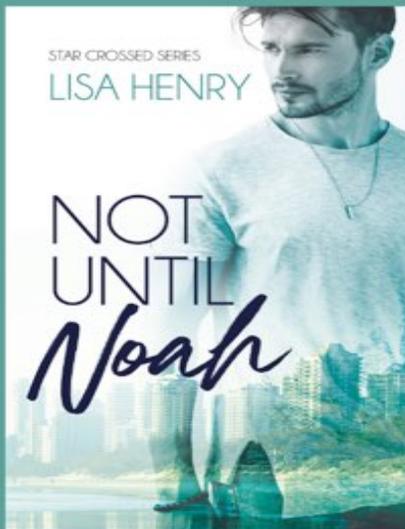




# FIRST VACATION



NOT  
UNTIL  
*Noah*

BONUS STORY

FIRST VACATION  
A “NOT UNTIL NOAH” BONUS STORY

LISA HENRY

## CONTENTS

First Vacation

## FIRST VACATION

Noah had never been so *cold*, but he wasn't going to let that stop him from building his first ever snowman. His gloves, which were already soaked through, were jammed into the pockets of his puffy jacket, and who knew snow was so hard? It always looked soft on TV, but it turned out it was like scraping the ice out of an old freezer—grazed knuckles included. He hadn't expected it to be like this, just like he hadn't expected breathing in to feel like getting stabbed in the lungs. He had to stop every now and then and hold his breath just to defrost his internal organs.

God, it was so beautiful here though. The snow, and the mountains, and the cabin. When Carter had said they were getting a cabin, Noah had thought that meant small and rustic, but this place was a long way and a lot of dollars from small and rustic. It was wooden, which was about where the resemblance ended. Because it was bright and modern, with large, wide windows that looked out over the snowy mountain landscape, and there was a massive hot tub on the back deck that Noah really hoped they were trying out tonight. He wanted to feel like one of those monkeys in Japan that simmered slowly in the hot springs while the ice clung to their whiskers. They always looked super relaxed.

Carter had said they might book a table at one of the restaurants in town later for dinner, but Noah figured he might be able to talk him around to homemade pizza and a soak in the hot tub instead. They'd taken a drive through Aspen earlier, and it looked beautiful, but Noah was glad they weren't staying at one of the resorts or hotels. Since moving in with Carter, he'd realised very quickly exactly how valuable privacy was, and the cabin out on Owl Creek Road, where they could only catch glimpses of their neighbours' rooftops when the wind shifted the curtain of pine trees, was perfect.

Their perfect, secluded, romantic getaway.

"Noah!"

He looked up to the deck, grinning as Emerson, looking like a bright pink Teletubby in all her layers and her puffy coat, waved down at him.

Okay, so there were some people who might not think a getaway could be called romantic if you brought your boyfriend's kid along, but Noah wasn't one of them. What could be better than spending time together as a new family? Carter and Emerson were a package deal, and Noah loved that about them.

"Dad!" Emerson yelled. "Noah's in the snow and he's not wearing his gloves!"

Noah laughed as, moments later, Carter came down the stairs from the deck, a scarf dangling from one hand and a pair of gloves from the other. Emerson hurried after him, her cheeks already pink with cold.

"Jesus, your hands are freezing," Carter chided, catching them between his own and gently chafing some warmth into them. "Put these on."

While Noah struggled to get his numb, uncooperative fingers into the gloves, Carter wound the scarf around his neck, even

though he was already wearing one. Then he used the ends to reel Noah in, like a fish caught on a line, and put his arms around him.

They swayed together for a moment like a couple of kids at a school disco who didn't really know how to dance. Noah's nose, wedged into Carter's scarf, slowly defrosted.

"I'm so cold," he mumbled. "Nobody told me snow was going to be this cold."

Carter laughed. "Let's get you back inside. Your snowman will still be here tomorrow."

"Take a picture of him first!" Noah exclaimed. "He's my first ever snowman."

"It shows," Carter said, laughing again as Noah tried to jab him in the stomach in retaliation and barely made a dent in his layers. "I'll take a picture! Em, get Noah inside before he freezes to death."

Noah let himself get dragged up the steps to the back deck by Emerson. He expected Carter to be right behind them and, when he wasn't, he looked back, squinting down into the snow-covered yard. "What is he doing?"

Emerson leaned on the railing with him, and they both watched, bemused, as Carter knelt in the snow and then shuffled around on his knees to take what must have been a hundred different pictures of Noah's wonky snowman from all different angles.



THEY MADE HOMEMADE PIZZA, and even spent some time in the hot tub, and the night was pretty perfect. After they put Emerson to bed, they retreated to the main bedroom and Carter lit the fire, and Noah suddenly understood that whole romantic fireplace thing. He got it. Then again, his romantic fireplace had Carter Westlake standing in

front of it, with his literal movie star good looks. He looked like the poster for this year's hottest holiday romcom. A city girl who needed to learn an important lesson about Christmas was about to stumble right into his small-town heart. All he needed was a cable knit sweater and a dog.

Carter joined him in bed, and *this* was the part of the schmaltzy holiday movie that Noah could still barely believe, even though he was living in it: the part where he got to fall asleep with Carter every night, and wake up with him every morning. Their relationship began with stolen hours in the middle of the night, and a lot of creeping down dark hallways on Noah's part, and he ached, acutely, to have Carter in the daylight. He had that now, and so much more.

"So, tomorrow," Carter said, a slight smile playing on his lips as he propped himself up on one elbow and settled a hand on Noah's hip.

"Tomorrow?" Noah asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Emerson wants to ski."

"No," Noah said, pre-empting Carter's next question. "No, and I know I said back in LA that I'd think about it, but, to be fair, that was before I saw how high the mountains are. No. You and Em can ski, but I'm not doing that. Not even on the kiddy slopes. Tongans don't ski."

"Isn't your dad Scottish?"

"Name a famous Scottish skier."

"I can't name *any* famous skiers." Carter reached for his phone.

"Googling's cheating!" Noah tugged it out of his hands. "I'll come with you guys, and I'll wait at the bottom and cheer you on and stuff, but I'm not skiing." Guilt tugged at his belly. "God, sorry."

Carter's brows tugged together. "What are you sorry for?"

"Um... for not being any fun? For being scared of skiing?"

Carter smiled at him, and stroked his flank. “Oh, yeah. I’m sure if we dragged you kicking and screaming up the mountain, that’d be fun for everyone! You don’t have to ski if you don’t want to. I just thought you might have changed your mind.”

“I haven’t.” Noah bit back another “sorry” with difficulty.

“You don’t have to wait for us at the bottom of the slope either,” Carter said. “I mean, you can if you want, but if you want to hang out here instead, or go into town, that’s fine.”

Noah loved the crinkles Carter got around his eyes when he smiled. “I just don’t want to disappoint you guys.”

“You’re not.” Carter leaned in and kissed him, just a gentle brush of their mouths together that filled Noah with warmth.

Noah pulled Carter back for another kiss when he tried to disengage. “Get your pants off, Carter.”

Carter’s abs weren’t nearly as well defined as they had been when he’d been filming *Exogenesis*, but he still looked like he’d walked straight off the cover of a men’s health magazine. And Noah was sort of soft around his middle parts, but he made sure to get his exercise in. Like right now, when he intended to ride Carter for as long as he could. And it turned out that it didn’t matter if there was no way he matched up to Carter when they were both naked, because Carter still looked at him like he was the hottest thing he’d ever seen, so it turned out Noah didn’t need abs to validate him at all—Carter fucking Westlake thought he was hot, so who the hell was Noah to disagree?

They both tugged their pajamas off, and came together in a tangle of limbs and kisses and joy.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON Noah was debating whether or not to peel himself up off the couch to go and work on a husband for his snowman—it just involved putting on so many clothes—or finish watching the movie he'd started, and an entire bag of chips, when he heard the slam of car doors in the driveway.

"Noah! Noah!" Emerson yelled.

He hurried to the front door, in time to see Emerson rushing toward the stairs and Carter following—and limping—at a snail's pace. Noah flung the door open. "What happened? Are you okay? Is anything broken? Oh God! It was the skiing, wasn't it? I knew it was dangerous!"

He reached the bottom of the steps, barely even noticing the sudden blast of cold in his hurry, and Carter hobbled closer.

"It's fine," he said, but pushed the words out through a grimace. "Nothing's broken."

"You're never skiing again," Noah said. He tugged at the bobble on Emerson's woolly hat. "And neither are you!"

"He wasn't even skiing!" Emerson exclaimed. "Dad, tell him!"

"The skiing was fine," Carter said. "I slipped over on a patch of ice in the parking lot when we were leaving."

"He was trying to carry his bag, and his phone, and his skinny caramel macchiato, *and* get the car keys out all at the same time," Emerson said.

"Tattletale," Carter muttered, and glared at her.

She glared right back, her hands on her hips.

"Don't," Carter said when Noah looked at him. The corners of his mouth twitched. "Don't say anything."

"I..." A laugh bubbled up inside him. "I think that once you get a *caramel* macchiato, the 'skinny' is kind of pointless. You might as well just smother it in whipped cream and enjoy it."

Carter made an unhappy noise. "I spilled it in the parking lot."

"Aw, no!" Noah laughed again, and pulled him into a hug. Carter winced. "Okay, how badly are you hurt, really?"

"My ass is bruised as hell."

"I will—" Noah managed to shut down all promises of kissing it better while in Emerson's earshot, but from the way Carter grinned he knew exactly where he'd been going. "I will help you put some arnica on that later."

He took Carter's bag and helped him hobble up the stairs, with Emerson leading the way.

Later, sitting in front of the fireplace in the living room, eating an early dinner of leftovers and playing a game of Scrabble that was quickly degenerating into a round of good-natured bickering, Noah looked at Carter, and at Emerson, and realised, with quiet contentment, that he was almost completely happy. There was a little pang when he thought of home, and Mum and Dad and his brother Dylan, but home was only a day away on a plane, after all, and here? Here was family too. The family he'd chosen, that had chosen him in return.

"I thought you were going to make a snowhusband for your snowman," Emerson said as she peered out the wide windows into the yard. "What if he's lonely?"

"You can help me make one tomorrow."

Carter stopped digging through the Scrabble tiles for a moment. "I'll help too."

"No more dangerous skiing?" Noah teased.

"It wasn't the skiing," Carter protested.

"You should tell people it was," Noah suggested. "It sounds more exciting than falling on your arse in an icy car park."

Emerson plonked back down on the rug, holding out an open bag of popcorn. "You should tell people you fought off a *bear!*"

"In a helicopter," Noah said. "With a machine gun."

Carter gave him a look. "Who's in the helicopter with the machine gun? Me or the bear?"

Noah and Emerson exchanged a look and said, as one: "Both!"

Carter laughed, dragging Emerson down onto the floor in a hug, making exaggerated growling noises. Popcorn spilled all over the floor.

"I'll get the dustpan," Noah volunteered, to save Carter's bruised arse from having to get off the floor. He stepped over Emerson on his way, and stopped to lean down to kiss Carter, taking a moment to run his fingers through his hair. "I love you."

"I love you too," Carter said, his hazel eyes shining, and it didn't matter that he was a movie star, or that he was famous or rich. It didn't matter that they were in a cabin in Aspen that cost more money than Noah could imagine spending. It didn't matter that in a week they'd be back in LA, where Noah would never get used to being photographed buying groceries or coffee if Carter was by his side. Only *this* mattered. Noah and Carter, in love, making a family with Emerson.

Making a future together.