



Born In

January

A Novelette

Stephanie Van Orman

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ONE

It wasn't the right time to leave a party, nor the right time to tell your hostess you weren't feeling well and you had to leave immediately. The hostess shook her head like the defection was nothing new and went back to attending to her more worthwhile guests. Annaliese's friend, Kimberly, offered to drive her back to the house, but Annaliese wouldn't hear of it.

"How will you get home?" Kimberly asked tartly as she followed Annaliese to the door.

"I'll get an Uber, call for a taxi, or take the bus. It doesn't matter. I just have to leave right now." Annaliese rushed the explanation as she threw her coat over her shoulders.

"Oh, I see," Kimberly said without turning her head. "You've seen someone you'd rather not see and you're only 'saying' that you're feeling sick."

"That's a good girl," Annaliese praised. "I'll make it home just fine."

"If that's the case, I won't worry about you."

"Good. Don't," Annaliese said as she hoisted her umbrella over her head and stepped out into the late afternoon rain.

Kimberly let her go down the steps and let out the usual sigh.

Annaliese was a soft sort of woman with light brown hair and light brown eyes. When she was younger, her hair would escape from her elastic and collect in wisps around her face. As an adult, she slicked it back into a no-nonsense French twist and enjoyed a level of sophistication no one would have believed possible of the child she had been.

That was who she had been avoiding at the party. Someone who had known her when she was a child.

His name was Trip. Not really, but everyone called him that. The nickname was so prevalent that hardly anyone knew what was written on his birth certificate. Annaliese knew what his real name was. She knew all about him. Every detail: his dark hair, his green eyes (which were darker than hers and often mistaken for brown), his height, his weight, what he thought about everything... except one thing. How he would feel about running into her at that dinner party on that night.

She couldn't pretend anymore.

She couldn't put that damn innocent look on her face one more time.

He'd seen her.

Trip had seen her before she made her escape. She'd felt his eyes follow her as she tumbled out of the house and onto the street.

Her phone blinged.

She couldn't look at it. Whoever it was, they would have to wait. Whoever wanted her could go to hell... even if it was Trip himself.

She didn't call for an Uber or a taxi. She walked blindly through the late afternoon rain as the wind bent the branches of the trees. Raindrops rolled down leaves collecting weight until they were blown free and smashed against Annaliese's umbrella. Her dress was wet. The sky was getting dark. She slipped under a bus shelter and stared at the numbers on the sign. Did one of the buses that came by take her home?

Trip's car pulled up to the side of the curb. Without hesitating, he got out, came over to the passenger side of his car, and opened the door for her.

She didn't say a word. She got in.

He gave her a little bow before returning to the driver's side and getting in.

When he maneuvered the car into the driving lane, she asked him, "Where are you taking me?"

"To my house."

"I didn't know you had a house," she said, amazed at what she didn't know about him.

"Oh, I do. It's a new acquisition. If you weren't playing hide-and-seek with me, I would have shown it to you already. If you're still playing hide-and-seek, I'll take you home instead."

"No. Show it to me. You must know how tired I am of playing games."

He nodded and drove them through the city rain. He put on music that was soft and melded into the sounds the raindrops made as they splashed against his car.

More than once, Annaliese checked where they were going, confusion all over her face.

Trip noticed, but didn't comment. He wanted to surprise her.

Finally, they pulled into a U-shaped driveway of a house Annaliese knew very well. The lights were on and the glow on the gray brick made the house look golden.

"This is your uncle's house," Annaliese observed. "He's always been so annoyed with you. Why are you staying here?"

"My uncle passed away last month," he explained.

"How shocking! You should have told me," Annaliese fumed.

"What? You would have gone to the funeral with me?"

"Yes. If you'd asked."

"Hmm," he sighed. "You've been through enough lately. I did think to ask you, but you have to understand, I was not expecting him to leave me this house. He left his money to other people, his extensive properties to other people, but he left this house to me. I was stunned. Like you said, he's always been so annoyed with me... like my father. In his will, he said he left it to me because I was the only person who made memories here."

Annaliese went crimson. "Did you ever explain the situation to him?"

"No, but he found out. I don't know how, but he found out. He explained as much in his will."

"The lawyer didn't read that out for everyone to hear, did they?"

"No," Trip said, eager to quiet her fears. "I was given my portion privately. Actually, everyone was given their portion privately. Maybe it was done that way to keep my secret, but maybe other people have their secrets too."

"Did he say much about it?" Annaliese asked quietly.

"Yes. That he was wrong. That my father was wrong. That everyone who had dealt with me was wrong and he hoped that this gesture might go a long way in correcting everyone's terrible advice, incorrect thinking, and stubborn, foolish ways."

Annaliese relaxed slightly. "Did any of that make you feel better?"

"We'll see," he said, as he got out of the car and opened Annaliese's door for her. He took her hand and lifted her out of the car. He closed it quietly behind her and opened the front door of the house for her.

Annaliese had been in the entryway so many times she could hardly remember the first time she'd been there. It was huge with twin staircases rising like wings. Trip had to walk across miles of tiled flooring to reach the closet where he hung her coat.

She lowered herself onto a cream velvet chair to remove her black high heels. Before she could undo one zipper, Trip was on his knees in front of her, sliding her ankles out of the ankle boots she wore on cold days.

A painful sigh escaped her lips. "Please stop." She slid off the chair and into his lap with the layers of her black gauze skirt flowing all around them. "You're always on your knees. I hate it. Stop it."

Before he could put his arms around her, she stood up, removing her weight and herself from him. The moment the fabric from her skirt slipped between his fingers was always the moment when he felt he had truly lost her. It was not the moment when her skin stopped touching his, but the moment when even her clothes were out of his reach.

She took five steps from him and waited.

He waited too.

They were both waiting for the moment they got the green light from the other, but they hadn't felt like they'd received it yet.

"Did Uncle Clement leave you all the furniture?" Annaliese asked conversationally.

"Every stick. Even the chess set in the library." Trip got up from his knees. "Would you play a game with me tonight?"

"Of chess?"

"Yes," Trip said, his heart in his throat. "We always used to play together. It might help us relax."

"Is it still set with the old papers we used?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked at it since we played with it last, but it's always set up. Uncle liked it. He thought of it as part of the decorations."

Annaliese remembered some of the things they'd written on the papers they'd put in that chess set. It would be so much easier if they could have a conversation like normal people, but it felt too late for that. They needed a therapist... or a lawyer.

TWO

The library was a room of unsurpassed beauty. As far as a personal library went, it was beyond luxurious. The room had originally been a ballroom. The owner of the house before Uncle Clement had been another relative. They had bookshelves attached to every wall in every corridor in the house. It made moving furniture in and out a nightmare. Annaliese and Trip both remembered the way the house had looked in those days. Sometimes a person had to turn sideways to get down a hallway.

When Uncle Clement inherited the house, the first thing he did was acknowledge that he did not need a ballroom. He purchased uniform shelving, had all the mismatched bookcases removed from the house and all the books properly stored in two lines of bookcases in the ballroom and leaning against all four walls. When all the books were moved into the new library, there was still shelf space for new books. Soon that was no longer true and more bookcases were brought in because the house was just made to be read in.

Of the many beautiful features of the library, one of them was a small table intended only for playing chess. The pieces and the board were wooden. It looked ordinary enough unless you knew that it held a secret. The secret of the chess set was that every single one of the pieces had a hole drilled in the bottom. The tube created inside was the perfect size for hiding a tiny roll of paper.

A thousand games could be played with a chess set that had a message hidden inside each piece. Sometimes the game contained commands like dares, sometimes clues, and sometimes questions. Trip said he didn't know what was written inside the pieces, and he didn't. He flipped over a black pawn to make sure there was still a roll of paper inside before pulling out the chair in front of the white pieces for Annaliese.

She believed him, that he didn't know what was inside, and sat down. She had long learned that it didn't matter what was written inside. You could ignore what was written on the papers and ask whatever you wanted.

He sat down and looked at her gravely. "Begin."

She picked up her pawn and moved it forward one square.

"I miss playing chess with you," Trip said as their game wore on. No one had shed blood yet and both sets of pieces had strayed far into the no man's land in the middle of the board.

"Are you going easy on me?" she asked suspiciously.

"I hoped you were going easy on me," he retorted.

She huffed and killed one of his pawns with her bishop. She unrolled the scroll that had been placed inside his dead pawn. It read, 'Do you like carrot cake?' She wasn't asking him a dumb question. She knew everything about him, even whether or not he liked carrot cake.

Instead, she made up her own question and tried to place it on the same maturity level so it didn't seem out of place when he read a question from her side. "Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked.

"Is that what it says?" he asked, reaching for the paper in her hand.

“Don’t you trust me?” she asked coyly, like a little girl. Then, she rolled over her tongue and became a sharp woman. “Or do you not want to answer the question?” She did not show him the paper. She rolled it up and stuffed it back in the pawn.

“No. I don’t have a girlfriend,” he said flatly and offered no further information before moving a pawn to threaten her bishop in retaliation.

His answer did not satisfy her. It was too childish a question after all.

Three moves later, Trip killed her knight. He opened the paper hidden inside. It wasn’t even a question. It was more like a fortune cookie. It said, ‘Make plans for further education.’ It was impossible for him to say those words to her. Instead, he pretended to read a dare instead.

“Let your hair down.”

Annaliese’s hair was tied up in a French twist, but familiar with this game, she didn’t hesitate to do as she was told. If she wanted answers to her questions, she had to play by the rules of the game. She deposited her elastic and thirteen bobby pins into the tray where they were the dead pieces were stored.

Trip felt the tension in his shoulders ease as soon as he saw her hair fall over her shoulders. He remembered her as a little girl with flyaway wisps, as a teenager who couldn’t quite bring herself to use as much product as it took to achieve perfect smoothness. Seeing the destruction of her French twist gave him a lift.

Maybe everything would be all right.

Annaliese always lost her knight first when she played chess. It didn’t matter who she was playing. She was better with her bishops and took another pawn.

She opened the paper. It read, ‘Wonder not. All will be revealed.’ She did her best to hide an exasperated pant before she asked cleanly, “What did you think of me the first time you saw me?”

“Probably nothing,” Trip answered. “I don’t think I even remember the first time I saw you. I was a child.”

The disappointment Annaliese felt at his statement was so palpable it surprised her. What he said was perfectly reasonable. They were three or four years old when they met. Still, she must care a lot about what Trip thought to be hurt by his honest reflection. She thought it was a bad sign for their conversation if he didn’t try to make something up, even if only to please her. Had he fallen to his knees in the entryway for nothing?

“However,” he continued. “I always thought the days when you were here, in the library, were the nicest.”

She smiled. That did feel like a hopeful place to start.

THREE

Meeting as children and looking through Uncle Clement's books was a pleasant memory for Annaliese too. Trip's Uncle Clement and Annaliese's mother were lawyers who worked for the same firm. Not only did they work together, but they were close friends. Hence, on some Sunday afternoons, they met to chat and unwind. Annaliese was brought to visit the library and Trip was called over to help entertain her.

Those were essential memories, but they were not the beginning of Trip and Annaliese's love affair.

Rushing forward, Annaliese was sixteen and she was set to attend summer camp. She had chosen the camp herself for the archery program and horseback riding. It was in a beautiful mountain range miles away from the sort of summer hideaway her mother would have chosen for her, but Annaliese was sixteen and granted the right to choose how she spent her summer.

None of her friends from school were going to be there, but that was part of the appeal. She was awkward with friends and didn't know what to do with them. At her high school, everyone Annaliese knew was so competitive, it was cutthroat.

"What was your score on the test?"

"How many times did you get asked to dance?"

"What was your time around the track?"

Annaliese struggled because she wasn't above average at any of those things. She was plagued by a haunting feeling that she didn't belong there. She was an imposter, but she couldn't tell anyone she thought that. The last thing in the world she needed was to land herself in therapy or have even one person tell her mother that she felt that way.

So, Annaliese chose her camp and she was allowed to go mostly because when her mother was researching the camp, she discovered that Trip was going to be there.

On Annaliese's way to the camp, there was a mixup at the airport. A limousine company was supposed to take her from the airport to the camp and the mixup meant that instead of merely going from point A to point B in a shiny black sedan, she arrived at the camp in a white stretch limo.

It made quite the sensation.

All the girls and all the boys stared.

However, Annaliese was a pro at showing no emotion. That was the thing that carried her through attending a school where the average student was an over-achieving showoff. She didn't give them any reaction and instead looked unimpressed and vacant no matter what happened.

Annaliese couldn't see the sensation she created as she pulled up, but Trip could. He was standing on a balcony that overlooked the U-shaped drop-off point. Everyone was watching as the white limousine pulled up. When the chauffeur opened the door for her, the effect was quite dazzling. She was not dressed like a person who ought to be coming out of a limousine. She was wearing frayed cut-offs, a white undershirt with a short-sleeved plaid shirt over it, tied at the waist. She wore yellow high-top sneakers and carried a backpack. She yanked her headphones from her ears and stowed them away while the driver unloaded her luggage.

Her dark blonde flyaway hair was straightened, her tan was the perfect shade of golden and suddenly, everything about her was rich with a capital R.

"I know her," Trip said to his friend Jamison, who was standing next to him.

"Sure, you do," Jamison sniggered back. "What's her name?"

"Yeah. That's Annaliese Strider."

Jamison clicked his tongue. "She must be famous."

Suddenly, it struck Trip as a mistake to let on how he knew her. He had been one of the first people there and he noticed something from the way the other campers arrived. He and Annaliese were rich by comparison. It meant that his family was far wealthier than the families of the other campers, but he decided not to show it off. He got the counselors to hide all his best tech toys in the camp safe and vowed not to use them. He decided that the use of his gear was more important than whether or not anyone knew where they came from. He ripped the logos off his hiking gear and drew on his shoes with a permanent marker.

He came to the camp to have a normal summer, a stress-free summer, and he couldn't do that if he was labeled as a rich kid. What if he was targeted by some brat who had something to prove?

Staring down at Annaliese, it was already too late for her. He racked his brain. Why had she arrived in a limo? Of all the stupid, careless...

He looked down at her and his tirade stopped. Maybe it didn't matter how she arrived. She looked like white gold and sunshine. She probably caused a riot wherever she went.

A second later, she was wheeling her modestly sized suitcase behind her as she passed through the log arch into the camp.

Annaliese was not surprised when she saw that she was rooming with three other girls. It said she would be on the website, but still, she was surprised by her roommates. They were friendly, unlike the other girls at school.

She went to dinner with them under an outdoor canopy. She saw Trip on the other side of the cluster of tables, surrounded by his bunkmates because everyone was eating with their bunkmates for the first two days. She tilted her head at him and gave him a cool-girl salute, which he returned in the form of a wink.

There was no rush to meet up with him. She knew he had been told to watch out for her. She'd meet up with him eventually.

As she chewed on her grilled cheese sandwich, she glanced at him repeatedly. He had really changed since the last time she'd seen him. They were almost the same age. He was born on January third and she was born on January nineteenth of the same year. What right did he have to have gotten that tall? They had been the same height for as long as she could remember.

Finally, she acknowledged that it had been a while since she had last seen him. Two years? Three?

She chatted with her roommates and tried to ignore their awestruck gazes as they grilled her about what school she went to and what her life was like as a super-rich heiress.

Annaliese tried to explain that the limo to the camp had been due to an error and not because she was a super-rich heiress. She told them it was the first time she'd been in a limo, which was a lie, but it was the first time she'd been in a stretch limo, which was the truth. She wasn't sure if she was curbing their enthusiasm, but she continued to try, while the rest of the camp did not hear her explanation.

FOUR

Trip was awoken that night by a counselor, a twenty-year-old named Skyler, hissing in his ear. "Trip. There's been a problem. Can you get up?"

The clock read 12:30, so he hadn't been asleep that long. "What's going on?" he asked as he flopped out of bed.

"Shh! Don't wake up the other guys. I only need you."

Trip was confused. What could they need only him for?

Skyler led him to the administrative building and to the counselor's lounge.

Trip heard Annaliese crying before he saw her and quickened his pace. He knew exactly what Annaliese sounded like when she cried. In the room, a female counselor was hovering over Annaliese, clearly unsure of what to do.

As soon as Annaliese saw him, she rushed him like a little girl who needed a hug. Trip put his arms around her. It was only a little awkward and the strangeness of them touching like that melted away in seconds.

"What happened?" he asked the counselor over Annaliese's head. The top of her head only came up to his jaw.

"Someone put a dead, bloody, rabbit in her bed. Either she got into bed and didn't notice it at first or someone put it in after she was already in bed. Needless to say, when she put her feet down at the foot of her bed, she felt something weird, investigated and this is the result."

"You need to call her mother," Trip said instantly.

"Let's not be hasty," the female counselor said.

Trip understood immediately. This counselor, Camilla (Trip read her name tag), knew that Annaliese's mother was a lawyer and didn't want to involve her. Instead, she wanted to see if she could de-escalate the situation on their own. The first thing they needed to do was calm Annaliese down. They asked her if there was anyone in the camp who could comfort her, and she gave them his name. Trip tightened his arms around her.

Camilla went on to explain that it would be wisest if Annaliese and Trip took a few minutes to calm down in the counselor's lounge while she found out who had put the dead rabbit in her bed.

Trip agreed that was fine. They might be able to rectify the situation before they reported the incident to Annaliese's horrifying mother. If they couldn't set things straight, nothing was going to stop the horrifying mother. It was much better to try to find a solution first.

He pulled Annaliese over to the couch and held her close as he yanked a tissue from the box free.

Camilla left and Annaliese took the tissue from him like he was a hero and blew her nose.

Skyler held a garbage can out to her.

"How are your feet?" Trip asked the weeping girl.

"How do you think? I left bloody footprints all down Roger's Hall."

"Did anyone take a picture? You're going to want that for the scrapbook," he chuckled ironically. "So many memories."

"This is serious," she wailed. "I have to see a doctor in the morning! I'm up on my tetanus shot but I'm going to need a round of antibiotics."

"So you got your feet washed?"

"I washed them in the bathroom sink, but I don't know. They still feel weird," she wiggled her toes.

"Let me see them," Trip said, moving to look at her feet.

She had cute feet, perfectly polished toes, and an anklet made of string, which had absorbed a bit of blood through the ties that dangled.

"Your anklet is ruined," he observed. He pulled her ankle onto his knee and undid the knot. "I hope this wasn't like a friendship bracelet."

Annaliese did not have close friends. "Nah, I made it myself, but I'm annoyed. I liked it. I bought the materials myself and learned how to make it myself so I would have one."

"Let's keep it," Trip said brightly, exuding a next-level charm he didn't know he had. "Can we get a baggie?" he asked Skyler.

The counselor looked surprised but could see no reason to deny them a sandwich bag, so he got up.

"Are your feet clean enough? Do you think we should wash them again?" Trip asked, turning her foot around in his hand.

"I dunno. I scrubbed them. I want a pedicure."

"You know," Trip said with a cheerful, yet wicked, smile. "If we told them you needed a pedicure to feel better, I bet the two of us could spend tomorrow in that cute little tourist village we passed on the way here."

She turned to him. "Are you good at milking things?"

"I bet I could make you cry all over again if you want to make the appeal look genuine."

Annaliese's mouth fell open. Alone in the counselor's lounge, she bent toward him. "You want to go to the village, go to a spa, and get a pedicure with me?"

"I've never wanted or had a pedicure in my life. But, I was told that I was supposed to look out for you at this camp, and so far... this is a bit beyond my pay grade."

"They're paying you! I could die of embarrassment," she cried as she pulled a throw blanket off the back of the couch and covered her head with it.

"They're not paying me!" he said as he pulled the blanket off her head.

"Really?" she asked with wide eyes.

"Really," he said flatly. "All I was saying is that this is a little more drama than I was expecting on the first day! I require professional assistance."

"Look, I know you didn't come to this camp to hold my hand." At that moment, he was literally holding onto one of her feet. Annaliese was not able to articulate that the gesture was the most reassuring thing about having him come to comfort her. If he was willing to touch her foot, then what happened must not have been that big a deal. She pulled her feet back and tucked them under her on the couch.

Trip didn't get to say anything further before Skyler came back with a ziplock and a tray of snacks and drinks. He turned on the TV for some background noise and prepared to hunker down.

"Was Camilla thinking that she'd figure out who did this before sunrise?" Trip asked.

"She was hoping," Skyler replied.

Trip thought that was impossible, but far be it for him to criticize. He spent the rest of the night on the couch watching old TV programs and convincing Annaliese that it was fine to snuggle with him.

The whole thing was a bit of a revelation for him. He learned that he was cool-headed in a crisis, that he enjoyed cuddling with a girl, and that he could outlast a camp counselor in a game of which one of them could keep their eyes open the longest. As soon as Skylar was asleep in the recliner next to them, Trip maneuvered Annalise so she was using his lap as a pillow and leaned back himself.

He hadn't been aware that he had a crush on her. He had a soft spot for her from their collective childhood as he had always thought she was very sweet. He liked her better than the other girls he knew. She was not fascinating to him in a novelty kind of way. He had crushes on girls at his school sometimes, but it never felt like a replication of what he felt for Annalise.

He clicked his tongue dryly and wondered if she was his first love. Part of him hoped she wasn't. The idea of a first love sounded doomed to failure in his mind. The other half of him timidly suggested that he would have to find someone very attractive for him to find them more attractive than Annalise.

The idea was simply impossible.

FIVE

The next day, Trip kept to his word. He went with Annaliese to the village. They began their day by visiting the doctor, where Annaliese got the prescription for the round of antibiotics she knew she needed. Then they went to the pharmacy to get the prescription filled. Then to the spa for pedicures.

"Really, Trip, you don't have to do this with me," she said, shaking her head wearily at him, but also squelching her laughter as they stretched out at the spa.

"I'm only doing this because it's so funny for you," he said with his feet in the whirlpool bath.

He was wearing a T-shirt with a Batman logo on it. No one could have looked more out of place. The sight of him made Annaliese cover her mouth to stop the giggles.

"Do you want polish?" the beauty consultant asked Trip.

He flipped his head toward Annaliese. "Do I want polish?"

"No!" she gasped.

He flipped his head back. "I guess not."

When they left, he took her out for lunch. Skyer was with them, saying consoling things about how Camilla hadn't been able to figure out which camper had played the rabbit prank.

"Maybe we should stay at a hotel tonight," Trip suggested casually. "You know, because we don't know who did it. The criminal's still hanging around the camp. Annaliese can't be expected to return to her bed tonight or to spend another night in the counselor's lounge."

Annaliese and Skyer exchanged looks. Clearly, they both thought that suggestion was too demanding, but at that moment, neither of them had a better idea.

When the three of them returned to the camp, it turned out that the situation was more serious than they thought and the camp counselors were considering alternatives.

It seemed that even though they spoke to everyone in the cabins and interviewed everyone, no one knew anything. The rabbit had been hit by a car, so it was probably hit by one of the people coming to the camp, but it had been fresh enough to make a bloody mess. Had whoever hit it stopped their car, got out, put the rabbit in a bag, and then dumped the whole thing out in Annaliese's bed? That would require an alarming amount of forethought.

None of the campers knew how it happened. No one had any memory of their vehicle hitting a bump or anything.

With no new information, Annaliese was finally encouraged to call her mother, but she knew that if her mother heard what happened, she would be pulled from the camp. She glanced at Trip and worried that if she decided to go home, it would not be the last time she saw him. They were getting older with only two more summers before they graduated from high school. She went to a different school than him. She wasn't sure how much more time she could spend with him if she bailed.

"Could I be moved to a different room?" she asked Camilla.

The camp counselor hissed in hesitation. "There aren't any other beds available in the girls' dormitory. There is an empty cabin for sick campers that we could set you up in until we find the culprit."

"That sounds perfect," Annaliese said.

"It's behind the front office. Do you think you'll be scared to stay alone? I'd feel better if we could get another camper to stay with you."

Annaliese shook her head. "As far as I know, the only camper here who couldn't have pulled the rabbit prank was Trip. You aren't going to let a boy stay with me, so I'm fine staying alone."

"What's your relationship like with Trip? Is he your cousin?" Camilla asked, digging a little deeper.

"He's not a relative. We've been friends since we were little kids."

"So, he's like your brother?" she asked, still picking.

Annaliese didn't know where that line of thought was going, so she answered, "I don't have a brother. Of the people I know, I guess he's the closest thing."

Camilla smiled knowingly and helped Annaliese cart her luggage out to the infirmary cabin and helped her get sorted from there.

Afterward, Annaliese went under the canopy for dinner and saw Trip sitting all alone at a table. She was supposed to be sitting with her roommates, but since she didn't know if they were the ones who had left the rabbit in her bed, she walked at a measured pace over to Trip. He got up with her and they joined the line to get food.

"Why are you by yourself? Aren't you supposed to be sitting with your roommates?" she asked in a sly whisper as they moved through the buffet, choosing their dinners.

He leaned over and whispered into her hair, "I was removed from my room this afternoon."

"Why?"

"They moved me to a room by myself."

"Huh? So there were no free rooms in the girls' cabins, but there were plenty of free rooms in the boys' dorms?"

"Something like that." He gave her a meaningful look.

Annaliese didn't know what that meant. When she sat at the table, she expected Trip to sit across from her, but he didn't.

He sat next to her, with his shoulder brushing hers, and whispered, "I'm supposed to sneak out and sleep in your cabin."

Her face flushed red. "Do they know how inappropriate that is?"

"They said that since I'm like your brother *and* we have been friends all our lives *and* since the person you wanted when you found the rabbit was me, I should be there for you. Just until they find out who did this and then you can return to your room."

"Even though all that is true," Annaliese hissed back, "we're not actually that close."

"I heard Skyler tell them that in the eighteen hours he spent with us he has never witnessed less sexual tension between two teenagers than us."

"That can't be true. Half of these kids barely know the difference between their knees and their elbows. How could all of them be raring to go?"

"I agree."

Annaliese swallowed, but the cool, empty look was on her face. "What do you think about staying in my room with me?"

"We need to make a deal," he said, trying to match the coolness on her face. If he could look as indifferent as her, it could only serve them both.

"Should we talk about it tonight, when we're alone in our... cabin?" Annaliese asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

Trip nodded.

SIX

Trip snuck out of his room by merely packing a backpack with what he needed for the night and walking out his front door. The hall of the cabin was empty and the counselor on supervision knew he would be leaving and that everyone was fine with that.

Annaliese waited for him. She had changed into her pajamas, ones she never thought would need to look good for a guy, and felt her heart hammering like there was construction going on inside her.

He tapped on the door three times as they had already decided that would be their secret knock and she opened the door for him.

Once inside, he dropped his backpack and locked the door behind him.

The room was generally used as a sick room, so there were six beds lined up instead of the regular four of the dorms. He saw which bed she was using and put his stuff on the bed next to hers.

"I have a problem," he said, trying to keep his mask of indifference up.

"Me too," she said, sitting on the bunk facing him.

He mimicked her and they sat together with their knees touching. "This isn't a good situation for me."

"Not me either," she confessed.

He started off easy. "I don't like being here on the pretext that I'm 'like your brother'."

"I agree. I've never thought of you like that," she reassured him.

"I'm relieved to hear it," Trip said steadily. "The thing is, I think I like you too much to be here, spending the whole night with you. It would put my mind to rest if you merely told me that even though I am not your brother, you're not available. You have a boyfriend at your old school."

"I'm not allowed to have a boyfriend," Annaliese squeaked.

"You're not?"

"No. My mother is fiercely opposed to my dating until I finish law school."

"Law school?" Trip echoed in bewilderment. He started counting the years in his head. "You couldn't possibly finish all that before you turn twenty-six."

"I know, but she didn't get married until she was thirty-eight and she didn't have any children until she was forty-six, so I'm not going to win that argument. Besides, I haven't wanted to fight with her. She's a terrifying lawyer. If she turns all that on you, you don't win fights with her."

"Ah. I have a similar problem, though not exactly," Trip confided.

"What's your problem?"

"My father and my uncle don't believe in being with one person. They believe I should date as many women as there are weeks in a year. They think I should never be on a date with the same girl twice. They want me to die having sworn on an affidavit that I have screwed half the population of mainland Vancouver."

Annaliese was appalled and showed it. "Do you want to do that?"

"Do I want to become the source of all sexually transmitted infections *and* diseases? Of course not. Those old men are mentally unstable, and even though I have spent Sunday afternoons lolling around in my uncle's mansion, my mother raised me. No, that is not what I want for myself."

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