

Chapter Five

Port of Embarkation: Vancouver, British Columbia



After exploring part of Vancouver on foot after lunch—old Victorian buildings and a fascinating steam clock in Gastown—I laced up my running shoes. If I wanted to break that two-mile record in the fall in any attempt at undoing *Moore the Bore*, I needed to stay in shape.

My parents were resting, Mom reviewing info on the potential new clients and Dad reading an ebook.

When I got to the hotel's small gym, I saw through the glass wall that the room was occupied—by Tanner. He was lying on the bench press machine, wearing a loose T-shirt with the sleeves ripped out, which gave me a view of his muscles as he heaved the weights. Shirts like that should be outlawed when they made your nemesis look hot.

Not that I found Tanner attractive. Just that, objectively, he wasn't bad-looking. Why was my face warm?

I shook my head. My run would not be deterred. By his muscles, or by the fact that he was dedicated enough to also be working out on the first day of vacation. He was a star player, with the school's coach specifically designing plays that had allowed him to break tight end receiving records. His discipline shouldn't have surprised me. But it did.

As I entered, he sat up. "Hey, S'more. Want me to spot you?"

"I'm going to run." I motioned to the treadmill.

"No, you're not."

"Excuse me?"

"It's broken."

Sure enough, a paper taped to the screen said *Out of Order*.

Well, that was unfair.

"We could run outside," Tanner said. "The weather's great."

We? "And we could get lost in a strange city."

"That's what maps are for. Come on," he said. "It will be fun. I'll text my mom."

I eyed the nice, safe, and broken treadmill.

Tanner wiggled his phone. "She says okay, and your mom agreed. Don't worry. I'll keep you from getting mugged."

He flexed, and I tried not to stare at his biceps. How did I always forget that Tanner had gotten buff? Probably because as soon as he opened his mouth, that was the only thing I noticed. He stood and wiped off the bench, chugged a cup of water from the dispenser, and motioned to the door.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked as we crossed the lobby.

"It will be fine."

"I meant, do you think you can keep up?"

He grinned. “The better question is, can you keep up with me?”

“There are no balls involved here. No catching. No fans. Just running. And that’s my domain.”

“We’ll see, S’more.”

We left the hotel and jogged along the waterfront, with skyscrapers on one side and the harbor on the other. Seaplanes puttered on the water, and mountains framed the bay. It was pretty and far greener than I was used to, even on the clearest days in LA.

It was kind of nice, that I wasn’t the only one who wanted to work out. My parents stayed in shape, but neither was so into fitness that they found it necessary on vacation. Maybe Tanner wasn’t 100 percent an alien. Or we both were. That was a disturbing thought.

“Hey, check it out.” Tanner was veering off the sidewalk onto a platform that extended over the bay.

“Need a break already?” I asked.

“You wish. Look.”

A large sculpture of a leaping orca stretched into the sky, blocky like it was made out of big LEGOs. We slowed to circle it. It was pretty cool, especially against the backdrop of mountains, clouds, and water.

“Stand next to it,” Tanner said.

“Are we running or sightseeing?”

“Both. Come on, I want a picture, but I want to show the scale.”

“So why don’t I take your picture?”

“Just smile, S’more. Or don’t smile. Turn around and pretend you’re enjoying the view and you don’t see me.”

“I wish I could pretend that every day.” I paused next to the statue.

He snapped a picture and I rejoined him, jogging in place.

“You used to love LEGOs,” Tanner said.

I narrowed my eyes. I still enjoyed them, carefully following instructions in complicated kits, sometimes creating my own designs. When I needed to clear my mind, it helped to focus on a project. Given that my plans with Caleb this summer had exploded like a supernova, I saw many breakup LEGOs in my future.

I scowled at Tanner as I left the statue and returned to the sidewalk. “You only know that because you broke into my room.”

“I thought it was the bathroom,” he said. “And it wasn’t breaking. The door was cracked.”

“You knew it wasn’t the bathroom. You’d been to our house a hundred times. Once you opened the door, you didn’t have to go in.”

“Of course I did. You had a three-foot-tall replica of the *Enterprise*. It was impressive.”

Another argument we’d had many times. He consistently failed to understand why a twelve-year-old girl might not have wanted a boy going into her room behind her back. Especially when she had a giant spaceship in there.

“What happened to it?” he asked, pocketing his phone and joining me as I resumed a jog.

“It’s off exploring strange new worlds and fighting LEGO Klingons.”

“Cool. I hope it’s winning.”

“I took it apart,” I said.

“Aw, how come?”

“That’s what LEGOs are for. You build something, then you use the blocks to build something new. I didn’t exactly have room to leave it forever.”

I did keep a few smaller builds that didn’t make it impossible to cross my bedroom floor, but if I told him that, he might break and enter again.

“How long did it take to build?” he asked.

“Couple weeks.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“Seems a shame to take apart something so cool. What else have you built?”

“All kinds of stuff.”

Why this sudden interest in my hobbies?

“Are you stalling because you’re afraid you can’t keep up?” I asked, and increased the pace, to see if he could.

Sadly for me, he stayed at my side with no panting for breath or begging for mercy.

We crossed a bridge and entered a green park along the water with huge trees, a rose garden, a display of totem poles. Lots of people were biking and walking. None of them looked like hardened criminals, and many had kids. I doubted Tanner’s bodyguard skills would be needed. But I was slightly glad not to be alone.

We circled a few trails then turned around. According to my watch, the run here had been two miles, and I pushed the pace on the return trip. Running with Tanner regularly might help me improve, given our constant desire to beat each other.

Tanner's red face was the only indication I might have pushed him harder than he was used to. I refused to be mildly impressed.

We stopped outside the hotel to stretch, and my phone dinged as it reconnected to the Wi-Fi. I went inside, grabbed water from the fancy dispenser with sliced cucumbers, and sat on a bench.

Tanner joined me.

"Tired?" I asked.

"Tired of you doubting my athletic prowess."

I snorted and took my phone from the pocket of my running pants. Texts from Jordan waited. She wanted to know how Canada was, if I'd seen a bear yet, and how many times I'd checked Caleb's social media today.

I replied: *Canadian, thankfully no, and I'm not answering that.* Then I decided to blow her mind by telling her that I'd gone running with Tanner and I deserved a brownie because I'd burned lots of calories and because I'd refrained from tripping him into the harbor.

Her other text was a selfie of her hair, different from yesterday, this time with complicated braids. I gave her a fire emoji.

Since my phone was out, it wouldn't hurt to see if Caleb had posted today.

"Please tell me you aren't stalking that guy," Tanner said, and I quickly placed my phone screen-down on my thigh. "He

dumped you in public on the last day of school. You do not need him.”

“Thank you for the unsolicited opinion on my personal life. Would you also like to advise me on the experiences of women in STEM, my wardrobe, and my dental hygiene?”

“If you need advice, sure. Do you drink coffee? You should try whitening toothpaste.”

I glared at him.

“I’m just saying. He’s, what?” Tanner leaned over so his shoulder pressed mine and grabbed my phone to flip it over. He scoffed. “He’s playing video games the week after school let out, which is the biggest cliché ever.”

“You’d be playing video games if we weren’t here.”

“Meanwhile,” he said, “you’re in another country about to go on an adventure.”

“I don’t know if Canada counts. Even if they do have weird yogurt.”

He slapped a hand to his chest. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t insult our fine northern neighbors or their dairy foods, because that’s not the point. The point is, you’re about to have way more fun than he is.”

I supposed he was right.

A comment on Caleb’s post from a guy from newspaper said, *Let’s hang out.* Caleb’s reply: *Yeah, man. I have lots of free time.*

Because he didn’t have to spend any of it with me.

Numbness threatened to freeze my chest again.

Their consensus was to see the new superhero movie, which was something Caleb and I had planned to do. *Thanks*

for making those plans publicly, for me to see, dude. Technically, that made him the boring one this week. Except it didn't sound boring, and the idea of him at the movies without me made my lungs seize up.

"Did you take any pictures today?" Tanner's question cut into my thoughts. "At the bridge?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You should post one. Or, wait. Here."

He pulled his phone from his shorts pocket and scrolled. A second later, my phone buzzed. He'd sent me a photo of the view from the bridge. I was in the edge of the shot, in profile as I stared at the canyon stretching beneath me. It looked like I stood among the trees. Or was about to jump, which, considering I'd been with him, was a possibility.

Above the photo, in our text thread, I saw the last messages from Tanner—from the end-of-year sports banquet planning committee, when I had booked a classic bar and grill to cater tri-tip for the meal, and he'd changed it to a build-your-own tacos bar without telling me, a reminder I should be hesitant to trust him.

"I didn't realize you were in the shot when I took it," he said. "But that one's perfect. It shows you doing something new. And it's impressive."

It was a good picture.

"Can I post it?" he asked.

"I guess so."

He clicked, and my phone told me I'd been tagged in a post. He'd used hashtags like *adventure* and *travel* and *wanderlust*,

which didn't sound like me, but did sound exciting and glamorous. Likes from our classmates appeared immediately.

Huh.

"You're not embarrassed to admit you're hanging out with me?" I asked.

"Why? Are you embarrassed to be with me?"

"Not embarrassed. Maybe annoyed. Disappointed? Aggravated?"

"Thanks for the SAT list. I was just trying to help."

"Why? I mean, why help me?"

"What he did sucked. No one deserves that."

So he felt sorry for me. Wonderful. That was worse than him teasing me about it.

"Plus," he said, "it's an awesome picture. Shows I'm doing something more exciting than PlayStation. Something new."

There was that word again. That had been Caleb's comment—that I never wanted to do anything new.

Just because I preferred not to didn't mean I couldn't. It was an unfair accusation. Most people were creatures of habit. Besides, I didn't think I was boring. Sure, I liked routine. But I ran track and did pole vault, and volunteered at the Science Center, and led the Math Bowl team. Maybe it wasn't as unique as Jordan's style and her singing ability, or the guy in our class who had developed three apps, or the senior girl who was a semipro skateboarder, but I had a life and I liked it. I'd never cared before. Why did I feel this need to prove myself?

Moore the Bore. The whispers in my mind refused to go away.

I studied the picture again. The bridge and park had been

new. And I had liked it. Despite Tanner and bear jokes and a lack of suitable pre-excursion yogurt, the engineering, scenery, and fresh air had been nice. This vacation, I would literally be doing all kinds of new things.

Freshman year, Jordan had gone through a phase where she tried a different hairstyle every day for a month. She'd watched YouTube tutorials to learn and taken pictures of each one and posted polls so people could vote on their favorites.

"What?" Tanner asked.

"What?"

He waved a hand in a circle in front of me. "You have a look on your face."

"That's what faces do."

"But what are you thinking?"

"Again, why do you care?"

He shrugged.

The photo called to me. I could be fun. "I was thinking about trying new things on this trip. Like, intentionally finding stuff I've never done before."

As soon as the words were out, the idea sounded stupid. Or terrifying. Or both. And I'd said it to Tanner, which meant he'd never let it go and I couldn't take it back.

His face lit up. "Oh, yeah! That's great. There will be so many things to try."

"I can only handle one per day." Or none.

"Okay, then." He rubbed his hands together. "One new thing per day. That's excellent. You should post pictures of them. Document it."

That had worked for Jordan and her hair. It would show

Caleb that he'd been wrong about me. Hopefully our classmates, too. They couldn't keep calling me Moore the Bore if there was photographic proof of me having amazing, wanderlusting adventures. And Caleb would remember the fun times we'd had and realize he'd made a mistake. See that we could have a great senior year as planned, like our junior one.

"I'll be your photographer, if you want," Tanner said. "And I can suggest ideas."

He was watching me with his head angled, his gray eyes bright. The idea sank in, spreading through my brain. What would his suggestions be?

Was I certain that I wanted to commit to unknown activities I couldn't properly prepare for?

"You're looking at me weird again," he said. "You want to do it alone? Where's the fun in that?"

That wasn't what I'd been thinking. I'd been thinking, *Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut?*

He had a point, though. If I did this, I would need accountability.

But . . . Tanner.

He leaned forward. "We're on this cruise together, and in the same situation—let's be honest, with parents who are going to let us fend for ourselves. Let me help."

"What, be, like, my Fun Coach?"

"Exactly."

There was no getting out of it now, not without appearing weak.

It was fine. This could work. I might not have fun, exactly—it

would be too stressful for that—but if it made Caleb take me back, made people forget the nickname, and set senior year on course, I could do it.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I would get veto power, if you propose ideas I don’t like.”

“Isn’t the point to stretch yourself, S’more? If you play it too safe, it won’t work. *New* doesn’t mean running in a new city.” He waved a hand toward the door.

“I know. But I’m not doing anything illegal or that might get me in trouble or risk severe injury.”

A shadow flickered in his eyes, and his voice was flat. “That’s exactly what I was going to suggest. High diving off the cruise ship and hand-feeding a wild bear and robbing a convenience store in ski masks.”

“I’m not getting near a bear.”

“Fine,” he said, his voice light again. “Veto power. I’ll help you come up with ideas, but the final decision is yours.”

I twisted to face him, suspicion creeping in. We didn’t willingly spend time together. Certainly didn’t actively help each other. He’d been far too nice lately. It worried me.

“What do you get out of this? Besides seeing me uncomfortable, embarrassed, and out of my comfort zone? What’s in it for you?”

“The joy of your presence, S’more,” he drawled. “And what else is there to do, listen to our moms suck up to their boss all week?”

“So you’re desperate, and I’m your entertainment?”

He studied me, his eyes serious for once. He opened his

mouth. Closed it. Then his usual smirk reappeared. “Of course not. I expect repayment. You can help me with something in return. A summer project.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Help me pick a college major.”

I sniffed.

He continued to look at me.

“What? For real?”

“For real,” he said.

“Didn’t you talk to the guidance counselor about that?”

He waved a hand. “We mostly talked about football. Can you believe he’s a Niners fan? Besides, it’s hard being so talented that I have too many options.” He ignored my groan and continued. “My parents think I should have an idea of what I want to study. I need something that will make them happy. And they love you and everything you do. It’s all I ever hear about, how great Savannah is. If I tell them it was your idea, they’ll say it’s brilliant.”

A slight note of bitterness laced his words, and I knew the feeling, since my parents frequently talked about how much they loved Tanner.

“Plus,” he said, “you’re organized and into research. Isn’t this the kind of thing you love?”

“I suppose I could do that . . .”

It did sound fun. Not helping Tanner, specifically. But narrowing down fields and subjects. The brochures our guidance counselor had about finding your passion had looked interesting, but I knew I was going to study math and teach one day, so there hadn’t been much work involved. And he and I hadn’t talked about football during my appointment.

“Excellent.” Tanner rubbed his hands together. “We have a deal. I coach you in trying new things, and in exchange, you’ll figure out what I should do with my considerable talents. This is going to be fun.”

This was going to have a worse ending than the TV show *Lost*.

And possibly the same number of casualties.

“We should probably make an additional agreement to get along,” I said. “Call a two-week truce. No fighting.”

His eyes glinted. “Now you’re asking too much. No reporting me to the cruise ship cops or Alaskan dogsled police or anything?”

“If you do something worthy of being reported to the dogsled police, I make no promises.”

He snorted.

We studied each other. His features were familiar, his expressive brows and ready smile, but I tried to see him through new eyes, as an ally. I was agreeing not only to spend time with him willingly, but to let him participate in something that could end badly for me.

The clean Canadian air clearly contained mind-altering substances. The oxygen was too pure after the LA smog.

Tanner offered his hand, and I wanted to laugh wildly as I thought of Caleb. Apparently shaking hands had been ruined for me forever. This would come back and bite me when I applied for jobs one day.

What had I gotten into? Sure, this was a good idea in theory. Accomplishing the plan with Jordan might have been fun, because she’d allow me to play it safe. But Tanner wouldn’t let me

off easy. What was I going to have to do? And how mercilessly would he mock me when I got nervous or wanted to change my mind?

I reluctantly slid my hand into his. His was big and warm, completely enveloping mine. No wonder he was so good at catching footballs. He had a scar at the base of his thumb that I'd never noticed. A shiver went through me and I tried to hide it.

He squeezed and let go.

“This vacation just got more interesting.” He stood. “Race you up the stairs.” He took off.

Ignoring the sudden flood of worry and regret, I flexed my hand and followed.