



Making a Mountain Man

(Summer in the Pines #16)

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Category: Romance

Description: Making a mountain man out of a molehill.

Wesley

A viral selfie disaster sent my life into chaos—and me running for the hills. Literally.

I've been living off the grid on Strawberry Hill for the last year. No drama, no excitement and no one recognizing me as the guy from that photo.

But peace and quiet don't last forever.

Especially not when Jill, my childhood best friend turned journalist, shows up on my doorstep.

Suddenly, hiding doesn't feel like safety—it feels like loneliness.

Jill

My first assignment as a senior journalist? A puff piece about the internet's latest accidental celebrity.

I never expected the man behind the meme to be Wesley — my childhood best friend and first kiss.

Now he's bearded, broody, and built like the mountain he's hiding in.

I need this story to prove myself, but am I willing to risk Wesley's new life—and our second chance at love—to get it?

Total Pages (Source): 17

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:12 am

Jill

“ T he suck my cock guy? My first big assignment as a senior journalist is to write about the suck my cock guy?” I dropped into a chair in front of my editor Heather’s desk.

“Yes, and you should be thanking me.”

I made a dismissive sound. “That story is months old. Every newspaper, blog, late night show, comedian and magazine covered it. There’s nothing left to tell.”

She had a glint in her eye when she leaned her elbows on her desk. “What was the one thing missing from every one of those stories?”

I shrugged. “A family friendly way to talk about cock ?”

She laughed. “Not a single one of them had an interview with the man himself.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Go on.” If I could get an angle on this story that no one else had, it could be huge for my career .

“I have it on good authority that he lives here now. Up on Strawberry Hill, right outside Springwood.” She held out a piece of paper with a name and address on it. “You’re welcome.” She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” I snatched the paper out of her hand and hightailed it back to my desk.

This wasn't how I pictured my first story going.

I wanted to research real hard hitting news.

Connect crime cases, investigate fraud and corruption.

Not rewrite the story of some internet rando who was on the tail end of his fifteen minutes of fame.

Even so, this had the potential to draw in readers.

It was all about ad money at the end of the day.

Everyone knew the suck my cock guy story.

It had every element the media loved: a good looking guy, a moral lesson and an excuse to talk about dicks.

Still, I needed to refresh my memory. Then I could come up with a plan on how to get him to talk to me when he had refused every news outlet in North America.

I fired up my laptop, grabbed a notepad and got to work.

Name: Wesley Watson

Age: 42

Summary:

January 2024: W posted a picture on dating site Immedi-Date. There was graffiti in the background that clearly said 'suck my cock'.

Screenshot was shared. Became a meme used to promote discussion about: women's safety online, modern dating culture, divorce rates, the decline of the modern family structure and misogyny.

February 2024: W became internet famous...or infamous? Smear campaign is more targeted towards him

Internet sleuths revealed his name and information.

Media pressure, story goes even more viral. Immedi-Feed LL C, who owns Immedi-Date, condemns him and announces new initiatives to keep users safe

March 2024: W claimed he didn't see the graffiti, apologized for any offense, then disappeared.

March 2024-July 2025: no idea

W moves to Springwood - Date?

July 2025: Story assigned to me

Questions:

Why does he live here?

What's the story I want to tell?

Does the punishment fit the crime?

I stopped writing and chewed the end of my pen.

He had already been tried and convicted in the court of public opinion.

There was no point in rehashing whether he knew the graffiti was there or not.

No one cared about that anymore. I needed a fresh angle that I could only get with his input.

What that fresh angle would be? I had no idea.

Shit.

I didn't want to talk to him without a plan, but how did I come up with a plan when I had such limited information? We all knew the Immedi-Feed's side of the story, but what was his?

I sighed and shut my laptop.

I felt the pressure to get this story right.

When you're a childless woman over forty, people expect you to either have one hell of a career, or a whole herd of cats.

I had been single for so long that thinking about dating sites and dicks all day had me eager to put pajamas on and cry into a romcom.

None of the questions I had mattered, unless I could convince him to talk to me. But how?

I scanned through a few more articles, only finding more of the same information, when my eyes caught on something. The name in the newspaper articles was Wesley Watson, but the name on the paper Heather had given me was Wesley Monroe.

Blood flooded my face at the sight of that name.

Up until I was around fourteen, I was neighbors with a boy named Wesley Monroe.

He was a year older than me in school. He had been my first crush and my first kiss.

Then he'd moved to Vancouver to live with his mom.

We'd stayed in touch for a while, but within a year or two of him moving, we'd lost contact.

Surely this wasn't the same guy? And why the name discrepancy?

Question: Is Wesley Monroe the same one I knew?

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Wesley

“Don’t feed ducks bread, it makes them sick. You’re supposed to feed them frozen peas.” Franny had told me this before, but I nodded anyway.

Agnes, Bill, Franny and Henry, who I thought of affectionately as the Fab Four, were sitting on their usual bench and feeding the birds while I prepped my tools for the repairs I needed to do on the seniors center.

Today it was replacing some drywall after a pipe burst in the kitchen.

It was basic grunt work and the pay wasn’t great.

But after my life had imploded last year, I was grateful for the breadcrumbs – or frozen peas - of work that were thrown my way.

“Wesley, when are you going to meet my Rosie? She’s a good girl. You’d like her,” Franny said.

“Rosie is too old for him. What about that nice librarian at the public library? Joan? No, Joy?” Agnes asked.

“No librarians. We’re at the library all the time. What if it doesn’t work out? You don’t crap where you eat!” Henry grumbled.

Agnes threw a pea at him.

“I appreciate your match making skills, as always. But I’m fine on my own.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing, son,” Bill said.

“Oh, leave him alone.” Unlike Bill, Henry was a lifelong bachelor and always came to my rescue when these conversations got too personal.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to meet someone.

I did.

But after the dreaded selfie-gate incident, I had a hard time trusting people. Besides, my life was a mess.

“A man needs a wife, and he can’t use the interwebs to find one. He needs our help,” Agnes told the group. She had all of the energy and pull of a cult leader without the resources.

I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be hearing this part of the conversation, so I went inside to get started on my repairs. I’d had my own plumbing business before I became public enemy number one. Once my story hit the news, no one wanted their house repaired by the suck my cock guy.

My picture had been posted next to a text that said: there are plenty of fish in the sea, but this is the fish , and men wonder why women don’t want to get married.

The writing had been on the wall, so I’d sold my company and started over in my hometown of Springwood.

I first moved to Vancouver when I was in my teens to live with my mom. I still got along with my dad, but he had remarried and was busy with a new baby.

When I'd moved to Vancouver, I'd started using my mom's last name.

Mom said it made school paperwork easier and nosey people asked fewer questions.

Really, I think it was about her ego. My parents fought hard over custody of me, but it felt like it was more about winning than about wanting me around.

When I came back to Springwood, hiding from the media, I went back to my dad's last name. So far, between the name change, keeping my hat pulled low and my mouth shut, very few people knew who I was.

Eventually, I told Nick, my boss at Springwood Contracting .

He'd wanted to call past jobs for a reference before giving me too much work, so I'd had to spill the beans.

He'd been understanding. His brother in law was now married to Rosalind Huxley, the former heiress to the Huxley Entertainment fortune and renowned media trouble maker.

So, he understood how different perception and reality could be.

The ragtag band of seniors, led by Agnes, had figured it out on their own.

They were always up on the news, not to mention total gossip hounds.

They had sworn themselves to secrecy, and I couldn't have appreciated that more.

The better I got to know them, the more protective of me they became.

I didn't envy any person who let my name cross their lips.

Of course, my entire love life was open to scrutiny by them.

I'd sworn off social media as soon as I'd issued my public apology.

Being cut off from modern society wasn't all bad.

I had enough practical skills to get handyman jobs through word of mouth.

My flip phone was way cheaper than the smartphone I'd gotten rid of.

Besides, the seniors at the center weren't big into technology anyway.

They were reminding me how to live like it was the nineties.

Or, like I was in my nineties.

Eventually, the story died down. I had quietly slipped away from the big city where I'd lived.

The cabin I bought wasn't big or fancy. It wasn't even in very good condition.

I'd slowly been working on making it my own.

My neighbors didn't seem to mind that I kept to myself.

No one built a cabin on the side of a mountain because they wanted to be social.

I had met three of my neighbors, Ash, Flynt and Clay – all part of the Strawberry Hill Search and Rescue – in passing.

The other cabins seemed to be vacant. Most of the time it was just me and the trees.

Yep, nothing sad about that at all.

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Jill

“ I ’ll take a medium coffee, one of your famous chocolate chip walnut muffins and all the info you have on a guy named Wesley.”

Charlotte, the owner of Oh, Beans! Cafe in downtown Springwood, raised an eyebrow.

She made my order, rang up the purchase then leaned on the counter and leveled me with a look.

She was a good five foot ten, with dark hair and curves I was envious of.

She had just come back to work after getting married to her husband, Nick.

“Is this line of questioning coming from my friend Jill, Jill the single woman or Jill the reporter?”

Busted.

Apparently my answer was written all over my face.

She sighed. “Kim, I’m going on break.” We settled into a table by the window.

We’d both lived in Springwood most of our lives. We both had busy careers, but still got together enough for me to trust her. I also knew that Oh, Beans! was gossip central of this town since she’d opened it last year.

“Why are you asking about Wesley?”

I took a bite of my muffin while I thought about how to word my answer.

I didn’t want to say too much and risk another journalist getting the story before I did.

The walls had ears in this town. “He has an interesting past that I’ve been asked to write a story about.

I know he works for Nick on and off and I was wondering if you knew anything that would get him to agree to an interview. ”

She nodded and glanced out the window. “Nick trusts the guy. Says he’s a hard worker and keeps his head down. I’ve met him a few times when I was dropping off coffee or snacks for the guys at a work site. Is there something I should be worried about?”

I shook my head. I had worked in media since I finished my degree almost twenty years ago.

I had floated around from magazines to broadcast channels before landing at Springwood Press five years ago.

The older I got, the more I felt like my career needed to be something impressive.

Something to brag about, to make up for the fact that I didn’t have a husband and kids at home.

I wasn’t sad that I didn’t have those things.

I was just tired of being judged for it.

Once I was hired by Springwood Press , I put more focus into getting ahead and less into writing for the love of the craft.

I had mostly been writing straightforward stories.

Covering local events like counsel meetings, sports games and the opening of new businesses.

What I wanted was to get into investigative journalism.

I wanted to dig into stories and uncover new truths.

Make a name for myself that people would recognize .

There were countless examples of journalists who rooted out corruption, solved crimes or cast light on issues that have been forgotten or ignored. Nailing my new role as senior journalist was a step in the right direction to my long term dream. Wesley's story was step one.

“No, nothing like that. I just like to get an idea of what a person is like before approaching.” I took a drink of my coffee, cursing myself for not getting the iced version since it was already hot out and I'd be bootstrapping for information today.

“When you met him, did he seem familiar to you at all?”

She frowned. “He didn't look familiar, why? Should he?”

“What if I told you his last name was Monroe? Does that ring any bells?”

She clicked her short nails on the table top. “I remember a Wesley Monroe from like, what? Twenty-five years ago. Is it the same guy?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I really should just go meet the guy and ask him, but how I approach the interview will change if it turns out I know him. Or knew him.”

She nodded. “Well, I don’t have much to tell you. I hope whatever it is you write about doesn’t cause him any trouble. Like I said, Wesley seems like a good guy.”

I bit my lip. I was trained to write in a way that was fair and balanced.

Nothing sensational. I wasn’t there to convince people of something.

I was just supposed to report the facts.

The facts, or a version of them, had already blown this guy’s life up.

The idea that I could be the reason it happened again had my coffee turning sour in my stomach.

Sadly for him, he’d already been found out.

If I didn’t write the story, someone else would.

I might as well get the points with my boss and the name recognition .

“That Wesley is a good egg. You leave him alone.” An older woman with a fluff of gray hair appeared at the edge of our table. She pointed her finger first at Charlotte then at me.

I opened the notes app on my phone. “How do you know Wesley, Mrs. um-”

“Agnes, my name is Agnes, and Wesley fixes things at the seniors center.”

“Has he ever mentioned what brought him to Springwood?”

She frowned, her bright pink lipstick highlighting the downturn of her mouth.

“Oh no, you don’t, young lady. I will not be pulled into gossip about that sweet man.

I know you write for the paper. I’ll see to it myself that you don’t get enough information to write a sentence, let alone a whole story.

That Wesley has been through enough thanks to people like you making a mountain out of a molehill. ”

Or a mountain man out of a molehill .

She turned up her nose and strutted away.

Charlotte and I looked at each other then burst out laughing. “I think you were just threatened by the senior citizen mafia.”

“Well, if I go missing, you know what happened. I guess I should get going before I get into any more trouble.” I waved goodbye to Charlotte and headed out. This story might be harder to put together than I thought.

Note: W has a fan club

Question: How and why?

The next day, I hit the ground running. I had tried to research him the night before, but couldn’t find him on social media. I did know from my encounter with Agnes that he worked at the seniors center and clearly they liked him. That gave me a few ideas of where to ask around about him.

My first stop was the library .

As a journalist, I spent a lot of time here. Sometimes for research and sometimes just for a place to write. I recognized the librarian at the front counter, so I beelined for her. “Hi, Joy.”

She gave me a genuine smile. We made small talk for a few minutes before I posed my question. “Do you happen to know a guy named Wesley? He’s a construction worker I think. Might come in here with Agnes?”

Joy rolled her lips under, her cheeks bloomed red. “No, nope, no, no, no. No one by that name. I mean, what kind of name is Wesley anyway? Is there also an Eastley and a Northly?” She forced out a fake laugh.

My brow dropped. “Agnes told you not to talk to me, huh?”

She tapped the side of her nose, before turning back to stamping books.

I spent the next few hours going all over Springwood, popping into Ruby’s diner, the hardware store, the gas station, Warrior Club gym, anywhere I thought Wesley might go. Everyone I talked to either had no idea who Wesley was, or had already been silenced by Agnes. The menace in pink lipstick.

Finally, I admitted defeat. My deadline for this story was loose but I did need to get words on a page sooner or later. I had exhausted every resource I had.

If I wanted to get to Wesley, I would have to go around Agnes and straight to the man himself.

Note: The senior citizen mafia was more powerful than anticipated.

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Wesley

My least favorite part of home maintenance had to be working on the roof.

I had patched it up when I'd moved in, but didn't want to risk it for another year.

My cabin was under the shade of towering pine trees, but even so, sweat dripped between my shoulder blades as I moved around my roof laying shingles.

I pulled my shirt over my head and tucked it into my back pocket. The work boots and safety gear were necessary, but the shirt I could live without. By the time I'd finished the job, the sun was directly overhead and sweat had soaked through the waistband of my jeans.

"I should have done this job in March," I muttered as I grabbed the last of my tools and started to descend the ladder.

The sound of an engine caught my attention.

Strawberry Hill wasn't a place that got drive-by traffic.

There was a lot of recreation in the area, hiking, hunting, cross country skiing depending on the season.

But that was in a different area of the mountain.

To get to my cabin, a person either intended to get there or their GPS was busted.

I wandered around to the front of my cabin and watched a small dark blue SUV pull up in front of my porch and shut off its engine. A long leg in a strappy sandal stepped into the dust next to the car. I wiped a bead of sweat from my brow.

A woman exited the car and hesitated for a moment before slamming the door. She was tall and slim, with her straight, auburn hair cut into a blunt bob. She was wearing a business casual looking blouse and capri pants. What the hell she was doing out here in the middle of nowhere was beyond me.

She stepped forward with a confident stride, dry sticks and pine needles crunching under her feet. She looked vaguely familiar but still my shoulders tensed.

I pulled my hat lower over my brow.

The media can't have caught up with me again could they?

My stomach plummeted at the idea of having to pick up my life and start it over...

again. "Can I help you?" I was shirtless, filthy and sweating like a pig, but if this person was here to blow up my life, they could deal with it.

After a year in Springwood, I thought I was a little less defensive, but having someone pull up to my house unannounced was suspicious enough to have me on edge.

"Hi, are you Wesley?" She pushed her sunglasses from her face to the top of her head. Her eyes flicked over my bare chest before landing on my face.

"You pulled up to my house, shouldn't you know?"

She shifted her weight so her face was in shadow.

As soon as the sun's glare disappeared, I caught sight of the color of her eyes— an interesting cerulean color that I knew I'd seen before.

It took me a moment to place them and my eyebrows shot up when I finally did.

My neighbor growing up had those same eyes.

They'd seemed to dance between blue and green depending on the light.

I'd spent hours looking into those eyes.

The person I remember was only a young teenager. If this was her, she'd grown up well.

She stepped forward. "I should introduce myself, I'm—"

"Jill."

She had reached out her hand to shake mine but she let it drop as I said her name. "Yeah, you remember me?" She asked the question almost shyly, which wasn't the Jill I remembered.

"Of course." How could I forget the first woman whose lips had ever touched mine?

She'd been tall even when we were teens.

Just a hair shy of six feet. The long, lanky limbs I remembered had been replaced by curves in all the right places.

She had a professional polish to her, from her manicured nails to her fancy ass clothes.

“I’m not exactly dressed for company, but...

” I gestured to the two Adirondack chairs on my front porch.

I’d been meaning to sand them down and stain them, or at least wipe the cobwebs off, but I hadn’t gotten around to it.

Jill took a seat on the worn wooden chair like it didn’t bother her and my heart warmed thinking she might still be the person I remembered.

I excused myself to splash some water on my face and put on a shirt. I stepped back out onto the porch handing her a bottle of water before cracking one open for myself. “So what brings you to my neck of the woods?”

She crossed one leg over the other and twisted in her seat to face me. “Haven’t seen you in over twenty-five years. Seemed like a visit was in order. ”

“So you missed me, is what you’re saying?”

She laughed. Something I had always loved about her was that her laugh was never understated or discrete.

When she laughed, she did it with her whole body.

Seeing her do it again now, even when my joke wasn’t remotely funny, warmed my chest in a way I hadn’t felt in too damn long.

“I did. Life wasn’t the same around here after you left. ” She picked at the side of her nail.

“Life wasn’t the same for me after I left either.

” I swallowed. Even before my parents had gotten divorced, they were both focused on the sins of the other.

Anything to do with me was just to goad each other.

I came to feel invisible until Jill came along and saw only me.

She was my friend. My person. My confidant.

And none of that had to do with proving something to someone else.

Her family and home life were stable at a time when mine wasn't, so she could be there for me. And I leaned on her like a porch railing.

I'd loved working with my hands even back then.

I tinkered on everything from the toaster to the lawnmower to my first car, and she was there with me.

Listening to me, distracting me or just being there when my own parents weren't.

It probably wasn't as bad as I made it out to be in my mind.

But going from a spoiled only child to invisible had me searching for someone, and I'd found her.

She wasn't just convenient, though. She was my perfect opposite: book smarts to my practical skills; passionate to my disinterest; organized to my laid back. She kept me out of my own head and had me thinking of things in ways I hadn't before.

She kept us out of trouble, gave me a different perspective, encouraged me to look at

things from all angles. She was my voice of reason and I pushed her to try new things.

My dad had been a great provider and I'd talked to my mom regularly even after she moved to Vancouver. Neither one wanted to hear about how the divorce had hurt me unless it was to put blame on the other. I didn't feel heard or seen by either one of them, but I did by Jill.

Since putting myself into exile after the selfie-gate situation, those lonely invisible feelings had returned.

And now here was Jill again. The one person who had been able to read me. To see past my shrugs of indifference to what was really going on inside. It couldn't be a coincidence that she was on my front porch right now, could it?

In the year before I'd moved away, I'd noticed something else about her. She was a girl and I was a boy and I'd wanted to know what it felt like to kiss her.

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Jill

My professional mask threatened to slip when I saw Wesley emerge around the side of his cabin sweaty and shirtless. His dirty blond hair was the same but now it extended into a short beard that highlighted the strength of his jaw. He was wider and stronger than he had been as a kid.

Puberty had done this man some favors.

The fact that he knew who I was from a look had my heart remembering what it felt like to be fourteen and crushing on a boy for the first time.

Noticing the smile on his lips not only because it made me smile too but because I wanted him to press them to mine.

Memories rushed through my mind of summers spent barefoot and exploring.

Him always pushing me to try something new, me always reminding him to be careful.

We'd balanced each other. I'd been an ear when he'd needed it because his parents weren't getting along and he'd been the one to break me out of my shell.

I needed to interview him. I had to take the trust my old friend had in me and use it to get him to agree to a story.

I took another drink of water to digest the idea.

Building a career I loved but also was proud of was my focus, but this was Wesley.

Maybe since it had been a year since he'd moved he'd be okay with rehashing the whole thing? There was one way to find out.

“So what have you been up to in the last few decades?”

He shrugged. “Became a plumber, worked and paid taxes. Now I’m back here.”

“How wonderfully vague of you. Anything else? Wife? Kids? Prison term?” I bit my lip, his relationship status more important to me than I’d realized.

He shook his head, his eyes flicking to my lips before turning back to watching where he was scuffing his boot against the floor of the deck. “You?”

I gave a humorless laugh. “Hopelessly single and the proud mom of three house plants that have managed to survive my erratic watering schedule. Career is number one for me right now. I’m a writer.”

“You always were the independent type.” If the idea of me being a writer put his walls up, he showed no signs of it.

“Except with you.” I felt a blush in my cheeks.

“Yeah, except with me.”

We slipped into a rhythm of conversation that had collected dust but came back easily.

My article became the furthest thing from my mind.

“Do you remember that time you tried to burn bugs off the front bumper of your dad's car using a lighter? Man you thought that was such a good idea, until he came out and saw the paint damage. ”

He chuckled and fiddled with the label on his water bottle. “You always learned from books and careful research. I was more of a fuck around and find out kinda kid.”

“Has that changed?”

The corner of his mouth ticked up. “I’ve had a lot of years of trial and error since the last time you and I did a project together. No more fires, I promise.”

I held out my pinky finger like we used to when we were kids. “Pinky promise?” He snorted a laugh but held out his hand and linked his pinky finger with mine.

Not being a doctor, I had no idea if there was a nerve that connected the pinky finger to the female fun zone .

There had to be with how quickly I felt that little bit of contact between my thighs.

Granted, sex had been more of a memory than a reality in my life for the last few years.

Even so, I did a lot of shaking hands in my job and had never had it send a tingle through me like this one did.

He gave my pinky a bit of a squeeze before letting his hand fall away.

As the sun moved closer to the horizon we traded in our water bottles for beers and Wesley threw some meat on the barbecue.

I hadn't planned on staying here this long, but being around him had the same calming effect on me it always had.

Our conversation was flirtier than they had been when we were younger, but we weren't hormonal virgins anymore, either.

"I'm really glad you stopped by," Wesley said as he cleared out empty plates from the table.

Even though I'd stopped after one beer I felt light and giddy.

I could easily have spent the whole evening on his front porch as the air got cooler, but Wesley looked beat.

Besides, I had shown up under false pretenses and I didn't feel good about it .

I needed to go.

I'd forgotten just how attached to him I'd been. I'd underestimated how fast that bond would come back. I couldn't have a lie sitting between us. "Thanks for dinner and letting me crash your afternoon chores."

Wesley nodded, running a hand through his hair in a way that had his bicep flexing distractingly. "I'll walk you to your car."

My car was literally fifteen feet away, but I didn't protest. We walked towards my SUV in silence but before I could open my driver's side door he spoke. "Do you remember the last time I said goodbye to you? Before I moved to Vancouver?"

I turned to face him, leaning against my driver's door and nodded.

That had been the first and only time we'd kissed.

It hadn't been a goodbye kiss, though. It had been a tease of what we could have had but never got the chance to.

It was a way for us to communicate what we meant to each other when the words were too hard to find. That's what it was for me anyway.

"It was a pretty great goodbye." His eyes dropped to my lips.

"Are you thinking you want to say goodbye the same way now?" Logically, I knew kissing him when I hadn't told him the truth was a bad idea. But out here in the mountain, spending time just the two of us like when we were young, shoved all those thoughts to the back burner.

He rested a hand against the door of my car, angling his taller body so we were face to face. He smelled faintly of smoke from the barbecue. His pec flexed distractingly under his shirt as he leaned in.

My head was swimming. I wanted to hook my fingers into the belt loops of his sinfully well fitting jeans and pull him to me.

I wanted to blurt out the secret that only I knew was between us.

More than anything I wanted to feel the same connection I'd felt when we'd first kissed more than two decades ago.

"That's exactly what I'm thinking," he said, but didn't make a move to follow through. He was leaving the decision to me, and for me it was no decision at all. I slid a hand around the back of his neck, feeling his sun heated skin under my palm and pulled his lips to mine.

He kept his body at a respectful distance - unfortunately - still, I melted under his kiss.

The pillow soft touch of his lips had my knees forgetting how to function.

The car and my desire not to lose contact were the only things keeping me standing.

He was a complete gentleman, his tongue remained in his mouth, his hand stayed off my ass, but the way his breath caught in his throat had me holding him close for just a second longer.

Reluctantly, I let him go. I knew one thing for sure as my lips touched his for the second time in my life. I couldn't write that article.

I all but skidded around the corner into Heather's office the next morning. I had no idea what I could say that would convince her this story was a dead end, but figured I would come up with something on the fly.

"Morning, Jill," she said as I cleared the doorway into her office, trying not to huff and puff after running up the stairs.

"Morning. I'm not going to write the suck my cock guy article."

She raised an eyebrow in my direction.

"The guy's been living a boring life under the radar since the whole thing blew up. There's no story. Nothing new to report."

She swiped her tongue over her teeth and studied me. I fought the urge to squirm. "I

told you he had never agreed to an interview before. Were you able to talk to him? Part of being a more senior journalist is having to dig for the story rather than just reporting what you see.”

My jaw clenched and I took a breath. I knew what was expected of me and I had intended to do anything to live up to the expectation.

But not this. So I did the only thing I could– I covered a lie with another one.

“I did have a chat with him, yes. Not a formal interview. He’s boring, like I said.

I’d rather my first article be something with more meat on the bones. ”

She tapped her nails on the table.

“I’ll come up with something even better and have it for you in a week.”

Finally, she took a deep breath and nodded. “Fine, get me something good.”

Note: this has to be the best article I’ve ever written

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:12 am

Wesley

I was on a high from my unexpected visitor. I wouldn't say I'd thought of Jill as the one that got away, but I had wondered if life would have been different if I hadn't moved. Would we have dated? Gotten married? Had two point five kids and a white picket fence?

We'd never know. What I did know was that the two of us might just have a second chance at...

something. I hadn't been able to resist kissing her goodbye.

I'd needed her to know that friendship wasn't the only thing on my mind.

I hadn't wanted her to think I was some creep though.

The selfie-gate incident had me hyper aware of how I was perceived, especially by someone I was interested in.

Had I wanted to take it further?

God, yes.

Did I think she wanted me to take it further?

I was pretty sure she had. But, hell what did I know about women?

We weren't kids anymore, but we did have a connection. Eventually, I would have to tell her what brought me back to Springwood. For now, I was content to get to know her again.

"So, what is it this time?" I asked the room at large as I walked into the seniors center a few days after my visit with Jill.

Agnes stepped forward to speak for the group as usual. "There was a mouse, maybe even a rat in the furnace room. I saw it and—"

Henry cut her off. "Did you have your glasses? And not the kind that holds wine."

She harrumphed. "I know what I saw."

"And I know it took you ten tries to park your car in the lot this morning and you still hit the curb."

"I don't see what one has to do with—"

"Never mind. I'll check it out," I said. These fights were known to last all day and I apparently had a mouse, real or imaginary, to catch.

Franny appeared while Agnes and Henry continued to bicker. "What has you smiling like a fool, Wesley?"

I sighed. Half my billable hours at this place were just getting grilled by the Fab Four.

"Can't I just be happy to see such a lovely lady?"

Agnes stopped fighting with Henry and turned back to me. "I'd have expected your pants to catch right on fire with a whopper of a lie like that."

“Unless your eyesight is as bad as hers,” Henry said, pointing towards Agnes with his chin.

“How dare you—” Agnes started.

“I had a date.”

Four sets of eyes pivoted to me, and I sensed my mistake .

Agnes rubbed her hands together and sat at the table, her fight with Henry forgotten for now. “Sit, sit, sit. Tell us everything.”

Town gossip was like a soap opera to this group.

I rubbed at the space between my eyebrows but dropped into a chair as I was told. Sometimes my friendship with these four felt more like a hostage situation. “Don’t get too excited. I was just catching up with an old friend.”

Agnes and Franny exchanged a look. “A lady friend? How exciting!” Franny clasped her hands in front of her chest. A large emerald ring I knew her late husband had given her sparkled on her hand.

As much as all the people at the seniors center, but especially these four, drove me crazy, I could appreciate that they had life experiences that I didn’t have.

“Yes, a lady friend. I made her dinner. Right now, there is nothing else to tell. But I will be sure to let you know when there is.”

“Dinner? That’s it. What about flowers, chocolates, a trip to the movies? A lady expects to be wined and dined son.” Bill had been married to the same woman his entire life until she’d passed a few years ago. He was a true romantic, even now.

“Pfft,” Henry said dismissively. “Wesley and I are lifelong bachelors. We love ‘em and we leave ‘em. You can’t tie men like us down.” He put an arm around my shoulders and met Agnes’s glare.

“I’m not talking about tying down. I’m talking about reining in. You, Henry, need supervision. Our Wesley needs love. He isn’t cranky like you, so there’s still time.” Agnes smiled at me fondly.

My heart warmed a little at her words. I liked the idea that forty-two wasn’t too late for love.

“But don’t scare this one away either. The days are long, but the years are short, and this town is woefully lacking in single women.”

“Gee thanks Agnes.”

Her face softened. “You know we just want to see you happy. Many people are happy alone but I don’t think you are.”

Her words hit home and my chest tightened.

I didn’t want to get into a heart to heart right now.

I was lonely. I did want someone in my life.

What I didn’t want was to put pressure on my relationship with Jill when it was only twenty-four hours old after a twenty-five year hiatus.

I was also once bitten, twice shy about putting myself out there.

“On that note, I am going to go mouse hunting.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:12 am

Jill

“Careful. If you keep showing up here, I’m going to think you like me,” Wesley said as I stepped out of my car into his dusty driveway. The sun was powerful even at nine in the morning. It was going to be another scorcher.

I rolled my eyes. “Well, we wouldn’t want that.” I let my eyes scan over him. He was in blue jeans so faded on the thigh that they were practically white, with a black t-shirt and ball cap. He had paint speckled work boots on his feet and tools spread out on the ground around him.

“What are you up to?”

“Replacing the boards on my front steps. I don’t get many visitors, but after you stopped by the other day I realized I should get them fixed ASAP. They are rotten as hell.”

“Oh.” I should have called before I showed up, but I hadn’t thought to ask him for his number.

I’d been busy over the week researching and writing about an unsolved crime that had happened a decade ago.

It wasn’t as hard hitting or ground breaking as I had hoped for for my first article, but Heather was happy and Wesley was safe.

“Well I should leave you to it,” I turned to leave but he caught my wrist.

“No, no, no! You’re here now, you can help. Hand me that big hammer over there.”

I glanced around, finding the tool in the dust, and picked it up. It was heavy in my hand and the metal of the handle was hot from the sun. “Pfft. you call this big?”

He grinned, taking it from my hand. “It’s all about how you swing it.” He knelt down, the muscles in his back rippling as he pounded the nail through the board in one swing.

Fuck that was hot.

Competence kink activated. Or maybe re-activated.

He pulled a pencil from behind his ear and a tape measure from his waist. He used a triangle ruler to draw a straight line, then cut through the board with a saw he had set up on the ground.

Sawdust scattered into the air landing on his shoulders and hat, filling the air with the smell of fresh cut lumber.

It almost sparkled in the late morning sun giving the whole scene a surreal quality.

A very sexy surreal quality. “You want to nail this one?”

I pulled my eyes from where they were stuck to his ass and bit the inside of my cheek. “Tools were always your thing.”

“Then it’s well past time you learned. Come on, grab my hammer and get over here.”

He had to be making these double entendres on purpose.

As much as I did not want to accidentally smack my thumb with a hammer, this scenario brought me back to when we were teenagers and we'd hang out at his place while he tinkered with the old beater car he'd been trying to fix up .

I grabbed the hammer from where he'd set it aside and knelt next to him.

He pulled a nail from a pouch on the tool belt and handed it to me. "Put the nail right there," he pointed to a spot on the board. "And fire away."

I swung the hammer clumsily and hit the head slightly off center. The hammer ricocheted off and smacked the wood, leaving a perfectly round dent. I frowned at it.

"Eight out of ten on the swing, two out of ten on the accuracy. You are a bit of a hazard."

I shoved his shoulder. "You're one to talk. Do you remember when you were fixing up that old Pontiac and decided to test the engine...in the garage. You did a burnout and filled the whole garage with burning tire smoke."

He laughed. "In my defense, I was like fourteen. I didn't even have a license. My dad probably should have been keeping an eye on me." His smile faded.

Just like old times, I pulled him out of his melancholy. "Let me try again." I did, but with the same result.

"Alright, before you turn my new step into Swiss cheese, let me help." He shuffled over until his side was pressing against mine, warm and strong.

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and put his big, callused hands over my smaller ones.

Together we lifted the hammer and my breath caught at the feel of his biceps flexing against my arms. He held my arm straight as I brought the hammer down and the nail slid halfway into the wood.

“No dents this time.” I turned and beamed at him. His face was so close it would have taken no effort to close the gap between us and kiss him again. It was all I had been thinking about since I left here the other day .

“One down, a dozen more to go.” His eyes darted to my lips but turned back to his project.

“Getting hot out already.”

“It is,” I murmured, then cleared my throat.

My help was more of a hindrance, but he insisted I work with him until the job was done.

Once all the tools were picked up he turned his focus to me. “You weren’t really dressed for carpentry.” He ran his eyes over me as he dusted sawdust from my blouse.

“Are you really concerned about my clothes or is this just an excuse to grope me?”

“Can’t it be both?” He slid his hands over my shoulders to my lower back and pulled me closer to his chest.

“It can definitely be both. I’m more interested in one than the other right about now.” I leaned into him, the width of his chest enclosing my smaller frame.

“Well, it is a nice shirt,” he joked as he tightened his arms around me and brought our

lips together. “Still want you to take it off, though.”

Note: First story as senior journalist complete and Wesley is hot!

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:12 am

Wesley

Mr. Cool I was not.

The sun was streaking through the trees casting a glow around Jill and the idea of an extended get to know ya period was pushed to the back of my mind.

This was Jill.

It may have been two and a half decades since we'd been around each other but everything had slipped right back into place. She kept me out of my head. She made me laugh and right now she was making me so hard I could pound nails – without a hammer.

Jill hooked her fingers through the belt loops of my jeans, pulling me after her up the steps we'd built without her lips leaving mine.

The steel toe of my work boot caught on the first step and she laughed against my lips even as her back hit the solid wood of my front door.

I fumbled with the door knob behind her back and we stumbled inside.

My blood was running hot, my breath coming fast and every stitch of clothing on my skin needed to go. Now.

Jill squeaked as I wrapped my arms under her ass and picked her up. Luckily, my cabin wasn't that big, so I had her back on my bed and my hips between her thighs in

record time.

Her hands slipped under my t-shirt and up my back.

Her tongue was in my mouth battling with mine, her legs tightened around my hips and the assault on my senses had a growl ripping from my throat.

I'd never growled in my entire life. I'm not a bear, but it was the only thing my body could manage to do besides hang on.

Something sharp dug into my lower back and I slid my hand down her leg to find that she was wearing sandals with a million little straps and buckles on them. "These have to go, and I don't have enough blood flow to my brain to figure out how to get them undone."

She laughed and sat up. "You're one to talk. Those work boots have more hardware than a Home Depot."

She had a point. "Okay, pause." Reluctantly, I pushed myself off her and took a few steps back.

She looked so fucking good half reclined on my bed that I was tempted to say fuck it, shove both our pants down to our knees and get the job done.

But, we weren't teenagers anymore. The fact that our first time together was happening at forty and not fourteen meant I could do a little better than half-assed fumbling. "Take your shoes off."

She cocked her head in challenge. "Take your boots off."

We held eye contact for one heated moment before I bent and started undoing my

laces. She watched until I kicked my first boot away before starting to tackle her buckles and straps with nimble fingers. “You follow instructions better than you did when we were kids,” she joked .

“Yeah, well, I have better motivation these days.” I gestured to the very obvious tent in the front of my jeans.

“Motivation is good. Now, take your jeans off.” She reclined back on her elbows, her bare toes skimming the rough hardwood floors.

I didn’t get embarrassed easily after the events of the last year or so, but I felt my ears heat as I brought my hand to the top of my jeans and popped the button. “I hope you’re not expecting me to do a little stripper dance.”

She laughed, her eyes following my fingers as they lowered my zipper. “No, no dancing. I spent a lot of hours admiring you when we were teens. But you’ve changed a lot since then.”

I shoved my jeans to the ground and unhooked them from my ankles all while she watched with rapt interest. I tossed my jeans to the side. “You weren’t the only one watching back then. Your turn.”

She lifted her hips from the bed, hooking her thumbs into the top of her tight fitting capri’s and slid them down her thighs. She kicked her feet until the fabric hit the floor but my eyes were glued to where a pair of black panties rested below her hip bones.

I started to stalk towards her, eager to get my hands on all that bare skin, but I was stopped when she raised a hand.

“Shirt, too.”

I stopped a foot away from where her bare legs were dangling off the end of my bed.

She brought one bare foot up and slid it up the side of my calf. I scrambled to grab the collar of my shirt where it rested against the back of my neck and ripped it over my head.

The smile that I'd loved since the first time I put it on her face spread across her lips and she hooked both her heels around my knees, pulling me closer. I planted a hand on either side of her shoulders and leaned over her.

"Definitely changed since our days swimming in the lake," she said as she ran her hands over my chest. I wasn't in my twenties anymore.

Muscle definition was still there but it had a little padding from the stress of the last few years.

Some of the hair that covered my chest was gray, a development which had freaked me out when I'd first noticed it.

I couldn't have been self conscious about any of that if I tried with the way she was eating me up with her eyes.

"Took way too long to get my hands on you," she murmured, bringing her hands to rest on the waistband of my boxers.

I leaned down, pushing the bottom hem of her top out of the way with my nose and kissing a strip along her hip.

Her skin smelled sweet, with a hint of sawdust, a smell she picked up from me.

The idea of my scent on her skin gave me a possessive caveman feeling towards the

woman laid out like a sexy buffet before me. “We can make up for that right now.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:12 am

Jill

Lying on my back, looking up at miles of Wesley's touchable, bare skin was a dream come true going back to when I was a teenager who knew nothing about sex.

Not that I claimed to be an expert now, but at the very least I was confident enough to ask for what I wanted, and his lips on my skin was a hell of a good place to start.

I dug my heels into the mattress, the blanket cool under my overheated skin, and crab walked up the bed. Wesley followed on hands and knees, stalking his way up my body with heat in his eyes and a drool-worthy bulge in his boxers.

"I can't believe I have you in my bed after all these years," he said, bringing his lips to my neck and kissing his way down to my collarbone. "It doesn't feel real."

I reached my hand out and cupped him, taking hold of his length and giving him a slow stroke. "Feel real now?" His only reply was a grunt, then his hands were on the hem of my shirt and it was sailing across the room.

"It won't feel completely real until we're both naked."

We kissed and touched, our movements growing more frantic.

I managed to hook my toes into the band of his boxers and shove them over his hips, leaving me a nice view of an even nicer ass.

As soon as the fabric cleared his cock and it sprang free, he canted his hips against

my center and every nerve ending in my core gave a little cheer. “Do that again.”

He brought his hands around my back, unhooking my bra as he ground himself between my legs.

We both made a gasping sound and then my panties were gone.

Now it was just us, skin to skin, chest to chest. He slid down my body enough that he could tease my nipples with his mouth and I laid back and enjoyed the sensation.

His mouth was hot and wet, his tongue sinful, his beard scratchy in the best way.

I could smell sawdust in his hair where his head moved against my chest and I was torn between the impulse to let him worship my body, or flip the script and taste every inch of his bare skin.

Did I really have to decide?

Would we only do this one time? I doubted it enough that when he moved his mouth farther down my stomach and shoved my thighs open with his wide shoulders, I buried my hands in the soft strands of his hair and directed him where I wanted him most.

He chuckled against my skin but let me move his head until the first swipe of his tongue landed right against my already sensitive clit.

“Fuck,” I murmured. I was a journalist. I wrote for a living. I’d spent four years in college learning how to be articulate, witty and accurate. With all that expertise, I could be sure that the word fuck was the only one that could describe the feeling of his tongue on me.

Always a quick study, Wesley continued slicking his tongue over my center, varying the pressure but never missing that one spot I needed him most. It was rare for my mind to just quiet down and let me be in the moment but that is exactly what his touch did to me.

I was reduced to a moaning blob of Jill, mumbling praise and gripping his hair like a lifeline.

An orgasm teased at the edge of my senses and I shut my eyes tight, afraid it might skirt around the edges but never actually hit.

I'd been there more than once and it was more frustrating than Monday morning traffic.

One of his big callused hands came to rest between my hip bones and he skated it up my chest, seeming to touch my skin just because he could.

That thought was enough to push me over the edge.

My back bowed and he clamped one arm over my hips to keep his face right between my thighs until the orgasm started to fade.

Before I'd caught my breath, he grabbed me around one knee and flipped me like I weighed nothing.

He lifted my hips with one hand and shoved a pillow under them with the other.

"You look so fucking sexy like this," he said, his hands sliding up the backs of my thighs before coming to rest on my ass cheeks.

I wiggled my hips. "You going to do something about it?"

Wesley rooted around in his night stand for a moment before I heard the telltale sound of a condom wrapper opening.

A moment later, he leaned over me, hands coming to rest on either side of my shoulders, and slid into me in one smooth stroke.

My arms were laying uselessly by my sides, my face was mashed into the mattress and my ass was in the air.

He rested his hips against me once he was fully inside and the stretch was unbelievable.

“Shit, that feels good.” I could feel his forehead resting against the middle of my back. His body heat surrounded me, and I was caged in a place I never wanted to get out of anyway. To encourage him to move I squeezed my inner muscles and smirked when I felt his muscles contract in response.

“Oh, you want to play like that, huh?”

I squeezed them again.

He chuckled but it was strained. “Alright, as the lady demands.”

He pulled out of me until only the head remained inside, then snapped his hips forward.

I groaned as the deep contact set my nerves on fire. He did it again with the same result. I could feel every glorious inch when he moved out followed by an intense burst of heat and pleasure. I was lighting up like a Christmas tree inside in a way I wasn’t sure I ever had.

He leaned over me, his chest almost resting on my back, his hands up over my shoulders and started snapping his hips faster, over and over. I scrambled to get my arms above my head, bracing them against the headboard so I could push back against his thrusts.

Sweat pricked my skin as we continued in this backwards tug of war, both chasing the same goal.

His breath ghosted over the skin of my neck.

Being on my stomach I couldn't reach my clit and without some sort of stimulation, I normally would never be able to finish.

Somehow I could feel the pressure building as Wesley worked his hips.

"Fuck, I'm going to come," he mumbled, picking up speed more than I thought possible. "Can you come like this?"

Between my face smashed into the mattress and my arms straining to hold my body in place my answer was an incoherent mumble.

Whether he understood or not, he acted on it, managing to wedge one of his big hands between my body and the mattress enough to slide it between my folds.

It was sloppy, uncoordinated, sweaty and feral, but when his muscles all locked up and he let out a strangled cry, fuck if I didn't follow him right over the edge.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:12 am

Wesley

My smile was all but tattooed on my face the day after Jill's visit.

Getting laid would do that for a guy. Especially given how long my dry spell had been.

I had already been single for months when I joined the online dating site.

I didn't even have one date before my selfie broke the internet and I went into hiding.

Now that I had been with Jill, it felt worth the wait. Not to say I wanted to wait that long for a repeat. There was something about being with someone you were totally comfortable with that made the whole thing better. The anticipation was higher. The payoff was indescribable.

I didn't want to jump the gun and start seeing a future that was us since I didn't know where she stood, but when I really thought about it, she came to me.

Both times I'd seen her she came to me. Granted, I had initiated the first kiss.

And I was the one who made the hammer-dick jokes and put my arms around her and suggested she take her top off...

what was my point? Right, she came to me.

We both came, but it started with her. Her perfectly polished image stepping into my

driveway.

Her grabbing a tool and jumping right in like she used to when we were kids.

And the whole new experience of her naked skin under my lips.

Getting ahead of myself was something I needed to avoid, but the reality was, for the first time since I saw my face on a meme about assholes on dating sites, I felt like I wasn't in survival mode.

Maybe my future wasn't going to revolve around one crappy selfie.

Maybe I could trust someone and they could trust me and the whole viral bullshit could just be a blip in the story of my life.

Maybe.

With the way my life has gone, I should have known that my good feeling wouldn't last long.

I could all but feel the temperature dip to sub zero as I walked into the seniors center.

I was there to fix a leaky sink, but it seemed like I should check the air conditioning unit while I was there.

Then my eyes landed on Agnes and I realized the chill was coming off of her.

She was pacing while Franny, Bill and Henry watched from a nearby table.

“We need a plan. We can't let this story get published.”

“What’s going—“

Henry grabbed my arm and steered me away from the table before I could complete my question. “I hate to break it to you, son, but you’re up shit creek without a paddle here. You know what I’m saying? You’re caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. You’re in a spot tighter than a—”

“I get what you’re saying Henry, thank you. But, what are you talking about?”

“Agnes is all up in a tizzy over your article and is fixing to raise hell.”

My eyebrows dropped. My heart dropped even further. “What article?”

“That reporter woman, Jill something, was sniffing around for a story about you last week. Well, you better believe I shut that down. I told her what she could do with her questions. Talked to everyone I knew too about not telling her a thing. Told them you were a good egg and that if they said anything, they’d be dealing with me, by god.

” Agnes sniffed. “When the Sunday paper came out with no mention of you, I thought it was all over. But, my grandson was at the newspaper office fixing the copier yesterday. You know my grandson, Kason? Terrible name, which I told his mother when he was born, but he’s a good kid. You know what he saw?”

I shrugged, trying to follow as she bounced between topics.

“A list of stories they were planning for the next edition including Misogynistic Meme Guy Hiding out in Springwood. The list could be from the week before I suppose, but we can’t take that chance. Of all the nerve...”

She continued to grumble but I stopped listening.

A numbness had spread out from my hands and was working its way through me.

I realized I was clenching my fists but didn't seem to be able to do anything about it.

When Jill and I had been talking at my place, we hadn't talked about work much.

Mostly I had skirted the topic. I was pissed I'd had to sell my business, thanks to going viral.

She had said in passing that she was a writer, but hadn't stayed on the subject long.

I thought she had sensed I didn't want to talk about work and had changed the subject for me.

Now I wasn't so sure. My oldest friend wouldn't have come to my house, flirted with me and implied she wanted more just to use me for a story.

She definitely wouldn't fuck me for one.

Would she?

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:12 am

Jill

“Thanks for passing on the suck my cock guy article,” my coworker Anthony said, appearing over my shoulder as I poured myself a coffee.

I was still in a bit of an orgasm induced haze from my time with Wesley, so it took me a minute to catch up. “I didn’t pass on the article. I canceled it. No story to tell.”

He shrugged, leaning a hip against the counter as I spooned sugar into my cup.

I knew I needed to talk to Wesley about his past. Tell him that I knew what had happened.

That I had been tasked with writing his story.

That I believed him when he said he didn’t see the graffiti and frankly even if he did, it was at worst a tasteless joke.

Besides, the idea of watching every muscle in his core contract as I wrapped my lips around his dick wasn’t nearly as offensive as the world made it out to be. Suck my cock guy, indeed.

“Well, that wasn’t my understanding,” Anthony said, pulling me out of my head.

“I told Heather I wanted to take a crack at the story and she approved it. I just wanted to see if you had any notes I could use as a starting off point? No reason to redo research you’ve already done.

If there is enough there, I can put both our names on the article. ”

I froze.

“What angle were you thinking for the story? It’s all been said.”

He shrugged again, his nonchalance about the idea of blowing someone’s life up pissing me off more than it had the right to. I mean, if it hadn’t been Wes, I would have written the story and not looked back. “What’s he been up to? Why is he here, maybe? Follow up a year later.”

My mind was racing. He can’t write the story.

I needed a reason to give him besides the fact that I’d been naked in Wesley’s bed just a day before and he was too nice to be dragged into the public eye again.

“Heather said the only way to get a new story out of it was to interview the guy. That’s a roadblock I don’t think you can get through. ”

He smirked. “Maybe it was a roadblock you couldn’t get through.”

“What does that mean?” I thunked my coffee mug on the break room counter harder than necessary.

That fucking shrug again. “Maybe I have a few extra tricks up my sleeve. Won’t know until I at least try. This story will get a lot of reads for whoever pulls it off.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck .

My pulse raced as I skirted past my desk, thumping my thigh on the corner and not caring. I skidded into Heather’s office and stopped in front of her desk. “The cock

guy story, we killed it. Right?” I managed to say between huffs of breath .

“What?”

I held up a finger and put my hands on my knees fighting to catch my breath. Man, I needed to get back to doing cardio. Once I was relatively sure I wasn't dying, I tried again. “I told you there was no story for the suck my cock guy . Rumor mill has it Anthony is writing it.”

She crossed her arms over her chest as if this little change of plans didn't have the potential to fuck up my love life. “Jill, what is going on?”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed and gestured to the chair across from her desk which I dropped into. “I'm your boss but I'm also your friend. Why are you so invested in this particular story and whether it gets written or not? You know this is not how journalism works.”

I did know. Especially for a newspaper. We needed to get stories out quickly, one publication a week.

Not to mention that a lot of what we wrote about was time sensitive.

Agonizing over and rehashing a story idea for this long wasn't even close to the norm.

I needed Heather on my side and I saw no way to get there except to tell the truth.

“I started researching Wesley's story. In the last year he has relocated, changed his last name, and now lives up on Strawberry Hill hiding from the world.

It didn't seem fair to throw his life into turmoil again. ”

She chewed the inside of her cheek and studied me. “So he means something to you, is that it?”

“I slept with him.” The words flew out of my mouth and I sank further into my chair, as she blinked at me.

“Wait, you slept with Anthony or the suck my cock guy .”

“The suck my cock guy , Wesley. I realized I knew him from when we were kids. We grew up together. I...we...there might be something there. Something real.”

Her eyes widened in understanding. “So did you kill the story because there isn't one or because you don't want to drag your boyfriend's name through the mud?”

“There's nothing new to tell besides a man hiding from the world because he was made an example of. The punishment didn't fit the alleged crime at the time and sure as hell doesn't make sense to put him through it a second time.”

“So, what's the truth about why you wanted to kill the story then?”

“I don't know. Some weird, misplaced protective instinct, I guess.”

She smirked. “How'd that work out?”

I shot her a look.

“What do you want me to do here, Jill? Tell a journalist not to write a story because another journalist has a crush? This story will hit the news again at some point. You're fighting an uphill battle.”

She was right and I knew that. Still, I had to do something. “Let me write it then. I can write it some way that won’t blow his life up.”

She rolled her lips under. “I need something to print, Jill. I can’t put out a blank newspaper because stories keep getting shuffled.”

My heart was starting to race. I understood where she was coming from but I couldn’t take no for an answer. Not on this. Not with him. “I’ll get you enough puff pieces to fill a hundred newspapers if you just assign this one to me and call Anthony off.”

Her eyes softened and I knew I had won before she gave the nod.

Note: Fix this clusterfuck.

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Wesley

Fixing the leaky sink at the seniors center was as simple as a new gasket.

I did the familiar task on autopilot then snuck out the side door to avoid talking to Agnes and the rest of the Fab Four.

After a year in Springwood, my past had caught up with me.

That was a hard enough pill to swallow without considering Jill's part in it.

To what extent our interactions were real and what was fake, I had no idea.

What I did know was that she was tasked with writing a story about me and she didn't tell me.

She knew my whole sordid past and didn't mention that either.

All traces of the optimism I had felt just this morning evaporated as I pulled into my driveway.

My eyes caught on the new stairs, the roof repairs and the Adirondack chairs on the front porch.

I had spent hours on this place, clearing brush, pressure washing the outside, upgrading electrical and plumbing where it was needed.

It was slowly becoming mine, and now I'd probably have to leave it.

It was bad enough when my face had become recognizable in a big city.

In a small place like Springwood? Everyone would know who I was, or think they did, anyway.

I wouldn't be Wesley - plumber, handyman and friend to senior citizens.

I'd be the misogynist. The bad guy. The face of every toxic man a woman had ever met.

The sound of an engine cut through my pity party before I'd even gotten my key in my front door. Without turning around, I knew who it was and I hated that my heart gave a little skip.

Jill.

She thought I mattered enough to come to my cabin and talk to me. The question was, was it for a story or did she actually care that she had sold me out?

"Wesley," I heard her feet pound against my driveway as she scrambled after me.

I steeled myself before turning to face her. "I hear I'm going to be famous. Again."

"I'm so sorry I didn't tell you."

Anger flared in my chest. "That's what you're sorry about? Not about using me, but about not telling me after?"

She flinched. "It wasn't like that. It isn't like that."

I took a deep breath, not wanting to yell or hurt her even when she had cut me so deep. “What is it like then?”

She gestured to the Adirondack chairs we’d sat in getting to know each other again just a week ago.

She sank into a chair and I did the same.

I wanted her to tell me a story that made this all better.

I just wasn’t sure she could. “My editor assigned me a story about you. I didn’t realize it was you, though.

The articles all had your mom’s last name. ”

“Yeah, I changed it to avoid this exact situation. ”

“The file my editor had on you had your dad’s last name. That’s when I realized the suck my cock guy might be you. I asked around town, I wanted to know if it was you before I talked to you, but Agnes got between me and everyone before I could get to the bottom of it.”

I smiled a little. “Agnes is loyal but terrifying.”

She snorted. “Yeah, tell me about it. Anyway, when I came here that day and confirmed it was you, I knew I couldn’t write it.

I knew I couldn’t be the reason your life got uprooted again.

Especially after you kissed me. As soon as I left here that day, I told my editor that there was no story and that I would write something else. ”

The pressure on my chest eased a little that I hadn't been used. Unfortunately, the end result would be the same. A story would come out and I'd be back in the spotlight. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She squeezed her eyes shut then turned to face me. A breeze cut through the summer heat making her hair dance around her jaw line. "I should have. I would have eventually. I'm sorry I didn't."

"So why is Agnes on the warpath about an article coming out if you squashed it?"

"One of my coworkers picked up the story. I had no idea until I went into the office today." She licked her lips. "I have an idea—"

Her sentence was cut off by the approach of a loud engine. It sounded like a big rumbling truck. When it came into view I saw Henry's old boat of a car, which I suspected had a hole in the muffler.

The passenger side door opened and Agnes was out and coming up the driveway before the engine had even cut off. "Well, well, well. Here for another interview?"

All four seniors moved up my driveway and took up a post in front of my porch. Their loyalty was second to none.

Watching the blood drain from Jill's face when Agnes confronted her should have been vindicating.

Spoiler alert: it wasn't.

Probably because I actually believed Jill when she said she wasn't just using me for a story. Probably also because, whether I believe her or not, it wasn't in her power to prevent anything from ever being written about me.

I pulled myself out of my own head and turned my attention to what Jill was saying. “Agnes, I swear I didn’t know the story was still going to be written. I think I have a solution. I just need to talk to Wesley.”

“Well, we think you’ve done enough,” Agnes said, standing shoulder to shoulder with Franny and Henry, with Bill bringing up the rear.

Watching the four best friends I had in the world attempt to come to my rescue caused my heart to do a little flip. Of everything in Springwood, I would miss them the most. “I want to hear her out,” I said, causing all four to turn their eyes to me.

“You sure about that?” Bill asked. He was a sensitive guy and the perfect person to talk to if your mental health was teetering.

He also respected my ability to make my own choices, something Agnes and Henry were not as great at.

I gave a nod and turned to face Jill. The view of my oldest friend looking frazzled and guilty just adding to the misery of the situation.

Jill repeated the story she’d told me. I felt like a fool for believing her but I did. Trust was hard to come by, but I had it in her. Too bad I wouldn’t be here long enough to use it.

The Fab Four seemed less interested in what Jill knew and more concerned about how to stop the next journalist from blowing up my life.

At least they were thinking logically.

“We’re going to need details on this coworker of yours, then I can work my magic like I did on you.” Agnes, crossed her arms over her chest, oversized brown purse

hanging off of one elbow.

Jill shook her head. “No, I already talked to my editor about it. She is letting me be the one to write the story.”

A sharp pain twisted in my chest again. My trust in Jill had pingponged between full to non-existent over the course of this conversation and it was wringing me dry. “Well, that makes sense. If anyone is going to get the career boost out of me being a dumbass it might as well be you.”

“I don’t think that is what she’s saying, son,” Bill said in his usual calm voice. He made eye contact with Jill for confirmation and she nodded.

I was lost. “What does it matter who writes it? The end result is the same.”

“Avoiding this article is like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. You know what I mean? The ship is going down one way or another,” Henry said.

I glanced towards Bill, Franny and Agnes who were all nodding in agreement. “Henry, I have no idea what that means.”

He moved up the steps and put a hand on my shoulder, a gesture I would have killed for my own father to do. “Having someone you care about write the article might be the lifeboat you need. The ship sinks but you survive the sinking. See?”

”I just want a chance,” Jill said. “Let me come up with a way to tell your story that doesn’t turn you into public enemy number one. A way that lets you stay here and hopefully a way that lets you forgive me for the shit storm I’ve stirred up.”

How could she possibly write the story in a way where I don’t come off as a sexist piece of shit? No media outlet had done it so far, although I doubted they had actually

tried. I had nothing to lose. I wasn't sure I had anything to gain at this point either.
“Okay, do what you can.”

“Uh, uh, uh,” Agnes said, putting a hand on Jill's arm. “ We will do what we can. You're not in this alone, Wesley. We can all put our heads together and come up with a way to keep you here where you belong.”

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Jill

Just as I managed to get my heart out of my throat, my cell rang.

Anthony.

“What?” I held the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I started setting up my notes and laptop at Wesley’s kitchen table.

“I just had an interesting meeting with Heather.”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t touch the cock guy story.”

He scoffed. “Artistic freedom. Freedom of speech. The less you want me on this story, the more I think I’m going to dig up something good.”

I really didn’t have the patience for this. I shifted the phone to my other ear as I opened my laptop and hit the power button. “No conspiracy, take off the tinfoil hat. Just write about something else.”

“I will not be silenced. I know you and Heather are friends. Is she cherry picking the good stories for you? Is that it? Give me one good reason why my next headline shouldn’t be Corruption at the Springwood Press .”

“Oh my god, Anthony, I don’t have time for this. It isn’t a conspiracy. No one is against you. I slept with the cock guy, okay.”

He was silent for a beat. “Wait, what?”

“Yes, we were friends as kids. I went to interview him. We reconnected. We laughed, we reminisced, he saw me naked. Now I don’t want his life to blow up because I want to be a part of it.”

I glance up to find five sets of eyes watching me, but I only meet one.

Wesley.

Whether he forgave me for this whole shit storm or not, I didn’t know. First, I needed to clean up the mess I’d made, or sort of made. Once he knew his life wasn’t in danger of blowing up, then we could see if there was more to explore. God, I hoped there was.

“Uh, okay. I guess that—”

I hung up before Anthony could finish his ramblings. I needed to think.

Wesley’s wife was slow but I didn’t want to go home or back to the office to get this started.

Wesley had been isolated from everyone, both as a kid of divorced parents and again as an adult.

This whole war room needed to stay where it was.

Franny busied herself making tea and the men found their way out to the porch.

After reviewing what I had, my eyes hit on a note I’d made on the first day the article was assigned:

Question: Does the punishment fit the crime?

I'd said something similar to Heather in her office .

That was it.

Wesley had become the face of a problem bigger than himself. He became a scapegoat for every man who had ever made a sexist comment or sent dick pics on a dating site. He didn't deserve it.

I settled my fingers over the keys and started writing everything that came to mind.

Every community has its moral code. Doing something wrong within a community can and should be called out, reprimanded and/or penalized depending on the nature of the incident.

What if that community is the entire world via the internet?

Worse, what if the people within that internet community feel safe behind a wall of anonymity and are willing to call out, threaten and ruin the life of a person for something that would normally barely be a blip on the radar?

Franny set a cup of tea next to me on the table and I kept writing, rewriting and scribbling on a notepad.

An hour later I had a half-assed draft of something I thought I could work with.

I'd need to do some research to add real numbers and stats into the story.

I'd also have to see if Wesley would be willing to provide a quote for the piece.

Not because I wanted this article to shine for the sake of my career, but because I wanted him to finally have a say.

I became aware of faces peering over my shoulder and I gave Agnes, Bill, Henry and Franny each a chance to read what I'd written. I got four nods of approval before they headed towards the driveway. I guessed that meant they trusted me to do what needed to be done.

I hadn't seen Wesley since I'd been typing. I stretched my back and started looking for him. It didn't take long. He was standing in front of his bedroom closet, the bed was covered in boxes, hangers, hats and clothes.

"Wesley," I started, but I didn't know how to finish the sentence. He had resigned himself to having to move before the article was even out.

He turned to face me, shoulders slumped in a way I wasn't used to seeing.

I had no idea where we stood, but it didn't stop me from moving across the room and putting my arms around him.

He hugged me back without hesitation and I sank into the heat of him.

I could get used to this way too easily, but the man was literally packing.

His first round with the media had broken him.

If I wanted him, I'd have to help put him back together.

"I want to show you what I wrote, but first I want us to forget about this whole thing. At least for a little while." With his arms still around me I shoved the boxes off the bed, irrationally angry that they were there in the first place.

They hit the floor, one after the other, scattering on impact.

Only when the bed was a place for sleep and sex and not packing, did I sit on the edge and pull him towards me.

Neither one of us spoke as I scooted up the bed and rested my head on his pillow. He crawled his body over mine. He was wearing another faded pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. The material was soft under my hands where I slid them up his back and pulled his mouth to mine.

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Wesley

As she had since we were kids, Jill pulled me out of my head and into the moment. Her technique was different now, but the result was the same. I sank my weight onto her, feeling each muscle relax as she worked her lips over mine. Chaos was about to descend on my life.

Again.

But with Jill under me, her hands caressing my back and my cock lengthening against her thigh, we had all the time in the world.

Was I eager to get her naked?

Always.

But now wasn't the time for frantic groping and pistoning hips. Right now it was a fantasy of what could have been.

"I need to feel you," she murmured, pulling at the collar of my shirt until I rose to my knees and tugged it over my head.

Her hands roamed reverently over my bare chest, tangling in the hair of my happy trail before coming to the button on my jeans and popping it open.

Before her hands could wander too far, I pushed up the hem of her shirt and kissed my way from one hip bone to the other.

Her skin was soft against my stubble and the way she sucked in a breath under my touch had my cock getting impossibly harder.

I took my time removing her clothes piece by piece, my mouth roaming over every new inch of exposed skin.

Her taste was sweet. She was soft and pliant and smelled feminine in a way I couldn't identify.

Flowers, vanilla.. hell, I had no idea. All I knew was that it smelled like Jill and Jill was starting to smell a hell of a lot like home.

Once she was fully naked, she tugged on my elbow until I was on my back and it was my turn to be the canvas for her to paint with unspoken promises. Her mouth and hands worked me over, slow and methodical. Licking at my nipple, gripping my biceps and finally straddling my waist.

She let one hand rest against my chest as she leaned over to grab a condom from my nightstand. I took the opportunity to study her, to look up at the woman who had gotten me through so many hard times as a kid. The woman who was now trying to get me out of another one.

She'd lied to me, or not told me the truth.

There was no way around that. The sting of betrayal had been potent when I'd first learned that she was a journalist. A part of the very group of people who had taken my life, turned it upside down and shaken it like a snow globe.

The fact that she had tried to kill the story had me willing to forgive.

The fact that she was actively trying to counter the damage any other story could do,

had my heart wanting to believe things that would never be.

I took the condom from her hands and rolled it over my length.

Slow, sexy foreplay was all well and good but a man could only take so much.

Right now there was a gorgeous naked woman on top of me, looking down at me like I was something special.

She pushed up onto her knees and wrapped her delicate hand around the base of my cock before positioning it at her entrance.

She held my gaze as she lowered herself onto me and her eyes fluttered shut.

“Hell, you feel so good Jill.” I said, pressing my head into the pillow as she started to circle her hips. Again, it was slow. The kind of sex that could feel like a promise of more to come or a reluctant goodbye. I suspected that it was something different for each of us.

She rose up and slid down my length causing sparks to burn through my veins and settle into a persistent heat at the base of my spine. “I won’t last long with you doing that,” I almost added the word babe to the end of the sentence but cut it off.

She sighed as her breasts came to pillow against my chest and I started to move us together. My hips coming to meet hers. My thighs burned as I continued to move but it was a welcome distraction from the way my balls were drawing up against my body, ready to empty inside her before she was done.

I slid a hand between us, seeking out that little bundle of nerves between her thighs that I hoped would get her to the finish line before I crossed it alone.

“Yes, I’m so close,” she whispered against my neck.

I fought to keep my strokes steady rather than start thrusting in and out like a man possessed.

The last thing I wanted to do was mess up the rhythm and have her not finish.

Her body started to shake a moment before her inner muscles clamped down around my length and I was done.

My orgasm rolled over me in waves that crested hard every time I thrust up into her wet heat.

I continued to move inside her until we had both stilled and were breathing hard.

“I needed that,” Jill said, laying beside me on the bed and kissing my shoulder.

I shuffled down to lay beside her and linked my hand with hers.

It would be so easy to picture this being my everyday life.

To go to sleep in this bed every night with this woman by my side and wake up to her face.

I turned to study her, a face that I had grown up with that had only gotten more beautiful in the decades we’d been apart.

Fuck, I was getting all sentimental. That would only make it harder when I had to go.

I pushed a lock of her hair off her face and she opened her eyes to meet mine.

They were even more impossibly blue up close.

It had always felt like they saw more of me than I intended to show.

Her brow furrowed. “It’s going to be okay, Wes.” She wrapped her arm over my chest and pulled herself flush against me. “It won’t be like when the story hit before.”

I nodded, knowing that was what she wanted.

In my head though, I was creating a checklist of things I needed to do.

It was deja vu of the year before except now I was leaving more behind than I could ever replace.

My fiercely loyal friends at the seniors center and the one girl who I never thought I’d get to reconnect with.

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Jill

After we'd had sex and a little nap, I asked Wesley a few questions so I could round out my article.

He answered with as few words as possible and when I asked if he wanted to read the article, he declined.

That was the reddest of red flags. I was pretty sure he trusted me to write a fair story, but not enough to stop what was inevitable in his head.

He was already mentally checking out. Steeling himself for what was to come.

When he had to put his whole life in the back of a truck and start over.

I still believed that I as a journalist could make a difference in the world.

A positive difference, that is, even after what happened to Wesley.

The difference was I had found something that was more important: being happy.

And being happy meant being with Wesley.

I couldn't let him go, yet he was already slipping away.

"I should head home and get this edited so it can be printed in the paper on Sunday," I said, sliding my laptop into my bag.

Again, he only nodded. I didn't bother trying to reassure him again. He had always been a practical, hands-on kind of guy. The only thing that would change his mind about the storm that was coming was for him to see it dissipate before it hit.

I walked to my SUV in the driveway and turned to face him as I opened the door.

He was leaning against the door frame of his cabin wearing only a pair of jeans.

The light from his kitchen illuminated his thick frame from behind.

How the hell this simple, hardworking guy had ended up as public enemy number one I could never understand.

Well, I could understand actually, and that was why this story was so important.

I was glad that going viral had brought him back to Springwood - back to me - but now I had to use the same power that had brought him here, to keep him here.

The next day was a blur of researching, editing and polishing my article.

When I had finally submitted it and Heather had assured me it would be in the Sunday paper, I had nothing left to do but wait.

There was no way I could just sit at home, so I got in my SUV and somehow it steered towards the seniors center.

I needed to talk to someone, and Agnes, Bill, Henry and Franny were the ones who came to mind.

"The knight can't move like that," I heard Henry exclaim as I walked through the door of the seniors center.

Henry and Franny were staring at each other across a chess board while Agnes and Bill watched.

They fell silent when they saw me. I felt the urge to fidget under their stare and wondered if coming here was a mistake.

They were protective of Wes in a way his parents never had been and I had betrayed that trust.

Finally, Agnes stood. "Come have a seat. You can play the winner of Henry and Franny." The tight feeling in my chest unraveled, rivaling the relief of taking off a tight bra at the end of the day.

I sat at the table. "You did a good thing, hun," Agnes said, sliding a plate of cookies across the table.

"I just hope it's enough."

They all nodded in understanding and turned back to their game.

Sunday morning arrived and I'd slept like shit.

Being over forty, that wasn't a brand new experience, but the reason was.

It was one article, but Wesley's future rested on how it was received.

In a way mine did, too. I was dying to know how people would react but it wasn't like I could hand out a survey.

The only way to know was to go out and see if anything had changed.

There was no way I was going to do that alone. Wes needed to see for himself.

I took longer than necessary fiddling with my hair.

It was short and stick-straight, so there wasn't much to do besides make sure it was still on my head where I left it.

After applying mascara, then washing it off and putting it back on, I could admit to myself I was stalling.

The work was done. All that was left was to see where everything was going to land.

I grabbed my purse, got in my SUV and started the drive up Strawberry Hill.

I parked in his driveway and for once, he wasn't puttering around outside, nor did the door open to greet me. The cabin windows were dark. The place itself looked like it was in mourning. Even the sky was overcast, leaving the air feeling thick and muggy.

I started towards his front door, the thunk of my SUV door closing seeming too loud in the stillness. My footsteps echoed against the wood of his front porch. This was it.

I took the deepest breath I could and knocked on Wesley's front door.

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Wesley

I had promised myself that I would only go into town if I was bleeding to death.

That only lasted a few minutes after I woke up.

Begrudgingly, I headed to the closest gas station and bought a copy of the Sunday paper.

I hadn't intended to get my hopes up, but seeing Jill's name on the front page under the title The Harms of Cancel Culture Hit Home my heart did a little flip.

I threw the paper on the passenger seat of my truck and forced myself to drive all the way home before I started to read.

I scanned through the background information she provided about memes, the internet, infamy and bullying before my eyes landed on my name and my mouth went dry.

The world decided he was guilty, but even if he was, did the punishment fit the crime? Isn't a life sentence a little steep for a bad picture?

I scanned the rest of the article right through to the end then started it over again.

It was a great article with lots of thought provoking information and statistics.

The article would have stood up well without using me as an example, but dropping

my secret would hopefully insulate me from future negative stories.

If it worked that is.

Just as I was contemplating this little beam of hope, there was a knock at my door.

I answered it on autopilot, knowing who it was and why she was here.

“Ready to go?” she asked, gesturing towards her SUV. We hadn’t made plans for the day, but I knew what she meant. Nodding, I grabbed my wallet and keys and headed down the driveway.

We drove towards town in silence. I wasn’t used to being a passenger and I took advantage of the opportunity to stare out the window.

The forest on Strawberry Hill was thick and tall.

Wildfires raged through many areas of British Columbia each summer without fail, but this mountain side had been spared so far.

As we got closer to town the trees thinned and the road smoothed out.

Finally, she pulled her SUV into a parking spot in the middle of downtown Springwood. The squat brick buildings and leafy trees that lined the sidewalks were all as familiar as the back of my hand. I hoped I still felt that way after testing the waters on how Jill’s article was received.

Jill materialized outside my door and I stepped out to meet her.

She held her hand out to me and I took it, letting her lead me down the sidewalk.

Our first stop was Oh, Beans!, a coffee shop owned by my boss Nick's wife, Charlotte.

Charlotte was a tall, curvy woman with a big smile and a personality to match.

I had met her a few times when she came to one of the work sites. She smiled when she saw me now.

"Hey, Wesley. Hi, Jill. I read your article this morning. I'm sorry you went through all that. I hope you know Springwood is behind you. It takes more than one goof up for us to turn our backs on our own."

"Uh, thanks," I said awkwardly. Jill ordered us coffee and muffins and we continued our walk down the block.

We went to the library and a few little shops before making our way back to Jill's SUV.

I opened the door and heat poured out of the interior.

We both stood with the doors open, waiting for the worst of it to dissipate.

She watched me over the top of her vehicle.

She hadn't said much on our walk, letting the locals speak for her.

"So, what do you think?" she finally asked.

I cleared my throat and got into the passenger seat, fiddling with the scalding hot metal of the seat belt while I considered my answer.

The majority of people hadn't treated me any differently.

A polite smile or no reaction at all. Those who did say something about the article only had good things to say.

They expressed support and a little pity.

But hell, I would take pity over hostility any day.

Jill cranked the engine and turned the AC to high. "So?"

"It was only one article and it's only been a few hours since it came out."

She pulled her lower lip into her mouth and stress lines appeared around her eyes. "I hope there is a but in there somewhere."

A smile spread across my lips. Not a big one, not one full of abandon but hey, there was some hope in there somewhere. "But, I think you pulled it off."

She leaned over the center console and gripped my jaw, pulling me into a kiss so full of promise that a moan escaped my lips.

When she finally pulled away, she threw the car into drive and pulled into traffic, getting us back to my cabin in record time.

Before the door was even shut behind us we were shedding clothes, socks, shoes and shirts disappearing before we were through the bedroom door.

Last time we'd had sex I'd taken my time, memorizing every pore of her skin and every sound that came from her lips.

I'd wanted to take my time in case I never got another chance, but now I knew I would.

When my name had been dragged through the mud the first time, I had turned and fled.

Running back to a place that was familiar to me but where I wasn't familiar to anyone else.

Not as the s uck my cock guy anyway. It hadn't occurred to me before to ride it out, to trust the people that I knew to support me through the shit storm my life became.

Maybe it was because I didn't have the kind of support then that I had now.

Or maybe it was because this place, Springwood and Jill's arms, were where I belonged.

It just took a whole hell of a shove to get me back here.

After we had both come, we lay together on my bed.

It was hot as fuck in the house and sex hadn't exactly helped the matter so the only place we touched was by holding hands.

She turned to me, her cheeks pink and her eyes soft.

"I am truly sorry for not telling you about the article, Wesley. I hope I made it up to you."

I leaned over and kissed her, soft and slow, her taste already as familiar to me as my favorite beer. "I know and I do. I have a question for you, though."

She pushed herself up on one elbow, her face growing somber. “What is it?”

“Can I take you out on a date? A real one, I mean.” I avoided eye contact while I stumbled out the words.

“We knew each other so well as kids, then we were apart for a long time. I didn’t want to put a label on things when I wasn’t sure where life would take me.

Now though. Even if a story does come out and some people don’t take well to it, I know I have you and my crazy group of senior supporters.

I want to take you out on a first date. I want to start over with a solid foundation.

Actually live life rather than hide from it, you know? ”

She leaned in and kissed me again, before leaning her forehead against mine. I was a sweaty mess from the heat, the sex and now from my admission about how I saw the future going. She didn’t seem to care. “I would love to start over with you.”

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Wesley

No matter how much I had been through in my life, I was still nervous when I raised my hand to ring the doorbell at my dad's house.

After Jill's article had hit the paper and the world hadn't exploded, I'd finally felt truly settled.

With that in mind, I wanted to close some old wounds.

My dad, step mom and step brother all lived in Springwood, so I decided to start there.

It was Christmas Eve, and that should be about family.

"Wesley, what's wrong?" My dad's eyebrows, now more gray than dirty blond like mine, dipped low over his eyes.

"Nothing. I just wanted to see you guys."

If he was surprised, he didn't show it, although showing any emotion had never really been his thing. "Just me home at the moment. Come on through to the garage. I'm just doing a tune up on the truck."

I followed him into the garage and we worked side by side in silence for twenty minutes or so before I finally broke the silence. "Dad, do you ever think about back before you got remarried, when you and Mom were starting to fight and eventually

got divorced?”

“What about it?”

“It was a rough time for me, being a kid and all. I don’t know if you guys realized it, but I got a little lost in the shuffle.” I swallowed, and my dad finally turned to face me.

He sighed. “We did our best, Wes. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I’m not trying to give you shit or anything,” I said quickly.

“I just think, maybe, we aren’t as close as we could be, or would be if that whole thing had gone a different way.

That maybe I am a little more closed off than I would have been if you two hadn’t focused so much on one upping each other and more on being my parents. ”

I hadn’t planned on guilt tripping the guy, but it was hard to say what needed to be said without doing just that.

He turned and studied me, probably for the longest he had in a long time. “My focus shifted from fighting to divorce to getting remarried, to a newborn baby all one after the other. I guess you did get lost in all of that. I’m not sure what I can do about that now.”

It was less than I wanted, but more than I expected. “That’s okay. The past is the past.”

He rubbed his cheek with the back of his hand, leaving a streak of grease behind. “You want to help me change out these spark plugs? Maybe stay for dinner after?”

I nodded. "I could do that."

After dinner I drove back up Strawberry Hill.

It was snowing hard, and I was glad for four wheel drive and winter tires.

A silver sedan ahead of me lost traction a few times but continued on after I turned into my driveway.

Someone had bought the vacant cabin up the way from mine, but I hadn't met them yet.

My focus since the summer had been on Jill.

"I'm home," I said, coming through the door with a load of firewood in my arms. I put a few pieces in the fireplace and moved them around, before taking off my jacket and settling into the couch next to Jill.

The holidays could be a lot of fun, but after having been to a Christmas party at the newspaper, the seniors center and Nick and Charlotte's place, we were both done with big celebrations.

I was no longer in self isolation but that didn't mean I didn't want some alone time with the person who brought me back.

Her article had done what she'd said, casting a new light on the whole situation that took me out of the hot seat.

Although the article hadn't rocketed her to the top of her field, she had made her peace with being a great journalist but also being happy with her life.

Jill snuggled into my side and I put my arm around her shoulders.

I'd intended to take things slow with her after the first date I invited her on, but we'd been through enough crises together to bond us for life.

She'd moved into my cabin when her apartment lease had ended in September and I'd woken up to her face every day since.

"Are you okay that we didn't do a big Christmas this year?"

Jill snuggled closer into my side. "After everything you went through and what it took for us to be together, I think we deserve to celebrate just the two of us."

"Me, too."

We kissed and cuddled as the light outside grew dim before heading off to bed.

"Love you," Jill said, as she did every night and snuggled against my chest.

"Love you," I said, although the words didn't feel big enough.

I was a man who could build anything, take it apart and put it together.

One thing I hadn't learned to do was work on what was on the inside.

Face the feelings that I pushed down, talk rather than bottle things up.

Jill had been the one to save me from that as a kid, and despite the shit circumstances, she'd saved me from it again twenty-five years later.

I'd learn to deal with things on my own one day.

Talking to my dad had been a good start.

Knowing that someone had my back while I figured it out was more special than any gift that could be put under a Christmas tree.

I'd moved around a lot in my life, but one person had been my home. Now, finally, she was really mine.