bad I’d never be bringing cool-as-a-cucumber Alex home with me any time soon.

“Well, let’s go,” I said. With my hands in my pockets, I pointed with my elbow at the Volvo. “If any car can get us there, it’s this one.”

“Nice,” he said, and then he surprised me. “Thank you for the ride. And for stopping. I’d be in that lake if it wasn’t for you.”

He wiped at his forehead, seeming a little dazed as he looked at the snow coming down thick and fast. Maybe he was overcome with the fate he escaped, or maybe he could not believe he was going to let some dicy-looking stranger give him a lift to a country lodge in the middle of the forest that might or might not have rooms.

Frankly, I was a little surprised at myself, at new me, though I didn’t have any idea how all this might look in the morning. But I led the way to the Volvo and got in, reaching over to move stuff from the passenger seat into the back so he could slide in. As he did, his eyes lit up at the bag of Bugles that still sat on the console between us.

“Help yourself,” I said. “I always have eats and treats when I’m on a road trip.”

“Thank you,” he said and with a sigh, he stuffed a small handful of Bugles into his lovely mouth. Then he smiled at me as he crunched away, then said, “I’m not dead.”

“No, Alex, you are not.”

I laughed and waited while he buckled in, then slowly trundled across three lanes of snowy highway, and turned onto the road into the woods. The road was white between the trees, with the only thing breaking up the snow was a single set of what looked like deer tracks.

“Here we go,” I said, and turned the wheel into what looked like no-man's-land, but which would hopefully end up taking us to a hotel that had rooms for the night.

Ho ho, fucking ho.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:31 am

The snowy track turned out to be a two-lane road deep with snow that came up to the top of the Volvo's hubcaps. And while I knew the car would make it, the looks Alex was giving me as I trundled along, taking it slow and sensible, were anything but convinced I had any idea what I was doing.

"Chill out," I said. "I practically drive for a living."

"What do you do for a living?" asked Alex, but I could tell he didn't really care about the answer, only that he wanted a distraction. How do I know this? He grabbed the oh-shit handle (Jonah liked to call it the Jesus handle), with a grip so tight, his fingers were white.

Being new me, I had some empathy to spare, so I humored him.

"I lived over a garage in Denver," I said, keeping my eyes on the snow-piled road, so he wouldn't think I was taking my eyes off the road and freak out. "We sold spare parts, and I delivered a lot of the times, and drove all over."

His response was a noncommittal grunt, and I got the feeling he was still coming down from an adrenaline high of almost dying and being rescued by a handsome stranger dressed in black.

"My name is Beck, by the way," I said, because new me had some manners.

"What kind of name is Beck?" he asked.

I stole a glance at him, thinking for a minute that he was being snarly in mean, and

that maybe he'd meant to say something more along the lines of, What kind of fucking name is Beck? But he wasn't.

By the time we got to Whispering Pines Lodge, I reckoned he'd be back to his old corporate CEO self, and giving orders. I'd seen a flash of that bossiness right before he'd gotten out of his car. I'm going to come that way . His tone then had been everything about being in charge in a crisis, and I figured that kind of attitude was tattooed on his skin. Maybe even his very soul.

I almost missed the driveway that led to Whispering Pines Lodge, but a last minute sharp turn got the Volvo onto a mostly plowed drive that led up to what looked like a main lodge. The building was old, covered in snow, and the supports that held up the front porch looked barely able to hold the weight.

But as I parked the car carefully between a large truck and a Honda CRV and got out, I took a look around as I waited for Alex to get out, too.

The lodge was old, but it was sturdy. The walls were made of logs that looked thick, with a river rock base, all of which looked robust enough to last another hundred years.

As we walked across the scraped-snow parking lot, I could see there were lots of cars. Which meant lots of people were already checked in. Would there be rooms? If there weren't, Alex and I were going to spend a chilly night in a Volvo that, while comfortable to drive, was not set up to sleep in.

Alex rushed past me to go up onto the porch.

"After you," I said, not hiding my sarcasm.

He flung open the door, and I followed him into the reception area of the lodge and I

might be the least romantic person to ever walk the planet, but right away I could see that the lodge, at least this part of it, was cozy. There was even a fire in the river rock fireplace, and two young ladies in flannel shirts standing behind the wooden reception desk.

They looked at each other as we approached with expressions that seemed to say Uh oh, be on the alert . But that's not what they said.

"Welcome, gentlemen," said one. Her badge said Lisa , and she had long dark hair.

"Lisa," said Alex in a commanding way as he laid a gold-tipped black credit card down on the glass-topped counter. "We need two rooms. The state trooper said the road is closed and that you might have rooms for us."

He said all this as if he was quite confident that the state trooper with Christmas lights on his brown trooper hat had actually taken the time to phone ahead for us. In a perfect world, maybe, not this one.

But before I could add anything to this brusque request of Alex's, Lisa shook her head of dark hair and looked sad. And, I might add, she did not seem impressed with that black credit card. The card Royce had given me was also gold-tipped, but it was dark blue, and I was willing to whip it out if Alex's card was at its limit. Then we could engage in a little credit car war.

"We only have one room, I'm afraid," she said. "So, if you don't mind sharing."

"Actually, we only have a cabin ," said the other young lady. Her badge said Marge , and she had her hair in a bun. "Number 7. It's the furthest from the main lodge, but it's all we have."

"You're right," said Lisa. "It's got a queen sized bed, and a little fireplace."

“What about food?” I asked. Now that I was warming up, my hands began to ache a little, and my stomach had become alerted to the fact that someone was roasting something that my nose could not identify, but which smelled very good.

Alex spared me a glare as if I’d been bothering him all day with my food demands and had just gotten on his last nerve.

As Lisa took Alex’s credit card, I realized he’d won the battle of the credit card, but what did I care? The gals gave us two room keys. Real ones, old, brass. Cool, right?

Then Lisa handed Alex a laminated card with directions to Cabin 7. I had to go on my toes to look over Alex’s arm to see any of this.

“The parking lot is paved all the way back,” said Lisa. “And there’s a reserved spot for your car.”

“We’ve got a restaurant and a little convenience store and a small bar, right down that hallway there,” said Margie. “We’re limited on what we have, but we make a mean roast chicken. Can I make a reservation for you two?”

Alex was all over this information, like the corporate Boy Scout he seemed to be. Which left me waiting, holding the car keys while he decided which time we would eat.

When we finally walk out into the cold, trudging back to the car, Alex was reaching into the pocket of his thin city coat. But when he brought out his phone, even from a distance, I could tell the glass was cracked and that the phone would ping no more.

Old me wouldn’t have given a shit, but new me made a sympathetic sound.

“Bummer.” I was pretty sure Alex could afford a new phone every month for the rest

of his life, but he looked pretty stricken as he clenched the phone in his hand.

The snow had let up a little by the time we got back into the Volvo. When I started the engine, which purred right to life, he said, “Can I borrow your phone?”

I never loaned anyone my phone, always thinking they would fuck it up, you know? But now he handed it over and watched him enter a number and hold the phone to his ear.

He had nice hands. Recently manicured. His movements were fluid, not that I was staring, but because I was driving and he was on the phone, there was no way that I couldn’t listen in to the call.

I imagined he’d be calling some floozy or other that he had waiting for him in Steamboat, so I was surprised to see his face soften when someone on the other end answered.

It was a short drive to Cabin 7, but it was just the two of us in that car, so I could hear every word.

“Mom, it’s Alex. I’m okay, but I wrecked my rental?—”

I could hear the gasp at the other end, and then Alex explained how he’d been rescued, and who I was, blah, blah, blah. Then the conversation turned more informative, at least in a one-sided way.

“Did Lottie bring the baby?”

“Tell Tim he shouldn’t wait to go skiing?—”

“Did Dad get my message?”

“All of my presents to you are at the bottom of a lake except for the ones I shipped from Amazon?—”

There were long pauses between what he was saying and the words he was listening to, and I could just about hear a woman at the other end of the line. Something about Christmas and home and family. And I love you. A lot of I love you.

Then Alex said to me, “You were headed to Steamboat, you said? Mom wants to know which hotel. You told me once, but now it’s slipped my mind.”

“The Anchorage,” I said, not sure what difference it would make for her to know. “Got a soak and stars package or whatever it’s called. First drink’ll be a G&T under the stars.”

Alex passed along the information, paused to listen, and then said, “Yes, I agree. He did save my life, after all.”

With a shake of my head, I parked the car in front of Cabin 7 and watched for a minute as the snow gathered on the windshield once I turned the wipers off. The little brown cabin in front of the parking spot had snow on its roof, and a mist on the inside of the windows. The cabin looked old and would probably be a miserable hovel.

We got out and grabbed our stuff, with Alex going ahead to unlock the door. As he pulled it open, he handed me my phone back and said, “Thank you,” as polite as could be, though I could see he was stressed about missing Christmas with his family.

I had sympathy and all, even though Christmas to me was just a holiday to be gotten through. My experience with Christmas was strictly limited to the Mr. Magoo version of a Christmas Carol.

Once inside the cabin, I had to revise my initial thought that the cabin would be old

and dumpy. It was not. Half of the walls were painted white, the others were covered with wood paneling painted a soft blue. Ship lap, I think Royce would call it.

There was a faded blue and white rug on the pinewood floorboards. Someone had come by and brought logs and kindling for a fire. The heat was on, too, which made me shiver as I warmed up.

“Why don’t you have gloves?” asked Alex as he prowled around, inspecting the small kitchen off the small living room with its river rock fireplace. As he headed down the short (really just a step or two) hallway to the bathroom and bedroom, I shouted after him, “Why don’t you have boots?”

I plopped myself on the couch in front of the unlit fire, throwing my old green army duffle on the floor. As long as I was warm and there was supposedly food nearby, I could weather any storm.

But before I could really relax, Alex came back, having left his leather suitcase collection in the bedroom. As he looked down at me, I couldn’t read his face, exactly, but he didn’t look happy.

“Why are you sitting on the couch in wet clothes?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, matching his tone that seemed half-exasperation and half bossiness.

“No, you’re not, you’re shivering.”

“What do you care?” I asked, and yes, by golly, my whole body twitched with a massive shiver. All that tramping around in the snow had finally caught up to me. “Fine, fine,” I said, standing up, peeling off my blue fleece jacket. “I’m not going to catch cold and die, you know.”

I never caught colds, and I was about to go on and on about this, to distract him, when he sat on the arm of the couch, snow dripping from the shoulders of his fancy city coat, melted snow, tinged rose-colored, sliding down his temple.

He covered his face with his hands and I realized something was going on. Yeah, I can read the room when I try, but I'm not so good at small talk.

"Eh?" I said, more of a sound than a word, an invitation, I guess.

"She almost died," he said, talking into his hands. His voice shook. More snow dripped from his hair, but I guess, along with the phone, he could afford a new city coat if he wanted one.

"Who?"

"Lottie. My sister Lottie and Baby Ginny. The birth took hours, and I couldn't be there because I was in Tokyo and couldn't get back fast enough."

For some reason, this pulled at my insides, all the way up to my throat.

Old me would have laughed at him. New me wasn't sure what I should do, besides which, he lifted his head and looked at me, utterly fetching, trying to hold his jaw still from quivering, his eyelashes sparkling with tears, exposing a vulnerability that I'm sure he was unaware of.

Yeah, both old me and new me wanted to hit that, but somewhere inside of me I found some manners.

"Maybe we should both change and get something to eat," I said. "Dinner's not for another hour or whatever, but we can go sit in the bar."

“I don’t really drink,” he said.

“That’s bullshit,” I said without any heat. “You almost died and my stomach is about to attack itself. Why don’t we get some beer, some munchies? I’ll loan you my phone again if you say yes.”

This made him laugh, a delightful burry chuckle, and maybe it was wrong of me to want to go closer and just, you know, touch him. He was tall and broad shouldered, with nice hands and a nice laugh. His eyes, as he looked at me, were deep blue. Gah. The kind that made me want to drown in them.

But the spell was broken when he got up and pulled off his coat, which he hung neatly in the small closet.

“Let me put on some dry clothes and we’ll go.”

Putting on some dry clothes also involved him taking, of all things, a quick shower. By the time he came out I had changed out my socks and put my boots back on, that was it, I was ready to eat my own arm.

I would have eaten any part of him, as well, because he shaved, and he smelled like a dream, and he was wearing blue jeans that sort of hugged him everywhere. Alas, the city shoes on his feet did not go and did not suit the outfit.

“Maybe they’ve got some boots they can sell you,” I said instead of everything else I wanted to say. Or do.

“Maybe,” he said with a shrug, as if my worry wasn’t important.

We put on our coats and trucked out into the snow, which was still coming down, but more softly now, a whisper of white that danced in front of the limited parking lot

lights. It wasn't far to the main lodge, so we walked, and while my hands were cold, I knew I was a great deal warmer than he was, with his thin shoes and city coat.

We marched into the bar and found ourselves a small, circular bar table along the wall. The warmth of the fire in the main reception area just about reached us, which was good because every time someone opened the front door, which wasn't often, we got a blast of cold air.

I talked Mr. I-Don't-Drink into beers and nachos, and while we waited, I leaned back. The low lighting in the bar let me look at him as he gazed around the room. The bar was small and cozy, the chatter low, the bottles of gin and wine sparkling in the shelves behind the bar.

"So what went down with the ship?" I asked, just making conversation, maybe to distract him from the fact that I was staring at his manly jawline and admiring his skin, the way a bit of his throat peeped out from his crisp white button-down shirt.

"Ship?" he asked, focusing his attention on me. Which I found felt very nice. I mean, we weren't on a date, but it sure could maybe feel like we were.

"Your car, when it went into the lake. You mentioned all the presents were lost except for the ones you shipped from Amazon."

"You've got a good memory," he said, nodding at the waitress as she brought our beers and a basket of nachos.

"That's not all I've got that's good," I said.

I swear, hand to heaven, I hadn't meant to say that, at least not out loud. But it was said now, so I gave him my best saucy wink, and if he wanted to follow up on any of what I might be offering, I would not say no.

“Excuse me?” he asked, like he had no idea what I was talking about.

I’m thinking he did know, because as he lifted his mug of beer and stared into it, I could just about see him turning over and over the idea of the two of us taking a roll in the hay. I also saw the second he shook the idea away. Then he took a long slug of beer, and I watched him lick his lips as he swallowed.

“So,” he said, a little flushed from the beer. “I had great presents for everybody, mittens and coats, a certificate for steak of the month, all the usual.” He shrugged and maybe he realized that his usual wasn’t my usual. “The only thing I saved was the silver spoon for Baby Ginny that I had in my suitcase.”

A silver spoon. Didn’t surprise me because of course a new baby from a rich family would get a silver spoon.

One year, when I was five or six or maybe seven (my kid hood is such a blur), I got a new pair of black socks. I cried because I was only little and all my other friends were getting new bikes and karate lessons and Game Boys.

For a moment, I went still, the memory futzing out before I could even grab hold of it. Who gave me those socks? Mom or Dad? Or some unmarried aunt stuck with a kid for the holidays?

All of these ideas always seemed to overlap and I never could figure out what was real and what came from a TV commercial. But moments like that one always reminded me that I hated Christmas.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:31 am

I was ready to be all grumpy about it, to hand out some sass, stir things up the way I liked to do. One time at Christmas, Jonah and I had been so drunk, we went to nice neighborhoods, tromping along carefully shoveled sidewalks to pick fights with inflatable Santas and reindeers until the plastic shapes burst a hole and the electric pumps forced air into air.

The cops had come, as they always did, but we skedaddled to a back alley where I'd parked Olive and roared out of that fine neighborhood before they could catch us.

Now, though, I didn't imagine Alex would appreciate hearing about anything so boisterous and alcohol-induced, so I kept my big mouth shut about the Santas we'd decked, and the black socks from when I was a kid that I wore for years, until they finally wore out, being a bunch of holes.

I always wear a lot of black, sure, but my socks are always any other color, white, gray, candy cane striped. Rainbow, even, if I was in a jocular mood.

"She's all right now, though," I said, remembering some of my manners.

"Yes," he said, taking a swallow of beer, as if relieved that this was so. "This is my first chance to see her. Lottie was told to rest a lot and there were just complications so I've only seen pictures of Baby Ginny—" He paused to look at me, his face flushed from the warmth of the bar (or at least until someone opened the door) and the effects of the beer. "I also broke up with my boyfriend a few months back—he cheated on me—so my head wasn't on straight. I was a mess."

"How are you now?" I asked, my brain tracking on the fact that he had once had a

boyfriend and now he was free. And no, I didn't wink at him, but there was a wink in my voice. "Still messy?"

He laughed, again a delightful low burry laugh that made me want to grab him and just hold on until that warm sweetness was soaked all into me.

His eyes sparkled as he looked at me, as if he knew how he was affecting me (it certainly wasn't the beer), and was teasing me. Or maybe he was unsure what might be on offer. Or maybe he was trying to say no, but gently.

Around that time—but of course, an interruption—the waitress said our table was ready. As she led us into the small restaurant with its glossy wood floors and soft candlelight level lighting, the gentleness offset with swags of evergreen along the wood-panelled walls, I asked her, "Does your store sell warm boots?"

"No, I'm afraid not," she said. "It just has basic supplies, maybe some sweatshirts and hats. But no boots."

She pointed us to a small booth that had high backs and cushioned bench seats covered in plaid cloth. I slid in and Alex slid across from me.

"Thanks for asking," he said. "You were right. My feet are freezing."

"We can take care of that later," I said, with visions of kneeling before him to take off his fancy leather shoes and thin socks and warming his bare feet against my bare belly.

Yeah, I'd lift up my t-shirt, and pull his foot close and, as I cupped his bare foot to me, I'd look at him and let my wants shine through my eyes.

Jonah always said my eyes gave me away. So if this guy was soft-hearted for hearth

and home, and reeling from a bad breakup, then I could be his rebound guy. I'd be willing, just so, yeah, we could have a roll in the hay and afterward I wouldn't have to sleep alone.

Yeah, he'd be using me, but I'd be using him right back, and it would all even out, eventually. The trick was getting him there.

With my sights set on getting him into bed, I was a charming dinner guest. I used my napkin. I didn't drink too much, only a few beers more, and I didn't eat as much of the wonderful roast chicken as I wanted because, I tell you what, I cannot fuck on a full stomach. While I wondered if I should get a to-go box, I got to watch him eat.

He was a bit dainty about it, as if he'd never gone hungry a day in his life and stuffing his face wasn't on his event horizon. He used his napkin on his glistening and lush mouth, and took small sips of his second beer (he only ever had two), and kept his mouth closed as he chewed.

Alex was a real charmer, definitely from good stock. Compared to me, he was a prince, while I was a dullard in a herd of nobodies.

I got two to-go boxes. One had most of my roast chicken and French fries. The other had a huge slice of carrot cake, for afters.

As we argued over who would pay (maybe he didn't realize I had a super duper powerful credit card in my wallet), I started to have my doubts that he would actually sleep with me, even if there was only one bed.

As we slogged back across the parking lot to Cabin 7, trudging over ice while a starlight black sky blew cold air across our faces, I continued to doubt that I would be successful at getting him in that bed to do anything other than sleep.

When we got back to the cabin, Alex opened it and, to our mutual surprise, someone on staff had come by to build a small fire.

There was a note. You can let the fire go out by simply not adding any wood to the kindling. Or you can add a log or two and enjoy .

I looked at the river rock fireplace, and yes, there were a handful of kindling sticks sporting small flames that might soon go out if the fire wasn't built up.

I handed the to-go boxes to Alex to put away and threw off my blue fleece jacket to kneel down and add another log from the curved basket that held them. My time coming on weekends to Farthingdale Valley had taught me some things, and one of them was how to build and maintain a fire, and my neck and arms and face were soon feeling the warmth of that fire.

As I knelt there, watching the flames grow, I wiped my hands on my black jeans as the air warmed around me. I felt Alex come up and stand right behind me.

Had we been anywhere else, and had he been anywhere else, every part of me would have been on high alert. But the cabin was cozy, and he was Alex, and there was nothing to fear.

“Are your feet still freezing?” I asked without looking back. He could say yes or no or that he was going to take off his shoes and put on fresh socks. He could do anything he wanted.

“I wish they had boots,” he said. “I never thought to bring any because there’s everything I need at my family’s place.”

“They have a place in Steamboat?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. People as rich as Alex seemed to be usually had a summer place and a winter place, in

addition to a regular house. Multiples of things, when they only ever needed one, whether it was houses or dining rooms.

“Yes,” he said after a bit of a pause. “They do.”

He moved away and sat on the couch, and in the back of my mind, I figured he was taking off his shoes here, in the living room, rather than the small bedroom so he could leave the damp shoes in the boot tray. And that was so he didn’t track dampness through the house.

Another rich person thing, something I’d never cared about until I met Royce. Until Jonah had met Royce, that is, and I got dragged along into a new level of self-care and fussiness.

“Let me help you,” I said, turning around, still on my knees.

The small couch was only a little ways away from the fireplace, and warm air wafted over my back as I looked up at him. He’d taken off his city coat and was struggling with wet laces on those stupid thin leather city shoes.

“Let me,” I said, a little more firmly now because maybe this was the first time in his whole grown life where someone had told him what to do.

I was pleased and maybe a little surprised when he leaned back and lifted his hands in a way that maybe said he was giving in, but I took my chance and started unlacing his shoes. Perfectly normal thing to do, one man to another, alone in a cabin on a snowy mountainside.

But I didn’t stop there. After I slid off his thin leather shoes and pretty much threw them behind me, I pulled off his damp thin socks.

My fingers told me the socks were woolen and that if they weren't laid out properly to dry, they might crumple and be ruined forever. Too bad. My focus was on his icy feet, red with cold. He had a little bit of hair along his big toe, like a Hobbit wannabe, and his feet were big. Size eleven? Twelve? Strong ankles, too.

I took his right foot between my two hands and bend to blow warm air across it. He tried to jerk his foot away, but I was too fast and quick, and before he could stop me, I'd lifted my t-shirt and placed the sole of his foot against my belly.

It was like placing a brick of ice there, but I kept his foot there until his foot warmed up and felt less like ice, and was looking down until I looked up from beneath my lashes, in the most flirty way I knew how.

His shoulders went down, like he was relaxing into the moment, a full stomach, one of his feet warm at last. There was nowhere for us to go, and nothing to do but sit in front of the river rock fireplace while the flames danced orange and gold, warming the whole room.

I figured if he pulled his foot away, or got up or anything but just stay where he was, I'd stop what I was doing and we could pretend nothing had happened. I'd eat my leftovers, take a long hot shower, take a glimpse out at the snow from an open doorway, maybe watch a little TV on the very small Smart TV that was flush against the wall above the fireplace, and call it a day.

But maybe I'd been a very good boy that year, in spite of everything. How do I know that? I knew it because Alex shifted his other foot closer to me, so I took care of that one, too. And when both his feet were warm, I crawled up his body. I was basically all up in his personal space, taking command by kissing him on the nose, you know, in an utterly irresistible way.

If he'd pushed me away or drew back or anything like that, I would have stopped. I

don't go where I'm not wanted, but I'm pretty daring, and he was too pretty for me not to at least try.

"What are you doing, Beck?" he asked, murmuring against my mouth as I kissed him.

I paused, my hands clasping his face as I straddled his thighs, and basically held him my captive.

"I'm doing you , Alex," I said, utterly deadpan.

He laughed low in his throat like he got the joke. And maybe he was totally willing for me to be his rebound guy because he leaned into the kisses I gave him. Then, with his hands on my hips, he pulled me closer, all that lovely friction building up between us as my thighs clasped his hips. Yeah, our dicks were just that close and he was as hard as a rock, and rocked back and forth a bit, just to let him know how aware of him I was.

"How is this going to look in the morning, Beck?" he asked, looking up at me, his cheeks flushed, his blue eyes bright.

Maybe he was seriously concerned, or maybe he was trying to be stern. I have no idea. Just that the burry lowness of his voice echoed in a ripple up my spine, a swirl in my belly, an echoing twitch from my cock, as if to demand that I move a whole lot faster.

"Don't know," I said, equally low. "Don't care."

Any concerns he had could wait until morning, and I aimed to make sure he was damn good and distracted. So I distracted him. I leaned close and kissed his nose, and his forehead, and then his lovely mouth. He opened up to me, responding like a man parched from days in the desert. Sighing as he kissed me, like I was the only thing

that could quench his thirst.

Yeah, sure, I was about to go on in a poetic vein when he turned, dislodging me from his lap to toss me onto the small couch. It was too small, so I banged my head on the arm, and flailed about, trying to keep from breaking my neck.

His response was to haul me up and over his shoulder, to march me into the small bedroom, and flop me on the bed. Much better. More room to fuck in. That was always the best way. He peeled off his shirt, right over his head, and fuck the buttons that popped off, unable to take the strain. He peeled my shirt off too, and it ripped, but that was okay by me.

This activity of disrobing continued until we were naked and free, tumbling beneath the soft sheets, the blankets having slithered onto the floor. We got warm, pretty quickly, and he was not shy, no, not at all. His head was between my thighs, and he had me screaming real quick, the heat of his tongue, his mouth, making me come faster than I ever had in my life.

But I didn't rest, I turned that favor right around, giving him special treatment, kissing him, one hand on his cock, my middle finger jammed up his ass as far as it would go until I found that nubbin of pleasure and pressed and released, pressed and released. I did this until he shattered in my arms with a kind of cry that was half surprise, half pleasure.

Then he collapsed on me, all billion pounds of him, gloriously sweaty and rumple-haired and just lovely. He kissed me then, pushing away the bedclothes from my face (how did they get like that? No idea) and kissed me good and hard, sighing into my mouth, pushing my sweat-damp hair from my forehead.

I sighed and sighed, and then he kissed his way down my front to latch onto my spent cock and sort of love on it with long, slow sucks that gently pulled the last bits of

pleasure out of me.

Then I fell asleep in his arms with a big ole smile on my face.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

Good things never lasted in my life, whether it was my one-on-one time with Jonah (without Royce) or the lovely peace of my small apartment above my uncle's garage, or the peace of knowing exactly how each day would go. That was all I ever wanted, pretty much, so when I woke up on that small bed, in the semi-dark, with only the low flicker of a fire in the other room to light it, it took me a minute to realize where I was. My night of passion with Alex was over.

I was at the Whispering Pines Lodge, sharing a room with only one bed with a man named Alex. A rich man with a recent bad breakup, and a family he was trying to join for Christmas. That man was sitting on the edge of the bed with only a brief curl of cloth around his hips.

He was shivering—he made the bed quiver slightly—and I think he was crying and trying to keep it quiet.

Just about instantly I went from enjoying a secret interlude in a snug cabin on a winter's night to standing on the edge of someone else's life. Alex might not have minded using me as his rebound guy, and I certainly hadn't minded being used, but now he was sad, and that put a huge damper on my having any fun.

But that was old me. New me couldn't lounge idly by and watch Alex be sad, as if it didn't have anything to do with me. So I sat up, and pulled the sheet over his shoulders, and grabbed a hunk of blanket and wrapped it around him, as well.

In that low glow, he blinked at me as if surprised. Maybe he was surprised to find me awake and aware, or maybe he'd even forgotten my existence. All I knew was that he lifted the blanket and used his arm to drape both his arm and the blanket around my

shoulders. I shivered as I grew a tad warmer, and sighed as I enjoyed that small, small moment of being that close to another human being.

“You okay?” I asked, though I knew his problems as well as if he’d said them out loud.

“Christmas Eve is tomorrow,” he said.

“They might have the road open,” I said, not knowing whether this was true. “And Steamboat’s only an hour from here.”

“That’s right,” he said, ducking his head, like he was trying to find his toes in the half dark. “Which makes it worse somehow. Hell, I could walk there.”

“Not in those shoes, you can’t,” I said, not hiding that I was laughing at him. “And you’d never fit in my boots.” I was a size ten and a half at best, and he was a twelve.

“Doc Martens, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, half yawning as I nuzzled his warm shoulder. “They’re new. My other ones bit the dust and so Royce and Jonah ordered a pair all the way from Wollaston. And it wasn’t even my birthday.”

“And they are?—?”

He left the question dangling, and I really didn’t want to answer and tell them who they were. That would open a whole can of worms, and while I didn’t mind being totally naked in front of a guy, I really didn’t know how to explain how I hated being a third wheel, but found it nice, sometimes, to be included in Jonah and Royce’s world.

“Wollaston is where they’re made,” I said, ignoring his real question. “Somewhere outside of Northampton. In the original factory or whatever.”

I shrugged and whether it was to dislodge the question or his arm, I really couldn’t say. But I chickened out and turned away when he reached for my face and finally had to lunge out of the bed.

A low growl came from my throat, like I was a wolf in the darkness, but he wasn’t afraid, because he got up, the bedsheet around his shoulders like a cape, and followed me into the living room.

Sad, sad me, with nobody to call my own at Christmas.

“Are you going to sit on the couch buck naked like that?” he asked.

“The cum has dried,” I said, flecking a bit of it from my bare thigh, because, yeah, that’s what I’d been planning to do. Sit there with my legs sprawled like some cave man drawing the last bit of light and warmth from the fire.

“Let’s take a shower and go back to bed.”

I turned to look at him. He was all aglow from the light from the fire, and maybe a bit of the light from the clock on the microwave was dancing blue lights in his hair, but he looked pretty strange. Ethereal, Royce would have said.

“It’s obvious,” he said. “I’m not oblivious. You’re all alone up here.”

“You don’t know that,” I said. I pushed my hair back from my face, suddenly hot. Not because I was standing naked with my back to the still glowing fire, but because he was looking at him. Up and down, trying to figure me out.

“Then tell me who they are, these men who got you boots all the way from England.”

If I was a caveman, he was a saber-toothed tiger on the prowl. Inch by inch, coming closer so carefully, it was like he meant to attack and then devour.

“I’m not sitting on the couch,” I said, holding my hands up as if ten fingers and two palms face out could stop him.

They didn’t. He came up to me and wrapped me in his arms, the bedsheet curling around my shoulders and ankles like bits of friendly cotton ribbon. Then he nuzzled my nose and kissed my cheek and sighed, his smile low and soft.

“Let’s take a shower and go back to bed,” he said, almost whispering.

I love to be loved. I love to be nuzzled and kissed and treated like I’m made of bone china. That’s my big secret.

On the streets, back in Five Points, in Denver, I kicked ass and took down names. I was a whirlwind of trouble and high energy. I wasn’t afraid of anything or anyone. But this, the way he was treating me, was my weakness. It was like he’d figured it out without me saying a single word.

“C’mon,” he said, gently with another kiss, this time very softly on my mouth. “Please?”

I was a sucker for sweetness. Jonah knew, but that was because he knew me. Royce knew, probably because Jonah had told him. But Alex? He’d figured it out, all on his own, inside of a handful of hours.

“Okay,” I said, and let him lead me back into the small bedroom. There, he paused.

“Go start the shower, and I’ll make the bed.”

“Okay.” Yeah, I could be had, not for a pocket of money (and I love money) but for a kind gesture, a sweet kiss, a kind word. A hot shower and a freshly made bed, both to share with a handsome man.

I went to the bathroom. The shower was a decent size, one of those made of all one piece, rather than lined with fancy tile or anything.

I slid the shower door back, turn on the water to hot, and saw that there was a dispenser with soap, shampoo, and cream rinse. On a little rack above the toilet were plenty of white towels and washcloths. The bathroom mirror was already steamed up by the time I took those towels down and put them on the toilet for easy reach.

And then came Alex, marching into the steamy bathroom, naked from head to toe, dick and balls hanging out with absolutely no shame, his head held high, his hair ruffled artfully like a Roman god. Inside of a second, he was dappled with moisture from the steam.

“Hot enough for you?” he said in a joking way.

“You said hot shower,” I responded, shoving his smile. “So hot it is.”

We showered together, naked beneath the pounding spray of the shower, steam rolling all over the place. The soap smelled a bit like flowers and honey, and was silky in my fingers as I spread it all over Alex, everywhere I could reach. I made sure his balls were extra special clean, rolled them around in my fingers until Alex was moaning and not really trying to get away.

“We’re supposed to be getting clean,” he said.

“Your rules, not mine,” I said, laughing at him. “Don’t worry about it. Everything will rinse away.”

We lathered and rinsed and there was a good bit of fondling and jacking off, and yeah, the hot water and soap rinsed everything down the drain.

Beneath my hands, his hair was like dense silk, and I had to go on my toes to make sure it was all rinsed out. He washed my hair, too, and did that make me purr like a kitten? Yeah, it did.

By the time we were done (the hot water seemed endless), I felt boneless, done in, barely able to hold myself up. We turned off the water, and I was ready to flounce back to bed, but he held me and dried me off, every bit of me, speckling me with quick kisses. Then he let me go and followed me into the bedroom, making sure of me, I guess.

We pulled back the bedclothes and sat naked together on the bed, and I realized we were facing a window. That, through the steam that had condensed on the glass, there were lights outside.

“Stars?” I asked. I wasn’t sure.

He opened the window and gasped as fresh, cold air rushed into the room. That was when I heard singing. A group of people, somewhere in the dark, singing Christmas carols, soft and low.

“I think there’s a fire pit somewhere. I saw it on the map,” he said. “Should we get dressed and join them?”

I shuddered and shook my head. Not only did I not want to get dressed and go out into the cold night, I didn’t want to stand along the edges of someone else’s

happiness. Nothing made me sadder, and the group of people singing surely didn't want Bad Boy Beck to ruin their Christmas joy. Besides, staying in with a naked Alex sound like the better time to me.

"Too tired," I said, half mumbling.

What I wanted was to get into the freshly made bed and shove myself into Alex's arms and fall asleep that way. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and I really didn't care. All I wanted was what I had, right then.

"Let's sleep, then," he said, and as if he'd read my mind, he leaned back, pulling me with him, and there we were together on the fluffy pillow, sharing it, our noses almost touching.

Alex pulled the sheet and blanket over us, and found my toes with his, and kissed me and then laughed as I yawned into his kiss.

"Tired," I said.

That's when Alex cuddled me, like I was quite small and perhaps very young and in need of protection.

I would have gotten more excited about this, my cock getting quite hard, if I wasn't super worn out. From the long drive that day, the excitement of rescuing Alex, and the lovemaking.

And now this. Christmas Cuddles. Better than anything, because it was just him and me, skin to skin, warm from the shower, relaxed and in bed where nothing could get at us.

"That's how to tame you, then," said Alex.

“Tame me?” I mumbled, a little confused.

“Strike that,” said Alex. “You don’t need taming. You just need sweetness.”

He’d discovered my secrets. In spite of his city coat and his city shoes, and the silver spoon he’d obviously been born with, he’d figured out that I could be HAD, body and soul, with a few kisses and kind touches. And, like an alleycat that knows it can trust, I fell asleep so hard, I didn’t remember that I nuzzled into his neck and fell asleep instantly.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

If the night before had been a dream, the morning came like a magic show.

Alex was gone from the bed. He'd opened the window to let in the fresh air and sunshine that now glinted on the white drifts of snow.

I was distracted from this by the fact that he marched into the bedroom fully dressed and smelling oh-so-good. He carried a tray that he placed on the nightstand, shoving the clock and odd glass figurine aside.

"Sit up," he said, helping me arrange all the pillows behind me.

When I was ready, he handed me a mug of coffee, freshly brewed, sweet with sugar, white with half-and-half. Another way to my heart: coffee in bed. I guess I'd not realized it until that moment.

It was even better when Alex took the other mug and sat on the edge of the bed, watching me over the rim of that mug, his eyes dancing and pleased.

Maybe he was happy I was naked and he was not. Or maybe he was glad that the sun had come out, because that surely meant the roads would be cleared in time for us to drive the rest of the way to Steamboat before they iced up again and it got dark.

"There's breakfast in the restaurant," he said. "I called. Used your phone. They said it's like a buffet. It goes on till 9:30."

One thing I didn't like was keeping to someone else's timetable, but it was obvious to me that Alex was an early morning riser kind of guy. And for that smile, and the

smoothness of his face from where he shaved, the waft of amazing cologne, and the way he looked at me, I guessed I could get up and go with him.

“And it stopped snowing,” I said helpfully. Mr. Helpful, that’s me. “Any report on the roads?”

“Again, I used your phone,” he said, but I shrugged and drank some more coffee. I had secrets, but they weren’t on that phone. “CDOT report says we can head out around three or so.”

“Sounds good,” I said, though it really didn’t. I would rather stay with Alex in this little cabin on a mountain hillside than head into Steamboat, with all its Christmas hustle and bustle. Maybe my face said that, because he patted my knee beneath the blanket.

“It’ll be fine, promise,” he said.

He didn’t say anything about the fact that he wouldn’t sleep with me again, but I kind of saw it in his face. I was a rebound guy, worth sleeping with one night at best.

He was soon going to be with his family on Christmas Eve, and meanwhile, I’d be in the hot tub for my one scheduled hour, drinking a G&T while the stars shone brightly in the icy cold sky overhead. Would I even be able to see stars amidst the bright lights of Steamboat?

We lingered a good long while until we’d drunk our coffee and my stomach had decided it needed to be fed. Alex laughed as my stomach growled, and he patted my stomach much the way he’d patted my leg. Good natured and not flirting.

“Get dressed,” he said. “Let’s go eat.”

I got dressed in my black t-shirt, and ripped black jeans, tying up the laces on my Doc Martens with quick fingers. As I pulled on my blue fleece jacket, I could see that Alex was struggling with his crumpled woolen socks and his thin city shoes that had dried into stiff husks. There was nothing for it, so he put those on, and dragged on his thin coat and together we stepped into the icy cold air of morning and made our way back to the main lodge.

There, we found a clump of people standing in the doorway waiting to get in who'd all done the same as we had. Lingered until the last minute. It was quarter to nine, and I worried that we wouldn't get a place and that we wouldn't have enough time to eat a decent meal.

But I worried for no reason. Somehow, a lady, Barb, a manager, by her nameplate, knew Alex and ushered the two of us past the line and to a cozy table near the coffee urns.

"Thanks, Barb," he said in a jovial way.

"Give my regards to your dad," she said. She made sure we had two sets of silverware rolled into napkins and empty white china mugs, ready for coffee. "Help yourself to anything. It's on the house."

"No, it's not on the house, Barb," he said sternly, but she was already walking away, busy with other customers, not lingering to be scolded by Alex.

"Who the fuck are you?" I asked.

"Just someone who knows the hotel business," he said, looking away. Then he stood up, distracted by the buffet, and the good smells coming our way amidst the bustle of that little restaurant. "Let's eat."

We ate. I can be obedient when I want to, it's true. Breakfast was hurried, but I got another cup of coffee out of it, and a sticky bun, which left a great deal of caramel lines on my fleece jacket. But that's what washing machines were for.

After breakfast (Who paid? Wasn't me.), we trundled back to Cabin 7 to pack, and for Alex to call his family. This time he called each one in turn (were they in their own rooms at some hotel?), and I tried to give him his privacy while he sat on the edge of the bed in the bedroom, while I lingered in the living room. I poked at the ashes in the fireplace, wishing it were last night all over again, and did my best not to listen.

Impossible in a cabin as small as Cabin 7.

"Yeah, I'll be there in time for dinner, so save me a spot, will you, Mom?"

A pause.

"Give Baby Ginny a kiss for me and can you take a picture of her and send it to this phone?"

I listened while he cooed over the picture and realized that I now had a picture of a baby on my phone.

"How was the skiing? Did you do any Black Diamonds? Oh, you went night skiing? How was it?"

That had to be the brother.

"Thanks, dad. I'll fill out the rest of the paperwork when I get there." A pause. "I love you too, dad."

Gah. I wasn't jealous or anything, but maybe I was. Jonah and Royce were so wrapped up in each other that as a third wheel, I was often on my own. Hence the reason I did not go on the cruise with them.

I figured once we got up to Steamboat, Alex would go his way and I would go mine, and I could pretend that we'd never met.

That was really the easiest way, forgetting.

Rather than me pining after a dreamboat of a guy who smelled nice and who had the softest skin I'd ever licked.

Rather than having naughty thoughts about climbing him like a tree and having my wicked way with him.

Rather than having any feelings about a guy who was out of my league.

I waited, and he just kept talking, so I wandered outside into the crisp, cold, high altitude air. The sky overhead was a diamond-hard blue without a single cloud anywhere. The sun reflected off the snow drifts and glittered on huge icicles that were already starting to drip. I cupped my hands and blew on them and thought I heard my name.

"Beck!"

Looking up, I saw that Alex was standing in the open doorway of Cabin 7. I couldn't imagine what he wanted, but he was waving me close so, being totally responsive to that casual wave and smiling face, I trotted over. He held out my phone to me and I thought he was just giving it back, so I was going to shove it in my pocket. But he stopped me.

“It’s Mom. She wants to talk to you.”

I was never the boy anybody brought home to meet their mother. Never the boy anyone wanted even talking to their mother. But Alex was insistent, and his smile was pretty wide (such perfect teeth!), so I figured it wasn’t anything bad and took the phone.

It felt warm in my hand from Alex’s grasp.

“Hello?” I asked, not feeling inclined to be any kind of welcoming chatterbox.

“Is this Beck?” a woman’s voice asked. Before I could answer, she went on in a tone that was bright and well-fed and incredibly rich. “This is Jasmine Westmore, Alex’s mom, and I wanted to thank you for saving my son’s life yesterday.”

“I didn’t—” I started, because the last thing I wanted was for some rich dame to feel any obligation to me. I just wanted to get on with my mountain vacation without it getting awkward.

“You did ,” she said. “Alex told me everything about what happened. I told him he should have taken the jet last weekend, but there were meetings and delays, and our pilot said it wasn’t safe when there was a blizzard over the Continental Divide.”

“The roads were plenty safe until Rabbit Ears Pass,” I said, thinking I’d imagined she’d said the words jet and our pilot. “It was just a freak accident, is all.”

“It was, and he would have gone into that lake if not for you.” Her voice was quite firm and had a ring of authority that probably came from having more than one house and more than one set of adoring staff to manage.

I didn’t really want to know anything about Jasmine-I-Am-Rich-Westmore. I just

wanted the conversation to end. Then I'd plow through gathering my things and wiping and scraping snow from the Volvo, and drive Alex to wherever he needed to be dropped off at in Steamboat.

"You're welcome," I said, because new me could at least pretend to know how to be polite.

"We'll want you to join us for dinner tonight," she said, and I felt my whole body twitched. "Unless you have other plans for your first night in Steamboat?"

"I got the soak and stars package, or whatever it's called," I said, hoping that would be enough to put her off. "Got an hour reserved to have a drink in an open air hot tub."

"Oh that," she said, totally dismissive about what sounded to me to be a really good time. "You can do that any time during your stay. Tonight is Christmas Eve, and you shouldn't be alone."

"Um."

I'd already said no, but now she wanted me to say yes. Saying yes would put me in a situation where I could at least look at Alex and his handsome face, but it would be torture, too. So I tried again.

"I think I can only get the soak for the time that I scheduled," I said. Back when I made the reservation, I'd picked Christmas Eve for that soak because I figured everybody else would be with their families and I'd have that rooftop, open-to-the air hot tub all to myself in perfect peace and quiet.

"They'll reschedule it for you," she said, sounding absolutely like she knew all about it. "I'll take care of it personally. That way, you won't miss out."

“Um.”

I clasped my phone in both hands and looked at Alex, totally confused. He was smiling at me like he knew there was no way I could say no to his mother. And I guess he was right. The Westmores probably had an in with the staff at The Anchorage and could change reservations willy nilly as it suited them.

“We’ll eat early,” she said. “Dinner’s at six, but Alex said the roads will be clear around three or so? Plenty of time for you to get here before dark.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, giving up completely.

Alex looked really happy at that moment, so I was glad I had said yes. I’d get a bit more Alex time, for one thing, though I did worry. If the Westmores were at one hotel and I was at another, I’d have to be careful driving on roads that would turn to ice come sunset.

With a shrug, I hung up and put my phone in my back pocket. I’d be ready to go inside of five minutes, and maybe we’d get to Steamboat quick enough so that I could go to my hotel room and simply be alone for a bit before joining the Westmores. Surely there’d be enough time for that.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

I 'm a smart guy, I really am. I might have the manners of someone raised by wolves (and I kind of was), but I'm plenty smart. But sometimes I'm slow on the uptake.

Alex and I headed up Rabbit Ears Pass on roads that had been scraped right down to the pavement, and salt and grit spread all around, ruining everyone's paint jobs. But at least all the ice was gone, and within an hour, we entered the ski town of Steamboat Springs.

The hustle and bustle was going on with lots of traffic, and people in parkas and sturdy boots waiting at every single traffic light. All I wanted to do was get to The Anchorage and plop my ass on a bed. But I had to drop Alex off first, and then join the Westmores for Christmas dinner.

"Which way to your hotel?" I asked.

He gave me the address, and I blinked at him.

"That's The Anchorage," I said. The pictures had shown it to be a pretty fancy place, halfway up the hill overlooking the pretty little downtown. There was even a way to pretty much ski from the entrance to the hotel, though I wasn't into that.

"Yes, it's The Anchorage," he said, doing his best to charm me with his smile and his beautiful blue eyes. It was working, but I was still confused.

"Why didn't you tell me where you were staying when I told you where I was staying?"

He just shrugged.

I guided the Volvo up the hill to where The Anchorage sat, a multi story lodge-looking place. And yeah, I used valet parking because why not?

I tossed the key fob to the valet and dragged out my duffle while Alex grabbed his two leather suitcases. Alex tipped the guy with a ten-dollar bill, making me blink again. He was loaded, sure, but the valet parking was mine to take care of.

With a shrug, I followed him into the main lobby while the valet drove off. There were some people waiting in front of me in line to check in, and then Alex tugged on my arm.

“I got to go buy a phone and call Tokyo,” he said. “Meet us at six-ish at the Antlers. Tell the host you’re dining with the Westmores, okay?”

“Sure,” I said, and watched him dash off.

I’m pretty sure his mother would want to know he’d arrived before any business call took place, but he was the CEO of something-or-other, so mom would have to wait because obviously Tokyo came first. Meanwhile, I stood in line and was soon at the front, my grubby duffle slung over my shoulder, my sticky bun-speckled blue fleece jacket on full display.

“Malachi Beckett,” I said when I got to the fancy-looking reception desk, smiling without any apology for the fact that I did not fit in with the finely dressed rich folk who were standing in line behind me. “I’m here to check in.”

“Welcome, Mr. Beckett,” said the guy. Steve, his nameplate said.

“Call me Beck,” I said.

“Certainly Beck,” he said. Then he consulted with his computer system and handed me two plastic keys in a little cardboard sleeve. I thought that would be it, but he gestured to someone behind me.

“Ralph will take you to your room,” he told me.

“I can find it,” I said, not hiding my indignation. When I was a kid, I used to wander around the downtown hotels, scouring the long corridors, taking anything that wasn’t nailed down. I knew how to find my own way around, you betcha.

“Ralph will take you,” said Steve, all smooth and suave. “Just follow him.”

Usually clerks in hotels give you a paper map that they quickly draw all over in yellow highlighter, like they couldn’t wait to get rid of you. But this hotel, I noticed, had placards all over the place with the layout of the hotel on them. Which was how I knew Ralph was leading me to the elevator that led to the penthouse suites.

“Hey, Ralph,” I said as he stepped into the elevator and pressed a button to hold the doors open. “I got a double queen with a balcony.”

“You have a penthouse suite, sir,” he said, ever polite. “Mr. and Mrs. Westmore insisted that your reservation be changed.”

The Westmores must have some clout to make such a change happen on Christmas Eve, sure. But the reason I stepped into that elevator without any more protest was because I knew Mrs. Jasmine I-Am-Rich Westmore would give me hell for saying no. They sure were getting their way with me.

Part of me wanted to resent it. The other part of me was damn curious to see the room as the nearly silent elevator shot up a bunch of flights before stopping.

When the doors opened, I could see right away that it was posh. It was as quiet as if the fancy carpet was absorbing all the sound. At one end of the corridor, I could see the hotel bent at an angle.

At the other end of the corridor was a huge window with a balcony that overlooked a hillside of snow with giant green pine trees, creating a boundary of sorts. Could I see people skiing on that hillside, or was that my imagination?

“This way, sir,” said Ralph. He looked like he wanted to carry my duffle, but I wouldn’t give it to him. Instead, it hung by my fingers over my shoulder and I marched solemnly behind Ralph to where they were putting me.

My original room had been two queens, with a balcony that overlooked the parking lot. However—yeah, the Westmores had gone all out.

Ralph opened the door with his master key and ushered me into the nicest place I had ever stayed. There was a balcony at the far end, and it not only looked enormous, it overlooked the hillside I’d seen earlier. There was nice furniture, including a dining room table, and a gas fireplace that was already lit. Sunlight poured into the place, splashing gold and blue and sparkles everywhere.

The penthouse suite was huge and elegant, and way out of my league. But what the hell.

“Where’s the bedroom?” I asked before Ralph could give me the grand tour. I just wanted to put my feet up and maybe shower before I had to face the Westmores.

“In here, sir,” said Ralph in an utterly calm voice, as if he escorted bad boys into a penthouse suite every day.

I found the bedroom, flung my grubby duffle bag on the bed that looked soft and

heavenly, and then went out to the main area where Ralph was still waiting. He was holding out his hand, but as I reached for my wallet, I realized he was holding out a little card of expensive paper.

“Just call this number at any time, and you’ll be able to schedule your hot tub session whenever you like.”

“Thank you,” I said because new me had manners and shit. I pulled out a tenner and handed it to him, and he was utterly unfazed by the amount, as if he received ten dollar tips every day.

“Just call the front desk if you need anything, sir,” he said. “And Mrs. Westmore said to remind you that dinner is at six in The Antlers, which you’ll find on the first floor.”

“Thanks,” I said, remembering my manners. There was no way I was going to admit to anyone that I was overwhelmed, but I was. The room was too elegant, and I stood in the middle of the main area like a lonely, badly dressed waif who had taken a wrong turn.

But that only lasted a minute because I was Bad Boy Beck, and nothing phased me, not even classy opulence. I tore off my clothes and hopped into the biggest rain shower ever, turned the water on hot, and scrubbed myself all over with fancy, silky feeling soap from the dispenser on the tiled wall.

You could have fit a football team in that shower, and while that would have been a lot of fun, it would have been even nicer to share it with Alex. He, however, was off somewhere, and the Westmores awaited me.

I showed, and even put on deodorant, which made me smell even more shower fresh than I already did. Then I shaved, brushed my teeth, and put on the cleanest black clothes I could find. I even ran a washcloth over my Doc Martens to get the last of the

snow crud off.

The washcloth was a goner, so I threw it away, right before I saw there was a wicker basket with black micro cloths for freaking shoes and boots. Oh well. I knew they'd make more.

With my trusty keycard in hand, I headed down the penthouse elevator to the first floor, and fumbled my way to The Antlers, there to announce my presence.

The place was packed. It was decorated for Christmas, of course, with tinsel hanging from the ceiling, and a Christmas tree (fully decorated) in each corner. Everyone was dressed in their best, and the wine was flowing freely, laughter and jocularity rising to the rafters. The room smelled like pine trees and happiness.

"Uh," I said. "I'm with the Westmores?"

No, my voice did not rise because I was anxious or overwhelmed. I just wanted to make sure the haughty-looking host could hear me over the fun everybody was having.

"Are you sure, sir?" he asked. His nameplate said Albert.

He was about to ask again when someone (maybe a waitress?) came up behind him and whispered in his ear. Albert looked at me as though I was a forgotten survivor from the Titanic, his eyebrows shooting up into his hairline.

"Excuse me, sir," he said now, his tone much more friendly. "Would you follow me?"

I followed him. We went around the edge of the room, to the far end, where he opened a wooden door, and stood to one side.

Before I could take in the elegant little room with its wood-paneled walls and the huge glass-backed shelves of wine and high-end alcohol, I got rushed. And by that I mean, people came up to me and hugged me and shouted my name and said thank you for saving Alex, dear Alex. No lie.

Back home, I would have balled my fists and fought my way out of such a crowd. But I saw Alex standing back with a smile and realized who they were. Mom, Dad, and Sis and, of course, little Baby Ginny, held in Sis's arms. And another guy. I don't know who he was, but he was standing at Sis's side like he belonged there.

"Pete, can you take the baby," said the young woman who was Sis.

Pete took the baby, cuddling her close. I realized that he kind of looked like the baby. Or the baby looked like him. I never did pay attention in biology, but I guessed he was Baby Ginny's dad.

Then Sis hugged me so hard, all the breath left my body. Then she kissed me on the cheek. Then the Mom did, too. Jasmine. Her name was Jasmine, and she looked like a runway model with her hair in a glossy dark bun. Fierce. Smart. Sharp.

"You did good," said Dad. He had a little round belly and a genial smile. "I'm Nathaniel. Call me Nate."

"Call me Beck," I said, faint, feeling out of sorts, like I was up against the hardest gang on the meanest street in Denver. (No, not Colfax.)

"I'm Lottie," said the beautiful young woman who'd handed the baby over.

Then a young man came in. Maybe he was nineteen, the spitting image of Alex, only more slender. He was dressed like he'd just stepped out of a Yale portrait, pressed slacks, a sweater vest. His name was Timothy-Call-Me-Tim. Everybody, it seemed,

had a shortened version of their name, except for Jasmine.

Finally, finally , Alex came over and slapped me on the back, but gently, his smile warm and familiar. Receiving it made me wish we were alone together in that old cabin on a mountain hillside, unable to go anywhere because we were knee deep in snow with nothing to do but make love on that fabulous bed all the live long day.

“Let’s sit down, everybody,” said Nate. “We don’t want to keep the staff waiting.”

Staff meant a bunch of waitresses, a wine sommelier, someone to carve the roast beast, and other staff to clear away after each course. I counted five, and each one was huge, everything fancy, not much I recognized.

All during this meal, the chatter was friendly and light. Nobody got drunk and tried to punch anyone. When someone said pass the mashed potatoes, they of course said please, and nobody, but nobody, threw any food. All of this was followed up by the most amazing slice of apple pie (with cheddar cheese on top of each slice, of all things), and then sweet wine and cheese.

I was shocked by several things.

One, that everybody was nice to me, and nobody laughed when I got gravy on my chin. The waitress replaced my napkin at least two times, and still nobody made any mean remarks. I might have been raised by wolves (which I was, really), but I got treated like a little prince, which was quite a nice feeling. Weird, but nice.

Second, was that when I told them about what I did, which was work on cars for a rich guy on a ranch, they acted all interested, rather than bored.

Third, was that I learned what they did for a living.

It went a little like this:

“Hey, Alex, did you get the contracts signed in Tokyo?” asked Nate.

“Dear, I thought we agreed not to talk about business,” said Jasmine with a disapproving frown.

“Yes, dear,” said Nate as he chewed politely on his mouthful of food. “I just need to know, so I am ready for the board meeting in a few days.”

“He can give you the write up about it later ,” said Jasmine.

“Sure did, Dad,” said Alex. “The sign on the hotel will say what they all do, but they want the web brochure and any marketing materials to also say it in Japanese.”

“How doe that go?” asked Tim.

“It sounds like Za ankarejji, ” said Alex. “Looks like I’m going to have to learn Japanese.” But he smiled as he said this, like it wasn’t a hardship and actually was something he looked forward to doing.

“What does it stand for?” I asked. When I was in school, I could have cared less. (Or I couldn’t have cared less, I can never be sure.) But after having known Royce, who might or might not have been a good influence on me, I had started to become more curious.

“It stands for The Anchorage,” said Nate. He waved his fork in a general way. “It’s the name of our hotel. All over the world, our hotels are called The Anchorage, but the Japanese are very culturally minded and want to share their beautiful language.”

“So that’s okay, then,” said Alex.

“I know you already told them yes,” said Nate, but he was smiling, so again, there would be no argument about anything.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not sorry to be breaking into this weird exchange that was making my head spin. “Are you saying you own this hotel?” That would certainly explain the sudden move to the penthouse suite and schedule my whenever-the-fuck-you-want hot tub reservation.

“And more than a dozen like it,” said Jasmine, gesturing to the wine sommelier for another pour into her glass.

“All over the world,” said Tim. His beaming smile showed perfect teeth, and an energy that told me straight off that he was going into the family business and that he was happy about it.

“Do you want more apple pie, Beck?” asked Lottie. She was rocking Baby Ginny in her arms, her chair pushed back a little way from the table. She literally had her hands full, and yet she was making sure I’d had enough pie.

“Maybe you’d like some coffee instead of that wine,” said Jasmine.

Her sharp eyes had not missed that I’d barely drunk any wine. I prefer a nice beer, a whisky, and of course a G&T. But she was already gesturing to the nearest hovering waiter, with a little scowl as if my having to do without a preferred beverage—even for a single second—was going to get the poor guy fired.

“Coffee’d be great,” I said, grateful that her sharp eyes shifted away from me. I had a feeling that she’d be a hoot if she ever got drunk, and would have great stories to tell. Sober, she scared the shit out of me.

I was halfway through my coffee and pie, and did my best to keep from looking at

Alex, who was on the other side of the table and felt miles away. Soon this little dinner would be over, and the Westmore's obligation to me would be a thing of the past.

That was how things went for me. Flashes of cool shit followed by the equivalent of grubby back alley blow jobs and the like. The one thing I could take pleasure in was the fact that Alex looked happy.

He was alive because I had saved him from a frozen death. I guess I was smiling (I'm a scowly kind of guy), because Alex caught my eye, smiling in return, and for a second everyone was looking at me.

So many smiles. So much love. They all looked like they were going to say something nice in unison like God bless us, everyone or Merry Christmas, I love you , and all at once it got overwhelming.

Baby Ginny saved me by becoming restless, making petulant noises in her mother's arms.

"I'll take her," said Pete, standing up, reaching out for the baby.

"You look done in, dear," said Jasmine.

"That's me, too," said Tim. "I have to go wrap the last of my presents to everyone."

"You'll be here for Christmas breakfast, won't you, Beck?" asked Jasmine. "That's when we open gifts."

I grew very still, like a teeny tiny little bunny that a wolf has just found.

"Um."

“It’s a madhouse,” said Nate. “We always try to keep a limit to the presents—” He paused to scowl at everyone, but they just smiled and laughed as if you say, You have no power over us . “But the food is very good.”

“Yes, the food was good,” I said, my mind racing. I couldn’t come to a breakfast such as that. I didn’t have any presents to give and surely they’d want to be alone as a family on Christmas morning.

“We eat breakfast at eight, Beck,” said Jasmine, and as she stood up, I realized that was the signal that the official Christmas Eve dinner was over. “Here in this room.”

Everybody stood up, and the waitstaff was on hand to clear everything away without any of the Westmores lifting a finger. Of course, rich people. They were born with money and never had to work very hard.

In the back of my mind I guess I was trying to sever the connection to these people because it would hurt less that way. They were nice, awful nice, but they were rich, which surely meant they were horrible and selfish and very self-absorbed.

Then I saw that before Nate and Jasmine walked out, she spoke to the sommelier. She was whispering, but I was close enough to hear her say, “Make sure. It’s twenty-five percent for each of them on top of the overtime. I don’t care if all they did was deliver the pats of butter. Understand?”

The sommelier just about bowed as he said, “Yes, ma’am.” No, he actually did bow.

Overtime and twenty-five percent? Holy fuck. Made me wish I worked for them. Except I didn’t have any skills they needed. Or the references. Or anything.

“I have to take this call,” said Alex’s voice from behind me.

“On Christmas Eve?” everybody asked in unison.

“It’s the last one. The last call,” said Alex.

I turned to look at him. He was already on his phone, hurrying out of the room, totally focused on business.

Not my circus, not my monkeys. In the general hubbub, I slipped out of the room and hurried out of the restaurant and across the lobby to the elevator to the penthouse.

It was only when the doors closed I could see nobody was following me. Good. Fine. It was better this way. I’d spend Christmas Eve with my lonely self, skulk about the hotel for a few days, and then drive home.

And that would be that. Christmas for Bad Boy Beck was already miserable, so why should this one be any different?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

By the time I got back to my fancy penthouse suite, I was wiped out. I wasn't shy or retiring, but I didn't much care for crowds, and I'd felt so fucking out of place at the Westmore's Christmas Eve dinner, every part of me felt like it'd been wrung through the wringer.

The first thing I saw when I got back into the room was that there was a fancy basket, wrapped in gold-shaded cellophane. It had fruit and nuts and probably chocolate, too, and were those Christmas cookies? I was still full from dinner, but I ripped the basket open and shoved that cookie in my mouth. The sugar was so fine, the whole thing started to melt in my mouth.

Then I saw the expensive piece of paper with a phone number on it so I could schedule my hot tub session. Could I get them to send up a couple of drinks as well?

A few hours ago, I wouldn't even have thought of it, but now, now I knew. The Westmores owned the hotel (and dozens like it, all over the world), so I, being their guest, could do whatever I liked. Have whatever I wanted. When I wanted it.

Old me would have run screaming through the halls buck naked, on account of I basically had a get-out-of-jail-free card on file. New me, well, I thought about doing that very thing, and while I smiled at the ruckus it would cause, I thought about Alex and his beautiful smile and the kindness in his eyes. The kindness in all of their eyes, sparkling with the joy of Christmas.

Yeah, I could say Bah Humbug with the best of them, but I pulled out my phone and dialed that number, fast.

“This is Jane at reception. Can I help you?” asked a polite female voice.

“Hey, Jane,” I said with my best, sexiest drawl. I find that women with names like Jane and Betty give the best head, so I knew it paid to be extra polite and stuff. Just in case there was an offer happening. (Sometimes, yes, I’ve slept with women. I like to keep things spicy and different!)

“What can I do for you, sir?”

“I’m in one of the penthouse suites on the eleventh floor,” I began, having no idea what my room number was. “I’ve been told I can schedule my hour in the hot tub, and can I have drinks sent up?”

In the back of my mind, I really felt like I’d left it too late, and that the Westmores didn’t have that much control over as much as they acted like they did and that Jane was going to turn me down flat. No hot tub beneath the stars for me.

“Is this room 1115?” she asked. “Am I speaking to Malachi Beckett?”

“Call me Beck,” I said.

“Beck,” she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “We can schedule you for two hours, actually, starting at nine o’clock. Will that work?”

“I only paid for one hour?” I said, my voice rising, because once again I was wrong and I already knew the truth. The Westmores (Jasmine, probably) had phoned ahead to give the staff the message: Take care of Beck.

“Your Soak and Stars package has been upgraded. You’re now getting as many hours in the rooftop hot tub as you like, and I’m ready to schedule the Massage and Sauna package for whenever you might be available this week. Plus there’s—”

No. Just no. I do not do massages where I strip to the skin so a stranger can touch me. Where I grew up, that kind of behavior, well, you might as well stick your head beneath an executioner's blade so you can get your head chopped off.

Sure, I let people touch me, but I had to know them. Alex had been the exception to that. For some reason, he'd felt different. The energy he'd given off had been different, and so I'd willingly let him get his hands all over me, pretty much from the start.

She rambled on for a bit, something about getting ski and snowshoe equipment for free, a nighttime sleigh ride through the woods, complete with dinner in a heated tent. Meals in my room. Nightly turndowns.

I leaned back a bit to see that yes, someone had come into my room while I'd been with the Westmores and turned down the freaking bed. An invasion of privacy that old me would have been pissed off about. As for new me, yeah, I was a bit irritated, but since it was a thing the Westmores did in their fancy hotel, I was just going to have to put up with it.

"Let's just do the hot tub for two hours," I said. A little overwhelmed? Yeah, that was an understatement.

"Certainly, sir. I've got you booked. You take the penthouse elevator to the rooftop. The key code to get in is your room number, followed by your last name. There's a heated changing room, complete with a robe, slippers, and towels."

"Can I—" I stopped and revised the question in my head. "Can you send up two double G&Ts, please?"

"Two doubles?" she asked, doubt clear in her voice.

“Well, I don’t want nobody coming up more than once,” I said.

“We’ll come up as often as you like, sir,” she said. “We want your gin and tonics to be fresh.”

“Okay,” I said. If that’s how they wanted it. “I’ll have a gin and tonic every half hour.”

“So four altogether,” she said, to clarify. “Will that be top shelf gin?”

“Best you got,” I said, nodding to myself.

I was going to go whole hog and get shitfaced drunk, then plop myself in bed and sleep it off. Maybe I’d make it to the Westmore’s Christmas breakfast, or maybe I wouldn’t. I certainly didn’t need all the complicated feelings that being around them brought me. It would be easier to forget about Alex and move on, if only his family would leave me alone.

“Would you like anything to snack on with that?” she asked.

I made a little sound in my throat. Sure, I was full, but after I started drinking, I’d want something salty and crunchy.

“Send up whatever,” I said. “One of them meat boards with crackers and cheese.”

“Certainly, sir,” she said, attentive and cheerful. “If you need anything additional during your soak, you can always use your phone or the intercom to call to reception, and we’ll get you taken care of.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re more than welcome,” she said. “We want your stay with us to be amazing.”

I was uncomfortable with all the kindness, but I was going to make the most of the hot tub or die trying. I grabbed my jacket, and picked up my keycard, made sure the hotel door was securely locked and closed, and marched to the penthouse elevator.

The ride up to the top of the hotel was quick and silent. I was early. It wasn’t yet nine o’clock, but I was all alone up there, at least as far as I could tell, because it was perfectly silent.

Ahead of me was a tall wooden fence with one of those keypads. The top of the fence had a string of tiny Christmas lights in all colors: red, green, blue, and white.

I entered my hotel room and my last name and pulled the gate open on silent hinges. Inside the enclosure there were around four or five hot tubs, each with a small wooden wall around them, to make them private. Keep out the wind.

Steam rose up from each hot tub. They were what I’d call in-ground, that is, the hot tub was level with the wooden deck. Probably so drunk people wouldn’t have to go up and down any ladders.

Along the far edge was a series of sheds that I guessed were changing rooms. Only I didn’t have a bathing suit. I hadn’t even packed one. Maybe I didn’t even own one.

I looked inside the shed nearest to the end, and while I found the promised robes and slippers and towels, there were no bathing suits for me to borrow. Fine with me. I could soak in the buff.

Dragging what I needed to the hot tub I wanted, I shed my clothes, feeling the crisp air against my skin right before I slid into the hot tub.

It was hot, hot, hot! But I stayed where I was and tipped my head back to rest it against the curved edge of the tub. This feeling, of floating with the steam rising all around me, was what I'd looked forward to from the moment I made the booking. Peace, quiet, and hot water up to my neck.

From somewhere I could hear gentle Christmas music on speakers. Maybe even people singing Christmas carols.

Looking up, I could see the faint glow of the streetlights from the small town of Steamboat glinting along the top of the wooden fence. But above, directly above, the sky was black and blue velvet, dotted faintly with stars.

City lights were hell on starlight, but I only learned that when I'd gone out to Farthingdale Valley to visit my good buddy, Jonah. Then, when I'd moved with Jonah and Royce up to Thackery Ranch, which was just beyond Billings, Montana, I'd seen a whole other level of starlight. Steamboat, for all it was so cute, was too bright for lights in the sky.

Reaching out of the hot tub for my phone, I wiped my hands on my pile of clothes and called down to the front desk.

"Could I speak to Jane, please?" I asked.

"Jane's gone off duty," a pleasant male voice said. "This is Mike. Is there something I can help with, sir?"

"This is Beck from room 1115. Penthouse. Jane said I could put in an order for a top shelf G&T to be brought up every half hour, starting at nine. So, four G&Ts, please, cause I got a two-hour window here and I want to make the most of it."

"Certainly, sir," said the voice. "And would you like your charcuterie board now or

later? Perhaps at ten o'clock?"

"That'll work," I said. I pulled the phone away from my ear to look at the time. It was 8:55, and they didn't even care that I was in the hot tub early. Best to make sure. "I'm in one of the hot tubs on the roof," I said. "I'm not in my room."

"Certainly, sir," said Mike.

"I wanted to make sure you knew," I said because I was still confounded how everything was so easy and nobody was saying no to me. "That I'm not in my room."

"Of course, sir," said Mike. "When you entered the hot tub area, the system let us know you were up there. Your time starts when you enter, but there's no rush, as you are the only one booked for the rest of the evening."

"Is there a note from Mrs. Westmore?" I asked, getting an eery premonition.

"Why, yes, sir, there is," Mike said. "And from Alexander Westmore. We've been instructed to get you anything you like."

"I like—" I paused. For some reason my throat had tightened as if it had been filled with something I couldn't identify. Gratitude to the Westmores for being so kind? Or maybe, like before, it was with a sense of overwhelm, because I was Bad Boy Beck and didn't deserve any of this goodness. "I rather like it when stuff is dipped in honey. Dates in honey. Or almonds. I don't know, but I've seen it on YouTube."

"There are all kinds of things dipped in honey like that," said Mike. "Let me see what the kitchen can come up with."

"And don't forget those G&Ts," I said, trying to make it a joke cause there's nothing I'm more uncomfortable with than ordering people around. "No later than nine-oh-

one, you feel me?”

“I feel you, sir,” said Mike and thank fuck there was laughter in his voice. “The first glass will be right up.”

I threw my phone on my pile of clothes where I could get at it if I needed it.

Inside of another minute, the tall gate around the collection of hot tubs opened, and a nice young man in black, black pants, black vest, with a white shirt underneath, came over to the little wall and opened the small gate. He carried a round tray, which he balanced on his palm, and on that tray was a single, frosty sided gin and tonic.

He held the tray out to me so I could take the glass.

“What kind of gin?” I asked, just to be sociable. Not that I cared. All gin was good gin, as far as I was concerned.

“I believe it’s Monkey 47 Distiller’s Cut, sir,” said the young man. “It’s from Germany.”

I held the glass to my mouth and took a sip. It tasted amazing and bright, and I could almost imagine myself a connoisseur because I was able to understand the mile-wide difference in quality between it and my regular brand, which was Beefeater.

“I’ll be back in half an hour,” said the young man, and then he was gone, leaving me with the warm steam, the hot water, and the ice cold G&T.

“Sounds good,” I said, but he was already gone and my words floated across the top of the hot, silky water until they sank beneath the surface and disappeared.

I’ll admit that I drank that drink a little faster than I should have. Like a shot, I

swallowed half of it in one go, the effects sliding down my spine like a torque wrench had undone all the tenseness in my body.

Which, in turn, let loose all the feelings that I'd been packing down and not known it. Except I couldn't define them. I'd never bothered before because my life had always come in fast and hot, and I didn't know how now.

The G&T in my stomach certainly wasn't helping, and all I could think about was Alex.

He didn't owe me anything for saving him. He and his family had been more than kind. Polite, suave, rich, and just oozing affection.

And now I knew why Alex had been so upset to be missing Christmas with his family. Sure he'd been unsettled on account of almost dying. But he'd sat on the edge of that bed and just about sobbed at the thought of not being able to hold Baby Ginny.

Until Jonah had hooked up with Royce, that kind of emotion from a man would have been like meeting an alien. And I'll admit I'd been all ready to mock Alex about those tears. Only?—

I hadn't. Not because he was simply too handsome to laugh at. Maybe it was because those tears, that vulnerability, unnerved me. I was adaptable, I guess, but not that fast. What in the world would I do with such a sweet man, anyway?

I drank the rest of my G&T. I sighed after the last swallow as the ice clinked against my teeth and caught the bitter taste of lime.

This might be as good as my vacation was going to get, and that was okay by me. It could have been worse. I might have been too late to save Alex, and would now be in my room with a queen bed and a balcony that overlooked a parking lot.

This made me happen, in spite of my sadness about the fact that after I went back to Montana, I would never see Alex again.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

Two seconds after I'd finished off my G&T, my cellphone rang. I had to leap out of the water into the icy air, on account of I'd thrown that phone pretty far away. My hands weren't even dry, but I grabbed it, thinking it was Alex to wish me a Merry Christmas and all that.

But it was Jonah.

"Hey, buddy," he said. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," I said right back, blinking as I attempted to convert the time zones. He was in the Bahamas or some shit. Maybe the Caribbean. That was two hours ahead of me, so it might be after eleven pm where they were.

"What are you doing up so late, bro?" I asked. I settled back into the hot tub, sitting on the second step so half of me was out of the water. It'd be a dream to sink back under once the call was over, so I shivered in silence, and watched water drip from my hair into the water.

"I wanted you to be the first to get the news!"

He sounded so excited, but my heart kind of sank. I already knew the news. I'd seen the velvet box Royce had been toting, so I already knew that my life was about to change irrevocably and forever.

"What news?" I asked, pretending I didn't know because, in spite of being a bad boy, I loved Jonah with all my heart.

“Royce proposed,” said Jonah, his voice bright with love and joy. “At sunset on the beach, can you believe it? He asked me to marry him.”

Sunset on the beach was about five-thirty or six, so it’d been hours ago. Between the proposal and acceptance and this phone call, they’d had hours to celebrate with each other and had probably done so in bed. They chose to wait to share it with me until the last minute, and that thought forced a bubble of jealousy to boil from my gut to straight up my throat.

I shouldn’t feel that way. I’d had long enough to get over it, that Jonah’s life was entwined with Royce’s. Long enough to force-march my jealousy and irritation about the whole thing into true joy and pleasure at Jonah’s happiness. He was my best friend, and I knew I should be happy for him.

And I was happy for him, him and Royce both. But I was mad, the way I always had been when Jonah’s attention would turn away from me.

Big boys don’t cry and Bad Boy Beck needed to grow a pair and get over it. I knew all of this, but it was hard. Look up lonely waif in the dictionary and that’s me. That’s my picture.

“Oh, that’s great,” I said after a long, hard swallow. “Congratulations. When’s the wedding?” I asked, with pictures of me serving as Jonah’s best man. I would look great in that tux, and I knew it. Or at least I would have. No chance of that now.

“Tomorrow,” said Jonah. Bubbles of his happiness came through the phone at me. He was probably a little drunk, and probably Royce had loved on him for hours and hours, and once again, I would be left in the cold.

“Tomorrow?” I asked, hoping that my concern about missing the wedding, let alone being his best man, was clear in that single word.

In the old days, before Jonah went to jail, before Jonah had hooked up with Royce, a single word would have spoken volumes.

“So soon,” I added just in case, like with everything else, things were no longer that tight between me and my oldest friend.

“Wouldn’t you know,” said Jonah. “There’s like laws and stuff and you have to have special paperwork. Well, Royce did all that in advance, so we can get married in the morning.”

Of course. Royce came from money, and he could probably pay all the fees to get the license and the pastor and whatever else the hell he needed to tie the knot with Jonah. And I was left out in the cold. Again.

“That sounds great,” I said, pulling myself up by invisible bootstraps. “I hope you get pictures and you can send ‘em to me.” I didn’t want any pictures, of course, but it was the right thing to say.

“We’ve got a photographer,” Jonah said, practically babbling. “And Royce got us matching white suits, too. Then we’re going to have a beach-side wedding supper. It’s going to be amazing.”

“Sounds amazing,” I said. I tried to put some amazing in my voice, but I failed.

“Listen, I have to go. So much to plan, and Royce is telling me to get off the phone.”

“Bye,” I said and hung up first because I had zero control at that point, and couldn’t stand to be nice one more minute. It was like old me rose to the surface, because I pressed the end call button so fast I just about chipped a nail.

I knew I had to be brave and good to myself and allow Jonah to lead his best life.

This much was true. But first, more drinks.

I dialed the front desk and spoke to someone and asked for all my G&Ts to be poured into a pitcher and brought up right away along with the meat board.

“All of them, sir?” the voice asked.

The voice wasn’t going to say no to me, that was for sure. I had a note from Mrs. Alex’s Mom, who was half of the power couple that owned this fucking hotel and a dozen others like it. The voice just wanted clarification, so I gave it.

“Yes, please,” I said. “Just pour three G&Ts worth into a pitcher. Bring another pitcher of ice, the fancy kind of ice, if you please. I already have a glass.”

“Certainly, sir,” said the voice. “We’ll have that up for you right away.”

Right away turned out to be five full minutes (it was getting later on Christmas Eve and so everybody was sleeping on the job). Two members of staff appeared, one with the meat board, the other with two pitchers, one of ice and one of my favorite beverage. These they placed at the pool’s edge, and while I did see them giving me the hairy eyeball (two pairs), they soon left me on my own.

Getting out of the hot tub, I sat on the edge and tossed a handful of ice in my glass, then poured it to the top with G&T.

I drank half of that glass, filled it again, and sank back into the hot tub, sighing at the warmth while I held that glass aloft.

It was good to be super warm after sitting out in the cold December air getting your heart broken for the zillionth time. I took another slug of my drink and licked my lips to get the last traces of pine-scented gin and tangy lime.

Grabbing my black t-shirt, I folded it behind my head and sank back down. The t-shirt would get soaked, but who cared about that? The fancy elevator was only steps away, and from there, my fancy room was within a hand's reach.

I might get chilled through when I pulled myself out of that hot tub, but it wouldn't last long and would be the perfect distraction from my woes.

I didn't have to list those woes, there was only one woe. I was all alone in the world. Nobody to answer back. Nobody to call my name, or whisper sweet things in my ear after a good-morning cuddle in bed.

Filling my glass once again (no ice, this time), I drank the whole glass, and that's when my head began to swim. I let it swim as I rested my head on my wet t-shirt and squinted up to the black sky, looking for stars. That was when my hand went slack and the empty glass and the little bubbles of ice slid into the warm water.

Glass in a hot tub was bad, even I knew that, so I shoved through my wobbly head, took a deep breath, and submerged my whole body. Even old me wouldn't have left a glass behind where someone might step on it and cut themselves. Luckily, the glass was in one piece when I found it, so I broke the surface of the water, holding it aloft.

Every part of me was cold now, my wet hair freezing into icicles, my shoulders and torso growing an armor of ice. Standing there, half of me hot, half of me cold, I fumbled for the pitcher, more careful this time as I filled my glass once again.

Even more carefully, I placed the pitcher back on its tray and looked sadly at the meat board. It was kind of getting swampy from the mist of the hot tub. And maybe I could see two meat boards, which meant twice as many goodies for me, if I could only focus long enough to reach far enough to grab something.

I'd just found a trio of honied dates and was just about to shove them in my mouth

when a voice said, “Are you naked in there?”

Sticky honey was oozing along my fingers as I looked up to see Alex standing there. He was fully dressed in a lush green sweater (cashmere, probably) and gray slacks with a crease so sharp it could have cut through diamonds.

He must have been on an online meeting with those folks in Japan, he looked so nice. I could even smell a trace of his cologne above the steam of the hot tub.

He looked a little tired, but he was smiling, and I stifled the urge to look around to make sure he wasn’t smiling at someone else.

“Japan all set up?” I asked, though I knew the answer. Of course it was, or he’d still be on his cell phone or the computer, typing and chatting like mad to make the bazillionty dollar deal wouldn’t fall through.

“Yes, thankfully,” he said, eying me closely.

“I have a note from your mom.” I was pretty sure I didn’t garble the words, but I went ahead and clarified. “The hotel has a note from your mom,” I said, sucking the honey from my fingers. “And from you too, I think.”

“Yes,” said Alex. His smile widened, and he approached the hot tub. “Aren’t you freezing?”

I looked down at myself. I was standing in the middle of the hot tub, in the deepest part. Half of me was in the lovely hot water. The other half, from just about my hips up, was not. But I didn’t feel a thing. Too drunk, for one thing. Having him there was the best distraction, for another.

“No,” I said, shoving one of the dates in my mouth.

Honey dripped down my wrist, melting in the heat of the steam from the hot tub. Once again, I was a mess.

Manners never meant much to me, and I never thought they would until Royce set out to be the best example for both me and Jonah. But all that did was make me realize I was being a slob while eating.

Nothing I could do about that. Alex had already seen. Besides, I was Bad Boy Beck and didn't give a shit what other people thought about me.

"You getting in?" I asked, because that was all I wanted. Him, naked, in the hot tub with me. Or not naked. I didn't much care.

"Sure," he said, and he went to the little shed and I could see him taking off his clothes, and then putting on a soft robe and slippers. For a walk of five feet only, but it really was cold.

He scuffed closer, then, at the side of the hot tub, he let the robe fall into a tidy puddle and stepped out of the soft, flat slippers. He walked into the hot tub, taking his time on those two steps as if he knew how much I loved looking at him. At his powerful shoulders and sleek sides. Those abs. His silky skin. Fully dressed, he was Prince Charming. Naked, he was A. Maze. Ing.

And that smile, so powerful, so full of pleasure at a job well done. And maybe he was even a little happy to see me. Maybe.

"You're lovely," I said.

"And I think you're drunk," he said, stepping through the steamy water till he was close and could touch my arm. I shuddered with pleasure. If that touch was all I got, then I'd be a happy boy.

I wanted more than that, but I didn't know how to get it, not when I could barely feel my feet and my head wobbled on my neck. My focus was getting blurry, too.

"What's the matter, Beck?" he asked.

I had no idea what he was talking about and could barely feel him taking the two dates from my grasp and putting them back on the meat board.

"Has something happened?" He came even closer until our chests were together, and his hand was on my face, his thumbs gently running beneath my unfocused eyes. And, damn, did he smell great.

Instead of answering (my mouth had gone completely numb), I could only blink at him. His lovely and lush dick trailed against my thigh, making me shiver with pleasure and need and a whole host of ideas that swirled about with no place to go.

"I am Bad Boy Beck," I announced with some dignity. "And you can fuck me if you want."

He went still, but at least he didn't move away. Instead, he moved closer, his hands cupping my face.

His chest brushed mine, bringing warmth that made me shiver. Our hips touched. His dick came closer, that lovely, lovely golden boy dick. Mine tried to twitch in response, but I guess all that G&T had really done a number on my little brain because, really, it just hung there.

"I would," he said, giving my cold nose a very small kiss. "But not like this. Not with you so drunk."

"But nobody would have to know!" I think I shouted. "The water will wash it away

and you can keep it a secret.”

“Why would I do that?” he asked, and he had stopped smiling. The look in his beautiful dark blue eyes was serious. There was frost forming in his hair from the mist of the hot tub, which made him look like he was wearing a silver halo. And still he didn’t let go of my face. “Why would I ever want to treat you like that?”

I shrugged. When you’re me and you grew up the way I did, that’s the way the fucking world treated you.

Opening my mouth, I took a breath because at the very least I was going to try to answer his question. But instead that made me dizzy, unsteady on my feet, so I wobbled in that lovely hot water and wondered if he would catch me if I started to drown.

And he kind of did. Except I wasn’t drowning in water, I was drowning in a flood of bitterness and just plain loneliness. His arm went around me, warm, his silky skin brushing my bare, cold shoulders. I would always want more, but this would have to be enough.

He kissed my ear and nuzzled my cheek. His mouth was warm, but his nose was as cold as mine.

Then he whispered, “Someone used you and threw you away and now you think everybody will.” He kissed me again on my cheek. “But that’s not me.”

“Isn’t it?” I asked, except it came out izzintit ?

“No,” he said. “Let’s get you out of here and into bed.”

“But my meat board!” Budmahmeadbod ?

“I’ll get you something better,” he said, and then began to haul my ass out of that hot tub. Next came a warm rub down all over my whole body, a warm robe for my shoulders, and slippers for my feet.

“Clothes? Phone?” I asked. Clozzzefun ? I surely didn’t want to leave my soaking wet black t-shirt behind.

“I’ll get someone on staff to bring everything down,” he said.

I resisted like a maiden in distress, looking up at him to make sure I got Dudley Do-Right rather than Snidely Whiplash.

He hugged me close and smiled a small, sweet smile at me. The best Christmas present ever.

“And we’ll get you something better than a meat board.”

“Thanks, Dudley,” I said, but he just shook his head and ushered me out of the hot tub area and into the penthouse elevator. I had no idea where we were going, but I was a little drunk, so at that point I didn’t much care. Just as long as he didn’t let go of me.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

I was plenty warm as Alex took me to the eleventh floor, and started walking me down the carpeted hallway. I thought that he was taking me to my room, room 1115, but he just kept going on past that to a room at the far end. It was pretty quiet there, and my brain had a field day. He'd been on the same floor as me and I'd not known! What plans I could have made for meeting him at midnight, naked at his door.

But perhaps this was better because I was at his door, and I wasn't naked. Alex's arm was around me as he unlocked his door with one hand and ushered me inside.

His room was the same as mine, an overly big suite with a separate bedroom, a fancy bathroom, a fireplace and a balcony. Outside that balcony, it was pure dark, and I had a feeling that his view was a wintery hillside, complete with pine trees and magical Christmas animals decorating for the holidays.

"Come over here," he said.

Still with his arm around me, he grabbed his cell phone and made a call. He said something about a tray and which room he was in, but that was all I understood. The rest of his words buzzed in my ears.

"Let's get you warmed up," he said.

This simple sentence resulted with me being gently led to the bathroom, stripped of my fancy robe and slippers, and the shower being turned on. When the water was steaming, which happened pretty much instantly because yeah, this was a fancy hotel with very good plumbing, I realized that Alex had stripped too, and was escorting me into the huge, marble-lined shower.

We were naked in a beautifully hot shower. The hot water glistened on his shoulders and streamed down his torso, making a path that my mouth wanted to follow.

Wow, and I thought his smile had been my only Christmas present. Stupid me. This was another present. Not that I deserved it but Jesus Fucking Christ, his hands felt good as he lathered me up. All over.

The soap was silky and his hands were warm and strong, and my dick almost decided to wake up and take notice, but no. Well, everything else was working (my heart for one, beating fast), and when he gently kissed me, his mouth tasted of soap and hot water, and he was utterly delicious.

“Easy now,” he said. “We’ll get that chlorine off you and get you dry and then we can watch Christmas movies in bed. How does that sound?”

At least that’s what I thought he said. Did he mean we wouldn’t be fucking?

“No,” he said, quite gently, with another kiss to my nose as he washed the icicles out of my hair. “Not until you’re sober.

Oh, he’d heard me. He’d been listening .

Jonah used to listen to me. In fact, Jonah used to drop whatever he was doing and listen to me. I used to be the center of his world and now I was floating out in space and all I wanted was to have sex with Alex and then I could go back to my rotten, shitty, lonely life?—

“Tell me about Jonah, Beck,” said Alex. “You mentioned him before. Was he your boyfriend? What happened?”

My brain turned off and my mouth engaged. As he rinsed me off, and dried me off,

and dressed me in some pretty fancy man-pajamas (Was that a fox print? Was the fox wearing a red scarf and dancing in the snow? Were the fucking pajamas made of fucking silk ?), I started talking. Hell, I was a one-man, tell-all, Jerry Springer show.

No one had ever asked me how I felt about what happened between Jonah and me. Sure, I'd muttered my complaints, and then when Jonah'd been in prison, I'd yelled at him, and complained out loud. But that had never stopped him from changing and going in a new direction.

Nobody had ever cared enough to ask me how I fucking felt . And nothing I'd ever done or said had stopped the inevitable. Especially not after Royce had shown up.

To be honest, I wasn't very good at sharing my feelings. Never realized I had any until all that shit started coming down. But I told Alex everything .

As he dried himself off and put on his bathrobe, I told him how I was raised (by wolves), and where, (in a barn). I told him how I hot-wired cars to steal them and then stripped them down and sold the parts. I told him how me and Jonah had been lovers, from time to time.

I even told Alex about those fucking ghost plates that Jonah had insisted on fucking around with. They're what got him arrested when he'd driven over the Wyoming state line. They're what got him landed in Wyoming Correctional, and then parceled out to the Fresh Start Program for ex-cons.

I told him about the good times when me and Jonah could be on our own, even at Farthingdale Valley, though in recent weeks, at Thackery Ranch, I could feel him pulling away. That he didn't want that with me anymore.

Sure, at Thackery Ranch we had some good times, putting super big wheels on an old junker and driving it dangerously along the banks of the Yellowstone River. But that

started to not happen. Jonah became more busy, him and Royce going off together all the time.

Then I told Alex how lonely I was, and I went on and on about it in a drunken flurry of feelings. I think by that time, his cell phone was ringing and there was someone at the door.

“I’m not a criminal anymore, though,” I said. “And that’s gotta be a good thing, right?”

“I’m glad you’re not,” he said as he tucked me into the giant, king-sized bed and propped about a hundred pillows behind me. “Give me a minute,” he said, kissing me gently, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’ll be right back.”

I guess there’d been some kind of confusion amongst the staff or whatever, but Alex sorted everything out, talking on his cell phone while he went to the door and opened it to allow someone to (Steve? Bret? Stan?) push in a rolling cart with a bunch of things on top.

In spy movies, a bad guy would be hidden beneath the draped cloth and spring out at the last minute. But that didn’t happen here. Alex finished his phone call and then directed Steve-Bret-Stan to bring the cart all the way up to the bed where I had been tucked.

I guess I was feeling a little better after that shower, and now I was in a dream state, warm and tucked into a bed, wearing silky pajamas while Alex strode around the very large suite, getting things done.

My brain was a little frazzled, still, and my mouth was tired from complaining. I also guessed that Alex would be kicking me out in the morning, now that I’d stupidly admitted to him that I was a freaking criminal. Still, might as well enjoy it while I had

it.

“Did you bring the bed tray?” asked Alex. He pulled out a fold of bills and handed them over before he’d even gotten the answer. “And I can’t find the remote.”

“Here it is, sir,” said Steve-Bret-Stan. “We keep it in the drawer at the night table. Makes the room look more tidy.”

Steve-Bret-Stan set a bed tray over my lap. Of course, the tray was solid wood and heavy. There was even a little mini-tablecloth that he spread out before putting several covered dishes on top of it. Then came cutlery, rolled in a real napkin, a collection of roses in a short glass vase filled with a bit of water, and then he spread a napkin over my chest.

“There’s not enough room for all of it, sir,” said Steve-Bret-Stan. He pointed at the rolling cart and said, “There’s a pot of coffee, a carafe of freshly squeezed orange juice, and a pint of milk. A bowl of sugar. Some desserts. Please call down if you run out of everything, Mr. Westmore.”

“Thank you,” said Alex, Mr. Manners. “I appreciate it, especially on Christmas Eve.”

“My pleasure, sir,” said Steve-Bret-Stan. And then he quietly left himself out.

I was all alone and in Alex’s godlike hands, warm from the glow of him, his handsome face. His lovely smile. He was still dressed in his robe, though, and looked a little frazzled.

“Get in bed with me,” I said, inhaling something that smelled amazing. “Join me.”

“I will,” he said. “But first I need to get this going.”

Getting this going meant turning on the simply enormous smart TV and clicking a few times to find what I guess was the Christmas Channel. A Christmas Carol was playing, because of course it was.

“Which version is this?” asked Alex, though I figured he was talking to himself.

Squinting at the screen, I said, “I think it’s an old one. Alistair Sim stars as Scrooge. Nineteen fifty-one. It’s called Scrooge , but it’s really just A Christmas Carol .”

“How do you even know all that?” Alex asked me this as he let his robe drop and he got into—wait for it—a gray t-shirt and some gray sweat pants. Which told me that I was wearing his pajamas and he was left wearing his ultra sexy gym clothes.

I’d have felt a whole lot guiltier as he climbed into bed with me (from the other side, so as not to upset the covered dishes on my tray, or the roses in the little vase), but it was fucking hard to do anything but goggle and stare at him, his lushness, the way his muscles pressed against the gray sleeves and the front of that t-shirt. The way his dick bounced around in those freaking sweatpants cause, yeah, he wasn’t wearing no underwear.

“Let’s eat,” he said, scooting close to take the lids off those dishes.

There was, of all things, freshly made BLT, and a bowl of tomato soup, and a grilled cheese sandwich, cut along the diagonal. Cups of coffee in thin china mugs.

“The BLT is for me,” said Alex. “Unless you want half?”

“I haven’t had a BLT in ages,” I said.

“Let’s trade halves, then,” said Alex.

On the TV, Alastair Sim acted his heart out in black and white, and Alex and I chowed down on all that great food. From time to time, he'd get up to refill my coffee cup (making sure there was plenty of milk and sugar in there), and then he found two slices of pie, one pecan (with a dish of ice cream on the side), the other pumpkin (also with a dish of ice cream).

We stuffed our faces until finally the 1951 version of A Christmas Carol turned into the Mr. Magoo version of A Christmas Carol .

"We can change it if you want," I said, because while I loved this version, I figured Alex had more sophisticated tastes and would want something different.

"No," he said. "I like this one. It's the best version."

"It is, really," I agreed, licking some ice cream off my spoon.

But maybe it was a mistake to watch this version, and maybe I still had some drunk left in me, because by the time the movie got to the part where little Ebenezer was singing as he languished in his boarding school, all alone, I was undone.

"Jim Backus is the voice of Mr. Magoo," I said right out loud, though nobody had asked me, in an attempt to distract myself from that viciously sad song. "He played Thurston Howell the Third on Gilligan's Island, you know."

"What's that now?" asked Alex. He turned to look at me, flush from the warmth of the room, his lips sticky with crust from his pie. I wanted to kiss his mouth clean and then devour the rest of him.

"This is my song," I said, my throat closing up as little Ebenezer sang and wondered where the voice was to answer him back, or the shoes that would click to his clack. Damn it.

“Beck,” he said, his voice soft and low. “I think we’re done eating. It’s time for cuddles.”

I kind of like being waited on hand and foot, as the staff had been doing to me from the second I arrived at The Anchorage.

Even better, I liked Alex taking care of me. Maybe that would be too much to ask for, but the thing was, I’d never asked for this. Not Alex slipping off the bed to take the bed tray away and to kiss me as he removed my cloth napkin and brushed the crumbs from the bedclothes.

The best part was when he tucked me in, then climbed over me, grabbing the remote as he went. He eased himself into bed, sidling up to me, wrapping his arms around me, making himself my pillow. Strong and muscled and handsome. Best pillow ever.

“You can rest now,” he said. “Okay if I fast forward past this part?”

“Sure,” I said.

I let my head fall into the curve of his shoulder. It felt filled with lead, and there were weights on my eyes. I think I fell asleep even before the Ghost from Christmas Past sang the last note of the Winter is Warm song.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

We were late for Christmas Breakfast.

It was my fault. Probably. When I woke up, I swallowed because I had little tiny fuzzy socks on each of my teeth. (Royce was a big pusher of brushing and flossing—bah, enough about him.)

I had been planning on getting up and brushing my teeth (ah, minty fresh!) but when I rolled over, there was only a blank spot beside me.

Blinking, scrubbing at my eyes, I looked around, only to see Alex pushing a cart from the doorway, this one smaller than the one from the night before. It carried a silver coffee urn, two thin china cups (and saucers, would you believe), a silver pitcher of milk, and a silver bowl of sugar cubes. That was it.

My attention was torn between the coffee offering and Alex. He'd been up, had already showered and shaved, and doused himself with whatever cologne he was wearing. (I planned to find out later what brand of cologne, so I could soak a piece of paper with it and stick it under my pillow.)

He was wearing sharply ironed gray slacks, and this time he had a Christmas sweater on, complete with a reindeer with bows on its antlers. He was even wearing shiny loafers with tassels on them as he brought me my coffee. All in all, he was like a commercial for clean living.

“No food?” I asked, sitting up, cramming those zillion pillows behind me. Instantly, I regretted the remark, but boorish, boorish Bad Boy Beck always thought of his own needs first. “I mean?—”

“We’ll get plenty to eat at Christmas Breakfast,” Alex said.

He sat on the edge of the bed, so yummy smelling, I barely wanted the cup of coffee he gave to me.

Man, that coffee was delicious. I drank it, but I never stopped looking at Alex.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

“After what?” I asked, though I knew what he meant.

Part of me, old me, wanted to pretend the conversation from the night before had never happened. New me, though, figured I needed to own up.

Alex seemed like such a straightforward kind of guy. He wasn’t likely to appreciate any attempts to suddenly have pretend amnesia. Still, I didn’t quite know what to say.

“I guess I kind of spilled my guts,” I said, then I buried my nose in my cup and tried to look elsewhere, rather than at his understanding blue eyes.

“You did,” Alex said. “That all sounds like it was hard to deal with, you and Jonah being so close for so long.”

“He was a part of me.” I clamped my mouth shut rather than complain any more. “Kind of like you and your boyfriend, I guess.”

That was a pure guess on my part, because I had no idea who’d he’d been stepping out with. More, I had no fucking clue why anyone who had been with Alex would ever let him go.

“His name was Charles,” said Alex, as if I’d asked him outright to tell me the story.

“I wanted to call him Chuck, but he never would let me.”

“All of your people have shortened names,” I said.

“Say what, now?”

“Nathan is Nate, Charlotte is Lottie, and so on,” I said. “And I guess Baby Ginny is Geneva? The only person who doesn’t have a short name is your mom. It’s always the full thing. Jasmine. It’s a power move. Like your mom needs any more power than she already has.”

I guess I thought I was in luck because Beck was a shortened name. Go me!

Alex looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then said, “I guess I knew that, but I didn’t really know it.”

“There you go,” I said with a shrug, which just about spilled hot coffee on me, but I made a save just in time. “Why did he leave?”

“I found out—” Alex paused and shook his head. “Sometimes it happens. They only want your money.”

“Yeah,” I said, handing my now-empty coffee cup over to him. “I guess so.” I’d never had money, so not having it (which was the norm) was no hardship.

“You don’t seem to care that we’re filthy rich,” Alex said, and it seemed, by his expression, that he’d been thinking this way for a while.

Old me would have left Alex by the roadside and made off with his wallet and whatever else could be quickly carted away. New me had rescued him. Alex knew all my truths, so maybe it was time for more of that.

“If you’d asked me a year ago, yeah, I would have been impressed,” I said, watching his eyebrows go up. “I also would have picked your pocket, made off with that nice Rolex you’re wearing, and maybe beat you up, just for fun.”

“And now?” he asked with a laugh that told me half of him was horrified to hear all this, and the other half was amused.

“Now I’m new me,” I said, thinking I might have to explain that a bit more, but he just nodded, so I went on. “Doing things differently, like stopping to help some poor schlub who rented the wrong car for mountain driving in the snow.”

“That was me, huh,” he said, laughing, showing all of his lovely white teeth.

“Yeah,” I said, then laughed as he took my hand and held it. “I really think it was those assholes as they raced past you, going too fast. You probably would have made it all the way to Steamboat, if not for them.”

“Thanks for that,” he said, and he looked like he wanted to kiss me. I would have let him, but I needed to tell him the rest of my truth.

“Royce,” I said, making a gesture with my free hand. “He’s fucking loaded, so I kind of got used to being around rich people.”

“Loaded?” he asked.

“Not hotels, or anything like that,” I said. “Thackery Ranch is above Billings, Montana. Grandad Thackery owns a horse ranch full of painted ponies. Each one is worth thousands upon thousands. The land is worth as much, and they own many, many acres.”

“So he’s loaded,” said Alex. “You mentioned Grandad last night. That he let you

work on his old model cars.”

“He pays me good,” I said. “I live in an apartment above the garage, which is nicer than my old apartment in Denver.”

“But,” said Alex. “You sounded like there was a but there.”

“I have his credit card in my wallet,” I said, rather than answer, because that would have led me to more complaining. “One of the ones tipped with gold, that has no limit?”

“You used that to pay for your vacation here,” he said. “Instead of going on the cruise with them. I would have done the same, I think.”

That simple statement did more for me than all the gold in the world, filling me with warmth and good cheer and just about wiping away my hangover.

“Do we have time?” I asked. “A little bit of time?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding as he got up, pushing the cart out of the way.

He pushed it kind of fast, so the china clattered and the cutlery bounced around, and the coffee urn was about to topple over, but he caught it.

Then he stripped down to his skin, as graceful as I could ever imagine, showing his lovely body, and amazing abs, and that delightful cock of his, pink and hard. He slid his hand up and down that cock, easing it, as if telling it soon, soon, my lovely, pleasure will come.

Pleasure that would come from me and my hands. Maybe my mouth, if I could get in there before anything else happened.

“We going to fuck?” I asked, because I still had a lot of old me inside, and old me had no manners whatsoever.

“I don’t have stuff,” he said, bending to drag off his thin socks. “And I’m not going to shove into you without stuff.”

“Maybe I’ll be doing the shoving,” I said as I hurriedly pulled off my silky pajama top and began tugging at the string on my pajama bottoms, desperate to be all naked at the same time he was all naked.

“Not without stuff,” he said.

Then he pulled me to my knees and kissed me hard and didn’t seem to mind that I had coffee breath on top of morning breath. And my, didn’t he taste amazing. His kisses were soft as honey to start with, and then he intensified as if he wanted to absorb me into himself, his arms around me, holding me close, those strong fingers in my hair.

I sighed and tipped my head back like a cartoon damsel in distress who’s just been rescued. I could have toppled over, but Alex wouldn’t let me fall.

He helped me out of my pajama bottoms and flung me to the bed. Then he ravished me in the way I’d always wanted to be ravished, but never knew until that moment.

His weight held me down, and his arms held me tight, and he kissed me breathless.

Wriggling free, I reached for his sweet, pink cock, now hard as an iron rod. Then I scooted down and took him in my mouth before he could protest. And gave him the best Christmas Morning blow job I could give him, with hearty licks and slobbery gobbling, his balls between my fingers as I swirled them around and around.

Above me he was gasping, half laughing, but not protesting. When his balls tightened, I doubled down, full throating him till I half choked. Then when he came, I swallowed and swallowed some more, kissed his sticky cock as it softened, my hands clasping his sweaty hips.

When I looked up, his hair was a mess, tousled from the sheets, his face flushed, his eyes bright, his expression a little shocked, as if he was surprised to be spun so far out into the stratosphere by my talented mouth, only to land back on earth in a rumpled bed.

“You are amazing,” he said, shaking his head slightly as he balanced himself on his arms, palms flat on the sheets.

“I am,” I said. No modesty there. I knew what I was good at.

“Let me do you,” he said, moving forward, lunging himself at me.

I pretended to shriek in terror (always funny, in my mind), and let him have at me. I’d let him have at me forever, if he wanted it.

He went down on me, full-throated me right from the start, and when I began to tighten up, he pulled back, like the monster he was. Then, with a low, evil laugh, he did that again and then one more time before my body couldn’t be backed down, and I came down his throat. Boy, he was a good swallower, going gentle and more gentle still as I came down from that amazing high.

Better yet, he sighed as he pulled me into his arms, tucked the pillow beneath our heads, and pulled the soft cotton sheet over our shoulders for a breather.

And that was why we were late for Christmas Breakfast.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:32 am

Alex and I arrived in the special dining room off The Antlers, and apologized over and over. But everyone, dressed in special Christmas sweaters, was as calm as could be, drinking what smelled like amazing coffee and chatting over slices of toast and butter and jam.

I felt out of place as I sat down (for all the usual reasons and especially because I had no Christmas sweater), but I made sure to be on my best manners. Napkin in my lap, no elbows on the table, and stuff. I did eat with my finger, but only the toast and bacon. The scrambled eggs, I ate with a fork. Go me!

The food was amazing, and the Westmores were as welcoming that morning as they'd been the evening before.

And soon we were on to the presents portion of the morning. Forgot to mention, they were in the corner, and by that I mean **PILED** beneath a tiny Christmas tree—a real one, of course, that smelled amazing—that had been put up on a table covered with a soft white cloth.

No Christmas sweater to wear, and now this. I had nothing to add to the festivities. But Alex, who was sitting next to me at the festive table, nudged me with his elbow, and then pointed with his chin to the pile of presents.

“What?” I asked him in a stage-whisper hiss because I could see the pile of presents.

“You got the Westmore family a Harry & David basket,” he said, in a low, less aggravated whisper.

Now I could see it. An enormous sturdy basket with large clumps of things stuffed in it. Stuff like cheese, and cookies and a box of pears, and more things than that. The crumple stuff-paper was silver, and there were even sprigs of evergreen in there.

I'd seen the Harry & David catalog at the Thackery house a week or so back. Jonah and Royce had been discussing which gift basket to send to everybody who'd been in the Fresh Start Program, as well as one for Leland Tate, who'd organized the whole thing.

"That's almost thirty baskets," said Jonah, a worried scowl on his forehead. "That's three thousand dollars."

"So?" asked Royce, because, to him, as always, money was no object.

I did the math, and it meant that each basket was around a hundred bucks. Was the delivery charge included in that? I had no idea. But what I did know was that those hundred dollar baskets of stuff were a lot smaller than the basket I was staring at now. It was as tall as a small child.

I didn't ask Alex how much I'd supposedly spent because it wouldn't matter, and the Westmore family would surely know I'd not been the one to get it for them. Still, it was a nice gesture, and I did the appropriate thing and said, "Thank you." And meant it.

After breakfast was cleared away (and by cleared, every dish was removed, the table was wiped down, and a lacy white tablecloth was laid down). Tim made himself useful by handing out presents. He was so much a Westmore that he made a big deal, right off the bat, by bringing over the basket I'd supposedly bought for the family.

"Look at this," he said. "Wow, Beck, this is amazing!"

Christ, he sounded so sincere, I believe he meant it. As did the rest of the Westmores

as they oohed and aahed over it. And started picking out a cookie or a bit of strudel or a fancy pear to eat. Now that's what I call nice because they were really enjoying the gift, and nobody called me out on it.

Then came more presents. It was like an avalanche of presents and wrapping paper and oodles of good cheer. I didn't remember all of what everyone got, except that Baby Ginny got her silver spoon from Uncle Alex and promptly stuck it in her mouth the second it came out of its fancy white box. Brother Tim got a felt cowboy hat that looked expensive, and Lottie got a beautiful set of glittery earrings that were, of course, expensive, this being a Westmore Christmas.

I was most interested in what Alex got, which was new leather shoes, and a cashmere scarf, a date book for the coming year. Someone, perhaps hearing about how Alex had had to wear his snow-crumpled fancy shoes for a whole two days, had purchased a set of leather boots, complete with a fur coming out of the top. They were kind of a joke, but they looked warm and if Alex would only wear them, I promised myself I would only tease him a little.

Then, in the midst of this, he turned to me with a bit of a grimace.

"Here it comes," he said.

That's when Tim started delivering presents to me . Luckily, other Westmores were still unwrapping their gifts, both from each other and from Santa, so I was able to hide behind the flurry of wrapping paper while I unwrapped some for myself.

A sweater, white, cabled, Irish, from Mr. and Mrs. Westmore.

A blue cashmere scarf from Lottie and her hubby, Pete.

A book about skiing from Not-So-Tiny Tim.

He shrugged at me as if to apologize for the hasty gift, but I'll wager the gift shop at the hotel had been all that'd been open, plus the selection had probably been limited, so I gave him the thumbs up and said, "I've always wanted to learn more about skiing! Thanks, Tim."

"This is from me and Baby Ginny," said Alex. He held out two slender boxes. The first one held soft leather gloves, and the second one held puffy insulated gloves.

"It's so lame," he said, blushing hard. "But that's all they had left that I thought you'd like. And you needed gloves. Your hands were freezing from the moment I met you."

"Thank you," I said, drawing out a glove from each box and putting them on, leather on the left, puffy and soft on the right. "I've kind of always gone without gloves, so I forget they exist."

That had come out of my big mouth rather loud, and every single Westmore heard me. Their expressions were kind, but not pitying, thank fuck, cause I would have run out of the room if I thought they felt sorry for me. But no, they acted like Alex had solved a problem for me and now we could all move on.

Then Alex's phone rang and though Mrs. Alex's Mom looked rather stern and started to say something about it being Christmas morning, Alex answered. He got up and went to the doorway and stood there with his back to us, talking intently.

"Sure, Mr. Shimizu, I'll be there. We'll get the New Year started off right and get all the paperwork signed."

When he turned to us, his cell phone was clasped in his hands like a prayer book. (Not that I've ever held one, it's just something I've seen in movies.)

"Tell me you're not going," said Jasmine. She had a scarf around her neck, a warm, soft red, but even still, she was not someone I'd be willing to cross, and yet here,

brave Alex was doing just that.

“In a few days, Mom,” he said. “Just for a week or so.”

“It’s that important, son?” asked Nate.

“This is the last hurdle to that fabulous location in downtown Tokyo,” said Alex. Before I had time to think about how soon we’d be separated, he turned to me and asked, “And maybe Beck would like to come with me?”

“Me with you?” I asked. I was shocked and didn’t have time to hide it so I could be cool Bad Boy Beck and act like I did not not give a shit about what anyone was doing. Or the fact that I’d been invited to go with him to Japan. “I don’t have a passport.”

“Is that your only objection?” Alex asked me, looking at me in a way that told me he was focused to the point of blocking out everything else in that room. That he’d wait an eternity for me to answer. Maybe longer. That he really wanted me to go with him.

“Yep,” I said, confident in that, at least, though I was less confident in anything else. Passports take weeks to get. Didn’t they?

“Have Beck fill out the online form, Alex,” said Nate. “I’ll call down to the CBP and get it rushed through.”

“You can use my computer,” said Tim.

“Thank goodness that’s settled,” said Lottie as she stood up with Baby Ginny in her arms and went over to him. “Tokyo is great and all, but it can be lonely if you travel there alone.”

“I’ve been there half a dozen times,” said Alex in a sibling-to-sibling tone. “I am a

CEO in the company, you know.”

“Yes, yes, we all know,” said Lottie, and she saved it from being a mean tease with a smile and a kiss to his cheek. Then she looked at me so sweetly and asked me, “Would you like to say hello to Baby Ginny?”

This was a test. Of course it was. I knew that as I got up and went over to them. It was a test to see how I reacted to a blob of flesh with zero personality, and also one that drooled.

Except Baby Ginny drooled only a little bit, and as she squirmed cutely in her mother’s arms, she smiled at me, her eyes as bright as starlight, with a shine in them that must be only seen in a baby’s eyes. She was dressed simply, in a white shift of some kind, wrapped in a soft pink blanket, and she had a pink ribbon on her nearly bald head.

“Do you want to hold her?” asked Alex. His voice came as if from far away, and I (finally) got the feeling that none of this was a challenge or a test. They just wanted me to say hello. So I did.

“Hell, no,” I said as I touched the tiny little hand with its miniature fingers. Then I said, as softly as I could, “Hello, Baby Ginny. When you get older, I can tell you about how I rescued your Uncle Alex from certain death.”

“Oh, my,” said Lottie. She pulled Baby Ginny away from me, and then laughed a little, and resettled the tiny thing in her arms.

“I’m sorry,” said. “I’m not very used to babies. Let me try again.”

“Sure,” she said, in a motherly way.

“Hey, little baby,” I said. “Did you enjoy your silver spoon? Your Uncle Alex picked

it out especially, and it was the only thing—" I stopped, having learned that for some reason talking about Alex almost dying wasn't the right thing to say. "It was the only thing he brought with him, especially for you."

She looked at me with deep blue eyes, which must be a Westmore thing, and her expression was so serious, she made me laugh.

"She does that," said Mama Lottie. "So serious. Like a judge or something. But I think she likes you."

I had a feeling that if I stuck around, eventually the baby would be put into my arms and I'd be expected to hold it safely and not drop it. Not drop her . Baby Ginny was pretty cute, and I knew if I got the chance, I'd hold her and protect her from anything I could.

"Come sit back down, Lottie," said Nate. "And let me hold the baby."

We all sat back down, and the baby was handed around, and Jasmine called for fresh coffee and for the wrapping paper to be cleared away. Tim ran upstairs to bring his laptop back down. I used it to fill out the online application for a brand new passport, gave the confirm number to Mr. Westmore Senior, and turned my attention to Alex.

"Are you wiped out yet?" he asked.

"Oh my god, yes," I said.

Our heads were bent together and everybody's attention was on each other, which gave us a little pocket of privacy.

"You really want me to come with you?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I think you'd like it and I sure would will enjoy your company."

He meant it. I'd learned that much about him, that he said what he meant and he meant what he said. He walked the walk and talked the talk, and everything about him was upright, steadfast, and kind.

"When do we leave?" I asked.

"In a couple of days, after Dad gets that passport expedited."

"He can do that?" I asked, astonished. Well, rich people could do what they liked, couldn't they.

"He knows people," said Alex, and left it at that.

"Maybe we could get another soak in before we leave," I said.

"At least one," said Alex. "Every night if we can."

"I know people," I said, pretending to be mysterious as I pointed with my chin at Jasmine, who was busy talking to two members of staff at once.

Alex laughed and he looked like he wanted to kiss me or hug me. I'd be up for either, but later, when we were alone. I still wasn't used to the wholesome camaraderie of the Westmores, and besides, I liked to enjoy my kisses in private.

"We're going to step out and get some fresh air, guys," said Alex standing. His expression said he wanted me to stand, as well, so I did.

"Come back in time for lunch," said Nate. "We're going to that Italian place your mother liked last year."

"Mazzola's," said Tim, sounding like he had started salivating at the mere thought of the place.

“We will,” I said boldly, cause I was always up for Italian food, day or night.

“We will,” said Alex. He winked at me and I guess he was figuring out how much I loved food. “We’ll get noodles in Japan,” he said. “We’ll go to the busiest crosswalk in the world. We’ll have a great time.”

“I’m already having a great time,” I said, and if that wasn’t the purest truth, I don’t know what would be.

We left the small dining room, made our way through the quite busy restaurant, and found our way to the front exit. When we opened the front doors to the hotel, a blast of cold air met us that was refreshing. I cupped my hands together and blew on them.

“You didn’t bring your gloves,” he said, half scolding me.

“Neither did you,” I said, then I took his hands, cupped them in mine, and blew on them. And added, “We’ll remember next time.”

“Both of us,” he said.

He dipped his chin and I looked up in to his blue eyes and thought about how lucky I was. And what a good Christmas it was turning out to be. Plus, I had Alex’s company to look forward to, and that was the best gift of all.