



A Winter's Hope

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Owen spends 1918 fighting in the trenches of Europe. Its a long, horrible nightmare, except for one dream of a night in Paris with a man hell never see again.

He comes home a shadow of himself.

Isolated in his parents winter cabin, Owen searches for healing in the silence of the forest. His journey back is helped along when, against all odds, the man from Paris appears in his town.

Can Jeremy and a little holiday magic bring Owen back to life?

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Paris, August 1918

The man looked young, his face unlined, his smile bright—too young and unsoiled to be wearing a soldier's uniform. His eyes, though, told a different story. The shadows there spoke of the same horrors Owen had witnessed.

All around them men talked and laughed, the air blue with cigarette smoke. Owen had one night, maybe two, in this little corner of Paris. He'd sprung for a decent glass of whisky, and the liquor's burn loosened something deep in his chest. More than likely his unit would return to the front, but for the first time in a long while, no one was shooting at him and he could draw a breath.

Without any real intent, Owen caught the young man's gaze and held it long enough for an offer to be made and accepted. The man was blond, his eyes dark, and he stood up from his seat at the bar with an easy grace.

Owen tilted his head toward the rear of the café. There must be a back door, which would likely lead to an alley. From there, they'd find a quiet corner, or something close by.

Leading the way, Owen wove through the crowd. His shoulders felt the weight of the young man's gaze, a sensation that made him stand straighter. To his dismay, he couldn't find the café's rear door. They couldn't very well waltz through the kitchen. He turned, his new friend stopping a shade too close to him.

"No door," Owen murmured.

The man's smile lit a fire deep in his belly. "My room's not far."

A room? Owen was bunking with three other men. "No one else will be there?"

"Come on." The man shook his head, and for the first time, Owen noticed his officer's bar.

He let the man go first, following at a reasonable distance. Up close, he'd noted creases at the corner of the man's eyes and framing his lips, either from age or sun or both. Being caught in a compromising position with any man was dangerous. For an officer to take that risk made the fire in Owen's belly burn hotter.

The odds were in their favor. Several companies had been given leave at once, and Paris was crawling with men in US Army uniforms. Any MPs were too busy busting drunks and keeping the local women safe to bother with a pair of men bent on a little privacy.

Owen knew his desires were wrong, had known almost as soon as he realized what it meant when his prick got hard. As a younger man, he'd vacillated between worry and fear and spent hours in the confessional, searching for ways to ask for forgiveness without admitting his sin.

Those months spent in the trenches, however, had hardened more than his muscles. Now he took what was offered and damn the consequences. After all, would court-martial be all that much worse than hours spent knee-deep in water too cold and foul for rats while hellfire rained down from the sky?

Wrenching his mind away from that awful memory, he followed his acquaintance. The man was shorter than Owen by a few inches, his shoulders broad and his waist trim. He moved quickly, with an eagerness to his step that sent heat to Owen's belly. They reached the street, and since the man didn't stop, neither did Owen. They left

the crowded streets around the base of Montmartre and began climbing at a pace that left Owen breathless.

The chase truly began when they came to a set of steep stairs running straight up the side of the hill. Landings had been constructed every twenty steps or so, with paths that led into the surrounding neighborhood. Any relaxation from the whisky was lost in the exertion, and Owen was close to giving up when his quarry shot a glance over his shoulder. “Just up here,” he said, still on the move.

Owen paused for a moment, breathing hard, hands on hips. “If this is some kind of trap...”

Because it could be.

The man paused on a step, turning to face Owen. “My mother has family here, and they’ve lent me a flat. I swear there’s not a firing squad in your future.”

His smile restored his youthful glamour and relit Owen’s fire. Owen nodded once, and with a laugh, the young man galloped up the stairs.

Owen followed more slowly, making note when the man turned right at the next landing.

He might have been chasing a will-o’-the-wisp. They left the stairs and moved through winding streets. Owen kept his quarry in sight, but it was a near thing until the man came to a stop at the door to an old brick building. He went in, leaving the door ajar, and Owen followed.

They climbed to the third floor accompanied by the creak and squeak of old wood. Owen caught up to his quarry when the man finally paused. The hallway was otherwise empty, the electric fixtures overhead cast a warm light, and Owen gave in

to his need for closeness, pinning the man against the door.

He smelled like castile soap and sweat in equal measure. Owen nuzzled his ear and the man fumbled his keys. Chuckling, Owen eased back half a step. The man wrestled the door open, and they went in.

They didn't speak. There was no need. The man tugged the lamp's chain and revealed a small room crowded with furniture. A pair of windows overlooked the street, and a set of glass doors closed off what was likely the kitchen.

By the time he turned toward Owen, the man had his shirt unbuttoned. Owen followed suit, slowly removing his shirt and then his undershirt, tossing them over an upholstered loveseat. He was hungry for the burn of that broad chest, thickly covered with hair, against his own smooth skin.

He toed off his shoes, and so did his new friend. In tandem, they loosened their belts. Only when he was down to his drawers did Owen make a move. He closed in on the man, helping him shove his trousers over his hips. Rather than kiss him on the mouth, Owen went for the man's chin, licking his roughly stubbled jaw.

He didn't kiss men unless he knew them well, and they hadn't even shared their names. Owen kissed his way down the man's jaw to the softer skin of his throat, going lower still before sucking hard enough to leave a mark.

The man slid his hands beneath Owen's drawers, grabbing and kneading his ass. Owen ran his fingers through the man's chest hair, found a nipple, and twisted.

"Ahh." The man's groan ended in a warm chuckle. He slipped away, sinking to his knees. In a breath, he had Owen's drawers down around his thighs and, with little warning, sucked Owen down.

“Jesus,” Owen groaned. He liked a man’s man, one with strength, who took what he wanted.

Like this man.

There was something special between them, something more than time and place should have allowed. He clearly knew his way around a prick, and with embarrassing speed, Owen was ready to shoot his load. “Wait,” he managed to gasp.

The man grinned around his prick, then let it slide slowly from between his lips. “We’ve got all night, handsome. Surely you’re good for more than one go.”

Owen answered with a smile of his own, his cock standing straight before him. “I guess I’ll manage.” He guided his cock back to the man’s lips and hummed at the warm, wet sensation engulfing him.

This time, he didn’t restrain himself.

He was dimly aware that his lover worked his own prick, though Owen fully intended to return the favor. That was his last conscious thought before pleasure pulled him under. He spent hard, releasing weeks of tension in one deep thrust.

When he would have collapsed on the loveseat, the man tugged him into the bedroom. There, Owen made sure to give as good as he got, roughness and urgency finally giving way to satiation.

Through it all, his lover’s sweet smile and his laughter reminded Owen what it meant to be human.

Owen woke when dawn’s grey lifted the curtain of darkness surrounding them. The man slept beside him, curled on his side. His mussed hair and dark lashes made him

look too young for a soldier's life, yet Owen's tender ass proved he'd been all man. They'd taken turns, both giving and receiving, and honestly, it had been the best night of Owen's life.

He needed to make his escape before the light of day ruined everything.

Moving with great care, he slid out of bed. His clothes were in the front room, and he dressed quickly. Before he left, however, he took a look around, locking in the memory of this place. He noticed a stack of envelopes on a small side table, and unable to resist, he picked up the one on top.

It was addressed to Captain Jeremy Abbot, and the return address included the crossed sword and pen of the Judge Advocate's Office.

Huh. His new friend was better educated in addition to his higher rank. Time to leave while the memory was untainted by awkwardness.

"Thank you, sir," Owen whispered, and then he snuck out the door.

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Springfield, 1919

When Owen arrived at home at last, his grandmother Mamé took one look at him and said, “Son, you need to go to the forest.”

He didn’t argue. Instead, he hugged his mother, took off his uniform, and changed into trousers and a shirt. He’d no longer need his olive drab shirts, breeches, and leg wraps, and in truth, most of the things he’d brought home were little more than rags. He kept his trench boots, because his old civilian boots were a shade too small, as if his feet had swelled over those months he’d stood in the muck and would never truly regain their normal size. And he asked his father for permission to stay at the cabin.

“Of course. We won’t need it until February or so.”

In the eighteen months since Owen left for France, Father’s hair had turned grey. Mother’s had, too, and wisps escaped her kerchief, framing her face in silver.

Dinner was strained; breakfast less so, if only because Owen was too tired to say very much at all. As soon as was polite, Owen went to his room for his bags. His mother stopped him at the door. “You’ll come home for Sunday dinner, won’t you?”

He leaned over and kissed her brow. “Mamé is right. I need the quiet. I’ll come back when I can.”

At any other time, Mother’s frown would have made Owen sad. Right then, carrying the weight of almost eighteen months in France, he merely kissed her again and headed out the door.

The cabin was some three miles from his parents' house, reached by a dirt road no one ever traveled. It sat in a small clearing, surrounded by sugar maples and birch trees. His family made use of it in the dead of winter, preparing for the sap to run. Two rooms heated by a wood fire, there was a bed, a table and a chair, and not much else.

A small stream, Owen's main source of water, ran behind the cabin. He had few visitors—Mamé's doing, most likely. After so much madness, he wanted nothing more than to bathe in the light that filtered through the forest canopy, to avoid quarrels with anyone more threatening than squirrels or chipmunks, and to savor the deep, deep stillness in hopes his soul would heal.

In February, he took charge of tapping the maples for their sap. Father drove the team out to pick up the buckets and take them home, where Mother could cook it down to syrup. Otherwise, Father stopped by once a week to drop off a box of staples: flour and sugar, venison or pork, and dried apples.

That left Owen with time. He noted when the bloodroot bloomed, and the meadow rue a few weeks later. In the heat of the summer, he fished in the stream, trading trout for his mother's fresh-baked bread. By the time the maple leaves sported hints of red, he felt ready to see other people.

It took until the first hint of snowfall before he wanted to go into town.

The eighteenth of October, to be specific. He stopped by his parents' house, asking if he could bring them anything. Mother wanted a pound of sugar. Father simply said to take care.

That annoyed Owen. "I'll be fine. I managed to make it home in one piece, after all."

Father gave him a considering look, the lines across his brow deepening. "Did you,

though?”

“Looks like.” Owen left before his father could upset him any further. He’d finally made up his mind to exert himself, and he surely didn’t need anyone trampling on his efforts.

With a rucksack slung over his shoulder, he set a brisk pace. The air was chilly, the clouds overhead heavy and threatening. He guessed his parents would invite him for dinner when he dropped off the sugar. Comparing their cozy room, the harvest table’s leaf raised to seat four, with his cold and spartan cottage was no comparison at all.

Maybe his father was right to be concerned. The quiet, which had once brought him peace, had started to devour him, sapping his strength of will. Still, in his bones, he knew he wasn’t ready to rejoin his family. Mother’s sadness and Mamé’s concerned gaze might loosen the tight hold he had on himself. Alone, he could drop everything when the memories grew to be too much. Cry if he had to. The forest smelled clean rather than carrying the stench caused by crowds of people and the foul stink of death.

He’d killed at least three men, those who’d come close enough for Owen to look them in the eye before he shot. Others had caught his bullets from behind their own lines or while running across the field of battle, but those three haunted him. It didn’t help much to remember that if he hadn’t fired first, he’d be dead. No, he did his best to draw his mind away from the way their bodies had convulsed when his bullets hit.

A religious man might have prayed for their spirits. Owen just wanted them to leave him alone. Nobody would blame him if he had used that one night in Paris with Captain Abbot to distract himself.

Abbot, with his youthful smile and his weary eyes. His memory alone washed Owen with peace. Owen had had men since, rushed and secretive, grasping hands in the

cold and dark. Their touch might have brought release, but no relief. No, that night floated like an island in his memory, a moment of respite in an otherwise grim interval.

It took about an hour to hike to Springfield. As a boy, he'd thought his hometown was quite the metropolis. Compared with New York, London, and Paris, however, Springfield wasn't much more than a dot on a map. After half an hour of hiking, Owen hit a paved road. It took longer still to reach the ramshackle warehouses and cottages that marked the outskirts of town.

As if to dare himself, he headed for Main Street. He might run into an old friend from high school, though of the boys he'd graduated with, half had gone off to war, and he had no idea how many of them had returned.

He trudged along, swallowing his rising panic as the first wagons passed, followed by a few automobiles. Ordinary men, going about their everyday chores. Some waved, though Owen could not bring himself to do the same. He kept his gaze fixed on the ground, counting his steps. He could manage this. He must.

Otherwise he was going to become one with the forest and never again return.

Warehouses turned into brick buildings holding offices and shops. Other people shared the sidewalk with him, men and women, strangers all, which made his heart pound. He passed the tobacco shop with a wooden India in the window and a shop with a small metal sign that stated "Chemist" hanging above the door.

His goal was the grocery, just a block or two away, but it took every ounce of resolve for him to keep going. The chilly air suited his mood, clouds overhead heavy with the promise of snow. Jaw clenched, he strode on, dimly aware that people were shying away from him.

He'd nearly reached his goal when he was forced to wait for the traffic to clear. A team of horses had been startled by an auto's horn, and it took several men to untangle things.

And while he was waiting, he heard a laugh. A laugh he knew, and one he hadn't heard in months.

Since...Paris.

Owen looked around wildly, and there, across the street, he saw Captain Jeremy Abbot. Not in uniform, not now. Instead, he wore a thick wool coat and a bowler hat. Owen could no more have taken a step than he could have flown to the moon. Abbot smiled at the man next to him, and Owen felt a spike of something new. Something unfamiliar.

Jealousy.

On its own, Owen's hand rose as if to catch Abbot's attention. Owen stifled that urge, clasping his hands together. He hadn't shaved in weeks, he'd tied his greasy hair back with a rude string, and god only knew what he smelled like. Maybe the people avoiding him weren't put off by his frown so much as by his rank odor.

Abbot and his friend kept walking, unaware of Owen's presence. What is he doing here? How had this come to be? Of all the towns in New England, why Springfield?

Owen had no answers. That glimpse of Abbot's smile, however, had awakened memories—the creases at the corners of his eyes, the thick hair on his chest growing darker as it surrounded his prick.

The man's taste.

Bowing his head, Owen made himself a promise. This wasn't the time or the place, but he would discover the reason for Abbot's presence, and he would renew their acquaintance.

But only after he bathed.

That vow, however, brought something new to the fore, another reason Owen was reluctant to live in his family home. He'd never been much for keeping time with the girls from school, and his time in the Army had proven why.

He'd much rather keep time with men.

He could only imagine what would happen if his parents discovered that. Their sadness and sympathy would turn to horror, and Mamé, who knew him better than anyone, would turn away.

And that he could not bear.

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Despite his intentions, when he returned to the cabin, the silence swallowed him up. Day turned into night and then into day again. He shot a buck, dressed, and butchered it. More than the fresh meat, he wanted better memories, to overlay horror with practicality. To prove that he could .

Keeping his mind firmly in the present was an exhausting task, but he managed.

The nights were cold enough to freeze the meat, and there was plenty to share. No sooner had he decided to bring some to his parents than he remembered Abbot. And that reminded him that he still needed a proper bath, shave, and haircut.

Filling his largest bowl with water, he set it over the fire until steam rose from the surface. It was no way near large enough to stand in, but he did his best to soap up and rinse off. Deciding his hair and beard deserved a barber's touch, he dressed in his cleanest clothes and filled a muslin bag with meat.

Snow flurries scattered out of his way and the frosted ground crunched underfoot. He set a brisk pace to keep himself warm, his wool coat barely up to the task. Soon—too soon, perhaps—he reached his parents' house and knocked on the door.

Mother answered. "Come in, Owen. Don't be a stranger."

He'd meant to leave the bag at the door and go on his way, but the warmth was seductive. Mother's flour-covered apron hinted at her task. Standing aside so he could pass, she followed him through the tidy front room and into the kitchen.

There, the stove put out a merry heat. Mamé sat at the small table peeling potatoes.

Owen lifted the bag of venison. "For you."

Mamé held up a dusty hand and Owen took hold, squeezing her strong fingers. "That's quite a beard you got there."

Chuckling, he patted the straggling growth. "Headed for the barber's today."

"Good."

Loaves of bread were rising on the counter, covered with a floury baking cloth. Next to them was a flat circle of pastry dough. "Getting started on the pies," Mother said. "You will come for Thanksgiving dinner, won't you?"

Owen cracked open the back door so he could set the bag of meat outside. "When is that?"

"This week."

Scratching at his overgrown beard, Owen gave her a puzzled glance.

"Today is Monday."

"Thanks," he said, abashed. He had no schedule, no calendar, no reason for getting through each day besides the cold and his hunger. "I'll see how things go."

She crossed her arms and he made note of the way her knuckles were reddened. It was easier than facing her disappointment.

"I'll set a place for you at the table."

He forced a smile. "Thank you."

He wished he could promise her more than that, but if Thursday was a bad day, the quiet would trap him in the cabin. Rather than say anything to upset her further, he described the cuts of meat he'd brought—a shoulder, the back straps, and one haunch cut up into steaks.

“Thank you, Owen. If I grind some to make sausages, would you like some?”

“Sure.” He stood awkwardly for a moment. “Can I pick up anything for you in town?”

Her smile was as warm as the room, though disappointment weighed down her gaze. “Father’s gone to market this morning to pick up the turkey.”

For Thanksgiving. He forced a smile. “I’ll do my best, Mother.”

“It’ll just be the three of us, plus your Uncle Richard and his family.”

“Leave him be, Doris,” Mamé said. “He already told you he’ll come if he can.”

Grateful for his grandmother’s show of support, Owen did his best to keep his smile from fading. He hadn’t thought about his Uncle Richard in years, and who knew how many children the man had now. “I’ll do my best,” he repeated.

Before they could waylay him further, Owen made his escape, moving more quickly without the twenty or so pounds of venison he’d been carrying. It had stopped snowing, though the clouds hung low, heavy and threatening. As he walked, he tracked hiding places. He didn’t want to run into his father, who likely would issue another invitation to Thanksgiving.

An invitation Owen might very well decline.

Fortunately, he didn't see his father, or anyone else for that matter. He made good time and was soon turning onto Main Street. At the heart of the town, the roads and sidewalks were busy. Owen made a deliberate effort to avoid other people. He especially didn't want to see Abbot.

Not until he'd cleaned up some more.

Abbot, the one bright spot in all his months in Europe. Likely Owen had elevated the memory of their one night together to a place real life could not equal, simply because of how different it had been from all those other nights. Many, many times he'd relied upon that night to remind him that there was still some good in the world. Just as many times, he remembered that Abbot had made him feel special.

Owen would risk spoiling the memory if it meant he could get to know the real man.

In short order, he found the barber. The man had an empty chair, and he was happy to take Owen's money in return for a shave and a haircut.

Afterward, Owen felt light, as if his hair and beard had weighed as much as the venison.

The barber, a grizzled veteran of many battles with the shaving knife, gave him a friendly enough smile. "You should come by every week or so for a shave, at least. You're much better looking without that beard."

"Thanks." Owen laughed, chagrined. "I will. Hey, I might have seen a friend the last time I was in town. Do you know a man named Jeremy Abbot?"

The barber leaned against the counter opposite Owen. "I do. You run across him in the Army?"

Owen's brows drew together in confusion.

"It's in your posture, son." The barber laughed. "He moved to town at the end of the summer. Went to work with the Sullivans."

"The lawyers?" That made sense to Owen, given that the man had received mail from the Army's Judge Advocate. Although if Abbot was a lawyer, he likely wouldn't have time for a man who hadn't even tried to find a job since he returned.

The thought undermined Owen's confidence, though he tried to shake it off. He pulled out his wallet and put a dollar on the counter. "Thanks. I'm a new man."

The barber took a moment to check his watch. "You might find him over at Lotty Mae's Café. I've seen him in there at lunch time more than once."

Owen's stomach gurgled, making both of them laugh.

"And even if he's not there, Lotty has a deft hand with the pork chops."

Thanking him again, Owen left. Though the very idea of mixing with other people nauseated him, he promised himself that if Abbot wasn't at the café, he'd talk his way past the receptionist at the law firm.

And if that didn't work, well, he'd try something else.

Lotty Mae's was just down the block from the barber's. White ruffled curtains shielded diners from those passing by on the street, and the scent of roasted meat made Owen's mouth water. Even better, Abbot sat at a table in the corner, fork in one hand and an open book next to his plate.

The crowded room could have distracted Owen, but he swallowed his discomfort and

threaded his way between tables to reach his quarry. Whatever he was reading held Abbot in thrall. He didn't look up until Owen had pulled out the chair across from him and sat down.

"Hullo?" Abbot glanced up from his book, eyes wide.

Owen couldn't speak, nerves warring with happiness to tie his tongue.

"I know you," Abbot said slowly. "We met in Paris."

Owen cleared his throat, nodding in agreement.

"How in the devil...?"

"I saw you," Owen managed. "Across the street."

Abbot's puzzled smile made it clear that Owen wasn't making sense, so he tried again.

"When I came into town last month, I saw you walking up the street."

Abbot tilted his head. "Why didn't you say something then?" He said it as if he and Owen were friends, as if Owen should have just called his name and waved.

When Owen couldn't come up with an answer, Abbot closed his book, tapping the cover with one slender finger. "Tell me your name again. I'm ashamed to say I can't seem to remember it."

"We didn't...uh...exchange names."

Abbot's smile widened. "In that case, I remember exactly who you are."

The heat rose in Owen's face so quickly his ears rang. "Owen Spense," he gasped out.

"And I am Jeremy Abbot."

"Captain."

Abbot laughed. "Not anymore."

Abbot extended his hand and for a moment, Owen could only stare. He shook himself and clasped Abbot's hand. "Pleased to meet you."

His grin turning saucy, Abbot responded, "As I recall, we got on quite well for two men who hadn't exchanged names."

Owen took a wild look around, unable to convince himself that no one was near enough to have heard. The other diners were occupied with their food and their companions, yet their eyes weighed on Owen. Or perhaps it was just their presence.

So many people, when he'd spent so much time alone.

He half rose from his seat. "I should go."

"Really?" Abbot's smile faded a bit. "I do hope we can renew our acquaintance."

As much as he wanted to jackrabbit out of there, Owen paused and dredged up an honest response. "So do I."

Their gazes met and held, until Owen could bear it no longer. He escaped from the café and ran toward the forest. He didn't slow until he reached the point where the paved road ended, and even then, he kept his pace brisk. His lungs worked like a

bellows, trying to keep up with his racing heart.

The whole way home, he beat himself up for acting like an idiot. If he'd had any hopes of spending time with Abbot, they were now dashed.

Goddamn war . God damned war .

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He remembered Thanksgiving when his father appeared at his front door, a basket of leftovers in hand.

“Your mother missed you,” was all Father said.

Owen would have apologized, but he couldn’t find the words. He took the basket, doing his best not to cry. “Thanks for this. Tell her I said...” His voice faded. He had nothing to say.

Father only nodded, taking his leave as quickly as he’d come.

Setting the basket aside, Owen went to the window. Father had come by horse-drawn sleigh, and now that he was paying attention, Owen could hear the jingle of the horse’s bridle and the crackle of the sleigh’s runners over snow.

They must have had eight or so inches, though Owen couldn’t remember the storm. All the days bled together, a blank canvas where his life was reduced to little more than acting on instinct. He’d kept himself alive, though he was starting to forget why he bothered.

If he thought about anything at all, it was the sound of bombs and machine-gun fire, and the pain of losing another friend.

He’d lost more than a few over those eighteen months. Gunfire, poisoned gas, despondence. One man had spent so much time standing in the trenches, cold water up to his ankles, that his feet had turned black, his toes staying behind when they removed his boots. They’d taken him to hospital, but by then the poison was in his

blood and he'd died anyway.

Still, if nothing else, his father's visit prompted Owen to pay more attention to his surroundings. The next day, or maybe the day after that, he heard another sleigh. They'd had more snow, deep and powdery, so all he'd heard was the dull thud of a horse's hooves and the rattle of its tack.

Father must be returning. Owen gave himself a sniff, unsure how long it had been since he'd last bathed. His cheeks itched with new growth, and on the way to the window, he raked a hand through his unwashed hair.

At least it had been clean once this week.

Standing to one side of the glass, he peered out. The horse was a Morgan, its thick winter coat a deep brown with a black mane and tail. Father's horse had never looked so elegant.

The sleigh wasn't Father's, either. This one was a two-seater, painted a deep cherry red. And Father didn't have the reins.

Jeremy Abbot did.

Before he could lose his nerve, Owen hurried to the front door and poked his head out. He had to squint against the glare of the sun off the snow, or maybe it was the glare off Jeremy's smile. "Hullo," Owen huffed, shivering, but not because of the snow. The man had gone from Abbot to Jeremy between one heartbeat and the next, though Owen blushed at his own presumptuousness.

"You're not an easy man to track down." Jeremy's words made Owen smile, something he'd lost the habit of.

“How did you...?”

“Asked around town. The grocer pointed me to your father, and he pointed me here.”

He'd gone to some effort. Owen should invite him in. He steeled himself against Jeremy's scorn when he saw the pitiful state of the cabin. He gave Jeremy a helpless look, which made the man's smile brighten.

“Grab your coat and I'll take us for a ride.”

Owen blinked. “A... ride?”

“Sure. There must be something around here worth looking at. If nothing else, we can head out to Brownsville and find a place to have a whiskey.” Something must have crossed Owen's face because Jeremy added, “You do drink, don't you?”

“I do.” And he even had a few dollars left from the last time he'd withdrawn money from his bank account. He had some savings, mainly because there'd been no place in the trenches to spend his Army pay. “Not someplace too crowded.”

Jeremy's smile took on a touch of sympathy. “No place too crowded.”

Owen nodded, patting his trousers to find his wallet. “One minute.”

He ducked inside, reaching for his coat. He wished he had a muffler the same bright red as the sleigh, something that would make him less drab. He buttoned up and pulled a knit cap over his unruly hair, feeling like a guinea hen off to ride with a peacock.

His morning fire had burned low, so he covered the coals with ash and headed out. Climbing into the sleigh, he smiled again. This time the muscles felt less rusty, as if

he might remember this feeling. Excitement? Happiness? Cheer?

He was still sorting it out as he climbed into the sleigh. A heated brick had been placed right where he'd put his feet, and Jeremy offered to share the wool blanket draped across his lap.

"Thanks," Owen said, settling in. "I'm glad you...did this."

"Oh, I figure this way you'll owe me a favor." Jeremy gave him a sidelong glance. A flirtatious glance. The kind of glance that sent a spark of heat from Owen's belly to his prick.

"One I'll gladly repay." Owen straightened in his seat, feeling more like the man who'd gone off to war, not the shell who'd returned.

Jeremy didn't ask for directions, so Owen was content to simply ride along. The narrow lane branched off, so they didn't pass his parents' house. Instead, the horse trotted along at an easy pace. Something in Owen's chest loosened, something that had been tight for a long, long while. As fortunate as he was to have the cabin, and as kind as his parents were to leave him alone, riding with Jeremy made him feel just plain lucky.

"How did you end up in Springfield, of all places?" he asked, marveling at fate's quirky gesture.

Jeremy guided the horses with a practiced hand. "Family's from Boston. My father's a lawyer who married above himself, and Mother's French, which is how I ended up with those rooms in Paris. I came home when the war ended and, please don't think less of me, I immediately got caught up in a fairly embarrassing situation. Father suggested I take myself elsewhere for a while. Sullivan owed Father a favor, so here I am."

He spoke with a mix of defiance and vulnerability, as if it mattered what Owen thought. “Don’t know that I’m one to throw stones,” he said. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

“Good.” Jeremy nodded quickly. “That’s good.”

They shared a glance, and Jeremy’s smile returned to its former glory. Owen even chuckled, a sound so unusual it seemed to rattle in his chest. They skimmed along the top of the snow, passing farms, the utilitarian buildings all frosted with glittering white. Owen was warm, the air was crisp, and Jeremy was just as handsome as he remembered.

“What about you?” Jeremy kept his tone gentle, his smile warm.

“I came home after Armistice, too. My gran said I needed to go to the forest, so I’ve been staying in the cabin ever since. There was so much noise, you know? The quiet helps.” The honesty of his response surprised Owen, but he didn’t try to take any of it back. This was a day for new things.

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“And you are good with your hands, as I recall.” Jeremy kept his eyes on the road ahead, but his smirk made it plain he felt the heat of Owen’s gaze.

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“Oh, I saw enough”—Jeremy bumped Owen with his elbow—“to be grateful I’d studied the law. And since we’re speaking boldly, I’ll confess that the night we spent

together meant more to me than you perhaps realize. I knew at a glance that you have the strength I needed.”

Owen didn’t know what to say to that exactly. “Thank you.” His voice was gruff, his words insufficient. He’d never considered himself a particularly strong person. His life was divided into segments. Childhood, those blurry days spent in the woods or helping Father with the farm. School, when he didn’t trouble himself over anything more important than his chores and his assignments. The war, when he did his best not to think at all.

And now, this state of uncertainty, a grey, cloudless nothing.

Jeremy nudged him again, and they shared a quick smile. Perhaps he’d found a hint of sunlight after all.

They rode along that country road until the sun began its descent, and Jeremy had to turn back in order to get the horse stabled before sunset. The cabin, when they reached it, had grown smaller and meaner since they left. Jeremy guided the horse to stop out front, and Owen turned, hand extended as if to shake.

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As if Jeremy could read Owen’s mind, he eased back in his seat. “This has been a lovely afternoon, but I think we should end it here.”

Owen nodded mutely.

“You see, I would like to get to know you properly and see what comes of our friendship.”

Another mute nod, though this time Owen’s lips twitched into something like a smile.

“I’ll be back next Saturday, then, and this time we will stop in Brownsville for that whiskey.”

To that, Owen grinned.

He gave Jeremy’s hand another squeeze and climbed out of the sleigh, standing by his front door until horse and driver were a blur of cherry red, fading into the gathering dusk.

Chapter Four

He remembered Thanksgiving when his father appeared at his front door, a basket of leftovers in hand.

“Your mother missed you,” was all Father said.

Owen would have apologized, but he couldn’t find the words. He took the basket, doing his best not to cry. “Thanks for this. Tell her I said...” His voice faded. He had nothing to say.

Father only nodded, taking his leave as quickly as he’d come.

Setting the basket aside, Owen went to the window. Father had come by horse-drawn sleigh, and now that he was paying attention, Owen could hear the jingle of the horse’s bridle and the crackle of the sleigh’s runners over snow.

They must have had eight or so inches, though Owen couldn’t remember the storm. All the days bled together, a blank canvas where his life was reduced to little more than acting on instinct. He’d kept himself alive, though he was starting to forget why he bothered.

If he thought about anything at all, it was the sound of bombs and machine-gun fire, and the pain of losing another friend.

He’d lost more than a few over those eighteen months. Gunfire, poisoned gas, despondence. One man had spent so much time standing in the trenches, cold water

up to his ankles, that his feet had turned black, his toes staying behind when they removed his boots. They'd taken him to hospital, but by then the poison was in his blood and he'd died anyway.

Still, if nothing else, his father's visit prompted Owen to pay more attention to his surroundings. The next day, or maybe the day after that, he heard another sleigh. They'd had more snow, deep and powdery, so all he'd heard was the dull thud of a horse's hooves and the rattle of its tack.

Father must be returning. Owen gave himself a sniff, unsure how long it had been since he'd last bathed. His cheeks itched with new growth, and on the way to the window, he raked a hand through his unwashed hair.

At least it had been clean once this week.

Standing to one side of the glass, he peered out. The horse was a Morgan, its thick winter coat a deep brown with a black mane and tail. Father's horse had never looked so elegant.

The sleigh wasn't Father's, either. This one was a two-seater, painted a deep cherry red. And Father didn't have the reins.

Jeremy Abbot did.

Before he could lose his nerve, Owen hurried to the front door and poked his head out. He had to squint against the glare of the sun off the snow, or maybe it was the glare off Jeremy's smile. "Hullo," Owen huffed, shivering, but not because of the snow. The man had gone from Abbot to Jeremy between one heartbeat and the next, though Owen blushed at his own presumptuousness.

"You're not an easy man to track down." Jeremy's words made Owen smile,

something he'd lost the habit of.

"How did you...?"

"Asked around town. The grocer pointed me to your father, and he pointed me here."

He'd gone to some effort. Owen should invite him in. He steeled himself against Jeremy's scorn when he saw the pitiful state of the cabin. He gave Jeremy a helpless look, which made the man's smile brighten.

"Grab your coat and I'll take us for a ride."

Owen blinked. "A... ride?"

"Sure. There must be something around here worth looking at. If nothing else, we can head out to Brownsville and find a place to have a whiskey." Something must have crossed Owen's face because Jeremy added, "You do drink, don't you?"

"I do." And he even had a few dollars left from the last time he'd withdrawn money from his bank account. He had some savings, mainly because there'd been no place in the trenches to spend his Army pay. "Not someplace too crowded."

Jeremy's smile took on a touch of sympathy. "No place too crowded."

Owen nodded, patting his trousers to find his wallet. "One minute."

He ducked inside, reaching for his coat. He wished he had a muffler the same bright red as the sleigh, something that would make him less drab. He buttoned up and pulled a knit cap over his unruly hair, feeling like a guinea hen off to ride with a peacock.

His morning fire had burned low, so he covered the coals with ash and headed out. Climbing into the sleigh, he smiled again. This time the muscles felt less rusty, as if he might remember this feeling. Excitement? Happiness? Cheer?

He was still sorting it out as he climbed into the sleigh. A heated brick had been placed right where he'd put his feet, and Jeremy offered to share the wool blanket draped across his lap.

"Thanks," Owen said, settling in. "I'm glad you...did this."

"Oh, I figure this way you'll owe me a favor." Jeremy gave him a sidelong glance. A flirtatious glance. The kind of glance that sent a spark of heat from Owen's belly to his prick.

"One I'll gladly repay." Owen straightened in his seat, feeling more like the man who'd gone off to war, not the shell who'd returned.

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Christmas morning, Owen woke with Jeremy in his arms, wrapped in warmth and the scent of sweat and sex. It was a strange feeling, being together. He'd never spent an entire night with a man. Although it was Christmas morning and the world was encased in ice, something in his chest cracked. The icy tundra that had trapped him for so long gave way the tiniest bit, allowing soft green shoots of...something unfamiliar to break free.

He tilted his head so he could kiss Jeremy's neck, the skin soft and salty under his lips.

"Morning," Jeremy murmured, shifting his hips so Owen's cock nestled against his ass. The contact made Owen gasp and Jeremy laughed. "Feels like you're ready for another round."

Tightening his grip around Jeremy's shoulders, Owen let his prick reply.

In very short order, they had both found their release. They lay side by side, sweaty, sticky. Owen's body felt as if he could melt into the mattress, while his soul felt, well, that was another matter.

Jeremy propped himself on his elbow. "It's pretty bright out there. Not sure whether the clouds have altogether cleared, but I doubt it's still snowing."

Owen answered with a sigh. Jeremy's sidelong glance made him close his eyes.

Jeremy followed up with a poke to the ribs. "We don't have to go anywhere."

Grasping at anything besides the issue between them, Owen said, “But you’re working for Sullivan. Won’t he and his wife expect you?”

With a shrug, Jeremy settled back on the bed. He curled on his side, one arm draped across Owen’s belly. “I sent him my apologies before I rode out to get you yesterday.”

Owen cracked an eyelid to peek at Jeremy. “You were that sure of me?”

That earned him another poke to the ribs, which made them both laugh. Chalk up another first. I’ve never laughed in bed with a man, either .

“Look, we can always use the weather as an excuse. If you find it’s too much, we won’t stay for dinner.”

“Just long enough to wish them a merry Christmas.” The words took on the resonance of a vow. “All right. Mamé would be disappointed in me.” Again. As would Mother and Father. Owen left those words unsaid. Instead, he rolled on his side to match Jeremy and pulled him in for another kiss. “Thank you.” The words were breathless. “You’ve done so much.”

Laughing, Jeremy rolled him onto his back and climbed on top. “I think, Owen, that you give me too much credit. Let’s get cleaned up and go spread some Christmas cheer.”

That last was said with his forehead resting on Owen’s, their lips nearly touching. It was some time before they rose from the bed.

Enough time for Owen to show Jeremy as much gratitude with his hands and his lips as possible.

Washing and dressing together took on a convivial air. Jeremy shared stories of his

life in Boston, parties he'd attended, escapades from his college years. Owen had nothing to match those stories with; pony races on McDermott's field didn't hold a candle to Jeremy's time in the city.

And as if by some unspoken agreement, neither of them brought up the war. Owen supposed those stories would come, when they knew each other better and more time had passed. He'd been about to scold himself for presuming he and Jeremy had the luxury of such time, but Jeremy poked him a third time.

"Whatever you were thinking, stop it. We're on an adventure, and I won't stand for long faces."

Owen smiled, a creaky, unfamiliar expression. "An adventure. I wouldn't dream of spoiling it."

They left his rooms, and after wishing his housemother a merry Christmas, Jeremy left Owen to collect a bundle of the warm buns she'd made while he went to the stable to prepare the sleigh.

Time passed in a blur, and soon they were wrapped in warm blankets, Jeremy's hands on the reins, his chestnut gelding cutting through the powdery snow with long strides. A string of sturdy bells hung around the horse's neck, adding a festive clatter to the proceedings. The stable master had placed hot bricks on the floorboards, so their feet were warm, and the air was crisp and dry. The sky wore a coat of high silvery clouds. Not threatening, but it wouldn't take much for them to thicken up.

"Probably take us the better part of an hour to get there," Jeremy said. His hands were sure, his tone confident, and Owen relaxed a little bit more.

Possibilities floated through his mind, everything from his mother's warm embrace to the whole family rejecting them on sight. They couldn't know the nature of their friendship just by looking at them, though Owen had to admit his family might be

confused by the suddenness of it.

Inhaling against a sudden flutter of nerves, Owen tried to attend only to the thud of the horse's hooves and the shush of the sleigh's runners through the snow. He'd never even mentioned Jeremy and their weekend excursions. But then, he'd barely spoken to his family at all. Surely, they wouldn't think it strange that he'd brought a friend home. A friend . As if Jeremy meant the same to him as the boys he'd hung around in school.

The horse's pace slowed. "Getting tired?" Owen asked.

"That's okay. I've got supplies to take care of him when we stop. He'll get a Christmas treat too."

Owen flexed his fingers inside his gloves. He both wanted the ride to last longer, and to speed up so they could get it over with.

Get what over with? He had no earthly idea.

The trees opened out, signaling they were close to his parents' house. Owen was glad. His face felt raw, his lips were chapped, and if he was going to have to deal with awkwardness, he wanted to get on with it.

The noise of the sleigh brought his father onto the small front porch. Compared to Jeremy's townhouse, this home of wood and stone didn't look like much. Still, Father's smile took the edge off Owen's nerves.

Jeremy brought the horse to a halt and for a moment, no one said anything. Then Mother burst out the front door, wiping her hands on her skirt, Mamé right behind her.

"Owen!" Mother's voice broke on the word. "I didn't know if we should expect you

or not.”

She stopped at the top of the porch steps, three shallow risers that disappeared into the snow. Owen unwrapped himself and stood. Before jumping down from the sleigh, he glanced at Jeremy. His lover’s smile was bright, and Owen smiled back. “Thank you,” he mouthed, and then he turned to his family. “Father, Mother, Mamé, this is Jeremy Abbot. We...well, we met in Paris, of all places, and now he’s here, working for the Sullivans’ law firm.”

“Merry Christmas to you all,” Jeremy said. If he was at all nervous, he didn’t let it show, and that reassured Owen in its own way.

They both jumped down from the sleigh, Jeremy pausing to reach for something behind his seat. He brought out a wreath made of holly and a bottle of wine. “I don’t know if you all partake”—he offered the bottle to Father—“but I brought something for your Christmas cheer.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind.” Father took the bottle, then offered Jeremy his hand. “Thomas Spense.”

Owen jumped in. “Sorry. Where are my manners? Jeremy, this is my father and my mother, Juliette Spense, and my grandmother, Therese Munroe.”

Mamé stepped up to the edge of the porch. “You may call me Mamé. All of Owen’s friends do.”

She caught Owen’s eye and smiled. His cheeks heating, he looked toward his mother. “I hope it won’t be too much trouble to set another place at the table.”

Mother assured him it would not. She and Father went inside, though Mamé lagged behind. “Your friends are always welcome here, you know.”

He stomped some of the snow off his boot. “Thank you.”

Her gaze was steady, pinning him in place. Feeling awkward, he waved at the horse. “I’ll just help Jeremy take care of his beast and then we’ll be in.”

“Of course.” Mamé followed his parents inside, though he could tell she had more she wanted to say to him.

“You can go on in,” Jeremy said. He was already at work on the horse’s harness.

“It’s no problem. There won’t be room enough in the barn for the sleigh, but there’s an empty stall.”

“Lead on.” Jeremy’s smile was back, and it warmed something deep inside Owen. Together they tacked up the horse and led him into the empty stall next to Father’s dapple grey. The barn was warm, and while Jeremy rubbed down the animal to dry its sweat, Owen went back to the sleigh and retrieved the canister of oats, the horse’s Christmas treat.

Chores complete, they left the horses munching from their feedbags, Jeremy having shared some of the treat with Father’s grey. Owen led the way into the house, though a sudden unsettled feeling had him extending the simple ritual of removing his greatcoat, gloves, and hat.

Given the occasion, his parents were in the small front parlor, sitting side by side on the loveseat. That left the pair of upholstered chairs open. Owen guided Jeremy to one of them and pointed at the empty upholstered chair. “Mamé can take the other. I’ll bring in one of the dining chairs for myself.”

“She’s getting us some cider,” Mother said. “Why don’t you help her?”

Giving Jeremy a quick smile, Owen left him with Mother and Father. “How long

have you known Sullivan?" Father asked. Jeremy's response was quick and sure, and Owen relaxed a bit more.

He found his grandmother assembling glasses of cider on a tray. She'd brought out Mother's fine tumblers, clear with gold rims and dogwood flowers painted on the sides. "I can carry that tray for you, Mamé."

"Thank you."

Stepping to her side, he reached for the tray.

"I expect you won't need to stay out in the cabin much longer," she said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"No, I don't expect I will." He lifted the tray.

"You might even want to find a place in town."

That made him laugh. "One thing at a time, Mamé. Let's have dinner first."

Chuckling, she patted his arm. "I like him, Owen Spense."

He met her gaze, his heart growing lighter. "I like him too."

With Mamé at his side, Owen headed toward the front parlor where Jeremy and his parents were busy comparing mutual acquaintances. Owen couldn't help the smile that broke across his face. "Merry Christmas to you all," he said, blinking back the odd burst of moisture from his eyes. "It's good to be home."