



Carol of the Bellskis

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Mystery/Suspense

Paralegal Seth Bellski is tired of being the secret lover of his boss, Lars Varga, founding partner of Finch, Varga & Vale Law. So when he asks Lars to spend Hanukah with Seth's family at their kosher B&B in Whistler, B.C., and Lars refuses, Seth realizes he will never get his self-conscious boss out of the closet.

So Seth prepares to spend his Hanukah holiday alone in the B&B. Instead he finds himself running the place, as his aunt and uncle are missing, and nine demanding, peculiar, and danger-prone guests have arrived. To make matters worse, Lars shows up, begging forgiveness. Lars's touches remind Seth of why he put up with his boss's behavior in the first place. If only the words that came out of that beautiful mouth were as sweet as his kisses.

But how can Seth find time to fix his broken relationship when the guests are demanding kosher, gluten-free diets, losing their pet terriers, and hitting their heads on the ice?

Seth and Lars find themselves put through the paces of being a married couple, all while still broken up. But then again, if they can survive this Hanukah, surely their relationship can withstand anything?

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices.*

Chapter One

The breakup was a long time in the making. Nevertheless, the end happened so fast, Seth didn't know it occurred until it was over.

After all, they had just made love, and it had been one of those achingly sweet ones where their bodies weren't using each other as much as merging together, their movements soft and slow, as if time would remember this union, as if everything depended on it.

They no longer mapped each other's bodies. They knew the routes by heart, and still, Seth took his time tracing his way along Lars's skin, as if his subconscious knew this would be the last time to savor such a sight or feel the rough hairs on Lars's leg and the reciprocal softness on his inner thigh; the last time he'd smell the musky earthiness of Lars's desire and share the dark, welcoming entrance, such privacy, great secrets on display.

And afterward, that sweet embrace, kisses shared like whispers between them, and then a quiet descended, the comfort of familiarity and safety like a balm soothing the stresses of the workday, the world outside.

"Are you packed for tomorrow?" was all he had asked.

Lars stiffened beside him. He stared up at the ceiling. "I'm not coming with you."

Seth stared up at the ceiling as well. Stains from the hotel room above seemed to sink through the floorboards, creating a muddied brown Rorschach print across the off-yellow paint.

"You said you would." Seth hated the hurt in his voice and cleared his throat. "It will be fun."

"I'm not stopping you," Lars said. His hands had withdrawn from Seth's body. "I just can't come along."

"You said..." Seth swallowed, tried to find a new approach. "It's our chance to get away from it all. Remember? We discussed this. Whistler is beautiful. The skiing is world-class. You'd love it, and the B and B is really charming."

“The B and B is another thing,” Lars said. His voice was cold now, lawyerlike. Even naked, he had a suit and tie on. “I don’t mind celebrating Hanukkah with you, but this is an orthodox B and B, kosher and...what do you call it when they observe the Sabbath?”

“*Shomer Shabbat*,” Seth said.

“I don’t think it’s fair to ask me to live up to those kind of expectations, especially for eight entire days.”

“The annoying part is just the Sabbath; that’s the only time you can’t turn on lights. And besides, my aunt and uncle have the whole place wired with timers. You won’t even notice. The coffee is made automatically; the shower turns on every three hours. It’s like magic!”

Seth knew he sounded desperate. But this had meant so much to him. More than he had even admitted to himself.

“Still. It’s a lot to ask of a person.”

Seth felt the disappointment like a crushing weight, sitting on his chest, pushing his happiness outward. “We discussed everything. Hell, you bought those books about hiking Whistler—”

“It was a fantasy, baby, nothing more.” Lars cleared his throat. “It would look too suspicious if we both went on vacation at the same time, especially for a whole week right before Christmas. Everyone knows I’m not a Jew. Why would I be taking Hanukkah off?” Lars shook his head. “No way.”

Seth clenched his eyes shut, clenched his fists. He fought to muffle his pain.

But he was angry, too. Angry at Lars, and angry at himself for expecting him to change. Of course Lars wouldn’t come with him. The risk was too great. Not only would it come out that the great Lars Varga of Finch and Varga Law Offices was actually friends with a mere paralegal, but that the two of them had been fucking each other for over a year.

“It’s about time they know,” Seth reasoned, trying very hard to keep the desperation out of his voice.

Lars sat up in bed, creating a wall with his broad back. Even without seeing it, Seth knew Lars rubbed his face with his hand, stressed as usual.

“Not this way,” Lars said finally. “It’s tacky.”

“So what is the not-tacky way?” Seth asked. He sat up as well, dislodging the sheet that covered his legs. “The best thing to do would be to tell people. Tell them we’re lovers. Tell them we’re going on vacation together.”

“No.”

The finality of the word twisted in Seth's stomach. He felt sick as hurt rage pooled in his gut, crept up his throat. Lars would rather hurt him than risk his own social standing.

“You’re so fucking selfish,” Seth said under his breath.

“What did you say?” Lars turned, and his eyes locked on Seth's flaccid cock, half-exposed. Arousal flickered in Lars's eyes.

But Seth wasn't going to let him get out of this argument like he usually did, swaying Seth by using his body as a distraction, both of them hungry enough that the carnal outweighed the emotional needs.

“You’re selfish,” Seth repeated. He swallowed back the burn creeping up his throat. “You have no idea how insulting this is to me.”

Lars's expression softened. “Baby, this has nothing to do with you. I love you. You know that.”

“Not enough, apparently.”

“Christ, what do you want me to say?”

“I don't want you to say anything. I want you to come on vacation with me. That's all.”

Lars reached out as if unable to stop himself. His hand rested on Seth's inner thigh, possessive and calming.

“We went on vacation together only six months ago, remember?”

“Yeah. For a weekend,” Seth said, “in separate cars, leaving at separate times. And when Finch called to ask about the Murphy case, you lied and told him you were sick at home.”

“But we were together,” Lars pressed. His hand slid up Seth's thigh. “We spent two days alone.”

“Did you enjoy it?” Seth asked after a moment.

“Of course I did.”

"Then do this with me." Seth reached out and tilted Lars's chin so that they stared at each other. Lars's eyes were so blue, so soft. "I don't want to go alone."

"I know." Lars reached out and stroked Seth's rough jawline.

"You have the time off requested already. Please."

But Lars shook his head. "Don't."

"Lars, I'm begging you—"

"Don't do that. God. Don't." He pulled away.

"You are being cruel—"

"*I'm* being cruel?" Lars bristled. "Do you know what you're asking me to do?"

"You're a fucking partner, it's *your* goddamn firm! No one is going to fire you because of who you're screwing!"

"Yeah, but I'll lose my clients. You know I love you. Isn't that enough?"

Seth stared at him.

A year ago, it *had* been enough. Back then he hadn't cared how far in the closet his boss decided to stay. What mattered was the time they did spend together, the hotness of Lars's embrace, the desperation in his touch, always so grateful, so frantic, so excited. What mattered were those lazy Saturday mornings in bed, rough legs entangled, chest pressed against chest, their bodies becoming one, so that hours after Lars had slipped out the back and returned to his expensive home on the gated estate, Seth could taste him in his mouth, feel the tender stretch of his entry, smell Lars's hair on the pillow.

But what had been enough for Seth a year ago no longer satisfied him. He was tired of being Lars's dirty little secret. He hated averting his eyes at staff meetings and the coldness of Lars's approach in the office. Lars was so terrified that his partner and the associate attorneys at the firm would find out about their clandestine relationship that he was purposefully rude to Seth, snubbing him in hallways and curtly requesting changes to documents. And while he would apologize later, when they were alone, making it up to Seth by offering himself shamelessly, spreading his legs and begging Seth to fuck him, forgive him, nevertheless, all those minor insults throughout the days, every day, added up.

But the worst blow was when Lars decided to get a fake girlfriend.

He had assured Seth that there was nothing between them. Ella was an old-fashioned beard, and she knew it, Lars claimed. She was an old friend from high school, recently reacquainted, and she was also an attorney. Their friendship was nothing but.

Yet Seth had to sit there and watch Lars's arm casually slide around Ella's shoulder when she met him for lunch at the office. He saw Lars kiss her cheek affectionately whenever Adam Finch or the newest attorney, Steve Vale, watched.

And he'd pretty much taken enough of Lars's shit to last a lifetime.

Seth wrapped his arms around his knees. He gathered his words carefully and let them out slowly, knowing they were weapons, knowing the barbs could hurt.

"I have said nothing as you coldly ordered me out of your office," he said. "As you kissed Ella and rubbed her back in front of me. As you turned away from me without a second glance." Seth looked at Lars then. "And in return, I ask you to do this for me. For us. Come spend the holidays with me and my family, like you promised. One Hanukkah. That's all I'm asking."

"For a whole week," Lars noted.

"Yes. After an entire year of doing things your way, I'm asking for one week. You, me, and a mountain wilderness." Seth tried smiling.

Lars ran his hand over his face once more. He frowned, and Seth knew then that he had lost, that Lars would never budge.

"I can't. I'm sorry I said I would. But Finch suspects something, and I don't want to fuel his speculations."

The coldness that washed through Seth wasn't new. He'd felt it before, but the heaviness of it felt different. He realized it was final. Love had just frozen too many times within him, and now, like an icy branch, it snapped, dead.

Seth didn't want to be naked with this cold man any longer. He dressed silently. Lars reached out to embrace him, and Seth jerked away and angrily pulled up his slacks. His work shirt was tossed on the floor haphazardly. There was no way he was sneaking back to the office, clothes wrinkled, without suspicion.

"Baby, don't be mad at me," Lars cooed.

Seth said nothing.

“Look, you're being unreasonable,” Lars said.

Seth buttoned his shirt and then searched for his socks and shoes.

Lars sat heavily on the edge of the bed. His naked body was a beautiful sight. His blond hair looked disheveled after their lovemaking, spikes wild and loose around his bright blue eyes.

Seth allowed himself one last glance at the long body that had given him so much pleasure, and then he turned away.

“Okay...look.” Lars's voice had a note of panic in it. “Maybe I can join you in a few days? I'll come for a night or two. I'll drive up separately, and then—”

“No.” Seth straightened and stared at him. “Fuck you.”

Lars's eyes narrowed. “What did you just say?”

“Fuck. You.” Seth found his tie and knotted it hastily. “I quit. I'm done. I'm so fucking tired of your excuses.”

“You quit? You mean the firm?” Lars's relief was palpable.

And Seth suddenly realized Lars wanted this all along. He wanted Seth out of Finch and Varga. It was too humiliating, Lars's being in love with a male assistant. And that relief in his voice was the absolute final straw.

“No. I want my job. I'm quitting you.”

Lars flinched. Seth hurriedly tied his shoes, because he knew he was going to puke any minute, and he wanted to get out of the hotel before he did so.

“Christ.” Lars stood. His hands were trembling.

Seth turned away. He couldn't look at him. “Have fun with Ella,” he said at the door. “Hope she enjoys being used as much as I did.”

Chapter Two

The drive from Bellevue, Washington, to Whistler, British Columbia, was a brutal five hours fired by rage. He would enjoy this vacation if it killed him, he decided. Fuck Lars. Fuck homophobic Adam Finch and conservative Steve Vale and all the stuck-up bastards at the law firm. He was going to *fucking love his goddamn single vacation alone with nothing to do* if it killed him.

That rage fueled him through the traffic north of Bellevue into Everett, and the traffic at the US-Canada border, and the traffic in Vancouver, BC. It tensed his ankle and pushed down the pedal. It clenched his fingers and rotated the steering wheel. It made him rip out the CD that Lars had given him and powered his terrible singing voice to angrily shout out lyrics as the classic rock station cycled through its hourly Supertramp/Journey/Styx/Zeppelin/REO Speedwagon lineup.

The drive up the Sea to Sky Highway took him on soaring cliffs above the pristine, icy waters of the Puget Sound, with jaw-dropping vistas of the evergreen-stubbed Gulf Islands, jagged Cascade Mountain peaks, and glassy streams. Seth didn't spare the inspiring view a second glance.

After all, what was so inspiring about an eagle soaring over a picture-perfect landscape when one's boyfriend was a complete and utter asshole?

Ex-boyfriend.

Seth nearly slumped over his steering wheel once he arrived. The dregs of his rage-rush left him spent, feeling like he'd run a marathon on five cups of coffee and no food. He wasn't angry anymore, only numb, physically and mentally, and it was unclear whether this was an improvement.

He stared at the B and B. Only now did he question his decision to show up despite everything. Just because his aunt Judith and uncle Carl saved a room for him didn't mean he actually had to come. They would have understood.

Seth sat there for many minutes. He knew the second he walked through that front door he would be inundated with cheer and food, and nothing clashed more with his current mood than cheer.

What the hell was he *doing* here?

A twinge of bitterness managed to break through his numbness, and Seth remembered that this was his decision: breaking up with Lars and driving to Whistler. He needed to take responsibility. But it still rankled, enough that Seth forced himself out of the car before the numbness completely wore off and he started to do something humiliating like weep.

The moment he stepped from the car, the wind smacked him in the face, crisp and dry and several degrees below freezing. The sun was out, but it was one of those fake suns, the kind that looks cozy, beckons you out to play, and then pulls away, snickering as you develop frostbite.

Seth yanked the overstuffed camping backpack out of the backseat of his car. His hiking boots sank into freshly fallen snow as he trudged to the front porch.

The log cabin-style house was very quaint, with enough rooms to qualify it as a lodge rather than a B and B, although Carl and Judi were rarely at capacity except over the holidays. The fact that it was the only kosher B and B in the mountains made it not only an attraction for the western Canadian Jewish population, but also a deterrent to those who had expectations of cheeseburgers or Saturday-morning cartoons.

Although Judi and Carl were about as religious as Seth himself—that is, they couldn't remember the last time they'd spoken a word of Hebrew and understood it—they catered to the stringent requirements of the orthodox community.

It was an odd setting for Talmudic law, but no one could dismiss its beauty. The lodge was off Panorama Ridge, backing onto hundreds of acres of wooded wilderness, filled with trails, wildlife, and stunning landscape views over the mountains. Whistler Village was only a few miles up the road, and they were within walking distance of Alta Lake.

The B and B had six bedrooms and usually booked in advance of major holidays, so it surprised Seth that no other footprints marred the thick snow. No cars were in the lot. Granted, it was still somewhat early for check-in, two p.m., but he was rarely the first guest to arrive.

Seth rang the doorbell. There was no answer. The lights were out.

He stared blankly at the heavy wooden door, not thinking much. It was cold.

He looked around the porch and noticed that there was fresh snow over the driveway to the back garage where Carl parked his SUV. They hadn't left the house since the night before, then.

Seth rang the doorbell again. Icy wind blew roughly at his face and tried to unravel his scarf. As the unmitigated silence reverberated through his mind, a hint of anxiety managed to slip past his numbness.

Seth dropped his backpack on the porch and walked around to the back of the house. The looming forest looked panoramic, with a dusting of white snow delicately tracing each needle of the evergreen trees, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He headed to the swing set his uncle had installed ten years ago and fumbled with frozen fingers under the side suspension bar for the hidden key.

His fingers burned, touching the cold metal of the frame. He pocketed them and the key and scuffled back to the front porch. He opened the door and stepped inside.

"Hello?" he called out tentatively. All the lights were out.

"Aunt Judi? Uncle Carl?"

No response. Clearly he was alone. His aunt and uncle had stepped out. But what about all the other guests? Weren't they scheduled to arrive for the first day of Hanukkah?

Maybe Judi and Carl had canceled the reservations and forgotten to tell Seth. Or maybe all the other guests had arrived and they'd all gone on some happy group excursion, leaving him alone with his shredded heart.

His energy level had sunk below empty an hour ago. He had to keep moving, because the moment he sat down on one of the comfy collection of couches around the large central fireplace, he would pass out and, with any luck, not wake up until he was dead.

Seth made his way over to the check-in table, an antique rolltop desk near the closet. He found the register and noted that his aunt had put him down to stay in the Chuppah Room.

Great. His aunt had placed him in the newlywed suite.

Seth's cold heart pumped hotter, touched at his aunt's acceptance and her sweet effort to bless his unconventional love affair by giving him the nicest room in the house. The Chuppah Room was actually the entire attic, furnished with warm red tones and a shag carpet, which didn't go with anything but remained since Uncle Carl felt shag was a "necessity for any honeymoon," the reasons for which bewildered and frightened Seth.

Seth had told Judi he was bringing his boyfriend, and of course she had overreacted. Everyone in his family would have. Seth *never* brought a guy home, even though he'd been openly out for years. The fact that he would be staying in the Chuppah Room, with its unnecessarily grandiose assortment of scented candles, all by himself, was a travesty.

But he knew his aunt hated room changes, so he trudged up the dark stairs and then the extra set to his majestic suite with its king-size bed, satin bedsheets, and strategically placed Torah. He sat at the edge of the bed and stared at a framed, cross-stitched wall hanging quoting William Shakespeare: *Love looks not with eyes, but with the mind.*

Seth snorted.

It was funny that Judi and Carl's inherent realism made that the most romantic quote they could think of to inspire honeymooners. *Who cares if she's ugly? She's smart!* suggested the same thing.

But as Seth sat there, he realized that, of all people, he was guilty of transgressing this golden rule.

Of course he'd been using his eyes. How could he not? Lars was six feet four, carrying lean muscles from obsessive running, with chiseled features and smoldering blue eyes under long lashes.

But the mind behind that beautiful face was shrewd, calculating. At first Seth had loved his boss's intellect. Lars was a quick thinker and funny. He could recite esoteric legal precedents and the contents of the most recent *People* magazine with equal aptitude.

But that quick mind never stopped calculating—appraising risks, weighing consequences. He knew how to give Seth just enough to keep him trapped in the love affair without ever committing.

Seth turned away from the wall. Thinking about Lars felt like jabbing a screwdriver between his ribs.

He considered unpacking, but instead he just stared at his bag, hoping it would inspire him. He noticed the zipper on the bag was broken. Typical. He pulled on it limply.

The ring of the doorbell snapped him out of his stupor. He pounded his wet boots against the side of the bed to dislodge the large chunks of melting ice atop them, scrambled down the stairs, and threw open the door.

To his surprise, it wasn't his aunt and uncle.

Two complete strangers blinked at him, both shrouded in heavy black wool coats with nearly identical jaunty wool caps.

"Hello?" he croaked.

The couple frowned simultaneously.

"Eh, hello?" the little man said. "Is this the Bellski B and B?"

"Yes?" Seth glared at them a moment longer, angry that they weren't the people he expected. And then he remembered this was a B and B and opened the door wider. "Yes! Yes, it is. Come in."

The little man smiled and shuffled in. "I'm Rabbi Chaim Siegel; this is my wife, Chana Siegel." The two of them clasped large, hard suitcases, the kind that could be thrown from planes with impunity. Seth stepped onto the snowy porch to gather the rest of their things. They traveled with four suitcases between them.

By the time Seth managed to drag them inside, the Siegels had removed their hats and coats and were holding them out for him.

Seth grabbed them. "Let me put those away for you."

"It's awfully dark in here," Chana Siegel noted.

"It's cold in here," the rabbi noted. "Are you sure this is the Bellski place?"

"Yes! Yes, yes..." Seth hung their coats up and then rushed around, turning on the automatic gas fireplace, switching on lights, fumbling along the wall frantically for the thermostat. "Sorry, I'm Seth Bellski, Carl and Judi's nephew, and I'm just helping them out until

they get back...soon..." Seth didn't really know what procedure his aunt had for registering guests, so he just glanced in her register.

"It looks like she assigned you the Mitzvah Room on the second floor. I'll show you where it is."

"This is a nice staircase," Chana commented, waddling upward. For a stout woman, she had impressive arm strength. Seth dragged their other bags behind him, yanking them individually over each stair.

"How old is the lodge?" Chana asked.

"Uh, I think it's—"

"I heard there's a shul within walking distance?" Rabbi Chaim asked.

"Well, the Sinai Center in Whistler has services—"

"Is there heating in each room?" Chana interrupted.

"Yes, I think so. But when my aunt—"

"When's dinner going to be served?" Rabbi Chaim asked.

"Uh..." Seth tried to remember the schedule Judi used the last time he had visited a few years prior. "Seven o'clock, I think."

"But sunset is at four fourteen today!" Rabbi Chaim said.

"Oh. Yeah. Well, I think we're doing a lighting of the Hanukkah candle first, with latkes, and then dinner at the regular hour." He was making this up. He had no idea what his aunt planned. He prayed that she would show up any minute, and he struggled to maneuver their luggage through the narrow door of the Mitzvah Room.

The Mitzvah Room faced the forest and had an unobstructed view of the glacial peaks. Both Chaim and Chana audibly *oohed* at the sight, and Seth took advantage of their distracted state to dash into the attached bathroom and make sure it was stocked with paper and folded towels. Luckily his aunt always left every room ready for its next guest without fail.

"The bed's a little hard," Chana noted, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Can we get a little more heat?" Chaim asked.

Seth found the thermostat and cranked it. He handed the rabbi the room key. "Here you are. This is your own private bathroom. The living room, dining room, television room, and

games room are all free for your use downstairs. When my aunt gets back, she'll talk about the other things she needs from you."

The doorbell rang.

Seth frowned. "Do you have more in your party?"

"The Rosenbaums are joining us, but they won't be in until later," the rabbi said.

"They drove all the way from Alberta," Chana said.

"And Mendel's car broke down in Banff," Chaim added. "And of course they won't get CAA, so they were stranded. In the cold, of all places."

"And so they tried to call us several times, but of course we don't have traveling phone service," Chana said.

"I can't stand all the extra fees!" Chaim confirmed.

"But it would be worth it just to speak to Mendel when his car breaks down."

"So now they are taking a rental car." Chaim nodded.

"And the rental car has one of those fancy new units. Those geological units."

"The GPS unit, Chana."

"The GPS unit. But Mendel says he gets more lost when he uses it than when he doesn't."

The doorbell rang again. Seth, stunned frozen by the rapid-fire assault of Siegel storytelling, shook his head to pull himself together.

"Sorry, let me go get the door." Seth practically ran from the room.

The gas fire roared in the fireplace, and the main room was beginning to warm. He opened the front door to see a tall, old, excessively wrinkled man standing there, clutching a little terrier under his arm.

"Bellski!" he bellowed.

"That's me," Seth said.

"Aha!" The man clapped a huge, thick-fingered hand over Seth's shoulder and pushed his way inside. In comparison to the Siegels, he only brought a backpack and a tote bag, which seemed stuffed full of hardback novels.

Romances, Seth noted.

“Checking in!” The man laughed. “It’s cold out there, kid! I walked from the village. Good for the constitution!”

Seth nodded politely. Despite acclaim for his constitution, the man had a gut large enough to fit Seth inside.

“I’ve never been healthier, and it’s all thanks to walks in the snow,” the man continued. “You should try it. You look pale, kid. Pale and unhealthy.”

Seth wondered for a moment if there were hidden cameras. Bad acting, he thought. No one is this naturally gregarious.

“And you are...?” Seth asked, heading over to the register. He was going to kill his aunt and uncle as soon as they came in. Or at least charge them.

He ignored the fact that his room was free.

“Ben Berkowitz,” the man said. His face was intriguing. Deeply etched wrinkles marked his face like engravings, and an impressive white shock of hair shot from his head as though fleeing the sunken crevices in his forehead.

“*B-E-R-K-O-W-I-T-Z*,” Ben spelled out. “You got that, kid?”

“Got it,” Seth said. “You’re in the Tikvah Room.”

“What a waste. I’m hopeless,” Ben said, playing on *tikvah*, the Hebrew word for *hope*.

His little dog yapped.

“And this is Doctor Mister.”

“I’m sorry?” Seth asked.

“Doctor Mister. That’s his name.” The man smiled as he held the terrier out toward Seth.

Seth reached out to pet the dog, and it growled at him. He withdrew his hand.

“Doctor Mister isn’t himself until he’s had something to eat. You got dog food, kid?”

“Uh...am I supposed to?”

“I talked to the older Bellski. He said it wouldn’t be a problem.” The old man’s magnanimous smile faltered. “It isn’t a problem, is it?”

“Oh no!” Seth said quickly. “No problem at all. If you cleared it ahead of time with Carl, I’m sure it’s fine. I’ll show you your room and then see if I can find some food for uh...”

“Doctor Mister.”

“Yes. Him.” Seth grabbed the key for the Tikvah Room and led Ben upstairs.

He barely managed to get Ben's thermostat cranked before the doorbell rang again.

“For God's sake,” he cried. He rushed down the stairs again to find two women beaming up at him.

“Hello!” said an attractive, redheaded, middle-aged woman.

“Hello!” The younger one was adorable, with bouncy, curly hair and bright eyes. They both cheerily entered the house and started talking at once.

“Oh! Sharon, look at that fireplace! How beautiful! And all the quilts on the walls and the furniture! And look at the carpet! And look at the lovely table!”

“I can see, Heidi.” The older woman turned to Seth. “We're the Neidlich sisters, Heidi and Sharon? I just flew in from Toronto, and Heidi from New York. We have a reservation for the Hanukkah package.”

“Heidi and Sharon Neidlich,” Seth read from the reservation book. “My aunt put you in the Mishpaha Suite.” The *family suite* was a fancy term for the room off the side of the house, with only a view to the garage. It was spacious but sparsely decorated, all part of Seth's aunt's philosophy that children will destroy everything in their path and therefore must be sequestered into the back room with due haste.

Seth handed them the key to their room and then quickly turned away before he could answer any questions or be forced into any more chores.

He fled for the kitchen, which was large and, more importantly, marked PRIVATE with a large sign. He searched for a beer, found one, cracked it, and sat at the wooden kitchen table, head in his hands.

Where the fuck were the Bellskis?

Throughout the house, Seth heard people unpacking, arguing, laughing, and the occasional barking of the little dog. Judi's register did not bode well for his own vacation at this rate. There was still another party on the way. He glanced at the clock.

It was three.

These people were going to expect a Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony. They were going to expect snacks and then a nice kosher dinner. And Seth did not cook.

Seth unlocked the back door that was in the kitchen and stepped outside. The wind had died down somewhat, but it was still far below freezing. The snow crunched under his boots as he walked. He peeked through the crack of his uncle's garage door.

Carl and Judi's red SUV was gone. That meant they really were running an errand and would be back soon. Seth's heartbeat slowed in relief.

But the lack of tracks in the snow bothered him. It hadn't snowed all morning. There was always the possibility that they had been in an accident, after all. Where the hell did they go? And what was he supposed to do until they showed up?

He didn't want to just give up. His aunt and uncle had always been kind to him, even now, granting him free use of their most expensive room so that he could get away from it all with his asshole of a boss. He owed it to Judi and Carl to suck it up for a few hours, tend to the B and B, and make sure the guests were welcomed until the proper hosts showed up.

Seth walked back into the house and did a quick inventory of the pantry. It looked stocked for a wedding. No one could ever accuse Judi Bellski of running low on food.

His aunt was an incredible cook. Part of the appeal of the B and B was its delicious meals, all made from scratch. But surely she had at least a bag of chips lying around somewhere, something he could serve up at candle-lighting time to get the ball rolling?

Nothing. Not even a slice of pizza. He found some bread and a container of hummus. There. Hors d'oeuvres solved.

Judi had two sets of dishes, two dishwashers, even two refrigerators. Her kitchen was strictly divided per the most stringent rules of kashruth. The blue plates were for meat dishes only, and the yellow plates for dairy. Seth stood for a moment, torn. Which plate should he use? Technically there was neither meat nor dairy in hummus. What were the rules about that?

And then he froze. Wait. Was hummus even allowed?

Oh yeah. Just not allowed on Passover, since it was a legume.

He was sweating by the time he got the food laid out on a yellow plate. The presentation was ridiculous. He probably should have taken the hummus out of the container first.

The doorbell rang.

Cursing, Seth wiped his hands on his jeans and walked through the kitchen and back into the main room of the lodge.

The Siegels had gotten the door for him, and since they were actively hugging the couple, Seth assumed they were the Rosenbaums. He put them in the only suite left, the Shalom Room.

This was Seth's favorite room, with a view of the mountains and a small, tastefully furnished bedroom and attached nook that served as an office. The bathroom was cramped, everything next to everything else, but he liked it for its dark blue decor and the four-poster bed, which barely fit in the tiny space.

Now everyone was here. Everyone but the hosts.

Seth ran back down to the refuge of the kitchen to search his aunt's ancient, flour-dusted address book for his cousin's phone number.

Ahava lived in upstate New York with the rest of the extended Bellski clan. Only Seth and his aunt and uncle had bothered to leave their roots on the East Coast and try to make it out west. Judi and Carl did so because they fell in love with Whistler. Seth did it because he fell in love with a musician who had moved to Seattle with his band, and Seth had tagged along.

The relationship with the guitar player was short-lived, but Seth's affair with the West Coast endured. He now considered himself a die-hard Pacific Northwesterner. He owned eight different hoodies and no umbrella. He recycled the tops of his latte cups daily.

But occasionally he missed the massive Bellski clan that stretched from upstate New York to the tip of Florida, and as soon as he heard Ahava's voice, memories of warm kitchens, evenings watching football, extravagant birthday parties, and huge weddings and fantastic meals all came rushing back.

"Ahava. It's me, Seth."

"*Seth!* Oh my God, I haven't heard from you in a year!" His cousin shouted so loud, Seth had to hold the receiver away from his ear. "How are you? Happy Hanukkah! How are you?"

"Yeah, hey. How are you?"

"Wonderful! My son Adam is directing a play this week. Did you know Adam was an aspiring playwright? He's like Shakespeare, only with fewer words and no drama."

“Really. Well—”

“His play doesn't make sense to me, but what can you do? It isn't the stuff of legend, but you should see it. It's an amazing set—”

“Ahava,” Seth interrupted. “Do you know where your parents are?”

“Of course I do. They're at the B and B, like always. Wait, aren't you supposed to be up there? Mom mentioned you were bringing over a boyfriend.” Ahava sang the word *boyfriend* so it took up about eight syllables.

“Yeah, I'm here,” Seth said, trying to control his mounting panic. “But your parents aren't. Do they have a cell phone? I'm assuming they ran into town for some errands. But it's been over an hour, and all the guests are arriving, and—”

“They're missing?”

“Well, I don't know if they're *missing*, they just aren't *here*, and—”

“Oh my God! My parents are missing!”

“Ahava, relax. I'm just calling to see if they have a cell or something—”

“Oh my God!” Ahava hollered loudly off the phone. “Dan! Pack the kids, we have to go to Whistler!”

“Whaa?” Seth heard in the distance.

“My mom and dad are dead!”

“Ahava!” Seth shouted, no longer controlling his annoyance. “Do they have a cell phone?”

“Are you kidding? My mom can't even operate the television remote! And my dad thinks they give off cancer. Oh my God, Seth, do you really think they died in an avalanche?”

“No. I think they're at the store buying groceries.”

Ahava took a breath.

“Look, just let me know if they call you, all right?” Seth asked.

“Of course. But look... I talked to my mom last week, and you know what she said?”

“No. What?”

“She was fighting with Pop. They were really mad at each other, last I heard. What if they killed each other in a grisly double homicide?”

"I think that's called a murder-suicide," Seth said. Then he shook his head. "No! That's not what they did."

"Well, now I'm all panicked. Will you call me the moment they walk in? The moment?"

"Of course. Sorry to freak you out."

"You did that. Good job."

"Sorry." Seth smiled.

Ahava sighed. "Keep me posted, Seth."

"I will."

"And don't scare the guests off. My parents need the cash," she added.

"I'll be a perfect host until your mom is back," Seth promised. "Bye."

Seth sat there, exhausted, receiver dangling from his hand. From brokenhearted crying to driving for five hours to playing host to this. He needed another beer.

He helped himself.

The inhabitants of the B and B stirred. There were sounds coming from the nearby games room and the persistent yap of Ben Berkowitz's little dog.

One hour to sundown.

Seth ran his hands through his hair frantically, hoping a thought might get dislodged. He didn't have any, however. What did Ahava mean, they had a fight? Seth couldn't believe it. Judi and Carl had been together for over forty years. Their marriage seemed rock solid. They represented everything that was possible in a good relationship to Seth, and he loved them for that.

Seth made a resolution. He would keep it together for the sake of Judi and Carl. *Keep it together.*

"Excuse me, kid?"

Seth turned wearily. "Yes, Mr. Berkowitz?"

"Can I get that dog food?"

"I'll see what we have."

After several minutes of searching, he found cans of something expensive-looking called Fancy Schmancy Chopped Liver for “kosher pets.” Seth opened the can and dumped the ingredients into a blue bowl and brought it upstairs.

“That’s way too much!” Ben Berkowitz complained.

“I’m sorry,” Seth snapped. “I don’t have a dog. I especially don’t have *your* dog. I don’t know how much he eats, okay? Look, I’m a fucking guest here. I haven’t had a chance to unpack my bag. I’m trying to be polite and take care of seven complete strangers and figure out where my missing relatives are, so I’m a little stressed, and I’d appreciate a little less criticism for about five fucking minutes.”

Ben froze, his smile melting off his face.

Good job, Seth thought. Nice keeping-it-together skills.

He shook his head and said, “I’m sorry,” just as Ben said the same thing.

They both paused.

Ben’s heavy hand came down on Seth’s shoulder. “Kid, I apologize. I get cranky when Doctor Mister gets cranky. I didn’t mean to be an ass. Is there anything I can do?”

Seth sighed. “I don’t suppose you want to lead the candle lighting?”

Ben smiled. His teeth were yellow, and his mouth was wide, but he looked genuinely pleased. “There is nothing I’d love more!”

Seth sighed in relief, grateful the man didn’t bear a grudge for Seth’s outburst. He pointed Ben Berkowitz in the direction of the menorah.

As sunset fell across the mountains, Seth lowered the lights in the dining room, and old Ben Berkowitz lit the *shamash* candle and then the first candle of Hanukkah.

Ben led the recitation of the Hanukkah prayer, which was chanted in varying degrees of enthusiasm. Seth mumbled the way he had since he was a child, the Hebrew words all merging into one inextricably long collection of consonants: *sherkidshanub'mitzvotavv'tzivanu*. But the rabbi and his wife recited it soulfully, and the Neidlich sisters giggled as they raced each other to the finish.

Then Ben launched into a theatrical rendition of “Hanerot Halalu,” the likes of which Seth and the other guests had never heard. It involved belting out the lyrics of the hymn so that his

voice filled all the corners of the lodge, and his breath wavered the candles, and his face turned red, and tears sprang to the corners of his eyes, and the top button on his shirt quivered and popped away, an early critic. Heedless, Ben emphatically thumped his mammoth gut.

Everyone stared at Ben.

"I'm a theater director," Ben explained. "I believe in projecting one's voice."

The rest nodded politely and joined in as he immediately launched into a raucous rendition of "Ma'oz Tzur," complete with a driving drumbeat created by smacking the top of Aunt Judi's oak dining table.

Afterward Seth moved the menorah to the bay window of the B and B to shine the light outward and hoped that it would lead Carl and Judi back before dinner. Then he darted to the kitchen and returned with his delectable offering of hummus in the container, pita bread, and wine.

"I thought you said there would be latkes," Rabbi Chaim complained.

"Later," Seth said, wearing a plastered smile to hide his desire to start punching people. "Once my aunt returns."

"The bread isn't warm," Chana said.

"Very good observation," Seth remarked under his breath. But she was right. He couldn't hope to deliver the wonderful meals these people were paying for.

He left the crowd to entertain themselves in the games room or in front of the fire while he figured out what he was going to do about dinner.

Seth's aunt had posted her Hanukkah package menu on the meat refrigerator. As he read it over, his heart sank.

Roasted herb-crusted chicken, green beans in garlic sauce, a fruited spinach salad, and all followed off with freshly baked honey cake.

Not going to happen.

Seth struggled to open packages, let alone cook. He lived off takeout, cereal, and grilled cheese sandwiches.

Which gave him an idea.

Ditching the meat refrigerator, he headed over to the dairy area, pulled out some butter, and heated a skillet. The theme of Hanukkah dinner was fried food. Why not a fried cheese sandwich? Who doesn't want that?

For a moment he convinced himself it was a good idea. Long enough to get to work on his masterpiece.

But two hours later, the noise in the dining room rising to a loud, demanding decibel count, Seth looked down at the ten plates with blackened, greasy grilled cheese sandwiches garnished with some parsley he found in the fridge, and realized he had failed.

At least they wouldn't starve, he thought.

"Dinner's ready!" he cried in false cheer. Ben had gotten everyone seated, and Chana had set the table, but the helpful team that was on his side turned traitor when he showed them what they would be eating.

No one said a word, although Rita Rosenbaum abruptly turned away and Sharon Neidlich's eyebrows raised and she said, "How...unusual!" in a slightly shaky voice. She gazed at her sister. In their glance, Seth could read plans for finding another hotel.

"It's just for tonight," Seth assured them. "A real chef will be joining us tomorrow."

Everyone sighed in palpable relief. And then dug into their grilled cheeses.

The dinner conversation was polite, with the guests asking questions about why everyone was there, whether they knew so-and-so who also lived in Toronto, and remarking on the weather.

Seth didn't join in. He ate his sandwich glumly, left a few bottles of wine out for everyone to enjoy, and then retired to the kitchen, where he stared at the pile of dirty dishes and finished off the last of the beer.

What was he going to do now?

It was nearly ten at night. His aunt and uncle has been missing for almost twelve hours. As snow began to fall again, he grew genuinely worried. Feeling slightly foolish, he called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Before, their absence has been an inconvenience. Now it had been too long to be anything but a mistake. Maybe Ahava's overreaction was right. Maybe they were dead under an avalanche.

Seth reported their disappearance and was reassured by a kindly constable that they would check the roadways around the village and send out an alert. But she also told Seth that it seemed unlikely that harm could have befallen the old couple; they were longtime Whistler residents and knew how to handle the roads in the snow.

"It's probably just some sort of misunderstanding," the officer told Seth.

"Yeah." Seth wanted to believe her, but if Bellskis were known for anything, it was for their dedication to routine. It was a genetic trait, right up there with exponentially increasing amounts of chest hair and heart palpitations.

As he sat by himself in the kitchen, listening to Doctor Mister yap away as the other guests watched television and shuffled off to bed, loneliness coursed through him like a virus, affecting every nerve, every muscle. No matter how life had treated him before, he always had those secret lunchtime trysts with Lars to look forward to or their Saturday mornings or those rare occasions when the two of them would go out to dinner and a movie. It wasn't a regular schedule, nor was it reliable.

But it was *potential*, and that potential had given Seth the courage to face every morning, the anticipation he needed to get him through a monotonous job and an uninspiring social life. Without that to look forward to, Seth felt the bleak emptiness of his life and foundered there, at the kitchen table, in self-pity.

He might have stayed like that all night if a loud rap on the back door hadn't startled him into an upright position.

Seth froze for a moment, shocked by the intrusion. The door off the kitchen was in the back of the house, and it would have been hard for a guest find it in the total darkness outside. Besides, the snow had started up again. Whoever made it here had done so in the midst of the storm.

And then Seth realized it had to be Carl and Judi sneaking in after hours. All his self-pity fled immediately in the absolute joy he had at their return. He unlocked the dead bolt and swung open the door.

Lars Varga stood there, teeth chattering.

“Miss me, baby?”

He gave Seth a crooked smile.

Chapter Three

Seth stood and stared in stunned silence.

Lars's grin was wide. It took over his entire face.

“Babe?” he asked after a moment.

He had a rolling suitcase gripped in one hand. His expensive charcoal wool overcoat was draped over the other arm. It looked like he stood in an airport terminal, not in a blizzard with snow dampening his golden blond hair and the face of his expensive Movado watch growing steamy.

Seth finally found his voice, although it squeaked with shock. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Uninvited, Lars stepped inside. He slipped past Seth through the narrow doorway, his cold chest rubbing Seth's as he passed. Seth hurriedly shut the door from the cold.

“I was hoping you'd still be awake,” Lars said in a low voice. “It's snowing like a son of a bitch out there. This place needs a better sign, by the way. I passed it three times before—”

“Lars!” Seth ran a hand through his hair. “What the fuck are you *doing* here? What part of 'it's over' do you not understand?”

Lars rolled his suitcase into the corner. “Have you got anything to eat? I drove straight from a meeting in Everett. All I've had since three o'clock was a strudel and two cups of coffee.” Lars's jaw clenched and unclenched, something Seth knew happened only when Lars was very anxious. But outwardly he showed no signs of remorse or even understanding.

Seth crossed his arms. “I'm not giving you jack shit until you explain yourself!”

Lars sighed. “What choice did you leave me? After the way you stormed out of the hotel room yesterday, I had no option but to follow you. It's what you wanted, right?”

“No!” Seth said, growing angrier by the second. “I want you to come out to your business partner!”

“Look, baby, sometimes we don't get everything we want.”

“You're very right.” Seth walked over to the door and opened it again. “Get out.”

Lars stood there for a moment. A tentative smile still lingered on his lips.

When Seth didn't move, didn't change his stony glare, Lars noticeably withered. His cocky expression crumpled, and his shoulders dropped.

“Christ, Seth. Don't throw me out.”

“We're done talking,” Seth said. His heart hammered in his chest, each beat bruising. “Get out.”

“Just hear me out,” Lars said, reaching out as if to physically hold Seth back. Seth had seen Lars pull that trick in court too many times to be moved.

“I have enough to worry about without you showing up here,” Seth told him. “My aunt and uncle are missing, I have the RCMP out searching for them, I'm trying to run the place so the guests don't leave before they return, and I can't cook worth shit. Since I have seven completely freaky strangers to tend to, the last thing I need is my ex-boyfriend showing up without even showing a hint of remorse.”

“That's not true.” Lars ran his hand over his face. “I want you back. I know I've fucked things up this time.”

Seth shook his head. “That's not good enough.”

“It's all I can offer.” Lars moved closer. He put his arms on Seth's shoulders. Against his better judgment, Seth leaned toward him, drawn by his desires. His brain wasn't calling the shots here; his body was, remembering how great it felt to be in Lars's embrace, how hot and strong his touch could be.

“Let me make it up to you,” Lars whispered. His lips were just above Seth's ear.

Seth closed his eyes, fighting his emotions. “No. You can crash on the couch tonight, but you're leaving first thing in the morning. I can't run this fucking B and B and deal with you at the same time.” He forced himself from Lars's embrace.

“I'm an excellent cook, you know,” Lars mentioned.

It was true. Seth knew this firsthand. A glimmer of hope rose in Seth's breast, but he beat it down with a stick.

"I don't care. I'd rather serve these people cheese toast all week long than spend another night with you."

Lars's eyes widened. It was a harsh thing to say, and Seth hoped it hurt.

Lars's eyes narrowed. "Fine."

"You got that?"

"Got it."

"I'll show you the couch." Seth quietly led Lars to the small television room, where there was a foldaway bed. As he'd expected, the bed inside was already made, just awaiting a blanket.

"I'll find a quilt from upstairs," Seth told him.

"Can't I just sleep with you?"

"No." Seth turned to him. In the darkness, he couldn't see Lars's expression. "I meant it. We're done. I deserve more than being your secret."

"I know," Lars whispered.

For a moment, Seth heard Lars's actual remorse. There was genuine conviction in his statement. It offered the faithless whisper of hope.

Seth stepped back.

"I want you to leave in the morning," he said, and then he left the room and returned to his own, where he spent the entire night cursing the day he ever applied for that paralegal position at Finch and Varga.

* * * * *

Five hours later, he awoke to the smell of hot cinnamon rolls.

Seth rolled over in bed and groaned. It took him a moment to get his bearings. Once he did and recognized the smell, he jumped out of bed and ran downstairs, expecting to see Judi in her kitchen preparing breakfast.

Instead Lars was there, humming to himself as he cooked a meal to feed an army.

There were frosting-coated cinnamon rolls, a breakfast strata, and orange juice in a glass carafe.

In the dining room, the Siegels already awaited their meal while talking with the Rosenbaums. They all cupped mugs of hot coffee and were helping themselves to more from a thermos on the sideboard.

“Morning!” Lars cheered. “I guess the yellow plates are for dairy, right?”

Seth froze.

“Your aunt had some butter on a yellow plate, so I made the call,” Lars continued. “I remember your telling me about her split kitchen, but I didn't believe it until this morning when I saw it in the light. Christ, what a pain! And two dishwashers? Isn't that taking things a little far?”

Seth still stared, speechless.

“I made fresh coffee. It's in the dining room, and hot water for tea is nearly boiling.” Lars didn't look at him as he plated some extravagant-looking cantaloupe salad. “I'll be ready with the whole meal in about twenty minutes.” Lars glanced up and then back down at his skillet, his mouth quirked up slightly. “You may want to put on a pair of pants.”

Seth glanced down and realized, in his excitement, he had run down in his boxers.

“Shit!”

He heard Lars laugh as he ran back up the stairs, thankfully avoiding any other guests.

He jumped into the shower, shaved, and then, despite himself, picked out his nicest clothes. He pulled on a white shirt and felt weak for wearing the light brown sweater that Lars had given him, the sweater Lars loved to see Seth in because it matched Seth's eyes. Seth looked in the mirror and tried to make sense of his thick brown hair. He looked thinner, he thought, thanks to the stress of the last forty-eight hours. He lastly pulled on his brown leather boots and went back downstairs.

“Good morning!” Heidi Neidlich greeted him. He smiled.

“It smells wonderful in there,” Sharon Neidlich said, nodding toward the kitchen.

“I got some culinary help,” Seth admitted, and the guests' instant smiles felt traitorous. So did his stomach, which growled at the delectable scents of cinnamon and freshly squeezed orange juice.

Lars emerged from the kitchen a few minutes later. Despite having slept on the foldaway—which Seth knew from personal experience was similar to sleeping on volcanic rock—he looked as cheerful and professional as always. His blond hair was neatly in place, he'd shaved, and somehow, without the benefit of closet or iron, his dress shirt and casual dark green cargo pants looked wrinkle free and smelled like dryer sheets.

In contrast, Seth himself felt wrinkled. He scowled as he joined the end of the buffet line.

“Good morning, folks!” Lars called cheerfully. “My name is Lars, and I'm assistant chef of the Bellski B and B! Until Mrs. Bellski can grace us all with her incredible cooking, I hope you will enjoy what I've provided.” Always the showman, he gestured and bowed to the array of items on the sideboard.

Seth saw he had even handwritten a menu: potato, tomato, and gruyère breakfast strata, cinnamon rolls, cantaloupe salad with honey and mint, coffee, tea, and orange juice.

There was also a heaping plate of small rolled pastries.

“Are those blintzes?” Seth asked incredulously.

Lars grinned. “But of course!”

“Oh, I love blintzes!” Mendel Rosenbaum cried, piling several on his plate.

Seth raised an eyebrow at Lars. He knew damn well that they were Seth's favorite. He made them every Saturday they spent together. Seth scanned the plates, fearful of some sort of kashruth offense, but everything looked in order.

“Are you sure there's no meat in that strata?” Seth whispered.

“I listened to *The Art of Kosher Cooking* on CD on the drive up here,” Lars whispered back. The feel of Lars's breath against his skin sent a shiver down Seth's spine. Lars squeezed his arm furtively and then smoothly moved into the kitchen.

Seth begrudgingly grabbed a plate.

He sat down with the guests and ate angrily. It was all so goddamn delicious.

The guests were vocal with their praise, and their relief, and discussed their plans for the day. The Rosenbaums were going to Whistler Village to shop, as were the Siegels. The Neidlich sisters planned on getting some skiing in, and Mr. Berkowitz claimed the lounge chair in front of the fireplace, where he was going to read for the next eight days.

The only guests who didn't ardently dig into their breakfast were the Siegels, who scowled at the offerings. Chana settled down with a small bowl of cut fruit, frowning and making eye contact with every spoonful. Chaim ate nothing.

Their suspicious glances made Seth uncomfortable, and he finished his breakfast quickly and then took his plates into the kitchen.

"What's up, baby?" Lars asked, scrubbing at the dishes in the sink.

"You're going home now, right?" Seth asked.

"You want me to?"

No.

Yes. Yes, please. For fuck's sake, go home.

"Excuse me?"

Seth and Lars both turned. Chana Siegel stuck her head through the door.

Seth rushed over to her.

"Yes, Mrs. Siegel?"

"I just wanted to double-check that you got the phone message we left last week. The answering machine sounded fuzzy."

"It's pretty old," Seth said. "What—"

"And since the B and B doesn't have e-mail, I couldn't do an e-mail message."

"Internet service can be sketchy here," Seth explained. "But why—"

"It's inconvenient," Chana complained. "Especially since I couldn't reach you about our restricted diet. I notice that we aren't getting what we asked for."

"Restricted diet? You mean kosher?" Seth asked. "Everything is kosher in this house, ma'am."

"Yes, but Chaim is also lactose intolerant, you see," Chana said. "He is too polite to mention it, but I thought you may not have gotten the notice."

"Oh." Seth looked to Lars for help. "Lactose intolerant?"

"That's why he's now a vegan," Chana said.

"Vegan." Seth gulped.

“And also because of his soy intolerance, we can't use tofu.”

“No soy. Gotcha.” Seth nodded. “Okay. No dairy, no meat, no eggs, no honey, no soy.”

“And I'm gluten free,” Chana added.

Seth smiled a grimace. “Of course you are.”

“Well.” Chana wiped her hands on her skirt, as if even being in a gluten-populated kitchen polluted her. “I just thought you should know.”

Lars moved forward. “Of course, Mrs....?”

“Siegel,” she said, giving Lars a smile. “Chana Siegel.”

Lars reached out and held her hand. “Mrs. Siegel, don't worry about a thing. I'll make adjustments to the breakfast and dinner menus to take into consideration all of your dietary needs.” He flashed her one of his charming grins, and Chana seemed to melt a little.

“That's very nice of you.”

“Please! It's my responsibility as assistant chef of the Bellski B and B,” Lars said, glancing smartly toward Seth. “Thank you for bringing the situation to my attention.”

“Thank you...”

“Just call me Lars,” Lars said, giving her another charming smile.

“Oh! All right, Mr. Lars. Thank you!” Chana waved at the two men and then shut the kitchen door.

Seth and Lars stared at each other for a long moment.

“What?” Lars asked finally.

“You idiot!” Seth cried. “Where the hell are we going to get gluten-free, soy-free, kosher fucking vegan food here in Whistler?”

“I don't think the altitude is high enough to affect baked goods. For the rest of it, we'll just go to the organic grocer.”

“It's tiny! We're going to have to go all the way to Vancouver!”

Lars shrugged. “All right. You drive.” He dried his hands and picked up his scarf, slung over the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

Seth shook his head. “No! This is...no. This is all a terrible idea.”

“Relax, it’ll be fine,” Lars said. “The rabbi’s got to eat beans, at least. Who doesn’t like beans?”

“I don’t like beans!” Seth pouted.

Lars cocked his head. “Really? You eat a lot of hummus for a guy who doesn’t like beans.” He smirked.

“They’re the only beans I eat! Not that you ever noticed.”

“Don’t say that.” Lars moved closer. “I do notice. I know you don’t eat pork and that you avoid spicy food. And you like your peanut butter on one slice of bread and jelly on the other.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “So does everyone else in the world.”

“And you hate warm fruits and okra but love feta and anything with balsamic vinegar.” He stood very close to Seth. “I know that you eat M-and-Ms when you’re stressed and like sushi with *tobiko* on it.” He put his arms around Seth. “I know you like Frosted Flakes and two percent milk and can’t stand the texture of eggplant, but go crazy for a pepper-charred steak, and—”

“Okay, okay!” Seth took a step back. He looked up at Lars. “You notice what I eat. What the hell is the point?”

“We’ve been together a year,” Lars said. “I know all about you.”

“Then why can’t you figure out why I’m so pissed right now?” Seth snapped.

Lars’s blue eyes never wavered. “I know why.”

Seth looked away from Lars. He felt everything—his emotions, his holiday plans, his sanity—cycloning around him, wild and out of control.

“I don’t know.” Seth wouldn’t look at Lars. “I appreciate your help here, but—”

“Come on, for the sake of the Siegels,” Lars said, trying to smile. He looked a little scared, at least. “Just this afternoon. We’ll drive down to Vancouver and get the supplies they need. Your car is better in snow than mine. You drive. I’ll help shop. We’ll get groceries, have some lunch, and be back in time to start dinner. Then I’ll leave, if you still want me out of the way.”

Seth wanted to say no, but really, what choice did he have? He had made a promise to his cousin, after all, that he’d try, for Judi and Carl’s sake.

And like it or not, Lars’s plan was better than his, which involved getting another six-pack, sitting on the frozen swing outside, and drinking himself slowly into a nice, quiet hypothermia.

* * * * *

It took two hours to get to Vancouver from Whistler. The weather was dicey on the mountain, which slowed their journey, but once they passed the one-thousand-foot elevation mark, the snow stopped and the rain started.

The dreary weather didn't help Seth's mood. Nor did the company.

Lars sat beside him and chatted as though everything were still normal between them. He gossiped about Adam Finch's secretary and talked about his Christmas plans with his ailing mother.

"I'd offer to visit her with you on Christmas," Seth snapped, "but of course that would never happen in a million years."

Lars cocked his head and studied Seth. "You want to meet my mom?"

Seth rolled his eyes. "Of course I do! She's your mom! I've heard all about her."

Lars looked out the window but said nothing.

"But how would you ever explain it?" Seth said bitterly. "Mom, here's my paralegal. I just thought I'd randomly bring one of my employees, who means nothing to me, over to meet you."

"I could tell her you're my friend."

"Yeah, right."

"Seth. People know we're friends."

"Do they?" Seth glared at him.

Lars looked away again. "My family has heard of you. My friends outside the firm."

"But no one *in* the firm. For fuck's sake, you can't even admit being my *friend*, Lars. How the hell do you think we're going to get through this?"

"Give me time, Seth," Lars said finally. "That's all I'm asking."

"Time for what? Time to straighten up?"

"No!"

"That's what you want, isn't it? You hate being gay. You hate me because I remind you that you're gay."

"Don't put words in my mouth," Lars said.

“Then why can't you admit it?”

“It's complicated.”

“Pfft.” Seth realized he was gripping the steering wheel with excessive force and urged his fingers to relax. “It isn't easy for anyone, but people come out of the closet all the time. I did. My parents didn't like it, but they eventually accepted it. And even if they didn't, I'm not going to spend the rest of my life pretending to have a girlfriend. That isn't fair to anyone.”

At the girlfriend comment, Lars shut up and stayed quiet for a long time. When he tried to reengage the conversation, asking about the B-and-B guests, Seth didn't respond. He hasn't asked for Lars's company, and so he owed him nothing.

Capers Community Market was in the center of Vancouver and was the only place Seth was familiar with that was big enough to have a broad range of gluten-free flours.

Although he had been silent and moody the last half hour of the drive, Lars perked up once they parked and entered the grocery store.

“I can handle this,” Lars said, whistling as he grabbed a cart.

“Don't go crazy,” Seth said, already noting the prices on display. “Judi already has enough food to feed all of Whistler.”

“I'm buying, my treat,” Lars said, and before Seth could protest, he rolled off with his cart and dashed through the aisles.

Seth kept his distance, fiddling with displays and picking up random, unidentifiable Asian produce until a staff member glared at him and he put his hands in his pockets. He found a display on the INCREDIBLE HEALTH AND TASTE SENSATION: SEITAN! and brought several packages over to Lars, who dismissed them with a flick of his wrist.

“It's gluten, babe. All gluten.” Lars was fondling fingerling potatoes.

“We don't need six-dollar-a-kilo potatoes,” Seth reminded him.

“Yeah, but that's six *Canadian* dollars,” Lars reminded him.

“Our dollar's on par.”

Lars laughed. “Good point. No fingerling potatoes, then.”

Armed with white truffle oil, polenta, quinoa, xanthan gum, kosher vegan egg replacer, some type of rice cheese that looked like plastic, and a selection of strange, expensive things called Seattle Brown Rice Loaf and Tapioca White Sandwich, Lars and Seth checked out.

The price was equivalent to two nights' stay at the B and B.

"That's absurd!" Seth cried, shaking his head as Lars whipped out his credit card.

"No worries. I got it covered."

"But—"

"I'm not paying for my room, am I?"

Seth crossed his arms. "You don't *have* a room. You have a *couch*. A couch that's in the TV room, and therefore available for everyone to use until ten."

Lars shrugged. "I can afford it."

Seth considered another protest but stifled it. He felt touched by the effort—and resented it. He didn't want to feel love for Lars at the moment. He needed to harbor his anger, because when Lars looked so good, when he was being sweet, the temptation to go back to the way things were was almost too great to resist.

They stopped at an Indian restaurant on the way back and enjoyed a thoroughly nonkosher meal of cheese and meats and spices. They got into an argument about the movie they had seen the weekend before they broke up, but it was a playful argument with no heat in it, and by the time Lars gave in and agreed that Seth was right, no actor should ever have to be in the same scene with a dog, a child, *and* Jim Belushi, Seth was in a good-enough mood to ignore the rain and drive home with a better outlook on life.

Lars fielded calls from the office on the drive back. Despite having told his secretary, Nancy, that he was on vacation, he still had responsibilities, and Seth forced himself to tune it all out. He didn't want to think about work right now. Work was what got him into this mess in the first place.

The rain turned into sleet and then snow, and the reality of Judi's and Carl's disappearance returned, and Seth's good mood vanished.

Lars noticed right away. He quickly terminated a call with the office and snapped shut his phone. "What's wrong? What did I say now?"

“Nothing. I'm just thinking about Carl and Judi.”

Lars frowned. “How long have they lived in Whistler?”

“Twenty years? Longer, even,” Seth said. “They've been here as long as I can remember.”

“Then don't worry. They can take care of themselves.”

“But it isn't like them,” Seth said. “In all the years they've run this B and B, they've never once closed their doors. They're always open, especially for holidays. What could have possibly happened to make them not show up for a houseful of paying guests?”

“We'll call the RCMP again when we get back,” Lars said.

It turned out they didn't need to.

The driveway was slushy and turning to ice, and Seth's Subaru nearly skidded into a patrol vehicle as he struggled to park. He rushed inside, terrified. Police didn't show up uninvited on anyone's porch for any good reason.

“Mr. Bellski?” one of the constables said, approaching him. She was bundled up in enough layers to survive the Antarctic.

Seth nodded, feeling the blood drain from his face. “Yes? What's going on?”

“I'm Constable Singh. This is Constable Ryan,” she said, motioning to a silent man standing and frowning beside her. “We just wanted to let you know that we have not found any sign of the vehicle you described anywhere in Whistler, Blackcomb, or along Highway 99.”

As they stood there, Ben Berkowitz and the Rosenbaums gathered around. Lars finished bringing in the last bag of groceries and stood beside Seth.

“So you haven't found my aunt and uncle yet?” Seth clarified.

“We'll be expanding the search south, toward Squamish,” Singh said. “To help us, I was hoping we could get some information from you.”

Seth led the officers into Carl's office and provided them with bank statements to help track their credit cards and photographs. If Judi was alive, she was going to rip Seth a new one for letting them use the picture he found of her, with her hair flat, before her morning curlers.

“Thank you for your help,” Seth said, feeling choked up. The actual physical presence of the officers made him realize how serious this all was.

“Notify us if you hear from them,” Constable Singh said.

Seth nodded.

As soon as the RCMP left, the guests gathered closer.

“What is it? What's happened?” Rita asked.

“My aunt and uncle should have been here by now,” Seth said. He began to feel nauseated. “They've been gone for over twenty-four hours.”

“Oh my God, how terrible!” Rita cried.

“Do they have a mobile?” Ben asked.

“No.” Seth swallowed.

“Maybe they went on vacation?” Rita suggested.

“Why would they have guests at their B and B if they went on holiday?” Mendel asked his wife.

She threw up her hands. “Well, how on earth should I know? I just am saying, maybe it isn't as terrible as it seems?”

Seth closed his eyes. He felt someone put their arm around his shoulder. He opened them again and saw, to his shock, it was Lars.

“Come on. Let's get dinner started.” He led Seth into the kitchen.

As soon as the kitchen door swung closed behind them, Lars clasped Seth to him. Lars was a good six inches taller than Seth and stronger, and so he was able to fully cocoon Seth in a protective embrace.

Seth felt too shaky to force himself out of it, so he relaxed and enjoyed the comfort and the heat.

“It's going to be okay, Seth,” Lars said softly. “Don't worry.”

“How can I not worry?” he complained.

“We'll get through this.”

“Through what? Hanukkah?”

“Through everything. The holiday, the missing relatives...and everything else.” Lars leaned down and kissed Seth's forehead. “Trust me.”

Seth let out a shaky breath. “I don't.”

Lars frowned.

Any minute now Seth was going to lose it completely. “I don't trust you. I know you love me, but not enough. Not more than your ego or your career. You care, but just not enough. So I can't trust you to put my well-being on par with yours. I don't trust you, Lars, and it's killing me.”

Lars opened his mouth and looked ready to argue. His expression had gotten stony, lawyerlike once again. But before he said anything, he clenched his jaw and turned away.

“I'll start dinner.” He began unloading the paper bags of groceries.

Seth felt miserable. But for better or worse, Lars was here, and at least for now, he was helping. So Seth swallowed his pride and held out an olive branch.

“Can you make latkes?” he asked.

Lars paused, holding a head of cabbage. “Latkes?”

“Yeah, you know. Potato pancakes. Were they on your CD of kosher cooking?”

Lars's mouth curled up. “Yes. I know how to make latkes.”

“Cool.” Seth nodded. “So could you make those first? To eat with the candle-lighting ceremony in an hour? It was one of Judi's traditions, sort of an appetizer before dinner.”

“Sure. No problem. I'll start right now.” Lars grinned as he unloaded the last of their purchases and immediately hunted down a cutting board and a canvas bag stuffed with potatoes.

“I'll help,” Seth offered.

“No, you should just relax,” Lars said. He started peeling the potatoes. “You've been running around since the moment you got here. This was supposed to be your vacation.”

“Yeah, but it's three.”

“So?”

“And it's Friday,” Seth added.

“Yeah?” Lars peeled potatoes like he'd worked in a kitchen his entire life. He didn't even look down. He made eye contact with Seth while skinning the hell out of those potatoes.

How many lawyers peeled potatoes at the speed of army cooks?

How many lawyers, for that matter, didn't think twice about tucking a dishrag with the words *Thank God it's Shabbat!* written in curly pink letters into their belts?

Lars was a bundle of contradictions. Against his better judgment, Seth smiled.

"It's Friday," he told Lars. "And sunset is in one hour. That means Shabbat begins."

Lars's eyes narrowed. "Shit. What does that mean?"

"It means everything switches on to timers. You aren't allowed to change the world around you. You're really supposed to pray and sit around and read and take it easy. But of course my aunt and uncle never bothered to do that part."

Lars looked around the kitchen frantically. "Am I going to lose everything in here?"

Seth closed his eyes, recalling the memories from the last time he had stayed at the B and B.

"The lights stay on until eleven, and then they switch off. The coffeemaker needs to be primed to start up tomorrow morning, and we need to precook anything we plan on serving for breakfast. You can cut things, but you can't cook them. But the toaster oven is also on a timer, so sometime tomorrow morning, that will crank to life."

"This is insane." But Lars already was scrambling to face the challenge, pushing aside the potatoes and yanking ingredients out of the two fridges. "Okay. Peel potatoes, then grate them. Do about fifteen. I gotta strategize here."

Seth got to work, watching out of the corner of his eye as Lars investigated cupboards, refrigerators, wielded odd-looking cooking instruments. A spark was in Lars's eyes, and Seth realized that this had gone from being a chore to a game.

"Having fun?" Seth called out as Lars rapidly beat something in a large ceramic bowl.

"Christ, this is like *Iron Chef*, only without a narrator." He grabbed a block of cheese, nearly put it into the meat fridge, and turned the other way. "This is such a crazy way to live one's life. Thank God you aren't religious, Seth."

"The way my personal life is going, I may need to turn to God."

"Ha-ha." Lars found something in the bottom of a fridge drawer that made him hoot. "Yes! Arugula!"

Seth rolled his eyes.

The kitchen was a disaster in no time flat, but Lars had a steaming pile of perfectly fried latkes ready just in time for sundown. Seth invited Lars to join in the Hanukkah ceremony, but

Lars begged off, saying he needed every last second to not only finish dinner but also finish tomorrow's breakfast and lunch for the two of them as well.

Seth should have said something then. Lars wasn't going to be around for tomorrow's lunch. But then Chana Siegel was heralding sunset, and Seth rushed into the dining room to start the festivities.

After prayers and candle lighting, the guests asked politely about the Bellskis in quiet tones, but their own happiness seemed obvious, and for that Seth was grateful. He handed the singing part of the program back over to Ben, who initiated a tribute to "Hava Nagila" that involved pantomiming the words and gesturing emphatically with one's fingers in the form of Hebrew letters. As he sang, Doctor Mister jumped into his chair and went to work finding every last hidden crumb.

Seth slipped back into the kitchen. "How's it going in here, Iron Chef Judaica?"

Lars looked up from where he kneaded dough. His eyebrow quirked. "What's that hideous noise?"

"Old Ben Berkowitz."

"That's enough to turn me off Judaism completely."

"I think he's an actor." Seth sniffed at the food in the oven. "Or else a scam artist. Haven't pegged him completely."

"And what's with the smiling corpses?"

"The Rosenbaums."

"Your aunt attracts the weirdest people to her place." Lars's hands came around Seth's waist. Seth nearly protested, but Lars just moved him gently out of the way and reached into the oven. He pulled out a big pot full of vegetarian *cholent*.

"I'm sorry, baby; it's gonna have to be beans," Lars said. He flashed Seth a smile. "But I got chicken salad too."

"Thanks," Seth said before he could censor himself.

Lars beamed, turning on the timer of a slow cooker full of another meal for the following day. "I have to say, I'm impressed myself. All this on about an hour of sleep."

"Didn't like the couch?" Seth asked, grinning.

“It felt like something from the Spanish Inquisition. Where's your room, by the way?”

“Up in the attic.”

“Aunt wanted you out of the way?” Lars smirked.

Seth pulled out plates for dinner. “No. For your information, the attic is the Chuppah Room, the nicest suite in the whole B and B.”

“Chuppah? Isn't that some wedding thing?”

“It's the canopy over the couple.” Seth yanked open the silverware drawer. “She gave me the most romantic and secluded suite because she thought I was coming up with you.”

Lars froze his preparations. His hands hovered over his sliced chicken.

“She... Wait a minute. She gave us her *honeymoon* suite?” Lars burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?”

Lars had to wipe his eyes. “Jesus! I mean, it's great they're all touchy-feely accepting of their queer nephew, but Christ! The honeymoon suite?” He laughed again. Then he went back to cooking.

“*I* thought it was fucking touching,” Seth snapped.

“*I* think it's hilarious.” Lars moved closer and lowered his voice. “Or maybe she just wanted us separated from the rest, knowing how often we'd be fucking and waking the whole house up.”

“Well, too bad that's all over,” Seth said.

Lars stared at him hard. His eyebrow raised. Seth couldn't exactly tell how he knew, maybe after a year of dating he picked up on these things, but he was certain that Lars now had an erection. His baggy trousers didn't show it, but Seth could tell just by the glint in Lars's eyes. Besides, all it ever took was the mere suggestion of fucking and Lars went hard as a rock.

Seth grabbed the plates, the silverware, and the napkins.

“Dinner!” he cried out before his own body joined forces with his stomach, his guests, and the rest of the world and decided Lars should stay.

Chapter Four

The phone was ringing.

It took Seth a blurry moment to figure out where he was and what the sound could be. He blinked and saw that it Saturday and seven in the morning.

Shabbat. Damn. He couldn't answer the phone.

But then he realized it was his cell phone ringing urgently in his discarded pants pocket at the base of his enormous, satin-covered honeymoon bed. He fumbled around to quickly answer it before the rabbi or any of the other conservative guests heard.

“Hello?” he whispered, feeling like a traitor.

“Seth! Thank God you answered! I didn't want to call the main line. Mom hates it when I break the Sabbath rules.”

Ahava. Of course. He was supposed to call her yesterday.

“Hey.” Seth rolled onto his back and staring up at the ceiling.

“What's going on? Did you find them? How panicked should I be?”

Seth thought of several conciliatory answers, before finally deciding on, “You should be concerned.”

Ahava screamed.

Seth clenched his eyes shut. “I alerted the RCMP. Rabbi Chaim, one of the guests, is going to shul this morning and promises to spread the word to the entire Jewish community that they're missing.”

“Oh great, so that's four people who will be alerted!” Ahava complained.

Despite himself, Seth laughed.

“I'm coming out there,” Ahava declared.

Seth sat up. “No! You don't have to. It isn't going to make them show up any faster. They're either okay or they're not, and trust me, if anyone can weather a disaster, it's your mom and dad.”

“I don't care,” she said. “I can't relax knowing my parents have been ingested by bears.”

“I thought it was an avalanche,” Seth joked.

“It was?” Ahava cried.

“I'm just kidding. We don't know anything. Don't jump to conclusions.” Seth had managed to calm her down and get her to agree not to come, when he saw that he had a call waiting and that it was from his parents.

“My parents are on the other line. I gotta go.”

“Tell your dad to fly out and help you!” Ahava shouted.

Seth switched over, went through the niceties with his mother, and then pretty much repeated the entire conversation he'd just had with Ahava.

By the time Seth disconnected, it was already seven thirty, and he knew the folks around the house stirred.

What was it with old people getting up in the morning? What made them rise at five? Was it the aches and pains? The lack of sleep?

He didn't know, but sure enough, all his guests over the age of sixty were already wide-eyed and cheerful, greeting him as he stumbled in his sweatpants down the stairs.

In his pocket, his phone rang. He hastily muted the ringer and grinned embarrassedly.

“The coffee's on a timer. Help yourselves,” he said, gesturing to the coffeepot in the dining room. As their backs turned, he switched his phone to vibrate.

Seth went into the TV room and checked on Lars. He was still asleep, flat on his back, his mouth slightly open, his hands crossed over his chest like a vampire. He always slept like that. He looked at once innocent, sweet, and ridiculous.

Seth touched his shoulder. “Wake up.”

Lars didn't move. His body smelled musky and warm. Golden stubble, a shade slightly redder than his yellow hair, covered his chin and cheeks. His lips pouted as he dreamed. Seth wanted to lean down and kiss him.

He gently touched Lars's hair. It felt so clean, so good in his hands. Why did Lars have to be such a jerk about all this? How could Seth love someone so much who was so bad for him?

No one had ever warned him that he would be in a situation where he'd have to break up with someone he still loved.

Lars mumbled something and shifted over, turning toward Seth. Seth saw that Lars had a large morning erection poking through the hole of his boxers. Seth's hands longed to reach down and pull that hot flesh into his mouth. How many mornings had he woken Lars that way? Hadn't he loved it?

It's not worth it, he reminded himself. Heartbreak. Shame.

Seth's phone vibrated in his pocket. He silenced it again and nudged Lars more violently. "Wake up."

Lars's blue eyes snapped open. "Huh?"

"Time to start breakfast, if you're going to earn your keep around here."

Lars's eyes were slanted, and he grinned slowly. His hands came up, and he pulled Seth down on top of him, curling his long body around Seth's, burying his head in the crook of Seth's neck. "Let's sleep in," he mumbled, and then he promptly fell asleep again.

Seth lay trapped in Lars's arms. He jabbed his finger into Lars's side, and he woke up instantly.

"Ouch!"

"Start breakfast," Seth said, getting out of bed.

Lars scowled at him. "This is supposed to be my vacation too, you know."

"Assholes who lie about their lovers don't deserve vacations," Seth stated.

Seth expected Lars to protest, but instead he just rubbed his hand over his face. "Fine, fine. Jesus. Why is it so dark in here? When are the lights coming on?"

"Around nine." Seth watched out of the corner of his eye as Lars got dressed. His rolling suitcase contained an impressive amount of clothing. Lars was nothing if not a perfectionist in his attire. As he struggled to pull a pair of jeans over his fading but still-noticeable erection, he smirked at Seth and gestured to it.

Seth gave him the finger and left the room.

Seth joined the guests in the dining room and chatted. All the while his phone vibrated nearly constantly in his pocket. Lars served breakfast cheerily, although Seth knew him well enough to see the exhaustion in his eyes.

Chaim, thrilled with his ugly bowl of teff grain, walked to shul. Seth reminded him to ask about the Bellskis.

Seth changed into warm clothes and walked outside so he could finally answer his phone. He didn't want the guests to see him breaking the Shabbat rules, but whoever was calling was not giving up. Outside, the snow had stopped falling and the sun shone, but it was bitterly cold, several degrees below freezing.

Seth walked down the road and listened to his messages. He had thirteen.

Dave Bellski, Carl's cousin. Rose Epstein, Judi's sister. Naomi Bellski, Carl's sister-in-law. The entire East Coast Bellski clan had mobilized.

There was panic everywhere.

Seth retold the same story over and over, getting mixed results. Some of his relatives yelled at him that the Bellskis were fine, that nothing could kill them, that they were impenetrable forces of sheer will and strong bone. Others knew they were going to be killed out there in the wild, with the bears and the rabid deer. Others said it was all up to God. Others said it was all up to Seth Bellski.

"You go out there and find them!" was one sage piece of advice, from a Merl Greenburg, some distant relation Seth couldn't even remember meeting.

"For God's sake, lock the door and don't go outside! There could be anti-Semites out there!" was more astute wisdom, this time from Grandma Adler, his father's sister's mother-in-law.

The sun beamed, the streets warmed, cars drove, people enjoyed the scenery, skiers slid down mountains, and all the while, Seth talked on the phone. He talked until his phone battery died. Then he slipped back into the B and B, stealthily plugged his phone in, and hid it under the bed like a delinquent child.

Meanwhile, around the house, magic happened. Showers turned on for invisible audiences. The toaster oven heated and cooled like an indecisive lover. The house answered the religious call of the orthodox Saturday afternoon by requiring no one to lift a finger.

Lars went for a long run in the morning and spent lunch reading Aunt Judi's cookbooks. But in the afternoon he found Seth and begged a chance to talk and go for a walk together. Against his better judgment Seth agreed, and the two of them strolled through Whistler Village. It was nice to get away from the B and B and the troubles, but every happy moment Seth spent with Lars seemed like another knife between the ribs. This all had to end.

Lars's phone rang persistently as well, despite it being Saturday and despite Lars being on vacation. He apologized every time, but he clearly still felt the need to take each call. Seth could tell when Lars lowered his voice that he was talking to Adam Finch.

"I'll have to get back to you on that," Lars said, eyeing Seth, giving him an apologetic shrug. His inability to switch his phone to silent annoyed Seth.

Still, Lars was trying. He pulled out all the stops, charming Seth, flirting like he had when he first seduced Seth over a year ago. Seth had been flattered by the attention back then, and even now he could sense the affection radiating from Lars, his honest desire to make Seth laugh, to please him, to wear down Seth's resolve.

Lars tsked as Seth clenched his hands in the cold. He grabbed Seth's arm and led him into the North Face and tried to buy him an expensive pair of leather gloves.

"I don't need them," Seth protested.

"I want you to have them, for here at least," Lars reasoned. "Come on. You're going to be in Whistler another four days, you'll want them."

Seth gave in. "Thanks."

Lars grinned and paid for them. When he returned, Seth pulled them on. He held up his hands. "How do I look?"

"Like the most attractive man I've ever met." Lars stared hard at Seth.

Seth couldn't respond. Lars leaned down and kissed him.

It was such a shock, Seth froze. Lars had never kissed him in public, never even held his hand where others could see him. Seth couldn't close his eyes. He stared, stunned, as Lars gave him a deep kiss and then, slowly pulling back, looked hesitantly into his eyes.

"Hey?"

Seth swallowed. Around them, people ostentatiously averted their eyes and hurried past.

"I can't believe you just did that," Seth whispered.

"I'm learning," Lars whispered back.

Seth reached up and cupped the back of Lars's neck. He pulled him in for another kiss, when suddenly Lars went rigid and jerked away from Seth.

"What?" Seth asked.

Lars walked backward, slipping into a clothing aisle.

Seth followed him. "Lars, what's wrong?"

"Shh!" Lars grabbed Seth and pulled him close, dragging him into the coats.

Seth stared out. "What are we doing?"

And then he saw him. Tall man, bald, with an impressive round gut and a long, expensive coat. A woman half his age clasped his arm. Seth recognized that sharp face at once. It was Glenn Bowen, one of Finch and Varga's wealthiest clients, a man Lars had just successfully negotiated a settlement for in the tens of millions.

Seth glanced to Lars, stock-still beside him. Lars had gone pale and watched Bowen's movements like a hidden rabbit eyeing an approaching mountain lion.

"Come on," Seth said, grabbing Lars's hand to lead him the other way.

Lars dropped Seth's hand as if it burned.

"Fuck you," Seth said angrily, not caring if his voice carried. He pushed his way out of the coats and left the store. His heart beat furiously. He was such a fucking idiot.

He started walking home. It was a long distance, and he hoped that Lars got lost.

No such luck.

He heard Lars behind him, running to catch up. "Wait! Seth!"

As soon as Lars caught up, Seth shoved him in the chest.

Lars's eyes flashed dangerously.

Seth squared his shoulders, almost daring Lars to hit him. But Lars's expression crumpled in confusion.

"What's wrong with you?" Lars touched Seth's arm.

“What's wrong with *me*?” Seth pulled away from him. “You know what? *Fuck you*. Seriously. Everything's fine one second, and the next you drop my hand as if touching me physically repulses you!”

Lars looked surprised. “Of course it doesn't! What are you talking about?”

“What happened in there?” Seth cried.

“Glenn Bowen was in there.”

“I noticed.”

Lars frowned.

“So what?” Seth snapped.

“I thought he saw us!”

“Again, *so the fuck what?*” Seth shouted. “You're done with his case! He's not your client anymore!”

Lars swallowed. “Seth, I just didn't want to make a scene.”

Seth walked away. Lars followed him.

“For fuck's sake. Talk to me,” Lars begged.

“Go home. I'm sick of you.”

“Stop being a baby. You know perfectly well that this has nothing to do with my not wanting to touch you.”

Seth didn't answer. Lars continued after him, until Seth turned and shoved him again.

“Stay the fuck away from me!”

Seth walked on. To Seth's relief, Lars stopped following. He turned for just a moment, to see Lars standing there, pale and wide-eyed, looking shot through the heart.

Good, Seth thought. He wished he could enjoy the feeling.

Instead he felt like puking. His heart shuddered painfully in his chest.

Back at the B and B, Seth slipped off his coat and slunk upstairs to his room for a quiet nap before dinner. He tried hard, but there was no way he could sleep when his chest felt so sore and his throat locked in that terrible way.

He hoped Lars would be gone when he woke up, but he never actually slept, and of course, he didn't really want Lars to leave. That was the worst part. He was a hypocrite. He hated the fact that, when he heard Lars's low voice downstairs, relief washed through him at the same level as his anger.

But there were other voices downstairs, growing in volume. It got dark outside, time for Shabbat to end and the third candle to be lit. He forced himself out of his room and downstairs to meet his guests, who paced the living room, debating whether they should break the rules of Shabbat and call the police or wait until it was completely dark.

"What's happened now?" Seth complained, rubbing his temples. He couldn't take much more of this.

"It's Mendel!" Rita Rosenbaum cried. "I can't find him!"

In her panic, she couldn't explain the situation very well. Sharon and Heidi Neidlich translated, however.

"They had a fight," Sharon told him. "And Mendel stormed out toward the woods, but he hasn't come back."

"Sometimes people just want to be alone after an argument," Seth said testily as he looked over to where Lars stood silently by the dining-room table. He had set it for dinner, Seth noticed. Lars looked upset but didn't say a word.

"He's been gone for four hours," Sharon said. "Rita doesn't think it's normal."

Rita was too busy crying in front of the fireplace to answer.

"For God's sake, do we have a vortex hidden in the basement here? Where are all these missing people going?" Seth grabbed his coat.

"Hold on. I'll come with you," Lars said.

Seth nearly shouted, *Don't bother*, but Sharon grabbed her coat as well. "We can help too." Heidi ran up to their room to fetch her jacket and returned, bundled as if a single snowflake touching her skin would kill her instantly.

Outside, the snow started to fall again, but it did so lazily, in swirly, halfhearted circles.

"If you two follow this path," Seth told the sisters, pointing to the left, "it will eventually circle back and spit you out behind the garage over there. Do you have phones on you?"

Heidi nodded and held up her cell phone. It looked minuscule inside her skiing mitten.

They exchanged numbers, and then Seth led Lars in the other direction.

The trail was partly obscured by the heavy snow, but before long Seth made out footsteps, although they looked to be hours old.

Lars didn't say anything at first, and Seth was glad. He was still too angry to speak, and if Lars said the wrong word, Seth feared he would actually hit him.

"You sure you know where you're going?" Lars asked finally, breaking the icy silence.

Seth nodded. "I've walked these trails for years now. Besides, you can see his footsteps here."

Lars squinted in the dark. "Where?"

Seth waved at the outline with his flashlight.

Lars straightened and gave Seth an odd look.

"What?" Seth asked.

Lars shrugged. A few steps later, he kicked at the snow. "That's pretty cool."

"What is?"

"You. Tracking someone in the dark."

Seth snorted. "It's not like I'm reading scat in the wilderness for a rare species of bird. I'm following large footprints in fresh snow."

"Still. I'm impressed." Lars sounded humbled. He moved a little closer.

Seth smiled to himself. "You don't think much of me, do you?"

"Eh?" Lars scowled at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'm just your paralegal," Seth said. "You don't respect that, and so in a way, you don't respect me."

"That's not true. I have no idea how you organized that filing system." Lars smiled as he said it.

But Seth just sighed. "You think I'm a chump."

Lars scoffed. "Come on. You know I have too much ego to be with a chump. I can only be with someone I think is smarter than me."

Seth snorted. "Right."

"You *are* smarter than me," Lars said.

"I'm just a paralegal."

"That's because you didn't have parents who gave you a full ride to law school. If you wanted to be a lawyer, you'd be the best. Hell, if you wanted to be a doctor, you could do it. I've always known you were brilliant. I only hate your title because I know you could do better and we're taking advantage of you at the firm. You're too smart to be filing my paperwork."

"The sad part is, I like my job," Seth admitted. He spotted a fallen log half buried in the snow and stepped over it carefully. Lars followed him.

"I found the work fun at first," Seth continued. "And I liked helping you. Even before we became lovers, I liked your style and the way you worked with people, how you helped them when they were scared."

Lars nodded. "It's why I do what I do. It isn't just about the money, you know."

"I know." Seth sighed. "For you, at least. Finch? I'm not sure. And everyone knows that new attorney, Steve Vale, he's in it for the cold hard cash."

Lars snorted. "Yeah. But he's a damn good defense lawyer; we're lucky to have him." He blinked into the darkness. "Finch, though... I think you'd be surprised. He has more heart than he lets on."

"The fucking bastard is a homophobe." Seth spat on the ground. "He doesn't believe in gay marriage, and he calls anyone he doesn't like a cocksucker."

Lars didn't say anything.

"Lars?"

"I know." Lars clenched his teeth. "Can you see why I don't want him to know about us?"

"But it doesn't matter what he thinks!" Seth shouted. "You're Lars Varga. You're fifty percent of the company. Fuck Finch. You don't need him."

"We've been partners for ten years, ever since we passed the bar," Lars said. He sniffed. "I'd have to start all over again."

"Your clients will follow you."

"Some would. Many wouldn't. Bowen wouldn't."

Seth felt icy just remembering their afternoon argument. “You'd have other clients. Gay clients. People who don't hate you for who you are.”

Lars remained silent. Seth almost asked *Well?* but then he heard Lars swallow. He turned and shone the flashlight in Lars's face. Lars blinked, wiping his eyes.

They stared at each other.

“Lars,” Seth said, just as Lars said, “Look.”

They both paused.

And then Seth heard a quiet moan, and he spun around, the flashlight skimming the bushes.

He caught the reflective stripe of a shoe. He nodded to Lars, and the two of them ran in the shoe's direction.

Sitting there on a log, shivering, was Mendel Rosenbaum.

“Thank God!” Seth cried. He sat beside Mr. Rosenbaum on the log. “Are you all right?”

“I'm a little cold,” Mendel said, teeth chattering. His arms were crossed together under his coat, and ice particles had formed in his beard.

“What happened?” Seth asked.

“I'll phone the Neidlichs and call off the search,” Lars said. He grabbed Seth's phone and walked off a distance.

“I don't know what happened,” Mendel said. His voice was weak. “I was angry and wandered off down the trail and got distracted, and I found myself all turned around.” He looked at the woods suspiciously. “How far are we from the house?”

“About ten minutes' walk,” Seth said. He helped Mendel stand. “Let's get you back. I'll call an ambulance and have it meet us.”

“Oh no, no ambulance. I'm sure I'm fine.”

“Mr. Rosenbaum, you probably have hypothermia, if not frostbite. It wouldn't be wise to ignore the fact that you've been out in the cold for almost five hours.”

“I'm in perfect health. Give me a swig of some booze and a hot fire, and I'll be good as new!”

They walked back toward the house. Mendel shook his head. "That should teach me for being so angry, huh?"

"People get lost in the woods all the time, Mr. Rosenbaum," Seth said. "It isn't your fault."

"But if something had happened... God. The last thing I said to Rita was that she should go to hell." His eyes filled with tears. "That would have been terrible. I do love her, you know. More than anyone or anything in this world."

Seth swallowed. Lars looked at him, eyes unsteady.

Out of the darkness, they heard women's voices, and Heidi and Sharon joined them. They latched arms with Mr. Rosenbaum and flattered him to the point that he blushed red. The fact that he could blush reassured Seth that disaster had been averted.

Back inside the house, Doctor Mister barked a high-pitched, obnoxious yap hello, and Rita Rosenbaum threw herself on her husband.

"Oh thank God! Thank God and thank you, Mr. Bellski! Thank you, Lars and Sharon and Heidi! Thank God!" She bustled her husband over toward the fire. "Now you sit there and warm up! What were you thinking, going on trails like a mountain goat! Didn't you think about me for one second? What would I do without you? What if they hadn't found you?" She started crying.

Mr. Rosenbaum still shivered. Seth threw a blanket over his shoulders, into which Mrs. Rosenbaum buried her head and wept onto her husband's shoulder.

"There, there, Rita," he said, softly rubbing her back. "I promised to be with you until the day you die. I told you that before."

"You can't go first!" she said hysterically.

The two of them held each other. Seth coughed and pointed to the dining room, and the gathered onlookers immediately fled toward the menorah, everyone smiling, except for Lars.

Chapter Five

“Hey.”

Seth rolled over.

“Hey.” That voice again.

For a moment Seth closed his eyes and smiled, remembering.

That weekend on the beach, the two of them, alone in that big, beautiful, empty house. The weather had been terrible, and they had spent the entire time indoors. Lars had made breakfast in bed, and after they ate, Lars had fucked him for the first time. It had always been the other way around, Seth somewhat nervous about the whole prospect after a rocky introduction with an impatient prick several years before, but this experience was very different. They had taken their time; there had been faith implicit in each caress, every kiss. Lars had spoken to him softly as he prepared Seth. They had joked and made puns and kissed, and they had compared their cocks, rubbed them together in oily union, laughing, and then the slick, cool sensation of lubrication, the intrusion and stretch, and then nothing but pleasure, pleasure inherent in a trust given to so few, something so precious, it had to be earned.

Seth remembered the peace and security of having Lars curled around him, his cock warm inside Seth's ass, and it was the first time Seth thought to himself, I am in love with this man. I would do anything for him.

“Hey.”

Seth blinked and rubbed his eyes. When he rolled over, Lars was sitting next to him on the bed, fully dressed. He had showered and shaved. He held out a breakfast tray.

“I know how you like breakfast in bed,” Lars said. He spoke softly, hesitantly. “It's Sunday, after all.”

Seth sat up completely, finally fully conscious. He looked at the tray. It held about twenty pounds of food.

He was still recalling his dream. How good it had felt to have Lars so close. That safety, of loving someone so self-assured.

Lars looked at him, and his eyes widened. Seth reached up, realizing that he had tears in the corners of his own eyes.

“Seth.” Lars sounded stricken.

Seth clamped his eyes shut.

“Goddamn it, what are you thinking?” Lars asked.

Seth shook his head. “You don't want to know.”

“Tell me.”

“I was thinking about the Rosenbaums. How nice it would be to have someone who noticed if you didn't return from your afternoon walk.”

“I would notice.” Lars frowned.

“But you wouldn't be able to do anything about it.” Seth opened his eyes and stared at the breakfast tray. “You'd miss me but couldn't risk showing any concern at work.”

“Seth, if it were a matter of life or death, everything else wouldn't matter.”

Seth looked up. “If it were a matter of life or death, you'd come out?”

Lars clenched his jaw. Finally, he nodded. “Yes. Is that what you want to hear? Yes. If it was come out or have you die? Of course I'd come out. Hell, I'd blow you in front of the whole office if it'd save your life.” Lars shook his head. “But it isn't a matter of life or death. And it's my job.”

“There are other jobs.” Seth glared down at the tray.

They were both silent for a long moment.

“Anyway”—Lars let out a shaky breath and stood—“I couldn't remember if you preferred maple syrup or fruit on your pancakes, so I made both.” He hesitated by the side of the bed.

“I'll go clean up after the guests. They're all going off on some walking tour that Ben Berkowitz arranged.”

“Ben's leaving the house?” Seth said, grateful for a neutral topic to take his mind off their relationship troubles.

Lars's mouth curled upward. “Yeah. I think he's making a move on Sharon Neidlich.”

Seth grimaced. "Ugh."

"She seems to be humoring him."

"He's twenty years older than her."

"And he reads *romances*," Lars added. He reached out, hesitated, and dropped his hand to Seth's head. He rested his palm there and then gently brushed the bangs off Seth's forehead.

And he left.

"Fuck," Seth said to no one in particular. He dug into the breakfast tray, astounded at the quantities. Lars had tremendous prospects of becoming a very good Jewish mother. He had the food portions right, at least.

After he ate, Seth leaned over the bed and fished out his phone, which blinked and flashed screens and showed symbols that he had missed twenty-eight calls the day before. None of them were from the RCMP. They were all from East Coast Bellskis, several of whom were threatening to come out there and find Judi and Carl if Seth failed.

That morning, Rabbi Chaim informed Seth that the entire Jewish community was out in force, looking for the Bellskis.

Sometime around noon, Heidi came over to Seth and sat very close to him on the couch, where had been trying to read the book he'd brought along. She glanced around the room, and then leaned in and giggled into his ear.

"Are things ready for tonight?" she whispered hotly.

For a moment Seth froze, suspecting some sort of joke. Was this a weird form of Lars revenge?

"You know," Heidi continued, "for Sharon's surprise birthday party?"

"Oh!" Seth recovered quickly. He was more grateful that it wasn't some weird pass at him than he was perturbed by this new, latest surprise. "Oh, sure, sure! For her...birthday, right?"

Heidi grinned and nodded. She had dimples when she smiled, and her curly hair bounced around her round, pretty face. "Her fortieth."

"Oh yeah. We've got a cake," Seth said, lying. He lowered his voice. "Was there anything else we were supposed to have ready?"

“Well, if you had balloons or streamers or something, that would be nice, but it doesn't matter.” Heidi clapped her hands together and leaned in again, very closely. “I'll keep her out of the house until sundown, and then we can surprise her right before the lighting of the candles.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Seth said. For God's sake. Would there never be an end to the special requests in this damned household?

As soon as Heidi and Sharon left for their excursion, Seth darted into the kitchen to warn Lars. But he wasn't there.

He searched the entire house and walked around the periphery, but couldn't find Lars.

What if he did what I asked and left? Seth felt cold shudder through him. That was the last thing he wanted.

What the fuck was he saying? He *needed* Lars to leave.

He took a deep breath, braced himself, and walked to the bottom of the drive. Lars's car was still parked. Seth felt almost ashamed of the way that, in his relief, he expelled the breath he'd been holding.

Seth went back inside and dug around his aunt's closets and drawers looking for party supplies. For a moment he wished he could just call her and ask. A sudden sadness washed over him.

She could be dead.

How was it that he could even continue to celebrate and fight with Lars and light candles and think about getting laid when his relatives were in peril? His stomach clenched.

Then he remembered the massive locked wardrobe up in the Chuppah Room. He dug around the register desk for the odd-looking key and went up to his room.

And froze.

There, on the bed, was a package.

It was wrapped, blue and silver. Seth didn't recognize the paper from the games room, where he had placed other rolls for the guests to wrap their small gifts to their family members for each night of the holiday. That meant this was bought in town and wrapped there.

There was a small tag on it that said *I'm Sorry* and was signed *Love, Lars*, as if Seth would be confused about who was giving him presents. Despite himself, he tore into the wrapping.

He was a sucker for presents.

He pulled out an elegant, ridiculously expensive Cartier wristwatch.

"I saw you looking at it yesterday when we were walking through the village," Lars said from behind him. Seth turned.

Lars leaned in the doorway, his pale skin flushed red at the cheeks from the outdoors, his light hair wet from melted snow. He still had his red scarf wrapped around his neck and his sweater on. He looked good enough to eat.

"It's too much," Seth protested. He had seen the sticker price when he first spotted it.

"It's nothing. You deserve a lot more than this."

Seth sighed. He sat on the edge of the bed. "Lars."

Lars immediately entered the room and crouched at Seth's feet. He looked up. For once he appeared uncertain.

"How can we resolve this?" Lars asked quietly. "There has to be a compromise we can settle on."

"This isn't a lawsuit," Seth told him. "Sometimes there isn't middle ground. I don't want to be hidden, and you don't want to be outed. Where's the compromise?"

Lars ran a hand over his face. "I don't know. But we have to try."

"I don't want to be something you're ashamed of anymore."

Lars hesitated. But he didn't pull away. He bowed his head and rested it on Seth's thigh.

They sat there like that a long time.

Lars wasn't agreeing to anything. On the other hand, he wasn't pulling away or saying no like he had the night Seth had broken up with him. That was some improvement, at the very least.

"We're having a surprise birthday party, by the way," Seth said, running his hand through Lars's hair.

Lars looked up, clearly grateful for the change of subject. "We are? Who?"

"Sharon Neidlich. It's her fortieth birthday. I guess Heidi arranged with Judi to have a cake and party decorations to surprise her."

“Well, let's get on it, then,” Lars said, leaping to a standing position and clapping his hands. “Kosher birthday cake. Good thing I've stopped using horse legs in my frosting.”

Seth snorted. “If you were an old Jewish lady, where would you stash your streamers?”

Lars laughed. “Hm. In the shoe closet?”

Seth walked into the hallway, toward Judi and Carl's bedroom and bathroom. Outside, in the hall closet, above a three-row rack of Carl's identical black shoes, Seth found a box marked as *Party equipment*.

Trying not to gape, he held it up to Lars. “You really *are* turning into a Jewish mother.”

Lars beamed. “Last night I shut my bedroom window so you could have more fresh air. See the sacrifices I'm making?”

Seth laughed.

Settled on a neutral task, they went to work, Seth decorating the main room while Lars started a cake. Seth felt a sense of peace as he unraveled cheap crepe paper streamers and hung glittery HAPPY BIRTHDAY letters from the dining-room rafters.

He realized that part of his happiness stemmed from the fact that Lars had now spent four nights of Hanukkah with him, despite his own intentions. And he had caught Lars on his laptop working only once that day. It was as if Lars was genuinely taking a vacation.

The Rosenbaums and Siegels returned to the B and B that afternoon, and Rita and Chana chatted together about polyps, foot cancers, and other fatal illnesses in loud, complaining voices as they pulled out some container of craft sticks and glue and made Star of David napkin holders for the table setting.

Awed and a little frightened, Seth watched them. Who just inherently knew how to make Jewish napkin holders? Maybe this was why his parents never let him go to the Jewish Community Center as a boy. They knew he'd come back with matzo pins and macramé versions of Joshua's shofar.

Shortly before sundown Lars reemerged from the kitchen, not with a birthday cake, but something far more extravagant.

The Siegels, the Rosenbaums, and Seth all gaped.

“What the hell is that?” Seth asked.

Lars grinned at his three-tiered contrivance.

“It’s a birthday, not a wedding!” Seth said, shaking his head.

Lars pointed to the top cake, frosted white. “This is for the Siegels,” he noted. “Gluten-free carrot cake. The next layer down is sour cream apple cake, and the next one is for the chocolate lovers out there.” Lars winked at old Chana Siegel, who blushed and giggled like a sixteen-year-old girl.

There was a Star of David, albeit slightly lopsided, on the middle layer, but the bottom layer said *Happy Bday Hot Sharon*.

“Hot Sharon?” Seth asked.

Lars shrugged. “Everyone wants to feel hot when they turn forty.”

The guests were clearly delighted, and it was hard to shut everyone up when they heard the loud clunking of snow-covered boots on the porch outside.

“Everyone be quiet and get ready!” Seth directed, turning off the lights.

Ben Berkowitz escorted the sisters inside. All three of them walked into the living room, out of sight. Seth struggled to remain silent when Doctor Mister dashed in and began licking Seth’s nostril as he crouched behind a dining-room chair.

“Where is everyone?” Sharon asked.

“I think someone’s in the dining room,” Heidi directed.

Heidi turned on the dining-room lights, and all the guests, Seth, and Lars shouted, “*Happy Birthday!*”

Sharon screamed. Not in a good way. In a panicked, I’m-going-to-be-slaughtered kind of way. She ran from the room.

Heidi stood there with a stunned expression.

“Shit. I forgot. She *hates* surprises.”

* * * * *

Sharon came around a few minutes later, and once the candles were lit, the cake was cut, and the wine was poured, everyone seemed to get into the swing of the party.

Seth had fun for the first night at the B and B. The food was excellent, the mood cheerful, and even the rabbi seemed to have more to drink than he should have and told weird, suggestive jokes about the kabbalah that no one understood but that cracked him and his wife up to no end.

Seth drank a lot. They had broken into Judi's party supply, and he probably had two bottles just on his own. Lars was one of those people who could sip his booze, even when stressed. The place was trashed by the end of the night, but Seth couldn't be bothered to clean up, nor could Lars, who had a strange glint in his eyes and looked disheveled and beautiful with a small dusting of flour in his hair.

"Let's leave the mess until tomorrow morning," Seth said. He tried to stand up, but the wall was a magnet, and he slammed into it.

Lars watched him. "Can you walk?"

"I'm not an invalid," Seth snapped. He tried moving away from the wall, but the floor spun closer to help him. "All these surfaces are so accommodating, aren't they?"

Lars's eyebrow rose. "Come on." He held Seth's arm and led him up the stairs. It took a very long time, Seth thought, and when they were done with the first staircase, there was another one.

"Whoa!" he said loudly, and Lars shushed him. "They're replicating," he whispered at the top of his voice.

Lars helped him up the second set of stairs and set Seth at the foot of the bed.

Seth smiled to himself as Lars shut the door and then knelt at Seth's feet. He unlaced Seth's shoes for him and took off his socks. Seth, eyesight a little unsteady, watched him, his head bobbing slightly.

"What'cha doin'?" he whispered.

"Getting you ready for bed," Lars replied. He didn't make eye contact. He stood and gently pushed backward until Seth lay flat on the bed. He reached down and unbuckled Seth's belt.

"Hey hey now," Seth slurred. "That's getting personal." But he smiled as Lars expertly unbuttoned his jeans.

"Lift your hips," Lars commanded. Seth obeyed, and Lars slid Seth's pants off.

Seth had a hard-on, clearly on display, filling up his white underwear, the head of his cock peeking around the elastic band for a better view.

“Look what I got,” Seth said and then laughed.

Lars's eyes had gone dark with arousal, and he swallowed. “You're drunk,” he said. “I can't fuck you when you're drunk.”

“Why not?” Seth unbuttoned his shirt but had a hard time with it. “We've fucked drunk lots of times.”

“Not when we're fighting.” Lars licked his lips. His gaze was glued to Seth's dick. “If you were sober right now, you'd be kicking me in the head, not asking me to suck you off.”

“Oh, *that's* a good idea,” Seth said. He lowered his underwear. His dick sprang out. “I really want to.” He smiled. “If I were sober, I'd want you to as well, you know. I just would have too much pride to let you.”

“Exactly. I'm not going to fuck you when you have no pride.”

“Fuck pride. Lars, I love you.” Seth knew he shouldn't be saying anything right now—what was the point of stupid words anyway?—but he couldn't stop himself now. “I love you, and it kills me that I can't show you how much I love you during the day. It's like a prison. I can see you, but I'm locked away. I can't touch you.”

Lars crouched over Seth and kissed him. Perhaps it was meant to be a chaste kiss good night, but Seth's entire body hungered for it now, and he wantonly opened his mouth, inviting Lars inside. Lars moaned, and his tongue surged into Seth's mouth.

Seth closed his eyes and devoured this incredible sensation—mouth full of Lars, delicious weight on top of him, the hint of friction against his painfully hard dick. He could feel Lars's erection prod anxiously against his thigh. Seth wanted it in his mouth. He wanted to be full of Lars.

“This is a bad idea,” Lars said, breathless, pulling back.

“No, it isn't,” Seth begged. “Please.”

Lars clenched his jaw.

"I want you," Seth whispered. "I know I'm pissed at you, and I know I'll still be mad in the morning. But just for now, for this night, let's pretend like everything's all right. I'll pretend that you want to be openly out with me, and you can pretend that I forgive you."

Tears came to Lars's eyes. "Seth..."

"Shh," Seth whispered. "Please, I want you."

Lars's voice was low, husky, and his breathing grew slightly ragged as he slid down between Seth's legs. "God, I fucking love this view," he whispered. He reached out and gently lifted Seth's scrotum, rubbing the soft skin. His mouth came forward, and Seth spread his legs wider and changed the angle of his hips, lifting himself toward Lars's mouth.

Lars swiped his tongue on the underside of Seth's sac, and then lower, and then up again, sucking each ball and then trying to take the entire sac into his mouth at once. Seth groaned with the sensation. Lars's mouth opened wide, and yet Seth filled him, claimed that hot space for his own.

Seth couldn't help but reach down and run his fingers through Lars's golden hair. It was always so clean, so soft.

"I love the taste of you." Lars withdrew to reposition Seth's cock and push it down his throat. Seth moaned, his eyes transfixed by the sight of his dick being swallowed by those pouty lips. He felt each breath and spasm in Lars's throat. A gentle graze of teeth, the pulse and swirl of Lars's tongue, and then he was released, only to be sucked back into that wet heat.

It was so good, too good. Lars was fucking amazing at this. It was almost too fantastic; Seth hardly wanted anything else. He could die a happy man like this.

And this was simple; this was what they excelled at, after all. It had started off like this, nothing but tongues and hands and cocks, bodies touching, filling, enveloping. It was their first language, and it was what they spoke best.

Lars worked him for a long time, stretching out Seth's pleasure. Seth gave in to the sensations, leaning back against the bed and holding his legs up and out of the way as Lars moved his head up and down his shaft. The pleasure built in a rush toward the end, so much sensation it could no longer be held back. He climaxed, holding Lars's head still as he pumped again and again into that pretty mouth. Lars shivered in his hands. Seth's head collapsed back against the sheet, and he exhaled slowly, recovering.

“Baby,” Lars whispered. He slid up Seth's body and fell alongside him, pulling him close. “You turn me on like no one else in this world.”

Seth reached down with his hands, felt Lars's open trousers, the sticky ejaculation on his semihard cock. Lars was the only man Seth had ever been with who could come just by blowing a guy. It was incredibly sexy and made him realize how lucky he was to have such a lover. He loved fucking this man. He loved him.

Seth clenched his eyes shut.

“Don't think about the future,” Lars whispered in his ear, as if reading his mind. “Just let me sleep with you.”

Seth nodded.

They slept.

Chapter Six

There was first a smell, warm, sleepy skin, and then the distant tang of aftershave, and so before Seth even opened his eyes, he knew he was curled up with Lars.

His eyes snapped open.

Lars still slept, hands crossed over his chest in his vampire pose. He smiled as he dreamed.

Seth ran a light finger over Lars's rough jawline, down his long neck. His skin was pale. Seth traced Lars's collarbone and then ran down his sternum into a thin bed of golden chest hair. Lars's nipples were tight and small and shockingly pink. Seth continued downward, following with his finger the trail of light hair over the contours of toned muscles, sweeping down to Lars's navel. It circled and continued south, tangling in curlier, blonder hair, until it reached the blazingly hot, soft, slumbering skin of Lars's cock.

Seth opened his hand and held Lars's cock in his palm for a moment, thinking. It hurt to think, because he had a headache, although honestly he expected worse, considering how much he had drunk. It had to have helped that the Neidlichs bought good wine instead of the boxed wines Seth preferred to get drunk on alone.

What was he going to do? How does one compromise with a closeted lover?

If Lars shared Seth in his personal life, with his family, would Seth be willing to forgo the coworkers?

Would he consider switching jobs? He had said no first out of pride. But if it saved their relationship, wouldn't it be worth it?

Seth shook his head. He wasn't going to give in that quickly. He had to look out for himself, and what he asked for wasn't wrong. It was the right thing to do.

But he was willing to give Lars time. He did deserve that. They'd been together a year, but it wasn't like Seth had made his position clear from the start. Of course it shocked Lars when

Seth had a change of heart. Seth was the one who had altered the rules halfway through. He had to give Lars leeway. Compromise.

Seth sighed aloud. Why the hell were relationships so fucking *hard*?

Seth didn't notice that Lars was awake until Lars's hand slid down and rested over Seth's. They held hands around Lars's cock.

"You regret this?" Lars asked quietly, voice gravelly with sleep.

Seth looked up into Lars's blue eyes. Lars kept a carefully neutral expression, but he watched Seth closely, like whatever words were next uttered would explode the room into flame.

"Regardless of what happens between us," Seth said at last, "I will never regret this."

Lars smiled his relief and pulled Seth close for a kiss.

The two of them lay there and kissed a long time, barely touching, just mouths and tongues, setting an easy pace that warmed them from sleep gradually, until desire burned strongly enough to overpower the last dregs of sleep and hangover.

Lars threw his long leg over Seth's thigh, allowing Seth's cock to slip up his crack, nestle near his entrance. At the same time Lars reached round and stroked Seth's hole with his finger.

Lars was Seth's first partner who truly enjoyed going both ways. "What do you want?" Lars whispered hotly. "You want me? You want to fuck my ass? Or do you want me to do you?"

All this talk of breakup, of loneliness, it formed a hole inside of Seth, which needed filling. "Fuck me," he said, surprising himself. "I want you inside of me."

Lars smiled. In a flash, he was up on all fours and digging in the back pocket of his discarded jeans. He pulled out a condom and a small packet of lube. "I came prepared."

"Son of a bitch," Seth said, but he laughed despite himself. Only Lars had the balls to bring lube when meeting his ex-boyfriend.

"You know what?" Lars whispered. He crawled between Seth's legs, grabbed one, and lifted it onto his shoulder.

"What?" Seth asked breathlessly.

"I want you to know a few things." Lars ripped open the lube and squirted it onto his fingers.

Seth tried to listen, but at the first touch of cool gel against his hole, his concentration slipped.

“Cold,” he gasped.

“Shh.” Lars's fingers instantly warmed the gel, rubbing it into Seth's skin, skating against the surface of his hole. With each pass, Seth shuddered. He was so sensitive there, every breath, every flicker of movement, magnified, electrified through his nervous system.

“Now lie there and listen,” Lars demanded huskily. His finger pressed inside, and Seth moaned.

“Let me tell you why we need to make this work,” Lars said. Seth barely paid attention. All the proof he needed was in the sensation below, that steady rhythm Lars's finger pushed into him. “You and I have the best sex I've ever had in all my years.”

“Ditto.” Seth gasped as Lars pushed deep inside. Seth clenched the satiny sheets in his hands.

“You're the only person I've ever met who likes Al Jolson music as much as I do.”

Seth expelled a breathless laugh. “That's...that's because we're complete losers.”

Lars stared at him, through him. “You and I have the same taste in music and like horror movies and hate sitcoms.”

“Who doesn't?” Seth said, but Lars shushed him.

“You make me furious, you make me laugh, and I never feel like I've done anything when I do it without you.” Lars pulled his finger out. He smiled and readjusted Seth's legs. “You're the one I wake up thinking about and the one I go to bed dreaming of, and that's even when I sleep alone, and even when I lie about how I feel. I want you to know that.”

“Oh God,” Seth cried, closing his eyes. “Lars, for God's sake, fuck me already.”

Lars laughed thickly and moved into position.

“Hold your legs open,” he whispered, and Seth did as he was told, spreading himself open, splayed like a display; cum dripped from his cock as he watched his lover. Lars's eyes raked in Seth's body.

“Spread your legs, baby,” he whispered. “I want to fuck you deep.”

Seth swallowed, his hands trembling as he opened for the claiming. Lars moved into position, and Seth tensed.

“Shh,” Lars said again. “Don't resist. Let me enter.” He guided his thick cock to Seth's hole and pressed in the head. Seth's muscle quivered and then gave, and Lars pushed in.

He's inside my body. It always amazed him, this part, this trust, letting another man possess him. It felt so shocking and filling, and Seth sucked his breath in and held it as Lars pushed deeper. Slowly, the sensations of stretch and pull and strain gave way to a slow, aching pleasure. Lars stopped.

“Breathe,” he reminded Seth.

Seth exhaled. Lars's cock pushed in farther. Seth forced himself to breathe normally, and with each exhalation, Lars claimed more space, advanced where Seth's body receded, relinquishing space.

Seth marveled at the feeling. He reached down to touch the root of Lars's dick, to feel Lars's balls under him, resting against his ass cheeks. Hot skin on hot skin. Connected by throbbing flesh. One body.

“You good?” Lars whispered. His voice sounded strained. He gripped Seth's thighs, holding him wide open.

“Yeah.” Seth breathed out and pushed his hips toward Lars.

Lars started a slow rhythm, each thrust long and deep. Seth's world contracted and expanded; it dimmed and brightened with each movement; and then Lars changed angles and Seth's world blazed with the voltage of orgasm shooting through him. Each stroke burned hotter, and he flexed upward to meet each of Lars's thrusts.

Lars reached down and pumped Seth's cock with his hand, changed the angle of his thrust, and Seth cried out loudly and came, his release emanating from somewhere deep within him, from his soul. All his anxiety and fears and loneliness and grief poured out of him and onto his belly in blinding pleasure.

Lars continued to fuck him with mounting desperation, and then, all at once, he froze above Seth as if struck by lightning. Seth felt the pulse of Lars's cock at his entrance, the flesh throbbing with Lars's ejaculation.

Seth slowly lowered his legs, which were beginning to cramp. Lars pulled out of his body and dumped the condom in the trash near the bed. He collapsed on top of Seth.

Seth felt sated, content, unable to conjure any resentment. He was just...happy. "Move," he whispered to Lars, heavy on his chest, but Lars's eyes were closed, and he smiled and clearly ignored the command. Seth didn't bother repeating it.

Below them, the early-morning sounds of the boarders signaled the beginning of the fifth day of Hanukkah. Seth's holiday was almost over. His aunt and uncle were still missing.

But Lars remained. Lars's cell phone rang in his trousers, and Lars mumbled something expletive but didn't bother to raise his head off Seth's chest. Seth looked down, saw the drying stains of his release right next to where Lars was nuzzling his dark chest hair, and smiled.

"It could be the office calling," Seth said.

"Fuck 'em," Lars mumbled.

Seth stroked the back of Lars's neck. "Chaim Siegel needs his serving of wheat berries."

Lars grumbled a laugh into Seth's belly. It tickled.

"Wheat berries. Glutinous, you know."

"Don't tell Chana."

Lars yawned and sat up. He ran his hand through Seth's chest hair. "Let's shower."

"Together?" Seth raised an eyebrow. "Someone might hear us."

"I don't care."

"There's a first."

"I'm starting small," Lars said. "I'll cut my teeth on a crowd of strangers."

Seth rolled over and got out of bed. They showered together and shaved, which took longer than necessary because Lars was a perfectionist and wouldn't release Seth from the shower until every single whisker was uniformly eradicated.

"All right, already," Seth complained. He held up his fingers. They were pruned. "I've never spent this much time in a shower with a guy without a blowjob being involved."

Lars laughed. "Uh-oh. What should be done about that?"

"I think it's my turn." Seth lowered himself and turned Lars around to block the spray from shooting directly into his eyes. Lars's cock was already hard, obtrusively begging for attention, nudging little *Excuse me? Hello?* Morse code against Seth's hip the entire shower.

Seth pulled the hot, wet flesh into his mouth and heard Lars's appreciative grumble from above. He felt Lars's fingers in his hair as he pulled Lars deeper into his mouth, as far as he could without choking. It was easy to set a rhythm, and Lars was ready for it. It didn't take very long at all before Lars gasped and gripped Seth to him and salty cum filled Seth's mouth. Of course, Seth himself was now desperate, and so Lars had to return the favor, and by the time they stepped out of the shower, the water was cold.

"You'll have to apologize to the other boarders," Seth said as they toweled each other off. "No hot showers for them this morning."

"I'll tell the truth," Lars said. "Sorry, folks, but it took me fifteen minutes to suck Seth off this morning."

Seth whipped his towel at Lars's ass. "I'd love to hear you say that, seriously." He laughed, but Lars didn't.

"What?" Seth asked, suddenly self-conscious.

Lars's blue eyes were unreadable. He kissed Seth but didn't say anything further until they were downstairs and preparing breakfast.

* * * * *

That morning, Seth received a phone call from the RCMP. They were tipped off from the Bellskis' bank that two charges had recently been made, one at Seattle-Tacoma airport and one in Kamloops, British Columbia.

"The fact that the charges were on the same day in different cities suggests that one of their cards may have been stolen," Constable Singh informed Seth. "We will contact authorities in the United States and see if they can follow up."

Seth arranged to meet with the Hermans, good friends of Judi and Carl, and put Ahava on speakerphone so she could be part of the discussion as well. They went over possible locations that the Bellskis might have traveled to, detailed physical descriptions, the names of their doctors for medical records. Seth put all the information together and turned it over to Constable Singh.

Despite the effort, no one felt any better after the meeting. Seth extended the hospitality of the B and B to Carl and Judi's friends, inviting them to stay for Hanukkah that night.

"We have our own kids over, but thank you," Sally Herman said, holding Seth's hand. "I can't thank you enough for taking care of the B and B and Judi's guests while they're gone. I know she will appreciate it. I hope it hasn't been hard."

You have no idea.

"A breeze," Seth said, lying while showing them to the door.

Sally seemed to know he was full of it, because she raised an eyebrow at him. "Really?"

Seth smiled reassuringly. "Not a problem at all. It's the least I could do."

The second he shut the door, the latest catastrophe occurred.

It should have been obvious to him from the start. There has been a distant echo to Doctor Mister's incessant barking that morning. But he hadn't registered this improvement until he saw old Ben Berkowitz frantically searching the house.

"Doctor Mister!" he cried, opening cupboards, checking in rooms. He approached Seth with a wild look in his eyes. "Seth, Doctor Mister is trapped somewhere!"

Seth tilted his head and listened. It sounded like Doctor Mister was beneath his feet. "Have you checked outside?"

"Ah!" Ben clutched at his heart. "Don't say that! He could be eaten by eagles!"

Chaim Siegel made a face at that. "Wouldn't you be more worried about bears or bobcats?"

"Or wolves or coyotes," Mendel Rosenbaum offered.

"Ah!" Ben collapsed in the lounge chair in front of the fireplace. "I can barely breathe. I'm so worried!"

"Well, now that I'm an expert on missing persons," Seth said, "let's see if we can apply our newfound knowledge to dogs." And with that he started a search of the property.

Lars, Sharon, Heidi, Ben, Rita, and Mendel joined in the search. Doctor Mister was found almost immediately, his muffled but insistent yapping coming from under the house.

He had indeed gotten loose. And clearly followed something small into the crawl space.

"Doctor Mister!" Ben cried in through the hatch, desperate. "Why isn't he coming out?"

"I can do it," Seth said, moving to the hatchway. "I used to get our Weimaraner to come to us all the time." He called Doctor Mister's name, but the dog didn't come. Seth tried threats. Still no luck. He scratched at the surface. He made meow sounds.

"You don't know what you're doing," Lars said, crouching next to the hole with him. "Here, let me do it."

"Oh, you're a dog whisperer now?"

"I've trained dogs, you know," Lars said.

"Who, Buddy, your golden retriever?" Seth scoffed. "Training a golden retriever to come is like training a cockroach to survive a nuclear winter. It's automatic."

Lars snorted. "So what makes you an expert?"

"I told you. I had a German dog growing up. They require expert trainers, since they listen to you fifty percent of the time and the rest of the time they are calculating the pros and cons of murdering you in your sleep."

"Well, that's what you get for raising a German dog."

"Ha-ha." The two of them were on their hands and knees, calling Doctor Mister with cheerful tones, excited tones, angry tones. Lars went inside and returned with a chicken leg, which he pretended to eat loudly.

"You can't give a dog chicken bones!" Ben Berkowitz wailed.

"I'm not *giving* it to him; I'm *luring* him." Lars ripped off a piece of skin and threw it into the entrance. Nothing happened.

"This is terrible, terrible!" Ben Berkowitz cried.

"Get out here, or I'll sue you!" Lars shouted under the house. This made the Neidlich sisters laugh, but Doctor Mister was unmoved.

Seth sighed. "Someone has to go under there and get him."

One of the guests brought out a flashlight, as it was already getting dark. Ben tried to crawl through the opening, but his stomach proved too great an obstacle for early-twentieth-century design standards.

Seth cursed into the snow and grabbed the flashlight. "Fine. I'll do it."

"If he bites you, I'll pay your expenses," Ben told him.

Seth rolled his eyes. “Wonderful. Look, just start the celebrations without me, all right? It's almost dark.”

“We can wait,” Ben said, frantically staring into the dark hole from which his dog's barks could be heard.

“No, we can't, or Rabbi Chaim is likely to give us another lecture, and I for one won't be able to stand it.” Seth patted Ben's bulky, down-covered shoulder. “Don't worry. I'll get him out.”

Ben nodded sadly and went into the house.

“Do you want me to hold the flashlight?” Lars offered.

“There's another one in the kitchen drawer by the sink. Can you grab that?”

Lars ran inside, and Seth slithered through the cold entrance. Outside, the ground was frozen and hard and cut at his jeans and puffy winter coat. But under the house, it was warm enough to be muddy, and Seth felt his knees and elbows sink into the ground as he crawled, using his arms, light swinging from side to side.

He paused for a moment. It was dark in here. The pipes overhead were very close. Touching-his-head close.

It had been a long time since Seth had felt claustrophobic, but he did so now, fear washing over him instantly, paralyzing him. The house could fall on him. He could get stuck like Doctor Mister and die. He could run out of air.

“Seth?”

Lars's voice calmed Seth somewhat, and he inched forward. Lars shone the more powerful flashlight into the hole and caught sight of movement and white hair. Seth aimed for the dog, whose tail waved frantically. Doctor Mister panted, eyes wild and wide in fear. His collar was caught on a water pipe, and the poor dog was nearly strangling himself trying to get free.

“Silly thing. What were you doing down here?” Seth whispered. “I found him!” he shouted up to Lars. When he didn't get an answer, he shouted again.

Still no response.

“Lars? Are you out there?” he said, annoyed. He suddenly had the thought that his aunt and uncle were down here in the crawl space.

“Lars!” Seth shouted.

"I'm here, baby. Stay cool." The voice was very close. Seth heard rustling and turned his flashlight. Lars was crawling under the house with him.

"What are you doing?" Seth asked.

"Coming to rescue you," Lars said. He shone his flashlight into his own face and grinned. "You sounded panicked."

"I wasn't panicked," Seth said defensively. "I was just...not in the mood to be left alone." Seth scowled at Lars. Somehow, despite having just crawled under a house, Lars's clothes remained spotless. He looked like a rosy-cheeked and cheerful model on an L.L. Bean catalog, not an attorney under a house.

Lars kissed him. Seth couldn't think of a less romantic place to be kissed than in the spider-filled, rat-shit-infested crawl space under a house, but Lars had a weird concept of romance.

"Feel better?" Lars whispered, breaking their kiss.

Seth felt cold, stunned, and in love, actually.

"Strangely, yeah," Seth said with a little laugh. He shook his head. "But I never thought spending a week with you would be so trying."

"Think of it as intensive trial by fire."

Seth rested his forehead against Lars's.

"Let's get the little bastard and get out of here."

Chapter Seven

“So what do you think about filing a petition for deferred prosecution in the Webster case?” Lars asked.

He and Seth sat at Judi's kitchen table, hiding from the other guests and the tremendous mess in the dining room. It was a sunny day, below freezing but clear, and everyone had eaten quickly and rushed outside to enjoy the spectacular views. Lars had gone for a run and now finally had a chance to eat his own breakfast. Seth sat with him, drinking his coffee, still amazed that Lars was even here. It had been two days since Lars had answered his phone or checked his e-mail, and it had been six days since he had last stepped foot in the Finch and Varga Law Offices. Surely people had to have figured out what was going on by now?

Seth smiled at Lars's question, surprised and flattered that Lars would ask for his input. “Well, let's see. The benefit is that he can get the company cleaned up and avoid prosecution, assuming they can reform in time. And they can stay in operation.”

“Yeah.” Lars looked out the window, thinking.

“But he's admitting wrongdoing,” Seth added. “And they have to waive attorney-client privilege, which leaves them vulnerable. So I wouldn't in this case.” Seth sipped his coffee. “If it were up to me, that is.”

Lars's silent, studious profile made Seth uncomfortable. “Of course, I could be completely off, but—”

“That's what I planned on telling him,” Lars said suddenly. “I'm glad we agree.”

“That's what you pay me the big bucks for, right?” Seth laughed, but Lars frowned.

“I'm just kidding, Lars.”

“Well, I'm not. I've been thinking about it.” Lars sipped his coffee and stared out Judi's window at the frozen landscape. “I don't think I want you as our general office paralegal anymore.”

Seth felt instantly cold. Holy shit. Was Lars going to fire him?

Fury rushed through him, flushed his face red. Lars looked at him and scowled.

"I'm not going to fire you, dumb-ass; I'm giving you a raise. I want you to be my personal paralegal, on a schooling track."

"A...what?" Seth had been so ready to be furious, he didn't know how to respond to the offer.

"You're smarter than Nancy or Rich in the office, and I know you have to do shit for them. I'm tired of you taking on tasks that a receptionist can do, when your research skills are far superior to anyone else's. Besides, no one works as hard as you do. So effective the end of your vacation, I'm promoting you to my personal researcher." Lars grinned. "Raise included."

Seth didn't know what to say.

Lars watched him carefully. "Are you mad? Would you prefer I didn't take you all for myself?"

"What? No. That's not it. I'm just surprised, that's all. Don't you think that's going to be suspicious?"

Lars's jaw clenched. "Maybe."

"What's a schooling track?" Seth asked to change the subject so Lars wouldn't change his mind.

"It's something Finch and I set up years ago but never followed through on. We wanted to start a schooling track for promising employees who were interested in getting fully educated and licensed as attorneys. We'd pay for your education and allow you a flexible work schedule so that you could study while working, and of course we'd pay your bar-exam fees, with the hope that, once certified, you'd work for the firm." Lars smiled. "We always liked the idea but never found anyone we thought would be interested." He looked at Seth. "I don't know if you're interested. Maybe you don't want to be an attorney. But I want you to know the option is open to you."

Seth was dumbfounded. "I have to think about it."

"Of course."

"It's not... Lars, this isn't some sort of consolation prize, is it?"

Lars scowled. "No! It's something I have wanted to do for a long time, but after our fight I realized you probably think I want you gone, and that's not true." He reached across the table, and Seth took his hand.

Someone screamed outside.

Their hands dropped, and both of them stood. "What the hell was that?" Seth shouted, grabbing his coat and forcing his feet into his boots.

"Help!"

Lars was out first, dashing into the snow in his socks. Seth joined him seconds later to see Rita Rosenbaum flat on her back at the base of the stairs to the porch. Mendel Rosenbaum crouched beside her head.

"Help!" he cried again, frantic.

"What happened?" Lars demanded, dropping to his knees beside Rita as well. "You all right, Mrs. Rosenbaum?"

She was unconscious.

"She stepped on the bottom stair and slipped on the ice. She fell back and hit her head!" Mendel said.

"I'll call an ambulance." Seth rushed inside for his cell phone.

When he returned, Rita was conscious and trying to sit up.

"I'm fine, really." She blinked at them, looking dazed.

"At least she's talking," Lars said.

Seth looked at the icy, deadly stairs up to the B and B front door and slammed his fist against the railing. "Damn it! I forgot that Carl deices every morning. This is my fault."

Mendel looked about to cry. "Don't move, Rita; it could be serious."

"Don't be silly; it's just a bump on the head!" Rita sat up slowly. There was no blood, and when Lars and Mendel helped her to stand, she seemed all right.

"Don't bother with the ambulance, Seth; I'm fine," Rita insisted. "I'll just go in and lie down for a minute or two." She blinked.

"No! You aren't supposed to take a nap after a head injury!" Mendel shouted. He helped her over the icy steps.

Lars followed, almost slipping in his socks. “Fuck. That’s a lawsuit waiting to happen,” he told Seth.

“Yeah. I get that.” He looked behind him. Mendel settled Rita in front of the fireplace. “Keep an eye on her. I’m going to fix this before someone else cracks their head open.”

In the garage, Seth found Carl’s ice pick and snow shovel. He returned to the steps and chipped away at the offending ice. Then he finished the porch off with a thin layer of sand. As he worked, guests came and went, all checking on Rita. The ambulance never showed. Seth went inside.

“Why isn’t the ambulance coming?”

“I told them to cancel it,” Rita said, smiling at Seth. “I’m perfectly fine. A little bruised on the hip, but nothing serious.”

Seth gave Mendel a critical look.

“I’m perfectly fine,” Rita insisted, laughing a little. “I told them to cancel it.”

“So you said,” Seth said. She looked like she was squinting and kept glancing up to her bedroom.

But he couldn’t force her to go to the hospital, so he dropped it, instead devoting the sunny morning to clearing the rest of the property of patches of potential lawsuits.

The B and B didn’t provide lunch for the guests, but Lars had gotten into the habit of making the two of them something to eat every day. Seth realized how quickly he had gotten trained to expect it as he walked inside the house at lunch and his stomach growled.

Right on schedule, Lars had two plates set at the kitchen table, each bearing an enormous sandwich.

“How do you stay so fit if you eat like this every meal?” Seth wondered aloud. The comment was meant as a joke, but then he realized he had never spent this much time with Lars in the year they had been secretly dating. He had no idea what Lars ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, because the two had never shared all three meals together.

Lars smiled up at him, but he was preoccupied with his laptop.

“Work?” Seth asked, sliding onto the bench and grabbing his sandwich. It was something with portobello mushrooms and aioli sauce, and Seth openly groaned at the incredible taste.

“No, I'm looking up signs of concussion.”

Seth frowned. “Why?”

“Rita keeps saying the same thing over and over.” Lars turned the screen to Seth, and both of them read over a list of symptoms.

“I think she has all of these but the vomiting,” Seth said. “That's it. We're taking her in. I don't care if she doesn't want to go.”

Seth abandoned his sandwich and found Mendel and Rita in the upstairs bathroom.

“She just threw up,” Mendel said. His eyes were wide with worry.

“I'm driving you and her to the health clinic right now,” Seth said. “Get your coats.”

It had been days since he'd driven the car, and it took effort to get the Subaru rolling in the snow. Once on the main road, it only took five minutes to get to Whistler's health clinic. It wasn't a large facility, but it did treat emergencies, and the staff immediately took Rita and Mendel into one of the rooms, leaving Lars and Seth alone in the reception area.

There was no one else in the facility. Seth felt sick with worry. His negligence was to blame for nearly killing a nice old Jewish lady. It was a good thing Jews didn't believe in hell, otherwise there'd be a special place saved just for him.

“Stop it,” Lars said.

Seth looked over at him. “Huh?”

“Stop worrying.” Lars sat beside him. “It isn't your fault.”

“How isn't it my fault? Until Carl and Judi are found, it's my responsibility to look after these people. I could have just shut the B and B down and sent them home, but I was under the delusion I could just run the place as well as they did.” Seth sighed into his hands. “What a travesty.”

Lars reached down and pinched Seth's ass.

Seth yelped and glared at him. “What was that for?”

“To make you stop thinking so hard. Rita's going to be fine. No one is going to die under your watch, so just relax.” Lars put his arm around Seth's shoulder. “You know, I think we're both going to need a vacation after this vacation.”

Seth laughed. “No doubt. Any ideas?”

“Want to go somewhere New Year's?” Lars asked.

“Sure. You mean together, I assume?”

Lars looked at him drily.

“What are you thinking?” Seth asked.

“Somewhere far from ice and snow and rain. Mexico?”

Seth nodded. “I like it. Count me in.” As he sat there smiling to himself, he realized that at some point, they weren't broken up anymore.

He was a little confused as to when exactly that had happened. Was it when they slept together? But even then he'd considered it just a temporary peace between them.

But now he was making holiday plans. He really had given up on Lars changing, hadn't he? Seth felt angry at himself for capitulating. But Lars squeezed him closer, in a public space no less, and Seth understood that Lars wasn't the same man who had categorically refused to show any affection in public. This was an improved Lars. Not exactly what he was looking for, but it was a start.

They waited a long time. Seth left to find a restroom, and as he returned, he saw the nurse approach Lars. Lars was standing, studying a poster about common skiing fractures.

“Excuse me. Are you Mr. Bellski's husband?”

Lars flinched in shock. His eyes grew wide. “No.”

“Oh.” The nurse blushed. “Sorry! I thought...”

“It's fine,” Seth said, entering the room and moving beside Lars. He tried not to laugh. “He's with me.”

The nurse smiled, clearly relieved. “I can let you both see her now.”

Lars and Seth stayed only for a few minutes, exchanging a few words with Mr. Rosenbaum, who hunched beside his wife on a rolling chair. Rita continued to smile and insist she was fine.

“Really!” she said, laughing nervously. “All this fuss for a little bump on the head!”

“We want you healthy, Mrs. Rosenbaum.” Seth reached down and squeezed her hand. Her skin felt like dry leather, but her grip was warm and reassuring, and she squeezed back.

“Thank you both. You are such good men,” she said, smiling at Lars.

Lars's blush still hadn't receded from the waiting room. He said little, mumbling something to her about getting well and then fleeing the room. Seth talked with Mr. Rosenbaum, who decided to spend the night at the clinic instead of returning with Seth and Lars.

"You go on," he said. "I'll be fine. We'll call a taxi tomorrow."

"I'll come pick you up," Seth insisted. He gave Mr. Rosenbaum his cell phone number. "Call me. I'll see you tomorrow." He gave Mrs. Rosenbaum one more pat and then went outside to hunt down Lars.

He found him in the corridor, sitting on a long padded bench and staring at the wall across from him. He didn't look angry, but he seemed preoccupied and started when Seth sat next to him.

"You okay?" Seth asked after a moment.

"Yeah. Fine."

They sat in silence.

"Well," Seth finally said. "That...was awkward."

"What? Mrs. Rosenbaum?" Lars turned, and then he quickly looked away again. "Oh. You mean the nurse."

"Yeah."

Lars rested his elbows on his knees and took a long, hard look at his boots. He still didn't say anything about the incident.

"Only in Canada," Seth joked.

"I forgot guys can get hitched here."

Seth nodded.

Lars turned to face him. His eyes were sharp. "How do you think she knew?"

Seth shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she saw you grab my ass in the waiting room ten minutes ago."

Lars's face turned red again, but he said nothing.

Seth sighed. "I wouldn't worry. It isn't like you're emanating gaydar vibrations or anything. I would never have guessed about you if you hadn't gotten me drunk that one night and made a pass at me." He smiled. "I was completely surprised by your advances. I never saw it coming."

"You should have," Lars said. "I'd been checking you out for two months, ever since we hired you."

"You were very subtle about it, then," Seth assured him.

"Do you want that?" Lars asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Getting hitched. A *husband*." He made a face at the word.

Seth scowled. "What does it matter? We can't."

"We could in Vermont."

"Please. Have you been to Vermont? Bears and maple syrup and liberal college kids learning how to snowboard." Seth joked, but his heart pounded noticeably in his chest. *Thump*. Ouch. *Thump*.

"But it is something we could do there." Lars didn't sound hopeful or dismissive. Just...thoughtful.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Seth said, trying to whisper to contain the anger in his voice. "You won't even talk to me in front of your employees, and now you're proposing?"

Lars looked at his boots again. There was something in his eyes now. Something...strange. Vulnerable. "Nah. Just talking here. I mean...I'm just curious. About whether you'd like that."

"Of *course* I'd fucking like that." Seth had to remember to lower his voice. "Of course I'd like our relationship to be considered as legitimate as the one my parents have. I'd like to be able to see you if you ever ended up in a situation like this."

Lars's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you get it?" Seth shook his head. "If you ended up in the ICU in the US, I couldn't sit beside you. I'm not family. I'm not a spouse. It wouldn't matter if we'd lived together for twenty years, if we'd raised kids together or had matching fucking last names. That's a privilege we don't have."

Seth sat back. What kind of argument was he making here? He wanted Lars to come *out* of the closet, not stay in it.

But that's what infuriated him, he realized. The whole injustice of it. Stemming from people like Adam Finch, who was friends and business partners with a homosexual and still

voted against gay marriage. He was someone who might question his opinions if Lars finally had the balls to tell him the truth.

“I’d find a way,” Lars said quietly, as if to himself. “I’d use all my legal powers. I’ll find a way.”

Seth wasn't sure what he was talking about. He shook his head. “Come on. Let's go back. It's almost sundown.”

Lars was quiet on the way to the car, and on the short drive to the B and B. Back in the house, Seth gave the guests an update on Mrs. Rosenbaum's condition and let Sharon lead the prayer and light the candles for the sixth night.

Lars spent the ceremony in the kitchen, where he whipped up dinner in record time. He said little all night, politely answering inquiries from the other guests and offering refreshments like a well-trained host. But he said nothing to Seth. He barely made eye contact.

But when dinner was over, the guests were in bed, and Seth and Lars returned to the Chuppah Room, Lars quietly clasped Seth to him in a hard embrace. He didn't let go.

It got hot.

“Mmph,” Seth said against Lars's chest.

Reluctantly Lars released his grip. He bent his head, and his lips found Seth's. Seth opened his mouth, and Lars's tongue surged inside, hot and wet and hungry. Lars's desire was silent but strong, something powerful and needy in his embrace.

They undressed quickly and crawled under the thick covers, legs tangling, arms embracing; Seth's cock found a nice spot between Lars's legs, and he began humping him automatically.

“Will you fuck me tonight? Please?” Lars whispered into Seth's ear. Seth stifled a groan of excitement. He loved it when Lars begged for it. It was their old trick, the way that Lars used to ask forgiveness. So what was Lars asking forgiveness for now?

“You have more lube?” Seth whispered back, careful not to wake any of the other guests.

Lars had brought his suitcase up the day before and now searched it to find what they needed. He took charge, pushing Seth down on the bed and turning to face Seth's groin, then sucking his cock as he opened the condom. He rolled it on and then slathered Seth with lube.

Seth was distracted by the sight of Lars's bobbing cock, flushed red and full, near his face. He pulled it into his mouth, its velvet-over-hardwood feel fitting in his mouth perfectly, like it was meant to dock there. Lars groaned and pushed into Seth's mouth desperately. Seth braced Lars's hips so he could manage Lars's need.

Seth relaxed his throat to take Lars in and stretched his lips around the base. He let Lars fuck his mouth, enjoying the building pace and depth, but then Seth pulled away, moaning at his own unfulfilled needs. Lars turned around, facing Seth, eyes slanted and dark, and he lowered himself onto Seth's rigid cock.

Seth gripped the sheets and forced himself not to thrust up into that strong heat. He let Lars set the pace and watched Lars use his thighs to lift up and slide down Seth's cock to undulate his powerful body above of him and ride him with a look of tense joy.

Seth gripped Lars's hips and pushed upward. God, this was shattering, this feeling. He smoothed out their rhythm, found a pattern, call and respond, and watched Lars's heavy cock bounce between them, weeping in need. Seth thrust up deeply, and Lars arched backward. Seth's hand closed on Lars's dick and stroked in time with his thrusts, hands full of him, smelling him, cock deep inside of him.

Lars came first, nearly collapsing onto Seth's chest as he did, clenching his ass and spraying liquid heat onto Seth's chest. Seth's orgasm followed, endless, continuing wave after wave until he felt wrung dry with delight.

Lars didn't pull off him right away. He collapsed forward as far as he comfortably could, catching his breath. Wincing, he rose off Seth's cock, which remained hard long afterward, no doubt still excited by the frantic pace of their lovemaking.

Seth dumped his condom and rolled toward Lars.

"Okay," Lars whispered when he finally got his breath back.

"Okay, what?" Seth whispered back.

"I'll tell Finch. I'll tell my parents, my brother. I'll tell everyone." Lars didn't look at him. He stared unblinking up to the ceiling.

Seth's throat felt full, tight. He leaned into Lars, who put his arm around Seth and pulled him close.

"Serious?" Seth asked after a minute.

Lars's eyes were a little trembly with emotion, but he smiled. “Yeah. Fuck it. All I've got to lose is everything. As long as I don't lose you.”

Seth didn't know how to put into words what he felt at that moment. It was as if something hard snapped and broke open inside his heart, and warmth gushed out of the opening; love and relief and pride poured through him, out of him, filling his fingers and breathing out of his mouth, out into the world.

“I can't see the clock,” Seth said, voice choked. “What time is it?”

Lars glanced over. “Two thirteen a.m.”

“Officially the best fucking moment of my life,” Seth said.

Until four hours later, when the Bellskis arrived on the porch.

Chapter Eight

As it happened, Seth was awake.

Lars's decision made sleep impossible; Seth was too excited. Around six in the morning, he officially gave up on unconsciousness and started some coffee downstairs, where he could read without disturbing Lars.

So he was awake and sitting there when he saw the kitchen doorknob turn.

He froze, feeling a sense of déjà vu. A week ago he'd seen nearly the same thing. He had been shocked to find Lars on the other side of the door that time. Who would it be now?

Judi Bellski walked in, switched on the kitchen light automatically, turned around, and screamed.

Seth screamed back.

"What the hell is going on?" Carl shouted.

"Judi! Carl!" Seth cried.

Judi squinted her eyes, as if not trusting her vision. "*Seth?*"

"What are you doing here?" Carl asked.

Seth stood, motionless in shock. "What...what am I *doing* here? I'm staying here! Where the hell have you two been?"

"Didn't you get my note?" Judi asked. She sniffed at a glass jar. "Who ate all my crostini?"

"Keep your voices down; you'll wake the guests," Seth told them.

Carl and Judi stared at Seth, looking like lost lambs.

"Guests? Everyone actually stayed?" Judi asked. She looked thrilled.

"*Yes!* You have fucking..." Seth ran a hand through his hair, trying to stay calm. His aunt hated swear words. "You have a houseful of paying guests, remember? It's Hanukkah? It's been Hanukkah for seven entire days?"

Judi and Carl glanced at each other. Then they both started laughing, hugging each other enthusiastically. “We’re not ruined!” Carl shouted.

“Do you have any idea how upset we’ve all been?” Seth cried. “We have a nationwide manhunt out for you! Ahava’s about to fly out here with the kids, the police have searched every icy ditch in the province, and you are now on millions of milk cartons!” Seth looked at their faces, and the realization that they were here, safe and alive, finally sank through. He ran to Judi and hugged her tightly, nearly crying into her neck. “I was so worried!”

“There, there, honey,” Judi said, patting his shoulder. “I’m sorry there was a little confusion.”

“A *little* confusion? Do you have any idea what I’ve had to go through to run this place for a week?”

“You’ve run this place?” Carl gasped. Seth tried not to feel insulted by his uncle’s horror.

“Yes!” Seth snapped. “And they’ll be expecting breakfast in an hour!”

Judi’s eyes flashed. “Well, I’d better get started, then.” She smiled at Carl, and then the two of them kissed. It wasn’t something they normally did, and Seth looked away, a little freaked-out by public displays of affection that involved tongues between people over the age of seventy.

Carl took their luggage upstairs. A few minutes later Lars emerged, hair standing on end, stubble on his face, wearing a pair of long sweatpants that hung loosely over his hips. “What’s going on?” he asked, yawning.

Seth pointed to where Judi was busy rolling out dough. Lars immediately straightened.

“Lars, I want you to meet my aunt Judi. Aunt Judi, this is...this is my boss, Lars.”

Lars didn’t bother shaking her outstretched hand. He gave her a hug. Seth could tell Judi liked him immediately.

“So you’re also a friend of Seth’s, then?” she asked, eyebrow raising.

“Well, boyfriend, yeah.” Lars swallowed. He scratched his head.

Seth choked on his coffee.

“There, there,” Judi said, pounding Seth’s back with unnecessary force. She beamed at Lars. “It’s very nice to finally meet you.”

In the next hour the rest of the house woke up. Lars went upstairs, changed, and returned looking ridiculously overdressed wearing a tie under his sweater. Seth noticed that Lars's sense of fashion improved the more nervous he got, and therefore didn't say anything.

Over breakfast, Judi and Carl told everyone what had happened. It had, as Constable Singh had predicted, all been a terrible misunderstanding.

"We had a fight," Judi said, dishing out blintzes onto each plate. "Carl thought that B and B meant more to me than he did, and he just up and left!"

"It was a stupid thing to do," Carl interrupted.

Judi shook her head. "I thought he would come back any minute, but when I realized he was gone for good, I had no choice but to go after him. I left a note on the door, but I figured you would all see the locked door and just leave."

"We'd flown all the way from the East Coast!" Sharon protested.

Rabbi Chaim frowned as well. "Where else would we have been able to eat kosher?"

Judi looked guilty. "I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt any of you. But I was about to lose my husband, and I couldn't let him continue to think the B and B meant more to me than our marriage."

Seth shook his head. "But a week! Where have you been this whole time?"

"I flew home to Albany," Carl explained. "I wanted to go where we first met, to put things into perspective."

"But I thought for sure he went to Hank Needleman's, over in Kamloops," Judi continued. "So I drove there first. By the time I figured out where he was, half the week had passed. I never imagined that any of you would have stayed this whole time!"

"There was no note," Seth said. "It must have blown away before I arrived." He wanted to be angry, but he couldn't. He was too relieved to feel much more than annoyance.

"When Judi finally found me and told me what she did, I realized that she does love me more than the business," Carl said, his eyes getting watery. "We assumed that the business was ruined, though. We figured all of you would hate us for what we did to you and give us terrible reviews."

Judi beamed. "I never figured that my nephew would be able to keep everything running so smoothly!"

Immediately all the guests launched into exuberant praise, although Seth noted a lot more was said about Lars's cooking than his own stellar leadership.

"He made me a vegan carrot cake!" Rabbi Chaim bragged.

"And teff grain!" Chana added.

"And the two of them saved my dog," Ben Berkowitz bellowed, getting teary-eyed.

The atmosphere remained festive, even after breakfast, as Rita and Mendel returned from the hospital and all the guests milled about in the living room, talking loudly enough to be heard over Doctor Mister's barking.

Carl said something to Lars and led him over into the corner. Seth watched from a distance with concern. Having never brought a lover to meet his relatives, Seth was inexperienced in how his family would treat Lars. While they all accepted Seth's orientation, that didn't always mean relatives would openly welcome the man who was sodomizing their nephew.

Seth walked closer, ostentatiously returning some books to the bookshelf, and overheard Carl.

"...so then, am I liable for my opponent's attorney's fees? Or can I force the son of a bitch to pay my legal costs if I win?"

"That depends, Mr. Bellski." Lars rolled his eyes at being trapped into giving free legal advice.

"He's very handsome."

Seth turned and put his arm around his aunt's shoulder. "I know. I've got good taste."

Judi wiped her hands on her apron. "How come you never mentioned you were dating your boss?"

"We haven't been very out about it until recently."

"Oh? How recently?"

"Like...an hour before you arrived."

Judi smiled. "I knew the Chuppah Room was a good choice." She patted Seth's cheek. "Thank you, Seth. I know it can't have been easy, but you and Lars did a wonderful job. I really wrote off the B and B as a lost cause. You saved us, and I owe you for that."

"But things are good between you two again?" Seth asked, unsure how much detail he wanted but concerned for the longevity of their relationship. He needed to know people could make it far into the future, even with obstacles in their path.

Judi nodded. "We're good. Better than we've been in a long time. Sometimes you need a break from it all to see what's really important."

Seth looked over to Lars, who tugged at his tie and looked uncomfortable.

"Uh...well, an exception to the American rule is when there's a claim under a statute providing for the recovery of attorney's fees..."

"You should go enjoy yourself for what's left of Hanukkah," Judi told him. "You and Lars are officially off duty. Take him into town. Go eat at a restaurant. Ski. Get out of here."

Seth finally interrupted his uncle.

"Sorry, Uncle Carl, I need to take Lars for a minute." Lars smiled politely at Carl and then sagged in relief as soon as they were out of the house.

"You okay?" Seth asked.

"Christ. Next time your uncle wants legal advice, tell him to make an appointment, okay?"

"Sorry. It's just the temptation of something free; it blinds him."

"I thought that was a Jewish stereotype," Lars said.

"Hey, people can be cheap regardless of ethnicity," Seth said. He linked arms with Lars. "Come on. Let's go enjoy Whistler."

Chapter Nine

The following morning they slept in, both freed from the responsibilities of the B and B, although at some point Doctor Mister nuzzled open their door and jumped into bed with them.

Guests were already packing and getting ready to leave the following day. That reminder of the real world, with job responsibilities, empty apartments, and coworkers to face, scared Seth more than he wanted to admit. Lars had come a long way, and he had done what Seth originally asked for—spent a week with him in Whistler. But there was always the possibility that his change of heart was an effect of the vacation, nothing more. Once again faced with the sterile, mirrored edifice of the Finch and Varga office building, and the bored, unsympathetic faces of their coworkers, would Lars stay true to his promise?

Lars and Judi had discovered their mutual love of cooking and were working together on some extravagant final dinner for Zot Hanukkah, the last day of the holiday. Seth tried to let go of his anxieties by reading in front of the fireplace, although his concentration constantly broke, thanks to old Ben Berkowitz's continued attempts to woo Sharon.

Rabbi Chaim led the prayers and songs after the candle lighting, and even Lars tried to sing along, although he just made *chhh* noises and bobbed his head, which made everyone else laugh.

During postdinner celebrations, the doorbell rang, and since Seth was closest, he excused himself and opened it.

And stared, uncomprehending, at a face he knew very well.

Adam Finch, Seth's other boss and Lars's partner, stood on the porch, looking cold and miserable in a business suit. Seth felt like the floor underneath him had just given way.

Adam Finch glanced at him, looked away, glanced again, and narrowed his eyes.

“*Seth Bellski?*” Finch asked, incredulous.

Seth gaped.

“Uh...” Adam Finch frowned. “Maybe I’m... I must have made a mistake. I’m looking for Lars Varga. He’s staying here?”

Seth gulped. “What would make you think that?” He hoped to buy Lars enough time to flee the building.

Adam Finch frowned at his phone. “Lars gave Nancy the number of this place the last time he called, and said he could be reached here. Since I was in Vancouver to meet with a client this afternoon, I thought we’d catch a bite and discuss the Ramirez file before I fly out tomorrow.”

Seth felt sweat trickle down his back, despite having the front door open and cold air blasting in.

“Well, he’s...” Seth breathed heavily. There was a loud laugh from the other room, and the sound of glasses clinking together. “I don’t know...”

“Hey, Adam.” Lars stepped out of the shadows and stood next to Seth. “Come in.” He opened the door, his long arm stretching over Seth.

Adam smiled, clearly relieved. “I thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere. Why aren’t you taking your calls, man?”

Lars’s expression was waxy. He smiled but was deathly pale. “I’m on vacation.”

Adam’s eyebrows rose. “Really? You didn’t say that when you left the meeting Thursday.”

“It was a last-minute decision. I left information with Nancy, though.”

Adam kept glancing at Seth and then back to Lars, confusion plain on his face.

“So you stayed here, then?”

Lars stared at him blankly.

“You...you stayed at this...kosher B and B this whole time?” Adam tried again.

Lars let out a long breath.

He put his arm around Seth’s shoulder. Seth assumed he was attempting to look casual and calm, but the fact that Lars was as white as a ghost and looked about to pass out ruined the effect.

“I stayed with Seth here,” Lars said, voice barely shaking. “It’s his family’s B and B, you know.”

“Oh! How...nice of your family.” Adam’s brows crumpled in confusion. He smiled, but it was cold, and he looked like he didn’t understand the language being spoken.

Lars let out another breath and tried again. "I stayed with Seth because...well, we're together, you know."

"*Together?*" Adam croaked.

"Yeah. A couple." Lars's voice was stronger, but he was trembling. Seth moved closer to lend support. Seth tried to erase the glare he was giving Adam, challenging him to say the wrong thing.

"I...I didn't know." Adam shook his head and gave a false laugh. "*That* I didn't know." He shook his head again, forming and rejecting words. "What about Ella?" he asked finally.

Lars shrugged. "Just a friend."

Adam wore a shocked expression. "Well, I...I guess I shouldn't interrupt your vacation."

"I'll be in the office the day after tomorrow," Lars said. "Give me a call about Ramirez then."

"Yes. All right." Adam turned quickly.

"Drive safely," Lars told him. Adam waved his hand stiffly.

"Bye," Seth said.

As soon as the door shut, Lars noticeably slumped.

"*Fuck*. You actually did it." Seth stared at Lars, awed.

"Yup." Lars gave him a weak smile. "Okay, I'll be puking in the bathroom. Holler if you need me..."

Seth grabbed his arm and pulled him back. He hugged Lars, who gripped him fiercely.

"I did it," Lars whispered after a moment. "I can't fucking believe it." He laughed a little. "That was much harder than telling your aunt and uncle, by the way."

"It gets easier the more you do it," Seth promised him. "Trust me."

"I do." Lars's smile was steadier, and color had returned to his cheeks. "What about you?"

Seth frowned. "Me?"

"Do you trust me?" Lars swallowed. "You didn't, eight days ago."

"I trust you. I forgive you. I love you."

Lars breathed out a loud sigh of relief. "Then everything will work out just fine."

* * * * *

“Hey, Lars?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

The two of them lay on top of the Chuppah Room bedspread. They were packed, ready to leave first thing in the morning. Dinner had been delicious and bittersweet, as the guests had all grown fond of each other and didn’t want to leave.

Even Seth found himself saying good-bye remorsefully. He let Doctor Mister lick his fingers and exchanged mailing addresses with the Rosenbaums and the Siegels. Heidi and Sharon had made Lars and Seth thank-you cards for rising to the task of running the B and B and salvaging their Whistler holiday. Ben Berkowitz wept and promised eternal gratitude for saving his dog’s life.

But in the last evening of silence in the house, Seth’s mind whirled, thinking about the drive home alone tomorrow and the next day at the office.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re thinking, or am I supposed to guess?” Lars raised an eyebrow.

“It’s about that study deal you’ve got going. I think I’ll take you up on the offer.”

Lars’s smile was genuine and wide. “Really?”

Seth smiled back. “Yeah. Assuming we both still have a place at Finch and Varga.”

Lars scoffed. “Hey. Like you said, it’s my company too. And if it’s too ugly at work, screw them all. We’ll get you through school and then start our *own* firm.”

“Varga and Bellski?” Seth laughed. “Doesn’t have the same ring to it, I’m afraid.”

“It’ll grow on us,” Lars promised.

 THE END 

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Astrid Amara

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