

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 5

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 5

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The Goodreads M/M Romance Group invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they produce.

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set with two additional bonus volumes, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Volume 5.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letters. If you'd like to view the photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group*

strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

These stories are a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 190 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Nearly two dozen members chipped-in to help; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

The **story titles** link back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The **author names** also link back to their Goodreads author profiles.

The written description that inspired each story, along with the letter that inspired the tale is provided. If you would like to see the actual photo, you can view them at: www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance.

Enjoy.

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ROAMING CANISTERS

By Adrian Fridge

Photo Description

Photo 1: A man, possibly naked, with short dark hair, sits with his knees drawn up to his chest, head turned to the side and his eyes closed. His hands are not visible, but the metal restraints on his ankles and neck are connected by a chain that then runs up the smooth black wall of his cage.

Photo 2: A green-skinned alien male leans his shoulder back against a gray space station wall, one hand touching the side of his head, the other tucked into a pocket. His bare torso is lean and muscled, and black pants with silvery piping ride low on his hips. Behind him, on the wall, black lettering is partially obscured by shadow.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

There I was, calmly going about my daily business, when there was a bright flash and I blacked out. When I awoke, I found myself in this metal cage and all chained up. There's a strange guy watching me and I don't know what he wants, but I think he is why I am here.

Sincerely,

Ilona

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: scientists, alien, interspecies sex, technobabble, masturbation

Word count: 10,323

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ROAMING CANISTERS

By Adrian Fridge

I took in a breath. Still alive—check.

Curled my fingers and toes. Mobile—check.

My head weighed heavily upon my shoulders as I tried to twist it side-to-side, my body splayed on the ground as I blinked in the darkness trying to figure out what happened. A cold shiver went through me as I sat up and drew my knees to my chest. All my clothes were missing, and metal bands connected by chains held down my wrists, ankles, and neck.

The ship didn't have an accident—check.

My eyes skidded around the room, a giddiness forming in my stomach as a smile passed over my face. In the shadows stood a form.

Alien encounter—check.

Okay, this wasn't ideal, but I couldn't complain. There was an alien, a real-life extraterrestrial, standing in front of me. All I ever expected to find were a few bacterial specimens, so fuck it, I was impressed.

I squinted to see if I could gather in more of the alien's features. Suddenly the lights came on and I shut my eyes, the burning sensation too strong.

"You're awake." My ears prickled as I recognized the words loud and clear from the alien in front of me. The accent was thick and unfamiliar, but I understood it. My heart beat faster as my mouth nearly dropped. They could speak my language.

"Your ship is under our custody now. Your crew is undisturbed in their chambers."

I sighed loudly, a certain tension draining at the good news that they hadn't killed the crew nor had they destroyed the ship.

I rubbed at my eyes before blinking them, trying to adjust to the brightness in the room. I took in a sharp breath as I absorbed every detail of my prospect. Scaly green skin, bald bulbous head, and large yellow eyes with a black iris,

the pupil a narrow, white vertical slit. Yet despite all that this alien was humanoid: lean muscular torso, broad shoulders and narrow hips. It even wore a grey lab coat and black pants, noticeably shirtless.

And this was our first formal encounter.

“Who are you?”

The alien smirked. “I’m the one who’s in charge of you during your stay.”

“My stay?” I paused, recalling how I even got here in the first place. I was the scientist in charge of the vessel while the rest of the crew was in stasis. Our mission was to set up base on our red sister planet, the first journey for mankind. The autopilot had a set course, and my job was to ensure a safe trip and landing. I kept myself occupied the past two months by drawing up plans and doing calculations.

The last thing I remembered was going over the water filtration system for the third time when the ship jerked to a stop. I speedily flew over to the control room to troubleshoot the autopilot. I lost consciousness sometime between realizing the autopilot was turned off and going to wake the Captain from her hibernation.

“Yes, your stay until I get further instructions from my superiors. I’m a little disappointed it took your species this long to get here. I expected it much sooner.”

“I don’t understand.”

The alien approached, squatting down in front of me. “I’m sorry, my Earthian is not great.”

“Earthian?”

“We’ve done research on your expedition, assessed which of your planet’s languages would be necessary for greeting your ship. I’ve only practiced with the computer.”

I tilted my head. “Well, I understand what you say. I meant I don’t know what you expected.”

“We’ve been anticipating the breach of Earth’s quarantine zone for the last three hundred years. I took over after my father several years ago. I thought

we'd never meet you." The alien reached out its hand. "I believe this is your proper greeting. I don't know the translation for my real name. You may call me Casey."

I couldn't keep my hand from shaking as my palm touched the smooth, warm skin of this creature. Its hand had five fingers like mine, the nails thick and black. I couldn't believe my luck. After all the intensive training, the years of study, the numerous hours of mental preparation, and I still couldn't fathom the reality of it. I was shaking the hand of someone not human.

The chosen name was oddly familiar. "My ship comes from the Casey Space Program."

"Yes, that's why I chose it. What might your name be?"

"D- Doctor Eugene Waters."

Casey's smile widened, sharp white teeth embedded in black gums. "Waters. I like that." Shivers went down my spine as Casey eyed my genitals. "Waters. Male. Mid-thirties."

In the distance I heard the words repeated as a screen lit up, a profile with an old photo of my face and the blanks next to it filling with text.

As Casey stood, I couldn't hold my tongue. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"I'm a scientist too. I'd like to know your specifics as well."

Casey laughed, a deep low rumble that shook my insides. "Casey. Male. Two hundred and three. Roughly the same age as you except I'm using Earth years."

My brain started going a hundred kilometers an hour. "I guess we're a fast planet compared to yours."

Casey wiggled his hand out of mine and stood straight, hands on his hips. "You're quite curious about everything except your well-being."

"My well-being?" My lips curled. "Even if I'm about to go under the knife, at least I can say that not only have I met a sentient extraterrestrial, but I had an actual conversation with him. That's all I ever dreamt of, it's why I'm even here." I laughed as I outstretched my arms. "Look at you, you're beautiful!"

Casey nodded in affirmation. “Then the feeling is mutual.”

I may have been a bit too eager to cooperate after being alone for over two months and craving attention. Over a dozen or so tests later and I was exhausted. In just a few short hours, Casey had more information on me than all the doctors, teachers, and therapists I’ve seen since birth. Everything about me was fascinating to him, and the computer profile grew ever longer as he created checklists of dozens more tests he planned on doing. So far no probes.

Casey had the lab to himself. There were other aliens, his students, who came and went for some of the tests, all lizard-type aliens, but none of them speaking anything I could comprehend. I was surrounded by them, the focus of all their efforts, their specimen. I was special, if only for a little while.

Their lab had data on human development since the Stone Age, watching carefully as the species matured, like bacteria under a microscope, mapping out our mutations, our socialization, our entire ecosystem. Earth was quarantined to make sure we developed in isolation until we were ready to meet the rest of the universe, some sort of grand experiment by his kind. They knew we were coming, and they prepared themselves extensively. Now I had the fortune of being the ambassador of the human race.

It made me feel big and important. Casey asked me a million questions, and I did the same in return. Technologically, his species was more advanced. They had a space station with artificial gravity installed. That was impressive. They had access to the far reaches of space, their vessels running on fusion power. They even had a renewable oxygen supply. My ship was nothing more than a crude barrel compared to them; no wonder they were so curious how we made it this far.

I didn’t get much time to myself until the work day drew to an end. One of the students brought me a tray of food, and I eyed it the same as my lunch. They were feeding me, which meant they wanted to keep me around longer. But what they fed me, it didn’t look artificial or processed. I prodded the slab of cooked meat, smelling it before cutting a chunk off, still disturbed by how appetizing it smelled and tasted.

I was struck by the silence; I was so used to hearing my own voice. Casey just watched me as I leaned back on the couch. When they saw I didn't struggle, they stopped putting me in the cage. When I got cold, Casey gave me a lab coat to wear. It was almost as if I was in a luxurious prison, the chainless cuffs on my wrists, ankles, and neck reminding me of my position.

"This real meat?" I asked hesitantly, unsure of whether I'd offend him somehow but hoping to make conversation. Even though I only met him, he reminded me of myself after the first time I finished solitary confinement training at the space center. I had to be near someone, had to make small talk, had to do anything to feel again. It was the only reason I could think of for why Casey was still with me. He could have thrown me in the cage, gone to bed, and been done with it. Instead he kept beside me, drinking me up with his gaze.

"Yes. We didn't want to risk infecting your system with foreign organisms, so we got *take-out*." There was that curl in his lip, the one I started associating with whenever he thought he was being clever.

"Thanks," I said offhandedly.

That silence again.

"So, uh, what does the number mean in the name?" I pointed to the plate above the main computer which said Intergalactic Zoology Zone-3MW. "And why is it written in my language?"

"This station has four zones. The third is mine." Casey nodded. "You'll find I keep a lot of Earthian around me."

"Oh." I took another bite of the meat with suspicious origins. I stopped in the middle of chewing to process that revelation, sighed, and swallowed the piece. This wasn't the time or place.

"I want you to know I have your best interests in mind."

"Is that before or after you dissect me?"

Casey cocked his head to the side. "Is that what you're expecting?"

I waved the fork in the air. "If our positions were reversed, your cadaver would be on our operating table." That's what I expected when I first arrived.

“Of course, if we had a station that captured your ship, I guess we’d keep one of you around, like a lab rat. First you treat the lab rat really nice, measuring their every action, analyzing every reaction, and then they get cut open so you can inspect their insides. You’ve been taking care of me well, so I’m reasonably content.”

Casey grimaced as he pulled back into his seat. “That’s barbaric. All I’ll need are blood samples.”

“Oh.” I pursed my lips, feeling the sting in his judgment.

“I was saving them for later when you’ve settled in.” Casey crossed his arms. “Now that you don’t have to worry about that, any other concerns?”

“Any other concerns?” I laughed. “You really don’t understand how loaded that question is, do you?”

“If our positions were reversed, I don’t think I’d be so cooperative, particularly if I feared for my life. I’d try to slash at your face, or something, and would have landed myself back in the cage. It’s astounding you’re so calm and collected.” Suddenly he took my hand in his, caressing my knuckles, his glisten in contrast to my chalky whiteness. “I really want to help in any way I can.”

“Don’t.” I shook my head. “Just be honest. How long do I have to live?”

“No one is out to kill you.” Casey held my hand tighter, his nails pressing into me. “No, no. The plan is to let you go after all this is over. Everything will be fine once you get clearance.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Clearance?”

“There’s a whole committee that has to vote on this. It could take several days to several weeks. Approval means everything proceeds as normal. You get back on your ship and continue with your mission.” He paused. “If they don’t approve, human space exploration will be set back.”

“Set back?”

Casey kept silent as I stared at him. I didn’t know what to feel. He was worth more to me than my own life. This entire trip was meant to settle humankind in the stars. Even if I wasn’t around anymore, those people would meet Casey and his kind. They would find themselves in good company.

“It’ll mean a tragic accident for you and your crew,” Casey said slowly.

“And what about you?”

“I don’t know,” he exhaled. “And I don’t want to think about it. Why should you get exterminated just because someone far, far away whimsically decides its the logical thing to do? It’s absurd. You earned your right to enter the universe, just as we did. It’s utterly unfair to you, Waters.”

“Well,” I pushed back my hair, the brown strands grown out past my ears, “they should have just killed us from the start instead of making me wait.”

Casey lowered his head. “With the tests going as they are, it’s unlikely to turn to the worst-case scenario. I’d do anything to protect you.”

“I see,” I said, more coldly than I intended. Casey seemed dejected by the response, his hand coming off of mine.

“Why aren’t you upset?”

“I *am* upset, but what can I do? I’m in the middle of space on an alien station. I’m just glad my crew isn’t awake or else it’ll turn into an even bigger disaster. The only thing I can do is wait, and I’m used to that.”

Casey put both his hands on my shoulder, meeting my gaze as his sharp fingernails dug into the fabric. “I shouldn’t have told you so much. You’re going to be okay. Let’s get you to bed so you can be well rested tomorrow.”

“Even so,” my eyes darted around the lab; ever since I got there I’ve been wanting to explore the lab, but there was always this test or that keeping me tied to a spot, “I can’t just sleep.”

He watched me with curiosity, his grey lips curling. “I could use some help, if you’re up for it.”

“You’d trust a primitive animal like me with your equipment?”

“Waters, you can’t possibly do worse than my students.”

I laughed, and this time he joined in.

Day one on station—momentous.

I groaned as I spread out across the makeshift bed, a springy mattress held together by metal bars. There was only one, and it was meant for Casey when he needed to work on and off during the night. He may have removed my metal restraints, but it was replaced by this torture. Casey's kind was advanced, but not advanced enough to make spare beds that didn't feel like I was stabbed every time I turned. I would have been happier to be back sleeping in zero gravity than continue with this.

My arm hit Casey on the shoulder. There was also that. My stay at his station was now into its second week, and I had yet to see him leave the lab. Sometimes we worked through the night and collapsed together on the bed. Other times he'd rush me to the connecting room, leaving me to fall asleep on my own only to wake up with him beside me again.

It reminded me of my college days, back when I used to dorm. My boyfriend would spend nights with me, and I'd always try to wake earlier than him to catch a glimpse of his sleeping face. Now that it was Casey beside me, I'd sometimes wake with a fright, as if my brain was trying to piece together the vision of a human in the darkness and upon failing would conjure a monster. Yet if I kept my eyes closed, Casey's steady breathing and warm presence only filled me with comfort.

Sometimes we'd accidentally touch, like today. It made me want to "accidentally" roam down his chest and check what hung between his legs.

I gritted my teeth and got out of bed. I hadn't gotten off in over a week and it didn't look like this clearance was coming soon enough. I didn't have access to the ship, nor could I get any of my usual wank material. It was my sex drive that got me the most wound up during my isolation training; I couldn't spend months with nothing but math and solitude. I needed an outlet, and my dick was getting the wrong idea about Casey. For all I knew, alien lizard-sex involved a rod down my throat and eggs buried in my stomach, waiting to eat me from the inside, and those were the horrible movie moments I clung to to keep myself in line.

I yawned as I went over to the bathroom. It was an empty room unless one knew which buttons on the wall to press; then the utilities would emerge. I

clicked for all of them, not sure how these aliens prioritized their morning routines, and slipped off the lab coat.

As I leaned against the sink, staring at myself in the mirror, I imagined even more gruesome experiences one could have with alien species. That's right, I told myself, bad idea. Even if it would be the kinkiest thing I'd ever done.

I pinched the bridge of my nose in disbelief. Blood was leaving my head and I needed more productive thoughts.

It had been two years since I'd been with a man, a byproduct of dedicating all my resources to preparing for this mission. My last lover dumped me because we didn't have time for each other, not that the sex was any good. I wasn't attracted to him and I couldn't stand the things he said. We got together because we were the only two gay guys in the program. The memory was so distant I had to fill in the gaps with fantasy. All I had to do was recall some sexy stud from one of the videos I had on file and cast him as the lead, pretend we were reshooting the entire scene with better acting. It gave me the release I needed, taking off the edge, but something about it was weaker than usual. I needed more than this.

I rinsed myself in disappointment.

When I got out I noticed Casey absorbed in his work, as usual. I still wasn't sure how or why he was able to look so human beneath the scales, but aside from his eyes, it was all there. The crown of his head held no hair, showcasing the oblong shape with two flaps of skin protruding out where ears would be. Darkened scales jutting out like eyebrows, nostrils flaring under the bridge of a nose, and those dark-grey lips, I wanted to touch them.

"I was going to give you another minute before I went in," he said, his lips thinning. "Put on those gloves."

"No problem," I said with a broad smile.

He nodded silently, more focused on his work station than me. He'd been testing the last batch of my blood for the past two days, and today he began removing the vials from the cylindrical unit, all of them looking different depending on the substance he dripped inside. It was twenty-six vials, the first

two batches already showing repeatable data. The computer screen had been set up to spin a 3D model of my DNA.

I sat beside him, putting on the same gloves he had on. Casey removed the contents of the first vial, putting it on a clear glass sheet before popping it under the scanner. The ping and the way he nodded at me meant we had a good start. He typed up a bit and asked for the next vial, which I handed to him with the tongs.

“Can I ask you something,” I said, even as all his attention was elsewhere.

“Go ahead.”

“Well,” I hedged, “They say there’s only a one percent difference between human genetics and that of apes. A part of me is hoping you’re not actually an alien but the next evolution of mankind, the one percent difference we’ll develop once we move into space.” I wanted it to be true, if only because I’d be able to convince myself he was human, just at a new stage.

“No, we’re completely unrelated.”

I groaned. “What did you evolve from then?”

Casey looked at me, a scowl on his face. “Do I disgust you in some way?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then why do you sound as though whatever I evolved from is disappointing?”

“Just confusing, you know. We’re so alike. I sort of wished some part of you came from Earth.”

“I’m sorry if it doesn’t.” Casey sighed as his expression eased. “But it’s the whole reason we began studying you. We saw the emergence of our characteristics, and it was the perfect opportunity to learn more about our own development.”

I nodded. Hell, I was going to do the same if I was faced with alien bacteria.

Casey leaned back in his chair, looking over his findings as his expression loosened up. “I’m going to have to run another full body scan on you.” He

leaned back further, stretching the back of his chair as he put his hands up behind his neck. “Have to make sure you didn’t injure yourself in the shower.”

“Okay.” I cringed, realizing he’d find nothing and start suspecting me.

“Are you really sure you’re fine, Waters?” Casey said with sadness in his tone.

My hands gripped the table. “Did you find I have an incurable disease?”

Casey seemed confused for a second as he shook his head. “I’m asking about you. For some reason you’ve become more... I don’t have the word for it... since we first met. Something about the way you looked at me. It reminded me of the way my father used to send me gifts. Would you call that cheer?”

“Even gifts lose their luster after the first time you use them. You’re right about the cheer. First alien encounter and all. I was doing flips in my head. Once that wore off, I’m just trying to figure out what’s next. As cool as it is being here with you, I’d like to get back to my ship and complete our mission.”

He began scanning another vial. “I’m sorry about the waiting. I wish I could entertain you more than this.”

I bit my lip as the word “entertain” echoed in the depths of my mind, niggling at the fantasy I’d been desperately burying. I closed my eyes and let out a breath. “How about this,” I said, hoping the more I spoke the less my mind would wander, “tell me about your species. It would only be fair.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.”

I reopened my eyes, examining him as he did the same back. “How about the difference between you and the reptiles we have back on Earth?”

Casey’s lip curled. “Do you think I’m *hot*, Waters?”

I was sure my heart stopped, because I damn sure held my breath.

“Because we’re warm blooded just like you. I’d say that’s the major difference.”

I covered my mouth as I lowered my head, heart racing in my chest. Stupid brain making more trouble than it was worth.

“You don’t look well.” Casey paused to touch my knee.

“I’m fine.” I lifted my head, smiling as I swatted his hand away. “Please continue.”

It didn’t seem Casey noticed my reaction. If he did, I couldn’t tell with the way he offhandedly went back to recounting his history. At one point he shifted over a second computer screen, clicking open an encyclopedia for me to read through as he went about his work. So much for entertainment. I skimmed through the screen, all of it in a language I could neither read nor comprehend. If Casey bothered to glance over he’d see the confusion on my face transform into shameful curiosity as my eyes locked onto the section about mating.

I gulped. The photos were graphic, and even if I couldn’t understand the words, I’d never be able to erase this. This was supposed to be educational, not wank material for a pervert with alternative tastes; this was Casey’s culture. This was their life, their reason for continuing their race. Everything that he was came from this, and all I could do was salivate like some starved animal, ingraining the images of the visible cocks for future selfish purposes.

My heart jumped into my throat as Casey’s hand went out for the next vial, his eyes still fixated on his own screen as he kept talking, mostly to himself, a habit even I knew was a trance brought about by boredom. I rapidly scrolled down the page, glad I didn’t have to explain myself.

I turned off the extra screen, focusing back on the task in front of me.

“What’s the verdict?” I asked as Casey went through the last few. Out of the twenty-six vials, there were a select few he set aside for further analysis at a later time. It didn’t in any way mean I was much of an exceptional being.

“It’s good. The committee will be very pleased.”

“Will it help with their decision?”

“That’s the intention.” He called out to his digital secretary, “Send now.”

“What exactly are they looking for?”

Casey had a big smile on his face. “You know all those movies where aliens come down and start destroying all your capitals with confounding accuracy? We’re trying to avoid that for ourselves.”

I rubbed my hairy chin. “What are you implying?”

“They want to make sure you’ll never rise as our equals.”

“Like a slave race?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even bother softening the blow.

“Then we’re fucked, because we’re not like that at all.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Please enlighten me.”

Casey put his hand on mine, his smile much broader now, showing rows of sharp teeth. “They’re not the only ones making plans.” Before I could ask for an explanation, he grabbed my hand, pulling me with him as he went across the lab.

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted and that fold-out bed is killing me.”

Casey turned toward the cage. I didn’t fight him when he took my hands, one after the other, and secured the metal straps around them, nor did I object to the neck band he added to the set. It was time for him to go back to his daily routine, and he had to make sure I wasn’t going to run back to my ship and make a grand exit while he wasn’t looking. I eyed the cage, small and empty, and braced myself to be thrown in.

Instead Casey took my hand, pulling at me again, this time to his work desk where he removed a sterile syringe and filled it with a clear substance from a bottle. He swiftly lifted my sleeve, sterilized an area, and injected me with whatever that was. He applied a bandage and took me towards the exit.

It was my first time seeing beyond the lab, as we crossed the empty corridor, heading through a passage of bright, luminescent lights and white walls toward the far end, where we stepped into their version of an elevator. Casey pressed some buttons as the doors closed and we began going downwards.

“We need a break, don’t you agree? It’ll take them at least another week to go through what I just sent, not counting how slowly they’re going through the

other tests I subjected you to, and I don't think I can stand another night camping." He curled his lip at my wide-eyed and no-doubt confounded expression. "And I enjoy your company, Waters, even if you do snore at night. I like you, and that's why you're coming with me."

Like me? Sure, I should have been worried about a million more important things, like, oh, the judgment of the human race or how Casey clearly had his own secret agenda. But nope, my mind was stuck on those stupid three words: I like you.

I blinked, my eyes going back to the door in front of me. Lab rat. That's all I was. A very coveted lab rat. One that he could cuddle with once he took it home. My chest constricted as the walls closed around me, his hand gripping mine tightly. I tried to control my breathing, and with that Casey's scent, once cloaked in lab smells, became clearer, like a sea breeze filled with seaweed and sand. It brought me back to lazy summer days and of relaxation I'd long forgotten. I looked over at Casey, imagining us naked on the beach.

The elevator stopped just in time. I was focused again on our travel through another series of hallways. This time it was bustling with more of Casey's kind, and they dispersed as we approached, narrowing their eyes in judgment. I guessed the restraints kept them from questioning who was in charge, and my hand closed tighter around Casey's, my senses tingling once again.

Casey unlocked a door and I found myself in his apartment. It was spacious, if slightly empty. I could make out a lush sofa, bookstand, and television stand, all in subdued shades of blue and pink. Casey bypassed all of it as we entered the kitchen. He let me go as he opened his refrigerator, taking out a few things as he began to cook.

"Need any help?"

"Just sit. I'm going to show you my *real skills*."

I chuckled as I supported my chin in my hand. The lab always smelled like metal and chemicals, and my meals there were connected to those odors. This, however, felt like I was back home; the sweetness from the vegetables Casey cut up intensified as he seared them in oil. I had no idea what most of them were.

“Isn’t that going to introduce foreign substances into my system?”

Casey snorted as he turned to look at me. “Our immune systems are compatible, so I inoculated you before we left the lab.”

“I thought you didn’t want to contaminate my system.”

“For the experiments.”

I scratched the back of my head as I sat on a slim stool cushioned with a yellow fabric. “When I return to Earth, I don’t want to bring back some deadly virus by mistake.”

“One of my students had a virus the other day. It was the same day I asked you to count the peaks on that graph as they appeared during the scan of your stool sample.” It was during my second day, probably the most embarrassing, not counting that specifically awkward incident. “Even though I kept you on the other side of the room, you were still exposed. It’s not worth the risk keeping you vulnerable like that. Besides, you’ll be subjected to a thorough sterilization shower before we lead you back to your ship.”

I nodded. “I’m your lab rat, of course.”

“Not exactly.” Casey poured something into the pan before closing the lid. “Unless your lab rats can hold a conversation.”

“I think they just choose not to.”

Casey laughed. “It’s why I prefer you this way.”

The smell from the food came wafting in, and I shivered, my mood dissipating. “What about the others? They looked like they’d rather eat me than have a conversation.”

“We’re not planning on putting you on the menu.”

“Even so.” I rubbed my stubble. “Let’s say this committee of yours gives us the green light. We inhabit a new planet. Then what? Do we stay ignorant? If not, do we become servants to your kind? I mean, these are things I only dreamt about a short time ago, when I imagined humans were the only sentient beings around.”

Casey grumbled. “I don’t know what they’re scheming. My only objective is to make sure you get the opportunity to discover the rest of the universe.

I've seen enough footage, real and dramatized, to know your kind will find its own destiny if given the chance."

"And me?"

"You..." Casey said, his eyes moving up and down my torso. "I'll miss you."

I waved my hand in the air, dismissing any thoughts that he may be flirting. "You'll only miss using me as a basis for research. I know how this goes."

"You really think it's only that?"

"I'm not delusional."

Casey nodded. "I guess you're right, Waters."

I wasn't sure why, but something changed in his demeanor. He finished cooking and set the two plates between us. It looked delicious. I took a first bite, and indeed, it was.

"Wow. What is this?"

Casey's shoulders slumped. "Nothing special. We have a terrarium on the station where we get everything."

"Still," I maintained, "this tastes way better than what they were feeding me before." Actually, I was just glad to be out of the lab. "By the way," I asked as I remembered the log on board, "wouldn't it be strange when the crew wakes up and realize the date is off by a week or more?" I put the fork down. "And the crew on Earth is tracking the ship's progress. We're completely off course and standing still."

"Not exactly," Casey shook his head. "We calculated the speed and direction of your vessel before we took you on board. This station is migrating on your route toward the planet as we speak. It means even if the committee drags their feet, they have a firm deadline to meet."

"Oh." I twiddled the fork in my fingers. "You could have told me sooner."

"It didn't seem as important at the time."

I nodded. He had a point, even if I still wished he'd have explained sooner. "Anything else unimportant I should know?"

Casey shrugged, a slight frown forming in between his chewing.

Something was definitely off about him. Maybe it was enthusiasm that left him when I professed I wasn't delusional. What else was I supposed to think? That him missing me was something heartbreaking? We were aliens to each other! Species from different planets across the galaxy. Us meeting in the first place was jaw dropping; us going separate ways was inevitable. It was hard enough trying to douse my horny feelings without having to also contemplate these emotions.

"Would it be possible to get some supplies from the ship anyway?"

Casey's attention stayed glued on his plate, his fork moving the pieces around as he spoke. "Make a list and I'll send someone."

I mentally fist-pumped in victory. I shouldn't have been so overjoyed when Casey sounded so defeated, but if he was going to have the comfort of his apartment, I wanted some benefits too. After we finished eating, Casey gave me a disk with a schematic of the inside of my ship. I zoomed in on my chamber, clicking on the portions of the room that had the stuff I wanted, typing the names and descriptions of each thing in the margins. Casey slid the disk into a wall unit, and a blip of the light told us it'd been sent to one of his students.

Afterwards I watched television while he showered. The channels were reminiscent of those back home: news, sports, drama, comedy, and porn. I focused on what I could make out from the breaking news. From the looks of caution tape and uniforms, I assumed this was a piece about a recent crime. Then I saw a crowd full of various alien species, some looking like the monsters from my nightmares. Yet the way the crowd undulated, the way it tried to get more camera time, even the way they seemed to heckle each other was all too reminiscent of back home. The universe had less diversity than I ever perceived possible.

I grumbled as it turned to commercials—jewelry, vehicles, fashion, food, other shows featuring Casey's kind. At least future generations of space explorers wouldn't be able to complain about severe culture clashes.

Casey came out dripping wet, a towel hanging from his neck. My eyes trailed down the muscles, the misty shine forming a cascade of shades of green

with each ripple of sinew, every part of him well-defined. There was a pattern of dark green stripes along the side of his torso, curving into his back and coming around the other side. But my eyes skimmed further down and found, in despair, nothing there except for a smooth, green bulge, as though he were wearing briefs.

Casey grunted. “You have no idea how much I was looking forward to that.” He wiped his face, and turned around to go through a drawer, and the stripes on his back were V-shaped, pointing down to his pinky-sized tail.

I rested my elbow on the armrest, covering the view I had of his fine ass. “I know what you mean. Nothing compares to relaxing at home.”

A beep went off at the door.

“That must be your stuff,” Casey said as he got the door naked.

On the other side was a student I’d seen plenty of times before, with a satchel on his shoulder. He handed it off with a grumble in my direction, never once eying Casey for his lack of clothing. Then Casey closed the door with a farewell and brought the satchel over to me.

I took it without hesitation, aiming directly for the bathroom. “This may take a while,” I warned.

“Take your time.” Casey waved at me as he took my seat on the sofa, changing the channel and increasing the volume.

As soon as I locked the door behind me, I removed the portable tablet I asked for. Turning it on, I found it still had battery left. I found one of my favorite porn videos to watch as I plugged in my earphones and pressed the button for the sink and toilet. I sat on the lid as I propped the tablet in one hand and my cock in the other, a tissue below it.

Human fucking human. It was so matter of fact. I felt nothing.

I sighed as I pumped my shaft, letting the images unroll before me as I lurched forward, gripping the wall in need. I was close, but something was lacking. Typically these sessions went quicker, with more ease. My mind wandered. It contorted the fantasy, trying new positions, new actors, new scenes, clutching every last combination until the lead male morphing into

someone recognizable. Someone with yellow eyes, green skin, and a hard cock just for me.

I screamed as the heat in my groin reached its pitch, erupting all over the wall as I fell to my knees, black spots in my vision.

Fuck.

This was wrong and I knew it.

The few times Casey took my hand, madness rose within me, I wanted more, knowing it was impossible. As the heat grew in my pelvis, tears rolled down my face. I didn't want a human man. I wanted Casey.

I groaned out as the orgasm hit, the stream dripping onto the tissue as I lurched forward, aching sobs escaping my lips.

I stayed like that for several minutes, rocking back and forth until my nose clogged and I couldn't breathe anymore. I put the tablet away and reached into the shower, hoping the hot water would soothe the coldness in my chest.

No one ever had to know. I've seen the sorts of crazy things people posted online, the creature-sex fetishists. I was just one of them, nothing more. My mind was merely making shit up out of the harsh reality. Once this dilemma was over I'd never see him again, and it was all for the better. I dried myself, feeling calm as I buttoned the coat, checking my face in the mirror. Put on a smile. That's right. All this was was a slip.

Smile. He won't know the difference. I brushed my teeth and shaved my beard. Presentable, even with the subtle redness around my eyes.

I dressed in my own clothes, hesitating as I stood at the door. This would all be over soon. One day I'd look back at this like a surreal dream, but until then, I had to keep it together. If Casey asked, I was lamenting the separation from my own kind. Homesick. That's all it was. Once I was back with my own kind, everything would be okay. Until then, I had to smile.

"You're right," I said as I stretched my arms over my head, walking barefoot along the soft carpet. "I was looking forward to that. Using my own stuff is a privilege I'll never take for granted again."

Casey neither moved nor responded.

I approached him cautiously, noticing how his head was hanging down. On closer inspection, he'd fallen asleep.

As I sat beside him, his balance faltered and his head collapsed against my shoulder. My chest heaved as I tried pushing him over to the other side, fighting the urge to bring my face up to his, taking in his smell and his warmth. Instead, his arms craned over my chest, tugging me in closer as he mumbled something incoherent in his own language.

I couldn't escape him.

We sat in silence. It was the third time in the past hour we tried small talk and my mind drifted off. I couldn't even recall what I was thinking. We gave up and turned on the television once again.

The night before, Casey insisted on continuing to sleep on the couch, shooing me to the bedroom. It was the first time since I met him that I hadn't woken up with him by my side. I hadn't realized how cold a bed could be until today.

And now our conversations were jagged, built on mere etiquette neither of us wanted to break. It made me wonder if I was better off not coming here at all, to be kept in the cage; it would have been better than now, sitting on opposite ends of the sofa, a palpable void between us.

I rolled my head up, staring at the ceiling as the noises from the screen filled the air.

Antiperspirant commercial.

"You guys sweat?" I asked.

"Yeah," Casey rested against a large pillow. "It regulates our body temperature."

"Through the scales?"

"No, the pores between them."

"I see."

Why did I keep trying?

I got up, heading to the bedroom where the satchel with my stuff was stored. I closed the door and took out my tablet, looking through the general list of movies I had saved. Mostly nature documentaries. I clicked through, sighing to myself as I lay on the bed. It wasn't only the porn that kept me sane, sometimes I was more homesick than anything else.

I considered watching the special about tropical beaches, grumbling as I realized why I was particularly interested in that subject. It was Casey's sweat that got to me on the elevator; I knew it because his scent was lost after he showered. I'd snuck a whiff while he was asleep on my shoulder the night before, a part of me hoping to gain back the reverie, but all I got was his fruity soap perfume.

I needed to get my mind off of this. I switched screens, tapping on the icon for my work. The spreadsheet opened, all the numbers and calculations flying at me, reminding me why I was in this predicament in the first place.

I went through some of the figures I'd drawn. The last thing I'd checked was the filtration system... before the aliens got me. I squinted my eyes as something struck me as off. I bit at my nail as I pulled up the digital scrap sheet, erasing my previous notes and deriving the formula from scratch again. One of the variables was wrong. My heart beat erratically in my chest as I went back to the spreadsheet. How the fuck did I miss that? I glanced back and forth rapidly, seeing the error was a typo, a miniscule detail I'd overlooked on multiple occasions, one that had me adjusting the filter strength to compensate.

I jumped up, goose bumps on my skin as I paced the room. I'd been working on this for months, reviewed it multiple times, even had it approved by the Captain. I shoved my hands through my hair. I had a flawless reputation, and all my projects in the past were successful. The Casey Space Program trusted me when they hired me as the lead scientist; the crew trusted me with their well-being. When we landed, they would have used my numbers to build the system. My miscalculation would have created an imbalance in the water supply, one that would jeopardize the entire mission.

If I weren't abducted... we would have died.

I swooped up the tablet again, praying it was still synced to the ship's server as I began checking all the other seemingly insignificant numbers. I

even pulled up all my other projects. I had to make sure once we landed we would be safe to continue with our mission.

Casey knocked.

“I’m busy!”

He nudged open the door as I continued tapping with one hand, biting a finger of the other. “That looks awfully small for whatever you’re doing. Do you want a bigger screen?”

With wide-eyes I looked up at him. “That would help.”

I tapped my foot and walked around in circles as Casey took his time hooking up my tablet to his personal computer. Once the screen was up, I continued from where I left off.

Casey stood behind me and watched quietly. He pointed at a box. “Multiply by this.”

I already knew that. “Can you stop hovering over me? You’re ruining my concentration.”

“I’m just trying to be helpful.”

“I don’t tell you how to do your job.” I swiveled the chair, to get a good look at his face. “In fact, something just dawned on me. You told me all the experiments were done and you sent them everything you had. What about those vials you separated for ‘further review’?”

“You shouldn’t worry,” Casey said coolly as he sat on the edge of the bed. “While you were asleep I used the data from the vials and recalibrated the computer. Even if they get new blood samples in the future, the results will be the same. I didn’t want any evidence of tampering.”

“Tampering?”

“This station was installed with the best equipment to track Earth’s progress. I’ve studied your language and culture, gained a sense of your perspective, and I’ve done everything in my power to avoid getting blind-sided by my kind’s prejudice against your species.”

“Prejudice?”

“I was raised with a high fondness for humans. It came with the knowledge you’d never be what my superiors wanted. You’d be better.”

“Why?” I narrowed my eyes. “We’re nothing close to what you have.”

“Not at the moment,” he smiled. “But you have brilliant imaginations and a certain charisma. You’ll never be their servant class. They just can’t know it yet.”

“When did you have time to reprogram? I’ve been watching you this entire time.” Then it hit me. “You lost sleep over this?”

Casey palmed his face as the shade of it turned yellowish. “It’s nothing I can’t make up.”

I tapped my finger against the desk. “Okay, so let’s say all you’re saying is true. I still don’t understand why you had to fabricate the truth. They’ll blow up my ship, and we’ll make a new one. It’s not going to stop us.”

Casey stared at me, his expression blank. “Your safety is far more important.”

“Because you like me,” I said in a flat tone.

“Yes.”

“I’m disposable.”

“Far from it. I couldn’t have met a better human.”

“And I couldn’t have met a better... you. That doesn’t change the facts. My mission was to be the caretaker of my crew during our travel through space. We were hijacked by an alien station, and I was extensively experimented on. Then there’s a committee we’re waiting on to find out if I can continue travelling or if I’ll be killed. But I know of your existence. I’m going to tell my crew if I get out of this alive. We’re going to look for you, and then you’ll be experimented on.” I flailed my hands. “Do you see where your plan failed? We’re the prejudiced ones. By saving me, you’re only endangering yourself.”

“It’s a risk, but I know you won’t do that. Because I know you.”

“You really think so?” I refuted.

In an instant I found myself grabbed and thrown to the bed, my back hitting the mattress as Casey's lips enclosed mine.

Wait. What?

I pushed at him hard, sending him tumbling backwards. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Casey dusted himself off, sliding beside me. "When I said I studied your culture, do you really think I skipped over that part about sex?"

My throat clenched. "But... you... and me? It's absurd. It's delusional. It can never work."

Casey leaned in closer, his breath brushing against my cheek. "I've been considering and reconsidering this ever since we first met, but unless I do something now, I know I'm going to regret it. I can't stand another day like today. I thought maybe you needed some comfort—the lab is not the best place to relax—but you only got worse. I lost hope, and now this. I was doing what I felt was best for you, and I know you'll do the same in return. You like me as much as I like you. It makes me want you so much it hurts. I really meant it when I said you're beautiful."

"I find a lot of things beautiful. It doesn't mean I'd fuck those things."

"Perhaps not," he said as he pushed a strand of my hair behind my ear, "but I have a feeling this is mutual. My research shows we're physically compatible."

"No," I pushed at him again, "I'm still human, and you're an alien lizard-man. This isn't natural."

"We're both scientists who are attracted to each other. Even if I can't explain why, I can't deny that it's there. I need to test this. I need you."

"Then you should also know I have no idea where your dick is."

Casey laughed as he slid off his shirt and pants, prompting me to do the same. "It's hidden in a pouch."

He took my hand and placed it between his legs, the tender area cool to the touch. I groped around, not finding any opening to the pouch. Casey chuckled

and advised me to glide my fingers up and down the area until it began to heat up. He kept my hand still as the tip of his cock edged out, my hand sliding down the shaft as it rose higher, blooming in width, the color lightening from black to a light grey.

“See, all very simple,” he said in a low growl as he reached for my shaft.

“For you maybe. Mine just sits there until it’s interested.”

“Seems I’m *interesting*,” Casey said as he kissed along my neck and down my collarbone, sending shivers through me. My cock swelled with blood, the tip pink and hard as he rubbed his thumb along it. I arched back with a moan. “And,” he continued, “so are you. Ever since you smiled at me that first meeting, I don’t know what it did, but all I wanted after that was to see that smile again. So calm. So confident. You didn’t fear the unknown.”

“Because I had everything to gain the moment I saw you.”

“Me?” Casey stopped at my navel, my dick nearly jutting into his neck. “I’m nothing special.”

I smirked. “You’re special to me.”

Casey pulled himself back up my body, his lips against mine. “That’s the smile.”

My hands gripped his back as our mouths opened up to each other. Sharp teeth, pointy tongue, slick scales. We groped at one another, the closeness with him burning up my core. All those years of drowning myself in work to be able to fly to space, all that isolation training to guard the ship while the crew hibernated, all so I could be at the forefront of human history. Here I was. I gripped him tighter as his fingers wove through my hair, our cocks sliding along each other’s bellies.

“Fuck,” I broke off to breathe as my balls clenched. “I want you inside me.”

“You sure?” Casey raised a brow. “Really sure?”

I reached down to stroke his thick, rock-hard cock, the sides of it slimy and hot. “Is there a problem? I thought you said we’re compatible.”

Casey laughed as his face flushed with yellow. “It’ll burn. A lot.”

Shit, that got me aching more as I bent my knees, opening my legs for him. “I’d like that. A lot.”

Casey’s grin took up his entire face. Without further hesitation he lined the tip of his engorged cock with my hole. I gripped his shoulders as he plunged in, my muscles standing no chance against the intrusion, giving way to the fullness as I moaned louder.

“Fuck.” My neck craned back as my feet dug into the covers. “So much better than the fantasies.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Casey groaned.

I didn’t have time to question the implication as he began grinding in and out, hitting my sweet spot as I clenched him. It was a long time since anything that big went inside me, and it was like learning the sensation all over again. It burned a little, not as much as Casey feared, his slime acting as sufficient lubrication.

The bed rocked beneath us as a part of me wondered if he’d stop if it broke, the same part that hoped he’d drive hard enough to make it happen. He pumped his shaft into me as he bit at my neck, ears, lips, and whatever else he could get his mouth on as my hands wrapped around his neck, refusing to let go, savoring every bit of pain and pleasure he dealt. I couldn’t protest, not with the way the pricks of pain travelled my nerves, tickling my shaft, making me want to explode. I wasn’t prepared for the intensity. I pressed my nails into his shoulders as he grabbed my knees, bringing them up higher as he pressed into my chest, plunging his full length into me.

“So close,” he lamented as his pace faltered.

In a sweat-filled daze, my fingers slid down the crook of his back, finding the little tail at the end, wrapping my finger under it and caressing the tender underside.

Casey buckled with a scream, his thrusts losing their rhythm as his cock undulated inside me, his release setting my insides aflame.

“Burning!” I yelled as he filled me up, consuming me as everything I had surged onto his chest.

I exhaled, my heart racing and my brain beating against my skull as Casey dropped my knees, still rocking back and forth as we stared at each other in wonder. He rolled over so I lay on his chest, his cock still firmly planted in my ass.

“Well,” I remarked as I licked at a bead of sweat from his chin, he tasted like the ocean, salty and warm after a sunny day, “You weren’t kidding about that warning.”

“Yeah. And I got a surprise too; no one’s touched the underside of my tail during sex before. This will need a retest for certain.”

He grinned as I bit at his lip. His cock expanded again.

“Wait,” I said in shock, “I need at least a few minutes before I can go again.”

“Oh, don’t mind me. Sometimes it takes a bit longer to completely unload.”

“What?” I yelped as Casey held my ass cheeks down, the sharp friction numbing my head as more of his cum coated my insides, the heat rising into my spine and making me drop into his chest. After that his shaft deflated, wiggling out of me. “What,” I whispered this time, “is that stuff made of? Lava?”

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing but the result of my sac growing hotter than my normal body temperature. It’s not enough to do you any harm.”

“What did I get myself into?” I laughed in satisfaction as my eyes closed and I drifted off into sleep. My fantasies were going to need some serious tweaking.

I lay on the sofa as Casey went about making breakfast. It was day four of staying in his apartment, and I couldn’t count how many times we had sex since. We fucked everywhere. We wrecked the living room, broke a couple of chairs in the kitchen, and caused a small flood in the shower when we bent one of the pipes. If we were too tired to screw, we’d embrace each other, feeling up every part of the other’s body.

Casey had told me everything, from his own fantasies to how he was afraid of the consequences. He even showed me his collection of human porn; it was more impressive than mine. When it came to relationships, though, his success rate was no better than mine, his sex life losing priority to his work. That wasn't the case for the past three days, and we've never been this satiated before. We were the same, and it took an alien abduction to find each other.

I knew what I had to do. My superiors were not ready to hear about Casey, would take it as a threat and would start a conflict. I had to ease them into the idea that we weren't alone in the universe, first with bacteria samples then with something small and simple. Casey said he could buy me time, that he could extend the quarantine until we proved we could not only settle in space but also begin to thrive. Then, he said, it would be up to fate to decide whether our two species would get along.

A ring came from the door, and Casey stepped out to get it while I covered myself with the blanket.

Casey was talking to someone out of my line of sight. There came an exclamation from him as he slammed the door and ran over to me, laughing. "You got clearance."

I jumped into his arms as we kissed, holding each other close. A dread filled me as the weight of the decision hit me. Whether I lived or died, I wasn't going to be in Casey's arms anymore.

"This is it," I said, tears in my eyes.

"A leap for mankind."

"What will happen to this station?"

"No use for it anymore. We're going to release your ship and travel back."

My chest pounded. "I'll never see you again, will I?"

Casey kissed the top of my head, moving down to my cheek and my chin. "Not unless you come with me."

"You know I can't."

Casey held my hand, our fingers intertwining. "Yeah," he exhaled, "All of this would be for nothing if you suddenly go missing."

“Hey,” I said as I bit his lower lip, “maybe you can come visit. I still have a few months left of travelling; my crew won’t know the difference.”

“Or once you’re done with your mission,” Casey bit right back, “I can abduct you and never let you go again.”

I raised an eyebrow, a smile spreading on my face. “I’d like that.”

Casey’s lip curled. “Then we have a *date*.”

THE END

Author Bio

I entertain people with stories. When I'm not writing, I'm out looking for new sources of inspiration. I love adventures, no matter how big or small, and I'm always up for trying something different, perhaps even kinky. I have a bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering even though I'm really pursuing a career in publishing; I volunteer my time at indie and used bookstores. If you like my fiction, it's all set in the same universe, across time and space. It's like the story never ends.

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THE ONLY WAY OUT IS IN

By Lyn Gala

Photo Description

The original request included a promotional shot of Jayne Cobb, a character from *Firefly*. He is gruff with a face shadowed by stubble, and he is crouched and holding a gun. The request wanted “a man deep in the closet, striving to be hyper-masculine, and completely misogynistic, simply to hide his attraction to men.”

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Jayne Cobb, of Firefly fame, struck me as a man deep in the closet, striving to be hyper masculine, and completely misogynistic, simply to hide his attraction to men. I'm thinking Kinsey three or four. This would also explain his extreme dislike of the shy Dr Simon (who we now know was played by a gay man).

I'd love to see a post Serenity, space opera treatment of someone like Jayne's self-realization. Now what would be his type... hmmm... what man would finally drive him wild enough to face up to his repressed desires. It should include all of the attendant emotional turmoil (inside monologue) of someone with his low IQ and high survival instincts, and yet include the outside language of someone who was trained to say as much with as few words as possible. This man has depth, but the waters are pretty murky.

Anyone take the challenge?

Sincerely,

Mateo

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: action, futuristic, military, spacemen, first time, alpha males, slow burn, HFN

Word count: 32,187

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THE ONLY WAY OUT IS IN

By Lyn Gala

CHAPTER ONE

“Anything?”

Jacqs scratched his crotch before answering. “Nope.” The front had been too damn quiet. It made him twitchy, and when he got twitchy he tended to get himself in trouble by taking shots at random asteroids. It was better than sitting in a flying tin can waiting for the other side to blow him up.

“Keep sharp,” the lieutenant ordered.

“Hell, I planned to fall asleep and let them blast us out of existence.”

“Glebov.” The lieutenant drew his name out until it sounded like another word altogether. He wanted an apology, but Jacqs just snorted. Anyone stupid enough to tell him to not end up dead was real dumb. Jacqs Glebov didn’t have many talents in this world, but shooting people dead while not ending up with a flaming round through his own chest was one of his best qualities.

The lieutenant took a step closer, his boots loud against the metal decking. “This is why you keep getting dropped in rank two days after getting promoted.”

“As long as I have enough money in my pocket to hire a good whore when we dock, I don’t much care.”

Lieutenant Taylor sat in the gunner seat next to Jacqs. It meant that Jacqs had to lean back so he could see around the divider between them. Taylor just sat there, looking at Jacqs real hard.

“If’n you’re looking for a fuck, you’d better try one of the other men.”

Taylor sighed, and Jacqs returned to his task of scanning their bit of the asteroid patch that divided human space from the batfaces. “Why is it that every time I try to talk to you the conversation ends with you accusing me of wanting sex?”

“‘Cuz you’re one of them hypersexualized types. Queer-turned and all.”

“Homosexual does not mean hypersexual,” Taylor pointed out.

Jacqs snorted again. He didn’t believe that for a cheap second. He’d grown up young and spent most of his adult life on mercenary and then military ships. If there was one thing he’d learned early it was that queer-turned men and pansexuals were always bothering him by looking at him, all admiring him, even after he had made it perfectly clear that he was interested in women.

“I want to talk about your career. You should be a sergeant by now, Glebov.”

“Yep, I should be,” Jacqs agreed. It was a point of contention with him, but as long as he got paid and as long as men who tried jumping ship from the military side to the private side got shot in the back, he wasn’t going to make much of a fuss.

“The fight with Greinbeck—”

“If he wants to go bullying people half his size, then he can live with the fucking consequences,” Jacqs interrupted. If Taylor wanted an apology, Jacqs didn’t plan to oblige. Greinbeck was a menace that command dumped on them because he couldn’t be trusted with a gun in his hand. Jacqs felt no need to play nice with a psychopath. As far as he was concerned, they should have congratulated him for that fight.

“But it’s hard to promote a man who constantly insults other crew. You proposition the women with such regularity they don’t even bother filing sexual harassment claims anymore, and you can’t exchange two words with me before you bring up my sexuality. Allie Grah is about ready to choke you to death with your own gun if you don’t get the message that her hypersexuality does not imply that she wants to be sexual with you.”

Jacqs pushed his chair back. It slid along the rail until it hit the stop, and now Jacqs could glare at Taylor real good. “There ain’t nothing wrong with me. You may be all into book learning, but most crew ain’t got enough schooling to fit in a teaspoon, so don’t talk down to me like I ain’t good enough to knock boots with any of them.” Jacqs could feel hot anger crawl up

his belly. He wanted a fight. 'Course on the ship, a fight meant time in the brig, and he did have a mighty dislike of being locked in a little place—but if Taylor were going to insult his masculinity, it might be worth the punishment.

“I’m not. I never meant to imply you’re not attractive.” Jacqs knew that Taylor was being honest about that. Fact was, Jacqs could turn a few heads. Dark hair and vivid blue eyes made a striking combination, and Jacqs’ wide shoulders helped a good deal. It made up for any deficiencies in the rest of his face, what with the scar down one cheek and an ear mangled in a fight with the batfaces. A blaster had nearly taken off his face, so he counted himself lucky to just lose part of an ear.

“Meaning what, exactly?” Jacqs demanded. “If you’re looking to exchange a promotion for sexual favors, I’m not queer-turned.” Crossing his arms, Jacqs waited to see what sort of stupid would fall out of Nimor Taylor’s head next.

Instead of saying anything, Taylor stood up and straightened his jacket while looking down at Jacqs in the gunner chair. It left Jacqs uncomfortably close to Taylor’s dick, and Jacqs worked real hard to not glance that way. He didn’t much care to find out whether or not Nimor Taylor got wood while looking at him. Pervert.

“If you decide that you’re ready to take promotions seriously and/or join the human race, let me know, Jacqs.” With that, Taylor turned and started walking away.

“Hey, I ain’t no Ba t̃l,” he called after the officer.

“Get back to work,” Taylor called back.

“Rat-bred queer-turned officers,” Jacqs muttered as he slid the gunner chair forward again.

CHAPTER TWO

Jacqs didn't have much time to ponder the strange conversation, because two days later, the *Candiru* reached dock. SenFifty-three was a dirty and dangerous little station where the whores took antibiotics and the whiskey was mostly home-brewed out of shuttle fuel, but Jacqs didn't care. He'd sell a kidney to get off ship, and that weren't even hyperbole. The *Candiru* was a retrofit, so sixteen crew and four officers were shoved into a tin can built for twelve. Some days Jacqs didn't know which he hated more, his crew or the damn batfaces.

He hadn't gotten more than a dozen steps before his ship comm gave a little jolt. Cursing, Jacqs pulled it out. Just as soon as he figured which joker had turned his comm into a damn shock-jolt, he was going to shove their head out an airlock and maybe not let them back in again. Jacqs read the short message before dropping it back in his pocket.

They had a new second-in-command coming in. Didn't make no nevermind to him. As a gunner he worked below decks and as a corporal, at least this month, he worked under the lieutenants. Jacqs figured he'd never even meet the commander. He'd seen the current commander once, and that'd been during a disciplinary hearing in the loading bay. Never once had he laid eyes on the captain.

Ignoring the message, Jacqs headed for his favorite bar on the more seedy side of the station. Let the others overpay for their whiskey and women, Jacqs preferred them both with less pretention. Or was that pretense? He liked honest.

It took almost an hour to cross over to the section he wanted, what with the two lifts being out of commission and the walks crowded with refugees camping up against the inner station walls, but Jacqs finally reached the ladder that led up to the more adult section tucked behind engineering. Other folk tried to avoid the engine hoping to survive any explosion. Personally, if Jacqs was going to die in space, he'd rather do it fast than linger with all the other idiots scrambling after the last air packs. Of course, even better would be avoiding death altogether.

“If it isn’t my favorite space tramp!” Aral cried out when Jacqs pushed his way into the cramped bar. Overhead struts forced him to duck down to reach the middle floor, where rough men and women sat at tables and gambled, and again to reach the bar proper. Dropping onto a seat, Jacqs reached out an arm for her. Aral slid into his embrace, her piles of blonde hair tickling the side of his face as she wiggled her whole body.

“Are you here to spend some time?”

“And money?” Jacqs asked.

“Oh babe, the money is just to pay the rent. Trust me, I’d give you a tumble for free if the boss let me.” Aral winked at the bartender, but Jacqs believed that about as much as he believed the army was like to promote him to captain. The other whores and tenders came and left, but Aral was a fixture in this place. If she didn’t own the place, he’d eat his britches.

“Can’t go ruining your reputation by giving it away for free,” he teased.

“And I know you wouldn’t go doing that to me.” Reaching down, Aral ran her hand over Jacqs’ chest and down toward his dick. This is what Jacqs wanted—simple, direct, and female.

A man chose the seat on the other side of Aral and loudly ordered a drink, but Jacqs ignored him. He had his prize. Unfortunately, his prize was interested in greeting every new soul that showed up.

“Well, you’re a new one. Let me guess, fighter pilot?”

The other man laughed. “If I got this in a fighter, I’d be dead. Nope, I’m a ground pounder. Well, I was. It’s hard to pound the ground with one leg.”

Aral seemed to twitch in Jacqs’ arms, and then she was gone, her back to him while she greeted this new fellow.

“Get lost,” Jacqs suggested. Aral’s smile turned a little thin, but he planned to pay her enough to make up for any perceived inconsiderateness.

“Now is that any way to speak to a lady?” the stranger asked.

“She was speaking to me before you got here, and we was doing just fine.”

The stranger turned his chair and Aral moved enough for Jacqs to get a good look. The guy had the roughness of a soldier who had lost his shine. He

had a uniform top, but the insignia were gone and the front wrinkled like he'd slept in it. Only one pant leg hung down to the foot. The other one ended about halfway up the calf, and a fully articulated mechanical leg had taken the place of the owner's original foot. The toes were longer than human toes, each bent slightly toward the ground to help with balance.

"I hear them is handy in a battle," Jacqs said. Aral reached out and punched Jacqs in the arm.

"You be nice."

"That were me being nice. If you want to see me not nice, you're welcome to hit me again." Jacqs wouldn't hit someone who wasn't big enough to hit back, but he didn't mind making the threat. Aral blinked at him for a second, and then she rolled her eyes.

"One of these days, someone's going to see through all that gruff, Jacqs Glebov."

"I doubt that."

Reaching up, Aral patted him on the cheek before swaying off to greet some new guests.

"Well, hell. I'd wanted to get her in one of them back rooms before she got distracted, and you went and ruined it," Jacqs accused the stranger. *That were just aggravating.*

"All I did was sit down." He stuck his hand out. "Zeke Waters."

Jacqs took the hand grudgingly. There wasn't actually a good reason for being rude, even if he wanted to take his frustrations out on someone. "Jacqs Glebov."

"That's what she said." Zeke nodded toward Aral.

"So, can you really kick the shit out of even batfaces with that thing?"

"If they have their armor off, sure. All I have to do is ask them pretty please to disarm themselves before we commence to fighting."

Jacqs snorted. He wasn't exactly sure if Zeke was laughing with him or at him, but Jacqs did tend to assume the worst of folk.

“Mostly it’s a pain in the stump. I don’t care how good medicine gets, a prosthetic leg does not take a pounding the way human bone does. The knee starts to hurt after a while.” Zeke patted the knee above the metal limb.

“It’s better than limping around legless.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that. So,” Zeke studied him, “you’re disreputable, so you have to have some serious skills for officers to let you get away with looking like you slept in those clothes. Muscled, so you have time to work out. I would say you do manual labor, but manual labor never gets away with looking that rumpled. You’d be written up and spending the first night of leave cleaning the planking.”

Jacqs pushed himself off his chair and crowded in Zeke’s space. Most folk were downright intimidated by Jacqs when he got close. He was muscled, and at six foot five, he towered over most people. It made it easy to get them to stop annoying him, and if his size didn’t do it, his gun generally did. “How do you know I just got in? Maybe my ship’s been docked a while.”

Zeke grinned. Slowly he stood, and he was almost as tall as Jacqs. His dark eyes stared straight into Jacqs and they pressed together, neither willing to yield, but Zeke had an expression almost like this amused him. It made Jacqs cranky. “No one has docked except the *Candiru* in at least two weeks. They had a skirmish near here, and the flight paths were littered with debris, including unexploded ordinances. Now you don’t look like a man to sit on a ship and twiddle his thumbs for two weeks, so I made an educated guess. Are we going to fight about it?”

Jacqs grunted, not sure what to think of the logic. Zeke might still be one of them spies trying to gather intelligence on the ships, but his story made sense. “If you go asking after crew and armaments, I’m like to shoot you in the guts,” Jacqs warned. Then he sat down again. The bartender had brought a whiskey, and Jacqs dropped his pay card on the counter for the man to charge.

“Good answer.” Zeke sat next to him. “And taking all those clues, I’m guessing you’re either a munitions handler or a gunner, so that threat has some teeth.”

“It sounds like you’re asking about crew.”

“You are a bastard with a one-track mind.”

“Yep,” Jacqs agreed, “and I came in here with the one thought of hiring a nice woman.” Once Jacqs reclaimed his card, he turned his back to the bar and started checking on possibilities. He ruled out the crew women immediately. Uppity bitches rarely gave him the time of day, always filing complaints or threatening to shove a microbomb up his nose and detonate it. Unfortunately, the whores all seemed busy. Jacqs was going to have to wait. Well, if that was the case, Zeke was at least interesting.

“How’d it happen?” he asked, using his whiskey glass to gesture toward the leg.

“I was sent in to blow a building. My cover team went down, and I didn’t think I was making it out, so I detonated.”

“You weren’t clear?”

“Hell, I’m surprised I’m not dead. Doctors picked about a ton of shrapnel out of my back, but the leg caught the worst of it.”

Jacqs grunted. “Nearly lost my arm once. Doctors managed to grow a new nerve or something in time to save it.” Jacqs still had the plastic netting in his arm. At one point that’s all that held the two halves of it together.

“Before the war turned ugly?”

“Yep,” Jacqs agreed, although it wasn’t strictly true. His family had been unfortunate enough to be at ground zero, so he didn’t know anything except war. The difference was that kids could get medics to look after their wounds even while adults were left to suffer.

“Doctors had time to fix things back then. Now they just slap the body together best they can.”

“Fuck, yes,” Jacqs agreed. “We ain’t even got a doctor on board.” He stopped. Wait. He weren’t supposed to be discussing crew.

Zeke scratched his chest. “I thought the captain or the second were supposed to be trained medics.”

He’d spilled the nuts and bolts now and there weren’t much Jacqs could do to change the fact he’d talked. So he just shrugged. “I suppose there are lots of

regulations people don't pay much mind to." Jacqs looked at Zeke. "You seem to know a lot about flying rules for a ground pounder."

Zeke smiled. "Yep."

"I'm thinking on gut-shooting you," Jacqs warned. The man was acting a little suspicious, and in the middle of a war, that seemed cause enough.

"Are you?" Zeke laughed. "That would be ironic, to survive the Ba t'l on Siros Two only to get shot in a bar fight."

Jacqs slammed his drink down on the bar top. "You're shitting me." Jacqs looked at the man again. No fucking way was one of the rare survivors of Siros Two sitting in a shit bar on the shit side of the universe.

Zeke pulled the neck of his shirt down to show the official tattoo.

"Hell."

"That was the word for it," Zeke agreed.

"That where you lost your leg?" Jacqs figured there were so many human parts on that planet, the doctors wouldn't have been able to find one random leg in the mess.

"No. I came through that without a scratch." Zeke seemed to lose his focus for a second, but Jacqs understood that. He'd lost crewmates. Real crewmates, not the ragtag losers on the *Candiru*. He'd lost crew he'd fought next to in space and on the ground. Megal had held her guts in with one hand and still kept firing with the other as he dragged her away from one fight, and it hadn't helped a bit.

"Ain't one of us to come out of a fight without a scratch," Jacqs said, real quiet-like.

Zeke sighed and ran his hands through his short curls. "I suppose not. Still, the body was in one piece. I lost the leg later. So, you have any replacement parts?"

"Nope. Haven't seen much action lately."

"*Candiru's* a watcher class," Zeke said with a slow nod.

Jacqs gave him another look to make it clear that gut-shooting was still a distinct possibility. Instead of taking offense, Zeke laughed and slapped him

on the shoulder. “That’s no secret. That tin can wouldn’t stand up to a fight, so she’s a watcher or a transport, and she’s not big enough for transport. Besides, no one names a transport after a fish that likes to crawl up a man’s dick and eat his bladder.”

That was true. Both parts. The *Candiru* had been a small smuggling ship, and she didn’t have the space for a military transport. Captain and commander got private quarters and the two lieutenants shared quarters, but the rest of the crew were all shoved down into what had once been a loading bay. The lower bays all carried munitions and heavy shielding for the belly guns, but Jacqs figured if he didn’t take any enemy out first, one good shot and the *Candiru* would go up like a flea in a candle flame.

“I still ain’t talking on it.”

“Right. We aren’t talking about it at all.” Zeke nodded, but the corners of his lips kept on a’ twitching.

“Asshole,” Jacqs said. About a half second later, it occurred to him that most men took offense at that. But instead of starting a bar fight that would have gotten Jacqs written up for sure, Zeke just grinned.

“Fuck, yes. Nice guys don’t do well in our world. Being an asshole’s safer.”

Jacqs grunted his agreement. That was true enough, not that the *Candiru* crew understood it. Pansy-assed worthless grunts and queer-turned officers, that’s what he had to deal with. He didn’t have no real soldiers on that ship, not like him. Of course, most folks on the *Candiru* were working up in their careers, and Jacqs had gotten busted back down to a watcher ship after a small incident that had not been his fault. Sometimes when soldiers didn’t get to fight enemy often enough, fights just broke out on their own.

The two of them leaned against the bar and watched the crowd. The poker game in the corner seemed a little heated, but then Aral left the lap of a mercenary-looking fellow and sashayed her way over.

“I coulda had that if you hadn’t interrupted,” Jacqs complained as he watched her. He’d really wanted her tonight. He liked a strong partner, some woman who would wrap her legs around him and bite his lip hard enough to

make it bleed as he left finger-sized bruises on her hips. He didn't want to get stuck with some frail whore.

"Tough shit," Zeke answered.

Jacqs laughed. He could appreciate a man who didn't take no crap. After that, they fell silent again. Jacqs was working on his third drink when a ruckus started off to the side where the ladies had their private rooms.

"Get your ass back here!" a man bellowed about a half second before a woman came busting out into the main room. Her shirt hung from one arm, and a man twice her size came charging after her. The room seemed caught in the moment. The girl screamed as the man reached for her, and Jacqs dropped his whiskey as he surged forward.

Fist cocked back, Jacqs crashed into both of them before slamming his hand into the man's face. Something gave with a crack and the woman screamed even louder. Rolling to one side, Jacqs tried to get offa her, but the asshole assaulting her had redirected his attention toward Jacqs. He held onto Jacqs' shirt with one hand and tried punching around the whore with the other.

"Fucking bastard." Jacqs got up on one knee and tried to yank himself free of the tangled mess of limbs, but now the girl was clinging onto him too. Near him weren't never a safe place to hide in a fight, and Jacqs shoved her to one side before the fool got her head bashed in.

"Do you know who I am?" the asshole who'd attacked her in the first place bellowed like a stuck ox. "Do you know who I am?" He threw a wide punch, but it hit Jacqs on the arm where it didn't do much harm. He tried winding up to punch again, but there was movement behind, and Jacqs turned to face any potential threat. This idiot wasn't much danger, but someone at his back might be.

Sure enough, two bruisers were coming at him. Jacqs shifted to get a wall at his back and started calculating on angles, but then Zeke lifted a chair and slammed it into Bruiser Number One's back. The man went down like a log, leaving the sides a mite more even. Unfortunately, even sides didn't make a bar fight one bit less messy. Men and women leaped up from the tables, some rushing to leave and others looking to jump into the fray, a wild-eyed

expression of joy already blossoming. Well, fuck. One of these days he had to learn how to schedule trouble for the last day of leave instead of the first.

CHAPTER THREE

Jacqs touched his swollen eye again. Damn chair had nearly split it open, and the long bruise that ran across the eye was puffing up for fair. “Fuck.” Jacqs kicked the bars of his cell. In the next cell, Zeke laughed.

“Hard to with the bars between.”

That made Jacqs laugh. He needed a good laugh about now. “It ain’t like you’re some girly queer.”

Zeke gave him an odd look. “I’m definitely not the girly sort. If you tried calling me girly, I’d give you a table-sized bruise to match the chair sized one you’ve already got.”

“Yeah? Well it ain’t like you made out any better.”

Zeke touched his temple where the head wound had finally stopped bleeding. His sandy blond hair was crusted reddish brown with blood. “If the other side took more hits than us, it’s worth it.”

“I think that’s a safe bet.” Jacqs grinned at the thought of that fat bastard howling like a pig going to butcher. While Jacqs might not know him in particular, he knew the type. That’s the sort that sat on stations or bribed some ship clear of military service and then made a sweet profit off a running food to starving people and robbing them blind. Jacqs had seen the sort too often to mistake it.

“Next time maybe you could avoid taking the girl down with you, huh?” Zeke suggested.

Jacqs grunted. “She didn’t mind the bruises, not when that bastard ended up with broken bones.”

That made Zeke grin again. “I don’t usually get to take a swing at civilians. This wasn’t a half bad night.”

“Yeah? You must have a nicer captain than mine.” Jacqs scratched his arm where another nasty bruise was starting to form. He could feel the heat of it under his fingers. “I’m going to end up on shit duty for the rest of leave, and I never even got to fuck me a whore.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Fuck, no. I’m going to be scrubbing the underside of deck plates.” Jacqs made a face at the very thought of all the shit work he was about to get assigned.

Zeke leaned forward, his elbows rested on his knees. “It wasn’t like you started it.”

“Yeah, but I ‘don’t start’ fights on a regular basis. There’s one rule for crew and another for me. For them, the rule is to not start shit. For me, I’m supposed to not even be adjacent to it.” Jacqs pronounced the word adjacent carefully. It was a mighty stupid word, but first commander on the *Candiru* had made Jacqs sign a paper that said exactly that.

“I don’t approve of two sets of rules on a ship. It makes people mean to know that others get a different sort of treatment.” Zeke’s voice turned all serious.

“Can’t say I disagree.” Jacqs kept scratching his arm. “Course my agreement ain’t exactly required. The worst part is that I didn’t even get a woman. It’s a long haul between dock stays and I’m getting mighty tired of my hand.”

“You can’t tell me there isn’t one person on that ship that’s worthy of bedding. Hell, that’d have to be a pretty disgusting lot if that’s true.”

Jacqs shrugged. There were plenty of women he’d love to bed, but they weren’t exactly running to his door. When Grah had joined up, all womanly curves and hypersexual twitches and winks, he thought he’d finally ended his dry spell. Instead she was as stuck up as the rest of them.

“That’s not a good thought.” Zeke leaned back and rested against the cool metal.

Jacqs figured the worst part was that Grah would let Zeke fuck her. He had that grin, that crooked grin that made women wet between the legs. And he didn’t have no scarring on his face where a woman would have to look at it, and he didn’t say all the wrong shit at the wrong time. Jacqs figured that last part was about his worst flaw, but he was who he was. If Jacqs Glebov weren’t

good enough, then he weren't. There wasn't no use making out to be someone he wasn't, just to get in some woman's pants.

"I wish I could say I was surprised." Lieutenant Taylor came around the corner, his uniform all crisp and his expression cold.

Jacqs rolled his eyes. He could do without the pointless attempts to inspire a guilt that wasn't likely to appear. The bastard had mauled someone half his size, Jacqs mauled him. Seemed fair to him.

"You didn't make it one day, Glebov. Not one day. The captain is talking about busting you back to private."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Jacqs said with a shrug. If he tried defending himself, he'd just make it worse. Best to take his lumps and move on.

"You attacked a local businessman, a powerful one at that. Are you even going to explain yourself?" Taylor crossed his arms, but Jacqs really didn't feel the need to explain or defend anything. He'd done what he'd done, and the captain would do what he'd do.

"If he won't defend himself, I will," Zeke said. "That businessman had attacked a girl and was chasing her when Jacqs stepped in."

"Really?" Taylor didn't sound overly impressed.

"Now, I'm not saying his way of handling the situation was particularly good," Zeke said, and Jacqs flipped him off. "Diplomacy and de-escalation are not in your skill set," Zeke said with a laugh, "but he acted with provocation and at risk to himself. He didn't do anything to deserve demotion, although I wouldn't say it reflects well on him that he led with a fist instead of something a little less likely to cause a general melee."

"I'll be sure and communicate that to the captain," Taylor said in the nastiest tone of voice Jacqs had heard out of him yet. Maybe Zeke's charm didn't work with queer-turned men.

"I'll tell him myself as soon as you get me signed out of here," Zeke offered.

Jacqs turned and stared at Zeke. Maybe the man had gotten hit too hard on the head, because he wasn't making any sense. Zeke pulled an order sheet out

of his jacket and handed it through the bars. With suspicion etched on his face, Taylor slowly took the order and opened it.

“Commander Zeke Waters, reporting to the *Candiru*, or the *Candiru*’s lieutenant, anyway.” At that, Zeke got a real shit-eating grin on his face.

“No fucking way. Commander? You ain’t got enough stupid in you to be an officer,” Jacqs blurted.

Taylor looked up from the orders to glare at Jacqs, but Zeke just grinned wider. “Sometimes they promote a man over his own objections.”

“And you were in a whorehouse?” Taylor sounded downright scandalized, but Zeke... the commander... just shrugged.

“I figured any men who showed up there on the first night of leave were the men I probably needed to get to know. Are you questioning my strategy or my morals with that tone of voice, lieutenant?”

Jacqs could practically see Taylor’s need to snap to attention. His heels came together and his fingers tightened on the orders in his hands. Yep, he was twitchy as a rat in the piston chamber.

“I’ll get you both signed out.” Taylor held the orders through the bars for Zeke to take back, and he did, tucking them away as Taylor practically fled the room.

Jacqs chuckled. “He about pissed his pants.”

“He’s never been on the front, has he?”

“Nope,” Jacqs agreed. “Most crew haven’t. Captain has and the other lieutenant has, but you’ll meet them soon enough. I don’t suppose it’s too hard to tell the captain is straight off the front.”

“Meaning?” Zeke asked. Zeke. He was Commander Waters, and Jacqs better get used to thinking of him that way or he was going to end up pissing someone off.

“Don’t know,” Jacqs said. “I’ve never met the man.”

Zeke looked real concerned at that. “Never?”

Jacqs shook his head.

“But you’ve heard scuttlebutt you think I should know.”

“I think you’ll figure out what you need to figure out,” Jacqs said. “I ain’t one for telling stories out of school.”

“And I didn’t figure you for one to play games and try to poison the well, but now I’m starting to question that initial impression that you might be someone to speak the truth.”

Jacqs pressed his lips together in anger. He didn’t want to be fighting with his new officer before the man even stepped foot on the ship, but calling Jacqs dishonest was a low blow.

The commander stood and leaned against the bars that separated their cells. “You tell me what you’re hinting about and I’ll decide if I believe it.”

Jacqs considered Zeke. So far he’d been a straight shooter, but spreading rumors about a captain could get Jacqs into more trouble than he rightly wanted to deal with.

“I’ll even keep it in confidence,” Zeke added.

That put Jacqs in an awkward position. If he didn’t say anything, it made it seem like he didn’t trust Zeke. Shifting around on his narrow cot, Jacqs looked the man in the eye. “I don’t really hold with people who give their word and don’t keep it.”

“Funny, I fucking hate those sorts.”

Jacqs gave a quick laugh as he reached his decision. “Fine. Rumor is that he drinks most days and all nights. The commanders have to do most of the captaining, and most times we get commanders straight out of school, men so green they don’t know which end of a gun to run from. So, them sending you out here... it’s a little odd, if you know what I mean.”

Zeke slowly sank back down onto the bunk. He didn’t seem too quick to deny anything, but Jacqs found that sometimes officers were like that—they came back on you later. “They’re sending me out here to keep me out of the way,” Zeke said.

Jacqs snorted. He believed that about as much as he believed that the war would end tomorrow. The military didn’t care about getting anyone out of the

way. It cared about its own ends. “Is the front shifting this way?” he came out and asked.

Zeke rubbed a hand over his face. “You’re assuming I know anything.”

“Yep, I am.”

The door clicked right before Taylor came in again, this time with a station guard.

“Dumb assumption, Jacqs,” Zeke said. Maybe Jacqs would have pressed his luck, but not with company. He could practically see Zeke put on that invisible cloak of officerness. He stood, and his back was a little straighter; his gaze found Taylor and locked on a little longer. Yep, this was an officer, and Jacqs didn’t know how the hell the man had fooled him so well.

Taylor glanced over at Jacqs, clearly wondering what sort of dumb assumption he’d made, but Commander Waters didn’t enlighten him, and Taylor didn’t ask. It was time to head back to the *Candiru*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jacqs stood at the edge of the command office and watched as Zeke—Commander Waters—bent over reports with Lieutenant Haslet. “Commander?”

Zeke looked up. “Jacqs? What can I do for you?”

Jacqs looked over at Haslet. The woman was going to make sure whatever Jacqs said or did, it landed in the middle of ship scuttlebutt. He didn’t quite know how to neutralize a threat that he couldn’t shoot. But on the other hand, he wasn’t too comfortable with the thought that maybe he’d avoided getting written up for fighting because some pansexual man was interested in him sexually.

“Lieutenant, give me a second with the corporal.” Zeke dismissed her.

“Yes, sir.” Haslet nodded at Zeke and then headed past Jacqs and out the door.

Zeke watched him for a second, sinking back down into his chair before gesturing toward the door. “Why don’t you close that?”

Jacqs reached over with a foot and kicked the door closed. Not sure how to start this conversation, Jacqs crossed his arms and tried figuring it out. He shoulda planned this better. Words weren’t his strong suit.

“Is this about me not telling you I was the new officer?” Zeke asked.

“You’re a pansexual.”

Zeke leaned back in his chair and took a second to just stare at Jacqs. “Okay. That’s not where I thought we were going, but yes. I registered as pan.”

“Fuck. You really are? You’ll sleep with people no matter how they identify?”

For a second, Zeke just frowned at him. Usually it was Jacqs who couldn’t really get his head around a conversation, but maybe Zeke was equally bad with words. “Is this your way of propositioning me?” he finally asked.

“What?” Jacqs felt his stomach drop. “I’m heterosexual. I’m not interested in any man.”

Zeke nodded. “Okay. I thought you came off pretty hetero yesterday, but that doesn’t explain why you’re here now. Why does my sexuality matter to you if we don’t match?” Zeke had an honestly curious expression on his face, and Jacqs found himself at a loss for words. Why did it matter? It did matter. It mattered if the commander thought that Jacqs was going to pay for any favors.

“I ain’t repaying you for not writing me up.”

“What? What the fuck are you talking about, Jacqs?”

Jacqs took a step forward and jabbed his finger in Zeke’s direction. “If you do me favors, I don’t plan on returning them.”

Zeke blinked several times and then slowly stood before coming around the desk. Jacqs braced himself. He didn’t know what Zeke wanted, but Jacqs wasn’t the sort to lie down and take any sort of abuse. Still not speaking, Zeke leaned back against his desk, sitting on the edge. “I am not understanding this conversation, so why don’t you explain what you’re thinking,” Zeke suggested.

“I’m thinking I don’t plan on sucking anything.”

“And if you’re a het, that makes sense,” Zeke said slowly. “Why do you think you have to tell me that?”

Jacqs felt like he was off balance and falling farther by the second. He came in to stand up for himself, so he couldn’t figure why he suddenly felt like he was in the wrong. He wasn’t. Everyone had the basic right to choose his or her own sexual partners, and he wasn’t less than anyone else. “Because you did me that favor don’t mean I’m going to repay it.”

Running a hand over his face, Zeke blew out a long breath. Jacqs figured that Zeke wouldn’t need to force someone into his bunk. He had wide brown eyes and dark blonde hair and the heroic history that would make men and women fall into his bed. But sometimes the men who didn’t need to go forcing others got the most perverse pleasure out of it. Jacqs could feel a shiver of disgust run through him.

“Okay, let’s slow this down.” Zeke held a hand up in a surrender gesture. “First, I didn’t do you any favors. You didn’t deserve to get busted back a rank, so you didn’t.”

“Captain woulda busted me down,” Jacqs pointed out, and he knew he was right.

“Maybe,” Zeke conceded. “He does have a certain concept of you that doesn’t quite match reality. Oh, he respects you as a soldier, but he does seem to think you start trouble where I just think you end it.”

Jacqs snorted.

“You’re a hothead, and I’m not saying otherwise,” Zeke said, “but you’re not out looking for trouble. You’re just one who doesn’t have the good sense to know when to walk away when it sticks its head up.”

“So, you would have walked away from that girl?” Jacqs demanded. If the commander said “yes”, then Jacqs was reconsidering his first impression of the man. No one should walk away from someone being bullied.

“No, but I might have tried to avoid the full-out bar fight.”

Jacqs shrugged. He never did have much luck at stopping fights, so it didn’t seem worth the effort to try. “I’m still not thanking you for saving me from another bust in rank.”

That comment earned him a real cold glare from Zeke. “You’ve said that entirely too many times. I don’t expect thanks. I also don’t expect the ship’s best gunner to show signs of paranoia.”

“I ain’t paranoid!” Jacqs could feel anger crawling up his belly.

“Then why would you think I’m going to demand some sort of favor?” Zeke shouted back. “I haven’t even done anything that you need to thank me for, except pull some local yahoo off your back before you could get two bruisers jumping you at once. It’d be nice if you thanked me for backing your play in that bar.”

“And now you’re calling me paranoid, and that would remove me from duty.” Jacqs could feel the fear crawl up into his belly. If he wasn’t fit for duty, they’d dump him off on whichever station was nearest, and Jacqs didn’t have a

whole lot of illusions about how well his life would go from there. He'd either take work for some ass like the one he'd attacked in the bar, or he'd starve. Frankly, Jacqs figured he'd be happier starving.

Closing his eyes, Zeke seemed to mutter something under his breath for an uncomfortably long time. "You're not the easiest sort to have a conversation with," he finally said.

Jacqs crossed his arms.

"Why do you think I would try and force you into sex?"

"You're pansexual," Jacqs pointed out. "It ain't like it's a real long leap from one to the other."

Zeke returned to his muttering before turning and walking back behind his desk and sitting. "That's an enormous fucking leap, Jacqs. The fact that I'm attracted to a personality and not a body type or set of genitalia does not imply that I would ever force anyone. If you even suggest that I would force someone, I'm going to kick your ass. You know," he said, the tone suddenly shifting to something more thoughtful, and Jacqs' nerves tightened up more than ever. When officers started getting thoughtful, men like Jacqs had to worry. "Your record doesn't go back more than four years. You were conscripted off a suspected smuggling ship."

"I weren't never convicted of anything."

"No, you weren't. But looking at how you're reacting, I'm guessing you grew up in refugee camps."

Jacqs didn't answer. This wasn't none of Zeke's business.

"Which would explain why you assume the worst of pansexuals."

"And homosexuals. You lot are hypersexualized by nature. I ain't," Jacqs said firmly. "I ain't the sort to go having sex any time I see movement. They don't have any control. None of them." Most of the time, once Jacqs got going, someone shut him up. Unfortunately, Zeke didn't seem to have gotten that message because he sat back, and the words spilled out of Jacqs faster than he could really track them, faster than he could stop them.

"There's something wrong with men who let their dicks lead the way. I wouldn't be like that. I wouldn't ever be one of them hypersexualized sorts,

always looking for someone desperate enough for a bit of bread that they'll do most anything, and if I do go for a whore, I always make sure to pay them fair, even if they aren't charging full price. A person is worth more than a bit of food." Jacqs practically had to choke down the rest of the words that wanted to come spilling out. He knew what people were capable of. People might like to cover up all that moral rot with a veneer of politeness, they registered their sexualities to avoid misunderstandings, but none of that changed the fact that the rot was there.

"Jacqs, I don't think you had homosexuals or pansexuals in those camps. I think you saw a whole lot of dyssexual people. I figure the camps breed them. But I am not going to ask anything sexual from a heterosexual man. You looked me in the eye and judged me yesterday, and I'm not any different today."

Jacqs narrowed his eyes and tried to judge the honesty of that statement.

"No tricks," Zeke said, holding both hands up in surrender.

"And all that crap about having a drink with me? I mean, you were my officer. Were you trying to trick me into doing something you could write me up for?"

Zeke gave a shrug. "Nope. I was tired of all these assholes who haven't actually fought all feeling sorry for themselves because they can't get supplies or because they have to work long shifts. Until you've seen friends bleed to death on your hands, you have no cause to go complaining. I was in there looking for a drink, and hoping to see crew interact when there wasn't an officer around, but mostly, I really needed a drink."

"Unless you're the one who's gone and bled out, you ain't got no room for complaining," Jacqs realized a half second too late that he probably shouldn't go implying that Zeke didn't have room for complaints, not after giving up his leg and suffering through the hell of Siros Two. "Of course, you came close enough, I might make an exception for you."

"Don't," Zeke said firmly. "If I ever turn into one of these people who spends their time complaining, I want someone like you around to tell me to shut the fuck up. I'm sick of people complaining because they don't get leave as often as they want."

Jacqs had heard that complaint about a million times. “If you’re alive to get leave at the end of a run, you don’t have room to claim the universe is treating you unfair.”

“Exactly.” Zeke threw up his hands. “If you don’t have anything better to complain about, then get out of my face and complain to someone else, only I’m supposed to be an officer and somehow fix morale. So it’s my job to nod and make sympathetic noises.”

Jacqs grunted. He hadn’t ever thought of an officer’s job quite like that. If that’s what officers did with their time, Jacqs would rather cut off his own foot. Jacqs cringed as he realized he needed to stop even thinking that particular comparison before he went and said it in front of the man with no foot. “I’d be more likely to offer to hit ’em hard enough that they had something worth complaining about,” Jacqs said.

“Don’t tempt me.” Zeke rolled his eyes. “So maybe I wanted to have a drink with a man who has stood at the front and who isn’t trying to con me out of extra leave with some sad story about his grandmother.”

“Hell, I don’t even know who my grandmother is,” Jacqs admitted.

“Then you won’t regale me with stories about how you need a three month leave to go sit at the side of her bed.”

“In the middle of a war? Hell no,” Jacqs agreed. “Do people really...” Jacqs stopped as he saw the look on Zeke’s face. The man was serious. That was enough to make Jacqs want to buy the man a few beers and spot him to a real good whore. He needed the break worse than Jacqs did, and serving on a ship with these losers made Jacqs need it mighty bad.

Jacqs cleared his throat. “So, you really don’t expect me to go repaying?”

“Hell, no. Maybe we can get a beer together and swap war stories, but this isn’t about expecting anything out of you.” Zeke sighed. “What made you even start to think that?”

Jacqs moved to one of the chairs across from Zeke and hesitated a second. Sitting around a superior officer was one of those things they got unreasonably cranky about, but Zeke just nodded his head toward the seat. After sitting,

Jacqs shrugged. "Allie Grah went saying how people think we're dating because you did me the favor of not busting me down to private."

"Why is it that the ships that see the least action like to talk the most?" Zeke shook his head. "I can call her out for gossiping if you want, but it will probably go away faster if we just ignore it."

"Makes sense," Jacqs agreed. On ship, denying something worked about as well as tossing fuel cells into a fire. "I should probably get to my station and check out the targeting sights. They've been acting up lately."

"Anything serious?"

Jacqs had the odd impression that he had Zeke's full and undivided attention in a way Jacqs wasn't used to. Officers in particular seemed to ignore him, and even shipmates only paid attention to the bits they wanted. Zeke, however, leaned forward, his dark eyes right on Jacqs.

"Probably not. The seals ain't exactly perfect, so they tend to wiggle. It just takes readjusting them every once in a while." Jacqs found himself uncomfortably aware of his hands. He suddenly didn't know what to do with them, and after thirty-some years of having them, it was odd not knowing whether to rest them on his knees or on the arms of the chair or what. He ended up crossing his arms over his chest.

"Keep on top of it," Zeke said. "If there's anything else..." Letting his words trail off, Zeke pinned Jacqs with an intense expression.

"Um. No." Jacqs stood. "I should just go. So the thing where I accused you of—"

"Don't worry about it."

"But it was a real shitty thing to assume."

"Yep," Zeke quickly agreed. "It was all kinds of shitty. But you came and asked instead of making assumptions, so I give you some credit for that."

That was a real strange reaction for an officer, but rather than looking a gift ship in the thrusters, Jacqs turned and headed for the door. Lieutenant Haslet still stood in the hall, and Jacqs headed past her. Most people on the ship got out of his way, but Haslet was a big woman, former infantry, who still had shoulders like she carried fifty pounds of gun everywhere she went.

“Problem, Corporal?” she asked.

“Nope.”

Haslet stepped to the side, putting herself in the middle of the hallway and right in Jacqs’ path. “Then why are you interrupting command meetings, Glebov?”

Jacqs opened his mouth to tell the lieutenant to fuck off, but that didn’t seem right. Zeke would have to send him to the brig for that one, and Jacqs had already put the man in an awkward position once today. Instead, Jacqs shrugged. “I did something stupid, and I needed to talk to the commander. If’n he has a problem with that, I suppose he’ll tell me. Either that or he’ll call to have you escort me to the brig, and he didn’t do that, now did he?” Jacqs stepped forward, pressing close to the lieutenant. He could see Haslet shiver, her body stiff as she tried to not back away. Jacqs was a powerfully built man, and he did know how to use that size to his advantage.

“Get to your shift, then,” Haslet ordered. Her body was stiff enough to crack at the first breeze. Jacqs gave her a wolfish grin.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered in a slow drawl, and then he detoured around her, deliberately bumping shoulders. Today was shaping up to be a mighty fine day.

CHAPTER FIVE

Leaning against the rail that overlooked the main deck, Jacqs took a drink of his illegal whiskey and watched three of the baby soldiers train. It was a nice enough way to end the day, watching others be idiots. They were using throws straight out of hand-to-hand school, which was like to get all three killed if they ever saw a batface. The aliens were squat with four legs, two arms, and a set between that could function like awkward arms or weak legs. They didn't fight like humans, and these three idiots were training to fight humans.

Zeke came out of a corridor and stood at the edge of the training mat, watching the exercise. The three were training two on one, but the two attackers politely waited their turn to go at Schreiber. Considering that Petrov Bolson and Karney Tells were maybe two hundred fifty pounds if you put them together, that didn't make a lick of sense. They needed to attack together, but they weren't even trying.

Circling the mats, Zeke studied all three, and Jacqs watched as the three stopped watching each other and started tracking Zeke.

"Sir, would you care to spar?" Schreiber finally asked. Even from the second-floor walk, Jacqs could see the man's eyes go to Zeke's metal leg. If he was smart, he'd be worrying about how much damage a titanium and scandium reinforced leg might do. Knowing Schreiber, the man was more likely to worry about whether a fight with a one-legged man was fair.

"I don't think you can handle me," Zeke said. Jacqs could see the confusion and alarm in the others. Officers weren't supposed to say shit like that. "How about all three of you take me on?"

Bolson looked absolutely terrified. "I need to get to shift, sir," he blurted out. He even managed to do it without stuttering.

"I'll write you a hall pass," Zeke said. Grinning, Jacqs watched as Bolson squirmed. The arrogant little shit was about to get his ass handed to him.

"Sir, we don't know each other's fighting styles, which could be dangerous

in sparring,” Schreiber offered. Jacqs gave the man credit for having balls. He had no sense, but he had balls.

Zeke toed off his one shoe and stepped onto the mat. “Is that what you plan to tell the batfaces if we’re ever in direct contact?” Zeke’s voice had a dangerous calm that made the hairs on the back of Jacqs’ neck stand up.

“No, sir.” Schreiber came to attention right there in the middle of the mat. Bolson and Tells were both fading back toward the edge of the training area, clearly about as uncomfortable as a human could get without having a gun pointed at his guts.

“Good. The next thing you should know is that bats tended to attack in groups, three to six at a time. So, you three will be playing the part of batfaces. Come at me.”

Schreiber, Tells and Bolson all traded alarmed looks as Zeke moved toward the center of the mat. Schreiber dropped back into a standard defensive pose, but he didn’t seem interested in attacking anyone. Mostly he just sweated and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

After a second, Zeke took a step back and considered them all. “What? Are you afraid the fight’s unfair? We can invite Jacqs down here.”

“You look like you’re doing fine without any help,” Jacqs said.

“I was going to invite you to help these guys.” Zeke poked his thumb towards the others.

“Sir,” Schreiber started in again. He didn’t get a chance to finish because Zeke looked for a second like he was falling forward, but instead he landed on his hands, thrust himself forward with his arms, leaving his leg free to sweep Schreiber’s feet out from under him. Schreiber fell with a cry, but Zeke sprang back to his feet before the man even hit the mat. Karney Tells took a quick backhand that sent her flying sideways, and that left Zeke facing off against Bolson. He backed up right off the mat rather than engage.

“Fuck. This is going to take a while.” Zeke walked over to the opposite end of the mat, stripped off his shirt and tossed it to the ground. While Jacqs had gotten a vague impression of Zeke’s power during the bar fight, he could see it

all on display now. The man had the long, lanky muscles of someone who used his body and used it well. “Okay, you three, you have two minutes to decide on a strategy to take me down, so I suggest you start talking now.” Zeke crossed his arms and waited. For a good thirty seconds, the three of them stared. Schreiber moved first, catching Tells by the arm and pulling her over to Bolson for a quick planning session. The three of them still had their heads together discussing the matter when Zeke started back onto the mat.

He stalked them. There wasn’t a better word in the universe for it. Hands held out from his sides, each foot placed carefully as he judged angles—he closed in on his prey with the grace of a predator. It took the three idiots a little too long to figure out their time was up, and then Bolson and Tells skittered away to the sides, leaving Schreiber to take the brunt of the attack again.

Schreiber crouched low, his own hands held out for balance as his stance practically screamed out that he expected another attack aimed at his legs. Idiot. Jacqs took another drink of his whiskey and watched as Zeke shifted his weight in preparation for an attack from any side. His back was a topographical map of scars with white lines and circles of burn scar all intersecting with such regularity that Jacqs was surprised the man had survived the injury that’d caused it. But under all that flawed skin, his muscles moved fluidly. Those three were about to get a beat down.

Just about the time Jacqs was getting bored, Tells launched an attack from Zeke’s left, aiming a kick for the artificial leg. Zeke shifted closer, and Tell’s shin hit the metal before she collapsed, clutching her injured limb, but she was clearly the distraction because Schreiber was already in motion, looking to do a bulldog throw. While Jacqs didn’t have a problem grabbing an opponent’s head and throwing him to the ground with it, it did seem like that there was the exact maneuver that had gotten Jacqs in trouble. Clearly other people got to break the precious rules.

Jacqs might have been tempted to point out the unfairness of life, but Zeke taught Schreiber a quick lesson, side-stepping his move and catching the man across the throat with his forearm. Schreiber went down hard. That left Bolson, who froze less than a foot away from Zeke. Not hesitating for a moment, Zeke caught Bolson’s arm, twisted it, and tossed the man to the side.

Standing in the middle of all his fallen opponents, Zeke looked like a god who'd just taught some lowly mortals a few lessons in life. When Zeke glanced up, Jacqs raised his bottle in salute.

"Scared to take me on yourself, are you?" Zeke challenged him.

Jacqs stood up. "I ain't scared of anyone."

"Even though I can kick your ass?"

"You can try," Jacqs said, a hungry glee gathering in the pit of his stomach, but then Schreiber climbed back to his feet.

"Glebov is banned from the sparring room, sir." Schreiber's voice had a raspy edge to it, and he rubbed his throat, but even that wasn't enough to soothe the resentment that washed through Jacqs. He leaned forward again, resting his forearms against the rail.

"Seems like I don't need to be down there for you to get your ass kicked," Jacqs pointed out, and Schreiber glared up at him.

Zeke looked from one to the other with a bewildered expression. "Why is a soldier banned from training?"

"Because he doesn't respect the rules of training." Schreiber sounded bitter about that, but then the training room was his domain. As the training sergeant, he liked making up rules about what happened in his world, and Jacqs wasn't particularly good at living by stupid rules.

"The rules?" Again, Zeke's voice had that deadly calm that made a shiver go through Jacqs. That voice carried real danger.

Schreiber stood a little taller. "We don't take risks that could lead to real injury. It's a small crew, and we can't afford to have men and women in the infirmary."

Jacqs snorted. They didn't have an infirmary... they had a single bunk near the first aid kit. And if a few days in that bunk made someone watch their blind spot more carefully, Jacqs wasn't feeling too guilty about it.

"Glebov, get your ass down here so I can officially kick it," Zeke ordered.

"Unless you're planning to order me to throw the fight, that ain't gonna happen," Jacqs warned as he headed for the stairs.

“How long’s it been since you trained?” Zeke turned and gave Schreiber an unhappy look.

“Going on seven months,” Jacqs answered. At one time, this room had been the only refuge he had. He shared a bunk room with every male soldier on the damn ship, he worked in a public area, and he had no interest in sitting in a tiny cubicle and having one of them virtual experiences. So the training room had been about the only place he could come and really let loose. Well, until Schreiber went crying that Jacqs was too mean to folks on the mats. Now he was limited to lifting weights and working out on the wall.

“Oh, I’m going to kick your ass,” Zeke said with confidence.

“I ain’t been sitting on my ass for all that time.” Jacqs stripped off his shirt and dropped it on the bench. Clicking his bottle closed, he set it next to the shirt and then pulled his shoes off, dropping them to the ground.

“Without active training, everyone gets rusty.”

Jacqs gave the man a wolfish grin. “You, maybe. Maybe you’re soft after all that officer training, sitting on your ass and learning rules about how to write shit.” Jacqs was guessing about that. Zeke moved more like a soldier than an officer, but if his leg made him less than useful in the field, it made sense to put him into officer training.

All expression gone from his face, Zeke dropped into a defensive pose. “I’m going to find out where that infirmary is when I put you in it,” he warned.

“If all four of you came at me at once, that still wouldn’t happen.”

“Talk’s cheap, Corporal.”

“Your talk included, Commander.”

Stepping onto the mat, Jacqs felt that old warmth, that rush of anticipation. He studied his opponent’s body—the way Zeke shifted his weight constantly, the curve of his hip and the straight line of his artificial leg. His fingers curled into claws and his shoulders stayed low, ready for any sort of attack, in that half-relaxed state that would allow him to spar without wearing out his arms.

“Like what you see?”

“Too much shifting in your feet. You’ll wear yourself down before I have a chance to kick your ass,” Jacqs pointed out.

Zeke dropped his natural leg back to give him more stability. “The new leg throws the balance a little. It won’t keep me from taking you down as easy as I took them.”

“Seems to me that Tells took herself down. She ran her leg into yours—you didn’t do nothing, and Bolson...” Jacqs snorted.

“Yeah, we’ll work on him,” Zeke agreed. “So, are you done talking? Maybe you’re nervous to actually spar again after all these months, you know, afraid to get shown up as incompetent?”

The jibes were as obvious as the sudden opening low on Zeke’s left side. “Maybe you think you have to talk me into doing something stupid because you can’t fight fair. I ain’t never seen a batface open with verbal taunts.” Jacqs felt the warm rush of victory when Zeke’s eyes narrowed. Yep, the man had thought he could play Jacqs. Well, Jacqs weren’t that stupid. Well, okay, he was about some things, but not about fighting. There wasn’t a man on the ship who could best Jacqs in a fight, and that included Zeke.

“I think you’re doing a lot of talking and not a lot of attacking. In that bar you threw your fists quick enough. What’s wrong? Scared to take on someone who can fight back?”

“Just smart enough to be wary.”

Schreiber laughed. The nastiness of it distracted Jacqs for a half second, and that was enough for Zeke to attack. Dropping into a crouch, he tried to sweep Jacqs’ legs with that titanium limb of his. Jacqs jumped over the attack, but he had barely landed, and he hadn’t caught his balance back, before Zeke slammed a foot into his stomach.

Jacqs flew back onto the mat, his shoulders hitting hard enough to take his breath, but Jacqs rolled before Zeke could get a disabling blow in. Rather than rolling away in search of safety, Jacqs rolled toward Zeke, catching his flesh leg and yanking it out from under him. The artificial leg couldn’t compensate, and Zeke fell back away from Jacqs.

When Jacqs landed a punch in Zeke’s groin, Schreiber shouted for the match to end. Before Jacqs could decide whether or not to obey that particular order, Zeke had grabbed Jacqs’ short curls. The hold was more of an

annoyance than a danger, and Jacqs shoved at the man's hand. A half second too late, he figured out it was a distraction. But before he could shift his weight to protect his vulnerable underside, Zeke had driven a knee up into Jacqs' diaphragm. The force of the kick drove the air out of Jacqs' body. Every cell felt like it was dying as his lungs failed to deliver oxygen.

Jacqs pulled off to the side, his right arm still up defensively as he used his left arm and his legs to scoot away, but Zeke grabbed one of Jacqs' ankles. Aiming his free leg, Jacqs hit Zeke's face hard enough that his head snapped back, but he didn't let go of Jacqs' ankle. Instead, he jerked Jacqs closer with enough force that Jacqs' skin dragged across the surface of the mat. Friction burns immediately heated his skin. Despite the pain, Jacqs brought his free leg up to kick again, but Zeke caught it, and used his greater leverage as the man on top to flip Jacqs over onto his stomach.

Still struggling to breathe, Jacqs didn't have the strength to hold Zeke off, and the man caught him in a chokehold that pinned Jacqs to the mat, ending the match.

Jacqs slapped the mat in surrender, and Zeke immediately rolled to the side where he lay panting.

"Sir, are you okay?" Schreiber asked.

Zeke waved a hand as he tried to catch his breath. Jacqs was proud that he didn't go down without a fight, without inflicting a little damage on the opponent, unlike those three idiots.

"You okay?" Zeke asked.

Rolling to his back, Jacqs stared up at the support beams as his body sorted through the post battle injuries. He had some hellacious friction burns and his stomach was going to bruise like a bitch, but nothing life threatening. "I'll live. You?"

Jacqs turned his head to see Zeke touching a badly split lip. "I think I need to find that infirmary, but if you think some weak-ass attack like that can keep me down, you don't know me very well."

Jacqs started to laugh, but it turned to coughing as his abused lungs protested vehemently. After pushing himself up enough that he was sitting,

Jacqs caught sight of Schreiber staring at them like they were both all shades of crazy.

Zeke got to his feet and offered Jacqs a hand, which Jacqs was more than happy to take. His legs were a little unstable. "That is sparring, ladies and gentlemen," Zeke announced. "Sparring is preparation for battle. It is unpredictable. It requires fighting despite the pain, and it looks nothing like choreographed exercises. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Schreiber offered with this parade ground sharpness to his voice as he went to attention.

"Glebov, show me this infamous infirmary of yours. I need to seal this lip together or I'll be as ugly as you."

"You already are," Jacqs shot right back. Fact was, Zeke was more than attractive, but Jacqs wasn't one to let a little thing like reality get between him and a good insult.

"Fuck that. I'm gorgeous. They put me on recruitment holos back home."

"Really? Damn, they must be desperate."

Zeke laughed. The sound burst out like he hadn't expected or prepared for it. "Yeah, Jacqs, they are," Zeke agreed. "Come on before I get blood all over this level and frighten all the kiddies."

Jacqs agreed with that. This crew wasn't prepared for the sight of blood, much less battle. "This way," he offered. Limping over to the bench, he sat and started putting his shoes back on.

Zeke walked over, and grabbed Jacqs' bottle before he could retrieve it. Upending it, Zeke took a big gulp, and for a half second, he seemed to utterly freeze. All the pleasure drained out of Jacqs as he realized he was about to land in the brig for bootlegging whiskey in his water bottle.

Bracing himself for the order to report below decks, Jacqs found himself surprised again when Zeke slowly lowered the bottle and handed it back to Jacqs before clearing his throat. "I think I need to requisition my own water bottle. Yours is tasting a little musky, Glebov."

"Yes, sir," Jacqs answered as he took the bottle back. Well, hell. Jacqs truly never had expected that sort of reaction out of an officer.

“Schreiber, you have two days to design a new training regime and get everyone’s name on the roster, clear?”

“Everyone sir? The navs and techs—”

“Need training more than anyone,” Zeke said before heading for the exit. “Glebov, I have no idea where I’m going, so get your ass in gear.”

“Yes, sir.” Grabbing his shirt off the bench, Jacqs hurried after the commander.

CHAPTER SIX

Jacqs watched as Zeke applied the skin seal to himself using the mirror above the chest where they kept medical supplies. “That was a good hit. So, why don’t you train these guys?”

“It ain’t like they want to fight, not really.”

“We’re in a war. I don’t think fighting is an optional activity.”

Jacqs nodded. He tended to agree, but there weren’t many who thought like that. Once again Jacqs found himself wondering why they’d inherited a real soldier instead of one of the fresh faces who needed a little time in uniform before moving on to another assignment. Maybe Zeke was like him and Greinbeck, hotheads who had too many discipline reports to keep them on regular duty.

That didn’t seem right, though. And he wasn’t like the captain, too drunk to do his job.

Zeke turned around. “You have some question written all over your face. Go on, ask it.”

“Is there some reason you’re on this ship?”

“Because the last commander got transferred out.”

Jacqs shook his head. “We ain’t never had a battle-trained officer, not in all the time I’ve been floating around in this tin can.” Jacqs didn’t point out that he’d been here longer than anyone excepting the captain.

“I was a ground pounder, an explosives man. I don’t have any formal training in leading men other than the crew I take with me when I’m blowing shit up. I’m here for the same reason all the officers are here—to get training in being a leader someplace where I can’t get soldiers killed.”

“Nothing else?”

Zeke sat on the edge of the infirmary bunk and put the tube of skin seal on the edge of the trunk. “If there’s another agenda, they haven’t told me.”

Strangely, Jacqs believed him.

Zeke studied him for a second before asking a question of his own. “You’re good. Too good to waste on a ship like this. Why aren’t you on a combat team?”

Jacqs shrugged. “I was. Front gunner.” It was the most dangerous position, sitting up front in the big gun as he targeted batface armaments to open a hole for the ground pounders. Every enemy targeted those big artilleries, but Jacqs had always kept his head and focused on getting the job done and his guys home safe.

“Now you’re a belly gunner on a monitor ship. Explain that.”

“Seems like you’ve seen my records.”

“They are clearly full of more bullshit than my father’s farm back home. You’re less battle fatigued than I am.”

“Is that what they said?” Jacqs found himself irrationally cranky. “I ain’t weak in the head.”

“Fatigue implies tired, not weak, but you don’t seem to be either. So, what happened?”

Jacqs weighed his words out. He could tell the truth, but there was something disquieting about giving people facts about his life. Leaning back against the wall, Zeke watched him. He didn’t demand or order, he just watched. Even though Jacqs’ gut said he could trust the man, he still couldn’t get over that irrational fear of letting anyone have a piece of him.

But Zeke deserved some truth, especially after Jacqs had gone and implied he was the sort of man who would resort to rape. That was unkind, even for Jacqs, and Jacqs had a high tolerance for unkindness.

“Some of the others treated the refugees like some sort of personal slaves, offering them table scraps if they’d do their laundry or kiss their fucking feet.”

“And that offended you.” Zeke said the words without emotion, which made it hard for Jacqs to figure out if he was digging himself in some sort of hole or not.

“If’n you want to help someone, you help them, you hire them to do your laundry for credits or for enough food to feed themselves. You don’t go treating them like pigs who root around after scraps.”

“But people took the jobs.”

“Because they were fucking starving,” Jacqs growled. “Either feed ’em or let ’em starve in dignity, but don’t go acting like you’re a saint for treating human beings like animals. They weren’t even giving them enough to actually survive. They were handing over rotted bits of high-cal rations and the boiled down bones of whatever we threw in the stew pot.”

Zeke nodded and seemed to think about that for some time before he asked, “How big was the fight?”

“Big enough,” Jacqs said. He’d made his point, and now he could feel that restless need to defend himself, but he couldn’t. It wouldn’t change nothing, and words weren’t his best battleground. He’d just get tangled up in his own story. But the fact remained that Jacqs couldn’t let the men and women whose lives he’d saved act like monsters, like fucking batfaces who killed without ever acknowledging that they were destroying sentient life. “You got something to say about it?”

Again, Zeke seemed to think on that. “I never liked the games people got up to on the front. Never. But human beings need to take their frustration out somewhere, and I guess I never got involved because I couldn’t change anything.” Zeke touched his split lip carefully. “Honestly, I don’t know which of us is in the right on that issue. Sometimes I wish I’d have taken a few swings at the assholes in my own unit. Other times, I tell myself that even if I had stopped one or two of them, the rest of the front would have been full of abuses twice as bad. So I made sure that people knew how I felt and I left it there. So no, I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“You’re a shitty officer,” Jacqs offered.

Zeke smiled and the skin seal stretched as blood gathered under the clear plastic. “Oh? Why? Because I just called Schreiber a moron in front of lower-ranked crew?”

“What? When’d you do that?”

Zeke opened his mouth, looked at Jacqs, and then closed it again before seeming to reconsider his answer. The man spent an irrational amount of time

thinking things through, that's for sure. "I just ordered him to rip up his entire training schedule and redo it."

"Because it stank," Jacqs said with a shrug. "Which isn't the same as calling him a moron."

"Actually, for most people, I think it would be the same. If I call what he does stupid, he's very likely to assume I'm calling him stupid."

That required a bit of thinking on Jacqs' part. "That ain't a bit logical. A smart person can still do something stupid, like putting together a sparring schedule that looks more like a grandmother's exercise routine than training."

Zeke chuckled. "Well, I guess that's true. So, if that's not the reason, tell me, why am I a shitty officer?"

"You aren't out there telling everyone that you have all the answers and pushing people around. Like that bottle. I thought you'd write me up for sure."

"I don't like you drinking alcohol," Zeke said, suddenly more serious. "You're the best gunner we have, and I've seen our shields. We need someone to keep the bats off us if we run into trouble. The thought that you might have slow reflexes does not make me happy. However, I don't think writing you up is going to solve things, especially given that you might have one or two reasons to drink on this ship. Consider yourself officially allowed back on the training mats, and if I find you holding alcohol again, I will find a more creative way of making you pay than writing you up. Clear?"

"Yep," Jacqs answered. It was closer to what he expected from an officer, anyway. "Which still don't mean you're acting like a real officer."

Leaning forward, Zeke studied Jacqs close enough that it got uncomfortable. "I'm pretty sure I told Schreiber that I have the answers and I pushed him around on his own training floor. I know I've told Lieutenants Taylor and Haslet I have better answers than they do, and those two other idiots who tried sparring with me—"

"Petrov Bolson and Karney Tells," Jacqs offered.

"Yes, well those two definitely got the feeling that I'm one more know-it-all officer. So tell me, Corporal Glebov, exactly how am I being a shitty officer?"

Strangely, Jacqs got the feeling that Zeke was teasing him rather than using rank to make Jacqs feel less important, not that Jacqs actually cared about rank. “You sure haven’t come off as a know-it-all to me. Telling me how the fight that got me exiled out here... telling me that I might have been in the right... that ain’t the sort of thing an officer would do.”

Zeke shrugged. “Maybe I trust you to be a man and handle the gray reality of truth better than all these kids who still think in black-and-white.”

“Schreiber’s older than me.”

“Has he been to the front?” Zeke asked.

“Nope.” Jacqs wasn’t sure how that happened, but from the few stories Schreiber had told of home, Jacqs got the feeling his family had money—enough to keep him clear of the fighting.

“Then my point stands. Now, I feel like I got my ass kicked, so I’m going to go take some cellular regenerate and lay on my bunk and feel sorry for myself,” Zeke said with a grin. “I suggest you do the same since your ass got kicked even worse.”

“Wait until I get more practice in,” Jacqs warned.

Zeke stood slowly, stretching his bad leg several times before putting weight on it. “Wait until I have at you first, instead of taking on three other opponents before you.”

Jacqs would have been happy to return the insult, but he couldn’t think up anything fast enough, and Zeke passed him with a pat on the shoulder as he left. Fingering the growing bruises on his stomach, Jacqs figured some regenerate would probably do him good. The chemicals left him feeling shaky and headachy, but they sped up healing enough to miss the worst of the soft tissue damage.

After a quick trip to the distributor to request regenerate, Jacqs headed for the men’s bunk room. Twelve bunks were jammed in the space, but only eight were being used right now, and Jacqs had the best of them in the rear corner. Ship seniority had its advantages.

“You okay?” Burtrell asked as Jacqs passed him.

“Fucking perfect,” Jacqs answered. He stripped his shirt off in the aisle and threw it onto the empty bunk above his.

Burtrell whistled. “Holy shit. What happened to you? Were you fighting with Greinbeck again?”

“Did I look like this after the last time?” Jacqs demanded. “The day a shit-for-brains like Greinbeck can bruise me up like this, someone needs to take a gun to my head.” With that, the conversation was over as far as Jacqs was concerned. He climbed into his bunk and pulled the curtain closed. Putting the regenerate tabs in his mouth, he lay back and let the drugs work. His sense of balance wobbled first, and he fisted his sheets to convince himself he wasn’t going to fall off the bunk. Then a general sense of weakness set in, the larger muscles first as the drugs stole resources from one part of his body to feed another. In this case, his stomach and side heated up as the drugs tried to fix the bruising and the friction burns.

While Jacqs might hurt, the fact was that Jacqs was having some trouble stopping himself from thinking about Zeke. When he’d stripped off his shirt, the power in his shoulders and the ease with which he moved had been a work of fucking art. Zeke lived in his skin. He owned his power, and that made him sexy.

Jacqs didn’t normally think on men being sexy, but he’d lived in barracks long enough to know that even the het men sometimes talked about some other male as being fucking gorgeous. Of course, Jacqs always thought that seemed a little suspicious. Het men shouldn’t go around noticing other men’s bodies.

But it was hard to avoid looking when it was Zeke stalking those three idiots in the training room. And his back made a person want to stare. The scars were like some holovid makeup for a war movie, only this time it was real. Zeke was an actual hero, strong enough to survive the injuries that left him that marked up. Jacqs had seen men with far fewer injuries just give up on life and die.

Reaching down, Jacqs scratched his thigh and tried figuring what would have made Bolson go telling people that Zeke was interested in him. Zeke had even said he wasn’t interested in no het man. And Jacqs had never sexed a

male. He was pure het. Always had been, always would be. Jacqs shifted around, uncomfortable in his bunk.

Since Zeke was pansexual, he'd bed about anyone if he found 'em interesting and their sexual orientations matched. Jacqs truly hoped that he didn't find Lieutenant Taylor interesting. Taylor was always trying to talk about everything—like explaining your motives for punching a crewmate in detail would somehow change the reality of things. If Zeke had been on the ship back when Jacqs had been busted down a rank for fighting with Greinbeck, things might have turned out different. Or not. Jacqs knew he'd gone a little too far with that fight, even if the ass had it coming. Fucking bully.

Still, Jacqs imagined how Zeke might have handled it. They would have sat on that bench after sparring, and Zeke wouldn't have made a big deal out of it as he asked for Jacqs' side. The fantasy sort of fell apart there because Jacqs couldn't quite imagine telling anyone how he felt sick inside watching people get bullied. He hated even being around weak folk, because people who went around showing their vulnerabilities were the ones who went and got bullied. Constantly. If Jacqs had his first choice, he'd be off this ship with all these weak people and back on a frontline unit. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option. So Jacqs took his second choice—he showed Greinbeck that bullying had a consequence on the *Candiru*.

“If you're going to masturbate, do you mind closing the curtain,” a snotty voice called out.

“I was scratching an itch, asshole,” Jacqs cursed back. However, he did reach down and tug his curtain to close the gap between the two halves. Some days, the people on this ship were enough to drive him to drink. Actually, up to this point, that would be all days. However, Jacqs wasn't going to risk seeing whether Zeke would be as strict about shipboard punishments as he was with training. It was time for Jacqs to get rid of the bootleg whiskey. Damn. He sure hoped Zeke planned to make it worth his while.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The ship comm chimed in Jacqs' pocket as he got on the lift. Cursing, he pulled it out. The message read, "*Want to talk, don't want to start rumors. My quarters programmed to admit you between 15:30 and 19:30. Don't be seen. Zeke.*" Not only did the message give him a sour stomach, but he still hadn't gotten around to taking out the damn shock mechanism someone had added to the comm. Well, a shock this low never killed anyone, not until Jacqs figured out who had rigged his comm, anyway. Then someone was dying.

"*Trouble?*" Jacqs commed back.

The answer took a long time to come back, and Jacqs could feel a creeping sense of discomfort. Maybe he'd read things wrong yesterday. Maybe Zeke was going to bust him for the whiskey after all. It wouldn't be the first time Jacqs had horribly misread someone.

"*No. I've just pissed off most of the crew. I'm trying to avoid pissing off the rest. No trouble with you unless you're pissed I kicked your ass.*"

Jacqs grinned.

"*Beginner's luck. I'll win next round,*" he texted back. Each incoming message gave Jacqs a new jolt, but it wasn't enough to do more than annoy him.

"*Dream on, ship sitter.*"

Jacqs was working on a comeback when the comm flashed a <<disconnect>> message. Ass. He needed to give Jacqs time to come up with a proper insult. He'd have time to come up with something during shift, though. Shoving the comm back in his pocket, Jacqs stepped off the lift and walked down the narrow corridor to his workstation. A long shift of searching for bats that didn't exist let him think on how Zeke seemed to have tied him in knots, but he hadn't come to any conclusions. As soon as shift ended, he headed down toward officers quarters without really considering how potentially wrong it might go.

Jacqs pressed his thumb to the access, surprised when the door yielded with a small click. Despite Zeke's message, Jacqs hadn't really expected to be

allowed into officer's quarters unescorted, or allowed in at all. Instead the door slid back into the wall, allowing Jacqs to enter. A wide desk with a screen-in-wall display took up one side of the room, and when Jacqs bent down, he could see a good-sized bunk tucked away underneath. So the desk must lift up somehow. A chair sat in front of the desk, and another was pushed off to the corner near a cabinet.

Jacqs pulled on the cabinet handle, but it was locked. In the other corner was a full-sized door, and he pulled on that to find a private head. The toilet and sink were together under a showerhead that seemed designed to hit the entire room, not that it'd be hard. Jacqs could barely even turn around without hitting something.

The others might complain about communal showers and heads, but Jacqs preferred them to these claustrophobic spaces. Jacqs quickly headed back out to the main room, closing the door behind him.

Wandering over to the desk, Jacqs spotted a personal reader. Picking it up, he thumbed it on. If Zeke were a normal soldier and not some officer, he'd have his porn in this thing. Officers always made a big shit about it, but a soldier needed something pretty to look at after a long and ugly day. Curiosity made Jacqs open the saved files.

The porn never went at the top of the saved list, and it never went at the bottom. Officers checked those files. And a smart man programmed the reader to lie about which files got accessed most often. Either that or they threatened someone smarter into reprogramming it for them. Jacqs flipped through the list of titles, mostly of military texts. The best files for hiding the personal porn were required manuals or training documents.

After searching a dozen files, Jacqs finally found what he wanted listed under "Multi-planet treaty law."

The first image was of a woman with a crooked smile giving a little finger wave to the camera. She had one leg angled so that Jacqs could almost see her pussy, but not quite. He'd be disappointed, only she definitely wasn't his type. She had pixie features and a coy little smile that made him wonder what she planned to con some man out of. He'd gotten out of the refugee camps by fighting, but others had gotten through with expressions just like this one.

Jacqs flipped a few images to one he liked. A woman with thighs like trees crouched on the edge of a broken wall, one hand resting easily on the end of a gun. Her dark skin contrasted against a white smile, and Jacqs liked her on the instant. She looked like the sort of woman who could kick some ass and hold her own on the battlefield or in the bedroom. He spent some time on that picture before going on to another. Jacqs' cock was warming to this idea by now. His own porn stash had grown stale from overuse, and his prick definitely liked the idea of new material.

He stopped when he hit the first naked male. The man's arms rested against a bar raised up over his head, and his cock was half-full. Jacqs studied it, discomfort crawling through his guts. If he'd caught Taylor with porn like this, he would have made fun of the man for envying someone who was clearly more man than Taylor ever would be. To be honest, Jacqs had always thought of homo men as envious of those they bedded and homo women as avoiding all the pain that came with trusting men.

But Zeke didn't need to envy anyone. He was a hero. He was a hero who got hard looking at this picture in his bunk. The guy in the picture had a large uncut prick hanging between his widely spread legs. His stomach muscles were well-defined and he had a loose-limbed posture that suggested he was comfortable in his own skin. Jacqs could imagine respecting a man like that. He also fucking hated the idea of someone like Taylor landing in bed with this anonymous man. Taylor wasn't good enough for a man like this who had confidence in himself, but the idea of Zeke with this man made Jacqs just as discomforted.

Flipping through a few more pictures provided a strange collection of battlefield candid shots and porn images and a couple of pics that looked like they were from back home. There was one of a man a lot older than Zeke who had the same nose.

Jacqs stopped at another picture, this time of two men. One stood behind the other, embracing his friend from behind. Both wore sleeveless shirts with tight pants and calabeads threaded into their hair. Not more than eighteen or nineteen years old, the one in back still had an easy smile and confidence that Jacqs recognized. Young Zeke had a striking resemblance to adult Zeke. Now he was more worn, more rugged and more attractive, but he had the same core.

Some people got torn up and rearranged by war. Jacqs expected he was one of them sort, although he didn't know if he'd been changed for the better or worse. Zeke seemed to be one of them that just got harder and stronger.

"Find anything interesting?"

Jacqs started at the interruption. Normally he wasn't one to get surprised. Quickly indexing back to the dark-skinned woman with the smile, he held the reader up so Zeke could see the image.

"Damn interesting. Is she still alive for me to harass?"

Zeke grinned as the door closed behind him. "I wouldn't know. It's a shot from a porn vid."

Jacqs held the reader out. "Damn. I was hoping for a date."

"Me, too. I like to think we could have had something beautiful. Unfortunately, most of my unit had the same fantasy. I'm glad you came." Zeke powered the reader down and tossed it onto the desk.

"Trouble?"

"Only of my own making." Making a disgusted noise, Zeke dropped into the chair in the corner. "I need a little honesty."

"No problem on that front. Most times I get accused of sharing too much honesty." Jacqs pulled out the other chair and sat down.

For a second, Zeke studied him. "I can believe that. This morning, I planned to ask if I had pushed too hard last night. Sometimes I get a little intense."

Jacqs snorted. "If you think that a little sparring is going to slow me down, you're not half as bright as you think you are."

"The sparring?" Zeke sounded almost confused, which didn't make even a little bit of sense, so Jacqs ignored it and waited for him to say something more sane. "Oh, shit. You didn't know I was... interested." Zeke threw his head back and then cringed as the back of his head impacted the storage cabinet.

"Interested?" Jacqs waited for the horror, the disgust, the overwhelming need to make fun of someone's manhood, but mostly he just felt confused.

“Of course, if you didn’t even notice, I’m not sure it counts as too far.”

“You mean you think I’m worked up over you thinking I’m, I don’t know, interested back?” Truth was, Jacqs wasn’t exactly sure what they were talking about.

“I’ll still kick your ass on the sparring mats, ship sitter.” Zeke gave him that playful grin. Then he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

Jacqs had come up with a real good retort for that in all his shift-hours, but right now he couldn’t put two brain cells together, much less remember what it had been. “Why the fuck would you be interested in me?” Jacqs exploded up out of his chair, but once he’d done that, there wasn’t really room to move around much. He just stood there trapped between the chair and the wall.

“What are you talking about?”

“You. You’re some sort of hero. You’re a beautiful man with the sort of a face I expect to find on a recruitment flyer. Why the fuck would you be interested in me, what with me being het and this.” Jacqs gestured toward the side of his face that a blaster had nearly taken off. Most of the ear was gone and heat burns scarred his cheek and neck. He’d had plenty of offers back before the war, but it took a special sort to focus on his blue eyes and not his chewed up face.

“Do you really think you’re that unattractive?” Now Zeke stood up, and this room was getting smaller by the second.

“Yes.” Crossing his arms, Jacqs dared Zeke to try and contradict him.

“Have you even seen my back, or the scarred stump of a leg I walk on?”

“It ain’t like it’s your face. And you got some heroic tale outta yours. I was just too dumb to duck.”

Zeke took a half step backwards, which was all the room he had, and leaned back against the wall right next to the door. “Mother of God, but you are a mess, Jacqs Glebov.”

“Never said I weren’t,” Jacqs pointed out.

“Do you want to know what I see when I look at that scar?” Zeke asked all quiet. Jacqs didn’t rightly trust people when they got quiet, so he refused to

even answer. Zeke must have taken that silence as permission because he said, “The spread pattern is front to back with every single v-shape pointing forward. That means whatever trouble you ran into, you stood your ground. You weren’t running when that happened. And that’s a blaster mark. Those aren’t long-range weapons, so you were staring trouble right in the eye, and you weren’t flinching. Trouble was close enough to take your head off, and given a couple of inches, it would have. I’m guessing quick reflexes saved the rest of your head from going the way of the ear.”

Jacqs lifted his chin. Zeke wasn’t all that far off.

“I see a man who’s pretty uncompromising, and maybe that isn’t the easiest way to go through life. But you’re strong enough to stand up for what you believe in.”

“Maybe I was just too fucking slow.”

“I doubt that,” Zeke said with a laugh. “So yes, I do find that sort of strength attractive, but I am not going to press in where I’m not welcome. Do you have any of that whiskey left?”

“Dumped every drop of it,” Jacqs said. He was real grateful he had because he did not want to lie to Zeke.

“Well, shit. Maybe I’ll break into the captain’s considerable stash.”

Jacqs didn’t like that tone of voice at all. “Zeke?”

“Nevermind. I’m just having a weird day. Anyway, consider this my official apology.” Zeke gave a sharp nod, and Jacqs had the definite impression he’d just been dismissed. That was fine with him because he was having trouble understanding his own feelings. A little distance would be good. He’d opened the door before Zeke called after him.

“Oh, I’m ordering mandatory training that actually trains people to fight a war. I need you and your brand of dirty fighting, so keep an eye on the comm for the next few days, okay?”

“Yes, sir,” Jacqs agreed. Strangely, Zeke flinched when Jacqs called him “sir.” Most days, people didn’t make a lick of sense, that’s about all Jacqs could think about that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A few days later Jacqs answered the comm request for training. After too many nights filled with his own thoughts, Jacqs was ready to get physical with someone, even if the someone involved was only an incompetent crewmate and the activity was fighting. If there were one woman on the ship that looked at him twice, Jacqs would have gone looking to reinforce his heterosexual orientation, because his thoughts did keep drifting back in the masculine direction.

Grah, Lacroix, Schreiber and Dary were all waiting. Dary had an expression like she was walking into an enemy stronghold, but he gave her credit for having the balls to show up at all.

One look at Grah and Lacroix, and Jacqs figured those two were knocking boots again. They had that sort of stupid look people got when they were all wrapped up in each other. Lacroix said something, and Grah reached out and pulled on one of his long braids.

Jacqs didn't want to get trapped in any conversation with Dary, so he headed toward them. "That hair's likely to get you into trouble," Jacqs warned as he gestured toward Lacroix's braids.

"Seriously, could you be more offensive?" Grah immediately demanded, sticking herself in the middle of the conversation. "It's part of his cultural heritage, Glebov."

Lacroix caught Grah around the waist and pulled her close. "Hey, it's not like I think my hair is magical," Lacroix said with a laugh. "And trust me, if some bat catches me by the braid, I'll take a blaster to it. However, cutting my hair would feel wrong. In my family, cutting our hair means that we're grieving someone, and I refuse to let these sons of bitches make me grieve. On the other hand, cutting our hair can also mean our little brother is getting revenge for an incident involving marbles and a freezer, but that's a different story."

Jacqs rolled his eyes. That sounded real stupid, but then he wasn't going to get in a discussion of logic with people who didn't have any.

“Are you ready for training?” Schreiber asked as he checked the edges of the mats to make sure they were attached firmly to the decks. “Grah, this might be a little rough for you. This session is designed for the gunners.”

“Right, and there’s zero chance that I’ll have to fight, so I should just go back to my nav station and paint my nails,” Grah said, sarcasm dripping off every word. Damn, Jacqs got hard looking at that woman. Lacroix seemed to feel the same because he tightened his arm around her.

Schreiber scowled at her. “We’re having more training for the navs.”

“Good, then it won’t matter if I train with the gunners, too,” Grah said happily as if the matter were closed, and clearly it was because Schreiber retreated.

A thunder of footsteps interrupted them as Zeke charged down the stairs to the main floor. “Good morning, good morning, good morning,” he sang out like one of those idiots who doesn’t have the good sense to avoid annoying others. “Grah, I like seeing you volunteer. We’re focusing on gunner skills, but a good officer knows all the tricks. So, who has next shift in the gunner seat?”

“I do.” Lacroix raised his hand.

“Okay then, know your limits and don’t push so hard that you can’t do your shift.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have shift after him,” Dary said.

“Good, that means that no matter how badly you get your ass kicked, you have a good six hours to take some regenerate tabs and sleep off the damage.”

Dary practically wilted. Jacqs had to stop himself from laughing out loud.

“So, let’s partner up and find someone to spar with,” Zeke said. Lacroix and Grah were always standing near each other and Dary near broke her leg moving to the other side of the room to stand near Schreiber. Zeke looked at Jacqs. “I guess we’re sparring partners.”

Jacqs grinned. He’d been wanting a chance for revenge because there weren’t many men who could make him yield in a fight. “Fine with me.”

“I’ll try to not kick your ass too hard since you just came off shift.” Zeke raised an eyebrow in an unmistakable challenge.

“You can try.”

“I can do more than try.” Zeke was grinning like a loon now. He stopped and looked around at the others and cleared his throat before continuing. “One of the best ways to learn is to watch someone and steal their moves. So, as we spar, keep an eye on which moves seem most effective.”

“Is there going to be a test after?” Grah asked in that sharp tone of voice she often had.

“Hell, yes,” Zeke said enthusiastically. “It’s called not getting your ass kicked when you try to use the move yourself. So, you ready?” Zeke turned to Jacqs.

“To take you down? I don’t need to be ready to do that. I can do that in my sleep.”

“Big talk for a man who had to yield last time.”

“Last time, I thought you were another pansy-assed officer who didn’t know how to fight,” Jacqs said in defense of his own performance.

“Really? And here I thought you’d been watching me kick Schreiber’s ass. Maybe you’re just slow.” Zeke stepped onto the mat, leading with his good leg. He kept his prosthetic to the rear, but Jacqs had seen the damage that metal had done to an unprepared opponent. He circled warily.

“In some matters, I reckon I am, but when it comes to fighting, I’m about as quick as they come.”

“We’ll see,” Zeke said, and then he moved fast, thrusting with his back leg in an off-balance leap that most people wouldn’t be able to make. Clearly the mechanical leg had a trick or two. Jacqs fended off a flurry of punches, high and low. At one point, he allowed Zeke to get in a glancing blow off Jacqs’ side and in return, Jacqs delivered a right to Zeke’s chin that made his head snap back. It also made the skin over one of Jacqs’ knuckles split so that drops of blood splattered across the mat. Each drop hit the plastic cover and exploded into a splotch of reddish brown against the tan mat.

“First blood to me,” Zeke crowed.

“Considering I split it open on your face, I’m calling that in my favor.”

“You can call it however you want, you’re still bl—” He didn’t finish. Mid-word, he spun around and swept that metal leg right at Jacqs’ shins. Jacqs leapt backwards to avoid getting hit, and Zeke followed up with a punch aimed right at Jacqs’ undefended sternum. Blocking the punch, Jacqs shoved Zeke to the side and planted an elbow deep into his back. The power behind it forced Zeke to stumble forward, but he spun around, his hands up and ready for another attack.

Jacqs shifted his stance for better balance. Truth was, he’d been sitting in that chair for four hours while Zeke had a shift worth of sleep, and Jacqs was starting to get the feeling that might cause a mess of trouble.

Shaking his hands out, Zeke moved forward, and Jacqs watched the way he moved. Even being the target, Jacqs had to appreciate the sheer power in Zeke’s every step. The man had a way of shifting his weight like an oversized cat walking along the top of a fence, and Jacqs wasn’t about to underestimate the man’s skill. He retreated.

“Someone seems to be running away,” Zeke mused.

“Not even if you cloned yourself.”

“Since I don’t have a cloning machine, I’ll have to kick your ass the old-fashioned way.”

“Not fucking likely,” Jacqs growled, but he shifted cautiously as Zeke circled closer. Jacqs needed something to give him an edge... something to put Zeke off his game. When Zeke’s smirk grew a little wider, an evil thought sprouted. Necessity was the mother of sexually inappropriate innuendo. Before he could change his mind, Jacqs stripped off his shirt and tossed it to the side. If Zeke was a pan, this should give him pause.

Lacroix started laughing, and Zeke completely fell out of his battle pose. His arms dropped to his side, and for a moment, he stared at Jacqs open-mouthed. The last time they’d fought, Jacqs had been wearing his standard uniform, but today he’d put on space protocol pants with fabric so tight it followed every line of his body. The theory was that the cloth was less likely to get caught on some bit of debris during a space battle. The result was a pant so obscene that most people not in the military called them “whore britches.”

What the tunic top had covered was now gloriously on display, and Jacqs was not a small man by any definition of the word.

“What are you doing?” Zeke demanded.

Jacqs grinned and gave a little shrug. “I’m just warm.”

“I think you’re hot,” Lacroix offered, and Jacqs made an obscene gesture. Lacroix just started laughing again. The man was lucky he was so het that he never even gave guys like Taylor a second glance, or Jacqs just might take offense to his bullshit.

“You fucking asshole. You’re trying to distract me.” Zeke narrowed his eyes, and for a second, Jacqs felt a stone form in his chest. But that moment’s fear, that brief second of thinking he’d really fucked up, ended when Zeke dropped back into a battle stance, his face twice as determined as before.

“If’n you can’t keep your mind on the task at hand, that’s your fault.”

“Fuck you,” Zeke shot right back, and he sent another flurry of punches right at Jacqs’ head. This time, the punches weren’t as focused, and Jacqs blocked the first few before planting a fist in Zeke’s stomach and forcing him to stagger back in order to catch his breath.

“You’re all about fucking and assholes... I think you’re distracted,” Jacqs pointed out. It wasn’t often he got the upper hand on someone, at least not without a big old gun in his hand, and this was kinda fun.

“Put your shirt on,” Zeke growled. His eyes travelled down to where Jacqs’ dick made a large bulge in the fabric.

“I’m sorry, I thought you were the one who said that soldiers had to fight on through distractions.”

“I’ve never had a bat distract me by stripping off his shirt.” Zeke sounded borderline homicidal at this point.

Jacqs truly was enjoying himself. It was a good thing he didn’t have any illusions about being a fair or kind man because his glee at torturing Zeke would have destroyed that image. “Are you giving up now?”

“No chance in hell. Go on, strip all the way down. I’ll still kick your ass.”

“Talk, talk, talk.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch.”

Jacqs lunged forward, and caught Zeke with a punch aimed for his throat. Zeke blocked, but he did it a second too late and the punch hit his shoulder, spinning him around and leaving a long smear of blood on his uniform. Zeke had to hop several times to keep from falling, and Jacqs pressed forward relentlessly. With Zeke’s skill in a fight, Jacqs couldn’t afford to let him regroup.

Zeke hit the edge of the mat, stepped off, and braced his good leg on the firm decking before kicking out with that metal limb. Jacqs took a hit hard enough to jar his whole skeleton. His hip was going to be a mass of bruise, but he ignored the pain and grabbed the foot, twisting it viciously.

After Zeke dropped to his stomach to avoid having his leg ripped off, Jacqs landed on his back, pressing his shoulders to the hard metal deck. “Yield?” Jacqs asked. Under him, Zeke struggled and writhed. Arching his back, Zeke tried to get some leverage, but Jacqs widened his legs, and braced his toes against the floor to keep Zeke pinned. “You ain’t winning this, so you might as well give up,” Jacqs said.

Zeke went still, but Jacqs weren’t a real trusting sort, so he kept his weight on those broad shoulders. Sure enough, Zeke gave it one more go, thrashing wildly with elbows and flinging his head back to try to butt Jacqs in the face. Jacqs kept clear of all those dangers, but the position left his crotch uncomfortable close, and with the tight pants, friction was making the situation a mite bit uncomfortable.

“Fine, I yield,” Zeke said with absolutely no grace.

“Who’s on top now?” Jacqs asked as he stood. Without facing the others, he went to grab his shirt. He definitely questioned the wisdom of wrestling someone while wearing space uniform pants. It’d been a long time since he’d gotten sexing, and his parts were definitely confused.

“Yeah, you cheated,” Zeke yelled after him, but it was hard to hear him over Grah and Lacroix whooping and clapping.

“Traitors,” Zeke complained as he stood.

“I’m just admiring a fine job of dirty cheating,” Lacroix said. After pulling on his shirt, Jacqs turned around to see him grinning like a mad thing.

“Speak for yourself,” Grah said. “I’m applauding Jacqs for his ability to lay off the homophobic bullshit he usually spouts.”

Jacqs raised a middle finger salute her way, but his pants got a little tighter anyway. He did appreciate a woman who said her mind, even if her mind was somewhat uncharitable toward him.

“Other than amusing you jackals, what did you get out of the sparring match?” Zeke asked.

Schreiber spoke up first. “Leg sweeps are effective in driving the opponent back, even if they don’t connect.”

“Until I grabbed his leg and made him squeal like a girl,” Jacqs added. Zeke flipped him off.

“Hitting for the throat... that’s... Okay, that’s scary,” Grah said. “Which is not to say I won’t use the move, but what if someone actually lands a good hit on a windpipe?”

“The person you hit won’t make the mistake of failing to duck a second time.” Zeke cringed and rubbed his throat as though remembering something. “We have medicine onboard and I’m a medic, so you can’t do harm I can’t fix unless you break someone’s neck.” Zeke seemed a little flustered, and he kept pulling on his shirt. “So, you guys, show me what you have.”

Jacqs sat down on the bench and grabbed his water bottle, which actually had water in it this time. Jacqs missed the whiskey. It took the sharp edges off the world, but at least this time around Jacqs didn’t feel like he was dying of a million paper cuts. When he’d come on the *Candiru*, that was about the best description of his mood. Every time he turned around, someone was shoving some rule that didn’t make any sense in his face. As a conscript, Jacqs only had a passing acquaintance with the rules, and some of the things officers did seemed a little counterproductive if they were preparing soldiers for the front.

But since Zeke had come, Jacqs could almost get through the day without missing his drink.

Zeke sat on the far end of the bench, still huffing and puffing from the fight.

“You’re out of shape, old man.”

“You’re an asshole,” Zeke countered.

“Yep.”

“It would help if you would at least take offense when I’m insulting you.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were. I pretty much figured that for a statement of fact.” Jacqs looked over, and Zeke was rolling his eyes.

With that, Jacqs turned his attention to the pairs. Lacroix was holding back. The man was going to get Grah hurt bad if he went and gave her an unrealistic sense of her own skills. She needed someone to really beat on her until she could take out a batface in hand-to-hand, and Lacroix was not stepping up to the plate. Grah was doing good, though. She aimed some nasty kicks right at Lacroix’s crotch. Good for her.

“That woman...” Zeke whistled.

“Fuck, yeah,” Jacqs agreed. She was a fine piece of vicious femininity. “She ain’t real fond of compliments, though.”

Zeke gave him an odd look. “Okay, I’ll keep that in mind.” For a second, he looked at Jacqs, and Jacqs could only look back and wonder what he was missing.

A thump on the mat made both of them redirect their attention that way. Schreiber knelt down next to Dary and seemed to be feeling up her leg. That was definitely not a move Jacqs had ever seen, although he’d seen one or two men try it on those they wanted to knock boots with.

“Schreiber, what are you doing?” Zeke called.

He didn’t look up. “Dary has hurt her ankle.”

“Serious?” Zeke stood up.

Now Schreiber looked around at him. “No, sir. It’s a mild sprain.”

“And?” Zeke asked in a dangerous tone of voice. The hair on Jacqs’ arm stood up.

“And she needs to sit out,” Schreiber said.

For a second, Zeke rubbed a hand over his face, and Jacqs could almost smell the impending explosion. “Schreiber, have you ever been to the front?” Zeke asked, his voice carefully calm.

“No, sir.”

“Are you under the impression that the enemy stops the second someone feels pain?”

“No, sir.”

“Well that’s a good start,” Zeke said sarcastically. Grah had to clear her throat to stop a laugh, and it still didn’t much stop it because Jacqs could tell what she was up to easy enough. “Dary, fight through it. If all else fails, fight from the floor using your good leg,” Zeke said.

“You want me to keep fighting?” Dary looked up from the mat with her face a riot of misery and tragedy. Jacqs had an ungodly desire to set the woman straight on a few facts of life.

“I want you to know how to fight through pain. I want you to know how to take a hit and keep on firing your gunner rig. I want you to leap from a falling rig, land wrong so you twist that ankle, and still come up fighting. I want you to learn how to kick serious ass, Dary. So yes, I do want you to keep fighting. And Lacroix,” Zeke said, turning to him, “if you can’t show Grah the respect of trying to honestly kick her ass, move aside and let me do it for you. She had the balls to come down here and train, and I know I don’t appreciate you pulling your punches, so I don’t even want to think how frustrated she is right now.”

“Very,” Grah muttered.

Lacroix ducked his head. “Yes, sir. Het man’s disease and all,” he said with an apologetic tone.

“Which you’d better get over or I’ll be banning you from each other’s beds until you can see her as a soldier first.”

“Yes, sir,” Lacroix said with a whole lot more enthusiasm. Someone definitely didn’t want to lose certain privileges. Zeke sank back down onto the seat, and the two pairs started sparring again. Dary and Schreiber were a lost cause, but at least Dary was trying. She was pathetic, but she was trying. The woman could target the shit out of anything that moved, so Jacqs seriously hoped she stayed a belly gunner. At least then she wouldn’t never have to fight the enemy. She’d either run her rig or her dead body would be floating in

space after the bats sent missiles through the ship hull, no middle ground. That middle ground of having to fight free of a fallen rig would be the end of Dary for sure.

Grah and Lacroix were getting interesting, though. They traded a flurry of hits, each grunting with pain as they tested each other's defenses. Grah got in a nasty kick to Lacroix's thigh. That was going to bruise like a bastard. Lacroix retaliated with a punch low on Grah's right side. The force of it about knocked Grah off her feet. She recovered, spun around and tried to sweep his legs. That made him back the hell off.

Lacroix was still passing up chances to hit Grah's breasts, but other than that, he was putting in an admirable job of doing serious harm. For her part, Grah had no reservations. Lacroix's longer reach and greater mass were all that were saving him from a serious ass kicking.

"I should not say this, but I am starting to understand why you got in so much trouble chasing her," Zeke said. Jacqs turned to see Zeke sitting a whole lot closer than he'd been sitting earlier.

He nodded. "She's an incredible little demon."

"I'm going to agree with that. Lacroix is a lucky man."

"Fuck, yes," Jacqs agreed. He cleared his throat, and fought an urge to slide away. He was about out of bench on his side, and he wasn't going to squinch himself up into a tiny little piece of the bench just because he'd become uncomfortably aware of the heat radiating out from Zeke's body. The silence pressed down on them despite the sounds of grunts and curses and flesh slapping flesh. Dary even got in a kick straight to Schreiber's crotch, and seeing as how she had her back to the mat for real good leverage, she floored the man. Of course, she then ruined the moment by apologizing about a million times.

"Okay, that's good," Zeke said after nearly an hour. "Grah, you need to spend more time looking for openings. You're going to wear yourself out attacking, but those are some very fine moves you have. If you can concentrate on getting half those attacks through your opponent's defenses, you're going to be a problem for anyone who crosses you."

“I am now, sir,” Grah said with a huge smile. Zeke’s comments had practically made her glow, and that wasn’t something Jacqs saw real often. “Thank you, sir. I’ll work on that.”

“Lacroix, you have good moves, but you telegraph them. If Grah had watched your body language at all, she could have flattened you. Move quicker. Don’t spend so much time thinking about it.”

One of Lacroix’s braids had come undone so he had hair hanging loose on one side and a braid on the other. He ducked his head and all that black hair bobbed. “Yes, sir. I’ll work on that.”

Zeke continued, “Dary, you did an excellent job once you focused. You do not have to apologize for getting in a hit. Schreiber dropped his guard, and you did your job, and you did it damn well. Congratulate yourself for that.”

“Thank you, sir,” Dary nearly whispered. Jacqs rolled his eyes. She couldn’t even take a compliment without sounding all weepy. Schreiber helped her to her feet and supported her weight as Zeke spoke to him.

“Your moves are stiff, overly rehearsed. You need to work on flexibility and speed. Lay off the weights and get on some speed drills to limber you up, and Dary won’t get in another hit like that. You have the right stuff, but it’s looking a little rusty.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll alter my workout schedule.” Schreiber didn’t sound happy, but he didn’t sound likely to mutiny in the near future. “Permission to help Dary to infirmary for some regenerate?”

“Of course. Go,” Zeke said with a shooing motion. Schreiber helped Dary hop off, her sprained foot not looking all that bad to Jacqs.

“So, what about me, seeing as how I kicked your ass?” Jacqs asked.

Zeke spun around to look at Jacqs as if startled to find him still there. “I think... you’re just fine.” Zeke closed his eyes a second. “You know how to survive, Jacqs, I don’t think that’s an issue.” Without another word, Zeke suddenly fled. Now normally Jacqs would hesitate to come to that conclusion, but the way Zeke darted off with a wild look in his eye, fleeing did come to mind.

Lacroix laughed. "Do not bite my head off, but damn that man has it bad," he said as he came over and sat on the other end of the bench from Jacqs.

"What?" Jacqs looked over.

"The commander." Lacroix used this tone of voice like he thought that explained everything. When Jacqs didn't answer, he and Grah traded concerned looks. "The commander wants you. Actually, the commander is tied up in knots because of his case of Jacqs lust," Lacroix said. "And while I may be het, for that man, I might consider changing my orientation."

"You would not, because I am a jealous bitch," Grah pointed out. Coming over, she stood next to Lacroix and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"That you are," he agreed. "But you have to admit that the commander has a certain magnetism, a charm that's pretty hard to ignore."

"He also has horrible taste in men, so he wouldn't even be interested in you," Grah argued.

"Your claws are showing."

"All the better to claw you with."

Lacroix caught her hands, and Jacqs watched with a sort of detached horror. He knew Zeke had said something about having some interest, but Jacqs had put it down to the way Jacqs had a passing interest in all sorts of folk. He could lust after someone in general ways without seriously wanting to put his boots under anyone's bunk. But Lacroix was suggesting that Zeke was well beyond the generic sort of interest where you noticed that someone was attractive and well into the crazy end of the lust pool. That... that didn't make sense.

"You stink," Grah said, and Jacqs realized he'd missed some bits of conversation while he was nursing his shock and confusion.

Lacroix laughed. "That I do, but you stink worse, so we're even."

"Then let's get cleaned up together," Grah suggested with a salacious wiggle.

Jacqs' cock gave a good twitch over that, but his brain was still stuck on thoughts of Zeke, and this was all kinds of confusing. Lacroix and Grah got up

to leave, and Jacqs was left in the empty deck staring at training mats and wondering what it meant that he felt this little spark of pride at having caught Zeke's eye. There was something seriously wrong with him, that's for sure. He didn't like it when men lusted over him.

Jacqs thought on that. He truly did not want Taylor lusting over him. He'd likely bust the man in the mouth if he said one thing to Jacqs' face. But the feeling he had when he considered Zeke's lust... that was not revulsion. That wasn't even on the same ship with revulsion. In fact, Jacqs didn't rightly appreciate how certain parts of him were reacting. Damn. Considering that Jacqs hated change, he was having entirely too much of it in his life recently. It was all Zeke's fault, and still... still, Jacqs couldn't bring himself to want things back the way they were.

That left Jacqs trying to figure out how to move forward. Unfortunately, that wasn't a skill he really excelled at.

CHAPTER NINE

Jacqs nearly knocked Taylor down as he got off the lift. “Need to talk to the commander,” Jacqs said, cutting off Taylor before he could reach the door to Zeke’s office.

“I have an appointment,” Taylor complained loudly.

Jacqs stopped and gave Taylor a real unfriendly look. For a second, Jacqs thought that Taylor was going to make an issue out of it, but finally he threw up his hands. “This had better be good, and if you’re not done in ten minutes, I’m coming in anyway. I have eight months of performance reviews to get caught up on.”

Jacqs snorted. He didn’t much care about that, so he’d take as long as he took. He just didn’t feel any need to point that out to Taylor. Without knocking, he pushed the door to Zeke’s office open. The man stood with his back to the door, stripped to the waist.

“Give me a second, Taylor,” Zeke said without turning. He was doing something on his chest, and unless Jacqs missed his guess, the something in question was using soothe gel on some bruised muscle. Jacqs felt a weird sort of satisfaction—a certain warmth in the pit of his stomach. Yesterday he would have attributed that to pride in having given a worthy opponent a real beat down. After Lacroix’s little announcement, Jacqs was starting to wonder if he wasn’t having another kind of reaction.

Jacqs gave Zeke’s back a real good looking over. He had strong shoulders, and the sort of strong muscle Jacqs had always admired. A roadmap of white scars led a merry trail across his back, disappearing under the waist of his pants, and Jacqs’ brain just sort of stopped at that point. While Jacqs was starting to think he might be attracted to Zeke above the waist, he wasn’t particularly comfortable thinking about what he might have below the waist.

Zeke turned and the expression on his face froze as he spotted Jacqs. Fingers still tracing the edge of a red mark on his bruise, Zeke stood staring. His chest had patches of skin slick with gel, but Jacqs found himself more interested in the well-defined muscles of his chest and stomach. Zeke opened

his mouth a couple of times without actually saying anything. Eventually, he grabbed a shirt off the back of his chair and pulled it on, or tried to anyway. He got one arm caught up in the neck hole and ended up cursing as he got himself righted again.

“I need to talk some things through,” Jacqs said. It wasn’t the most honest line he’d ever managed, but this was hard on him. Worse, he wasn’t entirely convinced that he hadn’t lost his mind. Maybe he was having some irrational reaction to not having sex with anyone except his right hand for too fucking long. But then, that warm feel in his gut told him that he was suffering more than frustration.

“I understand that I went too far,” Zeke said, “and in my defense, you do make it very difficult. That said, you have every right to complain and you are excused from any combat training with me since I’m clearly an idiot with a dick I can’t control.”

“You can’t control your dick around me?” Jacqs blinked in surprise. Hell, he’d never had that sort of effect on anyone. That was... that was real complimentary.

“Clearly not.” Zeke sank into his seat. “Taylor’s coming, so you should—”

“I told him to wait.” Jacqs sat down across from Zeke. Again, Zeke’s mouth did that silent moving thing he seemed to have going today. It was like watching a vid with the speaker disconnected. “We should talk about...” Jacqs stopped, not sure how to grab this tiger by the tail. He didn’t even know where the tail was.

“My inappropriate and incompatible sexual urges,” Zeke offered dryly.

“I ain’t so sure they’re incompatible,” Jacqs blurted out. This time Zeke’s mouth just fell open. “I’m just not sure on much, which is an uncomfortable place. Fact is, I still have a good deal of revulsion going at the thought of Taylor and sex, and I ain’t exactly sure I’m okay thinking on topics like your dick, but I’m starting to think I’m attracted to you.” Jacqs stopped, and Zeke stared at him. The silence grew increasingly awkward, and Jacqs shifted around in the chair.

Finally Jacqs crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you plan on saying

something here, or are you going to let me talk myself into some fool's corner?"

"I..." Zeke closed his eyes tightly and then opened them. "You never stop surprising and amazing me, Jacqs Glebov."

"What? Why? I swear, sometimes you don't make an ounce of sense."

"Why? Because most people run away from any sexual identity crisis. They ignore and repress and try to get through life without having to question a reality they decided when they were sixteen years old... or twenty-two. I was a late bloomer and changed my orientation at twenty-two, but even then, that was late in life. You're thirty-seven, Jacqs."

"Thirty-eight," Jacqs corrected him. "And if'n others are too stupid to go at a problem straight on, that's not something I'm worried about. I don't leave an enemy at my back to trip me up later, even if the enemy is my own traitorous cock." And right now, Jacqs felt like his cock was about as much of an enemy as any backstabbing camp rat who ever stole rations from him growing up.

"You don't think like any human I know, and that's a compliment. Human beings tend to lie to themselves. And most men, if they found themselves having a sexual crisis this late in life, they'd lie to themselves and make excuses and generally hide from reality."

Jacqs snorted as he realized that Zeke was just insulting the human race in general, not him. "People ain't like to do the sane thing three times out of four."

"And I'm not even debating that with you, but Jacqs." Zeke stopped again. Ducking his head, he scratched and seemed to struggle with something. When he looked up again, he seemed weary, somehow. "The safest thing here is for me to say that we have to stay away from each other. I mean, it's not fair to leave me hanging while you try to figure out what you're feeling."

"You think..." Jacqs let his words trail off because he didn't actually understand what Zeke was thinking.

With a sigh, Zeke leaned back in his chair. "Giving people advice is a game for idiots. I mean, if I tell you something, then you can blame me for anything that goes wrong. You're not responsible for your choices then."

“Fuck that,” Jacqs snapped. “If you say something, I still have a choice to agree or disagree, and it ain’t like I’m incapable of telling you to fuck off. I’ve proved that more than once.”

“And I don’t doubt that.” Zeke sighed again as he seemed to struggle with something.

“You’re annoying me,” Jacqs warned.

Zeke laughed gently. “You are a very unusual individual, Jacqs Glebov. Fine, I’ll say my bit, and if you tell me to fuck off, I will stay out of your way and get my own recalcitrant cock under control.”

Jacqs leaned forward, eager to hear what Zeke might have to say. The man tended to cut through the shit that Jacqs didn’t much understand and get right to the point.

“You say you’re attracted to me.”

“Seems like,” Jacqs agreed. “I ain’t as opposed to touching you, but my imagination is a little empty when it comes to exactly what more might be involved.”

“Mine isn’t,” Zeke muttered, but before Jacqs could go asking about that comment, he rushed on. “You are definitely attracted to Grah, and at that bar you wanted to catch the owner’s eye, right?”

Jacqs shrugged. “I like her better than most of her girls.”

“I’m not surprised. Most of those women were pretty young.”

“Too young for whoring,” Jacqs agreed. He understood that people had to make a living any way they could, but he hated seeing young men and women make that choice. Whoring wore a person down.

Zeke nodded. “So, what about Chankoowashtay Lacroix?”

“If’n you want to call him by his first name, it’s Shank. He don’t use that long-ass name,” Jacqs said.

“Answer the question, Jacqs.”

Jacqs tried focusing on it, but the feeling of unease grew. “I ain’t lusting after no het man,” Jacqs finally said.

“Clearly, you have better morals than I do,” Zeke said in that same dry tone. After clearing his throat, Zeke tried again. “Okay, imagine that Lacroix reclassified as pan. If he were pansexual... if he were a hypersexual pan, would you be interested in him then?”

Frowning, Jacqs tried thinking on the matter. He wasn't one for contemplating his own feelings, but under the conditions Zeke had given him, Jacqs could imagine himself fighting with the man, pulling on those long braids and feeling Lacroix's body bucking under him. “Might be I'd have some interest,” Jacqs said carefully. He didn't much care for the observation because Lacroix was het, and Jacqs didn't want to go lusting after someone who didn't match him sexually. That was the definition of a dyssexual, and Jacqs wasn't one of them perverts.

“It might be that you're a stenosexual.”

Jacqs blinked as that bit of stupidity filtered into the various parts of his brain. “Clearly you ain't all that bright,” Jacqs said. “You aren't nothing like Allie Grah, and Lacroix don't look like either of you, so how could I be steno?”

Zeke tilted his head to the side. “Jacqs, how would you define stenosexual?” He asked with that extra caution that usually meant someone was about to make fun of Jacqs.

“Steno—it means narrow. It's someone who gets a hard-on from one particular trait, like red hair. It seems like a mighty stupid way to decide how to pick a partner. I mean, liking someone with a certain trait means you're ignoring most of the person you're looking at. Pansexuals make more sense than that, and I don't think you lot make a whole lot of sense at all,” Jacqs said, referencing Zeke's own sexuality.

“Well, a person can't help what they're attracted to, but you might have the wrong idea about stenosexuals. My mother was steno. For her it was about hands.”

“Hands?” Jacqs couldn't quite keep the horror out of his voice. Lusting after some trait like red hair seemed plenty stupid, but taking it to the ridiculous lengths of lusting after hands? Jacqs didn't even have words for

that. He might have pointed out all the ways that was stupid, only insulting a man's mother seemed uncharitable.

"She always said there was something beautiful about the hands of someone who truly worked," Zeke said, his voice taking on fond intonation. "My father was a farmer, and she loved how strong his hands were. I remember sometimes she would hold his hand and trace the white scar where he'd ripped himself on a bit of barbed wire. She loved anything he made with his hands. She'd spend hours in the rocking chair he made, and lots of times she'd go out at sunset and watch the sun go down behind the fence we built together—the three of us, back before my sisters came along."

"Hands?" Jacqs still wasn't real sure how this made any sense.

Zeke rolled his eyes. "Yes, hands. We can't control what we're attracted to, Jacqs. I can't help having wider tastes any more than you can help having a very specific type. My mother loved seeing someone work to create something. For her, the act of creation was intensely desirable."

"So, it really wasn't about the hands?" Jacqs clarified. He was getting more confused by the second.

"It wasn't. Stenosexuals can be attracted to personality traits, to talents, to skills, to a body shape or a hair color. They may fall for someone with a certain tone of voice or someone who can play the piano until they get shivers up their spine. Stenosexuals have as many different tastes as there are people who identify as steno."

"And you think I'm steno?" Jacqs still wasn't sure, but when Zeke explained it like that, it did sound almost reasonable.

"You got yourself in all sorts of trouble going after Grah... a woman who has the balls to face me down in my own office. You tell me that you're interested in me, and I know I'm a cagey old bastard who has proven himself on all sorts of battlefields."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I've never seen you even glance twice in Honshi Quin's direction," Zeke said in a sudden verbal turn into new territory.

Jacqs frowned. "I ain't avoiding Quin." Of course, he also wasn't going out of his way to go anywhere near her. She was one of the techs, and that meant she spent most of her time with Daygik and Bolson—two people who annoyed Jacqs to no end. And she had some ancestor from one of them Asian countries—she had to. She was about the smallest woman Jacqs had ever set eyes on.

"You aren't paying her any attention, either," Zeke said gently.

"Why should I?"

"Because she thinks you're gorgeous. She clearly has a thing for bad boys."

Jacqs felt an odd twinge of dislike for the woman. "She... what?"

"She spends a large amount of time staring at you, Jacqs. Either she's interested in sex or the woman has some eye disease that I'm not aware of, because she can't seem to keep her eyes off your backside."

Jacqs blinked, unable to even come up with a proper response for that. Jacqs couldn't even remember a time he'd exchanged a dozen words with the tech.

"Yeah, well, she stutters every time she tries to talk to me, too, so her taste in men is a little questionable," Zeke pointed out. "but she does watch you every time you walk through the room."

"No, she don't." Jacqs felt like if he just ignored the comment long enough he could make it go away. As a het man, he should have noticed a woman giving him signals about being willing to share a bunk.

Zeke took a second to study the ceiling. "Okay, which of us is better at reading people?"

"You, no question."

"Exactly. I'm telling you that Quin would have landed in your bed in two hot seconds if you'd given her a chance."

The thought of Honshi Quin in his bunk made Jacqs a little queasy. She weren't his type—not even close.

Zeke laughed. "That face you're making is great. So, I assume you aren't the least bit attracted to Quin."

“I’d feel like I was bedding a child. No, no I ain’t interested.”

“She’s north of twenty-five, Jacqs. So if you’re that turned off, you’re more stenosexual than heterosexual. It’s not just any woman who does it for you.”

“All het have preferences.”

“Most aren’t physically disgusted at the thought of sex with someone with a compatible sexuality. They might not be interested, but disgust is not a usual reaction. No offense to het men, or pansexuals either, but we’re all a little whorish. If someone with the right sexual orientation is dangled in front of us, we go thinking with our dicks every time.”

Jacqs scratched his chest. “Not arguing that.”

“No, I didn’t think you would.”

“But... If I’m stenosexual, what would I be attracted to?” Jacqs asked.

Zeke swallowed several times and then stood. “That you need to figure out for yourself, Jacqs. And maybe if I’m your type we can talk, but this is... this is something you need to work out.” Zeke took a big breath and let it out. “Now, I have a meeting, and you have work.”

“I’m short-shifting for the next two days,” Jacqs said. He wanted to talk about this, to talk this through until he didn’t have all these jagged-edged thoughts rolling around in his brain.

“Unfortunately, I am working. However, maybe you should spend that extra time thinking this through,” Zeke said, and his voice had turned all cold and businesslike. Jacqs knew when he’d been invited to go the fuck away, at least he did when Zeke did the inviting.

More confused than ever, Jacqs stood up and moved to the door. Damn. This is not how Jacqs had pictured this conversation.

CHAPTER TEN

Jacqs didn't rightly like introspection. It never led to good things. It didn't even lead to mediocre things, not in his estimation. But at the same time, he'd never run away from a fight in his life—not when it came to bullies in the camps, not when he'd faced off against the batfaces for the first time, and not when he had demons rolling around in his own head. He faced them and he either won or lost the fight, but he didn't go hiding.

First time he lost a teammate in battle, he'd faced his own guilt, and figured it out for the arrogance it was. He thought he could save his whole team if only he were fast enough with that gunner rig. If he could get out in front and risk his neck, he could save all the rest. Jacqs snorted at that bit of stupidity. In war, no one was safe, and the sort of heroics where one person saved them all was limited to the holovids and movies they played on the rec screens.

Thinking on his sexuality was different, though. Being het was part of him. It defined who he was as a man, and he liked who he was, even if the rest of the universe seemed to have a problem with him. Jacqs wasn't sure how to get past that hurdle. Food and a good workout might jar a few thoughts loose, so he headed toward the galley.

The universe was playing tricks with him, because Honshi Quin was sitting at one of the tables when Jacqs walked in. Going to the distributor, he grabbed his rations and made a beeline for the farthest table. Quin was nattering on with Dary, the two laughing quietly in a way that made Jacqs wonder if they were laughing at him, not that he cared. Those two were about as soldierly as Jacqs' socks. Hell, that was probably an insult to the socks.

The rations had a slight metallic taste, and Jacqs wrinkled his nose as he shoved the stuff in while trying to avoid tasting it. Despite his best efforts, Jacqs found his gaze returning to Quin over and over. She was a slight thing with dark hair and brown eyes that slanted. Objectively, he could say she was beautiful. He knew plenty of men who'd cut off a nut to knock boots with her. He just wasn't one.

She glanced over his way, and then the two girls started whispering even more. Dary was probably relating all the ways that Jacqs and the commander had been unfair to the others during that sparring session. That sounded like her. Sure enough, after a second, Dary looked over. Her gaze landed on him longer, and Jacqs stared back. Quin poked Dary in the side with an elbow and the woman turned away.

Zeke said Quin liked him, though. Jacqs didn't see it, but he definitely didn't want her liking on him. He'd snap her in half or smother her in bed or something. He'd feel like he was sharing a bunk with a glass doll. No, she was more the sort of woman he preferred looking at rather than touching.

Jacqs rolled that thought around in his head a bit. Honestly, he didn't get much out of looking at her, either. Her or Dary. Now with Dary that made sense, because he couldn't even look at her without hearing her annoying voice in his head. But Quin was polite enough and he still didn't get much out of looking at her, not like when he watched Zeke stalk across the training mats, his shirt off and his muscles on display. That did make Jacqs feel something in the core of his guts. Okay, if he was honest, he felt it a little lower. Yeah, his het credentials were a little tattered at this point. But if he was steno, that meant he was attracted to one trait, some trait Zeke had that these two women didn't.

Jacqs was still thinking on that when Quin got up and returned her tray to the machine. Dary followed and the two headed for the door that would take them right past Jacqs' table.

"Hi," Quin said with a smile.

After offering a quick grunt, Jacqs looked the other way. Yeah, she liked him. Either that or she was feeling particularly suicidal and thought trying to start a conversation with him was a good way to get that done. Jacqs didn't have a good reputation for socializing.

"God, you're rude," Dary complained, before the two women vanished. As far as Jacqs was concerned, he was doing a kindness by not letting Quin get confused about his feelings. Liking someone and not knowing if they liked you back was one of those levels of hell.

Unfortunately, Jacqs figured he'd put Zeke through some level of that hell, even if he hadn't meant to. He wasn't toying with the man. He just didn't know what he was supposed to be feeling. He liked Zeke. He also liked Aral who ran the whorehouse. He had liked Megal before she'd died in his arms. He'd liked her enough that he would have traded places with her at the time, and he hadn't even gotten a chance to knock boots with her, although she'd hinted that she wouldn't be adverse to the idea.

The first woman he'd slept with had caught him stealing bread. He must have been fourteen at the time, and she couldn't have been more than sixteen, but she'd seemed so much older. He thought she was going to call one of the camp guards, who would deliver a good whopping and then deliver him back to his mother. Instead she had made Jacqs put the bread back, haul two loads of flour from the central stores, carry several buckets of water, and after all that, she'd *given* him the bread he tried to steal. After that, he'd landed at her tent a lot until the batfaces had broken through the military line. The camp squatting just behind the front lines had scattered as the battle had raged between their tents, ripping up cobbled-together tent homes and human bodies. Jacqs still didn't know what had happened to Raynatha, but that was the nature of war.

Up until now, Jacqs would have said that the common denominator was that all his lovers were women. However, Zeke didn't fit that category, and neither did Lacroix, and that was another man Jacqs wouldn't mind inviting into his bed if'n Lacroix's orientation had matched his. Jacqs admired the man, even if Lacroix had, up to this point, avoided Jacqs like the bat flu. Jacqs didn't fault him none on that front. With every officer on the ship constantly looking for new reasons to blame Jacqs for any little fault he showed, including his bad habit of breathing, Jacqs would have avoided himself if he could.

The only common denominator Jacqs could see was that they were all powerful individuals. But power was all about being dynamic, being one of those who tied people up or who liked getting tied up, and Jacqs knew for a fact that he was non-dynamic. He'd had a woman ask him to tie her up once. It made Jacqs feel like the villain in some vid, and he'd ended up having to do all

the work. Neither of those feelings had led to a successful encounter. Jacqs still chalked that one up to foolish experimenting as a young man. And getting tied up was not even a little bit interesting to him.

Still struggling with his thoughts, Jacqs finished his rations and shoved his plate back in the distributor before heading for the training room. When he was on short shifts, he tried to use the extra time to really work out hard. Schreiber mostly lived in the gym and Lacroix and Haslet spent a fair amount of time in the room, but that still meant it was more private than most other spots in the ship, excepting the venting ducts. Jacqs had gotten up there once or twice out of a sheer, raw desperation to get away from other human beings, but they were cramped enough that it wouldn't never be Jacqs' first choice.

This time, when Jacqs reached the training room, he found he had a bit more company. Schreiber seemed to be running the techs through their paces. Bolson and Daygik looked clean wore out but they were still trading punches, and Quin was about near tears, explaining to Schreiber how she'd forgotten about the session.

When Jacqs walked in the room, every person turned to look, and most of them had expressions of horror. The desperation nearly made him do the stupidest thing possible and join the sparring group. Hell, it'd feel good to knock Bolson around a bit. However, Jacqs would bruise one of the tender babies, and then he'd land on discipline again. Besides, with his luck Schreiber would ask him to work out with Quin, and that would not be a good idea. He headed for the machines where he could lift weights and do some solid thinking.

The sparring group slowly got back on track. If Jacqs walking in a room was enough to distract them, Jacqs wasn't giving them good odds on surviving. Maybe they'd land behind the front or get in a unit that respected their tech skills enough to keep 'em wrapped up all safe behind a few fighters. Jacqs watched as Neira Daygik actually tripped over her own left foot in an attempt to evade the most pathetic punch in the history of the human military. Bolson was worse than useless. Yeah, they'd better find someone to watch their six or they were all dying.

Jacqs settled on one of the machines and lifted his legs up to put his feet on the wide plate so he could do sitting squats. He completed his first set of twenty and the sweat started but his mind still swirled with a million thoughts.

Blocking out the near non-stop whining from that end of the training room, Jacqs threw himself into his workout. Muscles strained and sweat rolled down his spine until the front and back of his shirt were stained dark. His hands ached from pulling the lift bar, and his back sent up little flares of heat that suggested that Jacqs was on the edge of a serious injury.

He wanted to push harder. He wanted to force his body into motion until his brain stopped spinning, but Jacqs knew he couldn't afford to. He had a short shift to sit, and he couldn't do it if he was crippled up. So instead, Jacqs leaned back on one of the machines and watched one sparring class end and another begin.

They'd gone through several exercises when Lacroix spotted Grah's unprotected back and gave her a slap on the ass. After spinning around, she hit him back twice as hard in the chest. Laughing, he retreated from the mats backwards, leaving the four navs to fight under Schreiber's tutelage. Jacqs was mildly surprised when Lacroix wandered over his way, but he was mostly too worn down to care.

"You look more than half dead," Lacroix commented as he dropped down onto a box of sparring supplies near the weight machines.

Jacqs grunted. Usually that was enough to send fools into full retreat. Instead, Lacroix laughed.

"She's getting better," Lacroix commented as he nodded toward Grah.

"Leaves her left side open too much."

"I keep telling her that."

"You should tell her less and hit her real good in the kidneys once or twice, and that'll keep her from letting some bat use that same hole in her defenses."

"Yeah, I wish I could. It's hard to when I hope to keep my boots under her bunk that night." Lacroix tilted his head and studied Jacqs for a second. "She already hates you. Would you mind doing it?"

Jacqs felt a distant, soft sort of disappointment that someone he admired hated him, but that was an old wound, and Grah was hardly the first woman to have that opinion of him. More importantly, Jacqs wanted to think of Grah as surviving the war and giving birth to a whole tribe of cantankerous, smart young boys and girls who could verbally eviscerate the next generation. “Yeah, I’ll learn her up. She’ll curse me out nine ways from the word go, but that’s okay.”

“She’ll appreciate it in the end, although you’re right that she’s going to curse you out while you’re doing it.”

Jacqs grunted. He was ready for the conversation to be over. Lacroix did fall silent again, but he didn’t leave. Wondering exactly what was keeping the man around, Jacqs finally turned and faced off against him. “You need something?”

“All sorts of things,” Lacroix agreed amiably. “Universal peace, food that isn’t put together by a computer from nutritional blocks, and a bed big enough to not fall out of when I get energetic with a beautiful woman.”

Jacqs nodded. Those were three things Jacqs wouldn’t mind at all. “You ain’t going to find any of them here.”

“Nope. But I am hoping to keep Allie from exiling me from her bed.”

Seeing as he was feeling uncomfortable with the whole conversation, Jacqs ignored it.

“You see, Allie still hates you, but now she feels guilty because she thinks that you’re in some crisis and I’m supposed to come over here and magically fix it. So this is me standing here, pretending to have a deep conversation with you, so that my woman won’t rip me a new one about how I’m being insensitive to a soul in crisis.”

That didn’t make a lick of sense. “Wait. So, she won’t talk to me because she hates me, but she’ll make you miserable if’n you don’t come and talk to me?”

Lacroix shrugged. “Women.”

“Huh.” Jacqs really didn’t have much more to say on the subject of Allie Grah. The others were sparring, but Allie wasn’t doing as well now. She kept

looking over toward them, and the other navs had figured out that was the perfect time to hit her. The woman had a colorful and surprisingly varied pool of profanity from which to choose.

“So, are you and the commander going to start knocking boots?”

Coming out of the blue like that, the question caught Jacqs totally off guard. “Don’t seem like that’s none of your business,” he snapped.

“Nope,” Lacroix agreed. “It isn’t. But now I can tell her I brought the subject up.”

“You’re pussy-whipped,” Jacqs accused the man. Of course it wasn’t the wisest thing to say since those very words had caused a fight with another crew, a tech who had transferred out almost a year ago. Jacqs had spent three weeks in a six by nine cell for that one, but the other guy had spent a week in his bunk recovering from the injuries, so that was fair.

Instead of getting angry, Lacroix laughed. “We are all suckers for the people we love. I’m pussy-whipped enough to come over and start the world’s most uncomfortable conversation. She’s dick-whipped enough to start listening when I tell her that you’re not half the ass you pretend to be. Wow. That sounds really disgusting when I say it out loud, and my dick would not be doing anything if Allie heard me use that expression, so ignore me. However, I still say you’re not as much of a bastard as she assumes.”

“Don’t bet on it.” Jacqs gave Lacroix his most unfriendly grin.

“Oh, I would. I grew up on smuggling ships, and I’m guessing that’s where you came from, isn’t it?”

Jacqs shrugged. He’d spent years on them after the crew grabbed him off dockside, but he’d never felt like a smuggler.

“People like Allie and the commander, they grew up on the inner planets, I bet. They have this idea that being good is all about table manners and talking nice.”

“Most folks I know who talk nice are reaching around their back to grab the weapon they plan to gut-shoot you with.”

“That is true,” Lacroix agreed, nodding. “I suppose in a perfect world, the

settlement folks and the border folks would all have their territory, and we wouldn't be living together and confusing the snot out of each other."

Jacqs eyed Lacroix. "You don't sound like no smuggler."

Lacroix laughed. "No, I suppose I don't. My folks sent me to school for a number of years. They said that part of negotiating a good sale is not aggravating the buyer. So, they wanted me to take lessons in how to be less aggravating."

While Jacqs didn't say anything, he figured he would have an easier life if someone had done that for him. His ma was too busy crying and trying to scrounge up food to much care about his manners, and on the ships, if a person tried having good manners, it was mostly taken as a sign of weakness.

"Now, if you want to talk on something, like how you seemed mighty shocked at me sticking my feet in my oversized mouth, I wouldn't mind." Lacroix let his words trail off at the end, clearly inviting Jacqs to hold up his end of the conversation. He didn't bother. Jacqs hoped that would be enough to send Lacroix away, but the man was mighty bad at taking a hint. "Did you really not recognize that the commander admires you?" he finally asked.

Jacqs shrugged. "Didn't notice Quin neither."

"No offense, but you'd have to be blind to avoid noticing Honshi checking out your ass."

"It ain't something I go looking for."

Lacroix scrunched up his face.

Feeling his aggravation rising to dangerous levels, Jacqs said, "If you got something to say, you'd best say it. Otherwise, find a new expression or take that one somewheres else."

"No problem. That's just me. I make all kinds of faces, so don't make no nevermind about that. I just think that you were looking for it with Allie. She was about ready to space you, and I'd even offered to tell you to fuck off, only she informed me that if I tried to go fighting her battles for her, that you would not be the only one getting spaced. That conversation did not end well for me. Huh. I lost my train of thought in there somewhere."

“If you’d tried telling me to fuck off, I would have pointed out that she can speak for herself, and I wouldn’t have cared.”

Lacroix laughed. “I think I’m lucky you’re such an ass.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Lacroix quickly added. “But it does seem like you notice some people.”

“I noticed the commander,” Jacqs admitted. It felt strange, admitting out loud that he’d noticed another man. Jacqs wished he could take the words back, but the stupid was already out of his mouth.

“You’d have to be dead to not notice the commander,” Lacroix said with a laugh. “But it seems like you’re the only one he’s looking back at.”

This time Jacqs was smart enough to keep his mouth closed.

“In the past I know you haven’t reacted well to people like Taylor, but I wasn’t sure if that had to do with him being homo or pan or him just being a weak little pissant who doesn’t know how to get through the day without annoying pretty much everyone with his attempts to be “helpful”. I have to wonder if that man ever gets laid, because I don’t know of many men who want to listen to that much whining.” Lacroix frowned. “Actually, I don’t know any women who want to hear it, either.”

“He is annoying.”

“Yes, he is,” Lacroix agreed. “But you never seemed bothered by Ashwin Little, who’s registered pan.”

Jacqs didn’t really think on the sexual orientations of most people, but he had to admit that Little never made him itchy the way Taylor did. They sometimes crossed shifts as gunners, and the man could handle himself on the guns. Jacqs had even shown him how to cheat the computer targeting when the tracking got all wonky. “He ain’t womanly.”

“Allie is womanly, so you can’t be that adverse to the trait. Hell, I would worry about how much you like her if it weren’t for the fact that she hates you.”

“You can stop pointing that out any time now,” Jacqs warned.

“I could, but I feel a little better every time I say it.”

And here Jacqs had thought Lacroix was the sane one. Clearly not. But at least Jacqs understood his brand of insanity and meanness. Rubbing a man's nose in the prize he'd lost was a common enough game on the ships and in the camps. The silence fell again, and Jacqs ignored Lacroix. He couldn't stop thinking on the subject of who he liked and who he didn't and who annoyed him and who he didn't really mind all that much.

Fact was that on the smuggling ship, he never knew someone's orientation. Others seemed to have some sort of magical ability to recognize another and know that someone was gay or even figure out that their orientations aligned, but Jacqs had kept to whores. It was simpler than trying to figure out a new set of rules that he wasn't real likely to master anyway. Still, certain people annoyed him. He would have hated Taylor if they'd been on a smuggling ship together. Flat out, no doubt. And he would have done the hating without knowing the man's orientation.

The more Jacqs thought, the more mixed up he seemed to get.

“So,” Lacroix started again, “are you annoyed by men who leave their boots under some other man's bunk or are you annoyed by weak men?”

Jacqs didn't have an answer, so he didn't give one. He watched the sparring class end and Grah seemed to hover near the edge of the group, her gaze constantly sliding over to where they stood.

“She's hoping I fixed everything for you.”

“Why does she care?” Jacqs asked.

Lacroix sucked air through his front teeth. “Considering that she hates you, I have no idea.”

That's when Jacqs punched Lacroix on the shoulder without warning. Lacroix stumbled to the side with wide eyes and a bit of ungraceful windmilling of the arms before he caught his balance again. The gasps of the others told Jacqs just how much shit he had managed to land in, and he braced himself for the coming recriminations.

Instead, Lacroix started to laugh. “Yeah, I guess you warned me, huh?” He

rubbed his arm, and the others all started whispering in their little groups, all except Grah who glared daggers at Jacqs.

“Yep, I sort of did,” Jacqs agreed. He had pointed out that he was getting annoyed with all the talk of Grah hating him. He considered that warning enough.

Maybe Lacroix thought it’d been warning enough too, because he walked away chuckling. Now, Grah? She had a good head of steam as she met Lacroix halfway, slipping her arm around his waist like he had just received some great wound and needed her support. Jacqs rolled his eyes. For a strong woman, she did some odd things, but her oddness never bothered him none, not even when she filed complaints against him.

Jacqs thought on that some. Lacroix didn’t bother him none, either. Even when he was poking his nose in something that wasn’t his business, he wasn’t bothersome... much. Jacqs watched those two walk out of the room together, and he truly hoped they survived the war. Those were the sorts of people he would volunteer to spend time with, and mostly Jacqs avoided human interaction. Surprisingly, Jacqs figured he’d knock boots with either of them, not that he would give up Zeke to give it a shot. With that realization, Jacqs figured he had his answer.

Standing up and stretching his overworked muscles, Jacqs headed for the gunnery office. Most times, Taylor was in there playing his games and pretending to study the gunner systems for his promotions test. If Jacqs could learn every system, every bolt and gear and circuit and override on the whole of a front gunner and a belly gunner, then Jacqs didn’t figure the learning required all that much in the way of brains, but Taylor did seem to struggle.

After giving a quick rap on the door, Jacqs waited impatiently for the call to enter. This was one of them rules that Taylor got all red-faced about, so Jacqs had learned to swallow all his complaints about the time that got wasted waiting outside doors.

“Come in,” Taylor finally called out. Jacqs pushed open the door, and the gunner manuals were out on Taylor’s desk. Jacqs would put credits up against sawdust that the man had used those extra minutes to close down his game.

“I need to change my official orientation from het to steno,” Jacqs said firmly. Saying it out loud felt strange, but there was a weight off his shoulders. Yep, this was the right choice. Of course, from the look of dumb shock on Taylor’s face, it wasn’t the choice others were expecting him to make, but Jacqs never had cared much about what others thought. He was steno and there wasn’t a soul in the universe who could tell him otherwise.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After sitting through a four-hour shift, Jacqs was itching to do something. He had a suspicion that the something he wanted was to track down Zeke and announce his new status as a non-dynamic, stenosexual male. However, he'd checked the schedule and Zeke was on-shift for another few hours. Jacqs hadn't let his heterosexuality interfere with the job, and he wasn't about to let his stenosexuality change him.

Since he couldn't figure out what else to do, Jacqs headed back to the training room. He didn't want to work out a second time, but watching the others spar and heckling them could be good fun. No matter what Zeke said about training them, there was no way Jacqs was fighting with any of them, not excepting Zeke... or maybe Lacroix or Haslet. Haslet was a formidable woman. Funny, but most of the strong women he took a liking to had a perverse habit of disliking him intensely.

Well, that wasn't a problem with Zeke, so hopefully he wouldn't have to worry about it.

Jacqs hadn't even made it to the balcony over the training room when his comm went off, giving him a shock-jolt in a very unfortunate place. Cursing, he pulled the comm out of his pocket and read the message. *Report to commander's office.*

Jacqs smiled. His day was improving already. After reversing direction, he headed back toward the offices. In the lift, he found it impossible to stand still. The way he felt, he could have climbed the ladders faster than this old thing was moving. Jacqs glared at the doors, waiting for them to open so he could head for the commander's office. However, once the lift stopped and the doors slid open, Jacqs found himself eye to eye with the commander. He was right out in the middle of the corridor.

"You changed your status? Already?"

"Yep. Why? Is that a problem?" Jacqs' guts about knotted themselves to death.

Zeke blinked at him, and Jacqs could feel that aggravation crawl up the back of his throat. He crossed his arms and glared at Zeke. “If’n I’m steno and think that people who are strong and competent are sexy, that ain’t your business and you can’t go looking at me like I done something wrong.”

“What?” Zeke took a step back and shook his head a little, and it occurred to Jacqs that he looked confused now. “I didn’t—I wouldn’t tell you that was wrong. I’m shocked at the timetable, not the change.”

“Shocked why?” Jacqs knew he was not the smartest, but it didn’t take that long to figure it out once Zeke had put him onto the understanding of steno.

“Because you’re supposed to deny the truth and kick and—” Zeke stopped right in the middle and then sighed. “You know what, never mind. I am officially resigning myself to be pleasantly surprised by everything you do, Jacqs Glebov.”

Jacqs was just glad Zeke put that “pleasantly” in there so Jacqs knew how he felt about it. He stepped back when Zeke moved into the lift, and Zeke hit the button for the next level down. Officers’ quarters.

“I thought you had a couple more hours on shift.”

“One, no one on this ship keeps regular hours except the navs and gunners. Thank god you guys have a better sense of duty than anyone else. And two, I have put in so much overtime trying to work off my sexual frustration that I could take the next three shifts off and command wouldn’t be able to say anything about it.”

“You’re sexually frustrated over me?” Jacqs felt a flash of wonder at that. Zeke was all bothered over him. He hadn’t ever had someone frustrated for him. Oh, plenty had let him put his boots under their bunk, and once he got in with someone he could generally get back in, because he was a good lover, but he didn’t think anyone had suffered for lack of having him in their bed.

“You are an idiot,” Zeke said.

“Why?”

“Because I have been dying, and you haven’t even had the good sense to notice it.” The words sounded grumpy, but Zeke reached over and brushed a

hand over Jacqs' shoulder right before the lift bumped to a stop, and then the doors opened. Then Zeke was out like a speeder ship. "Coming?" he called over his shoulder.

Not even bothering to answer, Jacqs hurried after him. Zeke opened his door and then stood to the side for Jacqs to go first. The first thing Jacqs noticed was that the desk was up. That meant the big old bed was down and ready. Now if Jacqs just knew what he was doing, they could get started.

He turned to ask, but the intense expression on Zeke's face stopped him. The man had that predatory look again, and Jacqs' cock sat up and begged prettily. Hell, yes, he was lusting over a man. At this point, Jacqs wasn't sure what sort of insanity had kept him from jumping Zeke's bones the second he'd met him. Then again, maybe it'd been better this way because Jacqs' attempts at initiating sexual relationships usually involved either money or abject failure.

Zeke hit the door lock and then circled around so that he was near the bed, forcing Jacqs to move toward the door. Wait. Jacqs didn't want to retreat, but his feet had definitely done some retreating. Taking control of his own damn limbs, Jacqs forced himself to step closer to Zeke. His palms were sweating. Fuck. He wiped them on his pants and tried to figure out what he should be doing. With women, he tried complimenting them first, but telling Zeke that he looked superbly predatory might not be the best move.

Before Jacqs could figure out what he wanted to do, he slammed into the wall as Zeke crashed into him. His first instinct was to fight, to shove back until he made room for himself. But then Zeke caught Jacqs by the shirtfront, fisting it as he pinned Jacqs against the wall. Zeke's hot mouth pressed against Jacqs' lips. He caught Jacqs' lower lip between his teeth and nipped it before sucking the bruised skin.

Jacqs was mostly too shocked to do much. He certainly wasn't complaining, because despite his lack of imagination, his cock was warming to this attention without any trouble. Then Zeke used his tongue to press into Jacqs' mouth, and before Jacqs could stop himself, he let out a low groan of need.

Zeke chuckled, his fingers threading through Jacqs' short hair. Finally Jacqs' body seemed to catch up, and he grabbed Zeke's shoulders in a bruising grip. They kissed, hard and hungry, each trying to dominate. This wasn't some whore passing time. Jacqs wasn't near as careful as he was when he kissed a woman with her tender lips. This was the hot need of sexing with the fire of a good fight. This was letting go of all inhibitions, throwing them aside so he could feed the cravings. This was good.

Zeke finally pulled away. He gasped hungrily, and his face was flushed. "Jacqs, are you okay with this?"

"Fuck, yes," Jacqs growled. He reached up and caught Zeke's curls, fisting them. They were soft, and when Jacqs pulled Zeke's head to the side, his neck arched in a beautiful line. Jacqs stared at this strong man, not entirely sure what he wanted. He wanted sex. He wanted to fight. He wanted to touch, and seeing as how this was the first time he'd done this with a man, he didn't know how to make all those thoughts fit into one moment.

Then Zeke rubbed against him, and every thought in Jacqs' brain fled. Zeke reached up and grabbed Jacqs' wrist, slamming it against the wall and pinning it there before going back for another hungry kiss. After a second, Zeke let go of his arm, but then his hands were on Jacqs' hips, pulling at the waist. Jacqs groaned and thrust his hips forward.

Jacqs thought Zeke was going for his pants, but suddenly Zeke pulled off Jacqs' shirt. It caught around his neck, and Jacqs reached up to pull it the rest of the way off. He wasn't prepared for Zeke to suck at his exposed nipple. The heat of it stabbed through him, making his cock so hard that he thought he might come in his pants like a teenager. Jacqs cursed as he pushed himself away from the wall, and Zeke stumbled back onto the bed. Rather than let go as he fell, Zeke held Jacqs by the waist, pulling him onto the bed with him.

Without any chance to catch himself, Jacqs landed on Zeke. Immediately, he rolled to the side to get his weight off his partner, but Jacqs wasn't used to having a lover as aggressive as he was. Zeke followed and pinned him down to the bed before flicking his tongue over his nipple again. "Fuck," Jacqs cursed, as the need and the heat all crashed together to create a real storm that rolled under his skin.

“I’m building up to it.”

“Very funny,” Jacqs said. He caught Zeke by those blond curls of his and pulled him so that they were nose to nose. For a second, he stared into dark brown eyes that had all these emotions that Jacqs couldn’t sort the way he could a data set from his gunner station. He did know one thing, though. Zeke liked him. He arched up to kiss Zeke, but he managed to misjudge the distance or maybe Zeke turned his head at the last second, but somehow Jacqs ended up kissing Zeke’s neck. However, from Zeke’s deep moan, the mistake didn’t bother him none. Jacqs kissed him again, lower. The neck of Zeke’s shirt was in the way, and Jacqs yanked at the fabric.

Zeke obliged him by pulling off his shirt, and Jacqs got cloth-burn on the tip of his nose, but he didn’t care. He had more bare skin to work with. He kissed the hollow of Zeke’s neck, tasting the salt from that warm skin of Zeke’s.

“You bastard,” Zeke said as he tipped his head back as an invitation for more.

Jacqs obliged. He scraped his teeth along the curve of his neck. Zeke’s sharp intake of breath made Jacqs think he was doing something right. “Is that you complaining, complimenting me or just making a statement of fact?” Jacqs asked.

“Oh, I’m complimenting you. You’re a fast learner.”

Jacqs laughed. “Don’t often get called that.”

Zeke undid the button of his uniform and stood on his good leg to shimmy out of the pants. “I’m gonna make you scream,” Zeke said, and Jacqs felt a shiver of anticipation he hadn’t felt since the first time he’d paid for a whore. Even the sight of Zeke’s erection wasn’t enough to scare Jacqs off, although Jacqs did feel a little twinge of anxiety. He’d felt that his first time with a woman, too. Actually, he’d felt a good deal worse that time because he’d had to get himself good and drunk before he had the nerve to go through with it, and drinking was not the wisest thing for a man to do right before sex.

Never one to shy from a challenge, Jacqs reached out and ran a finger along that proud erection. Zeke hissed, and Jacqs took it one step farther by

wrapping his fingers around it. It felt the same as his, a shade narrower, maybe, but it wasn't nothing to go worrying about. Jacqs knew what these things liked. Jacqs used this thumb to tease the foreskin, shifting it in tiny increments, and Zeke started a low keening sound.

"Let go," Zeke said.

"What?" Jacqs pulled his hand back as though burned. He hadn't done anything wrong.

"I'm going to come right now if you don't stop, and I haven't even gotten you out of your fucking pants. That's not fucking happening." Zeke was all red in the face, and Jacqs was too shocked to even comment as Zeke leaned in and undid Jacqs' uniform pants, pulling them off with the underwear.

Jacqs allowed himself a bit of pride in driving Zeke to the use of profanity like that, but the fact was he didn't have much energy to feel anything except his own lust and need. His prick was so hard that it bobbed comically and had turned a rather alarming shade. He needed to come.

But Jacqs wasn't getting the quick hand job he expected, and that quite frankly, he fucking needed. His cock was about to fucking fall off. But Zeke just hummed as he ran his fingers up and down the shaft before grabbing it.

"Fuck it. Do something," Jacqs growled.

Zeke got a devilish look in his eye and then leaned down. Sticking his tongue out, he ran it along the tip of Jacqs' cock. Jacqs shivered so hard that it about hurt. Worse, he felt like he couldn't catch his breath. That was Zeke licking on him, and now he opened up and took the tip of Jacqs' cock in his mouth.

Instinct made Jacqs thrust his hips up, but Zeke was a strong man, strong enough to hold Jacqs down as he slowly pulled back, letting the tip of the cock escape.

"Fuck." That was about the only word still in Jacqs' head at the moment. His cock was red, and now the end was all shiny with spit.

"You like?" Zeke had a teasing tone of voice. He leaned down again and flicked his tongue across the head.

Jacqs threw his head back and strained with every muscle in his body. He needed more or he needed it to stop, because this hanging on the edge was killing him. His heart was near to beating out of his body, and his cock was going to fucking break. Could a man sprain his cock? If so, Jacqs was in real danger.

Zeke went back to humming as he climbed up on top of Jacqs. Jacqs bucked up again, and now his cock slid against Zeke's body. The slide, the thrust, that was familiar. But the smell of Zeke, the weight holding him down, the strength—all that was new and exciting. Jacqs' cock was hot and with each beat of his heart, he could feel the echoing ache in his balls.

“Don't fucking tease,” Jacqs snarled, and reaching up he grabbed Zeke's curls. Zeke gave a little startled sound, and then Jacqs forced him to the side, rolling them both. He hit his elbow against the metal wall, but Jacqs couldn't care less if someone offered to pay him to. He crushed Zeke's lips with his own. The kiss was hard and demanding, and Jacqs slipped his hand between their bodies. His fingers found Zeke's cock first, and Jacqs grabbed it.

He could feel the heat, the hard length that felt alive under his hands. This would be easier with slick, but Zeke wasn't cut, so he'd survive. Besides, he didn't seem to mind a little rough. Jacqs jacked him and at the same time ground down onto Zeke's body.

After a second, Zeke's legs came up around Jacqs, the cold metal of the artificial leg resting against Jacqs' thigh, a welcome island of cool in what had become a fucking firestorm. Jacqs could feel Zeke's body jerk and flail as he started to come. This was the wild, out of control moment that Jacqs loved seeing in his lover's eyes. He watched as Zeke threw his head back, that long neck arching out as he came. Jacqs felt the slick between their bodies.

Rolling to one side, Jacqs took his own cock in hand and started jerking off. Zeke reached for him, his hand resting on Jacqs' wrist while he worked. Slowly, Zeke let his fingers trail up Jacqs' arm and then rest on the inside of Jacqs' thigh.

“Fuck, that's killing me,” Zeke whispered. He brushed the back of his knuckle over Jacqs' balls.

Then Jacqs was coming, and he didn't much care what Zeke's words might have meant. His orgasm made his whole body stiffen as he shot his cum across Zeke's hip and stomach. Only then did Jacqs feel like he could breathe again, like a targeting system that had to go offline before it could properly restart.

As he panted, Jacqs checked in with his body. He felt good, except for his elbow that had taken a hit, and one shoulder that was sore from something, and he was hanging off the bed all awkward so that the edge of the frame pressed into his knee.

"Shift over," Jacqs said, pushing Zeke toward the wall. Zeke swung his legs up into the bed and scooted over, and Jacqs stretched out next to him. It was tight, but it was a hell of a lot better than trying to share a regular bunk. Jacqs shifted until he got one arm under the pillow and he draped the other over Zeke. "What do you mean I was killing you?" he asked.

"What?" Zeke sounded like a man woken in the middle of the night.

"You said I was killing you. Why? You'd come."

Zeke chuckled, and he started running his hand over Jacqs' arm. "It was killing me because watching you jerk off make me want to get hard again, only I'm not fifteen anymore."

"Really?" Jacqs didn't remember ever having someone enjoy watching him like that. It was a compliment, but not one Jacqs had been expecting.

"Really," Zeke said. "For someone who hasn't done this before, you didn't need much help finding the ropes. If anything, I felt like I was trying to keep up."

"It was a hand job. It ain't like I don't have a dick of my own. I know what feels good."

"You know, I like the world the way you see it, Jacqs. It makes a lot more sense."

Jacqs grunted. He kept telling people that; however, he also knew that sort of patience was likely to have a short shelf life. "Wait until I do something real stupid and Taylor sends me up for discipline. You won't be liking my logic then."

“I won’t. I had your file flagged, so two seconds after you changed your orientation to steno, I called the captain and told him that I was removing myself from your direct chain of command. So any discipline Taylor can’t handle goes straight to him.”

“What? Why?” Jacqs lifted up on one elbow to get a good look at Zeke’s face. He was trying to figure if Zeke was upset, but he looked mostly well-fucked.

“Because I informed the captain that I planned to have as much sex with you as humanly possible, and that it might be a conflict of interest for me to assign discipline.”

“Huh.” Jacqs settled back down onto the pillow. He hadn’t expected that, somehow. Telling the captain, that made it more real. They weren’t hiding anything, and Zeke was being all official about it. That was a real nice surprise. “Can we get started on that having more sex thing now?”

Zeke laughed. “You are going to be the death of me.”

“Yeah, but you’re going out happy.”

“I really am,” Zeke agreed. Huh. For once in his life, Jacqs had gotten the post-sex talk part right. It felt pretty damn nice. Actually, lying next to Zeke, a whole lot of things felt right, and for now, that’s all that mattered. The rest would have to take care of itself.

THE END

Glossary of Sexual Terms Used Within the Universe

Adynamic: An individual who does not require any sort of power exchange as part of the sexual experience.

Agendered: Having a perceived identity that excludes any sexual reference. These individuals attempt to avoid any traits that would identify them as male or female.

Asexual: One who does not experience sexual attraction.

Bigendered: Having a perceived sexual identity that encompasses traits of both male and female. These individuals may or may not have physical traits of both genders. Roughly one percent of human births have some ambiguity in their genitalia.

Cisgendered: Having a perceived sexual identity that matches the physical traits (i.e. a woman who sees herself as a woman)

Demisexual: One who appears to be asexual or intrasexual but who can enjoy a sexual relationship if a strong emotional relationship has already been established with the other person.

Dynamic: An individual who receives sexual satisfaction from one side of a power exchange, either dominating or submitting.

Dyssexual: An individual who receives sexual satisfaction from violating others' sexuality or making others uncomfortable (i.e. a woman who continues to seek a sexual relationship with an asexual individual). In extreme cases, a dyssexual may rape others or seek sexual satisfaction from those incapable of consent, such as animals.

Genderfluid: One whose perceived gender is flexible and may change, not over time as part of maturing, but on a regular basis. One who transitions between gender identities.

Heterosexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to someone who identifies as the opposite gender.

Homosexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to those who identify as the same gender.

Hypersexual: One who considers sexual interaction a necessary part of a meaningful relationship. One who uses sexuality as a means of getting to know a person or exploring a relationship.

Hyposexual: One who places a low value on sex in a relationship. While an individual may engage in and enjoy sexual intercourse, the act is not seen as central to any relationship.

Intrasexual: One whose sexual satisfaction is not focused on a partner or partners. In some cases, an intrasexual may even prefer self-pleasure over intimacy with another.

Non-dynamic: An individual who is adverse to any power exchange during sex.

Pangendered: An individual whose perceived sexual identity encompasses multiple gender identities

Pansexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to a wide range of individuals, including members of different gender groups.

Polydynamic: An individual who receives sexual satisfaction from both holding power over others (dominating) and yielding power to others (submitting), i.e. a “switch.”

Sexualfluid: One whose sexuality is flexible and may change, not over time as part of maturing, but on a regular basis.

Stenosexual: An individual who is sexually attracted to those who possess particular traits rather than being sexually attracted to a sexuality or gender.

Transgendered: having a perceived sexual identity that does not match the physical traits (i.e. a genetically-identified woman who sees himself as a man)

Author Bio

Lyn Gala publishes through Dreamspinner Press, Loose Id, and Ellora's Cave. She started writing in the back of her science notebook in third grade and hasn't stopped since. Westerns starring men with shady pasts gave way to science fiction with questionable protagonists, which eventually became any story with a morally ambiguous character. Even the purest heroes have pain and loss and darkness in their hearts, and that's where she likes to find her stories. Her characters seek to better themselves and find the happy (or happier) ending. When she isn't writing, Lyn Gala teaches history in a small town in New Mexico. Her favorite spot to write is a flat rock under a wide tree on the edge of the open desert where her dog can terrorize local wildlife. Writing in a wide range of genres, she often gravitates back to adventure and BDSM, stories about men in search of true love and a way to bring some criminal to justice... unless they happen to be the criminal.

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WHEN YOU WERE PIXELS

a standalone short story in the Syntax universe

By Julio-Alexi Genao

Photo Description

On a dark, rainy night, a man stands on a balcony overlooking a grim city dense with tall, futuristic buildings. Tiny skycraft are darting between the towers against the charcoal sky. The man—dressed in black, with very short hair—has his back to the viewer. He appears to be a solitary, lonely figure, staring at a single spire crowned by a full moon and marked by the numbers “072” on its side.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Welcome to the Capitol. Crime runs rampant far below in the slums, and civil unrest has spread even to its darkened spires in spite of the government's best efforts to silence dissent. What will become of the City of Lights when its last is extinguished?

There's an assassin afoot tonight. Whether or not his mark is made could be the deciding factor in this unspoken war. Will tyranny prevail? Or will the revolution finally begin to move forward?

I would love to see dark spec fiction with as many layers as you want to put on it. SFF? Yes, please. Dieselpunk, or other variants? Absolutely. Paranormal or demonic influences? Oh baby, purr.

As plot-focused or as porn-focused as you feel is appropriate!

You are already awesome. Thank you so much in advance.

Sincerely,

EK

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, dystopia, post-apocalyptic

Tags: hurt/comfort, tear jerker, anterograde amnesia

Content warnings: no HEA or HFN, some violence

Word count: 7,464

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Twice.

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Finally, to all the outrageously attractive members of #teamjoolz, who yet remain quite #effective: I made this with love. I really hope you love it too.

Dedication

for nino

*if equal affection cannot be
let the more loving one be me*

W.H. Auden

WHEN YOU WERE PIXELS

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My name is Antho, and I love you.

You don't remember me.

That's okay.

I'm going to leave this for you where you'll find it, in that long black coat you wear with all the secret pockets. It might take you some time, but I don't mind.

I watched you kill my boss. Then I watched you fall.

I think I maybe loved you as early as then. He was an asshole.

But that's not really what I need you to know.

You'll need to read these words one day, and I hope you believe them:

You are not alone.

You forgot me three times, and every time, we started over.

Maybe I'm already dead. Maybe you killed me like you said you would.

Doesn't matter.

I loved you even when you forgot me.

And—for a little while—you loved me back.

The first time I saw you it was like you had come out of nowhere.

None of the artificial intelligence surveillance subroutines had tracked your entry into the tower, or your ascent to the two hundred and nineteenth floor. You hadn't set off any alarms, and none of the security personnel ever put out a call over their comms.

Not until it was too late, anyway.

I'd been at my post in the tower security suites, babysitting the surveillance system as it sifted through data looking for anomalies.

Looking for someone like you.

It was boring work, but I'm an Undertown boy. I'd been lucky enough to get a job at all, never mind one so high off the ground.

I think you might be one too. An underton, like me? I heard your accent come back a couple times. You talk in your sleep.

Nothing ever happened at work. No anomalies.

Until you.

I saw what you did.

It was like watching a machine.

I'd never seen anyone like you, and neither had they. You sliced into the milling mass of confused officers, striking at every vulnerable target that presented itself. You took apart an entire corps of security personnel before they even realized what was happening.

You simply dismantled any who tried to stop you, fists and feet snapping outward in these crazy moves that took my breath away, that old-timey coat you love spinning around you the way it does, flaring up and out like black wings and then settling in a sexy ripple of leather when you went still.

You left none standing.

They hadn't even been armed. Hadn't prepared for the possibility of facing someone like you.

I sat there with my mouth open like a dummy, watching it happen.

You were incredible.

They sent armed orbs up to that floor to get you, but you were too fast. The whole thing was over and you were on another floor before the droids even got there.

You reached my boss's office. He was a dick to the end. Sitting in his chair behind an enormous comms array like he was master of the whole world instead of some mid-level corporate security executive with an en-suite washroom. I could see him barking harsh words at you—words I couldn't hear

over the alarms and the panic all around me with all these officers running around yelling like it was the start of the Energy War all over again.

A sudden hush fell over the room as everyone in sight of a monitor watched you coolly walk up to him and twist his head around in one brutally efficient movement.

Just like that. He was in the middle of a sentence, and you ended him on the spot.

Then you were running, and so was everyone else. I was left alone to man the feeds.

They were coming for you, yet somehow you knew where to go. Which corridor to run down. When to run down it. When to stop, when to go, when to slip back the way you'd come to avoid a group of security orbs floating by.

I never could figure out how you managed to fool their sensors.

You just *did*. Every time.

You couldn't avoid the cameras, though. I could see you the entire time. Even so, something kept the two networks from talking. The surveillance AI kept pinging the droid AI, trying to update the orbs on your location, but nothing ever got through.

You'd sorted it, somehow. In advance. Fixed it so it would all go wrong for us exactly when you needed it to.

I still wonder why you let us watch you. Why you never disabled the video.

I know you messed with the data capture—not one second of the feed was saved as it should've been—but you had to know someone would be sitting in a room somewhere in the building, watching you kill a man.

Then watching you run.

By the time anyone realized that the usual lines of communication had been sabotaged—that the only way anyone could track you was by watching your escape with human eyes—they were too late.

It was me. I watched it happen. And it was beautiful.

You.

You were beautiful.

You almost made it out. You were maybe a minute from getting away. Something happened to you.

You staggered a bit, like someone hit you in the head, but you were alone. You were in a service passage, deep down in the lower third of the tower, below even the living quarters for nobodies like me.

You went down on your knees, and you pressed your head to the floor. You looked like you were praying. Then I saw your mouth, and the cords of your neck above the collar of your coat.

You were screaming in pain.

The lights in the service passage started flickering. One second before the video feed terminated, they flared and went out.

I didn't know what to do.

I knew what I *wanted* to do. I knew what I was *supposed* to do.

But I didn't know what I was *going* to do.

You were still in the building. Still down there, a hundred and fifty floors below.

The surveillance suite filled up with people. Some barked orders at others. A group in the conference room had a hushed yet urgent conversation before mumbling gravely into their comms to speak to very angry people very far away.

Nobody knew where you were except me, and I—

I wasn't saying.

I don't know why. I still don't know why I didn't just stand up and tell somebody.

I'm nothing, here. A lowly surveillance analyst. Being the hero could have meant something good for me. Could have changed my whole life.

I could have done it. I *should* have done it.

I sat there and I thought about you, instead.

There was something about the way you cut down all those men. A kind of fragile tension in every step you took. It spoke of—vulnerability.

I recognized it.

I saw your pain, when you fell. The expression on your face. I watched the way you pressed your hand against your stomach as you slid from your kneeling position onto the floor, to lie down on your side like a broken child.

I recognized that, too.

I was asked a series of questions.

What did you see? Why are there no files in the video archives? How did the assassin escape?

I lied every time.

When they let me go, I went down to find you.

You were right where I'd seen you fall, but everything around you had changed.

The hall was dark. All the lighting panels were blown for almost ten meters in both directions. The metal walls were bowed outward, and you were at the epicenter of the damage, at the bottom of a crater of warped alloy flooring panels.

You lay still, breathing shallowly, one arm over your head. Your knees were drawn up to your chest.

I crept up to the crater in the floor, using a diode from my belt to gauge the scope of the devastation. Nothing was scorched. Nothing had been burned. All that incredible damage—the corridor, the floor, all the dead electronics—all of it had somehow happened without any kind of flame or explosive.

I slid down to the bottom of the crater and sat there on my heels, looking at you.

Unconscious, all the hard edges of your face had gone gentle, and I could see that your head wasn't shaved at all, as it had looked on the video feed. You had close-cropped blond hair, like a soldier.

I'm not good with ages. With the Citizens and their drugs and their implants, you can never tell if someone's thirty or a hundred. You didn't look like a Citizen to me, though—even if you looked like you were just a kid. Maybe twenty—but with someone as tall as you, with that long neck of yours and those slightly too-big ears, looking in sleep like you'd only just left your adolescence behind last Thursday—I couldn't be sure.

I wanted to see your face. Your whole face, not just the broad, masculine mouth, slack with dead sleep. I wanted to see you, up close this time.

I moved your arm.

Short lashes in a pale fringe. Thin brows. Your eyes were closed. I imagined that when they opened, they'd be large and full of something. That they'd look at a thing and *see* it.

You didn't open your eyes, though.

Good that you didn't, because I needed to get you out of there without any fuss. The rupture in services along that corridor could have been noted at any moment. At the time, I figured everyone had more on their minds than a dodgy video feed and some dead climate control software in a shitty lower-level service sector—but now I think you'd known they'd be looking closely at any anomaly, no matter how small, and that you had accounted for that.

Just like I'd accounted for all the surveillance feeds in every lift and corridor between where you'd fallen and my quarters.

I gently slid my arms underneath you and carried you home.

When I woke up, you were kneeling over me in the bed with the long, blunt-tipped fingers of one hand wrapped around my neck.

Your eyes were open, and as you squeezed my throat shut I saw the keen edge of focus in them. Your face was closed to me—all softness gone—with your mouth a hard line and your forehead sheened with sweat.

You were going to kill me, but first you wanted answers.

“You will tell me where I am.” Your voice was low and scary, grinding like the rusted innards of an old machine.

You relaxed your fingers to let me answer you. I didn’t panic. I drew breath as slowly as I could.

I was calm.

“Still in Tower Oh-Seven-Two,” I rasped. “But safe.” Something flickered in your expression, but I didn’t know what it meant. “I didn’t tell. I saw what you did but I didn’t tell. You were hurt. I brought you here.” Your fingers tightened again, and I knew I had only a few seconds to make you understand. “My home. My quarters. I kept you safe. I didn’t tell.”

It was enough.

You let me go.

I watched you roll off me and step away from the bed in silence, but when the heat of your body was gone, I wanted it back.

You smelled like sweat, and leather, and a little like ozone. I wanted you.

You took in your surroundings. The plastic furniture. The empty walls and my tiny, precious collection of real books in the battered box half-under the bed. No windows. No other rooms but the lavatory. No fancy video deck or domestic droids.

Just me, in the worn sheets we’d been sharing moments earlier.

I swallowed around my hunger for you. “My name is Antho,” I said, and then some strange, suicidal impulse took me: “Who—who sent you? My boss. He was Decuria. But a minor—only a second cousin, or something. Why did he—why did you kill him?”

You turned your head sharply towards me, and what I saw in your face stunned me.

Confusion.

You couldn’t remember.

Your expression shifted. You grew angry. I tensed, wondering if you were going to kill me after all.

Almost immediately, the lines of your face changed again. Your mouth—so mobile and expressive even when still—now spoke silently of pain.

The hairs on my arms stood up at a sudden charge in the air.

The lamp I'd left on by the bed began to flicker.

With a small pop, it sparked and went out, filling the room with the smell of fried circuitry. We were in the dark as you collapsed bonelessly back onto the bed, on top of me.

You were unconscious again.

Hours earlier, after struggling to carry you from the crater to my quarters with my arms on fire from the strain, I reached my door.

You're so tall that I'd had to carry you over my shoulder, holding you steady with my hands on the backs of your thighs, warm and taut even at rest. With my every step your arms had swayed behind my back, hands brushing my ass lightly. You weighed next to nothing, but the distance I'd needed to carry you and the body armor you wore under your clothes were nearly too much for me.

Guys like me don't rate sliding doors. This close to the ground I'd been lucky just to have a room to myself. I had to press you against the door with my shoulder and turn the knob with my free hand, afraid that at any moment we'd be seen.

I'd stripped your long coat off you and laid you on my bed. Checked your pulse before covering you with my blankets. Sat in my only chair, on the other side of the room, to wait for you to wake.

But I ached.

My skin hungered for you. You were warm, and alive, and in my bed, and I wanted you so bad I could feel the ripple of need on the pads of my fingertips, on the palms of my hands, on the skin of my back, at the base of my cock, inside my ass—

I wanted the taste of you in my mouth.

I'd been alone for so long. Winning this job meant cutting ties with everyone. Meant moving into my bare little room a third of the way up a bleak

corporate tower, living my life for the Company. I'd made my choice, and I would make it the same way again.

Wasn't like I hadn't had to live with another sort of hunger, down in the streets.

Undertown. You maybe don't remember it. Your clothes don't smell of it. Of the filth, the rot. The stinking hell of vapor and grime. The warren of hovels and the millions of us starving in them, defending whatever pathetic collection of things we call "ours"—sometimes to the death, yet still doing little more than waiting to die.

An entire world defined by suffering. Below even me, now, in my barren little room.

All the enormous machines that keep full Citizens comfortable far above us in their glittering towers, all the infrastructure of power, of fuel, of commerce and industry—all of it happens below. Made possible with our hands. With our bodies.

With our lives.

I would have done anything to escape.

I got my chance. I made it out—but the price was loneliness.

And your body was warm.

I'd removed all but my underclothes, that night I took you home. Took off all the drab corporate synthetics as if stripping my armor to uncover the vulnerable man I was underneath it.

The man who needed to be near you.

I'd pressed my back into your solid length, eyes wet as I fell asleep.

That's why I was calm. When you woke me in the middle of the night with your hand around my throat, and I thought I was going to die for bringing you home—that I had given my life to lie down next to a murderer—that's why I was calm.

Because all I was thinking in that moment was that it was worth it.

The next time you woke, you'd forgotten everything.

I was supposed to have the day off, but the brutal murder of a security executive with ties to a ruling family messed-up my schedule. I was called in to work a morning shift while better-qualified staff were deployed all over the building to do who-cares-what.

I left you a note on the inside of the door, hoping you'd read it, and stay.

I knew you could probably handle yourself, all things considered—but you weren't well. It seemed like you spent all night talking out loud or moaning softly. You moved around a lot in the bed, jabbing at me with sharp elbows a couple times.

I loved it.

Not your distress. Never that. I loved—I loved being there. Next to you. The pile of limbs that was Us. Together in the same bed. Even if it meant waking up with a few new bruises.

One time during the night you threw a heavy arm out and over my chest—you on your belly, me lying on my back—and when I turned my head I could just make out your hand, huge already, but also swollen from all the fighting, opening and closing on the sheets beside me.

I wanted to take your hand into mine and kiss it.

I never dared.

In the morning my personal comm chimed to wake me, somewhere inside the pile of clothes I'd left by the door.

I'd already been awake for hours.

At some point you'd settled on your side, and I'd turned as well, to fit my back against your front.

Your cock was a huge and solid mass of warmth behind me, crushed against the cheeks of my ass. I could feel it through my shorts, throbbing slightly every so often as you slept.

I wanted you.

I wanted to grind back onto that warmth and strip the barriers between us until I could push myself around you, to wrap the heat of my insides around

your cock. I wanted to gut myself for you, and my need was like an animal inside me, tearing at me to get to you.

I did none of those things. Never moved.

You slept on.

I stayed there with you, even when I had to go pee, listening to you snore softly. When the light in the bathroom went on at 0800, I counted the tiny moles on the skin of your forearm, on skin as pallid as the rest of you, but fuzzed with blond hairs I hadn't been able to see until just then.

I slipped out of bed carefully, out from under your arm, and it felt like leaving home all over again.

I dressed and went to work. The note I left you that morning read:

Stay. I'm Antho. You're safe, here. I'll be back with food. I didn't tell anyone about you. Please rest and get better. You're hurt, but you're safe now—I promise. I won't tell anyone. I want to help you.

You never saw it.

When I returned from my shift with new lamps for the room and extra rations for you, my note was still stuck to the inside of the door, and you were still asleep. I took it down and slipped it into my pocket.

I gave you all my secrets, and you lost them all. You lost a lot of things.

But the treasure of it was in the giving, not the keeping.

You've forgotten me, but I'll remember you as long as I live.

You tried to kill me again in the evening.

I was heating the rations. I had my back to the bed. You never made a sound.

"Who," you whispered harshly by my ear as you pressed something cold and sharp to my neck, "are you?"

My pulse spiked. I cleared my throat to speak, but didn't move. "My name is Antho. I found you when you—when you fell. You needed help. I brought you here. To keep you safe."

“Where is this place?”

“We are still inside Tower Oh-Seven-Two. You killed my—a man. You’re hurt. I saw it happen to you. On the feed. I came for you, and now you’re here. With me.”

You said nothing. I listened to your breathing, felt the tension in the blade against my throat. It never wavered as you considered.

Then:

“Why?”

“Because—”

I stood there, words tangled up inside me uselessly.

I couldn’t figure out how to tell you. I know how to say it now, but not then.

I didn’t know how to tell you about what was already there, inside me, a knot of something secret and warm.

I remember. I remember it like it’s happening to me right this second. I remember your smell. Like a mix of synthetic fabric and warm skin and—something else, not like ozone, this time; you were calm. Something cold and maybe metallic, like iron. I remember your breath, sour from sleep. I remember the heat of you at my back again, like the banked fires of a furnace. I remember thinking: *I shouldn’t hide. I should show him.*

So I did.

With a long, slow sigh, all the tension I’d held to keep perfectly still bled out of me in one breath. I slouched down a little, into you, arching my back slightly as I fitted myself to your lean body, and the shock of surprise robbed your hand of agency.

You dropped the knife.

And for a moment you just—let me.

Let me sink into you.

But only for a moment.

You closed your hand around my arm and threw me aside with incredible speed. My head hit the wall as I smashed into the small table where I took my

meals. My vision blurred as the legs collapsed and splintered under me, the bowls and cutlery I'd laid out for us clattering as they spun across the floor. Before I could recover you grabbed me by the throat and pulled me off the rubble and into the middle of the room. My legs flailed out as you swung me around, knocking the scalding hot rations off the heating element, to splatter onto my thighs and feet. I cried out in pain as you straddled me, pinning my arms to the floor with your knees.

You were full of rage. The skin of your face was mottled with it. Your lips twisted into a snarl as you leaned in close.

Blue. Your eyes were a leaden blue, dark with murder—but I was still not afraid.

I was not afraid of you. I was afraid of discovery. Of our time running out.

If—if that thing you do, with the lights, with electronics—if it happened again, any worse than before—they'd notice. Upstairs. Some clever AI would report the exception in the electrical grid to an eager admin in an office three hundred meters above us, and then all of this would be over.

They'd come for you, and this time they'd come with weapons.

I was afraid of that. For you. But not *of* you.

Never afraid of you.

I wanted you.

I wanted you more than I wanted to live.

You didn't hurt me again. My vision cleared. I watched you struggle against the urge to end my life.

I think you saw it in me. Or felt it, maybe.

The submission. The wanting.

I let go. My body went lax under you.

You realized it at the same time I did. That you were resting your ass lightly on my groin, and that my dick was hard.

This time I was close enough to see your surprise up close. Your rage melted away into a kind of innocent confusion for just a moment, before your brows drew down to darken your face again.

It's like a—like a video panel, you know that? Your face. I don't think you realize how much of what happens inside you can be seen in your face.

Maybe it was just me. I paid attention to you.

You were off me in an instant, and then what few belongings I had left were lost to the violence of the animal of suffering and fury you became.

You roared, mindless. I sat up to watch you lay waste to my home.

You were in such pain. So much pain.

You stalked from corner to corner, howling wordlessly, destroying anything within reach.

Everything except me.

You were the monster, but all I could see was the boy.

The hurt. The brokenness.

The outside of you had peeled away, and I could see your insides as clear as my own hand in my lap, aching to reach for you.

You were spent long after there was nothing left for you to destroy, your arms and legs trembling with exhaustion. You collapsed on the far side of the room, by the door to the corridor outside.

You didn't try to leave.

Your knuckles were cut and bloody. You rested your forearms on your knees, with your head hanging down. I watched you bleed onto the pieces of what used to belong to me.

I didn't care.

I didn't want any of it.

You were still, but you were not calm. I saw your chest heaving. The tears falling. You were covered in sweat and shattered things. For you, the storm hadn't passed. It had returned to its place inside you again.

I wiped tears from my own cheeks with the back of my hand, and your head snapped up to track my sudden movement.

Your face. Your face in that moment: your rage had vanished, but the hurt was still there.

“Let me—” I coughed. My throat was raw, and I could still feel the ghostly press of those strong fingers, crushing my windpipe. “Let me help you.”

“Nobody can help me,” you said, voice low and taut. “There’s nothing in me.”

“You’re safe here.”

“But you are not,” you whispered. “Not ever. I forget. I forget and then I’ll—I could kill you.”

When I didn’t reply, you dropped your head again.

I almost missed it when you murmured, “I always kill them, in the end.”

But you didn’t kill me, that night.

You let me come near, and pull you up to stand with me, and together we went into the lavatory.

You let me strip your torn and bloody clothes off you. I did it with something close to reverence. My hands shook like crazy, but you seemed not to notice.

I wouldn’t have been much ashamed if you had.

You let me set the water in the shower and followed me into the booth to stand there with me under the warm spray. You kept your head down, not looking me in the eyes—though if you were shy, I couldn’t tell. You had no reason to be. You know what you look like.

I know you don’t remember what we did.

I want to tell you.

I want to tell you how I stood there with you, taking every part of you in my hands, to pour all my heartsick years of secret need into your skin.

How I stroked you with fingers, and held you with arms.

I went to my knees to take you into my mouth, sliding you into my throat with all the tenderness I had. I moaned when you let me swallow your come,

and kept sucking you until you had no more to give me.

I want to tell you how I stood and took a cloth to your body, massaging the satiny soap into your skin, and the tension from your muscles. How I was so careful of all your scrapes, and tender with your bruises.

Before long you were hard again. Mine had never gone down in the first place. I led you out by the hand, mindful of sharp things on the floor, to the bed whose mattress had survived where its unadorned frame had not.

You fell on top of me onto the pile of synthetic sheets and foam padding, and I groaned with need at the living weight of you, the mass of you—of you, on me, and then inside me.

You took me apart and filled me with everything I'd ever needed.

I want to tell you how you fixed me.

How I came like dying, a rush of blood roaring in my ears—laughing as every part of me became joy, and pleasure, and—everything.

Everything.

You came inside me not long after, with my body wrapped tight around your cock as I'd wanted from the very first. I felt it swell even larger at the last, stretching me to the point of pain more sweet than any peace—

The wonder of that wet heat pooling deep within me—

And then you sighed, and collapsed on top of me, our sweat mingling on our skin as you slid to cup my entire body with yours, while you slowly spread your come around inside me with deep, tender strokes.

You made me feel vital. Like you needed me.

For one unbelievable moment, the emptiness—the ache—that terrible hollow of desolation I'd lived with all this time was just—gone.

Gone.

You inside me, instead.

We lay there together afterward, limbs heavy and slick with mingled sweat, bonelessly tangled up together, with your come inside me like a secret.

I held it in me for the rest of the night.

I want to tell you how grateful I felt. Grateful for you, for what we'd done—but also that I'd managed to keep that small part of you within me as long as I had.

Because when you woke up in the morning you had forgotten me again.

“You're safe,” I whispered out into the darkness, a surge of roiling panic in me that hadn't been there the last time. “I saw—I saw you. On the feeds. You needed help—I came for you.”

All the lights in my quarters, even in the lavatory, had died. I heard a rustling noise near the door. The stink of melted plastic filled the air, and underneath it ozone, like a thunderstorm was building inside my room.

I was afraid. Attack droids and armed officers could already have been creeping silently down the corridor to kill us both.

I heard the click of the lock on my door. You opened it just enough to let a wedge of light from the passage outside cut into the space between us. I could see you, now—head panning left-right, left-right, marking the shadowed destruction.

Marking your nudity. The armor and clothing in a pile beside you.

Me.

This was it. This was the end.

“I'm Antho,” I said, and this time my voice broke.

I felt it return. Felt the poisonous bloom open in the middle of me like it had never gone.

The ache. The empty. It had come back.

“Please—*my name is Antho.*”

You said nothing.

“This is—you're still in Tower Oh-Seven-Two. Listen to me, you—you got away, but something happened to you. You were hurt. I brought you here to take care of you. I took care of you—”

I looked around the room, fully registering at last what it must have looked

like to you—how exposed and vulnerable you must have felt—and in an instant I knew:

You'd woken in the dark, in bed with a stranger, and between you and your freedom was a floor strewn with the sharp edges of broken things.

I'd lost you before I'd even opened my eyes.

"This—" I gestured at the debris on the floor. "—It was an accident. You were safe here. You *are* safe here—"

My mouth snapped shut on the lie as you began pulling on clothes.

Body armor first.

It was really happening.

"Don't go."

Shirt. Boots. The coat you wear like it's a part of your body.

"You don't need to—listen to me, *you don't need to know why you're here*—you've forgotten, but it doesn't matter, don't you—don't you see? You're with me. *You can be safe here with me*—"

I couldn't make myself move from the bed. To reach for you. I'd known this moment was coming, and now that it had arrived I found I had no strength in my limbs.

Only my voice. Only words.

Asking you to stay.

"—Please, I promise, we can be—I can take care of you—"

You were ready. Face, backlit by the light outside, already beginning to flicker haltingly. I could see nothing of your expression.

I'd been shut out again.

One last look around. One last look at me.

You weren't the same boy.

You weren't even a boy. Not anymore.

You were the assassin.

“No—*don't*—”

But you did, and you'd never even spoken a word.

Alarms sounded in offices all over the building when you made it past the corridors I'd secured.

Your image was captured from every angle, and in the weeks that followed, parsed for the smallest clue to your identity.

They found nothing.

The face they'd tagged and cross-referenced and catalogued so diligently belonged to a man who didn't exist.

In the end, they'd seen no more than what I saw some days later, when I finally found it in me to examine the surveillance videos for myself:

A tall man in black, running down corridor after corridor, his coat trailing out behind him like a cape. Darkness lapped at his heels as he ran beneath light panels that flared brightly and then died, one after another, leaving a long stretch of stygian nothingness in his wake, until at last he passed through a service portal and out into the rippling heat of the sprawling city below.

You were gone.

They searched for you for a long time, and so did I.

Armed guards patrolled the tower in rotating shifts.

I was asked some more questions. You'd been seen near my quarters, but nobody really believed that a lowly video analyst could have had anything to do with the most brazen assassination in decades.

I went back to work.

Eventually, the patrols were curtailed, and finally ended.

I watched for you. Every day. Never stopped watching for you.

Checking the feeds. Checking the vids. Checking everything.

Sometimes I'd see someone on my surveillance monitors, someone tall,

and blond, and young, walking with the same grace and that exact kind of wounded menace in his gait—

But it wasn't you.

It was never you.

Until one day it was.

You'd been waiting for me. On my new bed.

I'd made a feeble attempt to put the ruin of my quarters back together in the weeks since you'd run from me, but I never finished the job. I didn't *want* to finish.

Because then the room would be done, but you'd still be gone. As if you'd never been.

I would be as I was before.

Alone.

But not that night.

You were on the mattress, leaning against the wall. Your eyes were red, and your cheeks blotchy. Those huge, battered hands of yours hung between your knees, clenching into fists, then relaxing, over and over as you spoke.

"I'm—sorry," you said, the first stripe of wetness on your cheek, "I don't mean to but I—Antho, there's something—something is wrong with my..." You took a shuddering breath, and shook your head. "But I remembered. I smelled something of—I don't know, I smelled it and I remem—"

You'd remembered my name.

I was all over you before you could finish.

I'm trying to put it into words.

To write those words down for you.

How it felt. How it feels, now.

I can't.

You remembered my name, and it was everything.

Three days. We had only three days.

In the middle of the first night, I got up and dressed to go out for the food we would eat together in the morning. At the door, I turned and cast one more greedy look at the unconscious tumble of limbs in the bed that had become ours once more.

I opened the door with a smile, only to reel back in horror.

An orb was waiting for me.

Panic clawed my belly, but I didn't move. I set my feet, knowing it was hopeless—that the sphere floating in the air before me was fitted with six different devices that could stun, maim, or kill.

I closed my eyes as searing terror solidified into the kind of cold certainty I'd only felt once before: when I'd been outside, Undertown, trying to win a place for myself in this tower.

It was my time. I was going to die.

I could hear the whine of the impellers that kept it aloft, and the terrifying grind of the motors within it as it scanned the room. The sounds should have shattered me, but did not.

I knew peace.

If it wanted you, it would need to kill me first.

I opened my eyes.

It wasn't one of ours.

The droid didn't belong to the tower. The coloring was wrong—still dark, but not grey; this one was a mordant black, matte with utility and menace. It was larger than ours, maybe a half-meter in diameter, and pocked with ports for instruments and equipment I couldn't identify.

Not private. Not police.

Military.

Deadly.

It stayed where it was, one foot from my door, floating in the corridor beyond.

Observing.

I risked another look back toward the bed. You slept on, as if you'd never had it in you to kill a man in your entire life.

Rage. I knew rage.

"Our time's not up," I ground out. "*You can't have him back.*"

The pitch of its impellers changed. I waited to die.

But I didn't.

The orb slid away from my door and down the corridor, to leave us to our delusion of safety a little while longer.

I couldn't tell you about it, then. I'm telling you now.

I haven't seen another orb like it since.

The second day, I watched you suffer through one of your nightmares, but this one was worse than I'd seen before.

You called out another man's name.

It ate at me. To see you in pain—not to know you once belonged to someone else.

You should remember him. You must have loved him very much.

His name is Niko.

This is the morning of the third day since you came back to me.

I woke up and found all the lamps blown and all the electronics in the room dead, even my comm.

I'd prepared for this. Yesterday I brought home a candle and some chemical matches.

I knew we'd run out of time. I knew we would run out, but knowing it and facing it are two different things. This, right now—this hurts.

Like all the good I'd ever had in my life, this is ending. This is ending today.

I know when you wake I'm going to beg, like before.

I'm going to ask you to stay, to remember, but you won't.

And then you'll be gone. I won't get the chance to tell you anything.

To tell you—everything.

I got some paper, two days ago, and this pencil, and I've been writing you this letter.

Almost done, now. I thought I might run out of time, but here it is, nearly finished.

It's time to hide it for you. In your coat.

The lights are blown.

I know what it means.

You will wake up very soon.

Up from your bad dreams. Out of this good one.

You won't remember me. You won't need me anymore.

You will leave me again.

I forgive you. I forgave you. I will always forgive you.

You should know that for a little while, you were not alone.

Not alone.

I loved you when you were pixels on a screen.

Your breath warms the nape of my neck right now. I still have the taste of you in my mouth.

Maybe you'll find this in your coat, someday, and come back to me.

Maybe you'll finally kill me when you wake up.

Whatever happens, I am content.

Things end. Everything ends.

But for a few days in a city full of hopelessness, and unkindness, and alienation—in this fucked-up mess of a life spent wandering in the dark without a hand to hold on to—

I was not alone.

And neither were you.

My name is Antho, and I love you.

THE END

Author Bio

Julio-Alexi Genao lives with far too many cats in New York City, silently condescending to his upstairs neighbor's taste in music.

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LEARNING TO DANCE

By Annette Gisby

Photo Description

A dark-haired young man stands in the center of a summer street scene. He wears a studded black leather harness and collar, fingerless black gloves, and black chaps that lace down the sides, and holds a green shopping bag. His hair has been gelled into spikes, and the fringe in the back is dyed a streaky blond. Hanging from the back of the harness is a red leather bear wearing a small black leather harness.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I found him over on CupOPorn.net last October, and I've been wondering about him ever since. I get the feeling that our "bold and brazen" here is actually a front for someone who's a little lost, a little alone, and needs someone to trust. Can you give him a top to protect him? I think he needs one. Also, that bear is incredibly important to him—I don't know why, but I do know he loves it.

Please no cheating or girly bits.

Sincerely,

Sarah

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: performance arts, dance school, first time, age gap, spanking, oral, professor/student, hurt/comfort, edging, light BDSM

Word count: 4,528

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LEARNING TO DANCE

By Annette Gisby

What had seemed sexy and provocative in the middle of a nightclub dance floor seemed sordid and tawdry in the cold light of day. The cloakroom at the club had lost his coat, so Daniel had no choice but to brazen it out and walk back to the school with nothing to conceal his outfit. Even in his head he had a time referring to his attire as *clothes*. Said outfit consisted of a pair of leather chaps, and since all he was wearing underneath was a silky G-string, they left his arse exposed to the gazes of passersby. His bare chest was criss-crossed by studded leather straps, but at least the sunglasses on his face hid his tear-filled eyes.

Ignoring the wolf-whistles and catcalls from some of the onlookers, he put his head down and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to forget all about the night's humiliations and just get back to his dorm room before anyone else at the school saw him. He hurried past the shops and businesses that were open so early. London was a city that never slept but he hoped everyone else was still abed and wouldn't see what he was wearing. Thank goodness, it was Sunday and they had no classes today. Daniel didn't think he would be up to dancing again anytime soon, not after the horrible night he'd just had.

He turned down the side street and paused in front of a large, Victorian building, his heartbeat calming somewhat when he saw the gilded sign: *Lawson Academy of Dance and Drama*. Every window still had curtains drawn, so he guessed most of the other residents were still asleep. He'd be able to get back to his dorm and get changed without anyone else being any the wiser.

He took a while getting his key out of the pocket of the lacing at the side of his chaps, the leather so tight his fingers hardly fitted inside. But finally, finally he had the key. He opened the door as quietly as he could, hoping not to wake anyone. Daniel pushed the door aside and entered the hushed hallway, straining his ears for any tell-tale footsteps, but he heard nothing. Daniel removed his sunglasses and tucked them into one of the straps on his chest. He

heaved a sigh of relief and turned to close the door. That was when his world came crashing down around his ears.

“Daniel? Daniel, is that you?”

Oh, God. The one instructor Daniel would never want to see him like this.

Daniel turned, his eyes stinging again as he felt all the hurt and humiliation he’d already suffered last night threaten again. He blinked, trying to dispel them before they fell, but it was a futile attempt.

“Professor Casey,” Daniel said, feeling a flush to his cheeks and neck. He’d had a crush on Neil Casey ever since he’d gone to Lawson after secondary school and it had never really gone away. And now, for the man to see him dressed like this; it was almost more than he could bear. His dance instructor was wearing a pair of plaid flannel pyjama bottoms and a plain blue T-shirt, enhancing the icy hue of his eyes, and it was all Daniel could do to tear his eyes away from the enchantment of that gaze. His fair hair was mussed, as if he’d just now got out of bed.

“You’ve been crying,” Professor Casey said, taking a few steps towards him. “And you’re shivering. You must be freezing! Come with me.” He stalked down the hallway towards the teachers’ rooms. Daniel followed him, unsure if he was even allowed in a teacher’s room, but too overwrought to do anything but obey him. He’d been used to obeying Casey’s instructions in his dance classes for almost two years now.

Casey opened one of the wooden doorways and beckoned Daniel inside. Daniel hesitated for a few moments on the threshold, but the thought of anyone else being up and seeing him dressed like this made his decision for him, and he entered Professor Casey’s domain. The professor’s sitting room was cosier than Daniel would have expected. A Victorian fireplace decorated with flowered tiles took up the middle of one wall, and the two alcoves on either side of the chimney breast were taken up with overflowing bookshelves. There were so many books that some were piled on the hearth and on the chairs, and side tables were dotted throughout the room. Daniel smiled inwardly, feeling more comfortable already that his professor shared the same love of books that Daniel did.

“Have a seat.” Casey waved to a worn, brown leather sofa with a colourful rug draped over the back of it, before disappearing into one of the other doors that lined the space. He returned a few moments later holding a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt in his hands. “I know I’m a bit taller than you, but we’re quite a similar build,” he said, tossing the clothes to Daniel. “The bathroom’s through there if you want to change.” Casey indicated a half-open doorway with a nod of his head.

Daniel nodded, grateful that Casey seemed to pick up how uncomfortable Daniel was in his current attire. He went into the bathroom and locked the door before removing all the leather. The black and white tiles made the bathroom floor look like a chessboard, and as well as a large claw-footed tub, in the corner there was also a large walk-in shower that was certainly big enough for two. Glass shelves above the bath and the sink held toiletries and soap, and Daniel couldn’t resist lifting up a bottle of the professor’s aftershave and inhaling the scent. It had a hint of sandalwood and cloves that instantly took Daniel back to his dance classes when Professor Casey stood behind him to correct a stance.

Once he was dressed, Daniel returned to the living room with the leather clothes and sunglasses piled up in his hands. He hovered in the doorway, unsure what to do with them. One thing he knew for sure was that he would never wear those items again.

“Have a seat,” Professor Casey said again, waving to the sofa. Daniel sat down and set the clothes on the seat beside him. “What happened? Why were you crying?”

“I think it was supposed to be a prank,” Daniel said. “They told me it was fancy dress and that everyone would be wearing the same sort of thing as me. Do you know the nightclub *The Cellar*?”

Casey nodded. “I do. But that’s not a BDSM club.”

“I know that *now*,” said Daniel. “It wasn’t even a gay club. I was the only one there dressed like that. Everyone was laughing and jeering, I felt so embarrassed I could die. Then the club lost my coat so I had to walk back here dressed like that. I thought they were supposed to be my friends. They just

wanted to humiliate me. I hated every minute of it. I never want to go through anything like that ever again.”

“Daniel, you said they told you it was fancy dress? Does that mean you only wore that outfit because of that? That you aren’t a submissive?”

Daniel blushed. “I—I think I might be. I mean, I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like that. But I hated those sorts of clothes.”

“Did they do anything else? Did they touch you?” Casey demanded, and Daniel was surprised at the anger in his voice.

“No, sir. They never touched me.”

Casey’s eyes glittered, a spark of interest that Daniel was sure he’d seen before, but wasn’t quite sure what to make of it.

“Sir? Do you—I mean—do you like me?”

“You’re one of my better students,” Casey said. “You have such passion when you dance. It’s as though nothing exists outside you and the music. Some of your classmates dance with perfect precision, no mistakes in their steps but it’s like watching a robot dance. Perfect though their routine might be, it doesn’t engage the audience. Not like you do, even when you have a misstep or two.”

“That wasn’t what I meant, sir,” Daniel said.

“I know.” Casey ran his hand through his hair. “Do you know how many times I’ve been tempted to kiss you? To take you in my arms after I’ve seen you dance?”

Daniel took a deep breath, stood up from the sofa and, then, as gracefully as the dancer he was, he sank to his knees in front of Casey’s armchair. “Please, sir. That’s what I want. I want you.”

“You have no idea what you’re asking for.”

“Maybe not,” Daniel agreed. “But I know you’re the one I want to teach me.”

“You look so good on your knees for me,” Casey said, reaching out to pet Daniel’s hair. Daniel hummed in pleasure and arched into the soft touch. “Do

you want to be my submissive, Daniel? Would you like that sort of relationship with me?"

"I'd like to try it, sir, if that's allowed."

"Of course it is. I'm not about to make you do something you don't want. Submitting to someone isn't a weakness, it's a strength. To show that much trust in someone takes great strength. I'll be pushing your boundaries, Daniel, but you need to first know what your boundaries are. I know now, for example, not to order you to wear such revealing outfits again, at least not in public. That's a pity; your arse looked delectable in those chaps."

Daniel glanced up, his whole body heating at both the words and the smile Casey bestowed upon him. "Thank you, sir," he said softly, smiling too. Casey shifted on the chair and Daniel noticed the tent in his pyjama bottoms at once. Daniel laid a hand on Casey's thigh and looked deep into his eyes. "Sir? Would you like me to take care of that for you?" Daniel nodded his head towards Casey's groin.

"God, yes!" Casey's hips arched off the chair, and he gripped hold of the armrests so tightly that his knuckles were white.

Daniel couldn't believe it. He was about to do something he had dreamed of and imagined so often, sucking on Casey's cock. His mouth watered even before he lowered his lips. His own erection was a throbbing mass of flesh between his legs, and Daniel was determined to make it so good for Casey that Daniel would be allowed to come, too. He wasn't sure what Casey would do if he performed badly, but he guessed some sort of punishment would be in order. Daniel shuddered with desire as he wondered what form that punishment might take.

Daniel opened the buttons on Casey's pyjama bottoms and removed his cock. Casey's cock was thicker than his own, but only slightly longer, and it leaned a little to the left. A drop of precome glistened on the tip and Daniel couldn't resist bending down for a taste. Casey hissed above him and bucked his hips again. Daniel glanced up at him one last time before he took to his task in earnest.

He closed his mouth around the head of Casey's cock, licking and sucking, loving the noises Casey was making as he did so. It felt so good to be giving

Casey so much pleasure and every moan, every groan, shot a spike of arousal through Daniel's body.

Oh, God, this was heaven, the musky heady scent, the little gasps and groans coming from Casey. Daniel sucked and licked as though it was a lollipop, but no sweet had ever tasted this good. His heart was thudding in his chest it was a wonder Casey couldn't hear it. Daniel's cock ached for a touch, but he restrained himself with difficulty, concentrating on what he was doing to Casey instead.

"Daniel." Casey guided Daniel's head away, his voice a hoarse rasp. "You can continue with your hands. I'm going to come soon. You don't need to swallow."

Daniel lifted his mouth off Casey's cock to voice his answer. "It's okay. I want to swallow. Please, sir?"

"You're perfect when you beg," Casey said. "If you insist."

Daniel set to with a vengeance, sucking and licking, wanting the man to come, wanting to feel it in his throat, wanting to taste it. Daniel groaned around the cock in his mouth, feeling his own arousal getting stronger at just the idea of swallowing Casey's come. He felt Casey grab his hair, as he stiffened in the chair and suddenly Daniel's mouth and throat were flooded with the taste of Casey's seed. Daniel swallowed like a drowning man taking in water, and the extra stimulus proved too much, the orgasm was ripped from him without his cock ever being touched. Daniel moaned and grabbed Casey's leg as the tremors wracked his body. *Oh, fuck!* He'd ruined Casey's jeans coming like that.

Casey's grip on his hair loosened and Daniel was afraid to even look up.

"Daniel," Casey said sternly. "Do you know what a good submissive should do?"

Daniel let Casey's softening cock slip from his mouth and he finally looked up, part in fear, part in desire.

"Obey his master, sir?"

"That too. But I was thinking of something else. Can you guess what it is?"

Daniel nodded, his heart sinking to somewhere near his feet. “That I shouldn’t have come without permission?”

“Indeed.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I couldn’t help it,” Daniel said. “It just happened. I lost control.”

“I didn’t want to have to punish you today, but you’ve left me no choice, Daniel. It’s up to me to teach you control and I will have it from you. I’m disappointed in you.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.” Daniel lowered his head, ashamed that he’d come so quickly like some untried teenager and upset that he had disappointed his master when they’d only just started.

“Take off those jeans and get over my lap.”

Daniel nodded and stood up to obey his new master. He felt so ashamed at what had happened that he could hardly even look Casey in the eye. It was easier just to keep his head down and look at the floor while he undid the jeans and pulled the sticky fabric away from his groin.

“The G-string too. It’s ruined now anyway.”

Daniel peeled the scrap of black silk away from his cock and shimmied out of it, unsure what to do with the clothes now. “Just set them on the floor for now,” said Casey, as if he’d read his mind, “and then get into position.”

“Yes, sir,” Daniel said, determined to suffer his punishment as stoically as he could. He walked over to Casey’s chair and draped himself over the man’s lap, feeling ungainly and awkward as his legs and arms dangled either side of Casey’s lap.

“You have such a perfect arse,” said Casey, caressing the arse in question. Daniel’s face flamed, no one had ever paid his arse such attention before. “Soft and silken like two ripe peaches. It will be a shame to mark it, but I’m sure you can handle it. Have you ever been spanked before, Daniel?”

“No, sir. Never.”

“So it’ll be a new experience for you then. We all learn something new every day, don’t we? If it really gets too much for you, say ‘red’ and I will

stop. I will be more disappointed that you wouldn't trust me with your word than if you have need of it."

"Thank you, sir," replied Daniel, determined to endure the spanking no matter how much it hurt.

"Count after each strike. Are you ready?"

Before Daniel even had a chance to reply, Casey's hand had left a fiery stripe of agony across his left buttock. Daniel hissed in pain but did manage to remember to call out the number. "O-one! One!" God, it stung like mad, much more than he was expecting. Two and three were delivered in such quick succession that he almost missed calling their number. He wriggled, trying to get away from the pain, but Casey's hand on the small of his back prevented him from moving.

"Try to move away again and I will give you three extra strokes."

"Sorry, sir," said Daniel, stilling his hips with an effort of will.

Casey's hand smacked him right across the middle of his arse. "F-four! Four!" Daniel grimaced through the pain but he didn't move. How many more were there going to be? Casey hadn't said, and Daniel didn't want to risk his wrath by asking.

Again and again the hand came down and by the eighth stroke Daniel was trying to hold back tears, but it was futile. "N-n-nine!" He sobbed out the number and grabbed hold of the chair legs with his hands, anything to distract himself from the pain in his backside. Tears trickled from his eyes to land on the wooden floor with a soft *plop*. Oh, God! When would it end?

By number twelve, not only was Daniel having to cope with the burning sensation on the skin of his arse, he now had an erection that was pressing into Casey's thigh. Daniel tried to concentrate more on the pain rather than the sensation in his cock and balls. He didn't want to come again; he didn't want another punishment like this one.

"Don't you dare come over my pyjamas!" Casey warned him as he raised his hand and brought it down again on the flesh where Daniel's arse met his thighs. The skin was thinner there, and it was more painful than any of the smacks that had gone before.

“Thirteen! Thirteen!” Daniel howled and sobbed in distress, wondering if he would need to use his word after all.

He tensed his whole body as Casey lifted his hand again, waiting for the next blow to fall, but it never did. Instead, Casey’s hand gave his arse some soft caresses, almost as if he wanted to soothe away the hurts he’d just inflicted. Daniel sighed and arched into the touch, and as he did so, he noticed that Casey was hard again too.

“You’ve been such a good boy for me today, Daniel.”

Daniel shook his head, a few more tears escaping. “I wasn’t good, sir. I got hard when you were punishing me.”

“Yes, you did,” said Casey. “It happens like that for some people. But you didn’t come when I told you not to. Already your control is getting better, isn’t it?” Casey lifted Daniel up and settled him sideways on his lap, reminding Daniel how strong Casey was. “I think you deserve a treat for all that.”

“I don’t deserve it,” Daniel said, resting his head on Casey’s shoulder. His breathing was still a bit ragged after his crying but he tried to stop sobbing. “I got hard. I shouldn’t have got hard.”

“I know you were hard,” Casey said. “I could feel your cock, so hard, so eager for my touch. But you didn’t come when I told you not to. And if I say my pet deserves a treat, then he deserves a treat. A good master doesn’t just punish, Daniel. He takes care of his sub too. Right now, I want to take care of you.” Casey slipped his hand underneath Daniel’s T-shirt, caressing Daniel’s abdomen and chest, before pinching his left nipple.

Daniel hissed and bucked his hips, his cock leaking precome down the shaft.

Casey kissed his neck. “Oh, my, you’re so sensitive, aren’t you? I love that in a man. I’m going to touch you now, Daniel. I’m going to touch your cock. You’re going to be writhing in my lap. You’ll be so hard, you’ll want to come, but you won’t. Not until I tell you too, will you?”

“No, sir,” said Daniel, his heart fluttering against the inside of his chest.

“Good boy, that’s what I wanted to hear.”

Daniel bristled a bit at being called a “boy”, he was hardly that, but he guessed Casey used it the same way he used “pet”. Just another term of endearment, and he couldn’t help the smile. He *belonged* to someone now.

And before Daniel could think of anything else, two hands were upon his cock, stroking him in tandem, and he lost all coherent thought after that. His hips were arching of their own accord, he just couldn’t seem to keep still as Casey brought him to the edge again and again, but wouldn’t let him fall over it. Daniel was so hard it hurt and his balls were aching deep inside.

“Please, sir! Please! Let me come!”

“Not yet, Daniel. Not yet.” And instead Daniel had to put up with Casey’s hands staying still on his cock for what seemed like an eternity, but couldn’t have been more than five minutes. He tried bucking his hips to get some friction, but Casey was holding onto his cock so tightly that it didn’t help much. When Casey seemed to think he’d been punished for his presumption long enough, he fisted Daniel’s cock with expert hands.

Daniel felt he was floating near the ceiling. He’d never been hard this long before without coming, and wondered if you could do yourself some damage that way.

“Pinch your nipples,” Casey said, both of his hands still busy on Daniel’s cock, his voice hoarse.

Daniel obeyed at once. His nipples had always been sensitive and he enjoyed the sensation of having his nipples played with and his cock being stroked at the same time. It was torture. Exquisite, blissful torture.

Casey brought him to the edge a few more times until all Daniel was aware of was his nipples, cock and sac. He wanted to come, he needed to come badly, but he held himself in check until Casey whispered close to his ear. “Come for me, Daniel. Come for me *now*.”

The order was all it took. “Ahh! Ahh! Sir! Oh, sir!” Daniel screamed as he came, spurting long ropes of come over Casey’s hands. His hips arched upwards, his thighs clenched as he rode the waves of ecstasy, his whole body shuddering with little aftershocks. Daniel hadn’t been aware of anything but his own orgasm as it happened but now as he was calming down, he was aware that his arse was wet and sticky.

“Sir?” Daniel asked in surprise.

Casey chuckled and rested his head against Daniel’s hair. “Here I am lecturing you on control and I seem to have lost mine somewhere along the way. You’re so hot when you come.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Daniel, turning his head for a kiss. Casey obliged him and they both kissed with equal fervour, as if their passion hadn’t already been spent.

Casey pulled away, breathing heavily. “I think we both need a shower. Or a bath.” Casey glanced down at their sticky bodies and clothes.

“Together?” Daniel asked tentatively.

“Of course, together. Now I’ve found you I’m not about to let you go. First though, I have something I want to give you.”

Daniel grinned and waggled his eyebrows.

“Not that!” Casey chuckled again, and pushed Daniel off his lap. “Wait here a minute.”

Daniel stood awkwardly, dressed in only a T-shirt and socks, come cooling on his groin, and not feeling remotely sexy now. He tugged the hem of the T-shirt down, trying to cover his cock, but the garment wasn’t long enough.

“Oh, don’t hide it,” said Casey when he returned through one of the open doorways. In his hand he held a red leather teddy bear, which looked a bit worn. The eyes were hanging on by a thread and he looked like he’d lost some stuffing along the way. “I love your cock.”

Daniel blushed, wishing he didn’t have such a pale complexion.

“This was given to me by my first master,” said Casey, handing Daniel the bear. “It’s very special to me and I want you to have it.”

“Oh, sir. I couldn’t, not if it means so much to you.”

“It does mean a lot to me, Daniel. But so do you. I want you to have it. I want you to know that even though I can’t be there with you in person every minute of the day, this bear will remind you that I will be thinking of you and the next time we can get together.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Daniel blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the tears before they fell.

“Thank you will suffice,” said Casey, smiling and holding out the bear.

Daniel took it and nodded. “Thank you, sir. I’ll treasure it.”

“And Daniel? You belong to me now. I will protect you, so if any of those so-called friends of yours give you any grief like last night, you will let me know. No one hurts my pet and gets away with it, right?”

This time, Daniel couldn’t help the tears. No one had ever cared about him so much before and it was a bit overwhelming. Casey marched over to him, and two strides later he had Daniel wrapped up in his embrace.

“Now, how about that bath, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” said Daniel, feeling his heart soar.

He was where he had always wanted to be.

Wrapped up in his master’s arms.

THE END

Author Bio

Annette Gisby grew up in a very small town in Northern Ireland, which had no bookshops and a very small library. After devouring everything she could get her hands on in the library, she started writing her own stories so that she would always have something to read later. Her M/M writing began with Harry Potter fanfiction, and she has since started writing her own original M/M tales.

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BRING HIM HOME

By **Sammy Goode**

Photo Description

One man sits, leg drawn up, his head resting on his knee. He and the man kneeling behind him are naked. The other man has his arm wrapped around the seated man, holding his hand. Their eyes are closed and their posture cries out their love and care for each other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two military medics have been through it all together. From living the horrors of war to falling in love. Will their love survive a life altering injury and PTSD?

Please write these guys a story where they find peace and a HEA with each other. I don't expect it to come easily.

Lots of sexual tension would be nice if it fits and I would like to see this scene at some point in the story.

****I strongly request that this story WILL NOT include cheating, ménage, or sex with other people****

Sincerely,

Heather C

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: military, medics, war, amputation, PTSD

Word count: 12,455

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A Brief Dedication...

A special thanks to Anna Larson for helping me portray military life as accurately as possible. Any inaccuracies left are deliberate and are meant to support the fiction aspect of this short story. Also, a huge thanks to my beta readers, Shaz, Kaje, and John for helping me along the way. And finally, this story is dedicated to our U. S. Military forces—may they all come home safely one day soon.

BRING HIM HOME

By Sammy Goode

Michael glanced down at the orders in his hand again and absently rubbed his now churning gut. *Camp Manhattan, Iraq*, he was being deployed to fucking Iraq. Well, Habbiniyah to be exact, some godforsaken strip of desert that lay close to fucking Fallujah, the land of IEDs and sniper fire and one hundred-twenty degrees in the shade. *Christ!*

He knew the deployment had been coming for a while now. After all, it had been a couple of weeks since he and his group of medics had finished up their sixteen-week training at Fort Sam Houston. Since then, there had been a lot of hurry up and wait, endless tactical training in desert-like conditions, review of field training, no leave... and Finn.

Finn McCullan. As if the very thought of the man could conjure his appearance, Finn was suddenly there in the distance, striding across the field toward Michael. Hazel-eyed with dark hair, Finn's beauty preceded him—was the first thing everyone seemed to notice, causing women and, yes, even some men to do a double take.

Michael squinted against the sun and watched Finn's long legs start to churn up the turf as he raced to meet him. This was a dangerous man. Michael had no doubt, fearless Finn McCullan, as the others jokingly called the medic, was the one thing that could break through his otherwise calm demeanor and set his blood to boiling. And *not* because the man made him angry, no, anger was the last thing on his mind when he thought of Finn.

Lowering his eyes to avoid giving away the crazy idea that so often raced through his mind—the one about grabbing Finn and pinning him down so he could grind his dick against him till they both came hard and fast, Michael glanced again at the papers in his hand. He remembered, with clarity, the original orders that had brought him to the fort and introduced him to the man who now seemed to make his fucking knees go weak with just a look in his direction.

“So, Cap how's the meatloaf today?”

Michael looked down at the tomato-glazed slice of what he hoped was edible ground beef and then over at the annoying medic-in-training that had been assigned to his group as of today at 0800. When his gaze connected with the intense stare of the chirpy little bastard who seemed to be everyone's best friend since his arrival that morning, Michael felt an odd stirring... a bit of a jolt deep down, and recognized it for what it was, desire.

Oh no, this was so not happening. He was a physician, in charge of getting these "wet behind the ears" recruits ready in little more than four months to care for the wounded on a battlefield. He definitely did NOT have time to fuck around with any of them, especially not this pretty boy.

"That's Captain Bradshaw to you, Private, and don't forget it."

Michael refused to acknowledge the slightly bewildered look in Finn's eyes and, instead, turned away to find a seat at the Officer's table. He heard a slow exhale of breath behind him and then the muttered, "Sorry, Captain Bradshaw, won't happen again." He knew he should be smiling at taking the cocky private down a notch but, instead, all he felt was shame at the way he'd reacted.

Christ, he thought, the kid was harmless, just friendly, that's all. Ease the fuck up.

Michael turned to apologize to the private just in time to see him leave the mess hall, his body language indicating he was a bit embarrassed at being called out. Suddenly the meatloaf no longer held any appeal; instead, he shoved the plate onto the dirty tray rack, and followed the retreating figure of his new recruit. This military shit was getting to him. There was no need to act like an asshole just to remind a private of who was in charge. Moving quickly to catch the private, Michael managed to grab at his arm just as he stepped through the barracks door. Deserted due to it being chow time, the room was also cast in shadow and Finn's face was barely discernible in the deepening gloom.

"Hey, listen, sorry about pulling rank back there. It's been a long day and I shouldn't have taken it out on you. Especially since I haven't even welcomed you to our group yet. I'm Michael Bradshaw and you must be..."

"It's Finn, Finn McCullan, Sir."

Michael watched as a huge smile lit up the soldier's face, and felt a responding twitch of his lips as they pulled into a grin. He shook the outstretched hand and felt how Finn held on for just a second longer than normal. The two men looked at each other and just then, something sparked; some sort of recognition took place in that knowing glance. In that fast few seconds, each man realized that the other was wired just like him. And that knowledge resonated deep inside Michael, cracking open the door to the place where lust lay hidden and waiting.

Slowly, Michael withdrew his hand. He watched as Finn's easy smile faded just for a second only to be replaced with an expression that spoke of hunger... need? Did he really see that, or was his overactive libido so frustrated he imagined it. Just as quickly as it flared, the look was gone and, with a lick of his lips, Finn's smile returned, as bright as before. But Michael wasn't fooled, no, he knew what he had seen, and if the slight swell of his cock behind his fatigues was any indication, his body recognized it as well.

"Well, welcome aboard then, Private. I'll see you at the briefing tomorrow morning at 0700."

Finn cleared his throat and nodded his head. Michael turned and walked out into the courtyard. As the door swung closed behind him, he paused to watch small groups of enlisted men stroll toward their barracks. He raised a hand and wiped away a fine sheen of sweat from his forehead that had risen despite the fact that it was a cool summer evening. He saw the fine tremors in his hand and let out a low, shaky laugh.

Jesus, Bradshaw, you're like a damn schoolgirl with a secret crush.

He looked around at the door that still swung ever so slightly to and fro. He could hear Finn moving around inside and leaned in to see if he could catch one more glimpse. Just then, the outdoor compound halogens turned on, casting everything in a soft purple glow. Michael rocked backward, startled, and then turned smartly, walking at first and then jogging across the courtyard, all the while, trying to escape the fierce need to go back in and grab Finn McCullan by the neck and kiss that grin right off his face.

The sight of Finn running toward him pulled Michael back to the present. He smiled as he saw Finn raise a hand to catch his eye. A slight breeze rustled

the papers in his hands and caused him to look down at the orders once more. Iraq. Well, at least he knew his guys were ready. They had not only completed their sixteen week course with flying colors, they had also shown real expertise at handling the more advanced equipment medics would be carrying in their packs these days.

They had trained both in the classroom and on maneuvers, trying their best to create what it would be like in the theater on deployment. Every one of his medics knew how to react in combat situations. He recalled being hunkered down during one maneuver, with Finn acting as the downed soldier.

He was monitoring another of his medics as he used the FAST 1 for the first time, right on Finn's chest. Damn guy was fearless, volunteering to have another medic punch a hole in his sternum to plant the IV line so that fluids could be directed straight to the heart. It was only to be used when normal access to set up an IV line failed. Finn had been joking around through the entire process. Michael was pretty damn sure that was when he began to really like Finn McCullan. After that exercise, he found himself seeking out the medic more and more often.

The two of them began to naturally gravitate toward each other no matter where they were. Casual "bumping into one other" had morphed into secretly meeting far away from base to have a drink or just blow off some steam at the pool hall.

As weeks passed, Michael found himself looking at Finn less and less as just a "friend" and more and more as a potential lover. He knew Finn felt the same just by some of the looks and accidental touching that had been happening with more frequency when they were hanging out. But this was the army and to let anyone know that both men were gay, and worse, wanting to hump like bunnies, was a very bad idea. So cold showers and jacking off solo in the early morning hours had to suffice. Plus, just because he looked forward to seeing the cocky bastard every damn day didn't mean he was falling in love or some stupid shit like that. He just really... liked the guy that was all.

It was for the best anyway, Michael thought, since now it looked as though he and Finn would be parting ways courtesy of their upcoming deployments.

Lost in thought, Michael turned to head back toward his barracks. He stopped just outside them when he heard Finn calling to him.

“Doc, hey Doc. Wait up, I have something to tell you.”

Michael looked up into the face that had come to mean so much to him. Damn kid was going to get them both in trouble for calling him Doc instead of Captain. But before Michael could let the warning sound from his mouth he saw Finn smile and, as usual, that smile lit Michael up inside. No matter how many times he tried to remind himself that the private smiled like that at everyone, he knew he was just fooling himself. Finn was an open book to Michael, and with just a nod, Michael was pretty sure he could have that sweet body beneath his own, hot and ready.

The deployment papers in Michael’s hand rustled in the wind again, reminding him that despite how much he wanted to spend more time getting to know Finn intimately, this was no doubt one of the last times he would be seeing him. The combat medics that had trained with him would also have gotten their orders and it was almost impossible that any of them would be deployed to the same unit. No, more than likely, they would be assigned to different platoons and be shipping out to opposite ends of the arena.

“Hey there, *Private* Finn. I’m guessing you got your orders today. Where are you shipping out to?”

“Fucking gorgeous Camp Manhattan, home of the 506th Airborne Regiment, *and* unless my sources are mistaken, future home of one Captain Michael Bradshaw!”

Finn let out a whoop of joy and grabbed Michael around the waist, swinging him around and clapping him on the back. When the dust settled and the earth stopped spinning, Michael was still held tight in the circle of Finn’s arms and their faces were so close that Michael could feel the gentle huffs of breath coming from Finn. Then he heard Finn’s breath catch and stop, his mouth open, his tongue darting out to moisten his lips. And for one brief moment, Michael allowed himself to gaze at Finn and wonder for the hundredth time how sweet he would taste. Just as quickly, where they were and who could see them came rushing back to mind and the two men separated. The close call did nothing to dispel Finn’s excitement, however, and he leaned in slightly, uttering words only meant for Michael’s ears.

“We’re going to be in the same unit, Doc.” In the back of his mind, Michael scrambled to make sense of Finn’s whispered remark. But the heat, the brief feel of those arms around him, the overwhelming desire to take that one step forward that would allow him to press himself against Finn once more was all he could process. He felt himself begin to lean in, the urge to push his groin up against that lean, hard body swamping his senses, his cock swelling, and his need sharp and visceral.

With a low cry, Finn met him, stomachs brushing, chests rubbing together and then, oh god, then, hard dicks rutting in time. The kiss followed, full on, unexpected, bruising. Lips crushing together, Michael’s tongue prodding Finn’s closed mouth, demanding entry; Finn relenting and, with a soft moan, opening to a hot, seeking tongue.

There, in the shade of the empty barracks, months of wanting, of hungry need, erupted in a moment that rocked both men to their very core. Michael managed to pull back first, his breath coming in harsh pants, his hands continuing to rub across Finn’s back.

“Fucking want you, Finn. Tell me you need it as much as I do. Tell me you...”

Michael got no further as Finn’s mouth crashed into his once more and he felt himself being propelled backwards through the door leading to his quarters. He heard a soft, high-pitched whine, like an animal in pain, and realized it was him, his voice, and his desire to touch Finn, forcing quiet, unearthly sounds from his throat.

Hands flew everywhere, army-issue fatigues being pulled away from heated flesh, fingers groping and grasping. Michael only let go of Finn long enough to work open his green webbed belt and tear apart his fly, pushing it aside to reach in past the boxers and grab the wet-tipped cock that seemed to come alive at his touch.

Finn gasped and moaned out loud. Michael’s rough hands reaching around Finn and thrusting down his pants to grab the well-muscled ass that had taunted him every time it had walked away from him, but not this time. This time Finn held on and thrust his cock hard against the warm hand that held him, pulling Michael closer, as if he could somehow crawl inside him.

The air filled with grunts and whispered curses, as pants hit the floor and Michael released Finn only to spin him around and drop to his knees, spreading his cheeks with both hands and burying his tongue deep inside him. Finn clutched the wall in front of him, and shoved his ass back into Michael's thrusting tongue, his knees suddenly weak and his cock dripping.

Seconds turned to minutes as spit-slicked fingers replaced the seeking tongue. With the crook of a finger and a slight bit of pressure, Finn raised up on his toes at Michael's touch.

"Fuck, Doc. You keep that up and I'm going to cum all over this damn wall."

Michael chuckled and pushed deep inside Finn again—brushing against that little nub that made Finn whimper and buck hard into his hand.

"Oh god, god, Doc, tell me you have lube and a damn condom somewhere... please."

"Get on your fucking hands and knees and don't move, Private."

Finn dropped down as Michael reached across the bunk to his kit and snatched up the supplies. Fumbling briefly to pull back the lid on the bottle of slick, Michael tore at the wrapper of the condom with his teeth. In a near obscene gesture, he balanced the lube on Finn's ass while he rolled the condom down over his aching dick. Grabbing it up, he squirted a generous dollop into his hand and stroked down his length, getting it wet and ready. Tossing the bottle aside, he knelt down behind Finn and positioned his cock at Finn's pucker and pushed in.

So tight, so hot, Finn's hole spasmed as Michael pushed past the first ring and drove home, fully seating his cock inside, his balls lightly slapping against Finn's ass. Both men groaned aloud as Michael paused, waiting for Finn to relax enough so that he could pull out again and thrust back in. Finn's head hung down, his labored breathing harsh in the stillness of the barracks.

"Fucking hell, move Doc, please, I need you to move."

Michael didn't need any further encouragement. Pulling back he jammed his cock back into that seductive heat and began to pound away, months of pent-up lust and frustration driving his need.

The air filled with the sounds of balls slapping and whispered encouragements, as Michael rode Finn hard and fast, their desires pushing all else aside. Sweat trickled down the side of Michael's face as he fucked Finn with abandon, his movements jerky and erratic as he felt his orgasm building. Leaning over so that he was laying chest to back, Michael reached around and grabbed hold of Finn's cock, using the drops of cum already flowing from the tip to ease his strokes. Up and down he worked Finn's shaft as Finn rolled and bucked and pushed back against the cock filling up his ass. Michael was so close... so fucking close. With one last heave and thrust into Finn, he felt his cock swell and jerk, shooting hot cum into the condom. Giving one last stroke, Michael felt Finn's back seize and then his dick erupted all over his hand.

Finn collapsed into a heap on the floor, falling to his side and carrying Michael with him. They landed heavily, breath coming in gasps, bodies still jerking. Michael wrapped his arms around Finn, pulling him back into his chest, spooning him on the cold, hard concrete that neither man felt at that moment.

"Christ, Finn, that was fucking amazing."

"Yeah, Doc, yeah."

They lay there together, Michael's cock softening inside Finn's ass, prompting him to move and get the condom off. Finn let out a slightly pained sigh as Michael withdrew to tie off the rubber. Reaching back, Michael grabbed at Finn's shoulders to lift him off the floor.

"C'mon Private, let's take this to a more comfortable location."

Both men moved to sit on the edge of Michael's bunk. Finn chuckled as he looked down at their crumpled uniforms still tangled in their boots.

Michael took in the direction of his glance and tapped his booted feet, causing Finn to laugh out loud and collapse backwards across the bunk, pulling Michael with him.

They lay side by side, their chuckles diminishing until silence reigned. Michael turned to look at Finn's smiling face. He reached out with one hand and brushed some dirt off Finn's cheek and smiled in return. They stared at

one another, both hesitant to speak, not wanting to break the comfortable silence. Finally, Finn spoke.

“So, now what do we do, Doc?”

Michael looked into Finn’s questioning gaze and, for just a moment, felt the weight of what they had done... of what they had unleashed. Then, breathing out a calming breath, he said the only thing that made sense.

“Now we go to Iraq, do our job, and...”

Michael paused as he reached for the courage to finish.

Gently, Finn reached out a finger and stroked Michael’s cheek.

“And, what?”

“And make sure we bring each other home safe.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Michael leaned in and kissed Finn softly as he sent up a fervent prayer that they would do just that... both come home, safe and whole.

The desert was fucking hot and dusty. And went on for miles and miles and miles. Michael washed his hands and dispensed more anti-diarrhea medicine and the same tired admonition to “please wash your damn hands.” Between the lousy porta-johns and the desert heat, he was seeing more stomach issues than anything else. Not that he was complaining. Anything was better than seeing someone who’d just had a limb blown off by stumbling onto a roadside IED. Fucking explosives were worse than sniper fire.

A hot, dusty breeze blew in as the door to the makeshift hospital opened and a few soldiers walked in, along with Finn, the battalion’s combat medic. From the laughter, it was obvious Finn had told yet another of his seemingly endless supply of dirty jokes. Michael watched the group approach, wondering what crazy-ass shenanigans they were up to this time. Finn should have been in bed—literally. One of the ways that command ensured the safety of the men was to make sure that both helicopter crews and medical staff followed a strict twelve-on, twelve-off tour. In other words, you worked twelve hours, you

rested twelve and most of that “resting” twelve should be done sleeping. Finn had a difficult time understanding the concept of resting.

Unfortunately, this also meant that Finn skirted the edge of placing himself and, by forfeit, his chopper crew in less than desirable circumstances. A tired medic was a slow medic and sometimes speed was what kept you from taking on unwanted enemy fire in a war zone. Already high-strung and full of erratic energy, a tired Finn was a dangerous Finn and Michael gritted his teeth once more at the signs of obvious exhaustion that were etched across Finn’s face.

He tried to understand why Finn put himself at risk time and again all because he refused to sleep. After one of the very few times he’d managed to get Finn alone, he asked Finn to explain it to him—why he had such a hard time relaxing and why Finn would not let Michael help him by prescribing a mild sedative to help him sleep. Huge mistake. Finn got pissed, and just a bit offended, and that was an understatement. He could still see Finn’s reaction had played out.

“Are you kidding? You want to knock me out? No way, Doc. That shit fucks with my head. Nope, absolutely not.”

“But Finn, you have to get some rest. If you keep going at this rate, you’re going to be pulled off the active duty roster and put on cleaning bedpans in the infirmary.”

“Only if you put me on report. And you would never do that right? Doc? Right?”

“Listen Finn, I didn’t want to but it’s just not safe, I mean...”

“You did it? You reported me? Shit! How the hell could you do that? Why? Why would you make the request to have me taken off active duty? Jesus, what am I gonna do now? How in the hell am I gonna keep you safe? You promised me—you promised we’d keep each other—watch each other’s backs. Home safe—that’s what you said. Did you forget what we said back at Fort Sam? Christ, how could you do this to me? What am I going to do? How am I going to keep my promise now? Tell me, goddammit! HOW IN THE FUCK AM I GOING TO DO THAT FROM THE FUCKING INFIRMARY?”

Michael stared at Finn, hardly able to believe that the screaming lunatic standing before him was the same man who had gone down on his knees not twelve hours earlier and swallowed his dick, laughing and moaning and grabbing his ass. Where had that man gone? Michael had no idea when he had requested that Finn be taken off extraction and put on mandatory duty at the Infirmary for the next two weeks, just how close to the edge Finn really was. But now he saw clearly that Finn was a ticking time bomb, just waiting to go off. He reached out to stroke Finn's arm to calm him and reared back as Finn shook him off and stalked to the window across the room. There he stood, chest heaving, obviously trying to get a grip on the emotions that were waging a pretty hefty war of their own inside Finn's head.

Michael approached him slowly, once more reaching out, this time to gently stroke Finn's back. He felt the shudder run through Finn, causing him to tremble violently. He reached an arm around Finn's chest and caught him just as the man collapsed against Michael's hard body. Michael felt Finn shake as the tears came, ugly, gulping tears that men cry when they've been pushed to the brink and left there far too long.

He shushed and petted Finn, squeezing him tight, stroking his hair and whispering quiet nonsense in his ear. Michael felt so inadequate, not knowing how to comfort the man in his arms but wanting to nonetheless. Slowly, Finn's sobs lessened and Michael felt his body relax into his own. He gave Finn a few minutes more, hoping he would speak and tell Michael that he was going to be okay, that he would rest and not fight Michael anymore about the change in duty and the need for rest. True to form, Finn began with a dry laugh.

"Damn, I hate this shit. I feel so weak over here, Doc. Every time I feel like I got it together, some damn IED explodes and our guys get fucked over. Christ I didn't mean to cry like a damn girl. Probably sounds like I'm a section eight eh, Doc?"

"Shhh Finn, of course not."

"Nah, it's okay, I get it. I even knew it was coming. I've been so wired lately. For Christ's sake I'm a medic. I've been trained to see the signs of combat stress. Guess I'm just piss-poor at seeing it in myself."

“Finn, why do you think one of the most famous sayings concerning doctors is ‘Physician, heal thyself’? We’re notorious for missing our own problems but aces at diagnosing everyone else. It’s okay, you just need to rest—get some sleep. I just requested you be given a few days, Finn, that’s all, then you can go right back on active duty roster, I swear. Hell, I’ll even sign the paperwork now, saying you’re ready for active duty early—postdate it to the day after tomorrow, if it will make you feel better.”

Michael began to step away to grab the forms needed to do what he had just promised to Finn, but Finn snatched at him like he was a life preserver and pulled him in tight to himself, clutching at Michael.

“Shhh Finn, it’s okay, I have you, it’s just a few days and then back to...”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just. Shit, Doc, I want you... please, I just need to feel normal, just for a few minutes.”

Michael looked at his lover and saw the lust behind the exhaustion. This was dangerous. Anyone could step in and discover them. But the need pouring off Finn was so palpable that Michael found himself unable to say no. Reaching out to briefly touch Finn’s cheek in reassurance, Michael stepped around him and locked the door to his office. Turning back, he grabbed Finn by the hand and took him behind the curtained exam area where he leaned in to kiss him. Finn devoured Michael’s lips. Michael felt his cock harden and push against the placket of his camo pants as Finn pushed his body flush up against Michael, grinding their cocks together.

Breaking off the kiss, Finn kneeled down and frantically tore at Michael’s belt and zipper. He worked Michael’s cock free from his boxers and greedily bent to suck him down, gagging in the process. Pulling back, Finn went down again and again, each time swirling his tongue around the tip of Michael’s dick, and sucking hard up and down.

Michael leaned back against the exam table, thrusting into Finn’s face, fucking his throat. Their harsh, guttural breathing broke the otherwise silent room, as Finn continued to work Michael’s cock as if his life depended on seeing Michael cum as quickly as possible. Within minutes, Michael was ramming his cock down Finn’s throat and doing just that in long, hot spurts.

Finn groaned as he sucked on Michael, not letting up until Michael pushed him off his now sensitive cock. Without pausing to draw a deep breath, Michael watched as Finn tore his zipper down and released his hard, weeping cock. A few strokes and Finn came all over his hand, his sweating head collapsing onto Michael's thigh.

The two men gulped in air as they came down off the heat of the moment. Michael reached down and stroked Finn's hair and smiled as Finn turned his head ever so slightly and nuzzled into his hand. Michael pulled Finn to his feet. Slowly, they cleaned up and reassembled their clothing.

Finn kissed Michael and hugged him tight for a brief second.

"I promise I'll sleep. Just let me stay on active duty, okay? Please fix it, Doc—and I won't let you down."

Michael felt himself nod his head and knew that he would ask that his own request be denied. He would lie and say that Finn was okay for active duty, that Finn had gotten the needed rest. He felt his chest tighten as he glanced down at the dark head that rested on his shoulder and sincerely hoped that his lie would not come back to haunt him in the end.

Six months in this fucking hole of a country. Six long months that should've ended with him and Finn catching a boat out of there for a month-long leave. For sure, Michael had sent his share of severely wounded to the medical transport ship that sat in the Persian Gulf but had never set foot on the boat himself.

Michael passed a weary hand over his face, scrubbing at what felt like permanent layers of grit and dust. He sat at his desk in the infirmary and looked once more at the paper laying in front of him. The words seem to swim and dance as his tired brain tried to make sense of them. The words *denied leave* and *six remaining months* jumped off the page and slammed into his brain. He glanced up at the door leading outside and wondered if Finn had gotten a similar order. He imagined so... after all they were a medical team sent to this godforsaken post together, he imagined they would leave at the same time as well.

He wondered how Finn would take this setback. Just the previous day, they had managed to steal a precious hour under the guise of taking stock for the upcoming supply run. In fact, they had fucked in the makeshift closet, urging each other on with strained whispers and a quick slap of slick applied to government-issue rubbers bought at the PX. Frantic hands groping each other, searing kisses and then Michael pushing into that hot tight ass. Finn crying out just briefly after insisting that a quick shove of two fingers had been enough prep to take Michael's straining cock.

Rutting deep and fast, heedless of the shelves they banged into and the bandages and IV tubing raining down on them, all they could see and feel was each other and their frantic need to feel alive. It had been weeks since they had last found the time and place to be together. All niceties, any thoughts of careful and slow lovemaking, had been thrown aside as their lust clawed its way to the surface and iron-hard dicks ground together in desperation. Never before had Michael felt such a deep urgency to be inside Finn, mark him, fucking *claim* him.

Afterwards, they'd stood with their harsh breaths rending the air around them. Michael held onto Finn by the back of his neck, pressing their foreheads to each other. Finally, Finn had spoken the words that had surely been eating away at him ever since that first time back at Fort Sam.

"We gotta get the hell out of here Doc. This place is killing me. The army and all its stupid, fucking rules are making me crazy. Not touching you, having to fuck like scared rabbits in a goddamn closet, never being able to lie down next to you... hold you... ah shit..."

Finn's voice broke and Michael's hand clenched around his neck, pulling his lover in even closer, as if by pressing into him, Michael could make all the buried hurt and frustration Finn was feeling go away. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. They should be kicking back on a sofa, sipping coffee and reading the Sunday paper after a leisurely morning of lovemaking. Each day almost boring in its routine and each night climbing into bed together with hours to explore the body that lay next to them, caress the warm flesh, kiss the places that drove each other insane with desire.

Normal, their lives should be fucking normal. They should be able to tell each other they loved each other. Instead, the words remained locked away,

always near the surface but never spoken aloud for fear that if they were, if they truly revealed how deeply they had come to need each other, one of them would be snatched away, or the victim of a hidden IED, the receiving end of a sniper's bullet.

Michael felt Finn's body shudder in the stillness, dry sobs racking his too-thin frame, and once again felt the anger over wasted lives and time spent in a country they had no place being, fill him. He wanted to lash out and destroy something, his anger white hot and corrosive. Instead, he drew in a deep breath, willing himself to calm down and focus on just holding Finn in his arms, soothing him with his voice and hands.

"It's gonna be okay Finn, shhh, we're going to get out of here soon. Our tour is almost up and then we head home."

Finn looked up at Michael's face, his own awash in anxiety and for the first time, Michael thought he saw fear as well.

"Together, right Doc? We leave this shitty hole together. We promised each other, home safe, yeah? Doc?"

Michael looked into the eyes of the only man he had ever thought it possible to love and felt the promise rise to his lips once again.

"Home safe, Finn. You and me, home safe."

The words rushed through Michael's memory with the speed of lightening, causing his eyes to fill with unshed tears as he stared at the paper that consigned him to no leave and more months of hell. He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers and thrust the paper aside. He needed to find Finn and make sure he was okay, that the orders hadn't sent Finn over the edge.

He knew exactly where to find him. He would be sitting right at the edge of camp, there at the mouth of the endless desert. He called it his "thinking place". Michael knew it was just a shitty little corner of camp near the constantly humming generators that few of the men ever ventured toward. It was a perfect place to have a few minutes alone, to just think or breathe for a minute. After all, sleeping in a tent with thirteen other guys every night wore thin, and any spare minute you could be alone felt like a bit of heaven.

Finn was currently on his twelve hours off rotation and Michael knew that he rarely slept more than a few hours during that time. He rose, stepping out around his desk, snatching up his cap, and making his way to the door when the call came across his radio for a dust off.

The alert was for the medevac to fire up and go in to pick up casualties. As he grabbed his gear, Michael recalled hearing that a small group of soldiers had been sent out to secure a village not far from base camp. There had been intelligence reports that insurgents were holed up there, using the few remaining villagers as human shields against military attack. The radio chatter meant they had taken on injured who were now waiting to be airlifted back to base hospital for treatment.

Michael took precious minutes strapping on his body armor and then his molle vest complete with extra rounds of ammo for his M4 rifle. He hated carrying a gun but since the enemy failed to follow any Geneva Convention rules, he was as vulnerable as the next man out in the field. Finally, he grabbed his helmet and slung his medic bag over his shoulder. With no thought to the additional equipment weighing him down, he began to sprint toward the landing zone and the waiting helicopter and her crew. Other than the pilot, there would be three others with Michael, the copilot, flight tech and the door gunner. The Blackhawk flying today could easily carry the four men and have room for two or three litters as well.

Michael jumped on board and was greeted with a small chorus of “Welcome aboard, Doc.” Nodding to the others, Michael began to turn and take his seat. Glancing behind him he nearly dropped his weapon at the sight of Finn running full out with all his gear toward the medevac.

“Hey, looks like fearless Finn is going to join us this trip, Doc. Did you request an additional medic?”

Michael felt himself shake his head as he watched with growing anger at the fast approaching medic. As Finn launched himself into the helicopter, Michael grabbed his arm and lurched forward to shout in his ear. The helicopter’s engines were producing a deafening sound, drowning out most, if not all communication.

“What the fuck are you doing, Finn? You’re not supposed to be on for

another six hours. This is my call and you know it. Now get the fuck off this bird and go back to your bunk.”

Finn grinned and tapped his ears, helplessly shrugging, as if to indicate he hadn't heard a word Michael had said. With growing frustration, Michael watched as Finn strapped himself in for the ride and then ground his teeth together as the flight tech tapped him on the arm to indicate he should do the same. Once strapped in, the pilot cleared them for takeoff and they became airborne. Desperately wanting to talk to Finn, Michael grabbed his headset only to realize that all the team members on the flight would hear anything he said to the private.

Michael sat and thought about just how much he was going to enjoy chewing Finn's ass off when they got back to base camp. Maybe he would request that Finn be grounded for a couple of days just to teach the cocky medic a lesson. Michael smiled at the idea of watching Finn throw a fit over the possible punishment.

The sound of enemy fire pulled Michael from his gloating thoughts to the mission at hand. As he listened, the copilot went over the plan for extracting two soldiers who were critically injured and in need of immediate care.

He glanced sideways at Finn, noting how he sat forward, nodding as each piece of information was given over the headsets.

Despite being pissed that Finn had once again skirted the rules, Michael was actually glad Finn was along for the ride. The medic was not only efficient but rarely anything less than calm and collected in high-stress situations, which from the sounds of it, was exactly what they were headed toward.

Apparently, there had been skirmishes most of the morning on the outskirts of the village with gunfire being exchanged off and on for several hours. According to reports from the theater, there were snipers set up both in and around the outlying area. Two soldiers had been picked off as they were running into position on the west bank. Both of the wounded were critically injured and needed to be medevaced back to the base hospital for further treatment.

This was a straight shot in and out. No big deal on paper. But Michael felt his stomach roll as the thought of all that could go wrong began to bloom in

his mind. Although they had been assured that the snipers had been subdued, no one knew for certain if they had managed to flush them all out into the open. Because of that, two heavily armed soldiers would meet them at the landing site and escort Michael and Finn to the waiting soldiers.

Once the medics assessed their patients' needs and did whatever they could in the field, those same soldiers would help carry the litters back to the helicopter. And that was the most dangerous time, when everyone was running full-out back to the chopper with very little ground cover except for their body armor.

As the Blackhawk began its descent, Michael had no more time to contemplate the dangers. Instead, he turned to Finn and gave him the "eyes on me" motion with his two fingers. Finn nodded his understanding that he was to follow Michael as they approached the place where the wounded lay.

In the last remaining seconds, Michael closed his eyes and sent up a prayer for safety. While he wasn't super religious, he figured they would need all the help they could get in pulling off a safe extraction. Then the chopper touched down and what should have been routine was shot to hell and Michael's worst nightmare began.

Three days later, as Michael watched the helicopter carrying Finn take off for the Persian Gulf and the navy ship, USNS Comfort, the memory of that dust off continued to ricochet through his memory and fill his every waking moment.

"Sure am gonna miss Finn, Doc, but he was damn lucky to have you there. Christ, that boy would be going home in a body bag if it hadn't been for you."

The sergeant clapped him on the back and moved off, leaving Michael to stare at the receding Blackhawk. Michael bit back a near sob and turned, blindly heading for the infirmary and his office. Once there he closed the door and went to the window, not bothering to move the sheet that served as the curtain keeping the heat of the day at bay.

He leaned his forehead against the window and finally let go, his harsh, gulping sobs filling the air. As he cried, his palm slapped against the cement wall next to the window and he cursed the day he had met Finn McCullan.

Why the fuck had he come along on that extraction? Why couldn't that stupid son of a bitch ever follow the damn rules? Why? Fucking hell, why hadn't it been Michael who caught the sniper's bullet?

The questions tore at the final edges of Michael's sanity as he realized that he might never see Finn again. His leg... oh shit, his leg. Michael couldn't stop the bleeding. He'd kept applying pressure but the bullet had hit the femoral artery and it just kept pouring out. He should have used the tourniquet earlier but he had hesitated because there was the chance that Finn might lose his leg due to lack of oxygen getting to his lower extremity. Now, none of that really seemed to matter because Finn was currently on flight to the Comfort and from there, eventually to home.

It all sounded great till you remembered that he would be travelling in order to be fitted for a prosthesis that would replace the lower half of his left leg. Too much blood loss, the surgeon had confirmed. The tourniquet had been on too long while the chopper had been pinned down due to the enemy fire that had suddenly erupted all around them. Minutes had turned into hours as Finn lay half delirious from pain, and his leg continued to bleed.

Every hour they were grounded, Michael would loosen the tourniquet for a few minutes, hoping it would be enough to oxygenate the lower portion of his leg and delay toxicity; but each time he did it, the blood loss increased until he could no longer justify messing with it at all.

Michael felt his "golden hour" slip by, that precious block of time to treat and retrieve the wounded, move them to a facility where full medical care could be administered. As one hour flowed into the next, Finn's chances for surviving intact became less and less and still Michael cared for him, doing everything within his power to extend that window of time.

Michael drew in a ragged breath and wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve. He was so tired. In the last seventy-two hours he had barely slept, spending most of his time at Finn's bedside when he wasn't on duty. Finn had woken several times, but it wasn't until he had managed to keep down some fluids that the surgeon had told him about the leg and the impending trip. Michael sat by his side as the doctor had droned on and on about how Finn

was lucky to have survived and that he could still lead a full and productive life. The entire time Finn looked at Michael only once and when he did Michael felt his stomach drop like a stone.

This is exactly why there were no fraternization rules. Michael had fucked up beyond measure, not only falling for another soldier but one under his command. Christ, how would he ever get the sight of Finn going down under that sniper fire out of his mind? This was his fault, he had put both Finn and himself and every soldier on that chopper in danger and for what? A quick fuck in the supply closet because he couldn't keep it in his pants? No, Jesus, Finn was worth so much more than that. The self-loathing Michael felt only increased when he'd finally caught a glimpse of Finn's face.

Finn's eyes had a defeated look that spoke volumes, and Michael knew in that instant that Finn would have preferred death over having to live the rest of his life crippled. But Michael could never let that happen.

Michael moved from the window and sat down heavily on his desk chair. He dropped his head into his hands and tried to shut down the memory of his last visit with Finn prior to his being airlifted out.

"Finn, you'll be home before you know it. Hell, by the time you're out of rehab, I'll be home. This is it for me, no more army, going to resign my commission and try to make it in a hospital somewhere or maybe even private practice. I'm going to need a good physician's assistant. We can meet up, figure out where we want to live and go from there. Just like you always wanted right, Finn?"

Michael paused and watched as a lone tear rolled down Finn's cheek. He felt as though his heart was being torn in half. Finn had not spoken to him since finding out his leg had been amputated and now Michael was fucking helpless to know how to pull Finn back from the nowhere land he seemed intent on dwelling in. Instinctively, Michael reached out to wipe away Finn's tear, only to be stopped by the harsh tone of Finn's voice.

"Don't touch me."

"What? What did you say, Finn?"

Finally after days of silence, Finn turned to face Michael, his eyes blazing, his face flushed.

“I said, Captain Bradshaw, don’t fucking touch me. I’m not your patient.”

“What the fuck do you mean you’re not my patient? I never said you were. But you are my...”

“Your what? Your boyfriend? Your lover? No? Can’t figure it out? How can this be? The great doctor doesn’t have a nice neat label for what I was? Well, how about I help you out. Maybe I was just another warm body. Something to use when you got a little bored out here in the desert. What do they call that Captain? Oh yeah... a fuckbuddy, right? Maybe that’s what I was to you, A CONVENIENT FUCKBUDDY!”

Finn’s voice grew louder with each question. Michael felt himself flinch at the disdain and anger that dripped off every word Finn uttered. Then, just when it seemed that Finn was going to lose it completely, he seemed to cave in on himself, his voice weakening and his body slumping back into the bed from where he’d risen during his outburst. The next time he spoke it was barely above a whisper.

“Well, I’m not your concern anymore. So, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to leave so I can get ready for transport.”

“No, wait Finn, we made a promise to each other, remember? We were going to get each other home sa...”

But before Michael could finish, Finn spoke again, this time stronger, steadier, with conviction in his voice.

“Just go, Michael, and don’t come back anymore. I don’t want you here.”

“But Finn...”

This time Finn turned and the words Michael was about to utter died on his lips as he saw the look on his lover’s face.

“I don’t need you anymore. I can find my own way home... alone.”

Somehow, despite the numbing cold Michael felt creeping over his body as Finn uttered those final words, Michael was able to leave the infirmary,

mumbling some halfhearted statement about returning to see Finn off the next day. During the last twelve hours Finn was on base, Michael moved in a fog through his job and then managed to walk with leaden feet to the tarmac in time to see Finn being boarded onto the big Blackhawk that would carry him out to sea to the Comfort.

Michael raised his head to stare at the place that would keep him captive for six more months. Placing both hands on his desk, he struggled to his feet, exhaustion threatening to overwhelm him. Slowly he pulled open the left drawer of his desk and bent down to retrieve the picture from his days at Fort Sam. He traced Finn's smiling face with the tip of one finger and blew out a shaky breath.

Somehow he had to reach beyond this guilt that was eating away at him from the inside out. Somehow he had to make it up to Finn, to prove to him that he was worthy of the sacrifice Finn had made. If it took every day for the rest of his life, he would show Finn what he meant to him. Michael was just beginning to understand that both of them had lost something that day, not just Finn but Michael as well. Finn had lost his leg, but Michael had lost faith in himself, in his ability to be the man Finn had expected him to be, the man who Finn trusted to bring him home safe.

Well, that was going to change. Right here, right now. No more tears. No more fucking whiny-ass crying. This was not over. He and Finn were not through. He had nothing but time on his hands to plan how to fix this. Six more months to find a way to get Finn back. He needed to concentrate now, be ready. Fuckbuddy! Oh Finn, you are so wrong. You were never something so casual, so disposable. You were so much more than that. It was time to set Finn McCullan straight. Michael was ready to fight for what was his. He was ready to bring Finn home. Bring him home safe, just like he promised.

Michael folded the picture in half and shoved it in his pocket. Scrubbing his face once more to erase any trace of the tears he had shed, Michael turned toward the door, his mind already ticking down the moments until he would see Finn again.

Six long months in the desert had not been kind to Captain Michael Bradshaw. By the time he stepped onto the tarmac at Joint Base Lewis-McCord in Washington, he was whippet-thin, with dark shadows beneath his eyes and an intense look that made most people reluctant to speak to him.

He was, in a word, a driven man. The burning need to see Finn had only increased exponentially in the last few months until Michael felt it would consume him with its overwhelming need. If he had thought seeing Finn leave on that litter was hell, he had in no way been prepared for what had come next. Silence. Deep, total, suffocating silence.

It had been six months of returned letters. Unanswered emails. Endless, increasingly frantic voice messages left on a phone Michael was not even sure Finn still used. No communication whatsoever.

The passing time had nearly broken Michael and, in the end, had finally made him come to terms with the idea that Finn might be lost to him forever.

And that, Michael thought, well, that was just a bitch, especially since in those long, dark months Michael had come to the firm realization that he was in love with the stubborn and elusive Private First Class Finn McCullan. Of course what was happening in Finn's life wasn't a mystery anymore, not since Finn's Aunt Sharen had contacted Michael. She had tracked down Michael while he was still in Iraq. All those voice messages had finally been heard by someone.

She told him that while Finn might be physically recovering and was, in fact, doing well with his prosthetic leg, she was sure something was still very wrong with her nephew.

Michael had listened, as Sharen described how Finn seemed to drift through his days. He was living with her in Baltimore, still going to therapy but doing little else. Recently, Sharen had been encouraging Finn to get out more, meet people. She said he muttered something about needing more time and then retreated to his bedroom for three days.

The hand holding the phone began to shake as Michael listened. Closing his eyes, he recalled the many times he had stayed behind in the barracks, supposedly resting while all the other off duty guys went off to pitch a ball and

blow off steam. He knew what Finn needed—to just be alone. The silence was always preferable to all the noise around that made you feel like you were going to jump out of your own skin

“Honestly, Dr. Bradshaw, I thought he was dead it was so quiet. Well, during the day anyway. But not at night, no, not at night.”

Michael heard the worry in her voice and gently asked her what she meant. He had a good idea what she was going to say but he needed to be sure, so he prodded her to answer.

“Well, he has these awful nightmares. Some nights, he just lets loose with one of those horrible, bone-chilling screams and then I hear him call out your name, over and over again. It’s why I knew I needed to track you down. I think Finn needs you. I think he believes that you’ll keep him safe. It’s what he always cries about, you know, when he’s dreaming. It just breaks my heart.”

She broke down then and Michael tried to comfort her, but the memories were rolling in on him so fast he could barely breathe much less speak. Nightmares. He had them as well. Over and over, on an endless loop, that day played out in Michael’s dreams.

Finn running, calling back over his shoulder for Michael to stay low. The sharp report of a gun and then the slight whine as the bullet flew past him and seemed to explode into Finn. The burst of red that turned so quickly to black as the sand colored pants drank in all that blood. Finn’s blood. The moment when Finn fell, crying out, and then lay so very still.

Michael felt the familiar dread bubble up, as time seemed to slow to a stop. For just a moment, standing there, vaguely listening to Aunt Sharen’s concerns, Michael was right back in the desert. Suddenly all Michael could hear were the screams that tore from his own throat night after night as he was ripped from his sleep by the horrifying dream of Finn getting shot. How many times had he woken up with his chest heaving, tears running down his face? Too many to count. He knew exactly what demons haunted Finn. Michael clawed his way back from that dark memory to hear himself promising to visit as soon as he got stateside. And now here he was, finally back and Finn just a few hours away.

Two more days dragged by until Michael was able to book a flight heading for BWI airport.

Michael carefully made his way through the concourse, watching for the signs indicating taxi service. He was so close to Finn he swore he could almost feel the man. Finally seeing the exit indicating a taxi stand, Michael jogged down the ramp and out through the doors toward the nearest yellow and black cab that had a lit sign. Tapping on the passenger side window, he impatiently waited as the cabbie pressed the button to lower the window.

“I need to get into the city, by the Inner Harbor, to 987 Light Street, can you get me there?”

The cabbie grunted his assent and Michael threw his bag in the trunk and slid into the back seat. After making sure Michael could pay the fare, the taxi slid into traffic and onto the highway leading into downtown, Baltimore.

Michael fidgeted in the back seat, his thin leg bouncing out a shaky rhythm, as the city loomed closer and closer. He looked over the skyline and all he could think was Finn. Finn was there, so close now.

When the cab finally maneuvered into a spot in front of Sharen’s townhouse, Michael was nearly vibrating with excitement. Handing the driver his fare plus a healthy tip, Michael bounded out of the cab, grabbed his suitcase and jogged up the stairs to the front door. And then it hit him.

What if Finn refused to see him? What if he disappeared into that damn bedroom and closed the door in Michael’s face? Holy god, what if he didn’t believe that Michael had come home so he could tell him how much he’d missed him, how much he loved him?

The questions raced one after another through Michael’s ramped-up brain, causing his heart to race and his palms to actually begin sweating. He was so close. Surely Finn would see him? Taking a deep breath, Michael raised his fist and knocked. When the door opened, a pair of hazel green eyes surrounded by a thick head of black hair peered out at him. Michael held his breath, waiting for some sign that Finn was happy, glad to see him.

Confusion knit Finn’s brow, causing him to squint at Michael and then, recognition dawned in his eyes. Staggering forward, his limbs more

uncoordinated than usual, Finn stepped down, forcing his trim body into the space barely large enough for Michael to stand.

Reaching out with one hand, Finn's expression became that of wonderment, as he touched Michael's face, stroking a finger down his cheek, stopping to hover over his lips.

"You came."

Slowly, Michael reached up and wrapped his hand around the finger poised over his mouth, and gently drew it close, kissing the tip of it. He watched as Finn's eyes drifted shut and a look of utter joy claimed his beautiful face. Pulling the hand downward, Michael closed the remaining distance and leaned in to kiss Finn. Just as their lips touched, Finn gave a startled cry, and stepped backwards, his arms wheeling in the air as his prosthetic leg failed to shift properly, causing him to lose his balance.

Michael's hand shot out to grab Finn's arm, helping him to straighten and regain his equilibrium. As if Michael's very touch burned him, Finn snatched his arm away and stepped back up into the doorway.

"Thank you Michael, but I don't need your help. Please, come in, my Aunt Sharen went down to the store just a few minutes ago but she should be back soon. I'm sure she'd like to meet you."

The icy invitation hung in the air. Michael blinked and almost shook his head at Finn's quick mood change. He watched as Finn moved into the house, leaving the door open behind him for Michael to follow.

Michael stepped inside and, after leaving his suitcase by the front door, joined Finn in the living room. He was sitting on the sofa, the fingers of his right hand tapping out a pattern on his thigh. Michael noticed that Finn sat at the nearest end of the sofa, allowing him to angle his body so that his injured leg was tucked against the side.

The anxiety rolled off of Finn in waves and Michael realized what he was seeing for the first time. The signs were all there: the anxiousness, the burst of anger when he had tried to help Finn, herky-jerky body language that cried out how very uncomfortable Finn was at the moment. All of them pointed to PTSD, and Michael wondered if he was right to think that Finn might be suffering from the disorder.

Michael felt himself slowly relax. This was familiar territory. He had certainly seen it often enough in the desert. Hell, he had danced with this devil himself. Finn was, in essence, reliving the trauma of being shot and losing his leg over and over again. Michael recognized it because he, too, had grappled with his own nightmares. The truth of it was that the time spent in Iraq had broken something within both of them. But now, together, they stood the chance of healing, of getting stronger, together. If only Finn would let him stay. If only Finn could forgive him.

Finn cleared his throat and jerked his eyes toward Michael.

“So, I guess you heard I, uhm, am getting a medical discharge from the service. What about you? Are you just here on leave or are you...”

Finn left the question unfinished and hanging in the air. Michael could see the mix of fear and hope in his eyes.

“No, I’m done as well. My resignation is in the works and I’m finally getting to use up all that excess leave I have. So after checking in, I came directly here from the base in Washington.”

Finn stopped and stared at Michael, understanding dawning on his face, as he figured out that Michael had flown directly to see him, not even stopping off to see his own parents. As Michael watched, Finn’s expression crumpled inward and tears started running down his cheeks. His sobs coming in big gulps, shaking his entire body. Michael dove off his seat and caught Finn up in his arms.

“Shhh, Finn, shhh, I have you. It’s okay. Everything is going to be okay. I’m here now and we’re both safe. Home safe, just like we promised to each other.”

Michael flinched as Finn jerked his body back and snapped out a response.

“Everything is going to be okay? How does that work, Doc? You got some magic pill that’s going to miraculously regrow my fucking leg? Or make these damn nightmares go away for good? Jesus Christ! Why the hell did you come here? So you could pity the poor fucking cripple?”

He watched as Finn angrily brushed aside his tears and struggled to control himself. But Michael had heard enough; he began to pace back and forth, trying to explain to Finn how he had it all wrong.

“What? Finn, no. Pity the cripple? Jesus, Finn, I would never, oh god, no. Finn, I came here because I missed you, because I love you and needed to see you. I’m here because every goddamn day away from you ate at my gut like acid. Don’t you see? I had to come—I had to ask you—beg you to forgive me.”

Finn looked up at Michael in shock.

“Forgive you? For what?”

Michael stopped short. Here was his chance to set the record straight once and for all and let go of all the guilt he had eaten for so long.

“It was my fault. You getting shot... it was all my fault. I was your commanding officer. I was responsible and I let you get hurt. It should have been me who took that bullet, not you. Never you, Finn. All I’ve done for the past six months is think about getting back to you. Of telling you how sorry I was. To have just one more chance to show you how much I love you and see if you still felt the same. To ask you if you could forgive me. But, I think I might be too late.”

Finn cried out as Michael moved to turn away. And then he was there, in Michael’s arms, sobbing and asking Michael to stay.

Finn cried as Michael rocked him in his arms, stroking his back, patting his hair. Slowly, the tender touches became more intimate as Michael began kissing the side of Finn’s neck and cheek, and he felt him arch into his touch. Turning his face to Michael, Finn lifted his mouth for a kiss and Michael swept in, gently at first and then harder, crushing Finn’s mouth beneath his own, plunging his tongue in, tasting the man he had only been able to dream about for months.

When they broke apart, both men were breathing heavily. Finn’s cheeks were still wet from his spent tears and Michael reached out to wipe the last remaining few away. Finn gave a shaky laugh, and then reached up to cup Michael’s head in his hands and drew him forward for one more soft, slow kiss. Releasing his hold on Michael, Finn leaned back, took a deep breath and spoke.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Doc. Neither one of us should have been out there that day, but we were. God, I missed you so much, Doc. It’s been so

hard, so fucking hard. You have to know I never blamed you—not ever. I was so messed up over having to leave you and then trying to deal with the leg. Doc, you can't blame yourself. Please, please don't do that."

Michael stroked Finn's cheek and softly kissed his lips one more time. For the first time in what seemed like forever he began to realize that this thing that had nearly broken him would always be with him. Maybe, together he and Finn could heal, one piece at a time. Michael wasn't really sure because Finn was different now, and so was he. They would never be able to go back to who they were; the time in Iraq had changed them forever. But that was okay.

Somehow, they were stronger now. They could survive this together; that was the key. With Finn at his side, Michael could battle his demons and help Finn beat back his. The therapy, the medicines, they might ease the way, but they were never really the answer. This man, this warm body pressed against his own and the strong heart that beat against his chest, this was his redemption. His saving grace.

Michael sat down and held out his hand for Finn to sit beside him.

"Tell me about rehab, Finn. Tell me what's been going on with you these last six months."

Slowly, Finn began to recount what had happened after he got stateside.

"Everything happened so fast after they shipped me out. Once they cleaned my leg up on the ship, they started me on PT right away, fitted me up for the prosthetic. As soon as I was able to stand up and make some headway with a walker, they got me a flight home.

"I went right into Walter Reed Hospital and spent the next couple of months recovering, doing PT every day. Fucking stump ached like a son of a bitch, Doc. And some of the pain? It was that phantom pain stuff they kept trying to tell me about. Jesus, I thought I was going crazy, feeling all kinds of shit from a leg that no longer existed. You know Doc until you feel something that just shouldn't be there it just doesn't really compute.

"Anyway, when they released me from the program I came here to live with my Aunt. I thought everything was going to be okay. I thought I could

wait to see if you still wanted to make a go of it, with me. But then the nightmares started and I got to feeling all jittery and shit.”

Finn stopped for a moment, gathering his courage to say the rest, to confess it all to Michael.

“Doc? I can’t sleep most nights. I just keep seeing that bullet hit my leg and hear the sniper fire all around me. And I know—in my head I know it’s not real. I do. But I can’t make it stop. Ah fuck. Listen, you should know, before you say anything or do anything else, you should know, I think I might have that PTSD they keep talking about. You know we saw it in guys coming off combat duty all the time.

“Doc, I have all the symptoms. Christ! Listen, what I’m trying to say is that I’m pretty sure I’m fucking broken Doc, and I don’t know if I can fix myself. I just don’t know...”

Michael grabbed Finn close and pulled him in tight, kissing his hair and holding him.

“Shhh, it’s okay. Me too, Finn, me too. I understand. It’ll be all right. We can work on this together. We’ll get a good counselor and work through everything. I’ll be with you every step of the way. What happened in Iraq, it didn’t break us, Finn—we’re just a little banged up inside.”

Finn tucked his head into Michael’s shoulder. His voice came out muffled and low but Michael heard every word, just the same.

“You’ll stay with me, right, Doc? And we can be home safe, you and me, home safe together.”

Michael drew back, forcing Finn to look up into his eyes.

“Every day, Finn. I’ll be here every day. You listen to me now. I love you, Finn McCullan. It took me too damn long to understand, but I see it now. You’re my home, Finn and I’m never leaving your side again. Do you hear me, Private?”

Finn gave Michael a tentative smile at the commanding tone of his voice. Looking into his eyes, he reached up a hand and laid it gently on Michael’s cheek.

“I hear you, Captain Bradshaw. And I love you, too.”

Finn leaned in and kissed Michael. They settled into each other's arms and slowly relaxed, talking quietly to one another.

When Sharen arrived home an hour later, she found them, wrapped around each other, fast asleep.

Epilogue

Six months later...

Michael stirred as the sun broke over the horizon and began to lift the darkness in the bedroom. He glanced over at the empty spot where Finn should have been sleeping soundly. As he rose to sit up and the fog of sleep cleared away he heard it, that soft keening noise Finn made when he was trying to push away the residue of a terrifying nightmare.

Although Finn was getting better and better every day, he still suffered from the horrible memories that disrupted his sleep and often left him trembling with aftershock. Michael's own dreams had slowly faded to where he rarely had them at all anymore. He knew this was because, unlike Finn, his body didn't bear a constant reminder of what had happened. For Finn, the loss of his leg had made his recovery slower.

Michael knew where he would find his lover. Quietly, he moved toward the small closet where Finn sat, still naked from their lovemaking the night before, crouched down with his head resting on his knee, his eyes closed.

Finn's other leg, free from the prosthetic rested on the floor of the closet. Michael carefully knelt down beside him, wrapping one arm around Finn's shoulder and using the other to brace himself against the wall. As Michael lowered his head to rest across Finn's broad back, he felt his hand being grasped tightly inside Finn's.

Gradually Finn's shaking began to ease as Michael murmured soft reassurances of his love for the beautiful man resting in his embrace. He waited for Finn to settle down and realize he was safe. Michael knew the

moment Finn was back with him, leaving the nightmare of the desert behind. It was the moment Finn whispered quietly to himself, “*Home safe.*”

THE END

Author Bio

Sammy Goode makes her living as a playwright and teacher. This is the second year she has been involved in writing for the Goodreads M/M Group, and she thanks you kindly for taking the time to read her offering.

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IN THE RIGHT LIGHT

By G.B. Gordon

Photo Description

Two young men in gym shorts, one slightly younger than the other, cuddling on a bed with two small dogs. Smiling and happy.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two have struggled so hard to get to where they are in this place and time. Their differences were always a focus to those that wanted them apart. Family for one, Friends the other. But little do they know those vast differences are what make them perfect for each other. Complete. They are sure to lose one or the other along the way but they'll always have what is most important of all, each other. Please tell me the story of this handsome calm man (white shorts) and this exuberant, blithe artist (grey shorts).

Please be a Happy Ending. ;) Some good smexing and everything else, drama or supernatural/shifter can be up to you! Also, what type of artist Grey Shorts is, painter or sculptor or glass blower is all up to you too.~ Have fun! :)

Sincerely,

Judianna

PS. Those puppies are little orphans Grey Shorts found one day on his way to his apartment. They were so cute, and it was raining; he couldn't just leave them there. And in any case... who still leaves two puppies on the street?! He took it as a sign that these two were meant to be his.

PPS. Some wall and or desk smexing is always welcome. >:3

Thank You so much!

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: hot and sexy, instant chemistry, fluffy, visual arts, landscaping, blue collar, men with pets, family drama, HFN

Word count: 15,676

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IN THE RIGHT LIGHT

By G.B. Gordon

In the right light, at the right time, everything is extraordinary.

~Aaron Rose

How his old man had managed to get them hired for a fancy-ass job like this, James couldn't imagine. Huge house. Cliff-top, river view. The land around it measured in acres, when what Carver & Sons Landscaping usually dealt with was measured in yards. Or even square feet. Not just the usual lawn mowing and hedge cutting here. The possibilities spun him around at every corner, looking this way and that. A forgotten need made his throat tight. And was that hope stirring under the rubble in his chest? Only to be ground back down, of course. This time by the architect's exquisite and presumably hand-stitched Italian flip-flops.

"A house like this," Sarah Holt said with a don't-fuck-with-me smile, "needs gardens that make a statement."

The old man was nodding as if he knew all about it, fooling no one. James looked away, embarrassed, and caught his brother's eyes. Rob briefly pulled one brow up, a silent comment about Holt's artfully frayed jeans, peasant blouse and the bandanna that held her dark hair back in a ponytail. James's lips twitched, but he shook his head. The old man and Rob might have her pegged as a leftover hippie, but James didn't buy it. This one took no prisoners.

Holt was leading them along the side of the house towards the river, sketching a picture of wide lawns, arbors, and statuary fit for a Roman villa. "A large magnolia tree right here. That'll fit well with the gentle slope and iron scrollwork. With branches hanging all the way to the ground and laden with flowers. A bench, maybe, or a patio set. We'll see."

The old man took notes, but didn't comment on her choice of tree.

Jesus Christ, Dad, tell her! The windswept plateau might be heaven on a sultry June day, but come February... "It'll never survive," James tried.

Holt, her deluxe vision unexpectedly interrupted, narrowed her eyes.

“The magnolia. Not hardy enough. Won’t last through the winter.”

She raised an eyebrow at the old man, who threw James a furious glance before he said, “Some of the newer hybrids are bred for our climate. I’ll look into it, Ms. Holt.” Another glowering look in his direction told James he hadn’t heard the last of this. He shrugged. Even zone four hybrids wouldn’t make it up here. The wide lawns would leave the rest of the vegetation at the mercy of the winds, and her arbors would be swept into the river below like so many matchsticks.

Rob put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. “Just shut up and tag along. Why do you even still try? He sure as hell doesn’t appreciate it.”

No, the old man didn’t. Never had. James wondered what the owner of the place was like, if he knew what he was getting for his money, or if he even cared.

To give this Holt chick her due, she certainly had a good eye, might even manage to anchor her arbors against a March storm, but she knew nothing about plants and their needs. Which should have been where Carver & Sons came in, of course. Expertise and advice. Holt might have listened. She had a generous mouth and lines in the corners of her eyes that hinted at easy laughter or at least a sense of humour.

The more they were shown of the property with its dregs of previous failed gardening attempts, the more James itched to be given free reign over its landscaping. Ericaceous shrubs, boulders and natural stone walls to break the wind, mosses and lichens... He could make this work; make “a statement” even, given half a chance. But as soon as Holt left them, the old man rounded on James and stabbed a bony finger in his chest. “How many times do I have to tell you, if I want your opinion I’ll ask for it?”

James turned away without a word. They’d really fought this battle way too many times. But his father grabbed him by the arm.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you.” The fact that he had to tilt his head back these days to look James in the eye didn’t improve his mood. “You give the client what he wants. Or do you want them to back out? We need this contract.”

“I know,” James said. “But the contract’s worth shit if it ruins our name.”

“Well, it won’t.”

“Half her fucking trees are gonna die during the first winter,” James said, pointing back at the imaginary magnolia.

“Then we’ll plant new ones. Keeps us in business. These people are too rich to care.”

“Which is why you’re having them pay for irrigation as well, instead of letting me plant for drought?”

“Don’t raise your voice at me, you puppy. When I’m dead and buried you can do with the company whatever you want. If Rob lets you, that is. For now, you’ll do as you’re told.”

James pressed both palms against the seams of his jeans, so they wouldn’t curl into fists. It hadn’t been this hard to keep his mouth shut since he’d left school. He was so fucked.

“Why you even sent me off to college if you couldn’t care less about what they taught me, I’ll never understand.”

“That was certainly a huge waste of money,” his father agreed and turned to walk to the truck, where Rob was already waiting.

James hesitated. He would have loved to wave them off and say “I’ll walk”, but it was a long way down off the escarpment and back to town. Reluctantly, he trailed behind, but motioned for Rob to go get in first. The more space between him and the old man right now, the better.

“One day you’ll give the both of you a heart attack,” Rob whispered in his ear, grinning. Right. All a big joke to Rob. He didn’t give a shit about anything. James almost envied him sometimes. Certainly made things easier.

As the old man steered the truck down the driveway and access road, James threw a last glance back at the patchy front lawn, the weeds in the gravel, and the dead spots in the boxwood hedges. He firmly shut his mind to any dreams of native dogwoods, willows, crepe myrtle and teaberry that would do so well on the windswept plateau. What a waste.

Mom was at her most steely this morning, explaining her ideas with choppy gestures and listening with curt nods whenever Danny made a comment or suggestion. Danny grinned. It was, of course, the electrician's fault. The stupid idiot had come in to check the wiring and bring it up to code and had visibly recoiled from a woman talking shop with him. Nothing ruffled his mother's feathers like people who treated women like they couldn't possibly know anything about wiring, or construction, or any other male dominated field. It made her ice up instantly, to the point where people had been known to reach for their jackets on hot summer days. Too bad the electrician had fled upstairs; Danny would have enjoyed the show.

They were just laying down the broad strokes, style wise; Mom wouldn't be able to make any decisions on his lighting details until the structural stuff was done, but this way they could both let their creative ideas percolate and know they'd be on the same page later, and that their designs would come together.

"Now, sweetheart." Mom closed the book of wallpaper samples she'd been using to highlight her vision. "I really have to talk to a man about a banister for the main staircase. And you have to look at the gardens." She went through a box filled with paper rolls, pulled one out and tapped it against Danny's shoulder. "Anything you need to know is in here."

"My copy?" Danny asked as he took the plans.

She nodded. "Scribble to your heart's content. Go wild. Off with you, shoo. And be careful of prowling, ill-tempered landscapers."

Danny laughed, "Will do."

Still grinning, Danny stepped through the double French doors onto the terrace. It was another sultry day, but way more bearable up here than down in the city. Pretty nice, actually. A light breeze ruffled the leaves and carried the sweet scent of some flower or other. Danny got out his sunglasses against the glare and unrolled the plan, his mother's precise sketches and notes as familiar as his own.

He checked the compass rose on the plan to get his bearings and commit to memory the view from the terrace and where the light would be coming from

at the different times of day. Then he took the three steps down to the grounds and started wandering, marking views, angles and distances, trying to ignore the existing layout and envision the one his mother had drawn for him.

Machine noise sounded from the east side of the property, and when Danny walked around the shrubbery, he saw two men hard at work taking out some large bushes. The first guy was tall and skinny, feeding cut branches into a shredder that spewed wood chips into the back of what looked like an electric cart. The other man... Danny swallowed hard. The other man stood with his back to Danny, swinging a pickaxe at the root of a huge lilac bush. Feet in heavy work boots planted firmly apart, muscular thighs and ass clad in jeans washed almost white, a plaid shirt hanging out of the back pocket. Bare torso tanned and gleaming with sweat, muscles bunching with every swing of the pickaxe. Danny tried the swallowing thing again, but his throat was way drier than the weather warranted. Holy hell, this guy was pushing all his buttons.

Skinny guy turned off the shredder when the cart was full and drove off. The sudden silence was deafening until the rhythmic thud of the pickaxe became audible. And hypnotic. Danny was staring, but he couldn't help it.

The man leaned his pickaxe against a rock and turned to the side to grab a spade. He spotted Danny and raised a questioning eyebrow.

And he looked just as breathtaking from the front as he had from the back.

It took every ounce of will Danny could muster to make himself move and walk over. He wished he'd taken his water bottle outside with him. He cleared his throat and managed a reasonably steady, "Morning."

The guy nodded a greeting in return. Wrists crossed over the T-handle of the spade, gloved hands relaxed, one foot up on the spade's blade. A vague flash of recognition shot through Danny. He'd seen the man somewhere before. The dark eyes, the five o'clock shadow. His chest was covered with the barest hint of dark fuzz, just enough to outline his pecs and—

"Anything I can do for you?"

Danny barely suppressed a startled jump. Caught staring again. Even the man's voice gave him goosebumps. *Say something, idiot.* "I, uhm, heard the shredder." He vaguely pointed over his shoulder to where he'd come from,

desperately trying to string two thoughts together. “Only polite to introduce myself.” He lost his train of thought again somewhere in the bottomless depths of dark brown eyes that now crinkled at the corners in an amused smile, and dear God, could this guy please stop getting any sexier right flipping now or Danny’s heart would just stop. He jerked his hand forward to break the spell. “Danny Holt. I’ll be doing the lighting. Inside and landscape.”

Slowly pulling one of his heavy work gloves off, the man never took his eyes off Danny’s. “James Carver. I’ll be doing the digging.” His eyes widened ever so slightly when their hands touched, a touch that went through Danny’s whole body, straight down to his balls and then his toes. Rough and calloused palms, firm grip. Carver let him go and quickly pulled his glove back on.

Now what? Leave? That was it? It couldn’t be. At least—yes—phone number. Danny dug his wallet out of his back pocket, fumbled for one of his business cards, and held it out to Carver. He wanted to simply slide it in the man’s back pocket, but he didn’t want to get clocked.

Carver took the card and looked at the white on black *Fiat Lux - Light Art and Lighting Design*. His eyebrow went up again. “Light art?” He said, like he might have said “Seriously?”

Danny squirmed. This wasn’t going well. “You know, sculptures, installations.” He cast around for words, needing Carver to understand. “Bruce Munro? No? Michael Hayden? Yochai Matos?”

Carver shook his head, then barked a short laugh. “Fucking magnolia’s getting a lamp, I guess.” With that cryptic remark he turned away. “Lilac ain’t digging itself,” he said as he hefted the spade. Down the path, Danny could hear the motor of the electric cart. Carver was back at his task before it came around the corner. Skinny hadn’t come back alone, but with an older man who looked enough like him to be his father. Mom had said something about the landscapers being a family business.

Danny gave a friendly wave and headed back to the house to get a drink and his breath back. He pulled the water bottle from his backpack and drained it in one go. When he turned, his mother was leaning against the doorframe watching him with a hard-to-read expression in her eyes.

“What?” Danny didn’t really feel like talking right now, especially not Mom talk.

“I did warn you, kiddo,” she said.

“He wasn’t prowling. And not particularly ill-tempered, either. Except something about a magnolia.”

His mother was rummaging around in the box with the floor plans. “Yes, he seems quite hung up on that magnolia. I wonder if I should listen to him about that.”

“You didn’t tell me he was flipping gorgeous,” Danny blurted out.

“I was sure you’d be able to figure that part out for yourself. Aha!” Having found the roll she’d been looking for, she disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Yeah, well, he could’ve used a little warning. He could have kicked himself. What the hell was wrong with him? He was good with people. The sort of moronic stuttering he’d displayed around Carver didn’t happen to him. He shoved the water bottle back into its pocket so hard that the netting ripped.

And he sure as hell didn’t try to impress strangers with names of artists they’d likely never heard of. He straightened slowly and stared hard at nothing in particular. Was Carver a stranger, though? That niggling feeling of having met him before was still there. The way he’d stood there, leaning on the spade like guys leaned against a bar. Bar! The Lookout, favorite gay bar in town. That’s where he’d seen him. Sonofagun. Carver was gay. Suddenly that whole instant chemistry thing made a hell of a lot more sense. And was a hell of a lot harder to ignore. Hot damn. Would he call?

James slammed the door shut, bent to untie his boots and carefully toed them off on the tray. What a day. Fuck idiots who couldn’t work with what they had, but had to bend the world every which way until it broke. He stripped in the bathroom, threw the shirt and socks in the hamper, made sure the pockets of his pants were empty and came up with the kid’s business card. *Light art, my ass.* He tossed the card in the trash and stepped into the shower,

eager to wash the day away. He turned the temperature up as high as he could stand it and just let the water pound on his shoulders, eyes closed, feeling the bunched muscles there relax bit by bit. Trying not to think, he ran his fingers down his thigh, under his balls, then closed them around his cock and started with slow, even strokes to get rid of that other tension that had nothing to do with swinging a pickaxe all day—and everything to do with a nice ass in chinos, a pair of clear eyes, same color as the woods in summer, and a smile full of rainbows and unicorns. *Ah, hell.* His strokes got faster as his breath hitched and his balls tightened. With a soft moan, he let his head fall back against the tiles. The water ran across his chest and stomach and washed the cum off his hand. He stood for a minute longer to let his heartbeat slow, then turned the water off. He was getting worked up over nothing. A stupid kid in flip-flops, barely out of university, who thought he was an artist. With light. *Joke's on you, Jamie.*

He ran a towel through his hair, slipped on a pair of ancient sweat pants, and went to get a beer. Grabbing *The Ontario Naturalized Garden* that he'd brought home from the library the other day, he settled on the couch and stared into space.

He hadn't thought they made kids quite that guileless any more. Nothing hidden about Danny Holt. No doubt he was into guys, little doubt he'd been interested by this guy in particular. Every feeling had played straight across his face. His reactions in bed would be mind-blowing. Which had nothing to do with native Ontarian plants. James shook his head. *Stop thinking about him. Get a grip.*

His fingers had itched to grab those short, dark curls, touch those soft lips, made for kissing, for running a thumb along them, lick them—He'd have to stay away from the kid. Hell, a simple handshake had gone through him like lightning. And what the fuck was light art? He shut his book with a disgusted snort and fired up the refurbished laptop he'd bought at the used computer store last winter, trying to remember one of the names Danny had mentioned. Munroe. Bruce or Bruno? Googling "light art" he found a Bruce Munro and searched for images. What he saw made him sit up and slowly click through the pictures. That was fucking magical. He sent a silent apology Danny's way

and spent the next half hour looking at light installations and exhibits, and getting glimpses of a world he hadn't even known existed.

When his bottle was empty he stretched his shoulders, went back into the bathroom and fished the little card out of the trash can. *Light art, eh? Who would've thunk it.*

"C'mon, ladies. I'm not waiting for anyone," Danny called with a chuckle. The dogs were practically falling over each other to get out. Hard to remember the pathetic little wads of matted Shih Tzu fur they'd been just over a year ago. Good thing it had been a row of mild days that January or they'd have frozen to death by the time Danny's run had taken him past the spot where they'd been left. Lux still bore a scar on one paw from frostbite. He knelt for a quick rub behind their ears and to put their leashes on. "Hold still, girls, or we're not going. And you do need a spa day."

Once they were across the road and in the park, he let them run free. As always, Lux, raced way ahead and then back, and ahead, and back, ad infinitum, while Lumen stayed by his side. At the other end of the park they both sat and waited for him to hook the leash back on their collars; they knew the way. And they loved Claire and possibly her treats enough to pull on the leash, so Danny gave in and jogged with them to the front door.

"You're right, they do need a haircut," Claire said when she saw them. "In with you all."

Danny hugged her. "I really appreciate that you're taking them to the groomer for me. I have no clue where I'd find the time this week."

"Well, stay for half an hour at least. I've made breakfast."

Danny groaned. He could manage half an hour, but he didn't want her to give him the third degree. And she would. His own fault, too. He couldn't seem to stop thinking about James Carver, and the name might've slipped out a number of times these past few days.

"Maple pancakes," Claire singsonged.

That made him laugh. "You win."

Sure enough, when he followed the girls into the kitchen, she asked, “So, how’s the Cliff House project going?”

Danny rolled his eyes. “Nice try. I might even answer that, if you can look me in the eyes and tell me you’ve not been talking to your brother about me.”

She had the grace to blush. “He says your landscaper trawls the clubs for one-nighters.” She shook her head. “And their company’s not exactly top of the trees, is it?”

Danny poured himself some coffee. “You know them?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “The Google knows. Tiny outfit. Which doesn’t have to be a bad thing, mind you. But apparently the company’s been in the same family for three generations and hasn’t exactly evolved since it was founded. Good thing pesticides are banned now. I’m sure they’d still be using those too.”

Danny had googled the Carvers, too, of course. No website. But his mother had known of a couple of their customers, and yeah, very fifties, the yards. He doubted they would’ve been hired if the season wasn’t in full swing already, with landscapers backlogged until Halloween. He silently loaded some pancakes on his plate, drowned them in butter and maple syrup and tried not to think too much about one particular Carver.

“You’re thinking about him right now, aren’t you?” she said, leaning against the counter, head cocked to one side.

“Claire! Stop analyzing me.”

“But one-night stands. That’s so not you. And Eric says he’s gruff, and tight-lipped.”

“Maybe I’m into the strong, silent type.” He was not going to argue one-nighters with her, friend or not.

“No, Danny, they suck at relationships. Don’t do this to yourself.”

“I appreciate the concern. I do. But I met the man exactly once. Introductions were made, I shook his hand and gave him my card. That was it. Jesus H. Christ.”

She looked as if she was going to say more, but in the end she kept it to a shrug and a “Don’t get your heart broken.”

Danny stabbed his fork into the pile of pancakes. "I'm so going to kill Eric," he said under his breath.

She pushed herself off the counter. "We love you," she said, giving Danny a quick hug.

"I know," he said. "Love you, too. Just don't overdo the mom thing, okay? One mother in my life's plenty. Especially one I work with on the same project for the moment."

"I'll try. No guarantees."

Danny rolled his eyes at her.

"Just promise me you'll be careful," she said.

Danny threw his napkin down, leaving his half-eaten stack of pancakes. "You're a pair of drama queens. Seriously. Listen to yourself. I'm outta here. I'll be late as it is." He stopped in the door. "Thanks though, for..." He pointed at the dogs.

Claire scooped up Lux and waved at him with one of her paws. "All good. Go already."

Danny jogged back to his car and drove up the escarpment in record time. He wasn't much later than if he'd been stuck in the rush hour crowd. Had to remember that.

Carver's truck was already parked in the drive, and that was enough for Danny's heart to skip a beat. *Focus*. He'd need some kind of cart to lug his equipment across the property. There was a shed at the back that might yield something. He went around the side of the house, listening for telltale sounds of a shredder or a chainsaw and hearing only bird song.

The shed turned out to be mostly empty, dim after the sunlight outside. Bare plywood walls, plastic sacks, buckets, a rake, some flowerpots. No cart or wheelbarrow in sight. He thought, not for the first time, that he should invest in a trolley of some sort. Something he could fold into the trunk of the car. Well, he wouldn't need the spotlights until it was dark. Might as well start to take some of the measurements, so he could coordinate with the landscapers about cables and outlets, and see whether any area of the garden had

progressed enough for some inspirational photos. He walked towards the shed door, eyes still scanning the semidarkness inside for anything useful, thoughts galloping ahead to design decisions. It would be awesome if he could somehow incorporate the cliff edge itself. Without getting himself killed, of c—“Umph.”

He'd walked smack into a hard body. Hands closed around his biceps to keep him from tumbling backwards. Fresh sweat and shower gel and a pair of bottomless brown eyes. James Carver. So close. “Just, uh, looking for a wheelbarrow,” Danny managed before his brain got sidetracked. His breath caught in his throat. He couldn't swallow, couldn't move at all. Carver drew him closer and kissed him. Pulled Danny's lip between his own, licked across his teeth, bit softly into Danny's lower lip. He didn't move, otherwise, never let go of Danny's arms, just nibbled, sucked and licked until Danny couldn't suppress a moan anymore. At that he let go so suddenly that Danny's knees almost gave out, and he took a step back to keep his balance.

“No,” Danny mouthed, but no sound came out.

“Christ, I... I'm sorry.” Carver sounded as breathless as Danny felt. “I shouldn't have done that. I don't know—”

“No.” This time Danny heard himself say it. “Again.”

“It won't—What?”

“I want you to do it again.”

He'd barely finished the sentence when Carver grabbed his arms again, shoving him backwards into the shed and against the plywood wall on the left. Danny's head banged against the wood, but he didn't care, because those lips touched his again. Harder now, more demanding. Tongue playing against tongue, teasing bites, and lips, wet and sloppy. He didn't feel the wall behind him anymore. The shed, the job, everything disappeared but those calloused hands now cupping his face. Thumbs running along his jaw, down his throat. Hard body crowding him against the wall. Danny moaned again, couldn't stop himself, but this time it didn't make Carver stop. James. Didn't you go to first names after first kiss? At first kiss? The hands moved down his arms, pulled his T-shirt up. Rough palms against his skin, his ribcage, thumbs circling his

nipples. Danny's brain gave up the fight, and he couldn't care less. The kiss, the hands, nothing else mattered. He bucked his hips against the thigh that had pushed between his legs, the hard muscle pressing against his cock, making him moan again. The hands moving down to his waist, to the button.

Then James grabbed his shoulders again, turned him sideways so that he faced the back of the shed, and stepped away. "I don't think so," Danny heard him say as if they'd been talking about something. He couldn't focus, couldn't make the connection. The blood pounded in his ears.

A shadow fell across the doorway, and James turned towards it. "Rob, have you seen a wheelbarrow Holt could borrow?"

"Not that I noticed. What do you need to move?"

He's talking to you, moron. "Lights," Danny croaked.

"If I were you, I'd just back the car in here," Rob said. "You got a minute, James? I could use a hand."

"Be right with you. Let me grab a few buckets."

Rob's steps faded away, and James turned to Danny again. He ran his hand across the back of Danny's neck, and touched foreheads. "Jesus Christ, Sunshine," he whispered.

Danny still had trouble herding his thoughts. "Sorry," he said, meaning the near discovery, not the kiss.

"No sweat. Not like Rob doesn't know I'm gay. I just thought you might not want to be surprised in a barn tussle." He huffed a laugh. "I've got to go, and I have no clue when we're gonna finish up tonight. But I guess I'll see you around." With that he grabbed the buckets he'd come for and left.

Slowly, very slowly, Danny gathered his wits about him. He pushed himself off the wall he'd still been leaning against and winced as he rearranged his cock in his pants. Jesus Christ, indeed.

Fuck, his pants were too tight. What was it about Danny Holt that was so impossible to resist? Not that James was in the habit of saying no to casual sex, but at work? In a shed? That was a first. And he wasn't so sure he

could've stopped himself if Rob hadn't come in. The look in those eyes had been an open invitation. And nothing—absolutely nothing—was as hot as the way that kid could completely give himself up to whatever he felt. James had never met anyone like that.

This job promised to be way more fun than he had anticipated. *Just make sure it stays fun, Jamie.*

Work kept him busy until dusk crept in between the trees, and when they wrapped up, James was surprised to see Danny's car still on the back lawn. The trunk stood open, and a bunch of cables snaked across the lawn from the switch box at the back of the house. As James searched the bushes where they disappeared, a beam of light shot up into the sky, was adjusted downward, and dimmed until it perfectly outlined the ancient maple they'd decided to leave. In the falling darkness, it looked like the tree had been magically carved from the dusk.

Then he saw Danny, a spotlight in one hand, a cable drum in the other, unreeling the cable as he walked toward the gazebo that overlooked the cliff edge. He placed the light, adjusted it, took some readings from a light meter. Then he jotted down some notes, dug a small camera out of his pocket, snapped a picture, and readjusted the light. James stood rooted, watching in fascination as Danny pursued his vision to achieve the exact effect he was after, working his light magic in the dark garden. He was completely absorbed in his task and obviously passionate about getting it just so, accepting no short cuts or good enoughs. James surprised himself by remembering what that felt like. It had been so long. Back in college, when he'd still believed he'd be able to make a difference, be one of the up-and-coming guys in his field. Yeah, right. And if he didn't drop his lofty memories right now and haul ass back to the truck, he'd be up-and-coming walking into town.

But the mood stuck with him all the way home. It made him antsy with nowhere to go. He finally grabbed his jacket and keys and went to visit an old dream. One he'd sworn to forget when it had become clear that it would bring him nothing but unfulfilled longing. It was a good half-hour walk, even cutting through the greenbelt. No one else was out here in the dark, at least no one on two legs. He'd discovered it by chance on one of his runs, an abandoned house on a medium-large property, backing onto the trail. The greenhouse at the back

had caught his eyes first. Beautiful metal scrollwork, but most of the glass broken and scattered.

He left the trail and walked through a couple of quiet streets until he came to the front of the house. A good size with a double garage, definitely room for a storefront and office, the property large enough for a landscaper to show off some of his trade. The windows and door were all boarded up and covered in graffiti, the roof would need to be replaced and the grounds completely overhauled. It was perfect.

James hadn't been back here since the old man had made it clear that he expected James to stay with the family business, like two generations of Carvers had before him. It would be Rob's one day, and family was family, and that was that. Looking at the house now and remembering Danny's single-minded pursuit of his art, James's responsibility to his family suddenly seemed less clear-cut. It wasn't like Carver & Sons had never had employees. The old man could just as well hire someone. It wasn't like James was doing anything but following orders. Any idiot could do that. James curled his fingers into the mesh of the construction fence that surrounded the property and took a deep breath. There was honeysuckle growing somewhere in the dark. He leaned his face against the fence. Who was he kidding? He'd never be able to put up the kind of money it took to buy the place. And fuck Danny Holt for making him forget that.

He made an effort to stay away from Danny after that. He volunteered for the muscle work during the day and hit the clubs at night for a few drinks and a quick fuck. But mostly to tire himself out enough to just crash into oblivion when he got home.

After a week of that, he overslept on a workday, barely making it out of the shower before the truck's horn sounded outside his door. Rob took one look at his unshaven face and said, "I guess we'd better stop for coffee."

"If he can party at night, he can get up in the morning." The old man didn't even take his eyes off the road.

"C'mon, Dad." Rob fiddled with his seat belt. "A drive-thru won't even slow us down."

James said nothing, just stared out the window. Rob was a good guy; he just never understood how much the old man's constant Bronx cheer grated on

James's nerves. James would've preferred to skip coffee, if it would shut the old man up.

He'd long ago given up on trying to figure out why even the tiniest transgression on his side was met with endless lectures. It still got to him, though, no matter how hard he tried to ignore it. And the old man kept it up throughout the day. By the time they were packing up, the reins James kept on his temper were frayed to breaking point.

Rob waved a tardy bee out of his face as he secured the tarp in the back, and the old man turned to James. "Did you get rid of that wasp nest?"

"They're honeybees."

"I don't give a shit what they are. I want to know if you got rid of them."

"I called the experimental farm, and they're sending a bee guy over to relocate them."

"Re—what? I'm not paying for that."

James almost laughed. "I know."

"Well, Rob can just spray some stuff on it tomorrow and be done with it."

"No, he won't."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not gonna let him poison a colony of bees just because you 'said so'. The removal doesn't cost us anything. So, why don't you for once just accept that I have a brain and shut the fuck up?" He was breathing hard by now and could feel his heart beat in his throat. He couldn't remember having sworn at his father, ever.

The old man had frozen in mid-step. A pulse beat at his forehead. "You are way too much like your mother," he said, visibly fighting to control himself. "God knows I tried to raise you right. But I've always been afraid her bad character would tell in the end. This is your choice now."

"Seriously?" James's head swam. So many things clicked into place, and so many didn't. He latched onto the most obvious one. "Are you seriously giving me an ultimatum between the bees and the family?"

Rob inched around the truck, out of the line of fire.

The old man squared his shoulders and gave James a curt nod before turning away.

James followed his brother. A million things crowded on his tongue, “Fuck you!” being the most prominent among them.

“I’ll walk,” he said when Rob ducked into the truck. He closed the car door on his brother’s surprised face and bolted. This couldn’t possibly all be about his mother having cut and run when James was a kid. Could it? Bad character? How full of shit could one man be? Did the old man actually believe that cheap movie script he’d been spouting? Fuck him. Fuck Rob for ducking out, and fuck the fucking landscaping business.

He’d stormed all the way to the cliff edge. No magic light in the trees tonight. He stood there for a while, watching the sky darken until the wind blowing up from the river cut through his shirt and gave him goose bumps. He felt like screaming into the void in front of him. But that wasn’t him. He clamped his teeth shut and headed back. It was a long way home. Would give him time to walk off his funk.

Two of the windows on the ground floor were still lit, and a current ran through his body. Please, don’t let it be Sarah Holt. Aw, fuck, who was he kidding? He was cold and messed up, and he didn’t give a shit about following his own rules right now. Please, let it be Danny.

The back door was unlocked, and a sliver of light fell into the hallway from a cracked door on the left. He quietly peeked into the room, ready to vanish if it was anyone but Danny. But it was him. On the naked walls, Danny had strung up plans of the property and photos of different views at different times of day. He was standing, back half-turned to the door, chewing on his thumb, studying them. The only pieces of furniture in the room were a massive, ancient-looking desk and a kitchen chair. The kid looked good enough to eat, in his usual beige chinos, leather flip-flops and T-shirt, and James just wanted to rip it all off, see the desire explode in his hazel eyes and those soft lips part on a moan. He was giving himself a hard-on just standing here.

He knocked softly to avoid startling the kid too badly, but it made Danny jump anyway. Surprise gave way to delight when Danny turned towards him,

and a bright smile spread across his face. “Hey. You’re working late. How’re you doing?”

James swallowed hard. God, it felt so good simply to be in the same room with Danny’s smile and welcome and realness. It occurred to James, just as he opened his mouth, that “I desperately need to fuck you” might not be the thing to say. He rubbed his hand across his neck. “The others have already left,” he said. “Thought I might mooch a ride.”

“Sure.” Was that a flicker of disappointment in the kid’s eyes? “I should probably wrap up, anyway. Might have some better ideas with fresh eyes tomorrow.” He came towards James and drew his brows together. “You okay? You look... unstuck.” He cupped James’s face with one hand and brushed a thumb over his cheekbone, sending a shiver all the way down to James’s cock.

Unstuck. Way to put your finger right on it. Perceptive Danny. Sexy Danny. Without taking his eyes off him, James turned his head just enough to close his lips around that thumb and started sucking, watching Danny’s eyes go wide, watching him swallow, watching his lips part on a deep inhale. Hot damn.

The knuckles of Danny’s other hand brushed along the fly of James’s jeans, across his stomach and chest. His hand came to rest on James’s shoulder, massaging his trap muscle between fingers and thumb. “So tense,” he murmured, as he pulled James in for kiss. Soft and curious, exploring, tasting. It made James’s toes curl. There was no demand in that kiss, and yet James felt himself pulled further into the room, then moved backwards a few steps until the back of his thighs touched the desk. Danny’s lips whispered over the stubble on his jaw, grazed down his throat. James had no idea what he was saying, or if he was saying anything at all. Without meaning to, he allowed his eyes to close and his head to fall back. Soft nibbles on his collarbone almost distracted him from the hands on the button of his jeans, the zipper. But nothing could distract from the hand sliding into his briefs and closing around his cock. Danny’s body heat radiated through the fabric of their shirts. He slid down the length of James’s body, until he was kneeling and those soft lips touched the tip of James’s cock. The shock made James’s buttocks and stomach muscles clench. He forced his eyes open, because he desperately wanted to watch.

Danny's eyes were closed, the look on his face that of a musician lost in his music. He kissed James's balls, licked and sucked, slowly moving along the groin and abdomen, the sensations killing rational thought until all that was left was the pressure of the elastic behind James's balls and the feather-soft touches of Danny's fingers and tongue. Heat shot through James's body when Danny licked his cock from root to tip, then closed his lips around it and started sucking. James gulped in air and gripped the edge of the desk, because his knees suddenly needed help doing their job. Danny wrapped one hand around the shaft of James's cock, stroking in time with the movement of his head, the other hand rolled James's balls and—Jesus Christ—how did he manage to massage *there* at the same time? Danny's tongue playing all over and around the tip of his cock made breathing impossibly hard, and the rhythmic movements sucked every rational thought from James's brain like the surf at ebb tide sucked the sand out to sea. The blood in his ears sounded like surf, too.

He was getting way too close way too fast, wanted to draw this out, say something, when Danny took him so deep that his nose touched James's groin and he swallowed around his cock, once, twice. James tried to warn him, but all that came out was something between a groan and an inarticulate cry. The world went dark, James's knees buckled, and only his death grip on the edge of the desk held him upright as his whole body shuddered through the release and aftershocks.

The world slowly came back into focus. Danny was passing a painter's rag across the wood floor, smiling that sunshiny smile of his at James as he tossed the rag into a corner. At least he hadn't been clueless enough to swallow. Not that anyone giving blowjobs like that could be called clueless.

With somewhat shaky fingers James zipped himself back up, but he didn't trust himself to stand just yet. "I..." he started, looking down into Danny's wide eyes. But he had to clear his throat, because his voice didn't work right either.

"Ready for that ride now?" Danny asked with a grin that said he knew exactly what he'd done to James.

James huffed a laugh at the double meaning. He might be able to walk, if he pulled himself together. How had he lost control of the situation so quickly, and so completely?

But Danny, too, was breathing hard, and his face was flushed. His eyes turned dreamy. “That was so hot,” he said, running a hand up James’s leg. “Too hot.” His grin returned as he stood up. “I might’ve just come in my pants,” he admitted with no hint of embarrassment.

Feeling a bit ambushed, but too dazed to care, all James could do was to watch Danny collect his stuff into a carryall he slung over his shoulder and follow him out to the car.

It was fully dark on the grounds now, the yard light surrounded by mayflies. James breathed in the still warm air, sweet with the last lilac blooms, before he got in the car and buckled up. The anger he’d carried around all day was gone. Muscles heavy and sated, he felt nothing, and that was just fine.

Taking the turn onto the main road Danny asked, “Want me to drive you to your place? Or come home with me?”

James looked at him, trying to make out his face in the dark. But Danny had his eyes on the road, driving like he did everything else, with his full attention. The occasional oncoming headlights threw his profile into stark relief.

“Didn’t your mama tell you not to bring strangers home?” James murmured, mesmerized by the shadow play.

“My mama taught me to trust my instincts,” Danny said.

It sounded easy when Danny said it, and it shouldn’t. It wasn’t. Lines were getting blurred here, priorities shifting. This was all supposed to be just fun. He should go back to his own place. But the thought of his empty apartment washed over him like a bucket of cold water. “Home with you,” he heard himself say.

Danny’s heart skipped a beat. As dismissive as James had been the first time they’d met, he’d only half expected that. Even the “barn tussle” had been

a bit high-handed—or had it? In any case, something had changed today; something had given James a knock it would take him some time to come back from.

Danny wasn't naive enough to call what was between them love. Yet. But there'd been an instant strong chemistry with hints of a deeper attraction, and despite what everyone else seemed to want for him, Danny thought he'd be damned if he dropped this. He was fascinated and intrigued, to say nothing of swept off his feet by the sheer sex this guy breathed through every pore.

"You hungry?" Danny asked.

"Starving." James's voice sounded slurred, as if he'd been half asleep.

"Sushi okay?"

"Isn't that raw fish?"

Danny laughed. "Doesn't have to be. You can have chicken or just veggies in your roll. Or shrimp; those are cooked."

"As long as I don't have to eat raw fish." Drowsy again. Probably tired after a day of working his butt off in the garden. And on a certain desk.

When Danny threw him a quick glance, his head was resting against the seat, and his eyes were closed. Dark shadows around the jaw, the lines of his throat exposed, begging to be—Danny wrenched his gaze back to the street. Holy hell, the guy was just, just... He swallowed hard, almost missed his turn, and squeezed into street-side parking in front of the restaurant with his heart hammering in his throat for no good reason.

"Be right back," he said. Good thing there was a line at the Sushi bar. Gave him time to catch his breath. He didn't have to wait very long, though, and was back at the car within fifteen minutes. James's head had rolled to the side; he was fast asleep. Danny stowed the food behind his seat, got in and quietly closed the door. He sat for a while, staring, looking his fill at James's face in the orange light of the street lamp. The five o'clock shadow outlining his chin, the soft lips. Knowing how soft they were pulled at the back of Danny's navel. Despite the Roman nose and dark, straight eyebrows, he looked softer asleep. Younger.

A car horn sounded at the other end of the street. Danny turned the key, drove the couple of streets over to his apartment building, and parked the car.

James peeled himself out of his seat. “Sorry ’bout that,” he yawned.

“Been a long day.” It would be so easy to slip an arm around his waist. Or both arms. Better get the sexy guy inside. Now.

Danny led the way, and as he turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open, he said, “By the way, small dog alarm.” As if on cue, Lux jumped up at him as if he’d been away for months, yipping and licking. A habit Danny hadn’t been able to break her of. Lumen was suspiciously absent. She’d probably known he was bringing a stranger before he’d even opened the door, and was now hiding somewhere until she was sure it was safe to come out.

Danny knelt to scratch ears and ward off sloppy dog kisses, holding the sushi bag above his head. James took it from him.

“That’s enough, Lux. We have visitors. Behave yourself.” Lux promptly lay down and just looked at Danny with adoring eyes. “Yeah, right.” He turned back to James. “Sorry. C’mon in. There’s another one of those around here somewhere, but she’s shy. You have to woo her.” He kicked his flip-flops off and padded into the kitchen. “Juice, water, tea, wine, beer?”

“I wouldn’t mind a beer.” James slowly followed him and held out the bag.

Danny took it and nodded toward the fridge. “Grab me one, too?”

Tail wagging, Lux sat by the table, eyes on the food being unpacked.

“Lumen?” Danny called. “C’mon, girl. He won’t eat you. I promise.”

James handed him a beer and grinned. “You sure?”

“Shhhh, you’re making it worse.” Danny wanted to kiss that grin, but first he had to make sure the dog was all right. He found her hiding under the bed, little tail thumping the carpet when he reached in to scratch her head. But she wouldn’t come out just yet. “Silly girl.”

James stood in the doorway, Lux beside him, both watching Danny with their heads cocked.

“You two are too funny,” Danny said.

James raised one eyebrow, and Danny wanted to kiss that, too. And why the hell not?

Body heat and end-of-day man smell, and lips and tongue and teeth, and a hitched breath. James's arms went around his back, cupped his butt and pulled him close. Danny was uncomfortably reminded of the jizz in his underwear. He pulled back a bit. "Why don't you start eating? I won't be a minute."

James "Kiss Me" Carver waiting two doors away led to a turbo clean-up. When Danny made it back to the kitchen, one of James's chopsticks was snapped in half, and he was eating the sushi with his fingers. Damn, more sexy. Danny mentally kicked himself and fed the dogs before joining James at the table. But every little thing riled him up tonight. James drinking from the bottle, with his head tilted back? How not to stare at that?

James set the bottle back on the table and, seeing Danny stare at him, crooked his finger in a c'mere gesture and pushed his chair away from the table. A hypnotic command, impossible to ignore. Danny let himself be pulled closer. James tapped his legs and Danny straddled him, unable to suppress a moan when James took both his hands and pulled him into a kiss. He wrapped his arms around James's neck, felt James's hand under his T-shirt, the heel of the other, *Oh Holy Friggin' Son of a Carpenter*, grinding against his hard-on. He gasped into the kiss, needing to get closer, needing to get out of his pants, needing... "Bed!" he panted.

James huffed a laugh. "Sorry, kiddo, as hella sexy as you are, I'm afraid if I lie down now I'll be out like a light."

The interruption returned enough of Danny's mental faculties that he became aware of both dogs sitting next to the chair, whining softly. So, Lumen had decided that James posed no threat, just in time to be annoying. He groaned his frustration and ran both hands through his hair. "I have to take the dogs out. You wanna crash, or come along? I warn you, though, I make no guarantees for your virtue on the trail."

That earned him another laugh. "Naw, I'll come. Clear my head. And I like walking in the dark."

Danny put both dogs on a leash. He didn't like letting them run free on the trail at night. There'd been the occasional coyote sighting out there. No threat for a grown man, but a small dog would be an easy dinner.

Dogs pulling ahead and James trailing behind, they made their way down the small path that cut between two houses onto the hiking trail. Danny turned left to start his round and only noticed after a couple of steps that James hadn't followed. He was still standing at the entrance to the path, staring at the property on the other side of the trail.

When he saw Danny looking for him, he pointed at it. "You live right behind my house," he said, sounding stunned.

"You live there? I thought it was abandoned."

"No, I don't. I mean, it is. I mean..." He shook his head. "I don't live far from here, half an hour on foot. Must've lost direction when I dozed off in the car." He looked shaken, but Danny had no clue why.

"That," James said, waving at the wire fence, "is a dream." Again he shook his head, then said, so quietly that Danny wasn't sure he'd heard right, "If I had the money, I'd buy that."

Lumen sat on Danny's foot, but Lux was having none of it. She'd been promised a walk, and they weren't walking. She was choking herself, pulling on the leash.

"Show me?" Danny said.

James joined him, pointing at a metal frame in the overgrown yard. "That used to be a greenhouse. Glass's all gone, of course."

They walked around to the boarded-up, spray-painted front that looked anything but inviting to Danny. "It's a good size," he said, because that was the only positive thing he could say.

"Breathe," James said. "Smell that?"

Indeed, now that it'd been pointed out to him, Danny did. A sweet, intoxicating scent on the warm evening air.

"The first honeysuckle of the season." James pointed into the dark. "You can't see it now, but there's a huge hedge of it along that side." He stuck both hands in his pockets, then pulled one back out and indicated the front of the house. "Double garage. Perfect for an on-site office. There's ample storage for machinery in a shed you can only glimpse during daylight." His voice was

getting more animated the longer he was talking. “The property is a stunner. There’s a little dip that’s perfect for a natural pond. And the whole thing slopes quite a bit towards the front, perfect for showcasing a terrace or two. Since it’s been abandoned for so long there’s a good cover of native plants already there. I’d take that crappy lawn here out, of course, and—” He stopped himself in the middle of the sentence. Although it was too dark to see, Danny was sure he was blushing.

“Sorry,” he said, passing a hand over his neck. “Got carried away. Didn’t mean to bore the shit out of you.”

It was the most Danny had ever heard him say. There was a hidden passion there that went deeper than the physical one that had bowled Danny over so completely. Well, hell. “I’m not. Bored. Not the least bit. I wish I could see it. I’ll have to come back and look at it in daylight. Is the basic structure solid?”

James shrugged. “No clue. Probably needs a new roof by now.”

“Who’s the owner?”

Another shrug.

“But it is for sale?”

James stared at his feet, the flame of his passion visibly turning to embers. “Can’t afford it, anyway.”

“You don’t even know if it’s for sale. How would you know how much it’ll go for?”

“I know how much I have.” It hurt to see him bury his dream like that.

“You can get a mortgage with next to no down payment these days,” Danny tried. “You need a good bank. Come on. It can’t hurt to ask around. You have such detailed plans for it. And they sound awesome. If you want to make them real, I’d say now’s the time. It won’t stay abandoned forever.”

The dogs were bouncing against his legs, then pulling on the leash again in a futile attempt to get them going. Even Lumen was fed up with all this standing around.

James stood, hands in his pockets, looking at them, then up at Danny, a wistful expression in his eyes. “You’re like those dogs. All bouncy and

excited, and I lo—like y—. It. I like it.” He looked back at the house, then turned away and shrugged one shoulder. “I should head home. Like I said. It’s not that far. I... See you tomorrow?”

“Wh...? Uh. Sure.” What the hell had just happened? “Uhm... Sleep tight. I guess.” He watched James stride down the road until the darkness swallowed him. The city should really put some street lamps up here.

James realized he was nearly running and slowed down, but not for long. He couldn’t get away fast enough. “*I like it*”??? *What the fuck? Way, way too close to a declaration, Jamie boy.* What the hell was wrong with him? First he lost his shit with the old man and now with Danny? How did Danny live directly behind The House? What was the chance of that? Was fate trying to tell him something, here? And how terrifying was that thought?

He made it home without noticing where he’d walked, his empty apartment mirroring the hollow feeling inside him. Just a quick shower and bed. And staring at the ceiling, trying not to think about tomorrow or the rest of his life. Or Danny. But his body remembered Danny’s hands, his lips, his tongue. Dammit, he would not jerk off again with Danny on his mind. What was he, twelve? How was a kid with two ridiculous little dogs tying up his thoughts six ways from Sunday?

Both arms firmly wrapped around his pillow, he stared at the clock in the dark and watched the numbers change. He was falling harder than he ever had in his life, and now was the time to either give himself up to whatever waited at the end of that fall or to pull the emergency cord and pray it would open a parachute.

Not that there was anything inherently wrong with love or commitment, he just really wasn’t good at it. Not like Danny, who could open himself up to the world and consequences be damned. That kind of openness took guts. And James didn’t know how to match that courage. Didn’t even know where to start. Most days it was hard enough to breathe, as trapped as he was.

And yeah, that was the other thing he needed to make a decision about. Leave everything he’d ever known behind, because the old man could be a

dickhead? James would be nowhere near where he was today without him. Good and bad.

At five he dragged himself into the shower. He was no closer to either decision. At this point the arguments for and against just circled round in well-worn grooves in his head.

Later, in the stillness of the kitchen, both hands wrapped around his coffee mug, he caught himself wishing for dogs milling about his ankles. Fuck, he was messed up. His eyes strayed to the clock at the top of the stove. Would he be picked up this morning, or had his insubordination the day before been taken as his notice?

The horn sounded at the usual time, but it was Rob driving and the old man in the middle seat, arms folded, lips pressed together so tightly it left creases in the corners of his mouth. James sighed and silently apologized to Rob. Looked like he'd taken up the fight when James had left them last night.

"Got home all right?" Rob asked.

James nodded. Then, just to break the oppressive silence, he added, "Danny gave me a lift."

The old man snorted.

Rob lifted an eyebrow. "No more Holt, eh? Danny, now," he teased.

James bit his tongue. He'd never learn to keep his fucking mouth shut. Thankfully, Rob waited until they'd arrived and the old man was out of earshot before he continued. "So, anything going on between you and 'Danny'?"

James got up on the tailgate step. "So, you think that's any of your fucking business?" He pulled out one of the bags of fertilizer and heaved it at Rob, who caught it with a grunt.

"I didn't think you went for young and bubbly, is all. You're gonna scare the shit out of him."

"You'd think, wouldn't you? Hasn't happened, though."

"Or he'll bore you to tears in a week," Rob said, hoisting the bag and loading it into the cart.

James made sure he had his gloves and shouldered the other bag. “Hmmm.” He didn’t see that. Didn’t see that at all.

The old man stayed away from him not only all day, but for the following days as well. James had no clue what Rob had said to him, but he was grateful for the reprieve. It wasn’t peace, but it was a truce. And it took some of the weight off James’s shoulders that had permanently settled there. James, in turn, stayed out of Danny’s way. There were things he needed to turn over in his head. Preferably more than once. And he couldn’t think when Danny was around. Smiling that Danny smile, touching him, kissing—*Fuck! You’re so fucked, Jamie*. He hammered the wooden peg into the ground with considerably more force than necessary.

“Do you have a minute, Mr. Carver?” Sarah Holt. Shit. This was so not good. She had no business with him. She always talked to the old man about anything concerning the job.

He straightened slowly and nodded.

“I thought up about a million excuses why I’d be wanting to talk to you, but I find I’m not into that kind of BS very much. The truth is, I’m warning you off. Because I’m starting to get worried about my son.” She leaned against the pile of patio stones that had been delivered this morning and crossed her arms. “I’m not in the habit of worrying about him. But then, he’s not in the habit of researching mortgages for his boyfriends. Especially not recently met ones he hasn’t even introduced to his family yet.”

What? The fuck? “I’m not his boyfriend.”

“Ah, yes, well, if he’s looking into mortgages for a fuck buddy that makes me feel much better, of course.”

“Jesus. I...” She was pulling the rug out from under him so fast that he was ass over teakettle before she’d even finished her sentence. “Things haven’t— We haven’t... You’re assuming way too much, here.”

“Am I?” She was playing with her car keys. “Danny doesn’t have a suspicious bone in his body. He’s never had a reason to shield his heart. I don’t know if that’s a good thing. I always thought it was. But, I swear to God, if you con him or so much as jerk him around, I’ll find you when you sleep, tie

you up, pound your balls with a meat tenderizer until they're the size of tortillas, wrap them around your ripped-off dick, and feed them to you."

"Con...? You're seriously messed up, lady. Who the hell do you take me for? Get out of my face before I forget you're Danny's mom. And stay the fuck away from me. Con him. Did it even occur to you that a con takes two? Give the kid some cred—"

"James!" Rob called from somewhere behind the shrubbery, a note of urgency in his voice. "Jamie! Help!"

James was already running.

"Goddammit, Dad," he heard Rob hiss as he sprinted around the hedge, where he found Rob trying to support the old man in his arms. But the old man kept sinking to his knees, left arm clutched across his chest.

"Call nine one one," Rob said. "I think it's his heart."

"I'm on it," Sarah Holt said behind him. "We'll take my truck. It has a rear door and bench. I can have him at the General in ten."

James didn't argue. Ignoring the old man's feeble protests, he scooped him up like a child and half-walked, half-ran back to the house and around to the front. Over his shoulder he heard Holt call ahead to the hospital. With Rob's help they managed to make the old man reasonably comfortable on the back seat. Holt actually had an amber emergency light she slapped on the roof of the truck. With that and all the hazard lights flashing, she floored the gas pedal, and the truck shot up the drive. Rob sat with his back to the passenger door, keeping an eye on the back seat. James wedged both legs firmly against the floor. Holt drove like a demon. She knew exactly what she was doing, how fast the truck could take a corner or when and how hard to brake without jolting the old man too much. She seemed to have fifteen pairs of eyes on the traffic at any given moment and never lost her cool. James was still pissed at her, but fuck, that woman knew how to drive. He occasionally threw a glance at Rob, who was white as a sheet and had his eyes glued to the back seat.

They reached the hospital in record time, and thanks to Holt's call ahead someone was already waiting for them with a stretcher. James and Rob jogged along until they were barred from going any further. Rob had to fill out and

sign some forms, and then they were left to kick their heels in a waiting room. They stood awkwardly between the chairs, too riled up to sit down.

“How’d it happen?” James asked.

Rob shrugged helplessly. “One minute he was spreading grass seed, the next he’s on his knees, clutching his chest. He wasn’t doing anything strenuous, I swear.” As if it was somehow his fault.

James grabbed his shoulder and hugged him briefly. “I’ll go see if they have coffee or something. You want one?” Rob shook his head. James didn’t either, but it was an excuse to move. If this shit was anyone’s fault, it was his own for ticking out over the bee thing. He’d never gone up against the old man before; that must’ve been a shock. Why the fuck did he have such a short fuse recently? He’d always been able to keep a lid on it before. Hell, in his yearbook, “keeping his cool” had been listed as his superpower.

He got himself a soda from a vending machine in one of the hallways and meandered his way back to the waiting room. Rob perched on the edge of a chair, arms on his knees, kneading his fingers. He sat up when he saw James and ran a hand through his hair. “Shit,” he said.

James sank down next to him and bumped his shoulder, but Rob shook his head. “I was laying into him for being an ass over the bees that day,” he said.

“Yeah, well, so was I,” James said. He turned the can round and round between his fingers. So Rob had indeed talked to the old man about that. “I was grateful he left me alone for a bit,” he confessed. “What’d you tell him?”

Rob threw him a quick sideways glance before looking back down on his kneading fingers. “I told him you’d leave,” he said. “And with you every ounce of creativity and passion we have in the company. I told him...” He clenched his fingers so hard they turned white. “I told him that he’d kick the bucket one day and leave the company to me to piddle along in mediocrity until the end of days unless he pulled his head out of his ass and listened to you.”

James stared at him. I-don’t-give-a-shit Robert Carver had said that? He let out a breath he hadn’t been aware he’d been holding. “Fuck,” he said. A movement caught his eyes, and he looked up to see Danny standing in the

doorway. The shock almost made him do a double-take. He swallowed hard. “Fuck,” he said again. Not that, too. He was starting to drown in everything happening at once.

“Jamie...” Rob started.

“It’s not. Your. Fault,” James said, getting up. “I’ll be right back.”

He motioned for Danny to follow him out into the hallway. He had to tell him to leave. He couldn’t deal with that decision on top of everything else right now. Hazel eyes and a worried smile. James forgot what he was going to say. That kid even fucking smelled of sunshine. He pushed Danny into the corner between a cupboard and the wall and kissed him. Hard. Desperate. Needy. It didn’t help at all that Danny gave himself up to that kiss, gave it back, gave James everything he demanded. *No, fuck it, stop.*

James wrenched himself back, breathing as if he’d been chasing after a runaway train. “I don’t... I can’t...” he gasped. “What’re you doing here?”

Danny, eyes wide, made a phone gesture with thumb and pinky. “My mother told me what happened. I thought I’d see if there was anything I could do to help.”

With an effort James pulled himself together enough to say, “No. Thanks. Really. There’s nothing. Go home.” He was still far from a decision, and he wouldn’t, as Sarah Holt had put it, jerk Danny around while he didn’t know which way was up. Though he had already, hadn’t he?

“I could just be here,” Danny started.

“No! Go home!” *Way too loud, Jamie.* Danny blinked. James briefly closed his eyes. “I’m sorry. I... Your mother is right. I’m jerking you around.”

“My... What?”

“Just go home, Danny.” It came out as a hoarse whisper. James cleared his throat. “Please.” With that he turned and went back into the waiting room.

Danny watched him go, too stunned to move. Of course they didn’t know each other that well, and family was more important now, but he hadn’t quite expected that brusque a dismissal. That kiss... He shivered. That kiss had told

him he was needed. It had been raw, unguarded. So why was he being sent away? *Your mother is right. I'm jerking you around.* He hadn't felt jerked around before. Now he didn't know what to think. Had James just wanted some time with his brother? That he understood. Or had the mesmerizing bastard just broken off the most tantalizing and exhilarating thing that had happened to Danny since... ever? That he wasn't ready to accept. He wanted to go in there and demand clarification, or better, return that kiss. But the timing sucked.

He threw a last glance at the two brothers sitting in their own little bubble in the waiting room and turned towards the elevators. Might as well go home and take the dogs out for their walk.

They were ecstatic to have him home early, but they seemed to sense that something was off. Lumen was glued to his side, and even Lux refrained from her usual scoutings to stay with him. Danny took them up the trail to walk by James's house, which made him even more determined than he already was not to let James go without a fight. He played their brief conversation over and over in his head. Or tried to. He kept getting stuck on that kiss.

What he didn't get was what in anybody's name his mother had to do with anything. Well, she'd be in her office for the rest of the day. Time to find out. He returned the dogs home and fed them, then took the bus downtown. Easier than trying to find parking.

"Hey. Any news?" she said when he walked into her office.

He shook his head. "Not by the time I left. Mom, why would James Carver say you're right about him jerking me around?"

He was trying hard not to phrase it as an accusation, but the way she pressed her lips together let his hope of a misunderstanding fade fast.

She rolled up a floor plan, then smoothed it out again on her desk. "He said that?"

Danny shoved both hands in his pockets and glared at her.

"Fine. I wanted to check him out. You've never been so head-over... I mean, the thing with the mortgage just threw me. I needed to know what was going on."

“So, you ran to him, instead of asking me? How do you even know I looked into mortgages?” This was quite unlike her. She didn’t spy on him or his boyfriends. What the hell was going on here?

“Josh Rainier told me.” Tapping her fingers on the plan.

“You discussed me with our banker?”

“Oh, keep your pants on. I didn’t discuss you with him. He asked me how the house hunt was going, said his cousin was an inspector and gave me his card in case you found something. It very obviously never even occurred to him that you might not have told me of your plans.” It hadn’t taken her long to switch from defense to attack. But if that was supposed to make him retreat, it failed. If anything, it served to set up his back for good.

“There are no flippin’ plans. I didn’t even ask for myself. James has his eyes on a house he thinks he can’t afford. I thought before I encourage him I should find out what the current deals are. I’m not looking for a house, why would I? Why didn’t you just ask me?”

She threw him a quick glance, then took the floor plan and fiddled with fixing it to her drawing board, turning her back on him.

“You don’t trust me,” he said, not even trying to hide his disbelief.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Nononono, I’m right. You don’t trust my judgement. You thought I was going off half-cocked, buying a house with a man I met three weeks ago.”

Now she did look at him. “I just wanted to protect you. It’s what mothers do.”

“I’m not a child anymore.”

“You can still get hurt.”

“Then I’ll get hurt. Big flipping deal. People get hurt all the time. I’ll survive. I’ll even try not to do anything stupid, if that helps.”

She huffed a laugh. “You gave your brand-new bike away for an injured cat that died the next day.”

“I was five, Mom.”

“You were devastated. The point is, you’re always all in. You can’t guard your heart.”

“No, I can’t. But that is not actually the point. The point is, no one can. Not if they want a chance at love. But then, you know that already, don’t you?”

She recoiled as if he’d hit her, and he said more softly, “Look, I know you had a rough deal. You still made a good life for us, and I would never dream of arguing with your decision to not try again. But I don’t want to live like that. That’s my decision. Please don’t argue with it, either.”

Her brows drew together as she searched for an answer. “You’re my son,” she said.

Danny didn’t want to fight with her or hurt her, but neither was he going to let her ride roughshod over him or run his life.

She must have seen it in his face, because she pulled herself up short and tried to laugh it off. “And I’ve screwed things up rather royally for you, haven’t I? I’m sorry, Danny.”

He shrugged. “I guess you meant well.”

“Ouch,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Tell you what.” She grabbed her car keys. “I’ll make it up to you. I’ll go talk to him.”

“Oh, nonono.” Danny leaned his back against the door and spread his arms wide. “Nuh-uh. No more meddling.”

“But, I thought—”

“Promise me.”

“Fine.” The keys dropped back on the desk. “But you better not screw this up and have your heart broken.”

“Well, if I come back here crying, you get to say ‘I told you so’.”

She threw him a speaking look from under her eyebrows. Danny blew her a kiss as he pulled her office door open and left. It meant apology accepted, though it would take a while until he was no longer mad at her.

Now what? Back to the hospital? He checked his watch. Hopefully things weren’t bad enough for the brothers to still be there. James had said he lived within walking distance of the old house, but as directions went, that was

rather vague. Time to check if he was listed in the white pages. Danny's hand went to his pocket, but there was no phone. He patted himself down quickly. Shit. It better be on his kitchen table and not somewhere on a bus seat. Back at his apartment building he checked for mail—latest copy of *Enlighter Magazine*, hydro bill, spam—then, one-handed, fiddled for his door key.

“Hey.”

Danny nearly jumped out of his skin. James sat on the stairs leading to the upper floors, arms on his knees like he'd sat at the hospital. Playing with Danny's phone.

“You lost it at the hospital. I would've called, but...” He grinned tiredly at his lame joke. “Anyway.” He held the phone out to Danny. “I figured, since it was probably my fault you lost it, I should bring it over.” He had deep shadows under his eyes. In combination with the usual five o'clock shadow, it made him look as if he hadn't slept in days.

Danny didn't take the phone, unlocked the door instead. “C'mon in.”

“I don't really—”

“Don't let the dogs out.” Not giving James a choice but to follow him in. “How's your dad?”

“Not too bad all things considered.” James followed him into the kitchen and put the phone on the table. “Apparently he had this heart attack coming for a long time. But the surgery went well, they say. They put him on a diet plan he'll hate every meal of.” He paused and passed a hand over his neck. “And they told him to retire, basically. No physically demanding work.” James shook his head. “He was too out of it to say much, but I expect we haven't heard the last of that one.” He stared at the floor, lost in thought for a moment, then hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I should go. Lots of shit to take care of.”

“Does anyone ever call you Jim?”

“What the...? No, not if they wanna live.”

“I talked to my mother,” Danny said.

James looked at him and wanted to do what he'd done at the hospital. Grab him by the shoulders, push him against the wall, and lose himself in the kiss. It had been a mistake to come here. He should've dropped the phone in the mailbox. His brain had known it, too. But then, he hadn't been thinking with that, had he?

One of the little dogs, he couldn't tell them apart, sat in front of him. James stared at it, so he didn't have to look at Danny.

But Danny wasn't having any of that. He crouched into James's line of sight. "She's wrong."

God, he was so serious, so intense. He made James's skin tingle just by looking at him. "Did you really ask about a mortgage?" James asked.

Danny made a face as he straightened. "Just checking the lay of the land. You were so amazing when you talked about that house. I wanted you to go on forever." He smiled, and James's heart stopped for a moment. "Thought I'd better check if it was safe to cheer you on."

His easy enthusiasm made the guilt congeal in James's stomach. "Danny, I'm not..." How could he have such a fuckton of thoughts in his head and no words to get them out? "I'd only drag you down."

"Maybe you'd ground me," Danny said, shrugging the argument off.

James huffed a laugh. "You don't need grounding. You're one of the most together people I've ever met."

"Baloney." Danny shoved both hands into his pockets, pulled them out again, then gently pushed the dog out of the way with one foot and closed the distance between them.

James's heel connected with the doorframe behind him. His breathing and heartbeat sped up, and he had to press both hands to his legs to keep them off Danny.

"When you sent me away earlier," Danny said quietly. "Was that because you aren't interested anymore?" There was a crease between his brows, and James could see his cheek muscles jump.

He tried to come up with something, anything, to say, and drew a complete blank. Danny's lips were closed in a straight line, which wasn't right. They should be open and soft. James brushed his thumb across to relax them into a smile. "Jamie. Those I love call me Jamie," he whispered, listening to Danny's harsh intake of breath.

Danny leaned closer. "Or did you send me away," he murmured, so close to James's ear that James felt his breath on his cheek, "because you bought into my mother's crap talk?"

He smelled of shampoo and Danny, and it took everything James had not to grab him and pull him close, bury his face in those short, dark curls, and close both hands over that tight ass. "I don't want to jerk you around," he squeezed through the roughness in his throat.

"Maybe I like to be jerked around." He could feel Danny's lips moving against his ear, was losing the battle to not just turn his head and kiss him, when Danny straightened and looked at James, eyes intent. "You've been pushing every single one of my buttons from the second I saw you swinging that pickaxe, James Carver. And the more I see and hear and taste of you, the more I want. And I think there is more. There are depths behind your stillness just waiting to be explored. I think this, us, could be more than just a fling. But if not, and in the meantime, it's my secret goal to be manhandled, shoved and kissed against every wall in the city."

Every one of his words grabbed the muscles in James's stomach and pulled them into a tight coil of need and want. He couldn't have said anything if his life depended on it.

"If you consider that jerking me around," Danny continued, "bring it. I'm not scared."

"I know you're not. But I am."

"I know. Just not what you're scared of."

"That the depths you see turn out to be shallows?"

"Not going to happen. But," with that smile that turned James inside out, Danny leaned in close again and whispered, "you'd be surprised just how shallow I can be, given the right incentive."

The doorframe behind him, the warm body in front of him, touching him, leaning into him, James had nowhere left to go. “You have about three seconds to change your mind,” he growled in a last ditch effort to regain control.

But Danny didn’t move, just watched him. “Not a chance,” he said.

James would never not lose himself in this man. And just like that, there was no decision to be made anymore, because walking away was no longer an option. “In that case, Sunshine, your ass is mine.”

Danny hummed against James’s throat and wrapped both arms around his neck. James grabbed his ass and lifted him up, hissed when Danny’s thigh rubbed against his hard-on, felt Danny’s legs go around his waist, and carried him to the bedroom.

“Kick the dogs out.” Danny’s voice sounded strained. “Or they’re gonna be all over us.”

James threw him on the bed, scooped up one of the dogs and set it outside, where the other one was still sitting, undecided. He closed the door and turned around just in time to see Danny’s T-shirt land on the floor. He watched Danny open the button and pull down the zipper of his pants, then raise his hips to push them off along with his briefs. James’s own pants were uncomfortably tight. As soon as Danny was naked on the bed, James grabbed his legs and pulled him closer, until his ass was almost on the edge. Danny propped himself up on his elbows. He was smooth everywhere, from tanned chest to shaved balls. And James vowed not to stop until he’d kissed and licked every last inch of his body.

“There’s a debt I’ve been wanting to repay for a while now,” James said. He pushed Danny’s knees apart and knelt between them, saw Danny’s eyes go wide. He took his time, admiring the smooth skin, breathing in the clean musky scent. Now that it was spiced with anticipation, he could enjoy the tight pull of his own need that had nearly killed him a few moments ago.

Danny gave a short laugh. “Are you just going to sit there?” he teased, but the tightness was there in his voice, too. And his cock was straight and hard against his stomach.

“Patience, Grasshopper.” James ran his fingertips across the insides of Danny’s thighs, saw his cock twitch and smiled at the hiss of his indrawn

breath. He followed with his lips, licked Danny's balls and pulled them in his mouth. Danny's stomach rose and fell as his breathing sped up. James continued to lick across and around Danny's balls. Danny's hips came up, even as he moaned, "Wait."

When James looked up, Danny's eyes were glazed. He had to lick his lips before he could say, "Take your clothes off. Please. I want to see..."

It did feel good to get out of his too tight jeans. James stood naked, ran his hand across his balls and gave his cock a couple of loose-fisted strokes that pulled a groan up his throat. But it was Danny's he heard. Danny, who was biting his lip, the need raw and shiny in his hazel eyes.

James dropped back down to his knees, closed his fist and lips around Danny's cock and started to suck in a slow rhythm. Again Danny's hips came up. "Please," he moaned. "Oh God, please James. I'm begging you..." He didn't say for what, but his hips trying to speed up the movement said it for him. James was breathing hard himself, now. He straightened, grabbed Danny's ass and shoved him higher up on the bed, so he had room to kneel behind him.

"Please tell me you have lube and condoms," he rasped.

Danny waved his left hand vaguely in the direction of the nightstand. "Nnn-drawer," he said.

James had to force himself to slow down so he wouldn't rip the condom. He lubed himself up quickly but took more time with Danny, losing himself again in the smoothness of his skin, spreading the lube over Danny's cock and balls and between his ass cheeks. Danny pulled his legs up and out to give him as much access as he could. "Please," he moaned again. And when James started to open him up with his fingers, he hissed. "Never. Mind. Just... Go!"

So inviting, so demanding. No denying him. But James still took it slow. He didn't want to hurt Danny, and he also needed to savour every little thing. The way Danny's stomach rose and fell with every harsh breath, the sheen of sweat on his skin, the tremor running through his thigh muscles when he tried to push himself closer. James placed a hand on Danny's navel, holding him down, entering him at his own slow speed. Danny's "Please!" turning into a

strangled groan. His eyes looked green now and brightly translucent. He had both arms up against the headboard bracing himself, and now and then his head would fall back, exposing the arch of his throat. But he always came back up to watch, his lips half open, moving with pleas and moans. Everything about him always open, unveiled and bright. He made everything look not just possible, but clear and easy. Light art. Magic.

James kissed his way up his torso to his chest, tasting every inch of skin and keeping up his slow rhythm, keeping himself on a plateau of need and desire, their skin between them slick with sweat and pre-cum. He played his tongue over each nipple, biting, licking, and sucking until Danny whimpered with every thrust. James looked up to find him still watching, his pupils huge, brows slightly drawn together. Joy, lust, every sensation playing out on his face, crashed into James like a tsunami, surging in his balls, pulling him off his plateau. He leaned back, braced himself against the backs of Danny's thighs, and, giving up his fight for control, fucked Danny hard and fast, his balls slapping Danny's ass, his breath harsh and desperate in his own ears.

Danny's pleas had turned completely inarticulate. His muscles strained with the need to meet James's thrusts. Meaningless syllables collapsed to rhythmic, low-pitched panting. Suddenly every muscle in his body clenched and with a shout he came all over his own chest. Hot, salacious abandon that pulled James's balls up as he was dragged helplessly into his own sweet agony of relief, again and again, until he collapsed against Danny's legs.

He managed to pull out and roll onto his back, gasping for air, vision blurred, heart hammering in his throat. He felt Danny's hand groping for his and took it. They lay like that, fingers intertwined, just breathing. After what felt like an eternity, Danny rolled to his side and propped himself up on one elbow. "What did you say to me that day in the shed?" he asked.

James huffed a laugh. "Jesus Christ, Sunshine," he said.

"That." Danny wiped himself off with the sheet, crumpled it up and threw it into the general direction of what looked like a laundry hamper. A soft whine sounded from the other side of the door, followed by a scratching sound.

James rolled his eyes, making Danny laugh, and heaved himself off the bed. He went into the adjoining bathroom to get rid of the condom, clean himself up and indulge in a long piss.

When he came back, Danny had pulled on a pair of gym shorts and threw James one as well. James barely managed to catch it and not step on one of the dogs. They fit. Just. James flopped back down on the bed, his head on Danny's shoulder, which seemed to be the signal for the dogs to jump up as well and wiggle all over both of them. James scratched a fuzzy little head between the ears and smiled. Life could be simple now and then. "Wanna tell me what you found out about mortgages?" he asked.

"Really?" Danny said, excitement in his voice. "You gonna try for the house?"

James nodded. "If it's for sale. We'll see." He touched his head to Danny's. "But what's more important: You think you might wanna do this again some time?"

Danny laughed. "And again, and again, and again."

"Good," James said, warm and languid between Danny and the dogs. "Me, too."

THE END

Author Bio

G.B. Gordon worked as a packer, landscaper, waiter, and coach before going back to school to major in linguistics and, at 35, switched to less backbreaking monetary pursuits like translating, editing, and writing. Having lived in various parts of the world, Gordon is now happily ensconced in suburban Ontario with the best of all husbands. Santuario is G.B. Gordon's first published work, but many more stories are just waiting to hit the keyboard.

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THE FIELD OF SOMEONE ELSE'S DREAMS

By Amelia C. Gormley

Photo Description

Two naked young men in a window seat, cuddling. One is leaning back against, and looking up at, the other. The other has his arms wrapped around the one in front.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Matt has always been out and proud and from a very understanding and accepting family. He's never openly flaunted being gay but he's never hidden it, either. Chris has hidden the fact that he's gay since he figured it out and has no intention of ever telling anyone. His family is very closed-minded and narrowly focused on him getting an athletic scholarship to college, like his dad.

Both boys end up at the same college together. Chris on an athletic scholarship for baseball, hoping to make it to the major leagues, and Matt on an academic scholarship, not quite sure what he wants to do with his life, yet. When they meet they both begin to question everything they've ever thought they knew about themselves. Can Matt be in the closet for Chris? Can Chris come out for Matt? Can they make a relationship work with so many differences between them?

HEA please with no cheating, some angst, and this awesome cuddle scene maybe used as a heart to heart!

Sincerely,

Shantel

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: homophobia, coming out, twink, hurt/comfort, sports, college

Word count: 13,714

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THE FIELD OF SOMEONE ELSE'S DREAMS

By Amelia C. Gormley

If you'd asked me three months ago, I would have said there was no more thrilling sound on this planet than the resounding *crack* that happens when the bat makes contact with the ball. Even when you're not the one batting, even if you're just standing on base, awaiting your opportunity to run for the next.

It's a heart-stopping, pulse-pounding sound, the deafening shot of a gun signaling the start of a race. It's a sound that is almost always punctuated by the roar of the crowd and a rush of adrenaline. Did it foul? Will I make it to base on time? Will it be a home run? A grand slam?

It is, quite frankly, the only reason I played baseball. For that matter (in my humble opinion, at least) it's the only reason anyone would spectate baseball, the only reason the game exists in the first place. Without it, baseball is minutes upon minutes of tedium with no purpose. All of us, the team at bat, the outfielders, the crowd in the stands, we're all just milling around waiting for that sound to call us to action.

I'd managed to convince myself I was in love with that sound, and why not? I'd spent my whole life hearing my father rhapsodize about it. Most of that speech I just gave—except for the last part—were direct quotes, straight (you'll pardon the use of the term) from his lips. From the time I was old enough to swing a Wiffle bat at a hollow ball or tap a real one off a tee, I'd heard all about the glory of baseball. My family was one of those for whom the national pastime had become a religion. I had quite literally drunk the love of it in with my mother's milk; my parents had decorated the nursery in a baseball motif, with stenciled images of bats and balls and large leather mitts scattered around the walls, the sheets and comforter reflecting more of the same. My first stuffed toy hadn't been an animal of some permutation; it had been a baseball bat.

Funny how three months can unravel a lifetime of indoctrination.

"So when can he begin training again?" My father asked as I tried to push the arch of my foot against Matt's hand. With just the slightest bit of

resistance, I felt my muscles begin to ache and tremble. My physical therapy aide backed off the pressure, frowning, and he looked at me instead of answering my dad's question.

"You had more strength last week. Did you overdo it?"

I shifted on the padded bench, trying to draw my foot out of Matt's grasp. "Just, you know, trying to build up strength."

Matt's mouth tightened and he darted a quick glance at my father out from under his long lashes. No need to guess whether or not he'd figured out at whose urging I'd overexerted. "Well, what you're most likely to build up is scar tissue that will permanently impede normal function."

I suppressed a wince as Matt's fingers gripped either side of the visible knot in my Achilles tendon and began to massage it firmly.

"Nothing wrong with trying to get around without the crutches for a while," Dad scoffed, clapping me on the shoulder. Sweat immediately began to bead on my forehead and I had to close my eyes and grit my teeth to try to conceal how much pain Matt's fingers were causing.

"Oh, sure, nothing wrong with going without the crutches... providing he has no interest in ever walking or running unaided again."

Fuck. Matt wasn't even trying for diplomacy this time.

Dad sighed with exaggerated patience. "He's not some pansy who'll keel over putting a little weight on a bum ankle. Back when I played ball, I played with sprains plenty of times. Doctors these days don't seem to get that. You don't pamper an injury; you find a way to work with it, not let it keep you down."

The corners of Matt's mouth went white at the word "pansy".

"I'm not a doctor, Mr. Boyden." Only someone as familiar with him as I was would miss the seething venom in Matt's undertone. "Just a PT aide. But if you would prefer more expertise, I could call Chris's orthopedist to consult with you. Or his physical therapist. They'll tell you the same thing. The fact that you ran on your sprains without giving the connective tissues time to heal completely means your joints today are weaker and more susceptible to re-

injury. And what happened to Chris wasn't a mere sprain. It was a traumatic injury. A completely ruptured Achilles tendon improperly healed could have him on crutches or using a cane for the rest of his life." Matt leveled me with a flat look. "So, keep your weight off the ankle and use the damn crutches, okay?"

I could feel my dad winding up for a diatribe and jumped in. "Yeah, of course. So, what's been happening on campus while I've been away?"

"Not a lot. I've got a class with Topher Carlisle this term. It's good to be able to hang with him again. Haven't had a chance to do that since high school. Roll over. I'm going to go get an ice pack."

Obediently I flipped onto my stomach and Matt went to grab a clay-filled pack out of the clinic freezer. The clinic was eerily quiet this time of evening; I was the last patient remaining today, because my dad insisted I take the latest possible appointment so he could come with me to my therapy sessions when he had a chance. "To see how I was progressing," which was code for, "to bully the physical therapist into giving me the all-clear."

I took the opportunity to wipe the sweat from my face onto my sleeve, trying not to let my dad see my hand shaking. Fuck, but it hurt when they massaged the tendon to break up the scar tissue. And that fucking cold pack was going to hurt even worse.

"Topher Carlisle." My dad snorted once Matt was out of the room. "I remember when you went to school with him. Biggest fairy in town. Matt hangs out with him? You sure he's not—?"

I turned my face away so he couldn't see my grimace. "Matt's never made a secret of the fact that he's gay, Dad. He and Topher even saw each other for a little while in high school, though it didn't last long."

"What? You're telling me you knew about it, even back then? And you still hang out with him?"

"He's my friend." I kept my voice neutral, yawning to try to hint that the subject was tedious or I was exhausted. Whichever would shut Dad up the quickest. "And Topher's not a bad guy, though I don't know him very well."

“Well, he was good in those spring musicals, I guess.” At least he was willing to grudgingly admit that much. “So, why didn’t you tell me about Matt?”

“Because you didn’t need to know. It’s his business and his family’s, not ours.”

“The hell it’s not! I let you stay over at his house.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Boyden. Chris’s virtue was always safe with me.” The polite chill in Matt’s voice was every bit as excruciating as the ache that settled into my ankle when he wrapped the cold pack around it. Dear sweet Jesus, it hurt. It felt like the biting pain when you’ve been outside in the snow too long, when you know you’d better get indoors soon because you’re a few minutes away from the dangerous numb of frostbite settling in.

“Oh!” I felt my dad jump, and couldn’t help but feel a little satisfaction as he began spluttering. “I didn’t—I mean—It’s just—”

“Don’t you need to be getting to work, Dad?” My amusement was short-lived, and mostly I was just tired and in pain.

“Yeah. Graveyard shift this week.” He pushed himself up from the stool he sat on with the same sort of larger-than-life energy he did everything. That’s my dad. A giant. Big. Strong. Powerful. A veritable man’s man. I often wondered how he’d ended up playing baseball when he was better suited to being a linebacker. I was no runt by any stretch of the imagination, but sometimes I felt like I disappointed him because I wasn’t large and towering enough to break tree trunks in half with my bare hands.

“Okay. I’ll see you soon, Dad.” I flinched as he clapped me on the shoulder again and mumbled an awkward goodbye to Matt. Silence filled the empty clinic as I lay there and tried not to complain about the aching cold wrapped around my ankle. Matt didn’t seem to be moving at all behind me, which meant he was probably standing there waiting for something.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered at last, burying my face in my arms. The cold was uncomfortable, but I was starting to adapt, or the pack was getting warmer, and the pain of the massage had faded. Fuck. I tell you, if I had realized how

much damage the helmet on a batter sliding into home plate could do to your leg, I would never have played catcher.

I felt Matt's hand settle between my shoulder blades, a touch just short of a caress. The "just short" part made me ache far worse than the cold on my ankle.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this." He took his hand away. "I stand here week after week and listen to his casual slurs and I bite my tongue and I'm just waiting for you to say something and you never do."

I swallowed and turned my face toward him. "I suppose I should thank you for working the mention of Topher into the conversation. It gave me an opening to let him know he was offending you."

"That wasn't exactly the opening I'd hoped you would take."

"I know, but—" I shook my head, wishing he'd step around front so I could see him. "Still, maybe he'll learn a little tact now that I made it clear to him that you're gay."

His hand pulled away and the loss of its warmth was a new kind of ache. "Yeah, sure. Until I'm out of the room. Then there will just be one fag he'll be running his homophobic mouth off in front of, unawares."

"I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't have to be."

"I'm not like you, Matt. My family isn't like yours. They didn't make an effort to foster an open and accepting environment from the moment they suspected when I was a toddler."

"No, quite the opposite." At last, he lifted the cold pack off my ankle and the pain began to dissipate. "Your dad wouldn't mind seeing you crippled for life as long as it proved that you're a *real man*."

"He's not a bad guy, Matt. He's just... a product of his upbringing. He doesn't know any better. He's a good dad, though."

Matt grumbled something inaudible before I heard him stalk out of the room with angry strides. I rolled up to sit on the edge of the padded table, my head hung low.

Fuck.

When Matt reappeared, he grabbed my socks and shoe for me. I hadn't even tried to hop down from the table without his assistance. He was pissed enough at me. He helped me into the huge, boot-like brace and then supported me as I slid down from the table, until I got my weight on my crutches.

"So, where am I driving you to tonight?"

I stood there with the pads of the crutches butted up under my arms and Matt so close beside me that I could smell his cologne and the minty/menthol scent of the therapeutic gel he'd massaged into my mangled tendons and ligaments.

"Your place? Please?"

The hard chill in his eyes softened, and his lips slowly drew up into a gentle smile. His dark green gaze held mine captive as he leaned in and brushed his lips across mine.

"Okay."

Matt rented a first-floor bedroom in an old house that had been converted into co-op housing. It was by far the most spacious of the five bedrooms, though being the farthest away from the forced air heating unit, it wasn't the most temperature controlled. I levered myself onto the bed and laid my crutches aside, hugging my zippered sweatshirt around me while Matt turned on the electric space heaters and patches of warmth began to spread throughout the drafty room.

There was no more natural a caretaker than Matt. He was quiet as he put my crutches next to my side of the bed and knelt down to help me remove the brace he'd put on at the clinic. My stomach felt tight and heavy, guilt gnawing at me. He deserved better than he was getting from me. He'd deserved better the last time we'd tried dating each other, back in high school; why he'd come back for more of the same, I would never know.

I couldn't apologize again. He'd heard it all before and nothing seemed to change. I couldn't find a way to make myself come out to my family, which

meant we could never be *together* in front of my family. I could never invite him to holiday dinners or admit to spending as much time with him as I did. I could never acknowledge him the way he deserved to be acknowledged.

I could never push back against my father's bigoted insensitivity in Matt's defense, much less my own.

"Ready for a shower?" Matt peeled my T-shirt, still damp with sweat from my physical therapy, over my head, gently massaging the back of my neck.

I shook my head, closing my eyes at the touch. "I think I'd rather just go to sleep. I'll never understand how physical therapy can be so exhausting, when I barely even move."

"It's the pain." He reached for my belt, carefully helping me to shimmy out of my jeans without moving my ankle too much. When they were gone, he Velcroed another brace around the joint, lighter and slimmer than the boot I wore when I was out and about trying to be somewhat mobile. "That and the fact that the parts you *are* trying to move really don't want to move because they no longer have the strength to do so, so it requires a lot more exertion for a much smaller result."

"Right." I let him help me to the communal bathroom to brush my teeth companionably beside him, then back to bed. I stretched out, placing a pillow under my ankle as he undressed and slid under the sheets beside me, turning off the bedside lamp. "You're so good at what you do."

He stared at the darkened ceiling. "Yeah, too bad I'm not even sure I want to be doing it."

"So apply to film school already. Before you get stuck in this rut."

"I'm never going to get anywhere doing the Film and Video Production degree here at Grand Valley, except maybe become a producer on some local news broadcast. I need to go to a school recognized for their film program. But if I go someplace else, I lose my scholarship. So I'm kind of stuck."

My hand drifted across the narrow inches between us, my fingers lightly stroking his wrist. I didn't really have an argument ready for that. I understood all too well what it meant to be trapped by financial necessity. I'd just started

high school when the Great Recession hit, and my parents had lost their jobs. Then we'd lost our house. They had eventually found work, working more hours and making far less than they had before. Their retirement funds had been gutted, and any hope that I'd had of going to college without a scholarship had been completely wiped out. That was when my dad's dream of me attending school on a baseball scholarship, as he had done, and maybe even being recruited into the major leagues, had become an absolute necessity. I hadn't lived and breathed a day since the ninth grade when Dad didn't talk to me about the critical importance of seeing to my future.

"I wish I knew what to say." I picked up his hand and pulled it to my face, pressing a kiss to his knuckles. "I wish you could get out of here. West Michigan is a waste for you. You should be someplace like LA, at a school with lots of guys who don't have to hide who they're dating from their families. You should be with—fuck, I don't know—someone like Topher. Someone who just lets it all hang out and doesn't give a fuck what anyone thinks."

Matt's hand went still in mine and he abruptly rolled up onto his elbow, looming over me in the darkness.

"You can't seriously think I want Topher."

"Not really." I shrugged. "Mostly he was just the first example at hand. Though, you *did* date him."

"Yeah, for all of five minutes, by default, because he was the only other out guy at our school and I was all one with the *fuck that* over the idea of going to the Homecoming dance stag or with a girl."

"You can't deny he's pretty."

That made Matt laugh. "Well, yeah, he's beautiful, but he's too much. I may be out and proud, but he turns the flames up a little too high even for me."

I smiled wistfully at that. The truth was, I was insanely jealous of Topher Carlisle. Not because he'd dated Matt, but because he was just so *open*. Topher hid absolutely nothing, and he didn't bother to play anything low-key, even if it made others squirm. Our similarities began and ended with our first

names and sexual orientation. I'd always hated him a little, just because I admired and envied him so desperately.

"Yeah, well, look at your alternative." My hand tightened on his. "I wouldn't blame you if—"

"It's not to that point yet." Matt caught my chin, planting a firm kiss on my lips. "I can put up with your dad's ignorance for a while longer. Maybe not indefinitely, but I'm not willing to give up on us yet. I'm praying you find a way to come out to your family before we hit that stage."

My throat felt tight. "I am, too."

"Hey." His mouth captured mine again, for longer this time. With more intent. "You're always a wreck after PT. Especially when your dad's there, because you push it too hard when he's around. Let it go. Deal with it later, when you're not so wrung out."

"Okay." I mustered a smile, catching him with a hand wrapped behind his neck, lingering in the kiss. His tongue slid across my lips, minty with toothpaste, and I let out a low groan, pulling him down above me.

Matt chuckled when he felt me press hard against his groin, but he was just as hard, his cock lining up alongside mine through the cotton of our underwear.

"Sure you're not too worn out?" His lips trailed a warm, damp path across my cheekbone to my ear, his tongue stroking inside the rim before his teeth scraped the shell.

I smiled, tipping my head back to give him room to work his way down my throat. My arms slipped around him, my fingers grasping the firm muscles of his back. "Never too worn out for this."

I rolled onto my stomach, slipping out of my underwear as Matt stuffed a pillow under my hips, and then his solid weight covered me, a whole-body embrace pressing me into the mattress. His lips and breath were warm, pressing kisses over my shoulders and the back of my neck, nuzzling the crease of my armpit, licking down the indentation of my spine.

"You smell good."

“Well, you feel good.” I sighed into the cradle of my arms, lifting my hips to press up against him. The ridge of Matt’s cock nestled in the crease of my ass and he rocked as he made love to my back and shoulders with his mouth, grinding me against the pillow until I groaned. Surely there was nothing softer on earth than his lips gliding across my spine, nothing more sensual than his tongue and the scrape of his teeth against my shoulder.

“Fuck me,” I whispered, turning to see him over my shoulder. I snagged another kiss, moaning in unison with him the next time he rocked. Puffs of his breath erupted against my cheek and neck as he drew away again.

Those sharp exhalations were a sound I’d come to cherish far more than the crack of a baseball bat connecting with a ball. They were only one note in a veritable symphony, though, the percussion that underscored the tearing of a condom wrapper, the crinkling noise of the rubber unrolling, the slick sound of lube being smeared around...

...My own half-pained whimper as he pressed into me.

Matt’s breathless gasp against the back of my shoulder. “Fuck. Oh, *fuck*.”

Those were the sounds that were precious to me now.

Like I said: a lot can change in three months.

“There’s one good thing about hiding it from my parents.” My seventeen-year-old self had moaned as Matt sucked on the side of my throat. *“They don’t bat an eye when I tell them I’m staying at your place overnight studying for a test tomorrow.”*

“And my parents,” —He abruptly flipped me onto my stomach and attacked my back with his mouth—“just don’t give a fuck. They know I’m gonna have sex, so they fling me some rubbers and give me lots of safe sex lectures and tell me to be smart.”

“Aren’t you worried they might hear us?” I groaned when his teeth scraped the back of my neck.

“Nice thing about having a basement bedroom when everyone else is upstairs. If no one has teased me about the noise I make jerking off by now, I

think we're safe. Although, if you were to look above the drop panels there on the ceiling, you'd see I've stuffed the space between the ceiling and pipes with lots of egg-crate foam." He pointed up at the heating vent in the ceiling "I even stuck some in there. At least for now. If we wanna bone once it's winter, we're just going to have to take our chances."

"Really?" Curiosity jerked me out of my testosterone lust-haze and I turned my head to peer at him. "When did you do that?"

"Last week." His lips were soft against my shoulder. Then my jaw. And finally my mouth. "After you said you wanted to move past hand jobs and the occasional blowjob."

"Oh." As far as romantic gestures were concerned, soundproofing his bedroom was a little on the iffy side, and yet I melted. This meant enough to him that he was willing to make certain I didn't walk away from our first time with any reason for shame or embarrassment.

I rolled onto my back again, drawing him down above me. He felt so safe; I didn't know the last time I felt safe. I don't think I had, since I'd finally admitted to myself that I was gay. I wasn't sure what I'd do when he graduated next spring and left me alone at Jenison High for another year, with no one here who understood me. Hell, even Topher would be graduating.

"I love you," I whispered, lifting my head for a kiss.

Matt smiled serenely and reached for the button on my jeans. "Of course you do."

I woke in the middle of the night with my ankle aching and a foreboding tension in my calf muscles that suggested I might get a charley horse if I wasn't careful. Beside me, Matt snored softly and I realized I'd forgotten to set out my pain meds and a bottle of water beside the bed like I usually did, so I wouldn't have to get up in the middle of the night. Maneuvering carefully, I reached for my crutches and levered myself out of bed, trying to keep the weight off my ankle.

The space heaters had taken the edge off the chill, but drafty pockets of cold still littered the back bedroom. Tonight the cool felt good; since my injury

and subsequent surgery, some nights I woke up sweating fiercely with no idea why. Wrangling myself into a robe felt like too much work, so after I swallowed my Tylenol with codeine, I lurched across the room to its one redeeming feature.

Before winter had set in, the huge bay window with its padded reading bench had been my favorite part of Matt's room. I'd spent a lot of time there after my surgery. In the sunlight filtering through those leaded panes, I'd passed long hours trying to keep up with my school work and figure out ways to explain to my family why I wasn't staying in my dorm room instead. Matt had generously gone along with the fiction that he had temporarily moved upstairs, and that he and his housemates were allowing me to stay in his usual room so he could help me until I got back on my feet, so to speak.

It had been a flimsy story, and I was surprised my dad bought it. I could practically see steam rising from Matt's ears as I'd rambled off the convoluted lie, but he hadn't contradicted me. Past Dad's shoulder, however, he'd given me a look that warned me I'd just burnt one of a very limited number of free passes.

The reasons I hadn't come out in high school had seemed so clear. The only way I was going to be able to afford college without accumulating a crippling amount of debt was to get a scholarship, and baseball had been my best bet. My dad had hammered home time and again how important it was that I not jeopardize my standing on the high school team, that I do everything possible to get my coach to recommend me to college recruiters. And in the Grand Rapids area—a region dominated largely by the Christian Reformed Church, a denomination so conservative that they only allowed women representatives in their synod in 2008 and they still have individual congregations branching off in protest of that move—there was every reason to believe that coming out could get me driven off the team by my peers, or possibly even prompt my coach to find a reason to exclude me.

The reasons had been clear to me, at least. Matt hadn't agreed. When he'd realized I would never attend prom with him or greet him after class with a kiss, he'd decided he deserved better and had broken things off.

I hadn't blamed him. If keeping my secret made me feel like shit, I could only imagine what it must have felt like for him to *be* the secret.

The freezing cold outside seeped into the alcove, leaching the warmth from my skin as I sat there sipping my water. The reasons I'd had in high school didn't track anymore. I'd already gotten my scholarship. It was unlikely GVSU was going to take it away if I came out of the closet. They'd be more likely to take it away if I wasn't in shape in time to begin training for next season, which was a distinct possibility. The Achilles tendon tear had only been the most traumatic of my injuries when that runner had slid into home, colliding helmet-first with my ankle. All the connective tissue around the joint and even down into the foot was fucked up, and the recovery period could last up to a couple of years.

The chances of me returning to school next year were pretty damned slim. Which was, simultaneously, both the best and the worst argument for me coming out. On one hand, it wouldn't matter to my academic future one bit. On the other hand, where would I go when I couldn't go back to school if I estranged my family?

"Aren't you freezing over there?" Matt's sleepy mumble filtered out from the mass of covers on his bed long before his tousled blond head emerged. I smiled at the sight of him. My perfect, tall, blond, broad-shouldered Dutch boy.

"Honestly? Yeah."

"Then come back to bed. Do you need help walking back?"

"No." I sighed, looking out at the snow-covered lawn in front of the house. It was one of those perfect winter nights when the sky was cloudless, so that the moonlight reflected so brightly on the snow, it could almost have been day. Tendrils of frost were slowly creeping their way inward from the edges of the panes of glass in the bay window. Everything seemed cast in an cold, ethereal glow. "I'm just thinking."

"Warm thoughts, I hope." With an exaggerated "brrr" he flung back the covers and dragged a comforter around his shoulders. It trailed behind him like a cape as he crossed the room. "Scoot forward."

I inched up and Matt slid in behind me, wedging himself between my back and the wall and wrapping the comforter around us both. He grumbled and rubbed my arm nearest the window briskly.

“Jesus, any longer and you’d be an icicle.”

“Sorry.” I leaned my head back against his shoulder, letting his warmth thaw me.

“Oh, did I tell you what Topher said his plans for next summer with Morgan Gardner are?”

I shook my head. “No, you didn’t.”

Matt chuffed a soft laugh against my shoulder. “Apparently Morgan’s family has a house on Lake Michigan near Saugatuck, so they’re going to be spending all summer there. Can you imagine?”

“Saugatuck? That’s a little south of Holland, right?”

“You’ve never heard of it?”

“I remember one time when I was in junior high, my mom wanted to drive down there and tour for an afternoon because it’s supposed to be picturesque, but Dad didn’t know why she wanted to go see a town full of fairies.”

I could practically hear Matt’s eyes roll. “I dunno, sounds like heaven to me. A gay vacation hot spot not an hour’s drive away. Just think about it. Maybe we could go down there sometime when you’re on your feet again. Spend the night at a B&B, eat dinner someplace where no one would bat an eye if I held your hand at dinner or kissed you in public.”

“That sounds wonderful.” I heaved a wistful sigh. “Maybe we can go at spring break. I’ll tell Dad I’m going to Tampa with some friends or something.”

I felt Matt stiffen behind me and realized what I’d said.

“Fuck.” I cursed the codeine for making me thoughtless.

“Is that how it’s going to be?” Matt’s voice was barely audible behind me. “I thought it would be different, us here at college together. That we wouldn’t have to hide. But you still won’t do anything resembling a display of affection

in public in case someone you know from high school sees you and spreads rumors back home. And now that's supposed to go on for another four months until we have to sneak away for spring break? What about the holidays? What excuse are you going to come up with to spend time with me then? Or are we just not going to see each other for the better part of a month?"

"No. No! That's not what I—I wasn't thinking when I said that. I'm sorry."

His sigh sounded bitter, but his arms tightened around me.

"You know, I almost wish playing were an option for you this upcoming season. It won't be, not that your dad will accept that just yet, but if it were..."

I tried to relax against him again, tried to reclaim the warmth he'd brought with him when he'd sat down behind me. "If it were, what?"

"I've daydreamed of walking up to you after a game and kissing you, right in front of everyone. Just tearing through all the bullshit and doing what your teammates' girlfriends do with them."

"Then why haven't you? You had plenty of chances during the fall scrimmage season before I was injured."

"Because it has to be your choice. I can't make it for you."

My throat felt tight and I pulled his hand up to my face, pressing a kiss to it. "I wish you would. I wish you'd just... take that plunge for me."

"You know I can't."

"Doesn't stop me from wishing."

His lips brushed the top of my shoulder and he pulled the comforter more securely around us both.

"I love you, Chris. I have since before my senior year of high school. Even after we broke up, even when I tried to date other guys or just fuck around in clubs, I missed you. Wanted you."

"I love you, too. I just—"

"I don't need to hear the reasons and excuses. I know them all. And I know it's easy for me to say 'just do it, already' when I live such a charmed life where my family's acceptance is concerned. I know it's harder for you."

I turned my head to try to look back at him. “Why do I hear a ‘but’ coming in this?”

“I don’t know if it’s a ‘but.’ Not completely. I hate the idea of issuing ultimatums, because you know, it’s not like there’s not already enough pressure riding on this decision. But you should be on alert that I’m probably going to hit the end of my tolerance sooner, rather than later. I want to be able to have my *boyfriend* over for Christmas, not just some friend from school. And I definitely don’t want to try to remember some convoluted fiction for how I spent spring break so I don’t reveal that I actually spent it making love to you in some romantic bed and breakfast in a vacation town known to be popular with queers. I can’t deny who I am, and I don’t want to deny who *we* are.”

“I understand.” Jesus. My chest hurt like I’d been punched dead in the sternum at the implied *or else* in that speech. It wouldn’t be so bad if he were unjustified, but he wasn’t. Not in the slightest.

“Good.” He kissed my shoulder again, then nudged me upright. “Come on. It’s freezing here even with the blanket. Let me help you back to bed.”

Safely back in the warmth of his bed, Matt surrounded me. He engulfed me not just with his arms, but with his entire body, his entire presence.

“I’ll give it a few more weeks,” he whispered into the darkness as sleep continued to elude me. “Until the holidays. After that... we’ll see if I’ve got it in me to give any more.”

The days spun rapidly toward winter break and I hovered indecisively between my options. Every time I saw my dad I wanted to say something, but the conversation never drifted toward any sort of graceful segue, and each time I tried to steel myself to simply blurt it out my vocal cords froze, locking the words in my throat until they threatened to choke me. No amount of telling myself how much Matt deserved it seemed to overcome that paralysis.

“That’s where you’re going wrong, baby.” His fingers stroked up and down my spine as we lay in bed and I confessed the difficulty to him. He hadn’t brought the subject up again after that night when we’d discussed the

holidays, but it was on my mind constantly. “You can’t do it for me. It has nothing to do with me. This is about *you*, what *you* deserve.”

“How can you say that? You made it pretty clear that if you don’t stick around, it’ll be because you can’t have the things you feel you need. So it *is* about you.”

“You can’t do it to make me stick around. Yeah, I might take off because I need something else, something I can’t get in this situation, but that’s on me. You need to do it because *you* deserve better. You deserve better than to sit silently by while your dad casually insults queers without even realizing he’s talking about *you*. You deserve better than to always hang in limbo, wondering if you’ll still be loved if you dare to be honest. You deserve better than to feel all this pressure to be something you’re not.”

I rolled away, unable to keep looking at him. Still, he was a solid presence behind me, pressed warm against my back.

“You don’t realize what they gave up, when the economy turned to shit and they lost their jobs. How many hours they had to work so we could stay someplace where the schools were top-notch instead of moving somewhere cheaper. Yeah, my dad’s an insensitive dinosaur when it comes to opinions on homosexuality, but I can’t stand the thought of disappointing him after everything he’s done to take care of us. They worked so hard to try to make sure we’d have a good life with every opportunity, every chance to be happy and successful.”

“Happy and successful according to whom?” Matt’s breath ruffled the hair at the back of my neck, which I’d started to grow out now that it didn’t matter how I’d look after I took off my baseball cap. “Does making yourself miserable trying to live a lie count?”

I didn’t have any answers for that.

Since my injury, my professors had been as accommodating as possible to enable me to continue the semester without having to drag myself all over campus. They had allowed Matt to collect my homework, permitted me to submit assignments via email, and made alternative arrangements for quizzes

and tests. But there was no avoiding my finals. The week before, I decided to try to attend classes to take advantage of finals prep.

“You’re sure you’re going to be okay?” Matt hovered fretfully over me as I strapped on my bulky, boot-like brace.

“Of course. You can’t help me to every class. You’ve got your own classes to get to. I can get around. I might be slow and clumsy, but I can do it.”

“Yeah, but it’s icy as fuck out there.”

“Yes, and they will have shoveled and salted the hell out of the walkways between buildings. It’ll be fine. And even if I do take a header, the boot will keep me from re-injuring the ankle.”

“But it won’t keep you from cracking your skull open when you hit the ground.”

“Oh, please. I’ll be fine. I’ve got to start getting around soon, anyway. I don’t want to have to go through all the special arrangements for my classes next term. Just drop me off as close as you can to the math hall and I’ll manage.”

The truth was, I was aching to get back to campus. I’d been inactive since the end of September and I just wasn’t used to sitting still that long. Furthermore, with the very real possibility that my baseball scholarship would dry up, I really needed to figure out if there was any point in me sticking around academically. The truth was, of all the possible careers I could imagine myself in, doing something like what Matt did, maybe even being an actual physical therapist, sounded the most appealing. But how could I possibly afford to complete my education, much less do the graduate work required to become a PT, short of taking on a bunch of loans?

Maybe debt was what it would take. It was just so fucking ridiculous that putting my future in hock before I’d even gotten started was the only way to *get* started.

Sighing at the endless churn of frustrated attempts to figure out my post-baseball future, I allowed Matt to help me shoulder my backpack while I balanced on the crutches and then lurched after him out the door.

I got a decent amount of insight that week into just how *unaccommodating* a college campus could be for someone not fully able-bodied, the Americans with Disabilities Act be damned. You'd think after lurching up and down the stairs to my dorm room when I bothered to drop by, the risers of a lecture hall would be no big deal. Actually, it wasn't so much the risers as it was trying to work my way into one of the narrow rows of seats. Finally I had to concede defeat and select an end seat in the front row. Almost worse was the stats class with the tables and chairs, or the history class with the student desk/chair combos. Those were a bitch to get into while simultaneously trying to avoid tripping other students with my crutches *and* un-shouldering my backpack to dig my books and notes out.

In the end, it wasn't the ice that got me. It was one of those student desks, and a distracted girl trying to walk and text at the same time. The boot might have helped protect me if I slipped, but it wasn't going to take all the damage of a hundred and sixty pound woman falling over it.

Had the pain always been this horrible, or had I actually forgotten in three months' time just how awful it had been the first time around? My entire body shook with the effort not to scream or sob as I sat on the exam bed in the ER and waited for someone to bring me some drugs and wheel me to radiology so they could get a look at how much of the repair work had been undone.

My dad sat beside me, grim and silent. I think even he was starting to get that I wouldn't be playing in the upcoming season. If not for his presence I probably just would have cried, the pain was so immense. He wasn't even urging me to be tough or telling me how this wouldn't keep me down long if I just worked harder and refused to let it stop me, and I wasn't sure if that was better or worse. On one hand, it took the pressure off me to reassure him that I would try to get over this as quickly as possible to get back on the field. But on the other hand, his silence felt like a withdrawal, as if he were a kid who wouldn't even acknowledge his favorite toy now that it was broken. He was sitting right there beside me and I felt completely alone.

Did my dad feel I wasn't even worth talking to if I couldn't play baseball? Besides the ties of family, what did we have between us if we no longer had that?

I wish Matt were there. I wouldn't have to be strong in front of Matt. He would understand and he'd know what to say and do. Forget playing baseball, at this point I was worried that I would never walk without a cane or a limp again.

"Will you say something, Dad?" I had to grit my teeth to talk without groaning.

My dad scrubbed a hand down his face, pulling at the corners of his mouth. "I don't know how many more hospital bills we can afford, Chris. Those surgeries last time around nearly bankrupted us. Plus all the physical therapy."

I suspected by the level of pain that another surgery was in my near future and immediately felt sick with remorse for thinking my dad was so shallow that all he cared about was the baseball.

"I know, Dad. I'm sorry." We had found out in early November when the bills started coming due that most of my care wasn't covered because my dad's health insurance didn't cover sports injuries, and we hadn't yet reached the \$90,000 deductible for the NCAA's catastrophic injury coverage to kick in.

The greatest irony of the whole thing was that we might end up paying more in medical bills for an injury sustained playing baseball on a scholarship my parents had insisted I *had* to get than we would have paid for my education without the scholarship.

"You're not going to be able to play this season."

"No."

"If the school doesn't renew your scholarship, you won't be able to go back next year."

"I know." I tried to move and couldn't help the whimper that escaped me when even the slightest motion reached my ankle. "I'll move back home, get a job, go to GRCC part-time, I guess."

"What if you can't work?" The scratching sound his callused palm made against his stubble was too damn loud, and the throbbing in my foot so intense I felt sick to my stomach from the pain.

"I don't know!" I hit the sides of the bed with my fists and couldn't help

but whimper again, louder this time, as the impact jolted my body. “What do you want me to say, Dad? We’re screwed, okay? I’m screwed.”

God damn it. Tears burned my eyes and I couldn’t stop them. Everything hurt so bad and there was nothing. No hope. I was screwed. By the economy, by the educational system, by the national health care system... I was twenty years old, and I’d done everything I could possibly do to give myself a future. I’d studied hard, and I’d trained well and tried to be the best I could possibly be at everything to give myself every possible edge. And yet I had nothing except a steadily-growing mountain of medical bills, and probably another mountain of student loans before it was all over. The years when I should have been putting away money for retirement would be spent digging myself out of debt.

How was anyone supposed to ever be successful under those circumstances?

He sighed and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “It’s okay, Chris. We’ll work it out. I’ll talk to Pastor Rob. The church has funds set aside to help people in bad situations, you know. Maybe they can take a collection for us or something.”

“Oh, God.” I covered my face with my hands, leaning my head back. Fuck it all, where were the God damn pain meds?

The last time I’d been to church with my parents had been right before the elections in November. Pastor Rob had—without outright endorsing any candidate—spoken to the congregation on the importance of voting for the candidates who would most reflect the church’s values, which of course was code for anti-gay, anti-choice, pro-big-business candidates.

I could just see it now, us accepting assistance from the congregation, only for them to begrudge it when I came out of the closet.

“No. Don’t.” I lowered my hands and made myself look at him. My eyes were still stinging with tears, and I couldn’t tell if they were from pain or frustration or fear.

Dad shook his head with a sort of half-shrug, a helpless *I’m-out-of-options* gesture. “I’m not crazy about it either, Chris, but that’s what it’s there for. That’s why people tithe and make offerings.”

“Do you think they’d still be willing to help us out if they knew that I’m gay?” I didn’t even stop to let myself draw a breath before I asked the question, afraid that if I paused, I’d lose my nerve. As it was, I was winded by the end of it, and my heart was racing. But I had to do it. I had to. Because if I didn’t, and Dad accepted help from the church, it would be one more reason for me to feel obligated not to come out.

Better to do it now, when I had nothing left to lose.

I watched the procession of emotions sprint across my dad’s face: disbelief was followed by a moment of amusement, as if he was sure I was joking with him. He stopped himself mid-scoff, though, to stare at me, and then it was anger, a shudder rippling through his entire body and his face flushing a deep red. That was an expression I remembered well from growing up, the one that let me know I’d hit the end of his patience.

And then the anger bled away, and in its place was... nothing.

No warmth. No reassurance. Not even recognition. He looked at me the way he would a stranger.

Then his chair scraped against the floor and he was gone.

I let my head fall back against the hospital bed and closed my eyes.

I had been taken to radiology for an MRI and admitted to a hospital room from the ER by the time Matt got there.

“Hey.” He stood in the doorway looking cautious, glancing around—no doubt for my dad.

“Hey.” I held out my hand to him, and he crossed the room to take it. The pressure of his fingers around mine felt good.

“I had my phone off. I didn’t get your message until I was done with my final, or I would have—”

I shook my head, the motion exaggerated courtesy of the Dilaudid they had finally shot me up with. The relief from pain had been so immediate and profound that I would have gladly blown the doctor for another shot if the pain came back. I could see how people got hooked on that sort of stuff.

“It’s okay. You had to take your test.”

He cupped my face, his thumb caressing gently under my eye, which was probably no doubt still red-rimmed and swollen. “Pain’s really bad?”

“It was.” I heaved a groggy sigh and tugged him closer. “They gave me something.”

He smiled, looking tenderly amused. “I can tell. Better watch it. Who knows who might walk in?”

“I don’t care.” I pressed my face against his palm. His skin was warm, and the hospital too cold. “It hurts, baby.”

“I know.”

“They think I’ll need surgery again.”

“I’m sorry.” His hand moved, his fingers stroking through my hair.

I squeezed his hand tighter. “I came out to my dad.”

Matt went still.

“You what?”

“I had to. He was going to go to our church, ask for assistance with the medical bills or tuition. And I couldn’t let him. I’d feel like a hypocrite, taking their money when I know most of them don’t even consider me a person.”

“So that’s why he’s not here.” Matt grabbed a chair and pulled it close to my bedside so he could hold my hand again. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Me, either.” I leaned back against the elevated head of the bed, closing my eyes again. “He never even said a word. He just stared at me, and then he walked out. I don’t know if I have a dad or a family or a home to go to anymore. If I can’t go to school and I can’t work, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“We’ll figure it out, baby. Later, when you’re not dopey. You can come home with me for the holidays after you’re out of the hospital, and you can stop pretending to live in your dorm room. We’ll make it work.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead as the drugs started to drag me toward sleep. “It’ll be okay.”

When I woke up next, it was because my mom arrived. It was after 10 PM, so she must have just gotten off work. Matt sat beside my bed studying and nudged me awake when she walked in.

“Hi, Mom.” I tried to lever myself to sit a little more upright in the bed, and Matt set his notes and highlighter aside to help.

“Hi, honey.” She kissed my cheek and managed an awkward smile for Matt, which was frankly more than I was hoping for. “Hello, Matt.”

“Dad’s at work?”

“Yes. He works graveyard the rest of the week.” She pulled up a chair on the other side of my bed.

“How bad is it?”

Her knuckles whitened around the strap of her handbag where it sat in her lap. “He’s in shock, Chris. What did you expect? We both are.”

I swallowed hard against the tight knot aching in my throat. “Is he angry?”

“Yes, somewhat. And hurt. Betrayed. This isn’t how we raised you.” Her lips quivered and her eyes shone with tears. “I don’t understand why you would do this.”

“It isn’t a matter of why. It’s who I am, Mom. Who I’ve been for as long as I can remember. I don’t have a choice.”

She cleared her throat, but I could still see how badly her composure was shaken. Normally, my mom was a very warm person. Her cool distance was a bad sign. “I don’t believe that.”

“Really?” Blame it on the drugs, but I couldn’t help but let some bitterness creep in. “When did you choose to like men?”

Matt squeezed my arm in warning and I backed down just as I saw my mom start to work up some outrage. It didn’t matter if I had a point. I didn’t speak to my parents that way, and being confrontational wasn’t going to help.

“Sorry. I’m sorry, Mom. I don’t mean to be snide, but I can’t help the way things are. And I don’t want to fight with you about it. Matt said I can stay with the VanderVeens for the holidays if you don’t want me to come home.”

She bowed her head, her hands fidgeting with her purse strap. I saw her inhale deeply several times, as if she were about to speak, only to exhale again.

There was nothing encouraging in her eyes when she looked up again.

“I think that would be best.” She drew a shaky breath. “There’s a part of me—the part that wants to be perceived as a good mother—that wants to say *of course* you should come home, of course we’ll accept you, of course we want you to be happy. I wish I could do that, Chris. But I can’t. We live by certain beliefs in our family. We raised you to believe those things, too. You’re an adult and you have to make your own choices, but my belief is that what you are doing is wrong, and no matter what love I feel for you as your mother, I can’t condone that. I’m sure you and the rest of the politically correct world think that if I can’t do that, I’m abandoning you. But from where I sit, you’re abandoning us.”

A sob caught in my throat, threatening to choke me. I’d known they wouldn’t approve, but no matter how well I’d known that fact, I still hadn’t been prepared for it to hurt so badly.

Tears tracked down her face as she stood. She didn’t approach the bed to kiss my cheek again.

“I hope someday we can find a way to be a family again in spite of—*this*—but I don’t know, Chris. I’ll call you when I think we’re ready to talk about things.”

When she was gone, Matt slipped into bed beside me and held me while I cried.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered, his lips pressed against my temple. “I’m so sorry.”

“I knew what would happen.” I scrubbed my wet face with my hands, but a new wave of tears started.

Matt’s arms tightened around me. “I didn’t. I think I’d convinced myself that you were underestimating them, that they wouldn’t be as bad about it as you thought they would once they knew.”

“I think I hoped for that, too.” I clung to him and hid my face in his neck until the nurse came and caught us and made him leave.

It was only a ten to fifteen minute drive from the GVSU campus in Allendale to Jenison, so Matt and I could easily have stayed in his co-op for the holidays and just driven to his parents' place for Christmas. But between the snow and the fact that I was recovering from surgery and thus even less mobile and in need of more assistance than before, we decided to spend the break at his parents' house instead. His little brother had commandeered Matt's basement bedroom after Matt moved out, so we were stuck on the main floor with the rest of the family, which was good since it meant I wouldn't need to navigate the basement stairs. If I hadn't been high on pain medication from the surgery, I might have resented the loss of the sound-proofing, which I assumed Matt had left in the drop-panel ceiling, but as it was, there really wasn't a better time for us to be on our best behavior while staying with his family.

When Matt and I were dating during high school, or even when we were just friends, there would have been sledding and snowball fights and a lot of other winter activity. As it was, I got to prop my foot up and direct the decorating of the Christmas tree with a mug of mulled cider in my hands, which really wasn't a bad gig. Matt's family did things I didn't think families did any more. They spent evenings around a card table playing board games or Uno or that uniquely Midwestern bastard stepchild of a trick-taking card game, euchre. More often than not, Matt's younger brother was over at his girlfriend's house, so I got to fill in.

I'm ashamed to admit I was pretty glum company. I tried not to mope, but between being set so far back in my healing and the developments with my family, it was hard to maintain a cheerful presence. I'd always gotten along well with Matt's family, and they were more than sympathetic—and even a little horrified—at the way my mom and dad were handling things. They welcomed me as one of their own, and I wish I could say it was enough. Maybe someday it would be, but at that moment I was having a hard time getting past why they needed to do it in the first place.

I actually had a good deal of time to myself, since Matt had to work at the clinic. I was lucky in that when he was around, he was solicitous without crossing the line into hovering. He went shopping with his mom for Christmas presents and the family made their annual pilgrimage to see the Trans-Siberian

Orchestra concert, which was sold out long before they considered the need to get a ticket for me. Matt begged off going to see *The Nutcracker*, though, and we had an evening to ourselves in the empty house.

“And what should we do with all this unexpected alone time?” I asked, snagging him by a belt loop and drawing him closer.

Matt laughed, letting me pull him forward. “I’m pretty sure whatever it is, it won’t happen with you sitting in that recliner.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I leaned forward, catching the fabric of his shirt between my teeth and tugging it up out of his waistband. “With a little strategic straddling, I think we could work something out.”

“Oh, yeah? Like this?” Matt swung his leg over mine, wedging his knee between my thigh and the arm of the chair, then planting his hands on my shoulders to do the same on the other side, so that he straddled my thighs.

“Exactly.” It was a snug fit, but I didn’t care as I grabbed his hips and pulled them closer so that his pelvis was just about level with my mouth. Smiling up at him, I nipped him again through his shirt, catching a little bit of skin this time as I worked his fly open. Matt gasped, and his hips rolled toward me before he got with the program and tossed his shirt aside. “That’s it.”

It had been nearly three weeks with nothing but a couple of furtive hand jobs since I’d re-injured my ankle, and I was eager for the taste and scent of him. I squeezed and kneaded his ass while I nuzzled his belly, then nibbled around the edge of his navel and made him twitch and squirm when I dipped my tongue inside. His cock bumped my chin as I licked my way down his treasure trail, inhaling deeply, filling my nostrils with his musk.

“Fuck, Chris. Yeah...” Matt’s low groan vibrated along my nerves, and I rolled my eyes to look up at him for a moment, taking in his face in that instant of anticipation before I wrapped my lips around his dick. I opened my mouth and tongued the slit, tasting him, and began to move down.

Which was when the doorbell rang.

“*Shit*,” I hissed as we both jumped guiltily. Nothing like being on the verge of a blowjob in one guy’s parents’ family room to make you feel like you’re seventeen again and doing something illicit. “Ignore it?”

“I’d better not.” Matt made a pained sound as he wrestled his dick back into his jeans and closed his fly. He didn’t bother retrieving his shirt as he jogged through the kitchen to the living room and the front door.

I tipped my head back, rubbing the erection under my sweats absently while I waited for Matt to send whoever it was packing, until I heard his startled voice.

“Mr. Boyden! Um, hi.”

I snapped upright in my chair so quickly I nearly pitched myself out of it. My boner started to deflate in record time. If I’d been agile enough, I would have rushed to the door. I didn’t hear my dad’s low reply, but Matt’s higher-pitched responses filled in the blanks.

“Chris is in the family room. Come in, please, I’ll take you to him so he doesn’t have to get up. He was gonna watch TV while I, um, went downstairs to lift weights.”

That one gave me pause for a second, until I remembered Matt’s shirtless state. He was trying to spare my dad embarrassment; coming out to him was an entirely different proposition from flaunting in his face that he’d walked in on us not two seconds away from a blowjob.

I had to resist the temptation to get out of my chair and stand. There was no reason I needed to greet my dad on my feet or come to attention for him, and every reason for me to stay *off* my feet, but the impulse was there anyway. Every muscle tense, I watched the archway to the kitchen until my dad appeared with Matt behind him.

“Can I get you anything to drink, Mr. Boyden?”

My dad shook his head, his eyes on me. “No, thanks. I just need to talk to Chris.”

“Okay. I’ll be in the basement if you need anything.” He chuckled a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the stairs and I nodded mutely.

My dad stood there looking awkward and out of place and almost as if he were on the verge of bolting for a moment, before he committed himself to actually stepping across the threshold into the family room and taking a seat

on the sofa. He perched on the edge like he might spring up at any second, though, and every so often his shoulders shifted and twitched uncomfortably.

“So, how’s everyone at home?” I forced a bland smile, resolved to keep the conversation neutral until I knew why he was here.

“We’re fine.” He rubbed his forehead as though it pained him. “How did your surgery go?”

You would know if you’d been there in Recovery like you should have been. I didn’t allow myself to put that bitter thought into words.

“It went okay. I’m going to take it a lot easier this time around. Not try to push my recovery so hard. I’m going to drop a couple of classes next semester and try to take the lightest class load I can to keep my tuition down. If I lose my scholarship—which is pretty much a given, since there’s no way I’ll be able to play baseball again for the next year or two—I’ll apply with the financial aid office for a work-study job; they might have positions I can fill without being too mobile. Data entry or something, I don’t know. Between the minimal credit hours and the work-study, maybe I can cover the rest with student loans without going too far into debt.”

I paused to suck in a breath, realizing I’d been babbling. My chest was tight and it was hard to breathe, with my heart racing the way it was and my palms sweating. I swallowed hard, trying to tamp down what felt like a pending fit of anxiety.

“That’s good.” He braced his elbows on his knees, his fingers laced, looking distinctly nervous. It was the first time I’d ever seen my dad look anything less than in charge. Since I was a child, he’d always seemed larger than life, sure, confident, firm, determined. Everything he taught me a man was supposed to be.

It was like looking at someone else, someone I’d never met.

He drew a deep breath. “Your mom sent me with some presents we’d had for you. She thinks it’s best you don’t come over even for Christmas morning or dinner. Not when your aunts and cousins and grandparents will be there. Maybe next year, once we’ve all had a chance to wrap our heads around things. This year, she doesn’t want to risk things getting... awkward.”

Something painful spiked in my chest and I took refuge in bitterness. “What, does she think I’m going to make out with my boyfriend at the dinner table?”

Dad actually *winc*ed, which made me feel immediately guilty. He was trying to be civilized and courteous, despite his discomfort. The least I could do was not needle him, even if I was entitled to my anger.

“She doesn’t know what to think,” he said with a sigh. “Neither do I.”

“I know, I know. It goes against your beliefs...”

“That’s your mother, not me.” He waved the suggestion off. “That’s not what I—I mean, suddenly one day you’re not the son we thought we knew, and that’s not something we’re going to get used to overnight. Chris, this—how long have you been hiding this?”

I scoffed. “My whole life. It’s not something I just decided on one day. Dad, I was in *preschool* the first time Grandpa teased me about which little girl was my girlfriend and how I’d grow up to be a ladies’ man, and he did it right in front of you and you sat there and laughed alongside him. I wasn’t very old before I got the message that the assumed default didn’t apply to me. How many times when we were practicing or when I was in training did you encourage me by telling me not to be a sissy or a pansy or don’t throw like a girl or shake it off when I was hurt, like a *man*.” I gripped the armrests of the recliner, wishing I had the mobility to get up and pace. “By which you meant be a *man* like you, a straight man. I spent my life hearing about pussies and that I shouldn’t be one. Can you *blame* me for hiding?”

He looked guilt-stricken at that, and I wondered if he was replaying in his mind every casual slur and derogatory term for gay he’d ever dropped in my presence and considering how they must have impacted me. Every day for my entire life, he’d been deriding me—*me*, not some hypothetical stranger—and he’d never even known it.

Finally, he lifted his eyes to meet mine. “I would never have said those things if I’d known—”

“You still would have thought them. You believe them, Dad. You believe that anything other than being straight and ultra-masculine is a failure. You see

the fact that I can't just shake this injury off and get back to playing as a failure on my part, and you see the fact that I don't like women as a flaw." I scrubbed my hands down my face as my eyes began to burn. "I'm never going to be a *man* by your definition, Dad. A *real* man. I'm never going to be the man you want me to be. And I would apologize for that, except that I shouldn't have to because I haven't done anything wrong. No matter what Mom believes."

He had no answer for that, sitting there with his shoulders hunched, still so different from the man I knew. Watching him, I really wanted that man back, because despite everything, he'd been a good man. Through the loss of jobs and the foreclosure on our house, settling for far less skilled work that kept us in a modest rental but barely allowed him enough time to sleep, let alone be with his family, he'd always been proud, strong, encouraging. He'd done his best for us, or tried to, even when he was in error.

He was ignorant, not evil. A product of a society and an upbringing that taught him to revere all the wrong things.

"I don't know what to say, Chris." He studied the floor again and I was okay with that. I was a little afraid of what I'd see if he looked at me just then. "Back when your mom and I lost our jobs and then the house and it took so long to find work again and then we were barely getting by..." His hands twisted together, clasped there between his knees. "I knew I wouldn't be able to provide for you the way I wanted to. The way I should have been able to do. I had to make you strong. Self-sufficient. Toughen you up the way my dad would have toughened me up, so that you had opportunities and could take care of yourself."

I gave a weary chuckle. "And of course all that's tied in with masculinity for you, isn't it? Gotta be the breadwinner." I deepened and roughened my voice on that last bit, imitating a burly, manly-man tone, which drew a reluctant smile from my dad. "My injury notwithstanding, Dad, I was doing an okay job securing my own future. So if it's any consolation, you succeeded. I can take care of myself. And I'll keep doing so despite the injury, which for the record didn't happen because I'm queer or because I'm not tough enough, and it won't suddenly get better if I were to turn straight and be more macho."

He gave me an outraged look and I met it evenly, reminding him with a lift of my eyebrow of all the times he'd urged me to ignore the advice of my physical therapist and doctors in favor of toughing it out and getting on my feet sooner.

He cleared his throat. "Well. Speaking of your injury, the church is going to help us with your medical bills."

"What? I said I didn't want—" Now it was my turn to get indignant, my entire body vibrating with it.

"It's got nothing to do with you," Dad said sternly. "It doesn't matter who those bills are for, you're covered under my insurance, which makes me the party responsible for paying what insurance doesn't cover. It's my credit they'll damage if they go to collections, and I have two more kids to try to get through college. This is about helping the family get by, not about you and what the people at church might think about you."

His gaze hit the floor again, and then it seemed like there was nothing left to say. He'd be comfortable with who I had revealed myself to be, or he wouldn't. Mom would reconcile it with her faith, or she wouldn't. My family would welcome me, or they wouldn't. It was out of my hands, and this was another way in which I realized I was different from the man I would have been if I had modeled myself after my dad. All my life, he'd kept pushing for the outcome he desired, never giving in, never accepting that he couldn't make things fine by sheer dint of will.

He was going to have to accept this. We both were.

"Come to Christmas dinner," he said finally, rising to his feet.

I swallowed, my heart lurching in my chest as that anxious feeling began to creep back in. "What about Mom?"

"She's hurt and confused. But I think if you're not there, someday she's going to feel terrible about it." His shoulders twitched under his jacket and he stuffed his hands in his pockets. "We're still a family, and we haven't been through all we've been through to start falling apart now. I can't promise it will be comfortable, or even that no one will make a scene, but the sooner everyone starts to get used to the way things are now, the better."

That was a start. “And what about Matt?”

“Well, if you’re already locked into plans with his family, we’ll understand. If not...” I could see the effort it cost him to commit himself to this course. But he did it. Like he always did, once he’d made up his mind to do something. “If you feel he belongs with the family, bring him. Cam’s having his girlfriend over for pie afterward, to meet your grandparents. It’s your call.”

He was putting a lot of faith in me, offering me that option. He was trusting me to handle things maturely and responsibly, whatever I did.

But then, he always had trusted me to do that.

I bit my bottom lip and nodded, meeting his eyes. “I’ll talk it over with Matt. Decide what we want to do.”

He nodded and shuffled again, then headed for the door, squeezing my shoulder as he passed. “I’ll see you soon, Chris.”

“See you soon, Dad.”

When he was gone, I hauled myself out of the recliner and into the bedroom. Downstairs, I could hear weights clinking, but I didn’t disturb Matt. I got ready for bed and crawled in alone, letting my mind wander until I heard his footsteps clomping up the stairs and the shower running. His hair was damp and he smelled like body wash when he finally slipped into bed beside me.

“Was it that bad?” His fingers brushed up and down my sternum as I lay staring up at the ceiling.

“Hmm?”

“Was talking with your dad so horrible that you needed to shut the world out and just go to bed?”

“No, it wasn’t—” I sighed, turning to curl into him. “It was hard, but it wasn’t awful. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I think me and my dad will be okay.”

My family was still going to have issues with me, and it was entirely possible my dad's thoughtless homophobia couldn't be cured just by being mindful of who he was talking to. I was still never going to be a lot of the things my dad had tried to make me into.

But I was starting to think that maybe in the ways that really mattered, he'd taught me the right things after all.

Matt drew me closer with a lot of careful shifting, until I lay with my head on his shoulder. I lay there a long time, listening to the drumming of his heart. It was too late now to have sex; his family could be home at any moment. I regretted the lost opportunity, but the cuddling felt good. Someday, we'd be back in Matt's room in the off-campus co-op and I'd be more mobile, so we'd have plenty of time for that in the future.

Now that everything was out in the open, we had time.

"We've been invited to Christmas dinner," I murmured into the skin of his chest.

"We?"

"Yeah. Can't guarantee it will be pleasant, though."

He fell silent for a long moment. "Wow. You know, I never actually considered that."

"What?"

"What things would be like after you came out."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Isn't that strange?" He chuffed a soft laugh into my hair as I let my hand drift along his arm in slow strokes. "I think I always assumed that after they had time to adjust, it would be like my family. That they'd welcome me the way my parents have welcomed you. I never believed they'd truly write you off, but I never thought about what things would be like in-between. The awkwardness and disapproval and all that."

"They might still adjust, but then they might not." I sighed. "Think you can handle it?"

“I don’t think I have much choice. You’ve come this far. Least I can do is ride it out with you.”

I tilted my head back, and he turned his to give me the kiss I was seeking.

“I guess we’ll just see where it takes us.” I nuzzled his neck, tightening my arm over his waist. My future looked nothing like it had six months ago. I felt a little cast adrift, unsure where I would wash up. But at least I had one thing to hold onto for now. There was still a lot of uncertainty about what we would face once college was over, but for now it was enough.

We would be all right.

THE END

Author Bio

Amelia C. Gormley may seem like anyone else. But the truth is she sings in the shower, dances doing laundry, and writes blisteringly hot M/M erotic romance while her son is at school. When she's not writing, Amelia single-handedly juggles her husband, her son, their home, and the obstacles of life by turning into an everyday superhero. And that, she supposes, is just like anyone else.

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WHEN IT'S RIGHT

By Aria Grace

Photo Description

A smiling dark-haired guy in his twenties or thirties is apparently driving a car. Another man, perhaps a little younger, also with short dark hair, is resting his head on the driver's shoulder, eyes closed, a faint smile on his face. Behind them on the backseat is a dog, and all we see of it is the dog's big head, eyes closed, its chin on the resting man's neck. All three look utterly contented.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

If it wasn't for this wonderful, sleeping animal, my love and I would have never found one another. We fell hard and fast, but a secret I'd hoped would never be exposed almost tore us apart forever.

Please describe our journey finding true love and overcoming obstacles with the unexpected help of the best four-legged friend a guy could have.

I'm looking for a story that has angst, but ultimately ends with a sweet HEA.

Sincerely,

MW138

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: family drama, veterinarian, first time, coming out, men with pets

Word count: 32,976

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WHEN IT'S RIGHT

By Aria Grace

CHAPTER ONE

Alex

Sometimes I wish she wasn't so damn cute. Those brown eyes beg for attention, and her droopy ears get to me every time. I really can't afford to take a puppy break, but we've both been cooped up in the house for hours and my mind is mush anyway. My presentation is as good as it's going to get and if I keep tweaking it, I'm just going to talk myself out of a client.

"Okay, Stormy. You win." She jumps up at her name and starts licking my face. I have to shove her off me so I can step into a pair of running shoes and find her leash. As soon as the leash is in hand, she bites the end and drags me to the door.

"We're going, we're going. Just chill for a second." When I picked her out of the litter of twelve chocolate Labs, I thought getting the hyper female was a good idea. I wanted to be able to take her running and to play Frisbee with her on occasion. I had no idea that meant she'd never settle down. At almost a year old, she is even more hyper now than she was at two months old.

As she bounds down the steps of my small bungalow, I consider my options. We could walk to the park about a mile away and play fetch for a while. She loves that, but it is part of her regular routine with Mandy, the lady who walks her every afternoon. So, feeling guilty about having to leave her over the weekend for a business trip, I decide to take her somewhere special.

"Load up, girl. We're going for a ride." She jumps right into the front of my Pathfinder and waits for us to take off. With her tail whacking me in the arm at an alarming rate, she settles in with her head out the window and enjoys the summer breeze.

It is only a thirty minute drive to the state park just outside of Denver, but by the time we drive into the parking lot, she is fit to be tied. The high-pitched

whines of excitement are enough to make passersby think I am skinning her. But once the car is in park and the door open, she bolts from its confinement. Always ready to explore. I don't usually let her off leash out here, but she's so amped up that I know leashing her will just end up pissing me off with all of her pulling and tugging, so I go against my better judgment and let her roam.

The trail that we usually take is blocked because of a fallen tree, so we veer left onto an access road. I know I'm going to spend the rest of the week locked up in conference rooms and hotels; I'm happy to take in the fresh air while I can. With P!nk blaring in my earbuds, we begin our run.

Stormy takes off with me hot on her heels. She loves to smell the plants that have been marked by the various wildlife, so when she wanders a few hundred feet in front or behind me, I don't worry. The park is visited by hundreds of people each day, and despite the risk of possibly running into a coyote, this trail is generally pretty safe.

About a mile into the run, we see cattle in the distance. Fortunately, Stormy doesn't pay much attention to them so I don't either. I am zoning out to my music when Stormy turns a corner about fifty feet ahead of me. Just as I round the bend and look up, the world moves in slow motion. She is running full speed toward a large gap in a fence. Before I can get any words out of my mouth, she leaps onto a cattle grate and falls in. Her four legs slip through the steel bars at odd angles, leaving her hanging over the drainage ditch underneath. The silence of the park is pierced by her terrified yelp of pain and surprise.

"No," I scream as I run faster. I can see her struggling to get up, but each time a paw lands on a rail, it just slips again, causing even more damage to her already injured limbs.

"Hold, Stormy." I try to sound firm but I can hear the quiver in my voice as I sprint to reach her. She is too scared to listen, but I get to her before she can fully lift out. As I approach her from behind, I quickly assess her injuries. No compound breaks, thank god! She thinks she's in trouble, and her tail is curled between her legs. Maybe that means it isn't as bad as it could be. Hopefully, she just slipped cleanly between the steel rails and is fine. "It's okay, baby. Just hold for a sec."

Reaching under her belly with one arm and around her neck with the other, I lift her straight up and carry her back down the trail. My nerves are frayed and I think I'm at least as freaked out as Stormy is.

Eventually, my adrenaline wanes, and after some reassuring licks across my sweaty shoulder, I attempt to let her down. I set her on a flat patch of dirt and attach the leash that was stupidly in my pocket instead of around her neck. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She tries to walk but her right front leg is in bad shape. After a short whine when she puts it on the ground, she yanks her leg up and holds it out from her body. Clearly, there is a problem. I see a small cut on her elbow, but it's not big enough to cause the pain she's in. That means it's internal. Dammit.

This is her first real injury since I brought her home at eight weeks old and it breaks my heart. Having been fairly spoiled, she seems scared and confused as she hobbles around. *My baby is hurt and it's my fault.*

Scooping her up, I carry her the rest of the way back to the car.

"Don't worry, girl. You're gonna be fine. We get to go see Dr. Mills."

She is the only dog I've ever seen that loves going to the vet. Between the treats they give her and the attention from the staff, she has almost as much fun there as at the dog park.

The ride to the vet seems to take forever. Rush hour traffic and her occasional yelps when she forgets she's in pain and tries to stand on the seat, make me a ball of stress. As soon as we pull into the parking lot and she sees the office, she is up again and trying to jump out the window.

Carrying her in, her wiggling and squealing gets the attention of some kids in the waiting room. They have a Rottie that's a little over-interested in Stormy, but when I explain to the receptionist what happened, we're quickly directed to an empty room to wait for the doctor.

The room is familiar. To date, it has only had positive experiences. The faux-granite counter is lined with jars of treats and cotton balls. The worn vinyl bench is wide enough for me to sit on while holding her upper half on my lap. The large, stainless steel table in the middle of the room seems more

like an operating table than just a place for well-puppy visits. It's currently lowered to the ground to act as a scale but I know this visit isn't going to go as well as the previous. This is when I have to admit that I've failed to keep her safe and now she's suffering. How do people survive having actual kids that get hurt? I can't even imagine.

While we're waiting, I gently press my finger down the length of her right leg and watch her breathing. She is panting happily until I touch a particularly tender point. Her breathing quickens so I know she feels it, but her tail is still wagging so that's a good sign. Probably not a serious break, if there's a break at all. Hopefully this is just a false alarm and she'll be good as new with a few days of rest.

After only a few minutes of trying to keep Stormy calm, the door opens and my jaw drops. The most gorgeous guy I've ever seen walks in. In all the months I've been coming to this office for routine shots and flea treatments, I've only seen women working. This guy must be new because I would have definitely remembered him. He gives me a shy smile as he puts down his clipboard and kneels in front of us.

"Well, hello, sweetheart. You must be Stormy." He grabs her around the ears and lets her lick his cheek. "What a pretty girl you are."

Just seeing him on his knees makes me almost forget about the dog. I have to sit on one hand to keep from reaching out and running my fingers through his silky brown hair. It's cropped short around the ears with just an inch at the top, almost military style, which makes him even more attractive. What would it feel like to be pumping into that mouth with my fingers tightly wound through it? *Okay, focus!* I try to compose myself so I can deal with the matter at hand.

Clearly remembering that we haven't met, he looks up at me and offers his hand. "Hi, there. I'm Shane. I just need to get some information before Dr. Mills comes in."

"Hi, Shane," I mumble while still staring at him. "I'm Alex. Are you new here?"

Without looking back at me, he pulls a Milk-Bone from the pocket of his

scrubs and slips it to Stormy. She is already smitten so he doesn't need to coerce her onto the floor-height tabletop.

"Yeah, I'm interning for a few months," he responds while gently maneuvering Stormy onto the scale. Sixty-three pounds. No wonder my arms are tired from carrying her. "Let's see if we can get you all fixed up, pretty girl."

Okay, I get it. You like girls. Just let me have my little fantasy over here. I can't help the frustrated thoughts from entering my mind and in a ridiculous moment of immaturity, I'm actually jealous of my dog. What I wouldn't give to have him rubbing my back like that.

"I just need to take her temperature and then I'll bring in the doctor." As he raises the table to counter-height, I stand up to help hold her. She loves a good old-fashioned thermometer up the ass more than the average dog but she's so wiggly, I always worry she's going to break the damn thing while it's inside of her.

"I'll hold her front and try to keep her steady," I offer. While leaning her good leg against my chest, I wrap one arm under her chest and the other closer to her belly. My hand has a mind of its own and accidentally brushes against Shane's bicep. Just a few fingertips graze the skin below the edge of his shirt. But he notices. He quietly gasps and freezes. Shit. I've overstepped.

My eyes shoot up to his and he's staring at the spot on his arm where I touched him. Does he feel the same electricity that I do? My fingers are still tingling from where they met his skin. Maybe I'm coming down with something because I swear the heat in the room has gone up twenty degrees.

"Sorry. She doesn't always understand the words 'stand still.' Probably why we're in here now." I'm trying to lighten the mood and ease the palpable tension in the room. I know what I'm feeling, but I can't tell if he's tense because he is new to the job, not used to touching patients, or just a homophobe that has heard about me. I have to remind myself that the world doesn't revolve around me and there is basically zero chance he has heard about me prior to that moment. I'm sure it's just his professionalism kicking in. Regardless, I don't want to make it weird.

“No problem.” He quickly recovers and lifts her tail, standing at her back. “If she’s ready...” He doesn’t finish his sentence. He just slips the thermometer in and focuses intently on his watch. I try to keep my eyes on Stormy, but they keep drifting back to Shane. His lips are full and pink. They are shaped perfectly, even on the top and bottom. I can imagine that they would be soft and smooth. So kissable.

Not realizing I am staring, and not sure if I got caught, he clears his throat and pulls out the thermometer. “102. Perfect.” He quickly cleans up and excuses himself to get the doctor. With Shane out of the room, I can finally breathe.

“I’m sorry you got hurt, baby, but you’re getting steak tonight for introducing me to Shane. Yes, you are,” I coo into her ear. I will be fantasizing about those lips kneeling in front of me for weeks to come.

After reliving our ordeal to Dr. Mills, and getting a much shorter lecture than I expected about letting a puppy run off-leash in an unfamiliar place, she takes Stormy to the back for an x-ray. Between berating myself for being so careless and imagining how I can ask Shane out without seeming like a creepy old man, I email the team to let them know I’ll be offline for the next few hours. Thankfully, my piece of the presentation is basically done so I’m not the bottleneck for anyone else.

The x-ray reveals a hairline fracture of her right radius bone. It’s slight, but still makes me feel queasy as the doctor walks me through the film. The good news is that it isn’t completely broken and would likely be fully healed within six weeks. The bad news is that she’d be in a cast for at least four of those weeks.

“She needs to stay off her feet as much as possible, and that means keeping her crated when you’re not home. No jumping around, and don’t let her chew on her cast.” The doctor gave me final instructions while Shane stood in the corner taking notes. I try to keep my focus on the printouts she is handing me about proper care of a cast, but I’m distracted by the way he chews his lower lip while he writes. The way his perfectly white teeth roll over that beautiful

lip has my mouth watering. He has a childlike innocence that makes me want to hug him. Well, preferably a naked hug, but a hug nonetheless.

“Uh-hunh. No problem.” I absentmindedly follow along with her directions.

“No getting wet, and no jumping into the car or on the couch. You have to be strong if you want her to heal.”

“Yeah, of course. She’ll be on bed rest, I promise.”

Dr. Mills laughs. “Easier said than done. I’ve never met a Lab that could handle bed rest. I hope you don’t have a social life planned for the next few weeks, because she’s gonna be a handful.” With that, she walks out of the room and leaves Shane to fit an Elizabethan collar around Stormy’s neck to keep her from chewing her cast.

“Do you have any questions before you go?” Shane asks, finally looking me in the eye.

“Um, no. I think I have everything I need. I can work at home tomorrow and then...” Shit. My trip. “Oh, actually, I forgot—I have to leave on a business trip on Friday morning. Do you think I can have her kenneled here for the weekend while I’m gone?”

“Of course. We can keep her here, but she’ll have to be in the crate pretty much the entire time since she can’t walk around in the yard. We’ll just let her out to do her business and stretch. She won’t be too happy about it.” He kneels down again to pet Stormy. She is already annoyed by the collar and keeps trying to catch it with her teeth. It’s going to be a long four weeks.

“The whole time? I hate to do that to her, but I really can’t miss this meeting in San Diego. Um, do you know of any dog-sitters that can stay at my place? I’ll pay well if they are willing to keep her entertained while off her feet.” In my head, I quickly run through the list of friends that might be able to keep her, except none would want to deal with a whiny pup that was supposed to stay still.

“Well, actually, I could do it. My family runs a kennel and training center in Wyoming, and that’s actually why I’m doing this internship with my aunt. I’m planning to open my own dog ranch out here someday.”

“Seriously? That’s awesome. I leave on Friday morning so if you want to come by tomorrow after work, I’ll show you around and give you a key to my place.” Getting him to my place was easier than I expected. Of course, it was for Stormy, not for me. I could work with that. My charm was legendary and could turn a straight man bi... well, it hadn’t in the past, but there’s a first for everything.

“Cool. And you don’t even have to pay me. She’ll be easy, and I could use a break from my cousins. I love them but teenage girls are... loud.” He laughs quietly and I lean closer. I don’t even realize I’m doing it. It’s totally instinctive and totally natural. He has a pull on me that is almost magnetic. I want to be closer to him but I remind myself to stay in control.

“No, I’ll pay you. This is a huge help for me.” He’s got to be at least five years younger than me, even so, I can’t help staring at his lips when he talks. Obviously, he’s only interested in a professional relationship and I can respect that boundary. I need his help with Stormy so I can keep from freaking him out. Besides, if he’s from Wyoming, he’s probably a Bible-toting Republican that will beat me with the barrel of his shotgun if I seem overly friendly. *Gotta stay cool, Alex.*

After exchanging numbers and giving him my address, Stormy and I head home. I have some serious cleaning to do before he comes over tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO

Shane

Offering to dog sit seemed like a good idea when I said it. Now that they're gone, I'm having second thoughts. Aunt Karen didn't have a problem with me taking the business from her, though she did remind me that I'll be representing her practice and have to be professional in all respects. Obviously, I know that, but it still adds some pressure. I probably should call and say I'm not available after all... but I know I'm not going to.

He reminds me of Brandon and it's too tempting. As much as moving to Denver was to start a new life where I could be honest about myself, I still miss my home. Brandon was the only person that knew the truth about me and was willing to indulge me in my drunken confessions.

Not only was he my best friend, he was my first kiss, my first blow job and my first love. If only he felt the same way for me, I might have stayed. I might have been willing to face being disowned by my family and ridiculed by everyone else I cared about. But he never could. Never would.

I know he cares about me but he could never love me. Outside of occasionally fooling around after a late party or a fight with Missy, he is determined to be the ladies' man that his father raised him to be.

I can't do that again. I will get through this weekend at Alex's and then probably never see him again. Stormy was just too sweet to confine in a crate for three days straight. I can be strong and not let my past feelings cloud a professional relationship. He is my aunt's customer and I am just a new guy in town watching his dog.

Arriving at exactly six thirty on Thursday night, I'm nervous as I knock on the door. I can hear rustling around inside as Alex is obviously trying to calm Stormy down. Like most dogs, she is probably used to running to the door to greet all visitors. I hope she didn't pull anything when I knocked. I should

have texted him that I was here so he could hold her. Duh, I was already fucking up my first solo gig.

When he answers the door, I can't help but catch my breath. Alex is dressed in a pair of low-slung jeans that have a few strategic holes down his legs. His bare feet peek out from the hem and make me smile. His feet are perfect. I've never considered myself a foot guy, but his look exceptionally nice. And soft. A navy V-neck sweater fits snugly across his chest, not in an overt way, just very fashionable. I am suddenly self-conscious in my Wranglers and Ropers. I'll need a new wardrobe if I'm going to fit in around here.

"Hey, Shane, glad you could make it. Please, come in," he says, opening the door wide to let me in.

Stormy was sitting in a hold position with her tail thumping vigorously on the wood floor. It's obvious that she wants to attack me with affection but she is well trained. The bright pink cast looks awkward as she holds it slightly away from her body, but she stays in place with only her lower half wiggling until I get to her.

As soon as I kneel down in front of her, Alex says, "okay," and she bursts into my arms. I lose my balance and fall on my ass, grabbing her by the chest to keep her hurt leg off the ground. I am laughing at my lack of grace while she cleans every inch of my face with her slobbery tongue. Alex is laughing too, so this must be her standard greeting.

"Hey, beautiful. I'm happy to see you too," I say, trying to regain my footing while still holding up her front half.

"Sorry about that. We've been working on her door greetings and she is usually pretty good, but I think she recognizes you as the treat man so she couldn't hold back." Alex walks her to her bed and tells her to settle.

"No problem. I'm used to it. Actually, I'm impressed at how well she obeys. You've done a good job with training her." He obviously knows how to assert his dominance as the leader of the pack. It's kind of hot.

"She has her moments, but I've finally gained the upper hand. She knows who's boss and is usually good. Well, at home anyway. Once we get in the

car, all bets are off.” He gestures for me to follow him to the kitchen. “Can I get you a drink or anything? Water, beer, Coke?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.” I could really use a beer, but that wouldn’t be professional. I need to get his instructions for the weekend and then get out. He probably has plans tonight that I’m interrupting.

“Okay, well, this is the kitchen. Help yourself to anything. I’ve tried to stock it for you but I’ll leave some cash, too. If there is anything you need, feel free to pick it up.” He points out where to find glasses and plates and shows me Stormy’s treat stash. She is a well-loved dog. It was amazing she wasn’t heavier. Actually, with all the snacks Alex kept in the house, it was more amazing that he was so trim. His flat stomach didn’t hold an ounce of fat. He turns down a hallway and I can’t resist checking out his ass. With a flick of his wrist, he gestures for me to follow. I would follow that man anywhere.

“This is the guest room. I’ve been using it as storage, so it’s a mess. I’ll change the sheets in the morning and you can just sleep in my bed. It’s more comfortable and Stormy is used to sleeping there with me.” His face pinks up as he admits it. I think it’s sweet that he lets her sleep with him.

Growing up with dogs, I could appreciate the comfort of having a friend nearby overnight. It was one of things I missed most since moving in with Aunt Karen. Her little Shih Tzus didn’t want anything to do with me. The feeling is mutual.

“You don’t have to do that. I can sleep on the couch or whatever.” The thought of sleeping in his bed seems so intimate. Although I have to admit I’m a little excited, too. I wonder if he sleeps nude? Maybe I will.

“Hey, you’re doing me a huge favor. I want you to be comfortable.” As I follow him into the master bedroom, I take a look around. The dark wood furniture looks brand new and all matches. The large bed sits at least three feet off the ground in a display of grandeur and I have to resist the urge to jump on it. I know I’ll have time to really check out everything tomorrow.

There are a few pieces of art on the wall that look like they were painted by a kindergartener, still, it all works. The whole room has a very hotel-like feel. He either has a girlfriend that decorated or he hired someone, because I’ve

never met a guy that had such elegant taste. This room reminds me of the Pottery Barn catalogs that Mom always has around the house.

Alex is pushing buttons on the remote and trying to explain how to turn on the different channels but I'm not paying much attention. I'm too busy looking for earrings on his dresser or a pink toothbrush over his sink. No signs of a live-in girlfriend. The fantasy continues.

Just as we walk out to the back porch with Stormy, we hear the doorbell ring.

"Oh, lemme grab that. Can you keep her out here so she doesn't get too hyper? She was good for you but she isn't as good when food is involved."

"Sure." Before I realize what he means, he is back in the house and Stormy is pressing her nose against the glass to check out the new guest.

A few minutes later, Alex is back with a pizza box and a six-pack of beer. "You haven't eaten yet, have you? I'm starving. I hope you don't mind a little food break."

"No, I'm fine. Thanks, though. I should get out of your hair anyway. I'm sure you have a lot of packing to do. Is there..."

"No, please. I'll feel like an ass if you make me eat in front of you. Have at least one piece and then we can finish up. I didn't know what you'd like so I got half pepperoni and half everything."

"Oh, yeah, that's fine" He ordered with me in mind? That was thoughtful. "Thanks."

"Beer?"

Well, I guess if I'm going to eat, I might as well have a drink.

"Yeah, I guess one would be okay." I settle at the glass patio table, in the seat across from Alex, while he sets out paper plates and napkins.

At first, we both study our pizza so intently you'd think neither of us has ever seen one before. Just as I'm thinking the meal is going to be completely silent, he finally breaks it. "So, Dr. Mills is your aunt?"

Stormy lies on a purple bed at his feet, just waiting for crumbs to fall, and

Alex is pulling off small pieces of crust and ‘accidentally’ dropping them near her.

“Yeah, she’s been really great. She encouraged me to move here and get serious about my future. I guess it’s time.” I don’t want to sound like a loser but I feel inadequate with Alex. He is more sophisticated than I will ever be. I’m sure he hangs out at museums and concerts, where I am more of a billiards and bowling type of guy. He even looks like he just stepped out of a men’s fitness magazine. His hair is darker than mine and longer. He has a messy look that probably takes hours to perfect. It’s obvious that he spends time indoors because his light complexion sets off the most amazing aqua-blue eyes.

My curiosity is getting the better of me so I ask, “So, what do you do?”

“I’m an account manager for an ad agency. One of my biggest clients has an event this weekend, and I’m going to be presenting to the management team tomorrow, then running around like a chicken with my head cut off for the rest of the weekend to make sure everything runs smoothly. Oh, what time do you get off tomorrow?” he asks before taking a drink of his beer.

I am about to answer him, but my eyes have drifted yet again to the rim of the bottle as it reaches his lips. Some guys put their lips around the whole bottle. Some guys stick their upper lip inside when they take a drink. Alex doesn’t do either of those. He opens his mouth and actually pours the beer into it without even touching the glass. Just his open mouth waiting to receive the liquid that flows in.

I realize his lips have tugged up into a smile, breaking my trance. Shit! Busted.

“Oh, um, sorry. It’s been a long day. I guess I’m zoning. Anyway, I get off at three so I’ll be here right after that. Will she be okay until then?” I look down at Stormy, watching her scoot forward to lick up a piece of pepperoni.

“No problem. My friend, Stephanie, will stop by at noon to put her out and let her stretch.”

And there it is. The girlfriend. “Cool.”

We finish up dinner and Alex shows me a few more things before handing

me a set of keys. I'm anxious to get on my way, suddenly feeling like I'm intruding in his personal space way beyond what is appropriate.

"Like I said, make yourself at home. Watch anything you want on pay-per-view. Eat whatever you want. Walk around naked. Whatever." He laughs as he says it but I feel like he's staring at me. When my eyes catch his, they hold there. He seems to be questioning me, and I wonder if I've been too forward. Maybe I'm getting a little too bold for my breeches. I need to rein it in before I get my ass whooped.

"Will do. Have a good trip," I mumble as I rush for the door. "I'll call if we need anything but Stormy and I should be fine." Without meaning to, I practically slam the door behind me. I take a deep breath as I jog down his porch steps. The cool air flowing into my lungs is a welcome sensation. I might be able to dodge a panic attack if I can get out of here fast enough.

CHAPTER THREE

Alex

The scrubs he was wearing yesterday did not prepare me for what I find when I open my front door. He looks like he's right off *Brokeback Mountain*, and I want to ride that cowboy into oblivion. He wears a simple black T-shirt and dark jeans. Tight, dark jeans. Wranglers. Damn, I haven't seen anyone look so good in a pair of those in a long time. They are snug around his waist and down his thighs, not leaving much to the imagination. The bulge in front is encouraging. If that is what he sports when he's limp, I couldn't imagine what he'd look like... Stop. Focus. He's your dog-sitter, for god's sake.

After ushering him in, I let him greet Stormy while I compose myself. Holy hell, he looks even better from the back. He is kneeling again. This kid is killing me. Before he notices the drool from my chin, I release Stormy and she flies into his arms. I subtly adjust my jeans so my growing interest isn't as obvious. Then he laughs.

Shane has a deep, playful laugh that makes my stomach tighten. I feel that pull again, like I should go to him. I need to go to him. That's ridiculous. He's rolling on the ground with Stormy and doing an admirable job of keeping her casted leg from bearing any weight. If I'm not careful, that good ol' boy will beat my ass for coming on to him.

I take a few steps toward him and then catch myself, remembering that he's here for purely professional reasons. Walking past, I wait for him to pick himself up before leading him into the kitchen.

Showing him around my Craftsman-style bungalow doesn't take long. The guest room is full of boxes and I immediately offer up the master bedroom. It seems like he's checking out the room. Is that approval or disdain? I can't tell. I hope he doesn't think it's weird to sleep in my bed. I'm getting hard just thinking about him sprawled between my sheets. Too bad I didn't have a camera set up... *Okay, perv, kill the stalking tendencies.* I've got to remember he's just doing me a favor.

I spend a few minutes showing him how to use the universal remote to control the stereo, DVD and DVR, but he isn't really paying attention. He seems anxious in this room. Maybe he can sense my interest and thinks I'm gonna jump him. I have to be honest, the thought has crossed my mind. I don't want him to feel uncomfortable around me, so I quickly wrap up the demo.

Shane seems like a cool guy. Genuinely nice, and I already feel like I can trust him. I might even be able to set him up with one of the girls from the office. Steph is always bitching about all the good guys being gay. I'll have her stop by over the weekend and introduce herself. She's twenty-five, about the same age as Shane, and god knows she'd love a hot cowboy. Who wouldn't?

"Let's go out back, and then I think that'll be about everything." Shane and Stormy follow me as we walk out into the cool evening air. I'm about to show Shane the bin that we keep all her toys in when the doorbell rings. Almost forgot that I ordered a pizza.

Shane tries to get out of eating but I guilt him into it. My Catholic upbringing is good for something. I could guilt over a kind heart as well as the rest of them. Poor guy is obviously tired. I should let him go, but I'm selfish and want to spend as much time as I can with him. After tonight, I might not really see him again. When he zones out and looks like he's staring at my lips, I can't help but smile. If only.

I want to come out and ask about a girlfriend but I can't. If he is already feeling weird, that will definitely send him running. I just need to get past this weekend and then I'll figure out a way to see him again. Maybe Steph can get a better read on him. She's a cute girl; if he's single, he'll definitely be interested.

Shane looks like he saw a ghost when he bolts from the house. I don't know if he remembered a prior obligation or what, but I barely get to say goodbye as he flies down the steps and into his truck.

"Well, girl, he's all yours this weekend, so you better behave. And make sure you're close by when he showers. I want a full report of what he looks

like naked. Leave nothing out!” Stormy is barely able to keep her eyes open enough to feign interest. She has no idea what she will bear witness to this weekend. *Could I get a nanny-cam set up in the next twelve hours?*

After a quick shower, I hop into bed. I’m too amped up to sleep, and flip through the channels to see if anything good is on TV. When did prime time TV become all about cooking and singing competitions?

My mind keeps wandering back to Shane. What is he doing right now? Who is he with? Is he going to bring some chick over here this weekend? So what if he does? He’s an adult and if he wants to use my house as his fuck pad for a few days, I guess I don’t have a problem with it. As long as he takes care of Stormy, he should have a good time.

I wonder what his story is. His chocolaty-brown eyes seem so innocent. Like they just want to be loved. His tendency to keep his eyes low is endearing. When he peeks up from under those long lashes, it makes me want to pull him into me. Like he needs to be protected. Which is crazy since he has at least twenty pounds on me and clearly doesn’t need any protecting.

His broad shoulders and swollen biceps were developed through years of manual labor. Lifting, carrying, working. Not like my leaner muscles that are borne from hours at a gym and running up and down countless hills. My vanity has kept me trim. He is all rugged man. Natural and hot as hell. I can imagine him as a teenager on a ranch. It must have been cool to work around dogs all the time. And cowboys. Did he ever experiment with any of the guys on the ranch? You hear the stories, but I wonder if there’s any truth to them. I grew up in the ’burbs and did my experimenting out in the open for god and the world to see.

I knew I was gay by the time I hit puberty. I couldn’t keep it down around any of the boys... but had nothing but friendly feelings for the girls. As much as my parents hate that I won’t be bringing home a nice Catholic wife or any babies, they are cooler than some. Our visits, though short and infrequent, are always cordial and I know they love me. They just don’t love certain things about me.

How would my life be different if I were raised on a ranch in Wyoming? In Seattle, we saw gay couples all the time and it wasn’t a big deal. Not

completely accepted but not uncommon. Out in the country, it probably wasn't so tolerant. If a guy like Shane was gay, he'd probably have to stay closeted or move. Why did he say he moved? Something about his future and starting a dog service here? Would there be a girlfriend following him? Steph better get some good dirt on him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shane

Letting myself into Alex's house feels weird. I'm half expecting an alarm to go off and the police to show up. I've never really been in someone's home when they weren't there, and I feel like I'm violating his privacy.

Stormy's tail thumps loudly against the wall of her crate, and the huge, plastic collar around her neck bangs against the gate as she stands to greet me. I quickly release her from the kennel and let her lap at my face, her lower half bouncing in excitement. "I missed you too, girl. Are you ready to get out of that silly cage? Hunh?"

When I take the collar off her, she looks at me with grateful eyes. The poor thing really hates not being able to freely run and play. I am here to keep her happy without disturbing her injuries, so I will do just that. "Okay, okay. Let's go outside."

She eagerly follows me through the house to the back door. Carrying her to the lawn so she can do her business, I water a few of Alex's plants. He probably has a service take care of his garden, but if not, I don't want to be the reason his flowers are all dead when he gets home.

After Stormy has a few minutes to stretch, I carry her back inside. Alex's house has wall-to-wall hardwood floors, and every time Stormy stands up or gets excited, her paws slide on the slick surface. Knowing she must be used to it, I don't worry too much. As a loud truck drives by, Stormy jumps up to look out the window and her left leg slips, causing her right leg to take her weight. She lets out a short yelp and that is the end of her fun.

"Okay, missy. You're coming with me to the bedroom and we're staying in there." I scoop her up and carry her to Alex's bedroom. Stormy immediately gets comfortable on his bed while I gather a few toys from around the house. There is a hollowed-out chew toy that I stick a Milk-Bone in and toss to her. She immediately goes to work on getting out the bone.

Settling in next to her, I feel a little awkward on his bed. He's basically a stranger, and here I am snuggled up on his bed with his dog. It's such a

domestic scene, I actually get a little sentimental. This is how I want my life to be. A cute, little house with a dog and a... boyfriend to come home to.

When I left Wyoming, it was so I could finally come out and attempt a relationship with a man. A real relationship where we both want the same things and are both comfortable enough to ask for them.

In the three weeks that I've been in Denver, I've only come out to the girls in the office and that's only because they were all hitting on me. It was extremely awkward to say the words, *I'm gay*, out loud but it was liberating too. I'd never admitted it to anyone. No one back home really knew for sure, except for Brandon. And her. My parents just had suspicions that I never actually confirmed or denied. It wasn't something we ever discussed, and we probably never would.

You didn't do those things where I was from. It wasn't right. The embarrassment that would come to my family would be too much for them to bear. My parents were sad to lose an employee but I think they were secretly relieved that I left before bringing any shame to their good name. They had a thriving business, and it could have been all lost if word got around that they had a faggot son.

Brandon said he wanted me to stay and that it wouldn't be the same around town without me... but I think he was secretly relieved that I was leaving too. I brought out a side in him that he didn't like. Wasn't proud of. He loved me like a brother and I loved him like a lover. It just wasn't good for either of us to indulge the deeper feelings. On those rare occasions when he would slip into my room after a night of drinking and we'd get each other off... I'd get my hopes up that maybe he was coming around. But really, he was just coming. Period.

I was a means to an end when there wasn't a pussy around. And it wasn't right. If I stayed, I'd have let him use me as a blowup doll for the rest of our lives. Just waiting to be his booty call while he got married and had babies and lived the idyllic country life. No, thanks. I had to leave while I still had some dignity left to take with me.

It was getting easier to envision myself living openly with a man. Not having to hide behind excuses or fear for my safety. I saw gay couples walking

around town every day now. I want that. To live happily ever after in a house like this. With a dog like Stormy. A man like Alex.

Aunt Karen hinted that if I wanted a friendship with Alex, I had to keep things professional while I was working for him. Did she know him well? I didn't ask her about him personally because I didn't want to seem overly interested, but she is a good judge of character. If he was a loser, she would have warned me to stay away.

She's known my secret since I was sixteen years old and not nearly interested enough in any of the girls as I should have been. She was the one to convince me that if I wasn't happy with how my life was playing out in Casper, I should move to Denver where people were very tolerant of all types and I could find whatever I was looking for without judgment. I could read between the lines. She knows and accepts me as I am. When I do meet someone I want to introduce her to, she'll be my biggest cheerleader.

Leaving Stormy to work on her bone extraction project, I slip into the kitchen to see if there is anything to snack on. Being a bachelor, I don't expect to find much in the fridge but when I open it up, I'm shocked. It is fully stocked. Loaded from top to bottom with milk, juice, beer, eggs, white wine, bacon, lettuce, tomatoes, steaks, cold cuts, and stuff that I don't even recognize. Alex must really like to cook.

I grab a Coke and walk to the pantry to see if there are any chips. Again, it is loaded. Bags of Doritos and Fritos and Lay's Barbecue as far as the eye can see. I feel like I am standing in the 'food' aisle at a 7-Eleven. Just a bit overwhelmed by the options, I grab a bag of Fritos and go back to the bedroom. I sit at the edge of the bed to make sure I don't get any crumbs in his bed and flip the TV to a baseball movie.

I don't realize that I've zoned out on TV until the phone rings. It is so rare to hear a landline ring that I actually panic a little, not sure if I should answer it. Looking around, I see the handset glowing from the dresser across the room but I don't move to answer it. If it is important, they'll call Alex's mobile phone. After the third ring, the phone goes silent. Only a minute passes before my phone rings out from my pocket.

Glancing at the caller ID, I see that it's Alex.

"Hey, Alex," I say into the phone, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Shane. Hey." He sounds breathy, his voice low and heady. I feel myself almost hum into the line at the sound of it. "I just wanted to check in to see how you guys are doing. Is Stormy behaving herself?"

"Yeah, she's great." I look up at her because I haven't actually noticed her in a while. She is curled up on a pillow, sleeping. "She's taking a nap with me."

"Oh, you were sleeping? I'm sorry. I wasn't sure if you were going out tonight, so I was hoping to catch you before it got too late." He sounds nervous.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, unsure if he's nervous for Stormy or himself.

"Yeah, everything's good. Just wanted to... say hi and see if you needed anything."

"We're great. Thanks for checking in." And for reminding me of how sexy you sound. At least I know I'll be christening this bed tonight.

"Glad to hear it. Have a good night, Shane."

"You too, Alex."

When I hear the phone click, I instantly feel alone. I debate calling him back with a stupid question but I don't want him to think anything is wrong. He's busy working and doesn't need any additional stress.

The clock on my phone says it's eight thirty. Have I seriously let hours pass by watching stupid movies and day dreaming? I go back to the kitchen to fix something for dinner. Having so many choices is always overwhelming for me. Everything looks good but I don't feel right making a big meal in Alex's kitchen. After considering several meal options, I settle on mac and cheese. Childish, yes. But, delicious and probably not something Alex would miss from his pantry.

Stepping out of Alex's luxury shower is tough. If the water hadn't cooled off, I would have stayed in there for another hour. There are fountains coming

at me in every direction. I didn't realize how tight my muscles were until the hot water was pelting them with a massaging spray that switched between a steady stream and a pulsing trickle. I am so relaxed when I towel off that I can't think of anything better than passing out in my bed. Well, Alex's bed.

Passing his hamper, I notice a T-shirt on top. It is grey with the words *California Polytechnic State University* written inside a green circle across the front. I don't know what possesses me to pick it up, but as I hold it to my face and breathe in, I am instantly erect. I can smell Alex in his shirt. A little sweaty, a little musky, a lot sexy. Slipping it over my head, I take a quick look at myself. I look good in his shirt. I could get used to this.

With the stress of the week behind me, I slip between the sheets of Alex's bed wearing nothing but his shirt. Spreading out to feel the cool, crisp sheets over my bare skin feels amazing. I don't know much about thread count but his must be high because the sheets feel like velvet.

Scissoring my legs to feel the softness all over, I let my mind wander. With my legs spread, I close my eyes and imagine Alex in this bed with me. It doesn't take long for my hand to wrap around my cock and begin to pulse. Not wanting to make a mess on my first night, I pull back the top sheet and grab the extra pillow to angle my neck forward. Sliding my fist up and down my hard cock, I quickly give in to the fantasy. Being in this bed with Alex. His hand wrapped around me. His mouth on me. Him inside of me. Me inside of him. Fuck, this isn't going to take long.

On each upward pull, I let my thumb brush over the head to capture the drop of moisture that has settled there. Using it to lube the taut skin, I gently stroke up and down my dick. It's been a few days and the tension builds quickly. Taking a solid whiff of Alex's scent from my shoulder, I tighten my grip, pushing down hard at the base, pressing my balls against the sensitive skin behind them. Imagining that Alex is with me, I let my other hand slide past my thigh and roam below.

My right hand is stroking firmly, wrapping around my head and swirling the moisture with each pass while my left hand finds my opening. With only a mouthful of saliva for lube, my middle finger slides into my ass past the

knuckle, quickly finding the ball of nerves hiding in there. Flicking it to the tempo of my other hand, sweat beads on my brow while my breath increases. I know I'm close. I think about Alex's bright blue eyes. His tall, thin body with hard muscles that look delectable. How it would feel to have his hand wrapped around my ass, pressing me to his body. I want to touch him. I want him to touch me. Stroke me. Suck me. Fuck.

With a final turn of my head into my shoulder, I inhale him again while I release. Thick cords of white cream pour onto my exposed belly, just missing Alex's shirt. His sheets aren't so lucky. Gently rubbing my come into my skin, I feel content. Sticky, but content.

Grabbing one of the extra pillows, I hold it against my chest and curl around it. Someday, it'll be a real guy. For now, this is good enough. It has to be.

The room is as warm as the wet tongue trying to peel open my eyes. I guess Stormy is awake. Looking at the clock, I'm surprised it's already nine. I don't usually sleep in this late, but I don't want to wake up. I haven't slept this well in ages. The bouncing pup next to me has other ideas.

"You ready to get up, girl?" I scratch behind her ears before finally sitting up in the bed. Grabbing a pair of shorts from my bag, Stormy and I head out to the back so she can stretch while I get her breakfast.

While Stormy is eating, I make myself some eggs and toast. I haven't cooked at all since being at Aunt Karen's. Most of the time, she cooks or the girls are hanging out in there so I just grab something quick and try to stay out of their way. Being at Alex's makes me feel like I'm playing house. I like it.

At the table where we had pizza a few nights earlier, I eat and fool around with my phone. I have a text from Mom asking me to call her but I ignore it for now. It's better to call her when I'm driving and have an excuse to keep the conversation short.

Alex has one of those one-cup coffeemakers with a hundred different flavors. I can't find anything that looks like regular coffee so I choose

something that tastes like a coffee-flavored Snickers bar. I have to say, it's delicious.

Stormy has a ball in her mouth and is begging me to throw it for her. Not able to resist those eyes, I get down on the grass with her and gently wrestle the ball out of her mouth. As soon as I'm on my ass, she lets out a playful growl that tells me this is a game she's played before. While keeping her weight on her back legs, I steal her ball and try to hide it behind my back.

Between her growling and my laughing, I don't realize we aren't alone until I hear the snap of a camera above me.

Startled, I stand up instantly to face a little brunette with a Rockies baseball cap on. She has short hair and nice curves. This must be the girlfriend.

"Oh, sorry. I knocked but I guess you didn't hear me so I let myself in. You must be Shane." She extends her right hand to me. "I'm Stephanie."

"Yeah, no problem. It's nice to meet you, Stephanie." She isn't really what I would have expected Alex's type to be. I don't know what I expected, actually, but someone taller maybe?

"Damn, you're even cuter than Alex said." She's looking at me like I'm a piece of meat. I am used to getting attention from girls, but they aren't usually so forward. Back home, the dance was much more subtle. That's why it was easy for me to avoid it all together.

"Um, thanks." I don't know if that's a joke or not so I just smile.

"I brought you bagels. I know Alex never has a crumb of food in this house and I didn't want you to starve. I hope you like Asiago."

Ozzie what go?

"Thanks but I already ate. He must have just gone shopping because there is a ton of food here."

She barks out a laugh and reaches into the bag for a bagel before realizing I'm serious. "No way?" She takes the bagels into the kitchen and inspects the cabinets. "Hmm, that boy is smitten. Well, I guess you don't need these." She gestures to the bag in her hand.

What the hell is she talking about? Alex is smitten? With who? Her? She couldn't mean me, could she?

"I appreciate the thought, though." I tug at the hem of my shirt, feeling awkward after her comment.

"Oh, my god! Did you go to Cal Poly too?" She is pointing to my shirt. Alex's shirt. FUCK!

CHAPTER FIVE

Alex

Food. I need food. And a drink. Today was crazy. When one of the hired promotional girls fell off the stage and got a very bloody cut on her head, I thought that was the worst thing that could happen. I was wrong. Her gory ordeal was not nearly as bad as it looked. But when the sound system died in the middle of a live keynote speech, I was ready to slit my wrists. It didn't get much better as the hours passed.

In the end, it all worked out, and the client was able to laugh off the debacle of a day. My nerves are so frayed I just want to curl into the fetal position and cry. I just have to get through the sponsored brunch tomorrow and then I'll be on my way home.

Too tired to go out with everyone, I pick up Chinese takeout on my way back to the hotel. I eat takeout almost exclusively since I'm not big on cooking for one person, so it feels like being at home. After scarfing down a container of chicken lo mein, I strip out of my clothes and flop on the bed. I don't even want to take a shower after being on my feet all day.

Finally looking at the texts that came in throughout the day, I see one from Steph from early this morning.

Looks like you've been replaced

There is a photo attached of Shane on the lawn with Stormy. She is trying to grab something from behind his back and he's laughing. He has a perfect smile. Seeing him so happy warms my heart. His dark eyes are so sexy and he looks damn good on my lawn, with my dog and... in my shirt. That *is* my shirt, right? I can feel little Alex starting to twitch just thinking about how that happened. He fills it out better than I do.

I wore that on Thursday night. Why would he put on my dirty shirt? I know why I would put on a guy's dirty shirt but that couldn't be his reason... Well, maybe I was wrong about that country boy.

Pulling a couple bottles from the mini bar, I lie back on the bed debating whether to call him or not. I empty the small whisky bottle into a can of Coke

that was only half full and grab my phone. He's wearing my shirt for god's sake. A straight guy wouldn't do that.

Before I lose my nerve, I thumb out a quick text to Shane.

I see you met Stephanie.

Not two minutes later, I get a response.

Yeah. She seems nice.

Nice, hunh? That doesn't give me much. I'll have to go the more direct route.

She is nice. And Single. She'd come over if you called her. She probably even has a hot girlfriend 4 a one nighter if you're looking 4 something casual.

No way for him to be vague about that. If he responds, I should have my answer.

Thanks but not really my style. LOL

Damn, he's good.

Which part? The hot girlfriend or the one nighter.

Please say girls, please say girls, please say girls.

Both.

Thank you, sweet baby Jesus!

I guess we have more in common than a love of dogs.

Okay. That was lame. I need another drink. Opening up a bottle of vodka, I drink the shot straight. Just enough to warm me up. It's been several minutes so I might have spooked him. I try him again.

Is this a bad time?

No. Just took Stormy out one more time and now we're in bed.

Oops. Forgot to ask about my dog. The whole reason he's at my house. What a bad daddy I am! Ah well, all the more reason to find her a new daddy. Whoa, I think I feel those shots already.

So are you seeing anyone right now?

No. Very Single.

Maybe we can get a drink sometime next week?

Sounds good.

Monday?

Sure.

So you're in bed now? In my bed?

LOL. Yes.

Me too.

Is trying to sext too trashy for our first flirt session? I'm gonna have to assume yes so I'll let the poor boy go. As hard as it is to do it. And as hard as I am for him.

I'll let you get comfortable and go to sleep.

OK. Good night Alex.

Good night Shane. BTW, you look fucking hot in my shirt.

Okay, I couldn't resist that last part.

The next fifteen hours pass in a blur. I can't stop thinking about Shane while going through the motions of work. I am tempted to text him but hold off. We already did that and I don't want him to think I'm a horny teenager.

The brunch is the most successful aspect of the weekend and the clients are happy. But what I'm really focusing on is what time I'll get home and whether I can get away with ordering dinner again to keep Shane there a little longer.

Landing at the Denver airport, I practically run to my car. It's only four in the afternoon, and I'm hoping to hang out with Shane for a while before he has to take off. When I finally pull into the driveway, I can see his truck out front. It makes me wonder how often I'll see his truck in front of my house. Very often, I hope.

I can hear Stormy's high-pitched, excited whine so I know she heard me pull up. Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I get out of the car and grab my bags. I'm suddenly nervous about how he's going to react.

Forcing my features to relax, I walk in my front door. Shane has Stormy in a hold position but it won't last long, so I drop my bag and kneel beside her. She is licking my face before I can even release her from her hold. Shane's soft chuckle makes my stomach clench as I remember to be nervous.

"Looks like she missed you." He moves to straighten up the pillows where he was just sitting and then edges closer to the door. His bags are already waiting for his departure.

"Well, she seemed to be pretty happy in that picture Steph sent."

I give him a quick glance and notice his tan cheeks turn a crimson red. Now that I feel like I have permission to really look at him, I stare a bit longer than before. His bronze skin has a light dusting of stubble along his jaw that gives his boyish features a manly edge. Again, I have to fight the urge to reach out and brush my finger along it.

"About the shirt, I, uh, wasn't..."

"Don't. I think it's kinda sexy. Don't ruin my fantasy by telling me you only put it on because you spilled mustard on yours or something. Let me imagine it was intentional." I laugh when I say this but I need to put it out there. He's obviously shy, and now he knows I'm interested. The ball is in his court. And hopefully my balls will be in his... Focus!

"Oh, okay." That's it? That's all he's gonna give me? This kid is either in the closet or a virgin. Or both. A challenge. Well, god-of-making-me-work-for-it, challenge accepted.

"Have you eaten yet? I was thinking of putting some steaks on the grill? Can you stay?" Stormy's still in my lap but is chewing on a bone, already forgetting about my three-day absence. Clearly, I wasn't missed that much. But, let's be honest, I'd rather spend three days alone with Shane too, if I were her.

"Um, I guess, I could stay. If you're sure?" He looks like he's ready to barf but he slowly edges closer to me. If I had to guess, I'd say newly out. Like, maybe as of last night. Could I be his first? Do I want to be? Hell yeah, I do.

Scooting Stormy off me, I stand up and head to the kitchen. Thank god I stocked up for Shane because there usually isn't any food in the house. I wash

my hands and immediately start blending spices for a simple rub. I'm not much of a cook but I can grill a mean steak.

After a few moments of silence while I prep the meat, Shane finally clears his throat and finds his voice.

"Want me to make a salad or something?" He is washing his hands and the view of his ass is mesmerizing. His black cargo shorts go just past his knees and I don't realize I've been studying the muscles of his calves until he turns around and walks back to the fridge. I can only murmur out agreement while working the meat in my hands a little harder.

"So, it was a good trip?" It takes him a minute, but he seems more comfortable chatting now.

I don't waste the opportunity. "Really good. My clients are happy. My boss is happy. After our little chat last night, I am happy." I grab the tray of steaks and walk out the door before he can respond.

After a few minutes of standing over the grill by myself, Shane walks out with two beers. He twists the top off one and hands it to me then stands next to the grill. Making himself at home already. I love it!

"Yeah, I'm kinda new at this... so I hope I didn't sound too desperate or anything." He takes a swig of his beer and stares hard at the ground. Rocking back on his heels, he seems like he was trying to avoid looking at me. I hold my gaze until he finally makes eye contact.

"I get it. I'm just teasing you because you're so damn cute. But if I make you feel uncomfortable, just tell me. I can be a little forward when I want something." And I really want you. "But I can also be patient." Kinda. Not really... but I'll try.

"No, it's not you. It's... okay, I'm not going to say that, but it's true." He takes another heavy swallow and then squares up his shoulders and turns to face me. "I just haven't really dated much. Back home, I couldn't, and I've only been here for a few weeks so I haven't met a lot of people." He shrugs to play it off as no big deal but I can tell it is.

Feeling the need to save him, I change the subject. "Do you like 'em rare or medium rare?" I ask as I flip the steaks and glance back at Shane.

“Still mooing.” His smile this time is genuine. It is the most relaxed he’s been since I got home. “I’ll grab some plates and the salad,” he says, then disappears into the house.

After settling in for dinner, we chat about Stormy and how she behaved over the weekend. We keep it light and friendly but I don’t want him to leave without getting a better feel for what his intentions are. As soon as we both take our last bite, I lean back in my chair and go for it.

“So, would you want to go out sometime? I can take you to some of the bars around here, introduce you to some of my friends... but if you’re not ready to be out in public with an openly gay man, I get it.”

I smirk in an effort to challenge him but my insides are a mess. Why am I so nervous around him? *I’m* not the closeted virgin in this scenario. *I’m* the converted manwhore. I’ve done this dance a hundred times. Maybe thousands. Okay, probably not thousands but definitely hundreds. I shouldn’t be holding my breath waiting for his answer... but I am.

“So, all of your friends know you’re... you know? Are they... you know... too?”

Could he be any cuter?

“Gay? You can say the word. It won’t offend me, I promise.”

“Sorry. I don’t even know what is PC to say. Back home, no one ever said that word in a good way. Or, really at all. They used every other word in the book but I’ve never really been comfortable saying it out loud. I know that sounds stupid...” His cheeks pink up again and he stares at his empty bottle, probably wishing it would magically fill up and give him something to do with this hands... and mouth. I have a few ideas for both... but we’re not there yet.

“To answer your question, yes, all my friends know I’m gay. And my family. And my coworkers. And my vet.” I’m watching his reaction carefully and I can see the realization as it hits him. His aunt knows where he is and who he’s with. Is that going to be a green light or a red light for him? “So, does anyone know you’re gay or am I your first?”

When his eyes almost bug out of his head, I realize the double meaning in my words. Oops. “I mean, am I the first person you’ve told?”

“No, my family here knows. And the girls at work. They all fawn over me like I’m a damn teddy bear. It’s crazy. They call me ‘their gay.’ I don’t get it, but it’s better than what I would have been called back home...” He trails off as his features harden. Obviously, his ranch in Wyoming wasn’t exactly liberal.

“What’s that?” I ask quietly. I know I shouldn’t pry. Especially if I’m trying to get in his pants... but I want to know.

“Hunh?” He barks out a surprised laugh. “Oh, probably ‘my father’s dead son’. Maybe, ‘that faggot that ruined his reputation and destroyed the family’. I dunno.” He looks like he’s ready to bail, so I lean forward against the table, trying to get as close to him as possible without physically moving my chair.

“So, do your parents know now?”

“I’ve never told them in so many words. Maybe never will. They’ve probably always known, but as long as they didn’t have proof, it was okay. I finally got tired of being alone and I knew the only way I could ever be happy was to leave. My aunt and uncle have been really great. Letting me stay with them and giving me a job has made it a lot easier to start over.”

Without a conscious decision, my hand reaches across the table and lands on Shane’s. His breath hitches as he looks at my light skin clutching his large, rough fist. Despite the obvious differences, we look right together. I can feel the heat coming off him and his brown eyes darken even more. Neither of us say anything for a moment.

I haven’t had a connection like this with anyone in a long time. And Shane probably never has. Wait, he didn’t say that...

“So, no one knew back home?” I hedge, not sure how I want him to answer.

“No, not really. Well, except Brandon. He was my best friend.” Shane quickly looks at me for a reaction and then looks away. Studying the leaves swaying on an apricot tree in my yard, it is clear he isn’t sure whether to proceed or not. Not wanting to let the subject die, I wait for him to continue.

“He and I used to fool around sometimes. Nothing serious. Well, not to him anyway. He’s getting married next month to his high school sweetheart.

He'll have everything he ever wanted." He fakes a smile as he says it, but the hurt is evident on his face. He isn't over Brandon.

That means I have to really be patient or be a rebound. Damn it, both of those choices suck.

CHAPTER SIX

Shane

As uncomfortable as it is baring my soul to Alex, it also feels good. Like a Mack truck has been lifted off my shoulders because now at least one other person knows the real me. He seems to really understand what I'm going through.

I don't get to ask him much about his own history, but it sounds like his parents are still in his life. And all his friends know about him, which means they could know about me. It is like waking up after a lifetime of being sedated. I feel alive. Really, truly alive. I suddenly want people to know. I want to be accepted. I want to find a guy like Alex and fall in love. He joked about being interested, but he's not serious. He's the kind of guy you have fun with but it doesn't last.

If he was the settling-down type, he wouldn't be alone. He's too much of a catch. Funny, successful, sexy as sin. Yeah, he would be in a relationship if he wanted one. Unfortunately, that is what I want. I know I should take this sexual awakening as an opportunity to sow my oats and have sweaty sex with strangers in clubs, or wherever strangers go to have casual sex, but that's not me.

Even if it doesn't last forever, I want my first 'real' time to be with someone I care about. Someone who knows me and accepts me and loves me... warts and all. Not like the last time. Not like with her.

Knowing that Alex probably isn't looking for the same thing, I have to keep my attraction to him under control while absorbing all of his confidence about how to be a gay man. How ridiculous is it that I need a tutor to be gay in public?

I agreed to meet Alex at The Unicorn at eight thirty, but now that I'm in the parking lot, I'm not sure. His Pathfinder is parked along the street so I know he's here, but I'm having trouble with the idea of walking in alone. Why

does it have such a fucking fairy name? Couldn't it be called the Beer House or Joe's Sports Lounge or something more neutral? There is no way for me to play it off as ignorance if I get called out while walking in. When you walk into a bar called The Unicorn you might as well be waving a damn rainbow flag.

I'm not ready for this. I want to be ready for this, but I'm not. I moved to a different goddamn state to do this. But I need more time. Maybe I'll go to an eighties bar first. Those seem pretty gay. I'll work my way up to The Unicorn. I'll just tell Alex I got stuck at work. Or I could say I'm sick. At least that wouldn't be a lie. I'm about three breaths away from puking.

As I'm about to start the truck, my phone buzzes.

I'm here. When you walk in, we're at a table on the left.

Stay or go? My traitorous thumbs make the decision for me.

Parking now.

Okay, I guess I'm doing this.

Keeping my head down, I walk into the bar and turn left. Taking a deep breath and steeling myself for The Village People to be dancing on a table in front of me, I quickly glance around. I'm almost disappointed by the fact that it looks pretty much like every other bar I've ever been in. There is a rainbow flag on one wall and an obvious absence of women, but other than that, it's not as flamboyant as I expected.

Alex is at a table with two other guys. He stands up as soon as he sees me and waves me over. *I can do this.* He pulls me into a quick hug and ushers me into the chair next to his.

"I'm so glad you could make it," Alex says while scooting his chair closer to mine.

I haven't been shy since kindergarten, but I am suddenly afraid to make eye contact with anyone. All eyes at the table, and, honestly throughout the bar, are on me and I want to crawl into a hole and die.

“Yeah, me too,” I say quietly, continuing to avert my gaze. What am I so afraid of? I’ve had guy friends all my life. Alex isn’t any different. Except in every way that matters.

I need a drink.

“Shane, these are my friends, Greg and Dave. I grew up with Greg in Seattle. They moved here about two years ago after they got married. Guys, this is Shane Greenly. He just moved here from some mountain in Wyoming and is working for my vet.” Alex is interrupted by a thin guy that looks like he’s fifteen and is wearing short jean cutoffs and a sheer, skintight V-neck. Okay, I guess that’s another difference from all the bars I’ve been to.

“Oh, Lexy, who’s your cowboy?” the server purrs above my head, almost drooling as he boldly checks me out. I unconsciously scoot my chair in deeper under the table so he can’t ogle my crotch. I need some looser jeans because these Wranglers don’t hide much, especially when I’m around Alex.

“Down, boy. Shane just moved here and I don’t want you scaring him away. He’s newly out so be nice and bring him a Blue Moon.”

“New, hunh? Well, sweet pea, I think you’ll fit in just fine around here. You are just delicious. I’ll make sure to add some orange to yours. You look like you could use a little tang in your punch,” he says while doing some pirouette thing to walk away. I am pretty much speechless after that. Noticing my shock, Dave comes to my rescue.

“Don’t worry about Jamie. He’s a total size queen, so unless you’re packing nine inches or more, he’ll leave you alone.”

What. The. Fuck.

Out of the last ten sentences I heard, I really only understood the words *Blue Moon*... and I’m not positive that isn’t a euphemism for something else. I’m so not ready for this. That fight-or-flight instinct is setting in again when Alex puts his hand on my shoulder.

“I know this is overwhelming but try to relax,” he whispers close to my ear. Feeling self-conscious, I glance at the couple across the table. Dave is curled into Greg’s neck and gazing at the silver band on his finger. “We’ve all

been there to some degree. Dave just came out a few years ago when he met Greg. You're safe here."

Alex's hand drifts down to my bicep and he gives me a reassuring squeeze. Where is my fucking beer? And like the devil himself, Jamie is back. He puts the wet bottle on a napkin in front of me and turns completely around so his ass is leaning on the table.

"If you need a tour of the city or want to hang out sometime, just call me. Lexy has my number..." Jamie pats the side of my cheek and pushes off the table.

Remembering what Alex was saying before Jamie arrived, I nod at him. "I'm okay. This is sorta what I expected. Well, better in some ways," I look back to where Jamie is taking an order from the lap of a biker on the other end of the room, "and worse in others. But it's cool."

Taking a quick drink from the bottle, I'm already feeling better. Knowing that Alex isn't judging me helps take off some pressure to fit in. I know that I don't fit in yet but I really want to. More than anything, I want to feel comfortable in places like this.

"Okay, you two, you were about to tell me your big news when Shane showed up so let's hear it."

Both men break out toothy grins as they prepare for their announcement. Looking up to Greg, Dave nods. "We have a surrogate," Greg says quickly. He looks like he's about to burst from the chair.

"Seriously? That's awesome, guys. Congrats." Alex stands up and walks around the table. He pulls Greg up into a hug and holds him for a few seconds. I see him whisper something into Greg's ear but I can't hear what he's saying. It's obvious from their embrace that they are close. Probably very close at some point in the past. Dave is watching the exchange lovingly so it must be way in the past. Alex leans down to hug him as well. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Do you remember Marisa from our New Year's Eve party? The gorgeous blonde that is like ten feet tall?" Dave asks, jumping into the conversation. "Well, she posted something on Facebook about how her husband got snipped

and they were done with babies but she was gonna miss being pregnant. So, I posted that she should be our surrogate so she could get the good parking spots and six weeks paid vacation and we'd get a baby. After a few conversations, she agreed to do it. Can you believe it?"

As the guys talk, I nod appropriately and laugh when they do but I'm not really paying attention to their words. My focus is completely on the men themselves. Watching the way Alex's aqua eyes seem to twinkle when he teases his friends makes me smile. He is so generous with his laughter that I want to hug him. Or kiss him. Or both. Definitely both.

The craziest part is that I can. If I want to hook up, I'm pretty sure he'd be into it. And it probably wouldn't change our relationship, as far as he's concerned. He's obviously had something with Greg in the past and they are still close friends. He's just one of those happy people that wants to do his thing and let others do their thing. You gotta respect that. And I do. But I know it would change things on my side. I want a partner. A best friend *and* a lover.

When I turn to the couple in front of me, I feel a yearning for something that I didn't realize I could ever have. I know gay people can get married, but those that I've seen on TV always seemed like old guys that had been married to women at one point and now wanted to marry men. Not guys like Greg and Dave. Not guys like me.

It's almost shocking to realize I could have that if I want it. And I do want it. To be married. Maybe have a family someday. A husband. It still sounds weird in my head but it sounds exactly right in my heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex

When I told Shane that Greg and Dave were married, he blanched. Even in the dim light of the room, I could tell that his mind was spinning. At first, I thought he was upset by the idea. Maybe same-sex marriage hasn't made it to Wyoming yet? But as I'm watching his reaction to Flaming Jamie, and Greg and Dave's PDA, I realize he's not disgusted. He mostly looks fascinated by everyone. Like he's watching his favorite reality show.

His grin is genuine so I relax. He is just not used to this kind of open acceptance yet... but he will be. I know he needs time before he'll be ready for anything serious but the wheels are turning behind those sweet brown eyes. He might be ready sooner than he thinks.

I don't even realize how many hours have passed until Shane announces that he has to leave. Quickly signing my tab, I follow him out. His truck is in the back, and I walk next to him in silence until we get to his door.

"So, Greg and Dave really like you."

"Oh, yeah? They seem cool. I can't believe they're married. And a baby? That's... wow. I've never met a couple like them." Shane was fidgeting with his keys but I could sense a wistfulness in his words. That's a good sign.

Unable to resist, I reach out and place my hand on his forearm. I want to pull him to me but he's still tense. Obviously, he's not used to being touched. That makes me want to hold him even more.

"So, would you like to go to dinner on Friday? Just us?" I ask. He slowly moves his gaze from my hand, up my arm, stopping at my mouth and then finally settles on my eyes.

"Yeah, I would."

"Good." I smile widely, now that he's accepted. Pulling him into a hug, I whisper, "I'm glad you came."

His arms are tentative at first and then he relaxes, holding me against his

broad chest. He smells so good, I can't help but inhale his cologne. Maybe it's just his deodorant but it smells amazing.

"I'm glad I came too," he whispers into my neck. His hot breath tickles me everywhere. Afraid he's going to feel the effect he's having on me, I pull back. I want to give him a peck on the cheek but I don't. I just need to go slow with him.

Wanting this to be a proper date, I insist on picking him up. He's shy about me meeting his family, but this is all part of the process. If he wants to be out, he has to be able to invite a guy over to his home. At least, this is how I'm justifying the fact that I'm being selfish in wanting him to be ready to date. More specifically, ready to date *me*.

Dr. Mills answers the door with her husband at her side. "Alex, welcome. It's great to see you. Please, come in." They both step back so I can enter the large foyer. Their home is newly-built and quite large. Obviously, she's done well as a vet.

"Thanks, uh, Karen." I give her a quick hug and reach my right hand out to her husband. "Hi. I'm Alex."

"Ron. Good to meet you. I've heard a lot about you from..." Karen pinches his side and he stops himself. "Karen. She's always talking about that dog of yours."

Was he going to say Shane? Has Shane been talking about me to his uncle? Definitely a good sign.

"How's my favorite patient coming along? Has she been staying off that leg?"

Just as I start my update on Stormy, Shane appears at the bottom of the staircase. I can't speak. He looks so damn good I can feel my heart speed up. I know I've got a stupid grin on my face but I don't care. I just stare as he walks up to me. Unconsciously, I reach out and pull him into a quick hug.

"Hey," he says tentatively.

"Hey. You look great," I say quietly, aware of our audience but unable to

suppress my mouth. If I don't speak, I might lick him or something equally inappropriate.

"Well, have a great time, boys," Karen says as she drags Ron out of the room.

"You look good too," Shane says shyly. He briefly scans up and down my body. His eyes are just as hungry as mine. We need to get out of here.

"You ready?" I ask, hands in my pant pockets to keep them from wrapping around his thickly muscled arm.

"I think so." Shane's smiling but I can hear his hesitation. Before he can talk himself out of this night, I reach for his wrist and tug him out the door. By the time we get to my car, he's walking in step with me. I'm not usually traditional but I open his car door for him. That might have been a little too much because he just stands there on the sidewalk staring at the open door for a minute before finally climbing in.

Once we're driving, I realize something is wrong. Shane is unusually quiet in the passenger seat. I can see him watching me from the corner of my eye but I wait a few minutes before looking over to him.

"Is everything okay? You seem like you want to say something." While we're stopped at a light, I shift in my seat a bit to fully look at him. "You can say anything to me. If you are uncomfortable with anything I do or if you have any questions, just let me know."

"Um, well, do you always do that?" Shane asks, unable to make eye contact with me.

"Do what?"

"Open doors and stuff. Are you, like, always the guy?"

It takes me a minute to figure out what he's talking about but once I do, I have to chuckle. God, he's adorable.

"Yes, Shane, I'm always the guy. But, so is my date. We're both 'the guy' tonight." I'm trying to be funny but he hasn't relaxed yet so I know it's still bothering him. "I don't know what kind of experiences you've had, if any, but

I don't go for the really femme guys. I like to be with men. Strong, tough, sweaty men. And I like to be strong and tough and sweaty too. But I asked you out, so I'm opening doors and picking up the check and all that good stuff." He's chewing the inside of his cheek so vigorously, I'm expecting to see a hole appear on the outside. Maybe that wasn't the right answer either.

"Is that what's bothering you or is there more to your question? I promise, you can ask me anything." I don't want to mess this up so I reach over and put my hand on his knee. It's meant to be a reassuring gesture but I can feel the muscles of his thigh through his jeans and I'm tempted to pull over and rip them off him. *Control yourself, man!*

"I was just wondering if that translated into other areas. Like, are you always the top?" His gorgeous face reddens, but I'm glad he feels comfortable enough to ask. And even more glad that he is thinking that far into the future. Although, hopefully it's not *that* far into the future. Like, maybe after dinner tonight?

"Oh, I see." I should have known that would be a concern if he is inexperienced. "Actually, no. I can switch, but I'm usually a bottom." The light is green so I can't watch his reaction as closely as I'd like but I can see his shoulders relax back into the seat.

"Really? Hunh..." He's quiet after that so I give him the rest of the ride to think. I can only imagine what's going on in that pretty little head of his. Hopefully there are some images of him slamming me against my headboard in there. I know that's what I'm picturing through the silence.

Dinner is perfect. The restaurant is one of the best in the city, and once you take that first bite, it's obvious why. Reservations are usually booked a month out, but the owner does a lot of work with my agency and when I ran into him on Wednesday, he was happy to get me onto their VIP list. The table was in a secluded corner that couldn't have been more romantic. It was also private enough that Shane doesn't mind when I make a toast to "us" with a seventy-dollar bottle of champagne. Or when I reach out to hold his hand while we wait for dessert. Or when I offer him a bite of my soufflé off my fork.

As we walk to my car, I hold his hand. He seems a little tense as we pass a couple in the parking lot, but when they don't react, his whole body relaxes. I can't remember ever being so self-conscious of my sexuality but I respect his hesitancy. Of course, that doesn't mean I'm not going to keep pushing him.

I walk him to the passenger side and place my hands on his hips, shifting his weight so his back is up against the door. Taking a step between his spread legs, I press the length of my body against his. When his initial shock wears off, he looks at me with a shy grin. That's all the encouragement I need. With my lips parted, I lean into his mouth, closing them around his lower lip and tug it gently. He is already breathing heavily when I run the tip of my tongue over the front of his teeth. He opens his mouth wider as I pull him into me, exploring his hot mouth eagerly.

Shane's hand untucks my shirt and kneads my lower back as we continue to explore each other. Remembering that we're still in the middle of a parking lot, I force myself to take a step back. Leaving one hand on Shane's neck and the other gripping his bicep, I look into his eyes. "You up for dessert?"

Getting him to agree to come back to my place for a drink takes some effort. I can tell he wants to... but is still afraid. Not willing to part ways so early, I pull out the big guns and remind him that Stormy needs to be let out. As expected, he quickly gives in.

When Stormy sees Shane, she almost pees herself. You would think they were long lost siblings or something. She is so jumpy that he has to sit on the floor and wrestle with her just to keep her weight off her cast. I quickly snap a picture on my phone and attach it to his contact. I could stare at that image forever.

Once she settles down, we sit on the sofa with some chardonnay and Shane confesses that he isn't much of a wine drinker. He seems to like it though, and I think it might loosen him up faster than beer.

"Tell me about this kennel that you want to open up," I ask. We are sitting side-by-side on my sofa but still have a good foot between us. Close enough that we can be pressed against each other in seconds... but far enough away that I can continue to ogle him. It's fast becoming my favorite pastime.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Shane

Our date started off a little rocky. When he hugged me in front of Aunt Karen and Uncle Ron, I almost passed out. But they didn't wince or comment so I guess they can deal with it. But when he opened the car door for me I almost bolted. The only thing I could think was that if he's doing the guy stuff, that means he expects me to do the girl stuff... which I'm still not sure about.

But once we got into the restaurant and started talking, everything fell into place. Alex is thoughtful in ways that keep surprising me. Not only did he get us a table in a corner that was totally private, he also eased me into the physical affection. When he reached for my hand across the table and held it, in plain view of the world, I was beaming. I had to stop myself from climbing over the table and into his lap.

I waver on whether or not to go back to his house after dinner, but it's close to the restaurant and Stormy needed to get out. I didn't want her to suffer because I was being a pussy about alone time with Alex.

Now that we're on his sofa, facing each other with a glass of wine, I am so glad I came. This feels so natural that I can easily picture spending my evenings here with Alex for a long time to come.

"Well, my parents' ranch trains hunting dogs for people across the country. We'll usually get a pup for six to ten weeks and work with them until they are competent bird dogs. I guess I want to do the same thing here but on a smaller scale." I paused to make sure Alex was still interested and he was staring with rapt attention. Like every word out of my mouth is fascinating to him. "Ultimately, I'd like to have a few acres that I can use to do day boarding of dogs and just take a few training pups at a time. Land is more expensive out here, so it'll be a while before I can buy something, but Aunt Karen said I can manage her kennel services at the end of summer if I want."

"That's sounds great. Are you going to take her up on her offer?" Alex asks me, scooting forward just a bit so he can rest his hand on my elbow over the back of the sofa.

“Probably. I didn’t want to commit for the long term in case I didn’t like living here, but I’m starting to think this might be a good place to settle down.” Feeling suddenly bashful, I tuck my chin and look for Stormy. She’s curled up on her bed across the room, passed out.

“Is that what you want to do? Settle down?”

“Well, eventually. I just mean this seems like as good a place as any to set up my kennel. And with referrals from Aunt Karen’s office, it makes sense to be here.”

Looking over to Alex, his eyebrows are furrowed. He’s contemplating something that he doesn’t look happy about. Damn. I knew those words would be a turnoff, but I have to be honest about what I want. No more lying. That’s what I promised myself when I moved here and it has to start now. Of course, that doesn’t mean I have to disclose everything yet... but I will be honest about any direct questions he asks. I just hope he doesn’t ask *that* question anytime soon. Or ever.

Not able to stand the silence, I reach my hand up and rest it on his bicep. His compact but very well-defined bicep.

“What about you? Where do you see yourself in five years?” Whether he wants to talk about it or not, I need to know. If this isn’t going anywhere, I need to stop before we get too deep.

“Well, I’m a bit older than you, so I probably have different priorities. I hope that in five years I’ll be in a serious relationship. Maybe thinking about a family. Maybe get Stormy a little brother or sister.”

A little bit of wine dribbles out of my mouth as I almost choke at his confession.

A serious relationship? A family? “Human brother or sister... or canine?” I ask with a smirk. Maybe he’s just messing with me.

“Either. Both maybe.” He scoots toward me so his calf is pressed against mine. Even through our clothes, I can feel his heat. Looking into his eyes, the aqua is just a tiny border around solid black. He is just as aroused as I am. I’m leaning forward without realizing it when he finishes his thought. “But don’t

let that scare you. I don't expect anything more from you than some fun. I know this is new to you so don't worry about that now. This can be totally casual."

What? What the hell does that mean? He doesn't expect anything from me. Does that mean he doesn't want anything serious with me? Am I just some checkmark off his bucket list? Seduce a virgin and then start looking for someone long term. Fuck that.

"You know, maybe I should get out of here. I'm flattered that I've made it onto your list or whatever but we aren't looking for the same things." I've gone from aroused and ready to pissed off and humiliated. Within seconds, I'm on my feet and heading to the door. "I'll just call a cab, you don't need to drive me home."

"What? What's wrong? Shane... why are you leaving?" He's right behind me but I can't look back. I'm afraid my emotions will manifest into tears and I don't want him to see that. I don't know why I'm so upset. I knew he wasn't interested in me in a serious way. What happened to my plan to just use him for 'tutoring' and maybe friendship? Doesn't matter now. I've got to get the hell out of here.

I pull the front door open only a few inches before his hand passes my head and stops it. Palm flat against the door, only inches from my face, Alex slams it shut and takes a step into me. With his chest pressed into my back, he whispers, "Please tell me what's wrong. If I said something stupid, I didn't mean to. I'm just... really stupid. Please."

I'm frozen between Alex and the door. Part of me wants to run but he feels so good on me that I lean back. My ass is against his crotch and I can't help pushing into it.

"Just tell me what freaked you out so we can talk about it. Okay?" he asks into my ear.

I nod slightly and let him pull me back to the sofa. When he sits, he grabs my hand and laces his fingers with mine, holding them on his lap. Looking up at him, I decide to try out that honesty approach I committed to just moments ago.

“I’m not looking for a one-night stand. I’m looking for a... boyfriend, I guess.” I try to pull my hand out of his grip but he doesn’t let me. His grip tightens and he adds his other hand to reinforce his point.

“I’m looking for that too. I just told you that,” he says softly. “What’s the problem?”

“Well, you said you weren’t looking for that with me. If I’m just some kind of conquest, I’m not interested.” Finally, I meet his gaze. The anger and embarrassment are back but I’m ready to confront him. Maybe even looking for a fight after all this.

“I did? I didn’t mean to say it like that. I meant that if you don’t want that, it’s okay. But, I definitely want more than one night with you.” His hand reaches up to cup my face, trailing his fingers along my jaw, brushing his soft thumb across my lower lip. “I want you. More than I’ve wanted anyone in a long time.”

Without another word, his palm wraps behind my neck and he pulls me in. My lids drift down as I feel his smooth, warm lips land on mine. At first, we are both still. Then, he begins to move over the curves of my mouth. Tasting me. It feels so good. It’s been so long since I’ve been physical with anyone that I quickly lose control. In a matter of seconds, I shift from hesitant to desperate. My mouth opens and I’m pressed into his lips, seeking his tongue, licking his teeth, practically climbing inside of him. I can’t get close enough.

Alex’s shirt is off before I realize that I pulled it straight up and over his head in one pass. He pulls me up and we’re stumbling to his room, never losing contact. My lips always on him. His jaw, his neck. God, he smells good. My mind is rationalizing what my body can’t stop. I know I should slow it down. That I’ve only just met Alex and we should wait but I’ve waited too long. I’m done thinking things through before I act. I need this. I need Alex.

Once in his room, he backs up to his bed until he’s leaning against it. My jeans and boxers are off and in a pile before he even sits down. Pushing him down against the bed, he lays back and I climb over him, tearing my shirt off in the process.

I attack Alex’s mouth, months of pent-up tension pushing me to keep going. Faster. Harder. He places a palm on my forehead and pushes back just a

bit. “Hey, slow down there, turbo. We don’t have to rush.” He pulls me into a languid kiss and I melt into it... for about two seconds. Then, I am all fired up again and pawing at his pants to get those fuckers off.

“I don’t want to slow down. I want you. *Now*,” I almost growl as I finally pull down his pants. I am greeted by the most beautiful cock I’ve ever seen. Perfectly pink and glistening at the tip with anticipation. Granted, I haven’t seen very many in person but Alex’s has to be one of the best. It is lean and long, just like him.

Now that it’s out, I need to put it in something. Immediately. I lean over and kiss it. So smooth. Wrapping my tongue around the head, I roll it around in my mouth, sucking on it like a pacifier. And it is.

Alex is making adorable moany sounds that make me want him even more. His short fingernails are grating the top of my head, trying to get a grip, but the sweaty strands slip easily between his fingers.

Taking a deep breath through my nose, I suck hard on his tip and push down, letting him slide further into my mouth. He is at least an inch longer than Brandon so I know I won’t be able to take him fully in but it doesn’t matter. When he hits the back of my throat, his thrust tells me what he needs.

I pull off his dick slowly and let him pop out of my mouth. He grinds up a bit but my hand on his thigh holds him down. We’re doing this my way. Like a caged animal that has finally escaped, I am ready to lose my virginity. Well, to a guy anyway.

This *is* my first rodeo and I’m gonna savor every second of it. I want to try everything that I was never allowed to try before. Touch everything that was off-limits with Brandon. Do everything that I’ve spent the past ten years fantasizing about. And I’m gonna do it all with Alex.

CHAPTER NINE

Alex

Oh my god, this boy can give head. Obviously this is one of the things he did when he “messed around” with his buddy. I want to come but he won’t let me. Using his lips and tongue and teeth to get me just to the edge and then backing off. I almost wonder if he’s doing it accidentally, not realizing how close he’s getting me before changing positions. It might have been frustrating if it wasn’t so damn sexy watching him experiment on me.

This isn’t at all how I expected the evening to go. I thought I’d totally screwed up any chance I might have had with him when he went for the door. My stupid mouth got me into trouble again. After we straightened that out, he’s been unstoppable. But I’m definitely not asking him to stop. I did try to get him to slow down but he’s been slowed down, or stalled completely, for too long. As soon as he knew I was serious, he practically jumped me.

I hope he doesn’t regret this in the morning because I want all of him. And by the way his fingers keep inching toward my ass, I know he wants it too.

“Is this okay,” he asks, taking his lips off my cock only long enough to get the words out. He’s rolling my balls around in his hand with just enough pressure to make me squirm. They’re full and tight and begging to release.

“Mmmmm.” I’m so lost in the moment, I don’t want to speak. Afraid I might say the wrong thing again, I try to encourage him with the sounds that I like to hear. Sounds I don’t always make but can’t seem to suppress with Shane.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he coos against the seeping head of my cock, pulling off and trailing his tongue along the dorsal vein and then continuing down my thigh. Pushing both knees off the bed, he leans back and looks at me. I’m fully exposed to him.

“Please, Shane. I need to feel you,” I beg. Lifting my ass up off the bed, he just stares for a moment.

“God, you’re hot.” If I wasn’t on the brink of imploding, I would have felt self-conscious under his scrutiny. But I don’t. I know this might be one of the

first times he's ever really looked at a naked man, and I don't want him to feel ashamed by it. I try not to let my own embarrassment tense me up. He seems to like what he's seeing so I'll let him get a good look. And I won't feel bad when I subject him to the same ogling.

"Fuck me, Shane."

"I want to but... I haven't before. Not like... this." He leans over my body and hovers just above me. Not even really touching me... just a faint teasing of his skin against mine. Grabbing his ass with both hands, I pull him against me, hard.

"That's okay. We'll go slow. I just... Fuck, I want you." With that, his mouth is back on mine. I know he's trying to pace himself but he's just as desperate as I am. Moving his lips to my chin, he nibbles up to my ear.

Shane slips the tip of his middle finger into my mouth and I eagerly accept it, sucking it in deep as he shudders against my chest. When he pops his finger out of my mouth, he moves it straight to my hole and gently starts to rub. He isn't pressing in yet, but I can't wait much longer. I need to get this moving. Quick.

"In the drawer," I mumble, pointing to the nightstand on the other side of the bed. He freezes for a moment before realizing what I mean. Climbing over me, and rubbing his rock-hard dick across my belly in the process, he opens the drawer.

"Um, what do we need?" He's shuffling things around, probably curious about some of the toys in there but we don't have time for that. Not this minute anyway. Maybe on the next go-round.

"Just the lube and a rubber." And you in me. Now!

With supplies in hand, Shane resumes his perch above me and is suddenly shy. Not sure what to do next, he just stares at the condom.

"Do you have a preference? Like, position or whatever." Could he be any cuter?

"C'mere." Pulling him down into a soft kiss, I try to take a bit more control. I know he wants to do everything, and I want him to do everything,

over and over again. But, I also want him to enjoy it and not be stressed about whether it's right or wrong. This thing between us already feels different than with other guys I've been with. It already feels right. I want him to love every second of it.

Shifting him to the side, I reposition myself so I'm straddling him. Our cocks are finally touching and I'm ready to blow again. Reaching between us, I let myself touch him. With the overhand grip that I prefer to use on myself, I firmly grasp his head and stroke down to his base. The long breath that he lets out releases some of the tension in his body.

With a few more solid strokes, I sit back on his thighs and look into his eyes. "Are you ready?"

His eyes light up like a kid on Christmas morning, and that smile makes me melt just a little bit. "I want you, Alex."

That's all I need to hear. I unwrap the rubber and slowly roll it down his length. His cock is thicker than mine but a little shorter. Perfect. I want to spend hours inspecting every inch of his body but that'll have to wait. Right now, I just need him to fuck me.

With a generous dollop of lube, I slowly cover his sheathed cock. When I lean forward to kiss up his chest, I reach under and coat myself with lube. Lightly pressing in the tips of two fingers, I stretch myself just a bit. I've only been with a few first-timers but it can get a little rough until they know how to read my cues. Not that it matters. At this point, I'd let him fuck me bare and dry if he wanted to.

When we're both out of breath, I move him to my opening. As much as I want to keep kissing his face, I pull up so I can control my descent. Without breaking eye contact, I slowly slide over his head. Shane's breath catches and his almost-black eyes bore into mine. I continue to lower myself, not even waiting to adjust. He fits perfectly inside me and is fully buried within moments.

"Fuck, Alex," he whispers. "You are so tight."

With my palms on his chest, I lift up slowly until only his head is in me and then drop my weight quickly. He is pressed against every nerve that

matters and I'm in heaven. I want to go slow but he feels too good. Trying to pace myself, I set a medium rhythm. Not super slow, but not fast enough to make him come before he's ready.

His pecs are solid and smooth. Just running my fingertips over his taut skin is almost enough to bring me to the edge. After a few more long strokes, I increase my speed. Shane grabs my hips and holds me against his pelvis.

"Don't move. Just hold there for a sec." His eyes are closed and I have to grin. I know he's probably picturing his mother or some other mood-breaking scene to calm himself down. When his eyes open and he notices me watching him, he just smiles. That perfectly sweet smile. I lean down to him.

"You're so beautiful, you know that?" I ask softly as I lick the length of his ear lobe.

"You're pretty fucking gorgeous, yourself," he says, chuckling. More seriously, he adds, "You have no idea how many times I've imagined this moment."

"And?" I ask with a smirk. Part of me knows he wouldn't tell me if it was bad but I still want to hear him say it.

"Way better than I imagined. I'm trying not to come but... fuck, you feel good."

Not wanting the boy to wait too long, I start moving again. With my knees spread wide so I can stay as low to him as possible, I set a faster pace. Sliding all the way to the tip and pumping hard against him. Each time he hits my prostate, I shudder. It's like I'm having mini orgasms with each pass. Is that possible? If it is, it better be a permanent phenomenon because I can't go back to the old way. This is amazing. Shane is amazing.

While I'm lost in my own ecstasy, I feel his body tense below me. He's ready. My hand wraps around my cock, matching the speed of his hips. With two quick, short thrusts into me, Shane releases his load. His hips arch off the bed as he tries to get even deeper, chasing the orgasm that has his body vibrating. As his eyes flutter back and his fingers dig into my thighs, I give into my own release. A deep, rolling wave of pleasure rocks me forward and I shoot hard all over Shane's chest.

After a moment of just lying in my come on top of Shane, I finally lift my ass off him and curl into his side. His arm wraps around me and pulls me closer. There is no place in the world I'd rather be than with this man, naked in my bed.

"Fuck, that was amazing," Shane says once he's caught his breath.

"For me too," I confess into his neck. "I felt like I was coming the entire time. I've never had that happen before." I reach down and pull off the condom, tying it and tossing it on the nightstand.

"Really?" I can hear the smirk in his voice.

"Yes, really. But don't go getting a big head or anything. I'm sure it was just a fluke," I tease. "You'll have to do that at least... I dunno, ten or fifteen more times before I'll believe it was more than just beginner's luck."

"Beginner's luck, hunh?" He shifts his weight so he is lying on me, his full weight pressing me against the mattress. I'm already hard and ready for him. "Well, let's see what you think about this."

CHAPTER TEN

Shane

Beginner's luck, my ass. Okay, it's true that I am technically a beginner, but I knew exactly what I was doing to Alex. His face is so expressive that when I hit the right spot, I knew it immediately.

After he was fully relaxed on me, I was able to angle my thrusts so every one counted. His weeping cock on my belly was proof enough of that. Each time I pounded into him, it seemed to thicken just a little bit more. When I knew I was ready to blow, I had to hold him in place. Deep enough to keep him stimulated but still enough that I could regain my loose grip of control.

I was just barely able to hold out for a few more minutes once he started riding me again, quickly stroking me with his ass in a way that made it impossible to concentrate on anything else. I could feel my orgasm building but when he reached for his cock and started jerking it, it was so hot that I knew I was done. Holding him down, I gave a few more thrusts before I was erupting within him. Pushing my ass off the bed, I tried to get as deep into Alex as I could. His muscles, still contracting from his release, were milking my dick of all that I had to offer.

I knew intercourse would be awesome but nothing I'd ever done alone or with Brandon could possibly have prepared me for how it felt to be with Alex. Not even with her. This was gentle and hot and... intimate. Alex was completely open to letting me have his body in a way I wasn't sure I'd ever feel comfortable doing. Yet with him, everything feels right. Like we've been doing it for years. When I came, I could feel every nerve in my body light up.

Maybe that was some kind of beginner's luck because I can't imagine ever leaving this bed again if that could be repeated. Not that I ever *want* to leave this bed.

After that first night, Alex and I have been practically inseparable. The excuses that we were using to see each other every day were so ridiculous that

it's become a running joke. One night he asked me to stop by to help him shuck some corn for the grill. A few days later, I told him I needed him to go with me to the barber shop to help me choose a new hairstyle.

Tonight, for our one-month anniversary, he asked me to go to dinner with him at his favorite dim sum restaurant so I could help him order from the Cantonese menu. Tomorrow, we're going on a hike so I can take pictures of indigenous butterflies. That'll be funnier when he remembers I don't own a camera.

I told Aunt Karen and Uncle Ron that I'd probably stay at Alex's this weekend but they know *probably* means one hundred percent definitely. Since that first weekend, I've stayed over every Friday and Saturday night and have trouble going home on Sunday.

So, with my duffle bag on his back seat, Alex is driving us to the restaurant with my hand entwined in his. Now that we're officially a couple, he is always touching me. I love it. I'm not even shy about public affection anymore. When I'm with Alex, the rest of the world seems to fade into the background. If people are uncomfortable around us, I don't even notice. I only notice where his skin is touching mine. Where his arm embraces mine. How his smile grows when he's looking at me. And how many minutes are left until we're alone again.

"You brought your English-to-Chinese dictionary, right," he says, tugging on my arm.

"Gong Hei Fat Choi," I immediately respond.

"Great." Alex laughs. "I'm sure after we wish them a happy New Year, they'll bring us something delicious."

"We'll just do what you usually do. Point and grunt at anything rolling past that looks good. It'll be fine."

Looking at me with those adoring eyes, he nods slowly and squeezes my fingers. "Yeah, it will be."

And that's how it always is. We joke around and act silly. And then there are these moments when we get lost in each other. I've seen my aunt and uncle

do it and thought it was just something old people did when they were remembering their younger years. But now that I'm doing it, I realize it means something more.

Having never been in a real relationship, I didn't know how quickly one could go from being just attracted to a person to head-over-heels, completely in love with them. But, in only a few weeks, I've done it. I haven't said the words to Alex, and he hasn't said them to me, but that's how I feel.

Without meaning to, we rush through dinner. Everything tastes great, as usual, but Alex has something planned at his place that he was anxious to get back to. Based on past experience, I had a pretty good idea of what his plans would entail and I was just as antsy to get out of the restaurant as he was.

"Can you wait out here for a second?" Alex asks when he pulls into his driveway. "I need to get something ready."

"Sure."

He opens his door and then ducks back in to grab me by the neck for a kiss. It was meant to be a quick peck but quickly turned into the beginning of a full on mack session.

"Hold that thought for two minutes," he begs when he pulls away and hops out of the car.

When Alex walks back out, he is beaming. The goofy grin on his face has me mirroring his excitement.

"Ready?" I ask, getting out of the car and stretching my arms above my head.

"Are you?" he says back with a smirk.

"I've been half hard all night so if whatever is in there involves you getting naked, I'm more than ready."

"Is that all you ever think about?" he teases, grabbing me by the bicep and pulling me onto the porch.

"Honestly?" I look over his shoulder and down to his perfect ass. "Yes."

"Good answer, perv," he says, smacking my ass and pushing me through his front door.

Not sure what to expect, I enter his front room and look around. Nothing seems out of place so I glance back at Alex.

“What am I looking for?”

“Just keep going. Out back,” he says, pushing me to walk through the house.

When I step out the back door, I’m greeted by a twinkling picnic. Alex has clear Christmas lights strung across every branch and post in his yard, creating a beautiful canopy over a blanket that is set directly under the large apricot tree.

“I thought we could have dessert out here,” he says, glancing to me. He’s still smiling but I can tell he’s nervous about my reaction.

“You did all this?” Wrapping my arm around his waist, I pull him against me. “I love it.”

“It’s not too much? I wanted to do something romantic but I didn’t want to freak you out.” He brings his hand up to trace a finger around my ear. “You’re not freaked out, are you?”

“Not even a little bit. It looks great.” I lean into his mouth and lightly kiss him. Just a soft brush of my lips on his before I feel him smile against me. Easing off, I ask, “So, what’s for dessert?”

“Not that. Well, not yet.” Alex pulls back with a smirk and drags me to the blanket.

Taking a seat in the middle of the blanket, I watch as Alex opens the basket. He pulls out a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Then, he opens a container of huge, chocolate-dipped strawberries. Finally, a can of aerosol whipped cream is unveiled and my mouth is watering. I don’t eat a lot of sweets but I have a feeling this night is going to satisfy more than my sweet tooth.

“So, I wanted to start off with a toast,” he explains, opening the bottle. The cork pops, but no fizz is lost. Alex has done this before. While he pours the champagne, I sneak a peek into the basket and realize it isn’t empty. There is a small, black box with a red bow around it. A gift. Shit.

“What is that? I didn’t know we were doing gifts, Alex.” I feel like a total douche. I should have asked what he had planned but it never occurred to me that I should get him something for one month.

“No, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. Please, just... here.” He hands a glass to me and raises his own. “I know it’s only been a month but I really care about you, Shane. A lot. I know this is all new for you and I don’t want to rush you into anything you aren’t ready for but, actually, this is new for me too. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. Even the guys that I thought I was in love with, I’m beginning to think maybe I wasn’t. Because, now I’m thinking that maybe I really am... in love with you.”

I’m speechless. Alex just told me that he’s in love with me. He loves me. Is that possible? Does he really feel about me the way I feel about him? I know he’s waiting for me to respond in some way but it takes me a minute to compose myself. My throat burns but I manage to finally find my voice. “I think I’m in love with you too.”

The relief and happiness on Alex’s face is evident. He was afraid to be honest about his feelings but he did it. I know that I’ll need to be honest with him about everything at some point but not yet. This is too good to mess up. He is more than I ever hoped to find and I’m not sure how he’ll react when he finds out what I did. Tonight that doesn’t matter. All that matters is that Alex loves me. And I love Alex. And we’ve got all weekend to show each other just how much.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alex

After hearing Shane tell me that he loves me too, I felt like I was floating. I planned to give him a key to my house for our one-month anniversary but I wasn't sure how he would take it. I know one month doesn't seem like a long time, and in all my previous relationships, I was never sure I liked the guy enough to consider a key exchange until at least the six month mark. But, to my surprise, Shane happily accepted it. He looked as happy to say the words as I was to hear them.

We spent the whole night feeding each other strawberries and licking whipped cream off each other and making love. Just slowly moving with each other under the lights with only a small blanket to cover us from the world. It was amazing. I came over and over again within Shane's embrace. Cocooned inside of him in every possible way.

Fast or not, I was in love with Shane and couldn't stop myself from imagining a future with him. A long and happy future with Shane by my side. Living on a ranch with a bunch of dogs running around... and maybe even a baby or two at some point. I don't care how it all happens, I just want to be with that man for the rest of my life.

When Shane's phone rings at eight am, I immediately have a sense of dread. No one calls that early on a Saturday unless it's an emergency. The first time it rings, he just hits ignore and nuzzles into my neck. When it rings again a few minutes later, his whole body tenses up. I know that he's thinking the same thing I am. This is bad.

"Hey, Mom," he says into the phone, clearing his throat. He sits up in the bed to better focus on what she is saying.

"No, it's fine. What's up?"

"B negative, I think. Why?" The tension is now in his voice. Are they talking about blood?

“When?” Shane swings his legs off the bed and reaches for his boxers on the floor.

“What about... uh... Jacob?”

Jacob? He’s never mentioned a Jacob in his past. His best friend slash jacking buddy was Brandon.

“I’m on my way.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll be there in a few hours. I’ll call when I’m close.”

Shane hangs up the phone and quickly starts gathering his clothes.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, stepping in front of him to get his attention.

“Um, no actually.” He looks at me for a second like he forgot I was there. “A family friend was in a car accident yesterday. I need to go home for a few days.” He pulls out of my arms and starts looking for his keys.

“Now? You’re driving up there now?”

“They’re in the hospital and need blood donations or something. I guess I’m the right blood type so I’ll see if I can help.” As he approaches the door, he seems to realize he’s about to leave me for a few days. Dropping his bag, Shane turns back to me. “I’m sorry I have to leave like this but I’ll call you later or tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to go with you? I can take a few days...”

“No. Thanks, but no.” Staring into my eyes for a long moment, he kisses me urgently. I can feel the fear and pain in his motions but I tell myself it’s just his fear of losing a loved one. I have so many questions I want to ask, not the least of which is about *Jacob*. But, I hold my questions. He’s obviously distracted and needs to get on the road. “I love you,” he says quickly as he pulls away.

“I love you too.” I barely get the words out as the front door shuts and Shane is gone. I feel like my whole world just walked out the door.

The drive to Casper should have taken about four hours on a Saturday morning. It’s now four pm and I haven’t heard from Shane at all. I’ve sent a

few texts to see how he's doing but no response yet. I try to distract myself with laundry and errands but I can't stop thinking about him.

I'm not generally insecure but I can't help feeling that I'm about to lose Shane. It's stupid and immature but I just need to hear from him. I need to know he's okay. And that we're okay.

Greg took pity on me and invited me over to their house for dinner. I wasn't in the mood to socialize but I couldn't stand being home any longer.

"Lex, come on. You know he adores you. He's just got to deal with a family thing." Greg is always good for a pep talk but it's not working today.

"I know. I'm sorry I'm being such a downer," I apologize.

Dave sits next to me on the couch and hands me another glass of Syrah. "Remember when my mom broke her hip a few years ago? I think I went three days without calling Greg because I was so focused on helping her and keeping my dad calm and making sure my sisters weren't fighting. Just give him some space and once the initial shock wears off, he'll be just as anxious to get back to you as you are to see him."

"You think so?" I want to believe that's all that's happening but I can't completely trust it. Until I hear from Shane that we're good, I just won't be able to rest.

"Of course, I do." Dave pats my knee. God, I hope he's right.

At nine thirty on Sunday night, I finally get a text from Shane.

Hey. Sorry couldn't talk til now. I'm OK. U?

I'm fine. Was worried about you. I miss you.

Miss U 2.

When will U be home?

Not sure. Got some stuff to take care of here. I'll call this week.

Can you talk now?

Can't. At the hospital. Not supposed to use my cell.

OK. I love you.

Love you 2.

Okay. That's not so bad. He's okay but in the hospital where he can't use his phone. That makes sense. I still want to hear his voice. See his face. But I can chill for a few days and give him space. He knows I'm here for him when he's ready. I just hope he isn't planning an extended stay.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Shane

When Mom told me that Ashley had been in a car accident, I felt bad for her but wasn't sure why Mom was telling me. But when she said that Jacob was with her and is now in critical condition, I was shocked. She knows. Mom wouldn't have called me if she didn't know.

I don't know how I avoided a ticket but I managed to go almost three hundred miles in three and a half hours. The whole drive, my thoughts jumped between what to tell Alex and what to do about Jacob. I should have known that life couldn't be as easy as it was.

Everything is perfect with Alex. I am finally in a relationship with a guy that cares for me the way I care for him and that could all be ruined. One stupid moment in time eighteen months ago and now my life could be changed forever.

Walking into the hospital I visited several times in my childhood makes everything more real. My mom is in one of the waiting rooms when I finally arrive.

"Shane, honey, you made it." She rushes to hug me. "I didn't expect you for a few more hours."

"Well, there wasn't any traffic..." I'm happy to see Mom but still ashamed that she knows about the secret I've been hiding for over a year. "How's Ashley?"

"Come sit with me." Mom pulls me to a chair and holds my hands in her lap. "The accident was very serious. A truck hit their SUV head-on and caused it to roll over twice."

I feel like I'm listening to her through a pair of headphones. Her voice seems muffled as I take in every word.

"Tim died instantly. He was driving and had the most direct impact. Ashley had a lot of internal bleeding when she arrived but we thought she'd pull through. I talked to her last night and it seemed like she had turned the

corner. But, overnight, she went into cardiac arrest and passed away at about four am.”

“Oh my god.” I can’t believe this. Standing up, I pace the small room trying to understand what my mom is saying to me. “Why didn’t you tell me on the phone?”

“I didn’t want you to be upset while you were driving but, as I mentioned, we needed you here. Jacob wasn’t actually hurt from the accident itself but there was a bag with tools in the car, and when it rolled over, a screwdriver impaled his leg, nicking his femoral artery. Because it was a clean wound, he didn’t lose as much blood as he could have but I wanted you to know.”

I’m still contemplating the meaning of her words when a doctor asks me to join him in an office.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Greenly. I take it you know why you’re here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, you know that you’re Jacob’s biological father?”

All I can do is nod. I never thought I’d hear those words again. After Ashley brought Jacob over to meet me before I moved, I thought that would be the last time our secret was ever discussed. Who knew that she and her husband would both be dead just a few months later?

“As his next of kin, you’re now legally responsible for making decisions about his care. He is doing well, but it’ll be a few more days before we know for sure. We’ll need you to fill out the necessary paperwork as soon as possible.”

“What do you mean, I’m responsible? I don’t know how to make decisions for a baby. I’ve only met him once.”

“Don’t worry. We’re the doctors so we’ll tell you what needs to happen. I just need to know there is someone here to make decisions on his behalf.”

The doctor says more stuff but I can’t remember what. I nod a lot and sign the papers that are put in front of me. When I get back to the waiting room, my mom is still there.

“Are you ready to tell me how this happened?” Mom asks as soon as I sit down across from her.

“What did Ashley tell you?” If she doesn’t know about me and Brandon getting caught by Ashley, then I’m not going to tell her. It wouldn’t be fair to Brandon and Missy. I never would have believed that one night could have such a significant impact on so many lives.

We both knew there was a risk of getting caught but we’d just come home from a game and were amped up. Since we had the house to ourselves, we decided to stay out on the deck under a full moon instead of going to my room. Ashley stopped by to pick up her paycheck and when I didn’t answer the door, she went around the back to see if my dad left it on the picnic table. I was on my knees with Brandon’s dick in my mouth when Ashley turned the corner and caught us.

I begged her not to tell anyone and she agreed as long as I’d do something for her. She’d been trying to get pregnant for years but her husband was almost completely sterile. The doctors gave him only a ten percent chance of successfully fertilizing an egg so she agreed to keep her mouth shut if I’d get her pregnant. Thankfully, it only took one well-timed lay to do the deed. Never did I imagine I’d be the kid’s only living parent just a year and a half later.

“Well.” My mom takes a deep breath. “She didn’t tell me much. She just said that you were Jacob’s father and she wanted you to take him if anything happened to her. Of course, at that point we expected her to pull through, but now it looks like you’ll be his legal guardian.”

“I don’t know how to take care of a baby,” I say in a whine that I would only attempt with Mom.

“I know, sweetie, but your father and I are here to help. I can watch him during the day and you’ll learn as you go. That’s how all parents do it.” She stands up and moves to the chair next to me.

“But that would mean I’d have to move back here.” It’s all just starting to sink in. I’d have to leave the world that I was just starting to feel comfortable in. And Alex. I don’t want to leave Alex but I can’t go back with a nine-month-old son. He made it clear that’s not when he’s looking for right now.

Not to mention that I can't support a kid working as a vet tech and living in my aunt's guest room.

"Of course, you would. That way we can raise him together. It takes a village, you know. And your father and I did a pretty good job with you. He'll be so relieved when finds out."

"Wait, what?" I interrupt her grandmotherly fantasy. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, you know, he's always been a little worried about you. He thought you moved away because you didn't like women. Now that he knows you're fine, he'll be so happy to have you home. And a grandson. Wow, he'll be shocked. I didn't say anything to..."

"Mom, stop." This can't go on. Whether I'm at home or not, I can't continue to live a lie. This ends now. Angling my body so I'm fully facing her, I say the words I never wanted to say. "Dad wasn't wrong. I don't like women, in that way. I'm gay, Mom. And, believe it or not, I am fine. More than fine. I'm actually pretty happy with how my life is going. As a matter of fact, I have a boyfriend." Well, had a boyfriend. I'm pretty sure this is going to be a game changer for him.

"Honey, don't say that. I know you needed to experiment while you were living with your aunt but now you have a son. You'll want to find a mother for him." She paused for a moment, her eyes pleading with me to just agree with her. "Unless, well, unless you want your father and I to raise him for you?"

And there it is. She wants Jacob. I guess I'm not surprised. She always said she wanted more kids but wasn't able to. Honestly, it would probably be the best-case scenario for all of us.

"How's he doing? Jacob, I mean." I haven't seen him yet but I know my mom's been talking to his doctors while I was gone.

"He's a fighter. And he looks just like you. Honestly, I can't believe I didn't make the connection sooner. I remember saying to Ashley that he looked like you when she'd bring him by but it never occurred to me..." As if remembering that I never gave her the story, she changes course. "I didn't even know you two were having an affair."

“Mom, did you hear what I just said? We didn’t have an affair. I don’t date women.” My voice is getting louder but I can’t help it. This has to be said. “Ashley was blackmailing me. Sorta. She found out I was gay and made me knock her up to buy her silence. We were never dating.”

My mom is speechless... but I think she finally understands. It’s all out there and she looks like she is about to faint. I reach for her hands and hold them on the armrest between us. “Mom, are you okay?”

She nods her head but doesn’t say anything. After waiting a few minutes for her to speak, I move to stand, but she holds tight, keeping me in place. “Are you sure this is what you want? How you want to live?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m very sure.”

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath and slowly blows it out. “Well, then, I guess we do need to have a talk with your father.”

Really? Not exactly what I expected her to say but I’ll take it. Whether or not Dad ever accepts me, at least I know Mom can deal with it.

As we’re both thinking about how that conversation might go, a doctor comes into the room.

“Mr. Greenly. Mrs. Greenly. Jacob is awake if you’d like to see him.”

“Of course, thank you, Doctor.” Mom is out of the chair and rushing down the far hallway to the pediatric trauma wing before I collect my phone and keys from the coffee table.

I follow Mom down the quiet corridor but not too closely. She’s been here all night so she just walks to a scrub sink and begins a rigorous process of washing up. Following her lead, I read the instructions on the wall for getting dressed in scrubs and washing my hands and arms.

When we’re finally ready to cross the curtain, I hold my breath and walk to the bed my son is strapped to. I don’t know what I was expecting to find, but seeing a little baby with his wrists strapped down in a crib and monitors taped to his body makes me a little light-headed. I stop short of the crib while he turns his head to look at me.

I can see what Mom means. He does kinda look like me. He has the same nose and his ears stick out like mine. Except for the eyes. He has Ashley’s

crystal-blue eyes. I'm just staring at him while Mom rearranges some wires and unstraps his restraints, lifting him to her chest. Settling in the rocker next to the crib, she cradles him in her arms. I can imagine her holding me that way when I was a baby.

Apparently a curious baby, Jacob is craning his neck to look at me so I move to stand closer to Mom. The large, green pacifier in his mouth stops moving as he stares at me.

"Jakey, this is your..." She looks at me. "Maybe we shouldn't use the word he'll associate with... anyone else. He's still waiting for them to come for him." Her eyes well up as she looks down at him. "Jakey, this is my little boy, Shane."

I don't realize I've got tears streaming down my cheeks until they tickle my chin. I can't imagine what he must be thinking. Yesterday, he was driving in the car with his mom and dad. Today, he'll never see either one of them again. I reach out to touch his hand. His fingers close around mine and he holds on. He's still studying my face but his pacifier is moving at a steady pace again.

"Hi, buddy," I say quietly. Despite all the machines and the gauze on his left leg, he seems healthy. His chubby arms and cheeks are a little pale but he's alert. And strong. He won't let go of my finger. When Mom offers to let me hold him, I try to step back but he just holds on. Without much choice in the matter, I trade places with Mom and snuggle with Jake in the rocker.

"I'm going to call your father," Mom says. "If you need anything, just hit that button there and a nurse will be right in."

"But, what if..." I try to argue with her to stay but she cuts me off.

"You're doing fine, honey. I'll just be a few minutes."

When I look back down, Jake is still staring at me but his pacifier is out of his mouth. We're both analyzing each other. He's inspecting every inch of my face and I'm doing the same to him. I can't help but wonder if he can sense that I'm his biological dad. I know that's not really possible, but deep down I'm almost hoping he does.

After a few minutes of silence, I begin to ramble.

“You all done with that? It doesn’t look very tasty.” He smiles at me. Do nine-month-old babies smile or is it just gas? Either way, it looks like a smile. I can finally see that he has two bottom teeth. He really is a cute baby.

“You think that’s funny?” I say to him. “Well, just wait until you taste your grandma’s cooking. Then you’ll know what tasty is. You’ll never want a pacifier again.”

And then he laughs. He actually laughs. I don’t even realize Mom is back until I hear her sniffing from the other side of the room.

“I think he likes you, sweetheart,” Mom says as she wipes her eyes with a tissue.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alex

This has been one of the worst weeks of my life. I know Shane is dealing with stuff but we haven't talked at all. He's sent a few texts to let me know he's okay but he won't answer when I call and keeps making excuses for why he can't call me back. I feel him pulling away and I hate it. Every morning I have to talk myself out of driving up to Casper just to see him.

If he's done with me then I want him to say it to my face. I don't know what's going on but I'm not just going to give up without a fight. I've never had this kind of reaction to guy and to feel this strongly after only a month... well, I think it's worth fighting for.

And who is this Jacob that he rushed out of my bed to see? Maybe he's an ex that Shane didn't want to tell me about. Maybe he's someone that he crushed on but never had a chance with before? Not knowing is the worst part. My brain is constantly thinking up ridiculous scenarios of what could be happening but they all play out the same way in the end. Shane doesn't come back.

Pathetic as it is, I made an appointment to see Dr. Mills, hoping she'll give me a hint about what's going on. Stormy's cast came off last week so she isn't due for a follow-up for another week, but I can't wait that long. I make up some weak story about Stormy limping and they let me come right in.

Fortunately, Stormy has healed really well and isn't limping at all. It's not ideal for my lie but I'm thankful that she's not limited anymore. After being cooped up in the house for weeks, she's so happy to be back in the car and on her way to the "treat people".

When Dr. Mills comes into the exam room, I know she knows that I'm full of shit and just looking for info. But she was rooting for us from the beginning, so I'm just hoping she'll take pity on me and give me something I can hang on to.

"Stormy, girl. Have you gotten yourself into trouble again," she says, not making eye contact with me when she first walks in.

“Hi, Doctor. She seems to be doing well but I think I noticed a limp earlier so I wanted you to check it out.”

“Hi, Alex. It’s good to see you.” She gives me a look that is both sympathetic and frustrated. “Let’s see what we have here. Stormy, are you ready for a treat?”

Stormy hops up and trots over to Karen. Not even a token stumble to help sell my story.

“Well, Stormy, you look perfectly healthy to me. I think your daddy must be seeing things.”

“Well, I figured it was better to be safe than sorry,” I say, feeling stupid for trying to pull one over on her. But, as long as I’m here, I have to get what I came for. “So, how are you doing?”

“I’m well,” she says, leaning back on her supply cabinet with her arms crossed over her chest. “How are you?”

“Fine.” I lean down to put the leash back on Stormy’s collar. “Actually, kinda bummed that Shane’s still gone. Do you know when he might be back?”

“Alex, I know this isn’t easy for either of you but Shane’s dealing with some family stuff that I’m not sure he’s ready to talk about yet.”

I stand up to face her. “But, is he okay?”

“I think he’s adjusting to some things going on. I’ve made it clear that he still has a home with us and I hope he comes back but I’m just not sure if he will.”

What? I back up to the bench at the back of the room and slide down onto it. “Not come back? Like, at all? I thought this was temporary? What could be happening that would keep him from coming back?”

I feel like I’ve been kicked in the gut and I want to double over.

“I wish I could answer your questions but you really need to talk to Shane.” She walks over and rests a hand on my shoulder. “I know he doesn’t want to hurt you but he’s not sure how to handle his new reality.”

“Is this about Jacob?” I ask, anger replacing my hurt. “Is that why he doesn’t want to come back?”

“You know about Jacob?” Karen seems shocked that I know about him.

“Yes. Well, no. Are they, like, seeing each other or something?” I glance up at her, afraid of her answer.

The smile that breaks across her face is surprising. “No, Alex. It’s not like that. You need to have a conversation with Shane. If I talk to him tonight, I’ll try to get him to call you. I think he’s just worried that you aren’t going to handle his news well.”

“What’s his news? Is he sick?” God, could he be sick? The rolling cramps in my stomach start up again.

“I’ll ask him to call you, Alex,” she says again and walks out of the room.

It’s been four days since I went to talk to Karen and I haven’t even gotten a text from Shane. I’m officially in panic mode. I can’t stand this any longer. I’ve called in sick to work, dropped Stormy off with Steph, and am driving to Casper. If he wants to dump me, he needs to just do it. This state of wondering is killing me.

It was easy enough to find a listing for Greenly Training Kennels on Casper Mountain. It is an impressive ranch on over a hundred acres of open space. I can almost see why he would want to come back. It does seem like the perfect place for Shane. But, then again, he left it for a reason. What could possibly have changed in just a few weeks that could make him want to stay there? And not want to talk to me. Well, I’m going to find out.

I’m not sure if he’ll be at the ranch but it’s the only place I can think of to start. His parents may not want to tell me where he is, but if I have to park in front of their house until he shows up, I will. Either they will talk to me to get rid of me, or the Sheriff will pick me up. I don’t care which, as long as I get some answers.

When I finally pull up to their ranch, the large gate seems ominous. The rusted metal bars are propped open on both sides and a sign above welcomes guests to Greenly Ranch. I stop just outside the gate, debating whether or not I should keep going.

If Shane wanted to talk to me, he would have called. Or even sent a text. He obviously needs some space and this is the last thing I should be doing. On the other hand, if he thinks I'm going to reject him because of some weird family issue going on, then I should be here. I want to reassure him that I'm here for him... regardless of what's going on at home. If he needs to stay here for a while, we can work through that. The drive isn't too bad and it's not like I can't bring Stormy with me. She loves road trips. We'll figure it out. Just as soon as I know what *it* is.

Although, if there really is another guy and he wants to end it with me... well, I guess I'd rather know that for sure than to stay in limbo. I'm doing this. One way or another, I'm going to see Shane today.

With a newfound determination, I drive through the gate and down the long path to the house. There are several buildings but the main house is centered on the property. It's a yellow farmhouse with green shutters and dogs everywhere. There are at least fifteen dogs running loose on the property, but none give me a second glance as I park beside Shane's truck. He's here.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Shane

The rest of that first weekend home was spent in Jacob's room talking to him or watching him sleep. Mom and I never left his side. At about six pm on Sunday night, a woman burst through the door wearing too much makeup and perfume that made me dizzy from across the room.

With a nurse closely inspecting her, the stranger scrubbed up and prepped to fully enter the room. Jacob woke up and instantly reached for me so I gathered him in my arms and waited to meet his visitor.

When she finally comes in, she eyes Mom and me suspiciously but then zones in on Jacob.

"Oh, baby boy, I'm so glad to see you." Her loud voice and wide arm gestures cause him to flinch as she rushes to take him from my arms. When he sees her quickly approaching, he starts to cry. It's the first time I've heard him really cry and it breaks my heart. I want to punch this bitch for scaring him but I still didn't know who she is.

"Hello, ma'am. Can I help you?" I ask as politely as I can manage while trying to soothe Jacob and shield his eyes from her scary clown makeup.

"Yes, please. You can hand me my nephew. I'm Amber Osterlund and I'm his legal guardian."

The fuck?

"Amber, it's so nice to meet you. You are Tim's sister, right?" Mom says, jumping in before I can.

"That's right." As if remembering to be in mourning over her dead brother and his wife, she chokes out a few sobs and reaches for a tissue. "I still can't believe they're gone. I talked to him just last month and he was fine."

Okay, she's clearly a sharp one. I want to tell her that car accidents don't usually manifest a month in advance but I bite my tongue. Mom's got this for now.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Amber.” Mom stands and guides the woman to her chair, and away from us. Thankfully.

“Thanks. It just breaks my heart that this little guy is an orphan now. But, I’ll make sure he knows what good people his parents were.” She is still eyeing me but hasn’t attempted to get any closer. “And you are?”

“I’m Margaret Greenly and this is my son, Shane. Ashley worked for us and was a close family friend.”

“It’s nice to meet you both. I appreciate that you’ve been here to keep an eye on Jacob until I could get in town but I probably should take some time to bond with him. This is really just a family matter. I’m sure you understand.” Standing again and walking towards us, she further explains, “We’ve got a long drive back to Aberdeen and I don’t want him fussing the whole time like I’m some stranger.”

I lean away from her and wrap my arms protectively around Jacob’s still form. He’s watching her speak but has a death grip on my shirt. *Don’t worry, kiddo. You’re not going anywhere with her*, I think to myself.

“Um, ma’am, I think there is a misunderstanding.” I have no idea how to tell her that her dead brother’s son wasn’t his son... but there isn’t any nice way to say it. “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Tim wasn’t Jacob’s biological father. I am, and I’ll be keeping Jacob here.”

She stops just short of tearing him out of my arms but is able to contain herself.

“I think you’re mistaken, Shane, was it? Jacob is my brother’s son and I am the beneficiar... I mean, I am the guardian that they chose to raise him. We discussed it on several occasions.” She’s going with the sweet route but it’s not going to work.

“Amber, I understand your confusion. We are all still in a state of shock, but the doctors have confirmed that Shane is the biological father, and since Tim never adopted him, Shane is now the sole parent. Of course, we want your family to stay in his life and would love for you to visit as often as you can.” Mom was always great at handling people. Said it was similar to working with dogs. The irony is not lost on me.

“Listen here, lady. I don’t know who you are but if you think you can just show up and claim rights to this baby or his inheritance, you’ve got another thing coming. My lawyers will be all over your ass if you try to fight me on this,” Amber says to Mom, waving a finger in her face.

Mom gently pulls Amber out to the nurse’s station and asks for a family counselor to intervene. After an hour of yelling and swearing, Amber eventually leaves in a huff with the threat that she’d sue the hospital if they let Jacob leave with anyone but her.

By noon on Monday, Mom and Dad had their attorney file the documents to change his birth certificate, and I was assured that Amber did not have any kind of case. Ashley’s mom stopped by once to see Jacob but she didn’t stay long. She and Ashley were never close and she seemed relieved when we explained that I was his guardian and she wouldn’t “get stuck with the kid,” as she said.

Jacob was off all the monitors and able to keep formula down. If his vitals remained strong, we would be taking him home on Tuesday. Dad stopped in to bring a change of clothes for Mom and to say hello to me. He was civil, but it was clear that Mom had given him the rest of the story. He was colder than usual but said he’d be setting up a crib at the house and had picked up a car seat for the ride home. I almost laughed at the picture of my big, gruff dad in his dirty Carhartt jeans and plaid flannel in the baby section at Walmart.

The entire time I sat in that hospital room, I kept thinking of Alex. Jacob’s blue eyes turned a bright aqua when he laughed or cried. They reminded me of Alex and everything that we wouldn’t have together. But, honestly, I wasn’t resentful of how things were working out with Jacob. Sad for him and for me, but not resentful. After just a few hours of hanging out with the little guy, I couldn’t help but love him. He seemed so vulnerable and alone. He didn’t have anyone left but me and my parents.

Mom taught me how to change a diaper and give him a bottle but that was really just the very basic part of being a parent. Actually being there for his every need was the overwhelming part. Mom and Dad agreed that they would

raise him. I'd have to stay in Casper to help out, but he needs more stability than I can give him. I'll go back to working at the ranch and get an apartment in town. As he gets older, maybe he'll want to spend the weekends with me.

Maybe at some point, I'll even try dating again. I wouldn't ever have the kind of lifestyle that allowed me to hold the hand of a guy as we walked down the street. Or, sit in a dark restaurant with a man over a romantic meal. That was completely out of the question but maybe I could be happy again. Eventually.

Bringing Jacob home was almost as scary as meeting him for the first time. I carried him into the house in his car seat and didn't quite know what to do next. He was asleep so I just put the carrier on the table and went to find Dad. We hadn't said more than ten words to each other since I came home so we had to have it out.

"Dad, you got a second?" I ask, peeking my head into the kitchen where he is making a sandwich.

"Yeah. I've got a few. You hungry?"

"Yeah, that'd be great." He pulls out two more slices of bread and begins making me sandwich.

"So, are you sure you're okay with all this?" I grab two Cokes from the fridge and sit at the table.

"I'm okay with taking care of my grandson." He was silent for a few minutes while he finished with the sandwiches and then turned back to me. "If you aren't man enough to step up to your responsibilities, then I guess I have to do it for you."

This is pretty much what I expected. I take a few deep breaths and try to steady my voice before speaking. I don't want this to turn into a fight. He's right about that part.

"Dad, I don't know how to take care of him. He's just a baby. Once I get settled in an apartment, I can try to keep him sometimes and—"

"No, I don't think so." He put down his sandwich and stared at me. "You

can't be a role model for a man. You're barely one yourself. No, he'll stay here. You go do whatever it is you want to do."

"Dad, I know you don't approve but I'm still a good person. I just, well, I just..."

"I don't want to hear about it. From you or from any of my friends so I hope you'll be discreet in your exploits." With a disgusted glance at me, he stands up from the table and stomps out the door.

That went well.

Every time my phone buzzes in my pocket, my heart breaks. I want to answer it. I want to call Alex and hear his voice and tell him I'll see him soon... but I can't. I can't give him what he wants anymore. I thought I could but not anymore. Now that I'm going to be staying in Casper, I have to let him move on. It's not fair and he probably hates me by now anyway, but I really don't have a choice anymore.

Aunt Karen told me about her talk with him. She said he seemed sad but I just couldn't do it. I can't say the words that will officially end us. I'm just going to let him come to that conclusion on his own. It's a chicken-shit solution, but it's all I can do right now.

Staying with my parents is awful. Dad, though not openly hostile, is cold when he does have to speak to me. Fortunately for both of us, he doesn't speak to me much. Mom's been great with me and with Jacob but I'm anxious to get a place of my own. The only thing holding me back is Jake. He's really growing attached to me. As soon as he wakes up, Mom brings him to me. She places him on the bed next to me and he pokes my face until my eyes open. Then he laughs.

That laugh gets me every time. I wonder what he'll think when I'm not living here. Will he be just as content to hang out with Mom all day? He loves being with her but I have noticed that as soon as I walk into a room, his eyes are on me the whole time. If I get within ten feet of him, his arms fly up for me to take him. And I have to admit to being pretty attached to him too. I never imagined being a dad, but I'm already considering him in everything I do.

When I want to run to the store, I consider whether Mom or Dad can watch him or if I should take him with me. When I take him out, I check the weather to see if it's supposed to rain so I can pack his diaper bag. And when I think of Alex and want to call him, I remember that I can't. That I have a son now and I'm not the single guy that Alex fell in love with in Denver. I'm the single parent of an infant, living with his parents on Casper Mountain.

Not speaking to Alex for over a week has been tough. I let my phone battery die a few days ago just so I don't have to feel the pain every time it buzzes. I hate myself for doing this to him but it has to be this way. He's probably already over me. Maybe he's been going back to The Unicorn to pick up guys that are actually eligible. The thought makes my stomach turn but I can't begrudge him that. I want him to move on and be happy. He deserves that. He deserves all the happiness in the world.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Alex

Steeling myself for the rejection I'm heading into, I walk to the front door. It takes a minute for me knock but once I do, I wish I didn't. I don't want to hear the words that I know are coming. When Shane tells me it's over, I'm not sure what I'll do. Will I cry? Will I beg? Will I die? It feels like it.

The door pulls open and Shane is on the other side. There is a woman approaching behind him that I assume is his mom.

"Alex," Shane says, looking shocked to see me. There's something else there in his eyes—I want to believe it's happiness, but that's probably just my wishful thinking.

"Hey. I'm sorry to just show up but I really wanted to talk to you."

The woman quietly backs out of the room, leaving us alone.

"Yeah, of course. Come in." He steps aside to let me pass but I don't. I walk into him and wrap my arms around his chest. He feels so good. Smells so good. He's stiff for only a second before his arms come up and hold me too.

"God, I've missed you," I whisper into his ear. I know I sound desperate but I can't help it. I am desperate. Desperate to have him back. Desperate to know why he might not come back.

"Me too," he says. "Let's go sit down."

I follow Shane to a cozy den and he sits in an armchair next to the couch. I have no choice but to sit on the couch, away from him. Damn, this isn't good.

"I know I owe you an explanation and I'm sorry I couldn't give you one sooner. I just wasn't sure what was going to happen here and then, well, I was afraid of what you'd say so..."

"Shane, please tell me what's going on. I can't stand not knowing. If you've moved on or if this has to do with Jacob or whatever, just tell me. I can handle it."

"What do you know about Jacob? Did my aunt tell you about him?"

That is not what I want to hear. The rolling of my stomach increases as I shake my head. “I don’t know anything about him.” I school my features and try to sound more composed than I feel but my words just come out pissed off. “I just heard you say his name but no one will tell me a goddamn thing. Please just spit it out.”

He looks away and takes a deep breath. I know it’s serious by the way he’s avoiding eye contact. “He’s my son.”

“Your... son?” I feel like the room is spinning and my mind is jumbled. Is this actually happening?

“I was with a woman one time and she got pregnant. It was planned, on her part. She threatened to tell my parents about me if I didn’t do it. Anyway, she and her husband were both killed in the accident and now I’m Jacob’s legal guardian.” His words come quickly, all in one breath. He lowers his face into his palms and holds there, unwilling to look at me.

After a moment of taking in his words, I scoot to the edge of the couch and reach for Shane. Tracing the outline of his ear with my fingertips, I trail down to his jaw and nudge his face upward. Once he is looking at me, I recognize the fear in his eyes.

“So, there isn’t another guy?”

He looks stunned for a minute before he grins. “Well, not like that. But, there is a nine-month-old little guy, I guess.”

“So, do you still...” I don’t want to say the words because I’m afraid of his answer. But I have to know. “Do you still love me?” I whisper with a shaky voice.

“Of course, I do. But everything’s changed now. I have to stay here and we can’t be together.” He chokes on that last word and I slide off the couch onto my knees, landing right in front of him.

“Why not? Why do you have to stay here?”

“Well, I don’t want to leave him here. I thought about it, I swear I did, but we’ve bonded. He’s already lost his parents and I can’t just leave him here... no matter how much I want to be with you.” He looks away but not before a tear escapes his watery eyes.

“Shane.” He still won’t look at me. “Shane, I’d never expect you to leave him here. Bring him to Denver. It’s a great place to raise kids. I’ll help you. And Karen said you still had a home with her. I’m sure they’d love to have a baby around.”

“It’s not that simple. Daycare is expensive and we can’t just live in her guest room forever. I’m not capable of taking care of him right now. If I can save up for a few years, maybe we can move back, but I wouldn’t expect you to wait around for that. Who knows how long it might take. You deserve to find someone that can give you everything you’ve always wanted. Be the partner that you need.”

“I already have. I want to be with you, Shane. Please don’t give up on us.” My eyes are filling and my throat stings as I’m literally on my knees begging him. “We’ll figure it out.”

After twenty minutes of trying to convince Shane that we could find a way to be together, we heard a small cry from the back of the house. Shane’s eyes lit up.

“Do you want to meet him?” he asks tentatively.

“Hell yeah. Oh, sorry. I guess I have to watch my mouth.” Oops, I’m already screwing this up.

“Why?” He seemed confused for a second. “Oh, shit. I guess so. Wait here. I’ll go get him.”

While Shane is gone, I take a look around the room. The walls are covered with photos of Shane growing up. There is an eight by ten portrait for every year of his life. He was a cute kid. Always had short hair and big ears... and those big brown eyes. When he was little, his eyelashes were even longer. Adorable.

Caught staring at his high school graduation photo, I hear a cooing noise and turn back to the doorway. Shane is standing there with a wide grin, holding a miniature version of himself. Jacob has a light downy layer of brown hair on his head and the same Dumbo ears as his daddy and I can’t help but laugh.

“He looks just like you,” I say, walking up to them. “He’s gorgeous.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty cool.”

“Hi, Jacob,” I say, shaking his foot.

He seems tentative with me at first but when he looks up at Shane and sees his smile, Jacob gives me a mostly toothless grin. I like this kid already.

“He’s probably hungry. Come with me while I feed him.”

I follow Shane into the kitchen and he places the baby in a high chair. Shane’s mom is at the sink when we walk in. She dries her hands and looks at me. Taking a deep breath, she approaches with an outstretched hand.

“Hi, there. I’m Margaret and you must be Alex. I’ve heard all about you.”

Surprised by this, I look to Shane. He seems just as shocked by her announcement.

“It’s nice to meet you, Margaret,” I say, still watching Shane.

“Where did you hear—Oh, Aunt Karen,” Shane concludes. He takes a container of yogurt from the fridge and pulls a stool up to the high chair.

“Well, you must be tired after that drive. Have a seat. Can I make you a sandwich or something?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine,” I reply.

My stomach isn’t quite ready for food yet. I’m still in shock over the news about Jacob. That was the last thing I expected to find when I showed up. I guess it’s better than finding some twenty-five-year-old cowboy here with him, but still a shock nonetheless.

The more I watch Shane with Jacob, the more relaxed I become. He really has taken to parenthood well. It’s only been a few weeks and he already looks like a pro. Wiping up the extra yogurt with the side of the spoon like I’ve seen moms do and placing the cup just out of reach. I’m impressed. He’s even chatting up Jacob like they are having a full conversation.

“Do you need any help,” I offer. I’ve spent some time around babies and am not a complete idiot when it comes to taking care of them.

“Oh, yeah,” Shane looks surprised by the offer... but pleased. “Can you get me one of those baby wipes by the sink?”

Walking back with a wipe, I gently swipe it across Jacob's mouth. He is staring at me like I'm crazy but he isn't scared. Probably just curious at the stranger that is touching him. Looking over to Shane to make sure it's okay, I can see him watching me. His eyes meet mine and the fear that was there earlier is gone. I just see happiness on his face now. Taking that as approval, I run the wipe through Jacob's fist to clean off the mess he made when he grabbed the spoon.

I spent the night at a motel to give everyone some space. Jacob's mom offered to let me sleep in their RV but I didn't want to push my luck with his dad. When I finally met Robert Greenly, I could feel the hatred and disgust seeping out of every pore in his body. He shook my hand when his wife nudged him to, but I know he probably soaked it in bleach after. By the way he crushed my fingers together, I am lucky I can still drive. It's already starting to bruise. But, that's a small price to pay if I can keep Shane in my life. And I guess that means Jacob too.

Shane and Jacob meet me the next morning at an IHOP. It was a bit of a drive from where I was staying but I think Mr. Greenly made it clear that Shane needed to keep his "funny business" away from the prying eyes of their neighbors.

When they finally show up, I rush out to his truck to help him with Jacob. He continued to impress me with his comfort at being a dad. He disconnects the carrier, hands me a diaper bag, and we walk into the restaurant like we own the place. The little stand they bring out for the car seat is interesting. We both reach for it every time someone walks by, afraid it would topple over. But, I guess they are sturdier than they appear because it didn't move and he was content to chew on a rubber block for most of our breakfast.

Just before the check is dropped off, Shane's phone rings. I'll forever associate his phone with bad memories, but I try to keep the panic at bay until he looks at the caller ID. When his brows furrow, my stomach turns.

"It's local. No one around here has this number." Looking at me and back at Jacob, he scoots back his chair. "Are you okay with him if I grab this?"

“Yeah, sure.” Watching the baby was fine. Watching Shane walk away with that damn phone to his ear took ten years off my life.

When Shane returns ten minutes later, his expression is unreadable. He seems to be in a state of shock, again, and I want to puke. Now what?

“Is everything okay?” I ask, not really wanting to hear the answer.

“Yeah.” He sits down and stares at the black screen of his phone. “That was my dad’s lawyer. He’s been trying to reach me but my phone was dead.”

“What’s going on?” Instinctively, I reach across the table and hold his wrist. Shane looks at me with a shocked expression on his face.

“Apparently, Tim and Ashley had life insurance. They left it all to Jacob, of course. But, since he’s a minor, I have access to it to take care of him.”

“Seriously? Is it... a lot?” I’m not actually concerned with the amount but if it means Shane can afford to move back to Denver with Jacob then I’m very interested.

“Yeah. It is. They each had policies worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. So, Jacob has half a million bucks.” He looks over to Jacob, sucking on his fingers. “He’s rich.”

“Well, he better be smart, since now he can afford to go to any college he wants to.” I’m still waiting for Shane to say what I need to hear.

“I guess so. And, I guess that means day care won’t be a problem. Shit, we can get a nanny if we want.”

We. He said we. Does he mean me and him, we? Or, does he mean him and his parents, we?

“Yup, anything you want. You guys have choices now.”

Shane’s face softens as he takes both of my hands in his. “Choices, hunh?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Shane

When Jacob and I get back from breakfast, Mom and Dad are both sitting in the kitchen. I put Jacob in the high chair with some Cheerios and sit at the table between them.

“Have you heard from the lawyer?” I ask.

“Yes,” Mom says quietly. “It’s great news.”

“It means I don’t have to stay here.”

“I knew it,” Dad says and slams his coffee cup on the table. “I knew you’d run at the first chance you got. Just because you have some money now, you’re gonna take off with that hippie and just leave your responsibilities with us.”

Hippie? I want to comment on that but now isn’t the time.

“I’m not leaving Jacob.” I look to Mom. She knows what this means. She already has tears in her eyes as she reaches for my hand.

“Honey, please be reasonable. He’ll be so much better off with us. We can provide him with a normal childhood. He needs a mother and a father... not... well, please think this through,” she begs.

“There’s nothing to think through, Marge. He isn’t taking our grandson to some sex shack where he’ll be raised to be just like them. It’ll be over my dead body!” my dad yells, making Jacob flinch at the noise and wail loudly. This is only the second time I’ve heard him cry like that. Like he’s terrified. I will not make him live like this. If I have to deal with my dad the way I did with that crazy woman that tried to take him, I will.

Rushing to get Jake out of the high chair, I pace the room, holding him tightly to my chest. He likes when I press his arms against me and he can’t squirm. He knows he’s safe with me.

“Do you seriously think I’d leave him here? He is my son and I will raise him. You have no right to keep him,” I say to him through gritted teeth. The

only thing keeping me from completely going off on him is the scared baby in my arms.

“Shane, we know you don’t have to leave him, but just think about. What kind of life will he have with two dads? That won’t be healthy for him. He can still visit you and you’ll always have a home here but please let him stay with us.” Mom is fully crying and I want to go to her but I’m watching my dad. He should be comforting her instead of being an asshole. But, really, that’s all he knows. He’s an ignorant homophobe, and he isn’t going to change just because his son has come out. That probably makes him hate all gays even more.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I know you’d be great with him and I want you to be in his life but I can’t let him be raised by a bigot. What kind of things would Dad teach him? What does he say about me now? Do you want Jacob growing up to be like him?”

I know they both hear me but neither will look to me. That’s okay. I don’t need their permission or approval. I’m going back with Alex tomorrow, whether they like it or not. I’d rather raise Jacob completely alone than around someone like my dad.

After Jacob goes down for the night, Mom suggests I go get some air so I head over to Alex’s motel. He was catching up on some work and said he’d just get something delivered for dinner. When he answered the door and saw me, he immediately pulled me into his arms.

“You’re here? Is everything okay?” he asks, hesitantly. With all the bombshells he’s had lately, it’s no wonder the poor guy is paranoid.

“Everything’s great. Jacob’s down for the night so my mom suggested I ‘get some air’ but she meant see you.” My grin is contagious and Alex quickly sports one too.

“So, she’s okay with everything? Okay with us?”

“She’s dealing with it. The three of us talked for a while today.”

“Oh?” Alex turns off the TV that was on in the background and pulls me next to him on the bed. Sitting directly across from a mirror and dresser, we

are looking at each other through the reflection across the room. We look damn good together.

“I told them Jacob and I are going back to Denver with you tomorrow.” Watching Alex’s reaction without turning toward him is funny. He quickly turns his torso to face me, a wide smile forming across his face.

“You did?”

“I did.” I finally face him. We are practically giddy. He hops up and straddles my lap.

“Tomorrow? You’re coming back tomorrow?” His right hand cups my cheek and his left combs through my hair. Having been sidetracked for the past few weeks, it’s long enough that he can grip it. His fingertips leave a trail of heat every place they touch. I’ve missed this so much.

I nod, leaning forward to meet his lips. Alex’s mouth is hungry. The weeks of fear and loneliness and anxiety pour from him in waves. His hands grab my hips and yank me lower so I’m flat on the large bed. His whole body is pressed onto mine, his weight holding me still, securing me with his embrace.

His tongue explores my lips. Moistening me with his warmth and entering me eagerly. My hands are under his shirt and trying to pull it over his head, even though I don’t want to lose contact with his mouth. I’d forgotten how good he tastes. I don’t ever want to move from this position but I need to feel more skin. With a frustrated groan, I release him long enough to get his shirt off and then he’s back on me. Kissing my jaw, licking my neck, sucking my earlobe.

“I need you, Shane. Don’t leave me again,” he whispers into my ear. His hot breath sends tingles down my body to the tips of my toes. Fumbling with the button on his shorts, I finally get it open and the zipper down. Sweet Jesus, has he gotten bigger? His dick is sticking straight up out of his boxers. Its beautiful head is pressed against his belly and seeping for me. Waiting for me.

“You’ve got me, Alex. I’m not going anywhere.” I gently shift our positions so I can stand up and slip off the rest of my clothes. Once naked, I take a moment to admire this man spread open on the bed before me. He’s

given me more than he'll ever know and I want to show him how much I love him.

Taking a quick look around the room, I see his toiletry bag on the dresser. I grab it and place it on the bed next to us. Lowering myself over his thighs, I take the head of his dick into my mouth and gently suck. The bittersweet drops make my own cock twitch. Alex whimpers and grabs my hair with one hand, holding me against him. With a tight suction around his shaft, I slowly lower my mouth, sucking as I go. When I am as deep as I can go, I release the seal with a pop. Alex shudders beneath me.

“God, that feels good,” he says to the ceiling, his head thrown back.

But I want to see him. I want to watch him when I make him come. So I slowly pull off of his cock and leave a trail of wet kisses from his pelvis, up to his right nipple. I swirl my tongue around it to tighten it even more, then gently close my teeth over it. Just tight enough to get his hips to buck into me, but not enough to hurt. My tongue flicks the beautiful brown nub a few times before sliding across his chest to the left side. Knowing what to expect, he lifts his shoulder off the bed just an inch to get his nipple into my mouth even sooner. I eagerly accept his offering, sucking hard, while wrapping my hands around his waist to cup his ass.

Every part of his body is hard. He's like a live wire just buzzing with anticipation. Moving my lips up to his hot mouth, I devour him. I'm almost as close as I can be and it's still not close enough. Reaching for the bag, I feel around for the lube and a condom. We've done this enough now that I don't need to look. I couldn't pry my mouth away if I wanted to so I tear open the package and roll it onto myself without ever opening my eyes.

Feeling more ready than I ever have, I lift up and sit back on my heels, between Alex's bent legs. Slowly applying a handful of lube to myself, I lock Alex's gaze. Running my slippery hand over his cock a few times, he bucks up again, begging for more. But, we're not ready yet. This is going to last a while.

After adding more lube to my fingertips, I hover over him, resting my weight on my left hand by his head so I am perfectly aligned with his body. Still staring into his bright blue eyes, I press my middle finger into his

opening. Feeling only a moment of resistance, Alex relaxes and I slide completely in.

He's already panting as I work my finger in and out. By the third stroke, I slip in a second finger. When they're as deep as I can get them, Alex squirms. I know he wants more and I want to give it to him. Scissoring my fingers just a bit, I stretch him as much as my patience will allow and pull out.

Moving down for a soft kiss, just barely enough to taste his mouth, I slide my cock into him. He takes me completely in one motion, bucking up to suck in every inch of me. He is watching me as I am watching him. Studying his sparkling eyes and beautiful mouth and perfect nose. His wavy hair is moist with sweat and I can feel the heat of his body like I'm lying on a cloud. As I move in and out of him, I know this is where I always want to be. Right here with Alex. Making love to him slowly. Always reminding him how much I love him.

Six months later

Moving back to Aunt Karen's house was an adjustment for everyone. The girls thought Jacob was a dress-up doll and spent hours taking pictures of him in different outfits. Uncle Ron brought home a new piece of sports equipment every day and Alex and I figured out how to be in a relationship with a baby in the mix. It was a little awkward at first to explain to everyone how he came to be, but everyone has been supportive.

On September fifteenth, Jacob turned one. We had a quiet party at Alex's house with close friends and family. He took his first step that day to the balance bike that Uncle Ron brought for him. He is now running and can babble up a storm.

His first word was *me*, while tackling Stormy. His second word was *dada*. Alex was holding him but he was looking at me. Well, that's what I keep telling myself. Honestly, Jake adores Alex. His natural confidence carried over into his handling of Jake. He always seems so calm, even when I'm freaking out about a scratched knee or bumped head.

As soon as we got back from Casper, Alex cleared out his guest room and started setting up a room for Jake. I resisted at first, needing time to make sure we were both ready for full-time parenthood. But now, after six months of figuring everything out, Jacob and I are going to officially move in. It won't always be easy and it definitely isn't as traditional as some families, but sometimes you just know when it's right.

THE END

Author Bio

Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, Aria enjoys the year round sunshine and laid back environment of the west coast. She lives with her husband and two children on a quiet hill that gives her lots of time to read and write. Her first series was a semi-traditional look at sexy gigs found online. She has now ventured into the exciting M/M world of gay erotica. She loves to hear from readers so please feel free to drop her a note or visit her at www.ariagracebooks.com.

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FOREVER. I PROMISE.

By Lily Grace

Photo Description

Two teenage boys cuddle outside. One is leaning back against the other's chest and they're smiling at each other like nothing else exists in the world.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

People always tell me that the chance of finding your true love in high school is pretty slim. Well thank god then that I didn't meet Patrick in high school; that's just the time I fell in love with him. We actually met the day we were born, our mothers going in labour the exact same day and us being born just minutes apart from each other. We grew up together, always being at each other's side, no matter what. So why are people so shocked about us falling in love? Why are they telling us that for us to be close is great but for us to love each other is wrong?

But all this doesn't matter, because no matter what our families may think, I am never letting him go. I simply cannot live without him and I certainly don't want to. So even if everybody will turn on us, we'll be good, because we have each other.

Sincerely,

Little.dhampir

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, young adult

Tags: high school, first time, friends to lovers, young adult characters, bullying, coming out, homophobia

Content warnings: sex between two minors (both seventeen years old)

Word count: 29,819

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FOREVER. I PROMISE.

By Lily Grace

PROLOGUE

May 1997, 10 years old

“Come on, Zack!”

“Wait up!”

Zack ran after Patrick through the woods behind their houses. Zack had been trailing behind him since they had decided to race back to their secret spot from the park. Gripping his baseball glove tighter in his sweaty hand, Zack skidded down the hill between the trees and finally came to a stop in the small meadow that opened up in front of the pond.

“Beat ya!” Patrick jumped up and down, waving his hands in the air.

Zack grinned good-naturedly, not minding that Patrick had won. Patrick was faster and stronger and better at sports than Zack was, but that was okay. Zack was just happy to tag along, and Patrick always wanted him to.

The grassy knoll in front of a small, algae-covered pond was their place. They had been coming here since their parents had started allowing them to them go off exploring on their own. It wasn’t all that special, really. There was too much algae for the pond to be good for swimming. But it was secluded and to them, it was their own private kingdom. When they were seven, Zack and Patrick pinky swore never to tell another living soul about it.

Still breathing hard, Zack sat down cross-legged on the grass, tossing his glove off to the side. Patrick flopped down next to him, close enough so their knees pressed together.

“You’re getting better, y’know.” Patrick nudged against Zack’s shoulder and unzipped his backpack, shoving his glove inside.

Zack smiled and ducked his head. They had spent the last two hours at the neighborhood park working on Zack’s fielding. Little League tryouts were only a few weeks away.

“Not sure I’m good enough to make the team.”

“Sure you are. The coach would be stupid not to want you.”

“Still, it might not happen.” Zack wished he could take some of Patrick’s confidence and transfer it to himself.

Patrick frowned. “Don’t think like that. And, if you don’t play, then I’m not either.”

Zack’s eyes widened. “Don’t say that! You’re gonna be the best player on the team! You have to play!”

Patrick shrugged. “I don’t have to do anything.” He turned and gave Zack a brilliant smile. “Besides, it wouldn’t be any fun to play if you weren’t on the team with me.”

Zack’s heart soared a little. Patrick Martin had been his friend forever. They lived next door to each other at the end of a cul-de-sac and had spent almost every living moment with each other since birth. They were both only children and they even shared a birthday. June eighth. Their mothers had been pregnant together, had gone into labor within hours of each other, and they had been born only minutes apart. Patrick was older by exactly twenty-three minutes. Zack didn’t know much about fate or kindred spirits or soul mates, but he figured Patrick was his. He was his best friend, his hero, and his favorite person all wrapped up into one. He couldn’t even begin to picture his life without Patrick in it.

“Patrick?”

“Hmm?”

“You think we’ll be friends for a long time?”

Patrick regarded him for a few moments, chewing on his bottom lip, as Zack’s heart climbed into his throat.

“Of course we will, Zack.” Patrick’s expression was as serious as he had ever seen it.

“Yeah?” Zack hadn’t even realized he had been holding his breath. He could feel his smile taking over his entire face.

Patrick matched his grin and slung an arm around his shoulders, pulling Zack to him. “Forever. I promise.”

CHAPTER ONE

September 2003, 17 years old

“That was so frickin’ cool.” Brad walked ahead of them as they exited the movie theater in Uptown. “*Underworld*. Best movie of 2003.”

“Totally agree.” Joel grinned. “Kate Beckinsale as a vampire in all that tight, black leather? So hot.”

Brad and Joel played varsity baseball with Patrick. Zack had played Little League with all of them, but once they reached high school, there was no way Zack had been good enough to make the school team. He still went to all the games to cheer them on, though. It was how he had convinced Patrick to continue to play when Zack hadn’t made the cut. Patrick played first base and was by far the best player on the team. Now that they were starting their senior year, there was even talk of an athletic scholarship to the University of Minnesota.

“Whatever. She didn’t even get naked. I feel totally cheated.” Scott gave a smile that was somewhere between a sneer and a leer. Zack had never been a particular fan of Scott’s, and he knew Scott wasn’t a fan of his. But he was on the baseball team as well and seemed to have a habit of inviting himself along when they went into the city since he didn’t have a car of his own.

Joel rolled his eyes. “What’re we doing? Burgers?”

“Sounds good.” Patrick elbowed Zack. “Burgers good with you?”

“Like he cares. He barely talks as it is.” Scott wrinkled his nose.

Zack felt his face flush. He knew he was shy. He didn’t have any trouble talking when it was just him and Patrick, but in groups he had a tendency to stay quiet unless someone spoke to him directly.

“Watch it, asshole.” Patrick shot Scott a warning glare, and Zack was both touched and embarrassed that his best friend had to stick up for him. Patrick nudged his arm and smiled. “So, burgers?”

“Yeah.” Zack forced a smile.

“I thought the werewolves were pretty cool. Heard they’re planning a sequel.” Patrick pulled open the door of Bob’s Burgers and let the guys file in ahead of him.

“Rock on.” Brad slid into a booth near the door and the rest of them followed suit. “What’d you think, Zack?” Brad pulled out the plastic-covered menus from where they were wedged behind the napkin dispenser and handed them around the table. “Think Kate was hot?”

“Yeah. Totally.” Zack lied through his teeth and buried his face in his menu. At seventeen, he knew he should be noticing when girls were hot, but somehow it was still escaping him. He didn’t really need to look at the menu, he basically had it memorized at this point, but he knew he was blushing and it gave him an excuse to hide his face. The ’burbs of Minneapolis didn’t exactly offer much excitement, so once drivers’ licenses had been obtained, they had begun to make their way more frequently into the city. The Uptown Theater and some of the many restaurants in the hip, trendy area had become a hangout. More often than not, though, they always seemed to settle on Bob’s. Zack had to admit the milkshakes were out of this world.

Conversation turned from the movie to the start of senior year and classes just as the waitress arrived with their shakes. “That reminds me.” Patrick edged a little nearer to Zack in the booth. “I’m totally going to need your help this weekend with my math. My Algebra II teacher somehow thinks I actually remember Algebra I.”

The rest of the guys snickered and Patrick shot them a wide grin. Zack couldn’t help but laugh and also found himself very aware of the thigh now pressing up against his. “That can probably be arranged.”

“You’re the best.” Patrick looped his arm around Zack’s shoulders and pulled him into his side for a quick one-armed hug.

A burst of warmth spread through his body. “No prob.” Patrick was the jock while he was pretty much the nerd, but Zack didn’t mind if that meant he could help his friend. He figured it was the least he could do. Patrick had always made sure he was included all his life. Sometimes he wondered if he would have any friends at all, if it wasn’t for Patrick.

“Seriously dude, don’t you get tired of all those accelerated, AP classes and shit? I mean, don’t tell me you actually like it?” Scott looked at him dubiously from across the table.

Actually, Zack did like it. School was something he excelled at and it made him feel good that he was able to help Patrick. He took a sip of milkshake and gave a noncommittal shrug.

“He’s like the smartest person at our school. He’s going to be Valedictorian.” Zack could hear the pride in Patrick’s voice and his heart gave an extra beat. “He’ll have his pick of any college he wants to go to. You’ll be lucky if you get into Hennepin Community College.”

“Screw you.” Scott sucked loudly on his milkshake straw.

Zack didn’t want his pick of any school. The thought of going anywhere without Patrick was beyond terrifying. Besides, he would miss him too much. The U of M was a good school and then he and Patrick could be together.

After their burgers arrived there was a lull in conversation while everyone chowed down. They were all about halfway through their burgers when the front door to Bob’s jingled and two guys, probably in their mid-twenties, walked in. They were holding hands.

Zack watched, transfixed, as the taller blond smiled at something the shorter, dark-haired man said. Then he leaned down and kissed him. It was just a light peck. Short and sweet. But in the brief moment, Zack felt his world tip on its axis and all the air sucked out of his lungs. Something flip-flopped in the region of his abdomen and a sudden vision of he and Patrick kissing flashed through his brain.

The two men walked past their table, seemingly oblivious to their rapt audience, and took a seat at a small table near the back of the restaurant.

“Fucking gross! Did you see that?” Scott threw down the last bit of burger he had been holding onto his plate. “I’ve totally lost my appetite. Those fags were completely disgusting.”

“Chill. You don’t want them to hear you.” Brad looked uncomfortable. Joel looked like he had just seen an alien and Zack couldn’t read Patrick’s expression at all.

Zack's stomach churned at Scott's words. They made him feel hurt and panicky, but he didn't know why. The two men looked so happy together. What was wrong with that?

Zack's limbs moved on autopilot as he followed the other guys out of the restaurant and back to Joel's SUV. Scott had claimed shotgun and Patrick was wedged into the middle of the backseat with Zack and Brad on either side of him. No one besides Patrick seemed to notice the silence from his side of the backseat. Patrick kept glancing in his direction as the rest of the guys began a rousing conversation about the hottest girls in the senior class, but Zack did his best to avoid Patrick's gaze and spent the ride home staring out the window.

His mind whirled as he went from wondering why watching those two men kiss had affected him so much, why it physically pained him that his friends might not approve and why the first thing he had thought of was him and Patrick kissing. One other thought dominated his brain the entire ride home. He needed to know what Patrick had thought about the kiss. The thought that Patrick might feel the same way as Scott was devastating.

Joel dropped Zack and Patrick off between their two houses. Patrick checked his watch and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "So, am I sleeping over?"

Zack had to laugh, even though he was still feeling nauseous. "Well, it is Saturday, isn't it?" Zack fished his keys out of his pocket as they walked up the driveway to his house.

Almost every Saturday night for as long as he could remember Patrick had slept over in his basement. His mother didn't really use the downstairs of their house at all. The family room had been more of his father's domain apparently, and he had left shortly after Zack was born.

"Your mom working the night shift again?" Patrick stepped in the front door and toed off his shoes.

"Yup."

His mother, Linda, was an ER nurse and often worked long and odd hours. He knew she always picked up extra shifts when she could. Raising a child on

a single salary wasn't easy and Zack was thankful, but he and his mom had never been close. Because she worked so much she wasn't ever really around, and she had always been a bit distant even when she was. Zack guessed she loved him in her own way, but she definitely wasn't the type of mother to bake cookies and give out hugs. Sometimes it hurt. Sometimes he wished he had two parents like Patrick—a dad that would play catch with him and a mom who would make his favorite dinner to cheer him up—but Zack knew it was pointless to dwell on things that couldn't be changed.

After raiding the pantry for junk food and the fridge for Cokes, they made their way downstairs. Patrick dropped the snacks he was carrying on the old coffee table in front of the beat-up plaid couch and knelt down in front of the cabinet under the TV that held all the movies. “What’re you in the mood for? Wanna stay up all night and watch all three *Indiana Jones* movies?”

Zack bit on the corner of his bottom lip, shaking his head. “Sounds like a plan. Dork.”

Patrick threw a grin over his shoulder and popped in the first DVD.

They started out sprawling on either side of the couch, but as the movies and the night wore on, they grabbed the sleeping bags they kept in the corner of the room and stripped the couch of cushions, essentially creating mattresses for themselves, and stretched out in front of the TV. It didn't matter that Zack's bedroom was right off the family room. He always slept on the ground with Patrick.

They watched *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* from inside their sleeping bags. He knew the movies almost by heart and Zack found his mind wandering back to Bob's Burgers and what he had witnessed. Instead of focusing on Indiana and his father racing across the desert to find the Holy Grail, he kept picturing the kiss. He had... liked it. A lot. And he couldn't stop picturing himself and Patrick doing the exact same thing.

He stole a glance at Patrick. He was tall and muscular and always seemed to have a tan. It was a stark contrast to Zack's wiry, thin frame and pale skin. Where Patrick's hair was a rich brown and always seemed artfully tousled and just a bit wavy, Zack's was short, straight, and sandy blond. Patrick also had

amazing eyes. They were like liquid dark chocolate and were framed by thick black lashes. Zack's were a nondescript light blue.

Zack's gaze traveled down to Patrick's mouth. Even in profile and in the semi-dark, his lips looked full and plush and Zack was already too aware that when Patrick smiled, he could light up a whole room. Patrick was gorgeous.

Zack's brain skittered to a halt as he processed his thoughts. He wasn't an idiot and he was actually amazed he hadn't realized it sooner. But guys being attracted to other guys wasn't something that was talked about in the suburbs. Even though Zack had never understood what it was about girls the other guys found so fascinating, it had never really occurred to Zack to look at other guys. Watching two men act on their attraction to each other and kiss had caused some sort of mental block in Zack's brain to crumble.

He liked guys. Which meant he was gay. And, he was attracted to his best friend. His revelation hit him like a ton of bricks.

He tried not to hyperventilate during the rest of the movie. How had he been alive for seventeen years and smart enough to get straight As and not known? How had it taken a two-second moment between two strangers to bring everything into focus? It was the proverbial light bulb switching on moment. If it wasn't so terrifying, he would laugh.

It was three in the morning when the credits began to roll and Patrick switched off the TV with the remote. They had been falling asleep next to each other almost every Saturday night since they were little kids, but this time Zack was restless and scared and not doing a very good job hiding it.

"Zack, you okay? You were acting weird after we left Bob's and it's like you've been quietly freaking out all night." Patrick knew him so well.

They had always told each other everything, but his brain was still trying to process. He certainly couldn't tell Patrick how he felt about him, but the dark gave him some bravery. Zack at least needed to know how Patrick felt about gay people, because if Patrick wasn't okay with that, then Zack might just die.

"Yeah." Zack nodded and swallowed. "I'm okay."

"But?"

Zack steeled his nerves. “You remember those two guys kissing at Bob’s?” The silence stretched on for what seemed like an eternity.

“Yeah.” Patrick finally said. “I remember.”

He couldn’t determine anything from the tone of Patrick’s voice and his face gave nothing away. He could only forge ahead.

“Um, it was pretty clear Scott was totally disgusted, but I was wondering what you thought.” Zack bit down on his lip, pretty sure he might be drawing blood. The importance of Patrick’s answer hit him full force. What would he do if Patrick felt the same way Scott did?

“What I thought about it?” Patrick enunciated every word like he had to ponder each one before it left his mouth.

“Yeah.” Zack’s heart was in his throat.

Zack could see Patrick shrugging his shoulders beneath his sleeping bag. “I get that we don’t live in, like, San Francisco or New York, but sometimes it kind of freaks me out how closed-minded people can be. Scott was pretty much a douche.”

“So,” Zack licked his lips, “you were okay with it?”

Patrick turned on his side so he faced Zack. “Yeah. I mean, weren’t you?” There was almost a hint of fear in Patrick’s voice, but he could be imagining things. Relief washed over Zack and he felt giddy.

“Yeah. I was okay with it.” He cared about Patrick’s opinion more than anyone else’s in the entire world.

There was a beat of silence before Patrick spoke again. “It looked like they were really in love.”

Zack froze, as his eyes locked with Patrick’s. “Yeah. It did,” he whispered.

Patrick gave a small smile. “I’m glad it didn’t bother you. ’Night, Zack.”

“’Night.”

Patrick shut his eyes and several minutes later his breathing evened out. Zack continued to watch him, though, as he slept. He mentally traced his

features, taking in his dark lashes and full lips and strong jaw. Patrick was beautiful. And good. And completely amazing. The longer Zack stared the more certain he became of yet one more giant earth-shattering revelation. When he really thought about it, it probably shouldn't have been all that surprising because Patrick meant absolutely everything to him. Not only was Zack gay and attracted to his best friend, he was also in love with him.

CHAPTER TWO

Zack wrapped his arms tighter around his knees and stared out over the algae-covered pond. It had been a little over a week and Zack still hadn't found the courage to tell Patrick he was gay. It was killing him. Where they lived, homosexuality wasn't really talked about. Homogeneity was favored and sticking out or being different was pretty much frowned upon. Zack was already so shy and introverted, the thought of coming out just boggled his mind. It was already senior year. He figured a big coming out party was probably not in his best interest. He could just wait until he got to college and deal with it then. No need to rock the boat. He could get more comfortable with it, and then there would be no need for anyone to decide to hate him based on something he couldn't control.

He did want to tell Patrick, though. He would leave out the part about being in love with him. Zack would have to find a way to get over that or learn to live with it. But he and Patrick never kept secrets from each other. Ever. And somehow telling Patrick would make it real. Like he would really be gay once he uttered the words to his friend. Patrick had seemed okay with the two guys kissing at Bob's, but they had been strangers. It made it different. Would Patrick still be so okay with it if it was his best friend?

"Hey, Zack! Sorry I'm late." Zack startled as Patrick crashed through the undergrowth, leapt over a log and skidded to a stop beside Zack. He had needed help with his math homework and asked to meet at the pond after school. All too soon, the weather would turn freezing. They wanted to enjoy the Indian summer while it lasted. "Thanks for agreeing to help your dumb best friend." Patrick gave him a puppy-dog face.

"No worries. Let's see what sort of evils Mrs. Hanson assigned you this week. And, you are *not* dumb! Don't say that about yourself." He squeezed Patrick's shoulder as he settled on the grass beside him. "Lemme see your assignment."

An hour later, they were still slogging through algebra problems.

“I can’t believe I’m having this much trouble with problems I should have mastered last year. What the hell am I going to do once we actual transfer out of ‘review mode’ and start learning new stuff?” Patrick looked up, his eyes baleful. Zack bit his lip so he wouldn’t laugh. “I’m beginning to think our teachers are members of an evil intergalactic conspiracy put on Earth to torment me.” At that, Zack did laugh.

“You can do this, Pat. I know you can.” Patrick hated it when anyone else called him Pat, but Zack was allowed.

Patrick squared his shoulders and let out a deep breath. “Okay. If I solve this equation for X, then I can plug in that number in this equation here, and then all I need to do is solve for Y...”

As Patrick worked through the problem, Zack couldn’t help but focus on things his brain wouldn’t have allowed him to only weeks ago. He noticed how Patrick’s navy henley stretched nicely over his shoulders and upper back, how his right forearm muscles flexed as he wrote in his notebook and how when his tousled brown hair caught the light just so, it took on an auburn hue.

“Nine! Y is nine!” Patrick threw his pencil down in the grass and raised his arms above his head. “Am I right?” He turned to look at Zack and Zack caught himself staring at Patrick’s lips and mouth.

Crap.

“Yes! Awesome!”

Patrick held up his hand, and Zack gave him a high-five. “Thank you, seriously. Sometimes I’m not sure I would make it through school without you. You’re so smart.”

Zack shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. “I figure this just makes us even. You help me not to be a social pariah and I give a little help with school stuff.” One side of his mouth turned up.

Patrick’s brow creased. “What’re you talking about? You’re just a little shy. That’s all.”

Zack dipped his head and became more serious. “You have to know I only have the friends that I do because I’m friends with you. It’s like I’m made

cooler by association or something. If I didn't have you, I'd just be some introverted, nerdy guy without any friends."

"Hey," Patrick placed his hand on the back of Zack's neck and squeezed. "I don't know where all this is coming from, but I promise you, you're the coolest guy I know. If someone has a problem with you, then I have a problem with them."

"You mean that? You would stick up for me no matter what?" Zack was horrified when the grass in front of him began to blur as he pictured Scott calling him a fag.

"Of course! How can you even question that?" Zack glanced to the side. Patrick wore a worried frown. "What's going on, Zack?"

This was his window of opportunity. It was now or never. Zack gathered his courage and prepared to rip the Band-Aid off.

"Pat... I need to tell you something."

"Okay."

"But I'm not sure how you're going to react. But it's so important to me that you're okay with this." Try as he might, he couldn't keep the tremble out of his voice.

When Patrick scooted closer and wrapped his arms around him, Zack couldn't hold back his tears any longer. He cried into Patrick's shoulder and Patrick just held him tighter.

"Zack, I promise you, if you've killed somebody, I'll help you hide the body." Zack gave off a snort-laugh through his tears. "Seriously. You can tell me anything. You're my best friend. Nothing will ever change that."

It was exactly what he needed to hear. After taking a deep breath, he extracted himself from Patrick's warmth so he could look him in the eye.

"Pat, I'm gay."

Patrick's eyes went wide. "How long have you known?"

"Um," Zack used the heels of his hands to wipe his eyes. "I just kind of figured it out, actually."

Patrick continued to stare at him, and the terror began to roil in Zack's gut. "P-please tell me that it's okay."

"Shit, sorry." Patrick shook himself out of whatever stupor he had been in. "Of course it's okay." He pulled Zack in for another hug. "I'm glad you told me."

"I can't believe it took me this long to figure it out, y'know?" Zack breathed out a sigh of relief and breathed in Patrick's intoxicating scent of Irish Spring soap, Tide detergent, a little sweat and something else that was purely Patrick. "I mean, how could I have been this dense?"

"Well," Patrick shifted back, but kept an arm around Zack's shoulders. "I don't think there are any hard and fast rules about these things. Maybe some people figure it out earlier, but then there are guys who grow up, get married, have kids, and wake up one morning when they're forty and realize they're gay."

Patrick could always make him feel better about things. "I'm just really worried what everyone will think. I know I wanted to tell you, but I don't think I want to tell anyone else. I have a feeling most people would react like Scott did. I just want to get through high school. Preferably unscathed."

Patrick nodded slowly, but wore an odd expression. "But what if you, y'know, wanna have a boyfriend or something?"

Zack gaped at his friend. "I... I wouldn't even... know... the chances of that..." Zack couldn't tease out a coherent sentence from his tangled mess of thoughts. "I'm like the only gay guy in our whole town. And I'm completely shy. Why would anyone want to date me? And it doesn't even matter, because the chances of it happening are, like, a million to one." Not to mention the only person Zack wanted was sitting beside him, but he didn't tell Patrick that.

"Law of averages would tell you you're wrong. You can't be the only gay guy. In fact, I can guarantee you're not. Maybe they're just scared to come out, like you." Patrick's eyes bored into him, and Zack was almost certain he could detect a hint of blush creeping into Patrick's cheeks. "Isn't there anyone in school you would think about dating?"

Zack's mouth open and closed and he started to feel very much like a

cornered rabbit. He had never lied to Patrick, but he couldn't tell him the truth. "I dunno."

"Oh." Patrick withdrew his arm from around Zack's shoulders and stared down at the grass.

"Pat?" He didn't understand the sudden change in his friend's demeanor. "What's wrong?"

When Patrick lifted his head, Zack was shocked to see that his friend's eyes were red. "Maybe I've been keeping a secret, too."

"What? Tell me."

"I'm gay too, Zack." Zack briefly had tunnel vision as he let Patrick's words sink in. "But unlike you, I know who I want to be my boyfriend."

His heart, which he had allowed to soar for one brief nanosecond, came crashing back down and splintered into a million pieces. "Who is it?" Zack tried not to cry. Against all odds, Patrick was gay too, but he already had a boyfriend picked out.

Patrick gave a choked laugh. "You're really not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

Zack's brow knit, but before he could open his mouth Patrick had leaned forward into his personal space and cupped his face with his hands. "Hopefully this will answer your question." And then Patrick's lips pressed against his own. It was warm and soft and when Zack's bottom lip slipped between Patrick's, and Patrick sucked on it ever so gently, Zack thought he might just die of pure bliss right then and there.

Zack's eyes slowly fluttered open when Patrick pulled back and he could see the worry in Patrick's eyes. "Please tell me I haven't totally screwed things up between us."

"No!" Zack grasped Patrick's hands that were still framing his face. "I just didn't think... I had no idea... it never occurred to me that you would feel the same way about me. Or, that you would be gay. Wait a minute! You've had girlfriends." It was all a bit much to take in and Zack was worried he would need a paper bag to breathe into momentarily.

Patrick just laughed, wrapped his arms around Zack's middle, and pressed his nose against Zack's cheek. "I went out with Kelly for, like, three weeks freshman year. Then last year, I dated Sara for two months, but I knew it didn't feel right. All I could think about was that I would much rather be spending time with you."

"Really?" Zack wasn't entirely sure when he had started to tremble. Patrick's arms tightened around him.

"Really. Why would you think I wouldn't want you? You're the most important person in my life. You always have been. I just didn't know how to tell you I was gay. You were braver than me."

"I'm the farthest thing from brave. I definitely wouldn't have had the guts to tell you I wanted you. You were the one who kissed me, remember?"

"Okay. We'll call it a group effort."

Zack let out a breathless laugh and Patrick nuzzled at his temple. "Zack? Are you done talking now?"

"Yeah." He turned to Patrick. "Why?"

"Because I'd really like to kiss you again."

When Patrick's lips connected with his, Zack couldn't help but let out a soft moan and he wrapped his arms tightly around Patrick's neck. After a few moments, Patrick pushed him back until he was lying on the grass and Patrick was on top of him. Zack gasped as Patrick swiped his tongue over Zack's bottom lip and then Patrick's tongue was in his mouth, sliding over his own. Zack couldn't help it. His hips bucked up against Patrick's thigh and he could feel his erection pressing against the fly of his jeans. He loved the warm weight of Patrick's body on his and their tongues twining together was absolute heaven. He couldn't believe this was happening and how amazing it felt to be kissing his best friend.

Patrick kissed a trail from his jaw down his neck. When he began flicking his tongue over Zack's pulse-point, Zack thought he might pass out. His arms tightened around Patrick and when Patrick shifted, Zack felt Patrick's erection pressing against his hip. Knowing that he was the cause of his best friend's

arousal just added fuel to the fire traveling through his entire body. His hips sought more friction, and Zack turned his head in search of Patrick's lips. He had only had his first kiss moments ago, and he was already addicted.

Their mouths connected again and again and Zack could feel the desperate thrust of Patrick's hips against his. They had just gone from zero to sixty in the blink of an eye, but it was okay, because he trusted Patrick completely. He wanted this more than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

"Zack..." Patrick's breathing was harsh and ragged. "I'm gonna... if we keep going..."

Zack tightened his grip. "Me too. Please... don't stop."

Their kisses became sloppy as they stole breaths of air in between lips and tongues heatedly meeting, but it didn't matter. To Zack, it was perfect.

"Zack!" Patrick buried his face in Zack's neck and his whole body tensed.

Patrick trembled in his arms, and Zack's hips erratically thrust upwards a few more times before he came undone in Patrick's arms.

"Oh my god. I can't believe we just did that." Patrick pushed up on his elbows and kissed Zack's jaw and then placed a lingering kiss on his lips. "You okay?"

Still regaining his breath, Zack could only nod and smile. He didn't think there were adequate words to accurately describe how very okay he was.

Patrick beamed down at him. "So, does this mean you'll be my boyfriend as well as my best friend?"

Soon he would feel wet and sticky, but for now, lying beneath Patrick, listening to his words, Zack could only feel pure joy.

"Yes." He felt like the luckiest person on the planet as Patrick leaned in to kiss him again.

CHAPTER THREE

“Hey.”

Zack gripped the side of his locker as he felt Patrick come up behind him and his breath on the back of his neck. All too soon, the closeness was gone and Patrick moved to stand in front of him.

“Hey, Pat.” It had been a couple days since their afternoon at the pond, but they hadn’t had a chance to be alone since then. By unspoken mutual agreement, they had been extremely careful how they acted around each other at school, though Patrick somehow was able to look at him with eyes that conveyed heat and longing when no one else was looking. It was how Patrick was looking at him now, and Zack could feel the flush travel over his whole body and his pulse speed up. Thank god, he only had one more class to get through and then it was the weekend.

“Please tell me your mom works tonight.” Patrick’s mother was a stay-at-home mom so they could really only be alone at Zack’s house when his mom was at the hospital.

“Come over at seven. She’ll be gone by then.”

“Good.” Patrick glanced up and down the hallway. The last bell would ring soon and most students had already cleared out. He leaned in so his lips were right by Zack’s ear. “Because I can’t wait to kiss you again.”

Zack’s knees went a bit weak and he forced himself to think about cold showers and his sixty-year-old history teacher naked so he wouldn’t embarrass himself with an erection in school.

He somehow made it through history, but he had no idea what his teacher had said about the Medici family and Renaissance Florence. As soon as class was over, he headed for his car. Even though they lived next door to each other, he and Patrick never actually carpooled to school. Patrick had weight training with the rest of the baseball team after school and Zack had a first period while Patrick didn’t. Zack hopped in the beat-up Ford Taurus he had bought toward the end of summer with some of his savings and drove home, willing time to go faster and wishing that it was seven already.

When he got home, Zack thought about trying to pass the time by getting a head start on his homework, but quickly nixed the idea. He knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate. It still all seemed so surreal. One conversation was all he and Patrick had needed to completely change their relationship. Except, they weren't really all that different now. He and Patrick were still best friends. Now they were just... *more*.

It did bring up a lot of questions, though. Could Zack tell Patrick he loved him? Was it too soon? And were they just going to hide their relationship for the rest of the year? Or were they going to come out... as a couple? And, what—and this was the one that made Zack's heart stop and his blood run cold—what would happen if they broke up? He wasn't sure he would survive.

Zack jumped when he heard a knock and the front door subsequently opening.

"Hey. It's me," Patrick called.

They had been letting themselves into each other's houses for years. Zack almost tripped over his feet as he half walked, half jogged from the kitchen to the front entryway.

"Hey."

Patrick took a few steps forward and started to reach for Zack, but stopped himself. He peered down the hall and then in toward the kitchen. "Your mom gone?"

Zack smiled. "Yeah. We're alone."

"Good."

Patrick's grin was breathtaking. He wound his arms around Zack's waist and pulled him against his chest. Lacing his arms around Patrick's neck, he raised his chin in anticipation. His breath caught in his throat as Patrick's lips met his. It was like a jolt of electricity and he couldn't imagine it would ever be anything less than pulse-quickenning when they kissed.

"Let's go downstairs." Patrick kissed his cheek, then his temple, before turning and steering Zack in the direction of the stairs.

When they got down to the family room, Zack looked around at the

familiar surroundings and thought about all the nights he and Patrick had spent in this very room, but this time everything was different.

“Are you spending the night?” His voice came out sounding a little breathless as his brain processed the possible implications.

“Is that okay?” Patrick looked almost a little shy.

“Yes.” Zack swallowed. “I want you to.”

Patrick moved forward and pulled Zack close, resting their foreheads together. “Can we go to your room?”

Zack nodded, not trusting his voice. He led the way across the family room. Once they were both inside his bedroom, he shut the door for good measure. As soon as the door clicked shut, Patrick whipped him around and moved in so their lips met. Zack groaned as he opened up to Patrick’s questing tongue.

It was a small room, so it only took a few stumbling steps for them to reach the side of the bed. Zack felt Patrick’s hands slide up under his shirt and trail up and down his bare back.

“Is this okay?” Patrick tore his lips away from Zack’s. “I mean, are we going too fast? I just... god, now that I know you feel the same way and that it’s okay to touch you, it’s all I can think about.” Patrick pulled him closer and he could feel Patrick’s erection pressing against his own through their jeans. “Jesus, Zack, you feel so good. I want you so much.”

Zack had always considered himself so lucky that Patrick was his friend and that he wanted to spend all his time with him. But now, Patrick also *desired* him. He wondered if it was possible to burst from happiness.

“I want you too. Keep going.” He raised his hands above his head so Patrick could pull his shirt off. If it had been anyone else, he would have wanted to go slower. But not with Patrick. They didn’t need to spend time getting to know each other to be comfortable. He had finally figured out seventeen years’ worth of feelings, and now it was like a volcano of need and lust and want had erupted and all he wanted to do was act on them.

“You’re so gorgeous.” Patrick stripped off his own shirt and then Zack found himself wrapped up in another all-consuming kiss. They ground against

each other and the feel of their bare chests pressed against each other was almost too much for Zack. “Zack... take off your jeans? I wanna see you.” Zack moaned and tightened his grip on Patrick’s shoulder as his words reached his ear. He nodded against Patrick’s neck, and then forced himself to take a step back. With trembling fingers, he reached for the waistband of his jeans, undid the top button, and pulled down the zipper. Patrick matched his movements. Their eyes locked as they both pushed their jeans over their hips, down their legs and then stepped out of them.

“Will you lay down?”

His erection straining against his boxers, Zack did as he was asked and stretched out on the bed. He watched, heart pounding in his chest, as Patrick hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his own boxers and pushed them down and off his legs. Zack couldn’t help but stare at Patrick’s groin. The only other aroused dick he had ever seen was his own. Patrick’s cock was about the same length as his, but maybe a little thicker. It curved up toward his stomach and there was already a drop of pre-cum glistening at the tip. Zack licked his lips, unable to look away.

Zack vaguely heard Patrick chuckle as he knelt beside Zack on the bed. “I’ve shown you mine. Now it’s time for you to show me yours.”

Zack gave off a breathless laugh as Patrick reached forward to grasp the waistband of Zack’s boxers. Their eyes met and Zack nodded in answer to the unvoiced question in Patrick’s heated yet questioning stare. Closing his eyes, Zack took a shuddering breath as he felt his boxers being peeled down his legs. When he opened them again, Patrick was leaning over him and Zack could see the desire written all over his handsome face.

This was happening. He was naked with his best friend.

Patrick bent down and placed a kiss on his chest, then his neck, and finally on Zack’s lips. Patrick grinned down at him and then trailed his hand over Zack’s smooth stomach and over his hip. Patrick’s gaze followed his hand as it traveled toward Zack’s cock. “Can I?”

“Y-yeah.”

When Patrick's fingers closed around him and began gently stroking, Zack's hips actually came off the bed. Patrick maneuvered so he could stretch out beside him, his hand still languidly running up and down Zack's length.

"You're really beautiful." He murmured against Zack's lips and then claimed them with his own.

"Pat..." Zack wound his arms around Patrick's shoulders and pulled Patrick so he was on top of him. Patrick released his erection and Zack instinctively spread his legs, making room for Patrick between them and so their hips and groins would line up perfectly.

They both gasped. When they had been together by the pond, it had been magical, but this was intensified a hundredfold by the skin-to-skin contact. Their mouths came together as their hands wandered over each other's bodies, exploring and discovering. Zack's hips bucked up to meet Patrick's thrusts and Zack was sure he had never felt anything so good in his life.

Just as Zack was wondering how much longer he was going to be able to hold out, Patrick propped up on an elbow and reached a hand down between them. He grasped both their erections and began stroking them off together.

Zack was beyond being able to kiss. He buried his face in Patrick's neck, which served to muffle some of his incessant moans that he seemed completely unable to stop. Patrick's breath was ragged against his ear, and his hips began to jerk harder against his own. Zack gripped tighter at Patrick's back, holding on for dear life as the pleasure became too much.

"Pat!" It was all the warning he had time to give before he came apart at the seams.

Patrick thrust forward once more, groaning into Zack's shoulder, and Zack felt the slickness of Patrick's release mixing with his own.

After several shuddering breaths, Patrick lifted his head. He wore a dazed, almost goofy expression that only made Zack love him more.

"Holy shit." Patrick leaned down placed a shaky kiss on Zack's lips.

Zack made a noise that sort of resembled a hysterical giggle. "You can say that again."

Patrick reached for a few tissues from the box on the nightstand and did what he could to wipe up. When he had finished, he slid back down beside Zack, who still hadn't quite found the energy to move yet, and pulled him close. Zack rolled on his side so they were facing each other. He traced a finger down Patrick's cheek, and gently pressed his lips to his.

Patrick sighed and just pulled him closer so Zack's head was tucked up under his chin. "Wow. I still can't believe... that this is happening... that we..."

Zack pressed his lips against the base of Patrick's throat. "I know. Me too." He hummed contentedly and closed his eyes. They had a lot of things they needed to talk about and figure out, but for right now, all Zack wanted to do was bask in the afterglow.

After a few minutes, Patrick's voice punctuated the silence.

"Zack?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you, you know." Zack froze then slowly pushed himself back so he could look into Patrick's eyes, not quite believing what he was hearing. "It's true. I mean, maybe it's too soon to say that because we just got together, but I figure we've been best friends for seventeen years, so in some ways it's long overdue, and..." Patrick licked his lips, seeming to realize he was rambling. "I just... I love you. And I wanted you to know."

Zack could feel his eye prickling as he sucked in a breath. He was pretty sure his heart was about to beat right out of his chest. He pressed his lips hard against Patrick's and then buried his face in his neck, trying to regain some composure.

"How long? I mean, how long have you known? And, actually," Zack rolled onto his back, a thought coming to him, "how long have you known you were gay?"

Patrick propped himself up on his elbow so he could look down at Zack. He chewed on his bottom lip, thinking. "I think I realized both things at about the same time, really. Remember when I was going out with Sara last year?"

Zack nodded. “Well, I told you it didn’t feel right, and I realized when I spent time with her, I really just wanted to be spending that time with you. I think the real tell for me though was when she wanted to, um,” Patrick looked everywhere but at Zack, “y’know, do stuff... I um, I couldn’t really get *excited* about it, if you get what I mean, unless...”

“Unless what?” Zack couldn’t hold back a smile. Patrick was so cute when he was flustered.

“Unless I thought of you.”

Zack’s eyes flashed wide. The longer he stared at Patrick, the more Patrick blushed.

“I kind of had to ask myself some serious questions after that. So,” Patrick shrugged one shoulder, “I kind of figured out I was gay and that I was attracted to you at the same time. But I didn’t realize I loved you until a bit later.”

“When was that?” Zack shifted to his side and Patrick immediately put this arm around him, his fingers tracing up and down Zack’s spine.

“You remember last spring? When we took that practice SAT?”

“Yeah.”

“You got, like, an almost perfect score. And everyone was telling you that you could get into any college you wanted to. Teachers were thrusting Harvard brochures at you.”

“I told you, I never wanted to go to any of those places. I couldn’t afford to, anyways.”

“I know, but that’s not the point. I remember thinking that after senior year you were going to go off to some fancy school far away and I would be lucky to get into the U of M, and we’d never see each other. I was so happy for you. But when I got home after school I started to really freak out because the thought of being away from you was so physically painful. That’s when I had to admit to myself that I didn’t just have a crush on you. I was in love with you.”

“I’m not leaving you.” Zack swallowed hard, trying to get himself under control. “I never wanted to leave the state to go to school, even if I *could* afford out of state tuition. I always wanted to go to the U of M with you. I wish I would have known sooner. Maybe I could have stopped you from hurting.”

Patrick pulled him close and rested their foreheads together. “You can’t think like that. I think we both needed to just get here in our own time.” Patrick kissed the tip of his nose. “It’s funny. I may have only realized what all these feelings meant last spring, but I’m pretty sure I’ve loved you my whole life. Does that make sense?”

Zack pressed his lips against Patrick’s and nodded. “Yeah. It does.”

Zack snuggled into Patrick’s arms, mind reeling from all that he’d heard, and feeling like he was so content and happy there was probably a law against it, when he realized he had forgotten one very important thing.

“Pat?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you too.”

They made love twice more that evening. They took turns stroking each other to climax and then they just rocked together, erections trapped together between their bodies, kissing and touching and letting the pleasure slowly build until neither could stand it any longer.

When the need for food and water finally became too pressing to ignore, they pulled on clothes, ordered a pizza, rehydrated, and curled up on the plaid sofa together while they waited for it to arrive.

Part of Zack just wanted to continue floating along in the happy bubble they were currently in—basking in their new feelings and reveling in the new pieces they had added to their relationship. He didn’t want to face the real world, but he had always been practical, and Zack knew the real world would catch up to them, whether they wanted it to or not.

“Are we going to tell people about us? Or, are we gonna keep it a secret?” He lifted his head from where it rested on Patrick’s chest so he could look him in the eye.

“Honestly? I’m not sure what we should do.”

“You’re worried about what people will say.” It wasn’t a question.

Patrick blew out a breath of air. “Yeah. I mean, it was already something I worried about when I figured out I was gay, but Scott just really confirmed it for me. People around here are very closed-minded.”

“What do you think your parents would say?”

“Oh, Jesus.” Patrick ran his hands over his face. “I can only imagine. I’m an only child and my mom’s already talking about how much she wants grandkids one day. I’m pretty sure she cried when I broke up with Sara last year.” Zack liked Mrs. Martin well enough, but she was a staunch traditionalist and saying she smothered Patrick would be an understatement. “And, my dad...”

Zack frowned when Patrick looked away, his jaw muscle flexing.

“What about your dad?” he asked gently.

“Right after I had basically put the pieces together and figured out I was gay, my dad and I were watching a Twins game. It was one of the first games of the season, and the Twins weren’t doing so hot.” Zack watched, his heart aching, as tears filled Patrick’s eyes. “He said ‘I can’t believe the entire team is swinging their bats like a bunch of fags. Why can’t they just man up and hit the ball?’”

“Oh, Pat.” Zack offered the only comfort he knew how to and pulled Patrick into a hug. He kissed the corner of his eye, his cheek and down his jaw. “I’m so sorry. I wish I had known. I wish you hadn’t had to go through that by yourself.”

“It’s not your fault.” Patrick held him tight. “But I just knew right then and there, I couldn’t tell them. My mom would basically go catatonic and my dad would never be okay with it. He would never look at me the same way again.”

“Okay. So, we keep it a secret. We just get through this year and then we can figure things out when we get to college. Okay?” Zack stroked Patrick’s face and wiped away the remaining tears.

Patrick took Zack’s hands and held them in his. “You know I don’t want to hide forever. You know it’s not because I’m ashamed you’re my boyfriend. You know that right? I’m so proud of you.”

Zack leaned in and placed a kiss on Patrick’s lips. He knew Patrick would never do that, but it was nice to hear just the same.

“I know. And look, I have no idea how my mom would take it anyway.” Zack shrugged. “She’s not exactly forthcoming about her thoughts and feelings.” That was the understatement of the century. “Most of the time I don’t know what she thinks about anything. Things’ll be easier at college. People in Minneapolis are more open-minded than they are here and the city is at least a little more diverse.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Patrick pulled him in for a kiss. When Zack opened his eyes, Patrick’s smile had turned into a mischievous grin. “But there’s still one more problem.”

“What’s that?”

“How am I supposed to keep my hands off you at school?” Patrick slid his hands down Zack’s back and squeezed his ass.

Zack let out an undignified squeal, and they both erupted in giggles. “I guess you’ll just have to store up now when you can.” Zack smirked and then proceeded to attack his best-friend-who-happened-to-be-his-boyfriend’s lips with his own.

CHAPTER FOUR

Early November

It was so much harder than they thought it would be. Now that they were honest with each other about their feelings, now that they had admitted they loved each other, hiding it from the world took constant effort. Zack found himself second-guessing everything he said and did around Patrick at school and he knew Patrick felt the same. It was exhausting expending the energy necessary to *not* act like a couple. Zack was on edge all the time when they were around other people, and every day at school began to feel like torture. He wanted to be able to show Patrick affection. Even something as simple as holding hands. But they couldn't.

Sometimes he wondered if it would almost be easier to just tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may. But then he remembered Scott's reaction at Bob's Burgers and Patrick's story about his dad. Hiding certainly wasn't ideal, but at least they would be able to get through to graduation without everyone hating them.

So, every day they went to school and acted their asses off and pretended they were nothing but friends. And whenever his mom's work schedule permitted, they were in Zack's basement loving each other where no one could see. Some days they barely made it down the stairs and into Zack's room before they were ripping each other's clothing off, desperate to be skin-to-skin, and kissing like each other's lips were more important than oxygen. They'd curl up on the sofa together to do their homework or sometimes they'd just lie down together on Zack's bed, holding each other, talking and making plans for the future.

The problem was the longer they were together as a couple the more difficult it became to separate the time they spent alone and the time they spent in public. They began to slip up. Zack would catch himself staring at Patrick too long when he talked. Patrick would let their knees rest against each other under the lunch table. When they stood at their lockers, they stood much too close together. They should have known it was a recipe for disaster.

“You know Rachel?” Brad waggled his eyebrows and took another bite of his slice of pizza. “Heard she was talking to the other cheerleaders and apparently she has a thing for you, Patrick.”

Zack and Patrick sat next to each other at the crowded lunch table, taking the opportunity to scoot their chairs as close as possible. They sat with their backs to the wall, and Brad, Joel and Scott sat across from them. Several other members of the baseball team were at the table as well, but engaged in their own conversations. The thought of Rachel making a play for Patrick sent a wave of unfounded jealousy coursing through Zack. He knew it was silly, but he hated everyone thinking that Patrick was available. He wasn't. He was in a relationship. With him. But no one could know that. Zack just bent his head down and forced himself to eat his sandwich.

“Dude, she's hot,” Joel chimed in. “You gonna go for it?”

Patrick studied the potato chip in his hand before popping it into his mouth. He chewed slowly, and gave a half-hearted shrug. “I dunno.”

“What's wrong with you? Why the hell not?” Scott piped up. “You'd have to be a fag or something not to want to tap that.”

Zack had been taking a sip of his Snapple, but Scott's comment almost caused him to regurgitate his iced tea.

“Don't say that.” The words were out of Zack's mouth before he could think.

“You've had nothing to say for the past twenty minutes, but *now* you have an opinion?” Scott looked at him like he was a bug. A bug he'd like to squash.

What Zack really wanted to do was sink beneath the table, but his mouth had different ideas. “I just think it's a pretty ugly word. And Patrick deserves way more respect than that.”

“Dude, you're like some nerdy, Mr. No-personality. The only reason we hang out with you is because of Patrick.” Zack could almost feel himself being incinerated under Scott's glare. Now that his brain had caught up with the proceedings he remembered why he hated confrontation. Why couldn't he just have kept his mouth shut? This was not how he and Patrick were going to fly under the radar for the next seven months.

“Okay, let’s all just chill.” Brad gave Scott a wary look.

“I agree. Back off, Scott,” Joel said.

“Whatever.” Scott stood up to leave. “Maybe Patrick doesn’t want to date Rachel because he already has a *boyfriend*.” He looked between Patrick and Zack and sneered.

Zack felt his face heat and the cafeteria began to spin. He tried to take a calming breath and glanced over at Patrick, who had been silent through the entire altercation. Patrick’s head was bent down, but Zack could see his jaw muscles flex. He was pissed.

When Patrick stood up, it was with enough force to topple over the plastic chair. In two steps he had invaded Scott’s personal space, and Scott was actually forced to step back just so he wasn’t staring into Patrick’s nose hairs.

“I suggest you listen to me, Scott, because I’m only going to say this once. Zack is my best friend, and if you ever throw an insult in his direction again, you’ll have me to answer to.” Patrick didn’t raise his voice, but the mask of rage on his face left no room for doubt that he was not messing around. “That *nerdy* guy is so smart he’ll be ruling the world one day while you’re pumping gas.” Brad and Joel both snickered at that. “Not only does he have the balls to stick up for his friends, he’s also about a hundred times the man you will ever be. Fuck off, Scott.”

Scott looked like he might have wanted to say something, but thought better of it and instead turned and walked away. Zack thought that was probably the smartest decision Scott had made in a long time.

When Patrick sat back down, he still looked enraged, and Zack saw the red that had crept up his neck.

“Zack, you know we don’t think that about you, right?” Joel looked to Brad who nodded his head in confirmation. “Scott’s pretty much an asshole most of the time. Don’t listen to him.”

Zack managed to find his voice. “Thanks, guys.”

Several of the other nearby lunch tables had gone silent to observe the mini-fight between Patrick and Scott, but now that it was over, they had gone

back to their own conversations and Zack was thrilled not to have so many pairs of eyes directed at them. Just as he was beginning to breathe easy again, he felt Patrick's fingers find his under the table and grip tightly. He squeezed back. They both needed the comfort, and no one was between them and the wall to see. But Zack hated that his first instinct had been to pull away.

"What the fuck?"

Scott's voice froze the blood in Zack's veins. Scott must have doubled back behind them. He dropped Patrick's hand like he had been scalded.

"Were you two just holding hands? Hey, everyone!" Scott's voice carried over the entire cafeteria. "I just caught Patrick and Zack holding hands! They're fags together!" The lunchroom went deadly quiet, and then everyone started talking at once. All eyes were on them. Zack couldn't pull enough oxygen into his lungs and he thought he might pass out.

"So, I was actually right. You two disgusting freaks are fucking homo boyfriends together." Scott looked so satisfied and smug. Bile rose up in Zack's throat.

"A-Are you...? Is he serious?" Brad stared wide-eyed first at Zack, then Patrick and then Scott. Joel just looked stunned.

The bell rang and people started to stand up and throw away their trash, but instead of heading off to their next class, many stayed to stare and point.

"I'm gonna be sick." Zack heard himself mumble more to himself than anyone else. Patrick was still sitting next to him, looking like he was still processing what had just happened. He started to say something, but Zack couldn't wait. He had to get out of there. Now.

He sprinted from the cafeteria. After losing his lunch in the first bathroom he came to, he went straight to his locker. Ignoring the titters, sickened expressions and whispers behind his back, he grabbed his coat and left the building as quickly as he could. It was the first time in his life he had ever cut class.

He drove home in a daze. When he got home, he went straight to the kitchen and leaned over the sink, thinking he might be sick again. He tried to

take deep, calming breaths, but it just increased his nausea. So much for best-laid plans. He and Patrick had been outed by the absolute worst person imaginable. It had been as horrific as some of the worst-case scenarios Zack had outlined in his head. It had been so public. It had been so hurtful. There had been looks of disgust and contempt. Being gay at their school was most definitely not okay. Zack gripped the edge of the sink tighter as the room began to spin.

“Zack!” Patrick burst through the front door looking disheveled, distraught, and panicked. “Are you okay? You ran off and I didn’t know where you had gone.”

“I couldn’t...” Zack choked back his tears. “I had to get out of there. It was my worst nightmare come to life. Everyone staring at me and everyone hating me.”

Patrick’s arms were around him in an instant and Zack clung to Patrick for all he was worth.

“I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. I didn’t think anyone could see. I shouldn’t have grabbed your hand.”

Zack laughed bitterly. “It’s not your fault. We *should* be able to hold hands.”

“I know. It’s all kinds of messed up. But it’s what we were afraid of and what we were trying to avoid.”

Zack buried his face further into Patrick’s shoulder. How were they going to get through the year now? The thought was daunting. Paralyzing. How was he supposed to go back to school and continue to live his life?

“W-what are we going to do now?”

Patrick stepped back and cradled Zack’s face in his hands. Patrick’s eyes were red too. “First, I’m going to kiss you. And then I’m going to hold you some more. And then we’re going to talk about it. It can’t get any worse, right?”

Zack almost managed a smile. When Patrick’s lips met his, it was like a soothing balm. He was still overwhelmed and terrified, but kissing Patrick

made him feel like he could maybe, possibly, go on, as long as his best friend was at his side.

“I love you, Zack. So much. It’s going to be okay.”

“I love you too.” Zack let the words wash over his soul as he leaned in for more kisses.

“*What* is going on here?”

Zack and Patrick froze in each other’s arms. When Zack took a step back and turned around to face his mother and saw the expression on her face, he knew this day had entered a new hell dimension. He couldn’t breathe.

Laura Larson was still in her scrubs from the hospital and her straight brown hair was pulled back severely into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her expression was an equal mixture of anger and pure disgust.

“M-Mrs. Larson, we can explain—”

She held up her hand to stop Patrick. “I can see just fine. I saw exactly what was going on.” She shifted her gaze to Zack. “*What* were you thinking? How could you allow him to...?” She made a revolted face.

“Mom, please calm down and listen—”

“Calm down? *Calm* down?” She threw her purse down onto the kitchen counter. “I come home after a twelve hour shift and find my son skipping school so he can be touched and kissed by another boy and you want me to *calm down*?” She spit out the words as if they left the foulest taste imaginable in her mouth.

Zack slowly felt his insides begin to crumple and die. He wasn’t exactly sure when he had started to cry. “Mom, please. Patrick isn’t just any boy. He’s my best friend. And, well actually, he’s my boyfri—”

“Don’t you dare even say it!” She scrubbed at her face with her hands. “I don’t know how long this has been going on for. But it is going to stop. Right now. Patrick, get out of my house. Now. You are no longer welcome here.”

“Mom!” The panic and bile were rising faster than Zack could swallow it down.

“Enough, Zack! You are confused and have somehow been enticed by him.” She waved her hand haphazardly in Patrick’s direction. “You are absolutely not...” She scrunched up her face.

Gay. His mother couldn’t even say the word.

“Please. Please can we just talk about this? This isn’t Patrick’s fault.” He was begging and he didn’t care. Patrick looked shell-shocked and unsure whether it would help or make matter’s worse if he spoke up.

“Stop!” Her hand slammed down on the counter, and Zack knew he wasn’t going to get anywhere. “Patrick, leave. Zack, go to your room. I’m going to call the Martins and we are all going to talk about this tonight.”

Patrick’s face was pained and questioning, but Zack nodded at him to go. He wanted to just grab his hand, make a break for it, and run away from this nightmare. But there was nowhere to go. They were still kids. They were powerless.

With one last look back, Patrick left the house. Zack’s mom was leaning against the counter with her head down, her hands gripping the edge so tightly her knuckles were white.

“Mom?” His voice was small and pathetic.

“Just... go to your room. I can’t even look at you right now.”

Zack felt himself go numb. His body moved on autopilot and he walked downstairs, through the family room and finally shut the door to his bedroom. He crawled onto his bed and curled up on his side facing the wall, his arms hugging his body tightly. He couldn’t figure out why he was shivering. He wasn’t cold. He stared at the white wall, black spots dancing in front of his eyes. At some point, the wall began to swim in front of him and he felt wetness running down the side of his face.

He didn’t know what was going to happen when he went over to the Martins’ with his mom. He didn’t know how he was going to survive at school. One day was all it had taken for his life to go from heaven to hell. The only thing he did know was that he would give anything, anything in the world, to feel Patrick’s arms around him.

When his mom called down the stairs telling him it was time to go over to the Martins', Zack realized it had been about five hours since he had moved. His muscles were stiff as he stretched and stood. After taking a deep breath, he walked upstairs to learn his fate.

His mother still wouldn't look at him as they left the house and walked next door, and Zack wondered vaguely if he had had some sort of emotional breakdown, because he felt absolutely nothing. He was putting one foot in front of the other. He was aware that his mother was planning on telling Mr. and Mrs. Martin what she witnessed and that it would not mean good things for him and Patrick, but his brain felt blank. It was like he was floating alongside his body watching it all happen.

"Hello, Laura. Hi, Zack. Come on in." Beverley Martin stepped back from the door and allowed them to enter. She was wearing khaki slacks and a pale pink sweater set. Zack often thought that if he looked inside Mrs. Martin's closet all he would find would be rows and rows of khaki slacks and sweater sets in various colors. "Is everything all right? Laura, you were pretty cryptic on the phone and Patrick has been up in his room all afternoon. He said he came home early from school because he wasn't feeling well."

"No. Everything is not all right. Is Peter here? And you'll probably want to call Patrick down."

"Oh, dear." Mrs. Martin frowned and tilted her head to the side. "Zack, did the two of you have a disagreement of some sort?"

For some reason that made Zack want to laugh. Or cry. But he was pretty sure he couldn't get his voice working to do either, so he just managed something resembling a shrug.

Mrs. Martin's frown increased further. "Peter, honey? Laura and Zack are here," she called up the stairs. "Can you please bring Patrick down with you when you come?"

Mrs. Martin ushered them into the living room to sit. Zack sat next to his mother on one sofa and Mrs. Martin took a spot on the other. Silence permeated the room, and Mrs. Martin fidgeted with the buttons on her sweater as she waited for her husband and son to join them.

Zack's heart skipped a beat when Patrick walked in the room followed by his father. When they locked eyes, Zack could tell Patrick had been crying. He looked a wreck and it was all Zack could do not to rush forward and comfort him.

"Laura. Zack." Mr. Martin nodded at each of them as he sat down. "What's all this about?"

Zack's mom leaned forward, rubbing her hands together. "I'm not quite sure how to say this. So, I'm just going to say it, and please pardon the blunt delivery. I came home today from my shift at the hospital to find your son and mine..." she closed her eyes and looked like she had bitten into a lemon, "...kissing in my kitchen."

There was a long, digestive pause.

"That... that absolutely can't be true. There has to be some mistake!" Mrs. Martin turned to Patrick who was sitting between his parents on the couch. "There's been some sort of misunderstanding, hasn't there sweetie?"

Patrick had dropped his head to his hands, so it was impossible to read his expression.

"Answer your mother, Patrick. You explain yourself right now!" Mr. Martin's face had gone hard.

Patrick slowly lifted his head and turned first to his mother, then his father, and then looked directly at Zack. He looked absolutely defeated and Zack ached for him. "There's nothing to explain. We were kissing."

Mrs. Martin let out something resembling a wail and began to cry. "But, why? How could you do this?"

"No son of mine is going to be a fag!" Mr. Martin roared. "This nonsense is going to stop right now!"

"Laura, how could you have let this happen? I knew I shouldn't have let my Patrick spend so much time over at your house. You're never home!" Mrs. Martin's voice was shrill.

"Oh, don't you dare try to blame this on me, Beverley!" Zack's mom rose to her feet. "Some of us have to work! I don't have the luxury of staying home

like you do! And how do you know it wasn't Patrick that was pressuring Zack to do disgusting things together?"

"How dare you!" Mr. Martin's voice thundered as he stood up. "My boy plays varsity baseball. He's had girlfriends. It's obvious Zack's the queer one. No father figure to speak of. A mother who's gone all the time. No wonder he turned out the way he did. And he's sucked our boy into his disgusting ways!"

"He's not disgusting, Dad." Patrick slowly got to his feet and faced his father. "There's nothing wrong with Zack. And, there's nothing wrong with me. He's my boyfriend."

Mr. Martin's face, which was already red, turned several shades darker. "Don't you *ever* say anything like that again!"

Mrs. Martin just cried harder.

"It's not like we're super religious or anything, so why is it so terrible if I'm gay?" Zack heard the waver in Patrick's voice and he could see his hands shaking from where he was sitting. After the story Patrick had told him, and listening to the things that had come out of Mr. Martin's mouth, he couldn't imagine the amount of strength it took for Patrick to stand up to his father the way that he was. It made Zack love him even more.

"Because, I don't need someone named Leviticus to tell me two boys kissing and touching each other is unnatural, abnormal, and absolutely wrong! A man is supposed to be with a woman. That's it."

Patrick slumped back down onto the couch like his legs had just collapsed out from under him. Their parents went back to screaming at each other, throwing barbs, and placing blame. Zack tuned them out. He and Patrick just looked at each other from across the room. Zack felt lost and completely helpless. Why was everyone okay with them being best friends their entire life, but not okay with them being in love?

"Okay, enough!" Mr. Martin held up his hands. "This is what is going to happen. The two of you" —he pointed first to Patrick and then to Zack—"are not going to spend any more time together." Zack was sure his heart stopped beating. "Zack is not allowed over here any more, and you, Patrick, are absolutely forbidden from spending any time over at the Larsons'. I'm going

to call the school to make sure you boys are kept away from each other. You two are not to associate with each other ever again.”

“Dad, no—”

“No! You listen to me! You boys are not to be friends any longer. I mean it. You are *not* gay Patrick, and somehow the two of you have gotten it through your heads that it’s okay to...” He held up his hands and shook his head. “I absolutely forbid it. If you want us to pay for college, you will do as you’re told.”

Patrick looked mutinous, but Zack understood what was at stake. Zack’s grandmother had left him money for college and he would qualify for some financial aid. Patrick wouldn’t. If his parents didn’t foot the bill, he wouldn’t be going to college. He might get a partial athletic scholarship, but it wasn’t guaranteed.

“Dad, he’s my best friend, you can’t—”

“It’s fine.” Zack’s voice was quiet, but since it was the first time he had spoken since arriving, they all stopped to listen. “We won’t be friends any more.”

“Zack?” Patrick looked stricken.

“It’s done. We’re done.” He willed Patrick to understand. They couldn’t win this battle. They just couldn’t. And he couldn’t live with himself if it cost Patrick going to college.

When they got back home, it was clear his mother was going to be giving him the silent treatment for the foreseeable future. He went down to his room and let the full force of what had transpired that day hit him. He would be ostracized at school, his mother couldn’t even look at him, and he no longer had the one person in his life who could make him feel better because he and Patrick could no longer be friends. It felt like a ton of rocks were weighing down his chest. It was hard to breathe and this time when he cried it wasn’t the silent tears he had shed earlier that day. These sobs racked his entire body and made his very bones ache. Without Patrick, he wasn’t quite sure how to go on living.

CHAPTER FIVE

Zack didn't know what horrors awaited him when he parked his car in the school lot the next morning. He had tried to prepare himself the best he could and tell himself all he had to do was just survive the day. He'd worry about tomorrow later.

He kept his head down as they walked briskly through the hallway toward his locker. There may have been whispered conversations where he thought he heard his name. One guy Zack vaguely recognized from the hockey team asked, "Hey, is it true you're a queer?" as he walked passed. But that seemed to be the worst of it. He hadn't been beaten up and the words "fag" or "queer" hadn't been spray-painted on his locker. He breathed a very small sigh of relief as he shoved his backpack in his locker and grabbed his books for first period. Sure, Scott had announced to the entire cafeteria that he and Patrick were gay, but there wasn't any proof. It wasn't like the entire school had caught them making out or something. It was Scott's word against Patrick and Zack's. Scott was the only one who had seen them holding hands. He started to feel a little bit better and wished that he and Patrick could talk about how they wanted to handle things. Then he quickly remembered that they couldn't be seen talking to each other and he felt miserable all over again. He had no doubt that Mr. Martin would make good on his promise and talk to the school about keeping them apart.

His morning classes dragged by, but Zack got through them with only having to endure a few more comments thrown his way. He did his best just to ignore them, but each one sliced into him.

The worst part of the day was lunch. The cafeteria suddenly became a landmine. He stared at all the tables filled with groups of friends and cliques. He had no idea where to sit and it was terrifying. Before he hadn't even thought about it. He always sat with Patrick. But now he didn't belong anywhere. Escaping to the bathroom or finding some place he could hide during lunch was very appealing, but then Zack remembered this was just the first lunch of the rest of the school year. At some point, he would need to eat.

He skirted along the wall, keeping his head down, until he reached a table that was only sparsely populated with members of the theater clique. Sitting down at the very end of the table, he felt his face flame as he focused on unpacking his lunch. He dared one glance sideways and caught the cocked eyebrows and dubious stares from the junior thespians before they went back to discussing the winter play.

Trying to calm his jangled nerves and the twisting in his gut that just wouldn't go away, Zack twisted off the top of his Snapple and dared one more glance up. His eyes locked on his former lunch table. The seating arrangement was a bit different than normal. Scott and a few of his cronies sat at one end, there were a few empty seats in the middle, and then Brad, Joel and most of the rest of the baseball team sat at the other end. They were laughing and joking like today was just like any other day. His absence seemed to go unnoticed, but then his eyes landed on Patrick. It made him feel a little better that Patrick still had most of his friends by his side. Clearly most of the team had chosen him over Scott. But he wasn't smiling or joking around with the others. He was pushing food around on his lunch tray looking totally depressed. For the thousandth time, Zack wished there was some way they could be alone so they could talk. At that very moment, Patrick lifted his head and their eyes met across the room. Even from a distance, Zack could see the pain, but also the guilt, written across Patrick's face. Zack felt his eyes begin to prickle and he quickly looked down again. He couldn't lose it at school. Looking at Patrick and knowing the person he loved was so close, yet so far away, was the worst form of torture.

Zack attended the rest of his classes, but he wasn't really present for them. When the final bell of the day rang, all he wanted to do was get home as fast as he could so he could scream and cry into his pillow about the great injustices of the world. He flung open his locker, grabbed his backpack, but froze as he reached for his books. On the top shelf sat a cell phone. Zack didn't own a cell phone and there was only one other person who knew the combination to his locker. He dropped his backpack to the ground, and with trembling fingers, reached for the phone. The small screen told Zack he had one text message waiting for him. His hand shook as he flipped open the phone and called up the message. It was from Patrick and it said exactly one word: POND.

When he pulled to a stop in his driveway, Zack flung himself out of the car, leaving his backpack in the backseat, and ran around the back of his house to the edge of the woods and the trail he and Patrick had worn over the years through the underbrush. He almost fell more than once in his haste to make it down the slope to the pond.

Patrick was already there and turned to face him when he broke into the clearing. His face was a mask of hurt and it broke Zack's heart.

"Pat—"

"Did you mean it?"

Zack was taken aback. "Did I mean what?"

"That we weren't friends anymore. After everything... how could you?" Patrick choked out the words. "My dad makes one threat, and what? You're just done? I thought you loved me."

"No!" Zack rushed forward and pulled him close, resting their foreheads together. "I do love you. And of course you're still my best friend. You always will be. But he was threatening not to pay for college. I couldn't let you lose that. I only said it to protect you."

Patrick slumped against him and for several moments they just clung to each other. "You didn't sit with us today at lunch," Patrick mumbled into his neck.

"How could I? For all I know your dad has spies at the school making sure we don't interact. And I had no idea how everyone was going to react after Scott's announcement yesterday."

"I'm so sorry, Zack. I told people that Scott was just a fucking asshole, and I think most people believed me, though some of Scott's closest friends are siding with him. I don't think I squashed all the rumors, though."

"Yeah." Zack gave a bitter laugh. "I got asked quite a few times today if I was a big queer."

"Shit. I'm so sorry. This isn't fair. Why do I get to keep most of my friends and you have to sit off by yourself? I didn't know what to tell people when they asked where you were. I just said we had a fight." Patrick dropped to the

ground and ran his hands through his hair. “This just sucks so much. I don’t know what to do.”

Zack knelt beside him and rubbed soothing circles on his back. “It’s not your fault. The guys on the team are more your friends than mine anyway. Most of the guys like you more than Scott, so I’m not surprised they believed you over him. Telling people we got into a fight seems like as good an explanation as any.” Zack shrugged. He didn’t know what else to do. It was painful knowing that at school he wouldn’t have friends any longer, but he was almost feeling more resigned now than anything. In his head he already had a countdown to graduation going. “Thanks for the phone, by the way.” He tried to smile. “I was trying to figure out how the hell I was going to get a chance to talk to you.”

“I knew I had to do something. I was so scared after you and your mom left my house yesterday. I left for school early this morning so I had time to stop at the store first. It’s a pay-as-you-go phone, so there aren’t many minutes on it, but I figured it’s cheaper to text and it’ll at least be a way for us to communicate.”

Zack gently pulled Patrick’s face toward his. “Thank you.” When their lips met, Zack could almost block out the last twenty-four hours.

Patrick scooted back so he could lean against a large rock that sat in the middle of the small meadow and held out his hand. Zack moved forward and let out a surprised sound that was almost a squeak as he was pulled into Patrick’s lap. Patrick’s arms wound tightly around his waist as Zack straddled his hips.

“How were things with your mom after you got home?”

Zack shrugged and gnawed on his bottom lip. “She’s still not really talking to me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not like we were really close anyway. I was more worried about you. Your parents were so upset. Your dad...” He trailed off. He didn’t even begin to know how to express how sorry he was that Patrick’s dad had found out. Zack petted at Patrick’s face, trying to make some of the pain disappear.

“I knew he would react that way... I knew my mom wouldn’t do anything but cry. I wasn’t... I wasn’t expecting it to hurt so much. I didn’t want them to find out that way.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, Pat.” Zack held him close and he felt his shirt become damp as Patrick cried into his shoulder. Everything just sucked so much. And he had absolutely no idea how to make it better.

“Can we just stop saying we’re sorry? Because it’s not either of our faults.” Patrick wiped his eyes on the back of his coat sleeve. “People suck. And our parents... they suck too. I thought parents were supposed to love their kids no matter what, but it turns out they’re bigoted intolerant assholes just like the rest of the people we live around. We just, we need to figure out what we’re going to do. You’re the smart one. What’re we going to do, Zack?”

Zack wished he knew the answer. More than anything. “For now, I don’t think we can do anything but survive. Survive until graduation. That is...” He swallowed hard, his stomach twisting. “If you still want to do this. I mean, if you still want to try and be together.” He looked down and off to the left. Not daring to take a breath.

Patrick’s chilled fingers gripped his face and forced them to make eye contact. “Zack, I’ll always want you. Never forget that. I’ll love you forever. I promise.”

Zack sucked air into his lungs, the relief making him dizzy. Patrick’s words soothed his soul. “Me too.” He leaned forward to kiss him and then straightened his spine. “Okay, then. So, we just get through the days. Send in our applications to the U of M. And know that it will get better. For now, that’s all we can do.”

“And, we’ll text and meet here whenever we can, right?”

“Right. We’ll make it work. It’s gonna suck for a while. But eventually, everything will be okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He didn’t know how, but it would be okay. It would have to be. Because he had promised Patrick.

Patrick beamed at him. “Can you stay for a little while?”

“Yeah. My mom’s working until five.”

“Kiss me until you have to go?”

The conditions were less than ideal. It was freezing. The ground was hard. There was the ever-present fear of being caught. But as their lips and tongues met again and again, and they breathed each other in like it was the sweetest oxygen in all the world, Zack knew that everything they had endured and the hard months he knew lay ahead were worth it because Patrick was worth everything.

CHAPTER SIX

Mid-December

Saying things sucked was an understatement. Every day at school dragged by and every weekend Zack was lonely. He knew Patrick wasn't faring much better. Sure, he still had friends to hang out with, but Zack knew how guilty Patrick felt about that. Both Brad and Joel had tried to talk to Zack several times since the day everything went to hell, but Zack had basically all but blown them off. He appreciated the gesture, but he didn't know what to say to them, and he certainly didn't want to be put in a situation where he accidentally gave something away. It was just easier not to have to answer questions about why he and Patrick didn't hang out anymore.

He and Patrick usually managed to exchange at least a few texts each day, usually at night right before bed. Zack didn't want to risk his mom finding him with a cell phone and asking where it came from. And a day or two each week, they managed to meet at the pond for at least a little while. But there was two feet of snow on the ground now and it was bitter cold. Trying to kiss and be close through layers of winter clothes wasn't much fun. They hadn't been able to be *together* together in so long. Zack ached for Patrick.

Scott had gone from being an impulsive guy who acted like an asshole on occasion to being a full-on bigoted bully from hell. Apparently, he had decided that Patrick was too big a fish to take on. It wasn't surprising that people didn't believe that Patrick was gay. He had denied it, and he was more popular than Scott. His words had more clout, not to mention that he was a varsity athlete who had been known to have a few girlfriends. Zack, on the other hand, was quiet, shy and bookish, who now didn't really have any friends. Without the protection of Patrick and some of the other members of the baseball team, Zack was ripe for the picking, and Scott took advantage.

"Hey, fag." Scott nudged Zack's shoulder hard enough that he sidestepped and bumped into the lockers as he went to gather his things at the end of the day. "Sucked anyone's cock today?"

Zack felt his face heat in embarrassment and shame. He hadn't even done that yet with Patrick. He looked around to see who else in the hallway had heard. Several people smirked as they walked past his locker. Others were too wrapped up in their own conversations and mini-dramas to notice the boy getting bullied. He took a deep, calming breath and did what he always did, ignored Scott. He knew Scott was nothing but an ignorant dick, but Zack still hadn't quite mastered how to not let the words bother him. Every time was like a punch to the gut. Sometimes he wished he could tell Patrick. Zack could use the comfort. But he didn't want Patrick to worry, or get involved, which is exactly what Patrick would do.

Scott's hand slammed against the lockers, inches from Zack's head. "Look, you little fucking queer, even if both you and Patrick deny it, I know what I saw that day." Scott had lowered his voice so only Zack could hear. "I know you were both fucking homos together. Hell, maybe you still are in secret and this whole big fight you two got in is just some big sham. Whatever. You two are fucking disgusting and are gonna rot in hell." With that, Scott pushed away from the lockers, shoved his hands in his pockets, and sauntered down the hall.

Even though he had just about stopped shaking by the time he approached his car in the parking lot, he jumped when he heard his name called.

"Zack! Wait up!" He turned to find both Brad and Joel jogging in his direction. "We caught the tail end of what we assumed was Scott being an asshole." Brad came to a stop followed closely by Joel. "You okay?"

"Y-yeah. Thanks."

"Would you please tell us what is up with you and Patrick?" Joel stepped forward and shoved his bare hands inside his jacket pockets. "It's been over a month, and every time we try to bring it up with him, he basically jumps down our throats."

Zack open and shut his mouth. "I... can't."

"Dude, you and Patrick were, like, inseparable. And now, you don't even talk. And you totally stopped talking to us too. I mean, I'm really sorry if something happened between you and Patrick, but I thought we were your friends too." Zack was astonished when Brad actually looked hurt.

“I’m sorry. I never meant...” Words stuck in his throat. He didn’t know what to say.

“Look, you and Patrick have been best friends for... well, *ever*. We just wanna help.” Joel glanced at Brad. “And don’t get mad, but Brad and I have been doing some thinking. Patrick said you two just got in a fight. But it doesn’t really seem like one of you pulled a douche move or anything, ’cause you both just seem more sad and depressed than pissed-off. And you basically stopped hanging out right after Scott decided to yell across the whole cafeteria that you were boyfriends or whatever, so we just wondered... is that why you guys don’t talk anymore?”

Zack was frozen, like a deer in the headlights.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think most people really believed Scott. I think it was more just sensational for a few days more than anything else. Patrick shut down those rumors pretty fast. But I know some people are still giving you shit about it though, probably because you and Patrick kind of split after that. I know Scott’s still totally acting like a jerk toward you and doing what he can to perpetuate the rumor. Most of us don’t even really speak to him anymore.” Brad looked at Joel a little unsure, but Joel nodded so he took a breath and continued. “But, y’know, if there *was* anything you and Patrick wanted to tell us, it would be okay. We’d still be your friends. And you wouldn’t have to hide it from us or anything.”

Zack just stared back, not entirely sure what Brad was trying to get at.

“For fuck’s sake.” Joel rolled his eyes. “What Brad’s trying to say is that *if* you were gay, and *if* you and Patrick were, or are, or whatever, like, boyfriends or something, it’s okay. I mean, I don’t really get it, but I also don’t think it’s really something that you choose or anything, and we just wanted you to know that. Y’know... just in case.”

Zack still couldn’t find his voice and was horrified when his eyes started to fill with tears.

“Shit.” Brad wiped a hand over his mouth. “It’s true isn’t it? You and Patrick?”

Zack managed to jerk his head up and down.

“So, did you guys break up, or what happened?” Joel looked like he was still trying to process the information.

Zack wondered if he should tell. Would it be betraying Patrick? But Brad and Joel had basically guessed on their own, and they said they were okay with it. What harm could it do at this point?

“N-no, we didn’t break up. But after the cafeteria incident, our parents found out that same night.”

“Shit!”

Brad nodded in agreement. “Talk about a suckage of a day.”

“To say they didn’t take it well would be an understatement. Um, they basically said we couldn’t be friends anymore. Patrick’s dad even called the school and told them to keep us apart, so there are basically teachers making sure we don’t even talk in the halls and stuff.”

“Holy fuck.” Joel squeezed Zack’s arm. “That really sucks, man.”

“Yeah. You have no idea.”

“But you two are still... together?” Brad asked.

Zack took a deep breath and looked them both in the eye. “Yes. He’s my boyfriend.” For a millisecond it felt so wonderful to be honest about it and share it with other people. But then he remembered the reality of the situation and looked down at the pavement. “It just has to be a secret. At least until we go away to college. Please don’t say anything.”

“Wow. It must be practically impossible for you two to actually find ways to be together, huh?” Joel asked thoughtfully.

Zack nodded. “We manage to meet like once or twice a week, but it’s never for very long and we can never meet at each other’s houses.”

Joel pulled Brad toward him and whispered something in his ear. Brad pulled back and smiled, turned to look at Zack, and then leaned in to whisper something back to Joel. When they separated, they both had smug expressions on their faces.

“Okay, so, here’s the deal,” Joel said. “My parents are going to be out of town next weekend. They’re driving to Madison to pick up my sister from

college and move her out of her dorm room because she's studying abroad next semester. So, that means I have the house to myself. Saturday night you're going to tell your mom that you're spending the night at my place."

"And I'm going to tell Patrick that he's going to be spending the night at my house." Brad chimed in.

"But really, Brad is going to bring Patrick to my house too. And I'm actually going to go to Brad's that night. So really, you and Patrick will be at my house Saturday night by yourselves."

Brad and Joel crossed their arms over their chests and looked very pleased with themselves. Zack was dumbstruck.

"Y-you would do that?"

Joel shrugged. "Sure. It sounds like things suck pretty badly for you both right now. And you're both our friends. It's not much, but at least we can give you a little time to be together. We'll tell Patrick the plan tomorrow."

Zack shook his head, still utterly amazed. "Thank you. You have no idea..." He swallowed hard. "Thank you."

The next night, Zack's phone buzzed just as he was getting into bed. He smiled in anticipation and propped himself on his side to read the text.

PAT: J & B told me the plan 2day. Still can't believe it.

ZACK: I know. It's amazing. We'll get an entire nite 2gether.

PAT: Best X-mas gift I could think of.

Zack smiled and clutched his phone a little tighter.

ZACK: Miss you so much.

PAT: Me 2. Can't wait 2 touch you again.

Zack felt his entire body flush. He had definitely been missing that aspect of their relationship as well and his right hand just wasn't quite cutting it. He needed to feel Patrick's skin against his again.

ZACK: I can't either. I luv u.

PAT: I luv u 2.

ZACK: *Nite, Pat. <3*

PAT: *Nite. Sweet dreams.*

Zach rolled onto his back and hugged his phone to his chest. Only a few more days and then he and Patrick would get an entire uninterrupted night together. He had to think of something amazing to get him for Christmas. As he stared up into the darkness, an idea came to him. It would need to be modified slightly, but after that, it would be absolutely perfect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

His mother had eyed him suspiciously when Zack had told her he was going to spend the night at Joel's, but when Joel came to pick him up, and Patrick wasn't anywhere in sight, she seemed to be convinced that he really was just going to hang out with his friend.

As they pulled away from his house, Zack breathed a sigh of relief, but he couldn't get his knee to stop bouncing.

Joel looked over at him and chuckled. "Hang in there, man. We'll be there in, like, ten minutes and Brad and Patrick are on their way."

True to Joel's word, they had barely stepped through the front door of his house and had the time to take off their coats when Brad's car pulled up into the driveway. When Patrick entered the house he pulled off his parka, dropped it on the floor and strode straight toward Zack. Zack held out his arms and started to reach for Patrick, but stopped and actually took a step back when Patrick entered his personal space. He glanced to the left where Brad and Joel were standing.

"Um, it's cool." Joel looked mildly embarrassed. "Say hello like you normally would. Pretend we aren't even here."

Apparently, Patrick didn't need any further invitation. Zack found himself almost lifted off the ground as Patrick's strong arms went around his middle. Zack let out a happy hum as their lips met and he framed his boyfriend's still-cold face with his hands. They kept it relatively chaste, remaining aware that they had an audience, but their somewhat tame kiss felt very, very special. It was their first kiss in front of other people. When their lips separated, and they turned to face their friends, it made Zack feel warm that Patrick kept an arm around his waist.

Brad and Joel stared at them with wide eyes and their mouths hanging open for several seconds before they seemed to shake themselves out of it.

"Well, alrighty then." Brad's face was beet-red.

"Yeah." Joel still sort of resembled a guppy. "I mean, I understood in

theory that you two must... because you're... but it's a little different actually seeing it."

Zack felt Patrick's arm tighten around him. "Everyone still cool?"

"Yeah, man. No worries. It's just... it's just going to take a little while to get used to. That's all."

"Joel, thank you so much again. You too, Brad. This is just..." Zack looked up at Patrick and couldn't help beaming. "The best thing ever."

"Hey, don't mention it. Brad, you ready to go?"

"Ready when you are."

"Okay, so, um, the guest bedroom is, um, all made up." Joel's face turned several shades of pink. "So, y'know, help yourself. And I'll call tomorrow when Brad's gonna drop me off, so you, um, have a bit of warning. Okay?"

"Sounds good." Patrick walked toward Joel and after a moment of hesitation, pulled him into a hug. "Really, thank you."

As soon as Brad and Joel had made their exit and the front door clicked shut, Patrick whirled around, lunged toward Zack, and Zack could only let out an undignified squeal as Patrick picked him up and threw him over his shoulder.

"Pat! Put me down!" Zack knew he didn't sound very convincing since he could barely get the words out he was laughing so hard. Patrick had never picked him up before, but he guessed he shouldn't be that surprised by his strength.

Patrick carried him down the hallway until they reached the guest bedroom and Zack was unceremoniously dumped onto the middle of the bed. He clutched his sides, still gasping for breath. "Seriously? Was that necessary?"

Patrick laughed and climbed up on to the bed and over him and bent down until their noses were touching. "Yes." Then he kissed him.

This kiss wasn't chaste. Zack moaned as Patrick's tongue invaded his mouth, and he spread his legs to make room for Patrick between them. Patrick's body felt so warm weighing him down. He fisted his hands in Patrick's unruly hair as he kissed his way along Zack's jaw.

“God, I love being able to really feel you again.” Patrick’s hands trailed down Zack’s sides and up underneath his shirt and Zack shivered in pleasure as Patrick’s fingers danced along his ribs. “It’s been so long since we weren’t outside freezing our asses off.”

Zack laughed into the kiss as Patrick’s lips met his again. Now that they were together with an entire night before them, they could make light of their troubles. He just wished tomorrow never had to come.

Instead of continuing on with their make out activities, Patrick rolled onto his side and brought Zack with him, their legs tangled together.

“You have no idea how much I just want to get you naked and love you over and over.” Zack blushed at Patrick’s words but was also entirely delighted that his muscled jock of a boyfriend somehow found his thin frame such a turn on. “But you know what I want to do even more than that right now?”

“What?” Zack bumped their noses together.

“I just want to hold you and look at you for a little while. Is that okay?”

Zack found himself suddenly choked up. Patrick was always able to say exactly what was on his mind... and in his heart. He was completely forthright and utterly honest and Zack loved him so much.

“Yeah. Of course that’s okay.”

Patrick’s hands went up under his shirt and kneaded his back. “And, I need to talk to you about something. Something Brad told me.”

“What’s that?”

“He said Scott’s been giving you a hard time. Why didn’t you tell me?” Patrick’s forehead creased with worry.

“I can handle it. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d want to get involved. You can’t be seen sticking up for me at school. We can’t be seen together, remember?”

“I most certainly can! I would stop anyone from being bullied if I saw it. The teachers can’t run tattling to my parents just because I stopped Scott from

being an ass. I won't let this happen to you!" Patrick was getting more and more worked up. "It's not okay for him to think he can single you out just because the stupid fucking high school social hierarchy means he can't take me down because I'm more popular or whatever. I can't believe I didn't realize this was happening. Brad thought I should know. Scott's probably too much of a chickenshit to harass you when me or Brad or Joel is around. Bastard."

"Hey," Zack soothed and placed a kiss on Patrick's cheek. "This isn't your fault. And it's not something I want you to worry about. This is..." He shrugged his shoulders, at a loss. "It is what it is. It's high school. And it isn't fair. But you're gonna stay out of it because despite your good intentions, I know your dad would blow a gasket if he found out you were defending me at school."

"This isn't right." Patrick shook his head. "How can you ask me to just stand by and not do anything? God, how the hell am I supposed to play baseball with that douche this spring? Maybe I shouldn't even play."

"That's crazy! Of course you're gonna play. You love baseball and you want to play in college so you can't not play your senior year. You play first base and Scott plays left field. It's not like you have to interact on the field. And just ignore him in the dugout. It's not ideal, but you'll make it work. And you're gonna stand by and not do anything because I want to make sure your parents pay for college so we can be at the U of M together. I'm way more concerned about making sure we have a future to look forward to than being called names now."

Patrick stared at him long and hard before giving a small nod. "You're gonna need to promise me something in return, though."

"What?"

"If you won't let me be there for you, you're gonna promise to let Joel and Brad."

Zack rolled his eyes. "You make me sound like a damsel in distress."

"You know that's not what I meant. I just mean you're gonna start to hang out with them again at school. I know they want to. It's not a crime for you to

hang out with them. My dad can't prevent us from having some of the same friends. And you'll be less of a target for Scott if you aren't alone all the time."

Zack smiled. It was a pretty easy decision to make. "Deal." He could see the visible relief wash over Patrick's face. "Do you want to open your Christmas present now?" He trailed his fingers over Patrick's cheek and down his neck. "I promise you can hold me while you open it."

Patrick grinned. "Okay. I have something for you, too."

They separated just long enough to retrieve their backpacks that were serving as their overnight bags from where they had dumped them in the front hall. Zack pulled out the small gold box tied with red ribbon from the side pocket before returning to the bed to sit cross-legged in front of Patrick.

"Merry Christmas, Pat." Zack pressed the box into his hand.

Patrick gave him one of those soft, tender smiles that made his insides go a little weak before untying the ribbon and lifting the lid.

"It's a Celtic eternity knot pendant," Zack explained as Patrick stared at the contents of the box.

"It's beautiful. I've... I've seen this before, haven't I?"

Zack slowly nodded. He wondered if Patrick would remember. "Yeah. It was my Grandma Emily's. Grandpa George gave it to her on their first wedding anniversary. He was Scottish and said if she wore it, they would be together forever. And they were. They loved each other their whole lives." Zack rubbed his hands over his knees. His heart was pounding. "She left it to me when she died. She said I should give it to my one true love." He paused and took a shaky breath. "She probably assumed that would be a girl, so, instead of the really thin chain it was on, I had the jeweler put the pendant on a black leather cord."

Zack's grandpa had died when he was six, so he didn't have many strong memories of him, though he could still hear his window-rattling, belly-shaking, joyous laugh if he closed his eyes. His grandma had died when he was twelve. They had been very close and Zack still missed her very much. He often wondered how someone so loving and caring could have a daughter

whose demeanor was cool at best and lately had been downright icy. He liked to think his grandma wouldn't have minded that he was gay and that her necklace had been given to a boy. His eyes became prickly as he fantasized about having someone from his family accept him for who he was.

"I always really liked your grandma," Patrick said as he carefully picked up the necklace. "She was such a nice lady. This is absolutely amazing, Zack. Thank you." Patrick reached for him and Zack took the opportunity to press his face into the crook of Patrick's neck and breathe him in. "I know how much she meant to you. I can't believe..." Zack caught the hitch in Patrick's voice. "I can't believe that you're giving it to me. Help me put it on?"

Zack's fingers shook slightly as he undid the clasp and then refastened it around Patrick's neck. The pendant hung in the hollow on his throat. It looked perfect. Patrick reached up with one hand to finger the pendent and reached for Zack's hand with the other. "Did you mean it? What you said?"

Zack felt his entire body heat and his pulse rate increase. "You've been my favorite person in the entire world my whole life. No one could ever know me as well as you do. No one could ever understand me the way that you do." Somewhere along the way, he had started crying. "Maybe people would say we're too young to know, but I *do* know. I've loved you forever, even if I did just kinda realize what that meant recently. I could never love anyone like I love you."

At some point during his speech, Zack had gone from looking at Patrick to looking at the geometric pattern on the bedspread, but now that he had finished he dared to look back up. Patrick's eyes were red and he reached forward to pull Zack into his lap. Zack straddled Patrick's crossed legs and for the next several minutes, no words were needed, but their lips kept busy.

"Jesus, Zack. You may not have a lot to say to other people, but you say all the right things to me." Patrick reached to his left to pull his bag closer. "I don't have a beautiful speech to go with this, but Merry Christmas, Zack. I love you." Patrick placed a small black velvet box in his hands.

The stiff box hinge creaked as he opened it and he gasped when he saw the contents. It was an elegantly simple and completely beautiful hammered-silver

band. Zack was still gaping at it when he felt Patrick's lips brush over his cheek and heard him whisper in his ear. "I had it inscribed."

Zack's fingers trembled as he pulled the ring out of the case. Three words were written on the inside of the band. *Forever. I promise.*

He hadn't anticipated that exchanging Christmas gifts would get so emotional, but Zack felt himself tearing up once again. He remembered, with vivid clarity, the first time Patrick had ever uttered those words to him. It had made him feel warm and loved and so very, very happy. The ring was absolutely stunning, but the message lit up his heart. Zack slid the band onto the ring finger of his right hand. It was a perfect fit.

"I mean it." Patrick whispered.

Zack looked up and into the soulful eyes of the person he knew he could never do without. "I know. I love you."

Their kisses started out slow and languid, but with enough simmering heat that Zack was soon rhythmically rocking forward in Patrick's lap to gain what friction he could. Their lips parted long enough for Patrick to tug off Zack's shirt and then his own.

"Lie back." Patrick nuzzled into his neck and then gently pushed him back on the bed.

The rest of their clothing came off between kisses and soon they were lying skin-to-skin.

"God, I've missed this so much."

Zack hummed in agreement, and for several moments they just rocked together, kissed, and let their arousal build.

Patrick kissed along his neck, over his sternum and continued down his body, stopping to pay special attention to Zack's nipples with his tongue. Zack moaned and writhed under the ministrations and only managed to catch his breath as Patrick moved farther south, his tongue trailing a path down Zack's abdomen. Patrick stopped several inches from his erection and looked up.

"Can, um, can I try something?"

Zack was breathing hard and he had just enough brain cells to process what the close proximity of Patrick's mouth to his groin meant. He swallowed hard and nodded.

He gasped as Patrick's tongue experimentally flicked over the head of his cock and cried out as he was slowly sucked into the heat of Patrick's mouth. He tried to watch as Patrick's lips wrapped tightly around his length and started to move up and down, but it was too much. His head flopped back onto the pillow. Zack saw stars as Patrick gained confidence and began to move faster and suck harder. He couldn't help his hips from bucking up off the bed. Patrick looked up and smiled, Zack's cock still in his mouth, before placing his hands on Zack's hips to hold him down and returning to his task.

Zack was going to lose it in record time. The heat and the wet and the suction and Patrick—it was all just too much.

“P-Pat... close, I'm gonna...” He gasped for air, hoping he was getting his warning out in enough time.

Instead of pulling off, Patrick just sucked harder. Zack lost control, lost his mind, and came harder than he ever had before.

When he finally began to calm, Patrick scooted up Zack's body, and lay next to him.

“Was that okay?” Patrick actually looked a little shy. Zack noted Patrick's tongue darting out to lick at the corners of his mouth.

Zack didn't even have close to the words necessary to describe how amazing it had been. “That was... holy shit.”

Patrick laughed and planted a wet kiss on his cheek. “Good. I was hoping my enthusiasm would make up for any lack of technique. But you know what they say, practice makes perfect.”

“Please tell me you're interested in a lot more practicing.”

“Any time you want.” Patrick pulled him close and kissed him. When Zack parted his lips and their tongues met, it was strange tasting himself and Patrick, but he found it was also kind of hot. He pressed himself closer, starting to get aroused all over again, and felt Patrick's erection against his stomach.

Zack licked his lips and pushed Patrick onto his back. He didn't exactly know how, but he wanted to do the same for Patrick. He placed several kisses on Patrick's chest before going lower. Patrick's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"You don't have to if you don't want to. I'd be more than happy if you just wanted to stroke me."

Zack moved up so he was eye level with Patrick. "I don't know how good I'll be at it, but I want to. I promise."

Zack started with a few tentative licks along Patrick's shaft before closing his lips around the head. He slowly began moving up and down, applying suction and swirling his tongue. He tried to imitate what had felt good when Patrick had done it to him, and if the noises coming from Patrick were any indication, he was doing okay. It would take some practice before he would be able to take any more than half of Patrick in his mouth before his gag reflex kicked in, but he found wrapping his hand around the base of Patrick's length kind of made up for it. When he glanced up, he saw Patrick's head thrown back on the pillow, his mouth open, and bliss written on his face. Zack hummed and returned to his task. Zack decided that he loved the weight of Patrick on his tongue and the burst of salty, musky flavor on his taste buds. It was a total turn on to have Patrick in his mouth and at his mercy. It didn't take long before Patrick's breathing became harsher and his hands came up to grip Zack's head.

"Zack, I'm close."

Patrick's hips came off the bed and Zack managed to pull back just enough so he didn't choke as Patrick came. He swallowed as quickly as he could, but he could feel some of Patrick's come dribbling out the side of his mouth. Breathing hard, he let Patrick slide from his mouth. He licked his lips and wiped off his jaw as he sat up. Perhaps it had lacked a bit of finesse, but he loved that he had been able to make Patrick come apart beneath him.

"Wow," Patrick panted. "That was amazing."

"Yeah?"

Patrick sat up, grabbed Zack from where he was still kneeling between Patrick's legs, and yanked him forward. He fell on top of Patrick and was pulled into a heated kiss.

"Yeah," Patrick said as their lips parted.

They lay sated and sweaty in each other's arms for several minutes and Zack was content to spend the rest of the time they had cuddling naked with Patrick, their bodies tangled together.

He knew Patrick had gotten a few blowjobs before when he was with Sara, but this had marked yet another first for Zack. Patrick was his first everything, so when they had first gotten together, it seemed more than enough just to touch and kiss and get each other off using their hands. But now that they had moved on to oral sex, it made Zack think of other things they could do as well.

"Pat?" Zack nuzzled at his cheek. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Do you ever think about... would you ever want to... y'know, do other stuff?" He pressed his face into the crook of Patrick's neck. If his face wasn't already flushed from exertion, he was sure he would be turning ten shades of red.

"Like what?" Zack could hear the smile in Patrick's voice.

"Like *sex-sex*." He prayed Patrick would understand what he was getting at.

Patrick was silent for a few beats before shoving Zack so he was on this back and Patrick was on top of him. He bumped their noses together. "Do you want me inside of you?" he murmured against Zack's lips.

A shiver ran through Zack's body and he felt an ache somewhere deep inside him as he imagined what that would be like. All he could do was nod his head.

"And do you want to be inside me?" Patrick kissed the corner of his eye.

Zack gripped at Patrick's arms as he imagined sinking into Patrick's tight heat. Oh, god. Yes. He wanted that too. He let out a whimper and nodded his head again.

Patrick framed Zack's face with his hands and brushed his lips over Zack's. "I want both of those things too. So much. But I don't want us to have to rush. I want us to have all the time in the world so we don't hurt each other. Would... would it be okay if we waited until we've moved out to go to college? I just want it to be absolutely perfect. Not like this where we're sneaking off and in someone else's house and... does that make sense?"

"Yeah. It does." Zack was touched by Patrick's words. "I think waiting is a good idea." It meant that they would be waiting quite a while, but it would be worth it if when they did decide to be together like that they would be away from their parents and free from worry.

"Okay." Patrick smiled and kissed him one more time before rolling off Zack, curling into his side, and giving off a contented sigh.

For several minutes Zack lay on his back with his eyes closed, combing his fingers through Patrick's hair and listening to him breathe. But then he remembered that there were other things they really needed to discuss while they had this time together.

"Pat?"

"Hmmm?" Patrick sounded so happy and worn-out in a good way, Zack hated to bring up unpleasant topics, but there were things they should really talk about while they had the chance.

"How are things with your parents? You haven't really mentioned them." Patrick frowned and flopped onto his back. Zack rolled with him and placed a kiss on his shoulder. "It's just a long time until we leave for college and our problems aren't going to go away. And I certainly don't think they're going to get any easier and... they're your parents, Pat." Zack ran a hand through Patrick's hair and down his neck. "I just want you to know you can talk about it."

Patrick grasped Zack's hand and rested it on his chest as he stared up at the ceiling.

"I knew they were going to react badly," he began slowly. "I mean it's one of the reasons we agreed not to say anything until we got to college in the first place. I shouldn't have been shocked. I should have been prepared. But... I

wasn't. Even though I knew my mom would freak out and think it's unnatural and mourn the loss of grandchildren, and even though I knew my dad would be completely disgusted and just reject that he has a gay son at all and think that if he's a hard-ass about it I'll change my mind or something... I guess I just kept hoping that they would love me anyway. Unconditionally."

Zack watched, his heart breaking, as a single tear ran down from the corner of Patrick's eye and was absorbed into the pillow.

"I wish there was something I could do," he said quietly, knowing it wasn't nearly enough.

"You already do it." Patrick turned his head and pulled Zack's hand across his body, effectively pulling him in for a kiss. "I know you love me. I know you're there. That's enough. But what about you? How are things with your mom?"

Zack scrunched his nose. "She's still basically not talking to me. She only acknowledges me when it's absolutely necessary." Patrick squeezed his hand. "The thing is, I feel like I'm still far better off than you. I mean, my mom and I weren't that close to begin with. You know that. When I was younger, I was always way closer to my grandma. But you were always close with your parents."

"All the kindness and compassion must have skipped your mom's generation." Patrick furrowed his brow, thinking. "I guess I was close to my parents, but it was like I was always trying to be exactly what they wanted me to be. The great athlete who would play baseball in college, then get a job and get married and give my mom grandchildren and have a life exactly like theirs. But they never asked me what I wanted. And if they can't accept me and the life I want for myself, well, then that's their problem."

Zack sat up leaned back on his palms. "You know, after my grandma died, and it was just me and Mom, I kind of just told myself that you were my real family. So maybe," he could feel the blush creeping into his cheeks, "maybe we can just be each other's family."

Patrick sat up, grasped the back of Zack's neck, and pulled their heads together. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

Zack leaned a fraction of an inch closer in order to bring their lips together.

“So, what do you want to do now that we’ve cried over Christmas gifts, had sex and gotten really depressed over our parents?” Patrick bumped their noses together. “How about more sex?”

Zack laughed out loud. “Nympho.” He swatted Patrick on his shoulder.

“Only when it’s you.” Patrick waggled his eyebrows.

Shaking his head, Zack glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “Well, it’s only seven thirty. How about we work on your math? Your final’s next week. You brought your book didn’t you?”

Zack hadn’t been able to help Patrick much with his homework lately, so he had texted Patrick the night before to pack his textbook and notes.

“Yes,” Patrick grumbled. “I still can’t believe you made me bring it. Is that really how you want to spent our one night together?”

Zack leaned forward and kissed the end of Patrick’s nose. “Yes. It’ll make me feel better knowing you aren’t worried about your exam and we’ll still be spending time together. And after that, we could work on our college application essays.”

“Didn’t you finish your essay, like, a month ago?”

Zack bit the corner of his lip. “Yes. But I know you haven’t finished yours and our applications are due in a couple of weeks.”

Patrick groaned and started to reach for his boxers. “Slave driver. If you’re going to make me do all this work, could you at least institute some sort of positive reinforcement program?”

“What’d you have in mind?” Zack pulled on his shirt and boxers.

“Like for every math problem I get right, you’ll owe me a sexual favor later.”

Zack rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help a wide grin from forming. He picked up Patrick’s backpack from the floor and shoved Patrick in the direction of the living room. “I’m sure we can work out an amicable agreement.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Early March 2004

PAT: *U get your letter?*

ZACK: *Yeah. Came in the mail 2day. U?*

PAT: *Yup. U open it yet?*

ZACK: *No. Waiting for u.*

PAT: *Pond? When can u meet?*

ZACK: *6? Mom doesn't leave 4 work 'til then.*

PAT: *k*

Zack puttered in his room, counting the minutes until he and Patrick could open their letters from the U of M. Their future plans to be together all hinged on the contents of their respective envelopes.

Of course, everything was relative, but the last few months could have been worse. Brad and Joel had played a huge part in making things more bearable. They took turns sitting with Zack at lunch, so he no longer felt so alone at school, and they continued to help orchestrate secret meetings between him and Patrick. They had been able to meet up several times when Brad or Joel's parents were both going to be out of the house for an extended length of time. Mr. Martin had been very thorough and had called Joel and Brad's parents to tell them he didn't want Patrick and Zack to be at their houses at the same time. He hadn't told them the real reason, of course.

They hadn't been able to have a whole night alone since before Christmas, but it was way better than their former freezing cold clandestine meetings down at the pond. The few times they had been able to meet at Brad or Joel's house, Zack had almost been able to forget about everything that had happened. It had felt so normal, all four of them hanging out together, like nothing had changed. Brad and Joel always made themselves scarce for part of the time though, and he and Patrick were grateful for a little time to themselves in a temperature-controlled environment, even if their clothes did have to remain on.

Even Scott seemed to have lost interest in tormenting Zack in the hallways since he had started hanging out with Brad and Joel again. It was hard not to be hopeful that maybe everything would work out just the way he and Patrick had planned. Maybe in just a few short months everything really would be okay.

Patrick was already pacing along the frozen bank of the pond by the time Zack came down the hill and into the clearing. Patrick turned and beamed, but Zack could tell just by the way Patrick held himself—the tightness through his neck and shoulders and the clenching and unclenching of his fists—that he was nervous.

“Hey.” Zack wrapped his arms around him and held on tightly. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You don’t have anything to worry about.” Even through their jackets, Zack could feel Patrick trembling.

“Pat, your grades are *not* that bad. They’re plenty good enough to get you in. And with your baseball skills, they would be crazy to turn you down. C’mon.” Zack tugged him over to the large rock a few paces away and they both perched on it. “You got your letter?”

Patrick nodded and dug into his coat pocket and produced a folded envelope that looked exactly like the one Zack was clutching in his hand.

“Open ’em together?” Zack asked.

Patrick took a deep breath and blew out a gust of air that fogged in the cold evening air. “Kay.”

Zack tore open his envelope and with shaking fingers unfolded the several pieces of paper enclosed. The rustlings to his left indicated Patrick was doing exactly the same thing. His heart beat faster and faster as his eyes scanned the words on the page, not quite believing what he was reading.

“I got in... and they’re giving me a full academic scholarship.” His voice was breathless. “I won’t have to pay a thing. I’ll even get money for room and board, whether I choose to live on campus or not.” He couldn’t believe it. Of course he had been hoping for some financial assistance just based on his

mother's income, but he hadn't even let himself dream about a complete full ride. "Pat?"

Patrick looked up and gave him a half-hearted smile. "I'm so happy for you. No one deserves it more than you." Zack could tell his words were sincere, but something was seriously wrong. Zack's heart began to climb into his throat as Patrick went back to staring at his letter, his brow furrowed. "I got in too," he finally said.

"That's amazing!" Zack let out the breath he had been holding and threw his arms around him. "Congratulations!" His elation dampened, however, when he realized Patrick was still stiff in his arms. He pulled back, frowning. "Pat? Aren't you happy?"

"I got in, but no athletic scholarship and no financial aid. I mean, I knew the baseball scholarship was a long shot. Unless you play football or basketball, athletic scholarships are pretty hard to come by. And my dad makes too much money for financial aid."

"Well, your parents were always planning on paying for college, so that's okay isn't it?"

"You don't get it. Them paying for it *is* the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, after we get to college, you'll be fine. Everything will be paid for and you won't have to worry about what your mom thinks anymore. You'll essentially be independent. I won't be."

Understanding began to wash over Zack. He had been so focused on just getting to college and thinking that once they were out of their parents' houses and starting over in the big city that their troubles would go away. He had failed to examine the finer points.

"Even though I'll be living away from home, I'll still be dependent on them. They'll still have control over me. That means I can't be out. That means they still can't know that we're together. Things will be better, sure, but I still won't be free. We aren't going to be able to be together the way we want to be." Patrick's eyes were red-rimmed and he looked utterly defeated.

As Patrick rested his head in his hands, his elbows propped on his knees, Zack caught sight of the Celtic knot pendant dangling at the base of Patrick's neck. Just like that, Zack had the solution. It was so simple and it would fix all their problems. He just hoped Patrick would accept it.

"Pat, look at me." Zack slid to the ground and scooted around so he was kneeling at Patrick's feet, not caring that his jeans from the knee down were now covered in snow. "I have a plan." Patrick removed his hands from his face and looked up. Zack smiled and leaned forward to gently touch his lips to Patrick's. "I have a way for us to be together. Without worrying about your parents. You won't have to take a dime from them."

"How?"

Patrick's hands were resting on his knees, and Zack reached out to clasp them in his. "My grandma's money."

Patrick pulled his hands out of Zack's. "Absolutely not! That was the money she gave you for college! She left you that in her will!"

"I know." Zack put his hands right above Patrick's knees and squeezed. "Calm down and listen for a second. She gave me that money for school, but I'm not going to need it."

"Yeah, but you could still save it. Hell, you could use it to help pay for graduate school if you wanted to go. You could even use it for a down payment on a condo or a house or something!"

"Grandma gave me that money because she wanted to make sure I had everything I needed. She wanted to take care of me. More than anything, she just wanted to make sure I was happy and that I didn't have to worry. And what would make me the happiest person in the world is to be able to be with my boyfriend without worrying about whether our parents approve, or what we would do if they found out, or how we were going to pay for college if they did."

Patrick was looking down and off to the left, his jaw flexing. "I can't."

Zack racked his brain for what else he could say. Patrick was trying to be all noble and selfless. But Zack didn't want him to be. Zack wasn't just doing this for Patrick. This was for both of them.

“Do you love me?”

Patrick’s head shot up at the clearly unexpected question. “Of course I do. More than anything. You know that.”

“Then let me do this. Let me do this for us,” Zack pleaded. “I have enough to pay for your tuition and help out with living expenses. We can get an apartment. We can live together. We can even move to the city right after we turn eighteen if we want to and get jobs on campus for the summer. Please, Pat. I want to go to college with you and have everyone know that we’re together and not have to worry about anyone’s approval. Grandma wanted me to be happy. And you make me happy. More than anything else in the world. I love you. Please say yes.”

Patrick was fighting back tears as he reached forward and cupped Zack’s face in his hands. “I need to know that you’re absolutely sure about this. I want you to be completely positive.”

Zack thumbed the silver band around his right ring finger through his glove, feeling like he would burst with joy. “I promise.”

CHAPTER NINE

Early May

The announcement came during last period on a Friday. Zack was sitting in AP Calculus, copying down the problem Mr. Robertson was walking through on the whiteboard, when the loudspeaker crackled to life and the principal's voice filled the classroom.

“Good afternoon. Please pardon the interruption. This is Principal Norris speaking. As I’m sure all the seniors know, graduation is only a month away. So, it is my great privilege to announce the class of 2004’s Valedictorian and class speaker during commencement. Please join me in congratulating Zack Larson.”

Zack froze in place as his brain slowly registered what he had just heard. He knew he had a high GPA. It was actually a little over a 4.0 because he had received a few A-pluses. He had never really seriously considered that he might have the highest grades of his entire class. He tended to keep his head down, do his own work to the best of his ability, and not spend time comparing himself to other people. As pride and accomplishment slowly began to come over him, he realized two things that quickly supplanted those feelings. One, he was going to have to get up in front of his entire class and all their relatives to give a speech. And second, his whole calculus class was staring at him. Some were even clapping. In that moment, Zack fully understood the flight response. He desperately wanted to flee the scene. That, or dive under his desk and squeeze his eyes shut. He felt his face heat and could only imagine the red shade of his cheeks. He hated being the center of attention. He slumped down in his chair and forced himself to take several deep breaths, hoping to slow his heart rate. It kind of felt like he was having a heart attack. Fortunately, he was literally saved by the bell. The final bell of the day sounded and Zack bolted from the classroom before it had even stopped ringing.

The hallway wasn't much better. People stopped to look as he walked by. He heard several “Congratulations!” as he made his way quickly to his locker,

but he also heard a lot of other mutterings that he couldn't quite make out. He thought he heard "queer" and "speech" uttered in the same sentence by someone, but he could have been imagining things. As he continued to be the center of attention, Zack thought about just climbing into his locker and shutting the door until the school had cleared out. Then he heard a familiar voice call his name.

Patrick was running toward him grinning from ear to ear. "I knew it'd be you! I just knew it!" Patrick's arms went around him and Zack was soon wrapped up in a bear hug in the middle of the school hallway. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Pat, we're at school," Zack whispered. "We're not supposed to be seen together." It meant so much to him that Patrick was proud of him and there was indeed a light at the end of the tunnel for the both of them, but they weren't home free yet. It was probably still in their best interests to be careful.

Just then, Ms. Benson came around the corner. She taught European history, was nearing retirement, and was known for being rather cranky and a stickler for the rules.

"Mr. Martin and Mr. Larson. A moment, if you please." They broke away from each other and turned to face her. Ms. Benson pursed her lips. "I will ask you two to separate immediately. I've received instructions that the two of you are not to be associating with one another."

"Ms. Benson, you don't understand. My dad—"

Ms. Benson held up a hand, cutting Patrick off. "I'm not interested in an explanation, I just know what I have been told. Mr. Martin, please be on your way and allow Mr. Larson to collect his books from his locker in peace."

As she turned and strode away down the hallway, Zack half expected her to jump onto her broomstick.

"Shit." Patrick ran a hand through his hair. "Bet that witch is going to tattle. I was just so proud of you. I couldn't *not* congratulate you."

"I just hope it doesn't get you in trouble." They had been doing so well. They had kept away from each other at school since the fall. They only had a

month left to go, but their one slipup was caught by probably the worst person imaginable.

“Whatever.” Patrick shoved his hands into his pockets. “We’ll be out of here soon. We definitely need to get the hell out as soon as we graduate and we’re legally able to do so.”

Zack nodded in agreement. Thankfully they would both turn eighteen three days after graduation. He had already researched campus jobs and found that they would have no trouble securing full-time employment over the summer and most likely just be able to cut back to part-time once the fall semester started. He had even researched apartments within easy walking distance of the campus. They just had to make it another month.

“Hey, Mom.” Zack had waited upstairs, doing his homework at the kitchen table, for his mom to get home from work. She stopped, gave a half nod in his direction, and then continued to walk into the kitchen. Zack guessed that was about as much acknowledgement as he was going to get, so he plowed ahead. “Um, I just wanted to let you know that they announced who the class Valedictorian was today. It’s me.” She stopped with her hand on the door to the fridge and turned to look at him. Zack licked his lips and pressed on. “I’ll be making a speech and everything during commencement. I know you sometimes have to work Saturdays, so, I wanted to tell you now, y’know, so you could take that day off, if you can. So you can be at graduation.”

She yanked open the fridge, pulled out a can of Diet Coke and slammed the door. “You know, Zack, I’m really not that interested in you making speeches.”

“I thought you might be proud of me... for getting such good grades,” he mumbled. Even though they had never been close, even though she didn’t approve of him, she was still his mother and her words hurt more than he had anticipated.

“Well, that’s just great, but what I’m more concerned about is the fact that I got a call from Patrick’s dad today during my shift. Apparently he received a call from the school saying that the two of you were talking... and *hugging* in the hallway today.”

“H-he just wanted to congratulate me for being Valedictorian, I—”

“No! I don’t want to hear any more excuses! We told you two to stay away from each other! And, and now you’re what? *Flaunting* yourself in front of the whole school?”

“No, Mom—”

“I’ve just about had it, Zack! I thought you had finally come to your senses and you were done with that disgusting behavior.”

“That was the first time we had spoken at school since last fall,” he said softly. It was actually a true statement.

“Well, thank goodness for small mercies. But let me make myself perfectly clear. I don’t want to receive any more phone calls from Mr. Martin. Do you understand me? Stay away from Patrick.”

“Yes, Mother.” There wasn’t anything else to say. Heart aching, he quietly gathered up his books and headed downstairs to finish his homework.

Just as he was completing his history assignment, Zack’s phone buzzed.

PAT: *Fuck*

ZACK: ???

PAT: *School called my parents.*

ZACK: *I know. Your dad called my mom. U ok? What happened?*

PAT: *Dad freaked out. Talking about sending me 2 therapy. Says there’s something wrong with me. Grounded until graduation.*

Zack’s heart dropped into his shoes. He wanted so much to be there for Patrick right now. How the hell was he supposed to offer comfort via text message? There wasn’t anything wrong with Patrick. He was perfect. But his father was never going to understand that it was perfectly okay to be gay, that it wasn’t a choice, and that Patrick certainly wasn’t confused.

ZACK: *I don’t know what 2 say. I’m so sorry. We’re gonna make it. I promise.*

PAT: *I know. U okay? What did your mom say?*

ZACK: *She was pissed. Whatever. I'm ok.*

PAT: *I love u.*

ZACK: *I love u 2.*

Their last month of senior year sucked. While their classmates were making plans for graduation parties and prom, and spending their days with friends celebrating, Zack and Patrick were counting down the days until they could get the hell out and never look back.

Ever since Patrick had been grounded for speaking to Zack at school, his parents had been watching him like a hawk. Unless it was for school or baseball, he was barely able to leave the house. And unfortunately this year, Patrick couldn't get much joy from playing baseball. The rift with Scott had effectively divided the team and needless to say, the team was going to finish out the season without many wins.

It wasn't until three weeks later, the week before graduation, that he and Zack were finally able to meet at the pond.

"Geez. When my mom said she had to go to the store, and my dad still wasn't back from his golf game, I thought she was seriously gonna contemplate tying me up to make sure I couldn't leave."

Patrick walked right into Zack's arms and for a good long while they just held each other.

"How long do you have?" Zack placed a kiss on Patrick's jaw, then his cheek, and then his mouth.

"To be safe, probably no more than half an hour."

Zack nodded, and the next several minutes were taken up with mouths and tongues colliding, trying desperately to make up for lost time.

Even once their lips detached so they could have a conversation, they still stayed close. Patrick sat with his back against the big rock and Zack sat in his lap.

"How are things with your mom?" Patrick asked.

"She..." Zack took a shuddering breath. "She's not coming to graduation."

“What? You’re Valedictorian and she can’t even get over herself to come see her own son give a speech and graduate?”

“I guess I really shouldn’t have been surprised. I really doubt she’s going to be sorry to see me go when I tell her I’m leaving three days after graduation. She’ll probably be relieved.”

“She has to be crazy to not be so fucking proud of you.”

Zack ran his hands through Patrick’s hair and placed a lingering kiss on his forehead. “Thank you. I’m okay. Really. But tell me how you’re doing.”

“Honestly?” His face twisted. “Not good. My parents—” Patrick’s voice hitched and Zack pulled him closer. “They say something’s wrong with me, Zack. They literally think I’m sick in the head and that with therapy or some bullshit they can ‘cure’ me. In their world, when it comes to their son, homosexuality doesn’t exist.”

Zack held him tight as Patrick cried into his shoulder. He kissed his head and felt helpless that he couldn’t do more. “You don’t need to be fixed. You’re perfect and beautiful and I, for one, am so glad you’re gay because I don’t know what I would do if you didn’t love me the same way I love you.”

“I wish things could be different. I’m not gonna lie. But I would never want to change who I am. Loving you could never be wrong.”

Patrick’s arms tightened around his waist and Zack felt his heart surge. As long as they were together, they were going to be fine. They just had to be strong for another week and a half.

“I’ve done some research.” Zack pulled out a piece of paper from his back pocket and handed it to Patrick. “This is a list of a few apartment buildings that seem affordable and are right near campus. I checked ’em out online. The first one I think might be our best bet. It looks like they have several furnished studios that are available. But we should call to make sure. We probably won’t be able to go see anything in person before we’re ready to move in, but there’s an application online that we can send in.”

“Awesome. Thanks for doing this.” Patrick took the piece of paper and read it over. “I can call them. I know how much you hate phoning people you don’t know.”

Zack placed a kiss at his temple. Patrick knew him so well. “Thank you.” He pulled another piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to Patrick. “I, um, I also wanted you to read this. It’s my valedictorian speech. I wanted to know what you think.”

He moved off Patrick’s lap and sat beside him as he read, nervously chewing on his thumbnail. He had put in all the obligatory stuff—that they were all going off into the world to do great things and that they had accomplished so much by graduating—but he had also added in a few other things at the end.

After a few minutes, Patrick looked up. “Zack, this is amazing. Please tell me you’re going to say these things.”

Zack gave a short laugh. “Honestly, I don’t know how I’m going to get up on that stage to say anything at all, let alone what I’ve written down. I’m so scared, Pat. They expect me to give a speech in front of hundreds of people. How am I supposed to do that? I’m gonna pass out, or throw up, or both.”

Patrick looped an arm over Zack’s shoulders and pressed his nose against Zack’s cheek. “You aren’t going to do either of those things. You’re going to get up on that stage and give this amazing speech because you’re the bravest person I know.”

“Pat, I’m the opposite of brave. I can barely even talk to people who aren’t you. I’ve been so lucky all these years, because I didn’t need to have any courage. I had you.”

Patrick turned Zack’s head so their eyes met. “Zack, you’re stronger than you know. Look at how you’ve handled things since last fall. You’ve been the strong one. I’ve mostly just been falling apart. But you’re the one who figured out a plan for after graduation. You’re the one who gives me strength to just get through the days. And you’re the one who’s going to get up in front of the whole school and tell them what you really think.”

“But I literally don’t know if I can do it. I’m petrified. I can’t even explain it. When there are people around I clam up and my brain stops functioning and I can’t even speak. Not to mention, if I say these things, it will probably make our lives a living hell for the last few days we’re at home.”

Patrick leaned in and pressed their lips together. “We’re leaving seventy-two hours after graduation. After making it this far, what’re a few more days? Hell, I’ll sleep in a tent down by the pond if I have to. Don’t you dare let what our parents might say or do keep you from giving this part of your speech. So, when you get up on that stage, don’t say it to all of them. Find me in the audience and just say it to me. You’re going to be amazing. I promise.”

CHAPTER TEN

June 5

On the day of their graduation, Zack almost choked on his Cheerios when his mother entered the kitchen wearing a floral dress, her hair drawn back into a bun.

“I didn’t know you had gotten the day off of work. You’re coming to graduation?” Zack could feel the hope bubbling up inside of him.

His mom glanced briefly in his direction, lips pressed in a hard line as she pulled on a cream-colored cardigan. “I figured it would look pretty bad if the valedictorian didn’t have any family in the audience.”

His heart sunk into his shoes. She wasn’t going because she cared about seeing her son graduate. She was going because of what people would think if she didn’t go. He was foolish to be so optimistic.

“Mom, there’s something I want to tell you.” He figured this was as good a time as any. “I’m going to move into the city for the summer and work on campus. I’m leaving in three days.”

She stared at him, and if his mother felt any emotion, she didn’t show it. “I think that’s a good idea. I know you need to get to the auditorium early, so we’ll take separate cars.” With that, she walked to the fridge, poured herself a glass of juice, and left the room.

He had told her he was leaving and she didn’t even care. In fact, she seemed in favor of it. Zack took a shaky breath and then choked down the rest of his cereal. He tried to refocus on graduation. He had a speech to mentally prepare for. His mother being in the audience didn’t change what he wanted to say. In fact, he was glad she would be there to hear it.

It was strange experiencing his own graduation ceremony from backstage. Principal Norris gave some opening remarks. The choir sang and the band played. Ms. Paul, the teacher voted on by the senior class to give the commencement address, spoke. Zack tried to form some connection, to feel some bond with the school and his graduating class, but he couldn’t. He had

always been on the outside looking in, but this past year had just solidified that this was not where he fit in.

The stage manager walked up to him and gently touched his shoulder. “Your speech is next.”

Zack jerked his head up and down and he smoothed the crumpled piece of paper he held in his sweaty hands. With those four spoken words, his stomach began to rebel and the big red curtain seemed to swim in front of him. He closed his eyes and inhaled and exhaled deeply, but the room just began to spin even more and his nausea increased.

“And now for this year’s Valedictorian, Zack Larson.”

He wasn’t going to be able to do this. Zack was quite sure that if he opened his mouth he would vomit. He heard a smattering of polite applause, and the stage manager pulled back the curtain and gave him an encouraging smile. As he peeked through the curtain and saw the podium where he was expected to stand and the hundreds of people sitting in the auditorium, he was quite sure this was his own personal version of hell.

He had no idea how his feet began to move, but he somehow found himself standing in front of the podium. With trembling hands, he placed the mangled piece of paper that held his speech on the podium and placed his hands on either side, partly to get them to stop shaking and partly to help keep himself upright.

Zack’s heart pounded in his chest as he blinked rapidly, his eyes adjusting to the harsh stage lights. Scanning the audience, he saw a sea of students and parents staring at him, waiting for him to begin. He was never going to be able to find Patrick in the mass of bodies. Panic began to set in, and his grip on the podium became white-knuckled as his legs began to wobble. The silence stretched on, he began to feel woozy, and Zack was terrified his worst fear would be realized and he would actually faint right there on stage.

Then a person about half way back in the section where the graduating class was sitting stood up halfway in their seat and began to wave. Zack sucked in his breath. It was Patrick. Eyes focused on his best friend, he took a breath. Then another one. And finally he loosened his death grip on the

podium. He could do this. He let all the other people fade away until it was just him and Patrick in the auditorium.

“Good afternoon. It’s a privilege to be speaking to you today as Valedictorian. And I’m so proud of all of us, the class of 2004...”

He spoke about what a great accomplishment it was to be graduating. He talked of the wonderful experiences that lay ahead and the great things they would all achieve. The words were empty, but he knew that’s what everyone wanted to hear. It wasn’t until the last part of his speech that he really spoke from the heart and said what he really wanted to say.

“As we go out into the world to make our mark on it, I urge you all to practice tolerance and acceptance. Just because we grew up in a small town doesn’t mean we have to have small town mentalities. Just because something is less common, doesn’t mean it’s abnormal. And just because something is different, doesn’t make it wrong. Throughout our lives we will meet people with divergent backgrounds and beliefs, varying ethnic origins, and even people with different sexual orientations.”

A rippling murmur went through the audience and Zack paused to lick his lips. He could see Patrick smiling at him, eyes fixed on his. He took a breath and continued.

“I challenge each and every one of you to respect and learn from those who are different from you, instead of falling back on scorn and hate. Because at the end of the day, we are all human and far, far more alike than we are different. Remember that, Class of 2004.”

Zack wasn’t perturbed by the unsure applause as he exited the stage. He was simply giddy with relief that he had gotten through his speech and that he was out of the spotlight. He hadn’t exactly come out to the school, but he had said what he wanted to say.

The next hour was a blur of parading across the stage to collect a scroll of paper, raucous applause, and blue mortarboards being tossed into the air.

After the ceremony ended, it was mayhem as parents, relatives and graduates attempted to find each other in the mass of people.

Zack felt compelled to just slip off to his car and drive home. It was crowded and loud and he wasn't sure how he would be received by his fellow classmates after his speech and all too aware of what his mother would think. He guessed it wouldn't do, though, to simply take off. If he had the guts to get up on stage in front of everyone and give a speech, he had the guts to stick around for the aftermath.

He felt a little less claustrophobic once he left the auditorium and stepped out onto the lawn. Scanning the people milling around and the pockets of graduates grouped together, laughing, hugging, and taking pictures, he tried to find his mother.

“What. The. Fuck.”

As it turned out, Scott found him first. Zack tensed as he turned in the direction of the voice. “What do you want, Scott?”

“So, you thought you'd just ruin graduation for the rest of us with your speech? Fag. Trying to make excuses for being a completely disgusting gay freak?”

“Believe it or not, Scott, my speech wasn't just about being gay. And if that's all you got out of it, you really missed the point and I really feel sorry for you, your ignorance, and your teeny tiny little brain.” Freedom was only three days away and Zack just couldn't bring himself to be scared of Scott anymore.

“You little fucking faggot! How dare—”

A blur of blue whooshed past Zack on his left and then there was the sickening sound of a fist colliding with a face. Before Zack even quite registered what had happened, Scott was on the ground whimpering, clutching his nose, which was gushing blood, and Patrick was standing at Zack's side.

“Listen to me you sack of shit, *never* talk to Zack ever again. And if you knew what was good for you, you'd never use that word again.” Patrick put an arm over Zack's shoulders and turned to him. “C'mon.”

A small crowd of shocked bystanders was gathering around Scott and Zack was still a bit dazed as Patrick led him away. “I, for one, loved your speech.” Patrick squeezed his shoulder.

Zack smiled. “Thanks.”

“What the hell? Did you just punch a boy?”

The small feeling of victory dissipated quickly as Patrick’s parents rushed toward them. Patrick’s dad looked like he was about to commit murder and his mother looked as if she might faint.

“Answer me, Patrick! And what are you doing with Zack?” Zack took a step back as Mr. Martin turned his attentions to him. “You get away from my son! You hear me? You’ve done enough damage! This is all your fault!”

“Hold it right there!”

Zack cringed as he saw his mother, looking positively livid, walking toward them.

“You need to stop blaming my son for everything, Peter. You and Beverley need to take responsibility for your own son.” In a completely twisted way, it was almost funny hearing his mother defend him. “Though, I have no idea what you were thinking with that speech.” She turned to Zack. “Did you really have to bring... *sexual orientation* in to it? What were you thinking? I don’t know what has happened to you, but—”

“Enough. Everyone just shut up!” Patrick held up his hands.

Zack eyed a few other groups of graduates and families that were close by. A few had glanced in the direction of their outburst, but there was so much commotion no one really seemed to be paying them much attention.

“How dare you speak to us like—”

“Dad, seriously? Stop. Here’s the deal, and I’m only gonna say this once. You all have put Zack and I through hell this year. Not because we’ve done anything wrong, but because you are ignorant bigots who are completely afraid of anything that you don’t perceive as normal. But let me tell you something. I love him.” Patrick pointed to Zack. “He’s my best friend and I’m in love with him.”

“How can you say that? Patrick, honey, you need help.” Mrs. Martin was sobbing.

“No, Mom. I don’t. There’s nothing wrong with me and there’s nothing wrong with Zack. And nothing is going to keep us apart. I’m just sorry you

couldn't accept us for who we are. And Mom, Dad, I guess this is as good a time to tell you as any, but I'm moving out as soon as I turn eighteen. So in three days." Patrick turned to Zack. "You ready to get out of here?"

Zack fought back tears as he stared at his brave and beautiful best friend. "Absolutely."

Patrick slung an arm around Zack's shoulders as they walked away from their stunned parents.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

June 8

It was still very early when his phone buzzed, but Zack had already been up for hours. He finished taping up his last box and then reached for his phone.

PAT: Happy B-day

Zack smiled and sat down on the edge of his bed.

ZACK: Same 2 u. U packed?

PAT: Yup. Should be able to go by noon.

ZACK: k

It was still surreal to think that after months and months of painful waiting, the day had finally come and they were moving out. Their application for a furnished studio apartment in a building not a five-minute walk from campus had been approved. They would sign the lease when they showed up that afternoon and then they could move right in. Almost all the other tenants were U of M students as well and there was even a small park across the street from the building. It was going to be great.

They had already told Brad and Joel of their plans. They would see both of them over the summer before Brad and Joel went off to the University of Iowa together and they also promised to visit Zack and Patrick when they were back for holidays.

They had gotten lucky with their parents' schedules. Zack's mom would be leaving for work in a few hours. Patrick's dad would be at work all day and Patrick's mom had a hair and nail appointment so she would be out of the house for a few hours as well. After graduation, all they wanted was to leave without another scene. There really wasn't anything left to say anyway.

When it was time to pick up the small U-Haul trailer he had reserved online, Zack climbed the stairs unsure what to expect when he stepped out onto the main floor of the house. He had been studiously avoiding his mother since graduation, staying downstairs whenever she was home, but he knew she

hadn't left for work yet. He had thought about just waiting until she had left, but he felt compelled to try to talk to her one last time.

When he heard her coming down the hall, he backed up against the door leading downstairs, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

"Bye, Mom."

She halted on her way to the front door. Her back was to him, but Zack could see she was rigid and tense.

"I... I just wanted to let you know I won't be here when you get back. I'm moving out today."

There was a long pause before she said, "I think that's for the best."

"Y-you really can't be okay with me being gay, can you?"

She shuddered. "Of course I can't. I don't understand why anyone would choose such an unnatural lifestyle." She still didn't turn to look at him, and Zack's heart twisted in his chest. "But it's clear you aren't coming to your senses, so I would prefer it if you were no longer in my house." With that, she continued walking toward the front entryway and out of view. Zack heard the front door slam shut with finality behind her.

Zack was glad for the support of the wall behind him as he took several gasping breaths. He felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him as he realized that he would probably never see her again. She thought it was a choice. But it wasn't. It was who he was and she would never understand that what he and Patrick had was beautiful.

Once he had returned with the trailer attached to the back of his Taurus, Zack spent the remainder of the morning carrying out boxes full of his clothes, books, and other keepsakes. Just as he was loading his last box, he heard the Martins' garage door open and watched as Mrs. Martin backed her car down the driveway and drove down the street. Not a minute later, the front door of the house opened and Patrick was jogging toward him.

"Hey."

Zack didn't even have time to reply before Patrick's arms were around him. "Hey, yourself." His words were muffled as he pressed his face into Patrick's neck, breathing him in.

"Happy Birthday, Zack." Patrick tipped his head to the side and nudged Zack's head with his shoulder so their lips could meet. It was strange kissing out in the open, but it was exhilarating at the same time.

"Happy Birthday, Pat." Zack pulled Patrick's face forward for one more kiss. "You ready to load up your stuff?"

"Absolutely."

It was strange being back inside the Martins' house. As he carried down a box from Patrick's bedroom, he realized it was also the last time he would be in this house.

Between the two of them, it didn't take long to load Patrick's things. As Patrick shut the trailer door with all of their belongings inside, the finality of the situation hit Zack. They wouldn't be coming back and they would effectively be cutting off all ties to their families. He looked from his house to Patrick's and didn't even realize he had begun shaking until Patrick's steady hands came to rest on his shoulders. Zack leaned back into Patrick's sturdy chest and took a deep breath.

"You okay?" Patrick's hands massaged his shoulders for a moment before he wrapped his arms around Zack.

"Yeah. It's just, this is it. I wish..." He wished that so many things had been different. He wished the last year had been easier. He wished their parents understood. He wished they didn't come from such an intolerant place. He wished it didn't hurt so much.

"I know." Patrick's arms tightened around him. "Me too."

Zack turned in Patrick's arms, and they both held each other, Zack silently crying into Patrick's shoulder, as they both acknowledged their loss.

"Any second thoughts?" Patrick asked.

Zack lifted his head so he could look into Patrick's eyes. Of all the things he wished he could change, being gay wasn't one of them. He wouldn't change loving Patrick for the world. "Not one."

Patrick kissed him hard. "Let's go." They turned to walk to the front of the car, but Patrick stopped and looked back, his eyes focusing on the woods between their two houses and the parting in the underbrush that you could just make out from where they stood. "You wanna go to the pond one last time?"

Zack thought about it. So many of his favorite memories could be tied to the pond. It was where they had pledged to be best friends forever and where Patrick had kissed him for the first time. But it was also the place where they had had to hide to be together and where they had shared so much pain.

"No." He slowly shook his head. "I just want the future. I don't want to go back."

"Okay." Patrick traced a hand down his spine and kissed his temple. "Want me to drive?"

"Yeah."

Zack handed over his keys and got in the passenger seat of his old Taurus. As Patrick started the engine, he placed his hand palm up on the middle console. Zack threaded his fingers with Patrick's and gripped tightly. As they pulled out of the cul-de-sac and began driving down the street, Zack didn't look back.

EPILOGUE

Late May 2005

It was hard to believe their freshman year of college was almost over. Finals were just a week away. It was a beautiful sunny day and Zack and Patrick had opted to study outside in the small park across the street from their apartment building. They had both tossed their books to the side to take a little break and Zack scooted back so he could lean against Patrick. Smiling, Patrick looped an arm around Zack's shoulders so his hand rested on Zack's chest. Zack brought his own hand up to thread their fingers together and shut his eyes for a moment, basking in the warmth of the sun and of Patrick.

He was so happy. They were both out and proud and never hid their relationship from anyone at college. They had even joined the GLBTQ group on campus as well as the Gay-Straight Alliance, knowing all too well the importance of education and tolerance. Of course, it still hurt that their own families hadn't accepted them, but they had made so many wonderful friends and formed a new family of people that loved and accepted them for who they were. And, they had each other.

Zack opened his eyes and turned his head to the side, focusing on the Celtic knot that always hung at the hollow of Patrick's throat.

"Pat?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell me you'll always love me."

Patrick just leaned down and kissed him, his fingers caressing the silver band that Zack never removed from the ring finger on his right hand. Patrick didn't have to say anything. Zack already knew the answer.

THE END

Author Bio

Lily Grace hails from the Midwest but currently resides in the DC metro area. Her background is in public health and the life sciences and she spends her days working as a health care consultant. When she's not busy being a nerdy scientist she curls up with her laptop and dreams up romantic stories about beautiful men.

She's a fan of loud rock concerts, cooking, shoe shopping, and strawberry ice cream. She loves love, hates cleaning, and is still amazed that when she decided on a whim to try writing a story a few years back that it would lead to having her works published.

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OPEN ARMS AND OPEN EYES

By Michelle K Grant

Photo Description

A young man with warm brown eyes and shaggy, tousled brown hair looks seriously into the camera before pulling his long bangs back to reveal “I Love You” written in symbols on his forehead. His face breaks into a huge open smile as his secret is revealed.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I was surfing YouTube the other day and I came across a vlog my boyfriend made. I didn't even know he had a YouTube channel. He's never told me he makes videos. He obviously wants to remain anonymous because he's using a fake name. I only watched two of them. Even so, I feel like a total creeper. He's not real great at talking about serious stuff, at least not to me, so it was really weird watching him open up in those videos. In one of them, he talked about me. It was nice, but I don't think he meant for me to ever see it. A couple of the titles really have me wondering about things... Should I watch them? I know he'd be embarrassed if he knew I knew. I don't know what to do.

Sincerely,

Madison

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, gay for you, interracial, sweet no sex, college

Word count: 5,341

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OPEN ARMS AND OPEN EYES

By Michelle K Grant

Lionel sat at the small wooden table, thumbs tapping in rhythm to the mellow jazzy beat playing on the overhead speakers. His eyes darted repeatedly to the glass front of the upscale coffee house. The afternoon rain pelted the sunbaked Florida street. The resulting steam condensed on the glass, obscuring the passersby.

He picked up his empty cup for the third time, realizing again that he had already drained the contents. He picked up his phone, for the fifth time, checking for messages. The front door opened. He tensed and slowly looked up. It was only a stranger coming in from the rain. He slumped back down into his chair.

Oh, well. At least now I'm not the only brother up in here, he thought. *Huh, except this dude looks like he belongs here.* The light-skinned man that had just entered was well-dressed: button-up green and white striped oxford, stone-washed jeans, leather slides, and short, thick dreads crowning his head. The man's picture was probably right next to the definition of metrosexual in the dictionary.

Me?... Not so much.

Lionel looked down at his less-than-metro outfit: torn jeans and plain brown T-shirt, and worn camo jacket. *Good thing shabby chic is "in" on campus.* It didn't matter that his clothes came with that well-worn look from the thrift store. Thankfully he had been able to pick up some nice Adidas at the consignment shop. With the right kicks you looked stylish, no matter what you're wearing.

And Momma always said, "Black is Beautiful," Lionel thought, brushing a hand nervously over the coal-dark skin of his forearm before running it over his closely shaved head.

A familiar shape walked by him on the other side of the glass, shoulders hunched against the rain. When he entered, Lionel's heart leaped into his throat.

Oh, God. Here goes nothing.

Christopher perused the room, searching for Lionel. His deep brown eyes widened just a bit when he caught Lionel's gaze. He nodded at Lionel, but didn't smile. He rarely smiled. He stood in the doorway, rain dripping from his black London Fog trench. His pale skin grew slightly whiter. Taking a deep breath, he flipped the water out of his shaggy brown hair and squared his shoulders.

Lionel's stomach sank into his shoes as Christopher strode toward him.

Everything about Christopher screamed money, from his Doc Martens boots to his True Religion jeans. The black T-shirt he wore would have some band logo on it, Lionel knew. Christopher dressed the exact same way every day, and had since high school. The only thing that had changed with college was the genre of the bands emblazoned on his chest. The emo-goth of high school had given way to pop-punk.

Lionel had noticed the change the very first day Christopher dropped back into his life.

Lionel stood up quickly, nearly knocking over the tiny pedestal table. His empty coffee cup bounced on the floor between them.

Christopher gently steadied the table as Lionel bent to grab his coffee cup off the floor. A slight smile graced Christopher's face as he draped his trench coat on the chair across from Lionel's. Today's shirt paid homage to Green Day. They stood facing each other as the smile slowly faded from Christopher's face.

"Hi," Chris finally said, his rich tenor ringing out over the hustle and bustle of the coffee shop.

"Hi." Lionel's normally resonant bass cracked and he cleared his throat. "Want some coffee?"

"Yeah, that would be nice." Chris nodded as he sat down.

"How do you like it?" Lionel asked.

Chris's face broke into one of those rare, heart-melting smiles before he answered. "I'll take it black."

Lionel coughed in his fist and turned away. One benefit of his dark skin was that the flush burning up his face wouldn't be obvious to the barista taking his order.

Okay, he's making jokes. Maybe it's not as bad as I think. Lionel looked back at Chris while he was waiting for the order. Chris's face was serious again, and he was staring at his hands. *Or maybe it is.* Lionel sighed. *Or it will be when I tell him the truth.* Too soon the order was ready. Lionel sat down and slid Chris's cup across the table to him. *No time like the present.*

"Thanks for coming." Lionel began.

"I'm sorry I've been avoiding you." Chris looked down at his coffee cup. He traced the rim round and round with one slim finger. "There are some things that I need to tell you and I have just been afraid to do it."

"Me, too Chris." Lionel coughed. "I mean... I need to tell you some things too. I meant..."

"Lionel," Chris interrupted, placing his hand on top of Lionel's on the table. "Can I go first? I have to say something to you that you aren't going to want to hear and I would rather get it out of the way."

Okay here it comes. The big "let down easy" speech... Lionel coughed again. "Of course, you first."

A burst of laughter from another table startled them both. Christopher sat up, placing both hands in his lap. "I'm not very good at talking."

"You got that right," Lionel interrupted. At Chris's dirty look, he leaned back and put his hand up defensively. "Sorry!"

"Don't interrupt."

Lionel sealed his lips, gesturing with his hand as if he were zipping them closed, locking them and throwing away the key.

"As I was saying," Christopher continued. "I am not very good at talking. But there are things I need to tell you... things you deserve to know before this goes any further." Chris closed his soulful eyes and hung his head. When Lionel took a breath as if to speak, Chris held up a finger, silencing him. "So please be patient with me."

“I never told you how important you were to me. You were my rock in high school, my lifeline.” Christopher looked up into Lionel’s eyes. “If it weren’t for you I don’t know what I would have done.”

Lionel drew back, attempting his best impersonation of Gary Coleman’s “What’chu talkin’ ’bout” face. Christopher laughed at his expression. It was like sunshine breaking through an overcast sky. Lionel captured that smile in his memory, tucking it away in that special folder in his heart where he stored every stolen smile, every hard won laugh.

“If you remember,” Chris’s expression turned somber again. “I had a difficult time in high school.”

Lionel remembered, probably more clearly than Chris did. Lionel had been the class clown. He remembered how often he struggled to drag a laugh out of the quiet, solitary boy and how often he failed.

“You know it wouldn’t have been easy, even without the media circus. I mean, the divorce itself probably wouldn’t have affected me. That dickhead was an absentee father long before he left my mom for his assistant. But the changes: new house, new school, new town... I never handled changes very well.” Chris snorted. “And, of course realizing that I was gay didn’t help.” Chris closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his slim nose. “I would have had a hard time adjusting even if he hadn’t been a senator. Even if he hadn’t quit his office the same time he quit his family.”

Lionel slid one hand slowly across the worn wooden table, palm up fingers outstretched. To his intense relief, Chris took his hand in his own. One smooth white thumb caressed the calluses on his palm before tracing the crease of his love line, still embedded with the garage-shop grime that no amount of scrubbing would remove.

“You are the only thing that kept me from going completely insane.” Chris smirked. “I don’t know why you took me under your wing, but if you hadn’t, I might not have survived our junior year.”

Chris wasn’t the only one who didn’t understand Lionel’s fascination with him in high school. Racial tensions had been high at their public alma mater. Desegregation laws bussed the black kids from Lackawanna to the same high

school the preppy Ortega-ites and red-necked Westsiders attended. Like oil and water, the three cultures existed simultaneously in the same container. Fights were more common than friendships.

“I could have used you that summer between our junior and senior year.” Chris sat back in his chair, pulling his hand away from Lionel’s. “I found another way to cope.”

“Chris,” Lionel interrupted, and reached farther across the table. *You don’t have to say it*, he thought. *I know. I shouldn’t know, but I know.* But the words didn’t come and Chris wouldn’t take his hand. Lionel slid his hand back to his lap.

I really should have known back then, Lionel berated himself. *I should have seen it.* The smiles had been fewer that year and the laughs harder to come by. Lionel had to resort to some pretty extreme antics just to get a reaction from Chris.

“Mom didn’t cope well either. As soon as we moved here, she started medicating her heartache instead of dealing with it. And... that summer... I started stealing her pills.” Chris looked up into Lionel’s eyes. “Xanax, Valium, whatever I could sneak. It took her a long time to notice, even though I wasn’t exactly careful.” Chris shrugged. “She spent so much time gorked out; she thought she took them herself. When she finally realized it was me, she just got me my own scrips.” Chris looked down again. “Money buys everything I guess.”

Lionel leaned over, sliding both hands across the table to reach for Chris’s. Chris took them, squeezing them tightly as he drew a steadying breath.

“I spent most of our senior year high. I am amazed that I passed at all. Maybe money bought that too.” Chris looked up again. “I know it bought my way into Cornell. Just like it did for dear ole Dad.” Chris snorted. “Did you know drugs are very easy to get in an Ivy League university? That’s where I found heroin.” Chris let go of Lionel’s hand to rub at the crook of his left arm. Faint track marks were still visible on his pale skin. “I failed out my very first semester.” Chris picked up his forgotten coffee and drained it all at once. “I spent my second semester in rehab. Voluntarily, I might add.” He twirled the empty cup on the table. “I haven’t used since.”

Chris looked up at Lionel again. “When you kissed me, I realized our friendship was developing into something more and I thought you deserved to know what you’re getting into.”

“I do know, Chris.” Lionel sighed. “I already knew.”

Chris blinked at Lionel, his mouth slightly agape. “You knew?”

Lionel took a deep breath. *And here it goes...* “Okay, you’ve had your say.” Lionel let go of Chris’s hands. “Now it’s my turn.” Lionel rubbed at some of the grime embedded in this thumb before pointing his finger at Chris. “Your turn to be silent.” Chris repeated the lip-locking pantomime Lionel had used.

“I never told you how important you were to me in high school, either.” Chris *humphed* in response and Lionel gave him an exaggerated glare. Chris held both hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“You might remember that I was a bit of a clown in high school. It always seemed to me that life was just too damn hard not to laugh whenever you can. So I did my best to make sure that happened.” Lionel pointed in the air with his right hand. “I’m not going to bore you with tales of how hard life was ‘in the ghetto’, ’cause really, it wasn’t that hard for me, and our ’hood certainly wasn’t the worst in Jacksonville. My momma and daddy worked hard to get the best for us kids and we never went hungry, never had to do without. Most kids in our neighborhood didn’t get piano lessons... or college funds...” Christopher lifted Lionel’s hand to his mouth. With his eyes squeezed tightly closed, he very gently kissed the back of each of Lionel’s fingers. Lionel froze. It wasn’t until Christopher laid his hand back down on the table that he could continue.

“Uh, yeah...” Lionel sputtered, the blush heating up his neck again. “If I was lonely, I just rode my bike up to Dad’s garage. He made me work when I did, but I didn’t mind. Hell, I liked it. I liked hanging out and talking with him and my older brothers. I liked making them laugh. I liked feeling like I was doing something for the man who did so much for me. I guess it got to be a habit because before you arrived there wasn’t nobody who hung around me that didn’t have a near constant smile on their face.” Lionel reached across and brushed Chris’s forearm with the tips of his fingers. Christopher picked up that hand and cradled it against his cheek.

“Until you.” Lionel looked into Chris’s eyes. “Poor little rich kid dropped in our school in the whirlwind of a political scandal.” Christopher dropped Lionel’s hand and smacked him in the shoulder. Lionel laughed. “Not that I knew that at first. I never did stay caught up on current affairs. It was my momma who opened my eyes to that a few weeks after you arrived. Evidently she didn’t care for your father’s politics long before he shacked up with his secretary. Once she realized you were in my class, she would rant and rave about what he did to you and your momma.” Chris rolled his eyes in response. “That day the reporters were outside the school trying to get pictures of you, she nearly hit one of them with her handbag. I had to drag her away.” Lionel chuckled. “That woman is hell on wheels when she gets going.

“She ranted about you so much she got me thinking. Which was a good thing. You were so quiet and withdrawn that I had just about decided you were an asshole. Momma made me realize maybe you had reason to be. And maybe I could do something about that.” Lionel slid his fingers into the curve of Chris’s palm, caressing the back of Chris’s hand with his thumb. Christopher squeezed his hand in response.

“If it seemed like I followed you around...” Lionel nodded as if agreeing with himself. “I did. I was determined that I was going to help you. It turned out to be much more difficult than I thought it would be.” Lionel looked down at their intertwined hands. “The summer before our senior year, when I kept thinking about you even when you weren’t around, I began to suspect that I might be just a little too interested in you.” Lionel looked up to face Chris. “About halfway through the next year, I knew I was.

“I didn’t say anything then. You know, before that, I had never thought about boys the way I was thinking about you. I mean, I knew you were gay. Everyone did. But I wasn’t so sure about me. What if I was just curious? You know? It wouldn’t be fair to burden you with my feelings when I wasn’t even sure about them myself.” Lionel chuckled. “At least, that was Momma’s advice. After she spit her sweet tea all over the kitchen table that is.

“She got her shit back together and said, ‘Lionel, I love you to death, and if you wanna be queer that is all right with me. But know what you’re doing before you drag someone into your mess. Especially that poor boy.’” Lionel

laughed again. “She did box me on my ear for telling her something like that when her mouth was full.

“So I didn’t say anything to you.” Lionel’s face turned serious. “And after graduation, you were gone, just like that. And it was too late to say anything.

“But Momma was right. I didn’t like boys like that. Or at least not any other boys. So maybe I’m not gay. Maybe it’s just you.” Lionel traced lazy circles on the back of Christopher’s hand. “So when I ran into you at beginning of the summer term I almost jumped at the chance to open that door. I mean, I never stopped thinking about you. And when I saw you, standing in front of the UNF bookstore, it felt like a lightning bolt went right through me. So obviously my feelings for you hadn’t changed.” Lionel drew his hand back to his side of the table. “Do you remember that day?”

“Of course I do.” Christopher smiled. “I was so happy to find you. I couldn’t believe my luck.”

“I felt the same way... lucky. Do you remember I startled you? When you turned around to see who was calling for you, your spiral notebook slid off the top of the pile in your arms and fell to the ground.” Chris nodded, obviously confused. Lionel picked nervously at the table. “It had fallen open. I read where you had written ‘Open Arms and Open Eyes’ over and over again, pages of it.”

“It’s a line from a song by Incubus. To me the song is about staying clean, about not using.”

“Yeah, I figured. I found it on YouTube. It’s a good song.” Lionel coughed nervously. “It’s also the name of your vlog entry.”

“My vlog?” Chris practically shrieked, pulling his hand away. Lionel winced.

“I found your vlog, Chris, that very day. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I kept meaning to, but...” Lionel sighed. “I was afraid you’d be pissed.”

“Oh my god...” Chris leaned back into his chair.

“In that video, you talked all about your addiction, about how much change bothered you. And about how you were getting a new home, a new school, and a new life all over again, just like you did in high school.”

“I know what I said!” Chris’s face was beet red. “I made the damn thing!”

“I know... I know...” Lionel hung his head. “In the second one, you talked about me and I realized that I did help you back then, just like I hoped I could.” Lionel’s voice softened. “And I realized that you needed me to be that kind of friend to you again. You didn’t need even more change and you didn’t need me complicating your life with my issues.”

Lionel reached out for Chris again.

“I tried, Chris, I really tried. All summer I did my best to act the same as I did in high school. To keep my crazy mixed-up feelings to myself.” Lionel’s voice dropped even lower. “I just lost it that night. I couldn’t stop thinking about your lips. I couldn’t resist pulling you into my arms and kissing that smile I had been working so hard to keep on your face. I know I should have warned you... Shoulda given you some indication of how I was feeling before I did that to you. You were right to push me away.”

The noise of the coffee shop lingered between them as Lionel stared at his solitary hand on the table.

“You only watched the first two?” Christopher’s voice was a whisper.

“I felt so guilty from just those two that I didn’t watch the rest. You used fake names. I knew you didn’t want anyone to know. I admit that I did go back to the vlog, repeatedly even. But I just read the titles, I didn’t watch the new ones. Which was its own punishment I guess, ’cause I nearly died from curiosity.”

Christopher stood up, taking both cups with him, and walked to the counter. Lionel watched him as he stood in line, the rigidity of his back betraying his anger. Chris didn’t look at him even once. Lionel gazed back down at his hands.

Jesus, you really fucked that up, dumb ass. What the hell were you thinking? You should never have told him. No, you should have told him way back when you found the vlog. For that matter, you should have told him back in high-school that you had the hots for him. Maybe he would have stayed and never got on that shit in the first place. OR maybe he wouldn’t have cared like he doesn’t seem to care now.

A cup of coffee slid in front of him.

“I got you cream with no sugar. I hope you don’t mind my joke.” Christopher sat back across from him. The tension was gone from his shoulders. “*Ahem...* Speaking of curiosity, let’s talk about that kiss.” Lionel felt the flush climb his face again. “Did it answer any questions you had?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—have you decided if your feelings are real? Are you ready to ‘drag me into your mess’ as your mother put it?”

“God Chris, you couldn’t tell? I couldn’t get you close enough to me. I couldn’t hold you tight enough. And I never wanted it to end. If you hadn’t have pushed me away I would still be kissing you.”

“That’s just the physical, Lionel!” Chris leaned across the table. “I don’t want to be just your one-time-gay-fling in college. Your mother is right. I’ve got too much of my own shit to risk getting hurt. I’m gay Lionel. Do you know what that means? If we do this, it won’t just be physical for me. I don’t want to be *dating* you while you are just *fucking* me.” Lionel flinched at the word. “I don’t want to be your ‘friend with benefits’.”

“I don’t want that either.” Lionel slapped his hand down on the table. “Maybe I’m gay and maybe not. Maybe you’re the only guy I’ll ever feel this way about. I don’t know. All I know is that I want *you*. I want to take you to the movies. I want to take you home to meet my momma. I wanna see your face when she makes you eat neck bones and greens ’cause she thinks you’re too skinny. I want the whole deal!”

Christopher swallowed. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

A grin bright enough to light the sun eased across Christopher’s face. “*Neck bones?*”

Lionel laughed. “If you’re lucky! Momma makes some damn fine neck bones and greens.”

“I am sure she does.” Christopher agreed. “Far be it from me to doubt your momma.” Lionel chuckled.

“There is one more thing I have to tell you.” Lionel raised his eyebrows at this. “And I have talked more today than I have my whole life.” Christopher sighed.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Don’t mock me. I’m working on it.” At this, Lionel tilted his head in apology. “I am going to let my vlog get you ‘caught up on current affairs.’ Can I hold your phone?” Lionel unlocked his iPhone and passed it to Chris. Chris quickly pulled up a video and passed it back to him. Lionel looked down to see the words *Maybe, You’re Gonna Be The One That Saves Me* over a still photo of Chris’s earnest face.

“This is the most recent. I recorded it a week ago... the night you kissed me.” Chris stood up, kissed Lionel’s forehead, and darted out of the door into the rain. Lionel watched him through the glass wall until he vanished around the corner. Looking down, he gently traced Chris’s image before hitting play.

Hello, hello, hello, all you out there in the vlog-o-sphere. Welcome again to another episode of ‘As the World Spins on Its Ear’. I’d like to thank you for joining me and I would really like to put a special thank you out there to those seventeen people who are following me. Most of the things I talk about here are painful and just seeing that you guys have subscribed to my channel makes me feel not so all alone.

I named the first entry ‘Open Arms and Open Eyes’ because that phrase is so important to me. Those of you who tune in regularly know that it reminds me that if I want to survive... and by survive, boys and girls, I mean stay clean... ’cause do not doubt... that shit’ll kill ya... If I want to survive I have to be willing to ‘accept the things I cannot change’... i.e., open arms... and not hide from the truth, i.e.,... have the ‘courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference’... In other words, I have to be able to see things as they really are and deal with them... i.e., open eyes. It makes sense to me that’s what’s important... Man, am I rambling today or what? I am! I am! I know I am! But I have good reason to be. Do you remember the Lion? Of course you do. Who could forget the mighty Lion? Whose roar drives away all my tormenting demons? Whose smile shines like the sun?

Aesop had it backwards. It is the Lion who brings laughter, and the mouse who is trapped by the snare.

So now I'm rambling and waxing poetic. No surprise, really. The Lion does these things to me.

Okay boys and girls, girls and boys, and boys who want to be girls and girls who want to be boys, tonight... drumroll please... tonight... the Lion kissed me. Sweet Mary, Mother of God. I repeat... The LION kissed me.

Those of you who follow me, know how supremely amazing this is. Those of you in my inner circle, as it were, realize that this was perhaps the most significant moment of my life!... So tell me? How do you think I reacted? Do you think I took the golden bull by the horns? Do you think I laid the sexiest, most passionate lip lock on him? Do you think I used every last, however few, gayboy skills I had to seduce him into believing he couldn't live without me? Do you? I know you can't answer, that is what makes this so fun.... I mean freeing... And the answer is....

NO! I didn't! I pushed him away like a frightened maiden and I RAN. That's right. You heard it here first. I PUSHED HIM AWAY... Facepalm!... I can't wait to talk to my therapist about this one. This time she will agree with me when I tell her I am crazy... Or at least self-destructive... I mean really... could I have done anything more counterproductive? I don't think so.

So now, I have no idea what to say to him. I know what I wish I could say. I would say, "Lion, I am so sorry I reacted that way. The truth is, I have been dreaming of you doing exactly that since our junior year in high school. I have never felt about anyone the way I feel about you. If you would just give me another chance, I will make it up to you."

Chris's sincere face broke into a grin as his hand pulled his bangs back, baring his forehead. The letter *I*, a drawn heart, and the letter *U* were printed there.

I love you Lion. I am in love with you. And if you will just take me into your arms again, I will do everything I can to make sure you never regret that decision.

The grinning face remained as the video ended.

Lionel took a deep breath with his hand over his mouth, blinking back tears. *You're damn right I will.* He jumped up and ran out of the cafe, fighting to get his keys out of his back pocket. The rain had diminished to a drizzle.

As he rounded the corner, he saw Christopher sitting on a park bench across the street. Lionel skidded to a halt before crossing the street to him. Christopher stood as he approached. They faced each other silently as the sprinkle of rain slowed and finally stopped.

“Well?” Christopher said.

Lionel hesitated a second and then snatched Chris into his arms. He pressed himself tightly against Chris's chest, oblivious to the fact that they were both now soaked to the bone.

“My God, Chris. I love you too. You don't have to seduce me into anything. I already can't live without you. I can't believe...”

Chris silenced him with a kiss.

Chris's lips were tender, tentative. When Lionel bit gently on his upper lip, Chris slid his hands behind Lionel's head, delving into Lionel with his tongue. Lionel's moan vibrated in Chris's mouth and his hands slid down Chris's back, pressing their hips together. Lionel felt the heat of Chris's excitement through the thickness of both sets of cold, wet jeans. Lionel's body stirred in response, trapped painfully in the leg of his pants.

This time, it was Lionel who broke the kiss. He grinned at Chris. “This is going to sound like a come on, but we really need to get out of these clothes.”

The sun broke through the clouds and Chris laughed. “I think that *is* a come on.”

“You do?”

“I do.” Chris licked his lips. “And really, it's okay if it's a come on and it's okay if it isn't. But I think there is one more thing I should confess to you.”

“Good God man! Surely you jest! Haven't there been enough confessions for one day?” Lionel attempted his best British impersonation.

“How about just one more and then I'm done?” Chris smiled.

“Just one? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Well, if you’re sure you’re sure, go ahead.”

“Um... I’ve never gone all the way with a guy.” This time it was Christopher who blushed. Lionel watched the red slowly creep up his neck to his face as he spoke.

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Nothing about this is going to be easy is it?” Lionel asked, suddenly serious.

“No.” Chris laughed. “Nothing.” Lionel wrapped his arm around Chris’s waist and led him across the street to his car.

“In that case, I too have a confession to make,” Lionel said.

“Okay.” Chris turned serious as well.

“I’ve never gone all the way with a guy either.”

THE END

Author Bio

Michelle K Grant is a knitting, hiking, kayaking, guitar-playing, song-writing, singing, tarot-card-reading, video-game-playing, book-reading, coffee-drinking, movie-watching, fire-dancing, drum-playing, nature-worshiping, firefighting, dungeons-and-dragons playing, paramedic medicine giving, incest-surviving, pet-hoarding, yarn-shopping, squirrel-raising, Bob-Ross-painting, grandkid-spoiling, snake-keeping, bad-spelling, constantly-forgetting, sexually-deviant, fiber freak. In between all of these hobbies, Michelle is working on her first novel which she hopes to complete this year.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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THE IDEAL CUT

By Elinor Gray

Photo Description

A solitary diamond glitters on a black field.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm a jewel thief—the best in the world and proud of it. The only reason I'm even at this party is to get the job done; find the £3 million diamond with my name on it, steal it and get the hell out as fast as possible. But the mystery man who's been making eyes at me from across the room all evening is making me lose focus, distracting me, but I'm a professional and it takes more than a pretty face to keep me away from my prize. So there I am, sneaking into the vault, when I see mystery man breaking into the safe! If he thinks he's walking out of there with my diamond, he's crazy. There's no way I'm letting it go without a fight, even though there's something about this guy that totally throws me off my game.

Note: No BDSM please, and I would love a HEA for these guys!

Sincerely,

Jaime

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: action/suspense/adventure, criminals, jewel thieves, public activity, competitors to lovers, humorous

Word count: 11,657

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THE IDEAL CUT

By Elinor Gray

Clayton Gaumont surveyed the ballroom with satisfaction. The party was in full swing, the guests were on their way to drunk, and the hostess, heiress Sylvia Docker, was tied up (figuratively) with her social obligations. Everyone seemed to want a moment of the poor woman's time, and already Clayton could see the strain on her face. She was not the sort of wealthy socialite that thrived on attention, but that was to Clayton's advantage. He'd gotten a good look at the necklace she was wearing when they'd been introduced, and that told him everything and more about what was still sitting in the vault upstairs. If she wore *that* in public, what she kept hidden away had to be spectacular.

Straightening his tie, Clayton started to move away from the fruit end of the massive buffet table. Time to work the room a little, blend in, maybe rub elbows with a few bigwigs and give himself an alibi. He had a few hours to go until he could slip away and make good on his employer's challenge; until then, he'd have to entertain himself.

He'd only taken two steps, however, when he collided shoulder-to-shoulder with a man holding a champagne flute in one hand. They both took a step back, stared at one another, and Clayton couldn't help but be impressed at what he saw.

"Terribly sorry," the man said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. He was taller than Clayton—but that wasn't very difficult, if you stood taller than five foot six—with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, accentuated by the cut of his bespoke tux. He was brown-haired and brown-eyed with a sharp jaw and strong Roman nose, and he was looking Clayton up and down with undisguised interest, his gaze lingering somewhere below Clayton's belt, and then again on Clayton's throat. Silver cufflinks gleamed at the stranger's wrists, and his red bow tie caught the eye as an accent against all that black and white. There was a faint shadow of stubble on the stranger's chin and upper lip, as though even shaving right before an event couldn't subdue his testosterone-fueled manliness.

Clayton shifted forward on his toes, turning the charm up a notch. “My fault,” he said, smoothing down his own slightly unruly mop of curly hair, “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“No harm done,” the man said with a smile, and moved the champagne flute to his left hand in order to extend his right. “Theo Edgeworth.”

“Jeff Cagney,” Clayton said, taking Theo’s hand and squeezing it, rather than shaking it. “Which charity are you with?”

“Lawyers Against Climate Change,” Theo said, letting his touch linger. His hands were warm and dry, and his grip had the strength of a man who worked with his hands. Curious. “Sylvia has been very good to us this year.”

“That’s excellent.” Rich people. Clayton wondered if they ever managed to make friends at even a fraction of the rate they gave away money.

“What about you?” Theo asked. He had angled his body a little, inadvertently blocking Clayton’s way to the door, and to push past him at this point would be downright rude. Besides, Clayton didn’t really mind the distraction. He let himself be drawn into Theo’s space, plucking a champagne glass off a passing tray, and took a sip.

“Panda Population Revitalization,” he said. “I’m on the board.”

Theo smirked, and Clayton knew suddenly that he’d made a blunder. Damn it! Who actually cared about the panda population? This guy?

“Really?” Theo asked. “I don’t remember seeing your name on the program.”

Clayton looked down at his feet, and then back up, sheepish. “You got me. I’m not on the board. I work in Annual Giving.”

Theo laughed, showing straight, white teeth, and Clayton felt a little thrill run down his spine. Theo had a gorgeous, rich laugh, and Clayton was already imagining what it would be like to kiss that mouth, have those lips on his skin. Then Theo licked his lips—deliberately? Clayton couldn’t tell—and Clayton was starting to feel a little light-headed. His stomach was warm with arousal, his heart rate already picking up. He’d been so busy lately, traveling, getting out of the way, that sex had been put on the back burner. Now his body was reminding him how long it had been.

He couldn't afford to be distracted tonight. Regardless of how much interest Theo was telegraphing, Clayton wasn't going to let himself do anything more than get this dude's phone number. He could fuck him stupid *tomorrow* night. Tonight he had a job to do.

"I could use some air," Theo said, leaning across Clayton to put his champagne glass down on the table behind him. He touched Clayton's elbow lightly on the way back up, and Clayton swore he could feel it straight down his spine into his abdomen. "How about you, Jeff from Annual Giving?"

"Yeah, that sounds great," Clayton said, before he could stop himself. His face was hot. He really could do with getting out of the suddenly stifling ballroom.

Theo flashed him another smile, coy and closed-mouthed this time, and took Clayton's hand. Clayton let Theo pull him through the crowd, skirting around the edge of the dance floor, and toward the French doors that opened out onto the veranda.

Clayton snuck a peek at his watch. It was eleven thirty, and this party was guaranteed to go on until at least three in the morning. Clayton's best window of opportunity would open up just after midnight, when the party would be at its height and sneaking away would not be looked upon with suspicion. He could be meeting someone for more intimate conversation; who would know?

Of course, he was being drawn into intimate conversation right now, as Theo squeezed between two knots of people and they emerged onto the veranda with a mutual sigh of relief. The late spring night was not yet heavy with the humidity of summer, and Clayton took a deep, grateful breath.

There was another bar out on the veranda, and Theo drew Clayton in that direction past a few other couples seeking respite from the crush in the ballroom.

"Gin and tonic," Theo said to the bartender, and then to Clayton, "You?"

"Whiskey," Clayton said, "neat." One drink wouldn't hit him very hard. Even after the champagne, he had enough tolerance to be able to pull it off. Normally he didn't drink on the job, but turning it down would draw attention to him, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Drinks in hand, they drifted towards the edge of the veranda where the low stone wall separated the guests from the carefully manicured garden beyond. Its topiary and rose beds were lit by the full moon, but their details were lost beyond the brightness spilling out of the windows from the party. Clayton gazed in that direction nonetheless. Theo leaned against the stone wall and looked upwards.

“Isn’t that magnificent?” Theo said.

Clayton looked. The moon hanging just above the roof of the house had a silvery sheen and a faint ring of cloud around it. Clayton rested his elbows on the wall beside Theo. His glass was cool in his hands.

“Sometimes when I think the work I do is useless or extravagant,” Theo said, “I take a week off and hike to the remotest place I can get, and remember how fragile and amazing nature is.”

Oof, Clayton thought. *A real activist*. Well, he was going to have to play the Panda sob story card if he wanted to either get laid or get away easy.

“I know what you mean,” Clayton said, taking another sip of whiskey and lying through his teeth. “Working in an office doesn’t feel meaningful, I mean, all I do is answer phones all day and convince people to write checks. But I got to go on a trip once to China that the company sponsored and hold a baby panda.” Theo was looking at him with interest, as if he expected the story to get really exciting. “It was soft,” Clayton said, wondering if anyone actually let American tourists hold baby pandas. “I just think, you know, if we can do something to preserve the world we live in, we should do it.”

Theo’s brown eyes were wide and earnest as he said, “I absolutely agree. There’s nothing worse than standing idly by when things are going wrong around you and you have the power to change them.”

“How long have you been with LACC?” Clayton asked.

“Almost four years,” Theo said. “I went to law school right after college, and then spent three years working as an associate for a firm in New York, but something about it just felt wrong. I wanted to do good for the world, and here I was doing paperwork for corporate cases that were all about money. So I

switched jobs, got into non-profits, and became a lawyer for a lawyer's activist group." He grinned. "It suits me, I guess."

"I guess it does," Clayton said. Something about Theo's story felt off, but he wasn't sure what. Being a consummate liar himself, he usually knew when people weren't giving it to him straight. "Where did you go to law school?" he asked.

"Harvard."

"Oh yeah? My sister-in-law's cousin went to Harvard. You graduated, what, six, seven years ago? Do you know Sarah Baker?"

Theo shrugged and shook his head. "The name doesn't sound familiar. Sorry. She must not have been in my section."

"Sure, of course," Clayton said. "Sorry, I didn't mean to play the do-you-know game with you." He laughed, trying to sound embarrassed. "That's not what you brought me outside for." Maybe not, but Theo was definitely lying. He did it easily, without a pause, which made Clayton twice as suspicious. It also made him twice as interested in getting under this guy's skin (or into his pants, whichever came first). Why was he lying? Who was he, really?

"It's okay," Theo said, angling closer to Clayton. "I did have an ulterior motive." The coy smile came back, and Clayton flushed. "I hope I'm not being too forward."

"No, no," Clayton said quickly. "Definitely not." He could feel the warmth of Theo's body and he leaned into it. "In fact, I like that in a guy... willing to take a risk."

Theo laughed and his free hand brushed against the back of Clayton's. Then he turned his hand over and traced his fingers down the heel of Clayton's hand toward the tip of his thumb. Clayton felt it like a shock all the way through his body, just that gentle pressure of Theo's fingertips. He swallowed hard. Theo leaned closer and dropped his voice, speaking close enough to Clayton's ear that his soft lips brushed the shell. "I don't think you're much of a risk," he said.

Clayton shivered, blushed, and then scolded himself internally. This kind of behavior was going to get him noticed. He should have scooted past Theo

when they first collided, made his apologies, and gotten out of there. Instead, he'd been sucked in by that appraising look and now he was wasting precious time. He needed to disappear.

He turned his head to make an excuse to Theo, say something about getting back inside, maybe hitting the head before the dancing really got wild, or maybe spilling his drink and going back for another one, but Theo was so close that when he did turn, Theo met him in the middle, pressing their lips together softly.

Clayton pulled back, surprised, and Theo raised an eyebrow at him. "Wrong impression?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Clayton said. "Just, timing."

"It was good, wasn't it?"

Clayton snorted. "It was pretty good." He could feel Theo's breath against his lips, smell the warm, slightly spicy smell of his cologne; like leather, or campfire smoke, with a hint of cinnamon. The rational part of his brain *not* currently soaking in sex hormones reminded him that: A, they were in public and B, Clayton was on a goddamn mission. The rest of his brain just wanted to cozy up to this guy and get more familiar with that smell.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, gentlemen," a woman's voice said from a polite distance, "but Miss Docker is going to give her toast."

Clayton was prepared to let Miss Docker give her toast to an empty room, if it meant he could stay right here for another five minutes, staring at Theo Edgeworth, but Theo was already standing up straight and finishing his drink. He tipped the empty glass at Clayton, standing there with his dick half-hard in his pants, and said, "I'm just going to run to the john."

"Right," Clayton said, mentally shaking himself. What was *wrong* with him? "I'm sure we'll find each other."

"I'm sure we will," Theo replied, and brushed another kiss across Clayton's lips. Then he turned away, and was gone in the crush of the party.

Clayton took a moment to gather his composure back up from where he'd spilled it all over the flagstones, and headed in after him. He needed a minute

to recover. What had just happened? Theo was a liar, and a damn good one, but everything about him had raised Clayton's hackles (among other things). Theo didn't seem like one of the beef-heads Sylvia Docker had employed as her bodyguards, nor did he really have the air of an undercover guy, but Clayton had to be on his toes.

Briefly, he reconsidered even going after the diamond. It was only a ten-million-dollar job, and normally his dignity as a thief didn't allow for him to be a burglar for hire, but this was small potatoes compared to the job he was basically auditioning for right now. The employer, one Camilla Hendricks, had a lead on a shipment of blood diamonds from South Africa. Clayton wouldn't have touched it with a ten foot pole if she hadn't sworn they were going to get to them before their "legitimate" buyer had paid the paramilitary group supplying them, but even so. Having to prove himself before being contracted to lift a shitload of diamonds worth a shitload of money was questionable. But the cut... well. The cut Clayton would take as the organizer of the heist was enough to fund a retirement that could start the very next day, if he ever thought he would bother to retire.

But, no, Camilla had given him all the materials he'd needed to prep for the job: blueprints of the house, access to the caterers, a trial run of the safe. He could be in and out in twenty minutes. Clayton was here and he was doing the job.

With Sylvia giving her toast, and everyone occupied and most of them good and drunk, the upstairs would be empty. Clayton worked his way slowly around the edge of the room, giving the buffet a casual glance. By the time Sylvia was actually at the microphone, to much applause, Clayton had slipped out the other side of the ballroom, into the hall.

There were two guys in five hundred-dollar suits standing on the main staircase. They were both also wearing earpieces that snaked down the backs of their collars, which confirmed their status as party security. Clayton lingered beside a column, watching them through narrowed eyes. They were supposed to be on the move, walking the halls, not stationary. He needed to get up those stairs. Sylvia's toast wouldn't go on much longer, and then there would be general revelry again.

Clayton took a quick step backwards as one of the men glanced his way. Invisible behind the column, he also couldn't see whether they were still there. Peeking out sideways like a cartoon burglar wasn't really his style. He slowed his breathing and waited for a count of five, and then stepped out again.

The two men were gone, and the hall was empty. Clayton darted for the stairs and hurried up them. Time was a-wasting, and Clayton had to get in, crack the safe, and get out again before security made another sweep of the second floor. The clock was ticking.

Clayton glanced behind him towards the stairs at the noise of the party picking up again, and pushed the door to the study open. It squeaked once, which made him freeze and listen, but when nothing happened he slipped inside, unnoticed.

The study was dark, save the light on the desk that lit a haphazard scatter of papers, an open pen, and a black notebook on top. The desk was set diagonally so that it faced the study door and the wall of books to the immediate left of the entrance, and the occupant of the desk would have his back to the windows and the fireplace on the right wall. There was a door on either side of the fireplace, one of which Clayton knew from studying the blueprints of the house led to a bedroom, the other to a closet.

The safe was a large, black, metal box that sat on a reinforced bookshelf to the right of the door amid another impressive collection of first edition texts with leather spines. Inside that safe lay Clayton's prize, a diamond of such color, clarity, and carat that it deserved to be in a museum.

And kneeling in front of the open safe door, holding that very diamond in his gloved hands, was Theo Edgeworth. It glittered against the black leather: a single, robin's-egg-blue stone the size of a quarter, hung on a platinum chain.

"Motherfucker!" Clayton hissed. "I knew you weren't a lawyer!"

Theo shot to his feet, his face a mask of cold denial. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, taking the offensive. Clayton knew that tactic: the more forceful you were, the less likely someone was to question you. Theo was doing it well; his powerful body seemed to fill the room and demand respect.

Clayton stood his ground. “What are *you* doing with my diamond?”

“*Your* diamond?” Theo looked taken aback. “What—oh, hell no.” He looked down at the diamond in his hand and then quickly shoved it into his pocket. “Don’t tell me Camilla hired you.”

It was Clayton’s turn to be surprised (again). “You mean she hired *you*?”

“Hey, pal,” Theo said, pointing a finger at the middle of Clayton’s chest. “I’m good at what I do.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Clayton asked, crossing his arms over his chest. “Getting caught stealing priceless family jewels?”

Theo narrowed his eyes and took a step towards Clayton. Clayton swallowed hard, suddenly unsure of whether he was angry or turned on right now, whether he should feel threatened or aroused. The latter option was winning.

“Oh,” Theo said, dropping his voice, “because ‘Jeff from Annual Giving’ was such a good cover story. Come on, man. Maybe that can fool the plebs down there throwing money at each other, but a real confidence man can smell a fake ID from a mile away.”

“Did you just say ‘confidence man’?” Clayton asked. “You sound ridiculous. I’m calling security.” It wasn’t the classy thing to do, but he needed to get out of here and fast. This job was smoked.

“How are you going to explain what you were doing up here in the first place?” Theo was advancing on him. “You just said *your* diamond, and I know for a fact you’re not Sylvia Docker or any of her nearest relations. Camilla hired you, just like she hired me, to get this job done. The question now is *why*.”

“What did she tell you?” Clayton demanded.

“What did she tell *you*?”

They glared at each other for a long moment. Clayton’s heart was thundering in his chest. His diamond, his job, his multi-million dollar heist—they were all in this guy’s hands. There was nothing he could do.

“Motherfucker,” he said eventually, which was not an answer to anything.

“I should have known you’d have a dirty mouth,” Theo said with a smirk.

“Okay, look,” Clayton started, but Theo held up a hand before he could say anything else.

“Wait,” he said, voice dropped to a whisper. “Did you hear that?”

Clayton knew better than to ask, *Hear what?* He held his breath and listened. The door behind him was ajar, and through it he could hear the sound of the party going on downstairs. But on top of that, there was the distinct sound of someone coming up the staircase. The footsteps were sure; not the drunken wandering of a party guest, but the deliberate stride of a security guard. They had wasted a lot of time being indignant. Rookie mistake.

“Through there,” he said, pointing to a door behind Theo. They had to get out of this room fast, but with the diamond in Theo’s pocket, Clayton wasn’t going to let him out of his sight.

Theo obeyed, darting across the room and opening the door. “A closet?” he hissed.

“Fuck,” Clayton said, “it’s the one on that side—just get in!” He hustled Theo into the tiny linen cupboard—not what he’d been hoping for—and closed the door behind them. There was barely enough room for the both of them. Theo was crowded up against Clayton in the darkness, chest to chest, his broad body firm in all the right places. He smelled warm and spicy. Clayton sucked in a breath through his teeth, cursing himself.

“Maybe I was wrong,” Theo whispered in his ear. “If this is how you do all your heists, you definitely should get the job.”

“Shut up,” Clayton hissed, feeling himself flush with an embarrassed, angry sort of heat. “This is thanks to your interference. I’d be out of here by now.”

“If you’d picked the right door,” Theo said, so Clayton punched him.

He didn’t have much room, though, so mostly he just pushed his fist hopefully in the direction of Theo’s midsection. It connected with a solid wall of flesh, but Theo made a satisfying *oof* noise.

The door to the study opened, creaking faintly on its hinges, and closed again, engaging the latch.

“Did you close—?” Clayton breathed. He felt Theo nod.

The carpeted floor of the study provided no information about the new occupant. They might have been standing by the bookcase, or pacing across the room, and all Clayton could hear was the silence that came from the door to the hall being shut. The silence extended until it was painful, and then it eased into a comforting quiet. If the theft had been noticed, there would be an uproar by now. On the other hand, whoever had entered the room might not be going anywhere for a long time. There was a creak of leather and springs: the sound of a body sitting down in the desk chair.

Theo shifted restlessly in the dark, his body moving against Clayton’s, and Clayton felt a hot spike of want deep in his gut. He could almost taste Theo’s kisses on his lips and feel the press of Theo’s hand on his thigh. He swallowed hard. His dick was getting mighty interested in this forced proximity, fattening up in his trousers. Suddenly he was imagining what it would be like to get pinned to the door, to have Theo shove his thigh between his legs, to blow his load in his briefs like a teenager. Clayton’s cock twitched. He closed his eyes in the darkness, begging for patience.

But Theo shifted again, and suddenly Clayton could feel the press of Theo’s erection against his abdomen. Theo hissed through his teeth and pulled away, but Clayton’s hands shot out without his permission and grabbed for whatever he could find. He pulled Theo back in by the pockets of his tuxedo jacket. Theo’s weight pressed him against the door, and Theo’s breath was hot against his temple.

“This is so not the place for this,” Theo breathed. Clayton nodded. He was acting very inappropriately for a master thief. But fuck, he was horny. Theo felt amazing, all rock-hard muscles and equally rock-hard dick, and Clayton could feel him trembling slightly, as if he was still trying to hold back. Clayton flexed his hips, pressing his own erection against Theo’s thigh.

He heard Theo curse softly, and then that thigh was sliding between Clayton’s legs, just as he’d imagined it. Theo’s quads were solid, defined, and the perfect height to press against Clayton’s balls. Clayton let out a breath, shocked at how good it felt.

Sliding his hands up Theo's front, he found Theo's bow tie, shirt studs, and finally, the warmth of his bare skin above his jacket collar. Clayton wrapped one hand around the back of Theo's neck and pulled him slowly, inexorably, downwards, until he could press his mouth to Theo's. Theo parted his lips immediately, opening to Clayton's insistent tongue, and barely stifled a moan as Clayton plunged inside, licking as deeply as he could. As they kissed, Theo started to flex his thigh, and Clayton had to pull away to cover his mouth with his hand. He spread his legs, urging Theo to keep going, and Theo did, rocking his body against Clayton's and lowering his head until he could press an open-mouthed kiss just under Clayton's ear.

Clayton removed his hand and replaced it with the stiff fabric of Theo's jacket. He bit down on the wool, feeling a little guilty about marring a really nice tux, but mostly overwhelmed with the forbidden, bad-decisions pleasure of it all. Theo's hands shifted from the door behind him to the curve of his ass, pulling Clayton firmly against him, and Clayton almost shouted aloud. He couldn't hear above the rough sound of his own breathing and the thundering of his heart. The room beyond them didn't exist.

Theo kissed his throat again, then the corner of his jaw, then bit down lightly, gauging Clayton's reaction. Clayton's reaction was to stiffen all over, like he'd been touched by a live wire, and almost come in his pants. He felt Theo huff a laugh, and that was all the warning he got before he was bitten again, more firmly.

He couldn't come, he couldn't! Not here, not now. He squeezed his eyes shut, struggling to stay in control.

The desperation subsided as Theo went still, and then Clayton realized he was listening to what was going on beyond the door. Jesus H., Clayton was a mess. This was the worst job he'd ever pulled.

The desk chair gave a squeak as the occupant of the study stood up, and Clayton could hear the sound of things, papers, being moved about on the desk. He pushed Theo away, his cock aching, his whole body thrumming with need. *Pull it together, Clay*, he told himself, wiping a hand over his face.

Clayton and Theo stood in silence for a minute, waiting, and then the outer door opened and shut.

Clayton launched himself from the closet, gasping lungfuls of fresh air that didn't smell like cologne and his own desperation. Theo was right behind him though, and Clayton's diamond was in his pocket. Clayton wheeled around to face him.

"We need to get out of here," he said.

Theo raised an eyebrow, visibly unimpressed. "You can do whatever you like," he said, "but yes, I'll probably be leaving shortly."

"You're not going anywhere," Clayton said, jabbing a finger into the middle of Theo's chest and suppressing a shudder at the way he smelled, especially from this distance. "Not with that, not without me."

Theo's other eyebrow went up. "Then let's get the hell out," he said. "If you're going to come with me, you're not going to slow me down." He pushed past Clayton and headed for the door, but at the last moment he caught Clayton's hand in his own and pulled him along. Clayton was stunned into silence, and for a moment he followed Theo down the hallway without protesting. As they reached the end, he came to his senses.

"Who are you?"

Theo snorted. "Can we have this conversation anywhere but in a house full of people who don't like their property redistributed?"

"If we leave out the back door," Clayton said, "we will be noticed."

"Obviously." Theo cocked his head towards the end of the hallway, where a narrow staircase led both down and up. "The best way to avoid detection is to get caught." He started down the stairs.

Clayton followed. His diamond wasn't getting more than ten feet from him if he could help it. Better if he could pick Theo's pocket and get away on his own.

The stairs led down to the floor of the party, which could be heard at the other end of the hall, in the ballroom. Theo paused at the bottom and poked his head around the doorway, and then crept out. Clayton hurried after him, looking both ways for witnesses.

Then he was being swept into Theo's embrace, pressed against the wall,

and soundly kissed. Theo's body covered his from knee to shoulder, and Clayton melted into it.

"There's someone," Theo said, between deep, thorough kisses, "at the end... of the hall..."

Clayton turned his head to look, and Theo dipped his mouth to Clayton's neck.

"It's a woman," Clayton reported, his voice shaking.

"Is she watching?"

"She wasn't," Clayton said, "but now she is."

"Good," Theo said, and captured his mouth again. Clayton slid his hands up the front of Theo's suit jacket, arching his hips forwards. Theo was hard; his cock pressed firmly into Clayton's belly.

The diamond dug into Clayton's thigh.

Clayton moaned, suddenly on high alert. Even with his eyes closed, he could pull this off. Theo's arms around his middle made it even easier. He wriggled again, pressing himself closer to Theo, and Theo's embrace tightened. Clayton kept as much of his attention on the kiss as he could, licking into Theo's mouth, even as he stroked his hands down Theo's arms and back, down over his ass, digging his fingers in. He squirmed some more, and the diamond shifted in Theo's pants pocket. He had to be stealthy; his pickpocket skills were a little rusty.

Moving slowly, deliberately, Clayton worked himself against Theo's body. It wasn't easy, keeping a cool head like this, with an impossibly sexy man kissing the brainpower out of him and grinding on him where anyone might see. When Theo broke the kiss, Clayton sighed gratefully and tipped his head back. Theo began to nip again at his throat. Now that Clayton wasn't sucking the breath out of Theo's hot, insistent mouth, he could focus. A little squirming, a little groping, and he had the diamond between his fingers.

Theo stopped abruptly, and Clayton panicked, letting the diamond go. It slithered on its chain back down into the recesses of Theo's pocket. *Fuck*. This *so* wasn't his forte!

Glancing at where their voyeur had been, Theo said, “She’s gone, let’s move,” and stepped away, practically dropping Clayton from his arms. Clayton stumbled, caught himself on the wall, and glared daggers at Theo’s back. He had an embarrassingly prominent erection again, blue balls that would make even the most celibate wince, and still no diamond. All of his very real, very urgent desires lay in Theo’s hands. Quite literally.

Theo started down the hall. Clayton hurried after him. Again. He felt like a puppy, and he was no god damned puppy. This was *his* score, and he was going to finish the job. Let Theo think he was the one in charge, and maybe he’d let his guard down again; this time, long enough for Clayton to lift the diamond off him.

He was giving his claim stub to the girl in the coat room. When Clayton sidled up beside him, he slipped his arm around Clayton’s shoulders and started to press little kisses to the tip of Clayton’s ear as Clayton handed over his own stub. Clayton could feel himself blushing all the way up to there, and when the girl came back with the two coats over her arm she stifled a smile, looked away, and said, “There you are, gentlemen. Have a pleasant evening.”

“Oh,” Theo said with a leer, “we will.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, flustered. Clayton shoved Theo away from the coatroom door.

“I wish I could say my limo was waiting outside,” Theo said, “but I’m afraid we’ll have to get a cab.”

Theo gave the driver an address without consulting Clayton, and then settled back into his seat, looking smug. Clayton refused to ask where they were going. Part one of the night’s mission had been accomplished, though it had been a colossal mess, and now all that remained was to get the prize from Theo, who wasn’t nearly as dangerous as a scorned debutante. In fact, Clayton reflected, his situation had improved significantly from being stuck in a closet half an hour earlier. They were practically home free.

He started to say something, but Theo cut him off with a quick shake of his head. Clayton bit his lip and read the taxi’s fare policy to pass the time. The

radio up front was playing a late night talk radio program and the whole cab smelled like curry. Beside him, Theo was vibrating with barely suppressed impatience, bouncing his knee rapidly and chewing on his thumbnail. Every red light seemed interminable.

Finally, Theo leaned forwards and said through the window, “Here on the corner is fine,” and the cab came to a stop. Clayton watched him pass a fifty dollar bill over the console, then he was being hurried out of the car and into the night air.

“This is your place?” Clayton asked, impressed. They were standing in front of a four-story townhouse with white steps and a huge bay window, lit from inside by a single floor lamp.

“No way,” Theo said, taking him by the hand. “My place is three blocks from here.”

Clayton let himself be pulled down the street. The diamond was barely a bulge in Theo’s front pocket. “You didn’t want him to take us right to your front door.”

“Bingo.” Theo grinned at him and squeezed his fingers. “Someone will notice our little prize has gone missing sooner or later, and at some point that driver will be tracked down and questioned.”

“Just three blocks, though?”

“It’s enough. Come on.”

The apartment Theo let them into was on the third floor of an even more impressive townhouse on the edge of the park. Clayton took a few steps into the middle of the living room and then turned in a slow circle, taking it in. There was a picture on the mantel of a young family; mom and dad and two kids, all smiling broadly on a beach.

“This isn’t your house,” Clayton said, when Theo had locked the door again. What was he getting into? *Who* was he getting into?

“I’m house sitting,” Theo said. “The Millers are in France. They go every year. They don’t notice a few extra charges on their cable bill.” He grinned,

shrugging off his tux jacket and draping it carefully over the back of an armchair. “I clean up after myself, do the laundry, restock the cupboards. It’s a win-win, okay?” His waistcoat joined the jacket on the chair.

Clayton stifled a grin. “Okay,” he said, sitting down on the cream-colored sofa that dominated the small living room, “here’s what we’re going to do.”

Theo obligingly took the diamond out of his pocket and laid it on the coffee table. In the light from the foyer, it glittered primly on the dark wood. The blue was as striking now as it had been in Theo’s hands an hour ago, and Clayton could have stared at it for days. That was the danger of being an aesthete living a life of crime—distraction by shiny things. The platinum chain it hung on was almost hair-thin, and Clayton marveled that it could hold the weight of the diamond. *Fantastic.*

“First,” Clayton said, picking it up to look more closely at it, “we’re going to figure out what the hell is going on. Second, we’re going to decide what to do with this damn thing, now that we have it.” He glanced up at Theo, who was watching him with dark eyes, his hands shoved back in his pockets. “Third, we’re going to have sex, because if I don’t get a repeat performance of what happened in that closet, I might actually die.”

Theo snorted and relaxed visibly, his hands coming out again to start undoing his bow tie. He left it draped around his neck and said, “Yeah, all right.”

Clayton put the diamond down and made short work of his own jacket and tie. “Okay,” he said. “Item one?”

“Camilla Hendricks,” Theo said, shaking his head. He started to undo the studs on his dress shirt. “That woman is a force of nature.”

“Commanding presence doesn’t really begin to cover it,” Clayton agreed. He pulled his shirttails out of his trousers.

“She told me I was being sourced for a bank job in Budapest.” Theo unbuckled his belt and pulled it out of his belt loops to lay it on top of his waistcoat.

“She told me I was going to be stealing blood diamonds from arms traders,” Clayton said, undoing his collar studs. “Who the hell *is* this woman?”

Theo was fuming, pacing back and forth across the floor in front of the gas fireplace. “She said this job was just to see if I could follow directions and think fast under pressure. *Me.*”

“What else have you done?” Clayton asked. It was rare that he got to compare notes with a compatriot. He sat forwards on the seat, linking his fingers together between his knees.

Theo regarded him for a moment with narrowed eyes, and then sighed and said, “What the hell,” as he sat down beside Clayton on the sofa. “I mostly do bank jobs, actually, which is why I thought it was ridiculous to have to audition for one. Camilla said it was a crazy tough one to get into, though, and the money sounded almost too good to be true.” He scrubbed a hand through his short hair. “I used to be part of a crew that was based in Boston, but we kind of... came to blows over a job that went south a few years back, and I’ve been flying solo ever since.”

Clayton had a vague recollection of a bank robbery in Cambridge that had been interrupted, resulting in one of the robbers being shot dead and the rest scattering in the wind like so many loose dollar bills. Nothing had ever come of the investigation, and although the conspiracy theorists on the forums Clayton followed had speculated for months afterwards, the general public had quickly lost interest.

Theo was staring at his hands. “Anyway,” he said. “What about you? Why’d she pick you?”

“Jewels are kind of my specialty,” Clayton said. “I work alone. I don’t usually do domestic grabs—not enough payoff for the risk. I don’t like putting people in danger.”

“Very noble,” Theo said, smirking.

“Shut up,” Clayton said, giving him a shove on the shoulder. “You never know who might be home. Now, jewelry stores, those are a different story. Once you’ve cracked one security system, you’ve cracked them all.”

Theo laughed, nodding in agreement. “So what was your best one?”

“Once, I walked out of a store in Chicago with twenty million dollars’ worth of stones in my pockets, and nobody noticed for two days, because—”

“It was a long weekend,” Theo interrupted. “Holy shit, I know who you are.”

Clayton froze. “Pardon?”

“You’re The Ghost, aren’t you?” Theo said. He put his hand on Clayton’s knee and gave him a little shake. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Clayton couldn’t. The newspapers had started calling him that back in 2004, when the news of his first big heist had hit the headlines. That was Chicago. Five years later, a job Clayton pulled at a bank in Paris had also been attributed to The Ghost. INTERPOL had put together a few clues and patterns and rightfully given him credit for yet another job, this time at a hotel in Zurich. But his real name had never been linked, and Clayton enjoyed all the fame without any of the misfortune.

He shrugged, but his insides were all twisted up. Working alone had its downsides, and one of them was never getting to tell anyone the whole story. But Theo *knew*. “I didn’t pick the name,” he said.

Theo let out a hoot of laughter. “You’re not even kidding me right now,” he said, slapping Clayton’s thigh. Then he bit his lip and that hand began to inch higher on Clayton’s leg. Clayton let his knees fall open, encouraging Theo’s progress. Theo’s expression got serious, his smile fading into a look of determination. He shifted his seat on the sofa and leaned in, and by the time his mouth met Clayton’s, he was bearing Clayton backwards onto the sofa arm and covering him with his body.

Without the separation of their jackets, the heat from Theo’s body bled through their shirts where they were pressed chest to chest. Clayton opened his mouth to Theo’s deep, slow kiss and wrapped his arms around Theo’s torso, running his hands eagerly up and down Theo’s broad back.

“I don’t want that stupid job,” Theo said, barely breaking the kiss to speak. “Whatever it was.”

Clayton had a sudden thought that was like a cold bucket of water thrown over his desire. “You think it was a trap?” he asked.

Theo half sat up, pushing himself onto his hands above Clayton. Their hips

were still locked together, and Clayton could feel the obvious press of Theo's erection against his pelvis. Theo didn't look embarrassed by it at all.

"Could there have been more of us?" Theo asked. "More people she had *audition*?"

"Fuck that job," Clayton agreed. "What are we going to do with the diamond? We kind of skipped item two on my agenda." He didn't regret it very much. He wiggled his hips and found a nice place on Theo's waist to rest his hands.

Theo grinned down at him. "You wanna split it?" he asked.

"It's a diamond, not a pile of cash," Clayton said.

"Not yet."

"We can't just sell it right away." Clayton sighed. "But you wouldn't know that, since you're a bank robber."

"Hey, fuck you," Theo said, jabbing Clayton in the side with one finger and making him yelp. "I'm an expert safe cracker, *and* I got us out of that house with my brilliant escape."

"You felt me up against a wall. *That* was your escape."

Theo's smile spread slow like honey across his face. "I'd do it again," he said, "even if it wasn't part of the plan."

Clayton's breath caught in his throat. He said, "Let's skip item two; we can come back to it in the morning."

They did manage to make it to the bedroom for item three, leaving a trail of tailored clothing behind them. Clayton was doing his best to climb Theo like a tree, and Theo was doing nothing to discourage him, even going so far as to lift him by the thighs and carry him the last few steps across the floor. Clayton locked his legs around Theo's hips, linking his heels behind Theo's thighs. Theo's hands on his ass were huge and strong, and his abdomen against Clayton's cock and balls was rock solid.

Clayton felt him hit the edge of the bed, and then he was being dumped unceremoniously onto the duvet. He bounced, letting out his breath on a huff,

and then Theo was crawling on top of him and kissing his way up the middle of Clayton's chest. Clayton slid his fingers into Theo's short hair and tipped his head back to give Theo room. Theo's mouth was hot and gentle against his skin, little nips of his teeth being soothed by the warm, wet swipe of his tongue. He found a spot on Clayton's throat that made Clayton moan aloud, and began to suck and bite harder, sending startled pleasure tingling across Clayton's skin. Clayton smoothed his hands up and down Theo's broad back, digging his fingernails in to hear Theo hiss.

Theo's cock was barely contained by his gray briefs, and if Clayton tilted his hips up he could rub their dicks together through the fabric of their underwear. Theo's already had a little damp spot on it where the head of his cock was outlined obscenely, making Clayton's mouth water so hard his jaw cramped. Theo was worrying the underside of his Adam's apple, and he tightened his hand in Theo's hair to drag him up for a kiss.

The kisses in the hallway, Clayton discovered, had been about as real as they got. Theo kissed with the same intensity as before, only now Clayton could moan into his mouth and get his lip bitten. Theo, propping himself on his right hand, ran his left up Clayton's side and chest, pinching at his nipples and rubbing appreciatively at his skin. Clayton squirmed, too hot, even down to his briefs. He pushed Theo away just long enough to squirm out of them, and then he was laid out under Theo, totally exposed, staring him in the eye, daring him to go on.

Theo rose up on his knees, towering over Clayton, and pushed his own underwear off his hips and down his legs to get kicked off the side of the bed. His dick was thick and long and jutting out from his body, and Clayton wrapped a hand around it in awe. It was a dark, dusky rose color, its plump, exposed head wet and gleaming, and when Clayton gave it a squeeze Theo moaned and spread his thighs apart. His balls were heavy, hanging down between his legs; Clayton rolled them in the palm of his hand and Theo grunted, his cock jerking and blurting another fat drop of pre-come.

"C'mere," Clayton said, pulling on the back of Theo's thigh. Theo shifted up the bed until he had his knees in the crooks of Clayton's underarms, bracing himself on the bed beyond. Clayton lifted his head, licking his lips,

and slid his tongue around the tip of Theo's dick. The thick, salty flavor filled his mouth, and he groaned despite himself, eager for more. He tipped his head back and found Theo looking down at him, mouth half-open and eyes soft with desire. Clayton winked.

"Fuck," Theo said. "You just—Jesus, get on with it." His voice was rough.

Clayton wriggled a little lower on the bed and angled Theo's cock towards his face, opening his mouth again. He could get the head and half of the thick shaft into his mouth before he had to stop, the ache in his neck pinching tight. He dropped back with a moan and pushed and pulled at Theo's hips until Theo was kneeling directly over his head, his balls brushing Clayton's chin. The view from that angle made Clayton's stomach tighten with desire; looking up at the underside of Theo's dick, up the ridged plane of his abdomen to the bulging muscles of his chest, and then at the expression of sheer want on Theo's face as he watched Clayton run his tongue up and down the length of his cock. Theo was having trouble figuring out where to put his hands, so Clayton guided one to the top of his head and the other behind Theo to Clayton's own straining erection.

The first touch of Theo's fingers made Clayton shiver, and then he was cramming as much of Theo's dick into his mouth as he could as Theo petted and stroked him, rubbing his thumb over Clayton's sensitive head. The angle was awkward—Theo's shoulders were twisted around in order for him to reach, but he didn't seem to be complaining. Clayton spread his legs and dug his heels into the mattress, trying to thrust into Theo's loose grip even as he bobbed his head up and down, slicking the shaft of Theo's cock with his spit. Theo was leaking like crazy, making the slide easier, and soon he was rocking into the wet of Clayton's mouth, his cock head bumping against the back of Clayton's throat.

Clayton didn't have any lube on him, so he wrenched himself off Theo's dick for a second to stick his fingers in his mouth and get them as wet as he could. Then he went back to mouthing at the underside of Theo's cock as he slid those fingers behind Theo's balls to the tight pucker of his asshole.

Theo groaned and pushed back into the touch, his grip on Clayton's hair

tightening. Clayton pressed firmly against the resistance and his middle finger sank in to the second knuckle.

“Fuck, yes,” Theo said above him. He let go of Clayton’s cock, much to Clayton’s chagrin, but then he was falling forward on his hands to give Clayton room to finger him. His dick hung fat and heavy in front of Clayton’s face, the perfect height to lick and suck at the head, and he spread his thighs wide to give Clayton room for his hand.

He was tight and hot as a furnace inside, and Clayton pressed a finger deeper to find his sweet spot. Theo jerked and swore when Clayton touched it, rubbing the pad of his finger over the tender little bump, Theo’s cock twitching and smearing pre-come across Clayton’s lips. Clayton caught his cock again in his mouth and ran his tongue around the head as he eased a second finger into Theo’s body alongside the first.

“If you keep that up,” Theo warned, breathless, as Clayton worked his fingers shallowly in and out and took Theo’s dick deeper, “I’m gonna blow.”

“Mm,” Clayton said, not stopping. He knew the feeling. All that dancing around one another, all that groping and kissing and teasing, and he was about ready to come apart himself. But if he could make Theo come, then maybe he’d be able to take a good pounding without it being over too soon. He could feel the tremors in Theo’s thighs and hear the way that Theo’s breathing was getting ragged. Theo’s dick was dripping, stiffening in Clayton’s mouth, and his body was clamping down on Clayton’s fingers.

“Fuck,” Theo said, more urgently, “you’re gonna make me come!”

Clayton pulled away long enough to say, “Do it,” and wrapped his free hand around the base of Theo’s cock. He stroked it firmly, like he could squeeze the come right out into his mouth, and rubbed at Theo’s prostate, urging him on. Theo’s hips started to rock, pushing down into Clayton’s mouth. He was moaning through his teeth, as if he couldn’t help himself.

Clayton closed his eyes and got lost in the rhythm, the urgent thrust of Theo’s hips echoed in his heartbeat. He felt Theo start to shake, his cock swelling impossibly, and then Theo was groaning aloud, swearing and shuddering as he spurted, hot and thick, so much it overflowed past Clayton’s

lips, dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. Clayton held his breath and pressed harder on that spot inside Theo's body, eliciting another jerk and pulse of come.

Theo sagged, going down on his elbows even as he lifted his hips away from Clayton's face. Clayton kept his fingers pushed deep as Theo rolled to the side, and then he was sitting up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, and kneeling up between Theo's legs.

"Condom," he said, snapping Theo out of his post-orgasmic lethargy. "I'm gonna fuck you blind."

Theo scrambled just behind his head for the drawer beside the bed and then had a condom and a bottle of lube between his fingers. Clayton took the packet and tore it open with his teeth, groaning with relief as he rolled it down over his dick. Then Theo's hand, slick with a veritable puddle of lube, was squeezing tight around him, working his cock until it was so slippery it was dripping.

"Come on," Theo said, spreading his knees and pulling Clayton close by the backs of his knees, "come on, fuck me. I need it."

Clayton moaned, all his ignored desire welling up and pooling in his gut. He pushed Theo's knee to his chest and lined himself up with the fingers that had just been inside Theo's ass. Theo tossed his head back, exposing the long line of his throat, and Clayton pressed inwards, rigid cock spearing deep into Theo's body.

He bottomed out and paused, panting, trying to get his bearings. Theo reached up and pulled him bodily down for a kiss, rocking his hips up to take Clayton half a millimeter deeper, enough to make Clayton cry out. Theo ate at his mouth, scrunching his hands in Clayton's hair, and then jerked his hips and said, "*Fuck me*," with such imperative force that Clayton couldn't do anything but obey. He began to move, bracing himself on either side of Theo's ribs, and shuddered at the pleasure that roared through him.

Theo's body welcomed him, squeezing tight and eager for his dick. Theo grunted as Clayton fucked him, breath punched out of him on every thrust, and against his belly his cock hadn't ever gone fully soft. He was fattening up

again already; Clayton's dick must have been rubbing him just right inside, because he slipped a hand between them and swore under his breath.

"Wow, okay," Theo said, looking up into Clayton's face. His eyes were still dark with want and his face was flushed.

"Can you come again?" Clayton panted.

"It's been known to happen."

"Jesus," Clayton said, his breath sticking in his throat, "what do I need to do?" He *had* to see that.

"Slow down a bit," Theo said, and Clayton did, slowing the push and pull of his hips to an almost gut-wrenching crawl. Theo squirmed, jerking himself gently, and Clayton took the opportunity to lean down to kiss him again. He imagined he could taste gin on Theo's tongue, even though it had been hours since they were on the balcony at the party when he'd first tasted it on Theo's lips. Theo moaned deeply, his hand working his dick a little faster.

The lube was laying open at Theo's elbow, and Clayton broke the kiss to fill his palm with it. He sat back and replaced Theo's hand with his own and began to stroke him in time with the slow, upward thrust of his hips. Theo moaned and stretched his arms over his head, grabbing for a hold on the side of the bed. The muscles in his arms bulged and Clayton reached out to squeeze one. Theo grinned at him, looking genuinely delighted at their current situation.

"Little faster," he murmured, arching his back and pushing his hips against Clayton's pelvis. Clayton picked up the pace, his thighs burning, holding onto Theo's triceps and his dick. Theo was breathing heavily, squirming on Clayton's cock, and he closed his eyes, his face creased with pleasure.

"What if you turn over?" Clayton asked, coming to a reluctant halt and pulling halfway out.

"Yes," Theo said, scrambling to do that. Clayton sat back on his heels, his cock throbbing between his thighs. Theo got up on his hands and knees and pushed his ass back at Clayton. His hole was wet and pink, well stretched, and Clayton had the urge to lick it.

So he did, just for a moment, working his tongue in where his cock had been. Theo muffled his shout into the duvet and Clayton released him with a laugh. Then he was sliding easily back into Theo's ass and Theo was pushing back against him.

"Fuck, yeah, this'll do it," Theo said, even before Clayton had started to thrust. On the first push of Clayton's hips he moaned loudly and groped beneath himself for his cock. Clayton pushed his hand out of the way again and took over, fucking Theo into the grip of his hand. Theo went crazy, squirming and groaning and writhing so hard he interrupted Clayton's rhythm, so Clayton smacked him on the ass, nice and hard.

Theo made a noise like he was biting the duvet. Clayton smacked him again.

"You better be close," Theo said, turning his cheek to the blankets and glaring over his shoulder at Clayton. Clayton nodded, not trusting his voice. "Tell me your name," Theo panted.

"Huh?"

"I can't keep calling you Jeff in my head, it's fucking ridiculous."

Clayton paused, grinding deep, and pondered the request for half a second before he said, "It's Clayton."

"*Clayton*," Theo said, half-laughing, half on a moan. "Jesus, fuck me."

Clayton wanted to ask the same thing, but he was getting too wound up. He tightened his grip on Theo's dick and started moving again, hard and fast.

"Clayton," Theo said again, and it snagged something deep in Clayton's gut, shoving him towards his orgasm. "Come on, Clayton, give it to me."

"Fuck," Clayton said, the heat in his body turning liquid, the pleasure rising. "Oh, fuck!"

Theo said, "Oh, god, I'm coming," and did, with a powerful shudder that made Clayton gasp.

He held on for the ride as Theo's hips jerked, fucking Clayton's fist, and was drawn inexorably over the edge with him. It was as if Clayton's whole

body had been lit up from the inside, a hot, pulsing glow that went on and on until he was panting helplessly against the back of Theo's neck, utterly drained.

Theo lifted his head and Clayton pulled away, drawing his hands down the sweat-damp length of Theo's back. Theo smiled at him over his shoulder, his eyes a little hazy, his lips bitten red. Clayton swallowed hard and fumbled to grip the base of the condom.

When it had been wrapped up in a tissue and discarded, and Theo had half-heartedly mopped at the wet spot on the duvet, Clayton lay back and covered his face with his hands. He'd never been so careless, telling someone his real name in the middle of sex. Even if it was really *good* sex. Fucking seriously.

Beside him, Theo said, "Theo is my real name."

Clayton took his hands away. "Seriously?"

"Edgeworth's not real," Theo said, "I made that up." He was lying on his back beside Clayton, staring at the ceiling. When he sensed that Clayton was looking at him, he turned his head. "Quid pro quo. You should stay here tonight."

Caught off guard once again, Clayton just blinked at him. Theo grinned.

"Come on, you know you want to."

"For safety's sake, we should really split up," Clayton said.

"You are so full of shit." Theo rolled over and slung his arm across Clayton's hips. "You're not going anywhere, and you're not taking the diamond with you, jewel thief." He snuggled down against Clayton's side, his chin on Clayton's shoulder.

"We're going to have a long talk in the morning," Clayton said.

Theo's grin went crooked, genuine. "Fine," he said. "I look forward to it."

Clayton woke up to the sunlight coming through the window, its soft, honey-gold light spilling across the hardwood floors and pooling on the navy duvet. Clayton could see the tops of the trees beyond the sheer curtains,

swaying gently in the morning breeze. The sky above was a pristine, empty blue. Beneath him, the bed was soft and warm, cradling him in pillows. It was also empty of any other occupants.

“Fuck!” he yelled, leaping out of bed and running for the living room. His diamond had been right there on the coffee table, and Theo had *tricked* him—Theo must have drugged him, to have gotten away without waking him up—Theo—

—was in the kitchen in a clean pair of briefs, standing over a frying pan with a mug halfway to his mouth, staring at Clayton.

“You okay, there, cowboy?”

“Jesus,” Clayton said, pressing a hand to his jackhammering heart.

Theo took a sip from the mug and grinned. “You thought I’d *left*,” he teased. “Come on man, after all that? You think I’m the type to love ’em and leave ’em?” He looked even better in the morning light, his bronzed skin warmed by the sun and his sleep-tousled hair just spiky enough to be charming rather than ridiculous. The muscles in his arms and body reminded Clayton of just how eager Theo was to be pinned down and fucked.

“I don’t know what type you are,” Clayton said, very aware of how naked he was. The diamond was sitting on the countertop. “What’s that doing there?”

“Sparkling,” Theo said. “Looks nice, huh? Oh, do you eat meat? I didn’t ask.” At Clayton’s baffled expression, he said, “Bacon,” and pointed to the frying pan.

Clayton was out of his depth with this guy. “Uh, yeah, I eat meat.” *Fuck it.* “Is there more coffee?”

Theo beamed from ear to ear and pulled a mug down from the cabinet. He poured a cup, sneaking glances at Clayton out of the corner of his eye, and handed it over. The rich, warm aroma filled Clayton’s nose and he took a slow, grateful sip. He felt Theo take a step closer to him and he opened one eye to glare at him over the top of the cup.

“Normally I’d suggest clothing before breakfast,” Theo said, reaching out to skim his hand down Clayton’s side, fingers just brushing the curve of his ass, “but I’m pretty into this look for you.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Clayton said, taking another sip. He didn’t step away, though, and he turned into Theo’s next caress that skated up the length of his spine, facing the window with Theo behind him. Theo inched closer until he was pressing his body against Clayton’s, his arms wrapped around Clayton’s middle. The street below had a few morning joggers, a dog walker, and some light car traffic zipping past. Clayton knew that they *probably* couldn’t see him, but the thrill that went through him at the thought made him shiver all the same.

Theo brushed a kiss to the curve of Clayton’s neck and nosed at the tender skin behind his ear. “So, how long do we have to wait to make good on this diamond we’ve got?”

“Nine months to a year,” Clayton said. “It’s a one-of-a-kind piece, Sylvia Docker’s not going to let it go without a fight, an investigation, a big to-do. Even if she does hate the public eye.”

“We can’t even sell it to a fence for a year?” Theo huffed his disappointment into Clayton’s hair. He was tall enough that his mouth was against the back of Clayton’s skull and he could see over the top of Clayton’s head. “Get a cash advance, let someone else sit on it for a while and take off with the spoils?”

“This is why I don’t have a partner,” Clayton said.

Theo gave him a squeeze. “Come on, you’d love a partner. Having someone to rely on during a job, count on to have your back—it changes things.”

Clayton shrugged his way out of the embrace. “I’m going to put something on,” he said. He left Theo standing in the kitchen and headed for the bedroom, where last night’s clothes waited crumpled on the floor.

“Shit,” Clayton muttered to himself, bundling his clothes up in his arms. They would need to be cleaned and pressed, and morning-after dishabille wasn’t a look he really wanted to present, but it was all he had. He pulled on his briefs, trousers, and undershirt, and let his shirt hang open in the front.

The bacon was done by the time he got back to the kitchen, and Theo was cooking eggs in the grease. There was toast sticking out of the toaster and

plates laid out on the table. Clayton's chest felt too tight. His own New York apartment was nothing to scoff at— a penthouse on the Upper West Side, thank you very much— but it had none of this: the gorgeous man in the kitchen, the dishes in the sink, the bedsheets rumpled by two bodies. Clayton never stayed there more than a few weeks, always eager to move on to somewhere exotic, expensive, enviable. He had a one-bedroom in Paris he liked, and a villa in Cairo that had a frankly outrageous view of the Nile, and a few other places scattered around the globe. But, like the penthouse, they weren't quite right.

Shit, Clayton thought.

Theo was humming to himself as he scrambled the eggs in the pan, and Clayton put his head in his hands to wait it out. Better not to look. Having a partner was beyond him, it just wasn't the way he operated.

“Well,” Theo said, a few minutes later, bringing the pan over to the table and filling a plate. “If we can't give it back, and we can't get rid of it, we're going to have to hang onto it.” He went back for Clayton's abandoned coffee cup and the diamond.

“I can talk to a few people soon,” Clayton said, “maybe get the ball rolling, but if it's in the news, we're fucked for at least three months. No one's going to want to touch it.”

Theo sat down across from him, put the diamond in the middle, and pushed the plate of eggs in his direction. “Eat,” he said.

Clayton took a helping, and then accepted the pieces of toast and strips of bacon as well. It smelled amazing—hot and fresh and wholesome. Clayton took one bite and then he was trying to shovel it into his mouth as quickly as possible. The eggs were warm and salty, the bacon was crispy and just a little greasy, and the toast was perfectly golden. The coffee was hot, enough to make him blow on the surface before his first sip, but it filled his mouth with a rich, slightly bittersweet taste that made him close his eyes in appreciation.

Clayton decided then and there that he ate at restaurants too often. No brunch could ever compare to this moment. He was going to have to learn how to cook.

Or, something inside him said, he was going to have to have Theo to cook for him every morning. Clayton glanced across the table to find Theo watching him eat, a smile on his face. When Theo saw him looking, he blushed and grinned.

“Look,” Clayton said, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “I’ve never had a partner before. I don’t know what I’d do with one. I’ve always worked alone.”

Theo jabbed a finger in his direction. “There is no way you managed Monaco alone.” Clayton shrugged. “Seriously?”

“I plan ahead.”

“Jesus. Not even a driver, or anything?”

“I don’t take more than I can carry,” Clayton said. “It keeps things simple.”

Theo made a face, but then he said, “Things aren’t so simple now.”

“No,” Clayton agreed. “I might have to change my ways for a little while to account for this mess.” He looked around the apartment, and then at the diamond sitting on the table, bouncing little light beams all over the room. A few of them scattered across Theo’s bare chest. Clayton cleared his throat. “You know what city’s really gorgeous this time of year?” he asked.

Theo looked at him with barely concealed hope in his eyes. “Tell me,” he said.

“Cairo,” Clayton said, reaching across the table to brush his fingers over the back of Theo’s hand. “You should come with me to Cairo. They have a real appreciation for diamonds there. I think you’d like it.”

THE END

Author Bio

Elinor is a writer from Baltimore, Maryland. She came to romance writing through fandom, and will always be glad for the training she received there, as well as the more formal education that was the result of a Creative Writing minor. Elinor writes primarily short, contemporary gay romance, but is working on expanding her repertoire to longer stories and more exciting genres. She moonlights as a professional knitter and office administrator to support her writing habit.

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HARD AND FAST

By Jack Greene

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: The inside of a man's thighs bracket the view of a short-haired man with a perfectly sculpted body standing knee-deep in a tub. Strategically placed bubbles hide his groin and decorate his thighs. He holds a gun in a two-handed grip, pointing it straight at the viewer.

Photo 2: A naked man faces away from the viewer, silhouetted against a black background, displaying a muscled back, perfect ass and powerful thighs. His right arm is encased in a reinforced, elbow-length leather glove, he wears a fingerless leather glove on his left. He holds a large assault rifle across his shoulders and wears goggles of some kind as well. A belt crosses his waist in the back, supporting a thigh holster with a handgun.

Story Letter

"What the fuck are you doing in here!? You have ten seconds before I shoot your goddamn balls to Kingdom come."

"Awww, come on now, love. Do you really want to do that?"

"You bet your mangy ass I do. This is a private bath. How the hell did you get in here?"

"Bitter much? You know me; I like to get into a lot of things. Don't you remember the first time we met?"

"I'll never forget that incredible night after that Tango class."

"FUCK YOU!"

"Oh yeah, you let me do that too. Your ass was so red with my hand prints and you begging for more over at the club. I.n.c.r.e.d.i.b.l.e. and sweeeet."

Gunfire.

Dear Author,

See this guy? Yeah, that fucker. [Photo 2]

He's the cause of my injury and why I was taken off duty, indefinitely. I'm just now getting all of my memory back. I first laid eyes on him at the dance hall. I had been taking tango lessons for a few months when he sauntered into the hall and turned every head in the joint. So suave, and not one damn hair out of place. His suit fit him like he was poured into it. I mean, look at him! I got hard just looking at him. He knew all the moves and danced with a couple of the ladies who jockeyed for position to be next in line. I wanted to be in that line. Shit! He's looking right at me with a smirk on his face. Well god damn. - By the end of the class we were holed up in the Men's room up against the tiles. Hot as fuck it was, and I wanted ALL of it.

He invited me over to RockUHard, the new BDSM club that recently opened. Jesus, I couldn't pass that up. I really needed to get my kink on after an up-close-and-personal look at those bathroom tiles. Think he meets all the requirements? He's the epitome of a Top, dammit. What, I don't look like a bottom to you? Good, let's keep it that way. We played and fucked into the wee hours of the morning at the club. We both need to get to work the next day. I was needed at the Agency for the next assignment, and he was starting a new job. A one-off, that was cool with the both of us.

As Fate would have it (that Bitch), that first encounter was to lead to many more. Who the fuck knew that his 'new job' was the same place where I WORKED? Why in Hell did the Boss put us on the same assignment? And how did that twink worm his ass into the equation? How and why did I screw up that last mission to be off the grid indefinitely? And why the fuck am I still jonesin' on this fucker? God help me.

ETA See that martini there? Can you just hear Frank Sinatra crooning in the background with "Just The Way You Look Tonight", "Summer Wind", "Fly Me To The Moon"? He's really jonesin' on that Fucker.

Sincerely,

D

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: action/suspense/adventure, spies/secret agents, BDSM, assassins, first person

Word count: 7,565

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HARD AND FAST

By Jack Greene

See that guy in the tub, his naughty bits strategically covered with bubbles, pointing a gun? That's me. The guy in the other photo, with his perfect hard body and bubble butt? That's the fucker I'm about to shoot. And this is our story.

“What the fuck are you doing in here!? You have ten seconds before I shoot your goddamn balls to kingdom come.”

“Awww, come on now, love. Do you really want to do that?”

“You bet your mangy ass I do. This is a private bath. How the hell did you get in here?”

“Bitter much? You know me; I like to get into a lot of things. Don't you remember the first time we met? I'll never forget that incredible night after that Tango class.”

“FUCK YOU!”

“Oh yeah, you let me do that too. Your ass was so red with my handprints and you were begging for more over at the club. *I.n.c.r.e.d.i.b.l.e* and *sweeeet*.”

Gunfire.

And that's how I met the fucker.

Well, not exactly. That's how we met professionally, though I'm pretty sure us both being naked doesn't count as professional. We met at a tango class—well we did more than meet. Best damn sex of my life.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The fucker—his name is Nicholas Stevens, if you must know, though I prefer to call him “the fucker”—was the hottest thing I'd seen in a long time. He strolled into that tango class like he owned the joint, poured into an Armani suit that clung to every luscious inch of him. You could smell the hormones as

all the ladies in the place took notice—and half the men; I think it was just envy, though you never know. He had dark brown hair and ice blue eyes and the body of a Greek god, though I had to find that out later.

See, ahead of myself again. My name's Paul Brock, by the way. Nice to meet you.

The fucker was sex on legs and he damn well knew it. Then he started talking and you could hear the panties hitting the floor. He's British, with a perfect clipped accent—not too posh, not too common, you'd be amazed how many types of British accents there are—and damn if it didn't make him even hotter.

We switch partners around in dance class, and if the fucker had had a dance card it would have been full. The ladies were all over him, waiting their turn.

That was the other thing—he needed dance lessons like he needed a third nipple. The fucker knew all the moves, danced like a pro, smooth and oh so flexible. What he was doing there was a mystery, though I wasn't complaining. I was just enjoying the eye candy. Unfortunately, the place wasn't progressive enough for me to dance with him—who would lead, after all?—so I just got to watch.

I was taking a break, sipping at some brown sludge they laughingly call coffee when our eyes met across the room. Now you hear about that shit in stories, an electric connection in a glance, and I thought it was bullshit—until I locked eyes with this fucker. A bolt of lust went from my brain right to my crotch as he smirked at me. I'd been caught staring, admiring that gorgeous bubble butt of his and he was on to me. That smirk told me all I needed to know—he knew I was watching, knew I wanted him, knew he could have me. Boy, could he.

Until that moment I hadn't been sure about him—did he bat for my team? I was pretty sure, something about the way he moved, but I wouldn't have put money on it. Now, though, after that look, I would have bet my vintage E-Type that I'd have his cock down my throat soon.

I wasn't wrong.

After that sizzling eye contact, I had to hit the men's room to adjust my package. I walked into a stall and before I had a chance to shut the door, I heard the outside door slam open against the tiles. I knew without looking that it was him. I didn't look, though, just lowered my zipper and he appeared like magic.

Framed in the open door of the bathroom stall, up close he was a walking wet dream. I'd been at half-mast but now my cock stood up and saluted. He knew it, too, knew I was his for the taking, and in short order he had me up against the tiles.

Not a word was necessary as he tried to climb down my throat. He kissed like a force of nature, and his hands mapped my body. Now I don't look like a bottom, hell I don't even look gay unless I try, apparently, but this fucker could read me like a book. He pulled back from the kiss, whipped me around and slammed me face first into the cold green ceramic. I knew it was coming so I didn't get my nose broken, but he was anything but gentle as he ground his hard-on against my ass.

Now I'm a big guy and I spend serious time in the gym. Got to, in my line of work. But this fucker was *built*. Like the proverbial shithouse. He held me tight against that wall, rubbing against me, grunting in my ear. Not that I wanted to be anywhere else—I sure as hell wasn't struggling. His hand snuck around, shoving down the front of my trousers. He gripped me, and I thrust against his hand, and I should have been embarrassed but I knew I could come in minutes from this.

Which was when he stepped back.

I spun around, cursing in every language I knew. He just stood there, grinning at me, like he didn't have a hard-on just as steely as mine. And with still not a hair out of place. Fuck.

Then he stepped close, reached around and squeezed my ass with his big hand and laughed as he whispered in my ear, "See you after."

Then he turned and was gone, leaving me with an aching cock. All I knew was he damn well better be as good as he looked.

I was wrong. He was better.

Secured firmly to the X-cross, there was nothing I could do but wait for what the fucker wanted to give me. He'd tied me with my back to the cross, so I knew he wasn't going to whip me, not that I would have minded one bit. He looked in his element here in the BDSM club—charmingly named RockUHard—and the way he handled himself told me he knew exactly what he was doing. He'd asked for my safeword and hard limits and then ordered me to strip.

When I'd undressed a little too slowly, testing him, he backhanded me just hard enough to make my cock twitch. Oh yeah. This was gonna be good. I could feel his gaze on me, and by the time I was naked I was fully hard, my cock pointing straight at him like it knew what it wanted.

Now I was helpless, watching him watch me, and fuck it was hot. It had been a while since I'd played this kind of game, and if I'd had any idea he was taking me to a kink club I would have hauled him out of that damn dance studio immediately. As it was, the class had dragged on forever, and every time I so much as looked his direction I got hard again. Eventually I gave up and had a seat on the sidelines.

I focused as he approached, looking me over like the piece of meat I was right then. I tugged at my restraints, just to feel them, so I didn't notice what he was doing until I felt the sting of the crop against my bare thighs.

“Pay attention to me,” he warned, giving me another good smack, this time closer to my balls. I gasped involuntarily, though it didn't really hurt that much yet—high pain tolerance, a damn good thing in my line of work. “I'm your entire world right now.”

He was right, and I wanted it bad. Wanted him to own me, tease me, hurt me and fuck me. Not necessarily in that order.

He started with the crop, crisscrossing my thighs expertly, never giving me too much in one place. Then he moved to my stomach, making my abs flutter with every perfectly placed blow. Then I guess he got bored of the crop, and I moaned out loud when he came back with a wicked looking black leather flogger.

He worked me over with that flogger until I was coming apart. My cock was practically dripping and I was covered in sweat, biting back the begging I knew he wanted. Through it all he looked calm and cool, like he was at a business meeting instead of making me ache for his cock. My only consolation was that I could see his cock straining at the front of his trousers.

“Please,” I finally choked out, and he grinned.

“Please what?”

I didn’t answer, and he laughed. “You don’t want it that bad. Yet.”

Unstrapping me from the X, he dragged me to the spanking bench. He made me kneel while he adjusted it and then ordered me to get on. The cool vinyl soothed my reddened skin, but I knew it would be chafing soon. Though I was hoping I wouldn’t notice by then.

“I don’t need to tell you to hold still.” Unlike the X, I wasn’t strapped to this, just expected to hold on and take it.

He made me wait, and this time I couldn’t see him, my ass up in the air, presented for his pleasure. My cock bobbed free, aching for some stimulation, but there was nothing to rub against. It was torture, and it was perfect.

When the first blow came, though, I wasn’t ready. I rocked forward, tightening my hands on the frame. Damn, but he could hit hard! A small grunt left my lips as he did it again. He got into a rhythm, and I got into the zone. I can’t help it; spanking is one of my favorite things, and it gets me worked up like nothing else. His hands on my ass, so close to where I wanted his cock; spanking is incredibly intimate. My ass throbbed with each blow, but I ached even more inside. I wanted him deep in my ass and I wanted it now.

Finally I could stand it no more. Not the pain, the need to be fucked. “Please,” I ground out, panting.

He didn't even bother to stop, the fucker. He knew how bad I wanted it—no one could miss my stiff cock bouncing around—but he took his damn time.

“You want something?” he asked finally, between thwacks.

“Yeah. Fuck me. Please. Sir.” Speaking wasn't easy but I knew what he wanted to hear.

“Do you think you've earned it?” His voice dripped sex, his precise accent biting off each word.

“Yes sir,” I dared to say. It might have been the wrong thing to say but my brain was switched off.

It earned me another sharp slap and a low chuckle. “We'll see.” He walked in front of me, unbuttoning his crisp white dress shirt. He let me watch him strip, which was a torture in and of itself. He was built just how I'd guessed from the way he filled out his suit. Like a fucking god. I swear the man had a twelve-pack.

Wide shoulders, narrow hips, perfect obliques, massive thighs. The only words going through my head were “perfect” and “fuck me”.

When he got naked, I could see his cock was as gorgeous as the rest of him. Uncut, long, and thick, it hung heavy and hard right in front of my eyes. My mouth watered. He saw where I was looking and smirked. Yeah, the fucker has a beautiful cock and he knows it.

He walked forward, until his cock waved an inch or two in front of my mouth. “Suck me and make it good, or you don't get to come.”

I didn't need to be told twice. I reached out and wrapped my hand around his stiff length, urging him closer so I could suck him in.

I used every trick I knew and even made up some new ones, I was so motivated to please this man. He'd worked me over good and now I wanted a hard fuck to top it all off. I'm a greedy bottom, what can I say?

Of course, he had to be the strong silent type, and I had to work for every grunt and moan. Just when my jaw was beginning to ache, he pulled out of my mouth and grabbed a condom. I tried not to look too eager but I was on all

fours on a spanking bench with my cock dripping precome. I was the poster child for eager.

Luckily he didn't waste time; he moved behind me and I barely had time to brace myself before he slammed balls deep into me. An inhuman yowl came from my throat and tears burned in my eyes as I struggled to keep breathing. I love a rough entry as much as the next sub, but this was ridiculous. He didn't give me any time to adjust, either, but started pumping in and out immediately. I was just his fucktoy, a body to be used. So of course I loved it.

The fucker was strong, and he used every bit of his strength to abuse my ass. I held on for dear life as he pounded me. Pain and pleasure mixed so that even I couldn't tell the difference. I don't know how I kept from coming except that I knew I'd displease him if I did.

My whole world narrowed to his cock and my ass, and when he finally grabbed my erection, stroked it and growled, "Come," I almost had forgotten where I was. My body didn't care, though, and I came so hard I saw stars. He grunted and stopped thrusting, deep inside me, and I knew he'd found his finish as well.

My legs were jelly as he helped me off the bench. I couldn't remember how I got to the bed, or even that we'd moved to another room, but after we caught our breath we jumped right into the next round.

He fucked me like no one had ever fucked me before. By the time I staggered out of there just before dawn, I felt like a wrung-out dishrag, drained of every drop of come, and I couldn't have been happier.

"I'd buy you breakfast but I'm starting a new job today, can't be late—"

I waved my hand. "It's cool, I gotta get to the office too." I hobbled to my car, and he walked the other way, and I thought I'd never see him again. Sure, it would have been nice to get fucked like that again, but maybe we'd run into each other again sometime. That was the way things went in my world. No names, no commitments. A one-off, but oh what a one-off. I'd be good for a while, and I could focus on my next assignment.

Did I mention I'm an assassin? No, probably not, doesn't tend to come up in casual conversation. And yes, we most certainly do exist outside of movies. I kill people for a living, but sometimes I spy on them a little first. They're usually not very nice guys. And it's most always for a pretty good reason, to stop a war from starting. I don't ask why.

I don't work for the government. Politicians like to keep their hands clean, and even the CIA is accountable to the President. I work for a private agency, charmingly called the Agency, and governments contract out their dirty work to us. That way if things go south, they can claim plausible deniability.

I'd had a few days off between assignments, and I like to learn new things that might come in handy, thus the dance classes. You never know when you might need to fit into a black tie event.

So a few days later, I'm on my next assignment. As assignments go, it was a cushy one—my target was a member of one of those private clubs, you know the ones where you pay lots of money and they provide the entertainment? Entertainment that's perhaps not strictly legal?

Which is why I was sitting in a bubbling Jacuzzi, sipping at a perfect martini—stirred or shaken, you can't tell the fucking difference—casing the joint. I was a little annoyed—I always work alone, but this time my boss had told me I would have a partner, nonnegotiable. I argued, of course, but if I wanted the assignment I'd have to work with someone. This elusive someone hadn't shown his—or her, we're equal opportunity—face and I was getting impatient. Because of the nature of the assignment nothing could be planned ahead of time. I had the target's name and picture and nothing else. In this club, on a small island off the Turks and Caicos, we were essentially on our own. I didn't know my partner's name, but he or she knew what I looked like. Nothing more.

That was when *he* walked in.

Wrapped in a towel that barely covered him and bulged dangerously, looking like a fucking wet dream, was Mr. One-off. I jumped to my feet, gun pointed straight at him, and all he could do was smirk.

“What the fuck are you doing in here!? You have ten seconds before I shoot your goddamn balls to Kingdom come.”

“Awww, come on now, love. Do you really want to do that?” He was unarmed, but didn’t look worried in the least.

“You bet your mangy ass I do. This is a private bath. How the hell did you get in here?”

“Bitter much? You know me; I like to get into a lot of things. Don’t you remember the first time we met? I’ll never forget that incredible night after tango class.”

“FUCK YOU!” He definitely had me rattled. If anyone walked in now, my cover was blown.

“Oh yeah, you let me do that too. Your ass was so red with my handprints and you were begging for more over at the club. Incredible and *sweeeet*.”

Gunfire.

The sounds came from the corridor, near as I could tell, and I could tell from the look on his face he wasn’t expecting it any more than I was.

“Semi-automatic, sounds like a Walther P99, haven’t seen one of those in ages.”

I snapped my head around to look at him. “How do you—” It was then I noticed he did have a gun, a Walther PPK just like my own. His looked bigger, though. Where he’d had it hidden was beyond me.

He edged toward the door and I stepped out of the tub. He glanced over his shoulder and said, “I guess I should introduce myself. I’m your new partner. Nicholas Stevens. Though you can call me Nic, considering.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “You fucker! Did you know who I was?”

His smirk turned evil. “You mean when I fucked your brains out? No, that was just a lovely coincidence. I found out when I got the assignment, later that day.”

We'd reached the door and we both listened for more gunshots. "How do I know you're not lying?"

He sighed and spouted the control codes for the assignment, coded for the day and time. He was legit all right. Fucker.

The hallway seemed quiet, so I judged it safe to go out. Yes, I was naked, but this club saw things a lot weirder than a naked armed man—and one in a towel—on a regular basis.

"Have you seen our mark?" he asked, all business for the moment.

"No, not yet. Have you?"

"No, but I can bet he's somehow involved in this."

Another series of shots rang out, and we flattened ourselves along the wall.

"Sounds like it's coming from around the corner," Nic whispered, and I agreed. "I'll take point."

We moved down the corridor, using any and all cover, which wasn't much. When we got to the corner, he threw himself down and rolled, losing his towel but not his gun—I love a man with priorities—and ended up across the hall as another shot narrowly missed him.

"Cover me!" he yelled as he darted out again, and I laid down covering fire as he ran down the hall. I admired his bubble butt as he ran—multitasking is one of my talents—and followed him down the hallway. I had to admit we worked well together.

A man dressed all in black popped out, and before he could fire the gun he held, both Nic and I shot him. He fell to the floor and Nic kicked his gun away. "He came out of there!" he yelled as he kicked open a door.

We both moved to the side but no more shots were fired.

"Help me, please!" a frightened voice rang out, and we stepped into the room.

I took in the scene in an instant. Our mark, naked and dead on the floor, bleeding from a head and a chest wound. Tied to the bed was a slender blond

man that barely looked old enough to drink. He was naked as well—this was quite the nudist party!—but very much alive.

Our job had been done for us.

Debriefing—separately, then together with my new partner—took hours. We got shouted at by the boss, who threatened to dock our pay since we didn't actually do the job ourselves. I pointed out that the mark was dead, and also his assassin, so that wrapped things up pretty nicely. However, my opinion wasn't well received.

In the end, we weren't docked, or even formally chastised. I think the boss just wanted to rant at us.

Pausing outside the boss's office, the fucker looked over at me. "That went well."

He was dressed again, in yet another perfectly tailored suit and I was hard pressed—pun intended—to decide whether he looked better in clothes or naked. Further study was required. Too bad he was so infuriatingly smug. "He's in a good mood today." I tried not to ogle him, but I could still feel the aches and pains he'd given me.

"I could be in a better mood," Nic offered, suggestion written all over his handsome face.

"Not a chance," I hissed, walking away. I wanted the fucker bad, but no way was I giving him the satisfaction. Literally.

I sensed movement behind me, and as I turned, he slammed me into the dark paneled wall. Next to me, a no doubt expensive painting fell to the carpet.

"What the fuck!" I'm a trained agent, and I'm six two. Unfortunately, the fucker had me by three inches and thirty pounds of muscle. He held me against the wall as I struggled.

"I said," he growled, right in my ear, "I could be in a better mood. If I was balls deep in your tight little ass."

"Fuck you," I groaned, and fuck if my damn cock wasn't hard as a rock.

“No, I’m gonna fuck *you*,” he smirked, and ground his hips against me. My eyes rolled back in my head.

I was lost and I knew it. But I wasn’t giving in without a fight. I managed to get a hand free and braced against the wall with one foot as I shoved him hard, right in the stomach. It was like hitting a brick wall, but he moved just enough for me to slip free. I kicked him in the back of the knee and he went down, but not before he grabbed my leg and brought me down on top of him.

I managed to elbow him across the face before he rolled us. He expertly kept me from getting a knee up to his groin and before I knew it, I was pinned down but good. No one had ever been able to do that to me. I told myself it was because I was aroused and distracted. Right.

I didn’t give him the satisfaction of struggling this time, but he knew damn well he had me. “We gonna end this charade and find a room now?”

And for the life of me, as much as I wanted to wipe that smirk off his face, I couldn’t resist him.

“Yeah.”

We looked up to see we had an audience. Half the support staff had gathered to observe, and probably lay bets.

We made it outside to the alley behind headquarters before he had me up against the wall again. The fucker seems to have a thing for walls. I wasn’t complaining. His tongue down my throat, my hand in his pants—CNN could have been filming but we didn’t fucking care.

Fuck, no one’s ever made me so hot so fast. He rutted against me like an animal and I could only pant for more. I found his stiff cock and rubbed at it as best I could. He pulled back and we unzipped, a mutual jerk-off in a dirty alley. It was the best damn thing in the world.

Hot, fast, frantic—when we came he swallowed my moans with his mouth. Either he was the best damn lay I ever had, or I had it bad.

So it started. We fucked like kinky rabbits every chance we got. My place, his place, the beach, an elevator—whenever and wherever we could. I was bruised all over and I loved it.

We had a couple of assignments, which was fine because it gave us new places to fuck. We got the job done and then went back to the hotel. We broke a bed once. Well, just the headboard. They don't make those like they used to.

I knew I had a problem when I started thinking of him when we were apart. Damn it, I didn't need complications. We'd never talked commitment, we never talked about what we were doing at all. We were too busy doing it. It wasn't like I had time to see anyone else, though. We were either working, working out, or fucking, not necessarily in that order. I just kind of assumed he wasn't seeing anyone else either.

But then you know what they say about assuming.

We'd got back from an assignment the day before, fucked at my place and then he went home. He usually stayed over but he said he had some errands to run in the morning. Nothing unusual.

I went by the next morning after I hit the gym, needing to ask him about something. I let myself in—we had the key codes to each other's apartments, made it easier—and heard noises in the kitchen. I sauntered in, expecting to see him making coffee, and stopped dead in my tracks.

Someone was making coffee, but it wasn't him. Bleached blond hair showing dark roots, sticking up everywhere, tiny little hips, pale porcelain skin, bee-stung lips—it was the fucking twink from our botched assignment. Standing in the fucker's kitchen, stark naked.

He turned to face me as I entered, and a sly smile broke across his pretty face. "Hi there," he drawled, in a Deep-South accent that sounded straight out of *Gone With the Wind*. I was pretty sure it was as fake as his hair.

Before I could speak, the fucker himself walked in, took one look at me and said, "Hey, Paul, you remember Joey?"

He didn't even have the grace to look abashed. "What the fuck, Nic?"

“What’s wrong?” The fucker knew exactly what I was pissed about.

“Want some coffee, honey?” the twink said with his smug little smile.

“Never mind.” I turned on my heel and walked out. I wasn’t about to get involved in a domestic.

I made it to the front door before he caught up with me. “What’s the problem? Is it Joey?” I didn’t bother to answer, so he went on. “What? We never discussed being exclusive. I assumed you had other guys too.”

Well, no, we hadn’t discussed it. I had just figured with all the earthshattering sex we were having, he didn’t have need of anyone else. I know *I* didn’t. “Have you been fucking him all along?”

The fucker shrugged. “I ran into him during debriefing, he gave me his number—”

That answered my question. “You could have told me.”

He leaned against the doorframe. “Didn’t think I had to.”

I returned his shrug. “No, I guess not. Well, see you around.” I walked out the door then, and didn’t look back.

I don’t know why I was so upset. Well, I do, but I wasn’t admitting it to myself just yet. I thought we’d had something special. I know I’d never had sex like that before. Maybe he did all the time. And yeah, the twink was hot, if you like that sort of thing. I don’t, personally. I like my men big, strong, and tough. I couldn’t see the twink taking the rough treatment I could.

Fuck. I was jealous. I’d never been jealous of anyone before, and I wasn’t enjoying it. I couldn’t have feelings for the fucker, could I? Feelings deeper than lust? This was bad news.

I ended up that night in a jazz club, trying to drown my sorrows in martinis and sad songs. It didn’t work.

Fucker.

He called me a couple of times that day, but I didn’t pick up. Then, a text.

u ok?

I answered after a moment.

Yes

A pause, then another.

we ok?

I pondered this one a while longer. I finally settled for:

Sure.

We had to work together, after all. We were both adults. I could do this.

He came back with:

wanna cum over?

I snorted out loud. Was he twelve? I wondered if he had spelled it that way deliberately. Before I could answer, he texted again.

im alone

I resisted the urge to give him a snarky reply. I didn't even have the right to be upset. We weren't exclusive. We weren't anything to each other besides partners. The only mistake had been not calling first. He had no obligation to tell me who else he was seeing. I thought about telling him I wasn't alone, but that would just be bitchy. And he was fucking hot. I was horny. What the fuck.

On my way

Yeah, I'm a slut. Sue me. Just look at him.

I didn't mention the twink again, and neither did he. I didn't want to know. I made sure to text before I came over, and I never ran into the little bitch again. I sound kinda bitter, don't I? If he'd offered a threesome I would have kicked him in the nuts. He didn't.

Anyway, here's where things get a little fuzzy. We got a new assignment—can't get into details as usual, but a really bad dude needed taking out of the equation and we were just the guys to do it. The dude was surrounded 24/7 by

an elite security detail. We're not talking rent-a-cops here, these men were the real deal, trained the same as I was. They had all the high tech surveillance equipment dirty money could buy, and there were a lot of them. There were just two of us, but we had the element of surprise. We hoped.

We reconned the dude's house for a while, getting the lay of the land and observing the security team. They were good, I had to hand it to them. There wasn't a predictable pattern to their patrols, but I knew there had to be one.

We finally decided to go in through the basement. There were fewer cameras there, and the line of sight was obstructed. We planned to go in with a couple of flashbangs and then split up. We couldn't communicate once we'd split up, so we had to agree on a plan. Unfortunately, things don't always go according to plan. In fact, most of the time they don't.

Case in point: my flashbang didn't flash. Or bang. In fact, it just lay there like a dog turd. I heard the other one go off, listened as feet pounded toward the source of the commotion. Well, I figured I might as well use that as a distraction anyway. I crept up the steps, quiet as the proverbial mouse, and luckily encountered no one. That was suspicious in itself; despite the commotion, trained guards wouldn't leave their posts. I made it into the main part of the house, still without encountering anyone, and I knew something was wrong. There was no turning back now, though, so I went ahead with Plan B. Find the dude. Kill the dude.

We'd figured the dude would be in his bedroom this time of night, so that was my goal. I heard faint shouting, but no gunshots, so I kept going. Another long dark hallway—not dark enough for night vision specs but still hard to see—and then I stood outside the dude's bedroom. I knew it was too easy. But what could I do?

I stood outside the door, listening for movement from inside. I heard a faint murmuring, like the television or maybe two people talking quietly. I reached slowly for the doorknob, about to touch it when—

“You lose somethin', darlin'?”

I knew that honeyed drawl! I spun around to see the twink himself, one hand on his hip, the other one tossing something at me—I didn't go to catch it, because suddenly I knew what it was. It didn't matter, though. Just an instant later, my dud M84 went off in all its magnesium-fueled pyrotechnic glory, about a foot from my face.

The effects of a stun grenade at close range are temporary blindness, deafness, disorientation and, in the case of very close detonation, unconsciousness. Which explained why the next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital with the worst headache known to man.

I opened my eyes—big mistake. The light felt like a supernova to my optic nerve, and I shut them again immediately. There was an afterimage on my retina—someone was sitting in the chair next to the bed. A big someone. I forced my eyes open again, and yep, I was right—it was the fucker, big as life and twice as sexy, playing Florence Nightingale.

Well, except he was fast asleep.

As my eyes adjusted, I stared at him in wonderment. What the fuck had happened? Why was he here? He looked like shit, to be honest—his stubble had long since passed the fashionable stage and was veering into homeless—and his clothes looked like he'd slept in them. Which he was currently doing. He looked in dire need of a shower. He was still the hottest thing I'd seen.

As I stared at him, he shifted in his sleep, moaning a little, and I looked down at his crotch automatically. Yep, his jeans were tented magnificently, and despite myself I licked my lips. The fucker has a gorgeous cock, what can I say.

I forced my eyes back up to his face, to see him awake and grinning at me. I was busted.

“Half dead and you're still up for cock?” His gentle tone belied his words.

“Always,” I tried to say, but my throat was apparently the Sahara and it came out as more of a rasp.

To my shock, the fucker's expression turned worried and he almost jumped off the chair.

"Shit, I'm sorry, they said you could have some ice chips when you woke up and your throat would be dry—"

I let him shake some ice chips into my mouth; they felt better than sex. Well, almost. The ice melted and trickled down my desiccated throat like manna from heaven. I might have gotten hard from it.

Once my ice-chip-induced euphoria wore off, I had time to consider the fucker's uncharacteristic behavior. Had I been at death's door or something? "What happened?"

The fucker settled back into the chair. "You want it from the beginning?"

"Usually the best place to start."

He started.

So about the time he realized my flashbang didn't go off, he was surrounded by bad guys. He knew instantly we were blown, and not in the good way. He thought I'd been taken out before I could even set off the grenade. So what does the fucker do? He doesn't follow the plan. He comes after me. Never mind that there's half a dozen armed guards between him and where he thought I was. That was a technicality to him, apparently.

So after he takes out the guards—I'd have liked to see it, mind you, just listening to the description got me all hot and bothered, 007's got nothing on the fucker—he goes to find me. He comes up the stairs just in time to see the twink lob the flashbang at me and dive for cover. He ducked and covered as well, so he was just a little deafened and not blinded. He popped up just in time to see the twink brain me with a nearby lamp, thus adding injury to injury. Oh, that's why my head hurt like a sonofabitch.

So then what happened?

"I shot him." The fucker said, cool as a cucumber.

"But you were fucking him—"

"He tried to kill you. He was clearly an enemy agent—"

“That twink? An agent?” The thought was laughable.

“He was, we have positive ID now. His talents weren’t based on brawn.”

I glared at the fucker and he had the grace to look ashamed. “So I gathered.”

“I was fooled,” he admitted. “But that boy had a mouth on him—”

“Don’t wanna hear it.”

“Sorry.” He looked like he meant it.

“How long have I been out?”

“Two days. They were starting to talk about doing tests.”

“Fuck,” I groaned, sitting up. “Gotta report in—”

“Relax,” he said, putting his big hand on my chest. “I told them everything, your debriefing can wait.”

I sagged back onto the pillows. “I’m so getting written up for this.”

He cut his eyes to the side in an expression I immediately knew was evasive. “What?”

“You’re off active duty.”

“Fuck! How long? I’ll be out of here soon.”

“Indefinitely. Something about letting an enemy sneak up on you.”

This just got better and better. “Fuck my life.”

“I’m suspended too, if it makes you feel any better,” he offered.

“Yeah? And why is that?” I suspected I knew, but I wanted to hear him say it.

“Something about fucking the enemy.”

I tried not to snicker. It wasn’t easy.

One year later...

“You missed a spot.”

“Fuck you, I did not.”

“You did. I can tell. You want me getting an uneven tan? Or skin cancer?”

I sighed and applied another coat of coconut-scented sunscreen on the fucker’s back. Truth be told, it wasn’t really a hardship to put my hands all over his gorgeous, hard body. A year later and I still couldn’t get enough of him. Luckily, he seemed to feel the same way.

We fucked every night, sometimes more than once, with or without toys, it didn’t seem to matter.

We’d been *together* together since they released me from the hospital, and by mutual decision we quit the Agency. We were both getting tired of killing. Through some connections we found a cushy gig guarding an eccentric gay billionaire on his very own tropical island. He liked his guards to be eye candy as well, so we wore very little in addition to our guns. He never touched us, though, and he didn’t care that we shacked up in our little beach hut.

It was our version of domestic bliss, and it worked for us.

I still call him fucker, though.

THE END

Author Bio

Jack Greene loathes author bios, thinking they ruin the mystery. But if you must, picture a handsome twenty-something insomniac: junior partner in a law firm by day, guitarist in a punk band by night. He roams the streets on his Ducati when he can't sleep, gathering material for his books, and watches the sun come up over West Hollywood as he types away at his laptop. Peace only comes when he writes the words "The End". Jack writes about men who fuck, and love, other men. Men who, like all men, sometimes don't behave like they should.

Contact & Media Info

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THREE'S A CHARM

By CR Guiliano

Photo Description

Three Asian men are shirtless and intertwined with hands lovingly touching, connecting them intimately—in love with each other. The men are thin, delicate and beautiful, with exotic looks and breathtaking features.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

*The three of us have been best friends since forever. We were always outsiders, but that didn't matter—we had each other. After we graduated from high school, we all moved in together and all the pent-up feelings between us just erupted and we became so much more than just friends. **So** much more! The sex was beyond hot, but that was only part of it. The most important part was our love for each other.*

We became like one person, our hearts beat in tune with each other. But lately, I've felt one of my lovers moving away. I don't understand. He says he still loves us just the same, but it's like he's slipping through our fingers. Is he jealous? He's never seemed to be before... Has he met someone else? Is he just tired of us? One of us or both of us? I wish he would tell us, because my heart is breaking...

*Please, **no** BDSM, non-con or dub-con! I don't think that the mood in this picture would inspire to that, but I'd like to add that anyway.*

And I do like stories that contain explicit sex scenes, though I also realize that my prompt might inspire an author to a more romantic kind of story. But if possible, please include some sex! ;-)

Sincerely,

Asynia

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: ménage, Asian, erotic, martial arts

Content warnings: extortion by a secondary character

Word count: 7,687

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THREE'S A CHARM

By CR Guiliano

PROLOGUE

"I told you, I don't have any money!" Akira and Yuu heard Joji's strident and frightened voice and looked at each other for a second before they broke into a run, careening down the empty hall of their high school. They rounded the corner to see three of the football jocks surrounding Joji, one pinning him against the lockers. Akira heard the almost silent growl that issued from Yuu and knew if he didn't defuse things quickly those jocks were going to learn the meaning of pain. He and his two best friends might be small and look helpless, and certainly Joji was, but Yuu had a black belt in Karate, and was well able to deal with these bullies.

When Joji saw them, the relief on his pale face was instant. The jocks turned, sneering over at them. That was a mistake. Akira grabbed Yuu's arm.

"No, we don't want to make a scene." His harsh whisper didn't even register as Yuu yanked his arm from Akira's grip, and with cat-like grace, began to circle around the jocks. They tracked Yuu's progress, calling out taunts and slurs, most centered on Akira and his friends being fags. Akira closed his eyes, praying for patience, and followed Yuu. As his friend drew the attention of the big football players, Akira made his way quietly towards Joji, who was trembling against the lockers trying to look smaller than he already was. Despite both Akira's and Yuu's martial arts abilities, Joji was scared.

"Are you thugs incapable of picking on someone your own size? Well, how about you try me?"

Akira wanted to curse. Yuu's voice was low and controlled and it only got that way when he was livid. It was too late now. There was no way Akira was going to stop Yuu from teaching these morons a lesson. A lesson they weren't going to forget anytime soon. A lesson that Akira secretly thought they deserved. Both Akira and Yuu were very protective of Joji. He was small and

beautiful, and if things weren't so complicated with school and Joji's parents, Akira would have wanted to make Joji a lover, and some day, he would. Joji was that beautiful and Akira loved the slighter man. He looked over at Yuu, thinking he was just as lovely. The way Yuu got into his defensive position was a huge turn on, and Akira's heart sped up. He couldn't *wait* until they were out of high school.

All of them had been saving every penny they could scrape up to rent a place for the three of them to live together. Yuu already had a job lined up with the local Dojo as an instructor for the ten- to twelve-year-old group. Yuu loved kids, so he was going to be happy with that job. Joji's parents were trying to get him to work at their little store, but Joji had refused, even with the "family honor" guilt trip they had tried to lay on him. Joji was an artist, through and through. If he wasn't drawing or painting, he was nearly impossible to be around. Akira had a sketch Joji had done of the three of them that tripped his heart every time he looked at it. The love in Joji's eyes when he'd given it to Akira was hard to ignore, not that Akira wanted to. Joji was so very sweet and thoughtful most of the time. He could be a real brat at times, too, but Yuu could usually get Joji to calm down.

As Yuu moved in closer keeping his sharp black eyes on the three morons, Akira skirted around to be closer to Joji. He gave his friend a nod, letting him know he was being taken care of and Joji started inching his way towards Akira. Yuu was going to do some serious damage because these jocks had messed with what belonged to Yuu. And there was no mistake, Joji—and Akira—belonged to Yuu without a doubt. Nobody messed with Joji or Akira without Yuu wanting to beat them down. And they were in the halls of the school, so an administrator or teacher could come by at any moment. This was not a good thing.

"You know what, you pansy-ass? Your scrawniness ain't even worth the bother. You want your butt buddy? Take him. Fucking faggots!"

As the biggest jock spoke, he grabbed Joji by the arm before he could escape into Akira's embrace and shoved him right into Yuu's arms. In a flash,

Yuu patted their friend down and then pushed him behind his back towards Akira.

“I suggest you never touch him again.”

Akira almost wanted to laugh at Yuu’s warning. Unless these idiots got a taste of what Yuu was capable of doing, they weren’t going to stop their bullying or take Yuu seriously. No one took any of them seriously because they were “too pretty”, or so everyone said. Akira walked forward and hugged Joji against him, moving them both back in case Yuu decided he wasn’t going to let this go. Just as the jocks started cracking knuckles, they all heard the voices of the principal and a couple of teachers coming towards them. In complete silence, Yuu backed away, never taking his eyes off the bullies and then grabbed Akira and Joji, gently hauling them off down the corridor and out through a side door.

Joji was clinging to Yuu, his trembling just as bad as when he was pinned to the lockers.

“I’m sorry, Yuu, I’m sorry. I tried to stay away from them. *Yurushite kudasai?*”

“Of course, Joji love, I forgive you.”

Yuu murmured the words and kissed Joji on the temple, keeping his slim body close. Akira was on the other side of Joji, keeping as close as Yuu. Joji was fragile, and he and Yuu would both protect him no matter what. That’s what you did when you loved someone. Akira knew without a doubt that he loved Joji, just as he knew Yuu did, too.

CHAPTER 1

“When will he be home?”

Akira looked up at Joji when he entered the kitchen. “I don’t know. He called and said he’d be late.” Akira went back to chopping the vegetables he was preparing for dinner. It was happening a lot lately, Yuu calling to say he would be late. Akira wasn’t stupid. Yuu was an instructor at the Dojo, and so there was no reason for him to be late so much. Akira leaned back a little as Joji came up and wrapped his thin arms around him and kissed the nape of his neck.

“We could have a little fun to pass the time.”

The low purr from Joji had Akira hardening in an instant. But it didn’t seem right to make love to Joji without Yuu there. At least not while Akira was upset with Yuu.

“Please, Akira?”

Akira carefully put the knife down, his hands beginning to shake at Joji’s plea. Man, he never could deny the man. Joji was just too sexy, too sensual, for Akira to resist, Yuu or no Yuu. He turned in Joji’s embrace and gazed into the half-lidded brown eyes he loved so much.

“You want to do this without Yuu?” Akira had to make sure. The balance between the three of them was fragile and complicated, though Akira would not alter it for anything in the world. He loved Joji and Yuu with all that he had and would be destroyed without them. Maybe that’s why Yuu being gone so much was weighing heavily on Akira’s mind. He was really trying not to get suspicious, but what other reason could Yuu have for not coming home to his lovers?

Joji pulled Akira toward their bedroom in answer, and Akira let his lover tow him down the hall, his heart racing in anticipation. Out of all three of them, Joji was the most erotic and kinky. Yuu was more the aggressor, generally topping unless Akira or Joji wanted to, which wasn’t often, almost never with Joji. Akira himself was very laid back, going with whatever Yuu and Joji wanted to do. Akira loved it all, no matter who was doing what to

whom. Yuu had accused him of being too passive in bed once, and though Akira thought he was joking at the time, now he wondered if his lover was getting tired of him. Maybe he wasn't. But if he was, did that mean he was tired of Joji too? As Akira stood at the bottom of the bed, watching Joji remove his clothing, he couldn't fathom anyone ever getting tired of his lover.

Joji's soft hands on Akira's body were so carnal that his agitation with Yuu began to fade, though not the desire to have his other lover here. As much as he loved Joji and enjoyed what they did together, it would not be complete without Yuu. But Akira would allow Joji this since his small lover seemed intent on getting what he wanted. Once nude, Akira smiled as Joji stared at him, his lover's eyes dark with lust and face flushed with desire. It was always that way with them.

From the moment they had moved into this house together they had been inseparable. High school had been a test in patience and denial. It was so very obvious that all three of them loved each other, but they could do nothing without bringing the wrath of three sets of parents down on them. As it was, Joji's family considered him a disgrace and he was shunned now. Joji didn't care, saying he had all he needed in Yuu, Akira, and his art. Yuu had gone to try and reason with Joji's father, but it had been in vain. Yuu's family didn't know that Yuu was sleeping with both Akira and Joji and that he loved them both. Akira wondered if his strong but silent lover would ever tell them. He never pushed, though, knowing Yuu would make his own decisions. Akira's family accepted not only Akira's love of men, but the two men he loved. His mama adored Joji, spoiling him. She respected and loved Yuu, as well. Akira was very grateful and proud of them.

Joji had finished shedding Akira's clothing by now and Akira pulled him into an embrace, taking his lips in a passionate kiss. Their bodies slid together, the dampness of their skin mixing and heightening Akira's arousal. Within moments, Akira had Joji splayed out on their king-sized bed, his gaze drinking in the slight man as he kneeled between Joji's wide-spread legs. Joji was thin, almost too thin, but exquisite to look at with his pale, flawless skin. His black, chin-length hair emphasized the fragile lines of his jaw and highlighted the dark, dark-brown of his eyes. Joji's cock was proof that a small body didn't mean anything. It lay, thick and dribbling, upon his lower belly, and Akira's

mouth watered. He leaned forward capturing the leaking head with his mouth and sucking gently.

Joji was extremely sensitive and arched with a moan as Akira licked and sucked him deep, his small hands clutching at Akira's hair and his hips rocking. Two years they had shared a house and a bed, and Akira knew every trick there was to drive Joji insane with lust. He knew every erogenous zone, every ticklish spot, every patch of skin that made Joji shudder, every kink that enhanced Joji's need for release. Carefully, Akira pushed a finger into Joji, eliciting a groan of pleasure from his lover. Much to both Akira's and Yuu's delight, Joji never needed much preparation. Akira worked his way from that single digit to two and then three, Joji rocking onto them, his body starting to jerk with need. Akira brushed his knuckles over Joji's prostate, his lover crying out at the sudden intensity of his rapture.

Akira couldn't wait any longer, tired of humping into the duvet for friction on his aching member. He pulled his fingers from Joji and grabbed for the lube that sat on the nightstand. Despite Joji's body's ready acceptance of his fingers, no way would he hurt his lover with his much larger cock. He slicked his shaft liberally, tossed the bottle aside and scooted up to align himself with Joji's loosened entrance. He gazed intently into Joji's desire-filled eyes as he slowly pushed his way into Joji's warmth. No matter how many times Yuu and Akira had made love to Joji, he was always tight, always warm and inviting. Once buried deeply, Akira stilled, watching Joji's eyes. His sweet lover blinked a few times, then his soft hands caressed across Akira's ass cheeks before fingers dug into his flesh. That was Akira's cue to start thrusting. He pulled all the way out, pushing his way slowly back in and giving Joji's frustrated expression a smug smile. Joji liked it fast and hard, but Akira liked to take his time, and ultimately Joji's orgasm was shattering because of it.

So intent on pleasing his lover under him and the feelings coursing through him, it was a mild shock to feel warm, smooth hands caressing up the insides of his thighs and widening them, soft lips kissing the small of his back.

“What a lovely view to come home to.”

CHAPTER 2

Yuu's low voice sent shivers through Akira's entire body, causing Joji to groan in reaction. When Akira felt Yuu's naked body covering his, his long slicked fingers preparing him, he echoed Joji's groan. Moments later, Yuu slowly sank into Akira's body, the three of them now intimately linked. As always, Akira gave up control to Yuu, allowing his more aggressive lover to set the pace. Both Akira and Joji loved the way Yuu took control and brought them all to such heights of ecstasy.

Akira gritted his teeth, throwing his head back against Yuu's shoulder as his lover began to move. Joji's hands scrambled, trying to latch onto both Akira and Yuu. Little mewling sounds came from him as Yuu's thrusts drove Akira deeper into Joji. Yuu's rhythm was slow and deep, just the way Akira loved it. He groaned every time Yuu filled him and whimpered at each withdrawal. Joji was curled forward kissing his chest and sucking on his nipples. When they made love, usually Joji was the first to fall over the edge into orgasm, being so sensitive and responsive, but on occasion Akira, and twice Yuu, came before their smaller lover. Obviously, this was one of those times, as Joji's tongue and mouth drove Akira insane and Yuu continued to thrust deeply.

When Akira's balls began to tingle and tighten, he clenched his inner channel around Yuu, dragging a moan from his lover, and took over the thrusting needing the much faster rhythm to fall into his climax. Yuu froze, hips jutting forward and allowing Akira to rock between him and Joji and minutes later, Akira cried out, his body going tense and trembling with the force of his climax. God, it was always like this, so intense, so intimate, and so loving. Before Akira could collapse on Joji, Yuu started thrusting again, fast and furious, causing Akira to stay hard for Joji. His two lovers came at the same time, Joji's cock shooting between him and Akira, and Yuu filling Akira with his release.

Yuu, always considerate, dropped to the side, disconnecting from Akira so that they didn't squish Joji under them. Yuu pulled Akira over until he was

between Yuu and Joji on the bed. He was sweaty, sticky, sated and so in love his heart felt like it was going to burst from his chest. Only the nagging feeling that something was pulling Yuu away kept him from being blissfully content.

Despite the exhaustion that gripped him after making love with Joji and Yuu, Akira couldn't sleep. He could feel Joji's even breathing against his chest, hear his soft snores, but Yuu was silent behind him. "Yuu?" Akira almost cringed at his lover's deep sigh and his heart sank as Yuu shifted away from him to lie on his back. Akira kissed Joji's soft hair and then turned over to stare towards Yuu in the darkness. He couldn't see his lover's face, but the sigh told Akira that Yuu was once again frustrated by Akira's constant insecurities.

Akira had tried to talk to Yuu but was rebuffed each time. When he brought up how he felt to Joji, he'd been sincerely told he was an idiot and that Yuu would never think of leaving them. Akira didn't know what to do. They'd always been honest with each other, didn't keep secrets, but Akira could not shake the idea that Yuu was hiding something. "Please Yuu, tell me what's wrong. Why do you stay so late at the dojo? Why do I feel as if you are... I don't know... tired of us, or at least of me?"

"I have told you before, Akira, I am fine, and there is nothing wrong."

Akira snorted and crawled his way to the bottom of the bed, stomping into the bathroom and closing the door. "I don't believe you!" he shouted through the wood as he turned the shower on. Akira wasn't stupid. Something was going on, but apparently Yuu didn't feel he needed to confide in Akira. Well, he was done trying to pry out what was causing Yuu to become distant. As much as it hurt, he would let it go and hope that the day didn't come when Yuu left them.

Akira turned from the softly flowing water to see Joji standing in the bathroom watching him.

"Why do you antagonize him? Why do you push? You know Yuu loves us and would never do anything to hurt us or leave."

Akira angrily rinsed off, annoyed that Joji didn't get it, didn't understand. Maybe because Yuu wasn't pulling away from him, just Akira. Sadness

swamped him, his chest aching, and he slid to the floor of the tub, trying to take a deep breath and finding it hard to draw in any air to his lungs, his whole body shaking hard enough to make his teeth chatter.

“Yuu! Something is wrong with Akira!”

Akira tried to wave off Joji’s concern, but his small lover had already raced from the bathroom. The next moment, Yuu came in, distress showing through the frown on his face. “What’s wrong? Joji said you collapsed!” As Yuu asked him questions, he’d made his way into the tub and crouched down to pull Akira into his arms. Akira thought he should feel grateful that Yuu appeared to care like he used to, but he couldn’t muster up the gratitude. He probably was only putting on a front for Joji anyway. He tried to pull from Yuu’s embrace, only to find his strong lover pulling him tighter.

“No! You will not do this! I will hold you until you calm down. Joji, turn off the water and hand me a towel.”

Still trying to get his breathing under control, Akira watched Joji do what Yuu asked him. Next thing Akira knew, he was being wrapped in a warm towel and scooped up into Yuu’s arms. Akira never could get over Yuu’s strength as he carried Akira to the bed. Yuu was no bigger than Akira himself, yet didn’t even break a sweat under his weight. Once Yuu had Akira settled back in their bed he stood back, hands on hips, and glared at Akira.

“Now, tell me why you were having a panic attack?”

Akira glared in return and then flipped over, giving Yuu his back. If his lover refused to talk and ease Akira’s worries, then there was no reason for Akira to reciprocate. After all, what was giving him the anxiety attack in the first place was Yuu’s lack of communication. Akira had done all he could to get his lover to speak up, to no avail. As much as he loved Yuu, he was done fighting to get the man to confess what was on his mind.

CHAPTER 3

“Yuu, why is Akira acting that way? I mean, I know he’s said he’s worried that you are tired of him and that you will leave us. But I told him that’s not true.”

Yuu had left Akira in bed, stubbornly ignoring him. Yuu could have pushed it, making Akira talk, but his lover had reason to be worried. Yuu just didn’t want the two men he loved more than life to worry about him. They didn’t need to know he was being bullied by one of their former rivals from high school. It was humiliating, but Yuu’s back was against the wall. Corrigan, that jock bastard from high school, had found a weak spot to exploit: Yuu’s lovers. Yuu wanted to tear the man apart when he’d threatened Akira and Joji, but Corrigan had Yuu’s hands tied.

Just a few months ago, Corrigan started working at the True Palace, training the older kids, and had worked his way into the owner’s favor with false charm. Yuu knew that Corrigan was nothing more than an unintelligent bully. Yuu tried to tell his boss that Corrigan was not a good fit for the dojo, but Mr. Miyamoto was already smitten with Corrigan. Not even a week after he started, Corrigan caught Yuu in the back alley getting ready to leave on his motorcycle. He’d startled Yuu, who had become complacent in the two years since high school. Corrigan was just as big now as he was back then, maybe bigger, and now he was a black belt. Yuu was pretty sure his skills were still superior to Corrigan’s, if for no other reason than Yuu was extremely fast. Corrigan might have strength on him, but Yuu knew he could hold his own against the other man.

It was when Corrigan pinned Yuu against the concrete wall, getting up in his face that Yuu realized he might have a problem.

“So, you still a fag, Tran? You still hanging around and sexing up those two pretty boys? What were their names? Oh yeah, Joji and Akira. Like I wouldn’t remember you losers from the old days. Don’t bother answering, I know you are. I’ve followed you. I know where you live. I know where both of them work.”

Yuu wasn't sure what kind of psychotic expression was on Corrigan's face, but the man's eyes looked manic. Yuu held still, though he was aware Corrigan wasn't focused very well. He didn't want to go home and have to lie about being injured if Corrigan took exception to him trying to escape his grip. What worried Yuu more was Corrigan stalking him and his lovers. The bully had always been unpredictable, even more so now. Yuu would do anything to protect Akira and Joji. "What do you want Corrigan? What's it going to take for you to leave us alone?"

"Simple, Chinaman. You're going pay me to stay away from your little *boyfriends*. And if you don't? There's no telling what might happen to your precious butt-buddies."

Yuu's heart seized and his stomach curdled. What the fuck? Yuu didn't know what Corrigan's problem was, but he'd let Corrigan do whatever he wanted, as long as he never touched Joji or Akira. Yuu swallowed hard, his pride wanting to rebel against what Corrigan wanted. But Akira's and Joji's safety was involved, and Yuu had to do this to keep them safe. "Fine." He hoped Corrigan heard his whisper. He didn't want to repeat himself.

"Thought you'd see it my way, faggot. How about we get started right now?"

As Corrigan spoke, he jabbed at Yuu, shoving him against a wall and digging into his pockets. Yuu could feel the shame filling him and hung his head. As humiliating as this was, it was better than whatever Corrigan might think to do to Akira and Joji.

"Want whatever ya got on you now faggot, then we'll see what kind of figure I'm thinking tomorrow. And just so you know how serious I am, don't get any ideas about calling the cops. Because if you do, what happens to your little faggot boyfriends will make you wish you'd never been born. You got that, Tran?"

Yuu could only nod, his stomach clenched in dread.

CHAPTER 4

Another week and Yuu was still coming home late, and now it seemed he wasn't interested in sex anymore. At least not with Akira. He'd seen Yuu and Joji together without him. Of course, Joji could be very persuasive, and Akira wasn't persistent like that. If Yuu didn't want him, then Akira wasn't going to beg. But, God, the rejection hurt. Enough that Akira had made the decision to leave. He loved Joji and Yuu too much to stay here and be left out. He never thought it would come to this, but he couldn't stay.

He waited until both Yuu and Joji were asleep, again, without him. He'd given a lame excuse of working and spent the time they were making love on his computer in the living room. Once he stopped hearing the moans and cries from the bedroom, he peeked in to see Yuu curled around Joji, both fast asleep. He tiptoed to the dresser and removed his clothes then made his quiet way to the closet and grabbed a duffel bag and most of his hanging clothes and shoes. A quick trip through the bathroom for toiletries and he was ready. He'd leave everything else here for Yuu and Joji.

He'd called his mother earlier, when both Joji and Yuu were gone. She'd been saddened to hear things were not going well, but reassured him he was welcome to come home. As it was, their house was only a little over a mile away. Akira threw his bag into the back seat of his car, and then, sitting in the driver's seat with the door still open, he used his foot to silently push the car out of the driveway. Akira wasn't sure what Yuu would do if he heard his car. He pushed again, and once he was far enough down the road where he didn't think Yuu would hear the engine, he started his car and drove quickly to his parents' house. His mother waited up for him, knowing he was coming, but not why.

Yuu jerked up, something waking him suddenly. He glanced around in the dark, seeing nothing but shadows. He glanced down to see only Joji in their bed. Something was wrong. He jumped from the bed and raced to the living room, only to find it empty with no lights on. Stalking back to the bedroom, he

flipped on the light, ignoring Joji's grumbling, and ripped open the closet door. Akira's clothes were gone. His heart beating hard, he went to the dresser to see the same. *Fuck!* Their lover had left them! That would make Akira vulnerable to Corrigan and Yuu wouldn't be able to protect him. Akira never went back to get his black belt after they had graduated and would be no match for Corrigan.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"What's wrong, Yuu?"

Joji's sleepy question made Yuu turn and stare at him. Maybe it hadn't been right to keep what was going on from his lovers. With Akira out of the house, it would have been better if he knew what was going on to help protect himself. Yuu knew he'd shut Akira out, unwilling to take the risk of Akira figuring out what was wrong and that he'd been going through a lot of money. Akira was that perceptive, always had been. He hung his head, not answering Joji's question, and tried to think where Akira would go. He had a few friends at work, but Yuu didn't think Akira knew them well enough to ask to stay at their homes.

He jerked his head back up. There was only one logical place that Akira would go. To his parents' house. Yuu was digging for his cell phone before he realized it was late. He glanced at the clock to see it was after one a.m. Screw it, this was important. Yuu needed to know if Akira was there, and then he needed to sit his lovers down and confess to them what had been happening for the last couple of months.

Akira's cell phone went straight to voicemail which meant his lover had turned it off. Undeterred, Yuu dialed the Ishida house and waited. After more than six rings, a sleepy female voice answered and didn't give Yuu a chance to identify himself.

"Yes, Yuu, he's here."

He was sure Mrs. Ishida heard his loud sigh of relief. "I need to talk to him. It's important." He only hoped Akira would speak to him.

"I'm sorry, Yuu. Akira was pretty upset when he got here, so his father gave him a sedative and he's sleeping. You will have to call in the morning and speak to him then."

Yuu cursed under his breath. “Okay, Mrs. Ishida. Sorry for disturbing you.” Yuu hung up before the woman responded. He had to get to Akira. No doubt, with the way Corrigan stalked them all, he would find out Akira had moved out and Yuu was terrified the bastard would go after his lover despite their arrangement. He was trembling with fear, not something he was used to, and nearly jumped out of his skin when arms circled his waist and hugged him.

“You okay, Babe?”

“No, no, I’m not. Akira’s gone.” Joji dropped his arms instantly and ran back into the bedroom without a word. Minutes later, he came back out with tears streaming down his face.

“But why? Why would he leave us?”

Yuu swallowed the lump in his throat. It killed him to see Joji so distraught. He only ever wanted to make both his lovers happy and keep them safe. He closed the distance between them and gathered Joji into his arms, holding him tight and rocking him. “Because of me, sweet baby. Because of me.”

CHAPTER 5

Akira watched his mother putter around the kitchen, concerned at her silence. Usually, his mother was bursting with advice but not this morning. Was his break with his lovers upsetting her as well? Or was she just worried about him? “Mama? What’s wrong?” He watched her stop near the sink, her back to him.

“Yuu called last night.”

Akira sighed. Of course he did. But Akira had nothing to say to his former lover. “What did he say?” Akira didn’t really want to know what Yuu had to say for himself, but he knew his mother would expect the question.

“Nothing. Just that he needed to talk to you and that it was important. He did sound... distressed.”

Akira snorted. “Are you taking his side, Mama?” Akira could see that. His parents loved Yuu and Joji. And if his mother thought he’d done something wrong, she wouldn’t hesitate to defend them and rant at him. He watched her turn and look at him, her black eyes catching his gaze. Her expression was sad yet determined.

“I am not taking sides, Akira. I want to understand so that I can give the proper advice.”

Akira usually had no problem talking to his mother and sharing, but he’d not spoken of the stress between him and Yuu. “I don’t know...” He was loath to bring it up, not just because it hurt, but he didn’t want his mother thinking badly of Yuu. Akira still loved the man fiercely; he just didn’t know what to do to fix things, or if he even could. He dropped his head, worrying his lip as he warred within himself. He was startled when his mother’s soft hand cupped his chin and raised his gaze to hers.

“Akira, my son, I am not blind. I see that something is terribly wrong. You would not be here and separated from those men you love if things were okay. Is it Yuu? Or has something happened with Joji?”

Akira sighed and then took a deep breath before launching into what he felt and why he was here. It wasn’t as if Yuu had done anything specific. It was

just the feelings of rejection and suspicion that had driven Akira to leave. Akira had just finished speaking when there was a knock at the door. He fiddled with the now-cold tea that his mother had given him earlier as she went to answer the door.

“Akira.”

Akira’s head jerked up at Yuu’s whisper. His lover looked like crap, hair a mess, stubble on his chin, eyes haunted and clothes wrinkled and disheveled. He saw Joji behind Yuu not looking much better, but with the addition of red-rimmed eyes and sickly pallor on his usually golden skin. Yuu’s face was ashen, and Akira’s heart skipped. Was Yuu sick? Was that why his lover had distanced himself? Akira was up out of his chair and in Yuu’s arms in a heartbeat.

“I’ll leave you to talk.”

Akira felt Yuu nod at his mother, but he couldn’t make himself let go. Yuu’s solid, warm body was heaven, and he’d missed it. He felt Joji surround him from the back, Joji’s face against the back of his neck and wetness dripping down his back. God, he’d hurt his lovers. Finally, he pulled back but couldn’t meet Yuu’s eyes. He cleared his throat and put some distance between them. He’d fled to his parents for a reason.

“Akira. We need to talk.”

Akira just nodded, not trusting himself to look Yuu in the face and see the final rejection, Yuu telling him he was not wanted in their threesome anymore. “We can go in the back study. Papa won’t mind.” Akira turned without looking up but a sigh shuddered from him when he felt Joji take his hand as he led them down the hall. His father was gone, off to work, so they had privacy. He squeezed Joji’s hand and then let go so he could sit on the couch. Joji promptly dropped beside him and curled up against his side. He couldn’t help but put his arm around the small man’s shoulders, pulling him closer. After he settled, he finally looked up at Yuu.

His lover had chosen a chair across from the couch when usually the three of them would pile together on any furniture surface. Just one more sign to Akira that things were over for them. “Okay, Yuu. Talk.” His words came out

much more harsh and clipped than he'd meant them to, but he was hurting and Yuu was the cause.

"I'm sorry, Akira, Joji. I probably should have confided in you both months ago, but I was scared for you."

Akira tilted his head, confused. Joji remained silent by his side, but then, he was probably grappling with the idea of Yuu scared of anything. Akira knew there were a few meaningless things that frightened Yuu, he just never mentioned them to save Yuu's pride. "What are you talking about? What have you done, Yuu?" Akira's imagination was suddenly on overdrive, thinking terrifying things. Maybe Yuu was sick and dying. Maybe he was contagious and had infected both Akira and Joji? Maybe he lost his job, and they would be kicked to the streets? Akira didn't know what to think as he stared at Yuu, waiting for him to answer.

"I've done something terrible. I've..." Yuu trailed off, dropping his gaze, but not before Akira saw guilt in his eyes.

"NO! You didn't! You cheated on us?!" Akira had jumped up, nearly knocking Joji to the floor and then started pacing, his anger overwhelming. "How could you do that to Joji? I understand you no longer want me, no longer love me. But Joji? He doesn't deserve such pain." Akira was shouting, but he stopped and scooped Joji into his arms because the smaller man had started sobbing. He turned to glare at Yuu and saw such dismay and shock in his face, his anger drained away. Oh, he was still pissed, but he just didn't have the energy to yell at Yuu and comfort Joji at the same time. Joji was more important right now.

"I didn't cheat! This has nothing to do with sex! Do you remember Corrigan?"

Akira was surprised by the question. What did a homophobic, asshole jock from their high school days have to do with anything? His eyes widened suddenly. "Oh, God. Yuu!! You've been with him? You've been..." Akira couldn't even finish his sentence. The idea of his lover in the arms of that... that... well... Akira didn't think he had a strong enough word to describe what Corrigan Matthews was. Akira was further surprised to see tears trailing down

Yuu's face. Yuu didn't cry... ever. But then, Yuu had cheated on Akira and Joji. That it hurt the man was somewhat satisfying to Akira.

"No, no, you don't understand. Let me explain. *Please*." Yuu covered his face with his hands, his shoulders hunched forward like he was going to get hit. Akira wasn't going to touch him, even though he felt like beating the shit out of Yuu for being so stupid, for being uncaring and reckless. For causing such pain for both Akira and Joji.

"He started working at the dojo, got Mr. Miyamoto to trust him. I tried to tell Mr. Miyamoto that Corrigan was no good, that he was... was—Well, Mr. Miyamoto didn't believe me. One day Corrigan caught me in the alley behind the dojo and cornered me against a wall. He threatened... he threatened both of you if I didn't do exactly what he wanted. He knew where you both worked... knew where we lived. He... he... started demanding things, saying things... made me pay him money... every day to stay away from you and Joji... I had to... I had to pay him or he was going to hurt you and he was... was... well, he said exactly how he'd hurt you, too."

Akira's chest was aching; Yuu's voice had gotten thick with emotion and... fear. Jesus, but Akira never thought he'd see the day when Yuu was that afraid. He'd been watching Yuu the whole time he spoke, searching for deceit, but it was abundantly clear that Yuu was telling the truth. No one could be that convincing, and Akira knew Yuu too well, knew he was a lousy liar to begin with. That was why it was so easy for Akira to look at Yuu and know something was wrong.

"He... he told me that something bad would happen to you and Joji if I didn't... didn't pay what he wanted, said he'd get his cousin to... to..." Yuu paused, obviously struggling with his words. "I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let him touch either of you. I had to protect you both. I love you both so much, and I couldn't stop him any other way than to let him have what he wanted."

The last few sentences from Yuu came out fast and almost garbled with tears. Joji pulled from Akira's embrace and hurried to Yuu's side. He wrapped his thin body around their lover, murmuring reassurance. Akira was torn between wanting to comfort Yuu and wanting to smack him upside the head for thinking that what he'd done was the only solution. "Yuu..."

“Yuu, son.”

Akira whirled to see his father standing in the doorway to the study. The rage that colored his father's face almost made Akira take a step back. Never had he seen his father so angry. Yuu had stood quickly, Joji still clinging to him, and hung his head in front of Akira's father, his shame easy to see.

“Yuu, my boy. This has to stop. I will not have you enduring such humiliation to protect my son and Joji. It is illegal what this Corrigan person is doing. You will go to the police and explain. You will stop this immediately.”

Mr. Ishida turned and looked at Akira and gave a slight nod before turning back to Yuu and clearing his throat.

“Yuu, look at me.”

Akira's heart ached as Yuu raised his head to stare at Akira's father. He looked so... defeated, that Akira wanted to wrap him up in cotton and hide him away. He turned to his father when he began to speak.

“And you will stop thinking that Akira and Joji are unable to defend themselves. Akira is strong and smart. He is not helpless and can protect both himself and Joji. And our little Joji is a clever fellow and sneaky. You must trust them.”

Akira looked back at Yuu to see his reaction, his face still red with shame and embarrassment. He knew Yuu's pride would make it difficult for his lover to explain to the authorities what had been happening, but Akira's father was right. This had to stop. It was tearing his small family apart, and Akira would not lose Yuu and Joji to some redneck, bigoted moron from their past. They were older now, better able to take care of themselves and not be at the mercy of some bully. “Yuu.” Akira hesitantly walked forward, not sure of his reception. He gave a sob of relief when Yuu pulled him close and hugged him tight, burying his face in the juncture of Akira's neck and shoulder.

“I am so sorry, my 'Kira. So sorry.”

The whispered words caused warmth to spread through Akira's body, thawing the cold knot that had taken over his stomach, making him whole again. Yuu still loved him! Akira held Yuu close, thankful to finally know

what had caused Yuu to act so strangely. He smiled when Joji's arms came around them both.

EPILOGUE

Akira looked up in surprise when Yuu came barreling into the house much sooner than usual on a work day. “What’s wrong?” Akira squeaked when Yuu picked him up and swung him around, before putting him back on his feet and kissing him soundly. Breathless, Akira staggered when Yuu broke the kiss and grinned at him. “What’s going on, Yuu?”

Akira saw Joji come into the kitchen from the corner of his eye, a puzzled look on his beautiful face, but a smile, too. Yuu saw their lover and dragging Akira along, snagged Joji around the waist and crushed them both to his chest.

“He’s been convicted and sentenced! They’ve given him the maximum allowed by the law!”

Akira whooped, hugging Yuu tightly in celebration. Joji started prancing and dancing around the room, his giggles contagious. Before long they were all piled on the couch, giggles ebbing into chuckles that finally merged into silence. All three of them stared intently into each others’ eyes.

“I love you both so much.”

Yuu was the first to speak, and Akira could feel happy tears filling his eyes as he and Joji echoed the words. Yuu leaned forward and gave Akira a deep, passion-filled kiss then turned and gave one to Joji, too. It didn’t take long for clothes to start flying and three men, very much in love with each other, flew naked down the hall to their bed.

THE END

Author Bio

CR Guiliano is an avid reader, which logically morphed into the love of writing. CR writes in many genres, but is most happy writing the love between two men (or more!). She makes them work for their HEA and considers herself an expert in Angst.

You will usually find CR cuddled up to her laptop, grumbling about her day job wasting her writing time and creating stories to entertain, inspire and bring your emotions to the surface. CR has a huge warren of plot bunnies that is growing every day and can't wait to fill out the story ideas and share them.

CR is a committed advocate for the GLBT community and does her best to change society's attitudes, one mind at a time.

Contact & Media Info

You can learn more about CR Guiliano and her stories at the following locations:

[Email](#) | [Author Blog](#) | [Works-in-progress blog](#)

[Facebook Author Page](#) | [Facebook](#)

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OFF SIDES

By **Dianne Hartsock**

Photo Description

The picture is a close-up of three men in a grass field, the leanly muscled blond leaning back into the arms of a brunet who is kissing his neck and running his hands over his naked chest. The second brunet kneels at his feet, lowering the blond's boxers while his lips trail kisses down his body. Their eyes are closed, passion on their faces. The blond is gasping, anticipating those burning lips reaching their destination.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Austin and Riley have been together since high school. They've always loved each other and knew they'd spend the rest of their lives together. But when they started playing soccer in college they met a sexy blond named Luke who, as far as they know, is the stereotypical conservative rich kid with the perfect GPA (aka the stuck-up straight guy).

Please tell us their story and how this perfect couple became three.

Sincerely,

Kaylee

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athlete, college, first time, bullying, homophobia, m/m/m, masturbation

Word count: 10,356

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OFF SIDES

By Dianne Hartsock

CHAPTER ONE

Luke pushed through the locker room doors, letting them slam shut behind him with a satisfying *thunk* that echoed off the tiled showers. Goddamn Gabe. Two weeks until playoffs, and his forward and supposed ace-in-the-hole player was letting his game slip. It was already Wednesday and Gabe probably hadn't stepped foot on a soccer field all week.

His gaze shot across the room at a burst of jeering laughter from the group gathered at the showers. Shit. The toughness that made Gabe a killer on the field also made him dangerous to cross and a fucking bully to the less skillful players on the team. In Gabe's mind, that pretty much included everyone.

Luke couldn't see who the target was this time, and skirted the upright lockers. Riley, his new left back, stood under a shower rinsing shampoo from his hair as if he couldn't hear the vicious remarks being aimed at him. Luke groaned, not only for the harassment but also at the way his dick jumped as he watched the white suds slide down a slim back towards a sweet little ass.

He jerked his head up at Gabe's words. "And the little faggot can't kick a ball more than ten feet. Don't know why Ackley let him on the team in the first place."

What the *hell*? Luke clenched his hands and stepped up to the group, glaring at Gabe. "Shut your mouth."

Gabe gave him a startled look, a slow sneer crossing his ruddy face. "Or what? You know his playing sucks. As captain, I'd think you'd be happy to be rid of the queer and his equally pathetic boyfriend."

"Jesus, Gabe. Shut that hole in your face already," a voice called from the sink area.

"Yeah, McKenzie? You want to come over here and make me, you queer-lover?"

Luke made a lunge for Gabe just as a bellow swivelled all eyes to the door. “What’s going on here? Gabe, get your sorry ass to my office. The rest of you, five minutes to clear the locker room or I’ll suspend the lot of you.”

“Sorry Coach,” Luke called, breathing hard while he fought the urge to kick Gabe’s ass anyway.

Gabe scowled. “This isn’t over, Parsons,” he hissed to Luke as he brushed past him. Luke watched his retreating back, then looked at the guys milling around him, trying to gauge their reaction. Tim McKenzie nodded his red head but no one else met his gaze. Some stripped and quickly showered, but most simply threw on their clothes and left. Luke sighed. He’d worked all season to bring them together as a team, but he wasn’t sure how to deal with this new hurdle.

He chewed his lips, working on the puzzle as he removed his sweat-drenched uniform and stepped under the shower. God, the water felt fantastic on his aching shoulders. He listened to the quiet murmurs behind him and the closing of the locker room doors. Thinking himself alone, he turned under the hot spray, surprised to see his new teammates sitting on the bench by their locker.

For just an instant he allowed his hungry gaze to travel over them. Riley’s brown hair clung damply to his head, already curling on the ends. He’d dressed and was holding his socks while Austin spoke quietly to him. Riley’s shoulders slumped at something he said, and Austin touched his back, drew Riley against his shoulder. Luke held his breath, wondering if they’d kiss. God, he wanted to see them kiss. He’d caught them making out the other day behind the gym and had almost come at the erotic sight of touching tongues and lips and roving hands.

Stifling a groan, he faced the green-tiled walls again, wondering how to hide his fat erection from their eyes. He couldn’t stay there forever. Maybe they’d leave soon. He remembered their kiss and suddenly ached to have those plump lips on him, on his mouth and dick.

Pain twisted through him and he put a fist against the wall, rested his head on his arm to let the hot shower spray run down his back. He couldn’t be attracted to those gorgeous guys. His parents wouldn’t accept it. His father

sure as hell wouldn't accept a gay son. A little more than a year of school to go. He had to hang on and graduate. After that, well, he could fuck anyone he wanted. But until then, his old man held the purse strings and Luke had to dance to the straight-as-an-arrow path expected of him.

The silence stretched out in the locker room. Had they left? He glanced over his shoulder and lost his breath. They stood with their arms around each other, both sets of pretty eyes on him. Tension built between them, thick and heavy in the humid air. His cock throbbed in sympathy. Could they tell? Did they sense how hot he was for them?

He faced the tiled wall again. "Go away," he muttered, and hoped they took the gruffness in his voice for anger and not the aching lust that pulsed through him. He winced at Riley's small gasp. Damn, he hadn't meant to hurt him, not after Gabe's cruelty.

An apology was on the tip of his tongue, but the two guys were already heading across the locker room when he turned around. Austin opened the door for Riley and they strolled out without a backward glance. Probably for the best. He looked down at his thick cock pointing toward the door they'd left by.

"You and me both," he murmured, and ran a finger down the thick vein on the underside of his dick. He'd dated a few girls, for appearances, but it was a guy's mouth he wanted on him, fantasized about for as long as he could remember. Which one would it be, though? He shivered suddenly. Could he have both of them?

Shit. He wanted to grip his cock, work out his frustration in a furious hand fuck. But at a rattle and the sound of voices at the door, he quickly turned off the water and wrapped a towel around his slim waist. Time to get to physics class anyway.

Nodding to the guys he knew as the JV soccer team crowded in for practice, Luke dressed, not feeling safe until his inconvenient erection was tucked into faded jeans. Slinging his backpack over a shoulder, he checked his reflection in the small mirror he kept in his locker. Short blond hair, blue eyes, red tank top over a muscular chest. No body art. The clean-cut American boy. Sometimes he felt the image was strangling him.

He shoved open the heavy locker room doors and stepped outside, squinting in the sudden sunlight. The weather had grown warm for spring and he puzzled out how to keep the team hydrated during the grueling playoff games. Water, for sure. Sunscreen. Maybe healthy snacks...

The library clock chimed and Luke picked up his pace, cutting across the oak grove to save time. It was cool in the science building and Luke shivered at the change in temperature. The hallway was nearly deserted, but at least the door to the lecture hall hadn't been locked. He carefully closed the heavy door behind him when he entered the room and took the nearest chair. His heart jumped when he realized he sat next to Riley. The pretty brunet glanced at him and smiled shyly, blushing when Luke impulsively smiled back.

Luke sighed and opened his book, flipping through the pages to find the chapter the professor was covering that day. Riley had a sweetness to him that Luke found almost irresistible. How was he going to maintain his image as a straight shooter when all he wanted to do was pull Riley onto his lap and kiss those very kissable lips? He glanced up at a slight cough and caught Austin's startling blue gaze on him as the guy leaned around Riley. Austin's grin caught him off guard, a punch in the stomach. He lost his breath as the blue eyes warmed.

Luke tore his gaze back to his book and groaned silently, dick hard as a rock. Why now? He'd gotten through nearly twenty-one years of life without falling in love. What was so special about these two? Sure, they were lovely, but there were a lot of attractive people on campus.

He bit his lip when Riley leaned toward him, breath warm on his cheek. "We're on page a hundred ten. Second example. Take notes. Professor says it will be on the quiz."

"Thanks." Luke flipped to the desired page, pretending Riley's hand on his arm wasn't making the blood pound through his veins. Riley's hold tightened and Luke turned his head. His reluctance must have been obvious because Riley snatched his hand back, confusion sweeping his face.

Austin put an arm across his shoulder. "Never mind, honey," he said, loud enough for Luke to hear. "Guess he's not interested in a couple of queers like us."

“But you said...”

Austin met Luke's gaze, questioning. Luke let his mask fall into place. Much as he ached to haul Austin from his chair, pin him to the wall and ravage that hot mouth, he couldn't risk it.

His heart twisted at the hurt in Austin's eyes and the slight tremor in his voice when he spoke, “Guess I was wrong, baby.”

Luke stared at his text book until the numbers blurred. It wasn't fair! For an instant he was ready to throw it all away, his school career, his future dreams, everything, to snatch at the happiness the lovers offered him. But cold reality reminded him that without his father's support it would be years before he could graduate. And without Father's backing he would be hard pressed to get the position he wanted as a Civil Engineer in the city. Shit.

Smothering a sigh, Luke set his lips in a firm line. He'd sacrificed a lot to get this far, a few more years of loneliness wouldn't kill him. He picked up his pencil and tried to focus on the professor's droning voice rather than Riley's tempting presence at his side.

CHAPTER TWO

Luke adjusted the heavy backpack on his shoulder as he crossed the oak grove toward the campus coffee shop. It had been a grueling couple of hours in Physics and he looked forward to something cool and sweet and full of caffeine. He supposed he should be grateful Austin and Riley had left the crowded room immediately after class, but it stung that they hadn't said anything to him when they skirted his chair. All for the best. *Yeah, right.*

He slowed as he approached the crowded shop. Small groups gathered on the patio, chatting, while a line wound its way inside the popular coffee spot. He winced slightly at the young couple pressed into the corner of the building, hands and tongues exploring each other. He couldn't remember the last passionate kiss he'd shared with anyone.

Disheartened, he found an empty table under an oak tree and flung his pack down. Sitting on the bench, he folded his arms on the table and rested his chin on his forearm. The late afternoon sun was losing its warmth and the dirt under his feet was still damp from last night's rain. He longed for summer's heat and a few weeks of vacation where he could get the hell away for a while.

He thought of going somewhere with miles of white sand and blue ocean. A grin curled his lips as he imagined his pale boyfriends lying next to him. His smile widened. He'd have to invest in a large beach umbrella. Especially for Riley. It would be a sin to mar that lovely porcelain complexion.

He groaned into his arms, imagining Austin's sleek limbs in nothing but a skimpy Speedo, his silky skin turning golden in the sunshine, and a light sheen of sweat covering his leanly muscled chest. Luke ached to run his tongue between Austin's pecs, circle each dark nub with his lips. In his mind, he glanced down Austin's body and was jolted with lust at the bulge under the red swimsuit. *Oh god!* He wanted that cock in his mouth, shoving between his lips. He'd never done that, though it was front and center in every one of his fantasies.

He jumped and quickly raised his head when someone sat on the bench opposite him. He blinked stupidly at Austin, and sat up, yawning to hide his

confusion. “Must have dozed off,” he mumbled, blinking away the image of Austin’s face in ecstasy as Luke sucked his dick. His own cock pushed painfully against his zipper. Thank god the table hid the obvious from Austin’s view.

Austin laughed, and the friendly sound sent a pleasant shiver along Luke’s spine. He quirked a brow when Austin placed a cold drink at his elbow. “I saw you sitting over here and thought I’d bring you something. Riley told me how you stood up for him in the locker room earlier. Thank you.”

Luke nodded, distracted by the thickness of Austin’s lashes around the bluest eyes he’d ever seen. He gathered his scattered thoughts with an effort and took a sip from the plastic cup. “Peppermint! You remembered.”

“With extra chocolate and a shot of espresso. You buy the same thing every time you come in, love.”

“I’m still surprised you remember, with all the customers you get.”

Something flickered in Austin’s eyes and he held Luke’s gaze, lips parting as if he were about to say something. A shout behind them calling Luke’s name shattered the moment. Luke glanced over his shoulder and groaned under his breath. They *would* have to pick that moment to walk by. And fuck almighty, Patricia Sloan was with them. Awesome.

“Hey Luke.” Tim McKenzie stopped at the table, an arm around a willowy blonde. He nodded at Austin, who smiled back. There were a few other guys from the soccer team and also a couple from Luke’s Calculus class, who nodded as they walked by with a mix of girls. Tim waved them on. “We’re heading to the Wrap Shack for a bite. Want to come?”

“Can’t. Still have a chapter to read for ecology tonight.”

“You have to eat, don’t you?” Patricia had lingered and the tall brunette now put a hand on Luke’s shoulder. The warmth of her body spiced with a musky perfume teased his senses into remembering their one night together. He wrinkled his nose, wishing he could scrub the incident from his mind.

“Hey Patricia. What’s up?” he asked, to be polite.

“Hopefully you.” She bent and nuzzled his ear. “Can I help with that?”

He jerked his head away. "Fighting with Bobby again?"

"Don't be a prick." Her full lips drooped into a pout. "You never called me."

Luke swallowed a scathing remark. "You didn't bother to tell me you had a boyfriend, Patricia. I think we're even."

"Call me anyway. I know you miss this." She grabbed his chin, turning his head to crush their mouths together in a hard kiss. "I'm free tonight."

"Jesus, Pat. Come on." Tim gripped her elbow and tugged her after the others who were waiting some distance away. "Sorry," he mouthed to Luke, rolling his eyes when Patricia whined to be let go.

Luke rubbed his face after they'd left, embarrassed to meet Austin's keen glance. Sure, he'd been lonely and she'd been willing, but he'd felt like shit afterwards. At least he'd had enough sense to use a condom. He'd found out the hard way that sex without love wasn't for him. Better to be celibate than go through that again.

"Is that who everyone says you're dating?"

Luke's head shot up at the laughter in Austin's voice. A grin tugged his mouth at the merriment sparkling in his blue eyes. "We went out one time! I realized it was a mistake, but Patricia acts like we were in love or something." His smile slipped. "Got myself tested afterwards. Who knows where she's been? Still squeaky clean. But now I can't figure out how to get rid of her."

"I know how." Austin leaned toward him as if to tell a secret. Luke flushed, warmth spreading through him as Austin's breath fanned his face. "Want me to tell you?"

Suddenly, Luke wasn't sure. A shiver ran through him. Austin's plump lips were mere inches from his own. He only had to move his head slightly to reach them. *Oh god.* He wanted this, needed Austin in his arms, wrapped around him. Fuck the future. There was only here and now...

A frantic shout brought them both to their feet. Tim McKenzie stood by the coffee shop waving wildly. "Hurry!"

Without a question Luke grabbed up his pack and sprinted after Austin.

The urgency in Tim's voice had his heart thumping. Something was definitely wrong. Tim never lost his cool, even in the heat of a fierce soccer match.

"It's Gabe. He's completely lost it..." Tim fell into step beside them and led them around the corner of the building. Luke slowed, unable to believe the scene before him. Gabe had Riley pinned to the brick wall by a hand to his throat. Blood trickled from Riley's cut lip and a hand print shown bright red on his white face.

Gabe raised his fist again and Austin launched at him, tackling the larger guy to the ground. He rolled, but Gabe was quick, his knee catching Austin in the side. Something inside Luke snapped at Austin's grunt of pain. He strode over to where Gabe struggled to his knees and swung his heavy pack at his head. The blow smashed Gabe to the cement, but with a roar he started to his feet again.

Luke kicked him in the back then knelt and wrapped an arm around Gabe's neck, restricting his air. Gabe fought him and Luke tightened his hold. "Stop struggling or I swear to God I'll snap your neck."

Gabe must have sensed his cold fury and stilled, breath wheezing. Luke heard Riley's muffled sobs behind him and for just an instant cut off Gabe's air. He instantly loosened his arm, frightened by his blind rage.

"Tim, has Campus Security been called?" he asked, voice shaky.

"They're on their way."

At that moment two uniformed men trotted up. Luke left Tim to explain what had happened; refusing to let Gabe up until one of the guards had him by the arm. As he let him go Luke put his mouth to Gabe's ear. He wrinkled his nose at the scent of sweat and fear rolling off him. "Touch either of them again and next time I won't stop," he promised. Gabe grunted, hanging his head as the security team led him through the group of people that had gathered.

"Show's over," Tim called dryly, and made shooing motions until the crowd broke up.

Luke held out his hand. "Thanks, Tim. What set Gabe off?"

"He was bitching about the trouble he got into with coach earlier. Riley

had the misfortune to walk by just then and Gabe didn't even speak to him, just backhanded him in the face. That's when I ran for you guys."

Luke nodded, his attention on Austin where he knelt with Riley. Riley's face was buried against his shoulder while Austin whispered in his ear. As if feeling his gaze, Austin glanced up at him.

"Is he all right?" Luke asked, concerned.

"I'll take him to the cafeteria for ice."

Luke knelt beside them and put a gentle finger under Riley's chin, turning his face. Tears glimmered in Riley's beautiful hazel eyes and the swollen cheek was already beginning to bruise. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Riley whispered, and stood up with Austin's help. He absently brushed at the blood on his chin, tonguing the cut on the corner of his lip. He glanced down and horror jumped on his face. "Oh God, Austin."

"What is it?" Luke saw Austin's hold tighten protectively around Riley.

"This is Mom's jacket. She's gonna kill me."

"We can try to rinse it out..." Austin suggested, voice bleak.

Luke eyed the smear of blood on the denim jacket hugging Riley's slim chest. "Blood's hard to get out, but surely she'll understand—"

Austin turned on him, eyes blazing. "You don't know anything about it! Shut up and let me think."

"She's home early today, Austin."

Austin's shoulders slumped and he put his cheek against Riley's. "Jesus. I'm sorry, honey. I wish you didn't have to go home."

Luke looked at them, totally confused, worried. "I don't understand. I thought Riley lived with you."

Anguish twisted Austin's features. "Don't you think I want to take care of him? Keep him safe? But his mom hates me and I only make things worse. But I can't afford—" A sob choked off his words. "God, Luke! Go away. Go back to your fancy dorm and girlfriends and Daddy's money. You can't begin to imagine what our life is like."

Luke sucked in his breath, feeling like he'd been slapped in the face. Austin turned his back and urged Riley towards the cafeteria. Luke watched them walk away, heart aching as if he'd lost something precious he hadn't even known he'd had.

He jumped a little at a touch on his arm and glanced into Tim's discerning eyes. "Want to tell me what's going on?"

Luke groaned. "I'm in so much trouble here I can't begin to tell you."

"Come on. I'll buy you a sandwich and you can tell me all about it before class."

"Okay." Luke sighed and picked up his backpack.

They walked in silence for a moment until Tim made a thoughtful sound. "Riley should have that contusion on his face looked at. Make sure his eye wasn't damaged."

Luke chuckled despite the gnawing worry in his gut. Tim was a pre-med student and saw danger in every cut and scrape. "I got a close look. He'll be fine. Now stop being the doctor and come play psychologist and tell me how crazy I am."

"With pleasure." Tim slung an encouraging arm around his shoulders as they approached the crowded Wrap Shack on the corner.

CHAPTER THREE

Luke paced his room, wired, anxious. It had been hard sitting through his Ecology class and it was torture now, wanting to call Austin but not sure how he'd be received. *Damn.* Riley had sounded so frightened about that damned coat. He paused at a window and stared at the lawn two stories down. There was still about an hour of sunlight. Maybe he should look Riley's address up on the soccer roster and head over there...

He sighed and crossed the room, throwing himself down on the bed. God, how many times in the last couple years had he stared at those same damn cracks in the ceiling? Too many fucking lonely times, that's what. He thought of Riley's scared eyes and wanted him here, tucked safely in his arms. He wanted to feel Riley's heartbeat against his own. He'd kiss his full lips, daring gentle, deep probes of his tongue into Riley's sweet mouth.

Austin would be there, pushed against Riley's back, trapping him securely between them. Austin would nuzzle Riley's neck, making him giggle into Luke's mouth. Riley could roll into Austin's arms so Luke could see them kiss, see Austin's tongue circle Riley's lips before plunging into his honeyed depths.

Luke moaned, feeling that tongue all the way to his swelling cock. He continued the fantasy, burrowing between the lovers to bite and lick at the tiny nubs on Riley's chest, loving his soft gasps and the way he squirmed in obvious pleasure. Austin's fingers skimmed down Riley's body and Luke's lips followed, kissing a trail down Riley's flat stomach. Luke's cock ached as he imagined the length and taste of Riley's dick in his mouth.

His phone buzzed, startling Luke from the dream, and he scrambled from the bed to snatch it off the dresser. His heart jumped when he saw Austin's name. "Hello?"

Austin sounded distraught, his voice choked with tears. "Luke, can you come? Please? We need you."

"I'll be right there. Where are you?"

“By the river, south corner of the park. *Hurry.*”

“On my way.”

Shoving the phone in his jeans, Luke snatched up his keys and wallet and dashed from his room. He took the stairs two at a time, ignoring the shouts from his roommates as he slammed out the front door and sprinted for his car. Austin’s words from earlier stung. His mother had bought Luke the hybrid the day he started college. He’d never had to do without in his life. Maybe it was time to start.

It took only minutes to circle the campus and reach the large park by the lake. Parking in the first empty spot he came to, Luke jumped from the car and loped across the parking lot to the grassy field. Crossing at a quick jog, Luke slowed as he reached the tree line. The evening light was dimmer under the evergreen limbs, forcing him to slow to a walk, though his heart pounded at the delay.

He reached the lake and squinted in the brilliant light glinting off the surface as the sun lowered on the horizon.

“Luke.”

His gaze jerked to the left and found Austin several yards away, looking defeated. Riley perched on a rock beside him, knees drawn up under his chin as he faced the water. Luke hurried to them, a twist of fear in his chest when he saw Austin’s tearstained face.

“What?”

Austin swallowed as if finding it difficult to speak. “Riley’s hurt and I... I don’t know what to do. I had no one else to call...” His voice broke and his face scrunched with pain, looking suddenly very young and scared.

Luke put a hand on his shoulder, gave it a gentle squeeze. “I’m here, honey. Let’s see what we can do.” His face heated, realizing he’d said the endearment out loud. But that was how he’d begun to think of them.

He took a step closer to Riley and bit back a cry, shocked. Blood oozed from cuts on his forearms, long thin lines in the pale skin. Panic surged through him. “He needs an ambulance!”

“No,” Austin said at his side, voice tired, sad. “He does that sometimes.”

For the first time Luke noticed the web of fine scars running the length of Riley’s slender arms. His heart ached but also stirred with anger, all his protective instincts coming to the forefront.

“Look at his back,” Austin begged.

Luke winced, feeling Austin’s agony as his own. He leaned over Riley and touched the hem of his shirt. “May I?”

Riley made no answer, his face a sleepy mask, heavy lidded, lined with pain. Luke swallowed his tears and gently raised Riley’s shirt. *Christ!* Perfectly round bruises, the size of fists, ran his back, and his whole right side was purple with ugly contusions. Kicked, maybe...

Fury swamped Luke’s senses for a second, but he shoved it away. Only Riley mattered.

“What happened?” he growled, and clenched his teeth.

“His fucking mother drinks, and when we couldn’t get the bloodstains out of her coat... Oh, god, Luke! What do I do? I can’t protect him.”

Austin covered his face, hiding his anguish, and Luke’s chaotic thoughts suddenly stilled, knowing what he had to do.

“I’ll take Riley home with me for now. No way in hell will he go back to that bitch.”

Austin shot him a startled look, and then nodded at whatever he saw in Luke’s face. Luke gently lowered Riley’s shirt and without a word scooped him up into his arms. Riley gasped and flung arms around his neck, blinking his pretty eyes, bewildered. Luke chuckled, hefting him a little higher against his chest.

“You’re heavier than you look,” he said fondly, and despite the circumstances, enjoyed Riley’s soft blush. He nodded to Austin. “My car’s right up front.”

Luke’s arms were straining by the time they reached the parking lot, but he wouldn’t have traded this moment with his boys for anything. Riley smelled

wonderful, clean sweat and apricot shampoo. “Keys are in my left front pocket,” he told Austin, voice muffled against Riley’s neck. He couldn’t help a soft moan at the touch on his back and the fingers slipping down the front of his jeans.

Austin slid into the back seat and Luke handed Riley in to him. “We’ll be at my place in a minute,” he said, and closed the door. He took his place behind the wheel and glanced over his shoulder at them. A smile tugged at his lips. Riley had his head in Austin’s lap, and was smiling up at him. Austin brushed the hair from Riley’s eyes with a face so full of love Luke’s heart ached at the beauty of it. The ache spread to longing. Would Austin ever look at him that way? He hoped to God yes.

He drove with extreme caution to the house he rented with five other guys. The old Victorian home boasted five bedrooms and two guest baths, though Luke paid extra for the master bedroom with its own private bath. He pulled his Civic Hybrid to the curb and quickly climbed out.

Riley had fallen asleep on the short drive, and Luke lifted him once again into his arms.

“Go right in. Bedroom’s at the top of the stairs, first door on the left,” he instructed Austin as he followed him to the front door, its stained glass window sparkling in the last of the sunlight. They crossed the hardwood foyer and began climbing the oak steps just as someone came out of the living room.

Tim McKenzie gaped on seeing them. “Oh my God, Luke. What happened now?”

“Tell you in a minute. Can you grab the first aid kit for me?”

“Sure thing.”

Tim disappeared through another doorway and Luke hurried up the stairs as his arms tired, relieved to let Riley down on his bed. He sat on the edge of the mattress to catch his breath. Austin’s fingers felt wonderful as they threaded through his damp hair and Luke raised his face, warmth spreading through him at the humor and admiration in Austin’s blue eyes.

“My hero,” Austin murmured, and Luke’s heart jolted at his wicked smile. He leaned in for a kiss, biting his lip in disappointment when Tim burst into the room.

“So what do we have?” Tim asked in a no-nonsense tone, placing the plastic kit on Luke’s dresser and opening the many compartments.

“There are washcloths in the bathroom,” Luke said. He touched Austin’s arm, leaned close. “Can you ask Riley to undress? I’d like Tim to look him over. If he suspects any internal injuries we’ll call the emergency services.”

Austin nodded, and Luke left them to help Tim gather the wet washcloths and a towel. Tim looked at him expectantly when they entered the small bathroom.

“There’s a few cuts on his arms that will need to be cleaned,” Luke told him, and suddenly fought down the urge to be sick. “Tim, his mother beat him black and blue. Not for the first time, I gather. Christ, please see if he’s okay.”

“Hey, I’m sure he’s fine. You wouldn’t have been able to carry him without causing a lot of pain if there’d been any serious damage done. Let me check him over, then take him to the campus clinic in the morning, just to be sure.”

Luke rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m so angry! And worried. I can’t think straight.”

Tim squeezed his shoulder. “Totally understandable. Come on, let’s see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Tim.” Luke swallowed the tightness in his throat and followed Tim into the bedroom. Austin rose from where he’d been sitting on the bed holding Riley’s hand. Luke’s gaze raked over Riley and he caught back an angry cry. The purple and black contusions on his left side wrapped around to the front, discoloring his ribs and the sleek muscles of his chest. Luke glanced over black boxer briefs and sighed in relief when he didn’t see any marks on his slim legs.

He looked into Riley’s face, noting the dark circles under his eyes. “Can you sit up?” he asked gently, and slipped an arm behind Riley’s back when he nodded. Luke raised him carefully and Austin slid a pillow behind him.

“Thank you,” Riley whispered against his cheek. Luke nodded, lingering with Riley’s naked body against him, taking a moment to breathe in the heady

scent of his skin. He had to force his gaze away from the sweet bulge in Riley's underwear and felt the heat rush to his face when he glanced up and caught Austin's smirk. He stepped back and let Tim take his place.

Tim sat on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he touched along the dark bruises on Riley's chest and side, lingering on the spots that brought a hiss from Riley's pale lips.

"I'm okay. Tired."

"Lack of blood will do that," Tim said dryly, and dabbed at the injured forearms with a wet washcloth. "This might sting," he cautioned and spread a healing lotion over the angry lines in the pale skin. Riley bit his lip and Luke watched a trickle of sweat drip from his forehead to his trembling chin.

"Are you done?" he asked, hurting for Riley's pain.

"Almost. I want to check his lungs, then he can sleep."

Luke waited in agony while Tim pulled his stethoscope from a pocket and listened to Riley's chest, front and back. He'd never tease his friend again for carrying the thing around.

"Sounds clear, but Riley, you should really have a doctor look at you in the morning. There might be something I missed."

"He'll go. Thanks, Tim." Luke pretended not to notice the three sets of eyes that swiveled to him in surprise. Maybe he was going all dominant male on them, but right then he really didn't give a shit. His friends needed help and he'd see they got it. They could be mad if they wanted...

Austin put a hand on the small of Luke's back, calming the chaos of emotions churning in his stomach. He realized he must have been scowling when Austin peered into his face and smiled. "Hey. Riley's going to be okay. Aren't you, babe?"

"Yeah. I'm just tired," Riley assured them. His large yawn proved it.

"I'm going then." Tim gathered the first aid kit.

"Thanks, man," Luke said, and the others echoed him. He sat on the edge of the bed after Tim left and picked up Riley's hand, suddenly self-conscious.

He gently ran a finger beside one of the ragged cuts on his arm, then lifted his hand and pressed a kiss to his warm palm. "You scared me," he murmured, not meeting Riley's gaze.

"I'm sorry."

Luke looked up and almost drowned in the warmth in Riley's hazel eyes.

"Promise me you won't go back to that house."

"But..."

"You'll stay here for a few days until we figure something out." He wasn't going to argue about this.

Riley blinked, and a soft flush colored his cheeks. "If that's what you want."

"It is." He stood up and pulled back the blankets. "Climb in," he said with a grin. He liked having Riley in his bed, and took his time tucking the blankets snug around his slim body. He kissed his forehead, his heart swelling when Riley's eyelids fluttered closed. He caressed his cheek with a finger, then sighed under his breath and joined Austin where he leaned against the dresser watching them.

"Do you want to stay with him? The bed's big enough. I have a sleeping bag in the closet I can use tonight." He bit his lip, heart pounding when Austin didn't answer. He couldn't read the expression in his blue eyes and wondered if he'd crossed a line somewhere.

"I just want to help," he started to explain; beginning to wish he'd kept his mouth shut.

Austin straightened and stepped closer to him, lightly brushing Luke's lips with his own. "I know. Thank you." He coughed slightly, clearing his throat. "You don't know how many times I had to watch him enter that house when I wanted to keep him somewhere safe. You're a good friend."

Luke frowned at a thought. "Is there anyone else to worry about? Brothers or sisters?"

"No. It's always just been him and his mom. Have no idea where the father is. Left them a long time ago."

Luke nodded. “What’s your schedule tomorrow? We can borrow Riley’s house key and get his stuff when his mom’s at work.”

A slow smile spread across Austin’s face. “Shit, Luke. No one’s wanted to help us before. I owe you. How about after soccer practice?”

“Sounds good.”

Luke went to the closet for his sleeping bag and tried not to listen to the rustle of the bed sheets and Austin and Riley’s intimate whispers behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Luke stretched a kink from his back. What time was it? He glanced over his shoulder at the clock on the dresser and scowled. Only six o'clock? He didn't have to get up for another couple hours. Why was he awake...

His heart jolted at a breathy sigh, barely discernible in the darkness. *Riley*. He couldn't imagine Austin making a sound even when he came, if he didn't want to. He rolled to his side, away from the bed and scrunched down into the sleeping bag. They were so quiet! He had to give them that. But sometimes bodies made sounds of their own, the whisper of a kiss, the rasp of skin over skin, an involuntary moan.

A breath caught in the quiet room, and then Riley's groan, full of ecstasy and love, betrayed his orgasm. Luke squeezed his eyes shut. *Oh God!* He wanted to climb into bed with them. He wanted Riley's moans of pleasure in his own mouth.

He jumped at a low grunt and sigh from Austin. Shit, that did it. Luke plunged a hand into his boxers and pulled on his aching cock. What would it be like to be in bed with them, tangled limbs, sweat and spit and cum slicking their skin? He wanted to fuck Riley. Shit yes! He'd wrap that firm, sleek body in his arms, Riley's strong legs hugging his hips, Luke's hard cock slathered with lube pushing slowly into his hot hole. What would that be like? Heat and tightness and Riley's moans of pleasure when he struck his prostate, feeling his own orgasm building as he plunged into Riley again and again.

Luke smiled wickedly into his pillow, knowing as he fucked Riley that Austin, watching, would want to join them. He was pretty sure Austin wanted to top him. Did Luke want to be fucked? He wasn't sure. He'd never had anything bigger than his own fingers in there. There'd be pain, but if he'd been stretched...

Oh God! He knew how Austin's fingers would feel circling his hole, pushing at the tight muscles. One would slip in, another. He knew Austin would take his time, maybe kissing him while he stretched Luke one direction then the opposite, opening him up. Maybe Riley would lick his dick, suck the pre-cum. Riley's fingers would slip inside him with Austin's...

Christ! He was close to coming, his balls hard and achy. Austin would position him, ass in the air, and ever so slowly inch into him...

Luke smothered a groan in his pillow; almost weeping he wanted it so much. He needed Austin to fill him up, push the loneliness from his heart. He longed for Riley's kisses to take away the pain of living a lie. He'd been alone so many damn years.

He pictured Riley's lush mouth on his dick and he clamped his teeth shut on a groan as his orgasm burned through him, spewing out in thick globs into his hand. The fantasy came to an end with Riley turning his head and sharing Luke's spunk in a kiss with Austin.

After wiggling out of his boxers and wiping up, Luke rolled to his stomach and wrapped his arms around his pillow, imagined the weight of the sleeping bag was his lovers' arms around him. He must have dozed because the next thing he knew, sunlight streamed into the room and the shower was running. A glance at the clock confirmed the time, a little past eight. Time to get up, but he lay still a moment, imagining his lovers' sleek bodies soaped and slippery under the steamy shower spray.

A twitch in his cock reminded him of his nakedness and he climbed out of the bag. The water turned off and he nabbed a pair of boxers from his dresser, tugging them over his overeager dick as the bathroom door rattled, then opened.

"Hey," he said, and couldn't stop the slow smile on his face as he took in Austin's damp hair, flushed skin, and the sparse curls on his chest traveling downwards to disappear under the towel around his hips. Austin returned his smile and crossed the room to the bed, sitting and pulling his clothes closer.

"Riley had an early class," he informed Luke, rightly interpreting his glance towards the bathroom. "He told me to make sure to thank you for taking us in last night."

"I'm glad I could help." Luke leaned back against the dresser. He liked Austin on his bed, a strong thigh exposed where the towel parted. Austin's appreciative glance raked over him as well, and he licked his lips. They both knew nothing would happen without Riley's presence, but Luke was thankful not to have to hide his interest any more.

Tingling head to toe, Luke brought his thoughts back to more important matters. “Are we picking up Riley’s things this afternoon?”

“If that’s still okay? Um...” Austin nibbled a lip as he glanced around the small room. “What do you have in mind? We can’t stay here forever.”

Luke straightened from the dresser, heart plummeting at a twinge of doubt. Didn’t they want to be with him? He knew Austin would sleep with him, but he’d thought... Didn’t matter. Riley still needed a safe home. He ignored the small pain in his heart. “Let’s just get his things here. I have a couple of ideas, but need to do some checking first, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.”

Austin lifted his foot to slip on a sock, giving Luke a tantalizing glimpse under the towel. He hastily cleared his throat. “I’d better shower. Class is in half an hour.”

“See you at practice.” Austin waved his sock, and Luke beat a hasty retreat to the bathroom before he gave in to temptation and pinned Austin to the bed, minus the towel. He sighed as he closed the door and peeled off his underwear.

“What do you want?” He scowled at his heavy erection, tired of having to get himself off when he only felt hollow afterwards. He lingered under the shower spray, dejected. He’d gone to bed full of hope, excited for a future with the boys he loved. Now he wasn’t sure about anything. His father...

Fuck. No more hiding. Last night he’d felt alive! He wouldn’t go back to that dark little room his father wanted to keep in him, tied by his outdated rules.

He smiled crookedly. “If he doesn’t want to help with tuition, once he knows, I can always make coffees with Austin.” He pushed his concerns aside and lathered up. He wondered if Austin and Riley would enjoy touching him. He was muscular enough and the constant running on the soccer field kept him fit. But they were two dark beauties while he looked like every other blond on campus.

The thought made him laugh out loud. “Jesus, man, you’re a fag not a drama queen. Now finish and get your ass to class.”

Humor restored, he hummed as he finished his shower and toweled off. Pulling on jeans and sweatshirt, he slipped on socks and sneakers and headed downstairs. The morning air was cool as he climbed into his car, but the sun promised warmth later. Perfect. He had a couple of lectures in philosophy that morning, but then two hours on the soccer field. The team had several plays they still needed to work on.

Thoughts of Gabe Anderson sobered him as he drove the short distance to the college. What was the guy's problem? Gabe now had a warning from the college about his behavior, but Luke hoped he wouldn't have to remove him from the team anyway. As captain, he couldn't let the bastard bully the other players. Then again, they needed Gabe if they hoped to have a chance in the playoffs. Of course, Coach had the final say, but Luke's opinion went a long way with him.

Luke continued to worry the problem over during the two hours of lectures on logic. It surprised him when people got up to leave around him. He hadn't heard a word the professor had said. He'd have to ask someone for notes later.

Approaching the gym, he spotted Tim McKenzie waiting outside the doors and hurried over. This couldn't be good.

"Trouble," Tim confirmed when Luke got within earshot.

"Gabe?"

"And Riley. Gabe was harassing him and Coach Ackley overheard. He wants to see you."

Goddamn! He pushed through the doors and blinked in the dim light of the locker room. His heart lurched when he spotted Austin leaning against the wall outside the coach's closed door. Ignoring the stares of his teammates, he quickly went up to him. "Austin?"

Fury sparked in Austin's eyes when he raised his face. "*I hate* this shit! They're going to push Riley right over the edge..." His voice broke and Luke caught the glimmer of frustrated tears. Without thinking, he opened his arms and Austin stepped into his embrace, dropped his head on Luke's shoulder.

"I won't let that happen," Luke vowed fiercely against Austin's wet cheek, throat choked with his own tears. No way in hell would he let his sweet Riley

suffer one more day, even if he had to kick the ass of every bully on the planet. He laughed painfully, knowing he couldn't fight violence with violence. But at the moment he was afraid to face Gabe, ready to pound him into a bloody mess on the floor.

He stepped back, smiling grimly at the buzz of voices and a catcall behind them as he brushed Austin's damp hair from his eyes and kissed his forehead. "Be strong. I'll fix this." He flashed a look at their gawking teammates. "Practice in ten minutes," he snapped.

Luke rapped on the coach's door and went in at the gruff response. His gaze quickly took in Gabe's angry pacing and Riley's defiant stance in the middle of the room. He looked scared but determined. Luke's heart leaped, wishing Austin could see Riley now. He was stronger than they both gave him credit for.

"You wanted to see me, Coach?" he asked, as he closed the door.

"Yeah. What the hell's going on with these two?"

Ackley was a large man, fit, and sometimes intimidating. But he'd been Luke's coach for the past two years and they'd developed a mutual respect based on their love of the game. Luke returned his scowl with a lifted brow. "What happened this time?"

Ackley jutted his chin toward Gabe. "Big Mouth here was taunting Riley and I saw the bruises on the boy's back. Have any an idea what happened?"

"What does Riley say?"

"Said he had an accident on his roller blades. I don't believe him. More likely he's covering up for someone. What do you say?"

"You can take my word Gabe had nothing to do with his bruises...this time."

The coach let out an exasperated breath. "Nice caveat. Very well. Gabe, you're on the bench until you learn to keep your bigoted mouth shut. Riley, I want you on the opposite end of the field practicing goal kicks. Don't want you seriously injured before Playoffs. Well, get going."

"Right, Coach." Luke held the door for the other two to precede him. He

glanced at Ackley but the man was scowling at the roster on his desk and Luke followed the others into the locker room.

Gabe confronted him as soon as he closed the door. “What the hell, Parsons? You should have told Coach you need me on that field. Why you sticking up for that pansy ass—”

“Shut up.” Luke shook his head, disgusted. “Gabe, you’re a coward and bully and if you say one more word I’ll throw you off the team myself.”

Gabe’s eyes narrowed, an unpleasant smile curling his lips. “So that’s how it is. Got yourself a little girlfriend, do you? Tell me, does Riley squeal when you fuck him?”

Luke clenched his hand, heart beating furiously when Tim’s shout froze him in place. It took all his effort not to punch Gabe in the face. He envied his friend’s cool tones when he stepped between them and spoke to Gabe.

“You know, we had a little team meeting while you were in the office.” Tim motioned to the other players, who stopped what they were doing and gathered around. Gabe’s eyes widened and Luke glanced over his shoulder. Not all the players were present, but almost twenty of them stood at his back, strong, athletic. He could understand why Gabe would feel intimidated.

Tim continued, “Gabe, you’ve pretty much harassed every guy on the team, at one time or another. We’re done. We’ve reached the verdict that you’re a bully and a homophobic asshole. If you bother any member of this team in the future, *any* member, you’ll have to answer to all of us.” Tim’s voice turned to silk. “And believe me, you don’t want to know what we’ll do to you.”

Luke caught the flicker of fear in Gabe’s eyes. He was clearly shaken. Then Gabe hid behind a sneer. “Fuck off, McKenzie,” he grumbled, and shoved through the crowd to his locker. Luke thought Gabe might just grab his stuff and leave, relieved when Gabe tore off his shirt and started putting on his uniform.

Luke let out a held breath. “Thanks guys. I’ll change and meet you on the field.”

The team dispersed, several members giving Luke a nod. They had his back. Luke glanced across the locker room but Austin and Riley had already

gone out with the others. Gabe ignored him, refusing to meet his stare as he exited to the field. Luke felt a little dazed as he changed, pulling the jersey signifying he was the team captain over his head. He'd wanted to unite the team. Who'd have guessed it would be Gabe who accomplished it?

CHAPTER FIVE

Luke pulled his car to the curb and climbed out, taking a deep breath of the warm air fragrant with apple blossoms from the tree in the yard. The afternoon sunlight felt wonderful. As the saying went, thank God it's Friday. Yesterday had been tough. First the drama at soccer practice, then getting Riley's stuff from his house before his mom got home. He and Austin hadn't said a word between them, simply put everything from Riley's room in a few boxes and left. It hurt him how little the young man had, when he had boxes of shit stored in his parents' garage along with a bedroom crammed with more for when he visited.

He trotted up the walkway and hurried inside the house, climbing the steps two at a time to his room. He'd gotten it! It had taken some persuading and every ounce of charm he possessed, not to mention a big chunk of his savings, but it was all theirs.

"Hey, I've got a surprise..."

His words trailed off and the smile slipped from his face. The room was empty. *Damn.* He closed the door behind him and went to the window, stifling a sigh. The doubts he'd woken up with returned full force. He pulled the ring holding three keys from his pocket and stared at them.

"Maybe they don't..."

Pain tightened his throat. He'd spent the last two nights on the floor while Austin and Riley shared his bed. He'd ached in the darkness, listening to their whispers and soft kisses, longing to be included. Had he misunderstood them? Had they played with him? A game between lovers he could only watch from the outside?

He sat on the edge of the bed while the joy left his heart. He'd spent his whole life hiding who he was, being what everyone expected of him. He'd fallen in love for the first time despite that, but now it looked like they didn't want him. He smoothed a pillow, then with a groan picked it up and pressed his face into the soft down. It smelled like apricots. *Riley.*

Stretching out on the bed, he pushed his face into Austin's pillow and breathed in the scent of Axe cologne and clean sweat. His heart sped up and he rolled to his side, clutching Riley's pillow to his chest. He rubbed his cheek against the cotton pillow case, pretending it was Riley's satin skin he caressed. Falling deeper into the daydream, Luke outlined Riley's full lips with his tongue, teasing them open. He slipped his tongue into the warm depths of spun sugar and moaned with pleasure while his dick swelled. Austin would spoon up against Riley and they'd take turns stretching him with slick fingers, Luke pushing deep into his hot hole until Riley begged for release. Only then would Austin fuck him from behind while Luke stroked their sweet lover into coming.

He jumped when his phone went off, climbing reluctantly from the erotic fantasy to pull it from his pocket. "Hello?" He cleared the gruffness from his voice. "Austin?"

"Hey. We're practicing down at the park. Wanna join us?"

"Hell yes! Be right there."

He knew he blushed at Austin's laugh before he hung up but didn't care. They wanted him with them. They were thinking of him. His chest swelled, loving them. He loved Austin's intelligence and humor, adored Riley's kindness and sweet temper. And if he didn't get those hot bodies tangled around his own soon he'd go mad!

Grabbing up his car keys, Luke practically ran to his car and shot over to the park. Austin said they were at the southern corner again by the river, and Luke's heart pounded as he trotted across the mowed grass field. There they were, lazily kicking a soccer ball back and forth. His heart tripped when they waved him over. God, if they were playing with him he'd have to fucking kill them!

"Hi," he said, suddenly nervous as hell.

"Hey," Austin said, smiling brightly as he kicked the ball to him. They passed it back and forth in silence for a couple of minutes until Luke thought he would scream. What were the secret glances they exchanged and Riley's giggles all about? Austin had the ball and seemed to purposefully kick it into the trees.

“I’ll get it!” Riley volunteered, then covered his mouth to hide a mischievous smile and laughing eyes. *Adorable!*

“Wait,” Luke said before he ran off. “Come here a second.”

Riley gave him a questioning look and went to him. “What is it?”

Luke picked up his hand, rubbed a thumb over his palm. He eyed the angry red lines and scars running down Riley’s white forearm and struggled to express himself. “You must have been hurting badly to do this. I’m sorry. You don’t deserve it. No one does.” He looked earnestly into Riley’s pretty hazel eyes. “Promise me, if you ever feel like cutting again, you’ll talk to me or Austin first. Please?”

Riley blushed, and nodded shyly. “I will.”

Luke passionately kissed his palm, aching for his pain, and Riley sucked in a breath when Luke placed feather-light kisses up his arm. Luke stared at Riley’s plump lips, wanting to taste them, and groaned with need when Riley nibbled a corner of his mouth with his small white teeth.

“I’d better retrieve that ball,” Riley said suddenly, and dashed into the trees.

“I’ll help him.” Austin trotted after his lover. Luke blinked, frowning. What were they up to? A thought came to him while he waited and he caught his breath, cock twitching awake. No way...

Glancing over his shoulder, he followed the path the others had taken, and stopped in his tracks as he came to a small open area in the trees, pulse leaping to life. Austin and Riley were locked in each other’s arms, bodies pressed tightly together as they kissed. Luke wondered if he were supposed to leave them alone, but Riley’s sigh of pleasure drew him like a moth to a flame.

Austin had both his hands holding Riley’s dark head in place while he thoroughly kissed him, Riley’s arms clutching his back as if holding on for dear life. *So fucking hot!* They must have heard his whimper because suddenly Austin’s hand snaked out and yanked him closer. Luke shook, desire licking clear to his balls when two tongues vied for his mouth with wet, sloppy kisses. He tentatively tasted Riley’s lips, sweeter than he remembered, and then Austin captured his mouth, thrusting a possessive tongue deep inside.

Shit yeah! He shivered as if that hot tongue ran the length of his swelling dick. He wanted them to strip him right there, teach him how to love another man.

“Should we go home?” he asked with effort when Austin let him breathe, though hands touched him everywhere. He groaned when one slipped under his shirt and pinched a nipple.

“And risk offending your roomies?” Riley’s whisper tickled his ear, as did the tongue he ran over the edge and wiggled inside.

He scrunched up his shoulder with a laugh. “Stop! And no, I have a surprise for you guys. In my right pocket.”

Austin chuckled. “I bet you do!” he said and rubbed a palm over the bulge of Luke’s erection through his pants. Luke groaned, unconsciously thrusting out his hips when Riley reached around and undid his belt and lowered the zipper. Riley’s fingers teased upwards, lifting Luke’s shirt.

“Put your hands up,” he murmured against Luke’s neck, and the lust coating his voice melted Luke’s heart. He caught fire when Riley pulled Luke’s shirt the rest of the way off and ran his hands up and down his chest, teasing his nipples. He nearly came when Riley bit his earlobe.

“Pocket,” he gasped, trying to hold on to the thought while his pulse ran riot. A hand thrust into his pants, scraping along his cock and making him shudder.

“I feel keys... And what’s this?” Austin squeezed him through the thin material.

Luke gasped and leaned his head back on Riley’s shoulder, raising his chin when Riley nuzzled against his neck. “For us,” he managed to say. “An apartment. King-size bed—oh!” Austin jerked Luke’s pants off his hips. “We could go there...”

“We will. Later.”

Luke looked down as Austin knelt in front of him, blue eyes flashing with desire and laughter. “I love you,” he said before he knew he was going to say anything, and felt the blush that rose up his skin and flooded his face.

“I love you too,” Austin said and placed a kiss below his bellybutton. Austin gripped Luke’s boxers and nudged them lower, lips following with tantalizing slowness. Luke moaned, wild to have Austin’s mouth on him. He closed his eyes and Riley touched his chin, turning his face to brush their lips together.

“I love you,” Luke murmured into his mouth.

“Me too,” Riley whispered, and seized Luke’s lips in a devastating kiss just as Austin’s hot mouth swallowed Luke’s cock, drowning him in bliss.

THE END

Author Bio

Dianne Hartsock is the author of m/m erotic romance, both contemporary and fantasy, the psychological thriller, and anything else that comes to mind. Oh, and a floral designer. She says if she can't be writing, at least she can create with the beauty of flowers and foliage and bring a smile to someone's face. Currently Dianne lives in the Willamette Valley of Oregon with her husband, and both her children have chosen to attend colleges close to home, for which she is forever thankful.

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FALLING APART

By Kathleen Hayes

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: A young man leans his head on his hand. His dark hair spills over his fingers and onto his forehead. He is shirtless and clothed mostly in shadow. His eyes are closed and he appears to be in pain.

Photo 2: A typed note saying “Will you still love me when I fall apart?” with the last word tumbling down the page.

Photo 3: A light-haired man with strong arms is wrapped around the back of a dark-haired man. They are seated in a shroud of darkness, which makes the contrast between their light and dark hair all the more apparent.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He thinks I'm perfect.

I can't let him see the truth...

...that I'm broken inside

...damaged.

I'd rather he love only a part of me

Than have him leave if he knew the whole.

But the longer I hide the darkness

The faster I fall apart...

Sincerely,

Susan

Story Info

Genre: dystopian future

Tags: cataclysm, second chance, violence, HFN, dark

Content warnings: depictions of graphic, violent nightmare scenes that may trigger some people

Word count: 11,456

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FALLING APART

By Kathleen Hayes

The air in the Lower City burned my nostrils as I took a deep breath. It always took a day or two for the headache to go away whenever I was forced to travel to the Depths. I glanced up at the HoloMonitor above the pneumatic doors, just as I was jostled from both sides. From the gathering droves, I knew the shuttle must be arriving soon. Two minutes to arrival flashed above our heads before it switched back to its regularly-playing adverts. A burst of relief flowed through me when all I saw was a busty blonde in an apron, extolling the virtues of cryo-lock Tupperware. I took a deep breath and shook myself. I kept telling myself I couldn't have a nightmare if I was awake. I just had to stay awake.

My head began to swim with the heat of the crowd and poor air quality, so I reached in my pocket and pulled out my Oxohaler. I checked the meter and saw I only had one dose left. I sighed and debated if I should risk it. Finally, I figured if I passed out on the shuttle, I would get shoved out somewhere with better air quality than here, but if I passed out here I was stuck.

I placed the Oxohaler against my lips, depressed the release button, and inhaled my first breath of fresh air in hours. The mist, which had recently been patented by Gonos Corp, contained microbes that would help purify the air before it was filtered by the lungs and delivered to the bloodstream. It only lasted about twenty minutes in the Depths.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the doors of the shuttle slid closed, leaving half of the crowd waiting on the platform outside, myself not included. It was so crammed full that I didn't even need a wall to lean against. I let my weight fall against the wall of humanity surrounding me and, despite the spike of fear at the thought, felt myself seep into a waking doze.

As we rose through Mid City into High City, the shuttle cleared out, and everything outside the windows became conspicuously cleaner, more sterile. I stumbled out of the shuttle on level thirty-nine of forty-five—not quite the very top, but near to it. I had earned my money rather than being born with it, which would forever exclude me from the very upper echelons of High City.

Ten minutes later, I allowed my security system to scan my left eye and waited the half a breath it took for the front door of my apartment to open with a *whirr*. As soon as I stepped inside, the lights brightened and my telesystem turned on. The HoloMonitor image and sound followed me as I walked through the apartment towards the kitchen—the image never more than three feet away.

I sat down briefly to take off my shoes. While I was seated, I pulled up the HoloMonitor controls and set it to stationary. I didn't like it following me around the kitchen while I was cooking. It was distracting.

I sighed, still exhausted from my trip to the Depths, and leaned against the table to push myself up out of the chair. The only reason I'd braved the Lower City in the first place was to retrieve a data chip. I pulled it from my pocket and looked at it for a second before tossing it on the counter to be dealt with later.

I turned the volume up on the HoloMonitor so I could listen to the dreamy accent of Armand Sistrel, my favorite History Channel narrator, as I cooked.

“It was the middle of the twenty first century when humanity began to see the true consequences of their race to advance. Industry and technology had wreaked havoc on the environment, and it could no longer be ignored. There were three major catastrophes that forced their eyes open to the damage being done. The first occurred in 2037 when...”

His voiced droned on, soothing me as I pulled various food items out of the preserver and began prepping them for my cooker. I glanced over my shoulder at a break in the calming monologue and started. My heart sped up a bit when I saw that the advert that had popped up was one of my own. It looked like a clothing advert for last season's fashions. Something seemed off, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

I must have spaced out for a moment, because, before I knew it, Armand's voice was serenading me once more.

“...would have been destroyed if it hadn't been for the timely discoveries made by Gonos Corporation scientists. Their head scientists had been doing environmental research for years. In 2089, their breakthrough finally...”

When his narration broke off mid-sentence, I definitely knew something was off. Another of my adverts interrupted the History Channel stream. This time it was one I knew hadn't been streamed in five years. I walked closer to the HoloMonitor and gasped. The "cool, refreshing, low calorie beer" I was meant to be holding was actually a broken beer bottle that had been stabbed through my hand.

I started to back away from the HoloMonitor and said, "HoloMonitor, off."

Nothing happened.

Then, slowly but surely, the HoloMonitor began to move, as if it were following me, but it was already within standard parameters for distance from me.

Still only slightly freaked out, I turned. It followed me. No matter where I turned, it was ahead of me. I grabbed my keys and ran out my door and into the hallway. As I began the dash towards the elevators, the HoloMonitor started growing. The screen expanded until it covered the entire hallway.

My heartbeat sped up and I began to sweat. It shouldn't be able to do this. I closed my eyes trying to shut out the image of myself with a broken beer bottle shoved into my hand. When I opened my eyes, the image had changed.

I was tangled in a motorboat engine, bloody body parts dripping all around at three times life size. Then I was being raped by a jagged hockey stick. Then I was being stoned by three models throwing bottles of perfume at my battered body.

Sheer terror took over, and I ran. The faster I ran, the faster the images shifted—every advert I had ever done, twisted, with me beaten, bruised, raped, traumatized in every way imaginable.

I ran and ran and ran until my breath came tight in my chest. It was worse than the Depths. I couldn't breathe. No matter where I ran, I couldn't escape the images. I couldn't escape the feeling they were all happening to me at the same time.

A thousand pains coursed through me, violating me over and over again. Eventually, I ran out of energy, out of will. I couldn't keep running. I stopped

and I let myself fall to the floor with my hands over my head. And still the images flashed before my eyes—as if the HoloMonitor had downloaded itself into my brain.

I began to hyperventilate. The fear coiled throughout me and paralyzed me. My arms and legs wouldn't unbend to allow me to get up and run anymore. The pocket of air between my torso and legs seemed to have overheated, and just as I was sure I would pass out and finally be free, I felt hands grab me from behind—hands I knew, hands I had reason to fear above all else.

I screamed. I screamed until my throat was stripped raw and no sound emerged anymore.

Then, all at once, I was able to move again. I started when I realized my head was resting on my kitchen table. In the background I could still hear Armand speaking about the Gonos Corporation's brilliant contributions, which had allowed human advancement to continue apace without worrying about anything so pesky as the environment.

I shakily tried to stand up and realized my clothes were completely soaked through with sweat. I slumped back into the chair without thinking. I leaned my head into my hands, and fought off the tears. I couldn't take many more of these nightmares.

I was shaking so hard I couldn't move. More than anything, I just wanted Rasen's arms wrapped around me. I wanted his strength to surround me and for him to tell me I wasn't going crazy. But that could never happen.

He'd fallen in love with Markon, the perfect, beautiful, put-together model, that I was forced to play for Gonos Corp. He hadn't fallen in love with the mess of a man I was right now. I knew I would lose him if I let him see me as I was.

Unbidden, memories of our first real date streamed through my consciousness.

I told myself it was ridiculous to be so excited about bowling and beer with a mere Community Officer. He was so far below those I usually dated. Or more accurately, those Gonos Corp set me up to go out with.

Despite this, I couldn't help it when my pulse sped at the sound of my ComLink notifying me that Rasen had arrived. I double checked with the camera mounted to the left of my front door, and couldn't help the grin that spread across my face as I saw the image of Rasen shifting nervously in the hallway outside my apartment.

He was wearing clean, dark-wash jeans that almost looked like he had ironed them, and a starched, button-up shirt with only the top button undone. I caught myself before I could scoff at his idea of fashion sense, and instead focused on the warm feeling I got knowing he had tried to look nice for me. I almost regretted the leather trousers and loose shirt I had chosen to wear. They seemed a bit over the top compared to his wardrobe choices.

It was too late now, and I knew I looked fabulous. I threw open the door and smiled. A light blush spread across Rasen's cheeks, and it made me feel more than a little mushy inside that I had noticed. I felt like I was going on my first date. In some ways, I was. Back when I lived at the orphanage, I never got to go anywhere. And since I was hired by Gonos Corp, I went out with who my boss told me to go out with.

I laughed at the giddy pleasure of it all. Rasen gave me a questioning look.

"I'm just excited. Come on."

His blush deepened at my words and he stuttered out, "M-me too."

I had more fun that night than I can ever remember having. We were both terrible at bowling, and the more beers we had, the more creative ways we came up with to get the ball down the lane towards the pins. My face hurt from all the laughing by the end of the evening.

Most of the evening was perfect. There were just a few times when I looked over and saw the look on his face. The look I get from fans—utter adoration that has nothing to do with who I am and everything to do with how I look and how famous I am. Those looks were like bruises on my heart. I desperately wanted this man to know me, but I didn't know if I knew how to let him do that. I wasn't sure if he would still want to be with me.

I tucked those feelings inside a box in my heart and determined that I would have as much fun as I could while it lasted. A part of me already knew I

was in too deep for that to work. If he rejected me now, it would hurt more than I wanted to think about.

We traveled in silence most of the way back to my apartment. It was sweet that he wanted to walk me to my door from the shuttle stop.

We stopped before I let the security system scan my retina.

“I had a really good time tonight, Markon.” The stammer was gone, but the blush was back in full force.

“Me too,” I replied, right before I leaned in to kiss him. Apparently he had a similar idea. Unfortunately we both tipped our heads to the left and knocked noses.

“Owww,” I yelped as I rubbed my nose. I heard his groan from less than a foot away. We looked at each other, and after a tense moment we both started laughing. Our eyes locked and the laugh faded.

“You want to try that again?” I asked almost in a whisper. His nod was barely perceptible.

I leaned slowly towards him and gently pressed my lips to his. Warmth bloomed within me and something clicked into place that I hadn’t even known was missing. I gave his bottom lip a brief lick and then broke the kiss, keeping it chaste.

I smiled widely as I said, “Call me,” and then went inside.

I leaned against the wall beside the door and let my smile turn into a grin and reveled in that warm feeling. I touched my lips, remembering the feel of his. I started as I heard a whisper through the security system. My head must have clicked it on when it hit the wall.

“I can’t believe *the* Markon just kissed me,” said an awed whisper.

My heart flip flopped in my chest and I tried not to feel the hurt that statement lodged in my rib cage.

The dreams were getting worse. It had been three days since I had allowed myself to fall asleep. It was a damn good thing I was on a hiatus from work.

The bags under my eyes and the gaunt, pale set of my face would have sent my agent into fits. Although thinking about why I was on hiatus was the last thing I needed right now.

I sat staring out my window at the cityscape. From High City, none of the dirt and despair of the Depths was visible. It almost appeared as though the towering architecture emerged, pure grown, out of the clouds. Even five levels below, in the upper reaches of Mid City, the view would be obscured by a cloud-like fog.

I let my eyes lose focus. There was a perpetual layer of condensation on the windows at this altitude. It made it look like it was always drizzling. The light shone through the water rivulets, creating patterns on my retinas. Rainbows danced behind my eyes as I felt them drooping, losing even more focus.

Sleep reached out for me like an unwelcome lover come morning. I fought, but its fingers grasped me and held me tight. I lurked in that unknown space between sleeping and waking, flashes of unease and pain the only remnant of my nightly terrors.

I heard my ComLink chirping from far away and tensed momentarily, until I realized it was my actual ComLink notifying me of a call, and not the beginning of a twisted version of my advert for the communications division of Gonos Corp.

I struggled to gather my wits about me before I reached for the earpiece on the table next to me. I put it in my ear and said, “Answer call.” I could have said it to the room in general, and the call would have been linked through my telesystem, but I had been wary of using that automated feature since the nightmares had begun.

I shook my head sharply as I registered Rasen’s voice coming through the earpiece.

His voice sounded more tentative than usual, with an undercurrent of something I was too worn out to parse. “Hey, Markon. How have you been?”

Horrible. Exhausted. Terrified. “Fine.”

His voice tightened. “Would you like to come over for dinner? I haven’t seen you in what seems like weeks.”

It had been exactly nine days since I had seen him. Nine days since I hadn’t felt completely alone. Nine days since I had felt safe in his arms. Nine days since Gonos Corporation had stolen normal from me.

I realized I had been silent for too long. “I’m sorry. I can’t.” I paused, steeled myself, and lied. “I have a shoot tonight.”

Instinct wanted me to make up details as to where and what it was for and how long it would last, but that would just get me caught up in my lies.

I could hear the disappointment in his voice when he replied. “Oh. I guess I’ll see you later, then.”

My heart constricted in my chest. I could feel him slipping away. I couldn’t keep him close, or he would find out the truth—and if he found out the truth, he wouldn’t want to stay close. “I’ll call you later this week.” I said it in a rush before I disconnected our call.

I closed my eyes against this totally different sort of pain. I had thought I had gotten used to pain in the past nine days, but I was wrong. My whole being yearned for the balm of his presence—for how it used to be.

We had met at a Gonos Corporation event seven months before. Rasen—Gonos Corporation Community Officer Rasen Jiacek—was a rising star. He was currently commander of the Mid City branch of the Gonos Corporation Community Officers. That’s Gonos Corp-speech for some combination of cop and enforcer. Gonos had thrown a party for some of their up-and-coming Community Officers to make them feel important, and to instill a sense of loyalty and belonging.

I had been required to attend as a part of my modeling contract. They needed some pretty faces to liven up the party. It started out more or less as expected—getting pawed by drunken officers who thought it was their right.

I had noticed Rasen throughout the evening. Despite doing his best impression of a wallflower, he was impossible to miss. He was the tallest man in the room, with shoulders to match. His blond hair was cut short, but not

buzzed, and his almost-navy eyes watched everything with a hawk-like intensity. It seemed every time I caught sight of him, he was hastily looking away from me.

Finally, I took a moment to sit alone at the bar and drink a beer. I chose a corner where no one could sneak up behind me and maul me without my permission. From across the room, I saw Rasen push his shoulders off the wall he was leaning against, set them in determination and make his way towards me. The resolve in his eyes was clear.

When he reached me, he looked straight at me for the first time. The impact of his eyes smacked into me like a sledgehammer behind my breastbone.

His first words broke the tension that had come up around us. “Y-You’re Markon, r-r-right?” he stammered, and it was adorable.

He cleared his throat and tried again. “Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?” I smiled at the formality of his request. It was obvious he was a bit star-struck.

“Of course.”

A grin broke across his face, and I was hit with the realization that there was not much I wouldn’t consider doing if it put that smile on this man’s face.

He reached out his hand, took mine in it, and led me out to the dance floor. Once he had his arms around me, I rose onto my toes a bit and whispered into his ear, “What’s your name?”

He started, and looked embarrassed for a moment before he told me. After that, we danced. I lost myself in his arms and the music for the evening.

When the party ended, we went our separate ways, but I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I had my agent track down his contact information and called him only a week later.

He had slowly grown out of that star-struck puppy love, but he never saw beyond the model-perfect image of Markon. I was very careful to not let him see beyond that perfection. I had grown to need him like the air I breathed. The smiles had been waning of late, as I knew they eventually must. I kept telling

myself that if hiding my true self kept them for even a minute longer then it was worth it.

In the distance, I heard my ComLink chirp for the second time that night. This time, it was the call I had been expecting. It was a man I knew only as Anthony. He was the leader of a group of rebels—or terrorists, depending on who you talked to. Their motto was *Veritas Omnia Vincit*—truth conquers all—and they were simply known as the VOV.

“Do you have it?” His voice was raspy, distorted by the modulator on his end of the ComLink.

“Yes.”

“Two hours.”

I sighed at the melodrama of it all as the call disconnected. Then I groaned. I would have to rush to get to the Depths in time for my meeting with Anthony.

I grabbed the data chip I had retrieved a few days before, and placed it carefully in a pocket on the inside of my jacket.

The journey to the Depths and back was an exercise in endurance. I didn’t have another Oxohaler, because if I tried to sign for another at the pharma-distributor, it would require me to report when and why I had used my previous one. My movements were not generally monitored, but I couldn’t be sure after what had happened.

By the time I stumbled out of the elevators on my floor, I was wheezing from exhaustion and contaminated air, my clothes were covered in grime, and I barely had enough energy to lift one foot in front of the other. Pain was so widespread—real physical pain leftover from nine days ago and lingering phantom pain leftover from the nightmares—that I could barely remember what it might be like to be without it.

I was so concentrated on arriving home before I fell apart, that I did not immediately notice the man sitting in the shadows of my living room. It wasn’t until the shadow was rushing me that I remembered that, in a fit of romanticism, I had programmed Rasen’s retinal scan into my security program.

It seemed like his voice came from the distant end of a tunnel when he exclaimed, “Oh my God! Markon, what happened to you?”

I registered his arms wrapping around me, catching me as my legs gave out from under me, and then bliss. Somehow, I recognized home and safety. Beyond the brain, deeper than the heart, my whole being knew it was where it was finally meant to be, and it all just shut down.

I woke some unknown time later, lying on top of my bed fully clothed. Rasen walked in the room almost immediately. Emotions flashed across his face nearly too quickly to recognize—but not quite: anger, horror, fear, confusion, heartache.

He just stared at me with silent tears running slowly down his cheeks. I looked down at myself and considered what he was seeing. In a week and a half I had dropped ten pounds from an already skinny frame, my dark hair was scraggly and greasy, my skin was gray and dull. I had dark circles under my eyes and hollows in my cheeks. I had no bruises, but I moved as though I was covered in them. That was the beauty of what they had done to me.

After another moment of staring, Rasen wiped his cheeks, and I saw a mask drop over his face. It was the cold, dead eyes of a stranger that looked at me when he asked, “What happened to you?”

I started to speak, to spin some tale of drugs or a mugging, but the lies caught in my throat, clogging it. The more I tried to push the words out, to say something—anything—that would appease or explain, the greater the mass grew.

With growing horror, I felt hot liquid gather at the corners of my eyes. The words trapped in my throat became a torrent that my body pushed, burning, onto my dirty cheeks. The more I tried to stop it, the faster it flowed. Finally, I let go. I fell apart.

At once, I could both breathe easier and my breathing was hindered by full body-wracking sobs. Rasen’s mask cracked under the onslaught of my tears. He took the two steps from the door to the bed and gathered me in his arms again.

After so long keeping it all in, everything inside me seemed in a rush to get out all at the same time. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I can’t be your perfect

model. I can't... I'm sorry." Over and over I sobbed my pain and guilt into Rasen's shoulder. He kept those strong arms wrapped around me and just held me until I stopped.

I felt bereft when he finally moved off the bed to stand up, but almost immediately, he pulled me up off the bed as well and led me into the bathroom. Methodically, he took off my clothes and placed them on the bathroom counter. I was in a daze and just let him do as he would.

He reached in turned the hot water on, testing it with his hand before he gently pushed me into the shower cubicle. I stood under the glorious hot water for a few moments before utter exhaustion made my limbs too heavy to bear. I sat down on the tile, pulled my knees up in front of me and leaned my head on them.

I startled when Rasen's naked form sat down behind me and pulled me into the curve of his body. He wrapped his arms and legs around me and leaned his head on top of mine. I had never felt so surrounded, so cared for. The water fell down from above and blocked out the rest of the world while I was cocooned in him.

Eventually, he pulled me to stand up and washed all the dirt and grime from my body. He was careful of places that caused me to wince, despite there being no evidence of injury. Through it all, he was silent.

When we had dried off and re-dressed in pajamas, we climbed into my bed. Just before he ordered "Lights, off," in a quiet voice, he said, "You will tell me what is going on in the morning."

I stared at him for a long moment before I nodded. A few minutes later, into the dark, Rasen whispered, "I love you."

I reached for his fingers, lying on the bed next to me, and spoke just as quietly as he had. "I love you, too." I couldn't help but think *I just hope you feel the same in the morning* to myself before I fell into sleep once more.

I woke to the smell of coffee wafting from the kitchen. I had managed to sleep the whole night through without being woken up by a nightmare. If for

no other reason, it was a good morning. As soon as I sat up and saw that the other side of the bed had been slept in, that plus the smell of the coffee already being made and my memories of the night before clicked into place.

Rasen was out there waiting for me to tell him the truth. I knew I had no choice at this point. I wasn't sure what I was more afraid of—that he would wash his hands of me, or that what I was going to tell him would put him in danger.

Rasen turned his navy eyes on me as soon as I stepped out of the bedroom. I paused a few steps into the kitchen and raised my hand before he could speak.

I stared up at him and said quietly, “Can I kiss you? In case, after what I say, you never want to kiss me again.” I pleaded with my eyes.

I saw the assent in his before he even began his nod. I closed the distance between us quickly, reaching out to pull him toward me. I pressed my lips to his, gently at first, and then more firmly. My heart beat almost out of my chest with that bittersweet meeting of our mouths.

Briefly, he took hold of my face and deepened the kiss. Then, all too soon, he pulled away. The slight flush on his cheeks reminded me of our first kiss, but I pushed that thought aside.

I waved my hand at one of my chairs and said, “You want to sit? This may take a while.” He sat down and looked expectantly at me. I sat in the chair across from him. Then I stood and began pacing. I didn't think I could get all this out while sitting still.

“You know me as Markon—a Gonos Corporation contract model. And I am. But I was born Mark Montoya. My parents died when I was six years old. I was raised in a Gonos Corp funded orphanage, and when I turned sixteen, I was expected to help repay what had been spent on me.

“I was young and eager, and I let the modeling recruiter's words go to my head. I signed a lifetime contract, with the promise of access to all the latest youth-maintaining treatments and a salary big enough that I would be able to retire with ease after fifty or sixty years of looking twenty-five years old. At least those are the lies I was sold.”

I paused. I could see the confusion seeping into Rasen's expression. From everything I'd learned about him, he bought into the *Gonos Corporation as humanity's savior* party line. He proudly served as a Community Officer, and his greatest aspiration was to move up in the company to help them make the world a better and safer place to live. This next part was going to be the hardest for him to take.

"None of us are going to be around in fifty or sixty years, much less retiring in ease. The revolutionary technological advancements Gonos made in the late twenty-first century have a byproduct. The public has always been led to believe that this byproduct combines easily with water to create a non-toxic, biodegradable waste. And for the first hundred years or so, Gonos actually believed this as well—until that rash of volcanic activity about ninety years ago. It was covered up, and they 'found the cause', but in reality, that volcanic activity was caused by their 'harmless byproduct' seeping into the earth's crust and into magma pools underground. It combines with that magma to make it exponentially more volatile. Since then, Gonos has been buying time to create safe areas—places far away from tectonic plate movement and volcanoes—in order to evacuate everyone selected by them to safety before eighty percent of the earth's crust is broken apart by volatile magma explosions."

Rasen had gone from looking confused to looking at me with a depth of pity and concern I would have leapt for joy at in any other situation.

"You're serious about this. That's ridiculous. And it still doesn't tell me what the hell happened to you last night."

I had expected this. "I have proof."

I walked into the kitchen and got the copy I had made of the data chip I gave to Anthony. I had promised not to make any copies, but I also wasn't born yesterday, so make a copy I had.

I brought the chip into the living room and inserted it into the coffee table, pressing a button so the HoloMonitor would project the data in front of us. Rasen was high enough in Gonos Corp that he knew what official documentation looked like. He even understood the alphanumeric security designations at the top of each file. I could see the alarm emerging on his face as he read through some of the files.

“It can’t be. How could they do this and no one knew?”

I looked hard at him. “When was the last time Gonos was subjected to any regulation? When was the last time any company that isn’t one of their subsidiaries has released a successful tech advancement or product? They control everything the public knows.”

I could see the dawning knowledge and acceptance of the truth on his face. He looked around, lost. Grasping at something that might help him understand, he asked, “But what does this have to do with last night?”

“The other week, I overheard a conversation somewhere I wasn’t meant to be. Gonos Corp higher-ups were at the Advert Branch headquarters to discuss whether it would be prudent to include a handful of models in those taken to the havens, both for breeding purposes and for PR continuity purposes.”

I stopped speaking. My eyes closed and I took a deep breath. This was the hard part.

“They caught me. When I asked what they were talking about, initially they denied everything. But when I wouldn’t give up they knocked me out. When I woke up I was in a lab facility, strapped to a table.”

The memories flashed vividly in front of my eyes.

The table was cold through the thin hospital-type gown they had put me in. Metal restraints held my ankles and wrists in place, and a strap held my head against the table.

I heard a door open and the sound of multiple sets of footfalls walking into the room.

My throat was tight with fear, and the words came with difficulty, but I forced them out. “What are you doing to me?”

“Well, Mr. Montoya, you have presented us with a unique opportunity. You heard something you were not meant to hear, and refused to leave it be. We need someone with that kind of determination and fire to test something on. Our usual pool of test subjects are too docile and defeated, cowed by money and fear.”

All of a sudden, a pair of hands came into my peripheral vision, placing a chip implanter at the base of my neck, just behind my ear. I felt the sharp tip of the needle break through my skin and pressure as a data chip of some sort was injected.

In that moment, every single part of my body lit up with pain.

I knew, in my brain, that I was still strapped to that metal table, but every other part of me was being beaten. The meaty crush of fists against muscle overlapped with the sharp blinding pain of bones being broken and crushed, entwining with the deep violation of foreign objects being shoved inside me. I was cut, bruised, raped, and broken for what seemed like hours on end.

I knew. I knew they had somehow implanted those experiences in my brain, but no matter how many times I repeated that mantra to myself, the pain overwhelmed me.

I finally looked back up at Rasen, pleading silently with my eyes for him to believe me.

“There is not a mark on me,” I said shakily. “But it still feels like I went through all that. It feels as real as our first dance, or losing my parents, or cooking dinner.”

Rasen jerked his head up and down in a manic impression of a nod.

As emotionlessly as I could I continued, “The next day I convinced them that I was no threat, that they had broken me. I begged for time off to recover. They gave it to me—gloating with their success.”

“That’s when I went in search of proof. The orphanage I grew up in was not a nice place, and most of the people I grew up with turned into not very nice people. I got that data chip from one of them.”

Rasen had moved beyond his mechanical movements and just stared in shock. I walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He jerked like I had stuck him with a hot poker.

I looked into his wide eyes and murmured, “I’m almost done. Do you want to hear the rest?”

His stilted nod returned, and I decided that was probably the best I was going to get.

“I tracked down Anthony and the VOV.” His head snapped up at that. In his role as Community Officer, Anthony would be one of his most sought after criminals. He was on every Most Wanted list in the country.

I definitely didn’t always agree with Anthony’s tactics, but I knew I did not have the resources to even begin to sift through all the information I had gotten, much less figure out if, and how, to disseminate it.

“Last night, I went to the Depths and gave him the data chip. In exchange, he won’t take any action on the information without my involvement.”

Rasen wrenched to his feet and began to pace. Eventually he turned to me. “H-how could y-y-you... I m-mean what... I d-don’t even...”

He couldn’t seem to get any complete thoughts out, and I knew, especially with his job, how hard it would be to wrap his head around everything I had just told him.

He continued to mutter for a few more minutes before he turned back to me. The sputtering outrage drained out of him, and a look of horror washed over his features. He crossed the room to me in two large steps and pulled me into his arms.

My whole body was sore but I pressed against him anyway. The feel of his arms around me was worth any pain they might inflict.

I gradually noticed that he was whispering into my hair. I turned my head a bit so I could hear what he was saying. It was a litany of, “Oh my God. I can’t believe they did that to you. I’m so sorry.”

I rubbed his back and whispered back, “It’s okay. I’m okay, now.” I was so relieved to still be in his arms. A few minutes later, I felt him take a deep breath and back away from me. I immediately felt bereft.

“Okay.” Rasen seemed like he was about to say something more, so I waited out the long pause after this word. “Okay. Setting the horrible things they did to you aside, did you just tell me the world as we know it is going to end, Gonos Corp knows about it, and is keeping it a secret?”

I nodded. “Essentially, yes. They have a way to save some people, but they don’t want to cause a panic, so they are controlling who they invite.”

“Are we talking about months or years or what?”

“From their preliminary perusal of the data I gave them last night, the VOV’s scientists say we’re looking at weeks. This has been building up for almost a century.”

“There’s nothing we can do to stop it?”

“No.”

He collapsed in the chair behind him. “Oh my God.”

As I watched him quietly fall apart, I realized it just made me love him even more. I shook with the realization of what I had almost thrown out by pushing him away.

I knelt in front of him and put my hands on either side of his face. Gently, I pulled his face towards mine and I kissed first his right eyelid and then his left. I kissed both of his cheeks. I kissed his forehead. And then, tenderly, I pressed my lips against his.

I leaned my forehead against his. “I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner. You just always seemed so enamored of the ‘perfect model Markon’, and I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you if I wasn’t really that man anymore.”

He opened his eyes, but we were so close that they were just a blurry wash of dark color. Brokenly, he said, “I would rather be with the real you. These past days have been terrible, but I feel like I have finally made it past your walls, like I have finally met the real you. I’d really like to get to know that guy. ’Cause I think I could love him, love you, even more than I already do.”

With that statement I couldn’t hold back any longer. I pushed up towards him and took his lips. For the first moment it was hot and hard, all bruised lips and clashing teeth, but after that first passionate struggle, we settled into a slow sensual dance.

The flame between us burned hotter than blue embers. Without breaking the kiss, Rasen maneuvered us to my bed and our passion flared bright and strong.

Afterward, I fell asleep in his arms, forcing myself to leave our problems until we woke again.

The next week was alternately nerve-racking and wonderful. Rasen took his vacation days and came to stay with me. We spent our days getting to know each other again—this time with no pretenses—and waiting to hear from Anthony, whose people were digging through the vast amounts of information I had given them as quickly as humanly possible.

Tonight, we sat curled on the couch watching the news on the HoloMonitor. Nothing had come out about the impending environmental disaster, but evidence of it could be spotted if you knew what you were looking for.

There had been multiple sector collapses all over the world. They had been blamed on shoddy workmanship and using downgraded building materials. All the executive officers of Gonos Corporation were on a weeklong “Inspiration Summit Meeting” in the middle of nowhere. I would bet everything I owned that they were holed up in one of their havens.

I sat up in frustration and barked, “HoloMonitor, off.” The screen winked out of existence and Rasen looked at me questioningly.

“This is getting us nowhere. I’m tired of watching and waiting. I want Anthony to call already.”

Rasen just looked at me for a second and then burst out laughing. I tried to keep a serious face as I smacked him on the arm. “Come on, I’m serious.”

Still cackling, Rasen replied with, “I know. That’s why it’s funny.” He reached out and grabbed my arm to pull me into his lap. After a bit of maneuvering, we ended up lying full length on the couch with me mostly between his legs, resting on his torso. I could still feel the slight vibrations of his laughter animating his muscles.

“All right. All right. I’m sorry.” His fingers played through my hair and I groaned in satisfaction.

I settled between his thighs more snugly and continued with a game we had been playing all week. “So, what is your most embarrassing moment?”

Now he groaned, but not in satisfaction. “Couldn’t you have asked something easier like ‘favorite color’ or ‘favorite dessert’?”

“You can answer those if you want but my question still stands,” I said with a smirk in my voice.

“Fine.” He paused. “When I was a rookie, I arrived first on scene to a break-in alarm. It was right when 3-D holotechnology was being released. It was dark and I was nervous and I had a ten-minute standoff with a holo-image shooter. It took me years to live that down.”

I couldn’t help myself. I burst out laughing. “Seriously? A standoff with a holo-image?”

“It was dark. Shut up.”

He grabbed me and wrestled me until I was under him on the couch. All of a sudden, I was completely aware of everywhere we touched. Calf to calf, thigh to thigh, hips to hips, chest to chest. I got momentarily lost in the depths of his eyes.

“Make me,” I said breathily.

Rasen stared for another moment, then leaned forward a hair’s breadth at a time until, finally, his lips touched mine. The pressure was infinitely tender. His lips moved slowly down the line of my jaw and neck until his mouth rested on my pulse. His tongue flicked out so lightly I could hardly feel it, but that barely-there caress sent shivers racing through my body. My hips arched into his and my hands reached up to grab his head and force him to kiss me harder.

Rasen resisted, and his mouth continued its torturous journey down my throat until he was kissing his way across my collarbone. Finally, when he reached the divot just below my shoulder, he increased the pressure. His hot tongue smoothed across my skin, leaving a trail of fire behind it, and at long last, he pressed his lips firmly against me. I knew the suction he was creating would leave a mark and reveled in it. I wanted him to mark me as his own.

I scraped my fingers down his back, hindered by his shirt, and prepared to pull it over his head. I needed more of our skin to be touching, and I needed it now.

I moaned when Rasen let his teeth scrape across my slick skin, and it sent

trails of heat blazing their way through my body, towards my groin. He matched my force when I arched my hips into his once more.

My scattered thoughts had gathered long enough to return to my task of removing his shirt when I heard a clear chirping sound coming from the ComLink sitting on the coffee table.

Rasen growled and pressed his forehead where his lips had been just moments before. He grated out, "Identify caller."

"Blocked Caller."

With a quiet curse, Rasen rolled off me to sit on the floor by the couch and said softly, "It's probably Anthony." Then more loudly, he said, "Answer call."

Anthony's modulated voice rang through the apartment as he said, "Two hours," with his usual curtness and disconnected the call.

Three hours later found us being led into a dark alley in the Depths. We had been met by a hooded man just outside the pleasure den I had gone to in order to hand over the data chip only a week before. I couldn't tell if this hooded man was the same hooded man who had met me the last time.

When we arrived, he handed us both an Oxohaler and said, "Let's go," before we had a chance to stop properly in front of the rowdy establishment. Our contact led us on a twisted path through the hovels and alleys of the Depths.

Everything was covered in a thick layer of grime, and that was just the beginning of the dirt that permeated the entire Lower City. Children huddled, half-dressed on street corners, not even bothering to beg because they knew no one would spare them even a moment of pity. Pale, emaciated teenagers, who had probably never seen actual sunlight, walked the streets, willing to do whatever it took to earn a scrap or a coin.

I had been to the Depths several times and had steeled myself not to look, but Rasen lived in a rosy world where Gonos Corp had our best interest at heart, and if you worked hard enough, you could eventually move from Mid

City to High City and give your kids a better life. It was a carefully constructed lie, and he had bought into it. I could see the shock and dismay on his face at every turn.

It seemed like this was almost worse than my revelations earlier in the week. Those had been abstract—pollution, environmental damage, corporate sins. These miserable faces, devoid of all hope, were personal, and I could tell it hit him a lot closer to home.

The first time on our journey that he had slowed enough to get a good look at the human detritus surrounding us, we had almost been mobbed. Our contact fired off some sort of weapon into the air and everyone scattered.

“Don’t slow down or you won’t make it out,” he growled. Despite being close enough for me to smell his breath, I couldn’t make out his face below the hood.

Neither of us made that mistake a second time.

Our contact finally turned into a recessed doorway and punched in a sixteen-digit code. I heard the hiss of hydraulics moving as the door opened. I was surprised that such a door would exist in the building in front of me. It appeared that it had been built centuries before, and had probably been shoddy then.

Rasen reached out and grabbed my hand as we followed the hooded man through the door. I squeezed his hand gently, regretting that I had to let go almost immediately. We were led down a narrow staircase, lit at distant intervals by dim, fluorescent lights.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs and went through another door, we entered another world. The underground workspace we encountered would not have been out of place in any High City office building. It was fully modded with holotechnology, and technical workstations were set up in orderly rows in the large space. At least two dozen people were absorbed enough in their work that we didn’t rate a second glance.

Our contact reached his hand up to his ear and then spoke into what I assumed was a ComLink.

“We’re here.” After a brief silence, he spoke again. “Copy that.”

Then, he turned to us and lowered his hood for the first time. His skin was just as pale as all those out on the streets had been, but it had the benefit of being clean. It gave him an ethereal look. The brilliant green eyes and almost-white blond hair did nothing to dispel that impression.

He reached out a hand to me. "I'm Antoine, second in command here. Welcome." I shook his hand and then introduced him to Rasen. It didn't occur to me until then to wonder how he had known to bring two Oxohalers.

Pleasantries over, Antoine turned on his heel as he said, "Follow me."

He wove effortlessly through the warren of hallways and workspaces and eventually deposited us in a conference room. A young woman with similar coloring and features to Antoine sat at the head of the table.

Antoine introduced her by saying, "This is Tanya. She is going to brief you on what we've learned from the data chip you gave us."

I nodded. They didn't know that I had made a copy and that Rasen and I had been over as much data as we could in the past week. I preferred to keep that nugget to myself until I ascertained how far I could trust these people.

Tanya talked for a good three hours. Apparently, they had an army of analysts that had torn every iota of data from the files possible. Most of what she told us we had already discovered for ourselves, but there was so much data that there were a few new pieces of information. One very interesting new fact was the exact location and outfitting of the Gonos Corp havens.

Tanya didn't give us any time to process before she whisked us back out of the conference room to another unknown destination. As we walked, I reached out again for Rasen. I needed to feel the grounding reassurance of his presence. As soon as my fingers brushed against his hand, his fingers swiftly grasped mine.

Somewhere along the line, he had schooled his face into an emotionless mask. The only sign of his distress was the fierceness of his grip on my hand. My heart tightened for a moment as I realized he needed me just as much as I needed him.

I flashed him a brief smile and mouthed "I love you" to him just before Tanya opened the door to a large office dominated by a workstation in the

center of it. Through the HoloMonitor screens that were up around the entire workstation, I could see a well-dressed man with more typical coloring. This man had obviously spent the bulk of his life at least as high up as Mid City. His suit—which cost more than Rasen’s entire wardrobe—suggested it was probably even higher than that.

I assumed this was Anthony. He purposefully ignored us for a few minutes as he finished reading whatever it was that he had pulled up on his HoloMonitor. It was a clear intimidation tactic and it rankled me.

It only took five minutes of conversation to realize that Anthony—he had confirmed his identity—resented my demand that I be a part of any plan stemming from the information I gave him. Our introduction to his headquarters, our debriefing, and our first meeting with him were clearly designed to throw us off our guard and convince us that we had no place here.

Our discussion became quite heated, quite quickly.

“You can’t *not* tell people what’s going on! There may not be anything that can be done, but people deserve the right to choose how they live the last days of their lives.”

A vein in Anthony’s forehead twitched as he spoke. “It would be pointless and just cause rioting. People would overwhelm the havens. No matter how much we might wish it, there just isn’t room for everybody. There isn’t even room for most people.”

“Now that we know about the havens, how are we supposed to choose who goes? Your little band of rebels? Our families? We should open it up. Let anyone who wishes sign up for a lottery.”

“We don’t have time for that!”

Frustration and anger coursed through me, and with every exchange we raised our voices just a little louder until we were yelling back and forth.

Finally, a louder sound broke through. “ENOUGH!” Rasen bellowed. The echoes of his outburst vibrated through the room as we both stared at him in silence.

He sighed and looked resigned. “It doesn’t matter one way or the other. It’s not like anyone is going to believe you. Gonos Corp PR will get on stream and

claim corporate terrorism or crazy cultists or misinformation or something, and everyone, trusting in the security of their existence, will believe that there is nothing that could ever get in the way of the life they are leading.” He paused. “I know if it hadn’t been someone I know and love who showed me this information, I would have believed whatever PR had been published to assuage the mass consciousness.”

I just stared at him. That was more words than I had ever heard him say all at one time. I had assumed that since he was being quiet, he wasn’t following the intricacies of what was going on. I would never underestimate his intelligence again.

In the end, it turned out that Rasen was right. I convinced Anthony to release a limited amount of the data we had collected and to allow anyone who wanted to go to the havens to sign up for a drawing. Gonos Corp didn’t even have to try. They published one buried segment on the news and our release was safely filed under “crazy apocalypse doomsday preachers”.

With the data I had stolen from Gonos Corp, and the extensive scientific research data that Anthony’s group had collected, they were able to more accurately predict the crisis point. The volcanic activity and destruction had slowly increased to where people could no longer ignore it. However, most of the speculation ran towards a cover-up masterminded by a terrorist group.

Anthony had teams in cities all over the world, gathering those who would listen, collecting supplies and researching how to live more primitive lives.

Rasen and I got a crash course in planting and growing food, cooking, and building by hand, as well as what it would be like to live with extremely limited electricity. The data indicated that the havens had massive generators, but most of their power would be used to power the environmental regulators that would be necessary to make the air breathable and the land workable for a long while after the cataclysm. Other than those regulators, the survivors would be dependent upon non-electric means to live.

The idea sounded completely romantic in a *hero of the wilderness* kind of way, until Rasen and I spent our first night ever sans electricity in a specially

modded training area. The sun went down around seven in the evening. We barely had time to get our things settled and gain our bearings. My head ached from the candle and fire smoke, and my eyes strained from the relative darkness.

I looked away from the food cooking over the wood-burning stove for just a moment, and when I turned back it had burned and crusted onto the side of the pot. My temper ran through me hot and fast. Without thinking I grabbed the pot off the stove and threw it against the wall. Burned beans made a trail of grossness that dripped down onto the floor.

“Augggghhh!!!” I screamed in the wake of the pot’s loud clang.

Rasen looked up from where he was working on using filters to purify some water for us to drink with dinner.

His eyes widened as his brain processed the scene. “What’s wrong?” he asked, strain evident in his voice.

I looked at him in disbelief. I wanted to take everything in this horrible, powerless place and break it. I wanted to free myself through destruction. The muscles in my arms twitched towards the dishes on the table and it was almost painful to rein in my instinctive need to throw things.

“I...I can’t do this. Rasen, we are going to have to live the rest of our lives like this. Everyone else—they’ve been preparing. They know what to do. Me? I’m a model! I live in High City. It’s been an hour and I already know I’m not cut out for this.”

I didn’t notice the tears streaming down my face until Rasen reached out and wiped them off my cheek.

He reached out to gather me into his arms as started to say, “I know. It’s hard but...”

I pushed his arms off me and cut him off. “I don’t want your pity! I just... I want things to be the way they were.”

A storm cloud passed over Rasen’s face. “Well, Mark, it can’t be. It can never be the way it was. Stop being a whiny baby and suck it up. Do you know how many millions—billions even—of people are going to die because they’re ignorant? Because they’ve been lied to and don’t know any better?”

His voice rose with each phrase and by the end he was yelling. He paused, and when he spoke again, it was in a fierce but quiet voice.

“I would rather live in these shit circumstances with you than have died out there, never knowing the truth.” His eyes blazed with something I barely caught. “It’s going to be hard. It’s probably going to be worse than either of us can even comprehend. But it’s going to be together.” His flashing eyes stared into mine for a long second before they shifted away.

Rasen glanced around for a quick moment, grabbed a spare pot from the table, and dropped to one knee. Mirth was apparent on his face before he even spoke. “Mark Montoya, will you survive the apocalypse with me?” He held up the pot as he would have a ring if he had been proposing.

The ridiculousness of it all broke my mood and I burst out laughing. I smiled as I pulled him to his feet. “Of course, Rasen Jiacek. I will be your apocalypse buddy.” A warm bubble seemed to start from my heart and spread through my whole body. I was a little bit giddy and so glad I had this wonderful man by my side.

I kissed him hard. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

When I stepped back from him, I looked around the “practice cabin” that we were staying in for the night with different eyes. I sighed. “Come on, Rasen. I’ll clean up the mess I made if you’ll start on Dinner 2.0.”

“Sure thing.”

That night, we were beyond exhausted when we crawled into the little bed in the corner. I fell asleep almost immediately after settling myself next to Rasen.

It seemed only a moment later when I woke up screaming. Rasen was standing over me, his hands on my shoulders as if he had been shaking me awake. His face was drained of all color, and his eyes filled with shock and terror.

My throat burned from the screaming and I had drenched the bed in sweat. Fear coursed through my veins, even though I knew it wasn’t real. As soon as I got my breathing under control, I panted, “I’m okay. Bad dream.” I

shuddered. I hadn't had a full-blown nightmare since Rasen came back. I had naively thought they were a thing of the past.

He reluctantly let go of my shoulders and walked over to the table. He wet a rag in a bowl of water we had left out. He then came and sat down on the bed next to me. The water felt cool against my overheated skin as Rasen carefully washed the sweat off my face, arms, and torso.

By the time he had finished his ministrations, I had come down from the terror of the nightmare enough to speak. "It was the same as the others except this time you were always dead and mutilated alongside me." I shivered at the memory of Rasen bruised, battered, and abused. It was bad enough to experience it when it had just been me.

Rasen returned the rag to the table and climbed back into bed. He wrapped his arms around me and held me until I fell asleep again. Thankfully, I was nightmare-free for the rest of the night.

Three days later, we got the call from the VOV. It was time to move out. The nearest haven was a day and half drive away. Anthony had gathered all those who were willing from three hundred miles around into a caravan with trucks full of supplies. It was a paltry two hundred people, but it was better than no one.

The weakest part of the plan, to my mind, was that we were just going to arrive at the haven and use any means necessary to gain access to the haven in our region. Anthony assured us that he had a spy placed on the inside who had guaranteed us entrance, and also promised that our numbers would not overwhelm the capacity of the haven itself.

The supplies included dry food, building materials, fuel for lamps and fire, a limited amount of water, a much larger supply of water filters, and something even I boggled at. Somehow, the VOV had found animals—chickens, goats, cows, horses, and cats and others. There hadn't been naturally-occurring livestock in almost one hundred years. I could only imagine where Anthony had stolen these animals from.

A little over a day out on our journey, the first shock wave came. The ground shook under us for a good two minutes before the earth settled.

Far off in the distance, the sky filled with fire. It had been hours since we had driven out of view of the city skyline, but I could imagine the buildings shifting on their foundations, and story upon story falling as those below them collapsed into nothingness.

As fire roared in the distance, a red light and dark ash took over the sky, and I imagined I could hear the screams of millions as the Earth took her penance on a humanity who had turned their back on her. Her cruel maw opened and swallowed her children whole into the burning pit of her gut.

The heat reached us, even at this distance, and fine, dark ash fell out of the sky, covering us in the remains of the only life we had ever known.

Through it all, the caravan forged forward. By the time the silhouette of the haven made its way into our line of sight, we were driving in complete darkness. The ash cloud covered the entire sky. The caravan lurched to a halt as the driver of the first car stopped to gain entrance for all of us.

Anthony kept his radio on broadcast to all the vehicles so we would know what was going on.

“You’re here. Thank God. We thought no one had escaped when the others didn’t show up.”

“We are two hundred strong and have brought supplies enough for twice that.”

“Welcome.”

A great cheer went up as the caravan began its slow progress into the haven. We were in a vehicle near the end of the caravan, so by the time we got out, most of the refugees were gathered in the central unloading area.

Rasen grabbed my hand as we joined the others. The darkness seemed to cover everything. Someone began to circle the courtyard area, lighting lamps with a torch of some sort. With each lit flame, a pool of light revealed hollow eyes and grime-covered faces stained with tears.

As the minutes passed, it became clear that the environmental regulators were holding. The growing pools of light allowed families and loved ones to find each other. Everywhere I looked, people embraced, and slow smiles filled with bittersweet pain spread through the crowd.

Anthony stood up on the hood of one of the trucks and spoke into the slowly brightening darkness.

“Tonight we mourn for those we have lost. No one here has not been touched. Tonight our tears run free, cleansing the dirt from our faces and the pain from our hearts.” He paused. “Look around, because grief does not rule us. Grief does not direct our path. The world has fallen apart, and we are the pieces left with which to rebuild. Look around, because we are the pieces from which the future will be forged. We are the future.”

Around us the crowd roared its hope and determination, but my attention was on Rasen. I tightened my grip on his hand, looked into his eyes and saw my future reflected there.

THE END

Author Bio

Kathleen Hayes is a bit of an all-around geek. She has mastered the art of procrastination, is owned by two crazy cats, and is excited to have just added a fellow super geek to her clan. Kathleen loves to explore worlds—whether in her head or on page. She welcomes you into her worlds and hopes you have as much fun there as she does!

She writes M/M Romance short stories and poetry. Other works by Kathleen include Broken, Life in Chaos, Like So Much Hot Air, Christmas Tradition, and Perfect. You can also follow her serial, True Love's Kiss, on her blog and find a selection of shorter ficbits [here](#).

She loves to hear from y'all so if you have questions/comments/feedback comment on her blog, message her on Goodreads or email her.

Contact & Media Info

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PICKUP LINES

By Kathleen Hayes

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: A youngish man is dressed to the nines in a black tux and bow tie. His light brown hair is styled to perfection with just a flip of it falling onto his forehead. His blue eyes are staring into the distance and he has a slight quirk to his lips.

Photo 2: A man with red hair and a fierce red beard is grinning a little mischievously as he lifts his pint of beer in a toast. He is wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. His arms are covered in colorful tattoos.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Hi!

This is me:

[Photo 1]

And you see this guy (he is adorable, right?):

[Photo 2]

He is The One!

Meeting him and falling in love was the biggest surprise of my life, I had everything figured out and one day I saw him and my life was turned upside-down.

The problem is that he doesn't know and I don't know what I can do to make him realize...

(HEA needed, no cheating, no gay-for-you or in the closet)

Sincerely,

Adriana

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: man in a kilt, sweet no sex, friends to lovers, tattoos, family issues

Word count: 5,429

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PICKUP LINES

By Kathleen Hayes

As I saw Mack squatting down to wipe up splatter from a fallen tray, I was instantly, almost violently, reminded of the first time I had met him.

Back then the bar had been a dive—dark booths, dark corners, dark alley behind. I had stumbled in after storming angrily out of a family function a few blocks away. The rain outside had just started coming down hard. I had been nursing a pout and a beer at the bar when the sound of the side door slamming open drew my attention. It was almost like one of those horror movie scenes—lightning flashed, rain streamed down in heavy sheets, and a huge dark shadow centered itself in the doorway. An instant later, the shadow had crumpled to the floor, the door had slammed shut and I had shot out of my seat.

In the dark of the bar, it was hard to make out details, but the large shadow was sitting, collapsed in the corner next to the door. As I approached I was able to make out wild red hair and an untamed red beard. Almost before that registered, I saw a different red staining most of one side of his head and seeping onto the collar of his shirt. He was bleeding from cuts on his cheek and forehead, and had a few choice bruises starting to form across his face and neck.

I hesitated for a moment—after all, I didn't know this man—but my eyes met his, and any indecision fled my mind in the wake of the pain I saw in those blue depths. I held out my hand.

“Need a hand?”

He looked at me a little funny, then cracked a hesitant smile. “You trying to pick me up?”

I marveled that he could crack a joke while bleeding on the floor, but beyond the lighthearted words, I could hear the wavering fear, the panic held at bay, and the need to pretend everything was normal.

I smiled back at him, and gamely pretended he hadn't just had the bloody crap beaten out of him. “Yup. My place or yours?” I winked.

He reached up and grabbed my hand.

I took him to the emergency room that night, and it came out that his brother had gotten in with an unsavory crowd. He owed money and refused to pay, so they had taken it out on Mack, hoping to convince Andy that dodging them would be a bad idea. He had three broken ribs, a broken nose and more bruises than I had ever seen on a dozen people, much less all on one person.

That first year, we had gotten to know each other as I randomly showed up at his job site—back then he still worked construction—to walk him home anytime it was after dark. I know, I couldn't have stopped a flea from biting someone, but that first year after the attack, Mack did better when he wasn't alone outside after dark. Despite his size, he never did feel safe.

The first night, I walked up to him, tapped him on the shoulder and with my best come hither face said, “Hey Mr. Construction Worker, can I feel your hard... hat?”

I had managed to maintain a straight face until he responded with the same “You trying to pick me up?” as the first time, but with an added wagging eyebrow. We both burst out laughing. The other guys, just out of hearing range, gave us funny looks, but it was the beginning of a tradition.

I was snapped out of my reverie when Mack yelled across the bar that he now owned, “Hey, is Edmund Chauncey Roth the third too fancy to help out with cleanup now? Get your butt over here.”

I made a show of groaning in complaint and slowly getting up off my stool. As I grabbed a rag from behind the bar, I shot back, “You know I hate it when you call me that.”

After we finished cleaning up the spill, Mack went back to work, and I spent the rest of the evening sipping beers and watching him. He poured drinks, called orders, laughed with customers, and generally kept all his employees focused. Every once in a while he would catch my eye and send me a smile, or stop by and say hi, but he had taken that crappy dive and turned it into a busy and successful pub, so he didn't have much spare time.

I loved watching Mack in his element. All his fear and uncertainty was gone in the face of his accomplishments. My heart tightened, and I was almost

overwhelmed by longing. It had taken me almost a year to recognize what those pangs in my stomach were every time I saw him, but back then he was still on such shaky ground that it was never the right time to mention anything.

And then four years passed.

I startled a bit when my phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and groaned audibly when I saw “Mother” blinking across the screen. Mack turned my way at just that moment so I waved my phone at him and nodded my head towards the front door.

I said, “Hello, Mother,” into the phone as soon I was safely out of the din of the pub.

“Edmund, dearest, where are you that it took you so long to answer the phone?”

I stifled a sigh and answered vaguely, “Nowhere, Mother. What can I do for you tonight?”

“I was just calling to remind you of your father’s fundraiser this weekend. It is important that we all show up and support him. Now, I have taken the liberty to arrange for Kitty’s boy, Arthur, to go with you. You know how he has been dying to meet you.”

I gritted my teeth. “Of course I remembered, Mother. Which is why I already have a date. You will just have to give my regrets to Arthur.”

After a few protests and stern reminders of how important it was that my date be suitable, she finally allowed me to hang up. Father was Edmund Chauncey Roth II, and he had been head of the Helping Hands charity since he took it over from his father. It was all about allowing the upper crust of society to look down their nose at “those poor people” and pretend they were doing something helpful. Father had no illusions about my willingness to take over after him and it is the main reason he rarely speaks to me anymore.

I hated going to these events and I usually ended up seething in silent anger, or storming out before the end.

Also, I had purposely forgotten the event, and now I had to find a date before Friday. Preferably someone who would make Father roll in his future grave.

Glumly, I walked back into the pub and my solution smacked me in the face. There Mack was—the light shining off his red hair and beard, his smile broad and friendly. He was in the informal uniform of his staff, jeans and a black T-shirt. It showed off his heavily tattooed arms. Mack saw me as I walked in, and lifted the large pint glass in his hand in salute before he downed half of it. He was wonderful—all the more so because Mother and Father would hate him at first glance.

I realized it must be later than I thought because Mack would never drink until it was near closing time. I spent the next half hour or so helping Mack get through his closing process and then cornered him in his office as he was putting the money in the safe.

I waited until he had closed the safe door and spun the lock before I began my attack.

“So, you’re my best friend, right?”

He had sat down at his desk, and looked up sharply with a wary glance. “Yes. But I don’t think I’m going to like where this is going.”

I smiled sweetly.

“Yeah, I know I’m not going to like it.”

“Mother called. She was reminding me about Father’s fundraiser on Saturday night. And to tell me about the guy she set me up to attend with. I told her I already had a date. But the thing is, I don’t.”

He started to look a little panicky. “No, no, no. I refuse.”

“Please. I’ll do anything.” I batted my eyelashes at him ridiculously, and held my hands up in a pleading gesture.

Mack let out a groan and finally said, “Fine, anything to get you to stop making that face.”

I paused, then replied with, “Baby, you’re like a student and I am like a math book, you solve all my problems.”

He shook his head and threw his pen at me with a smile, “Get out of here. You’re not allowed to use pickup lines on me when I’m doing you a favor.”

I bowed gallantly with a smirk on my face and backed out of his door. “As you wish.”

As I walked out to my car, I ignored the twinge in my heart at the fact that I had to beg Mack to go out with me—and that wasn’t even for a real date. I sighed, and not for the first time, called myself hopeless.

I stood outside Mack’s front door and took a moment to try and calm the rampaging elephants that had taken up residence in my stomach. This isn’t a real date. This isn’t a real date. I figured if I told myself that enough, then maybe my heart might actually believe it.

Finally, I gathered my courage and knocked.

I heard Mack’s voice, muffled through the door. “It’s unlocked.”

I took a deep breath and walked in. It was kind of a letdown when it was the same apartment I’d hung out in multiple times a week—the same messy tables, the same rumpled couch, the same ratty carpet, the same...

My breath caught in my throat as my eyes passed over the same weirdly painted bedroom door, because Mack was stepping out of that door right then.

My brain boggled and my heart skipped a beat. About ninety percent of the time, Mack wears jeans and a black T-shirt. The other ten percent, he wears sweats. I don’t know what I thought he would wear to a formal event, but I hadn’t wanted to make him feel awkward about his wardrobe, so I hadn’t asked him about it.

Mack was wearing a deep teal-blue kilt with aged silver studs and buckles, a white shirt, an open black leather vest with matching aged silver fasteners, and black boots that laced up to a couple inches above his ankles. He had the sleeves of the shirt rolled up to just below his elbows and the tattoos on his forearms were displayed to perfection. The shirt and vest fit snugly around his barrel chest. Finally, my eyes reached his face—he had washed, combed and possibly oiled his beard with something that made it look positively silky. His eyes sparkled and some undefined emotion lurked in them.

I felt my mouth hanging open and tried to shake myself out of my speechless shock when I saw a measure of uncertainty enter Mack’s eyes.

“Is it okay?” he asked, more tentatively than I would have expected.

“It’s perfect,” I replied, a little breathless.

“I knew I couldn’t pull off the whole monkey suit thing like you,” he said with a vague wave towards the extremely conservative, completely traditional tuxedo I was wearing. I knew I rocked a tuxedo, and I also thought he would look fantastic in one. But this was so much better.

He looked to be taking another breath to begin explaining himself, so I walked up to him and put my finger against his lips. “No. You look wonderful. I will have the best looking date at the whole fundraiser.”

I felt his lips curve up into a smile under my finger and it sent a jolt all the way down my arm. I looked up and caught his eye. We seemed to stay locked in each other’s gaze for a small eternity before I stepped back and broke eye contact.

The tension was so thick I wasn’t sure I could move any further. I cast around my brain for a way to break it, to move back to where it was safe, comfortable.

I jerked my head up when Mack spoke. He had a smirk on his face as he said, “Do you have any overdue library books?” Pause. “No? ’Cause you’ve got fine written all over you.”

I burst out laughing, and the tautness of the moment before was broken. I groaned and shook my head. “That was horrible.”

We arrived at the convention center twenty minutes later, and I took advantage of the situation to grab Mack’s hand and lead him towards the entrance. He looked a little startled at first, but didn’t force our hands apart. I firmly pushed the voice inside my head into a box and allowed myself to pretend for just this one night.

As we entered the ballroom, I glanced over at Mack. His eyes were wide with wonder as he took in the surroundings. I had been to so many of these that I had become a bit blasé about it all. But seeing Mack’s reaction made me take a second look.

A huge chandelier hung over the center of the space—it was probably twenty feet in diameter. White fairy lights on the potted plants along the walls

added a romantic glow to everything, and each table had candles floating in varying-sized vases surrounding a single orchid as the centerpiece. Off to one side, taking up an entire corner, was a twenty-piece orchestral ensemble. A huge set of double doors on one wall led to a second, lavishly decorated room hosting the silent auction.

We both paused, lost in the grandeur of it all for a few moments more before I shook myself, smiled up at Mack, and led him towards our table.

The evening flew by in a swirl of bright lights, soft music, and fantastic food. We spent the first half of the evening exploring the silent auction and laughing as much as possible. After dinner was served, the dancing began.

It took me a few songs to work up the courage to ask Mack to dance, but I finally managed.

I looked at him shyly. “Would you like to dance?”

“Me?! Ummm, I’m not sure I really know this kind of dancing,” he hedged nervously.

“It’s all right. I’ll lead.”

“Okay.” We both seemed a little stunned by his answer, but I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth and all that, so I took his hand and led him out to the dance floor. About half the couples out there actually knew how to dance, and the other half just sort of swayed around trying not to run into the other dancers. I firmly fell into the latter category, but I could not pass up the opportunity to hold Mack close like that.

I put my right hand on his waist, used my left hand to take his right, and drew us together as the music began. As I moved my feet, long-ago cotillion lessons seemed to come back to me, and I managed a little better than a simple box step. Despite being larger and taller than me, Mack followed wonderfully. As the music slowed, so did my steps. I drew him closer until I could feel his chest against mine. It might have been my imagination, but I thought I could feel his heart beating in time with mine.

The music spun out around us and gave me courage. I leaned my head in against his shoulder and breathed deeply of his scent—unlike anything else I

had ever smelled. My head spun from the dancing, from the headiness of the moment, and from the champagne that had been flowing freely all night long. Somehow, without my realizing it, our hands had shifted and no longer rested on each other's hips but were wrapped around each other's backs.

It was a perfect moment. I sighed and said Mack's name against his throat, and almost unconsciously leaned a little closer to press my lips against his neck.

"Edmund, dearest." Mother's voice interrupted me before I could take that final irreversible step. I didn't know if I was relieved or disappointed. We had moved to the edge of the dance floor as we danced, and Mother was standing just off the dance floor with Father and another couple—I thought they might be Arthur's parents.

I went from utterly content to thoroughly annoyed in no time flat. I had brought Mack, both so I wouldn't have to come with one of her cronies' bratty children, and because I knew Mother would not approve of Mack. I planned to milk it for all it was worth. I shocked myself with how quickly I switched gears.

I pulled Mack towards the small group of people and plastered myself against his side.

"Edmund, you remember Kitty and James. Why don't you introduce us to your date?"

"This is Mack Ferguson. Mack, this is my mother, Elizabeth Beauregard Roth, and my father, Edmund Chauncey Roth the second. And as Mother said, this is Kitty Allen Spencer and James Frances Spencer."

After a round of "*pleasure to meet yous*" Kitty turned politely to us and asked, "So how did you two meet? It must have been recent because just last week your mother was bemoaning your single state."

Definitely Arthur's parents. Mack had begun to speak but I cut him off, and replied in the most aristocratic tone I could manage, "I picked him up in a bar." It wasn't a lie, and it would serve my purpose of embarrassing my parents.

I saw Mack's face turn hard as he looked at me, and Mother appeared to be thinking on all cylinders.

She was the first to speak. Her voice was strained with control and fake jocularity. "Edmund, honey. You mustn't joke so. This must be your friend I hear so much about who owns that pub you are always hanging out at."

Ignoring Mack's look and trying to get every dig in I could, I leered slightly. "More than a friend, Mother."

It almost felt like I was not in control of my body or my mouth. I grabbed Mack's face and shoved my tongue in his mouth. There was about a split second in which I was overwhelmed by the fact that I was kissing my best friend, I was kissing Mack. But Mack held completely and totally rigid against me. His jaw was set and even with only a glimpse of his face, I could see that he was furious.

He mechanically disengaged himself from my grasp, turned towards the rest of the group and, with a barely constrained temper, said, "Please excuse me." Then he whirled in the opposite direction and stalked towards the exit.

All at once, the magnitude of what I had done hit me like a two by four between the eyes. I had been so concentrated on embarrassing my parents that I treated Mack, my best friend, the man I was pretty sure I was in love with, like garbage.

I ran after him.

I caught up with him at the coat check as he was waiting for the attendant to bring him his leather jacket.

I touched his arm to get his attention, and he jerked instinctively out of my reach. He was angrier than I had ever seen him and behind that anger lurked a hurt I had no idea I was capable of inflicting.

"I cannot believe you did that to me," he hissed. "I do not want to see you right now. I'll catch a cab home. Please leave me alone."

I stepped back from him, and just nodded like a mute bobblehead doll, trying to get an apology, a plea, anything to cross my lips, but by the time I unstuck my brain enough to whisper, "I'm sorry," he was already out the door.

I stumbled around the corner beside the coat check, into a mostly deserted service corridor, and collapsed on the floor against the wall. My chest felt so tight it was difficult to breathe and I tried to wrap my head around what I had just lost. I felt like I should be crying but no tears came.

Eventually, I looked up to see Mother coming down the corridor towards me. She came to a stop in front of me and glared down at me. “Edmund Chauncey Roth, what in the name of everything on God’s green earth do you think you were doing out there?” She took a deep breath, and I assumed she would continue her lecture as per the usual. But after a few beats of silence I looked up at her. She was just staring down at me. As I met her eyes, she kept staring, hard and piercing. Something of her usual mask slipped, and some new emotion flashed through her eyes.

It seemed as if she was trying to read me like a book, trying to open up my head and figure out what was going on in there. It was the most attention she had ever paid to me as just myself, and not as an extension of her or Father.

After another moment of silent staring she finally spoke. “You really love him, don’t you?”

I don’t think anything she could have said would have shocked me more. Without really thinking, I just answered, “Yes.”

“Then I say again, what in the hell were you doing out there?”

“I don’t know. I just got so caught up in hating all the family drama and embarrassing you that I lost my head a bit.”

Then Mother shocked me for the second time that night. She sat down on the floor with me and leaned against the wall—her shoulder touching mine. This time tears did slip out of the edges of my eyes.

She took my hand and sighed deeply. “Sometimes I get so caught up in being good enough, appearing perfect to all these people, that I forget who I am, forget that the whole world doesn’t live in masks.”

We sat there, truly together for the first time, I think, in our entire lives.

A time later, she spoke again. “I wasn’t always like this. I started out like your friend Mack. My parents died when I was nineteen, as you know, and I was on my own for three years before I met your father. I worked at a deli

below the firm where he was interning. His parents were so mad. But we loved each other and I vowed I would change, I would become good enough for the world he came from. And now, I don't even recognize either of us anymore."

"I never knew that." There had been so many shocks this evening that I think I had stopped feeling them at that point.

"So, hear me when I tell you this. Don't let him change for you. If you really love him, go apologize and do whatever you need to do to make him understand how you feel."

The next day was a Sunday so I knew the pub wouldn't be opening until one p.m. I headed over around eleven a.m. to try to catch Mack before any of his employees showed up.

I knocked on the side door and when he opened it, his eyes were granite-hard and his jaw was set.

I gathered my courage. "Can I come in?"

He didn't say anything. He just opened the door a little wider. He walked over to the bar, stepped behind it, and began methodically cleaning all the glasses. The glasses were all cleaned at night before closing.

I went up to the bar, in front of where he was standing, and figured this was as good as I was going to get.

"Mack, I'm sorry. There is no excuse for how I acted last night. I treated you horribly and I used you to get back at my parents. I shouldn't have treated a stranger that way, much less..." I paused, debating if I should declare myself quite yet, and settled on, "my best friend. Please forgive me."

He just kept washing the clean glasses.

I cautiously reached my hand over the bar and rested it on his moving arm. "Mack, please."

He finally looked up at me and the pain in his eyes physically knocked me back. My hand fell off his arm and I almost stumbled over one of the bar stools. He began to speak in a low, taut voice.

“I can’t believe you used me like that. You treated me like I was some whore you picked up on your way to the party—like I wasn’t worthy to be the dirt scraped off the bottom of your shoe. I have never felt so low in my whole life. After all we’ve been through together, I never would have expected that from you. And to think, I actually thought that... never mind.” He sighed, “I was obviously wrong.”

He turned his back and began placing the twice-cleaned glasses back on their shelves.

I was pretty sure I knew what he meant with those last words, but I decided to set that aside for now. I needed to make things right between us before anything else could happen. I walked around behind the bar and stood in front of Mack, forcing him to look at me.

“You are the best person in my life. You have been through more, and created more out of a shit lot, than anyone I have ever heard of. If you let me, I will do everything in my power to earn your trust again, because I know right now I don’t deserve it. Please give me a chance.”

He was silent for a long time. His eventual nod was barely perceptible, but my heart leapt to see it.

I grabbed an apron, tossed it over my head and asked him, “Where do you need me?” just like I did every Sunday morning. I wasn’t technically an employee but I would rather be here, with Mack, helping out, than pretty much anywhere else. So this is where I spent all my spare time.

There was a long pause and then he said, “Check the setups.” I kept the grin on my face in check as I grabbed the crate with the salt, pepper and various sweeteners needed to refill the setups on each table.

Over the next six weeks, our relationship slowly regained its footing. Mother came to eat at the pub multiple times, and the three of us even had one completely awkward and stilted dinner together.

The day I knew everything would be all right between us was the day I was greeted by Mack’s booming voice yelling across the bar, “Would you grab my arm so I can tell my friends I’ve been touched by an angel?” I had never been so happy to hear a cheesy pickup line in all my life.

I yelled back, “I’ll grab something—might not be your arm.” Mack and the few people sitting at the bar all burst out laughing.

Three days later, I walked into the bar wearing my tuxedo. I had gone all out, used my best cuff links and done my hair. Mack wasn’t in the front so I sat down at the bar and ordered a beer from Aaron, one of the regular bartenders.

I waited a few minutes, and before I had finished my beer, Mack came out of his office dressed in his typical jeans and black T-shirt. He did a double take when he saw me all dressed up, sitting at the bar.

He approached me and asked, “What’s the occasion?”

I smiled and said, “I’ve got a really important date.”

About a million emotions flashed through Mack’s eyes before he squeezed them briefly shut and then plastered a smile on his face. That’s when I knew he was just as into this as I was.

He managed to grate out a “congratulations” and started to turn away when I reached out, grabbed his hand and waited until he was looking at me again.

“Mack Ferguson, will you go out with me?” My heartbeat raced in my chest as I waited for his answer.

A small smile began to spread across his face, and the hope in his eyes was brilliant. He spoke in an almost whisper. “No games?”

I shook my head. “No games.”

His smile turned full-blown and he whooped, “Of course!”

He grabbed me off my bar stool and spun me once. I didn’t even know that was possible, but I didn’t have time to think about it, because as soon as he set me down, he was kissing me.

His lips were pressed against mine and I thought my heart might burst from joy. He grabbed my head, threaded his fingers through my hair, and pulled me in tighter. I could feel his beard scraping against my face and neck. I let him deepen the kiss, and melted into him as he joyfully took my mouth.

It was hot, and wet, and wonderful, and I don't think I had ever had a kiss quite like it. Eventually we had to separate, because it is really hard to kiss around two huge grins.

My cheeks hurt, I was smiling so hard, as Mack pulled me into a hug. Amidst the catcalls and shouts of the customers, he whispered in my ear, "Why'd you dress up?"

I leaned back and looked him in the eyes before I responded, "I wanted you to know how important this moment is to me, how important you are to me."

Joy practically shone out of his whole face. "Thanks. You're pretty important too."

I smiled and kissed him again.

THE BEGINNING

Author Bio

Kathleen Hayes is a bit of an all-around geek. She has mastered the art of procrastination, is owned by two crazy cats and is excited to have just added a fellow super geek to her clan. Kathleen loves to explore worlds—whether in her head or on page. She welcomes you into her worlds and hopes you have as much fun there as she does!

She writes M/M Romance short stories and poetry. Other works by Kathleen include Broken, Life in Chaos, Like So Much Hot Air, Christmas Tradition, and Perfect. You can also follow her serial, True Love's Kiss, on her blog and find a selection of shorter ficbits [here](#).

She loves to hear from y'all so if you have questions/comments/feedback comment on her blog, message her on Goodreads, or email her.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Blog: Romancing the Word!](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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ONLY MINE

By Valentina Heart

Photo Description

Two older, good-looking men caught in an intimate moment after a good time in a BDSM club. They are dressed in leather with their T-shirts tucked in their belts. They look dangerous with all that exposed muscle, but still share a touch of tenderness where one man's hands rest at the waist of the other while they press their foreheads together.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We have what appears to be a Dom and his sub, but appearances can be deceiving. These two men are actually undercover. While their personas are masks, the emotion in this photo is very real.

What has brought these two men to this point of giving and receiving comfort?

I wouldn't mind BDSM in the story. Either because it is a part of one or both of their real lives or because while undercover, they realize that these new experiences work for them in some way.

*I would like a HEA and **Genre:** contemporary*

***Tags:** law enforcement, BDSM, tattoos, dirty would LOVE this scene to appear in the story.*

Sincerely,

Sue

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: law enforcement, BDSM, tattoos, dirty talk, slave

Word count: 9,411

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ONLY MINE

By Valentina Heart

CHAPTER ONE

Gavin

I only had enough time to pull on the first not-too-bad-smelling T-shirt before I could hear the van braking in front of my first-floor apartment and only seconds later, the insistent sound of the horn. I picked up my keys from the cracked bowl by the entrance and shut the door on my way out.

The van was standard cop issue, as inconspicuous as we could make it, cheap in all the places the department could cut costs, and puke ugly to look at. But the door was already open and I could see the irritation on Kent's face as he motioned for me to run faster, as if he'd been waiting for me for hours. It was just one of those things that made the guy who he was and instead of letting it annoy me, I smirked evilly enough to make him huff. I took my wins where I could get them.

Sliding the door closed, Kent was speaking before the rookie behind the wheel managed to put the van in first. I cleared my mind of extra baggage, ready to take on my new personality on the fly.

"Sorry for pulling you in after your double. You're the only one who can do this." Kent gave me that remorseful look that was only half sincere.

"Don't worry about it. It's not the first time and I'm sure it won't be the last. Fill me in."

"You know that BDSM club Pristine? Of course you don't, what am I thinking," Kent answered for himself, making me grin because I did actually know about the club, but decided he was flustered enough even without that information. "Anyway, the owner is this big shot, Francis Long. He has multiple clubs and friends in high places. Pretty much untouchable, but he's been on McKay's radar for a while. You know how he leads his department, once his teeth are in a suspect, he's not letting go. They suspected him of

human trafficking but could never prove anything. But tonight, Pristine is organizing a BDSM show for their exclusive clientele. It's an all-night event, public scenes and very few limits, so once you're in, until the winner is declared, you're not going anywhere. The winner gets the works, a one-time offer to see his private island, private training opportunities and access to another elite BDSM event."

"Why is it always a private fucking island?" I mumbled, thinking it a cliché.

"Security, no trespassing or noisy neighbors. You know this, Gavin."

"Yeah, yeah."

Kent gave an unimpressed look. "Be that as it may, you're not to even think of staging a scene. McKay suspected all the illegal activity has been happening there, but he's had no access, until a while ago when he sent in one of his agents undercover. The guy was supposed to gather enough evidence that Long is actually doing something illegal, and then ask for an extraction. Unfortunately, they lost contact with him a couple of months ago and tonight is the first night he's been seen since. You're his way out and I have every faith in you."

"Of course you do." I laughed. "So who's the guy?"

"We only got word a couple of hours ago, so it's all one big mess."

"Do you even know?" I interrupted him, not letting my original question go.

"Top of the class, standard undercover agent like you, only younger."

"That's really beside the point if he's good at his job. Getting stranded like that can't have been easy on him."

Kent ignored me and went on, "You have to make yourself believable. The agent is up for sale, some twenty-four/seven type of bullshit I don't honestly want to know about, and we need you to buy him. They picked you for your cool personality and general tolerance—read that last one as your sexual orientation catching their attention—but I don't doubt your looks played a role as well."

I just scowled at him.

“Dude, it’s nothing personal, this is a BDSM club, and unlike them, I know being gay and dangerous doesn’t equal dominant in bed.” Kent had his hands up as if surrendering and I had trouble staying serious. It’d been years since undercover federal agents were required to provide their personal information for inter-departmental cooperation. It made for easily accessible info when different task forces lacked qualified personnel and despite the drawbacks of discrimination, however slight, the arrests that resulted in the following years were very much worth it.

But I ignored his jabs, used to Kent’s loud and mouthy way, and gave him a little bit of information, he didn’t have authorization to actually sneak a peek at in my file but I didn’t mind him knowing at the moment. “Don’t worry, I’ve played before.” His expression was priceless but I moved on before he managed to get a grip. “What about the rookie? Could they have read him as a fake right away?”

“He’s not exactly a rookie, he’s been on the force almost as long as you,” Kent said ignoring me back, but one look from me and the words came out. “Yeah, fine. He’s listed as gay but no previous experience in similar assignments. You know how these things work, his preference is the key. He wasn’t flinching when touched and they deemed it enough.”

“But he had some interest at least?” I was getting nervous at that point. If the guy had had absolutely no interest in whips, chains and unmerciful fucking, there was no way he would ever have passed as a sub in a club like Pristine. “This shit is important. Am I gonna go there and find a brainwashed slave, or just a guy who was good enough to actually pass slave training?”

“You kinda just went way over my head. But yeah, he expressed interest.” Kent looked apologetic.

“Jesus, just say so. I fucking hate working with other units on such a short notice but we have to get him out safely.”

“I hear you, man.”

Then another thing occurred to me. “Will he expect me there or will he blow my cover? What are his unit’s assumptions?”

“They doubt he’ll jeopardize the case, but aren’t giving any guarantees. The general advice is to go in prepared for anything.”

I sighed but gave Kent the signal to go on. “He’s going by the name Will Gordon, submissive obviously. Twenty-seven, writes for a magazine and requires a hard hand.” He smirked at me but didn’t give me a chance to push back. “You’re Chase Gibson, thirty-nine. Owner of a thrift shop, but you come from old money and invest wisely. You’re in town on business. The job allows you to travel and while it’s something you love, it gets kind of lonely. This seemed like the perfect opportunity to find some company. In your professional life, you’re ruthless, not afraid to take what you want, and that transfers to your private affairs where that same control freak gets what he wants sexually—by being a dominant. You got all that?”

“Yeah, alpha personality, no bullshit tolerance and very confident. No problem. They require that much of a background check?” I pushed off my sneakers, ready to get undressed.

“Yeah, we actually had to find a guy to vouch for you. You’re buying a human being, I guess they actually care what happens to their slaves.”

“It’s a different world. Your Will went through a two-month-long intensive training, probably under one of the better-known names in the world. They won’t just let him end up with someone unworthy of the property.”

“Property? What?” Kent asked worriedly.

“Usually people sign up for that. They give themselves to a house and one of their trainers who’s willing to take them on. The handlers train the volunteers to be perfect slaves and then sell them to the highest bidder. There is also a matter of a minimum currency amount previously agreed upon between the slave and the trainer. It’s all consensual and contract binding.” I took off my jeans and pulled at my shirt, managing to take it off again despite the sunglasses perched in my buzz-cut hair. What can I say? It’s a talent.

“I don’t understand.” Kent gaped at me.

“You’d call it kink, but it’s much more than that. It’s a lifestyle and not all that uncommon either.”

“So you think he gained access to the information by becoming a slave? And his department approved it?”

“It’s most likely. But a number of things could have gone wrong. One thing I know for sure, nothing illegal is going to happen tonight. If there is a story worth pursuing, it happened while he was on the island.” I pulled on the white T-shirt, somewhat loose, low-riding leather pants and shiny boots.

“We’re here.” The rookie up front spoke for the first time and I took a deep breath, ready to take on another challenge.

CHAPTER TWO

Spencer

I was insane, irresponsible, weak and just delusional. Why ever did I think everything would work itself out in the real world? That my job would just disappear, my superiors would forget that I vanished from the face of the earth for two whole months without a word or even a letter of resignation. That they would just say *okay, Morris, we totally understand that you want to be someone's slave, clean, serve and take it up the ass. It's perfectly all right that you've let us pursue false leads for the last two months and have nothing to show for it now. Good job.*

I actually snorted at that, earning myself a crop bite on my thigh. Michael laid his hand on my nearly-shaved head and rubbed affectionately. It helped calm me, focus on my position where I knelt on the floor, my thighs slightly spread and my ass resting on my booted heels. It was the perfect position, something I only discovered when Michael took me on, showed me how quickly I could go under and how peaceful it was to just focus on my Master, to let go of the worry and expel the tension.

Michael had me on my knees ten minutes after meeting me, but I required an additional three surprising encounters and a panicked mouthing off in the face of something I desperately craved, to actually accept who I really was. It was one thing knowing what I was supposed to do, to think of it in only a sexual sense, but something completely different to willingly obey and submit to a stranger, without any strings holding me back.

I opened my eyes, took in the crowded club, so many curious eyes, and allowed Michael to ground me, give me courage, where I might have lacked it on my own. This was something I truly wanted, to belong, to serve, to satisfy. I needed a Master and a purpose and my job on the force was a far cry from actual satisfaction.

A loud gong sounded through the spacious club, and I vaguely heard the auctioneer praising our training, attributes and appearance, but the cop in me

had surrendered long ago, and nothing short of Michael's voice or a tap of that crop could have snapped me back to wakefulness.

Once my turn came, I lifted myself up on all fours, following the snap of my Master's fingers and twisted my hips, in an almost seductive crawl that had taken me ages to perfect. My eyes focused on the shiny floor, I followed the leather boots leading me, wishing for an order, almost whining for praise.

I was hard as stone, noticing the harsh breaths of the attentive crowd, seeing the oil glistening on my freckled skin and I felt myself being admired, appraised, wanted. I was someone's future property, a source of pleasure and I could hardly wait.

CHAPTER THREE

Gavin

The club was bustling with people, excitement almost vibrating in the air and the expectation was so thick I could almost taste it on my lips. The smell of sweat and the sound of a whip infused themselves into my senses reminding me of what I was capable of—what I craved and reveled in each and every time I had a moment to spare. This was my world, my kind of drug and also the last thing I ever wanted to relate to work.

Single Doms prevailed for once, lounging in comfortable round sofas, sipping drinks at the bar or focusing on big screens off the side of the stage that were an addition to the usual appearance of the club. The first part of the evening was about to begin, something easily heard in the increasing rush of the muted drum and the focus on the patrons stalking the dimmed stage.

Even the Doms with slaves and subs at their feet paid attention, paused in their sips and riveted their attention to the slowly illuminated entertainment.

My gaze sharpened and centered on the eight people taking over the stage as their features were lit up, four slaves kneeling obediently and their trainers holding an attached leash or simply standing next to the pretty property. I shivered in excitement.

Only one of them was a woman, far to the left, lean and naked with pert nipples on smallish breasts, but I let my gaze barely touch her as the one I was looking for fit a whole different set of parameters—male, of the cop variety, and my future property.

It was a nice presumption, idealistic even, because not even my wildest expectations could have prepared me for what the light revealed: Three men, all of them in different states of undress and rather stunning. Still, it wasn't any of them that held my attention, but rather a familiar set of shoulders dusted with freckles I'd eagerly licked once upon a time and the perfectly held kneeling pose I could remember so clearly between my own feet.

Mindlessly, my legs carried me closer to where my gaze was glued—to his glistening muscles. The leather crossed over his pecs, held in place by the

shiny ring between his nipples. His eyes faced downward, but there was no mistaking those long lashes and the full lips that had once been wrapped around my cock. I moaned, unsure if it was from despair or simple undiluted want.

I barely noticed the quiet tap from the man standing next to him, then narrowed my eyes and looked at the dangerous-looking trainer who had Spencer kneeling for him so effortlessly, as if he had that right. He was imposing, sure of himself but with a light step as he led Spencer forward. His kind eyes loosened something in me, and I gave the man the benefit of the doubt that, just maybe, everything was as perfectly kinky as it seemed to a trained eye and that not a single order or crop correction was met by an unwilling slave.

Then my lovely sub crawled a step further, twisting his tight ass while on his knees, putting one hand in front of the other, and I felt my cock lengthen beneath my belly button, my balls pull up. Spencer was like a cat, twisting leisurely, carrying on a confidence I never knew he had. He was performing for the crowd, giving his best for a buyer without even realizing what he was doing to all the interested Doms around him. Without having a clue just how strongly he pulled at my possessive streak and how likely I was to tighten my hand around his neck and have him begging prettily at my feet.

Sweet Spencer, the obedient, tough-looking sub I had never managed to collar as my own. I groaned, mentally kicking myself. The one man I ever wanted but never managed to find enough time to actually give him the attention he deserved.

I was startled as a man from the crowd leaned forward, cupped Spencer's ass, and squeezed as if he already owned him. My blood boiled and I tightened my fists. The sub would be mine, one way or the other and if that Dom didn't stop fondling my property he might just lose his greedy fingers.

I took out my new phone, careful enough not to jeopardize the operation but also determined enough to get what I wanted. I typed a message to my accountant, the same one who'd never managed to persuade me to enjoy the cash my grandparents had left me ten years ago, and asked for him to prepare

for a money transfer, significantly larger than anything I had spent up until now. I would buy my slave with the department's money, for the sake of the case and appearance, but there would be no doubt in Spencer's mind about who actually bought him in the end.

CHAPTER FOUR

Spencer

I had my blushing moments, minutes when my heart raced as if I was running after a suspect instead of kneeling under the scrutiny of a full club. But there were also those when the peace surrounding my whole being surpassed even the best orgasm I'd ever had. I was made to kneel for my Master and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I'd made the right call.

The men touching me, speaking to Michael, were as much background noise as the hum of the surrounding crowd. It was of no consequence who bought me. All the patrons were checked out, good choices. Still, I would not go into the hands of a Dom unapproved by my trainer, who would check on me occasionally to make sure I was safe and happy.

Shiny boots right in the line of my vision pulled me out of my dazed state. How long had they been there? Was the man even moving? Solid boots without a speck of dirt on them, black, polished. I imagined I could smell them, and I leaned ever so slightly forward until a tap against my thigh had me straightening my back once again, paying attention to my surroundings despite the desire uncoiling in my belly.

Then a hand found its way onto my scalp, fingers rubbing against my short cropped hair. I leaned into it, almost purring at the sensation of the somehow familiar large hand and strong fingers that held me as if I was precious. It was natural to give in, let someone else take the reins and I ceased thinking. The man slid his fingers under my chin, one thumb pressing at the corner of my lips as he tilted my head backward without an ounce of resistance from me.

My eyelids had dropped into slits and even with him in my clear line of sight, I only saw a blurred form who'd deemed me worthy of attention. I sighed in pleasure and the man chuckled, coming closer to me, allowing me to take in his overpowering scent of masculinity and traces of sweat. I hardened to the point of pain even before his breath caressed my skin, but it was the teasing lick against my cheek that had me whimpering.

"Gorgeous, as always," the man rumbled—such a familiar voice.

I was dropping—a part of me not even aware of reality and the feeling was so good. I couldn't have cared less about the warning signals sounding somewhere in the back of my mind. This man had me in his hands. I was his to play with and he could very well take me right on the spot without even a word of complaint from my lips.

Unfortunately, Michael had other ideas. One resounding “Will,” had me snapping back to attention, as if I rushed into the light from a tight-fitting tunnel, only to be met by the smirk I knew too well and piercing eyes that had never allowed me to hide.

My jaw slackened and eyes widened but I was still too wrapped up in pleasure to connect all the dots, to fit in his familiar face with the person I had once known. He leaned a bit closer, wrapping me up in his scent again and I couldn't have forced myself to care. I just gratefully accepted the chaste kiss against my lips, the playful bite on the edge of my chin as he still held my head in his palm.

“Just a bit longer and I'm taking you home, gorgeous,” he said, and then was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gavin

The auction itself, after the half-hour presentation, was a silent affair. Done over the computer in an expectant hush, it gave the slaves an opportunity to stay in their little safe bubbles, and the bidders an impression of civility. It bothered me that I couldn't assess my competition, but in the end, the fact didn't quite matter. I had an unlimited budget, and since I knew I would be paying every cent of it back to the department, my conscience was clear.

Two men were left at the end, trying to push their way in, but they couldn't match my determination. When my last bid on my boy went unchallenged, I had sealed the deal.

The instructions started scrolling down my screen right away, and Spencer, no—Will, I had to remember his name was Will in this world—was led away from the stage by his trainer. It made me uneasy, but I knew there was no going around the auction's sales contract so I sat comfortably and got on with my reading.

We were not allowed to leave the premises until the last of the entertainment was through. Simple observation of the slaves' interaction with their new owners assured the trainers that the slaves were, in fact, in good hands. No heavy play was allowed until the submissives' contracts were read and signed which would happen sometime during the evening at the Masters' convenience.

The rest was pretty much the usual, with the inclusion of a "damages fee" in case the bidder changed his or her mind after the auction, they would be obligated to pay ten percent of their final bid to the wronged slave. As if I would ever give Spencer back.

One trainer opened the thick curtain hiding the backstage rooms and came back up front announcing the slaves were ready for their new Masters and asked for us to follow him, and I happily obliged.

The new room was surprisingly spacious with designs on the walls, decadent paintings and thick carpets beneath the slaves occupying each

flourished corner. Will was still in his leathers, with a black T-shirt tucked into his back pocket, hanging to his mid thigh and strangely turning me on. He was standing next to his trainer, hands behind his back and chin low, but despite the seemingly relaxed pose, I could see just how tense he was and I couldn't wait to ease him into our new beginning. His size was beautifully exposed while on his feet, the muscles twitching unconsciously and the beginning of his sideburns adding to his ruggedness. He was taller than his trainer but wonderfully submissive while the other man aired confident dominance without even trying.

"Hello, I'm Michael," the trainer said, offering me his hand as I came to them, something I happily accepted. I had to fight to tear my gaze from Will and focus on the dominant but very handsome man.

"Chase Gibson. A pleasure," I responded in a voice far from the husky whisper I'd used on Will and the man in question flinched slightly, as if I'd struck a nerve.

"Well, onto the business, I suppose," Michael said as he motioned toward the curved, modern table and pulled out matching chairs, taking a seat himself.

Will dropped down with ease, close enough to lean against Michael, but obviously trained enough not to. He was making my fingers tingle with the urge to touch him, pull him to my side and make him sigh in contentment just for me. I was more than simply another buyer. I had the advantage of being an agent, knowing how Will's mind worked when under pressure, but I also knew the man, and despite being only a part-time Dom, I was still a presence in both his worlds.

"Anything out of the ordinary I should be aware of?" I asked instead, already picking up the contract and reading through it, willing the time to pass quickly and for the formalities to be done and over with.

"No. Everything is very straightforward, and the contract just repeats what was already said in Will's profile. He's not a masochist by any means, and is looking mainly for servitude. There will be random checks, by me or one of the club owners, to make sure he is all right. We will most likely be accompanied by a doctor to make sure he's not being abused. The rest is up to the two of you."

I nodded, noticing the same clause in the contract in addition to the payment detail sheet, where it was clear that the club got only a portion of the money I'd paid, the rest would go to Will's bank account, something that definitely didn't ring as illegal. Will was in this willingly and I was itching with curiosity to know what exactly was going through his head.

"I believe a two year contract is not too long for you?" Michael's eyebrows popped up as he looked at me unaware of my impatience and the jumble of my enthusiastic, as well as conflicting, thoughts.

"Not at all. I'm looking forward to it actually, and I trust we'll extend that for a longer period eventually," I said with a smirk, completely satisfied with the turn of events despite the niggling obstruction of Will's employment with his department. I wasn't sure Spencer Morris had thought that one through so well before becoming Will Gordon, body and soul.

"Please sign here and I will leave the two of you unless something unexpected occurs." I did as he requested, wishing he would just pop out of there with the snap of my fingers and leave me alone with my lovely new slave. At least that one vision was staying constant and persistent in my head.

I'd never been a slave owner before, but was interested enough to know what it entailed. My priority should have been the case. I was sure it had no grounds considering the slaves were there of their own will. It was a matter of lifestyle instead of imprisonment. But Detective Morris, someone who I knew to be far from a rookie, was too deep into his own submission and way too gorgeous to simply ignore.

I snapped my fingers, watching as the haze instantly faded from his eyes and he crawled the distance to my chair before taking on the same pose. He was the perfect model of submission with all those little details that made him real and irresistible to me, like the way his fingers trembled every so often or how his tongue slipped out to wet his full lips. It would have been so easy to just sit there and pay attention to him, feed my unyielding erection with his simple presence, and enjoy it for hours.

Touching his head held a promise of becoming my favorite pastime, the prickle of his short hair, the warmth of his scalp, and the cat-like way he

always pushed into my hand as if this instinct was stronger than his training. I hummed in satisfaction, squeezing his neck and pulling him against my thigh.

“You are mine now, Will. Does that please you?”

“Yes, sir,” he answered almost with a hiss, and I knew his eyes were closed and he was getting too relaxed again.

“Pay attention to me now.” I slapped his cheek lightly, startling him.

“Yes, sir.” I could see the tip of his tongue as he licked his lips and I wanted to chase it with my own.

“I need to know how settled your affairs are and if there is something that might come and bite you in the ass in the future.” He leaned his chin on my hand as I slipped my fingers to the front side of his neck.

“No, sir,” Will whispered and I didn’t need my detective skills to know he wasn’t really listening to me.

“That means you gave back your detective badge and gun to your chief?” He flinched in my hand, throwing away everything he’d learned to turn and actually look at me for the first time.

“Gavin? What...?” His jaw dropped and I could see the detective struggling to come up front, to disregard the setting, the comforting feeling he’d been lulled into.

“Hush, you’re safe, Spencer,” I whispered, leaning down to cradle his face and lick the corner of his mouth. Knowing that calling him Will just wouldn’t work anymore.

“What are you doing here?” He shook his head and asked, so adorably confused.

“Why, I just got myself a slave, and it turns out, we’re old acquaintances—of the bondage kind.” I grinned wickedly and hardened my grip.

CHAPTER SIX

Spencer

Gavin Perry, detective extraordinaire, was the top bad boy on the force and that perfect Dom every sub dreams of but can't have. Yes, I was so screwed. He was the one detective I should have expected to be sent after me. He worked far enough away from the club and on cases completely unrelated to the BDSM world. No one could have recognized him, and none of those into the lifestyle knew him enough to realize he was actually a cop.

But it was more than that, Gavin Perry was that one Dom who had showed me how good it could be, to crawl and beg and plead. To take the punishment and revel in the reward. Gavin was the start of everything and an end of an era. I was never so dramatic before I'd dropped to my knees for him, and never quite so broken as when he'd taken his last assignment and dropped off the face of the earth.

"It must have been some mistake. You can't buy me," I said, halfway to hysterical, soaked with desperation.

"Oh, but I did," he said smugly, tightening his fingers around my neck, making me struggle to keep my wits about me.

"No, you can't. It's not legitimate if you buy me with the department's money. They will receive their refund on the basis of a criminal investigation. This isn't the twentieth century anymore. You're also undercover, with a false name."

"But you are as well, gorgeous," Gavin said, his features hardening.

"I might have started out as undercover, but right now I'm just protecting my skin. I can't be a cop and a slave up for sale. Any of the people who'd spent time in jail thanks to me could very well end up buying me. But strike all that—you're not qualified to own a slave!" I raised my voice, letting the implications overwhelm me as the haze of submission slowly pulled its claws out of me. "You're gone for months at a time, always in danger, plus you don't have enough money to fulfill the requirements of the contract. You've screwed me over!"

That steel jaw relaxed slightly, his pupils widened and I knew I was right. Gavin had been someone I would have happily stayed with—once upon a time—but that had been long ago, and after distance and a realization of who I really was, he simply wasn't enough anymore.

But then the determination was back, Gavin's lips were pressed tightly and between one blink and the next, he was down on his knees in front of me, pulling me forward until my forehead rested on his chest, fitting perfectly.

"The department paid for you, for the sake of a case I assume is truly nonexistent." I tried to move to answer, but Gavin continued right over me, "But the reimbursement money will be coming from my pocket, not yours. I will pay them back, leaving the amount you've received safely in your account. My family has enough to our name that I don't have to worry about ever working again. It is something I chose, not needed, to do. So don't worry about it."

Another one of my attempts to speak was subdued and his fingers slid almost absentmindedly down my back. "My job was my life up to this point, it was something I enjoyed and would like to continue doing. But it's not something I'm not willing to change. There are plenty of departments these days, jobs with less risk but the same dose of excitement. My decision to buy you might have been instinct more than a thought-through decision, but I didn't bid for you lightly, spend all that money just so I could give you away to someone else, someone who definitely doesn't deserve you. We have our past, those months when you were on your knees for me, licking my leather boots and giving me the hard-on of a lifetime, when I bent you over the sofa and plugged my cum in that sweet ass of yours, where you begged me for more, over and over again. I'd never had a sub like you, someone so free of constrictions, willing to both give and ask for that which was deserved. I left with a heavy heart then, knowing I was giving up not only sex, but a man behind his needs, the kind of brute who was easy to smile, quick to joke and deep enough to give a piece of his heart each time he gave his body." I gasped. "A man who was too easy to love," Gavin finished in almost a whisper, and by then I wasn't struggling to get away, but rather to pull him closer. I needed the warmth of his embrace, the assurance that everything he'd said was true, and if

I'd shed a tear or two against his shirt no one would ever know but him, my Master.

He gave me some time, touching my exposed skin, taking me on a journey to the past. Maybe both of us were fools, two tough men so ready to sacrifice themselves, to give up a good thing for the other. His words took away the fault of one man and shared it between us, blamed me for not stopping him, giving him my promise that I would be there once he returned, that he meant more than casual play, and not just putting it all on Gavin's shoulders, for leaving me, his friend as much as his sub.

Just the same, this time around we had a fighting chance, an opportunity to take whatever was between us and make it better, deepen and nurture it. Then again, maybe training had turned me into a sap, unfit to be an agent again, just as easily as I'd consciously made the decision to leave that life behind.

I flinched as Gavin slapped the back of my head. There was no heat in the reprimand, just as there was none in his words, "Stop that. You're not allowed to think about your position right now, we'll solve it together before we leave the club. We'll stand tall together against all of them. For now, just give into your needs and wants, introduce me again to the slave I bought and let me use you to the best of your ability. Or have you forgotten all Michael and I have taught you?"

He was grinning as he said it, but I felt the challenge deep in my submissive bones, it was an opportunity to please him and he was so on.

Down on my knees, thighs spread and my hands behind my back, I stared into my lap where the ebbing erection was still very much visible, and I waited for his next move, next order.

"Very beautiful. I don't think you actually have any idea how sinful you look." His fingertips grazed my scalp, "All muscles, freckles and raw power at my feet. I feel like the king of the world to have earned submission from someone as well-rounded as you are in my eyes."

I blushed at the compliment, trying not to let it go to my head but nonetheless feeling the warmth in my chest. I was falling back into that easy dynamic we'd once had between us as if barely a moment had passed since then, as if he'd always been there, demanding the best from me, pushing me

over the lines of comfort and letting me soar up high above the clouds only to catch me safely each time I fell.

“Come,” he said, snapping me into the present, the muted noise of the club, the presence of others around us hitting me front and center. He’d connected the leash to my collar and I stood up, falling into step behind him, following him perfectly—deeply aware of his every motion, ready for any silent or verbal request.

I watched his back as he moved, trying to see the tattoos beneath the cloth, the muscles I’d dared scratch in those uncontrolled moments when neither of us cared beyond the next thrust, the approaching edge of the cliff leading into overwhelming satisfaction. I shivered.

Gavin stopped and so did I. Daring to look around, I noticed we were in the secluded part of the club where there was a booth selling accessories. They didn’t carry hair clips and lipstick, but belts, nipple clamps and any type of leather for play could be found in a variety of designs.

“You need something of mine on you. This way you just seem naked, and in the wrong way, too.” He smiled at me before selecting precisely what he wanted with the help of the guy behind the counter.

I tuned out, letting the sounds of the club seep into my skin, bringing myself into that state of mind where I knew only Gavin’s desires were important. Not the hardness between my legs or the drop of sweat sliding down the middle of my back. It was so easy with him around, not even words were needed because he made me feel safe, in the dark or in the brightness, even better than Michael ever could.

His fingers were warm against my wrist as he tightened first one leather cuff then the other. They had rings on the inside of the wrist and as I paid more attention, I noticed him wearing a similar one. Thicker leather of the same color and width but without any rings. We matched and for some reason, it made me smile.

“I knew you’d like that.” He pinched my nipple, drawing out a long moan, and then we were on the move again, him with a clear purpose in his stride and me following blindly, just as I’d always wanted.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gavin

Spencer kept giving in, tuning in to me every few minutes and I was elated, turned on and simply beyond caring about the outside world. I needed my mark on him, and in our situation leather worked better than a love bite, something that would have taken time and attention I wasn't willing to give an avid audience.

The cuffs satisfied that primal beast in me that believed someone could just take him from under my nose unless he wore a visible sign of my possession, and a trainer's collar certainly wasn't it.

Next, I led him to the back rooms, a necessity in an exclusive club like Pristine. I marked the board next to the entrance as private, not giving others permission to watch, and entered with a goal in mind.

One of the many things I loved about Spencer was his size and rough appearance, that first impression he gave that was so fucking misleading, I reveled in it. I detached the leash, threw it on the nearby table, and then pushed him against the wall. I felt the thud his flesh made and it spurred me on. I crowded him, not letting him lift his arms and react as a cop would. I was all around him, breathing his air and forcing him to breathe in mine. Our skin touched, lips grazed against one another and Spencer reached for me, wanting to bridge the miniscule distance in between, to get that full-on kiss I'd been teasing him with all night, but yet again I moved away.

I left my crotch pressed firmly against his, feeling the heat even through the leather as I pulled off my T-shirt, smirking at the hungry look in his eyes, the need he trembled with. So fucking perfect, my Spencer.

When I surged forward again, it was almost violent. I gripped his head between my palms, squeezing at his cheeks until his lips dropped open and then I pushed inside with all my pent-up desire, pushing my tongue past his, not letting him move an inch under my assault. His moan overlapped with mine as he gripped at my forearms, barely keeping his feet underneath him. Spencer tried moving, rutting his hardness against me, but I forced him still,

needing him desperate and whimpering, unable to think, and when I finally moved away, he looked betrayed, lips wet, his neck flushed and his hands trembling.

“On your knees,” I whispered, and Spencer dropped as if cut down like a strand of grass. He was so ready it would have been painful to watch, if not for that sadistic streak in me that couldn’t get enough.

I crossed the space between us, picking up a condom from a tall, filled-up vase and was impatient enough to unzip my own pants and pull out my hard cock. I suited up almost instantly and grabbed the back of his head, pulling him forward, almost making him fall as he caught himself against my thighs. I liked the position too much to abandon it. “Keep your hands there and open up like a good boy.”

He whimpered again, his fingers gripping at my legs as if needing an anchor and I squeezed harder, pressing his face into my pubes, loving the graze of stubble against my dick. “Will you take in all of me? Can you still do it as beautifully as you could before?” I asked softly, making him strain to hear me.

“Yes, sir!” Spencer gasped, pressing the corner of his lips against the soft skin of my erection, the most I’d allow him, until the anticipation got to me too, and I had the glans between his lips, pushing insistently.

I gave him no adjustment time, loving the way his throat constricted as he gagged, unprepared. I knew he could do it, and I knew how much Spencer loved it and just how hard it made him to take all of me, for me to keep my cock inside his throat, second after long second until I gave in and pulled out.

“Do you want more?” I asked teasingly, knowing the answer even before he pressed his fingers deeper into my flesh almost crying as he desperately said, “Please, sir.”

So I did push in again, deep, slow and unrelenting, repeatedly. I watched as his lips stretched around my flesh, as saliva wetted my pubes and his face. Once he moaned with that desperation I knew meant he was close, I hissed, “Hold it!” then came, pushing back in through his begging whimper and imagining I was bare and he was swallowing it all.

Spencer held still as I recovered. His hands were still on my thighs and I rubbed at his scalp in gratitude, sliding my hands down his back as I bent over, cradling his head against my stomach and letting my softening cock slide a bit deeper inside him before pulling out all the way and getting rid of the condom.

I went to my knees then, looking at him all sweaty, hard and gorgeous. I had so many plans for us that one night would never suffice, especially not one that should have revolved around work. So instead, I pushed him back, hard enough so he lost his balance and I crawled forward, grinning all the while.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Spencer

Not even the taste of rubber could ruin the dull ache in my throat that signified a good blow job. My head was in a bubble, void of blood that had pooled lower, making me harder than I could remember ever being. Falling down on my back seemed like it was happening to someone else, but if anything could have slapped reality back into my mind, it was that evil smirk on Gavin's face, one that promised too much frustration before satisfaction, and lots of begging on my part. Unfortunately, there was a piece of me that loved that expression just as much as a piece of me despised it.

"Hold on to the bar above you," Gavin said, pulling off my pants and I looked up, only then noticing the foot bar for an elaborate spanking bench above me. Spanking. I shivered, which Gavin obviously noticed because his grin got bigger and all I got was a promise of "When we get home."

The rest was lost with his fingers pulling back my foreskin, exposing me to his hot breath, and the insistent tongue pushing into my slit. I moaned and thrashed as much as I was able with Gavin holding down my hips, trying to keep my orgasm in check. I gave up on holding down my frustrated screams the first time he gripped me hard enough to pull me back from the edge only to continue sucking my glans as if it were a lollipop just minutes later. He explored me thoroughly, not giving in an inch despite all of my pleas and desperate tears. The trembling was now unstoppable and the shakes passed through my legs in waves.

I was no more than the hardness of my cock and the strength of my will that was conditioned enough not to let me come without Gavin saying so, that sweet tone of permission that was worth more than food and water, hell, more than air. "Just let me... let me... please, Gavin, Master... Please..."

And then I almost missed it, as he barked sharply, "Come!" making me bow under the rush of my denied orgasm, spurting over myself, his face and hands, and shedding tears through each and every satisfying spasm.

Gavin cleaned me up while touching my spent body, casually, lovingly, letting me know I was precious, beautiful and telling me how wonderfully I

did for him, how happy he was with me. There was no way I was getting up off the padded floor without an order, hell—a whip. Something that unfortunately came all too soon, and not with a word from Gavin but rather a knock on the door that had Gavin zipping up his pants and moving to answer it.

“The scenes are almost over. You’ll be able to leave in half an hour.” I recognized Michael’s voice on the other side, and just like that my heart started pounding and I was headed straight for a collision with reality where I saw no way not to lose over and over again.

“Hey, stop it.” A slap that was casual, but not painless in the least, connected with my cheek and I was focused on Gavin again who’d noticed how hard I was breathing and how quickly I lost all the calm he’d worked so hard for.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. I can’t... I’m sorry, sir.” I took hold of his shoulders and pleaded.

“It’s okay. Not your fault. Come, stand up. It’s time we sort out the mess.” He stood and pulled me up to my feet. Gavin redressed me without hesitation, tucking my shirt in my belt above my back pocket and doing the same to his, only more to the front, then hugged me close, holding my muscles with his, letting me kiss his shoulder tattoo in gratitude. He picked up his sunglasses from the floor and perched them on the top of his head again before leading me out of the room, through a hallway, and into some type of a storage room where the music was barely heard and not a soul wandered.

Gavin took me close to some type of a boarded-up closet space, taking hold of my waist and keeping me at enough of a distance so that he could see my face before he spoke, “Tell me what you found out while you were on the island?”

I sighed, dispelling the cloudy afterglow from my head and cracking my spine in one twist of my shoulders, “Absolutely nothing. The first couple of weeks, I faked it. Pushed my way into every nook and cranny, listened to the chatter and tested out every single slave there. There was nothing out of the ordinary—BDSM ordinary that is. But then I was stuck and I actually started

listening to Michael, giving in, little by little and something flipped in my head. The lifestyle wasn't as much of a play anymore. I didn't even know I wanted any of it, until Michael led me through positions, service, bondage and the works, step by learning step. The funny thing is, once I gave in, I had even more access around the island, got to talk to Francis Long. God, what a guy. I swear if he wasn't straight, I would have dropped down to my knees for him and begged him to spank me. He has such a personality. He's cocky, sure, but that's only the surface, probably the personality trait that got him on McKay's radar in the first place." I chuckled, rubbing at my chin while Gavin just waited patiently, listening. "Anyway, I found myself there, but I lost sight of the case. Not that there was a case. After meeting the guy, in a setting different from a police station, I would put my hand in fire, that's how sure I am that he's not doing anything illegal. I mean, I understand where McKay is coming from. Some of the slaves were a shock even to me. They need it in the extreme. From true masochists to those who need their Master to tell them when to piss. The property is full of unusual kinks and the people with them mostly belong to some really influential people, let me tell you."

"You couldn't call out and let your department know?" Gavin rubbed his thumbs against my sides.

"Yeah, see, the first month was complete isolation. It was a part of the training requirement. They wanted us to focus on us, our needs and wants, not the outside world. It had no relevance to what we wanted to achieve. Hell, we signed up to be slaves, trained and eventually sold. I didn't even know that part until I got to the island. The department just slipped me in, they had no idea what they were doing. I signed the contract there because otherwise I would have been shipped back home. They give you a chance to observe the first day and decide if it is what you really want. God, they were all so kind and approachable. I didn't want to leave."

"And after the first month?"

"That's where I screwed up. I knew what would happen, McKay would have demanded an extraction, probably barged right in and pulled me out for all to see. It would have blown my chances of ever finding a Dom in town, let

alone a Master. It was a purely selfish decision. I didn't want to leave." I lowered my head and Gavin leaned his cheek against my own.

"Then that's the part that never happened. You were in isolation for two months. Going through slave training. You'll exaggerate, or rather downplay your enjoyment of the crops and canes, emphasize how much people there enjoyed it. It will be enough of an aversion for the vanillas in your department."

"So you want me to lie?" I whispered, leaning closer to him, wanting him to tell me it was all right, no big deal.

"You're only protecting yourself. Long is not a criminal despite what McKay wants and, in the end, his dramatic approach to your extraction would have brought him more trouble than the police force needs. If Long truly has friends in such high places, the last thing they want is for the lifestyle to be on the front cover. McKay probably would have gotten himself fired, as well as everyone else working on the case. So really, you're doing them all a favor."

"I can see that." I smiled with my eyes closed.

"We're gonna go out there, keep it cool and collected and you're gonna stick to the truth as much as you can. The rest of it will work itself out." He kissed my forehead gently.

That was the point where I panicked again. "What about us? We're sticking to the contract, right? You're not leaving me again?"

Gavin tightened his grip against my waist, making me lean on the wall next to me. "I'm not going anywhere without you again. You'll quit if you want, I'll change my job. Oh, and you're moving in with me, as soon as your boss chews you out."

"Are you sure?" I looked up at him, feeling so vulnerable and exposed.

"Nothing is gonna change my mind. We will face it all together. I'm not leaving again, and it can all crumble as far as I'm concerned, we'll always have each other." Gavin pressed his nose against my forehead, giving me safety, support and romance. A Dom and a Master, lover and a partner—I got it all with one selfish decision and my heart swelled with those three words I couldn't yet say.

Then the moment was over. Gavin kissed me hard, making me feel it, realizing the strings between us wouldn't be breaking anytime soon and we were heading to face the music together.

THE END

Author Bio

Valentina Heart lives in different locations in Split, at the coast of the Adriatic Sea. Like the directions of her stories, her life takes a new twist with every passing year, and she welcomes every single one.

As an avid reader for many years, she had a habit of mixing fiction with reality, until she realized she could simply breathe life to her characters and make them as real as they could get. From forever romantic to deeply troubled, they bring joy to their creator, just as they sometimes bring frustration with their naughty behavior.

Kinky imagination aside, she enjoys music and movies just as much as reading, but give her summer all year round and she'll be ready to free-climb, swim, or stretch in all those mind-stirring yoga positions.

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FALLING AWAY

By Lisa Henry

Photo Description

A young guy lies cuffed to a table. Exposed, debauched... and completely vulnerable.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Completely debauched, wrecked—he's floating now, but tomorrow the shame will come. Tomorrow he'll be disgusted all over again at what he's done. What he's allowed to be done to him. More than that... what he's begged for.

And the worst part? He's so stupid in love with the man he just keeps coming back for more. Because of this moment. This one, right here, when he can believe that he's loved in return, even if it is only for the night.

See, it's not the acts they engage in that shame him. It's not the bondage or the submission or the mind-blowing sex—he finds his strength there. It's his weakness for the man himself that's destroying him. Because tomorrow he'll be gone again.

He can't go on like this. He tells himself that every time, swears this time will be the last. He needs for there to be a tomorrow, and a next day, and a next day—for them, together. Not just another tomorrow of loss and heartache and picking up the pieces.

But he can't tell him that... can he?

Sincerely,

Kim

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, teaching, political diplomat, established couples

Word count: 6,890

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Dedication

To Kim, for the fantastic prompt, and for J.A. and Kaje for being awesome beta readers!

FALLING AWAY

By Lisa Henry

Cuffs weren't a commitment.

Not to anything except the moment.

What Jason felt when Ben put them on him—wholeness, quietness, *hope*; like he'd been somewhere else for a really long time but now he was home for good—Ben never actually promised him that. Ben never promised more than a night here and there, and Jason knew that. Knew that it was his fault it meant more, that it was all tangled up in his mind like a lump of knotted, old fishing line, and he couldn't separate the strands. The things that fed his body and the things that fed his heart weren't supposed to get all twisted up together like that.

He *knew* this, but the pressure of the cuffs on his wrists told him differently. His pulse pounded against the leather, slick with his sweat, and whispered heresies that traveled over him like gooseflesh: *You're home, you're loved, you're his.*

"Please," he whispered. "Please, Ben."

No other words at this point, not ever. Just *please*. Just *Ben*. Over and over until it became like a mantra. A prayer.

Ben leaned over the table and placed his hand on Jason's chest. Splayed his fingers.

Jason arched his back into the contact.

Nobody had ever known every inch of Jason's body the way that Ben did. No other partner had ever taken his time the way that Ben did, tracing his fingers, his lips, over Jason's skin. Mapping every part of him by touch: the dip of his sternum, the soft, golden hairs on his abdomen, the veins snaking over the taut musculature of his extended arms. That was what he couldn't explain to anyone: that those moments when he had all of Ben's attention, all of his concentration, made him feel like the centre of the

universe. Jason wasn't sure he understood it himself. He only knew that his fingers followed the paths that Ben's had taken for days after, keeping the memory of that touch alive for as long as he could.

"Ben, please."

"Not yet." Ben leaned close and pressed his lips to Jason's ear. "Real soon though, okay?"

Jason closed his eyes and nodded as Ben moved away. Shifted his legs when Ben's touch coaxed them gently apart. Lifted his knees.

The first time, he'd hated this. This *exposure*. The awful, terrible moment when Ben was just staring at his cock and balls, at his hole, when he might suddenly *laugh*. Ben hadn't laughed, not that first time and not now, but Jason could never quite shake that worried voice in his head: *But what if he does?* Sick anticipation curled in his stomach. Jason clenched his fingers into fists, and tried not to squirm. Tried to remember that he trusted Ben. That Ben had earned that.

"Please."

He was desperate for Ben to touch him again, because if he was touching then it somehow made his gaze less stark. It somehow made Jason less naked.

"I love it when you beg," Ben murmured, and at last, finally, reached down.

Just the ghost of a touch, featherlight, a single finger across his exposed hole, but it was almost too much. Jason jerked, the cuffs tugging, his cock hardening and curving up toward his abdomen. "*Ben!*"

Ben's low laugh was full of pleasure. "You're so hot for this, aren't you?"

For you.

"Please, Ben."

Ben slid his hand along Jason's abdomen, skirting his cock. "You want to try the clamps tonight, Jase?"

Jason moaned his assent. Anything. Anything that Ben asked.

“Put your legs down for a bit.”

Jason obeyed, the muscles in his thighs easing. He bit his lip as Ben rolled his left nipple between thumb and forefinger. Sucked in a deep breath as the chain slid across his chest.

Fuck. His eyes flashed open as Ben snapped the first clamp on. Every muscle tightened as he rode the sudden sting of it, his back arching off the table. His breath shuddered out of him.

Ben leaned down and dragged his thumb across his bottom lip. “You like that?”

“*Mmm.*” Jason unclenched his fists as the sharp pain settled into a familiar dull throb. He read the question in Ben’s face and nodded for the next clamp.

Ben attached it.

Jason bucked and twisted, a cry caught in his throat. He pulled on the cuffs.

“Okay?” Ben rubbed his stomach, soothing him as the pain ebbed away.

Jason remembered how to breathe. “I’m okay.”

“You look good like this,” Ben said. He leaned down and brushed his lips against Jason’s forehead, a tender gesture that made Jason ache in a new way. “You want me inside you?”

“Please,” Jason murmured. “God, please.”

Ben ran a hand through Jason’s hair. “So hot.”

Jason stilled, the clamps biting with every breath. His cock was still hard, leaking pre-cum all over his abdomen. He was so ready for this, so needy. Ben moved to the end of the table, running a hand down Jason’s leg. Jason shivered.

“Legs up again, Jase.”

Jason raised them.

“You ready for me?”

“Yes, please.”

Ben climbed up onto the table, into the space that Jason had made for him. Jason gazed down at him, at the hard planes of his body, at the heat in his dark eyes, and at his dark, erect cock. Ben took a condom and sheathed himself, squeezed some lube into his palm, and pumped his cock with his fist a few times. It shone, slick with lube, and Jason squirmed.

Ben shuffled forward on his knees, taking Jason’s legs and pushing them back. Curving Jason’s spine, tilting his hips up and then taking Jason’s weight on his thighs. Ben’s hot, heavy cock brushed against Jason’s balls, and Jason shivered and tugged at his cuffs.

Jesus. Ben’s fingers. Touching him inside. Jason dropped his head back on the table.

“Don’t close your eyes.”

I won’t.

Ben could ask him anything in this place. There was nothing Jason wouldn’t do. That realization was terrifying, exhilarating. He could spiral out of control, he could fall, except that Ben was there, always there, his voice and his touch anchoring Jason.

Fuck.

Jason moaned at the sting of penetration.

Ben’s eyes were dark. There was a crease like a frown between his brows. Holding himself back, going so fucking slowly, because this was how they both liked it. When Ben pushed Jason to the edge and held him there.

Time didn’t exist here. Seconds lasted a lifetime.

“Please, Ben,” Jason moaned. “Please fuck me.”

A smile broke Ben’s frown. “Yeah?”

Jason clenched his fists, digging his blunt nails into the fleshy parts of his hands. The sting wasn't enough. Not in his hands, not in his nipples, not in his ass. He needed more. "Fuck, hurry, please!"

Ben shifted, raising himself up. He hooked his elbows under Jason's knees and began to thrust. Jason moaned.

God. The cuffs, the clamps, Ben's cock inside him. He'd come. Any second now and he'd come, from that alone. His balls were already drawn tight, had been since Ben had touched him.

Jason bit his lip and fixed his gaze on Ben. Ben's eyes, the frown that was back. The muscles cording in his arms. His abs shifting as he thrust. His olive skin gleaming with sweat. Driving Jason closer and closer to that edge.

The coil of heat in Jason spiraled higher and higher, tighter and tighter.

Ben released Jason's left leg, and reached for the chain that linked the clamps.

"Come with me, Jase," Ben gasped, his dark hair falling in his eyes. "Come on!"

He ripped the clamps off.

Pain tore through Jason. Pleasure too. Both ramped up so high that he couldn't tell the difference. Too much and too fast for his brain to pick the signals apart. A wall of sensation.

Jason came, crying out. He arched his body toward Ben's, falling away from everything at the same time as Ben fell forward against him, their bodies shaking and trembling together.

Ben panted against Jason's throat. "Fuck. So good, Jase. So fucking hot."

Jason floated, his eyes fluttering closed at last.

Ben's lips brushed his, featherlight.

You're home. You're loved. You're his.

In that moment it was perfect.

In that moment Jason was complete.

Then Ben reached up matter-of-factly to unbuckle the cuffs, and the moment shattered.

His world did, too.

Every time that Ben shattered him, Jason wondered if he'd managed to pick up all the pieces again. Every time, he felt like maybe he'd missed one or two. That sooner or later he wouldn't have enough to put himself back together again.

His fingers were still trembling when he fastened his jeans and pulled his shirt on.

"See you next week?" Ben took a bottle of water from his night table, unscrewed the cap and took a swig.

"Okay, sure." Jason jammed his trainers on his feet. He didn't even wait to lace them properly, just shoved the ends down inside the shoes and headed for the door. Ben's voice stopped him.

"Jason?"

"Yeah?" He turned, swallowing down his irrational hope.

Maybe this time Ben would ask him to stay...

Maybe just this once

"You were great tonight." Ben said.

"Thanks," Jason managed. "You too."

Ben's answering smile, full of genuine delight—full of empty promise—was almost too much to bear.

Jason lost himself in the city; in the lights, the sounds, the people. Everything jarred. Greasy fast-food smells and exhaust fumes washed over

his skin, stuck to it. He lost himself and he lost Ben too, by degrees. Jason wrapped himself in the smoke from a stranger's cigarette, the stench of beer and vomit outside a club, and of a dropped hot dog on the footpath smeared into mush. The world stripped away the scent of Ben until there was nothing left. A woman's shriek of laughter stole Jason's memory of their silence, their breath, their hearts beating in counterpoint.

He stumbled once—his unlaced trainers almost bringing him down—and spun when someone said, “You right, mate?”

Jason mumbled something, like the drunk he appeared to be, and hurried on his way.

He could still feel that featherlight kiss, still see that smile. Those tiny touches of genuine affection from Ben that he ached for, and afterwards he hated. He wanted to fling it all back in Ben's face somehow. *What do you want? What does this mean? Tell me. Please just tell me.*

And knowing that he was too much of a coward to ask.

Like some sort of stupid, cheesy game show in his head.

Well, Jason, you've won The Best Sex of Your Life. You can go home with that, or you can risk it all on our final round: What's Ben Really Thinking? What's your decision, Jason?

Jason snorted.

At Fortitude Valley Station he waited for the last train. He eyed the other people on the platform, then looked away.

Counted down the minutes by circling his left wrist with the fingers of his right hand. Pressing, releasing, then pressing harder. He closed his eyes to try and recapture the feel of the cuffs, but it wasn't the same. It was Ben he needed, not the sense-memory of him.

When the train came, Jason sat in the middle row of seats in the middle carriage and let the rhythm lull him. It worked so well he missed his connection at Central. He caught up with it at Roma Street, half running, half hobbling in his unlaced trainers, to make it to the platform on time.

Played some stupid game on his phone, all the way to Keperra, just to keep awake.

“You *dirty whore!*”

Jason flinched. The screen door swung shut behind him and rattled in the frame.

Dylan looked up from his laptop. “Oh, hey, you’re home. Check this out, it’s some kinky shit!”

Sharing a house with his little brother while they were both at university was a trial.

“I don’t want to look at your straight porn, Dyl,” he said, looking around the small living room. The floor was covered in games’ controllers, beer bottles, and pizza boxes.

“Did your mates come over tonight?”

“Yeah.” Dylan’s gaze was fixed on the screen again. “Holy fuck! Clothespins, *really?* This chick’s tits look like porcupines!” He spun the laptop around.

Jason ignored it, and dumped his wallet and keys on the table. “Clean up. Mum and Dad are coming up tomorrow.”

“So?”

“So it’s their house,” Jason reminded him. “Their investment property, and you’re turning it into a fucking rats’ nest.”

Dylan made a face. “What’s up your arse?” Then he laughed. “Sorry, Jase.”

“And I can smell the pot,” Jason said. “Fuck’s sake, Dylan, you’re studying law!”

“So?”

“So you’ll never get a job if you get arrested, you tool.”

Dylan shrugged. “Eh. First offence, probably no conviction recorded.”

“Just...” Jason rubbed his forehead. “Just spray some air freshener around or something before Mum and Dad get here, okay?”

Dylan closed his laptop. “You all right?”

“Yeah.” Jason moved into the kitchen, separated from the living area by a breakfast bar, and dug around in the top drawer for an aspirin. He ached, and he knew from experience that if he didn’t take something now then in the morning he’d be sore all day. He found the blister pack, popped two pills free, and swallowed them down with a glass of water from the tap.

Dylan laughed. “Ouch! Fuck, bitch, *really?* That *cannot* be right. Hey, Jase, come and look at this. Do you reckon it’s photoshopped?”

“I don’t want to look at your porn,” Jason told him again.

“You sure? She’s moved on from clothespins to bulldog clips.” Dylan roared with laughter. “Holy fuck!”

Jason frowned, and turned the glass up in the dish rack.

You don’t get it.

It’s not about how it looks; it’s about how it feels. When your blood flows back, and it hurts and hurts and hurts, builds on itself over and over, and takes you someplace you’ve never been before. When the only thing you can hear is his voice.

“I’ve got you, Jase. Good boy. So good.”

When it hurts so much you don’t think you can take it anymore. When it hurts so much it turns into something else entirely, and the only thing you can do is come. Hard.

Jason wondered if he should have been more ashamed of that, but he wasn’t. After the first time, maybe, but he’d been too shell-shocked to process it in the beginning. And then the need he hadn’t even known was inside him had already overtaken that part of his mind that told him it wasn’t right. Wasn’t *normal*. That it was something to be laughed at by people like Dylan, who couldn’t see past it.

But it wasn't the things they did—the things Jason had *begged* for—that ashamed him. It wasn't the need for bondage, or pain, or submission that frightened him; it was the need for Ben. That was what left him exposed, what left him wondering who he'd become and hating himself the next day. Because Ben hadn't promised him anything, not really.

It'll blow your mind, he'd said. Nothing about what it would do to his heart.

And there it was. *Fuck*. His *heart*? He was worse than a lovesick teenager.

"I'm going to bed," he said to Dylan. "This place had better be clean by the morning."

"Or what?" Dylan asked.

Jason rolled his eyes. "Or I'll show Mum your browser history."

"Evil fucker," Dylan said, with no rancor in his tone. "I'll do it."

Jason raised his eyebrows.

"I *promise*, okay?" Dylan said. "Just as soon as I'm finished here."

Which meant Jason would end up doing it, like always.

He headed to the bathroom, stripped off his clothes, and stepped into the shower. He made it as hot as he could stand. The water stung, but it loosened his aching muscles. Jason rubbed his wrists, hoping they wouldn't bruise. The cuffs had been thick... but imagine trying to explain that away to his parents. Or to Dylan.

He bowed his head, the water running off his eyelashes, his nose, his lips.

So fucking tired.

What would it be like if he didn't have to go home after? If, instead of walking to the station and then fighting sleep on the train, he could just fall into bed with Ben? Wake up the next morning curled under that thick comforter, with Ben beside him. Morning breath and bedhead. Starting the day together, instead of always leaving the night before.

Jason knocked his head gently against the tiled shower wall.

That was the one fantasy he wasn't allowed. The one that Ben couldn't fulfill. The crazy one. Not the one with chains and clamps and cuffs, but the one with... everyday things.

"I don't do relationships," Ben had told him the first night they'd met. *"Are you cool with that?"*

"Yeah, that's cool."

Stupid stupid stupid.

It hadn't been a lie at the time. But now it was, five months down the track.

Things changed. People changed. Jason had, because Ben had been the one to change him. He'd never known it could be like that. Never before found that place where sex was something more, something larger than the act. Where it became about trust, and openness, and belonging. It wasn't just the ritual—the silence, the kneeling, the waiting for Ben's voice and his touch—and it wasn't just the toys. It was everything. Jason let Ben lay him bare, strip everything away, and he'd never done that before, not with anyone.

So much more than fucking. So much more than playing. So much more than some chick with clothespins bristling from her double D implants.

Every Friday he offered up his shame, his fear, his need, and Ben took them, like a holy confessor.

Jason closed his eyes as the water beat down on him.

So much more, but what if he was the only one who felt it?

The week dragged.

Jason didn't know when the world had flipped; when those hours with Ben had stopped being the fantastical part, and had become the reality. It was everything else that slipped away now, strange and dreamlike. His studies, his job, the house, his parents, his friends. They were the things he

couldn't make sense of anymore. They had become unreal, *unnecessary*. Jason was sleepwalking through his own life, just counting off the hours, just waiting for Ben to wake him again.

He hated it.

He had never felt so—not miserable, but *adrift*—in all his life. When he was with Ben, when Ben's gaze was fixed on him and Ben's voice was telling him exactly what to do in that low pitch that made him hard just by thinking about it, he was complete. He knew who he was in those moments. He knew with utter certainty: he was *Ben's*.

Without Ben: *adrift*.

Ben had become his lifeline in a black, wind-whipped ocean. Ben was the quiet in the eye of the storm. But Jason could never hold on to him—Ben wouldn't allow that—and when he was cast *adrift* again, dumped into the next trough, falling away, he discovered that he was drowning.

Jason had never felt like this with anyone before. Thought it was bullshit the way his sister Amy, still in high school, got hung up over boys; the way she lived and died waiting for every text message, the way she overthought every abbreviation and smiley face, and hunted for every nuance in a medium so brief there was nowhere for nuance to hide.

And now Jason was doing it.

See u Friday? he sent to Ben on Wednesday morning.

I have a work thing. Don't know if I can get out of it. Text you later in the week.

Jason read that and knew it was over. Knew that Ben was laying the groundwork for an excuse.

Then he read it again, and knew that Ben would try to make it. Understood that Ben was telling him that he would try to get out of his work thing, that Jason rated higher than work.

He wavered between the two for hours, never landing on one long enough to find his balance. Always falling away.

Miss u, he typed out, but didn't send it.

Want u, he typed out, but didn't send it.

Ok, he sent back, and wondered stupidly if Ben would try and discern any hidden meaning in those two tiny letters.

He wouldn't. Of course he wouldn't, because this wasn't a relationship. Ben didn't do those. This was a hook up.

He reread the text message: *I have a work thing*.

Jason felt the same prickle of unease he always did when Ben mentioned his work. Ben had influence in circles that Jason couldn't even begin to understand. What could he possibly see in a university student who lived in the suburbs and worked part time in a fast-food joint? And it wasn't like Jason would be in the same league even after graduation. He'd be a high school teacher, still paying off his used 2009 Mazda way into his thirties.

It worried Jason that he knew very little about Ben. And what he did know was hardly enough to convince him that they had anything in common at all. Sometimes, when Jason was flipping burgers, he tried to imagine what Ben was doing at the same moment. Chairing some departmental committee? Drafting government policy? Going to meetings with ministers and directors? Thinking of Jason?

No, not likely.

"My job is boring, really," Ben had laughed when Jason asked. *"How's uni going?"*

But he couldn't really want to know all of that. That Jason was doing his prac at Kelvin Grove, and his supervising teacher was really good, but Jason was worried that he couldn't control the classroom. Terrified, actually. That standing up in front of thirty kids who were all looking for a way to get the student teacher to snap was *awful*.

"Hey, sir!" one of the kids had said. *"Hey, I know you. You work at McDonalds!"*

And after that it was all *Hey, McTeacher! Can I get fries with that?*

And Marlene had said he was doing well, but she'd said it with such an encouraging smile that Jason knew she thought he wouldn't last a day on his own. Which wouldn't even be an issue if he fucked up his exams at the end of the year and couldn't get a job teaching anyway. Which was another thing he was terrified about.

Ben wouldn't get that. How could he?

Ben was clever, and confident and stylish, and everything that Jason wasn't. Jason couldn't shake the idea that, even if Ben did do relationships, that he wouldn't do them with someone like Jason.

Jason had never had a real, long-term relationship—three months was the record, and it had never been so *intense*, the way it was with Ben. That's all he was doing. Mistaking that intensity for something that didn't translate outside of the bedroom. That couldn't, probably, because something that intense would burn itself out in a flash if you opened it up to the world, wouldn't it?

And anyway, Ben didn't do relationships.

They connected when they fucked, at least Jason thought they did, and that was all they had, probably. It was just a casual thing, and Jason wished he could be casual about it. Not so desperately pathetic that he had no hope of hiding it.

"It's not like you to get so hung up on some dickhead," Dylan told Jason on Wednesday night, pointing his fork at him accusingly.

"He's not a dickhead."

"Ha! I knew it was a guy!"

"Shut up."

"You're fucked up, Jase," Dylan said, gesturing with his fork. A spiral of pasta fell off it and landed on the table with a splat. "This guy, he's got you all fucked up."

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jason said, but a panicked spark flared inside him. What if Dylan was right?

Shit.

Dylan *was* right. His irresponsible little brother, who last month wore the same pair of underpants for four days straight because he didn’t feel like washing them, was right. And somewhere in hell they were complaining about the sudden chill.

“I’ll sort it out,” Jason said.

“You better,” Dylan said. “You’re supposed to be the sensible one, remember?”

Jason smiled bitterly at that.

Yeah, he was the sensible one.

“I’ll sort it out,” he repeated, his stomach clenching.

Ben liked him. It should have been enough. It had been, for a while, and Jason felt greedy, ungrateful, *unworthy* for wanting more. But every word of praise Ben gave him, every smile, broke something inside Jason. Something strange and intangible, but something Jason was sure couldn’t keep breaking. Not week after week. Not forever.

It was his hope, he thought. It demanded more. A quick death maybe, instead of these thousand cuts.

He’d thought that offering up his wrists to the cuffs had been the bravest thing he’d ever done, the bravest thing that Ben had asked of him. And then the clamps, and then the toys, and then the paddle... but all of that was nothing compared to what he had to do now.

He’d thought there was no part of him that Ben hadn’t laid bare, but there was his hope. There was his heart.

Ben texted him later that night: *See you Friday.*

Friday then.

He’d sort it out on Friday.

Ben was late. Jason sat in the foyer of Ben's apartment building, and checked the time on his phone. Ten past eight. He thought about taking the elevator up to Ben's floor, but that seemed pathetic somehow, waiting at his door like an eager puppy. Better to sit here with his phone and scroll through the news sites, pretending to be interested in current affairs, and which team had won the football.

It was the footy that had brought him and Ben together, five months ago.

They'd met on Caxton Street, after the game, in that press of people walking from the stadium, over the hill and into the city centre. Thousands of people streaming through the closed street, laughing, cheering, singing. That strange community made by shared experience, ephemeral, trickling away in tiny degrees as people slipped down narrower streets that fed off this one, carrying their laughter with them.

Jason had never seen the guy before, but they'd fallen into step together.

"Good game," the guy had said.

Jason had grinned at the guy's blue scarf. "Not for you."

The guy had laughed at that. "It was still a good game."

Ben had a place in the Valley.

Jason went with him.

That first time, Ben had bound Jason's wrists together with his blue football scarf and fucked him so hard he'd got carpet burn on his forearms and knees. The teasing sting of it had stayed with him for a week.

It'll blow your mind, Ben had said, and it was the truth.

Every time since, every time that Ben had introduced something else—clamps, a plug, the cuffs—a part of Jason had wondered if he was in over his head. And he was, of course, but it had nothing to do with the props and everything to do with the man wielding them.

The doors to the foyer rolled open, and a blast of warm air hit the cool inside. Jason looked up from his phone to see Ben, his tie loosened, his suit jacket folded over his arm, carrying his backpack by the straps.

That was one of the things he liked about Ben. That he wore suits for work because he had to, but still preferred a backpack over a briefcase.

“Hey.” A smile lit up Ben’s face. “Sorry I’m late. It turns out I couldn’t get out of that work thing as quickly as I thought. I’m glad you waited.”

“That’s okay.”

They walked to the elevators together. Jason’s pulse was already racing. Just this proximity to Ben did it. The building need inside him. The anticipation. But for something else tonight.

“I smell like *hors d’oeuvres* and cheap white wine,” Ben said, pulling Jason close as the elevator doors closed. “The fucking staples of the Press Gallery, but the minister says we must go along and play nice.”

Jason heard the thud of Ben’s dropped backpack on the floor of the elevator, and then Ben was pushing him up against the wall and kissing him.

Jason moaned into the kiss, rocking his hips against Ben, searching out the hardness of his cock through Ben’s trousers and his jeans. Ben’s mouth followed the line of Jason’s jaw, his teeth nipping. His breath was hot on Jason’s throat. “You like that?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, hooking his fingers into Ben’s belt loops. “Fuck yeah.”

No.

No no no.

“Wait,” he managed, his voice grating.

Ben pulled back, a quizzical smile on his face.

We need to talk.

Fuck, he couldn’t say that. He was enough of a needy cliché as it was.

The elevator dinged, and the doors rolled open, saving Jason from coming up with something better for a minute or so more.

He followed Ben down the hallway, and stared at the carpet as Ben's keys rattled in the lock. Then Jason followed him inside, wanting so badly all the things that being with Ben in his apartment promised, but also wanting *more* this time. Needing more and, *fuck*, risking everything he already had. Knowing that he was about to do something monumentally stupid, knowing that he had to.

What they had was untenable. Unbearable.

Ben put his backpack on the kitchen bench. "Do you want a beer?"

"No, thanks."

Ben opened the fridge and got one out for himself. He twisted the top off. "Are you okay?"

Jason nodded sharply, and then shook his head.

Ben put his beer on the bench without drinking. "What's up?"

Oh God.

"I know we're not a *thing*," Jason said, the knot in his gut worsening. "An item, or anything, I mean. I know you said we wouldn't be, so that's why I want to... I want to stop."

"You want to stop?" Ben asked, raising his brows. "You want to stop because we're not a *thing*? Seriously?"

Jason sucked in a shaky breath. "I know, yeah. But what we do, I want more."

The blood roared in his skull.

"I can give you more, Jase," Ben said coolly.

"Not more ways to fuck," Jason said, his face burning. "*More.*"

"You're not making sense."

"More," Jason said, his throat aching. "Like, um, like sometimes we could go out to eat, or see a movie, or I could stay over or something."

Fuck. That sounded even more pathetic out loud than it had in his head.

Ben frowned. “You want to stay over?”

“No. I want you to *want* me to stay over.” Jason shoved his shaking hands in his pockets. “Because the stuff we do, nobody’s ever done that for me before. I just want it to last longer.”

He was so sick of coming down on the train, when he could have been coming down in Ben’s arms instead. So sick of being given so much, but craving more. So sick of hiding how he felt for fear of losing it. He drew a deep breath, desperate to explain. “I love how you make me feel, Ben. I love what we do together. I love—”

Jason clamped his mouth shut.

You.

He didn’t have to say it. The look of horrified surprise on Ben’s face told Jason that he’d said more than enough.

Fuck fuck fuck.

“Sorry.” Jason wrenched his hands out of his pockets and headed for the door. Almost shoulder-charged Ben to get past him. “Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

“Jason...”

Jason didn’t wait to hear it.

Didn’t want to hear what Ben was going to say next, not when he’d said Jason’s name in that tone. That patient, gentle tone that wouldn’t have been out of place explaining to a naive child how the world worked. That they couldn’t have that puppy. That Santa wasn’t real. That this dream here—see it?—I’m just gonna step on that now for your own good.

Jason bolted.

He didn’t even wait for the elevator. He hit the fire stairs instead, his trainers squeaking on the concrete, his footsteps echoing in the stairwell, his breath rasping. He scrubbed at his face, and had his humiliating tears more or less under control by the time he made it to the lobby.

“Dude,” said Dylan when Jason walked through the door. “You look like shit warmed up. What happened?”

Jason shook his head.

Dylan got that same look on his face he had when Jason had come off his bike when they were kids. The one right before he’d picked his older brother up off the gravel and helped him limp all the way home. The stubborn *I’ve-got-you* look. It was the last thing Jason wanted tonight. He was already so close to coming undone.

“What happened?” Dylan asked again, his voice low.

“I’m okay, Dyl. Leave it.”

“Sit down,” Dylan said. “You look like you need a beer.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“Sit down, Jase.”

Jason sighed and sat on the couch.

One beer became two, became three, and Jason found himself telling Dylan more than he’d intended. About meeting Ben five months ago, and going home with him. And going back again every Friday night.

“So you were fuck buddies?” The look on Dylan’s face was one of confusion, and Jason didn’t need to ask him what he was confused about. *Fuck buddies... sweet! So what’s the problem here?*

“More than that,” Jason said. “Well, I thought more, you know?”

“Oh,” Dylan said, realization dawning.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“You gave him an ultimatum,” Dylan said. “Rookie error, bro.”

“I didn’t even get as far as an ultimatum,” Jason admitted. “I sort of told him how I felt instead.”

“Jase,” Dylan said. “Really? *Really?*”

Jason smiled despite himself. “Yeah.”

“You’re such a girl,” Dylan told him, snorting as Jason elbowed him in the ribs. “But really, this guy... this guy is a *dick*, and you can do better.”

“I dunno. I’m making him sound bad. He never said...” Jason shook his head. “He never promised...” He trailed off.

“I don’t do relationships. Are you cool with that?”

“Yeah, that’s cool.”

It was his own fault, for thinking there was more. For wanting more. For building all his stupid hopes on nothing.

“I’m an idiot,” he said.

“You’re a good guy, bro.” Dylan enveloped him in a sweaty, smelly hug. “And you can do better.”

“Thanks Dyl,” Jason said into Dylan’s armpit. He extracted himself carefully. “For just listening and stuff. I’m wrecked though. I’m gonna go to bed.”

“Okay.” Dylan reached for his game controller. “I’ll be here for a while if you want anything.”

For the first time Jason looked at the TV screen. “You paused *Assassin’s Creed* for me? Are you sure *you* feel okay?”

“Dickhead,” Dylan said warmly. “Go to bed.”

Jason headed for his bedroom.

Three beers had him buzzing, and should have helped him sleep. Should have dulled the sting of his own stupidity. Should have stopped his brain from freeze-framing on that horrified look on Ben’s face, but it didn’t.

He fell into an uneasy sleep.

Dreamed he was swimming in a black ocean. Storm-tossed. And suddenly not swimming at all. Suddenly floundering. His hands grasping desperately for a life rope that wasn’t there. He was drowning.

“Jase!” Dylan shook him by the shoulder. “Jase, wake up!”

Jason frowned up at him in the darkness. Dylan's eyes were as big as an owl's. "What?"

"There's some guy at the door," Dylan said.

"What?" Jason squinted at the clock. "It's one in the morning."

"He wants to talk to you."

"Who does?"

"The guy," Dylan said. "The guy at the door."

Jason, still half asleep, let Dylan drag him outside into the lounge room.

And there was Ben, standing at the open front door. Still wearing his suit pants and his perfectly tailored shirt. Still looking immaculate despite the hour.

Jason hitched up his old track pants and raked his fingers through his hair. "What—what are you doing here?"

Dylan, still owl-eyed, backed off.

Ben stepped inside.

"I'm not some emotionally retarded fuckup," he said.

Jason blinked at him. "You're not?"

"There's no cheating prick of an ex who dumped me and broke my heart," Ben said. "Just in case you're wondering."

"Okay," Jason said warily.

"I don't do relationships because I don't have the time," Ben said, sighing. "I work long hours, and when I get home I don't want to put in the fucking effort, you know?"

Oh, so you're not an emotionally retarded fuckup, you just don't have the time?

He had no right to be angry, not when Ben had never made him any promises. It was Jason who had changed, not Ben.

Jason nodded, afraid to speak, afraid to *accuse* when he had no grounds for it.

“It’s a shit excuse. I know it is. And wasn’t an issue because I never really met anyone worth making the effort for,” Ben said. He wrinkled his nose. “And then you came along.”

“Me? What?” Jason stared at him.

Ben nodded. “When you ran out tonight, I was pissed off. At you, for springing that on me, and at me for letting it get to that stage.” He shrugged. “And then I took my head out of my arse and realized I didn’t want that to be the last time I saw you.”

Something flared inside Jason. It felt a little like hope, but he didn’t trust it. Not yet. “You didn’t?”

Ben nodded. “And maybe it would be fun to catch a movie, or eat out once in a while. And I do want you to stay over at my place. I want to... I want to wake up with you beside me.”

Jason’s breath caught in his throat. His heart pounded.

“I want more too,” Ben said. “More of you.”

Of all the times that Ben had taken Jason to the edge, this was the most exhilarating. This was the time that threatened to leave him breathless, falling into an unknown place. Without Ben guiding him, reassuring him, because this time, Jason knew, they’d both be falling away.

“Jase?” Ben asked, a worried frown and a dopey apologetic smile on his face at the same time. “Will you please go out with me?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, croaking out the word.

Ben’s frown vanished. His smile grew. He stepped forward and closed the distance between them. He reached out for Jason’s hand, tugged him close, and kissed him.

And they fell together.

THE END

Author Bio

Lisa lives in tropical North Queensland, Australia. She doesn't know why, because she hates the heat, but she suspects she's too lazy to move. She spends half her time slaving away as a government minion, and the other half plotting her escape.

She attended university at sixteen, not because she was a child prodigy or anything, but because of a mix-up between international school systems early in life. She studied History and English, neither of them very thoroughly.

She shares her house with a long-suffering partner, too many cats, a dog, a green tree frog that swims in the toilet, and as many possums as can break in every night. This is not how she imagined life as a grown-up.

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