







# The Heartstrings of Harry

## (Mulligan's Mill #5)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** HARRY

Me, I'm just a simple guy living the simple life in Mulligan's Mill. I run the hardware store. I fix what's broken. I'm a doer, not a talker, I just keep the cogs of Mulligan's Mill turning. No one here suspects I'm gay—least of all that I've been quietly in love with Dean Reeves for years.

He's my best friend's son. I watched him grow up gentle and gifted, always strumming something on his guitar, lost in his music. But when he turned eighteen—when he stepped out of his little music studio in Andy's backyard, taller, broader, with something magnetic about him—needless to say I haven't been able to unsee it since.

Now he's a real-life rock star, and he's coming back to town for a break. Just for a while, he says.

And I'm trying real hard to act normal. But it's getting harder by the day... and so am I.

DEAN

I tell everyone I just need a break from L.A.—the noise, the pressure, the weird messages from that stalker who won't leave me alone. And yeah, that's part of it. But the truth? The real reason I'm going back to Mulligan's Mill?

Harry Dalton... my dad's best friend.

He was always there when I was growing up—the big, bear of a guy at the hardware store with those kind eyes and that quiet strength. But after I turned eighteen, something shifted. I started noticing the way his forearms flexed when he lifted lumber, the way his laugh rumbled low in his chest. And then I couldn't stop noticing.

I've been trying to convince myself it's just a crush. That he'd never look twice at a kid like me, especially now that fame and fortune have left their dirty marks on me. But I still can't stop thinking about him.

Coming home is supposed to be temporary. A reset. But if Harry

HARRY

If there was one question I'd heard a thousand times, it was this—

“Why haven't you found yourself a nice wife yet? You're such a wonderful man.”

I laughed off the question—as I had done a thousand times before—and climbed out from under old Mrs. Abernathy's sink, stretching a few twitches and aches out of my bulky frame before wiping my wet hands down the front of my hardware store apron. “Well, the new strainer should stop the leak. I've also replaced the rubber gaskets and tightened the washers on the trap, so with any luck...” I turned the kitchen faucet, ran the water, and bent low to check the pipes underneath weren't leaking at all. “There you go. Good as new.”

“I can't thank you enough,” said Mrs. Abernathy. “I called Handy Andy, but he was too busy to come out. Something about a trip to Eau Claire to pick up some fancy tequila his son likes. Did you know Dean arrives back in town tomorrow? You know Dean, don't you?”

At the very mention of Dean's name, I anxiously twisted a crick out of my neck. “Yeah, I know Dean. I've been best friends with Andy since we were kids.”

Mrs. Abernathy didn't seem to bother listening to my answer. “Of course you know Dean. The whole world knows Dean. I have a teenage granddaughter in Indianapolis who's absolutely obsessed with him and his music. Apparently, she's planning on having his babies.”

“Oh! Wow! I guess we all need goals in life.”

“I don’t blame her. He’s turned into something of a dreamboat, wouldn’t you say? He’s no longer that shy, skinny little boy who used to stand on Main Street Bridge playing his guitar and busking for pocket money.”

“No, he ain’t. Anyway, if there’s nothing more I can help you with, I best be on my way.”

“Oh, but of course.” Mrs. Abernathy picked her clip purse off the kitchen counter and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. “Here, take this for your troubles.”

I waved a hand at the money. “No, please. I’m just happy to help.”

“But I insist.” With a mischievous wink, Mrs. Abernathy tucked the cash into the string of my apron as though I was a stripper.

“Oh! Well, thank you. But why don’t I just add it to your store tab.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort. Just don’t spend it all at once,” she advised, sneaking a firm pat on my ass to seal the transaction.

I flinched, but Mrs. Abernathy didn’t seem to notice. A happy, faraway look came over her face. “You know, I once felt the same way my granddaughter feels about having a rock star’s babies. Not Dean, of course. No, I was madly in love with the great Liberace. What a ladies’ man he was. A real tiger, wouldn’t you say?”

Yikes, where was this going? “I should probably get out of your way now,” I said, quickly packing up my tools.

Mrs. Abernathy looked lost in happy thoughts. “All those rings of his,” she purred.

“If only he’d have put one on my finger.”

“You have a lovely evening now, Mrs. Abernathy. I can see myself out.”

“The way he tinkled those keys. I’d have let him play ‘ Chopsticks ’ on me any day.”

She was still in the kitchen, romanticizing about Liberace’s tinkling fingers when I made my escape, quietly creeping to the front door—pausing by the hallstand to tuck the twenty-dollar bill under a porcelain figurine of a rosy-cheeked young boy stealing a kiss from a rosy-cheeked young girl—before making my hasty departure.

Outside the spring air was still warm even as the sun sank toward the west.

I piled my toolbox into the back of my truck, slipped off my apron and threw it onto the passenger seat, then climbed in behind the wheel and started the ignition before Mrs. Abernathy had time to realize I was gone.

There was no point heading back to the hardware store at this hour. I’d left Gage and Old Walt to close up shop and was more than happy to call it a day. Besides, it was Friday—among other things—which meant poker night with the boys at Andy’s. No doubt Andy had picked up the usual case of beer while he was out hunting for Dean’s new favorite tequila.

“Tequila? Really?” I mumbled to myself.

Since when did Dean drink tequila?

Not that I would know the answer to that. Dean was barely legal drinking age. It wasn’t as though Dean and I even had a chance to share a drink before fame swept him off to Los Angeles.

“Tequila, huh? I guess that’s what LA does to a guy.”

Me, I wasn’t a fan of tequila myself.

I was a simple man with simple tastes.

I liked my Budweiser with a chaser of beer nuts.

I dined on frozen pizza and Stagg Chili most nights.

And despite my best efforts to try and download Dean’s music on Spotify—which I had failed at spectacularly, accidentally erasing my Cloud account in the process, whatever the fuck that even was—I much preferred to listen to my collection of records from the seventies and eighties.

I liked to watch old detective movies starring Humphrey Bogart.

I read books nobody would have suspected, tear-jerkers by Nicholas Sparks and rags-to-riches romances by Judith Krantz and the kind of pulp-fiction paperbacks you find in the bargain bins of second-hand bookstores with their spines creased and their pages dog-eared.

Sometimes I imagined myself as the leading man in a spicy blockbuster by Jackie Collins or Nora Roberts.

Sometimes I kicked myself for being such a sappy fool and stayed up late working on the ledgers and invoices for the hardware store.

Sometimes I went to bed, wishing nothing more than to feel the warmth of someone beside me... to hear them whisper my name...

“Harry! Harry!”

What I heard was not a whisper.

As I turned onto Chestnut Drive, the voice calling to me snapped me out of my daydream.

Mrs. Dinkle had obviously spotted my truck from her front yard and was now bounding toward the curb to wave me down, her fluffy pink robe billowing and several curlers flailing about on her head.

I saw the alarm on her face and quickly pulled over and jumped out of the truck. “Mrs. Dinkle? What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

“No, it’s not.” Her voice was trembling, her legs unsteady.

I looked Mrs. Dinkle up and down to see whether she was hurt.

I glanced at the house, expecting to see smoke billowing from the windows.

I reached for the toolbox in back, ready to arm myself with a wrench and fight off any intruders that may have broken into the house.

Then, seemingly from the sky above, I heard the most forlorn— meow!

Mrs. Dinkle and I both looked up to see Binky, Mrs. Dinkle’s beloved ginger cat, dangling from a branch above our heads.

With a terrified whimper, Mrs. Dinkle clamped a knuckle between her teeth and began to cry.

“It’s okay, Binky’s gonna be just fine,” I reassured her. “I’ll save him.”

“But how?” She began to sob. “I don’t have a ladder and he’s at least six-stories high.” Binky was, in fact, no higher than the roof of a single-story house. “Binky’s gonna die!” she shrieked. “Please don’t let him die, he’s in the prime of his life!”

“Nobody’s gonna die today,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t regret what I was about to do. Stepping up to the trunk of the tree, I reached for the lower branches and hoisted myself up.

Above me, Binky howled.

Below me, Mrs. Dinkle wailed.

I grunted as I pulled myself higher up the tree, praying each branch would take my weight, edging ever closer to Binky.

“Hold on there, pal. I’m coming.”

I inched my way along the limb to which Binky was clinging. The cat seemed incapable of pulling himself to safety, instead dangling from the branch precariously, claws sliding slowly down the bark, about to fall until—

I shot my hand out.

I grabbed the scruff of his fluffy neck just as he lost his grip.

“Gotcha!”

Binky shrieked, startled and scared, but safe.

Below, Mrs. Dinkle clapped with excitement and cried with joy.

I slipped the stunned feline inside my jacket, then ever so carefully scaled my way back down the tree.

When I landed on terra firma, Mrs. Dinkle raced over and scooped the cat out of my jacket and into her arms. “Binky Dinkle, you naughty little thing, you gave Mommy the fright of her life! Oh Harry, how can I thank you?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, trying to subtly stretch out a pinched nerve or two. “I’m just glad he’s okay.”

“And I’m so glad you happened to drive past when you did. You’re a hero. So big and brave. How is it you haven’t found yourself a nice wife yet? If it wasn’t for Mr. Dinkle, I’d snap you up myself.” Her tone shifted discreetly. “He’s away on business at the moment, you know... Mr. Dinkle, that is. Would you like to come in for a drink?”

“Oh! Thank you, but I really should be going.” I took a step toward my truck.

“Are you sure? I’ve just opened a nice bottle of chardonnay. Seems a shame to drink it alone, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Thanks again, but I really have to go. You enjoy your wine.” I took two more steps toward the truck and wagged a finger playfully in Binky’s direction. “And you make sure you stay out of trouble, mister.”

Mrs. Dinkle took Binky’s paw in her hand and made him wave to me, saying in a baby voice, “I sure will, Harry. Thanks for saving my patootie!”

She kept waving the cat’s paw as I climbed into the truck and pulled away from the

curb, grinning my farewells until Binky and Mrs. Dinkle were out of sight.

As I drove past the park, I caught the scent of jasmine from the trees down by the river. I realized I hadn't had flowers in the house for years. Suddenly I was taken by the idea to buy a bouquet. After all it was kind of a special day.

I crossed Main Street Bridge then turned onto the promenade, pulling up in front of Bud's Blooms which was still open... just. Out front Bud was emptying buckets and preparing to move the outdoor displays inside for the evening. "Hey Harry, how you doing?" he said with his always-sunshiny smile.

"I'm doing okay, you?"

"I can't complain one iota. Spring is in the air, the flowers are blooming, and Pascal has promised to cook me some fancy French specialty for dinner. You ever tried something called 'escargot' before?"

"I don't think you're supposed to pronounce the 't', and no I haven't. Not sure I ever want to." A shiver ran down my spine. Like I said before, I'm a guy of simple tastes. "You do know what escargot is, don't you Bud?"

He shook his head, eyebrows arched with curiosity.

"Let me give you a hint. They come in a shell."

Bud's face lit up. "Like lobster? I love lobster. God, that Parisian pastry chef of mine sure knows how to spoil me."

The puppy-love shimmer in Bud's eyes was so sweet I didn't have the heart to tell him he was about to be served up a plate full of snails. Something told me it wouldn't matter anyway. Bud and Pascal had been together almost a year now and they still

both walked around with a honeymoon glow about them. You couldn't help but feel your heart swell at the sight of it, like a reminder that good things did happen to good people, that the world was still capable of conjuring up something hopeful and wonderful when it needed to. But by the same token, I pined for the day I might be lucky enough to experience it for myself.

"I should take some flowers over to Pascal's tonight." Bud's eyes were already dancing excitedly. "And candles. I'll take some candles in case things get romantic. And ice cream! I'll pick up a tub of Clarry's new Pink Champagne Sherbert. I can almost taste it now." He licked his lips, then his nose caught a whiff of something else entirely. Like a truffle pig he sniffed his way down his sleeve and lifted one arm. "Woof! Note to self, I probably need to take a shower too. Do I smell to you?"

I raised both hands in surrender. "Not from where I'm standing, but let's not get any closer just in case."

"Shit, I'm sorry, I haven't stopped talking since you pulled up. I'm sure you didn't come here to listen to me yammer on. So, what can I do for you, Harry? You after some flowers? You got a hot date tonight? Don't tell me, it's Madeline Montgomery, the new math teacher at the school. Apparently, she moved here for a fresh start after her divorce. She seems lovely. And smart. And very polite."

"Bud, the flowers aren't for Madeline Montgomery. I've never even met Madeline Montgomery. The flowers are for me."

"For you? "

I gave a casual, one-shouldered shrug, intent on not making a big deal of it. "Sure, why not? I need a little color in the house, something to brighten things up."

Bud smiled. "Then a bunch of flowers is exactly what you need. Why don't you head

on inside. Maggie can help you out while I keep packing things up out here.”

As I walked through the door of the flower shop, the bell dinged overhead, and Maggie looked up and beamed at the sight of me. “Harry, you great big beautiful lug! Come here and give me a hug, I wanna lick your face, you gigantic lollipop you!”

As Maggie dropped what she was doing—like, literally dropped a bunch of daisies and pruning scissors on the floor—and charged at me, I braced myself like a running back about to get pummeled, then grunted as she slammed into me, arms around me in a death squeeze and tongue lapping at the air, trying hard to reach my face.

I craned my neck, head high as I laughed awkwardly. “Great to see you too, Maggie. Although I’m not really a lollipop. Now if you wouldn’t mind just... letting go of me... I think you’re about to crush one of my ribs... my God, you’re like an octopus.”

Maggie loosened her grip, and I managed to shake her off. “Sorry, I guess my sugar levels are low. I get a little light-headed and hangry if I don’t have one of Pascal’s chocolate croissants every hour... on the hour... along with a couple of strawberry macarons... and a custard éclair... and to make sure nothing gets stuck in my teeth it only makes sense to wash it all down with one of Clarry’s Creamy Cookie Malty Milkshakes.” Thunder rumbled. I looked to the windows and saw nothing but a clear sunset outside, then realized it wasn’t thunder at all but Maggie’s stomach. She gave an I told you so nod. “Like I said... low sugar levels. Dangerously low.”

I reached into my pocket. “I have some gum if that’ll help.”

Maggie huffed dejectedly. “Thanks, but what’s the point of chewing something you can’t swallow. If you ask me, gum is the cruelest joke of all. Worse than the one about the priest, the pastor, and the rabbit who walked into a bar.”

I felt sorry for her—slumped over and tummy rumbling—and took the bait. “So, what happened to the priest, the pastor, and the rabbit who walked into a bar?”

“The bartender asked the rabbit what he wanted to drink, but all the rabbit could do was shrug and say, ‘I don’t even know what I’m doing here. Blame auto correct.’”

I snorted a laugh. “That’s kinda funny.”

“I don’t get it at all. And what if the rabbit really needed a drink? If you ask me, it’s just ducking cruel.”

“I guess you don’t want any gum then.”

“No thanks. Besides, it gives me gas. It don’t matter how many pretty-smelling flowers are in this room with us. If Mount Maggie blows, she leaves no survivors.”

I blinked back this information. “Right. Well. Speaking of flowers, I was hoping to buy a bunch from you. Something nice and colorful to brighten up my place.”

Maggie gasped. “Oh my God! You’ve got a date. Is it Madeline Montgomery, the new history teacher at the school?”

“I thought she taught math.”

“So you are interested in her!”

“No, I’m not. I haven’t even met her.”

“You should. She seems lovely. And smart. And kinda hot! Oh yeah, she could help me out with my alge- bra any day.”

“Oh God! No! Maggie, the flowers aren’t for Madeline Montgomery. They’re for me.”

“For you? ”

I gave another casual, one-shouldered shrug, again intent on not making a big deal of it. “Sure. I was thinking something like...” I pointed randomly. “Those, over there.”

“Oh, you mean the, um, daffodillolilies. Yes. Nice choice.”

I gave her a quizzical look. “Daffodillo-what?”

“Daffodillolilies. I believe that’s their Latin name.”

“Really?”

“Are you questioning my expertise in plantology?”

“I don’t think ‘plantology’ is a word.”

“Says the guy who thinks the rabbit joke is funny.”

“What about those over there?”

“Ah, the chrysanthemummies. One of our biggest sellers. Believe it or not, they’ll stay in full bloom all the way through to next winter... and maybe even the next... and the next.”

“Seriously? A bunch of flowers can actually last that long?”

Maggie scoffed a laugh. “Well, obviously you need to put them in water first.”

“What about those?” I pointed to an especially beautiful bunch of yellow flowers. They reminded me of sunny days. They reminded me of warm spring nights. They reminded me of the color of his hair when he turned in a particular light, not that he even knew I was looking. “I’ll take those. They’re perfect!”

“Ah, the marigolden-girls. Beautiful this time of year, and perfect for those heading into the twilight of their life.”

I was about to pluck a bunch out of the bucket when Maggie’s words pretty much jarred my back. I pinched the base of my spine, straightened up and asked, “What do you mean, ‘the twilight of my life?’ Are you saying I’m getting old?”

Maggie blushed, embarrassed that she’d embarrassed me. “No, no, no! I didn’t mean you, you big old bear.”

“You literally just used the word ‘old.’”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes, Maggie. You just called me a ‘big old bear.’ You honestly think I’m old?”

“No! You look great for fifty.”

“I’m thirty-nine.” I checked my watch. “Still.”

“That’s what I said. You look great for thirty-nine... still. Now, what about those marigolden-girls, huh?”

While Maggie wrapped the flowers, I noticed the stand of greeting cards on the counter. My eyes lit up when I saw one with an illustration of a guitar on the front of it. I picked it out and saw the inside was a blank canvas. “I think I’ll take this card

too, Maggie.”

“A card?” She eyed me suspiciously. “Are you sure these flowers aren’t for Madeline Montgomery?”

“I assure you, the flowers are not for Madeline.”

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After I left Bud’s Blooms with my bunch of marigolden-girls in hand, I decided I might need more cheering up than I first expected on such a day. The irresistible aromas wafting over from Pascal’s Patisserie called to me.

“Ah, Harry! Bonjour! What can I get for you on this fine spring afternoon?” Pascal had changed since settling into Mulligan’s Mill. He was no longer the cynical, stubborn sourpuss he was when he first arrived. It seemed that Bud’s rays of sunshine had succeeded in melting the ice around Pascal’s heart. You could practically smell the love in his shop... or maybe it was all those mouth-watering tarts and cakes or even the range of savory pies he had started baking that had the whole town talking.

I was standing at the cake display, eyeing all the petite pastries and tantalizing French tarts indecisively. “It all looks so delicious, I’m not sure what I want.”

“Let me help. What are you in the mood for?”

“Something small, I guess. Just enough for one.”

“Feel like treating yourself, oui? Why not? We all deserve a sweet reward every now and then.”

“Actually, today is...” I thought twice about mentioning what today was.

Pascal looked at me quizzically. "Today is what?"

I gave an easy-going, one-shouldered shrug. "Today is a good day for one of your delicious pastries."

Pascal beamed. "I couldn't agree more. Why don't you try a mille - feuille ? The crème patissiere is so light it could float on air, the puff pastry is so delicate it will crumble and melt in your mouth, and I think you'll find it's just right for one. Nobody wants to share a mille - feuille... something I constantly have to tell Bud. He always wants a little bite of mine... then another... then another... and before long, it's all gone. Never mind, I still love him."

"It's kind of a nice problem to have," I said. "Having someone you love eat all your dessert."

Pascal smiled sweetly. "I suppose it is."

"Bud tells me you two have a romantic dinner lined up for tonight, although I'm pretty certain he has no idea what escargot is."

Pascal chuckled. "I'm sure his beautiful brown eyes will pop right out of that handsome head of his the moment I serve them up. But as soon as I tell him they're an aphrodisiac, he'll be licking his plate clean in no time."

"I didn't know escargot was some sort of love potion."

Pascal shooed the idea away like a fly. "Oh please, they're snails. Of course they're not. But Bud doesn't need to know that. Now," he said, pulling a tray of mille - feuille from the display cabinet. "Are you intending to have your pastry here, or would you like it to -go?"

“I think I’ll save it for later tonight.”

“To -go it is.”

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At home I kicked off my boots, put the flowers in a vase and set it in the middle of the dining table. I put the pastry in the fridge, then rummaged through the kitchen drawer for a lighter and a small tea light before placing them on the counter for later.

I showered, washing the day off my large hairy body.

I lathered up the soap, the one with the sandalwood scent, not too strong, just enough to make a big old bear feel fresh, clean, all scrubbed up. I even shampooed my beard. I wasn't sure why, it's not like there was anyone at Andy's poker nights I wanted to impress... at least not yet.

"Tomorrow," I thought aloud. "Don't make a big deal about tomorrow. Don't even mention it. Act like you don't even know what's happening."

Unfortunately, my dick didn't get that memo.

Just the thought of him returning home made my thick cock twitch and swell, the soapy water trickling over its vein-strapped girth.

"Oh no you don't!"

I shut off the shower.

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it tight around me.

I dried myself and slid on my tightest jockey shorts, a pair that would keep my dick snug and tight and hopefully in its place. Hell, I was supposed to be too anxious to

feel horny. I couldn't afford to let my raging hormone levels take over now.

I needed to calm myself down.

I needed to take a breath.

After all, it was just another Friday night of poker with the guys... the guys being Andy, of course, as well as Norm who started making and selling furniture crafted out of recycled wood after his wife died, and Trucker Ted who often took on long-haul runs interstate when Bo Harlow was out of town on another job.

None of them would ever remember what today was, they never did.

And Norm and Ted would barely acknowledge what was about to happen tomorrow. Andy, on the other hand, would undoubtedly be thrilled that his son Dean was returning home for a visit. How short or long that visit was supposed to be, nobody really knew. Dean had simply told his dad, "I just need a break from LA for a while, that's all."

A while.

That meant the chances of bumping into Dean while he was in town were pretty high.

Would he say hi if he saw me on the street?

Would he even remember who I was?

I mean, Dean Reeves was a hotshot rock star in LA now. Hell, his picture was no doubt tacked to the bedroom wall of every teenage girl the world over. The odds of him remembering one of his dad's old friends were slim to none.

Yep, Dean had probably forgotten who I was completely.

No matter. Just spotting Dean in the street—with that scruffy blond head of hair and that perfectly happy smile—would be enough to warm my heart, whether he recognized me or not. Like I said before, I was a simple man. I didn't ask for much in life. Just the sight of him would fill my cup until the next time he came to visit.

As I pulled on my jeans, the mere thought of Dean made my stomach flutter and my cock stiffen once more. “Jesus,” I breathed in annoyance, zipping that beast away. “Settle the fuck down, would you?”

I put on a flannel shirt, I lined my wallet with cash for the game, I grabbed a six-pack from the fridge, then I flicked off the house lights and turned the porch lights on as I left the house.

I always walked to Andy's for Friday night poker, knowing I'd have more than a few beers under my belt by the time I returned. The stars were beginning to appear in the darkening blue of the sky and the breeze was still warm, adrift with the smell of backyard barbecues as the people of Mulligan's Mill embraced the approach of summer.

There was laughter in the air.

Crickets chirped merrily.

And in my pocket, my phone buzzed.

I pulled it out and saw the name on the screen. “Andy, my friend. I hope you're ready to get your ass kicked tonight... again.”

“Again? What are you talking about? You're the one who still doesn't know a

straight from a pair, even after twenty years of this shit. I'm beginning to think you only come for the beers and snacks. Ooh, speaking of snacks, the reason for my call... would you mind swinging by Old Man Raven's and picking up a few things?"

"Don't tell me, you forgot to get snacks."

"It's not my fault. I was busy at the liquor store looking for some damn fancy tequila for Dean when he arrives tomorrow. Do you have any idea how many fancy tequilas there are out there? Tequila ain't just something you drink in a dive bar in Tijuana anymore. Oh no. There's one hundred percent blue agave tequila, the gold bottle tequila, oh and let's not forget the tequila that's slow cooked in clay ovens built by the Aztecs. For Pete's sake, it's tequila , not baby back ribs. Hell, even George Clooney has his own line of tequila."

"Did you find the one Dean likes?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. I grabbed a bottle that cost more than my first car but less than my second."

"That ain't saying much, Andy."

"All's I'm saying is, the tequila I got him was expensive enough. I figure that oughta do. Besides, he's twenty-one, what would he know about tequila anyway?"

"I dunno, but he's been hanging out with all those celebrities on the West Coast for over a year now."

"So?"

"So, all's I'm saying is, Dean's all grown up now. He might know a lot of things we don't."

“Jesus, Harry! Don’t say that, you’re making me feel old.”

I laughed. “That’s because we are old, Andy.”

“No we’re not. We’re still in our thirties. We still know how to have fun, don’t we?”

I didn’t have the heart to tell my best friend he’d forgotten my birthday yet again, as I knew he would. I checked my watch. Mom had told me I was born just before six in the evening, at a time when the moon and sun were both in the sky, one handing their job over to the other. She said that’s where I got my work ethic from, two heavenly bodies who kept going all day and all night.

It was well past six now.

Nope, I wasn’t in my thirties anymore.

I didn’t have the heart to tell Andy that for me, the clock had just ticked over into my forties, not to mention that our idea of “fun” was playing poker once a week... and had been for as long as we both could remember. Not that I had anything to complain about. That was about as much fun as I needed—hanging with my best friend, playing terrible poker, losing a few bucks, and sinking a few beers.

“Yes, Andy. We still know how to have fun,” I told him. “Now how many bags of pretzels do we need?”

“Two. No, three. And some beer nuts. And microwave popcorn. But maybe give the beef jerky a miss this time round.”

“But you love beef jerky. I love beef jerky.”

“Yeah, I know. But it doesn’t seem like the kinda thing a gentleman should eat in

front of a lady.”

I stopped in my tracks. “What do you mean, ‘in front of a lady’? Did you invite Maggie to poker night again, because the last time you did that she ended up with half the deck up her sleeves and three aces down her pants.”

“No, it’s not Maggie I invited.”

“Who is it then?”

\* \* \*

“Harry Dalton, please meet Madeline Montgomery. Madeline, this is Harry.”

I stood wide-eyed in the doorway, surprised and somewhat confused that Andy would invite someone none of us knew to poker night. “Oh. Hello. I’m—”

“Harry, yes I know,” Madeline half -laughed. “Andy just introduced us, remember?” Even though it was little more than a chuckle, I could tell she had one of those infectious laughs that could make everyone in the room smile... which is what I did.

She was standing in the hallway just inside the door, a bottle of beer in hand. She was perhaps in her mid-thirties, her brown, shoulder-length hair tied back in a ponytail and wearing a floral print dress that seemed at odds with the beer bottle. But as I would soon learn, defying expectations was one of Madeline Montgomery’s more appealing traits. She was undeniably attractive, but not in a conventional way. It was something about the playful light in her eyes, the casual confidence she gave off, that weird feeling you get when you just know you’re going to get along with someone, almost like you’ve known each other all your lives, or perhaps even in a past one. And there was that laugh... yes that laugh that came again when I stood there in silence, staring at her.

“Hello? Harry? Earth to Harry?” She grinned. She waved a hand in front of my eyes. “Is there anybody in there?”

“Um, yes. Hi. Hello.”

“We covered that already.” She held out her free hand for me to shake. “And it’s nice to meet you. You own the hardware store, right?”

“That’s right.” I juggled the six-pack and the bag of snacks from the general store in one hand. Her palm was cool and soft. “And you’re the new... math teacher?” I was trying to recall my conversation with Maggie, but conversations with Maggie always turn pretty fuzzy in my head.

“That’s correct,” she said. “A-plus for you.”

I beamed like a schoolboy at her approval, then felt kinda stupid.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Andy said. “We’ve got a poker game to start.”

The screened-in porch at the back of the house doubled as Andy’s poker room in spring and summer, while in autumn and winter he moved the game to his dining room. The porch had everything we needed to get us through a night of card -playing: a fridge in the corner for the beer, a microwave for heating up popcorn, a TV on the wall for whichever Friday night game was playing at the time, and an old stereo that was currently belting out Eric Carmen’s “ All By Myself .” Andy loved a seventies power ballad. Who didn’t? Oh, and let’s not forget the ice chest beside the fridge that was topped up for whiskey on the rocks later in the night... or earlier, depending on who was having the worst losing streak. Trucker Ted always seemed to be first to break open the whiskey.

Ted was the one whose place at the table Madeline had taken that night.

Andy explained that Ted had been called out on the road, covering a haul while Bo Harlow was busy doing a run from Minneapolis to Albuquerque. While filling up on gas, Andy had bumped into Madeline. They introduced themselves, got to talking about weekend plans... Andy mentioned Dean's arrival on Saturday, and of course his Friday night poker game. According to the story, Madeline's face lit up—evidently she loved poker—Andy told her they were one player down that Friday, and before they knew it, Madeline was invited to the game.

“You take Ted's seat,” Andy said to Madeline, pointing to the chair next to mine.

Madeline looked from the chair to me and smiled. “Don't mind if I do.”

\* \* \*

On poker nights, we each had our seat.

I always sat with my back to the main part of the house, looking out the back-porch screen to Andy's backyard, as well as the shed at the end of the drive that Dean had converted into his own live-in music studio when he left school at eighteen. He had his own bedroom set up in that space, as well as some recording equipment and a small kitchenette and bathroom that made the shed completely self-contained.

Between the ages of eighteen and nineteen -and -a -half—when one of his YouTube recordings was discovered by a big entertainment label in LA—Dean would spend days, sometimes weeks in his studio, writing and recording music, stepping out into the real world only when he needed food supplies or to clear the jumble of musical notes and lyrics in his brain. That shed became his retreat, his haven, his creative sanctuary. He was Aladdin, and that shed was his Cave of Wonders where he conjured up treasure after treasure.

It was shortly after his eighteenth birthday when my view of Dean changed.

Completely.

He had always been a good kid, the creative if not somewhat reclusive son of my best friend. He always did what his dad asked, he was a good student and never got himself into trouble. He seemed to be liked well enough by the other kids at school, but he never really seemed to hang out with any friends. His guitar, his songs, his music, they were his best buddies. They were the company he preferred to keep. It was evident, even as a teenager, that they were his life.

But then one summer night after his eighteenth birthday, while sitting there playing poker with the boys, I looked up to see Dean step out of his shed to get some air and gather his thoughts.

His guitar was slung over his shoulder and suddenly I noticed his back had broadened.

He was wearing a tight-fitting T-shirt, one that hugged his firm young biceps, and as he plucked quietly at his guitar strings trying to find the right chord, I watched his youthful muscles flex.

His shorts were tighter, as though his thighs were growing out of them.

He seemed taller, his torso toned, his once pimply jaw now strong, square, and in need of a shave.

The quiet, gangly kid was gone, and in his place stood a young man who—with every twang and strum of his guitar—suddenly tugged relentlessly at the heartstrings inside me.

Every Friday night from then on until the day LA whisked him away, I would play poker with one eye on my cards and one eye on that shed, hoping he'd step outside

with his guitar, even if only for the briefest moment, so I could get a glimpse of him in the hope it would get me through another week.

It wasn't long before I figured out a guaranteed way of not only catching sight of him, but actually talking to him, face to face.

There were two bathrooms at Andy's: one was inside the house, the other was inside Dean's shed.

One night we paused the game so that Norm could go relieve himself. It was a well-known fact that Norm's trips to the bathroom were no short affair, given his age and the time it took him to shake it all out.

"Actually, I gotta go as well," I said one night, polishing off my fourth bottle as if to hammer home the message. "Do you think Dean would mind if I used his?"

"Go for it," Andy said. "He might think it's his shed, but I own it. He ain't paid a dime in rent since he set himself up in there. Not that I've ever asked. I know someday he'll be a famous rock star with a mansion and a gold fountain out front. Then he can pay for anything his old man wants. Till then, if you gotta pee, be my guest."

"You sure he won't mind?"

"Go. He's probably got a set of headphones on. He won't even hear you come in."

My heart was racing as I walked across the back yard, illuminated only by the squares of light that fell on the ground from the windows of the shed.

I got to the door and knocked.

There was no answer.

I knocked again, still no response.

Warily I opened the door a few inches.

I peered inside and my galloping heart tripped over itself when I saw Dean sitting on his bed strumming his guitar. His headphones were draped over the plume of messy blond hair, just as Andy suspected, a cord running from the headset to the base of his guitar. His head was bobbing up and down with the occasional lyric slipping out through his lips, his foot tapping, but my brain barely processed anything but the fact that he was shirtless.

I shut the door quickly.

Probably a little too forcefully.

I knew Dean had to have heard that and realized I was going to have to re-open the door if I didn't want to look like a complete weirdo. This I did with an awkward grin, looking in to see the then eighteen-year-old sitting on his bed, headphones now around his neck, looking straight in my direction.

"Harry," he said, a faint smile crossing his face. "Everything okay?"

"I knocked. I opened the door, but I guess the wind caught it. I... I was hoping I could use your bathroom. Norm beat me to the one in the house."

"Sure. Of course. Yes." He seemed overly obliging, laying the guitar on the bed beside him and jumping to his feet. "It's right through here." He pointed. "Excuse the mess, I just had a shower."

Dean.

In the shower.

I had to gulp hard to keep my heart from rising in my chest.

I also had to hurry to the bathroom to try and crush down the rising bulge in my crotch, which made my supposed urgency to use the toilet look all the more authentic.

“I won’t be long,” I said, and ran into the small bathroom, closing the door behind me.

I went to the mirror over the sink and stared at my reflection.

I ran the water, to make it sound like something was happening in there, and eyed myself sternly.

“Keep it cool, Harry. Don’t get all wacko now. It’s just Dean. You’ve known the kid all your life.”

Except he wasn’t a kid anymore.

No sir.

When he stood from the bed, I couldn’t take my eyes off his lean shirtless body, his young abs taut, his pecs formed into firm young mounds, that happy trail of blond hair running from his belly button and disappearing under his gray trackpants. Speaking of which, was that a—

“Bulge? No, Harry, there was no bulge in Dean’s trackpants,” I sternly told my reflection. “Just. Keep. It. Cool!”

There came a knock at the bathroom door. “Harry? Everything okay? Are you talking to yourself in there?”

“Me? No. I’m fine.”

I flushed the toilet.

I turned off the running water.

I opened the door to see Dean standing there, smiling at me. “Say, do you think I could play you a couple of lyrics and get your thoughts? I’m kinda stuck on something.”

“Me? You want my thoughts? Oh, I don’t know anything about music.”

“You don’t have to. That’s the great thing about music. You don’t have to know why you like something, you just have to feel it inside.” He tapped his long, thin fingers to the middle of his bare chest.

“Oh no. I should go. We’re in the middle of a hand. The guys are waiting for me.”

“It’ll only take a minute.” He tilted his head to one side, his hair flopping before he pushed it off his forehead with one hand. “Please? Come sit on the bed with me for a second.”

The only reason I sat was to help cover up the bulge in my crotch that had once again decided to rear its head. “Sure, let’s hear it.”

He plonked himself excitedly on the bed and tried to brush the creases out of the sheets before patting his hand on the mattress, telling me to sit next to him.

He sat his guitar in his lap and strummed it. “This is the chord progression so far.”

“What’s a chord progression?”

He smiled, as though he appreciated me asking an honest question, as though he was happy to enlighten me. “A chord progression is basically the tune of the song. It’s the structure that holds it together.” He strummed, and sang “bah, bah, bah,” along with the chords.

“I like it. Sounds catchy.”

“Thanks, but those aren’t the lyrics. And there won’t be any lyrics if I can’t get the words of the chorus right. That’s where I need your help. It’s a song about not being able to have the one thing you want... about loving the one thing you’ll never have.”

My pulse was pounding in my throat. “Sounds kinda... sad.”

“It is, I guess. But it’s full of hope too. Can I sing you what I’ve got so far?”

I shrugged—“Sure”—and my large left bicep brushed against his bare arm.

He was sitting closer than I realized.

We both gulped, our throats clacking.

He covered it up by launching himself into his song.

His voice was strong and clear, yet there was a tenderness, a vulnerability, a longing in his tone that sent a ripple up and down my body.

He closed his eyes, and I watched him, mesmerized, as he sang—

You're a secret on the wind

You're a stolen work of art

You're the one I've always wanted

You're the... something ... of my heart

He stopped the guitar mid-chord. He rubbed the knuckles of one hand against his forehead. "It's that last lyric, that one word I can't get. You're the what of my heart?"

He looked at me, his blue eyes practically pleading for an answer from me.

"What are you trying to say?" I asked, determined to keep my voice steady, my words calm and collected.

"I want to say you're the one who owns my heart, you control its very beat, you always have," he said, blinking anxiously but nonetheless holding my gaze. "It needs to be a metaphor for something strong, something that represents the power you hold over me, but also speaks to the very heartbeat that keeps me alive... that keeps our love alive." He paused a moment then blushed and quickly added, "I'm not talking about you, of course. I'm talking about whoever the subject of the song might be."

"Of course. And who's that?" I asked before I could stop myself.

He took a tremulous breath. "Whoever the listener needs it to be. That's what songs are all about."

I felt the blood burning in my veins, I felt the anxious turning of my stomach, I felt the booming of my heart like a hammer striking steel.

“Hammer,” I said with so much self-assurance, there could be no other word to fit the lyric. “You’re the hammer of my heart.”

Dean inhaled sharply.

He blinked quickly, and I could almost see the lyrics flashing before his bright, brilliant eyes.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Then, without a word of warning, he clasped my bearded face in his hands and planted a kiss on my lips.

It lasted all of two seconds before we both pulled away.

I looked at him.

He looked at me.

Then suddenly he bounced off the bed and scrambled for a pen, flicking through the sheets of music he’d scrawled on and scattered across his nearby desk. “That’s it. That’s it! Harry, you’re a genius!”

I didn’t know what to say, how to react, other than to mutter, “I’d better get back to that poker game now.”

I stood, leaving Dean to scribble down his music and lyrics.

Eighteen months later, the song “ Hammer of my Heart ” went to number one on the charts.

\* \* \*

“Harry? Earth to Harry! Are you alright? You don’t have narcolepsy or anything, do you?”

The voice came from Madeline as she sat beside me at the poker table, shaking my forearm.

“Huh? Sorry. No, I don’t have narcolepsy.” I pulled myself away from my memories of that night with Dean and focused on the cards spread in my hand. “It’s my turn, right?”

“We’re waiting,” said Norm, drumming his fingers on the table. “Jesus, Harry. Sometimes you take longer to play your hand than I take to do a piss.” He turned to Madeline, having forgotten there was a lady at the table. “Excuse my French.”

“I don’t think ‘piss’ is French,” Madeline smirked. “And please don’t worry about offending me. It takes a lot to ruffle my feathers.” She turned to me. “And now that you seem to have landed safely from whatever planet you were on, shall we return to our game of poker?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” I blinked at my hand, trying to figure out what the hell I was going to do with my cards, not that I really cared anymore.

I shuffled and reshuffled the hand I’d been dealt.

I squinted, deep in thought.

I arched one eyebrow.

Andy frowned at me. “Jesus, Harry. Not only has your poker face not improved after

all these years, it's actually gotten worse."

Madeline chuckled. "Now, now, Andy. I think it's a cute face. If not a little clueless."

I glared at her, pretending to be insulted. "You think I'm clueless?"

She gulped down her beer then said, "Oh Harry, I'm a math teacher. Poker's my jam... and I'm about to wipe the floor with you, doll."

\* \* \*

Madeline did in fact wipe the floor with me that night. In fact, she used Andy and Norm to mop up the rest of the cash too, taking all the winnings for herself.

On the way out the door, Norm muttered to Andy, "We're never inviting her again."

Madeline laughed good-naturedly and shouted after him from the doorway, "Hey, I heard that, Norm."

Norm had already disappeared into the dark, grumbling to himself.

Under Andy's porchlight, Madeline thumbed left like a hitchhiker. "Well, I'm this way."

"So am I," I said. "I'll walk you."

She gasped playfully. "Such a gentleman. So, chivalry isn't dead after all."

"Of course I'm a gentleman. And I'd do anything for my friends." With a jerk of my head I gestured to Andy, who was swaying in the hallway, barely able to keep his eyes open. "Although I draw the line at putting this one to bed when he's had one too

many whiskeys. Pulling his boots off requires a gas mask. You have been warned.”

“Warning heeded. Thank you.” Madeline turned to Andy. “Are you sure you’re okay to get yourself upstairs to bed?”

Andy’s head wobbled on his neck, brow furrowed, words slurring—“Upstairs? You wanna go upstairs with me? But I invited you here to meet Harry. He’s the one whose mattress needs a good workout, if you know what I mean.”

Madeline raised both eyebrows and couldn’t help but giggle.

I blushed instantly.

Andy swung an unsteady arm around my neck, almost hitting me in the face accidentally. “Ain’t he just the most adorable fuzzy bear you’ve ever seen. And single too. What a catch, huh?” He gave Madeline a wink so sloppy it looked as though he was in the middle of a medical emergency.

Swiftly I pulled his arm off me. “Okey-dokey then, I think someone’s had enough truth juice for one night. You got a big day tomorrow, buddy. Dean’s coming home. Now why don’t I just pop you downstairs on the sofa and you can get a good night’s rest down here.”

I guided him toward the living room, but he was pitching like a ship in a storm and Madeline grabbed the other side. Together we steered him into the living room, plopping him down on the sofa where he sank onto his side, snoring before his head even hit the cushion.

I lifted his legs up, but I decided to spare Madeline the trauma of removing his boots.

“Will he be okay?” she asked.

“He’ll be fine. He’s not usually this drunk, the booze just seemed to go straight to his head tonight.”

“I guess he’s overly excited about Dean coming home.”

I wanted to comment that he wasn’t the only one, but instead I said, “Just for the record, my mattress doesn’t need a workout, but I’m still happy to walk you home.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate that.”

We locked Andy safely inside his house and set off along the quiet streets of Mulligan’s Mill, the night still warm and the gravel crunching beneath our feet.

“So, evidently you’re the reason there was no beef jerky tonight,” I said out of the blue.

“What? Wait... I am? How? Why?”

I shrugged and smiled. I couldn’t tell if she was mocking me or genuinely outraged. “Andy told me not to get any jerky. I think he probably thought it’s not something you eat in front of a lady.”

“What? That’s crazy. I love beef jerky.”

“Me too. Apparently, Andy thought you’d be offended.”

“I work in a classroom. You teach kids for long enough, nothing offends you anymore. Wait till he gets to know me better.” Her voice took on a teasing, sing-song lilt. “Which is obviously something he wants us to do.”

“Oh no, please don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Please let’s not try to unpack Andy’s attempt to play Cupid. I have no idea what that was all about. I’m sorry, I’m so embarrassed. He’s never tried to do that before.”

“Do what?”

“Oh, now you’re just toying with me.”

She laughed. “Maybe a little. But you have to admit, it’s very sweet of him to do that.”

“To try and set us up?”

“No, I mean, to look out for his best friend like that. He obviously just wants you to be happy.”

“I am happy. He doesn’t have to try and set me up on a date with a beautiful woman to make me happy.”

Without even looking at her I could hear the smile in her voice. “You think I’m a beautiful woman?”

“Well... yes. But...”

“But not in a ‘please come give my mattress a workout’ kinda way.”

“Oh God, can we please stop talking about mattresses.”

She laughed again. That melodious, infectious laugh of hers. “What have you got against mattresses? Don’t you like your mattress? Is it too flabby, is that why it needs

a workout?”

“Stop,” I grinned.

“Maybe it’s too squeaky. Like every time you sit on it all you hear is eeky - eeky - eek .”

“Stop!” I laughed too now.

She stopped walking. She stopped laughing. “Or maybe it’s too empty. Maybe it’s too big for one. Perhaps that’s the problem.”

Maybe she was right.

I stopped walking too.

I didn’t say anything.

She pointed to the house we’d arrived at, a small cottage with a light on in the window, illuminating a row of flowerpots sitting on the windowsill. “This is me. I’d invite you in for a drink, but I think cleaning up at the poker table and being called a ‘beautiful woman’ is enough of a win for one night... especially coming from an ‘adorable fuzzy bear’ like you.”

She pulled out her keys and walked to her door, unlocking it and calling back over her shoulder, “It was nice to meet you, Harry Dalton. I’ll see you around.”

She closed the door behind her and the light in the window went out.

\* \* \*

As soon as I got home, I switched on the light above the dining table and wrote inside the card, the one with the illustration of a guitar on the front of it. I tucked the card into the bouquet of flowers sitting in the vase, then went to the closet under the stairs.

I opened the closet door, reached inside, and pulled out my hidden treasure—

An old second-hand guitar I picked up at a yard sale in Eau Claire just after Dean left town.

In the time he'd been gone, I'd taught myself to play, googling lessons online and watching tutorials on YouTube.

I learned songs.

I learned his songs.

I printed the sheet music off the internet.

I played them to myself some nights, although I wasn't very good at it. I never really intended to be good at it, nor did I want anybody in Mulligan's Mill knowing that I could play. I didn't teach myself the guitar so I could pull it out at parties or entertain friends around a campfire. I had no intention of ever playing to a crowd. That wasn't the reason I'd bought the guitar in the first place.

No, I'd bought the guitar to somehow feel closer to the one person who could never know my true feelings for him.

I bought it to feel some sort of connection, despite the fact that he lived on the other side of the country.

I learned how to play just so I could close my eyes and cradle that guitar to my chest,

holding it like a lover, wishing he was there with me, singing his lyrics softly into his ear.

You're a secret on the wind

You're a stolen work of art

You're the one I've always wanted

You're the hammer of my heart

I played the song now, the tempo much slower than his original hit, the chords a simple strum on my guitar, just like the first time he played me the progression in his room that night.

When the song ended, I pressed the guitar close to my chest for a long while.

Eventually I stood it on the floor, resting against the table.

I got up, then returned to the table with the lighter and tea light and the French pastry from the fridge.

I lit the candle and murmured to myself, "Happy fortieth birthday, Harry."

I blew out the candle, and through the tendrils of smoke I reached for the card resting amongst the flowers in the middle of the table.

I opened it and read my own handwriting aloud. "To my darling Harry, my secret, my stolen work of art, my hammer... Happy Birthday. I will love you always. Dean."

I sighed then muttered to myself, "If only."

I closed the card and slipped it through the strings of my guitar, then returned the guitar to the closet under the stairs and a defeated laugh escaped me. “For fuck’s sake, Harry, he won’t even remember who the fuck you are.”

I didn’t eat the pastry.

I put it back in the fridge and went to bed.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

“Who the fuck is Harry?”

The question came from my manager, Astrid, who was standing on the other side of the fitting-room door.

“What?” I felt panic tighten around my throat. “Why the hell are you asking me that?”

“Because there’s an unsent message on your phone from last night. It’s from you, wishing someone named Harry a Happy Birthday and if I’m honest, it’s kind of gushy... and emotional... and hot! Who is this Harry?”

I threw myself out of the fitting room, lunging for the phone in her hand. Unfortunately, I was only half -dressed, the bright red leather pants Astrid wanted me to wear for the shoot only halfway up my legs. Before I knew it, I came crashing out of the fitting room and teetering across my dressing-room floor, trying desperately to snatch my phone from Astrid’s clutches and failing spectacularly.

“Can you please gimme that!” I shrieked before—“ Oomph! ” I hit the dressing-room floor, shirtless, ass up, red leather pants slipping down around my ankles.

The second she heard me hit the floor, the freelance wardrobe assistant hired by Constellation Records for today’s shoot rushed toward me, giggling, her phone already out. Apparently, she was all too willing to throw her burgeoning career away for the chance to make her social media dreams come true by videoing me at my most

awkward and vulnerable, before—

“Put that fucking phone down right now!” Somehow Astrid’s British accent and perfect pronunciation made her even more terrifying when she was mad. “Take one single second of footage of Dean Reeves in his jocks and I promise you’ll spend the rest of your fucking career washing the cum stains of sixty-year-old rock stars out of the sheets in the laundry room of the Beverly Hills Hotel. You wanna be famous? I’ve got news for you, sweetheart. It takes talent, not a phone. Now get the fuck out of here... you’re fired!”

With a clatter of her stiletto heels, the stunned and teary wardrobe assistant fled like a whimpering baby hyena about to be pounced upon and ripped to shreds by a protective lioness.

I rolled over onto my back on the floor, the leather pants still twisted around my ankles as I sighed with relief. “Thank you.”

Astrid smiled. “My absolute pleasure, darling. Now hold still, you look fucking adorbs.” With my phone still in hand she took a snap of me.

“Astrid! You just fired someone for trying to do that!”

“Yes, but this photo’s on your phone, not on some random assistant’s devilish device, so you can do with it what you will. Maybe you’ll decide to share it with this Harry chap, because that birthday message you never sent was rather steamy.” Suddenly a thought dawned on her. “Oh shit, it’s not Harry Styles, is it? Have you secretly been dating Harry Styles and didn’t tell me?! Oh. My. Fucking—”

“It’s not Harry Styles!” I thrashed my legs, furiously trying to get the pants off. “Oh my God, who was the masochist that designed leather pants! For the love of God, someone get these pants off me!”

“Dean, calm down, darling!” Astrid set my phone aside, brushed back her fiery red hair, hitched up her skirt, and knelt beside me. “Now, do you want the pants up... or down? I can get them off you if you want, but please keep in mind we have an award-winning photographer in the next room who’s keen to take a snap of you in these red leather pants for the cover of Rolling Stone . So the choice is yours. Pants come down and we call the whole shoot off... pants go up and you sell a million more downloads on Spotify. It’s up to you. Oh, and a friendly reminder, the magazine has had their entire print -run in a holding pattern for a week waiting for your schedule to sync up with the photographer’s. Keep in mind this month’s issue comes out next week. No pressure.” She leaned down and pecked me on the forehead with a kiss that was at once caring and patronizing. “So, my darling, what’ll it be?”

Astrid Aldridge was the toughest, sexiest, most ambitious talent agent in the Los Angeles music industry. A bloodthirsty early-thirty-something from Shoreditch, London, Astrid had moved to the West Coast three years earlier, bringing with her an ear for the freshest new music and an eye for the next big thing. Astrid was the one who found me on the internet, that stupid nineteen-year-old kid singing his original tracks on his own private YouTube channel, hungry to be heard, just like the billion other kids posting their songs on social media. Except when Astrid sniffed me out like a bloodhound on my trail, she was ready to push aside every other dreamer with a guitar to bet the whole farm on me.

Me .

She was the one who snatched me from Mulligan’s Mill within three days of me posting my video of “ Hammer of my Heart ” online, swooping in with a bottle of champagne, a one-way ticket to LA, and a contract with Constellation Records, the music subsidiary of Constellation Media, the fastest-growing entertainment distributor in the world.

With her bombshell looks, business savvy, and the fearsomeness of an entire Spartan

army, Astrid took me in her arms and parted the seas of the recording industry so effortlessly that, well, I couldn't help but fall in love with her.

And she fell in love with me too.

How much? I'll never really know.

But when she was ready for a fresh young shooting star to launch her career into the stratosphere, I was happy to be her comet.

She was not only my manager; she was my adviser, my stylist, my legal counsel, my sounding board, my emotional anchor, my mentor in a world I knew nothing about. She chose which clothes I wore, which parties to attend, which haircut would spark a new trend in Hollywood, which salads to order off the menu, which lunch meetings to say yes to, which conversations to walk away from, which people to trust and who was sure to kill my career, even if only by mere association.

"It doesn't matter if you like them," she would tell me. "It doesn't matter if you think the bloody sun shines out of their arse. If I tell you to avoid them, it means their star is about to come crashing down. The last thing you want is to be dragged down with them. In this game, comebacks take a long time and a lot of hard work. People will sooner move on to the next big thing than give you another chance."

Sometimes the pressure became all too much.

There were nights when I found myself on the doorstep of Astrid's penthouse apartment with a half-finished bottle of tequila in my fist.

She nursed me through my drunken moments, overwhelmed by the burden of my rising star. She also nursed me through my many hangovers the next day. And sometimes, when I needed to be held, when I needed to be loved, she nursed me in

her arms.

I lost my virginity to Astrid, but I never lost my trust or faith in her, even when I lost faith in myself.

We were never exactly a couple.

We were never public with our affections.

She simply did what she had to do to make me a star.

Yet, in all those times I found myself in her bed, in her protection, there was always someone else's arms I wanted around me.

Harry.

Then again, what would Harry know about the lightning-paced, ego-fueled, money-hungry, celebrity-obsessed, fame-addicted world of Los Angeles? He'd hate it here. He'd be like a tiger in a cage, pacing back and forth, constantly looking for his chance to escape. Hell, there were times I wanted out too; to simply vanish, to give it all up, to just write the music I loved so much instead of playing the game for the sake of the cameras and the fans, performing to screaming audiences night after night, all the while pretending it was okay to be clawed and kissed and grabbed and fondled by hordes of complete strangers.

Yes, sometimes I wanted nothing more than to go back to Mulligan's Mill where I knew I was safe.

Especially now that the letters had started arriving.

There had been three of them so far, all looking like stalker mail from a 1970's

slasher movie, their threatening messages made from different newspaper and magazine headlines, letters cut and glued in creepy, helter-skelter fashion.

The first one I found taped to the front door of the Malibu beach house I was renting. Astrid was with me when I opened the envelope and saw— The world doesn't need another wannabe star. Quit now or you'll live to regret it!

The second letter was found by a janitor who was cleaning up backstage after one of my shows— End your career, before I end it for you!

The third letter I found on the back seat of my limousine— Sing one more song and it'll be your last!

The driver had insisted he hadn't seen anyone come or go while he was waiting to pick me up, let alone notice anyone opening and closing the back passenger door to the limo.

Astrid had told me not to let the threats get to me, despite having hired a burly Romanian bodyguard named Bogdan who had started escorting me everywhere and stood outside the door of whichever room I was in at any given moment, including the dressing room I was in before the photoshoot. Astrid's advice was to be vigilant—to be alert rather than alarmed—but not to let some psycho ruin my career.

I had told Astrid after the second letter that I needed a break from the whole fame thing, which is when I called my dad and organized my trip to Mulligan's Mill.

Astrid reluctantly agreed, although she warned me not to stay away too long. After all, as she had often reminded me time and again—"What it takes to step out of the spotlight is one thing, my darling boy. What it takes to step back into it is something else entirely."

Lying there on the dressing room floor, I pushed thoughts of my stalker out of my head and answered Astrid's question. "Up. Pull them up." I was talking about the red leather pants. I knew it was the answer Astrid wanted to hear.

She smiled, hitched up my pants, and said, "That's my boy. Rolling Stone cover, here we come."

"We'll be finished before my flight leaves, right?" I tried not to sound too panicky.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On how ready you are to make love to that camera. I want you dripping with sex for this shoot. I want you to ooze with desire. I want copies of this magazine hidden under the mattress of every horny teenage girl and raging queer in the world. Deliver me that, and I promise you'll make your flight to Hillbilly Hicksville."

"Mulligan's Mill."

"I'm teasing." She buttoned up my leather pants for me, then decided to undo the top two buttons.

I eyed her suspiciously. "You're not doing that so I can tuck my shirt in, are you?"

Astrid winked. "What shirt?"

Ten minutes later, I was sitting on a wooden stool with an electric guitar in my hands and a plain white scrim behind me. My red leather pants, unbuttoned at the top, hung low around my hips. Although I'd been told to "ooze with desire" before, I was anxious about my flight and was having trouble summoning the level of sensuality

Astrid wanted from me.

“Darling, you’re tense,” she said, even as the photographer continued snapping away. “What’s the matter with you today? You’re getting caught up in your thoughts again, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. I’m sorry.” I did know. I was thinking about my flight. I was thinking about the letters from my damn stalker. I was thinking about... Harry.

“Darling, put everything out of your mind that’s stressing you. Make room for nothing else but the one thing you desire the most. The one thing that drives you wild. The one thing you want more than anything else in the world.”

I put the flight and the letters out of my head.

I closed my eyes and thought of the night in my room back in Mulligan’s Mill, when Harry came up with the word “hammer” and suddenly a hit song was born.

I threw my head back and with one hand I positioned the guitar between my spread legs.

With my other hand I ran my fingers through my wild blond hair, then down the side of my face.

I touched my fingers to my neck, my chest, my nipple.

For a few more seconds I heard the camera clicking furiously, then the sound faded away as I completely lost myself in the moment, the images in my mind stretching beyond a simple memory, pushing their way boldly into fantasy.

I imagined Harry sitting beside me on the bed...

Taking me in his arms...

Laying me down on the sheets and planting his lips on mine, forcing a loud, ache-filled groan from deep within.

I suddenly realized the groan wasn't just in my imagination.

I threw my head forward and opened my eyes, my gaze happening to find the camera in that exact moment, my entire body quivering with longing.

Lust.

Hope.

Snap!

“That’s the fucking money shot!” Astrid declared, yanking me out of my daydream and back to reality with such a jolt I almost fell off the stool.

There in front of me stood Astrid, fanning herself with my phone, while the photographer muttered in a somewhat stunned voice, “I think that’s a wrap. And I think I need a cold shower.”

\* \* \*

In the limo from my house in Malibu to the airport, Astrid managed to down two Grey Goose vodkas on ice and inhale three cigarettes—yes, she had found one of the few limousine companies left in LA that turned a blind eye to smoking—before escorting me to the gate in the first-class lounge, the towering Bogdan trailing close behind, my guitar case in one of his gigantic fists and his black suit two sizes too small for his Hulk-like shoulders.

Astrid waggled a finger at me as she saw me off at the gate. “Keep your sunglasses and headphones on for the flight. Don’t eat the fish and do not drink the coffee; airplane coffee will kill the joy of caffeine for you for the rest of your life. The flight crew will stop anyone from harassing you, that’s their job, unless a kid with a rare disease approaches you and asks for your autograph. If that happens, give her one of your signed publicity photos, you know, the ones we give away to all your VIP fans.”

“But I didn’t bring any with me.”

“Yes you did. There’s a dozen of them in your backpack.”

“I didn’t put them there.”

“I know . And for fuck’s sake, if the sick kid thing happens, make sure someone gets a photo and posts it online. Money can’t buy that kind of publicity.” The gate attendant tried to take my boarding pass, but Astrid held me back a moment longer. “My darling boy, I know there’s a lot going on in your world with those nasty letters. I know you’re feeling on edge. So take this time to find yourself again, recharge that beautiful soul of yours, and perhaps even write a hit song or two. I promise that when you return, that stalker of yours will have found somebody else to torment and your star will shine brighter than ever before!”

She kissed me on the lips then thumbed her lipstick off me.

Bogdan handed me my guitar.

“I’ll call you,” I told Astrid, then gave my boarding pass to the gate attendant.

After one final wave to Astrid and Bogdan—who stood waving back at me like they were playing my parents in some arthouse horror movie version of my life—I turned and boarded the plane...

On my way home to Mulligan's Mill.

\* \* \*

Dad looked dusty.

His eyes were bloodshot, his face was unshaven and his bed hair—or was it sofa hair?—hadn't quite been tamed. It didn't matter. I was just glad to see him as he pushed his way through the crowd at Eau Claire airport to greet me.

"Hey pal! Come here! Give your old man a big hug!"

He wrapped his arms around me, squeezing hard, almost knocking the sunglasses off my face and breaking the headphones that were now around my neck.

"Hey Dad," I grinned, knowing I could always buy a new set of headphones.

But that hug from Dad?

That was priceless.

He broke the hug and held me at arm's length to get a good look at me. "You look taller. Your hair's longer. Have you been working out? Your shoulders look bigger. Have you been eating? You look kinda thin around the waist. You need some fattening up. I know just the thing. How about I cook you up a batch of my famous fried chicken with some ranch dressing on the side, huh?"

"Oh God, that sounds so good. But Astrid my manager would kill me!"

"Then we won't tell her," was Dad's swift, decisive response. "Maybe we'll even invite a friend or two? I'm not talking about a party or nothing. Just a coupla people

to say welcome home. You feel like company?”

“Not really. I’m kinda tired.”

“What about Harry? You remember Harry?”

“Dad, of course I remember Harry. I didn’t leave town and forget everyone I’ve ever known my entire life.” I shrugged to make my next comment sound as casual as possible. “Yeah, I guess you can invite Harry over.” I gulped. “He’s cool.”

“He’s a good guy. He’s easy. Why don’t we see if he wants to come over for a few beers. Just to make an occasion of it. You don’t come back home every day, you know.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Maybe I sounded too casual. Dad must have read my tone as offhand. “I thought you liked Harry. Don’t you like him?”

I scoffed, overcompensating yet again, this time in the other direction. “Of course I like Harry. Everyone likes Harry.”

“I know, right. I’m trying to set him up with someone new in town. A teacher at the school. She seems great.”

“You are? She does?” I did a terrible job of hiding my shock. “That’s great.”

Instantly I wanted a change in conversation. I needed a distraction from the pang that hit my heart. At that moment a pair of teenage girls rushed toward me, Sharpies and boarding passes in their hands, and I’d never been happier to be approached by a couple of fans.

“Excuse me, are you... Dean?” one of them asked, breathless. “Oh my God, it’s really you. I’m dying. I’m dying right now! Can we please get your autograph?”

I smiled and took their boarding passes to sign. “I’d love to. What are your names?”

The girls gushed. “Susan. No wait, I’m Denise. She’s Susan. Oh my God, we can’t believe it’s really you! Would you mind signing my T-shirt too?”

I chuckled. “That’s a Shawn Mendes T-shirt.”

“He’ll never know,” one of the girls said.

“I won’t tell him if you don’t,” I replied with a wink.

The two girls giggled so hard I thought they were going to hyperventilate.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed my dad stepping back, a little confused, as though he wasn’t expecting any of this. I guess in a way he wasn’t. Whenever we talked on the phone, I never really went into details about life in the fast lane. I knew it wasn’t his style, so why fill his head with it. It’d only keep him up at night worrying about me. So I kept our conversations simple; I told him about a new burger joint I liked, about how small the Hollywood sign looks when you’re standing right in front of it, about the beaches and the gridlocked traffic and the funny, crazy, weird and wonderful people you see on the Boulevard. But I never talked about the fame, the concerts, the paparazzi, the fans, and he never asked. Clearly, he wasn’t following my career online—hell, despite being a handyman, Dad could barely operate the TV remote, let alone navigate the internet—and that was fine by me. Because if he wasn’t swept up in it all, it meant that I had someone I could trust who could stop me from being swept up in it too. I had someone who would always keep me grounded.

Deep inside, I hoped that Harry could be that someone too.

As I signed the boarding passes and the T-shirts—always on the sleeve, never on the chest; not even Astrid needed to give me that tip—the girls scurried back to their parents, eeking and squeeing and trying not to make a scene in the airport.

Dad looked at me strangely, as though some alien had claimed my skin as its host. “What was that all about? Do you know them? Does that happen all the time?”

I shrugged. “Forget about it, Dad. Let’s get home. I don’t know about you, but I’m ready for a big plateful of fried chicken.”

\* \* \*

Home was home, the same as it had always been.

Driving into Mulligan’s Mill was like kicking off a tight-fitting pair of shoes at the end of the day. It was like unbuttoning a collar, like stretching the cricks out of your neck, like slumping onto the couch, grabbing the remote, and flicking on the TV.

I physically sank into the passenger seat of Dad’s pickup as we passed the Welcome to Mulligan’s Mill sign, like melting into an easy chair.

I sighed with relief when he drove along the clattering boards of the red-roof-covered Brannigan’s Bridge, then gawked at the cordoned-off hole in the ground where the old Ritz Theater once stood. “What happened to—”

“Don’t ask. It’s a long story. I’ll tell you over a drink.”

From Main Street Bridge I saw the changes that had happened on the river promenade—that Mrs. Hartigan’s old garden shop had been transformed into Bud’s Blooms , while next door to that Mr. Flannery’s bakery had become Pascal’s Patisserie —and I suddenly felt the sting of distance, that a small part of me had

become a stranger in my own town. “When did that happen?” I asked Dad, pointing to the new stores.

“Last year, I guess. Just after you left. Bud opened up his flower shop, then Pascal moved to town from Paris and opened up his patisserie, then before we knew it—boom! They fell in love. There was more than just geraniums blooming, let me tell ya.”

“Wait. You mean, Bud? The mechanic? He owns a flower shop now? He’s gay now?”

“Yes, he owns a flower shop now. Flipped from being a grease monkey to watering daisies, just like that.” He clicked his fingers. “The whole gay thing, though, I’m not entirely sure how that works, but I don’t think it’s something he suddenly decided one morning. Hey, I could be wrong. You probably know more about that than me.”

I sat up defensively. “Me? What do you mean? Why would I know about being gay?”

“I don’t know. Because you live in LA now, I guess. You must meet lots of different people. Isn’t Elton John gay?”

“Yes, but I’ve never met him.”

“Well, you’ve probably met some gay people since you’ve been out there, I’m sure. Mind you, you don’t have to go far down the streets of Mulligan’s Mill these days before you bump into some happy gay couple.”

“Seriously? That was not the case when I left.”

“Seriously,” Dad nodded. “Mitch Winton finally came back and hooked up with Gage Channing. Apparently, they had a little somethin’-somethin’ going on way back

in high school.”

“You mean, ‘Wings’ Winton, the ice skater? And Gage, the guy who was once captain of the hockey team?”

“They’re not the only ones. Old Man Raven’s son, River, returned home from the Marines and fell head over heels in love with Clarry from the ice cream parlor. Talk about chalk and cheese, but I tell ya, those two walk around like they’re on a cloud. Then Benji and Bastian from the BnB finally got back together again. Yep, love is in the air everywhere you look.”

“Wow, who would have thought?” My chest had tightened when Dad had asked about knowing any gay guys in LA—which of course I did, a couple of them had even hit on me once or twice although I’d never acted on it—but knowing that there was something of a rainbow shining down on Mulligan’s Mill made me breathe easier about my secret crush on Harry.

Not that there was a remote chance of romance with someone like Harry Dalton.

But it at least gave me hope that if I ever did fall in love with someone —other than Harry, of course—that maybe one day we could settle down in Mulligan’s Mill.

I scoffed audibly at the thought, and Dad looked at me.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “You don’t like the gays? I know they’re a little different to us, but they’re not hurting anyone, and who they love is their business.”

“Oh God, Dad, you know I’m fine with gay people. I’m good with everyone .”

“I know, son. I raised you right.”

It was nice to have a father who was as small -town as it gets yet had learned to teach himself tolerance and compassion over the years, which was a far cry from the father who had raised him , using a belt or the back of his hand to try and beat any kind of empathy or enlightenment out of him.

My dad could have turned out to be a very different man, he could have continued the abuse down the line, but he chose not to. For that I would always respect him.

“What about you?” I asked. “If love is in the air, has the breeze blown in your direction yet?”

He didn’t quite get the metaphor. “What?”

I kept it simple. “Have you met someone?”

“Me? What the hell?” He laughed so hard the pickup rocked. “Not likely! The only person who could ever love this old coot was your mother, God rest her beautiful soul.”

Mom had died when I was three. I couldn’t remember her at all, but there were pictures in the house still, and whenever Dad mentioned her, he always added, “God rest her beautiful soul.” I wasn’t sure he’d ever get over the loss.

I reached across and squeezed his shoulder. “You know that if someone did come your way... someone you liked... Mom would be happy for you. You know that, right?”

He patted my hand. “I know, son. I know.”

As we pulled into the drive, my entire body seemed to exhale with relief at the sight of our house; our house that was exactly the same as the day I left. The white paint on

the porch was still peeling, the broken weathervane protruding from the peak of the roof swung lopsidedly and squeaked noisily instead of spinning with the breeze, and the guttering on one side of the house was still buckled and rusted after a snowstorm a few years back, something that Dad had promised to fix time and time again. I guess when you're a handyman, the last thing you wanna do is spend all day fixing other people's properties then come home and have to fix up your own.

"I'll get to it when I get to it," was always Dad's motto... which was better than my grandfather's motto of "I'll skin you like a fucking deer if you don't do as I say, you no-good little bastard!"

We very rarely talked about my grandfather, and when his name did come up, we spoke about him like he was dead. He wasn't. He lived just outside of town. He was a recluse. He hunted for his own food and rarely came into Mulligan's Mill. We hadn't seen him since I was twelve, and even on that occasion we crossed to the other side of the street before he saw us. I guess Dad preferred to avoid the man who made his life hell, rather than poke the Devil if he didn't have to.

Stepping inside our house I saw once again that nothing had changed.

The glass panel on the clock hanging in the hallway was still cracked, threads of carpet were peeling away on the well-worn line between the couch in the living room and the kitchen door, and the screened-in porch at the back of the house was still set up for Friday night poker with Dad's buddies.

I wondered if Harry still came over on Friday nights and my heart began to race. I gestured to the beer bottles yet to be taken out to the trash. "You had the guys over last night like you always do, I see. Did he have a good birthday?"

The question came out before I even thought about how knowing it sounded.

Dad just looked at me, puzzled. “Birthday? Who’s birthday?”

My chance to backpedal. “Nothing. I was getting confused.” But it was too late, the cogs in Dad’s still-hungover brain were spinning.

“Oh fuck! It was Harry’s birthday yesterday, wasn’t it? Shit, I always forget. I’m such a shit friend sometimes. How the hell did you remember?”

“Oh. Um. I guess I got a Facebook reminder.”

“Harry isn’t on Facebook.”

“It was something like that, then,” I muttered vaguely.

Dad went back to kicking himself. “Shit, we really need to invite him over for a drink now. I should bake him a cake,” he mumbled... before realizing, “I have no idea how to bake a cake.”

“Dad, Dad, relax. Harry’s not the kind of guy who’s gonna hold this against you. Besides, you forget every year. Don’t make a big deal out of it, Harry would hate that.”

Dad was already fumbling with his phone, stabbing slowly at the screen with his calloused index finger which was his clumsy way of communicating via text. “I know, I know. But I kinda get the feeling this was a big one.”

“What do you mean?” I knew exactly what he meant, but it wasn’t my place to put two -and -two together for him. I regretted not sending Harry the birthday message I’d typed the night before, but Astrid was right, it was kinda gushy and emotional and yes, hot. Note to self: go back and delete that message.

Dad, meanwhile, plonked himself into a chair at the poker table, still jabbing at his phone. “Yep, I’m sure it was a big one alright. Harry’s six months older than me, and I’m thirty-nine which means...”

“You forgot your best friend’s fortieth birthday?”

“I know, I know. I’m such an asshole.”

“No, you’re not, Dad. Harry would never think you’re an asshole.”

“I know, but I still feel bad.” He paused, finished his message, then read it aloud. “Hey Harry, Dean’s home. Come over for a drink. Besides, I owe you a birthday beer. Happy Birthday, big guy.” He looked up at me. “How does that sound?”

My head was focused on the words “big guy.”

They reminded me just how hot Harry was, even despite the fact that the words had come from my father’s mouth.

“That sounds great. You didn’t make a big deal of it, that’s perfect.”

I could see an idea flash through his mind, as he typed and spoke at the same time. “Why don’t I invite Madeline too.” He hit send and said, “Done.”

He looked pleased with himself, like inviting Madeline as well—whoever that was—would make up for forgetting Harry’s birthday. What was she gonna do, jump out of a fucking cake?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

HARRY

I read the first message and my heart raced with excitement. Dean was home!

I read the second message and muttered to myself, “Why did he invite Madeline? What’s she gonna do, jump out of a fucking cake?”

I typed back, nervous and thrilled and trying to keep from throwing up at the idea of seeing Dean for the first time in a year. “Sure. Sounds good. Be great to have Dean back home for a while. Absolutely no need to make a big deal out of my birthday. It’s nothing. I actually forgot too,” I lied. I inhaled and added, “No need to invite Madeline. I’m sure she has plenty of school assignments to catch up on. The three of us can just hang, you, me and Dean. That’d be great.”

I hit send...

Then I looked back at the message.

“Jesus, that was way too long. Talk about overthinking things, Harry. Just calm down.”

I didn’t calm down.

I tried on every single shirt I had in my closet before realizing I never wore a buttoned shirt to Andy’s place. I put them all back and settled for a plain black T-shirt.

I pulled on my jeans then tried on a nice pair of shoes, then a pair of sneakers, then my boots. “Boots,” I decided, knowing that’s exactly what anyone would expect me to wear.

I stood in front of the mirror and ran my fingers through my hair. I ran the tap, wet my hands and tried to finger-comb my hair into something vaguely fashionable. I pushed it up... Did guys wear their hair up these days? I wet it down... Did guys slick their hair down these days? I scruffed it up into an old man’s version of what Dean had always done with his hair, making it look messy, like I was way too cool to give a fuck.

I smiled at my reflection. “Edgy,” I said approvingly, before admitting to myself— oh, what the fuck would I know?

I backed quickly away from the mirror and did not return to it.

I tucked my T-shirt into my jeans.

Untucked it.

Half -tucked it, belt buckle showing. “Groovy,” I grinned, before telling myself— oh my God! Never ever EVER use the word “groovy” again!

I grabbed a six-pack of beer from the fridge and stepped out the front door. I took a deep breath and told myself, “You can do this, Harry. Just act casual, you’re not about to ask Dean out on a date. Hell, you’ll never ask Dean out on a date. Just be yourself, the same old Harry you’ve always been. You’ve got this. You da man!” After which I told myself— never say “you da man” again. Seriously?

\* \* \*

Ever since Dean moved away, I had tried not to follow his career.

I was concerned it might alter my impression of my best friend's son.

I was worried it might taint that perfect, unexpected, heart-swelling perception of him that had formed like an out-of-control tornado in those few months between the time he turned eighteen and the time he was whisked away to LA.

I was terrified I might fall out of love with the boy who had suddenly stolen my heart.

So I stayed away from the entertainment news and the social media platforms. I tracked his fame by learning to play his songs on YouTube. He'd had more than one hit in the year he'd been gone. After "Hammer of my Heart" went to the top of the charts, guitar lessons appeared online for songs titled "Knock On My Door," then "When You Weren't Looking," and a particularly moving ballad called "One Soul, One Town," which had to be written about Mulligan's Mill... not that anyone in town would know.

The songs were—according to the amateur guitar players teaching me lessons on YouTube—one hit after another.

In the quiet of my house, I learned them all.

And I promised myself, if and when I saw him again, I would never let him know.

\* \* \*

I never knocked when I arrived at Andy's. When Andy was home the door was always unlocked, and after showing up on his doorstep for over thirty years, I would just let myself in and call out, "Harry's here!"

I hesitated at the door that day.

Dean was a big star now.

Should I knock now?

Had things changed?

Had Dean changed?

Would I change when I saw him?

I raised my hand to knock.

I hesitated a moment longer.

I took three short sharp breaths and whispered, “You can do this Harry,” and suddenly—

“What the fuck are you doing out here?” Andy had yanked the door open and was looking at me with complete bewilderment. “Did you forget how to open a door? You okay? Harry?”

“Oh, I... um... you saw me out here, huh?”

Andy nodded. “Through the window. Although I wasn’t sure it was you at first. What have you done with your hair? Did you try to...?” He didn’t have the words for “style it,” because styling it wasn’t something either of us had ever done.

I tried to shrug it off. “I know, I need a haircut, right? It’s got a mind of its own when it gets this scruffy.”

My attempt to fake a complete disregard for how I looked worked. Andy nodded again. “Who the fuck gives a shit about your hair anyway?”

I rolled with it. “Who the fuck, right?”

“You betcha. Just bring it on in and give me a hug. I owe you a birthday hug, buddy.” He waved me into his arms. I put the beers down, and when we embraced, we both did the heterosexual slap— one, two, three —that had somehow become a signal between straight men that it was okay to hug, so long as they slapped each other on the back three times while doing it.

While everybody still thought I was straight, I was more than willing to keep up the ritual.

Hell, most days—when I wasn’t fantasizing about Dean—even I thought I was straight.

Being straight is the starting point, right? Society teaches us that’s the bar, that’s who we are, until some of us figure out we’re not. I guess you’re always something... until you’re something else, right? I mean, there was no evidence that I wasn’t straight... and there wouldn’t be until I actually did something that wasn’t straight. And until now, I’d never so much as set foot on the yellow brick road with Dorothy and her friends. So I guess I was just gonna keep slapping men on the back until...

“Harry!”

I turned, and there in the hallway stood Dean.

His eyes lit up when he saw me, and my heart instantly started racing and I had to break my hug with Andy in case he felt the sudden booming in my chest.

Dean looked good.

He looked fucking great.

His hair was longer, thicker, and so was his torso, but not so much that he'd lost his boyish looks.

Immediately I sounded like someone's grandfather and said, "Well look at you. Haven't you grown?"

Dean scoffed. "Like, an inch, maybe. But not really. I'm still not as tall as you."

"Nobody in Mulligan's Mill will get as tall as Harry," Andy chimed in. "He's like a bear in human form. Now get your butt over here and give him a hug," he said to Dean. "It was his birthday yesterday. You ain't forgotten how to hug while you've been away, have you?"

"Of course not."

Dean came up to me with arms open wide, and I realized we'd never actually embraced before. There had never been a reason to, except for maybe when he left for LA, but his departure was such a whirlwind that he was gone before I barely had a chance to say goodbye.

Now, as he came toward me, I gulped but tried not to let my anxiety—or the growing bulge in my crotch—show.

Just before he wrapped his arms around me, I was sure I caught a glimpse of nervousness in his eye. His arms were uncertain where to go, one going over one shoulder, one looping around my side, while I tried to figure out where to put my own arms. It was awkward, and embarrassing, and we both ended it quickly with a one -

two - three clap on the back.

“Happy Birthday, Harry,” he said.

“Welcome home, Dean,” I smiled.

“It’s good to be back. Things are... quiet here. Nice and quiet.”

“I guess life in the Mill is a little different to life in LA, huh?”

He laughed. “I guess you could say that.”

It was a stilted conversation that trailed off into nothingness.

Andy smacked his hands together and rubbed them, as though he was about to conjure something up, which he was. “Drinks? Who’s thirsty? I know I could use a hair of the dog, that’s for sure.” I held up my six-pack and Andy took it from me, heading to the back room. “Come on, fellas. Let’s celebrate!”

Dean looked at me. “You’re gonna have to forgive Dad’s decorations. He kinda had to make do with whatever he could find around the house.”

“I can’t wait to see.” I gestured for him to follow his dad first. “After you.”

Dean walked ahead of me.

His scent drifted behind him, a fragrance I hadn’t smelled on him before.

His jeans were tight and hugged his ass.

It was impossible not to tear my eyes away from that firm young bubble butt until I

stepped into the back room and Andy's decorations stole my attention.

"Oh wow. Toilet paper."

"I like to think of them as multipurpose streamers," Andy corrected as my eyes scanned the trails of toilet paper that had been looped around the curtain rods and draped down from the light fittings. On the table where we usually played poker were chip bowls containing the no-doubt stale remnants of the previous night's snacks, only now the bowls were wrapped in red and silver tinsel, even though Christmas was half a year away. And sitting beside the pretzels was something wrapped in old newspaper and tape.

"It's a present. Sort of," Andy said to me. "Go on then, open it."

"It's not a dead fish, is it? It looks like it might be a dead fish wrapped in newspaper."

Dean snorted. "It's not a dead fish."

"Good." I grinned back at him.

"Don't get too excited, though. You haven't seen what it is yet. You might hate it."

I picked up the parcel and pulled away the newspaper to see a signed publicity photo of Dean inside an old picture frame.

"Please know this was not my idea," Dean cringed.

"Oh, don't be precious," Andy told him, opening beers for me and him and fixing a tequila for Dean. "It's a great birthday gift. Do you know why? Because one day when you're bigger than Elvis, that right there is gonna be worth a fortune." He handed me my beer. "You like it, right Harry? I mean, so what if I didn't go to any

huge effort, right?”

“Dad, you didn’t go to any effort at all. You saw I had the publicity shots in my backpack, then pulled an old fishing photo off the wall and switched the pictures out.”

Andy wobbled his head at Dean. “Well of course I switched the pictures out. Nobody’s gonna pay a fortune for that photo of me pulling a fifteen-pounder out of the river, although Upstream Magazine did pay me a nice fat hundred-dollar check to use it on their front cover. But enough about me and my fishing expertise. The point is, Harry’s not just holding a photo of you; he’s holding stardom in his hands, and that’s gonna be worth something someday.” He handed Dean a glass of tequila. “Maybe when Harry cashes that photo in, he can chip in for your next bottle of fancy booze.”

“You know you didn’t have to buy this for me,” Dean said, holding up his glass.

“I know. But you mentioned you liked it over the phone, and I wanted to make you happy. Just like I wanted to make Harry happy with his birthday present.”

The pair of them had pretty much been ignoring me while they teased each other back and forth, while I stared at the framed photo in my hands, entranced.

“I’m not sure he likes it at all,” Dean commented when he saw me gazing at the picture. “I think he’s in shock. You know, you don’t have to be polite and accept it. If you hate it, I totally understand. It’s a terrible photo of me anyway—”

“I like it,” I told him. I wanted to tell him I loved it, but instead I said, “It’s a great photo of you.”

“You like it?” Dean sounded surprised.

I nodded. “Sure, I do.” I suddenly realized I sounded way too serious, even a little moved by the gift. I quickly shifted the tone. “And I’m gonna like it even more when it’s worth a million bucks.”

Dean laughed. “I wouldn’t hold your breath for that kinda paydirt. But if you don’t totally hate it, then Happy Birthday.”

“Happy Birthday, Harry!” Andy raised his beer, then almost polished off the entire bottle in a single gulp.

“Did I hear Happy Birthday?” called a voice from the front doorway, which we’d left open when I arrived.

Andy quickly wiped a dribble of beer from his bottom lip and called out, “Madeline? Come on in, we’re out in the back room.”

I glanced at Andy and said quietly, “I thought you weren’t going to make a big deal of this.”

Andy pointed to the gift he’d given me and laughed. “I didn’t.”

“I mean, I thought it was just going to be the three of—”

“Madeline!” Andy beamed as she entered the room, a bottle of wine in one hand and a bunch of flowers in the other.

“Hi, guys!” She hugged Andy and handed him the wine. “I brought chardonnay. Don’t hate me, but I think I drank way too much beer last night. I thought I woke up in a brewery in Milwaukee.”

“I love that feeling,” smiled Andy with dreamy eyes.

Madeline turned to me next and handed me the flowers. “And these are for you. My God, I can’t believe we played poker instead of celebrating your birthday. I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you say something? I hope you’re not allergic to flowers. I picked them up from Bud’s. Maggie said marigolden-girls are your favorite. Very rare, apparently. It’s not weird to buy a man flowers for his birthday, is it?”

I shook my head, thinking about the flowers in the vase at home, the ones with Dean’s name on the card... in my handwriting. “Not at all. Thank you, they’re lovely.”

She spun on her heel to face Dean. “And you must be the famous Dean Reeves. I’ve heard so much about you. I’m Madeline. Madeline Montgomery. I’m the new math teacher at the school.”

“So, Mr. Lowery finally retired, huh?”

“Yes. Not surprisingly he took his abacus with him. I think it was the only thing in that classroom older than he was.”

Dean laughed while Madeline spotted the toilet paper on one of the curtain rods, then saw it everywhere. “Are those supposed to be decorations?” she asked Andy, one eyebrow raised. She didn’t wait for an answer. “Classy.” With a wink in Dean’s direction she added, “I bet this is just like the parties back in LA, huh?”

Dean laughed again.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

The last party I went to in LA was at the house of Selena Gomez and Benny Blanco. Troye Sivan had crowned himself “Queen of the Cocktail Cart” and was pushing a small mobile bar clinking with bottles around the living room, mixing some potent potions guaranteed to please Selena’s guests. Billie Eilish and Liz Grant aka Lana Del Rey were squeezed onto a piano stool with Finneas sandwiched between them, tinkling the keys. Outside, Taylor Swift was getting cuddly in the jacuzzi with Travis, while upstairs, several agents and acquisition managers did private business deals in one of Selena’s twelve enormous bathrooms, drunkenly negotiating royalties and penning record deals on rolls of toilet paper.

So, while a party at Dad’s place felt very different to a party at Selena’s, they did have one thing in common. Toilet paper.

Of course, if I had mentioned any of the famous names at the party to Dad or Harry, they’d have been clueless as to who I was talking about. And that was fine by me. The more time I spent in LA, the more I realized how important it was for my sanity to keep Los Angeles and Mulligan’s Mill completely separate. Most days, I wanted nothing more than to step away from the bright lights and take a back seat to it all, to let someone else step out onto that stage, while I focused solely on the music, writing the best songs I could. Hell, I was even open to the idea of never singing again, of writing songs for other people and letting them lap up all the fame.

Celebrity, I had learned, was not for everyone.

Madeline, however, was keen to know more. Perhaps she was being polite, perhaps

she was genuinely interested. I figured it was a little of both as we sat at the table in the back room, drinking and nibbling on Dad's stale snacks.

"I have to admit, I've heard your songs on the radio. It's not every day I get to meet a rock star."

"Dean's not a rock star," Andy laughed. "He's just Dean, ain't that right, buddy?"

Madeline spoke before I could respond. "Oh, I think your son's more famous than you realize."

"Thanks, but Dad's right. I'm just Dean when I'm here." My face was hot and flushed. The truth was, I was never truly myself when Harry was around. I had to try to hide my true feelings, I had to constantly simmer the urge to reach for him, to do whatever it took to be close to him, to come up with some stupid excuse just to be alone with him. It struck me that between being onstage in LA and sitting here in the back room of Dad's house opposite my secret crush, I was constantly pretending to be someone I wasn't. I didn't even know if my mask was convincing. I tried not to look at Harry, in case he somehow saw straight through me. "It's not real, anyway," I added, trying to downplay the conversation. "The whole fame thing. None of it's real."

"Your success seems pretty real to me," Madeline said. "I mean, I've seen you on the covers of magazines."

I thought of the Rolling Stone shoot and the upcoming cover, and felt my face burn bright.

What would Harry think if he ever saw that?

I squirmed. "If I'm honest, I find all that stuff pretty embarrassing."

“You shouldn’t,” Madeline said. “You should be so proud of what you’ve achieved. I’m impressed you coped so well with such a seismic shift in your life, moving from Mulligan’s Mill to LA. I mean, talk about a change of pace.”

“Yeah, that was kinda crazy. All the meetings and lawyers and recording sessions, it’s all a little overwhelming. I mean, my manager steered me in the right direction, she’s kept me on track, kept me from making the wrong move, kept me from screwing anything up. She’s kind of amazing at what she does. But some days, it feels like everyone wants something from you all at once.”

“But you must get a kick out of all the fans out there listening to your music. You must love the idea of people playing your songs and singing along. So much love and appreciation for your art. And your music is so damn catchy. I mean, “Hammer of my Heart”... I love that song!”

I smiled and nodded in Harry’s direction. “You can thank Harry for that song. He was the one who nailed the lyrics... excuse the pun.”

Madeline looked at Harry, wide-eyed and impressed. “You did?” She patted him on the arm and rested her hand there, and the sting of jealousy shot through my heart. “I didn’t know you wrote music?”

It was Harry’s turn to blush. “I didn’t do anything. I just thought the word ‘hammer’ might work.” He laughed awkwardly. “I mean, you’re talking to the guy who spends his whole day surrounded by hammers. It was hardly a stroke of genius.”

“It went to number one on the charts,” I told him, my tone soft and grateful.

“Don’t tell him that,” Andy joked. “He’ll ask for money.”

Harry slid his arm out from under Madeline’s hand and tapped his birthday present.

“Don’t worry, Ebenezer. I’ve got my signed photo, that’s payment enough.”

Madeline looked from Harry to me, the smile still on her face. But there was something behind that smile now. As though she was trying to read the room. I had to look away.

“Well,” she said to me. “I bet you’re having the time of your life. I mean, you’re living the dream that most kids can only fantasize about. It’s wish-upon-a-star kind of stuff.”

I shrugged. “I guess. I mean, it’s a learning curve, that’s for sure. And yeah, it’s definitely wish-upon-a-star kinda stuff. But some days you get the feeling you should have been more careful what you wished for.”

Harry sat forward and I saw the concern on his face. “You’re not happy out there? If you’re not happy, you should come home straight away.”

“I’m okay. I’m happy.” I wanted to sound like I meant it, but I wasn’t so sure I pulled it off. “Don’t worry about me, I’m fine. I’m old enough to look after myself.”

Truth was, I didn’t want to look after myself at all.

I wanted Harry to scoop me up in his arms.

I wanted him to hold me tight.

I wanted him to protect me from fame and glamor and everything .

But I knew that was never going to happen.

I changed the topic. “Enough about me. So, Madeline, how are you finding life at

Mulligan's Mill High. Any apples for the teacher yet?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

HARRY

“I’m old enough to look after myself.”

When Dean said those words, my heart ached.

I didn’t want him to look after himself at all.

I wanted to scoop him up in my arms.

I wanted to hold him as tight as I could.

I wanted to protect him from whatever was making him feel sad or lost or lonely. I could hear it all in his voice. I could sense something hurting him deep inside and I wanted to make it all stop.

But I knew that was never going to happen.

And so, I sat there while he shifted the conversation to Madeline and they compared notes and stories about Mulligan’s Mill High. I fetched more beers and filled Madeline’s wine glass and Dean’s glass of tequila, until he said, “Actually, I think I’ll take a break from the tequila for a little while. It reminds me too much of LA.”

“What would you like instead?”

He looked up at me and brushed his fingers against the beer bottle in my hand. “I’ll drink whatever you’re having.”

My stomach knotted with both excitement and the pain of longing.

My head felt light.

My heart hammered in my chest and Madeline must have heard it because she said, “Let’s listen to some of Dean’s songs. This is a party, right?”

Dean shook his head. “Oh, Dad doesn’t own any of my music.”

But Madeline was already flicking through her own phone. “Don’t worry, I’ve already got a playlist happening. Please don’t think I’m a stalker. I’m not, honestly.”

I saw Dean move uneasily in his chair at the word “stalker.”

Nobody else noticed, then the music began on Madeline’s phone and Dean’s voice filled the room as the song “Hammer of my Heart” started playing.

Of course I knew the song.

I played it on my guitar almost every night.

But I never listened to it on the radio. I didn’t want to listen to the version everyone else knew. I preferred to keep his songs pure, simple strums on the guitar strings just like when I heard him play in his room, untainted by whatever LA had done to his music to make all his songs chart-toppers.

Madeline sang.

Dean downed the beer I gave him, and I couldn’t take my eyes off his lips wrapping themselves around the neck of the bottle, my heart screaming like one of his obsessed fans at the sucking sound when he pulled his mouth away from the beer.

God, I could have watched those lips on that bottle all night.

As the thought crossed my mind, he suddenly glanced at me, almost like he wanted me to watch.

I looked away instantly.

Before I knew it, Madeline was out of her chair and grabbing for my hand. “Dance with me, Harry.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no. I don’t dance.” I looked at Dean. “No offence. It’s a great song.”

Dean chuckled good-humoredly.

“Aw, come on,” pressed Madeline. “Everyone can dance.”

“Nah-uh. Not me. I’m like a bear... with two left feet... on ice.”

Madeline laughed as Andy stood, rising from the table, trying to clap in time with the music and doing a terrible job of both.

“I’ll dance with you, Madeline,” he said, stumbling a little, the beers already gone to his head.

Madeline caught him. “Woah, steady there, Fred Astaire.” She held him by both hands as they danced, more for the purpose of keeping him on his feet than keeping him moving in time with the music.

Madeline sang along with the words.

Andy tried but clearly didn’t know the song well at all.

I dared to glance at Dean. “Did you ever picture this as the pinnacle of your music career? Because I honestly don’t think it gets any better than this.” Thank God he laughed. He got my humor. Dean always had.

He shuffled his chair closer to mine and my heart pounded even faster. “I kinda love that Dad has no idea of the words to my songs.”

“You do? I mean, you don’t mind at all?”

He shook his head with absolute certainty. “Not one bit. God, I’d hate to have one of those obsessed parents who wants to control every little thing about my career. Look at Britney, look at Whitney, look at the whole Jackson 5. As far as I’m concerned, fame and family do not go together.” He sighed. “I’m not sure fame and anything go together.”

I shuffled my chair closer and my arm brushed against his. I didn’t mean for it to happen and I inched my body away slightly, just enough so we were no longer touching. “Are you sure you’re happy out there? Are you sure it’s what you want?”

He half-laughed, although there was no humor in his reply. “Of course I’m happy. Besides, I’ve got contracts I’m committed to. I’ve got a new album to finish. I’ve got a tour coming up, they’re talking about including Europe and Asia. Apparently, they love my songs in Japan and South Korea. They think I’ve got a whole K-Pop look happening.”

“They think you look like a breakfast cereal?”

He laughed again, genuinely amused, and all I wanted to do was kiss those lips of his. “No, K-Pop is... never mind... Clearly, I need to give you an education on modern music trends.”

I couldn't help but smile at the thought of it. "I'd like that."

He seemed surprised. "You would?"

I pulled myself up. "Oh. Um. Yes? If you wanted to. Or were you just joking around?"

"No. I'm not sure. I guess not. Do you really wanna know about modern music trends? Or are you just joking around now."

"No. Not unless you are. Are you?" The conversation was so clumsy and ridiculous that all I wanted to do was shut it down. I set my beer on the table and quickly stood. "I need to use the bathroom."

"You can use mine if you like."

"Oh, that's okay. I can use the one in the house."

"No, you can't," he told me. "Madeline's in there."

Only then did I realize Madeline had vanished, leaving Andy to dance all by himself, which he happily did in his own uncoordinated way.

I shrugged. "I can wait till Madeline's done."

"Just use mine," he insisted. "You like using my bathroom, don't you? I swear it's clean."

My voice got pitchy as I started stacking excuses on top of my nervousness. "It's not as though I like to use your bathroom. It's just, when you gotta go, you gotta go. Right?"

He laughed. “Then go. Now. Use my bathroom, it’s all yours.”

I wished he was all mine.

I gave in and nodded, just so I didn’t have to listen to myself ramble on like an idiot any longer. Without another word I dashed out to Dean’s bedroom studio in the backyard.

\* \* \*

Dean’s backpack was on the floor.

His old guitar was on the bed, lying there like a lover.

I closed the door behind me. It had been a year since I’d set foot inside his creative zone, but I got the same old buzz I used to. The room had that boy smell about it, the same one that made me want to drop onto the bed and inhale his scent. I dreamed of breathing him in, of one day smelling his hair on the pillow, sniffing where his body had lain between the sheets.

I swallowed hard and my throat clacked.

I bunched up my fist, as though it helped me fight the urge to fling myself onto his bed.

I made a beeline for the bathroom and closed the door.

I lifted the toilet seat and unzipped my jeans. Now that I was there, I kinda did have to go. As I began to pee, my eyes wandered over the bathroom counter beside me. Next to the sink sat Dean’s open toiletry bag, a few things lying out on the counter: electric toothbrush standing upright on its charger, a tube of toothpaste, a bottle of

men's cologne, a bottle of—

“Lube?”

Yep. Right there on the counter was a bottle of “peach-flavored, extra silky smooth, silicone-based lube specifically enhanced for male pleasure,” according to the label.

Instantly I felt my cock stiffen.

I quickly shook myself off, zipped my jeans up, flushed the toilet, and washed my hands.

I picked up the bottle of lube. It felt half -empty. My cock strained in my jeans at the thought of Dean squeezing out a palm-load of lube and jerking himself off. It took all my strength not to unzip my jeans and do the same right then and there.

“Chill, Harry. This is not the time or place!” I told myself, before adding, “But a little whiff of that peach flavor can't hurt.”

I popped the lid and pressed the pump-action trigger.

It seemed jammed.

I figured I needed to twist the top to unlock it.

I turned it left, then right, then pushed down hard.

A jet of lube shot out of the nozzle with so much force it missed my palms and splodged all over my T-shirt.

“Oh fuck!”

I stared down in alarm at the cum-sized spatter down the front of me.

“Oh fuck, fuck, fuck!”

I put down the bottle and carefully tried to wipe up the lube with both hands. Unfortunately, all I did was smear it farther up my T-shirt.

“Fuck.”

I stared from the smudge to my lube-slippery hands, the air filling with the smell of peaches.

Panic was setting in fast.

I tried to turn the tap on, but my hand slipped off the silver faucet, hitting Dean’s toothbrush which proceeded to topple off the bathroom counter—charging stand and all—and land in the open toilet with a splash.

With a buzz the toothbrush came to life like it was suddenly possessed, the swiveling bristles swirling against the side of the bowl.

Sparks hissed from the electrical socket where the charger cord stretched from the wall into the toilet.

I jumped with fright...

And horror...

And a feeling of revulsion that made my stomach turn.

“Oh no, no, no!”

Grimacing with dread, I peered down at Dean's toothbrush buzzing away in the toilet, cleaning the sides of the bowl.

I knew I had to rescue it, I couldn't just leave it there, but more sparks fizzed from the electrical socket and I knew I had to get the charger cord out of the wall first.

My hands were still lube-slicked.

I used my left hand to turn the other tap on.

Unfortunately, it slipped straight off the silver faucet as well, this time hitting the bottle of cologne. It fell to the floor and an explosion of fragrance—pine needles and mountain rain—wafted through the air.

“Oh, you've got to be shitting me.”

I crouched quickly and scooped up some of the large shards of glass.

The toothbrush continued buzzing.

The socket zapped and sizzled.

I winced as I cut my hand on a piece of glass.

“Ow! Fuck!”

That's when there came the knock on the bathroom door. “Harry? You okay in there?” It was Dean.

I gasped.

My eyes scanned the bathroom -turned -disaster -zone—taking in the lube on my shirt, the blood on my hand, the smashed cologne bottle on the floor, the fireworks coming from the socket, the buzzzzzzzzzzzz of the toothbrush cleaning the toilet—and I quickly realized my chances of salvaging this wreckage were slim to none.

The next few moments would not be big on dignity.

I drew a deep breath, unlocked the door, and in no uncertain terms said, “I think I owe you a new toothbrush.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

I saw sparks coming from the socket in the wall, an electrical cord stretching from the socket into the toilet, shattered glass on the floor... blood on Harry's hand.

"Oh my God, Harry, you're hurt." My voice was urgent, panic-stricken and firm. "You need to sit. Right now. Let me see your hand."

"I'm okay. But if you know how to cut the power to your shed, that'd be great."

I looked again at the sparks spitting from the socket. I raced around to the side of the shed and flicked off the electricity at the power board. From inside, Harry called out. "Got it! Thanks!" I turned the power back on then hurried back inside to see he'd removed the cord of my toothbrush charger from the wall.

A moment later he fished my toothbrush out of the toilet.

"Wow!" I uttered. "And here I was thinking rock stars were the ones with a reputation for trashing things."

"I can explain."

"Really?" I started laughing, kind of amused that he'd managed to turn my bathroom into a war zone in a matter of minutes. "I can't wait to hear it. No, let me guess... you had visions of renovating my bathroom and couldn't wait to get started."

He laughed too, sighing defeatedly as he did so. "Yep, that's it. And the first thing

that needed to go was this toothbrush.” He laughed louder, caving into the sheer craziness of the situation, then winced and cradled his hand.

“Oh shit, your hand. Come with me.” I led him out of the bomb-shelled bathroom and sat him down on my bed. “Stay here a moment.” I returned to the bathroom, stepping carefully around the glass to fetch my First Aid kit from my bathroom cabinet.

I returned and sat next to Harry on the bed, opening the kit and pulling out some antiseptic swabs and a bandage. I took his hand in mine. It was cool and large, and I lingered over it as I looked for stray pieces of glass in the wound.

There was a stillness, a closeness, a silence between us that made my heart race.

As I nestled his hand in mine, I traced my finger over the bumps and creases of his big fingers. I tried not to quiver as I touched his calluses, most of which looked like they’d been there for decades, a signature of the work horse that he was. But then I noticed his fingertips, a more recent hardening of the skin. I knew those minute slices and scars. I knew them well.

Had Harry started playing the guitar?

If he had, then that man on my bed became all the more perfect in my eyes.

In that moment I wanted to push him down on the mattress.

I wanted to straddle him.

I wanted to kiss him.

I wanted what I knew I couldn’t have.

Jesus, Dean! This is Harry you're fantasizing about! He's... not... interested.

Of course he wasn't interested. I was his best friend's kid. We had nothing in common apart from my dad. And let's not forget that Madeline seemed keen as hell on Harry, and for all I knew the feeling was mutual.

Suddenly Harry shifted awkwardly on the bed, and I realized all my touching was making him uncomfortable.

"I kinda made a mess in there, didn't I?" he said, breaking the stillness between us. "I'm so sorry, I'll clean it up. I guess I got kinda clumsy and—"

"Stop talking," I said. "You move a lot when you talk, do you know that?"

"I do?"

"Uh-huh. Now keep still, this is gonna hurt." He flinched as I wiped the first antiseptic swab along his cut to clean up the blood. It was a long thin streak that ran across his palm. "It's shallow," I reported. "I don't think there's any need to see Doc Morgan. Hopefully you'll live."

"I hope so too." He took a breath, and it was shaky. Clearly, I was making him feel awkward.

I inched a little farther away from him as I began to wrap the bandage around his hand.

I tried not to look up at him, keeping my focus on the wound.

"You know," he said in the quietness of the moment. "I've kinda missed you since you've been away."

I stopped wrapping the bandage, if only for a second, then kept winding it around his hand. “You did? I’ve kinda missed you too.” I suddenly realized how needy that sounded. No, not just needy... clingy, flirty, infatuated. “I mean, what I’m trying to say is, I missed everyone .”

“Oh yeah. That’s what I meant!” He squirmed on the bed again. “Of course you did. Of course you missed everyone. And everyone missed you, including me. That’s totally what I meant.”

At that moment there came a heavy thump - thump - thump on the door to my shed. “Hello? You two okay in there?” Dad slurred.

“Sure, come on in.” I quickly finished wrapping Harry’s bandage and clipped it neatly in place.

The door opened, and Dad and Madeline stood there, both looking a little light on their feet.

“Hey you guys,” said Harry, obviously wanting to jump in before anyone could ask any embarrassing or suspicious questions. “Sorry about going AWOL. I had a little accident in the bathroom. Knocked over a bottle of cologne.”

“Oh shit, Harry!” said Madeline, focusing on his hand. “What have you done to yourself?”

“He’s fine,” I told her. “I’ve cleaned the cut and bandaged him up.”

“Do you need stitches?” she asked Harry again.

Again, I answered for him. “No, he’ll be fine.”

Madeline sniffed the air. “Well, you certainly smell nice. What scent is that, anyway?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. “Just a bottle of cologne I wear every now and then.”

“You were wearing it tonight,” Madeline said to me, snapping her fingers as she realized. “I love it. What is it?”

I felt myself blush. “Actually, it’s... mine.”

“We know it’s your cologne,” Dad mumbled. “Madeline’s asking you what it’s called.”

“Dean,” I answered abruptly. “It’s called Dean. It’s nothing really.”

Harry turned to me, wide-eyed and blinking. “You have your own line of cologne?”

I stood from the bed, waving my hands like I was trying to wave the scent away. “It’s nothing. It’s embarrassing. It’s little more than a PR stunt to make more money for Constellation Records. Can we please not talk about it?”

But Harry stayed on the bed, looking somewhat mortified. “Oh my God! I broke a bottle of your own personal cologne?”

“It’s not my own personal cologne. Anyone can buy it. It’s on sale everywhere.” I paused a moment then added, “Although if Old Man Raven stocks it, which I very much doubt, I’d probably check he hasn’t watered it down.”

“Oh wow,” said Madeline. “You seriously have your own—”

“Please. Stop. Let’s just get back to the party.”

“I think I need to clean up your bathroom first,” Harry said.

“No, please. I can do that later,” I insisted. “Let’s just all go have some fun. I know I could use a shot of tequila right about now.” I looked at Harry and gestured to his wound. “After that cut, you could probably use one too.”

He nodded and stood from the bed. “I guess you’re right.”

That’s when Madeline pointed to the stain in the middle of Harry’s T-shirt, something I hadn’t noticed in all the chaos. “What’s that?” she asked, suspicious and rather amused. She moved her face close and sniffed at it. “Smells peachy.”

Harry’s cheeks flared red. “Oh crap. I think I need to leave.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

HARRY

“Oh my God! I can’t believe you squirted his lube on your shirt!”

“It’s not like I meant to do it!”

Madeline laughed so loud I had to shush her—while not trying to laugh myself—until the sound of it floated away on the night summer breeze.

“I’m sorry,” she giggled. “But the question begs to be asked: why on earth were you in Dean’s bathroom playing with his lube?”

“I... I... I have no idea,” I stammered as I lied. “I guess I hadn’t seen that brand of lube before and—”

“Wait. You’re an expert in lube brands?” She grinned mischievously. “Harry Dalton, clearly you’re a man of many talents.”

My face went red again.

I had rushed out of Andy’s place ten minutes earlier. I was so embarrassed in front of Dean I didn’t even say goodbye to him, let alone try to explain why there was a splodge of his lube on my shirt... in front of his father... who was also my best friend!

I figured it was easier to just throw down a smoke bomb and vanish.

I was halfway out the door when Madeline called after me—“Harry, wait! Would you mind walking me home?”

I exhaled, paused, and knowing it was the right thing to do I said, “Of course.”

It was already dark outside. Mulligan’s Mill was probably the safest place to live in the whole nation, but I still knew all too well that regardless of how safe a town might be, it was a gentleman’s duty to walk a lady home.

Madeline caught up with me on the road.

She slipped her hand through the crook of my arm.

She rested her head against my shoulder, and I felt my back stiffen.

I think she felt it too, because she lifted her head off me and asked, “So what exactly is that stain on the front of your T-shirt? I have to know.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I like getting to know you. Tell me everything... starting with that stain,” she giggled.

I didn’t want to tell her everything , but I figured I needed to own up to the mess in Dean’s bathroom, no matter how humiliating it was. I huffed out a sigh. “If you must know, I saw his bottle of lube in the bathroom, and it said it was peach-flavored on the label and...”

“And you wanted to taste some peaches?”

“No! Not taste it. I just... I don’t know what I was thinking. Clearly, I’m regretting

the whole thing now.”

Madeline laughed. “Oh my God! I can’t believe you squirted his lube on your shirt!”

“It’s not like I meant to do it!”

I couldn’t help but laugh myself.

She stopped walking for a moment, and with a slight sway of her head she said, “Harry, would you like to go out with me sometime?”

I stopped. Kinda blanked out for a second. Then said, “Oh!”

She laughed. “That’s neither a yes nor a no.”

“Sorry. I’m... I wasn’t expecting... You’ve taken me by surprise with that one. I don’t get asked out on dates very often. Actually... never.”

“We don’t have to go out. We can have dinner at my place. Or yours. Whatever you like.”

I wanted to say no .

I wanted to say no, I’m in love with Dean and he doesn’t even know it.

Instead, the people-pleasing words that fell out of my mouth were, “Sure. Yeah.”

Madeline smiled. “Great! How about Tuesday night? Say, seven o’clock? You wanna come over to my place? I can cook you something nice.”

I smiled. “Sure!” But internally I was spiraling into a panic.

What if she was already planning something intimate and romantic?

What if she was going to light candles?

What if she played music for slow dancing?

I'd be completely at her whim if I went to her place.

I jumped in and quickly changed the narrative in my head. "Actually, I'd like to cook for you at my place... if that's okay. I don't get a chance to cook for two very often. Whaddaya say?"

She gave an easy-natured shrug. "Sure, sounds great. I love a man who can cook."

And all I could think was—

Why couldn't she be Dean?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

I curled up under the sheets, my heart swollen with excitement after sitting beside Harry on my bed, after mending his hand, after touching his skin and taking care of him. But it was also hurting that he had to go, that he rushed off like he did, that he left his birthday present behind.

I had no idea what caused the frantic exit.

Madeline pointed to a stain on his T-shirt.

At first, I thought maybe he'd spilled beer down his front.

But as Madeline pointed it out, I caught the distinct smell of something other than the aroma of pine needles and mountain rain that filled the room from the broken bottle of cologne.

Peaches.

I could smell the sweet scent of peaches.

"Mmm," I murmured, getting out of bed, walking into the bathroom which I had cleaned up earlier, and saw the bottle of lube on the counter. "Oh shit, did I seriously unpack that?"

I had.

And it had been handled, because when I picked it up, the bottle was slippery as if someone had used it.

A grin spread across my face.

An erection surged in the jockey shorts I wore as pajamas.

I chuckled at my reflection in the mirror, amused and excited. “Holy shit. Harry played with my lube.”

I suddenly began fantasizing about what else Harry might have played with.

The thought had me racing back to bed, the bottle of lube in hand.

I set the lube on the nightstand, peeled my jockey shorts down my legs and let my long hard cock slap against my abs.

I threw myself onto my mattress and spurted a couple of globs of lube onto my right palm. Oh yeah, Harry had been into the bottle all right, the lock on the pump trigger had been released.

“Oh God, that’s so fucking hot,” I uttered to myself, before clamping my teeth shut, arching my back slightly and seizing my stiff dick in my fist.

I jerked myself hard, listening to the music of the lube squelching. I closed my eyes and imagined that the sucking sound was coming from Harry who was crouched between my legs...

My dick in his mouth...

His head bobbing up and down as I groaned with pleasure.

“Oh yeah, Harry. Right there,” I moaned, twisting my grip as I pounded my dick.

“Uh-huh... oh fuck... I’m gonna...”

With a loud cry I raised my hips high and let my load fly.

Hot cum splashed across my tensed stomach and up my chest, splashing against my throat while I grunted and bit down hard on my bottom lip.

Slowly I caught my breath, let my body melt against the bed.

Looking down I grinned at the last of my cum oozing from my slit, pooling in my navel.

The aftershocks of ecstasy rippled through my body, pleasure washing over me until that feeling of bliss slipped away like a wave on the sand, leaving me once again heartbroken that Harry hadn’t stayed.

That I could never be with him the way I yearned to be.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

HARRY

It wasn't until I curled up in bed that I realized I'd left Dean's framed picture at Andy's.

I kicked myself.

I'd already decided to place it on my nightstand.

Just the thought of his face by my bed, that scruffy blond hair, that million-dollar smile, those eyes watching me while I slept... God, I could feel my cock already getting hard.

I slept naked, and when I threw the sheets off, my thick, huge cock was already stretching its way up my hairy belly, seed already spilling from my slit.

Obviously, a job needed doing, but I was going to have to do it left-handed, since my right hand was cut and bandaged. It also still smelled of Dean's signature fragrance after trying to clean up the smashed glass.

As I grabbed my meaty cock with my left hand, I raised my right hand to my face, pressing my palm against my nose and mouth and inhaling the heady cocktail of blood, antiseptic, and cologne.

"Oh, fuck yeah," I snorted into my hand, the words muffled.

I dry-jerked my cock hard, the foreskin sliding up and down, my fist squeezing and

twisting and ready to wring every last drop of cum out of me.

I clenched my big ass cheeks and raised my hips.

I breathed in the scent of the cologne with a bestial growl, hungry for more.

I felt my stomach muscles knot and contort as I pumped my cock to the brink of orgasm before—

“Oh fuck! Dean!” I choked. “Oh, fuck yeah!”

Cum splashed over my hairy chest and heaving abs, sticky spools matting my fur.

I groaned with each surge.

Cum drenched me and I pulled my hand away from my mouth and nose, desperate for air.

Meanwhile, my other hand tightened its grip on the base of my cock, slapping the hard shaft against my gut to shake out the last surges of cum.

Then there I lay, flat on my back, buck naked and panting, wishing that if I couldn't have Dean in my bed, at least I could have his photo beside me.

First thing the next morning I'd drop by and collect my gift.

But before that... I needed to buy Dean a new toothbrush.

\* \* \*

I opened the door to Old Man Raven's General Store and was instantly met with that

familiar smell of dusty shelves, moose-leather moccasins and out-of-date rat poison. As the bell above the door dinged, Old Man Raven looked up from behind the counter where he was slotting packs of cigarettes into the empty spaces of a candy stand.

“Harry! Good to see you. How are you this fine morning?”

I stepped up to the counter. “I’m okay.” I pointed to the stand he was filling. “Should you be doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Placing the Marlboro next to the Snickers. Is that even legal?”

Old Man Raven shrugged. “I dunno. Why don’t you ask Sheriff Gates next time he drops in to pick up his candy and cigarettes. You want some?”

“Thanks, but I’m trying to watch my weight.”

Old Man Raven’s face lit up. “Good news for you, my friend. I’ve got a special on at the moment for anyone on a diet. Two candy bars for the price of one when you purchase any packet of cigarettes.”

“Is that supposed to help with dieting?”

“No, but it helps stop the urge to kill the next person you see just because you’re not allowed to have a donut. So, whaddaya say? I can practically hear the candy bars and cigarettes calling your name.”

“That’s great, but I don’t smoke.”

“Even better news, I’ve got a special on at the moment for non-smokers. Twenty percent off cigarettes with any candy bar purchase. No matter which way you spin it, it’s a win-win. Besides, we all know how hard it is to quit smoking. Go on, reward yourself.”

“I hate to tell you this, but I’ve never actually quit smoking because I never started smoking in the first place.”

Old Man Raven grabbed a pack of Marlboro off the stand, opened it, and offered me one. “It’s never too late to start.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “Please tell me you don’t give this sales spiel to the kids who come in after school.”

He ignored my comment, put a cigarette between his lips, and lit up. “Your loss,” he said, sending a plume of smoke into the air. “So, if you don’t want smokes or sweets, what is it I can do for you today?”

“I’m after a toothbrush. It has to be electric. It has to be the fanciest, most expensive toothbrush you’ve got.”

“Fancy, you say?”

“Yep.”

“Expensive, you say?”

“Uh-huh.”

Old Man Raven grinned. “You’ve come to the right place. Follow me.”

We weaved through the maze-like shelves that cluttered the store, past the fishing tackle and the women's lingerie and the canned hotdogs and the packets of sea monkeys with the corners eaten out of them that made me think the marine monkeys had somehow chewed their way to freedom, until we arrived at an aisle that could only be described as bathroom -hygiene -meets -mousetraps.

Old Man Raven wasted no time, plucking an electric toothbrush off the top shelf and blowing the dust off the packaging.

"This is the one you want," he said, handing me the box. "Fully rechargeable, state-of-the-art technology with advanced swivel action delivering a deep clean guaranteed to remove one hundred percent of plaque and provide a pristine, floss-like clean."

I was impressed. "Wow, you really do know your products."

"It's been sitting on the shelf for twenty years, I've had time to work on my pitch. I'll even throw in half-price batteries."

"It says here on the box that batteries are already included."

"Then I'll throw in this week's moose moccasins special. Buy one moccasin, get the other one free."

I was so keen to deliver Dean's new toothbrush that I wasn't even thinking about the math. "Sold!" I said.

Old Man Raven clapped his hands and rubbed them together, until a voice behind us said—

"Pardon me for butting in, but I'm not sure those moccasins are the bargain you think they are."

Old Man Raven and I both turned to see—

“Madeline? Hi,” I said.

Apparently, Old Man Raven and I had been so wrapped up in his rather impressive toothbrush sales monologue, that we hadn’t even heard the ding of the bell above the door when Madeline entered.

“Forgive me for interrupting,” she said to Old Man Raven. “But I’m the new math teacher at the school, and well, I’m not sure your specials are quite so... special.”

Old Man Raven deadened his eyes and leveled his gaze at her. “Who the hell are you?”

“Oh, ah, this is Madeline,” I jumped in. “She’s new in town. Madeline Montgomery, meet Old Man Raven.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Madeline said cheerily, extending her hand.

Old Man Raven just huffed at her. “Math teachers. They spoil all the fun.” With that he returned to stacking the stands on the sales counter.

Over the top of the store shelves, Madeline watched him and quietly asked, “Is he putting Marlboros next to—”

“Don’t ask.”

“Is that even legal?”

“Don’t ask that either.”

Madeline took a deep breath. “Well, when in Rome I guess.”

“I’m not sure they wear moose moccasins in Rome.”

Madeline laughed that infectious laugh of hers and I couldn’t help but smile. She gestured to my still bandaged hand. “How’s that big old bear’s paw of yours this morning?”

“It’s okay,” I shrugged. “What are you doing here?”

“If you must know, I came looking for a gift for you ... for your birthday.”

I shook my head. “You gave me flowers... which I left at Andy’s and need to rescue before they die. I’m hoping he at least put them in some water.”

“No, I mean, I wanted to buy you a proper gift. I bought the marigolden-girls in a hurry. Andy only told me at the last minute that it was your birthday.”

“Andy usually remembers after the last minute that it’s my birthday.”

“He forgets, huh?”

“Every year.” I shook my head and shrugged. “It honestly doesn’t bother me. I don’t really know what to do with all the attention anyway. And seriously, those flowers you got me were more than enough... if they’re still alive.”

Madeline laughed again and stepped a little closer. “Your modesty is sweet. Really it is. But I’m a giver, so you’re just going to have to allow me to buy you a proper gift. So long as this general store even has what I’m looking for.”

“Are you kidding? Have you seen this place? Old Man Raven has everything you

need and everything you don't. There's even a shelf of Mr. T breakfast cereal, although they're probably nothing but boxes of sugary dust by now."

Madeline giggled. "Lucky for you, a box of Mr. T cereal was not on your birthday present list."

I was curious. "What exactly was?"

"Well, against Dean's best advice, I was going to see if there was anywhere in town that sold Dean's cologne. It smelled kinda... sexy. I thought you might like some, not to mention I'd be supporting sales for Dean's fragrance line."

I only registered half of what Madeline was saying because it suddenly dawned on me—"Oh my God, I broke Dean's bottle of cologne and didn't even offer to replace it. I am such an ass!"

"Oh Harry, it was an accident. I'm sure he doesn't mind. It's his cologne. I'm sure he has a thousand bottles of it back in LA."

"But he doesn't have any here."

I weaved my way through the shelves back to the counter. "Mr. Raven, where are your colognes? Colognes for men."

He raised one eyebrow. "The fancy ones?"

"Yes."

"The expensive ones?"

"Absolutely."

“Follow me. You’ve come to the right place.”

We passed the faded pinatas and the cans of lighter fluid and the jars of pickled herring and the bodice-ripping paperback novels from the seventies, to arrive at a shelf containing some dubiously labeled fragrances. Madeline caught up with us as he pulled a tester bottle off the shelf. “What exactly can I tempt you with? Perhaps the alluring scent of Animal Attraction by David Beckon.”

“I think you mean David Beckham, the soccer player,” Madeline said.

Old Man Raven shook his head. “Are you crazy? I can’t afford to stock his products. And if you ask me, it’s far inferior to Mr. Beckon’s fragrance anyway.” He squirted the tester in my direction.

“Ow! Fuck! My eyes! What is that, mace?”

“It’s strong, I admit. Perhaps you’d like something more subtle. What about Aqua - fish Man by Jason Momo?”

“Don’t you mean Jason Momoa?” Madeline said, before shooing her words away. “Ah, forget I asked.”

I flinched as Old Man Raven sprayed some fragrance at me once again. This time he missed my eyes, but one whiff was enough to make me pinch my nose in disgust. “Oh my God, it smells like dead fish.”

Old Man Raven sniffed the air then sniffed his own breath. “There’s every chance that could be the tuna sandwich I had for lunch. I never met a tin’s expiry date I didn’t trust.”

“Either way, would you mind putting the lid back on that bottle?”

“Suit yourself. What about this one? Extra Spicy Red Devil .” He squinted at the label. “Oh wait, that’s chili sauce.”

I held my hands up in surrender before he could anoint me in chili. “Thank you, but no. We’re actually looking for a certain brand of cologne. It’s called Dean .”

Old Man Raven scratched his chin. “Not sure we have any men’s fragrance called that, although I do have several of Dean Martin’s greatest hits records in the music section down the back. You’ll find it right next to the Hustler magazines. If you see Bo Harlow down there, tell him this ain’t a library! I swear I’ve been chasing that guy out of my store since he was twelve.”

“Bo’s twenty-eight.”

“And people wonder why I look so exhausted all the time.”

Madeline placed a hand on my forearm. “Harry, I’m not sure we’re going to find what we’re looking for here.”

“Judgy, judgy,” mumbled Old Man Raven with an indignant glance in her direction.

“It’s not that I think your store isn’t well -stocked,” Madeline told him, smiling sweetly. “And next time I’m in the mood for a pirate romance novel with Fabio on the cover I know exactly where to come. But until then, do you think you can tell us where we might find another store that specializes in men’s fragrances? One that doesn’t stock David Beckon or Jason Momo?”

He huffed indifferently like he wasn’t offended. “If you insist on taking your business elsewhere, you can always try Claudio’s Colognes in Eau Claire.”

With that, Old Man Raven went back to stacking his Marlboros and Snickers.

Madeline arched her eyebrows. “In the mood for a road trip?”

I shrugged. “Why not? My truck’s parked outside.”

\* \* \*

I punched my way through the radio stations every time a romantic song came on.

Like Foreigner’s “ I Want to Know What Love Is. ”

“I love this song,” Madeline said.

I hit the dial.

Diana Ross and Lionel Ritchie’s “ Endless Love ” came on.

“Oh my God,” she swooned. “This movie made me cry!”

I hit the dial again.

We heard the catchy beat of a-ha’s “ Take On Me .”

“Oh yes!” Madeline said.

Oh no! I thought to myself and punched the dial again.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Linda Ronstadt and the Stone Poneys began singing “ Different Drum. ” I left the radio playing and quickly thought of a conversation filler to distract from my game of musical chairs on the radio.

“So, I haven’t even asked where you’re from. I mean, before you moved to

Mulligan's Mill. I'm sorry, that's rude of me."

"Don't apologize. If I'm honest, I tend to avoid the topic unless people bring it up."

"You don't like to talk about it?"

"I can talk about it," she said. "It's just that I prefer not to. But since you asked, we might as well get it over and done with. I was married to a man whom I genuinely loved once. We lived in Ann Arbor in a house with a porch and a picket fence. He worked as the gym teacher at the same school where I taught math. For the most part, our marriage was pretty much perfect, until the day I received a text from one of the mothers at the school, telling me that my husband had just broken off a year-long affair with her. She was angry and hurt and felt the need to tell me all about my husband's infidelities."

"Oh God, that's awful."

"She said she thought I should know what was going on behind my back, but what she really wanted to do was destroy his perfect life... and in doing so, she destroyed mine. Only, it made me realize we didn't have the perfect life at all. Our marriage was nowhere near perfect, only I was the last to know. That was over a year ago now. I left Ann Arbor and moved in with my sister in Cedar Rapids for a while to get back on my feet. By the time I was ready to face the world again—to trust anyone again—a teaching job came up here in Mulligan's Mill and I snapped it up. And here I am... sitting in your truck... in search of a cologne that won't attract seagulls... or blind you for life."

I wasn't sure what to say. "Wow, that story really does suck. No wonder it's not your favorite topic of conversation."

"I'm sorry. It sounds like such a tale of woe-is-me, which is why I hate explaining it.

But I fully intend to change my destiny in Mulligan's Mill. It's time to take back control of my life, do the things that make me happy."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Poker nights. Long drives through the countryside. I might even find happiness in someone's arms again, who knows?"

The song on the radio ended and it was back to the love songs.

This time it was "Close to You" by The Carpenters.

I decided to turn the radio off altogether.

\* \* \*

Claudio twirled the end of his pencil-thin moustache. "Dean?" he said in an Italian accent so thick, I was convinced it was fake. "You mean the fragrance released by the singer, Dean Reeves?"

"That's the one," Madeline and I said at the same time.

"Follow me." Claudio clicked his fingers, and we chased him as he strutted quickly across the floor of his store to a glass cabinet on the far wall. Between the Christian Dior and Calvin Klein displays, a backlit poster came into view. On it was an over-saturated, over-stylized image of Dean, shirtless and lying on the steps of a spiral staircase, clinging to the wrought iron balusters like they were prison bars. His expression was sultry, desperate, yearning—a look of unbridled passion that made me hard almost instantly.

I shifted my walk to accommodate it, trying not to let my bulge show as we stepped

in front of the cabinet.

“This is the one you want?” Claudio asked.

“That’s him.” I nodded a little too emphatically, ogling the poster. “I mean, that’s the fragrance, yes.”

Claudio unlatched a set of keys from his belt like a jail warden, jangled his way through them and slotted one into the lock of the glass cabinet to retrieve the one and only bottle of Dean off the shelf beneath the poster. “You’re in luck, this is our last bottle.”

“We were actually after two bottles,” said Madeline. “One for him and one for me.”

Claudio gave her a quizzical look. “ You wear Dean ?”

“No,” she answered. “Although I don’t see why I couldn’t. I’ve smelt it and I rather like it. But no, it’s not for me. I want to buy a bottle to give to him for his birthday.”

She gestured to me and Claudio looked more confused. “Then why does he need a bottle if you’re already going to give him one.”

I quickly jumped into the conversation. “Because I need to replace a bottle that belonged to... someone else.” I wasn’t about to tell him that “someone” was the young hottie on the poster in front of us. “I broke it, and I need to replace it.”

“Well, as you can see, I only have the one bottle, so one of you will have to miss out.”

Madeline and I looked at each other. She inhaled and her shoulders rose in a shrug. “I suppose we could take all the sentiment out of it and treat it like a mathematical

equation. If I buy the bottle and give it to you, you then have a bottle to replace the broken one. It's not exactly teeming with tenderness, but it is the only logical thing to do."

She was right, it did make sense.

"Then let me pay for it," I said. "I'm the one who broke the bottle in the first place."

Claudio looked from me to Madeline and back again. "Let me get this straight. You want to buy the bottle to give to her ... so she can give it to you ... so you can give it back to somebody else?"

Madeline and I both nodded.

"Uh-huh."

"Yep."

With a wink, Madeline added, "And would you mind gift-wrapping that, please? A blue ribbon would be nice if you have one."

Claudio rolled his eyes. Cologne bottle in hand, he strutted like an angry bird back to his counter.

\* \* \*

On the way back to Mulligan's Mill I asked Madeline, "Are you sure you don't mind me regifting this to Dean?"

"Of course I'm sure. Besides, you paid for it." She paused a moment. "You really like him, don't you?"

I felt my stomach drop and in a strangled voice I asked, “What? Who?”

“Dean. You think the world of him, I can see it.”

“He’s a good kid. Andy’s my best friend.”

“I get it. You’ve known Dean all his life. You’re like an uncle to him.”

The word put my mind into a spin.

An uncle?

Is that what people thought?

Is that what Dean thought? That I was like an uncle - figure to him?

Oh God, what kind of weirdo was I?

\* \* \*

I dropped Madeline at her home, and before she closed the passenger door of my truck she smiled. “I’m looking forward to Tuesday night.”

“Me too.” I tried to keep my voice even, enthusiastic. I wasn’t sure I pulled it off.

Driving from Madeline’s to Andy’s, my heart started to race. It amazed me that the giddy feeling in my head, the flutter in my belly, the tightening in my chest, had never truly diminished since that first day I realized I was utterly smitten with Dean; that day when he seemed to magically transform from my best friend’s kid into a smoldering, sexy-as-hell eighteen-year-old guy with a guitar. The thought of him threatened to turn my self-control into a total fucking trainwreck, the sight of him

seemed to torch any shred of decency I had, the smell of him buckled the bars of the cage keeping the animal inside me captive. It literally took everything I had not to let myself slip into a complete disaster of a human being when I was around him.

“Keep it together,” I mumbled to myself as I pulled up in front of Andy’s place. “Just keep it the fuck together, would ya, Harry?”

I grabbed the cologne now wrapped in blue ribbon, as well as the toothbrush I’d bought from Old Man Raven before we left his store earlier.

I took a deep, deep breath, then stepped out of the truck.

As I made my way to the front door, Andy came around the side of the house carrying his paint-splattered A-frame ladder and a bucket full of rags and brushes.

“Harry, how are you doing? You okay?” he asked, plonking the bucket down and loading the ladder into the back of his truck. “You left in a hurry last night.”

“Sorry about that. Guess it was something I ate.”

“Yeah, those leftover pretzels did kinda taste like old boots. But hey, you don’t love me for my catering skills, right?” He gestured to the gift-wrapped cologne in my hand with a tilt of his head. “Say, what’s that?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Something for Dean.”

“You bought Dean a gift?”

“Not exactly. It’s a replacement for the bottle of cologne I broke last night.”

“How is your hand today?”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“You sure? It looks a little shaky.”

Keep it together, Harry.

“I’m fine. I’ll just give this to Dean then I’ll be outta here.”

“He’s not here. Matter of fact, he went looking for you .”

“He did?” My heart skipped a beat. “Why?”

“You left your birthday gift here, along with the flowers from Madeline. He walked over to your place to give them back, about ten or so minutes ago. I offered to drive him on my way to a paint job at Mrs. Colvin’s house, but he said it was too nice a day not to walk. He’s probably knocking on your door right now.”

“Dean’s at my house?” I asked stupidly.

“Uh-huh.”

Dean’s at my house! was all I could think.

“I gotta go!” I said, and hurried back to my truck.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

The marigolden-girls quivered in my hand, rustling nervously. My fist clung to the picture frame so tight that my knuckles had turned white. I stood on his porch and took a deep, deep breath, then slid the picture under one arm and rapped my white knuckles against the door.

There was no response.

I knocked again, a little louder.

Again, nothing.

I wondered if perhaps he was out back, or maybe he was in the shower. That thought gave me an instant hard-on. The image of Harry in the shower popped straight into my head, water cascading over his thick, muscled body, matting the hair, soap bubbles sliding down what I could only imagine was the thickest, meatiest cock I'd ever set eyes on. The vision was vivid because I had conjured it up in my mind countless times while jerking off, gasping his name while I drenched myself in cum.

I looked down. "Oh crap!"

My hard-on wasn't just raging. It was seeping .

I was wearing a pair of tan-colored cargo shorts, and spreading from the head of my tentpole erection was a pre-cum stain that turned darker and wider by the second. That was one of the setbacks of being twenty-one years young and full of

cum—keeping it in was often a difficult if not impossible task, especially when all I could picture was Harry...

In the shower...

Bubbles sliding down his...

“Fuck! Stop it, Dean!”

I was so focused on trying to push down the erection that threatened to volcanically erupt in my shorts that I didn’t even hear the truck pull up on the street behind me until—

“Dean? Hey there!”

I turned to see Harry calling to me from the open window of his pickup.

He stepped out, shut the door, and made his way toward me.

I quickly covered my cum-stained bulge with the marigolden-girls and smiled nervously.

He gave me a nervous smile back and I thought— fuck! He saw my erection before I could cover it in time. Now he thinks I’m a freak. Damn! Fuck!

I tried to distract myself and saw something wrapped in blue ribbon in one of his hands, and in the other—“Is that a toothbrush?”

“Ah, yeah,” he said, stepping up to me.

He was close.

Too close.

And yet... not nearly close enough.

“I knocked your toothbrush into the toilet, remember?” He was blushing. God, he was even hotter when he blushed. “I’m so fucking embarrassed about that. I hope you managed to get by this morning.”

“Oh sure. My dad had a spare toothbrush in his bathroom.” Jesus, did he think I would dare venture to his house without brushing my teeth? Not on your fucking life.

“Oh good. Well, here’s a new one, just for you. And I got you this as well.” He held up the other item and I immediately recognized the shape of the packaging under the blue ribbon. “It’s a bottle of Dean,” he said. “For Dean.” He laughed awkwardly.

“Oh geez, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Actually, it’s kinda from Madeline too. Sort of. It’s a long story.”

“Oh.” The mention of Madeline’s name broke whatever spell he was casting over me. “Well, I’ll have to thank her when I see her next.” I quickly changed the subject. “And these are yours.” I held up the flowers and the picture, practically shoving them in his face so he couldn’t see down to my crotch. Not that my hard-on was an issue any longer, it had started to wane as soon as Harry mentioned Madeline. But that pre-cum stain wasn’t going anywhere soon.

“Thanks,” he said as we clumsily tried to exchange gifts, the toothbrush and flowers almost falling and another bottle of cologne almost smashing on the ground.

To make matters even more clownish, the phone in my pocket buzzed with a text message... once... twice... three times.

“Sounds like someone wants you,” Harry remarked.

How I wished that “someone” was him, but obviously it wasn’t, since he was standing right in front of me.

“Here, let me take this.” He scooped all the gifts into his big muscled arms. “You get your phone.”

“You sure?”

“I’m good. Got ’em.”

“Thanks.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket, looked at the screen and whispered, “Shit. It’s Astrid.”

“Who’s Astrid?” Harry asked, his voice rough like he needed to swallow. “Sorry, that’s none of my business. Is she your girlfriend?”

“No, she’s my manager,” I replied absently, looking at the messages on my phone.

I’m about to call you. You need to answer!— was the first message.

Our little problem just got a whole lot bigger!— was the second.

The third message was a photo of an envelope sitting inside an open drawer, or more precisely, the drawer of the desk in my dressing room back in LA.

“Oh fuck,” I uttered.

“Dean? Is everything okay?”

A second later, my phone rang. It was Astrid.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I really have to take this.” I turned and walked to the end of his porch, inhaling deeply before answering. “Astrid? What’s going on?”

Before I heard her voice I heard the sound of a cigarette lighter igniting. Astrid only ever smoked when she was stressed. “Dean, darling, I’m sorry to break it to you but your bloody stalker is back. I’ve just found another letter in your dressing room. Whoever this nutter is, they’ve broken into your home to leave their latest crazy-as-fuck calling card.”

“Oh shit. Really? How did they get in?”

“I have no idea, there’s literally no sign of a break-in anywhere inside the house. Bogdan is still searching the grounds to see if he can find any clues outside.”

“What are you doing at my house anyway?”

“I was looking for some of the rings you wore onstage during your last concert. The record label wants to auction them off for some charity event. I opened the top drawer on your desk and there was the letter, just sitting there. I’ve got to admit, this one scares me.”

I felt my stomach turn. “What does it say?”

I could hear Astrid take a puff on her cigarette then the rustle of paper. “It says, ‘Sing one more note and die. Release one more record and die. Leave LA... or die.’”

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

“Dean, darling, I know there’s a chance that this crazy fuck is just messing with you,

but there's also a chance things could get serious. The gossip rags already know you've left town, they know you're in Wisconsin, apparently someone took a snap of you signing autographs at the airport. If this secret psycho admirer of yours is on your trail, I'm worried they're going to come looking for you in Clodhopper County."

"Mulligan's Mill," I corrected automatically.

"You know what I mean. The way I see it, we have two choices."

"Which are?"

"Number one, we get the police involved. That'll mean an investigation here in LA as well as getting the state police in Wisconsin involved to make sure this lunatic—"

"No! No cops. This town is my home. It's the one safe haven I have left. I don't need the police scaring the hell out of everyone in Mulligan's Mill."

"Dean, this stalker could be from anywhere. Did you ever consider the person writing these letters could already live in Mulligan's Mill? It could be anybody. A school bully, a jealous girlfriend... anybody you've ever met could be responsible for trying to end your career."

"Then maybe I should."

Astrid paused. "Should what? What are you talking about?"

"Maybe I should end my career."

"Oh Dean, darling. Don't let some crazy fuck destroy your dreams. Your journey to fame has only just begun. You have the potential to be the most successful artist of your generation. Don't let anyone take that away from you, especially not some

crackpot who likes to cut and paste letters out of a magazine to try and frighten you.”

I took a breath. “All right then, what’s option two?”

“Option two is I fly over there to at least try and monitor your safety. I’ll bring Bogdan with me. I know he may not be discreet, but if you need a bodyguard, he’ll get the job done.”

“No, you can’t—”

“Dean, darling, this is my final offer. Believe me when I tell you that today’s to-do list did not include buying a ticket to Hayseed Hollow—”

I rolled my eyes. “Mulligan’s Mill.”

“But I’m willing to pack my bags and several cans of mosquito repellent to ensure your safety.” She paused a moment. “Dean, you’re my star. You’re the light I’ve always wanted shining on my career. Every day you burn brighter and brighter. I’m not going to let anyone dim that now. I won’t let anyone hurt you or your career. Do you hear me?”

I sighed heavily, nervously, a shudder of a breath. “All right then. Thank you.”

“Darling boy, you never have to thank me. Although you could show your undying appreciation by booking me and Bogdan into the Mulligan’s Mill Hilton, or Marriott, or any five-star hotel will do just fine.”

I was silent.

Astrid groaned over the phone. “Oh my God, there’s no fucking Hilton, is there?”

“No. But there’s a very nice BnB run by Benji and Bastian.”

“How quaint,” she said flatly, clearly unimpressed. “I’ll book us on the first flight out tomorrow. See you then.”

I hung up the phone, turned around, and saw Harry still standing by his doorway.

All I wanted to do was cry.

All I wanted to do was throw myself into his arms.

All he did was say, “That sounded... bad. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but... that sounded bad. You need someone to talk to?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He smiled gently. “Come on in.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

HARRY

I thought he was going to cry.

I thought his legs might cave beneath him.

I wanted to rush to him and take him in my arms and lay his head against my chest and let his tears soak through my shirt. I was ready for my heart to soak up his pain.

But I was pretty sure Dean didn't want my arms, or my chest, or my heart.

So instead, I opened the front door, juggling the gifts in my arms as I did, and gestured for him to come inside.

Dean had been inside my house only once before. He was maybe twelve or thirteen at the time, a skinny kid who had fallen off his bike on the way home from school. I happened to be driving by, so I picked him up, lifted his bike into the back of my truck, and drove him back to my place where I patched up his knee and gave him a hot chocolate before driving him home.

He was a good kid, my best friend's kid, someone I would help and protect and care for because in a way he was family. But I saw nothing in him then other than a boy who was all skin and bones with shoes too big for his feet on account of the fact that Andy liked to buy him clothes he'd "grow into," to save him forever buying new clothes for his constantly sprouting son.

It was long before Dean came of age.

It was long before Dean transformed.

It was long before I saw him as someone completely new and different and altogether... fuckable .

And yet, as hot as Dean was to me now, I knew my chances of touching him, kissing him, having him, were zero.

Hell, they were less than zero given the fact that the kid was a famous rock star.

Now that the two of us were alone in my house, I didn't even know where to start except to say, "You want a hot chocolate? Whatever's happened, will it help if I make a hot chocolate?"

Dean chuckled and I felt stupid. "Harry, I'm not a kid anymore."

No, he wasn't a kid at all.

Then he paused, rethinking his answer and quietly saying, "Actually, a hot chocolate would be... nice."

I set all the gifts—his and mine—on the kitchen counter. "Marshmallow?" I'd never offered a famous rock star a marshmallow in his hot chocolate before. I felt stupid again.

"Oh yeah," he smiled. "Yes please."

I smiled back. "Two hot chocolates with marshmallows coming right up. Why don't you take a seat on the sofa and relax."

I heated milk and cocoa in the microwave.

I stirred in some sugar and plopped marshmallows into the mugs, letting them bob in the foamy milk.

I took our drinks to the sofa and handed one to him, then sat beside him.

We sipped.

“God that tastes good,” he said with froth on his top lip.

I grinned. “You have a little... here... let me.”

I touched my finger to his upper lip before I even knew what I was doing, gently wiping the foam away.

I didn’t quite know what to do with it after that, so I quickly put my finger in my mouth and sucked it off.

A hard-on sprang up so fast in my jeans it actually hurt .

I couldn’t help but glance down at his crotch, just to get a glimpse, hoping to fulfill the fantasy that there was something going on in his pants too. But his hands were in his lap, covering the one thing I wanted to see.

I raised my gaze quickly, shifting on the couch, stifling a grunt of pain... unsuccessfully.

“You okay?” Dean asked.

“Yeah. I’m... good. Burnt my tongue, that’s all. How are you? I know it’s none of my business but... do you wanna talk about that phone call?”

He looked down at the marshmallow bobbing in his hot chocolate and shook his head. I couldn't tell if he was embarrassed or uncertain or—

“Are you scared to talk about it? Dean, is something scaring you? Because if it is, I can kick whoever's ass I need to kick.”

His face brightened as he looked up. “You'd do that? For me?”

“Of course I would,” I answered. Before adding, “You're my best friend's son. We're family.”

The second it came out of my mouth I kicked myself.

Dean's smile faded a little. “Yeah, we're family. You're like... an uncle to me.”

God, no!

I didn't want to protect him just because he was Andy's son.

I didn't want to protect him because I was some stupid uncle figure to him.

I wanted to protect him because I loved him .

“I'm okay, really,” he said, looking back down at his marshmallow. “It's just that... life in the fast lane. Sometimes it gets a little too fast. I'm okay. I'm old enough to handle myself, at least in most situations.”

“Why do I get the feeling there's something you're not telling me?”

“Harry, everything's fine.”

“No it’s not. Dean, I heard your voice. You sounded... afraid of something. You know you can talk to me.”

He was silent for a moment—

More than a moment—

Until eventually he raised his head and said, “You have to promise not to tell my dad. I don’t want Dad to worry about me. He doesn’t get the whole fame thing. He doesn’t wanna know anything about it... especially not the bad stuff.”

I took my mug and his and set them both down on the coffee table.

My hand inched across the sofa, closer to him.

God how I wanted to hold him.

“Dean, what kind of ‘bad stuff’ are you talking about?”

He exhaled, a long quavering breath, then said, “The worst stuff. Harry, I think someone’s stalking me.”

“What do you mean, ‘you think someone’s stalking you?’”

“I know someone’s stalking me. There are letters. Whoever it is keeps leaving letters for me. Threatening letters. I think someone wants to kill me if I don’t leave LA.”

“Oh my God, Dean! We need to call the police.” I couldn’t hold my hand back. Instantly I reached out and laid my large paw on his thigh. I squeezed his leg, desperate to shield him from harm, determined to let him know I would keep him safe no matter what, furious at whoever had scared him so.

He looked down at my hand on his thigh.

I was about to remove it, thinking I'd made things even worse, thinking I'd made him feel even more uneasy in his vulnerable state.

But instead, he laid his hand on mine and held it there.

He looked at me directly.

I saw his confusion, his fear, the lost look in his beautiful blue eyes.

He shook his head. "I don't want the police involved. My manager, Astrid, she's flying here tomorrow. She's bringing my bodyguard. I don't want anyone to panic, I don't want anyone to worry about me... but I also don't want to leave Mulligan's Mill. Not yet. Not while things seem so... dangerous."

Before I could stop myself I reached for him.

I wrapped my arms around him.

I pulled him in so close, so tight, I was worried he couldn't breathe.

But he could breathe, because I heard him crying.

I felt his hot, frightened breaths against my shoulder.

I ran my large fingers through his blond hair and cradled his head against the crook of my neck, listening as he uttered, "Harry, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I told you all this. I never meant to..."

But I quietened him with slow rocking motions. "Shhh, it's alright, Dean. I'm here

for you. I'll protect you no matter what. I'll stop whoever's doing this to you. I'll make everything alright, I promise."

He pulled his head from my neck to look at me. Tears had reddened his blue eyes. "You will?"

I nodded. "Oh yes. Oh God yes."

I suddenly realized how close our faces were, his sweet teary breath mingling with mine.

I suddenly realized how intensely he was gazing into my eyes.

I suddenly realized I needed to kiss him.

I had to kiss him.

I... I...

I sat back. I pulled my fingers from his hair and clasped both his shoulders in my hands, like an uncle giving his nephew a reassuring squeeze for luck before a big game. "We're going to get you through this. We're going to make sure nobody hurts you. And we're going to figure out who the hell is sending you those letters. Just tell me what I need to do first."

He looked pained.

He looked bewildered.

Then he seemed to process his next steps, and with a nod of his head he said, "I think I need to find somewhere for Astrid and Bogdan to stay. Benji and Bastian's is the

only place in town. Do you... do you think you could drive me over there so I can book them in?"

"Of course."

I moved to stand but he grabbed my arm. "Harry, I don't want anyone to know about the letters. Promise me you won't tell anyone. Especially not my dad."

I wanted to hug him again.

I wanted to hold him in my arms till the end of time.

Instead, I simply nodded. "I promise."

DEAN

He had held me in his arms.

He had cradled my head against him, and I could smell him, almost taste him, feel the hairs on his neck brush gently against my cheek, my nose, my lips.

God, I thought for a second he was going to lean in and kiss me.

My heart ached and swelled at the same time, thinking about what might have been had he kissed me.

Would the day ever come?

The swelling in my chest subsided, leaving only that lasting, lingering ache.

Of course that day would never come.

Harry was straight, you idiot. He'd probably already planned his first date with Madeline. Anyone could see that courtship coming a mile away. They were perfect for each other—similar ages, normal careers, both good-looking and funny and hell, I could practically hear the wedding bells already.

And yet, walking up the steps to Benji and Bastian's BnB, I still desperately wanted to reach out and take his hand, or at least entwine my fingers with his, or at least brush my knuckles against his knuckles. I longed to touch him once more, and found myself trying to think of ways I could... and get away with it.

Before I knew it we were standing on the porch, and his hand was reaching for the big brass doorknob of the BnB's front door.

I quickly reached for it too, seeing a chance to "accidentally" touch him.

And for the briefest of moments, like a zap of electricity, our hands collided on the knob, his landing on top of mine.

I heard him gasp audibly, before he quickly retracted his hand, smiled awkwardly and said, "After you."

God, had I just scared him off?

Had I moved too rashly?

Had I ruined my chances of discreetly touching him again?

I'd have to choose my moments wisely, be smart about when and how I seized my opportunities.

I'd have to be content with the slightest of contact, the tiniest of touches, nothing that could ever be construed as intentional or intimate or, God forbid, romantic.

Without hesitating another moment, I opened the door to the BnB, and there behind the antique check-in desk stood Benji and Bastian...

Kissing passionately...

Hands running through each other's hair...

Voices moaning muffled I love yous into each other's mouths.

“Oh shit,” Harry said. “Perhaps we should come back later.”

Instantly Benji and Bastian snapped out of their kiss, their faces flushing red hot.

Benji practically knocked his glasses off his face trying to straighten them, to look and see who had just entered the BnB.

Bastian cleared his throat, shuffled papers on the desk, and in the worst attempt at acting I’d ever seen in my life said loudly, “How are the reservations looking for today, Benji? Are there any new bookings that need to be added to the system?” He looked up and smiled at us, as though noticing us for the first time. “Oh look, Benji. We have visitors. Harry... Dean... please come in.”

“Are you sure it’s a good time?” I asked. “I mean, we can always come back later.”

“No, please come in,” said Benji. “It’s great to see you both.” He looked from Harry to me and back again and asked, trying not to sound surprised, “Are you looking for a room? Together?”

“No!” Harry and I both said, a little too emphatically, although the thought of it made my cock surge.

“Dean needs to make a booking for some friends of his,” Harry said as we stepped up to the check-in desk.

“Actually, it’s for my manager and her...” Don’t say bodyguard. Benji and Bastian will freak if you say bodyguard. “And her boyfriend.”

“That’s great,” Benji said. “We can put them in our most romantic suite.”

“Oh! Um, actually, I think they’d prefer separate rooms.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he’s a terrible snorer. Sleeping in separate rooms is the one thing that keeps their love alive.”

Benji and Bastian gave each other a curious look, as though they couldn’t imagine ever being separated again, before Benji said, “Well, if that’s what makes them happy. I guess.”

Dad had told me about Benji and Bastian’s unexpected reunion, how Bastian had fought cancer and returned to the one person he cared for most in the world, begging for forgiveness, begging to be loved once more. Dad had told me that story over the phone, and I had to choke back my tears as I pined for such a love.

I was conscious of my eyes beginning to water again now as I looked at the two of them, their arms touching, their bodies so close they might as well have been joined at the hip.

I was jealous.

I was spellbound.

I was in awe of their love.

Thankfully, before I could embarrass myself by spilling a tear, a voice called from the nearby staircase. “Harry? Is that you? Thank Christ, you’ve come to sweep me off my feet?”

We all turned to see Benji’s cousin Connie swanning down the stairs, face lit up and eyes glued to Harry. I had to admit I didn’t know Connie very well, but I’d seen her around town a few years ago while I was at school. She’d lived with the Larsons for a

while, and I could only assume she was back. All I remembered was that she was kinda loud and free-spirited. I guess things hadn't changed.

Like an eagle spotting a mouse in the forest, she suddenly swooped down the staircase and practically threw herself over the check-in desk in front of Harry, draping her body suggestively on the vintage desktop.

Oh my God, I thought to myself. Harry had women falling all over him. How the hell was he still single?

How the... hell?

Suddenly I wondered... maybe he wanted to be single. Or maybe he was...

"Oh hey, Connie," Harry said in a faltering, almost quivering voice.

"Hey yourself," Connie said with an open-mouthed wink. "What brings you to the inn, big fella?"

Before he could answer, Benji gave his cousin a good shove, pushing her off the desk. "Connie, do you mind? You're interrupting the guests."

"Guests?" Connie said, looking from Harry to me before grinning from ear to ear. "Oh my God, are you two getting a room together? Can I join you?"

"No!" Harry and I said in unison once more, before Harry clarified. "We're not getting a room together. Dean is here to book a couple of rooms for—"

"Wait a minute," Connie said, quickly zeroing her gaze in on me now. "Are you Dean Reeves? As in the Dean Reeves? Holy shit, I heard some big shot record company snatched you up and swept you off to LA. Didn't you do that song... what was it

called... ‘Spanner of my Heart’?”

“ Hammer of my Heart,” Harry corrected her, before looking at me and adding, “Connie’s not very good at identifying tools.”

Rather than be offended, Connie purred at Harry. “Maybe you should strap on that big old tool belt of yours and teach me.”

Benji rolled his eyes and said to Bastian, “Babe, would you mind sorting out a booking for Dean and Harry. Connie and I need to tend to something in the kitchen.” He walked around the check-in desk, grabbed Connie by the forearm, and began dragging her away.

“What?” she protested. “I was just making polite conversation.”

“About Harry’s tool belt?” Benji whispered harshly. “I know you, Connie. You were literally three seconds away from asking if his jackhammer needed a good lube.”

Connie giggled. “Actually, I was about to ask if he needed someone to hold his monkey wrench, but the jackhammer line is even better. Note to self!”

“Oh my God, you’re incorrigible!”

With that, he hauled her through the kitchen door and slammed it behind them.

Bastian gave a polite, “Mmmm. Sorry about that. Ever since we made her head of housekeeping, she thinks she owns the place. At least she refrained from slapping anyone on the ass this time.” He beamed his widest smile as if to say moving right along . “Now, what name shall I make the booking under?”

\* \* \*

Harry drove me back home, and for a moment we were silent in the car before he said, “Dean, I’m worried about you. Are you sure you don’t want to drive straight over to Sheriff Gates and tell him what’s going on?”

“No. Please. I don’t want to make a big deal over this. It’s probably nothing. I know it’s nothing. Besides, I came home to get away from everything in LA. The last thing I want is to bring all that drama and trouble back with me. Mulligan’s Mill is my one place to hide away. It’s my shelter. It’s my home. Calling the police, telling Sheriff Gates... all that’s gonna do is make me feel unsafe all over again, even here. I don’t want that. Promise me it won’t come to that.”

And that’s when it happened.

That’s when Harry—my Harry—reached across and held my hand.

“I told you before. I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

He squeezed my hand so tight I thought my heart was going to burst from my chest. I struggled to speak, struggled to breathe. He still had the bandage wrapped around his hand and it crinkled up in our grip.

“Your bandage,” I said, my voice barely audible. “We should change your bandage. Would you like me to...”

Suddenly he seemed overly self-conscious.

Suddenly he pulled his hand away from mine.

“It’s alright. I think it’s healing just fine.”

He pulled the truck up to the curb outside my house. He jumped out and hurried

around to my side of the car to open the door, but I was already halfway out. I had my new toothbrush and bottle of cologne with me.

“Thanks for the gifts.”

“They’re not gifts, they’re just replacements for the stuff I broke.”

“Right. Replacements.” I turned for the house, then back to him and said, “Well, I guess I’ll see you... sometime soon.”

He nodded. “Sometime.” He left off the word “soon.”

What did that mean?

Didn’t he want to see me again?

Didn’t he know how bad I ached for him?

How could he not see this was killing me?

Then again, I didn’t want him to see.

I didn’t want him to know.

I didn’t want him to suspect a thing, because if he did it would only mean he’d want to make up excuses not to see me ever again... he’d have to avoid me whenever he could... he’d have to break my heart and tell me he didn’t feel the same way I did.

I turned and started to walk toward the house.

That’s when I heard his footsteps hurrying up behind me.

I felt him grab my forearm and spin me around.

I gasped and he gazed into my eyes, and for a moment—just one fleeting moment—I thought once more that he might press his lips to mine.

I wanted him to.

I almost cupped my hand around the back of his head and forced his lips to mine.

But I held back.

Choose your moments.

Be smart.

Be discreet.

I inhaled. Exhaled. Inhaled again as though he wasn't sure what he was about to say or how to say it. Then he breathed, "I... I wish you could stay in Mulligan's Mill. If there's danger back there... if there's danger anywhere... I don't want you to leave. I can keep you safe here... but if you leave...."

His voice trailed off.

I didn't know what to say, and even if I did, the words would have caught in my throat.

I took too long to respond, and before I knew it he was letting go of my forearm...

Returning to his truck...

Starting it up...

Driving away.

And all I could think was—

Harry.

HARRY

I paced the floor of my living room, muttering over and over to myself—“Fuck! I could have kissed him. He could have kissed me. We were so close. What the fuck is going on?”

I stopped and backed myself up to the sofa, bouncing onto it with a feeling of elation... dread... hope... panic.

That night I took the framed photo of Dean and placed it on my nightstand.

I masturbated, not taking my eyes away from his handsome face.

The next day I busied myself at the store. I let Gage take the counter while I replenished the stocks of two-by-fours and fence pickets out back. I drove the forklift back and forth, loading pallets of pavers and marble countertops and bags of river stones into the storeroom. I did everything I could to avoid making conversation with my customers and even my staff, my head a blur of thoughts and my heart a flurry of emotions.

I tried frantically to clear my mind.

I tried in vain to suppress my desires.

I tried like hell to pull myself out of the rabbit hole that led to Dean.

But all I could think was—

You're a secret on the wind

You're a stolen work of art

You're the one I've always wanted

You're the hammer of my heart

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

From the steps of the BnB, I watched the limo cross Main Street Bridge before pulling up in front of us, looking as out of place as a giraffe in a chicken coop. If I'd thought their arrival in town might go unnoticed, I was sadly mistaken.

"These are your friends?" Benji asked on one side of me.

"My manager. And..." Don't say bodyguard. "Her boyfriend. Yes."

On the other side of me, Bastian said to Benji, "Should we ask Connie to run over to your Mom's and get the good china? I think we need the good china."

"Oh my God, stop turning into my mother," Benji replied. "Besides, I sent Connie to Eau Claire to pick up a bunch of refills of Great Nan's medication. And thank God for that. I'm happy to have Connie change the sheets and dust the lamps, God knows she needs something to keep her busy. But the last guest she greeted at check-in ended up filing a restraining order against her. The last thing we need is for her to get on the wrong side of some bigwig from LA. Those people know how to sue!" He patted me on the shoulder and added, "No offence, Dean. I don't think of you as an out-of-towner. You're one of us. You always will be."

The comment warmed my nervous heart. "Thanks, Benji."

The driver exited the limo first, hurrying around to open the back passenger door, but Bogdan had already shouldered it open and squeezed his hulking frame out of the vehicle, before offering his hand to help Astrid out of the car.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, I don’t need your bloody hand,” came Astrid’s voice, her British accent sharply clipping each word. “I don’t need any help, I need a fucking cigarette! Had I known it would take three planes and a moth-eaten 1978 Limousine to get me from Beverly Hills to Bumfuck Alabama I might have thought twice about it. Just tell me where Dean is so I can convince him to return to civilization.”

Bogdan pointed up the stairs to me, but Astrid had already spotted me. “Oh, thank God, you’re still alive,” she exhaled.

“Yes, I’m alive. And you’re in Wisconsin, not Alabama.”

“You know what I mean,” Astrid said, snatching a cigarette out of the open pack that Bogdan offered her before he lit it.

A plume of relief billowed from her lungs as she climbed the steps to the BnB where I stood with Benji and Bastian. She looked the old building up and down and said to me, “Well, doesn’t this place look quaint. I hope you’ve booked me a massage at the day spa. After that journey, I’m going to need to decompress before I tell you about my brilliant new plan to solve this whole debacle.”

“Um... I’m sorry but we don’t have a day spa,” said Benji, followed by an overly cordial, “Please let me introduce myself. My name’s Benji, and this is my partner Bastian. Welcome to our BnB.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” she said, ignoring his hand and pulling her phone from her pocket and trying to check her messages. “It’d be even more of a pleasure if I could get a fucking signal anywhere in this town. Please tell me you have Wi-Fi.”

“Of course,” said Bastian. “All of our rooms come with Wi-Fi, as well as air-conditioning, a minibar, coffee and tea facilities, not to mention—”

“Enough said. You had me at minibar. Just promise me you have Grey Goose.”

Benji glanced sideways at Bastian and said uncertainly, “Actually, I don’t think goose hunting season starts till September.”

“Oh my God,” said Astrid, blowing out the last puff of her cigarette. “I don’t need a rifle, I need a drink. Someone get me a bloody drink!”

\* \* \*

Astrid unpacked her suitcase like a gust of wind plucking clothes off a clothesline and hurling them in all directions. Some landed haphazardly on the dresser, some flopped at the foot of the antique closet, others landed on the bed until she found what she was looking for.

“I always bring my own,” she said, holding up a bottle of vodka. “In case of emergency, smash glass.”

“Please don’t break the bottle,” I said, taking it from her and opening the lid. “There are less dramatic ways to get a drink around here.”

“Chin chin, darling. Just please don’t tell me I have to drink it out of a teacup.”

“Relax. Benji and Bastian provide tumblers for their guests. They’re not neanderthals, you know.” I poured us each a drink, then turned to see her lighting another cigarette.

“Astrid, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m lighting a ciggie.”

“You can’t smoke in here.”

“Oh please, darling. Nobody’s ever going to know. Do you see a smoke detector anywhere? No, that’s because this place is older than Mick Jagger’s dance moves, and that’s saying something. At least if I die in a fire, I know I’ll only have myself to blame.” She reached into her bag and pulled out one last item... an envelope. “Speaking of threats to one’s life...”

She handed it to me.

I opened it, and there pasted onto a piece of paper—each letter a different size, a different font, from a different magazine or newspaper—was the message Astrid had read to me over the phone.

Sing one more note and die. Release one more record and die. Leave LA. or die.

I sat on the bed and stared at the words, unable to take my eyes off them until Astrid sat beside me, wrapping one arm around my shoulders.

“You know we can beat this bastard, don’t you? You know we can beat him at his own game.”

I looked at her. “We can? How?”

“Rats like this, they need to be flushed out. So... we flush him out.”

“How?”

“We hold a concert. We lure him to us. And we catch him at his own game.”

“What do you mean, we lure him to us? How?”

“By using you as the bait.”

“Bait?” I freaked out. “But I don’t wanna be bait!”

“Dean, darling, listen to me. I’ll hire an army of security personnel to make sure you’re safe. I will do everything in my power to protect you. But until we try to flush this fucker out, this twisted game of his is never going to end. You need to trust me on this.”

I huffed for air.

My head was spinning.

My eyes were welling with tears.

“I never signed up for this,” I panted. “I never wanted this. All I ever wanted to do was write songs that people liked.”

Astrid took her arm off my shoulder and took my chin in her hand, turning my face to hers. “The moment you try to do something that people like, that’s the moment the haters come for you. My darling boy, let’s stop this hater before he does something we’ll all regret. Let me put on a concert and flush this fucker out.”

“But I’m not ready to go back to LA yet.”

Astrid shook her head. “I’m not talking about holding a concert in LA. Whoever your stalker is, they’ve already seen your LA shows. They’ve been watching your every move on the West Coast, and I have no doubt they’ve seen the tabloids. They know you’re here. Darling, the only way to bring this scum to the surface is to lure them right... to... you.”

I caught my breath. “You mean...?”

Astrid nodded. “Uh-huh. The only way to catch this bastard, is to hold a concert right here, in Bumpkin Bayou.”

“It’s Mulligan’s Mill. Astrid, there’s not a swamp in sight.”

“Darling, I don’t even know what a bayou is, and I’m quite certain I never want to know. But I do know that holding a concert here in...” she waved her cigarette-holding hand as though trying to summon the name of the town by magic.

I helped her out. “Mulligan’s Mill.”

“Yes, Mulligan’s Mill. That’s the place. By holding a concert here, I’m certain we’ll draw your stalker out and end this reign of fear forever.”

“But... but...”

“But what?”

“But Mulligan’s Mill doesn’t know how to put on a concert. Nobody in this town wants to put on a concert. I don’t think anybody in this town has ever been to a concert before.”

“You know what they say; there’s a first time for everything. I’ll call in the marketing and events team immediately. I saw the park across the way as we drove into town. It’s perfect for an outdoor concert. It’ll be just like Coachella, but in the woods of Montana.”

“We’re in Wisconsin.”

“You know what I mean.” Astrid gasped excitedly. “Oh my God, I think Benson Boone has an opening later this week. He can do a guest appearance. I’m calling his

manager right now.”

“You want to bring Benson Boone to my stalker concert?”

“Darling, at the first sign of danger we’ll get Benson to sweep you up into his arms and carry you to safety, stage left. Just imagine! The cameras of the paparazzi flashing, the crowds screaming, and you in Benson’s arms. Money can’t buy that kind of publicity! Who do I need to talk to in this town to get an event up and running? Who organizes all of your town parades and Christmas festivities and whatever cornball carousels you put on here?”

I tried to breathe. I tried to act as calm as possible. “That would be... Harry.”

“I need his number. Where’s my phone? Oh my God, I was promised Wi-Fi!”

And all I could utter to myself was, “What have I done?”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

HARRY

“What am I doing?” I asked myself, standing in the shower, breathless and squeezing the last drops of cum from my thick, soap-slicked dick.

Ever since Dean had returned to town my libido was out of control. Fuck, I hadn’t masturbated this much since I was a teenager.

In the shower.

In my bed.

In the kitchen.

God, I even jerked off on the couch the night before while watching two male penguins spoon each other on National Geographic.

It wasn’t until I dressed and went downstairs that I sniffed the air and realized—“Oh shit, this whole house smells like jizz.” Which normally wouldn’t have been an issue except—“Oh fuck, Madeline’s coming over for dinner tonight!”

I yanked open the bathroom cupboards in search of a house deodorizer, a scented candle, anything that might mask the smell of excessive masturbation. Nothing. I opened all the doors and windows hoping a breeze might blow the stink of solo sex away, but there wasn’t a puff of wind in the air. I grabbed a newspaper and fanned the room, but it only seemed to spread the waft of wanking. I’d read once that serial killers masturbate up to seven times a day, and I panicked even more. “Jesus Christ,

she's going to think I'm Jeffrey Dahmer."

I needed to buy something to take the smell away.

I also needed to buy—"Dinner! Shit! I've got nothing to cook for dinner." I remembered Pascal's new range of freshly baked pies. And Bud's Blooms was next door. I called Gage and asked him to take care of the store. Only when I hung up did I notice the three missed calls on my phone, all from a number I didn't know. I must have been too busy whacking off to hear the phone ring.

I ignored it, grabbed the keys to the truck, and left the house.

\* \* \*

The moment I stepped into Pascal's Patisserie, I felt a strange energy in the air. Customers seated at tables inside the café gossiped excitedly as Lonnie Larson, Benji's mom, came rushing up to me, tucking her notepad and pen into the pocket of her waitress's apron.

"Harry! Have you heard the news? Oh, you must have, you'll no doubt be the one they need to cordon off the streets and help set up the stage."

I shook my head, confused. "Cordon off the streets? Set up the stage? Lonnie, what on earth are you talking about?"

"You don't know? There's going to be a big rock concert, right here in Mulligan's Mill. You know Dean Reeves, Andy's son? He's a big rock star now and he's going to hold a concert in the park. They're calling it 'Dean's Homecoming Concert.'"

The shock of the news made me physically queasy. "He's doing what? When?"

“This Friday night. Apparently, tickets are almost sold out already. His fans will be pouring in from all over the country.”

“He can’t.”

Lonnie looked confused. “What do you mean, he can’t? Isn’t this what he does? Sing songs? Record albums? Perform concerts?”

“Yes, but... not here. He came here to get away from all that, not to bring it with him.”

“I guess he changed his mind. Now, what can I get you?”

Hurriedly I ordered a chicken and leek pie, then—based on recommendations from Bud himself who clearly knew the difference between a marigolden-girl and a real marigold—scooped up no less than four bunches of the most aromatic flowers I could find, before racing home, packing the food in the fridge and sitting the flowers in a sink full of water to keep them alive before returning to my truck and charging over to Andy’s.

When I pulled up out front, I saw that Andy’s truck was gone. He must have been out on a job, and I was thankful for that at least.

I ran to the front door and knocked on it loudly.

There was no answer.

I knocked again, even harder, and when there was no response, I raced around the side of the house, across the back yard and up to the door of Dean’s studio shed.

“Dean? Are you there?” I rapped my knuckles frantically on the door.

Dean pulled it open while I was still knocking.

He was standing there, wearing nothing but a towel he held around his slim waist, his firm young body shiny and wet.

“Harry?” he said. “Everything okay?”

“No. What’s this I hear about a concert? Are you seriously going to put on a concert... here... in Mulligan’s Mill?”

“Astrid called you, huh?”

“No.” I remembered the missed calls. “Maybe. Someone tried calling me.”

“That was Astrid. The concert’s her idea, and she’s moving full steam ahead with it. She’s already had the permits cleared through Sheriff Gates, then she was going to call you to go through the logistics. The AV production team arrives tomorrow. They want to start building the stage in the park first thing in the morning.”

“But... but... I thought you came here to take a break from all that. What happened to lying low? What happened to getting away from all the chaos and craziness of LA.? Not to mention, you have a stalker to worry about.”

He didn’t answer, at least not straight away. Instead, he reached forward, grabbed the front of my T-shirt, and pulled me into his studio, shutting the door behind me.

He sat me on his bed, then plonked himself beside me, still holding the ends of the towel at his waist. Shit, he hadn’t even tied it around him properly.

Not that it was time to think about Dean wearing nothing but a towel...

Still dripping wet from the shower...

His blond hair dangling in his eyes and his taut muscles gleaming.

No, now wasn't the time for any of that.

The stalker! All I could think about at that moment was Dean's stalker.

"He's the main reason Astrid wants to hold the concert," Dean explained. "She says it's a chance to flush this creep out."

"She wants to use you as bait to find your stalker?!"

He nodded nervously. "She's hiring a bunch of private security guards to make sure—"

"No. I won't allow it," I stated in a stern, clear voice.

Dean's lips curled into a smile. "You won't allow it?"

"Are you laughing at me?"

"No! Not at all. You just sound so fucking gallant right now."

"That's because I don't want anything to happen to you. This psycho could turn up with a knife or a gun, has Astrid thought about that? What happens then?"

"Hopefully that won't happen. But if it does..." Gingerly he laid a hand on my thigh. "Then hopefully you'll be there... to protect me."

In a single moment, my body seemed to forget how to breathe.

I froze, my eyes locked on his, my every muscle motionless. For a second or two I was even certain my heart had actually stopped beating. Then he gave my thigh a gentle squeeze, and my heart made up for lost time by breaking into a drumroll.

I tried to remember how my voice worked.

“I... I...”

I didn’t do such a great job at it.

It didn’t matter anyway, because before I could stop myself, I found something better to do with my mouth than speak.

Without another moment’s hesitation, I planted my lips on Dean’s.

I was fully expecting him to push me away.

But I didn’t care.

I was done caring.

I wanted to kiss him—I had to kiss him—as urgently and passionately as I could, before this would surely end with me apologizing profusely and him shouting at me to get out, telling me he never wanted to see me again.

But one, two, three seconds passed, and the kiss was still happening.

Not only was it still happening, but Dean was kissing me back!

His tongue pushed passed my lips into my mouth.

His breath was hot and shuddering, escaping his flaring nostrils and warming my upper lip.

His fingers dug into my muscled thigh, as though he wanted to claw my jeans off then and there.

I was in shock.

I was confused.

I took his jaw in my hand and pulled him out of the kiss, my eyes wide and staring into his baby blues as I uttered, “What’s happening right now?”

“You tell me,” he whispered back. “Didn’t you kiss me ? Why did you kiss me?”

“Because... I couldn’t hold back a second longer. I’ve wanted to kiss you for years.”

He smiled. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for years. Couldn’t you tell? Wasn’t it obvious? Harry, you’re the hammer of my heart. You always have been. I just never thought you’d feel the same way.”

I laughed and let out a long, quivering sigh of relief. “I never thought you’d feel the same way either. But I guess you do.”

He laughed too. “I know I do.”

We pressed our lips together once again.

This time our hands got busy as well.

The hand he had on my thigh slid between my legs. His other hand reached for the

back of my head, holding me in position so there was no way of pulling out of that kiss until he let me.

Meanwhile, I placed one hand on his bare back, my large hand sprawling across his muscles, fingers spreadeagled, feeling the rise and fall of his breath that trembled throughout his whole body. With my other hand, I dared to touch his towel, to let my hand rest against his thigh and slowly inch my way toward his crotch.

He groaned through our kiss and breathed into my mouth, “I want you to touch me. I want you to take me. I want you inside me so bad.”

My heartbeat quickened and air moved rapidly in and out through my nose.

He pressed my face harder against his, pushed his tongue farther down my throat like he wanted to choke me, devour me, consume me whole.

And I wanted him to.

It was permission enough for me to slide my hand beneath the towel, my rough fingers gliding over the smooth skin of his thigh until—

He gave a loud guttural groan as I found his hot hard cock.

I took it in my grip, squeezing it hard and he broke away from our kiss, threw his head back and cried out, “Oh fuck! Harry!”

Before I knew it, he had flung himself onto his back on the bed.

The towel was nothing but a tangled hindrance now.

I grabbed a corner of it and yanked it off him, hurling it across the room.

As it flapped to the floor, I stared down at the completely hard, naked, beautiful body splayed on the bed before me.

Dean ran his hands through his messy blond hair and gazed at me, grinning from ear to ear, nervous yet thrilled, his chest heaving, his legs spread wide, his perfect young cock long and hard and resting against his quivering abs, reaching all the way up to his navel.

“God, your gorgeous,” I breathed.

I wanted to touch him, I wanted to take him, just like he begged me to. But first, I just wanted to stare, to drink him in, to tell myself over and over again— no Harry, you’re not dreaming. This is actually happening. This is finally happening.

I stood from the bed.

I took the hem of my T-shirt in my hands and lifted it over my head, tossing it to the floor.

I pulled off my boots and socks, not losing eye contact with Dean for a single second as his cock flinched and slapped against his stomach, veins straining.

His fingers twirled through his hair.

His teeth bit down on his bottom lip.

He let the tiniest of groans of approval slip from his throat as I unbuckled my belt and whipped it off.

I opened the top button of my jeans, then pulled the zipper down over my bulge so fast I was amazed it didn’t catch on the cotton of my swollen jockey shorts.

With a shimmy of my hips I slid my jeans down to my ankles and kicked them off.

Dean laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I chuckled back.

His hands settled behind his head. “You and those dance moves of yours. They’re kinda hot.”

“They are?” I flashed a grin.

“Oh yeah. I’d love to see you up on a podium one of these days, dancing your heart out to a song.”

I dropped to my knees between his legs and said, “The only songs that get me moving are yours.”

He looked down the length of his body, past his rock-hard cock, eyes fixed on mine, breath tremulous again. “Is that true?”

“Um, actually, no. I don’t dance at all. I was just trying to be sexy.”

Dean bellowed with laughter, then said, “You don’t need to try. You are sexy. Harry, you’re the sexiest man I’ve ever met in my life.”

“I am? But I… I’m nobody. I’m just Harry.”

His smile faded, and in a faint, nervous voice he asked, “Will you be my Harry?”

A gush of air left my lungs.

I sucked in another, nodding, squatting down on my haunches and answering him by taking the base of his throbbing cock in one hand.

I pointed it upward, then positioned myself over it and breathed, “Yes. Oh, yes.”

I eyed the head of his handsome young cock. It bloomed brightly before me, blushing a beautiful bright pink, bulbous and proud and pushing crystals of pre-cum from its slit.

I opened my mouth wide, closed my eyes, and took him in.

He was warm and wet and oh-so sweet.

The mattress bounced a little as he threw his head back on it, while I began to take in more than just the crown of his cock. I tilted my head left and right, working my way down his shaft as I caressed the veined contours of his dick with my tongue. At the same time, I squeezed the base of his cock even harder in my grip, then began to twist my fist as I slid it halfway up the length of his mast to meet my mouth.

I sucked hard.

He groaned.

He spread his legs wider, and with my free hand I ran my fingers up his silky inner thighs until my index finger found his ass.

His groans turned to a series of grunts as my finger—then fingers —penetrated him, exploring his hot yearning passage, feeling his ass muscles loosen, tighten, loosen once more.

“Oh fuck,” he uttered, as though surrendering to me was his only option.

I sucked on his cock harder, faster.

My fingers delved deeper and deeper inside his ass.

His back arched.

His hips pushed themselves upward and with one hand he reached down and gripped my hair, forcing my head all the way down his cock.

His crown was full and throbbing against the back of my throat, almost gagging me.

I quickened my pace, sucking more furiously.

His loud, moan-filled panting fell in time with the motion of my mouth riding his cock, then turned to the hottest, most helpless whimpers I'd ever heard, as though he was almost begging for mercy.

"Uh... Uh... Oh God... I gotta come... please let me come!"

In response I sucked harder, faster, and soon his searing hot seed was surging into my mouth.

"Fuck!" he cried out, squeezing my hair as tight as he could and wrapping his legs around my shoulders. "Oh Harry! Jesus! Oh fuck! "

His body jolted.

Every muscle seemed to convulse as his cum gushed into my mouth in waves, and all I could do was swallow.

I drank that boy down like I'd just stumbled across a desert oasis.

I gulped.

He whimpered.

I moaned.

He groaned. “Harry! Harry! Oh Harry!”

I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.

His body bucked on the bed once more as I squeezed the last of his cum out of him, washing it down my throat before sliding his strapping young dick out of my mouth and grinning with delight.

“Good?” I muttered, wiping my mouth with a back of my hand and smearing some stray cum into my beard.

He didn’t answer. He only said, “Take your fucking jocks off. I want you. I want you inside me. I need you inside me. Now!”

He stroked his dick, refusing to let his erection wane. Impressively, his cock remained as thick and hard as ever. He let it smack against his abs, giving his muscled gut a light spritzing of post-cum. God I hoped there was more where that came from.

As if he read my mind, he winked and said, “Don’t worry, there’s more where that came from.”

My heart fluttered and I licked my lips.

Quickly I stood, squaring off my shoulders, flexing my chest and letting the

enormous bulge in my jockey shorts push against the fabric.

“Fuck,” whispered Dean. “What have you got in there, an anaconda?”

I didn’t say a word. I simply slid both my thumbs under the waistband and pushed my jocks down to my ankles, unleashing my slab of stiff, pulsing meat, roped with veins and already oozing pre-cum.

Dean’s eyes widened, whether in excitement or fear I couldn’t tell.

I kneeled on the bed.

I took his legs and hoisted them onto my hairy, boulder-like shoulders.

I was about to spit onto my palm before I remembered with a smile—“Peaches.”

I hurried into his bathroom to find his lube sitting on the counter.

“There are condoms in there too,” Dean called from the bed, before adding, “If any will fit.”

I chuckled, found the condoms, slid one onto my aching dick, then returned with the lube.

I resumed my previous position, kneeling between his legs, his ankles resting on my shoulders.

I slicked my dick with the lube and the scent of peaches filled the room.

I wet my fingers and slid them back into his ass, and suddenly Dean smelled like peaches too.

I set the bottle on his nightstand, took my cock in one hand, and pressed the palm of my other hand against his chest.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

He nodded silently.

“Just breathe easy. In and out.” His chest rose and fell under my palm. “In and out. In and—”

He cried out as I nudged the head of my cock inside him.

I stopped, he held his breath, and as he exhaled, I said, “And out.”

I pushed myself all the way inside him. “Dean? You okay?”

The veins on both sides of his neck bulged.

His eyes blinked frantically.

Then, with a calm and steady breath he nodded. “Yeah. I’m good.” A smile spread across his lips. “I’m better than good. I’m great.”

Slowly, carefully, I eased my cock out of him, not quite all the way. Then gently I pushed my way inside him again.

His passage had relaxed a little more, and I felt less resistance this time.

I slid inside him again and again.

He scrunched the sheets in his fists, but I could feel the tension slowly leaving his

body as he welcomed my cock, over and over.

I increased my rhythm, my thrusts growing faster.

With one hand he grabbed his own stiff cock in his fist and began stroking it roughly. “Take me,” he uttered. “Fuck me. Harder!”

I repositioned myself on my knees. I lifted his ass higher and began pounding him, my desire for him hungry and untamed now.

I wanted him to feel the heat of my cum as I filled the condom.

I wanted him to come all over his chest and stomach, I wanted to see how far he could shoot his load.

I didn’t have to wait long to find out.

The thought of it made me grunt with delight and pump his firm young body even harder. He groaned louder, a signal that he was about to come again.

My chest swelled.

My balls were ready to explode.

And then, with a guttural noise that sounded like it came from a dangerous animal, I cried out, “Fuck! I’m coming! I’m...”

Dean released the sheets, and one hand shot toward my nipple, twisting it hard.

It was more than enough to tip me over the edge.

“God! Fuck!” I roared.

I threw my head back, and with that I felt the rush of cum fill the head of the condom.

In the same moment, Dean cried out again.

I glanced down to see him unleash his second wave of semen, the white fluid splashing up his chest, spattering over his neck, and spooling onto his chin and lips.

Watching the impressive trajectory made even more cum gush from my dick into the condom.

Tremors rocked my body and I shuddered uncontrollably.

I took Dean’s narrow hips in my hands and thrust myself inside one last time, my pelvis locking against his ass cheeks as the last of my seed left my body, hot and swirling in the head of the condom.

Our panting and gasps began to ease as his body melted against the bed and I gently retreated from his passage, one final wince pinching up his face as I slowly pulled out.

My large hairy chest still heaving, I collapsed onto the bed beside him.

I gazed adoringly over his cum-covered body as I rolled the condom halfway up my still hard cock and slid it off. I fully intended for my cum to spill out of it, watching it ooze over my gut and mat my thick stomach fur. I swirled my fingers through it, then reached over and stroked Dean’s chest with my shiny fingers, mixing our seed together.

“That feels good.” He smiled, then leaned his face close and kissed me.

When he pulled back, his fingers joined mine in mixing our semen, then he lifted his fingers to his lips and licked them clean.

With our cum on his lips he kissed me again and I could taste the cocktail of our lovemaking, at once sweet and salty.

We kissed for what felt like an eternity of bliss, before laying our heads on the bed and staring into each other's eyes.

“My beautiful boy,” I whispered, touching my fingers to his cheek.

“My handsome Harry.” He smiled back at me, stroking my beard with his thumb.

DEAN

We fell asleep in each other's arms, our cum drying on our torsos and lips. I fell into a deep slumber, the kind of sleep that comes from utter contentment, from a feeling of peace, as though a battle I'd been having with my emotions was finally over. I could rest. I could be happy. Harry knew my secret. Harry was mine.

But when we woke in the late afternoon, Harry was up and in something of a panic.

"Harry? What's wrong?"

His jockey shorts were already on and he was sliding one leg then the other into his jeans. There was a serious look on his face that set alarm bells off inside my head.

"Harry?"

He pulled and scratched at his stomach where our cum had matted the hair and dried in clumps. "I need to wash that off. Can I use your bathroom?"

I felt a crack streak across my heart.

He wanted to wash me off him?

"Yeah. Of course," I said. But he was already heading to the bathroom. I heard water running, I heard splashing. I pulled myself quickly out of bed and hurried into the bathroom, stark naked. "Harry, what's going on?"

He was wiping his furry belly dry with my towel. The sight of it would normally have

turned me on, but I was too worried for that.

“I have to... I have to meet someone. I totally forgot, and now I’m late.”

“Who? Who do you have to meet?”

“It’s nobody...” I could see he wanted to tell me and he gave in quickly, his shoulders slumping slightly. “It’s Madeline.”

“Madeline? Why are you meeting Madeline, it’s almost dark outside.”

“Because...” He sighed, a sense of defeat taking hold of him. “Because she wanted to go on a date with me.”

“Oh.” That crack in my heart splintered off in a dozen different directions. “And you said yes?”

“I felt bad saying no. So yeah, I said yes. I didn’t think... you... me... I didn’t think we would ever happen. I thought that secret was going to stay bottled up inside me forever.” He smiled and stepped toward me. “But now it’s out of the bottle, all I wanna do is be with you. Forever.”

“Then stay.”

“I can’t. I can’t just leave her standing on my doorstep.”

He moved past me and pulled his T-shirt on, every muscle in his hairy torso flexing, creating an even greater ache in my chest.

When he sat on the bed to pull his shoes on, I sat beside him.

I rested my hand on his thigh and my dick started to stiffen again.

He saw and groaned. “Oh God, you’re making things harder.”

I gave him a gentle, sneaky smile. “Actually, you’re the one making things harder.” I took my erection in my other hand. “Don’t you wanna stay and do it all over again?”

He looked from my face down to my cock and licked his lips. “I do. God, yes, I so want that. But I can’t. Madeline is a nice person, I can’t just stand her up.”

My erection began to wane. “So, you’re just gonna go ahead with your date... after you spent the afternoon fucking me?”

He kissed me quickly, before my jealousy found more ways to make him feel bad. “Dean, please don’t be like that. And please let’s stop calling it a date. I’ll talk to her, I’ll let her down easy.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “I’ll simply tell her I’m not interested. I’ll tell her it’s me, not her.”

“Because nobody ever sounded gay saying that line before,” I said sarcastically.

“Hey,” he said, touching my cheek. “It’s okay. You’re not gonna lose me. I’ve been wanting you in silence for far too long to let you go now. You’ve got nothing to worry about.” His face suddenly shifted.

“What is it?” I asked.

He didn’t want to tell me what had crossed his mind, but I had a good idea he suddenly remembered my stalker, and the upcoming concert, and the fact that at some

point one of us or both of us was going to have to tell my dad what was going on between me and Harry. And I could see on his face that he realized I did have things to worry about.

He stood from the bed.

I grabbed his hand, not ready to let him leave.

“Dean, I have to go.”

I let his fingers slip from mine, and just like that he vanished out the door and disappeared into the twilight.

HARRY

Halfway home my phone buzzed, and I saw that the number on the screen was the same one from this morning. I could only assume it was Dean's manager wanting to talk about the event planning for the concert. I knew I couldn't ignore her call any longer. I answered the call.

"This is Harry Dalton."

"Finally!" came the sharp British accent over the phone. "You're a hard man to track down, Harry Dalton, do you know that? Don't bother answering, it's a rhetorical question and I don't have time to beat around the bush. My name's Astrid Aldridge, I'm—"

"I know who you are, Ms. Aldridge. Dean mentioned you."

"Good, then hopefully you know all about the concert we're holding on Friday night. I've already spoken to your sheriff and had all the necessary paperwork approved. Now all I need is someone to help me co-ordinate all the logistics and AV set-up. Apparently that someone is you, is that correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. I handle all the outdoor events in Mulligan's—"

"Good. I'll see you at six a.m. sharp tomorrow morning. My team will be bumping in the rigging and staging from seven. I hope you have plenty of perimeter fencing and bollards, we're expecting quite the crowd."

“Quite the crowd? How many people are we talking about exactly?”

“We don’t have precise numbers yet, but today’s pre-sale VIP tickets sold out in under a minute. Indications are we’ll have all ten thousand tickets sold by close -of -business tomorrow.”

“Ten thousand! They’ll overrun the whole town. Mulligan’s Mill can’t handle those sorts of numbers.”

“I’m afraid you have no option. It seems his fans can’t wait to see Dean in his hometown.”

With that she hung up.

“What the fuck?” I breathed to myself, my head spiraling into a panic over the thought of that many people descending upon Mulligan’s Mill. This was beyond the logistics of setting up a stage and AV rig. Every business in town would be overrun with concert-goers wanting food and accommodation and God only knew what else.

As my frantic train of thought rambled through my brain, I steered my way home on autopilot, pulling up out front of my house to see Madeline sitting on my front porch step, a bottle of wine beside her.

I jumped out of the car. “Madeline, I’m so sorry. I... I got held up.”

She smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s okay. You’re a busy guy, I get it. Although one more minute and I was about to smash the top off this bottle of chardonnay and start drinking.”

I helped her up off the step, fumbled with my keys, and opened the front door.

Instantly we were met with an overpowering smell.

“Wow, something smells nice,” she said.

Thankfully she was talking about the scent wafting from the lilies and lilacs I’d left in the sink, not jizz.

“I bought flowers, but I haven’t put them in vases yet, I got kinda waylaid. Come on in.”

I showed her into the living room with the kitchen and dining room off to one side. “You need some help? I’m good with flowers. I can help arrange them.”

“No, please. Sit down. Why don’t I open this wine and pour us each a glass, huh?”

Madeline gave me the bottle and took a seat on the sofa. I opened it and poured, taking her glass to her before turning the oven on, pulling the pie out of the fridge and scouring the cupboards for vases. I found three, all different shapes and sizes, filled them with water and plonked the flowers haphazardly into them.

I set one vase on the dining table, one on the mantle and one on a side table next to the sofa.

As I busied myself, Madeline asked, “Are you sure I can’t do something to help?”

“Not at all,” I said, sliding the pie into the oven. “I hope you like pie. Sorry it’s not homemade, but I picked it up from Pascal’s so it’s probably way better than anything I could have cooked anyway.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You seem flustered.”

“I’m fine. Today was just a little... unexpected.”

“Are you talking about Dean?”

I froze, my anxiety suddenly peaking. “What?” My voice was uncharacteristically, uncontrollably shrill.

What did Madeline know?

Had she seen me going into Dean’s backyard studio?

Had she heard us crying out in ecstasy?

Oh fuck!

“What about Dean?” I dared to ask, trying to look as innocent and clueless as possible.

“You haven’t heard?”

I gulped my wine. “Heard what?”

“His manager turned up in town, seemingly out of the blue. She’s organizing a concert headlining Dean, right here in Mulligan’s Mill. Can you believe that?”

Soundlessly I let a long, even sigh leave my lungs. “Oh right. That! Yeah, I had heard. His manager called me, wants me to help with the logistics. Looking after the events in town is kinda my thing, although something this size? I have no experience with something this big.”

“How big is it?”

I joined her on the sofa. “They’re talking ten thousand.”

“Ten thousand! That’s how many fans Dean has?”

“That’s just the ones willing to travel to Mulligan’s Mill. I’m worried they’re gonna trample this town to the ground.”

“I thought Dean came back home to get away from all that?” she said.

“He did. I guess his manager has other ideas.”

“And Dean can’t just turn around and say ‘no, I’m not doing it?’”

I shrugged. “I don’t think you reach that level of fame by saying no. Maybe he thinks if he turns it down, it’ll be the beginning of the end for his career.” I didn’t want to mention the letters or the stalker or the real reason Astrid wanted to hold the concert. Instead, I just said, “I can’t imagine having to deal with that kind of pressure.”

Madeline shuffled her way along the sofa toward me. “I’m pretty sure you’re about to experience a whole lot of pressure yourself. Coping with ten thousand visitors to the town? Harry, you’ve really got your work cut out for you over the next few days.”

I took a deep breath. “Tell me about it.” I shut my eyes and gulped down more wine, and when I opened them again Madeline was right beside me.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

I smiled uncomfortably. “You keep asking me that.”

“That’s because I’m good at lending a hand. You need me to help round up volunteers or type up run sheets or just pass out bottles of water, I’ll do it. You’re

gonna need everyone to pitch in and help, so don't be afraid to ask. God, you look stressed already, I can practically see the knots in your shoulders." She set both our wine glasses down on the coffee table and said, "You know, I happen to be great at massages too. Turn around and let me work some of that tension out of—"

Her hands fell on one of my shoulders and I flinched.

No, I didn't just flinch.

I practically launched myself off the sofa as though somebody had just thrown a live rattlesnake at me.

My arms swept wide.

The vase on the side table went flying across the room and hit the floor.

Glass shattered and flowers went everywhere.

"Oh shit! Oh fuck! I'm sorry," I stammered, quickly apologizing to Madeline before scrambling across the room to clean up the mess.

"Don't do that, let me," she said. "You've already sliced your hand on glass once this week. You're clearly on edge about something. Step away before you hurt yourself and tell me where you keep the broom."

"I'm okay, really I'm okay."

I was already picking up shards of glass.

Madeline was already opening the door to the closet under the stairs.

“No! Please don’t open—”

Too late.

Madeline was already staring into the closet, then looking back at me with a quizzical smile. “You play the guitar? I didn’t know that.”

There’s a lot about me you don’t know , I thought.

I shook my head. “I don’t really play at all. It’s a hobby, not something I’m good at. You can close that door now, the broom is in the laundry room. I’ll go get it.”

But Madeline had already pulled the guitar out of the closet... along with all the sheet music of Dean’s songs. She looked through the pages and looked at me. The expression on her face was a strange mix of surprise and a dawning realization. “You, ah... you’re more of a fan than I thought. Of Dean’s music, I mean. You’ve learned all his songs?”

I was a bad liar.

Some people have it in them to fabricate the truth. Some people are good liars. Some people are great liars. Not me.

I nodded.

“Does Dean know?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Do you ever play the guitar for anyone?”

I shook my head again.

“Will you play it for me?”

“Oh, no. I can’t. I couldn’t. I’ve never played for anyone before. I don’t want to play the guitar for anyone.”

Madeline took a deep breath and said, “I think what you mean to say is, you don’t want to play the guitar for just anyone.” She paused and added, “You want to play it for Dean. Don’t you?”

“Oh, no, not at all.” That was true. I never wanted Dean to hear how terrible I was at playing the guitar. But Madeline was peeling away the layers of a much deeper truth.

That’s when we both noticed the card lying on the floor at her feet.

It was the card I’d tucked into the strings of the guitar. It must have fallen out when she pulled the instrument out of the closet.

She bent low.

“No, please—”

She picked it up, opened it. “You got a birthday card from Dean?” She read the message. “You’re his darling? His secret?”

“Oh God.” The sigh that came out of me felt like my soul was leaving my body. “It’s not... it’s not what you think. It’s...” Like I said, I was a bad liar. I had to come clean. “Dean didn’t write that. I did.”

Her brow furrowed. “You wrote a card... to yourself... pretending to be Dean?”

My head fell into my hands.

Madeline set the guitar and the card and the sheet music down on the coffee table and sat on the sofa once again.

For a moment I didn't move, and she didn't gesture for me to sit beside her, but there was a conversation that needed to be had and we both knew it.

I walked away from the smashed vase and sat next to her on the couch.

"You don't think of Dean as just your best friend's son, do you." It wasn't a question. She didn't look offended or betrayed or even shocked. Her voice was calm. Comforting even.

I shook my head.

"Does Dean know how you feel?"

I struggled to find my words, to even be talking about something that had been my cherished secret for so long. When I finally spoke, my voice was gravelly. "No, Dean didn't know. Not for a long time. And I had no idea how he felt about me. But then today... out of nowhere..." Suddenly my tone went from defeated to concerned. "Oh, but Andy doesn't know. Everything is so... new... and I'm pretty sure Andy doesn't have the foggiest idea. Please don't tell him."

Madeline gave a gentle laugh. "Oh, don't worry. I won't tell him. That's your job." She picked our wine glasses off the coffee table and handed me mine, before clinking our glasses together. "I think we're going to need these."

We both drank, then Madeline said, "So... tell me all about it."

I sighed with relief more than anything, and eased back into the sofa.

I may have completely fucked up my first and last date with Madeline Montgomery.

But that night I got the feeling we'd be friends forever.

\* \* \*

Apart from the possibility of a ghost living down the well, Mulligan's Mill Park had always been a peaceful, happy place. A safe little patch of green where folks could bring their dogs, their kids, their heartbreak, or their fishing rods and just sit by the river on a lazy afternoon. It was a place where you could sit on the same old bench under the same old tree, toss a coin into Winnie's Wishing Well, and know that life would keep ticking along just the way it always had.

This morning, though?

Hell, it wasn't even six a.m. and already the park looked like it had been invaded by a traveling circus made entirely of electricians and chaos goblins.

Yep, this morning the park looked like it had gotten drunk and signed up for an industrial rave.

Trusses like skeleton scaffolding rose out of the ground like alien bones. Cables coiled across the grass like snakes on a mission. Speakers the size of my truck stood stacked like black monoliths, humming with quiet menace. Crew members swarmed in hi-vis vests, waving clipboards and frantically shouting things like "Check phase on the line array!" and "Where is my gaffer tape?" like their lives depended on it.

I barely made it ten steps from the truck before someone hollered, "Heads!" and a coiled cable thunked onto the ground right at my boots. A little closer and I'd have

been wearing it like a necktie.

This wasn't a concert setup.

This was the exorcism of peace and quiet.

I took a slow, calming breath through my nose. It didn't help. Mostly because there was so much ozone and burning solder in the air it nearly fried my sinuses.

There were crates everywhere—those big black travel cases that always looked like they'd been dropped out of a plane, survived, and were ready for more. Half of them were leaking lengths of gaffer tape like some kind of arts-and-crafts horror show. A guy with a mullet was using a smoke machine to defrost a sandwich. I gave that one a wide berth. He looked like he knew his way around bad decisions, so I let him do his thing.

"Excuse me!" I called out, aiming my voice at the first person who didn't look like they'd been awake for twenty-four hours straight and surviving on nothing but Red Bull and donuts.

She turned sharply, red ponytail snapping like a whip. The woman had the kind of expression you only get from a lifetime of wrangling egos twice your size and not backing down once.

"Astrid Aldridge. Manager and Site Director," she said briskly. "Please tell me you're Harry."

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm Harry. I'm also... concerned."

I gave a helpless sort of wave toward the absolute circus happening behind her. "This feels like... a bit much."

Astrid didn't blink. "Oh darling, this is just the preliminary setup. We haven't even put the light towers in place yet."

I opened my mouth to ask what that meant—then thought better of it when a forklift whizzed by at an alarming speed, hauling a massive speaker on its forks. There was a guy riding shotgun on top of it, one leg slung over the side like he was Miss Mulligan's Mill in a parade, waving a bag of zip ties over his head like he'd just won the lottery. "Found 'em!" he called to Astrid as they flew by.

"Good for you, darling. Another life goal achieved." Astrid's gaze shifted past me toward the LED crew who were now trying—and failing—to wedge a giant screen into a truss that was very clearly two inches too narrow.

"Look, I get it," she said, waving one hand vaguely behind her. "You're worried this is gonna trash your nice little park. But my crew? We've done shows in worse spots than this. Smaller spots. Trickier spots. Bat-infested spots. We're good. We're fast. We clean up after ourselves."

I was about to argue when somewhere behind us a voice shouted, "The lasers are here!" and a delivery van backfired hard enough to make me physically flinch. A flock of pigeons shot out of the trees like they'd just remembered they had an appointment elsewhere.

"I thought your guys weren't supposed to be here yet," I grumbled. "Didn't you say the setup starts at seven?"

Astrid gave a one-shouldered shrug that somehow felt dismissive and apologetic at the same time. "They made good time on the road, and we all know time is money. So here we are."

She reached up and pressed two fingers to the headset snug around her ear. "Barney, I

swear on my favorite shoes, if you so much as touch that wishing well with anything resembling a scaffolding mount, I'll bloody well duct-tape you to the fog cannon and fire you straight into the river myself. Are we clear?"

I squinted at Winnie's Wishing Well. Someone had added a sign to the fencing around it: No Dancing, Climbing, or Jumping Down the Well.

Good to know we were covering the essentials.

"This used to be a quiet town, you know," I muttered.

Astrid gave me a glance, softer this time. "And it will be again. After Friday. This is for Dean, remember. He's one of you."

The knot in my stomach tightened at the sound of his name. Yeah. Dean was one of us. More than she knew. "Just promise me you'll leave the place exactly how you found it."

Astrid held out her hand. "Scout's honor."

I hesitated for a moment, then shook it. Her grip was firm. Bold. Sharp. No surprises there.

At that moment, the subwoofers fired up a bass test so deep my teeth rattled. Somewhere in my guts, a small, vulnerable part of me wondered if my spleen had just moved to a new neighborhood.

Astrid turned away to bark another order into her headset, and I took that as my cue to retreat before anything exploded or collapsed or blasted off like a skyrocket.

I barely made it ten feet before I heard someone yell, "The fog pony is back!"

followed by the wheezy growl of the mobile smoke machine kicking into life and half a dozen crew members hacking and coughing as the first thick plumes of fog rolled out across the grass.

I didn't even look back.

This was happening.

Our park was turning into a battleground of cables, lighting rigs, and questionable pyrotechnics.

All I could do now was call my people to help supervise, stay the hell away from anything that sparked, and pray that out of the ten thousand strangers about to swarm my little town, the one person we didn't want showing up—the sick bastard stalking Dean—wasn't among them.

\* \* \*

On the edge of the park, I found Maggie hunched over a compost bin, dry-heaving like a cat coughing up a hairball.

“Maggie? You alright?”

“Oh, hey Harry. Yeah, I'm okay. I just got a little close to that smoke machine as it fired off a shot. There's chemicals inside me now that will outlast time, but unless I turn into Spider-Woman in the next few minutes, I think I'll be okay.”

I rubbed her back in little, slow circles, and she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and gave me two thumbs up.

“This is all pretty chaotic,” I said. “You think you're okay to help me out? We need

some volunteers to make sure these guys don't permanently wreck our park. You good with that?"

"Hell yeah! Bud already decided to close the store today and help out Pascal in the patisserie, so I'm all yours."

"Great. Why don't you go rustle up some locals. Folks we can trust not to knock over a lighting rig or electrocute themselves."

I told her we needed people we could trust, people who wouldn't already be run off their feet trying to keep the hordes fed and sheltered. That pretty much ruled out Pascal and his staff members, Lonnie and Ronnie, and Maggie already said that Bud would be donning a waiter's apron to help his boyfriend out. It also meant that Benji, Bastian, and Connie would be flat out busy at the BnB, as well as Bea who would no doubt need Gage to help tend bar. River Raven would probably be busy either helping Clarry in the ice-cream parlor, or his old man at the general store, or both. Which left Mitch and Ginny, Bo Harlow if he was back in town, Brooks from the bookstore, and of course Andy and Madeline.

Maggie gave a wild salute. "On it, bossman!" Then promptly tripped over a coil of cable and fell behind a crate with a loud thud. Quickly she jumped back to her feet. "Ope! Guess my Spidey senses haven't quite kicked in yet."

I gave an exhausted sigh.

By seven-thirty, I had what passed for a ragtag crew of local volunteers slowly trickling in.

First to show was Mitch, pushing Ginny across the grass in her wheelchair like it wasn't the bumpiest terrain this side of Mount Whittlesey.

Ginny, as usual, looked like she was here on official business, clipboard balanced on her knees, tablet in hand, pigtails braided tight.

“Morning, Harry,” Mitch called out, steering Ginny clear of a particularly precarious tower of crates. “Maggie-pie said you needed some help.”

“At your service,” said Ginny, proudly waving her clipboard at me before I could even respond. “I brought a site map. I did some googling, found the staging company online and copied the blueprint off the AV producer’s email thread.”

“You hacked the AV guy’s account?” I asked in a stunned whisper.

“I like to think of it as ‘borrowing information.’ Anyway, I annotated it myself. The production team’s got power cables running too close to the eastern path—total accessibility nightmare, by the way. And they didn’t factor in a proper emergency egress. But don’t worry, I fixed it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You got yourself on the payroll yet?”

“Working on it,” she deadpanned, clicking her pen.

I chuckled under my breath. “Appreciate you both showing up.”

“Of course,” Mitch said. “I mean, I have no idea what I’m doing, but always happy to help.”

From across the grass came Andy, wide-eyed, face full of wonder as he scanned the hive of activity, all for his son. He clapped me on the back. “Hey, big guy. Maggie said you need help. Figured I’d better pitch in, seeing as my boy’s the reason this circus is parked in the middle of our park.”

The mention of Dean hit me like a wrench to the ribs. The idea of having to tell Andy about me and Dean made my stomach flip. I forced a nod and tried not to let my face give anything away. “Glad you’re here, buddy.”

A moment later, Bo Harlow came striding across the grass with his usual too-much swagger, wearing his trucking aviators and a leather jacket. He jerked his chin at me in greeting.

“Heard you’re lookin’ for some extra muscle,” he said, cracking his knuckles like he was hoping I’d say the job involved breaking kneecaps.

“I’m looking for people who won’t scare the tourists,” I replied.

Bo grinned. “No promises.”

Behind Bo, Brooks wandered over at the cautious speed of a man who regretted every decision that had led him outdoors today. His trousers were already dusty from the walk across the park, and he looked personally offended by the existence of morning dew. Under one arm, he cradled a thick sci-fi novel—hardcover, naturally, the kind of book big enough to double as a weapon if things really went south. His other hand was shoved deep into the pocket of his cardigan, sleeves already pushed up like he’d prepared for battle but fully expected to die in the first wave.

“Maggie ambushed me,” he announced, his voice as flat as the expression on his face. “Cornered me right outside the bookstore. Told me I was ‘on the team’ now, not that she gave me much of a choice.”

He held up the clipboard she’d apparently forced on him, turning it slowly between his fingers like it might bite.

“Apparently, you need me to... I don’t know... hold this. Or something.”

“You’ll make it look good,” I told him.

Brooks sighed, long and theatrical. He tucked the book under his arm and gave the clipboard a grudging little shake, like he was testing its structural integrity. “I hate outside,” he muttered. “It’s where the bugs live.”

I clapped him on the shoulder. “Welcome to the team, champ.”

His only response was a glare.

Lastly, Madeline arrived, looking calm and prepared as always—neat ponytail, sensible shoes, cooler bag of sandwiches tucked under one arm like she was leading a field trip.

“Morning, Harry,” she said warmly, being nothing but her usual self. I knew she wasn’t about to telegraph last night’s news to the others. I trusted her.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” she said. “Oh, by the way, I just saw Maggie asking if she could play with one of the laser lights. I think we need to implement the buddy -system.”

“Good idea.”

I glanced around at the crew I’d managed to scrounge together. Mitch, rock steady. Ginny, small but terrifying. Andy, strong as ever, big heart to match. Bo, cocky but useful. Brooks, miserable but compliant. Madeline, calm and practical.

And Maggie—chaotic, clumsy, and way too enthusiastic.

God help me.

“All right,” I said, clapping my hands together. “Let’s get to work.”

DEAN

By the time I made it to the park, the place was unrecognizable.

What was usually a sleepy green patch of lawn with a couple of benches and Winnie's Wishing Well now looked like the lovechild of a monster truck rally and a NASA test site. Trusses and towers rose like launchpads blocking out the sun. Cables twisted underfoot in every direction, marked with fluorescent tape and, for reasons I couldn't begin to understand, one hand-painted sign that read: Do Not Lick the Cables .

Crew members in hi-vis vests zigzagged around the field, shouting into walkie-talkies, rolling speaker stacks into place, and arguing over something called a "diode sync issue," which sounded way out of my league.

Suddenly someone yelled, "Heads up!" and a roll of gaffer tape went flying through the air, missing my head by mere inches.

"Jesus Christ." I tucked my hands deep into the pockets of my jacket, kept my head down, and told myself to breathe. Two more days. Two more days and this would be over. Two more days and I could go back to pretending to enjoy my career while slowly losing my mind in peace.

The thing was, I hadn't wanted any of this. The cameras, the lights, the screaming crowds, the goddamn terrifying drones overhead that made me feel like I was about to be audited by the government.

But Astrid wanted it. And Astrid usually got what she wanted.

Also, there was the stalker thing.

So here I was, playing along, putting on the show, trying not to crack down the middle from the anxiety.

And then there were other reasons my chest felt like it was in a vise.

Because as much as this whole thing made my skin crawl, there was one person here who made the ground feel a little steadier beneath my feet.

I spotted him across the park, and the minute my eyes landed on him, my heart did a drum solo, loud and wild.

Harry.

Cap pulled low, clipboard in hand, he tried his best to control the chaos, or at least one little corner of it. His broad shoulders looked like they could hold up half the rigging if the trusses gave out. His arms were tanned from the sun, strong and sure, and there was that beard, bushy and dark, that made me want to lose my damn mind.

He laughed at something Mitch said, head tilted back just enough that I caught the smile. That soft, rare, easy Harry smile that most people didn't even know existed.

God, I wanted to walk straight over there and grab him by the front of his shirt, press my mouth to that bearded jaw, feel his hands slide under my jacket and let him claim me right there in front of everybody. Hell, let the whole town know. Screw the shock and surprise, screw the secrecy.

But I couldn't.

Because nobody could know.

Not yet.

The thought of anyone guessing, anyone even suspecting , made my skin prickle like a thousand tiny needles stabbing me.

“Dean! Dean! ”

Astrid’s voice snapped me out of my muddled thoughts and emotions like I’d been slapped.

She was striding toward me, iPad in one hand, headset clamped down like she was calling in an airstrike.

“Dean, focus, darling. We’ve got to go over the load-in schedule, the pyro cues, and the second outfit change for the finale.” She glanced at me, narrowed her eyes. “Are you even listening?”

I blinked at her. “Uh—yeah. Yeah. Load-in. Pyro. Finale.”

She gave me the I know you’re lying but I don’t have time to deal with you look she’d pretty much perfected.

“Good.” She flicked through something on her iPad, lips pursed. “We’re tight on rehearsal time, but I’ve carved out three hours tomorrow afternoon for you to run through the set list. Lighting wants to test the spot op tracking, and we need to rehearse the camera cranes, so they don’t get too close on the aerial shots during ‘Break Me Down.’ Also, your mic pack’s arriving tonight. Pray it actually works in this backwater frequency zone.”

I nodded along, trying to pretend my stomach wasn't doing somersaults. My eyes kept drifting—couldn't help it—back across the field to where Harry was crouched down next to Ginny's wheelchair, listening to her like whatever she was saying was the most important thing in the world. It probably was. That kid was smart as all get out.

Astrid kept talking, fast and sharp. "Soundcheck's still locked in unless we hit a delay on the roof rigging—but don't worry, I've threatened Barney's job twice already this morning, so we should be fine. Also, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that Benson Boone is a no-show. Apparently, he has some children's charity to attend. Rude! But the good news is Bogdan has doubled his security team, so we'll have eyes everywhere, looking out for you-know-who."

I tried to nod like I was paying attention, but my throat felt tight. All I could think about was the way Harry's hand rested steadily on the back of Ginny's chair, the way his forearms flexed as he stood again, tucking the clipboard under one arm, sleeves shoved up just enough to show that line of hair on his arms that I'd traced with my fingers just yesterday.

I clenched my hands into fists inside my pockets.

Don't look at him like that, Dean. Don't give it away.

But my body didn't seem to care what my brain was saying, because my heart was still racing, and my stomach was still wrapping itself into knots.

It would've been so easy to run to him, to throw my arms around him, kiss him until I forgot how much this whole world terrified me right now, when all I really wanted to do was live in his world.

But we couldn't.

Not here. Not yet.

“Dean!” Astrid snapped her fingers an inch from my face. “For God’s sake, stay with me!”

I flinched. “Right. Yeah. I’m here.”

She gave me a sharp look, then narrowed her eyes like she was trying to read me. “You’re nervous.”

“No, I’m fine,” I lied badly.

Astrid’s lips pressed into a tight line, but thankfully, she didn’t push it.

“Okay. Listen up.” She stabbed at the iPad again. “Here’s what we’re locking in next...”

But I barely heard her.

Because across the park, Harry looked up—and for half a second, his eyes met mine.

And just like that, I was gone all over again.

\* \* \*

By late afternoon, the war zone had quietened down, at least a little. The park was still tangled with cables and half-assembled trusses, but most of the crew were packing down, coiling wires, locking up gear crates, and shouting things like, “Who moved my impact driver?!” across the field.

The air smelled like crushed grass, sweat, and hot electronics.

Astrid clapped her hands once, loud and assertive. “Alright, people! That’s a wrap for today. Tomorrow we’ve got sound check then a full rehearsal in the afternoon. If anyone oversleeps, I will send Barney to your house with the fog cannon.”

A couple of groans rippled through the crew, but mostly folks nodded, too tired to argue. She flipped her headset up and turned toward me.

“Dean,” she called out, voice slicing through the leftover hum of generator noise. “Home. Rest. Hydrate. No tequila tonight—I want your voice.”

I gave her a half-hearted thumbs -up and probably the worst fake smile in history. She narrowed her eyes at me like she knew exactly how little I meant it, but let it slide.

The Mulligan’s Mill crew started peeling off one by one.

Dad hoisted a coil of rope onto his shoulder and gave me a friendly wave. “See you at home, kiddo.”

Mitch pushed Ginny back toward the path, the two of them deep in conversation—probably about the logistics of emergency egress or how to overthrow the production team via spreadsheet.

Bo gave a lazy salute, sunglasses still on even though the sun was dipping.

Brooks trailed behind them with his book under one arm, muttering something to Madeline about voltage converters like he was personally offended by their existence.

Maggie yelled, “Bye besties, love you, see you tomorrow—don’t let the lasers bite,” and immediately tripped over a speaker case, catching herself on the rigging with the grace of a baby panda.

God, I loved this town.

And then there was Harry.

Standing off to the side by the equipment trailer, arms crossed over his chest, cap pulled low, watching the last of the crew roll out with that quiet steadiness of his. Unshakable. Dependable. Strong.

And mine.

Even if nobody could know.

I watched him shift his weight, scratch the back of his neck absently, and something about the simple movement—the way his biceps flexed just a little as he did it—made my breath catch in my throat.

Harry caught my eye, and his lips twitched into the smallest, softest smile.

God, how I wanted to kiss him.

I wanted to walk straight over, wrap my arms around that solid body, and bury my face against his chest where I could finally breathe easy. But there were still too many eyes, too many people packing down cables and stacking road cases.

So, I stayed put.

But Harry didn't.

He pushed off from the trailer and wandered my way, slow and easy, like he had all the time in the world. I could tell it was an act. He didn't want anyone figuring things out either, at least not yet.

When he stopped in front of me, his voice dropped, soft enough that nobody else could hear.

“You holding up?”

I nodded, but it felt like a lie. “Yeah. Mostly.”

Harry gave me a look—the kind of look that saw right through me.

“I know that face,” he said gently. “That’s your ‘I’m absolutely not okay but if anyone asks, I’ll say I’m fine’ face.”

I swallowed hard. “Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me.”

I felt my chest ache at the sound of it. God, I loved him so much it scared me.

For a second, neither of us said anything. The only sound was the rumble of a distant generator shutting down and the buzz of a cicada somewhere in the trees.

Then Harry leaned in just a fraction, his voice even lower.

“Think you can sneak off without your boss noticing?” His eyes glinted with something softer. Something just for me. “Grab a drink with me?”

My heart nearly leapt out of my damn chest.

I nodded, trying not to smile too hard, but I knew I was failing. “Yeah,” I said quietly. “I can do that.”

\* \* \*

Aunt Bea's wasn't just a bar.

It was the bar, and no cool cocktail lounge or trendy nightclub in LA could hold a candle to it.

Stepping through the big sliding doors was like walking into another world. String lights crisscrossed the beams overhead, casting everything in a soft golden glow. The long wooden bar had been polished so smooth it shone, lined with high-backed stools and framed by shelves stacked with bottles in every color of the rainbow.

The jukebox in the corner was humming out The Supremes—" Baby Love "— and the smell of bourbon and lemon oil hung in the air like a welcome home hug.

Behind the bar stood Aunt Bea, larger than life and twice as beautiful as I remembered. She was six -foot -something in heels, a towering swirl of raven-black curls piled high on her head and topped with a tiara, makeup sharp enough to cut glass. Her deep plum lipstick caught the light when she smiled—which she did the second she spotted me walking in behind Harry.

"Well, well, well!" she boomed, voice dripping honey and sass as she put one hand on her hip and pointed a finger at me like I'd just walked in late to church. "Look what the cat dragged back into town."

I laughed, already feeling the tension in my shoulders ease a little. "Hey, Aunt Bea."

" Hey, Aunt Bea, " she mocked, wagging her finger. "That all I get after a whole year?"

She sashayed out from behind the bar like a queen making her entrance—arms open

wide, sequins shimmering like a disco ball. She grabbed me into a hug so tight I swear my ribs popped.

“Mmmm!” She pulled back just enough to hold me at arm’s length, looking me up and down like she was appraising a prize bull at the county fair. “Well, damn, sugar. I see fame’s been feeding you real nice. You filled out good! Got that jawline workin’ too. Look at you! ”

I felt my face flush hot. “You’re being too nice.”

She gave me a look. “Baby, I’m being accurate. Don’t make me fetch my reading glasses to make the point.”

Harry snorted softly beside me, and Bea swung her gaze toward him.

“And you, handsome—”She winked. “Still brooding and delicious as ever. I’d flirt with you, but I respect you far too much.”

Harry gave her one of those shy, half -smiles that made my knees wobble.

Bea turned back to me, folding her arms under her chest with a little shake of her head. “I gotta say, I’m surprised to see you walkin’ through that door like a grown-ass man. Last time you were here, I couldn’t even serve you a Sprite without checkin’ your ID twice. Now look at you—legal and lookin’ dangerous.”

“This’ll be my first drink at your bar,” I admitted, sliding onto one of the stools.

“Well, hell, sugar, that calls for somethin’ special.” She snapped her fingers and pointed to the bottles behind her. “You trust me to make you somethin’ good?”

“I trust you.”

“Mmmm,” she hummed, pleased. “Good answer.”

She got to work, graceful and dramatic, throwing a lemon twist into the air and catching it one-handed like it was all part of the show. She poured, stirred, tasted, nodded to herself. “Can’t have your first drink at Aunt Bea’s be basic. We’re goin’ classic with a little extra.” She slid a cocktail glass toward me, rim sugared, the drink bright and golden. “Bee’s Knees. Gin, honey, lemon. Sweet, strong, a little sting in the tail. Just like me.”

Harry chuckled and leaned on the bar beside me, and Bea popped the cap off a beer bottle for him without even asking what he wanted.

“So.” Bea braced both hands on the bar, leaning in close. “I heard y’all are tearing up my nice peaceful park with some kinda techno monster truck circus. Got people runnin’ around like squirrels on espresso.”

I groaned. “Yeah. It’s... a lot.”

Bea rolled her eyes, grinning. “Mmm-hmm. Your little friend Astrid came in here last night, flappin’ her little city girl mouth about lasers and line arrays like she was planning the second coming of Beyoncé. You sure know how to turn things upside - down, baby boy.”

I felt a flush of guilt. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

Aunt Bea simply winked. “Oh sugar, don’t you worry your pretty little head over it. I’m sure everything will be back to normal before we know it. Like my Grammy always said—no parade stays fabulous forever, even glitter settles at some point.”

“Your Grammy said that?” Harry asked.

Bea primped her hair proudly. “Actually, that one’s mine.” She gave me one more playful squint, then patted my hand. “Good to see you back, honeybunch. I’ll leave you boys to it.”

She sauntered off down the bar, hips swaying and lips syncing to the song as the jukebox switched over to Stevie Wonder’s “ Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I’m Yours). ”

Harry turned toward me on the stool, elbow on the bar, eyes soft and steady.

“You alright?” he asked quietly.

I nodded, but it was shaky. “Yeah. I mean... no. Not really.”

Harry reached out, his fingers brushing against my knee under the bar, hidden from view. Just enough to let me feel him there. I pressed my leg back against his, craving his touch.

“I hate lying,” I blurted before I could stop myself. “I hate... hiding this. Hiding us. Now that you and I know how we feel, I want the whole world to know.”

Harry’s gaze didn’t waver. “Me too. But... first we have to figure out a way to break it to your dad.”

I looked down at my drink, tracing the rim of the glass with my fingertip. “I don’t even know where to start with that. He doesn’t suspect a thing, I’m sure of it. How’s he gonna take it?”

Harry sighed softly, leaning in a little closer, voice low. “I’ve been running that one over in my head all day too.”

“I mean, we can’t just... blurt it out. ‘Hey Dad, surprise, I’m in love with your best

friend. Also, we've had the most mind-blowing sex imaginable.' I don't think that's gonna go down real smooth over breakfast."

Harry gave a quiet chuckle, but his smile was sad. "Yeah. Not exactly a Hallmark moment." He paused for a sip of his beer and added, "Mind-blowing? Was I really mind-blowing?"

"Harry, I hate to sound like Astrid, but will you please stay focused? And yes," he added. "You were totally mind-blowing."

I downed half my drink in one go. It went down easier than I expected. "We need to tell Dad at some point. We have to. I can't keep this inside much longer."

Harry nodded slowly, fingers still resting steady on my knee. "We'll tell him," he said. "Together. When the time's right."

I swallowed hard. "When's that gonna be?"

Harry's eyes softened, warm and sure. "Soon. But not tonight. Not till after this concert is over."

I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding and leaned into the quiet between us, the jukebox humming in the background, Bea's laughter floating from the other end of the bar.

Right now, just for this moment, it was enough to sit here with him, drink in hand, his touch steady and grounding, knowing he wasn't going anywhere... except maybe the bathroom.

Harry drained the last of his beer, gave me a soft smile, then stood, his fingers brushing my knee once more under the bar before pulling away. "Back in a minute,"

he said, nodding toward the bathroom at the back of the barn.

I watched him go—broad shoulders, easy stride, the way his hand dragged absently along the edge of the bar as he passed. God, I wanted to follow him. Lock the door behind us, pin him against the wall, kiss him until all the dread and uncertainty drained out of my chest.

Instead, I stayed where I was, staring down at the lemon twist floating in my drink, turning it slowly between my fingers like it might give me some kind of answer.

Aunt Bea reappeared, gliding back down the length of the bar with a swish of her sequined hips and a fresh dish towel tossed over one shoulder. She leaned one elbow on the bar beside me and gave me a look. Not the playful, teasing look from before. This was a curious, delving, eyebrow-up expression.

“Oh baby,” she said, tilting her head. “I’ve seen that look before. That’s the face of a man whose heart’s locked up tighter than his mama’s liquor cabinet... and he ain’t got the key or the good sense to go lookin’! Now tell your Aunt Bea... what’s got your pretty little knickers in a twist, honey-pie?”

I gave her a tired smile, but it didn’t reach my eyes. “I’m fine.”

Bea narrowed her gaze, unimpressed. “Uh-huh. And I’m the Queen of England.”

I huffed out a soft laugh, shaking my head.

“Baby,” Bea went on, propping her chin in her hand. “Lemme tell you somethin’ about that little fib you just tried to sell me. I’ve been performin’ kinks and servin’ drinks longer than you been alive. I’ve seen every kinda heartbreak there is. Breakups, breakdowns, bad karaoke choices—you name it. If you ask me, you got the look of a boy carryin’ around a secret so big it’s about to pop the buttons off your

shirt... which, by the way, I wouldn't mind seeing. But I figure there's more you wanna get off your chest than just your clothes."

I swallowed hard, eyes on my glass.

Bea reached out gently, tapping one long lacquered nail against the rim of my drink.

"Now, I ain't here to pull it outta you. But I am here to tell you—whatever it is you're twistin' yourself up over? Whatever storm you're holdin' back in that chest of yours? Baby, it's gonna find its way out sooner or later. Might as well be on your terms."

I looked up at her, throat tight. "It's just... complicated."

Bea smiled, warm and wide. "Baby, everything worth a damn is complicated. Love, family, taxes." She gave an exhausted roll of her eyes. "Especially taxes. My ex-boyfriend Ernie knew that all too well, but that's a story for another time."

I chuckled despite myself, the knot in my chest loosening just a little.

Bea straightened up, giving her towel a snap before tossing it onto the counter. "And let me say this too, sugar—ain't nothin' wrong with being scared. Being scared means it matters. But you can't let scared make your choices for you. Otherwise, you're just lettin' fear sit in the driver's seat while your heart rides shotgun."

I blinked at her. "Has anyone ever told you how wise you are?"

Bea laughed. "Oh honey, have you seen my booty? Who do you think put the 'ass' in 'wiseass'?" She gave my shoulder a little pat before turning to refill a beer for one of the regulars down the line.

As she walked away, she called back over her shoulder without even turning around,

“Also, for the record, sugar-pie—you are absolutely allowed to be happy. Don’t you dare ever forget it.”

I sat there for a moment, staring at the last sip of my drink, Bea’s words ringing in my head as though she’d just read my mind— and my heart.

When Harry came back, he found me smiling.

### HARRY

The night air was soft and warm as we left Bea's, the hum of the jukebox fading behind us, the trail ahead lit only by the moon and the scatter of stars overhead.

Dean walked beside me, hands stuffed into the pockets of his jacket, head tipped back just enough to catch the glow of the sky. His shoulder bumped mine gently as we took the shortcut along the forest trail out toward Percy's Pond on the way home. The crickets were singing, the leaves overhead rustling just enough to keep the world from feeling too still.

Neither of us spoke. We didn't need to.

I'd walked this trail a thousand times, but tonight it felt different. Like every turn in the path was leading me somewhere I'd never been before.

The pond came into view, still and silver under the moonlight, the water glassy and calm. The old white gazebo stood just off the bank, half-hidden beneath a sweeping willow, the paint flaking a little, but holding steady—like everything in this town.

Dean slowed, then turned to me with a crooked little smile that hit me square in the chest.

"C'mere," he said softly, reaching out and lacing his fingers through mine.

God, I would've followed him anywhere.

He tugged me toward the gazebo, stepping up onto the creaky old boards, leading me under the soft shadows of the roof where the moonlight caught the edges of his blond hair, casting him half in light, half in dark.

I barely had time to take a breath before he was pressing me back against one of the posts, his mouth finding mine like he'd been starving for it.

I groaned, grabbing his hips and pulling him to me, every inch of him fitting against me like we'd been made to fit this way. His lips were soft but insistent, hungry, tongue slipping into my mouth with a needy sound that shot straight to my gut.

"Dean," I whispered against his lips, but he didn't stop, just pressed closer, his fingers tugging my shirt free from my jeans, sliding under to touch bare skin.

"I've wanted to kiss you all night," he breathed, kissing his way down my neck, teeth grazing just enough to make me gasp. "I've been losing my mind wanting you."

I groaned again, hands sliding down to cup his young, firm ass, pulling him tighter against the hard line of my cock, already aching for him.

"You're not the only one," I muttered, dipping my head to bite softly at his jaw, then lower, to the curve of his throat. "You drive me crazy."

Dean trembled against me, and I could feel the anticipation rippling through him, his hands slipping up under my shirt, fingers splayed across my stomach, ruffling my fur like he couldn't decide whether to kiss me or tear my clothes off.

He settled on both.

I let him tug my shirt up and off, arms raised, and the second it hit the ground, his hands were on me again, mouth following, kissing down my chest, his fingers finding

my belt.

“God, Harry,” he whispered, voice shaky but sure. “I need you.”

I cupped his face, tilting it up so I could look him in the eye. “You got me.”

He smiled, soft and sweet, and it broke me a little—the trust in his eyes, the way he looked at me like I was something good. I hoped to God I wouldn’t disappoint him.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the condom packet I’d shoved in there before I left the house—just in case. I had a small pillow of lube too.

Dean’s eyes caught the movement, and his smile turned wicked. “Just like a big boy scout,” he said, chuckling into my mouth. “Always prepared.”

He reached for his own shirt then, pulling it off and tossing it aside. His skin glowed silver in the night, lean and perfect, muscles taut beneath that smooth, pale skin.

I kissed him again, harder this time, walking him backward until his knees hit the bench inside the gazebo. He sat, then leaned back, pulling me down on top of him, legs spreading to cradle me between his thighs.

“God how I want you,” he breathed, fingers fumbling at my jeans, desperate. “Please, Harry—God, I need you.”

I kissed him again, slower now before dipping lower, down his neck, across his chest, tasting him, taking my time even though my cock was throbbing with the need to be inside him.

“You sure?” I asked, breath ragged against his skin.

Dean nodded, eyes blown wide with want. “I’m sure. Please.”

I made quick work of the rest of our clothes, peeling them off between kisses, hands greedy, mouths never staying apart for long, his body under me, warm and wanting, soft little gasps escaping him as I kissed my way down his stomach.

I took my time prepping him, fingers slick with lube, working him open slow and gentle, watching every expression on his face as his body yielded to me, soft and ready.

“You’re perfect,” I whispered, leaning down to kiss him as I slid the condom onto my thick, hard dick.

“So are you,” he whispered back.

I slicked myself up.

I nudged the bulbous head of my cock between his lubed ass cheeks.

He gripped my shoulders, pulling me closer, eyes bright and wanting.

I pushed in slow, one steady thrust, burying myself inside him, and the tight heat of him made my heart skip.

Dean gasped, head tilting back, hands clutching at my arms. “Oh, fuck—Harry—yes...”

I gave him a moment, leaning down to kiss his lips, his throat, his firm young chest.

“You’re okay?” I checked, brushing the hair back from his forehead.

“Yeah.” He nodded, breathless, smiling. “God, yeah—don’t stop.”

I started to move, slow at first, pulling almost all the way out, then pushing back in, deep and steady, finding a rhythm that made Dean moan, his hands scratching at my back, nails digging into my skin.

“Harry... harder... please!”

I gave him what he wanted, hips snapping forward, thrusting harder, deeper, driving into him until the gazebo echoed with the soft creak of wood.

His thighs tightened around me, pulling me in closer, locking me against him.

His eyes were fixed on mine, desperate and adoring all at once.

I reached between us, wrapped my hand around his cock, stroking him in time with my thrusts, and it didn’t take long. Soon he was crying out, back arching, body clenching down hard around me as he came, shooting hot white spools of cum across his stomach.

The tight squeeze of his ass muscles around my cock pushed me over the edge. I groaned his name—“ Dean! Oh Dean! ”—burying myself deep as I gushed hard inside him, hips stuttering, the world going white for a second as pleasure flooded through me.

We collapsed together, tangled and breathless, hearts racing.

I kissed him softly—his lips, his cheek, his sweat-damp hair—then pulled out, slow and careful.

Dean curled against me, head on my furry chest, arms wrapped tight around my thick

waist. His breath slowed, soft and even, and he let out a happy little sigh that felt like the best sound I'd ever heard.

"I've missed you," he said softly. "All that time in LA, I couldn't stop thinking about you. All I wanted was for you to hold me."

I held him even tighter, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "I'm right here, babe. I'm not going anywhere." I paused and added, "I wish you didn't have to go anywhere either."

The pond rippled softly under the moon, the world quiet around us.

In that little white gazebo, wrapped up in each other's arms, everything else could wait.

DEAN

The next day, the park felt even more chaotic than before.

It was only mid-morning, but the sun was already baking the damaged grass, and the buzz of power tools, forklifts, and yelling tech crews filled the air. The stage was nearly finished—towering metal rigs, black curtains snapping in the breeze, rows of lights stacked like soldiers waiting for orders. Somewhere nearby I could hear Maggie arguing with one of the lighting guys about whether or not she was “technically certified” to help operate a laser light. She wasn’t.

I stood dead center on the stage, mic in hand, watching Astrid pace in front of the production desk like a general preparing for war.

“Alright, Dean, let’s run it again from the top!” she ordered into her headset, not even looking up. “Cue one, lighting ready—Dean, whenever you’re set!”

I gave a thumbs -up, forced a smile I didn’t feel, and took my mark. The crew adjusted the monitors, waved me into position, and the backing track kicked in through the giant overhead speakers.

I opened my mouth to start... and promptly came in two beats late.

“Cut!” Astrid’s voice sliced through the comms. “Dean, babe, we gotta lock the timing in, yeah?”

“Sorry,” I called back, waving at the sound guy. “Let’s go again.”

The music rolled. I focused. Tried to, anyway.

But my eyes kept wandering—out past the stage, to the edge of the field where Harry stood, head tilted back, squinting up at the roof rigging like he was thinking through ten problems at once. God, he looked good. Plain work shirt rolled up at the sleeves, cap low over his eyes, arms crossed tight over that huge, solid chest of his.

Every now and then, when he caught me staring, he'd give me this little half-smile—just a curve of the lips, soft and secret—and it made my heart flip so hard I almost forgot where I was.

Almost.

“Dean!” Astrid snapped again. “Come on, darling, focus. Let’s take it from the chorus.”

I nodded, adjusted my grip on the mic, and tried to steady my breathing. But my mind wasn’t there. My body might have been on that stage, but my heart... my heart was back in that gazebo with Harry last night, tangled up in his arms, skin to skin, safe and warm.

God, I just wanted to be with him.

Nothing to hide.

Nowhere to run.

Nobody wanting anything from me.

Just Harry... asking for my love.

The track rolled again. I missed the first note completely.

“Cut, cut, cut!” Astrid threw her hands up and yanked off her headset. “Dean, what the hell, darling? Where are you today?”

“I’m sorry, I just—” I blew out a breath, wiping sweat from my brow. “I didn’t sleep much. I’m fine, I can do it.”

Astrid leveled me with a sharp look, one hand on her hip. “You’re not fine. You’re about three seconds from forgetting what planet you’re on.” She glanced toward the crew. “Take five, people. Reset.”

She walked toward the stage, heels clicking hard on the plywood, eyes narrowing as she reached me.

“You wanna tell me what’s going on, Dean? You’re all over the bloody place. The concert’s tomorrow night. This is not the time to start sniffing nail polish remover.” She paused and added, “Wait, that was a joke. Please don’t tell me you’re actually sniffing nail polish remover!”

“I’m not sniffing nail polish remover.” I shifted my weight from foot to foot. “I’m just... I’m tired, Astrid.”

Her expression softened, just a little. She sighed, pressing a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of her nose.

“Fine. You’re no good to me like this. Go take a break before you drive me to drink.” She pointed a finger at me like a warning shot. “One hour. Clear your head. Eat something. Meditate. Pet a llama. I don’t care what you do—just come back ready.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, hopping down off the stage before she changed her mind.

Astrid was already barking into her headset again. “Barney! Where the hell is the pyro team? And someone tell Maggie to get off the bloody scaffolding— again! She is not Spider-Woman!”

I headed toward the edge of the field, my body already relaxing as I slipped out of the center of all the madness.

I wanted to see Harry.

I needed to see Harry.

But there was something I had to do first.

And I knew exactly where I was going.

\* \* \*

The second I pushed open the door of Raven’s General Store , the bell overhead let out its tired old ring, and I was immediately hit with the smell of dust, musty leather, and what I could only describe as wet dog... even though Old Man Raven had never owned a dog in his life .

I hadn’t been in here for over a year.

I’d forgotten how cluttered the place was.

Every available inch of wall space, counter space, and floor space was stacked with... stuff. Not organized in any way that made sense. Just... stuff. Paint thinner next to children’s coloring books. Cans of Spam stacked against bags of potting soil. A wobbly pile of VHS tapes threatening to topple into a cardboard box labeled Clearance: Golf Balls & Rosary Beads—Play and Pray Combo. \$5.99 each or Best

Offer.

Behind the counter, Old Man Raven was busy trimming a stack of laminated signs with a pair of rusty scissors. When he looked up and saw me, he smiled from ear to ear. “Well, I’ll be damned, if it ain’t Dean Reeves himself. Local boy makes good. Back to honor us with your celebrity presence, huh. You wanna autograph some jars of pickled onions for me?”

“Hey, Mr. Raven. Thanks, but if it’s all the same to you, pickled onions aren’t exactly... on brand.”

I noticed the signs he was making. In Comic Sans font they read We Heart Dean and Dean We Love You and Dean I Want Your Babies . Some had clip-art guitars on them. A few had pictures of random male models who definitely were not me.

I raised an eyebrow. “Wow. Real high production values there. Although I’m not sure Constellation’s marketing department would approve.”

Old Man Raven shrugged off my comment. “Who cares about them. Better get in quick if you want one. Five bucks a pop. Don’t miss out. I’m expecting these to fly off the shelves like hotcakes.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I’m good, thanks.”

Old Man Raven kept snipping, completely unfazed. “Suit yourself. So, what brings the rock god to my humble establishment? Is it the two-for-one CD offer? I’ve burned all your music onto blank CDs so your fans can buy them for half the normal retail price. You wanna sign some of those?”

“Oh wow! That’s really not Constellation Records approved.”

“Then what the hell is it you want?”

“Actually, I was wondering if the new Rolling Stone magazine came in.”

Old Man Raven’s eyebrow crept up a notch. He reached under the counter and pulled out a glossy stack of magazines wrapped tight in plastic. Right there on the cover, staring back at me like some other version of myself, was me. Shirtless. Hair messy. Red leather pants low on my hips. One hand holding an electric guitar. One hand in my hair, mouth parted just enough to look like I was thinking either something deep or something filthy.

I felt my face flush the second I saw it.

Old Man Raven tapped the magazine stack and said, “I don’t know about you, but that cover is hot enough to turn even me gay.”

I coughed, looking anywhere but at the cover. “Yeah, well. It was... my manager’s idea.”

“I ordered extras. Figured the tourists’ll eat it up. You want one... or did you just come in here to critique my CD merchandise?”

I pulled out my wallet and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. “Yeah. I’ll take one.”

Raven rang it up slowly, sliding the magazine across the counter like it was a porno.

“That’ll be nineteen ninety-nine,” he said.

“Is that price right?”

“Concert surcharge.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is that a real thing?”

“No,” he replied, already pocketing the cash.

I slipped the magazine under my jacket as casually as I could and hurried out the door.

HARRY

By the time I made it home, I felt like I'd been hit by a truck.

It was the kind of tiredness that settles in your bones and makes even your boots feel heavier than they should. My back ached from hauling gear and solving other people's problems all day. My head throbbed from the endless questions, the near misses, the small disasters barely dodged.

And I hadn't seen Dean since Astrid pulled him off the stage for that break. Not a glimpse. Not a wave. Not even a stolen look.

I'd been scanning the field every chance I got, but nothing.

I sighed as I stepped up onto the porch in the dark, fishing for my keys in the pocket of my jeans. The porch light was off, and I flipped the switch. The bulb flickered once, then buzzed to life—and my heart damn near jumped out of my chest.

Dean was standing at the far end of the porch, half -hidden in the shadows, arms crossed tight over his chest, head down like he wasn't sure if he should be here at all.

"Jesus, Dean," I breathed, pressing a hand to my chest. "You scared the hell out of me."

He looked up then, eyes soft and tired, and God, if that didn't undo me all over again.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to... I just. I wanted to be with you."

I stepped closer, my heartbeat still racing, but not from the fright anymore. “Are you okay? Where have you been all afternoon?”

“I... snuck off. After Astrid sent me on break, I turned my phone off. Figured I could deal with the fifty angry voicemails later.”

I smiled and the slump of his shoulders against my chest felt good.

“Can I...?” His voice trailed off before he tried again. “Can I hide out at your place tonight?”

I reached for him without thinking, my hand brushing against his arm gently.

“Dean,” I said softly. “You can stay here as long as you like. You can stay here forever if you want.”

He let out a breath, shaky but relieved, eyes lifting to meet mine fully now. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, stepping aside, holding the door open for him. “C’mon in.”

I followed him inside, closing the door quietly behind us.

Dean kicked off his boots by the door, moving slowly like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to relax yet. Like he was still half on stage, waiting for someone to tell him where to stand, what to do.

I headed to the kitchen, grabbed two beers from the fridge, popped the tops, and brought them over. I handed one to him as I sank down onto the couch.

Dean took it with a small, grateful smile, sitting beside me, close but not quite touching.

For a long moment, we just sat there in the quiet.

Dean took a sip of his beer, stared down at the bottle in his hands, then—

“I’m done,” he said quietly, voice barely above a whisper.

I turned toward him, brow creased. “Done with what?”

“With... all of it. LA. The scene. The whole rock-star thing.” He shook his head, lips pressing tight together. “It’s not the dream I thought it’d be. It’s fast and loud and... fake. It’s just not me.”

I watched him for a second, let him talk. Let him say it out loud.

“I hate it there,” he admitted, eyes still fixed on the label of his beer. “I hate feeling like I have to be somebody else all the time. I hate that I can’t just... be. I can’t slow down, I can’t breathe. I can’t hold your hand. I can’t even talk about you because you live in this world... and I live in that one... and all I wanna do is be back here with you .”

His voice cracked on the last word, and I felt my chest ache.

“I wish I could stay here,” he murmured, finally looking up at me. “I wish I could stay with you. Forever.”

I reached out, one hand against the side of his face, thumb brushing softly across his cheek. “I wish you could stay too.”

Dean leaned into my hand, closing his eyes for a second, like he was holding onto the touch.

“You know what kills me the most?” I said quietly. “It’s not the distance. It’s not LA. It’s not even the fans. It’s knowing you’re out there and some sick bastard’s got his eyes on you. Watching you. Following you. Threatening you.” I shook my head, jaw tight. “If I ever get my hands on him...”

I didn’t even finish the sentence. I didn’t need to.

Dean’s hand slid onto my thigh, gentle, grounding. “I...” he whispered, his voice sounding lost, meek, young. “I don’t wanna talk about that tonight.”

I nodded, taking a long breath, letting the anger ease out of my shoulders. “I get it.”

Dean gave me a soft smile, eyes shining. “You know what I wish?”

“What’s that?”

“I wish I’d brought my guitar,” he said, leaning back against the couch, head tipping to the side. “I don’t wanna play stadium rock right now. I just wanna sit here with you and play something slow. Something beautiful. Just for you.”

I stared at him for a second, then stood up without a word.

Dean blinked, confused, watching me cross the room.

I opened the door to the cupboard under the stairs.

I reached in and pulled out my guitar.

When I turned back around, Dean was sitting forward on the edge of the couch, eyes wide.

“ Harry, ” he breathed, shocked. “You never told me you had a guitar.”

I felt my face go a little red, gave a sheepish shrug. “I, uh... I was too embarrassed.”

Dean stood, closing the space between us, looking at me like I’d just told him I could fly. “You play? ”

“No! God, no! Maybe a little,” I admitted. “I’m terrible at it. I only bought it so I could... well...” I scratched the back of my neck, feeling like an idiot. “So I could learn to play your songs.”

Dean’s eyes went soft, the tension melting out of him all at once.

“I... I just wanted to feel close to you,” I mumbled, not quite able to meet his gaze. “Every time I played one of your songs, it felt like... like you were here. Here with me.”

Dean reached for the guitar slowly, carefully, like it was something precious. Like he understood exactly what it meant.

“Can I?” he asked softly.

I nodded, handing it over.

He settled back onto the couch, adjusted the strap, gave the strings a gentle strum, tuning by ear. His fingers moved slow and sure, practiced, the notes warm and soft in the quiet room.

Then he looked up at me, looked straight into my eyes. “Can I play something for you?” he asked quietly.

I smiled and sighed with utter joy. “Please. Yes, please.”

The first few chords were soft, familiar. It took me a second to place it—but then the melody hit me, and my heart caught in my throat.

Dean’s voice was barely above a whisper, soft and low, rich with feeling as he played a slow, aching version of Dido’s “Here With Me.”

The lyrics wrapped around the room like a lullaby, like a confession, every word soaked in longing.

And as he sang, I surrendered myself to every emotion oozing out of those lyrics—

I didn’t want to go...

I didn’t want to sleep...

I didn’t want to breathe ...

Until he was resting there with me... forever.

I sank down onto the couch beside him, eyes never leaving his face. The way his lashes cast shadows on his cheeks. The way his fingers moved, gentle and easy across the strings, like the guitar was just an extension of him.

God, he was beautiful.

He was everything .

When the song ended, he let the last chord hang there, soft and sweet, fading into the hush between us until I leaned in, kissing him slowly, kissing him sweetly, easing the

guitar out of his arms. I put it on the coffee table and said—

“Come here.”

Before Dean could so much as blink, I swept him right off the couch, arms sliding under his back and behind his knees, lifting him into my arms.

“ Harry! ” he gasped, laughing, hands flying up to clutch my shoulders. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed,” I said simply, starting toward the stairs. “You can complain about it if you want, but it won’t change the plan.”

Dean grinned, biting his bottom lip. “No complaints here.”

“Good.” I grinned, holding him tighter as I climbed the stairs.

By the time we reached the bedroom, his smile had softened again, those big blue eyes locked on mine like I was the only thing in the world.

I nudged the door open with my foot, carried him across the room, and laid him down gently on my bed, soft sheets just waiting for him, warm lamplight casting shadows on the walls.

Dean sat up on his elbows, still smiling, but then his eyes flicked to the nightstand.

I followed his gaze.

There it was—right there beside the lamp—the framed signed photo of him.

Dean’s smile broadened. “You... you keep it by the bed?”

I shrugged. “Well, you weren’t here with me. So it was the best I could do.” I grabbed it and opened the drawer to stash it away.

He caught sight of the novel in my drawer. “Is that a romance novel?”

It was in fact.

Mistral’s Daughter by Judith Krantz.

“Stop snooping! Do you mind?”

He giggled as I tucked both the photo and the novel away in the drawer. “Now, if you’re done fucking with the mood...!”

Dean grinned. “I am. There’s something else I’d much rather be fucking.” He let out a breathy laugh, his hands sliding into my hair, pulling me down to kiss him harder.

Suddenly clothes began peeling away between hungry kisses. My shirt hit the floor first, then his. I couldn’t stop touching him—his chest, his waist, the soft curve of his hips. I wanted to memorize every inch of him, every freckle, every line.

He gasped when I pushed him back against the pillows, my mouth trailing down his neck, across his collarbone, tasting his skin.

I kissed my way down his chest, pausing to suck his nipple, making him shudder beneath me, before sliding lower, nipping at the line of his stomach as I worked open his designer jeans and tugged them down.

He was already hard, throbbing, aching, and the soft little sounds he made when I kissed the head of his cock were enough to make me groan right back.

But I didn't want to rush.

I wanted him to feel every second of it.

I wanted to make this count, like we were only now starting to make up for so much lost time.

I reached for the lube and the condom from the nightstand drawer—always prepared, always hoping, even when I hadn't dared believe this would ever actually happen again.

Dean watched me, eyes hungry with need, lips parted, breath shaky.

"God how I want you," he whispered. "Fuck, Harry... I want you so bad."

I slicked my fingers, reached down between his legs, and worked him open slowly, gently, my own body quivering at the way he gasped...

The way his hips rolled up to meet my touch...

Needing more from me...

Needing everything from me.

"Be mine," I said, leaning down to kiss him again as I slid my fingers deeper, stretching him open until he was trembling beneath me.

"I am yours," he breathed. "I always have been."

I rolled the condom on, lubed myself up, guided myself inside him, inch by inch, watching his face the whole time—watching the way his lips parted on a soft, broken

moan, the way his eyes fluttered shut, fingers tightening around my wrist.

“God, yes... Harry, yes! ” he gasped, back arching, legs wrapping around my waist, pulling me in deeper.

I gave him a second, let him settle, leaned down and kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his lips.

“You okay? Everything okay?” I asked softly, brushing the hair back from his face.

Dean smiled, nodding. “Everything’s perfect.”

I started to move, slow and steady, rolling my hips into him, burying myself deep with every thrust.

Dean moaned beneath me, clinging tight, meeting every push with a lift of his hips, breathing my name over and over like it was the only word he knew.

“Harry... Harry... Harry!”

I groaned, dipping down to kiss him hard, teeth clashing, tongues tangling, our bodies moving together like we’d done this a thousand times before. Like we were made for it.

The tension built fast, heat twisting low in my belly, my balls ascending quickly. I reached between us, wrapped my hand around his cock, stroking him in time with my thrusts.

Dean came almost immediately, years of pent-up lust gushing from him like I’d just broken his dam wall with a wrecking ball.

He cried out, letting loose a deluge of hot cum between us, body clenching down hard around me as he came, shaking beneath me, breathless and beautiful and helpless as his seed bloomed all over us.

As the convulsions ripped through his body—as his ass muscles crushed my cock—I let out a guttural cry and came inside him, hips bucking, groaning his name as I buried myself deep one last time, the world blurring around the edges as the pleasure tore through me.

When it was done, I collapsed against him, heart pounding, panting, drained.

“Stay,” he whispered, his voice soft and sleepy. “Stay inside me. It’s where you belong.”

I kissed his neck. “Anything for you.”

That night, we slept with our bodies pressed tight together.

We slept as one.

DEAN

I woke to the sound of someone pounding on the front door.

It took me a second to remember where I was—Harry’s bed, his arms still wrapped around me, warm and safe. The light coming through the curtains was soft and gray, early morning.

But the knocking kept coming, loud and fast, rattling the whole house.

“Harry!” someone shouted. “ Harry, open the goddamn door! ”

Harry jerked awake at the same time I did, blinking hard, already sitting up. The clock on the nightstand read 6:02 a.m.

I reached for my underwear, pulling them on as fast as I could. Harry was already out of bed, tugging on his own pair of jockey shorts. He looked back at me, eyes wide, but all he said was, “Stay here.”

I wasn’t going to.

I followed him, barefoot, heart pounding, stomach turning sour with dread. The way that voice had sounded—sharp, worried, angry —I already knew.

It was my dad.

Harry reached the door and yanked it open—and there he was.

Dad.

I'd never seen him so distraught, standing there on the porch, hair a mess, his face flushed and tight with worry.

“Harry, I need your help. I've been calling Dean all night. But he's switched off his phone and he didn't come home. I need you to help me find him, I need—”

“Andy, whoa, whoa. Slow down.” Harry blinked, voice rough with sleep. “Dean's fine.”

“I know you think that. I know he's a big boy now. But he's still my kid. Look at all the shit and chaos that comes with being famous, all that craziness with the concert. I've never seen anything like it before. I've never really thought about what happens out there in LA, and that's on me. Maybe I need to be a better father. But now that I have seen it, all that fame shit, it terrifies me. God only knows where he spent last night—”

Suddenly his words stopped dead.

His eyes had drifted past Harry, down the hall, landing squarely on me...

Standing there, in nothing but my underwear, hair a mess...

Heart in my throat.

For half a second, I saw it—the relief. The easing in his face when he saw I was okay.

Then confusion.

Then realization.

And then—

Dad's eyes darted back to Harry, his jaw clenching so hard I could see the muscle working beneath the stubble.

“What the fuck ?” he snapped, stepping forward, jabbing a finger hard into Harry's chest. “You wanna tell me what the actual fuck is going on here?”

Harry held his hands up, trying to calm him. “Andy—just listen—please, let me explain—”

Dad shoved past him into the house, eyes blazing, steam practically coming off him. “No. No, fuck that. Tell me right now—why the hell are you two standing there in your underwear like you just spent the night fucking?! ”

“Dad—” I started, stepping forward, voice shaking, but it didn't matter. He was already working it out in his head, the pieces snapping into place whether we wanted them to or not.

“How long?” he hissed, glaring at me now. “How long's this been going on? How long have I been stupid enough to think that I could trust my best friend with my son?”

“Dad, it's not like that?”

“Oh no? Then what is it like? Tell me. Tell me everything. Because this looks like something I don't wanna know about. This looks fucked up on every level.”

Harry moved between me and Dad, steady, palms out, voice calm but strained. “Andy, I swear—we were going to tell you. We didn't want you to find out like this.”

“Tell me what?” Dad shouted, eyes wild. “That you’ve been fucking my son?”

“Dad, we’re not just... messing around,” I said, my throat so tight the words barely made it out. “We love each other, Dad.”

Harry nodded beside me, his voice soft. “We’re in love.”

Dad stared at us like we were speaking a language he didn’t understand.

“ Love? ” His voice cracked on the word. “Jesus Christ, Dean—you couldn’t find anybody else? You had to go and spread your legs for him? For my best friend?”

The words hit like a punch to the gut.

Harry shook his head, desperate. “Andy, please—”

But Dad was already moving. His hands balled into fists, chest heaving.

“Andy—wait—” Harry tried reaching out a hand, but Dad’s fist came fast and hard.

The punch cracked against Harry’s jaw, knocking him back to the floor with a sickening thud.

“ Harry! ” I dropped down beside him, grabbing his shoulder. “Harry—Jesus, are you—”

He touched his lip, wiped away a smear of blood, then sat up slowly, blinking through it. “I’m okay,” he breathed.

Dad stood over us, glaring down, breathing hard, his face twisted with something between heartbreak and rage.

“We’re done,” he spat at Harry, voice shaking. “You and me—we’re done. ”

Then he turned that same look on me—his eyes hard, his mouth drawn so tight it looked like it hurt.

“As for you... son ... I don’t even wanna look at you right now.”

The words knocked the air clean out of me.

“Dad—”

But he was already gone.

Storming out the door, slamming it behind him so hard the walls shook.

The house fell dead quiet, except for my heartbeat hammering in my ears.

I sat there on the floor, my hands still on Harry’s shoulder, the sting of Dad’s words cutting deeper than I could’ve ever imagined.

We’d wanted to tell him.

Just... not like this.

HARRY

The bruise on my jaw wasn't the worst of it.

It throbbed, sure—a hot, ugly ache radiating down my neck—but I'd taken harder hits back in high school brawls behind the local gas station. No, the part that hurt most was somewhere deeper, somewhere I couldn't patch up or put an ice pack on.

It was the way Andy had looked at me.

Like I was a stranger. Like I was something filthy.

I stood at the edge of the concert site, clipboard in hand, watching the final rig checks, the sound team tweaking the speakers, the lighting crew calling down from the trusses. The park looked like a different world now—stage glowing under the afternoon sun, cables taped down neatly, barricades set, vendors wheeling in carts of bottled water and corndogs.

It was showtime. Whether I was ready or not.

The first of the crowds had already started rolling in—vans and buses coming down the hill from the highway, lines of cars backed up all the way to Brannigan's Bridge. People in cutoff shorts and T-shirts with Dean's face plastered across their chests were spilling out onto the sidewalks, chattering, laughing, snapping selfies under the big banner that stretched across Main Street: Welcome To Mulligan's Mill—Home Of Dean Reeves!

I should've been proud.

I should've been excited to see the town bustling, thriving like this.

But all I felt was dread twisting hard in my gut.

Because somewhere in that sea of fans—faces I didn't know, people smiling and laughing and waving signs—one of them might be the sick son of a bitch who'd been sending Dean those letters. One of them might be here for something darker than a concert.

And God help me, if I couldn't stop it—if anything happened to Dean on my watch—I'd never forgive myself.

I caught myself rubbing my jaw again, fingertips tracing over the sore spot like I could scrub the memory of Andy's fist right out of my skin.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered under my breath.

I hadn't seen Andy since he stormed out of my house that morning. Hell, I didn't know if I would ever see him again. My best friend—my found family—had looked at me like I'd betrayed him in the worst possible way. And maybe, in his eyes, I had.

A lifetime of friendship had gone down the drain in one sickening, awful moment.

I shook it off.

Or at least tried to.

I had work to do.

I had Dean to protect.

“Harry!” one of the crew called from the barricade line. “We need a hand over here!”

I waved back, nodding, pushing down the ache in my chest and the pounding in my head. I could fall apart later. Right now, I had a job to do.

I crossed the grass toward the stage, jotting notes on my clipboard, giving the lighting rig one more visual check, triple-checking the path to the green-room area. Watching the roads, the fences... the faces in the crowd.

I scanned every damn stranger twice.

The band’s equipment truck was backed in now, crew unloading even more amps and mic stands, hauling gear toward the wings. Astrid was a streak of motion near the front of the stage, headset on, shouting into the mic, already looking like she was one caffeine hit away from a coronary.

And then I heard the voice I hadn’t realized I needed to hear.

“Harry.”

I turned.

Madeline stood there in her sensible shoes, soft brown eyes watching me like she could see all the way through to the part of me I was trying real hard to hide.

She gave me that gentle, no-bullshit smile of hers—the one that said don’t you dare tell me you’re fine if you’re not.

“You got a minute?” she asked.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry, and nodded. “Yeah.... yeah, I got a minute.”

Dean was up on stage again, guitar slung over his shoulder, mic in hand, ready to do one last quick walk-through onstage.

The crowd hadn’t fully arrived yet—just a slow, steady trickle of fans filling the outer perimeter—but the stage lights were already kicking up dust into gold, making the whole scene look bigger than life.

Dean’s eyes found mine across the field.

Just for a second.

And in that second, everything in my chest tightened. Because I saw it written all over his face—the same exhaustion, the same hurt, the same desperate, aching love that was chewing me up from the inside out.

I gave him the smallest nod. Steady. I’m here .

Dean’s lips pressed together, his chin lifting just a fraction, like he was bracing himself.

Astrid’s voice crackled through the stage comms. “Okay, Dean, babe—we’re rolling. Let’s go from the top, cue one!”

The opening bars of the first song kicked in through the massive speakers, bass humming low beneath my feet. The crew moved like clockwork, heads down, focused.

I felt a soft hand on my arm.

“Harry.”

It was Madeline. She stood close, her voice just loud enough to carry over the thrum of the final soundcheck and Dean’s walk-through.

“Come with me.”

I let her lead me across the grass, past the crew tents and food vendors, into the shade of the big white merchandise tent. Inside, it was cooler, quieter—the thick canvas walls muting the music outside to a distant thump.

And everywhere I looked... Dean.

His face on shirts.

Posters.

Laminated lanyards dangling from a rack.

Badges and stickers and tote bags all stamped with Dean Reeves Homecoming Concert.

My stomach clenched.

I tore my eyes away from the merch table and focused on Madeline as she guided me into the corner of the tent where nobody else was hovering.

“I know what happened this morning,” she said softly.

I swallowed hard, felt my bruised jaw tense out of instinct. “Yeah?”

“Andy called me,” she went on, eyes kind but serious. “He was in tears, Harry. Said he caught Dean at your place. Said the two of you had a fight.”

I let out a slow breath and the bruise on my jaw throbbed like I needed another reminder of what happened.

Madeline’s eyes turned to it, her expression softening even more. “I can see Andy wasn’t exaggerating the part about a fight.”

I didn’t say anything. Just stared down at the trampled grass underfoot.

She stepped a little closer, lowering her voice. “Harry... he’s angry, yeah. But mostly he’s confused. Embarrassed. This is uncharted territory for him.”

“It’s uncharted territory for all of us,” I said, then shut my mouth again, kept my eyes down, hands flexing uselessly at my sides. I could feel the shame burning behind my ribs. The fight was playing on a loop in my head...

The look on Andy’s face...

The weight of a lifetime of friendship crumbling between us.

“He’s your best friend,” Madeline said gently. “And yeah, this... this caught him off guard. But that’s not how your story with him should end.”

I finally looked up, meeting her eyes.

“You should try again,” she said softly. “Talk to him. When he’s calmer. When you’re calmer. Don’t let the way it happened this morning be the end of it.”

I nodded slowly, throat thick. God, I knew she was right.

But the fear of standing in front of Andy again, of taking another swing at that conversation, of risking another punch to the face—or worse, another punch to the friendship—that fear sat heavy on my chest.

“I just...” I swallowed. “I don’t wanna push him. Not if it’s only gonna make it worse.”

Madeline reached out, gave my arm a gentle squeeze. “Just... give him another chance. He’s a good man. And so are you. That’s why you’re best friends.”

The music outside faded, the last chords of the soundcheck ringing through the park.

Madeline gave me one more nod, then stepped back, leaving me standing there surrounded by Dean’s face on a hundred pieces of glossy merch, the ache in my chest louder than the speakers outside.

I knew what I had to do.

I just had to find the courage to do it.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

The sound of the gates opening echoed through the walls of the dressing room marquee—a hum of excitement as the first wave of concert-goers surged into the park. I could almost feel the buzz of it vibrating through the ground beneath my boots.

I stood in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection in my black skinny jeans and loose white tank, with a leather jacket waiting on the hook by the door.

All I had to do was walk out there and be the version of myself they all came to see.

I'd never felt less like him.

The entrance to the marquee opened behind me. I looked up in the mirror—and there was Harry.

He hovered there for a second like he wasn't sure if he should come in, then stepped inside, closing the flap behind him.

His eyes found mine right away.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” I nodded.

“I've been looking for your dad. But I can't find him anywhere. I've asked

around—nobody’s seen him since this morning.”

I nodded again, slowly, staring down at my hands.

“Maybe he just needs space,” I murmured, though my chest ached as I said it.

Harry crossed the room, crouched down in front of me, one knee on the floor. His thumb brushed over the back of my hand. “We’ll figure it out,” he said softly. “Just... not tonight. Tonight, you need to focus on you. On the show. We’ll deal with the rest tomorrow.”

I looked at those steady brown eyes. I glanced at the bruise on his jaw where Dad had hit him. His face was calm, but I could see the hurt there, tucked just beneath the surface.

“I know, you’re right,” I whispered. “I can’t help but worry.”

Harry leaned forward until our foreheads touched. “Let me do the worrying, okay?”

I smiled. “Okay.”

The entrance opened again, and Astrid stuck her head in, her headset still perched on her head like a crown.

“Ten minutes, darling,” she announced. “Time to get into your zone.” She glanced at Harry, arching one eyebrow. “That’s your cue to leave, big guy.”

Harry gave her a quick nod, then looked back at me. His hand slid up to touch my cheek. “Go knock ’em dead, babe,” he said, voice soft enough that only I could hear it.

Before I could say anything back, he leaned in and kissed me.

It was gentle. Sweet. One soft kiss for luck, but it carried so much more. Like he was pouring everything he couldn't say out loud into the press of his lips against mine.

When he pulled back, I caught his hand, held it tight for just a second longer.

"Harry," I whispered. "Promise me."

His brow furrowed. "Promise you what?"

"After tonight... we'll find a way. You and me. To be together. No more hiding."

His eyes softened, and he nodded, squeezing my hand.

"Yes," he said. "I promise."

Astrid's face lit up as though a revelation had just dawned on her. "Oh. My. God. That's Harry!" Her eyes flicked from me to Harry. " You're Harry from the text message!"

Harry looked confused. "What text message?"

"It's nothing," I said. "Actually, it's not nothing at all. I'll explain later."

"What text message?" he asked again.

But Astrid already had him by the wrist and was dragging him out. "He'll tell you later. Time to go, lover boy. It's show time."

Harry gave me one last wink, then he and Astrid disappeared through the flap of the

marquee.

HARRY

The sky had turned to gold and violet by the time the crowd really surged in—ten - thousand bodies packed tight against the barricades, a sea of arms waving, phones held high, the air electric with the buzz of anticipation.

I was halfway between the dressing room marquee and the lighting rig when I spotted him.

Andy.

His cap was low, arms crossed as he stood leaning against the security fence at the edge of the perimeter, jaw tight, eyes hard.

I didn't think. I just moved.

"Andy," I tried to call over the noise, quickening my pace, weaving past a cluster of stagehands.

He saw me coming, straightened up, then swiftly turned away.

"Andy— wait! " I was close enough for him to hear me over the crowd now.

"There's nothing to talk about, Harry," he snapped over his shoulder, already walking faster along the perimeter line.

" Bullshit! " I caught up, staying on his heels. "You don't just get to walk away from

a lifetime of friendship like it's nothing."

He spun on me then, eyes blazing. "No, you don't get to stand there and talk about friendship after what you did!"

"What I did? " I threw my hands out, breath already tight. "Andy, I fell in love with your son. I didn't plan it, I didn't go looking for it, but it happened. And you know what? I'm not sorry."

His face darkened, lips pressing into a hard line. "You should be."

I stepped closer, fighting to keep my voice steady. "I know this hurts. I know it's a lot. But dammit, Andy—you know me. You know I would never, never hurt him. I love him."

Andy's jaw clenched. "You couldn't have picked anyone else?"

"It doesn't work like that!" I shot back. "I didn't pick Dean like I was choosing a goddamn wrench off the shelf! I love him because he's him. Because he's good, and kind, and brilliant, and he makes me feel like maybe I'm not just some tired old man running a hardware store. He makes me feel like I'm somebody. "

Andy shook his head, eyes still flashing with anger. "You're twice his age, Harry."

"I know," I said, swallowing hard. "And you can hate me for that if you want. You can hate me for the way you found out about it. But don't tell me what I feel isn't real."

The crowd started screaming then—a roar like thunder rolling across the park.

Astrid's voice boomed through the speakers. "Music-lovers, please welcome to the

stage—the one, the only, Dean Reeves!”

The place exploded with excitement.

Andy’s eyes drifted toward the stage, jaw still tight. I could see the hurt in him, the stubborn twist of his mouth, but beneath it... I could see the worry... the love of a father for his son.

“I know you’re angry,” I said, softer now. “And I’m sorry. I’m sorry it came out the way it did. But Dean and me—we’re not gonna stop. We can’t. We’re in this now. And I hope one day you can come around to that. But if it takes time... if it takes years ... then so be it. I’ll wait. I’ll wait as long as it takes for us to be friends again.”

Andy didn’t answer. His shoulders stayed stiff, his fists clenched at his sides.

On stage, Dean’s voice rang out through the night, clear and strong, the first few lines of the opening song sending the crowd into a frenzy.

The bass thumped beneath my feet, lights flashing wild across the faces of the fans pressed tight against the front barricades. The screaming was deafening.

But something—something felt off.

I caught it out of the corner of my eye.

A ripple in the crowd near stage right.

Not the usual concert surge.

Not just people bouncing or dancing.

It was more like panic.

A shove. Then another. People were turning, shouting.

My stomach dropped.

“Andy,” I breathed, my eyes glued to the movement at the edge of the pit.  
“Something’s wrong.”

He followed my gaze, frowning, then straightened. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, already moving. “But I’m gonna find out.”

I pushed past the crew barricade, down into the pit, heart pounding, eyes scanning the crowd. The roar of the music blurred with the rising edge of shouting voices, hands waving, a crush of bodies turning against each other.

Please God, don’t let it be the stalker.

I charged into the chaos.

It all happened so fast.

One minute, the crowd was screaming the way crowds do—wild, excited, waving signs, jumping in time to the music. Normal. Controlled.

And then it wasn’t.

A shove here, a push there.

People shouting, arms going up—not in celebration, but in panic.

Bodies surged forward, pressing against the barricades, crushing toward the stage like a goddamn tidal swell. A surge of fans screaming, climbing, clawing over each other, trying to push their way up onto the platform.

I saw Astrid at the sound booth, headset clamped on, one hand jabbing furiously toward the security team, shouting orders I couldn't hear over the roar.

The guards moved fast—an army of black shirts flooding the perimeter—but it wasn't enough. The crush of bodies overwhelmed them, fans pouring over the barricades like it wasn't even there.

Jesus Christ.

Dean's voice faltered—mid-song, off-mic—but I could still hear him shout, “ Stop! Stop! Hey, back up—! ”

The music cut out, the amps buzzing into dead silence, but the screaming only got louder.

Light stands toppled as the first fans reached the stage, knocking over the camera rig, cables snapping, sparks showering down like fireworks gone wrong. Someone shoved one of the lighting trusses—it groaned, then collapsed with a deafening crash, sending a spray of shattered bulbs and metal shards across the floor.

I saw one of the side curtains burst into flames where a spotlight smashed into it.

The smoke started to rise.

Screams became deafening.

People were running in every direction, security guards trying to push back the surge,

fire extinguishers blasting clouds of white across the stage—but the panic was already out of the bottle.

And somewhere in that mess—somewhere in the chaos—was my boy.

Dean stood frozen near center stage, eyes wide, body rigid, his guitar still strapped across him, breath coming hard and fast. Helpless. Terrified.

Please God—please let me get to him.

I charged forward, shoving my way through the bodies, knocking people aside as they climbed up onto the lip of the stage. A kid in a Dean Reeves T-shirt tried to grab the edge of a speaker stack—I yanked him down by the back of his collar and pushed him out of the way.

I didn't care who they were; didn't care if they were kids, fans, stalkers, or just scared out of their minds.

All I cared about was Dean.

I scrambled up onto the stage, ducking a flying elbow, barely dodging a toppled mic stand as it clattered down beside me. One of the pyrotechnic panels gave off sparks and smoke.

“Dean!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

His head turned in my direction, eyes locking on mine—and the terror on his face was enough to make my knees damn near buckle.

I didn't hesitate.

I pushed past the people scrambling onto the stage, grabbed Dean, scooped him straight into my arms. His hands clung to my shoulders, desperate, gasping.

“ Harry! ”

“I got you,” I panted. “ I got you, babe. ”

The surge of fans kept coming, more of them clambering onto the stage, climbing over monitors, grabbing at the scaffolding, screaming Dean’s name like they weren’t even seeing the panic they were causing.

I dropped my shoulder, barreling through them like a linebacker, shoving bodies aside as I fought my way toward the backstage entrance.

“ Move! ” I roared, my voice loud and furious. “ Get the fuck out of the way! ”

Dean’s arms clung tighter around my neck, his breath hot against my ear. “ Harry—”

“ I’m here. I’ve got you. ” My grip tightened, sweeping him up higher in my arms, carrying him like he weighed nothing.

We hit the curtain line at the side of the stage just as another crash echoed behind us—another truss going down, cables sparking, smoke filling the air.

I pushed through the side entrance, burst into the green-room marquee—but fans were already breaking through, spilling into the backstage space, pushing past the rattling fence line.

“Harry!” Dean gasped, eyes wide, coughing from the smoke. “ We gotta get outta here—get me home. Please—get me back to my room. Now! ”

I didn't stop to argue.

Didn't stop to think.

I just tightened my hold on him, turned on my heel, and ran for my truck.

\* \* \*

His bedroom studio was quiet and dim, the curtains drawn tight against the outside world. The sounds of chaos from the concert felt a lifetime away, but the panic was still in his eyes.

I cupped his face, my thumbs brushing his cheek as I kissed him softly—once, twice—trying to slow the thundering pace of both our hearts.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my voice low, gentle.

Dean shook his head, eyes glassy. “No.”

I stroked my thumb along his jaw, feeling the tremble under my fingers. “It's alright, babe. You're safe. I'm here.”

But Dean pulled back a little, lips pressing tight together. There was something else beneath the panic. I could sense something weighing down on him, threatening to break him. “Dean? What is it?”

“I need to ask you something,” he whispered, pacing across the room toward his desk.

“Anything,” I said. “You can ask me anything.”

He turned to face me, hands gripping the edge of the desk like he needed to hold onto something solid.

“If I told you... if I told you I’d done something bad...” His voice cracked. “Would you still love me?”

My chest tightened. I crossed the room to him, closing the space between us, my hands resting lightly on his arms.

“Dean,” I said softly. “Of course I would. I love you. Nothing’s gonna change that.”

Dean didn’t say a word. He only swallowed hard, nodded once, then turned and reached into the top drawer of the desk.

When he faced me again, he was holding a copy of Rolling Stone magazine.

There was a picture of him on the cover—shirtless, hair messy, electric guitar in one hand, red leather pants unbuttoned just a little and a smoldering look on his face that made my knees feel weak.

“Is this it?” I asked. “Is this the something ‘bad’?”

Dean held it out to me, eyes downcast. “Look at it.”

I took it from him, frowning, confused. I flipped it over, tapped the cover. “Babe, you look fucking hotter than hell. This isn’t bad. This is great.”

Dean didn’t smile. He didn’t even look up.

“Look inside,” he said quietly.

I opened the magazine, flipping through the glossy pages, past the interview spread, past the double-page photo shoot of Dean looking so damn fuckable it made me hard.

But that's not what he wanted me to look at.

It took me a second to notice.

The headlines on some of the pages... little pieces of them were missing. Tiny chunks of words clipped out, leaving awkward gaps in the page titles. Letters gone here and there. Sliced so clean I might've missed it if I wasn't looking closely.

I flipped faster, my brow furrowing deeper.

Then I found it.

Tucked between two pages, half -folded, was a piece of paper.

My stomach dropped before I even unfolded it.

The letters that had been cut out from the magazine headlines were pasted onto the sheet of paper in uneven rows.

This will be your last—

The message stopped there.

Unfinished.

My throat went dry.

I stared at the paper, then back down at the magazine in my hands, and my mind

reeled—adding it up, the missing letters, the cut headlines, the careful, deliberate placement.

I lifted my eyes to Dean.

He was watching me.

Silent.

Fragile.

His chest rising and falling too fast, fingers white-knuckled against the desk.

“Dean?” My voice caught.

The room swayed a little under my feet.

I couldn’t breathe.

Couldn’t think straight.

The horror of it crept in, slow, cold.

“Dean...” My grip tightened on the magazine, my heart pounding so hard I felt sick.

“Babe... are you— ”

I couldn’t finish the question.

I didn’t have to.

The truth was already written in the way Dean couldn’t meet my eyes, in the tremor

of his hands, in the tears now sliding down his cheeks.

The stalker...

It was him.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:06 am*

DEAN

The moment Harry looked up from that half-finished letter—his eyes wide, stunned, shattered—it felt like all the air got sucked right out of the room.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move.

I saw the pieces falling into place behind his eyes, saw him putting it together. And when he whispered, "Dean... are you—" I didn't even try to stop it.

The tears were falling before I even realized.

I sank down onto the edge of the bed, my whole body crumpling in on itself like it couldn't hold me up anymore. My hands shook so badly I had to press them between my knees to stop them from flying apart.

"Yeah," I choked out, my voice barely more than a gasp. "It's me."

The words tasted like ash in my mouth.

Harry didn't say anything. Didn't move. Just stood there, holding the magazine, staring at me like he didn't know whether to come closer or run.

The shame poured out of me faster than I could catch it.

"I didn't know what else to do," I sobbed. "I just—I couldn't do it anymore, Harry. I couldn't breathe out there. The shows, the lights, the fucking cameras in my face all

the time. I couldn't get away fast enough."

I swiped at my eyes, but the tears kept coming, hot and blinding.

"The first three letters... that was it. That was all I planned. Just enough to scare Astrid into giving me a break. A reason to leave LA for a few weeks, come home, clear my head. I didn't—" My voice cracked, and I pressed my hands to my face, curling forward. "I didn't mean for it to get this bad."

I felt the weight of Harry's gaze on me, but I couldn't look at him.

"I had the fourth letter ready for when I got back. Just one more. But Astrid found it at my place before I could even decide if I was gonna send it." I let out a broken, bitter laugh. "And then it all seemed to spiral out of control. And I didn't know how to stop it. I didn't know how to tell her. I didn't want to wreck her career. I didn't want to ruin her dream too."

My throat burned.

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

"I didn't wanna let anyone down," I whispered. "Not Astrid. Not my dad. Not you."

The words hung there between us, the silence so loud it hurt my ears.

I finally forced myself to look up at him.

Harry was still standing there, the magazine clutched in one hand—but now his eyes were soft, wet at the corners, his brow pulled tight with something that wasn't anger.

It was heartbreak.

And I couldn't take it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, shaking my head, my voice faltering. "I'm so fucking sorry, Harry. I didn't know how else to make it stop. I just—I love writing songs. I love making music. But I hate the spotlight. I hate the crowds and the chaos and the noise. I hate the fucking... machine of it all."

I wiped my face again, the tears still coming.

"I didn't wanna give up the songs. But I didn't know how to escape without blowing it all up. Without blowing up everything. "

I swallowed hard, my voice barely a breath.

"Do you hate me now?" I asked.

Harry's brow creased even more. "Dean, I..."

"Are you disappointed in me?"

For a moment, he didn't move.

Just stared at me with those deep, steady eyes.

Then he dropped the magazine onto the floor and crossed the room in two steps.

His arms wrapped around me tight, pulling me in against his chest, holding me like he could put all my broken pieces back together with just the strength of his arms.

"Babe," he whispered, pressing a kiss into my hair. "I could never hate you."

I shook against him, sobbing into his chest as he held me tighter.

“I’m sorry,” I kept gasping. “I’m sorry, Harry, I’m sorry—”

“Shh.” He ran his hands slowly down my back, soft and sure, rocking me just a little. “I know, babe. I know. You’re scared. You’re hurting. But listen to me—I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m gonna keep you safe. I love you, Dean.”

I gasped softly. “You do?”

“Of course I do.”

I laughed and cried at the same time. “I love you too, Harry. God how I love you.”

I gripped his shirt in my fists, holding on like it was the only thing keeping me from falling.

Harry kissed the top of my head again, his lips gentle against my hair.

“We’re gonna fix this,” he murmured. “I’ll help you. I’ll make everything better.”

I could barely breathe through the tears, but I believed him.

Because he was Harry.

And he was holding me like he meant every word.

HARRY

Dean fell asleep in my arms, a slumber so deep it was like he hadn't slept in weeks.

His body curled into mine, breath slow and deep against my chest, fingers still tangled lightly in the fabric of my T-shirt like he wasn't quite ready to let go, even in sleep. But the tightness had gone out of him. The panic, the guilt, the shaking—it had all ebbed away as exhaustion took over.

I held him close, one hand stroking slowly down his back, the other brushing through his soft blond hair.

My heart still felt like it was breaking in half.

God, the weight that kid had been carrying. Alone. Hurting. Wrapped up in fear and shame so deep he hadn't seen any other way out.

I kissed the top of his head gently, careful not to wake him.

“You're safe now, babe,” I whispered. “I got you.”

The night was still and quiet, serene after such a night of panic and pain. All I could hear was the faint sound of the crickets outside the window, the slow rise and fall of Dean's breathing.

Then came a soft knock at the door.

Careful not to wake Dean, I slid out from under his weight, eased him down onto the pillow, tucked the blanket around him. He didn't stir.

I crossed the room as quietly as I could and inched the door open.

There, standing in the shadows of the shed, was Andy.

His hands were shoved deep into his jacket pockets, his eyes no longer angry but soft.

"Figured I might find you here," he said quietly.

My throat tightened. I stepped outside, closing the door most of the way behind me to keep the house quiet.

"He's asleep," I told him, voice low. "Out cold. He's... safe."

Andy nodded slowly, eyes down, scuffing the toe of his boot against the ground like he didn't quite know where to start.

"I ain't here to fight," he muttered after a moment.

I exhaled hard, leaning back against the doorframe, the tension bleeding out of my shoulders.

Andy looked up, his eyes tired but clearer now. "Can we... talk? Back at the house?"

I nodded.

"Yeah," I said softly. "Yeah, I'd like that."

I glanced back inside one more time—Dean still sound asleep, peaceful at last—then

pulled the door shut behind me and followed Andy up to the house.

\* \* \*

We sat across from each other at Andy's poker table. Andy slid a bottle of beer across to me, twisted the cap off his own, and leaned back in his chair, elbows resting on the arms like he was holding himself steady.

The silence sat heavy between us for a while.

Finally, Andy let out a slow breath and looked up at me. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry about the fight. The punch. For all of it."

I nodded, fingers wrapped around the cool neck of the bottle. "Yeah... well. I probably deserved it."

Andy gave a small, sad smile. "You didn't. I was just... confused. Shocked. Hell, it was the last thing I ever expected. But that's no excuse for lashing out like I did. I always promised myself I'd never turn out like my father. I vowed never to hit anyone like my dad hit me. I wanted to be a better man than that. I wanted to be the best father I could possibly be. Will you forgive me?"

"Andy, of course." I leaned forward, my eyes fixed on his. "I'm sorry too. I didn't mean for you to find out like that. The whole thing's been a surprise to me and Dean too." I gave him a soft smile, shrugged. "A wonderful surprise. But yeah... I should've told you how I felt. I just didn't know how."

Andy nodded slowly, tapping his bottle against the table once, twice, like he was feeling out the right words.

"I've been thinking," I said, keeping my tone steady. "Dean... he's stressed, Andy.

Overworked. The city, the scene, the noise—it's too much for him sometimes. LA hasn't been good for him." I paused, choosing my words carefully. "But he's finding his way. He's figuring out what he wants, what makes him happy."

I stopped there.

Because there were some things Andy didn't need to know.

There were things nobody needed to know.

I wasn't going to tell him about the letters. About the truth of the so-called stalker. That wasn't my story to tell. And it wasn't something Andy needed on his shoulders. He'd worry himself sick.

So I kept it locked down, tucked away, right where it belonged.

Andy took a long drink, wiped his mouth, then met my eyes again.

"I gotta tell you," he said. "When I saw you out there tonight, running into all that chaos... the way you pushed through that crowd, the way you fought to get to him..." He shook his head slowly. "I realized then... you really do love my boy."

The words hit deep in my chest.

"And Dean..." Andy went on, leaning forward, resting his arms on the table. "He must love you right back. I saw it in his face when you reached him. I saw it clear as day."

He gave a little laugh, shook his head again like he still couldn't believe it. "And hell... who am I to stand in the way of that?"

I felt the smile pull at my lips; I couldn't stop it even if I wanted to as the wave of relief washed over me.

"Andy..." I said, but my voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Thank you. You don't know what that means to me."

He waved a hand like he was brushing the air. "Harry, c'mon. You've always been more than my best friend. You're family. You always have been."

I reached across the table and gripped his forearm, hard. He grabbed my wrist right back, then stood up, rounding the table to pull me into a rough, tight hug.

This time there was no slap on the back.

Just a tight, loving embrace.

"Keep him safe. Make him happy," Andy muttered into my shoulder. "That's all I ask."

I nodded against him. "I will. I swear."

We pulled apart, both of us blinking a little faster than we needed to, and clinked our beer bottles together.

"To family," I said.

Andy smiled widely this time, nodding. "To family."

DEAN

The park looked almost peaceful again. Peaceful and totally fucking trashed.

The stage was half dismantled now, light rigs coming down piece by piece, stacks of black crates lined up like dominoes across the grass. Crew members moved slowly, quieter than they had all week—heads down, voices low, the adrenaline of the show setup long gone, replaced by the steady, tired rhythm of pack-up.

Harry's truck rolled to a stop along the perimeter fence, tires crunching on the gravel. He killed the engine and sat back, one hand still resting on the steering wheel, the other finding mine where it sat clenched tight in my lap.

“Are you sure you wanna do this today?” he asked softly, squeezing my hand. “It can wait.”

I shook my head, eyes fixed on the half-collapsed skeleton of the stage.

“No. It can't.” I let out a slow breath. “I've already waited too long.”

Harry nodded, his thumb stroking the back of my hand.

We sat there in the pickup for a minute, the only sound the distant clang of metal being loaded onto trucks and the calls of the crew counting off inventory.

My stomach twisted nervously.

God, I didn't know if I could actually say what I needed to say. Not to Astrid. She'd put so much into my career. I could already see her face, that sharp little frown, the way her jaw clenched when something didn't go the way she'd planned.

But I couldn't keep doing it. Not the way I had been.

I felt Harry's eyes on me, steady and patient.

"You want me to come with you?" he asked. "Stand by your side?"

I turned to him, swallowing hard, my throat thick.

But I shook my head.

"This is something I gotta do myself."

Harry's eyes softened, and he nodded again.

I leaned in, pressing my forehead to his, our hands still tangled between us.

"I love you," I whispered.

Harry smiled, then kissed me slow and sweet. "I love you too, babe. More than anything."

I took one last breath, squeezed his hand, and pushed the door open.

The morning sun was warm on my back as I stepped out of the truck and onto the grass. I could feel Harry watching me, and it gave me just enough strength to keep walking.

Toward Astrid.

Toward the conversation that might just change everything.

\* \* \*

The crew was still breaking down the last of the barricades when I found Astrid at the production desk, clipboard in hand, sunglasses on and barking orders into her headset like the show was still happening, pointing sharply toward the last of the equipment trucks as they reversed into place.

“No, no, no! Speaker stack three goes in the blue truck, not the red one!” She yanked the headset off with a frustrated sigh, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “God, give me strength. These people would drown in a rainstorm if I didn’t tell them how to float.”

I swallowed hard, shifting on my feet.

“Hey,” I said softly.

As soon as she saw me Astrid jumped out of her folding chair and hugged me tight. “Dean, darling. Are you alright? Last night was fucking crazy. You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

I shook my head. “I’m okay. You?”

“Fine, although I felt like I lost at least three years off my life watching that chaos unfold. You’re lucky your lovely boyfriend fought off half the crowd or we’d be scraping you off the stage with a spatula.”

I couldn’t argue with her on that.

I stuffed my hands deep into my jacket pockets, stared down at my boots. What I wanted to say felt big and heavy in my chest, but I knew I had to get it out.

“I need to talk to you,” I said quietly.

Astrid’s arms dropped slowly to her sides, her expression shifting. She pulled off her sunglasses, tucking them into the collar of her shirt. “That sounds ominous,” she said. “Go on, then. Hit me.”

I took a breath. “I’m done, Astrid. With performing.”

She blinked, like she wasn’t sure she’d heard me right.

“I don’t want to be on stage anymore,” I said, steadier now. “I don’t want the lights. The interviews. The crowds. I can’t... I hate it, Astrid.”

She drew in a deep breath. “Dean—”

“No, please. Hear me out. I love writing songs. I want to keep writing songs. I want to move back to Mulligan’s Mill and write the best songs the world has ever heard. But I can’t keep doing this.” I gestured to the staging being packed down all around us. “It’s not for me. Not anymore.”

Astrid crossed her arms, head tilting, eyes searching my face. “You’re serious.”

I nodded. “Dead serious.”

She inhaled deeply again, held her breath, then let it out through her teeth. “Goddammit.”

I flinched, but she wasn’t shouting. She just shook her head, looking up at the sky

like she was asking for divine patience.

“I knew,” she muttered. “Deep down, I knew this was coming. You were never like the others. Never had that bloodthirsty, fame-hungry look in your eye. You were the only artist I’ve ever had to push onto the stage instead of pulling them off it.” She dropped her arms, planted her hands on her hips, and stared at me for a long moment. “Of course, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t utterly devastated. I’ve worked my arse off to get you where you are. We built this together, you and me.”

“I know,” I said, my dry throat clicking as I swallowed. “And I’m grateful for everything you did for me. I mean it. But I can’t keep standing out there like that. It’s not who I am.”

She let out a soft, bitter laugh. “No. No, it never was.”

There was a beat of quiet between us—heavy, but not angry.

“I still want you to be my manager,” I added quickly. “For the songwriting. If you’ll have me.”

Astrid raised an eyebrow. “On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“That you bloody well write the biggest hit songs of all time.” She jabbed a finger at me. “You owe me that much.”

I laughed, the weight easing off my chest. “Deal.”

Astrid stepped forward and pulled me into another hug. “I guess you can take the boy out of Mulligan’s Mill, but you can’t take Mulligan’s Mill out of the boy, huh.”

“I guess not.”

As we parted, she wiped her eyes. “Go on, then. Go and be happy.”

I nodded, my heart thumping, soft but steady, the fear replaced by something warmer. Something right.

“Thank you, Astrid,” I said, my voice cracking a little. “For everything.”

She waved me off, already pulling her sunglasses back on like she couldn’t handle another second of emotional vulnerability.

“Off you go, darling. Before I change my mind.”

I grinned, turned on my heel, and walked away.

Free.

HARRY

The house was quiet again.

Not the heavy kind of quiet—the good kind.

The peaceful kind.

The kind that settles into your bones, warm and steady, like the smell of coffee in the morning or the creak of the porch swing on a summer's night.

Dean was curled up on my couch, barefoot, legs folded under him, wearing one of my old flannel shirts that hung loose on his frame. His hair was still a little damp from the shower, soft and messy, and there was the easiest smile on his face—the kind I hadn't seen for a long time.

The kind that wasn't forced.

The kind that wasn't hiding anything.

I leaned against the doorframe for a second, just watching him, arms crossed, heart full. God, he looked good here.

Like he belonged here.

Like he always had.

“Stop staring at me, old man,” he teased, eyes glinting, that smile tilting into a smirk.

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m admiring the view. Don’t be rude.”

Dean laughed, head leaning back against the cushion.

I crossed the room, dropped down onto the couch beside him and pulled him close, tucking him under my arm. He nestled into my side like he was made to fit there.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” I murmured, kissing his hair.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “It feels really good. No chaos. No lights. No screaming fans. Just this. Just us. ”

Dean tilted his head up and kissed me softly, slowly—one of those lazy, happy kisses that didn’t need to prove anything.

After a minute, he pulled away, eyes sparkling. “Hey,” he said, nudging me gently with his elbow. “Feel like playing a song together?”

I grinned. “With you? Always.”

We both stood, moving almost in sync, crossing to the corner of the room where my acoustic guitar—now freed from the closet under the stairs—leaned against the wall alongside his touring guitar.

Dean grabbed his, settling into the chair across from me as I picked mine up and gave the tuning pegs a quick twist.

We didn’t need to say what song.

We just started playing.

Two guitars.

Two hearts.

In perfect tune.

You're a secret on the wind

You're a stolen work of art

You're the one I've always wanted

You're the hammer of my heart

Only, our love wasn't a secret on the wind anymore.

DEAN

ONE YEAR LATER... ALMOST

The house smelled like garlic and rosemary and just a little bit like panic because I was absolutely winging it on the roast vegetables. But the table was set, there were fresh marigolden-girls in a vase in the middle, and the cake from Pascal's was hidden in the fridge.

I stood back for a second, wiped my hands on the tea towel tucked into my jeans pocket, and grinned at the sight of it all.

Harry wandered into the kitchen behind me, barefoot, still in his work shirt with the sleeves rolled up, eyeing the spread like it might bite him.

"You're making a hell of a fuss," he said, eyebrow raised. "You sure we're not hosting the mayor or something?"

I gave him my sweetest smile, leaned in, pecked him on the cheek. "Nope. Just a little family dinner."

Harry shook his head, but I could see the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You're up to something."

I shrugged, doing my best innocent face.

Before he could press me, there was a knock at the door.

I wiped my hands again and practically skipped over to open it.

There they were—Dad and Madeline.

Madeline was beaming, looking gorgeous as ever in a soft green sundress, her arm linked through Dad's. And Dad, hell he looked happier than I'd seen him in years. He had that dopey smile he got when he was over the moon about something, and he couldn't stop glancing sideways at Madeline like he couldn't believe his luck.

"Hey, kiddo," Dad said, leaning in to give me one of his rough hugs. "Smells good in here. You sure this isn't catered?"

I laughed and swatted at his arm. "Rude. Come on in."

Madeline hugged me tight, kissed my cheek. "It looks beautiful, Dean."

I ushered them both inside, Dad giving Harry a solid, heartfelt hug, no more of those back-clap, half-hug things they used to do.

I caught Harry's eye across the kitchen. He smiled, soft and full of love, and my heart did that happy little somersault it still hadn't gotten tired of doing.

Dinner was easy. Laughter, good food, the clink of glasses, stories shared between bites. The windows were open, letting in the soft evening breeze. Then—when everyone was full and the last of the plates were cleared—I slipped away into the kitchen and came back carrying the cake.

It was chocolate, rich and simple, with Happy Birthday Harry piped across the top.

Harry blinked, surprised. "Oh Dean!"

"Nobody ever remembers," I said, setting the cake down in front of him, candles

already lit and flickering. “But I’m not nobody.”

Harry’s lips twitched, his eyes shining.

Dad gave a loud, approving whistle. “Look at that, huh?”

“Make a wish,” I told Harry, nudging the cake in front of him.

He looked around the table, at me, at Dad and Madeline, at this messy, wonderful life we’d built together, then smiled at me with that soft, brown-eyed smile of his and said—

“I don’t have to. It already came true.”