



Love Songs (Harmony Lake #3)

Author: *L.C. Chase*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Fighting fires is his passion, but he's no match for the rock star who sets his heart ablaze.

Conor Holliston has everything he needs in life: a supportive family, three lifelong best friends, a rewarding job as a firefighter, and a love of adventure. What he doesn't need is some big-time rock star with electric blue eyes and a breath-catching smile coming to his quaint New Hampshire town and flipping it on its side.

Dallas Blade thought he had everything in life: an amazing career fronting an internationally renowned rock band, traveling all over the world, meeting thousands of fans, and no two days the same. Until fate took a sharp turn, and he discovered he had a teenage daughter who needed him and a career at a crossroads.

Fire brings Conor and Dallas together, but are the embers hot enough to keep burning when their worlds are as different as night and day?

Love Songs features a carefree firefighter suffering from pesky feelings for a rock star who'd suddenly become a single dad, lifelong best friends, a charming small town where everyone knows everyone's business, and the best truffles known to humankind.

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

FINGERS SNAPPED IN front of my face, and reality blasted into my eardrums like a freight train.

I glared at Ryan, the owner of the snapping fingers. He'd been one of my best friends since sixth grade, when he'd drawn a green alien on my cast after I'd broken my arm skateboarding.

“What's up with you?” Ryan raised his voice over the din.

Me and my three best friends—Ryan, Sam, and Haider—along with a new addition to our unit, Sam's boyfriend Ben, were having dinner, drinks, and a massive Death Star shaped cake at the Lakeside Inn for part two of my birthday celebrations.

It was tradition. We celebrated each other's birthdays by meeting at the covered bridge in Stonebridge—oddly enough, not made of stone—and taking a late morning walk along Parker Trail, followed by a party later that included family, friends, and coworkers.

Ryan and I sat at our table shooting the shit while Haider had gone to the restroom and Sam and Ben were on the dance floor.

The lovebirds may as well have been the only ones out there, gazing into each other's eyes as they swayed to the slow beat of Taylor Swift's “Lover”.

For all the crap I gave Haider about being a massive Swiftie, I actually liked that song. I would never tell him that, though.

“Nothing,” I lied, finally answering Ryan’s question, but unable to stop from sliding my gaze over to where Sam and Ben were moving as one.

“Oh, I see how it is.” Ryan sounded pleased with himself, as though he’d discovered some new secret to woodworking.

“See how what is?”

Ryan tipped his chin toward the dance floor. “Did you want to marry Sam?”

I had just taken a slug of my Gansett, the unofficial beer of New England baseball, and spit it out at Ryan’s words. Unfortunately, my beer spray didn’t reach him.

“Of course not,” I spluttered, wiping the beer dribbling down my chin with a napkin. “That was a joke. Besides, I’m not the marrying kind.”

Ryan bunched his eyebrows but didn’t comment, thankfully.

Back when we were all in our early twenties, Sam and I had made a pact that if we were both still single when we turned thirty, we’d marry each other.

I can’t even remember why we’d made that pact in the first place, though I remember wanting Sam to be happy, no matter what it took.

I’d forgotten all about it until Haider, the first of us to turn thirty this year, brought it up during his birthday walk back in February.

We’d laughed it off, but deep down I was .

. . I don’t know. I felt weird about it.

I'd never tell the guys that, and it wasn't because I wanted to marry Sam.

No, it wasn't that at all. It was . . . that I was afraid I'd lose my best friend.

I glanced at the dance floor again. Sam was laughing while Ben looked up at him with stars in his eyes.

I want that.

Shit. No, I don't.

Okay. I don't know where that thought came from, but I most definitely did not want that.

Even though I'd recently told Sam everyone wanted what he and Ben had, I loved being single.

I loved the freedom of coming and going as I pleased.

And I especially loved not having to answer to anyone for my career choice or my sometimes-extreme adventures and the many injuries I'd sustained as a result.

If it got the adrenaline pumping, I was all in, and I didn't need anyone giving me crap for it.

But my bestest bestie, Sam Caldwell—whose great-great grandfather founded our little town of Caldwell Crossing—was the first one of us four to find his person.

Their relationship was the real deal. They'd been together for a few months now and though I'd thought Ben joining us would change the dynamic of our group, he'd fit in seamlessly.

And as long as Sam was happy, then I was, too.

But what if the other guys found their someone, and that someone didn't blend in as well?

I didn't want to lose any of these guys who were like true brothers to me.

Haider made his way back to our table like a beacon in the night wearing a silky, bright orange shirt.

Three multi-colored neon balloons tied to his wrist bobbed along behind him.

His last name was Gray, but he was color personified.

And he was sleeping with the enemy and liking it.

Phillip Brauning was the vice president of a massive European chocolate conglomerate that was threatening to take over Haider's family chocolate shop.

I'd never seen Haider so torn up about someone before, which could only mean he had serious feelings for the man.

But did they have to be for a man who was threatening his livelihood?

I glanced back at Ryan, who was still watching me speculatively.

He was probably the next to fall because he had such a huge, soft heart.

Not to mention the cute writer we met last week, Adam Nelson, who was renting Ryan's cabin for six weeks.

The two of them had been sending heated looks at each other when they didn't think anyone was paying attention.

Then where would that leave me? Odd man out. That's where.

"Stop it," I growled at Ryan.

He shrugged as Haider dramatically plopped down beside me, his bright blue gaze bouncing between us.

"What did I miss?"

"Nothing," I groused at the same time as Ryan said, "Jedi is jealous of the lovebirds."

Being that my birthday was May fourth, and we were all Star Wars fans, the guys had dubbed me Jedi when we were kids.

Haider snorted and snuggled into my side.

"Don't worry, my little Jedi," he said, looking up at me with a flirty grin and fluttering eyelashes. The balloons tied to his wrist bumped against my head, making my hair static-y. "I'll box up some fresh truffles for you to eat your sorrows away with."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Haider knew the way to my heart.

"I don't have any sorrows," I said, ruffling his dark, curly locks. "But I would never turn down your truffles."

Haider and his grandmother Mamie owned and operated Harmony Chocolates, and his gourmet truffles were my most favorite treat on the planet.

It was good to see Haider laughing and joking, even though he still looked tired.

He'd lost it earlier today on my birthday walk.

He'd planned a whole Star Wars theme to celebrate, and while we were battling lightsabers—me as Luke Skywalker and him as Darth Vader—he went full on rage monkey, jabbing at me.

Sam and Ryan had to step in and wrestle the saber from him.

But he was in much better spirits tonight, which was good. Otherwise, I'd have to have a talk with Phillip.

Sam and Ben returned, their faces flushed from dancing and smiles big. They reached for their beers at the same time and chugged a few gulps before sitting down.

Sam wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt as his gaze drifted over the three of us.

“What did we miss?”

Haider giggled, Ryan grinned, and I sighed. One of those big, loud, put-upon kinds of sighs.

“Conor's jealous,” Haider teased.

“Again, with this . . .” I dragged a hand down my face. “I am not jealous.”

Maybe a little envious of Sam and Ben's relationship, though.

Sam, either taking pity on me or being intuitive enough to clue in, which was most

likely the case because he was one smart dude, changed the subject.

“So, are you all ready for the fair next weekend?” he asked.

Except for that subject.

“Ugh,” I wasn’t ready for any of it.

“I have all my roses carved,” Ryan offered. The light catching in his brown eyes made them glitter like he had a secret. “Just a few more bowls to make.”

He was a woodworker, but I’d call him an artist. I didn’t know how he did it, but he could take the gnarliest piece of wood and whittle it down to a beautiful work of art.

The guys carried on sharing their plans. Each had a booth for the Founders Day Fair—Ryan with his woodworking, Sam with his family’s maple syrup, Haider’s chocolates, and even Ben was taking part in the library book sale.

I didn’t have a small business like all my friends did, but I’d be working a booth for the Caldwell Crossing Fire Department, where I’d worked since graduating high school and then fire school.

Along with educating people on fire safety and doing demonstrations, I’d be overseeing fire safety checks for the live performances throughout the afternoon.

Six bands were lined up to play, one of which had become the bane of my existence.

The fair would end with a bachelor auction for a local charity, which Mamie had volunteered me for.

Can’t say I was much looking forward to that.

“Are you excited to meet Dallas Blade in person, Con?” Ryan leaned forward, drawing me back into the conversation. His purple-and-gray plaid shirt strained over his muscular biceps and shoulders.

“Not even a little,” I said with a huff.

“But he’s so hot,” Haider swooned and fanned himself.

“So hot,” Ben agreed, earning a side eye from Sam. Ben planted a kiss on his cheek and to Sam, added, “Not as hot as you, though.”

Sam smiled at him with googly eyes. He was so gone.

“And you’ve had a crush on him since we were kids,” Ryan added with a wave of his beer mug in my direction.

Sam frowned at me. “How did I not know that?”

“Drunk on syrup, maybe,” I quipped, and Haider barked out a laugh that had half a dozen heads turning toward our table.

“You all suck,” Sam said, but he was grinning, and his blue eyes were shining with mirth. “I’ve been listening to his music. It’s good.”

“Told you,” Ryan said with a note of pride.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

Ryan had introduced me to the Dallas Blade Band when we were fifteen years old.

We'd ridden our mountain bikes through the woods on the Harmony Lake Grafton trail, jumping over rocks and logs and tree roots, until we'd reached Harmony Cliffs.

I'd dared the guys to jump off the cliff and into the lake, a fifteen-foot drop, but Sam's complexion had paled.

Haider and Ryan had run toward the edge of the cliff, hooting and laughing when they launched into the air together.

"Come on, Sam," I'd said, holding my hand out for him. "I'll never let anything bad happen to you."

I'd never let anything bad happen to any of them.

Sam had stood there, chewing on his bottom lip for a full minute.

When the echoes of Ryan and Haider's laughter carried up to us, Sam nodded and reached for me.

I'd held his hand tight, given a squeeze of reassurance, and we'd jumped.

Sam screamed, not in a fun way, but when we'd come up spluttering for air, he'd laughed his head off and wanted to jump again.

Afterwards, we'd all laid on the cliff under the hot summer sun to dry off, and Ryan

had turned to me, pulling his iPod and headphones out of his bike bag. “You gotta hear this new band.”

Laying side by side with one headphone in Ryan’s ear and the other in mine, I’d fallen in love with Dallas Blade.

“COME ON, CAP,” I grouched and dropped a stack of fire-smart pamphlets on the table of the CCFD booth at the Founders Day Fair a week later. “Can’t you go talk to them?”

“Sorry, Holly,” Captain Burgess said, using my station nickname as he clapped me on the shoulder.

Holly was short for Holliston, my last name.

All the guys at work had nicknames that were their last names abbreviated or were a play on them—Whittaker was Whitty, Shepherd was Shep—or reflected an incident that had us all laughing.

Some were better than others. Like rookie Firefighter Jackson.

We’d dubbed him Polly, because he’d drawn the short straw—well, he was the rookie, so he got all the short straws—and had to rescue a parrot from a tree.

No lie. A bird stuck in a tree. Granted, it was a prized thousand-dollar bird .

. . The obnoxious little beast had a serious attitude to boot, and no amount of Jackson’s pleading “Polly want a cracker” had helped.

But he’d eventually gotten a hold of the winged demon and all had ended well.

We needed the occasional call out like that to break up those that didn't end happily.

But Polly hadn't stuck for Jackson's nickname. Being so close to mine, people were getting confused.

But when it came to nicknames, only my lifelong best friends called me Jedi.

By some strange twist of fate, we'd all been born a month apart, each on an unofficial holiday, and we'd nicknamed each other to match.

Sam was born on April Fool's Day, so we dubbed him Joker.

Haider was born on Valentine's Day, so he was Cupid, naturally.

He even had the wild curls to match. Ryan was born on St Patrick's Day, so we called him Paddy.

And then there's me. May fourth wasn't a holiday, unofficial or otherwise, but the day had become popular thanks to the Star Wars franchise.

May the Fourth Be with You and all. I was just glad the guys settled on calling me Jedi and not Vader.

Bad enough, I sounded like the Star Wars villain when I had my full breathing apparatus on at work.

Plus, being that I was a firefighter, I was one of the good guys.

"You're the one whose been dealing with them since the beginning," Cap continued, pulling me from my reverie. "So, I need you to go over and make sure they aren't trying to add more than we agreed to."

I bit back a groan. The last thing I wanted to do was deal with the manager from the Dallas Blade Band over pyrotechnics for their stage performance again, and especially not with Blade himself.

I tried not to let it show on my face what I thought of that, but going by the captain's raised eyebrow, I didn't hide it as well as I'd thought.

I glanced over at the band shell in the park, which I could see from our booth's vantage point on Main Street, and frowned.

"Fine," I grumbled. "I'll finish helping Jackson and Whittaker set up before going over."

"Good man." Captain Burgess smiled and wandered off.

My temples throbbed. All the captain had to do was mention Dallas Blade , and hello raging headache. Eldi padded over and leaned against my leg, sensing my mood change.

She was our firehouse dog, named after the Icelandic word for fire. A dalmatian, of course, because what respectable fire station didn't have a dalmatian? Or any dog, for that matter.

I petted the soft fur on her head as she looked up at me with her warm brown eyes, and whispered, "Thank you, sweet girl."

"Want me to come with you?" Jackson asked with his eyes too bright and his voice too eager. "For backup?"

"Nah. I've got it," I said, holding back a grin. "Thanks, though."

While I appreciated the offer, I had about four inches and thirty pounds on Jackson, and I knew he likely just wanted to meet the rock star and get an autograph and a selfie with him.

I got it. I mean, Blade was hot. Who wouldn't want to meet the man?

I was still a fan of the band, after all these years.

And okay, maybe I might still have a low-key crush on the lead singer, what with his long, silky, brown-blond hair and smoky eyes and lean, tight body.

But there was a proverb about meeting your heroes in person, and Jackson hadn't been dealing with the pain in the ass like I had for the past three months. There would be zero pandering to the celebrity ego. Crush or not.

Half an hour later we had the booth all set to rights, and the 1950s fire truck we'd parked next to it shined to perfection.

Eldi and the bright red engine were always a draw at events where people often found fire safety boring—until disaster struck and they needed us.

The kids loved getting their photos taken with Eldi and the truck, as well as the chance to sit in the driver's seat and turn on the lights and siren.

I glanced at my watch. People were wandering down Main Street now that the parade was over, perusing the offerings from local vendors and artisans. Plenty of time for me to run over and check in with Blade's manager before the crowds picked up.

"I'll be back in a few," I called out to the guys. "I'm taking Eldi with me."

Whittaker nodded without looking up from adjusting paraphernalia on the table for

the twentieth time, and Jackson watched me with a hopeful expression before also nodding.

Eldi trotted along at my side as I made my way over to the park, where half a dozen local bands would play throughout the day.

Well, the headlining band wasn't all that local.

The Dallas Blade Band had come as a surprise to the small town of Caldwell Crossing.

Dallas Blade was a huge international star who played arenas and stadiums. Not Founders Day Fairs in tiny city parks.

I would've been more curious as to the reason behind them playing at our event if the band's manager hadn't constantly hassled me for permits to use pyrotechnics on stage. I'd said no over and over, because hello ? Major fire risk there.

But then Blade himself had called.

As irritated as I'd been at having to deal with Blade, his voice had some sort of hypnotizing magic to it—deep and melodic, with a touch of rasp that shot straight to my groin. He'd short-circuited my brain, and I'd caved.

Only a little!

I'd maintained enough wits to not sign off on the full display they'd wanted, but I did agree to a couple of small pots for the end of their set.

I regretted that now, as I made my way through the park and behind the band shell to a gravel lot that had been designated for the performers to park their vehicles, and

with Dallas Blade, a tour bus.

The thing was flashy and expensive looking, with its spotless, deep green paint job, tinted windows, and polished chrome accents.

The band's name wasn't splashed across the side, but there was a black and yellow DBB logo above the handle on the bus door.

I knocked on the door, hammering my knuckles dead center on the sticker, as Eldi squatted to take a pee by the front tire.

"Good girl," I praised, grinning. Yeah, I was an adult.

The door squeaked open and the man standing in the frame had short dark hair threaded with strands of gray and crow's feet around the corners of his shark-like brown eyes.

"Hi," I said, plastering a wide smile across my face. "I'm Lieutenant Holliston with the Caldwell Crossing Fire Department. I'm looking for Brian Lawton."

"That's me." Brian stepped out onto the stairs, closing the door behind him, and extended a hand. I shook it. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"I wanted to introduce myself and make sure we're on the same page with pyro for your show this afternoon."

"All set," Brian said, his tone curt. He eyed Eldi like she was some kind of attack dog when she sat dutifully at my side. "As agreed. Was there something else?"

I shook my head and said, "I'll drop by when your band is setting up to double check that everything is fireproof."

“There’s no need for that,” Brian argued, his bushy eyebrows furrowed.

“Just the same.” I stepped back, my grin firmly in place. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

I RAISED AN eyebrow when Brian stepped back inside the bus. His lips pursed tight.

He was filling in for our full-time road manager, who was on a much-needed sabbatical because he worked too much, took everything to heart, and the stress had been taking a toll on his health.

Brian Lawton had come well recommended as a man with an attention to detail who got things done, but I'd yet to see that, seeing as I was the one who "got things done", especially for our pyro permit.

One small show I already had concerns about Brian staying on staff when we got back to arena tours.

"That was Lieutenant Holliston from the fire department," Brian said. Irritation rang in his voice as he correctly read my silent question. "Making sure we're set with the pyro this afternoon."

I shook my head and rolled my eyes, saying what I thought about that pain in the ass without speaking.

I would have had a lot of words to share about how the small-town fire department lieutenant seemed to go out of his way to restrict our show, but I needed to conserve my voice for the stage later.

"How's the voice?" Brian asked, giving me a look that reminded me of my late grandmother, with her head tipped down, glaring at me over the top of her bifocals,

whenever I did something she didn't approve of.

I shrugged and held my hand up, rocking it in a see-saw motion. My voice was probably doing better than I was, as I fought a rare case of stage fright at being able to perform to a level our fans expected.

He watched me for a second, his gaze assessing, and with a quick nod, he sat back down at the small table he'd claimed as his office desk and returned to his concert day checklist. A lot of work went into a show, even for a small town, seven-song gig.

I looked outside. Thick green trees blocked the view of the band shell, birds sang and fluttered about, and the sky was spotless blue. For a second, I imagined I was camping somewhere magical, far off the grid.

A woman with long dark hair jumped out of the driver's seat of a white van painted with red polka dots that pulled into the lot and met a tall man at the back door.

They began unloading musical equipment from the vehicle.

The polka band, I deduced. They were the first act in today's lineup.

My band was the headline act, which, given we'd been headlining stadiums for well over a decade, I should not be feeling this nervous.

I caught myself gnawing on my lower lip in my reflection in the one-way window and sighed.

I couldn't just sit here, but I didn't want to get out and wander around.

Someone would inevitably recognize me and force me to talk.

And if I didn't, they'd think I was an entitled asshole.

So instead, I pulled my acoustic guitar onto my lap and plucked the strings in search of a new melody while my mind wandered.

It had been three months since the surgery—the second surgery—for vocal nodules, polyps, and this time a small tear, and today would be my first time singing since.

Aside from regular vocal exercises and reduced rehearsals, that was.

This show was another rehearsal of sorts.

A test to see how my voice held up. If it would hold up and I'd still have a career.

I'd been singing all my life and started my first band with some high school buddies.

We were your typical teenage garage band with dreams of grandeur, playing parties and the occasional talent night, but that was as far as we'd got.

When half the band left town for college, me and Kirk, my best friend and lead guitarist from the beginning, formed the band as it is today.

We got our big break when I was only eighteen years old, and we haven't stopped since.

Well, until my voice, my instrument, gave out.

Twice.

My voice had changed since the surgeries, too.

I wasn't entirely sure I was happy with the deeper, raspier sound it produced now.

I couldn't hit the high notes quite as well, either.

Okay, I hadn't tried to hit them. I'd never tell anyone, not even Kirk, but the thought of singing our older songs made my heart pound and sent shivers down my spine.

What if I'd never be able to hit those notes again?

What if I'd lost half my octave range, which was four.

What if my voice wouldn't last a full set, day after day? What if my career was over?

What if it's better than before ?

What I needed was to stop what-iffing myself into circles.

I'd deliberately left songs off the playlist that called for my full range and high notes, and luckily, no one questioned me on it.

Maybe because the band thought a small, low-key show would be a good test for my voice, and my confidence, and Brian had agreed.

Luna, my bass player, had come across this small Founders Day Fair in Caldwell Crossing, New Hampshire—only a three-hour drive from Albany, New York, where I called home during my vocal recovery—and I'd jumped on it.

Unfortunately, while the gig would be perfect for taking my voice out for a test drive, the annoying fire lieutenant had refused to sign off on our permit for full pyrotechnics and stage effects.

It ticked me off that I'd had to personally call the guy myself and persuade him, because Brian couldn't get the job done, but Lieutenant Holliston eventually relented.

Somewhat. We were allowed a couple of small pyrotechnics on the front of the stage, but nothing else, and only for the last song of our set.

It wouldn't be the full effects show we were known for, but at least we'd still have something.

My phone, sitting on the table where Brian was working, rang with an incoming video call. I was already shaking my head when he glanced at the screen.

"It's Jaylin," he said, grabbing the phone and handing it over to me.

Jaylin was another major change in my life. A teenage daughter I didn't know about until last year.

I set my guitar aside and accepted the video chat with a smile, because she was a precious gem and I had no choice but to smile in her presence. She had my eyes and her mother's nose, but the pastel pink streaks in her wavy blonde hair were all Jay.

"Hey, Dad," she chirped, her voice always so cheery and enthusiastic these days.

That hadn't been the case when we'd first met.

Not after first losing her mom so young and then discovering who her biological dad was.

"Don't talk. I know you're going on stage soon, but I couldn't let you go without wishing you luck."

My heart squeezed. Oh my god, this kid. I placed a hand over my chest and mouthed thank you .

“You’re going to kick butt because you’re the Dallas Blade, and your voice is going to be perfect.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. For Jay, I would speak. “What are you up to?”

“Dad,” she admonished, her delicate eyebrows lowering. “You’re supposed to rest your voice.”

“A few words won’t hurt.”

She stared at me for a second, then raised her brows and grinned.

“Carolyn is taking me to the stables today,” she said, her image jiggling as she bounced in her seat. Or jumped. I couldn’t tell if she was sitting or standing. “She said I can ride Flicker.”

She loved horses and Carolyn, a friend of Jaylin’s mom who she was staying with while I was away, was an equestrian. I’d even gone riding with them occasionally.

“That’s great.”

“Right!” Her eyes, as blue as mine, glittered with delight. “Okay, I gotta go. You have a great show, Dad. Get someone to record it for me so I can watch it later.”

I nodded I would. “I love you.”

“You, too.”

She made a kissy face and then her image froze for a second before the screen went black. I smiled as I put the phone down, feeling like I was missing out by not being there with her.

I'd met a woman in upstate New York named Marley, who I used to hook up with in the early days, whenever the band performed there.

She was wild and sweet, but after the third or fourth tour stop in her town, I never saw her again.

I used to wonder what had happened to her, but she hadn't crossed my mind in years—not until I'd received a call from a lawyer last year.

Marley had passed away from a rare and aggressive form of cancer, leaving our thirteen-year-old daughter orphaned.

Our daughter.

Kirk, having been through a false accusation of fatherhood in the past, had insisted I get a paternity test to prove she truly was mine, but I'd taken one look at her and known right down to my very core that she was.

I hadn't wanted to disrupt her life more than it already had been by uprooting her from everything she knew to fit into mine.

Finding out about each other was a big enough disruption for both of us, so she stayed with Carolyn while I finished our last tour.

But after some initial awkwardness and wariness, she took to me as her dad far better than I'd have imagined.

That might have also had something to do with her looking forward to boasting to all her friends about having a famous father.

I was the one who'd struggled.

Now though, I got a giddy feeling in my stomach every time she called me Dad.

But how did I take care of raising a young girl when I spent most of my life touring? I'd never known anything but music and the road. Carolyn was a godsend, but she wasn't a permanent solution.

I'd spent a lot of time thinking about the recent changes in my life.

I wasn't getting any younger, either. I'd be turning thirty-five this year and I'd been singing and touring the Dallas Blade Band for going on eighteen years.

Maybe learning that I had a daughter combined with my vocal issues was a sign that I needed to change course.

But where did I even start?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

THE DAY FLEW by in a flurry of activity. The truck and Eldi were a big draw with the kids and teenagers alike, even some adults, and kept us busy. We made a point of talking to parents about fire safety while they watched their kids climb up into the engine and turn on the siren and the lights.

My temples were already throbbing from the siren chirps.

Phillip, the dream crusher, came by, and I eyed him dubiously.

He was a big guy. Maybe an inch shorter than me and broad shouldered, but he'd be no match if he hurt Haider.

Not only did my job keep me fit, but I also had a purple belt in judo.

This guy probably sat around eating chocolate made from the tears of all the small businesses he destroyed.

Except it was obvious he had some muscle under his casual but very cosmopolitan tan chinos, raspberry-colored polo, and bright white sneakers. No socks. I made a point of not looking at his, as Haider had described them, "sexy ankles". But still. Nobody messed with my friends and got away with it.

Phillip smiled cautiously at me as he approached. "Good morning."

Ugh , why did he have to have a cool accent?

I didn't reply, earning a curious look from Jackson. Eldi trotted right on over and sat

at Phillip's feet, her tailing sweeping the ground and tongue lolling. There had to be something wrong with her good-people detector. Either that, or she was a traitor.

"Hallo, hübsches M?dchen," Phillip said as he kneeled to her level and petted her. She leaned into him, soaking up the attention.

"What was that you said to her?" Jackson asked. I was curious too, but I wasn't about to ask.

"German for hello, pretty girl." Phillip said with a smile that made him look far more handsome than the leader of a chocolate cabal had any right to. "What is her name?"

"Eldi," Jackson answered.

"Icelandic for fire," Phillip said. Great . He was multilingual, too. "Lovely."

With one more pet behind Eldi's ears, he stood and glanced over at the fire engine, smiling at the kids climbing all over it.

His gaze slid back to mine, and we stared at each other for a few long seconds.

I didn't know what was going on in his head, but in mine I mentally told him he'd better not screw Haider over, and his expression answered said he would throw himself at our mercy if he ever did.

I huffed out loud, ending our silent standoff. We'll see .

"It is good work that you do," he said, as he pulled his wallet from his pants pocket. He stuffed two one-hundred-dollar bills into the donation box for the firefighter's burn fund.

I forced a smile and grudgingly said, “Thank you.”

Because even though he was a dream crusher, he’d received Eldi’s approval and that had been generous of him to donate. He nodded at me and wandered off to the next booth. Maybe he’d turn out okay for Haider after all.

Adam came by as I was finishing showing some kids the ‘stop, drop, and roll’ safety technique, and this time, I didn’t have to force a smile. I’d only met him the once, when Ryan had brought him to our regular beers and burgers night at Lucy’s Pub last week, but he seemed like a genuinely nice guy.

“Hey, Conor,” Adam said as I sent the kids off to their parents. “How’s things going here?”

He had a couple of bags in his hand with logos I recognized—Harmony Chocolates and Stonebridge Maple Syrup. My smile widened at the support he was showing my friends. I knew there was a reason I liked him.

“Busy and—” The engine siren double chirped. “That.”

Adam winced, and I didn’t blame him. The siren on the old truck wasn’t as loud as the ones on the more modern engines, but standing this close, it could still give the eardrums a good ring.

We tried to keep the kids to one chirp, so we didn’t inflict headaches onto the whole of Caldwell Crossing, but sometimes they got carried away.

“I’m getting a headache already,” I added lightly as I brushed some dirt off my station pants from when I’d been rolling around on the ground with the kids.

“I feel for you, having to listen to that all day.” His eyes were wide in either disbelief

or sympathy. Both worked for me.

I shrugged. “Comes with the job. I’m used to it.” Then, with no segue, I said, “Hey, I started reading your book.”

“Right.” Adam’s cheeks colored. “The first book in the Harmony Lake Murders series. Uh, how do you like it so far?”

“I’m not too far in,” I said. I got little downtime at work to read, and when I wasn’t on shift, I preferred to be outside doing things. “I can tell you’ve been here before, even though some of the details aren’t quite right.”

“ Finally ,” Adam breathed. The air whooshed from his lungs and his shoulders relaxed. “Someone who gets it.”

“Uh . . .” I tilted my head, confused, but Adam didn’t elaborate. “You’re welcome?”

Adam’s face lit up and his teeth flashed.

The siren went off again, and I gave Adam an apologetic look, as though it was my fault. Though I suppose I was guilty by association.

“And on that painfully high note.” He rocked back on his heels. “I think I’ve had enough people-ing and noise for one day.”

I waved him off with a laugh and a see you around .

I was close to having had enough of today, too.

Except I still had to oversee all the bands’ stage setups, continue with fire safety demonstrations, help break down the booth, and later, stuff myself into a

claustrophobic penguin suit for the charity bachelor auction.

I cursed Mamie for the millionth time since she'd voluntold me I would be participating.

When I finally slipped away for a quick break, I wandered over to check out my friends' booths.

They were all doing brisk business, and it looked like they would wrap up early because they were running low on inventory.

I loved to see the support for our town's local businesses, farmers, and artisans.

I bought the biggest jug of maple syrup that Sam had left for the fire station kitchen and a smaller bottle for myself.

At Haider's booth, I bought a box of truffles that he had stashed for me.

Man, I loved that guy. He gave me a wink and tried to hand my money back, but I wasn't having that.

I needed to do my part to help him fight the evil candy syndicate.

Ryan was deep in conversation with someone inquiring about a custom-made headboard for their bedroom, and when he was done, I bought one of his animal wood carvings.

He'd made a dragonfly that I had to have because they symbolized living life to the fullest and I loved how iridescent their wings were.

I had more than a few dragonfly-themed T-shirts and knick-knacks in my house.

My last stop was the library's Buck-A-Book Bargain booth, where Sam's boyfriend Ben was helping.

He'd dressed casually today, in jeans and a forest green T-shirt with Yoda one for me stenciled on the front.

I only noticed because when he'd first arrived in town, he'd still dressed like the city boy he'd been.

"Hey, Conor. Looking for anything in particular?" Ben asked as I perused the display of old paperbacks.

I shook my head. "Not really, but what would you recommend?"

Ben's face lit up. "What genres you like to read?"

I thumbed my chin while I thought about it. I didn't read too often, but—

"I do like a good mystery. Just started reading the first Harmony Lake Murders novel. It's pretty good so far. Have you read those? Did you know Adam is—"

Ben frowned, his expression tightened, and the light in his green eyes dimmed.

"Uh . . . Not a fan I take it?"

"No. It's not that." He shook his head, lips pursed. "It's . . ." He turned away without finishing his sentence and rifled through some books that were still in a box. "Here. This is an excellent murder-mystery series."

He handed me a well-worn book with a colorful cover, the title "Bourbon Street Blues" in bright yellow, and . . .

“Is that a go-go dancer?”

I frowned at the image of a near naked man with dollar bills tucked into his G-string. Don't get me wrong. I loved a good go-go dancer, but the cover didn't exactly say mystery.

Ben laughed at my expression. “This is the first of nine books set in New Orleans with a gay protagonist. I dare you to put it down once you start.”

“Dude . Did Sam not tell you never to dare me?” He laughed as I handed him a dollar bill. But it was true. I had yet to meet a dare I wouldn't accept. “I'll take it.”

“And the author knows his city,” Ben added ominously as he handed me the book.

I tucked it under my arm, wondering what that was about, and headed back to the fire booth.

By the time late afternoon rolled around, I felt like I'd already been there for two weeks, and I was still far from done. The country band from the next township over had finished their set, and it was time for my now ex favorite band to take the stage.

My heart pounded with a mix of excitement and aggravation as I walked over, my legs a combination of heavy and shaky, and found Brian barking orders at a couple of sweaty roadies wearing black T-shirts with “CREW” in big white letters stamped across the back.

Anger flared in my chest, and I flattened my mouth.

The manager was a pompous ass and a dick.

“Lawton,” I called his name louder than necessary, but I wanted his attention away

from the roadies. Dudes were only trying to make a living. They didn't need a tyrant of a boss berating them while they were at it.

"Lieutenant," Brian said with a groan in his voice.

Yeah, buddy. I feel the same way .

"Can you show me your pyro set up?" I asked, biting back a remark about his attitude and treatment of his employees. Captain Burgess would not be happy with me making a public scene.

Brian waved an arm toward the front of the stage. I scanned the immediate area and what I could see of backstage through the greenroom door as I crossed the wooden floor, but I didn't see Dallas, the elusive rock star.

Shoving down an unexpected flare of disappointment, I turned my attention to their setup.

They'd set a microphone stand in the middle toward the front.

About a dozen feet behind it was a shiny chrome drum kit on a foot-high riser.

Two towers of amplifiers flanked the drums, and another set of amplifiers stacked two-high sat flush with the frame of the band shell.

Black curtains with the Dallas Blade Band logo screen-printed on them ran along the curved wings.

Stagehands had placed the band's two flash pots at the very front, about midway between the amps and the mic stand.

“These are too close to the edge of the stage.” I pointed at the flash pots.

“That’s where we always put them,” Brian argued, his expression tight.

“If you want me to sign off on them, you’ll need to move them back.” I propped my hands on my hips to keep from wringing some sense into the guy. “I can’t have them hitting any fans at the front of the stage because there’s no security pit here to keep them a safe distance away.”

He opened his mouth, no doubt to argue with me.

“In fact,” I added before he could speak, taking another scan of their setup.

“You should push everything back a couple of feet. And make sure you aim the pots directly up, so the sparks fall back on themselves. It’s not windy today, but that doesn’t mean we won’t get the odd breeze that could blow sparks into the crowd or back onto the stage. ”

“I think they’ll be fine,” Brian hedged, pulling at the collar of his navy polo shirt.

“Hmm.” I made a point of looking him over from head to toe. “I don’t see a fire department badge on your shirt.”

“Fine.” Brian huffed under his breath and whistled to call the roadies over.

This guy is such a dick .

With a manager like that, my doubts grew that Dallas Blade would be any better. If he was, why would he work with someone like Brian?

I helped the roadies adjust the pots, making a point of thanking them, and satisfied

that everything was safe, I did the final sign off on their permit.

As I crossed the stage to leave, I saw Dallas Blade standing on the other side, leaning against the staging area doorframe. I stumbled over my own damn feet.

The larger-than-life singer was frowning at me, but that didn't stop my heart from lurching in my chest.

Holy . Shit .

I'd thought Dallas was hot in photos and videos, but in person .

. . My childhood crush came roaring back to life with a vengeance.

Dallas was tall, though not as tall my six-foot-four.

Maybe four or five inches shorter. The bottom half of his long brown hair faded into a sun-kissed blond, giving him a bohemian vibe.

He was wearing soft-looking jeans that hugged his long legs, shiny cowboy boots, and an open-collared white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows that showed off his muscular tattooed forearms.

I gulped. Please don't be an ass .

"Have a good show," I called out to Blade with a smile and wave.

His expression didn't change. If anything, his frown deepened, but he tipped his head in acknowledgement.

Sigh. Of course, he's an ass, too .

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

I WAS NERVOUS.

My palms were sweaty, my heart was racing, and my stomach felt all twisted up in knots.

I didn't get pre-show jitters. Ever. But today was a big deal, worrying whether my vocal cords would hold up. The last thing I wanted was to let our fans down because I came back too soon, and my voice crapped out on me. Or worse, my voice was gone forever.

A shiver trembled through me at that depressing thought.

"I need to stretch my legs." I jumped from my chair in the small backstage room of the band shell where we'd be playing shortly.

Kirk looked up from where he sat on the couch, strumming on an acoustic guitar, while our drummer Arthur was playing video games on his phone, and Luna was sitting crossed legged on a mat on the floor, eyes closed, meditating.

I'd been sipping on a hot cup of water with lemon and honey after doing my vocal warmups.

"You good?" Kirk asked, brushing a lock of long, dark hair from his forehead to reveal curious hazel eyes.

I nodded, not wanting to talk too much, and made my way toward the stage door.

I heard voices as I approached. One I recognized as Brian's, but the other—deep, authoritative, and as smooth as honey—was familiar yet not.

I leaned in the doorway, staying out of the audience's line of sight, and watched as a tall, fit-looking man dressed in navy pants that hugged a gorgeous bubble butt, and a same-colored tight T-shirt that strained across his muscular back, pointed out to Brian where the flash pots should go.

Was this Lieutenant Holliston, the firefighter who'd been giving me grief about having pyrotechnics for the last few months?

When the lieutenant turned to leave the stage, he caught me watching and froze mid-step.

My heart froze for a second, too. The man was F-I-N-E fine, with his tousled blond hair and sharp blue eyes and sexy scruff on his jaw that I'd love to feel against my skin.

I frowned. I wasn't here to get down and dirty with the locals.

"Have a good show," he said, flashing a smile that sent butterflies fluttering in my stomach as I watched him leave.

"Dayum ," Kirk said at my side, and whistled low. I hadn't noticed him approach, caught in Holliston's snare as I was. "Tell me that wasn't the firefighter who gave us the run around for pyro, and that he's single."

"That's him," I said, my throat feeling tight. "If he's single, you can have him."

"Meh. He's probably straight anyway," Kirk huffed, but after that brief heated exchange I'd had with him, I'd disagree. Kirk bounced on his toes, hot firefighters

forgotten. “Just about show time. You ready for this?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied, while my emotions bounced around like ping-pong balls.

“You got this,” he said, and squeezed my shoulder.

“Yeah. I got this.” I shook my hands out and jumped on the spot for a second, hoping to dispel my bout of nerves.

“Did you set up to record the show for Jaylin?” Kirk eyed me, then shook his head at my expression. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

I had.

“No,” I hedged, but not convincingly enough, because Kirk called Craig over—one of our long-time roadies—and asked him to set it up.

I handed him my cell phone so I could send the video to Jaylin later. “Shit. The battery is getting low.”

“No problem,” Craig said with a crooked grin. He’d met Jaylin when she’d come to a show not long after she came into my life and thought she was the sweetest thing. I couldn’t argue. I felt the same. “I’ll make sure to find the perfect angle for her.”

“Thank you.”

A few minutes later, the rest of the band joined me as the town mayor, a short man with graying sideburns wearing a pink polo shirt and tan slacks, strolled across the stage to address the crowd.

“Our next act is a big deal for us here in Caldwell Crossing,” he said to cheers and whistles. “I’m sure they don’t need much of an introduction. So, please give a warm welcome to the Dallas Blade Band!”

He waved his arm in a sweeping gesture across the stage toward the door where we waited as more cheers and whistles rent the air, louder than I’d expected for a small town.

The thrill of performing pumped adrenaline through my veins, chasing away the rare jitters, and the four of us ran out onto the stage and to our respective places.

I sent a silent prayer out into the universe that all would go well and leaned into the mic.

“Hello, Caldwell Crossing,” I raised my voice to be heard over the cheering audience.

I scanned the crowd, not surprised to see the city park completely packed and spilling out onto the street.

There’d been maybe a hundred people tops for the last couple of bands, much less for the polka band that opened the day.

We’d asked the town organizers to keep our name off their promotions until the day before, knowing if word got out too soon that the Dallas Blade Band was playing a small local venue for free, the quiet little New Hampshire town could be overwhelmed.

“Are you all having a good time?” The audience roared in response. I bent down at the front of the stage and clapped a few outstretched hands. “What do you say we play some music?”

That got a resounding cheer as we launched into our first song—the least vocally demanding song in our repertoire.

I'd arranged the setlist by degree of difficulty, with one of our more famous and challenging songs being the last. Though it wasn't our most difficult song, which I was still hesitant to try.

I hadn't been able to hit the top of my range yet, and no way was I going to attempt it live.

The first notes sat comfortably in my midrange, my throat felt good, my voice strong, and my apprehension faded. With each verse and chorus and bridge, my voice held true, my confidence grew, and I reached up an octave for a smooth crescendo.

Maybe everything was going to be okay after all.

We launched right into the next track that took me back to the beginning with a song that had broken us into the mainstream.

The crowd screamed and sang along, their voices mixing with mine, their energy feeding me.

This never failed to amaze me. The sharing of emotion and joy, where for a moment in time we were all one.

I danced around the stage, leaned down where Craig had set up my cell phone behind a stack of amps and made faces for Jaylin to laugh at later.

I dropped to my knees at the foot of the stage and held my mic out for the closest fans to sing while hands scrabbled at my skin and clothing, looking for purchase.

I wasn't used to being this close to the audience, but I loved it and feared it in equal measure.

We played six songs back-to-back, and my voice held strong through each one.

"What a beautiful day it is here!" I shouted into the mic, sweat dripping down my face and my chest heaving from exertion. "Are you all having a good time?"

The audience roared.

"I said, are you having a good time?"

They roared louder still.

"We have time for one more song," I teased, wishing the set was longer. "You might recognize this one."

Arthur counted in our latest number one song, *Wicked Forever*, with his drumsticks. Kirk launched into a wailing guitar intro, and I blended my voice into the fading note. The crowd erupted into a single entity of synchronized motion, and my contact high reached for the stratosphere.

A shower of sparks shot into the air on either side of the stage with a rhythmic pulse perfectly timed to the beat.

This song was my biggest post-surgery challenge yet, and I was sailing through it. My voice might be a little deeper now, a little raspier, but I was back, and I didn't want the night to end.

A breeze joined the mayhem of sound and bodies, sweeping through the band shell and cooling my heated, exposed skin.

I raced across the stage and held the mic into the air, toward those on the right side, encouraging them to sing the chorus.

“ You and me, wicked forever ,” their collective voices rose into the heavens.

Running to the left side, I did the same, motioning up with my free arm. They rose to the challenge, singing louder than the opposite side had.

An acrid fishy smell caught my attention. There and gone so fast it had to be my imagination, because why the hell would I be smelling fish on a stage?

Standing mid stage while the center audience sang, trying to out-volume the sides, the back of my throat tickled.

A flare of worry gripped me, and I swallowed the itch back, but when I reached the song’s bridge, the itch became a scratch, and another, stronger smell assaulted my senses: burning plastic.

Then all hell broke loose.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

BACK AT THE fire station booth, my attention kept straying to the band on stage.

Specifically, to the singer for the band on stage.

As much as I loved his music and had been a fan ever since Ryan had first introduced me to the Dallas Blade Band, I'd never seen them perform live.

Concerts weren't my thing. That might have to change, because watching Blade move across the stage from all the way over on Main Street was a sight.

I could only imagine how much more thrilling it must be right up close.

Close enough to see his chest rise and fall, and the sweep of his gaze, the lift of his mouth, and the sweat trickling down his creamy skin.

Blade's voice carried across the park and danced on my eardrums. I didn't know if it was because the show was live or the acoustics or what, but Blade's voice had a quality to it I'd never heard before on his recordings.

Deeper somehow, with a touch of grit to it that reminded me of smoky bars and hard liquor.

Not that I drank hard liquor, and smoky buildings, in my experience, usually meant they were burning down.

But whatever had changed about his voice, I liked it.

The song ended and the cheer the audience sent up rivaled our fire engine siren.

I frowned. I'd been so fixated on Dallas that I hadn't noticed the audience had doubled in size, and a fissure of concern spread through my chest. Being outdoors eliminated capacity and exit concerns, but the growing crowd brought all kinds of risks with it.

Just because they weren't confined inside a building didn't mean they were safe from harm.

Fortunately, Sheriff Sturn was over there keeping an eye on things, along with a couple of his deputies, but that still didn't ease the impending sense of doom in the pit of my stomach.

Dallas launched into what would be their last song, and everything seemed to be okay, even though that gut feeling didn't subside.

"Hey, Holly," Whittaker interrupted. "Can you help me reset for the fire hose demo?"

"Sure thing," I said. A breeze ruffled my hair, and my scalp prickled when I stepped out of the covered booth.

Not a minute after I turned my back on the show, I heard someone shout, "Fire."

I spun around to see flames licking up the band curtains in the stage wings.

Shit-shit-shit .

"Whitty, stay here with Eldi," I shouted as I grabbed a fire extinguisher from the booth, thankful that we had almost our entire firefighting kit here for demonstrations.

"Jackson, come with me."

We raced across the park to the band shell, yelling at everybody to stay calm and get back as we went. We split off at the stage, Jackson going to the front to help move the crowd closest to the fire away, while I jumped onto the stage and doused the flames with the extinguisher.

Luckily, the fire was small and hadn't spread beyond the one curtain, so it only took a couple of minutes to put it out. Smoke rolled across the stage and dissipated as the light breeze grabbed it.

Once I was satisfied that there were no more embers or risk of a flare-up, I turned to the audience.

"Sorry, everyone," I raised my voice to be heard. "The fire's out now. What a way to end the show, right?"

Cheers and whistles greeted my declaration. I took a bow, because it seemed like the right thing to do when people were cheering you.

Dallas glared at me—which, what the hell for? I didn't start the fire—and stepped up to the microphone.

"Thank you, Caldwell Crossing. You've been a wonderful audience." Dallas paused and cleared his throat, but his voice sounded a little scratchy when he continued, "I'll be signing autographs at the side of the stage in half an hour."

A smaller crowd of hardcore Dallas Blade Band fans whooped and headed toward stage left, while everyone else made their way out of the park and onto the rest of their evening. I wondered how many of them would be at the auction in a couple of hours.

Ugh. Why did I think of that ?

I turned to inspect the area. Someone had placed a power bar on the stage, right underneath the curtains. One outlet had a plug in it that led to the backside of the amplifiers, where a small gorilla stand sat on the floor holding a cell phone. Its red recording light was still on.

You have got to be kidding me .

I put my free hand on my hip and growled. That had not been there when I'd signed off on the band's setup, and if it had, I never would have entertained approving it for even a second. No matter how magical Blade's voice was at making me agree to things I knew better not to.

I glanced over my shoulder. They hadn't moved the flash pots from where I'd told them they should stay, lucky for them, but that foreboding gust of wind I'd felt must have pushed the sparks inside the stage, where they'd hit the power bar and short-circuited it, and that then ignited the curtains above it.

The progression was as easy to see as tumbling dominos.

I didn't take much in life too seriously and I joked around a lot, because in my job, I'd seen how fast life could change, or worse, end.

But when it came to fire, I was dead serious.

I tried to stay professional. I really did, but nothing pissed me off more than otherwise smart people doing stupid things.

Add in months of frustration dealing with this particular band, and well, buh-bye professional.

"Who the hell put this fucking power bar here?" My voice boomed inside the band

shell and out into the park. Jackson stared up at me with wide eyes, along with a few startled fans. “And this goddamned phone?”

I blasted the thing with the fire extinguisher to make the point before taking a second to think better about that. White foam encased the phone and stand into a single abstract art object.

Whoops .

“What the hell, man?” Dallas shouted over my shoulder, and I jumped, not realizing he’d been that close. “You trashed my phone!”

“ That —” I pointed at it, my movement jerky and disdain dripping from my voice. “—was the reason for the fire. Which might have been okay if you hadn’t insisted on your precious fucking pyro.”

“It’s just a cell phone,” Dallas retorted, followed by a short cough, not getting the point.

“Which was plugged into a friggin’ power bar. Not to code, by the way.” I waved toward the bar. “And your pyro short-circuited that bar. That shouldn’t have been there !”

My voice rose with each word of that last sentence, because yeah, I was pissed as hell now. The nerve this guy had to argue with me . . .? I swear, my blood was on the verge of boiling in my veins.

Dallas’s complexion paled as the guitarist, Kirk, came up beside him.

“You need to stop talking,” he said to Dallas.

Good advice .

“I’m fine,” Dallas snapped, the color rising in his cheeks again. “And you!” He jabbed a finger at me. “Owe me a n—”

A full-on coughing fit overtook Dallas. His eyes widened with something like fear, and he flailed his arms the way someone drowning would reach for help.

Anger fled and all my firefighter training kicked in. He’d probably been standing too close to the fire, not realizing how much smoke it emitted before the flames took hold.

I grabbed his shoulders, and he gripped onto my forearm like a lifeline.

“Hey, you’re okay. You probably inhaled a little smoke.” I guided Dallas to the backstage area and onto a chair. “Anyone have water?” I shouted.

A roadie from earlier handed me a fresh bottle of cold water. A look of concern etched on his face.

I thanked him as I twisted off the cap.

“Here.” I handed it to Dallas, but he shook his head.

I frowned. “You need water.”

“Too cold,” he gasped, pushing my hand and the bottle away.

“Are you for real right now?” I snapped, speaking before thinking. But seriously? He was going to be a diva about the water temperature?

He raised an eyebrow at me, and if an eyebrow could be condescending, that one deserved an award.

“Ginger tea or . . . hot water with lemon and . . . honey . . . is better . . . for my throat,” he said haltingly.

I cursed under my breath and pulled out my cell phone, punching Jackson’s number.

“I need you to run over to Mabel’s Bistro booth and get a ginger tea,” I ordered before he could say hello.

“You want me to get you a tea?” Jackson sounded scandalized. “Now?”

“No.” I snorted. “Dallas Blade inhaled some smoke.”

“Oh.” His voice took on a whole new note at that information. “Yes. Right away.”

“Thanks. Mabel will have it waiting for you.”

After calling Mabel and putting in the rush order so it would be ready for Jackson, I took a good look at Dallas.

The defeated set of his shoulders bothered me for a reason I couldn’t explain, but more so was the fact that he seemed scared.

The fire hadn’t been big, and we’d been there to put it out before it could turn into something serious, but maybe he was afraid of fire.

Though that made little sense, considering the amount of pyro their live shows were famous for.

Those damn pyrotechnics.

“Why was there a cell phone set up on the stage?” I questioned, my tone a little harder than I intended, but again, people doing stupid things . . .

Dallas glared at me but didn’t speak.

“He can’t talk right now,” Kirk said as he entered the room and handed what looked like a hard candy to Dallas, who took it with a grateful nod. He opened it and popped it into his mouth. I noted the wrapper was for a throat lozenge.

Kirk turned to me. “He was recording the show for his—”

Dallas kicked him with the toe of his boot, shifting his glare from me to Kirk, who raised his hands in surrender.

“Sorry, man.”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. “If you wanted to record you should have told me. There are a million safer ways to do that.”

Dallas opened his mouth and snapped it shut with a snarl.

Heavy footsteps thudded across the floor, and Jackson burst into the room. He held his hand high, holding a to-go cup.

“I’m here!” he shouted the obvious, skidding to a stop in front of Dallas.

He passed the cup to Dallas, who flashed a blinding smile as he accepted it. A tendril of jealousy snaked through my guts that Jackson had been the recipient of that smile.

What the serious freaking hell ?

“That was an amazing show,” Jackson effused, and a second later, his eyes widened. He stammered on. “I mean, before the fire. I’ve seen you play live like, four times.”

“Thanks, man,” Kirk said with a smile. “We love to hear that.”

Jackson gasped, as if only now realizing who Kirk was. “You’re . . . Can I, uh . . .” He patted his pockets, coming up with a small notepad he always carried with him. “Could I get your autographs?”

I rolled my eyes. Now was really not the time for this. “Jackson . . .”

“It’s all good,” Kirk said, and Dallas made a gimme motion at the same time.

Signatures signed, Jackson smiled so big I thought his face might crack in half.

“Thank you,” he gushed, staring at them and not moving.

“Okay,” I said, getting things back on track. “Jackson, can you please go and take photos of the scene while I wrap up here?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” Jackson pocketed his notebook and shook both Dallas and Kirk’s hands. “It was amazing meeting you both.”

“You too,” Kirk replied.

“I don’t think you inhaled too much smoke.

Maybe a breath or two, so you shouldn’t need oxygen,” I said to Dallas after Jackson left.

He looked up at me with electric blue eyes.

Now that the immediate danger was over, a new emotion rolled through my veins: desire.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, as though that would curtail my wandering libido.

“Keep an eye on your breathing. Go to urgent care right away if your breath gets short. Otherwise, keep the fluids flowing for a few more hours and you’ll be good to go.”

Dallas snorted at that.

Okay, then .

“Good talk,” I said, not hiding my sarcasm, and spun on my heel to leave.

And that was why it was a bad idea to meet your heroes in person.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“YOU AND THE hot fireman are totally going viral,” Jaylin exclaimed when I called her on Kirk’s phone after the show and short signing session, catching her before dinner.

“Okay, first of all,” I said, using my newly discovered dad voice, because I needed to shut that down ASAP. “Fourteen-year-old girls can’t be calling men in their thirties hot. Got it?”

Because just no . Especially when that fourteen-year-old was mine.

“Seriously, Dad?” She rolled her eyes at me dramatically. The video stuttered as she moved around her bedroom at Carolyn’s. The girl was ever in motion. “I’m obviously too young for boyfriends. Plus, eww . He’s way too old for me.”

Thank goodness for small miracles. Who knew my kid was so smart?

“But . . .” She leaned closer to the screen, and sweet as could be, said, “He’d be perfect for you.”

“Hold on now.” I laughed to deflect from the funny little thrill that raced through my veins at the idea. “I’m not looking, and I am definitely not having this conversation with you.”

“Fine.” She sighed the way only a teen could, as though she was having to carry all the world’s burdens on her slender shoulders. “We won’t talk about your nonexistent love life.”

I adored how open and accepting she was.

Jaylin was more grown-up than half the people I knew in the music industry, but no way was I taking romantic advice from my daughter.

Just the idea of her reaching the age where she even knew about all that was already terrifying.

I never realized until this last year how scary it was to be the parent of a teenager. And a single parent at that.

“Anyway,” I said, taking a sip of my ginger tea.

My throat was feeling better, but not a hundred percent yet.

I wasn’t sure if it was the bit of smoke I’d inhaled or the singing.

I prayed it wasn’t the latter. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to see the whole show, but Lieutenant Holliston killed my phone with the fire extinguisher. ”

She snort-laughed, which made me snort, too.

“I saw that. But don’t worry.” She turned the phone to show me her open laptop.

Frozen on the screen was the moment Holliston did just that.

I was in the frame behind him with a look of outrage and shock on my face.

“People were live streaming from their phones, so I got to see the whole thing from multiple angles.”

“Yeah?” The back of my throat tickled. “What did you think?”

“You were awesome. I told you you’d do great,” she said with genuine sincerity.

But the fire and shouting match with Holliston was what everyone would remember. I was probably going to be a meme from now on. Great .

“I wish I was there,” she said, her tone wistful.

“Me too,” I said, and coughed.

I took another few gulps of my drink to soothe the tickle, and her eyebrows knitted together in concern.

“Are you okay?” She stopped moving and her stillness was eerie.

Not really . “Yes,” I assured with a touch of rasp. “I breathed in a little smoke.”

“Okay, no more talking then.”

“Yes, boss,” I teased.

“What did I just say?” she barked, and I made a show of zipping my lips closed, earning a cheeky smile. “Love you.”

“Love you back.”

I disconnected and reveled in the warm feeling rolling through my chest.

For more than a decade, it had always been me and Kirk and then us and the band hanging out after shows, going to parties or clubs to burn off the excess adrenaline

from performing.

There'd never been a reason not to. Even when I hit my late twenties and grew bored with the endless parties, only going because I didn't want to sit in an empty hotel room or on the bus by myself.

Then Jaylin had come along.

I'd never had someone I looked forward to seeing and talking with after a concert, but now that I had her, I couldn't wait to get home and tell her everything that had happened. Well, almost everything. She was still a child, after all, and I was still in a touring rock band.

For now.

I glanced around the bus. It was like a luxury suite at a swanky hotel.

The only difference being it was on wheels rather than concrete foundations.

I was sitting in the front lounge in a plush pleather chair, with a view through the fully appointed kitchen and down the hallway—where I could hear the water running in the full-sized bathroom because Kirk was in the shower.

The hall housed eight sleeping bunks, complete with their own lights, climate controls, and small-screen TVs.

Two of the privacy curtains were pulled, with our roadies, Craig and Todd, already tucked inside.

Craig was snoring loud enough to shake the whole bus, and the TV was on in Todd's bunk, the volume low.

Beyond the sleeping bunks was the back lounge-slash-primary bedroom where I slept.

Arthur and Luna were sitting at the kitchen table playing cards. Brian was sitting on the couch across from me reading, and our driver, Terrance, was sitting on the other end of the couch with his feet up on the ottoman, watching the big-screen TV.

The bus suddenly felt too small with everybody on it. I needed some fresh air, so I finished my tea and stood as Kirk exited the bathroom.

“I’m going to go take a walk around town, if anyone wants to join me.”

Please say no . I only asked to be polite, and luckily, everyone shook their heads. All but Terrance not even bothering to look up.

“I’ll join you,” Kirk said. “Give me a second.”

Kirk I could handle. We’d known each other since high school, but we became brothers when I’d brought a boyfriend home for dinner when I was sixteen, and my parents suddenly realized that bisexual meant being attracted to women and men.

They kicked me out and Kirk’s family took me in.

Looking back, that was the best thing that could have happened to me.

Kirk’s parents showed me what unconditional parental love truly looked like.

We both tucked our hair up under baseball hats and put sunglasses on, even though daylight was giving way to twilight, and strolled across the park, past City Hall, and onto the quiet sidewalks of Main Street.

It was only seven in the evening, but the town's businesses and shops had already rolled up their carpets—either a very sleepy town, or they'd closed early because of Founders Day.

All the booths and displays had been broken down and packed away, and the street cleared.

Banners still hung above storefront windows and flags waved from Victorian-style light posts, the only remaining signs that the fair had happened at all.

"This town is too small," Kirk said, as we wandered down the deserted street, window shopping.

"I think it's quaint," I mused. There was an air to the town that felt comfortable and inviting. The kind of place where everyone knew each other and always had a smile and wave and kind word for everyone they passed. The kind of place to raise a kid.

"Sure," Kirk snorted. "If you're a farmer."

None of the buildings were over three stories, and most were brick facades in varying shades of red.

Only the window treatments differed in style and color—some were painted white, some black, some yellow.

Some windows had little baskets hanging from their ledges, overflowing with colorful flowers.

Many, I guessed, were apartments. The ground levels were mostly retail businesses with glass fronts and creative displays in their windows.

We walked past a stationery store and a cafe bearing a logo I recognized from the drink Holliston had ordered for me after the fire.

He hadn't needed to do that, which spoke volumes about the kind of person he was, especially after I'd been the reason the fire happened.

I hadn't put the power bar there to connect my phone to, but I wouldn't throw Craig under the bus for a request I'd made. The fire was my fault, full stop.

"Damn, those look good," Kirk said with longing in his voice when we stopped to look in the window of a bespoke chocolate shop. Any second now, he'd start drooling. He pointed at a display of bite-sized chocolates in foil cups. "I gotta come back here tomorrow before we leave and get some of that."

Kirk had a serious sweet tooth. I wasn't much for sugary things, but I had to agree.

Those chocolates looked damn good. We walked past a bank and a clothing store, a music store that also offered lessons and a knickknack shop with a display of wooden bowls and cute little animals carved out of wood by a local artisan.

One carving was of a rearing horse. I made a mental note to come back and get for Jaylin. She'd love it.

We came to a real estate office next, and I stopped to look at the listings taped in the front window.

"What are we looking at real estate for?" Kirk asked with a frown.

"I'm just curious." I'd been thinking more and more about buying a permanent home. "I need to find somewhere nice for me and Jaylin. Shuffling her around and leaving her with friends every time we go on the road is no life for a kid."

“True. Kids need stability,” Kirk said softly and rocked on his heels. “But why not closer to New York?”

I shrugged. Honestly, I thought he worried I’d settle down and leave the band. I didn’t want to tell him he wasn’t all that far off the mark. I wasn’t ready to call the band quits, but I was ready for the settling part. Jaylin needed that.

A couple of houses for sale seemed halfway decent, but my eye caught on a listing in the bottom corner of the flyer collage that shouted LAKESIDE PROPERTY in large red letters.

Below that a caption read: Secluded four-bedroom historical home on a two-acre wooded lakeside lot .

The photo showed a nice-sized lake surrounded by trees and a small dock in disrepair that I assumed belonged to the property, but not showing a photo of the house made me nervous.

If they were boasting about all the amenities of the property and only showing exteriors, that usually meant the house was a teardown. Not something I was interested in.

We strolled on, coming to the Caldwell Crossing Library with grand steps leading up to a column-framed entrance.

Above it was a sculpture of a roaring lion.

The stone and wood building looked like it had been added to several times over the years, none of it quite matching but somehow still working together.

“What’s going on up there?” Kirk asked.

I followed the tip of his chin to where Periwinkle Street crossed Main Street, and on the corner sat a squat brick building with solid black doors, over which a glowing, pink neon sign read Lucy's Pub .

Parked cars and trucks lined the block. The doors swung open as a couple entered, and spotlights spilled out to dapple the sidewalk.

Laughter, chatter, and someone speaking over a microphone echoed down the street toward us.

"Let's go see," I said, and excitement fluttered in my stomach. Maybe this town wasn't all that sleepy after all.

When we reached the pub, I spotted a large sandwich board outside the entrance announcing a bachelor auction happening tonight.

Twelve of Caldwell Crossing's most eligible bachelors were available for onetime dates with the winning bidders, and all proceeds going to the Harmony Lake Animal Rescue League charity fund.

Photos of the bachelors filled the bottom half of the signage—and the hot firefighter was one of them.

"Well, I'll be," Kirk said, smirking. "Look who's up for auction."

I rolled my eyes and stated the obvious. "It's a charity fundraiser."

"Yep." Kirk's eyes glinted in the light, and I knew what was coming. "Let's go make a donation."

I didn't want to see the lieutenant again, not after the months-long hassle trying to

convince him to sign off on our limited pyro and then setting the stage on fire with it.

But the part of me that woke up and took notice of him—the way he moved, the way he spoke, the way he cared without hesitation—when we’d met in person, couldn’t wait to get inside.

The pub was standing room only, and the bartender was doing brisk work mixing drinks with practiced flare.

Streamers and banners hung from the rafters and swayed lazily above our heads.

Bright spotlights focused on the small stage on one side of the pub, where an attractive brown-haired man was wearing a black tuxedo and making James Bond poses.

The auctioneer, a dark-haired woman standing at the foot of the stage with a microphone, encouraged and relayed the bids.

“Two-fifty going twice,” the auctioneer called enthusiastically. “Last chance to get a rare date with Deputy Chris before Rebecca comes to her senses.”

Laughter rolled through the crowd at what had to be an inside joke only locals would get, and a strange sense of being left out hit me. I pushed it down as we paid our entry fee to a pair of shrewd-eyed women at a card table.

A woman near the stage raised her hand. “Two-seventy-five!”

When no one else bid after three calls, the auctioneer shouted, “Sold to Lindsey James for two hundred and seventy-five dollars!”

I scanned the cheering audience while the next bachelor prepared to take the stage,

and my gaze snagged on a group of men in matching black tuxedos gathered in the back corner.

One stood out above the rest. Figuratively and literally.

He was the tallest man by a head, with broad shoulders and that tousled blond hair I'd recognize anywhere.

He took the stage, and Lord have mercy . . . Lieutenant Holliston was hot AF in a tux.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

BY THE TIME I got to Lucy's Pub and pulled the tuxedo out of the back of my truck, I was still cranky. I couldn't believe Dallas Blade had the nerve to argue with me about his cell phone causing the fire, and then demanding I replace the damn thing.

He'd come at me like a pissed off bull, not backing down, and I had to give him props for that.

I know I can be an imposing force, seeing as I'm six-foot-four and one-ninety-five of well-earned muscle.

But I would never hurt a fly. I might raise my voice in the heat of the moment, but I took my frustrations out mountain biking the most extreme trails I could find or jumping out of airplanes or whitewater kayaking.

Anything that demanded one hundred percent of my physical and mental focus.

But that grudging respect, not to mention attraction for him, irritated me more.

I huffed out a cleansing breath of air and wiped the whole thing from my mind. The Founders Day music fest was over, and I'd never see Dallas again. He could go back to being an abstract fantasy in my mind.

My phone pinged, and I checked it to see several messages in the group chat with my lifelong best friends.

They'd all left the fair early and were too comfortable to venture back out, so none of

them would be here for the auction.

Part of me was disappointed, because that was exactly what I worried would happen when they all found their significant others. I'd be the odd man out.

But on the other hand, they'd be teasing me relentlessly if they were here, so it was better that they weren't.

I opened the chat thread to find a whole slew of jokes about me in a penguin suit and them putting bets on whether I would get the highest bid, or if Chris—Ryan's sister Rebecca's boyfriend—would rate as the most eligible bachelor in Caldwell Crossing.

Though why Chris was in the auction at all, I didn't know.

He and Rebecca were a ring away from married.

I leaned against my truck as I typed out a reply to the guys.

Me: Ha-ha , losers. Add me to the pool. On me for the win, obvs .

Sam : The odds are five-to-one .

Me: Five?

Haider: Yeah. Rebecca and Chris both bet against you.

Ryan: *crying-laughing face emoji*

Me: Whatever. I'm taking those odds .

Sam: It's your money .

I laughed. Chris might be a sheriff's deputy, but I was a lieutenant firefighter. And I was eligible, although not for the town's single women. Sorry, ladies. I wondered what my chances of there being a single gay man in the audience were.

I texted back: Nope. It's going to be YOUR money .

The texts that followed delved into a collection of laughing emojis, silly gifs, and good-natured smack talk.

Grinning, I tucked my phone back into my pocket as I crossed the street.

Nothing like a side bet with the guys to make the night more fun.

I'd win too, because March was the most popular month in the Annual Firefighter's Calendar, featuring yours truly in my turnout pants, suspenders, and no shirt.

There was a sandwich board outside Lucy's on the sidewalk, announcing the charity bachelor auction, including photos of us fools who'd volunteered or had been voluntold.

Underneath was a cartoon cat, dog, and bird for the Harmony Lake Animal Rescue League, the charity tonight's fundraiser was for.

I shook my head for the millionth time, wondering why I'd let tiny Mamie Aubert strong-arm me into this.

But then, one didn't say no to Mamie. Plus, I loved animals.

I stepped into a packed house at Lucy's, but considering how small the pub was to begin with, filling it to capacity wasn't much of a feat.

They'd set up a makeshift stage along the far wall by moving some tables and chairs out of the way.

Gold and white streamers and banners hung from the ceiling, and another placard sat at the foot of the stage with the bachelor order—I was going up last. Under each bachelor's name was a brief description of the date and when.

At least I didn't have to plan what my winning bidder's date was going to be, especially since I didn't date. I wouldn't have any idea what to do.

Mrs. Jennings from the community center and Mamie had set up a card table at the front entrance, and were checking people in and selling tickets, because Lucy deserved some extra cash for hosting the event, too.

Mamie's bright eyes lit up behind her trendy square glasses when she saw me.

"Conor, darling," she cooed. My name always sounded like Con-air in her French accent and made me smile. "I'm so happy you volunteered for this. You're going to bring in so much money for the rescue."

Volunteered. I snorted, but I wasn't about to argue with Mamie. Nope. Not me. She might be a petite silver-haired seventy-year-old, but she was feisty as all get out. One did not get on Mamie's bad side if they knew what was good for them.

"Indeed," Mrs. Jennings agreed, giving me a once-over. She wasn't as petite as Mamie, but she was just as feisty, with natural red hair to boot. "The rescue will be able to afford their expansion to help more animals."

I laughed, because what else could I do? When these two ladies were in charge, we were all at their mercy. They were right, though. The rescue league could use all the help it could get.

“Just doing my civic duty, ma’am,” I said, flashing my flirtiest grin.

“Oh, you,” Mamie fluttered a dainty hand at me.

With a wink, I made my way into the bar and spotted a few of my fellow bachelors downing some liquid courage, including Chris and Rebecca. I could use a cold beer right about now, too, and I had a bone to pick with those two.

“So,” I said as I wedged between the barstools to stand beside Chris. “I hear you two are betting against me for the highest bid tonight. And uh, how is it you’re an eligible bachelor at all?”

Chris held up his hands, a half empty beer bottle in one. “It wasn’t my idea.”

Rebecca harrumphed. Her eyes, the same warm brown as Ryan’s, narrowed. “According to Mamie, unless he’s legally married, he’s eligible. And I’m not allowed to bid.”

I burst out laughing as Lucy’s niece, Grace, who was bartending tonight, handed me a cold Gansett.

“On the house,” she said with a wink as I reached for my wallet.

I raised my bottle with a thanks, then tapped a cheers with Chris and settled in shooting the shit with our fellow bachelors.

Mamie came over a short while later and clapped her hands, drawing our attention.

“Okay, boys,” she said. “The auction is about to start. Time to go and get dressed in your finery.”

Ugh . I hated wearing a suit. I always felt so claustrophobic all buttoned up, but this was for a good cause, and I loved giving back to the community.

Which was why I'd also been posing for the annual firefighter calendar every year since I'd joined the department.

Not to mention, I got a kick out of people's reactions when they saw each year's photo.

A few minutes later, I was all dressed up and gathered in the corner by the stage with the rest of my bachelor brethren.

I spent a lot of time sitting in the wings waiting to be auctioned, but the audience kept me thoroughly entertained.

Bidding was fast and furious, and so far, everyone had gone over a hundred dollars.

If we kept this up, we were going to have a nice donation for the rescue by the end of the night.

Sam, Ryan, and Haider kept messaging me to see who was getting what, cracking jokes, and placing side bets on who I'd be bringing to the Stonebridge Maple Farm, where my date was going to be.

They were tied between Harriet Thompson, the town librarian who was also Ben Marshall's great aunt, and who was always giving me the eye, and Margret Madison, who always had some sort of "emergency" she needed the fire department for.

Chris was up next, and I was a little surprised by the wild bidding.

Especially since he wasn't technically single, and the town knew that.

Less than a minute had passed before the high bid hit two hundred dollars.

And it was still climbing. When Mary, Lucy's wife—as well as the pub's cook and tonight's emcee and auctioneer—called the last bid, Chris had set the bar high for me. He stepped off the stage, grinning.

“Top that, Holliston,” he dared.

“Count on it,” I shot back with a laugh.

I pulled out my phone to send a quick message to the guys.

Me: Ryan . Your soon to be brother-in-law just went for \$325 . To Lindsey James .

Ryan: *shocked face emoji* *crying-laughing face emoji*

Haider: Betcha Rebecca will stake out their date.

Sam: Right? Lindsey's been after Chris since high school.

Ryan: Remind me to hide till it's over.

I could see Rebecca doing just that. She and Lindsey had a rivalry going for as long as I could remember over Chris, but he only had eyes for Rebecca.

Mary called my name. Showtime.

I pocketed my phone and hopped up onto the tiny stage like a boxer entering the ring, making a big show of it and earning catcalls and wolf whistles.

No way was Chris going to beat me for the highest bid.

I glanced around at the crowd while Mary did her bachelor introduction spiel, and my gaze snagged on a familiar face at the back of the room.

What. The. Fu . . .

He'd hidden his long hair under a baseball hat, but there was no mistaking Dallas Blade standing not twenty feet away from me.

Beside him, also wearing a ball cap, was his guitarist Kirk.

Apparently, the townsfolk hadn't received the memo yet, because they didn't pay the rock gods in their midst any attention.

I glared at him, and he tipped his hat at me while Kirk flashed a mischievous grin my way.

Apprehension rushed through my veins at that grin. I tried to ignore them as Mary called out the opening bid of twenty-five dollars, because we're a small town and the auction was for fun as much as for charity.

Harriet and Margret bid me up to a hundred dollars right off the bat, and then Jackson bid one-fifty. I gave him a side eye. Jackson was as straight as they came, but he was a good guy and would probably tell me to take one of the shelter dogs out for a playdate at the Harmony Lake dog park.

The bidding stalled at two-fifty, and my mind swirled. That's all ?

"Going once," Mary called. "Going twice . . ."

Dammit. Chris is going to beat me .

I would never hear the end of it, so I rallied, of course.

In a last-ditch effort, I put on the flirtiest expression I had in my arsenal, made direct eye contact with everyone I could—except for Dallas and Kirk—and struck a pose that best showed off my assets.

I had to beat Chris. Nothing else mattered at that moment.

“Three hundred and fifty,” a male voice that did funny things to my insides called.

Please tell me I didn’t hear that right .

I glared at Dallas, who smiled back at me somewhat apologetically. Yep . That happened. And damn it all, that smile threatened to short-circuit my brain like his voice had when we’d first talked on the phone.

But I’d just drawn the highest bid of the night.

Ha! Take that, Chris .

I grinned and preened, making a show of it because I was now officially the highest bid of the whole auction. The audience cheered and whistled, and I shot Chris a smug look over my shoulder. He raised his beer bottle in salute.

“Three-fifty going once,” Mary called out, laughter in her voice. “Three-fifty going twice. Three-fifty going . . . And—”

“Five hundred,” Kirk shouted.

What the . . . ?

Kirk, standing there sporting a mischievous grin bigger than the Cheshire Cat's, winked at me, while Dallas stood staring at him with his eyes wide and jaw dropped to his chest. Seeming to gather himself, Dallas turned to me and held my gaze. His eyebrows lowered and his lips pursed.

"Seven hundred," Dallas countered, his voice firm.

The breath caught in my throat, and the crowd gasped.

"One thousand," Kirk called in rapid response.

I didn't know what those two were up to, but Kirk looked like he was having the time of his life, and Dallas watched me with an expression I couldn't decipher. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't seem unhappy, either. More like, determined?

"Fifteen hundred," Dallas shot back, his balance rocked by what I guessed was Kirk's elbow in his side.

I took back any woe-is-me complaining I'd done earlier. I was one hundred percent relieved the guys weren't here to see this. They'd be having a field day heckling and teasing me about two members of the Dallas Blade Band in a bidding war for me. I would never hear the end of it as it was.

The pub fell dead silent while everyone stared at the two madmen and then murmurs rippled through the crowd, and Dallas and Kirk's names drifted up to my ears. Some voices were in awe of the bidding, and others were in awe at finally realizing who they were rubbing shoulders with.

The two of them went back and forth while the audience watched them with rapt attention.

“Twenty-five hundred!” Dallas shouted, followed by a short cough.

I narrowed my eyes at him as the crowd’s cheers and whistles erupted to ear-splitting decibels. Dallas was staring at Kirk in a way that reminded me of the way he’d come at me after the fire. Kirk raised his hands in surrender, but his expression never changed from one of mirth and mischief.

Mary called out the current bid three times, pausing for any takers, which would have blown me away if anyone countered.

“Sold for two thousand and five hundred dollars!” Mary shouted into the mic and did a little dance jig on the spot. “Congratulations to . . .” She paused, staring into the crowd for a second before her eyes widened. She gasped. “Dallas Blade!”

Holy crap .

Twenty-five hundred? For me ? That was ridiculous.

The guys were going to shit when they heard about this.

I stepped off the stage in a bit of a daze.

Dallas Blade was in Lucy’s Pub.

Dallas Blade won the bidding for me.

I was going on a date with Dallas. Blade .

My phone was buzzing away in my back pocket like an angry hornet’s nest. I pulled it out and looked at the screen, my hands shaking. I shook my head at the good ole small town gossip train. Rebecca had been messaging Ryan the play-by-play, and

Ryan had been updating our group chat.

The guys had been rapid-firing hilarious comments, but Haider's last comment had me busting out in stitches. No matter how many times we told him you can't call dibs on people, he remained undeterred.

Haider: I can still call dibs on that, right ?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

I WAS NERVOUS again.

For the second time in as many days.

Butterflies fluttered about in my stomach as I stood in the lobby of the Lakeside Inn, waiting for Lieutenant Holliston to pick me up for our charity auction date.

I felt like a teen waiting for their prom date to arrive.

Not that I'd had a date for prom. Or even gone to prom.

But me and my garage band had played at an after-prom party.

I hadn't meant to bid on the lieutenant, only to watch the show, but when the bidding stalled at two-fifty, he'd looked so crestfallen for the briefest of seconds before he'd started hamming it up.

I'm not sure anyone else noticed his fleeting mood change, but I'd been watching him too closely, unable to take my eyes off him, and a sudden urge to see him happy had me raising my hand.

I didn't normally go for suit types, but Holliston in a tux had captivated me.

He'd seemed so much larger than life, so confident of himself and the world around him, and genuinely enjoying interacting with the audience.

At times, both seductive and boyish in his expressions and mannerisms, and both

vibes were working for me.

I also felt guilty for the stage fire and freaking out about my phone.

What upset me most wasn't the trashed phone, but losing the video I'd been recording for Jaylin.

I wanted to make up for it. Not to mention, the funds were going to a good cause, so it was a win-win.

Sure, I could have bid on anyone, but who was I kidding?

I wanted to spend some time with the sexy as sin firefighter and get to know him better.

What I hadn't expected was for Kirk to bid against me. I still wasn't sure if it had been competitiveness or possessiveness that had come over me, but no way in hell was I going to let Kirk win the date with Holliston. That was my date.

I think I was as stunned as the whole of Lucy's Pub, if not more, when the auctioneer enthusiastically shouted SOLD and my wallet was twenty-five hundred dollars lighter.

I had to wait a day for the pre-arranged date—a tour of the local maple syrup farm and lunch at a lakeside restaurant—so I'd stayed back when the band left for New York the following morning, and I rented a room at the Lakeside Inn for the week.

Jaylin still had school, and I didn't have any immediate band commitments, so I thought I'd explore the small town of Caldwell Crossing and maybe get a look at the lakeside property for sale, that I'd seen in the real estate office window.

And who knew? Maybe I'd run into the handsome lieutenant again while exploring.

The front doors swung open a few minutes later and Holliston strolled inside—shoulders rolled back, and head held high—brimming with understated swagger.

My mouth watered.

He was wearing a pair of faded jeans over his muscular thighs, white sneakers, and an open, tan-colored button-down shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows over a white T-shirt that stretched across his very nicely defined chest.

“Blade,” he said as he stopped in front of me, that one word as smooth as honey.

I couldn't tell if he was still angry with me, but he was here, so I'd take that as a win.

“Lieutenant,” I greeted, shoving my hands into my pockets as a bout of nerves took hold.

Bidding on him had seemed like a good idea at the time. Now? Not so much. If we were going to do this date thing, I figured I should get the elephant out of the room first.

“I'm really sorry about the fire,” I began, watching him watch me with a piercing stare I swear reached right into my soul. “We didn't think plugging my cell phone in there would be an issue.”

“Why did you set it up in the first place?” His voice held no accusation or disapproval, only curiosity. “Half the crowd had their cell phones out recording. You could have had someone from your crew out there instead.”

“Someone I couldn’t refuse asked me to record the show,” I said, leaving it at that.

He grunted but didn’t prod for more information.

“Well,” he said, and tipped his head toward the parking lot. “We should get going.”

An awkward, giddy feeling bubbled in my belly as we walked toward a big, maroon-colored Chevy with an extended cab and tinted windows, neither of us speaking. I hopped in and buckled up.

“So,” I said when he pressed the engine start button. “We’re going to a maple syrup farm?”

Holliston winced. “I apologize in advance.”

That caught me off guard. Was there something wrong with the farm, or was he mad I was the one he was taking there?

“It can’t be that bad, can it?” I hedged.

“Oh, no.” He held up a hand and chuckled under his breath. “It’s just that one of my best friends’ family owns it. Him and my two other best friends, troublemakers all of them—” he said with affection “—will probably be there to spy on us.”

“As long as they won’t be taking photos to sell to the tabloids,” I said lightly, but I wasn’t exactly joking.

“No, no. Nothing like that,” he assured me quickly, his eyebrows lifting as he shifted the truck into gear. “We just like to give each other a hard time. And call me Conor. I’m only Lieutenant at work.”

“Will do. Conor.”

I liked how his name sounded on my tongue.

He gave me a funny look with those piercing eyes of his that I couldn't decipher, then checked both directions before pulling out onto a tree-lined country road.

“I'm curious,” Conor said after a few minutes with only the steady hum of the truck's tires on pavement and the whoosh of the wind through my open window filling the cab. “Who couldn't you refuse?”

I turned to him and raised an eyebrow.

“You said you were recording at the request of someone you couldn't refuse.”

Oh . Right .

Not wanting to disrupt Jaylin's life any more than it had been after losing her mom and finding out I was her dad by bringing the invasions of privacy that celebrity garnered, I'd tried to keep our relationship contained to my inner circle.

But when your newly discovered daughter boasts to all her friends at school that her dad is the Dallas Blade, the tabloids eventually pick up on it.

I still didn't tell many people outside my close circle unless I needed to, but I figured Conor already knew, anyway. Half the world did.

“Because my daughter asked me to,” I finally said.

Conor whipped his head around to me. His eyebrows rose and his jaw dropped.

“You have a daughter?” I couldn’t deny the genuine ring of shock in his voice. “And you’re bidding on strange men at auctions?”

I laughed. How did he not know?

“Firsly,” I said, holding up a finger to count off. “You’re not strange.”

His mouth quirked at the corners, as though he was holding back arguing or cracking a joke. But he seemed more relaxed than when he’d first arrived, and relief washed through me at that. I was worried for a minute there that this date would be full of awkward silence and stilted conversation.

“Secondly,” I continued, straightening another finger. “I don’t make a habit of attending bachelor auctions. And third, news of my surprise daughter was all over the entertainment news last year. I’m pretty sure everyone knows about her by now.”

“I didn’t.” Conor shook his head. “I don’t pay much attention to pop culture and what’s going on in the celebrity world. I listen to the music and maybe catch a video occasionally if someone at the station is watching, but other than that, I couldn’t tell you the first thing about you personally.”

“You are so refreshing,” my mouth said before my brain could think better of it.

Conor looked at me for a long few seconds, assessing me with that sharp stare, but he didn’t say anything. I fought the urge to shift in my seat.

“Eyes on the road,” I teased, and he complied, chuckling under his breath. “Anyway. I only found out about her last year. She’s fourteen now.”

“Wow. What a trip,” Conor said. “Just in time for the terrible teens.”

I sighed, not needing the reminder. So far, she was a good kid and far more mature than her fourteen years, but I couldn't deny the niggle of worry in the back of my mind.

Even though I'd not known about her for thirteen years, now that she was in my life, I'd discovered a protective streak I'd never realized I possessed.

Conor whistled under his breath and shot me a glance, his eyes bright and expression amused. "Dallas Blade, the world-famous rock star, is a single dad."

I snorted, but it was still a shock to me sometimes too. "Don't knock it until you've tried it."

"Yeah." He huffed a laugh, but his tone was rueful when he said, "I don't see that happening."

Did he mean he didn't like kids or didn't want kids? Part of me hoped that wasn't the case. Even though we'd only just met, I had a feeling he'd make a great dad. But the other part of me wondered why the hell I should care whether he wanted kids or not at all.

Conor didn't say any more, so I turned my attention out the window to the passing countryside.

We were the only vehicle on the rolling two-lane road that ribboned between lush green pastures and dense forest. We crossed a narrow, covered bridge over a burbling creek and shortly after, Conor slowed when a cluster of connected and free-standing buildings with weathered-wood sidings and red metal roofs came into view.

He turned into a gravel parking lot marked with a large sign that read Stonebridge Maple Farm .

He parked beside a building with brightly colored flowers in baskets on each side of the entrance and lining the walkways.

Conor exited the truck and scanned the area with an intense expression on his face.

Looking for his friends, I guessed. A tall, slender woman with her dark hair pulled back into a twist and somehow making jeans and a chambray shirt look elegant, stepped out of one of the buildings and smiled when she saw us.

“Conor,” she said, her eyes warm and kind. “Nice to see you.”

“Hey, Mrs. C.,” Conor said, pulling her into a quick hug.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

She gave me a once over, and her smile widened. “And this must be your bachelor auction date.”

“He is,” Conor replied with a cheeky grin. “This is Dallas Blade. Dallas, this is Mrs. Caldwell. Her family owns the maple farm. The Caldwells founded the town, too.”

“Oh, I can’t take credit for that,” Mrs. Caldwell rebuffed with a wave. “I married into the Caldwells.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” I said, reaching out to shake her hand.

“And you,” she replied, and then to Conor asked, “Are you going to show him around?”

“Yep. I’ll take him on a private tour.” Conor looked over at me with a coy smile that I suddenly wanted to see more of. “I’ve spent so much time here over the years that I know the place like the back of my hand.”

“Sounds good,” I said, holding his gaze while the temperature rose. Or maybe that was just me, because I was imaging all the private things he could show me.

Mrs. Caldwell beamed, and I hoped she couldn’t read minds. “Don’t forget my maple ice cream before you go home.”

“I would never,” Conor gasped, placing a hand over his chest.

She patted his arm. “That’s why you’re my favorite.”

“Hey,” a voice called, coming up behind them. “I thought I was your favorite.”

“You’re all my favorite,” Mrs. Caldwell said with affection as she pulled a brightly dressed man with a shock of dark, messy curls on his head into a hug.

The newcomer harrumphed but seemed appeased as his big blue eyes landed on me.

“I’ll leave you boys to it,” Mrs. Caldwell said, and the man, who I had a feeling was a real firecracker, turned fully toward me expectantly.

Conor groaned and waved a hand toward him. “Dallas meet Haider, one of the troublemakers I was telling you about.” Then he narrowed his eyes at Haider. “What are you doing here?”

“Moi?” Haider said far too innocently, his eyebrows raised. “I only stopped by to get some syrup for a new confectionary creation.”

“Ha-ha,” Conor intoned and then addressed me. “Haider owns Harmony Chocolates. Best truffles in the county.”

“Best truffles in the world, you mean,” Haider corrected, propping a hand on his hip and nodding his head to make the point.

I chuckled at their antics. Haider was cute, and the interaction between these two lifelong friends charmed me.

“Are the rest of the jokers going to unexpectedly drop in, too?” Conor asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” Haider said with a cheeky grin before turning on his heel. “Have a fun date.”

“Well,” Conor said as Haider sashayed away. “Shall we?”

Like any good host, Conor shared the history of the farm as he led me through the sugar shack and loosely explained the process of sugaring.

We passed several displays of unique farm art, including a few wood carvings of life-sized aliens with elongated bodies and big heads.

But instead of being scary, they all had a welcoming feeling with their cute little smiles.

“One of my best friends carved those,” Conor said as he motioned toward the wooden aliens.

“Who doesn’t love a friendly alien,” I said with a grin, and wondered if his friend carved smaller ones. Jaylin would get a kick out of them. “He’s talented.”

Conor nodded with a soft lift to his lips and carried on with my tour.

“You’re good at this,” I said, taking in the sights as we ambled along. “Did you work here growing up?”

“No, but we all help during sugaring season,” he said. “Takes a lot of work to make syrup.”

Leaving the alien art behind, we followed an easy trail that meandered through a forest of tall maple trees, their verdant leaves twisting and fluttering on a sweet, faintly vanilla-scented breeze.

“The air smells sweet,” I said, looking up at the sunlight filtering through the forest canopy.

“That’s the trees,” Conor said. “Their scents are strongest in spring and fall, and the harder the maple the sweeter the aroma.”

“Huh.”

“I’ve never seen you perform live before,” Conor said after a few minutes of walking in companionable silence. “But I thought your voice sounded different.”

I winced. Not my favorite topic.

“It is. I had vocal surgery recently,” I said, and of course, now that I was thinking about it, my throat felt tight. “For the second time.”

“Twice?” Conor turned to me with genuine concern in his eyes. “Is it serious? Are you losing your voice?”

My chest tightened. That right there was my greatest fear. Right out in the open.

“No, I’m not going to lose my voice,” I said, more to convince myself than to assure Conor. “But I don’t know how extensive the damage to my upper range is. That’s why we did the Founders Day show. A small audience to test out how my voice is going perform.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I like the deeper raspy sound,” Conor said, holding my gaze with his piercing eyes. “It’s soulful.”

I couldn’t pull my eyes away from him. I felt like some sort of magnetic energy buzzed in the space between us, drawing us together and locking us into place. Until I stumbled on the well-groomed trail.

Conor reached out and grabbed my arm to support me, sending firebombs blasting

through my veins. Heat rushed up my neck and flooded into my cheeks.

“You okay?” he asked, his hand slowly sliding away as I regained my balance.

“Just a couple of left feet,” I joked, drawing a boyish grin from him that warmed my cheeks for another reason. I cleared my throat. “So, uh. What’s next?”

The strained sound of my voice now had nothing to do with my vocal cords and everything to do with the man at my side.

“Now we check out the sugar store, and then we go for lunch.”

We fell into easy conversation on the way back, as Conor shared stories of growing up in Caldwell Crossing and jumping off cliffs into Harmony Lake, and I shared some of the many adventures I’d had over the years touring around the country and abroad.

As we talked, a pulling sensation grew inside me, growing larger, tugging harder, until I could identify what the feeling was: longing.

Conor had had an idyllic childhood, and while mine wasn’t awful, my biological parents had disowned me.

That had been a hard time, but thankfully, Kirk’s family had been there for me.

I don’t know what I’d have done, or where I’d be today without them.

“So,” I said when we wandered into the Sugarworks Store and a comforting sugary-sweet aroma wrapped around me like an old blanket. I wanted to know everything about Conor Holliston. “You’ve lived here your whole life then?”

The smile that tugged at Conor's mouth was wistful and his gaze went distant for a second as he led me deeper into the store, which overflowed with every imaginable maple syrup concoction, along with an eclectic collection of maple-themed knickknacks.

"Can't imagine a better place to grow up," he said with a fondness in his voice that made me smile. "My family all live here or nearby, and I have the best friends anyone could ask for."

The sale flyer for the lakeside house popped into my mind again. Could Caldwell Crossing be the right place for me and Jaylin to live? Somewhere she could grow up safe and carefree and with lifelong friends like Conor had.

"Do you have a big family?" I asked, picking up a package of maple spice cookies I knew Jaylin would love.

"Three sisters." Conor laughed, absently running a finger over a soft-looking plushie of a moose wearing a red bandana with the Stonebridge Maple Farm logo on it.

I dropped the moose into my basket as I followed him down the aisle.

"My oldest sister, Emma, is a doctor in town. Hazel is the second oldest. She works in marketing and lives about an hour away in Lebanon. Juno is my younger sister and she's also a firefighter stationed down in Grantham.

My folks live in town. Same house I grew up in. "

"Two firefighters in the family," I whistled, adding some maple shaker meat rubs to my growing basket of everything maple.

"I think the two of us are responsible for my parents' premature gray hair," Conor

paused and cocked his head in thought for a second. “Actually, I’m probably responsible for most of that all on my own.”

“Bit of a terror growing up, were you?”

“Let’s just say, I like a bit of an adrenaline rush from time to time.”

What he must have been like growing up, I mused to myself as we made our way to the checkout counter with my near-overfull basket. I got the meat rubs, three kinds of syrup, and the cookies and moose plushie for Jaylin.

Conor glanced over my shoulder and narrowed his eyes. I turned around to see three men a couple of aisles over, all quickly looking away at having been caught watching us. They stared intensely at a display of maple syrup, but one of them looked like he might be holding back laughter.

“Your friends, I take it,” I said, motioning toward them with my free hand.

“I’m so sorry,” Conor said with a huff. “I swear, sometimes I don’t think any of us evolved past high school.”

I shrugged. “It’s nice. They want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m not the one they should worry about,” Conor said loud enough for his voice to carry.

“Oh-oh, we’re in for it now,” I overhead one of the guys joke.

“Come on,” Conor said with a sigh, after I paid for my purchases. “You might as well meet them, or they won’t leave us alone.”

The trio gave up their shopping ruse as we approached, grinning as Conor made introductions.

I met Ryan, with wavy brown hair, a stubbled jaw, and strong shoulders; Sam, who was the tallest of the three, wearing a plaid shirt and a serious expression; and Sam's boyfriend Ben, who had light brown hair and while he was dressed casually, he had a big dog energy about him.

"Ryan is the one who carved the aliens," Conor boasted, with a note of pride in his deep, honeyed voice.

A light blush crested high on Ryan's cheeks, and he shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Wow. I love that you made them cute when they could have been scary," I said, the praise coming easy because they were amazing. "Any chance you make smaller ones that you'd be willing to sell?"

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“Thank you, and yes,” Ryan said, standing straighter. “I have some that are only a few inches tall.”

“I’ll take one,” I said. “Do you have a card?”

Ryan nodded, and his brown eyes sparkled even as his mouth tip down. “But not on me right now.”

“I’ll put you two in touch,” Conor offered.

“Great,” I said.

“Thanks, Con.” Ryan shifted on his feet, and his smile turned shy when he looked back at me. “Could we, uh . . . Would you mind if we took a group photo?”

“Of course,” I said.

Ryan’s his face lit up, and all three of them whipped their phones out of their pockets. Beside me, Conor groaned, dragging a hand down his face.

“Guys . . .”

They all handed their phones to Conor.

“What?” he complained. “I don’t get to be in the photo?”

“You get to hang out with him all day,” Ryan teased. “Take your own photo.”

Conor sighed, but he obligingly took photos of me with his friends, grumbling as he handed each phone back.

“I’ll take one with all of you,” Mrs. Caldwell said as she came around an aisle.

Conor handed her his phone and then squeezed in between me and Ryan, slipping an arm around my waist as we all tucked in close.

His body was solid and warm against mine, and butterflies once again took flight in my stomach.

We all said “cheese” and when everyone stepped away, I felt the loss of Conor’s touch like a cold draft on my back.

“Okay.” Conor made a shooing motion. “Enough monopolizing my date’s time.”

“It was nice to meet you all,” I said as Conor steered me out of the store with another glare over his shoulder at his friends.

“One more thing before we leave,” Conor said. “You cannot come to the maple farm without getting a maple soft ice cream cone. They’re legendary in these parts.”

Mrs. Caldwell proudly served us up a couple of towering cones and refused to take Conor’s money when he tried to pay.

We stepped outside to enjoy our ice cream, and from the first taste, I was sold.

A moan rumbled up my throat as maple and vanilla danced on my tastebuds.

I looked up to find Conor looking at me like he’d swallowed his tongue, and a grin tugged at my lips.

“You’re right,” I breathed. “These are to die for.”

“Right?” he agreed, his voice gruff and his gaze fixed on my mouth for a moment.

He seemed to jerk out of his thoughts, and I watched, rapt, as his tongue swirled around the peak of the ice cream mountain before he sucked it into his mouth. Sparks raced through my abdomen and my groin tightened.

“So, I like your friends,” I said, needing to get my mind off all the things he could do to me with that tongue. “They seem like good people.”

Conor’s tongue sneaked out again, gathering a drip of ice cream from the corner of his mouth, and I barely kept my eyes from rolling into the back of my head.

“I’ve known Sam and Haider my whole life,” Conor said, casual as could be, as though he had no idea what he was doing, but I had my doubts.

He took another sinfully seductive bite of his cone.

His gaze locked on mine. Yep , he knew what he was doing.

“Ryan moved to town when we were in sixth grade, and Sam and Ben met recently, just this spring.”

“Nice,” I said. “I’ve known Kirk since high school, and moved in with his family after mine kicked me out.”

Conor stopped and looked at me with a fierceness that caught me off guard. “Why the hell did they do that?”

“Boys loving boys,” I said and shrugged.

He stared at me for a long moment, his lips pursed into a flat line, before walking toward his truck.

“I’m sorry they did that,” he said with genuine sincerity, but there was a bite to his voice when he continued. “I’m sorry that happens to anyone at all. It’s so wrong.”

That it was.

“I’m glad Kirk’s family was there for you,” he said, his voice softer. “That’s parenting done right.”

I smiled up at him as a wave of happiness curled around my heart. “I can’t argue that.”

Best cones ever finished, we climbed into the truck and drove a short distance to Pearl’s on the Lake for lunch, where we sat on an outdoor patio overlooking Harmony Lake, and Conor regaled me with tales of his outdoor adventures and some of his less serious and more entertaining stories about firefighting and had me in stitches.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed so freely, and I suddenly didn’t want our date to end.

But when the radiant blues of the afternoon gave way to the first pinky oranges of sunset, I knew we were going to have to say goodbye.

We drove back to the inn, mostly in silence, but the air felt charged to me. There was an energy bubbling under the surface and sparking between us, like we were on the brink of something amazing. If only we dared take that one step forward.

Conor parked and shut off the engine but kept his hands on the steering wheel instead

of getting out—or telling me to go. He seemed as reluctant for our date to end as I was.

“Do you want to come in for a coffee in the lounge?” I asked, my voice breathy.

“Sure.” Conor smiled and I swear it was like the heavens opened and the sun’s rays shined directly on us.

Inside, we talked for hours, until my throat felt abused and raspy, and my words cracked. I knew I shouldn’t have been talking so much, especially after the show the other night, but I couldn’t find it in myself to call an end to our night. Not until Conor finally looked at his watch and gasped.

“I should get going,” he said with a note of regret I felt in my gut. “I’m on shift early tomorrow.”

My legs felt heavy as I walked Conor back to his truck. He stopped beside his vehicle and turned to face me. He might have been about to say something, but unable to help myself, I leaned in close, making my intention clear. Conor’s breath hitched.

“May I?” I whispered, and fire flared in the depths of his eyes.

He nodded without hesitation, and I pressed my lips to his.

A sense of rightness rushed through my veins, and my body tingled all the way to the tips of my toes.

Conor snaked his arms around my waist and pulled me closer, deepening the kiss.

I sank against his solid, muscular frame, his heat enveloping me the way his arms did.

A deep rumbling moan vibrated between us, and I wasn't sure whose lungs it escaped from.

He moved his lips moved over mine, firm and confident and silky soft, and when he opened his mouth, I slid my tongue inside to tangle with his.

I tasted the bitterness of the coffee he'd drunk, and the lingering sweetness of maple.

Every cell in my body lit up like the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Square.

He pulled back, breathless, lips glistening under the parking lot lights. Which took me a second to comprehend. Our lunch date had blended into evening without my realizing it, and I mused on how I could extend it into an overnight when Conor stepped back.

"That was the best date I've ever had," he said, his voice sounding ragged. Just like how I felt. But in a good way.

"Me too," I said, my voice thready.

With a nod, he turned and hopped into his truck. He rolled the window down.

"See you, Dallas Blade," he said with a smile.

I hope so . I raised a hand in a lame wave. "See you, Lieutenant Conor Holliston."

After he drove away, I stood there in the parking lot, waiting until my knees felt solid enough to walk again.

I think I'm going to enjoy my stay here .

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

TWO DAYS LATER, I was still thinking about Dallas and that incredible kiss as I walked along Main Street. The little kick in my step was as strong today as it had been after our date.

The kiss had surprised me, even as I'd been wanting to do the same thing from the moment I'd spotted him standing in the Lakeside Inn lobby, waiting for me.

He'd shoved his hands into his snug jeans, the motion pulling his fancy button-up shirt tight across his chest and revealing the edge of a tattoo on his left pec.

He'd foregone the baseball hat but pulled his hair back into a loose ponytail.

I'd still been angry with him for the fire and unsure what to think about him winning the bidding on me.

Well, I'd been trying to stay angry, but that was an emotion I didn't much like to carry around.

There was no point for it beyond the moment, and when I saw him standing there, all sexy and gorgeous with a surprising air of nervousness, and first the thing he did was apologize for the fire .

. . My loose grip on that ire fled like an arsonist from the scene of the crime.

I hadn't expected to enjoy our date as much as I did, either. Even with my best friends making appearances. Dallas hadn't at all been the pretentious, self-absorbed rock star I'd thought him to be after the lead up to, and drama of, Founders Day.

And that kiss . . .

Holy fireballs, that kiss.

I could still feel the press of his lips against mine, still taste the lingering flavor of ginger on his tongue, still smell the amber and warm wind scent of his skin.

When was the last time I'd been kissed like that?

When was the last time I couldn't stop replaying a kiss in my mind?

Never, that's when. I didn't date, because let's face it, Caldwell Crossing was a small town, and I was pretty sure me and my best friends filled the gay population quota.

Although that seemed to grow with the additions of Ben, Adam, and Phillip.

But aside from a couple of guys I hooked up with when I ventured into Lebanon occasionally, I also didn't kiss—except sometimes in the heat of the moment.

Kissing Dallas, though . . . That had felt like a long time coming. Felt . . . needed somehow.

I snorted and shook my head.

I'd just met the guy, so why the hell did my mind keep reading more into it than what it was: a nice kiss at the end of a nice day together?

The reality of it was that we lived in different worlds.

I was never leaving Caldwell Crossing, and Dallas was a rolling stone.

And whoa ! I needed to rein in my wandering mind.

Anything more was moot, anyway. Dallas Blade had gone back to his rock star world, and the next time I'd see him would be on an album cover or in a music video.

I pushed Dallas out of my head as I pushed through the doors of Harmony Chocolates for a fresh supply of truffles, the bell tinkling above as I entered.

The guys at the station loved them as much as I did—and I seriously loved Haider's truffles—so I made my way over to stock up at least once a week when I was on shift.

Crocus, Haider's manager, smiled as I approached the counter.

"Hey, Conor," he greeted. He was a big guy with a crocus tattoo running up the back of his neck and onto his bald head. Hence, the name. I could never remember what Crocus's real name was—I'm not sure I ever knew. "Here for the usual?"

"It's like you know me," I joked.

It always amazed me to see the hulking ex-con handle dainty confections with such care.

He'd been Haider's first hire from an ex-offender program that helped reintegrate people back into society.

Some guys only stayed a short while, some didn't work out at all, but Crocus had settled into Caldwell Crossing seamlessly.

"Heard you had a date with that rock star who set the stage on fire," Crocus said, because of course everyone in town—and probably half of New Hampshire—knew

about my date. Or more to the point, who my date was with.

“You know me,” I chuckled. “Always up for an adventure.”

Crocus chuckled, as though he was afraid to make too much noise, and shook his head. His eyes glinted with humor as he took my money and handed over a box of chocolate treasure.

“See you next week,” he said.

I did a two-finger salute to the brim of my imaginary cowboy hat as I stepped back outside.

The sweet aroma of blooming flowers in the myriad baskets and planters that lined Main Street and hung from window boxes in the apartments above filled my senses.

I’d always loved this time of year, when everything was fresh and vibrant and full of promise.

As I was about to turn the corner at Bellflower Street, heading back to the station, I saw a familiar man on the sidewalk heading toward me.

I would have recognized him anywhere, even now, in his incognito mode, with his lush hair tucked up under a black baseball hat and mirrored sunglasses hiding his electric blue eyes.

He wore tight-fitting jeans and a jean jacket over an equally tight-fitting black T-shirt with a design I couldn’t make out.

My fingers twitched with the need to reach out and touch.

“Hey,” I said, keeping my hands to myself when he stopped in front of me. “I’m surprised to see you still here.”

“I decided to stick around for the week and explore the area,” Dallas said with a crooked smile. “This is a charming town.”

That my small town had charmed Dallas enough for him to stick around a little longer filled me with happiness. I had the sudden urge to bounce on my toes. But I stayed cool. Just.

“Well. If you’d like a tour guide,” I said, trying not to sound overly eager and no doubt failing. “I’d be happy to offer my services.”

Dallas grinned, and it took me a second to realize what I said. Heat crept up my neck, but I smiled back. Any service he wanted from me, he only had to say the word, and I would grant it wholeheartedly.

“You are a very good tour guide,” Dallas said, his voice low, and I wondered if he was remembering our kiss, too.

We stood there staring at each other for what felt like hours, while energy sparked in the air and the floral breeze ruffled through my hair.

Something passed between us. I didn’t know what, and I wasn’t sure how on board I was with it.

More kisses? I was there for that. More than kisses? Oh, hell yeah. But more more—

A car horn honked, jolting me back to the here and now.

“Here.” The charged moment gone, I tucked the Harmony Chocolates box under my

arm and pulled my phone out of my pants pocket. I handed it to him with a giddy feeling bubbling inside. “Let’s trade numbers and you can let me know when you want that tour.”

I glanced down the street as he entered his digits and saw Mrs. Jennings walking along the sidewalk on the other side. Her red hair glinted in the sun.

Please don’t see me, please don’t see me .

“Hello, Conor,” Mrs. Jennings called out, waving.

I waved back. Grateful she couldn’t tell that my smile was more of a grimace from across the street.

“Is that Dallas Blade with you?” she shouted as a car passed by.

Dallas looked up at his name, a crease in his brow as he waved back. Mrs. Jennings put her hand on her chest, like parents did when they saw their kids doing something adorable, then she looked both ways down the road.

Crap . Don’t cross the street, don’t cross the street.

Luckily, she continued on her way with another wave, but now the whole town would think Dallas and I were together. At least that’s how she would tell it. Then Mrs. Jennings and her silver-haired gang would have a summer wedding planned for us before the end of the week.

“I was heading over to Mabel’s Bistro for a ginger tea,” Dallas said as he handed my phone back after sending a text to himself, so he’d have my number, too. “Would you like to join me for a drink?”

“I’d love to, but I’m on shift until seven,” I said, motioning to the box I was holding.
“I’m just picking up treats for the guys at the station.”

“Oh,” he said softly.

That one word sounded heavy. Was he disappointed?

“Are they as good as I hear?” he asked, pointing at the box.

“Are they as . . .?” I gasped in mock offense and opened the box. “Take one.”

He picked out a square-shaped truffle with gold flakes sprinkled on one side and popped it into his mouth. I watched with rapt attention as he savored the sweet confection. My gaze followed, glued to the bob of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

“Damn,” he groaned so decadently I had to fight back a groan of my own. “That is good.”

I shifted on my feet, gulping hard and willing myself not to sport wood in the middle of Main Street.

And then he was looking at me expectantly.

I didn’t know how long I’d stood there staring at him as he ate a friggin’ piece of chocolate.

To be fair, though. The sounds he made while eating it should have come with a may cause arousal warning label.

“Uh . . .”

Ugh. Look at me, all eloquent and shit .

“I think I’ll go over there after getting my tea and grab some for myself,” Dallas said with laughter in his voice, and I got the feeling he’d repeated that sentence more than once. He coughed, once, the sound breathy.

“Make sure that you do,” I said, getting my mental balance back under control. “Tell them I sent you.”

“Will do,” Dallas said, the words cracking. His face pinched, and he coughed again, though this time more fully.

It was only then that I realized how hoarse his voice had sounded.

He couldn’t still be having issues from inhaling smoke the other day, could he?

The fire had been small, and I’d put it out quickly.

Any smoke he’d inhaled would have been minimal and shouldn’t have affected him much, if at all. Certainly not four days later.

“Are you okay?” I asked, knitting my eyebrows in concern and patting his back. Then I remembered he’d told me about having vocal surgery.

“Yeah. Sorry,” Dallas said sotto voce. “My throat’s a bit sore. I haven’t rested it enough since the show.”

He looked like he was going to say something else, but shook his head.

“So, no more talking today,” I said, watching him closely. He nodded. “Go get your tea. I need to get back to work, but text me if you want that tour, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said with a smile that damn-near sent me to my knees. “See you around, Conor.”

I grinned. “See you around, Dallas.”

I watched with a frown on my face as he crossed the street and headed for Mabel’s Bistro.

He looked back as he reached for the door and waved before disappearing inside.

As I headed for the station, that kick in my step a little higher because I would see Dallas again, I made a mental note to call Sam to see if he had any maple remedies to ease a sore throat.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

AFTER GETTING MY ginger tea at Mabel's Bistro—and signing an autograph for the star-struck barista who thought the stage fire was part of the show—I sipped the hot, soothing liquid, letting it work its magic on my throat as I walked down the street to the real estate office.

A bell jingled over the door as I entered, and a man wearing a burgundy polo shirt and tan chinos rose from his desk. He was about my age with short brown hair and sported round, red eyeglasses.

"Hi. I'm Nolan Kaslo," he greeted with a friendly smile, extending his hand. "How can I help you today?"

"Nice to meet you, Nolan. I'm Dallas." I shook his hand. "I was hoping to take a look at that lakeside property you have listed in the window."

Nolan frowned, his gaze sliding toward the window and back.

"On Harmony Drive?" Disbelief rang clear in the raised pitch of his voice. I guessed few people asked about that property, opting for one of the turnkey offerings.

"Yes," I said, dragging the word out and capping it with a slight inflection.

I knew from the lack of photos that the house would need work, but now I wondered if there was more to it. Was there a house at all? Did a murder happen there? I suppressed a shudder.

"You should know," Nolan said, eyeing me dubiously, as if he thought I might be

playing with him.

“The property is beautiful, but the house has sat abandoned and neglected for over a decade. It’s in serious disrepair and will need a lot of work.

Or raze it and build a new home.” He waved toward a wall opposite his desk, papered with a dozen listings.

Most were duplicates of the ones I’d seen in the window.

“We have some beautiful homes I can show you that are move-in ready.”

“I understand, but I’d still like to see that one,” I said, undeterred. I’m not sure what it was about the lakeside property, but even with only seeing a photo of the sagging dock, I had a good feeling about it. “Is it possible to see it today?”

Nolan studied me for a second, maybe gauging if I was serious, or waiting to see if I would come to my senses, but I wasn’t going to change my mind.

“Sure. Okay,” he said, still with a wary note in his voice but accepting there was no punchline. He adjusted his glasses higher on his nose. “We can go have a look now, if you’d like.”

“That would be fantastic.” I smiled, raising my to-go cup of tea like giving a toast. “Thank you.”

After gathering his keys and paperwork, we climbed into a copper-colored compact SUV and headed toward Harmony Lake.

The property was on the other side of the lake, opposite the inn where I was staying.

Once we cleared the few streets that made up downtown Caldwell Crossing, Nolan turned onto Harmony Drive, a winding tree-lined road with glimpses of the lake and homes tucked behind a shield of maples, oaks, and pines.

“You look familiar,” Nolan said as he drove. “But I know you’re not from around here.”

“No, I’m not. You might have heard of my band,” I said, bracing myself for more comments about the fire. “The Dallas Blade Band.”

Nolan frowned and shook his head. “No, that’s not it.”

Okaay . . . I fought back a chuckle. More and more, I found it refreshing meeting local townsfolk who didn’t know who I was, or did but didn’t care.

“Oh, I know!” Nolan smacked his palm on the steering wheel, his teeth flashing as he guffawed loudly. “You’re the guy who won Conor Holliston at the charity bachelor auction for twenty-five-hundred bucks.”

“Yes.” The laughter I’d been holding back escaped, entertained that he seemed to have no idea who I was. Only that I was the big bidder from out of town. “That was me.”

Nolan whistled. “Nobody’s ever bid much over a couple hundred bucks, for as long as they’ve been running the bachelor auction.”

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged and rubbed the back of my neck. “It was for a good cause, and I felt bad for setting the stage on fire on Founders Day.”

Nolan whipped his head around and stared at me, his eyes comically wide. “You did what now?”

For a town that seemed to know everything about everyone, I wondered how it was possible for him to have missed that. Apparently, it was a pretty big thing. Having gone viral online, and all.

“Never mind,” I said with a grin. “It was small, and Conor put it out fast.”

“So . . . Did you fall instantly in love with our little town and decide to move here?” Fire forgotten, thankfully, Nolan glanced at me with bright humor in his dark eyes and a wry grin on his face. “Or did a certain firefighter you’ve been seen around town with sway you?”

I didn’t know why the gossip tree in this little town charmed me, when in the tabloids it annoyed me. Maybe because the people here cared about each other and everyone felt supportive—like we were all in this together. Whereas the tabloids were a bunch of money-grubbing pariahs.

“I can’t lie. Lieutenant Holliston is highly attractive.

” I couldn’t deny that Conor might be a factor in my interest in possibly making Caldwell Crossing home, but he was the cherry on top.

My desire to plant roots for Jaylin was the primary driving factor.

My priorities in life had taken a sharp turn when she entered my world.

“But this town has a genuine appeal to it. I love the easy-going, open, and friendly vibe here, and when I saw the photo for this property, something in my gut said I had to look at it.”

“The town and its people are very charming, and this is a beautiful piece of property,” Nolan agreed, but he chewed on his lower lip as though debating saying more.

“But don’t get too excited about it yet.

The house isn’t legally habitable. Making it worse is some kids in town who think it’s haunted and dare each other to go inside.

Conor and the CCFD are forever getting called out there. ”

“It’s not haunted though, right?” My voice cracked and rose embarrassingly, but I didn’t care. As drawn as I felt to the place already, I wasn’t sure I could get past living in a murder house full of traumatized ghosts.

I took a few sips of my tea to ease the tickle in my throat, finishing it as Nolan flipped his turn signal on. I dropped the empty cup into one of the center console drink holders.

“No, it’s not haunted,” Nolan laughed. “And no one ever died in there, but I wouldn’t trust the stairs to hold you or the light switches not to shock you.”

I puffed out a relieved breath. “Good to know.”

Nolan turned into a gravel driveway and stopped in front of a derelict wooden gate. Tall trees and overgrown bushes blocked the view of whatever lay ahead. A weathered FOR SALE sign stood at an angle near the edge of the quiet, two-lane road.

The gate creaked as Nolan lifted rather than pushed it open, and I made a mental note to put that at the top of the list to replace when I bought the property. I shook my head. There I was getting ahead of myself, already making plans and I’d yet to see the house.

The gravel drive was bumpy, with potholes and weeds nearly as tall as the vehicle’s

hood ran down the middle of the two tracks. At one point we had to stop and move some large branches out of the way so we could pass—and I still couldn't see anything but forest.

“How long is this driveway?”

“Little over six hundred feet,” Nolan said, wincing when branches scraped along the side of his car.

Finally, the trees gave way to reveal the house, a detached garage, and the lake behind it. Two things crossed my mind in that moment: one, it did look haunted; and two, I was going to buy it.

“What style is this?”

“This is a colonial revival built in 1904,” Nolan said as he shut off the engine and we exited the car. “There are four bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a little over two-thousand square feet.”

I stood there for a second to take in the atmosphere.

Birds of all kinds chirped and chattered merrily as they darted about.

A light breeze ruffled through the leaves on the mature trees, and sunlight dappled the ground like a million tiny spotlights.

Ducks quacked and splashed in the lake. The air smelled clean and fresh, nothing like New York City, and carried with it a sweet note that reminded me of my auction date with Conor at the Stonebridge Maple Farm.

The peaceful chorus of nature sang to my soul and said, this is your home .

I didn't have to try hard at all to imagine living here with Jaylin. A different life than the one I'd led to this point, for sure, but one I knew I wanted from now on.

"Shall we?" Nolan asked with what sounded like forced eagerness. I knew he'd rather be showing me any house other than this one, but he didn't yet know that he'd already made the sale.

I gazed up at the house. It had two storeys plus an attic.

Most of the paint had peeled off the wood siding, leaving me to guess what color it had been.

Yellow, maybe? The bottom floor windows were all boarded up, and the cracked and peeling window casings on the second and attic floors would need to be replaced.

The diamond-pane glass in the second-floor bay windows looked worth keeping.

Hopefully, the same glass was still under the boards on the ground floor bay window.

Four steps led to a large, covered porch that stretched the width of the house, where I could see Jaylin and I sitting on a warm afternoon sipping iced tea.

The portico sheltered a faded yellow front door, with a glass pane in its upper half.

Or I assumed the glass was still there because someone had boarded it over.

"Yeah," Nolan said, correctly gauging my train of thought. "We've had to cover the windows and the glass in the door because people have broken them too many times."

Set back and to the right of the house, the detached garage looked large enough for

two cars—or a recording studio—but the roof had caved in, and one door hung cockeyed off the hinges. The interior hid in shadow.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“Why was it left abandoned for so long?” I asked as we climbed the steps and onto the veranda. The floorboards complained under our weight but held.

“That’s a long story,” Nolan said as he stuck a key into the front door lock and struggled to get it open.

“A railway tycoon originally built as a wedding gift his new wife. Unfortunately, the wife died during childbirth a couple of years later, and the husband was so distraught with the loss that he couldn’t bear to stay here without her. ”

The lock gave and, with a grunt and a bit of shoulder, Nolan pushed the door open. It creaked and groaned from disuse. Going by Nolan’s reluctance to show me the house, I wouldn’t be surprised if I were the first person he’d brought to see it in years.

“He left the country. Went back to Europe,” Nolan continued his retelling of the house’s history as we stepped inside the foyer.

“He eventually sold the home to a millionaire, who owned it for a handful of years before he lost everything when the markets crashed in 1929. The house sat empty until a wealthy widow, Abigail Ferguson, purchased it in the early 1940s. She lived here until she passed and bequeathed the home to her daughter and her family.”

I surveyed the foyer as Nolan spoke. The hardwood floors were beat up and thick with dust and rodent tracks, but hopefully some TLC would bring them back to their original glory.

“They, in turn, lost it to a loan shark because of the husband’s gambling problem, and

the shark ended up in prison, where he died,” Nolan continued. “After several years clearing probate, the bank took ownership and has held it since.”

“That’s quite the history,” I said quietly, distracted by the curved wooden staircase with ornate spindles. Broken or missing spindles marred the staircase, while sunlight poured down from and above bleached each tread to a flat gold. Dust motes danced like merry little sprites in the sun’s rays.

Only two feet inside, and the house felt like a welcoming embrace.

“I wouldn’t go up the stairs, if I were you,” Nolan warned. “In fact, we should leave the upstairs until a home inspector can confirm whether they’re safe. This way.”

To the right of the entry, through a wide archway, we entered the living room with high ceilings and the boarded bay windows I’d seen from outside.

I pictured Jaylin there, curled up with a blanket on a window bench, reading a book.

Luckily, the diamond-pane glass was intact, and I couldn’t wait to see the light spill into the room when the boards were gone.

Another wide archway led us into the kitchen and dining area.

“I can’t believe no one has bought this place,” I said, brushing cobwebs away from a drop light over a dust-covered island. I swiped at the island to reveal a granite surface that had seen better days. The space was good, but needed to be gutted and rebuilt from the studs up.

“There’s been the occasional offer,” Nolan said as he opened a door off the kitchen to reveal a large brick patio.

“But they never went further than building inspections, when the potential buyers realized the cost of either restoring the home or tearing it down to build new. Nothing in here is to code anymore.”

“What do you figure it will cost to update?” I asked, following him outside into the warm sunshine.

Nolan stopped and eyed me for a second. “Some would say more than it’s worth.”

I didn’t know about that. I saw something here worth any cost.

Like how the overgrown shrubbery and rose bushes surrounding the patio gave it a relaxing, oasis-like vibe. And how the weeds and grass and dandelions growing between the bricks didn’t detract from the beautiful herringbone pattern we stood on.

A mental movie played alongside everywhere I looked: Jaylin and I baking cookies together in the kitchen.

Jaylin sitting at the island doing her homework while I made us dinner.

Relaxing in the living room in front of the fire on a cold winter’s night with a special someone who looked an awful lot like Conor.

Barbecues with friends on this very patio, sharing drinks and laughter.

Jamming with a band in the garage-turned-studio.

Running to the end of the dock and jumping into the lake. Skinny dipping with Conor.

Whoa . How was it that a man I’d only met a few days ago was taking up so much

space in my head?

“What’s that?” I pointed to another falling down building about a hundred yards from the house as we stepped off the patio and walked toward the lake.

“A barn,” Nolan said.

“For horses?”

“At one time, yes.” Nolan nodded. “There’s a fenced acre, but most of the fencing is in disrepair.”

I imagined how excited Jaylin was going to be when I told her there was room for a horse here. I took my new cell phone out of my pocket—that I had priority shipped to the inn after the good lieutenant destroyed my previous one—and opened the video app so I could show her everything later.

“I’ll take it,” I said, amused by the expression of shock on Nolan’s face.

I WINCED AT Jaylin’s high-pitched scream as she jumped up and down in the small screen on my phone.

“I can really have my own horse?”

“Yes.” Warmth flooding my chest at being able to give her so much joy. “You can have a horse. We’ll need to fix the barn and the fences first, but when everything is ready, we can start looking.”

“Can I have Flicker?”

Flicker was the horse she rode at the stables in upstate New York.

“We’ll have to talk to Carolyn about that,” I said with a smile. “But if she says yes . . .”

She squealed again, and the image on my screen spun like a tilt-o-wheel before going still with a close-up view of the carpet in her bedroom. Before I could panic that she’d hurt herself, Jaylin’s face filled the frame again. Her eyes were wide with excitement.

“Sorry. Dropped my phone.” She sat down on the edge of her bed and started bouncing. Rather, she continued bouncing. I didn’t think she’d stopped since I’d shared the news. “When do we move?”

“Not for a while yet,” I said, my mind racing through all the things that needed to be done before then. “First we have to finalize the paperwork to make it official, and then we have a lot of renovations to do before the house is livable again.”

A wave of doubt washed over me, thinking about the overwhelming amount of work that needed to be done. I didn’t know the first thing about renovating, but I knew, deep down in my gut, that this was the right move for us.

We talked for a few more minutes about plans for the house as we watched the walk-thru video I’d taken and found photos online of the house when it had been in better shape. I also had to convince her the house wasn’t haunted, but she seemed more disappointed than relieved. Kids .

I’d just ended my video call with Jaylin, when my phone pinged with an incoming message. I expected it to be Jay, but my heart did a little hop in my chest when I saw the name on the display.

Conor: Hey. Any chance you’re free to meet up tonight ?

Conor: It's Conor, btw

I chuckled at his second text, and replied right away, because hell yeah, I wanted to meet up .

Me: Sure. How about now? I'm at the inn if you want to meet in the lobby .

Conor: Now is perfect . Be there in ten .

I jumped from the sofa in my suite and checked myself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. I was wearing the same clothes as when I'd run into Conor in town earlier and debated whether I should change my shirt.

"It's not a date," I mumbled to my reflection, but I swapped out my T-shirt for a burgundy button down with a paisley pattern.

I left the top few buttons open and rolled the sleeves up to my elbows.

Running my fingers through my hair, I debated changing back into a T-shirt, but a glance at my watch told me I didn't have time.

I hustled downstairs while my heart galloped ahead of me with anticipation.

True to his word, Conor strolled in ten minutes later.

He'd changed out of his station wear and into a pair of well-worn jeans and an old Metallica T-shirt that may or may not have sparked a jolt of jealousy that it wasn't a Dallas Blade Band shirt but could be forgiven for the way it clung to his muscular chest and biceps.

He carried a bag with a logo I recognized from the Stonebridge Maple Farm, where

we'd had our charity date the other day, and wore a grin on his face that made my mouth water.

"Are you just off shift now?" I asked when he stopped in front of me. His grin grew into a blinding smile and the heat from his body set all my senses on fire.

"No." Conor shook his head. "I had a stop to make on the way."

We stood there, staring at each other for an extended beat. Me studying him, debating if now was too soon to invite him upstairs, while he studied me with a smolder in his eyes that had me wondering if he was thinking the same thing.

"Have you eaten?" I asked, clearing my throat and breaking the moment. "The lounge kitchen is still open."

"I ate at the station," he said, his gaze never leaving mine, but then he blinked, and a light blush colored his cheeks. He motioned to the bag in his hand. "I, uh, have something for you."

"Let's go sit." I waved toward the lounge, curious about what he'd brought.

We sat across from each other in a pair of leather club chairs near an old, floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace.

After placing orders—a ginger tea for me, and a virgin tequila sunrise for him—he slid the bag across the table toward me with a shy sweep of his eyelashes.

He bit at his lower lip. In the short time I'd known him, he'd been nothing but confident and self-assured, so to see him uncertain like this piqued my interest.

"What's this?" I asked, delighted and touched that he'd brought me a gift. I didn't

care what was in the bag, only that he'd thought of me enough to bring me something special meant more than he could possibly know.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

I opened the bag and inhaled the sweet aroma of maple syrup. Inside was a package of maple syrup hard candies, and half a dozen maple syrup lollipops.

I looked at Conor questioningly.

“For your throat,” he explained as he shifted in his seat. “Sam said the hard candies are good for soothing a sore throat, like a lozenge, and you can dissolve the lollipops into your tea if you want. They’re kind of like antioxidants.”

For the first time in my life, I was speechless.

Make that the second time. The first time was when I’d found out about Jaylin.

I couldn’t believe that Conor had gone out of his way to get these for me, to help me feel better.

Most people in my life wanted something from me, wanted what I could do for them, what my celebrity status would bring them.

Very few genuinely did something for me.

Especially without ulterior motives. In that moment, I knew that not only was I going to call the house on Harmony Lake home, but that I wanted to have this man in my life, too.

“Is that okay?” Conor asked with a note of apprehension in his deep voice, and I realized I’d been staring at him in silence, with my jaw hanging open too long.

I snapped my mouth shut and smiled, reaching my hand across the table to clasp his in mine.

“More than okay,” I said, and my voice cracked. Not because of possibly permanent vocal cord damage this time, but because a swell of emotion tightened my throat. “I can’t believe you thought of this, that you went out of your way to do this for me.”

He shrugged. “It’s possible I had an ulterior motive.”

I froze for a second, but the sly grin on his face relaxed me. He wasn’t looking at me with calculation in his eyes, but instead, with a lustful longing that sang in harmony with my own growing desire for him.

“Yeah?” I leaned forward, enticed. “And what is that?”

“An excuse to see you again.” His words were quiet, but loaded with innuendo.

“Consider this a no excuses needed relationship,” I teased, lowering my faltering voice to match his.

His eyes widened, but there was humor in his voice when he asked, “This is a relationship already?”

I laughed. Nervous and excited all at once. “I think you know what I mean.”

He hummed and looked down at our still joined hands. He lifted his gaze, and the naked hunger in his intense stare pierced right into my soul.

“So,” I dragged out the word even as I yearned to drag him upstairs as fast as possible. “Do you need to get home, or do you want to stay?”

“I want to stay,” he replied. No hesitation. His voice was low and gravelly, sending a frisson of adrenaline racing through my bloodstream.

We rose together, our drinks forgotten but not the bag of maple candies, and he followed me to my suite. Neither of us spoke while my nerves vibrated like plucked guitar strings, and the moment I stepped inside my room and closed the door, Conor was on me.

He pushed me up against the wall, and the breath whooshed from my lungs.

My bag of maple candies hit the floor. He claimed my mouth with a possessiveness that would have left me speechless even if I’d been able to speak in that moment.

His kiss was frantic and desperate and all-consuming, and all I could do, all I wanted to do, was surrender to his onslaught.

And I loved it.

Loved that he wanted me that much.

Loved that I wanted him that much.

I scrabbled with the soft cotton of his shirt, yanking it up his torso.

I couldn’t wait another second to feel his skin.

To have nothing between us. He growled when I forced him to break the kiss, but lifted his arms so I could pull his T-shirt up over his head.

I tossed it somewhere over my shoulder. The faint scent of smoke danced across my senses before I dove back in to claim his lips.

This time I made the wordless demands. He opened his mouth, and I slid my tongue inside to stroke his.

I savored the faint taste of orange juice and grenadine from the tequila sunrise he'd drunk in the lounge, and the indefinable essence that was Conor Holliston.

My synapses sparked in every direction, threatening to short-circuit my brain.

I gripped Conor's sides like he was a life preserver, needing to hold on for dear life under his erotic assault.

His ribcage expanded and contracted in concert with his steady but rapid breathing.

Even though his skin was hot to the touch, goosebumps rose across my forearms. I moved my hands around to his back, tracing the muscular contours that bracketed his spine.

Without breaking our explosive kiss, he bowed his body away from me, making room for his fingers to fight with the button-fly of my jeans.

Conor broke the kiss, drawing a ragged groan of complaint from me.

"Off, off, off," he panted with an urgency I felt all the way to the tips of my toes. "Get it all off."

I chuckled at the mixture of plea and demand in his voice and knocked his hands out of the way so I could finish undoing my pants.

I dropped my jeans and briefs in one fell swoop, but the fabric got caught up with my boots—biker boots with far too many laces.

I stood there staring uncomprehendingly at my feet, while my junk hung free in the wind and the bottom of my shirt tented from my growing erection.

“Shit,” I breathed as I tried to put enough brain cells together to figure out how to get out of my boots without falling. “Stuck.”

Conor’s gaze bounced from my face to my barely covered hard-on, down to my feet and back up. He raised an eyebrow, and warning bells went off in my head at the slow, mischievous grin that spread across his face. I braced myself for what I didn’t know.

It didn’t take long to find out.

Conor crouched down and, for a second, I thought he was going to drop to his knees and suck me off, but he put his shoulder into my midsection and hoisted me up over his shoulder and into a fireman’s carry with such speed and ease, a surprised squawk burst from my mouth.

I. Freaking. Squawked !

And what followed that embarrassing sound? Laughter. Uncontrollable laughter at the ridiculousness of the position I found myself in, but I couldn’t find it in me to care all that much. I couldn’t remember when the last time was that I’d had so much fun getting naked with someone. If ever.

I grabbed a healthy handful of Conor’s jeans-clad butt-cheeks to hang on, giving him a squeeze while my dick pressed against his chest and my ass rubbed against his stubbled cheek.

Laughing, he bit playfully at my butt as he walked me toward the bed and dropped me down.

I bounced with my feet hobbled like a horse and my shirt riding up to expose my very eager erection.

“Now that was a first.” I grinned as I palmed my rigid length.

“Did you like it?” Conor’s voice was raspy as he watched my hand move slowly up and down with rapt attention.

“More than I should,” I said, and I meant it. Being manhandled by Conor turned me on more than it should have. More than I could have imagined. “You can pick me up anytime.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” he said, meeting my gaze with a wink, then he began working the laces free of my boots. His brows furrowed, the groove between them deepening as he tugged the ends through the holes. He huffed. “Jezus . How many hours did it take you to put these on?”

Chuckling, I sat up and waved him off. “I’ll get these while you strip.”

“Yes, sir,” he teased with a two-finger salute to his brow, before stripping off the rest of his clothes—taking his shoes off before his pants. Smart man.

“There’s condoms and lube in my toiletries bag in the bathroom,” I said, kicking off my boots and freeing my legs. Fully naked, I stretched out on my back.

Conor’s mouth tipped up into a crooked grin as he held a couple of condoms and a little packet of lube between the index and middle fingers of one hand. His jeans dangled from his other hand.

“Came prepared, did you?”

“Well,” Conor said as he dropped his pants to the floor and climbed onto the bed. He crawled up my body like a prowling panther. “I was a boy scout.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised,” I said with a slow smile.

“I excelled in all areas,” he said as he nipped at my chin.

“Oh yeah.” I rocked my hips up to meet his. “How about this one?”

He answered by mouthing and kissing the column of my neck. His warm breath tickled my sensitive skin, sending shivers in every direction. “Not exactly part of the curriculum, but I can go all night.”

“Pretty confident of your stamina, aren’t you?” I said with a breathy voice.

“I’m a well-honed machine,” Conor teased. He sat back on his heels and raised his arms, flexing his biceps like a bodybuilder. “Just look at these guns.”

I didn’t know that I’d have called him a machine, but there was no denying the exquisite example of the male form that was his body.

Sitting there naked, with the low light from the bedside lamp gilding the delineated curves of his firm pecs, the rise and fall of his abdominal muscles, and a thick, straight cock reaching toward me.

“Fuck, you’re a beautiful man,” I whispered.

The slow and sexy lift of Conor’s lips told me he agreed, but was also happy that I thought so, too.

“I could say the same about you,” he said, tracing a finger down my navel.

He wrapped his hand around my length and stroked up and down, slow and deliberate. The heat of his hand, the pressure of his grip, sent an electric shockwave arcing through me. I shuddered with an overwhelming need for him.

“I’m waiting to hear it.” My attempt at a demand sounded more like a keening whine.

“Fuck.” Conor released my dick, much to my dismay, and crawled back up my body until he was looking down at me with fire in his eyes. “You are the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

“Right,” I croaked at the intensity of his stare. I felt exposed, flayed open, and heat flooded into my cheeks. “Now quit talking and kiss me already.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

This time, while still demanding and all-consuming, the desperate edge of his kisses had given way to raw, unfiltered desire.

Conor kissed his way down my body, sending shocks and sparks and electric charges bouncing and pinging in every direction.

Disorientation spun my head, and I had the sensation of falling even though I was lying flat on my back.

But I wasn't afraid because Conor had me.

I don't know why, but I felt unexpectedly safe in his arms. When he finally came up for air, trapping my legs in the cage of his thighs, his eyes were wild, and his voice was ragged and gritty when he asked if I was a top or bottom.

I was verse, though I topped when it came to hookups.

He's not a hookup .

"I want to feel you inside me," I said. "I want you to own me."

"Jesus," Conor breathed. "That's so hot."

He wasted no time working me open with his nimble fingers and talented tongue until I was writhing and begging mindlessly for him to just fucking fuck me already.

"Demanding bottom," he teased. His deep, honeyed voice sounding ragged.

“Only because it feels like I’ve been waiting for you forever,” I said to him without thinking.

His eyes widened ever so slightly. He could read into that anyway he wanted because I didn’t have the bandwidth to clarify. And honestly, I wasn’t sure I could clarify what I’d meant.

“I’m ready,” I said, rolling my hips to make the point and get his mind off my words. Action was the only thing I wanted, the only thing I needed at that moment.

After suiting up and applying liberal amounts of lube, his gaze never left mine as he entered me, rocking slowly and deliberately until he was fully seated inside.

He paused for a second and nodded. One minute tip of his head, as if asking for the green light.

I responded by pulling him down for a sloppy kiss as we began to move as one.

Our movements were so perfectly in sync.

Conor, so unerringly in tune with me, anticipated my every need and delivered it tenfold.

I couldn’t remember sex ever being so good before.

I knew I’d had good sex. But right now, in this moment, I couldn’t for the life of me remember a single time that had felt as good as this.

Nothing matched this moment. No one before Conor could hold a candle to him.

No one even came close. I knew then that I was a total goner for this man.

He brought me to the edge, and he held me there, suspended on the brink of release, again and again.

“Now,” I begged, breathless. “Please.”

And then, as effortlessly as he’d physically lifted me over his shoulder and into a fireman’s carry earlier, he metaphorically threw me over the edge of the cliff.

My orgasm hit like an explosion. I felt like I was free falling while my vision went white and my body shattered with ecstasy.

What seemed like hours later but was probably only a few minutes, I began to feel the weight of my body slowly return.

Gravity had never felt so heavy before. Or so damn good.

Conor dropped beside me, his panting harsh.

“Holy shit,” he gasped.

His chest rose and fell rapidly, and beads of sweat on his skin glistened like tiny diamonds in the dim light.

“You can say that again,” I said when I could catch my breath.

We lay there, side-by-side, immovable, while the echoes of our lovemaking faded, and my body slowly knit itself back together.

Conor hooked his pinky finger with mine. His eyes were closed, and he wore a silly grin on his face. I couldn’t help smiling in response, even though he couldn’t see me.

“I’m glad you came over tonight,” I said softly.

“Me too,” he said. He huffed. “I think you melted all my bones.”

“Well, fair is fair.” I laughed. “You shattered all of mine.”

He turned to face me with a playful expression on his handsome face.

“So,” he smirked. “That was earth shattering sex?”

I nudged at his ribs with my elbow. “I’m pretty sure you know it was.”

His smile widened as he closed his eyes again.

“I’ll get up in a minute and get a cloth.” But he made no move to follow through.

“It’s all good,” I said, giving his pinky a squeeze. “I’ll grab one.”

My body complained as I left the bed, left the warmth of Conor’s body, and went to the bathroom. I tied my hair up into a ponytail, and after cleaning myself up, I rinsed the cloth and went back to take care of him. He mumbled something under his breath, already half asleep.

“I think you should stay the night,” I said as I tossed the cloth back into the bathroom.

Conor made a sound of agreement and rolled over onto his side, facing the middle of the bed.

He patted the empty space, and I crawled into bed beside him, pulling the covers over us as I mirrored his position and put my back to him.

Conor snuggled up behind me and tucked his arm around my waist. His breath tickled the fine hairs at the back of my neck, and a sigh of blissful contentment passed through my lips.

Why did this feel so perfect? Like I'd found more than a house to call home here in Caldwell Crossing? I'd traveled all over the world for more than a decade, met thousands and thousands of people, but it wasn't until this small town that I'd stumbled upon the one man I could imagine a future with.

I hoped he felt even a little the same.

A thought crossed my mind that I should probably be freaking out right now.

Or I should freak out because I wasn't freaking out.

I hadn't had many boyfriends, even fewer girlfriends, and I rarely let the people I slept with spend the night.

But having Conor in my bed felt right in a way I couldn't deny.

It was too soon and a little ridiculous for me to be thinking this way, but I could see him fitting into my life with Jaylin. The most bizarre thing was that it felt like he already was a part of my little family.

Conor tightened his arm around my waist, snuggled closer and mumbled into the shell of my ear, "Your thinking is keeping me awake."

I snorted and grabbed his hand, tucking it under my chin and kissing his knuckles.

The future was a tomorrow problem.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“EARTH TO HOLLY.”

I jerked out of my mind’s constant replay of last night with Dallas, the mental gears grinding as they switched to the here and now. I winced and looked up to see Whittaker watching me with conflicting expressions of concern and humor on his face.

“What?”

“You’ve been standing there staring into space for the last ten minutes.” Whittaker waved at my hand. “Polishing the same spot.”

“Oh.” I glanced at the engine’s bumper. Yep . That one spot was super shiny. “Just thinking about the hella wicked trails I’m going to hit on my bike this weekend.”

“Right,” Whittaker said with a dubious note in his voice. He wiggled his eyebrows. “Or thinking about a certain rock star you’ve been seen hanging out with.”

“Funny,” I deadpanned, but there was no way I was going to tell him I was still thinking about waking up in bed with Dallas this morning, or about the sinuous way his body moved when I rocked into him, or the sounds he made every time I drove him to the edge and back, or the way he’d shouted when we came together.

I’d had a lot of great sex. But last night, and twice this morning, with Dallas had been unexpectedly mind-blowing. Scratch that. Beyond mind-blowing.

“Are we talking about Conor dating Dallas Blade?” Jackson asked when he walked

into the apparatus bay.

“Oh my God.” I threw my arms up. “There is no dating. I am not dating Dallas Blade. You two have been spending too much listening to Mrs. Jennings and her crew’s gossip.”

“Well, it’s not exactly gossip,” Jackson said with a shrug. “It’s no secret you two have been seen together all over town since the bachelor auction.”

“We haven’t been all over town.” I rolled my eyes.

“Yeah, so what’s the deal?” Whittaker said. I swear, the man was five years older than me but acted five years younger than Jackson.

“No deal,” I said, finding a new spot on the bumper to polish. “I’ve been playing a good host and showing him around is all.”

Jackson snickered like a friggin’ high schooler. “I bet that’s not all you’ve been showing him.”

“Ha-ha,” I intoned. Then lowered my voice and flashed a flirty grin at him. “Wouldn’t you like to see what I’ve got to show.”

Jackson’s eyebrows rose and Whittaker snorted, jabbing an elbow into Jackson’s ribs.

“You walked into that one,” Whittaker teased. His gaze shifted over my shoulder, and he tipped his chin toward the front of the bay. “Well, speak of the devil.”

I followed his line of sight to the open bay doors, and Dallas himself strolled in wearing jeans and an emerald, open-collared shirt under his black jean jacket. He’d pushed his sunglasses up onto his head, which pulled his long hair back from his

smiling face.

Fuck, he's gorgeous .

“Hey, Conor,” Dallas said when he stopped in front of me with a glance over my shoulder at my coworkers. The deep green of his shirt made the brightness in his blue eyes pop—as if they weren't already electric enough. “Hope it's okay I dropped by unannounced.”

“It's all good. Welcome to the CCFD.” My pulse kicked into high gear, words fled, and after what felt like a forever moment of awkwardness as the four of us stood there in silence, I turned to the guys. “Don't you two have something to do somewhere else?”

Jackson snickered under his breath while Whittaker tapped his fingers to his brow, and the two of them disappeared into the main station.

“What brings you by?” I asked, ridiculously happy to see him, now that the dynamic duo had left us alone.

Dallas shrugged. “I was in town, so I figured I'd drop by and say hi.”

The dog door at the back of the bay swung open and Eldi trotted toward us, her toenails tapping on the polished concrete. She ran straight to Dallas and danced around his legs, her tail wagging a mile a minute, as though he was already her favorite human. Dallas kneeled to pet her.

“Hey, pretty girl,” Dallas cooed, and she slobbered him with kisses.

Yuck . Don't get me wrong. I loved dogs, and Eldi was one of the best, but dog kisses were nasty. Did he not know where that tongue had been? I grabbed a clean cloth

from one of the shelves that lined the bay.

“That’s Eldi,” I said as I handed him the cloth.

“Hello, Eldi,” Dallas said as he took it and wiped his face. “Jay would love you.”

I frowned as something tightened in my chest. Who was Jay and why did Dallas care what he’d think about Eldi.

“Who’s Jay?” I asked, trying hard to sound casual but going by the smirk on Dallas’s face when he looked up at me, I’d failed.

“Jay is short for Jaylin,” Dallas said with a note of pride in his voice and his grin widened. “My daughter.”

“Oh.” I shoved my hands into my pockets and looked away as heat crawled up my neck. “That’s a nice name.”

“It is,” Dallas agreed. “But I didn’t name her.”

No. I remembered he’d said his daughter was fourteen, and he’d only found out about her the year before.

“So, uh. Would you like a tour of the station?” I asked, relieved that he didn’t have a man back home waiting for him and confused that I’d felt jealous at all because he wasn’t mine.

I had no claim on him. Dallas had a whole life that had nothing at all to do with me.

One so far removed from my life that the two could never mesh.

“Sure,” he said, standing and brushing dog hair off his jeans. “I’ve never been inside a fire station before.”

Eldi followed on Dallas’s heels as I showed him our two firefighting vehicles.

“This is our fire engine,” I pointed to the truck I’d been polishing, and then to the one parked beside it that looked similar except for the large hydraulic ladder on top. “And this is our ladder truck.”

“And the one out front?” Dallas motioned to the vintage fire engine.

“That one is for show,” I said. “We usually only roll it out for fairs and fundraisers.”

I opened the driver’s side door of the engine. “Want to hop inside?”

“Hell yeah, I do,” Dallas enthused, his eyes growing wide. “Can I turn on the sirens?”

“Not inside the bay,” I said, my gaze fixed on the way his jeans hugged his firm ass as he climbed up into the cab. “Not unless you want to blast your eardrums out and piss off all the guys.”

“Maybe not then.” He shook his head. “My eardrums take enough abuse on stage.”

I frowned. “Please tell me you wear ear protection.”

“Oh yes,” he said. “But not until it became cool to wear earplugs. Now I wear them all the time.”

“Good.”

He climbed down out of the truck after a few minutes of asking what all the gadgets

were for, and I led him to a small room at the back, where we stored all our turnout and duty gear.

The room was small and not meant as somewhere to hang out, but when Sam, Ryan, and Haider came by, we would go in there so we could talk freely without my coworkers overhearing.

“What is—”

I didn’t let Dallas finish asking his question.

Taking advantage of the quiet, private space, I pulled him close to me and kissed him.

I couldn’t wait another second to feel his lips against mine again.

And holy hell, did I need it. I felt like I’d been lost in the desert, and he was my oasis, even though it had only been a few hours since I’d said goodbye that morning.

“How do you always seem to know what I need?” Dallas whispered against my mouth when we broke for air.

“Because I need the same thing,” I said, my voice as low and rough as his. I nipped at his lips. “We better get out of here before I get fired.”

We left the storage room, and I led him across the bay. We passed through the EMT supplies room, where the fire pole punched through the ceiling to the dorms upstairs. He pointed at the shiny silver pole.

“Do you really slide down that when there’s an emergency?” he asked.

“No,” I laughed with a shake of my head. “I used to before my body started to feel

the years. But the younger guys use it all the time.”

He looked me up and down and in a low, provocative voice, said, “There is absolutely not a single thing wrong with your body.”

I smiled, appreciating the compliment, but my usual retorts lay silent as my cheeks heated. I worked hard to stay in shape and in good health, and usually deflected words of praise with cocky humor, but coming from Dallas, all I wanted to do was wrap myself around him like a cat and purr.

I cleared my throat, but my voice still cracked when I said, “This way.”

We crossed the hall and entered the day area slash kitchen.

Captain Burgess was sitting in a Naugahyde recliner reading an actual printed newspaper.

Whittaker was sitting on the couch watching some crime drama on TV that he couldn’t get enough of.

Firefighter Shepherd, who’d gone through fire training school with me, was sitting at the kitchen table working on a crossword, and Jackson was rummaging through the kitchen cupboards, no doubt looking for unhealthy snacks.

I didn’t know how the guy stayed so fit when he was always munching on something no good for him.

All heads turned to us with varying expressions of curiosity.

“Hey, everyone.” I waved toward Dallas. “I’m sure you’ve all heard of Dallas Blade.”

They all nodded and waved back with hellos. I turned toward Dallas.

“You’ve met Jackson.” I motioned toward him, and then to the rest of the guys. “And this is Captain Burgess, and firefighters Whittaker and Shepherd.”

“Hey, Dallas,” Jackson said, hiding something behind his back, but not before I saw the telltale Pop Tarts label. I didn’t even know those still existed, let alone that he’d found one in our kitchen. “It’s so cool to see you here.”

“Hi. Thanks.” Dallas whistled as his gaze bounced around the large room. “This is a nice kitchen.”

“When you’re on a twelve-hour shift, you spend a lot of time cooking or learning to cook,” I said. “Speaking of food, would you like to stay for lunch?”

“If that’s okay?” he looked to the guys, who all nodded, and back to me with an easy smile that seemed shy and only for me. “I would like that.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“Have a seat,” I motioned for Dallas to sit at the kitchen table, then walked over to Jackson and tugged the Pop Tarts from his hand with a shake of my head.

“This stuff’ll kill you,” I said, turning the packet over to check the best before date. I held it up for him to see. “Especially since it expired four years ago.”

“Pfft ,” he said. “Those things will last through the next ice age.”

“Exactly,” I snorted. “And you want something like that rotting in your gut for the rest of your life?”

“Exaggerating much,” he rolled his eyes as I handed the packet back and he turned it over, a frown growing on his face as he read the ingredients. He shuffled backward toward the garbage bin and discreetly tossed them inside.

I put my back to him and grinned at Dallas, giving him a wink.

“Can we get a group photo for the wall while you’re here?” Jackson asked Dallas as I started pulling sandwich fixings out of the fridge.

The “wall” was a large corkboard where we pinned photos taken with various people in the community who we honored.

Some were of people no longer with us, some were town heroes for one reason or another, some were of special occasions and events, and some were of our friends.

Dallas graciously posed for both the group photo and a couple of selfies with

Jackson, while laughing off a little ribbing about the Founders Day fire.

I smiled as I watched him interacting with my coworkers. Having him here, in my space, felt . . . right, somehow.

I shook my head as I turned on the panini press to heat while I prepped half a dozen sandwiches, when the alarms sounded and two lights in the ceiling glowed red—which meant fire. When the lights were blue, it was a medical call, and green was for all other emergencies.

Dallas startled while the rest of us jumped to action like a well-oiled machine.

“Structure fire. Grafton,” a woman’s voice said through the broadcast alert system speakers. “Multiple responders on route . . .”

“I’m so sorry, Dallas,” I said, and unplugged the panini press as I listened to the rest of the alert message, quickly throwing everything back into the fridge. “Duty calls. I’ll text you when we’re done.”

I rushed a wide-eyed Dallas out of the building.

“Be careful,” he said, his voice tight.

“Always,” I said with a reassuring grin, fighting the urge to kiss him.

I spun and ran into the apparatus bay, quickly donning my turnout gear.

I hopped into the passenger seat of the ladder truck and put my radio headset on while Whittaker got behind the wheel, fired up the engine, and flipped on the sirens.

Jackson and Shepherd climbed into the back seats.

Captain Burgess pulled out ahead of us in his command vehicle as two cars pulled into the lot at the same time.

Three of our on-call volunteer firefighters spilled out of the vehicles and ran toward the engine truck.

Seconds later, we were racing east toward Grafton with the second truck quickly following behind.

“So, it’s true then, Holly?” Shepherd asked from the backseat.

“Is what true?”

“That you’re dating Dallas Blade now.”

I turned in my seat to glare at him. “We already went over this.”

“It’s all over town.” Shepherd shrugged unapologetically. “And I didn’t miss the looks you two were throwing at each other back there.”

“Yeah,” Jackson chimed in, and I wish he hadn’t. “Plus, I heard from Mabel at the bistro who heard from Arnold at the hardware store who heard from Mrs. Jennings at the library that you’re an item. And Prescott over at the Lakeside Inn saw you guys looking all cuddly in the lounge.”

Cuddly ? I sat forward in my seat and rolled my eyes. This town .

“We are not dating,” I grumbled.

The daydreamer part of me would happily date Dallas, but the realistic part of me knew he’d be leaving town the following day and chances of seeing him again, let

alone developing any kind of relationship, were about as likely as me winning the lottery jackpot.

Since I'd never once bought a ticket in my life, that put my chances at nil, zero, nada, zilch.

Whittaker snickered, but didn't add to the conversation. I turned my attention to the communications coming over the radio from dispatch. We were headed to a five-alarm fire, which meant it had to be a big event if they were calling in crews from several stations.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins, sharpening my focus.

Most of our calls were for minor incidents, which was a good thing.

The best days at work were the quiet days, where everyone stayed healthy and in one piece.

But the fires that called us out of our township were the worst. While all fires and callouts had the potential for serious outcomes, these big ones enormously increased the risks from serious results to fatal.

Black smoke billowed into the air as we drew closer, and when a three-story apartment building came into view, fully engulfed, I saw fire engines and apparatus trucks from four other townships parked at odd angles, and first responders running in all directions.

I spotted a truck from the Grantham station, where my little sister Juno worked out of.

We stopped on the street while Captain Burgess drove ahead and parked. We waited

for him to confer with the incident commander and find out where they needed us.

I surveyed the scene while we waited, but didn't see Juno anywhere among the responders already on the ground. She was a professional and knew what she was doing, but it still made me uneasy not knowing where she was.

“Whittaker,” the captain’s voice crackled over the radio. “Take the apparatus truck to the east corner of the building and get the ladder ready for extraction. There are still people inside.”

All four of us in the truck cursed in unison.

We pulled up next to Grantham’s fire engine and, like a perfectly synchronized Olympic swim team, began pulling out all the tools, equipment, and hoses that we’d need.

Shepherd and Jackson ran to the back of the rig to set the jacking system to keep our truck stable with the ladder fully extended, while Whittaker hustled up the outrigger steps to the control panel.

I grabbed a handful of bright orange cones and dropped them around our apparatus to create a safety perimeter. When I dropped the last cone, I spotted Captain Baraldi from Grantham and even though I shouldn’t have, I stole a couple of seconds to rush over.

“Captain,” I called out. “Where’s Holliston?”

His gaze dropped to my name badge, and he grimaced.

“In there.” Baraldi lifted his chin, and I followed his line of sight.

My pulse quickened, and I swore under my breath. Nobody should be inside that building right now.

“No one else goes in,” Captain Baraldi warned.

Three firefighters staggered out of the building. Two were carrying young children who were coughing from smoke inhalation, but none of them were Juno. I raced forward without thinking.

“Where’s Holliston?” I shouted to be heard over the roar of the fire and shouts of the responders.

The guy not carrying anyone thumbed over his shoulder as he pulled off his breathing apparatus. “Up there. She turned back for another kid.”

Of course she did. I would have, too.

“Where was she?”

“Second floor, east hallway,” he said. “But take the back stairs. The front ones collapsed behind us.”

Fuck . She was going to get trapped in there. I knew I was going against protocol, and Juno would be pissed that I came to rescue her while she was busy rescuing someone else, but panic flared brighter in my chest. My sister could kick my ass later, after she made it safely out of there.

I radioed Captain Burgess as I pulled on my breathing apparatus and charged inside, ignoring his shouts in my ear to stand down.

“Juno,” I shouted, pushing through thick, black smoke.

I made my way to the second stairwell at the back of the building and started climbing while flames licked at me from the first-floor landing.

I'd cleared all of five steps before a section of the stairwell collapsed behind me, closing another escape route.

I called out Juno's name again and again as I reached the second floor. My heart raced and sweat dripped down my face. Wood snapped and glass shattered as floors and ceilings collapsed nearby.

"Juno! Oof ." Someone coming out of an apartment banged into me, knocking me off balance, but I recovered quickly.

"Conor," Juno shouted, and a powerful wave of relief washed through me, nearly dropping me to my knees.

"We have to get out of here," I said, reaching for the child she had over her shoulder.

She shook her head. I thought for sure she was going to rip into me for coming in here against orders, but she gestured to the door she'd come through, either not knowing or not caring.

"There's another little boy in there. I promised," she implored. "Bathroom."

Shit . We needed to get out, but there was no way I was going to leave anyone behind, especially a kid. Death by fire was a horrible way to go.

"I'll find him. You get out of here." I pointed the other direction down the hall. "Stairs collapsed. Go that way."

She hesitated for a second, and I knew exactly what she was thinking because I'd

have been thinking the same thing—leave no one behind.

“Go!”

She turned and ran down the hall, dodging a flaming ceiling beam as it fell.

Cursing, I raced inside and found a young boy of maybe ten crouched in the bathtub with a wet blanket draped over top of him. There was no way in hell Juno would’ve made it back up here for him, but at least she’d done what she could to keep him as safe as possible.

I bundled him up and threw him over my shoulder, crashing into my sister once again when I reached the hallway.

“What the hell are you still doing here?” I yelled at her.

“We’re trapped,” she barked back.

“Son of a—”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

I kicked open an apartment door across the hall and raced for windows that were blown out from the explosion. If we couldn't get down the stairs, we could get down a fire escape.

Except the ladder was well out of our reach.

Fortunately, our truck was positioned nearby, on the east side of the building.

I radioed Shepherd with our location so they could get the hydraulic ladder into position.

Flames closed in on us while we waited for what felt like an eternity, but I knew wasn't more than thirty seconds before the turntable ladder was in place.

When it was, I shouted at Juno to go first. Once she and her limp but precious cargo were out, I followed, but thought I heard something—or someone calling out.

“Did you hear that?”

Juno looked up at me from the ladder. “Hear what?”

I glanced over my shoulder, straining to hear anything over the snap, pop, and roar of the fire. The fire had closed the room behind us, too. There was no way I was getting back in there.

“Don't you dare, Conor James Holliston,” Juno barked, but I heard the worry in her voice.

We were out of time.

I prayed to the universe that the sound had only been my imagination and climbed onto the ladder with an extra eighty pounds of dead weight over my shoulder.

Paramedics rushed to us at the bottom to take the kids while both of our captains railed at us—me for disobeying orders and Juno for going back when her team had been recalled.

An eardrum-busting boom cut off Burgess and Baraldi's tirades, and the roof of the apartment building collapsed, shaking the earth under our feet.

Flames exploded from the broken upper floor windows a good twenty feet out and thirty feet high.

Shattered glass rained down on the ground, sending first responders running.

If we'd still been in there . . .

"You," Captain Burgess pointed at me, his cheeks flush with anger or heat. Probably both. "Go help clean up and then start on-scene decon."

"Same goes for you," Captain Baraldi barked at Juno.

"Good to see you, sis," I said as our captains walked away, and we headed toward our respective engines.

"Good to see you too, big bro," she said, poking me in the ribs with her elbow, for all the good that did under our turnout gear.

"You know, we really have to plan our visits better," I said, trying for levity but still

wondering if I'd heard a voice when we were up there.

"So, what's this I hear about you dating the Dallas Blade?" She looked up at me with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Christ," I groaned and dragged a hand down my face. "How the hell did you hear about that all the way down in Grantham?"

"Please." She snorted. "I'm only an hour away. Besides, Emma heard it from one of her patients, and she told Mom and Dad, and they told me."

"Oh my God." Our oldest sister Emma was the biggest gossip in the family, and being the only doctor in town, she got the scoop from almost everyone in Caldwell Crossing. "Mom and Dad know? Great ."

Any minute now, my phone would be buzzing with their calls, asking when I was going to bring Dallas around for them to meet, and before I knew it, they'd be including him in family get-togethers and all. Then Mom would head the wedding planning crew.

"Like they don't already know everything going on with us anyway." She laughed, and I snort-huffed in agreement.

She was right. I didn't know what it was about parents, but they had some strange sort of sixth sense. When I was younger and my imagination would run rampant, I used to wonder if they'd received some kind of magical drug at the hospital that gave them all-knowing superpowers.

"We are not dating," I argued for the millionth time today. "He's a big-time international rock star, and I'm a small-town firefighter. It would never work."

She studied me for a long moment, and I fought the urge to fidget under her intense stare.

“What?” I asked finally.

“But you want it to work, don’t you?”

“Not answering that.”

Juno was quiet for a minute, but her smile may as well have been shouting through a megaphone.

“So,” she drawled. Soot streaked over the bridge of her nose and brows, making her look a bit like a racoon. “When do I get to meet this famous rock star you’re not dating?”

“Probably never.” I pulled my helmet off and ran a hand through my sweaty hair. “He’s leaving town tomorrow and I doubt I’ll see him again.”

“Hmm.”

I threw my arms up. “What does hmm mean?”

She shrugged. “You know the saying ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire’?”

“Did you forget that we’re firefighters? Smoke and fire are literally in our job descriptions.”

“And the flip side of that adage is ‘where there’s a will there’s a way’,” she said sagely.

I shook my head and playfully shoved her. Sisters , man .

“Go do your decon.”

“See you at Mom and Dad’s for dinner on Sunday,” she called over her shoulder as she walked away.

After clean-up, a quick decon shower and change of gear, my team and I drove back to the station in silence.

While I was grateful that we’d been able to get people out of the building, not everyone had made it out.

A firefighter from Danbury had been critically hurt by a falling beam and taken to a Lebanon hospital; two bodies had also been discovered.

It ate at me that I hadn’t gone back in, and I fell down the rabbit hole of second guessing my every move. Could I have handed off the child I had over my shoulder and gone back in? Should I have searched harder for someone else trapped or injured? Could I have saved those two people?

I knew I was running around in circles, but even a single injury was one too many. And when loss of life happened on our watch . . . The weight of it was hard to carry.

Back at the station, the mood was solemn as we went about the full decontamination routine of our gear and the trucks. When we were done, Captain Burgess called us into the dayroom.

“That was a tough call today,” he began. “You guys all did good out there, but I don’t want to see any of you taking risks again like Holliston did.”

I deserved to be called out for my actions, but I still went and opened my mouth to explain. Burgess held his hand up.

“I know your sister was in there,” he said. “But she’s a trained firefighter, too. We could’ve lost both of you in there today.”

“You’re right, Cap,” I said, my voice gruff as guilt and remorse roiled through me for my actions and those we’d lost. “I’m sorry I can’t guarantee it wouldn’t happen again though.”

He nodded at me like he understood, and I knew he did because he would’ve done the same thing for a loved one. We all would.

An image of Dallas smiling up at me played in my mind. If it had been him trapped behind the fire line, I would’ve done anything, risked everything, to save him.

“The department counsellor is on call if any of you need to talk,” Burgess said. He pressed his lips together, and with a brief nod, returned to his office.

“Anyone want something to eat?” Shepherd asked as he wandered into the kitchen.

That was his way of coping after a bad call, even though he never ate what he made.

Just the act of cooking helped him. Me though, I needed to burn off the agitating mix of exhaustion and adrenaline still pumping through my veins, but we still had a couple hours left on shift.

I couldn’t hit the trails or the rivers, but I could hit the treadmill in the weight room and run it off.

Walking the few blocks to my home on Willow Lane when my shift finally ended, I

pulled my phone out of my pocket.

Usually, when I had a bad call at work, I would text Sam, Ryan, and Haider.

We'd meet up at Lucy's or my house, and they would rally around to bring my spirits back up, reminding me that life went on and about how grateful I was to have them in my life.

Calling them was second nature. A thing I did on autopilot.

But not this time.

This time I pressed Dallas's number.

A brief thought crossed my mind that I should worry he was the first person I wanted to talk to.

He was a pleasantly unexpected but wholly temporary visitor in my life.

Someone I shouldn't be getting so attached to.

Who would be leaving soon—like the next day—and whose life was completely opposite mine.

But that didn't matter just then. I couldn't fight the pull, and if I was being honest with myself, I didn't want to.

All I knew was that I wanted to hear his voice. No. I needed to hear his voice.

"Hey, Conor," Dallas greeted in that melodic raspy voice of his, and warm light burst into my chest. "Are you doing okay?"

Weight sloughed from my shoulders, my body felt lighter, and the pressure constricting my lungs released. How did such a simple question make me feel instantly better? It wasn't so much the question that eased my melancholy, though, but the person who'd asked it.

“Hey,” I said, my throat suddenly tight. “I . . . Uh . . .”

“What’s wrong?” The pitch in Dalla’s voice rose a notch. “What do you need?”

Just hearing your voice . . .

I cleared my throat. “Want to meet up for dinner?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

I WOKE UP feeling content and pleasantly achy in all the right places. The only thing that would've made the morning better was if Conor was still in bed with me, but he'd had to leave far too early for work.

Conor had looked so devastated when he'd arrived at the inn the night before.

He'd told me about the apartment fire his station had been called to, that a couple of people had died and a firefighter seriously injured.

He'd tried to deflect how deeply he was hurting at first, but there was no hiding the dark clouds of pain that swirled in his normally dazzling eyes and dulled the tone of his voice.

I'd taken him by the hand and led him upstairs to my suite, and after giving him a safe space to let out all the emotion he'd been holding, he'd broken apart.

I'm not sure he'd ever fully let go of the anguish and guilt he carried from his job—a calling, he'd said.

Afterward, I'd taken him to bed and put his pieces back together with soft kisses and soothing touches and comforting words—and an orgasm that had his shout echoing off the ceiling.

He'd left in much better spirits this morning, even though there was a lingering note of sadness in the depths of his eyes and his last kiss had felt like goodbye.

It had been hard to let him go, especially since my stay in Caldwell Crossing was

over and I was heading back to New York City today.

A wave of melancholy threatened to drown me.

Instead of looking forward to getting home and returning to my regular life, I couldn't help feeling like I was leaving something important behind. Rather, some one .

I sighed and rose to get on with the day. But I would be back, and with any luck, Conor and I could pick up where we left off.

After a shower, the third one in the last twenty-four hours thanks to one Conor Holliston, I packed my bags and went downstairs to check out of the quaint Lakeside Inn.

"I hope you enjoyed your stay with us, Mr. Blade," Prescott Davies, the inn owner, said as I handed over my credit card. "We hope to see you again."

"Thank you, Mr. Davies," I replied. "I think you'll be seeing more of me soon."

"Excellent." He smiled as he handed my card back to me. "Looking forward to it."

I went into town before going to the airport because I'd promised Conor I would drop by the station before I left. There was one stop I wanted to make on my way: Harmony Chocolates for Conor's favorite truffles.

The sweet aroma of gourmet chocolates and candies wrapped around my senses when I entered the shop, and a feeling of comfort draped over me.

The brightly dressed, curly-haired man I'd met when Conor and I went on our charity date was behind the counter, leaning on his elbows on the glass top.

He was chatting animatedly with a tall man with dark hair standing in front of the counter, who I recognized as another of Conor's friends who I'd met in the Sugarworks Store.

Haider's eyes widened, and he grinned as I approached, and the other man, whose name I couldn't remember, turned to face me.

"Hi," I said with a smile. "Haider, is it?"

He bobbed his head, his curls bouncing, and his eyes sparkling with mirth. "I can't wait to tell Phillip the Dallas Blade was in my little chocolate shop."

"As long as that's because of the band and not the stage fire," I teased, earning a tinkling giggle.

"Or the outrageous bachelor auction bid," Haider joked with a wink.

Oh boy . My cheeks warmed. Even if I wasn't already famous, I'd sure made a name for myself in this little town.

"Hey, Dallas." The tall man extended his hand for a shake. "How's your voice? Did the maple candies help?"

I stared at him, speechless for a second.

Here was this man I'd just met—Sam, I remembered now—who didn't know me beyond the celebrity persona, and he was concerned about my voice.

Not if I could sign something or take a photo or get him tickets to a show.

But genuine concern for me as a person. So, of course, my throat constricted with

emotion, and I couldn't say anything at all.

Sam frowned. "Oh, no. They didn't help?"

That spurred me out of my temporary stupor. I shook my head and held up a hand.

"No! Er, yes." I took a breath and smiled. "Yes, thank you. Your candies worked like magic and my voice is back to normal. I never would have thought of melting a lollipop in my tea, but it's my new favorite thing."

Sam's chest puffed out. "I'm glad to hear it. Most people don't realize there are some healthy qualities to maple syrup. They're always fixated on the sugar content."

"Well, to be fair," Haider interjected. "The sugar content is high."

"Unlike anything in this shop," Sam retorted with a grin.

Haider rolled his eyes.

"Touché." He turned to me, standing straighter. "What can I get you, Dallas?"

"Two boxes of your famous truffles," I said, grinning at the way Haider preened at the famous comment.

One box was for me to take home, and one was to take to the fire station for Conor and his coworkers.

"Oh my god," Sam chuckled. "We're never going to hear the end of that."

"I hope we'll be seeing you around again," Haider said as he rang up my order and slid my purchases across the counter.

I winked at him and said, “You definitely will.”

Haider gasped, and the biggest smile I’d ever seen split his face as he placed a hand on his chest. He looked up at Sam and whispered what sounded like, “I knew it.”

Sam shook his head at Haider and waved at me.

“Don’t set any stages on fire,” Sam called out as I headed for the door.

“I’ll do my best,” I replied with a tip of my head.

Smiling as I exited the shop, I made my way toward the fire station on Maple Street, but stopped as I passed Waylon Music.

I wasn’t sure why I stopped. Maybe because I’d loved hanging out in small music stores growing up and a sense of nostalgia called to me.

There was so much energy and a feeling of belonging in them, being surrounded by all those instruments and kindred spirits.

I turned on my heel and entered the store.

The mingling scents of leather, polished wood, metal, and the musky notes of antiques transported me back to when I was the same age as Jaylin was now, picking out my first real guitar.

I used to sit in the back of the store for hours, strumming as many guitars as they’d let me.

I’d been there so often the manager had finally offered me my first after-school job.

A man a few inches shorter than me, with a round belly stretching his black polo shirt and silver shot through his brown hair, approached with a friendly smile and boss energy.

Behind him, a young man with shaggy brown hair, who was probably around the same age as me when I started that first job, stared at me with wide brown eyes and his mouth hanging open.

“You’re Dallas Blade,” the teen blurted, darting around the manager.

“I am, yes.” I smiled my polite stranger smile.

“I saw your show on Founders Day. It was so good, but too short. How’s your voice?”

I was stunned silent for the second time today.

This kid in an old Iron Maiden concert shirt that had seen better days was the first fan to ever ask me about my voice.

That said, I didn’t get to spend much time with fans outside of backstage meet-and-greets and organized events.

And bonus, he hadn’t brought up the fire.

“Thank you,” I answered, feeling genuinely touched by his concern. By all the people I’d met in this little town. “The show was a test, and it held up good.”

But his concern didn’t mean I wanted to share more with him. That my voice hadn’t been great for a few days after the show and had me questioning my future as a front man. The last thing the band needed was for rumors spreading online that I might not

be recovering as well as I'd hoped.

A phone rang, echoing throughout the store.

"Ian." The manager turned to his employee. "Can you get that please?"

Ian hesitated, biting his bottom lip, but when the manager cleared his throat, Ian darted across the floor to the counter and picked up the phone.

"I'm Waylon," he said, and held out his hand. "What can I help you with today?"

Ah , so the boss man was the owner. I shook his hand.

"Honestly, I just had the urge to wander in," I said. "I used to love hanging out in music stores when I was younger."

"I get that." He chuckled knowingly. "I opened this store the second I'd saved enough money to buy the building."

I whistled. "That's impressive."

His cheeks colored, and he shrugged. "Would you like to try out one of our instruments?"

"Yes. I would love that." A giddy feeling bubbled inside. How long had it been since I'd sat in a store and tinkered on the instruments for the sheer joy of it? Too long.

Waylon pulled a beautiful Gibson Hummingbird Original acoustic with a mahogany neck and rosewood fingerboard from the wall display of acoustic and electric guitars.

"Let's see what you've got," he said, handing it to me with a wink.

I put my chocolate boxes on a counter and sat on a stool across from the wall, then settled the guitar in my lap before strumming a few chords.

Once my fingers were limber, I launched into a medley of popular guitar riffs that had Waylon grinning ear-to-ear and Ian bopping his head along. They both clapped when I finished.

“She’s got a beautiful sound,” I said, reluctantly handing the Gibson back, but the last thing I needed was another guitar.

“Sure does,” Waylon agreed. “Thank you for that. It’s not often we get a big-name musician in here to play for us.”

“Like never,” Ian added.

“Well, you never know,” I said with a conspiratorial note in my voice. “I might be back.”

Ian’s entire face lit up and I swear he did a little hop and jump on the spot.

“Sweet!”

“Well, I should be on my way,” I said, shaking both Waylon and Ian’s hands. “Thank you for letting me play. It was great meeting you both.”

“The pleasure is all ours,” Waylon said, as he walked me back to the door.

I paused, noticing a help wanted flyer looking for vocal and guitar instructors taped to the back of the door. Waylon followed my line of sight.

“Any interest in teaching?” he asked. His tone hopeful.

“Nope,” I said. “The thought has never crossed my mind.”

But as I made my way to the fire station, the idea rattled around in my brain like a persistent earworm.

Yes, my voice was better, but how much longer would it hold up to the demands of touring?

What would I do if I couldn't sing anymore?

I didn't have a backup plan, but then, the band had done well, and I'd managed my royalties wisely.

Theoretically, I could retire today without a worry, but what would I do then?

I was still musing with my future when I reached the fire station. The bay doors were closed and when I went inside, the building was eerily quiet. Through the large glass windows between the bay and the rest of the station, I noticed that one of the fire trucks was gone.

The tappity-tap of toenails on the tile floor echoed down the hall and Eldi appeared. She lowered her head, her whole body wiggling with her tail, as she approached me with a happy dog face.

“Hey, pretty girl,” I said, accepting a sloppy dog kiss. Conor's voice drifted into my head with one word: ew . I laughed. “Conor doesn't know what he's missing, does he?”

Eldi let out a little woof in agreement.

“Hi, there,” a casually dressed woman with sleek black hair tied up into a ponytail

leaned out of an office off the front hall. “Can I help you?”

“I was hoping to see Lieutenant Holliston,” I said, standing up and brushing dog hair from my jeans. “Is he around?”

“Sorry, no.” She stepped fully out into the hall and toward me with an apologetic expression. “They got a call out about ten minutes ago. I don’t know when they’ll be back.”

“Oh.” My shoulders dropped along with my heart. We hadn’t made plans to keep in touch. I hadn’t told him about the offer I’d put on the house, either. We’d parted with a smile, a “See you later”, and a kiss that felt like goodbye.

“You’re Dallas Blade, right?”

I nodded. My throat was too tight to push words through.

“Can I have him call you when he’s back?”

“No, it’s okay,” I croaked out. “I have a plane to catch soon.”

She was quiet for a second. Her voice was soft when she asked, “Will you be back?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she said, her dark eyes warm and her smile kind. “Conor’s seemed more settled this week, and I have a feeling you might have had something to do with that.”

I smiled in return. I’d only just met— “What’s your name?”

“Donna.” She smiled up at me.

I liked her.

“Thank you, Donna.” I handed a box of truffles to her, and her eyes lit up. “These are for you all here.”

“How did you know these are our favorite?” She clutched them to her chest like she was Gollum and had just found her precious.

“Lucky guess.” I shrugged. “Save a few for the rest of them.”

She snorted. “Maybe.”

I left disappointed that I didn’t get to see Conor once more before leaving, but at the same time looking forward to coming back and seeing him again.

Several hours later, I returned home feeling like I’d left something behind, and I knew exactly what.

Conor had somehow taken a little piece of my heart and kept it with him.

For the first time in my life, I’d found someone not enthralled by my celebrity status, who wanted to be with me for me .

Was it fast? Hell, yes. But Kirk’s parents were living proof that when you know, you know.

His parents said they’d known before their first date was over that they would be together forever.

And Conor was the first person I wanted to call when I landed and let know I was home.

I stepped out of the town car that dropped me off at my condo in New York City and the grating noise, oppressive smells, and frenetic pace of the city assaulted me in a way I hadn't expected.

Before today, no matter where I'd traveled or for how long I was gone, coming home had always felt good, but now it all felt wrong somehow.

Empty. One week in Caldwell Crossing had felt more like home.

I tipped my head to the sky bracketed by towering concrete buildings and sighed.

"What am I doing here?" I asked the endless deep blue.

But the universe didn't answer.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

A TREE brANCH whacked me across the face, right over the bridge of my nose, and blinded me just long enough to miss the foot-high boulder in the middle of the trail.

The front tire of my bike hit the edge of the damn rock at an angle and launched me into the air.

The thought that at least I was going to land on dirt and not concrete flashed through my mind as I did a Superman over my handlebars, followed by a dirt slide on my stomach for a few feet.

After coming to an abrupt stop, I rolled over onto my back and waited for my brains to unscramble while spitting leaves and dirt out of my mouth.

Because that's the kind of day I'd been having. Scratch that. That's the kind of week I'd been having.

I took stock while staring up at the sky through the thick canopy of trees. I could wiggle all my toes and fingers, and nothing felt broken or sprained. Only shaken up. I took a deep breath and released it slowly.

What the hell am I doing out here like this ?

This marked the third time I'd wiped out since I'd hit the trails on my mountain bike to burn off some restless energy.

My mood had been heavy since Dallas left barely a week ago.

All the things I used to like didn't seem as satisfying anymore, and the world didn't seem as bright somehow.

I didn't know what to do with that. Or with me.

Hence, the deep dive into some of my favorite extreme sports.

But all I had to show for myself was a flashy new collection of bruises, scrapes, and cuts.

Work hadn't been helping me forget about Dallas—not when there was a photo of him with my crew pinned on the wall in our dayroom.

Hanging out with my best friends hadn't been helping me forget either—especially when their boyfriends joined us for Friday night beers.

Don't get me wrong. I was beyond happy that they'd all found their people, but I was feeling even more the odd man out every time I saw any of them together.

And how did I go from having a no-strings good time with Dallas while he was here to missing him with a physical ache in my body?

I'd hoped some adrenaline-inducing exercise would do the trick, but once again, no luck.

The only accomplishment there was risking breaking bones, which I couldn't afford to do.

The last thing I needed was to be laid up and unable to work for a month and a half because I couldn't get over some guy I'd known for all of a week.

Eventually, I heaved myself up off the ground with a grunt.

I might not have broken anything, but I was for sure going to have another bruise or two.

I brushed dirt off my clothes, and from the scrapes on my knees and elbows, checked my bike over for any damage—I couldn't afford to be replacing the fork, either—and climbed back on.

Riding at a more moderate pace, I followed the trail around the lake and popped out onto Harmony Drive.

The winding, tree-lined road was peaceful, free of cars, and there was no risk of hitting boulders and tree roots.

Sunlight reached through the treed ceiling of dancing leaves and dappled the pavement, and the breeze carried the familiar sweet aroma of maple and spring earth.

This was my home and would always be home.

Maybe Dallas couldn't be part of my life, but I had my best friends, my family, my coworkers, and a career I loved. What else could I really ask for?

For Dallas to be in my life .

I pushed the thought away as I rounded a corner and slammed on the brakes.

I squeezed my eyes shut, as if that would change the reality of what I'd just seen, but nothing was different when I opened them.

The weathered FOR SALE sign at the old Ferguson house that had been there so long

it had become part of the scenery had a bright red SOLD sticker slapped across it.

I sat there on my bike with my feet on the ground, staring at that sticker as though it had been written in a language I couldn't understand.

Who bought my house ?

And why now? It was bad enough I was feeling Dallas's absence, but now I was losing an unspoken dream that I'd harbored for a good decade.

I tipped my head to the sky. "Could a guy catch a break here?"

I'd been working on saving enough money to buy the abandoned Ferguson place since the first time I'd been there with the CCFD, when some kids had hurt themselves on broken glass.

I needed to save more than enough to buy it, but also to afford the massive renovations that it needed to bring it back to its original condition and into the modern age.

Ms. Ferguson had been alive when we were still teens in high school, but I knew for a fact if the house had been abandoned then, we would've been like the kids today who'd dared each other to go into the "haunted" house.

It wasn't haunted. Just holding the stories of lives gone by and awaiting the next story to care for.

But to the fire department, it was a nuisance property.

We were constantly being called out for kids trespassing and getting into trouble.

They'd even started a fire on the second level once.

Luckily, the fire had been contained in one room, and the damage hadn't been extensive.

I got off my bike, set the kickstand, hung my helmet over the handlebars, and walked to the sign. I put my hand on it, fingers tracing the sticker as if I needed to feel the edges of it to confirm it was truly real.

It was.

I looked past the derelict gate and down the drive, but couldn't see anything beyond the dense trees and overgrowth. Were the new owners in there already? Were they going to do the old girl justice, or tear her down and build a McMansion?

I shuddered at that devastating thought, and the sigh that gusted past my lips took a future I'd imagined with it.

I'd never told anyone, not even my best friends, how much I loved that house and wanted to buy it.

I don't know why. Maybe because it was more than just buying a house.

It was a symbol of a future I wasn't sure was for me.

That I could hope for and have. Maybe because even though they were my closest friends, and I knew they'd support me no matter what, I never went too deep into my feelings.

I was always there for them when they were going through something heavy and usually tried to bring the mood up and get them smiling again.

But feelings were uncomfortable when they were mine. That's what adrenaline sports were for.

But something about the house fascinated me from the first moment I'd stepped inside.

Not the house itself, but the way the maples and spruces wrapped around the property as if to protect it.

And the lake seemed to be a brighter aquamarine along the shore, as if the house shone a light on it rather than shadowed it.

Even falling apart, the house felt regal.

After a few more CCFD visits to the property, I'd started picturing myself living there with a partner who made me smile all day and shout in ecstasy all night.

We'd have a couple of dogs running around.

Big goofy dogs that would make us laugh and leave muddy paw prints on the floor.

I'd never seen kids in the picture, mostly because I felt like I was still too much of a kid myself, but I'd also never felt that calling to be a father.

Thanks to my older sisters starting their own families, I'd never had the added pressure of parents demanding grandkids.

But now, after meeting Dallas, the partner I imagined wore his face, laughed with his deep raspy voice, smiled at me with his shiver-inducing electric blue eyes. Thanks to Dallas, the dream expanded to include his teenage daughter, and not just two dogs, but a horse as well.

Except none of that was going to happen now.

Now, there was a hole in my life where Dallas had been so briefly but so fully. Now some faceless stranger had taken my dream house, taken my dream future.

A horn honked, and I damn near jumped out of my skin.

Heart racing a mile a minute and skin crawling from the sudden flood of adrenaline, I turned to see Adam Leeters, a retired railwayman who was always out cruising around in his old Studebaker, leaning out the window of said vehicle.

“Hey, Conor,” he called with his gruff voice. “Can’t believe they finally sold that place.”

“Yeah.” I glanced back at the SOLD sticker and my shoulders felt like I had a couple hundred pounds draped over them. “Wonder who bought it.”

“Sure we’ll find out soon enough,” Adam said with a sage nod. Then he pointed at me with a wrinkly finger. “Looks like you had a little trouble keeping the rubber side down.”

“Nothing broken.” I flashed a grin I wasn’t feeling. “It’s all good.”

“Well, take care of yourself,” he said, and with a wave, he drove off.

I took one more look down the overgrown driveway before climbing back on my bike. At least I’d never see the house again to be reminded of a lost dream, because once the new owners moved in, we wouldn’t be getting trespassing and nuisance calls there anymore.

I turned around and pedaled halfway around the lake to Sam’s family maple farm.

Maybe he could help me make sense of all these damn unwanted emotions twisting up my insides.

“What happened to you?” Sam said when I found him in the sugar shack, his brows raised and eyes wide. He fluttered his hand at me, as if he couldn’t decide where to point first.

“What?” I looked down at myself. I had dirt stains all down my front, scuffed knees, and something crusty on my chin. I shrugged. “A boulder jumped out of the ground and attacked me.”

“Of course it did.” Sam rolled his eyes. “Can’t trust those rocks to stay off the trails where they belong.”

When I didn’t smile back, Sam frowned. “What’s going on?”

“I think I’m in trouble,” I confessed, running a hand through my sweaty hair, dislodging dirt and a leaf.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

He stared at me for what felt like forever, his eyes searching for truths I wasn't sure I wanted to share, but knew I had to. Just as I was about to tell him, never mind, I was good— ha !—he held up a finger as he pulled his phone from his back pocket.

“I’m calling in the guys,” he said.

I bit back a wince, but I didn't argue. We all pitched in whenever one of us needed help. Today was a rare turn for me.

While waiting for Ryan and Haider to show up, I went into the bathroom to clean up a bit and startled at my reflection in the mirror.

Shit . What a sight .

No wonder Sam had looked shocked when I'd arrived.

There was a tear in the shoulder of my T-shirt that I hadn't noticed.

The dirt on my clothes was going to need a heavy-duty wash, and dried blood on my chin from my spontaneous dirt surfing.

There was no fixing my clothes now, but I rinsed the dirt and blood from my face, then ran wet fingers through my hair to tame it back into place.

Haider and Ryan were there with Sam when I returned, and the three of them wore matching expressions of concern and curiosity.

“No one’s dying,” I joked, but I didn’t get a single chuckle. Tough crowd.

“Come on,” Sam said, tipping his chin over his shoulder. “Let’s walk.”

We followed the narrow trail from Sam’s farm to the covered bridge, not speaking until we crossed the bridge and turned onto Parker Trail, where the path opened wide enough for us to walk side-by-side—Sam on my right, Haider on my left, and Ryan beside him.

“Okay,” Sam said, sliding a glance at me. “Spill.”

“Ugh.” I dragged my hands down my face and groaned. “I hate feelings.”

“Oh my God,” Haider gasped, stopping suddenly. With glee in his voice, he proclaimed, “You fell in love with the rock star.”

“What? No!” I knee-jerked in response.

Sam and Ryan had also stopped, but I walked a few steps ahead of them before giving in and turning.

They all stood there staring at me—Sam with disbelief written across his face, Ryan frozen in shock, and Haider with glowing pride, because everything about Haider glowed. That was one of the things I loved most about him. That and his truffles.

I let my head fall back and gazed up at the sky as if it held all the answers for me.

“Yeah, okay.” I looked back at them and flapped my arms. “Maybe I fell in great like with Dallas. I thought it would be nothing more than a fun week with him, but . . .”

“But it became more than fun,” Ryan finished for me.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “And now he’s gone, and I doubt I’ll ever see him again.”

“Oh, my little Jedi.” Haider snuggled up close to me and put an arm around my waist because he couldn’t comfortably reach my shoulders. “You’ll always have us.”

“I know, but I’m not sleeping with any of you jokers.” That earned me the chuckles I’d been looking for earlier. “Besides, you guys are all shackled up now.”

“Maybe,” Sam agreed. “But that doesn’t change the fact that we’re always going to be here for you no matter what”

“Yeah, no matter what,” Haider and Ryan said in unison.

“Is that why you were so grumpy at Lucy’s last Friday?” Ryan asked.

I nodded and took a deep breath.

“But there’s more,” I said. Might as well tell them everything, since I didn’t plan on talking about this stuff again. “You know the old Ferguson house on Harmony Drive?”

“The haunted house that should’ve been torn down years ago?” Haider said.

Ryan and Sam snorted, and in unison said, “It’s not haunted.”

“That’s the one, but it’s not haunted,” I echoed. Haider raised an eyebrow but didn’t argue. “Somebody bought it.”

“No way,” Haider squealed. “Who would buy that. It’s a dump. And haunted.”

“It’s a tear down,” Sam agreed with a nod.

“Depends on what condition the bones are in,” Ryan said thoughtfully, his brown eyes going distant for a second, as they often did when he was planning woodworking projects in his head.

Haider waved at Ryan. “See? Haunted!”

“Bones means foundation,” Ryan countered.

I glared at them while they disparaged my dream home until they finally noticed that I wasn’t adding to the discussion. One by one, they raised their eyebrows, and their jaws dropped as comprehension struck.

I held up a hand, palm out.

“I didn’t buy it, but yeah,” I said, my voice tight. “I was going to buy it. One day.”

Silence greeted that statement for a suspended moment, and then the responses came fast and furious.

“What?!”

“No way!”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“But it’s haunted.”

That last coming from Haider. Being the most stubborn one of the four of us, he’d always believed the house was haunted and nothing was going to steer him from that.

I shrugged and looked away. My thoughts were racing away from me again.

“I’m sorry, Conor,” Sam said, and laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I didn’t know.”

“None of us did,” Haider said with a pout in his voice, like I’d personally offended him.

“You’ve been always so freewheeling and adventurous,” Sam said as we started walking again. For whatever reason, it was easier to talk about all this when I was moving. “We kind of figured you’d be the last of us to want to get all domestic with owning a home and starting a family.”

“Who said anything about a family?” I grumbled. “I was thinking more along the lines of a partner and a couple of dogs.”

“That still makes a family,” Ryan said. “And if Dallas is the one you’re thinking of, he has a daughter.”

I snorted. “That’s getting way ahead of the curve.”

Even though that’s where my thoughts had gone when I’d stood on the side of the road in front of that SOLD sign.

“But you wanted that house,” Sam said softly. “And now, maybe, the instant family Dallas would bring.”

I sighed. It was ridiculous to be thinking about anything along those lines, but I had to admit the idea felt good.

“Yeah,” I breathed.

Haider’s eyes glistened with affection as he looked up at me. “Our Jedi growing up.”

“Shut up.” I bumped my shoulder into him, chuckling when I knocked him off balance for a couple of steps.

“Brute,” he teased, smiling.

“Right. Okay.” Sam stopped and propped his hands on his hips. “First thing you’re going to do is find out who bought the house. Then you’re going to make them an offer and buy it from them.”

“I don’t have enough money yet,” I admitted, my cheeks heating.

The guys looked at each other, and a silent discussion passed between them.

“Oh, no.” I raised my hand and shook my head. “You guys are not loaning me anything.”

“Why not?” they asked in unison.

“We can help, and we want to,” Sam said, and Ryan and Haider nodded their heads in agreement.

“And don’t forget,” Haider added with a grin. “I have a rich boyfriend now.”

“I appreciate that you guys want to help. I really do. But there’s no point now.

” I shrugged and started walking back toward the bridge.

“No one is going to sell a house they just bought. And more than likely, the new owners are flippers. Once they get the house renovated, they’ll put it back on the market for substantially more. ”

The guys fell into step beside me.

“He has a point,” Sam conceded, and Haider hummed in agreement.

“Speaking of rich boyfriends . . .” Ryan piped up after a few minutes where the only sounds were the crunch of gravel under our feet and the birds chirping in the trees. “Have you heard from Dallas?”

“He is not my boyfriend.” I slanted a glare at Ryan. “And yes, we’ve exchanged a couple of texts.”

Which were awkward. Dallas had texted the day he’d left, letting me know he was back in New York City and that he’d enjoyed spending time with me.

It was ridiculous how my heart had jumped in my chest with excitement when I’d seen his name on the screen, but after a few exchanges, I hadn’t known what to say.

Didn’t know how to tell him what I was feeling, and over text was probably not the best way even if I could.

The last message had been from Dallas, saying he hoped we could see each other again soon. Pick up where we’d left off. If only . I’d texted back that I’d like the same, but that had been lip service. An easy out because I knew the chances of more happening for us were slim to none.

“And?” Ryan prompted when I hadn’t replied.

“And nothing,” I said with a flap of my hand. “I’m here and he’s there.”

“But you want there to be something?” Haider asked, his voice soft and understanding.

“There’s no point.” I sighed. “His life is completely different from mine. How could it ever work?”

“You could travel with him,” Sam offered, but there was a hollow note in his voice. He didn’t want me to leave as much I didn’t want to, but he’d support me if I did. They all would.

“I love you guys. You know that right?” Three heads bobbed. “But I’m not giving up my job and I’m not leaving Caldwell Crossing. Not for any man. Besides,” I added with a grin. “You three would be lost without me.”

They all snorted and guffawed at that, but we’d all be lost without each other.

“Well, then. Dallas will just have to move here,” Haider said, like it was the most obvious answer in the world.

“If only it could be that easy,” I muttered.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“YOUR THROAT HAS healed nicely,” Dr. Okamoto said as he leaned back in his chair. “But the damage to your vocal cords was extensive so you’ll have to make some permanent lifestyle changes.”

“Does that—” Ice slid into my veins, and I felt the blood drain from my face. “Does that mean I won’t be able to sing again?”

“Yes. I mean, no,” he amended quickly, holding up a hand. “You can still sing, but I can’t guarantee your voice will hold up to the demands of touring.”

“What kind of rock band doesn’t tour?” I complained even as relief dulled the edge of panic that I could lose my voice. I mean, the chances were slim. Tons of singers had had vocal surgery and continued their careers with great success, so there was no reason to think I’d be any different.

Except Julie Andrews was never able to sing again , my ever so thoughtful inner voice countered.

Dr. Okamoto shrugged. “You could play pre-recorded songs.”

My mouth dropped open, and I stared at him in disbelief. Did he just suggest . . . ?

“Please don’t tell me you mean I should lip sync to my own music?”

“Sure, why not? A lot of artists do that.” He was far too nonchalant in suggesting I deceive my fans with a career-ending move like that.

“Not this one.” I snorted. “Not in a million years. It’s the real deal or it’s no deal.”

“Unfortunately, then,” he said, “I’ll see you back here for another surgery. But you should be aware that any surgery comes with risks, and each subsequent procedure may be less effective.”

I glared at him from my raised viewpoint where I sat on the bed in his small exam office.

“And if I continue taking voice therapy, diligently do my vocal exercises, and stop touring, I can keep singing?”

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “And avoid irritating your vocal cords with spicy foods, alcohol, and smoking and inhaling other pollutants.”

Other pollutants immediately sent my mind back to Caldwell Crossing and the stage fire—where I’d met Conor. I could still smell the slightly bitter odor of smoke on his silky, tanned skin, and the sweet maple-vanilla aroma in the air as we’d walked the trail at the syrup farm.

After wrapping up and scheduling another follow up appointment, I left Okamoto’s office and called a band meeting at my condo as I climbed into a waiting town car.

None of them were going to be happy with this news, but I really didn’t want to go through another surgery and months of recovery, so something would have to give.

Unfortunately, that something was me.

Part of me wanted to say screw it and keep going. If I followed all the prevention and care protocols, I should be fine. But what if everything wasn’t fine? What if I permanently destroyed my voice and could never sing again at all?

No, the risk of never singing again wasn't worth it.

Towering buildings and bustling sidewalks of a city that never stopped passed by my window in an abstract slideshow as I replayed my career to this point.

I was thirty-five years old now and had spent the last seventeen years living my dream and rolling through life with little in the way of responsibility.

Always on the move, always another album to record, always another tour, another hotel, faces upon faces of people whose names I'd never had time to learn.

I'd never owned a home of my own. My Greenwich Village condo was a lease.

The house in Lake Placid where I'd recovered from my last surgery was a short-term rental.

The only permanence in my life had been music and my best friend, Kirk.

Don't get me wrong. I loved what I did, and I knew how fortunate I was to make a career out of music.

Every single show, from the early days when I was a teen, and we'd played in cramped garages, to the massive stadiums we'd played all over the world for the last decade, had been pure joy.

I couldn't have asked for anything better.

But life had a way of throwing wrenches into the spokes, forcing you to recalibrate.

Like suddenly becoming a single parent to a teenage daughter.

I had no idea how to be a father when Jaylin entered my life—didn't know if I even could—but now, only a year later, I couldn't imagine my world without her in it.

My surgery recovery had given me a lot of time to take stock of the direction of my future too, and changes were already happening.

Only I hadn't fully accepted them until now.

But while music and the band had been my number one priority for more than a decade, Jaylin had shot up to take that number top spot from the word go.

Sure, I was a world-famous musician, but I was also a father.

Watching the light in Jaylin's eyes return as she learned to deal with the grief of her mother's passing and her new life with me, to see her bloom into the vibrant young girl she was, had been a thing of beauty.

All I wanted was the best for her. No more touring meant I could be a better dad.

I could always be there for her and give her the stability and love she needed to grow into a strong, confident adult.

Not for the first time this past year, I wondered if my parents disowning me was part of the reason I'd so eagerly embraced my newfound fatherhood after the initial shock.

And then there was a certain firefighter I couldn't stop thinking about . . .

Yes, another huge life change was on the horizon.

Kirk was already standing at the front entrance of my building when we pulled up to the curb, dragging me from my thoughts.

My bassist Luna, and drummer Arthur, were with him.

They all waved when I stepped out of the vehicle with various expressions of curiosity and expectation on their faces.

A note of anxiety plucked at my nerves. They were expecting an update on my voice and plans for the next album and tour.

Not that I was stepping down and there would never be another tour.

The town car pulled back into traffic and a yellow cab snaked into its empty spot, earning a chorus of honks and one shouted “asshole”.

I shook my head as the taxi door opened, and Brian stepped out with a pinched look on his face.

While I was concerned about how Kirk, Luna, and Arthur would take the news and what they’d do going forward, especially Kirk, Brian hadn’t been with us long enough to rate.

That and I’d had my reservations about him from the start.

He wasn’t ever going to be long term, even if the band continued.

“Hey, everyone,” I greeted while my nerves jangled. “Come on in.”

Once we settled into my apartment, I got right to it.

“What does that mean for the band then?” Kirk asked twenty minutes later as he paced the length of my living room, his leather jacket creaking as he moved. He’d been the most visibly upset when I relayed what was happening and my thoughts for

the future. “Are we over? Is this it?”

“As far as the band goes, yes,” I said, my heart hurting for my best friend, but breaking up the band would never change the fact he was, and would always be, like a brother to me.

“I’m sorry. I wish it didn’t have to be this way, but my voice won’t hold up.

If you three want to stay together and form a new band, or join other bands, then I’m one hundred percent behind you and will do whatever I can to help, if you want, but I think it’s best we call the Dallas Blade Band quits. ”

That hurt to say, but there was a certain unexpected freedom in those words. A heavy sadness washed through me at ending this soundtrack of my life, but the opening notes of a new song, a fresh soundtrack, countered that weight with the promise of something bigger.

Brian sat in a club chair glaring at me as if I’d personally offended him, and on the couch, Luna looked at me with watery eyes while Arthur stared at the floor.

He’d always been so quiet. I wished I knew what was going on in his head, but I knew he’d land on his feet.

He was an incredible drummer, and any band would be lucky to have him. To have all of them.

Luna rose and approached where I stood by a bay of floor to ceiling windows that revealed a snippet of the New York City skyline. Without a word, she wrapped her arms around me, shocking me immobile for a second. She wasn’t the touchy-feely kind. Ever. I held her tight.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, and she shook her head.

“These years with your band have been some of the best.” Luna stepped back and looked up at me with a sad smile. “But my life is on the road. There’s a reason I stopped as a studio session bassist.”

I nodded. “I get it Luna, I really do.”

Arthur walked over and shook my hand. “It’s not your fault. It’s not like you can go to the store and buy new cords.”

“True,” I said through a throat constricting with emotion. Goodbyes sucked.

“Well. I guess that’s that then,” Brian said as he stood, brushing his hands on his slacks as if flicking away dirt. “Good luck in your future endeavors.”

Without another word or even a handshake, he turned and left my apartment.

All three now former bandmates looked at me with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah,” Kirk said with a light huff. “He was never going to be more than temporary.”

Arthur and Luna left shortly after, with shiny eyes, best wishes, and promises to keep in touch, but Kirk hung back with a hangdog expression.

“So, what’s next then?” Kirk asked, his voice sounding weary. He pushed his long hair back from his face. I hated seeing him look so down, but there wasn’t much I could do. “Are you done with music completely?”

“No way. Music is in my blood,” I said with conviction, and dropped into a club chair. “I’ll never not have music in my life, but I need to revise how that’s going to

look now. Maybe I'll write for others or produce. Or teach."

Kirk lifted his eyebrows as he sat back down on the couch across from me. "Teach?"

"Sure, why not?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

The more I thought about teaching, the more the idea appealed. I certainly had more than enough lived experience for the job.

“Just never thought about that before,” Kirk trailed off with a shrug.

“And . . . I might’ve bought a house.”

“What do you mean, you might’ve bought a house?” Kirk leaned forward. His dark hair fell back into his eyes, and he tucked it behind his ear. “Where?”

I couldn’t help the grin that tugged at my lips. “I put in an offer on a house I saw when I was staying in Caldwell Crossing.”

“Wow.” Kirk sat back, staring at me like I was some new and strange attraction to marvel over.

Then he chuckled, a low, hearty sound, and shook his head.

“You just lit up like a Christmas tree. Like when we had our first sold out concert, and when we got our first platinum album. When you met Jaylin for the first time.”

“Everything about it feels right,” I said, and it did. I’d never felt so certain of anything before now.

Kirk sat quiet in thought for a moment, then he raised his eyebrows and grimaced.

“But that town was so small,” he said in a hushed voice laced with disbelief. “And

quiet.”

Unexpected laughter burst from my lungs at the look of horror on his face.

“Spend a week there and you’ll fall in love with it,” I said when I could catch my breath.

“There’s a soul to the town that breathes life and joy.

The people are quirky and endearing and feel like they’ve always been friends.

They seem to know me more as the guy who set the stage on fire on Founders Day, or the guy who won the fire lieutenant in the bachelor auction for an outrageous amount of money and not as the lead singer for the Dallas Blade Band.

” I chuffed under my breath. I had a feeling they would never let me live either of those things down.

“And it will be the perfect place for Jaylin to grow up.”

He stared at me skeptically, then his eyes softened, and the corners of his mouth curled up.

“And might a certain firefighter have something to do with it, too?”

My phone rang, and I held up my finger as I dug it out of my back pocket to avoid answering. Nolan Kaslo’s name flashed on the screen, the realtor from Caldwell Crossing.

“Hold that thought.” I stood up, and a bubble of elation rose in my chest. “I have to take this. Nolan,” I said by way of greeting as I made my way to the kitchen. “What’s

the news?”

“Congratulations, Dallas,” Nolan said brightly. “You are now the official proud owner of a fully dilapidated home on Harmony Lake.”

There was humor in his voice, prompting laughter from me.

“ Yes .” I pumped my fist, my body buzzing like a busy beehive. “This is the best news I’ve had all week.”

Holy crap . I was a homeowner. Sure, the house needed a massive amount of work, but it was going to be amazing when it was finished.

Nolan chuckled before getting down to business. “You’ll need to come to town and sign the final paperwork with the lawyer, then pick up your keys. When do you think you can get here?”

My mind whirled with excitement. I wanted to shout now , but it was late Wednesday already, and I wanted to take Jaylin with me. “This weekend.”

“Good, good,” Nolan said. A horn honked in the background, and I pictured Conor in his station wear, walking down the sidewalk to Harmony Chocolates for his truffles fix. “Be here before the lawyer’s office closes on Friday to get the paperwork done.”

“Will do,” I said, my pulse racing. “I’ll call you back with my schedule.”

Holy . Shit .

I felt weightless as I walked back into the living room, like I was floating on air, and my cheeks were aching from a massive smile I couldn’t contain.

Kirk raised an eyebrow, a grin tugging at his lips. “Good news, I take it?”

I nodded so fast I probably looked like a bobblehead doll. “I have officially bought a house.”

“Congratulations, Dall,” he said, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

I didn’t know what to say, so I pulled him into a hug. Our lives were about to change in a big way, and while I was looking forward to mine, I knew Kirk was unprepared for the changes to his and felt like he’d been cut adrift.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled into his shoulder.

“Hey, no.” He extracted himself from my embrace and took a step back, his watery gaze beseeching and his smile shaky. “Don’t you dare apologize for going after what you want and what’s right for you.”

“You know this isn’t going to change our relationship, right?” I said, my voice thick.

“Please .” He rolled his eyes. “Like you’re ever going to get rid of me.”

We both laughed and while not with our usual heartiness on his part, some of the weight of the moment slipped from my shoulders.

“Anyway.” Kirk shrugged, his jacket squeaking from the movement. “I knew this was coming the day you got that phone call about Jaylin.”

“I guess,” I said.

“Bro.” Kirk put his hand on my shoulder and gave a little shake. “We’re good. We’ll always be good.”

Kirk left a few minutes later, after scheduling a time to sit down with management and the label to officially dissolve the band.

The second the door closed behind him, I grabbed my phone.

My insides felt like they were vibrating, and adrenaline pulsed through my veins.

I couldn't wait a second longer to share the news with Jaylin and Conor.

Whoa . Conor ?

I dropped onto the couch with the phone clutched in my hand and a fluttery feeling in my belly.

Absolutely, I wanted to see Conor again when I went back to Caldwell Crossing, see where we might go, but that he was at the top of my share-all-the-good-news-with-first person, right there beside Jaylin, threw me for a loop.

Was it even possible to grow that attached to someone in so short a time?

Why was I even asking that question when I had a real-life example in Kirk's parents who'd done just that?

The moment I'd seen Conor inspecting the pyro set at our Founders Day show, I'd been drawn to him.

Even after he'd ripped into me for setting the stage on fire, he'd been hot.

As hot as the flames that had licked up the backdrop curtain.

Then he'd shown me his caring side, his funny side .

. . his loving side. I wanted to know every side of Conor Holliston.

I thumbed through my contact list to Conor's name and tapped on it. The call connected and my anticipation rose with every ring—until I got voicemail instead of him and the bubble popped.

I disconnected before leaving a message, swapping from my phone to the text app.

Me: I'll be in town for May long weekend. Want to meet up ?

I held my breath, staring at my screen for what felt like hours, waiting for those three little bouncing dots to show because Conor was writing a reply, but they never appeared.

"It's okay," I told myself.

I stood and started pacing. He was at work, maybe out on an incident, and couldn't answer yet. I didn't even know if he could have his phone with him while on the job. Pretty sure texting while firefighting was cause for dismissal.

A glance at the clock told me it was too early to call Jaylin—she was still in school—so I distracted myself by starting the ball rolling to end the Dallas Blade Band.

It wasn't until after nine when my phone rang, and Conor's name flashed on the screen, that I realized he'd never texted me back.

"Hey, Conor," I answered before my phone could ring a second time, not caring how eager that made me look.

"Hey, Dallas," he replied, setting off a fluttering kaleidoscope of butterflies in my

stomach. “I’m happy you called.”

Shit, I’d missed the sound of his voice. I knew then and there that I needed him in my life, and I was going to do everything I could to make that happen. So long as he felt the same.

“You sound tired,” I said, hoping he hadn’t been out on a call like the apartment fire when I’d been in town, where people had died and a firefighter injured.

“Long day at the office,” he joked, though even his humor carried a weariness to it. “We had to rescue a horse stuck in a tree.”

“Uhm . . . What?”

How did that even make sense?

He chuckled, deep and throaty, and the sound curled around me like a warm blanket. The only thing that would have made it better was if he were here in person and his muscular arms were the blanket wrapped around me.

“Did you know horses think they’re only as big as their heads?” he said and grunted.

Rustling sounds in the background echoed down the line and I pictured him at home, stretching out on a couch. Or maybe he’d stripped down to nothing and had crawled into bed. He’d be sitting up and leaning against the headboard, his chest bare and glowing like gold in the low lamplight.

“I didn’t know that,” I said, distracted by the mental images of a naked Conor in bed playing in my mind.

“Yeah. Couldn’t tell you if that’s true or not, but anyway,” Conor began, his voice

gaining steam as he spoke. “We show up to find this massive horse. Like a Clydesdale or something. One of those big draft horses that pull the Budweiser beer wagons, you know?”

“Yep, a Clydesdale.”

“Yeah.” I could hear the smile in Conor’s voice as he continued.

“He was apparently scratching his neck on a tree trunk, only the trunk he’d found was growing off in two directions like a Y.

Turns out he was smart enough to figure out he could scratch both sides at the same time if he lowered his head, but not smart enough to realize he could get stuck. ”

“So, he got stuck,” I said with a snicker, knowing where this was going.

“Stuck real good,” Conor said, his voice so earnest I could picture the serious expression on his face and the glint in his eyes as he retold the tale.

“How did you get him out?” I asked, fully invested in the story now.

“Finally had to cut one of the branches off,” Conor said like it was no big deal.

“That damn horse stood there calm as could be while we took a chainsaw to the tree. Then stepped back and right onto Jackson’s foot.

Rookie’s got a bruise as black as night over half his foot now.

So, while Jackson is hopping around howling like a wounded cat, this big ole horse walks right back up to that tree and starts scratching his neck again. ”

Conor started laughing. The sound unguarded and free and infectious. I couldn't help but join in with a full belly laugh that might very well have been the freest sound to come from my lungs in a long while.

"No," I gasped while catching my breath as our laughter died down.

"True story," he said with conviction.

"Your job is full of adventure," I marveled.

"It's never the same twice," he said and yawned so loud that I once again followed his lead with my own jaw-cracking yawn.

"I should let you get some sleep then," I said reluctantly.

"Wait," he said, suddenly sounding more awake. "What did you call for?"

"Oh. I, uh . . . Wanted to let you know that I'll be coming to town this weekend and I was hoping we could get together." I quickly added, "I'll have Jaylin with me, too."

There was a long pause, and I swear my heart stopped. Had I been imagining that he might feel the same as me? Or was it because I'd mentioned my daughter?

"I would love that," he said, his honeyed voice low and soft.

I exhaled long and slow.

"Great," I said, as my heart resumed its normal rhythm. "We're staying at the Lakeside Inn again. I'll text you when we get in."

"See you, Dallas," Conor said.

“See you, Conor.”

I dropped back in my chair with a satisfied sigh, and the conviction that I was on the right path.

Friday couldn't come fast enough.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“I’M PRETTY SURE it’s only been ten seconds since the last time you checked your watch,” Sam said, motioning toward said watch with his beer bottle.

We were sitting at our usual table in the back of Lucy’s Pub for our regular Friday night beers.

Just my besties and me tonight. Adam was under deadline working on a new book, Ben was still at the library, and Phillip was back in Germany for a couple of weeks.

But I was having a hell of a time sitting still.

My phone felt like the business end of a branding iron in my back jeans pocket, drawing near all my attention while I anxiously waited for it to vibrate with an incoming text.

“Yeah.” Haider rocked forward on his chair, the sheen of his pink collared shirt catching the light like a beacon. “What’s going on?”

I glanced around the table and shrugged. “Nothing?”

Ugh . I’d been going for nonchalant, but that pesky inflection ruined my whole playing it cool vibe. I mentally crossed my fingers, hoping they didn’t pick up on that.

Three laser-focused gazes locked on me.

Nope . They caught it.

“Was that a question?” Ryan asked after a few long and uncomfortable seconds. Then, grinning, he turned to Sam and Haider for confirmation.

Haider nodded, his curls bouncing. “Sounded like a question to me.”

“Yep,” Sam said, popping the p. “That was definitely a question.”

“You guys are assholes,” I sniped without heat. I flopped back in my chair with a huff and crossed my arms. “I don’t know how we’re still friends.”

“Because you love us.” Sam dug a peanut out of the nut bowl in the middle of the table and chucked it at me. It bounced off my biceps and fell to the floor. “Now spill.”

I blew out a resigned sigh. They weren’t about to let me off the hook.

“He’s back,” I said, not needing to clarify who I meant after my mini breakdown the other day.

They stared at me in silence for all of two seconds, and the ambient noise of the pub—conversation, laughter, clinking glass, fans cheering the baseball game on the TV—seemed deafening in those brief seconds.

“Then what are you doing here?” Haider gasped, breaking the silent standoff.

“It’s Friday,” I said, stating the obvious. We always met up on Friday, but also, Dallas hadn’t texted yet and there was no way I could wait at home by myself without vibrating out of my skin.

Sam and Ryan snorted while Haider stared at me in disbelief. “Every seventh day is Friday.”

“You know what I mean.” I flicked my beer coaster at him. He dodged it neatly and preened, puffing his chest out.

My jeans pocket buzzed, and I damn near spilled my drink in my rush to retrieve my phone. Ignoring the guys, I opened the text app to see a message from Dallas, and my heart did a funny little hop, skip, and jump.

Dallas: We’re at the inn, if you’d still like to come over .

Pfft. In what world wouldn’t I?

Dallas: We’re in the cottage suite .

I downed the last two gulps of my virgin tequila sunrise—I hadn’t wanted to drink anything alcoholic if I was going to be meeting Dallas’s daughter—and plunked my empty glass back on the table with a thud.

“Gotta go, guys.” I threw some bills on the table to cover my drink and launched from my chair so fast it threatened to topple.

Amusement flashed in Sam’s eyes. Ryan was grinning, and Haider snickered.

“We want to hear all the juicy details later,” Haider called out as I headed for the exit.

“I don’t kiss and tell,” I shouted over my shoulder.

Hearty laughter and Haider’s “Since when?” followed me out the door.

We’d always told each other about our exploits—most of the time—but Dallas wasn’t an exploit.

Being with him felt different. What we did, the time we spent together, had more meaning somehow—was precious—and I didn't want to share that with anyone. Not even my best friends.

I made it to the Lakeside Inn as fast as the speed limit allowed and sat in my truck to collect myself for a minute while my heart raced and my pulse pounded like I'd run full tilt up the side of a mountain. I didn't want to come across like one of his overexuberant fans.

Maybe thirty seconds later, because I couldn't wait any longer, I climbed out of my truck, adjusted my shirt, and inhaled a deep breath before strolling across the parking lot and inside. I paused at the door to the cottage suite to wipe my clammy palms on my jeans-clad thighs, then knocked.

Did my knock sound shaky, or is that just me ?

The door opened and there he was. More gorgeous than I remembered with his long, blond-dipped hair and electric blue eyes and that breath-catching smile of his lighting up his handsome face.

My heart literally swelled in my chest, and the dark cloud that had settled over me after he'd left cleared.

Somehow, standing two feet from him, simply being in his presence, the world seemed to right itself.

"You're here," Dallas said, and I swear he purred. His voice was a low rasp and his eyes overbright.

"Is that him?" An exuberant female voice called from deeper within the suite, and a second later, a pink-streaked blonde-haired head poked in between the door frame

and Dallas's shoulder.

I grinned when I saw the young girl who could only be Dallas's daughter.

"So . . . You're Conor," she said with a blinding smile and mischievous blue eyes as electric as her dad's. "The hot firefighter."

Ohh , she was a little troublemaker, this one. I liked her already.

"Jay . . ." Dallas groaned, flashing me an apologetic look as a light blush bloomed into his cheeks.

He was adorable. She was adorable. And I might've fallen a little in love just then.

"The one and only," I reached my hand out to shake hers, but she tugged me forward and gave me a hug. "And you must be Jaylin."

She let me go and grinned. "The one and only."

"Oh my god. I think introducing you two is a mistake," Dallas teased as he opened the door wider and waved me inside.

The three of us stood there for an extended beat, grinning while looking at each other.

All I wanted to do was pull Dallas into my arms, press him up against the wall, and kiss him breathless, but I didn't think that was proper in front of his teenage daughter.

Not when she was staring at us with her gaze bouncing back-and-forth between me and her dad, and her smile growing wider.

Until Jaylin snorted and broke the moment.

Dallas seemed to jerk out of his daze with a chuckle. "I'm glad you're here."

"Wouldn't be anywhere else," I said honestly.

We fell into another silent lull of awe that Jaylin broke yet again.

"So," she dragged out, her gaze settling on Dallas, and the corners of her peach-pink lips curled into a grin. "I'm hungry."

"You two haven't eaten yet?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. I hadn't had dinner either, just nibbled on some snacks at the pub, but that was only because I'd been too amped up to eat while waiting for Dallas to arrive.

"No." Dallas shook his head. "We had some pastries from Mabel's Bistro when we got into town earlier, but nothing since lunch."

I bit back a frown at learning they'd been down the road from Lucy's Pub while I was there and wondered why he hadn't texted me then.

"Well then," I beamed at Jaylin, quashing my wounded ego. "Let's get you fed."

Dinner was a whole lot more relaxing than I'd thought it would be.

Jaylin was charming and regaled me with stories of her school friends, what it was like having a famous rock star for a dad, and the horse she rode in upstate New York, where she stayed when Dallas toured.

She didn't mention her mom, and I didn't want to pry.

Loss was hard. I'd sure as hell seen a lot on the job, felt some of it personally, too, and everyone dealt with it in their own ways.

When Jaylin yawned, Dallas chuckled and said, “Well, I guess it’s time to get this one to bed.”

Jaylin snorted. “It’s not even that late.”

I glanced at my watch, shocked to see that it was close to ten in the evening. How had the time flown by that fast?

“It is for growing young girls,” Dallas said, and Jaylin rolled her eyes at him.

We walked together to the lobby, the three of us side by side while my stomach roiled with a tendril of dread that this was it. I didn’t want to say goodnight. I didn’t want to go home. Didn’t want to leave Dallas.

We stopped, and that charged silence wrapped around us once again.

“I’m not going to crash out if you two kiss or something,” Jaylin giggled.

With a roll of his eyes at his daughter, Dallas stepped forward and pulled me into his arms. I held him tight in my embrace, reveling at the feel of his body pressed against mine, and I swear my entire being sighed in relief from his touch.

“Give us twenty minutes and come up,” he whispered into my ear. His warm breath sent a shiver down my spine.

I gripped him tighter, nodded once, and stepped back.

“It was nice to meet you, Jaylin,” I said, receiving another bear-like hug from her.

“You too,” she said and waved while Dallas watched with a soft smile. “See you around.”

“See you, Jaylin,” I replied, my voice sounding subdued to my ears.

She tucked her arm into the crook of Dallas’s elbow, then she and Dallas crossed the lobby and disappeared down the hall.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and rocked on my heels. Waiting was hard. Even though he’d just left, waiting to see Dallas again was even harder. I puffed out a breath of pent-up air and sat in one of the comfortable leather chairs in the lobby.

After the longest twenty minutes of my entire life, I rushed back to the cottage suite like I was being chased by the hounds of hell. Instead of knocking when I reached his door, I pulled my phone from my back pocket and sent Dallas a quick text, letting him know I was there.

A second later, the door opened and once again, my stomach swooped at the sight of Dallas standing there. With a heart-melting smile and fire in his eyes, Dallas silently took my hand and led me through the suite and into his bedroom.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“What about Jaylin?” I asked in a hush.

“She sleeps like a log,” he replied, quietly closing the door behind him. “But don’t be screaming loud enough to shake the foundations when I rock your world.”

A thrill rushed through me at those words. “I seem to remember you being the excessively vocal person.”

With a soft grin, he stepped forward, cupped my face in his hands, and kissed me.

Oh, how I’d longed for those lips. For the way they molded so perfectly against mine.

For the silky way they felt as they moved so passionately over mine.

For the spicy hint of ginger on his tongue from the tea he loved to drink.

Nothing felt or tasted better than Dallas Blade.

“I’ve missed you,” he purred between desperate kisses.

My heart ignited at his confession. “I’ve missed you, too.”

He lifted my shirt over my head and kissed my bare chest. His satin lips and hot breath ghosting my skin and drawing groans of pleasure from me as I struggled to keep quiet.

“Your skin tastes so good,” Dallas whispered.

“I’ve been dying to taste yours again,” I echoed softly, leaning back to unbutton his shirt and push it off his shoulders.

I captured a hard nipple with my mouth, sucking it inside and swirling my tongue around it. A decadent moan escaped from Dallas while his whole body quivered. A wave of pride washed through me that I’d been the one to make him tremble with need, and loving how responsive he was to me.

We divested each other of the rest of our clothing in a frantic tangle of hands and limbs. Dallas seemed as eager as me, unable to wait another second to see and taste and feel all that luscious skin. He grabbed my hand and tugged me onto the bed with him.

“I want you so bad,” Dallas said, his golden-tipped hair fanned out on the pillow and the soft glow from the nightstand lamp giving him an ethereal radiance. “You have no idea how much.”

“Pretty sure I do,” I replied as I settled myself over him, our limbs notching together like Tetris blocks.

Dallas grabbed the lube and condoms from under the pillow and pushed them against my chest.

“Hurry,” he rasped, his gaze intense and imploring. “I need to feel you.”

I felt his desperation like a living thing pulling at me.

“Don’t have to ask me twice.”

But I took my time getting him ready. I wanted to rush. I wanted to dive inside and feel every scorching inch of him around me, too. I wanted him so badly my hands

shook, but no way would I risk hurting him because I couldn't control my patience and didn't prep him properly.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry," he keened as I gently, carefully, worked him into a writhing mass of nerves and need.

I claimed his mouth to swallow his moans because the last thing I wanted was for Jaylin to hear us from across the suite. Exhibitionism wasn't my thing, and I wasn't about to start with a teenager.

When I was confident that he was finally ready, when he could no longer form coherent words, I sank into him.

Home echoed through my mind, and a sigh of contentment drifted from my lips.

He stared up with at me with those electric eyes of his, so full of desire and adoration, that my breath stuttered.

How could he have come to mean so much to me in so short a time?

I had no idea why he was here in town again or for how long he was going to stay, but I wanted to spend every minute with him.

Preferably in bed, but I would take whatever I could get.

So long as I could watch the light glitter in his eyes, smell the warm, amber-breeze scent of his skin, taste the ginger on his tongue, I would be happy.

We moved together in perfect unison, our groans and moans muffled by our kisses, but they still sounded loud to my ears.

I was having trouble remembering why that was a worry.

Dallas gripped my shoulders, my ribs, my hips, hard enough that I was sure I'd have an abstract hand-print bruise pattern along my torso. I would wear it proudly.

And when I came right after he had, with my hand over his mouth to muffle his shout, I felt like I'd been christened by fire. Like a spark igniting a flame, change was coming. A new life was in front of me, and while I didn't know what that would look like, I vowed to make sure it included Dallas.

"Stay," Dallas said, pulling me down to the bed after we coasted back to earth from our orgasmic high and cleaned up.

Hell yeah, I want to stay .

"I shouldn't be here when your daughter wakes up," I said reluctantly, even as I crawled back into bed and slipped my arm around his shoulders, drawing him closer to me.

"Then set an alarm." He snuggled into my side and rested his head on my chest with a satisfied sigh. "But I don't want you to go. Not yet."

"Okay." Like I could argue with him. "For a little while."

"Good." He rocked tighter against me.

I wanted to ask him where we went from here, if there was an us— could be an us—but his breathing deepened and evened out.

His body melted against me, and I knew he'd fallen asleep.

I kissed his forehead and closed my eyes.

That I had to get up and set the alarm was the last thing to cross my mind before falling into the most restful sleep I'd had since Dallas had left.

I TRIED TO climb stealthily out of bed the next morning, but Dallas reached for me, his hot hand on my biceps stopping me mid-rise.

"No, don't go," he grumbled. His voice was rough with sleep and his eyes were still closed. "Why are you up so early?"

I lowered back to his side, his skin warm and comforting, and kissed him.

"Body clock." I nuzzled his ear. "I've always been an early riser."

"Blasphemy." He grunted, snuggling closer.

Chuckling, I planted a kiss on the end of his nose. "And I should get out of here before your daughter wakes up."

"She's a teenager. She won't be awake for at least a couple more hours," Dallas mumbled against my chest. "Stay."

I hesitated for only a second, because of course I wanted to stay.

"We should make use of the extra time, don't you think?" I nipped at his shoulder as I slid a hand down his lean torso.

Dallas hummed and rocked his hips toward me. "I like your thinking."

After a perfect morning blowjob to start the day, I didn't get back into bed after

cleaning us both up. I had visions of Jaylin walking in and catching me with my bare butt hanging out. No thanks.

“I really have to get out of here now,” I said to a blissfully sated Dallas. His skin flushed a pretty pink.

He huffed. “Fine. Okay. But meet us in the lobby for breakfast?”

“I will.” I kissed him again before forcing myself to leave. If I didn’t stop now, I’d never stop. “Text me when you’re ready.”

I pulled the covers up and tucked the blanket around him, earning a lazy smile and a kiss on the back of my hand, then snuck out of the hotel suite as quiet as possible.

I grinned at the concierge, who raised a judgmental eyebrow at me as I passed the front desk, and headed outside to wait in my truck for Dallas’s text.

More than anything, I wanted to still be in bed with him, taking our time and exploring each other’s bodies all day.

After what felt like forever but was less than half an hour, my phone pinged, and an ear-to-ear smile spread across my face. Ugh . I needed to get a grip. I was acting like a lovesick teenager instead of a full-grown adult.

With a shake of my head, I headed back to the lobby, fighting the urge to run the whole way, and found Dallas and Jaylin waiting in the same spot they’d been last night when we’d said goodnight—at least temporarily for Dallas and me.

Only difference being they were wearing different clothes today—Dallas in a white button down open at the collar, a faded jean jacket over top, decadently snug jeans, and boots, and Jaylin in an oversized plum-colored hoodie with ripped jeans and

bright yellow sneakers with pink laces.

And me . . .

Jaylin looked me up and down, and a wide, knowing grin crossed her face.

“You’re wearing the same clothes as last night,” she said with a giggle.

I felt my cheeks heat. So much for playing it cool and thinking I got away with sneaking out this morning.

“Who says they’re the same clothes?” I countered and raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I have a closet full of matching shirts and jeans.”

I did, actually, have several matching shirts and jeans. It made deciding what to wear less stressful.

She snorted and rolled her eyes.

“Come on, kids,” Jaylin said, giggling under her breath. “I’m ready for breakfast.”

She smirked at me before marching ahead of us toward the inn’s restaurant. Dallas winked as I fell into step at his side. He mouthed, “Busted .”

I bumped my shoulder with his, then trailed my pinky finger down the back of his hand. He turned his hand over, grabbed mine and gave a quick squeeze, slanting a sexy smile my way before letting go as we entered the restaurant.

We sat at a table that overlooked Harmony Lake, and we all ordered the to-die-for French toast with cinnamon-infused maple syrup from Sam’s farm. There wasn’t anything better, as far as I was concerned.

“So. What’s your first impression of our little town so far?” I asked Jaylin while we waited for our meals to be served.

“It looks like something out of a Hallmark movie,” she replied, with a note of glee in her voice.

“I take it that’s a good thing?” I asked, having never seen a Hallmark movie before, but if it described Caldwell Crossing, then it couldn’t be a bad thing.

“Oh, yeah. That’s a good thing.” She brightened and leaned forward, her voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. “Love is always right around the corner, but the couples never realize it until the last fifteen minutes.”

Okaay . . . I shot a quick glance at Dallas, who grinned back at me.

Jaylin spent the next fifteen minutes regaling me on all things Hallmark, while Dallas watched her with so much affection, so much love, I couldn’t help but fall a little more in love with him myself.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

Wait. More in love?

My whole body jerked, the thought catching me off guard. Fortunately, our server chose that moment to appear with our food, so no one noticed.

Was I falling in love with him? I liked him a great deal. I couldn't—and wouldn't—deny that. But love?

I looked up to find him watching me with a sort of affectionate reverence that had my toes curling.

The little crinkles in the delicate skin at the corners of his eyes were soft, and there was a gentle lift to the edges of his lips.

This time, my heart and stomach joined forces, and my whole body swooned.

Shit . I was falling for him. And strangely, even though the feeling had caught me off guard, it wasn't unwelcome.

I didn't know how we were going to work.

If we could, because it would figure that the first guy I went and fell for was someone with no roots.

And I had roots. My roots were dug in deep and thick and fully entwined with everyone in Caldwell Crossing.

My roots were twined so tightly with my three best friends, my chosen brothers, that they were inseparable, and they were growing deeper with each addition to our life tree.

The fear I had of my best friends finding their people and leaving our small town hadn't come to pass.

Instead, our tight circle was only growing.

But Dallas was different. Dallas was rootless, a rolling stone.

But even rocks found solid ground to settle in to . . .

I cleared my throat and picked up my utensils.

“So, what brings you back to Caldwell Crossing?” I asked Dallas, pushing my revelation away as we tucked into our tantalizing gourmet breakfast. “How long are you staying?”

“Daddy’s taking me to see—” Jaylin started but Dallas choked on a mouthful of food he apparently tried to inhale. She turned worried eyes on him. “Are you okay?”

My body kicked into firefighting mode on autopilot, braced and ready for action, but he nodded and washed down his food with a big gulp of orange juice. I released a quiet sigh and settled back into my chair.

“Just for the weekend,” he said with a rough voice and a nonchalant shrug that didn’t fool me. Not with the way he’d rushed to say something before Jaylin could finish her sentence. “I wanted her to see the infamous sight of the stage fire.”

Long way to go to see a stage .

She gave Dallas a funny look, not buying his act either, then turned to me and flashed a smile that I already knew meant trouble. “Did you know you went viral on the Internet after that?”

“Yes,” I said with a snort-chuckle. “Took a minute to figure out why I suddenly got a bunch of new followers online.” I shifted my gaze to Dallas and playfully added, “I got a ton of date offers, too.”

Dallas narrowed his eyes ever so slightly, and I fought back a grin. That was exactly the reaction I was hoping for.

“But I guess everybody found something shinier to follow when I never responded,” I added, my voice light and gaze still locked on Dallas. I took a bite of my maple syrup-soaked bread and moaned as I chewed.

Dallas pursed his lips as if to hold back laughter, or a snarky remark, and Jaylin tittered.

What could I say? It was moan-worthy French toast.

“So,” Dallas said after mopping up the dregs of maple syrup from his plate with his last bit of bread. He shot a glance at me, a flash of blue, then, as though nervous, he stared at his plate and asked, “If you’re not busy today, would you like to hang out with us for a while?”

Yes ! I wanted to shout, but because I was cooler than that, at least in my mind, I said casually, “Unless I get called into work, I’m yours all day.”

The smile Dallas gave me made my heart flutter, while Jaylin snickered and mumbled something under her breath that sounded like “so Hallmark”.

“Good.” Dallas rose from the table. “There’s something I want to show you.”

I raised my eyebrows. “There’s something in my town that you want to show me?”

His lips quirked. “I’ll drive.”

A few minutes later, we all piled into a plain brown rental sedan and Dallas steered us toward Caldwell Crossing, but instead of veering off Lake Road and onto Main Street, he kept going.

“We’re leaving town?”

Dallas pressed his lips together, smirking, but kept his eyes on the road.

“No hints?” I teased, hoping for something.

He shook his head but looked in his rearview mirror, and said, “No hints.”

I spun around and raised an eyebrow at Jaylin, who mimed zipping her mouth shut.

I harrumphed and settled back into my seat. I didn’t know where he was taking me, but curiosity and excitement had me bouncing my knee. I loved surprises.

Dallas turned off Lake Road and onto Harmony Drive.

Ah , so he was taking us on a scenic drive around the lake.

I hadn’t been out this way again since I’d seen that offensive red sticker on the Ferguson house FOR SALE sign, not wanting another reminder about my lost dream.

Not wanting one now, I decided I’d find the other side of the street more interesting

when we drove past it.

The road ribboned its way parallel with Harmony Lake, and I knew that hideous sign would come into view around the next bend. A shot of adrenaline spiked my pulse, much like when the alarm tones sounded through the speakers at the fire station for an incoming incident announcement.

Anticipation rose by the second and I felt like I was holding my breath, waiting for the not-so-funny punchline. I tried, I really did, but I couldn't help the overwhelming pull to look. We cleared the turn, and my gaze slid toward the scene of the crime.

The slanting sign and its ugly sticker were gone.

The breath whooshed from my lungs and Dallas shot a quick grin at me, his eyes alight with excitement, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

I wondered who the new owners were. If they were there right now. And most of all, what they were going to do with my house.

Dallas eased off the gas and slowed down. He flipped on his left turn signal.

No .

He steered into the driveway.

My lungs froze mid-breath.

It can't be .

"Is this it?" Jaylin chirped from the backseat, leaning forward with her hands gripping the backs of my and Dallas's seats to see between us.

“Yes, it is,” Dallas said, his voice full of pride.

“What is she talking about?” I stammered, furrowing my brows while my heart pinged off my ribcage and my head felt dizzy. “What are we doing here?”

Dallas stopped in front of the decrepit gate that was going to be the first thing I repaired when I eventually bought the property. Except I would never do that now because someone else bought my dream.

He shifted the car into Park and turned to me with a waggle of his eyebrows. “Hold that thought.”

He hopped out, opened the gate with a few grunts and groans as it fought him the whole way, then climbed back into the car.

He didn’t say anything as he put the vehicle into Drive and slowly navigated the unkempt laneway.

The rental car rode so low that the undercarriage scraped along the ground a few times.

The potholes were deeper and the weeds taller than when I’d last been down this driveway.

Then the old house came into view, and I stopped breathing until my body took over and forced my lungs to expand.

She looked worse than the last time I’d seen her, when we’d been called out because some kids had gotten inside and one of them had gotten his foot stuck in a broken tread on the staircase.

The once cheery yellow wood siding looked grayer and more brittle—like a stack of cards that one strong breeze could send tumbling down.

Some of the window casings were hanging by single nails or were completely gone, and then there was the ever-present graffiti on the boarded-up windows.

She was in a sad state and in dire need of some major TLC.

I wanted to be the one to give that to her.

I wanted to be the one who brought her back to her former glory.

I wanted to be the one to call her home.

Dallas parked the car in the gravel area near the front of the house, overgrown with weeds and wildflowers, and cut the engine.

“Surprise,” he whooped, his voice full of energy and face radiant with uncontainable joy. “I bought a house.”

I amended my previously stated love of surprises. This was one I could do without.

I stared at him, unable to comprehend what he’d said for a moment. I didn’t know what kind of expression my face revealed, but his smile slipped, and his eyebrows knitted together.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, the shining light of his excitement dimming from his eyes.

A noise escaped my mouth, and I wasn’t sure if it was a gasp or a sob. Whatever it was, it hurt my throat on the way out.

“Conor,” Dallas said, his voice low and laced with concern. He placed a hand on my biceps, gentle but firm in a way that let me know he wasn’t pushing, but that he was there for me. “You’re scaring me.”

I opened my mouth a couple of times, feeling like a fish gasping for air because my windpipe was so tight that I couldn’t push enough breath through it to speak. My lungs had frozen along with the rest of my body.

“You bought my house,” I finally mumbled in disbelief.

I hoped he hadn’t heard that, but Dallas stared at me for a minute and tilted his head. Confusion slashed across his face.

“What do you mean?” He eyed me cautiously. “Was this your house?”

I still couldn’t find my words, but Dallas had been so excited to share this with me, and Jaylin was bouncing in the backseat as though she couldn’t stand waiting any longer to go inside.

That last thing I wanted to do was put a damper on this for them.

No matter how much it hurt to learn that this house would never be mine.

But if I couldn’t have it, then at least knowing Dallas had been the one to buy it took the sharp edges off my shock.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

I pulled myself together, plastered the biggest smile I could muster on my face, and had to clear my throat a few times before I could sound words again.

“Congratulations,” I said, wincing internally at the less than enthusiastic cheer. “But you do know this house needs a lot of work, right?”

“Ye-es,” Dallas drew out, studying me for a few seconds, as though unsure of what to think of my reaction.

Then the light came back on in his eyes.

He nodded and spoke a mile a minute when he said, “Nolan Kaslo, the realtor, told me all about its history. It’s amazingly rich and added to the charm that drew me in.

But I’d know from the second I saw it that it was home. ”

The same way I’d felt when I’d first seen it, too .

“I know the feeling,” I agreed softly. It was supposed to be my home.

“Come on.” Dallas opened his door. “Let’s check it out.”

I took a second to pull a few deep breaths into my lungs, telling myself to be happy that it was Dallas who’d bought my dream house and not some developer who’d tear it down and build condos or something unsightly in its place.

“What are you going to do with it?” I asked as I exited the car and walked with Dallas

and Jaylin to the front steps. “Are you going to tear it down and build a new house?”

He stopped so fast that I bumped into him.

“No way,” he said with equal parts conviction and horror that I’d dared to ask such a thing. “I’m going to restore it back to its original grandeur, with a few new modern touches in the kitchen and bathrooms, mostly. But it’s too gorgeous of a home with too deep a history to tear it down.”

“Good,” I said, shoving my hands into my pockets.

“Wow, Dad,” Jaylin said, awe lacing her voice as he she looked up, taking the house in. “This place is sick. It’s like something out of a horror movie.” She turned to me. “Is it haunted?”

“No,” I sniped, my tone sharper than I’d meant. Jaylin and Dallas both looked at me with matching expressions of surprise. “No,” I repeated softer. “It’s not haunted. Just old and neglected.”

She hummed thoughtfully, then, with all the conviction of a teenager, said, “We’ll take care of it from now on.”

My body relaxed a little at knowing they were going to do right by the old girl, but now that the initial shock had worn off, I didn’t quite know what to make of this shift in reality.

Before today, my chances of any future with Dallas were an abstract pipe dream, given how opposite our lives were.

Yes, my feelings for him were growing bigger and deeper, and I wanted to find a way to be with him, but a part of me, deep down, doubted that could happen.

I was fully rooted in Caldwell Crossing.

My entire world was here, and no matter how involved my heart was getting with Dallas, the idea of leaving it all behind for a life of travel and celebrity gave me hives.

And Dallas? His life was constant motion and screaming fans and public scrutiny—everything small town living wasn't. The two just didn't mesh.

But now . . . Did Dallas buying this house mean he'd be moving to Caldwell Crossing permanently, and the abstract suddenly became real?

"Can we go inside?" Jaylin asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Absolutely," Dallas beamed.

"But don't go up the stairs," I added, shuddering at the idea of Jaylin falling through the rotten stair tread and getting hurt. "They're unsafe."

Jaylin's gaze shot from me to her a dad a couple times, then she nodded and held her hand out, making a gimme motion.

Chuckling, Dallas handed a key to Jaylin, who rushed up onto the sagging porch to open the door.

He turned to me with concern swirling in the depths of his eyes. His mouth dipped into a slight frown.

"Are you okay?"

"Are you moving here?" I blurted.

His expression blanked, and his body stiffened. I didn't like that look, didn't like that I put it there, but I had to know. I held my breath as he stared at me, as though unsure what I was asking. I was unsure too.

"Yes," he said cautiously. "When Jaylin's summer break begins and the house is renovated. And I thought . . ." he trailed off. He swallowed audibly, his Adam's apple bobbing, and looked up at the house.

"Thought what?" I breathed when he didn't continue.

"I thought," he repeated, turning back to me. "I think there's something happening between us, and that maybe, if you feel the same, we could see where it goes?"

My spirits lifted at the idea of him being nearby, of seeing him anytime I wanted, and my dream future took on a new shape, becoming clearer than it had before.

This time, instead of fixing up and living in this home with a faceless partner, Dallas's face shone brightly at me as we sat on the back patio overlooking the lake.

Instead of only two big dogs making up our little family, I now saw Jaylin playing in the water with those dogs, and a horse looking on from the newly re-fenced paddock.

I nodded, words I wanted to speak all clogged up in my throat. I reached for his hand.

"Let's go check out your new house."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“DON’T WORRY, DADDY,” Jaylin said as we parked the rental car at the curb in front of Conor’s parent’s home.

After checking out my new house yesterday, we’d gone for lunch together and Conor had invited us to his family’s Memorial Day barbecue.

He’d been quiet as we ate our burgers and eventually shared that it had been a dream of his to buy the Ferguson house for years.

I was even more certain now that this was meant to be— Jaylin, Caldwell Crossing, Conor.

That I could not only give Jaylin a real home and the perfect place to grow up, but that I could honor Conor’s dream, too .

. . Happiness swelled in my chest, almost too big to contain.

I couldn’t wait to start this next chapter in my life.

But first, I had parents to meet. Just the thought made my palms clammy.

“What do I have to worry about?”

Aside from everything .

I flashed a reassuring smile at Jaylin while my nerves jangled.

The only parents I'd ever met were Kirk's, but I'd known them almost my whole life. They didn't count the same way as meeting the parents of someone I cared for romantically.

"You look nervous," Jaylin said. Understanding in her eyes. "But don't worry. They'll all love you, too."

I reached out and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. "How is it you're so wise?"

And what does she mean by 'they'll love me too' ?

"I was born smart like that," she chirped with a shrug and an amused grin, then leaned over and kissed my cheek before hopping out of the car.

She waited for me at the front bumper while I grabbed the bottle of wine we'd brought for Conor's parents, then she took my hand free hand.

I marveled at how the reassurance of a fourteen-year-old made me feel better, and at how meeting Conor's family meant more to me than I could've imagined.

It was important to me that they approved of me and Jaylin.

But I knew they would love her. I glanced over at her.

I didn't know how anybody couldn't. Call me biased, but not loving Jaylin was impossible.

I took in the large house painted an inviting yellow with bright white shutters bracketing the windows as we walked up the stone pathway to the front door.

The lush green front lawn, trimmed with obvious care, followed a wave of flower

beds bursting in a riot of colors.

A large oak tree stood in the yard with a rope swing tied to a thick branch, and I pictured Conor climbing as high as he could, laughing the whole way and daring his sisters and best friends to join him.

We climbed the front steps together and stopped on the porch. I took a deep breath, and Jaylin gave my hand a squeeze.

“You’ve got this, Dad,” she assured.

The smile that tugged at my cheeks warmed me all the way to my toes, and I wished, not for the first time, that I’d known Jaylin her whole life.

I knocked on the door and a few seconds later it swung wide to reveal an older version of Conor with gray eyes instead of blue, and a smile just as big and infectious.

“Well, you must be Dallas and Jaylin,” he boomed enthusiastically. “I’m James, Conor’s dad.” He stepped back, sweeping an arm in welcome. “Come on in.”

“Thank you,” I said, nerves freezing me again until Jaylin elbowed me in the ribs and raised her eyebrows. Right ! I thrust our host gift toward him. “This is for you and Mrs. Holliston.”

“Oh, you didn’t need to bring anything but yourselves,” James said even as he reached for the bottle. “Thank you.”

He led us through a large kitchen that would be the envy of any Michelin Star chef, and out sliding glass doors into a huge backyard that I could only describe as happy chaos.

I knew Conor had three sisters, but that those sisters would be there with their significant others and their children hadn't registered in my mind.

I counted five kids—two boys maybe eight or nine years old, and three girls, two of whom were identical, about Jaylin's age—running around the yard tossing a ball for a large golden retriever or splashing in the pool.

Five women who I guessed were Conor's sisters, his mom, and grandmother, sat in lawn chairs around a fire pit, drinking from orange, red, and yellow tumblers and chatting animatedly, while two men stood with Conor at the barbecue, laughing at something he'd said—no doubt tales from work—while Conor flipped burger patties and smokies.

Tantalizing aromas of rich, sweet smoke rose from the grill and made my mouth water.

A sharp whistle rent the air too close to my ear, making me jump.

Every head turned toward us, but the only one I had eyes for was Conor. He glowed with happiness and the smile he sent my way weakened my knees. Pretty safe to say I was gone for that man.

"Listen up," James bellowed, and everyone turned their attention to us. "This is Conor's friend Dallas and his daughter Jaylin."

A hearty chorus of welcomes, waves, and how ya doings greeted us.

"Alright," James said to me, his voice was serious, but he had a mischievous glint in his eyes. "There will be a test later."

That earned some chuckles and hoots from the rest of the family as he introduced me

and Jaylin to every member of the Holliston clan. I hoped James had been joking about that test, because no way would I remember everyone's names and who belonged to whom.

Conor's sisters and their husbands came forward to shake mine and Jaylin's hand or give us a hug in the case of his grandmother and his mother—who gave us a kiss on the cheek—and any nerves I'd had about meeting them disappeared into the air like the smoke from the barbecue.

Last in the welcome line was Conor, holding a microbrew in each hand.

"Thank you for coming," he said, standing close enough for me to smell the fruity sunscreen on his lightly tanned skin and the underlying scent of fire. "Both of you."

"We wouldn't have missed it for the world," I said in a low voice.

I wanted to reach out and pull him into my arms so badly just then. Feel that muscular body pressed against me. Kiss him senseless.

The youngest of the girls, Hazel's daughter, who was about Jaylin's age and whose name I couldn't remember, approached. She smiled up at me, then to Jaylin said, "Come hang out with us."

Jaylin looked up at me, a question in her bright eyes.

"Go ahead." I grinned. "Have fun."

The two ran off and joined up with Emma's twins, their animated expressions and brilliant smiles warming my heart.

"You have a big family," I stated the obvious, taking the beer bottle Conor offered

me.

Our fingers touched, sending a wave of desire cascading through me, and Conor's smile, as he slowly lowered his hand, said he felt the same.

He snickered. "Be glad all the extended family members and friends aren't here, too."

Conor led me to a couple of lawn chairs set back from the patio, where we sat and watched the goings on.

I'd never felt so relaxed in a crowd of people I didn't know before.

I'd always been Dallas Blade, the rock star, and had had to portray a celebrity image that, while it hadn't been totally fake, had never been truly me either.

I'd always been "on". But here, with Conor and his family, I didn't feel the need for putting on a public face.

I could chill and simply be Dallas, Jaylin's dad.

And just maybe Conor's boyfriend.

"This is nice," I said.

Conor snorted. "Enjoy the calm before the storm. I told them not to all bombard you at once."

"Oh-oh," I intoned lightly. "Do I need to worry?"

"Nah." Conor snickered. "Just the usual 'hurt my son-brother-uncle and we'll disappear you' kind of thing."

“So, the basic Spanish Inquisition, then,” I replied with a laugh.

Giggles drew my attention to Conor’s nieces and Jaylin, huddled in a circle and no doubt conspiring to take over the world.

I’d hoped that Jaylin would find a good group of friends when the house was done and we moved to Caldwell Crossing permanently, but it looked like she was already well on her way.

“Conor. The burgers are burning,” the red-headed man shouted. He was married to Conor’s second oldest sister, Hazel, and his name was . . . Liam?

I hoped again that Conor’s dad wasn’t serious about that quiz later.

“Flip them your own damn self,” Conor shot back with a playful smirk on his lips. He turned to me, paused for the briefest of seconds, then leaned over and placed a chaste kiss on my cheek. “Be right back.”

With a wink, he got up and sauntered over to the barbecue, all loose-limbed and sexy. Before I could fully admire his gorgeous ass, someone dropped into his vacated seat. His mother. I looked away, but not quick enough. She grinned at me knowingly.

“He’s a good man,” she said, thankfully not calling me out for ogling her only son.

“Can’t argue with you there,” I said with a smile. He was the best I’d ever met.

“So, Dallas.” Mrs. Holliston shifted in her seat to look at me more fully and mischief sparkled in her warm hazel eyes. “Do you make it a habit of setting stages on fire?”

And so begins the inquisition . . .

For the next ten minutes that felt like ten hours, Mrs. Holliston, who'd insisted I call her Crystal, peppered me with questions about my life, Jaylin, and my plans for the future.

I heard the unspoken "and my son" in that last one.

I answered honestly, not holding back about my growing feelings for Conor.

She paused in her questioning to take a long sip of her cooler, watching me over the rim of her glass, and I felt like she was coming to a final judgment. She nodded, more to herself than to me. Judgment made.

"I think you'll be good for him," she said.

"I would like to be good for him," I replied without hesitation. I wanted nothing more.

She beamed at me. "He's always been adventurous, and I would hate for him to lose that sense of fearlessness, but sometimes I would really like him to be a little less reckless.

We've done our time in the emergency room with him.

" She chuckled, her face soft with fondness.

"I think having you and your daughter in his life will balance him out."

"I wouldn't want to change him," I agreed with her. "Except for the reckless part. I worry enough with a teenage daughter."

She burst out laughing, drawing a curious look from Conor.

“Believe me, I know what that’s like,” she said as she rose from the chair and placed a hand on my shoulder. “I raised three of them. Give me a call anytime you need help.”

“Thank you,” I said. Touched by her offer.

She walked away and Conor made to return, but one of his sisters beat him to his chair.

He raised his eyebrows and mouthed, “ Are you okay ?”

I nodded. I was one hundred percent okay, and if having his family like and accept me meant sitting in this chair all night answering pointed questions, then I was more than happy to do it.

“My turn,” my next inquisitor said, staring at me with eyes almost as intense as Conor’s. “I’m Emma, Conor’s oldest sister.”

“Let me guess,” I teased, my tone conspiratorial. “Hurt your baby brother and you’ll break both my legs.”

She flashed a broad smile at me, confirming I’d said exactly the right thing. “Yes. But don’t worry. I’m a doctor so I’ll fix you right back up after.”

I snorted a laugh and raised my beer bottle to clink against her glass. “Ooh, I think I like you.”

“As you should. I’m the favorite, of course,” she retorted with a wry grin, then motioned toward the girls who were now in the pool having a battle between an inflatable bright pink flamingo and a large yellow rubber ducky. “You have a good girl there.”

“The best,” I agreed warmly and settled into an interrogation, that was more like a test of puns and comedic banter.

I learned that Conor was one of the reasons she’d ended up becoming a doctor.

She got a lot of practice forever patching up his countless cuts and scrapes when they were growing up.

I also learned that I was the first person Conor had ever brought home to meet the family, and that made me inexplicably happy.

My attention shifted to the man in question as he made his way back over a few minutes later.

“Shoo .” He pointed a spatula at his sister. “That’s enough harassing my guest.”

“We’re having a perfectly civil conversation here,” Emma said, slanting a cheeky glance at me.

I nodded my head. I was no fool. “Absolutely.”

Conor narrowed his eyes, glancing between us, and harrumphed. “Dinner’s ready. Round up the troops.”

He leaned down and kissed me, his smoky citrus scent a welcome comfort as it swirled around me.

“Come dish up,” he said, his mouth a breath away from mine. “I make a mean burger.”

One of the boys ran by and Conor scooped him up, throwing his nephew, who

squealed with delight, over his shoulder and then pretending to toss him into the pool but eventually setting him on his feet in the dinner dish-up line.

I sat back for a minute to take in the scene before me, marveling at how much I loved this day. These people. Conor.

This was what I didn't know I'd been looking for. What I wanted more than I could have imagined.

I'd never expected to be a father, but in the year since Jaylin had come along, I still got a thrill whenever she called me Dad.

I'd never expected to be so charmed by the small town of Caldwell Crossing and the big old house on Harmony Lake that I'd want to call it home.

And I'd sure as hell never expected to fall in love with a sexy firefighter who knew how to stoke my every desire and make my heart sing.

But now that I'd fallen, I never wanted to get back up again.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“PLAY ME A song,” I said later, when all but my parents and Bailey, their retriever, remained after the day had given way to night, and a blanket of winking stars filled the endless sky.

After we’d devoured the burgers and smokies, we’d all sat around the firepit, where the kids roasted marshmallows and the adults bantered.

Liam had strolled proudly from the house with an acoustic guitar in his hand and asked if Dallas wouldn’t mind playing a few songs for them.

Dallas had been gracious, accepting the instrument and strumming a collection of requests with a glowing smile and firelight flickering in his eyes.

Fuck, he was so damn gorgeous.

And kind and funny and an amazing father.

He’d fit right in with my family, patiently sitting through their good-natured pestering and answering all their questions.

The best part was how they’d all accepted him with open arms and immediately pulled him into the Holliston fold.

As my sisters left, they each stopped to tell me how much they liked Dallas and how happy they were for me to have finally found someone special.

Special .

He was so much more than that. In such a short time, he'd become everything to me. I thought about him constantly and the world seemed brighter, my heart lighter, every time he was near.

I was in love with him. Flat out.

"What would you like to hear?" Dallas asked, now that we were alone on the patio.

My parents had gone inside to put away the last of the party paraphernalia, and Jaylin had gone home with Emma and all my nieces. The girls were having a sleepover in a backyard tent, and they'd invited Jaylin, who'd pleaded with big puppy dog eyes I knew Dallas wouldn't have been able to deny.

"Your choice," I said, my voice low and throat clogged with emotion.

Dallas looked at me for a long moment, his eyes full of affection and heat.

A smile spread over his face, as slow as molasses, as sweet as honey, and as sexy as fuck.

My heart flipped, and my stomach did a slow roll.

These feelings for this man who had driven me crazy a short while ago were growing bigger than I knew what to do with, bursting at the seams. I wanted to sing and dance and shout from the rooftops that I was in love, and he was mine. I never wanted to be apart from him.

Was this how Sam had felt when he gazed at Ben with hearts in his eyes? How Ryan felt when Adam passed him secret love notes? And Haider, did Phillip make him feel like he was ten feet tall and better than the world's best chocolate?

“Got it,” Dallas said, unaware of my inner musings. Or maybe he was, because the wink he sent my way felt like a shared secret.

He started strumming chords on his guitar that sounded familiar. It took me a second to identify the song, and I clued in to the lullaby as he began singing.

“You are my sunshine . . .” he sang sotto voce. Private and intimate. Raspy and seductive. “My only sunshine . . .”

He slowed the timing down, somehow making the tune romantic, and dragged out each bar with a subtle, lilting vibrato.

“You keep me happy, when skies are gray . . .”

If I hadn’t already fallen in love with this man, I sure as hell would now.

“You need to know . . . Conor . . .” Dallas changed the words and looked me straight in the eye with that electric stare of his. “How much I love you . . .”

My pulse skipped. Time stopped and even the air held its breath.

He loved me. Dallas Blade loved me.

Dallas set the guitar on the ground, leaning it against his lawn chair, and swallowed. My gaze followed the bob of his Adam’s apple. He leaned forward and reached for my hand.

“I love you,” he breathed, and my heart spun merrily in my chest. “I want to make a life with you. Here, in Caldwell Crossing. If you’ll have me. Have us.”

“You had me at sunshine,” I choked out through a tight throat, and I cut off his

chuckle with my lips on his. I pulled back and whispered, “I love you, too.”

A loud sniff drew my attention, but I didn’t look for the source until Dallas glanced over my shoulder and grinned.

I turned to see my mom and dad standing arm in arm on the patio, watching us with happiness radiating from them.

My mom put a hand to her chest. Even Bailey, who sat at their feet with his tongue hanging out, looked like he was smiling.

I shook my head and turned back to Dallas.

“Come home with me,” I said into his ear, earning a shudder that made me smile.

He nodded and launched from his chair so fast it tipped over, taking the guitar with it.

“Sorry,” he called out and righted the chair, setting the guitar on the seat.

Taking his hand, I led him across the yard, hoping my parents would settle for a quick goodnight so I could get Dallas into my bed. Alas, a speedy exit was not to be.

After Dad gave me a hearty hug, he pulled a startled Dallas into his strong arms. Mom touched my arm, her eyes glistening as she gazed up at me.

“Please don’t cry, Mom.” I slid an arm over her shoulders and tucked her to my side.

“He’s perfect, and his daughter is an angel,” she said with a wistful note in her voice.

“I don’t think we could have chosen anyone better. Make sure you do right by them.”

I slid my gaze over to Dallas and Dad, deep in conversation.

“I will do my best,” I said, and planted a soft kiss on the top of her head.

“You better go get your man before your father takes him into the study to show off his Hot Wheels collection.”

“Oh no, Dad will have him in there for hours,” I groaned. Dad loved his little die-cast car collection. The cars were little; the collection, not so much.

“Goodnight, Mom.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

When I could finally drag Dallas from Dad, we hustled the few blocks from their house to mine.

I swung my front door open and pulled him inside, our mouths locked in kisses that felt like it had been years since the last time our lips had met—frantic, needy, passionate.

I kicked the door closed with my heel and flipped on the hall light with my elbow, the both of us pausing long enough to toe off our sneakers.

He ground against me, my back to the wall, and his shorts-trapped length was as hard and demanding as mine. I growled into his mouth, unsure if we were going to get to the bedroom in time or strip down right there in the hallway.

“Fuck, you’re so sexy,” he rasped, as I angled him toward my room.

“Sexier in bed,” I joked—mostly—earning a chuckle.

I led us on a haphazard path to the bedroom.

I couldn't keep my hands off him. Couldn't stop kissing him.

Couldn't stop seeking every inch of warm, velvety skin as I tugged at his clothing and he yanked at mine.

Articles of fabric—shirts, shorts, boxer briefs—dropped to the floor as we bounced off walls and crashed into corners like we were a pair of bumper cars.

After an eternity, because seriously, how long did it take to cross a modest two-bedroom house, we stumbled through the doorframe of my room.

I guided him to my bed in the dark, and the two of us flopped down in a tangle of limbs and laughter.

“Turn on a light,” he gasped. “I need to see you.”

I flicked on a bedside lamp, and he squinted against the sudden brightness for a second before his gaze roamed my body, and an appreciative moan rumbled up his throat.

“Fuck, you're so damn sexy,” he sighed under his breath.

“You already said that,” I teased as I sat back on my knees and slid my hands down his long, lightly furred legs and pushed them open.

“Worth repeating,” he said, taking ahold of himself and stroking slowly, his gaze never leaving mine.

“Hmm,” I crawled up the bed and claimed his mouth again. “I happen to think you're the sexiest thing I've ever seen.”

“Meant to be,” he said in a hushed tone, his eyes soft and grin lopsided.

I liked that. No, I loved that. We were meant to be. Maybe I’d never dated anyone before because I’d been waiting all these years for Dallas to come along. I kissed him quick, then leaned over to grab supplies from my nightstand drawer. Leaning back, I stared at him for a long moment.

Fuck. How did I get so lucky?

“What are you going to do with those?” he asked with a knowing glint in his eyes.

“Do you top?” I asked, suddenly nervous.

It had been a long time since I’d bottomed. Mostly because I’d never been one for much more than hookups and the occasional repeat. I’d never known anyone long enough, never trusted anyone enough, to go there. But Dallas . . . Dallas had been different from the start, and I trusted him implicitly.

“Yes.” His answer was a barely audible croak.

Nerves flared as I handed the lube and condom to him and dropped onto my back beside him. He kissed my shoulder.

“Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent,” I said with conviction. There was no lie in my words, no lie in what I wanted.

“How do you want it?”

“Like this,” I said, tracing a finger down his torso from his collarbone to his navel. “I

want to see you when you take me. I want to watch your face when we come together and explode.”

“Jesus,” he gasped. “Did I mention how fucking sexy you are?”

I leaned up and kissed him. “You can tell me every day.”

Because we would have an everyday and I couldn’t wait to get started.

Dallas slid his hands down my sides as he leaned back and prepared me with his nimble fingers and decadent tongue, and before long, I was begging shamelessly for him, my thoughts scattered and my pulse racing.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice raspy and reedy.

“Yesss ,” I hissed, panting already. “So many yeses.”

With a crooked grin and a soft chuckle, Dallas slowly, lovingly, entered me. He rocked in and out in slow short strokes until he was fully seated inside, and my stomach fluttered with excitement. With desire. With joy.

With love.

We moved together as one. Dallas making love to me was like nothing I’d experienced before and everything I wanted to experience for the rest of my life.

Every touch meant more, every hushed word spoken carried more weight, every brush of skin against skin sang the sweetest notes.

And when we came, one right after the other, I knew this was it. He was it.

I found love. I found a family. And I was never letting either go.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:31 am

“I DON’T KNOW,” Haider said as he pointed to a corner for Phillip to drop a box. “I still think the house is haunted, but it looks really good in here, so maybe the ghost is a nice one.”

“It’s not haunted,” Conor, Sam, and Ryan all called out in unison.

Haider waved them off and leaned closer to me. “Tell me the truth. Haunted, right?”

I laughed and handed him a stack of napkins. He furrowed his brows.

“What do you want me to do with these?”

“Put them on the patio table, for the pizzas I ordered.”

“Oh, well,” Haider jumped off the counter he’d been sitting on. “I can do that.”

He sashayed outside, and I chuckled as I returned to my task of unboxing the kitchen.

Today was the day we officially moved into our new forever home.

The three of us—me, Conor, and Jaylin. I marveled at all the changes that had happened in my life these past six months.

It still amazed me that I’d bought the house that Conor had dreamed of owning, and thought, more than once, that there must have been greater forces at work to pull off a coincidence like that.

Maybe, in a way, the house was haunted.

I'd made sure Conor and Jaylin had a hand in all the design ideas and that they each knew this was their home and they needed to put their mark on it, too.

Conor's friend Ryan, who I'd become close friends with during the extensive renovations, had done all the fine and finishing woodwork, and Sam, Ben, Adam, and Phillip had helped with hard labor as much as possible.

Haider worked hard, too, or so he'd said, as he'd directed from the sidelines and fed us too many delicious chocolates from his shop.

When I'd gone back to New York after Memorial Day weekend, I hadn't been able to handle being away from Conor.

I'd felt like an essential part of me was missing, making me antsy and grumpy when we were apart.

I'd racked up so many air miles points flying back and forth that he'd finally told me enough was enough.

That Jaylin and I needed to move into his little rental house in Caldwell Crossing while we finished our new home.

Jaylin had been ecstatic about that, and the weekend after school let out for the summer, we moved in full time.

I ended up taking the job at Waylon Music as a vocal coach and was loving it way more than I'd ever imagined.

My first big show was going to be a concert for Christmas, since I'd also taken on the role of the local choir director.

I was already nervous. Just like when I was getting ready to go on stage with my old Dallas Blade Band.

Preparing for the choir concert was nothing like planning a world tour, but was just as amazing and exciting.

I'd even started offering private singing lessons at home and writing music for other musicians and bands.

Jaylin had settled in at her new school and had already made a couple of good friends—including Conor's nieces. She was constantly on me about getting a horse, but first we needed to get settled into our new home for that to happen. Maybe for Christmas . . .

Ian, the teen who also worked at Waylon's Music, walked in with a box in his arms while Jaylin showed him where to put it.

The two of them had been thick as thieves from the moment they'd met.

I wasn't sure I liked Ian quite as much as I had when I'd first met him.

As far as I was concerned, Jaylin, who'd turned fifteen on October sixth, was much too young for —gasp —a boyfriend. Thirty would still be too young.

But when I put my dad hat aside, Ian was a good kid and treated Jaylin like the princess she was.

Jaylin stopped at the bottom of the stairs to snag a caramel bonbon from the Harmony Chocolates box Haider had brought over earlier, while Ian continued up.

She and Haider had become instant besties, always conspiring together and giggling like school kids.

I loved that Conor's friends had accepted us so warmly into their fold.

And Haider, when he'd found out that Jaylin's birthday fell on Mad Hatter Day, had gone all out creating an Alice in Wonderland themed party for her.

We'd all had to wear ridiculous hats for the entire day and drink fruit-flavored teas, and Haider was, of course, the Hatter.

We'd had a fantastic time, laughing until we had stitches in our sides, and I didn't think I'd ever seen Jaylin smile so much as she did then.

Yes, this was home. This was the right move. Conor was the right man.

Speaking of the right man. He stepped through the front door with another box and when his gaze landed on mine, his smile stretched so wide and bright my knees weakened.

The sight of his infectious smile, of his piercing blue eyes so full of love, had my heart swelling with happiness and contentment.

I walked over and took the box from him, placing it on the floor.

"What?" he asked with a slight cant of his head.

I pulled him close, slid my hands around his back and under his shirt, and kissed him.

I kissed him with all the feelings I couldn't contain.

I kissed him because words weren't enough.

I kissed him until someone—or someones—cat-called and wolf-whistled.

He was smiling at me when I broke the kiss and stepped back, his eyes glittering.

“Not that I’m complaining,” he said, sounding a little breathless. “But what was that for?”

I shrugged. “Because I love you.”

“Okay, you two,” Haider hollered. “Quit lollygagging and get back to work.”

Laughter rang throughout the house, and joy sailed through my veins. This was the everything I’d been looking for in life. Jaylin, Conor, good friends, and a place to call home.

“WHERE ARE YOU going?” Dallas asked later, after the pizza boxes were all empty and everyone had gone home.

“There’s one more box.” I tucked my phone away, so he didn’t glimpse the message on the screen, and a thrill danced through me. I loved giving surprises as much as I loved receiving them.

Dallas looked around the living room with his eyebrows furrowed.

With the help of my friends and their significant others, we’d unpacked all the big and important items by early evening. There was still a lot to do, but at least the house wasn’t in complete disarray or cluttered with boxes everywhere I looked.

“How can there be another box?” he asked, turning back to me with a frown. “I don’t think we’re missing anything.”

“Be right back.” I winked at him, trying so hard not to bounce on my toes. “Call Jay down.”

Dallas narrowed his eyes and propped his hands on his hips. “What are you up to?”

I flashed a wide grin at him and pointed. “Stay right there.”

Leaving a confused Dallas standing in the middle of the living room, I rushed outside, where I found Sam waiting for me by the back of his truck.

“Are you sure about this?” Sam sounded serious, but there was a smile on his face.

“One hundred percent.” I hopped from foot to foot as he opened the tailgate and canopy hatch to reveal a large box with holes in it.

“Thought so,” he said with a soft note of affection in his voice. “They’re adorable. I was kind of hoping you’d change your mind so I could keep them.”

A throaty laugh burst from my lungs. “No way!”

I gently grabbed the box and tucked it close to my side, away from Sam, while Sam shook his head and chuckled.

“Good luck,” he said. “I want to hear how it goes.”

“Thank you for helping me, Sam,” I said. “This means a lot.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t have to marry you, so we’re all good.”

“Ass,” I joked.

I’m not sure if we’d have ever gone through with the pact that we’d made to marry each other if we were still single when we turned thirty, but I’m happy we never had to find out. Sam, as well as Ryan and Haider, were and would always be my best friends and chosen brothers.

“You know I love you, right?” he said, and I nodded. “I’m really happy you’ve found the other half of your heart, and your own family.” He shook his head and chuffed under his breath. “Who’d have thought you’d be the first one of us with a family?”

“And you were doing so well,” I teased.

He laughed as he got back into his truck and waved as he drove off.

I took a deep breath and went back into our house, where I found both Dallas and Jaylin sitting on our couch in our living room.

They both looked up at me as I entered the room, curiosity glittering bright in their matching blue eyes.

I had to pause for a second, overwhelmed that these two had come into my life and given me the love and family I’d never thought I’d find.

And now that I had, I couldn’t imagine a single day without them in it. They were my everything.

“What’s that?” Jaylin asked as I placed the box carefully on the floor in the middle of the room.

“Open it and see,” I said, unable to keep the grin from my face, and stood back.

She cautiously lifted the lid, as if worried I was playing a prank, and something would jump out at her. Something was definitely going to jump out at her, though. Two somethings.

She squealed when two of the most adorable Bernese Mountain Dog puppies I’d ever seen tumbled from the box and trounced around the room, uber excited at their new digs and new humans.

One launched himself at Jaylin and she cradled the wiggling black, white, and copper bundle of fur in her lap, giggling while the puppy planted sloppy dog kisses on her cheek.

“Puppies?” Dallas looked up at me with wide eyes and a grin he was clearly fighting. “When you said a couple of dogs, I thought you meant a couple of grown, past the chewing-everything-in-sight stage shelter dogs.”

“These are shelter dogs,” I defended. “A breeder couldn’t afford to care for their dogs anymore and surrendered the entire litter to the Harmony Lake Animal Rescue League.”

“Oh my god,” Jaylin beamed, now with a lap full of two rambunctious puppies. “They’re ours?”

“Yes, they are,” I said, my heart singing at the joy on her face. “They’re brother and sister.”

She dislodged the puppies and jumped up to hug me, her arms tight around my waist. My heart did a little tumble.

“Thank you,” she said. “I love them already.”

“You’re welcome,” I managed, my throat tight.

“Do they have names? Can I name them? They should have matching names, right? A theme?” she asked rapid fire all in one breath as she sat back down and was instantly mauled by fluffy sweetness.

Dallas and I both laughed as we joined her on the floor, sitting side by side.

“You can name the sister,” I said a puppy waddled into my lap. “I already named the

brother Yoda.”

Dallas whipped his head around to stare at me with amusement in his eyes. “You did not.”

I puffed my chest out. “I most certainly did. Every Jedi needs a Yoda.”

“Then I’m calling her Leia,” Jaylin proclaimed, petting Leia’s tummy.

Yoda launched himself from my lap and into Dallas’s, jumping up to kiss his chin, then Yoda decided tackling his sister was more fun.

I sat there watching as the puppies tussled on the floor and explored their new surroundings while Jaylin looked on, her face alight with sheer delight, and I reached for Dallas’s hand.

I didn’t see how I could possibly feel any happier than I did at that moment.

I had three of the best friends anyone could ask for, an amazing man I loved with my whole heart, a daughter I adored, the dream home I’d always longed for, and two goofy soon-to-be-big dogs.

Dallas squeezed my hand and leaned over to kiss me. Warm and perfect and always sending a thrill through my veins.

Seriously, how did I get so damn lucky?

“I love you,” Dallas said in that seductively melodic voice of his. “But they’re going to have monster poops.”

Laughter burst from my lungs. Full and hearty and uninhibited.

My life was perfect. Monster puppy poop and all.