



Cold Nights & Cryptids: An MM Coworkers to Lovers Romance

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Jesse loves working as a receptionist, but often feels overlooked and ignored by coworkers. When an opportunity comes up to spend a week on a Bigfoot hunt as part of a team-building exercise, he jumps at it. He loves camping and the outdoors, so even if it's with people from work, it seems like the break he's been needing.

Reed is the golden boy of the company. He's charming, handsome, and everyone likes him. Almost everyone. Reed is a total city boy with painted nails and perfectly coiffed hair. Camping is the last thing he wants to do.

Jesse gets his hopes up for a quiet trip when he doesn't see anyone from work, until he spots Reed, the last person he would want to be stuck with. But when he sees how nervous and scared the golden boy is, he reluctantly feels protective of him.

Off the grid and in the shadows of a legendary cryptid, how far will their team-building exercise go?

Cold Nights and Cryptids is a stand-alone novella with coworkers to lovers, cuddling for warmth, and tall tales to take home.

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Giant pines lined the highway as I drove away from the city. The beautiful peak of Mount Hood was my compass, guiding my way. The closer I got, the more it loomed over me. It was easy to forget that this majestic wonder was within reach when I got caught up in the daily grind. On clear days, it could easily be seen in Portland. It was close, only a couple of hours away, but far enough to take for granted.

I rolled my window down, breathing in the fresh scent of mountain air. It was instantly transportive. The green of the trees, the shadows they cast over the road, the quiet lack of traffic, and the clean, crisp air. It was refreshing. I felt like I was catching my breath for the first time in a while.

The cityscape disappeared in the mirror behind me. For the next week, I wouldn't have to answer any phone calls, get stuck in traffic, or deal with noisy neighbors and obnoxious customers. It would be me, the forest, an adventure, and maybe a handful of coworkers to bond with.

It was as close to a paid vacation as we were going to get. When Printech announced they would be doing team-building exercises, there was a collective rolling of eyes from all of us minions. We spent every day together at work, so why was there such a need to do something outside of the office together?

I worked as a receptionist, a job that was often overlooked by most there. They would walk past me with barely a nod. It didn't matter that I was the welcome committee. The first face people saw when they came in, and the first voice they heard when they called. Before any of the callers got to their destination, I played triage, assessing the needs and urgency and filtering through the sob stories I heard to figure out who they needed to talk to.

To the other departments, I might as well have been one of the plants that brightened up the lobby. Scenery that you got used to until you didn't notice it anymore.

It wasn't that I didn't like my job, I actually loved it, but spending a week outside of work with workpeople wasn't my idea of a good time. At least it was a week away, though. In the mountains, in nature. I grew up camping, only now it had been years since I'd spent time off the grid. Bills, responsibilities, cost of living, adulting. They prevented me from taking time for myself and doing things I used to love.

I inhaled deeply, letting the pure air cleanse my soul and bring me out of the office and out of the city. The turnoff I needed was coming up. I followed the signs and made my way down a single-lane road. If another driver was going the opposite way, one of us would have to pull to the side. Even still, I'd rather that kind of traffic jam than what I dealt with in the city.

It was a bumpy ride along the pothole-riddled road that ended in a parking lot. Two buildings stood surrounded by the forest. The larger of the two had a crooked sign with a few letters missing. Mt. Ho d Bigfoo M seum. It was about the size of a roadside diner with a large, comical statue out front. The smaller building looked like a shed really, but painted faintly on the front of it was Restrooms.

The place had definitely seen better days, but it brought a smile to my face, nonetheless. I wasn't a 'Squatcher' by any means, but I found the whole Bigfoot thing endearing. As a Portlander, it was something we grew up with. Murals, tours, river cruises, and statues everywhere. We lived in the shadow of the behemoth. How could you not love the mysterious cryptid?

A small group of people gathered in front of the museum with backpacks or duffel bags at their feet. In the parking lot, there was a large capacity van, the kind that sat fifteen people. Behind the van was a truck full of equipment. On the side of both were matching decals that featured a Bigfoot with a walking stick.

I grabbed my bags, steel water bottle, ran through a mental checklist to make sure I had everything I needed, and locked my car. As I approached the group, I scanned faces to see if I recognized anyone from work. No one so far. An older man with a long, grizzly white beard, wearing the same logo that was on the vehicles, walked over to me.

“Hiya. You here for Bigfoot Adventure Camp?”

“Yes, sir. I am. I’m Jesse.”

He grabbed my hand and shook it rapidly. “Nice to meet you, Jesse. My name is Strike. I’ll be your camp guide for this adventure. We’re getting ready to load the truck with everyone’s bags. Then we’ll kick things off with a tour of the museum first before heading deep into Sasquatch territory.”

“Sounds great, thank you.”

Strike left me to greet another newcomer. Glancing around again, I still wasn’t seeing anyone I knew. Maybe I lucked out and everyone picked different activities from the suggested list. Originally, management brought the idea forward with one big event for everyone, but there had been too much griping and complaining about the obstacle course they offered, so they’d created a list of five different activities to choose from. Maybe it wasn’t the best for overall team-building, but it calmed the masses.

Just as I thought I would get to appreciate the corny adventure on my own, I froze in place when he came into view. He came out from behind the truck and flipped his head back, whipping his luscious blond hair out of his eyes. I could swear it was in slow motion with a crescendo of music and birds singing in the background like a Disney prince making his grand entrance, releasing his smolder on the world. Zoom in for the money shot and the gleam of perfect teeth. Ting.

Reed fucking Dawson.

He was the poster boy of Printech. Literally. Reed was the darling of the sales department and was featured in a lot of their promotional videos and, yes, actual posters. He was no Disney prince, though. Unless you counted the ones from Into the Woods; all charm, no sincerity. Of all the people to be stuck in the woods for a week with, why did it have to be him?

Reed looked right past me as he scanned the crowd, likely looking for someone he knew. When his gaze swept back toward me, he tilted his head, as if trying to place my face. Which, yeah, kinda stung a little. His eyes rounded and that smile I saw on the posters at work formed as he jogged over.

Wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans, I straightened, trying to look like I hadn't been watching his every move.

"Hey, you're from Printech, right? Um...Jason something?" Reed held out his hand.

My stomach soured, and I was half-tempted to cancel this whole thing. But I needed the time away, the fresh air, tall trees, and a night sky unpolluted by city lights. I wasn't going to let fucking Reed ruin this.

I shook his hand. "Jesse, actually. Jesse Diaz. I work the front desk."

Reed flipped that blond wave of hair. "Jesse, right. Sorry."

"Alrighty, folks. Looks like we've got everyone here. Once you've loaded your bags into the truck, we'll begin with a tour of the Mount Hood Bigfoot Museum. This will help you familiarize yourself with the signs and clues to look for once we're out in the bush," Strike called out.

Reed's eyes darted around once more, before leaning into me with a lowered voice, "This can't be everyone, right? Where's the rest of the Printech staff for this team-building thing?"

I shrugged, trying not to be too weirded out that Reed was talking to me when he normally blew right past me in the lobby. No wonder he didn't know my name.

"They're probably all at the pottery-making class."

Reed grabbed my arm and turned me to face him. He had the most gorgeous blue eyes. I may or may not have spent a lot of time staring at said eyes in 2D, or while watching his sales videos. He looked like he was waiting for me to respond. Was I staring too long? Did he say something?

"I'm sorry, what?" I asked as I shook myself free from the hold his eyes had on me.

"There was an option for a pottery class?" Reed asked.

"Oh, yeah. That one filled up pretty quickly."

"Seriously? What the fuck? I was told this was the only one available." His eyes went dark for a minute before he fixed that smile on his face, a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Something about that flash of emotion made my heart twinge, but I shook it off. This was Reed, a man who had everything handed to him. He could use a little discomfort and disappointment. The man might not be my ideal companion for this trip, but I found myself looking forward to seeing him and his perfectly manicured nails roughing it for a few days.

"So how many options were there?" Reed asked.

"I think there were five. Some were weekly classes like the pottery one, others

weekend getaways, but this one was the longest.”

”So, which one were you hoping to do?”

”This one,” I stated.

Reed’s eyes widened. ”Wait? Are you serious? You had other, simpler things you could have done, but you chose to spend a week in the woods hunting a creature that doesn’t exist. Why?”

The shock in his tone was amusing. I grew up doing this, and he was appalled that anyone would choose to spend time outside.

”I like being in nature. It’s refreshing. Besides, a paid week away seemed like the best deal to me.”

”I...suppose.”

Before long, we were ushered into the small museum, and the fourteen of us barely fit in their main exhibit room. It was filled with framed photos with outlines of blurry shapes, plaster molds of footprints, maps, drawings, and photos of strange stick piles. I examined each item carefully, enjoying the showmanship of it all. It might not be a big place, but they had enough hype that it didn’t matter.

Reed sidled up beside me, close enough that I could smell him. Was he wearing cologne? I mentally rolled my eyes. Who wore cologne when they went camping? I would have been content to look around in peace and quiet, but apparently, he decided I was his buddy. Damn, he smelled good, though.

”Hey, Jesse. Do you actually believe in all this?”

"I don't know. I mean, there's a ton of stuff that can't be explained. I believe man has a lot yet to discover. So who's to say there aren't creatures or beings beyond human reach that are older or different from what we know?"

It wasn't that I believed completely, but there were too many stories in different places that were too similar for coincidence.

Reed's breath tickled the skin of my cheek as he leaned in to whisper. "Do you think this could be dangerous?"

I wanted to laugh, but when I caught the worry on his face, I decided to go easy on the guy. "They do these trips all the time. It may be a little hokey, but they know what they are doing. Besides, there's safety in numbers. Just don't go anywhere by yourself and you'll be fine."

Bigfoot or no, it was generally good advice for camping that wouldn't hurt him to follow.

That seemed to help a little as he took a step away from me and the worry decreased. And I could breathe a little easier without his cologne filling my nose. So why did I miss it...a little?

"If you listen carefully, you can hear the whoops and shrieks often attributed to Bigfoot," Strike announced before a soundtrack played in the room. It was hard to distinguish anything through the wind and rustling until a faint shrill sounded.

Yet again, Reed was at my side, practically leaning against me. "What do you think that was?"

"Probably just a bird or something." I had to admit that it didn't sound like any animal I knew, but I wasn't going to tell him that.

“Okay, birds, yeah. That’s good.”

My lips pursed at the smile that wanted to form. I didn’t know why I was protecting this gorgeous man who overlooked me almost daily, but I had to admit I didn’t hate seeing the always suave and confident Reed Dawson a little shaken.

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As we loaded into the van, I took a seat next to Jesse. Safety in numbers and all. I really thought the whole team would be here, and now I was feeling like an ass for being the only one. Well, the only one besides Jesse, who actually wanted to be here. I slid a glance over to watch him watching the trees that passed by the window.

His rich, golden skin picked up the sunlight that shone through the glass. He had beautiful dark brown eyes and deep brown hair. I'd seen him, of course, but was usually too preoccupied to interact with him. And now we were stuck in the woods together. At least if I was going to be stuck, I'd have a good view.

My uncle put me up to coming. He was the CFO of Printech and the reason I started working there. Of course, he was hoping I would go the corporate route, but that would never have worked. I wasn't a numbers person or a finance person; I was a people person. Except, even that got overwhelming too, and I needed a break from peopling sometimes. Truth be told, I wasn't planning to sign up for any of the team-building exercises. My uncle pulled me into his office and went on and on about reputation and the way it looked if his own family didn't participate.

When I finally opened the sign-ups, the only one left was the Bigfoot Experience. I wouldn't have put my name down if I hadn't had him breathing down my neck. While I was surprised not to see more people from work, it was a bit of a relief, actually. Less people to have to put an act on for.

I leaned against Jesse. "Do you camp often?"

Jesse sighed slightly before turning to me. "Yeah. I mean, I haven't in years, but we grew up camping."

“Really? Why?”

It was something I never understood. Choosing to give up all the luxuries of modern civilization and roughing it. Why would people decide to go backward when we’d worked so hard to advance technology and conveniences? As a kid, I remember trying to sleep on a trampoline at a friend’s house. Except there were bugs, it got damp, and we noped out of that fast, ending up in the living room, under a blanket fort. That was the closest I came to sleeping outside.

And now I was going to be in the actual woods for a whole freaking week with a beast looming around us, and who knew what kind of bugs.

Jesse shook his head. “It’s a lot of work, but it was always special. Time away as a family to simply be together. Time to step outside of the busyness of every day and enjoy the beauty of nature. It’s nice to get away, see the wonders of the world, and it’s a reminder that there’s more to life than punching the time clock.”

“But there are bugs in nature.”

He cracked a smile and I rather liked the way it looked on him. “Yes, there are bugs. But there are owls, foxes, squirrels, deer, bats, bears, and a lot of other amazing creatures, too.”

My gaze slid past him to the dense woods outside that were so completely removed from the city. “Yeah, I’m not sure that’s any better.”

Jesse let out a laugh. “It’s going to be a long week for you then.”

No kidding.

Jesse returned his gaze to the window, and we sat in silence for the rest of the drive.

When we went off-road, even more off-road than we already were, a big bump had me clutching for an armrest. But we were on a bench seat, so it was his leg I grabbed and definitely not an armrest. Jesse sucked in a breath and cut me a look, one that I couldn't read. Normally, that was something I excelled at; reading people. Reluctantly, I released his leg and shrugged an apology.

Strike announced our arrival, and the van came to a stop. I stood up quickly, hoping to not make any more of an ass of myself than I already had. I slipped on my mask, the one that made me Printech Salesman of the Year, for the third year in a row.

Everyone unloaded the vehicles, and I busied myself with small talk with the other campers. Small talk was my bread and butter. I could weather and hair and day job the hell out of anyone because it came with the sales territory. The surface stuff was easy; it was everything else I found hard.

Of the fourteen of us here, twelve were couples of all ages and stages. There was an elderly husband and wife celebrating their fiftieth anniversary with an adventure. A hot, young gay couple that seemed mismatched, but so completely in love. And a woman who confided in me that she planned to propose to her girlfriend. I was surrounded by people in love, who, for some reason beyond my comprehension, decided a week in the woods hunting for Bigfoot was the perfect way to celebrate. Weirdos.

And then there was me. And Jesse. Great!

"Alright folks, it's time to set up camp. Best to do it while we have plenty of daylight," Strike announced, before revealing a pile of tent bags.

"Oh? We are setting up our own tents? I thought they would be ready for us."

Strike let out a loud, raspy laugh. "Where's the fun in that? Our staff is available to

assist, but will not be doing the work for you.”

I frowned as I grabbed a tent bag and walked to a clearing. The information about the trip said everything would be provided for us. Since they got a lot of tourists and travelers, they offered all the necessary supplies. Guests were only expected to bring clothing, and a small suggested list of items. In my mind, I’d pictured more of a glamping set-up. Constructed canvas tents with full beds and tables to sit at, not something that came in a bag and needed assembly.

Jesse clapped my shoulder. “Come on. I’ll help you with yours and then you can help me with mine. It’s not as hard as it seems, it’s just the getting started that’s the worst part of it.”

At least he had knowledge about these kinds of things. Jesse took my bag, opened it, and began laying out the fabric. He was bent over, ass in the air, and damn, that made for a great view. He looked over his shoulder at me, catching me staring at his juicy butt.

“Come on, I’m not doing this for you.”

I brushed my hand through the wave of blond hair on my forehead, pushing it back. “Right. Sorry, I wasn’t expecting you to. I just, uh, got a little...”

“Distracted?” Jesse supplied with a smirk.

“Maybe.”

His brown eyes warmed, drawing in the natural light that came down through the trees, making them gleam. Was that interest that sparked in them? Or just flattery at being admired? There was a lot to admire about him. How had I not noticed this beauty sitting at the front desk? Maybe because he always had a phone to his ear, or

maybe because I had my head up my ass.

“Okay, how do we do this?”

Jesse talked me through each step patiently. We got to the final hole for the last tension rod. When I tried to get it into place, it whipped up and slapped me in the face.

“Oh, fuck!” I stood up, holding my cheek.

Jesse let the tent drop, running around to check me out. “Let me take a look.”

I met his gaze as I pulled my hand away. With the gentlest touch, he brushed my stinging cheek. He took a breath. Or maybe he took my breath; it was hard to tell with him so close to me. Jesse blinked hard and took a step back.

“It doesn’t look too bad, might bruise, but it missed your eye.”

“It’s not going to scar, though?” It sounded vain, even to me, but my face was my foot in the door wherever I went. I put a lot of effort into my looks and I’d hate for one attack of a tent to ruin it.

Jesse rolled his eyes. “No, your beautiful face remains intact.”

Beautiful? His annoyed tone didn’t match the word. Was he using it as an insult? With the way his gaze held mine as he checked my cheek, he didn’t seem repulsed by me.

Jesse indicated toward the tent. “We’re almost done.”

Right. Back to business then. We got my tent up without any more beatings. It wasn’t much, but I had to admit I was proud of it. I stood back with my hands on my hips,

admiring the makeshift shelter.

“Not too shabby, Reed.” Jesse grinned.

“Yeah?” I smiled broadly.

“Yeah. Now, we do mine.”

We got Jesse’s tent up a lot faster after having done it once before, and, thankfully, without any further injuries. I touched my hand to my cheek and felt a slight welt had formed. Great.

Jesse stood back, observing his tent, before sliding a glance at me. ”Thanks, Reed. It’s always easier with an extra set of hands. I...uh, think I’m going to work on setting up my stuff.”

That felt like a dismissal if I’d ever heard one. ”Right. Thanks to you as well. I appreciate the help. I’m going to see if I can find an ice pack or something.”

”Probably a good idea. I’ll catch up with you later.”

”Later, Jesse.”

The tents were set up in wheel spokes centered around a bonfire pit. Several chairs were set around it and a long wooden picnic table was being turned into an outdoor kitchen of sorts. A camp stove was set up on a stand next to the table. One-half of the cute couple I’d seen at the museum was sorting through tubs and arranging large cans on the table.

He had this gorgeous deep blue hair in a style similar to mine and wore a black faux leather jacket. Not the typical camping gear. As I walked up, his partner ran up to

him. He had long, wavy brown hair and wore a bright green hoodie that said Portland Bigfoot, I Believe.

“Hey Ri, I heard they have night vision goggles for us to use. I’m going to go see if I can snag a pair.” The brown-haired man kissed Blue Hair’s cheek. An action that brought an immediate smile to his face. It was sweet.

“Sure thing, Camper. I’ll be here.” He sent him off with a slap to his ass.

I closed the distance to Blue Hair, clearing my throat to pull his attention away from the man who had him in a trance.

“Hi, sorry to interrupt. I was hoping to find an ice compress or something.” I pointed to my cheek.

Blue Hair guy was tall, but his partner had been his equal in height. He was a few inches taller than me, though. He scanned my face and winced when he saw the raised mark on my cheek.

“Ouch. Tent attack?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Educated guess. I’m pretty sure the whole place would be freaking out if you’d gotten injured by stumbling across Bigfoot,” he smirked.

“Haha, yeah. Right. Do you think he’s actually out there?” I asked and shifted my eyes to the trees.

The man shrugged. “I don’t really care one way or the other.”

Not what I was expecting. But then his whole vibe wasn't really meshing with the whole Bigfoot Hunting theme. "So you're not a cryptid enthusiast then?"

"Nah. Not really. But my boyfriend loves all this paranormal shit. And, well, I love him. I'm happy being anywhere he is. So, am I looking for Bigfoot? Nope, don't give a fuck. But I will follow him anywhere. Haunted asylum, mystical woods, hunting for creatures of legend? If it puts a smile on his face, I'm there."

"Wow." The word came out on a sigh. If he weren't already completely spoken for, I might have fallen for the gorgeous bad boy. What would it be like to have someone love you like that? God, I wanted that. I'd never had anyone serious in my life. I'd dated a lot, but never got much further than two or three dates. After that, things tended to get deeper, and deeper was vulnerable and hard.

"There's a cooler with ice packs tucked around the food. I'm not sure where the first aid stuff is yet, but that could probably do. I'm Rider, by the way."

"Reed. And thank you. I just don't want it to leave a permanent mark."

Rider's eyes clouded for a moment at my words. "No, you don't want that."

Wanting to redirect whatever darkness tugged at him, I asked. "How'd you get roped into setting up the food?"

His blue eyes brightened immediately. "Oh, I volunteered. I may not know anything about camping or cryptozoology, but helping people with food is something I'm passionate about."

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Alone in my tent, I focused on setting everything up the way I liked it. I hung the lantern from the roof of the tent to provide maximum lighting when I needed it. After digging out my flashlight from my duffel bag, I placed it in a sidewall pocket for easy access. My sleeping bag and foam pad were set up away from the walls of the tent so I wouldn't feel the dampness seep through in the early morning hours. Each task was automatic for me, with a lifetime of doing the same thing. Only this time, my attention was divided, my thoughts pulling back to the Printech poster boy.

For someone who barely knew I existed at work, Reed had seemed to decide I was his buddy. Which I supposed was the point of this whole thing, anyway. And maybe he wasn't as douche-y as I thought he would be. Reed was rather...helpless, and it was satisfying seeing the golden boy struggle. Maybe even a little endearing.

I didn't hate having his attention, especially knowing he'd been checking me out. Reed fucking Dawson had been staring at my ass. And yeah, his caught my attention too. It was hugged perfectly by his likely designer jeans. Jeans that probably hadn't ever gotten dirty until today when he knelt on the ground and assembled the tents with me. The way his full lips turned down when he stood and patted the dust off them had been telling.

Still, he did it, even taking a thwack to the face. As much as I found his immediate concern about his looks a bit much, I was glad he wasn't hurt worse.

Reed followed me around like I was his only hope of surviving this thing. It would have been cute, except I'd been hoping for time alone. This was my refuge, my getaway, my adventure. Maybe I felt a little bad about how I brushed him off, but I needed time to myself. Except, with him flooding my thoughts, I wasn't really by

myself, anyway. Reed Dawson would be sleeping in a tent next to mine, mere fabric the only thing that would separate us as he undressed. Fuck! That was so much more appealing than it should be. Thinking of that Disney prince hair swoop moment and the way his soft cheek felt beneath my touch had my dick hardening.

Standing up as much as I could in the tent, which meant slightly hunched, I unzipped my tan cargo pants and adjusted myself. Not sure if he would come knocking soon, I would have to release the tension later. For now, I needed a distraction. I was in the woods, surrounded by trees, with endless stuff to do and see. I didn't need to stay in my tent and not think about Reed.

With the single goal of getting him out of my head, I unzipped the tent door and swung my head to scan the area. My heart leapt when I caught him near the kitchen area talking to that blue-haired guy. Useless heart. Opting to go anywhere else, I spotted Strike and another young man standing near one of the trucks looking at a tub full of equipment, and headed toward them.

Strike looked up, and the wrinkles around his eyes crinkled with joy as he met my gaze. "Hiya, Jesse. Have you met Cameron?"

The guy in the green Portland Bigfoot hoodie smiled broadly and stretched out his hand. "You can call me Cam. Can you believe we're actually out here?"

I shook his hand, appreciating the excitement in his warm brown eyes. "Nice to meet you. And yeah, it's beautiful out here." I pointed to his hoodie. "You from Portland?"

"No, I drove up from Southern California with my boyfriend. But my mom and her girlfriend live in Portland. Ever since my mom moved up here, I've been dying to go on a Bigfoot excursion. I've always kind of had a thing for ghost-hunting and the things that go bump in the night. Even if they freak me out at the same time."

I chuckled. “Yeah, I get that.”

“Well, we have some great goggles that will help you observe from a safe distance,” Strike interjected.

“That sounds perfect. I’d love to see what you have.”

“Check out these beauties.” He pulled out a long, clunky pair of goggles that had numerous buttons and switches on them. He handed me a pair.

“Once it gets darker, you’ll be able to utilize the night vision better. It’s too bright just yet. But they also have infrared, which lets you see temperatures. It may not give you clear shapes, but if you see something with a big enough heat signature, it’s probably a living creature. And you can switch the infrared off and zoom in.”

Cam and I both looked through our goggles, scanning the campsite in regular mode. Strike clicked a switch on each of ours, revealing a colorful range of images. Heat signatures.

“I spy something really hot,” Cam whispered.

“Yeah? Where?” He pointed me in a direction where two yellow people shapes glowed brightly. I flicked the switch to turn off the infrared to see Reed and the blue-haired guy in view. They were sitting in chairs by the fire pit talking. Reed, holding an ice pack to his face and his pouty lips spread wide in a smile. Damn! Cameron was right: very hot.

“That’s my boyfriend. We’re actually celebrating our second anniversary. Is that your guy?”

I lowered the goggles and straightened. “My guy?”

“Yeah. That blondie, model-looking dude. You two came together, right?”

“No,” my voice croaked, and I coughed to clear it. “No! Reed is not my guy, and we didn’t come together. He’s just...someone I work with.”

“Really? Interesting. How is it possible that the two of you work together and just happen to end up on the same excursion?” Cam gave me a knowing look.

“It’s not like that. It’s this whole employer-sanctioned team-building exercise thing.”

“Sure, sounds totally reasonable. But, hey, no judgment. We’re out in the middle of nowhere. Seems the perfect opportunity to team-build.” He wagged his brows.

I couldn’t help the laugh that popped out of me. Today had turned out much weirder than I expected, and I was on a Bigfoot hunt. The weird meter was already pretty high.

Cam turned to Strike. “Can I borrow these?”

Strike pulled out a clipboard from the bag. “Sure, you just need to check them out.”

We each signed our names and took our loaner goggles with us. Cameron rushed back over to where the other two were sitting and crouched beside his boyfriend, excitedly showing off the features. I took another chair around the fire pit, across from Reed, offering him an awkward smile.

The one he returned wasn’t as brilliant as when he’d been laughing with Rider, but it was stunning all the same. Luckily, a few other campers settled in around us, saving me from our awkwardness.

Before long, one of the crew was busy cooking, and a fire was built in the pit as the

sun went down. It was a fun evening filled with laughter and camaraderie. Now and then, I would catch Reed's gaze, his eyes reflecting the fire's light. There wasn't anything planned the first night of the trip to allow everyone to settle in. Adventures would begin tomorrow.

I heard Cam mention something about star-gazing to Rider, which had an immediate effect, his eyes gleaming with amusement. Little by little, couples paired off and retired to their tents. Not wanting to be the last two out here by the fire and for things to get awkward again, I said goodnight, deciding it was time to hunker down and read by lantern light to nature's soundtrack playing around us.

Inside the privacy of my tent, I undressed and put on my thermals. Even though it was early fall, and the temperature was moderate, it tended to drop at night. Knowing we were going to be off the grid, I brought a couple of paperbacks to read so I wouldn't have to rely on electronics. If I laid on my stomach with my book in front of me and my pillow propped under my chest, it was the best angle to catch the light that hung above me.

The wind whispered through the campsite, the leaves of the trees rustled, and owls hooted. It was a lovely symphony, one that I missed often when the noise of the city filtered up to my apartment. Sirens, people shouting, dogs barking. The forest was loud, and it always amazed me how awake everything was at night, but I'd take a loud forest over a loud city anytime.

It wasn't long before I heard footsteps outside that came to a stop by my tent door. With the light from my lantern, I could see a man's profile outside the fabric wall. He stood there for a moment, turned away, and then came back.

"Knock, knock," he whispered.

I sighed and tucked my book away before getting up to unzip my door. Surprised to

see who stood there, and yet not surprised at all. He was in a hoodie and sweatpants, arms folded over his chest, looking out of sorts.

“Reed? What’s up? Everything okay?”

“Um...I didn’t think it would be so noisy here.”

“Yeah, the woods are like that.” There might have been a bite of sarcasm, though I managed to keep my eye roll internal.

“It’s just...I thought I heard something. Something big.”

“It’s probably just your imagination.”

Reed gave me a half-smile, one that didn’t do anything to ease the fear in his eyes. “Yeah, the thing is...I have a really good imagination, which is not at all helpful when it comes to nighttime noises. And with only a thin material protecting me from whatever is out there, whether real or perceived, I don’t think I’ll be able to relax. Is there any chance you’d let me bunk with you? Safety in numbers, right?”

My initial reaction was to turn him away and tell him he’d be fine. But with the way he stood curled into himself and the way his eyes darted every time the leaves rattled, it would be cruel of me to turn him away. As much as I wanted my tent to myself, I couldn’t be cruel to him.

“Sure. Grab your sleeping bag. I’m not sure there’s room for all of your stuff, but we can figure that out tomorrow.”

His eyes lit up, and he bounced off. Well, fuck me. There went my alone time, and my plans to jack off when it seemed everyone else was asleep. How could I relieve the tension caused by the dreamy company spokesperson, if said dreamy guy was

sharing my space? Because, damn, if he was going to keep looking at me with those beautiful blues of his, I was in for a long, hard week.

While I waited for him, I rearranged my stuff, condensing it as much as possible, and slid my bedding over as far as I could without it being up against the side. It was going to get a little cramped.

The shuffling of footsteps outside told me he was back. I held the flap of the tent open, welcoming him in. Reed looked so young, standing there holding his bedroll like a little kid dragging their blanket into their parents' room to hide from monsters. My heart did that annoying pitter-patter thing again.

“Come on in. We’ll have to get cozy, but there’s room.”

Reed stepped inside and placed his foam pad on the floor of the tent, pushing it right against mine. He laid the sleeping bag on top of it and sort of stared at it for a moment.

“Are you sure about this?” He asked hesitantly.

I managed to keep my sigh from escaping my lips. “Yes, it’ll be fine, I swear.”

“Okay.” He lowered down and tucked himself into his sleeping bag, pulling the zipper up. I had to step over him to get into my bed. Cozy was a polite word for how close we were going to be. I got in and faced the side of the tent, my back turned toward his back.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do this, but I really appreciate it. It already helps to know someone is here,” Reed whispered into the dark.

“It’s not a problem at all.” It was the biggest problem. Especially with his decadent

cologne now filling the small tent—and my cock. I shifted slightly, putting another inch of space between us.

We were quiet, both of us laying there awkwardly, our breathing sounding loud in my ears. The lantern was still on above us and I cursed myself for not having turned it off before laying down. Now, I was hard and trying not to move. I'd either have to wait it out and see if I could relax or risk slapping him in the face with my tent pole as I climbed over him. Yeah, that wasn't happening.

"I'm sorry. I forgot to turn the light off. Is it okay if I leave it on for a bit?"

"Yeah, actually. I was going to ask if you minded if we kept it on. I'm not used to it being so completely dark. There are always lights at night in the city."

Phew! Crisis averted. "Yeah, that's fine."

"Thank you," Reed whispered.

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Hearing Jesse, knowing he was near, helped keep the beasts, and Bigfoot, at bay. If he was real, we were in his territory, and that thought amplified every sound in the night. But with Jesse beside me, my overactive imagination was quelled by the cadence of him. In his tent, I might have actually been able to fall asleep, despite being close to the ground in the middle of the woods with nothing but fabric as a shield, except...I couldn't stop shivering.

Even in my hoodie and with the sleeping bag cinched around me, I was chilled to the bone. I tended to get cold easily, but I had no idea it would be this cool at night. We weren't that far from home, but apparently high enough in elevation that it made a big difference. And outside. Why would anyone choose to sleep outside? Especially not when they had a big, soft bed with fluffy blankets to burrow into. I missed my bed.

"Reed, your teeth are chattering so loud it's making my jaw hurt," Jesse said.

"I'm sorry. Can't help it. I'm freezing and can't seem to get warm." Another shiver jerked my body.

"Alright, we can fix this. Turn your sleeping bag around so it opens on this side. I'm going to do the same."

Through lots of wriggling and twisting, we both flipped over until we were facing each other. The lantern light shone over us, and Jesse's rich brown eyes appeared right before mine. He gave me a sheepish smile, and it was sweet. Very sweet.

"So, yeah. Let's unzip, and we'll just have to get nice and close, share body heat."

“You want to spoon with me?” I asked with surprised amusement.

Jesse smirked slightly. “What I want is to get you warmed up so we can both get some sleep. Spooning is a side effect we’ll have to risk.”

Sounded like a fun risk to me. I didn’t often share a bed with someone. Fucked, sure, but not the cuddling, breathing the same air kind of thing. Besides freezing my ass off and wanting anything I could get to help me heat up, being in Jesse’s arms seemed like a really good idea.

“Big spoon or little spoon?” I asked him.

Jesse cleared his throat. “Seeing as how we need to get you comfortable, I think that makes me the big spoon.”

He bent down and unzipped his sleeping bag, holding it open. I did the same and scooted closer to him, facing away from him. With both of our bags covering us, he wrapped his arm around me, my back in front of his chest, but not quite touching.

“Is this okay?” he asked, his breath fluttering against my ear.

I snuggled even closer, enjoying the heat that radiated from him. My body finally untensed after shivering for so long. I sighed in relief. “Yeah, that’s nice. Thank you. You okay?”

“Um, yeah. Just don’t wiggle around too much. And also, I apologize in advance if you feel...anything.”

“Like what?” My mind went all over the place; snakes, bugs, Bigfoot steps. What kind of anything was he talking about?

“Please don’t make me answer that.” Jesse pleaded with desperation. It took me a minute to rein my paranoia back in and realize what he meant. With the position we were in, my ass was a couple inches away from his crotch, and damn, his telling me not to wiggle only made me want to do it more. I suppressed the urge to chuckle, but couldn’t fight the smile that pulled at my lips.

“Right. This is a no-judgment tent. Besides, it’s your space, and you’ve been generous enough to help keep me comfortable. Which I am, by the way. I think I can handle the side effects. Thank you, Jesse. Rest well.”

His entire body seemed to relax behind me, and he let out a soft sigh. “Rest well, Reed.”

Jesse felt so warm that I seemed to draw nearer throughout the night, enjoying the cocoon we made together. The noise of the forest and the wind and everything that shouldn’t be there when I was trying to sleep drifted away. Gone was the fact that we were sleeping on the ground, or outside, or in a tent. Gone was the lack of privacy, with other people sleeping behind fabric walls close by. It was just the two of us, alone, in the coziest suite there was.

My body had a mind of its own, though I admit I was aware enough and did nothing to fight it. I inched closer and closer to him, curious to see if his body had reacted to our situation as much as mine had. Because, yeah, I was sporting some serious morning wood. It would be nearly impossible not to with his breaths against my head and his arms wrapped around me.

Another wiggle and I sucked in a breath, feeling his hard cock nudge my ass. His thermals did nothing at all to constrict his erection. I moved back, trying to maneuver him to nestle between my cheeks when his arm tightened around me.

“Would you stop that?” His voice was gruff with sleep and so very sexy.

“Stop what?” I asked innocently and rubbed my ass against him again.

“Fuck, Reed. What are you doing?”

“Nothing at all.” Squirm, rub, wiggle. My own cock was throbbing now as I continued to tease him.

“It’s not funny, Reed. If you keep doing that, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“No-judgment tent. Remember? You helped me out, which I appreciate. Maybe I can do the same for you.”

I reached between us and gripped his cock through his long underwear, enjoying the hiss that slipped from him.

”We can”t do this.”

I stilled my movement, realizing I didn”t know anything about the guy, besides catching him checking me out and waking up with his boner at my back. Those were important details. But there were probably some questions that needed asking.

”Are you in a relationship?”

Jesse sighed heavily. I might not have been great at them, but I wouldn”t be the one who broke up a couple. Not intentionally, at least.

”No. No, I”m not.”

One side of my lip tugged up. “Good. Neither am I, by the way.” I turned up my best salesman charm, and added, “So, I see no reason not to do this.”

Behind me, I cupped his balls and gave them a squeeze, before wrapping my hands around his cloth-covered dick.

“Fuck me!” Jesse bit out, even as he pumped into my hand. Okay, he wasn’t pushing me away or stopping this. He let out a groan when I was the one that paused, pulling my hand away. “Don’t toy with me, Reed.”

His desperation made my grin stretch wider, but I was far from done with him, merely needed to rearrange. I tugged at the waistband of my sweatpants and slid them down to my thighs. I was bare beneath them and wriggled back in place until Jesse’s cloth-covered cock was resting perfectly between my cheeks. I grabbed his hand and placed it on my hip as I began to work myself against him. Was it forward? Yeah, probably. But I didn’t have a problem with being forward sexually. It was the what to do with the guy after that I struggled with. Hell, I’d already spooned with the man all night; the least I could do was get him off. Or both of us, if I was lucky.

Jesse moaned and tightened his grip on my hip before sliding his hand forward and brushing his fingertips against my shaft. Looked like I might be lucky, too. His fingers wrapped around me, stroking and twisting, causing me to buck into him. His hips moved in sync with mine as we writhed together. The sexiest of spoons. He ground against my ass, the fabric a wicked delight against my skin as he jacked me to the wild rhythm.

“Fuck! Reed! I’m almost there.” Jesse’s voice was frantic with need. He let go of my cock and put enough distance between us to pull his dick out from his thermal bottoms. Nothing separated us as he took me in hand once more and thrust between my cheeks.

His thumb brushed over my head, putting the slightest pressure on my tip. It undid me. I came hard, spurts covered his hand and my belly. Jesse grunted loudly as he shot warm cum onto my back. Both of us were left panting and breathing hard,

neither of us moving from our position.

“Good morning,” I said, breathless.

Jesse let out a loud laugh. “What the hell just happened?” He released his hold on me and flopped onto his back.

My front and back were sticky, but I didn’t have any of my stuff here and I didn’t want to ask to use something of his to clean up. Instead, I pulled my sweatpants back up and put my hoodie back in place, hoping to find somewhere to wash up later.

I turned to face him, noting the look of contentment on his face, and propped myself up on my elbow. The need to continue touching him swept through me. I managed to hold back from rubbing his chest or tracing his body through the skin-tight thermal shirt. His bottoms were still down, flaccid cock just sitting there for me to admire. Did I have any right to run my fingers over him? We’d gotten each other off, sure. But hadn’t even kissed. It wasn’t intimate, just a much-needed release.

He shifted his gaze to meet mine before shaking his head. “Reed fucking Dawson.”

The way he said it with equal amounts of exasperation and wonder had me feeling like it wasn’t the first time he’d said my name like that, and I kind of hoped it wouldn’t be the last.

“At your service,” I replied.

Jesse gave an awkward laugh. My eyes roamed over him, catching again on his dick resting on a bed of dark curls. Under my gaze, it began to thicken again. Jesse pulled his thermals back up, tucking himself away. Pity. I salivated at the thought of watching him harden, ready for more.

He cleared his throat. “My eyes are up here.”

When I returned my attention to his face, I noticed that there was a tint of pink in his golden cheeks. He looked beautiful like that.

Jesse ran a hand through his hair and let out a deep breath. “This...this can’t happen.”

I itched to reach out and caress him. Would he even want that? He’d been so hot and cold since we got here. Well, maybe more indifferent and annoyed, and then very hot.

“And why is that? We’re both available. No harm, no foul.”

Jesse sat up. “Because. You’re you, and I’m me, and this can’t go any further.”

Wanting to be on an even level with him, I pushed myself to a sitting position. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re Reed Dawson, Prince of Printech. And I’m just the baker’s wife.”

I felt my brows pinch and my lips purse as I tried to figure out what that meant. “Wait. What? Who’s this baker and what makes you their wife?”

“No, it’s...shit. I don’t know. My head’s all over the place. I was thinking of the musical, Into the Woods. You’re royalty, and I’m having some bizarre Moment in the Woods moment.”

“What makes you think I’m royalty? I’m just in sales.”

“Shit, Reed. You’re not just in sales. You are the whole damn department. I can’t go anywhere at work without seeing your face all over everything.”

That was true. At first, it was weird as hell being on the company promotional stuff, but I found satisfaction in the fuck-you-ness of it. I bet it made my uncle's skin crawl, having to see me everywhere, painted fingers and all. Never what he wanted me to be, yet unable to escape my presence. But I didn't like the way Jesse said it, as if it was an affront to him.

“What's wrong with that?”

Jesse scrubbed his hands over his face and let out a sigh. “Nothing. There's nothing wrong with that. They couldn't have picked a better person for it. It's just...you're here, and this is all fucked. I just wanted to escape and not have to look at your gorgeous face for a few days.”

Jesse stood abruptly, as much as he was able to inside the tent, grabbed a pair of pants, and stuck his feet into shoes. I sat there, slack-jawed, while he intentionally avoided eye contact through the whole slow, torturous escape. When he unzipped the tent and left without saying another word, I sat there, stunned.

“What the hell?”

Sitting here wasn't going to help me get the answer to that. Grabbing my sneakers and lacing them up, I stood and righted my clothing. The skin beneath was still covered in dried cum from both of us. How had we gone from the hottest of ass-job mornings to him unable to get away from me fast enough?

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It was a mistake, all of it. From the second I'd let him into my tent. Except...he'd sounded so afraid; how could I refuse him? And this morning? Fuck, it felt so good. He felt so good. And now I was screwed. I slept with the one person in the company who could make my life miserable. It was no secret that his family practically owned Printech. If he decided he didn't want to see me there—not that he ever noticed me in the first place—he could make that happen.

I put distance between myself and my tent, but as I paced around the campsite, the cool air hit me and I had to pee. I followed a worn pathway through a set of trees until I was far enough away not to be seen. Ducking under a tree, I began to relieve myself. Leaves crunched behind me and I snapped my neck to catch Reed coming my way.

“Dammit!” I hissed as I returned my attention to the stream. “You can't just sneak up on someone when they are taking a piss.”

“Mind if I join you?” Reed came up to my side, only a foot away, to use the same tree I was watering. There was a whole damn forest, and he had to stand right beside me. When I was done, I fixed myself and turned to leave.

“Wait! Hold up a second. Please.” Reed's voice had a hurt tone in it. And didn't that make me feel like the asshole in this situation?

I let out a huff and leaned against a tree across from him with arms folded over my chest. I wasn't being fair. I knew that. But I didn't need all of this drama during my week away from work. Though the sexy morning wake-up was a big improvement to just jerking myself off like I had planned to do. Reed's ass molded perfectly around my cock. What would it feel like to push inside of him?

Nope. Can't go there. Already the memory of him pressed against me had my blood rushing south. Reed finished and came to stand in front of me before his eyes slid around, taking in our surroundings. Right. The man that had been confident and bold in our tent and who offered himself so quickly was back to being nervous in the woods. It stirred my traitorous heart, making me want to protect him and keep him feeling safe. God, I was hopeless.

Reed returned his focus to me. "What's going on, Jesse? Did I do something wrong? I mean, we both participated earlier. If you had told me to stop, I would have."

"I know. It's not that. Well, it's partially that."

Hurt flashed in his beautiful blue eyes. "Partially? So what's the rest of it?"

"Listen, I love my job."

He shifted his stance, and his expression morphed with confusion. "Okaaaay? What does that have to do with this?"

"Everything, dammit. It's more than loving my job. I need it. I have bills and responsibilities, and I can't be putting everything at risk for one beautiful man."

"I fail to see what that has to do with this?" Reed waved his hand back and forth between us.

"Because, if this goes south, who's the one they are going to fire? Not their poster boy, that's for damn sure. Not the nephew of the CFO."

He flinched when I said that last part, as if I'd hit him. I immediately wished I could take my words back, even without knowing why they seemed to affect him.

“My uncle has nothing to do with this. And we’re just having fun. So there’s no need for anything to ‘go south.’ And did you call me...beautiful?” He finished with a smirk. But there was something about it that didn’t reach his eyes. He was deflecting. And well, I supposed I could go along with that, especially since I was the one who put the hurt there in the first place. And, apparently, the protectiveness I felt for him seemed to cross to the emotional side as well.

My position softened, no longer trying to create a rigid barrier between us, and I focused on Reed. “I mean, you know you are. It’s not a secret.”

His eyes brightened a little, and he shrugged. “It’s still nice to hear.”

“I bet you hear it all the time.”

“Sure, from guys trying to get in my pants, but you already have. So, at least it’s not weighted with wanting something from me.”

He may have said it off-handedly, but it felt as though there was history that came with it. “Well, you are,” I said softly, wanting him to know I meant it. I mentally shook myself and straightened. “Can we just start over?”

“Like get back to the tent and get naked again? Yeah, I’m in.” Reed gave me that money shot smile. For all the times I’d seen it at work, I’d never imagined the way my heart would leap at having it directed at me.

Tempting. So very tempting. “Slow your roll, Prince Charming. How about we maybe try talking, or hell...do some of that team-building we’re supposed to be doing.”

“I think I’m ready to wash off the team-building we did earlier. Any ideas?” Reed winked.

“Uh, right. I think they set up a camp shower.”

Reed’s award-winning smile turned to a grimace. “What does that entail?”

“It’s like a tall, skinny tent with a water bag and a hose.”

“Well, that sounds horrifying. Do we have a second option?”

I let out a laugh. Reed’s aversion to anything camp-related was more amusing than it should be. He was this guy I’d fantasized about, who lived up on a pedestal, and yet so human out here in the woods.

“Strike said there was a stream nearby.”

“That sounds moderately more appealing than a hose in a tent.”

“Yeah? You wanna go exploring, Reed?”

His eyes gleamed with mischief. “With you? Absolutely.”

Reed hooked his arm through mine and let me lead him back to the path. I was sure Strike said it was about a half mile away. It was early, and we hadn’t eaten yet, but food was suddenly the last thing on my mind. Not with Reed pressed against my side, smelling like sex, and imagining him naked in a stream. I was in deep trouble with him.

The more distance we put between us and the campsite, the tighter Reed clutched my arm. “How much further do you think it is? Do you have any kind of weapon? What do you do if you come across a bear? Or a badger? Those are vicious too, right?”

“First of all, badgers are nocturnal, so you’re not likely to see one.”

“You mean they could be running around outside our tent? Is that what I heard last night? God, that’s even worse.”

I chuckled as I threw an arm over his shoulder, liking too much how he leaned into me. With my free hand, I grabbed the pocket knife I had in my pants. Years of camping taught me never to leave my tent unarmed. Even in my awkward hurry to get out, I still checked my pocket to make sure my knife was in there.

When I showed the multi-tool knife to Reed, I felt some of the tension leave his body. “I’m not sure it’s as comforting as I thought it would be knowing you are armed. But also, damn, that’s kind of hot.”

I slipped it back into my pocket. “It’s not going to do any real damage, but it could give us a head start. Besides, if you need a can opened or screw tightened, I’m your man.”

“Cute and handy. That’s a good combination.”

Being called cute by the Reed Dawson felt pretty amazing. Maybe I was the only option currently, but I’d take it. I didn’t expect to have the attention of a gorgeous man during my week away.

A trickle of water sounded in the distance. “Come on, we’re almost there.”

Another hundred feet and we found it. A beautiful running stream with pristine, clear water. It looked to be a few feet deep in some areas, and the water moved at a nice, lazy pace. Not rushing by in a force that would be too strong to withstand. I looked for any signs of danger, saw no algae blooms or funky smells. It looked...

“Beautiful,” Reed’s awed tone matched the sentiment I felt. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen water that looked so...untouched. I might be a city guy through and

through, but this is really something.”

“Yeah, it is. I’ve always loved getting to see areas that aren’t taken over by humans. There’s a lot of beauty in this world, but so often we stomp all over and ruin it. But seeing something like this always reminds me of what it could be.”

“Is it safe?”

“Yeah, should be. The rocks might be slippery though, so just step carefully.”

I toed my shoes off and removed my socks, tucking them into my shoes. The cool, damp earth beneath my feet felt amazing. There was something really grounding about it. Reed watched me cautiously as I took steps toward the water. When my toes hit the first edge of the stream, I jumped.

“What happened? Did something bite you?”

I chuckled before letting the water lick at my feet once more. “No, it’s really cold. It just takes a minute to adjust. Do you think you can handle it?”

Reed gave me an impish look. “I’ll be fine. Besides, you know how to keep me warm.”

Without any hesitation, he stripped completely naked and ran into the water. He was a gorgeous sight, all bare and running free. Damn!

“Oh fuck! This is cold! Don’t just stand there gawking. You better get your ass in here, Jesse.”

“I was not gawking. I was...appreciating the view.”

“Well appreciate it from closer.”

Yeah, that I could do. I took off the layers of clothes I had on and followed him in. Not at the full speed with which he had entered the stream. I gasped as the water enveloped me. It was deep enough to reach my thighs, but I felt too exposed and lowered myself into the frigid water. Breathing deeply, I waited for my body to stop tensing from the cold.

Reed was still standing, turned away from me, as he splashed water on his chest, and vigorously scrubbed, trying to clean. His ass was at the perfect height in front of me. It was flawless and smooth, not a hair in sight. Did he wax? Was his hole as smooth as his cheeks? What did he taste like? The thought warmed me up, though the cold water countered the desire I felt.

When he turned to catch me staring at eye level with his ass, he smirked and splashed water back at me. I yipped when the coolness hit my chest and face. “Hey!”

“Hey, yourself. If you’re going to spend so much time ogling my body, the least you could do is help wash me down so we can get out of this water faster.”

I felt my cheeks burn at being caught. But touching him again was definitely appealing. I stood, no longer caring that my cold-affected dick was out of the water. It was exhilarating being so near him, and so...naked. Especially out in the wilderness, with no care. I scooped up some water and poured it over his back, washing away the remnants from earlier. When my hands ran down his body, Reed let out a throaty moan.

Another scoop of water and I followed the rivulets down his back, tracing his spine, and my hands rounded over the swells of his ass. I grabbed his hip and tugged him backward. Reed let me move him until his back was once again pressed to my front. He rested his head on my shoulder, tilting it in invitation.

Wrapping my arms around his chest, holding him firmly against me, I nuzzled my nose along the side of his throat. When he purred in response, I couldn't help but press my lips to his cold skin.

Reed groaned and reached back, holding my hips and pulling me tighter. Despite the polar water lapping around us, my cock was warm enough nestled against his ass to spring to life.

We stood in a stream in the middle of a forest, with no shame or worry, and it was glorious. God, he was so sexy, and the way he was pliant to my touch was invigorating. I loved the tremble as I ran a hand up and down his chest. The delicious inhale when I brushed against his hard nipple. I circled its peak and teased him, leaving him keening.

“God, Jesse, that feels so good. There's only one thing...”

I paused my motions, afraid of what he was going to say. “What's that?”

“I can't feel my toes.”

I laughed, only then realizing that mine were feeling a little numb, too. “Well, we can't have that.”

Before I released my hold on him, I pressed a kiss on his cheek, lingering a moment longer than I intended. Putting space between us was becoming harder and harder. Reluctantly, I let him go, but he grabbed my hand instead as we walked out of the water. Despite the cool morning, the sun shone through the trees, and when it danced across our skin it felt blissfully warm on our chilled bodies.

Grabbing my thermal bottoms, I used them to towel Reed off, trying to keep him from turning blue. He had a strange look on his face as he stood there, letting me sop

the water off of him. I didn't know why I'd done it. I could have easily handed him my long underwear and let him take care of himself. It was strangely intimate, and probably an overstep, even though I had been washing his body before I started fondling him. And yet, he didn't stop me.

Once he was dry, I turned away and started to dry myself. Reed put a hand on my arm and pulled me back to face him. Before I knew it, his lips were on mine. They were so soft, even softer than I had imagined all those times I'd stared at his image at work. While cool from being in the water, heat bloomed between us. The initial shock I felt when he kissed me left and soon I met his kiss with vigor. Sure, we'd gotten each other off earlier, and that would live rent-free in my head, but it was still hard to believe I was kissing Reed Dawson. We were both naked and when our kiss deepened, his hard cock brushed against mine.

"Fuck, Reed!"

He rocked his hips forward, eliciting another gasp from me. But whatever thoughts I had of naked fun time with him disappeared when a shiver rolled through his body.

"Ignore it," he said with a tremble.

I brushed my hand against his cheek, reveling in the soft expression he wore. "I can't. I promised I would keep you warm. As much as it pains me to say it, we need to get you dressed."

Covering up his beautiful body was the last thing I wanted to do. But watching him try to ignore how cold he was wasn't going to move things along. I handed him his sweats and got into my pants commando and tugged my thermal shirt on.

I rubbed Reed's shoulders, glad to see him looking more comfortable. "Better?"

“Sadly, yes.” He offered me a crooked smile.

“Did you want to head back?”

Reed looked around us; only this time, I didn’t see the fear that had been there earlier at being out in the woods. “I don’t know. Can we stay for a bit?”

My heart tumbled around in my chest. Nothing that had happened since I woke up was anything that I expected it to be. “Absolutely.”

With Reed’s hand in mine, I walked him toward a spot where the sun shone down. I sat down and leaned against a tree, pulling him down to sit between my legs. Reed snuggled against me with his head resting on my shoulder. He grabbed my arms and wrapped himself in them. It felt easy, having him tucked into me, but then maybe that was because I’d already held him all night.

“This is nice,” he whispered.

It really was. Like our own personal haven. The warmth of the sun beaming down on us in a perfectly cozy spotlight.

“Tell me something about you, Reed. What got you started at Printech?”

“As you said, my uncle is the CEO. I never really had a choice. My whole life I’d been told exactly what was expected of me. Where I would go to college, what my job would be, the kind of woman I should marry. Except, I’ve never been very good at doing what was expected.”

I snorted a laugh. Yeah, I couldn’t see Reed settling down to live in a house with a picket fence, a wife, and two point five kids.

“I was supposed to follow him up the corporate ladder, but the thought alone made my soul want to shrivel up and die. Still, I got tired of the lectures and the pressure. So if I had to be a part of it, I was going to do it my way. When I applied to be in sales instead of doing what my family wanted, my uncle was furious. But he couldn’t show it in public. And I may have gotten some joy out of him having to proudly announce my new role, knowing he hated every second of it. So, I don’t know, in spite of a good enough reason to start a career?”

I chuckled and kissed the back of his ear. “I suppose it’s as good as any. Do you like it, though? Because your happiness matters, too.”

Reed leaned back and tilted his head so he could look at me. “I don’t think anyone has ever asked me that.”

He settled back into place, looking out at the stream. He was quiet for so long I didn’t think he was going to answer, but when he did, his voice was light and small, similar to when he asked if he could stay in my tent.

“I don’t know. Some days I am, I suppose. The novelty of pissing off my uncle faded when I had to pretend that I loved every minute of what I was doing. I can sweet talk and make a sale, sure. That’s not a big deal. But becoming the ‘Prince of Printech,’ as you deemed it, is, quite frankly, exhausting most days. To be the face of the company. I have more pressure on me now than I expected. I’m always being watched, always have to be perfect. So I take little victories where I can get them. If I am expected to always represent the company, well, I add a little something extra that still feels like me.”

He held his hand up to show his painted nails. It was clear he got them done professionally from how perfectly shaped they were and with the high sheen of the royal blue. I twined my fingers with his and brought his hand closer to my face.

“I like your nails,” I said as I kissed the back of his hand. They’d always caught my eye in the promotional material that crossed my desk. While I tried to convince myself how much I despised him, I secretly admired how pretty they looked.

“What about you? You seem capable of doing pretty much anything. How’d you become a receptionist?”

Normally, the word was accompanied with disdain. Like it was an offense to even say it, but Reed’s tone didn’t change. It wasn’t a condescending question; he was genuinely asking.

“I stumbled into it, to be honest. My friend Sheila was there before me. She stopped working when she went off on maternity leave. I was out of work at the time and she made the suggestion. It’s not something I planned to do necessarily, but it was steady income. The more I did it, though, the more I grew to like it. I like being able to help customers and greet people, to be a friendly face, to calm concerns, or to offer an ear. Before I field the calls to each department, I’ve already talked them down from whatever level of stress they started at. More often than not, people just want to know they are heard. Which...I get.”

“You are underappreciated.”

“Mmm. Yeah, it definitely feels that way. Most days, I’m pretty content with the job itself, but it gets lonely, too.”

Reed tilted his head back to look at me again. “How so?”

I shook my head. It was so unreal that I was sitting here with him like this. Talking with the one person I unfairly put all the blame on at work. Hearing him talk about his role in the company put him in a whole new light than the one I had assigned to him. If he was always having to put on an act, I wondered how many people got to

see him the way I did now. To glimpse the scared, anxious man who crawled into my tent and was afraid of wildlife. I wanted to wrap him up tight and keep him safe.

“As you feel seen too much, I feel invisible. Like I’m not really a part of the company, just a decoration. More customers know my name than coworkers and that feels pretty fucked up most of the time. So I try to focus on the role I play with the customers, to feed those relationships. I’d pretty much given up hope of being noticed by others, by...you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. ‘The Golden Boy.’ Your face taunted me every day, except you never once bothered to look my way or learn my name.”

Reed turned around and knelt between my legs. He stared at me with misty eyes. “God, I’m so sorry, Jesse. Most days, I’m too in my head as I walk in. Trying to prepare myself to be what everyone expects me to be.” He shook his head. “I’m such an asshole. I’ll do better, I swear. But I want you to know, I see you, Jesse.”

His intent stare left no room for doubt, and I felt it. Felt seen in a way I hadn’t in a long time. And Reed...there was no mask in place, no Prince Charming, just a guy who was more like me than I ever could have imagined. I held his chin, meeting his gaze. “I see you too, Reed.”

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I'd never talked about work like this with anyone before. Sure, I gave the company line; how good Printech has been to me, what a great company it is to be a part of, how lucky I am, blah, blah, blah. All the things I knew were expected of me to say, and if I didn't, I worried it would get back to the family. As much as I liked to pretend I didn't care what they thought, it was hard not to.

Now, here with Jesse? We were far enough removed from the ears and eyes that were always on me that I felt like I could be more open. I felt awful for how he'd been treated at work, especially by me. But he held me in his arms, he saw me. Something about him made me feel protected. He wasn't much bigger than I was, we were fairly matched in height, but he had a presence that I was drawn to. Jesse seemed so much stronger and sure-footed than me, and damn, I didn't realize how much I craved that.

I certainly never imagined I'd feel comfortable alone in the woods, but he made me forget where we were, and I found myself wishing we could stay right here. The sun shining on us, and the stream bubbling in front of us. It was serene and perfect, even for someone who didn't care for the outdoors.

I breathed in deeply, relishing the moment we were in. Except...a smell tickled my nose. I sniffed again, and it was stronger. "What is that?"

"Mmm, what?" Jesse asked dreamily. Was he falling asleep?

I tapped his arm, which was folded over my chest. "Jesse, something smells...funky."

I inhaled once more, hit with a pungent, wet animal odor that had definitely not been there before. I sat up and whisper-yelled, "Jesse! I think there's some sort of creature

out here.”

The urgency in my voice caught his attention, and he launched to his feet. When I stood, too, he clutched me against him as he withdrew his knife from his pocket. Quietly and carefully, he sprung the blade free. He looked all around us, even as he pressed me behind him. If I wasn’t terrified by how alert and worried he seemed, I might have swooned at the protectiveness of the action.

That same putrid smell wafted around us stronger than before. A growl rumbled, and Jesse looked at me with wide eyes. My heart was racing, but then I realized it was my own stomach betraying me, speaking its discontent with not having been fed yet. I let out a nervous chuckle.

“Sorry,” I whispered as quietly as possible.

He gave me a sweet half-smile. When an even louder growl echoed around us, we both froze.

“That one wasn’t me.”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed, and I watched him as he seemed to be calculating the scenario. This was it; we were goners. I came all the way out to the woods, met a guy I liked in a situation that allowed us to be ourselves, and now we were going to be bear food.

“Here’s what we do. We’re slowly going to make our way back to the path. Everything is going to be fine.” Jesse’s whispered reassurances only partially calmed my freak-out. But a freak-out seemed pretty damn justified at the moment.

I held tightly to him and we moved as one, each step carefully placed to make as little noise as possible. Jesse grabbed the still-damp thermal pants that he’d used to dry us off and we continued on our way, not leaving anything behind. Inch by excruciating

inch. My heart beat louder than our footsteps. We were nearly to the path when the air seemed to stand still.

An eerie whoop screamed through the land and I swore even the stream trembled at the sound of it. I caught Jesse's gaze. Too afraid to speak, I mouthed, 'what was that?'

He shook his head. My heart sank to my stomach. That wasn't a good sign. Jesse said he'd grown up camping, so if he didn't know what it was, we were in trouble. I silently asked, 'what do we do?'

He seemed to think for a moment, but when it sounded again, he simply said, "Run!"

Jesse grabbed my hand, and we took off, retracing the route we'd taken to get to the stream. I felt slightly better when our feet landed on the worn walking path, but it didn't slow us down. We ran, hand in hand, until we were at the edge of camp. With the tents in sight, we slowed to catch our breath.

Once we could breathe normally, we listened before going back into camp. Had we led the creature back? Did we just offer everyone up as a buffet to whatever it was? That eerie sound played in my head on repeat. Something about it was strangely familiar, and considering I was not the outdoorsy guy that Jesse was, it made it even more baffling. Where had I heard it before?

Jesse scanned the path behind us before placing his hands on my cheeks. "Are you okay?"

Concern was written all over his face. When was the last time someone was actually worried for me? It unnerved me a little too. Unused to the kind of attention he paid me, seeing past the facade everyone else saw.

I threw on a smile and offered my best cool and collected version. "Yeah, sure. Only a light sprint through the forest with who knows what chasing after us. Completely fine."

Jesse squinted at me. "You don't have to do that. Not with me."

My mask began to slip as he gently caressed my cheek with his thumb. I placed my hand over his as it rested on my face and leaned against it.

"Better now. That was...intense. I'm just glad you were with me."

Jesse's lips tugged up on one side before he leaned in and gave me a quick peck. "Thank you. You're allowed to be honest with me. You don't have to pretend. And we're back, we're safe now."

"Yeah, I think we should stick close to camp from here on out. Safety in numbers, right?" It had become my mantra since he first said it to me. If I had been alone, I would have been a goner. I couldn't help the shudder that rolled through me at the thought of whatever was out there.

"Right. Now, how about we get some food?"

My stomach responded to the suggestion. "Yup, I think that's a great idea."

When we got to the makeshift kitchen, Rider was there alongside the camp cook, helping dish up food. He took one look at us and grinned broadly. Self-conscious, I ran a hand through my hair, trying to tame the ran-for-our-lives look.

"Looks like you two have had an exciting morning."

"Yeah, a bit," Jesse responded nonchalantly.

“Uh-huh. And the team-building? Going good, yeah?”

With the adrenaline rush subsiding and my brain still processing what had happened, it felt a lot easier to focus on the man at my side. My hand found Jesse’s and our fingers entwined. “Pretty good, I think.”

Jesse slid a glance at me and gave me a wink. He was so handsome. I was a complete fool for not noticing him before. But now that I had, I could never un-see him. Rider gave me a not-so-subtle thumbs up before offering me a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and potatoes.

We took our food and sat at the table alongside Craig and Liza, the older couple celebrating their anniversary. They were a sweet and quirky pair, but we’d had a good time chatting yesterday. Strike joined us soon after, and he seemed all amped up.

“Well, folks, you’re in luck. It seems our sensors have picked up some activity.”

“Activity?” I asked as I clutched Jesse’s thigh. “What kind of activity?”

“Well, it could be nothing, or it could be Sassy.”

“Sassy?”

Strike smiled toothily. “Our good ol’ sasquatch.”

Jesse and I looked at each other with wide eyes. That sound we’d heard...it finally hit me where I’d heard it before. It was on the recording they played in the museum. That was impossible. It couldn’t be. Jesse had been noncommittal before when I asked about his belief in the creature. But the way his face paled, he must have been thinking the same thing.

“Where did your sensors pick up this activity?” Jesse asked carefully.

“About a half mile out, just a little past the stream that cuts through on the east side.”

Half a mile? That was so close to where we were. There was no way that was a coincidence. “I think something was out there.”

All eyes turned to me as they sat on edge, ready for me to regale them with our tale. Jesse watched me too, except his look told me he was ready to take over if it was too much. Which was very sweet, but a captive audience and a story to tell, that was what I excelled at.

I stood up from the table and stepped back, needing room to emphasize.

“Well, it started out like this...” My arms flew as I gave all the details. Well, maybe not the naked, making out details; I’d keep those to ourselves. “The sun shone down on us like a spotlight from the heavens. A perfect, picturesque day. Until a cloud covered the sun, casting darkness across the land. The birds stopped singing, the fish swam upstream, anxious to flee. It was as if nature itself feared the shadow we found ourselves in.”

The rest of the campers had gathered around at the commotion, all listening, completely captivated. Jesse sat back, eyes twinkling and lips pursed with amusement at my dramatics.

“What happened next?” Cam leaned forward, eager to hear more.

“The ground shook beneath our feet and a dank, heavy mist crept in and lapped at our legs, bringing with it an unearthly stench. Soon the only thing we could smell was the rot of something ancient. The murky mist threatened to envelop us completely. We couldn’t see, yet we felt the presence of something lurking in the fog. Jesse pulled

out his bowie knife, ready to take a stand. But when the creature let loose a sickening chortle, we knew we only had one chance.”

”What did you do?” Liza whispered.

”We hightailed it out of there. I’m too young and pretty to die.” I ended by putting my hands under my chin and lifting my eyes upward in an innocent, cutesy pose that brought a round of laughter. Jesse smiled and clapped, and everyone else followed suit. I took a bow before sitting back down.

He leaned into me and whispered in my ear. ”You are really something. Had I not been there, I might have believed it.”

Replaying it in such a way strangely helped ease the fear I felt when we actually experienced it. It was a show, a story, something that happened to someone else. Only it didn’t; it happened to us. It was still there, the smell and sound that was imprinted fully in my mind. If I thought about it too much, it would have sent me into a panic. But we were safe. We made it together, Jesse and I. And now we were back in camp and surrounded by others. Whatever was out there was sure to stay away, I hoped.

”Well, kid, you really had us going,” Craig laughed.

”Was any of it true?” Disappointment bled into Cam’s voice.

”I may have taken some liberties.”

Jesse drew out his pocketknife and flipped open the three-inch blade. ”My bowie knife.” The campers around us twittered. ”But we really did hear something and smelled it, too.”

Strike studied us. He’d taken in every detail of my story, cautiously excited. I didn’t

doubt he'd heard any number of tall tales on these trips, and probably told a few, too. "What did it sound like?"

I did my best to mimic the call we'd heard. "I swear it was exactly like the track you played in the museum."

"Well, hotdog! Looks like we got ourselves a hunt tonight. Good job, boys. Glad you made it back safe. With a sighting this close, I would recommend staying within the campsite unless we go as a group. Stay with your buddy. If you want to join me on a night hunt, I'd suggest a little siesta."

He'd get no argument from me. I would happily stay with my buddy...and rest sounded ideal. Coming down from the fight-or-flight response and with a full belly, I felt myself beginning to crash.

The group around us was chattering away at the possibilities of Bigfoot being so close that our experience might as well have been theirs. They knew someone that it happened to. We were the someones it happened to. I was still trying to wrap my head around that. A shudder rolled through me as the realization hit me.

Jesse caught my attention, likely noting the change in my demeanor. "Need to take a break?"

I bobbed my head in response as everything that had happened slammed into me. He was suddenly at my side, his arm around my waist. Jesse's lips brushed over my ear. "I got you, Reed."

It had been a rollercoaster. Steamy wake-up sex to the weirdness after, the cold water, the relaxed cuddle, the terror, the relief. I found myself leaning on Jesse more than I meant to. I had spent so little time with him and yet I already found comfort in him.

When we reached our tents, we paused halfway between his and mine. “Do you want to be alone? I can move your bed back.”

I shook my head. Alone was the very last thing I wanted. “I think you’re stuck with me...buddy. I mean, unless you want to be alone. I know you said you were looking forward to time to yourself on this trip.”

And I swooped in and took over everything. Is that how he saw me at work, too? I winced internally at the thought. I hated that he spent so much time thinking about me, and I hadn’t spent any time on him. I was a rotter. No wonder he despised me.

“Yeah, I’ll just leave you be. Thanks for everything.” I started to walk toward my tent, not wanting to get my bedding. I didn’t deserve bedding.

Jesse grabbed my arm and turned me back around. His beautiful brown eyes were warm and inviting. “Sometimes plans change. I might have been seeking quiet solitude when I drove up the mountain, but then you were there.”

“And ruined your plans,” I offered solemnly.

“No, not ruined...rerouted. You’ve made this trip far more interesting than it would have been on my own. I haven’t been fair to you either, I’m sorry. But you know what...buddy? You’re stuck with me, too. Besides, we have some unfinished business to take care of.”

The gleam in his eye and the crooked smile he wore had me feeling a lot less tired than I had a minute ago. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Now get out of your head and get your ass into my tent.” His exasperated tone was belied by the heat in his expression.

I bit my lip to keep from smiling like a fool and did as he said. As soon as he zipped the fabric flap closed behind us, we crashed into each other. It was awkward as hell, not enough room for us both to stand. We squirmed and hunched, trying to get at each other. He nipped my bottom lip as we fumbled together. It was messy and clumsy and so fucking hot. Who knew a shared experience of running from Bigfoot would bring such urgency? Thank you, Sassy.

Jesse slid his hands under my hoodie, roving over my chest. I pulled my sweatshirt off to get it out of the way. He continued touching me, fingers dancing over my skin, driving me wild. But we were both crook-necked, trying not to bump the roof of the tent. I sat down on the bedding, happily watching as Jesse freed himself of the same clothes I'd seen him dress in twice today already.

Naked, his rich golden skin on full display, with the happiest of happy trails leading down his lower belly, pointing toward his beautifully hard cock. He stood over me, pushing my shoulders until I was laying across our two sleeping bags. Jesse bent down and rolled my sweatpants down my legs until I was as naked as him.

It was the middle of the day, and light bled through the material of the tent, leaving us in full sight of each other. Not that we hadn't seen the other naked. We'd been naked at the stream before the chills took hold. Hell, Jesse had lain beside me with his pants down just that morning. Even still, he was a beautiful sight in the green tent-filtered daylight.

Settling himself between my legs, he leaned over me, his chest against my chest, his cock against mine. Jesse rolled his hips, rubbing our dicks together, and captured the moan that let loose from my lips. I liked that it was him leading things this time. That it wasn't merely the convenience of helping each other out in the morning. There was drive and need. Our tongues danced together as he thrust again, the most luscious friction.

Jesse braced himself on one hand and brought the other to his mouth. He stared straight into my eyes as he licked from his palm to the tip of his fingers. With his hand dampened with spit, he reached between us and grabbed our cocks together. He pumped up and down, the wicked sensation of our shafts rubbing against each other made my back arch and my head fall back.

I was moaning louder than the fabric walls could contain. When he twisted as he tugged, I let out a gasp.

"Oh fuck, Jesse, that feels so good. But. I. Think. We. Need. To. Stop." Stopping was the last thing I wanted. But he did, much to my dismay.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing at all. You would have me coming in no time if you kept it up."

Jesse tilted his head and squinted at me. "And that's a problem how?"

"Because unless you have something to clean up with, I don't want to take another trip to the stream. Maybe not ever, not after today."

"Well, I did pack some wet wipes."

I couldn't help the smile that cracked. "Of course, you did. You're such a boy scout. That would have been helpful earlier."

"I like to be prepared. This morning, though, was...unexpected. Besides, if we'd used them earlier, I wouldn't have gotten to see you all naked and wet in the middle of the forest, which was a glorious sight, so no regrets."

It was exhilarating being out there with him. I'd always been pretty comfortable with

my body, but never to the point of being nude in public. Despite the terror of what came after, I didn't regret that either.

"Tell me, boy scout. How prepared are you?" I ran a finger down Jesse's stomach, playing with the dark hair at the base of his cock.

Jesse gulped, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Unfortunately, not that prepared. Hooking up was the last thing on my mind when I packed, especially knowing I was going to be with coworkers."

"Pity that." I tried not to let the disappointment show. I wanted him so badly, wanted to feel him deep inside me, filling me up. I'd screwed around with a lot of guys but had never felt so seen before. Had never had a connection with someone I slept with. "That's probably a good thing, though. Guys don't usually stick around after they fuck me."

Jesse's expression softened as he brushed his knuckles along my cheek. "Well, we've already established that we're stuck with each other. And I haven't pushed you aside yet, right?"

I shook my head. Quite the opposite. Besides his weird reaction that morning when he left the tent, which was understandable, he'd been at my side the whole day. Two days together, and already I'd spent more time with him than any other dates I'd had.

"We can have some fun along the way, too." He gave me a wink before kissing his way down my body. He paused at my nipples. He twirled his tongue over each one, sucking lightly until they were hard and my dick throbbed from the sensitivity.

Jesse continued down and brushed his nose against my length, causing my cock to jump with interest.

”Shit, Jesse, please!” My voice was thick with needy desperation. Besides the scare we’d had, it had been an edgy roller coaster, too. With literal ups and downs for my poor dick.

He gave me a wicked grin before licking his lips and opening wide, swallowing me down. I let out a loud moan as I was enveloped in warmth. Jesse applied the perfect amount of pressure as he bobbed his head. My toes curled and my hips bucked. It didn’t take long to push me over the edge I’d been riding.

”Fuuuck,” I drawled out as I came hard. Jesse stayed locked onto me until I stopped pulsing from my release, capturing every last drop.

When he popped off, he gave me a devilish look. ”See? All clean, Prince Charming.”

”I can’t decide if you calling me that is good or bad.”

Jesse crawled back up until he hovered over my face and shrugged, eyes hazy with lust. ”It could be either. It’s multi-functional.”

”And right now?”

”Right now...” Jesse leaned down and caught my mouth in a hungry kiss, and I savored the taste of me on his tongue. ”It’s a great thing. Besides, now I have a prince indebted to me, and I intend to collect.”

”Is that so?” I hooked my legs around his waist and twisted, forcing him to fall to his side and I climbed on top of him. ”I don’t like being in debt to others. I’ll need to remedy that right away.”

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Reed's big, luscious lips felt even more amazing on my cock than I could have imagined it. And I had. I'd spent way too much time staring at his image at work and wondering what those full pink lips felt like. Only now I didn't have to wonder anymore, and I already wanted there to be a next time.

After he'd done a thorough job on me, we lay there blissed out, letting the adrenaline, exhaustion, and satisfaction take over. With the sun warming the tent, we were comfortable enough to stay naked. Thank the heavens. A naked Reed in my arms was quickly becoming my favorite thing. His body was smooth all over, except for neatly trimmed blond pubes. His back, chest, and ass, were all shaved or waxed or gifted by the gods. Reed's skin felt silky soft beneath my touch. He was a man that put care into every part of his body. Not my usual type, but fuck, he was sexy.

The sleepy purr he made as I ran my hand over his side, hip, and upper thigh could easily become my new addiction. Reed fucking Dawson. I wasn't sure I would ever lose the wonder that it was him here with me.

We rested and touched and snuggled, until the temperature dipped enough that it would require clothes, sadly. If I were to ever vacation with him again, it would be somewhere hot where we could happily lounge in the buff endlessly. Or swim in warm waters where we wouldn't have to hurry for being too cold.

Damn! How was I already picturing future trips with a man who had almost never spoken to me until yesterday? But we'd spent more time together already than the last guy I dated for two weeks. Add in some shared intense moments and there was something that felt very real and very big here. I only hoped it wasn't one-sided. Not that Reed had given any indication otherwise. He'd been as clingy to me as I was to

him.

He shivered, and I couldn't have that. It surprised me to find how much I liked taking care of him. I kissed the back of his shoulder. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

He turned over to look at me. "You're not supposed to say that, especially when we're out in the woods. That's what every person in a horror movie says and they never make it back."

One corner of my lips tugged up. Underneath the playful tone was a hint of real fear there. I ran a finger over his cheek, tracing the outline of his lips that begged to be kissed. "I'm just going to your tent to grab your things. I figured you probably wouldn't want to keep wearing the same thing you've worn since last night."

When I ran my thumb over his bottom lip, he opened his mouth. My cock hardened at the sight of his beautiful lips wrapping around my thumb, the suction a reminder of his skills and how good he felt. I was completely captivated by that mouth of his. He popped off my thumb like a lollipop and pulled me down to kiss him, continuing the display of his talented tongue. A moan built up in the back of my throat.

And then he was pushing me off of him with a satisfied smirk. "There. I wanted to make sure you knew what you would be missing out on if you didn't come back."

"A hot, gorgeous man waiting for me to return. There is no greater survival tool than that. Because nothing on earth could keep me from coming back to you." I gave him a quick peck on his nose before forcing myself to get up. His incredible blue eyes followed my cock as it stood with me. I stroked myself twice, enjoying the hungry look he gave me. Shit! I needed to put some clothes on, or I would never want to leave this tent, or him, again.

Finding a clean pair of pants and boxer briefs, needing to have another layer to keep

things under control, I dressed quickly. My skin heated, knowing Reed watched me the entire time. He made it so hard to leave; he made me so hard. I couldn't remember the last time I had someone who made me this needy.

I stepped outside and breathed in deeply, letting it fill me and settle this longing urge that was building. The air had the slightest bite to it and I knew we were going to be bracing ourselves for an even colder night than the one before. A smile rose as I imagined getting to spoon with Reed again. The man was a drug, pure serotonin.

In his tent, I let out a chuckle. Of course, he had several bags. There wouldn't be room for all of his stuff and mine in my tent. Well, it was our tent now, because as long as he let me, I planned to keep him close. I felt a little awkward rifling through his things, but picturing him lying there naked, waiting for me, made it easier to be the one to do this task. He had a carry-on size bag that was full of beauty products. A hairdryer that required an outlet, a mirror, skin care products, nail polish, and cologne. I took the lid off the cologne and sniffed. Mmm. It smelled like him; woody, yet bright and citrusy, with a hint of spice.

I took the bottle along with a face wash, deodorant, and his hairbrush, adding it to his suitcase full of clothes. The rest would have to stay; there was no use for the hairdryer, anyway. Before I'd spent time with him or gotten to know him, I might have judged him for bringing so much useless crap with him on a camping trip. But now, it only endeared him to me more. He was completely out of his element here. So opposite from my history of camping. I had to admit I admired how much care he took in the way he looked, and damn, it paid off, too.

When I returned to my tent, Reed was on his side, head tucked into his arm, asleep once more. God, he was such a beautiful sight. I carefully placed the suitcase in the corner of the tent before kneeling beside him. I caressed his cheek; his soft skin was irresistible to touch.

“Wake up, Sleeping Beauty.”

He groaned and turned to his back, eyes blinking as he looked up at me. Reed gave me the sweetest smile that made my heart melt. “Which is it? Prince Charming or Sleeping Beauty?”

“That’s the beauty of it—you can be both. Now, get dressed, so we can actually do some of the things we were supposed to do on this trip.” And so I wouldn’t attack him and stay huddled inside for the rest of the week. Not that it sounded like a bad idea.

“Fine,” he huffed and sat up.

“Where’s the rest of my stuff?”

“It’s still in the other tent. There’s just not enough room for everything in here, or we’d have to sleep on top of our things. I grabbed what I thought you needed.”

Reed opened his suitcase, and his cologne was sitting on top. He held it in his hand and gave me a questioning look. “Just what I need, huh? Are you saying I smell bad?”

“No. I’m saying you smell fucking delicious when you wear that, so it might have been a little self-serving.”

“Good answer.” He opened the bottle and dabbed a little on either side of his neck and a dab on his inner thighs and gave me a wink. The pleasant aroma wafted around the tent, but my eyes were glued to his groin, where I desperately wanted to breathe it off him.

“You said we have things to do, right?” Reed grinned deviously.

“You play dirty.” He had me practically salivating, questioning the idea of rejoining the others.

“Gotta work what you got, boy scout.”

“You do know how to work it.”

“Damn straight. Well, not straight, but you know what I mean.”

Once he was dressed in a gray turtleneck that hugged his slim form and sexy dark blue jeans, we managed to leave the tent. Me, looking like I was ready to go hunting in a plaid jacket and cargo pants, and him looking like he was ready to go cruising.

It was nearly sunset. We all ate together as Strike went over the safety protocols and what to look and listen for on the evening hunt. Cam and Rider sat across from us. Cam looked between us, taking in how close Reed sat to me. He was leaning into me, his arm touching mine. Beneath the table, Reed’s thigh pressed against my own. I liked it. I liked how much he seemed to crave being close, being touched.

“You two seem cozy,” Cam said with a smile.

Reed only snuggled in closer at his comment. “I like cozy.”

I threw an arm over Reed’s shoulder, allowing him to tuck himself even more into my side. My heart fluttered at the lack of hesitation to be this touchy in public. Granted, these were all strangers, so it wasn’t the same as cuddling in front of people we knew. I wondered what it would be like back at home, back at work. Was this all a fantasy, a trick of the woods? Or could we actually maintain something under the prying eyes and pressures of home?

That thought made my stomach sink. To have this with Reed now would make going

back to being ignored utterly devastating. I tried not to think about it, hoping the nighttime activity would be a welcome distraction.

We all followed Strike with our night vision goggles in hand. The group had been lively during dinner, but now that it was growing dark and we were walking on the footpath that would lead us back toward the stream, an eerie quiet settled around us.

When we came to a clearing not too far from where Reed and I had been earlier, Strike used hand motions to direct us. No one said a word as we sat on the ground facing different directions, looking through the green tint of night vision. Reed kept himself pressed firmly against me, not leaving even an inch of space. Coming back so soon after what we'd experienced...I was surprised he was even here. Though it was either stay with the group or back at camp by ourselves, so it was the safer of the two options. Still, I liked that he seemed to find comfort in being at my side. Another thought that made my heart soar and sink in equal measure.

We stayed for two hours, listening, watching, breathing, making as little noise as possible. And...nothing. There had been a few nocturnal creatures that scurried about in the dark, but nothing big. No rank wet animal smell came, and no howls or whoops echoed around us. Nothing.

Strike led us back to the camp, congratulating everyone on a great hunt.

“But we didn’t find anything.” Cam’s disappointment bled through once more.

“Maybe not, but it’s all part of it. Just like with fishing. Half the fun is the cast.”

“That doesn’t sound fun at all,” Reed whispered to me. I let out a chuckle. If there was any sort of future for us, it wouldn’t be what I always thought I would have—someone who loved the outdoors as much as I did, because that was not Reed.

“Well, have a good night folks. We’ll try again tomorrow.” Strike dismissed himself.

After saying our goodnights, we returned to our tent. Reed kept his turtleneck on but switched out his jeans for joggers. Before we could settle in for the night, we did some rearranging. I laid my sleeping bag out flat across our two pads, then put his on top of it, zipping the two together. When we climbed inside, we were in one giant cocoon that allowed us to move closer and stay snuggled up in the warmth of the now-bigger sleeping bag. Reed curled into my side with his head on my chest and I wrapped my arms around him. He felt so damn perfect there.

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The rest of the week we only grew closer, and yet the weight of the ‘ what if?’ settled heavier inside me. What if everything returned to how it was when we went back home? What if I was merely something to do on what would otherwise be a boring trip for him? What if word got out at work and I was done for? What if I had to give up my Prince Charming now that I finally found him?

I kept those thoughts to myself and tried to focus on the present and how much I loved being with Reed. How he made me feel strong and sexy. How he seemed to crave my touch and sought my protectiveness. It was all so heady and intoxicating and would be hard to give up. At least I had a few more days to bask in him before we had to face reality.

Each day, we spent time together with the others, an odd group that all got along rather well. We grew closer with Rider and Cam, even going star-gazing with them one night, learning why it was so special to them. I stared into the crystal clear night sky and imagined what it would be like to immortalize someone with their own star. Was there any kind of permanence for Reed and me? Anything lasting? A love written on the stars like they had?

I hoped so. I wanted it but was afraid too. Afraid of wanting it so much, I would be left crushed under a falling star.

Each new thing I learned about him I found endearing and captivating. All the same things that might have been turn offs if I had learned them on a date at a restaurant, yet somehow, out here, it was all different. We were able to focus on each other, seeing past the surface things and first impressions, which I could admit I had not given him a proper chance before.

Every moment I spent with him cemented him to me. I enjoyed the fun, confident, showboat side. The soft, anxious side. The spending time getting his hair just right side. And the take what he wanted side. Definitely that part. Reed was a walking, talking wet dream, and damn, he had zero hesitations about using his body.

For six nights we slept together, cuddled through the cold nights, Reed's body perfectly conformed to mine as if our spoons had been made as part of a set. In the mornings, we would wake up and give in to the needs that built while we slept, finding ways to warm our bodies and leave each other panting. Despite Reed's aversion to the camp shower, my wet wipes only went so far, and we'd had to take a couple of quick rinses throughout the week.

For seven days we lazed around, ate camp food, went for walks, and talked. We talked more than I had with any other man I'd dated. Spending twenty-four hours a day together with no distractions, no social media, no Netflix, or the busyness that filled our daily lives back home felt like it had been the equivalent of months spent together.

In the evenings, we joined the hunts for the cryptid that hadn't been seen or heard since our day by the stream. It had gotten easier; the group had a more relaxed vibe without the urgent fear pressing in on everyone, and Reed didn't seem nearly as terrified as he'd been the first day, but he clung to me all the same, and I loved it. I loved the sounds of the woods, the fresh air, the comradery with the others, but especially the beautiful man who didn't leave my side. This trip was everything I hoped for and everything I'd never dreamed of.

The last morning, we were breaking down the campsite, loading everything on the trucks, and all the what-ifs slammed into me. Everything would change after this. We would go back to the city, back to work, back to reality. Where we were two very different people who came together in isolation away from society, but who would be torn apart by the worlds we lived in.

With our stuff loaded, Reed came before me and lifted my chin to meet his gaze. “You’ve been awfully quiet this morning. What’s going on?”

I shook my head, not sure if I could bring myself to say what was haunting me.

He placed his hands on the sides of my waist, keeping me in place. Did he sense I would make a run for it? “Jesse, you can talk to me, whatever it is. We’ve spent more time talking with each other this week than I have with anyone, probably ever. You asked me not to hide from you, so now I’m asking you the same.”

I brushed the back of my knuckles over his cheek. “You’re so perfect.”

“I’m...sorry?” he said with a shrug. I let out a chuckle, appreciating the break from the tension. “Come on, boy scout, out with it.”

“Are we still just...having fun? I don’t want to go back to how things were.”

Reed sighed and gave me a wistful smile. “I don’t either. I’ve kept people at a distance for a long time. But with you, I don’t want distance. Yes, I’m having fun, but it’s so much more than that. I like you a lot, Jesse. No, not just like. I’ve completely fallen for you. You make me feel safe and seen. I don’t have to pretend with you.”

“You don’t, Reed. I swear. I like all of you. I like you when you are full of charm and hooking people with your stories, and I like you in the quiet moments when you let your guard down. I like you so much that I ache at the thought of losing you. A soul-deep ache I’ve never felt before.”

Reed tightened his grip on my waist. “You won’t lose me. If you want me, I’m yours.”

“God, you have no idea how much I want you. I can already picture a future together,

and there are so many things I want to do with you.”

His eyes lit up, and his expression filled with wonder. “Yeah?”

“Hell yeah.”

“I want that too, Jesse. I was always so afraid of letting people in, but you’re already in, all the way in, and I don’t want to let that go.”

I grabbed his cheeks in my hands and sealed my mouth to his, kissing him until he leaned into me, kissing and pouring every vision of the future into it, kissing and picturing him naked in a hot, tropical location. Kissing and claiming him as mine.

When I released him so we could catch our breath, he gave me a punch-drunk look. “So...what do you say? We get back to the city, you come over to my place. We take a long, hot shower and clean all this filth off of us and then see how dirty we can get again.”

My heart and my dick jumped in tandem at the thought. “Fuck yes!”

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The drive back to Portland was the longest drive of my life. I was half-tempted to pull over, to flash my lights at him and get him to stop at a motel, or a gas station, or shit...anything. But the whole point was to get back home. Back to his home. It was torturous as I stared at the back of his car like it was his perky ass. Never had taillights gotten me so worked up before.

When we got back to the city, I was hard as a rock, thinking of having Reed soon. We'd spent a week on foreplay and learning each other's bodies in every way except one. While I might have been fine only ever using our mouths and hands with him, he'd teased me plenty with his ass pressed against my cock, so close, and yet, never quite there. I'd never needed anyone as badly as I did him.

I let out a prayer of thanks to the universe when he pulled into a parking garage. Minutes later, we were carrying his bags to his apartment. I barely had time to look around and appreciate the swankiness of his place when he dropped his stuff on the ground and tugged me by the waistband of my pants.

His stunning blue eyes carried all the heat and wanting I'd felt during that excruciating drive here. Our mouths smashed together, all teeth and tongue in a graceless kiss that was wrought with need. My hands rounded over his ass.

Reed groaned before pulling back abruptly. "Uh-uh. None of that. Shower first. I'm dying to feel human again."

"I suppose we've waited this long. I can hold out for a few more minutes."

"Wanna bet?" Reed winked before turning around and undressing on his way to the

bathroom.

I smirked and adjusted myself. He was definitely going to make this hard on me. I stripped and followed him. Before long, we both were sighing in relief at the heavenly feel of hot water raining down on us. Steam billowed around us in a cozy cloud.

The way Reed moaned under the water had my cock reacting, longing to wring more noises out of him. I grabbed him and kissed him deeply until he was leaning against the tiled wall. He put a hand on my chest, stopping me from grinding against him.

“First we clean, then we get dirty. That was the agreement,” he said with a wry grin. “The next time you come is going to be inside me. In a bed, all proper-like.”

I couldn't help the grin that stretched my lips. “Anything for you, Prince.”

With the greatest care, I shampooed his hair and washed his entire body, loving the way the suds felt over his smooth skin. I loved how he let me. How he was putty in my hands, satisfying the strong urge I felt to take care of him. We both stayed hard during the shower. It was difficult to ignore, but it made it more sensual and tender than hungry and desperate. And that was pretty damn perfect.

When we finished at last, I wrapped him in a towel and kissed him softly, rewarded by the sweetest smile. God, having such a gorgeous man look at me the way he did was the most incredible thing. I could live a full, rich life off of that smile alone.

Once he was dry, Reed hung his towel and walked into his bedroom. He threw back the covers and face-planted on his bed. He hugged his pillow beneath him and wiggled with his ass in the air.

“Ah! My bed! I missed you. Clean body, clean sheets. This is the good stuff.”

He was so fucking cute. And that ass was just there, taunting me. I couldn't hold off any longer. I climbed on top of him, kissing my way up his bare legs. When I got to those perfectly pert globes of his, I couldn't resist giving his round cheek a little nip, enjoying the squeak that came from him.

Encouraged by his reaction, I gripped both cheeks and spread them wide to reveal his hole, completely hairless, just as I suspected. I imagined him spread just like this, getting waxed in the most private of places, and that image was hot as fuck.

Reed squirmed beneath me, getting his knees under him more, presenting himself to me. It was too gorgeous a sight to pass up, and I leaned down, swiping my tongue over his hole. His moan was enough to make my own cock leak as I continued to swirl around his rim. The way he reacted to each flick of tongue or puff of breath was making it harder to concentrate on what I was doing, my dick aching to feel him. I slid my tongue along his crack and kissed my way up his back, planting my knees between his and letting my steel-hard cock play between his cheeks.

“Fuck, Jesse. That feels so good. I want more, though. I need you inside me.” He pushed his ass up, trying to get me where he wanted me. As much as I was dying to take him just like this, we'd have time for hot and fast later.

I kissed his shoulder, his neck, his cheek. “Turn over for me. I want to see your beautiful face.”

He flipped over and smiled up at me with that sweet, luscious mouth of his. He pointed to the bedside drawer, where I found the lube. In our many conversations at camp, we'd already discussed our history and knew we both were negative. After waiting this long, we were ready not to have anything between us.

Reed lay there looking like a masterpiece. He should have been painted and framed. Though he was in many frames at work, but not like this. Not all naked and exposed.

His gaze full of desire. His knees bent and legs wide, revealing himself to me. His cock hard and dripping.

“Damn, you are so fucking beautiful.” I positioned myself between his legs, my lubed finger brushing against his hole. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Leaning over him, I kissed Reed as I pressed a digit in, loving the way he arched up and hummed in the back of his throat. I added a second finger, pumping and stretching him. If we had started things up when we first got here, it would have been urgent and quick. But now, seeing him splayed out before me, seeing the admiration on his face, I wanted to savor every second.

Reed was writhing and pushing toward me, trying to get me deeper. And deeper was what I wanted too. He whined when I pulled my fingers out. “Please, Jesse, I need you.”

My heart fluttered around in my chest. “Shit, I could get used to hearing you say my name like that.”

Unable to wait any longer, I lubed my cock, lined the tip with his slick hole, and buried myself in him. The vision of him with the way his head went back and his knees clenched my waist as he adjusted was something I would never forget. A masterpiece indeed. I pulled out and pushed back in balls deep. We rocked together, his hips thrusting each time I did. Reed’s blond hair splayed out on the pillow, his perfectly smooth skin blushed under the effort, eyes hazed with satisfaction.

With him watching me so affectionately, and with the intimate week we’d had team-building, trying to take it slow was pointless.

I wrapped my fingers around Reed's cock and pumped my hand. He let out a loud moan. "Mmm. I'm so close, Jesse. Fill me, please. I want to come with you."

His words pushed me over the edge. I squeezed my hand around him as I exploded inside him. Reed let out a yell and came over my hand, shooting across his stomach. He put a hand on my neck, pulling me down to kiss him. It wasn't a hungry, toothy kiss as when we'd first arrived. It was a soft kiss, full of promise.

Collapsing onto him, his cum sticky between us, I rested my head on his. We stayed there in silence, not wanting the moment to end, simply existing together as we floated above the earth. Drifting so high, nothing of the world below mattered. Reed's hands caressed my back, a soothing motion that made me sink into him.

When Reed broke the silence, it was the last thing I expected to hear.

"That was different," he said with a soft sigh.

I rolled off of him, propping my head up on my hand so I could look at him, worried to see regret or uncertainty in him, but I didn't. He looked...happy. 'Different' wasn't a word I expected to hear after the sweetest and sexiest moment I could remember. "Is that good or bad?"

Reed brushed his knuckles over my cheek. "It's a good thing, Jesse. Really good. I don't normally have all these feelings involved when I have sex. It's always just been physical. But here with you? I've never felt so connected to someone." His beautiful blue eyes roamed over my face, his expression so tender. "I think I've fallen in love with you, Jesse."

My heart soared. How did I get so lucky? With a broad smile, I shook my head in disbelief that this was actually happening, before throwing my arms around him and pulling him on top of me. He let out a squeak at the fast motion but I swallowed it in

a searing kiss.

“Reed fucking Dawson.”

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The door opened, sunlight beaming in, highlighting the figure that stood at the entrance. I could have sworn birds sang just for him. The theme music that accompanied him intensified in the perfect Disney prince moment.

Reed walked into the lobby, carrying two drinks. He set one on my desk and leaned over to kiss me on the lips. Just a chaste kiss that tasted of his favorite peppermint mocha. “Good morning, boy scout. Have a great day. Love you.”

“Thanks, Prince. Love you, too.” I grinned as he waved and walked toward the elevator, sashaying his ass for me. Mmm, I loved that ass—almost as much as the man it was attached to.

It had been a year since our Bigfoot excursion. A year of having Reed fucking Dawson as mine. It had taken a little adjustment when we got back to the real world, but what didn’t? When we first showed up at work together, his uncle had had a fit. He’d tried to make it seem like it was bad for the company, but that got shot down pretty quickly. There was no power imbalance between us, or anything that could be deemed inappropriate. Printech had a public stance of being queer-inclusive and that extended to the work environment, as well as to customers.

Reed was never shy about showing me affection at work. He loved doting on me, bringing me things, sneaking down to kiss me, and inviting me to events I’d never gotten to participate in before. I was no longer decor in the lobby. People knew me. It was weird and had been a lot to get used to, but it was nice, too. I understood more about how Reed needed breaks from it all, too.

We would come home from work and his mask would come off and he would curl up

in my lap, needing to be held and cherished. And I did. I cherished him with heart and soul. I loved getting to see the parts of him no one else saw and loved being the one he needed.

We'd been living together for the last six months, finding it too hard to go our separate ways when we both craved holding each other at night. Mornings were a different story. I needed to be in earlier than he did, and he took more time to get ready. So instead of letting it start our days off frustrated, we decided to drive to work separately.

It was the best decision we could have made for our relationship. He got all the time he needed, and I got to welcome him when he came in. I would never get tired of seeing that man light up the way he did for me. Of seeing his smile as he crossed the lobby just for me when I used to watch him walk right by and never notice me. Getting a good morning kiss at work started my day in the best way possible, and every night I got to go home to him.

I would forever be thankful for the team-building trip that brought me Reed in a way I would have never gotten to see him otherwise. And our encounter had become his favorite story to tell. It got embellished more and more each time he told it. I knew the real fear he'd felt, that we both had felt, in the moment it happened, but it was a treasured memory for both of us. A spark that ignited our hearts and bonded them together. Every time I saw a Bigfoot statue or mural around town, it made me think of our trip. I didn't know if he existed or not or if it was some strange fluke experience we'd shared. But if I ever did see Bigfoot, I was giving him a big hug.