

# Counting STARS

The chance to go home and hide in his crappy little apartment in South End passed by at a sedate fifty-five miles an hour. Marc watched the exit sign recede, his neck cracking as he turned. Two nights slumped across a lobby chair in the corner of a nameless motel on the outskirts of Albany had left a permanent kink in his spine. Facing forward again, he swallowed against the panic rising up from his gut.

Why had he said he'd go home with Henry?

As though hearing the thought, Henry glanced back at him. Wintry sunlight strobed across his face, picking out ruddy cheeks, gray eyes and the slight smile that almost—no, *always* plucked at something inside Marc. It was Henry's mouth. He had the sexiest damn mouth Marc had ever encountered. He couldn't exactly say why; whether it was the fullness of his lips or the angle of his smile. Maybe it was the fact his smiles were rare and each felt like a gift.

"Having second thoughts?" Henry asked.

"No." The denial was instinctive. Marcus Winnamore never had second thoughts. He picked a direction and followed it until the end.

"I can turn around. It's no problem," Henry's father said.

It'd been no problem to drive over a hundred miles along barely cleared highway to deliver his only son from the gates of frozen hell, either. Who did that? Heinrich Aутtenberg Senior, obviously. Marc had no doubt Heinrich "I prefer Henry" Junior would have done the very same thing.

"I'm fine, really." Home might mean a long, hot shower and being horizontal for a while, but it also meant the small stack of unopened Christmas cards, a frozen turkey dinner and the absence of Henry. Which shouldn't be a big deal. Wasn't as if they were suddenly inseparable. The thing in the car might have been just that. A thing. They'd been facing frozen death, after all.

Henry wasn't one for empty gestures, though. For him, this invitation was personal.

For Marc—

“I’ll drop you home later, hmm?” Auttenberg Senior said, nodding to indicate Marc should probably just agree with him.

“Thank you.”

“Dinner will be worth the detour. Lissa is making everything fresh today. No Christmas leftovers for the weary travelers.”

“Mom made two Christmas dinners?” Henry asked.

Auttenberg Senior shrugged one shoulder. “I helped. I made my cranberry relish and two pies.”

“Two pies?”

“I couldn’t decide on just one.”

It was a very un-Auttenberg comment. The two men occupying the front of the car were definitely related, however, and it was nice to know there was a relaxed version of Henry in the world—even if Marc would never be able to deny the fact he liked poking little ripples into the still pond of Henry’s calm.

“I’m looking forward to a proper meal,” Marc said. His stomach would be unknotted by dinner time if he had to reach in there and align everything himself.

Twenty minutes later, they wove through the icy tunnels of suburbia under siege. With the snow stacked high in front of every house, the neighborhood was a maze. No doubt a proper architectural term existed for the squat and square houses that spread across Dorchester like a rash. Each had a square porch set against a cube of house with corners and angles and square windows. The color varied slightly from house to house, though often it was down to the age of the paint. Come home on a dark night, and it would’ve been difficult to tell one from the other.

Auttenberg Senior picked a driveway seemingly at random. As he climbed out of the car, stepping into a narrow drive carved between thick banks of snow, Marc thought he might have been able to tell the Auttenberg house from the rest of the pack. The decorations were as bright and garish as those dripping from every eave in the street, but there was something neat about the place. Orderly. In an odd way, it felt like Henry. Staid. Solid. Reliable. Welcoming. Warm.

Henry was wrestling Marc’s suitcase out of the trunk.

“Why not just leave it there? I don’t need anything inside.”

“Mom will have everything washed and folded by the time we’re done with dinner.”

“She doesn’t have to—”

“Of course she doesn’t. She’ll want to. It’s how she is. When I moved out, she used to call me and ask if I had any clean underwear.”

“Seriously?”

“Mmm-hmm. Trust me, if we don’t take your case in, she’ll ask where it is and come get it. And it’s slippery out here.”

Henry worrying about his mother slipping on the driveway during her quest to wash a colleague’s underwear shouldn’t be cute. But it was. Marc helped pull both cases out of the car and followed Henry to the porch. The door flung open, holiday scents spilling outward in a warm and cheery haze, and a woman who was hopefully Lissa Autzenberg attached herself to Henry like a multi-limbed parasite. Except in a much more loving and lovely way.

Thankfully, she didn’t inflict the same damage on Marc. She took his offered hand and squeezed instead. “I’m so happy you could join us! Henry never brings friends home.”

Marc shot Henry a *look*. Henry responded with the same one-shouldered shrug his father used in the car.

“I appreciate the invitation, ma’am.”

“Call me Lissa, please.” She let go his hand and leaned out sideways. “Heinrich, did you remember the cider?”

Henry’s father groaned. “No, sorry. I’ll go back out.”

Because six hours on barely cleared roads wasn’t enough for one day?

Lissa flapped a hand. “Don’t worry about it. Was just a thought. Come on, let’s get inside. It’s freezing out here.”

The warmth of the Autzenberg house was dizzying. Bright yellow lamps, colorful strings of tinsel, cards propped against every surface, a Christmas tree in full swag, the scent of turkey and dressing, cinnamon, the crackle of a fire behind a grate and the quiet murmur of caroling. And this was all in the first room.

Lissa was trying to pull his coat from his shoulders while Autzenberg Senior tugged at the suitcase in his hand. Somehow they were doing the same to Henry, at the same time. Henry handled the whole process with much more grace, meaning he submitted. Consciously relaxing his shoulders, Marc shrugged out of his coat and let the case be taken from his fingers.

“I’m sure you two would like a shower and there’s plenty of time for a nap. You poor dears. Two days in a chair, not to mention the car and the storm.” Lissa pressed a hand to her heart.

“The snowplow driver who saved you is a hero! I hope she’s commended by her department, or whoever sends out the plows! It’s such a shame she couldn’t join us today. She was just lovely on the phone. She can rest assured we’ll be remembering her every year. I wonder if she’d like a picture of you two in front of the tree?”

What?

“I think the phone call was fine, Mom,” Henry said.

The ride down from Albany had been accomplished in an almost comfortable bubble of quiet. Despite his effusiveness over the phone, in person Autzenberg Senior was as reserved as Henry. After a minute in Lissa Autzenberg’s company, Marc was beginning to understand why the men were so quiet. They’d probably given up trying to get a word in twenty-odd years ago.

A smiling Lissa directed them toward the staircase. “Well, I’ve laid out some of Henry’s old clothes for both of you.”

“Thanks.” Tipping his head toward the stairs in a “follow me” gesture, Henry led the way.

Marc followed. After turning the first corner, he leaned in to whisper, “Is she always like that?”

“Like what?”

Grunting, Marc continued to follow Henry up the stairs, instinctively ducking his head as the small house closed in around him. Henry abandoned him in a short, dark hallway, disappearing into an equally dark room. He reappeared a moment later with a short stack of clothing in his hands and raised it toward another door. “Want to go first?”

The weirdness returned, along with the feeling he’d missed his exit. He was in a strange house, and though surrounded by people, Marc suddenly felt... alone. These weren’t his people. The clothes folded over Henry’s arms weren’t his clothes.

Why exactly was he here?

Was he really gay?

Curling his fingers around Henry’s biceps, Marc leaned in, nosing Henry’s almost smooth cheek. In contrast, he had three days’ growth and it itched. He inhaled Henry’s scent—those same three days plus the now familiar presence of someone he’d been intimate with—and hummed softly. It was still there, the insistent itch of attraction. Whether it made him gay or not, he still wanted Henry.

“Showering together might be more efficient,” he murmured.

Henry turned his cheek, lining up their mouths, and spoke against his lips. “Not in my parents’ house.”

“They sent us upstairs together.”

“Assuming we were adults.”

“Which is why they shouldn’t be surprised—”

Henry silenced him with a kiss, his lips latching softly onto Marc’s before questing for more. His tongue broke barriers, aggressively deepening the connection. Groaning, Marc stepped closer, bringing their bodies together, reaching for more of Henry with his other hand. The sound of their kisses echoed quietly in the enclosed space. Quick breaths, the moist drag of lips and tongues. Groans that sounded like bruises. Grabbing the back of Henry’s hip, Marc stepped away, pulling Henry toward the bathroom.

This, exactly, was why he was here.

He needed more Henry. He wanted more Henry. A fantasy unfurled quickly in his head—Henry up against a wall. No, Henry in the shower, completely naked, skin shining beneath a cascade of water. His cock jutting out, thick and fully hard. Buttocks flexing. Fingers roaming. The wonderful inevitability of that moment before climax. Sweet surrender.

Henry followed him into the light... and stopped. Then he leaned back, grinning, and stepped back into the hall. The door swung shut between them.

“Don’t use all the hot water.” Henry’s voice was muffled by wood and several layers of paint, but Marc could hear the laughter beneath his words.

Henry had managed him. *Managed* him. Marcus Winnamore. Worst part? Marc stood there, staring at the back of the door with a stupid grin on his face.



Marc denied him a kiss after the shower. Dark brown eyes twinkling with humor and challenge, he lifted his chin as Henry leaned in. “Your turn.”

God, Marc smelled good. Warm and steamy. Sexy. Had he jerked off in the shower? If he had, he’d been quick. Not that self-love ever took too long in Henry’s experience—which would be why the solitary act so often left him unsatisfied.

Determined not to lose ground, Henry blocked the doorway as Marc tried to pass. Grinning, Marc pressed close. “Water pressure is great. Felt like fingers on my back, down my spine. Little

sensitive on the front parts, though.” Front parts? “Had to shield my dick with my hand if you know what I mean.” His tongue flicked out, catching the shell of Henry’s ear. “Could have been your hand. Front, back...”

A groan escaped Henry.

Marc cackled.

“Please tell me you didn’t jerk off in my parents’ shower.”

“I didn’t jerk off in your parents’ shower.”

After pressing a light kiss to his cheek, Marc slithered past, into the hallway, and shut the door against Henry’s back. Served him right, really. If anyone would be into games, adept at upping the stakes, it would be Marc.

Henry quickly shed his clothes, wincing at the odor of nearly three days on the road. The stink had been more attractive on Marc, for sure. Then he stepped under the shower and indulged in five minutes of nothing. Of standing. Of appreciating superior water pressure. Of being home and on the way to being fed. Of the fact a man he’d lusted after forever stood in the hall outside, dressed in an old pair of his BU sweatpants and a flannel shirt that should have been sorted into the donation bag five years ago.

And that the want between them remained intense. Whatever they’d shared on the side of the road in upstate New York hadn’t been left beneath four feet of snow. It had traveled south with them, followed them up the stairs and nearly tempted him to have sex in his parents’ house.

“Marcus Winnamore is in my parents’ house.”

The thought tugged him toward the swirl of water around the shower drain. What the heck was he doing inviting someone like Marc to his parents’ house? And why had Marc accepted the invitation? Surely he’d rather be elsewhere... anywhere.

More likely, he was reacting. That was what people like Marc did. They bent with the winds of change, only thinking about it after the storm had passed. When he did get home, would Marc regret having spent time with Henry and his family?

Would he deem his experiment over?

Henry’s thoughts stopped swirling. Paused. Rolled back over the past few days to the backseat of the rental car. To the intensity of Marc’s kisses and the sound he made when he came. His enthusiasm while returning the favor—the feel of his hand on Henry’s dick. Sure and definite. Not hesitant, not experimental.

Henry reached for the soap, thinking about jerking off in the shower, but confined himself to some seductive touches without imagining his hands were in fact Marc's hands and that...

He jerked off in the shower, cheeks flaming with arousal and guilt.

The quick tug left him warm and satisfied, though. His skin tingled and his mouth wouldn't stop quirking into a smile—until he wondered what Marc might be doing at that very moment and further imagined him downstairs chatting with his mother and father, sharing the full story of what they'd gotten up to in that rental car in upstate New York.

Cold air stung his hot skin as he flung the shower curtain aside. The sweatpants clung to his still damp calves. Henry tugged them so hard, the waist cord retreated into its hole. Dammit! He put the shirt on inside out and fell into the door trying to wrestle a pair of his father's thick woolen socks over his feet. The smell of Christmas hit him again in the hall, wrapping around him with a comforting snug. Then he noticed the door to his old bedroom stood ajar.

Oh no.

Marc was in there. Thankfully, he wasn't sitting on the bed with the contents of Henry's nightstand strewn across the quilt. Marc *was* on the bed. He lay on his back, head pillowed by folded arms, eyes closed, face slack with sleep.

It was weird seeing someone he'd been intimate with on his old bed, the one that somehow remained pure and innocent, despite some youthful fumbling. Kissing, mostly. A couple of touches. He hadn't actually gotten naked with a guy until college.

Again, he was struck by the fact Marc was here, in his parents' house. In one sense, he wanted to chide himself for being so affected by it, by the sight of Marc asleep on his old bed. He also wanted to cherish the feeling as precious. This was someone he could see himself caring about in a true and deep way. A man he'd looked up to and had tried to emulate. Not all of his fantasies about Marc had included sex.

He stood there a moment longer, pulling at the cuffs of his long sleeve T-shirt. If he wanted a nap, he could use his sister's old room. Or the couch downstairs. But... Marc was on his bed. *His* bed. And he'd left a space to his left, as though expecting Henry to join him. He looked warm and cozy. And...

Borrowing a little of Marc's forward momentum, Henry picked up the quilt folded at the end of his bed and drew in a deep breath that ended in a jaw-cracking yawn. Then he laid down beside Marc, spreading the quilt over the both of them, and closed his eyes. The room spun

crazily in the crackling dark behind his lids. God, he was tired. He could smell Marc again, warm and clean. The familiar scent of his mother's laundry detergent rose between them. Christmas wafted through the door he'd forgotten to close properly. Happily, muzzily, Henry curled his toes, smiled and gave into the deep tug of sleep.



Marc swam toward the surface of consciousness slowly. He felt as though he'd been asleep for a month, but his internal clock indicated only a couple of hours had passed. That and the late afternoon light filtering through his closed lids. He was warm and cozy and... someone was breathing next to him.

He opened his eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling. Dingy white and cluttered with the faint, off-yellow outlines of glow-in-the-dark stars. Remembering where he was, Marc smiled. Of course Henry had stars on his ceiling. He probably made wishes on them. Which was kinda sweet, actually.

Sweet not being Marc's thing, he slithered toward the edge of the bed, taking care not to disturb the quilt that had mysteriously been tucked around him, and sat up. He scrubbed sleep from his eyes and made an attempt to smooth his hair. He'd fallen asleep with it wet and could feel the damage at the back of his head. He turned around to look at Henry and that stupid smile caught him again—because damn if Henry didn't look *sweet* all snuggled under his colorful quilt. He had that wholesome and entirely too sexy combo going, and that shouldn't be his thing.

Except, apparently it was.

Tearing his gaze away, Marc checked out the room. He'd meant to poke around before falling sleep, but the bed had been wide and flat and just *there*. Three days without a bed had started making a free patch of floor look good. The happy clutter of adolescence filled every corner of Henry's bedroom. Books, posters, a chair piled high with teddy bears—and if Henry hadn't thought to hide that pink unicorn before collapsing into a nap, all the better for Marc. Grinning, he crossed the room and picked it up. Damn it was soft. Of course, he was hugging the damn thing when Henry woke up.

“Soft, isn't it?”

“And pink. Very, very pink.”

Henry shrugged away the quilt and stretched his arms over his head, yawning and blinking. When he looked human again, he said, “And soft.”

“You should put it on your desk at Beck and Meyer. See if a senior partner is suckered into picking it up.”

Chuckling, Henry sat up and rubbed the back of his head, wincing as he discovered the inevitable mess. “Ugh. I should have dried my hair before lying down.”

“No kidding.”

“Not all of us can look perfect all the time.”

Snorting softly, Marc tossed the unicorn back toward the chair and zeroed in on Henry’s desk. He picked up one of the three framed pictures. It was Henry at his graduation from BU; capped, gowned and pressed in on both sides by the wide smiles of his mother and a younger version of Lissa, who must be Henry’s sister. Auttenberg Senior stood just behind Lissa and another man stood behind the sister, holding a toddler in his arms.

Swallowing an annoying and somewhat prickly lump, Marc turned. Henry was standing right behind him. Marc held up the frame. “This is a great photo. I’m surprised you didn’t pack it for your apartment.”

“I do have it there. A larger version. Housewarming gift from Mom, along with six casseroles for my freezer, a set of matching towels and ten packs of underwear.”

Marc laughed. He set the picture down and picked up another of Henry and the younger woman from the first photo. “Is this your sister?”

“Yep. Mel.” Henry’s smile widened. “Short for Melissa, which is my mother’s name.”

“Your parents named both of you after themselves?”

“Pity in the form of cash would be most beneficial.”

Scoffing, Marc set the picture back down to pick up the third and final frame. “This is Mel’s wedding?”

“Yeah and I have a larger version of that at my place too. Along with yearly portraits of her kids in frames with multiple little windows I can fill every year when she sends me the new photos.”

“So, basically you never left home.”

“Nope.”

A tingling burn spread across his chest. Swallowing, Marc set the last photo down and ran a finger along the jumbled book spines. He recognized the tight warmth as jealousy, which he hadn't felt for a while. Which he shouldn't feel here in a tiny house in Dorchester. His bedroom had been four times the size of Henry's. His bed larger. The wallpaper had never been old enough to peel from the corners the way it did in this house, and if he'd looked out his window, he'd only have seen their neighbors through a screen of trees. Here, the house next door stood so close, they could hear the neighbors' toilet flushing.

His room had never been this personal, though; nor had it ever been as full of tokens. Reminders that he was part of a family. Loved. Cherished. The first time Marc had visited his parents from college, it had been to discover his bedroom had been packed away, the few boxes of his childhood neatly labeled and stacked in the attic.

Henry was folding the quilt, which looked as though a fabric shop had thrown up on it. His grandmother had probably made it. Or an aunt. Someone who knew Henry should be surrounded by bright color and familial warmth.

Suddenly irritated, Marc nodded toward the door. "Think we could get a snack?"

"Sure." Henry caught him by the arm just before he got there. "Hold up."

"What?" He hadn't meant to snap, but he had. Marc pressed his lips together and looked pointedly toward the door.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah." He softened his tone. "Just hungry."

Henry inspected his face a moment, expression pensive, then nodded. "All right."

"Do I have your permission to go downstairs?" Marc tried for light tone and probably failed.

"Not if you're going to be rude to my parents."

Yep, failed. "Listen, Auttonberg—"

"Henry."

There it was, the fire of intractability that made Henry so desirable, and now Marc knew where it came from. Henry might be somewhat reserved, but he was solid. Implacable. He had *this* behind him—a room full of cherished memories and a family who supported his choices. His very self.

He had substance.

Marc was supposed to be the one with substance. Instead he stood there questioning everything, and questions made him moody—particularly when he hadn't had time to figure out all the answers.

He looked at Henry, looked for answers. Just one would do. Henry's gorgeous mouth curved into a small smile. Breathing out, Marc leaned in and kissed him—not tentatively, not asking for permission. He claimed Henry's lips as though they already belonged to him, backing Henry into the closed door before reaching up to frame his face, grip one shoulder and lean in harder, more intently. Henry met his kiss with equal force, his tongue again the aggressor. He grabbed the back of Marc's hips and pulled him closer. Groaning, Marc deepened the kiss, surprised he could, that they still had somewhere to go. Desire licked across his skin, burning a path to his groin. His fingertips and toes tingled. Henry tasted of toothpaste and sleep. He smelled of soap and this house. Of Christmas and good things. And he was so very male—his skin soft, but not quite pliable, his lips a little rough. Stubble tickled the tips of Marc's fingers and the body against his was hard. Strong.

Marc reached down, trailing his fingers over the fabric of Henry's long sleeve T, until he got to the waist band of his sweats. He wanted to feel Henry's other hardness. Meet it with his own. Henry gasped into his mouth. Moaned. Rocked into him. Clutched at his hip. Then he was pushing Marc away—the parting of their lips almost painful, the loss of heat between them awful.

Between heavy breaths, Henry said, “We can't.” But he wanted to. Marc could see the want and need in every fiber of Henry's being. Closing his eyes, Henry tipped his head back toward the door and breathed again. Panted, really.

Marc stepped away. Much as he'd like to push, tease and... push, he also wanted to respect Henry's wishes. Respect his family and home. It was a small thing, really, but as he sought to calm the southward flow of blood, he acknowledged that doing this for Henry, backing off, felt right. He liked the fact Henry could make a demand of him. It was new and different, something he hadn't known he needed, and a sure sign he'd met his match.

Heavy footsteps on creaking stairs gave them plenty of warning before the knock at the door. “You two awake in there?” Auttenberg Senior. “Mel is here and Lissa is getting ready to serve dinner.”

“We'll be right down, Dad.” Henry stepped away from the door, tugging at his sweats.

He was still half hard. So was Marc. He met Henry's soft smile with a wink and grinned as color flushed Henry's cheeks. Leaning in, he brushed his lips to heated skin and whispered, "Count something, Auttenberg."

Silence, then breath tickled his ear. "Counting our kisses was totally the wrong choice, just so you know."

Marc's heart simultaneously jerked and held. Sweet shouldn't be his thing! Except, in Henry's case, it totally was.



Downstairs the house rang with noise and color. Mel and family had arrived and Henry's nephew was shaking the small pile of gifts stacked next to the tree, trying to guess what was inside. His niece burbled quietly from one of those car seats that looked secure enough to withstand atmospheric reentry.

Mel wrapped him up in a hug. "I'm so glad you're okay!"

Henry exchanged the usual handshake with her husband Jerome, each assuring the other it was good to see them.

Introducing Marc felt weird. Henry settled on "a colleague from Beck and Meyer," keenly aware of the fact Marc was wearing his clothes. Had just been asleep in (okay, on) his bed. Then there were the roadside shenanigans in upstate New York. *This is Marc. He thinks he's gay, so we fooled around during a blizzard. I'm an idiot, so I figure we're going to try it again sometime.*

Yeah, no.

He could feel the weight of Mel's curiosity as she shook Marc's hand, though.

For his part, Marc slipped easily into his usual role: Marcus Winnamore, rising star of B and M. His outfit no longer mattered. His smiles dazzled and his wit charmed. Within minutes, both Mel and Jerome were chuckling and following Marc toward the dining room as though they were his guests, not the other way around.

Marc remained admirably cool throughout dinner, entertaining everyone with stories from both college and his career at the firm. He asked questions, too, and listened attentively as Henry's father talked about his hardware store, H&H.

"It's been in the family two generations already," Heinrich said proudly.

Marc darted a glance toward Henry before asking, “What does the other H stand for?”

“My grandfather,” Henry replied with a grin, then answered Marc’s next question before he could ask it. “If I have a son, I have to call him Heinrich. Officially, he’ll be Heinrich Auttenberg the sixth. It’s a long and illustrious line.”

Mel snickered. His father laughed.

“If you have a daughter, do you have to call her Melissa?”

“I’m going to call my dog Melissa.”

More laughter. Mel kicked as many ankles as she could reach beneath the table. Then a warm hand crept over his knee and squeezed. Henry glanced over at Marc and met a quick and sneaky sorta smile. He blamed the sudden flush of his cheeks on the wine.

His mother spoke up. “If Henry has children”—oh God, she was giving Marc a meaningful look—“he can call them what he wants. We already know he’s not going into the hardware business with us.” She did the books for H&H. He’d had to get his aptitude for numbers from somewhere.

“Maybe when I retire.” Henry’s cheeks were burning now.

His father reached around the table to clap him on the shoulder. “You’ll be what you want to be, Heinrich.”

It’d be easier to just lean over a candle. Give his cheeks a permanent burn.

Marc’s smile was less sneaky, more wistful, and Henry remembered the same look from the car. It spoke to him, this quieter expression. It was louder than the cut of Marc’s cheekbones, the depthless gaze of his eyes. His mouth, so kissable. His sharp nose. The package of Marcus Winnamore, handsome and successful. He hadn’t expected it, but he liked it. Marc’s inner vulnerability made him all the more attractive and it changed the focus of Henry’s winsome crush. Tempered his fears. Made him want Marc even more.

After dinner, everyone wanted Henry to open his gifts. Cheeks still uncomfortably hot, Henry sorted through the pile. His eyebrows nearly leapt from the top of his head when he saw a tag labelled “Marc.” Wordlessly, he handed the small package over and picked up the one his nephew had obviously wrapped, knowing that was the one he had to open first. He looked up to smile at his nephew and noticed Marc hadn’t touched the gift in his lap. Well, he’d touched it. His fingers were resting lightly on the corner of the box, and if he stared at the paper any harder, he’d set it alight.

Henry tore the paper from the package in his lap, revealing a set of graphic novels he would definitely read. Grinning, he thanked his nephew and reached for the next box. Marc was still picking at the paper on his.

Lissa clucked her tongue. “We don’t need to reuse the paper, Marc.”

Curious now—and hoping his mother hadn’t bought his almost-maybe-sort-of-boyfriend a package of underwear—Henry waited with everyone else for Marc to finish opening his gift.

It was socks. Henry wanted to die until Marc shook out the first pair, adorned with Santas stuck in chimneys. The second pair featured an intersecting pattern of Rudolph heads. Marc was laughing by the time he unfolded the third. Pie wedges. Pumpkin and apple. “These are great. Thanks.”

The fourth was the most discrete: snowflakes.

“You could almost wear those ones to work,” Henry said.

“I’ll be wearing all of them to work.” Mark picked up the card from the bottom of the box and opened it. A green piece of paper fluttered out of the fold. Henry recognized it with an audible groan. His parents didn’t do gift cards like everyone else. They gave cash. Fifty bucks a card. How embarrassing.

Marc leaned over to pick it up and tucked it behind the card as he read, “Because you never know when you’ll need a little something extra.”

“It’s to put in your wallet and forget about,” Heinrich explained. “Life has enough surprises, hmm? All our kids carry an extra fifty, just in case.”

Marc’s smile wavered only slightly before he nodded. “Thank you. That’s... Thank you.” He tucked the fifty into his wallet and went back to messing about with his socks.

The rest of the evening passed too quickly. Henry could have wished for a quiet moment with Marc, but in all honesty, he was enjoying the company of his family too much to look for opportunities. Then there was the fact Marc looked to be having just as comfortable a time. He was enjoying himself, even when chatting with Henry’s nephew.

When Marc stood up, covering a yawn, and asked if he could call a cab, Henry’s father and sister both objected.

“I can drive you.”

“Jer and I can drop you off on our way.”

Marc was polite in his refusal of a ride and no one pressed too hard. He wasn't allowed to leave without a suitcase full of freshly pressed laundry and several Tupperware containers of Christmas leftovers, however. Thankfully, the entire family didn't insist on waiting on the porch with them for Marc's cab to arrive.

"Do you regret coming over?" Henry leaned against the rail, curling his fingers over the edge to steady himself as he looked up. The ambient light of Dorchester reflected dully from a ceiling of murky grey. The stars were rarely visible this close to the city.

The rail creaked quietly as Marc leaned next to him, facing the other way, looking back toward the living room window. "No." His voice was quiet and contemplative. "Might have been the nicest Christmas I've ever had."

"Should I apologize for the socks?"

"Actually, I could have used some new underwear."

"God, don't tell Mom. She'll send you a care package."

Marc didn't answer that, and Henry didn't press for more information than his silence already gave. Instead, he leaned out again, looking up at the sky.

"Looking for stars?" Marc asked.

"In the summer I used to climb out my window and lie on the roof, waiting for the stars to come out. I don't know if I ever really saw them or not. It's hard to tell if my memory of starry skies comes from trips to the country or movies or maybe some miracle glimpse from this close to the city. But I always imagined them up there, you know?"

"Did you count them?"

"Huh?"

"The stars." Marc turned around and leaned out, looking up. "How many are there?"

Henry swallowed a short laugh. "One summer I got to three hundred and twenty-six before I lost count."

"I knew it!"

"I used to pretend the planes were stars too. Falling stars. I wished on every one." Why would he share something like that?

"Of course you did."

Henry snorted softly.

"I saw the stars on your ceiling. Upstairs. I figured you used to wish on those too."

That he had, sometimes, would never be shared, even under the most excruciating torture.

Marc leaned closer and murmured, “What did you wish for, Auttenberg?”

“For someone to call me Henry.” He turned, met Marc’s gaze and lifted one eyebrow in question. “What about you?”

“I don’t wish on stars.”

“Yeah, you do. Everyone wishes on a falling star, airplane or not, at least once in their life.”

They were close enough for a kiss to happen and the delicious tease of proximity and promise was almost better than a brush of lips. Marc seemed to think so as well. He remained still, smiling, eyes sparkling in the reflected light of the window behind them, the streetlights outside the porch and some inner glow of certainty and amusement.

Then the kiss happened. Henry didn’t initiate it, neither did Marc. They simply came together, lips touching, moving, whispering. Exchanging wishes and secrets. It was a warm and affectionate kiss. One of the nicest kisses Henry had ever had.

“What will you wish for tonight, Henry?” Marc’s words tickled his lips.

His name could have sounded ironic. Instead, it felt like another gift, which was really, really stupid. As was his answer of *you*.

Licking his lips, Henry drew back a little. “What would you wish for?”

Marc smiled. “A date.”

“A date?”

“With you.”

“That’s not a wish.”

“New Year’s Eve. Come to Shelly Flore’s party with me.”

A date with a man he really wanted to spend time with at a party he’d never attend alone.

A date with Marcus Winnamore.

Henry squinted up at the sky, looking for a sign. A single star, a trail of light. Something. He saw nothing. This one was up to him. He looked back at Marc and drew in a fortifying breath.

“Okay.”

A cab crunched to a halt against the snowbank lining the sidewalk and honked once. Marc shrugged into his coat and picked up his suitcase. “See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Be...”

“Be what?”

“Be safe, okay? Roads are still messed up.”

“You’re sweet, Auttenberg.” He grinned. “Just like your family.” It could have been an insult, but it wasn’t. From Marc, it was a statement of fact. He leaned in to peck Henry’s lips once more. “Night, and thanks.”

It was only as the cab moved away that Henry realized they hadn’t actually exchanged wishes. Not real ones. He had an idea of what Marc might want, though, and figured they wanted the same thing. Security. Family. Someone by their side. To personalize that dream any further would require a real star—not an imagined one, or a glow-in-the-dark sticker. Henry was tempted to do it anyway. Wish it for Marc, wish it for himself. Instead, he counted the dark patches in the clouds, pretending they were stars, and imagined each one was a chance to make one of their wishes come true.

THE END



Henry and Marc’s story begins with [COUNTING FENCE POSTS](#) and continues this coming spring with [COUNTING DOWN](#).

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