



Once Upon a Yuletide Romance (Once Upon a Holiday Story)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Calculus is kicking Will Hargrove's butt. When fellow student Tom Dawson suggests they study together, both hope it will improve their grades in the college class. Spending time together leads to more than just a passing grade, and a tentative romance blooms, however Tom's negative feelings about relationships—thanks to his mom's attitude about her failed marriage—keeps most of his feelings at bay.

One thing leads to another and soon the men are willing to admit their true feelings, but can Tom get past his mother's influence and open himself up to a full relationship? The annual YuleFest is the perfect occasion to spend time together, connect and enjoy everything the holiday festival has to offer.

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CHAPTER ONE

Will (Billy)

Will was sure his Calculus 101 professor had seen his eyes glaze over in class today. If he heard about “the fundamental notions of convergence of infinite sequences and infinite series to a well-defined limit” one more time, he thought he might scream! Why had he thought taking this class was a good idea? Oh yeah, it was his advisor who had suggested it since Will wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted to do for a living. A general business degree, including things like this hell called calculus, would be a good thing. She claimed her recommendations were based on Will’s SAT scores, but Will wasn’t convinced. He slumped into a chair in the student lounge of Quincy College and groaned.

He pulled his laptop and a ham-and-cheese sandwich out of his backpack along with a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips and a bottle of water, then began to eat his lunch while going over some notes for his English class, which started in an hour. It was nice to have time to eat and relax before class, but it wouldn’t hurt to review the notes he’d taken on American poets the last time the class had met.

“Hey,” a voice called as a guy sat across from him at the combination dining/work table. “You’re Billy, right?”

“Actually, it’s Will, but yeah, hi,” Will said, swallowing a bite of sandwich and looking across the table. A very cute blond with dazzling green eyes stared at him, hand outstretched.

“Oh, sorry, I thought it was Billy. I’m Tom. Tom Dawson. We’re in Calculus together.”

“Oh. Nice to meet you, Tom.” Will wiped his hand on his pant leg and shook Tom’s hand. “And you’re not confused about my name. I’ve been Billy Hargrove for all my life, but now that I’m in my twenties, I just don’t feel like ‘Billy’ anymore, so I’ve been working on changing it.”

“Fair enough,” Tom replied. “So is it just me, or does Calculus suck donkey dick?”

“Not just you.” Will laughed. “I’ll be happy if I can pull a C in that class.”

“Sorry, that was a bit crude, wasn’t it?” Tom asked.

“Not at all. You just spoke the truth.” Will paused, grinning. “Even if it did involve donkey dick.”

“Well, since you feel the same way about it, do you think you might like to study together sometime? I mean, if you’re hoping for a C in that class, you’re definitely doing better than me.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Will agreed. “Let’s compare schedules and see if we can figure something out.”

“Okay. Do you live here in Plymouth?” Tom asked.

“No, I’m down in Hawthorne Bluff. How about you?”

“Cool. I live in Hawthorne Bluff too. That could make this a little easier. I work part-time at the Gray Whale, mostly waiting tables and sometimes as a barback,” Tom told him. “Usually Tuesday nights and either Thursdays or Fridays and until six or seven

on Saturday.”

“Really? I work just down the street from there at Bradley House B and B. I normally work three nights a week, and I’ve been known to cover parts of a weekend here and there. Nights there are typically pretty quiet, so I can get my studying done,” Will said. “Maybe we could meet up there. I’m sure my boss wouldn’t mind.”

They settled on a couple of dates, exchanged phone numbers so they could text, and headed off to their next classes: Will to English and Tom to American history.

As Will left the college in North Plymouth to head to work at the B he was extremely happy that Tom had noticed him. Studying with a great-looking guy like Tom could end up being the high point of the semester.

Will pulled into the small parking lot on the side of the guest house, grabbing his backpack as he exited his Honda CR-V. He was extremely thankful to work there with a great boss like Clay.

“Hey, Kate,” he greeted the woman behind the front desk. Kate Spooner worked three days a week at Bradley House while her kids were in school. “Anything going on?”

“Not really,” she answered. “It’s been kind of quiet. The highlight of my day was when the couple staying in room two asked me to make a reservation at Tavino’s for them tonight.”

“Okay, good. I’m hoping I have some time to study tonight.”

“I’m sure you will.” She stood up and donned a light jacket. “Okay, I’m off to get the kiddos. See you later.”

Will moved behind the counter and peered into Clay’s office, hoping to find him

there. But the room was empty, so he hung his jacket in one of the lockers along the right wall and returned to the desk with his backpack. As he unloaded both his English and Calculus 101 books, he saw Clay descend the front staircase.

“Hey, boss, what’s going on?”

“Not much, Billy. Good day at school?”

“So-so. Don’t get me started on Calculus.” He grinned. “Can I ask a favor?” Clay raised a brow. “Can you call me Will from now on? I haven’t talked to my mom about it yet, but I think I’ve outgrown Billy and want to start going by Will now.”

“Sure, Will. And for what it’s worth, I think it suits you.”

Will smiled and said, “Thanks. By the way, I have a question.”

“Sure,” Clay said.

“Would it be okay if a friend of mine comes by some nights when I’m working so that we can study together? I’ll still do my job and everything, but since calculus is kicking his butt too, we thought that studying together might help.”

“Of course,” Clay said. “I trust you and know you won’t let things get out of hand.”

“Thanks. He lives in town, and we got to talking today. We’re trying to set up some study times that work around our schedules. He works at the Whale,” Will added, referring to the tavern located down the street.

“What’s his name?” Clay asked.

“Tom Dawson. Why?”

“Twenties, blond, good-looking?”

“Yeah, that’s him.” Will grinned. “Do you know him?”

“I don’t really know him, but I’ve seen him at the Whale before. He waits tables, and I know he helps out at the bar when they’re slammed.”

“Well, thanks, Clay. I’ll text him and finalize which nights we can study together.”

“Fine. I’m heading out to run a couple of errands, then I’m meeting Finn for dinner. I’ll see you later.” Clay had recently started dating Finn Reynolds, and it looked to Will like the romance was blossoming.

“Enjoy. And don’t forget to use protection.” Will could be such a smart-ass when he wanted to be.

Laughing, Clay shot him a one-fingered salute as he headed out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Tom

“Hi, Mom,” Tom said as he strode into the kitchen. She was washing dishes, and Tom wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek.

“My, but someone’s in a good mood today,” his mom, Alice, replied in greeting. “Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

Tom hadn’t worked at the Whale that day, so he’d stayed at school after his last class to study for a while in the library. “I talked to a guy in my Calculus class today, and we’re gonna set up some times to study together,” Tom told her. “Hopefully, it will help both of us pass that class.”

“I don’t know why you took that in the first place,” Alice said, wiping her hands on the hand towel near the sink. “It seems that all you do is complain about it.”

“You know I’m considering a degree in engineering, and my advisor suggested it.” He sighed. “But who knows, if I don’t do well, I may need to think about switching majors.”

“I know you’ll do fine, Tommy; now wash your hands, then set the table for me, please.”

She pulled a casserole dish out of the oven and set it on a trivet in the middle of the small table in the kitchen’s corner. The only time they ate in the dining room was for

holidays, so it had become a catchall space for Tom to do homework and Alice to keep her sewing supplies.

The aroma of the chicken pot pie wafted through the kitchen, and Tom's stomach grumbled. "Smells delicious, Mom." He pulled the pitcher of ice tea out of the fridge and saw a bowl of salad there, so he grabbed that as well.

As they tucked into their meal, Alice asked, "So who's this guy from your Calculus class? Someone you know from another class, or is this somebody new?"

"I've seen him around before. Kind of a friend of a friend, but today was the first time I talked to him. His name's Will. He works over at Bradley House B and B."

"You've got that look on your face, Thomas Dawson. Don't you go falling for him," she warned, using his full name so Tom knew how serious she was.

"He's just a friend. Well, not even that yet. Just a study partner," Tom protested.

"I bet he's cute, though, right?"

"Well ..." Tom started. His mom had never had an issue with him being gay. She just said the same thing she'd have said if he were interested in a girl. Don't get serious, Tommy. Relationships always end in heartache. They're not worth it. She was still so bitter about her marriage to Tom's dad. He was no longer around, having cheated on her for several years before she finally "threw his sorry ass out," as she told it. Tom honestly didn't know if his mom had really thrown his father out, or if he had just left of his own accord. He didn't think it really mattered anymore.

Tom had been four at the time, and he vaguely remembered seeing his dad a few times after that, but eventually, he stopped showing up. When Tom got older, his mom said his dad had moved away, and good riddance to him. She did a great job

raising Tom, and while they didn't have a lot, they had each other. They made do with what they did have, and overall, life was pretty good. Sure, after high school, Tom worked for a few years before he started college—mostly to save up a little money—but he had convinced himself he needed time to figure out what he wanted to do anyway.

“Yeah, he is kinda cute, but don't worry, Mom,” he continued. “I just want to pass this class, okay?”

As he got into bed that night, he thought about what his mom had said about Will. It was true that he'd been eyeing him for a while.

He remembered first seeing him last year in the student lounge. He'd been eating his lunch, just like today, while reading some textbook—Tom couldn't remember what the subject was. It didn't matter; he only saw Will.

Short brown hair, chocolate eyes, and just the hint of a beard. He'd been wearing a V-necked shirt of some kind, and Tom could see some dark hair peeking out from the collar. Every so often, whatever he was reading would cause a smile to light up his entire face. Yeah, Will was definitely hitting all of Tom's buttons for sure.

Relationships never worked. He knew that not only from listening to his mom all these years, but from his own experience with Derek. Derek the Dick. He'd taught Tom more than he cared to think about regarding relationships.

Sure, it had started off nice enough. Derek had been a couple of years older than him, and in the beginning, he cared—or at least seemed to care—for Tom. As time went on, things began to change. Derek got more demanding of Tom's time, always expecting to him to be at Derek's beck and call. But it wasn't reciprocal. If Tom tried to initiate a date with Derek, the man either wouldn't reply to a text or say he wasn't available. He often went out with other friends and rarely included Tom in his plans.

And when he did, Tom felt compelled to go, even if the time was inconvenient or the friends weren't his favorites, lest he incur Derek's wrath.

Looking back, Tom supposed he should have seen the warning signs, but at that point, he had just been so happy to have a boyfriend, he had ignored all the bad things that were happening. Soon, Derek grew tired of Tom and broke it off with him. Alice, of course, was unsympathetic. "What did you expect?" she asked him. "Relationships never work. Gay or straight. It's just the way it is."

So he guessed his mom was right. Relationships never worked out, did they? It certainly hadn't for her. Dad had walked out and pretty much never looked back. Some days, Tom wondered if he were still alive. Probably, he figured. Mom wasn't even fifty yet. Even if his dad were a few years older than that, he still should be alive, right? Did he have a new family somewhere? Did Tom have half brothers or sisters? Crap! Why did his brain always take him down these crazy paths? It didn't do any good to think about what might be, or what might have been. The simple fact was that Dad was a loser.

He finally fell asleep, hoping that just once, he might find someone with whom a relationship might last for more than a month or two.

CHAPTER THREE

Will

Classes over for the day, Will walked out to his car and thought about the fact that he'd not seen Tom at all that day. I guess our schedules don't match up as well on the days we don't have Calculus. As he made his way back to Hawthorne Bluff and Bradley House for his shift, he realized that he really missed seeing Tom, and that struck him as rather odd. They'd only just met and weren't even really friends, but Will felt something was missing when their paths didn't cross.

Ah well, they'd texted, and Tom would be coming to the B I think your dad would approve. But don't get upset if I slip up once in a while. After all, you've been Billy to me for a long time." Her smile radiated love and sincerity.

"Thanks, Mom." Will yawned. "Okay, that's my cue to hit the sack. I'm beat."

He picked up his backpack, then leaned over and kissed his mom on the cheek. "Good night, Mom."

"Sleep well, sweetie."

CHAPTER FOUR

Tom

Tom breathed a sigh of relief when his shift was finally over. They'd been slammed at lunch, and after a brief lull around three, it had picked up again until he finally clocked out at six thirty. There was a definite uptick in business thanks to the tourists staying in the area so they could visit Plimoth Patuxet Museums and Cape Cod, or even Boston, from Hawthorne Bluff's central location.

"Wanna grab a coffee before heading home?" Charlotte asked, grabbing her bag from the locker next to his. The petite blonde fireball was his best friend in the whole world and had been since they first met on the playground in first grade.

"Sure," Tom replied. "I take it you wanna go to Cuppa Joe's, not get a cup here, right?"

"Of course." Char snickered. "I mean, the coffee here is good but not as good as Cuppa Joe's." A brisk October breeze kicked up colorful leaves along the sidewalk as they hurried along to the café.

"So ... what's been going on with you?" Char asked after they'd ordered cappuccinos and were seated on one of the overstuffed sofas near the front window.

"Not much. School, work, sleep, repeat," Tom said honestly. "Although I have a new study partner for calculus," he added, almost as an afterthought.

“Really? Tell me more. Is he cute?” She practically leered at him.

“Um, I never said it was a guy,” he said, ignoring her question.

“But it is, right? I’m hoping for a really cute guy who’ll teach you more than calculus.” Her smile was wicked.

“Okay, fine. Yes, it’s a guy, and yeah, I think he’s pretty cute.” He sighed. Char wouldn’t be happy until he provided every last detail. “His name is Will, and he works over at Bradley House.”

“Oh! Will Hargrove? I know his sister, Melissa. He is cute. Well done, my friend.”

“Okay, just stop right there. We agreed to study the hell that is calculus. Nothing more,” Tom chided her.

“Well, I happen to know that he likes guys, so at least you two have that in common. You know that means I’ll stay ever romantic and hope that you two fall madly in love over a math formula or whatever it is you do with that calculus crap.”

“So he’s gay, huh?” Tom’s mind drifted, thinking of what it might be like to kiss Will. Where had that come from? Shaking his head back to the present, he said, “Wait, it doesn’t matter. Again, we’re just study partners. It’s not like I’d stand a chance with him anyway.”

“You stop that right now, Mister ‘I Can’t Have a Relationship Because All Relationships Suck’!” she whisper bellowed. “Don’t you be talking shit about yourself.”

How did she manage to be so quiet and yet scream at the same time?

“But you know it’s true,” he whined. “They never work out for me.”

“That’s your mom talking right there. Didja ever stop and think you might sabotage any chance you could have with someone?” She looked at him, and he could see in her radiant blue eyes how much she really cared for him. “I think your mom’s done a number on you, Tom. She’s had a bad time of it and now tries to convince you that relationships can’t work. But they can. I mean, look at me and Cee Cee.” Cee Cee was Cecile, Char’s girlfriend of almost six years. Char toyed with the magenta stripe on the side of her pixie haircut as she spoke.

“I know it works for you, but I think it’s because you’re both a little weird. Or wacky. I haven’t decided which.” Tom grinned.

She smacked his shoulder playfully. “Damn right, we are! We take pride in our weird wackiness. But remember, you love me.”

“That I do,” Tom admitted. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He poured sincerity into his words. Char had stood by him through it all. When kids had tried to bully him in high school, Char was there to stand up for him, fists at the ready. When he had realized he was gay, Charlotte was the first person he’d told. She’d hugged him and said she’d be his friend forever. Then she told him that she was pretty sure she liked girls—so they could be each other’s wing-people—she’d help him find guys if he helped her find girls.

“Hey,” Char said gently, “friends forever, remember? We’re in this together.”

“I know. Now before we both melt into a puddle of mushiness, what’s up for the rest of the weekend?”

“Cee Cee and I are doing a stay-at-home date night tonight. She’s working until eight, and we knew we’d both be too tired to go anywhere.” Cee Cee worked at The Bee’s

Knees, a small gift shop in the next block that sold bee- and honey-related products. With the number of tourists in the area increasing for the fall holidays, the shop stayed open later on Fridays and Saturdays. “She’s gonna swing by here, and we’ll pick up a pizza at Tavino’s before heading home to watch a movie or something,” Char said. “You’re welcome to come by if you want.”

“And horn in on your cuddle time? Thanks, but no thanks. I wanna spend some time with my mom,” he explained. “Between work and school, I don’t get to see her as often as I used to.”

“Speaking of your mom, have you talked to her yet about moving out?” Tom had been considering reducing the number of classes he was taking next semester and working more so that he could get an apartment. He loved his mom, but he was twenty-four now and needed to think about going off on his own.

“No. I’m afraid to,” Tom admitted. “She’s gonna try and talk me out of it, I just know it.”

“You’re right, she will,” Char said honestly. “But you have to be firm, Tom. This is what you need.”

When Tom got home, he found his mom watching her soap operas in the living room. There was one she was particularly fond of, and she taped the episodes all week, then binge-watched them on Friday night.

“Hi, Mom,” he said quietly, sitting on the sofa.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Alice replied, her eyes glued to the screen. “This’ll be over shortly.” A bowl of popcorn sat in her lap, and Tom reached over and grabbed a handful of the fluffy kernels. He sat patiently, knowing it wasn’t a good idea to interrupt his mom when she was so engrossed in her program. Finally, about fifteen

minutes later, she reached for the remote and turned off the TV.

“Wow, that was an exciting week on the show,” she declared. “Not like here in Hawthorne Bluff, where nothing ever seems to happen.”

“Yeah, well, they gotta keep things interesting on those stories so that people keep watching. Real life isn’t usually like that,” Tom said.

“So how was work today?” Alice asked, changing the subject. “Was it busy?”

“Yeah, it was crazy for lunch today. There was a bit of a slowdown in the middle of the afternoon, but it picked up again for dinner. I was really happy to get outta there when my shift ended,” he told her. “Char and I went to Cuppa Joe’s for coffee after work. She was meeting Cee Cee there, and then they were heading home with a pizza.”

“Didn’t you wanna hang out with them?”

“Nah. I didn’t want to butt in on their date-night stuff. Besides, I’ve barely seen you all week. Figured I’d come home and see you.”

“You’re a good son, Tom.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He almost told her that he was thinking about moving out, but he wasn’t ready to have that discussion with her yet. He’d brave those choppy waters when he felt better prepared for the backlash. Instead, he asked her about her job at Standish Construction Company, where she worked as a personal assistant to the owner.

CHAPTER FIVE

Will

Things were going well, both at school and at work. He and Tom had managed to meet up a few more times—twice at school and once at Cuppa Joe’s—and Will was finally getting the hang of the calculus stuff. Tom seemed to be picking up on most of it as well. Will was so thankful that Tom had approached him about studying together. It was definitely the right thing to do.

But every time they met, Will felt a stirring in his loins. And his belly. Yes, he was definitely developing feelings for Tom. And why not? Tom was great looking, with a terrific sense of humor and a killer smile. He was a bright guy and could talk on most topics with ease although sometimes Will had to work at getting him to actually talk. There was a quiet, almost timid quality about him that Will found adorable. They shared some similar interests, like movies and reading, but even when Tom talked about things that Will normally wasn’t interested in, he found the subject fascinating when the words flowed from Tom’s mouth. Yep, he had it bad.

At first glance, Tom didn’t seem to share Will’s feeling. But the more time they spent together—they had started hanging out together for lunch after Calculus class—Will realized that Tom was actually quite shy, especially when there were other people around. There was something else; Will couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but it was some kind of hesitancy that exuded from Tom. More than just the shyness. It was almost like Tom was trying to avoid getting to know Will too well.

All Will knew was that he absolutely wanted to get to know Tom better; he just

wasn't exactly sure what to do next. Maybe he needed some advice. And he knew the perfect person to ask.

"Hey, Clay," Will greeted his boss when he walked through the door at the B&B. "How are things going?"

"Not too bad. How were classes today?" Clay asked.

"Okay. Now that Tom and I are meeting up to study, I'm actually starting to understand things."

"That's great!" Clay effused. "I'm happy that's working out for you."

"Um, yeah, about that ..." Will began.

"Oh, is it not working out so well?" Concern painted Clay's words.

"No, the studying part is working out great. It's just that, um, well, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"When you and Finn started seeing each other, how did you know that he liked you? How did you actually start dating?"

"I see. Am I correct that you're starting to have feelings for Tom?" Clay asked.

"Yeah, I am. But he isn't showing any interest that I can see," Will lamented. "I mean, he's friendly enough, but he's also pretty shy, and I'm wondering if that might be the problem."

“So Tom may be interested, but he’s just too shy to say or do anything?”

“I think so,” Will said slowly. “So ... what do I do?”

“Well, to answer your question, the first time Finn and I went out to dinner, it wasn’t really a date. It was just two friends getting together for a meal and catching up a bit,” Clay told him. “I hadn’t been back in town very long, and frankly, I was getting the cold shoulder from a lot of people because of my time in prison while I was in Chicago. But Finn never held that against me. He said that Emma trusted me, so he did too.” Clay was referring to his grandmother, who had supported him through all the bad times he’d gone through. “And honestly, by the end of the night, it did kinda feel like a date.”

“Hmm, just friends getting together. We’ve kind of done that already. What’s next?” Will asked.

“Oh, you’ve spent time together besides just studying and in class?”

“Yeah, we’ve had lunch after Calculus several times now,” Will said.

“Since you’ve already done the ‘just friends eating together’ thing, I think it’s time you asked him out on a proper date.”

“Shit. What if he says no?” Will felt himself hyperventilating.

“Relax. If he says no, then you’ll know that he’s not interested in you like that. No harm, no foul. You can still be friends and continue to study together.”

“Okay, yeah.” Will’s eyes grew wide. “Fuck, what if he says yes?”

Clay laughed. “Then you go out on a date with him. That is what you want, after all.”

“Oh yeah, right.” Will sagged against the front desk where he’d been standing. “Thanks, Clay. Sorry to sound so needy, but I really needed to talk to someone about this.”

“No worries, Will. I’ve got your back.”

Will talked to himself all the way to school that morning, practicing how he was going to ask Tom out on a date as well as how he’d react if Tom said no. He wanted to keep a neutral expression so that Tom wouldn’t know how disappointed he was if he was turned down.

They didn’t have Calculus that day, but a few weeks before, Will had discovered that Tom usually hung out in the library before his morning classes. So that’s where he headed, backpack slung over his shoulder. Sure enough, there was Tom, sitting in one of the carrels near the long expanse of windows on the far wall. Now that he was there, with Tom just across the room, butterflies fluttered in his stomach, and he felt like he might throw up.

Deciding on the direct approach at the last moment, Will sauntered up to him, trying to look calmer than he actually felt. “Hey, Tom,” he whispered, “I’m glad I found you here.”

“Hi, Will,” Tom replied. “Is something wrong? We’re not supposed to meet until tomorrow, right?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure. What’s up?” Tom asked.

“What time are you off work on Saturday?”

“I should be done by six or so. Why?” Tom queried.

Okay, you can do this. Just relax. Will took a deep breath, wiping his sweaty palms on the legs of his jeans. “If you don’t have any plans, I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner with me?” Will said, praying his nervousness didn’t show.

“Dinner?” Tom seemed confused for a moment, then his eyes lit up. “You mean like a date?”

“Um, well, yeah. A date,” Will stammered. “You know, um, well, if you want, that is.” Crap, I’m babbling! I shouldn’t have done this! He’s gonna say no!

Tom’s smile lit up his face. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

“You would?” Will said, trying to keep the surprise out of his voice. “I mean, that’s great. Okay. How about I pick you up around seven. Is that okay?”

“Seven is perfect. But if for some reason I’m running late, I’ll text you.”

“Okay, cool.” Will nodded. “I’ll let you get back to your studying. See you tomorrow.”

Will turned and left the library, trying not to hoot and holler in excitement. Oh my God, he said yes! When he exited the library, he turned the corner and leaned heavily against the side of the brick building, wrung out from a mixture of worry and excitement.

He pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to Clay.

He said yes!

A few moments later, his phone buzzed in reply.

Great! I know UR not working today, but stop by later & we can chat.

Will hurried off to class with a bounce in his step as his mind swirled. He was going to go on a real date with Tom!

The lobby of the B and B was quiet when Will arrived. He had texted Clay when he left school, saying he was on his way. Jeff was sitting behind the reception desk, and he looked up when he heard the door.

“Hey, Will. What’s going on? You’re not scheduled to work today,” Jeff said in greeting.

“Hi, Jeff. No, I’m here to see Clay.”

“He’s upstairs getting ready, but he should be down shortly. Finn’s picking him up in a few minutes.” As Jeff spoke, the door opened once again, and Finn walked in.

“Hey, guys,” he said in greeting.

“Hi, Finn,” they both replied in turn.

“Clay should be down in a sec,” Jeff added.

“I understand congratulations are in order,” Finn said to Will, smiling. “I’m told he said yes.”

“Um, yeah. So why am I still nervous?” Will answered.

Finn laughed. “First-date jitters. But don’t worry, it’s gonna be okay.”

“What’s this?” Jeff asked. “You’ve got a date, Will? Is it with that guy Tom?”

“Yeah. I asked him this morning before class.” The color rose in Will’s face. “We’re going out Saturday night.”

Clay sauntered down the stairs just then and headed directly for Finn, kissing him lightly. “Hi, sweetheart.”

“Hi, you,” Finn replied. “We were just talking about Will’s upcoming date.”

“Oh yeah, that’s why I wanted you to stop by,” Clay said, turning toward Will. “Finn and I went to this great place a couple of weeks ago, and I figured we could tell you about it.”

“That’s right,” agreed Finn. “The Artisan Pig in Plymouth. Nice, but casual. I think you’ll like it.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Will said. “It’s a pizza place, right?”

“It is,” replied Finn. “The food was great, and best of all, it won’t break the bank.”

“It sounds perfect,” Will agreed. “Thanks, guys.”

CHAPTER SIX

Tom

“A date?” Char squealed. “That’s awesome! Now tell me exactly how he asked you.” Char hadn’t worked that day, but Tom had called her as soon as he got home.

“Honestly, he kind of caught me off guard,” Tom explained. “I was in the library this morning, studying before my Spanish class. He walked up to the carrel where I was sitting and said he had something to ask me. At first I thought I had forgotten about a study session or something.”

“I know you better than that,” Char said. “You wouldn’t miss a study session, especially since you told me it’s helping you a lot. Is that when he popped the question?”

“Yeah. He asked me if I’d like to have dinner with him Saturday night. I said yes, but now I’m wondering if maybe I should have just let him down easily,” he admitted.

“Why the hell would you do that? I mean, you like him, right?” Char asked, her voice rising in pitch.

“Yeah, I do like him, but I just know it’s not gonna last, so why even bother?” Tom’s voice broke slightly.

“Stop that right now, Tom!” Char exclaimed. “What have I told you about talking like that? I don’t wanna hear your mom’s words coming outta your mouth.”

“Sorry,” Tom said sincerely. “I know I shouldn’t say shit like that. But it’s not easy. Remember, I’ve been hearing that stuff almost all my life.”

“I know, hon.” Char’s tone changed, and Tom could hear the care in her words. “I’ve tried to be patient with you. But you know your mom is a bad influence when it comes to relationships. That alone is enough of a reason why you need to get a place of your own. I understand that your dad was a dick, but that doesn’t mean all guys are. But enough about that.” Char deftly changed the subject. “I wanna talk more about the date. So where is he taking you?”

“I dunno. We didn’t really talk about it. Just that he’s gonna pick me up around seven.”

“Okay, so you’ll need to wear something casual but nice. I don’t think he’s gonna take you anywhere too fancy.” She spoke like she was his older and wiser sister if he’d had one.

“There’s no place that fancy around here anyway,” Tom said. “And I don’t think he’d take me up to Boston on a first date.”

They continued their date discussion until they both began to yawn and agreed to chat again the following day.

The next couple of days flew by. Before he knew it, Tom was leaving his shift at the Whale to race home to change for his date. He hadn’t seen Will much at school, but he did get a text at one point just letting him know that they’d be going to The Artisan Pig in Plymouth for dinner.

His mom was in the living room in front of the TV when he got home, and he stopped to give her a quick kiss on the cheek before bounding up the stairs to his room. “No time to chat, Mom,” he said after the kiss. “I’ve only got a few minutes to shower and

change.”

He quickly showered off the stink of a shift at the restaurant and changed into what he thought of as “casual but nice” clothes. He didn’t go out very often, so his choices were limited, but standing at the bathroom mirror, fixing his hair, he thought he looked presentable.

Just as he finished tying his shoes, his phone rang.

“Hey, Char,” he said. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to wish you luck on your date tonight,” she replied. “Did you find out where you’re going?”

“Yeah. Will texted me yesterday. The Artisan Pig in Plymouth,” he told her. “You and Cee Cee have been there, right?”

“Yeah. A few times, actually. The food is excellent,” she gushed. “The dirty fries for an appetizer are really good, and the last time we were there, they still had a summer-special pizza with corn puree, summer squash, and red onions. It was heavenly. They’ve probably switched it up by now for the fall, but we’ve never been disappointed in any of the pizzas we’ve tried.”

“Good to know,” Tom said.

“So what are you wearing?” she asked.

Tom rolled his eyes, happy they weren’t on a video call. “Dark jeans and a sweater, sis. That’s okay, right?” Although they were the same age, she never ceased to act like an older sibling. He felt butterflies in his stomach and began to second-guess himself. Why had he even agreed to go on this date?

“That’s perfect. The place is really casual, and I know you look amazing,” she told him. “Now stop worrying. You’re gonna have a great time.”

“How do you do that?” Tom asked, feeling himself relax in response to his friend’s words.

“Do what?”

“It’s like you can read my mind, and you always know the right thing to say.”

“Gee, Tom, who knows you better than me?” Char chuckled. “No one, that’s who.”

“You’re right. Thank you,” he said quietly.

“Okay, I’ll let you go. Just please don’t worry. And remember, I love you.”

“Love you, too, Char.” He was so lucky to have someone like her in his life.

Tom grabbed his jacket and descended the stairs. It was still early, but he didn’t want to spend time with his mom right then, for fear of what she might say. “I’m gonna wait outside, Mom,” he told her. “Will should be here soon.”

“Okay, babe. Have a good time,” she said. “Just don’t go leading him on,” she continued as he opened the back door. “You know this can’t really go anywhere.”

Dammit! Why did she have to say that? Tom’s good mood evaporated instantly. He sat on the squat stone wall that bordered their property, trying to slow his breathing. He recalled Char’s words and replayed them over and over again in his head until he felt his peace returning. No matter what his mom said, he was going to do his best to enjoy himself tonight. Who knows, maybe Will was different. He’d stay positive and keep telling himself just that. Will was different, and this relationship could work.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:15 am

CHAPTER SEVEN

Will

“Tonight’s the big night, isn’t it Will?” Jeff asked. Jeff was working the overnight shift, and Will was relieved to see him walk through the door almost twenty minutes early.

“Yup, my first, but hopefully not my last date with Tom.”

“I thought you might like a few extra minutes to get ready, so why don’t you take off, and I’ll start my shift now?” Will didn’t normally work on Saturdays, but Melissa had asked him if he could work that afternoon for her. Since the extra money would come in handy with Christmas just around the corner, not to mention tonight’s date, he had agreed.

“Thanks so much, Jeff!” Will effused. “I owe you one.”

“Just have a good time. And relax, dude. It’s gonna be fine.”

“I sure hope so,” Will said, loading up his backpack and heading for the door. “See you later.”

Home was only seven minutes away from the B he just seems tentative about things, so I plan to take it slow.”

“Nothing wrong with slow, Will,” Emily agreed. “You’re young. You’ve got plenty

of time before you decide on one person.”

“I know.”

“Do you have enough money?” his mom asked.

“Yeah, I stopped at the ATM when I left work. It’ll be fine.”

“Well, you run along then. I’m sure Tom won’t mind if you’re a few minutes early to pick him up.”

Will parked around the corner from the restaurant, and they walked side by side to the entrance. Will glanced at Tom. Damn, he looked so good in dark jeans and an oatmeal cotton sweater along with a dark-green barn jacket.

The restaurant didn’t accept reservations, but there were a couple of tables free when they entered, and Will breathed a sigh of relief. They were seated quickly and took a moment to catch up before ordering. The restaurant was bright and welcoming, with a front wall of windows. It was all done in black and white, giving it a slightly retro feel, but somehow updated and modern in its own way. Tables were arranged in the front and on one side while a bar graced the opposite wall.

“So how was work today?” Will asked.

“Lunch was busy, but it slowed down this afternoon,” Tom replied. “Since Char agreed to work a double today, I was able to get out a little earlier than normal. How about you?”

“It was pretty steady for me, actually. As you know, I don’t often work on Saturdays, but my sister needed some time off, and I was happy to make a few extra dollars. Fridays and Saturdays can get crazy since they’re often the days we have folks

leaving and new folks coming in,” Will explained. “But it made the day fly by, so I’m not complaining. And Jeff showed up early ’cause he knew I had plans for tonight, so I got out a few minutes early.”

There was a short lull in the conversation, and they both picked up their menus. When their server stopped by, Tom ordered a wheat beer from Lone Pine Brewing, and Will opted for a red ale from Pipeworks Brewing. They asked for a few more minutes to decide what to eat.

By the time their server came back with their beverages, they’d decided on some dirty fries—currently loaded with pulled pork, BBQ sauce, caramelized onions, and cheddar—for an appetizer, and the sausage-and-ricotta pizza.

“I hope this place was an okay choice,” Will said. “Clay and Finn recommend it to me. They told me they came here a few weeks ago, and the food was really good.”

“Char said we’d love it. She and her girlfriend, Cee Cee, consider themselves pizza aficionados, and they’ve been here a few times. She was really excited that I was finally coming here.”

Their appetizer arrived, and they dug in, chatting about their classes but avoiding Calculus to keep things upbeat.

Dinner was great. The food was, indeed, wonderful, and they were both stuffed. It was still early, so they decided to take a walk, hoping to burn off a few of the many calories they’d just consumed. Fishmans Memorial Park was just a block away, right on the water, so they headed there. There was a brisk breeze coming from the harbor, so they walked quickly, agreeing that this probably wasn’t the best idea but still determined to get in as many steps as they could.

By the time they got back to Will’s vehicle, they were laughing about how foolish

they had been to try such a thing. Will started the engine and turned the heat to high so they could warm up. As Will turned down the street where Tom lived, they were both toasty.

“Thanks for a great evening,” Tom said as Will parked in the driveway. “I hope we can do this again.”

“I hope so too, Tom,” Will said sincerely. “I like you, Tom. A lot. So yeah, I definitely want to see you again.” He leaned over and kissed Tom chastely on the lips.

“Thanks again,” said Tom. “Goodnight.”

Will’s mind swirled with both confusion and happiness as he drove home. Had he done the right thing, kissing Tom like that? Was it too soon? Tom hadn’t seemed to mind, but he didn’t really do much. Maybe he was just too surprised to react. It’s not like he’d pushed Will away or anything. Well, at least Will had enjoyed the kiss. Tom’s lips were soft, and Will got a whiff of his cologne as they smooched. Something citrus, with an underlying herbal mix; Will found it quite intoxicating.

His mom was already in her bedroom when he got home, so he went up to his room, stopping in the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face. He fell asleep thinking of the kiss and the smell of Tom’s cologne.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tom

“How was dinner with that boy?” his mom asked as Tom walked in the back door.

“He has a name, Mom. It’s Will. We had a nice time. We went to The Artisan Pig in Plymouth. The food’s really good there,” Tom said.

“So is he your boyfriend now?”

“I think it’s a little too early to put a label on this, Mom. Sure, it was a date, and yes, it was nice,” Tom answered, getting a little defensive. “And for what it’s worth, I like him. He told me that he likes me too. And I’d like to go on another date with him. We’ll see what happens.”

“Just remember what I’ve been telling you since that no-good father of yours left us,” Alice said, bitterness creeping into her tone. “Men are no good. You can’t depend on them. Don’t go falling in love or anything. It’ll only end in disappointment.”

“Mom.” Tom sighed. “I know you believe that, but really, do you think that all men are bad? Me included? Maybe Will’s different.” As he spoke the words, he knew his mom wouldn’t listen. She never did.

“You’re a good boy, Tom. But you can’t trust anyone who shows any interest in you. They’re all after something, and once they get it, they’ll leave you high and dry as soon as something better comes along. Mark my words.”

Knowing he couldn't win this argument, he kissed Alice on the cheek and said, "G'night, Mom. I'm tired. See you in the morning."

"Good night, sweetheart."

After peeing and brushing his teeth, Tom undressed and slipped under the covers, replaying the evening in his head. Will had looked good tonight. It was clear that he'd made an effort to wear something better than just old jeans and a T-shirt, like they did for classes. And that black leather jacket fit him really well, accentuating his shoulders just a bit.

Let's not forget that Will was very easy to talk to. Sure, they talked about school and work quite a bit, but it went beyond that. They both enjoyed reading for pleasure and had similar taste in the books they read. Not to mention they were both huge Star Wars fans. When there were lulls in their conversation, it didn't feel awkward. That was something new for Tom. In the past when Tom would go out on a date with someone, he'd always felt like he needed to keep chatting lest he and the other guy get uncomfortable with the silence.

Ending the evening with a kiss was a surprise for him. He wasn't opposed to it. In fact, he'd liked it. Really liked it. But he probably hadn't reacted that way, because it was just so unexpected. He should text Will or something to tell him again how much he'd enjoyed their date. He grabbed his phone off the charger on his nightstand and typed:

Thanks again for a great evening. I hope we can do it again soon. Especially the kiss.

Was that too much? Ah, screw it! He sent it before he could change his mind. When he didn't get a reply after a few minutes, he hoped it was just because Will was already asleep. He thought about texting Char but decided it could wait until tomorrow. If he texted her now, and she was awake, it would turn into a phone call,

and he just didn't have the energy for that right then. Tom turned onto his side and thought of the kiss and Will's soft lips as he drifted off to sleep.

The incessant buzzing of his phone woke Tom from a sound sleep.

"Hullo," he said sleepily, not even bothering to look at who was calling.

"Um, you didn't text me last night." Char's voice cut through his fogginess.

"Sorry." He yawned. "I was beat by the time I got home and just thought it could wait until this morning. What time is it anyway?"

"It's seven thirty, and I couldn't sleep. Tell me how it went," she demanded.

"I'll call you back in ten minutes. Gotta pee, and I need caffeine." He ended the call.

As he trotted off to the bathroom, his phone buzzed again, but he ignored it. After taking care of business, he went downstairs and made a pot of coffee. His mom would be up soon enough, and she'd be thankful the coffee was waiting for her. Securing a cup for himself, he returned to his comfy bed and called Char back.

"It's been almost twelve minutes," she said in way of greeting. "Now spill."

"Wow, you can be such a bitch sometimes, ya know," he replied. Sipping the hot brew, he said, "The date was nice. You're right, the food is amazing there."

"What did you get?" she asked.

"We had the dirty fries and a sausage-and-ricotta pizza. They were both excellent."

"So you had a good time? What was he wearing?"

“Really, Char?” Tom couldn’t hide the exasperation in his voice.

“Yes, Tom, really. You know I need all the details.”

“Fine. He had on black jeans and a pale-blue button-down. With a leather jacket. He looked so hot.”

“Nice,” Char told him. “What else happened?”

Tom talked about the rest of their date, laughing about their attempt to walk around in the slightly too-cold weather. “When he brought me back home, he parked in the driveway and told me that he had a good time, and that he liked me. Then he leaned over and kissed me.”

“Ooooh,” Char squealed. “Is he a good kisser?”

“Um, I think so.” Tom was hesitant. He’d need to admit that he had fucked up a little. Ah well, might as well just tell her.

“Whaddya mean, you think so?”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting it, so I kinda froze up. I’m not sure if I actually kissed him back or not,” Tom said. “I think I fucked up.”

“Oh, Tom.” Char sounded crestfallen. “Hopefully you’ll be prepared for the next time. There’s gonna be a next time, right?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure there will be. After all, he said he liked me and wanted to see me again. And before I went to sleep, I texted him and said I enjoyed the evening, too, and wanted to do it again. Especially the kiss.”

“Wait, you told him you wanted to kiss again?”

“Yeah, why? At first I thought it might be too much, but then I sent it before I could change my mind.” Tom was suddenly confused. Had he fucked it all up again? His stomach growled as he heard his mom walking in the hallway. That meant breakfast would be ready soon.

“That’s perfect,” she said. “You saved it by saying that. Even if you didn’t kiss him back, you told him you wanted to kiss him again. That’s good. Very good.”

“Whew, okay. That’s a relief,” Tom said, slumping down into the covers. “I’m so out of practice with this whole dating thing. You know I’m not good with people.”

“You’re gonna be fine. Did he respond to your text?”

“No. I figured he was already asleep.” A thought occurred to him. “Should I be worried about that?”

“No. It was late, so you’re probably right. But hopefully you’ll hear something from him today. Either way, let me know.”

“Okay, I will. I’ll let you go now, kiddo. I heard Mom a few minutes ago, so I’m gonna go see what’s for breakfast. Love you.”

“Love you back. Bye.”

CHAPTER NINE

Will

Will reached for his phone on the nightstand, where it had been charging. He shook his head as he checked the weather app on his phone. How did it get to be almost the middle of November? Fortunately, the weather forecast showed sunny weather, with a high in the mid-sixties today. It seemed they were enjoying a second summer in New England.

That was fine with him since he and Tom were double-dating with Char and Cee Cee today. It was Veterans Day, so school was closed, and the four of them miraculously all had the day off. Will silently thanked whoever was gracing them all with such good fortune. He and Tom had managed to go out on a few more dates—after comparing schedules, they realized they were both off on Wednesday nights, so that had become date night for them. Nothing fancy, but usually dinner and conversation followed by kissing. Lots of kissing. Will learned that even though Tom had been really shy when they kissed the first time, he turned out to be quite a good kisser.

And now he was really looking forward to this double date. Sure, he loved spending time with Tom, but he really wanted to get to know Char better and to meet Cee Cee, so Tom had suggested today's outing.

The plan was for him to pick Tom up, then drive over to Char and Cee Cee's apartment since he had the largest vehicle between them. They were gonna drive down to Provincetown, at the very end of the Cape. While technically off-season, tourists still flocked to P-town—as it was known—all year long. It was extremely gay

friendly, so it was a perfect destination for the four of them this fine fall day.

Will decided he'd best get his ass in gear and scooted to the bathroom to shower.

He got ready in record time and climbed into his vehicle to head to Tom's, who was just coming out of the door when Will pulled up. As he slid in beside Will, Tom smiled, leaned over, and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. "Hi."

"Hi, you." Will's pulse quickened, and he thought this might be the best feeling in the world. It seemed that Tom was finally starting to get over his shyness, and that made Will smile.

Tom rested his hand on Will's thigh as Will drove away.

"Hi, Tom, hi, Will," Char said as she got in the back seat. "Will, this is my girlfriend, Cee Cee. Cee, this is Will." Will had met Char at school one day. Since she was a nursing student, their paths didn't cross much, but Tom had wanted to introduce them since Will was becoming more important in his life. The three of them had gotten together for coffee in the student lounge a few times since their first meeting.

"Nice to meet you," Will replied.

"Same," Cee Cee said. "I've heard lots of good things about you."

"So what's the plan for today?" Tom asked the group. "All we really said was that we'd drive down to P-town. Was there anything special anyone wanted to do?"

"It's a beautiful day, so we can stroll down Commercial Street," Char said. "Not sure what shops are open, but I'm sure we'll find something to pass the time."

"And we can stop somewhere for lunch. I've heard good things about 1620

Brewhouse,” Cee Cee added.

“Sounds good to me.” Plans made, Will turned onto Route 6 and headed toward Cape Cod.

Will pulled into a spot in the parking lot at MacMillan Pier and got out of the car to stretch. The ride had only taken ninety minutes, but he often got restless behind the wheel. “I’m not ready to eat yet, but I could certainly go for a cup of coffee,” he said to the group as they walked toward Commercial Street.

“Oh God, yes, please!” pleaded Char. “He’s definitely a keeper,” she whispered, winking at Tom.

“That settles it,” Cee Cee said. “First stop is the Portuguese Bakery.” They entered the establishment and gazed at the display of Portuguese bread and pastries, including freshly made malassadas —the fried dough covered in sugar was a specialty that the bakery was known for.

“I’d love one of those,” Char said, “but my waistline won’t.” The group concurred and passed on the tasty treats. Coffee in hand, they continued their journey down the not overly crowded street.

There were people traveling in both directions, some families, some couples, hand in hand, all enjoying the beautiful weather. Will saw Tom smile. “Remember the first time you and I came here, Char?” It had been a few years ago, and Char smiled back at him.

“I sure do. It’s so nice to see everyone just accepting each other for who they are with no judgments.”

“Right?” Will agreed. “Not that we really have any issues in Hawthorne Bluff, but

somehow it just feels different here.” He scanned the area, watching families of tourists, many with kids in strollers, mingling with gay men and women, all enjoying themselves.

Will had noticed that Char and Cee Cee had been holding hands since they’d left the bakery, so he casually grazed the back of Tom’s hand with his own, then took Tom’s hand in his. “Is this okay?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Tom said shyly.

“We don’t have to ...” Will began.

“No really, it’s fine.” Will felt Tom’s thumb glide along his own, and his grip tightened. “I just haven’t held a guy’s hand for a while. I like it.”

They continued their stroll, occasionally stopping to window-shop and again, once or twice, when Char just had to go into a store to look more closely at what they had to offer. Neither Will nor Tom felt compelled to enter said shops, so they waited outside while Char and Cee Cee browsed.

“I’m glad we decided to do this,” Will said. “I like hanging out with you, but I also enjoy spending time with Char. She’s quite funny. I can see why the two of you are such good friends. And Cee Cee seems nice,” he added.

“Yeah, Char and I are like siblings at this point, and Cee Cee is definitely a sweetheart. I think she helps balance Char a bit.” He grinned. “And yeah, I like hanging out with you too.”

“I sense a ‘but’ at the end of that,” Will said, looking Tom in the eyes.

“Ah,” Tom sighed. “Not really a ‘but’ ... it’s just that my last relationship went south

pretty fast, so I guess I'm always a little, um, apprehensive?" Tom shook his head. "I'm not sure if I'm saying this right." He paused as if trying to figure something out in his head, so Will stayed quiet, waiting. "Look, the truth is, I haven't really had any luck with dating. Nothing ever seems to work out. And frankly, my mom doesn't really help."

"Your mom?" Will absently scratched his cheek. "Whaddya mean?"

"My dad left us when I was pretty young, and my mom has never really gotten over it. He wasn't around much for me and eventually just stopped showing up," Tom told him. "The whole situation has soured my mom on relationships of any kind, and she's pretty much beaten me over the head with those thoughts for as long as I can remember." He took a breath, then continued. "I guess that's affected how I've acted with guys I've seen in the past. Not that there have been that many. But Derek, the last guy, was the worst. Char could tell you stories." He laughed humorlessly. "Anyway, I'm always waiting for something bad to happen since things haven't worked out in the past. Probably not what you want to hear, but that's the way it is."

When Tom stopped speaking, Will waited a moment or two before saying anything. "Okay, are you done now?" When Tom nodded, Will continued, "First, it definitely sounds like your mom has done a number on your head, so I'm just gonna say that since you realize that's what's happened, you need to try and move on from that." Will grinned. "I know it's easier said than done, but I'll help you, okay?"

"You will?" Tom sounded surprised. "Char reminds me every time I start talking shit about relationships. Maybe if I hear it from both of you, I'll finally start believing it."

"Fair enough." Will nodded. "Second, I hope I'm different. You're not gonna scare me away by saying that you've had back luck dating. Honestly, I have too. But I'm not giving up." Will spoke from the heart. "And more importantly, I'm not giving up on you. I've told you before, and I'll say it again, I like you, Tom. A lot. And I hope

we can make this work, 'cause I wanna keep seeing you, okay?"

"Okay." Tom nodded back. "But remember, I'm a work in progress. I'm trying to get better."

"Deal," said Will, leaning over to kiss Tom on the lips.

Char and Cee Cee chose that moment to exit the shop, and Char said, "Hope we're not interrupting anything, boys."

"Not at all," Tom said, ending the kiss. "We were just chatting."

"And kissing." Char snickered. "Don't forget the kissing."

"No bags." Tom deftly changed the subject. "Didn't see anything you wanted?"

"There was a top I liked," Cee Cee answered, "but it was too expensive, so I decided against it."

"I tried to convince her to get it anyway, but you know she's much better about money than I am," Char said.

Once they passed the Boatslip Resort, a popular venue in town, the area became a bit more residential, so they crossed over to the other side of the street and headed back in the opposite direction. But not before checking the schedule posted outside of the Boatslip. There was, indeed, a Tea Dance later that afternoon. Tea Dance was legendary, with pop-up bars, music, and dancing out near the pool in the back of the resort. It was the place for gays to be when in P-town.

"We really should stop in for a little while before heading back," Will said. "I'll have a beer with lunch, but I won't drink anything but water after that since I'm driving."

You guys can have some fun, though.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind, Will, I’d love to,” Cee Cee said.

“Speaking of lunch, I think it’s time for food,” Tom chimed in as Char hummed in agreement.

CHAPTER TEN

Tom

“As much as I loved our meal at the brewhouse,” Tom said as they piled into Will’s vehicle, “I’m really glad we went to Tea Dance and worked off some calories. But I do love a good burger.”

“Amen to that,” Cee Cee agreed. After a late afternoon meal of burgers and beer, they’d returned to the Boatslip to enjoy some dancing before making their way back home.

“We have to do this again,” Char chimed in. “I mean, get together for a double date. Although I wouldn’t mind another trip to P-town either.”

“We definitely need to do both again,” Tom added. “Once we know our work schedules, maybe we can plan to get together for dinner or something in the next week or two.”

“That sounds good to me,” Will said.

Tom grabbed Will’s phone from the console and selected a playlist so they could listen to some music on their way home.

After Will dropped off Char and Cee Cee at their apartment, he drove up to the park at Hawthorne Bluff. There was a small parking area not too far from the copse of hawthorn trees that was the inspiration for the town’s name. The bluff, with its

famous lighthouse, was just past the park, and beyond that, the waves rolled in from Cape Cod Bay. Dusk settled around them as they chatted.

“I had a really nice time today,” Tom said. “I’m so glad we got to spend some time with Char and Cee Cee.”

“Me, too,” said Will. “They’re both great, and I want to get to know both of them better. Today was a good start to that.” Will reached for Tom’s hand. “You know, I meant what I said earlier, Tom. I don’t plan on going anywhere. I don’t know what it is about you, but there’s something special here. You’re nothing like anyone I’ve ever met before.”

“I’m feeling it too,” Tom admitted. He blinked a few times and bit his bottom lip. “I, um, well, there’s something I wanted to tell you.”

“Of course.” Will turned to him. “You can tell me anything.”

“I’ve been thinking of moving out of my mom’s house and getting my own apartment.”

“You have? I think that’s great. After what you’ve told me about your mom, I think putting some distance there is a good thing,” Will said, smiling. “But how’s that gonna work with school and everything?”

“Funny, Char said the same thing about Mom. As for the rest, I’ve been saving up for a while, and I’ll cut down on the number of classes I take each semester so I can work more hours at the Whale,” Tom told him. “It might be a little tight at first, but I think I can make it work.” He cleared his throat. “You don’t think I’m making a mistake, do you?”

“Not at all. You’ve obviously been thinking about it for a while. If you’re ready, then

it's time, right? And I'll help you any way that I can."

"You will?"

"Of course! Are you gonna try to do this for next semester?" Will asked.

"Yeah, I'd like to. Mom won't be happy, but I really do think it's time."

"Okay, Operation Help Tom Move is a go."

Tom laughed. "Whew, it feels good to tell you. Char knows, of course. We really don't have any secrets from each other."

"Hey, I can help you look for an apartment if you'd like. And we can check the bulletin boards at school. Folks are always trying to sell old furniture and stuff."

"Oh my God, that would be great. There's so much that has to be done, and I'm not sure where to start," Tom admitted.

"And if it's okay with you, I can ask Clay about apartments. He knows a lot of people in town and may know someone who's renting."

Tom reached over and hugged Will. "Thank you."

That led to a kiss, which led to another. Deeper this time. When the kiss ended, Tom felt Will's lips move to his neck, kissing him gently. Will's hand grazed Tom's crotch, and he moaned.

"Is this okay?" Will asked. They'd done a little of this on past dates, but Will had the feeling it might go a bit further tonight.

“Yes,” Tom panted. He tilted his hips to give Will better access to his hardening length.

“I want to touch you.” Will moaned, kissing Tom’s throat.

Tom unbuckled his belt, then felt Will’s hand unbutton his jeans and lower the zipper. He gasped as Will’s hand cupped his balls through his underwear.

“Need more room,” Will said, opening his door. Tom held his jeans together as they both climbed into the back seat.

Will undid his pants, pushing them to his knees, and Tom followed suit. He straddled Tom as best he could, rubbing their groins together and kissing him soundly.

“Really want more,” Will whispered, dipping his hand into Tom’s boxer briefs.

Tom moaned as Will gripped his cock, gently stroking it. Will scooted back, lowering himself on the seat, and licked the head of Tom’s dick. He moved up and down Tom’s shaft, licking and tasting, swirling his tongue around the head and kissing the tip.

After a few minutes, he took the head of Tom’s cock into his mouth, slowly moving down the length.

“Yes,” Tom murmured. “Feels so good.”

Will sped up a bit, bringing Tom almost to the edge, then slowing. Over and over again until Tom couldn’t stand it any longer. “Please!” he pleaded.

As Will once again moved up and down his sensitive organ, Tom gasped. “Gonna come!”

Will pulled Tom deeper, swallowing him completely. Tom's orgasm hit, and he shuddered. His head rolled back, and he panted, "Wow!"

Will sat up, kissing Tom deeply. Tom could taste himself on Will's tongue as he reached forward and rubbed Will's dick, still encased in his underwear. He reached in and wrapped his hand around Will's throbbing length. Will tucked the waistband of his shorts under his balls, and Tom began to stroke him in earnest.

"Oh yeah," Will moaned, "Just like that."

They kissed again and again; before long, Tom felt Will's hot release on his hand. When Will had calmed a bit, Tom lifted his hand and licked the cum from his fingers.

"So hot," Will whispered. "Kiss me," he demanded.

Eventually, they cleaned up a bit with a cloth that Will found in the door pocket, and they tucked themselves back together.

"Another added benefit to you getting an apartment—it will be more comfortable than the back seat of my car." Will chuckled.

"You're not wrong," Tom agreed, grinning.

"So when do you wanna get together?" Char asked as they filled salt-and-pepper shakers in the now-empty dining room at the Gray Whale. It was a week after the P-town trip, and they'd both worked a late shift. After cleaning up their respective sections, they were completing their back-work duties before heading out.

"Will sent me his work schedule; he's off next Wednesday night, just like you and me. Is Cee Cee available?" They were trying to find a day and time where they could double-date again. The YuleFest was fast approaching, and their schedules would be

a little more flexible, but they wanted to meet up earlier if possible.

“He sent you his schedule, huh? So you can plan things together? Does that mean you guys are getting more serious?” Char smiled, checking her phone. “Yeah, Cee Cee is off too.”

“Perfect. I’ll block off Wednesday night on both of our calendars,” Tom said. “And yeah, I guess we are although who knows how long it will last.” He sighed. “You know I don’t have the best track record.”

“Now listen here, Thomas Dawson, you cut that shit out right now!” Char reprimanded. “That right there is your mom talking, and you and I both know that’s not how it has to be. She’s poisoned part of your brain.” She stared at him with angry eyes, nostrils flaring.

“Okay. Jeez, calm down, Char,” Tom said gently. “I know, but it’s not easy. I’ve been listening to that bullshit for so many years, it’s hard to think differently about it. Will promised to help adjust my attitude, too, but sometimes I forget.” His phone buzzed and after looking at it, he smiled. “Okay, Will saw my addition to the calendar. He said, ‘Hell, yeah!’ so I guess he’s in.”

“Cool. The next question is, where should we go?” Char said, tightening the lid of the last pepper shaker and wiping it down.

“How about the Burger Boutique? I heard a couple of customers talking about it the other day, and they said it was good. After our meal together in P-town, I know we all like burgers.” The restaurant was on the edge of town and had only been open for a few months. It served artisan burgers with an assortment of traditional and not-so-traditional toppings along with some innovative sides.

“Yes, please. I’ve been dying to try that place,” Char effused. “I’ve heard good things

about it too.”

“Great, the Burger Boutique it is. How ’bout Will and I pick you and Cee Cee up at six thirty?” Tom asked.

“Sure, that works.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Will

The four of them entered the Burger Boutique, and Will spoke to the host. “We have a reservation. It should be under Hargrove.”

They were seated in a booth in the center of the restaurant, giving them a good view of the space. It reminded Will of a steak house, with lots of dark-wood wainscoting, but the walls above the wood were painted in bright colors to match the variety of solid-hued tablecloths, giving the place a light, fun-filled vibe. As Will looked around, he saw that most tables were filled.

“Is it me, or do you find it strange that this place is so busy on a Wednesday night?” he said to no one in particular.

“I think it’s because the place is so new,” Char replied. “Everyone just wants to try it out.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Will agreed.

After their server took their drink orders—beer for both Will and Tom while Char and Cee Cee ordered wine—they perused the menu.

“How about we get the nacho fries to share?” Tom asked

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Char chimed in.

“Wow, look at these burger toppings,” Cee Cee said. “Onion jam, avocado, honey chipotle barbecue sauce, spicy slaw, kimchi, and the list goes on. I’ve never seen so many options.”

“I think I want a burger with that onion jam, bacon, and bleu cheese crumbles,” Will said definitively.

“I’m thinking turkey burger with cranberry chutney and Boston lettuce,” Cee Cee said.

“I’m looking at a teriyaki burger with kimchi and maybe bean sprouts,” Tom announced. “Or does that sound too weird?”

“Sounds good to me,” Will said. “You can have a bite of mine if I can have a bite of yours.” He grinned.

“Deal,” Tom said.

“Oh, I think the beef burger with Swiss cheese and spicy slaw is calling my name!” Char added enthusiastically. “And onion rings instead of fries for my side.”

Orders placed, they chatted about a variety of things until their food arrived.

“Oh my God, that was so good,” Will said as they all walked back to his car. He smiled, thinking of how much he enjoyed the feeling of Tom’s hand in his. “I don’t know whose idea it was to go there, but I approve.”

“It was mine,” Char said, smiling.

“Actually,” Tom cut in, “I suggested it, you merely agreed, saying you wanted to try it.”

“Okay, fine,” Char admitted. “But I agree with Will, it was so very good.”

“Definitely on our list of places to visit again,” Cee Cee agreed.

This day was dragging! Will had agreed to work the day after Thanksgiving, figuring it would be a good day to get caught up on studying, but he was having a really hard time focusing, so the day just slowly inched along. And because of the Thanksgiving holiday, no one was even checking in or out that day. Will tried reading, but the book wasn't holding his interest. He started an outline for a paper he needed to get done for English, but halfway through, he realized he didn't want to read that paper, let alone write it, so he ripped the page out of his class notebook and tossed it in the trash.

He heard movement on the stairs and hoped it was one of the guests who needed him to make a reservation or something. Anything!

Clay turned the corner and greeted him. “Hi, Will!” he said cheerfully. “How's it going?”

“Ugh. Don't ask,” Will replied. Realizing how he sounded, he quickly apologized. “Um, sorry, Clay, I didn't mean to sound so contrary. It's just this day is dragging. I can't focus on anything at all.”

“No worries, but yeah, there are days like this,” Clay chuckled. “It sucks, but you just gotta roll with it. You're only working until three, right?”

“Yeah, Jeff's on tonight, thank God. I don't know if I'd survive working late today.”

“Do you have any plans for tonight?”

“No. I was thinking of texting Tom to see if he wanted to do something. He's done at the Whale around four today.”

“There’s an open mic night tonight at Cuppa Joe’s if you’re interested,” Clay told him.

“Oh yeah, I saw the flyer there the other day. Are you and Finn going?”

“We are. Ash mentioned it at dinner yesterday,” Clay said, referring to Finn’s brother Ashton. “It seems he and the guy he’s been seeing are going, so Finn and I decided to pop in and meet the guy. His name is Walker.”

“Oh, a new guy, huh?” Will was intrigued. After all, gossip kept the town going, so why not get a firsthand view, right? “I’ll definitely see if Tom’s interested.”

“Sounds good,” Clay said, shrugging on his coat. “Okay, I’m off to the bank to make a deposit, then I’m meeting Finn for lunch at the Whale. See you later.”

As soon as Clay was out the door, Will texted Tom about the open mic night. Moments later, Tom texted back, agreeing to Will’s suggestion and offering to pick him up around six that evening.

Cuppa Joe’s was slowly filling up when they walked in. They waved at a couple of people they knew. Will saw Ash and the guy he assumed was Walker at a table, but there wasn’t anything available close to them, so he and Tom grabbed a table off to the side. While Tom stood in line to get them both some grub, Will manned the table so they wouldn’t lose their seats. As Will waited, he saw Finn and Clay enter the café and waved.

Tom returned, settling into the chair across from Will. “I got a couple of sandwiches and some chips, plus a brownie to share. Someone will bring over the coffees as soon as they’re ready.” The baristas were doing their best to keep up with the crowd, but everyone remained in good spirits even if they had to wait a little while for their beverages.

A few minutes later, Joe, the owner of Cuppa Joe's, walked up to the microphone and announced, "Welcome to another open mic night; thank you all for coming. We're thrilled to have some wonderful local talent here tonight. Guitarist Paul Decker is here again along with a few newcomers, including poet Janice Winters. And from Cape Cod, I'm excited to welcome Kim Moberg again to sing and play for us. The entertainment will be starting shortly, so please get any food and drink you want now, so as not to disturb folks once the music starts."

When it was time for intermission, Tom quickly bussed their table, commenting that it was ingrained in him at this point. He had to help out when he could. That made Will smile.

Will excused himself to use the restroom and stopped to say hi to Clay and Finn on his way back to the table. When he returned, he said, "Clay and Finn say hello."

They settled in for the second half of the show. "What do you think so far?" Will asked.

"I'm really enjoying this," Tom replied. "I have to confess, I'm not much into poetry, but Janice Winters was really good. I could feel the emotion in her voice as she read."

"I am a fan of many poets, and I have to agree with you, her performance was very moving."

When the second half was over, Joe once again took to the mic and thanked everyone for attending. As they put their coats on to leave, Will saw Ash and Walker talking with one of the performers. "You ready?" Will asked.

"Yeah, let's go." At Will's suggestion, Tom had parked in the Bradley House lot. As they ambled back to the truck, Tom said, "Tonight was fun, thanks for asking me."

“I had a good time too,” Will replied. “I’m glad Clay mentioned it.”

“That guy that Ash was with. You said his name is Walker? He looks familiar. I’m pretty sure he works at Standish Construction. I believe he’s some kind of supervisor.”

“Really. How do you know that?” Will asked.

“Oh, my mom works there,” Tom told him. “She’s the personal assistant to the owner, Paul Standish.”

“Enough about them. I need some alone time with you,” Will said, heat in his tone. “Wanna head up to the bluff for a little while?”

“Yeah,” Tom whispered. “That sounds like a great idea.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tom

“Mom, there’s something I want to talk to you about.” Tom shuffled into the living room, shoulders sagging, head bowed.

“Of course, dear,” Alice said, motioning him to sit on the sofa. “What’s wrong? It’s not school, is it?”

“Not really although that’s a part of it, I guess,” Tom said. He spoke quietly, afraid he might cry or throw up; he couldn’t decide which. He’d finally decided to tell his mom about moving out. But as he sat, he realized this would be much more difficult than he’d imagined. He tried to keep Char’s words in his mind so that he would have talking points at the ready when his mom raised objections.

“You’re not failing anything, are you?” The look on Alice’s face was a mix of concern and anger that scared Tom just a little.

“No, Mom, I’m not failing any of my classes.”

“Well, then, what? You know you can tell me anything.”

“I, um, well ... I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about this, and I want to get a place of my own,” he blurted out, waiting for the reaction he knew would come.

“What? Why, Tom? We’ve talked about this,” Alice said. “There’s no rush for you to

move. I like having you here. I think we need to talk about this before you make any rash decisions.” She spoke quickly as if hoping to avoid having Tom speak again.

“I know, Mom, but I really think it’s time.” Tom kept his voice calm and even. “After all, I’m twenty-four years old. I want to be on my own.”

“But what about school?” Alice asked. “You can’t afford to go to school and work and have time to study. It doesn’t make any sense, Tom.”

“First of all,” Tom began, “I’ve been saving, and I’ve got a good amount socked away at this point. Plus, I’ve decided to cut back on the number of classes I’m taking next semester so I can pick up some extra hours at the Whale.”

“Next semester? So ... you wanna do this soon, huh? Why not wait until the summer? That will give you more time to save.”

“I don’t wanna wait any longer, Mom. I wanna do this now.” As he predicted, his mom was trying to talk him out of it, but the blowup he’d expected hadn’t happened. Yet.

“Wait.” His mom looked directly at him. “Does this have anything to do with that boy you’ve been seeing? I bet Will’s behind this. Trying to get you to move out so you two can shack up together or something.” Shaking her head, she said loudly, “Well, I won’t have it. Don’t even think about it, mister.”

And there it was. He’d expected that to surface a lot sooner. “Mom, it’s got nothing to do with Will. Sure, it would be nice to have a little bit of privacy now and then, I’m not denying that, but I started planning this long before I started seeing Will.”

“Have you talked with him about it, then? That might be just the thing to scare him off. You know it will never work out in the long term between you two. It never

does.” Tom sighed, once again hearing the same tired arguments from his mom.

“Mom, Will’s not like that. I know what you think will happen, but just because it didn’t work out between you and Dad doesn’t mean all relationships are doomed to fail.” This was the first time Tom had actually stood up to his mom. And damn, it felt good even though he knew this was a really difficult conversation for them.

“So if it’s not Will, it’s Char, right? She put that bug in your ear,” Alice tried. It was clear she was grasping at straws now. “Now that she and Cee Cee are living together, she wants you to get an apartment too, right? Mark my words, they’ll eventually break up, and then where will she be? Alone, that’s where.”

“Mom,” Tom started, speaking as sincerely as he could. “I want, no, I need to do this. I’m sorry if I’ve upset you, but nothing’s gonna change my mind.”

“Fine.” She laughed bitterly. “Leave me. I guess I should have expected this. It’s like I told you, everyone leaves. Now I guess it’s your turn.”

“Don’t say that, Mom. I’m not leaving you. Yes, I’m venturing out on my own, but you’ll still be a part of my life. I’ll come over for dinner, and we’ll still talk all the time.” He tried again. “This doesn’t mean that I love you any less, Mom. It just means that I need to spread my wings a little.”

“Sure. Whatever you need to tell yourself, Tommy.” Alice stood, touched him briefly on the shoulder, and walked into the kitchen.

Tom shook his head. Yes, he had known this was gonna be bad. At some point, he’d need to solicit some advice from either Char or Will. Maybe they could help. But for now, he grabbed his jacket and went out. Hopefully a walk would clear his head.

Tom strolled through his neighborhood with no real destination in mind. It was a

clear, crisp Sunday afternoon, and he was vacillating between restless and bored. Oh, and anxious. We can't forget anxious. The conversation with his mom had gone pretty much the way he'd expected. But it had still left him a bit rattled. Why can't she understand why I need to do this? I can't live with her forever, dammit!

He pulled his phone from the front pocket of his jeans and began typing.

Hey. Got a minute?

Sure. What's up?

Any chance you can meet me at Cuppa Joe's?

CU in 10.

He turned at the next corner and headed into town.

Cuppa Joe's was quiet, and after getting a cappuccino and cinnamon Danish at the counter, he grabbed an empty table along one side toward the back so they'd have a bit of privacy.

A few minutes later, Will walked in and waved. He got a coffee from one of the baristas, then sat across from Tom.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, concern coloring his words.

"Yeah, kinda." Tom spoke quietly. "Thanks for meeting me. I hope you weren't in the middle of anything important."

"Just a little studying, nothing major. Your text gave me the feeling that something wasn't quite right, so tell me what's going on."

“You know how I told you I was thinking about getting my own place?” Tom asked.

“Yeah. I told you it was a good idea. I want to do that at some point too, but I don’t think it’s the right time for me just yet.”

“I’ve been thinking about breaking the news to my mom. Char reminded me that I can’t wait much longer if I want to do it by next semester, but I was scared.”

“Because your mom isn’t gonna be understanding,” Will said, remembering their conversation in P-town.

“Not at all!” Tom almost shouted. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to get loud.” He blushed. “I think Mom’s biggest fear is being all alone. Remember how I told you that Mom’s always talking shit about relationships? I know it’s because Dad left when I was little, after cheating on her. That one bad experience has tainted everything in her life since.”

“Hmmm, you’d think she would want to meet someone else so that she wouldn’t be alone,” Will said.

“Right? But no, just the opposite. Her marriage didn’t work out, so all relationships must be bad, so she can never try again. That way she’s never again disappointed.” Tom shook his head.

“And you wanting to move out is just gonna make her feel alone again,” Will observed.

“Exactly. Well, I finally worked up the courage to talk to her this afternoon,” Tom admitted.

“I take it things didn’t go well.”

“Correct. It went much the way I expected,” Tom told him. “She tried every way to convince me to stay. In fact, she tried to blame you for convincing me to move so that we could be together if you catch my meaning. And when that didn’t work, she tried to blame Char.”

“Wow. I’m really sorry that you had to deal with that.” Tom could hear the sincerity in Will’s words.

“Thanks. Like I said, I completely expected it, but it still shook me up. I went for a walk, but what I really needed was a friend to talk to. That’s why I texted you.”

“I’m glad you did. And really, I’m a bit more than a friend, right?” Will smiled and reached over to take Tom’s hand. They’d been seeing each other for about a month and a half, and while they hadn’t really put a label on it, Tom had begun to think of Will as his boyfriend since he wasn’t interested in seeing anyone else.

“Yeah, you are,” Tom agreed. “I know we haven’t really talked much about it, but in my head, you’re my boyfriend. Is that okay?”

“It’s more than okay,” Will said. “I think of you as my boyfriend too.” His eyes brightened. “So I guess it’s official; we’re boyfriends now.”

“It looks that way.” Tom smiled in agreement.

“Are things gonna be okay between you and your mom?”

“Eventually. I told her she wasn’t gonna change my mind. I’ll try and talk with her again in a few days and see what happens,” Tom said. “In the meantime, I guess I should start looking for an apartment that I can afford. Wanna help?”

“Sure. You’ll need to give me some idea of your price range, and we’ll look together.

Char may have some ideas too.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will!” Tom laughed. “She acts like my older and wiser sister most of the time even though we’re the same age.”

“Good to know,” Will said. “Just remember, I’ll help any way I can.”

“Thanks again for agreeing to meet me today.” Emotion filled Tom’s words. “Except for Char, I don’t really have anyone I can turn to at times like this.”

“Hey, what are boyfriends for?” Will squeezed the hand he still held.

An unexpected lightness filled Tom. He was so happy that he and Will were dating now. He was a good man even if his mom wouldn’t believe it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Will

Will sighed with relief as he walked out of the classroom on Tuesday morning. His Calculus 101 exam was over—it was his last of the semester—and while he didn't ace it like he had his English final, he felt good about it and thought he'd earned at least a C for the class, maybe even a C-plus. Tom was still in class; they'd promised each other that whoever finished first would wait for the other, so he headed to a small sitting area near the stairs to wait for his boyfriend.

Wow, that's feels good! Will was glad that they had finally talked about what they were to each other even if it did start out with a heavier conversation about Tom's mom. How could his mom make him feel that way? It almost seemed like she didn't want him to be happy. Not to mention the fact that she feared being alone again.

He sat at one end of the sofa and pulled his worn leather journal from his backpack. Using his favorite fine-line black rollerball, he wrote in a neat cursive, detailing his thoughts about that morning's exam as well as his growing feelings for Tom. Then skipping a line, he drew a small asterisk with an extra little dot at the end of each arm. This was his code for an entry about whatever story he was working on. The little graphic made it easy to find these lines later. He entered a few lines about one of the characters—details he'd worked out in his head in the shower that morning and didn't want to forget. Some folks liked to divide their journal into separate sections, and while Will did that for his class notebooks, for his personal one, he preferred what he thought of as “stream of consciousness” writing—just writing things down and sorting through it all later.

“Come here often?” a voice said to his right. Tom was standing there, smiling and looking gorgeous.

“Only when I’m waiting on your slow ass.” Will smirked. He stuffed the journal and pen into his backpack and stood. He hugged Tom, kissing him lightly on the lips. “How’d you do?”

“I think I did okay although that last problem was a bitch.” Tom sighed. “How ’bout you?”

“Same. I’m really glad we decided to study together. It definitely helped. Not to mention that we got to know each other,” Will said.

“And then some. So are you ready to go?” They had driven to school together that morning and both were heading to work in a few hours.

“Yeah, we should have time to stop for a bite to eat on our way. I wanna add your upcoming shifts to my calendar since next week is gonna be a little different,” Will explained.

“Me too,” Tom agreed. With classes over and the upcoming YuleFest, they had both been able to adjust their schedules so they could provide coverage where they worked but still have time to enjoy the annual holiday celebration. Since they’d both been at their jobs for a few years, seniority definitely had its privileges.

They ended up at Cuppa Joe’s since it was close to where they each worked. They got coffee and sandwiches and split a bag of sour-cream-and-onion potato chips, sitting at a small table along the far wall.

“Okay, tell me again when you’re working,” Will said as he bit into his chicken-salad sandwich.

“I just had an idea,” Tom said, crunching a chip. “You put your work schedule into your calendar, right?”

“Yeah. I have a separate calendar called ‘Work’ for that. Why?” Will asked.

“Why don’t you just share that calendar with me? I have one I call ‘Whale’ for my shifts there, and I can share that with you.”

“Brilliant!” Will exclaimed. “Why didn’t we think of that sooner?”

“As long as we’re doing it now.” Tom smiled.

Will walked over to the front counter and came back carrying a flyer. He held up the brightly decorated paper with the event’s official title splashed across the top: “Midwinter Magic: A Yuletide Festival.” Since that was quite a mouthful, most folks just called it YuleFest. “Here’s the schedule for YuleFest. We can figure out what stuff we want to see and add that to our calendars too.” There were things going on in both Plymouth and Hawthorne Bluff, so they’d need to make the best use of their time to see as much as they could. “Once we decide what we want to do, I’ll check with Char and see if she and Cee Cee are interested in any of it.”

“Perfect.” Tom scanned the schedule, pointing at one of the items. “What’s this thing called ‘Hook’s Traveling Book Nook’?” he asked.

“Oh, I actually know this one,” Will said, smiling. “Jeff was telling me about it at work the other day. It’s a big yellow school bus that’s painted like a rainbow. It’s run by these two women— from what I’ve heard they’re a married couple—and they travel all over, sharing books and spreading love.”

“That sounds amazing! Looks like they’re around all weekend. We have to stop and see them.”

“Yeah, for sure. Oh, look, there’s a presentation called ‘Early Winter in Plymouth Colony’ at Plimoth Patuxet Museums on Friday afternoon. Do you wanna go to that?”

“That could be interesting. From what I remember from my Early American history class, there wasn’t a lot of celebrating of Christmas going on back then. And Tavino’s,” Tom said, mentioning the Italian restaurant in Hawthorne Bluff, “is gonna have a food truck in front of the Hawthorne Bluff Bank and Trust on Saturday. They’re giving out free samples of their pizza. If we go there around lunchtime ...”

“I like the way you think, Tom,” said Will. Well, I like the way you do a lot of things.

“Why don’t we focus on things in Plymouth on Friday and then Hawthorne Bluff on Saturday?” Tom said. “I know it’s not far, but that way we minimize our traveling back and forth. And on Sunday there’s the special Jingle Mingle Buffet for breakfast at the Whale. I can get us in if you want.”

“Perfect. Clay mentioned that Finn’s mom was having an open house on Sunday afternoon and invited me, so we can stop by for a little while if you’d like.”

They continued to plan out their weekend before heading off to work.

The rest of the week sped by, and before Will knew it, it was Friday morning. A whole weekend off, and I get to spend it with Tom! Will bounded out of bed and made his way to the bathroom to get ready. He practically flew down the stairs and greeted his mom, who was sitting in the kitchen sipping her coffee, with a hug and kiss before pouring a cup of his own dark brew.

“My, aren’t you in a good mood today!” Emily exclaimed, laughing.

“Of course, I am, Mom!” he replied, face beaming. “My exams are over, YuleFest

starts today, I'm off work for three whole days, and I get to spend them with Tom!" The day was cold but clear, perfect for walking around YuleFest with one's boyfriend.

"You've grown quite fond of him, haven't you?" she asked.

"I have, Mom." Butterflies seemed to dance in his belly just from thinking about Tom. "Remember when I went out last Sunday? Well, Tom had texted me and needed to talk. His mom is laying some heavy stuff on him, and he needed to vent. He's thinking of getting his own apartment so that he's not constantly subjected to the things she's saying."

Will paused to sip his coffee, considering what to say next. "Anyway, we chatted about that for a while, and then we talked about us. We agreed that we think of each other as boyfriends, so here we are."

"Something tells me there's more," his mom said.

"I know I can trust you not to share this, Mom," Will began. When Emily nodded, he went on. "Tom's dad left when he was just a kid, and his mom's been bitter about it ever since. She's constantly telling him that relationships never work out, and that he'd be better off alone, so he's never had a boyfriend for any length of time. I think he unconsciously sabotages any chance of anything good happening because he's convinced himself—or his mom has convinced him—that it's eventually gonna end anyway."

"That's awful." Emily shook her head. "Why would a mother do that to her child?"

"I dunno, Mom, but I told him I wasn't going anywhere, and that we'd figure it out together. I just hope he believes me, 'cause I really like him. It might even be more than just 'like,'" Will admitted.

“You’re a good man, Will. You need to invite him over for dinner soon. I want to get to know him, seeing as you’re getting serious about him.”

Just then there was a knock on the back door. Tom was standing there, looking as handsome as ever. “Hey,” Will said. “Come in.”

“I, um, well ...” Tom stammered.

“Come in, Tom,” Emily said from inside. Her voice was warm and friendly.

Tom stepped in and said, “Hello, Mrs. Hargrove. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“It’s very nice to finally meet you, Tom,” she said. “And please, call me Emily. Will and I were just talking about you.”

“You were?” Color rose in Tom’s cheeks.

“Nothing bad, silly,” Will said, hugging Tom. “Mom just told me that I need to invite you to dinner soon.”

“Oh, um, sure.”

“I’d like to get to know the guy that’s dating my son.” Emily smiled.

“That would be nice, Mrs. Ha—um, Emily. I’d love to,” Tom said as Will shrugged into his winter jacket.

“Perfect. Now you boys go on and have fun. I have a few things to do here, but Melissa’s coming over this afternoon, and we’ll go out and see some of the sights at YuleFest, too, so I may see you later.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tom

It was just the two of them today. Cee Cee had to work in the afternoon, so she and Char would try to catch a few things in Hawthorne Bluff that evening. But they hoped to meet up tomorrow and hang out together for at least part of the time.

Tom and Will hadn't planned anything specific for their morning in Plymouth; they just wanted to walk around and see what was happening. "Oh, look," Tom said, pulling a flyer out of his pocket. "Let's head to the library." In the vestibule there, which was festively decorated with boughs of greenery strung with white lights and festooned with deep-red ribbons, a group of small children were singing a variety of holiday songs, so they stood watching them for a while.

"I love seeing the little kids and the expressions on their faces at this time of year," Will said as they wandered away after about fifteen minutes.

"I know," Tom agreed. "It's so magical." The coffee shop had set up a table outside, handing out coffee, tea, and hot cocoa, so they each accepted a cup of cocoa and, tossing a few dollars in the tip jar, moved on. They walked hand in hand through the Brewster Gardens, where members of the historical society were reading various holiday stories and poems near the Pilgrim Maiden statue.

"Oh, let's stop for a minute. I love this story," Will said. Tom recognized it as "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry and remembered Will telling him it was one of his favorites. They stood and listened all the way to the end, then stayed for the next

person, who read “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost. Tom wasn’t a huge fan of poetry, but he really enjoyed that one.

“That story always gets to me,” Will said, and they continued on their way. “The unselfish love that each has for the other.”

At that moment, Tom realized just how special Will was. He was different, no matter what his mom might think or say. Tom finally believed that this could actually work between the two of them.

“You’re so very special, Will,” Tom said. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met before.” He stopped walking so he could lean over and kiss Will. “Thank you for taking a chance on me,” he added sincerely.

Will kissed him back. “I think you’re pretty special too.”

Tom smiled shyly, and as they continued along the walkway, he asked, “Okay, whaddaya wanna do next?”

Suddenly, Will stopped, smacking his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Oh my God,” he cried out. “I completely forgot to tell you!”

“Tell me what?” Tom stared at him.

“I finally got a chance to talk to Clay yesterday and told him about your plans to look for an apartment right after Christmas. I asked him if he knew of anyone who might have something affordable for rent, and he said he might.”

“Really? That’s great. Did he say who?” Tom asked, excitement building in his tone.

“No. He just said to give him a couple of days. He needed to talk to someone and

would let me know.”

“That’s okay,” Tom said. “Hopefully he’ll know something when you go back to work on Monday. Thank you for talking to him.”

“Of course.”

That afternoon, after walking around Plymouth for a while longer, Will and Tom stopped by the Plimoth Patuxet Museums, formerly the Plimoth Plantations, for their presentation on early winter in Plymouth Colony. Tom found the museum fascinating—he’d been visiting since he was a kid, usually with school groups—but learning about how the early settlers survived in the early 1600s was sobering. Public Christmas celebrations were, in fact, outlawed until 1681.

“Wow,” Tom said as they strolled back to his truck, “I can’t imagine living back then. It was such a difficult life.”

“I know,” Will agreed. “Imagine being fined for celebrating Christmas.” He shook his head. “Thankfully, we don’t have to worry about that.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “Char says she and Cee Cee are heading to the Whale for a drink as soon as Cee Cee gets out of work. Wanna join them?”

“Yeah, that sounds good to me.”

The parking lot wasn’t too crowded when Tom pulled in, and he easily found a space to park along the back. When they entered the bar, Tom waved at Joe, who was working behind the bar along with Cliff. Everything looked festive, with red and gold ornaments hanging from the ceiling above the bar and a large Christmas tree gracing the far corner of the seating area.

Dani, one of the bar servers who’d worked with Tom for a few years, walked by

carrying a large tray and said, “Hey, Tom. You need a table, or are you going to the bar?”

“A table, please, Dani. And there’s gonna be four. Char and Cee Cee are joining us.”

“That four top”—she nodded toward a table in the corner—“should be heading out shortly. No one else is waiting, so it’s yours as soon as they leave.”

“Thanks, Dani.”

Sure enough, a few moments later, the group stood and made their way to the door. Tom grabbed a tray from the service bar and began bussing the table.

“You don’t need to do that on your day off,” Dani said as she came up behind him.

“That’s okay,” Tom told her. “I don’t mind helping out.” Dani took over filling the tray with used glasses, and Tom said, “Dani, do you know my boyfriend, Will? He works over at Bradley House. Will, this is Dani.”

“Oh, sure, I’ve seen you around. Nice to officially meet you, Will. So ... you’re dating this guy, huh? Well, I guess you could do worse!” she said, laughing.

“Thanks a lot, Dani.” Tom chuckled.

“Nice to meet you as well,” Will replied. “And frankly, I think I’m pretty lucky, snagging this guy.”

Dani wiped down the table, lifted the tray, and said, “I’ll be back in a few with some menus.”

They were sipping some local craft beer when Char and Cee Cee showed up. After

greeting each other with hugs, Tom said, “How was work today, Cee Cee?”

“It was busy for my entire shift,” she replied. “In fact, I left a few minutes late because I had a line at the cash register.”

“That’s good. It’s nice to see businesses doing well during YuleFest,” Will said. “Clay told me that the B and B is completely sold out for the weekend.”

“What did you guys see today?” Char asked after she and Cee Cee placed their drink orders with Dani.

Tom and Will took turns relaying their day so far. Will ended by saying, “And now we’re here with you. Did you guys want to do something after we eat?”

“There’s a gingerbread contest going on. All the entries are on display in the Hawthorne Bank and Trust lobby. Cee Cee and I were thinking of going to check it out,” Char said. “Wanna join us?”

Tom looked at Will, who nodded. “Sure, that sounds like fun.”

“Okay,” Cee Cee said, picking up her menu. “Let’s order some food.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Will

Tom was already waiting outside when Will pulled up. He slid into the passenger seat and leaned toward Will, planting a quick kiss on his cheek. “Good morning.”

“Same to you,” Will replied, pointing to two to-go cups in the console. “I stopped for coffee.”

“Thanks. Another cup is always welcome.”

“Did you have time for breakfast? We can stop somewhere if you want to get something to eat.”

“I’m good. Unless you need to get something,” Tom said.

“No, I ate with my mom before I left the house.” Will glanced over. “I figured I could park in the B and B parking lot, and we can start by walking down Main Street. See if anything looks interesting.”

“That works. Oh, and I got a text from Char just before I left the house. Cee Cee’s boss called her in to work this morning, seeing as they were so busy yesterday. But it won’t be for all day, so she promised to let me know when they could meet up with us.”

As they exited Will’s car, they saw Clay walking down the path from the front door

of the guest house.

“Hi, guys,” he called out to them.

“Hey, Clay,” Will said. “What are you up to?”

“I’m meeting Finn at Cuppa Joe’s for breakfast,” Clay told them. “He’s working the gingerbread contest this afternoon, so we figured we’d spend some time together this morning.” Finn was a vice president at the bank where the contest was being held.

“We went to see all the entries last night,” Tom said. “There are some great ones for sure.” They walked together, continuing their conversation.

“I’ll walk over to the bank with Finn after we eat so I can take a look.”

“We may go back today,” Will said. “The aroma of gingerbread is amazing. I just wanna stand there and take it all in.”

“You should stop at the Cask and Larder,” Clay said, chuckling. “Finn told me that Mitch is selling gingerbread cookies this weekend along with hot cocoa and hot mulled cider.”

“Oh yeah. We’ll definitely stop there.”

“Okay, here’s my stop,” Clay said, veering off to Cuppa Joe’s door. “See you guys later.”

The guys continued along Main Street. “It’s so nice to see everything decorated for the holidays,” Will said. The town’s streetlamps were strung with boughs of evergreen and shiny burgundy bows. Each was festooned with a banner proclaiming Midwinter Magic: A Yuletide Festival that fluttered in the morning breeze. Many of

the businesses continued the holiday decor with wreaths and lights. An occasional menorah or Kwanzaa candles in shop windows added to the festive displays, and even Earthen Roots, the holistic store in town, paid homage to the Winter Solstice in its window display. Hawthorne Bluff happily celebrated it all during YuleFest.

“It is,” Tom agreed. “The only thing I don’t like about it is that when it all comes down after New Year’s, everything looks so bare.”

“You’ve got a point there. So let’s just enjoy it while we can.”

They stopped in at the Cask and Larder where, as Clay had told them, there were gingerbread cookies and hot mulled cider for sale. So what if it wasn’t even lunchtime yet? Armed with their sugary treats, they turned the corner past the bank, where near the small park across from the beach, they spotted a rainbow-hued school bus.

“Look, there’s Hook’s Traveling Book Nook!” Will exclaimed. “Let’s go there.”

Before heading over, they sat on one of the park benches, finishing up their cookies and cider while watching people milling about. A farmer’s market of sorts had sprung up in the park, and several vendors were selling their wares.

After tossing their trash in a nearby receptacle, they made a beeline for the bus.

An older woman was standing outside, handing out flyers about the Hook’s.

“Howdy,” she said as they approached. She was dressed in a long, red winter coat with a bright rainbow-striped scarf and matching wool cap. “I’m Cybil. Come on in. Jane’s inside and can show you around or answer any questions you might have.”

“Thanks,” Tom said, and they climbed aboard.

Inside, there were shelves of books filling almost every nook and cranny, interspersed with a few seats here and there. Another woman, in matching scarf and cap but sans coat, sat in the bus driver's seat.

"Hello, I'm Jane, Cybil's better half." She chuckled. "Though she might say otherwise. Welcome to Hook's Traveling Book Nook."

"Hi, I'm Will, and this is Tom," Will said. "Nice to meet you."

"Ah," Jane sighed. "New love. I'd recognize it anywhere. Happy you stopped by, boys. Now take a look around and let me know if you have any questions. If you see something you have to have, feel free to take it. This is a library although we don't often get our books returned, seeing as we travel around so much. But we do accept donations of both books and cash so we can replenish our stock. We're all about spreading the love around."

"Thank you," said Tom.

They proceeded down the central aisle, noting books of all sorts along the way. There were nonfiction titles covering both major and minor holidays as well as lots of fiction books that spanned the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

"Oh my God, this is incredible!" Will gushed. "The idea of this bus traveling around and sharing all of this is just so amazing."

"I know, right!" Tom agreed.

Will found an anthology of queer short stories that interested him, so he carried it with him as they made their way back to the front. Cybil had joined Jane, sharing the seat with Jane's arm wrapped around her shoulders.

“So, ladies,” Will began. “I did find a book that I’m taking, but I’d like to make a donation to your traveling library if I could.” He pulled some cash out of his pocket and handed it to Cybil. “Please use this however you can to help keep this going.”

Tom took out a couple of bills and gave them to the ladies as well.

“Thank you both so much,” Cybil said, accepting the donations. “We’ll put this to good use.”

“I do have a question or two,” Will continued. “First, how long have you been together? And next, how did this”—he gestured around the bus—“come about?”

“Let’s see ...” Jane started. “Cybil and I met many, many years ago. Before either of you were born, that’s for sure. For me, it was love at first sight, but it took her a little while to come around.” Cybil laughed, nodding her head.

“Yeah, I was the stubborn one back then,” she said, grinning widely.

“After we retired—you boys were probably still in grade school when that happened—we wanted to do something to spread the word that love is love,” Jane picked up the story. “You see, it was quite different when we were younger. For many years, we had to keep our love secret.” Jane took Cybil’s hand. “We’ve seen lots of things change during our lifetime, but there’s still more that needs doin’.”

“So we got this idea,” Cybil continued. “We took some of our retirement savings and bought this old bus. Some friends helped us get it renovated and painted all pretty like it is. Didja notice there’s a door at the back wall?”

Tom nodded.

“Well, we’ve got a small bedroom and kitchenette back there along with the tiniest

bathroom you've ever seen." She chuckled. "But we don't need much. So we travel around, sharing our message of love with everyone we meet."

"And we occasionally splurge on ourselves and stay in proper lodging. We eat at restaurants pretty regularly too," Jane added. "In fact, we're staying over at the B and B in town for the weekend."

"Oh, Bradley House?" Will asked. When the ladies nodded, he said, "I work there. But I'm off this weekend, so I didn't get to see you when you checked in."

"We met the nicest man Friday morning when we arrived. Clay was his name," Cybil said.

"Oh yeah, he manages the guesthouse for his grandmother. He's my boss. You might see him and his boyfriend, Finn, today or tomorrow. I'm pretty sure they're planning on stopping by."

"And now I have a question for you. Nothing nefarious, just to ease an old woman's curiosity." Jane smiled at them. "As I said when you boys came in, I recognize new love. How long have you two been dating?"

"Well, we met just a few months ago. We were taking a class together in college and became study partners," Tom said.

"We just decided about a week ago that we are boyfriends. So you're right, Jane, this is very new," Will added, taking Tom's hand.

"We love seeing new love blossom!" Cybil effused. "Now you boys run along and enjoy the rest of your day. And thank you again for your generosity."

Cybil and Jane stood and hugged Tom and Will goodbye.

“That was so nice,” Tom said as they walked away. “I’m really glad we went there and met them.”

“Me too,” Will concurred. “You know, Tom, Cybil and Jane are actually a great example of how relationships can work between two people.” He held his breath, hoping he hadn’t gone too far.

“Oh my God, you’re right! They’ve been together longer than we’ve been alive. My mom’s been drumming that crap about relationships in my head for so long that I can be blind to good when it happens right in front of me. Thanks for reminding me of that!” He threw his arms around Will, hugging him tightly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tom

Dorothy's Clam Shack was a small seafood restaurant right near the water. It closed for the season in late September but reopened for YuleFest, and based on the line at the take-out window, despite the temperature, it was doing a booming business. After Will and Tom tried a couple of pizza samples that Tavino's, the town's Italian restaurant, was handing out, they decided bowls of clam chowder would be the perfect ending to lunch.

They waited patiently in line, then Tom ordered two bowls along with some crusty bread. Will suggested they walk back to Bradley House, where they could eat in comfort and relax for a little while before heading out again.

"This chowder is really good," Tom said, dunking a piece of bread into the rich, creamy soup and chewing thoughtfully. "What are we gonna do after lunch?"

"The Strand is showing holiday movies all day for free," Will said, referring to the movie theater at the edge of town. These days it doubled as a venue for plays and other live entertainment as well. "We could pop in and see what's playing."

"That works for me," Tom agreed. "And then another walk down Main Street to see if anything strikes our fancy." They cleaned up the trash from their lunch and, after using the facilities, ventured out into the cold again.

The strand was showing *The Bishop's Wife* with Loretta Young, David Niven, and

Cary Grant when they arrived, so they sat in the back, holding hands, and watched for a while. “I really like this movie,” Tom told Will. “I try and watch it every Christmas.” They ended up staying to the end, and when a Christmas cartoon started up after the movie, they left the theater.

“Oh, look, it’s snowing!” Tom exclaimed gleefully when they walked out. Snow gently fell, coating the trees and lampposts, adding a layer of glittery whiteness to the holiday decorations around town.

“Now it really feels like Christmastime,” Will said.

As they moved down Main Street, Tom’s phone buzzed. “Cee Cee’s done with work,” he told Will. “Char says they’re heading to the park so they can meet the ladies at Hook’s Traveling Book Nook. Then they’re gonna go to The Pub at Tavino’s to have pizza for dinner. She wants to know if we want to join them.” The main dining room at the town’s Italian restaurant was a bit more formal, but a few years before, they’d opened an adjoining space simply called The Pub that served appetizers and pizzas. It featured a long bar and lots of high-top tables and attracted a younger crowd, especially on weekends.

“I’m good with that,” Will replied.

“Okay, we’re meeting them at Tavino’s at five,” Tom said, putting away his phone. “That will work out perfectly since the tree lighting at the town hall is at eight.” The town had erected a tree that was easily twenty-five feet tall on the lawn outside of the town hall. They would have a small lighting ceremony, followed by carolers around the tree. “What do you wanna do until dinner?”

“Why don’t we head toward the park; we can meet up with them early.” Will suggested, taking Tom’s hand.

“Lead on,” Tom replied.

They leisurely strolled along, enjoying the decorations along the way. It was getting dark, and lights were coming on, turning the town into a magical holiday scene. One shop had an inflatable snowman perched near the door, and folks were stopping to have their picture taken with it. A block later, the town’s candy shop, Oh Fudge, had a large wooden nutcracker out front, and once again, it had become a photo opportunity for many.

“It’s so nice to see everyone out and about, enjoying themselves,” Tom said. “This is part of why I love living in a small town.”

“I know, right?” Will agreed. “As much as I like visiting places like Boston, I can’t imagine living there. Small towns are definitely more my speed.”

When they reached the park, Tom peered into the doorway of the rainbow-painted bus. A string of tiny multicolored lights was strung around the doorway and along the length of the vehicle, adding to the already festive feel. He saw Char and Cee Cee chatting with the ladies, so they waited outside, so as not to crowd the entrance.

A few minutes later, their friends exited the bus, along with Cybil and Jane. “Hi, guys,” Char said. “Isn’t this bus great?”

“Yeah, we were here this morning. It’s amazing,” Tom effused.

“Hello, boys,” Cybil said. “You know these girls?”

“Oh yeah,” Tom replied. “Char and I go way back. She’s more like my sister at this point.”

“We thought we’d stop by and meet up with them,” Will added. “We’re going to

Tavino's for some pizza before we go to the tree lighting at town hall."

"Have a wonderful time," Jane told them. "Some lovely lady who works at the Cask and Larder brought us some sandwiches and gingerbread cookies, so we're planning on eating in the back, but we may see you at the town hall later."

The four of them hugged the ladies and went on their way.

The Pub was filling up even at this early hour, but a lot of that had to do with everyone being out for YuleFest. Nevertheless, after waiting a few minutes, they were seated at a high-top that opened up near the bar.

"I'm still kinda full from lunch," Tom said to Will. "Wanna just split a salad and a small pizza?"

"Yeah, that works."

They settled on pepperoni and onion with extra cheese and a Caesar salad while Char and Cee Cee decided on mozzarella sticks and a white pizza with chicken, black olives, and cheddar. And since they all felt that the only appropriate beverage to accompany pizza was beer, they split a pitcher of a local lager.

"Were you slammed again at work today, Cee Cee?" Will asked.

"Yeah, all day," she told them. "But no one was getting cranky, so it was fine. And the extra money will really come in handy."

"I know what you mean," Tom said. "I plan on talking to Michael again next week about picking up some extra hours once the new semester starts." Michael was Tom's manager at the Whale.

“Again?” Char’s face scrunched up, and she raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t know you’d spoken to him already.”

“It wasn’t anything official,” Tom explained. “A few weeks ago, I mentioned in passing that I might be available to take more hours after the first of the year, and Michael said to let him know closer in, and he’d see what he could do.”

“So you’re definitely planning on getting your own place?” Cee Cee asked. “Char and I both expected your mom to have talked you out of it by now.”

“I know what you mean.” Tom sighed. “I did too. But she’s been unusually quiet about it so far. Well, after that initial conversation, where she did everything she could to convince me not to do it. But I’m standing firm this time.”

“Have you started looking for a place yet?”

“No, but Will mentioned it to Clay, and he may have a lead for me. We’re hoping to hear more next week.”

“Let us know if you need help with anything,” Char said. “You know we’re here for you.”

“Thanks, guys. I really appreciate it.”

After dinner they slowly walked back to the center of town for the tree-lighting ceremony. It was still snowing lightly, but there hadn’t been any real accumulation—just a dusting to make everything look magical.

Lots of people had already gathered when they reached the town hall, but they managed to find a good spot not too far back. The mayor gave a short speech, thanking everyone for coming, and then she introduced the YuleFest committee, led

by Imogene Lewis, who flipped the ceremonial switch to light the beautiful tree. Everyone oohed and aahed when the tiny white lights blazed on, their incandescence illuminating the large multicolored ornaments that graced the tree.

A chorus of men and women from a few of the local churches had assembled on bleachers near the tree, and they sang a variety of holiday songs, both religious and secular. Slowly, people began to drift away, and the foursome followed suit, Char and Cee Cee one way to their apartment and Will and Tom back to the B&B to Tom's truck.

When Tom dropped Will off at home, Will said, "I had a great time today. I'll pick you up at ten tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. I enjoyed myself today too."

They kissed for a few minutes but stopped prior to things going too far.

"See you in the morning," Will said before shutting the door.

Tom watched him walk along the drive and waited until he went inside before pointing his truck home.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Will

When they arrived at the Gray Whale on Sunday morning, the parking lot was almost full. Tom directed him to park in the back, where the employees normally left their cars. The restaurant was busy as well. Will didn't see any open tables, but shortly after they arrived, Dani walked over to them and handed a couple of tickets to Tom and said, "Follow me."

Sure enough, there was a table for two in a corner, not too far from the breakfast buffet that had been set up in the middle of the dining room, allowing service on both sides of the long table.

"Thanks, Dani," Tom said as she sat them.

"I'll bring over a carafe of coffee for you in a minute," she told them. "Do either of you want juice?" They both declined, and Dani moved toward the kitchen.

"So breakfast is on the Whale," Tom said. "Hence the two tickets Dani gave me. Once we get coffee, we can go up and get some food."

Will looked over the buffet offerings in awe. The assortment was incredible. Eggs, an omelet station, bacon, sausage, a variety of Danish, ham and turkey carving stations, fruit salad, pancakes and waffles along with fruit compotes and syrups. They both filled their plates and returned to their seats.

“I can’t believe how much food they have!” Will exclaimed, digging into his scrambled eggs. He also had some crisp bacon and a waffle topped with an apple, cinnamon, and pecan compote.

“Right? The restaurant doesn’t offer breakfast all that often, but when they do, they go all out.”

They ate their fill, both going back for seconds before calling it quits. “Whew, I’m stuffed,” Will said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. “That was excellent.”

Dani had checked on them a couple of times, and once they were finished, Tom got her attention, and she hurried over. “Need anything else, boys?”

“Just the check,” Tom said.

“Let me get the tip,” Will said after Dani had walked away, handing Tom some bills. “Is that enough?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Tom placed the money, along with the two tickets for the complimentary Jingle Mingle Breakfast, in the check presenter on the table, and they left the Whale.

“Is it okay to leave my car here, or should I move it to the B and B?” Will asked.

“Probably best to move it so someone else can park. Then we can walk off some of these calories.”

Tom

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to be here?” Tom asked, his voice cracking slightly. After they’d walked around town for a while, Will had driven to the neighborhood

where Finn's mom lived and parked along the vehicle-lined street before making their way to Muriel Reynolds' house.

"Of course!" Will assured him. "Clay and Finn invited me. It's an open house, so there will be lots of people here. And I've met Finn's mom, Muriel, a couple of times—she's very nice. It's fine."

"Okay. Just don't leave me alone," Tom pleaded. "I'm not really great in a roomful of strangers."

Will took his hand. "Don't worry, babe," he said, using a term of endearment for the first time. "I've got you."

Someone was just slipping out as they reached the door, so they entered without needing to knock or ring the doorbell. There were several people in the foyer, chatting and milling about.

"This way," Will said, dragging him along. When they reached the far doorway, Tom saw Clay standing there.

"Hey, guys, glad you could make it," Clay said, shaking their hands. "Follow me to the bar."

They entered the next room, which turned out to be the dining room. A large table filled with platters of cold appetizers occupied the center of the room. A long table on the other side featured silver chafing dishes of hot food. Clay directed them to the back of the room, where a wall of windows overlooked a spacious yard. A full bar was set up there, complete with two bartenders taking care of guests. After they each got a beer, Tom saw Finn speaking with a striking older woman on the far side of the bar.

“Hi, guys,” Finn said when they sauntered over. “Mom, I’d like you to meet Will Hargrove and Tom Dawson,” he said to the woman. “Guys, this is my mom, Muriel Reynolds.”

“Very nice to meet you, Mrs. Reynolds,” Tom said. “Thank you for inviting us into your beautiful home.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Tom,” Muriel replied. “And please, call me Muriel.” Turning to Will, she said, “It’s nice to see you again, Will.”

“Thanks, Muriel. Nice to see you again as well.”

“Please excuse me. I have other guests to greet. Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen.” Muriel departed.

“Enjoying YuleFest?” Finn asked them.

“Yeah, it’s been fun,” Tom answered. “Did you get a chance to visit Hook’s Traveling Book Nook? Those women are great!”

“Yeah, Clay and I stopped by yesterday. We loved it,” Finn agreed.

Finn saw someone from the bank where he worked, so he and Clay excused themselves to chat with them. Tom and Will wandered around, ending up in the sunroom, where another smaller bar was set up along one wall. They were waiting in the short line to get another beer when an attractive man walked up to them, smiling.

“Hi, Will,” the man said, offering his hand.

“Hey, Mitch.” Turning to Tom, Will said, “Tom, this is Mitch Reynolds, Finn’s brother. Mitch, this is my boyfriend, Tom Dawson.”

“Nice to meet you, Tom,” Mitch said. “You’re just the guys I wanted to see.”

“Huh?” Will’s face scrunched up. “Why were you looking for us?”

“Clay told me you were looking for an apartment, Tom,” Mitch explained. “I might just have something for you.”

“Really? Where?”

“Above my shop.”

“Mitch owns the Cask and Larder, Tom,” Will explained. “Mitch, I didn’t realize there was an apartment up there.”

“Well, it hasn’t been used as one since I opened the shop,” Mitch told them. “I didn’t need it since I have a house a few streets over from here. When I bought the place, I focused on remodeling the shop so I could open it up. I originally had planned on fixing up the apartment so I could rent it out, but frankly, I just never got around to it.”

“But you want to rent it out now?” Tom asked.

“Well,” Mitch started, “to be honest, it needs some work. Nothing major, just a good cleaning and maybe a fresh coat of paint here and there. And it’s not very big. Part of the upstairs space is a storage area for the shop.”

“I don’t need a lot of space, and I’d be happy to clean it and even paint if I need to,” Tom said, his voice rising in pitch. “How much would the rent be?”

“Well, as I understand it, you’re a starving college student, and if you’re willing to clean it up yourself ...” He named an amount, and Tom’s eyes practically bugged out.

“Really?” He was incredulous. “That’s all?”

“I look at it this way: it’s going unused at this point, and Clay pretty much thinks of Will as part of the family, which in turn makes you part of the family. So yeah, I’m willing to give you a break,” Mitch explained, smiling. “And you’re saving me from having to hire someone to clean the space, put ads in the paper and online, and interview prospective tenants. But before you agree to moving in, why don’t you take a look at it first? After all, you wanna make sure you like the place, right?”

“Okay, yeah, sure,” Tom agreed. “Can we do that this week? Since school’s out, I’m picking up more hours at the Whale, so I could easily stop by.”

“Sure. How about tomorrow morning? The shop opens at ten, but I’ll be there by nine to get things ready.”

“I can do that. I don’t have to be at the Whale until eleven tomorrow,” Tom said, enthusiasm clear in his voice. “Will, wanna come with me?”

“Sure,” Will agreed. “And if you do take the place, I’ll help you with the cleaning and painting.”

“I admit it’s been a while since I really looked in the place, but if memory serves, there may be a few pieces of furniture there too,” Mitch said. “I don’t know what condition the stuff might be in, but you’re welcome to whatever you find up there.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tom

Since they were both working later that day, Tom and Will agreed to meet at Cuppa Joe's for breakfast at eight thirty, then walk over to the Cask and Larder to see Mitch and take a look at the apartment.

Tom arrived first—okay, maybe he was just a little excited about the possibility of getting his own apartment—and after ordering a cappuccino and a ham-and-cheese croissant, he snagged a small table along the back wall.

Will walked in a few minutes later, got his own food, and joined Tom, giving him a quick kiss before sitting down. “Are you ready?” he asked, shrugging out of his coat.

“I sure am!” Tom said, practically bouncing in his seat. “Let's hurry up and eat so we can go.”

Will chuckled and said, “Sure,” before biting into his blueberry-streusel muffin. They scarfed down their food and were soon on their way up the street.

The door to the gourmet food shop was still closed, so Tom knocked, and a moment later, Mitch let them in. “Good morning, guys. Either of you want coffee? I just made a pot.”

“I'm good,” Tom replied.

“No thanks,” said Will.

“Okay, then, follow me.” Mitch led them to a short hallway at the back, where the shop’s restrooms were located. There was a door at the end of the hall marked “Employees Only,” and he opened it. “You can get in from the door out back”—he pointed to an exterior door—“and then head up these stairs. There’s a small parking lot back there that you can use too.”

Once they reached the upper landing, there were two doors. Mitch gestured to the one on the left. “That’s a storage room for the shop. Now let’s see what you’re getting yourself into.” He pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the door on the right.

The dimly lit room was a combination living and dining area. Tom knew that because he could see a sofa along one wall and a small table with two chairs in the far corner, near what looked like a galley kitchen, separated from the main room by a small island. Mitch went to a set of windows opposite the sofa and opened the vertical blinds, letting in the bright morning sunshine.

A fine layer of dust covered every surface, which Tom had expected, so the condition of the area didn’t dampen his spirits. In addition to the furniture, there were several boxes piled up and a couple of display cases scattered about. “I’ll put the boxes and stuff in the storage room,” Mitch said, looking around. “Hmm, it’s not as bad as I thought it would be.”

“This is great,” Tom said excitedly. He maneuvered around a large display case and entered the kitchen. There was a sink and small stove as well as a fridge and some storage cabinets. Not a lot but enough for his needs. Noticing a doorway, he turned and ventured through.

“That’ll be the bedroom and bath,” Mitch called after him.

Will followed, peering into the small bedroom. Tom stood in the doorway to the bathroom, grinning widely. "I'll take it," he practically shouted. "When can I start cleaning the place?"

Will laughed and hugged Tom. "Really?"

Mitch joined them in the bedroom and said, "Are you sure?"

"At the price you quoted me yesterday? Absolutely."

"Okay, then," Mitch said, holding out his hand. "We have a deal."

Tom shook his hand vigorously. "Thank you."

"Just give me a day or so to get this stuff outta here, and then you'll be good to go. I'll get you keys for the back door and the apartment door. We should also exchange phone numbers," Mitch said. "We'll make this official as of January first, but you're welcome to start cleaning as soon as you want. Consider the time between now and New Year's a Christmas gift."

"Thanks!" Tom said, unable to contain his excitement. "I'm off Thursday this week, so I'll probably start then if that's okay."

"I'm off too," Will said. "I'll be here to help out."

"Thanks, Will. Oh, Mitch, the sofa, table, and chairs look to be in decent shape, so I'll keep those. I think they just need a good cleaning." He looked around and chuckled. "Along with everything else."

"You definitely have your work cut out for you," Mitch said. "Okay, let's go downstairs. I've got a rental agreement for you to sign if that's okay. I'm happy this

is gonna work out for both of us.”

Tom took one last look around his apartment— Oh my God, I have an apartment! —and followed Mitch and Will down the stairs.

Tom arrived at work early and was hanging his coat in one of the lockers in the staff room when Char waltzed in.

“Hey, Tom,” she said in greeting, giving him a quick hug. “How did it go this morning?” Tom had texted Char the night before to tell her about Mitch’s offer.

“I have an apartment!” Tom laughed, bouncing from foot to foot.

“Oh my God!” Char joined in. “That’s fantastic!”

“It needs a good cleaning,” Tom told her. “Jeez, I’ve never seen that much dirt and dust. But it’s gonna be great.”

“This is so exciting!” Char continued to gush. “You should start a list of things that you’ll need. Furniture, kitchen stuff, towels, sheets; you know, things like that.”

Tom suddenly stopped, dropping onto one of the seldom-used chairs on the other side of the room. “Oh God, there’s so much to think about. So much to do.” He looked up at Char. “Am I stupid for thinking I can actually do this?”

“Of course not,” she said seriously. “And you’re not doing it alone. Cee Cee and I will help any way we can. And I’m sure Will feels the same way.”

“He does, actually.” Tom’s face lit up. “He came with me this morning, and we’re both off on Thursday, so we’re gonna start cleaning. Oh, and there’s already a couch and a small dining table with two chairs in the apartment that Mitch said I could have,

so that's a few less things I need to get."

"Cool. Cee Cee and I are both working Thursday, so we can't help, but I'm sure we'll be there with you before too long. And I'll ask around to see if anyone has any furniture or cookware and stuff that they're either tossing or selling cheaply. You'll have everything you need before you know it."

"Thanks, Char. What would I do without you?"

"Don't even say that in jest. Together forever, remember?" she chided him.

"Oh shit," Tom groaned, shaking his head.

"What?"

"Now I gotta tell Mom," he choked out, staring at his feet.

Char put her hand on his shoulder. "Hey, you can do this. Besides, she already knows that you're planning on moving out, so it won't be as big of a shock to her, right?"

Tom sighed.

"I didn't say it would be easy," Char admitted. "And it will probably get a little ugly, but ultimately, it's gonna be okay."

Tom pulled into the driveway, turned off the engine, and sat in his truck for a few minutes. He chewed at his bottom lip, thinking about what would happen when he told his mom that he had found an apartment and was definitely moving out. Well, better get this over with.

His mom was washing a few dishes at the kitchen sink when he walked in. "Hi,

sweetie. How was work today?"

"Okay. Typical day. Steady."

"That's good. Dinner's in the oven. Should be ready in about half an hour. I made a cottage pie," she told him, drying her hands on a yellow dish towel.

"Um, Mom, we need to talk."

"Of course, Tommy. What's wrong? Oh, did that boy Will dump you? I told you it?—"

"No, Mom, that's not it," he interrupted. "Will and I are still seeing each other."

"It's not work, is it? Your boss wouldn't let you go. He knows you're one of the best workers he has."

"No, Mom, it's about what we talked about a couple of weeks ago. About my getting my own place."

"Oh, Tom, I thought we went over this. It's not the right time. Do you have any idea how much an apartment is going to cost?" Alice spoke rapidly as if that would make it all go away somehow. "You just wait, and we'll talk about this after your next semester. Summer's a much better time to think about things like this."

"Mom, listen to me," Tom said, staring into her eyes. "I looked at a place this morning before I started work. It's small but nice. And it's right in town, so I could walk to work if I wanted. Plus, it's cheaper than what I thought I'd have to pay."

"I see." Alice's face was blank. "So ... it's like I said, you're gonna leave me too. Am I that bad of a person that you can't stand to be around me either?" Her shoulders

shook, and Tom saw a tear slowly slide down her cheek. “What’s wrong with me that everyone wants to get away from me as fast as they can?” Her voice broke.

“Oh, Mom!” Tom wrapped his arms around her. “Nothing’s wrong with you. You’re a good person with a good heart.” He paused, wondering if he should say what had been lurking in his brain for a while. Well, might as well just rip that bandage all the way off. “It’s just that you’ve let what happened between you and Dad affect everything else in your life. You’ve never let go of that, Mom.” She sobbed into his shoulder, and he just held her.

Eventually, she pulled away and looked up at him from red-rimmed eyes. “What are you saying, Tom? Let go of what?”

“The hate, Mom. The hate that’s been festering for almost twenty years. Dad’s gone; he’s not coming back. For all we know, he could be dead, but you just go on hating him and believing that because your marriage didn’t work out, no relationship can ever work. And what’s the second thing you said, after trying to convince me to stay? That something must be wrong with you if everyone in your life leaves.” Tom tried to keep the anger out of his voice, hoping that his mom might finally understand what he was trying to say. “Did you ever stop and think that maybe Dad was at fault? Maybe there was something wrong with him, and that’s why things didn’t work out between the two of you? I love you, Mom, but you’ve got to stop thinking this way.”

“I just don’t ...” Alice paused as if finally letting the words sink in. “I’ve felt like this for so long, Tommy. What am I gonna do now?”

“Did you ever consider seeing someone to talk about these feelings?” Tom asked quietly.

“I don’t know ...” She trailed off.

“Just think about it, Mom. Now I’m gonna go wash up, and then we can sit down and eat. You know how much I like your cottage pie.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Will

U awake?

The text came in just as Will finished the book he'd been reading on his Kindle. It was a mystery story featuring gay characters in New York. One owned an antique store, and his boyfriend was a police detective. Good stuff.

Instead of answering the text, he called Tom, who answered on the first ring.

“Hey.”

“How did it go?” Tom had called him after work and said he was planning on telling his mom about the apartment as soon as he got home. Will had been feeling antsy since that conversation. Fortunately, the book had managed to take his mind off it until now. He hadn't wanted to call or text Tom lest he interrupt something.

“It started out pretty bad,” Tom admitted. “Pretty much how I expected it to. After she once again tried to talk me out of it all, she accused me of leaving, just like everyone else.”

“I'm sorry,” Will said quietly. “That must have been awful for you.”

“I realized that once again, she was blaming herself for everything that's ever happened, and I finally asked her to consider that maybe it was my dad's fault, not

hers.”

“What happened?”

“It’s like a light bulb went off above her head. She finally stopped and thought about it,” Tom said. “And then I asked her if she ever gave any thought to seeing a counselor to help her work through her feelings.”

“Wow. What did she say?”

“Not much at that point, but I could see the wheels turning. She’s not happy that I’m leaving, but I think for the first time, she’s beginning to look at things a little differently.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t all bad, but you know she’s still got a long way to go before she can think more clearly about everything.”

“I know, but at least now I have hope that things might actually get better,” Tom said.

“Any plans before work today?” Emily asked her son as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

Will looked up from his iPad. “I was just looking at some classified ads. There’s one here about someone selling some furniture and things. I was gonna give them a call to see what they have. Maybe Tom can use some of it for his new apartment.”

“That’s sweet of you, dear,” she said. “Oh, take a look in the basement. Remember when I replaced our dishes last year? The old ones along with some cutlery should be in a box on one of the shelves. Tom is welcome to those if he wants them.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Will picked up his phone and placed a call. After a few minutes, he

ended the call and said, “The lady I spoke to has a coffee table and an end table along with a microwave. They live a few blocks over, so I’m gonna go take a look at the stuff before I go to Bradley House.”

He gave his mom a quick kiss on the cheek, grabbed his coat, and was out the door.

The bright sunlight nearly blinded him when Will opened his bedroom curtains on Thursday morning. A quick look at the weather app on his phone let him know that it was also quite cold—currently thirty-five degrees, with a high of forty-three expected. Ah, well, he’d work up a sweat helping Tom clean the apartment that day.

He got ready quickly, dressing in an old pair of jeans, work boots, and a well-worn T-shirt topped with a sweatshirt that had seen better days. Perfect clothes to clean in, he figured. Sending off a quick text to Tom to confirm their meeting time at the Cask and Larder, he hurried downstairs to have breakfast with his mom.

“I looked for the dishes downstairs like you told me to,” Will said to his mom as he buttered his toast. “I’m definitely gonna bring them to Tom but not today. I’ll wait until most of the cleaning is done.”

“That’s fine, dear,” she said. “How did you make out with that used furniture you were going to look at yesterday?”

“Great. The tables and microwave were in good shape, and the woman didn’t want much for them, so I bought them yesterday,” Will told her. “She agreed to keep them for me for a couple of days. I’ll tell Tom today, and hopefully we can pick them up soon. I plan on telling Tom they’re an early Christmas gift.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

“Well, I know he’s gonna be overwhelmed with everything that he needs to get. If

this helps, I'm happy to do it," Will said. "Oh, and Mom? Is it okay if I borrow some cleaning supplies? You know, the dustpan and broom, some spray cleaner, sponges and rags, and maybe a bucket?"

"Of course, sweetie. Take whatever you need. And don't forget some trash bags for all the dust and dirt and whatever else might need to be thrown away."

"Thanks, Mom." Will's phone buzzed, and he checked it quickly. "Okay, let me grab the stuff and load my car. Tom says he'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

Will parked next to Tom's truck in the rear parking lot and met him at the front door with a kiss. Mitch let them in and handed a set of keys to Tom.

"I think I managed to get all the crap that was stored there moved into the other room," Mitch told them. "But if you find anything I missed, let me know." And with that, the guys went upstairs.

"Okay," Tom stated, surveying the mostly empty room. "Where do you think we should start?"

"How about we clean the higher surfaces first?" Will suggested. "That way any dirt and dust that falls down will get swept up later."

"That sounds good to me," Tom agreed. They returned to the parking lot to get their supplies, then went back upstairs to begin. Several hours later, the kitchen, living room, and dining area were clean, and the place was looking better already.

They heard someone on the stairs; Will opened the door to find Mitch standing there with a tray of food. "I thought you guys might want to take a break for lunch."

"That's so nice of you!" Will exclaimed.

Mitch set the tray down on the dining table and looked around. “Wow, you’re doing a great job. This place is looking so much better.”

“Thanks,” Tom said.

“Oh, I spoke to my mom, and she has an old rug in her basement that she said you can have. It should fit in here just fine. I’ll pick it up Saturday morning and bring it over.”

“Really? That’s very kind of her.”

“Not a problem. Okay, I’ll let you two eat your lunch. Enjoy.”

“I can’t believe how nice he is,” Tom said after Mitch had left.

“I know, right? But it seems to run in the Reynolds family. From what Clay has said about Finn, it seems Mrs. Reynolds did a wonderful job raising those guys.” Will paused to sip from one of the water bottles that Mitch had left for them. “So, um, speaking of moms, has yours said anything else about the fact that you’re moving?”

“Subtle, Will,” Tom said, smiling. “Actually, she’s been rather quiet about it. And weirdly, I think that’s a good sign. At least she’s not yammering on and on about how all relationships are bad.”

“Yeah.” Will sighed. “I just wish she was a little more positive about things.”

“Well, I don’t expect her to change overnight. I’ll take her silent acceptance as a good sign.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tom

When Tom pulled into the driveway that night, he was surprised to see that his mom wasn't home yet. She'd gotten out of work over an hour ago, and if she were running late for some reason, she'd usually let him know.

Before even getting out of his truck, he quickly sent her a text.

Everything okay? Just got home, and you're not here.

He went upstairs to shower and change—he and Will had managed to get pretty dirty cleaning the apartment—and then heard his phone buzz.

Sorry, sweetie. Be home shortly. I'll explain when I get there.

Relieved that everything seemed to be okay, he finished dressing and headed to the kitchen. Just as he opened the refrigerator door to grab something to drink, the back door opened.

"Hey, Mom," he said, turning. "How are you?"

"I'm good, Tommy. I thought about telling you that I'd be late today, but I wanted to see how it went before I said anything." She placed a familiar flat square box on the table and hung up her coat. "I got us pizza for dinner. I'll tell you where I was while we eat."

Tom took a couple of cans of diet soda from the fridge while Alice grabbed plates from the cabinet.

“Mmm, pepperoni and black olive.” Tom sighed contentedly. “My favorite.”

“With extra cheese,” Alice said. “Do I know my boy or what?”

“Thanks, Mom,” Tom replied, starting in on his first slice.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said when you told me you were moving out,” Alice began. “About always blaming myself for my failed marriage and not letting go.” She sipped her beverage and shook her head. “You’re right. I was putting it all on me, and it clouded my judgment.”

“I’m sorry, Mom ...”

“No, you were right, and I’m glad you finally said something. I, well, I never wanted to hurt you, Tom. Part of my twisted brain thought I was helping you. But that’s another topic for another time. Like I said, I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I called the HR Department at work. One of the benefits they have is counseling services, so I made an appointment. Normally, I wouldn’t be able to see someone so quickly, but they had a cancellation. I had my first meeting with a therapist today. That’s why I was late.”

“That’s great, Mom.” Tom hesitated, unsure if he should say more. Deciding, he went on, “How’d it go?”

“Good, actually. We didn’t get into too much detail yet—it was hard to talk about some of these things to a stranger—but I think it’s going to be okay. I felt really good about everything by the time the hour was up.”

“I’m happy for you, Mom. All I want is for you to feel better about yourself and your life.”

“Thanks, sweetheart. And I want to say I’m sorry for holding you back for so long. I’m still not happy that you’re leaving, but I guess I understand why you need to do it.”

“I promise, I’ll see you all the time. After all, I still wanna come over for dinner so I can eat your chicken pot pie and cottage pie.”

Alice smiled and threw a piece of pizza crust at him.

Tom grinned.

Tom was in bed reading that night when a text popped up on his phone. It was Char, asking if he was still awake. When he said he was, his phone immediately rang.

“Hi, Char.”

“So how was cleaning day? Did you and Will try out the shower after getting all sweaty?” she purred.

“Cleaning went really well, and no, we didn’t shower together,” Tom replied in mock exasperation. He knew her well enough to know that Char was just busting his balls.

“Well, that’s no fun,” she retorted.

“But hopefully that will happen at some point,” Tom said, giving her something. After all, he and Will had done a few things so far, and he definitely wanted more. “Anyway, we got a lot done, and I’ll probably be able to move in by the first of the year. Or right after. I still need to get a few things for the place.”

“You really need to make a list of things you need and share it with Will and me. Then we can add stuff you forget and cross things off as we find stuff.”

“You mentioned that once before, and it’s actually a great idea,” Tom said. “I’ll start on one tomorrow.”

“So ...” Char started. Tom could hear hesitation in her voice. “How’s your mom doing with all this?”

“Believe it or not, she’s handling it pretty well. She’s started seeing a counselor. Her first appointment was today after work. We talked a little about it at dinner. For the first time, she’s acknowledging that there’s a problem, and she seems to want to fix it.”

“Oh, Tom, that’s great!” Char gushed. “And frankly, it’s about fucking time.”

“I know. I wish I’d had the guts to say something to her a long time ago, but at least she’s doing it now.”

“What’s past is past, hon. I’m just happy things are starting to go your way.”

“Me too, Char.”

Tom, Will, Char, and Cee Cee sat together at a table toward the back of Cuppa Joe’s. It was the week before Christmas, and the place was quite busy for a Tuesday afternoon.

The four of them had spent most of the day at Tom’s new apartment, cleaning a little more and organizing things. Earlier in the week, Char had searched the online bulletin board at Quincy College and found some small appliances and other kitchen items that Tom could use. True to his word, Mitch had delivered the area rug from

Muriel's basement. And Will had told Tom about the tables and microwave, which they'd picked up a few days ago using Tom's truck. The place was really shaping up.

Tom had searched the classified ads and bought a used bed frame and matching chest of drawers along with a nightstand to furnish his bedroom. That was followed by a trip to a big-box store for a new mattress.

"Thank you all for helping me out with all of this." Tom raised his cup of hot chocolate. "I don't know how any of this would have happened without your assistance."

"We were happy to do it," Cee Cee said. "After all, you lent a hand when Char and I moved into our place. It's only fair that we help you."

"Well, I appreciate it."

"Have you decided exactly when you'll move in?" Char asked.

"Since everything's going along faster than I expected, I think I'll officially make the move just before New Year's. Seems like a nice way to mark a new beginning," Tom told them. "Plus, it means I'll be there before the new semester starts on January third."

"Any reason why you don't wanna do it sooner?" Char asked. "After all, the place is pretty much ready at this point."

"I know, but I really don't want Mom to be alone in her house for Christmas," Tom admitted. "I thought it might be a little easier if I hung around until the following week."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Will said.

“Well,” Char started, “you could always try out the bed before that. Perhaps an early Christmas present?” She waggled her eyebrows.

“You’re a goof, you know that, right?” Tom laughed.

“Hey, I just want my best friend to get some before the holidays!” Char replied.

“Actually,” Tom continued, heat rising in his cheeks, “Will and I have already talked about it, and we’re planning a little New Year’s Eve celebration at the apartment. Just the two of us.”

“Whoop!” Char exclaimed. “That sounds perfect.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Will

It was the day before Christmas Eve. They had fixed a simple dinner in Tom's kitchen and eaten burgers and Caesar salad at the small dining table. Even though Tom hadn't moved in yet, he and Will were spending more time at the apartment while they were still on their holiday break.

"You know, just because we agreed to wait until New Year's Eve to take this to the next level doesn't mean we can't still do other stuff." Will stared deeply into Tom's emerald eyes. Up until now, they'd made out a few times, had even exchanged blow jobs on more than one occasion, and had agreed that they were ready to move forward. Once Tom decided to move to the new place just before the end of the year, they made the decision to christen the new apartment—and the bed—on New Year's Eve.

"What did you have in mind?" The glint in Tom's eye told Will that he was enjoying the banter between them way too much.

"We probably should test out the new mattress and box spring to make sure everything holds up okay with the two of us on the bed." Will grinned. "After all, we wouldn't want to go crashing to the floor at a crucial moment."

"That's actually a very good idea," Tom agreed. "C'mon, we can clean up later." Tom reached for Will's hand and led him to the bedroom.

Will took the lead, kissing Tom as he ran his hands down Tom's back, cupping his ass firmly. Will felt Tom's tongue seeking entrance, and he parted his lips and deepened the kiss.

"Really want you," Tom panted, breaking the kiss and reaching for the hem of Will's sweatshirt.

That was all the encouragement Will needed, and they quickly helped each other undress until they stood at the foot of the bed clad only in boxer briefs, navy for Will and dark gray for Tom. Their excitement was evident, bulges straining at thin fabric. Will pulled Tom to him, rubbing their crotches together as they kissed passionately.

They maneuvered onto the bed, Tom straddling Will as they kissed and frothed against each other.

"Still too many clothes," Tom moaned, running his hands down Will's furry chest. Grabbing the waistband of Will's shorts, he pulled them over his ass and down his legs until Will lay before him, completely naked. Shucking off his own briefs, he climbed back on top of Will, reversing his body so that they could suck each other.

Will worked his way up and down Tom's rigid shaft, sucking and nipping along the way. He licked Tom's hirsute balls, then ran his tongue along Tom's taint and circled his hole. Will inhaled deeply, his nostrils filling with the scent of Tom's musk and a faint citrus blend that Will now knew was Tom's body wash. The heady aroma excited Will, and he began to suck eagerly on Tom's cock.

His own dick was being laved and stroked, sucked and licked, working him into a frenzy. A few more seconds like that, and he knew he was a goner.

"Gonna come!" he nearly shouted, then completely engulfed Tom's cock with his lips and tongue. His orgasm overtook him, nearly causing him to black out as Tom sucked

him dry. He no sooner finished then Tom's cum hit the back of his throat, and he swallowed quickly, not wanting to spill any of Tom's essence.

As their breathing slowed, they lapped at any stray cum, and Tom flipped around so that he was facing Will. They kissed, tasting themselves on each other's tongues.

"That was pretty intense," Tom whispered.

"Well, the bed survived," Will said. "At least this time. We might need to try again just to be sure."

"I think that's a very good idea," Tom agreed, smiling.

Will woke in his own bed on Christmas Eve morning. Even though he and Tom had napped after last evening's "testing of the bed," he wouldn't stay over until next week, when Tom officially moved into his new place for New Year's Eve. Aromas of coffee and cinnamon hit Will's nose, and he rose, tempted by the scent of his mom's French toast casserole. That, along with some crispy bacon, was a Christmas Eve tradition. As he entered the kitchen, his sister Melissa walked in the back door.

"Hey, sis." Will hugged her in greeting. "Merry Christmas Eve."

"You too, Will," she replied. Ever since their dad had died, back when Will was just twelve, they had put more emphasis on Christmas Eve. For some reason, their dad preferred it over Christmas Day, so the family continued to celebrate on the eve in memory of their dad and husband.

"Breakfast smells delicious, Mom," Will told Emily.

"You say that every year."

“Because it’s true.” Will smiled. As they began to eat, they caught each other up on their lives over the past week.

“I was talking to Jeremy, and he says he’d like to hire me full-time,” Melissa announced. In addition to her hours at Bradley House, Melissa worked part-time at No Place Like Home, a home-goods shop in town.

“Really? That’s wonderful,” Emily said. “You’ve been wanting to work there full-time, right?”

“Yeah, but it means cutting back at the B and B, or stopping completely,” Melissa admitted. “I hope Clay’s okay with that.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine with it,” Will told her. “You know he only wants the best for his employees.”

“I know you’re right, but it will be difficult if I have to leave there. The Bradleys and the rest of the staff are like family.”

“I know what you mean, sis. I feel the same way. But I’m sure Clay will be open to anything you want to do even if it just means filling in once or twice a month.”

They finished eating, and both Will and Melissa helped Emily clean up the kitchen. They’d spend the rest of day watching holiday movies on TV and would open gifts later that night. Dinner would be another tradition—French meat pie, a nod to Emily’s French-Canadian roots.

Will thought back to past Christmases, some with his dad and some later. But it was memories of happy times—like singing carols together, drinking eggnog, and opening a small gift before bed on Christmas Eve—that brought a smile to Will’s face.

Christmas morning dawned bright and cold. Puffy clouds dotted the azure skies. Will smiled as he gazed out his window. It was Christmas Day, and he'd get to spend some time with Tom. A week ago, his mom had talked to him about asking Tom and his mother to spend Christmas Day with them. Will had met Tom's mom twice. The first time, he was picking Tom up for a date, and she had seemed nice although a bit standoffish. It was before Tom had spoken to her about moving out, so Will didn't dwell on her reaction all that much. The second time was just last week, and she had come across as much friendlier. Will wondered if the counselor she was seeing was already having a positive effect on her.

When Will asked Alice and Tom to spend Christmas Day with his family, at first Alice was hesitant, saying she didn't want to intrude. Will secretly thought part of it was that she still wasn't completely happy about his and Tom's relationship, but he didn't say a word. After a few minutes, Tom convinced her to accompany him, explaining that he wanted to spend some time with Will's family and really wished she would be there as well.

After breakfast, Will helped his mom get ready for the day. Emily put a turkey breast in the oven to roast and had prepared glazed carrots along with her famous—at least to her family—dressing with sausage, apples, and pecans along with another meat pie since Will was particularly fond of them.

"Merry Christmas!" Will greeted Tom and Alice at the door. They hugged, still too shy to kiss in front of both Alice and Emily at that point.

"Same to you," Tom and Alice each replied as they entered the house. It was just past four, and Melissa had already been there for a couple of hours. They sat in the living room, reminiscing about past Christmases.

"I remember one Christmas before Dad died," Will said. "He insisted we all get matching plaid pajamas and wear reindeer antlers and red noses on Christmas Eve."

“Oh my, that was such fun,” Emily added. “But I had the hardest time finding extra-large pajamas that would fit your dad. It was worth it in the long run because we did look great.”

“Didn’t you take a photo of us and use it for our Christmas card the following year?” Will asked.

“I certainly did,” his mom said. “I still have a copy somewhere. I’ll need to dig it out and make a copy for you.”

“I don’t remember any Christmases with my dad,” Tom offered, his voice tinged with sadness. “But I remember so many when it was just Mom and me. Thinking back on them, I always felt loved and cared for. Thanks, Mom.” Alice smiled warmly and took his hand. She seemed too choked up to say anything.

They continued sharing memories for a while, with Alice, Emily, and Melissa sharing some favorite times. Emily and Alice appeared to hit it off rather quickly; Will hoped they would become friends as time moved on.

After a while, they exchanged gifts. Will and Tom had agreed to keep things simple this year since Tom was using most of his savings for the new apartment, and Will had already given him the used furniture as an early gift. Emily gave Alice a Jerusalem cherry plant in a gorgeous planter from her shop, and Alice gifted Emily with a set of linen placemats and matching napkins.

Will received a beautiful leather-moleskin notebook with a set of the black rollerball pens he loved, and he gave Tom a navy-blue Quincy College sweatshirt.

They ate, drank some wine, and had many laughs as they chatted throughout the evening. Indeed, it was a wonderful first Christmas together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tom

Oh my God, it's New Year's Eve! Tom opened his eyes and surveyed his new bedroom.

He'd slept in his new bed for the first time the night before, after he and Will had put the finishing touches on his new apartment yesterday. I can't believe I'm actually living in my own place.

They had done all they could to the place although Tom still wanted to get a few more items, but they were more "want to haves" instead of "need to haves," so they could wait. Their last task of the day had been to do groceries, getting a few staples for Tom's fridge and cabinets as well as the ingredients for their New Year's Eve dinner. Will offered to make a pasta-and-chicken-in-cream-sauce dish that his mother had taught him years ago. It also contained peas and mushrooms and had become one of Will's favorite quick meals. Neither of them drank much wine, but Mitch had gifted Tom with a bottle of prosecco as an apartment-warming gift, so they'd open that at midnight.

Tom's phone rang. It was a FaceTime call, so he hit the button and said, "Hey, handsome," when he saw Will's face.

"Hey, yourself," Will replied. "It looks like you're still in bed."

"I am."

“How did you sleep last night?” Will asked.

“Good. I thought it would be hard to fall asleep in a new place, but I guess I was tired.”

“I’ll be sure to tire you out tonight too.” Will snickered.

“Promises, promises.” Tom laughed. “So what time are you coming over?”

“I dunno. I haven’t had breakfast yet, but I was thinking about coming over after lunch if that’s okay?”

“That’s fine. I haven’t talked to Char yet—she may want to meet for coffee or something; it’s kind of a New Year’s Eve tradition with us—I’ll let you know so you can join us too.”

“Okay, that works.” Will blew him a kiss and rang off.

Tom rose, padding into his kitchen to make himself breakfast. He had a boyfriend and his own apartment. Suddenly, he felt more like an adult than he ever had. And it felt so good.

Char called Tom just after he got out of the shower.

“So I think we’re both ready to move this relationship to the next level,” Tom admitted.

“Really?” Char practically squealed. “You’ve really fallen hard for him, haven’t you?”

“I have,” Tom said quietly. “I think, um, that is ...” he stammered.

“You love him, don’t you?” Char was always so perceptive.

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Tom spoke slowly. “I’ve never really been in love with anyone before, but ...” he trailed off. “Do you think it’s too early to say something to him?”

“That depends.” Char turned serious. “Do you think he loves you?”

“Maybe. I mean, we’ve kind of talked about things, and neither one of us wants to see anyone else,” Tom said. “I told him I care for him, and he’s said the same to me. But neither one of us has used the L-word yet.”

“Well,” Char said, “the best advice I can offer is to play it by ear. If the opportunity presents itself, and it feels right, go for it. But don’t rush it if you’re not ready.”

“Thanks, Char. I really don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Let’s hope you never have to find out. Now about today ...” She and Cee Cee were both off work, and they wanted to get together for either coffee or a drink. They agreed to meet for a New Year’s Eve beverage at two o’clock at the Whale.

Tom had sent a quick text to Will, saying to come to the apartment no later than one forty-five so they could walk over together.

“So tonight’s the big night, huh?” Char asked after they’d ordered their drinks from Dani. They were sitting at a high-top near the not-yet-crowded bar.

“You’re trying to make this as awkward as possible, aren’t you?” Tom replied.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Char batted her lashes at him.

Will laughed, and Cee Cee swatted Char’s arm playfully.

“Behave,” she told her girlfriend. “We all know what they’re gonna do. No need to beat it to death.”

“That’s what he said,” Char deadpanned.

Tom groaned. “Can we please talk about something else?”

The conversation changed to school starting up again the following week, and Tom for one breathed a sigh of relief. Even though they all knew what was gonna happen later that day, he still wasn’t completely comfortable being so open about his sex life.

Dinner had turned out great. Will’s pasta was delicious, and Tom made him promise that he’d make it again so Tom could watch more closely and learn how to make it himself. During one of their many conversations, they both confessed to a love for the old TV series Grimm , and Tom discovered that one of the cable channels was doing a marathon, so they watched several episodes before and after dinner.

They were sitting together on the couch. “Too bad Nick’s not gay,” Tom said at one point.

“Right. I mean, can you imagine him and Captain Reynard getting it on? Those guys are so hot,” Will agreed.

“My boyfriend’s pretty hot too,” Tom said, smiling.

“You think so?” Will leaned over and kissed Tom. One kiss led to another, and they continued for a while until Tom reached over and turned off the television.

“We should move this to somewhere more comfortable,” he told Will.

They undressed slowly, almost putting on a show for each other. When they were

both naked, Tom hugged Will tightly, caressing his back and sliding his hands to Will's ass.

"Let's lie down," Will said. They kissed deeply, lengthening against each other.

"I want you inside me tonight," Tom said. They'd spoken briefly about their preferences, and while they were both pretty versatile, Will had admitted he preferred to top even though he'd gladly bottom for Tom.

"Are you sure?" Will asked.

"Absolutely," Tom answered, his smile full and bright. "And maybe we can try it the other way in the morning."

"Deal," Will readily agreed, kissing Tom once again. "Now let me take care of you." He worked his way down Tom's body, kissing, licking, and nipping his way from neck to nipple, navel to cock. He licked around the head of Tom's dick, eliciting a moan from Tom, further encouraging him. He grabbed the lube that Tom had left on the nightstand and poured some on his fingers.

Tom watched as Will continued to suck on his cock while tapping his hole with one finger.

"Oh yeah," Tom moaned in anticipation. He felt Will's finger at his entrance and spread his legs to give him better access. Will took the hint, and Tom felt himself breached, relishing the feel of Will's finger inside him. "More," he whispered.

Will slid his slicked finger deeper while running his tongue up and down Tom's length. After a minute or two, he added a second finger, and Tom moaned again.

"I'm ready," he panted. "Just want you. Now." He reached for a condom and unrolled

it down Will's hard cock.

Tom felt the tip of Will's dick touch his hole, and he pushed, eagerly taking the hard shaft.

Will moved slowly, giving Tom time to adjust to the feeling. Once Will was fully seated in Tom's ass, he stared into Tom's eyes. "Okay?" he asked, tenderness in his voice.

"Oh yeah," Tom said. "You feel amazing. Now fuck me."

It started slow at first, then Will increased his tempo. He took Tom's cock in his hand and stroked, matching the strokes to his thrusts.

Tom felt himself on the edge of orgasm when Will suddenly slowed, almost pulling out of his ass completely. It was as if he knew and wanted to make this last. Tom leaned forward, kissing Will again and again.

"I ..." he began, feeling the L-word on his lips. But was this too soon? Like he'd confessed to Char earlier, he'd never felt this strongly toward someone else, and it certainly felt like love to him, but he didn't want to scare Will, so he veered at the last second. "I can't believe how good this feels."

"Me too," Will panted. Speeding up once again, Tom knew he'd reach the summit in seconds.

"Gonna come!" he cried, taking Will's mouth in a searing kiss, sucking deeply on his tongue.

His orgasm hit, splashing his release on Will's belly as well as his own. He clenched his ass, and that was all Will needed. He felt Will's dick throb in his ass, knowing

he'd come as well.

Will's thrusts slowed and finally stopped. He began to pull out, but Tom's hands on Will's ass stopped him. "Just stay for a minute," Tom's whisper pleaded.

When they were both soft and their breathing was back to normal, Will slipped out, and Tom immediately felt the loss of fullness he'd enjoyed so much.

"That was amazing," Tom declared, reverence in his tone.

"Yeah, it was," Will agreed.

Tom woke with Will's arms around him. He smiled. He couldn't remember ever being as happy as he felt right then. Turning, he woke Will with kisses, and they made love again, reversing roles just as Tom has suggested the night before. Afterward, they showered together, dressed, and cooked breakfast.

"This feels so right," Tom said.

"It does," Will agreed, hugging Tom from behind and kissing the side of his head.

Tom was confident that this was just the beginning of something special between them.

EPILOGUE

Will

Six months later

Today was the day! Will leaped out of bed, excited for everything that was happening. He'd taken his last final exam of the semester yesterday, and today he'd be moving in with Tom.

His relationship with Tom had only gotten stronger in the past few months, and he couldn't be happier. He practically flew down the stairs and kissed his mom, then poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Today's the big day!" Emily exclaimed. "I'm so happy for you, Will."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Everything packed?"

"Just got one more shelf of books to box up, then I'm done," Will said, slathering his toast with peanut butter. "Sure you're gonna be all right here without me?"

"Of course, son," Emily said sincerely. "I survived when your sister got her own apartment, and I knew it was only a matter of time before you left the nest too."

"I know, but I still worry about you."

“And I appreciate that, Will. Just promise me that you and Tom will come by for dinner sometimes.”

“Of course, we will.” Will finished his coffee and washed his dishes at the sink. “And on that note, I’m gonna go upstairs and finish packing.”

Tom was waiting for him in the small parking area behind the Cask and Larder.

“Hi,” Tom greeted him with a kiss.

They carried box after box from Will’s vehicle until everything was upstairs. On their last trip, Mitch stopped them in the small foyer. “When you’re done with that, come to the shop and pick something out for lunch. It’s my welcome gift to the two of you.”

“Thanks, Mitch. That’s so kind of you.”

“Hey, you’re both struggling students, setting off on your own. It’s the least I can do.”

They stood in the living room of their apartment and hugged. Tom kissed him. “Welcome home.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Will replied. “I sometimes think back to when you first came up to me and asked about studying calculus together. Even then, I thought you were so handsome, but I never thought we might end up together. It’s almost like a fairy tale.”

Tom smiled at him. “Once upon a ...”

They kissed. Will knew he’d found his prince. “I’ve thought about saying this but wanted to wait until today. I love you, Tom.”

“I love you too.”

“So if this is a fairy tale, I guess that means we’ll live happily ever after.” Will grinned.

“I certainly hope so.”

THE END