

Tyler Corke

Chapter 6

The Cool Changes

I love a campfire. I like drinking scotch until my eyes cross, staring into that hot orange abyss. The lingering smoke is my designated driver when it follows me through the door of the wall tent to my cot. The smell of warm, sooty fir pushes me over the edge to a deep sleep filled with vivid dreams, and in the morning, as I down my coffee, warmth on my face from a fresh stoking starts the day right.

But campfires require time. Time to gather wood, split kindling, stack the larger pieces, keep the supply up and time to build the fire. If it's wet, this can take too much time, and time is a precious thing when you're a couple of road tripping steelheaders in B.C., bent on burning the candle at both ends till the last bit of your soul is a crumbling piece of black carbon. When it falls to the muddy soil beneath your cot and soaks into the earth in the middle of the night, you know it's time to take a break. I hadn't reached that breaking point, yet. Until something changed, the fire ring in front of the wall tent sat cold.

Then our first snow arrived. Four days of mid-30-degree daytime air temperatures combined with the short days of mid-November dropped the river water temperature like lead eyes on a bare hook. Two days ago, we tallied our two-day totals during the sled ride back to camp this morning. When the water temp neared forty degrees, our grabs came

later the day. When the water hit thirty-eight, everything happened in the last two hours of daylight. That was enough beta for me. We changed our program; noon till dark, till warmer weather returned, fishing the most productive times of the day to save our feet. Yes, a pair of boot foot waders might have made a difference, but we're both poor steelhead bums and dollars are hard to come by. If I find myself considering whether another pair of waders is in order or a new rain jacket, I most definitely choose the coat. Tyler usually buys a new rod then considers the coat, so he is stuck with a pair of waders two years too old, covered in aqua seal, taped, discolored, and smelling like a public men's room. I have to deal with cold, wet feet. Tyler deals with that and the constant waft of man sweat, urine, and musty cheap beer farts rising from his wader tops.

Under this new program, fishing only four hours a day left lots of down time. We lingered around the fire ring until late morning.

Tyler sat on the front edge of his camouflaged folding camp chair holding a bowl Cheerios and orange juice. He poured the orange juice over the Cheerios, mind you, then tipped the bowl to his mouth and picked off the Cheerios one by one like a kid eating popcorn from one of those skinny white paper bags.

Hovering over the fire ring, he asked, "You ever want to get married?"

"That's a stupid question."

“Why is that a stupid question?”

“I live at the end of a dirt road, up a canyon, on the lower part of the most remote river in Oregon. Most chicks think *Deliverance* when they see my place.”

“Might help if you shaved now and then.”

“What’s the point?”

“But you like getting laid?”

“Getting laid and getting married are two very different things.”

“Maybe.”

“Okay, I can see how getting laid can lead to getting married, and I can see how getting married can obviously lead to getting laid, but what does liking to get laid have to do with getting married?”

“It doesn’t. I was just checking to see if you were normal?”

“Prick!”

“Yep.”

I kicked at a rock in fire and pushed a stick deeper into the coals with the toe of my Romeo.

“What about you?”

“Been there done that.”

Tyler sat back in the chair, balancing the paper bowl and plastic spoon on his knee and stared at the fire.

And with that, everything changed. I didn't know what to say. I was astonished that this goof ball, ADD-plagued, ex-farmer from Montana could keep a secret for so long. I'd seen this guy pick up the hottest chicks in the most remote bars—tiny towns you'd be pressed to find even one looker—take them out to the truck, screw their lights out, return to his barstool a half-hour later and boastfully recount the juicy details of his sordid encounter till I told him to shut the fuck up. Tyler can't keep his mouth shut. There's no way there could be any truth to the fact the Tyler Corke was once married.

“What’s that like?” I asked.

“Sucks if you marry the wrong girl.”

I’ve said this before: Two men living in close quarters are like two young grizzly bears, fresh from hibernation, constantly circling one another to avoid crossing paths or a direct encounter. Sometimes, our past is sacred ground. If this episode in Tyler’s life came to light, it would be on his terms. Then he surprised me a second time. He told the story.

“I didn’t go to the fly shop for a specific reason. I just felt an urge. You know, one of those...I’ve got nothing better to do, don’t have a fucking dollar to my name but for some reason gotta poke around, check out some tying materials, do a little brainstorming...”

Typical Tyler.

“I was just looking at this dubbing, it had Mylar blended in it, and I thought that stuff would look fucking tight in one of my prawn patterns, you know, that shimmering twinkle-like little green lanterns all up and down the body screaming to a steelhead, ‘Come eat me!’ They had it in black, orange, pink, green, red, purple, all the good colors. Well, I was pulling the little zip seal open on a pack of the black when I hear this, ‘Excuse me,’ and all I see is this long, blonde hair and the most amazing ass in a baggy pair of jeans moving past me over to the deer hair. I mean if her ass looked like that in

those jeans...probably why she wore that shit in the first place. I was just trying to stay cool and stay out of her way. Well, I slid behind the carousel of hooks and kept picking at that black dubbing but kept an eye on her 'cause she was pulling stuff down like she knew what she wanted. *Pink fucking deer hair?* What do you tie with pink deer hair? You spin it into intruders and shit, but what the fuck does she know about that, right? So I'm a wreck, you know, 'cause you just don't see that very often. Even if she doesn't know what she's gonna do with that pink deer hair, at least she looks like she's gotta plan, and I can't tell you how hot that is that a smokin' hot chick knows what she's gonna do with a package of pink deer hair. So, I pretend to be interested in my dubbing, but she catches me peeking around the Mustads and asks me what I'm going to do with the sparkle dubbing. And before I can tell her that I'm thinking about spiffing up my prawns she says, 'You know, that dubbing looks great in a big tube fly like a giant GP or a prawn pattern.' And then she smiled. *Fuck!* I'm thinking. *You gotta be shittin' me.* I mean, she is so hot. So I ask her what she was gonna do with the pink deer hair and she says, 'Spin some collars on my intruders so when I wrap the goose shoulder through it makes it stand up nice.' *What the fuck?* I'd been married for two weeks, and I meet a woman who knows what an intruder is and how to spin deer hair. Do you know how fucked up that is?!"

"No I don't."

Tyler tossed the bowl and spoon into the fire, rested his elbows on his knees, looked at the flames for a moment. then put his head in his hands.

“I was divorced in a month. Started dating the hot chick.” Then, he looked up. “After two months, she said she loved me, wanted to be with me, and I fell hard, right into that shit. Then one day, a month later, on the way to the river she yells, ‘Stop the truck.’ I do. She gets out, and bolts into the forest like a brush bunny running for its life. She just vanishes into one of those old growth stands of really big fuckers. Well I had to haul ass to catch up. Thought I was gonna break an ankle climbing over all those dead trees. I found her standing next to this huge spruce. She was turning in circles, biting a fingernail, and muttering something. I don’t say shit ’cause I don’t know what the fuck is going on until she looks up and starts crying her eyes out. She says she can’t do this and bolts off again. I look at that big spruce and I’m thinking, *Man, I’m just supposed hang out with you guys.* I head out to the truck and she’s standing at the edge of the highway with one foot on the white line watching the cars coming at her, and I’m thinking she’s gonna step out into traffic any moment and kill herself. I mean she’s really messed up, crying, yelling, “Don’t come near me,” and I haven’t done anything. I just stand there, in the ditch next to the truck and talk to her nice and soft. Finally, she gets in the truck, and we go to this beach, a gravel beach with perfect black rocks for throwing. You know what I’m talking about? They’re all the same size and black. They fit in your hand perfectly. We walk for a bit, and she’s crying hard until she says she just wants to sit on a log for a while. She tells me to keep walking, but I know if I do I’ll never see her again, so I walk down the water

and start throwing these perfectly shaped rocks into the sea. I check back after every toss to see if she's still there. We're like three hours from town, but I know she's gonna run. I throw about fifty rocks into the ocean and walk back to her. She's a sobbing mess. I tell her everything's gonna be okay but she just loses her cookies again. She's balling her brains out yelling. 'No it's not! It's never going to be okay!' and I'm just speechless 'cause I don't think I can help her."

He's still looking at the flames.

"Something to do with her dad, I guess. Love was too hard for her."

I didn't know what to say, so I sat still and watched the fire, too.

"Fuck man, she could fish."

The campfire smoke spun into Tyler's face. He leaned away from the fire, but had to stand to escape.

"Man, those plastic spoons reek when they melt."

He disappeared into the flaps of the wall tent.

This romantic catastrophe explained why he still listens to “Honky Cat” by Elton John and uses the *F* word 125 times a day.

Yes, women can do that to you. They can kill a man’s spirit. Hollow doesn’t begin to describe how you feel when you realize you’ve lost the one thing you hoped for your entire life. But if you’re wired a certain way, it’s hard to unravel the mess and the steelheader Tyler Corke is a tightly wrapped package. I didn’t see the wheels falling off yet.

I heard the zipper of his mummy bag and creaking of his cot. I knew what was next. Tyler took up his hibernation pose, climbing into bed fully clothed, drawing the hood of his mummy bag tight around his head. I won’t know for hours or days when he’s gonna fish again. It was funky-funk time for Tyler Corke, but now he made sense.

His unpredictable antics are just manifestations while coping with grief at the hand of a heartbreaking loss.