



LOVE
& FRIENDSHIP
A SIGNAL BEND BYWAY

PART TWO: THE FIRST SPRING

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**by
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Love will enter cloaked in friendship's name.

~ Ovid

PART TWO

The First Spring

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“Why do we have to do this *now*? I want to play outside!” Ian shoved the flat red box away.

Cory pushed it back. “Because tomorrow is your Valentine’s party at school, and if you don’t get these signed now, it won’t be done at all. Come on, Ian. Your dad asked me to make sure you did these today.”

That was true; Lexi, who’d done her class Valentines the very day Cory and Adrienne had taken the kids out to buy them, had been nagging at Bart for a few days now about Ian and Declan’s cards, and Bart had finally pushed the job off on Cory.

Now, all the kids were done but Ian. Even Henry, who was also here at Cory’s, had gotten his finished about half an hour ago and was now in the back yard, playing with Loki and Thor.

Which was why Ian was being such a pill. Through the open screen door, he could hear Thor barking and his friends laughing.

The weather had broken, in one of the false springs that were a common phenomenon of Midwestern winters. The hard, grey, bitter cold had given way to blue skies and comparatively balmy temperatures. Nolan and his new love, Iris, were off riding. Bart was riding, too, on club business with a couple other Horde. The whole town had stirred to life after weeks being cooped up against the arctic cold.

The timer on the range dinged. “It’s the cupcakes!” Lexi called. “Can I get them out?”

“Hold on, honey.” Cory shifted Deck off her lap and set him back on the seat after she stood. “They’re hot, so let’s do it together.” Deck happily continued drawing his picture, the crayon moving vigorously over the construction paper.

Before she went to help Lexi, Cory leaned on the table at Ian's side. "All you have to do is write your name on twenty-three cards. Three letters, I-A-N. Do that, and I'll fold them up for you and get them ready for your backpack. But I won't write your name. The longer you sit here, the longer it will be before you can go outside."

"YOU ARE NOT MY MOM!" Ian yelled and shoved the Valentines off the table. He jumped up and ran outside. The wooden screen door slammed and bounced in its frame.

Deck stopped and watched the door bounce. Then he looked up at Cory. "You can be my mom if you want. I don't have one." Then he went back to his picture, which might or might not have been a green dog.

With a jolt, Cory realized that she might cry. She crossed her arms around her waist and squeezed, trying to hold herself together.

"Aunt Cory?" Lexi's voice behind her was soft and reluctant. "I think the cupcakes are going to be burned."

Cory shook herself back into shape. "Right. Let's get them out before they're fat cookies, then."

She gave Lexi two oven mitts, put one on herself, and watched as Bart's little girl pulled the cupcake tins from the oven—one batch of chocolate and one batch of yellow, both from mixes. Lexi had been disappointed that they were using cake mix. Apparently, their housekeeper in Madrone had made everything from scratch. But Cory was a big believer in food from boxes. Cooking was not her favorite thing, and baking was even lower on the list.

Yet here she was, baking cupcakes for Lexi's dance class party.

Lexi still had a fairly pronounced limp, from the injury she'd taken when Riley had been killed. Lexi—tiny, ten-year-old Lexi—had tried to save her mom and had gotten shot. Bart had told Cory that she'd been taking and loving ballet classes for years, and one of the hardest things for her had been the thought that she wouldn't be able to dance anymore.

But her father had found her a rehabilitative dance class, expressly for dancers recovering from injuries. A kind of physical therapy. It seemed to be working—Lexi's limp was better, and she was recovering well in general—from the loss of her mother, the cross-country move and the loss of the family she'd known, from everything. In the four months that Cory had known her, Lexi had blossomed from a quiet, polite, sweet girl to a friendly, interested, bossy but still sweet young lady.

She'd turned into something of a little mother to her brothers, too. Even with all the Horde women taking their turns, she'd seen a gap and was trying to fill it.

Cory was a little bit in awe of her.

“They’re burned,” Lexi sighed now, peering at the cupcakes sitting on the stovetop.

They were a bit singed around the edges, yes. But that was a common occurrence in Cory’s kitchen. “They’re not so bad. With some frosting, no one will ever know, and the frosting will soften up the burned parts so they’ll taste fine.”

Lexi gave her a skeptical squint. “Too much frosting isn’t healthy, though. Frosting is all sugar.”

“Not all sugar. It’s also milk and butter.”

That same squint moved to the two plastic containers of store-bought frosting: strawberry (with natural flavors!). “I don’t think there’s milk and butter in there.”

They had candy hearts for decoration, too. When Bart asked her to help Lexi make cupcakes, she’d bought the usual stuff, neglecting to take into consideration Bart’s daughter’s conscientious concern about healthy food.

“Trust me, Lex. They’re going to be pretty and delicious, and everybody will be happy to have them. Treats don’t have to be healthy. That’s why they’re treats.”

Lexi considered her for a second, and then nodded. “Okay. As long as they’re pretty, I guess it’ll be okay.”

“That’s what the hearts are for. Pink frosting, candy hearts, pretty paper cups with hearts all over them—they’ll be perfect. Let’s get them out of the pan so they can cool.”

While they set the cupcakes—a little too dark on the bottom, too, but she didn’t think Lexi had noticed—Cory looked out the kitchen window and saw Ian laughing with Henry and Loki. She decided not to try to talk to him about his outburst today, or to push him again to do his Valentines. She’d just pack up the cards and talk to his father instead.

~oOo~

“How’d everything go?” Bart asked as his kids ran off with Demi, the bloodhound puppy they’d gotten for Christmas, who was already growing gangly legs and crazy-long ears. He took their packs from Cory, leaving her with the Tupperware travel tray of cupcakes.

“Pretty good. But can we talk?”

He frowned. “Sure. C’mon in.”

She followed him up onto the porch and into the house. He hung the kids' packs on the rack near the door, and Cory went past him to the kitchen and set the Tupperware on the counter.

Bart came in and went to the coffeemaker. "You want a cup? Or something stronger?"

"Coffee's fine, thanks."

He poured her a cup and made it to her liking, then poured a black for himself. "What's up?"

She took the cup he offered. "Can we sit?"

"Shit, Cor. What happened?" Bart nodded at the table, and they sat.

"Nothing happened. The kids are okay. It's just... Ian didn't get his Valentines signed."

"Oh. Well, I'll just have him do it tonight then, after supper." He laughed. "That's it? Jesus, you scared the shit out of me."

Cory's resolved faltered. She wasn't sure how to say what she needed to say, and she didn't want to throw a wrench in Bart's still-rickety progress in this new life. She reached out and set her hand on his arm. The skin under her fingertips was uneven; he had a bad burn scar on the inside of his forearm.

He glanced at her touch, then frowned at her. "What?"

"I think... I think I'm spending too much time with your kids. I don't think Ian likes it."

"What? What're you talking about?" He pulled his arm away.

"I think Ian's afraid I'm trying to replace his mom."

"You're not. You couldn't."

"I know. But... I do a lot of mom things with them. I think it would be better if you did those things. He needs you. They all do."

His expression hardened and went completely still. "They have me. I'm right here."

"I know. But... what did you do today?" It was Sunday; she'd had Bart's kids since before lunch.

Now his expression was like stone, his eyes glittering like old ice. "I told you. I was working on the garage. It wasn't safe for them to be here."

“Did it have to get done today? Couldn’t you have spent the day with your kids?”

“Make your fucking point, Cory.”

He was so angry, Cory would almost swear the temperature in the room had changed. She hated upsetting him, but she was too far in to give up now. “I’ve made my point. Ian resents how much time he spends away from you, and with me in particular. Sometimes, he’s outright hostile. Today, he shouted at me that I’m not his mom, and it’s not the first time.”

“You’re *not* his mom. Maybe you shouldn’t try to act like you are.”

Now she was angry, too. “What am I supposed to do? I fix their meals, I help them with their homework, I baked those cupcakes with Lexi today so she has them for her dance party. I clean up Deck when he has an accident. I fix his boobooos. I’m constantly trying not to get too close, not to cross a line, with them or with you. But they’re with me more than with the other old ladies. Fuck, they’re with me more than they’re with you! They need at least *one* parent!”

She cut herself off, shocked that she’d said that much, gone that far. Now, Bart looked like he wanted to hurt her.

“Bart, shit. I shouldn’t—I didn’t mean—”

“Get the fuck out of my house.” His voice was nearly too low to be heard.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Get out. Get the *fuck* out.”

Ashamed of herself for her lack of control, and still angry at him, Cory nodded and stood.

She left without saying goodbye to Bart’s kids.

5

On a sunny but chilly day in March, while his kids were at school, Bart spent the morning finishing the roof on his barn. He'd promised the kids they could have goats and chickens when the warm weather came to stay, and that wasn't far off now. Len, who sat on the board of the Humane Society, had arranged for him to adopt some goats from a petting zoo that had been closed down, and he was going to get the kids a little flock of chicks they could raise, as soon as they were hatched. That would be another few weeks, but the winter had been cold, and he wasn't as far along on his home improvement projects as he'd like.

It wasn't just the cold winter holding him back. He had trouble getting motivated to do much of anything. He knew why, and he kept expecting to feel at least a little better, but he never did. Riley had been dead eight months, and he couldn't get around the loss of her. There was no 'new normal.' There was no new anything.

When his kids were gone, at school or with their friends or family, wherever, he missed them like crazy. He felt raw and desolate. But when they were with him, that was when he missed Riley most, when he could see her loss and feel it most keenly. The empty chair at the table when they ate. The vacant seat on the sofa when they watched television.

The family they'd made together was running on a flat tire now, and it was pulling them off track.

He finished nailing down the last row of shingles and made his way down the ladder. At least he'd get this project done. The shed he wanted to turn into a playhouse was still a ramshackle shed, and he hadn't gotten any farther on the garage than patching the leaks in the roof, but the barn was almost ready for goats and chickens. Maybe horses, too, if Lexi's leg kept getting stronger.

He checked his phone—just past noon. He had time to finish the coop, too. The frame was up, but he needed to close it all in with chicken wire. There was no big rush, but as long as he had a decent day and was actually working, he figured he should capitalize on the momentum.

Maybe he'd stop in at Marie's for lunch.

He packed up his tools and went into the house for his keys to the Tahoe. He called Demi in to follow and closed her up before he left. She whined pitifully as he latched the door to her crate.

As he headed across his yard to the truck, a plume of white dust and the rumble of gravel told him somebody was about to crest his hill. Yep—Isaac. Bart shoved his keys into his pocket and waited for his old friend to pull up.

“Bartholomew.” Isaac dismounted his Fat Bob. Bart thought he was looking pretty stiff today. He’d been off his bike through the cold weather and hadn’t gotten his riding legs in shape yet. And Isaac’s much-abused body was getting old, too. Bart wondered how many more years the big man had on the saddle.

“Hey, man. What’s up?”

“You said you might work on the barn. Thought I’d see if you needed a hand.”

“Nope. Done for the day. Just going into town for some chicken wire to finish off the coop.”

“Want help with that?”

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, man.” Getting help from a brother wasn’t unusual at all. Getting a random assist like this, no plan, no talk ahead of time—that was more out of the norm. Bart tilted his head and tried to figure out Isaac’s ulterior motive. Finally, he just asked. “Why’re you here, bro? Really.”

Isaac grinned. “I thought we could talk while we worked. Got a proposition for ya.”

Bart’s back went up. He was fucking tired of being everybody’s project. “Is this a work thing?”

“Sure is.”

“I don’t need to work.” Over a career spanning decades, Riley had made millions as an actress, and Bart’s work had earned well, too. While they’d lived a very comfortable life, even by Southern California standards, they hadn’t been lavish. By Hollywood standards, they’d been practically ascetic. As a member of the Horde, he was still earning. Neither he nor his kids would ever have to hold a job, if they continued to live comfortably and not lavishly.

“I know, brother. But you’re needed.” Isaac set a mammoth hand on Bart’s shoulder.

Bart shrugged it off. “How? Signal Bend is humming like I’ve never seen it before.”

“That’s how. We’re doing so well that it’s making problems. The problem we were thinking you could fix is at SBC.”

Signal Bend Construction, the main business owned by the Horde. Showdown was in charge of that business. Isaac, as far as Bart knew, worked as a crew foreman. “We?”

The extra beat before Isaac's answer primed Bart for the proof that he was a project.
"Show talked to Badge and me. We thought it be a good fit."

He knew without asking that they'd sent Isaac because they knew Bart looked up to the former Horde president. Isaac wasn't old enough to be his father, but what Bart felt for him was close to that and always had been. It felt like dirty pool to exploit that feeling here. But rather than pitch the fit he felt brewing about his brothers having big meetings about him behind his back, he addressed the issue immediately between them.

"I've never worked construction. All I am is handy."

"In construction, maybe, but not with engines. You're a wizard with engines. You worked at Keyes Implement for years, and you were a mechanic in SoCal, too, right?" Without waiting for Bart's nod, Isaac continued, "Since Keyes retired and closed up, we've been trying to do the equipment maintenance and repairs ourselves, but we have to outsource the big jobs, and it's costing us trouble with the schedule. We were thinkin' the club could buy Keyes and reopen it, and you could run it. Hire on a staff, the whole nine."

"No." The thought of running a business made Bart tired. He was having enough trouble running a family.

Isaac obviously had expected him to at least consider the idea. "Can we sit down and talk about it?"

"No. I'm not interested. Look, I've got errands to run. I'll catch you at the clubhouse tomorrow."

Isaac stared at him long enough to piss him off. "You okay? Talk to me, Bartholomew."

Isaac was the only one who'd ever called him by the name on his birth certificate. Usually, Bart felt it like an honor, an extra connection between them. But right now, the way he was feeling, it just pissed him off more.

And what a stupid fucking question, anyway. No, he was not okay. Anybody with one eye and half a brain could see and know he was not okay. He didn't know how to raise his kids without Riley. He didn't know how to make a life without her. Fuck, he could barely remember how to *breathe* without her.

"I'm fine. I gotta go." Without waiting for Isaac to mount his bike, Bart climbed into his truck and pulled away.

~oOo~

No longer in the mood for Marie's, Bart intended to head straight to the hardware store for his supplies and get back home as fast as he could. He wasn't in the mood to finish the chicken coop, either, but he'd needed the excuse to escape Isaac's presence.

As he approached Marie's and made his final decision not to bother with lunch, his peripheral vision caught the lot across the street—St. John's Methodist Church. Normally, on a Thursday at this time, the lot was empty, but there was an SUV parked in it now. As he drove past, he recognized it as Cory's.

For the past few weeks, he'd barely spoken to her. Lexi had asked the other day if they could take Demi over to play with Thor, and he'd made up an excuse, but it wasn't going to wash for much longer. The kids loved her, and Loki, and Thor, and they were starting to miss them. They were full up with missing already. Even Ian was missing her.

Cory was right, though; Ian had been feeling like Cory was moving in where his mom belonged. But after talking with him, Bart understood that Ian was mad not because of what Cory was doing but because of how he was feeling. He wasn't missing his mom as much, and it scared him.

That scared Bart too.

He wasn't angry at Cory anymore. He'd been furious, so much that he'd felt ill, during that last conversation and for a good while after it, but lately, he felt more embarrassed than anything. He'd gotten so mad because she was right. He was foisting his kids off on other people. He was *still* doing it, just not with Cory. Because he didn't know how to be what they needed.

The whole point of moving back to Signal Bend was to give his kids a better, safer life. He could see them adjusting, settling in, healing. He wanted to be able to do that, too. But he couldn't. Every day, he felt like half of what they needed. He didn't know how to fill the space where Riley belonged.

He didn't *want* to fill the empty space. It was Riley's space.

It actually hurt him to see their children healing, moving on, finding their new normal, learning to be happy and full without her.

But he'd been a shit to Cory, leaning on her, taking advantage of her kindness, and then snarling at her when she'd called him on it.

Her SUV was still parked in the St. John's lot when Bart was on his way back from the hardware store. Without thinking much about it, he turned in and parked beside it.

As he did, he saw where she was. Their trucks were parked on the side of the lot, facing the graveyard. She was sitting before a headstone at the far end, under the big tree, in the Horde area.

Jesus. She was sitting at Havoc's grave.

For a moment, he simply watched her. She was wearing the thickly knitted cable sweater that she wore often. The breeze blew her dark hair, and she caught it and tucked it behind her ears again and again, finally catching it all in one hand and holding it at her shoulder. The afternoon air was picking up a chill. But she showed no signs of leaving.

He had no business being here. Bart reached for his keys in the ignition, but stopped before he turned the engine.

Maybe he did have business here. Havoc was the thing they shared, and they'd spoken often about him. Cory seemed to crave stories about the man they both still loved. And Bart felt a clear calm when she listened to stories about Riley. Telling her to someone who'd never known her felt like conjuring her back to life.

He could apologize for being a hapless shit because she would understand. Her life had broken, too, when she'd lost her love.

Not sure that he belonged, but sure he needed to be there, Bart got out of his truck and headed across the still-hibernating lawn of the cemetery toward his best friend's widow.

She saw him approach, and she stood, taking a wary step back as he came up. "Hi?"

"Hey, Cor. I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Are you? It's not exactly an accident, walking across a graveyard to get here."

She was still angry at him, obviously.

"I'm sorry. I was shitty to you. I got defensive, and...I'm sorry."

"Okay." She crossed her arms. After a moment of awkward quiet, she asked, "How are you?"

The question wasn't funny, but it made him laugh. "I suck. I can't pull my head out of my ass. You called it, that day. I guess that's why I was so pissed off. You pushed the exact right button. I'm letting my kids down, letting other people do what I can't. I can't figure out what I need to be for them. I can't give them what they need, because what they need is their mother, and my life got her killed. I don't know how to fill the hole I made. I don't know how to be their dad. I don't even know how to be *me* anymore. Not without her."

Cory turned from him and looked down at Havoc's headstone. Bart followed her and studied his friend's marker himself. *Beloved Brother, Husband, Father, Son.*

Riley was buried in California. He'd left her behind when he'd moved away. He'd told himself that he hadn't left her, that her spirit had joined them in Missouri, that she was in their kids, in their things, in the family they'd made together, but right now, standing at Havoc's headstone while his widow gazed down on it, Bart felt like he'd abandoned his wife.

He had to get away. "I'll—I *am* sorry I interrupted you. I'll call you later."

"Today's our anniversary," was her response.

In the act of turning toward the parking lot, Bart stopped and turned back. "I didn't know that. I really am sorry I'm here."

She didn't look away from the headstone, but she said, "We got married at the courthouse. I was pregnant with Loki. On the way home, he took me to our house for the first time. It was a total surprise. Nolan was in on it—the whole club was in on it—but I had no idea. He pulled into the driveway and told me I was home. It took me forever to understand what he meant. I'd never had a home of my own before. I'd spent most of my life, and Nolan's, on the edge of homelessness, keeping a roof over our heads by leaning on friends. And for a wedding gift, Havoc gave me a home of my very own."

Bart smiled. That, in one story, was Havoc. "That sounds like him, yeah."

Cory turned to him. Her eyes were dry, but her whole aspect was sad. "He was dead before we could celebrate even one anniversary. I've spent every one of them sitting here. Today would have been our eleventh. He's been dead more than ten years, and I still live half a life. I don't want anything to fill the hole but what I can't have. And he was only in my life for a little more than a year. I can't imagine what it's like for you. How long were you together?"

"Almost thirteen years. It's not a competition, Cor."

"That's not what I mean. I just mean...don't be so hard on yourself. You'll figure out how to live a good enough life. People live with one kidney, one lung, half a liver. It turns out you can live with half a heart, too. And live okay—be happy again, find joy. It'll happen—for your kids and for you. Until then, just do your best to get through. I wasn't fair to you, either. You're there for your kids. They know you love them."

She was being kind. He knew he needed to be more than he was for them. "I need to do better."

"And you will. You love them, so you'll figure it out." She sat down on the cold ground again. "I'd like to be alone with him today, if that's okay."

“Yeah, of course. Cory...”

She turned her face up and met his eyes. She was a beautiful woman, retaining her youthful looks well into her forties, despite her sadness.

“Thank you. And I’m sorry.”

She smiled. “Me too. If you need anything, call. I miss the kids.”

“I will.”

Feeling like he should have done or said more, Bart left her and went back to his truck. He decided he’d call Lilli and tell her he’d pick up the kids today. Maybe take them for pizza or something.

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Deck held his basket up over his head. “I HAVE SEVEN EGGS! IT’S THE MOST!”

Cory laughed. “It’s a lot, little man. Maybe we should help little John find some eggs for a while. He only has two.”

“Okay!” Deck went over to John, who was not quite two yet, and took one of his eggs out of his own basket and put it in John’s. “Come on, John!” Then he took the toddler’s hand and nearly dragged him off his feet toward Lilli’s vegetable garden.

Cory followed after them, making sure that Deck, in his wild enthusiasm, didn’t mow poor little John over.

Behind her, Nolan and Iris held each other, talking intimately. Cory could see her firstborn falling hard and fast for Show’s daughter. She was happy for them both, especially for Nolan, whose spirits had lightened markedly since he’d gotten serious with Iris. But she was worried, too. He’d be furious if she said it to him outright, and he’d deny it emphatically, but Cory knew that her boy’s heart and spirit had been damaged to the point of fragility. She didn’t think there were many more losses he could take in his life.

But Iris was steady. She was a sweet girl, and she seemed uncomplicated. Nolan had told Cory that she had no greater aspirations for her life than to live in Signal Bend and keep her little job on Main Street. Nolan, on the other hand, was a wanderer and always had been. Cory had been a seeker, too, and she’d done a shit job of giving Nolan stability. She hadn’t found roots until Havoc had given them to her.

Maybe that was what Nolan needed, too—somebody to give him roots.

Maybe Iris Ryan was that somebody.

While Deck found a green plastic egg and put it in John’s basket with a cheer, Cory turned back to her son. He stood under the big cherry tree, wrapped up tightly with Iris, holding her off the ground. He kissed her, and it was full of love and passion. A joyful, unreserved, beautiful kiss.

Watching them, Cory smiled, but her heart ached. It ached for Nolan, because she wanted him to have that wild, ecstatic love, to have it and keep it and never know the loss of it. And it ached for herself, because she’d had it once, for far too brief a moment in her life, and would never have it again.

“Little John has a smelly butt!” Declan yelled, breaking Cory’s wistful reverie. “PEE-YOO!” Deck pushed the toddler away, not meaning any harm, but John fell onto his bottom and began to wail.

Deck, instantly guilty, dropped his basket of eggs and put his hands over his mouth.

“I got him, I got him.” Adrienne, pregnant with her and Badger’s fifth, hurried over and picked up their fourth. “Oh, you’re okay. Come on, doodle. Let’s get you changed.”

Cory went to Deck, who was crying now, too.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he bawled.

“I know, honey. You didn’t hurt him. You need to remember to be more careful with little ones, though, right?”

Still crying, but more quietly now, he nodded. “Yeah, like with Demi.” Their puppy was running all around the Lundens’ yard, practicing her baying and having the time of her life. Cory thought that when that pup got bigger, she’d withstand Deck’s rough kind of affection just fine.

“Right. Like with Demi. You have to show your love gently.”

Deck sniffled and threw his arms around Cory’s neck. “Like this.” He turned his head and planted a sloppy kiss on her cheek. “I love you, Aunt Cory.”

The tendrils of that bittersweet ache still squeezed her heart, and Cory’s eyes filled as she hugged him back. “I love you, too, buddy. And this is exactly how you show it.”