

TRAILS MERGE

by

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PROLOGUE

Where was Lynn? She should have been home hours ago. Campbell Carson paced the living room like a caged bear. She had run out of things to do in her small apartment in Madison, Wisconsin. She had packed their suitcases, watered the plants, and gassed up the car. All she was waiting on was Lynn Meyers, her partner of five years.

She had waited on Lynn a lot over the past few years, so she should have been used to it. But Campbell always played Charlie Brown and trusted Lucy to hold the football upright. And she never did. Like a fool, Campbell had still hoped when Lynn said she would be home by noon she actually would be. Now it was late afternoon and Lynn had only just called to say she was leaving the office.

Lynn put in long hours as a gay-and-lesbian-rights advocate for Wisconsin Equality, a special-interest group with political and philanthropic agendas. Campbell understood that. But did Lynn really have to work these particular hours on this particular Saturday afternoon? She was obviously trying to put off their upcoming visit to Campbell's family at Bear Run.

Campbell had been named godmother to her newest cousin, and the christening was tomorrow morning, followed by a celebration at the small family-run ski resort. Lynn didn't enjoy the trips to see Campbell's family but had promised to make the most of this occasion. Surely she knew how important it was to Campbell.

Campbell hadn't seen her family in five months, and even then Lynn had been too busy to go with her. She resented the time away

from the city, and she resented Campbell's connection with her large, extended family. She always found something to complain about—the lack of cell-phone reception, the way Campbell's mother hovered over her children, or the lack of nightlife on the mountain. Lynn didn't have a good relationship with her own relatives, and she couldn't understand Campbell's desire to stay close to hers.

Still, Campbell thought a weekend on the mountain would be good for them. Lynn was overworked and they hadn't spent any quality time together in weeks. They needed to reconnect. Campbell was lonely and ready for some time away from the fund-raisers, business dinners, and late-night phone calls that had taken over their life in the past year as Lynn climbed the career ladder.

Campbell's days weren't bad, since she worked with an underprivileged youth program at the local YMCA and enjoyed the time she spent with the kids. But her nights were long, and the weekends dragged on forever, with Lynn working so much. They got out often, but usually for a political event Lynn needed to attend, and their peer group consisted entirely of her business associates and colleagues who were as busy and driven as Lynn.

"Hey, honey." Lynn bustled through the door and immediately began to change clothes.

Campbell smiled at the flash of porcelain skin she glimpsed as Lynn traded one dress shirt for another. Lynn was every bit as stunning as the day they met in college.

She was still every bit as passionate and outspoken, too, and hot tempered as her flame-red hair indicated, which was why Campbell instantly fell in love with her, and that love hadn't wavered.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I just got an interview with a staffer of one of the senators who's been stalling the hate-crimes bill."

"That's great," Campbell said. "You've been working on this bill all spring. Why wouldn't I want to hear that?"

"Because the meeting is tonight at eight thirty," Lynn said, heading toward their bedroom.

Campbell's heart sank, but she wasn't eager to start a fight. They'd been having a lot of them lately. "Okay, I guess we'll just go up late tonight."

Lynn's brow gathered in disbelief. "You don't get it, do you?"

"What?" Campbell thought she might be getting it, but she didn't want to admit that possibility yet.

"I'm not going to Bear Run this weekend." Lynn pulled a suit jacket off a hanger in the closet before she added, "If I never go there again, I wouldn't mind."

"I know you don't like Bear Run, but I'm the godmother. I have to be at the baptism."

"Well, that's your fault for going along with that antiquated idea. But you won't catch me sitting in some small-town church pretending to be interested in a ceremony I don't even agree with." Lynn began to raise her voice, a sign she was about to go on a tear.

"Okay, you don't have to, and when we have kids, we don't have to have them baptized," Campbell said, trying to pacify her, but she knew immediately that she'd said something wrong.

"Are you serious?" Lynn stopped dead and her light green eyes flashed with anger. "Are you freaking serious? When we have kids? You see? That's why I don't want you going up there. You spend two days on Walton Mountain and you start acting like a goddamn straight girl."

"Hey, that's not fair." Campbell was tired of having this argument. "You can be a lesbian and still have a relationship with your family."

"And live in a small town, take over the ski business, raise another generation of Carson kids? Give me a break. If you want to act straight, you need to find someone else to do it with," Lynn snapped.

Campbell recoiled. "You don't mean that," she finally whispered.

"I do, Campbell. I mean it. No self-respecting lesbian would ever settle for the life you're dreaming of. If you take that road, you'll spend the rest of your life alone." Lynn grabbed her briefcase. "I'm off to my meeting now. While I'm gone, decide whether you want to be a dyke or play heterosexual homemaker at Bear Run."

Campbell barely heard the door slam as Lynn left. The pain would come eventually, but she felt nothing as she processed the ultimatum. She could either be with the woman she loved in a life she hated, or she could live the life she loved with the people she loved, but she would do it alone. She wasn't eager to choose, but Lynn had left her few options.

Sadly she picked up her suitcase, leaving Lynn's on the floor, then slipped the key to the apartment from her pocket, placed it on the coffee table, and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER ONE

Six Months Later

Parker Riley shouldered open the door to her new office, a box of her personal belongings in one arm and a stack of file folders in the other. She dropped the box and folders on top of an old wooden desk and looked around. The walls had probably been white at one point, but they were now dingy and yellowish. The thick brown carpet shaded from light to dark in various parts of the room, depending on the amount of direct sunlight it had been subjected to over the years. The ceilings, in keeping with the alpine theme of the old building, peaked high and then sloped drastically downward, with a window set back in the dormers on each of the outside walls.

She walked over to a window and had to admit the view wasn't unattractive. The fall colors were almost at their brightest, painting brilliant reds, yellows, and oranges across the rows of trees that climbed the steep incline of the terrain.

"Not bad," she mumbled to herself, then shook her head, "but it's not Chicago."

She trudged back to her desk and flopped into a rickety swivel chair. It gave more than she expected, and she grabbed the sides of the desk to keep from tumbling backward. After steadying herself, she rubbed her forehead and wondered if this near fall was a metaphor for her life. Fallen politicians, leading to a fall in her career, topped off by the falling apart of a two-year relationship. Now she was reduced to falling out of old desk chairs at Bear Run Ski Hill in Wisconsin.

The possibility was almost too depressing to contemplate, but before she had time to dwell on it, a knock interrupted her pity party. Emery Carson, her new boss, stepped through the doorway.

“Well, I guess you found the place all right,” he said as he glanced around the office.

“Yeah, thanks,” Parker replied, not sure what else to say to the man who stood there. He wore Carhart overalls and muddy work boots, not exactly business attire where Parker came from, but she would probably see a lot more of it. Emery wasn’t as old as she had assumed during her initial interview, maybe in his mid to late forties. He was clean shaven and smelled pleasantly of Cool Water cologne, but he was far from the slick and polished Ivy Leaguers she usually worked for. And while she immediately liked him, she was at a loss about what to say to him. Finally, she fell back on the one thing she knew—her job.

“I should start researching the clientele demographics to see what I have to deal with. Where can I get the spec sheets of season-pass holders for the past five years? Also, the conference bookings for as far back as you have them would be helpful.”

“The conference ledgers are in the main office, but our bookkeeper doesn’t come in on weekends,” Emery said, running his fingers through his perfectly coiffed golden hair. “And we’ve never compiled any spec sheets on season-pass holders. We have a list of names and phone numbers on the computer, though.”

“Okay, that’s a start.” Parker tried not to let her frustration with the lack of record-keeping show. “Can I have those?”

“They’re in the front office, too. I can get you a key, but if you wait until Monday, the secretary will print everything out for you. Why don’t you take some time to settle in?”

Parker thought of all the boxes the movers had unceremoniously dropped in the living room of her apartment less than a mile from the resort. “Okay, I guess I can wait until tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow. Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

Parker paused, trying to follow Emery’s logic.

“Nobody works Sundays here during the off season. It’s a day of rest.”

Parker stood up. Sitting down when someone else was standing put her in a one-down position. “I’m not really a religious person.”

“Neither am I.” Emery chuckled. “But once the snow flies, we

won't get a break around here for a solid six months, so take the time now."

Parker nodded, not wanting to disagree so early on her first day. "If you say so."

"Sleep in or unpack in the morning. Then you can meet the rest of the year-round staff at the softball game in the afternoon."

"Softball game?"

"Yeah, there's a makeshift field over by the summer picnic area. Everyone who's available meets there around one o'clock on Sundays for a pickup game."

"Oh, I'm not good at sports." Parker tried to back out gracefully.

"None of us are." Emery laughed. "It's mostly a bunch of middle-aged men trying to recapture our youth. You can just watch. Some of the wives join in, and some of them sit around and make fun of us. Either way, you can meet some folks before you start work on Monday."

"Sounds fun." Parker tried to force a smile, even though she would rather poke herself with a sharp stick than spend an afternoon playing jock with a bunch of farm boys.

"Great." Emery smiled. "See you tomorrow."

"See you then." Parker kept her fake smile until Emery shut the door behind him. Then she dropped back into the desk chair, remembering to catch herself before it tipped her backward. What had she gotten herself into this time?



Parker cringed at the sight of her apartment. The movers had been oblivious to the official labels she had painstakingly created and attached to each box to detail its contents and which room it belonged in. Instead, they had dropped everything in a series of haphazard piles just inside the door. Parker slipped through the available space left by the half-open door and wove between stacks of boxes, picking a path through the mess toward the kitchen.

When she finally made it to the refrigerator, she found a lone carton of beef chow mein she'd picked up on her drive from Chicago to Bear Run. She grabbed it and sniffed before she succumbed to the inevitable and tossed it into the microwave. The only other item not still in a box was an unopened bottle of red wine she had bought at one of

the wine-and-cheese huts that seemed to be the only type of shops that survived in this part of Wisconsin.

“Well,” Parker mumbled to herself as she grabbed the bottle of wine, “red meat does call for red wine.” She closed the door to the now completely barren fridge and searched through the maze of boxes for a corkscrew and a wineglass. When she didn’t find the glasses right away, she realized most of her fragile items had probably ended up beneath several heavier boxes, perhaps her books or her free weights.

She wandered back into the kitchen and retrieved the steaming beef and noodles and uncorked the wine. Sitting at the kitchen table, she used a plastic fork that came with the carryout and shrugged at how desperate she would look to anyone who might see her. But that thought didn’t stop her from swigging directly from the bottle.

When she was about halfway through her meal, her cell phone rang shrilly.

She finished swallowing a mouthful of noodles as she fished the phone from her pocket. “Parker Riley.”

“Green Acres is the place to be,” sang someone on the other end of the line.

Parker chuckled at her best friend. She could picture Alexis Reynolds clearly, her platinum blond hair falling over her shoulders and down her lithe frame while her sharp blue eyes danced with laughter. “Hi, Alexis.”

“Hello, darling. Have you fed the chickens and milked the cows yet?”

“I don’t have any chickens or cows, Alexis. In fact I haven’t seen a single chicken since I got here.”

“But be honest. You have seen cows, haven’t you?” Alexis said playfully.

Parker looked down at the piece of beef on her fork. “I guess you could say that.”

“I knew it. So what does the new dyke about town have planned for her first Saturday night in Wisconsin?”

“Um”—Parker glanced around the room—“I’ll probably unpack.”

“Oh, come on, not even a dinner date?” Alexis sounded a little worried.

“No. I’m having Chinese food at home.”

“Oh, dear.” Alexis sighed heavily. “I just had the most horrible vision of you sitting alone surrounded by boxes, eating old moo shoo and drinking whiskey out of a Dixie cup.”

“It’s not whiskey. I’m drinking a very nice cabernet,” Parker replied in an attempt to reassert her dignity. Then she added more softly, “And I can’t find my cups.”

“Honey, you’re positively depressing. When do you plan to stop punishing yourself?”

“Alexis, we’ve been through this already. I’m not punishing myself,” Parker said seriously. “I’m starting over, clean slate, back to the basics—”

“Off to find yourself in the great wild yonder,” Alexis added with fake enthusiasm.

“Yes.”

“And isolating yourself to wallow in self-pity is part of this rejuvenation process?”

“I’m not wallowing.”

“Sitting at home and drinking alone on a Saturday night doesn’t constitute wallowing?”

“I’m simply enjoying some peace and quiet for once.”

“I have a feeling you plan to do that a lot in the upcoming months.”

“Don’t make me sound like a hermit, Alexis. I’ve only been here two days. I’m still getting settled.”

“I know. I’m just worried about you.” Alexis’s voice softened. “I can’t stand the thought of you up there alone. You’re a social creature, honey. You’ll go crazy if you sentence yourself to solitary confinement.”

“I know. But I really am okay. In fact, I’m already filling my social calendar.”

“Really?” Alexis sounded skeptical.

“Really. I’m going to a softball game tomorrow afternoon,” Parker said, without adding that her boss had told her to.

“A softball game?” Alexis sounded perplexed.

“Yes, apparently it’s in season. The whole staff gets together to play every Sunday.” Parker tried to make the event sound appealing.

“Yes, yes.” Alexis affected a snooty air. “I’ve heard of such things among country lesbians. Sporting events accompanied by the traditional potluck. I think the requisite attire is flannel and work boots.”

Parker laughed. “Then I’d better head to Wal-Mart. I haven’t unpacked my flannel yet.”

“Don’t you dare. I’d rather you drink alone than spend your Saturday night at Wal-Mart.”

“You’re right. I’ll just have to forgo the flannel.”

“But how will you signal to the other women that you’re one of them? Mating call? Secret handshake?”

“No.” Parker sighed, despite her friend’s humor. “I’m through with mating calls for a while.”

“Uh-oh, we’re back to wallowing.”

“No, not wallowing at all. This is exactly what I want from my life right now.”

“Loneliness.”

“Independence.”

“Thank you, Mia,” Alexis mumbled under her breath.

“It’s not about Mia. Really. I’m just focused on rebuilding my career and reputation. You know I want to make a difference in the world. Another relationship right now would only keep me from getting myself back together.”

“Especially if she shows more interest in frat parties than partisan politics.”

“Alexis, I mean it. Leave Mia out of it. This isn’t her fault,” Parker said, even though the ache in her chest suggested that statement wasn’t completely true.

“Who said anything about Mia? I was speaking hypothetically,” Alexis responded dryly. “But if the shoe fits—”

“Can we change the subject? Why don’t you tell me what you plan to do tonight?”

“Well, some of the girls from the office have tickets to that *Wizard of Oz* musical, but I’d rather hit the clubs.”

Parker tried not to let her voice reflect her twinge of sadness. Getting away from Chicago had been the right choice, even if it hadn’t been easy to make. “I hear that’s supposed to be amazing.”

“Why don’t you come down next weekend and we’ll see it together?”

“Alexis, you know I can’t. I have a job here.”

“You won’t see any hit musicals at Bear Run,” Alexis answered sullenly.

“No, probably not, but you should go and then tell me all about it.”

“If you say so.” Alexis sighed again. “I’d better run. Hugs and kisses.”

“You, too.” Parker hung up and took another swig of wine directly from the bottle before she stood up. Dwelling on her doubts wouldn’t improve the situation, so she resigned herself to an evening of unpacking.