



Marrying the Guide (Forestville Silver Foxes)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: I love my job as a wilderness guide, even when an adorable guy sends me splashing into a river.

I messed around with some guys while in college, but I haven't been attracted to a man since. Until I meet Onno, a sweet Dutch man visiting Forestville.

We're the same age, and he's so easy to talk to. Plus, I love his sense of humor.

He would be so easy to fall for...

The problem? He's going back home to the Netherlands in three weeks.

But not if I can help it.

Marrying the Guide is a standalone short story in the Forestville Silver Foxes series.

Total Pages (Source): 10

1

ONNO

How the fuck was I supposed to get into a kayak without it toppling over and sending me splashing into the river? Not one of life's more existential problems but at the moment a pressing one, considering I'd signed up for a kayak tour on the Skykomish River in the beautiful state of Washington. And while I was an excellent swimmer—most Dutch people were—that didn't mean I wanted to test my skills, thank you very much.

I eyed the red kayak assigned to me with distrust. It looked...too small. Too narrow to keep my balance. A few years ago, when I'd finally convinced Gerard to do something fun together, we'd kayaked on a lake. But that kayak had been different, one you sat on and not in. And it had been a hell of a lot wider and that lake a hell of a lot calmer than this river.

"Everything okay?" The voice was as warm as a shot of whiskey on a cold winter night.

I spun around, my mouth dry. Our guide, Howell, stood before me: six feet of muscled yumminess with a smile that could thaw the snow off the distant peaks. Alas, straight yumminess, unless my gaydar was severely malfunctioning, which wasn't out of the question, as everything else in my life seemed to be on life support as well.

"Yes. I'm fine, but I do have a question. How do I?—"

“—get into the kayak without getting wet?” Howell grinned.

“I guess I’m not the first to ask?” I chuckled sheepishly.

“Nope, happens all the time. But I’m happy to show you. First, let’s get your kayak farther into the water.”

Without breaking a sweat, Howell one-arm dragged it half into the water.

“The trick is to get it far enough out that you can easily push off but not so far it’ll float away or you get more than your feet wet.”

Right. He’d positioned it perfectly, then. Well, duh, that was his job.

“And then you step in, hold on to both sides for stability, and sit. See?”

He demonstrated, surprisingly nimble for a man of his built. But again, his job.

“I think I’ve got it,” I said with far more confidence than I felt. My nervousness increased when I noticed everyone else had already gotten in their kayaks and was now watching me. Fuck.

“Good.”

Howell climbed out of the kayak with grace, and then it was my turn. I double-checked that my life jacket was buckled tightly. I could easily see myself losing it and watching it float down the river. Not happening.

Okay, if the others could do it, I could too, right? I wasn’t the most coordinated person, but I did have decent balance.

“I’ll help you,” Howell said.

Oh great. If I flipped, he’d have a front-row seat to my humiliation. “Thank you.”

With my knuckles white from the force, I held on to the kayak and lifted my right foot.

“You know what,” Howell said. “I’ll keep the kayak steady. Put your hand on my shoulder for support.”

I searched his face for any sign of condescension. Finding none—only the earnest offer of assistance—I nodded, my heart pounding. A sense of impending doom settled in my belly, making me even tenser, but I placed my hand on his shoulder.

“Good. Now move your left foot.”

I followed his lead, trying to appear positive, acutely aware of the strength in his grip, the calm control in his movements. I placed a wobbly foot in the kayak. But my other foot, still on the ground, seemed to have developed a sudden fondness for the earth, refusing to lift as smoothly as I’d intended.

I closed my eyes. Here went nothing. I forced myself to push through my fear and raised my foot. I’d done it! Elation filled me, but then I opened my eyes and promptly lost my balance. My arms flailed, seeking something solid in a world that had decided to spin around me. Howell grabbed me, but I toppled sideways, slammed into him, and sent him backward into the chilly current of the Skykomish River with me on top of him.

My shriek, amid the chorus of gasps, could’ve woken the dead. Mortified, I scrambled to my feet, the water coming to my middle. Oh god, how upset would Howell be? He’d been submersed in the water and was now dripping wet.

But when he rose, he was laughing, showing a row of straight teeth. With the water streaming from his beard, he looked like a rugged captain. He winked. “That didn’t go as planned.”

“I’m s-sorry,” I stammered, my cheeks burning despite the cold water. “I didn’t mean to... Well, obviously, I didn’t plan to almost drown you.”

His grin widened as he shook his hair like a dog. “No worries. It takes a lot more to drown me, trust me. This was just a refreshing dip.”

How nice of him to try and make me feel better. “That was about as graceful as a cat on ice. Anyway, I think it’s safe to say kayaking is not my thing. You guys can go without me.”

Howell pushed stray strands of wet hair from his forehead, his beard glistening with droplets of river water. “Nah, you’re coming with us. Everyone capsizes their first time. It’s like an initiation rite. And after this, what’s the worst that can happen? You’re already wet. It’s a gorgeous day out, so you won’t get too cold while you’re drying.”

Despite my embarrassment, I smiled. “True, but I still have to get into that damn kayak.”

“Do you trust me?”

I looked into a pair of soulful brown eyes. “Yes.”

“Good. We’ll do it the same way I do with little kids.”

Before I knew what was happening, he’d lifted me out of the water and deposited me into the kayak. Automatically, I sat down.

“There ya go.” He sounded satisfied, like a man who’d solved a problem. “Now stay seated, okay?”

If my cheeks were as red as I feared, there was no way he hadn’t noticed, but he sent me a smile and didn’t add to my humiliation. He hopped into his kayak, seemingly unbothered by his soaked clothes. “Okay, now let’s do a quick refresher on how to use your paddle…”

He went through the basics, and I paid close attention. When he gave the signal we’d be on our way, I was able to keep up with the others. As low as that bar was, I was proud of myself.

Watching Howell navigate the water with such natural grace stirred a fluttering in my chest. He was strength and stability personified, a counterpoint to the chaos my life had become. His beard, flecked with droplets from the spray, gave him a tough, strong look that contrasted sharply with the softness in his eyes.

But after fifteen minutes, even that view couldn’t lift my mood. My ass was sore, my shoulders were on fire, and my abs were screaming for mercy. My arms burned with each stroke, every muscle fiber stinging as if woven from barbed wire. Fucking hell, this was so much more of a workout than I had counted on. Maybe because of the current?

“You doing okay?” Howell checked. “Onno, was it?”

“Yeah. And I don’t know, to be honest. My body has muscles protesting I didn’t even know I had.”

He snorted. “Kayaking is not as easy as it looks.”

“Now he tells me. “

“Are you saying you didn’t read the release forms before you signed them?”

“You mean the ten pages of American let’s-cover-our-ass legalese?”

“You have a bit of an accent. Where are you from, if I may ask?”

“I’m from the Netherlands, from Leiden, about half an hour from Amsterdam.”

His eyes lit up. “There’s a bakery in Forestville that sells a lot of Dutch pastries.”

I nodded. “Brianna is my sister-in-law. She’s married to my brother, Joost. I’m here visiting them.”

And hoping to get my mojo back. Somewhere in my fifteen-year marriage to Gerard, I’d lost the sense of who I was. Was it crazy to hope I would find myself here?

“Her pastries draw people from all over the state, and no wonder. They’re amazing.” He patted his stomach—or rather his life vest—and grinned. “I had to schedule extra workouts to burn the calories.”

“Or you could not eat them.”

He laid his hand on his heart in mock shock. “Why would I punish myself like that? I’ll happily add an hour to my daily workout so I can keep eating what she bakes.”

It still baffled me that Brianna had found so much success with simple Dutch pastries. The krentenbollen , stroopwafels , and boterkoek sold like hotcakes. Granted, she was an excellent baker, but I hadn’t expected Americans to love them so much. And the Dutch bread always sold out as well.

“What do you do for a living?” Howell asked.

If he was trying to distract me from my aching muscles by making conversation, he was succeeding. “I’m an accountant, so about the most boring job you can imagine.”

So boring, in fact, that Gerard had told me not to mention it unless people specifically asked. Few had. People had little interest in me whenever he and I were somewhere together. He always got the attention, which made sense. He was a plastic surgeon, full of colorful stories. Unlike me.

“Do you like it?” Howell asked. “Being an accountant, I mean. Do you like it?”

Huh. No one had ever asked me that. “I do. Numbers calm me, and balancing the books is like bringing order to chaos. When everything adds up, literally, it always gives me a deep satisfaction.”

Howell shrugged. “So why call it boring?”

“‘Cause most people feel that way about accounting.”

“Yeah, so? That sounds like they have a problem, not you. You’re not responsible for how other people feel.”

I stared at him. How had he summarized in one sentence what my therapist had been trying to get me to see over the last four months? “Thank you,” I said hoarsely. “You’re absolutely right.”

“You’re welcome. Are you recovered enough to paddle on your own again?”

Huh?

My confusion must’ve shown because he pointed at a rope between his kayak and mine.

“Have you been?—”

“—pulling you? Sure have. You looked like you needed a break, and everyone else seemed to be doing fine.”

Jesus, and I hadn’t even picked up on it. “Thank you. And sorry.”

He unhooked the rope with a smooth move. “Why are you apologizing? It was my choice, wasn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“No buts. Don’t say sorry for what wasn’t your fault or responsibility.”

“Can I hire you as my life coach?” I blurted out.

Howell threw his head back and laughed, a full-out belly laugh that had the kayakers in front of us looking over their shoulders to see what was happening. “Nah, I think I’ll stick to being a wilderness guide. The life advice is a free bonus.”

Hmm, what other activities did the company he worked for offer? Because whether he was straight or not, I wanted to hang out with him again. Preferably without dunking him, but that was a minor detail. Maybe something on dry land? Did they do hikes? Not much could go wrong with hikes, right?

Page 2

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2

HOWELL

I zipped up the last compartment of my hiking pack. My fingers skimmed the items one more time: first-aid kit, compass, map, water bottles, and enough trail mix to pacify a small army of squirrels. Everything was in its place, ready for the eager group of beginners I'd be leading up Lookout Mountain.

Six people. That was a nice number for this relatively easy hike. Relative being the keyword. Any activity in the mountains could go from an enjoyable stroll to a disastrous nightmare with one slip, one slide, one second of inattention.

Was there anyone on the list I knew? I scanned the names, blinking when my eye fell on the last one: Onno Veldhuis. The sweet Dutch guy from the kayaking trip last week. A tingle of excitement shot through me, quick and unexpected, like the first jolt of a caffeine rush.

Something about him, even just his name on the page, sparked an enthusiasm I hadn't felt in years. It wasn't merely his shy charm or the way he talked when nervous, filling the air with words to ward off silence. No, he drew me in with his authenticity, his honesty, his vulnerability.

I'd felt so bad for him when he'd crashed into me, dumping us both into the water. For me, it had been nothing more than an accident, but he'd taken it hard. I was glad to see him try something else.

Still, I triple-checked my emergency supplies when I loaded my backpack, then grabbed my keys and headed out the door. The sun was already painting the sky with streaks of gold and pink, a perfect backdrop for a day in the mountains.

The brisk morning air nipped at my cheeks as I made my way to the designated meeting spot—a small clearing near the edge of the parking area, where the forest loomed like a silent guardian. Within minutes, the people who had signed up arrived: a mom and dad with a ten-year-old girl, an older couple, and one tall figure standing slightly apart from the rest. Onno.

“Welcome to the beginner’s hike. I’m Howell Moorhouse, your guide for today. We’ll take a scenic route that should give us some great views without being too strenuous.” I looked at each person in turn, ensuring they felt included.

The five others had assured me they all had hiking experience. That didn’t mean that was actually the case. I regularly ran into people who, for some bewildering reason, thought it was smart to lie about their experience with outdoor activities. Apparently, they figured admitting a lack of experience was worse than risking not only their own safety but that of others as well. Somebody would have to explain that to me like I was four because it made zero sense.

Onno, however, was honest about being new at hiking in the mountains. “I’m from the Netherlands,” he said in an apologetic tone. “We don’t have mountains.”

Alicia, the ten-year-old, looked puzzled. “No mountains at all?”

“No. Most of the country is as flat as a pancake. In fact, half of it lies below sea level, so without our dikes, dams, and locks, it would flood.”

How about that? I’d never known.

“I promise I won’t get you wet this time,” Onno said with a self-deprecating laugh.

“It was no big deal. Seriously.” I held up a compass. “Who knows how to use this?”

“Doesn’t it automatically point north?” Alicia asked.

“It does, but how will that help you if you’re lost?”

Onno raised a hesitant hand. “You need to use it with a map?”

“Ideally, yes, but you’d still have to figure out where you are on the map.” I unfolded the map I’d brought with me. “Who can point out our current location?”

Over the next ten minutes, I explained the basics of navigating using a compass and handed them all a copy of the map. “Sometime during our hike, I’ll ask each of you to show me on the map where we are.”

“You didn’t tell us there would be a test,” Onno said, his eyes twinkling.

“Yup, and if you fail, you have to come to another one of my hikes for a retake.”

Alicia giggled. “You’re funny.”

“We’re going to start by heading up the Cedar Trail, which will loop around by the creek. It’s five miles round trip, with plenty of spots to rest and take in the beauty of our surroundings.”

My gaze landed on Onno. His blond hair seemed almost luminescent in the brilliant sunlight, and he offered me a tentative smile that did strange things to my stomach. And beneath the surface, something else was stirring. Something I hadn’t felt in a long time. Something that whispered of possibilities.

But I'd have to focus on my job, not on pretty Dutch men. "Any questions before we begin?"

"Will there be bears?" Alicia asked, wide-eyed with innocence.

"Only the friendliest." I winked at her, eliciting another giggle. "But seriously, they tend to keep to themselves. We're more likely to see deer or maybe even an eagle."

That got me grins and thumbs-up, and we set off for our three-hour hike in good spirits. On longer or more remote treks, we always had two guides per group, but Jason—my boss and the owner of Rock Adventures—entrusted me with the responsibility of handling this one by myself.

Morris, half of the older couple, took the lead after I pointed him toward the trail, and I made up the rear. Onno walked in front of me, and I discreetly checked his gear. His boots were of good quality, though they looked brand new. Hopefully, he wouldn't get blisters. Not breaking in new boots was a rookie mistake you could pay dearly for.

He was carrying a sturdy daypack with plenty of water and wearing long hiking pants and an REI T-shirt. He'd followed our checklist to a T, not surprising for someone whose job required attention to detail.

We crossed small streams and navigated around rocks jutting out like nature's stepping stones. The first ten minutes went without incident, but then Onno started to have trouble keeping up. He trudged with determination, but the stumbles in his stride showed his struggle. It was clear the terrain was more challenging than he'd anticipated, yet his jaw was set and his eyes fixed on the path.

Should I call out to Morris and ask him to slow down? Better not. Onno seemed sensitive, and I didn't want to embarrass him. He'd taken his mishap during the

kayaking tour hard, and I didn't want him to feel bad about himself again.

Instead, I tapped him on the shoulder. "I'll be right back."

I walked past the others, discreetly checking them, pointing out a woodpecker to Alicia, and caught up with Morris. "Can you slow down a little? We need to stay together as a group, and some are having trouble keeping up with your pace."

Morris looked guilty. "Of course. Just holler if I go too fast again. Ruthie is always complaining that I jog instead of walk."

"It's true." His wife shot an exasperated look at her husband. "And then I have to remind him he's a good foot taller than me and my legs are much shorter."

I chuckled. "When I'm alone, I always walk fast, but thank you. I appreciate you taking the lead."

I let everyone pass me again, signaling they should wait until Onno had caught up. I hiked back to him. He was huffing and puffing as he labored up the mountain, his face red.

"I'm holding everyone up, aren't I?" Onno wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. "I don't think Mother Nature got the memo about my being a beginner."

"First hikes are like first dates. A little awkward, plenty of sweating, and you hope it ends with a good story."

Onno laughed, a delightful sound that resonated with the rustling leaves. An unexpected jolt twinged in my chest, not from the exertion of the hike but from the connection sparking between us. Did he feel it too?

His lips quirked upward. “Thanks for slowing down for me. I promise I’m not usually this much of a drag.”

I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something told me his apologetic behavior had a reason, an underlying cause. As if he’d been conditioned to apologize, maybe to avoid someone getting angry? And I would bet good money it was a partner. Or ex-partner. Onno had to be a few years older than my thirty-nine, making it less likely that a parent would still have that kind of influence.

I put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, Onno. Really. Trust me, you’re far from being a drag.”

He eyed me incredulously, as if he expected me to mock him. But when I held his gaze with sincerity, he relaxed. “Thank you.”

I gradually slowed us down until Onno had caught his breath. He shot me a look of pure gratitude. “Do you do this full-time?” he asked.

“No, I work for Rock Adventures part-time, mostly between April and October, with an occasional winter hike. But I’m also an EMT and a lifeguard, and I teach several community classes in the area. Oh, and I’m a CPR instructor. I think that’s it.”

He laughed. “That’s all? Don’t you think you have room for a few more jobs?”

I chuckled along with him. “It requires solid planning to keep my schedule straight and show up at the right place at the right time. Oh, I forgot to mention I’m a search and rescue volunteer all year long, so whenever a hiker is in distress, I’ll be one of the people gearing up.”

“Wow. I’m seriously impressed.”

I shrugged. “What can I say? I have a passion for the outdoors and love helping people.”

Morris kept checking in with us to ensure he wasn’t going too fast, and the family in front of us had clued in to Onno needing a slower pace. I was grateful but not that surprised. People who loved nature were generally kind to each other. Being around nature had a calming effect.

I wove through a forest of towering pines, stealing glances at Onno. The occasional sunbeam that managed to pierce the dense canopy highlighted his blond hair, and every time he caught my eye, he’d flash that disarmingly sweet smile. It was hard not to keep looking his way.

After an hour, I called for a ten-minute break. “Make sure to drink plenty of water, guys, and eat a snack. And then grab your maps and see if you can find our location.”

Onno plonked down on a tree stump next to me, dug out a KIND bar from his backpack, and devoured it. I was glad to see he’d brought good snacks. I took my turkey and cheese sandwich out of my bag. “Dutch bread.”

He laughed and pulled a similar package from his backpack. “Brianna made me lunch.”

“That’s a good sister-in-law to have.”

“She’s amazing. And perfect for Joost. He’s so happy with her.”

I munched on my sandwich. “And you? Since you’re here visiting by yourself, should I conclude you’re single?”

He cast his eyes down and a deep sigh escaped him. “Divorced, actually. Four

months ago.”

“I’m sorry. Were you married long?”

He flicked some crumbs off his pants. “Fifteen years and together for eighteen...until he told me he’d grown bored with me and wanted out.”

“What? I’m so sorry. That must’ve been devastating to find out.”

He looked up. “Worst day of my life. Until he topped it two days later by walking it back and saying he hadn’t meant it like that. But he never apologized and merely stated we shouldn’t throw away what we had just because of my overly emotional reaction.”

“Jesus, that took balls. I hope you turned him down flat.”

“Fuck, yes. And then I made sure he couldn’t touch a single penny of my money. He’d always insisted on separate accounts because he made much more than me as a plastic surgeon. And because he was a big spender, he walked away with nothing, whereas I was—am—a saver and have a healthy savings account and plenty of investments. Plus, the house, since that was in my name.”

He flushed. “Sorry, got a little carried away. You couldn’t be possibly interested. As you can tell, I’m still upset about it.”

“I would be too in your shoes.” God, he must’ve been heartbroken. Probably still was. My heart went out to him.

“Gerard—my ex—had this way of making me feel small, almost invisible. I’m trying to find who I am without him.”

Bingo. I'd been right. A protective surge barreled through me, and I itched to pull him into a hug and tell him everything would be okay. "Sounds like a tough journey, but you'll find your way again."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. And you? Do you have a partner?"

"Also divorced, coming up on five years now. We were together for ten years, and as cliché as it sounds, we grew apart. No drama, no harsh words, no fights. She saw it before I did, but we split amicably. Six months ago, she remarried, and I was at her wedding. Her new husband is a wonderful guy."

"That's great. And how it should be."

"Sure, but it's all but impossible when someone hurts you the way your ex did. You're allowed to have hard feelings."

He chuckled. "Oh, trust me, I have lots of feelings. Sorting them out is gonna take time, I'm afraid."

"So take that time. There's no set schedule for such a betrayal. I imagine it's a lot like grief. That only subsides over time as well."

Onno slowly nodded. "Yes. You're right. There you go with the excellent life advice again."

"You're welcome. All part of the service. Now, tell me, do you have any clue where we are on the map?"

He laughed, the sadness evaporating. "If I say no, does that mean I have to go on another hike with you?"

My heart skipped a beat. “Yup.”

I couldn't wait.

The forest, which usually held my attention, faded into a mere backdrop as we continued walking side by side. With every word exchanged, every shared laugh, every dry joke, my attraction to Onno grew, unfolding like the petals of a flower reaching for sunlight. I hadn't felt like this about another man since college.

Not so straight after all. Be still my beating heart.

ONNO

The moment consciousness took hold, I wished it hadn't. My body hurt like I'd survived a battle, each muscle screaming its tale of defeat from yesterday's hike. Moving was a challenge, a protest staged by every cell in my legs as I tried to sit up. My throbbing feet would probably look worse than the day before when I'd inspected them once I was home. And that had been...not pretty.

I carefully lifted the covers, revealing the sorry state of my feet. The sight was almost comical—if it wasn't so painful. Clenching my teeth, I forced myself into a sitting position and swung my legs over the side. If I allowed myself to stay in bed, I'd be there all day. On the night table stood a small bottle of ibuprofen next to a glass of water and a tube with antibacterial cream. Bless Brianna.

"Ah, the foresight of a saint." I downed two ibuprofen eagerly, hoping they'd offer some respite soon. I'd have to wait to apply the cream until after I'd showered.

After throwing on a T-shirt and sweatpants, I hobbled into the living room, where I sank into a reclining chair. Putting my feet up sounded like an excellent plan.

Brianna came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. Whatever she'd been baking smelled delicious.

"How are you doing, honey?" Brianna patted my shoulder carefully.

I let out a deep sigh, and even that made my body ache. “Everything hurts. Who knew a beginner’s hike would be so strenuous?”

“Well, breaking your boots in probably would’ve helped.”

“If I had known boots needed to be broken in, I would have.”

Brianna winced, her hands coming to rest on her hips. “Oh, Onno, I’m so sorry. I should’ve mentioned that. It’s common knowledge around here, but I forgot you’re new to all this hiking business.”

“Don’t worry about it. I learned this lesson the hard way, so I won’t make that mistake again.”

She bent over and studied my feet. “Yikes, those are some impressive war wounds. Try to stay off them today, okay?”

“Wasn’t planning on running a marathon, trust me. And thanks for the cream you left for me. I’ll put some on after I shower.”

She sat opposite me on the couch and played with the towel in her hands. That was so not Brianna. She never sat still for more than a few seconds.

I quirked an eyebrow. “Something on your mind?”

“Guess who stopped by the bakery early this morning?”

“The Banner twins? I’ve already drooled over them from a respectable distance, but thank you. The sheriff is very easy on the eyes as well, by the way.”

“Howell. You know, the guide?” She added the last part when I wasn’t responding

immediately.

“I know who Howell is. It’s my body that’s hurting, not my brain.”

“He asked about you.”

I sat up straighter, ignoring my muscles, which screamed their tale of protest. “He did?”

My voice sounded odd even to my ears—hopeful, hesitant, and utterly bewildered.

“Wanted to know if you were okay.”

“What did you tell him?”

She shrugged. “That you spent three hours in the bathtub yesterday, soaking your muscles, and that your feet looked like a war zone.”

Oh my god, was she serious? “Please tell me you didn’t.”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? And you Dutch are always so proud of being Dutch direct, so why wouldn’t I tell that man, that absolutely fiiiine specimen of a man, the truth?”

“Because... Because...” I sputtered. Shit, she was fighting to hold back her laughter. “Bitch, you had me there.”

“You make it too easy, honey. But no, I didn’t say that. Just told him you were sore but had loved the hike. Oh, and I gave him permission to use your number.”

“What?”

“He had your number from your booking, but he didn’t want to use it without your permission, so I gave him that on your behalf and told him you’d love to hear from him.”

Huh? Why? I’d pegged Howell as straight. After all, he’d mentioned an ex-wife. The possibility of anything else hadn’t even crossed my mind. Until now. “I thought he was straight.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No, but...” Brianna was right. He could be bi or pan or have had a gay awakening later in life. I shouldn’t assume, even though my gaydar had been completely silent.

“If he asked to use your number, he may not be as straight as you think. Sounds like someone made quite the impression.” She winked at me.

Warmth crept up my neck as realization slowly dawned. Perhaps I wasn’t as perceptive as I’d thought. Jesus, have mercy on me and let it be so. Though for the life of me, I couldn’t imagine what a man like him would want with me.

Howell didn’t leave me in suspense long. About an hour later, his text interrupted my aimlessly scrolling through articles on how to treat blistered feet.

Howell

Hey, this is Howell. Brianna said it would be okay to text you. Hope she was right.

Me

Of course it’s okay! It’s good to hear from you.

Howell

How are you? Brianna mentioned you were sore.

I stared at the screen, a smile creeping onto my face. My thumbs hovered over the keyboard. How much should I divulge?

Me

If by sore you mean that I can barely move, then yes, I'm sore. Although I prefer to describe it as "everything hurts and I'm dying" as it feels more accurate, if a tad dramatic.

Howell:

[crying laughter emoji]

[hug emoji]

I'm sorry. But also, that was funny.

Me

I'm glad my suffering provides you with some amusement. At least it serves a higher purpose, then.

Howell

I promise I won't laugh too much.

Me

I'm not laughing at all, but only because it hurts too much. Who knew I had core muscles? I sure do now.

Oh, and I forgot to mention that my feet look like I've been tortured.

Howell

Oy. How bad is it?

Me

Like I've been tortured?

My phone buzzed, and I fumbled it, almost dropping the device in my haste to answer the FaceTime call. "Hi."

"Hi. Show me your feet."

"Excuse me? Men usually buy me dinner first before they ask me to undress."

He snorted. "Sorry. I promise I don't have a foot fetish. I just wanna make sure nothing is getting infected. EMT, remember?"

"Plus lifeguard, CPR instructor, wilderness guide, and search and rescue volunteer. Yes, I remember."

"Humor me, Onno," he said much softer now. I loved the way he said my name. How could I refuse?

After checking my feet were at least clean—if still gross because of all the blisters—I aimed the camera at my feet.

Howell whistled between his teeth. “Oh boy, that does look painful.”

“Trust me, it is.”

“You should’ve said something during the hike. I noticed you were uncomfortable and figured your boots were bothering you, but I didn’t realize it was this bad.”

At least I’d managed to tough it out. “There was nothing you could’ve done anyway. It’s not like I could’ve taken them off or, you know, have you carry me down the mountain.”

Another one of those low, sexy chuckles. “Which I would have, in a worst-case scenario, but you’re wrong that I couldn’t have helped. I always bring special anti-blister tape I could’ve put on to prevent it from getting this bad.”

Crap. I hadn’t known. “Oh. Now I feel stupid.”

“For next time.”

I aimed the camera back at my face. “That’s a funny joke. There will not be a next time. I think I’ve humiliated myself enough, no?”

His face grew more serious than I had expected. “I don’t think you’ve humiliated yourself at all. You tried something new and dared to take a risk. That’s brave. And I was hoping you’d book another tour with me.”

“Oh.”

Not my most eloquent answer, but it was all I had. My English, usually fairly decent, was failing me now.

“I liked hanging out with you,” Howell said.

“Oh.”

“So I was wondering if you wanted to do it again.”

“Oh.”

“Hang out, I mean. Not necessarily on another tour. You don’t have to pay, is what I’m trying to say.”

“Oh.” Somebody slap me. I swallowed. “Sorry, I’m having some trouble finding words.”

“It’s okay if you want to say no. Or if you want to think about it.”

“No! That’s not it. I’m just... Forgive me for being blunt, but are you asking me out? Or am I misunderstanding things and you’re offering friendship?”

He smiled at me, and my belly swooped. “I am asking you out. On a date.”

The word “date” hung between us, charged and buzzing like a live wire. My mind stalled, gears ground to a halt, thoughts stopped. What had he just said? Howell Moorhouse, wilderness guide extraordinaire, with his easy smile, effortless masculinity, and the body of a god, wanted to go on a date? With me?

“Are you...are you serious?” The words tumbled out, each syllable tinged with incredulity. “I thought you were straight, sorry.”

“First, why would you say sorry for that? And second, well, in all fairness, so did I. I messed around with a few guys back in college, but not since then. I never had the

urge either, so yeah, I did think of myself as straight. I figured that was a phase since I'd never been attracted to another guy again, not even since my divorce."

His eyes were earnest, a testament to the truth of his statement.

"But you are now?"

He scratched his beard. "I couldn't take my eyes off you yesterday and couldn't stop thinking about you afterward, so yeah, I'd say that counts as attraction."

"Oh."

"So I figured I'd give it a shot and see if you felt a spark too."

"Oh." I was back to one-syllable answers. Stupid brain.

He chuckled. "Brain not cooperating?"

I shook myself out of the strange stupor. "No. I mean, yes. Maybe? I don't know." I inhaled sharply. "Let me start again. Thank you. For asking me out, I mean. I'm more than a little flattered."

And while my feet hurt, it was nothing compared to the yearning ache inside me—a longing for connection, for the chance to feel wanted, for someone to care about me. I couldn't believe Howell was offering that.

Howell's face fell. "But you're saying no?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Because usually, when people say they're flattered, they follow it with a rejection."

Really? “Maybe I’m not expressing myself well. English isn’t my first language.”

“Okay. So you aren’t turning me down?”

“No, I’m trying to find the words to ask...” I sighed. “I don’t understand, is all. I’m a hot mess, as evidenced by my mishaps on the two trips with you, and I’m still hurting and trying to get over what my ex did. Why, for the love of god, would you want to go out with me?”

Howell’s eyes grew soft. “I hate that you see yourself that way. You’re not a hot mess. You’re smart and funny and not afraid to try new things. That takes courage, especially in another country, talking to people in another language. I admire that.”

“Oh.”

Jesus Christ, if I said “oh” one more time, I’d slap myself.

“Thank you. I don’t see myself like that at all.”

“I know, but I do. So why don’t you let me be the judge of who I’m interested in and why?”

He had a point. “Yes, sorry. I need to work on my self-confidence, I guess.”

“After what you told me, I understand where it’s coming from, but don’t put yourself down. But the ball’s in your court, Onno. I know you’re still hurting and getting over your ex, so maybe you’re not ready. That’s fine. But if you are, well, I guess I wanted you to know I’m interested. Anyway, put the camera a little closer to your feet so I can have a better look. Maybe I can recommend some treatments that could help them heal faster.”

HOWELL

He said yes! A few hours after our call, he'd texted me he was in for a date.

Asking Onno out had been unexpectedly hard and incredibly easy at the same time. It was scary to put myself out there and face the fear of rejection. I had given myself a stern talking-to before making that call to Onno.

But once I'd had him on the phone, we'd chatted naturally, even with his one-syllabic answers. He was cute and sweet and kind, and I loved his dry sense of humor. I wanted to hug him, assure him everything would be okay, and roll him in bubble wrap to keep him safe, but that wasn't a topic for a first conversation.

Asking him out had been the first step. Now, I needed to make sure we had a date to remember. How long had it been since I'd had an official date? Jeez, it must've been before I'd gotten married, so at least fifteen years. After my divorce, I hadn't planned on staying single, but I'd needed time to process and move on—code for nursing my wounded heart and probably also a little of my pride. Being dumped is hard on the ego, even if I could see all the reasons in hindsight.

But after that, I'd been open to dating again. Except I hadn't met anyone I liked enough to ask out on a date. Hookups, sure, but not the official going-out-for-dinner-and-maybe-kiss-afterward thing. Until Onno, which was surprising since he was a guy. Back in college, a drunken bet with my gay roommate had led to us making out. I'd liked it enough to try it with two other guys, and it had been hot.

But since then, I hadn't met a guy who'd made me want a repeat, so I thought those had been, for lack of better words, youthful experiments. And then I'd met Lori-Ann, and that had decided it. Straight it was.

Until now. And I was so out of practice, it wasn't even funny. What could we do together that would be fun? Dinner? A movie? All that seemed so cliché. I wanted something special, something that suited Onno. I could think of only one guy to ask.

"Howie," my former roommate— yes, that one —said cheerfully as he picked up. "How's life?"

"Bubbles, I need your help."

I could practically see him sit up straight. "You do? What strange calamity has befallen you that the most competent man on the planet needs my help?"

"I'm going on a date."

He clapped his hands. "Oh, excellent."

"With a guy."

Long silence. "I'll be goddamned. I just lost a five-year bet with Justin."

"Why on earth would you make a bet with your husband about me?"

"He said you'd do at least one date or hookup with a guy before finding someone new. I assured him you'd only been bicurious in college and were now firmly established in your straightness as a fierce ally, but he told me I was wrong."

I winced. "Sorry? Seems your husband was right."

“And you couldn’t have discovered that earlier, like, before I met Justin, so we could’ve at least had one passionate night together? We never went all the way back in college.”

I laughed. “You always told me you were too much for me to handle. Something about you being a power bottom and me being too bossy?”

He sighed dramatically. “Yeah, I do admit we would’ve had compatibility issues.”

“Now that we’ve settled that, can we focus on my problem? I need you to tell me what to do for a first date with a guy. And maybe what to wear.”

“The latter is easy. Wear a white button-down shirt that’s just a little tight. It’ll show off your gorgeous body with all those big muscles. Pair it with nice jeans or, if you wanna go dressier, a pair of slacks, and you’re good.”

Okay, that was easy enough. “And what can we do? I asked him out, and I want to do something original. Something special.”

“Tell me about him.”

“His name is Onno, and he’s from the Netherlands.”

Five minutes later, I stopped talking.

“And you’ve only met him twice?” Bubbles asked.

“Yeah, and we FaceTimed once.”

“Howie, my friend, you’ve got it bad. But I have an idea.”

He wasn't wrong, and his suggestion was gold.

Onno had needed a little time to recover from the hike, so we'd agreed to meet three days later. Dressed according to Bubbles's instructions, I wore jeans and a tight white button-down. Considering what we were going to do, I'd probably have to chuck the shirt afterward, but it would be worth it.

Onno was waiting for me outside the bakery. When he spotted me, he took me in thoroughly. "You look amazing."

"Thank you. I love your shirt. It makes your eyes pop."

When I'd shared my suspicion that Onno had low self-esteem, Bubbles had told me to be liberal with the compliments.

Onno's face lit up. "Thank you. I borrowed it from my brother. We're the same size, and I didn't bring that many clothes with me."

"I can imagine. Are you ready to go?"

"Where are we going?"

I gestured at my truck, parked on the other side of Main Street. "To a little town called Berne. It's about a fifteen-minute drive."

"Do I need to bring anything? You didn't tell me what we'd be doing."

"Nope, you're fine. And I'll explain on the way there."

I held out my hand, and he took it, his cheeks growing adorably red. "I still can't get over how big the cars are here," he said as we walked to my pickup. "We don't have

these back home.”

“No? Why not?”

“They wouldn’t even fit in most parking spaces or garages. The Netherlands is a tiny country that’s densely populated, so everything is small. Houses, gardens, roads, parking garages—everything is a hell of a lot smaller than here. Plus, gas is much more expensive. I can’t imagine this is a very economical car.”

I chuckled and held the passenger door open for him. “Oh, it’s not.”

He awkwardly climbed into the cab, but that wasn’t strange if he’d never been in a truck. I closed the door after him and got in myself. “I got this truck because I often have to haul equipment to the outdoor activities I participate in. Backpacks, tents, coolers, you name it. I can throw it all in the bed. I even have a rack that fits two kayaks.”

“That makes sense. So, what are we going to do?”

God, I hoped I’d gotten it right. “Well, you told me you were trying to do all kinds of things you’d never done, like kayaking and hiking, so I figured I’d continue that theme. No worries, it’s not something physical.”

He laughed sheepishly. “Thank you. I was about to get worried I would embarrass myself again.”

“It’s something I’ve never done either, so we’ll both be outside our comfort zones. We’re going to a pottery class where Clara, our instructor, will help us make a vase.”

I shot a quick look sideways. His face lit up. “Pottery? Oh, that sounds like fun. I’m not sure I’ll be any good at it, but it will be exciting to try.”

“I’ll probably suck at it because I have the artistic skills of a squirrel, but that’s okay. It’ll be fun to learn together, right?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

He put his hand on my thigh. Goosebumps pebbled on my skin at that simple contact, and my dick also made its interest known. Bubbles had been right. I did have it bad. “For being so intentional and thoughtful in coming up with an idea for our date.”

The warmth flooding me was unlike anything else. “You are so welcome. I’ve been looking forward to our date all week.”

“Yeah?” He removed his hand, and I missed it instantly. “What did you do this week? More kayaking and hiking?”

“I led an advanced three-hour kayak tour. That one was a challenge because of the rain, but we had a fun group, so that helped. And yesterday, I assisted with a rock-climbing outing.”

“You do rock climbing?”

“Not if I can avoid it. I know the basics, but I don’t have the body type for it. You need to be light and nimble, and that’s not me. But I’m excellent at belaying, so I’m the guy who holds the other end of the rope in case someone slips and falls. It’s not my favorite activity, since it involves a lot of standing and watching, but that’s also part of my job.”

“Rock climbing is something I won’t even try. I lack the necessary motor skills for that.”

“I’m sure you could learn if you put your mind to it, but if it doesn’t appeal to you, why would you? There are plenty of other fun activities you can do.”

He hummed in agreement. “What’s your favorite? Out of all the outdoor stuff you do, I mean.”

I didn’t need to think long. “Hiking. Heading into the mountains. Nature relaxes me, helps me find peace, and I love the physical exertion.”

“After I did the hike, I did some reading on it.” Onno laughed. “I know, I should’ve done that beforehand and prevented the blisters, but I didn’t. Anyway, I read some articles online, and it’s not as easy as it seems. And not as risk-free either. Which I’m sure you know since you do search and rescue.”

I let out a sigh. “Unfortunately, people underestimate the risks. Every year, we have to rescue people who get stranded because of inadequate preparation.”

“Like what?”

“Not bringing enough water or food, forgetting rain gear or cold weather clothing, not anticipating changes in the weather. Or they get lost because they can’t use a compass and have no clue where they are. Sure, we have rescues where people did everything right but an accident still happened. Two years ago, I had to rescue a fellow S&R volunteer who had slipped on a slick rock and broken his ankle. Freak accidents happen, and I never get annoyed over those. But it does baffle me how people can head into the mountains without any sense of the dangers.”

“I wouldn’t have known either.”

“No, but you didn’t go by yourself. You went with a guided tour and followed our gear list to a T.”

Onno chuckled. “I did. Joost drove me to REI in Seattle to get everything I needed. We don’t have the same shoe size, unfortunately, or I could’ve worn his boots.”

It spoke volumes about his character that he’d bought those things for a one-time outing. “We should go for another hike if only to make sure you use your gear again.”

He shot me an incredulous look. “You wanna go hiking with me again?”

“Absolutely. Now that you know you have to break in your boots, you could prepare. And we’ll take it nice and slow so you can enjoy the experience.”

He put his hand on my thigh again. “You are the sweetest to suggest it.”

This time, he left his hand there, and the warmth burned right into my soul.

5

ONNO

Clara was a riot. She was a seventysomething woman with wild curly hair that cascaded around her shoulders like a lion's mane. With her kaftan bursting with psychedelic colors, she looked like she'd never left the seventies behind her and was now living her best life making gorgeous pottery, cracking dirty jokes, and spinning wildly entertaining tales. Originally from South Carolina, she'd never lost her Southern twang.

"Hope y'all are ready to get your hands dirty." She sauntered over with a grace that defied her eccentric appearance.

"Absolutely," Howell said, his deep voice bouncing off the clay-stained walls. "This is Onno, my—uh, we're here for the class."

"Charmed, I'm sure." She took his hand in both of hers. "I can already tell you've got the hands of an artist, darling."

"Or at least a farmhand," Howell quipped.

"Ooh, I love a man who can handle some serious plowing." Clara winked, and I burst out laughing.

Howell's cheeks tinged pink. "Clara, you're terrible."

“Terrible, maybe, but never boring.” Clara sashayed back to the front of the room, where a row of wheels awaited our touch. “Now, let’s get started. Pottery is like making love—it’s messy, it’s passionate, and if you do it right, you come out with something beautiful.”

She also served amazing hors d’oeuvres and a delicious, bold red wine. An hour into our two-hour class, I was a little tipsy, had pain in my sides from laughing, and was well on my way to creating the ugliest crooked vase on the planet. The only vase that was worse than mine was Howell’s, and he laughed about it harder than anyone else.

We had a fun group of people—ten in total—and like us, most were new at pottery, but everyone approached it with enthusiasm and a good sense of humor. Once we shaped our wet clay on the wheel, the phallic jokes were inevitable, and the hilarity rose. This was the most fun I’d had in months.

“Move your hands like you’re following the shape of a woman,” Clara said to me. “Boobs, small waist, round hips.”

I snorted. “I’m gay, honey. Women don’t do it for me.”

“Well, use your man’s muscles as inspiration, then. Biceps, chest, and from what I saw when he walked in, a nice ass too.”

I burst into laughter, promptly fucking up my vase beyond all help because my hands were shaking. Howell’s cheeks turned bright red, something I wouldn’t have thought possible. He seemed so unflappable, but the jokes had broken through his tough exterior.

Clara wasn’t done cracking dirty jokes. “Remember, the clay is just like a lover. If it’s not wet enough, it won’t be much fun. And if it’s too dry, well...” She wiggled her eyebrows.

I almost snorted my sip of wine through my nose. My god, she was hilarious.

Clara patted Howell's shoulder. "Sorry, dear. My mouth gets the better of me sometimes."

He shook his head, laughing. "Yeah, I can tell you're real sorry."

She winked at me, and I loved her for it. I gathered my clay to create another clump and start again. "This is so much fun," I said to Howell. "Best date ever."

The way his face lit up, I would've thought I'd told him he won the lottery.

"I'm having the best time too." He nodded at his vase. "Though this has to be the ugliest vase I've ever seen."

I stifled a chuckle as Howell's fingers, so sure and steady in the wilderness, fumbled with the unyielding clay. The lump on his wheel splayed out like an abstract expression of confusion rather than the elegant vase he'd intended. With each spin, it morphed into a lopsided hat, followed by a caricature of a mountain range. "It's certainly...unique."

"It's hideous."

"Original? One of a kind?"

"I think it might be a new art form. Postmodern dysfunction." A twinkle lit up his eyes. His hands were a mess, and clay was smeared like war paint across his cheeks where he had pushed his hair back.

"Keep at it, boys," Clara said. "Remember, it's all about the journey, not just the destination."

That seemed to have become the theme of my trip, a message I'd do well to remember.

I gently spun my wheel again, holding my hands the way Clara had shown. Molding wet clay was so much harder than it looked. She did it with such ease, making perfect shapes in mere minutes, while I struggled to form an evenly round base.

Clara's suggestion to imagine Howell's muscles was easy. His biceps were a work of art, even more drool-worthy in the tight shirt he was wearing. Hell, it looked like it would rip if he flexed too hard, and my stomach did a little dance. What would it be like to run my hands over those muscles?

His skin would be smooth on his biceps but rougher on his chest, with all the chest hair. He did have a nice, round ass. Clara had spotted that correctly, and I sighed at the thought of putting my hands on it and squeezing. Would he be into ass play? I loved it, both giving and receiving. Rimming was one of my favorite things to do, and even more when a man had an ass like that.

Was Howell a top or a bottom? Or vers? I wasn't opposed to topping, but I preferred to bottom, especially with a strong man like Howell. It had been too long since I'd had a good, hard fucking, and funnily enough, my hole twitched at the thought.

With each press and squeeze, I imagined the firmness of Howell's chest, the bulge of his biceps, the gentle taper of his waist. My fingers danced around the clay, coaxing it into the strong lines of a masculine form—each touch a silent ode to the man who had unexpectedly stirred something deep within me.

"That's beautiful, Onno," Clara said.

Wow. I stared at what my hands had created while my thoughts had been elsewhere. Somehow, I had managed to shape the clay into a perfect vase. The base was wide,

but it transformed into a smaller section, followed by another wider circle and a thinner one on top. How the ever-loving fuck had I pulled that off?

“Time’s up, everyone!” Clara announced, pulling us back from our private bubble of amusement. “Let’s start cleaning up.”

We rinsed our hands under the tap, the water turning murky. Howell’s vase—or what could generously be called a vase—sat on the bench, looking like it had survived an apocalypse.

“Yours has character.” I gestured with a wet hand, flicking droplets in its direction as if baptism by water could consecrate its oddity.

“And yours has muscles.” Howell nudged me with his elbow. “You sure you weren’t sculpting your dream man?”

“I did exactly what Clara told me to and imagined running my hands over your muscles,” I said without thinking, and the whole room exploded into laughter. Howell took the ensuing ribbing in good humor, though his cheeks were red.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, everything fell away—the chatter of people, the clatter of tools, the outside world. Oh, I was in trouble. Deep, deep trouble.

As we walked back to the truck, I took his hand and laced our fingers together. “Thank you. That was so much fun.”

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it. My stomach fluttered at that old-fashioned gesture. “I had the best time. And your vase looked freaking amazing.”

“Trust me, I’m as surprised as everyone else.”

“It tells you that you need to keep trying new things. You may not be good at all of them, but you could discover some hidden talents.”

Wasn't he the sweetest for saying that? “Maybe, but I doubt I'll ever be good at kayaking.”

“I could take you in a two-person kayak...”

“You mean you'd do all the work, and all I'd have to do is sit and look pretty?” I fanned myself dramatically. “I'm sure I can do that.”

He grinned. “Something like that. Unless you don't like the water.”

“I love it. I'm a good swimmer. We all learn as kids in the Netherlands. Since we have so many rivers, lakes, creeks, you name it, being able to swim is considered crucial, so everyone learns in school.”

“That's amazing. Every year, people drown because they end up in the water and can't swim.”

“Exactly. I used to swim all the time, but...” Even thinking of Gerard made my chest contract. “My ex didn't like it, so I stopped.”

Howell squeezed my hand and opened the passenger door of his truck for me. He gave me a little boost to get in and closed the door. He looked pensive as he buckled up and started the engine. “If you enjoy different things than your partner, it doesn't mean you shouldn't do them anymore. Lori-Ann, my ex-wife, loved going to flea markets and yard sales, which are my absolute nightmare, but I still wanted her to go. So she went with her friends while I went fishing with the boys, which she hated. There should be room for the things you love, shouldn't there?”

He was so right. Unfortunately, it had taken me way too long to realize how much I'd given up for Gerard. Bit by bit, I had disappeared to make him happy, and in the end, it still hadn't been enough. In hindsight, it was all so easy to see, but when I'd been in the middle of it, his arguments that if I truly loved him, I wouldn't do things he didn't like had sounded normal and persuasive.

"I didn't mean to make you sad," Howell said softly.

"Just bad memories, is all. Not your fault."

"Are you hungry? I'd planned for us to get dinner, but Clara served a lot of really yummy hors d'oeuvres, so I'm not sure how hungry you are."

"I could eat a little, but not a whole meal."

"How about some ice cream? There's an ice cream shop here with the best Italian ice cream."

Ice cream? Now there was a man after my own heart. "Yes, please."

Hand in hand, we walked to the ice cream parlor, its vintage sign promising cool delights. Stepping inside was like wandering into a childhood dream, lured by the scent of sugar and waffle cones and the rows of vibrant flavors nestled in their frosty beds.

"Rocky Road for me," Howell said with the confidence of a man who knew his pleasures. His choice sparked no surprise. He was the embodiment of rugged terrain and sweet surprises.

"Strawberry, please," I said. The girl behind the counter, with her pierced nose and bubblegum-pink hair, flashed us an approving smile as she scooped our selections

onto cones.

We found a corner booth, the vinyl squeaking beneath us as we settled in. The first bite of my ice cream was a burst of pure, creamy delight, and judging by the look on Howell's face, his was just as satisfying.

"How long will you be staying?" Howell asked. "I forgot to ask."

"The plan was six weeks, of which three have already passed. So only three more weeks."

The words hung suspended above our half-eaten treats, and a bitter pang of sorrow mingled with the sweetness on my tongue. It was a strange concoction, this blend of joy and impending loss, and I searched Howell's face for clues as to what he was thinking.

Only three more weeks. Was that even enough to build anything with Howell? Maybe enough for a hookup, but not for anything more. Not that I was opposed to sex with this man. Hell no. If he asked me to go to his place after, I was totally on board.

But I wanted more with him...and he gave me the impression he wanted that too. Otherwise, he would've asked for a hookup instead of a date. So, where did that leave us? Was three weeks sufficient to get to know each other and see if we had something real?

Howell paused his hand midair, the cone forgotten, a myriad of emotions flickering across his face like shadows cast by firelight.

"Three weeks," he echoed softly, setting his cone on the napkin-strewn table. His fingers found mine atop the cold, sticky surface and enveloped them in a grip that was both firm and trembling ever so slightly. "That's... It's not long."

The warmth of his touch seeped into my skin, chasing away the cold dread that had settled in my bones. The concern in his gaze held me captive, his handsome features etched with lines of determination.

“We can make it count though, right?” His voice was low, a tender rumble with an undercurrent of urgency. “I mean, we’ve got today and every day after until you have to leave.”

My throat tightened, a lump forming as I nodded. “I’d like that,” I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I want to make the most of every second.”

Howell brushed his thumb over my knuckles in a gesture that felt like a promise. A simple touch, but it held the power of unspoken words.

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” The corners of his mouth lifted in a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “We’ll pack as much fun into these three weeks as possible. Hikes, movies, dinners...hell, even more pottery if you’re up for it.”

Joy bloomed inside me. He wanted to spend time with me, wanted to be with me as much as I longed to hang out with him. “Very much looking forward to that.”

I wanted to spend every waking moment with this man.

When we got back to Howell’s truck, it had cooled a bit, but the warmth radiating from Howell was enough to keep the chill at bay. Night had fallen, and I glanced up at the sky, where stars twinkled like diamonds across an ink-black canvas.

“I’ve never seen so many stars,” I whispered. “Beautiful.”

“Sure is.” Howell followed my gaze. “But not as beautiful as you.”

Howell's hand, rough and warm, found its way to my cheek, and I leaned into his touch. His thumb brushing my skin sent a shiver down my spine. "May I...?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. My heart hammered as Howell closed the distance between us. His lips met mine, gentle, questioning, as if testing the waters. But when I kissed him back, something ignited deep within us both.

We deepened the kiss, passionate and intense, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. Howell responded in kind, encircling my waist and pressing me against the side of his truck. The hunger in his kiss, the yearning, matched my own. His beard scratched my face softly, a new sensation.

Our tongues swirled, the aftertaste of his Rocky Road mingling with my strawberry. He gently sucked my bottom lip, then surged back into my mouth. God, the man could kiss. I'd forgotten how good kissing could be, how erotic.

Howell's body was solid and warm, grounding me in the present. I ran my hands over his chest, then slipped them underneath his shirt and caressed his back. Beneath my fingertips, his muscles rippled. Muscles I had jokingly molded clay after earlier in the evening, and I chuckled softly.

He pulled away, breathing hard, and rested his forehead against mine. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing." My smile widened. "Just...happy."

"Good," Howell said, his voice husky. "Because I plan on making you laugh a lot more."

And as we stood there, in the quiet embrace of the night with only the faint hum of the town around us, I believed him.

HOWELL

The sun showed her glorious evening colors, painting the sky in bright orange and yellow. I laced up my dance shoes, which had been gathering dust in the back of my closet for more years than I cared to admit. The last time I wore them might've been at my wedding. Fuck, I was getting old.

But no, none of that now. Not when anticipation buzzed through my veins. All day, I'd been looking forward to tonight's date. Even when leading a zipline excursion, I'd barely been able to keep my focus. My thoughts had drifted to Onno and how much fun we'd had two days before.

I'd wanted to hang out with him yesterday, but I'd been called in for a search and rescue. A female solo hiker hadn't made it back at the agreed-upon time, and her family had called in help. Luckily, she'd worn a GPS tracker, which made finding her easy. Though it had required a two-hour climb because she'd been halfway up King Mountain. She'd slipped and hit her head and was still dizzy and confused from a concussion when we found her. We'd made it back safely, but by then, it had been too late to meet up with Onno.

Finding something else to do that was original and fun had been a challenge on such short notice, but I'd pulled it off—with a little help from Bubbles, who'd sent a list of suggestions. I wanted to offer Onno the chance to try new things, but with me instead of alone. Tonight, we'd learn to waltz. I'd double-checked with Onno to ensure he was up for it, but he'd assured me his feet had recovered enough to swirl on the dance

floor.

Once again, he was waiting for me outside the bakery, dressed in dark blue slacks and a crisp pink polo shirt. God, he was so gorgeous. He slid into my truck with much more ease and grace, then leaned in for a kiss, which I happily gave. I kept it brief, though. I didn't want to give Brianna and her husband a show, but that was fine. If the night went according to plan, we'd have more time for longer kisses later. And maybe more.

"You look nice," he said. His blond hair caught the last rays of light that streamed through the window, giving him an otherworldly aura.

"Thank you. The shoes feel weird, I gotta say. Haven't worn them in a long time."

"Mine aren't dance shoes, but they're nice enough. I didn't bring them with me, and I wasn't about to make the same mistake twice by buying new shoes."

"Smart."

He chuckled. "I have my moments. But if I step on your toes, you can't hold it against me. Gerard used to say I dance like a clumsy giraffe."

"Your ex sounds like a real charmer," I muttered, and Onno's smile faltered. Shit. He'd brought up his ex, but hell if I'd allow that asshole to ruin our date. "We'll just have to make some new memories. Yeah?"

He sent me a grateful smile. "I'd like that."

We arrived at the studio as twilight settled, the mountains now silhouette against the darkening sky. The town was quiet, but the dance studio buzzed with an energy that felt like a world away from the quiet wilderness where I found solace.

“Ah, you must be Howell and Onno. Welcome!” Our dance instructor, José, greeted us with a flourish as vibrant as the flamboyant scarf looped around his neck. He was a whirlwind of encouragement and enthusiasm, moving with the grace of someone who had dedicated his life to the art of dance.

“Come, meet the others.” José beckoned, sweeping us into the studio, where soft music played and couples chatted in loose groups. “Everyone, these are our new dancers, Howell and Onno.”

A murmur of welcoming “Hellos” and “How are you?” followed. Tiago Banner was there with his boyfriend, Cas. Cas had done a stellar job fixing my bathroom two years ago. Tiago and his twin brother, Tomás, were Forestville’s most famous residents, though both former top models had now retired. They were still extraordinarily handsome men.

The polished floor of the dance studio gleamed under the warm lighting as Onno and I stepped into place among the other couples. José’s voice, clear and melodious, cut through the soft hum of music, guiding us to stand face-to-face, our hands tentatively searching for the right positions.

“Relax your shoulders, Howell,” José said, and I obliged. Some of the tension of the unfamiliarity ebbed away under his encouraging gaze.

“Okay, gentlemen, let’s start with the box step,” he said, demonstrating with fluid ease. “Forward, side, together, back, side, together.”

I mirrored his movements, hyperaware of Onno’s presence. We stumbled, our feet tangling in a clumsy shuffle. Onno’s chuckles, a sound so genuine, coaxed a smile onto my lips.

“Sorry,” he murmured, but his eyes showed no real apology—just sparkling

amusement.

“Hey, no worries. We’re both learning.”

José paced before us, tapping the rhythm softly against his thigh, and gradually, we found our stride. One-two-three, one-two-three—the numbers looped in my head like a mantra, syncing with the steady thump of my heart every time our gazes locked.

“Look at you two!” José said after a while, clapping in delight. “You’ve got the basics down already.”

“Thanks to you,” Onno replied, his blue eyes crinkling, shining with a warmth that hadn’t been present when we’d first met, a softening around the edges. And something inside me swelled with an emotion I couldn’t name. His nervousness had also lessened as if he wasn’t as scared of disappointing me or others.

“Shall we try it with music now?” José asked, and without waiting for an answer, he started a melodic waltz that tempted the dancers with its lilting invitation.

As we danced, the world beyond Onno’s gaze seemed to fade. What was left was his hand in mine, firm and reassuring, and his other hand on my shoulder, following my lead confidently. Our steps flowed more naturally, the initial awkwardness melting into a rhythm that felt as easy as breathing.

“See? You’re a natural,” I said.

“Then so are you.”

“Maybe we’re just a good match...”

Our smiles became a silent language, the growing connection between us pulsating to

the cadence of the waltz. I reveled in feeling Onno's body moving with mine, the dance crafting an intimate space where words were unnecessary and the past held no sway.

"Good job, guys," José praised again as the song neared its end, but I barely heard him. All I could focus on was Onno, whose eyes never wavered from mine. Electric current charged the air as our hands remained clasped even after the music stopped.

As José called for a water break, Onno and I slipped away to a quiet corner of the dance studio. The mirrors lining the walls reflected the flushed faces of the other couples, but all I could see was the blue in Onno's eyes, bright against the sheen of sweat on his brow.

"Didn't think I'd work up a sweat from dancing." Onno ran a hand through his locks, damp at the temples.

I wasn't sweating, but then again, my daily activity level was several steps up from his. "Consider it a bonus. You get to learn to dance and exercise at the same time."

"You know, I didn't expect to enjoy this as much as I am." He held my gaze, earnest and unguarded. His honesty was like an open door, inviting me into the warmth of his presence. "It's...nice to feel connected to someone again. To laugh and move together. It's been a while."

"Same here," I said. "Dancing with you feels natural. Right."

He smiled, a smile that reached his eyes and made my heart beat a little faster. "Glad to hear I'm not the only one who thinks so."

Before we could delve deeper into the conversation, the music beckoned us back, the rhythm promising a chance to further explore our burgeoning affinity. As we rejoined

the group, José clapped, setting the tempo for the next dance.

“All right, let’s take it from the top!” José said. “Remember, it’s all about finding your rhythm with your partner.”

Onno’s hand found mine again, this time with confidence. A jolt of excitement surged through me. Our bodies moved in unity, the waltz steps becoming second nature as we glided across the floor. With each turn, twirl, and twist, the world narrowed to just the two of us, our breathing synchronized, our hearts beating as one, our movements a mirror of each other’s.

As the lesson continued, our coordination and rhythm improved, our steps and spins and spirals reinforcing the silent bond forming between us. The dance had started as a chance to learn, but now it felt like a language all its own—one that allowed us to converse through the push and pull of our intertwined figures.

As the final notes of the song faded like the softest of whispers, the room erupted in applause. We parted, breathless and flushed, joining the others in their appreciation. José approached us with a wide smile and clapped us on the back.

“Bravo, gentlemen! Your connection is palpable. That’s what dancing is all about.”

“Thank you, José,” I said. “Your instructions made it seem easy.”

“Ah, but the joy is in finding the right partner.” José winked, a knowing in his gaze, a recognition of the bond that had formed between us on the dancefloor.

As I stepped out of the dance studio, the cool Forestville air hit my flushed skin like a splash of mountain-stream water. The heat in my body had little to do with the exercise and everything to do with Onno. He’d set something ablaze inside me.

We strolled hand in hand back to my truck, leaving behind the rhythmic echoes of music and laughter. Our steps were unhurried, syncing naturally as if the dance had spilled over into our walk. Main Street was quiet, the shops darkened for the night, but the ever-present silhouette of the mountains stood as silent witnesses.

When we got to my truck, I opened the door for him, but he kissed me. Unlike the first time, there was nothing tentative about this kiss. Desire surged through me like wildfire, and our mouths moved together with a passion that had been building up since the moment our hands touched, as if the dancing had been foreplay.

He threaded his fingers through my hair, tugging gently, sending sparks shooting down my spine. I pulled him closer, deepening the kiss, exploring the taste of him—sweet like sugary pastries and intoxicating like the crisp mountain air.

I slid my hand to his ass, absorbing his heat through the fabric of his slacks, and he responded by surging deeper into my mouth, his tongue exploring mine with a fervor that matched the racing of my heart. He backed me up against my truck. I loved this newfound confidence, this touch of assertiveness. As if he'd found a part of himself again that had been lost.

Onno's hands weren't idle either. He unbuttoned my shirt and roamed over my chest, across my stomach, and down to my waist. My cock was so hard I was glad no one could see it because I'd be giving an X-rated show.

"God, you're incredible," I murmured against his lips, my hands tracing the contours of his body, committing the feel of him to memory. His scent, a mix of cologne and clean sweat, filled my nostrils, intoxicating and exhilarating.

His response was a sinful moan that vibrated into my mouth. I wanted more than a stolen kiss in public. I wanted all of him.

“Come home with me?” The words spilled out, tinged with longing and the anticipation of what could unfold between us. Each syllable hung heavily in the charged air, and I waited, eager, hopeful.

Onno’s blue eyes radiated a raw vulnerability, but he nodded slowly, the corner of his mouth quirking upward in that sweet smile I was becoming addicted to. “I’d love that.”

ONNO

The moment the door of Howell's cottage clicked shut behind us, it was as if a dam broke loose within me, releasing a torrent of longing held at bay for far too long. His lips crashed against mine with an urgency that set my entire body aflame. The soft hairs from his beard grazed my skin, sending sparks of electricity dancing down my spine.

"God, Onno." Howell groaned against my mouth, his voice muffled by our fervent kiss. His hands, strong and certain, roamed over my back, gripped my waist, and pulled me closer until not even a sheet of paper would fit between us.

I clung to him, tangling my fingers in his hair, reveling in his solid, muscled frame pressed against mine. His heartbeat thundered against my chest, echoing my rapid pulse.

"Where's your bedroom?" I managed, lost in the heady blend of desire and the sweet taste of Howell on my tongue.

Without breaking our kiss, he guided me down the dimly lit hallway, our mouths locked together in a dance as old as time. We stumbled, laughter bubbling up between kisses, my nerves dissipating in the face of Howell's calm certainty. He steered me forward with one hand on my back, his other tracing the line of my jaw, tilting my head back to deepen our connection. The carpet muffled our clumsy steps, cocooning us in our own world where nothing existed but the magnetic pull drawing us toward

his bedroom.

“Can’t wait to feel you,” Howell whispered, his breath hot across my cheek, his voice low and husky with promise. Anticipation built, a bubbling fountain of need that eclipsed all thought beyond the overwhelming desire to be one with this man who had so unexpectedly captured my heart.

“Please,” was all I could utter, a plea wrapped in a sigh. We crossed the threshold into the sanctuary of his room. I had never wanted anything more. Had never wanted anyone more.

The door clicked shut behind us, and the world outside fell away. The urgency in Howell’s grasp ebbed, and he drew back. Confusion fluttered through me. It was quickly assuaged when he reached past me and flicked on a dimmer switch. A warm, amber glow suffused the room, casting shadows across his muscled form. He moved with a fluid grace, born from years of physical activity, and I was enraptured by his elegance.

“Wait here,” he murmured, delicately tracing my lower lip with his fingertip in a too-brief touch. The loss of contact left a tingling absence on my skin, a yearning for more.

He walked to an old-fashioned record player perched on a mahogany dresser. The needle dropped with a satisfying crackle, starting the sultry strains of a romantic ballad, a song that spoke of endless nights and fervent whispers. The music enveloped us, a velvet caress against my eardrums that pulsed in sync with the throbbing desire coursing through my veins.

Howell’s consideration pierced through the fog of lust clouding my mind. His concern was such a stark contrast to Gerard’s cold, calculating ways, where every encounter had felt transactional, devoid of care or forethought. Here was Howell,

creating a bubble of intimacy, each detail a testament to his thoughtfulness, attention, and preparation in case I came home with him. Inside me, something profound built higher and higher and higher.

“Wow.” The word felt clumsy on my tongue, my voice betraying the swell of emotions rising like a tide within me. “This... It’s beautiful.”

He returned to me, his gaze tender. “For you,” he said simply. And those two words held a promise, a commitment that required no grand gestures, just a silent shared understanding.

His lips curved into a smile that made my heart stutter. He bridged the gap and captured my mouth with renewed passion. The taste of him was intoxicating, a heady mix of mint and the earthy hint of the forest that clung to him like a second skin. His scent—a whiff of sweat and the subtle cologne that seemed to embody the very essence of masculinity—filled my nostrils, anchoring me to the present when everything felt possible.

Howell’s hands, strong and sure, found the hem of my shirt and lifted it with a tantalizing slowness. As the fabric whispered over my skin, every nerve in my body stood at attention. His gaze roamed over me, dark and hungry.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, brushing his fingertips over the line where tension had once made a home across my shoulders, now melting under his touch.

His thumbs skimmed the waistband of my slacks, and I moved my hips forward to encourage him. A zipper parted like the prelude to an orchestra’s crescendo. The bedroom was warm, but as the thin material slid down my legs, the cool air kissed my heated skin, and a shiver raced through me.

Howell knelt before me, the reverence in his eyes searing me more than any touch.

He removed my socks one at a time, pressing a soft kiss to each ankle. Goosebumps trailed in the wake of his lips.

My boxer briefs were the last to come off, and he eased them down with care, kissing every inch of skin he revealed. I felt cherished, worshipped, precious. He only needed a few seconds to take his clothes off and then he lifted me off the ground as if I weighed nothing and carried me to the bed. Jesus, this man would be the death of me.

I was laid bare, vulnerable in the soft glow of the bedside lamps, yet there was no room for insecurities. Howell's tender ministrations were a balm to the scars Gerard had left on my soul. Each caress was an affirmation, each kiss a promise of something pure.

"You're so beautiful." Howell mapped the territory of my flesh, fingers dancing over my ribs, teasing the sensitive skin until I was writhing beneath him, endless moans spilling from my lips.

His mouth followed the trail blazed by his hands, tasting every inch of exposed skin. I arched into the warmth of his touch, his lips, his tongue. When he wrapped his lips around a nipple, sucking gently, a low growl rumbled from my throat, and I tangled my hands in his hair, urging him closer, deeper.

And Howell, with the patience of a saint and the devilish intent of a sinner, complied. He worshipped my body with an intensity that bordered on devout, igniting fires in places I'd forgotten could burn. His tongue drew patterns down my stomach, swirling around my navel, stoking the flames higher with each lap.

"Please," I gasped, hips bucking up in silent supplication.

His hot breath against my thigh teased the edge of desperation clawing inside me. Every muscle tensed, coiled tight as a drum. With a smile promising untold pleasures,

he looked up at me, and my heart stumbled and fell. I was his, utterly, completely, irrevocably.

The world blurred into a haze of heat and need as Howell closed his lips around my cock, already wet at the tip. I hadn't expected him to be comfortable doing this right away, but he took me in with calm confidence. What a turn-on. He licked and lapped, swirled and sucked. His mouth was a cocoon of warmth, his movements deliberate, skillful, each motion designed to unravel me piece by piece.

A symphony of sounds escaped from deep moans to ragged breaths, each note underscored by the sloppy, wet noises of Howell sucking me off. Fuck, he was good at this.

"Howell..." I panted, the world narrowing to the overwhelming presence of this man between my legs. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and my skin was flushed.

And then there was the sight of him—brown eyes filled with a hunger mirroring my own. It was a look of pure intent, one that spoke of his desire not just to please but also to cherish.

"Close...so close," I murmured, teetering on the edge as Howell doubled his efforts, digging his fingers into my hips with possessive intensity.

With a cry, I came undone, and waves of release crashed over me as my cock spurted its load. Howell kept suckling me, drawing out every shuddering pulse of ecstasy until I was spent, a tangle of trembling limbs and raw nerves.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looking like a man who was mighty pleased with himself—as he should be. He stretched out next to me and held out his arm, and I snuggled close.

A maelstrom of emotions welled inside me. The contrast between this selfless act and the years of Gerard's selfish demands struck me with the force of a tidal wave. Where Gerard had taken, Howell had given—freely, completely, generously, asking for nothing but my pleasure.

Gratitude washed over me. For this man, for his kindness, for the way he saw me—not as a project or a prize but as a partner. He was healing me, closing wounds that had hurt too long.

“Thank you,” I whispered, the words inadequate to express the enormity of my emotions.

“I mean it when I say it was my pleasure.”

I put my head on his shoulder. His embrace felt so...powerful. Protective. I played with his chest hair, then ventured lower. His stomach was flat, though he didn't have a six-pack. Not that he needed one. The man was ruggedly handsome in the best way. He'd literally carried me to the bed...and I was well over six feet tall.

He also had a really, really nice cock. It had been hard as iron the whole time but had now flagged a bit. But I intended to remedy that. I just needed a moment to recover, both physically and emotionally.

I propped myself up on one elbow, gazing down at Howell. His chest rose and fell with steady breaths, the muscled contours shadowed in the soft light. A surge of warmth filled me, not only from the afterglow but also from a newfound determination. I wanted to give him the same earth-shattering pleasure he'd given me.

“Your turn,” I murmured, voice husky with desire, and I found his lips in a gentle kiss, tasting the lingering salt of my release. He hummed, lifting his hands to tangle in my hair. But I was already moving, trailing kisses over his face, his ears, his temples,

every now and then finding his lips again.

“You don’t have to...” he said.

“Hush. I want to. I very much want to.”

His skin was hot under my touch, each muscle tensing as I explored farther. I nipped and sucked at his neck, drawing a deep groan from him that vibrated against my tongue.

“Onno,” he breathed out, a plea and a benediction all at once.

My hands roamed lower, mapping the expanse of his broad chest, toying with a nipple, rolling it between my fingers until it hardened. Howell arched underneath me, seeking more contact. I obliged him by playing with his nipples until he squirmed on the bed.

His cock stood proud and beckoning, and I didn’t waste any time. He’d waited long enough. I wrapped my hand around him, relishing the velvety firmness and the way he bucked into my grasp.

“Ah, Onno.” Howell’s voice was strained, thick with need.

I loved hearing my name on his lips, loved knowing I was the cause of him coming undone. For a moment, I had to let go of him so I could position myself between his legs. When I looked up, he was watching me with brown eyes burning with want.

I lowered my mouth onto him, taking him in, sucking until his cock hit the back of my throat. The taste of him was intoxicating, a heady blend of musk and arousal, and my desire flared anew.

With my lips wrapped around him, I set a rhythm, hollowing my cheeks, applying pressure in all the right places. Howell's fingers were back in my hair, guiding without forcing. His moans mingled with my wet slurps and the low, romantic strains of music playing in the background.

"Oh... Fuck, sweetheart. Yes, just like that." Howell's voice hitched as I took him deeper. He unraveled beneath me, his body taut like a bowstring, his thighs tensed. I knew he was close.

"Come for me, Howell," I whispered and enveloped him once more. That was all it took—my words, my mouth, my hands. With a guttural cry, Howell spilled into me, his climax pulsing, and I drank him down, savoring every twitch and throb and tremble.

As he sprawled on the bed, panting and spent, I crawled up his body to claim his lips again. We lay on our sides, face-to-face, and kissed lazily, the urgency replaced by a tender languor. He trailed his fingers over my back, igniting tiny sparks that settled deep within my core.

I snuggled into Howell's embrace, my skin tingling from his touch, the scent of our desire lingering like a heady perfume. His chest rose and fell against mine, each breath a silent testimony to the passion we'd just shared. The taste of him was still on my lips, salty and sweet, and it made me hunger for more. I flicked my tongue out, chasing the lingering flavor.

"Stay with me," Howell murmured. He traced the line of my jaw, a tender gesture that spoke louder than any declaration. "I want to fall asleep with you tonight and wake up with you tomorrow."

The earnestness in his tone settled inside me, soothing the scars left by a marriage where every offer had an angle, every compliment a price. Howell's kindness was a

balm, healing wounds I'd had for so long I hadn't known they could be treated.

"Okay." The word lifted a burden I hadn't realized I was still carrying until it was gone. "Yes, I'll stay."

A smile spread across Howell's rugged features, crinkling the corners of his eyes, revealing sexy dimples.

As he kissed me again, slow and sweet, I savored the taste of him, committing it to memory. Because in less than three weeks, I would be gone...and this would have to end.

HOWELL

Onno's laughter bubbled over the sizzle of the wok he was stirring. Our hostess for the evening, the amazing Intan, had turned a simple Indonesian cooking class into an adventure for the senses. The rich aromas of garlic, lemongrass, and ginger made my stomach rumble.

"Look." Onno expertly flipped the contents of his wok, where he made nasi—Indonesian fried rice with egg, thin slices of ham, vegetables, and spices to give it its distinct yellow color and subtle flavor. "I'm a natural."

His blue eyes sparkled with mischief under the kitchen's warm lights, and I chuckled at his feigned boastfulness. "Sure, you are." I stirred the rendang, the tender beef simmering in coconut milk and spices. "Because you've never done this, obviously."

Onno had organized this date, and while we were chopping vegetables, he'd told me Indonesian food was popular in the Netherlands. Indonesia was a former Dutch colony, and many Indonesians had moved to the Netherlands, bringing their favorite recipes. Onno loved their food and had made some dishes before.

He waved his hand. "Details."

I shook my head, amazed at how easily our banter flowed.

Intan moved between us, her long ponytail swishing as she inspected our dishes.

“Really good, Onno! You have good technique,” she said and turned to me with a nod of approval. “And, Howell, your rendang looks perfect, hmm? Right consistency.”

We beamed under her compliments, and a surge of pride rolled through me, not just for mastering the art of Indonesian cuisine but also for the ease with which Onno and I interacted. Everything was so natural, so effortless, so spontaneous.

“Okay, class, time is up!” Intan announced, clapping her hands together. “You can take your food home with you and let me know how it tasted, yes? Remember, rendang must simmer for two more hours.”

The room buzzed with the rustling of the six participants packing up our creations, the delicious results of our labor. I couldn’t wait to taste it, especially those succulent skewers of satay that promised a burst of peanutty flavor. We wrapped the dishes carefully, ensuring none of the precious sauces would spill during transit.

“Thank you, Intan, for such an incredible experience,” I said as we approached her, balancing our containers.

“Terima kasih ,” Onno said, one of the few Indonesian phrases he’d learned. He looked so damn pleased with himself that my heart swelled with affection.

“Senang bisa membantu ,” Intan replied with a warm smile. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. Don’t be strangers to the kitchen or each other.”

Her knowing look didn’t go unnoticed, and my cheeks heated slightly. Onno gave a short, hearty laugh, clearly unfazed by her insinuation.

“Thanks again,” I said. We waved goodbye to the other participants, who were engrossed in chatter about their newfound culinary skills.

It was only a short walk to my house, so we hadn't bothered to take my truck. Inside, I flicked on the lights, and a warm glow spilled out from the overhead lamps, casting shadows that danced along the walls. With a few strikes of a match, I lit the candles I'd strategically placed around the living room. Their flickering flames gave a softer, more intimate illumination, the faint ocean scent slowly permeating the air.

"Nice touch with the candles." Onno set our culinary treasures on the table.

"Thought it created the right atmosphere. Same with this." I clicked on the sound system, and soft music began to play—a gentle acoustic melody that wrapped around us like a comforting blanket.

"Perfect." Onno turned to me, giving me his radiant smile. The kind of smile that said everything without uttering a single word, that made my stomach do flips, that made my heartbeat stutter. I was so crazy about this man.

Porcelain clinked and napkins rustled as Onno and I set the table, our movements falling into a rhythm that felt as natural as the rise and fall of the tides. I handed him forks and knives, and he placed them beside each plate, his long fingers careful and precise.

"Feels good, doesn't it? To create something with your hands." Onno surveyed the spread of dishes we'd prepared.

"Definitely," I agreed. "But with the right company, it feels even better."

He treated me to another one of his sweet smiles.

We settled at the table. The tantalizing aroma of spices, coconut, and lemongrass made my mouth water. I'd heated the satay for a minute. Onno carefully took a bit, closing his eyes, and savored the tender chicken in its rich, fragrant sauce.

“Oh, this turned out really, really well. So much better than store-bought.”

“You have store-bought satay back home?”

“Well, the peanut sauce. We eat that with a lot of other food. Fries, for example. It’s delicious.”

Fries with peanut sauce? I knew the Dutch ate their fries with mayo, which in itself was already interesting, but peanut sauce? I shouldn’t diss it before trying it, but that didn’t sound like an appealing combination.

“I’d love to visit sometime,” I said. “See your home country with my own eyes.”

Shit. Why had I said that? It only reminded me that time was running out on us. Every day together was a bittersweet reminder of our impending goodbye, which came closer and closer.

“I would love to show you all my favorite places.” Onno’s voice sounded hoarse.

“Sweetheart...”

He shook his head. “Don’t. Don’t say it. I can’t bear it.”

Once dinner was over and Onno had loaded the dishwasher with a precision that was true to his character, we settled on the couch with a glass of wine.

“Your place has such a warm vibe,” Onno said, letting his gaze wander over the bookshelves and framed photos of mountain landscapes. He nestled deeper into the cushions, drawing his feet up beneath him in an unconscious display of comfort.

“I was going for cozy.” I tucked a throw pillow behind me for support. “Makes

coming home feel like...well, coming home.”

“I have to redecorate my house when I go back. Gerard had specific tastes, and I want it to feel like me now.”

Before, when he’d mention his ex’s name, his face would grow tight, displaying hurt and bitterness, but now he talked about him more neutrally. “I’m proud of you,” I said softly. “You’ve made big strides in your healing process.”

He slowly nodded. “You were a big part of that.”

“I’m grateful I could help, but most of it is you, sweetheart. You’re so much stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

He put down his wine glass and turned to me. “Will you take me to bed?”

I swallowed. In the last week, we’d exchanged more blowjobs but hadn’t done full anal. I was okay with that. Not that I didn’t want it, but the last thing Onno needed was to be put under pressure. “Are you sure?”

“I want you, Howell. In every way. Please show me...”

Show me you love me. He didn’t need to say the words. We both felt them, but by unspoken agreement, we didn’t say them aloud.

“Sweetheart, I—” My voice cracked, thickened with emotion. “I want you too. So much.”

I cupped his cheek, smooth and soft beneath my palm. He pressed against my hand, closing his eyes for a moment as if to savor the touch. When he opened them again, they were alight with affection and a desire that mirrored my own. “Then have me,”

he whispered.

It was all the invitation I needed. With a fluid motion, I closed the distance between us, my lips finding his in a tender and fervent kiss. As our mouths moved together, exploring and learning, our bodies followed, drawing nearer until there was no space left between us.

We stumbled to my bedroom between kisses. I flicked on the lights. I wanted to see him, see what I did to him.

“Gorgeous,” Onno murmured, tentatively brushing my chest. His touch ignited a fire on my skin, warmth spreading through every fiber of my being. I captured his hands with mine and guided them to the hem of my shirt. Together, we lifted it over my head, the fabric whispering its farewell, exposing my body to his gaze.

My fingers found the buttons of his shirt, undoing each one with deliberate slowness, prolonging the moment. The shirt parted, revealing his pale skin, such a contrast to the dimly lit room. I traced the lines of his collarbone, and a shiver passed through him. He was so beautiful with his smooth skin, long, sleek limbs, and perfect eyes. Eyes I wanted to drown in. Everything about him spoke to me, sang to me.

“Your turn,” I said softly, and with a smile that held volumes of unspoken words, he mirrored my actions, divesting me of my shirt. In between more kisses and caresses, we shed all our clothes piece by piece. There was a reverence in the way he touched me, as if memorizing the map of my body with his fingertips.

Our gazes locked, and time seemed suspended. With each breath, anticipation built, charging the air with electric potential. I stepped closer and wrapped my arms around him, our skin meeting in a flush of heat, our chests rising and falling in sync.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, and led him to the bed.

Onno nodded, his blue eyes shimmering with trust and something deeper, something I recognized as akin to my feelings. Love. We were in love.

“I’m perfect.” The corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

I smiled back, arranged the pillows, and pulled back the sheets, laying a foundation for what was to come. Leaning over him, I brushed my lips against his forehead, a silent promise to honor the gift of his vulnerability.

“Let me take care of you,” I whispered. Such simple words, but they felt like a vow.

I opened the bedside drawer and retrieved the lube but hesitated when I got to the condoms. Going bare seemed crazy this soon, yet...

“I’m tested and negative,” Onno said softly. Even now, we were on the same page.

“Same. So, bare?”

“Bare.”

He spread on his back, letting his legs fall wide as he showed me everything, giving me a view into his very soul. I’d never done this. My ex hadn’t been into anal, but I’d done my research, wanting to know what to do when Onno was ready. Thank god I had. I felt certain, confident, convinced I’d get it right.

“You’re perfect,” I whispered as I ran my hand down his stomach, over the length of his cock. “So fucking perfect.”

His smile lit up my heart.

I kissed his right leg from his still somewhat damaged feet to the inside of his thigh,

then did the same to his left leg. His soft signs were a sweet symphony.

With lube-coated fingers, I slid into him, first with my middle finger, then with my index. I prepared him with unhurried movements, giving each touch, each caress, each move my utmost attention, ensuring his comfort. His responses guided me—little intakes of breath, a subtle shifting of his hips, his fingers gripping the sheets and relaxing, gripping and relaxing.

“Good?” I checked, pausing to look into his eyes.

“Perfect.” That single word suffused me with warmth, spreading from my chest outward, each cell prickling and tingling.

I stretched out on top of him, and nimble as he was, he folded his legs double, accepting me between his legs. Positioning myself was a bit of a fumble because of the awkward angle, but he was patient, watching me with that sweet, shy smile.

I slid into him slowly, guided by every flicker of pleasure that danced across his features. The heat of his body welcomed me, wrapped around me like the embrace of a long-lost lover. There was no resistance, only the seamless joining of two souls hungry for the taste of each other’s essence. He took me in like he was made for me, not showing a hint of discomfort.

“Howell...”

His voice broke, and it was as if he spoke directly to my heart, urging it to beat faster, to love harder. Because god, I loved him. I loved him with every fiber of my being, with every beat of my heart, with every breath in my lungs. But I dared not speak the words, scared they’d shatter the sacred trust between us.

“Look at me.” I held his gaze in silent conversation. A conversation made of shared

desires and whispered dreams.

With each gentle thrust, I discovered what turned him on, learned the rhythm that drew soft moans from his lips. The room filled with the sound of our bodies moving together, and the air grew thick with the scent of our mingled arousal. My skin heated, sweat beaded on my forehead, and electrical pulses zipped down my spine.

“Harder... Please, Howell, harder...” Onno pleaded, and I obliged, my movements growing bolder, driven by the urgency pulsing through my veins. We swayed together, a sensual dance that pulled us closer to the edge of ecstasy.

“Yours.” He dug his fingers into my shoulders. “I’m yours, Howell.”

“Oh, sweetheart...”

I couldn’t speak. If I did, I’d spill the words I shouldn’t say, confess the promises that shouldn’t be voiced. Instead, I poured my love for him into the touch of his soft skin and the slides into his warm channel. Each stroke, each kiss, each shared breath wove us tighter together.

Onno wrapped his right hand around his cock. I would’ve done it, but I couldn’t figure out the logistics without putting my full weight on him. Next time. There would be a next time.

And when I couldn’t hold back anymore, when my balls were painfully tight and my muscles cramped with tension, Onno whispered, “Let go, baby. Send us over the edge.”

I threw my head back and surged deep inside him. My muscles seized, and my body grew taut as I shook and shivered my way through the orgasm blazing through me. Onno shuddered underneath me, spraying his load between our heated bodies.

Our dance continued in a quiet postlude of labored breathing and thudding hearts seeking a common rhythm. I rolled off him gently and pulled him into my arms, our limbs entangling. We lay there, sweaty and messy, skin on skin, hearts exposed and vulnerable.

“Thank you,” Onno murmured against my chest, his breath warm and comforting.

“Thank you.” The echo of our lovemaking reverberated in every fiber of my being.

As I held Onno in my embrace, a heaviness settled over me. The knowledge that this bubble of contentment was temporary—a fleeting perfection—clawed at my insides. My chest tightened, and without warning, tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

He would leave. He had to leave. How would I survive without him? How would I ever be able to let him go?

ONNO

Three weeks—the span of a heartbeat in the grand scheme of things, yet enough time to turn my world on its head. I lay in Howell’s bed, the predawn light filtering through the curtains, casting a soft glow on the man beside me. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest was a silent siren song, lulling me into a false feeling of forever. But forever was a luxury we didn’t have.

As much as I longed to burrow deeper into the warmth of his embrace, it was time to leave. Time to go back to the Netherlands, to a life that suddenly felt foreign, though I’d lived there my entire life. We had spent every waking moment together—exploring the dense greenery of Forestville’s forests, laughing over homemade dinners, getting lost in each other’s arms. And now, the reality of our separation squeezed my heart, leaving a hollow ache where happiness once resided.

I traced the contours of Howell’s sleeping face with my eyes, committing every detail to memory. The way his beard created a perfect shadow along his jaw, how his brown eyes crinkled when he laughed, the softness of his lips when he kissed me.

I was in love with him, and by the way he looked at me, the way his touch lingered, I could only conclude he felt the same. But neither of us had dared to give voice to our feelings. What was the point? It would only carve deeper grooves into our breaking hearts.

“Time to get up,” Howell murmured, his voice a gravelly whisper. His heavy eyes

met mine, reflecting my heartbreak.

“Right.” My voice was barely audible. “Airport.”

Neither of us spoke. Words were trivial, powerless against the weight of our shared silence. We moved mechanically, packing the last pieces of my temporary life into my suitcase, our touches lingering, trying to memorize the feel of one another.

All too soon, we were in Howell’s truck, the engine rumbling beneath us as we headed to Sea-Tac. Howell’s hand found mine across the console, gripping it like a lifeline. He drove with a calmness that belied the turmoil in his eyes, the tightness of his face, the tension of his shoulders. The fir trees blurred past us, a green canvas streaked by the tears I refused to shed.

“Will you be okay?” Howell stroked his thumb over the back of my hand.

“Yes,” I lied, squeezing his hand. “And you?”

“Guess I’ll have to be.” His halfhearted smile didn’t reach his eyes.

The miles vanished behind us, each one a countdown I wished I could stop. The closer we got to the airport, the tighter my chest constricted. I talked about mundane things—my flight, the weather in Amsterdam, my mother who awaited my return—anything to fill the void, to keep from crumbling.

Howell found a spot in short-term parking and killed the engine. He turned to me, his jaw hard as granite, the lines around his eyes deepened with sadness. “Let’s grab your bags,” he murmured, his voice laden with resignation.

As we reached for my luggage in the back of the truck, our hands brushed—a spark in the dimming light of our time together. The expression in Howell’s eyes was a

reflection of everything unsaid.

We walked into the terminal, silent, holding hands.

“Flight to Amsterdam?” the check-in attendant asked mechanically, her smile practiced but empty.

“Yes.” I handed over my passport, my fingers trembling slightly. Howell’s presence beside me was a pillar of strength I was about to leave behind.

I put my suitcases on the scale, and she labeled them, then gave me my boarding pass. “Have a safe trip,” she said, oblivious to the earthquake shifting the ground.

“Thank”—my voice wavered—“you.”

Howell’s hand found its way to the small of my back, a silent message of support that didn’t need words. His touch was a balm, but it was also a reminder of what I would miss—those strong hands that had guided me, held me, loved me without words.

“Hey.” I put a warm hand on his arm. “I’ll text you when I land, okay?”

“Okay,” Howell said, the corners of his mouth lifting in a brave attempt at a smile, unshed tears glistening in his eyes.

In that crowded airport, with the world rushing by, I felt like we were the only two souls—a small island of stillness in a sea of chaos.

“Take care of yourself,” he whispered.

“I will. You too, Howell.” Each word stabbed my heart.

The security checkpoint was ahead, a physical manifestation of our looming separation. I stole a glance at Howell, finding his deep brown eyes on me. We exchanged a silent conversation. A conversation of “I’ll miss you” and “This isn’t over” interspersed with desperation. Desperation neither of us wanted to voice.

We reached the point where only passengers were allowed to go. I turned to him fully, the world blurring around us until there was only Howell. His sturdy frame, which had shielded me from the perils of the wilderness. His kind eyes, which saw through my defenses. His strong calloused hands that had held me together when I thought I might break.

“Come here,” I said. Howell opened his arms and wrapped me in an embrace that felt like it could stop time. My tears came then, unbidden and hot against my cheeks. He held me tighter, and I buried my face in the crook of his neck, inhaling the scent of something undeniably Howell.

“I’ll come visit,” he whispered, his lips moving softly over my scalp. “As soon as I can.”

“Make it soon,” I choked, clinging to him. “I’ll...I’ll come back too. For you. Always for you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” Though the word seemed too small for what I meant.

We kissed, our lips pressing firmly against each other in a kiss that spoke of endless longing and silent promises and whispered confessions. We pulled apart, only to crash back together, each kiss a punctuation mark in a sentence that had no end.

“Go,” Howell said, his voice ragged. “Before I do something stupid like kidnap you.”

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing.” I attempted levity but failed miserably as another wave of tears blurred my vision.

“Go, Onno,” he urged again, and this time, I forced myself to step back, to disentangle myself from his hold.

“Okay.” I nodded more to myself than to him. “Okay.”

With a final, lingering look, I turned and walked toward the security checkpoint. I didn’t dare turn back, knowing that one look would unravel me completely.

The tears streamed down my face as I took my place in line, my shoulders stooped, my chest heavy, my breaths labored. I felt like someone had died, and in a way, maybe they had.

“Onno!” The urgency in Howell’s voice sliced through the ambient noise, sharp and clear, commanding every ounce of my attention.

I spun around, breath hitched in my throat. There he was—Howell—pushing his way through the crowd with determination. His eyes locked onto mine, shining with pure love and raw vulnerability as bright as a beacon in the dark.

He reached me and, without regard for the curious eyes of strangers, sank to his knees on the polished floor of Sea-Tac Airport. The world stilled and the chatter fell away until there was only Howell, looking up at me like I was his True North.

“Marry me,” he said, his voice quivering. “I love you, Onno. I can’t let you go. I know it’s only been three weeks, but they were the best weeks of my life. I don’t want to be without you, sweetheart. I’ll do anything, everything, to make you happy for the rest of our lives.”

His words hit me with the force of a tidal wave, flooding me with shock and awe and indescribable warmth that seeped into the marrow of my bones.

Tears welled and spilled over. My throat tightened, but the words I'd never dared to say clamored for release. "Howell, I—" A sob choked off the rest, but I fought through it. "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you."

People stopped and watched, but they didn't matter. Nothing mattered. The world could've crumbled around us, and it wouldn't have mattered. The only thing that mattered was Howell and his faithful brown eyes promising me a future I'd stopped believing in.

"And I'll move here," I said. The decision crystalized with a certainty that surprised even me. "To the US, to wherever you are." I felt light, buoyant, as if the weight of years had been lifted from my shoulders. Was it reckless? Maybe. Did I care? Not one bit.

"Yeah?" Relief washed over Howell's face, mingling with his tears.

"For you, for us, I'd cross oceans."

He rose, and we hugged and kissed, and we cried and kissed some more. We were a spectacle, two grown men clinging to each other in Sea-Tac Airport, but it didn't matter. Not when every whispered promise and gentle touch spoke of a love that had blindsided me, a love that was worth every risk.

"Oh, sweetheart"—Howell pressed his forehead to mine—"I can't believe this is happening."

"Believe it," I whispered back, reeling from the intensity of our connection. I tasted the salt of our tears as they continued their silent descent, marking the trail of

emotions we'd unleashed.

"Let's not waste any time." Howell pulled back slightly, his gaze steady and strong. "I'm going to marry you as soon as possible. We'll get started on your visa the moment we've said our vows."

A laugh bubbled up through the tightness in my chest, more from joy than disbelief. "After that proposal? You already know my answer." I leaned in and stole another quick kiss, a promise of all the ones to come. "Yes, let's do it. Let's start our forever."

"Then it's settled," he said, his grin infectious. "We're doing this. And, Onno?" Howell's voice dropped to a husky whisper. "Once you're here for good, I'll make sure you never doubt how much you mean to me—not for a second."

EPILOGUE

HOWELL

Six Months Later

As it turned out, marrying right away was not the smartest course of action. A fiancé visa was easier and quicker to obtain than a spouse visa. That meant Onno had to return home since he couldn't apply for one from within the US. Saying goodbye was still hard, but we had a goal now, something to look forward to, and that eased the pain. A little.

We filed the paperwork—endless forms of questions—and the waiting game began. I let my parents and sister know what was happening, and they were over the moon happy for me, not wasting a single word on the fact that Onno was a man. They assured me they very much looked forward to meeting him.

After four weeks, I couldn't stand it anymore, and I booked a flight to Amsterdam to visit him for a week. I met his mom, who was the sweetest ever and immediately accepted me, although she was sad that her other son would also be moving abroad. So I told her she could visit as often as she wanted. I also got to know Onno's friends. Seeing him through their eyes only made me fall in love with him more.

Once that week was over, I had to return to Forestville, where I spent time with Joost and Brianna and got to know them better. Another month passed, and I flew back to Amsterdam. Apparently, four weeks was the maximum time I could stand to be separated from Onno, even when FaceTiming daily. I needed him like I needed

oxygen, and he felt the same way.

While grocery shopping, we ran into Gerard, who I recognized from pictures Onno had shown me. Even if I hadn't, the way Onno tensed would've clued me in. So I kissed him passionately until Gerard got the hint and disappeared, and Onno looked at me with stars in his eyes.

It took four months to get the letter that his fiancé visa had been approved, which meant he could book his ticket, and we could get married. Finally.

He flew in with his mom and two of his best friends, Froukje—whose name I horribly mangled every time I attempted to pronounce it—and her husband, Steven. Froukje would be his maid of honor and Joost his best man. On my side, Bubbles—who would be my best man—and Justin flew in from Tampa, and my sister, Carrie, would be my maid of honor. It was unconventional as fuck, and I loved it because it completely fit us.

Onno was waiting for me outside the bakery like he had every time I'd picked him up for a date, except now he was dressed in a blue pinstriped suit, a white dress shirt, and a baby-blue bow tie that made his eyes sparkle. My eyes filled with tears. My man, my best friend, my unexpected miracle.

"Hi." He flashed me that shy smile.

"Hey, sweetheart." I pressed a soft kiss on his lips. "You look amazing. So gorgeous."

"So do you." He patted my biceps, where the fabric of my jacket stretched tightly. "You'd better not flex too hard."

Smiling at our inside joke, I kissed him again. Surrounded by our family and friends, we walked to the church hand in hand. Growing up, Onno had always gone to church,

and while he didn't anymore, he'd explained it would mean a lot to his mom if we got married in a church. I didn't consider myself religious, but I had no objections if that made her—and thus him—happy.

I couldn't take my eyes off him as we stood facing each other to say our vows.

"Howell, you may go first," the officiant said.

I'd written it down, but I didn't need my notes, the words etched in my heart. "Onno, I think I fell in love with you the moment I met you...when you sent us both flying into the Skykomish River." Laughter rose, and he grinned. "I fell, but so did my heart. Three weeks was enough to know I loved you, but a lifetime won't be enough to show you how much."

My niece Sara, our ring bearer, beamed a smile as she held up the little pillow with our rings. I took Onno's and slipped it on his finger.

"I promise I will always love you, cherish you, and honor you, support you in every way I can, and do all within my might to keep you safe and happy."

His eyes filled with tears, and I had to fight the urge to kiss them away.

He took a deep breath. "Howell, you were my compass when I felt lost, my buoy when I thought I was drowning, and my shelter when it was storming. You helped me find myself, and for that alone, I will always be grateful. I fell for you so quickly, so easily, and so deeply. In the words of Ruth from the Old Testament, 'Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.'"

He took my ring and carefully put it on my finger. "I promise I will love you and never leave your side, that I will take care of you the best I can in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until the day I die."

We both turned to the officiant, who gave us a nod. “By the power vested in me by the state of Washington, I declare you husbands. You may kiss.”

I didn’t need to be told twice, and I took my time kissing my husband. Then I leaned my forehead against his. “I love you, sweetheart. Our forever starts now.”

Thank you for reading! If you’d like to read more stories about men falling in love in Forestville, please check out my Forestville Silver Foxes series on lokepub. The first book in the series is Renovating the Model .