



ALL

ROADS

LEAD TO

PHIL FRAGASSO

CHAPTER 1

A kinder, gentler man would have ditched Norah at the altar.

He would have been heartbroken and deeply hurt, but he would have remained calm and respectful. He would have met privately with Norah, discussed the situation, and explained how her actions made their upcoming wedding an untenable sham. They would have considered how best to cancel the ceremony and reception, what to tell their parents and friends, and when to go their separate ways.

But from Alex Bergman's perspective that was letting her off far too easily. It would have been embarrassing and painful but not sufficiently horrific. Alex needed horrific. In truth he needed blood, guts, and gore. He wanted to see Norah's snarky face wrenched in spasms of anguish and humiliation. He wanted to see every strand of her highlighted and extended tresses matted ugly against her cheeks. And he wanted to see tears dripping all over the shamefully hypocritical whiteness of the chichi gown she and her Botoxed, Spanxed and silicone-augmented mother couldn't stop raving about. Alex needed blood-curdling revenge. Nothing less would suffice.

That's when having a gay best man really came in handy.

“No one does vindictive better than us gays,” said Jeremy.

Jeremy Schofield and Alex had been best friends since grade school. Jeremy had been gay even longer, and he'd been openly and proudly gay ever since coming out during their junior year of high school. What Alex found fascinating about the whole thing was that, as much as Jeremy liked to trumpet his gayness, he shattered every stereotype of the homosexual male. Not just the obvious stereotypes like listening to show tunes, being a neat-freak shopaholic, and subsisting on appetizers and cosmopolitans. Jeremy was like a Grizzly Adams outdoorsman who loved nothing more than perching in a tree stand at the crack of dawn, bagging a deer, dressing it in the field and grilling it for dinner while sipping High West ninety-two proof, double-rye whiskey. He was also a natural athlete -- meaning good enough to make varsity in high school but not good enough to play in college. He sang off-key and danced just like Alex and ninety-nine percent of straight guys -- off-balance and off-tempo. Instead of a well-groomed, gym-toned physique, Jeremy leaned towards the unkempt and flaccid with abs that were more beer-bellied than six-pack.

“I guess you can say I'm a man's man,” was Jeremy's favorite way of describing himself. “In the fullest sense of the phrase.”

The whole mess started because Norah screwed her ex-boss the night before the rehearsal dinner Alex's parents

were hosting. Jennie, Jeremy's younger sister, was there to witness the sordid affair upfront and personal.

Jennie was like Alex's own kid sister. He'd known her since he and Jeremy started hanging out. At the time Jennie was only three or four years old but she was already a world-class charmer and a relentless pain in the butt. As an only child, Alex thought it was cool how much Jennie looked up to her older brother. And because he was at their house as much as his own, Jennie often referred to Alex as her honorary stepbrother.

Jennie had just completed her junior year at Georgetown and returned from a semester abroad in Barcelona. She still lived with her parents in Newton and was meeting up with a bunch of hometown friends to celebrate the end of the school year, the beginning of summer, and the fact that they had all reached the legal drinking age of twenty-one. They gathered at O'Hara's, a traditional Irish pub and sports bar that was a longtime favorite of parents with young children (because of the pizza), young couples (because it delivered a modicum of ambience for relatively short money), and young singles like Jennie and her friends who used it as a starting point before heading into Boston for dancing, live music, and hookups. Jennie was sipping a Yuengling at the bar when she noticed Norah exit the dining room with an older man. She watched them leave the bar and hurried after them.

"I had a feeling something dastardly was about to go down," she later explained.

Jennie was an English major with literary aspirations and a fondness for tossing about bookish allusions. She was also a bit of a voyeur with a penchant for gossip and a worrisome case of schadenfreude. The combination of which led her to discover and reveal a piece of information that would forever change Alex's life.

As Jennie was secretly observing the bride-to-be, Alex and Jeremy were hanging out in one of their favorite dive bars, the Plough & Stars just outside Central Square in Cambridge. It was a long-planned celebration of Alex's last solo night as a single man. The next night was the rehearsal dinner and the day after was the wedding. They'd just finished the first round when Jeremy's phone chirped. He saw a new text message from Jennie, read it quickly, and handed the phone to Alex.

The message read, *"nd to c u and Alx asap WTF!"*

Alex smirked as he returned the phone. "She's always been a drama queen."

"I know," said Jeremy, "but let me call her and find out what's going on."

The place was way too noisy to talk on a cellphone so Jeremy headed outside and Alex ordered another round of drinks, a Maker's Mark for himself and a Johnnie Black for Jeremy, both neat.

A singer-songwriter was performing in the back corner of the bar. He was a young mixed-race man with dyed-blond dreadlocks and a severe overbite. He picked at an acoustic

guitar affixed with a rainbow peace sign and sang with a raspy reggae-tinged voice. He was accompanied by a wisp of a woman with bluish-yellow hair playing a bass fiddle that looked twice her size. She focused intently on her fingers thrumming the strings and rarely looked up except to catch her bandmate's eye and flash a split-second smile through pursed lips.

Alex's ears perked up at the opening chords of "Misty Roses," a 1960's classic by Tim Hardin. It had always been one of his favorite songs with poetically spare and unabashedly romantic lyrics. To Alex, the song perfectly summed up the mystery of love with its unavoidable conflicts and contradictions. Of course, he understood none of that the first time he heard the song. He was in his teens when it popped up on a random Spotify playlist. There was something about the way Hardin's voice would crack, ever-so-slightly but enough to make you realize he was pulling at his own heartstrings as well as yours. As a teenager, Alex was a huge movie fan and visited his local Blockbuster several times a week. His tastes ranged the gamut from *Pulp Fiction* to *Spinal Tap* to *Silence of the Lambs*. He often mused about becoming a Hollywood big shot, the Scorsese or Spielberg of his generation. He admired how screenwriters, actors, and directors could crystallize human emotions in a single phrase, sideways glance, or barely perceptible facial tick. The best of them made the human experience visceral. Alex felt Hardin had accomplished the same feat with his depth of insight into

the deepest and most complex of human feelings. Love, as Hardin wrote, was indeed too good to last forever “but too lovely not to try.”

Alex found the singer’s reggae interpretation off-putting at best. He understood how every performer wants to recreate a song in his image, but there was something terribly wrong about messing with perfection. Alex blocked out the singer’s voice and sang Hardin’s version under his breath.

Jeremy returned to the bar just as the drinks arrived. He gulped down his Scotch and signaled the bartender for another round.

“Slow down there, cowboy,” said Alex. “What’s the rush?”

“Drink up. We have to go see Jennie.”

“What did she have to say?”

“Not much, but she was crying hysterically. She said it was really important and she needs to tell us in person.”

“She’s pissed that I’m getting married, huh? I always knew she had a schoolgirl crush on me.”

“I’m sure that’s it.”

Jeremy lifted Alex’s glass of bourbon and placed it in his hand. “Knock it down.”

Alex did as instructed and, a moment later when the next round arrived, did it again. Jeremy left a fifty-dollar bill on the counter and placed his empty glass on top of it. Alex was a cheap date by any standard of measure, so downing

three bourbons in less than half an hour set off a buzz-saw ruckus in his head. He leaned against the headrest of Jeremy's 5-series BMW and closed his eyes. He had lived through too many of Jennie's histrionics to be concerned about whatever news she felt compelled to share. Over the years Alex had patted her back, stroked her hair, and provided avuncular advice about boys, professors, bitchy cliques, and cures for the common hangover.

Jeremy parked the car in his building's underground garage. They took the elevator to his apartment on the twelfth floor. The elevator was clad in marble with brass doors and a highly polished floor of inlaid mahogany and oak. Alex had visited many times before but was always astounded by the accoutrements of wealth. He knew Jeremy was a rising player in Boston's private equity industry and earned far more than Alex could ever dream of. Jeremy was a One-Percenter who made his money the old-fashioned way -- buying low and selling high. As a Mergers & Acquisitions attorney with a Master's in economics, Jeremy specialized in scooping up distressed businesses at bargain prices, slashing fixed costs and headcount, leveraging them to the hilt with bank loans, and selling them a few years later for gains that would make Warren Buffet blush. It was a great gig if you could get it and Alex was proud, albeit envious, of his best friend.

Jennie opened the door as soon as Jeremy placed his key in the lock.

"I needed a drink," she said, "so I let myself in."

Jennie's face was red and blotchy. Her normally chirpy voice was muted and raspy. She was clutching a bottle of Sam Adams as though afraid someone would try to steal it away. She led them to the balcony where she recounted her story of seeing Norah leave the bar with a strange man.

"I just had a hunch something was rotten in Denmark," she said.

"Skip the Shakespearean crap," said Jeremy. "Just spit it out."

"It was probably her father or one of the guys she works with." Alex shrugged his shoulders and waved a dismissive hand at Jennie.

Jennie shook her head. "I'm not an idiot. I know what Norah's father looks like. And, by the way, if it *was* Norah's father then the thing is even more messed up than it already is."

"Okay," said Jeremy. "So they left together and you followed them outside. Then what?"

"You ready for this, Alex?" she asked.

It was at that precise moment that Alex's legs got a bit twitchy and, as he swallowed hard, his throat burned with bile and back-splashed bourbon. This was serious. This was the very first time he'd seen Jennie freak out about something outside of her own narrowly defined world. This was not a philosophical debate about the fine line between sexual openness and promiscuity. She was not looking for guidance or empathy. She didn't need money, alcohol, or

weed. She wasn't asking for anything. She was providing something.

Alex nodded. "Just lay it out there."

Jennie started to cry. "This is really hard. And really sad."

She tried to speak but the sobs became uncontrollable and turned her words into meaningless mumbles. She retrieved her phone from her jacket pocket, tapped the screen and held it up for them. "I was hiding behind some bushes. They didn't see me."

The iPhone screen displayed a grainy video of an older man opening the rear door of a Cadillac Escalade for Norah. She stepped inside and he followed, closing the door with a slam.

"Recognize him?" Jeremy asked.

Alex shook his head. "Maybe."

The video grew herky-jerky as Jennie moved closer to the action without drawing attention to herself. Once she was repositioned, she was able to zoom in tighter. What she was zooming in on was unmistakable. The mystery man was leaning hard against the headrest. His mouth was open and he was breathing hard. Norah was kneeling on the back seat facing him and her head was bobbing up and down.

"We've seen enough." Jeremy grabbed the phone from Jennie and shielded it from Alex's view.

"No," said Alex. "I want to see every goddamn second of it."

"Not a good idea," said Jeremy.

“I didn’t ask you. Now give me the damn phone.”

Jeremy handed over the iPhone and placed a comforting hand on Jennie who was trembling from deep inside and gasping for breath. Alex held the screen inches from his face, committing every pixel to memory. He watched the head-bobbing transition to a girl-on-top humping. He watched Norah toss her hair back and forth as the thrusting increased in pace. He watched the couple collapse into each other with the exhaustion of a hard-fought climax. He watched them exit the car. Norah brushed her hair before heading back to the bar. The now-sated gentleman got behind the wheel and drove off.

Alex returned the phone to Jennie and stood. “It’s Carl Verlander. Her ex-boss. He’s got two kids, a wife he supposedly adores, and a bad toupee. Norah always made fun of him. Said she hated him. I guess she was lying.”

CHAPTER 2

Jeremy knew unequivocally that being gay was not a choice. Nonetheless, as he often stated, if it had been a choice, he would have immediately and enthusiastically chosen to be gay. It was the best of both worlds. You could do all the fun shit macho guys enjoyed while allowing your feminine side to shine through without a trace of hesitation or embarrassment. Plus you got to bed down with men who, despite the campy archetype of the over-the-top flaming queen, tended to be far less melodramatic and far more straightforward than the women he'd known. His sister was the prime exemplar. Jennie never missed an opportunity to root out scandal and theatrically spread the word of wanton wickedness.

Jeremy and Alex normally derided this tendency in Jennie, but the video footage she captured of Norah screwing her ex-boss more than made up for any of her earlier gossip-mongering indiscretions. This was the mother lode. It provided an opportunity for revenge that had to be slowly savored rather than rushed into. Yes, payback was a bitch -- but when done properly, payback could blossom into a Godzilla-sized MegaBitch.

That's why Jeremy's priority as both best man and best friend was to suppress Alex's initial Sicilian impulse to

immediately storm over to Norah's apartment, cancel the wedding, and call her a lying, cheating, despicable slut at a decibel level that would have deafened the living and awakened the dead.

"I have to do it now," Alex had said. "I need to make that bitch's life miserable. I want everyone to know exactly what she did." Alex pointed at Jennie's phone. "I want everyone to see that video. Over and over again for the rest of their freakin' lives."

"That's what we all want," said Jeremy. "I damn sure know it's what I want."

"Me too," said Jennie. "Bitch doesn't even begin to describe the kind of person she is. She's a disgusting contemptible whore but you're the one getting screwed."

Jeremy nodded. "Yes, and now she's the one who needs to get screwed. Screwed really hard with a prickly cactus up the ass."

"Ouch." Jennie scrunched her face in pain. "Leaving aside my dear brother's homoerotic fantasies, he's absolutely right. Let's go slow. Let's think it through. Look at all the angles and come up with a plan that delivers pain and revenge in a package as powerful and graceful as a Whitman poem."

"Talking about homoerotic fantasies," said Jeremy.

Jennie rolled her eyes. "I'm getting another beer. What can I get you guys?"

"Whiskey," said Alex. "The best he's got."

Jeremy nodded. "There's a bottle of Whistle Pig in the cabinet over the stove. I've been saving it for a special occasion. This certainly qualifies."