

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# VOLUME 10

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance Collection*

## Volume 10

### 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 10.

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](http://www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance).

Enjoy.

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# THE DOOR AT THE END OF SUMMER

By Jaime Samms

## Photo Description

The picture is of two twenty-something men lying on a beach. They are fully clothed in jeans and T-shirts, wrapped up in one another's bodies, but not looking at each other. One gazes off into the distance, and the other at the camera, as though they are both looking for something they can't quite find. They seem happy, but a perceptive observer might detect some tension; a sign that maybe there's something missing in their outwardly idyllic life together.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*These two took me under their wing when I didn't have anywhere else to go. They welcomed me into their family with open arms... but what I feel for them, well, let's just say I don't think of them as my substitute parents. They are my best friends, and I want them both so bad it hurts to be around them. I know I'm young, but I'm nineteen, not a kid. I know they saw how I looked at them the other day when I accidentally walked in on them, and ever since then, they've been looking back... What do I do?*

*HEA or at least HFN please! I am hoping for a hot, hot threesome where hearts are engaged, everyone ends up happy, and no cheating. Also, vanilla sex is fine, but I wouldn't mind a little bit of D/s and some spanking if it works! Hope this inspires someone!*

Sincerely,

Penny

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** BDSM, D/s, fetish toys, open relationship, M/M/M, established couples, summer romance, underage drinking

**Content warnings:** reference to past cutting/self-harm

**Word count:** 22,442

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# THE DOOR AT THE END OF SUMMER

**By Jaime Samms**

## CHAPTER ONE

Alistair adjusted the handle of the basket he was carrying onto one arm so he could ring the bell with his free hand. He had no idea how his mother, all five foot three of her, managed this job. The thing was about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle and seemed to weigh almost as much, full as it was of the small things people forgot in the midst of an inter-state move. Like toothpaste and a can of coffee, and maps of their new hometown.

A long, clanging buzz sounded deep inside the house and he stepped back. The sound just went on and on. He heard running feet, a thump, muffled shouts and laughter, and then the door flew open.

“Hello?” The exuberant greeting set him back another step and he nearly overbalanced under the weight of the heavy basket.

Hands reached for him, grabbed both his arm and the handle of the basket and lifted the latter away. “Careful!” Happy laughter followed.

Despite his poor balance and the heat flooding his face, Alastair found himself smiling back. “Hi.” He relinquished his hold on the basket and found his feet as he reseated his glasses. When his vision had focused, he was looking into a pair of warm laughing brown eyes. “I’m Alistair.” He stuck his hand out, realized his host had his own now full of gift basket, and pulled back, wiping his palm on his jeans. “Um, welcome to the neighbourhood?” He gave a short nod and took a step down off the porch. “Sorry about the bell.”

“Nah.”

Abruptly, the buzzing stopped and a moment later, another young man appeared in the doorway behind the first, a short wire held up in triumph. “Killed it! Who’s here?” He pushed past and looked Alistair over. “Hi. I’m Malcolm. This is Charles.” He tilted his head to one side. “Who are you?”

“Mal!” Charles shoved the basket at him and pushed him back inside. “This is Alistair. He came to welcome us to the street.” He shot Alistair



another of his winning smiles. “We were just about to break for beer and pizza. Come on in.”

“Ah, no.” Alistair held up both hands and waved them back and forth. “I don’t want to intrude. Just deliver the basket and—”

“Come on.” Charles took his arm again, lightly gripping above the elbow, and pulled him forward. “We’ve got plenty. You’re legal, right?”

Alistair nodded so vigorously, his glasses slipped again. “Well, nineteen, yeah.”

“Close enough for a beer. C’mon. We don’t know anyone here,” Charles said. “We moved from out west. A shockingly not-gay-friendly town of backwater yahoos.”

Alistair tried to stifle his reaction, but both men stopped to look at him, faces visibly tightening, pinching around lips and eyes.

He smiled a tiny smile and licked his lips. “This is a good town for that. You’ll be happier here.” He pulled in a breath and plunged on. “I know I’m happier since we came from down south. I was twelve then, just after Dad died. Mom got transferred. I think because she was so sick of seeing me get beat up. You know, the whole gay kid with no father thing. She took the offer without hesitating. We got a new start. People here are so much better.” He flashed a grin through the blazing heat emanating from his cheeks. “Sorry. Life story...” He shrugged and rocked on his heels. “I’m rambling.”

“Yes, you are,” Charles said, holding open the door. “Come in.” His smile was kind. Encouraging.

Alistair was led through an entrance littered with empty, flattened boxes, down a corridor made narrower by stacks of unopened cardboard crates and into a kitchen with more boxes, wrappings and paper hanging out the open flaps.

“Still in full swing, I guess,” he observed.

“Slow going.” Malcolm set the giant basket on the tiny dining table.

“I don’t know if there’s room in this house for all this stuff,” Alistair said, running finger over a box marked *kitchen pantry*.

Charles chuckled and handed over a beer. "It's really not as much as it looks. I'm a bit of a packing, um, stickler."

Malcolm snorted.

"I can relate," Alistair said. "Christmas is a fiasco around our place. My mom had this really delicate set of glass ornaments when she was a kid and every year she tells the story about how her little brother destroyed them all. He waddled down the hallway carrying the box they were tucked in, dropped it because he was carrying too much so he decided to kick it the rest of the way into the living room. By the time she rescued the box from him, every ball was shattered. She cried for a week.

"Now it's like digging for treasure unpacking the Christmas ornaments, and most of them are these little paper stars made from hers and my hand prints that we cut out of construction paper and glued together when I was five. You can't break those..."

Both men were staring at him.

"I did it again." Heat snuck into his face once more.

They grinned.

"I... sort of ramble when I'm nervous."

"And you're positively adorable while you do it, too," Charles said.

As if he wasn't blushing hard enough already. He had an urge to press the cool bottle against his hot cheek, but took a sip instead. "I don't think I could actually eat right now," he confessed. His nerves jangled at him. Talking to people he didn't know had never really been his thing. When he did, his tongue ran away without his brain and people inevitably backed off until he was alone again. He was better alone. No one to annoy that way. At least he liked his own company well enough.

His mother had talked him into doing this job by convincing him he could drop off the basket and leave, barely have to talk to the people. So not the case, it turned out. Not with these guys, anyway. He wondered, suddenly, if she had known they were gay. She liked to interfere that way, worried he spent too much time on his own.

“Nonsense. You’ll have a slice of pizza with that beer,” Malcolm declared, slipping one onto a plate he’d pulled from the dish drainer and handing it to him.

Alistair stared at him as he took the offered food. The man couldn’t be more than three or four years older than him but he carried himself like a guy who was used to speaking and being obeyed. Sort of like what he remembered of his father, but definitely not in the same fatherly sort of way. Malcolm’s command of the situation was absolute, but still soft in a way Alistair’s father had never, ever been. Probably why he’d had a heart attack so young.

Sitting in that kitchen with the two men, answering their questions about the small town they’d moved to, he got the impression this was very much Malcolm’s domain. It was a comfortable sort of idea, and his nerves settled quickly. He found he’d polished off the beer and two slices and was well into a glass of iced tea when he realized he’d whiled away most of their Sunday afternoon. He glanced about the kitchen and his blush came back.

“I’ve talked your ears off.”

“Don’t worry,” Charles said. “We appreciate the information, and you’ve been perfectly charming company.” He reached over and set his forefinger against the bridge of Alistair’s glasses. Gently, he pushed them up his nose from where they had slipped. He’d been looking over the rims without realizing, and as he gazed at Charles through the lenses, he was struck again by how handsome the sandy-haired man was. His face was open and excited about everything around him, and he smiled a lot. A dimple dug into his left cheek and he had the build of someone who took good care of his body.

He hit all of Alistair’s buttons physically, even if he was a bit less domineering than he usually went for.

Alistair was still contemplating the breadth of Charles’s shoulders when Malcolm cleared his throat. Heat flushed right up to Alistair’s hairline.

“I’m sorry!” He scrambled off his stool and set his glass down with a clatter. He’d been caught and they all knew it. “I-I should go.”

“You should come back tomorrow,” Charles said, getting up too, and walking with him to the door. “I’ve got a ton more questions, like where I can get gardening stuff, and there’s lots to unpack.” He grinned wide. “You can

make up for wasting our afternoon by helping unwrap coffee mugs and candle holders.”

“I—”

“Probably have a job.” Malcolm gave Charles a sidelong look. “Give the poor guy some breathing room, Charlie.”

“Just sayin’.” He patted Alistair’s shoulder. “He’s cute.”

Alistair gulped. “I thought... I mean, aren’t you two... together?”

This time, Malcolm smiled, and if he was a bit darker, a bit less... expansive than Charles, he was no less handsome. He was a lot more poised and controlled. “We are.” His eyes twinkled, chips of obsidian in the backlight from the evening sun coming in the window. “Charlie likes eye candy and pretty things.”

“P-pretty?” Alistair had been told that before, with his black curls and ever-changing hazel eyes. When he’d been a kid, he’d been compared to dolls and exotic women, usually not in complimentary ways. Now he stared at these two men, openly appreciating him, right in front of each other, and when he blushed, it wasn’t so much because he was embarrassed.

“Thanks.” He glanced between them. “I think.”

“Oh, it was definitely a compliment,” Malcolm assured him. “Come by again sometime.”

“I’d like that.”

They both smiled and the room lit up. “Excellent,” Charles crowed.

\*\*\*\*

Alistair did return, late the next morning, to find them sleep-tousled and groggy where they sat at their kitchen table looking deflated.

“Morning,” Alistair chirped as Malcolm stomped back to the table and sat. “Mom sent these.” He placed a pie plate of home-baked pastries on the table. “She made me bring them over with her apologies for not greeting you herself. She figured I talked you to death when I wasn’t home until suppertime.” He grinned as they stared, forcing the cheer to cover his nerves. “Guess she knows me.”

They both stared at him, unspeaking and he desperately tried to think what his mother would do next. She always knew how to set people at ease. She'd make the place as cheery as she was. Open it up, shed some light. He went to the windows and opened the shutters between the kitchen and the front entryway, letting in a flood of glorious sunshine.

That got him dark glares from the squinting men at the table.

"You need coffee, then you'll feel better," he assured them, moving to the coffee maker sitting on the counter where having something to do would hopefully keep him from turning tail and running.

"Sure," Charles grumbled. "Coffee'd be great. If *someone*" —he glared at Malcolm—"had labeled the pantry boxes with their contents, and not just 'pantry'." He made air quotes and stuck out his tongue at his lover.

"If I remember, we were in a hurry to get the stuff in boxes for the movers, because *someone* insisted on over packing, and then keeping me up all night." Malcolm smiled at Alistair, and that wicked glint appeared in his eyes, the same as the one he'd noticed as he'd left the night before. "Something about saying good-bye to the old place. It had some... unique features Charlie really liked being tied to."

Alistair nearly dropped the coffee carafe into the sink. He caught it with both hands and shot a glance at Charles, who was grinning like a maniac and looked a lot less tired, suddenly.

"God, that was a nice place," he muttered as his smile widened.

Alistair found himself staring, watching the dimple form on Charles' cheek and the light creep into his eyes. He turned to the sink, hiding his raging blush from them and trying to ignore that blood had rushed to more parts of him than his face.

"Well now, that got his attention," Malcolm said. "Even if the whole 'we-don't-know-where-the-coffee-is' portion of the conversation didn't."

"There's coffee in the basket," Alistair said, wishing his voice had more shape to it. He was having a hard time focusing on much of anything but the image in his mind of Charles, tied to something—anything, really—that kept taking over his thought process

“So you’re going to make us coffee?” Malcolm asked. He got up and leaned on the counter, arms folded in front of himself, close to Alistair. He could look down on Alistair from his greater height, and he definitely had presence.

Alistair nodded.

“Good. Charlie, give him a hand.” He left the room, headed down the hall to the bedroom.

Alistair set the full carafe down very carefully, almost managing to hide the tremble in his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Charles asked cheerfully, rummaging through the basket for the tin of coffee.

“I don’t know. Pissing him off?”

“Oh, he’s not pissed off.” Charles handed over the tin with a wide, dimpled grin. “He is fucking horny as hell, though, even after I did my best to wear him out last night.”

Alistair’s eye widened and he met Charles’ gaze. “What?”

“You obviously have no idea what a blush does to your face. He could, pretty literally, eat you alive right now. He had a boner the size of—”

“Oh my God, Charles, I didn’t mean—”

Charles laughed. “Calm down, Al.”

“Alistair.”

Charlie’s grin widened. “Al, you can call me Charlie. Only people I don’t like have to call me Charles.” He held onto the tin when Alistair tried to take it. “And no one is mad, I promise.”

“I don’t know what I did.”

“Pretty much, you walked in the front door, Al.”

“What do I do now?”

Charlie shrugged. “Make coffee. Stay and help us unpack.” His grin softened to a legitimately affectionate smile. “Stop panicking. No one is going to do anything someone else doesn’t want them to do. Understand?”

“I... don’t know.”

“Then let me spell it out. If Mal wants to maul you, he can, if you want him to, he can’t if you don’t want him to. He would say the same about me. But in the end,” he grinned crookedly, “you have to want it.”

“But you’re—” he waved towards the bedroom. “Together.”

Charlie nodded. “And we stay together because we are perfect for each other.” He sighed and set the coffee on the counter. “I don’t know how much you know about this stuff, Al, but he’s... demanding. He likes order and calm. I can give him that—obedience, service, and everything else that makes his world make sense. But sometimes, he doesn’t want to be the one doing the touching. He wants to see me happy, but he can’t always do the deed. It’s complicated and I’m not telling you all his secrets. Just that he gets stuck sometimes, and when that happens, he hates to make me go without.”

“So...”

“So we came to a decision a while back. To open things up so he can find the right guy for me who will accept him, too. It didn’t go over so well back home. And we might never find one guy, but sometimes, we find *a* guy. You see?”

Alistair nodded. “Sure.”

A snort came from Charlie and Alistair glanced up at him. “Not many actually do see.”

“I do.” Deliberately keeping his eyes on his task as he began to make the coffee, he explained. “They say being gay is genetic, right? And I always sort of wondered how that works if your parents are both straight, but there’s no doubt people are just born this way.”

“Yeah.”

“My dad. Well, he was a miserable, demanding, contrary son-of-a-bitch for most of my life.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Alistair shrugged. “He wasn’t as bad with my mom, or with me when I was little. Just as I got older and he knew. I mean, I’m not exactly the epitome of a straight-acting gay guy.”



Charlie snorted again and Alistair managed to grin in agreement of that wordless assessment of his attire and carriage.

“So as I got older and it was obvious, he got worse and worse, meaner, until Mom just made him stop or told him he had to go.”

“So he went?”

Alistair shook his head. “He totally disintegrated.” He drew in a deep breath, pushed the start button and shoved his glasses up his nose. “He was gay, apparently, and had pretended he wasn’t, got married, got a good construction job, made it to foreman, did all the right things, according to his family. Had a kid. And when I turned out gay, too, he didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want to do what his father had done to him, but he didn’t know how to be any other way. Add to that the openly gay guy he’d just hired on one of his sites, a guy who made no apologies, who recognized his truth and wanted him to do something about it, and his world was falling apart. I was about ten when I heard this conversation between my parents. Old enough to know what he was talking about, too young to know what it really meant.”

Charlie hopped down from where he’d been sitting on the counter and moved to stand behind Alistair, wrapping an arm around his middle and letting him lean on him. Malcolm had come back from the bedroom and was listening, too, leaning in the doorway.

“So she told him, just be who he was. She’d give him a divorce if he wanted, she’d give him full visiting privileges for me, part custody, anything he wanted. She just wanted him to be happy, for once in his life.”

“And?” Charlie asked quietly, when Alistair said nothing for a long time and the only sound was the coffee maker, burbling away. The scent of fresh brew curled around them and the sun warmed the tiles, and Alistair thought maybe it was a perfect moment, somehow.

“And. He said he didn’t want to live without her. She was his lifeline, what kept him sane. He loved her. And she loved him, obviously. Enough to give him whatever he needed. He started dating the guy he’d hired. Patrick. He was nice. Honestly, he was really perfect for my dad. Softened all his edges, was strong enough to take his shit and call him on it, was kind to my mom, and good to me. And he fell hard for Dad. Really hard.”

“So what happened?”

“My bastard father had the bad timing to go and have a fatal heart attack at forty-seven and leave us all in a huge mess. Patrick, he tried to stick around, but he couldn’t go in to work and be safe on the job, safe for his co-workers, because he was too distracted, and instead of getting fired, he quit and moved out west. Mom took her promotion and we moved here.” He shrugged. “It was almost perfect there for a little while.” He held up his thumb and forefinger. “So close. He almost had it all. He could have been happy.”

Charlie’s head came to rest against Alistair’s and his warm breath caressed along his neck. It was comforting, the embrace and the closeness, and Alistair relaxed against him.

“So I know it isn’t the same, but I get it.”

Malcolm nodded. “Guess you do.” He turned and went back to the bedroom.

“Is he mad?” Alistair asked. He’d looked so dark and brooding. It was hard to tell what he was thinking.

“He still gets a little mad, when he knows he can’t be everything I need. But not at you, and not at me. Just at himself.”

“And you can’t just...”

“Pretend I don’t need what I need?” Charlie straightened and Alistair took the hint and moved a few steps away. “No, Al. I tried. Like your dad, though, it wouldn’t be honest, and everything we have only works if everyone is brutally honest and tough enough to take the truth.”

“And the truth is, you can’t be in a relationship that doesn’t include sex.”

“No. I can live without sex.” He shrugged and grinned. “Probably. And it’s not that what we have doesn’t include sex. Only that it doesn’t include sex I have any control over. I can submit to him, but I can’t always be submissive. It would... I’d resent him after a while. And he knows that about me. It doesn’t mean I love him any less, and it doesn’t mean what he does give me isn’t appreciated. It is. I like his dominance. Honestly, it’s good for me, and it keeps him safe.”

“And when you need to be in control?”

Charlie smiled and glanced at Alistair through his lashes. “We work something out.”

“Right.”

A part of him wanted to take a few quick steps back, out the door, and far, far away. A part of him warmed to the idea and he glanced towards the bedroom. “And you guys have done this... before.”

“Actually, no. We thought about it, talked about it. Never actually managed to find anyone who didn’t run screaming from the idea. Not where we’re from. Most guys think it’s about as much as they can manage to admit they like to kiss other guys. Letting two of us double-team them? Not going to happen.”

“Hm.” Alistair nodded. “Coffee’s ready.” He grabbed mugs from the drainer and began to warm them under the tap, then fill them with coffee. “What do you take? What does Malcolm take?”

“Cream for me, black for Mal.”

“Figures.” He dribbled some cream into one of the cups and handed it to Charlie. “You know when you can just tell the guy in the room who drinks his coffee black?” He offered a nervous smile and Charlie laughed.

“You want to bring Malcolm his?” Charlie asked.

“I think you should.” Alistair glanced once more to the partially closed bedroom door. “I think you two still have some talking to do.”

“You going to come back?”

Alistair found a pen and pad and scribbled his name and number, which he handed to Charlie.

“Is this a yes?”

Alistair shrugged. “It’s not my decision, it’s Malcolm’s. Looks and sounds like to me, he’s the one who has to come to terms with it. And he’s the one in charge.” He didn’t make it a question, but it was, and Charlie nodded, answering it.

“Still, in charge or not, how it works is that if you don’t...”

“For Pete’s sake, I’m giving you my number. I’m not going in with my eyes closed, here, Charlie. But Malcolm doesn’t seem convinced, so now it’s time for me to leave, and you two to sort it out. I won’t fuck you if he’s not okay with it.”

Charlie blinked at him, pad dangling from his loose grip. “You shouldn’t swear around Mal, okay?” he asked at last.

Alistair sighed. “Fact is, Charlie, this is less about sex than it is about love. At least for you two. I’ve known you less than twenty-four hours. I’ve slept with guys I’ve known for less time than that, but I’ve never been in love. Maybe I only know what it looks like from the outside, but I do know what it looks like, and, well, yeah. I’ll screw you, but I won’t screw up you and Malcolm.” He pointed to the pad. “That’s where you can find me, if you decide you want me.”

\*\*\*\*

“Mal?” A few minutes later, Charlie carried the pad of paper and the hot coffee cups to the bedroom and toed open the door. “Mal, you okay?”

Malcolm was sitting on the edge of the bed, palms pressed into the mattress at his sides, bare feet scuffing over the thick shag underfoot.

“Um,” he said.

“Alistair makes pretty decent coffee.” Charlie held out the cup.

“Sure.” Malcolm didn’t move, so he set the cups and pad on the bedside table and knelt on the floor in front of Malcolm.

“You know what we always said, Mal,” Charlie began.

Malcolm rested a finger lightly over his lips. “You cannot figure this out for me, babe.”

Charlie dropped his gaze to Malcolm’s lap and nodded. Something he’d been told before, and he had to accept it was true. If only Malcolm would believe him that he was patient enough to give his lover a chance to figure it out.

“You know, I heard him start talking about his dad, and genetics, and I thought...”

Charlie glanced up, not surprised at the shine in Malcolm's eyes. "I know," he whispered. "I know, Mal. My gut churned when he said that. I thought what I could do to shut him up so you wouldn't have to think about all this."

Malcolm shook his head. "It doesn't go away, Charlie. And you know, his story isn't mine, and he had a happy-ever-after for a little while, at least."

"Yeah." Charlie rose from his heels to his knees and pressed his forehead to Malcolm's, cupping his face in both hands. "I love you."

"You don't think I'm a freak?"

Charlie chuckled. "Hell, yes. But not about this."

Malcolm moved out of the intimacy to look into Charlie's eyes.

It never failed to get right under his skin, that obsidian-dark look, the determination to overlay his control over everything around him, so he never had to be vulnerable. It got under Charlie's skin, into his gut, stirred his cock, and he lowered his gaze.

"Charlie."

"Anything you want," Charlie whispered. "Anything you need, Mal. I'm yours."

Malcolm lifted his face, gazed into him, and for a long time, all he could be was the repository for all of his lover's fear and uncertainty. Because he could take it in and keep it all safe and if he did, Malcolm could let it go for a little while.

"I rode you pretty hard last night," Malcolm said, brushing his thumb over Charlie's lips.

Charlie nodded, closed his eyes, because it was always better to *feel* Mal when he wasn't being distracted by how gorgeous and out of Charlie's league he was. Malcolm's big, warm hand covered Charlie's closed lids, and for a few minutes, Charlie knelt and breathed, their only connection that hand over his eyes.

He listened to Malcolm's unsteady breath and wondered. He knew his lover wasn't in the room with him just then. He was off in his head somewhere, remembering. Of that one thing, he was right: Charlie could never

take the memories away. They'd stay with Malcolm forever. But he could absorb the fear and keep him safe now, give him all the control he needed, and make whatever they did together good for him. He could do those things, and it was a gift to know he had that capacity.

He waited patiently.

Some indeterminate amount of time later, Malcolm removed his hand. Charlie kept his eyes closed. Malcolm was more comfortable in the dark, and today, with the sun up and curtains not yet installed, this was the only way Charlie could give that to him.

The bed creaked and clothing rustled, then Malcolm cupped his cheek. "You can open them."

"You sure?"

Malcolm kissed him gently, a long, thorough kiss that made his chest tight for wanting more of it, deeper and harder. But Mal pulled away, and so Charlie did what was requested and opened his eyes.

It wasn't like Charlie had never seen the scars. Tiny burn marks lined up along Malcolm's side, armpit to hip, and thin, white parallel lines marched in a neat row, peeking above his waistband, near his groin. They showered and bathed together, but Malcolm was adept at keeping them hidden, like everything else, and it had been a long time since Charlie had been allowed a proper look.

"A person who didn't know they were there would probably never notice them," Malcolm said. His fingers ran absently over the faint bumps of the razor cuts.

Charlie followed the movement, but quickly moved his gaze back up to Malcolm's. "They've faded a lot."

Malcolm nodded. "Do you think it would be different if he'd put them there? If *anyone* else had put them there?"

Charlie placed a hand on each of Malcolm's knees and shook his head. "Does it matter?"

"I couldn't keep it together."

“That was then.”

“If I slip even a little bit, Charlie...”

Charlie drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You never do.” He gently took Malcolm’s hand from the scars and kissed his fingertips. “Those are ten years old, Mal. You were a kid. A hurting, frightened kid, and this gave you control. Now you have me.” He smiled. “All the control you could ever need or want.”

Malcolm nodded. “You don’t think I’m a freak.”

Charlie snorted. “Of course I do. You’re my freak, and anyway, this is not the freakiest part of who you are. Now, let’s talk about the thing with the toothpaste, because that’s just plain weird.”

Malcolm laughed and shoved him hard enough to knock him onto his ass. “Always the charmer,” he growled, getting off the bed and straddling him.

“You know me,” Charlie agreed, watching with a growing sense of urgency as Malcolm opened his belt and jeans.

“I do know you.” He stood, one foot still on either side of Charlie’s ribs, so he could push the jeans down and get them off, out of the way, before dropping back to his knees. “Always eager to serve.”

“Hell yes.” But all he could do was lie there and watch Malcolm stroke himself to hardness. His lover’s knees clamped his arms close to his sides, and while he might be strong enough to throw him off, he had no desire to.

“Do something for me, Charlie.”

Charlie nodded, heart pounding. “Anything.”

Malcolm got off him, stripped off Charlie’s sleep pants and lifted his feet, pressing his knees against his chest.

“Hold those.”

Charlie gripped the backs of his knees, but when Malcolm freed his belt from his jeans, Charlie moved his arms to circle his knees. He crossed his wrists, gripping his own forearms and Malcolm wrapped the belt around his wrists. It was hardly the most romantic pose ever, or even very comfortable. But it was never about Charlie’s comfort at this point.



He dropped his head onto the floor and waited, spine digging right through the shag rug and grinding against the hardwood. This was going to leave him bruised and rug-burnt.

His cock, trapped against his body between his thighs, throbbed in response to that thought and Malcolm gripped his hips, positioned him, and began to work his way inside.

He used plenty of lube, and he was right. He had ridden Charlie hard the night before, so entrance wasn't more than a brief stretch and burn. It was the fullness that mattered, and the inability to do anything about anything Malcolm would do to him. Fast and hard, or torturously slow, or backing out completely and leaving him like this while he freaked out in the bathroom were all possibilities Charlie had learned to deal with. The last option happened less and less, now they'd been together so long, but it still could, on days like this, so he remained still, waiting, as calm as he could with his heart rattling in his chest and his cock aching and his entire being crushed under the weight.

There was no running. No more talking, either. Just fucking, and Charlie couldn't help grunting and moaning as he took another pounding. If his hands and feet went numb—and they probably did—he didn't notice. All he really saw was Malcolm's face, his dark eyes, locked on his, and all he felt was the warmth and weight and fullness of being what his lover needed in that moment.

It was enough.

Lots of times, the scenes never got as far as actual intercourse, and that was fine. Malcolm loved to torture Charlie and watch him come, or just watch him come, and most of the time, he took enough control leading up to it that he didn't need Charlie completely immobilized like this to take him, just needed his hands tied. But when he did need this ultimate control, those were the times Charlie most felt like they were complete.

He didn't need to have any control. He didn't need true confessions. He didn't need anything other than to be the vessel of Malcolm's contentment.

The rocking, pounding beat of their coupling quickly ground away thought and sensation, narrowed Charlie's world to the belt holding him in that tight

ball. The numbness in his limbs disappeared behind the insistent rhythm of Malcolm's use of his body. All Malcolm needed or wanted from him in that moment was to be still, to accept him, and give him peace. What he got in return was the same peace. His body no longer mattered inside Mal's world, not even his erection, which had dwindled away to nothing. Only the way they joined, gazing into each other's eyes, locking the rest of the world, the past, and all the uncertainty out.

"Charlie."

A thin tendril of thought reached him, and he smiled. "Mal?"

"Stay."

Charlie nodded and concentrated on his lover's face, the sweat beading on his temple, and the delicate lines around his mouth, evidence that he'd learned how to smile again. If he could have traced those lines, he would have.

"I want to try," Mal whispered and for a moment, Charlie thought the words were a part of his light-headed haze of submission, but Mal's gaze was so intense, so fierce, he had to believe it had been real. Again, he nodded.

Mal stopped what he was doing long enough to get the belt off, and Charlie grabbed the backs of his knees. Because he wasn't forced into helplessness didn't mean he wasn't still submitting. That was a dynamic that would never change, and he gave Malcolm the same compliance his bondage had.

Mal sat back on his heels and gazed at the offer, taking in every line of Charlie's open, vulnerable position.

Charlie held his breath. If his heart had been pounding before, now it slammed so hard against his ribs he was sure it would smash itself to a bloody pulp.

Malcolm leaned over him, guided himself with one hand and the slow, delicious slide of cock into hole had Charlie gasping and panting out a nearly incoherent jumble of pleas and promises.

"God, Charlie, you are so fucking perfect," Malcolm whispered.

"Mal, please, just... do me until I can't feel anything. Please."

Malcolm traced a circle around his dimple as he slowly, almost lazily, slid in and out of him. "I want you to stay with me this time. Come with me."

Charlie stared up at his lover. How to tell him what worked wasn't what Malcolm always hoped would work?

"You never come when I fuck you, Charlie. Why is that?"

"I come when you watch me, Mal. That's what works."

Malcolm smiled, his most brilliant, wicked smile. "I'm watching you now, my Charlie." He snapped his hips, pegging Charlie's prostate, which didn't make him hard, but by God, did it make his body sing, and he cried out.

"And I'm not the only one watching."

"What?"

Even if he'd still been bound, Charlie could not have gone more still, more frozen in the bright light of Malcolm's glee.

A small squeak from the hallway made him try to twist and crane around, but Malcolm pinched his chin in his grip as he jerked his hips against Charlie's ass again. It was a deliberate, calculated thrust to nudge his prostate again, and he threw his head back, his skull thudding against the floor as he grunted.

He actually recognized a glimpse of Alistair's shoes before Malcolm demanded his attention again.

"Does it help to know that?" he asked, coaxing Charlie's cock to half-mast with a light stroking of his fingers.

Another soft squeak from the hallway did the rest. "I'm sorry!" followed by the clatter of feet on the boards, the slamming of the back door and Charlie groaned, fully hard again.

"You wait here," Malcolm demanded, getting up and wrapping a towel around his waist. "Be right back."

He dashed out of the room, and Charlie heard the door again. His palms sweated against his skin and his hips began to complain as the minutes ticked past. Lube drooled down his crack and a breeze from somewhere lifted his skin to tiny bumps of chill before he heard the door open. He couldn't hear Malcolm's bare feet on the floors, but he could sense him. Mal would never expose him to anything they hadn't agreed on. They had all but accepted someone was going to have Alistair, sooner or later, so he took a breath and craned around to see who might be coming into the room.

Just Malcolm.

“You catch him?”

Malcolm nodded, kneeling on the floor and prying Charlie’s fingers free of his knees. “Relax.”

Charlie would have flopped out flat, but Malcolm supported his legs as he lowered them, and propped his knees over his own thighs. “Okay?”

Charlie nodded through the buzz of returning circulation, and a few shivers.

Malcolm pulled a blanket from the bed for him. “Lift.” He slid the towel under his ass to try and save the rug from the lube. “He was on the porch having a mild panic attack.”

Charlie grinned. “Is he okay?”

“A little shaky. Um.” He chuckled. “Poor guy. You’re very hot, with your ass in the air like that. I think all the blood ran out of his head.” He tapped his temple.

Charlie snickered, caught Malcolm’s amused gaze and they were both laughing.

“I’m sorry,” Malcolm said after a moment, holding out a hand. “This is kind of a bust.”

Charlie accepted the help to sit up and then swivelled under his blanket to lounge against his lover. “It’s okay.” He rubbed a palm along Charlie’s thigh. “You feel better?”

“Much.” He turned Charlie’s head and kissed him, the long, hard kiss Charlie had hoped for earlier. “Thank you.”

“Mmmm.” Charlie lay back, head against his chest, eyes closed, and cock regaining some life. “Always my pleasure, Mal.”

“I know.” Malcolm stroked his hair and played fingers over his chest as Charlie stroked himself. With the feel of Malcolm still lingering inside him, the image of Alistair watching them, everything the morning had brought, his mind reeled a bit and his body held tension he knew one sure-fire way of releasing.

Pushing the blanket back, he bared his erection and his hand working it and sank his weight into Malcolm's arms. It didn't take long to get right to the edge, with Malcolm playing over his nipples and nibbling at his neck.

His lover whispered encouragement into his ear and in a few minutes, he was riding the edge hard, needing to spill over.

"You ready?" Mal whispered.

"God, yes," Charlie managed to force out. "Please." Because he wouldn't come without Mal's say so. It wasn't a formal rule, like some of the others. It was just how he liked it, and Mal seemed to agree that's how it should be.

"You know if Alistair hadn't quite connected the submissive hints you gave him earlier, he does now." Mal traced a heart over Charlie's chest. Dragging his fingernail lightly over each nipple as he passed.

"Uh," Charlie replied, pulling his legs just a trifle further apart. "You think?" he squeezed his dick and held his breath.

He could hear a grin in Malcolm's voice when he spoke. "You're shaking."

Charlie sighed, tightening his fingers, feeling the throb and heat under them and the tightness begin to form deep inside. His heart thundered. If he moved his hand, he'd come, but he couldn't catch his breath. Holding off had never been so hard. It was the idea of Alistair walking back in, seeing him like this, having already seen him with his feet in the air and Mal buried in him...

"Mal." His voice was small, desperate.

"You need help?" Malcolm asked.

"You could do it."

"Or." Malcolm glanced past him, towards the doorway. "Come here."

"Oh God!" Charlie turned to the door, only to find it empty. "Really?" He groaned and his balls tightened.

"But you like that idea," Malcolm crowed. "Look at you." He touched the tip of Charlie's cock and brought his finger to Charlie's lips to suck the wetness away. The taste of his own come on his tongue only made everything worse and Charlie actually whimpered.

“Do me a favour,” Malcolm said, lips close enough to his ear to brush against the shell and lift the hairs along his neck.

“Anything.”

“Imagine he was standing right there in the door, watching.”

“Mal.” Charlie groaned.

“Got it?” Malcolm touched his forehead. “Right there in your mind, do you have it?”

Charlie nodded.

“Imagine him tenting his pants watching you do everything I tell you. Imagine him licking his lips, eager to have you down his throat or up his ass.”

Swears formed on the tip of Charlie’s tongue, flirted with his lips and he clamped his mouth shut, held them back. “Mm-hm.” He nodded again and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Imagine me letting him suck you down and swallow all your jizz.”

“Oh God.”

“Now let go of your dick, Charlie.”

Charlie’s free hand tightened into a fist. No way could he remove the pressure and hold his explosion back. The idea of Alistair kneeling between his legs, bare ass in the air for Malcolm while he sucked Charlie was too much.

“Let go,” Malcolm ordered, voice a flat, hard heat of command in his ear.

He let go.

His balls drew up and his body jerked tight. His mind whited out behind of sheet of pure pleasure and he came, long jets spurting out of him, his cock throbbing, the warmth of come splattering over his chest.

“You have the most beautiful mind, Charlie,” Malcolm praised. Then he snickered. “A pretty good trajectory, too.” His finger dipped into the hollow at Charlie’s throat and trailed up a few inches and Charlie heard the smack of lips and a sigh.

“Just couldn’t leave you hanging, could I?” Malcolm asked as Charlie’s

breath settled into a deeper, steadier rhythm again. His muscles liquefied and Malcolm gathered him close against his chest.

“You can do whatever you want to me, Mal,” Charlie said. “Anything you want.”

Once more, Malcolm took his chin and turned his head so he could kiss him. “I know.” He moved to look into Charlie’s eyes. “I know. And I love you for that. Among many other things.”

Charlie grinned, happy to see the light back in his lover’s eyes. Whatever had gone through Malcolm’s head over the course of the morning, he was more at ease than Charlie could remember seeing him since the decision to move out here. “I love you too.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

Charlie wanted them to shower together. Malcolm could see in his eyes what he wanted so plain. He wondered if Charlie was that easy to read, or if it was just their connection that made it clear to Malcolm, knowing what went on in his lover's head. He conceded to the shower, because as much as he hated anyone seeing what he'd done to himself all those years ago, Charlie had been a huge part of his healing process. He deserved to see the scars had faded.

So they showered and Malcolm lathered him and rinsed him and took as good care of Charlie after the fact as Charlie had taken care of him during the aborted fucking. The dynamic wasn't something they had ever really talked about. It had grown organically from their lovemaking that had never worked out until the first time Charlie looked him in the eye and gave over every aspect of control to Malcolm. He hadn't known he even needed it until Charlie gave it to him. He only knew he had to give something back to his lover after all the taking he did.

Over the years, they stumbled through how it worked, still did stumble, sometimes, but mostly, they'd found ways around Malcolm's issues and Charlie's deep-seated need for chaos control in his own head.

"I am going to find some dishes and hopefully, some food," Charlie announced as they dressed. He sounded centered and happy, and Malcolm nodded.

"Good. Because we still have a young man on our back porch and I'd really like to make sure he's okay."

"You want me to talk to him?"

Malcolm grinned. "I think maybe it needs to be me this time."

"Oh, right. Because he's lost all respect for the easy slut over here." Charlie said it with a grin on his face that assured Malcolm he didn't think of himself that way and that he understood Malcolm didn't think of him that way, either. But still, his lover had a tender spot about it where the rest of the world was concerned. He worried about what others might think of him for how they

were in bed. How they were in life, more and more as they went on, and he would not let Charlie get bruised for the gifts he gave to Malcolm.

Rubbing a hand over Charlie's buff bicep Malcolm returned the smile. "That wasn't the impression I got. But it is why it has to be me, Charlie. I won't let that attitude anywhere near you, I promise you that. No one else has to understand how we are. They just have to respect it. You do what I can't. That doesn't make you easy. It makes you strong."

"I know."

Malcolm wrapped him into a hug and a deep kiss. "*Know* it, Charlie. I have nothing but respect for what you give me."

Charlie held him tight. "I love you, that's all."

"Okay. So. Coffee for the kid, and yeah. Food for three, okay?"

"Course." Charlie went to the kitchen as Malcolm finished dressing and went out to the back porch. He half expected to find it unoccupied, but Alistair still sat where he'd left him, staring out over the expanse of lawn towards the sea beyond.

"This could be a beautiful garden," Alistair said quietly.

"Yeah." Malcolm sat in the chair beside him. "Part of why we bought it. Charlie loves to garden. He's got the biggest green thumb I ever saw. He has a vision. You should hear him talk about it."

Alistair looked over and smiled at Malcolm. "I don't know what to say to him."

For a few minutes, Malcolm studied the younger man. "Nothing," he said at last. "About catching us having sex—"

"It was more than that," Alistair said softly.

"Not really. The emotion is the same. So is the messy end result." He grinned and caught a quick smile from Alistair, too, before the poor guy's nerves flooded back. "Just the method is more suited to our temperaments."

Alistair nodded.

"Tell you what," Malcolm said, when the silence had stretched and their guest didn't seem to have much else to say. "Come and eat breakfast" —he

glanced at the sky and shrugged—“lunch with us. Just hang out. Get to know who he is, and forget what you saw. What you might think that makes him, okay? He is the best guy I know, and he honestly likes you.”

Again, Alistair nodded.

“Thank you.”

The screen door squeaked a few moments later and Charlie came out with a tray. He’d reheated the coffee Alistair had first supplied and brought another mug, along with cream and sugar. “Found some waffle mix and even guessed which box the iron was in. Breakfast will be ready soon.” He set the tray down and handed Malcolm his mug, then glanced to Alistair. “Wasn’t sure what you take, but I figured you for a cream and sugar kind of guy.”

Alistair nodded. “Yeah. Lots of both.” He dressed his drink and sat back again. “Malcolm said you’re going to build a garden.”

Charlie sat on the railing, leaned against the post and nodded. “Yeah. There’s a good spot on the old gazebo, once it’s fixed up, for an outdoor shower, and space along the west fence for a shed. Too hot there for plants, so I’ll build a little tool house and potting shed. And put some beds in around the gazebo, then take out some evergreens over there” —he pointed—“and replace them with smoke bush and flowering shrubs. Dahlias will grow really well here and—”

Malcolm couldn’t hold back a small chuckle any longer.

“I’m doing it again,” Charlie said, a huge grin on his face.

“Burning waffles?”

“Oh shit!” He jumped up and ran for the kitchen.

“He really likes gardening.”

Malcolm nodded. “And talking about it. Talking in general, really.”

“You don’t strike me as the kind of guy who talks a lot.”

“I’m not.”

Alistair studied him. “I think I’ll hang out for a bit, if that’s okay.”

Letting go of tension and the pent breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding back, Malcolm agreed. “Good.”

For a little while, they were silent. “You should know,” Alistair said after a while. “I’m not staying.”

“Um, you just said...”

“I mean in town. I’m moving to Baltimore in September.”

“Really.” A surprising churn of his gut had Malcolm turning away to look out at the view. “School?”

“Yeah. Graduated a year ago past January. Worked for a year and a half to make enough to pay for it, but with the money my grandmother left me, I have enough now.”

“What are you taking?”

Alistair shrugged. “General arts. No idea what I want to do, really. Barely had time to figure out I’m not a kid anymore.”

“But you’re here for the rest of the summer.”

“Yeah. Another month or so.”

“And Charlie’s making waffles.” He made the offer despite his mixed feelings. The last thing he wanted was for Charlie to get attached to someone who’d leave in a month. But then maybe someone who wasn’t sticking around was ideal for them. Someone they *couldn’t* get attached to.

“Charlie made waffles. I do love waffles.”

“Then I guess you should come and eat with us.”

Which he did, and then he helped them to unpack, and later, offered to show them around town a bit. They ate out, they went dancing, and they repeated the pattern the next day. And the next.

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## CHAPTER THREE

By the time three weeks had passed, any bashfulness Alistair had felt around his new friends had ceased. The long, warm summer days passed quickly as he helped them settle in, spent afternoons on their beach and nights showing them around and exploring the best dancing spots with them. He had never been one for the nightlife, so the dancing and flashing lights were intoxicating, especially when they discovered there was more than one club where the three of them, dancing close in the midst of the crowded dance floor, didn't raise eyebrows.

Alistair never would have considered himself much of a dancer, but between Charlie and Malcolm, his lack of skills didn't seem to matter. In fact dancing skill didn't seem to be the point at all. It was just an excuse to rub bodies close and grind hard-ons in a sweet, sweaty haze of bliss for a few hours.

Alistair felt a little guilty about getting between them, but usually only for about the first five minutes. Both Charlie and Malcolm, with their wandering hands and grinding hips, got him over that quickly, and he soon ran out of reasons to complain after the first few evenings out with them.

By the third week, Alistair felt the imminent end of the summer and the corresponding end to this brave new thing he'd found. He wasn't sure he was willing to call this one more night of dirty dancing if it might be their last.

For the first time, he decided, as they hit the last bar, it was time to let his own hands do a little wandering of their own. It only took a bit of liquid courage guzzled on the sly and a steady, pounding rhythm to get there.

Dancing chest-to-chest with Charlie, music thumping through him, all he had to do was follow Charlie's lead. Sliding his hands up over the tight T-shirt covering the tantalizing curves and planes of Charlie's pecs. Tentative at first, he glanced up over the rims of his glasses, close enough to see Charlie grinning down at him.

He liked how the undulating muscles felt under his palms. He liked the way Charlie was looking at him, encouraging. Participating in the fondling

was a little different than being humped and smelling their heat surround him. He hoped it would be taken for the invitation he meant it to be.

When Charlie bent and took his mouth, he had his answer. The beat continued to hammer through him, to drive his own heart in its pounding thump against ribs, but the rest of him stopped, suspended. His feet fused to the floor. Fingers dug into hard muscle. His world narrowed to the hot, wet tongue sliding along his lips and he gasped.

Taking the invitation, Charlie slipped his tongue inside his mouth and even Alistair's breath stopped for the duration.

Then a heavy hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed. Muscle hard as a brick wall pressed against his back, pushed him forward until his neck strained back under the pressure of Charlie's kiss. Thick fingers wrapped around his wrists and his hands were removed from Charlie, pulled down to his side and then clasped behind him.

For a heartbeat, Charlie broke the kiss to glance over his shoulder. His gaze smoldered a challenge and Alistair felt the familiarity of the crush between Charlie and Mal, the scent of their sweat and their arousal and he let his eyes drift closed.

"You're kissing my boyfriend," Malcolm whispered in his ear, the sound so low and close Alistair had no difficulty hearing it over the music or feeling it vibrate through his whole being.

Charlie ground against him, his thick cock hard against Alistair's, his weight crushing. It was hard to breath. Hard to think.

Behind him, Malcolm swayed to a slower song as the music changed, and he found himself carried along on the wave of sound and the sway of bodies.

"Technically, Mal," Charlie said, also close so Alistair and Mal could both hear. "I kissed him."

"Oh, I know." Malcolm licked the shell of Alistair's ear, nipped at it and nuzzled. "I was watching. Do it again."

Alistair held his breath, squeezed his eyes shut. Charlie's hands on his face tilted his head back, and lips once more covered his. He was helpless to stop

them. He didn't want to stop them. Matching Charlie's slow gyrations, he let his ass push back into Malcolm's crotch and shivered at the hard cock he felt there, too.

Malcolm crossed Alistair's wrists behind him, pinning them between their bodies, gripped in one of his big hands. The other, he edged between Charlie and him where he fondled them both by turns.

Alistair could barely breathe and it had little to do with the kiss. This was not dancing. This was him being made a public spectacle, taken on the dance floor where anyone who wanted to could watch. He pushed his aching cock into Malcolm's hand and a groan into Charlie's mouth.

"You going to shoot?" Malcolm asked into his ear.

He was very, very close. If he had known all it would take was to touch one of them, he'd have done it weeks ago.

"I asked you a question." Malcolm squeezed him hard and he whimpered. "You gonna come?"

He was. He knew he was. They knew he was.

"Don't," Malcolm said, a low, growled-out command.

"Can't help it."

"Yeah you can. Mind over matter."

Alistair whimpered again. "Please."

"Let you come? Or let you go?"

If Malcolm told him to come, there in the middle of the bar, he would have. So if he told him not to...

He pulled in a breath and held it. His whole body shook, but he kept his hips still, refrained from pushing into Malcolm's palm again.

Charlie's tongue worked his mouth. His hard body crushed him against Malcolm, and he was completely theirs to control. He focused hard on relaxing his body, going limp in their grasp and letting them do what they wanted. What he wanted, really, but there was no fooling himself into thinking it would be in any way other than on their terms.



“Very good, boy,” Malcolm whispered, true praise in his tone. “We’re going to take you home, now.”

Charlie backed away a hair, ending the kiss and telling him to open his eyes as he reset Alistair’s glasses, very gently. “You want that?” Charlie asked.

Alistair nodded. His glasses slipped and Charlie put them back a second time.

They stumbled out of that club, the late August moonlight shimmering on wet pavement. Rain had come and gone. The sky was clearing and Alistair glanced around at the diminished crowds and quiet boardwalks. He hadn’t realized how quickly the season had slipped away on him.

In a week, it would be over. In a week, this new, exotic thing in his life would be gone. Well, he would be gone, to college in Baltimore, and that was a very long way from Charlie and Malcolm.

“You’re quiet,” Charlie said as they slipped into a cab for the ride back to their street.

“Thinking.” He wiggled more comfortably into the seat between the two burlier men.

“About?” Malcolm rested a hand on his knee and tipped his head. It was an expression Alistair already knew well. One that meant Malcolm had latched onto something and wasn’t going to let go until he had what he wanted. Usually, an answer Alistair was reluctant to give, or a task Charlie didn’t feel like doing. But neither of them, it seemed, had the will to resist Malcolm for very long.

And Alistair didn’t really bother to try this time. “I’m leaving in five days.”

“We know.” Charlie settled beside him and put a firm arm around his shoulders. He did that a lot. Rather than move away as he normally did, Alistair gave in to the beer haze and the warmth and rested his head on Charlie’s shoulder. “I’m going to miss you guys.”

Malcolm squeezed his knee. “We still have five days. You just need something to remember us by.”

That made Alistair smile. “Like what? A photo strip from the dollar booth?”

Malcolm reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and pulled out a small, dog-eared square. “Already have that.” He held it out and Alistair glance at the image on it. The three of them crammed into the tiny booth had barely fit. The hilarity of the effort showed on all their faces in the photo.

“Yeah. Guess we do.” He automatically felt for his wallet, knowing his square was tucked safely away in there.

“So what do you really want?” Malcolm tilted his head again and Alistair gazed over at him.

The beer made him loose. Less careful than he normally was. “Wasn’t that obvious? You.” They both remained silent, gazing at him.

“Oh shit.”

“By ‘you’,” Charlie said, “do you mean him?” His arm was still around Alistair, but his body was rigid, his voice flat.

“Not exactly.” Alistair’s heart thundered and he found he was cold and sweating, his cock hard, his heart fluttering panicked wings in its dark cage.

“Then what?” Charlie asked, finally taking his arm away.

“I’m leaving in five days,” Alistair said again.

“Yeah, you said. We know.” Charlie crossed his thick arms across his chest. “So?”

“So it isn’t like I can come between you once I’m in Baltimore. In five days, I’ll be gone. The past three weeks we’ve been dirty-dancing like fiends.” He took a huge breath and let the beer rule his tongue. “Who says we always have to do it with our clothes on?”

“Um, the bar managers?” Charlie growled, arms still clenched across his chest, but the barest hint of a smile playing at the corner of his lips.

Alistair punched him. He probably hurt his knuckles more than Charlie’s arm, but so what. It almost got the big man to lose the smile.

“I’m not trying to steal your man, Charlie. You can keep him. He’s a bossy so-and-so.”

“I like him like that,” Charlie said quietly.

“You like him bossing you around?” Oh, how he wanted to make that sound incredulous, but hadn’t he held his orgasm in check just because Malcolm told him to?

Charlie fixed him with a luminous glare. “Yeah. I do. Problem with that?”

Alistair took a moment to really think about it and finally shrugged. “Don’t really know, I guess.” He glanced at Malcolm who was alternately watching them both. “Never really tried it.”

“But you want to,” Malcolm guessed, running his hand along Alistair’s thigh, closer to his crotch. “Don’t you?”

A long cool shiver ran through him, chilling the dance sweat on his skin. “Yeah.”

Malcolm leaned forward and spoke quietly to the cabbie who nodded and on the next block pulled into the convenience store parking lot.

“What are you doing, Mal?” Charlie asked. There was a thickness in his voice Alistair didn’t like.

“Nothing,” Alistair said. “Never mind. Pretend I didn’t say anything. Pretend I never touched. Please, guys.”

“Everybody out,” Malcolm ordered.

Without questioning or batting an eyelash, Charlie opened the door and climbed out of the cab. Malcolm paid and stuck his head back into the back seat. “You can take the cab home, Al. No hard feelings. Or you can get out. Choice is yours.”

If he thought too hard, he’d chicken out. So he slithered along the seat and scrambled out to stand in front of Malcolm.

“Okay, then.” Malcolm shut the door and the cab drove off.

“Go inside and get a package of condoms, Charlie,” Malcolm ordered, gaze fixed on Alistair.

Silence pervaded for a few heartbeats and Alistair understood. Malcolm was giving Charlie his choice. He could obey, and give tacit consent to whatever came next, or refuse, and close the subject for good.

Alistair held his breath, regretting he'd said anything at all. Stupid to have had that last beer. To have touched what wasn't his. To have spoken. Why had he turned off his brain at this late date?

Finally, Charlie sighed, looked carefully at Alistair, eyes narrowed. "You sure about this, boy?"

Alistair shivered again, but nodded. "Yes." He had to be. He had to do it or always wonder.

"Once we agree, you don't get to change your mind or say no. That's part of Mal's thing. It's his game, then, and even I don't get a say." He jabbed a thumb at his own chest as he spoke. He loosened, finally, and raked fingers through Alistair's sweaty hair. "I'm good with that. I trust him."

"I trust you both." He glanced to Malcolm, but Charlie's fingers tugging brought his attention back quickly.

Everything Charlie thought was written on his face. His uncertainty, nerves, and lust scoured his expression in quick succession. "*I want* you," he rumbled. "But soon as I open that door, I only get what Mal allows."

So he took now. At least, as much as was prudent in the store parking lot, under the streetlamps and moonlight. He took Alistair's face in his hands and kissed every thought out of his head. It boiled through most of the beer haze and washed his confusion away.

"Charlie," Malcolm reached across and took him by the wrist, effectively breaking them apart. "You're sure about this."

"Are you?"

Caught in the middle of the look they shared, there was enough residual heat to boil Alistair's blood without even a touch from either of them.

"I already made my call." Malcolm squeezed Charlie's fingers, glanced at Alistair and back. "You're my number one, Charlie. Always."

Charlie smiled, broad and loving. "We are what we are, babe. If I wasn't good with that, I would never have left home for you, and you know it."

"Charlie—"

"We've hashed this out a thousand times. Part of coming here in the first place was to have the freedom to be who we are. I'm not going back now." He

lifted his captured hand and kissed Malcolm's knuckles. "Be right back." He broke free, and it took an effort, but as soon as he regained his freedom, he was out of Malcolm's reach and up the front steps of the store.

Silence sank down around Alistair and Malcolm. "I should have kept my mouth shut," Alistair said softly. "I thought, with the way we danced and everything. I just thought..."

"Alistair," Malcolm pressed fingers under his chin and made him look up. "You thought right. We all know it." He leaned close. "Do you know what it says about you that you were the one with the balls to admit it out loud?"

"I'm desperate?"

"Brave." He caressed Alistair's cheek and smiled. "Beautifully brave."

Alistair drank in the praise flowing off the older man. "You're going to take me home with you," he whispered. He knew how that sounded. Airy and dreamy and dazed.

Malcolm nodded.

"Then what?"

Malcolm smiled and his eyes sparkled. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Of course he did. He wanted to know it all. Everything they expected of him. And he didn't. He wanted to trust them, go with the flow of the evening. It terrified him a bit. It excited him more.

Slowly, he shook his head.

"No?" Malcolm kissed his lips lightly. "You don't want to know?"

"No." His voice rose barely above a whisper, but it brought a smile to Malcolm's face.

"Good."

"Will you tell me about moving here? What you ran away from?"

Malcolm shook his head. "No."

"Why?"

"Because it's our past. It's the old us. What we pretended to be." He caressed Alistair again, kissed him again, lingering longer, delving a little bit

deeper with his tongue, but keeping the contact too tender to inflame. “You are the new.”

“But I’m leaving—”

“I know. In five days. Not tonight. Or tomorrow.”

“No.”

The bells above the store’s door rang and Charlie was back. He handed Malcolm the bag and Mal opened it and peeked inside. He glanced at Alistair and winked. “Pre-lubed.”

Alistair nodded. “That’s... good.”

“It’s a start.” He pulled out a bottle of lube and grinned. “We got you covered, Al, don’t worry.”

“I’m not.” He glanced between them and let the heat and blush scald away the last of his beer buzz. And he really wasn’t. Already, he’d talked more about getting into bed with a guy than he ever had in his life. Most times, he danced, kissed, and enjoyed his romps, but they weren’t encounters that required much discussion.

“Here.” Malcolm handed him the bag. “Carry your supplies.”

Nothing like carrying the whip to your own flogging. Alistair gripped the rolled up bag in tight fingers and walked between them towards home. The stroll to Malcolm and Charlie’s doorstep was less than ten minutes, and made mostly in silence, Malcolm in front and Charlie’s huge, comforting presence at his side.

“Second thoughts?” Malcolm asked as they headed up the front walk.

“No.”

Charlie’s hands descended on his shoulders and he shuddered and drew to a stop under the pressure. He waited on the bottom step, Charlie’s hands holding him still as Malcolm went up and unlocked the door. He went inside and still, they stood there.

“What are we waiting for?”

“I told you. From here on, it’s his game.”

“I’m not playing.”

Charlie kissed his temple. “Neither is he. Not in the way you’re thinking, but we are playing, Al. And it’s his scene.”

Scene. Alistair swallowed, nodded, and took a step back into the comfort of Charlie’s heat. “Okay.”

“You’re sure?” Charlie kissed his other temple.

“I’m sure. Can we go in?”

“When he says.” He wrapped both arms around Alistair and pulled him back against his chest. “Patience.”

Alistair nodded and leaned against the warm, broad chest. “Okay.” He put himself into Charlie’s hands and sighed. “Okay.”

Charlie’s arms tightened around him, nearly cutting off his air, but it was comforting. Grounding. Gripping Charlie’s forearms, he pressed kisses to his skin and closed his eyes.

“You ready?” Charlie asked. His lips tickled and his breath lifted the fine hairs near his ears.

“More than.” He pulled Charlie’s hand to his crotch and thrust into his palm.

Charlie chuckled.

“Enough of that, boys!” Malcolm called from the porch. “Get in here.”

Charlie pulled abruptly away and propelled Alistair forward. “His scene,” he hissed. “Keep that in mind.”

Not knowing what to expect, released from the safety of Charlie’s hold, Alistair stumbled forward and caught himself on the porch banister.

“Okay?” Malcolm asked.

Alistair nodded vigorously.

Charlie steadied him by the elbow. “Easy.”

“I’m okay.” He sounded breathless. He *was* breathless. But he was also okay. He smiled up at Malcolm and was rewarded by an approving nod and a darkly glittering grin.

They led him inside and the front door closed with a soft thud behind him.

He followed them to the living room where Malcolm was fiddling with the stereo. A warm samba beat throbbed through the air and Charlie's hips began to sway. Fascinated, Alistair watched as Charlie swung and his stocking feet glided over the hardwood. He was graceful despite his size, and more beautiful, when he moved like that, than Alistair could have imagined. Charlie closed his eyes, and ran a hand over his chest, his other arm swaying in the air beside him as he moved to the music.

Malcolm watched, too, his admiration plain, his own hips following the beat in a much more subdued pattern, his feet still. This was Charlie's show, and it was riveting. After a few minutes of watching him seduce with just his moves, Alistair found he was also swaying to the swing of the music, and when he glanced at Malcolm, he realized Charlie wasn't the only one under scrutiny.

"Join him," Malcolm ordered. Though it was softly said, there was no denying the command. Alistair shuffled forward, nervous, acutely aware his moves had nothing on Charlie's. He was clumsy, thin, and awkward next to Charlie's athletic, easy expression.

Still, Malcolm had made a command, and Alistair's libido remembered the way it had felt dancing between them. If that could happen again, he'd do as he was told.

Charlie pulled him in, turning him so his back melted to form smoothly to the contours of Charlie's chest. Big hands cruised over him, rubbing the cotton of his shirt to sweaty, sensitive skin, tightening his nipples and lifting his cock. He didn't require Charlie's touch on his equipment to get it in full working order. His hard body melded close, his hitched breathing in Alistair's ear was enough.

Apparently satisfied he was being obeyed, Malcolm made himself comfortable on a chair next to the stereo. Moonlight and streetlight drifted in between the curtains and trailed across his white shirt. His hand, splayed over his chest, ticked off the rolling beat as he watched them. He spread his legs and there was no mistaking the pleasure he was getting just from watching.



Behind Alistair, Charlie moved away, leaving him dancing for a few moments on his own. When the bigger man's guiding touch came back, there was more heat, and, Alistair realized, fewer clothes between his back and Charlie's chest. He never strip-teased anyone before, and his heart tripped into a manic flutter.

Before he could think up some way to follow Charlie's lead, though, it was being done for him. Charlie's hands stopped their roving and took on purpose, unbuttoning Alistair's shirt, one button at a time, and baring his chest to Malcolm's view. It wasn't much of a view, he thought, but the heat of skin on skin when Charlie pulled it down over his shoulders and then pulled him back against his body was heavenly.

Struggling to get his arms free of the dangling material, Alistair was fumbling with the buttons at his wrist when Malcolm sat forward.

"Leave it," he said, lifting his gaze from Alistair's chest, to his face, then to meet his eyes. "Charlie?"

Once again, Charlie moved away, but this time, he never quite relinquished all contact.

As Alistair concentrated on the music, rolling his hips and melting under Malcolm's stare, Charlie trailed fingers down along his arms to the shirt.

He expected Charlie to help him get it off. Instead, the other man gathered up the folds of material and wrapped it securely around his wrists, effectively trapping his arms behind his back.

He faltered. The dance stuttered to a stop just ahead of the song ending and the three of them stood in silence.

Charlie ran his hands back up Alistair's arms, his palms warm, his touch firm, and drew Alistair back against him once more as the next song started. They danced together again, Alistair accepting Charlie's guiding hands for the first few bars until the music bled into him again and he found his balance, dancing without his arms, almost moving as an extension of Charlie. The beat thrummed through his body, slowing his radical heartbeat to match the rhythm. He watched Malcolm's attention drift from one to the other of them and slowly let himself glide into the music and the attention and the touches, both of eyes and hands.

Malcolm didn't leave his chair, but he was a part of the dance, just in how he communicated with his eyes. He didn't have to speak, and when a look passed between him and Charlie, Alistair was not at all surprised to feel Charlie's hands drift down to his belt.

It was opened, his pants followed, and he wiggled out of the clothing to the slow seduction of the samba's lilt.

Malcolm sat back with a sigh and a glance at the contents of the paper bag, which he'd taken inside with him and opened. The contents lay spread within easy access on the table beside him, and his look at them now was significant in some way, though Alistair wasn't sure at first, why.

"What do you think we're planning on doing with a naked you?" Charlie teased, clearly reading his confusion.

"Oh."

Charlie rubbed his jeans-covered cock over Alistair's ass.

His breath caught the sensation. "Oh!"

Malcolm grinned. "His hands are already back there, Charlie. Maybe it would be fun to watch him do it himself." Alistair blushed, but he didn't refuse, and Charlie reached for the lube, spurting some on to Alistair's waiting fingers.

He couldn't reach well, had very little freedom of motion, but he could reach, and Charlie guided him around so Malcolm could watch him finger himself. "If you untie me," he began, but Malcolm cut him off.

"Oh no. This is just the start." He looked past Alistair. "Charlie?"

Taking his cue, Charlie lubed his own fingers and brushed Alistair's hands out of the way. His fingers were a lot thicker and Malcolm lifted one of Alistair's feet to prop it on the chair cushion between his own knees. It gave Charlie free access and Malcolm a clear view of Charlie stretching him.

Remembering a vague mention of not swearing in front of Malcolm, Alistair clamped his lips closed and only allowed the moans out, afraid to offend his host. But God, Charlie was good at this. His fingers were thick, rough, and his touch barely on the gentler side of force. Always a fan of the

idea of letting his partner do the taking, Alistair shifted, pushing himself onto those fingers, taking more and faster than Charlie was giving.

“Not so delicate as he looks,” Malcolm observed. He slapped Alistair’s ass hard, making him jump. “Calm down, boy,” he warned. “Let Charlie do his job.”

Alistair moaned and thrust back again, the warning barely registering. Another blow connected, harder and faster, and he yelped.

“Put him down here, Charlie,” Malcolm said, voice hard. “He’s not paying attention.”

Without more warning than that, Alistair felt his feet leave the floor. He tried to move to stop his fall, but his arms, of course, were of no use to him. And he floundered. Charlie’s strong arms steadied him, tilted him, and he was lying face down over Malcolm’s lap.

“Wha—”

“You’re not paying attention,” Malcolm said again, bringing his hand down on Alistair’s ass. “Are you now?” He spanked again and Alistair groaned.

If Malcolm was trying to get him to focus, he wasn’t sure this method was going to work. The music had faded to the background. Charlie was a foggy looming presence over and behind him, and Malcolm’s swats drove him deeper into his own head where the burning skin of his ass and the scrape of his cock over denim was tail-spinning him fast towards orgasm.

And then it stopped. Whatever had passed between Malcolm and Charlie, he had completely missed it, but the next thing he knew, his ass cheeks were being parted and something cold and thick shoved into him.

It burned and stretched, and he groaned, trying to find purchase on the floor with his toes to get away from the sensation, but Malcolm held him fast and the inexorable, slow build to where he thought he’d scream eased in an instant, and he was full, his hole clamped tight around the object but no longer stretched past comfort.

“Oh, fuck.” Muscle control deserted him and he went limp over Malcolm’s legs. Hands stroked over his back, his ass, and his thighs and for a few minute,

he hung there, entranced, eyes closed, just remembering how to draw air into his lungs.

“Knees,” Malcolm said softly. He shifted under Alistair and he understood the direction to be aimed at him. He struggled, with Charlie’s help, to get himself upright, then back down to the small rug Malcolm’s feet were on. He knelt there between the man’s legs, gaze fixed on the straining denim at his crotch, not knowing where else to look.

“Are you okay?” Malcolm asked, lifting his chin and looking into his eyes. “The truth.”

Alistair stared up at him, knowing how glassy, flushed, and stunned he would look. But he nodded.

For a few moments, Malcolm studied him. He steadied his breath and his gaze and waited. The plug in his ass was a new sort of sensation. He couldn’t move without feeling how it filled him, how it was, in a weird and alien way, part of him, going where he did, unlike another man’s cock that would pull out if he wanted it to, if he moved the right way. It was trapped in him the same as his hands were trapped behind him.

“Normally,” Malcolm said, “I’d plug up your mouth, too, if you’re prone to swearing.” He ran his fingertips over Alistair’s lips. “But I won’t, because I don’t think you even realize you said it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Malcolm smiled. “I know. It’s okay. But I am going to keep it from happening again. Move back a bit.”

Alistair did as he was told, leaning a bit into Charlie’s hand on his shoulder, against his knee where it brushed along his side, grateful to feel the other man even if he didn’t dare turn his attention from Malcolm to look at him.

Malcolm took the time to open his jeans, pull them off, and remove his shirt. He sat back down in his chair and beckoned Alistair forward again.

“Rather than gag you with a toy, I thought this might be more satisfactory.” He grinned. “For both of us.” He palmed his cock and crooked a finger for

Alistair to move close. There was no doubt he had a gorgeous cock, long, slender, and uncut. It was far more length than Alistair would be able to handle, but he nodded anyway, a rush flaring through him as rug rasped against his knees and heat raced over his skin.

“Good.” Malcolm’s fingers along the side of his face were gentle and reassuring. “Come here, then.” He spread his legs and guided Alistair’s mouth to the tip. “As you like, to start with.”

Alistair licked lightly, tasting his salty, thick flavour and the musk of his skin. He slicked his tongue over the slit, played with the edge of the extra skin around it, and finally, lightly, wrapped his lips over it.

“Now that’s a pretty sight,” Malcolm approved with a sigh. “Don’t you think?”

Behind Alistair, Charlie grunted.

Another wave of heat danced along his limbs, drawing a flush of sweat. His heart raced ahead of him as he worked more of Malcolm onto his mouth.

As Alistair explored and Malcolm fondled his face and hair, the world began to slip away again. It was fascinating how quickly that happened, when he had no control over things. He could, he supposed, pull off and tell them no, but the sting of his hot ass cheeks, and the heaviness of the plug, the constriction around his wrists, the heat of eyes on him, none of it was unwelcome, and giving in to all of it was easy. It felt good. So much better than when he had to encourage a guy to take control, or subtly hint until he got some measure of what he craved.

Here, he had no time to crave. Here, he only had the next order, the next moment, the next breath, heartbeat, and throb of his cock. Every sound he milked from Malcolm was a victory. Every wave of heat from Charlie’s nearness, soothed him closer to something that wasn’t quite orgasm, but was no less pleasurable. Being the center of their combined attention was a rush unlike anything physical touch could trump.

When Malcolm’s hips began to move and the caresses turned to gripping and holding, he couldn’t help but moan and wiggle to get better control over what he was allowed.

It only made Malcolm hold him tighter, and eventually, Charlie's hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"I think we need something more, Charlie," Malcolm said, pulling Alistair off by his hair. He lifted Alistair's face until they were gazing into each other's eyes again. "You keep looking at me." He glided fingers over Alistair's jaw, and as soft as the touch was, it was the most domineering thing Malcolm had yet done. As though appraising a possession he was thinking of purchasing. "Charlie's going to fix you up."

"How?"

Malcolm smiled. "You'll have to spread your knees and feet apart," was all he offered in reply.

Behind him, Charlie positioned his legs how they wanted, and he glanced back to watch Charlie buckle stiff black leather around each ankle. His heart jumped ahead of its normal rhythm and his breath caught as the clank of metal drew his attention to a long bar that Charlie positioned between his feet.

"You're okay," Malcolm assured him drawing his head back around and meeting his eye again.

"This is..." Alistair attempted to swallow, but his mouth was too dry. His eyes stung.

Malcolm's fingers tightened in his hair. "Okay," Malcolm assured him. He wasn't asking if Alistair was okay, only telling him there was nothing to worry about.

Alistair nodded.

"You're a good boy," Malcolm whispered. "I'd almost think you've done this before."

This time, Alistair shook his head, blushed, but offered what explanation he had. "Read about it. Seen a few movies."

"Dreamt about it," Malcolm said. Again, he wasn't asking.

"Yes."

Malcolm ran a thumb over the side of his face, down and across his lips. "And is it everything you dreamt, I wonder?"

Alistair closed his eyes and turned slightly into the touch. He kissed the pad of Malcolm's thumb. Parts of him had begun to ache; his shoulders, from the position of his arms and his knees. The floor was hard under the rug. He tried to shift his weight only to realize Charlie had finished his task and his feet were now attached to either end of that bar.

Malcolm stood, fingers trailing off Alistair's face, and Alistair opened his eyes to watch him. The man circled him, appraising him, eyes dark, face a picture of impassive calculation.

"What do you think, Charlie?"

Charlie shuffled behind him. Alistair wished he could turn around to see his face, but between his hands being tied and his feet spread by that bar, he didn't dare twist too much. If he overbalanced, he'd end up with a jarred shoulder or broken nose. So he stayed still, feeling the mass of Charlie's bulk at his back, and concentrated on breathing.

"He's pretty," Charlie said at last. Fingers combed through his hair.

"You want him?"

Charlie grunted. "'Course."

"I mean, do you want to screw him?"

A sharp slap stung Alistair's ass and he yelped.

"Yeah," Charlie breathed.

Malcolm circled back around in front of him and lifted his chin in one cupped palm. "You hear that, boy? He wants to screw you."

Alistair would have nodded, but Malcolm held his head immobile. "I heard."

"And?"

He swallowed, met Malcolm's frightening, dark gaze, and tumbled into it.

"What if I wasn't finished with you sucking my cock?"

"I can do both."

"At once?"

Alistair fought to keep his focus, to stay present as Malcolm studied him, gauged his compliance. Rather than answer, he simply waited, willing to

accept whatever he decided. He might have read about this, and envied the men in the videos he'd seen, but he wasn't experienced like Malcolm and Charlie clearly were. So he waited and relied on them to decide what he would do for them. It was enough they'd taken him this far. Now he knew he liked what he'd imagined he would, he could accept their guidance without worry.

Malcolm palmed his cock and stepped closer. Alistair didn't need to be told to open his mouth. He didn't need cajoling to accept the unspoken command.

Malcolm's cock slid over his tongue, deep into his mouth, and a hand nestled into his hair. Something hard angled across his back, and after a moment, he realized it was Charlie's hand in his hair, and Charlie's leg bracing him, holding him in place where he had very little room to move away from Malcolm's slowly rocking hips. Swallowing around Malcolm's length, he gazed up through his lashes, over the rims of his glasses, to the blur that was Malcolm's face. The pressure at his back grew, and Charlie was leaning over him, drawn in by Malcolm's hand in his hair, and being kissed in a way that made him tighten his own fingers threaded through Alistair's locks.

Alistair groaned at the pressure and the tug. Malcolm cupped his face, letting him know he wasn't forgotten, and he did his best to be more than a passive receptacle.

Soon the kiss ended and both men stepped away, leaving Alistair swaying between them, balanced only by Charlie's hand on his head and Malcolm's expectation that he could endure whatever they offered him.

"Let's get him up," Malcolm said softly.

Together, they lifted Alistair off his knees, right off his feet, so he could swing the bar around and land, flat-footed, legs spread wide, on the warm floorboards.

"How strong are your abs?" Malcolm asked, settling on one of the bar stools Charlie fetched for him. He ran a hand over Alistair's flat stomach and nodded approvingly. "Guess we'll find out. You won't be needing these for now." He removed Alistair's glasses and set them on the table next to the condoms.



Watching him stroke himself made Alistair's blood boil. And his heart zing in an unpredictable rhythm of heavy thudding and fast, tripping cadences.

When Malcolm beckoned, Alistair shuffled the few steps forward and carefully lowered himself, bending at the waist until he could lick at the drops of pre-come on Malcolm's dick.

He must have been quite a picture, mouth full, hands tied, legs wide, and ass in the air. He'd been in a lot of vulnerable positions in his life, and felt a lot less safe fully clothed in the street than he felt in that moment. When Charlie's hands began caressing him, legs, ass, back, and Malcolm's soft sounds of pleasure reached him, there was nothing about the situation that left him uneasy. He settled more comfortably into his task, knowing he could give good head, and being allowed, for the moment, to do so at his own pace.

Charlie's shuffling and touching were distracting, but pleasant. The plug being removed had him sucking in a breath, his head still in Malcolm's lap as Mal caressed his hair and soothed him. Then the blunt pressure of Charlie's cock made him moan and tense.

"Relax," Malcolm soothed, petting his hair and back. "I didn't tell you to stop, did I?" He traced a finger along Alistair's lips, still formed around his cock, though he wasn't actively doing anything but holding Malcolm in his mouth.

Charlie pushed forward, breaching him, and the burn eclipsed everything. He was far bigger than that plug had been. Huge, endlessly long, it seemed, and Alistair couldn't breathe around the all-consuming sensation of being completely overtaken.

"There you go," Malcolm praised him and stroked his back. "You see? You can take it." He rocked his hips, reminding Alistair he had bragged he could take them both.

Alistair swallowed around him, moans coming unhindered as Charlie slowly pulled back and filled him again. It was possibly the gentlest fucking he'd ever received, but he could feel the strain as Charlie gripped his hips, braced his legs along Alistair's thighs and ass and controlled his movements with a sort of stiff rigidity that told him Charlie was desperately holding himself back.

“You see how gentle he’s being?” Malcolm asked.

Alistair nodded. The deep burn had eased towards pleasure now and he swayed with Charlie’s movements, coming off Malcolm’s cock most of the way under the control of Charlie’s grip.

Malcolm pulled his cock free and lifted Alistair’s head, chin in the palm of his hand. “Second thoughts?”

Alistair shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Sir, is it?” Malcolm leaned over and kissed him hard, taking his breath and not allowing him a chance to pull in another before he was swallowing cock again. He had no control over how deep he took either of them. The position was designed to give Charlie most of the control over that, over how fast, and how hard, and Alistair forced himself to relax enough to give the control to them.

Staying on his feet as he was rocked between them took co-ordination and effort. He wasn’t passive. He couldn’t be, or he’d end up on his face on the floor. But all his efforts went into staying vertical. They weren’t fucking him for his pleasure, he realized.

That was something he hadn’t anticipated from the books or videos. He wasn’t the one being pleased, here. He was the toy. Not that he wasn’t enjoying himself, but the realization that his comfort was secondary to their pleasure was a breath-stealing insight.

A shiver ran under his skin, scalp to toes, resonating through to his bones. Charlie thrust, riding over that tiny bundle of nerves and sparking his body to life. Every touch, every grappling hand, thrust and tug and retreat echoed down deeper than anything had reached in a very long time. For an instant, he was back in the skin of a kid who didn’t dare look the other way from the bullies on the school ground, who couldn’t turn and run or stand and fight, and that helpless feeling washing through him was terrifying.

Charlie’s vicelike grip crushed bone, Malcolm’s fingers tore his hair, and he split open. Just for an instant. Then Charlie’s voice dragged him back to their living room, Malcolm’s soft grunt and lax grip preceding him stiffening and pouring his release into Alistair’s mouth cemented his attention in the

here-and-now and a moment later, he could feel Charlie's throbbing cock, his rigid muscles as he spilled into the condom.

Everything collapsed back in on him and Alistair choked and sputtered as Malcolm pulled out and helped him to straighten. It was a useless effort. He had no strength. His legs ignored the plea from his brain to work, to hold him up, to just move, and give him space and perspective. Then he remembered why he couldn't move and the shivering started again.

"You're okay," Malcolm soothed, gathering him up close as Charlie knelt and unbuckled the cuffs around his ankles.

The bar fell away with a clatter and it didn't matter. His legs still refused his commands, because Malcolm scooped him up and carried him towards the bed.

He groaned and thrashed, unable to push himself clear, still bound as he was.

"*Shh.*" Malcolm deposited him on the bed and he rolled to his side, determined to get to his knees, to get his feet under him.

Charlie pinned him easily, a hand on his shoulder. Not rough. Just imperative. The bed tipped and rocked as both men climbed on with him.

"No more," he whispered as he struggled to gain some sort of autonomy, to catch his breath, to still his racing heart before it burst from his chest. He hated himself for wimping out on them, but he was done. He couldn't get the equilibrium back. He couldn't calm himself down. Understanding they meant him no harm was a useless idea as that moment of understanding just exactly how helpless he was lingered.

"No more," Malcolm assured him softly. "You're finished, Alistair. You were perfect."

Alistair wiggled and finally managed to prop himself awkwardly on one elbow and peer up at them. "What?"

Malcolm's smile was radiant. "Listen to me, okay?"

Alistair nodded and Malcolm brushed fingers over his cheek. When it had gotten wet, he had no idea, but Malcolm brushed tears from the other side, too,

and gently kissed his lips. “You have to lie on your stomach for just a moment so we can untie you, okay?”

Alistair stared at him, at his lips, still soft and curved gently upward, his hair, messy and his eyes, dark, invitingly kind.

“What?”

Charlie chuckled. “Roll over. Let us get you free, babe.”

Alistair responded to the deep, urgent, but infinitely tender voice and turned to discover Charlie sitting next to him, naked now, as well, and flushed with happiness.

Heart still stuttering slightly, Alistair swallowed a bit of the bitter fear and nodded, understanding seeping in at last. He struggled to sit up, watching them reach to help but hold back in deference to his grunts of annoyance and sharp shake of his head.

He could do it himself. He could. Finally managing a mostly upright position, he waited as Charlie carefully unwound his shirt and loosed his arms.

Fireworks raced up his muscles and he groaned, flopping back onto the bed. His fingertips tingled, sending sparks through his brain, flashing over his vision.

“Oh God.”

Malcolm hovered, leaning on one arm and gazing down at him. “That was hard, what you did.”

Alistair gazed up at him, processing, searching for a way back to them, out of the jumble of his own thoughts.

“Take your time.” Malcolm’s light touch moved over Alistair’s face. His eyes were a fascinating shade of dark. Impossible to tell in the dimness if they were brown or black. A smoky blue ring near the irises made them incredibly otherworldly, and Alistair blinked. He wasn’t imagining it. Malcolm was the most beautiful man he knew. He blinked again, realizing how close the other man had to be if he could see him clearly without his glasses.

When he opened his eyes again, Malcolm was gone and Charlie was there, a hand resting, warm and comforting on his chest. “Before you pass out, can we get clean and under the covers?” he asked.

“What?”

He chuckled. “Just let me take care of you, please?”

Alistair frowned. “I’m...” *fine*. Confused was what he was. So he just nodded.

Charlie urged him up, guided him to the bathroom and under the warm spray already flowing from the shower. The visit was brief. Enough to get the sweat and stink of adrenaline washed off. Long enough for Charlie’s thick fingers to delve between his ass cheeks and sluice away the lube dribbling out of him, coating him. And long enough to be thoroughly pampered, then thoroughly, very gently and determinedly, kissed until he was limp, moaning, and hoping it might never stop.

Soon enough, he was led back to bed and climbed in without protest. If he’d lost himself for a little while in the midst of their scene, he was content to know Malcolm and Charlie knew exactly where he was and what he needed. He lay down, allowed Malcolm to fold him into an embrace that left his head on the other man’s chest, and promptly fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

If falling asleep had been a lazy, hazy pleasure, waking was even more so. The first thing Alistair became aware of was hands. They smoothed random patterns over his skin. Body heat surrounded him and a man's chest hair chafed lightly against the smoothness of his own body. That sensation sent a slow delicious tingle through him and he sighed softly, rubbing himself against hard muscle to feel more of it.

He was manhandled away a bit—just enough for one of those hands to slide over his chest.

“You wax?” The question was low and as lazy as he felt.

Alistair sighed, arched into the touch and nodded, unable, for the moment to identify the owner of the voice. “Tweeze, really. Not enough to bother with wax.”

That got him a low chuckle as the hand continued to roam. “How far down?”

“Mmmm,” was his only reply as his half-hard cock was fondled to full attention.

He thought maybe he should rouse himself enough to at least know whose hands were all over him. But did it matter? Malcolm or Charlie could have anything from him they wanted, so he snuggled closer and let the thought drift away.

“You do know if you keep up the wiggling and sighing you’ll be taken full advantage of, right?”

Alistair nodded, head pillowed in the lovely, curly nest of chest hair. “Molest away.” *I’m yours*, his mind whispered. Not out loud, though because he had four days left and only four days.

Fingers knocked the underside of his chin and he reluctantly looked up.

The smoky blue rings were wider this morning, opening up Malcolm’s gaze, lighting him from the inside.

Mesmerized, Alistair stared until Malcolm lifted his head off his pillow

enough to lay a kiss on Alistair that made his toes curl. It was long and languorous good morning kiss that ignored bad breath and sleepy, lazy brains.

Malcolm continued his exploration of Alistair's body, taking his time over the places that made Alistair sigh. Eventually, he covered Alistair's ass. More awake, now, he dipped between his cheeks, playing over his hole, kneading and prodding, never actually entering, much to Alistair's growing dismay and despite his ever more insistent attempts to achieve even the slightest penetration.

“Eager?”

Alistair only moaned and arched his back, pushing his ass towards the touch.

Malcolm had strong, very capable hands. He smelled heavenly. No one had eyes like his. Already, Alistair was cataloguing the things he'd miss. The things every guy, from that day onward, would have to live up to and most likely fail.

“Hey,” Malcolm said softly.

For a moment, Alistair tried to focus on why Malcolm wanted his attention. A heartbeat later, a sound in the doorway behind him told him they were no longer alone.

“Check this out,” Malcolm said, parting Alistair's ass cheeks to show off his hole, twitching from the attention and wanting more. If he had even the least capacity left in him to be shy about what either of these men thought of him, it drifted away on the breath of a whistle Charlie let out.

Alistair glanced over his shoulder to see the other man entering the room with a huge tray loaded down with mugs, coffee, toast and fruit. Charlie smiled and winked.

“Pay attention, now,” Malcolm whispered, and Alistair turned back to him. Behind him, the tray hit the dresser top with a clatter and a moment later, the mattress dipped and Charlie joined them.

It was only moments before Charlie began gliding big hands over Alistair's legs and hips and ass. “You like being touched.”

Alistair sighed, nodded, and wriggled a little closer to Malcolm, gravitating to his warmth as cool breezes from the open window wafted over his bare skin.

“Show me again, Mal,” Charlie said, leaning down to kiss Alistair’s hip softly.

Alistair moaned as Malcolm hauled his leg up, bending it to lay it along Malcolm’s abdomen and parting his cheeks once more. Charlie didn’t just look. He took the liberty of exploring Alistair’s ass, fondled his balls, rolling them gently in his palm as he rubbed a finger over his opening. In no time, between Malcolm’s roving hands and generously attentive mouth and Charlie’s fingers, Alistair was moaning and writhing between them.

His cock, fully hard, leaked as he rubbed against Malcolm’s thigh, alternately humping him and arching to lift his ass into Charlie’s maddeningly light touch.

“More” he moaned. “Please.”

“Bet he can get off on just this,” Charlie said, wiggling his finger over Alistair’s entrance.

Malcolm moved his leg in concert with Alistair’s ever more frantic rocking. “No bet,” Malcolm crooned, rubbing circles over Alistair’s back and kissing a line down the side of his neck. “He’s close.”

And he was. As frustrating as Charlie’s teasing finger was, rubbing and prodding but never quite breaching, Alistair still rode the wave of pleasure towards orgasm.

This was the opposite of the night before when he had been a tool for his lovers’ pleasure. This moment was about him. As utterly about him as it was possible to be. They drove him towards release in a gentle but relentless press of touch, whispers and encouragement.

Still, there was something missing. An edge to their touch just not present, and Alistair whimpered.

“What is it?” Malcolm asked, nuzzling at his neck. “What?”

Alistair groaned and writhed, arching as Charlie prodded, growling in frustration as he drew his finger back from Alistair’s movement.



“Frustrated?” Charlie asked.

Alistair groaned, beyond speech and wanted to swear at them, knowing it wouldn't get him what he wanted, but not sure, even, what that was.

Then Malcolm threaded fingers into his hair, pulled his head back and took his mouth, thrusting his tongue inside and straining his neck to claim him so thoroughly. And that did it. That catapulted him into a frenzy of desire that pushed any clear thoughts out of his head.

He gave in to the kiss, and then, second by second, to their ministrations, letting them have their way, drive him crazy, refuse to send him completely over the edge. Letting them play with him like a mouse between two bored cats.

As long as Malcolm maintained his hold, his control, Alistair could relax into the teasing, ride the wave of pleasure they were offering.

“Now you get it,” Charlie crooned. “Let us do this.”

Alistair rocked into his hands, feeling Charlie's strength and size as he cupped his ass, felt wave after wave of pleasure as he rubbed himself against Malcolm, and the tide of bliss rose and lifted him with it until he was balanced, barely keeping his head above the ocean of sensation.

It was Malcolm's fingers in his hair, Charlie's strength, gripping his thigh in its position across Malcolm's body, the containment of their hands on him that sent him over at last and he clenched, every muscle stiffening as he finally came with a deep groan.

“Oh my God, that is gorgeous,” Charlie said in a hushed voice. At last, his finger, slicked now, drove inside Alistair's clutching, tight hole and Alistair gasped.

There was no time to catch his breath before Charlie was working him open, stretching and preparing him, and he was still in a stunned stupor when Charlie's big cock worked inside him. Grappling for a handhold on something, he found Malcolm's hand, his wrist, and would have held on tight, but his own wrist was clasped and his arm hauled behind his back.

The restriction, far from worrying him, calmed him, gave shape to the

world swimming around him, and he manoeuvred himself back into his place between them as Charlie began to move inside him.

Lying on his side, one arm trapped in Malcolm's grip behind him, one leg pressed up against his own ribcage, his upper body laying half over Malcolm's body, it should have been a position to allow for long, slow morning languor. With Malcolm holding him, though, Charlie had more freedom to push deeper, thrust faster and harder, and he did. Alistair relaxed into the rhythm and the restraint giving them whatever they wanted from him.

It was a perfect way to greet the day, made better as Charlie moaned and stilled, body tight, cock throbbing hard as he dumped his load into the condom.

When it was over, he flopped onto his back beside them. Malcolm eased his tight grip on Alistair's body and squirmed until Alistair was laying on his back on the mattress between them. Malcolm fished for something beside the bed, found a T-shirt and used it to clean Alistair's spunk off himself, and the lube off Alistair before handing it to Charlie, who gave his cock a quick swipe as he tossed the condom into the trash.

"Morning," Alistair sighed, letting his eyes drift closed. The scents of sex and sweat and early morning sunshine warmed him from the inside out.

"I brought coffee," Charlie muttered.

"Mmm."

"And toast."

Alistair nodded. "Toast is good."

Silence for a few heartbeats.

"Love toast," Alistair said, letting out another contented sigh.

"Not enough to get up and get it from across the room?" Malcolm asked. He sounded a lot more clear-headed than Alistair felt or Charlie sounded as they chorused their denial.

"Lazy ingrates," Malcolm muttered happily.

"Mmm." Alistair said again. "What's your hurry?" He blinked up at Malcolm.

“Four days left,” Malcolm said softly. “I plan on making the most of every second you’re not packing.” He climbed back on the bed, straddling Alistair and leaning down to kiss him heavily.

Alistair groaned. “If you two keep this up, I’m not going to be flying anywhere. Not unless the flight attendants have those little donut pillows.”

Charlie laughed and shoved Malcolm off him, grabbed his wrists and pinned his hands over his head, taking his turn at Alistair’s mouth, kissing him until he couldn’t breathe. “You think it’s all about fucking?” Charlie asked.

“Isn’t it?” Alistair grinned. “Has been so far.”

Charlie shook his head. “It’s been about dancing and unpacking and getting to know you.”

“And now I’m leaving.”

“You were always leaving.” He smiled. “And we all knew that.”

“I guess.” Alistair stared up at him. “Yeah.”

“Yeah.” Charlie caressed his cheek. “What are you thinking?”

Alistair shook his head, turning as he did to kiss the tips of Charlie’s fingers.

“Answer the question, Alistair,” Malcolm said, giving Charlie a little shove to get him off Alistair. He handed out coffees and joined them on the bed as Alistair pushed up to rest against the pillows and headboard

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, it matters.” Charlie gave him a gentle smile. “It matters. Tell us.”

“We knew I was leaving,” Alistair said softly. “This is okay because you don’t really want me to stay.”

“Knowing you have to get on with your life is not the same thing as not wanting you to stay,” Charlie assured him. “It’s new.”

Alistair nodded.

“I think I don’t want you to go, but it is so new.” Charlie voicing his wish was comforting and Alistair nodded. “I don’t even know what I want.”

“We’ve never done this before, either,” Malcolm said. “What I know for

sure is how you talk about school and what's coming for you, and I know how excited you are for that. I would never want to change that for you."

Once more, Alistair nodded.

"You are still excited for it. Aren't you?"

"Yeah. Of course" —and almost in the same breath—"I'll miss you."

"And we'll miss you," Malcolm assured him. "But Charlie's right. We're a stop on your road." He kissed Alistair gently. "Okay?"

"I—not really." Alistair gazed into his coffee and nodded. "But yeah."

"Okay." Malcolm sat back and patted the mattress next to him. "Come here."

Not needing a second invitation Alistair scooted over, tucked himself in close to Malcolm's side and sipped the lukewarm coffee. He didn't care to heat it up if it meant one of them would have to leave the room to do it. He'd drink it cold.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

Four days passed in a blur. It wasn't all sex. There was a lot of that. But there was just as much help packing and shipping Alistair's belongings, lunches in town with Alistair's mother and even a couple of quiet evenings on the couch watching movies during which Alistair made popcorn for them, brewed iced coffee and cleaned up as Charlie and Malcolm wandered off to bed. He thought he'd be jealous the first time they disappeared into their room without him.

He wasn't.

Content and tired, he curled up on the couch with another movie, of which he watched about five minutes before falling asleep. In the morning, Charlie fetched him back to the bedroom instead of coffee, and they did things to him that made him blush as hard as he had the first night. It felt like a reward for not making a deal out of being left on his own the night before.

They didn't talk any further about his imminent departure. It was happening and they all knew it, and so they took full advantage of the remaining days. Charlie and Malcolm were generous in so many ways, including making it okay for him to begin to feel the excitement again.

It was a big deal, after all. He'd worked hard for a year and a half to be able to afford tuition and have some money in place for an apartment. He had a friend offering him a job in his field of study. He was about to embark on his life. It *was* exciting. And it was sad to leave his new lovers, but knowing they were happy for him made it easier. Knowing how much they had taught him about himself made it easier, too.

"Shouldn't you be spending your last night at home with your mom?" Charlie asked as they dried and stored dishes after supper.

Alistair shook his head. "She's out. She made a point of telling me this morning that she would be out all night. I think she has a..."

"Boyfriend?"

Alistair shuddered, but nodded. "She said she'd meet me at the airport for breakfast. He grinned and sighed. "I'm happy for her."

“Worried about leaving her all alone?”

“I was a bit, but she’s happy.” He glanced over. “And she told me to make sure you and Malcolm know to keep in touch. She likes you two.”

“Wonder if she knows you’re sleeping with us.”

Alistair shrugged and another shudder went through him. “She’s open minded and all, but... don’t tell her that.”

“You know we wouldn’t,” Malcolm chimed in from where he sat at the table sipping his coffee.

“I do know.” He glanced over and found Malcolm was studying him.

“You want us to keep in touch with her?”

Alistair nodded. “She likes you. She spent so much time looking after me, doing things to make sure I was okay. Working and everything. I know she has friends, and people other than her kid in her life, but still.”

Malcolm smiled. “We’ll keep you in the loop, Alistair. We’ll stay in touch.”

Relief washed through Alistair and he turned back to the sink.

“It won’t be a quickie when you come home for holidays, though,” Malcolm said. Both Alistair and Charlie turned to stare at him.

“I was thinking about this. It has to be all or nothing, or none of us will ever move on. Since you won’t be here for all of it—”

“It has to be nothing, Mal? Really?” Charlie asked.

“It has to be. Alistair will have a life in Baltimore, and he should live it. We’ll be here.” He met Charlie’s gaze and smiled, and it might have been a slightly sad expression. “Maybe we won’t be able to just wait until he can afford a trip home, or we have time off to go to him. Maybe our life will move on too.”

“You’ll meet some other guy, you mean,” Alistair said.

“You’ll meet other guys, too, Alistair.” Malcolm met his accusing gaze calmly. “And you should. We all should. I have no doubt if this is what’s meant to be, then it will be.”

“But you don’t really think it is,” Alistair couldn’t quite keep the accusation out of his voice.

Malcolm smiled. “I think it’s the first time any of us have done this, and I, for one, need to step back and figure out what it means.” He glanced to Charlie, and there was uncertainty in his expression.

Charlie nodded. “Okay.”

Alistair turned back to the sink and said nothing.

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“He’s pissed, you know,” Charlie said later as he and Malcolm sat on the back porch and watched Alistair trimming a lilac bush. It pleased Malcolm to see him working, even if he’d been finding busy work to do all evening. It turned out, when Charlie had shown him how to prune the bushes, he’d discovered the task a soothing one. Between them, even in four days, the yard had begun to look a little more kempt, less jungle-like. Now he was using the chore to avoid them. Anything to keep from resolving the earlier conversation.

Malcolm nodded. “He needs time to figure out we’re right.”

“You mean you’re right. I haven’t necessarily agreed with you yet, either.”

Malcolm looked up at his lover. “Charlie.”

“Don’t use that tone on me. You don’t get to dictate this one without hearing what I think.” He glared down, but the look was softened by worry. Maybe even fear, and Malcolm reached for his hand.

Charlie eased away for a moment. “I feel stuff too, Mal.” Then he inched his fingers back within Malcolm’s reach.

Malcolm’s gut twisted but he smiled as he all but snatched his lover’s hand into his. “I know you do. And that’s why I promised we’d keep in touch, and why I insist it’s just friends once he’s gone. I mean it, Charlie. I’m not being arbitrary.” He shifted around to face Charlie and picked up his other hand. “You gave me the reins a long time ago, yes?”

After a slight hesitation, Charlie nodded.

“I’ve thought hard about this, I promise. Up to now it’s been about letting

me have control in bed, about you silently agreeing to serve me the rest of the time, and me quietly accepting that, because it makes us most happy.”

“Yeah.”

Malcolm drew in a deep breath. “It was okay to go on without really talking about it because it was working. But there was going to come a time when we tested this thing. When you were going to have to let me call the shots, and not about when or where or how we fuck, or who does the dishes, or who gets the shower first. Some choices were going to get hard, and either you trust me to do what’s best for us both or you don’t.”

Charlie remained silent, staring at him, big brown eyes huge and vulnerable. It twisted Malcolm’s gut tighter and tighter to see his lover so frightened. But the fright was what gave him the strength to take the control Charlie craved and make it real. Deep enough to protect him even when he didn’t know he needed protecting.

Drawing in a heavy breath, Malcolm forged ahead. “Trust me in this. I’m not saying it has to be this way—”

“Because if we make a commitment to Al, you have to honour it. You can’t bring some other guy in when you think I might be slipping—”

“Quiet, Charlie,” Malcolm said softly. Firmly. “Don’t interrupt me again.”

Charlie snapped his mouth shut and stared, anger sneaking in under the fear, hands clenching until his grip hurt.

“Am I scared you’ll stray?”

Charlie shrugged.

“No, Charlie. The answer is no, I’m not afraid you’ll leave me over sex. I trust you to stay and help me through when I freak out. It’s what you do. It’s what you give me. I trust you.” He tightened his grip on Charlie’s fingers, too and was gratified to feel a reciprocating strength in the connection, and less pain from his desperate grip. A little bit of the fear faded from his eyes.

“You like this guy a lot,” Malcolm said.

After a heartbeat and a glance to Alistair across the lawn, Charlie nodded. “Yeah. ’Course I do.”

“So do I.”



“So then—”

Malcolm lifted one eyebrow and thankfully, Charlie shut up.

“I want him to go off and live his life and be happy not pining for something halfway across the country. I want to give you what you need to be happy, when you need it, not when we might be able to get him home or go there. This is not a long-distance sort of set up and trying to make it that will only break it. You have to trust me. To keep him, we have to let him go.”

Charlie sighed. “I’ll miss him.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You’ll miss him.”

Malcolm sighed. “Yeah. I know.”

“I don’t want to replace him.”

“That isn’t what it’s about. He had his place with us for a little while and now he’s moving on with his life. We can’t stand in the way of that. He’s going to find a guy—or guys—who are going to be there for him when he needs them. We have to let him do that. We aren’t going to replace him. He’ll still be ours, just in a different capacity.” He grinned trying to bring some lightness to the situation. “You just won’t be allowed to fuck him anymore.”

“This seemed like such a good idea,” Charlie lamented.

“It was. It is. And we were really lucky to find Alistair. He’s good for us. Maybe he’s given us something no one else could have.”

“A hole when he moves out?”

“A chance to understand how this works, to know it can work, with the right guy. But he isn’t the right guy, because if he was, he wouldn’t be moving to Baltimore or we would be moving with him, but we aren’t, and he is.”

Charlie stared at him a long time.

“Trust me, Charlie. This is best.”

Charlie swallowed hard. “I have to, don’t I, because I don’t know how else to do this.”

Malcolm smiled. “That’s why you have me.”

The vast uncertainty in Charlie's eyes was heart-stopping, but Malcolm didn't look away. He saw there when Charlie made the leap of faith before anything ever came out of his mouth.

"That's why I have you," he agreed in a whisper.

Malcolm stood, drew him up and pulled his shaking lover into his arms, kissing him, containing him in the moment for a long time, cementing Charlie's acceptance of his decision inside all the ways their relationship had slowly come to this point of no return.

Malcolm had made a hard, unhappy decision that was going to hurt them all a little bit right now but he knew in his heart, it would be best for them in the long run. It would set them all on the road to getting over each other in the best possible way.

He was still holding Charlie when Alistair clumped up the steps to stand outside their tight embrace.

"This is it, then?" he asked. He sounded so sad.

Malcolm held out an arm, then Charlie did and Alistair joined them. "This is it," Malcolm agreed, kissing the top of his head.

"I still want to stay here tonight," Alistair whispered. "Can I?"

"You'll stay here tonight." Malcolm agreed. "Go inside and get cleaned up." He pulled back to look Alistair in the eye. "Be thorough." He kissed him, deep and demanding and tapped his ass as he turned to go inside.

"I think you just made the kid's day."

"I just made your day." Malcolm kissed Charlie, too, in a way he hadn't kissed him in months. As deep and demanding as he had Alistair, feeling the response deep in his gut. He felt Charlie's release in the way his entire body relaxed, in the sigh that came out of him.

He felt the trust flow between them again and sighed himself. He wasn't sure how they had sipped so far from this center. Now, with Charlie's acquiescence and the way his lover hung onto him and sighed into the stroke of his hand over his back, he thought that as little as he'd liked making the decision to let Alistair go, it had been the right one.

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The rising sun found them pulling into a parking space at the airport. They found Alistair's mother sitting at a small table in one of the cafes across from the check-in counters. She wasn't alone.

At her table was a handsome man in his early forties. He had on expensive jeans and a designer T-shirt under a cashmere sport jacket and long-toed leather dress shoes. Everything about him spoke of understated, but undeniable class.

"Mom?" Alistair stopped, Charlie and Malcolm at his back.

"Hi, honey." She stood and her companion rose with her. "This is Bob. Bob, my son, Alistair."

"Hi." Bob nodded and held out a hand which Alistair skipped a beat before taking and shaking.

"Hi," he managed, before Malcolm nudged him and he introduced them.

"Sit," his mother said, and Bob reached to hold her chair and push it gently in as she sat.

"I ordered a pot of coffee for you boys." Her eyes sparkled as she smiled and poured. "I thought you all might be a bit tired this morning."

Alistair could not have stopped the blush if his life depended on it, and he caught Charlie grinning at him. "So, Bob, how do you know my mother?" he asked.

The question worked to deflect the attention from their night's activities, and Bob commenced the explanation of how he had met Alistair's mother when she helped him to pick out the jacket he had on his back. They'd had a lot of laughs choosing his wardrobe for a baby shower.

"Easy to be relaxed around him when I was sure he was gay," Alistair's mom said.

"I liked her right off." Bob said, his gaze locked with Alistair's. "She's a smart, funny, sexy lady." He laid his hand over hers and smiled down at her. "Thank goodness my niece dragged me to the mall that day, or I might never have met her."

Alistair stared at them for a few minutes before excusing himself to wash his hands before their meal arrived.

Seconds after he retreated to the restroom, Malcolm walked in.

“You okay, Alistair?”

“He’s ten years younger than she is!”

“And obviously isn’t after her money.”

Alistair snorted. “We don’t have any.”

“But he does, Alistair. Did you see what he was wearing?”

“Yes.” Alistair glared at himself in the mirror.

“And the way he looks at her?”

Alistair shuddered. “My mom, Mal.”

Malcolm rested a hand on his shoulder. “And the way she looks at him?”

Alistair sighed. “Yeah.” He met Malcolm’s gaze in the mirror. “This is it,” he whispered.

Malcolm smiled. “It’s time.”

“You’ll—”

“Keep in touch. Of course.”

“Keep an eye on them.”

Malcolm grinned. “On your mom, the cougar?”

“Oh God. Really?” Alistair glared and Malcolm laughed.

“Come and eat, yeah?” Malcolm said.

Alistair turned to study him. “One last order?”

Malcolm cupped his cheek and kissed him lightly. “If I must.”

“You don’t.” He glanced up through his lashes. “But you could anyway.”

“Get out there,” Malcolm growled good-naturedly, slapping his ass as he scurried past.

“Everything all right?” Bob asked as they returned.

“Yes,” Alistair smiled at him and was rewarded with a relieved grin in return, and breakfast proceeded with small talk and decent food.

When it was time for him to say good-bye, his mother took him aside to wish him safe travels.

“Do me a favour, Mom?” he asked, glancing to where Bob, Malcolm and Charlie still chatted over coffee. “Keep an eye on them? Make sure they’re okay.”

“They strike me as perfectly capable young men, Alistair.”

“And they are.” He bit his lip. “Just that I’m sort of leaving them in a spot.”

“You’re leaving them period.” She smiled kindly. “Do you think I don’t understand the looks?”

“Mom,” Alistair warned. “Please don’t.”

“You’re my son.” She smiled and patted his cheek with a soft sigh. “But you’re also a grown man, and I can’t say I was thrilled with all this, but who am I to judge, after everything with your father? You are making the right decision, though, going to school.”

“You never said a word about it.”

“You thought I didn’t know?”

“I didn’t really want to find out if you did, to be honest.”

“Well, I did.”

“So why didn’t you say anything? Why not use your considerable influence to make sure I left?”

“Because honey, it isn’t my life. I saw what parental interference did to your father. We both lived with it. And we both did our best to raise you to make your own way in the world. I couldn’t make this decision for you.”

“But you think I made the right one.”

“I think if it’s meant to be, Malcolm and Charlie will be here when you come back.”

“That’s what Malcolm said.”

She smiled. “He’s a very kind young man. Wise.”

Alistair nodded. “He told me I have to go. Talked me and Charlie into believing him. Talked himself into believing it, I think.”

“And what do you honestly feel?”

“I want to do this. I’ve been dreaming of it for years. I don’t think I could stay and not always wonder what I gave up.”

“So he’s right, then.”

Alistair nodded. “He’s right. That’s why Charlie’s with him.” He drew in a breath and met his mother gaze. “Why I was with them. Now I have to go.”

She nodded and hugged him close. “Now you have to go.”

“And about this Bob guy?”

Her smile was radiant. “I should have told you about him months ago.”

“Months?” he boggled at her.

“Well, it was new.” A faint pink infused her cheeks. “And he’s young. I wanted to be sure he was sure before I brought him into your life.”

“Good God, Mom, he’s what? Forty?”

“Forty-three.”

“So twelve years, then.”

This time her flush was filled with a kind of pride and she nodded.

“So he’s not all that young, and I’m not a kid anymore.”

“No.” She sighed. “I suppose not.”

“He’s good to you?”

“He’s a very good man. Alistair. His first wife died five years ago. I think he’s very brave to risk again.”

Alistair nodded as she straightened his collar. “Honey, I’m glad you’re going. I want to like your friends, but I can’t really, honestly say I’m sorry to see this arrangement come to an end.”

“Mom—” He gazed down at her. “Never mind.”

Her smile, though, was knowing. “You found something. I know.” She blinked a bit, and just when he thought she might cry, she squared her shoulders. “We don’t have to talk about lifestyle choices now. Not on your way out. Not unless it comes up again.” She clicked her tongue. “We can argue another time if we must. For now, let’s say good-bye, and leave it alone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nonsense.” Her expression, when she fixed her gaze on him, was filled with pride. “I don’t think you expected me to approve, and I don’t know if I do. Right now, I don’t want to send you off across the country angry.”

“I’m not.”

“Good. Neither am I.”

“So I’ll see you at Thanksgiving.”

She lifted one eyebrow. “You had better, young man.”

He grinned and his worry over whether or not she approved of him evaporated. “Yes, ma’am.”

The others joined them as they embraced, and Bob wished him well before escorting his mother out.

That left him with Malcolm and Charlie and a wall of good-bye he was reluctant to breach.

Charlie did the honours, grabbing him into a tight embrace, kissing him soundly and long, then turning and hurrying for the open air.

“He’s—”

“Yeah.” Alistair watched him go. “Take care of him.”

“You know we’ll take care of each other.”

Alistair nodded. His eyes stung and he turned his head away.

“And you don’t need anyone to look after you, Alistair. You know you don’t.”

“Of course not.”

“That’s what makes you the guy we needed for now.” He clenched his teeth, and then growled. “God, you are so...” He made another snarling sound and hugged Alistair tight.

There were more good-byes and good lucks, but all the important things had been said. Alistair was going. He wanted to go more than he wanted to stay, and he knew it was the right thing for all of them, because they needed someone who would stay.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “For everything.” Including letting him go.

In his heart, later, as he sat on the plane and watched his small town life fall away, he thanked them most of all for pushing him out the door and into his life.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Jaime has been writing for various publishers since the fall of 2008, although she's been writing for herself far longer. Often asked why men; what's so fascinating about writing stories about men falling in love, she's never come up with a clear answer. Just that these are the stories that she loves to read, so it seemed to make sense if she was going to write, they should also be the stories she wrote.*

*These days, you can find plenty of free reading on her website. She also writes for Freya's Bower, Pink Petal Books, MLR Press, Dreamspinner Press and Total E-Bound.*

*Spare time, when it can be found rolled into a ball at the back of the dryer or cavorting with the dust bunnies in the corners, she's probably spending reading, drawing, gardening (weather permitting, of course, since she is Canadian!) or watching movies. Well. She has a day job or two, as well, and two kids, but thankfully, also a wonderful husband who shoulders more than his fair share of household and child care responsibilities.*

*She graduated some time ago from college with a Fine Arts diploma, with a major in textile arts, which basically qualifies her to draw pictures and create things with string and fabric. One always needs an official slip of paper to fall back on after all...*

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# GUARDING LUCAS

By Mitchell E. Sanford

## Photo Description

A man with short dark hair has his back to the viewer. He wears a dark blue suit jacket with the sleeves pushed up, and a beaded bracelet of some kind on his left wrist. He is being embraced—or held up—by a man wearing a tan trench coat over a suit and tie... and with white wings extending from his back. They stare into each other's eyes with a look of wonder.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've had a tough life. So tough, in fact, that I've stopped believing that anybody is watching out for me. Until one day I avoid an accident and catch a glimpse of a handsome man with wings. Could it be that I actually have a guardian angel? Why do I keep thinking about this man? I can't get him out of my head. Who was he, and who is he now? Is loving your own guardian angel an act against God, or is it destiny?*

Sincerely,

Victoria

*P.S. A fair deal of angst would be cool, but a H.E.A. preferred.*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy, paranormal

**Tags:** dark, angels, drug use, self-mutilation, alcoholism

**Content warnings:** main character suicide and rebirth, secondary character deaths

**Word count:** 11,063

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# GUARDING LUCAS

By Mitchell E. Sanford

## CHAPTER ONE

Red. I've always loved the color red. Something about it seemed so familiar. They say that red is the color of passion and desire. But for me, it signified peace and serenity. A sense of calm captivated my body whenever I was surrounded by the color of fresh blood.

The man at the bar was wearing a red T-shirt. Cut low to show off his sexy chest, developed muscles popped through the open length, and at the sight I found myself getting hard. I had my shirt off, and the cool night breeze kept making my nipples perk. Not that I was complaining, I always got big tips when I pulled off my shirt.

The night went by at its usual pace. A sudden and stressful influx of patrons. Then the lull, and then the cleanup from the bastards. A man had the nerve to vomit directly onto the bar, and we had to call a cab.

"Sorry." David smiled and tossed me the rag. "I'm out, y'all. Peace."

*God, I hate him,* I thought bitterly. David was a Texas frat boy with an astounding body and the personality of a dead bee.

"Well, he's fired." Ryan groaned.

"He was useful as shit anyway." I smirked. David never even went home with me.

While the night was pretty simple in terms of patrons and drinks to serve, my eyes kept drifting to the man at the bar. When he brought up a wrist to glance at his watch, I was impressed with the display of rippling biceps and forearms. The guy was hot, that's for sure. Fuckable, I was certain, with his upturned bangs and tight shirt. Then he dropped a twenty and winked at me. On instinct, I handed him my card with full confidence that we'd hook up tonight.

Oh we did. We certainly did. And he was smoking hot, ripped almost as much as me. His body was clear of ink though, which I thought was lame. But

when he leaned back and rode me until I climaxed, I was able to overlook virgin skin.

\*\*\*\*

I slept in that Friday. By some miracle, I had Saturday off and didn't have to go in to cover David's shift. I knew Ryan would find a replacement quickly. If I had to be brutal and honest with myself... I was beat. Tired, exhausted, and every other adjective I could think of. My body stayed curled in my red sheets until the sun positioned itself just right to blind me through the window. And any position I switched to was useless.

"Guess I gotta get up," I moaned, sitting and gathering my bearings. My erection hadn't really softened from last night's hookup. So to keep calm, I lay back down and pumped myself to completion, groaning with delight at the release. Then came the knock at the apartment door. "Shit!"

"Who the hell is it?" I yelled, tossing on jeans and zipping them dangerously close to my "best friend".

"Um... it's Lisa," said a small voice. *Whoops!*

I opened the door in excitement and smiled.

"Lisa!" I cried as I fell to my knees, and the little girl jumped into my embrace. She laughed when I started kissing her head and swinging her around. She was so small, so delicate, so beautiful.

"How are you, Daddy?" Lisa squeaked through giggles. I wasn't really her father. The guy bailed and I knew her mother, Pam, for years now. Together we paid for Lisa's dialysis treatments. "Mom's been crying. The doctor looked real sad too. Why?"

My face fell as Pat showed up on the threshold. Her eyes were puffy and red, tears streaked down her cheeks and she kept swallowing hard.

"Would you like to watch television?" I smiled at Lisa and chuckled at her vehement nod. She scampered off to the couch and skipped through the inevitable static before reaching the cartoons, which were still blurred horribly. I took hold of Patricia's shoulder and led her outdoors, closing the door behind us. "It's worse?"

Pat nodded and let out a small sob, but she pushed it back inside her before taking a deep breath.

“Stage four. The diagnosis came through. She’s... she’s...” Pat started sobbing, and I held the woman. Her stick-thin frame felt weak, and I knew from the gaunt, hollowed look to her face she had been shooting up again. But it felt nice to embrace her weakened body, almost soothing to give comfort.

None of my hookups ever let me hold them, or touch them really. And sometimes I found myself desiring that most.

“Do you? Do you think you can help with the bills? Like you did last time,” Pat said, stifling her tears.

“No! Jesus Christ. I’m barely making rent working the bar at night, and I don’t even get high anymore.” My admission felt good, almost four years now that I’ve been without a drug in my veins. That’s how I was able to focus enough to get my body where it is now. Which I was aware of suddenly, and Pat didn’t waste a beat. She leaned into me and slid a skinny hand down my pants, finding my naked groin. With a smile, she began to stroke my balls.

“There’s always ways I can earn it,” she whispered, kissing my earlobe.

Despite an instinctual drive to thrust into her touch, I pulled her hand out and tried to stop the fire in my cheeks. “I said no. Go back to your baby daddy and get the money from him.”

“But he said he wouldn’t help,” she cried.

“Then go to the police or something, I don’t know! I can’t do this for you anymore. I love Lisa—you know that, but I can only give her love. Not money.”

“Fuck you then. Piece of shit,” Pat snarled and slammed the door open, yanking Lisa from the couch, down the hall and pulling her daughter out to the bus stop.

“Bye, Luke!” Lisa waved and smiled.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER TWO

The day off gave me the perfect opportunity to get to the gym. Which I have been avoiding for the past week or so, ever since the hottest man I've ever seen in my life started to go there. He was always swimming when I was swimming, lifting when I was lifting, and showering when I was showering. I'd think he was following me if he ever made eye contact.

While the man didn't glance my way, I was not so gracious. I let my eyes examine his body carefully as he swam or showered. Naturally golden skin was pulled tight over toned muscles. His body was broad, masculine, but also somewhat soft in frame. His waist was tapered and muscles were quite visible through the healthy layer of fat on his belly. But his legs, God his legs! Muscled and formed and so perfect I found myself watching him bend over and rub at his toe. The muscles rippled in his thigh, and his incredible calves bulged. Muscles were toned down his back and he had a strong and sensual curve to his spine.

At times I looked away and then looked back and the man was gone. I didn't know how he did it, but it was freaking annoying.

Today he was there even more, or at least I thought. I even got close once, but then I blinked and he had vanished.

"Damn. How does he do that?" I thought aloud.

"Do what?" A voice rolled over my ears and I turned with a start. The man was standing right there, and he looked me in the eye for an uncomfortably long while. His eyes were pale blue surrounded with ocean, and they glittered with such beauty I had to blink. He was gone!

Fuck!

Then I saw him again, lifting while I was lifting. He was all the way across the floor, but I recognized the jet black hair cut short and slicked back as if it simply grew that way. Something strange clicked in my body and I felt the need to impress him... despite the fact he couldn't see me. I pushed the bar up in the press over and over. Until, *crack!* With a gasp I put the bar back and sat up, holding my shoulder as the pain lanced through the muscle.

“God I hate my life,” I whined as I started down the stairs back into the locker room. It was surprising to me how affordable the gym membership was for my pay grade. Some of the clients seemed quite well-off—most were probably taking advantage of the price. I knew to leave by six in the evening when all the “nine-to-fives” got out of work. Just as I was inching my hurt shoulder into the sleeve of my coat, I spied the man as he put on his own tan business jacket. Of course he was a business man, he looked the part.

\*\*\*\*

Night set quickly that Saturday, and I was walking in darkness by the time eight came around. The lights of the streets popped on and the prostitutes came out. The few men I encountered during the hunt were ugly as hell. Obviously infected with something, based on the marks around their lips.

“Come on hottie, you know you could use a good fuck!” one man said, hollering after me as I walked away. “Fine. Go to Hell.”

Oh yes. I would go to Hell all right. It seemed to be the only place I wanted to go. No, forget that—I just wanted to die. And for whatever reason, the desire to cut was building in my mind. So I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to think other thoughts.

*I don't need this. I don't need this, everything is fine. You don't need this Lucas. Stop thinking this. Stop. Stop.*

I had my eyes shut so tight that my feet took me into the street, directly into traffic. There was a screech of tires, several tires, and horns blaring. Then in an instant I was not in the street, I was back on the walkway, gazing as car horns blared and pedestrians screamed in agony.

“Oh my God!” I cried out. How did I ever avoid that pile up?

“Keep moving,” a voice whispered into my ear, and a hand pulled my arm to the side. I didn't take my eyes from the accident, but in a daze I followed the voice. There was a corpse in the street. It was that male hooker I had rejected. Blood was pooling around his head, and his arms and legs were twisted in ugly angles. And there were other men and women sobbing and screaming over his death. “Keep moving, Lucas.”

I know that voice!

My eyes snapped to my left, and there was the man. He wasn't looking at me, but he had a hand on my biceps and he was pulling me down the sidewalk. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins now, and as I placed my fingers on the man's arm, he gasped and yanked away from my grip. Then he took off into a sprint, leaving me under a light to watch him leave.

Without acknowledging what had happened, I watched him run away. Not turning back or even looking at me, he just ran. And as he ran under the lights I saw with growing shock that something or... some things were materializing from the man's wide back. They were white, barely visible, and I thought I was tripping on acid as they grew more opaque. Wings—they were wings. White wings like on a fucking angel! And they grew and grew until they were as wide as the street, but folded down to take up less space.

“What have I done?” I whispered to the night air. The man was gone, disappeared in a flash of white as he neared the edge of the street. The cause of the accident was me, I knew it.

\*\*\*\*



## CHAPTER THREE

Somehow I made my way home, and didn't even bother locking my apartment door. A detached haze fell over my mind and I wandered to the fridge for my whiskey, intending to finish the bottle. And then I cried.

Years ago I had cried, the time I awoke in the hospital with the bandages over my arms and the drip in my vein, but not since then, the day I failed to kill myself. With the courage born of alcohol I cursed and stood, stumbling to the bathroom and pulling open the cupboard. I avoided my reflection for the most part—no need to see how shit-faced I was—and yanked out a double-edged razor. With tears in my eyes, I put the blade against my wrist and pushed into the pale flesh. It didn't draw blood, but I did feel the resistance my skin exuded against the thin metal.

The scar that flowed down my forearm was still a reminder of my last attempt, and that held me in that pose. Did I need this? Was the release of pain something that was so truly necessary right now that I needed to slide that razor down the soft skin? The blue vein pulsed beneath my skin. It was almost calling for me to puncture it.

But that man popped into my head just before I opened my skin, his voice resounded in my head. A cacophony of memories stirred in echoes. For the past thirty years of my life, I had heard that voice.

When I had broken my arm and had to walk home holding the bone?

*Keep moving, Lucas.*

When I was raped in my late teens and was forced to walk home bloodied and almost naked?

*Keep moving, Lucas.*

That night when I had slid that other razor down my forearm for real I was slumped against the wall, utterly at peace with myself as the blood rushed out of my body and onto the white of the bathroom floor. Not just a voice, though, that time the man had knelt before me. Exactly the same as the man from the gym—I'd know him anywhere. That handsome face, blue eyes, black hair. Soothing, perfect voice.

*Keep moving, Lucas.*

So instead of cutting, I threw the razor into the bath and turned to punch the mirror over the sink. It shattered, most definitely. But not before opening a gash across my palm, as I accidentally squeezed a piece of glass as it landed in my hand. I bled freely from the wound, but took the toilet paper and pressed into the cut. It wasn't fatal, or even a real cutting attempt. But it was good enough.

\*\*\*\*

I woke up with a killer hangover and a bloody bathroom. My hand stopped bleeding sometime in the night, and I was naked and wet.

"Ugh," I groaned. My clothes were in the corner. It seemed that I had pissed myself, why else would I would be wet? It wouldn't be the first time that I had peed myself after downing a pint of whiskey. But my wrist was unscathed. Vaguely remembering the feeling of holding the metal against my skin, I leaned over to peer into the pearly white of the bath. There it was, a tiny little weapon of pure release and peace.

"Screw it," I muttered and lifted the razor with my fingers. I slid it over a very small patch of skin on my forearm and relished the sharp pain that spread across my arm. I let my head fall back as I licked my lips. That's what I needed, the release that was deeper than any emotion I could ever hope to feel.

It was a small cut, not fatal or something that would scar. But with such a sharp blade it bled freely for several moments.

\*\*\*\*

"You're looking rather pleased," Ryan said as I clocked in and readied my bar. He did a good job of keeping everything in order and properly stocked, but I'll be damned if he was a good bartender. He couldn't mix a drink to save his life. I was his golden boy for sure.

David's replacement was a poor excuse of a man. Obviously hired for his twink figure and beautiful face, but even with his slender neck and full lips he did nothing for my desires. Lamé.

A steady stream of customers poured in. No. A freaking team of athletes. The bar was so full that Ryan had to keep people outside. Sweat was running

down my back enough that I lowered my arms and gripped my shirt, smiling at the hoots and hollers coming from the drunkards as I lifted the cloth over my head and exposed my immaculate torso. The light seemed to really pull the shape of my tattoo out, and the elegant lines it formed over my chest and shoulder gave me a look of tough and sexy all at once.

Once the shirt came off, the tips came piling in. Of course I did my usual glance for those who could be an enjoyable fuck later that night, but none seemed to get me excited.

Then *he* came in. The man from the gym, the man from the accident, the man that probably saved my life. He walked in, head down, hands tucked into his coat pockets. He found a tiny corner and sat, not looking up or talking to anyone.

Oddly enough, despite him being particularly attractive—not to mention out of place—nobody paid him much heed. I’ve noticed over the years that when someone seems uncomfortable in a bar, the vultures of society try to swarm to them and see if they can pick off an innocent and pop their cherry. So he caught my attention.

“I’m going on break,” I said, to Ryan’s displeasure. So I kissed him on the cheek and got more hoots as well as a blush and smile from my boss.

I wandered through the crowd—avoiding the gropers who made instinctual grabs for my groin—and finally got to my destination. The man didn’t look up, he just peered to the side. I noticed his gaze lock with the cut on my arm as well as the bandage around my palm.

“Hey.” I smirked, and placed my arm on the table. His eyes shot to my chest and I pulled back my shoulders to round my pecs. “I know you. We go to the same gym.”

There was a very awkward silence. He just sat there and stared at my chest, then his eyes ran down my abs and then back to the cut on my arm.

“You okay?” I asked him, reaching out to touch his shoulder. He jumped and recoiled, getting up from his seat and pushing back into the crowd. “Whoa, whoa. Hey. Calm down.”

The man locked eyes with me, and they were wide and filled with shock and fear. In an obvious panic, he turned and sprinted out the door.

What... who is he?

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Hey fucker,” I snarled, pushing on the man’s shoulder in the locker room. He stumbled and hit the wall. I put my hand to the side of his head and moved close, pressing my body against his. Fully dressed, it wasn’t as uncomfortable as I had anticipated, and I was so angry I didn’t care. “I think you owe me an explanation.”

I moved my lips right by his ear and felt him shiver.

“You can—I,” the man’s voice quaked. “Um. Yes, of course.”

“Name?”

I pulled back but stayed close to the man’s face. He was handsome, masculine, and mystical. He was more rugged, I supposed, but still had a glowing softness in his eyes and demeanor I couldn’t place.

“Um. Jacob.” He dipped his chin, but kept eye contact. They hypnotized me, and I didn’t fight when he pushed on my sternum. “I don’t like bars.”

I backed away and smiled. “Don’t play coy with me, Jacob. What were you even doing there? Or better yet, why were you there at the accident on Lincoln?”

His face dropped and his skin paled at my inquiry. “Um...”

“Okay, fine. Um... I get it,” I mocked. For some reason, I was overcome with emotion, and I had to cover my eyes with my palm while I collected myself.

It was the perfect time for him to escape, but he didn’t move. Instead, I was witness to one of the most arousing gazes I’d ever experienced. It was only a moment, changing almost instantly to a more alert look in his eyes. Love. Total love—I could feel the energy of the emotion.

“So, Jacob. Would you like to go out sometime?” I fumbled over the words, but his eyes lit up and he smiled.

“Okay,” Jacob whispered.

\*\*\*\*\*

“What do you do for work?” I asked the man. He was smiling so much. His head canted to the side and his smile widened.

“Accountant.” Jacob put his beer to his lips and tilted his head back to drink. I stared at his throat as it undulated and worked to swallow. Beautiful and erotic. “Are you all right Lucas?”

My focus returned and I smiled at those pale blue eyes. “Yes, I’m fine. Sorry, but I swear I’ve seen you before.”

“We go to the same gym. For the past year or so.”

I ran my fingers across the neck of the bottle as I pondered the fact of his evasion. Jacob was not telling me everything. I noticed the subtle flash across his eyes, and how he held his body. How his jaw clenched before he gave his answer. Maybe he was just being cautious.

“Uh-huh. And how do I know that’s true?” I leaned in close and his face went serious. “What are you hiding?”

“Um.” Jacob swallowed, and that was it for me. I took his hand and led him from the bar. He didn’t resist me, walking with his arm in my grip all the way down the street. We turned a corner and I grasped his throat. I pushed him against the wall and moved close, pressing against his body. He tensed but didn’t fight.

“Listen to me. I’m not stupid, not like some people think. I know that you’ve been stalking me, and unless I am totally insane, it’s been years and years. Tell me I’m wrong,” I breathed into his ear.

Jacob made a small grunting noise, and I let some tension from my hand around his throat.

“Please let go of me,” he begged, but I pulled him from the wall just to push him against it again. He whimpered.

“Answer me. Why do I keep hearing your voice, seeing your face? I know what I saw.”

Jacob didn’t answer me or make any move for the longest time. Finally, I took a breath, and that’s when he responded.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” he whispered—to himself, apparently.

“What are you—”

Two giant objects flew out from his sides, knocking my grip from his throat as Jacob pushed me away. Stumbling back, I stared in disbelief.

Jacob walked toward me with two giant white wings sprouting from his back. They moved with small rotations and flicked up and down with every step. He looked somewhat angry.

It didn't matter, now I was in a panic. The tears streamed down my face as the man reached out to grab me. His arms wrapped around me, and I could feel the muscles of his strong biceps flexing with the embrace. Despite my fear of him, I didn't have the strength—or desire—to flee, not even to push him away. Instead, I cried into his shoulder.

I felt lips press against my head, and a voice whispered, “I love you, Lucas.”

\*\*\*\*

“What's with you, dude?” a drunk asked me as he collapsed against the brick wall.

My eyes opened to find me standing in the middle of an empty alley, crying and shaking. Jacob was gone—he'd vanished. What did I just see? Wings?

He had held me, and it was like everything that was missing from my life was suddenly there in one moment. It was too much.

\*\*\*\*

I jumped into my car and sped home. I slammed my door shut and took hold of a razor from my bathroom cabinet. Pulling down my pants, I sat on the closed toilet seat and slid the blade across the inside of my thigh, outlining the previous scars there. Reminders of a more inexperienced time. The blood ran freely down my thigh and onto the toilet seat, and I laid my head back and sighed at the peace that the cuts gave me.

So focused, so calm, and so very perfect.

Much like how I felt that moment that Jacob embraced me.

Shit. Listen to me. I sound like a whining little bitch.

But God, did that feel so good.

“Should I even say that anymore? If Jacob is really an angel, then—” I cackled to myself at the notion. An angel? Bullshit. Why the hell would God send an angel to talk to me? He hasn’t ever done anything for me. No... fuck God and fuck angels.

I fell asleep.

\*\*\*\*



## CHAPTER FIVE

The entire next week I didn't see Jacob. Not even in the background. Must have scared him off.

And with embarrassment, I found myself desiring the man to appear, just to have something friendly in my eyes. Everything around me seemed so dark, so dreary. Jacob had brightened everything with his presence.

Hmph. Maybe he really was an angel.

\*\*\*\*

"Could I get some whiskey?" Ryan called and I bent down and shoved the bottle across the bar. "You okay?"

"What? Yeah. I just..." My voice dropped and I felt a knot form in my throat. Fuck, I wanted Jacob. The blue of his eyes, the black of his hair, the kindness of his face. His smile, God, that smile. And from what I've seen in his swim suit, a wonderful body.

Now *that* was what made me hard, not the hot guy flirting with me, his hand caressing the bulging muscles of my shoulder and arm while I handed him his drink.

"Lucas. Phone." Ryan said, holding the receiver for me.

I wiped my hands and answered. "Hello?" I shifted my body away from the crowd and pressed a finger into my ear, trying to hear the distorted voice speaking. "Sorry. You gotta talk loud, I'm working."

"He's dead, Lucas," Pat said on the other end of the line.

Shit.

\*\*\*\*

The hospital doors slid open with their usual *whoosh*.

"Daniel Turner. I'm his son," I told the receptionist. The tired eyes of the nurse went dim as she told me how to navigate the halls to reach him. Not bothering to greet Pat or Lisa, I pushed into the room where the man was covered with the white sheet. He didn't smell, but the energy of the room was that of death. "Well..." I drifted off, sliding my shoe across the linoleum floor.

“Good-bye Dad. Hopefully you can rest easy now that your... faggot of a son is all alone.” The words were meant to be spiteful, but they just made me tear up. He never showed me love, never held me. He never told me that he loved me, he never told me that I could do whatever I set my mind to. And because of this, I sat on the chair and cried.

I didn't cry for my father. No. I hated the man, despised him and didn't feel a thing over his death. Actually, I cried for my loneliness. My father was the last anchor in my world, the last thing holding me in my life. With him gone, I felt lost, but also hopeful. It meant I could finally end my own life and finish what I had tried six years ago. Nothing to live for now.

Nodding to myself with my new resolve, I stood and went outside. Lisa was slumped in her chair, her tiny body even tinier now.

“Holy shit, Pat. Is she getting worse?” I wiped my eyes and rolled my shoulders.

Pat came up to me and hugged my neck, even thinner herself. “I'm so sorry for your loss.”

“I'm fine, but you should get her looked at” I gestured to the sick little girl in the chair, the circles under her eyes darker than usual. Pat's skeletal arms were prominent through her long-sleeved shirt, and the haze over her eyes told me everything I needed to know. “Fuck, Pat. Get out of here.”

“Oh, come on. You need some comfort tonight, baby. Let me suck that sweet little cock of yours.” Pat fell against my shoulder and her hand went down to my groin.

“Go home. Get to sleep. Take care of her, for Heaven's sake.”

“Give me a ride home. I'm so tired, she's so tired. Please,” Pat begged me. Using Lisa as bait was low. But nothing I wouldn't put past an addict.

Shit. I handed her a twenty. “Get a cab.”

Her drugged-up eyes were smiling now, and she planted a sloppy kiss against my neck before waking Lisa, holding her hand while walking away.

\*\*\*\*

I sat in the hospital chair with my head relaxed back against the wall. It was a strange feeling really, to feel numb. I didn't feel that way after cutting, or even when trashed. I felt calm after such things. But this... *this* was numb. I felt nothing, and it was great.

But then I heard the voice.

*Keep moving, Lucas.*

My eyes shot open and there he was. Oddly enough, I wasn't surprised to see him.

"My dad died," I said.

"I know," Jacob replied, and sat down in the chair to my right. "I took him."

That got my attention. "You... you took him? Oh God. You really are an angel."

Jacob's blue eyes hardened and he nodded.

"But why are you here? Why are you talking to me?"

"I don't know. In truth, you're not even supposed to see me. I have no idea why you can." Jacob's admission was shocking, and a slew of questions rushed into my mind.

*Why are you even around me? What do you do? Who were you? Were you always an angel?* At least I had one at the tip of my tongue. "Are you my guardian angel?"

Jacob's fine red lips pressed thin before he dipped his chin in a nod. Rage filled me.

"Where the fuck were you? Why the fuck did you let all that shit happen to me? I know you saw it, I know you were there. But you let me get shit on by everyone! God!"

Again, Jacob wrapped his arms around me and held me while I quaked. I wanted to cry, but my tears were dried up. So instead, I just shook in his embrace.

"Take me home. I'll talk to you. And say what I can."

So I drove him to my apartment and let him in. Having the man in my home was strangely erotic and sensual. There was a deep-set connection to him I could feel every second. Something saved for those with a life of love between them, which I know I never had.

Jacob was a stranger to me, and now I would find out about the man claiming to be an angel.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“Were you always an angel?” I asked.

Jacob canted his head to the side and gave me a sarcastic look. “Yes. Always.”

I was unable to suppress my laugh, shocked that he could joke like that.

The angel must have read my mind because he chuckled. “I know.” He came close to me and I could feel his breath on my face. “I remember numbers. I think I was an accountant,” he mused, and I smiled. He looked up to the ceiling and for a moment I was captivated. His neck was long and corded, begging for me to caress the soft skin.

“What’s it like? Do you remember dying?”

The man’s face fell for a moment as if in reflection. Then his shoulders squared. “I was sick. For a long time. No, I don’t remember dying. I was just awake somewhere else...” he trailed off, lost in the memory, and then looked at me. “Sorry. I can’t speak any more about it.”

“You’re saying you took my father?”

“Yes. He died and I guided him to the next life.”

My hand covered my face. “Fuck. I can’t believe all this... Prove it.”

“Prove it?”

“Yeah. Show me that you’re really what I think you are.”

The man’s blue eyes sparkled, and he smirked, and in the blink of an eye, he was before me. So very close. I watched him, afraid to move. He reached up, placing the width of his strong hand on the back of my neck. Jacob’s face moved closer, his eyelids lowered until they were barely open. He pushed his lips against mine, and I tensed. It was sudden, unexpected, and awkward.

Despite an insane desire to question his actions, I remained quiet.

I found myself on the couch when I opened my eyes. How in the Hell did I get there? Jacob stood before me, his hands held in front of his stomach.

“If I show you this, Lucas”—he undid his belt and pulled it from the

loops—“you can say nothing, tell no one, or I will have to disappear and never return. You’ll lose your angel. Understand?”

I nodded my head. In the dim light, Jacob looked surreal, his pale skin and dark hair in vivid contrast. His blue eyes were almost invisible in the low light. Turning around so his back was to me, Jacob crossed his arms and took hold of his shirt. With one slow movement, smooth as silk, he pulled the fabric up. His tapered waist showed first, and then the bulge of his muscles popped as the shirt lifted. The fabric curled and bunched when it arrived at his ribs.

The sight was lovely, sensual, and fascinating. He was just taking off his shirt—why was I tenting?

Jacob reached his arms up over his head, and the entire span of his back was visible, flawless flesh over toned muscles. The shirt fell to the floor, silent as it lay on the carpet. He turned to me, and I had to let my eyes drop down for a moment. Smooth stomach, muscles visible through skin, yet with a healthy layer of fat. And a flat chest, cut with lean muscles. The man seemed to look at me but also somehow unfocused, as if he were gazing through me.

The air shimmered behind Jacob. It wavered like heat rising from asphalt. I gasped as large wings appeared in my vision. They didn’t grow, they simply appeared, growing more opaque and solid as I watched, until they spanned the entire width of my living room. At first I doubted they were real, or maybe I was just imagining things. But as Jacob released a breath and flexed his neck side to side, the wings shifted with the motion.

The angel didn’t move as I approached and hesitantly touched his bare shoulder. My eyes were drawn to the rushing pulse at the base of Jacob’s throat—he seemed almost nervous.

“Go ahead,” he encouraged.

Hands shaking, I slid one over his shoulder and touched the inner part of the wing. It was warm and firm. Life could be felt flowing beneath the feathers.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, entranced. Swirling around his body, I kept my gaze fixed upon his middle back. My fingers explored the flesh around his scapula. Totally normal human skin, but just to the inner part, by his spine,

were the protrusions that made the base of his wings. I poked, and touched. Nothing. “What the fuck? How is that possible?” my voice inquired, because I was not there mentally. No, my mind was lost somewhere as I tried to comprehend the actuality of what I was seeing and touching.

“How’s what possible?” Jacob chimed in, the amusement obvious in his soothing baritone.

“I—this—how’s—all of this! There’s nothing there in your body. It’s like they’re just glued to your back, no bone reaching farther in. It’s not possible.”

Giant, beautiful wings flexed together and then they hid Jacob from view. The angel turned around and stared deep into my eyes. He was standing so close, our lips were barely an inch apart. “I can’t explain this to you, Lucas,” he whispered. “But I can say for certain that I am here for you and you only.”

Something broke within me. I pushed my lips against his. Perhaps I needed the solid feel of this creature before me. He tensed a moment, but then pushed back. His arms wrapped around my back and he pulled me against his body. His bare chest was warm and firm as he sighed and pushed his tongue into my mouth. I moved myself against him, molding myself to fit his embrace and found myself shaking with emotion.

It happened in a matter of moments. Jacob was grinding against me softly, groaning with desire as we kissed. And then he was gone. I was left with an empty living room, empty arms, and an unfortunate erection.

Breathing hard, I sat down on the couch, running my hands through my hair. It had grown long in the past few months, and it was the same silky texture I’d grown up with.

“Shit,” I exhaled. It wasn’t difficult for me to sleep on the couch that night, despite my wandering mind.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

The gym was starting to be a more frequent endeavor. Something inside my mind felt very good, soothed and relaxed. Lifting was easy, and no one complained when I pulled off my shirt to do my lifts. The stares always stroked my ego, and the flirting that came with it gave me reason to smile. It helps to be smoking hot, this I knew. But at times I caught sight of the scars down my arms. The memory of the razor blade sliding down my wrists was always fresh.

My muscles pumped up, I left the gym. Some patrons smiled at me with hungry eyes. It was a great night, but a working man needs to be punctual. So I sped my way through the city, only to be met by a very suspicious bouncer.

His huge palm spread over my chest to push me back from the door.

“Richard, don’t be an ass.” I smiled and moved in again, but this time he squeezed my bicep painfully. “Fuck!”

He crossed his arms and scowled when I rubbed at my now bruised arm. His eyes were hard, stubborn. Richard was never like that with me, he smiled and welcomed me. So I shifted my stance, watching the man as his eyes softened. Then I understood.

They let me go...

“Sorry. But Taylor works double your hours, and has an even more efficient output. We loved you here, but times are hard and I have to save where I can,” Ryan regurgitated. He’d obviously practiced the phrases several times. I glanced in to see Taylor with his shirt off, the lean, tight muscles of his twink body glistening with sweat while he did his duties. He was beautiful, for sure. But I was experienced and knew the clientele.

“Are you sure this is the right thing to do?” I croaked, my voice rough with emotion.

Ryan gave me a slow nod, and I couldn’t stop the tear from rolling down my cheek.

“Your last check will be in the mail. Good luck.”



When I didn't move, Richard turned me by my shoulder and gave me a little shove. "Get out of here, dude."

So I stared at the ground and stumbled my way to my shitty car. The creak of the metal seemed obnoxiously loud as the door swung on the hinges. How will I pay to fix this? How will I pay rent? How will I eat? What will I do?

My breathing started to grow erratic, and my chest heaved as I started to break down. I sobbed in my car for a good fifteen minutes before I felt steady enough to go home.

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"You'll never be anything, Lucas. Just give up. Nobody wants a faggot working for them," Dad had said. The memory was clear that night, as everything seemed to be falling into place.

"I guess you were right, Dad," I reflected, staring at the blank, textured ceiling of my apartment.

"Why is he right?"

"Holy shit!" I jumped up and flexed, ready to fight. Jacob was standing in the corner of my living room, his form more streamlined than the last time I saw him.

"Jacob? I..." My voice trailed off as he walked toward me. It was true, he looked different. His waist was more trim, hair more luminous, skin more flawless. "Why do you look different?"

"It doesn't seem necessary to hide my true appearance from you anymore." He sauntered over toward me with a painfully erotic gait. He smiled, and it lit up my world.

"Wait. How come you were hiding it from me?"

"We aren't supposed to come into contact with our charges."

"Then... why are you here?"

Jacob's eyes focused on my face, and he smirked. Even his blue eyes seemed an unearthly shade more sharp. They bored into my own and found the deepest parts of my spirit. I shivered.

“Because, Lucas.” He moved closer. “I broke the rules when I prevented your death that night of the accident. Then again when you confronted me.”

My body felt so weak as he pressed his chest against mine.

“Jacob. I—” I gasped when he kissed me. And I was lost in the moment; my hand slid up to the nape of his neck and into his dark hair. I gripped his skull as I pushed my tongue into his mouth. I wrapped my legs around his waist, inspired by a surge of aroused strength. I ground against his body as he moaned. How could this be happening? Why was this even happening?

Jacob gripped my shirt and pulled it up my back, his finger scrambling through the fabric as I sucked on the base of his throat. He tasted like citrus and cinnamon; my tongue wound across his collarbone and dipped into the notch where they met. The tiny beat of a second as I pulled away and let him remove my shirt was far too long before I desired his smooth lips again. I pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. His skin was flushed red with heat as I pulled his back away from the wall.

Keeping our grip on each other, I walked him to my bedroom and laid him on his back. He was gorgeous, every line of muscle and every inch of perfect skin seemed to shimmer in the dim light. I undid his pants and pulled them down, hearing his surprised breath.

Jacob sat up with a jerk and helped me with my belt buckle. In one yank, he pulled down my pants and boxers.

“Oh,” I gasped as his lips surrounded the head of my erection. With a growling moan, he took me into his throat with ease. I shivered and my knees buckled.

There was a sweet giggle as the angel pulled me over onto my back and turned himself around so he was on his hands and knees over me, head at my cock while he sucked me. In return, I grabbed his penis and started to suck him. Hearing him moan was addicting, absolute ecstasy. His cock was smooth, silky, with bulging veins along the very well-shaped shaft. He yelped when I took a testicle in my mouth, small, fine hairs sticking to my lips as I licked.

When Jacob started to thrust down into my mouth, I worked my left arm over to my nightstand and opened the drawer. I pulled out the lube and slicked

up one of my fingers. Giving him no warning, I pressed my finger into his hole. At first he grunted and quaked. Then he moaned as I slid into his body. He was warm and tight, the muscles of his sphincter most likely not used to such intrusion. So I paused in sucking his gorgeous erection to focus on stretching him.

“Lucas. Oh please.” Jacob stopped sucking my length, and buried his nose in my groin, sniffing deep. That made me so hot I forgot what I was doing and just left my finger in his bottom. He reminded me by rocking back onto my fingers.

With a deep groan, I pulled out and yanked back his shoulders. I held him back against my chest as I tilted back his head and kissed him. My hand slipped around his penis and he sighed as I gave him a few nice pumps. Then I had him on his back, he sighed as I bent his knees and slid my finger back into the warmth of his body.

I oiled another and pushed back in with two fingers. His sleek back arched and he moaned as I scissored him and stroked his prostate. When I moved up his body, between his muscled thighs, I kissed him. He pulled my tongue in and stroked at my throat with a content sigh.

“I’m going to make love to you,” I whispered into Jacob’s ear. He smiled and nodded, offering me gasps of agreement.

“No condom,” Jacob said when he heard me rip the wrapper. So I tossed it aside and lubed my penis. I found his entrance and pressed my head against it. There was a very slight resistance before I was in. He blushed a deep red as I slid inside, inch by inch. My cock joined with his bottom fully. “Oh Lucas. Yes.”

I held myself there, hoping the pained look on his handsome face would fade just a bit. When he sighed and smiled, I pulled back a bit and thrust into his body. The squeeze of his muscles in his body was a pleasure, something I’d never done without the protection of a condom. He was so warm and perfect. My eyes were fascinated with the sight of my erection appearing and disappearing into his body. But soon I was in awe of the incredible creature below me. He writhed and moaned as we made love. I let my hands explore

his tight midsection, lean muscles rippled under pale skin, and his nipples were hard with pleasure.

Jacob groaned, and his back arched off the bed. I slid my arm around that narrow waist and pulled him up, slipping across sweat. My tongue found his throat and I sucked on the soft skin at the juncture between his corded neck and shoulder. With a shudder, Jacob ejaculated, pumping several strong globs of his semen onto his belly and chest. He shot hard, even landing on his upper chest. There was no hesitation, I licked up the highest bit and let my tongue slide into his open mouth.

Strong hands gripped my back as he growled and pulled me into a passionate kiss, at which I just thrust harder. Jacob wasn't having it though, he wanted something else. I pulled out and he turned me onto my back, kissing me the whole way.

When his sweat slicked thighs pressed against my hips I smiled and sighed in pleasure. He reached back, holding my dick while he slid down onto me. He rode me, letting his hands explore my barrel chest and my shredded abs. I stared at the angel on my penis, sweat pouring down his face and throat in sensual rivulets, down his toned chest and tight stomach.

He doubled over as I tightened my eyes for own my orgasm. Jacob gasped and fell against my chest while I pumped into him. We were both sticky with sweat and semen, the smell of sex pervaded the air.

Jacob smiled at me with a glint of lust in his eyes.

Utterly spent, I pulled his head to my chest and lay there while sleep rolled over my mind and I was out.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The ring of my phone was what woke me. It always startled me when it rang, because I was called so rarely. Usually it was just Pat calling to ask for a ride somewhere, or to take Lisa to the dialysis center. My arm slapped across the bed as I fumbled for the damn thing, knocking it around before getting a proper grasp. At that moment I noticed I was alone, and clean.

Of course it was just a dream.

“Hello?” I murmured into the receiver.

I heard nothing.

“Hello? This is Luke.”

Again, nothing. With a frustrated sigh, I pulled the phone away and as it lit up I saw the name *Pat*. “Hello? Pat? It’s Luke. Are you all right?”

For a third time, I heard nothing. But then there was a small static, maybe a finger brushing the phone. Then a very quiet moan.

“Lisa? What’s wrong, baby?” I kept my voice kind. Another pained moan. “Okay. Lisa, you hang on, I’m coming to get you right now. All right? Stay on the phone with me.”

I threw on my clothes and sprinted out the door, not bothering to lock it. Pulling back from the lot, I crashed my rear bumper against a neighbor’s car and swore. But I drove anyway, trying to hear Lisa on the phone.

“Lisa? Baby. Talk to me. Come on now. Say something.”

Nothing but air.

Fuck! Lisa had a problem like this a year ago. Pat had left her alone to go get high.

I dialed 911 and got the practiced, mechanical voice of the operator.

“I just got a call from a little girl who I think it having serious issues with kidney failure. She sounded like she was in pain.”

“All right, sir, what was the address?”

“Five-thirteen Lincoln Avenue. Apartment twenty-two.” It took everything in my power to stay focused and calm, but part of me thought the dispatcher was being very cold.

“Are you with the girl, sir?”

“No. I’m driving to her and her mom’s place right now.”

The rest of the conversation was pretty simple, and I told them all I knew. When I saw the apartment complex in the distance I dropped my phone and heard the sound of the battery popping out.

*Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!*

\*\*\*\*\*

Her door was locked, but Pat always kept a key under her mat for her hook-ups to enter whenever they felt like it. So I found the key, unlocked the door, and rushed into the apartment. The piles of dirty dishes were attracting flies in the sink and the television was on cartoons.

“Pat?” I called out as I moved toward the couch in the living room. “Oh fuck!”

Pat was sitting sprawled out on the couch with her head back and eyes open. Her lips were blue, skin pale. She’d been dead for a while now. So while I panicked, I stormed through the apartment. It felt so much larger than it actually was while I tried to find Lisa. But when even her room turned up empty, I ran back out to my car. My trembling hands pushed the battery in and I turned it on.

I ran back up to Pat’s apartment, trying not to be drawn to the corpse on the couch. I called Pat’s phone as I stood in the center of the living room. Praying and hoping.

There it was. The familiar chaotic sound of Pat’s ringtone. It came from the kitchen.

“Please. Please,” I whispered while I wound around the counter and found Lisa on the ground, clutching her stomach. Kneeling, I scooped up the emaciated little girl and wept. She was so tiny as I held her against my chest. Lisa didn’t move, she didn’t say anything. “It’s okay Lisa. Stay with me. Just

stay with me. The ambulance is on its way. Just stay with me.” I kissed her forehead and licked away the cold sweat that came with that.

Lisa shivered for a moment before tensing against my body. Then with a final sigh, she went limp.

“No. No. Lisa! Lisa!” I cried as I pushed her hair from her face, but she was gone. Her eyes were closed, accepting. With nothing to do but hold the little girl, I wept and sobbed, while I waited in the kitchen, rocking her body against me.

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It was like a dream. I had stopped crying by the time the ambulance arrived and they took Lisa from me. A pair of strong, open arms helped me to my feet. They asked me questions, but I didn’t hear. They touched me, but I didn’t feel. I looked at them, but I didn’t see.

I was a cold man—broken and numb. The same feeling like after a deep cutting session, where I’d lost enough blood to be in another zone of consciousness.

So after the questions from officials and the profiling of my own psyche, I was released, assured I was just in shock but would be okay. Yes, I would be, after a lot of alcohol and a knife running down my thigh.

Driving home was odd. It was the middle of the night. While I sat on my couch and stared at the blank wall, I had a realization. I was jobless, friendless, and lost. There was no hope for me.

“Jacob?” I called out, my voice a queer shift in the air around me. There was no answer.

Moving to the bathroom, I pulled off the borrowed sweater I’d gotten at the hospital. I stared at myself in the mirror for a long time.

The physique I had spent years building now seemed so meaningless. Rippling muscles pulling my tanned skin taut were not an ugly sight. The shredded midsection I was so frequently praised for was now nothing to me but a vain attempt for attention.

“You’re disgusting,” I scowled at the reflection. In that moment of self-

loathing, I began laughing maniacally. “Of course he wasn’t real.” The idea seemed preposterous.

I’m alone. I will always be alone, and nobody will ever notice me. The solution was simple.

It was time to die.

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## CHAPTER NINE

“Here you are,” the teller said, her eyes never meeting mine. The woman played with her pen the few seconds it took me to gather the few hundred dollars in savings I had withdrawn. “Anything else I can do for you?” The detached, disinterested tone of her alto voice bothered me. And I was curious, was she always like that? The woman, named Sarah—according to her nameplate—fiddled with her fingers before glancing up at me. Her shining green eyes locked with mine for just one magic moment. And in them I saw something that was hurt.

“Are you all right?” I asked Sarah quietly. She plastered a fake grin and nodded. “No you’re not. Tell me, I won’t breathe a word.”

“I broke up with my boyfriend,” she admitted, gritting her teeth so that the muscles of her jaw flexed. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Are you going to school, Sarah?”

“Yup. Accounting. He said I was boring.” Her green eyes darted down to scan at the corners of her desk.

“Well. Maybe you are or maybe you aren’t. There’s no shame in being boring. I’m boring, and I know that even though I’m boring, I’m content.”

Sarah was about to speak in response but I took hold of her hands, leaning over the counter. I gripped them tight and pulled until her face was close to mine. She didn’t meet my eyes and she tensed, but she didn’t pull away or cry out.

“You have absolutely nobody that you need to prove anything to except yourself. A young woman needs only to look in the mirror and realize how far she can go if she lets herself.” And with that I dropped her hands, handed her a twenty and left the bank. The words came out of my mouth easily and they felt right. I didn’t hang around the bank after that, thinking people might be wary of my presence. So instead I wandered down the streets and gave random strangers some money. Dispersing my bills among the homeless and the weary.

Turning a corner, I still had about two hundred dollars left of my savings and noticed a very small black boy sitting on a bench. He was clearly poor, because his denim jacket was far too large, and his pants were the same big size. No shoes, and a terrible hat on his head that must have been chewed to pieces by an angry dog.

“Where’s your momma?” I asked the boy. He didn’t respond at first.

“She’s working,” he said. The boy kept his eyes down, but he swung his feet back and forth under the bench.

“Where is she working?”

“Inside the apartment.”

Oh. Nothing needed to be said, I understood clearly. “Can you do me a favor and give your momma something?”

This piqued his interest. He looked up at me with dark chocolate eyes. “Like what?”

I knelt down before him and handed him the wad of money in a small envelope.

“Give this to her, will you? It’s for her only, though. So don’t let anybody have it but your momma.”

The boy nodded, his eyes set with determination.

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There was a strange air of freedom that came with having nothing. I found myself skipping a bit as I made my way into my apartment. Popping the cap off the whiskey, I downed it with wild abandon. Lighting a cigar, I smoked until I had none left.

With no sense of terror or hesitation I stumbled into my bedroom, razor in hand. Putting my head on my pillow, my legs down by the foot of the bed, and my back on the mattress comfortably, I sighed.

I slid the razor from my wrist down to the middle way of my forearm, then fumbled with the razor as I cut my other arm. It didn’t hurt, not but a small tingle. Staring at the uneven texture of the ceiling, I smiled. The memories of

my life, and the shit that it was, seemed insignificant as my blood pumped from my arms.

Jacob, the imaginary angel that I had started to feel affection for, was in the front of my thoughts. Shimmering blue eyes that stared into the deepest parts of me. His big hands that almost fit into my own gliding over my body as we made love. Dark hair that was cut short, but not so short that I couldn't pull on it. I thought of him as the world warped, and I began to fall asleep.

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"Hey. Lucas, wake up," Jacob said, shaking my shoulder until I opened my eyes. It was a slow process, as if I had forgotten how to lift my eyelids. His sparkling blue eyes were right before me and I took a weary breath.

"You came," I whispered. My words sounded fuzzy as I sat up to give him a soft hug. My arms met behind his toned back, and he returned my embrace with a small kiss to my temple. "Why do I feel so strange?"

Jacob smiled and turned away, reaching down to yank his shirt off over his head. Giant, pearl white wings unfurled and filled my bedroom. The light that emanated from the angel was soft and comforting.

"You're dead," he said without facing me.

It was true. I knew that I was dead. But there was such a strange peace filling my awareness that it seemed unimportant, the concept of my demise. Like a steel wall had been constructed between me and any feeling or sensation of pain, guilt, or sadness, effectively blocking out the negative emotions, leaving me stranded on the other side with only feelings of joy and peace.

"What happens now?" I asked, reaching out to stroke the length of a feather down his wing. I noticed there weren't any marks down my wrists where the razor had opened my veins. When Jacob turned to face me, I lay down on the bed to stare in wonder. His wings flexed and closed so he was able to turn completely. Then he knelt and spread them once more, filling the entire width of the room.

He was so beautiful, it was astounding to see him bathed in such pleasing light. Something was different, though. His strong hand came up to brush across my left cheek, and I tilted my chin to meet the touch.

“I want to give you a gift. But it’s only if you want it.” The smile on his pink, soft lips spread until the skin around his eyes bunched and his eyes sparkled.

I nodded dumbly. “Am I going to Hell?” I asked. Despite the worry I knew I should have felt, there was a strange numbness in my mind as the angel gazed into my eyes.

He leaned forward, moving closer between my thighs until all I could see was the strip that ran from one eye to the other. His forehead pressed against mine and he exhaled, deep and calming.

“No. I want you to join me as a guardian,” Jacob breathed, moving down to press a chaste kiss to my lips. “You have done everything that was needed. You’ve earned your wings, Lucas Turner.”

“But... how? Everyone is dead. Everyone is... gone.”

“My love. Lisa was meant to die young. And she died happily in your arms. You were her angel. Pat died peacefully too, with your beauty in her thoughts. That little boy you gave your money to? He really did give it to his mother. And she’s going to use it to buy herself a business suit, enter a multi-level marketing company and excel. She’s going to send her son to college and he’s going to develop a machine that will save millions of lives. You were his angel.”

My eyes were downcast, focused on the thrum of Jacob’s pulse at the base of his throat. “I was always an angel?”

Jacob nodded, his lips curved up in a gentle smile.

“What about me killing myself? Or being gay?”

At that the angel before me chuckled. “Nobody is hated in heaven. And your death is forgiven, as it was meant to be. Please, come with me.”

But I didn’t move. Was this real? Or was it just a dream before my true death? I could have just been bleeding out this entire time.

“Don’t you dare,” Jacob announced, and his strong arms furred around me as he pulled me close. “This is real. I’m real, you’re real. And I love you.”

Love? Yes... love.

“I love you too,” I sighed, and gave a soft exhale when he kissed me. Deep and forceful, his lips parted and his tongue slid into my mouth. With a groan he moved me onto my back, and I was melted muscle and bone in his embrace. When he pulled back, a single tear ran down his nose and fell upon my cheek.

“Now sleep, Lucas. Sleep and awaken reborn,” he cooed into my ear as my eyes grew heavy and sleep seemed inevitable. Everything seemed okay for once. A lonely past was forgotten, and a broken heart was mended by a series of events that led to a fate I could have never imagined. As my mind closed in on itself, I could feel my mouth form a smile and a soft pair of lips pressed against me once more.

My eyes closed, and I did not see darkness. There was light, warm and welcoming. I dreamed of Jacob, the angel who had been present for my life and carefully guided me in the direction I was meant to go. He was my angel, my guard.

“Jacob,” I whispered as my life slipped from my body, and I was lifted by strong arms from the world and into an endless sky where my true life would begin.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Mitchell E. Sanford is a young man who dreams of sharing stories with the world around him. Using his imagination to weave stories of sorrow, loss, joy, and pain, he tries to create worlds that are both gritty and hopeful.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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# **RUNNING DEER AND HIDDEN BADGER**

By **K.D. Sarge**

## **Photo Description**

Two young men in white T-shirts snuggle contentedly, asleep together in a narrow bed. Both are fit and tanned, as if they work outside a great deal.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*I didn't want this at first. I don't want to be vulnerable. I don't want to be weak. I don't want to lose myself.*

*But I'm here with him now, and I just feel so... safe.*

*I know it's not on the picture (I couldn't find one that fit what's in my head) but if you give the boyfriend/love interest/whatever we call him long hair I'll be ever so happy. If you make him Native American I'll send millions of virtual kisses your way :)*

*Sincerely,*

*Astrid*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** cowboys, sweet no sex, young adult characters, western, slow burn, hurt/comfort

**Word count:** 46,569

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# **RUNNING DEER AND HIDDEN BADGER**

**By K.D. Sarge**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

The faded blue truck was older than Cal. He'd sat in the middle between his granddad and great granddad, ridden in the back with dogs and hay, ridden smushed between his brother and his granddad with Mom on the end every Sunday for years. He felt out of place sitting behind the wide wheel even if he had learned to drive in it. Worse still was his mom sitting at the far end of the bench seat leaning on the door, her body jolted by the ruts Cal couldn't avoid, looking weary and even fragile like Jessamyn MacGregor never should.

Any AC the truck might have known was long gone, and the rutted dirt road kept Cal from getting any speed to initiate wind-cooling. So he sat in the polo and slacks he'd worn onto the plane and felt the sweat bead on his forehead. Welcome back, Cal MacGregor. Texas goes on, with or without you. He jerked the wheel aside, dodging a pothole big enough to lose a heifer in.

"The weather channel said it was fifty degrees in Massachusetts this morning," Mom said. "You going to wilt if we hit ninety like we might could?"

"I'll try to withstand it, ma'am."

"If you feel the need for a wallow in the horse trough, just jump on in."

"Yes'm."

The conversation died again. So much for the weather. They'd already tried discussing how finals had gone, and the latest stupidity the state legislature meant to push through. Cal hoped the next topic wasn't going to be ranch-handy girls of marriageable age.

Mom shifted awkwardly, sighed. Cal was sure her hip pained her, and doubly sure he better not apologize for the long trip again. Nor say word one about how she should have sent someone to fetch him, not driven all the way to the airport herself. Especially he better not mention how Lyle was already in



Amarillo, and would have been glad to leave work early to pick his brother up and drive him home and argue with him the whole way.

Lyle said Mom was hiding things from Cal. That he'd better get home and get it sorted, because she wouldn't listen to reason from Lyle anymore. Cal didn't want to listen to Lyle neither, but Mom's needing a cane was proof he had some of it to rights. Mom had told Cal she was doing fine.

The truck jolted past the Dead Turkey cutoff and Cal was home, on *Y Otra Cosa* land for the first time in near on a year. The road stretched ahead, rutted and dusty yellow in the near-noon light, but Cal knew the ranch as well as he knew his mother's face, and they were on MacGregor land.

He'd expected to feel relieved.

Mom sighed again, shifted some more. Fencing appeared on either side of the road. Cal watched it for holes as he'd always done. Driving slow took little concentration, especially as he hadn't a June bug's chance in the chicken coop of finding a smooth route over the hard-packed earth. Up ahead he spotted a sagging section of fence, and someone fixing it. The saddled horse behind the ranch hand was Delilah, but Cal didn't know the hand himself. "Who's that?" he asked.

"Joseph." Mom smiled. "He's from California. Can't do a damn thing but mend fence and look pretty, but he does just fine at both." She gave Cal a sly smirk. "Nothing like the scenery in Texas, huh?"

"Mom..." Cal grumbled, but she had a point. Native American, guessing by the nose and cheekbones, the brown skin and the black hair under a fancy black hat with a feather band. Cut, judging by the thin T-shirt he wore, clinging to his sweaty torso and showing off arms with muscles that stood out as he wrestled with a posthole digger. Cut but still slender, tight jeans and leather gloves and just damned pretty if you were into dark lean sexy guys and Cal certainly was.

"I'm old," Mom grumbled back, "I'm not dead. And he's hot." She leaned across the cabin to poke Cal. "Huh?"

"Yes," Cal agreed. "He's hot." Was she really encouraging Cal to lustfully admire a man? Maybe some things in Texas had changed.

The ranch hand looked at Mom as they rumbled near, and touched two fingers to his hat. Cal waved but Joseph didn't look at him. Mom chuckled as the truck creaked on, leaving Joseph to put a hand over his face in the rearview, protecting himself from the dust Cal couldn't help raising.

"Not the friendliest fellow," Mom said, "but he gets on all right with the boys and he does what I ask as best he can."

"What about the girls?"

Mom made a face. "I don't pretend to know a gay on sight anymore, if that's what you're asking. He don't bother the girls, and they don't braid his hair that I've seen, and that's all I know."

Cal hadn't meant that, but he let it go.

"With the new bunkhouse it's easy for 'em to sneak," Mom went on, "so if he's slipping into someone's bunk I haven't heard."

The "new" bunkhouse. It had been there fifteen years, since Mom won the battle over women hands being treated the same. The "new" bunkhouse was built like a motel with every small room opening onto the porch and shared, lockable bathrooms.

"Did someone leave?" Cal asked. "You didn't mention anyone." Every hand but Joseph had been on the ranch ten years or more, helping to raise Cal along with all the other livestock. He would expect to hear if someone moved on.

"You did," Mom said. "And Lyle before you. Think we wouldn't miss you 'round the ranch? Wobbie's getting up there, and so are most of the rest. It's not fair to work them short-handed. Joseph comes tenderfoot-cheap. I figured it was even odds whether he'd last long enough to earn his keep, but he's pretty enough I took a chance. So far, so good—he's a hard worker, and he learns fast."

The truck creaked up a little hill and through a leaning gate. The *Y Otra Cosa* lay below, baking in the heat of a warm day in May. Cal's eyes knew every detail—the sprawling old adobe house where he was born in the same bed his mother had been, the barn where he learned to work, the bunkhouse,

the shed where Cal got his hide tanned once and only once, the paddock where he learned to rope... Lupe, housekeeper and nanny, waited on the porch with sweet tea in a pitcher and a baby on her lap. A grandchild, maybe, or a neighbor kid. She worked best with a baby on her hip, she liked to say. Sekhmet, Athos and Porthos all sat around her, guarding the lady who fed them from the unknowns in the truck they'd probably heard a mile off.

"Welcome home, Cal," Mom said.

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Joseph's head hurt and his feet hurt and that bastard was wearing his hat. The rope sawed at his arms, and he thought he might explode, blow up in a million flaming shards from humiliation and anger and he'd have been fine with that as long as he took the others with him.

"MacGregor!" the leader of the bandits called again at the house. "Get out here, I want to talk to you!"

Jess MacGregor continued to not come out. Another MacGregor did, though. Over the saddle of the horse in front of him, Joseph could see the stranger from the truck that had driven by with Mrs. MacGregor. The younger son, home from college just today. Pasty and headed towards pudgy, Cal MacGregor didn't look a thing like his mother except for the straight nose and the intense eyes, and Joseph knew he was on his own.

"Howdy, Mr. Ferguson," Cal said as he stepped to the edge of the porch but didn't come off it. He faced four armed men on horseback. Joseph couldn't blame him. "You wanted a MacGregor?"

"Well, if it isn't young Callan, finally home." Ferguson tapped his hat. "Where's your ma, boy?"

"Resting." Cal wore his own battered hat, and now a T-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. Joseph still would have rather had Jess MacGregor. By about a million miles. "And Lyle lives in Amarillo," Cal MacGregor went on, "so unless you hold a seance, I'm all the MacGregor you get right now."

Ferguson jerked his head at one of the horsemen and he backed his horse so Cal could see Joseph, hatless, scuffed, and tied up. The college boy's eyes went wide and he went still.

“I warned your ma about hiring illegals,” Ferguson began, and Joseph saw the moment Cal MacGregor stopped listening. The man’s jaw clenched and his head lowered. He shoved his hat down on his head and stalked off the porch, his eyes on Joseph while Ferguson went on about wetbacks and kindness. A step away from Joseph, Cal bent and pulled an actual knife from his boot, reached Joseph and pulled up a loop of the rope to cut. It was a stiff rope, but the knife was half through before anyone reacted.

“Bastard, that’s my best rope!” yelled the cowboy who’d lassoed Joseph. Cal didn’t even glance at him, and he leaned over and slugged Cal just as the rope parted. Cal staggered back.

“Johnny!” Ferguson barked. Then a series of clicks froze everyone in the yard.

Jess MacGregor stood on the porch, her cane leaned on a post and a rifle on her shoulder aimed at Ferguson. Joseph thought maybe he didn’t want anything to do with Texas after all.

“Case Ferguson, explain yourself and make it good,” Mrs. MacGregor said.

“Good afternoon, Jess,” Ferguson said, sliding off his horse to take his hat in his hand. “Why don’t you put that rifle down?”

“Armed men in my yard assaulting my son? I’ll hold it a bit. Cal, bring Joseph over here.”

Cal tried but Joseph shook him off as he tugged at the remains of the rope. Cal looked at the man who had held the rope.

“Give me his hat,” he ordered, and the man took Joseph’s hat off his head to hand it over. Joseph stalked to the porch and Cal followed. Once there he gave the hat to Joseph, then walked into the house without a word, leaving his disabled mother to face Ferguson. Joseph put his hat on his head and stood next to her.

“Be reasonable, Jess,” Ferguson said. “I’ve got a right to see his papers.”

“Not in America!” Mrs. MacGregor snapped. “He doesn’t have to prove his rights—you’ve got to prove reason to take ’em away. Innocent till proven

guilty, Mr. Ferguson. You got anything beyond the color of his skin that ain't reason at all? Let's hear it."

Cal MacGregor came back out of the house, a revolver in a holster on his hip and a rifle in his hands. Joseph kept up his glare but behind it he wondered why he'd left home if everywhere he went people pointed guns at each other.

"I think if anyone has a right to be peeved, it's me," Ferguson said. "I'm trying to help you, Jess. You want trouble with the feds? I've talked to you before about trusting folks."

"Mr. Ferguson," Mrs. MacGregor said, "you are not my daddy."

"If he were alive today—"

"You'd already be dead in the dirt. You assault my hand and drag him from his work, you lay a hand to my son, and now you stand here and patronize me? Not a jury in Texas would convict him. Or me."

"I'd worry more if you aimed that gun *at* me, Jess. Arms getting tired?"

"I'm aiming at the head you think with," Mrs. MacGregor answered. "It's pretty small, but I like a challenge."

"Jessamyn Lynne MacGregor—"

"Touch my men again," Mrs. MacGregor said, "and I'll have the law on you. Rangers will act if the sheriff won't move like we both know he won't. Now git off my land."

Mr. Ferguson shook his head sadly and put his hat back on, swung up on his horse and led his bandits off. Mrs. MacGregor lowered the gun and let the hammer up.

"Still say you should have shot him when he grabbed Lupe," Cal MacGregor said.

"It's a regret," Mrs. MacGregor said. "Joseph, you all right? Did someone hit you?"

"I... fell off my horse," Joseph admitted. "I'm sorry, ma'am—it threw me and ran off when they shot."

"They shot at you?" The gun came back up and she looked around as if for a posse to lead after Ferguson.

Joseph shook his head. “No, ma’am, they shot into the air to scare the horse. I couldn’t stay on.”

“Haven’t taught you bronc riding yet,” Mrs. MacGregor muttered, jerking her head at Cal. He was already headed off the porch. “Chisholm’s waiting,” she called after Cal. “He’ll be ready—”

“Horses coming,” Joseph said because they didn’t hear the hoof beats. “A horse, I think.” The brown horse he’d been riding came trotting around the barn, headed for the water trough. Mrs. MacGregor relaxed.

“There she is!”

Cal MacGregor walked slowly towards the horse. Mrs. MacGregor took Joseph’s arm.

“Come in the house and let me look at you,” she said, but Joseph knew it was an order so he let her take him while the boss’ son took care of Joseph’s horse—just like he’d been told was rude to do. In Texas a man took care of his own horse.

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Delilah was a good mare worth good money and seeing her all lathered up and mistreated didn’t help Cal’s fury at all. But only a fool showed his anger around horses, so he kept his voice quiet and his hands gentle as he cleaned her up and cared for her, and slowly the shade and peace of the barn seeped into him. As long as he didn’t think about Case Ferguson roping up a man like a calf because of the color of his skin, anyway.

It wasn’t like he didn’t have other things to think about. Lyle was right about the ranch too. Cal had been home three hours and he’d seen things needing fixing that he’d never noticed before, things that had been broken or damaged for years and just got overlooked in the everyday work of keeping the ranch solvent. The money wasn’t there to replace stuff, but oftentimes what money couldn’t solve hard work could, so Cal had started a list and worked out some priorities.

So yeah, Lyle was right. The ranch did need more looking after than it was getting. But Lyle was wrong too—it wouldn’t be any hands but MacGregor taking care of those things.

Cal went over Delilah a second time with the curry comb because she loved it, leaning into the brush till his hand ached. Cal switched hands and went on, relaxing the mare. She'd had a rough day, what with gunshots and greenhorns falling off her.

The greenhorn in question was coming from the house. Cal watched him over the horse's neck as he brushed. Damn, but the man was pretty. He must have had his hair tucked in his hat when Cal saw him on the fence, because no other way had Cal missed seeing all that. Now Joseph had that fancy hat in his hand, and black shiny hair fell—well, probably all down his back, though all Cal saw now was a lock draped over a fine chest to the man's flat stomach. Joseph shoved that lock back with the others and Cal admired his chest and arms.

No lusting after the hands, Cal MacGregor. That was sure to end badly. Cal put his eyes on the horse.

Naturally, the pretty hand Cal wasn't supposed to lust after came right to him. "Thank you, sir," he said. "I can take over."

"I already brushed her once," Cal said as he handed the curry comb off. "Just working out my mad now, but I guess you've got some of your own."

"You could say that. Sir."

"Stick with 'Cal'. Mom's the boss. I'm Cal."

"But I still jump when you give me orders?"

"Yes." Cal grinned to show he didn't quite mean it. He walked down the center aisle to where Chisholm had stuck his head over the stall door. Cal grinned at the little buckskin, but mindful of the man behind him, he greeted the horse softly.

"Hey, fella. What are you doing, hanging out in the barn? Sitting around getting fat like me?" The stallion had put on some weight. Cal scratched behind his ears. "Well, I hope you enjoyed your break. I'm home now, and we've both got work to do." Speaking of work, Cal's nose was telling him barn care was one of the things that had slipped since a cow fell on Mom.

No time like the present. Cal went and got the wheelbarrow and a pitchfork and started on the first stall.

“You do what you want,” Cal said to the hand as he pitched. “But if you keep calling horses ‘it’ I imagine the boys—and that includes Billie and Gina—are going to laugh at you.”

“Why are you Texans so obsessed with looking at an animal’s junk?” Joseph demanded.

Cal chuckled. “It’s important information!” he said, wondering why the stall looked like it hadn’t been pitched in days. Who did Mom have on barn duty? “To a rancher with an eye to breeding, anyway,” he went on. “I can see where you wouldn’t care. For the record, that’s a mare you’ve got. Delilah’s a she. Are you what Mom would call an experienced rider?”

“The woman who rides like she was born up there? No. That I am not.”

“She was born up there, near enough.” And she shouldn’t be riding, Cal was sure. “But you’ll probably get mares to ride. Generally the girls are the gentlest.”

“I like my feet,” Joseph grumbled. “I know what they’re going to do.”

“Horses are pretty predictable too. You just have to learn their habits.”

“That’s what Wobbie keeps saying.”

“No surprise, I learned it from him.” Cal decided to fork out the whole stall and put down fresh straw. It looked overdue. “She’s just milking it now,” he said, grinning at the sight of Delilah leaning full into the brush. Joseph’s hand was probably killing him. “You want to maybe put her away? Then if you’ve a mind, help me get these stalls forked out.”

“Easier than holding this horse up.” Joseph put the mare away and got a pitchfork for himself. He twisted his hair up and stuck his hat on. Then he started on the stall across the aisle, and the barn was silent but for the noises of the horses and the soft sucking sounds of shitty straw being forked.

Within three stalls, Cal thought his arms were going to fall off. He couldn’t believe how out-of-shape he’d got in less than a year, but he kept going. If the boy from California who called horses “it” could keep going, then by God, so could Cal. Besides, he hated the weight he’d put on and he wanted it gone. Pitching shit was the best exercise in the world, not to mention useful and



perpetual. Cal carried on, resolving to stop when Joseph looked tired. That was a good barometer, right?

Joseph didn't get to looking tired, but in Cal's frequent stolen glances he did look hot as hell, working up a fine and sexy sweat.

"Cal?" Mom called from outside. Where did she think he was?

"In Rincewind's stall," Cal yelled anyway, hoping she was about to give him an excuse to stop. In the meantime he kept on.

"Oh, fine," she said, coming through the door. "I'd meant to give you a day before I handed you a fork." Mom grabbed the bale hook from the wall and dragged a bale of straw to the first stall. "Lupe's fixin' to ring the dinner bell in a bit, but if we move right quick we can get done." She cut the string on the bale and started breaking it up, putting down a clean layer in the first stall Cal had cleaned. Cal held back a groan and moved faster. She probably shouldn't be doing even that much, so he ought to get done so he could take over.

At least Joseph was two stalls behind Cal now. The bad side of that was that Cal would probably end up doing at least one of Joseph's stalls, so they could get done before dinner. Cal left the door of Rincewind's stall open and moved into Chisholm's.

"I got nothing for you," he grumbled as the horse came looking for treats. "I wasn't fixin' to come down here yet!"

"He missed you!" Mom called from the other end of the barn. "Moped about for a solid month, till Petunia came into season."

"Who do you have on barn duty, Mom?" Cal asked. "They're not keeping on top of it."

"Billie helps me feed in the morning," Mom said, dragging another bale to the next stall. "And Juan Carlos at night. But I haven't kept on top of the pitching."

Damn it. Of course she'd taken barn duty rather than hire someone. Someone else, as she'd put Joseph on the fences. Cal reckoned he ought to be glad she'd at least hired someone for the fences.

Across the aisle Joseph looked up, his eyes on the door, then started pitching faster. A minute later Cal heard hoofbeats too.

“About to get a mite crowded in here,” Mom said, dragging a bale to the third stall and pulling it in with her.

Cal braced himself for the welcome of the ranch hands though he wasn't in a friendly mood. At least it meant he was almost done pitching.

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Joseph's arms hurt in the morning. He'd been a fool, trying to outwork Cal MacGregor. Pudgy or not, the man had probably been shoveling manure all his life. Joseph wasn't going to win a contest like that.

Over breakfast Mrs. MacGregor informed Joseph that Cal would help him finish the rest of the Limp Creek fence, since “Ferguson's stupidity” had lost him half a day and she needed it done three days gone. She didn't mention the other reason, that the presence of the heir apparent of the ranch should keep Joseph from being tied up again.

Joseph could live with that. He did hope the man continued not talking too much. Then he went past Cal in the hall and the man was putting on yesterday's gun belt, revolver and all. Joseph wondered again if he shouldn't just go home.

Joseph was the last hand in the paddock but he was done saddling his assigned mare and was checking that the cinch-strap was tight enough by the time his new partner came from the house. Joseph had been dumped once because he was too worried about pulling the cinch-strap too tight and hurting the horse. Now he checked.

Despite Joseph's lead, Cal Macgregor was checking his own cinch by the time Joseph swung up on his horse. He glanced up at Joseph and made a face.

“Who taught you to ride?” Cal demanded.

“My grandmother.” In about three lessons, on a very small and well-behaved pony, but Joseph hadn't said that in his interview and he didn't say it now. Except when firearms were involved, he hadn't fallen off since the cinch-strap incident, and that was good enough.

“I'm guessing it wasn't with a saddle,” Cal said and walked over, holding a hand out to the mare. He seriously moved like the gun-belt belonged on him, like he was used to the weight at his hip. Like he'd just stepped out of a movie.

“Howdy, Athena,” Cal said to the horse. “Been a while, but you remember me. Right, girl?” The mare sniffed him and looked away, disinterested. Cal slapped Joseph’s leg lightly. “Let me at the stirrup,” he ordered. Joseph took a deep breath and took his foot out of the stirrup, putting it back by the mare’s leg. “You want these shorter,” Cal said, flipping the leather flap up to tighten the strap underneath. “You don’t want your weight on your crotch, you want it on your feet and the back of your rear.” He dropped the stirrup back into place and stepped back. “Let me see.”

This was what he wanted, Joseph told himself, to learn to ride so the other hands didn’t laugh at him. So he did what he was told without comment. Cal jerked his chin to the right and stepped forward again. Joseph moved his leg so his boss’ son could fix his stirrup.

“Now,” Cal said.

Joseph put his foot in the stirrup, bending his knee to do so. It felt—better. Putting his weight on the stirrup changed where butt met saddle, and Joseph thought maybe he could ride without feeling split like a log. But Cal slapped his ankle through the jeans.

“Heel down,” he snapped. “If you’re not going to wear boots, you’ve got to do for yourself what the boots do. Learn to ride heel down.”

Joseph put his heel down and didn’t tell the rich ass who probably had never paid for anything himself that cowboy boots cost six times what a cheap pair of sneakers did. The rich ass walked around to shorten Joseph’s other stirrup. He had a tug at the cinch too, so Joseph figured at least the guy wasn’t looking to embarrass him. Yet, anyway.

Then Cal MacGregor swung into his own saddle. His horse was a dark cream with black markings, and it skittered as he mounted but Cal landed in the saddle anyway. Of course he did. He even smiled at the horse. “Eager to be moving, boy?”

Boy. Cal MacGregor got to ride boy horses. And his saddle had a lasso tied to it.

Cal turned his horse, not hauling it around as Joseph tended to do. Joseph tried the same move, pulling the reins to lay on the mare’s neck, and she

turned almost as neatly as Cal's horse did. And Joseph didn't wobble in the saddle as she moved—his feet were firm in the stirrups where he could adjust his balance.

Okay, maybe this was going to work out all right.

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As they rode out to the Limp Creek fence, Joseph kept watching Cal, and it was making Cal—not nervous, exactly. Aware. On alert, sort of. An extremely attractive man couldn't take his eyes off Cal. It was interesting. Even if he knew it was because Joseph had figured out that Cal could teach him the things he wanted to learn, like how to ride decently.

Mom said the man had been here a month. Why hadn't someone taught him already? In the maybe twenty minutes they'd been riding, Cal had already seen Joseph's seat improve.

It was probably because Mom had put him on the fences alone. Joseph hadn't had the chance to watch anyone else ride.

Cal wasn't sure, but he thought Joseph kept glancing at the gun on his hip too. If he didn't understand the reason for that, there was no helping the man.

Aside from Joseph winding him up, though, Cal was relaxing as he hadn't in—well, nearly a year. Massachusetts had been so *noisy*. Always someone talking, someone driving by, something flying over... a confusion of noises that didn't mean much of anything, as far as Cal had been able to figure out.

And the sun! What they called a sunny day back east was... well, it wasn't much of one. Cal knew the day was a mite warm and would get more so, but he found he liked it. Maybe he'd known that and forgotten, but the heat and the wide-open space felt like home and eternity. Cal could feel his mind stretching out like his body, spreading in the sun and abandoning the little circles it had been running in for months.

A man could *think* in Texas. On the prairie, with no buildings or trees or much of anything around, he could see where he stood.

Joseph rode Athena a bit behind Chisholm, whether letting Cal enjoy his homecoming or hanging back respectfully or just not knowing he needed to

prod his mare, Cal didn't know. It was all right. If Joseph wasn't the talkative sort, Cal would just be that much more pleased with Mom's idea. He had a lot of room to get more pleased by it—he'd meant to start on his list first thing, and it was only getting longer.

Maybe Joseph would give him a hand with that list. Once they'd finished Limp Creek and moved the herd up from Swamp Bottom, riding fence would go back to its usual not-immediate urgency. Mom said Joseph wanted to learn ranching, well Cal could teach him from the ground up if he was actually willing. Many a man thought he wanted to be a cowboy until he saw the work it took.

If he wanted to get on his list sooner, Cal knew, he should stop poking along on the fence repairs. "How far have you gotten, checking the fence?" he called over his shoulder.

"I don't know," Joseph called back. "I can't answer in miles or landmarks. But I started on this end, and I went thataway." Cal looked over his shoulder and Joseph was pointing the way the horses' heads were.

"If you've a mind, go ahead and show me where," Cal suggested. He nudged Chisholm into an easy lope. "Yell out if you see where you stopped," he told Joseph.

Riding Chisholm was just about the best thing in the world, Cal reckoned. He wanted to let the horse run, but that wouldn't be right when they had the whole day's work ahead. Instead he untied the lasso. "Stay back," he warned Joseph as he let the loop out. "I'm a mite out of practice."

He wasn't so much, though. He twirled and played with the rope as they rode and did fine, and when he spotted a fence post that had to go, he dropped the loop around it pretty as you please. Chisholm did his part, pulling the rope taut, and it was that much less work Cal and Joseph had to do.

"No one told me that was how to pull fence posts," Joseph said with a grin as he rode up. "Not that I could."

Cal grinned. "Wait'll you see me hog-tie it."

Joseph laughed and got down, dropping his reins to ground-tie the mare before pulling the tools from his bag. Cal got his rope out of the way.

“Mom says you want to ranch,” Cal said as they worked.

Joseph’s shoulders jumped as he reached for the hammer. “Maybe. Now my stirrups are fixed, I might decide I still want to.”

Cal snorted.

“Maybe,” Joseph said when they’d fixed the post and remounted, riding the fence looking for the next problem. “I don’t know. It’s kind of... quiet. I thought I’d like that. Now I’m not sure.”

“It’s not so quiet.” The wind was rustling the grass, after all, the ever-present wind of the high plains. Cal had missed it. In Massachusetts the air just... stayed, a lot of the time. Heavy and wet and still, like drowning in a puddle. “Though I can see where the high plains alone would be a bit of a stretch for most.”

“And there’s... just nothing.”

Cal looked around at the clouds ambling across the sky and the cloud-shadowed and wind-twisted prairie and the fence stretching on, at a hawk floating down towards the tops of cottonwoods sticking out of Limp Creek Canyon yonder, and shook his head. “There’s everything.”

“You’re Texan. Your judgment is suspect.”

Cal chuckled and looked around again, this time at the ground. “Here,” he said, pointing. “Badger burrow. If you want to meet a true Texan, stick a hand in there. Though I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“No, thanks. I’ve seen documentaries. Badgers are mean.” Joseph reined his horse away from the hole as they passed it.

“If you corner one, yes. He’s not going to climb your horse.”

“What does it eat? Grass?”

“Probably prairie dogs, what eat grass. It’s the circle of life.”

“If you start singing I’m heading back to the barn.”

Cal chuckled.

“Don’t horses die from stepping in prairie dog holes?”

“Most folks have the sense not to ride a horse through a town, so—”

A sound cut Cal off, the deep bark of a 30-30 rifle a ways off. Echoes and birds told him where.

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Joseph realized the sound was a gunshot as Cal and his horse took off, running towards the line of shrubs ahead where birds had flown up.

Hell!

His horse wanted to follow. Joseph figured he better let it. Her. He should stay by the boss' son. Joseph clamped his legs and bent low like Cal had, and hoped they weren't going to run right through the prairie dog town. He also hoped whoever was shooting didn't want to shoot him. Or Cal. That would be bad.

Running was amazing. Exhilarating. He almost lost his hat. Joseph clamped a hand on his head. Before him Cal disappeared, reappeared, running through a ripple in the land Joseph hadn't seen.

Cal disappeared again, didn't reappear. Joseph let the mare go, figuring she knew where the hell they were going. Wobbie said horses didn't like to be away from other horses.

The line of shrubs was a line of trees, following a creek in a steep canyon. Joseph saw the edge before they reached it, and reined the horse to a walk even though below him he could see Cal and his horse trotting down the path they'd chosen. Farther down, by the stream, a brown man in a round hat stood waiting, his rifle butt grounded on the flat rock he stood on.

Joseph hoped the man's smile stayed put.

"Luis Agustin!" Cal called, waving his hat. "*Buenos días! Cómo estás, mi amigo?*"

Luis Agustin answered with a flood of Spanish too quick for Joseph to catch any words. Cal answered. Joseph let the mare pick her way slowly down the path as Cal dismounted near the man and they met with a big hug and back-slapping.

As Joseph came up he heard Cal say his name. Luis Augustin shook his head.

“¿Entienda usted español, amigo de Cal?”

“He’s asking if you understand Spanish,” Cal said after a second. “No, Luis.”

“Then we will not be rude,” Luis Augustin said. “It is good to meet you, Joseph.” He offered his hand and Joseph shook it.

“Luis and his family have standing permission to help with the hog problem whenever they like,” Cal said. When he waved, Joseph saw the large hairy form lying in the shade, blood oozing from a hole behind the beast’s shoulder.

“That’s a *pig*?”

“Well, it’s not a cow.”

“It’s huge.”

“Three hundred pounds at least.” Cal grinned. “One less hog digging up pasture, and just a few meals Luis doesn’t have to buy. ¿Verdad, Luis?”

“Si. Yes. Now I must care for the food.”

After an even friendlier goodbye, Cal swung back on his horse and led the way up out of the canyon. Joseph rode behind him.

“Does that Ferguson harass them?” Joseph asked.

Cal chuckled. “The Saldanas have been here longer than he has. And Señora Saldana sort of forcefully adopted him into the family. She sends cards and invitations and pictures. Ferguson’s very proper in some things. Grits his teeth, swallows his gall, and sends gifts for every baptism, quinceañera, and wedding.”

Joseph grinned at his horse’s neck.

“I didn’t even know this was here,” he told Cal as they neared the rim.

“The prairie looks flat,” Cal said, “but there’s secrets everywhere when you look closer.”

“Like badgers?” Joseph asked.

Cal snorted. “Here,” he said, and turned his horse to the right, heading along the edge of the canyon instead of back to the fence. His horse started



trotting. Joseph sighed and prodded his horse with his heels. She moved willingly, and Joseph bounced. Her back went up, and so did he, but then her back dropped and while Joseph was still coming down she came back up and OW! But still it was a lot less jolting than before Cal fixed Joseph's stirrups. Before when he trotted, Joseph had been sure he'd fall off any second. Now he just wished he would.

"Stand in the stirrups," Cal said over his shoulder. "She's got a dreadful bouncy trot."

Joseph leaned forward and put his weight on the balls of his feet and the horse jolted along under him, but didn't beat the hell out of delicate portions of his anatomy with her back.

Okay, he might kiss Cal MacGregor just for that. If it wouldn't get the crap beaten out of him and then get him shipped back to California in a cat carrier, anyway.

Cal wasn't standing in his stirrups. He moved with the horse, with a minimum of bouncing that Joseph could see. Well, of course he did. He'd been doing it all his life and had a hand-picked horse besides.

With everyone knowing how new Joseph was, why didn't *he* have a horse with a smoother trot?

Cal rode close to the canyon wall, not really watching where he was going the way Joseph would have if he were that close. He wasn't, of course. Joseph rode a bit behind and off to Cal's left as they rode—Joseph thought they were headed south. But he wasn't sure.

"There." Cal's horse stopped and without Joseph telling her to, so did his mare. He felt his balance go and grabbed the saddle horn to stay on as the dumb horse walked closer to Cal's buckskin. Cal himself was pointing down into the canyon. "See the ruins?" he asked.

"No—yes." If by ruins Cal meant the seemingly regular collection of rocks that might be the size of a small hunting lodge, down by the creek.

"You've heard of the Battle of Adobe Walls?"

"No...?"

Cal shook his head. “In 1864, Kit Carson held off thousands of Kiowa and Comanche with three hundred men at Adobe Walls. The part they often don’t mention is that Carson had raided the Kiowa a couple days before in provocation, and he had howitzers. Still, it was a helluva battle, three hundred against thousands. He didn’t win, but he didn’t lose either. Whatever you think of the reasons for the battle, that’s pretty impressive.”

“History-wise, that’s pretty awesome. But I thought adobe was mud?”

“That’s not Adobe Walls down there, but it was one of the triggers. A man named Willard Grissom lived down there with a couple wives and a passel of kids, and he traded with the Comanche. After a while he got to thinking he should run the place, the story goes, and the Comanche disabused him of the notion. It was pretty nasty—though history now says not nearly as nasty as the rhetoric went, kind of like Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction—and it’s part of why Kit Carson was sent after the tribes here.”

“Texas schools must beat California’s by a mile,” Joseph said, trying to remember anything he’d learned in school besides *nobody’s listening*. “When did you have time for rodeo class?”

“That was PE,” Cal said with a grin, turning his horse. The little horse almost swapped back for front, he turned so tightly. “I didn’t learn about Grissom in school, though,” Cal said. “My four-times-great-grandfather was at Adobe Walls. Twice. In the second battle he fought beside Bat Masterson, and twenty-eight men held off seven hundred attackers mad as hell about white men shooting their buffalo and doing a lot of other rotten things.”

“...damn,” Joseph said. “So the ranch has been here over a hundred years?”

Cal looked up at the sky, looked around, moved a bit as if settling deeper in his saddle. “The ranch has been here since God made it,” he said. “It’s been entrusted to MacGregor hands for more than a hundred years. And I mean to keep it that way, so we might ought to get back to the fence.” He shoved his beat-up hat down on his head. “How d’you feel about running?”

“That it’s easier than trotting?”

“Good.” Cal clucked at his horse and he bolted. Joseph braced himself and prodded and his horse went flying after.

Riding a running horse felt like flying. Or music. Joseph wanted to shout for joy as the horses thundered across the plain. He snatched his hat as it swooped off his head. His hair streamed behind him and Joseph laughed into the wind.

All too soon Cal was slowing his horse to trot alongside the fence. Joseph stood in the stirrups and followed. Soon they came to another drunk-looking fence post and Cal swung down to give the fence post a shove.

“Yep,” he said, and kicked the new fence post lying in the grass. He kicked it again, then pulled on his gloves and picked it up. He’d kicked the first one too. “Scorpions,” he said, maybe seeing the mystified look Joseph knew he was wearing. “They don’t want to sting you any more than you want to be stung. Always give ’em the chance to get out of your way.”

Joseph thought of all the things he’d picked up off the ground without a thought and cringed. Then he got down and pulled the posthole digger from its sling behind Cal’s saddle.

They worked in silence, Joseph starting a new hole as Cal pulled the staples off the old post. Then Cal took a turn at the posthole digger. Soon they were on horseback again, sweat cooling in the breeze of a quick trot down the fence line.

He could get used to this, Joseph decided. Cal was far more interesting than Wobbie, more quiet than Billie, and unlike either Billie or Wobbie, he told Joseph things a non-Texan needed to know without acting like he was a fool for not already knowing.

Well, he probably shouldn’t get used to it, actually. Joseph had been put to riding fence because it was simple work. Cal was only on fences because Mrs. MacGregor needed this one done. Cal could probably do any job on the ranch; surely there were better uses of his time than riding herd on the tenderfoot.

Lunch was sandwiches under a bush while the horses dozed in the sun. Cal seemed preoccupied and Joseph had already had more conversation than he’d had in a week, so the quiet held. Cal did break it to point out vultures circling far off, and to explain the wing shape that let a man tell from just a silhouette if he was looking at a scavenger or a raptor.

“If it was MacGregor land,” he said, “I might would find out what they were after.”

“I thought the ranch went ‘as far as the eye can see’?” Joseph said. “That’s what Mrs. MacGregor said, anyway.”

“Does,” Cal said with a chuckle, “if you’re standin’ in the middle of it. Now we’re on the edge. That’s Ferguson’s Forked F over there.”

“Ah,” Joseph said. Duh. Idiot.

When Cal had first stretched out on the ground under the bush, he’d pushed his hat back. Now he shoved it down on his head. “Reckon we better make fence while the sun shines,” he said.

For the first time in weeks, Joseph didn’t think he’d rather die than get back on that horse.

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The new hand, Cal decided, might just train up good enough to ride the river with. When Cal got the text that dinner was almost ready, he muttered about the fence being almost done, and Joseph suggested they just stay out and finish it.

“Lupe’s a good cook,” Cal said, not really arguing though he hadn’t spent a day on a horse in ten months and his whole body ached.

“And her food never runs out,” Joseph said, clearly not affected by the hours they’d already put in. “Also Mrs. MacGregor wanted to move those cows two days ago.”

“Cattle,” Cal corrected, keeping them riding along the fence instead of heading for the barn. “A cow is a specific age and sex. It’s not wrong to call ’em all cows, but it’s vague. Comes back to caring about their junk.”

Joseph snorted.

In a little more than an hour the last bit of barbed wire was spliced and a fine strong fence stood to contain the four-footed wealth of the *Y Otra Cosa*. Cal turned Chisholm towards the barn, putting the sunset behind them. Long shadows stretched out before them.

“If you’re really interested,” Cal said, “I’ve got a book on the history of Texas that’s not just about the Republic. Or about killin’ Injuns.”

“Yes,” Joseph said, still riding behind him. “I’d like to read it.” He chuckled. “Don’t tell my sophomore English teacher, but I’m so bored nights I’d kill for a good book.”

“I could loan you more than one if you promise not to kill anyone,” Cal said. “We need all the hands right now.”

“Can I get a possible exemption for Billie?” Joseph asked. “She keeps wanting to braid my hair.”

Cal jerked and Chisholm skittered under him, willing to move but not knowing what Cal wanted. He calmed the horse with his hands. “If you only kill her a little bit,” he told Joseph. “She’s a dab hand with a rough calving.” He took a deep breath. “Is the TV broken?”

“The other guys are always watching sports. I find baseball so dull I want to throw pointy things, and I don’t care to watch other guys play basketball. Billie taught me checkers but she creams me every game so we’re both bored of it. And all her books have bare-chested cowboys and fainting women on the covers.”

“Ha!” Cal snorted. “I’d have expected bare-chested ladies and fainting cowboys!”

“That’s probably the book she’s writing.”

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After a long shower, supper, and some ibuprofen, Cal plopped on his bed with his laptop to see what the rest of the world had been doing while he was digging holes and stringing wire. He realized when Skype chimed that he should have set everything to “invisible.”

Preston. Oh... hell. Cal grabbed the headphones with the mic and answered.

“Hello.”

“Hello, sweet Callan!” Preston’s voice said, delighted like they hadn’t talked yesterday. “How are you?” he asked. “How goes life in the Wild West?”

Cal winced. Despite his best efforts, Preston insisted on seeing Texas as

exactly what he'd seen in the spaghetti westerns late at night. "Awkward," Cal answered anyway. "I hurt everywhere."

"Ouch," Preston said. "Please tell me you didn't get assaulted."

"It's Texas," Cal said, "not Uganda. We don't kill gays here. We even stopped public floggings a whole five years ago."

"Tell that to the police in Fort Worth that raided that gay bar," Preston said. "I'm glad you're all right, though. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider your vacation plans? We could still take off to Europe for the summer."

"I reckon not," Cal said, thinking of far-off places and thinking he shouldn't.

"No cowboy talk," Preston reminded. "Have you started regressing already?"

"Fixin' to," Cal said, setting his jaw, "if y'all keep doggin' me on it."

"Now you sound like a pouting child," Preston said. "You said you wanted to change. You didn't want to sound like a savage. Remember?"

He didn't want to sound like a hick, was what Cal had said once. But to Preston they were the same thing.

"Might could change my mind," Cal said.

"Dear God, that place *is* affecting you," Preston said. "Why don't you get your mom to invite me for a visit? I'll brave the wilds for you." He chuckled. "Tell her I'll share your room and I won't eat much."

"No," Cal said.

"Still playing hard to get. Fine. I would like to come, though. Surely that ranch has a guest room. Will you ask? You've met my family; it's time I met yours."

"No," Cal said again.

"We'll talk about it later," Preston said.

"No," Cal said a third time. Hell. Just do it. Over Skype sucked, but what were his options?

“Now you’re being obstinate,” Preston chided. “That’s so unattractive. Fine. I won’t visit. You won’t come to me. We’ll both be miserable and lonely. Satisfied?”

“Preston...” Cal took a deep breath. “I’m not coming back.” There. He’d said it. It was better to do it now rather than—

“What are you talking about?” Preston demanded. “Not coming back to school? To me? You can’t do that! I’m madly in love with you!”

“And I’ve got a ranch that’s been in my family a hundred thirty-five years,” Cal said. “Mom needs me if we aim to make it a solid one-fifty. The savings on tuition alone—”

“You’ll earn more with a degree. I could help. I want to. Callan, I refuse to lose you over money!”

“I won’t take your money, Preston. And I told you—I won’t live anywhere but here. It—it’s been grand. But I’m home now, and I’m stayin’.”

“You wanted to see Europe! I could show you so many things, Callan. You could hire a ranch manager—”

“That’s done with,” Cal said. “I’m stayin’ here.”

“Then I could—I could come visit. Summers there, and when I graduate and come into the business—”

“You’d never fit in here, Preston. I’m so far out, pizza delivery is a pipe dream. There’s nothin’ but dust and horse shit and scorpions. You’d hate it. You’d be miserable and you’d come to hate me for putting you in it.”

“...scorpions?” Preston asked.

“Pesky critters,” Cal said. Preston hated bugs of all sorts. “I almost forgot to check my boots yesterday, and damned if there wasn’t one in there.” A fake one, a joke perpetrated by Lupe’s youngest probably, but Preston didn’t need to know that part. “And I spent all day today on a horse, from sunup to sundown just about, getting bit by horseflies and skeeters. You think you’ll ride with me? Or sit around the house till I come home too tired to do more’n eat and fall asleep?”

“Callan...” Preston said, soft and pain-filled. Cal closed his eyes and took another deep breath.

“It’s been grand,” he told Preston again. “Truly. I’ll never forget you, Preston.”

“God damn it,” Preston snarled, and ended the call. Cal closed the laptop and heaved an unsteady breath.

Done. He’d been dreading it since he saw Mom walk and knew he couldn’t leave again, not with her like that. But it was done. Cal pushed away thoughts of Preston’s tall, tennis-toned body, of his laugh, of being part of a couple just like everyone else. It didn’t matter. What mattered was MacGregor land.

That hollow feeling wasn’t his heart breaking. He hadn’t been in love with Preston. Probably would have got there eventually, but not anymore. The last thing he needed was a boyfriend messing things up and distracting him. Talking of far-off places and sights and—

For the first time in Cal’s life, Texas felt small, and closing in. Cal yanked off the headset, tossed the laptop on his pillow and headed for the door. Came back to shove his boots on and grab his hat, though it was dark out.

In the hall he passed the bookshelf and snatched the history book from it. He’d take that down to the bunkhouse, go check on that foaling mare though Billie was with her—hell. He did *not* want to talk to Billie tonight.

Well, he’d find something useful to do. But first he’d take the book to Joseph, since he didn’t even have Billie creaming him at checkers to occupy him.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Whatever the game was tonight, Joseph thought as the roar of excitement came through his wall from the common room, someone had just scored or spectacularly failed to do so. He couldn't wish the other hands a boring game, but he could wish they got a little less loud about it.

They'd been roaring off and on for an hour. It couldn't last much longer, then he'd sleep. Hopefully. Joseph pondered getting off his covers to strip and slide under them and decided it was too much effort. Even kicking off his shoes seemed unjustifiable work at the moment.

Damn, but he was tired. He needed to stop trying to out-work Cal MacGregor. Pudgy or not, the man was an energizer bunny. Even after a long and enervating shower, every part of Joseph hurt. He should go ask Gina for some Tylenol, but that too required an inordinate amount of effort incomprehensible to his tired brain.

It wasn't just the extra hour they'd stayed out. Joseph knew they'd got twice as much fence done as he'd done in three days alone because Cal knew what the hell he was doing. More work meant less rest time, and the only part of Joseph that didn't ache miserably was his backside, thanks to the stirrup trick. That no one else had shown him.

Well, the others might like laughing at the tenderfoot, but the boss' son probably recognized that he'd get more work out of a hand that wasn't too busy thinking about his ass to think about his job.

Joseph had known he'd get hazing. That was expected, and to be fair, aside from the bull joke no one had actually been mean. Joseph wasn't sure anyone else had looked at the way he rode—Mrs. MacGregor had sent him out with Wobbie in the pickup the first time he worked on the fence, so Wobbie could show him what to do and then drive on dropping fence posts where needed.

God, Wobbie and his pointless stories... Joseph hoped whoever he got teamed with to teach him whatever he'd be learning now had more interesting stories than Wobbie. Or was as quiet as Cal when he wasn't saying interesting things. He could stand maybe one or two boring stories, if the hand shut up the rest of the time, or lots of interesting stories, or—

Someone knocked on the door. Joseph sat up in surprise, and groaned just a little at the sudden movement. He rolled out of the bed and opened the door.

Cal stood there, a book in his hands and a twisted smile on his face. Like he was being polite but something else was very much on his mind. Joseph told himself he'd known the man two days and he shouldn't be trying to read him like his best friend back home. Before he died.

"I brought the book," Cal said like it wasn't obvious. "Since I forgot to give it to you after dinner."

"Hey, thanks!" Joseph pushed a little enthusiasm into his voice to hide the tired. "*Tall Tales and Taller Truths: A History of the Texas Panhandle*. Sounds good." By Skyller MacGregor. Cal hadn't mentioned that part.

"It's not half bad." Cal started to turn away. Joseph almost invited him in, but the place was damned small. A roar through the wall gave him an idea. "Hey, I was gonna go for a walk till the game ended," he said. "Anything I should know about Texas at night? Killer armadillos? Alien abductions?"

Cal snorted. "The armadillos are harmless, but if the coyotes spot you for a tenderfoot you could have a problem." He pronounced it "ki-yotes" not "ki-yotees." As if to punctuate his warning, off in the darkness an animal yipped. Another answered with the bark that sounded like maniacal laughter. Howls answered the first two. "Stay close to the house, though," Cal said, "and you'll be all right."

"I could take a dog with me?" Joseph said. The dogs were ubiquitous during the day, following people around or dozing in the shade. He was surprised Cal didn't have the whole lot of them following him now.

Cal chuckled. "That's why I said stay close to the house. The dogs are working. Listen."

Joseph heard deep barks, snarls, and then the yip of a distressed coyote fading with distance. Cal grinned.

"If you ever think you're worked too hard, try following them around for a day—and a night."

"Should have known you didn't keep them for the fluffy factor."

“The *Y Otra Cosa* is a working ranch,” Cal said. “The only critter kept for cute is Lafe.”

Joseph laughed. Lafayette “Lafe” Cisneros was one of the hands. Cheerful and funny, he had the habit of stopping work to talk with his hands. Billie said that was why he was often paired with Wobbie—because he worked best when he couldn’t get a word in edgewise. “I heard it was his wife’s cooking,” Joseph said. Lafe’s wife was Lupe.

“She keeps him ’cause of cute. We keep him to keep her. Here.” Cal turned away. “I’ll walk you. Have you been down by the creek?”

Well okay then.

“Only today when we met Luis Augustin,” Joseph answered, following.

“Not that creek.” Cal took off, walking fast towards the far end of the house where Wobbie had told Joseph, “Hain’t a road fer a reason,” and Joseph had ridden his horse the other way and never found time to wonder why he shouldn’t go that way.

Cal’s legs were shorter, but he’d caught Joseph by surprise. Now he trotted to catch up. Since they weren’t working, he walked beside Cal and wondered what a near-stranger could say to help with whatever was bothering the man. “So the dogs are guard dogs?” he asked.

“Athos and Porthos—the big ones—are what’s called Livestock Guardian Dogs. Once they bond with anything, human or animal, they protect it. Sekhmet’s the border collie, she’s a cow dog—she can turn eighteen hundred pounds of aggravated Angus with a nip on the nose. She runs with the others ’cause she bosses them too.”

They walked past a low fence of close-woven wire. “Lupe’s garden,” Cal said. “Fence does a middlin’ job of keeping the foragers out. Goes down in the ground a couple feet to discourage ’dillos.”

Armadillos. Joseph had heard they were everywhere, but he hadn’t seen one yet.

A few hundred feet on, the ground did that thing where it disappeared again. Joseph eyed the little canyon in the unbelievable light of a full moon

like he'd never seen. There were stars, but they couldn't compete with that moon.

"Texas skeeters are the size of Cessnas," Cal warned, "but you'll probably survive."

Skeeters. Mosquitoes. Joseph shook his hair around his shoulders for what protection it could provide. "I'll brave them," he said.

"Here's the trail." Cal led to the edge and stopped, looked up, looked down, and looked at Joseph. "The moon's not high enough to hit the path," he said. "I could walk this in my sleep and likely have, but I'd hate to lead someone to a tumble. Take my hand?"

Joseph knew the smart move was to walk somewhere else, but he let that foolish pride take him again, and took Cal's hand rather than back down in front of him. Cal turned and led down a steep path Joseph couldn't see. He could almost see where Cal put his feet, so he tried to let that guide him.

Cal MacGregor's hand was warm and not as callused as Joseph had expected. Well, the man had spent the last year in school. And Cal had a blister on his hand. Joseph had been awed by his endurance, and he wasn't the iron man he seemed? Joseph's measure of Cal's strength came down to more human levels, while his estimation of Cal's determination went up.

The path led down in darkness, but beside them the moonlight streamed almost tangibly to the bottom of the canyon. Joseph stopped watching the path and stared at the landscape revealed.

A creek ran chattering down the canyon, but right below them it widened into a still pool. Along the canyon stood more of those trees that Joseph kept thinking were bushes because apparently they all stood in canyons next to creeks he didn't know existed. On the near side and right on the edge of the pool leaning over it was the largest, a tree to dwarf anything called that back in Los Angeles, and from it hung a tire on a rope.

Ah. The swimmin' hole.

Cal led out of the shade of the cliff and the instant Joseph could see where to put his feet, let go like Joseph's hand burned. Maybe it was the blisters. Cal

paced across the rocks and into the shadow of the tree. The moonlight was so bright Joseph could still see him, dappled as a breeze moved the branches.

“That same great-grandfather who served with Kit Carson planted this tree,” Cal said from under it. “It’s a Red River Gum—a kind of eucalyptus from Australia.”

Joseph thought about his mom’s “his name was Dan—I think” the one time he had asked about his father, and didn’t comment on MacGregor history because he was too busy fighting down envy.

“The first ranch house was down here,” Cal said. “Then Wilf reckoned he might ought to get married, only she didn’t want to live with the skeeters and she did want indoor plumbing, so he built a house up on the prairie to bring her home to.”

So history was Cal’s way of freaking out, was that it? Joseph could see him, leaning on the tree like he needed it to stand. Like he thought Joseph couldn’t see him. What the hell?

“Why aren’t there a couple dozen more MacGregors?” Joseph said because sometimes he said stupid shit without thinking. He’d heard Jess MacGregor was “a shadow of herself” since the accident. Was she worse off than anyone knew? Was Cal looking at losing his mother? If she was about to become part of MacGregor history, that would explain Cal’s fixation on it. “I mean, since you’ve been here that long,” Joseph explained. “Staying in one place makes it easier to keep track of relatives.”

“Good question.” Cal straightened. “Bad luck, maybe an ‘Injun’ curse, Wilf’s own misdeeds—I’ve heard them all. Wilf had five children, but only Kaden lived long enough to have kids of his own. A son, anyway, then Kaden got caught on the wrong side of a stampede. Down through the years—only one or two each generation has made it to parenthood. Mom’s brother Skyller caught that damn hantavirus before they knew what it was. My brother Lyle up and moved to Amarillo after. Said he was trying to avoid the family curse. He’s got two kids, but he doesn’t bring them here much.”

Leaving his ranch work to the new hand. Joseph knew he was there to do what the boys weren’t there to do. He’d worried briefly that Mrs. MacGregor

would send him back to LA when Cal changed his mind about going to Europe and came home instead.

They stood silently. Joseph restrained the urge to hold out his hand and see if moonlight puddled in it.

“You ever just want to chuck it all,” Cal asked, “and light out for parts unknown?”

“Yes,” Joseph said. “Definitely. Oh yeah.”

“What do you do about it?”

“Umm... here I am.”

Cal chuckled. “Right. Whole other world here, isn’t it?”

“Pretty amazing,” Joseph agreed. “It’s three states away from home, but there’s so much I don’t know.” And a lot of that could kill him or at least hurt pretty bad, like the scorpion thing. He hadn’t realized that before he left California.

Joseph wondered, not absently, if scorpions liked water. And moonlight.

“I was born on this ranch,” Cal said. “Pretty near certain I’ll die on it.”

“There are worse fates,” was the best Joseph could think of. Was it the moonlight? Was it sheer desperation? Why was Cal talking to the person he knew the least for probably twenty miles?

Maybe because Joseph was a stranger. Anyone else might lecture Cal on his duty, or his history or something. Joseph knew he had no right, and he wouldn’t have anyway. He knew the walls-closing-in feeling too well, the overwhelming urge to just run before you couldn’t, before you were trapped forever and maybe dead—Joseph had cut and run. How much worse was the claustrophobia for Cal, sixth generation and the last of the MacGregors, with upright and honest duty in front of him?

“God’s country, they call Texas,” Cal said. “You oughtta see when it’s foggy—happens just this side of never—and the sun’s rising out of the fog and it hits just right, the air turns to gold all around and you can’t breathe it’s so magical.”

Joseph figured the subject change meant Cal wasn't going to cut and run. He knew his duty, and he was damned well going to make the best of it. So talk about how beautiful his trap was. "Right here is pretty nice," Joseph said. "Is that a firefly?" A spot of green light had lit over the creek. Either it was a firefly or his joke about alien abductions hadn't been a joke.

"Yes." A sound came out of the darkness, like the "twang" of a rubber band. "And that's a tree frog," Cal said quietly, walking slowly, lightly, from the tree to stand next to Joseph. "If we keep still," he said softly, "they'll all be back in full chorus soon."

Joseph stood still and watched the firefly wander. His eyes picked out more, little flares of green light all around. He knew crickets, though he didn't think he'd ever heard them so loud. The *twang* sound repeated, and more voices joined in. A deep *ba-RUP* was probably a bull-frog. He'd heard them in movies or documentaries or something. In the dark something peeped, and something answered, and then a whole chorus came in. The noise swelled to fill the night. A breeze brought Joseph cool air off the water, and he wrapped his arms around himself. "I can't believe it's so... much," he said.

"They say all of nature is the sound of millions of creatures trying to get laid."

Joseph snickered.

"You think this is loud, you should hear them when spring first gets started," Cal murmured. "Every wild critter goes nuts when spring hits."

"It's... amazing." Unlike in daytime, or maybe unlike on the high plains above, the air in the canyon was soft and just on the pleasant side of damp. The brightest moonlight Joseph had ever seen streamed down from above, and all around him wildlife moved through their lives as if the humans didn't exist at all. "You could—it's easy to imagine one of those books where a man steps out of his time and into prehistory or something."

"Texas abides," Cal said. "She's not much impressed by us, on the whole."

"Isn't there some philosophy thing—or physics—that time doesn't actually exist, it's just an invention like... like making shapes out of the stars and telling stories about them?"



Cal shook his head. "Friend, I don't know. Too deep for me."

Joseph stood in the pale light and watched the fireflies flit, listened to the many-voiced chorus of life around him. From the plain above, the plaintive howls of coyotes floated down, and Joseph thought about the veil between the human world and the spirit and shivered. Then he shook himself. No one he'd ever known had come to Texas to die. Shawn wouldn't come all the way to Texas to haunt him. If anyone needed to worry about a visit from the restless dead, it would be Cal.

"Reckon the path's lit enough to go back up," Cal said, unaware of Joseph's thoughts. "And we'll be rousted out early to help with the gather."

"You mean I'll actually get to ride a horse near a cow?" Joseph asked. Oh. Hell. Now he had to walk back up. Just the thought made the wonder go away and the aches come back.

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Cal hadn't been kidding about being rousted out early. Joseph wasn't even up when the knock came on his door, and after he threw clothes on and staggered out, went back for a jacket and wandered out again, he didn't make it as far as the house in the pale light. Wobbie hailed him from the paddock, where Cal was saddling a horse while his own mount Chisholm stuck his nose down Cal's neck as Cal worked. He was done saddling before Joseph could get there to take over, tossing Joseph a grin as he swung up on Chisholm. Once Cal was up, Lupe handed him a metal cup and something wrapped in a cloth napkin.

"Breakfast," Cal said, as Lupe held out the same to Joseph. "When you're done, tie the cup and napkin on your saddle." He tugged a pair of leather laces hanging from the side of his saddle to show Joseph where.

"Tippy cup!" Joseph said. "Man, I used to love these."

Cal grinned. He didn't look like he felt like bolting today. He did have his gun on his hip, and his lasso tied on the side of his saddle.

"You're on Delilah," he told Joseph, "just so you know."

"Hey, hey, good morning, littlest MacGregor!" Lufe's horse bumped Cal's



and he grabbed Cal by the back of the neck and shook lightly. "Riding with the big boys today?"

"Somebody's gotta show you how to work, Lafe."

"Oh ho! Somebody's hat's gotten big!" Lafe tapped his own hat. "Morning, city boy. You young'uns just hang back and see how it's done today, huh?"

"And while you're showing," Lupe said, holding out a sandwich, "don't you show them how to fall off your horse midstream, Lafayette Cisneros."

"Guadalupe my darling!" Lafe said, clutching his heart as the hands laughed. "How can you betray me so?"

"Take your breakfast or I'm giving it to Cal."

Lafe snatched the sandwich a heartbeat before Cal's hand got there.

"Lupe—"

"Hey, Running Deer!" Bart Collier, not the brightest of the ranch hands, slapped Joseph on the back. "Ready to get up close and personal with persons of the bovine persuasion?"

"Running Deer?" Cal demanded. "What's this?"

Bart's grin folded. Every one of the cowboys in hearing range found something to do with his hands. Cal's solid stare wasn't on Joseph, though, so he didn't answer either.

Cal waited. His horse shifted under him and his saddle creaked. Bart jerked like he'd shouted.

"Just a joke, Cal!" he blurted. "Nobody meant nothing. He's fine—and he's fast! Boy can sure run!"

"The bull trick," Cal said. "Right? Tricked him into a field with a bull?" Cal snatched off his hat and smacked Bart with it. "Dammit, Bart! You could've got him killed then you give him a name mocking his history?"

"It wasn't me—" Bart began, implicating his friends.

"Wobbie!" Cal shouted.

"I'll take care of it, boss." Wobbie swung up on his horse. He was a big man, and his horse was the tallest of the animals so he looked down on

everyone. Most of the hands looked away as he surveyed them. Joseph bet Wobbie—and Cal too—were taking note of who couldn't meet Wobbie's eyes.

"Let's move 'em out," Wobbie said after a long silence. Lupe opened the gate and Billie directed her horse through it.

"Sorry," Cal muttered as Chisholm paced through the gate, Delilah's nose by Cal's stirrup. "Sometimes they're idiots."

"I'm the idiot who fell for it."

"I hear tell," Cal said, exaggerating his drawl, "city-folk don't gen' rally put much stock on an animal's junk."

"I hear tell there's a big damn difference between a cow and a bull, and city-folk who like life better learn it."

Cal snickered. "Huge difference, about two foot long."

"Holy shit!"

"Pretty much. Except when a cow's got a calf. She can get meaner than any bull then. That's easier, though—any damn fool knows not to get between a mother and her baby."

Joseph bit into his breakfast and didn't mention that it hadn't occurred to him, since no one else seemed worried about working with cows instead of bulls. He sipped his coffee, letting his horse follow Cal's as she seemed happy to do. Wobbie's horse loped by, taking him to the front of the little posse.

"Is he John Wayne's illegitimate son or something?" Joseph asked.

"Could be," Cal said, "for all I know. I've never asked. Don't know as I'd look if I could, but he doesn't have an employee file I could check either. Only contract he's ever had was Granddad's handshake."

The reciprocal of that factoid was that a handshake was all the contract Wobbie had ever needed to get fair treatment from the MacGregors. Nice thing to know about your boss.

Joseph had tried bringing his iPod for long rides, but it took him too far from what he was doing, and the dissonance between Texas and street music was too much. So he didn't know how long it was before Billie and a few other hands split off, or how long after that he finally saw cows. Most of them had calves sticking close. Well, that should make it easier not to get between.

“You ride with me,” Cal announced, like Joseph hadn’t been at his stirrup for the last however long. “The goal is to get them moving slowly. A stressed cow loses weight and also produces less milk, which stresses her calf.”

“So try not to push them faster than a good mosey?” Joseph asked.

Cal grinned. “Yes. A smooth mosey is the perfect gait for a herd on the trail.” He untied the straps holding the lasso on his saddle and put the loops of rope over his saddle horn. “If you need to come at a cow, do it from the side the calf’s not on. If for some reason you can’t, come at her slow. Make sure it sees you, and likely the calf’ll scoot around to the other side. Then you can get his mamma to mosey along to the group.”

“Should I have a lasso?” Joseph asked.

Cal snorted. “No.”

At Wobbie’s direction, the riders spread out. “We’ll ride the whole pasture first,” Cal said, “and gather them up. Then we’ll move them. Got your phone?”

“I do.” Using a cell phone to ride herd seemed wrong to Joseph on a basic level, but he could see the value in instant communication when they would cover so much land they’d lose sight of each other.

Riding through a patch of tall grass he wondered how the horses knew where to put their feet, but his mare plodded on behind Chisholm and didn’t seem to be tripping over anything.

“Next question?” Joseph called as they rode along a fence, getting to their assigned position. It was the first time Joseph had approached cows on horseback, and he was noticing a surprising discrepancy. Cal turned his head and tilted it, waiting. “Why is Wobbie’s horse the only big one?” Joseph asked. “Why choose horses so much smaller than the cows they’re supposed to herd?” Nearly all the grown cattle were black and huge, perhaps shorter but way more solid-bodied than the black-and-white cows Joseph remembered counting on long road trips. They also, thankfully, did not have horns. Joseph had seen pictures of Texas Longhorns and he wanted nothing to do with them.

“That,” Cal answered, “is better seen than told. Likely you’ll get a demonstration before too long.”

It was the first time Cal had put him off. Joseph decided he could take it on faith that a smaller horse was better, and he was safer where he was than up behind Wobbie. If Cal's hat-beating of Bart was any sign, the MacGregors took the safety of their ranch hands seriously.

Cal reached some point in the sea of grass that meant something to him though not to Joseph, and turned in his saddle. "Stop here," he ordered. "When I turn in, you do too. Watch for Lafe—" Cal pointed to where the hand sat his horse on their back-trail, "and don't lose sight of me. Remember to mosey."

Joseph snickered as he reined in his horse.

Cal continued alone for a while, then turned his horse and started into the field. Joseph clucked to Delilah as he prodded with his heels and she pulled her head out of the grass and moved. In Joseph's pocket his phone vibrated.

*Don't let a horse graze when she's supposed to be working,* the text from Cal said. *She'll get bad habits.*

*Yes, sir,* Joseph texted back.

*Delilah knows her way around cattle,* Cal sent, *but if you let her get lazy, she might endanger you both.*

*I'll be more careful,* Joseph promised, sitting up in the saddle. He might have thought Cal was just being a nanny, but there were all the missing MacGregors. Clearly ranching was more dangerous than Joseph had yet seen.

Off to Joseph's left Lafe met cattle. He heard the man call out to the cows, and saw him ride close enough to whack a stubborn one across the backside with his lasso. The cow jolted into motion but only jumped a step or so before she slowed to the mosey the others had adopted. Lafe grinned at Joseph and tapped his hat.

On Joseph's right, Cal met cattle and did pretty much the same thing. He didn't look to see if Joseph was watching. He also didn't startle a single jump out of his cattle.

Joseph rode on, until he approached a clump of cattle clearly in his area. He nudged Delilah into a trot as Cal had done, and waved his hat in lieu of a rope.

“Hup, hup, hup!” he called, and the cattle started to move. Joseph looked to Cal and got a grin for reward.

Through the morning the cowhands worked, pulling the herd together and setting it in motion. When Cal and Joseph and Lafe neared each other again, Lafe rode over to Cal.

“There’s a calf in trouble,” he said, pointing. “The bald-face heifer with the limp. I think she’s got some wire on her off hind leg, but momma won’t let me near enough to see.”

Cal pulled out his phone and punched a speed dial number. Lafe sat staring into the herd, keeping his eye on the calf in question.

“Wobbie,” Cal said into the phone. “Send me someone you can spare that’s good with a rope. We need a look at a calf.”

In minutes Gina came riding around the edge of the milling herd, followed by Steve and Juan Carlos.

“Cut her out, Lafe, Gina,” Cal said, and the two cowhands rode in among the cattle. Joseph couldn’t see how they managed it exactly, but soon Steve and Juan Carlos were moving the rest of the herd on while one cow was held back by a rope on her neck, Lafe’s horse backing away to hold her as the cow struggled to follow the herd. She lowed as her calf pressed against her. Even Joseph could see the little one had something wrong with its leg.

“Gina, rope the calf,” Cal ordered. “Lafe, take her down when she turns. Joseph, you’re with me.”

Gina’s lasso spun above her head then flew, and Lafe did something with his horse, and suddenly the cow was on her side on the ground, Lafe wrestling her legs together and tying them. Gina’s horse backed, dragging the calf away from the cow, then she flung herself out of her saddle to tackle the calf. It bellowed, its mom bellowed back, and Joseph jumped from his horse’s back as Cal did, remembering to drop his reins so the mare would stay put.

“Joseph, on her neck,” Cal ordered, so Joseph put his knee and his weight on the animal’s neck like Gina had and she moved away. Cal grabbed the calf’s hind leg and pulled it straight.

“Wire,” Gina said like it wasn’t obvious, barbed wire wrapped around and starting to cut into the calf’s skin. She dipped a hand in a pocket and came out with a pair of pliers. “Two minutes, boys, give me two minutes...”

“No hurry,” Cal muttered, fighting with the waving leg. The calf bleated, a desperate little sound, and its mom bellowed back, deep and angry.

Joseph was perfectly placed to watch her struggle, nearly a ton of pissed-off mom that would kill him in a heartbeat if she got the chance. Lafe had tied three of her feet together, but she still writhed, trying to get her legs under her.

Then she got a leg out.

“The cow—” Joseph gasped.

“She’s working free!” Lafe shouted from the safety of his horse. Cal jumped.

“Get away from the calf!” he ordered, vaulting into Chisholm’s saddle. Joseph didn’t move because Gina didn’t, she had her back to—

“Ten seconds,” she muttered. “Hold, baby, hold ten seconds—”

“Not gonna get it!” Joseph gasped but he stayed because fighting her would take longer than ten seconds.

The cow roared to her feet, her front feet hobbled but murder in her eyes then the loosened rope fell off her—

“Hi hi hi!” Cal’s feet and Chisholm’s legs appeared, blocking Joseph’s view of the enraged mother. Chisholm’s head was down and his ears back, angry posture of his own but Cal sat loose on his back. “Gina, get off that calf!” he shouted.

“Five seconds!”

The cow lunged towards Chisholm’s back end but the little horse spun in place, glaring her down. She lunged again, he spun again. She lowered her head and pawed the ground and Chisholm’s ears went flatter, his head lower. Cal took the lasso off his saddle horn.

“Gina, I swear to God if this horse or Joseph gets hurt because you—”

“Done!” Gina bounded away. Joseph jumped up and Lafe was right there, his stirrup empty and his hand out.

“Clear!” Lafe shouted as the calf bolted and Joseph landed behind him. Cal and Chisholm dodged out of the way of the mother and child reunion.

Gina had Joseph’s reins and everyone had cleared out so the angry mother had no close target, and her baby stuck close to her side. She lifted her tail with a bellow and both ran off after the herd.

“Joseph,” Cal said, his voice tight, “get back on your horse. When you drop rein you drop *one* rein, so you can get back up in a hurry and ride.”

“Yes, sir,” Joseph said with not a hint in his voice or his mind of sarcasm. Lafe gave him a hand down and he walked to his horse while Cal rode over to Lafe and smacked him with his hat.

“What the hell kinda tie was that?” he demanded, smacking again as Lafe hunched his shoulders. “You could have killed us all!” *Smack!* “Keep your mind on your damn knots!” *Smack!* “You going to—” *Smack!* “—tell Lupe you let—”

“Cal,” Gina said, “gonna be a long day yet. You’ll regret doing that to your hat.”

“And you!” Cal stopped beating Lafe to point the hat at Gina. “I’ll have you—both of you!—in the kitchen with the babies till you die of shame or Lupe learns you some goddamn *sense*. We could have roped her again!”

“Figured it was easier to just get ’er done,” Gina said, hunching her shoulders like Cal had smacked her too.

“Ride herd,” Cal snapped, turning Chisholm after the cattle. The other horses followed, their riders silent. Delilah tried to take her favored place by Chisholm but Joseph held her on the far side of Gina instead.

When they came to the herd Cal pulled a bandana from his pocket and tied it on his face. Gina and Lafe did the same, then Cal held a bandana out to Joseph without a word. Joseph tied it on and took a deep grateful breath of less-dust-filled air.

After the adventure of the maddened cow, the day went more like Joseph thought a cowboy’s day should. The ranch hands rode along the edges of the herd, keeping it moving and collecting stragglers, but no one needed to rope

anything and Joseph got to stay safely in his saddle. He kept Delilah clear of Chisholm on the pretext that they were supposed to spread out, but eventually he found Billie riding her red horse next to him.

“Tell me,” she said, smacking her horse’s nose with her lasso when it tried to nip Delilah, “what in tarnation has Cal tossing his horns?”

“...tossing his horns?”

“Mad. Pissed. Got his dander up.”

“How can you tell?” All Joseph could see of Cal was his eyes, and maybe the stiff way he—

“Looks like someone nailed him to the saddle,” Billie said. “And his hat’s more smushed than it was this morning.”

Joseph shook his head and told her the adventure of the maddened cow. Billie whistled when she heard what Gina had done.

“That little idiot,” she said. “She thinks she’s gotta be better and braver than any of the boys and she’s right. But when a MacGregor runs and tells you to do the same...” Then she took off her hat and smacked Joseph on the shoulder with it. “What would have happened if you got up when you were told?”

“Gina would have been alone—”

“BZZT!” Billie buzzed like a game show. “Gina couldn’t hold the calf and pry at the wire, so she’d have given it up for hopeless and moved her own ass.”

“...Oh.”

“Instead you both endangered Cal and Chisholm, because do you think for one second he’d have saved his own self with either one of you on the ground and a dead easy target, and I do mean *dead*?”

“No,” Joseph hunched his shoulders, mimicking the others without meaning to. He was sure of that, now the terror was gone. The only way that cow would have gotten to him and Gina was through Cal.

“You’ve got the excuse of being a tenderfoot greenhorn newbie what don’t know shit from shinola,” Billie said. “But I seem to recall you don’t want slack



on that account. Or do I misremember?" She leaned to smack her rope on the rump of a cow that was moving at a too-slow mosey.

"No," Joseph said. "I don't want coddled."

"Then you listen to Cal MacGregor. Wobbie and his momma both won't countermand him, so you might ought to follow their lead. Boy's a born stockman. Not to mention he's your boss as much as Jess. He can fire you just as quick and he's twice as likely to do it."

Every time it turned dangerous Joseph wasn't sure he wanted the job, but he was absolutely sure he did not want to be sent off by Cal MacGregor.

"I'll remember," he promised. Listen to Cal. He'd known that, really, he'd just... forgotten, in the heat of the moment. "Chisholm," he said, changing the subject a little, "glared that cow down, I swear, and kept her back."

Billie chuckled. "Him and Cal are a match. Generations of careful breeding to get the finest cutting horse in Texas and a proper cowman to ride him. Chisholm knows his job and he loves to do it."

"Okay, I'll bite. What is a cutting horse's job?"

Billie rolled her eyes. "Cutting one certain animal out of the herd and keeping her out till we're done with her. You really want to see Cal and Chisholm dance, wait till the fall sorting. Watching those two work is like being in the front row at a ballet. Impressive as all hell."

"I don't know," Joseph said, his eyes finding Cal by his crumpled hat off to the side of the herd. "I'm already pretty impressed."

"Hmmp," Billie grunted, taking her hat off again, but this time she swiped her sleeve across her face instead of hitting Joseph with it. She dropped the hat on her saddle horn and ran her fingers through her short grey hair, keeping one hand on the reins. Unlike Delilah and Chisholm, her horse had a habit of minor misbehavior. "Why'd you leave Californy again?" she asked.

"Just needed to get away," Joseph said, trying to remember what he'd told her last time and failing. Why did she keep asking? He did remember that last time she'd called it "cali-for-nigh-ae."

"Uh huh." Billie prodded her horse and it turned to head off a contrary cow trying to go the wrong way. She didn't come back, so Joseph focused on

keeping the cows moseying in the right direction and forgot to keep clear of Cal until Delilah found her way back to Chisholm's side.

Cal glanced at him but didn't speak.

"Billie says when stuff goes down I need to listen to you," Joseph said in a sort of apology. "Not anybody else."

"It was mostly my own damn fault," Cal said without looking at him. "Don't know how I managed to forget Lafe's worthless as tits on a bull most of the time."

"Texas slang is so... evocative," Joseph said.

Cal snorted. Joseph let Delilah keep her nose by Cal's boot. After a while he started telling himself yes, he was an actual cowboy herding actual cows but it was not nearly so glamorous as the movies made it out to be so he should just get over it and think about going back to Sefu's shop where he knew what he was doing. Before he got someone killed.

It was only natural that he kept glancing at Cal, the person he seemed most likely to get killed besides himself.

When the cattle were finally moved, it was midafternoon. Sandwiches had been passed and devoured despite the grit of the trail pervading them, and the last warm gulps of water had been taken from canteens and water bottles. Joseph felt like he had dirt in every fold and pore of his body and he'd never be clean again. Cal pushed his hat to the back of his head and Joseph could see the line across his forehead where his sweat had washed the yellow dust away.

"That's it," Wobbie said, as Billie got down to close the gate. The tail end of the herd had stopped not fifty feet off, nose down in fresh grass. It didn't look much different from the other pasture to Joseph, but then, he wasn't a cow. "Head back, boys and girls," Wobbie went on. "Gina, Lafe, Joseph—you're on barn duty. The rest of you take the afternoon."

On the far side of the group Lafe heaved a deep sigh. Next to Joseph, Gina swore under her breath. Joseph didn't make a sound. An extra hour of forking manure was light punishment for what could have happened.

Cal clapped Joseph's shoulder, sending up a cloud of dust then spun Chisholm to point his nose the other way. "Ready for a run?" Cal asked Joseph

as Delilah performed a less impressive turn. Cal tugged his bandana down to grin at Joseph then shoved his hat down on his head. “Not the whole way, of course, but—”

“Last one in the jacuzzi is sweet on his horse!” Billie shouted, and her horse shot off. Chisholm bolted after, Cal leaning low over the little horse’s neck. Joseph let Delilah chase him. His hat tried to fly as he thundered across the plain. Joseph snatched it off, letting the wind stream his hair out behind him, and despite the dust and the tired and the work he ran towards, Joseph laughed into the wind.

The “jacuzzi” was the swimming hole Cal had shown him, Joseph discovered when barn-duty was done. Lupe had sent snacks down to get them by until dinner, and someone had put a case of beer in the stream to cool. The ranch hands played in the water and dozed in the shade and Joseph thought he could get used to ranch life after all, though he wondered why Cal didn’t come down.

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Cal went into the house through the laundry room door, and was stripped to his jeans before he came out of the laundry room. He padded barefoot down the hall, trusting Lupe and Mom would be busy elsewhere for the ten seconds it took to get to his room. Once there he hung his gun belt above his desk and tossed his boots then his hat on the floor. The poor thing lay there crumpled and Cal shook his head. Probably time for another one. Again.

Whatever. At the moment the important thing was that he get down to the “jacuzzi” before Lafe splashed all the water out.

That, of course, was when his phone rang. Cal picked it up because only a few people had his number, and all of them deserved instant access to him.

Lyle’s home number, calling at a time he and Cal should both be working. Cal flipped the phone open.

“Howdy. Is everything all right?”

“I should be asking you!” Lyle’s voice had laughter in it, so Cal relaxed and dropped his jeans. Swim trunks...

“Everything’s fine here,” Cal said. “It’s just not often you call so early.”

“I took the afternoon off to help Enola get the party set up. I’m guessing since we never heard from you that you’re not coming? We at least got Mom’s polite refusal.”

“Sorry, Lyle. I’ve been busy.”

“You’re never going to have a minute to yourself as long as you’re chasing extinction.”

“I do not want to go over this again.”

“Too bad. I had an offer today. It’s more than the last one. Enough to put you through school, buy Mom a house, and neither of you would have to work for at least ten years if you played it smart.”

“And the *Y Otra Cosa* would be drilled and fracked and blown up.” Cal turned a dresser drawer over on his bed. Where the hell were his swim trunks? “No.”

“You’ve seen the shape Mom’s in. The finances are similar. Hasn’t shown you that, has she?”

“No,” Cal said again.

“You’re not going to turn the tide by yourself, Cal. The ranch has been killing MacGregors and dwindling because of it for years. You and Mom are the only ones who won’t see it. We need to sell while people still want to buy.”

“No.”

“So you’ll work yourself to death, you’ll watch Mom do the same, and then what? There won’t be any more MacGregors to pick up the reins, will there?”

Cal winced. “You asshole,” he muttered.

“I’m your brother. It’s my job to make you see the truth so you take care of yourself. Come to Amarillo. Acceptance is growing, and no one here will ever care if you father babies. You can play with mine. Leandra has been flat-out pining for you.”

“Lyle—” Cal closed his eyes. “Give my love to Enola and the girls.” He closed the phone and drew back to throw it against the wall, but instead he tossed it on his bed. Cal jumped with both feet on the abused hat, then stalked into the shower.

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In the morning Cal’s assignment was to take the truck and Lafe to the Nine Tails tank and get it pumping properly. Of course Wobbie didn’t put it that way. There was “might” and “if you’ve a mind to” and “surely could use” until Cal said he’d take care of it.

The pairing was understandable. Only Cal, Wobbie, and Billie got much work out of Lafe, and Billie was on foal watch still. Didn’t mean Cal had to like it.

When Cal had Lafe and the supplies in the truck, though, the consarned thing wouldn’t start. ’Round and ’round the starter went, but the engine wouldn’t catch. From the paddock, Joseph came running.

“Pop the hood,” he told Cal.

Wasn’t like he could mess it up much. Cal popped the hood. Joseph leaned under. Cal kept his hands on the wheel and didn’t lean out the window to admire the portions of Joseph’s anatomy not under the hood.

“What’s pretty hair gonna do?” Lafe muttered. “So anyway, there I was—”

“Try it!” Joseph called. Cal turned the key and the starter cranked but nothing else happened.

“Cut it!” Joseph said. “Hold on—now try it!”

Cal turned the key and the engine roared like an engine built before “quiet” was a thing. Joseph dropped the hood and stepped back with a grin. Cal grinned back then leaned out the window.

“Wobbie!” he shouted. “I’m taking him!” He pointed at Joseph. “You take Lafe!”

“But I—” was as far as Lafe got. Cal helped him out of the truck. If he had to listen to Lafe rattle on all day, he’d probably beat the man with more than a hat. That couldn’t be a good thing.

Joseph was a far sight prettier than Lafe too. Cal reckoned he deserved that.

“Great!” Joseph said when they were rumbling out of the yard. “A day not on horseback! Where are we going?”

“Nine Tails tank needs some work.” Cal gave him a bit of a smile. Now things were level, he was feeling his grumpy again. “Mechanical work, most likely.”

“Excellent.”

“Mom didn’t say you were a mechanic. I reckon she didn’t know, or you wouldn’t have been on fences. So much, anyway.”

“I didn’t figure it was worth listing. High school classes, and hanging around Mom’s boyfriend’s shop.”

“We get this done fast,” Cal said, “I got a tractor for you to look at.”

“Uh oh, now you’re going to expect miracles... A tank. That’s a watering pool, right? Not a war machine? Because I’m not up on tread technology.”

“It’s a watering hole,” Cal said. “If I wanted talk instead of work, I’d have brought Lafe.”

“Got it,” Joseph said before Cal could apologize. He turned away, putting his arms on the bottom of the window frame and looking out.

“Cal,” he said after an hour of silently watching the grass go by, “why is there a house in the middle of your ranch? That’s not yours, I mean?”

“It’s a hard land, especially for starting out.” Cal slowed to creep through a wash. If he broke an axle, it was a long walk home. “Fellow ran llamas, but he lost half his herd to a hot spell some years back. Sold out and moved back east to his nine-to-five. Granddad bought the land.”

“And you just leave the house there?”

“It’s not hurting anything.” Cal pulled the truck up into the breezeway of the abandoned barn.

Joseph slid out and looked around then he froze. “Cal, what are those?” he asked quietly, nodding over Cal’s shoulder.

Under a herd shelter stood four or five antelope. Cal grinned.

“Pronghorn antelope. Teenage boys hanging out, most likely, since in spring the females drive the young bucks out of the herd. Here for the water, probably.”

“They’re beautiful,” Joseph said, still not moving.

“I should say they’re not actually antelope,” Cal said. “It’s convergent evolution—true antelope are the ones that live in Africa, but they occupy the same niche.” Yay for one-fourth of a college education.

“Let me know when we run across something you don’t know?” Joseph said.

“If I notice it,” Cal said with a chuckle. “Grab the toolbox from the back. We’re far enough off they probably won’t run from a water source midday unless we make a helluva lot of noise.”

“Got it.”

At the windmill Joseph stopped to stare again. It would have bothered the hell out of Cal if Lafe did it, but Joseph was a tenderfoot.

“The water’s there,” Cal said, pointing down. “This is how we bring it up.” He waved at the tank, less than half full and murky. “The windmill taps a near-constant power source we don’t have to pay for.”

“I take it the fact that the windmill is going but water isn’t happening is why we’re here?”

“Yep.” Cal pulled a breathing mask out of the toolbox and pulled it on. He saw Joseph’s eyebrows and smiled a little despite himself. “Hantavirus spreads through rodent feces,” he said. “We figure this is how Uncle Skyller caught it.” He held another out to Joseph.

“Thank you.”

So, looking like cowboys taking a hand at being surgeons, they stuck their heads and hands into the innards of the old pump. Cal pointed out the working parts and Joseph nodded like he got it, and Cal bet he did. Cal gave him gloves and let him deal with the rat nest. Sometimes it was good to be the boss.

Within two hours of tinkering—and without using any of the must-be-bought spare parts—the turns of the windmill were bringing water from the

pipe. Cal grinned at Joseph. “That would have taken me most of the day alone. Two days, with Lafe.”

“So now what do we do?” Joseph asked.

“Now is the fun part,” Cal said, taking his boots off.

“What?”

“See the gunk?” Cal pointed at the algae growing in the tank. “Comes of it being stagnant—the water gets warmer and the algae gets out of hand. We have to clear it out.” Cal shrugged off his shirt. “The pump’s bringing up cold water,” he said as Joseph hadn’t moved. “It’s going to be a mite uncomfortable in there soon.”

“Right.” Joseph hung his hat on the cattle rail and braided his hair quickly. Cal stripped to his jeans and emptied his pockets, but left his hat on. He jumped into the murkiest part, wondering as he always did if the water had been stagnant long enough for leeches to find a way in.

It was a tank in the middle of the prairie, he told himself as he always did. There weren’t any leeches.

Joseph had stripped down to boxers and jumped in, unbothered because he probably didn’t know what leeches were. Cal showed him how to “herd” the algae together so they could grab larger armfuls of the stinking stuff and toss it out.

“I like the swimming hole better,” Joseph said, craning his face away from the smelly stuff in his arms.

“Me too,” Cal said.

A few minutes later Cal declared, “Doesn’t have to be perfect.” He stepped into the pump-stream and sputtered at the cold, but he rinsed off anyway and then stepped out. “It’s cold,” he warned Joseph, “but I particularly dislike the smell of algae.”

“Me too,” Joseph said, and took his own turn at sputtering.

If he’d been alone, or maybe even with Lafe, Cal would have stripped naked for the cleaning, and lounged about letting the wind dry him before he dressed. But Joseph was too pretty to risk it, especially as he’d probably stay



half-naked as long as Cal did. So Cal threw his T-shirt on, but left off the outer shirt until he dried a bit. He carried his boots to the truck, stepping carefully until he could step into the truck bed and get the lunch box Lupe had sent. Joseph jumped up to join him.

“Wonder if Lupe puts better food in the box when it’s meant for Lafe,” Joseph said, “or worse?”

Cal laughed as he led them back to the house’s porch, thumping it as he stepped up to drive off undesirables. “After yesterday? We’ll be lucky if she didn’t put rat poison in it.”

“In that case, I call the sandwich that has your name on it,” Joseph said, planting himself with his back to the house’s wood siding before starting to unbraid his hair.

“Did you get beat up for that in high school?” Cal asked, thinking how beautiful Joseph’s hair was and what jerks most teenagers tended to be. He put a vacuum bottle of sweet tea between his knee and Joseph’s, and set a cup on Joseph’s knee.

“The white kids tried,” Joseph said, as Cal poured himself some tea. “But the Latinos had them outnumbered, and while no Latino ever mistook me for Mexican, they weren’t going to allow any white kids beating up brown kids. Since they knew the white kids couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Sounds... fun.” Cal put a paper-wrapped burrito on Joseph’s leg beside the cup.

“Oh yeah.” Joseph’s eyes focused beyond Cal and he grinned. “Our work is appreciated,” he said softly. Cal turned to see the pronghorns picking a cautious path to the tank.

“Pretty things,” Cal said, turning back to his lunch. “You ought to see them run.”

“This is pretty awesome.” Joseph finished with his hair and tossed it over his shoulder. “I wish I had my camera.”

“Mmm,” Cal said. Lupe had made her black beans and rice burritos, known to every current and past *Y Otra Cosa* hand as “those blessed amazing things.”

Unlike Lafe in nearly every way, Joseph took the hint and bit into his own burrito, grunting approval around his first bite. After that the only sounds came from the prairie—the eternal wind swishing through the grass, the rattling tin and creaks of the windmill working. The soft bass thud of the pump in the well, the chime of cold water trickling from the pipe into the tank. Cal ate his lunch and let the world go by, watching a thunderhead stack up on the horizon. Weather guy said rain wasn't likely, but the man had been known to be wrong.

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Joseph could get used to this. He sat with his back to the house and his toes in the wind and relaxed in the middle of the day, a luxury unknown since Mrs. MacGregor picked him up at the bus station in that ghost town that everyone swore had people but he'd only seen two besides her.

The burrito had been delicious and large. The sweet tea was sweet and cold. The windmill creaked and rattled, the wind blew, and the sun shone but not on him. Joseph wriggled his toes and sighed.

“Yeah,” Cal said. His feet were pale except for a few freckles. His big toes had a tiny sprinkle of red-brown hair on them.

Beyond Cal's bare toes lay the abandoned ranch. Joseph pondered the windmill, the falling-down outbuildings, and the dead trees. He wondered if the little ranch welcomed some life, or if they were intruding.

If he'd had to fix the windmill alone, Cal had said. Joseph thought of being out there alone and he didn't like it. Working the fence alone had been weird enough, but at least then he'd had the solidity of a warm and breathing horse beside him, and aside from the fence, nothing to see but wild. Here where people had tried and failed... He wondered if anyone had ever checked that the former rancher had really moved back east, or if Texas had just swallowed him whole. Like in a horror movie when an unsuspecting family moved into that great house they can't believe they got for such a steal, and why was that old woman staring at them like that?

Yeah, stop that. Joseph glanced over at Cal.

His boss, the energizer bunny, the man no hand wanted to work with because he worked them hardest, had tilted his hat down over his face. His

hands were folded on his stomach, that was not as pudgy as Joseph remembered from just a few days ago. Get Cal back in his element, apparently, and he was as healthy as the horses he seemed such friends with.

It shouldn't be surprising, given how hard Cal worked. Give him another day or two and he'd be as lean as David Tennant. And a week after that, he'd look like Matt Smith.

Joseph snorted softly. No, Cal would never be lanky enough to pull off Matt Smith unless he stopped eating entirely. But David Tennant—yeah. Cal could play the Tenth Doctor. He was a bit short, but he had the expressive face, the intense eyes, hair almost the right color—give him a suit and a trench coat and a Jack Harkness to snog at conventions—whoa. Joseph dragged his brain back out of the danger zone.

Over at the water tank, an antelope stamped, and then they all took off, bounding across the prairie. Joseph grinned at the beautiful sight, but beside him Cal sat up to pull his socks on. Damn. “Back to the grind?” Joseph asked. “What's next?”

“Something spooked them,” Cal said. “Best to meet it with boots on.”

Oh. Double damn? Joseph reached for his own socks and shoes. If running was in order, he wanted his sneaks.

Cal stomped into his second boot, jammed his hat down on his head and stood, staring at the grass beyond the water tank. “Coyote,” he said.

Now Joseph saw it, a grey-brown dog shape running towards them in a jolting gait and—growling?

“Cripes, it's rabid!” Cal grabbed Joseph by the collar and dragged him off the porch. “Get to the truck!”

Joseph had read *Animorphs*. He knew about rabies. He clutched his hat and ran. Cal's boots thudded behind him. Behind that sound came the lurching growl of the rabid animal.

Joseph outpaced Cal in three strides, but he still ran his hardest. He nearly flew into the bed of the truck, snatched up a wood fence post and spun to fend the beast off attacking Cal as he jumped. Cal lunged for the front of the truck

and Joseph jabbed the post at the frothing, snapping mouth, and then Cal was beside him with a pistol in his hand and shot the thing.

“Holy shit,” Cal gasped while Joseph stood there, alert for more or just too freaked out to put down the post or whatever. “Running Deer! If you get hungry again, just go chase down an antelope!”

Joseph laughed and eased the fence post down to the truck bed. “In school the track coach was always after me to join the team. I’d quote *The Faculty* at him.” Cal didn’t look like he got it. Well, neither had the coach. “It’s a movie. One character always said he didn’t think that a person should run unless he’s being chased.”

“I’m sorry,” Cal said. “It was stupid to leave the gun in the truck.”

“I’m thinking it was stupid to leave LA,” Joseph said. “Nothing to worry about there but the smog and traffic...”

“That’s Texas.” Cal put the gun back in its holster and strapped the gun belt on, his gaze on the waves of green and brown grassland. “Always something going on.” He sighed. “Reckon we might ought to be getting back. Heaps of daylight left to get some work done.”

“Yessir.” Joseph took one last look around before he got down to climb into the cab of the truck. He picked up the papers that had fallen out of the glove box when Cal lunged through the back window to grab his gun. When he straightened, in the large towing mirror he saw Cal coming from the porch, the lunch box in one hand, the other hand on his gun as he scanned the area. Joseph watched him walk. He was so fucking *picturesque*. Igloo-brand lunchbox or not, Cal could have just walked out of any of the Western movies Joseph had watched at Babu’s feet. That early programming came through—Joseph’s mind practically painted a neon sign above Cal’s head that said “HERO.”

Didn’t help that he was so damn cute when he was flustered, that he’d all but thrown Joseph off the porch one-handed...

Goddamn, stop that.

Cal set the lunchbox in the truck then he pulled a tarp from the large set-in toolbox that rested across the bed. He vanished behind the truck, then Joseph

saw him toss something into the truck wrapped in the tarp, and he dropped his gloves on top of it.

“If you don’t mind, grab me the sanitizer,” he said when he came to the driver’s side window. Joseph had seen that in the glove box; he got it and dumped some on Cal’s outstretched hands.

“We’re taking the coyote home?”

“Needs to be buried. Ground here’s worse’n cement, and all I’ve got is a blunt shovel anyway. I’ll cultivate it into a fallow field.”

Ew.

The drive home was long and slow and uneventful. Cal was quiet and Joseph leaned out the window humming and watching the clouds go by. Back at the ranch Cal apparently had a list of things he wanted done, starting with the coyote carcass and moving on to more pleasant things like fixing broken slats on the barn and cleaning gunk out of the buckets hanging in the horse stalls. When the light started to fade, they turned to gathering up chickens that had gotten out of the habit of nesting in the chicken coop. Up in the hay loft, Cal looked into a wooden box and called Joseph over.

“Sit,” he ordered with a grin over his shoulder. “I just found our next job.” He reached into the box. “Oh, yes, you’re a vicious beast, you are,” he said, and then he was depositing a tiny kitten in Joseph’s lap. “Pet it,” he ordered. An orange kitten joined the black one as Joseph petted the hissing little bundles.

“They don’t like me,” he said.

“They think we’re going to hurt them.” Cal plunked down across from Joseph with his hat in his hands and three kittens in his hat. “We don’t want them feral,” he said, stroking tiny kitten backs, “so they have to get used to us. As Mom puts it, we love on ’em until they like it.”

Joseph shrugged. “You’re the boss.” He petted kittens.

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Apparently the game wasn’t good tonight, Joseph thought when there hadn’t been a roar through the wall in at least ten minutes. He didn’t mind the

quiet. Working in Photoshop with a touchpad wasn't the easiest thing ever; he could be glad he didn't have distractions to mess him up along with his own fingers. At least until—

On schedule, his phone rang. Joseph pushed the laptop back with its fine image of the *Y Otra Cosa* ranch house silhouetted against the sunset, and answered it.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Shouldn't that be 'howdy'?” Mom's voice asked. “Hello, Ki. How's things?”

“Going great. Today I played in algae and then got chased by a coyote with rabies.”

“Don't I remember that disease absolutely terrifying you when you were little?”

“I was twelve, Mom, but yeah. It's okay, though. The thing didn't get near me, and Cal shot it.”

“Shot it,” she said flatly. Mom had a thing about guns now. “Tell me the whole story, young one, in proper order.”

“Should I start with this morning, or go back to yesterday and the cow that almost killed me?”

“Don't make me come over there, young man.”

Joseph laughed and started at—no, the day after Cal got home so he could skip the part where Cal cut him out of Ferguson's rope. The edited version still made for a better story than last week's events, which had been mostly *And then I rode more fence. And fixed a fence post. And rode more fence.*

“So we sat there petting tiny sleeping kittens until their mom came and woke them all up,” he finished.

“Wow!” Mom said. “Sounds awful! How much are they paying you again? Because it's not enough.”

Joseph snorted.

“So help me picture things,” Mom said. “Since you haven't sent me any photos in at least a week. What does Cal the coyote-killer look like?”

“Mom...” Joseph grumbled. “I don’t have any pictures of him—I’m supposed to be working, remember? But he looks like a shorter David Tennant.” She wouldn’t know who that was. “Google the Tenth Doctor.” She was probably sitting at her desk. Heaven forbid she should neglect Farmville.

“The Tenth Doctor what?”

Joseph chuckled. “Just like that. Google images, type in *Tenth Doctor*.”

“Oh,” Mom said. “He’s just adorable.”

“Remember those Westerns that Babu was always watching when you came to pick me up after work?” Joseph asked. “Cal looks like he just walked out of one all the damn time. When he sees trouble coming he jams his hat down to make sure he doesn’t lose it.” Unlike Joseph, who was always wasting a hand holding onto his hat because Mom had bought it big to contain his hair. “He wears a leather gun belt with his four-times-great-grandfather’s revolver on his hip.” Joseph knew that because there was a picture of the gun in the book Cal had loaned him. “And he knows like, *everything*.”

“Mm hmm,” Mom said. “And how does he feel about you?”

“Mom! I’m just—”

“Sitting on a rock singing *Part of Your World*?”

“No! It’s Texas. He’s not—”

“Ten percent of the population,” Mom said. “Some of them have got to live in Texas.”

“There’s only about a hundred people in the whole state, from what I’ve seen,” Joseph argued.

“That still leaves ten gays, and at least four of them should be male.”

“You shouldn’t encourage me, Mom. He hasn’t done a single thing to make me think he’s interested, or even gay.”

“I’m your mother. It’s my job to encourage you.”

“Mom—”

“You don’t fall in love every day, Ki. Enjoy it a bit before you bludgeon it with reality.”

“I—all right.” Joseph slithered from chair to bed, wriggling to get comfy. “I don’t know how you do it, but you saw it before I did. I’ve got a crush on Cal. Happy?” Cal. Oh God, he was done for, he even liked saying Cal’s name. Cal. Cal MacGregor, hot cowboy.

“Very happy,” Mom said. “Now tell Momma all about your new man.”

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Cal had observed a few things over the three days he’d worked with Joseph. The man didn’t groan when he was assigned to work with Cal, unlike pretty much everyone else. He didn’t talk too much, nor too little. Joseph worked hard, he did what Cal told him to, and he never acted like he resented having to earn his pay. He also didn’t spend dinner telling everyone every minute of what they’d done that day like Lafe, so if Cal felt like taking a few minutes to point his toes skyward, he could. Also, Joseph continued to be prettier than anyone else on the ranch. Any other human on the ranch. Chisholm was prettier than Joseph. Still, if Cal could have both kinds of scenery set against the backdrop of beautiful Texas, why wouldn’t he?

In the next week, though, every day or so Wobbie would try to cadge Joseph and dump one of the other hands on Cal, but Cal felt justified overriding him. The evening after the second time Cal overrode Wobbie at breakfast in front of everyone, Cal made time after dinner to walk out to Wobbie’s little house and greet Wobbie’s silent wife. He brought a six pack of good beer and had a talk with Wobbie about how things needed to be. That the men needed to know Wobbie was the one in charge, but Cal wasn’t going to be just one of the hands either, so he and Wobbie should be talking often. And also that if Wobbie thought he wanted Joseph on a particular job that he didn’t want to put Cal to, he should come to Cal before breakfast to debate the matter.

Things went a mite smoother after that. After checking on Nine Tails, Cal and Joseph worked on the Pigeon Walk tank. Another day they rode fence before helping move the small but vital herd of bulls. Most days they got done well before dinner, got some relaxing in someplace pretty, and got back to the ranch to work on Cal’s list.

Joseph started bringing a digital camera along, but he only pulled it out when it wouldn’t slow his work, so Cal didn’t object. Cal had his picture



snapped about a double dozen times the first day, but he reckoned that wasn't any sort of a big deal.

One night after dinner Lupe brought a cake out and everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to Cal. It was a surprise—he hadn't looked at a calendar or even his laptop in days. Mom gave him a fancy new cell phone. Wobbie gave him a leather hat, "the better to smack the men into line." The others had smaller gifts, and the cake was delicious like everything Lupe made.

After the third time Cal walked by Joseph mounted in the paddock, and smacked Joseph's leg with his gloves to remind him to keep his heels down, Cal figured out all on his own that the reason Joseph wore tennis shoes for work on a ranch was that he didn't own boots. Cripes, why had that taken so long to get through his head? Everything else, soon as Cal told him to do it differently, Joseph started doing it proper.

That was probably why he wore that fancy black hat every day too—because he only had the one. Cal consulted with his mother, and told Wobbie he'd be taking Joseph into town. It was time for a treats run anyway. Monday at supper Wobbie told everyone if they had outgoing mail or shopping requests, to get them to Cal by morning.

Tuesday morning found Cal and Joseph in the truck, jolting along the dirt road to the highway. Cal would as soon have taken the horses, but he needed to bring home more than two burdened horses could carry. It was also more than he could carry, so Joseph was completely justified.

"So I've been told there are actually people in Vega," Joseph said as Cal turned onto the highway. "Will we see them today?"

"Might could," Cal said, "if you look fast. Most folks don't have time for hanging around in town."

"But we get to make a day of it? Lucky us!"

Cal chuckled. "I don't reckon it's much of an outing for you," he said, pushing the old truck up to fifty. The wind rushed through the cab and he had to raise his voice. "Seeing where you're from."

"After a month on the ranch?" Joseph asked. "It'll feel like New York City."

“Well, try to keep your gawking under control,” Cal ordered. “You’ll make the ranch look bad.”

“I’ll be good, boss,” Joseph promised. He took his hat off to let his hair blow in the wind. Cal grinned and pushed the truck to sixty.

In Vega, the first stop was Mix’s Ranch Equipment. Cal led Joseph to the back.

“Mom says your birthday’s next month,” he told Joseph. “We’ll be busy then, so I’ll be facilitating Mom’s gift to you now. Get yourself a pair of boots.”

“But—”

“Don’t you know better than to argue with your boss?”

“No, sir. I mean yes, sir. I mean—” Joseph grinned. “Are there particular boots I should consider, sir?”

Cal pointed Joseph at the boots he preferred with a well-worn version of that same brand, and went to browse the hats. He came back as Joseph was trying on the cheapest pair he could find of the specified boots. Cal swapped a white straw hat for Joseph’s fancy black one. All that hair came tumbling down.

“This is my gift,” Cal said. “So you can save the pretty hat for impressing the ladies.”

Joseph grinned. “Are you going to stock up for your Lafe-smacking while we’re here?”

“Going forward, I’ll smack him with his own hat,” Cal said, but he picked out a replacement for the one he’d jumped on after talking to Lyle. He didn’t lose hats like he used to, but he still liked to keep a few on hand for unexpected circumstances.

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Joseph caught himself staring at Cal’s ass when he bent to look at something on a low rack, and dropped his eyes to the boots he was standing in. He couldn’t stop grinning, though. It was the same as every other day—him and Cal doing something that needed doing—but it also really wasn’t. It was almost a date. Especially with the gifts thrown in.

Lose gracefully, Mom would say. He didn't have a leg to stand on refusing the gifts, so he would be happy about them. Both that Cal and/or his mom cared that Joseph had proper boots, and that he got to spend a working day hanging out with Cal and not working.

"Try these," Cal said, returning to drop a pair of dark brown boots with a wing pattern on the tops by Joseph's feet. "Those you've got are work boots. These are riding boots."

"What if I say I'm afraid of heights?" The pair Cal brought had a higher heel. And a narrower toe. Joseph had assumed they were more for dress up, but now he looked, Cal's beat up boots looked much like the pair that he'd picked out for Joseph.

"I say get over it," Cal said. "If you fall off—as you've been known to do—and your foot gets stuck in the stirrup, your dragging body isn't going to slow your mare much at all. The more you thrash and yell, the more she's gonna run, and eventually you're not gonna be making any noise."

"Ew," Joseph said, and started to sit.

"Hold on." Cal knelt to push at Joseph's toes in the work boots. "How do these feel?"

"Good?" God, Cal at his feet... Joseph raised his eyes to the buffalo head hanging on the wall. "They're stiffer than I'm used to, obviously," he went on, "but they're more comfortable than I expected."

Holy shit, buffalo were big!

"Walk around a bit," Cal ordered, standing.

Joseph walked. Was Cal watching his ass? Joseph couldn't tell. And for all he knew Cal needed to, in order to see if the boots made him walk funny or something. So he better not make any assumptions, even though he was pretty sure Cal was, in fact, watching his ass.

"Those'll do," Cal said. "Now come try these."

"But—"

"We'll take 'em out of Lafe's pay, for pretty near killing you the other day. You need work boots too."

Joseph shook his head and brushed his hair back and sat to do what he was told. When he'd tugged off the work boots and jammed his feet into the riding boots, he stood up and Cal had to look up at him. Okay, definitely liked these boots.

Cal raised amused eyebrows. "How's the weather up there?" he asked.

"A bit unsteady," Joseph said. Cal stepped back, waving an arm for Joseph to walk. He tried, and immediately wobbled. Cal grabbed his arm to steady him.

*Really* liked these boots.

"Practice," Cal said, and led Joseph across the rug and back. It wasn't that hard, just had to keep his feet solidly under him. "Now let's see," Cal said, and let go.

Joseph was too occupied with not falling over to see if Cal watched his ass, but after two times across the rug and a couple wobbly turns, Cal nodded.

"Do you like the color? There's light brown too."

"No, these are great." If they'd been white with sparkles, Joseph probably would have kept them since Cal picked them out.

Maybe not with sparkles, actually.

"Leave them on," Cal ordered as he scooped up the rest of Joseph's haul. "Sooner you learn to walk in 'em the better."

Cal paid for the boots and hats and the other things he'd collected, and Joseph managed to help carry stuff to the truck. Then they walked down the sidewalk with cracks that sported the only green grass in sight. Joseph had a new hat and new boots and got to grab Cal's arm at random moments, so all was right with the world.

"What's next?" he asked as they crossed an empty street to step onto the sidewalk in front of First Lock and Storage. Next was Vega Flowers and Gifts, but Joseph doubted they were going there.

"Plannin' to drop by the post office, save Del a trip," Cal said. "Have a sit at the Dairy Queen for lunch then see if we can't round up all the provender everyone—"

“Cal! Cal MacGregor!” A tall, hollow-cheeked man stepped out of Vega Flowers and Gifts, rubbing his hands together. He was smiling, and it just looked wrong on that face. Joseph thought he’d be a great undertaker in any of those movies Cal should probably be making. “Ah, you’re here! Well, this—this is a mite embarrassing. I’d have been out tomorrow, I mean my Jake would have been, honestly, but we still wouldn’t have been ready and I’m sorry. I am so sorry. And now here you are, and I haven’t even called—”

“Cyrus Whaley, what are you rattling on about?” Cal demanded.

“Why, your flowers!” He put a long, thick finger on his cheek. “Or—have I ruined the surprise? Blast it, the order said nothing—well.” He took Cal’s arm. “Come here.”

Cal let himself be dragged into the store, so Joseph followed.

“Howdy, Cal!” A tall young man with a softer version of his father’s features grinned at Cal from behind a tall vase in which he was arranging long stem red roses. “We’ll bundle everything up for you, but I figured you could see one arrangement the way it ought to be.” More vases surrounded him, and several flower boxes.

“Jake, hush a minute. Let him see. Cal, these are the cards.” Mr. Whaley handed Cal an envelope with that ghastly smile. “The first order was late for your birthday, so we thought there was no rush, thought you knew, wouldn’t mind if we just made one trip—”

Joseph totally wasn’t watching as Cal opened a card with a confused frown. But he did see a large scrawled “P” at the bottom before Cal closed it and stuffed it back in the envelope blushing.

“Ahh, I knew it!” Jake Whaley crowed. “Some pretty East Coast girl fell for our cowboy! What’s her name, Cal, and does her daddy know what she’s doing with his credit card?”

“Cy,” Cal said, “can you reverse the charges?”

“Why—yes, of course, Cal.”

“But then you pay for all these?”

“I had to make a special order,” Mr. Whaley admitted. “I’ll never sell all these before they die.”

“You—” Cal waved a hand as he ran out of words. “You bundle ’em all up. Make ’em pretty as you can, and then you take ’em to anybody you think should have ’em. Can you do that, Cy? Give Abuela Martinez a big bunch. Betsy Layton. And old Miss Rowena. Take some home if Ms. Laila isn’t sick of flowers. Anyone else you think would get a smile on ’em. Get rid of every last petal if you would, and then don’t accept anything else from this buyer.”

“Cal, if it actually is someone using her daddy’s card—”

“I’ll swear to you, Cy, that every single thing was bought fair and square. Will that satisfy you?”

“A MacGregor’s word? Of course!” Mr. Whaley clapped his hands together. “That’s an odd and expensive joke, but we’ll turn it to good. Want your name on the cards?”

“No. Please. Just get rid of them.”

“Will do,” Mr. Whaley said. “Awful sorry to throw a wrench in your day, Cal.”

“Not your fault, Cy.” Cal stalked out the door and Joseph hurried tiptoe after so he wouldn’t fall over when Cal was in no mood to be catching him.

“Post office,” Cal said when Joseph had mostly caught up. “This way.”

Walking fast in heeled boots was far harder than walking slow, but Joseph managed. At the post office Cal took custody of a canvas bag of mail and a large box. Joseph saw how Cal’s jaw tightened at the sight of it, so he wasn’t surprised when Cal stepped over to the customer’s prep counter and pulled his knife out of his boot.

Well, at least he didn’t have his gun on him for the town visit? Joseph bet it was in the truck, though.

Cal sliced the box open and peered inside. Joseph mastered his curiosity and stayed politely where he couldn’t see what made Cal’s lip curl.

“Bobbi Jo,” Cal called over his shoulder, “how old’s your girl now?”

“All of four years old, Cal, and smart as a whip.”

“If you’d kindly bring her out,” Cal said, “I’d like to pay my respects.”

The little girl was duly produced, and her shyness lasted only as long as it took Cal to pull a fuzzy blue bear as big as herself out of the box and hand it to her. Cal gave the empty box to Bobbi Joe to deal with, stuck the note in his pocket and put the mail bag over his shoulder like a cowboy Santa. He tipped his hat to the ladies, and stalked out.

Joseph didn't try to catch up; he just walked behind Cal, torn between wariness and elation.

"P" had to be a man. Right? The credit card had a man's name on it—father and son Whaley had both been certain of that. And Cal had said the flowers were bought "fair and aboveboard." The owner of the card knew what was happening. So he was doing the ordering.

Cal was gay. And if he'd had a boyfriend back at school, Joseph bet that just as soon as Cal had five minutes alone with his phone, he'd be single. The man was furious. Joseph could see it in the set of his jaw when he wasn't walking behind Cal, the way Cal held his shoulders, the way he stalked down the street...

Ahead he could see the Dairy Queen. Joseph debated if asking why they were having ice cream for lunch would annoy Cal more, and if he really cared why they were having ice cream. It was ice cream! He could eat a real meal later. Lupe was never stingy with the leftovers.

The DQ parking lot held one car as Cal stalked past the outside tables. It was a beat-up Chevy about the same age as Cal's truck, and three young men came out of the other door of the restaurant headed for it. One of them made a face at Joseph's glance.

"What are you looking at, Cochise?"

Cal spun on his heel. "Beg pardon?" he said.

"MacGregor!" The guy was brought up short, but then he looked at his friends and the sneer came back as they walked over. "Get tossed out of your fancy college?"

Cal set the mail bag down. "You're a jackass, Steele Kennedy," he said, shoving his hat down on his head. "A stone-cold fool. And if you ever go near Betsy Layton again you're going to be a toothless fool. Got it?"

Joseph stood behind Cal and wondered if what he thought was about to happen was really going to happen and what he should do about it if it was.

Betsy Layton? She was getting some of Cal's flowers.

Steele Kennedy laughed. "You're just jealous she never put out for—"

Cal's fist in Steele's face interrupted him. Cal punched him once, and stood there as the idiot staggered back. The other two boys laughed while Steele picked himself up.

"Your face was asking for it," Cal said as Steele stood. "Wearing that smirk? Just begging for it."

"Get him, Steele!" one of the others said, still laughing. "You can't let him knock you around!"

"Cool it!" the other snapped. "Deputy Haley!"

On the street a red car with "Oldham County Sheriff's Dept" on the side rolled slowly by. It seemed to go slower and slower as the driver watched the Dairy Queen parking lot and not the road.

"Clear out," Steele muttered, and they all piled into the car. As the car pulled out of the driveway, the deputy tapped two fingers to his hat. Cal returned the salute then picked up the bag as the deputy's car accelerated.

"I've been hankerin' to do that for six months," he told Joseph, and yanked the door of the Dairy Queen open.

"Cal MacGregor!" called a girl's voice, "Welcome home!"

"Thanks, Millie." Cal walked to the counter and set the bag down, put his hat on top of it. "I'd take it kindly if you'd give me a cup of ice. I just split my knuckles on Steele Kennedy's teeth."

"Did you?" The girl grinned. "Lacy!" she called over her shoulder as she filled a cup with ice. "Cal MacGregor decked Steele Kennedy and I'm buying him lunch!"

"You have my blessing!" came a voice from the back, followed by a tall dark-haired girl. "Ooh, maybe I'll buy you lunch," she said, smiling at Joseph. "What's your name, handsome?"



“Oh!” Cal looked stricken. “I haven’t introduced you—Joseph, I am sorry. I had my head so stuck in what I needed to get done, I just let you follow me all over—”

“So make it up to him now, and introduce him to two pretty girls!” Lacy ordered.

“Joseph,” Cal walked over and snatched Joseph’s hat off his head, “meet Millicent Grant and Lacy Jane Dalton. Ladies, Joseph whose last name I don’t even know. He’s a new hand on the *Y Otra Cosa* since last month.”

The Dairy Queen in Vega, Texas, served actual food alongside the ice cream. And the girls who worked there didn’t have a lot to do. They chattered with Cal as they fixed the food, flirted with Joseph, and took turns coming to the table to hang out until finally two frazzled road-tripping parents came in with their cranky brood of five, and Cal went and ordered ice cream cones to go. He led the way out the door as the youngest vacationer started wailing about being told to eat his dinner before he got a sundae. Joseph followed Cal down the street, licking his cone and wondering anew. “P” had to be a man. But Cal had decked Steele Kennedy because of Betsy Layton, and both Lacy and Millie reminisced about going with him to the drive-in.

Vega, Texas, had a drive-in?

So maybe Cal was bi, Joseph thought. Maybe he’d gone away to college to explore his orientation. It wasn’t because he hated Texas, after all, or needed an education Texas couldn’t offer. It made sense. If everything in Cal’s life began and ended with the *Y Otra Cosa*, what other reason could he possibly have for going halfway across the country to go to school?

No wonder Cal felt trapped when he came home. Now if only Joseph could figure out a way to show him that he wasn’t as alone as he thought—

If Joseph’s entire chain of suppositions wasn’t completely off base, anyway. Did he have one shred of evidence? No. Did he tend to see things in the rosiest glow possible when he had a crush? Yes. Witness the horrible incident with Blake and the balloons that weren’t actually for balloon animals and if Shawn hadn’t been way smarter than Joseph...

Before they left the DQ, Cal had been pressed to call both girls but Joseph noted he hadn’t promised to call either. Joseph had been given both their

phone numbers too, which he planned to lose ASAP. Within three steps of the door the smile slipped off Cal's face and silence fell between them. Joseph turned that around in his mind and decided he liked it. Cal knew he didn't have to fake cheerfulness with Joseph. That was a good thing.

If, you know, he wasn't getting everything wrong. Cal might just be sorry to be back to being alone in Joseph's company.

They walked back to the truck, put the mail in it, and got in to drive to the supermarket. Joseph thought it might be half the size of every supermarket he'd ever seen, but it was sufficient. Cal brought out the envelopes with lists on the outside and money on the inside, and they bought the special treats everyone had requested and a bag of ice to dump on the cold stuff in the cooler in the back of the truck.

When they passed the "Now Leaving Vega City Limits" sign, Cal let out an explosive breath. "Sorry," he said without looking at Joseph. "Guess I'm just not ready to be around people again yet."

"Well, if the people include that Steele Kennedy..."

Cal snorted and settled a bit in his seat and Joseph turned his grin out the window. He *was* more relaxed around Joseph than with girls he'd known all his life!

"Reckon we might get us some rain," Cal said. "Don't see clouds like that in Los Angeles, do you?"

Joseph hadn't been looking at the scenery. Now he did, at the huge cloud that hung low and flat at the bottom, but towered higher and higher and looked slightly twisted, containing the cloud in a big circle. "Is that a tornado? I mean—"

"Naw. Supercell they call 'em. Some of 'em spawn tornadoes, but the weather guy says it's not likely this one will."

"Fine by me." Joseph leaned out the window, his hair blowing in the wind as he watched the gorgeous cloud. For once he wasn't wishing for his camera—he was remembering that in his interview Mrs. MacGregor had specifically asked if Joseph could work with gays. He'd decided she meant Billie, but given Billie's reading tastes he wasn't sure. Unless she read that stuff for the quivering females?

Whatever. It was unlikely, but it was statistically possible that the *Y Otra Cosa* contained two percent of Texas' gays. Because he really didn't think many straight guys would get as close to him and stay there as Cal kept doing. Taking his hand not his wrist to go down to the creek, holding him up in the store, sitting at a tiny table rather than a bigger one the girls could have sat at too in the Dairy Queen...

Of course, the question was, had been, and remained—what the hell was Joseph going to do about it?

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## CHAPTER THREE

When Cal drove into the yard, the hands were heading from washing up in the bunkhouse to dinner. He sent Joseph off with his arms full of his gifts, then drafted the other hands to get everything else in the house and sorted out. The mail Cal kept in his own custody until he could dump the bag out on his bed to sort. That was the safest plan after Preston's damned fool gifts. Looked like there was one more—a good-sized flat box with the image of a red ribbon printed on it, from FrameURFace.com. God only knew what was in there and Cal didn't feel fortified enough to find out. He left it on the bed, sorted out everything for his mother, and took the rest to dinner to pass out.

The box was, naturally, still there when Cal returned to his room after dinner. Might as well get it over with. He tugged on the tab embedded in the ribbon to open the box.

Out came a picture that Preston didn't take, had never seen. It was a canvas print of Cal's mother in a fine black frame. She stood leaning on the paddock fence, staring into the distance. Behind and above her floated sculpted clouds, before her the *Y Otra Cosa* stretched in spring-green waves. The picture was cropped just right so none of the buildings showed—it was just Mom with her back to the fence, and Texas. She wore her hat, but her face was barely shadowed. She looked—determined. Content. Her cane was not in the picture.

It was beautiful. Cal turned it over, turned the packaging over, but it offered no clues. The picture wasn't a present Mom would give, nor Lyle, and obviously not Preston... Cal went looking for his mother.

She was sitting at her desk. She put a file folder over what she was working on when Cal knocked.

"Mom?" He showed her the picture. "Who sent me this? There's a gift receipt, but it only says *happy birthday*."

She grinned. "Oh, that did come out nice!"

"It was you?"

"Joseph took the picture. He told me it would be amazing, but it didn't look so great on his little camera. Reckon it was all he could think of to give

you. Didn't think to mention the hands always give you presents. Or when your birthday was, come to think on it."

Joseph. He should have guessed, but Cal hadn't imagined that dinky little camera the man played with could take such impressive pictures. Cal had seen shots no better hanging in the galleries Preston dragged him to.

Mom held out her hands and Cal handed her the picture. "Goodness, it did come out well," she said. "He even made a crippled old lady look good, without making me look like someone else!" She handed it back with a smile. "Me and the *Y Otra Cosa*. That boy has good instincts—that's a picture you'll treasure all your life." She sighed.

Something in the way she said it rattled Cal. Like she expected him to have nothing left but the picture one day. Maybe one day soon. Cal took a deep breath.

"I'm not going back to college," he said.

"What?"

"I'm not going back to college." Cal stopped himself from shoving down a hat he wasn't wearing. Instead he set the picture down. "I'm not moving to Amarillo to take that job with Lyle either," he went on. "I never meant to, I just never told him no so he wouldn't step up the pressure. I'm staying right here and if I never get farther than the Vega Dairy Queen again, I'm fine with that."

"You're no quitter, Callan MacGregor," Mom said.

"That's why I'm not going back. The *Y Otra Cosa* has first claim. I won't quit her." One reason. There were so many more, but they were personal, petty. The *Y Otra Cosa* was the one that mattered.

"You could get your degree and come back after. You were so all-fired-up sure you could bring the ranch into the twenty-first century. Without losing our history, you said."

"I can do that better here. I can read books myself, and no teacher in Massachusetts or anywhere else knows more about ranching than Wobbie. He's not going to live forever—I need to be here, learning from him."

“None of this is new since you left,” Mom said. “I remember sayin’ a lot of it beforehand. So I reckon there’s another reason.” She prodded her cane with her toe. “Isn’t there?”

“Maybe I just needed to see it for myself,” Cal said.

“And maybe you’re as rotten a liar now as when you were five,” Mom snapped. “You want to stay and take care of me, take care of all the things I can’t do quite right anymore. Follow me around and nursemaid me.”

“Have I been doing that?” Cal demanded.

“You treat me like fine china,” Mom growled. “Don’t get up, Mom, I’ll get it, Mom, why not let me handle the business stuff, Mom—do you think I broke my head too?”

“I just think I’m old enough to be involved,” Cal said. “That’s all stuff I have to learn too. I should learn it from you.”

“You think you’ll just take over,” she said. “Same as Lyle. Just bull in and tell me what to do with my land, my life, because you’re a man now you’re twenty and men know it all!”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t you argue with me again!” She pushed up out of the chair, grabbed her cane and threw it down. “I’m not so helpless! I ran this place from my hospital bed, and I ran it from the couch, and I’ll run it from this desk.” She pointed at him. “You took off then you come home and tell me you changed your mind, just step aside? I don’t think so!”

She took a step. Cal saw her waver and he stepped forward to catch her but she stopped him with a glare as she caught herself on the chair.

“See?” she demanded. “You think I can’t stand in my own office!”

Cal reached again to shove down his hat again, set his feet instead. He’d come too far to back down. She’d spend day and night bullying him to go back to school if he let off now.

“Don’t you set your jaw at me, young man,” Mom said. “You were a stubborn boy and now you’re a stubborn man, but your mamma has your measure.”

Cal didn't want to test that. He really didn't. But he didn't see that he had any other choice.

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Joseph was reading a book of *True Texas Ghost Stories!* he'd just bought when his phone rang. He nearly jumped out of his skin. He reached from bed to desk to pick it up. Cal's number?

"Hello?"

"If I tell you to do one thing," Cal said, "and my mother tells you different, are you going to mind me?"

"Yes?"

"Then meet me at the truck."

Okay, then. Joseph sat up and pulled on his sneakers. His feet had endured more than enough of the boots for one day, and "the truck" meant no horses. He hoped.

He got there first. Then Cal came from the house, carrying a cursing Mrs. MacGregor.

"Get the door," Cal ordered. Joseph jumped to open the passenger door. "She fell," Cal said over Mrs. MacGregor ordering Joseph to get his skinny city butt back in the bunkhouse, didn't he know better than to get in the middle of family? Somehow Cal got in, still holding his mother. "She's going to the hospital."

"The hell I am!"

"Keys are in the visor," Cal said. "Move!"

Joseph ran around the truck to get into the driver's seat.

"Come on," he told the truck as he pumped the gas. He didn't want to be playing with the carburetor while—the engine roared and he patted the dash before throwing the truck in gear.

Los Angeles had some bad roads, but nothing to compare with the raw dirt of the ranch driveway. Joseph crept along at two or three miles an hour, and even then sometimes he hit a bump and Mrs. MacGregor let out a gasp or a swear. Actual swear words, not the "dadblast!" and such of days past.

"I'm sorry," Cal would murmur with each thump. Eventually Mrs. MacGregor stopped cursing, only letting out a gasp on really bad bumps.

"She still had some narcotics left," Cal said. "I made her take one."

"I can't imagine the pain she'd suffer if you hadn't," Joseph said. "I'm trying to be careful."

"Ain't no gentle on this road," Cal said. "It's one thing I've always meant to fix. We'd only be half an hour out of Vega if the road had some flat to it."

"But then you'd get... salesmen."

Cal snorted. The truck thumped. Mrs. MacGregor whimpered. Lit only by the dim green of the dash lights, the truck's cab was pretty dark, but Joseph saw Cal's hand stroke his mother's hair.

"Would she be more comfortable on the seat?" Joseph asked softly.

"I think I've got more give than this old padding," Cal said, and went on holding her.

The drive to the highway took forever. When finally the headlights flashed on road signs as they went over a small hill, Joseph flipped the turn signal on automatically.

"Turn right," Cal said. "There's no hospital in Vega—we have to go to Amarillo."

"Got it," Joseph said, and switched the turn signal.

The road was empty both ways. Cal had Joseph stop on the shoulder so he could buckle his mother into the middle seat, but he didn't offer to take over driving. "Watch for deer," he said as he buckled himself in. "And cows."

"Got it," Joseph said again, and put his foot steadily and slowly down. Cal pulled his phone from his pocket and called Wobbie. Mrs. MacGregor leaned on Cal and muttered something Joseph didn't catch, but when Cal was done talking to Wobbie he placed another call.

"Lyle," he said. "Cal. Mom fell. We're bringing her to Physician's Surgical. Be there in—" he peered into the dark until a milepost sign came into view. "Twenty minutes. Do you know... right... okay... see you then."



“Whassurna?” Mrs. MacGregor asked.

“What, Mom?”

“What’s... your... name...?” she said again, slowly.

Oh, crap, had she hit her head?

“Callan Stonewall MacGregor,” Cal answered. “Because you knew I’d have to be a fighter.”

“Don’t... let Lyle...”

“I won’t, Momma. You know I won’t. If you can’t move me, damn sure he won’t.”

“Good boy,” she said, and her head fell to Cal’s shoulder. Joseph wanted to ask what that was about but he didn’t think he should. Instead he just drove the truck.

Traffic on a Tuesday night in Amarillo was no big deal, but Cal gave directions like it was impenetrable. Go this way rather than make a left, watch out for that car, better wait on the light—“Tell me where to go,” Joseph finally said. “Let me get you there.”

After that it took seven minutes before he was pulling up at the Emergency Room drop-off. A tall man in a suit came towards the truck the moment he saw it. He yanked the passenger door open as Cal unbuckled, dragged Cal out and hugged him quickly, set him down and reached for Mrs. MacGregor. Joseph unhooked her seat belt and the man pulled her carefully out. He shut the door with his hip and Joseph drove off to find a parking space.

On the ranch the keys stayed in the truck. Here Joseph locked up, and pocketed the keys, then hesitated. If there was one place in the world he didn’t want to be, it was waiting for hours in another ER. And inside, he’d be right in the middle of all the family stuff Mrs. MacGregor was completely right to warn him away from. Why not stay with the truck? He could probably manage to sleep in the back. Cal could just call when he needed a ride home.

Because he was a damn fool in love, that’s why he couldn’t stay with the truck. Mrs. MacGregor knew Cal and Lyle were going to fight. As the fool in love with Cal, it was Joseph’s duty to be there to back him up, whatever the

hell they were fighting over. He sighed and walked, trying to comb the wind-snarls out of his hair with his fingers. Should have worn his hat, or put his hair back. Brought a hair-tie. Or a jacket. Or a book. Too bad Cal had been too busy wrestling his mother into the truck to tell Joseph what he might need.

Joseph hoped Cal and Lyle wouldn't actually get in a physical fight. Suit or not, Lyle MacGregor was a big man.

In the waiting area of the ER, it looked like Cal and his brother were already at it. They stood in an alcove by the unoccupied kids' corner, facing off. Lyle was explaining something important, and apparently frustrating, with his hands. Cal had his arms folded and his jaw set, and, if he'd been wearing a hat, it probably would have been shoved down to the bottom of his ears. Joseph took a deep breath and called himself a fool a few more times and moseyed on over.

"Howdy," he said, and hoped it didn't sound stupid from him. "Did they take Mrs. MacGregor back already?"

"Lyle, this is Joseph," Cal said. "He's the new hand—he drove while I kept Mom from walking home."

"Joseph!" Lyle offered his hand with a smile that showed a lot of teeth. "I've heard good things about you, young man!" He had a firm grip but if he wanted it to hurt, he should have met Joseph a month ago. "Thank you for your assistance tonight."

Joseph shrugged. "I just drove. Cal was the one who got cussed at."

"Mom's doctor had her taken back to X-ray," Cal said. "It will probably be a while before we know anything. I'm sorry—it's not the way anyone wants to spend an evening."

Joseph shrugged. Get rid of Lyle and he could still manage to have a great evening, but he didn't say that.

Lyle clapped his hands together softly. "Gentlemen," he said. "I know a self-serve cafe a few corridors away. Dr. Singh will know to find us there. Cal, Joseph, may I buy you a cup of coffee?"

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Cal let himself and Joseph be guided down the hall by Lyle's shooing motions. First he'd get them somewhere less public, then find a way to politely get rid of Joseph, then... well. It didn't matter. His momma didn't name him Stonewall for nothing.

In the little alcove that held a couple vending machines, three tiny tables, some magazines and a small couch, Lyle bought two cups of coffee and a soda. He handed the soda and a magazine to Joseph, who took the hint and planted himself on the couch while Cal and Lyle sat at the table farthest from him.

One day, Cal promised himself, MacGregor plus MacGregor wouldn't always equal a fight.

That's not where Lyle started, though. He turned his head to check that Joseph had obediently buried himself in the magazine, then he leaned forward, sliding his hands across the table.

"I know we're going to crash horns in a bit, but let's get this out of the way first. Cal, we've got to convince Mom to stay this time."

"To stay?"

"Dr. Singh wanted her to stay in a rehabilitative facility last time, but as soon as she felt like she could walk well enough, she checked herself out and went home. I guarantee you, when Dr. Singh comes in here, he's going to tell us that skipping all her physical therapy is why she's hurt herself. She didn't heal proper. And she's not going to heal proper if she doesn't allow that maybe doctors know something. Especially Dr. Singh. I checked him out, Cal. He's the best in Texas, possibly in the country. The man is right smart."

"Why didn't she stay?" Cal had heard none of this, from either of them.

Lyle's hands balled into fists, still on the table. "That would have left the ranch without a MacGregor."

"Temporarily. Wobbie can run the ranch, though, and you and I could have helped with the financial—"

"Tell it to her," Lyle said, bouncing his fists lightly on the table. "Tell it to her this time, because it's going to take both of us. She didn't even want me to

tell you she was in the hospital last time, Cal, and then she censored how much I could tell you. I listened because we both wanted you to stay in school, and also because I didn't want her kicking me out and then trying to handle everything on her own."

He didn't want to, but Cal had to ask. "Does our insurance cover the physical therapy?"

Lyle gave him a sour look. "Some of it. The year changed since last time, so we'll have to pay the twelve thousand dollar deductible before the insurance kicks in again, and I'll promise you the bills weren't paid off from last time. The minute we carried her in the door we started the bills mounting again. And that's not all the debt. You still don't know, do you? Why do you think I keep telling you we have to sell while we can? You two are going to hang on until they take the *Y Otra Cosa* out from under you, and then you'll be penniless and landless. I'll take you both in, of course, but—"

"Let's stick to Mom," Cal interrupted. "For now."

"For now." Lyle sat back and crossed his arms. Cal sipped his coffee and made a face. The stuff needed another brown crayon. From a speaker somewhere George Strait sang about not owning anything but what he wore. As a Texan, Cal knew he was contractually obligated to like George Strait. Most times Cal was tepid about it.

Sometimes, though, the man just hit it right. George sang that he wasn't rich, but he was free.

The *Y Otra Cosa* was worth a passel of money, Cal knew that, but it was all tied up in the ranch. A man couldn't spend an acre like he spent his paycheck on Saturday night, knowing he'd get another next week.

No way could Cal let go. The *Y Otra Cosa* was *his*, but it went deeper than that. He was the *Y Otra Cosa*'s. Cal was a child of her just as much as of his mother. More, because his mother came from the land too. It wasn't right that the land should be anything but the *Y Otra Cosa*, home of the MacGregors.

It wasn't right, but wrong things happened all the time. You only had to turn on the news to know that was true. Cal considered a mountain of debt ready to sweep over the *Y Otra Cosa* like a flood from a toad-strangler of a

days-long-storm, and where everyone would wash up if it happened. Where would the hands be, after? What would happen to Lafe and Lupe and the kids, to Wobbie when he'd spent his whole life learning to run the *Y Otra Cosa* just the way the MacGregors wanted it done? To Billie and Gina, when in the 21st century many ranches still wouldn't hire a female hand?

If it was as bad as Lyle said, then the thing to do was to sell. If they sold, they had control of the situation. Everyone would have a chance to go job-hunting before they lost their home. Cal could make sure Mom was taken care of. He could find a way to—to do what? What would he *do* without the *Y Otra Cosa*? What was life, away from the ranch and never able to go home? Never daring to go home, not wanting to see what oil or gas interests would do to the land. Could he betray it like that, let someone drill holes and blast out blocks of the land that had nurtured his family for six generations?

Could he let his mother ruin her health, cripple herself, and probably die too soon, trying to save a way of life that had been gasping its last for years?

"I'll be right back," Lyle said, getting up. He hadn't touched his coffee. Probably he knew how bad it was. He walked away, following the "Restroom/Baños" sign. Cal considered if he cared enough to see if the vending machine held anything decent to drink, and decided he didn't. From the vending machines his eyes wandered to the couch, where Joseph had set aside *Sports Illustrated* to pick up a celebrity magazine. Cal wondered if Joseph knew any of those people personally. With so many celebrities in Los Angeles, some had to live near normal folks, right? Maybe not, though, because Joseph switched the celebrity magazine for one about cars. He put his feet up, sliding his shoes under the cushion of the next spot instead of putting them on the couch, putting the magazine on his upraised knees. Cal wondered if Joseph was cold in his T-shirt, seeing how aggressive the hospital's AC was. Should have warned the man they'd be gone for hours, maybe the night.

"Somehow Mom never mentioned how handsome the new hand was," Lyle breathed, coming back to the table. "Are you sweet on him?"

"You got the wrong pig by the tail, Lyle." Cal sat up to glare at Lyle. "I didn't come home to go getting tangled up in *that* sort of mess."

"Sorry." Lyle sat and ran his hands through his hair, just a shade darker than Mom's. "Just thought I'd twigged to something."

“Tend to your own rat-killin’,” Cal ordered. “If I decide to go courting, I’ll ask for help then.”

“No, you won’t,” Lyle countered. “Just like you won’t ask for help with Mom, or the ranch. I don’t want to see you go under, Cal, I swear I don’t. Do you think I don’t love the *Y Otra Cosa* too?”

“You left, didn’t you?”

“So did you!”

“And now I’m back.” Cal managed to keep his hand from shoving down the hat he wasn’t wearing.

“And now you’re set,” Lyle said, sitting back, “you’ve got your dander up and a two-by-four upside the head won’t move you.” He folded his hands on his stomach. “Granddad left the ranch to us as much as Mom, so you’ve a right to look at the books. You might ought to do that when you get home.”

“Is that what you did, last time?”

“If the *Y Otra Cosa* is taken, I lose out too. Yes, I looked. Mom kicked me out of her office the minute she got home, and I didn’t fight her about it, but I do have a right to see how my inheritance is being managed, just like you do. So—Doctor!” His scowl turned to a smile and he stood to greet a dark man in a lab coat as he walked into the alcove. Cal stood too.

“Cal,” Lyle said, “let me introduce Dr. Singh. Doctor, my brother, Cal MacGregor.”

“Ah, the college son, yes?” Dr. Singh took Cal’s hand with a gentle squeeze. “I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Cal MacGregor. May we sit?”

Wasn’t like he could say no, like refusing to hear would change things. Cal sat and folded his arms on the table.

Lyle wasn’t always right. And *he* wasn’t named Callan Stonewall MacGregor.

Into the silence as they settled, old Waylon sang about how easy life was in Luckenbach, Texas.

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Joseph was trying to be polite, trying to pretend he wasn't there, but it was hard as hell. Cal looked—he looked stricken. He didn't let it show in his face, but his eyes...

Lyle was, as Billie would say, big enough to hunt bear with a switch, but if Joseph leaned back just a little he could peer around Lyle to keep an eye on Cal. And he did feel like he had to. Whatever Lyle had said had put a worried look in Cal's eyes that Joseph hadn't seen when he faced down an angry cow or a rabid coyote, and now as Cal sat with the doctor he looked braced for more bad news.

Mrs. MacGregor had just fallen, hadn't she? Joseph was sure she was in a lot of pain, falling on an already bad hip, but Cal's face made Joseph wonder if the doctor was telling the MacGregor boys their mother was dying.

No, he wouldn't do that here. Emergency departments had special rooms to give families privacy in such times.

As the doctor talked, Joseph kept a sneaking eye on Cal and saw the news was not good. He'd spent every day for nearly two weeks staring at that face, the last nine days like a man in love. He ought to be able to tell when only politeness was keeping Cal from slugging someone or shooting something.

Cal dredged up a smile, then Lyle stood up and so did the doctor. Joseph could no longer see Cal, until the doctor headed out and Lyle stepped around the table to bend down and talk to a standing Cal. Joseph stared at his magazine, totally not watching out of the corner of his eye. Nope.

"I'm going home," Cal announced. "I'll be back before she's out of surgery tomorrow." He said it louder than the rest of the conversation, but still not loud. Joseph debated if it was a test to see if he was trying to eavesdrop, and settled for looking up with a questioning face.

"Ready?" Cal asked Joseph, giving him a version of that ghastly polite smile. "Morning comes early on the *Y Otra Cosa*."

"You're telling me," Joseph said, tossing down the magazine.

Cal asked for the keys before they were out of the building. Joseph shook his head.

"Let me get us out of Amarillo, then if you're determined, we'll switch."



“I’ll be needing to learn to drive in Amarillo,” Cal said. “Late Tuesday night’s as good a time as any.”

Cal driving in a city was nerve-wracking. Joseph kept his mouth shut and held onto the door as Cal drove for the next half hour like they’d fallen into a reboot of *The Road Warrior*. Every car was out to get them, and every driver but Cal was an idiot, and it was a wonder that no one died before they were out on the freeway and humming along pretty much alone.

It was late. They moved behind a cone of light, pushing it forward but never reaching it. The night air flowed through the truck and Joseph was finally warm. So naturally he got sleepy. He tried not to, but he yawned.

“You could sleep,” Cal said. “I won’t mind. Thanks for giving up your evening to help me out.”

Joseph thought about and discarded *my pleasure*. Instead he answered, “*De nada*.” It was maybe one-sixth of the Spanish he knew, and it meant *it was nothing*. Which was just about the truth.

Cal snorted. “Better watch it,” he said. “Too much Spanish and you’ll get yourself deported.”

“If I could deport myself to a nice bed right now, I might consider it,” Joseph said. “But this seat—well, it probably would be softer sitting on you. And seeing how you’ve lost most of your padding since you got home, that’s pretty sad.” Though he’d do it in a heartbeat given an invitation, oh yes.

“I’m surprised Mom hasn’t mentioned to you,” Cal said, “but she doesn’t like ‘Mrs. MacGregor’. When she married she was the last MacGregor, so she didn’t change her name. Dad took hers. She feels like ‘Mrs. MacGregor’ is a hint she don’t belong running the *Y Otra Cosa*. She’s a mite touchy about it.”

“Ah. I, um, call her *ma’am* to her face,” Joseph said. “I’ll get it right. Thanks for telling me.” It was the first mention Joseph had heard of Cal’s father. “What happened to your dad?” he asked.

“Ale McMurphy’s longhorn steer,” Cal said. “Went through his fence and ours, come to service our cows. Mixing breeds devalues the beef. Dad decided to put himself and Chisholm’s grand-sire in the way. Lost them both.”

Kind of like Cal had put himself and Chisholm between Joseph and an



angry mom-cow. In the green light from the dash, Joseph couldn't see Cal's face. He asked the next question anyway, softly. "How old were you?"

"Two months from being born."

"That's why the name?"

"That's why the name."

Joseph looked for something else to talk about, but the world beyond the green dash lights and the pale headlights was black. "I can't see any stars tonight," he said. "I've heard about the stars in Texas, but every time I think to look, I can't see them."

"In Massachusetts I'd wonder why anyone even believed in the stars," Cal said, "since you never saw 'em."

"Why in hell did you go all the way to Massachusetts to go to college?" Joseph asked. He could have gone to California to be gay, after all.

Cal chuckled. "About a half-dozen bullheaded reasons that don't matter anymore. Seen it, didn't like it, trotted myself right back home where I'm stayin', thank you very much. I won't be going back in the fall. And speaking of home—thank you for the picture. I didn't spot it till after dinner or I'd have said sooner."

"Oh, good! I was starting to wonder if it was ever going to show up." So he really was home forever. That explained the panic that night by the creek, maybe.

"It's beautiful," Cal said, still talking about the picture.

Joseph shrugged. "I—well, it would be hard to go wrong with such subjects."

"How did you manage to get Mom's face under the hat?" Cal asked. "When I take pictures of folks in hats you can't never see faces proper."

"I forced the flash." Joseph grinned and turned sideways on the seat so he could more easily talk with his hands as he explained about lighting angles and went on to how he'd chosen the composition, and taken at least fifty shots because the clouds kept moving, and finally Ms. MacGregor had laughed at him and pointed out they both had work to do. Cal asked if he'd had anyone

else “sit” to get their portrait taken, and Joseph told him about those sessions too. Before he ran down they were jolting their way back into the *Y Otra Cosa* yard.

“I’d sure like to see the others sometime,” Cal said as he shut off the truck.

“You’re welcome to come anytime. Right now if—” Joseph slid out of the truck but grabbed the door before he fell. “Ow!”

“What?” Cal ran around the truck, scanning the ground as he neared Joseph. “What’s wrong?”

“My leg fell asleep.” Way to be an idiot! Cal probably thought he got bit by a snake or something.

Cal snorted and took Joseph’s arm. “If that’s the worst you get from taking that driveway four times in one day, you’re doing just fine.” He helped Joseph limp towards the bunkhouse. Then Joseph realized it wasn’t as dark as it probably should be, and he looked up. And stopped.

“Wow,” he said softly. The clouds from earlier had moved off, and a hundred times the stars Joseph had ever seen lay spread above him. The sky was lit nearly from horizon to horizon, and right above him was a great brilliant slash of stars and light like a river in the sky. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

“City boys,” Cal murmured with a chuckle. “That’s the Milky Way. Your home galaxy. You really never saw it before?”

“I—no. Not like that.” He’d seen an anemic blur, a fuzzy ribbon pointed out as the “amazing” Milky Way one late night when half the city was blacked out. Joseph had never seen this. The stars were so huge he swore they quivered just beyond arm’s reach, and the Milky Way... “Would you—is it all right if I just crawl up in the truck bed and stare for a bit?”

“Good a place as any for it.” Cal guided Joseph to the side of the truck and he grabbed onto it. “But if you fall asleep, you’ll likely wake to Sekhmet washing your face.”

“Reckon I’d survive that,” Joseph said and Cal grinned. “But I’ll try to avoid it.”

“G’night, Joseph. Thanks for your help.”

“Good night, Cal.”

Cal walked away. Joseph looked from him to the sky and he just couldn’t believe the difference. It was the same sky, only three states away, but...

Inside the house a light came on. Joseph happened to know that Cal’s bedroom was on the far side of the house. He looked and the light was on in Ms. MacGregor’s office. Maybe Cal was looking for a place to hang the picture?

Whatever. Joseph limped his way into his room for a blanket, grabbed his camera bag and tripod, and staggered back out to climb into the truck bed.

From the creek he could hear frogs and crickets. The air was finally cool, and the view... well, he didn’t even mind the mosquitoes as he played with settings and snapped away.

Some unknown time later Joseph thought he might have got some decent shots, and knew he’d stayed up way later than he should have because he was yawning hard enough it hurt. He sighed and stretched, packed up his camera bag, then stood.

The light was still on in Ms. MacGregor’s office. Through the window Joseph could see Cal sitting at her desk, his head on his hand as he leaned over something. Telling Cal to quit being stubborn and go to bed was not his job—not his *right*—so Joseph slung his camera bag over one shoulder and his blanket over the other, grabbed his tripod and went to his own bed.

Maybe Cal would sleep in tomorrow. No way Billie would be dragging Cal out of bed like she often did to Joseph, right?

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Billie did drag Joseph out of bed in the morning—he didn’t even set an alarm, intending to sleep through the last possible second—and prodded him towards the house for breakfast.

“Just what were you up to last night?” she asked the third time she prodded him to shamle faster. “If you don’t move, all the sausages will be gone!”

“I finally saw the stars!” Joseph said. “Do you know in LA you can’t see the Milky Way? I got some great shots I think. Couldn’t look at them last

night, of course. I can't wait to see what I got. I should read up on night photography too. I want to send my mom a good picture—she won't believe it!"

"That woke you up." Billie laughed and poked him. "Better take your camera today, to wind you up when you're flagging."

"I take the little one with me every day now." Since Cal didn't mind it. Since that way Joseph got at least one new shot of Cal every day.

"Really?" Billie asked. "Boss lets you?"

"I don't take it out when I should be working, so he doesn't mind."

"Uh huh."

Ms. MacGregor's seat was empty, of course, but Cal was at breakfast. He told the hands about Ms. MacGregor's accident then handed the announcing over to Wobbie, who made a few comments about keeping the ranch going and then handed out assignments. Cal looked tired, and he didn't eat much around the four cups of coffee he drank.

Once Joseph yawned and Cal caught his eye, shaking his head with a small smile.

They worked on another tank that day. The windmill was in good shape, but the tank itself needed repairing, so it took a while and involved more than a little wrestling with slime-covered bolts out of sight. Cal was quiet, and Joseph didn't try to draw him out.

It was past time to eat, according to Joseph's stomach, when Cal's phone rang. His hands were covered in green, but Cal managed to get his phone out and answered.

"Cal." He was silent a moment, then he smiled. "Good. That's good. I—no, I'm out at the Long Neck tank... Surely. I'll be there. Yep." He ended the call and grinned at Joseph. "Mom's out of surgery. Lyle says the doctor thinks everything went great."

"Excellent!"

"Yeah. Now—" Cal picked up the wrench, "let's get this contraption put together."

The thing didn't magically start cooperating, but eventually Joseph and Cal got it in working order. There was no convenient ghost-house with a porch to rest on after, so Cal drove home eating his lunch one-handed. Joseph had both hands to use on his sandwich, but it still wasn't easy eating while the truck bounced.

Back at the ranch Joseph was ready to work on Cal's list, but instead he was set free. Before he got out of the shower the truck was gone, with Cal running off to Amarillo. Should have expected that, but even hearing half the conversation, it hadn't occurred to Joseph that Cal would leave the ranch while there was still enough light to work.

Set unceremoniously adrift, Joseph took his camera to the barn. Billie was standing in the aisle, leaning over one of the stall doors. She looked up when she heard him.

"Come here," she said softly, a brilliant smile on her face, "and see one of the best parts of this life."

Joseph went. In the stall was one of the mares, standing over a little brown ball of damp fluff with a white blaze on its face. "She had her baby?" Joseph asked. Duh. But Billie didn't laugh at him. The mare nuzzled the little one, licking its shoulder, and the little head bobbed, heavy on a long, hard-to-control neck.

"Called a foal. Mebbe twenty minutes ago," Billie breathed. "He's a mite tired, but any minute—" The foal lurched, sticking impossibly long legs out in front of him. "There he goes," Billie said, as the foal lurched again, trying to get back legs under him but it didn't quite work out. He rested a moment then lurched again, almost made it up, but didn't. One more time and he was up, balanced on his wee stilt-legs, but none of his feet were under his body and he didn't seem sure what to do about it.

"Almost there!" Joseph whispered. "Come on, little guy!"

"He'll get there," Billie promised. "Mom's got the milk, and he's a hungry boy."

The little fuzzy tail was spinning furiously, trying to provide helicopter-like support, but the little feet slid and the baby horse fell back to the straw. Joseph gasped like the manly man he was.

“It’s good and deep,” Billie said, “so he can fall all he needs to.”

The little one, though, didn’t have any patience for this falling business. He lurched right back up and this time got his front feet under him, and a little buck of the back end brought his hind feet where they needed to be. The foal stood there a moment, tail spinning as he pondered the new situation.

“Mom,” Joseph muttered, “why are you all the way over there?”

Billie chuckled. The foal picked up a leg, wobbled on the three left, put it down in the same place.

“How do you humans balance on just two?” Billie breathed.

The foal put his head down and, in a wild flinging of legs, managed to propel himself to his mother’s side. Joseph laughed.

“Just like Cal! Puts his head down and charges on in.”

Billie snorted. “Even when he doesn’t have a clue what he’s doing, yep. That’s the wrong end of Momma, little man.”

The foal had fetched up against his mother’s front legs. He leaned on her and stretched his neck towards the milk, but her body was too long or his neck was too short or both. Mom stepped away and the foal staggered and fell, but he was back up in one lurch and this time he got his head in the right place. The little tail twirled twice as fast as before. Billie sighed.

“Seen it fifty times. Never gets old.”

“Awesome,” Joseph said, leaning on the stall door. His hip pressed against the camera in his pocket and he felt like an idiot. He could have got some great shots!

“You sweet on Cal?” Billie asked.

“I—”

“Just you, me, and the horses,” Billie said. “And none of us gonna say a word.”

“Yes!” Joseph said.

“There’s queers in Texas,” Billie said. “We mostly hide behind the steers.”

“Cal is—?”

“Didn’t say that,” Billie interrupted. “I dunno. Never saw it my place to ask. He used to drive into town on a Saturday night, takin’ girls to the drive-in or DQ. Town girls, what didn’t know beans about living on a full working ranch. Went round with Betsy Layton for a bit, folks was thinking he might marry her, but it never looked that way to me.” She shook her head. “Cal’s no fool. Betsy’s cute as a possum and sweet besides, but that girl is tendsome as they come. Sure as shootin’ she could never stand up to the *Y Otra Cosa*. Could never stand up to Cal neither—that boy needs reining in once in a while, and Betsy Layton hain’t got enough mean to knock him down when he needs it.”

“When we were in town,” Joseph said miserably, “Cal punched Steele Kennedy and told him to stay away from Betsy Layton.”

“Yet he ain’t gone to see her and he’s been home nigh on two weeks.” Billie tipped her hat back, wiped her arm across her forehead. “I’ll tell you what. Steele Kennedy most times needs a sock in the face. And Cal didn’t ’zactly date Betsy—he did his homework with her, danced with her at barn-raising and what have you, but it was other girls he took to the drive-in. Not my place to say much of nothin’, but that’s all common knowledge. No blame to me if no one else sees what’s in front their face.”

“So... you’re saying you don’t know?”

“Didn’t I say that first?” Billie demanded. She took her hat off to fan herself. “Humid enough to drown a bullfrog today. Reckon we might could get rain by nightfall.” She smacked Joseph’s shoulder with the hat. “Don’t be lookin’ all down in the mouth. Want my advice? Wait on it. See what falls out. City-folk are always in such an all-fired hurry—you just met the man two weeks ago. You’re right here, Cal ain’t goin’ nowhere. Give it time.”

“Why do old people always say that?” Joseph asked, dodging away with a laugh as Billie swung at him harder. “You’d think you guys would know you’re running out of time!”

“Get over here, boy, I’ll learn you who’s out of time!”

Joseph laughed as he ran.

Outside, the heat and humidity, as well as the sunlight, hit like running into

a sauna. Billie hadn't chased him into the sun, so Joseph slowed to a walk and pondered options.

He could go play with the pictures he'd taken. Billie would loan him her Wi-Fi hotspot later so he could send a few to his mom. He could go nap, considering how tired he was, or would be once he settled somewhere for a bit. He could grab that history book Cal had loaned him and fall asleep over it, maybe on the porch swing? There someone would be sure to wake him up in time for supper.

Billie was right. It was a hot one, and the humidity didn't help. Especially as he couldn't go jump in the Pacific Ocean. Joseph thought of the little fan in his room, and of trying to sleep in stifling heat. He thought of all the things one of the hands might think it funny to do if they came on him sleeping on the porch when they'd been out working all afternoon. Maybe a nap wasn't such a great idea.

Well, there wasn't an ocean to jump in, but there was water. Joseph eyed the treetops sticking out of the canyon that held the creek. It would be cooler down there. And he could probably get some great shots, not to mention putting his feet in the water. Joseph popped into his room to change into shorts and the flip-flops he hadn't touched once since he took them out of his suitcase. He snatched up a towel and his camera, shoved his new hat on his head and headed out.

With every step down into the canyon, the air was a tiny bit cooler. Joseph took a few shots as he walked, but he was too eager to reach the water to linger.

When he reached the swimming hole, a soft *plop* told him he'd disturbed the denizens at least a little. The sun fell on half the pool so the tiny ripples on its surface cast dancing reflections on the canyon wall above it. Dragonflies flitted about, a cicada buzzed, and Joseph grinned and dropped his towel under the swing-tree.

He didn't mean to go swimming. He was tired and alone, and in the ocean if you were smart you didn't swim alone or tired, let alone both. So he was just going to stick his feet in the water and take some pictures. But eventually it dawned on Joseph that he was: one, completely alone and likely to stay that



way since no one knew where he was and also everyone else was still working, and, two, next to a swimming hole that was deeper than his head for less than a third of its area and also contained no waves, sharks, or jellyfish to worry about.

Two minutes after those dual realizations, Joseph was skinny-dipping and it was glorious.

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The hoped-for rain didn't come that night, but the clouds hung around so Joseph went to bed early instead of stargazing. He did notice as he was falling into bed that the light in Ms. MacGregor's study was on. Cal hadn't made it home for supper, so he must have come while Joseph was in the shower.

The day after Ms. MacGregor's surgery was hotter and more humid. Even over breakfast, tempers were short. Cal looked exhausted, and he snapped at Lafe when he hadn't even done anything but ask for more pancakes. Joseph was assigned to work with Cal again, and he resolved to keep his mouth shut as they rode out, no matter how Cal snapped at him.

Great dark clouds formed off in the distance as the day went on, mirroring the look on Cal's face at times. Joseph wanted to ask what the hell was wrong with him, but he didn't.

As soon as they got back to the ranch Cal ditched Joseph again. It was later in the afternoon, but still far earlier than Joseph was used to being done working, so he went looking, found Lupe busy in the kitchen, and asked her about something needing doing. Lupe sent him off with her youngest son to help clean "great-granddad's den" since her second-youngest was spending the summer in Mexico with his grandmother. Apparently a lot of the chores weren't getting done because of that.

Joseph followed the ten-year-old Emilio through the maze-like house. He had to love the layout, which must have grown organically as MacGregors found they needed more space. No one would actually design a house that sprawled like that, would they?

Joseph had seen the common dining room. He'd been in the hall between it and the side porch every day. He'd been in the kitchen once or twice. Those parts were, if not modern, at least updated a bit. The "family" portion of the

house, though—Joseph couldn't believe all the stuff everywhere. It was like a museum, or a thrift store. In one corner stood a cigar-store wooden Indian, next to a knight's suit of armor. A case in a hall held a bunch of spooky looking dolls, and one entire wall in a room he passed was full of stained glass art.

Great-granddad's thing, Joseph found when Emilio at last led into the den, was saddles. Emilio told him all about Storm MacGregor and every single saddle as they cleaned and polished the collection.

When the work was done and Emilio dispatched back to his mother, Joseph went skinny-dipping again because he could.

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On the third day after Ms. MacGregor's surgery, Joseph was assigned to work with Cal once more. The damn man had snapped at him twice before they even left the house, and Joseph's patience was already gone with everyone else's—up in the smoke that hung in the air from brush fires started by dry lightning from the damn clouds that kept forming all huge and photogenic, looming about threateningly, sounding off with occasional lightning and thunder, but *not raining*.

As they rode out of the paddock the heat was already oppressive, the air thick and hazy, and Cal snapped something about “seat like a sack of potatoes.” Joseph decided that if Cal MacGregor didn't straighten his ass up, he was going to learn that country boys weren't the only ones that knew how to sock a jerk in the face when he totally deserved it. Joseph was past caring that every line of Cal's face and body showed his exhaustion, that he knew damn well the man had barely slept in four days. Who was it making the damn stupid choice to work all day, visit his mom evenings, then spend all goddamn night in her office doing whatever the frick took so much time? Cal could leave one of those things out to sleep once in a while. He was the damn boss, wasn't like anyone was going to call him out for taking a fricking nap.

The job of the day apparently somehow involved a normal-looking truck tire, rim and all, tied on the back of a packhorse, on the end of a lead tied to Cal's saddle. Wobbie had said at breakfast that they needed to deal with a “pressure warning.” Joseph eyed the tire as he rode but he swallowed his

questions. Cal was in a foul mood, and Joseph wasn't going to go asking for the waspish remarks.

New to Texas Joseph might be, but he knew the feeling of a storm coming as they rode into a gully and out of sight of human habitation. He hoped the storm came soon, hoped it rained like no tomorrow, because both fires and tempers around the *Y Otra Cosa* needed a good dousing.

The ride was long, as usual. Joseph spent it riding behind his boss, where he could stare at Cal's butt. It improved his temper a bit.

The tire, it turned out, was for a "center-pivot irrigation system." As they came over a rise, Joseph saw big circles of green on a brown backdrop. Crop circles, for real. Each circle had a short tower in the middle, extending an arm to the edge of the field. Great metal arms, on wheels. Ah.

In the field Cal led the way into, one of the tires on the irrigator was nearly flat. The sensor gauge on the tire's valve, Cal explained in short, sharp sentences, had sent a warning to the system's hub, which had sent a warning to Wobbie's cell phone. If it went flat, it might damage the whole expensive system, so Cal was sent out right away to deal with it.

Middle of the plains, nothing but grass and sky to see, and Cal and Joseph were changing a tire.

Helping Sefu with cars, Joseph had changed many a tire over the years, but Cal didn't want to act like Joseph knew how to do anything, so Joseph let him change the damn tire and stood there watching as Cal fought with the lug nuts. Joseph knew the trick of standing on the lug wrench when the nuts wouldn't budge, but he didn't share it with Cal. He'd probably get snapped at for being right.

As the heat built, the clouds stacked up again. Joseph watched them grow in puffs and swirls as they advanced and Cal's temper deteriorated even further. *Come on, rain*, Joseph silently urged. Riding home in the rain would probably feel good, and if it rained hard enough it might keep Cal home until he accidentally took a damn nap.

When Cal got the tire off, he let Joseph help to set the new tire in place, but then he beat Joseph's grab for the lug wrench. Joseph stepped back with a shrug. Maybe enough work would tire Cal out so he'd sleep. And if he fell

asleep on his horse, Cal the born cowboy certainly wouldn't fall off. Joseph grinned at the thought of leading Chisholm in circles while Cal napped, since the moment the horse stopped he'd probably wake up and...

And how the hell was he now grinning fondly at the back of Cal's head, when he'd wanted to slug the man ten minutes ago? When he'd be done with the damn tire already if he were allowed, but instead Cal kept dropping lug nuts and even managing to let the lug wrench slip off because he was tired and uncoordinated?

Whatever. A cool breeze blew out of the huge looming cloud, and Joseph lifted his face into it.

Cal dropped the lug wrench and stood so fast he almost fell over, whirling around to stare at the sky.

"What?" Joseph asked. "Rabid coyote? Invisible buffalo stampede? We're actually standing in a dry river bed and God just asked where's our ark?"

"Pick up the tools," Cal ordered, looking around. Joseph shrugged and bent to finish the job.

"Leave it!" Cal snapped as Joseph gave each nut a last turn. "Let's go!"

Joseph bundled the tools into the bag and clutched it to his chest as Cal grabbed him, twisting a hand in his shirt to haul him up. The old tire they left where Cal had dropped it, and that told Joseph this wasn't just about Cal's bad mood. He put some of his own power behind Cal dragging him out of the field. Cal took the tool bag and shoved it into the packhorse's saddlebag. Joseph looked around as he swung up on his mare, and he saw the funnel dropping from the giant cloud.

"Oh holy fuck."

"It's between us and the house," Cal said, turning Chisholm with a rein on his neck. "And it's coming right at us." He shoved his hat down on his head. "Don't fall off," he warned with a strained grin over his shoulder, then he prodded Chisholm and the horse took off. Joseph leaned low over Delilah's neck and urged her after.

It might be coming right at them, but that didn't mean it would stay on that

course. Why were they running perpendicular to its path? Why not just run away as fast and far as they could go?

Because canyons maybe, blocking their escape route. Because wind patterns. Whatever. Cal knew Texas and Joseph didn't, so he raced after Cal and prayed that lack of sleep hadn't fatally screwed up Cal's judgment.

Trust Cal. Didn't he know yet to trust Cal?

Trust meant he didn't need to think. Freed from the need for rational thought, Joseph's mind turned to gibbering terror. He looked to his right and the funnel had almost dropped to the ground. He leaned lower and the saddle horn bit into his stomach but he thought Delilah went a little faster so he stayed there. He looked again and the funnel had receded a little, but Cal was looking too and not slowing, so Joseph and his horse thundered on.

Out of the blue he wished he could take pictures. God, the ride would be so amazing if there weren't a damn tornado coming! Delilah bunched and stretched under him, running like she was born to do. Ahead Cal moved with Chisholm like music, riding like *he* was born to do. It was beautiful, it was amazing—Joseph's hat lifted in the wind. He snatched it and his hair streamed behind him and suddenly it was cold. Why—

"Hail!" Cal yelled. "Put your hat on!"

Joseph put his hat on, shoved it down but it didn't—he took his hands off the reins and stuffed his hair under his hat then shoved the thing down, and it fit tighter and stayed on. He snatched up the reins.

Off to his right the white funnel touched down, and was dyed brown.

"That's MY goddamn dirt!" Cal yelled at it.

Delilah was wet with sweat. The packhorse ran in a jolting gait beside Joseph, the line between its halter and Cal's saddle taut. The wind roared and far off the sky was a stunning pale green, but under the cloud—

Oh God. Two funnels.

Ahead of him, Cal cut the packhorse loose. Chisholm leaped forward. Joseph put his arm on the saddle horn and leaned lower still and yelled to Delilah, and she ran harder. The packhorse fell farther behind with every step

and Joseph spared a fleeting thought to hope she survived, but then he was back to hoping he and Cal survived.

Hail pelted Joseph with tiny sharp blows. The horses came thundering over a rise and Joseph saw the Nine Tails tank, and the ghost-house beyond it. Fucking Cal, genius!

“Go right, look for the cellar door!” Cal shouted over the screaming wind. The first funnel was nearly on them, wide and black with debris. Chisholm leaped the dead hedge and plunged to the left across the yard. Joseph yanked Delilah to the right, through a hole in the hedge. They hadn’t gone three running leaps before he spotted the slanted door opening down into the ground.

“Here!” he shouted, leaping off and dropping one rein. “Cal, it’s here!”

Locked! There was a fucking padlock on a chain! Son of a bitch, who abandoned his ranch forever but locked the goddamn cellar before he left?

Cal snatched Joseph behind him and shot at the chain. It wasn’t like the movies. It took three shots before the chain was in pieces. Three shots while the storm howled closer—Joseph leaped to pull the chain out, and Cal grabbed a door and dragged it upward.

“Hold this!” he ordered. Joseph held the door; Cal grabbed the horses’ reins. Chisholm snorted and tried to back away, but Cal talked to him too soft for Joseph to hear, and the little horse let himself be led down the steps. Delilah followed Chisholm. In half a moment Cal was back, helping Joseph fight the wind to pull the door down. Hail clattered on the wood, percussion under the wind section howling as they fought to bolt the doors in the dark. Finally the mechanism slid home.

“Here,” Cal said in the utter dark and roaring wind. His hand slid down Joseph’s arm to take his hand so Cal could lead him away from the doors, both of them bumping into things in blackness until Joseph ran into a horse’s rump. “Here,” Cal said again, leading Joseph between the heaving, sweat-slicked sides of the horses. “Farthest corner from the door, and pray however seems best to you.” He took his hand from Joseph’s. “Poor things,” he said. “The horses are too tuckered out to be scared.”

“Wish I was,” Joseph said. Cal’s hand came back to his arm and squeezed.

“Ain’t you glad I didn’t toss that dead coyote down here?” Cal asked.

Joseph laughed. Outside the wind shrieked over the rumbling sound of a freight train. Across the cellar the doors rattled, hammered by hail and under attack. Inches away, the man Joseph loved stood waiting to maybe die beside him, and Joseph still didn’t even know how Cal felt.

He took his hat off and, by feel, put it on the saddle horn of the horse next to him. Then he reached, guessing distances from the location and angle of Cal’s hand, and his fingers found hat. He plucked it off.

“Joseph, what—”

He followed the sound of Cal’s voice until his lips landed almost right on target, and Cal stopped talking. He just stood there while Joseph adjusted his aim, and then his arms went around Joseph and he became an active participant in the kiss.

Scratch that. He *took over* the kiss. Cal wrapped a fist in Joseph’s hair and kissed him hard, a desperate, needing, demanding kiss that set Joseph’s heart thundering in his ears, drowning out the storm above. Then he broke the kiss, caught Joseph’s head in his hands and his lips ghosted over Joseph’s cheek, across his forehead in tiny kisses so tender Joseph’s chest ached as well as places farther south. Cal kissed his eyelids and his mouth again and ran his hands over Joseph, molding Joseph’s body to his as he pressed their lips together. Joseph opened his mouth and Cal accepted the invitation, grabbing fistfuls of Joseph’s hair again as he deepened the kiss. All Cal’s focus, it felt like, everything that Cal was, was in that kiss, and Joseph was drowning. All he could do was cling to Cal’s strong, sexy body, holding them together with all his strength as Cal kissed his brains out.

Lightning lit the basement even through Joseph’s closed eyelids, but he was lost in Cal’s kiss.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Cal was certain they—himself, Joseph, Chisholm and Delilah—were going to die. The twister looked strong as hell, and the house above them was not. So when Joseph kissed him, he went with it. Why not?

Went with it, hell. He went *for* it. He grabbed Joseph back and kissed him just how he'd been wanting to, driving back from Amarillo tired and feeling sorry for himself, his weary mind wandering to better ways a man might could spend a gorgeous Texas night. The wind roared and above them something thudded as the house started to come apart, and Cal kissed Joseph with all he had, instead of apologizing for being too damned focused on an effing tire to notice a twister coming up.

He couldn't stop the tornado tearing up the *Y Otra Cosa*. He couldn't get to the other hands, let alone protect them. So he put his all into kissing Joseph, distracting them both from the imminent death he also couldn't do a damn thing about.

Something slammed the house and everything shook. Joseph jumped. Cal held him tighter. The horses snorted and startled but they had nowhere to run. Dust rained down, but Cal just went on kissing Joseph. He hadn't had many kisses. By God, his last one would make up for that.

Cal knew he was in trouble when he heard the soft sounds of their kiss—when the wind had calmed enough he could hear it.

They were going to live. Now what?

He'd seen two funnels. Best to be sure it was safe before they tried the door. Cal let his hands frame Joseph's neck, fingers in that glorious hair and his thumbs on the pulse points in his throat, feeling Joseph's heart pound as Cal kissed him.

Then he felt guilty. He felt like a damned fool. Handy, seeing how he *was* a damned fool. He pulled out of the kiss and he had to push gently back to keep Joseph's mouth from following him.

"Cal..." Joseph said softly in the darkness. His fingers brushed Cal's cheek.



“I’m sorry.” Cal would have stepped away but he didn’t have anywhere to go, pressed up between two terrified horses under a falling-down house. “That should never—”

“I started it,” Joseph said, laughter in his voice. “Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I shouldn’t have let it go on.” Cal managed to take his hands off Joseph, but he could still feel Joseph’s warmth so close to him. “I’m sorry. I can’t...”

“Can’t what? Kiss? You sure as hell can!”

“I can’t—the ranch needs me.”

“I didn’t ask you to run away with me, Cal. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m *on* the ranch, so that’s not much of an excuse for whatever you think you committed yourself to.”

Cal tried to gather up his thoughts, but they’d been all spun out everywhere by racing the tornado then kissing Joseph. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “We—better see if we can get out.”

“I guess we better,” Joseph said.

Cal stumbled his way back across the cellar, calling himself names in his head to avoid thinking what he’d see when he lifted the doors. When he found the doors with outstretched hands, he managed the bolt easily by himself, since the doors weren’t jumping around. He pushed one up, keeping his eyes on the task.

Sunlight smacked him in the face like there’d never been a storm. Cal slit his eyes against the brightness and went to bring the horses out. As he came up the stairs, his cell phone rang.

“Cal,” he answered. “Joseph’s with me and we’re safe. Has everyone checked in?”

“You’re the last,” Wobbie said. “Damn you, boy, don’t scare me like that! Why didn’t you answer?”

“We hid out in the cellar of the Nine Tails house,” Cal said. “Phone didn’t ring till we came out. How—” he still hadn’t looked around. “How bad is it, Wobbie?”

“Bad enough. Didn’t it go right over you? The house held?”

“The tornado dropped a tree on it,” Cal said. That must have been the crash. “Maybe that’s why the cellar wasn’t breached.”

“God’s got a use for you yet, son. Is the tank still there?”

Cal lifted his eyes, and shook his head. “No,” he told Wobbie. “Windmill, tank, pump—it’s all gone.”

“Meet me at the L-bend of Limp Creek,” Wobbie said. “We’ll ride the path and see where we stand. Right now I’ve got to call your mother.”

“Limp Creek,” Cal said. “I’ll be there.” He put the phone back in his pocket.

“How bad is it?” Joseph asked. Cal shook his head.

“No one’s dead,” he said. “Everything else we can rebuild.” Somehow. If the money could be found. If the herd wasn’t gone.

“Isn’t Limp Creek where the herd is?” Joseph asked, not knowing what he was saying so it wouldn’t be right for Cal to sock him one, even if he hadn’t been kissing the man senseless ten minutes ago.

God help him, he was such a damned fool.

“Can you find your way to the ranch?” Cal asked. “No reason for both of us to be out.” They were covered in dust, looked like a gentler version of a coal mining accident. The only part of Joseph that wasn’t dust-coated was his mouth.

Hell. Cal pulled out his bandana, wiped his own face. Offered it to Joseph.

“It’s... back where the tornado came from?” Joseph said, scrubbing at his own dust-coating. “Only farther on?”

“Better stick with me.” Cal took Chisholm’s reins and led the horse to the puddle that remained of the Nine Tails tank. “Don’t let her drink too much,” he told Joseph as he followed Cal’s lead. “We’ve still got a long ways to go.”

After a brief slurp for the horses, Cal mounted and so did Joseph. Cal put Chisholm at a trot, riding after the tornado. Joseph rode next to him, his eyes mostly on the tornado’s path. What was there to see? Dirt. Dirt, where there’d

been grass an hour ago. Dirt and matchsticks, where there'd been an outlying stand of trees. Dirt and barbed wire slinky where there'd been a fence.

Cal couldn't stop himself toting up the damage. He didn't know the numbers—would they have to redrill the Nine Tails well? How much for a whole new windmill?—but his brain tried to add it up anyway. Too much, he knew that. It was all going to cost too much, and he'd waited too long to sell. The *Y Otra Cosa* in other hands, himself and Mom living on Lyle's charity—

There was insurance. It'd never pay enough, but it might keep the ranch solvent if it paid fast enough. Needed to find the paperwork—he hadn't thought to look for that yet, tied up in all the tangles of the ranch's financial status. How much would it pay? What was the deductible? What was his best bet, where did he start to repair the damage?

The herd was most important. If the herd survived, the ranch might could. Start with the cattle, and work the priorities outwards. Water and grass and fencing. Shelter for the cattle. Then irrigation, so he'd have something to feed them come winter. Maybe sell off more than Mom had planned if beef prices stayed high, get more cash this year in return for having less to sell next year, and hope Providence didn't throw anything else at the *Y Otra Cosa* for a few years.

Planning on luck was no plan at all.

“Are you sure we should be chasing the tornado?” Joseph asked. “I mean, that was a perfectly good cellar back there, and either the tornado will come back and we'll want it, or it won't and the ranch will still be here when the funnel's completely gone. Right?”

“It's not going to turn back,” Cal said. “Weather don't work like that.”

“Really liked that cellar,” Joseph muttered soft enough maybe he thought Cal didn't hear. Cal felt himself blush. Damned fool, letting himself take advantage of the situation. He didn't want a boyfriend, had no time for a boyfriend, nor for the hassles of a *boyfriend* in Texas, and he should never have gambled on not surviving.

Cal MacGregor, sixth generation rancher, kissing a boy in rural Texas? Of *course* he was going to have to live with it.

“I went to a Pride parade once,” Joseph said. “Mostly because Sefu, my step-dad—well, mom’s boyfriend for the last fifteen years—told me I could be gay if I kept it quiet. Flamboyance isn’t my thing, but I bought a rainbow shirt just for the occasion.”

“I was out in Massachusetts,” Cal said. Emphasis on *was*. “Here only Mom and Lyle know. And it’s staying that way.”

Joseph chuckled. “I hate to tell you, but one more person figured it out a little while ago.”

Cal had a moment of panic, thinking he meant Billie or worse, Lafe, but then he realized Joseph meant himself, referring to the kiss.

“I don’t announce it,” Joseph said, “but my family and close friends know.”

“Sometimes in Massachusetts I thought I might ought to just wear a sign,” Cal said. “I got mighty weary of coming out, of folks being surprised. ‘Gay cowboy? What is this, Brokeback Mountain?’”

Joseph snorted. “At least you didn’t have random people explaining that you should be proud, since ‘two-spirit people’ are a long and honored tradition of Native Americans, seeing that we’re all one big homogenous group of noble savages.”

“I’m sorry I took advantage—”

“I kissed you,” Joseph said again. “I was half-expecting to get punched for it. I was just hoping the darkness would throw off your aim.”

“Don’t—” Cal began and stopped. He took a deep breath. “Just—forget it for me, will you? I thought we were going to die. I can’t—I’ve got too much on my plate.”

Joseph didn’t say anything for a time. Cal didn’t dare look at him.

“It was a kiss, Cal,” he said finally. “It was one hell of a kiss, yeah, but it was just a kiss, not a proposal of marriage. It barely even qualified as making out.”

“Joseph—”

“I’m not going to out you to the entire town of Vega, population twelve and three-quarters,” Joseph snapped. “I’m not going to out you to anybody. I’d think you’d know I’m not that much of an asshole, but since you don’t, I’ll say it. I’m not a MacGregor so I’m not sure what my word is worth, but it’s all I’ve got. Good enough?”

“I’m sorry,” Cal said yet again. He’d meant—he didn’t know what he’d meant. But he hadn’t meant to cast aspersions on Joseph’s character. He just needed Joseph to understand something he didn’t quite understand himself. He couldn’t go losing himself. The *Y Otra Cosa* needed him.

And he could get lost in Joseph all right. Cal felt certain he could spend a hundred years exploring Joseph and not come to the end of wanting to explore Joseph.

God help him.

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Joseph couldn’t take it, couldn’t stand riding beside Cal, didn’t want to fall behind and stare at Cal’s backside. He prodded Delilah with his heels until she broke into a slow, reluctant run, and he passed Cal and left him behind. It wasn’t like he could get lost with the tornado’s trail wide as a house and right there.

Delilah was tired, though, and he didn’t want to get yelled at for abusing the horse. So when he was a good distance ahead of Cal, he reined her back down to a trot.

*“You don’t let her slow down,”* Cal had told him once. *“You tell her to. She’s got to know that you’re in charge.”*

Fucking Cal. Fucking stupid Joseph, for thinking it would be any different. Billie had warned him. Queers in Texas stayed in hiding.

That had not been the kiss of a man who wanted to hide. Fucking goddamn Texas.

Eventually Cal caught up to Joseph, but he didn’t say anything to Joseph and Joseph didn’t say anything to him.

The herd was fine, Wobbie told Cal when he and Joseph finally met up with Wobbie after an eternity of silent and distant riding next to each other.

Wobbie reported that he'd gathered the hands and put them to riding the whole Limp Creek parcel to look for damaged fence or damaged animals. Cal nodded and turned Chisholm back to the tornado-wide path of destruction. Joseph followed, since he wasn't told not to.

Riding the tornado trail took the rest of the day. Joseph had started taking pictures as the tornado moved away—just like Cal had said would happen—because as long as it was headed away it was awesome. Then he started taking pictures of the damage. Cal would need pictures for his insurance company, right? Might as well make himself useful, since he did work for the man.

Wobbie was unusually silent. Cal only spoke when he had to. Joseph rode out to the side of the others to get clear shots, and wondered if a funeral wouldn't have been less somber.

“Whattaya reckon?” Cal said when they'd come to the point where the trail first began like the rampage of a giant that magically appeared out of nowhere. Which was pretty much what had happened.

Wobbie looked back the way they'd come and pursed his lips. “Two hunnerd thou,” he said. “And six months. Two hunnerd thousand in labor and materials, and six months to get her back to where she was.”

“Two hundred thousand,” Cal said like it choked him.

“We've had worse.” Wobbie slapped Cal on the arm, raising dust. “Go wash up. Call your momma—she don't want to hear me sayin' you're fine, she wants to hear you. Better yet, go see her. Let her see you. Tell her we got this. We've had worse.”

Cal nodded and Chisholm started a slow plodding walk towards the windmill that was all Joseph could see of the ranch headquarters, the horse's head drooping as much as his rider's. Joseph tugged Delilah back from following. He was just a hand. He hadn't just taken a two hundred thousand dollar financial hit, and there was still light to work by.

“What should I do, Wobbie?” he asked as it started to rain. Joseph's eyes went to Cal, he dragged them back.

Wobbie shoved his hat back, looking Joseph over. “Shower quick,” he said, “and get in that truck before Cal does. Only one tree betwixt here and Amarillo, and it don't need some sleep-addled cowboy wrapped 'round it.”

“Got it.” Joseph tugged Delilah’s head around and prodded her into one more run.

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When Joseph got in the truck, he was prepared for hours of waiting around. He had his laptop for photo editing, and two books in case he got bored with that. He had a jacket, some cash, change for the vending machine so he could buy a drink he wanted instead of what was handed him, and he had his cowboy boots on so he wasn’t so short next to Lyle, and also so that if the man tried to pick on Cal, then Joseph could implant a Cal-bought boot so far in Lyle’s ass he’d need a surgeon to get it out.

He thought maybe cowboy boots had narrow toes for just that reason.

Cal was so sunk in gloom that he didn’t even fight when he got to the truck and found Joseph in the driver’s seat. He just swore and got in, and before Joseph got the truck on the highway Cal was asleep.

By the time they got to Amarillo, Joseph was more than ready to give anyone who messed with Cal a taste of his new boots.

When Cal got out of the truck, though, Lyle MacGregor enfolded his little brother in a long hug, then dragged him off to the elevators. Joseph followed along until he could settle himself outside Ms. MacGregor’s room. Lyle wouldn’t fight with Cal in front of her, he figured, so just outside was good. And if they didn’t come out till visiting hours were over, he’d still be there to protect Cal from assaulting trees in his sleep on the drive home.

When Cal came out of his mother’s room he didn’t look any happier than he had going in. He was still avoiding looking at Joseph too. Joseph drove him home, Cal falling asleep before they got out of Amarillo and not waking till the truck stopped jolting in his front yard.

He didn’t say good night, just muttered “thanks” and fled.

Before Joseph fell into bed, he looked out the window to see that the light was on in Ms. MacGregor’s office.

At breakfast Joseph was assigned to ride with Wobbie for the first time since Cal came home. He was still in the truck before Cal that afternoon,

without Wobbie's orders this time. Cal had a little more spark to him, but Joseph didn't argue and he also didn't budge, so he got to drive Cal to Amarillo again.

Over the next few days Cal went from despair to anger. He drove all the hands to work harder, and himself hardest of all. When the hands were done for the day he was still working, fixing the things around the ranch from his list. Joseph helped with everything he could, and still he was in the truck before Cal every night, though now Cal left right after dinner.

"Why?" Cal asked him the fifth night, after he woke up to the lights of Amarillo. "I've treated you like dirt."

Joseph shrugged as he drove. "You've got a lot on your plate," he said.

"Seems right foolish to put so much time into helping a man too stubborn and prideful to appreciate it."

"It's my time to waste."

Cal scrubbed at his face. "I—I'm not going to change my mind."

"Fuck off, Cal."

Ms. MacGregor had been moved to a "rehabilitative facility." Lyle no longer met Cal at the door—the facility was close to his office, so he visited at lunch and brought his wife and kids after work, but they were all gone before Cal made it into town each night. At first Joseph stuck to waiting outside, until Ms. MacGregor caught sight of him and demanded he "get his rear inside and tell all about the ranch." Now he came in with Cal, and provided corroboration and additional information as Cal told her everything about the day at the ranch.

He only had different information because he *still* was working with anyone but Cal every day. Joseph had come to dread the days he rode with Billie, since she kept trying to get the reason for the change out of him.

Joseph figured out ten minutes into the first visit that Ms. MacGregor thought Cal was hiding things from her. And Cal might be, and Joseph didn't want to start anything between them, so he was careful what he said and wondered if the family was auditioning for a reality show, with all the drama and secrets.



He was careful enough that even after his “fuck off” in the truck, Cal didn’t take Joseph along when his mother dispatched him to have a talk with an “uppity” nurse. As soon as the door closed, though, she grabbed Joseph’s arm and pulled herself and her wheelchair to him.

“Did something happen to Lupe?” she demanded.

“No.” Joseph shook his head. “She’s fine. Why?”

“Consarn it.” Ms. MacGregor sat back. “Cal’s getting skinnier,” she growled. “No reason he ought to be, with Lupe to feed him up.”

Damn. He’d thought he was imagining it. Joseph shrugged. “He’s working pretty hard. I’d be surprised if all the hands aren’t a bit skinnier, the way he works everyone.”

She ran an eye over him. “You’re putting on weight. Muscle, I mean. Not quite the scrawny city boy I hired.”

Joseph grinned. “That city boy would be dead by now, ma’am.”

“You’re not riding with Cal anymore? You two have a falling out?”

“No’m. I guess—” Joseph searched for, found an answer. “I guess he decided I know enough to be trusted out of his sight.”

“But you come with him every night.”

Joseph spread his hands. “I learned to drive in Los Angeles.”

She chuckled and leaned to grab his knee, pulling herself close again. Joseph remembered that she knew Cal was gay, and prayed—

“I’ll tell you what, Joseph,” she said. “I surely do hate jello.”

The door opened; she snatched her hand back. Cal came in to assure her that the nurse hadn’t meant to be patronizing and would stop. Ms. MacGregor snorted disbelief, but moved to quizzing Cal about the health and prospects of the kittens in the hayloft.

Apparently tabbies with big ears made better hunters.

The next night Cal woke up as Joseph turned into a Jack in the Box drive-through. Joseph ordered three milkshakes, strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate. He sneaked them into the facility in his empty laptop bag, and gave Ms.

MacGregor her choice, the strawberry one. He took the vanilla. Cal eventually picked up the chocolate.

The night after that, Joseph pulled into the drive-through of a Dairy Queen, and though Cal insisted on paying, Joseph debated flavors with him long enough that Cal bought three sundaes just to make sure his mom would have a choice she liked.

He and Joseph ate the other two, of course.

On Saturday it was a week since the tornado, since the kiss in the cellar that turned Joseph's knees to goo and set his libido on high. Sometimes while he worked beside Cal at the after-hours list, Joseph couldn't look at Cal because he'd be remembering those hands on him, that body pressed against his, the thing Cal had done with his tongue, and if he didn't look away quick and think of scorpions all around him or Shawn's girlie mags or something, he'd be standing there with a hard-on making a tent in his jeans.

Sometimes Cal was avoiding his eyes too, but it had been a week and Joseph hadn't brought up what happened once, so sometimes Cal relaxed and was just a stressed-out version of the man Joseph had fallen so damn hard for.

It almost pissed Joseph off. If the damn man had just gone on being an ass, he might have managed to fall back out of love.

Saturday night a truck came thumping into the yard as everyone poured out from dinner. The driver, a lean-faced man in a cowboy hat, leaned out the window and howled.

"Rip Tucker, what in Sam Hill are you doing?" Cal demanded.

"There's a dance!" the cowboy shouted. "Didn't no one tell you? Betsy Layton's already there, lookin' purty and a-lookin' for you, Cal MacGregor!"

"Cripes, didn't nobody tell the boss?" Billie demanded, wrapping an arm around Cal's neck. "It's a dance, Cal, and there'll be girls and beer and Rip's sworn off drinking so he's the designated driver. Long as Gina don't once mention the patriarchy, anyhow. She's sworn she'll talk with her fists if she needs to, so it oughtta be a great night!"

"You're early, Rip! Let me get my dress!" Gina bolted for the bunkhouse, and half the hands ran after. Cal detached himself from Billie.

"I'm going to see Mom," he said. "Joseph will represent the *Y Otra Cosa*."

"I," Joseph said, "don't dance."

"Killjoys, the both of you!" Rip called, climbing out of the truck's window to sit on the door. "Cal, what do I tell Betsy? She's set on filling up your dance card!"

"Tell her Mom's got my dance card."

"Mama's boy!"

Cal flipped him off, walking to his own truck. Joseph outran him to get to the driver's side.

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Monday before supper Cal told Wobbie, who slipped the word to Joseph so he wouldn't be sitting in the truck waiting all night, that his mom had called. Ms. MacGregor had taken her first round of physical therapy with a walker and she was "plumb tuckered out and ornery as a washed cat" so Cal wasn't going into town.

Naturally that meant after supper Cal was back outside working on his "hole in the bucket" list in the golden evening.

"It's like the song," he told Joseph as they worked at moving cinder blocks onto the truck bed for transport to... something Cal wanted fixed with cinder blocks. Cal had kicked all the blocks, but he still wore gloves, so Joseph did too. "There's a hole in the bucket, and the straw is too long to fix it, and the knife is too dull, and the stone is too dry..."

"Yeah, okay." Joseph had heard the song. He'd also heard the dirty version, and he liked that one better. "And I get the stitch-in-time thing." That was what Billie had told him about the jobs Cal was doing. They weren't high-priority like what the hands worked at all day, but they'd save a lot of work later. "What I don't get," he said, swiping sweat off his forehead before he bent to pick up another block, "is how come—"

Something big, black, and hairy dropped out of the cinder block to land at his feet. It had eight legs. Joseph shouted and tossed the block.

"Holy shit, what the fuck, shoot it!"

Cal burst out laughing. Joseph scrambled into the truck bed as the thing reared up, waving two long hairy legs ominously. “Cal! Shoot it!”

“It’s just—” Cal gasped, still laughing, “—just a tarantula!”

“It’s a motherfucking spider the size of my face, will you goddamn shoot it? Sekhmet!” he yelled as the dog came over and Cal just kept laughing. “Sekhmet, kill!”

“Sekhmet, down.” Cal caught her collar as she approached the thing curiously. “Down.” The dog lay down, unworried, and Joseph decided he probably looked like an idiot standing on the truck, but the goddamn thing was *a spider as big as his face* so he stayed where he was.

Fucking Cal took off his hat and slid the brim under the spider. He cupped his gloved hand over the monster and walked off to put the thing down at the far corner of the fence behind the house.

“Lupe’s going to kill you for putting that thing in her garden!” Joseph warned.

“Lupe knows they eat bugs she doesn’t want around,” Cal said, coming back. “Like scorpions.” He walked to the truck and held out his hand, sweeping the hat back as he bowed. “Let down your hair, Rapunzel. The monster is vanquished.”

“Oh screw you,” Joseph growled, and jumped down. The work slowed after that, as he checked each and every block before he picked it up. Cal kept snickering but Joseph kept looking.

As they worked, the sun set into huge shelf-like clouds. Flaming orange and red shone around them. Joseph kept an eye on the glory when he wasn’t looking for spiders and thought about his camera but continued working. Finally Cal poked him.

“Quit wishing and go get your camera.”

Joseph tossed the block into the truck and darted for the bunkhouse. He took about twenty shots of the sunset, and then he wanted to add to the composition, so he begged Cal to stand in front of it. Cal grumbled, but Joseph said please and promised it would be great and they could get a print made for

Cal's mom and finally he did it. Joseph took three shots forcing the flash, then Cal turned his head, looking to see what Sekhmet was stalking over by the barn. He put his hand to his gun, and Joseph switched to burst shots because he knew if he could catch Cal's silhouette just right he'd have utter gold.

He got maybe fifteen shots before Cal grumbled about time wasting and got back to hefting blocks. Joseph couldn't wait to see what he had, but he worked until Cal declared it "too dark to see the spiders comin'."

Asshole.

In his room Joseph put his camera on his desk, took two of the ibuprofen he'd learned to keep on hand, and went for a long hot shower, his second of the day. When he got back to his room, the light was on in Ms. MacGregor's office. Joseph shook his head, wondering what the hell Cal was *doing* in there.

Didn't matter. He had pictures. Too bad he hadn't gotten a shot of the tarantula to scare his mom with, but hell, Wikipedia. Joseph hung up his towel, threw on boxers and a clean T-shirt and eased into the bed. Getting his laptop and camera from the desk was an easy reach.

The black-silhouette shots were gorgeous. Three of them were just about perfect, in Joseph's humble opinion. He wondered if Cal would mind if he sent a print to his own mom as well as Cal's mom. And Playgirl magazine, and Gays on—

Yeah, he might be a bit overtired himself. Joseph turned to the shots where he'd forced the flash, so Cal's features were visible, though he stood in front of the sunset.

The pose wasn't as perfect as the others, but Joseph liked them better anyway. Cal looked almost relaxed, the smile lines by his eyes were back, and holy shit, the man was hot. Every bit of pudge had melted off him in the nearly a month since he came home. Every inch of him was built solid and made to work, and Joseph wanted those hands working on him, and that mouth, and... crap.

Joseph set aside the laptop and camera. He extended the magnetic telescoping tool intended for fishing dropped metal things out of engines, and flipped off the light. Closed it up and set it on the desk.

Goddamn. He wanted Cal to fuck him. Just bend him over something and fuck, Cal still in full cowboy getup and maybe wearing his gloves... and he wanted to fuck Cal. In the back of the truck, parked in the shade of what was left of the ghost-house, he wanted to fuck Cal with one leg over his shoulder and Cal grunting with every thrust and telling him to fuck harder because Cal was a tough little son of a bitch and he could take it. He wanted to suck Cal off in the tack room of the barn, wanted to watch Cal fall to pieces as Joseph fellated him. He wanted to make love to Cal down by the creek with a citronella candle nearby to protect sensitive bits from skeeters the size of Cessnas. He wanted to get in Cal's bed first like he'd got into the truck every night, and see if Cal tossed him out.

Light on the wall above his head told Joseph that Cal was still in Ms. MacGregor's office and suddenly more than anything else, Joseph wanted to go up there and smack Cal with his own hat. Then he'd lead Cal to bed, where he'd forget all his fantasies just to hold Cal and make sure the damn stubborn man *slept*.

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Cal flopped back in Mom's office chair and closed his eyes to the mess of papers around him. He'd never get it sorted. He'd messed it up so Mom wouldn't be able to find anything, and he already couldn't find anything, and he didn't damn well know what to do unless it was drop a match and claim the office on their insurance.

That he even thought that showed how stupid he was to even be in there. Cal opened his eyes on Wilf MacGregor's journals that would probably be first to go up, even before the modern papers. He turned his head to the pictures above the bay window, especially the one of Mom as a girl with her parents, her granddad, and her great-granddad, standing in front of the ranch house. Grandma stood sideways, showing the camera the small bump that was Uncle Skyller in her belly.

Cal let his eyes run down the row of pictures, naming names and going back in time. Konner MacGregor, Cal's own granddad. Taught Cal to rope, ride, shoot, and stand up solid. Storm MacGregor, great-granddad. He'd joined the navy, got all the way to Japan at the end of World War II, then come home

to get the ranch shipshape. Zack MacGregor, great-great-granddad, fought in the trenches of World War I, came home and fought the Dust Bowl to hold the ranch through the Great Depression. His daddy, Kaden MacGregor, who was a trick rider for Buffalo Bill's Wild West and toured Europe, meeting two princesses and a pope before he came home to run the ranch. Wilf MacGregor, founder of the *Y Otra Cosa*, sitting for a painted portrait. The very last was Callan Mikel MacGregor, seven generations ago, Wilf's daddy. The last MacGregor not to call the *Y Otra Cosa* home until Lyle.

That was Lyle's choice. He'd always seen things differently.

Cal sat up and stacked all the bills on the desk into a pile, and put the plastic paperweight with a scorpion in it on top of the pile. Some were old and hopefully paid, others he knew weren't, so that pile might sting. Now the receipts—criminy, had Mom kept every receipt she got her hands on her whole life?

Didn't matter. He'd sort them later. Cal stuffed everything he could identify as a receipt into Great-Uncle Mikel's rucksack.

Talk about sorting. How did they even have space to walk, what with hanging onto everything that had ever been used by a MacGregor? It was a shock they didn't have a roomful of worn-out bandanas.

The loans. That paperwork was a pile all its own, and Cal hated to even touch it. The *Y Otra Cosa* had three loans against it, somehow. Cal had known about one, borrowing money to send him to school. The ranch counted as assets, so though they paid their taxes like everyone else, he hadn't qualified for financial aid. Why *had* he chosen Massachusetts, paying out-of-state tuition at a private college?

Because Lyle told him if he went too far he'd never come back, and Cal was determined to prove him wrong, that's why. And because he figured nobody was going to come visit him in Massachusetts, nohow. He could sow some wild oats with no one back home the wiser—only come to find out when Preston got grabby, Cal didn't have wild in him.

He'd thought. Joseph, though—Cal shook his head.

The other two loans, one taken out before he went to school and one after,



Cal hadn't known about. The loans must be what Lyle knew. He hoped. Cal prayed there was nothing more to find.

All three loans were current when Mom went in the hospital, but if he paid Mom's bills so she kept getting care, he couldn't make the mortgage payments. And as soon as they fell behind—well, that's when the bills would really start mounting. That's when the creditors had a say in what he did or didn't do with the *Y Otra Cosa*.

To the right of the picture of Mom as a baby was the picture of Mom and Dad with Lyle three years old, and Mom standing sideways to show off Cal making her big.

Callan Stonewall, right there. Sixth generation of the *Y Otra Cosa* MacGregors. The one who lost the ranch, maybe.

Cal rubbed his face with both hands, wondering if he could make coffee without waking Lupe. There had to be a way to take care of Mom and still save the ranch. He just had to wake up enough to find it. Cal set the rest of the papers aside and turned on the computer.

Checking his email first was automatic. Cal deleted three from Preston unread. He almost deleted the one from Betsy, but just left it unopened.

Uh oh, insurance company. Cal knew they weren't going to send the settlement through email, but he dared for half a second to hope it was a "*pleasure doing business with you, the money is on the way*" email. Then he saw it wasn't.

"*Your claim has been delayed.*" Hell! Cal skimmed the polite mouthings for the reason. "*We find we have no record on file of the purchase price of the property listed as 'destroyed', namely the Nine Tails tank and windmill.*"

...they didn't have a receipt because the well was in place when the *Y Otra Cosa* bought out the Nine Tails ranch!

"*Before restitution can be made, a correct estimation of damages must be obtained. Please acquire three (3) quotes from reputable businesses for the repairs required. Price quotes should be itemized and guaranteed for thirty days.*"



Cripes. There wasn't but one well drilling rig in Vega! And guaranteed? Any man who ever drilled a well knew better than to give guarantees. It was why digging for gold and drilling for oil were speculative ventures—you never knew what you'd find in the ground.

And who was supposed to pay to get three different companies out to the *Y Otra Cosa* to look at the well?

All right. All right. Cal had known their insurance agent since he was knee-high to the man. Mel Sheets wouldn't let the MacGregors get railroaded by paperwork. He'd just call Mel in the morning and—except the email said since the Vega office had been closed, Cal would need to get his proofs to the Amarillo office by—

Cal closed the email and closed his eyes. Took a couple deep breaths and went on to one from Lyle, not that it was likely to be much better.

It was a forward.

*Re: Is it worth my price?*

*Lyle—*

*Yes, that land is worth ten million easy, and Jack Snavelly knows it. He's seen all the maps and reports I have. He's maybe hoping the tornado on top of your ma's injury makes you all desperate. If Snavelly won't meet your price, you know I will. I'd have to put my grandmother on auction to make the payments, but the bat makes biscuits like horseshoes, so I'd not regret it. You want to go with a man who's trying to cheat you, or the man you know will treat you fair and square?*

*Let me know. I can have papers and a \$750,000 down payment ready in a week.*

*Tom Bellamy*

Cal sat blinking at the screen. Ten million. Ten million *dollars*. He'd known the ranch was worth a pile, but he'd never tried to nail a figure to it.

Ten million dollars. For the land he walked every day, had ridden end to end, that he knew backwards and forwards. The land where he was born, and four generations of MacGregors before him.

Ten million dollars. It wasn't enough, anywhere near enough, could never be enough for the *Y Otra Cosa*. But did he even have a choice? Between the hospital and the tornado and the insurance company and three mortgages...

Cal closed his eyes, took a deep breath before he passed out cold on the floor. It wasn't enough air, so he took a few more.

He had two weeks before the first of the mortgage payments was due. If he could get the insurance settlement that fast, he could buy some time. Make payments to the hospital, pay the banks instead of getting the well fixed—he could work around the Nine Tails pasture if he had to, till he could scrape money together to get the well redrilled. Then get a solar pump. Jenny McMurphy swore by them, especially seeing how the federal government might could hand out a grant that'd cover half the cost.

The insurance settlement. That was the answer. For that he had to prove the damages. He had poor Miranda's paperwork, the pedigree of the packhorse he'd cut loose to save himself and Joseph, Chisholm and Delilah. He had the receipt for the irrigation system. He needed to prove the Nine Tails well had existed, and figure out how to get the costs quoted and itemized.

Joseph. He'd been taking pictures the whole afternoon they rode the damage trail, snapping away till Cal might could have knocked him off his horse just from sheer ornery. All the documentation Cal needed, maybe, was in that little camera of his. Time-stamped, maybe, because nowadays cameras did that. Maybe even with the GPS coordinates in the file, 'cause cameras did that too now.

Joseph. Cal chuckled, thinking of the city boy meeting a country spider, and stuck his hat on. Joseph.

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Once upon a time Joseph had been hard to wake up, but once you got enough bad news in the middle of the night... two raps on his door and he was out of bed, lurching to answer.

His alarm clock was by the door. The red numbers read three twenty-four a.m. Someone must have died. Joseph flicked the light on and snatched open the door. He squinted at Cal standing outside, that ghastly smile on his face

and his hat in his hands. He was as tall as Joseph—wearing his boots when Joseph was barefoot. Had he even gone to bed?

“I’m so sorry,” Cal said, looking away. “I didn’t notice till I’d knocked that your light was off.”

“Cal...” No one was dead. He wouldn’t be apologizing for knocking if someone had died. “Cal, what the fuck? It’s three in the morning!”

Now Cal looked at him, eyes wide like he didn’t know. Damn man probably didn’t. Over his shoulder, the light was *still* on in Ms. MacGregor’s office.

“This is getting fucking ridiculous,” Joseph growled. He grabbed Cal’s arm and dragged him in, closed the door behind him. “This needs to stop,” he told Cal. “You need some fucking sleep.”

Cal put his hat on, shoved it down. “Don’t think—”

“When’s the last time you slept four hours in a row?” Joseph demanded.

“How’s that any of your business?”

“You knocked on my door at three a.m. and made it my business.”

Cal shook his head. “I was thinking of other things. I’m sorry. I’ll see myself out.” He started to turn but Joseph grabbed handfuls of his shirt and shook him.

“Stop it,” he ordered again. “You’re killing yourself, damn it, for what?”

Cal just glared at him. Joseph wanted to punch him, wanted to kiss him, wanted to toss him in the horse trough or toss him into bed. His bed, Cal’s bed, any bed, and sit on him till he slept. And then snuggle him in his sleep.

“You stubborn ass,” he said softly. “The ranch is *fine*. Anyone can see you’re taking the best care of it anyone could, so stop killing yourself—” He stopped talking. Cal had that look in his eyes, that told him he was missing something. He wasn’t getting it. “What?” he asked. “What is it? Is it your mom?”

“I need—” Cal stopped, licked his lips. “Joseph. I need the pictures. The ones you took of the storm damage.”

“You came to me at three in the morning for *pictures*?”

“I’ve got—” Cal grabbed his elbow, squeezed. “Please. I’ve got to prove the damage. I need the pictures.”

“Goddammit, Cal, you’ve lost your mind. You need *sleep*. Get the damn pictures in the morning!”

Cal went back to silent glaring. Joseph shook him again.

“You don’t know,” he growled. “You don’t have any idea how damn much I want to kiss you right now, or punch—”

Cal grabbed Joseph’s arms and spun, slamming Joseph’s back into the door. He stepped close, holding Joseph’s arms at his sides. “Ya think?” he breathed, his mouth so close to Joseph’s he could feel the puff of air as Cal spoke softly. “You think I don’t know,” he said, his breath warm on Joseph’s lips, “when you’re standin’ there all tousled and near naked?”

Oh God. “*Touch me*,” Joseph breathed, begged, ordered. Cal let go, stepped back. He looked for an escape route, but he’d put Joseph across the only door.

“I—sorry. I’m sorry. I just—the pictures. Please. And I’ll go.”

“What are you so afraid of?” Joseph demanded, not moving. “Thought your name was Callan, not Chickenshit.”

Cal made a fist and Joseph knew he was about to get his ass kicked but good. Then Cal buried his face in his hands.

“I like to have murdered you just now,” he said through them.

“Thanks for not.” Joseph took the step to reach Cal and pulled him into his arms. “Pretend I’m a friend. Lean on me.”

Cal leaned. Just a little, just resting his forehead on Joseph’s shoulder. Joseph stroked Cal’s hair and told him he hadn’t meant it—he’d never met a man as brave as Cal. Brave and smart and damn, but he knew *everything*. Determined, strong, funny... Cal’s hands dropped from his face, he buried it in Joseph’s shoulder as his arms went around Joseph and he held on. Joseph kept talking, telling Cal just how amazing he was. Eventually Cal chuckled.

“It’s like the cellar again,” he said against Joseph’s shoulder. “Here we are, we’re not dead—I didn’t go stark raving mad like for a moment I thought I might could—now how do I get out of this?”

Joseph smiled and stroked Cal's hair again. "We're friends," he said. "Right? Even the mighty Cal MacGregor can lean on a friend once in a while."

Cal lifted his head. "You go rattling on," he said, "and I might get to thinkin' I'm something special." He laughed. "That's not good for nobody."

"You're kidding, right?" But he wasn't. Joseph took Cal's face in his hands and the friend vibe between them vanished into intensity. "Cal, you're *amazing*."

"I'm stubborn as hell," Cal said. Not like he was arguing. Like Joseph might somehow have missed noticing. "And selfish. And sometimes I'm just an embarrassment."

"Cal..." Joseph shook his head, thinking of flowers and a blue teddy bear. "Whoever told you that didn't want *you*. He wanted—wanted a pet cowboy or something."

"I talk like a hick."

"You talk like Cal MacGregor. It's adorable."

"I'm stubborn as two mules."

"You get shit done. And I've watched you busting ass all over the place to take care of every person and animal on this ranch and a few off it, so don't try to tell me you're selfish." Joseph tilted Cal's head down with his hands, so he could kiss Cal's forehead. "Any man with a brain at all would be proud to call you his. But right now I'm just calling you 'friend', all right? Come here." He tugged Cal the half step to his bed. "I don't trust you to go to bed if I send you back, since you're stubborn. So I'm going to see to it you sleep."

"Joseph, that bed ain't wide enough for two rattlesnakes spoonin'."

"We're skinny." Joseph put Cal's hat on his dresser, then threw himself down and tugged Cal's hand till he lay down on the very edge. Joseph wrapped his arms around and pulled him closer.

"Don't worry," he said. "Don't think. Trust me, and go to sleep." He picked up the telescoping magnetic tool and flipped the light switch off.

"I still got my boots on!" Cal protested.

"You sleep just fine in the truck with them on." From his experience driving, Joseph figured Cal would be asleep two minutes after he quit arguing.

Joseph, though, wouldn't get any more sleep. He was fine with that. He could spend three hours enjoying the feel of Cal against him, no problem.

As they lay in the dark, though, Cal grew more tense, not less. Joseph wasn't doing anything but playing with his hair in what he hoped was a soothing way, so it wasn't his fault.

"What is it?" he finally asked. Cal twitched.

"There's three mortgages on the ranch," he said like it had been torn out of him through use of torture. "What with Mom's bills and the tornado—it could wreck the *Y Otra Cosa*. I say could—that's if Mom's bills stop now. And they won't, unless I bring her home to get more crippled till she dies. The insurance settlement might could get me some breathing room, but the insurance company wants proof there ever was a Nine Tails well before they pay, proof of what'd cost to fix it—and Lyle's got some Amarillo oilman offering ten million dollars if we sell out, check in hand in a week."

Joseph goggled at *ten million dollars!* but that wasn't the important part here, so he shook it off. "You don't want to sell," he said. "So don't."

"I can't let Mom die young and crippled to save the ranch, Joseph. She says she's fine, but I reckon the doctor knows better, and he says she needs the treatment." Now, finally, it came flowing out of Cal, everything he'd been keeping bottled up while he worked himself nearly to death. "If I can't make the mortgage payments, they'll take the land and sell it out from under me. If I pay Mom's bills, I can't make the mortgage payments. If I pay the mortgage, Mom's care ends."

"Cal..." Joseph sighed, stroking Cal's hair. "I don't know her as well as you do, obviously. But I think losing the ranch would kill her. Can you see her retired? Puttering around tending rosebushes and cats? You and her are just alike—you need to be doing. If you put her somewhere nice and safe where there's nothing that needs doing, she will waste away and die just like you would. Tell me I'm wrong if you can."

"You ain't wrong," Cal admitted. "So I got to save both her and the ranch, only I can't. It's one or the other, so I'll lose both—"

Oh hell. Joseph squeezed Cal. "So sell something other than the ranch."

“It’s months still to the roundup. The calves need to grow a mite.”

“Sell something else.”

“Like what? The truck? The thing’s older than I am and not worth insuring more’n liability.”

“Cal...” Well, yeah. *He* didn’t know he lived in a museum. Cal just knew he lived with everything all his relatives had left behind. Like Mom with Great-Aunt Mina’s ugly porcelain dalmatians that turned out to be worth a hundred bucks. “That gun you carry,” Joseph said. “Your four-times great granddaddy’s. The book you loaned me says it’s one of the first revolvers Colt made. That’s got to be worth something.”

“I can’t sell—”

“There’s got to be stuff up there that you could. Or use it as collateral, get a loan on better terms than the others, to pay off the others.” Joseph tugged his laptop off his desk and woke it up, scrabbled a bit for the book, also on the desk. The laptop woke up to one of the pictures of Cal, of course, Cal’s face lighting Cal’s face in the dark room. “Colt Single Action Army,” Joseph read then typed.

The first link was Wikipedia. Joseph skimmed the article, pointed to the line about the inspector’s stamp that made the gun “most prized by collectors.” He searched again, clicking links until he came to an auction posting, and lay blinking at it.

“Three hundred and fifty thousand?” Cal breathed.

“See what you get for sharing your troubles?” Joseph said, trying not to sound blown away by what he’d found. That would buy Mom a house. Two houses! “You get *help*.” Joseph put the book back on the desk, closed the laptop and put it back. In the darkness he kissed the top of Cal’s head.

“So. Sleep. Tomorrow’s another day, Scarlett, and the land will still be yours.”

Cal shot coyotes with a gun worth three hundred and fifty thousand dollars?



Cal lay with his head pressed against Joseph's chest, listening to his slow heartbeat and so at peace he didn't know what to think. The ranch was safe, or would be. Mom was healing. Joseph thought he was amazing.

Maybe he could keep it that way. "What—" Cal breathed, "Joseph, if you could change one thing 'bout me, what would it be?"

"I'd make you be asleep," Joseph whispered. His hand closed in Cal's hair, tugging gently. "Sleep, Cal. Even you need rest sometimes."

Even you. The mighty Cal. Joseph worked beside him all day and into the night, drove him to town and back and never asked for nothing and still thought he was amazing. Cal reckoned he might ought to quit looking a gift horse in the mouth, but he had to ask one more question.

"If I was to ask you—sometime, not now—if I was to ask you to be my boyfriend, what would you be expecting?"

In the dim light from the house, he could see Joseph grin.

"Well," he said after a minute, "I guess I'd expect to get to kiss you a lot. I wouldn't expect to work with you all the time, but I'd want to at least sometimes. I wouldn't expect you to take me to the drive-in, but going swimming would be fun. I suppose I'd just follow your lead on how out we should be. I'd think we'd be fine on the ranch, but some people like discussing everyone else's business, so I don't know."

"You wouldn't never want to go on dates? Go to parties?"

"Not... really?" Joseph said slowly, like he was giving it thought. "I think... well, not parties, at least not often, unless you wanted. If I were planning a date with you, I'd want to—oh, take the horses and a picnic lunch somewhere you haven't shown me yet. Or maybe stargazing. Or... petting kittens, or something. You and me, not you, me, and a hundred strangers."

"That sounds... awful nice," Cal said, wriggling a little, careful not to kick Joseph, until he could press his face into Joseph's shoulder, that long shiny hair brushing his forehead. "I got one heck of a temper," he said softly. "You sure you wouldn't mind it?"

Joseph laughed. "If I were to give you a tribal name," he said, "it would be Hidden Badger. All fluffy and adorable until somebody messes with you, then



you kind of hunker down and get mean.” He squeezed Cal. “I love when you shove your hat down and get ornery. It’s sexy.”

Sexy. Not childish.

“Go to sleep,” Joseph breathed, resting his cheek on Cal’s head. Cal breathed deep and let it out and went limp.

It was a relief.

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Joseph had thought he wouldn’t sleep then he woke to the soft chimes of his phone’s text alert. Cal slept sprawled across his chest, mouth open and adorable, and outside the first tentative light of dawn had come. Joseph scrubbed at his face and reached for the phone before it sounded again and woke Cal.

*“If you two aren’t ready to go public, you’d best roust Cal out,”* the text from Billie read. *“Lupe’ll be up any minute.”*

Oh *shit*. She must have heard the conversation on the porch, heard Cal come in but not leave—shit!

But she’d woke him up so no one else would know. Wonderful Billie! Joseph would thank her later. Now he brushed Cal’s cheek with the back of his hand.

Cal’s eyelids fluttered and he opened his eyes. He smiled. “Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” Joseph said, smiling stupidly back. He so didn’t want to, but—“It’s morning. If you don’t want—”

“Cripes!” Cal rolled out of the bed and onto the floor. He was up before Joseph could ask if he was all right, and headed for the door. He came back, though, as Joseph sat up, and leaned to kiss Joseph quickly. Then he snatched his hat and slipped out the door.

Joseph sat on his bed grinning at his door. Then he fell back into his bed and fell back to sleep with a smile on his face, and Billie had to drag him to breakfast again.

As the newest addition to what was essentially a large family, Joseph had never sat near the MacGregors during meals. That morning he was grateful for

the arrangement, as it made it easier to avoid looking at Cal. Joseph got by on sneaked glances, doing his best not to meet Cal's eyes for fear of getting lost in them.

It was probably for the best that once again Wobbie announced Joseph wasn't assigned to work with Cal, but it was disappointing.

Not disappointing, though, was the way Cal smiled and ate, two things he hadn't been doing while he drank too much coffee at breakfast lately. Billie sat across from Joseph. She glanced at Joseph meaningfully, cast her eyes at Cal, and grinned. Joseph reminded himself she'd saved his butt twice just that morning, and didn't kick her under the table.

Joseph worked with Juan Carlos that day, fixing tornado-damaged fence and learning survival Spanish. For once, his work-fast-to-get-back-to-Cal method failed him, since the job was more than a day's worth. Working faster just meant he got more tired, but eventually Juan Carlos said they'd done enough and they rode back to the ranch. To ranch headquarters. In an entire day of riding and fencing, they'd never *left* the ranch. Joseph still couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. He wondered what it looked like from the air, like a helicopter tour he'd once taken over LA. Ooh, keep that in mind as a present for Cal—he bet Cal would love seeing the *Y Otra Cosa* from the air. Joseph thought about helicopters and noise, about small planes and altitude, and wondered if Vega had a hot air balloon tour service. Not frakking likely, of course, but he could dream of taking Cal up for one of those champagne brunches he'd seen advertised back home.

Cal was sitting on the edge of the porch brushing Sekhmet as Joseph and Juan Carlos rode into the yard. Cal looked up and greeted them both, but when Juan Carlos got down to pump water into the trough, Cal gave Joseph a bigger smile just for him. Joseph grinned back and looked away, got down to pick up the reins of both horses so they knew it was okay to drink.

Joseph had never been willing to stay in the closet, not for any reason or any person. But this was different. It wasn't himself he was hiding, it was a sweet secret romance. He smiled at Cal from between the horses and Cal caught it, looking back to his work with a grin. Yeah. He could enjoy a secret held with Cal.

And Billie. She seemed to be keeping their secret, though. Her knowing took some of the fun out of it, but Joseph was not going to complain of having a protector. Far too many times in the past he'd needed one.

Juan Carlos took his reins from Joseph's distracted hands—at least he wasn't staring at Cal while distracted!—and led Athena into the barn. Joseph gave Cal one more glance and followed. He hurried through Delilah's care, but she'd mostly just stood around while Joseph worked so she wasn't in great need of attention. He put her in her stall and headed for the porch.

Cal had a brush ready. "Take Athos," he said. "He's a big puppy, but he won't take it personal if you catch a mat too hard."

"Got it." Joseph sat next to Cal and called Athos over. "Have I mentioned I love the names of all the animals?"

"It's a new generation," Cal said. "In Granddad's day they had names like Blackie, Brownie, Blaze and Star."

Joseph snorted. Cal showed him how to brush the dog, keeping an eye out for ticks. "Normally Lupe's next-youngest does this," Cal said, "but he's—"

"Visiting his grandmother this summer. I know. The other day I was dusting saddles in his place."

Cal chuckled. "Dust's an infernal nuisance round these parts," he said. "How was it out there today?"

Coming home to the man he loved asking about his day... Joseph thought he just might have found heaven, but he kept brushing around Athos' attempts to wash his face. "Saw a red-tailed hawk I think. Might have got some good shots. It's different working with anybody else—I feel like I have to be careful, where I know you'll tell me when I'm doing too much sightseeing and not enough working."

"Try not to worry on it," Cal said. "We—me, Mom, Wobbie—know we work you all seven days a week most weeks, and most days over eight hours. Ain't going to complain if you take an hour to pull up a comfy bit of shade and have a siesta. Or spend the time other ways."

"Now I'm thinking of the next time you and I work together and those other ways," Joseph said softly.

Cal looked down at Sekhmet, but Joseph could see him grinning under his hat.

“How was your day?” he asked Cal.

“Irritatin’.” Cal lifted a mat of black fur from Sekhmet’s back, brushing it carefully from the bottom to detangle it. “Lafe.”

“Ah.” Yeah, Joseph could see how that would be. “Why not tell Wobbie not to—” he stopped, looked up. The truck sat in the yard. It was a Tuesday afternoon. Why was he hearing an engine?

“What—” Cal began, then he heard it too. He stood on the porch, looking off towards the highway. “Lyle,” he grumbled, trying to dust dog hair off his clothes.

“Change if it matters,” Joseph suggested.

“It don’t.” Cal took his hat off and knocked it on the post of the porch and dust fell from it. He ran his fingers through his hair and put his hat back on. Then he pushed it down hard.

Joseph bent his head over Athos and grinned. He kept brushing, in the hopes of having a front-row seat for whatever was about to happen. He even had the right boots on, though Cal didn’t look like he’d need rescuing anymore.

As Cal waited for the truck, Billie and Bart rode up to the barn. Bart tapped his hat, but Billie looked from Cal to Joseph and grinned. His face safely hidden from Cal by his hat, Joseph stuck his tongue out at her.

A huge shiny red—or what had been shiny red, before it met the yellow dust of the driveway—pickup drove into the yard. It was one with a full-sized backseat, and it looked like it had never been used for anything but driving around. As a Californian Joseph was born a tree hugger, and he hated just-for-show trucks on principle. Cal might have felt the same, his lip curled.

Lyle climbed out of the truck dressed just like Cal from hat to boots except he hadn’t done hard physical labor in his clothes. Cal went to meet him. Lyle laughed.

“Here you come, walking all stiff-legged for a fight!” He opened the back door of the truck. “Girls, say howdy to Uncle Cal.”

Cal stopped walking. Two little girls—not so little, maybe around ten—climbed down from the truck, both in cute sundresses and hats.

“Cal! Cal! Uncle Cal!”

“Now hold up!” Cal said, putting out his hands. “I’m all covered in dirt and dog hair!”

The taller girl stopped. The smaller tackled Cal’s waist in a hug then climbed him like a tree. “Cal!”

“Leandra!” Cal kissed her cheek and set her on his shoulder. The girl wrapped around his head and Cal beamed as he leaned down to kiss the older girl’s cheek, and Joseph melted. *This*. Cal and kids. He wanted *this*, so bad it hurt.

Billie and Bart came out of the barn as Lyle walked around the truck to help a woman in a smart red suit out of the other side. Cal still had Leandra wrapped around his neck like a face-hugger alien, but he went to kiss the woman’s cheek until she stopped him with a hand up.

“We’ll take it as expressed,” she said. She was blonde and immaculate, with a slim leather briefcase. Joseph imagined she was a shark in the boardroom. “Cal, we brought you some options.”

Joseph saw it. Cal stiffened, and the little girl nuzzled his cheek, and he softened again. Damn Lyle, had he found an advantage?

Well. That could be dealt with.

“If you’re going to talk business,” Joseph said, “the girls might want to check out the kittens in the barn. They’re about a month old, and awful cute.”

“Kittens!” both girls squealed. The little one leaped out of Cal’s arms, he caught her midair and set her down, and both ran for the barn. Lyle and the woman stared at Joseph like he’d been horribly rude, listening to a loud conversation held less than twenty feet away.

“Come on,” Billie said to the girls, holding out her hands as Bart dodged away from the incoming children. “I’ll show you.”

“Don’t let ’em get rumped, Billie!” Lyle called.

“Don’t dress ’em up frilly for the ranch!” Billie answered. She and the girls disappeared into the barn.

“Lyle—” the woman began.

“We’ll get them new dresses,” Lyle said. “Cal, I’m sure Enola would like to sit down.”

“Ain’t you always reminding me it’s your house same as mine?” Cal demanded, but he led the way to the porch.

“They’re going to want kittens,” Enola warned Lyle as she turned the cushion over in the rocking chair Lupe liked to sit in. The bottom of the cushion was clean enough it seemed; she sat down.

“We’ve got room.” Lyle lowered his large self to the porch swing, leaving Cal to stand, sit next to him, or sit on the porch itself. “Joseph, nice to see you. Want to take that somewhere else?”

“He’s fine where he is,” Cal said, leaning his shoulder on a porch post between Joseph and the visitors. “Lyle, you don’t get to show up once in a blue moon and start tellin’ the hands what to do.”

“This is family,” Lyle said.

“And he’s already shown he feels qualified to offer opinions,” Enola said.

“He offered a kindness,” Cal said. “If he’s offended your principles, I’m mighty sorry.”

Joseph bent his head over the dog and brushed. He got a face-washing as reward.

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Cal knew he was being stubborn, and he didn’t care. The more the better. Lyle thought he’d just drive up in his fancy truck with his pretty wife and great kids and start treating Joseph like hired help? Hell no.

“Fine.” Enola reached into her briefcase. “Maybe if all the hands know the situation, you’ll think about their interests too. Now. I’ve been looking into your options, since Lyle tells me you won’t. He set up online accounts when Mother Jess was laid up last time, so we know where things stand.”

Cal bristled, but he let her talk. Enola went on, rustling papers and explaining options ranging from selling most of the ranch to selling all of it, expounding on how Cal would be free to do whatever he wanted. He’d be young and rich and “not tied down.” She didn’t come out and say he could go somewhere more gay friendly, but Cal heard it and he guessed Joseph did too.

Joseph hadn't barely blinked at ten million, and he thought Cal would die off the *Y Otra Cosa*. Not that Cal had to consider Joseph's future, but—

“What's your suggestion if I want to stay right where I am?” Cal demanded. “Doin' what I'm doin'?”

Lyle took off his hat and fanned himself with it. He glanced at Joseph who was bent over Athos like it took all his concentration to brush a dog, then at Cal. Like he knew. “If the *Y Otra Cosa* weathers the storm?” he asked. “Well, then, I imagine you'd have to go ahead and marry Betsy Layton so as to raise up some more MacGregors, right?”

Athos yipped as maybe Joseph jerked the brush in a tender spot. Cal took his hat off, didn't hit Lyle with it, put it back on. Shoved it down.

“I reckon,” he said, “that I'll run this ranch how I like and with whomever I like, till they plant me head down to keep me in the ground. You want to go against me? Bring on your lawyers. I'll make this porch my goddamn Alamo.” He lifted his hat. “Sorry 'bout my language, Enola.” He shoved it back down on his head.

“Cal—” Enola began.

Cal folded his arms and set his jaw just the way Lyle and his mom hated. Like Joseph said he liked. Lyle looked at Enola and shook his head.

“Momma! Momma!” The girls came running back from the barn, Skyla with a kitten in her arms outrunning Leandra who had to run back and pick up her hat. “Momma, look how pretty!” Skyla held up the orange kitten. “Can I have him?”

“You put him back!” Leandra caught up and smacked her sister with her hat. “Billie said he's too young to leave his momma!”

“If he's a month old, Billie's right,” Lyle said. “Give him cuddles, Skyla, and ask Billie to put him back. It's about time to go.”

“I'm staying,” Leandra announced as Billie came forward to take the kitten.

“You're not,” Enola snapped. “Go get in the truck.”

“Serenity's momma died,” Leandra said. “She's lonely. I fed her with a bottle. I'm going to stay and take care of her.”

“Serenity?” Lyle asked, looking to Cal.

“Three-month-old filly,” Cal said. “Her dam was our packhorse the day we got caught out by the tornado. Poor Serenity’s left all day in the barn, most days without any other horses.”

Skyla gasped at “tornado” and cuddled the kitten closer.

Leandra nodded her head. “She needs me,” she announced. “I’m not going to ballet camp. I’ll stay with Uncle Cal and take care of Serenity.”

“Seventh generation MacGregor,” Joseph murmured behind Cal, so soft only he heard.

“You don’t have any clothes—” Enola began.

“We can find clothes for her,” Cal said.

Leandra threw her arms around Cal’s waist. “I knew you’d let me!”

“Cal, using the children—” Lyle began.

“Tell me you didn’t bring ’em just to soften me up,” Cal said. Lyle looked away. Cal picked up Leandra and she latched on like a cute leech. “Let her stay. Either she’s born for the life, or she’ll come runnin’ home in a week. No point fighting it.”

“No point fighting *her*,” Enola muttered.

Leandra stayed. Lyle and Enola and Skyla left, without the kitten. After supper Joseph and Cal drove into Amarillo, and from Mom’s facility they went to Lyle’s to pick up what Enola thought was a week’s worth of clothes for Leandra. Joseph tossed the suitcase in the truck bed while Cal got a full hug from Skyla since he was now clean enough to hug.

As soon as they were out of Amarillo, Joseph patted the seat beside him. “Why don’t you move over here?”

Cal chuckled and moved, buckling into the middle seat belt, setting his hat on the empty seat. Joseph drove one-handed, the other arm around Cal’s shoulders. He slowed the truck way down and turned the lights off, driving by moonlight. With the city and the moon behind them, all Cal could see forever was star-speckled sky and prairie. A cool breeze flowed through the truck, sweet with the scent of growing grass.



In the truck again, coming home from Amarillo. But unlike that day a month ago, Mom was on the mend and the ranch was safe. And Joseph thought Cal was amazing.

“Yeah,” Joseph said softly, lifting his hand to tousle Cal’s hair. “God’s country. I believe it.”

Cal leaned his head on Joseph’s shoulder and didn’t sleep the whole way home.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*KD Sarge writes for joy and hope, and works for a living. She has tried her hand at many endeavors, including Governess of the Children, Grand Director of the Drive-Through, and Dispatcher of the Tow Trucks. Currently KD labors appreciated but underpaid in the public school system.*

*KD has somewhere between five and ten universes under construction, writes science fiction, fantasy, steampunk, smut (in many genres), and means to one day undertake a cosy mystery. She wishes, as always, that she had more time to research things.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)

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# ANIMAL MAGNETISM

By Willow Scarlett & Andrea Speed

## Photo Description

The photo is of a hot nerdy guy. There's really nothing more to it than that.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Do you laugh when you read a blurb about another book with an obscure animal shifter? Do you ever want to write a shifter story of your own but tire of those wolves and big cats and dragons? Well, here is your chance to write a character that changes into an animal your readers will be rushing to Google!*

*This man changes into one of [these](#) amazing creatures (your choice). Is he a timid African [bongo](#), with graceful vertical horns? Is he a waddling [capybara](#), who make some people giggle with mirth and others jump onto their dining room chairs at the sight of him?*

*Is he a [civet](#), captured in an underground perfume trade? Is he a [jerboa](#), with a tail longer than Princess Diana's wedding train? Or a [kinkajou](#) nicknamed Pooh-Bear for his love of honey?*

*Is he an [okapi](#) who looks like he can't decide what animal he is?*

*The story, barring a few specifications, is entirely up to you!*

*Story MUST:*

*-not take itself seriously (obviously!). Bonus points for humor!*

*-make this character nerdy/geeky/uncoordinated/whatever, as long as he's uncool. And not poser uncool like a hipster... unless unbeknownst to him he's cool because he's so uncool, like a real hipster... nevermind. He's an outsider among his kind, for whatever reason.*

*-not be bittersweet. HFN is fine.*

*-and no girl parts please!*

*Sincerely,*

*Kyle Adams*

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal/contemporary

**Tags:** shifters/non-wolf-cat, support group, comedy, geeks/nerds, self-esteem, heroes, animals, therapy, sweet no sex

**Word count:** 3,980

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## **ANIMAL MAGNETISM**

**By Willow Scarlett & Andrea Speed**

When Terry found the door, he thought it led to a closet.

It was at the end of a narrow, poorly lit corridor. He was sure it simply couldn't be what he was looking for and he must have taken a wrong turn at the bottom of the stairs. But as he hesitated he caught a whiff of coffee, and decided to open the door and see what was behind it.

Although his damnable shyness reared its ugly head again, he swallowed it back and slowly peeked inside. For some reason, the light surprised him. It was clean and inviting. He was surprised, too, by the number of chairs. Most of them were occupied. How many people were here? A quick count told him ten, including the primly dressed woman he took to be the therapist, and he was about to walk away when he realized someone was looking at him.

"Come on in, don't be shy," said a jovial bearded man, standing at the side table where the coffee pot and a plate of cookies waited for everyone.

Of course Terry still wanted to run. But now everybody was looking at him, so rather than show what a coward he was, he walked in. He feigned a smile, nervously pushing his glasses up to the bridge of his nose while he scoped out the nearest empty chair. He decided to sit next to the middle-aged woman knitting what looked like the world's most rectangular scarf, figuring she was too busy to strike up a conversation.

It turned out he was the final arrival. The bearded man eventually wandered to an empty seat as the therapist took her seat and crossed her legs, smoothing her hands over her knees in a practiced gesture. "I think it's about time to start. Before we begin the session, it's important that we all remind ourselves that this is a safe space. There is no judgment here."

There were some nods and murmurs of agreement from the group, and the therapist smiled in satisfaction. "We have newcomers to the group this evening. Would they like to introduce themselves?"

She turned to Terry. He looked down quickly to avoid her intense gaze, hoping to act nonchalant and like he just hadn't seen her. Unfortunately, jerking his head down so fast made his glasses—slightly loose on his nose—slide right off and bounce onto his knees. He couldn't dare look up now, imagining everyone staring at him. He fiddled with the loose plastic pad to fit make it fit on the bridge of his nose and tried not to think of how blotchy his cheeks were when he blushed.

The woman beside Terry cleared her throat, and her knitting needles clicked as she held them in her lap. Terry assumed she was laughing at him until she said to the circle, "You may call me Mrs. Carlin. I am here today because I am the last of the dodos."

"Hello Mrs. Carlin," everyone replied. Terry, glasses back on his face but cheeks still burning, tried to join in the chant but started late and continued a moment after the beat.

She gave a fussy little flourish of her needles as she picked them back up and started knitting again. The *clack-clack-clack* every time the needles clicked together continued constantly as the circle began their introductions.

"I'm Joe," mumbled a large man to Mrs. Carlin's left. "Warthog."

"They call me Sheriff. I'm a honey badger."

"Hello. I'm Nancy, and in my spare time I'm a jerboa."

And so on. The voices and list of animal forms continued over the machine-gun clack of knitting needles until Terry relaxed. He finally drew his eyes away from his knees and looked around the circle. Everybody here seemed so calm—even the bearded man, Roger, a walrus. There really was no shame. And shame was what he'd expected most—it was part of daily life, for an odd species shifter like himself.

Terry was feeling at ease until the young man on his right started talking. Then Terry remembered that he still hadn't given his own introduction. Everyone would be staring at him. The sudden panic nearly drove away his ability to hear the man beside him say, "I'm Craig, and I'm a kinkajou."

All eyes now on Terry, he lifted his chin high and focused on not doing anything humiliating. "Hello. My name is Terry, and I'm a pangolin."

His was the final introduction. When the responding chorus of hellos had died out, the primly dressed therapist said, “Hello everyone. I’m Doctor Susan Webster, and I’m a kiwi. The purpose of this group is to encourage everyone to be proud of their inner animal. We can’t all be werewolves, werelions, or werebears, and that’s okay. Every animal is special in its own way—”

Terry tuned her out. Much of this was on the webpage. Why was he even here? He wasn’t exactly a group therapy kind of guy. But he really didn’t know what he was supposed to do with himself. He was a lame were in a world that only seemed to like good ones, and he had no idea what he was supposed to do. Hiding seemed like a good idea, but that wasn’t always possible.

“You doing okay?” the young man beside him asked quietly.

Terry gave him a side-eyed glance. He was kind of cute, in a scruffy sort of way. His name was Craig, Terry remembered. “Yeah, I’m just not sure why I’m here.”

“We’re all like that at first. I know it sounds like a bunch of psychobabble, but the people here are really nice. Give ’em a chance.”

Terry had no intention of staying long enough to give anyone any kind of chance. There was nothing to be gained from therapy—except maybe coffee and a snack, but it looked like he may have been too late even for that. He was feeling more and more that he shouldn’t have come here. It was just like any other group activity: if it wasn’t embarrassing, it was just depressing.

Doctor Susan Webster kept talking like she had a PowerPoint display in her head, rattling off buzzwords like *comfort healing* and *road to acceptance* and even an ironic *safety in numbers* with a little patronizing laugh. Terry cringed. He promised himself that if she mentioned *synergy* he would just walk out, despite the fact that it would make him look like a coward.

He tuned out, and looked again at Craig. Yes, definitely cute. Terry had never even heard of a kinkajou. It sounded like a made-up name. But considering that the same could be said for Terry’s pangolin, the obscure species form just made Craig cuter. He had his fingers intertwined in his lap and kept tangling them in different ways, keeping his palms flat on his legs but

twisting his fingers around and around each other like tangling worms. He could have been nervous, or he might have been as bored as Terry was.

Just as Terry was thinking that, Craig looked up at him. He turned his head and met Terry's eyes, raising an eyebrow. Their gazes locked and Terry waited for Craig to speak, to give more reassurance or an anecdote about the group. When his gaze kept holding, it occurred to Terry that Craig might just be weirded out by his staring—or he might even be flirting.

The thought made Terry's heartbeat speed up and he looked down in embarrassment. Just fast enough for his glasses to fall off again.

He hurriedly slid them back onto his face—again—and glanced back at Craig. Craig was still watching him, now with an amused half-smile. He had to be flirting. There was no other reason a guy would hold eye contact that long. Unless he was a serial killer.

But then Craig gave a little sideways jerk of his head. When Terry followed the direction of the movement he saw that the entire group was looking at him. Craig wasn't flirting. He was just waiting for Terry to answer a question that Doctor Susan had asked him while he wasn't listening.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry?"

She didn't look annoyed. She just nodded serenely at him and said, "It's perfectly natural to still experience feelings of embarrassment at your first meeting. With time you'll come to feel more comfortable with your animal shape and, so, with yourself."

"Okay."

It wasn't the response she had been looking for. The circle of faces just kept facing him. To his left Mrs. Carlin said politely, "Perhaps I could be the first to share an experience from the week?"

"If Terry has no objections?" Doctor Susan asked him brightly. There was just enough emphasis on the first syllable of his name that it was clear she'd made a point of memorizing it.

"Sure, go ahead," Terry said, still bewildered. He glanced back at Craig, who was now grinning at him like a child catching an adult using a naughty



word. It was clear he had realized that Terry had zoned out during Doctor Susan's speech, and found it kind of funny. Terry blushed and looked away.

Mrs. Carlin carefully placed her knitting in her lap. She took a short, hissing breath before saying, "I visited the zoological museum again. This time I only stayed in front of the dodo display for two hours."

There were murmurs of encouragement and praise from the circle. Doctor Susan said kindly, "Well done. How do you feel about that now?"

"I feel that I would have stayed longer if some boys hadn't been making fun of the stuffed displays," she said, and picked up her knitting again.

"All progress is positive," the doctor urged. "I think we should all be proud of Mrs. Carlin."

There was a small round of tepid applause, and while this was going on, Craig leaned over and whispered, "Wanna go get a coffee after this?"

For some reason, this made Terry relieved. Maybe because he'd get something out of group therapy after all? "I'd love to."

The rest of the session was a blur of happy talk and lukewarm affirmations of loving their inner animals, which still struck Terry as hilarious. Had they seen a pangolin? Cuddly was the last thing you'd think about one of them. It was like the unholy union between a snake, an anteater, and a pineapple.

Terry followed Craig to a coffee shop just down the street from the group therapy center. It wasn't a chain, either, which was nice, but sadly that also meant it was kind of empty. They were alone except for a woman laboring over her laptop in the corner.

Terry ordered a coffee, but Craig ordered a black tea with a shot of raspberry syrup and honey. They had their choice of seats, and ended up taking a nice table by the window.

They settled in and Craig asked, "So what do you do, outside of changing into a pangolin?"

"I'm a cube rat. I work for a software company."

Craig smiled. "So the glasses aren't a hipster affectation. You're a genuine nerd."

“Hey. Now that’s a stereotype.”

“Who’s your favorite X-Man?”

Terry sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Jean Grey. But I kind of like Mimic from Exiles too.”

“See? I didn’t understand that last sentence at all.”

Terry smirked and dropped his gaze. It had been a trap, of course.

But Craig leaned closer over the table, his smile warm. “I think nerds are hot.”

“Clearly you’ve never been to a comic con,” Terry replied.

As Craig chuckled, Terry decided to turn the tables on him. “So what is it you do, besides being a kinkajou?”

“Bit of this, bit of that,” Craig shrugged. His shaggy brown hair was just long enough that it curled against his shoulders and bounced as he shrugged. “I work at a bed store at the moment, but I have a gig doing nights at a radio station twice a week. That’s what I’d really like to be—a radio DJ.”

He gave Terry a look just challenging enough to prove that he was used to being mocked. Terry smiled. “So you’re a DJ. Would I have heard you?”

“Not unless you make a habit of listening to alt-pop radio between eleven at night and one in the morning.”

“I don’t.”

“No one does. But it’s a foot in the door. And the studio space is huge. It’s connected to this old concert hall with rafters a mile high. Sometimes after work, I’ll sneak into the concert hall alone and shift. Climb up into the rafters and on the ancient chandeliers. From that high up you can’t even see the ground.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Terry shivered. “I stick mostly to parks and playgrounds, but out of the way and always after hours.”

Craig smiled lazily and leaned closer, elbows on the table between them. “It’s a thrill. Breaks up the monotony of the day. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother with the radio gig at all. No one’s listening. I might as well not

even talk. Sometimes I think about just putting on a whole John Cage album to see if anyone complains.”

“At least you have a dream. I don’t think much further than my next day’s coffee and next week’s project,” Terry joked. It felt good to be able to talk to someone who knew about his animal form but didn’t think it was a big deal—who could even relate, without laughing.

“I doubt that. You’ve got this kind of intense look about you, and it’s not just the glasses. Like a man with a mission. I like it.”

Their drink order arrived, and Terry was saved from having to think of an answer. He stirred sugar into his own drink as Craig took a sip of his tea and let out a low rumble of contentment.

Craig leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed and the tea cup cradled between his hands like a squirrel holding a nut. Terry took the chance to study him while Craig wasn’t watching. There was nothing forced or styled in his scruffiness—he just didn’t seem to care how he looked. He was a few days late to shave, and his hair was mussed. It suited him.

Craig’s eyes snapped open. Terry darted his gaze away so fast he might get whiplash. He felt like he’d been caught pressing his nose up against Craig’s bedroom window. He hastily took a sip of coffee and burned his tongue.

Craig leaned onto the table again. “So what brought you to the meeting tonight? You hardly spoke two words.”

“I’m a bit shy.”

“Shy and nerdy? You just keep getting sexier.”

Terry blushed and looked away, watching the woman from the corner leaving the shop with her laptop held to her chest. He took a deep breath and forced himself to look back at Craig. That’s what normal people did—looked at each other. “I read about it online. And I thought... well, it’s true, isn’t it? We can’t all be werewolves or werebears. But that doesn’t stop us wishing we could be.”

Terry heard the bells on the shop door chime and carefully didn’t turn to look. Not acting like he was terrified of any passing noise might be a good way to impress a cute guy.

“Hand over the fucking money!” a man suddenly exclaimed, making Terry jump. A quick look showed that the man who’d just come in was wearing a black hoodie and holding a small gun, which he waved menacingly at the barista, who simply stared at him like he was crazy.

“Dude,” the barista said. “It’s been a slow night. There’s, like, twenty bucks in the register.”

The robber smashed the gun against the side of the barista’s head, sending her reeling backwards. “Shut the fuck up!”

“We should do something,” Terry muttered, before he realized what he was saying. Oh hell, did he actually say that?

Craig looked briefly alarmed, and then kind of intrigued. “Well, we are animals.”

Yeah, but he was a pangolin, which was no one’s idea of a hard-charging dynamo. Was a kinkajou any better? Still, he suggested it, and he might as well follow through on something for once. “You go high, I go low?” Not that he had any choice in the matter. Pangolins were low to the ground, so he was sticking with low unless he came across a catapult.

Craig nodded, and started sinking beneath the table. Terry did the same thing, as it was probably for the best.

Underneath the table, he willed the change, and then had to climb out of the tangle of his clothes. Craig did this easily. It turned out a kinkajou was a bit like a small cat, spry and agile. Terry’s own pangolin had huge claws built better for tree climbing than walking.

Terry managed to get out of the snagging net of his clothes and started walking across the floor to the legs of the robber. He was saying something, but Terry couldn’t make out what. He was just concentrating on the robber’s dirty sneakers.

There was a high-pitched screech, and suddenly the orangish blur of the kinkajou launched itself like a rocket at the startled robber’s face. It clung to him like a face-hugging alien, and the robber let out a shriek of his own as he reached up to grab it. It was then that Terry dug his thick, unwieldy claws into the robber’s leg, like he was a fir Terry wanted to climb.

The robber let out a nearly comical scream, arms pinwheeling wildly as he tried to step away and lost his balance, falling over as the kinkajou rode him down, gnawing on his forehead the whole time. The robber was able to grab Craig, as he'd dropped his gun, and pulled him off and threw him across the room. "Motherfucker," he spat, and gave Terry a look that was equal parts confused and angry.

Before the robber could do anything, the barista was suddenly towering over them. She poured a steaming hot cup of coffee in his face.

Now the robber was really screaming, and he grabbed his face and curled up in a ball as the barista added a kick in the stomach for good measure. "That's for hitting me, you fuckwad."

Terry made his way to the table and changed back near his clothes, hastily covering himself with his shirt before squirming into his boxer briefs. All he needed was to be charged with public indecency.

But Craig seemed to have no such hang-ups. He walked back completely naked, ducking down to get his clothes. "You all right?" he asked, grabbing his pants.

Terry tried not to notice that Craig was in pretty good shape, but he was. Maybe if he had Craig's build, he wouldn't have minded walking around naked either. "Yeah. You?"

"Oh yeah. Luckily, kinkajous are pretty flexible." He stood and pulled on his jeans, and just in time, too, because now Terry could hear the sirens approaching. "Maybe we could be superheroes ourselves. Kinkajou and The Pangolin."

"Ahem. Why am I second-billed?" He knew Craig was joking, but no way was he going to let this slip past unmentioned. "I'm the one who actually knows anything about superheroes. Like what kind of names could be catchy, for instance."

"Heh. Let's not hang around long enough for the police to start asking how two exotic animals found their way into a sparsely populated coffee shop. No need to end the vigilante career as soon as it begins." For all his talk of haste, Craig grabbed his tea cup and drained it before following Terry to the exit. The

barista had her back to the door and a phone pressed to her ear, and didn't even notice them leaving.

"She'll be okay, right? You don't think she'll be traumatized?" Terry hesitated, looking back through the door. His body was coursing with adrenaline, but he knew when it faded he'd feel sick and shaky.

"Terry." Craig put a hand on Terry's shoulder, calming rather than trying to lead him away. His hair had fallen into his face and it just drew more attention to his killer smile. "We just brought a robber down. And you know what? No way a wolf or a bear could have gotten away with what we just did."

Terry chuckled. "You're right. I hadn't thought of that. Maybe being small and weird isn't a bad thing."

"Maybe it's not." Craig winked to reinforce the words.

Terry blushed and pushed his glasses up. "We should get going?"

"We should. But first..." Craig caught Terry's face in both hands and tilted it upward so they were looking eye to eye. He held Terry's gaze for a long moment, then lowered his head to press their lips together. It was a tiny, chaste kiss and it tasted like raspberry. "Congratulations on becoming a superhero."

Terry was grinning too wide to form any words.

Their hands intertwined as they walked away from the scene.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Willow Scarlett is an erotic romance writer living in beautiful New Zealand. She wrote bleak science fiction until she met the man of her dreams and dedicated her writing to sharing the delighted happiness of love. Her greatest joy is in creating holistic romances, bringing characters through friendship and lust to consuming, eye-opening, world-fulfilling love.*

## Contact & Media Info

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## Author Bio

*Andrea Speed writes way too much. She is the writer of the Infected series for Dreamspinner Press, and the Josh of the Damned series for Riptide Publishing, amongst other things. She won a Rainbow Award for best horror/paranormal novel in 2012, and feels she may be ubiquitous on the web. But she is not (sadly) the Italian DJ of the same name that often comes up first in Google searches.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Website](#)

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# THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO TRYING NOT TO DIE

By Sam Schooler

## Photo Description

A shirtless guy in jeans stands with a sword slung across his shoulders.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Overnight, my whole world has changed. I woke up with psychotic LOTR-looking freaks trying to kill me, only to be rescued by my scary next door neighbor. He claims to be my guardian and that I'm some sort of key. Key to what? And oh gosh, are those guys in my bedroom really dead? There's no way I'm getting my security deposit back now.*

*Fantasy, time-travel, AU all welcome. Please no BDSM. I do like snark, UST, HEA!*

Sincerely,

Ithra

## Story Info

**Genre:** urban fantasy

**Tags:** coming of age, geeks/nerds, magic users, college, humorous, road trip, slow burn/UST, soul mates or bonded

**Content warnings:** some violence

**Word count:** 25,388

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# THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO TRYING NOT TO DIE

By Sam Schooler

Aragorn, Boromir, and Faramir are trying to kill him.

Danny tightens his grip on the silver candlestick he snagged off the dining room table, trying to muffle his panicked breathing. He had migraines as a kid and his mother took him to a relaxation therapy clinic; he remembers the CDs they gave him and breathes in, holds it, breathes out. In, out. Calm. He's capable. He knows this house better than they do. He can do this.

A floorboard behind him creaks.

Oh god, he's going to die.

Candlestick at the ready, Danny whirls, bringing it crashing down on the shoulder of the guy... who...

...is his next-door neighbor.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" Danny hisses, eyes wide, and then he sees the sword in Neighbor Guy's hand and backs away so fast that he knocks his head on the bathroom doorframe. He yelps and Neighbor Guy makes a cutting gesture with one hand, signaling for silence. "No," Danny says, "no, you are trying to kill me, and—"

"I'm not," Neighbor Guy starts, half a second before Aragorn slides into the living room, hefting his sword over his head in what is possibly the worst attack plan that Danny has ever seen. He isn't, like, a master swordsman, and nor does he know anything about hand-to-hand that doesn't come from action movies and the mandatory self-defense section of gym class in eighth grade—but, regardless, he knows that the guy is kind of an idiot if *that's* how he's going to come at Neighbor Guy, who has at least three inches on him vertically and four or five on him horizontally (because seriously, the guy has Shoulders. Capital S-worthy Shoulders).

Neighbor Guy promptly uses those Capital S Shoulders to drive his sword through Aragorn's stomach. He drops one knee at the last second, ducks, and heaves upward, putting his shoulder under the hilt of his blade and dragging it through Aragorn's chest until he hits bone he can't break. Aragorn gasps and gurgles, reaching for Danny, who may or may not be having a mild panic attack right there in the hallway, and then, oh gosh, he's dead, all the life sinking out of him in one limp flop. Neighbor Guy stands, letting Aragorn's body drop off his sword, and looks at Danny.

"I really don't want to die," Danny reminds him.

"I'm here to make sure that doesn't happen," Neighbor Guy says. He has a nice voice, and Danny would take more time to appreciate it if he wasn't sure that his life was in peril.

"What do we do?" he asks, holding his candlestick closer to his chest. Neighbor Guy's eyes drop to it, and then he actually has the fucking nerve to *roll them*, like Danny's attempt at self-preservation isn't good enough for him. "What?" Danny snaps. "I'm sorry, is this not sufficient for you? I could have grabbed a pepper shaker or something else useless. I was going to die!"

Neighbor Guy squints at him, his mouth open a little. After a moment, he asks, "...Is there something wrong with you?"

"Is there," Danny says. "Oh my god, *is there something wrong with me?* Fuck yes, there's something wrong with me! People are trying to kill me!" He almost wants to swing at Neighbor Guy with the candlestick again, but too late he realizes that he's been shouting, and that there are heavy footsteps thudding toward them, and equally heavy footsteps above, on the second floor.

"Come here," Neighbor Guy says, and grabs him by the collar of his shirt, dragging him forward and into Neighbor Guy's chest. Neighbor Guy walks backward, pulling Danny with him into the bathroom. He pushes Danny into the corner where the door wall meets the side wall, and of course, Danny starts fucking sneezing right there, because Malia insists on putting these incense things in the bathroom that smell like Moonlight Vanilla and Beach Pineapple Coconut, and they irritate his asthma like nothing else. "Be quiet!"

Danny gives him an ugly look and lifts the candlestick again. He doesn't want to kill anyone, and he's trying not to think about what the police are going to say when Danny calls and says that he has a dead *Lord of the Rings* cosplayer in his house. Whatever they say, he's sure it will end with him in prison, wasting his young life away in solitary and eating fake baked beans and stale bread.

"What," he says, and Neighbor Guy pushes into his space, putting a hand over his mouth that Danny is immediately tempted to lick. A shadow falls on the far side of the hallway, and Danny breathes into Neighbor Guy's hand, assuring himself that his lungs aren't going to go traitor on him now. *We've come so far*, he thinks, sucking in a slow breath. Neighbor Guy is looking into the hallway, his whole face dark except for the line of one cheekbone and the groove on the top of his lip, which is prickled with five o'clock shadow. Unfair, since it's only like eight-thirty in the morning and Danny hasn't even had coffee yet, much less breakfast.

The shadow stalls, then creeps forward, and Danny sees the glinting edge of a sword before he sees the rest of the man. He can't tell if it's Boromir or Faramir—and then it doesn't matter, because whoever it was is dead now, his left arm mostly severed, and his blood painting the wall in a spattering wave.

"Oh," Danny says weakly. "That's great. That's a lot of blood."

"I'm really going to need you to be quiet," Neighbor Guy says, glaring at Danny. He has blood smeared on his face, droplets arched artfully over one side of it, a line from his chin to his hairline. God, *ew*, there's probably some in his hair, too, but it's too dark for Danny to tell. "Here," he says, and Danny looks up to see Neighbor Guy offering him a sword.

"Uh," Danny says.

"Take it," Neighbor Guy snaps. He pushes it hard into Danny's hand. "There's one more of them." Easing back out into the hallway, he glances left, then moves right, motioning for Danny to follow. Sword in hand, Danny does, keeping his back pressed to the wall as he navigates his way over Aragorn's splayed limbs. As soon as he lets himself think he's in the clear, he slips in Aragorn's blood, and Neighbor Guy hauls him back to his feet with one hand

under his arm, his eyes set ahead, on the front door. The front door is less appealing than upstairs, where Danny could dress himself in something that isn't, you know, *Star Trek* boxers and a ripped orange T-shirt that says BIG LOUIE'S SUPER SHRIMP from his cousin's failed attempt at a shrimp truck.

Neighbor Guy leads Danny forward, checking the stairs and the study as he goes, his barefoot steps silent on the hardwood floor. He motions Danny closer and leans into him, passing a set of keys into his hand. "Listen to me. You go get in my truck and you drive it down to Clairview Park. Got it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find the other one." Neighbor Guy pushes Danny toward the front door. "Go. I'll meet you."

Really, Danny would have more questions about why Neighbor Guy seems so bent on saving Danny's life, and why he has this whole *Man on Fire* act down pat, but he sees the third one—definitely Faramir—coming around from the hallway before Neighbor Guy, and he... Okay, yes, he shrieks, "Behind you!" as he throws his arms up on instinct. To his surprise, his blade meets Faramir's and the shock ricochets up his arms, jangling his nerves. Faramir looks as stunned as Danny does, and Neighbor Guy uses that to his advantage, sliding between them and bringing his sword up, the tip resting on the heaving bob of Faramir's throat.

"Don't," Neighbor Guy growls, pushing Faramir back.

Faramir smirks and brings his free arm up, knocking Neighbor Guy's sword away as he pulls a dagger out of his shirt. It's glowing a cherry red, sparking here and there, and Danny scrambles backward too late; the cut the dagger makes is quick and it *hurts*, worse than the time Danny broke his arm playing hopscotch.

"Too late," Faramir murmurs as Neighbor Guy rallies, turning on him, and Neighbor Guy's sword... goes through the side of his throat.

Danny has never seen so much blood in his life. It *sprays*, it's fucking Old Faithful. Danny is never going to make fun of horror movie blood after this.

“Guardian,” Faramir spits, his voice hoarse. “You are too late.” He coughs and blood sprays thickly from his torn throat. Danny recoils as some of it hits his arm, warm and wet.

“Who sent you?” Neighbor Guy—Guardian? Is that his name?—demands. When Faramir does nothing but smile up at him, he pushes the tip of his blade deeper into the new wound. “*Who sent you?*”

“A new reign is coming,” Faramir murmurs. Danny can see his eyes glazing over. Neighbor Guy seems to realize he’s losing him, too, and he steps back, letting Faramir hit the ground. Faramir gasps and chokes, his smile widening. “My life I give in service, so the light will be remade. My salt to this land, my flesh to this soil, so his reign may extend here. My ancestors take my spirit.”

“You’re not on soil,” Neighbor Guy says. “And you’re a murderer. No spirits are coming for you.” He pauses, watching Faramir’s chest heave. “At least, not the ones you want to see.”

Danny feels a flash of sickening satisfaction that is replaced with pure sickening, because he doesn’t know who this guy *is*. He doesn’t know who any of them are. Who says that Neighbor Guy is the good one here? Danny means to ask this, and he means to dig his heels in, but instead he looks at the keys in his hand, then looks back up at Neighbor Guy and asks, “What now?”

“Pack a bag. We’re leaving.”

“We’re leaving,” Danny repeats. Neighbor Guy reaches for his keys and Danny snatches them back, stuffing them into the useless breast pocket on his T-shirt. “No. No, that is incorrect. I don’t even know who the hell you *are*.”

Neighbor Guy sighs and switches his sword to his right hand, offering his left to shake. “My name is Soren. I’m here to protect you.”

Danny’s life is officially a bad movie. “Protect me from *what?*”

Soren raises both eyebrows and looks down at Faramir. “Uh...?”

That is the precise moment when Danny knows that this man is going to drive him *up the wall*. “Uh, yeah,” he says. “‘Uh,’ he says to me. Uh, who the fuck is he?”

“I don’t know his name,” Soren says slowly.

Danny boggles at him. “I can’t tell if you’re purposefully missing what I’m asking you here or if we’re having—I don’t even know. Who are you?”

“My name is—”

“Soren,” Danny cuts off. “I know that.” He points at dead Faramir. “You asked him who he worked for.”

“Right.”

Danny drags a hand down his face, remembering belatedly that there’s blood all over it, at least eighty percent of which isn’t his. *Ugh*. “You and I are gonna have a difficult time with each other, aren’t we?”

Soren shrugs. “I like you fine, Danny.”

“You don’t even know me,” Danny says, half-laughing it. He feels hysterical, suddenly, because he can smell blood. There are three dead men in his house and he has their blood on him. He needs his inhaler, and he needs to call Malia, and he needs, he thinks, to call his mother, who will probably make the four-hour drive down here in three. “How do you know me?”

He knows Soren in the way casual neighbors know each other, sure, but Soren is looking at Danny like he expects him to know everything, like Soren is miles ahead and he expected Danny to be walking next to him, matched step for step, only to find that he let Danny fall down a fucking hill, *Princess Bride*-style. Soren has lived in the house next to his and Malia’s since they moved in, and he’s kept to himself. Malia met him once but didn’t ask his name, and aside from gawking at him when he did laps in the small swimming pool behind his house, Danny has had zero contact with the guy.

Soren’s expression is strange. He steps into Danny’s space and cups his jaw in one hand, tilting his face to one side so Soren can examine the cut. “He marked you,” he murmurs, his jaw ticking. He lets Danny go a second later, which is good, since Danny’s body has developed a sudden and ill-timed fever that is located primarily in his groin. “We really have to go,” Soren says. “I need you to pack a bag. There’s going to be more of them, once these don’t report back.”

Danny grits his teeth. “Are you going to call the police?”

“The police won’t help us,” Soren says. “Pack, Danny.”

So, he does. He washes his hands and face, first, and then he fishes his old high school backpack out from under his bed. When he catches sight of himself in his bedroom mirror, he’s so pale that he looks sick. Even his freckles have lightened. He drags a hand back through his hair, fixing it and, belatedly, remembering to check it for blood. Nothing; his hand is clean.

That done, Danny calls Malia. He gets her voicemail and he tells her not to come home, that something’s happened and he’ll be at Soren’s house. Come there, he says, and he wonders if she’ll hate him for this. Probably. She holds a hell of a grudge.

Inhaler. Clothes. Wallet. Cell phone. Cell charger. Toothbrush. Deodorant, even. His mother would be proud.

Danny doesn’t call his mother.

“Look,” he says on his way back down the stairs. “I have a roommate. If she comes back here and finds this...”

“She can’t come back here,” Soren says. “The seekers won’t kill you, but they’ll kill anyone who gets between them and you.”

Danny picks up the short sword from the floor, wincing as sticky blood coats his palm. “When I asked who that guy was, ‘a seeker’ would have been a good answer. You know. FYI.”

“He’s a seeker,” Soren says, with a tone that suggests he’s only humoring Danny. “They’re looking for you because they’ve been sent by someone.”

“For me.” Danny has three dead bodies to prove that Soren is right. “Why?”

“I’ll explain.” Soren opens the front door. “Later.”

“Have you done this before?” Danny asks. “Any experience? Y’know, student teacher placement?”

Soren’s shoulders stiffen. “No. Why?”

“Because you have a terrible bedside manner. It needs work. For all I know, you’re one of them and you’re going to cut my liver out and sell it on the Black Market.”

Soren blinks. He has this amazing ability to rearrange his entire face from scowl to bemusement and back in seconds. “What?”

“Nothing.” Danny isn’t sure why he believes Soren in the first place; he doesn’t want to have to explain the fact that he does. Not to himself, and especially not to Soren.

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Malia calls as Soren is slinging a leather satchel into the back of his pickup truck.

“What,” she says, “the fuck was that message, Daniel.”

“Uh,” Danny says. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Soren look up. “Look, I need you to... not come home for a while.”

“Why?”

“I see dead people?” Danny says, and only when it’s out of his mouth does he realize how *wildly* inappropriate it was. He darts a glance at Soren, whose face is carefully blank.

Malia’s voice is very calm and very low. “Excuse me.”

“I’ll explain when you get here,” Danny tries. “I just need you to trust me, Mal.”

“Tell me that when there aren’t dead people in my house.” She hangs up. Danny pulls his phone away from his ear, sighing. If the next Tolkien crew doesn’t kill him, she might.

“She’s a black belt,” he says morosely. “D’you realize what she’s going to do to me?”

“It’s better than ending up dead.” Soren has his arms folded loosely on the lip of the truck bed. “When she gets here, she needs to pack a bag and leave. We’ll meet up with the rest of the League when we get to Lohrfast.”



Danny waves his hands in a way that kind of signals that he's having a seizure. He might be, he doesn't know. For a brief, terrifying moment, he can't remember where he put his inhaler; it's in his pocket when he slaps his hands down, a comforting and familiar shape. He takes a hit off it, sighing at the instant relief.

"Okay," he says. "Okay, *look*. There are about fifty things wrong with what you just said. That's her *house*," he says, throwing out an arm to point at it. "That's her house, dude, and there are three *dead guys* in it!"

"I realize that," Soren says. He's doing this thing where his eyes are dark and unreadable, and his face is utterly devoid of emotion, like some demented C-3PO. Hell fucking no, Danny is not about to be his R2-D2.

"*Look*," Danny repeats. "I can't leave them there and leave her to deal with it. The police might not help us, but somehow I doubt they'll have an issue arresting her."

Soren sighs. He seems very put-upon by Danny's whole freaking out episode. Danny scowls at him. "Okay," Soren says slowly. "We're going to go to Lohrfast—"

"I don't want to go to *Ireland*—"

"And then," Soren says, slightly louder. "We're going to send someone back here to help with cleaning up your house. Okay?"

Danny gapes at him. "No," he says finally. "No, not okay."

Soren sighs again, more exasperated. "What else do you want me to do, Danny?"

"Explain all this shit!" Danny says, throwing his hands up. He quite abruptly needs his inhaler again, and he takes a couple puffs. This is more than he's ever taken in such a short amount of time, and he hopes he isn't about to keel over. Then again, dying might be a reprieve from the torrent of bullshit that his life has become. "Where is Lohrfast?"

"Not here," Soren says. "Where I'm from..." He falters, his eyes dropping away for the first time. "Where we're from," he begins, "isn't here. I need to take you there. For protection."

“Protection.”

“From seekers like the ones in there.” Soren nods to the house.

Danny turns out of habit to look at it. It looks... foreign. He thinks about the three dead men in it and it feels less like the place he’s been living in for the past year. This is how his childhood bedroom felt, the first time he went back to it, but that had been after months of living here. He didn’t think a place could change that quickly. He swallows hard, rubbing his fingers into the hot metal of Soren’s truck.

“What about my parents?”

A flicker of emotion. “They’ll be informed.”

It sounds so *clinical*. “Informed,” Danny echoes.

“They knew already,” Soren says. “They knew when they took you into their home.”

“I’m...” Danny blinks at him. “What?”

Soren’s mouth twists at one side, wry. “Sorry.”

Danny sags against the flank of the truck. He’s adopted. There are three dead dudes in his house, his roommate is about to kill him, he’s being whisked off to Ireland, and he’s adopted.

“I should never’ve gotten out of bed this morning,” he mutters. “Shit.”

Of course, that’s when Malia’s car screeches around the corner at the far end of the street and comes barreling into their driveway. “What,” she says, stepping out. She’s near six foot, taller than Danny is, and she run-walks at him on her five-inch Manolos, doggedly determined to... *Oh god she’s going to rip my face off.*

“Malia,” Danny says.

“Nope,” she interrupts. “Nope. If there are dead people in my *house*, Danny—”

“Look—”

“Don’t you *look* me! I hate when you *look* me!”

“For the record,” Soren says pleasantly, “I hate when he does that, too.”

Malia squints at him. “Why the hell is my roommate’s shit in your truck?” she asks, looking pointedly at Danny’s duffel bag.

“I’m taking him with me.”

“And leaving me with the dead bodies?” Malia snaps.

Soren shrugs. “I’m sending someone to fix your house. You should—”

“*What.*” Malia whirls, turning her laser focus back on Danny. “There are *actually dead bodies in my house*? I thought you were fucking joking, you asshat!”

“I’m sorry,” Danny says, itching for his inhaler again. “It was—What happened was—What...” He breaks off, fending away the tightness in his chest. “I don’t even know what happened,” he says lamely. “I don’t know, Mal.”

She stares at him for another long moment, her jaw clenched, and then she softens and touches his lip where it’s split. “You okay?”

“Oh yeah,” Danny mutters. “Fabulous.”

Soren clears his throat from behind them. “We need to go,” he says to Danny. To Malia, “You should find somewhere safe to stay. A hotel, a friend’s house. Stay there for a couple weeks, until I can draw their attention away from here.”

“Is that why you’re taking me?” Danny says. It’s near squawk-level. “Am I bait for Legolas?” He cannot handle this. He just can’t. “I...” He snatches his bag up from the truck bed. “Look, I’m just going to stay here. With Malia. At a hotel! I’ll be fine. Just fine.”

“No,” Soren says. He’s back to that deep, scary voice that Danny can tell he uses to end conversations.

Unluckily for him, Danny rarely responds to conversation-ending tones. “No,” he parrots instead. “No way. If Malia can stay, I can stay. I’ll *inform* my parents myself.”

Soren's jaw tightens. "My job is to look after you," he says. "That's what I'm trying to do. I'd appreciate if you'd let me *do it*."

They lapse into tense silence, Danny staring at Soren and Soren staring back at him, puffing up, and spreading his stupid Shoulders until he's taking up as much room as possible.

"You look like a fucking peacock," Malia says eventually. Her voice is practically a snarl. "I sure as fuck am not staying here if there's dead people in my house. Wherever you two are going, I'm coming with you."

"No," Soren says. Conversation-ending voice.

"Yes," Malia says. I-will-fucking-kill-you voice.

"Dude," Danny says, "don't even bother. She's gonna win." He can practically hear Soren grinding his teeth from here. "I've tried, believe me."

"Two years of law school," Malia says, by way of explanation.

"I can tell," Soren agrees, and just like that, the tension dissipates. Danny glances between them. This is baffling, he thinks, and almost says it, but Soren is already saying, "Go pack a bag."

"Two minutes." Malia jogs toward the house, still on her five-inch heels.

"She's your girlfriend?" Soren assumes, watching the still visage of Danny's house.

"What? No." Danny shrugs. "We met through a friend. I needed a place to stay." Soren hums, noncommittal, which is when Danny realizes that maybe he's asking so he can *date* her, or *court* her, or whatever the fuck it is that people from Lohrfast do. God, he can't imagine what would happen to the world if Soren and Malia hooked up. That's like... that would be like, Jesus, all that's coming to mind for him are bad WWII-related images. Superpowers.

Malia is gone longer than two minutes. Danny gets antsy, *wants* his inhaler again. He says, "I need to call my parents." Soren makes a face, but he doesn't say no, so Danny pulls out his cell phone.

He gets voicemail.

“Fuck,” he mutters, listening to his mom’s cheerful, familiar intro. “*Hi, you’ve reached the Marlaeto household! Leave a message after the beep, and we’ll call you back as soon as we can. Have a great day!*” He turns away from Soren, tucking his phone and face into his shoulder. “Hey, Ma,” he says. He tries not to look at his house. “I love you a lot, okay? You and Dad.” *You never told me.* “I’m safe, okay? I’m going with Soren. I’m okay. I’ll...” He grits his teeth, then lies through them. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

Soren is watching him impassively when he comes back to stick his (turned off) phone in his bag. “They know me,” he says. “They met me before I moved here.”

Danny leans on the truck, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. He wants to set his whole life on fire, and Soren’s face on fire, and this truck. And the house. “So I guess everyone knew but me. And I *still* don’t know.”

“I’ll explain,” Soren says. His voice is softer, but when Danny drags his hands away from his eyes, it hardens again. “We don’t have time right now.” He leans in the open driver’s side window and slams his hand down on the truck’s horn, blaring it for five short blasts. Danny sees one of the front window curtains rustle, and an extended middle finger appears in it. He ducks his head, laughing. A moment later, the front door slams.

Malia has stripped down out of her dojo uniform and has sneakers on. Her long blonde hair is tied back in a severe ponytail. “We’re in Montana,” she says to Danny, tossing her duffel in the truck bed. “I needed to oh-so-suddenly go to rehab for a Vicodin addiction.”

Her selflessness makes Danny’s chest ache, and he reaches for her, hugging her around the waist. If he said thank you, she might say, *You’d do the same for me*, except Danny doesn’t know if he would. He doesn’t even know if he *could*. Could he pick up and leave his entire *life*? Go off on some... some *quest* with rules and backstory that were only vague shapes? With no playing cards and shitty figures and loaded dice?

No. But he isn’t Malia.

Soren climbs into the truck. His eyes are cool now. He says he's Danny's guardian—so how much of his own life did he give up? “We need to go,” he says, peering at them through the passenger window.

“Shotgun,” Malia says. She gives Danny a lopsided smile.

He can't look back at the house when they drive away.

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They don't go to Montana, but it's a close thing. Soren drives for six hours, Danny and Malia exchanging *WTF?* looks and napping on and off—Malia worked an all-nighter at her dojo, and Danny's reaction to trauma has always been sleeping. Soren shakes Danny awake when the sun starts to set so they can go through a McDonald's. Danny has zero cash on him, and he's a little surprised when Soren is fine with him using his debit card. Isn't that how action movie heroes get found out? All the bad guy has to do is *ping* and there's the tracking chip.

“Seekers are behind the times,” Soren says, stealing a handful of Danny's fries. Malia is sucking her way through a triple-thick shake, her cheeseburger forgotten in her lap. “Not many people from Lohrfast spend time on Earth.”

“Right,” Danny says, focused on *food holy fuck food* until he realizes Soren just said *on Earth*. “You're an alien,” he says blankly.

“What?”

“You know,” Danny says, gesturing vaguely. “E.T.? The Doctor?”

“Which doctor?”

There are so many terribad jokes Danny could make right now. Instead, he says, “How much time have *you* spent on Earth?”

“A year.”

Since Danny moved out of his parents' house. Danny glances at Malia, who shrugs and widens her eyes at him. “You said my parents... know you?”

“It's tradition for the parents of a key to meet the guardian before they take post.” Soren steals more of Danny's fries, despite the fact that he has his own *bag* with his *own fries* right in his lap.

“Stop it,” Danny snaps, hoarding his fries in against his chest. Soren raises both eyebrows at him. “What’s a key?”

“You’re a key.” Soren’s fingers twitch on the steering wheel.

“A key is...”

“A source of magic,” Soren says, reluctant. Danny can see why he would be, because the second the word *magic* is out of his mouth, Malia is laughing, and so is Danny.

“You’re fucking kidding,” Malia says. “*Magic*. And he’s a source of it?”

“Don’t say that like it’s impossible!” Danny snaps, grabbing her milkshake from her.

“Honey, you’re awesome, but you can’t walk ten feet without tripping over yourself.” Malia unwraps her cheeseburger and takes a huge bite. “God,” she says through it, “San Francisco needs to get better burger places.”

“Agreed,” Soren says. And really, his whole attractiveness level is steadily declining. Danny sticks his hand in Soren’s bag to steal back the handful of fries Soren pilfered from his carton. Soren watches him the whole time, dark eyes keen, but he doesn’t stop Danny. It’s uncomfortable. His laser stare is... is uncomfortable. And stupid.

Danny pulls his hand back and stuffs the fries in his mouth. “I hate you both,” he says, with less conviction and more good humor than he’d intended. “So,” he says loudly, to distract them both from that fact, “what did the warriors three want with me?”

Soren sighs, shifting his hand on the steering wheel. His skin is cast orange in the sunset. Danny can barely make the four-hour drive to his parents’ place without going cross-eyed; he isn’t sure how Soren’s still going. Maybe with magic. Ha ha.

“There’s been talk lately about a sorcerer rounding up keys,” he says. His voice is affected for the first time, some emotion Danny doesn’t want to think might be hopelessness, or, or loss of resolve, or sadness. Danny is overreacting, that’s all. Malia is silent, listening. “I think they were working for him.”

Danny goes quiet, processing this. Malia speaks up abruptly. “So he wants a shitload of power.”

Soren nods. “That’s what the League thinks. At first, his men stayed in Lohrfast, seeking out keys there, but lately he’s moved to the other dimensions with the help of keys he’s already caught and bound to him.”

“Bound?” Danny asks.

“Sorcerers can...” Soren’s fingers flex on the steering wheel again. “They can use a key’s magic at will. See, it’s like... Keys are like a well where magic is stored. But unless you have a bucket, you can’t get to that water. Sorcerers are the people who have the bucket—the natural ability to access a key’s magic.”

Danny rubs his fingertips together. “Can’t I just use magic to avoid them?”

“You can’t,” Soren says. “Only a sorcerer can. A well doesn’t do anything with its own water.”

“That’s really fucking shitty,” Malia chimes in. She balls up her cheeseburger wrapper, then takes her milkshake back from Danny’s loose grip and sips it noisily. “Where are we going?”

“Mount Rainier.” Soren puts his bag on Danny’s lap. Danny’s all set to protest until he sees the fries that are still left. “There’s a portal to Lohrfast set up there.”

Malia makes a faint noise in her throat. “I thought Earth didn’t have magic?”

“It can,” Soren says. “If we bring it here.”

Danny glances over at Malia. She looks... not unhappy, but thoughtful. He nudges her gently in the side. “We aren’t coming back,” she says, swatting at Danny’s arm. She peers over his head at Soren. God, Danny hates being 5’6”. “Are we.”

Soren’s jaw flexes. “Not until the League can be assured that this sorcerer’s handled.” He glances back at her. “Are you sure you want to come?”



“No, that’s why I’ve been sitting in a car for six hours with you two. Of course I’m coming. You may be his guardian, but I’ve kept him from falling on his ass more times than you ever will.” Malia hands her milkshake back to Danny, who is rapidly being convinced that he functions only as a) comic relief, and b) a garbage disposal. She goes on, “Are you guys just hoping he dies of a massive heart attack, or are you trying to stop him?”

“We’re working on it.” Soren takes the milkshake out of Danny’s hand and sucks the rest of it down. Maybe he needs the sugar rush. “He has upwards of two hundred keys bound to him already. It’s hard to neutralize that much magic.”

“You guys don’t have any keys,” Danny assumes.

“We have some. Our leader is a woman named Ilyana, and her wife is a key.” The way Soren says it is completely offhand, with no odd tone at all. Like the leader of an immensely powerful group of warriors being female and having a wife is a common, everyday thing.

...Okay, maybe Danny could like this League. At least they seem friendlier to queer people than all of Earth does.

Danny takes the empty milkshake cup from Soren and sticks it in the bag. “That’s not the problem,” he says, dropping the bag between Malia’s feet. She jumps a little, dozy. They both slept earlier, but this truck, while huge, is mostly made up of bed instead of cabin, and there isn’t a lot of room to act as good sleeping ground.

“What *is* the problem?” Malia asks, blinking.

“The problem is you don’t have any sorcerers,” Danny says, looking Soren’s way. “Do you?”

“We don’t accept unbound sorcerers into our ranks,” Soren says. “We have few bound pairs. Keys usually do their best to stay unbound.”

Malia snorts. “Big surprise there,” she says. “If a key is so easy for a sorcerer to control, who the hell would do that? Willingly, I mean.”

“Wait,” Danny says. Malia and Soren both look at him, and he shrinks down in his seat. They have the same piercing, hawkish stare, even with Malia half-asleep. “Wait, so how many keys are there?”

Soren shrugs, switching lanes to pass a semitruck. “A few thousand. Most are sent out of Lohrfast when they’re born. Keys are harder to detect in realms that don’t naturally have magic. The majority have guardians assigned to them, we think, but there are some whose parents refuse to reveal them as a key, even to us. We can’t be sure of how many.”

Danny huffs out a long breath. This morning, he got up and worried about his geology final (he’s going to miss it; his grade is definitely fucked). Now he’s... *magic*, and, and alternate dimensions, and Soren, sitting next to him, is so calm about all this. Danny’s lungs catch on the next inhale; he fumbles for his inhaler and takes two puffs of it, letting the medicine sting its way through him. Soren is watching him when he looks up, and Danny offers a weak smile. “Stop the ride, I wanna get off.”

He thinks he sees an answering smile flicker on Soren’s mouth, but he can’t be sure. Maybe it’s the streetlights.

Somewhere between then and the next morning, Danny sleeps. He remembers waking up, once, and hearing Malia talking lowly to Soren. Everything before and after that is a long, blank gap, broken occasionally by car horns or rough ground.

When he does wake up completely, the truck’s clock says 5:54 in blurry red letters. The sky is still dark.

His head is on Soren’s shoulder.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, pushing upright. Soren wears cologne, or strong deodorant, and Danny has a nose full of it and maybe a boner—which is not his fault. He will personally dare any nineteen-year-old gay guy to sleep on an attractive man who smells nice and *not* pop a stiffy, for real.

“It’s fine,” Soren says. He glances over Danny and shrugs the shoulder Danny was probably drooling on. “I don’t mind.”

Yeah, no, Plan B is better, so Danny says, “Don’t worry about it,” and slumps against Malia, putting his head on her shoulder instead. After fifteen minutes of half-hearted dozing, he can admit that his body has had enough sleep and is rebelling against any and all notions of attempting to get more. Danny groans, straightening up again.

Soren is eyeing him again from under the dark fringe of his hair. Danny watches him right back, trying to telepathically impart some meaningful wisdom about staring, but then Soren says, “Want coffee?” and Danny likes him a lot more, in that moment.

“Please,” he moans.

Soren pulls off at the next exit ramp and they find a Dunkin’ Donuts. Danny is enjoying the silence, so he doesn’t wake Malia, but he *does* order her a mocha frappe for whenever she wakes up. He buries his face in the largest size of black coffee they have, and Soren, *Soren*, gets a “Caramel Drizzle Dunkaccino”. With extra whipped cream. It’s possibly the least manly coffee order Danny has ever heard, which is why he thinks it’s appropriate to ask, “How old are you?”

He doesn’t get a response until Soren has swallowed his sip of caramel and licked the whipped cream from around the rim of his cup. Then, “Twenty-six.”

Huh. He’s only seven years older than Danny. Somehow Danny expected him to be in his early thirties, not stranded in the middle of that nebulous twenties existence, wherein everyone over twenty-one and under thirty is essentially the same age. “Why’d you become a guardian?”

“You do know I’m going on about an hour of sleep here. Not a good conversational partner,” Soren says, sipping his coffee again. They’re back on the highway, and Soren has coaxed his pickup to eighty-six miles per hour. When Danny raises both eyebrows at him, he sighs. “It seemed like a good idea.”

“So what does...” Danny waves his non-coffee-occupied hand vaguely. “Besides, you know, keeping me from getting my face cut off. What’s it... like?”

Soren shrugs. “A lot of non-action. Until now,” he adds, mouth twisting. “You take the Oath at eighteen, if you’re committed that early. You train, and then you’re used like a police force until a key needs your protection. Now, though...” He shrugs again. God, it kills Danny that he was napping on one of those Shoulders and was too zonked to appreciate it. “Who knows.”

“Does this sorcerer have a name?”

“Not that he’s given away.”

Danny hums into his coffee cup. “I’m gonna call him Doctor Doom.”

There’s a noise from Soren’s side of the truck. Danny doesn’t realize what it is until he hears it deepen; it’s Soren *laughing*, mouth open and white teeth flashing and all. “...Well,” Danny says. He’s blindsided, he’ll totally admit it. He’s in a truck cabin at six in the morning, sitting next to a guy sworn with an actual, medieval *oath* to protect him, a guy who likes to garden and swims twenty laps every day at four o’clock and who drinks *Caramel Drizzle Dunkaccinos*, and he’s blindsided. “There we go,” he finishes lamely.

Soren sets his coffee in one of the cup holders, eyeing Danny. “There we go, what?”

“You,” Danny says. “I didn’t know you could smile, much less laugh. You’ve kinda got a ninja thing going on here. Like Ra’s al Ghul, but less... I dunno.” He takes another sip of coffee.

“I don’t understand sixty percent of what you say to me,” Soren says eventually, “but thanks? I think.”

Danny grins at him, feeling marginally better about life. “So,” he ventures, “can I ask you a personal and possibly invasive question?”

“...Is me saying no going to stop you?”

“If you’re from Lohrfast,” Danny says, “why do you sound American?”

“Oh my god, Danny,” Malia mumbles. “You can’t just ask people why they sound American.”

“Did you wake up just to use that line?” Danny asks. “Impressive. Ten of ten. Go back to sleep.”

“Mm,” Malia hums, and does.

Soren has an expression of profound bemusement on his face. Danny decides instantly that he likes sleepless Soren better than he likes regular Soren. The whole emotionless C-3PO thing is way less fun than this is.

Soren says, “What?”

“Pop culture,” Danny says. “My question?”

“If guardians are assigned to keys in other dimensions, we’re taught to assimilate.”

“Dude,” Danny says, “Mal just made a *Mean Girls* reference and you missed it. Also, *Star Wars*. The Fantastic Four! You’re seriously missing some chunks of assimilation here, Borg.”

“Borg,” Soren repeats. “*Borg*. Is that even a word?”

Danny takes in the fact that Soren knows nothing about either *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. He hasn’t had that happen to him... uh, *ever*, because his dad (adopted dad?) was the biggest *Trek* freak on the face of the planet, so much so that Fridays were designated TOS rewatch nights. Danny was never short of geeky kids to hang around with. “If you ever come back to this dimension,” he says, “we have work to do.”

Of course, then Soren has to go and change the whole mood by saying, “That’s a big if,” in this... this *stupid* accent. It’s sort of South African, close to the exchange student from Johannesburg that Danny was friends with in his senior year of high school. Soren’s voice is deeper now, too, and raspier.

“Whoa,” Danny says. “Say something else.”

“I need to sleep,” Soren says dryly. He checks his mirrors and eases over into the right lane.

“I see a Motel 8 sign,” Danny offers.

Soren shakes his head. “Can’t stop. They’ll know we’re heading for Rainier once they realize we’re gone. It’s the closest and most accessible portal on this coast.”

Oh, so they're driving right into a giant interdimensional target. Great. "Let me drive, then," Danny says. Soren shakes his head again, and Danny knocks their knees together, purposefully obnoxious. "Let me drive, I'm serious. I have coffee and I actually slept." He taps his knee against Soren's until Soren gives in with a sigh and pulls over on the shoulder.

The highway is mostly empty this early in the morning, and it smells thickly of clean dew. Soren's graceful as a cat, stepping out and bending in half, stretching to touch his fingertips to the asphalt while Danny sleepily clambers out, coffee clutched to his chest.

"If I tried to bend like that, I'd snap," he says, watching Soren twist at the waist, one arm extended.

"Brittle bones?" Soren asks, doing a... thing with one of his legs. He's a big dude, he's got a lot of limb, and it's really weirdly attractive when he's arching his back like that. "Danny?" Soren says, and Danny jerks away from staring at him.

"Brittle, right," he says. "Yeah." He turns, ostensibly to look out over the fall of the highway into the road below. There are mountains in the distance, and a lot of mist (smog?), and a lot of evergreens. He drifts, looking, forgetting that Soren is there until Soren leans in next to him, elbows braced on the truck's hood.

"It looks like Lohrfast here," he says, rubbing at his eyes. Danny wonders how long he's been awake. Then looks into the truck, at Malia, who can sleep through anything.

"Why'd you decide to become my guardian?" he asks. He can't help himself.

Soren tilts his head down, looking away from the view and at Danny instead with all his laser focus. "I didn't... pick you," he says. He pauses, then reiterates, "I was called for you."

"Assigned to me."

"Yes," Soren admits.

"What did you do before me?"

“I was a town sheriff,” Soren says. “Posted at a small town popular amongst travelers. We keep a network between us, so it’s easier to track sorcerers.”

Danny hums, vacuuming down the last of his coffee. He’s about to say something else, something about how he hopes Soren doesn’t think he’s totally useless, or a shitty hobbit joke, but Soren is already stepping back and stretching one last time.

“We should go.”

They settle back into the truck. It manages to feel both bigger and less roomy with Danny behind the wheel (no power steering, fantastic) and blocked between the driver’s side door and Soren. Soren, for his part, drops his head back and promptly passes out. He snores, ugh, but he also twitches in his sleep, like a running dog, and Danny occupies the time between other cars (a *lot* of time) watching him move, memorizing his little tics. He’s seen Soren big and bad and deadly, and yes, he knows that Soren is a twenty-six-year-old warrior from another dimension who could probably kill him with a pen, but seeing him like this is like... Like they’re on a road trip, the three of them, and they’re going to Rainier to hike and camp and do stupid teenager things.

He finds himself wanting to check his phone for the first time, so he opens his window and sticks his arm out, sealing his fingers together and turning his hand into a plane. Overhead, a sign tells him he’s one hundred miles from Mount Rainier.

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Twenty miles out, Malia wakes up. She’s annoyed at the noise the truck makes and at the sun and at the world in general until Danny hands her her coffee. “You’re my favorite,” she mumbles, burying her face in it.

“I’ll remember that,” he tells her. He gives her the required fifteen minutes to wake up. “We’re close.”

Malia hums, peering between them at Soren’s sleeping face. Danny’s expecting the needling, is preparing himself for it, but all she says is, “You okay?”

“I’m on the run from magic warriors from another dimension,” Danny says. “Other than feeling like a Power Ranger, I’m good.”

“You’re not cool enough to be a Power Ranger,” Malia responds, grinning.

“Yeah, well, you’re not cool enough to get into Starfleet.”

Malia mock-gasps. “Take that *back*.”

“Never.” Danny toes the truck’s sluggish brakes, hoping that if he does hit something, he’ll just run over it and not have to worry about stopping. They’re slowed to a crawl, stuck in rush hour traffic. “Do you want to,” he starts, just as Malia slaps a hand on Soren’s chest and says, “I think we need to move.” Soren startles awake, glazed eyed, and Malia says, “Really, we need to—”

They’re thrown forward as something slams into the back of the truck, juddering them forward with enough force that they rear-end the tiny sedan in front of them. Danny whips around.

It’s a fucking semitruck.

“What the hell,” he says.

“*Drive*, Danny.” Soren grabs the wheel, jerking it hard right. Danny puts his hands up and jams his foot down on the gas. They shoot out between a honking Miata and a pickup and into the “oh fuck” lane. Apparently willing to trust Danny with making them go straight, Soren lets the steering wheel go and pushes himself over the backrest, scrabbling in the backseat. Malia is turned around, too, and Danny is mostly just making sure they don’t crash into the guardrail.

That’s why he’s the one who sees the motorcycles zip past them.

“Uh, you guys,” he says.

“What,” Soren and Malia say.

“We’ve got company,” Danny says. Forget *Power Rangers*—he’s in fucking *Fast and Furious*, and it’s no longer as exciting when he has three people on motorcycles yanking around a few hundred feet up the road and then *heading for them*. “Guys,” Danny says, high and panicked.

Soren drops back into his seat. With a rifle.



“Is that an AK-47,” Danny says, numb.

“Yes it is.” Soren slings it across his lap. “Drive.”

“But they’re—”

“Drive!” Soren snaps. Danny obeys, gunning the engine up to twenty, thirty, forty miles per hour. “Keep straight. They’ll move.” Fifty, sixty.

“I thought you said they weren’t high-tech,” Danny says.

“This isn’t high-tech, it’s vehicles. Remember how I said we assimilate?”

“They do too,” Malia murmurs. Her hand is white-knuckled on her door handle, her body leaned forward. She’s bracing to hit them, Danny realizes, and that’s when the panic rising in his stomach starts to whirl.

“I’m gonna throw up,” he says weakly. Soren puts his hand on the steering wheel. They keep barreling toward the motorcycles, which aren’t wavering in the slightest. What if one of them hits? What if the truck blows up? What if Danny can’t—

“Here they come,” Malia says. She stiffens on Soren’s other side, hunching her shoulders, and Soren says something low to her, something that ends in *okay*, and then he turns and says, “You can do this, Danny—”

The first motorcycle hits them.

Danny didn’t expect it to. After all of this, he expected them to veer off. To dart away between traffic.

Instead, the driver’s body is flung forward, splintering the windshield, and the little Suzuki bike becomes an ornament for the truck’s grille. Danny screams, he knows he does, and he reflexively hits the brakes. Malia yells, “No, keep going!” as Soren pushes out of his seat, slamming the butt of his rifle into the windshield and shoving the seeker’s body off. Danny can’t see, can’t think, can’t *breathe*, but he knows that Malia is right: he has to keep going.

They want him to stop. If he stops, he’s going to be taken.

The truck bowls over what’s left of the Suzuki. Danny hears its corpse crunch under the tires, and then they’re free, fishtailing into—

Nothing.

“You said they’d move! Where’d the other ones go?” Danny shouts, both hands on the steering wheel. There’s an exit ramp coming up, and he aims for it, struggling to see through the busted windshield. Soren apparently reads his mind—he shoves his rifle through it again, pushing it into breaking away from the frame. Cool wind whips in, the smell of traffic air. Danny is having issues breathing.

“They’re behind us, still on the freeway,” Soren says, pulling his gun closer in his lap. “I need you to stop for a second.”

“Get off the exit first,” Malia adds. She’s still braced, her long legs stiff and planted on the floor of the truck. Danny shoots down the exit ramp and takes a right. He pulls into the nearest parking lot and brings the truck to a screeching halt that he can barely hear over the pounding of his heart. Malia says his name, he thinks, maybe, and then something louder, and then Soren’s warm hand is digging into the pocket of Danny’s jeans and his inhaler is brought to his mouth.

He inhales twice on instinct, his hand coming up to wrap around Soren’s. Fuck, this is embarrassing.

“...anxiety medication?” he hears, as he’s coming out of it. “Do I need to give him—”

“I don’t think so,” Malia says. Danny shakes his head, meeting her eyes. “No,” she amends.

Soren peers down at Danny. Danny gives him a half-shrug and tugs backward, taking his inhaler from Soren. He lowers it, slowly, and caps it. Soren is still frowning, leaning over him, but the faint whine of motorcycle engines is drawing closer. “Let me out,” Soren says to Malia. She hops out, letting Soren onto the pavement, and swings back in as Soren makes his home in the bed of the pickup.

“Can you drive?” Malia asks, meeting Danny’s eyes.

What she means is, *Can you maneuver this four-thousand-pound truck at excess speeds down a two-lane road to Mount Rainier while your guardian plays sniper—all without having an asthma and/or panic attack?*

“You know,” he says, tightening his hold on the steering wheel, “if I was the Slayer, the whole world would be dead by now. This isn’t that bad. I think I can manage to not kill just the three of us.”

“You really know how to put things in perspective.” Malia rolls her eyes and slams her door closed. “All set, Rambo?” she calls, and gets two thumps in answer.

They peel out of the parking lot and turn north, toward Rainier. Danny, for all his consumption of action movies and superhero movies and the *Fast and Furious* movies, numbers one through six, has no idea how to get out of a high-speed chase, so he mostly hangs onto the wheel and follows the directions that Malia gives him. Luckily, her sense of direction is sharp as all hell, and within twenty minutes, they’ve lost their motorcycle tails (one to Soren’s sharpshooting skills, the other to side streets) and they get inside the park with little issue.

“We should walk from here,” Soren calls, as soon as they pass the first parking lot. Danny’s lungs already hate him. He parks and climbs out, peeling his shaky, stiff body from the driver’s seat. If he never drives this truck again, it will be too soon.

But hey. At least he’s alive.

At least they’re all alive.

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Soren takes the heaviest of their equipment strapped to his back. He leaves the AK-47 buried under blankets in the pickup bed—by the time anyone goes picking through it, the three of them will be long gone. “It’s not legally registered to anyone, anyway,” Soren says, tossing the keys through the windshield hole and into the driver’s seat.

“How does *that* work?” Malia asks, nudging the back license plate with the toe of her shoe. “Feels real.”

“Assimilation,” Soren reminds. “The League has willing keys who work for us. They take care of the details.” He hefts up his backpack, which has Danny’s duffel tied securely to it with Velcro straps. Malia is carrying her own pack and has a dagger on her thigh, plus a leather sheath of Soren’s throwing knives on the outside of one forearm. Soren is similarly outfitted: two daggers, one on each thigh, and his sword on his back, under his pack. Danny has the short sword Soren gave him sheathed at his hip. He expected to feel more badass with it on, but mostly what he feels is that it keeps tripping him when he climbs over tree roots.

“Just to the base” turns out to be a two-hour hike. Soren and Malia handle the quick clip with no issues; after all, they’re both Cylon killing machines. Danny, however, has to puff on his inhaler every half hour, and he’s relegated to carrying nothing but himself.

No one talks. Soren is terse, his shoulders taut. He’s back to Neighbor Guy from yesterday morning, ready to pull some Norman Bates on Aragorn. Danny can barely see the guy from earlier, who leaned on the truck hood with Danny, hair a mess, and talked about his life before.

Danny starts to lag behind in the last quarter of the trip; both Malia and Soren slow down for him, keeping him sandwiched between them. He doesn’t know when Malia decided that she has Soren’s job, too, but he knows that he’s grateful for it, in his oxygen-deprived blur of a world. He’s in decent shape—he has to hike out to the quarry by his university twice a week for “lab,” a.k.a. all the geology students sneaking vodka in their water bottles and sitting around on the various boulders so they can watch the quarry workers dig. He lifts weights, too, twice a week. But hiking over flat scrubland is different than hiking through trail-less *forest*. Even without a pack, Danny feels like his body is turning into lead, like his shinbones are separating from his muscles. His cheek hurts.

He doesn’t ask to rest. He gets the feeling that it’s either impressing or worrying Soren, but all Soren’s focus is being put into making sure they’re not being stalked like especially tasty gazelles.

“Not too much farther,” Soren says after a while. Malia makes a quizzical noise. Danny slants a questioning look at her.

“There aren’t any signs,” she says lowly. “No markers. How the hell can he tell how close we are?”

Danny cocks his head. “Practice?” She shrugs. “What? You think he’s...?”  
*A traitor?*

“Fuck, no. He’s as Boy Scout as they come.” Malia flips one of her throwing knives into her palm.

“Maybe he has a homing beacon. E.T. phone home?” Danny says, louder.

“Very funny,” Soren says from ahead of them. He comes to a stop at the base of an enormous hill made mostly of gnarled, dried tree roots.

“No,” Danny says.

“Yes,” says Soren, checking the buckles on his pack. “This is it. Malia?”

“I’ll play spotter,” she agrees. It creeps Danny out, seriously, how well the two of them get along. He fully expects them to be playing the death warrior version of house by the time this is over (which is fine, totally fine; it’s *fine*).

The climb is slow and arduous, and halfway through, Danny’s reconsidering his career choice. How the fuck is he supposed to be a geologist, hauling rocks around, when he can’t even pull himself up a root wall?

Knowing that Malia is under him helps. If he fell and hit her in the face, he would probably lose a good chunk of his own in divine retribution. He’d never be able to sleep again. There. That’s his inspiration.

Well, that and Soren getting to the top of the wall and shrugging his pack off so he can lie flat on his belly, one arm extended down to grab Danny’s. That helps. “Got me?” Danny pants. His whole body is clammy, and it takes a second for him to be able to grip Soren’s wrist.

“Got you,” Soren says. His hand is warm and sure. That surety settles under the hand Malia has on Danny’s calf and pushes him the rest of the way up to Soren’s side. Soren hauls Malia up as well, and they lie there together, catching their breath, on the plateau of ground. That’s what it is: a plateau. It

isn't a wall or a hill or a simple barrier. It's a *rise*, like a burial mound, ancient and solid under them, and it sinks into Danny's bones, the feeling of it. Suddenly risking his life to get here doesn't seem like such a huge price after all, not if he can bask in this for the rest of his life.

Now Danny understands how Soren got them here with no signs. This place is *thrumming* with...

Christ. With *magic*. No wonder that sorcerer is bringing keys to him. If this is what one portal worth of magic means, Danny can't *imagine* feeling an entire key full of magic, or ten keys, or a hundred. The thought of that makes him dizzy.

"Lying here on the ground is great," Malia says, breaking the mesmerized silence. "But we need to get up?"

"What?" Soren murmurs. His voice is dazed and drunk, exactly the same as Danny feels.

"Up," Malia says. She pushes onto her feet and stands over them, watching them with narrowed eyes. "What's wrong with you two?"

"It's..." Danny manages a wave of one hand.

"It's the portal," Soren says, scraping together a semblance of a normal voice. "The magic, it's... overwhelming."

Malia frowns. "I can't feel anything." She bends double and fists both hands in Danny's shirt, pulling him upright. "We need to go. Big rush? Lohrfast? Does no one fucking remember this?" She stands firm as Danny sways into her, still dazed but slowly recovering the sense of panic that has been his best friend since yesterday. "Soren!" Malia snaps. "People! Chasing us!"

Soren groans and rolls himself over, shaking his head hard. "Sorry," he says. "I'm sorry, I should be able to..." He shakes his head again and straightens, swaying on his feet.

"This isn't a poppy field," Malia says dryly. "Get us out of here." She slings Danny's captured arm over her shoulders and props him up easily,

holding him pinned to her side. Soren has to unsheathe his sword and stab it into a tree root in order to prop himself up on it.

“Sorry,” Danny slurs, aware that he’s useless. At least he doesn’t feel like he needs a hit off his inhaler—for the first time since, you know, ever. “How do we...?”

Soren grabs Danny’s free hand, swaying dangerously on his feet, and there’s a jolt between them, a zing through Danny’s entire body that is not unlike the time Jenny Aarons, his fourth grade science partner, zapped him with an electrified potato. He jerks, the drugged haze falling away from him, and his wide eyes meet Soren’s.

“...The hell?” Danny says, staring at him. Soren looks similarly shocked. Then he pulls his hand away from Danny’s.

“Keep hold of him,” he says to Malia. Danny starts to feel drunk again immediately, and he sags into Malia’s shoulder, dizzy. This time, it’s less like drowning in euphoria and more like being extremely hungover, sapped of all his energy and faintly nauseous. *Fuck*.

“You need to tell me what the fuck is going on here,” Malia says, squeezing Danny close to her.

“I will,” Soren says, digging in a side pocket of his pack. When he brings his hand back, he has a loose handful of sparkling herbs cupped in his palm. He takes Malia’s free hand with his. “Take a deep breath,” he advises them both.

The ground swallows them.

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Outside of the sucking vortex, Danny can function.

They hit the ground hard. Malia shouts in Danny’s ear for him to let his knees buckle, to let his body take the impact, and he does. It knocks the wind from him; he doubles, his stomach threatening to bring his Dunkin’ Donuts right back up to him. “Fuck,” he wheezes, burying his hands in...

Snow.

“It’s snowing,” he says, wrenching his eyes open. He’s on his hands and knees in the middle of a white tundra, and in the distance are trees.

“Isn’t this where you say something about Kansas?” That’s Malia, who has regrouped already and is refastening her dagger to her thigh.

“Yeah,” Danny says. “We aren’t in it anymore.”

“I understood *that* reference,” Soren says from off to Danny’s left. Danny looks over to see him crouched a few feet away, one hand in his pack. “Welcome to Lohrfast.” He unearths two small, wrapped bundles and tosses them to Malia and Danny. “We have a hike ahead of us.”

The last thing Danny wants to do right now is walk more. He would rather lie here and let a Yeti eat him. Honestly. Really. He is so done walking. He didn’t volunteer to carry the ring into Mordor. “How much farther?”

“Not long.” Soren takes another wrapped bundle from his pack and unties the length of ribbon binding it closed like a scroll. It unfurls into a fur-lined cloak, and Soren fastens it around his shoulders, then pulls the hood up to cover his hair. “We need to go,” he reminds them.

“Big talk for someone who went all cat-on-catnip,” Malia says pointedly. God, Danny loves her.

Soren frowns at them both, then straightens, easing his pack on over his cloak. “I’m sorry. It shouldn’t have happened. But stopping then isn’t a reason to stop now.” He offers Malia a hand up, which she takes after an appropriately grudging pause.

He doesn’t help Danny up.

“C’mon.” Malia strong-arms him to his feet. She eyes Soren’s back, lowering her voice to a whisper. “*Now* do you get what I was talking about?”

“Yeah,” Danny says. “That was weird.” Finding the portal can be explained: Soren has had more experience with magic, and obviously he could find the portal by feel alone. But the random changes in his personality—here and then there, stoic warrior to Caramel Drizzle Dunkaccinos—are starting to give Danny whiplash.



“It was more than weird,” Malia mutters. “He’s not telling us something.”

“Maybe it’s for our own good?” Danny offers faintly.

“Don’t let his blinding hotness distract you, Danny.”

“You’re the one who said he was totally Boy Scout.” He doesn’t bother to deny the blinding hotness comment. Soren looks back at them and waves; Danny checks to be sure he still has his sword before starting off after him, doing his best to step in Soren’s footprints. The snow here is at least a foot thick, but it’s packed solid, and is easy enough to walk on.

Malia matches him stride for stride. She’s undone her hair under the hood of her cloak, and it curls down her front in loose waves of blond. “He is,” she says. “I just... I don’t know, Danno. There’s something. What the hell was up with you two back there?”

Danny shakes his head. “It was trippy as shit,” he says. His one and only encounter with pot was two years ago, and it ended in sixteen stolen lawn ornaments and a stack of mortifying Polaroid photos that his cousin still had stored away for future blackmail purposes. Rolling around in the portal magic felt like that, but with less shame and no apology letters to write. Malia doesn’t respond, so Danny finally adds, “I dunno. It was *magic*.”

He kind of expects her to laugh again, but she doesn’t. She looks up at the evergreens they’re walking toward, and at the mountains behind those. “Yeah,” she says. “It was.”

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Soren waits for them at the tree line, and together they make their way into the dense forest. It is, amazingly, even more impossible to push through than Mount Rainier’s surrounding foliage. “I hate trees,” Danny says. He’s given in after two hours of getting whipped in the face by branches and is hacking the low-hanging ones out of his way with his sword. Ahead, Soren is clearing a walking path with his own sword. “I hate trees, and I hate snow, and I hate walking.”

“Lohrfast’s hospitality is wasted on you, I see,” Soren calls back to him. Danny isn’t a prideful guy, but it’s nice to see that Superman Soren is winded, too.

“Hospitality,” Danny gasps, slashing through another branch. Malia was the one to point out that they are leaving a gaping trail in their wake, but Soren assured her that this forest is magic (because why wouldn’t it be) and will heal itself before any pursuers come close enough to see. “Hospitality? On Earth, hospitality is giving someone a drink and letting them sit *down*.”

“We’re almost to White Oak.” Soren crests the top of the hill, balancing on a tree root. Danny envies his steady feet. “See? You can see it.” He offers Malia a hand getting up onto the same root—it is enormous, good Jesus, Danny is starting to feel like he’s in that James Cameron movie that shall not be named—but, again, leaves Danny hanging until Malia takes pity on him and yanks him up with them. Soren points at a point of light in the steadily growing darkness, cupped in the valley and surrounded by mountains. “There.” His voice is warm, almost excited.

“Is that where you live?” Danny asks. He is maybe stalling for a little time to catch his breath, but he’s also genuinely interested. Maybe Soren only turns into Dunkaccino Guy when he’s looking out over nostalgia-inspiring landscapes.

“It’s where I was trained,” Soren says. “It’s another hour’s walk at most, if we move quick.” He sheathes his sword at his back and plants his foot, beginning the descent into the valley. Danny is beginning to lose feeling in his fingers, but having something visible to move toward pushes him on. There will be a fire. Fire, and a bed, and Danny will be able to stop shivering.

Halfway to White Oak, he realizes he hasn’t used his inhaler since they arrived in Lohrfast. It’s solid in his pocket, and he finds it with one hand, touching it. Back before all this had happened, he would’ve taken a hit of it just in case, out of the fear that an asthma attack would come on him when he least expected it. His doctor had warned him off using it so much, but for a while during his freshman year, Danny had barely been able to get through a test without feeling like his chest was on fire. When he told her *that*, Dr. Grey

had told him he was conflating his panic attacks with his asthma attacks. She'd offered to help him talk to his parents about finding a therapist.

But Danny had handled it on his own.

Mostly.

He's thumbing his inhaler out of his pocket, already craving the taste of it, when Malia bumps into his shoulder. "Look," she says, nodding ahead. Danny squints into the darkness, inhaler forgotten, and for a moment he can't see anything, and then the trees' shadows *flex*, and he sees three figures solidifying.

"State your name!" one of them calls, in an accent similar to Soren's. Danny hears the whicker of a horse, the crack of branches.

"Soren Greenfield," Soren calls back. He puts a hand up to keep Malia and Danny from moving forward. "I'm bringing my key into the keep."

"Key," the same voice responds. "State your name."

Malia digs an elbow into Danny's ribs. "I, uh," he says. "Danny. Danny Marlaeto."

There's silence, then the shadows advance, until Danny can tell that it's three people on horseback. The horses are wicked huge, and their riders are outfitted in smooth, fitted armor. Their leader halts her horse and lifts the mask of her helmet. She's grinning. "Soren Greenfield," she says. "You've grown five hands since I saw you last, boy."

"No I haven't," Soren mumbles, tipping his head down. Danny has to choke down his laugh. Soren's capable of being *bashful*. Wow. "Hi, Leith."

"Hello," she says. What's visible of her face is smooth when she turns her smile on Danny and Malia. Her eyes are a clear, cold gray. "Welcome," she says to him. To Malia, she adds, "You are?"

"Malia Hesse." Malia offers her hand; Leith's smile widens, shark-like, at the gesture, and she leans off her behemoth of a horse to reciprocate.

"We welcome you, Malia Hesse, of Earth. And Daniel, Key, we welcome you home." Leith's horse turns underneath her without any visible cues. "Shall

we?” She and her flanking guards lead the way into White Oak. It’s structured the same as the camps in the war movies that Danny’s dad collects: one enormous main tent in the center, which curves around a bonfire. Other tents are littered around the clearing, none of them uniform. Most are patched with scraps of fabric or old pieces of clothing, and some are rounded, built up to contain a fire. There are people *everywhere*, sitting around fires and eating bowls of stew. Over a small hill, in a bonfire-dotted field close to the base of a mountain, Danny can see tightly-packed troops running laps around a bunch of upright figures made of bundled straw.

“Whoa,” he mumbles, taking it all in.

Soren stops beside him and gives him a grin. “Like it?”

“It’s something,” Danny says. His chest squeezes inexplicably, and he pulls out his inhaler for a breath. He can feel magic here, too.

Leith waits for them to finish taking in the sight, her mount still underneath her. “You are tired,” she says, surveying them. “And you must be hungry. Come, we will care for you. Soren, Ilyana has care to meet with you. You will find Kat in the main tent with a scrying glass.”

Soren nods. He lets his pack slide off and unhooks Danny’s duffel to hand it to him. “Go,” he says, nodding at Danny. His expression is pinched. “I’ll come find you when I’m finished.”

The camp sheds some of its militaristic order the deeper they venture into it. Danny sees people as young as he is, looking equally out of place. Soren had said that there were other guardians bringing their keys here for protection, but somehow, Danny hadn’t expected to see them. He rolls his shoulders inside his cloak, keeping a good way back from the hooves of Leith’s horse.

“You too?” Malia asks him, voice quiet.

“Me too what?”

“You too, you’re restless,” she clarifies. She has a hand on her dagger. “It’s like...”

“Yeah,” Danny says. He understands what she’s trying to say: that they drove themselves on for two days, and now they’ve reached their Mount

Doom and there's no fucking volcano. "I'm sorry," Danny says belatedly. "For dragging you here."

"Hey, you didn't drag me anywhere," Malia says, elbowing him. He gives her a weak smile, and she knocks into him again. "Like you *could*." She looks worried too, and Danny sticks close to her all the way through the camp, until Leith halts them in front of a tent half the size of the main one.

"We are keeping our keys here," she says, smiling. "Malia, you are also welcome to stay."

"Where's Soren staying?" Danny asks.

Leith's smile sticks firmly in place. "He will be in a gathering for quite some time. I assure you, you are safe here. I suggest you make yourselves comfortable. I will have food brought to you." She gestures again to the opening of the tent. "Sleep well, Daniel." Danny slips past her horse and inside, the hair on the back of his neck prickling at the way her voice lingers on the syllables of his name. This time, he drops his hand to check for his sword, not his inhaler.

The tent is full of low beds, close and cramped—probably forty of them. Half of them are full. Danny nods Malia in front of him, letting her choose where they'll sleep. He's beginning to wonder if the tightness in his chest when they first came into White Oak wasn't wonder, but wariness. Or, hell, maybe it's culture shock. After all, Danny is practically an alien to them, even if he is Lohrfastian. Lorfastian? Whatever.

Malia snags them beds close to the back of the tent, on the side furthest from the camp's central bonfire. Others glance at them curiously, but the ones who aren't sleeping are cloistered close to people that Danny can only assume are their guardians, judging by the Tolkeinesque fashion parade. Soren's absence is suddenly noticeable. If they were back home, Danny would probably be watching him swim his night laps. Instead, he watches a short girl with thick brunette curls lean, laughing, on the arm of her female guardian, her body screaming *flirt flirt flirt*, and he has to turn away.

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He sleeps. For a while, at least. A man brings the two of them a large pot of stew and a crumbly loaf of bread to share. Stomach full, bed warm, Danny goes to sleep, his sword tucked beside him. He's used to catching naps in the geology hall at his university, so the constant footsteps of passersby don't bother him, and he doesn't wake until late, when the other beds' occupants are still and the only sound he can hear is the crack of a distant fire.

*Go back to sleep*, he tells himself, but he can't. He's sticky and hot under the fur that his bed is padded with, and he's... *itchy*, under his skin. Restless, like Malia said.

He gets up and straps his sword to his waist, makes sure his inhaler is in his pocket, and puts his cloak on. His Payless-brand sneakers have taken a hell of a beating; he puts on the League-issue boots that were so kindly dropped off for him instead. In the other bed, Malia is asleep, curled in on herself. Danny pulls her blankets higher over her shoulder. He's still sorry he brought her here. He thought that coming to White Oak would be an *end* to this clusterfuck, and that the League would solve all their problems, but instead, they're stuck here, and nothing feels right. Danny wants to go home. He wants to figure out what the hell is *really* going on here. Why he feels out of sorts.

Most of all, he wants to find Soren.

The camp is quiet. Danny's sure there are guards stationed all around it, probably as invisible as Leith and hers were earlier. He walks aimlessly, cloak pulled tight around him, and his vague idea is to do a loop of the camp and see if he can catch Soren coming back from... wherever he was, but he's lost within five minutes. All the tents look the same; Danny's isn't the only one filled with keys. There must be a hundred in the camp, at least.

Thoroughly turned around, he picks out the arch of the main tent against the full moon and crunches his way to it. Snow is starting to fall in slow, dozy flakes, and Danny sees his breath mist. *Dragon*, he thinks, exhaling hard to watch it cloud out from his mouth. Oh god, what if there are dragons here? He pulls his cloak tighter around him. There's everything else here—those horses were definitely not the same horses from Earth. And plus, Danny has *magic*, right? A dragon isn't that far-fetched, when magic is a new part of your reality.

He's nearly at the main tent, mostly considering whether or not he should keep his phone on hand in case he has the chance to take a picture of a dragon, when a heavy hand falls on his shoulder. He yelps, hand going to his sword hilt, and spins, swinging it in a graceless arc to come down on the stranger's shoulder.

Only it isn't a stranger. "We need to stop meeting like this," Soren says, peering at Danny from under the rise of his leather armguard, which Danny's sword has bitten into.

"Fuck," Danny says, half-laughing it out. He lets the sword down, its tip thudding into the snow. "Sorry."

Soren examines the cut in his armguard. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I slept." Danny moves to sheathe his sword again, but Soren puts a hand out.

"Can't sleep any more?"

Danny shakes his head. Soren makes a thoughtful noise. "Come on," he says finally, heading past Danny.

Danny falls into step with him. "Where to?"

"The training fields."

Silence falls between them, thick as the snowflakes, until Danny works up his nerve and says, "Can you tell me what's going on now?"

Soren glances over at him. "With...?"

"With *everything*. You brought me here to protect me from a sorcerer. Now I'm here. Now what?"

"Now I help the League and we focus our efforts on finding him," Soren says, like it's the only option in the world. "Once he's taken care of, you and Malia can go home."

Danny rubs at one eye. The moon is heavy and full above them, round and bright. It's giving him a headache. "And all these people..." he says, gesturing back at the tents. "All the keys here, we can't help?"

“I told you,” Soren says. “Keys have to let a sorcerer tap their magic in order for it to be used. That ends in binding, more often than not. And binding doesn’t end well for most keys.” He seems tense, his Capital S Shoulders taut under his cloak.

Might as well get all the awkward questions out of the way. “What’s gonna happen to you?”

“I’ll come back to Earth with you.” Soren unsheathes his sword when they crest the small hill that slopes down into the training field. Here, the sounds of the camp are muffled, and the light from the fires is no longer visible. It feels like isolation, and Danny, for all his bitching about Soren, is happy to be sealed away from the world with him. “You’re still my key.”

Danny unsheathes his sword, too, and hefts it in his hand, weighing it. His first instinct is to hold it two-handed, but Inigo Montoya didn’t double-fist, and neither does Soren, so he’s not going to get any props for style doing it that way. “Don’t you have a family here?”

“No,” Soren says.

Danny blinks at him. Then, with surprise, because it’s the first time this has occurred to him, “Do *I* have a family here?”

“Your birth parents still live here, yes,” Soren clarifies. He lifts his sword gracefully, letting it spin once in his hand. Danny... doesn’t know what to do with that. He’s had his parents forever, has thought of them as his parents forever, and he can’t imagine going on horseback to some strange village to tell them that their cosmically important son is a geeky geology major who regularly has panic attacks about how he’s going to pay off his student loans.

“Do they know I’m here?” he asks.

Soren spins his sword again, looking at Danny with his clever, knowing eyes. “You don’t want to see them.”

“I mean,” Danny says, waving a hand. “Like, I mean, it’s like they sent their kid to Earth and expected to get Superman back, but I’m just Clark Kent, you know?”

“No,” Soren says. “I told you, I like you fine.”



“Yeah, you keep telling me that.” Danny lifts his sword up and puts his feet in what he hopes is a “ready” position. “How are we gonna—”

Soren moves too quickly for Danny to react and slams his shoulder into Danny’s chest, taking him down. Danny splutters out a cough, hacking out cold, moist air.

He points his sword at Soren, who’s grinning. What a *bastard*. “That wasn’t fair.”

“All’s fair,” Soren disagrees. He offers a hand; Danny considers batting it away, but this is a welcome difference from Soren’s earlier WHOA HEY NO TOUCHING policy. When Danny is back on his feet, Soren switches sword hands and adjusts Danny’s grip on his. “What do you think of, when you’re fighting with this?”

“Mostly that I’d like to not be fighting with it,” Danny admits. Soren rolls his eyes at him. God, Danny would swear on at least three Bibles that he and Malia literally share DNA. “I don’t know, a baseball bat?”

“That’s your problem.” Soren works his fingers around Danny’s, fitting his fingers into nonexistent grooves on the sword hilt. “Let it be your arm.” He steps away and brings his sword up to touch the underside of Danny’s. “If this was your arm, you wouldn’t let me hit it, would you?”

Danny shakes his head, letting his arm relax and move with the push of Soren’s sword. If he’s going to survive here, he’s going to need more than his inhaler and dumb luck. When he thinks *medieval*, it looks a whole lot like the training camp, but it also looks like people’s heads on spears and their guts pulled out by a giant cranking wheel. Add magic into that...

He parries on instinct when Soren swings his sword. “Pay attention,” Soren says. He swings again, a cross cut that makes Danny’s arm ache with the impact. “You aren’t strong enough yet to push my strikes back on me, so be defensive until you see an opening.” Another strike, another parry. Another strike—and this one catches Danny on the side, ripping his cloak with a soft, velvety tear. Danny tucks his head down and brings his sword arm up, guarding the spot. Soren lunges, feints, and slashes down Danny’s other side. “Don’t show me weaknesses,” Soren tells him. Danny huffs out his frustration,

about ready to tell Soren that he just *isn't* a warrior, not like Soren, but then he sees the opening.

Before he can chicken out, he parries Soren's next swing and drives it back into him exactly the way Soren said he couldn't, overbalancing him and sending them both toppling to the snowy ground.

"Ow," Soren says, tone pleasant. He's smiling, the dark wedge of his mouth open under his dark hair and against the white backdrop of the snow. "Good job. We should try this again when I'm not exhausted."

"Don't even. I got you fair and square." Danny tosses his sword away and flops down, spreading out next to Soren. He's reminded immediately of the portal, and he stretches his fingers out, digging them into the snow, searching for a trace of that magic here. There's nothing, of course. He doesn't want to ruin whatever this is by asking about it, so he wiggles a little, sinking down into the snow. "So is this gonna be a thing? We do sword practice and gardening in your backyard?"

Soren breathes out long and slow. "I'd like this to be a thing, yes."

Danny tips his head in Soren's direction, looking at his profile. "You never talked to me, before."

"We try to be as unobtrusive as possible. Most people don't handle it well." Soren's mouth twists wryly and he glances back at Danny. "Most guardians never have the opportunity to go to arms for their key."

"Lucky you."

"Mm." Soren is still watching him, and Danny doesn't know how to look away. Snow is falling between them, and their shoulders are nearly touching. "Lucky me," Soren says at length. "I don't think you give yourself enough credit," he adds.

Danny squints at him. "I'm a skinny, asthmatic geology major who has panic attacks and knows too much about *Firefly*. I'm realistic enough to know that I'm useless here."

"You hiked fifteen miles today," Soren says. He straightens his head and closes his eyes. "You survived what happened in your house, and on the

highway. You saved Malia. And me. You're more capable than you think you are."

"Yeah, right. *Now* you're reaching," Danny says. He folds his arms over his stomach, dragging the edge of his cloak to cover them. "Look, we aren't... I don't need you to lie to me."

Soren stiffens beside him, and Danny wants to bite the words back, aware that he's being a jackass for absolutely no reason. *Learn to take a compliment, dude*, but Soren is already sitting up, their moment broken.

"Wait," Danny says, pushing up to stand. "Soren—*Wait*. I'm sorry. That isn't what I meant."

"It is what you meant," Soren says. "You meant exactly what you said." He sheathes his sword and straightens his cloak.

Fuck it, Danny is cutting himself down at the knees here. "Okay," he says, and reaches out to grab the edge of Soren's hood. Soren stops, looking down at him with guarded eyes. "Okay, yeah, I meant it. But what else am I supposed to think? You and Malia, you're both—you're so *capable*. She can kick anyone's ass, and you're all, all medieval King Arthur McBadass, and here I am, and all I can do is suck on my inhaler and sometimes not kill us." Danny lets Soren go, his body thrumming with nervous energy. "You guys've both given up your entire *lives*, and I'm just..."

"Just what?" Soren asks, turning to face Danny fully, his body squared. His face is smooth and his voice is emotionless. "Just what, Danny, hmm?"

"Not worth it," Danny finishes. He spreads his hands apart. That's it. There it is: what he's been thinking since yesterday morning. There are a hundred other keys here who wouldn't need Soren and Malia to come to their rescue every time they slip.

Soren softens, sighing quietly. "Danny..."

"Tell me what happened at the portal," Danny says, mostly because he can feel himself going into self-destruct mode, like he did during his freshman year calc exam. He needs to get the attention off him. "Why did it affect you, too? You're not a key, are you?"

Any give to Soren's body vanishes. "I'm not," he says. "It was the magic, that's—"

"It didn't affect Malia," Danny argues. "Don't give me bullshit, Soren. You asked me to trust you." He reaches for Soren's sleeve again; this time, Soren flinches away.

Fucking great. They're back to this.

"Fine," Danny snaps. He grabs his sword, praying that he doesn't slip on the snow, and jams it in its sheath. "That's just... fine. Thanks a lot." Is this why it hurt to watch the other keys and their guardians? Because of the easy trust between most of them? He and Soren have to put themselves back together all the time, and Danny can't even do it right, and Soren—Soren won't tell him anything. Danny's sick of hanging on his word, waiting for him to deign to hand out vital information. He can take his Shoulders and his Dunkaccinos and fuck right off.

Danny's exit is great: his personal moment of badassery is fueled by his rage, and he channels it into walking Charlize Theron queen-style, his sword heavy at his hip.

Then the camp blows up.

Heat sears across Danny's face, stunning him, and he's thrown down by the force of the blast. He gasps in a breath, staring.

The camp is on fire. Everything—all the tents, they're ablaze, and, and there are people pouring from every direction.

Malia is down there. Danny pushes himself up, hand going to his sword, and then Soren scrapes to a stop at his side. "It's him," he says, as another blast of light arcs over the camp. It looks like a wormhole swirled with glitter, and when it touches the ground, it sucks inward, then arches, exploding violently. Soren drags Danny against his side with an arm around his waist, his arm up to shield their eyes.

"Malia," Danny manages. "We need to find her, Soren, we need to—"

"I know." Soren's hand turns heavy on Danny's shoulder, pressing him down. There are people screaming, now. "Stay here."

Danny shrugs it off, scowling. “No. I need to—”

“They’re here *for you*,” Soren says. He shakes Danny lightly, like an unruly puppy.

“For me,” Danny says blankly.

“I need to keep you safe.” Soren takes Danny’s shoulders in his hands. “Stay here. Stay hidden.” He holds Danny’s eyes for a long moment, then turns and lopez down the hill, into the camp. Danny’s legs ache with how hard he’s keeping himself from following. But Soren is right. Danny needs to... to stay here.

*They’re here for you.*

He flattens himself on the snowy ground, his sword in his hand, and it might be his imagination, but the cut on his cheek starts stinging. What was that Soren said about Doctor Doom “marking” him?

“Great,” he says into the snow. “Now I’m Harry Potter.” Harry Potter versus Doctor Doom. If he lives to get back to the Internet, he’s going to put that on Tumblr.

Another explosion rings through the camp, the spray of sparks making Danny’s vision spotty. He drags himself up closer to the crest of the hill, peering over it to see a melee mess of people, most running, some fighting—but there are a lot of them on the ground.

God, there are a lot of *dead people*.

Danny fumbles for his inhaler, watching as a woman rushes a horseback-riding, cloak-clad figure and gets a sword through her throat for her trouble. He feels like he’s waiting for the motorcycles to hit, like he’s standing in his bathroom, watching for Boromir’s shadow. The seconds before the implosion, the chest-tightening anxiety. Anyone who fights Doctor Doom’s seekers is being slaughtered. The deep cracks of their bones shattering are louder than the explosions.

*Don’t lose it now, D.* Danny takes a handful of snow and rubs it down his face, his grip on his sword tightening. He starts to count.

At three hundred, his panic deepens. Shouldn't Soren and Malia be here by now? They should.

At three hundred twenty, the ground under him starts shaking. Out of the smoke, weaving between burning tents, comes a small herd of horses, their eyes rolling in terror, their flanks streaked with sweat. Danny flattens back down, throwing his arm over his head, tucking into himself as they gallop past him, into the training field.

“Danny!”

“Malia?” Danny uncurls, and there she is, sitting on the biggest black horse Danny has ever seen. She has a sword in hand, one even longer than Soren's, and she's holding the reins to another fully saddled horse. One of their packs is strapped to her back. Danny doesn't need prompting; he scrambles down the hill and swings himself up into the saddle, trying to remember the basics of making a horse go from his first and only horse experience (his cousin's twelfth birthday party). “Where's Soren?”

“I lost him,” Malia says. “He told me to keep going.”

Danny cranes his head around, looking back into the flames. The main tent is collapsing, leaking burning cinders everywhere. Soon, there'll be nothing left. He tightens his one-handed grip on his horse's reins, his jaw tight. “We're just going to leave all these people?”

Malia leans into his line of sight. Her face is pale and drawn. “We have to. They're rounding up the other keys and putting them in chains, Danny.”

“Soren said he's after *me*,” Danny says, touching his cut.

“Doesn't mean he doesn't want the extra firepower.” Malia nudges her horse forward, heading for the training field. “Come on, before they see us.”

Teeth grinding, Danny pulls his horse around and follows. He's only going to make things worse if he goes back in there. He won't be able to do any good—not for Soren, not for himself, and not for anyone else.

It still feels a whole hell of a lot like he's abandoning them all.

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At the top of the hill, Malia kicks her horse into a run, and Danny's takes off without his consent. He's relegated to clinging first to the front of the saddle and then to its mane and hoping he doesn't fall off. For as big as it is, it moves gracefully, and they're across the field in under a minute, heading into the thick forest at the base of the mountain.

Really, if Danny never spends any time in a forest ever again, he'll be the happiest man alive. As it is, he lets his reins go loose, and his horse picks a delicate path deep between the trees, following docilely after Malia's.

After a while, Danny says, "We were set up, weren't we." He feels it, a gut-deep *knowing*: this didn't happen by chance.

Malia looks over her shoulder at him. "Yeah," she says.

"Not by Soren," Danny says.

"No." Malia finally sheathes her sword, but leaves her hand on her thigh, prepared to draw it again. "By Leith, I think. I saw her taking a horse out of the camp after the first explosion." She makes a faint, disgusted noise. "I fucking knew I didn't like her."

"Your people sense is A-plus," Danny says, smiling weakly at her when she glances back a second time. Her cheeks are soot-streaked and her hair is limp, hanging down around her face. "Also, you're rocking the came-through-hell Xena look, there."

"Yeah, shame I'm Californian," she says blandly. "I'll never get to use this cloak again."

They ride a while longer, long enough that Danny is starting to slump over on his horse, lulled by its rocking walk. Malia makes the executive decision to stop as the ground starts to incline enough to make their horses breathe hard. To Danny's grateful surprise, they stumble on a creek, and its water is freezing, but it's clear and it wakes him up when he shoves his face in it.

"No fire," Malia says. She's tied the horses up and is piling handfuls of pine needles in a space between two trees. Danny nods, stripping his cloak off. Now he's glad he put on the boots; Malia is still wearing her Earth sneakers, and while they're higher-quality than what Danny wears, they're blackened

and probably soaking wet. Malia looks his way, apparently weirded out by Danny's silence. She says, "If you're thinking about apologizing again, don't. Soren and I—"

"I had a fight with Soren," Danny mumbles. He leaves his boots on and rolls his cloak to make a pillow for both of them.

Malia sighs, sitting back on her heels. "About what?"

"He tried to compliment me. I bit his head off. And chewed it vigorously."

The silence drifts as Malia finishes padding their bed. "He cares, you know. You're not just a job to him."

"He doesn't even know me."

"Like shit he doesn't. You're easy to pin down, D." She flops onto her back. When Danny follows suit, she throws her cloak over both of them, fur side down. "That's not a bad thing," she says, gentler. "You just put all of yourself out there, you know? No bullshitting anyone, or pulling an act."

"I guess," Danny says, burrowing deeper under the cloak. Now he remembers how tired he was. "Do you think he's okay?"

Malia's quiet for a long time, long enough that Danny thinks she's probably asleep. Then she says, "Yeah. He'll find you."

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The morning light is cold and clear. There's no chalky San Francisco smog, no honking of traffic horns. Danny wakes up and breathes in and, for that moment, he feels *okay*.

Smelling seared skin is a fantastic way to jolt yourself out of a good mood. He sits up, shivering and trying not to gag, and eases the cloak off Malia, scanning her for burn marks. There aren't any. "Mal?" he murmurs, pushing at her shoulder. She stirs, grumbling, and turns over, baring her other arm. No, it's definitely not her.

A soft whuff makes Danny turn. Oh—it's one of the horses. They're both black, so it's impossible to tell which one Danny rode last night. He checks both of them, and finally finds the scorch mark along the hindquarters of one



of them: a deep, ugly gash that is red and raw on the inside. “Sorry,” he says, patting its side, behind the strap that is holding its saddle on. It turns its head to peer at him with dark, liquid eyes, and pushes its nose against his shoulder. Danny puts a hand up, and the horse bumps into that too, soft lips tickling Danny’s fingers, probably searching for a treat.

“You’re not so bad, are you, buddy,” Danny says, stroking the horse’s muzzle. “You look like a big badass, but you’re a softie.”

He’s not sure he’s entirely talking about the horse anymore. Great. He rummages around in the pack Malia grabbed—it’s his, not Malia’s—and fishes out clean clothes and a shirt to use as a towel. Going for a dip in a freezing creek is pretty much the last thing he wants to do right now, but he’s aware that he smells like sweat and smoke and an old bag of Doritos. He’s thankfully out of that phase of teenagerhood, where he never knew what he smelled like and thought he was immune to needing to shower, especially after eight-hour Halo marathons.

He leaves his sword on the bank along with his clothes and his inhaler and steps into the creek, telling himself not to be a pussy. He is at least eighty-seven percent sure that his balls are never going to reappear outside of his body. Danny’s built for heated swimming pools, not nature adventure shower escapades.

In the middle of scrubbing himself down with handfuls of creek water, the hair on the back of his neck stands up.

“Oh my god,” he says, in a desperate bid to distract whoever is watching him from immediately killing him. “Can we not do this while I’m naked?”

“I’m not in control of that,” the voice responds, and it’s *Soren*.

Danny turns on his heel, stumbling over a rock in his haste. Soren is on the shore, beat to hell with a ripped cloak and a scrape on his cheek and blood all down one hand. “You’re alive,” Danny says.

“I think.” Soren smiles lopsidedly at him, then sways and sinks down to sit. Danny scrambles out of the water and yanks on the waiting pair of sweatpants. Soren is watching him in a dozy way that suggests that maybe he doesn’t

actually *know* he's watching, his gaze sliding down the length of Danny's wet body and back up to his face. "You okay?" he asks.

"Fine." Danny comes to crouch at his side, hisses when he sees the gash in Soren's shoulder. "Did you *walk* here?"

"Someone freed all the horses." Soren's smile turns rueful; his eyes are glazed and unfocused. "That'd be me."

"Plot twist," Danny says, sliding an arm under Soren's good one and levering him up to his feet. "C'mon, dude, I can't lift you by myself. Your legs are not noodles." Soren obediently gets his feet under him, stumbling into Danny once he's upright. "How long has it been since you slept?" Danny asks, to distract Soren from the fact that Danny is valiantly failing at holding him up.

"Long time," Soren murmurs. "The truck?" He drops his head on Danny's shoulder. "Where's Malia?"

"Back in the camp. If I bend over, are you going to fall down?"

Soren considers this intensely, his eyes half-lidded. "Probably."

"Don't," Danny advises him, and props him up so he can grab his sword and his clothes. He steps into his boots and eases back under Soren's arm, his own wrapping tight around Soren's waist. Holy god, he can feel the muscles through his cloak. That just isn't fair. (What's more unfair is the fact that Soren has wedged himself so high on the attractiveness scale that nothing he does is diminishing his rating. Fuck.) "Left, right, Soren. Pick your feet up."

Malia is awake when they get back, and she rushes over to help with Soren. Together, she and Danny lay him out on their makeshift bed, where he's out, body falling limp into the pine needles' embrace. Malia immediately starts working her fingers into the buckles of Soren's leather vest, loosening the sides, and Danny makes his ice cube fingers cooperate on unlacing the ties that bind the front closed. Their eyes meet over his body, and Malia smiles faintly at him. She looks no better than she did last night—still exhausted, still pale.

Also, still managing to cope better than Danny is.

Soren groans as Malia lifts his shoulders so they can slide the vest off him. Underneath is a soft blue tunic, ripped over one shoulder in a clean slice. “Do we have anything?” Danny asks. It doesn’t look as bad as the burned gash on his horse, maybe, but the blood is a sick, dark color, and touching the crunchy edges of the wound makes Danny’s stomach clench.

“No. I shoved some of my shit in here, but I didn’t grab anything from the camp.” Malia digs around in the pack and comes up with a purple toothbrush holder. She dumps the toothbrush out and heads for the creek, leaving Danny to strip Soren’s shirt off.

He doesn’t want to cut it, since it’s the only clothes they have that’ll fit him, unless he wants to Jon Snow it and walk around with a fur cape over nothing. Danny undoes the collar laces and eases it over Soren’s head, carefully maneuvering his injured arm. More blood spurts out when it tears anew, and Danny swallows nausea, moving to cut strips out of a shirt. Malia comes back and Danny soaks the strips of shirt in cool creek water, bathing the wound until the crusted blood is gone and it’s free of dirt and soot. The wound starts to bleed again; he packs it with shirt strips, and it isn’t until he gets to the last of them that he sees PER SHRIMP on it. He stares at the letters, dumbfounded, until Malia reminds him to keep pressure on it with his hands.

This doesn’t feel like the shirt he was wearing three days ago. It feels like the shirt he was wearing years ago, when he graduated high school, or when he signed the lease with Malia. A lifetime ago, an entire world away, where his biggest worry was studying for his (missed, by now) Geology 296 exam.

How is he supposed to give a shit about a *geology* exam when he’s getting frostbite from a fucking river in the middle of another dimension? One that has *magic*. Where he’s sitting, licking his guardian’s wounds, because his life really has turned into *Harry Potter*, and he’s being hunted? He just watched a hundred people’s lives be *ruined* over him, and there’s nothing he can do.

*You’re more capable than you think you are.*

Hah. Right.

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Soren sleeps until twilight. Danny and Malia take turns dozing beside him in shifts to stave off the cold and the hunger; neither of them have experience with eating things that grow in forests—and plus, the last forest was magical. Danny has a feeling that magic wouldn't be good for his digestion.

No one comes looking for them. Danny is both disappointed and not. On the one hand, it could be survivors from the camp who followed their trail, but on the other, it could be Doctor Doom's men, come to retrieve Danny. Soren said that Doom didn't take well to losing. That he didn't let keys he'd marked slip from his grasp. That it made him angry. They're still looking for Danny—there's no denying that. Danny is being stalked, and it's only a matter of time before another of Doom's pet keys finds him.

If he were stupider, he'd leave Malia and Soren. Him being here puts both of them in danger. But if he took off, he'd just be captured, and then the two of them would try to save him. He's seen enough Chosen One plot movies to know that separating himself from the people capable of keeping him safe is The Worst Idea He Could Possibly Have, deserving of all capitals. So, he stays in the camp, watching their horses graze and watching Soren sleep while Malia goes off to the creek to do her meditation tai chi routine.

Just after Danny and Malia decide that they won't chance a fire, Soren groans and stirs under Malia's cloak.

"I'm gonna go get some water," Malia says, and is gone with the toothbrush holder before Danny can reply.

"Where...?" Soren mumbles, his eyes still clouded with sleep.

"Near the mountain," Danny says. He leans over him. "You found us."

Soren groans again, bringing his good hand up to scrub across his eyes. "Right."

"Smooth move with the horse thing."

"How'd you know that was me?" Soren squints up at him.

"You told me."

"I did?"

“You told me all the things,” Danny says, wiggling his fingers. He means it as a joke, but Soren’s face goes stricken, color draining from his cheeks.

“...Like what?”

“Like your favorite pajamas are pink.” Danny rolls his eyes. “You didn’t tell me anything, Soren. It was a joke. Kidding. Relax, your secrets are safe. You *did* get to see me naked, though.”

Soren shoves him, then drops his arm back over his eyes. “I don’t remember.”

Danny shoves him back. Maybe it’s the relief at seeing Soren awake, or maybe Danny is batshit insane, but he says, “You sound disappointed,” before he can censor himself.

“Do I?” Soren’s mouth flicks up on one side. “I’ve got *no* idea what you’re talking about.”

Danny becomes aware of two things: one, Soren’s accent is super great when his voice is all low and growly like that, and two, they’re flirting. It goes up like a neon sign in Danny’s lizard brain: F-L-I-R-T. FLIRT: GO. GREEN LIGHT FOR FLIRT. “Sure you don’t, big guy.” Danny starts peeling the scraps of his Big Louie’s shirt off Soren’s shoulder. Soren grits his teeth and stays silent through it. Danny lets his fingers drift, somewhere between the third strip and the fourth, and then it falls into a pattern: stroke, tug the scrap loose, stroke, move another one. Soren is watching him—it seems like that’s all Soren does when Danny is trying to hit on him. His focus heats Danny from the inside out.

Danny’s voice is low in his chest when he says, “What do we do now?”

“Now...” Soren’s eyes dip from Danny’s face to the line of his neck, and further down to Danny’s spread and kneeling knees, and wow, this is a really interesting positioning, isn’t it? Danny has definitely seen this in at least sixty percent of the gay pornos he’s watched.

“Uh,” Danny says. Soren’s lips part like he’s going to say something, but he doesn’t. He stalls out, half-smiling, and Danny’s chest does a thing that’s almost like the beginnings of a panic attack. He leans closer, telling himself to

man up and *just do it* (and now he's thinking of Nike shoes; sexy they are not)—and then out of nowhere, Soren moans.

Maybe that's because Danny is leaning on his injured shoulder.

"Oh my god, I am so sorry," Danny says, taking his hand off it. Soren laughs in a wheezing sort of way. "Are you okay? You're not okay."

"I'm fine," Soren says. His eyes are watering. He is *so* not fine.

"Oh good, everyone's still clothed." Malia strides back into the camp, the little toothbrush holder cupped in one hand. "How's your shoulder, Soren?"

"It hurts."

"I, uh," Danny says, and Malia sighs, giving him license to shut up.

She bathes and rewraps Soren's shoulder for him, using strips of one of her shirts this time. Soren tells them between taking sips of the water Malia forces on him that they need to move soon, and that they need to head to Fell Lake, where Ilyana and her wife live. Ilyana has connections everywhere, he says, and the League's headquarters should already know about the attack on White Oak.

"Do they know about me?" Danny asks.

Soren nods. "They're calling every key and their guardian back to Fell. Ilyana can't afford to send individual hunting parties after him anymore, not after last night."

"Not after I got here," Danny corrects.

"Getting marked wasn't your fault." Soren nods to Malia when she asks if the wrap is tight enough and sits up, testing the band of cloth across his chest and around his shoulder. He grabs a thick tree root and eases himself upright. "We should find something to eat."

"God, please," Malia mutters. "I had granola bars in my bag, but I lost it at White Oak."

Soren levers himself up on his good arm, accepting Malia's arm when she offers it. "I'll find something," he says, picking his sword up. The sheath's strap dangles, impossible to secure with one hand, so Danny does what best

serves his own interests and says, “Lemme help.” He buckles the strap around Soren’s waist and then around his thigh. When he glances up, Malia is stifling laughter into her hand and pretending to be very interested in their remaining pack.

“Thanks,” Soren says; his expression tells Danny that he knows *exactly* what is up. “Back in a moment. Get a fire going—a small one.” He ducks around a tree and vanishes, his footsteps nearly impossible to hear.

“Wow,” Malia says. “Wow with spaces between the letters.”

“Shut up.” Danny points at her. “You’re the worst.”

“How am *I* the *worst*? I could’ve told the two of you to get a room, but I stayed quiet, like a good best friend.”

“Yeah, well,” Danny says. “*Well*.”

“*Well*,” Malia echoes. “Odds of hitting that?”

Danny shrugs. “Two-thirds?”

“Holy shit, Danno. What was the last two-thirds you had?” Malia pushes off her knees and circles the camp, picking up any sticks that haven’t been soaked through with melting snow.

“Jacobs, I think,” Danny says. Don Jacobs had been a fellow student in Danny’s religion course a semester ago; he was hot but had serious confidence issues, which meant that Danny was more confident than he was, which had been an ego booster, which had turned Danny briefly into an asshole. Malia hadn’t been remiss in telling him, but he had only stopped “dating” —a.k.a. going out for campus frozen yogurt twice—Jacobs when she’d started calling him Reed Richards and refused to stop.

“Ugh,” Malia says, with feeling. Kindling gathered, she dumps it a few feet from their makeshift bed. “He doesn’t count.”

Danny hums agreeably. “I was probably gonna kiss him,” he muses. “Uh, Soren, not Jacobs.”

“Please stop putting the image of you kissing Jacobs in my brain.”

“Only if you can take it out of mine,” Danny sighs. “He was seriously shi—” He snaps his mouth closed when Malia’s hand jerks up, her fingers pressed together. It’s her signal for *silence*, mostly used when new *Doctor Who* TV spots come on. (Danny is not, for the record, a *Who* fan, but if he had to pick a favorite, it would be Ten all the way.) He waits until she relaxes, but a moment later, she’s tense again.

She motions to his sword, and that’s when a bright green bolt of... *something* lances out of the forest and cracks within an inch of Danny’s left temple.

“Holy *shit*,” he yelps, skittering sideways. The bolt snaps back and reappears, sweeping toward Malia. She rolls, grabbing her sword, and throws Danny’s to him. He has the feeling it isn’t going to do a damn bit of good against this shit, but he curls both hands around it—only for a second, before he switches to one, remembering Soren’s advice.

The green bolt is joined by a second, yellower one, and they snake across the ground, coiling around a tree and slithering straight for Danny’s feet.

“Yeah,” he says, “fuck this.” He grabs the pack and slings it over one shoulder. Malia is already untying the horses and tightening the bands on their saddles, her fingers quick and efficient, thank god. She tosses the reins of the horse with the burn to him and swings up on hers. “We need to find Soren!” Danny shouts. He slips climbing into his saddle, and his horse takes off a step early, following Malia. Behind them, men streak out into the small clearing.

Danny clings haphazardly to his horse’s mane, only one foot secured in a stirrup. He clamps the other around his horse’s belly and looks back again, trusting his horse not to run them into a tree. The bolts of energy—of magic?—have vanished, but he can see the hands of two of the men glowing. God, there must be fifteen seekers. How had they not heard them?

“There!” Malia shouts. She turns her horse hard and—

“Mal!” Danny shouts, in the spare second he has before his horse gathers itself and bounds over an enormous fallen tree. Danny slips further when they land, jolted out of place, and he loses the pack when they drift too close to a tree. Goodbye, limited edition Tony Stark underwear.



Malia's horse swerves right, and Danny catches sight of Soren.

"What happened?" Soren calls as soon as they're close enough. Both horses' nostrils are flared, and Danny's horse's flanks are heaving. He fixes himself in the saddle, shoving his feet firmly in both stirrups.

"Doombots," Danny says, glancing behind him.

Soren's jaw ticks. "How many?"

"Fifteen," Malia answers.

"Two of them..." Danny says. He holds a hand up. "They were glowing."

"Sorcerers," Soren says, his jaw tightening further. He drops the handfuls of food he had—aw, they're mushrooms, too; Danny was going to get to have *roasted mushrooms* for dinner, goddamn it—and comes up on Danny's left. "Stay still," he says, planting one foot on a tree stump and swinging up behind Danny.

"Uh," Danny says, "are you going to stay on?"

"I hope so," Soren replies. Danny can hear wry humor in his voice, and when Soren's arm circles his waist, Danny leans a little back into him.

"Where to?" Malia asks, nudging her horse forward.

"West," Soren says. "Through the pass. Fell is a day's ride from here, but we can push." He adjusts his seat, shifting closer to Danny, and points forward. "That way, toward the creek. We'll follow it upstream to the pass."

Shouts filter up to them, the crashing of feet through underbrush. Danny tenses, hoping this isn't like last time, that the seekers aren't already upon them, but Malia isn't going to wait around to see: she digs her heels into her horse's sides, sending it forward. Danny does the same, leaning forward when his horse breaks into a run. Along the bank of the creek, the snow is soft and melted, giving way to the sand underneath, and the horses eat up the ground, long legs flashing. Danny's is favoring its hind leg a little, maybe weary from the burn, but it pushes on without complaint, responsive in Danny's inexperienced hands.

The pass is not as grand as Danny was expecting. He figured it would be grand and dramatic, closing as they swept through à la *Ice Age*. Instead, it reveals itself as a gap between two imposing mountain ridges. It's about ten feet wide, and the rock is bared, bereft of snow.

Above, though. There's snow above, caught between shelves of rock that jut out from either ridge, closing off the top of the pass.

"Hey," Danny says, pulling his horse to a stop. He twists in his saddle, peering up. "You guys thinking what I'm thinking?"

Soren turns, too. "If they have sorcerers, they'll get through that easy," he says. "...But if we can bring down enough, it's worth it."

"How?" Malia asks. "We don't have shit to do it with."

Soren tenses up behind Danny, and Danny *feels* his uncertainty. It's the weirdest thing Danny has felt in his life, catnip portal magic included.

Soren says, "You're right. We can't. We should keep moving." He presses his calves into Danny's horse, urging it on.

He's right. He's totally right—they've got nothing to bring the snow down with.

But Danny can't get the hesitation out of his head. He's about to ask when he sees what climbing down from the pass is going to entail. "Fuck me," he mumbles.

It's ice. Ice, and some patches of rock, leading down into another valley.

"Slow," Soren says. He lets go of Danny's waist and takes the reins from his hands, wrapping them around his fingers. "Everyone go slow."

The descent is slow and arduous. Danny's horse is pure concentration, its ears pricked forward and its body low. Danny wishes he could look like that: sleek and confident and not terrified out of his mind.

His terror multiplies exponentially when Malia's horse slips once on an iced embankment, nearly throwing her. She recovers without batting an eye, doesn't even look back at them as she presses her heels into her horse's flanks and clicks her tongue against her teeth. She leads them all the way down to flat

snow before she drops her horse's reins to its neck and leans forward, blowing out a long breath.

"She'd have made a fantastic guardian," Soren says into Danny's ear.

"I think she is one," Danny says. Soren passes the reins into his hand, and he keeps his grip on them loose, letting his horse relax. He's thinking about taking a hit off his inhaler, but elation at not being dead from the descent makes him babble instead. "No offense, I mean. I'm not trying to replace you, I'm just saying, it's, you know, we met because she kept me from falling down a flight of stairs and breaking my face."

Soren laughs, also in Danny's ear. Danny's going to have to start keeping track of his unfortunate erections as a hobby. He's had more in the past three days than he's had this entire year so far.

He wonders what that says about him, since he's also had more near-death experiences in the past three days than the rest of his life combined.

The flat snow gives way to forest after ten minutes of walking. Once there, they pause, hidden in the trees, and watch the pass, but nothing comes through. "Did we lose them?" Danny whispers.

"No," Soren says. "They're just behind."

An hour of walking later, it starts snowing.

"I hate snow," Danny complains, peering up between pine tree branches. "I hate being cold."

"Whine when you don't have a riding buddy to keep you warm," Malia tells him. She pulls her cloak closed pointedly.

"She has a point," Soren says.

Danny aims a scowl over his shoulder. Secretly, he's glad for the conversation; he was starting to doze off. "Are you two sure you aren't related?"

"Pretty sure," Malia says. "Not a hundred percent, though. Maybe seventy-eight percent sure. Soren?"

"I'm stuck around ninety percent."

“Ooh, such a lack of faith.”

Danny sighs perfunctorily at both of them, but he’s grinning so wide it hurts.

“Not too much farther,” Soren says. “Through that pass and another few hours.” He closes his arms tighter around Danny, the grooves of his elbows fitting against the curves where Danny’s ribcage ends on each of his sides.

Okay, so maybe this isn’t all suckage.

Even if they did spot the human glowworms a while ago. They’re moving slower—they were only dipping down into the valley by the time Danny, Soren, and Malia were traipsing through the second pass; it’s much less treacherous than the first, though no more impressive. They head through, and there, across yet another valley, is a castle.

“Heigh-ho,” Danny says. “It’s off to Hogwarts we go.”

“Your wit is stunning,” Malia tells him.

Soren sighs out hot on the back of Danny’s neck. “Another mile,” he says, “and we can rest. We’ll be within the castle’s protection.”

Danny can’t remember the last time he was this tired. It’s too snowy for him to tell what time it is; it could be twilight or dawn, for all he knows. He can’t bring himself to care, either—he’s cold and hungry and exhausted, and his hair is doing weird things, probably in Soren’s face. What keeps him going, though, is the fact that while both Soren and Malia are flagging visibly, neither of them are slowing or complaining or letting it fuck them over in the least.

If Danny can’t do anything else to help, he can at least not fall asleep on his horse.

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Setting foot inside the castle’s barrier is like being pushed through a human-sized bubble. There’s a flex and a *pop*, and then they’re inside. Danny feels the faint tickle of magic in the bottom of his stomach, the fizzing sensation from the portal but less, more tolerable. He can’t tell if it’s the

acquired taste his body is getting for magic or if this magic is weaker, and he can't bring himself to care.

They stop in a thick stand of trees. Soren ties the horses while Danny helps Malia make another pine needle bed. No fire this time, and no food; Danny can hear Soren's stomach rumbling from five feet away. At least it's stopped snowing. Malia is the first to lie down, flopping face-first onto the cloak she's thrown over the pine needles.

"Never moving again," she says, muffled, and is asleep immediately, snoring softly.

"She's pretty amazing," Soren says. He smiles tiredly at Danny, working the straps of the horse's saddles with his one good hand.

Danny pads over to him, swaying on his feet. "She is," he says. He nudges his hand under Soren's, shooing him back so Danny can loosen it. He does the same to the other horse—his, he's starting to think of it. He can't tell if it's a dude or a lady and is kind of weirded out by checking, so he pats its nose and decides it's a she and Charlotte is her name. "Good girl," he tells her, rubbing her nose. She snuffles at him, then drops her head to doze.

Soren is stretched out on the bed, his sword unsheathed and set at his side. Danny takes his cloak off and tosses it over Soren. "Shut up," he says, cutting Soren's complaint off preemptively. "It's for sharing." He sets his sword down next to Soren's and settles between him and Malia, groaning as his whole body pops. He's pretty sure that nineteen is too young to be stricken with horrendous bodily problems, but since this whole debacle has aged him, oh, seventy years, he's due for some.

He tugs the cloak over him and over as much of Malia as he can manage. Soren shifts obligingly closer to allow it to cover the three of them. Danny's got the lucky spot, cocooned between the two of them. He folds his arms up to his chest, then tucks one under his head, his cheek pillowed on it. "Can I ask you something?" he says. It's not dark, not really, but it's hazy, and Soren's face is cast in shadows from the trees.

Soren says, voice sleepy, "Sure."

Danny gestures at the space between their chests. “I’m not hallucinating this, right?”

“This particular moment?”

“This *us*,” Danny says, pushing it out before he can gag on the words. Honestly, he’s too tired to give a shit anymore. If Soren doesn’t think he’s attractive, then they can let it go, and Danny—

“No,” Soren says.

“Uh,” Danny says. “No?”

“No, you’re not hallucinating.” Soren squints at him. “I think we should have this conversation when you’re more awake.”

“No,” Danny mumbles. He plants his hand flat on Soren’s chest. God, ugh, so much muscle. “Is this a, is it a guardian thing?”

“Hmm?”

“Like, is it...” Danny pushes Soren’s chest; predictably, it doesn’t budge him at all. “Nothing, I just saw a lot of guardians get pretty snuggly. I thought you said guardians are supposed to kinda stay out of the way?”

“Guardians tend to befriend their key quickly,” Soren says. “It’s not always romantic, but...”

“Sometimes it is.”

“Right.” Soren glances down at Danny’s hand. “Are you pushing me away, here?”

“What? No.” Danny drops his hand. “TBH, I was kind of feeling you up.” Soren snorts, ducking his head to laugh. “What?” Danny says, indignant.

“Nothing,” Soren says, and kisses him.

Danny opens his mouth to say *oh* before he processes that Soren’s mouth is on his, and that opening it is an invitation to do what the French people do. Soren readily takes this invitation, his tongue sliding hot and wet against Danny’s.

This is a three-thirds situation. If Malia were awake, she’d be clapping.

“This is good,” he manages when Soren leans back to breathe. Danny turns his mouth into Soren’s jaw, nipping his bottom lip. He wants to duck under the cloak and suck Soren off, or have a mutual jacking off session, but Malia is asleep *right behind him*; Danny is not that inconsiderate. “I’m gonna sleep on you,” he says, nudging his forehead into the crook of Soren’s uninjured shoulder.

“Good,” Soren says. He sounds as tired as Danny feels. His heartbeat is slowing under Danny’s ear, and he drapes one arm over the curve of Danny’s side like a shelter.

“Night,” Danny says. Soren’s already asleep.

Some hours later, Danny wakes up, and Soren is turned away from him, curled at the furthest edge of the pine bed.

He means to do something about it, but sleep overwhelms him again.

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In the morning, Soren makes them breakfast. Danny wakes up when Soren stands and crunches away through the snow, his usual light-footedness interrupted by the fresh-fallen snow and (probably, since Danny has one) a sleep hangover the size of fucking Montana. He’s back fast, with a shirtful of tubers that make Danny’s mouth water. His whole body thrills when Soren puts together a small fire and starts heating a rock in the middle of the fire. The tubers sizzle and blacken quickly, and they taste kind of like stale potato chips, but they’re *food*.

The three of them sit around the fire, eyes half-lidded and conversation stilted.

“These need salt,” Soren comments, chewing the end off a tuber.

“These need a miracle,” Danny corrects.

Malia laughs, her voice throaty. “Where’s Bear Grylls when you need him?”

Danny chokes on his next bite and has to spit it unattractively over his shoulder so he can laugh without killing himself. “Sun’s going down,” he says. “Water’s running out...”

“Better drink our own piss,” Malia finishes.

Soren stares at each of them in turn, still gnawing the end of his root.

“Your assimilation training needs work,” Danny tells him, fishing another root from the fire. Having hot food in his stomach is returning him to status: human. “How’s your shoulder?”

“It’ll be fine,” Soren says around a yawn.

“You should clean it again,” Malia says. She dusts her hands off on her pants and stands. “I’m gonna go for a walk.” She winks at Danny as she leaves.

Oh god. She was *awake*.

Soren is watching her go with keen eyes. “You two have an interesting friendship,” he says, reaching for the last of the tubers.

“We dated for three weeks.”

“Only three weeks?”

“We had sex,” Danny clarifies, “for three weeks. It didn’t work out, but it turns out you can be great BFFs after you see someone naked in ten-plus sexual positions.”

Soren huffs out a laugh, ducking his head to eat. There’s blood on his tunic still, caked dark over his shoulder and down one sleeve. His stubble is thick, fast-growing. Danny’s never had any luck with facial hair, aside from a truly unfortunate creeper moustache when he first started shaving. It looks good on Soren, though—the stubble. Danny’d like to rub his face on it, get some beard-burn.

“Wait ’til we get to Fell Lake,” Soren says.

“Huh?”

“You’re looking at me like you want to eat me.” Soren flicks one eyebrow up. “Wait until we get to the castle.”



“Okay, Soy lent Green,” Danny mutters, snagging the rest of Soren’s tuber out of his hand. Secretly, though, he’s stoked to tell Malia that this is a three-thirds, one-hundred-percent sure thing. Hell yes, Danny Marlaeto is going to *get some*, and it’s not going to be from Don Jacobs. Tuber gone (he is never taking table salt for granted again), he rubs his hands on his slacks. “So long as you’re offering, we should probably get go—”

The ground is vibrating.

Danny freezes and puts his hand to it, hoping that it’s him being dizzy, but Soren is feeling the ground, too. “Horses,” he says. His voice is off-kilter.

“A lot of them,” Danny assumes.

“Too many.” Soren pushes himself up and kicks dirt over the fire, blanketing it. “Find Malia, Danny, *now*.”

Danny bolts into the trees, heading the same direction Malia had. “Mal! Malia, where are you?” he shouts, ducking branches.

No answer. Nothing. *Jesus*.

He splashes across a shallow creek and climbs the bank of it, staring into the dense trees. Desperation sets in as he takes in just how fucking *many* of them there are. She could be anywhere.

Cupping his hands to his mouth, Danny yells, “*Mal!*”

“Here!” Malia calls back, thready. “Danny, fuck, come here!”

Fear sets in immediately. Danny has seen Malia teach self-defense classes with a broken arm, seen her half cut her thumb off while making dinner and wrap it herself, and she’s never, ever sounded like *that*.

Her leg is caught in a fucking *bear trap*. “No,” Danny says, sliding to his knees beside her. Oh god, he can see bone. A lot of bone. Too white under the fleshy red of her muscles. “Shit, Mal, I’m sorry.”

“Help me get this thing off,” she says. She’s pale and sweating—her skin is clammy when Danny touches her neck. “I was trying...” She gestures to a thick tree branch, which is frayed from her attempts to wedge it between the trap’s jaws. “Are there even bears in this fucking forest?”

“I kind of hope so,” Danny says, because if this isn’t for a bear, he doesn’t want to know what it *is* for. He jams the branch against the trap’s iron, panic rising in his chest. “Shit. *Shit.*”

“What?” Malia says. “Danny, what’s going on?”

“Seekers. A lot of them.” Danny manages to get the branch in and gasps, hope thickening—right as the trap snaps closed again, breaking the branch. Malia *screams*, blood gushing from her leg. “God, what the fuck.” Danny falls back, panting. “Okay, I. I need to get Soren.” He catches Malia’s face in his hands, brushing sweat from her temples. “It’s gonna be okay. I’m gonna get you out.”

Malia grabs his wrist, holding it with her thumb digging in. “If you can’t,” she says, “it’s okay.”

“Are we really going to have this moment?” Danny demands. “This is one movie cliché I am not going to share with you. Stop.” He pries her hand off him and lets her go, then peels his cloak off and drapes it over her. “I’ll be right back.”

He means it, he does, but somehow it feels like he’s lying.

That feeling chases him all the way back to camp, where Soren has the horses ready. The vibration in the ground has intensified, the trees buzzing. “She’s stuck,” Danny says, grabbing the reins of his horse and mounting. “She’s in a fucking bear trap, come on.” He doesn’t wait for Soren to agree, and his horse, bless her, is eager and quick under him. He bends low to keep tree branches from snagging him. “Should’ve called you Shadowfax instead of Charlotte,” he says into her mane. He grips it tight in one hand, the other directing Charlotte across a shallow creek and up the same embankment Danny climbed.

The trees here are too thick for the horses.

“Where?” Soren says as Danny drops to the ground.

“Down there.” Danny loops Charlotte’s reins over a tree branch and scrambles down into the cluster of trees. Malia is paler now, panting, and the

noise Soren makes when he sees her tells Danny that this is worse than it looks.

“Look what I did, Dad,” Malia says, giving Soren a pained half-smile.

Soren kneels, examining the trap. “It’s key-operated,” he says. “I...” He looks up at Malia, who’s making a face that says she already knows.

“You guys need to go, then.”

“Fuck no,” Danny snaps. “Malia, I meant what I said.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Soren says tightly. “I can’t... We’re not strong enough to get this off.” He meets Malia’s gaze again, and they have this whole silent conversation that makes Danny feel like rotting, useless meat. “We’re going,” Soren says, the decision apparently made.

Danny says, “No.” Soren and Malia both turn to him, and he says it again, louder. “No. We’re not leaving her. I don’t give a shit what we have to do, but we’re not leaving her here. I’m the key!” he snarls when Soren opens his mouth. “I’m the one at risk here, and I’m gonna stay.” He unsheathes his sword, ignoring Soren’s gaping. The seekers will be on them sooner or later, once they see the horses tied up. They’re probably not going to make it out of here.

But he isn’t going to run again. Fuck that. If he has to deal with a Chosen One plotline, he’s going to *own it*.

Soren stops him from shoving his sword between the trap’s jaws. His expression is raw, the lines around his eyes deeper. He squeezes Danny’s wrist. “What’ll you do?” he asks, holding Danny’s gaze. “Huh? What do you expect to do?”

“Anything I can,” Danny says. Soren stares at him a moment longer, then shakes his head, withdrawing. “Soren. Help me,” he orders, fitting the sword in place.

“The only thing that’s going to do is break your sword,” Soren says. He rakes a hand back through his hair and gets up to pace away, cloak swishing wetly on the ground. “You meant it?” he said. “When you said you’d do anything.”

Danny makes a *no shit* face at him. He's been living with learned helplessness for so long, and he's never hated it as much as he hates it now.

He realizes, in this bizarre flicker of a moment, that he doesn't know where his inhaler is.

It doesn't matter. He is *in control*, with a cool, hard focus. He is handling this.

Soren paces a line away from them, then back, his breathing harsh. "Do you trust me?" he asks. "Danny?"

"...Yeah," Danny says slowly, as Malia murmurs, "*Oh*."

Danny looks at her. "Oh? What oh?"

"You're a sorcerer," Malia says. She sounds woozy but certain. "Aren't you?"

Soren glances between them, then nods, mute.

Danny drops his forehead into one hand. "You're a dick," he says. "Worse than that, you're a hypocritical, lying dick." Soren's face falls by inches, his shoulders slumping under the harshness in Danny's voice. When he opens his mouth to speak, Danny says, "Get over here. I'll yell at you later. What do you need me to do?"

"Understand what you're offering me, here," Soren says, crouching by him. "This is *magic*, if I don't do it right—"

"Will you?" Danny demands. "Are you gonna fuck it up, Soren?"

"*No*," Soren says, vehement. "I wouldn't do that to you."

"Then shut up and bond us." Danny pushes his hand at Soren's chest. "How does this work?"

Soren eases his hand down. "Not like that," he says. "It should be easy. We've..." He grits his teeth. "We've already started. Remember the portal?"

"...That's why you wouldn't touch me," Danny says. Of course—the zing of energy, that brief connection. They'd accidentally started, so Soren was trying to keep from... "Fuck, Soren, *really*?"

“I’m sorry,” Soren says. He seems to mean it, so Danny lets him off the hook. For now. “Remember the magic. You have that in you. I need you to find it.” He puts his hands on Danny’s shoulders, his broad, warm palms cupping the rounds of them. “Picture a well.”

“I remember,” Danny says. He imagines a well, imagines seeing down into it...

Ugh, wow, *no*, all that leads to is a hallucinated version of *The Ring*.

*Focus*. Danny’s imaginary well gives way to a creek. The same creek they camped by last night: cool and clear and running, thick and bubbling. Running through him. To his fingertips. He imagines his bones as individual streams.

After a long time, through water in his throat, he says, “I’ve got it.”

Soren brings his hands in to bracket Danny’s neck. “Push it at me,” he says. His voice is shaking. “You have to open it to me, Danny.”

Okay, so creeks flow into rivers. Danny breathes out, concentrating on the warmth of Soren’s hands. The ground under him is vibrating harder. He imagines he can hear hoofbeats, but he lets the rush of the river drown them out.

The river, showing the creek how to run properly.

Something in Danny’s body *clicks*, and gives way, and he bows forward, falling against Soren’s chest and gasping out his surprise. He feels Soren’s surprise, too; the only way he would be able to explain *how* would be through several bad X-Men references. As it is, he’s drained of the ability to think coherently, and instead he sits there, leaning on Soren’s chest and basking in the *connection*.

He can feel Soren’s heart beating in his own chest.

“Okay,” Soren says hoarsely. His hands settle back on Danny’s shoulders. “Look out.” He slides away, to Malia, and touches the bear trap. “Stay sitting, Danny,” he says. His hands begin to glow blue, and Danny’s reservoir drains immediately. He flops back, lying in the snow, the world swirling. Nearby, he hears the crunch of metal, and then Malia’s yelp, and then a cracking, gunshot-esque sound. He’s too far gone to *care* about the gunshot—too far gone to care

about anything but how close he can still feel Soren's heartbeat. The whole goddamn batshit NRA could be standing around him and he wouldn't give a shit. He's focused on Soren's river. Danny is feeding Soren's river and that's all that matters.

"Did I give you enough?" he slurs. "Take more, y'can..."

"No." Soren's head appears, floating. He pulls Danny into his arms—oh, there's the rest of his body—and lifts him out of the snow.

"Shut up, Danny," Malia chimes. She's... upright. Standing.

"You have two legs," Danny says happily.

"You're high on magic," she retorts, smiling.

Soren squeezes Danny closer to his chest. Danny's head flops of its own accord onto his shoulder, which is healed as well. "Let's go," Soren says. He and Malia manage to get Danny's limp body up the slope and back to the horses. Once they're there, Soren moves as close to Charlotte as he can. "I can't lift you into the saddle," he says, ready to set Danny down.

"Why not?" Danny says, and Soren breathes, "Oh." Then there's a pull on Danny's magic again, and then he's being lifted in supernaturally strong arms onto Charlotte. "I'm probably gonna pass out," Danny informs them. He buries his fingers in Charlotte's mane as Soren settles in behind him. "You're such a good girl, Char."

"Is this what he's like when he's drunk?" Soren asks, wrapping an arm around Danny's waist.

"Live through the next hour and you'll get to find out," Malia says. She pushes off the ground on her strong, new leg—the one Danny's magic made for her.

What was it he was thinking earlier? *Maybe this isn't all suckage...*

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"...Yeah, sure, for *you*," Malia laughs. She leans into the guy sitting on her right. Danny can't remember his name, but he's really hot, and earlier, Malia

flashed him a two-thirds signal. Watching them now, Danny upgrades it to three-thirds.

The rest of the table chitters politely, most of them still with mouthfuls of food. “Do go on,” Soren says from Danny’s left.

“Traitor.” Danny steps on his foot under the table, feels the current of his amusement follow afterward. Danny is still mostly out of it, woozy from sleeping, but he’s functional enough to know that their fledgling bond is going to end in a Talk, likely soon.

It’s been three days since Doom’s (real name: Steve. Most non-threatening villain name ever) forces attacked Fell Lake. Danny was helpfully nonfunctional for the entire battle, giving up his glorious Chosen One moment of saving everyone’s lives with his amazing sacrifice, but even with him unconscious, Soren was able to use his magic, and Fell held its own.

Danny is never going to get over missing out on the end of his own heroic story. He’s like Harry Potter sleeping through the final Hogwarts battle. Luke Skywalker taking a smoke break instead of destroying the Death Star.

“For *him*,” Malia continues. “Except the rest of us had to fight a thousand magic death soldiers.”

“Hey, hey,” Soren says. “His magic was present.”

“All right,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Fine. Ten points to Marlaeto for magical presence.” The grin she gives Danny across the table is warm. It says she’s giving him more than a handful of points. She wouldn’t be alive without him.

...Okay, maybe he didn’t miss his heroic moment. Maybe he just passed out like a loser afterward.

Malia says something that makes the whole table ring with laughter, drawing the attention of the rest of the grand hall, even up to Ilyana at her high table, where she sits with her wife, Lena, and a handful of her advisors. Malia fits in here, among these people; she’s better at this than Danny is, and Danny’s grateful for that. He’s the whole reason Steve came to Fell Lake—because he was too obsessed to let a key he’d “marked” go. He died for power.

Danny almost wishes he'd gotten to have a face-to-face with the guy, so he could have heard his villain monologue and shot all the necessary holes in it. He bets it was lammer than passing out from overuse of magic.

The hall is full to the brim, and there are a hundred tents set up on the castle's grounds to house the keys and sorcerers freed from Steve's control and/or service when he died. They all get to go home, free and clear, but Danny has been walking around for the past day, working his recuperating body out, and it sounds like most people don't want to go. There's an odd stillness about the castle, a stasis. How many keys are going to have to go back, like Danny, and make up an appendicitis story for their professors to explain missing finals week? How many may have lost their jobs? Lost more than that?

Now that their lives are no longer in immediate peril, Lohrfast is kind of a vacation from the real world.

Don't get him wrong: Danny wants to go back. Shit, he does. He misses Taco Bell and his PS3 and indoor plumbing. He feels an ache in his soul that only manifests when he has a severe lack of *Battlestar Galactica*.

He'll go back.

Just... not yet.

"Wanna get out of here?" he says to Soren.

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They walk together to the lake. It's mostly frozen over, but winter is ending—it'll break apart soon. Danny might be sad, in the way-buried cockles of his heart. California will never look like this. He wants to get his fill of snow while he can.

"So," he says, kicking at a rock. "Talk to me, man."

Soren sighs, shoving his hands deeper in the pockets of his cloak. He's been in meetings with Ilyana since the end of the battle; this is the first time Danny has gotten to actually *talk* to him, alone, and if Soren thought he wasn't going to go straight for the throat, he needs to get to know Danny better.



In fact, that's something Danny is counting on.

"Soren?" he prods.

"I was young," Soren says finally. He comes to a stop on the edge of the lake. The sand is still loose, pure white under their boots. "My parents didn't tell me what I was, and there was a boy who lived near us. A key." Soren turns away, nudging the toe of his boot into the sand. His eyes are fixed out on the lake. "I bonded with him accidentally, and I didn't understand how to regulate the magic. He died."

Danny leans into his shoulder. "How old were you?"

"Thirteen." Soren heaves out a breath; Danny watches it drift and dissolve in the air. "I figured the best way to control my sorcery was never to use it. So I joined the League and trained myself and pretended I wasn't one at all."

"That's a fucking big closet to be in."

"Narnia," Soren says.

Danny laughs, startled. "Look at you, catching up."

"Malia said the same thing when I told her." Soren rolls his shoulder, nudging Danny away, then wraps that arm around him, letting him lean into the warm length of Soren's side and be closed inside his cloak. "Do you think she'll stay here?"

"I don't know," Danny says. "She's good at Lohrfasting, but she'll miss home, probably."

Soren is silent for a while, the line of his chest buffeting against Danny's each time he breathes. The sensations from being bonded haven't dimmed at all; he can acutely feel Soren's heartbeat and the ebb and flow of his magic. "What about you?" he asks eventually.

"What about *you*?" Danny says.

"I go where you go."

"Easy as that?" Danny lists into him, eyebrows raised.

Soren's arm tightens. "I'm still your guardian."

“But I’m bonded to you now. That’s how it works, right? No one else can use me.”

“Well...” Soren glances down at him, frowning faintly. “I’d assumed you’d want to break the bond.”

“That can happen?”

“I can do it,” Soren says. He holds up one hand, and Danny feels the familiar sink from his throat to his feet as Soren’s fingers glow blue, playing shadow games with the thick lines of his veins. “I *should* do it.”

Danny touches their fingertips together. “No,” he says, before Soren can take that as a go-ahead. “Do you think you’re going to kill me? Is that what it is?”

“No. But magic is unpredictable sometimes.” Soren lets Danny go and faces him, the angles of his cheekbones and jaw cast in shadow by the light of the half moon. “I don’t want it to be unpredictable with you. And we bonded... soon. In a rush.”

“You know what else is unpredictable? A bus hitting me when I get home,” Danny says, pushing up on his toes to drop a kiss on Soren’s mouth. He tastes like wine. “I can handle it if you can handle it.” Danny’s chest tightens; he should be anxious, he thinks, but he figures he’s survived *The Return of the King* (while comatose, even!) and so is entitled to say fuck anxiety. “We can handle it,” he adds.

Soren tucks a hand under Danny’s chin and kisses him more firmly. “Oh yeah?” he asks, his lips turned up with good humor.

“Yeah,” Danny says. “Also, we should go back to my room.”

And look, Danny is nineteen, and maybe two years from now Soren will get tired of him, or maybe five years from now Danny will resent handing his magic over. They aren’t *in love*—they’re barely dating on a level that could be called a *thing*, but the *yet* is there, waiting for them to get to know one another outside of the context of running for their lives. If nothing else, Danny can feel the pulse of shared magic under both their skins, ready and willing and bright,

as they walk together through the white fields back to the castle. Isn't that what this has all been for: the magic in Danny's body?

*Make something awesome happen*, he thinks at it, curling his fingers between Soren's.

Above the castle, without a cloud in sight, it starts to snow.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Sam Schooler was born on a Saturday in Cincinnati, Ohio, raised by a geek, and was recently released into the wild. A university student, a journalist, a Tumblr addict, and a queer romance author, she is most comfortable at night, basking in the healthy glow of a laptop screen. She can often be found crying over TV shows and comic books and is known to passionately campaign for the preservation of the Oxford comma. She has associative prosopagnosia. Jeremy Renner played her in a movie once.*

## Contact & Media Info

*Keep up with her blogging and book announcements at her website, or, if you're feeling daring, follow her on Twitter to get the full immersive experience.*

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# TEMPTING LUCIFER

By Kristina Schwartz

## Photo Description

A youthful man of indeterminable age lounges on a brocade-patterned chair, a look of disinterested haughtiness written across his face. His eyes, black as the starless night sky and rimmed in heavy black kohl seem to bore into yours, and resting on his head is a crown made of blackened horns, barnacles and spiral seashells. His smooth, bare chest glistens in the shifting light, beckoning your touch, but his air of arrogance stills your hand.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Isn't he something? All arrogant and so not in my league. I wish I felt comfortable saying something other than "Yes, Sire" to him. Wish I could find it in me to use the spine I'm sure I have, somewhere, and just talk to him when I find myself alone with him; however, as one of the demon prince's servants, I'm expected to be silent and obedient.*

*Sometimes though, I catch him looking at me out of the corner of my eye, and instead of the sulky, brooding looks he shows the rest of Hell, he has started giving me this subtly flirty smile whenever he orders me to do something, as though he's planning something.*

*Anything goes, though I'd like to see a HEA or HFN ending; otherwise, let me see what you've got.*

Sincerely,

Lacie J

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** angels/demons/gods, hot ass demon prince, hot ass fallen angel, jealousy, possessiveness, HFN, rough sex, dirty talk, orgasm denial

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# TEMPTING LUCIFER

By Kristina Schwartz

## CHAPTER ONE

“Raziel.”

The Dark Prince’s voice carried a silken tone, as though his tongue caressed the very essence of my being with the simple whispered utterance of my name. I fought hard to keep my face schooled in an expressionless mask, willing my supple body not to tremble with want as I acknowledged him with a deliberate nod of my head.

“Yes, Sire?”

His eyes, black as the starless night sky and rimmed in heavy black kohl, met mine, and one corner of his mouth made a brief twitch upward. The dim lighting in the throne room must have been playing tricks with my mind though; the Dark Prince rarely smiled, especially not at mere servants, not even those who had taken a long, hard fall for him.

“Raziel, I’m bored.” His face contorted, taking on that more familiar sulky, sullen expression he typically wore. “Entertain me.”

He shifted, twisting in his throne and draping his legs over one broad armrest. The throne, made of gnarled, blackened wood, didn’t look very comfortable but he didn’t seem bothered. Blackened horns, barnacles and spiral seashells protruding off the throne’s headrest mimicked the accoutrements of his crown, and the flickering light of the nearest open flame pit glistened off the bare skin of his torso.

It took everything in me not to sink to my knees on the dais and offer to undo his skintight leather pants with my teeth, and I had to swallow hard against the sudden dryness of my throat.

“And how shall I entertain you, Sire?” I kept my eyes focused on his face, though I could see his hand skimming along his thigh in my peripheral vision. It did nothing to kill the urge to kneel, and I swore I could feel the dull ache of hitting the marble dais too hard in my haste.

His lips parted; I felt my breath draw inward, awaiting his answer.

I flinched at the sudden bang reverberating through the throne room. The Dark Prince aimed an irritated glance over my shoulder, and I turned to see the stone double doors leading into the throne room had been flung open; the bang had been caused by them striking the dark stone walls.

The young demon, Asakku, dipped into a low bow as he approached, “My apologies, O Exalted Dark One,” he babbled. “The new batch of souls has arrived for sorting.”

Something flickered across the Dark Prince’s face, and I nearly did a double take—had that been *disappointment*? Just as soon as the thought registered, whatever I believed I had seen was gone, replaced by an arrogant smirk as he crooked his fingers in a beckoning gesture. “Bring them in, Asakku.” He glanced at me, winking, and I felt heat lick across my groin. “Perhaps another time, Raziel.”

He gave me a dismissing nod of his head, and I whirled away, walking stiff-legged out of the throne room. That heat made it difficult to think about anything but that wink, and by the time I reached my chambers, it had progressed into a dull throb. I loosened my dark hair from the black leather strap holding it tightly at the nape of my neck, and a quick toss of my head shook the long, lustrous strands free, spilling them around my face. I threw the leather strap down on the wood crate I used for a nightstand, and I jerked my fingers through my hair, huffing out a low sigh as I began to pace the small room I had claimed as my own centuries ago, when I first came to Hell.

Centuries ago. Had it really been that long? Some days it felt as though only minutes had passed since that fateful day.

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## CHAPTER TWO

The Keeper of Secrets, they called me, in those golden, ethereal halls. I held one of the greatest honors—the privilege of standing close to God’s throne—and was tasked with recording everything said and discussed in His presence. Well, perhaps *tasked* was a bit of an exaggeration; no one had *ordered* me to do such a thing, but no one discouraged me either.

My fall from grace came at the inadvertent hands of two humans. I supposed I shouldn’t be bitter; after all, it was my own compassion that proved to be my undoing. I felt sympathetic to the Creator’s children, who were misguided and ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. They had been cast out of the only home they had ever known, exposed to the harsh, unforgiving world that lay beyond the gates of Paradise. It had broken my heart, which was the only excuse I gave for my actions—I gave them the Book of Secrets, that ancient tome of knowledge that I had carefully safeguarded for eons, and encouraged them to use it to find their way home, back to God. Along the way, I had hoped they would gain a better understanding of our Father, which would bring them closer to Him.

This simple act of what I deemed kindness sent the other angels into an uproar. They acted as though I had committed some sort of heinous crime. My precious book, my life’s work, was cruelly ripped from the humans’ hands and thrown into the sea, and my own brethren shunned me. No longer was I allowed to stand before God’s mighty throne; I was physically barred from even entering the throne room, and the friends I had known and loved turned their backs to me. They would not even speak to me as I passed them in the halls. I had become a leper, and I resigned myself to a lonely existence.

And then, one day, *he* found me.

Oh, I knew who he was, everyone did; he was something of a legend in the hallowed halls of Heaven—*Lucifer*. The Morning Star, the only archangel to ever turn his back on his creator, to shun God Himself, to throw off our teachings and try to claim the Father’s throne for his own. God exiled him, of course, but Lucifer wouldn’t be satisfied with the mere sparing of his life. He

vowed to return one day to overthrow God and cast Him out, and descended to the underworld, where he crowned himself king.

He was known by many names, even then, and on that particular day, he looked every bit the regal Dark Prince into which he had fashioned himself. One look, that was all it had taken; I was besotted, hopelessly and inescapably. I had never encountered Lucifer before, not in such intimacy; I had seen him in God's court, of course, but to stand in his immediate presence, I had never had the—dare I say it?—*pleasure*.

“Raziel, the Keeper of Secrets.” His voice seemed to be spun from the finest silk, his words glittering jewels, and I was enthralled. He circled around me, and when he moved behind me, I could still feel the blazing rake of his eyes over me.

I swallowed, knowing he was taking in the sight of my wings, sweeping up from the curve of my shoulder blades and spilling down to my feet, the feathers trailing after me. Brilliant shades of blue melded into green and then back into blue, over and over, all the way to the tips, and the feathers shimmered as light played across them. I felt him catch a feather between his fingers, his touch as delicate as if he were holding fragile glass, and it took everything I had to suppress a shudder. No one had ever touched my feathers in such a manner before, and it resonated through me, the heat of it centering in my groin.

“Such flamboyant colors for a secret keeper, don't you think?”

I felt the whisper of his words on the outer shell of my ear, and the muscles of my throat flexed as I swallowed. My tongue felt swollen, at least three sizes too large for my mouth, and I could not form even the simplest of sounds. I feared that if I parted my lips, a most embarrassing, wanton moan would escape.

He did not seem offended by my silence, and he actually let out a light laugh as he circled back around to face me. Unbidden, my eyes dipped lower, trailing over the expanse of his naked, smooth torso, which seemed to glisten in the gilded light of the courtyard.

“I suppose none would suspect you of being capable of keeping secrets.” He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, drawing my attention

away from the riveting study of the planes of his abdomen. “It’s all the more a shame then, that they have spurned such cleverness.”

I stared at him, my mouth agape and my eyes wide, and he made that trilling sound again, that effortless laugh that set off sparks beneath the surface of my skin.

Swallowing hard in an attempt to conceal my bewilderment, I whispered, “You’ve heard of what happened to me?”

Lucifer flashed a smirk that could only be described as devilish. “My dear Raziél, of *course* I have. Who do you think encouraged the trickster serpent to tempt the humans?” His face softened a moment. “I had not expected you to act so kindly toward them. It’s cruel that the other angels have shunned you though. Does God not teach us to be creatures of compassion?” He reached out, cupping my cheek in his hand, and warmth radiated outward from his palm. “You shouldn’t be treated so shamefully. Come away with me. I promise you will be given the high esteem you deserve in my realm.”

The power of whatever held me enthralled broke with those words, and I gave a disoriented blink, pulling away from his touch. “You mean *Below*.” I had heard stories of his so-called realm, the kingdom he had chosen for himself, and its downtrodden dens of debauchery. It had frightened and—I was ashamed to admit, even to myself—excited me, but the thought of *going* there had never once crossed my mind.

His dark eyes held a sparkle of amusement as he watched me, and he gave an easy half-shrug of one shoulder. “You’d rather remain here where you’ll be ignored? Angels do not forgive easily, and you gave away their most precious *secrets* to mere humans, Raziél. Despite how highly-regarded those wingless brats are, they are still lesser than us, and they had no right to bear the knowledge you allowed them to have. Angels do not forgive and they do not *forget*.”

He stepped away, twirling his finger in a slow circle as he glanced around the courtyard, which had been empty for the duration of our conversation. “I suppose this *is* your home, though. I know all too well how difficult it can be to leave behind.”

There was no mistaking the bitterness behind his words, but I couldn't focus on that right then. I had realized with a flinch that while the courtyard was currently empty, it would surely be filling up at any moment. The midday break drew ever closer, and angels of every rank and denomination would be milling about the pillars and benches. He would be captured and brought before God for daring to sneak back into Heaven—how he had ever managed such a feat in the first place, I knew not.

I spoke with urgency as I stepped toward him. “You must leave. If you are found here, you—”

“Come with me,” he insisted, his eyes boring into mine and stilling my hand centimeters from grasping his upper arm. We stared at each other, his eyes seeming to darken, and I felt a clenching deep in the pit of my nether regions. “Raziel, you are unappreciated here, and your shunning will only worsen. You're no longer entrusted with God's secrets, so what shall they call you now?” He moved back into my personal space again, his movements fluid and graceful, and this time, when he leaned in to whisper against my ear, I felt his *lips* brush my skin.

“Come with me.”

That touch, that effervescent brush, electrified me, and I couldn't catch my breath, feeling as though it were being stolen away from me. The heat that had pulled my groin taut ratcheted up to an all-consuming inferno, and I nodded.

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## CHAPTER THREE

I gave my head a sharp shake, the abrupt gesture whipping my hair across my face, in an attempt to drag my thoughts back to the present. Turning my back on the gleaming halls of the only home I'd ever known had been easier than I thought, and even as I had picked myself up off the hard, unforgiving ground, my once-bright feathers in tattered ruin, I did not feel a twinge of regret. I held my head high as I followed the Dark Prince into his throne room, and there I remained at his side, silent and observant. Even now, I suspected that I would've followed him into the jaws of death if he had but asked.

*The Dark Prince.* Gone were the days when I would refer to him by his name. Through the centuries, I had come to realize that while I was entrusted with keeping his secrets in much the same way I had God's, I was not even a stone's throw of being worthy of his attention. I had faithfully followed him, casting aside the glitter and glamor of Heaven for the darkness of the underworld, in the hopes of slaking the exhilarating lust he had evoked in me, but the longer I spent in his presence, the more I realized just how many others had been compelled to follow him. I knew why he had become the prince of the underworld when I saw the legions of followers he commanded in the bowels of Hell, and I began to see the arrogance that clung to him like fine-cut cloth.

I had not lost my lust for him, though I had come no closer to enticing him into my bed. The Dark Prince had no shortage of admirers or concubines, and his bedchambers were rarely devoid of company unless he wished it. He had lured me to Hell with his silver tongue and wanton hands, but he had since failed to look upon me with such ardor, and I gave up the hope of ever being one of those he chose to *entertain* him behind closed doors.

At least, I had *thought* I had lost the hope, but even here, in the privacy of my room, I found myself aching to crawl to him on my knees, to offer myself to him as a plaything to do with whatever he wished.

If only I could speak to him, to give voice to my desires, but any time I was alone with him, my mouth became stuffed with cotton, my tongue distended

and my voice fell silent. It would seem that the *secret keeper* moniker suited me well.

Huffing out an irritated sigh, I snatched up the leather strap from the crate where I'd dropped it. Gathering my hair in my hands, I swept my long locks back, fastening the strap at the nape of my neck, and as I rose from the bed where I had sat during my rumination, I was dismayed to find a few shed feathers. Molting again, it seemed, something I hadn't had to contend with in Heaven.

I picked up one of the feathers, noting the dullness of the once-vibrant green color. Oh, I still retained the blue-to-green color variants, but the colors no longer shimmered, having lost their lustrous shine as soon as I hit the hard, unforgiving ground of Hell. The sight had a faint ache blossoming in my chest—my wings had always been a great source of pride for me, even before I had fallen. As I gathered up the feathers, I made a mental note to take extra care to clean my wings, tattered and forlorn as they were.

A quiet knock sounded at the door, and I dumped the feathers into a trash bin before crossing over to pull open the door. I was not surprised to find Asakku standing there. He and I had a tenuous friendship that had started with seeking sexual gratification in each other and eventually extended into keeping each other company in our off-duty moments, but sometimes, his habit of showing up unannounced rankled my nerves.

I regarded him with a bored expression. "Now what, Asakku?"

"You're shedding." Asakku's tone held just a hint of smugness. He was no angel—he had been born a demon, the crown of his head ringed in short bone spikes—a short, squat being, with pupil-less eyes the color of obsidian. He was something of a friend, I suppose. He served the Dark Prince as a messenger and page.

"I hadn't noticed." I arched one eyebrow, waiting for him to dispense the reason why he was knocking on my door, but he seemed more interested in drawing one of my discarded feathers out of the trash.

He held it delicately between his forefinger and thumb as he turned it this way and that, examining it, and I suddenly felt uncomfortable, rolling my shoulder in a fidgeting manner.

I moved forward, my steps fueled by a sudden irritation. “If you’ve just come by to steal my feathers, I’ll leave you to it. Otherwise, spit out whatever message you have for me.”

He tore his gaze away from the feather and sneered. “I came to see if you needed a bit of, ah, *tension* relief.” He cast a pointed glance southward, and I felt the heat of shame splash across my cheeks.

A fallen angel, even one completely in love with his master, had certain *needs*, and one’s own hand occasionally grew boring. Many of the prince’s minions sought each other’s company, and Asakku licked his lips as he looked me over, that sneer widening.

I stepped back with a frown and a shake of my head. “No, Asakku.”

He frowned, his mouth down-turning into a pout. “Why not? Don’t tell me you’re not in the mood.” He leered at my nether regions again, and I felt a strong compulsion to cover myself with my hands. “I can *see* the evidence that you are, Raziel.”

He took a shuffling step forward, and I sidestepped him, the warmth of the room suddenly unbearable. Normally, I would have gladly taken him up on his offer; he was well skilled at bringing someone to pleasure with his mouth, and indeed, after losing myself in the memories of my first encounter with the Dark Prince, I was aching for some release. However, I was not in the mood to seek it from *him*.

I made sure my voice was icy and hard as I said, “*No*, Asakku,” and plucked the feather from his fingers, throwing it back into the trash where it belonged. “Now, if you have no messages for me, then please, leave me in *peace*.”

Asakku snorted, his eyes seeming to have taken on a reddish cast as he stepped away from me. “Fine, you ungrateful swine, I’ll leave you to your so-called *peace*,” he sneered. “But do not think I will have forgotten this the next time *you* come seeking *me*.” With a final, indignant huff, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, slamming the door hard enough behind him that I flinched.

I sighed, knowing that I had wounded his pride, and feeling more guilty about the fact that I *didn’t* feel guilty for hurting his feelings.

My thoughts turned to the Morning Star; he would no doubt still be sorting through the souls, determining to which level of Hell they belonged. He had an official record keeper for that task; I would not be needed for some time, depending on how many souls had arrived. Perhaps I'd take the time to clean my wings until he summoned me.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Many humans had the misconception that Hell was a rocky, cavernous pit of fire and brimstone, a nightmarish place filled with the tortured screams of the damned. That was partially true, but that was just one section of the vast underworld. The souls who resided there were the truly wicked and depraved—rapists, murderers, serial killers and people who talked during movies at the theater.

No, Joss Whedon hadn't written that just as a funny one-liner.

Dante had been correct in his interpretation of Hell as multiple layers, though he was incorrect about the innermost circle being comprised of ice. The Dark Prince's lair resided in the topmost layer, the penthouse, per se.

Honestly, I had only ever heard of the other levels through written accounts and whispered words from the corners of mouths. My daily duties did not extend beyond the Dark Prince's throne room, and my recreational activities were confined to my personal chambers or Purgatory, which resided on the second level of Hell.

Purgatory could be summed up as our very own version of New Orleans' Bourbon Street, a place where the working demon went to quench his or her thirst for whatever form of debauchery they chose. The lesser of the damned, the ones who had minor infractions marring their souls, were allowed to mingle with the denizens of Hell, and there was always guaranteed to be a party going on somewhere. Quieter pockets of revelry existed, of course; it couldn't be Mardi Gras all year long, after all.

After giving my feathers a thorough scrubbing that left them with an opaque gleam, I braided my hair and secured it with that familiar leather strap. My fingers lingered over the soft leather, nearly worn thin after centuries of use, but I couldn't bear to part with it. It had been a gift, and while I doubted the gift-giver even remembered it, I treasured it.

The final touch was my bracers, made of the same black leather as my hair tie. I slipped my thumbs into the open slots of the bracers, then drew the leather laces tight and tied them in secure knots. That, coupled with the snug

leather pants I wore and the broad expanse of my naked chest, was sure to draw attention. Occasionally, the Morning Star himself joined his minions in Purgatory, losing himself in the midst of a crowded dance floor, and I hoped that would be the case. If I could not win him with words, perhaps I could woo him with the sensuous writhing of my hips.

By the time I made it down to Purgatory, the revelry had kicked into high gear, and I dodged a stumbling horned chimera, his goat tail swishing behind him. I continued down the street, headed to my usual drinking spot, Inferno.

As soon as I entered the club, the pulsating bass enveloped me like a warm, friendly lover and I felt my body respond, my head bobbing to the beat. The neon lights running along the length of the wraparound bar and DJ booth provided the only illumination, throwing shadows across everyone's faces and bodies. In the center of the large room, a mass of bodies moved as one, dancing to the music.

I let my eyes rove over the dance floor before eying the bartender. Drinks first or dance? My lips curled upward into a smirk as I instinctively moved with the music, and I knew my decision was made. I moved down onto the dance floor, melding into the throng of bodies. Closing my eyes, I let the music overtake me, rolling my hips.

I lost myself in the music, grinding against the bodies pressing into me, and I laughed, the tension in my body loosening. I lost track of time and didn't stop until my throat was parched. Moving through the crowd, I made my way over to the bar and flagged down the bartender. Sweat glistened on my muscled chest, and I smirked as I saw the bartender giving me an appreciative look.

Ordering a Manhattan, I tapped my fingers against the bar's surface. From behind me, I could hear fervor pass through the crowd, and I glanced back with mild interest. Celebrity sightings weren't all that uncommon in Hell, and I was curious to see which one it would be this time.

The crowd on the dance floor parted, and I saw him, his gaze seeming to pierce right through me. He smirked, the tip of his tongue playing slowly across his lips, and desire zinged through me, all the way to the tips of my toes.

## The Morning Star.

It started as an itch in my toes, the desire to boldly stride over to him and drag him close to me. My lips tingled with the phantom touch of his, and I could *taste* him. I licked my lips, shaking my head a bit, and I smiled at the bartender as he set my cocktail down in front of me.

Picking up the glass, I took a sip, focusing my attention on the mirrored wall behind the bar. I could see the Dark Prince's reflection as he stalked across the dance floor, drawing closer to the bar. Every fiber of my being ached to turn and face him, watch his slow strut forward, but I kept my back to the dance floor and my eyes fixed on the mirror.

My heart nearly stilled as he came to a standing rest beside me, and from the corner of my eye, I could see him wink at the bartender. I bristled as the demon practically swooned.

"Buttery Nipple, and make it a double." The words dripped off his tongue like honey, and I tried not to drop my gaze down to his chest where his dusky nipples stood at attention. They called to me like sirens, though, and I was unable to resist. My lips parted as I drew in a shallow breath, my eyes sliding down the smooth expanse of his chest. My fingers ached with the need to touch that bronze skin, and I gripped my glass tighter.

As the bartender set about making the drink, the Dark Prince turned, resting his elbows against the bar's edge. This bowed his back, jutting his chest out, and I lifted my glass to my lips, jerking my eyes away from the tempting planes of his torso. I heard him chuckle lightly, and when I glanced at him, I found him looking back at me. His lips twitched in some semblance of a secretive smile, and I felt my skin flush as his eyes slowly trailed down my torso. His tongue began a slow slide across his bottom lip, and a faint roaring began in my ears as my pulse raced. His lips began to form a word...

And the clink of glass on the bar's surface shattered the spell, dragging us both out of our trances. Irritation skittered across the Dark Prince's face as he picked up the shot glass the bartender had placed in front of him, but it was quickly replaced by cool confidence as he held the glass aloft in a silent toast to me. As he downed the shot in one gulp, my eyes were transfixed by the

flexing of his throat, and I felt again that desperate need to touch him—this time with my lips against that long line of skin.

He turned the shot glass upside down as he set it on the bar, and I huffed out a ragged breath. He licked droplets of liquid off his lips and winked at me before strutting back out onto the dance floor.

I drained the rest of my cocktail in one gulp and listened to the heavy thrum of the music. Hadn't my purpose in coming here been to seduce him with my hips? Why then did I hesitate, languishing at the bar and contemplating ordering another drink?

Flagging down the bartender, I started to order another Manhattan, but my eyes flitted to the discarded shot glass. "Give me a Buttery Nipple, Balzar."

Balzar gave me a knowing smirk but mixed the drink in a shot glass, pushing it toward me. I thanked him with a nod and curled my fingers around the tiny tumbler. I downed the drink in one gulp, the warmth of the alcohol flooding my body.

With the liquid courage pooling in my belly, I turned away from the bar and strode onto the dance floor. Heads turned as I flared my wings just a bit, just enough to draw attention and jostle people aside, and I smirked, feeling the music lead me into a sensual dance.

I caught the Dark Prince watching me from the opposite side of the dance floor. A pigtailed red-skinned demon woman in a halter-top and tight skirt writhed against him, her backside pressed to his groin and one arm hooked around his neck. Though his hand moved over her breasts, fondling them and bringing her nipples to hard, little points, his eyes bored into mine.

His gaze seemed to penetrate me and my breath quickened in response, my pulse racing. I felt emboldened and slid my hands up my torso, fingers tracing the contours of my muscles. I could *see* his eyes darken as they tracked the paths of my fingers, and the coil of desire in my nether regions tightened.

I continued dancing; every time I glanced in his direction, his eyes were on me, raking over my body. By the end of the song, my cock throbbed, desperate and aching, and I felt delirious. The first time I saw his finger crook and beckon to me, I chalked it up to delirium and started to turn away.

Then he beckoned me again, his tongue playing across his lips, and I startled. He was calling *me* over to him? Had it worked then, my siren call? Were all of my fantasies about to come true?

Anticipation fueled my steps, but the closer to him I drew, the more the buzz of excitement turned to caution and wariness. Doubt began to creep in, whispering that I was still just a servant and he most likely wanted me to fetch him a drink.

That thought persisted right up until the moment I was standing before him. The demon woman he'd been fondling had disappeared, and I thought perhaps he wished me to fetch him a new partner.

"Yes, Sire?" I tried to keep a stoic expression on my face, but standing mere steps from him, I could feel the heat of his gaze. I feared I might combust, and I fought the compulsion to bite my lips.

The Dark Prince smirked, flicking his tongue over his lips as he raked his eyes over my body again. He didn't speak, just stepped forward, closing the distance between us. I blinked in confusion and drew in a sharp breath as his hands gripped my hips. He gave a sharp tug and yanked me forward, pulling me flush against him. An electric shock went through me as our groins connected, and a searing heat raced along my aching cock.

The longer we danced, the more the noises around us faded into the background until all I could hear was the rush of blood in my ears and the ragged pant of his breath against my skin. His hands slid upward from my hips, his fingers brushing over the corded muscles of my back, and a tremor shook my body as he touched my wings where they jutted out of my shoulder blades. My wings had always been sensitive and stroking them aroused me, but this time the intensity of desire seemed magnified.

His fingers grazed along the underside of my left wing, and I fought hard to keep a shuddering groan from escaping. Then he leaned in, tilting his head up so that he could whisper in my ear.

"I want you to blow me."

A tight band notched around my chest, stealing away my breath, and I could do little more than gape at him. I didn't dare get my hopes up; after all,

in the din of the crowded club, his words might have been distorted. I might have misheard him.

Wetting my lips with a quick swipe of my tongue, I exhaled a cautious “Sire?”

The Morning Star laughed and draped a casual arm around my shoulder as he rolled his hips against mine. My eyes must have fluttered closed for a moment before focusing on his face. I couldn’t recall seeing that mischievous twinkle in his eyes moments ago.

He gave me a coy smirk as he stroked his fingers along the edges of my feathers, and my knees nearly buckled beneath me.

“You heard me, Raziel.” His smirk widened and he let go of me, twirling so that his back pressed against my front. He slithered down my body, then straightened, reclining back against me, his unexpected full weight nearly sending me staggering backwards.

I managed to catch my balance in the nick of time, and my hands instinctively grabbed hold of his hips to steady him. I startled, desire jolting me as my palms burned.

The Morning Star continued to move, gyrating against me as his hand glided along my arm, along my collarbone and up my neck before his fingers tightened in my hair. “I think we should find a dark corner, don’t you?” he all but purred as he lifted my hand from his hip and moved it down to rest on the prominent bulge in his leather pants.

My brain shorted out at the feel of that pulsating, steel-like rod beneath my palm.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

I think I must've made some sort of affirming noise because the next thing I was aware of was the Dark Prince lacing his fingers through mine and leading me off the dance floor toward a partially hidden staircase. White neon light lit the steps from within, and they winked out as our feet left them.

When we reached the top, we found ourselves on a balcony of sorts, partitioned into separate, curtained alcoves. He gave me a devilish wink and drew back one of the black velvet curtains, drawing me into the alcove.

He pressed himself against the back wall, splaying his arms out and bracing his palms against the side walls. Then he rolled his hips, jutting his groin out toward me.

Catching my gaze, he must have seen the uncertainty in my eyes because he laughed, smirking. "Go on, Raziel. Give us a kiss." He sent a pointed gaze downward, and my eyes immediately followed, my mouth beginning to salivate in anticipation.

I didn't even feel myself move. One minute, I stood staring down at my master's crotch; the next, I was eye level and working his pants open so I could get to the concealed treasure.

His cock sprang free of his pants and I wasted no time, eagerly taking the tip into my mouth and sucking. No sooner had I done this than I felt a sharp tug on my ponytail, jerking my head back and freeing his cock with a wet *pop*.

He clucked his tongue against his teeth as I shot a confused glance up at him. "Such eagerness is appreciated, Raziel, but I wish to *enjoy* this. Prolong it. Tease me."

He released his hold on my hair, and I nodded, running my tongue over my lips. The taste of him lingered in my mouth and I was desperate for more, a breath away from swallowing him to the root.

I forced myself to go slow though, taking heed of his words. Licking the palm of my hand, I wrapped it around the base of his cock and slid it upward at a slow pace. My eyes locked onto his as his back curved, his palms pressing flat against the walls.



He exhaled a soft groan and his head lolled back as I rubbed my thumb across the wet tip. “Ah yes, that’s better,” he gasped. “Make me beg for it, Raziel. Bring me to my knees with want.”

I groaned in answer as I continued to move my hand over his cock, using slow, firm strokes that had soft whimpers escaping from him as he rolled his hips. His cock leaked clear droplets, making the glide over the length easier.

“Your mouth,” he gasped as he rocked his hips forward, pushing his cock through the tight channel of my fist. “Use your mouth, Raziel.”

His pleading tone snapped me out of my trance, and I bent forward, flicking my tongue across the head of his cock as it poked out of my fist. He let out a deep groan, and I moved my hand down to the base as I took him into my mouth, groaning around him.

I sucked hard, bobbing my head down as his hips snapped up, and it didn’t take us long to fall into rhythm. I eased my head back, dragging the broad side of my tongue up the length of his cock and swirled my tongue around the tip. As I slid my fingers up his torso, caressing his muscles, I glanced up at him, meeting his eyes.

With his face flushed, his mouth agape and his breathing ragged, he looked every inch the very definition of *sinful*, and he began to thrust his hips faster, fucking my pliant mouth. One hand lifted from the wall, gripping my hair and holding my head still as he moved faster and faster, his groans echoing off the alcove walls.

My hand snaked down from his abs, settling between my legs, the heel resting against the hard, throbbing bulge in my pants. Before I could even attempt to alleviate my tension, he barked out a sharp “No, Raziel!” and stilled my hand.

His other hand came down to grip the side of my head, and all I could do was relax my throat and hold still as he fucked into my mouth. It seemed an eternity before he threw his head back and howled his pleasure as his cock twitched and he spilled down my throat as I swallowed.

He pulled out of my mouth, his hands releasing my head and hair, and he staggered back to lean heavily against the wall. His chest heaved as he fought



to regain his breath, and I was pleased to see that pink flush had spread down his torso. His flaccid cock glistened with the sheen of my saliva, and I ached to take him into my mouth again, lick him clean with broad strokes of my tongue, and suck him back to hardness, but he took himself in hand and tucked himself back into his pants.

He favored me with that familiar, arrogant smirk as he zipped up his pants; then he reached out and *patted* the top of my head. “Thank you, Raziel,” he purred. “That was absolutely titillating.”

I had little time to be affronted by the patting though; as he walked away, he dragged his hand along the edge of my wing in a firm, hard stroke that left me quaking with pleasure and made me gasp, body arching as the ache in my groin snapped and warmth flooded the front of my pants. I dropped back onto my haunches, tremors of my orgasm roiling across my body.

Seconds stretched into minutes before I could rise to my feet, and I exhaled a frustrated breath. I had come, yes, and my limbs felt loose and tired, but I did not *enjoy* it. Not as much as I would have if he’d allowed me to pleasure myself while his cock was still in my mouth. Perhaps next time.

Still, I *could* taste his saltiness on my tongue, and that gave me a quiet thrill. I made my way downstairs, eager to return home and change out of my soiled pants, perhaps replay the sight of him climaxing, an image that would be forever engrained into my memories. Perhaps I could even take my time, pleasure myself in a way that I knew I’d enjoy.

All of my ardor dissipated into a cloud of black smoke as soon as I reached the ground floor. In the time I’d been upstairs recovering, the Dark Prince had made his way back out onto the dance floor and found himself another she-demon. As I watched, my dismay increased; he grasped her hand, guided it down to his crotch and rubbed her palm over himself. They traded smirks and he whispered in her ear, then took her hand and led her toward the same staircase where he’d taken me.

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## CHAPTER SIX

My face burned with anger as I turned away, staggering out of the club and back to my quarters. I had been a fool, actually daring to think that it had meant something to him, that I had been *chosen*. *Special*.

Special. Ha! I had been gone barely twenty minutes and he'd found himself another willing partner!

Had I truly expected any different? Had I really been naive enough to believe that he would suddenly favor only *me*? The stabbing ache in my heart seemed to indicate that yes, yes I had been that foolish, and I cursed myself for being so gullible. I had seen the many partners he'd paraded in and out of his chambers over the centuries, yet I had fallen prey to his charms enough to think that one simple pleasurable act would change his ways.

I slammed the door of my quarters behind me and ripped the leather strap from my hair, flinging it across the room. Then I jammed my fingers through my hair, making a face. I could still taste him on my tongue, and what moments ago had been arousing only fueled my anger.

Stalking into the en suite bathroom, I jerked on the faucet handle, turning on the tap. Cupping my hand under the flow from the faucet, I bent down, my hair falling into my face as I drank. Swilling it around in my mouth, I spat the water into the basin with force and repeated my actions. When only a hint of his taste lingered, I straightened, turning off the tap, and dragged the back of my hand across my mouth.

I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror, and as I studied my features, my anger subsided. After all, I had no right to be upset that he had chosen another lover at whim. I was a servant, nothing more, and he could do with me as he chose, even using my mouth for his pleasure. If nothing else, in a way, I was special, because he could've had any number of fawning admirers in that alcove, but he chose *me*.

At least I had the memory, and as I settled into bed, I brushed my fingertips over my bottom lip, feeling the phantom weight of his cock. It would have to be enough.

The next time I found myself in his presence, I stood at attention next to his throne, my leather bound book of parchment pages resting open across my forearm. I could feel the weight of his gaze upon me as I carefully logged records of the day's business. Many demons in the realm disputed contracts over souls, and there seemed to always be a plethora of boundary issues. Some days, it proved to be quite taxing for the Dark Prince.

As I finished scrawling the last notation on the latest dispute, I realized we had come to the end of the line. I punctuated the sentence and blew across the page to dry the ink before I closed the book and tucked my pen into the spine. "Master, it seems that we have hit a lull." If my tone seemed a bit more brusque than usual, I assumed he wouldn't notice.

It seemed I was wrong, if the confused look he shot me was any indication. He furrowed his brow, then slouched down, twisting sideways in his throne and throwing one leg over an armrest. "Good. I was getting bored." His eyes fixed on me a moment, then narrowed. "You're wearing your hair differently today, Raziel."

I tried not to let my surprise show on my face. Indeed, I had braided my hair instead of drawing it back into a ponytail. Instead of my normal leather strap, I had secured the end of the braid with a plain band and adorned it with a flat, silver bead. I kept my voice even and flat as I responded, "So I am, Sire."

He fell quiet for a few moments, then gave me a dismissive wave of his hand. "Leave me, Raziel. I wish to take a nap before the next set of quibbling brutes arrives."

I bowed my head to him and began walking toward the door. His voice slowed my steps.

"Raziel, wait. Send Lilith to my chambers, would you? I'd like company."

I felt my jaw tighten, my teeth clenching, and I was grateful that my back was to him. I took a deep, calming breath and let it out slowly. *No sense getting upset, Raziel*, I told myself. *You are a servant, meant to be obedient.* "As you wish, Sire."

Outside the throne room, a quiet groan escaped me as I saw Asakku leaning against the wall near the doors. "What do you want now?" I asked dryly as I walked past him, heading toward Lilith's chambers.

Asakku pushed himself away from the wall, trailing along behind me. “You look *tense*, Raziel. Getting tired of your right hand?”

My jaw clenched and I threw a glare in his direction, which only caused him to laugh. The cheerfulness of the sound grated on my nerves, and I scowled. “Actually, yes.”

The answer seemed to surprise him, and he blinked, visibly floundering for a second before his lips twisted in a leer. “Well, you’re lucky I came along when I did. I *might* be able to help you out with that. Even though you were an ass the last time I offered.”

I scoffed, knowing that I should turn away, that I should continue down to Lilith’s chambers and carry out my duties, but I felt a strong urge to wipe that smirk off his face. “Then take me back to your chambers.”

Asakku almost tripped over his own feet in his haste to grab my hand and tug me along to his quarters, and I let out an amused laugh, smirking. Excitement prickled my skin and the restless ache of unfulfilled lust pulled tight across my groin. With Asakku, I needn’t worry about being gentle; he preferred it rough, which suited me just fine. I had no patience for gentle at the moment.

He yanked me into his rooms and locked the door, then began to strip, ripping off his pants. “Bedroom?”

I shook my head and beckoned him close, feeling a flicker of amusement as he scurried forward. He could play the arrogant bastard all he liked in public, but when it came down to just the two of us behind closed doors, he was nothing more than a lapdog, eager to please his master.

I kissed him once on the mouth, just a touch of our lips and a slow glide of my tongue across his bottom lip; then I turned him around so his back faced me and walked him forward into a settee. The two-person seat dipped low but the armrests curved high, and I pressed a hand flat against his shoulder, pushing him down until he was bent over the armrest, ass high in the air. He rested his elbows on the seat, trying to twist his head around so he could watch me over his shoulder. Because of his short stature and the way he was bent over, his feet couldn’t quite touch the floor, and my cock twitched at the sight of him so helpless.

He squirmed. “Raziel, fuck me already.”

I laughed and brought my open palm down—*crack!*—against the swell of his ass-cheek. “I’ll fuck you when I damn well please, Asakku. Remember who is in charge here.”

He groaned, his ass jutting out as if seeking another strike, and I was all too happy to oblige. Three smacks later, his red skin darkened and bearing my palm print, I undid my pants, sliding them down to free my throbbing cock.

I traced his lips with two of my fingers, and he opened his mouth, tongue flicking out to lap at my fingers. I laughed quietly and smirked. “That’s it. Get them wet, Asakku.”

My cock jumped in anticipation as he drew my digits into his mouth and began sucking in earnest. My free hand began an idle exploration of my cock, my thumb smearing pre-cum over the tip. My breathing grew more shallow as he sucked harder at my fingers, his tongue laving my skin, and my hand moved in tandem with his bobbing head.

“Stop,” I croaked as I felt my balls tighten, and I forced my hand to still. “I will come *after* I have fucked you, not from my own hand.”

Asakku let my fingers slip from his mouth and nodded. “Yes, please. Fuck me, Raziel, now.”

I ran my fingers along his cleft before letting a finger circle his opening and he gasped, a visible tremor shaking his body. Working my finger into him, I knew he would beg me to just get on with it after sliding a second finger into him. I usually tried to loosen him up with at least three, but I wanted him to feel a lingering burn.

Biting into his shoulder, I worked my finger inside of him, enjoying the way he twitched beneath me. From between the couch cushions, I withdrew a small vial of lavender oil. Asakku kept such treasures hidden all over his chambers, just in case. Drizzling some over his hole, I eased a second finger into him, laughing quietly at the ragged groan he exhaled.

He snapped his hips back to meet my thrusting fingers and growled “Dammit, Raziel, you’re killing me.”

I drizzled oil over my cock and spread it over my skin with my free hand as I continued to tease him. “I know. That’s the idea.”

But even I was in no mood for teasing, and I withdrew my fingers, eager to be inside him. I guided the tip of my cock to his opening and gave a tiny thrust of my hips, just enough to slide past that loosened ring of muscle. Then I grabbed both of his hips with my hands and slammed forward, wrenching a howl from him.

He didn’t ask me to stop though; I retreated, only to slam as hard as I could into him. He wailed again, his fingers scrabbling at the seat cushions, and I heard him gasp, “Yes, fuck, Raz, just like that.”

So I kept going, harder and faster, until only the sounds of skin slapping against skin and our grunts filled the room. I pistoned into him for all I was worth and felt my pleasure cresting. I pulled out and pumped my cock harder with my hand, gasping as I came, shooting stripes across his ass and back.

He grunted, his hips grinding against the couch’s armrest. “Ah, no, you fucking ass, don’t stop there!”

I took a step back to catch my breath and panted out a chuckle at the hapless sight of Asakku righting himself to his feet. He finally got his feet back under him and whirled to face me, his eyes blazing with anger.

I shrugged. “Finish yourself off. I have to fetch Lilith.”

Pulling my pants back up and refastening them, I sauntered out of the room, feeling smug.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

Once I reached Lilith's chambers, I knocked once. A handmaiden opened the door and bade me to enter, and I paused in the foyer. I cast my eyes toward the closed bedroom door. "My lady, the Dark Prince wishes you to join him in his chambers."

The door slid open and Lilith entered; I immediately dropped to one knee, keeping my head down. Unless granted permission, making direct eye contact with the Queen was forbidden, a high offense punishable by... well, whatever torture the Dark Prince was in the mood for at that moment.

I could hear her footsteps approach me. The gauze-like material of her gown entered my vision, and I kept my head down, focused on the bottom hem of her gown. I felt her hand cup my chin and I tilted my head up, my eyes drinking in the sight of her pale, creamy skin and vibrant red hair.

Lilith had once lived in the Garden of Eden with Adam as his first wife, but after a dispute with Adam of which I do not know all the details, she left the Garden and became the Dark Prince's consort. If anyone had a right to be upset about him taking another lover to bed, it was surely the Queen, but she seemed to take it in stride. Perhaps she could teach me how she handled it.

She studied my face, her eyes narrowing as she gave a quiet chuckle and released my chin as she stepped toward the door. "Come then. We mustn't keep Lucifer waiting."

We traversed the corridors to the Dark Prince's chambers in silence, Lilith two steps ahead, and I kept my eyes downcast. Anyone that we happened to pass also averted their eyes from the Queen of Consorts. No doubt they all remembered the last poor soul who had dared to look in her eyes. Legend had it that one could still hear his screams when standing in the right spot on the shores of the lake of fire, where the Dark Prince had thrown him.

I knocked on the outer door of the Dark Prince's chambers and heard him snap, "Come in! It's about time!" I flinched; he sounded crankier than I'd ever heard him, and I cleared my throat, squaring my shoulders as I opened the door and ushered Lilith inside.

“My prince,” she purred, her gown swishing as she crossed the foyer.

I turned to leave but halted as he barked, “Raziel!” For a brief second, I considered pretending that I hadn’t heard him and leaving the room, but I knew that was a surefire way to incur his wrath. As mad as I might be at him, I did not wish to—how do mortals phrase it?—get on his nerves.

So I lifted my chin and turned, taking measured steps to the doorway of his bedchamber. “Yes, Sire?”

The Dark Prince lay sprawled on his side across his bed, the thin sheet covering his lower half doing nothing to conceal the outline of his flaccid penis lying against his naked thigh, and I felt my breath catch. I felt an all-powerful need to saunter across the distance between us and whip that flimsy sheet aside, take him into my mouth and suck him to hardness, then beg him to fuck me, but I held my ground, remaining silent and observing. Lilith had joined him, shedding her gown, and she lay behind him, her fingers stroking his upper arm and shoulder.

He glared at me. “Why are you late? I asked you to bring Lilith to me ages ago,” he demanded, sneering. “Did you get *lost*?”

Before I could even think about opening my mouth to respond, Lilith snorted as she dragged her nails up his arm. “He bears the stench of that worm Asakku all over him, my liege. I thought I might asphyxiate from it before I reached your chambers.”

Never have I ever wished to strike a woman but I could see my hand rising up over my shoulder and swinging down to land a backhanded blow across her cheek. How dare she be so condescending as she judged my choice of sexual partners? Not all of us were fortunate enough to have the Dark Prince as our lover time after time. I kept still though, focusing on the Dark Prince, trying not to flinch at the anger I could see in his eyes.

In the flutter of an eyelash, his anger changed to disdain, and he jutted his chin toward the door. “Go on, get out of here. You’re dismissed.” Then he rolled over to face Lilith, burying his face in between her breasts, and she threw her head back, laughing, as he rocked his head back and forth.

Turning away from them, I stormed out of the chambers, fuming.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

I was surprised when I awoke the next morning to find a messenger at my door, informing me that the Dark Prince had cancelled the day's proceedings. He claimed the Dark Prince felt under the weather, which I knew was a lie. He never felt ill.

"I heard Lilith tell one of her maidens he's sulking," I overheard one of the lower demons whisper to another.

The Dark Prince sulking was nothing new; he was notorious for having pouting sessions but he usually preferred to do so in front of an audience. That he would cancel meetings to pout in private troubled me. I assumed Lilith would be handling it though, and it would pass without incident.

Then the proceedings were cancelled a second day, but I was still determined not to worry. Lilith had made no grand appearances, so I assumed she was still attempting to pacify the Dark Prince.

That belief lasted until the messenger found me in the courtyard. I shot him a curious look as he hovered above the ground, his tattered bat-wings a blur of motion.

"The Dark Prince summons you" was all that he said before flying away.

Curiosity hastened my steps, and in no time at all, I stood before the Dark Prince's chamber door. Allowing myself only a moment to fret about what he might want, I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders, rapping my knuckles against the door thrice.

The door opened almost immediately, and Lilith gave me a disdainful smile. "Oh good, Raziel, you're here." She pulled the door open wider and motioned inside. "He is waiting for you."

I opened my mouth to ask her what was troubling him, but I pressed my lips together as she sniffed the air beside my ear.

She leaned back after a moment and seemed satisfied. "Be thankful you don't have that worm's stench all over you. That would only make his mood even fouler."

I frowned, wanting to ask her what she meant, but she motioned for me to follow and led me to his bedchamber. I stopped just short of the door, and she arched her eyebrow as she pushed it open.

When I made no move to step forward, having assumed that the Dark Prince would wish to see me in the sitting room, she scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Well? Go in—he’s waiting for you.”

My surprise must have shown on my face because she let out a barking laugh and planted her hand flat between my wings, giving me a hard shove forward. As soon as I stumbled forward into the room, she pulled the door closed, and I was left with the Dark Prince. In his bedchamber. Alone.

He lay sprawled out across the bed again, the almost non-existent sheet draped across him, and I struggled to keep my eyes locked on his. He lifted his hand from where it rested on his hip and beckoned me forward with a crooked finger.

I took a step toward the bed. “Sire, I—”

“—will not be fucking Asakku anymore.”

I closed my mouth so sharply in surprise that my teeth clicked together, a most unpleasant sensation, believe me. I stared at him, startled. “I—Beg your pardon, Sire?”

He drew his finger across the space in front of him, writing something across the sheet that I couldn’t quite decipher, what with it being upside down and me in a state of shock. “Do I really have to repeat myself, Raziel?”

I continued to stare at him, my mouth not quite agape, and he *tsked*, rolling his eyes as he moved his hand back and wrote something again. This time, by the way that he lifted his finger and moved a space before continuing to trace invisible letters, I knew he’d written three words, but beyond that, I still hadn’t caught what he’d written.

“I do not want you fucking that vermin Asakku again. Are we clear?”

So I *had* heard him correctly then. I bristled, my eyes narrowing. Who was he to dictate who I could and couldn’t fuck? I had pledged my fidelity to him eons ago, yes, but that did not include whom I chose to warm my bed. “I’m afraid I do not understand, Sire.”

He scowled and stabbed his finger against the mattress, angrily scrawling out the words again, and I frowned, focusing on the letters. It took but a moment for it to dawn on me—he'd written *You are mine*.

I went cold with shock, my entire body freezing up. Surely, he did not mean—

"I will not have him thinking he can get away with fucking what is mine," he snapped, saving me the trouble of having to ask him to explain himself.

That didn't really clear things up as much as I hoped though. I almost growled at him, demanding to know when he'd placed his brand upon me, but I held my tongue. After all, was that not what I wanted—to be his?

I took a deep breath, hoping to calm myself. "Sire, forgive my ignorance, but I was unaware that I was *yours*." I might've spat the word at him, my eyes narrowed, but he paid no heed.

He snorted and pushed himself up into a seated position, his hand flat against the mattress to support himself as he glared at me. "Don't be ridiculous, Raziel. Of course you are."

I lifted an eyebrow, wondering what I had missed. Or did he really constitute me giving him a blow job in a nightclub's secret alcove as signing over ownership? As I recalled, only *he* had gotten something from that night, and he hadn't exactly been celibate in the following days.

His face softened and he held out his hand to me, beckoning me forward. I stood my ground, and he sighed. "Raziel, please."

I moved forward, fighting the urge to curl my wings protectively around myself, and stopped at the edge of the bed, looking down at him. "Yes, Sire?"

He reached out, taking my hand and bringing it close to his mouth so he could kiss my knuckles. The surprisingly tender gesture sent a tingle straight through me from head to toe, and I barely suppressed a shiver. His free hand moved behind my back, and I felt a sharp jolt as his fingertips skimmed the underside of my wing. "Raziel, why would you sully yourself with such filth?"

I tried to focus on his words, but the task was impossible as he continued to stroke my wing, moving his fingers along the delicate edges. He scooted to the

edge of the bed and tugged me forward so that I stood between his legs, which spread wide to accommodate me. I shivered, exhaling a ragged gasp as he pressed an open-mouthed kiss to my abdomen. It felt so good, that tinge of pleasure winding its way through my body as he stroked my wing, his fingers plucking delicately at the feathers. I felt an onslaught of desire strong enough to make my knees go weak, and if it hadn't been for his thighs clenching tight around my legs, I might've fallen.

His hands mercifully released my wings and slid down to cup my buttocks, his fingers clenching, and his teeth caught my skin just above my belly button, biting down just hard enough to rip a strangled moan from me.

He growled, his fingers digging into the soft leather of my pants. "You're wearing too many clothes, Raziel." He moved his hands around to the front of my waist, fingers plucking at the laces holding my pants closed.

A very small part of me longed to protest, to push his hands away and leave, but I'd desired this kind of attention from him for so long. I remained still, gasping as he jerked my pants down and my cock sprang free.

The Dark Prince let out a startled laugh, and I fought the urge to cover myself in humiliation. "Something amuses you, Sire?" I asked, a hint of defensiveness creeping into my voice. I knew I was nothing impressive but I felt I had a decent length. My true source of pride lay in my girth, for what I lacked in length, I more than made up for in thickness.

He shook his head, flashing that confident leer. "No, no, not amusement, my dear Raziel. Your dick is even more magnificent than I imagined." He licked his palm and wrapped his hand around my cock, giving it a slow pump, and I hissed in pleasure.

The Dark Prince continued to move his hand over my cock in languid strokes, and I could feel the strong pull of desire. I desperately wanted his mouth on me, wanted to see my thickness sliding between his lips, but he drew his hand away and pulled back, patting the bed.

"On your knees," he commanded, and it shamed me how fast I scrambled to obey, kneeling in the center of the bed. He grasped my wrists, lifting my arms up, and placed my hands on the headboard; my fingers instinctively curled around the iron slats, a tingle of anticipation going through me.

I heard the rustle of the sheets as he moved, and then his hands were on me, fingers gliding down my back in long strokes. He squeezed my buttocks and spread my cheeks with his fingers, and I nearly came on the spot as his wet tongue swept across my hole. My breath caught in my chest, my eyes widening in surprise, and he continued his onslaught, his fingers digging into my hips as he circled his tongue around my hole so many times that I gave up trying to count.

When his tongue slid inside me, my dick jumped, the buzz of pleasure traveling up my spine like an electrical jolt, and I gave a breathless moan. He began to fuck me in earnest with his tongue, strong, steady jabs that had my body quaking.

He suddenly withdrew, the euphoric torture of his tongue gone, and I let out what could only be described as a whimper, throwing a worried glance over my shoulder. Had I done something to displease him?

The sight that greeted me assuaged my concern—the Dark Prince pouring oil into his palm. He caught my eye and gave me a wink as he rubbed his palms together, spreading the oil around, then he took his cock in hand and gave it a bold stroke. My jaw went slack as I watched him, and he puckered his lips, throwing me a kiss.

“Sire,” I rasped, though I was not sure what I wanted to say beyond that. He seemed to understand though, and he set the oil jar aside, parting my cheeks again and licking into me. I bit my lip to stop the keening moan that escaped, and he laughed quietly.

“No need to be quiet, Raziel,” he whispered in my ear, his breath warm and making my skin prickle. His questing fingers slid into me, two at first, and I groaned. It had been a while since I had been the one being fucked, and I was tighter than I would’ve liked, but he seemed to be pleased, judging from the way he hummed as he thrust his fingers into me.

I bowed my head forward onto the headboard and shuddered, jutting my ass out toward him as he worked me open. “You should see yourself, Raziel,” I heard him growl. “You look so gorgeous. Can’t wait to be inside you.”

I wanted to beg him to fuck me already, but I couldn’t find my voice. He seemed to anticipate my want anyway; he withdrew his fingers, and I only had

to endure a brief moment of emptiness before the head of his cock nudged at my opening.

That was the only warning I got, and then he was plunging into me. His hands slid up my sides and inward across my back, fingers curled around the joints of my wings where they connected to my body. He drew all the way out before ramming back in, and I threw my head back, letting out a loud moan.

He gave an answering growl, moving his hands up to grip my wings tightly. “Oh, yes, you like that, don’t you, Raziel?” He slammed into me, the force of it moving me against the headboard, and I tightened my grip on the bars, holding on as he fucked me hard.

My dick throbbed in time with his thrusts, the touch of his fingers tightening on my wings driving me further along to my crescendo. I knew it wouldn’t take much to make me come.

I could hear him grunting softly as he fucked into me. “Fucking hell, Raziel, you’re so goddamn tight.” We moved together, me pushing back as he thrust forward, and he let out an inhuman roar as he came hard, shooting into me.

His thrusts slowed but didn’t stop entirely, and I could hear him panting hard as he ran his fingers over my wings in firm, long strokes. I felt the pleasure tighten across my groin, and I gave a hoarse shout as I came from one particularly sharp tug. I sagged against the headboard, forehead resting on the top bar, gulping in air.

I must’ve dozed off, because I was startled awake by the touch of a cool cloth across my bottom. I threw a confused look over my shoulder and was startled to see the Dark Prince cleaning me. He gave a cursory wipe of himself before flopping onto his back, motioning for me to lie down beside him. I complied, still feeling uncertain of what all of this meant, but as I folded my wings against my back and settled onto my side, he rolled into me, draping a leg across my hip and tugging me back against his chest. He buried his face in my wings, and in a matter of seconds, his soft snores gently ruffled my feathers.

Sleep claimed me before I could ponder any further.

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## CHAPTER NINE

I woke a short time later to find myself on my stomach, a heavy weight pressing me down into the mattress. I blinked, confused and a bit unsettled; I began to wriggle my way free of the smothering heft, and when I finally rose to my feet and turned to look behind me, I found my prince, lying on his stomach, still snoring away.

It all came rushing back to me—the Dark Prince ordering me not to fuck Asakku again, claiming me as his and fucking me. At the time, it had been enjoyable, but now, with the euphoria waning and my ardor cooled, I saw the possessiveness, the jealousy, and it angered me. How dare he tell me who I could and could not fuck when he didn't pay me the same respect! A servant I might be, and longed for him, I had, but I would not allow myself to be treated as a *plaything*.

I picked up my pants from the floor and jerked them on, glaring at his prone body. I had half a mind to wake him up so that I might yell at him, but I feared that he might distract me with sex again. So I turned and stormed out of the bedroom, making sure to slam the bedroom door and the outer chamber door as I left. Let him sleep through *that*!

By the time I reached the hallway that led to my chambers, I had worked myself into a fury, and I headed instead to Purgatory. He'd told me not to fuck Asakku again; nothing had been said about anyone else.

I made my way onto the dance floor, loosening my hair from its braid, and I grinned as a young man caught my attention. He had the palest blue eyes I'd ever seen and a slight build. I pulled him against me until our chests met, and my hands slid down his back, ending up cupped over the swell of his ass. We danced, grinding against each other, and I could feel his dick hardening in the tight jeans he wore.

Leaning forward, I brushed my lips near his ear. "Those have to be constricting. Why don't we go upstairs and I'll help you out of them?"

His eyes widened, his eagerness written across his youthful face, and he nodded. "Yeah. Yes. Fuck, please."



I gave him a sly smile and took his hand, leading him away from the crowd and up the staircase to the hidden alcove the Dark Prince had taken me to the last time I was here. I wasted no time jerking the young man's jeans off, and slid two of my fingers into his mouth as I wrapped my hand around his cock.

He let out a wanton moan and sucked my fingers, laving them with his tongue. I rubbed my thumb over his cock, leering at him as I watched him nearly gag himself on my fingers. I pulled them free with a wet pop and lifted him up, pressing him back into the wall. His legs wrapped around my waist, and our eyes met briefly as I worked my fingers into him.

His tongue darted out, wetting his pale red lips. "Fuck me hard. Don't hold back," he gasped.

I had been planning to do just that, so I was happy to oblige him. Withdrawing my fingers, I guided my cock to his opening and pushed into him. His mouth dropped open in a soundless cry, and I began to pound into him, groaning.

I came with a grunt, burying myself deep inside him, and rested my head on his shoulder as I tried to catch my breath. He whined and wriggled, working a hand between our bodies, and I drew back to watch him jerk himself off. He came with a gasp, his back arching off the wall, and the mess covered my chest and stomach.

He stared at me, his mouth agape, and he exhaled softly. "Shit, that was so hot."

I lowered him to the ground, and he leaned against the wall, whipping off his shirt and handing it to me. I grinned and nodded my thanks, using his shirt to wipe my chest and stomach. "Thanks," I said as I handed it back and turned, walking away without another word.

It felt good to stride off after taking what I'd wanted. I headed back downstairs and left the club with my head held high, exuding confidence.

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## CHAPTER TEN

I repeated the act of finding a nameless lover and fucking him in the alcove for the next three nights. On the fourth night, I had just made eye contact with the young man I'd chosen when the Dark Prince suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He swept in, crowding into my personal space and disrupting the eye-fucking I had just begun.

I gave him a scowl. "Yes, Sire? Is there something you want?"

He glared back at me. "I know what you've been doing, Raziel, and I don't like it."

I lifted my eyebrows, feigning disinterest. "I beg your pardon? I don't know what you mean."

He scoffed and gave a furious toss of his head. "You know exactly what I mean. You've been fucking every little son of a whore that crosses your vision, Raziel. You were eye-fucking *that* bloke when I walked up." He glared at the young man in question, who immediately dropped his gaze and turned back to the bar.

I narrowed my eyes, cold fury tainting my voice as I said, "I believe, Sire, that you instructed me not to fuck *Asakku*. Nothing was said about anyone else." I fixed him with an icy stare. "*You* certainly don't limit yourself to one partner."

He looked startled, his eyes widening, and he worked his mouth open and closed a few times. Finally, he frowned, resting his hands on his hips. "Is that what this is about? You're *jealous* because I have other lovers?"

I continued to glare at him. "Aren't *you* jealous that I have other lovers? Or are you really that childish?"

He let out a huff and spun away, taking a few steps toward the bar. I watched his hand come up to his mouth, and then he spun back, stalking back to stand toe to toe with me. We stared each other down, eyes narrowed; his eyes veered away from mine first, and he laughed lightly, shaking his head.

He started to walk away but something made him turn back. He regarded me for a moment, and then stepped into my personal space, his hand reaching

back to grasp my braid. He let it slip between his fingers until he was grasping the bead, which he rolled around between his forefinger and thumb. “Why have you stopped wearing the leather strap I gave you, Raziel?”

My heart skipped a beat; I thought he had forgotten about that ages ago. It had been a surprise gift from the Dark Prince; it hadn’t been my birthday or anything, just a random day, and he’d presented it to me when we were alone in his throne room. There had been a lull in proceedings, and he’d been watching me none-too-subtly tuck my long locks behind my ear. The strap I’d been using since my descent had sadly fallen apart and I hadn’t had the chance to get a new one. He’d called me over to him and held out a simple object wrapped in tissue paper.

I felt the Dark Prince’s eyes upon me, just as I had that day, waiting for some sort of a response, and I cleared my throat. “I seemed to have misplaced it, Sire.”

His eyes didn’t seem to buy it, but he just let out an inquisitive “Hmm,” and dropped my braid before turning on his heels and stalking away, leaving me feeling confused and frustrated.

When I returned to my chambers that evening, I found a small package waiting for me. Wrapped in the same shade of red tissue paper as the last one, this one had a note attached. I lifted the package, knowing what I would find inside, and as I carefully unwrapped it, my breath caught in my chest. Where the last strap had been plain black leather, this one was braided, the very center adorned with a blood red diamond cut in the shape of a faceted square. It was beautiful and much more extravagant than I would ever have chosen for myself.

Sitting down on my bed, I opened the note that had been attached to the package, and I smiled as I recognized the Dark Prince’s elegant script.

*My dear Raziel,*

*Please accept this as but a small token of my appreciation. If you wear it and nothing else into my chambers tonight, I will gladly show you exactly what you mean to me.*

*Yours,*

*Lucifer*

I let out a soft laugh and pressed the note to my lips, closing my eyes and breathing in the scent of musk that lingered on the page. It almost seemed too good to be true, but I knew there was only one way to find out.

Setting the note aside, I reached up and removed the bead and band fastening my hair, then unwound the braid. Carefully, I brushed my hair until it was silky smooth, then I drew it back into a tail, tying it off at the nape with the new leather strap.

Then I rose and made my way to the Dark Prince's chambers, my heart hammering wildly with the eagerness of finally, *finally* reveling in the fruits of tempting Lucifer.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*I've never been officially published, but I've written short stories of various natures and posted them online. I live in Florida where I work professionally as a graphic designer. I like going out to dinner and having long, intimate discussions about my fandoms while we gaze sensuously into each oth—Oh wait, this isn't that kind of bio.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# SINCERELY, TERRY

By Erin Shaw

## Photo Description

A beautiful man stands in front of a stove stirring French fries in a pan, trying to impress the man of his dreams with his cooking skills. Dressed only in boxers and an apron, he's hoping dinner won't be the only thing his man finds impressive.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author/Leprechaun of Love,*

*Who is he cooking for? And why is he only making French fries?*

*It would be interesting if he lived in Hollywood, but anywhere is fine.*

*Sincerely,*

*Spencer*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** cop, first love, hurt/comfort, love at first sight, men with pets, sweet no sex

**Word count:** 7,440

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# SINCERELY, TERRYN

**By Erin Shaw**

The wind was blowing frigid air down the back of Terryn's jacket, finding its way into the holes in the knees of his jeans. His ass was numb and his fingers felt like icicles had taken the place of his bones. Terryn was cold... no, not just cold, he was fucking freezing! The only thing that sucked worse than being cold was being hungry and Terryn was famished. He hadn't eaten since the afternoon before, where his lunch had consisted of a bean burrito and a crunchy taco from the dollar menu at the taco hut on the corner.

Hollywood was not what Terryn had expected. Well, maybe at first it sort of was but now that the shine was off the penny, Hollywood just plain sucked. The streets were littered with cigarette butts and discarded food wrappers. Broken beer bottles and chewed gum covered most of the sidewalks. So much so that Terryn had to kick the crap aside before sliding to the ground, his back to the wall. If he were in Phoenix right now at least it would be warm. He would still be out on the streets, but he would be way more comfortable than he was right now.

He pulled his thin jacket closer to his body and dug into the pocket of his grungy jeans for the last of his cash. He found a crumpled dollar bill and fifty-two cents. Not much, but he could maybe get a cup of terrible coffee and hang out in the convenience store for a bit until the chill left his body. The positive outlook on life that he tried to maintain was slipping and desperation began to take its place. It was impossible to find a job without an address and he couldn't get an address without a job to pay for it so here he sat, waiting for his morning glimpse of that dreamy police officer. Sadly, that was the high point of his day.

Terryn grabbed his backpack and stuffed his, HOMELESS AND HUNGRY, ANYTHING WILL HELP, sign into the front pocket and zipped it closed. He looked back up just in time to see the object of his longing rounding the corner with his German shepherd pulling at the leash, sniffing everything in his path. He had always been a sucker for men with dogs.

Terryn should have been at the convenience store by now, getting toasty warm until the shop owner asked him somewhat politely to move along but he had to wait for the cop to walk by. The man was a work of art. His dark blue uniform fit him to perfection. Not too tight, it left a tiny bit to the imagination and Terryn considered himself to have a great imagination. Oh, the things he would do to the man given half a chance. Who needed crappy coffee to keep themselves warm when just looking at the guy was raising Terryn's temperature by a few degrees?

The hint of a black T-shirt could be seen peeking out of the officer's shirt collar since he always left the top button undone. He had soft, deep-brown hair, close cropped but still a bit wavy on top... perfect for petting. Terryn imagined the man having piercing blue eyes the same color as the cobalt stained glass window at the church around the corner from De Longpre Park. His chin was covered by a day's worth of stubble, a teeny-tiny mustache, barely visible above the man's perfectly kissable mouth... yummy! And the man looked so kind. He stopped to chat with everyone that waved good morning to him; he always wore a smile. And his laugh was a thing of beauty. It made Terryn's heart thump harder every time he heard it echo off the soot-stained buildings that lined the street. Terryn knew he had it bad. He also knew he had nothing to offer the officer, but that didn't mean that he couldn't dream.

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Brian pulled back on Macho's leash, trying to control the overexcited pup. He was a good dog; he just got a bit distracted at times. Macho was a trained patrol dog but he had a small problem when it came time to do his duty. The problem... the dog didn't have an aggressive bone in his body. Macho had flunked out of the doggie police academy but Brian couldn't stand the thought of him being adopted out, of never seeing his partner again, so Brian had adopted Macho instead. The dog was a handful and took up half of Brian's tiny apartment but Brian couldn't imagine life without Macho by his side. The fact that he was able to take his buddy to work with him every day was an added bonus.

Today, Brian was stopped at the corner by his neighborhood grocer. He said good morning to Mr. Feinstein. Offering up a smile, he thanked the man

for the dog biscuit he had given to Macho and chatted politely with the man, but most of his attention was focused on the boy huddled against a building across the street. It had to be at least twenty degrees colder today than it had been yesterday morning and Brian wondered why the guy was still outside, sitting on the cold cement hunched over against the chill instead of being someplace inside keeping warm.

Brian had seen the boy nearly every day for the past week, perched in the same spot, like he was waiting for someone. He didn't look strung out, just a bit disheveled and a lot too skinny. Brian would bet the kid was a runaway and Brian knew that in this part of Hollywood, if the kid didn't get off the streets soon he would be swept up into a life that no one should have to live. That thought made Brian's heart hurt, though he didn't exactly understand why, he just sort of felt protective of the kid. After all, wasn't he supposed to protect the people in his neighborhood? It was still a silly thought, he knew this. He'd never even spoken to the boy, was never even on the same side of the street, so all Brian could tell by looking at him was that with each day that went by the boy looked more lost, more alone and it was breaking Brian's heart.

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Terryn was attacked with sloppy puppy kisses and he couldn't help but laugh. It felt like the first time he'd done so in days. Terryn loved sloppy puppy kisses, even though the dog's breath smelled like dog biscuits and week old chewing gum. The dog nuzzled him playfully as he tried to climb Terryn like a mountain, settling in on his lap. Terryn stroked the dog's soft fur, burying his fingers into the coarse brown and black strands. He loved dogs and missed his Irish setter, Collin, something awful. He only hoped his sister was taking care of him the way that Collin had become accustomed to, which clearly meant spoiling the dog rotten.

Terryn heard footsteps pounding in his direction. He looked up just in time to see his officer skid to a stop in front of him and he did not look happy. His face was pinched, his eyes glaring down at Terryn. Oh yeah... he was pissed!

"I'm sorry," Terryn said. "I was just sitting here and the big guy jumped me out of nowhere." Terryn laughed when the dog licked his face again. He'd never been this close to the cop before and he realized that seeing the man



from a distance did not do him justice. Up close he was even more perfect, his eyes the exact shade of blue Terryn had imagined.

Terryn felt his face heat as a blush crept up from his chin to the top of his head. He tried to push the huge dog off his lap gently but the dog wouldn't budge. The big guy just looked up at his owner and whimpered, knowing that he was in trouble but unwilling to move away from Terryn.

"I should be the one apologizing," the man said, the tone of his voice was so deep that Terryn swore he felt it resonating up his spine, short-circuiting his brain. He reached for his dog's leash at the same time Terryn was reaching out to give it to him. "I have no idea how he got away." The man chuckled self-consciously. "Sorry about the muddy paw prints. I'm Brian. Brian Wenchell. And the ox that attacked you is Macho."

Sweet baby Jesus! The man's smile was so amazing that Terryn had to look away. He looked down at his lap instead and groaned. Yep, damp muck caked the front of his jeans and two huge dirty paw prints were plastered to the front of his jacket.

"No worries." Terryn started to brush himself off as soon as the dog was pulled off his lap. "It's not like I was all that clean to begin with." Terryn told him, a self-deprecating grin spread across his face. "Oh shit... sorry. I'm Terryn... McAlister." Terryn offered Brian his hand in greeting and was shocked when Brian pulled him to his feet. Damn, the guy was strong.

"So, what's with the squatting?" Brian motioned to the place where Terryn had been sitting.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry... I'll move on, Officer."

"Brian, please. And I wasn't hassling you, I swear. Just curious. I've seen you here for the past week or so and I thought... maybe you needed someone to talk to?"

Terryn was floored. This big, beautiful man was actually offering to listen to Terryn's problems? How sweet was that?

"Nah... thanks. I'm okay." What else could Terryn say? He was so not going to spill his heart to Brian, no matter how much Terryn wanted to. And the kicker was that Brian looked sincere, like he really wanted to know.

Brian could tell the kid was lying. Although, up close Brian could also see that Terryn wasn't as much of a kid as Brian had first thought. He was young for sure, a few years younger than Brian's own twenty-five years but there was just something about the way the kid, no... scratch that... there was something about the way Terryn looked up at him. All big brown eyes and stoic bravado when it was obvious Terryn was hurting and needed a friend.

"Oh, I get it. Never trust the fuzz, eh? Smart thinking." Brian tapped his temple and flashed Terryn that gorgeous smile again.

"No, jeez! It's nothing like..." Terryn paused, looking up at Brian. Terryn noticed the shit eating grin. "You're teasing me right? I didn't know cops were allowed to tease."

"Well, normally we're not but I sort of figured if we're going to be friends then it would be okay." Brian looked at Terryn and the twinkle in his eyes had been replaced by uncertainty.

"Friends, huh?" Terryn thought he would do anything to make that look disappear, even if it meant telling a little white lie. "Just like that? Okay, well that's... pretty cool actually. Way better than being told to bug out." It was all Terryn could think to say. It felt so nice to consider what it would be like to have a friend in a city that had, at least up until now, been one of the most unfriendly places Terryn had ever been.

Brian reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out one of his business cards. He unclipped his pen and flipped the card over, writing his personal cell number on the back. When he was done he handed the card to Terryn. Terryn took the card from Brian and cupped it in his palm before shoving it into his pocket. It felt like a lifeline to Terryn, even if that was ridiculous. He didn't plan on ever using it but still, having it made him feel a tiny bit less alone.

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It was still cold and miserable when Terryn left the diner but at least he wasn't hungry, at the moment anyway. He had just spent the last little bit of the twenty dollar bill Brian had slipped into his hand. It was pressed tightly to the back of the business card Brian had given him so he hadn't noticed it at first. It was only after Brian had walked away and Terryn had gone digging

into his pocket again for his change. It made Terryn feel a bit guilty when he realized what Brian had done but it was so damn sweet and he really had been hungry. It was weird that it had only been a few days since he'd talked to Brian for the first time yet he missed the man. There was no logical reason for that feeling but then Terryn wasn't a big fan of logic when his heart was involved. It was too limiting, too hard to believe the unbelievable when logic was applied, so most of the time he was able to ignore it and accept what was in front of him.

Terryn stepped out from under the safety of the streetlight that lit up most of the parking lot. It wasn't a long walk back to De Longre Park but he had to cut through the alley behind the diner to get there. That always left him terrified. He wasn't much of a fighter and rumors of violence were a common thing in Central Hollywood. Pointless and brutal sometimes, petty and impulsive other times—but to Terryn it was all terrifying.

He peered in to the alley, the same way he did every time he was faced with entering it but didn't see anyone or anything hiding in the shadows. He stepped into the darkness, speeding up his pace so he could make it the other side quickly. He was halfway through when he saw the kids step out of the shadows at the ally exit. He turned around to head back to the diner but stopped in his tracks, realizing that he was now trapped; some kids were blocking that exit as well.

Terryn backed himself up against the wall. It was icy against his back but the fear inside him was even icier. His mind was screaming at him to run, to fight, but all he could do was scrunch his eyes closed tightly and hope to God that they didn't kill him.

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They had taken his backpack. It was sort of funny considering there was nothing of any real value inside. It did hurt losing the pictures he'd grabbed before he left his parent's house, but nothing else inside the pack mattered to him. It did matter that they had taken his tennis shoes though. They were the only thing he had left that was worth a shit, but they had left him his socks. *Such mercy*, Terryn thought as he reached his shaking hand up to wipe the tears from his eyes. He twitched a bit when his palm came into contact with

his black eye. His head hurt and he could feel the snot running down his face, mingling with his salty tears, but he was alive and relatively unharmed and that, Terryn decided, was a miracle unto itself. He pulled himself to his feet slowly and made his way to the mouth of the alley.

He swiped the sleeve of his jacket under his nose in an attempt to clean up most of the snot. He could see the pay phone at the end of the diner parking lot so he made his way over to it, careful not to step on anything too sharp. The last thing he needed was tetanus or the flesh-eating bacteria his mom used to warn him about.

He stepped into the phone booth, dug into his pocket for the last of his change and the business card Brian had given him. He picked up the receiver and prayed that the phone still worked as he dropped the coins into the slot and pressed the buttons that would dial Brian's number. He hoped to God that Brian was serious when he offered to be Terryn's friend because Terryn had never needed anything more in his life than he needed a friend at that moment.

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Brian wasn't much of a cook... okay, he couldn't cook at all but what made it worse was that there was nothing in his fridge that looked even remotely edible, except maybe the eggs. He might be able to manage scrambled eggs without setting off the smoke alarm... again. He opened the freezer and began to dig through its contents. He placed the eggs on the counter just as his cell phone rang.

Brian picked up his phone but didn't recognize the number. He pushed the answer button and held the high-tech piece of crap to his ear.

"Wenchell," he barked into the phone. He hated getting calls on his nights off; it happened frequently and Brian resented being bothered during his down time.

"Brian?" The voice was so soft, so small that Brian had to strain to hear. "I'm... I'm sorry to bother you but you said to, you know, call if—" *Hiccup*. "If I was in trouble? I think I'm in trouble, Brian. I don't know what to do."

Terryn. Brian knew immediately that it was Terryn and his heart froze in his chest. He never expected Terryn to call, judging by the look of skepticism Terryn shot his way as he stuffed Brian's business card into his pocket.

*Oh shit, something must really be wrong. Please God, nothing too bad,* Brian thought.

“Terry, where are you, honey?” Brian hated sappy pet names but he needed to calm Terry down so he had used his sweetest, most nonthreatening voice. The same voice he used to talk people off ledges or, in his mother’s case, to convince her that his life was just fine and dandy.

“I’m outside the diner.” There was a pause on the line while Terry stopped to look up at the street sign. “On the corner of June and De Longre—” *Hiccup.*

“Terry, my place is about a block away from where you are. Hang on, stay on the phone with me and I’ll come get you.” Brian was already slipping on his shoes and grabbing his keys.

“No... it’s cool—” *Hiccup.* “You don’t have to. I can... I’m okay. I can walk, just tell me where, please.” The please was said with a tiny little whine in Terry’s voice, and a whole lot of fear. Brian wanted to growl at Terry to stay where he was, that he would be right there but he was afraid that it would upset Terry and that Terry would run. Brian gave in and told Terry the way to his place.

“Thank you, Brian. You don’t have to be so cool and I know that and... just, thanks.” *Hiccup.*

“Just be careful Terry,” Brian said. He heard Terry sigh as he disconnected.

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Macho started whimpering at the door just before Brian heard a tentative knock. He stopped his pacing and raced to the door. He grabbed the knob and pulled the door open. Terry stood on the other side and the pressure squeezing Brian’s chest eased a bit. He looked Terry over quickly, noticing the bruise around his right eye and his lack of shoes. His feet were caked in dirt and there was a bit of blood on the floor where Terry stood, shuffling from foot to foot nervously.

“They took my shoes.” It was all Terry could say before he burst into tears.

Brian pulled him through the doorway and into a gentle hug. Terryn melted against him, sniffing loudly, a broken hiccup punctuating every other breath.

Brian held him for a few minutes, until Terryn seemed to get himself under control. Without saying a word, he took Terryn's hand and led him into the kitchen. He pulled out one of the chairs and gently pushed Terryn into it. Terryn heaved a sigh, let out one more hiccup and let his head fall back, closing his eyes.

Brian walked to the sink, turned it on and let it run until the water was warm. He placed a dish towel under the water until it was soaked through, wrung out the excess water, turned off the tap, then he turned back to Terryn.

"You want to tell me what happened?" Brian asked.

Terryn was much calmer now. Brian dropped to his knees in front of Terryn, stripped off his ruined socks and began washing Terryn's feet gently. The cuts weren't nearly as bad as Brian had expected, in fact they had already stopped bleeding so Brian held off on bandaging them for now.

Terryn took a deep breath. "I stopped into the diner to grab some food; thanks for the cash by the way. That was pretty sneaky." Brian blushed but didn't interrupt Terryn's story. "I walked out and was heading back to the park, like I do every night 'cause it seems safer there, you know?" Brian nodded and Terryn continued. Terryn was feeling shaky again but relaxed instantly when he felt Macho slide in next to his chair and place his head on Terryn's lap. Terryn stroked his fur and calmed down a bit more.

"So, I have to go through this alley, beside the diner and usually it's fine, like no problem at all. But tonight, as soon as I stepped into the alley, these guys blocked the way out." Terryn's voice was getting wobbly again and his eyes were filling with fresh tears. Brian reached out to Terryn and took his hand, squeezing it gently, offering Terryn a bit of comfort.

*Hiccup.* "I turned around to go back into the diner until it was safe but there were more guys at the other end—" *Hiccup.* Terryn laughed nervously, trying to hide the panic he felt when he thought about how much worse things could have been.

Brian gripped his hand a bit tighter, smiling at Terryn warmly. "Go on with your story."

“There’s not much more to tell, really. One of the guys punched me, I curled into a ball and they took my shoes. I didn’t really have anything else for them to steal so I guess it could have been worse, right? I mean, they could have really kicked my ass—” *Hiccup*.

Brian was seething inside. Punk ass kids with nothing better to do than scare the crap out of a poor homeless kid and jack his shoes. He wished he had been there. He would have put a stop to that bullshit and made sure those assholes didn’t fuck with anyone else for a long time.

Terryn could see the anger on Brian’s face. He reached down and tentatively touched Brian’s cheek, unsure how his touch would be received. Terryn was relieved when Brian pressed his lips against his palm as he kissed it lightly.

“Hey... I’m fine now. A bit shook up, but no worse for wear. I’ll pick up some more shoes as soon as I can make a few bucks and—” *Hiccup*. “It’s cool, okay?” Terryn hated seeing Brian upset because of him. He wanted nothing more than to kiss away the lines of worry on Brian’s beautiful face. He seriously needed a distraction or he was going to climb onto Brian’s lap and burrow in like a gopher.

“Hey, Brian? Would you mind if I like, take a shower? I’m stinking up the place. And maybe, if it’s not too much trouble, because you know, I might not get another chance for a while... do you think I can wash my clothes? Believe it or not I’m not usually this disgusting.” Terryn chuckled to hide his embarrassment.

Brian jumped to his feet and tugged Terryn’s hand, pulling him in the direction of the bathroom. “Shit, of course. I should have offered, I was just... distracted a bit.” Now that his anger had receded, his protectiveness toward Terryn was creeping back to the surface.

“The hot water takes a bit of time to make it to the shower so don’t jump right in. Toss your clothes out the door and I’ll throw them in the wash. I’ll leave some clothes you can borrow outside the door, okay?”

“Awesome. Thank you Brian, for you know... everything. I’m really glad you bullied me into taking your card.”



Brian snorted out a laugh, pushed Terryn into the bathroom and shut the door behind him so he wouldn't give in to the temptation to follow the man inside. A moment later, Terryn threw his dirty clothes into the hall. Brian picked them up, tossed the dirty clothes into the wash and dug through his drawers for something Terryn could wear. He chose a pair of sweats, pulled out a new pair of boxer briefs from a previously unopened package and a soft, comfy T-shirt. So what if it was his favorite and he wanted to see Terryn wear it. That didn't mean anything, right?

Brian set the clothes by the bathroom door and wandered into the living room, hoping to find something interesting enough on TV to take his mind off the gorgeous man occupying his shower.

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Terryn noticed, in the bathroom mirror, the look Brian was shooting at his back as he closed the door. Terryn didn't have all that much experience with men, but even he could recognize interest when he saw it. Brian had that look in his eyes and since it was likely he was only going to have one night with Brian, he was going to have to nut up and make some sort of move. If he was shot down that was okay because at least he'd have given it a try.

Squeaky clean and feeling a hundred times more human, Terryn opened the bathroom door to grab the pile of clothes Brian had left for him. They looked comfortable as hell, but sexy? Nope, not one bit, except maybe for the boxers? An idea formed in Terryn's head as he slipped his trim little body into the briefs. When Terryn left the bathroom they were the only thing he had on.

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Terryn tiptoed into the kitchen so he wouldn't disturb Brian while he was watching TV. He looked so cute all scrunched up on the couch, his eyes glued to whatever was on. Terryn had noticed the eggs on the counter when he was in the kitchen earlier and since it seemed that he'd messed up Brian's plans for dinner, he decided to put his magnificent cooking skills to use. He hadn't been able to cook much since being kicked out of his parents' house and the thought of making something delicious for Brian made him smile. He opened the fridge and wasn't a bit surprised to find it mostly empty, just a few half-full



takeout containers, a half gallon of milk and a six-pack of beer. He opened the boxes until he found one that didn't look off and smelled delicious, a nice spicy curry, with bits of chicken, bell peppers and onion. Almost perfect but something was still missing. He opened the freezer door, dug past the frozen pizzas and took out a bag of frozen French fries. He pushed aside the fabric that covered the lower cabinets and fished out a frying pan, snickering to himself. The fabric was covered in little white geese and Terryn found it both hilarious and endearing. He also found an apron that was folded neatly, obviously put away with care. It was covered in tiny flowers and piped with a pastel-pink ribbon. It was kind of sexy, in that Suzy Homemaker sort of way, so of course he put it on. There was no sense in taking the chance of burning anything important in the event of a grease spatter, right? After placing the pan on the stove, he turned on the burner to preheat it and then cracked several eggs into a bowl and whisked them gently. He opened the bag of fries, poured some into the pan and started pushing them around with a wooden spoon.

"Whatcha doing?" Brian said, startling Terryn. Brian couldn't take his eyes off of Terryn. Mistaken for skinny because of his ill-fitting clothes, Terryn was actually quite stunning. His compact frame was covered in lean, firm muscle and smooth skin. And he was wearing Brian's mother's apron. Seeing Terryn like that made Brian practically swoon, he looked comfortable and competent, sexy and loveable. The loveable bit didn't scare Brian a bit, which Brian thought was a little odd but not an unwelcome realization.

"Holy shit, dude! You don't just sneak up on a guy when he's making you dinner. You scared the crap out of me." Terryn had a massive grin on his face. Brian soooo wanted to kiss that grin.

"Hey, I bet you're hungry, huh? Looks like I interrupted your supper? How does potato curry surprise sound?"

"Sort of disgusting, but it smells amazing." Brian breathed in deeply and caught a whiff of cardamom and clean man, a fantastic combination as far as Brian was concerned. Fifteen minutes later, Brian and Terryn sat at the tiny kitchen table to eat.

"So how did you end up on the streets?" Brian asked. "It just doesn't fit with you. I see it every day and you don't have the look, you know. Good kid,

I'm guessing good family," Brian said, "please tell me you didn't run away from home to become an actor or some shit like that."

Terryn let out a shaky laugh. "No, nothing that pathetic... or hell, maybe it's more pathetic, I'm still trying to sort it out myself. It's kind of a long story, but I'll give you the highlights... you sure you wanna hear this?" Terryn put his hands on the table and tried not to fidget. He'd known the question would be asked and that he would answer Brian as honestly as he knew how, but now that the time had come and even though he knew he couldn't change anything that had happened to him, Terryn was terrified that Brian would judge him and it would change the way Brian looked at him. No one had looked at him with such longing and compassion in... well ever, and he didn't want to lose that. He needed Brian so much right now.

"Okay, well I graduated from high school and took a year off to sort of get my head straight, right? And I had a full-ride scholarship to a culinary academy in Phoenix, except for room and board and I was all set to start my classes in the fall. Anyway, it's a fairly typical story, boy likes boys, parents freak out, boy becomes homeless." Brian reached across the table to hold Terryn's hand.

"I had a friend that had moved out here so I thought, hey... great time to start a new life right? So I packed up a few things, said good-bye to my sister and Collin, my dog, and moved out here."

"So what happened to your friend?" Brian said. Concern creased Brian's brow as he began to softly rub circles with his thumb on the top of Terryn's hand. "The one you were staying with?"

"Oh, you know, fucked-up girlfriend, afraid I was gonna steal her man away. She convinced him that I had to go. I stayed at a cheap hotel for a while but I couldn't find work and I ran out of money. I tried a shelter but that place was scary, figured I would be better off on the streets than raped in my sleep by some toothless old guy. I've been sleeping in the De Longpre Park on a bench, by the old Rudolph Valentino statue." Terryn looked mortified by the admission but kept plugging away with his story. It felt cathartic to get it all out, to share what he'd been going through.

Tears began to form in Terryn's eyes. "It made me feel like someone was watching over me, right? Like even if it was just the statue of some dead actor

it was something—” *Hiccup*. “So I panhandled for food and stuff. I thought about calling my grandparents but I figured they’d be no better than my dad.”

Brian had heard enough. He couldn’t stand to see Terryn cry anymore. He had to change the subject. “That always happen?”

Terryn looked confused for a moment. “Does what always happen?” He hiccupped and a snort came out with his laugh. “Oh, the hiccups? Yeah, ever since I was a kid. Mad, sad, happy, whatever... the hiccups are never far behind. It’s embarrassing.”

“I think it’s adorable.”

“You have really strange turn-ons, dude.”

“I didn’t say it was a turn-on, I said it was adorable.”

“Are you coming on to me, dude? Because I gotta tell you, I’ve had a really shitty last couple of weeks and if I’m reading this wrong I’m gonna be really disappointed.”

Brian raised Terryn’s hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. “Yes, Terryn, I’m coming on to you but I know things are rough for you right now. I’m good with taking things slow. It’s not like I’m not going to see you again. I plan on seeing you a lot actually.”

Terryn’s face lit up, his smile so bright it was nearly blinding. “No shit?”

“No shit,” Brian said. He pulled Terryn up from the table and led him to the tiny bedroom.

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Brian took off the apron Terryn was wearing and placed it neatly over the back of a chair before taking Terryn into his arms and kissing him deeply. Terryn melted in Brian’s arms, snuggling up as close as he could get to him, savoring the intimacy. This wasn’t a one-time thing. Brian had said he planned on seeing him again, a lot. Terryn could not remember a time when he had been so happy, when he had fallen so fast or so hard for a man. It felt like heaven.

Brian broke the kiss and let Terryn go so he could strip out of his clothes. He pulled the covers down on the bed, climbed in and gestured for Terryn to

follow him. Terryn scrambled in next to Brian and pulled the covers up over them both. He snuggled into Brian's arms and Brian locked them around Terryn's body tightly.

Terryn let out a big sigh, followed by huge yawn.

"Sleepy?" Brian asked Terryn.

"A bit, yeah. It's been forever since I slept in a bed, longer since I had someone to share a bed with." Terryn yawned again, sleepiness in his voice. "Actually, I've never shared a bed with anyone before." He hid his face in the crook of Brian's neck to cover his embarrassment.

"Terryn?" Brian pulled away a bit so he could look Terryn in the eyes. "Hey, I like that. That you've never slept with anyone before. I'm not misunderstanding what you're saying, right?"

"Doubtful. You can tell I'm not all smooth moves and pillow talk."

Brian smiled at Terryn before he leaned in and gave him a tender kiss. "Cool. Get some sleep and then when you're ready... when we're ready..."

The rest of Brian's sentence was drowned out by Terryn's soft snores.

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God, was it morning already? Brian didn't want to open his eyes. He wanted to stay cuddled up in bed with Terryn and just ignore the outside world for a while, but Macho's soft whines reminded Brian that his dog needed to go out, and it was a workday. Brian sighed and rolled over to watch Terryn sleep for a moment before starting the day and saw that Terryn was wide awake, smiling up at Brian, his patented Terryn megawatt smile. Right there, in that exact moment, Brian actually felt the two of them sort of click into place. It was almost tangible, nearly audible, just one big, giant CLICK.

"Stay with me." Brian touched Terryn's cheek. "Just... I know, this seems way too soon and I wouldn't blame you a bit if you thought I was a nut job but it just feels..."

"Right?" Terryn put his hand over Brian's, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Yeah. It just feels right."

“Okay.” Terryn kissed Brian before pulling away to wipe his eyes. “Okay.”

“I’ve gotta get up and get moving but I should be home around six. You gonna be okay here by yourself?” Brian winked at Terryn.

“Hmmm, let’s see... there’s a warm, comfy bed that smells like you, there’s a TV and I’m way behind on my Judge Judy so I can catch up on that a bit and at the end of the day I get to see you?” Terryn laughed. “Yeah, I think I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, you’re a funny man!” Brian tickled Terryn’s ribs until he was hiccupping and giggling like a twelve-year-old, then he pulled Terryn into a hug. Terryn snuggled up to Brian’s side. “Hey, I’m gonna leave some cash for you so you can go out and pick up some stuff to stock up the kitchen. That way, if you’re feeling really ambitious you can make me something fabulous for dinner. By the way, check in the closet and see if any of my shoes fit you.”

“Sweet! Someone to cook for again!” Terryn was nearly bouncing with excitement. “You got it. Anything you absolutely hate?”

“Tofu.”

“I can totally work with that. Kiss me, and then get out of here so I can catch me some Judy. Thank you so much for the loan of the shoes.”

“Goofball.” Brian gave Terryn a rough kiss, a playful taste of things to come, and got out of bed to start the day.

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It was 7:30 p.m. and Brian wasn’t home yet. And he hadn’t called. Why hadn’t he called! Terryn was getting a bit crazy. Some of it had to do with the dinner he had cooked that was currently getting more and more disgusting by the minute but most of the crazy came from the documentary Terryn had been watching while he cooked. It was all about police officers and their families. Suicide rates, divorces, fear, loneliness, pain, God... what had he been thinking? How could he even think he was strong enough to do this? He was a wreck and he’d only known Brian for a total of maybe twenty-four hours? What would it be like when Brian was his life? Could he seriously love a man that might just disappear some day? Could he survive that kind of loss? As his

eyes began to fill with tears, Terryn walked over to Brian's desk and pulled out a note pad and a pencil.

*Dear Brian,*

*I shouldn't have watched it and now I feel so horrible and I don't want to lose you. How would I ever get over that? And it's 7:30 p.m.... where the fuck are you? I'm scared and I'm worried and I'm not sure I can do this all the time, every day, for like, forever. And I know we're not even close to the forever part but I want to be, you know, someday, but you're a cop and I could lose you and I'M SO SCARED!*

*Gotta think.*

*Sincerely,*

*Terryn*

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Terryn curled himself up tighter on the park bench in front of the Valentino statue. He'd stopped crying about fifteen minutes ago, stopped hiccupping ten minutes ago and now he was just cold and lonely. He'd never thought of himself as a drama queen before, but right now he knew the Oscar would go to him for best crazy person in a supporting role. He'd been so stupid, but now that he was thinking straight he was pretty sure he'd blown his chances with Brian. Why would Brian want someone who would freak out on him so easily, that couldn't be there for him when he needed him the most? And the granddaddy of dumb, Terryn was not that person. Terryn was a rock. He was solid and dependable and logical and patient, but he'd just lost it for a bit and now things with Brian were over.

Terryn heard Macho's soft whine just before he felt his cold, wet nose touch his cheek. Terryn reached down to bury his fingers in Macho's thick coat of fur and burrowed his face into Macho's neck.

"How'd you find me?" Terryn whispered, turning his head until he could see Brian's gorgeous face.

"I'm a cop, Terryn. It's all about deductive reasoning and you told me this is where you feel safe. I thought you felt safe with me too." Brian lifted

Terryn's head so he could sit down on the bench then set Terryn's head back down on his lap and stroked his fingers through Terryn's hair.

"I'm sorry I ran out. It all just sort of hit me at once. I watched this stupid show and then dinner was ready and you weren't home and I started thinking the worst things and then I just couldn't—" *Hiccup*. "I mean, what would I have done if something had happened to you? And I don't mean about being back out on the streets because—" *Hiccup*. "I can deal with that. Losing you though, not so much, and I know it's crazy and weird but I don't ever want to lose you, Brian. I've never felt like I've belonged with someone so much in my life more than I feel like I belong with you—" *Hiccup*.

Brian kissed Terryn with all the patience, all the love and understanding that he could before pulling back to look into Terryn's eyes.

"It's not crazy, Terryn." Brian brushed the tears from Terryn's face. "I feel it too, okay? And yeah, it's scary. But life always has its scary moments. Will it be easy being with a cop? Hell, no! It's gonna be tough. You'll worry and you'll be pissed at me for coming home late and lots of dinners will be ruined. There will be thousands of little things I do that will make you insane, but for all the rough times I promise I'll try to make sure you always feel loved. No relationship has ever been perfect Terryn, but I think we're sort of meant to give it a shot."

"You do? I mean, you don't think I'm an idiot for running out on you?" *Hiccup*. Terryn looked so hopeful but Brian wasn't going to let Terryn off that easy.

"Oh, no. You were definitely an idiot for running out on me." Terryn frowned up at Brian and it was hard for Brian not to laugh. The look was so adorable, so Terryn. "But only because you didn't stay to talk to me about what was bothering you, Terryn."

"I know." Terryn's frown turned into a mischievous smile. "But at least if I ever lose it again, you'll know where to find me, right?"

"In front of Rudy Valentino?"

"Nope!" Terryn popped up from the bench and gave Brian a quick kiss. "Your bed." Terryn took Brian's hand and started to drag him down the path, back towards Brian's apartment. "Take me home, Officer."

Brian drew Terryn close and put his arm around his shoulder. “Oh, I am so gonna love pissing you off.”

Brian ducked Terryn’s swing at his head as Macho bounced off after his men.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*I've been writing forever and finally got up the nerve to put some of it out there. I write to make myself happy and if I put a smile on someone else's face I consider that a bonus.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# THE TOUCH OF HOPE

By Brandon Shire

## Photo Description

Two slightly lanky, dark-haired boys are embraced, one behind the other. One boy has his hands inside the pockets of the hoodie of the boy in front of him. This small gesture hints at an unfamiliar reassurance that he plans to make his intimacy more than words will allow.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I got tired of my dad using me as a punching bag, so I packed some clothes and left our apartment one day while he was at work. Life is tough, but I learned that living on the streets is even tougher.*

*When I thought things couldn't get much worse, Erik suddenly appeared before me, just like an angel. Is this a dream or are the drugs making me hallucinate? What is he running from? Why won't he tell me about his past? Can I trust him?*

Sincerely,

Nancy

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** young adult, coming of age, barely legal, first-time, hurt/comfort, homophobia, HFN

**Content warning:** teens having sex and inferred small-time drug dealing.

**Word Count:** 13,527

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# THE TOUCH OF HOPE

By Brandon Shire

## CHAPTER 1

“Don’t do that.”

Jonathan looked over his shoulder at the boy leaning against the telephone pole. “Don’t do what?” he asked.

“You’re thinking about going into the police station and telling them you need help.”

Jonathan glanced at the door again and swung his gaze back to the boy who had so accurately read his mind. “They won’t help?”

“Hell, no. They’ll send you back to your parents, and if they don’t want you, the cops will stick you in juvie.”

“They can’t do that. I’m eighteen,” Jonathan muttered as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m eighteen,” the boy stated. “You’re not. Which would take them about two seconds to find out,” he added, pointing at the police station. “How old are you, really?”

Jonathan looked down at his well-worn Vans. “Sixteen.”

“You hungry?” the boy asked.

Jonathan glanced up through his thick lashes and brown hair. The heat crept across his face with his admission. “Yeah, kinda.”

“Come on.” The boy straightened up and jerked his head in the opposite direction. “You’re going to have to learn how to find something to eat; may as well start now.”

Jonathan quickened his step until he fell in beside the boy. He glanced at him cautiously. He had shaggy dark hair that looked like it needed to be washed, a nose that had been busted once or twice, and a wide mouth which broke into a huge grin when he smiled. His eyes were a deep, dark blue, unlike Jonathan’s, which were so gray they seemed almost white in the bright sun.

“You gonna keep staring at me?” the boy asked, still looking ahead.

Jonathan jerked his eyes forward. “Sorry. It’s just... not many people have been too helpful.”

“Did you really expect them to be?”

“Well, kind of, yeah. Or at least nicer than my dad was.”

“Man you are a newb, aren’t you?”

“What’s that mean?” Jonathan asked as he halted to a stop. He didn’t like the sound of it at all. He was new to the street, but he wasn’t stupid.

The boy stopped and looked back at him. “Means you’re probably going to get hurt, or raped, or killed. Or all of them if you don’t learn how to survive.”

*Raped, killed.* The words seared themselves into his head. His worst fears given voice. He had thought some of his friends would be able to help when he ran away, and they did, but only on a temporary basis. Maybe he should have thought things out more, planned better. But he hadn’t had time. His father’s last punch resulted in a fat lip and, when he dared to look in the mirror the next day, his father walked by the bathroom and smirked, just as he pressed his fingers against it and winced. It was at that exact moment he made the decision to leave. Enough was enough.

“Sorry, it’s just my dad...” he said as he realized the boy was still watching him.

“Yeah, he hates you, kicked your ass a few times. He’s a loser, a drunk, liked to grope you at night, didn’t like that you were gay, beats your mom... Should I keep going?”

Jonathan’s face burned. He shook his head and looked down at the ground. If this was supposed to be helping, he would hate to see what the opposite was like.

The boy came back to him and lifted his chin, looking directly into Jonathan’s eyes. His face, which had been hard and seemed to be on the verge of violence, softened immediately. “Whoa. Your eyes...”

Jonathan jerked his face to the side and looked down at the ground again. His mother’s eyes. He hated them. They had been his curse for the last sixteen years. “Yeah,” he answered without looking up.

“So you hungry or what?” the boy asked again, his tone much softer than before.

Jonathan nodded.

The boy brushed Jonathan’s fingers with his own and intertwined them slightly, urging Jonathan to follow. He let them go when Jonathan looked up and began to walk a pace behind.

“Can’t talk to you back there.” He stopped suddenly, then started walking when Jonathan stepped beside him. “That’s better. What’s your name?”

“Jonathan. You?”

“Erik, but they call me Special K.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked.

Erik rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I’ll tell you about it sometime. Right now, let’s get some grub. I’m starving.” He stopped again and looked at Jonathan. “By the way, you got any money on you?”

“I think I have a dollar and some change left. Not much,” Jonathan answered as he reached into his pocket. He brought out a wrinkled dollar bill and a couple of loose coins. Erik swiped them from his hand and stuffed them into his own pocket.

“Hey!”

“The answer is always *no*. Now you’ll remember it,” Erik said as he started walking away.

“Dickhead,” Jonathan mumbled.

“I heard that.” Erik laughed as he continued walking. “You coming, or what?”

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Six blocks later, they stood across the street from a Krispy Kreme. Erik looked over at him and frowned. “You need to get rid of that stupid book bag.”

“It has all my stuff in it,” Jonathan argued.

“It makes you a walking target,” Erik told him. He waved it away. “We’ll find somewhere to stash your stuff later. Come on,” he said as he started across the street.

“Is that why you were following me?” Jonathan asked.

Erik pulled his foot back onto the sidewalk and studied him curiously. “Not as stupid as you seem, are you?”

“I’m *not* stupid.” Jonathan seethed, hearing his father’s voice in Erik’s words. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

Erik looked over at the donut shop before he answered. “Yeah, that’s why I was following you.”

“You want my dirty socks?” Jonathan demanded as he flung the bag off his shoulder and held it out to Erik. “Here. Take it. Have fun. Hope you enjoy them.” He dropped the bag on the ground and started to walk away, tears building in his eyes. He was so frustrated with everything and everyone. He had tried and tried but kept getting nowhere fast.

“Jonathan,” Erik called out with a small bark of laughter. He seemed surprised by his outburst. “Jonathan. Wait.”

He ran around Jonathan, stopped in front of him, and held the bag out. “I was hungry, all right. Just like you. But it’s easier for two people to survive together than a single person on his own. It’s just the street, it was nothing personal. You’ve got to hustle to survive or you *don’t* survive.”

“Well, you seem like you’re doing pretty good,” Jonathan snapped, his eyes still shining with indignity as he glared at Erik.

“Yeah,” Erik scoffed. “I’m so great at surviving that I was about to steal your dirty underwear to buy a donut.”

Jonathan smirked. He couldn’t help it. He instantly pictured Erik pulling his dirty drawers from his bag and handing them to a horrified cashier.

“You are cute when you pout. Pretty smile too,” Erik added as a grin came to his face.

Jonathan blushed and looked away.

“Take your underwear and nasty socks,” Erik said as he pushed the bag back into Jonathan’s arms. “Can we get a freaking donut now?” he asked once Jonathan had slung the bag back over his shoulder.

“I don’t think a dollar is going to get us much,” Jonathan said as they started across the street again.

“Man, we aren’t going to *buy* anything. You’re going to use those beautiful eyes of yours to get us some for free.”

“I am?” Jonathan asked. He glanced over at Erik, and quickly looked away when their eyes met.

“Hell yeah, and then when we get done, we’re going to take your nasty drawers down to Tenth Street and see if we can find some perv to buy them from us.”

Jonathan turned and stared at him with his mouth open.

“I’m just messing with you.” Erik laughed as he wrapped his arm around Jonathan’s neck and walked them around the passing cars. “But someone would buy them.”

“I don’t want to know,” Jonathan said. “Just tell me how to get us some donuts.”

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Twenty minutes later, they were sitting on the curb with half a box of glazed donuts gone. “That was easy,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, well. They catch on pretty quick,” Erik said. “The sad-face only works once or twice before they run you out. And you look the part.”

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked as he licked the stickiness from his fingers.

Erik’s eyes locked on Jonathan’s tongue, watching him lick the sugar off. It cupped around his fingers as he sucked them into his mouth. “Erik?” Jonathan asked when he popped his finger out.

“Huh?” He looked into Jonathan’s eyes.

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked again.

“About what?”

“I look the part,” Jonathan repeated.

“Oh, nothing.” Erik shook his head dismissively. “You still have your schoolboy shine is all. It will be gone in a few weeks. Then you’ll be as jaded and fucked up as I am.”

“You don’t seem jaded,” Jonathan replied quietly. A blush crept up from under his collar and he looked away.

Erik was staring off into the distance when Jonathan got up the courage to glance at him again. “You don’t know me,” Erik said with barely a whisper.

His tone seemed resigned, even if quiet, and Jonathan didn’t understand what he’d said wrong. “Did you mean it when you said two could survive better than one?”

Erik shrugged. “Yeah, you can look out for one another and watch each other’s back. It just makes life easier sometimes. It’s a lot safer, that’s for sure.”

“Did you mean, um, like, with me?” Jonathan asked tentatively.

Erik leaned forward and swiveled his gaze up and down the street. “I don’t see anyone else toting around skid-marked underwear and week-old socks. Besides that, you have the donuts,” Erik said as he reached into the box in Jonathan’s lap.

Jonathan smiled and put the box in Erik’s lap. He pulled another donut from it and looked around the neighborhood. “This neighborhood looks nice.”

“*Now* it does. In about five hours, this place will be crawling with crack whores. If you’re not selling your ass or looking for some, you don’t want to be here.”

Jonathan froze; a worried look in his eyes. “Where is everyone now?”

Erik shrugged. “It’s early yet. They’re probably sleeping last night off, dunno really. Don’t care. This is about the only time of day it’s safe to be around here, but you still have to keep a sharp lookout.”

Jonathan whipped his head around, trying to look in all directions at once.

“Not like that.” Erik laughed. “Keep it casual. Alert, but casual.”

“How do you do that?” Jonathan asked.

“Man, how long you been on the street?”

“A few days,” Jonathan answered quietly. “I was staying at a friend’s but his dad said I had to go...”



“He was sorry but he couldn’t take responsibility for a minor blah, blah, blah. Am I right?” Erik asked as he glanced at Jonathan again.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

Jonathan turned away. “Heard it before. A lot. Anyway, let’s get out of here before the curb crawlers come out. Most of them are pretty nasty,” he added as he stood.

“Why?”

“You always ask so many questions?”

Jonathan shrugged. “Does it bother you?”

Erik shook his head in amusement. “Come on. Let’s go dump your underwear off somewhere and see what we can scrounge up for later.”

“Can I ask you something?” Jonathan queried as he got to his feet.

“No. No more questions. And if you’re asking about me, the answer is always *no*.” He started down the sidewalk and turned slightly when he noticed that Jonathan wasn’t beside him. “Do I have to hold your hand, too?” he called back over his shoulder.

Jonathan blushed again thinking about the softness of his grasp and how his fingers felt when they brushed against his own. “You’re not like... I don’t know, a psychopath or something, are you?”

Erik burst out laughing. He stopped when he noticed that Jonathan was somewhat serious and put his hands on his hips. “No, I’m just trying to survive like everyone else out here.”

Jonathan nodded, and gave him a hesitant smile that faded almost as fast as it appeared.

“That easy, huh? You know most psychopaths are going to lie to you, don’t you?” Erik asked as he wagged his eyebrows. “I might just be saying that to lure you off somewhere and get in your pants.”

He smirked as Jonathan blanched.

“I, uh... never...” Jonathan stuttered as he dropped his gaze and tugged at his shirt.

“So you’re gay?”

Jonathan nodded slowly, not meeting his gaze, and seriously uncertain if he should be so truthful. For all he knew, Erik would beat the crap out of him for it. Yet somehow, he didn’t think he was that type of guy, not the way he had so casually reached for his hand.

“Are you a virgin, too?” Erik asked.

Jonathan jerked his eyes up in surprise. He blushed a deep crimson and looked down at the sidewalk. “I just never... I mean...” he snapped his mouth closed, wondering why he ever opened it at all, and especially about *that* subject.

Erik chuckled. “Come on. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover yet.” He turned and started walking.

Jonathan watched him for a moment and then ran up to his side, avoiding eye contact. “Where we going?” he asked.

“Back to my place first, so we can dump off your bag. Then we need to get our hustle on, if we’re going to have some fun tonight.”

“Fun?”

Erik rolled his eyes. He grabbed Jonathan’s forearm and stopped, turning Jonathan to face him. “Listen, you’re just going to have to follow my lead, or go follow someone else. Okay? I can’t explain every little thing to you all the time. If you want to stick around, keep quiet and watch. That’s the best way to learn. You open your mouth and you make yourself a target. Listen and learn. Got it?”

Jonathan nodded silently.

“See how easy that is? Now come on.”

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They arrived outside an old, boarded-up house that appeared to have been condemned many years before. The blue paint was fading, the porch sagged, and each side was covered in graffiti. Every door and window was completely sealed with plywood except for one window on the second story which allowed a small portion of the glass to be exposed. The house seemed a stark contrast to the gleaming skyscrapers towering behind it.

Jonathan glanced sideways at Erik and recognized from his posture that he seemed somehow proud of the house in front of them.

“Not much,” Erik said as he watched Jonathan look it over. “But it keeps me from sleeping on the sidewalk.”

“Anyone else stay here?” Jonathan asked.

“On and off. This way.” They went around the back of the house and Erik pried a piece of plywood back from one of the ground floor windows. He directed Jonathan inside.

“It’s dark in here,” Jonathan murmured as he stood still and waited for Erik.

“Let your eyes adjust.” Erik grabbed Jonathan’s hand and led him upstairs. “Careful, that one isn’t safe.” He pointed at the stair he stepped over when they were about halfway up.

“This it?” Jonathan asked when they stood at the door of a bedroom at the top of the stairs. Heaps of clothes and trash filled the room along with an obnoxious smell that wafted down from one of the other rooms. The whole of the house was dark and damp and musty. This room was no exception. The one benefit it had was that this was the room with the half window exposed, allowing in some sunlight.

“You got someplace better?” Erik asked, seeming a little wounded at his response. “If you do, let me know.”

Jonathan shook his head. “No,” he answered quietly.

Erik glanced at him for a moment before he squatted and started digging a space under the clothes. He took Jonathan’s backpack and buried it.

“You have soft hands,” Erik said as he tossed clothes into a mismanaged heap to hide Jonathan’s bag.

“Thanks,” Jonathan said, flipping his hair out of his eyes. He put his hands behind his back, tucking them away. *Girly hands* his dad called them. They went along with his mother’s eyes, the constant reminder that brought about his father’s wrath. When they stepped back into the hall, he noticed that the odor got stronger.

“What’s that smell?” Jonathan asked.

“The bathroom, or that’s what some people use it for,” Erik said nodding towards the end of the hall. “Don’t go in unless you *really* have to go and then you’ll probably want to run in and out.”

“Isn’t there a real bathroom?”

“Duh, it doesn’t work. And even if we had water, we don’t have pipes anymore. They were all stolen,” Erik added with a hint of anger in his voice.

“Can’t you just go outside?” Jonathan asked.

Erik smirked. “That’s what I do. And if I have to take a shit, I’ll stop by a fast food restaurant or something.” He slipped his hand into Jonathan’s again, his grasp a little firmer.

“Don’t go in that room, either,” Erik said as he nodded across the hall.

“What’s in there?” Jonathan asked, noting that it was the only room to still have a battered door on the frame.

Erik shrugged in response, his eyes going to it with an emotion Jonathan couldn’t place. “Just stuff. Come on,” he said leading Jonathan down the stairs again.

“Where are we going?” Jonathan asked.

“I’m going to show you the town.”

Forty minutes later, Erik motioned with a nod of his head.

Jonathan turned to follow his gaze and saw a run-down building with a large fence around it.

“Food pantry,” Erik explained. “You can get stuff here for free. Most of it we can’t use because we don’t have anything to cook on. Over there,” he pointed to the opposite side of the street, “is a homeless shelter and outreach center. You can get lunch there every day. Just get in line and don’t answer any questions from anyone.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked.

“Because it isn’t a safe place for you. Too many cops and busybodies poking around there. Eat and leave, that’s it. Come on,” he said as he led the way across the street.

There was a line around the far side of the building. Erik and Jonathan joined the queue. When they finally got inside, they were each offered a plate with a piece of chicken, some vegetables and a slice of bread. Erik took a table at the corner of the room and put his back to the wall so he could see everyone in the place.

Jonathan looked around as they ate, noting all the religious paraphernalia. Several notices for services were hanging on the walls, as well as a large mural of smiling faces entering a church.

“Do you believe in God?” he asked Erik suddenly.

Erik stopped chewing and his mouth became pinched as he swallowed. “Do you?”

“I don’t know. I was just curious,” Jonathan said as he looked around the room again.

“I don’t,” Erik answered firmly. “Never have. Never will.”

Jonathan glanced at him. “You sound angry.”

Erik scoffed. “The only difference between the guys that would jump you on the street and the people that run this place is that this gang has more people and more money. They’re just ambushing your mind, instead of your body.”

Jonathan didn’t think that to be true at all, but it was obviously an issue for Erik so he dropped the subject and started eating again.

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## CHAPTER 2

When Jonathan woke, his head was still fuzzy. After only a week with Erik, this was becoming a routine. Erik was sleeping beside him on the old mattress on the bedroom floor. He was dressed only in his boxers. Jonathan didn't remember anything about the previous night. The last thing that came to mind was Erik handing him a pill and telling him not to be a wuss. After the pill, all he had were flashes of people, colored lights, and *really* loud music. And the latter felt like it was still thumping in his head.

He climbed over Erik, trying not to disturb him. Jonathan groped for his pants while he looked over Erik's body in the growing light. Erik had morning wood, and it stood firm against his boxers. The outline of Erik's dick made Jonathan ache. He paused and held his hand above Erik's groin, excited by the warmth he radiated. Stealing a glance to make sure he was still asleep, Jonathan leaned over Erik's chest and inhaled. He wasn't sure what to compare the smell to but he liked it, even if it was a little on the sweaty side of unwashed. He kept his hand hovering in place for a moment longer but suddenly became embarrassed for perving on Erik while he was asleep. He dropped his hand and stood.

*Wuss*, he told himself. It was obvious they wanted each other. Every time Erik glanced at him, Jonathan's dick got hard, and he thought Erik's may have as well. So why was he being a prude? It wasn't as if there was anyone around to stop them. He'd wanted a boyfriend since... forever, and now he had a near-naked boy right next to him. Hell, they slept together. On that first night, when Erik reached out to him, he pushed back against the wall, horny, but terrified too. Erik had been dumbfounded at his reaction, but he backed off and gave Jonathan the space his response required.

*Because you're a wuss*, he heard his father's voice echo in his head. *Can't even get laid.*

*I'm not a wuss*, he argued back. *I'm saving myself*, he reasoned as he searched for his shirt. He slipped his shoes on and looked down at Erik again, noticing that the view of Erik's dick was even better from this angle. He

reached down and adjusted himself as he grew hard yet again. If he'd had the courage, they would have had sex already; he would know what it was like. He shook his head. *Saving myself, yeah right. That was a lie.*

He was really just afraid because he didn't know a thing about sex, or what he was supposed to do, or what role he was supposed to play, or... anything. He was sure Erik could teach him, but he didn't want Erik to know just how dumb he was when it came to all that. It was bad enough that he was following him around like a lost puppy, but dumb about sex, at his age? There was no way he would ever live *that* down. Even the thought of Erik finding out made him glow with embarrassment.

And, he reasoned as his bladder became more insistent, if he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure he wanted to go that far with Erik. Not yet anyway. There was still something bothering him about Erik and he noticed it more and more as they spent time together.

Erik was a different person for everyone he met. Almost as if he segregated himself into different parts which he brought out only when a particular interaction required it. But then, maybe that was just a facet of his survival skills for the streets.

Jonathan shrugged as he stepped out the door and made his way downstairs. Whatever it was, or whatever motive Erik had for doing it, it made Jonathan leery for a reason he couldn't explain.

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## CHAPTER 3

Erik told Jonathan to wait on the corner while he attended to business. He sat on a low retaining wall and casually remained aware of his surroundings, just as Erik had instructed him. It was a seedy neighborhood and he wondered whether he blended in. Two weeks living on the street with Erik and he was beginning to understand how the dynamics worked more than he ever would have on his own.

A prostitute working across the street waved and smiled. Jonathan waved back, but having seen him walk up with Erik, he assumed that she realized he wasn't interested, and was only making a show for a pimp he couldn't see. Down the road a little further, there were two older homeless men wearing camouflage jackets and holding flags for sale.

*Veterans*, Jonathan thought as he watched them for a moment, and probably not friendly to gay people. At least that had been his experience with people of their generation.

He pulled his cell phone out and looked at it. The day before he met Erik, the service had stopped. That was one of the events of that day which had prompted him to stand in front of the police station and consider returning home. The face of it was still blank and he was wondering why he even kept it. It was his father's phone, not his. He had swiped it from the kitchen table the day he took off because his father had forgotten it. Now, it was just a weight in his pocket, one he hadn't even shown to Erik yet.

Erik would just want to sell it, but Jonathan still had an attachment to it, hoping, maybe, that his dad might restart the service and call to ask him to come home. It was a pathetic notion. He knew that. He didn't even have the ability to keep it charged, much less wait for a call that would never come. Besides, his asshole father had probably gone out to celebrate when he realized that Jonathan took off. How many times had he told Jonathan that he would have to get out the day he turned eighteen? Jonathan's early departure had only given him what he wanted, two years sooner than expected.

When he swung his head left, he noted two older boys walking down the street who had turned onto the sidewalk from a nearby side street. Their dress



and swagger looked like trouble and they were already too close for him to move across the road without attracting their attention. One kid was tall, thin, and black, and the other was a white kid with very short blond hair and a baseball cap tilted on his head. *Gangbangers*, he registered instantly. He met the blond boy's eyes, but not before he saw him nudge his buddy and call attention to where Jonathan sat.

Jonathan looked around, hoping to see Erik returning, but he was nowhere in sight. "Fuck," he said under his breath. He tucked the phone back into his pocket and stood to walk off, but it was too late. They were already on top of him.

"You know whose turf you're on, faggot?" the white kid demanded.

Jonathan looked back and forth between the two of them. "I don't want any trouble."

"Then you should have kept your bitch ass out of my neighborhood," the black boy said, inching closer. "We don't allow faggots around here."

Jonathan glanced around quickly. Erik still wasn't anywhere in sight. He bolted, hopping up on the wall and taking off around the building he had been sitting in front of. The two boys gave chase immediately.

Jonathan turned right, darting through a small alley, and came out on the opposite side of the building. He knew Erik would be back shortly, or at least he hoped so, and he turned again to start racing up the side of the same building, knowing that it would bring him out a little further from where he had been sitting.

He realized too late that there was a fence between him and the sidewalk. He was trapped. He turned to face the boys chasing him and pressed against the fence. "I don't have anything. I'm just waiting for my friend."

"Faggots don't have friends," the white boy barked as they strutted up the alley together.

"Least not 'round here," the black boy chimed. "You in the wrong fucking neighborhood, faggot."

"I don't have anything," Jonathan repeated, holding his empty hands in front of him.

The two boys looked at each other and smirked. “What about that phone we saw you with?”

“It doesn’t work,” Jonathan said.

“Give it to me,” the black boy said, snapping his palm out.

Jonathan reached into his pocket and placed the phone in his outstretched hand. “See, it doesn’t work. It’s dead. I don’t even have a charger for it.”

The boy fiddled with it for a moment then slipped it into his pocket. “What else you got?”

“Nothing.”

“Faggot come to our neighborhood, he better have something or he gets a beat down,” the white boy said in a menacing voice.

Jonathan gulped. “I don’t have anything. I told you.”

The boys looked at each other and smirked. The white boy led the charge, slamming into Jonathan’s jaw with a right hook that dropped him to the ground. When he hit the pavement, they started kicking him as he curled into a ball. The white boy knelt and began pelting him with punches while he screamed homophobic slurs.

Jonathan saw Erik and heard him scream at them.

“All right, that’s enough.”

The white boy glanced over his shoulder. He stood with his fist clenched as Erik approached. “Fuck you, faggot.”

Erik covered the remaining space between them in a second. Before Jonathan could blink, Erik had kicked the boy in the nuts twice, and then hit him in the face a few more times before he doubled over and fell to the ground.

The black boy jumped over Jonathan and caught Erik in the jaw. Erik fell, but rolled to his feet immediately. He began trading blows with the black kid and did not give an inch as they fought back and forth. Erik held his own until the black kid had enough and backed off, huffing for breath. He took one look at the blond kid still groaning on the ground, then took off in the opposite direction.

Erik watched him for a moment and then turned to help Jonathan to his feet. "You okay?" he asked as he wiped the blood from his lip.

Jonathan nodded. "They took my phone."

"What phone?" Erik asked as he lifted Jonathan's shirt. He pressed his fingers against the scrapes and watched how Jonathan winced. "Nothing broken, but it's going to hurt like hell for a few days," he advised.

Jonathan pushed his shirt down, staring at Erik and near tears. "How'd you find me?"

Erik shot a hard glance at the kid on the ground. "Heard him yelling."

"Fucking asshole," Jonathan blurted as he kicked the boy in the back.

Erik smirked at him. "Feel better?"

"No."

"Come on. I don't think anyone called the cops, but it's best if we're not here in case the black dude comes back with friends."

Jonathan looked around wildly, expecting to see a group of gangbangers descending on them. He followed Erik out of the alley and fell in beside him as he twisted his elbow around, trying to stem the flow of blood from where he went down. Frustrated that he had nothing to clean it with, he reached up and touched his lip instead. It was the same spot his father had fattened a few weeks before.

"Hurt?" Erik asked.

Jonathan sighed. "No worse than when my dad hit me. I'll survive." He glanced down at the sidewalk, ashamed that Erik had to come to his rescue. "Thanks," he mumbled.

"No sweat," Erik said. "What phone were you talking about?"

"The one I swiped from my dad when I left," Jonathan answered. "He turned the service off, but I still had it."

"We could have sold it."

Jonathan shrugged. It was useless to worry about it now, and he certainly didn't want to share with Erik that he had been hoping for some miraculous change in his father.

Erik wrapped his arm around Jonathan's neck and touched their heads together. "Don't worry about it," he said as he released him.

They walked two more blocks and turned when someone called out Erik's name. Jonathan saw a man approaching them who looked to be in his early twenties. He was short, with black hair, and had a cute, boyish face. He glanced at Jonathan curiously as he approached.

"Hey Erik, you got anything?"

"Not until later tonight," Erik answered.

"Who's your friend?"

"Jonathan, this is Roger. Roger, this is Jonathan," Erik introduced them.

They nodded at each other, and Jonathan took note of how Roger's eyes swept up and down his body, then focused on his swelling lip. He reached up to dab at it again with his sleeve.

Roger looked back at Erik. "So tonight... you're going to be around?"

"I'll be around," Erik said.

"Okay, I'll be looking for you," Roger said. He nodded at Jonathan again and crossed back to the other side of the street.

"Roger?" Jonathan asked.

Erik shrugged. "That's his street name. Don't know what his real name is, like most of these guys out here."

"He's a prostitute?" Jonathan asked, his eyes shifting back to Roger as he crossed the centerline of the road.

"Yeah, lots of guys hustle sex to survive," Erik explained.

Jonathan stepped up beside him and they continued walking. "Have you, like, you know, ever?"

Erik burst out laughing, an incredulous look on his face. "Of course I have."

"I mean..." Jonathan's eyes darted away.

"What?" Erik asked in a tone that would not allow condescension.

“With like, older guys?” Jonathan asked cautiously.

“They usually have the cash,” Erik informed him in a not-so-light tone. “Wasn’t anything though,” Erik shrugged. “Just quick, easy money.”

“Do you still?”

Erik tilted his head slightly and studied him as they walked. “No, those were more desperate times. I’ve got my own hustle now. If I had to,” he mused and nodded. “I’d do it again. But only if I had to.”

“Maybe I...” Jonathan began.

“No,” Erik interrupted immediately.

Jonathan frowned. “Why do you say it like that?”

Erik stared at him for a moment, turning something over in his head before he spoke. “You can’t do it, and you’d get hurt if you tried.”

Jonathan’s mouth fell open. “Why do you say that?” he demanded.

“Jonathan, *we* haven’t even had sex yet and we’re sleeping in the same bed, well, mattress, but you get my drift? Now, picture yourself with a total stranger,” Erik replied. “Besides, you’ve got no fight game and one of these fuckers would end up hurting you or whoring you out. No,” he reiterated. “No way.”

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## CHAPTER 4

Jonathan lay down but couldn't go to sleep. Erik had gone out, claiming he had business to attend to, and that Jonathan would scare off his customers.

"Just stay here until I get back," Erik told him as he slipped out of the house.

That was six or seven hours ago. The sun had gone down and Jonathan was sitting in the dark, afraid to leave the house, and even more afraid of being in it by himself.

"Where are you?" Jonathan asked the dark, empty room.

He froze when the stairs creaked, not sure if he should call out or simply keep his mouth shut and his presence unknown. He moved silently and pressed himself against the wall, hoping to go unnoticed if it was anyone other than Erik.

*Shoes*, he thought, grabbing for them and slipping them on his feet. If it wasn't Erik, he was out of there. There was no way he was staying in a dark, boarded up house with a stranger.

"Jonathan," he heard Erik whisper.

He let out a huge sigh of relief. "Yeah, up here."

"Why are you in the dark? You should have lit a candle," Erik said as Jonathan searched around for the matches and lit the candle again.

"I had one lit earlier, but I didn't want to waste it," Jonathan admitted quietly.

Erik looked at him curiously for a moment and then came over and sat beside him on the mattress. "I brought you something."

"Good, I'm starving."

"Oh, sorry," Erik reached into the pocket of his hoodie and brought out a sandwich wrapped in white deli paper. He reached into his opposite pocket and pulled out a can of soda pop, placing it in front of Jonathan as he ripped into the sandwich.

“Mm, good.” Jonathan nodded around a mouthful.

Erik smiled slightly and wiped away a spot of mayonnaise from the corner of Jonathan’s mouth with his fingertip. He popped it into his own mouth and licked the mayo off as he smiled. Jonathan watched him closely, then slowly lowered his sandwich. He pulled Erik’s finger from his mouth and, as he looked Erik in the eye, placed it in his own. He sucked on it gently.

“Jesus,” Erik whispered, his eyes locked on Jonathan’s lips.

The word curbed Jonathan’s impulse. He released Erik’s hand and stuffed the sandwich into his mouth instead. “Sorry,” he mumbled when he glanced down and noticed his pants were tented. He hoped Erik didn’t notice.

“Why?” Erik asked.

Jonathan shrugged and took another bite of the sandwich. “This is good. Where’d you get it?”

“New shop over on Eleventh Street,” Erik answered after a moment of awkward silence. “I was talking with the manager and she kind of offered me a job, I think. I don’t know for sure yet. I’ve got to go talk to her tomorrow.”

“Really?”

Erik nodded, pleased with himself. “It ain’t much, but...” He shrugged again. “Could lead to better things.”

“That’s great,” Jonathan said enthusiastically. He wrapped his arm around Erik and squeezed him. “I’m so happy for you.”

“You might be able get in there too,” Erik suggested.

“Do you think so?” Jonathan asked cautiously.

“Could be, you’re old enough to work. If you give her a good sob story, you might be able to talk yourself into a job.”

“A sob story?” Jonathan asked, his initial excitement at the prospect fading.

“They usually want experience,” Erik explained. “But you could just tell her it’s your first job and you’re saving up for a car, or you want to go to college or something.” He shrugged. “It’s better than telling her you’re homeless. She’d be less likely to hire you.”

Jonathan snorted, dismissing the idea of giving her a story. He had much more immediate needs than college or a car. And hadn't finished high school yet, so that lie would only hurt him when the truth came out. "Just having a place with water would be nice," he said. He finished off the sandwich and opened the soda, downing half of it before he turned to Erik again. "I couldn't go like this anyway. I'm dirty and I smell."

"Me too." Erik smiled. "But I've brought something back to fix that." He took the can from Jonathan's hand, reached under the mattress for the penlight, and after he had instructed him to take the candle, led Jonathan downstairs. When he turned into the kitchen, he shone the light across the room at the rickety counter.

"Water?" Jonathan asked as he looked at the plastic five gallon container.

"It was a bitch getting back here," Erik proclaimed. "You don't realize how heavy that shit is until you have to lug it ten blocks."

"You brought that all the way back here so we could wash up? What about our clothes?" Jonathan asked.

Erik shrugged one shoulder. "We'll figure it out in the morning. She said not to come by until three, so we should be able to wash some clothes down at the Laundromat. Cost us a couple bucks."

Jonathan beamed at him. "That is so cool." He leaned over and kissed Erik without even thinking about it, his lips registering an electric tingle as soon as they met Erik's. He pulled away and gulped, looking into Erik's eyes.

Jonathan turned away and heard Erik sigh with more than a little frustration. Erik's lips were so soft, softer than he'd thought they would be. He sighed internally and glanced back at Erik. "Sorry," he offered quietly. He saw Erik's disappointment harden and he was surprised when Erik grabbed the back of his head and brought their lips together with some force. He struggled against him for a moment, his hands coming up to push against Erik's chest. But his struggle weakened quickly.

"Are you afraid of me?" Erik asked when he released Jonathan. He pressed their foreheads together and looked into Jonathan's eyes.

"No," came Jonathan's breathless lie.



“Yes you are,” Erik said, nodding to himself. He was gentler the second time and held Jonathan’s gaze as he brushed his lips and slowly began nibbling at his lower lip. When Jonathan’s eyes fluttered, his mouth opened and Erik slipped his tongue in, drawing Jonathan tightly against him.

Jonathan panted when Erik released him and looked at him with wide eyes.

Erik’s face lit up with a knowing smirk as he dug into his pocket. “Oh, I almost forgot.” He pulled something from his pocket and held it up in front of Jonathan’s eyes, shining the flashlight through it.

“What is it?” Jonathan asked as he took the necklace from his hand and looked at it closer.

“It’s amber,” Erik explained. “You can’t really see it in this light but there’s an angel carved into it.” He pulled it from Jonathan’s grasp and pressed it against the penlight so the light could shine through.

Jonathan looked closely and could just make out the carving etched into the flattened backside. It was golden in color and felt warm against his hand when he touched it.

Erik offered it to him. “It’s for you.”

“For me?” Jonathan asked in surprise, looking up at him as a smile spread across his face. “Where’d you get it?”

Erik shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. The guy said once you get the string wet, you won’t ever be able to take it off without cutting it and breaking the spell, or something like that.”

“It’s beautiful, thank you,” Jonathan said as he took it from his hand. He placed the odd string over his head but had to fold his ears down to get it on. He reached up to stroke it, the carving of the angel seeming more defined as he allowed his fingers to caress the polished surface.

He glanced over at the water container. “Will you help me get it wet?” he asked.

“Are you sure?” Erik asked as he stepped closer and slipped his hand down to the small of Jonathan’s back.

Jonathan bit his bottom lip, looked into Erik’s eyes and nodded hesitantly. He turned his head slightly and focused on Erik’s lips as he pressed closer.

“You have to tell me what the spell is first,” he murmured before he met Erik with a light kiss. *So soft*, he thought as he pressed against him harder.

“You have an irresistible way of getting information,” Erik murmured as he brushed his lips across Jonathan’s once more.

Jonathan smiled. “I have my moments. So what’s the spell?”

Erik shrugged, not wavering his gaze as he whispered. “He said the amber was from the tears of twenty-six angels and the spell it carried would help you find your soul mate.”

“How does it do that?” Jonathan asked quietly, looking into his eyes.

“I don’t know. He said only you would know.” He slid his hands up Jonathan’s torso, drawing him closer as he leaned in to kiss him again.

Jonathan shivered under his touch and smiled as Erik pulled away. “I think it’s working already.”

“You didn’t even get it wet yet.” Erik smirked.

Jonathan took a step back, put the candle down, and pulled off his T-shirt as Erik watched. He blushed slightly and looked down at the floor as he unsnapped his jeans and pushed them down. When he reached out to balance himself Erik grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Let me do it?” he asked.

Jonathan opened his mouth, but couldn’t find the words to refuse him. He nodded and balanced himself on Erik’s shoulders as Erik knelt in front of him and helped slide his jeans off his feet.

Erik stood with a noticeable bulge in his pants and led Jonathan over to the water jug. He bent and shone the penlight into a space that used to be a cupboard. “I think there might even be some... ah,” he exclaimed, pulling out a small sliver of soap from under the space that used to hold the kitchen sink. He glanced around with some frustration, and then pulled his shirt over his head. He shrugged. “Sorry, there’s nothing to wash with. This will have to do.”

Jonathan nodded, chewing on his bottom lip again, as he realized that Erik intended to bathe him.

Erik balled his shirt up, drenched it in water, and then rubbed it vigorously with the soap until he had a lather. He began at Jonathan's forehead, gently rubbing away the grime he had accumulated since the last time he'd had a shower.

Jonathan's boxers started poking out immediately and he colored in the semi-darkness. Erik's touch was too gentle, too hot. Even through the wet shirt, Jonathan was still aware of the heat of his touch.

He grabbed Erik's forearm with both his hands, stopping him as he moved down to his chest. "I, um..."

Erik leaned into him and kissed away his protest. When he pulled back, he quickly shed his own jeans and tossed them to the side. His boxers were tented and he pointed down to make sure Jonathan saw it. "Nothing to be ashamed of," he said with a smirk.

Jonathan looked away, unable to meet his smile.

"Why are you so shy?" Erik asked, wetting his T-shirt again and running it gently across Jonathan's chest.

*Scrawny*, he answered in his head before he shrugged. Erik's body had some definition to it. Jonathan's had nothing. His entire body was a flat board. The only two things that stuck out were his dick and his nose, and even those didn't extend too far.

Erik cupped the bottom of his chin and brought his face back so that their eyes met again. "You have a beautiful body. You shouldn't be ashamed of it."

He met Erik's gaze for a moment and then dropped his eyes. His boxers were getting wet and becoming almost sheer with the water running down his chest. But it hid the wet spot that had been growing there. He stared up at the ceiling to avoid the hungry look in Erik's eyes.

"Turn around and hold your arms out," Erik instructed. "Got to make sure you're clean," he added with a smile against Jonathan's ear as he bumped his erection into Jonathan's backside.

Jonathan blushed again, his nose twitching as the odor from his armpits rose into his face. He was so dirty. He didn't know what Erik saw in him, not like this anyway.

He began to relax as Erik scrubbed his underarms and his sides, twisting into his touch as Erik squeezed his torso for a quick tickle. “Don’t.” He laughed.

Erik stepped up behind him, pressing his erection against his butt again. He whispered into Jonathan’s ear, as he put his thumbs on Jonathan’s waistband and slowly began to slide them down. “Okay?” Erik asked.

Jonathan froze. He was a fraction of a second from telling Erik to stop. He nodded hesitantly, and lifted his feet as Erik stooped to slip his boxers completely off.

“You are so beautiful,” Erik whispered when he stood again.

He stepped closer and Jonathan recognized the length of Erik’s naked penis pressed against the crack of his butt as Erik leaned into his neck with a kiss. He tilted his head and moaned. He couldn’t help it.

Erik wove their fingers together and wrapped their arms around Jonathan’s waist, pulling Jonathan back against his hard cock as he groaned into Jonathan’s neck. He let out a long breath and moaned in resignation before he stepped back and reached for his wet shirt. When he had rinsed it out and lathered it up again, he tapped against Jonathan’s legs until he widened his stance, and began washing them from bottom to top.

Jonathan shuddered when Erik’s hand brushed against his balls. His cock was rock hard and he kept waiting for Erik to reach around him and wash it with the soapy shirt. But he didn’t. Instead, Erik put the shirt aside, lathered up his hands and slid one finger into the crack of Jonathan’s ass as his other hand took a firm grip around the root of his cock.

Jonathan gasped immediately, afraid that he would cum right then. But after a few quick strokes, Erik quickly splashed water over Jonathan to rinse him off. The chill of it instantly quenched Jonathan’s self-muted yearning.

Erik lathered his hands again and moved behind Jonathan, his breath heavy and hot on Jonathan’s neck. He slid one soapy hand down into the crack of Jonathan’s ass and the other teased the head of his cock.

“Erik,” Jonathan moaned as Erik slowly began to masturbate him. He groaned as his orgasm began to rise. “I’m going to cum.”

They were the wrong words. Erik began to pump his cock furiously, his grip firm, his thumb swiping the tip of his cock as Jonathan squirmed under his touch. He pushed his finger into Jonathan, searching for his prostate.

“Cum for me baby,” he whispered when Jonathan moaned and a long spurt of cum shot onto the floor. He bit at Jonathan’s shoulder as he continued to jerk him, his finger rubbing the nub deep in Jonathan’s ass.

Jonathan’s legs buckled and Erik adjusted his grip, leaning back against the counter so he could take both their weights. Erik pulled his finger out, holding Jonathan around the waist as he stroked him to a finish. “How was that?”

Jonathan nodded, out of breath. He turned in Erik’s arms and kissed him deeply, locking his arms around his neck as he ground his belly against Erik’s stiff erection.

“Why don’t you go up and lay down. I can wash myself,” Erik said.

Jonathan touched the necklace and rubbed it between his fingers. “You sure?” He was wavering, uncertain if he wanted to wait for Erik upstairs or wash him as erotically as he’d just had done to his own body.

Erik nodded and splashed more water on Jonathan to rinse him off again. “I’ve done this plenty of times.”

Desire rose in Jonathan like it had never before. He pulled Erik away from the counter and looked down at his cock. Erik watched him closely. He touched Erik gently, exploring the soft heat of his cock, the hard width of it against his palm. He looked into Erik’s eyes. “I’ll be waiting,” he said as he trailed his fingers down to the tip and turned for the stairs.

Erik’s brow went up in surprise and he nodded quickly. “Okay.”

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The candle flickered in the corner of the room, throwing soft shadows over the bed. “Scared?” Erik asked after he lay down and brushed his hand lightly across Jonathan’s temple.

Jonathan looked down the blanket they had scrounged up and saw his toes poking out, he wiggled them. “No,” he lied, his heart pounding in his chest. Downstairs his desires had all but knocked him sideways, but now he was scared again.

Before Jonathan could over-think his decision, Erik planted his mouth on his lips. He pressed hard, his appetite whetted from the activities in the kitchen. He climbed over Jonathan and straddled his waist with his legs, never breaking contact with his lips.

He gasped as he pulled away and looked down at Jonathan. “God, you are so fucking beautiful.”

He put his arms on each side of Jonathan’s head and looked down at him before he moved in more slowly and touched their lips together again. Jonathan’s arms came up as if by reflex and wrapped around Erik’s shoulders. He could feel Erik’s cock rubbing against his own.

It felt so... right. He tightened his grip, and then ran his hand through Erik’s hair as they kissed.

Erik broke the kiss first, breathed deeply, then began a trail of butterfly kisses down to Jonathan’s navel. His eyes met Jonathan’s as he flicked his tongue across the tip of Jonathan’s cock. “I want to make you cum, and cum, and cum, and then I want to fuck you and make you cum again. Are you okay with that?”

Erik didn’t give him time to answer. He swallowed Jonathan’s cock as Jonathan grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled his breath in through clenched teeth.

“Yes,” Jonathan answered as his back arched off the bed.

Erik sat up on his knees and turned his body allowing Jonathan to take his cock if he wanted to.

He did. Jonathan maneuvered himself directly under Erik and began sucking on him immediately. One hand was milking Erik’s shaft, the other was playing up and down his ass. He could think of nothing he wanted more than having Erik cum in his mouth.

“I’m going to cum,” Erik warned after a few minutes.

Jonathan attacked his cock with renewed vigor, but gagged when Erik thrust deep into his throat and began to cum. He tried to push him off but it was no use. Erik blasted into his throat twice before he pulled back and finished on Jonathan’s tongue.

“Oh my God,” Erik moaned.

Jonathan turned his head and released Erik from his mouth.

“Not yet, baby. Put it back in your mouth and get me ready to fuck you,” Erik instructed, looking back at Jonathan.

Jonathan took Erik’s cock back in his mouth and began to suck on it gently as Erik went to work on him again.

Erik swelled in his mouth after a few moments. But this time Jonathan had the mind to explore Erik’s body and mimicked exactly what Erik was doing. He licked at the tip of Erik’s cock, swirled his tongue around the head, and then nuzzled his nose into his balls.

“Erik,” he whispered in warning.

Erik pulled off of him immediately. “Not yet, baby.” He turned, placing his body between Jonathan’s legs. He spread them wide and began licking the inside of Jonathan’s thighs, slowly working his way around his balls, up his shaft, and back down again until he lifted Jonathan’s legs in the air and folded them back. When he jammed his tongue into Jonathan’s ass, Jonathan moaned and slammed his hands down to the mattress, gripping the sheet and twisting it in his hands.

“Fuck,” he gasped.

Erik glanced up at him and chuckled. “You like that?”

Jonathan wasn’t sure if he did or not. It seemed kind of gross, but it felt... “Oh my God,” he murmured when Erik jabbed his tongue into him again. It sent a shiver through his whole body.

Erik reached under a nearby pile of clothes and grabbed the lube. Squirting some onto Jonathan’s hole, he slipped a finger into him and began to loosen his rectum. “You’re so fucking tight. I can’t wait to get in that ass,” he said as he started licking Jonathan’s cock. He kept whispering as he licked, never taking Jonathan’s penis fully into his mouth. He only teased him with his tongue.

“I’m gonna fuck you raw, baby. You want that?” he asked as he slid a second finger in.

Jonathan squirmed beneath him. “Yes,” he breathed. “Yes.” It felt so good; so right. He wanted Erik to fuck him. He wanted it bad. He gasped and locked his legs together when Erik slid his third finger in. The last one was a little painful and he glanced down at Erik with a question on his face.

“Just relax, baby. Ride through it,” he offered as he took the tip of Jonathan’s cock in his mouth. “That’s it,” he said as Jonathan relaxed his legs and spread them open again. “Nice and easy. We have all night.”

When he reached over him and grabbed a condom, Jonathan watched as he rolled it on and lubed it up. He lifted Jonathan’s legs and squirted more lube on Jonathan’s hole. “It’s going to hurt a little when I go in,” he said as he positioned his cock. “Just ride through it. I guarantee you’ll like it after a minute or two. Ready?”

Jonathan nodded hesitantly. Erik looked at him for a moment, gentling his lust, and leaned forward to kiss him. He took Jonathan’s legs and pressed them down on the mattress near his shoulders.

Jonathan winced as soon as Erik’s cock put pressure on his hole.

“Easy, baby” Erik said. “Once the head is in, I’ll stop for a sec and let you get used to it.”

Jonathan pulled a breath in through his teeth as Erik pushed in.

“Fuck you’re tight,” Erik gasped. “There we go.” He looked into Jonathan’s eyes and gave him a gentle smile before bending his neck to kiss him.

When Jonathan gave him the go-ahead, Erik began to move, sliding slowly in and out of him until Jonathan was beginning to pant in Erik’s ear.

“Okay?” Erik asked.

Jonathan moaned in response.

“Tight,” Erik growled as he began to build a rhythm. “So fucking tight.”

He put more force behind his thrusts and soon Jonathan was meeting them, pushing his ass back at Erik’s thrust, waiting for it, then riding as far down his shaft as he could go. He started panting as he felt another orgasm building. “You’re going to make me cum again,” Jonathan gasped between breaths.



Erik lifted his torso away from Jonathan's body and began slamming his cock into him. He locked his eyes on Jonathan's and pushed himself deep with each thrust. "Come for me, baby. Cum with my cock buried in you."

When Jonathan's ass squeezed his cock with his next orgasm, Erik grunted in pleasure, pounding away until he had filled the condom. He pushed one last time and fell on top of Jonathan, out of breath.

"Fuck, that was good."

Jonathan smiled and wrapped his arms around Erik. He glowed with the thought that he was no longer a virgin, and wondered why in the hell he had been so worried about it to begin with. He nuzzled into Erik's neck, drifting off to sleep with Erik still on top of him.

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## CHAPTER 5

Erik was gone when he woke up in the morning, but Jonathan smiled as he caressed the amber around his neck. He pulled it away from his chest and studied it in the light that crept through the top of the window, noting how intricate the carving was and how delicate the angel's wings looked as they fanned out.

He sighed and smiled, rolling onto his tummy and laughing, because he felt the sun immediately start warming his butt cheeks as he lay on the mattress completely nude. "Erik," he called out, hoping he would come back to the room and find him poised on the mattress, waiting for a repeat of last night. Before he left, Jonathan had felt Erik's rekindled desire pressed up against his backside. In a hazy sleep, he registered the kiss on his temple as Erik climbed over him and dressed in the darkness.

"Erik," he called out again. There was no answer. He sighed and got up, reaching for his boxers and collecting the rest of his clothes so he could go outside and take a piss behind the big bush in the back yard. He was always worried that someone from a high-rise around them would be watching him, but that morning the thought didn't really seem to bother him as much.

When he came back in, he realized that something had changed last night and it wasn't just his virginity. He had started to think of the house as *theirs*. He smiled at the thought.

*Their house.* It would be just he and Erik taking on the world together. They didn't have much, but they had each other and that was worth more than anything he could think of.

He started cleaning the house, just small things at first; there really wasn't much he could do in this place. But it was enough to make him feel a sense of accomplishment when he was finished. But they didn't want it too clean either. Erik had already warned him that too much organization would only invite trouble if someone wandered in. If the house looked like shit, people would be more willing to move on than not. Nobody wanted to stay in a place like this if they didn't have to, and Erik was big on trying to make sure they didn't have

to. Or so he claimed. Jonathan hadn't seen anyone come near the house other than a few kids with spray cans. In fact, he hadn't seen any other homeless people in this part of the city at all, which now that he thought about it, was kind of odd. Maybe it was the proximity to the high-rises around them. It definitely wasn't a homeless-friendly neighborhood.

"Oh well," he said aloud. The thought didn't bother him one bit. If anything, the idea that no one else would be scampering through the window made him feel safer.

He tapped his foot, looking around and wondering what else he could do. He paused when he went upstairs and saw the door on the room across the hall. He tilted his head to the side, suddenly curious as to why Erik had warned him off. He reached for the handle and glanced over his shoulder again. He knew Erik was gone and not likely to be back for hours yet, but he was apprehensive anyway. This was the only room in the house with a door on it and Erik had never explained why. He had only forbidden Jonathan's entry.

He reached into his pocket and took out the penlight as the door swung open. His brow folded in confusion as he looked around. The room was as dark as the rest of the house, but unlike every other room, this room could almost be considered clean, even though it was covered with a thick dust that made him sneeze as soon as he stepped in. There was a mattress on the floor with a faded bedspread tucked neatly over it. A weathered dresser stood across the room, and beside the mattress was a nightstand which appeared to be near rotted. He swung the light into the closet and noticed a few dresses hanging in the door-less shadows.

*Strange*, he thought. It didn't make sense, not against the disaster the rest of the house was. *Why aren't we sleeping in here?* he wondered. Surely the door would be an added level of security for them. But it was kind of creepy too. Maybe that was why Erik had them sleeping across the hall.

He glanced nervously over his shoulder again and stepped in farther, walking to the nightstand, drawn by the picture frame he saw there. He gasped when he picked it up, his head whipping around the room and trying to take all of it in at once.

"Erik," he whispered as he stared at the young boy in the photo. He pulled his sleeve over his hand and rubbed the glass to wipe away the dust. There was

a woman with her arms wrapped around Erik, and they were both smiling beside a ride in a theme park. Jonathan thought Erik looked to be seven or eight, but not much older than ten. Behind them, he could see crowds passing on a long pier. It looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't place it. It was nowhere near this city, he was sure.

He put the frame down and walked around the room, his fingers tracing across the top of the dresser as he stopped and looked at the small mementoes atop it, covered with dust. He picked up a dusty hand mirror and glanced at his own reflection. When he turned it slightly, he saw Erik standing in the doorway behind him, his chest swelling in outrage at the intrusion. He whipped around to face him, almost dropping the mirror in the process.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Erik demanded. "I fucking told you *not* to come in here," Erik screamed.

Jonathan's eyes went wide as Erik stomped over to him. "I'm sorry. It just... I..."

"Get out!" Erik screamed, snatching the mirror from his hand and pushing him away from the dresser.

Jonathan stared and stepped to the side, pressing his back against the wall.

"I said get the fuck out," Erik screamed again. He grabbed Jonathan by the arm, pulled him off the wall and shoved him into the hallway. "Get your stuff and get the fuck out."

"Erik, I'm sorry," Jonathan pleaded. "I didn't mean to..."

Erik ran up to him, only centimeters from his face, his fists clenched. His breath was hot and rank. "I said, get the fuck out. I'm not going to say it again," he growled in a low, dangerous voice.

Jonathan backed up a step, with his hands up in front of him, waiting for a blow. He took a few more steps before he turned into their bedroom and quickly started grabbing his stuff. He grabbed his book bag and began shoving his clothes into it. He glanced over his shoulder as Erik stared and ran his hand through his hair. He seemed unable to take in the cleanliness of the room.

"What the fuck did you do?"

"I..." Jonathan stuttered.

Erik dropped his hand and glared at Jonathan, his nostrils flaring. “Undo it, put everything back.”

Jonathan didn’t understand. “Put it back? I just picked up a little. I thought if we were going to wash...”

“Put it back!” Erik shouted.

Jonathan blanched. “I’m sorry...” he said as he started pushing piles over. Tears were forming and falling over his long lashes. How could this day be so different from last night?

Erik rushed over and grabbed one pile after another, flinging them around the room. Jonathan had disposed of the trash so he only had clothes to toss around.

“I said put them back.” Erik whirled and screamed at Jonathan before the clothes settled around the room. “You think we’re playing house here. Is that it? You think you’re going to be my boyfriend, and we’ll just live happily ever after in this fucking dump?”

“No. I... I... was just trying to make it nice for you.”

“Nice?” Erik barked. “The fuck do you know about nice?” Erik snapped at him. “You keep running around here like I’m supposed to be protecting you. That’s not my fucking job, you know?”

“I didn’t say it was,” Jonathan argued halfheartedly.

“Yeah,” he sneered. “I’m supposed to feel sorry for you. Couldn’t hang with daddy so you took off.” He mimicked Jonathan’s voice. “I feel so fucking sorry for you. Really, I do. You know what I had?” he demanded. “I had a nutcase for a mom and a dad who said fuck it all and left us behind when he blew his brains out. He couldn’t hang either.” He sneered. “Your pathetic sob story ain’t shit, so stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I... I didn’t say it was,” Jonathan murmured, shocked at his response and unsure what had caused his tirade. The tears were flowing freely now and he wiped at them with the back of his hand.

“Yeah, that’s it, cry. Fucking wuss,” Erik continued as if Jonathan hadn’t spoken. “You don’t know shit about what life is like. You need to go back to your daddy and hope he takes you in.”

Jonathan shook his head not wanting to hear any more. “Why are you acting like this?”

“It’s not an act, you little wuss,” Erik growled as he charged up to Jonathan and barked in his face. “You need to stop acting like such a pussy.”

He could tell Erik was high on something, now that he was up close. His pupils were dilated and he smelled of a chemical sweat. “I’m sorry,” he said as he backed away. “Whatever I did, I’m sorry.”

“*I’m sorry. I’m sorry,*” Erik mimed derisively. “You’re right. You are fucking sorry. Now get the fuck out.”

Jonathan felt the wall come up against his back. He looked to the side and saw the doorway just to his left. Now he understood who Special K was, just a younger version of his father. Before he could even think about it, he ran down the stairs, thoughts of his father, and how much Erik sounded like him, clouding his eyes. When he glanced up the stairs one last time, he saw Erik cross the hall and stomp into his mother’s bedroom. A boom echoed through the house as he slammed the door.

Jonathan made his way outside and sank to the concrete walkway, leaning against the house. It felt warm against his back as he wiped his tears away. He was confused and angry. Erik had stopped him from going into the police station, but what Erik didn’t seem to understand was that Jonathan had been there by necessity. It hadn’t been a choice. He’d been hopeless. And he certainly hadn’t wanted to return home. The reason he had left hadn’t changed, his understanding had. He knew that he could not survive on the street. But there hadn’t been any other options for him. He had to return home.

And then, Erik appeared, giving him a glimmer of hope. And throughout their whole short conversation, Jonathan kept hearing his grandmother’s voice, telling him how sometimes God put people into your life for a reason.

He blew out a long breath and pushed himself to his feet, looking at the high-rises a few blocks over. Maybe Erik was right. Maybe he *had* looked to Erik to be his savior. Maybe that notion had given him romantic ideas about making a home together.

He shook his head and when he got down to the sidewalk, he turned and looked up at the house. He hadn’t meant any harm, he was just curious. But

now he understood Erik a little more, and he wondered if maybe *that* was the reason Erik had flown into such a rage.

He sighed again, and looked up and down the street. He had the twenty dollars in his pocket that Erik had given him for an emergency and, now, thanks to Erik, a small clue about how to survive. “I can do this,” he told himself. He glanced up at the house one last time, caressed the amber around his neck, and whispered another apology as he looked at the boarded up windows.

\*\*\*\*

A week later, he was standing in front of the police station again. He looked around but there was no one to stop him this time. Even if there was, he doubted they would be able to convince him that he’d be better off on the street.

His shoulders slumped when he realized how accurate Erik had unwittingly been. He didn’t know if his dad would allow him to return, or not. He probably would. He’d probably let him in the house and not say a single word until he got drunk again, and then he would start telling him how much of a loser he was and how he *knew* Jonathan would come crawling back. And on and on it would go, until the blows started coming again. Until Jonathan had been cowed to the point that he reminded his father how much like his mother he was. How his eyes brought back all the old wounds his mother had inflicted upon them when she walked out and disappeared from their lives.

But there was no one else, and he had nowhere to go. He hadn’t eaten in three days, and he’d almost been caught at the convenience store trying to steal a candy bar. He could go back home on his own and face his failure at life, or he could wait until he got caught and let the cops drag him back. Although, knowing his father, he would probably tell the police to lock him up for a while so it would toughen him up.

He resigned himself to that fate and put one foot on the pavement beside the curb. He was about to step onto the street, when a pair of arms folded around him and pulled him back to the sidewalk.

“I knew you’d come back here,” Erik whispered into his ear.

He wanted to protest, wanted to demand that Erik release him, but he melted back against his chest and let Erik take his weight with a deep, internal sigh. He was so relieved to feel his touch again, so happy, but so tired, and so alone. "I didn't think you wanted me, and I can't do this by myself. You were right. I'm a wuss."

Erik kissed him behind the ear. "No, you're not. I'm just an asshole, and it's been so long since I could trust anyone that..." He paused and let out a long breath. "I'm sorry."

"I never meant to hurt you," Jonathan said as he turned in Erik's arms. "I was just curious."

Erik's jaw clenched for just a second. "It's a touchy subject," he admitted. "But that's no excuse. My mom hasn't been there for me since that picture and..." He shrugged. "Would you like to meet her?"

"She's still alive?" Jonathan asked in surprise. He had been sure from Erik's reaction that she had died sometime in the recent past.

"You could say that. Come on," he insisted as he wrapped his fingers around Jonathan's and tugged him along until he fell into step beside him.

\*\*\*\*

An hour later, they were standing in front of an abandoned hotel. It was so dilapidated Jonathan couldn't even read the name on the building. There were no doors or windows at all. It was just a big, brick husk of some bygone era, covered in kudzu. There was a weathered danger notice from the city hooked to a broken fence that warned people away but Erik took no notice of it and led him to the front entrance.

He felt Erik squeeze his hand once as if to bolster himself and then he led Jonathan up the steps and into the cavernous foyer. Jonathan paused and looked around as Erik glanced over his shoulder and tugged him along.

"It's just up here," he said as they rounded a corner that led up a flight of crumbling cement stairs.

Erik stopped in front of an interior room with no windows and called out quietly. "Mom? You here? It's Erik." He glanced over at Jonathan, cleared his throat, and called out to her again. "Mom, you here?"



The woman who came out of the shadows looked nothing like the picture Jonathan had seen. Her face was haggard and drawn, and she was stooped like a woman many times her age, whatever that was. And she smelled terribly. Her hair was a wild mess and her face was covered with dirt. Jonathan wanted to turn away, but he saw Erik watching him out of the corner of his eye. He made a move to step forward and put his hand out to her but Erik grabbed him immediately and pulled him back, shaking his head. "Don't do that. Just stay here."

"It's me, Mom," Erik said again as he slowly went towards her.

She looked between the two of them, her eyes narrowing on Jonathan. "Who's he?" she demanded, her voice raspy and harsh.

Her whole countenance seemed off somehow, and Jonathan immediately felt sorry for both her and Erik. He'd thought she was a drug addict at first, but as he studied her, he understood that she was mentally ill. His heart went out to Erik immediately. No wonder he had reacted so violently.

"Just a friend, Mom. He won't come any closer," Erik said as he shifted himself so that he blocked her line of sight to Jonathan. He reached into his pocket. "I brought you some food. Are you hungry?"

Jonathan saw her dart her head around Erik and glance at him before she spoke again. "Not hungry. You bring anything else?"

"Just food," Erik said with resignation.

She grunted in disinterest and started to recede into the shadows again.

There was a chair nearby and Erik went to it and knelt down, making a show of putting the sandwich on the seat. "I'm going to leave it here for you, don't forget about it, okay?"

She grunted again from the darkness and Erik turned to look Jonathan in the eye. A long, frustrated sigh followed as he stood and peered into the darkness. "I'm going, Mom. You want me to bring anything next time?"

"No," she barked out of the darkness. "Just tell that lazy ass father of yours to pay the light bill. I'm tired of being in the dark."

"Okay, Mom. I'll tell him," he said as he took Jonathan's hand and led him out of the building.

Erik paused when they reached the gate and looked back over his shoulder. “That’s my mom,” he offered as he rubbed the back of his neck and glanced at Jonathan.

“I’m sorry. Is there anything we can do?”

Erik blew out a breath weighted with anguish. “No. She’s not a danger to anyone so they wouldn’t commit her without insurance. The only other option would be prison.” He paused as he glanced at the building again. “After my dad....” He shook his head as if he could push the past away with his words. “She’s getting worse every year,” he admitted. “I don’t know what to do anymore.”

He took a deep breath and reached for both of Jonathan’s hands. He held Jonathan’s eye with his own as he spoke. “I know I ain’t much; probably won’t ever be, but you’re the only sane thing I have in my life right now.” The words seemed too heavy for his gaze and he glanced down at the dirt between them. “I’m sorry. I don’t want you to go. It’s just... She’s been my secret for so long. I didn’t know how to react.” He stopped again as his forehead furrowed. “I want you to stay,” he said as he looked up, directly into Jonathan’s eyes. “We’ll find somewhere else to stay besides that stupid house. She’s never going to come back,” he added as his eyes flicked to the building for a moment.

Jonathan nodded silently when Erik’s eyes touched on him again. “We’ll figure something out.” He stepped into Erik’s embrace and held still as Erik squeezed the breath out of him.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

Award winning writer **Brandon Shire** has been writing for 15 years and has only recently begun to publish his work. Genres include contemporary gay fiction, m/m romance, horror, and science fiction. Ten percent of the proceeds from the sales of his books are donated to LGBT Youth charities combatting homelessness.

## Contact & Media Info

Connect with Brandon Shire at:

[Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Website](#)

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# KILLIAN'S MOON

By Travis Simmons

## Photo Description

Two men stand in a dark room, firelight creating a backdrop on a whitewashed wall behind them. They are staring into each other's eyes like they are the only two in the world that understand one another. They are in a strong, passionate embrace that only comes with ease to people who know each other intimately.

## Story Letter

He's going off to do this alone. And I have to let him. I know he's strong and capable and will be careful—as careful as he can afford to be. I know what the stakes are, and why I can't help him. But I have to hold him one more time, have to look into his eyes, remind him that he's taking my heart along for the ride.

I won't die if he doesn't make it back, but God knows I may never really live again either. If there are any kind of guardian spirits out there, please help him make it safely through—don't let this be the last time I feel him warm and alive and vibrant between my hands.

*So, Dear Author, I'd like a little action, some angst, and whatever ending you feel will fit. You can even let him not make it home, or make it home in bad shape, but the love and grief would have to be there (and I sure wouldn't turn down a HFN or HEA)*

*No BDSM in this relationship—they are trying to be equals, even though the guy speaking (on the right) is perhaps older or more experienced or has special skills or talents (and yes, those could be paranormal.). Historical, fantasy, sci-fi, or contemporary are all fine. First or third person narrative.*

Thanks,

Kaje

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** space farming, moon mining, lake house, summer romance, sci-fi author, reunited

**Word count:** 12,453

\*NB: This story was previously published in May 2013 by the author under the pseudonym Talus Ripley.

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# KILLIAN'S MOON

By Travis Simmons

The holovision stops chirping and I sigh with relief, trying to relax back into sleep. When I wake up I must remember to change the settings to not let correspondences through so early.

“Taven, I see you.” I haven’t heard Killian’s voice in two years, outside of dreams. Dreams where he doesn’t turn into a shiftless vagabond whenever we start getting close. But that isn’t like Killian; he likes to travel, and he likes to run when things start getting too real. Content that the dream is claiming me again, I relax back into the warm embrace of my bed imagining Killian wrapping me in his loving embrace, where there will be more than sex this time.

The holovision chirps again and I growl in protest.

“Go away,” I mutter to myself.

“No,” comes the voice again. I start coming to myself, realizing the voice is within my home, and talking to me. That’s impossible.

“What has you so excited, Taven?” he asks. “Your sheets are tenting up pretty good.”

And I *am* getting excited. The timbre of the voice brings back memories of trysts under the stars and it’s almost like I can feel Killian moving inside of me in this half-sleeping state I’m in.

“Oh, for the love of God, *wake up!*” he insists.

I roll over with a moan to look at the incoming correspondence and smile when I see the familiar holographic face of Killian floating above the holovision.

“Hey there, sunshine!” The three-dimensional face smiles at me.

“What! Killian, what are you doing invading my holo?” I yelp, balling the blankets in my lap so he can’t see my rising excitement.

“Too late, I’ve already seen it. And if you remember correctly, I’m one of the few people you programmed into your holo to have unapproved access. I

can pop in on you anytime I want. Maybe I even watch you sleep!” His eyebrows knit together and he takes on a creepy look. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“I’m sure you’d enjoy it,” I scoff, sitting up in bed and rubbing my tired eyes. I’m bone tired, one of those sleepy qualities that muffles the senses and makes everything seem like a waking dream. The fact that I’m talking to Killian for the first time in two years when he has done nothing but *plague* my dreams for the last couple months doesn’t help the disorientation.

“Maybe I do. See, you never know.”

I really wouldn’t mind, but I quell that feeling. I have never shared a night with Killian, so if he’s watching me sleep like a stalker, I guess that would be close to spending the night with him.

“Listen, tomorrow is my last day home before I have to go back to work, I thought maybe we could spend some time together.”

Time together with Killian almost always translates into sex. I don’t mind the meaningless sex, but I’m kinda getting too old for it. I am twenty-six cycles now, and I’ve had my fill of one-night stands and just sex. I feel the ticking of my biological clock and lately it has been growing rather loud. I don’t want a life of just meaningless encounters any longer. The older I get, the more I feel I will never have a stable relationship, I will never have a husband and will die a withered old troll that’s always on the outside looking in at happy couples. Not to mention, I’ve been thinking of Killian a lot too, and that complicates meaningless sex.

I want to settle down, and not with just anyone. I have been through several relationships and it always comes back to one thing: they aren’t Killian Myles.

“So? What do you say?” He sounds nervous. I’ve never known Killian to be nervous before.

I open my eyes, not realizing I had them closed in the first place, and look at his face. The expression is different. Normally, when he holos it’s for sex, not for anything major. We are friends, we spend time together, we chat and have beers, but it has been two years since I’ve seen him, and part of me thought he was out of my life for good.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” he says. “I just stopped in to the lake house to see if you were still around and if you wanted to hang out.” His voice sounds dejected, but hard, like he is bracing himself for my rejection. That’s most certainly not like Killian, and not the voice of someone who wants to get laid.

“No—yeah, I can come over. I need to shower first, though,” I tell him. My curiosity is piqued. What can I say? Killian is acting strange, like something is up. After all we are friends, even if we end up in the sack together, and I wouldn’t turn a friend down.

“Great! I will see you in a few.” The holo shrinks out of existence until it is just a pinpoint of light that bobs up and down above the projector, happily waiting for the next incoming correspondence.

I force myself out of bed and to the shower. It’s made slightly easier by the fact that I’m going to see Killian today in person instead of in my dreams. I set the shower timer for ten minutes before the UV-protection chemical phase of the shower kicks in.

I don’t really take a long time picking out an outfit. If today is as warm as yesterday, I should go naked, but since that isn’t decent, and invites the wrong kind of attention, I put on a pair of khaki shorts and a light blue shirt. I slip my sneakers on, lock the house up and head on my way.

It’s been about a hundred years since the first SES vehicles were created, and fifty years since the last of the cars were made obsolete. Since then, people don’t tend to tread the old paths and roads, instead sticking to in-home gyms to escape the sun’s harmful rays, and take to the skies in their flying vehicles.

The roads have largely gone back to nature. Sometimes it makes walking treacherous, and takes most of my attention. I can’t really let myself focus on *where* I’m going if I want to get there unscathed.

I can’t really think about Killian’s correspondence until my feet lead me off the broken road and onto the wooded trail leading to the lake. Again, since people use their SES vehicles more often than walking, I follow game trails back to his home.

The dirt and stone crunches under my feet. The sun is warm enough today that sweat has soaked my shirt to my chest and back.



As I near his home, my heart starts racing. I can't count the number of times I have come this way hoping he would be home, and never finding him there. I always tell myself I came this way to enjoy the lake he offered for my use, but I can't lie to myself, I know that every time I've come here it was to see if he was home. I'm glad he hadn't been. If I had come here and found that he was home but hadn't contacted me, it would have caused a whole world of hurt I wasn't prepared to deal with, especially considering my developing feelings for him.

At times I feel desperate, like I'm stalking him, but he was the one who told me I could use the lake any time I wanted by accessing his beach. Even if that wasn't the reason my feet always brought me here.

In fact, the first time we met was late one summer night almost eight years ago. I had snuck through the woods to the lake. Not realizing there was a house so close, I stripped down and sank beneath the refreshing waves. I took in the sight of the moon, at that time it was whole—it was before the mining accident that blew a crater in the face of the moon—and I floated on my back, feeling the peace of the night wash over me. Crickets sang on the grassy shore, and in the distance I heard the lonesome hoot of an owl.

Killian had found me like that, my pale skin illuminated by the silvery light of the moon, the waves lapping around me, and my eyes closed. When he spoke it startled me and I nearly drowned. And I might have if he hadn't come in to help me.

Our friendship started then, and continued ever since. He was, and remains to this day, a man who prefers to smile and speaks about introverted topics. The type of person who is like a drug. The kind of person you wish you could be because he seems to have a handle on life. He knows what it is about, and he enjoys every second of it.

When I round the bend and see a light on in his house my heart skips a beat. I have to stop myself from running to his door. I see a movement behind one of the windows, and I know it is him. He is just as fresh and enticing as the first day we met. I knew he was here. I mean, we had just talked, but actually seeing proof of him makes it all the more real. I know it isn't a dream now, I know it is real.

I stand there for a moment and just watch him, remembering his touch and the feel of him. It seems so unreal that every time I have come here before it was to see darkened windows and memories of him in the living room. But now, I'm actually seeing him! The lights bobbing around in the house, illuminating the windows with a warmth I feel kindled in my heart when he turns and smiles at me through an open window.

"Taven," he calls once he sees me standing there, spying on him.

He comes running out to me and wraps me in his strong arms. The scent of him fills my nose, the manly sweat that sticks my clothes to his chest and the smell of the sun in his hair. I take it all in, and it's almost more than I can bear.

This is what I've been dreaming of for the last few months, and now that it's real, I can't believe it. I want him with me. I know now, having been through so many relationships, that Killian is the one I want. Not only the one, but the life I want to be part of. I want to share the rest of my life with him, and I want to be entitled to worry about him when he is gone without feeling like I am obsessing.

"I'm so happy to see you." He pulls away from me for a second and looks into my eyes. "What's wrong?"

There are so many things I want to say to him right now, but I am so overwhelmed with emotions that I can't think of the words. Instead I shake my head and hug him tight once more.

"My gosh, how I have missed you. Come on, I was just firing up the grill for an early lunch. We can swim for a while before we eat."

"I didn't bring any swim trunks," I tell him. Mentally I kick myself; it's summer, and we are by a lake, why on Earth wouldn't I bring swim clothes?

"Well, if I remember right, that isn't an issue for you," he says with a sly smile, tweaking a nipple through the wet shirt. It sends electricity coursing through my body, and I know that all my bravado of wanting a relationship with him would melt into crazy sex at a moment's notice if he makes an advance. I have no power to resist Killian.

He takes my hand in his, and I see the familiar living tattoo bloom to the surface, black and textured like scales along his skin. It reacts to touch. His is

mostly cosmetic—some people get tattoos of stone which become like an exoskeleton when they come in contact with anything.

I remember the feel of that tattoo when we make love, and I shiver.

We make our way along the white stone walkway to the front door. I slip my shoes off before I step into the darker, cool interior of his lake house. The inside is all done in wood. We enter through the kitchen and ahead of us is the living room, the right side of which boasts a large staircase leading to the upper story. Directly ahead of us through the living room is a patio door, with a treated wood deck and the lake beyond. The windows and doors are open and it is so silent in the house that you can hear the insects and birds outside, and the occasional fish splashing in the lake. It's a sleepy silence, and as it stretches I can even hear the sigh of wind through the trees.

The wind brings in the smell of the lake and the sun-warmed forest around the house. I could live here. Just standing inside the house, I feel all the tension of the last few days leave me in a cool rush. Being here, surrounded by the trappings of Killian, I feel at peace and at home, so much more than I ever do in my own house. This place is like a haven away from everyday life.

"You like?" he asks.

"I always love being here, your house is so calming, so quiet. It is insane to even think there is such a thing as SES craft flying around outside."

"Eh, I don't really see a lot of ships around here, do you?"

"Some, but not many." I admit.

"So what have you been up to? How is the writing?"

"It's going. I have another book I am about to release."

"Making enough money to support yourself without another job yet?" Killian leans against the wall.

"Just barely, but I manage. I really hate working for other people, so I will trim away what isn't necessary so I can live with the peace of being my own employer."

"That's awesome. Now all you have to do is get yourself an SES and you can start living like I do!" He sounds really proud of that. He knows I envy his

lifestyle, but I always make up reasons why I can't live like he does, even though it is something I long for.

He heads to the bar and starts mixing a drink. "You still drink Pluto's Gambit?"

He is already mixing the silver liquor with tonic before I answer. I hate how loose the drink makes my tongue, but it tastes so amazing going down.

"Of course." I smile, easing into a chair at the kitchen table. This place just feels like home, something I never really had when I was younger. It speaks of love and easy afternoons and cookies for breakfast and lazy Solstices.

"Come on, let's go sit outside." I follow him out the sliding glass door and onto the deck. I look out across the water and love the way the sunlight plays across the ripples.

"I've been thinking about you a lot lately," he tells me, resting the icy glass on the wooden railing where it instantly leaves a ring of moisture under it.

"Yeah?" I smile and inch closer to him, because I like being close to him. He rubs a hand down my arm and where he touches I can feel electricity. I want those fingers all over me. I want to feel his body pressed against me and his tongue slipping...

"Tell me about it," I say, my voice husky with need.

"Strange dreams really," he tells me and I scoff.

"You still believe in that shit?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I?"

"Because of the age we live in? That stuff is just fantasy."

"I think dreams hold power." He leans in and whispers sensually to me, his breath playing along my neck, and his words are deep and resonant in my ear. "The brain is a powerful muscle that can do amazing things, make us feel... sensations."

A shiver runs down my spine and I close my eyes and lean into him.

"You don't think that feeling is magical?" he asks, pulling away from me. I open my eyes and realize he was just teasing me.

“Ass.”

He laughs and walks to the grill. He moves his hand over the wood inside the grill and a flame springs to life in response to the motion sensor igniter.

“I believe we have come a long way in explaining a lot of things,” I tell him.

“But the brain is still a mystery to us,” he says and we fall silent. “But I didn’t invite you over here to discuss our differences.”

“You wanted me to come over here and discuss something else?” I say, and sitting in a chair I take a sip of my drink.

“Not really. I mean, we can talk, but I didn’t have anything specific planned.” The way he is fidgeting suggests otherwise.

“So where have you been?” I ask him. “It’s been two years since I last saw you.” I think about adding the last part—that I have missed him terribly—but he can probably tell that by the way I look off into the lapping water along the grassy bank of his private shore.

“Recently?”

“Well, I mean in the last two years, yeah.” I laugh. “I guess it isn’t really that recent.”

“Well, they have found another source for terbium on the moon, and with the growing number of SES vehicles, we need all the terbium we can get for the batteries. So, when I go back to work the day after tomorrow, I will be heading to the new site. They don’t have anything drilled there, so we will have to start from scratch.”

I remember what happened last time they started from scratch. I look up at the sky and I can see only a ghost of the moon now that it is daylight. But my eyes know where to go, my heart knows where the crater is. It had been a horrible accident, and Killian was lucky he didn’t die in it.

Terbium isn’t the only mineral being farmed from the moon right now, but it seems to be the most dangerous, and it’s the job that Killian is on.

“You almost didn’t make it the last time they settled into the deposit,” I say somberly.

“Yeah, I know. I’m not sure I ever told you how scared I was. Floating out in space, grappling to that chunk of moon rock before the rescue pods could get to me. I really thought I was going to die, Taven.” He looks deeply into my eyes, and I can read the fear there. I had felt that same fear when I saw the explosion that day, sitting on this very deck, thinking about him. Somehow I knew that he had been part of that explosion. Somehow I knew that he was in the accident, and I had feared the worst. I ran home, waiting for the holo from his parents, but it never came. That night I was able to pull up a broadcast from the moon on the holovision and learned that one person had drifted out to space, but had been rescued. It wasn’t until the following day I learned it had been Killian and that he was safe, and I no longer had to worry.

“You know,” he says, his voice a mere whisper over the crackling flames of the grill. “The entire time I was out there, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I was drifting on this rock as large as my house, and all I could think about was how I would never see you again.”

“I have that effect on a lot of boys,” I tell him.

“I am being serious, Taven.”

And I love that he is being serious, but I have a hard time admitting my emotions, and even accepting them from others. It is something I have been working on, and I force myself to relax at his words.

“I have been thinking of you a lot lately, too,” I admit, leaning back in the chair and slipping off my sneakers.

“Have you now?” He stands up straighter. “I did see how excited you were this morning at just hearing my voice.”

I blush. “Not like that.”

He comes over and sits in the chair beside me, swirling his drink around so the ice and alcohol mix together, before he takes a drink. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“There really isn’t a lot to tell,” I say. “I haven’t heard from you in so long, I thought maybe you had forgotten me.”

“How could I ever forget you?” he asks, taking hold of my hand and pulling it closer to him.

“I had hoped you hadn’t,” I admit.

“You are lonely,” he says, and when I look at him I can tell he is studying my face; he is looking deeply into me as if he can read the weight of my soul, the burden of my emotions.

“Extremely.”

“It’s because you live so far out here without any other men around you,” he tells me.

“I’ve dated.”

“Who?”

“A few guys, but they just don’t measure up.”

“Oh, they don’t, do they?” He tugs on my hand playfully. “What are you measuring them against?”

“I just have really high standards, I guess.” I dodge the question; I’m still not sure what will come of this meeting. I would love to tell him that I want to be his, that I want this to be my life from now on, beside him, *with* him. I have had the time to think about it, and I am tired of being friends who occasionally have sex when he wants it. But I would rather share fleeting moments between the sheets or talking on the deck with him than to push him away with demands of something he doesn’t feel.

This conversation is so strange though. It seems like there is something else he is trying to tell me, but he isn’t *saying* it. It’s like he wants me to guess it, and I don’t have those super mental powers like he imagines exists.

“Be careful.” He stands and sets his drink on the table. He peels off the sweat-soaked shirt. “We are getting older, and soon we will be trolls that none of the young ones want any longer.” He winks at me and undoes his shorts. As they fall to the hot deck and he kicks them away I can’t imagine anyone *ever* not wanting him.

I look from his strong feet, up his sculpted legs. My eyes graze over his flaccid penis lying heavily in his trimmed hair. His abs are smooth, but defined. There isn’t anything bulky about Killian. He is trim and fit, and though he is shorter than me, his muscles are long, giving the impression of him being taller than he really is. What a way to cut to the chase.

“We have time for a quick swim before the burgers are ready to go on,” he tells me. “Your turn.”

“Don’t you have swim trunks?” I stand and shuck my shorts, and unlike Killian I wear underwear.

“Yeah, but I would hate for you to feel left out.” He winks. “Now, let’s see.”

I roll my eyes, pull my shirt off and toss it at him, and while he is fighting with my sweat covered garment on his head, I tug my red undershorts off. When he gets the shirt off his face I stand before him naked as I have been so many times before. For some reason my being naked feels like it is ruining the mood, like I am expecting just the normal from this, like what I am going to get from him is not what I want, and my life will continue as it is, writing emotionless science-fiction novels to keep my head above water and living a life of non-living, just existing. Killian is the life I want.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, coming toward me. He was always able to read me better than I would like.

“Nothing.” I try to smile.

“Taven, I like to think we are close enough that you can tell me what is going on and not lie.”

“Are we?” I ask, and though I hate to ruin this moment, I feel it is coming and I can’t stop it. “Killian, I really, *really* love what we have going on here, but—”

“It isn’t enough anymore, is it?” He cuts me off before I can really get ramped up.

I shake my head. He gently eases me down into the chair and kneels before me.

“Tell me about it?” he says.

“It’s been two years Killian. I haven’t heard from you in two years.”

“I know.”

“I worry for you every time you are up there, but the thing is I don’t know *when* you are up there. I go through months and months worrying that there



will be another explosion on the moon that will take you away from me again. I sit up every night listening to the holovision reports just to see if there is an accident in one of the mines that I can't see from here, just to know if you are OK. And you aren't even up there all that time. You are only up there for two-month tours."

"I didn't realize it affected you like that," he admits.

"It does."

"You know I think of this as a lot more than just sex, right?" he asks.

"No, I don't know that at all."

"I do."

I try not to act irritated. I really hate getting this way, because when I have to explain my feelings, when I am so overwhelmed by them that they just come out and I can't stop them, I get pissed. It makes me feel weak, like I am laying all of my vital organs out for someone else to see, to do with what they will.

I have to remember that he is only here for another day, and I don't want to spend our time together fighting.

"Well, at first I thought all you wanted was sex," he admits. "And I am more than fine with that. You are one of those men, Taven, that I just want to be inside of all the time."

Yeah, he's a real romantic.

"Then I saw that you were more than a smooth, tight hole and that you had some really great things going on in your mind, and that you were so much like me, a nice fit, a great counterpart. And then I started getting attached." He stands up and leans against the railing, looking over the glimmering water. "And when I started getting attached I started thinking about how I am a space-miner and how dangerous my job is. I wanted nothing more than to make you more than just an occasional fling, but that wasn't fair to you. If we were dating you could end up tragically alone.

"And then the explosion happened and I am up there, floating through all this darkness, floating away from my crew and our equipment. I look down at

Earth as I use what tools I have to try to secure myself to the debris, and all I can think of is you. All I can think of is the last time we were together, and how it was so blissful for me. And that it will be the last time. And I am thankful that I didn't take you to my side. I am thankful that I didn't make you my guy, because you would be alone now."

I stare down at my hands. There really isn't anything I can say to that because his job is dangerous. People die doing it all the time. It isn't normally the job someone picks if they are coupled.

"So I stopped communications. I thought if I distanced myself from you that it would end all of the thoughts, all of these emotions that can only lead to no good."

"I understand."

"That's why I am getting out. I have enough saved to last me a few years, but I have this new site to get settled and another few months before I can draw on my retirement."

"So what does that mean?" My heart is in my throat. The implications make me glad I am sitting down.

"It means, Taven Majors, that I want to make this a thing."

"Us?"

"No, the deck. YES, *us*, you dumbass."

"We are a thing?"

"Do you want to be my thing?"

"Only if you want to be *my* thing."

"You know how I love your thing."

"And I yours."

He kneels in front of me and pulls me close to him. My heart is racing. This is so much more than just a lustful kiss. This isn't an "I'm going to fuck your brains out" kind of kiss. This is the kiss of solidifying our future together.

Again the tattoo blooms to the surface of his skin, like ink rising to the surface of water, blooming in response to my touch. I reach behind his right

ear, and press gently where they had injected him with the strand of the tattoo. The scales fade.

“Why did you do that?” he asks. “Don’t you enjoy the sensation?”

“Because I want to feel your skin, not your tattoo,” I tell him honestly.

His lips are tender, soft, and taste of sunshine and rain. I close my eyes and lose myself in him. His tongue slips past my teeth and I feel it twine with mine. I wrap my arms around him and slide off the chair, pulling him tight to me. His musk surrounds me. Every inhalation of breath is infused with Killian, and every touch is full of Killian. I can’t get enough of him.

It’s like the first time we have ever been together. It’s like the first time being with anyone, because it is the first time there has been this feeling behind it. I think most people call it love. I am not sure because I have never felt it during sex.

He tosses a shirt on the deck and lowers me onto it so I don’t get burned. Even through the moist blue fabric I can feel the heat of the deck mirroring the heat of Killian as he comes down on to me, pinning me in place.

He eases my legs up, and I can feel the slick tip of him there at my entrance. He pushes and I exhale, trembling with the sensation of feeling him, *needing* him inside of me. He moves slowly, wanting this moment to last, wanting the sensation to never stop. But I just want to be overwhelmed with him. I want to feel him on me, in me, *one* with me.

I arch up into him, and fire spreads through me as he loses his balance and crashes down onto me, forcing his entire length into me with one quick fumble. I gasp into his mouth and he tries to pull away, but I bite his tongue, not letting him. I make a noise low in my throat, and he repositions, pushing hard against me, as if his length isn’t enough and he wants to climb into me.

He pulls all the way out, lets me get my breath and then thrusts back in. Killian is like this, he likes full-length thrusts. I move with him with the ease of water on a bank, moving to his current.

His breath is getting sharper, more ragged in my mouth and his pace is getting less calculated, more vicious, more filled with the need of release.

When he comes I feel it hot and gooey inside of me. I feel his dick slip deeper into me with the heat of his semen.

He is growing flaccid, but doesn't want to stop; eventually he slips out of me and isn't able to push back in. He takes that as his cue and slides down my sweaty body, taking my entire length into his throat. It doesn't take too many bobs before I blast off in his mouth.

I close my eyes and I can see stars. How many times have I jerked off thinking of him, thinking of something like this? And now that it is happening again it feels euphoric. I have never felt anything as amazing as this moment. Lying here in the heat with him, feeling his warmth encasing my penis, swallowing every drop of everything I have to offer.

I swear at that point I touch God. I know true bliss and contentment.

"That was some swim," he tells me.

I pull him down to me and kiss him deeply, tasting the remnants of me on his tongue.

"Who needs to swim?" I say after we break apart.

"Um, I am pretty sure we do since we are covered in spunk."

I groan. "I just want to lie here with you."

"Later. We can camp out here tonight if you want."

"Nothing sounds better than a night under the stars with you, but I didn't bring any clothes."

"You left some here last time you were over for a swim, I had them laundered last night when I got in."

"Planning this were you?" I ask.

"I don't think God himself could have planned something this perfect." He kisses me again. "Come on, let's take a dip before the coals go out and I have to start another fire for the burgers."

The water is cool against my super-heated skin and feels amazing lapping around me. I would love to freeze time and just stay in this moment, this lazy afternoon, for the rest of my life. I could share eternity in this cool lake with the man of my dreams swimming around me.

“What are you looking at?” Killian asks, splashing a wave of water at me. I splutter and wipe water out of my eyes, only to have him grab hold of me and dunk me. I come up coughing and trying to blow lake water out of my nose. He laughs at me and swims away before I can retaliate.

“Not much,” I tell him, once I have composed myself.

“Oh?” he says, grabbing my dick. “That’s not what you were saying a few minutes ago.”

“I don’t remember saying anything a few minutes ago. My body was out of my control.”

He laughs and pulls me into his embrace. I feel the entire length of his body press against mine under water and I relax into his kiss as if it is the most natural thing in the world. I lean back and look into his eyes, his tan face beaded with water, his short hair streaking over his forehead.

“What?” he whispers.

“Killian, I love you,” I whisper back.

A huge grin splits his face. “That has to be the most amazing thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It is a truly amazing thing to be able to admit.”

We spend a couple more minutes treading water and just holding each other as if we would never get another chance to. It is amazing to be able to just relax around him finally, to know this is where I belong, and I have finally arrived at the point I have longed for so long.

“Come on, the coals should be ready for the burgers.”

He must have just cut the grass, because when I climb up on the grassy shore, the remnants of cut grass stick to my hands and knees.

When Killian goes to get the burgers I take up a position in his kitchen, slicing fruit and vegetables to go with the meal. I never thought I could have such happiness from such a domestic chore, but honestly at this point I think no amount of success or notoriety could make me this happy. I am ecstatic just being in his presence, and I don’t care if I am a writer that no one knows, because in Killian’s eyes, I am the only person he wants.

I look out the window, and watch him dancing around stupidly with the spatula as the hamburgers brown, and think I have to be the luckiest man alive. He keeps dancing to some internal music, and I know he knows I am watching him, because he starts smiling one of his smiles that always melts my heart.

“What!?!” he says finally, acting like he just now noticed I was watching him out the small window. “Aren’t you supposed to be cutting fruit?”

“I was, until I realized you were fruitier than the fruit I am cutting.”

“Shut your face, Mr. Majors.”

“Or what?”

“I will make you sleep inside tonight, and watch me sleep naked in the moonlight.”

“Now, that seems pretty harsh.”

“Harsh punishment for harsh words, toad.” He laughs. “Burgers are done.”

“Did your dancing help?”

“They took some encouragement.”

“Thank God you had just the remedy.” I gather the fruit into a bowl and place the lettuce and tomatoes on a plate.

“Yeah? I would like to see you dance a burger done like that.”

“Killian, when *I* dance, it will cook the shit out of *steak*.”

He laughs as the screen door slams behind me and we sit down at the table on the deck for lunch.

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That night, after dinner is done and dishes are washed, we gather bedding and build a makeshift tent outside.

“I can’t believe with all the traveling you do that you don’t have a freaking tent!” I tell him, snuggling into his shoulder.

“That armpit smell good, does it?” he jokes.

“Like the best armpit ever.”

“I don’t really camp, just sleep in my SES.”

The chirping of crickets lulls me into a deep meditative state somewhere between being awake and asleep where I am aware of what is happening around me, but not completely sure it isn't a dream.

"Are you real?" I ask.

"Nope, I am fake." He pulls me close to him and kisses me on the forehead. "I'm here. This is real. You aren't dreaming." He whispers the last.

"It feels like a dream."

"I know."

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I wake before him to the sun in my eyes. He is still passed out beside me, snoring loud enough to scare away any living creature within a hundred kilometers. Just because I can, I lift up the covers to look at his entire body and an unexplainable joy fills me. There may be many amazing men out there, but this one here beside me thinks I am just as amazing as I think he is.

Slowly I crawl out from under the blankets and head to the kitchen. One thing I am great at is cooking. One thing he sucks at is keeping a full pantry. Of course, if he isn't here often he wouldn't keep a full pantry.

I find things to make pancakes and in the icebox I find some side pork. I set the pork in a bowl of water to speed up the thawing while I get working on pancakes. If I were at home with all of my gadgets I could have thawed the pork instantly and mixed the pancakes with ease, but he likes less technology and more simplicity. Whatever. If his side pork turns out tough he will have to deal with it.

As I work I can't help but think of tomorrow, and how his departure is looming on us like some dark beast threatening to steal him away from me forever. I try to remind myself that it won't be long before he is done and safe from his job. But the truth is, now that I have him with me, I don't ever want to let him go.

I know he isn't sleeping any longer because it has been several minutes since he snored last. I hear the floorboards behind me creak and I know he is behind me. Just as he is about to pounce I spin around and shout. The look on his face is priceless.

“Why did you have to scare me?” he says, putting a hand to his naked chest. “And why are you dressed?”

“First off, it was preemptive, and second, have you ever gotten hot grease splattered on your cock? Doesn’t feel that great.”

“Who says I was going to scare you?”

“I know you Killian Myles. You are a prankster.” I go back to mixing.

“Maybe I was going to do this.” He wraps his arms around me and pulls me tight into him. His lips find my ear and I moan because that is one of my triggers and he knows it. I can smell his body as he presses me to the counter. He smells like nature, like fresh air and moonlit promises.

“Mind if we lose these?” he asks, tugging on my shorts.

“No,” I whisper, and in one fluid motion he has my shorts off me, but he doesn’t rise. Instead he pushes me forward and I feel his hands on me, opening me up, and his mouth going to my entrance. I gasp as the pleasure of his tongue fills my body. Each lick sends jolts of electricity through me, and I lose all control of my extremities, slumping against the counter for support.

“I thought you would never submit,” he jokes. I push his head back in place.

“Less talk, more lick,” I say.

“Sounds like a win, win.”

After he has me wet enough, and weak enough, he stands and positions himself behind me. I feel him at my entrance again, but I can’t wait for him to ease in. I turn around and push him to the floor. Angling myself over him I place him at my entrance and slide down his length in one fluid motion.

He gasps and I feel him spasm.

“Already?” I ask.

“What can I say? You taste amazing.” I feel the heat of his orgasm spreading through me, but I haven’t finished yet, so I keep riding him.

“Up for round two?”

“He seems to think so.” Killian motions to his cock. He puts his hands behind his head and I ride him like there’s no tomorrow. His hands find my



cock and start to stroke me. I lean back and keep moving around on him, feeling his length plunging into my depths, a shock of pain and pleasure floods my body at the apex of his thrust until finally I am coming, a huge arc into his opened mouth. He bucks hard and I feel such incredible heat flood through me, filling me up.

“Good morning,” he says, swallowing.

“Every day can start like that as far as I am concerned,” I gasp, flopping onto his chest.

In time, we peel our bodies apart, eat our breakfast, and get cleaned up.

When I come out Killian is standing before the holovision above the fireplace, and the channels are flipping automatically.

“What’s that?” I ask as one three-dimensional figure vanishes to be replaced by a news broadcaster from the moon. He turns to me and the hologram vanishes.

“Oh, you mean this?” He snaps his fingers and the holo comes back on.

“I can’t believe you had one of those chips installed!” I laugh at him. “Aren’t you the one always concerned with the archaic belief of Big Brother?”

“Hey, that chip is really helpful when I want to turn on stuff without moving.” The holovision comes on again, the image blurry at first and then gathering more strength until it looks like small people carrying out some soap opera on the mantel.

“Isn’t it awesome?” he triumphs. “I feel like a freaking wizard from those books you write!”

“I don’t write about wizards, and that chip makes you more droid than wizard.” I sit on the edge of the couch. “Does that chip in your head brew a good cup of coffee too?” It’s really a joke.

“Only if there is water in the pot.” He frowns.

“You’re kidding me?”

“No. Do I look like the type that would risk mental espionage if I didn’t get coffee out of the deal?”

“Ha. Ha.”

“I have something to show you,” he tells me, holding out his hand.

“I’ve seen your penis already.”

“Sick of the sight?”

“Absolutely not!”

“It’s not my penis. Something even better.” He winks at me.

“Is that possible?”

“Will you just shut up already and come here?”

I take his hand and he leads me out of the patio door and on to the deck. If it’s possible, today is warmer than yesterday, but it is overcast and I know it will storm later.

“Weather predictions are saying thunderstorms,” he tells me, looking to the east.

“That chip tell you the weather too?”

“That and so much more!” He sounds very proud of the fact.

“X-ray vision?”

“If I wanted to see you naked, I would just strip you down.”

“If you could,” I scoff.

“Is that a challenge?”

“No!” I start backing away but he lunges at me and yanks my shorts down. My penis flops with the effort and he slaps at it playfully. “Stop!” I try to run but he grabs me around the waist and it’s down the patio stairs we go, to a lower deck, where I see something bobbing in the water that I didn’t see before.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“What?” he asks, turning around so I lose sight of the object that looks like a round floating bed. “All I see is one fine ass.” He slaps me a couple times and I wince. “It’s kinda red now.”

“No kidding. I mean that boat-bed thing.”

“That’s what I wanted to show you if you didn’t waste so much time. Geez.”

He turns back around and I catch sight of the object again. It's round, with sides that keep the water at bay. Inside is bedding and pillows intended for sleeping on the water, I am assuming. He takes me over to the bed and tosses me in. Water splashes but the bed is resilient, and doesn't get any water inside or even wobble precariously as he gets in.

He turns around, unties the bed from the deck, and we start floating away. He moves a basket of food and water to the foot of the bed. Apparently he plans on being out here for a while.

"Now you're stuck with me," he informs me as he settles into the bed beside me.

"I can think of worse things."

"I can't. I am pretty dreadful."

"I've noticed."

"And occasionally I short out and do crazy things!" He makes a strange monstrous face and comes at me like he is going to bite me.

"I think I can manage."

"Really?" He pulls my shirt up, plants his face in my stomach and blows hard. The action produces a loud farting noise and I start kicking my feet and shrieking because it tickles.

"Stop!"

"See? Crazy."

"Absolutely looney," I agree.

A few moments pass where we don't say anything, but just stare up at the tumultuous clouds above. In the distance I hear a rumble of thunder which promises a storm to come. I wonder if the bed will be safe, but I don't see anything that can draw a current.

"What's on your mind?" he asks me, serious for the first time in a long time.

"That today is my last day with you for two months." It hangs unsaid in the air that it could be a whole lot longer if anything should go awry with his expedition on the moon.

“You do know that mining accidents happen all the time?” he asks.

“I know. I am trying to be optimistic about the two months.”

“No, what I mean is, accidents happen all the time and there aren’t always casualties.”

“I know, I listen to the holo broadcasts all the time.”

“Then you should know that I am in danger, but that doesn’t mean I will die.”

“Yeah.” But it’s just my luck that he will. It isn’t often that I have this kind of happiness. It seems like an oasis in the desert of misery my life has become.

“Then, you should know I will be back.” He doesn’t sound convinced.

“I should know that, but I can’t calm myself with the unknown hanging over our heads.”

“It’s just this one last mission and then I am done.”

“And we can travel?” I ask.

He nods, but I start crying because I can’t imagine that future happening, I just have this overwhelming sense of loss and he hasn’t even gone anywhere yet. It pisses me off that I can’t just enjoy these last hours we have together.

He pulls me close to him and holds me tight as the thunder rolls closer. When I open my eyes, my head sore from crying, I can see the flashing of lightning in the distance and feel the first drops of rain.

“We are going to get wet,” I tell him.

“Nah.” He waves his hands above us majestically and a force field wobbles into place, creating a nearly translucent bubble around us. He removes his clothes and tosses them at our feet.

“Again already?” I ask, taking my shirt off.

“Do you want to? I was just thinking how much more natural it feels to be naked around you.”

This time when we make love it is tender; it isn’t filled with need and hunger, but with a slow burning fire that lasts for a long time.

When we are done we sleep for a while, wrapped in each other’s arms just feeling the waves rock the boat-bed, listening to the thunder boom closer and

closer, and listening to the rain hit the force field as if it is pattering onto a window.

“Do you believe in magic?” Killian asks me sometime later as we drift in a lazy half-sleep. We are floating listlessly along. We are lying on our backs in a tangle of clothes, watching as each bead of water hits against the force field as if it is sticking to glass before it languidly trails off to join the lake.

“I’ve told you, that damn chip in your head isn’t magic.”

He laughs at me, a deep rumble of a noise. Not the silly, blissful noise of yesterday, but a calmer, relaxed laughter. I know this side of him. Yesterday he was the person he shows to everyone else. Today, he is the person he shows when he isn’t trying to impress, when all of his walls are down and he is just being Killian.

“Not that.” He flicks a bug off my leg and rolls on one side, his arm propping his head up. He stares at me with his aquamarine eyes and my heart skips a beat. “Real magic.”

“Like witchcraft?”

“I guess. More passionate though.”

“I used to, when I was younger. Now I’m not so sure.” How could I? So many things I used to think were mysterious have been explained the more I learn and the more I have grown into an adult.

“I do,” he tells me. “I feel magic every time I’m with you. Every time I’m inside you, it feels like two pieces of a puzzle that are meant to be together, meant to stay together.”

I can hardly register what he is telling me. My heart is hammering so hard I can barely hear what he is saying and I really don’t trust my voice right now.

“That’s just lust,” I say.

“It’s more than that.” Killian trails a finger up my stomach and I feel all the hair along my body electrically charged by that one touch. “It’s like, when you see someone and your heart starts racing, and you can feel the throbbing beat of it through your entire body. You feel supercharged with this energy that seems larger than you, hard to fit inside your flesh. You think if you could just cast that energy out of yourself you could work wonders.”

“I think I know what you mean,” I say quietly. He is close to me, but this time it is different. He is close to me in a way that is more than physical. I can feel that energy in me now, that throbbing heartbeat and, though I am not horny, the blood runs straight to my cock. But it’s more than that. I don’t specifically want him to take my length into his mouth, but when he does I lay back and watch the rain fall on the force-field, and then trail off like tears.

When we finish, the moon is starting to come out, and I look up to see the chunk that had blown off in the mining accident. Even with the cloud cover I can see the lights shining inside that crater and know Killian will be headed back there tomorrow.

“There isn’t anyone I want more than you,” Killian tells me. “Here, I have something for you.” He leans down to our feet and grabs his shorts. There is a minute where he fumbles in the folds of fabric before he comes back with a necklace.

“Seriously?” I ask. I hadn’t expected a proposal when I got the holo yesterday.

“Taven, I am serious that I want you. I have wanted you for a long time now, but was so unsure of so many things. Now that I have decided to get out, I want you to be mine.”

“Is that an actual proposal necklace?” I ask, sitting up and inspecting the silver locket he is holding. He flips a catch and it opens up. Inside I see the miniature chip and the attached needle. “You really did plan for this didn’t you?”

“This is a really cheap one. I wasn’t out much if you said no. If you accept, I will get another one when I get home, a better one.”

“What do you mean a better one? That is just silly. It doesn’t matter how expensive it is. It’s just a symbol of something you can’t put a price tag on.”

“Is that a yes?”

I want to answer immediately, I open my mouth a couple times trying to get the yes out, but things are just moving so fast.

“Look, if we decide against it later we can just destroy it in water. I know this is awfully sudden, but it isn’t like we are complete strangers.”

“No, I know that. I just never expected all of this!” I am just so overwhelmed that it is really hard for me to find words to express what is going on inside of me. It isn’t all just love, there is a lot of fear there too. Am I ready to accept this if he dies? Am I ready for my life to change like this? I am twenty-six cycles. Is that too young for all of this? And where I am living will I ever find someone I am so over the top in love with as I am with Killian?

“Listen, I know I have said not all mining accidents end in death, but there is a real possibility there, Taven. I want to make sure you are cared for if something happens to me. The chip in this proposal necklace holds all of my will in it. If we prick our fingers and let our DNA seal the deal, I know you will be cared for if something happens to me.”

My head is spinning and the thunder overhead only confuses me more.

“New missions like this are the most dangerous, and I can’t guarantee I will be okay this time if there is another accident. Being so close to the end of my time with space mining means that they probably won’t put me in the most dangerous of jobs, but there have been budget cuts lately and I just don’t know where I will be when I go back.” His voice is starting to take on the tone of defeat, like he already suspects my answer is no.

Since my voice won’t work, I reach out and take the necklace from him. I work the catch and see the silver locket flip open. I stare at it for a moment, and I see the small green numbers flashing on the computer display. The needle is on the opposite side of the locket, small enough to cause minimal discomfort but large enough to draw out enough blood to get a DNA reading on. Once both of our fingers are pricked and the locket closed, our proposal is a legally binding contract, the tip of the needle inscribing our blood on the pact like a signature.

I place my thumb on the side of the locket with the needle. I feel Killian place his hand on my knee, and I stop thinking of him as a fling, as a wayward vagabond, and instead as my other half. I feel the needle break the surface of my skin as the first blinding flash of lightning illuminates the darkening sky.

This man, sitting naked before me, fearful as a child that I will disappear in the night, is the one I am giving myself to now. It’s like a secret door has

opened up and I have been let into a world I've only glimpsed through murky windows before. A world other people were privy to, but I would never truly know.

He looks into my eyes, and there is a connection. I feel my heart go out to him and know that at this moment we are promising one another the life of a couple. A shared life with appointments and photographs and pets, maybe kids one day. A true family. Something I lost long ago and never thought I would have again.

I don't stop pushing until my thumb is flush with the sides of the locket. I take his face in my other hand and just nod my head. There are tears standing in his eyes. I pull him close and kiss him tenderly. His lips quiver against mine and I realize he is as nervous as I am.

"For the record," I tell him, pulling away. "I am not doing this to be taken care of. I am doing this because I love you."

"I know. You aren't the type that needs taking care of. But I am the type that needs to take care of someone. I can go back to the moon now, confident that if the worst happens, that I have provided for you long past my life."

I feel the needle retract as I remove my thumb from the locket. There on the tip is a drop of blood that slips down the side of the needle and into a compartment below. I hand the proposal necklace back to Killian and he punctures his finger with it much more assuredly than I did.

He removes his finger, and gives the blood a second to reach the other side of the compartment before he closes the locket. There is a moment of mechanical clicking and some whirring noises.

"Congratulations Taven Majors and Killian Myles on your betrothal," a mechanical female voice says.

"There." He breathes a sigh of relief. "Now, if something happens..."

"Stop." I shake my head. "I don't want to hear you say it. I know where to take it when I need to have the will claimed."

"Good."

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When the morning comes, I find we have drifted back to his dock. Killian climbing out of the boat-bed is what wakes me up. He is still naked, and I don't mind that. But I am panicked that it is the fateful day already.

He helps me out of the boat and hugs me tight. I close my eyes and feel the warm wind playing across our skin, I feel the entire length of him pressed against me, his feet on the outsides of mine, his heart thumping against my chest, slightly off rhythm with my own. It feels like an eternity that we hold each other, but sooner than I would like he is pulling away and kissing me on the mouth.

"I have to get ready," he tells me.

"Where are you headed to first?"

"I have to check in at Neoma City, and then I will be shuttled out to the dig site tomorrow."

"When do you actually start work?"

"Not really sure, could be as soon as I get there, but more than likely it will take a day or so to get to the major work."

"Do you want something to eat?"

"Yeah, but I want to cook for you today. Why don't we shower first?"

There is something about summertime that makes me feel less dirty than other seasons, but I realize what we did yesterday and that we are in need of cleaning up.

I am content today. Last night I felt like his leaving was a death sentence, but now the logical side of my mind is taking over and I know all of the broadcasts I listen to, and I have researched space mining enough to know the chances of Killian living are greater than his dying. It is a dangerous job, but not an assured danger.

I expect there to be sex, but there isn't. I don't think either of us could really function properly anyway after all the sex we had over the last couple days. I step under the hot water and feel it run in rivulets down my flesh. Killian steps in behind me and starts soaping me up. Once he is content that I am clean enough, I rinse off and return the favor, enjoying how the white suds bunch together with the contrast of his body hair.

“What’s for breakfast?” I ask as we towel off.

“That’s a surprise,” he says.

I sit on the sofa and use the screen embedded in his coffee table to scroll through his list of books, while he slices and dices and cooks breakfast in the kitchen. At times I feel him watching me, but when I look out at the stove I can only see him in profile. He isn’t looking at me, but he is smiling as he works. I know he feels it too, that this is our new normal. When he gets back we will have many more mornings like this, and many more evenings like the last couple.

I stand to go to him and he points at me with a spatula, a clump of egg dropping onto the floor.

“Sit your ass back down Mr. Majors, breakfast isn’t done yet.”

I sit back down with a sigh, and the holo comes on.

“There, watch something.” Killian smiles.

“I hate space operas,” I protest.

“You don’t believe in aliens?”

“Isn’t that kind of hard not to believe?” I ask.

“I don’t know, is it?”

“Seriously Killian don’t you ever watch the news?”

“As little as possible,” he admits cheerfully.

“Don’t you talk to people?”

“Not about aliens. Please, tell me your theory on space-life, Mister Sci-Fi Author.”

“We’ve *found* life on another planet. Three in fact. One is a very large planet and similar in composition to Earth, one is very old, and the other is a wintry moon.” I tell him.

“Really?” He truly sounds shocked, like he didn’t know.

“How could you *not* know this?”

“I’ve been on the moon?” It is a weak excuse.

“Yeah, but you *do* have holovisions up there! You need to stop watching this trash.”

“When did we find them? And are we sure? You know we have had many false alarms.”

“Yeah, we are sure. We’ve streamed some data to them. Some old record that was sent into space almost two hundred years ago.” I shrug, not really knowing the specifics on the data sent.

“So they are going to think we are primitive, then?”

“Really not all that much has changed.”

“Enough has. When did they do all this?” He asks as if he doesn’t believe me yet.

“Finding the aliens?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know, like three months ago. We just sent the data to them a week ago.”

“I was in Egypt.”

“They *have* holos there too, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” He seems to be giving in.

“You are messing with me, right?”

“Nope. Breakfast is done.”

“About time, I am starved.” I take the glass tablet out of his coffee table and start scrolling through the headlines. “Here, educate yourself.” I sit the tablet on the table before him. The article pops up in front of him, projected into the air by the tablet. He reads as we eat the eggs and fruit he prepared.

“Wow, that’s crazy.”

“Yeah, that’s what everyone else said... *three freaking months ago when we found them!*”

“Okay, okay, I will start reading the news more.”

When breakfast is done, I clear up the table while he goes upstairs to pack. When he comes back down he is wearing the skintight silver suit everyone has

to wear when leaving the atmosphere. There is a tube that runs from the suit around his right wrist to his nose, where it forks into each nostril.

“I think that’s all,” he says, and he moves closer to me. He holds out his hand and takes mine. Into my hand he places a key. “To the house, use it whenever you want. Feel free to move some stuff in if you like.”

I nod and shuffle my feet nervously.

“And here’s this.” Over my head he slips the proposal necklace, and I put it under my shirt, feeling the cool metal against my heart and the whirring of the computer chip inside like a fly trapped in a bottle, beating its wings feebly for release.

Now that the time is upon us, it feels strange, like we are bracing ourselves for the worst.

“Where would you like to go first when I get back?” he asks, pulling me tight. The space suit is like armor on him. It doesn’t feel right, having only ever seen him with casual clothes on, or naked.

“I would love to go someplace remote with you, where we can just spend a week full of moments like these last two days.”

“The Frozen North?” he asks. “They have some really awesome yurts up there we could camp out in.”

“Oh, yes! I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“It’s a plan. Now, give me a kiss. I have to go.”

My throat is tightening up and I can’t form any words. I was afraid this was going to happen. I hate the quiver in my chin, I hate how my face is scrunching up.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper because I can’t actually make the words come out.

“Don’t cry,” he says into my ear. He leans back and kisses me. “I promise not to be reckless. I have something worth coming back to now.”

“I know,” I nod.

“And two months really isn’t that long. I will send correspondence as often as possible.” He pulls me into him again and my hands slip over the resilient suit, wishing for all the world that I was feeling the skin that is underneath it.

“Walk me out?” He takes my hand and we exit the front door, and around the side of the house where his SES is sitting under a tarp. He flips the tarp back. His SES is big enough for two people, compact and shaped like a triangle. It is a popular model and color. There is storage in the back, and he has already loaded most of his stuff in it. I am sure he just never unpacked it. Killian could live his entire life out of the back of his SES.

At his approach, the door opens. He smiles at me and I claim one more kiss. I draw in the smell of him, but it is masked by the metallic, chemical smell of the suit. Chemicals that will help protect him if something should happen in the atmosphere that his SES can’t handle.

“I love you,” he says, and kisses my forehead. “Two months and we will be together.”

“Two months.” I nod. “I love you too.”

The door slides shut behind him and he places a small earpiece in his ear. On the dash, the holo of a thin black man appears.

“Peters, are you packed?” I hear him ask. He winks at me and I smile back. Darren Peters is his longtime friend.

“Yeah, man, just waiting on your lazy ass. Hey, who’s that?” Peters asks, his holo turning to look at me through the windshield.

“That’s Taven Majors, my fiancé.”

“Oh man, that’s awesome. Congratulations.”

The vehicle starts kicking up a breeze from underneath and I step back as the wind blows my clothes and hair. There is a mechanical shift and the vehicle takes off, floating up into the air before drifting away to the west.

I stand and stare at it, watching until it is out of sight over the tops of the trees, and I keep watching, even though I can no longer see it. I am trying to make sure I am okay with this. I am trying to test myself. I know I have to lock up and get home. I had a project going before Killian turned my world upside down, and I have to get back to it. But for now I have to stand here, surrounded by the land he owns, as if that will make me feel close to him even though he is gone for two months.

In time I break my vision from the cloudy sky and go back into the lake house. I make sure everything is in order, the windows closed, the doors locked. I hesitate at the door, looking back at the dining room and the kitchen. Did this really happen? Is this real?

As I look around the house, the memories of the last two days come back to me and I can't help but smile. I feel the weight of the proposal necklace under my shirt and I know that yes, this is very real. When he comes back he will be my fiancé. He *is* my fiancé.

I close the door with a click and start walking back home, my feet taking me along the path automatically, which is a good thing because my mind isn't on the journey home, it is on my thoughts, and the memories of the last two days and how elated I am that I didn't ignore his invitation.

If I had been asked two days ago what I thought would have happened when I came here, I would never have said I would be leaving with the love of the man I have wanted since we first met.

The high follows me home, and my sight is fixed on the ghostly outline of the moon hanging in the morning sky. Looking at the moon I feel closer to him. I feel like the moon is just another form for him. He is my man in the moon, and that is his moon. That's Killian's moon.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Travis Simmons is the author of The Revenant Wyrd Saga, The Harbingers of Light series, and his newest release, a zombie apocalypse novel featuring necromancers titled Desolation. He lives in upstate New York in a secluded section of the Adirondacks that he loves very well. While he writes dark fantasy and horror under his given name, he has a pen name of Talus Ripley that he writes gay fiction under.*

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# NO GETTING OVER YOU

By Suzanne Simon

## Photo Description

Blaine and Kurt, characters from the television show *Glee*, are kissing each other.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*My name is Tucker. See these two, they are Kurt and Blaine from Glee and I am a total Gleek. Their love is so perfect except it isn't real. It's just a TV show.*

*My best friend says I should stop obsessing over fictional characters. That maybe if I opened my eyes and looked around I would discover a love of my own.*

*But what does he know? He's hot and has tons of girls chasing him. He's totally straight.*

*Or is he?*

*HEA please.*

*Sincerely,*

*Dionne*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, tattoo, college, *Glee*, oral sex, HEA

**Word count:** 7,297

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# NO GETTING OVER YOU

**By Suzanne Simon**

Tucker stared at the television intently as *Glee*'s Blaine sang *Teenage Dream* while a fascinated Kurt watched him. He picked up the remote and bumped the volume up a few notches when he realized that the sound of running water was echoing through the apartment. He relaxed his tense pose when the added noise finally managed to drown out the sound of his roommate Cameron showering, naked and wet, just a few feet from where he sat on the couch.

It was Friday night. Again. Tucker sighed. Most people would be thrilled at the prospect of the upcoming weekend. For most, it meant the end of the workweek, the end of a week of school or even an upcoming date. For Tucker, it meant the beginning of a nag fest as Cameron tried unsuccessfully to convince Tucker to go out with him and his friends.

It wasn't that Tucker didn't like hanging out with Cameron. Or hanging out with his friends for that matter. It was just that there was only so much Tucker could take of watching his straight roommate flirting and being flirted with—and occasionally going off with—the eager females that regularly competed for Cameron's attention. Quite simply put, it hurt too much to see physical proof that Cameron was so very far out of his reach.

No, it was better to stay here in the apartment and indulge in his other, less painful obsession of watching Kurt and Blaine strut their stuff on *Glee*. Really, he might even start to believe that if he repeated it enough in his mind.

Gay man falls for his gorgeous straight roommate. Had to be the oldest story in the world, right? Yeah, Tucker knew how clichéd it sounded that he had fallen for someone who was completely unable to return his feelings, but it hadn't started that way. Okay, maybe it had been like that the first five minutes Tucker had laid eyes on Cameron.

He had been just a few weeks into his freshman year in college and was having lunch in the university cafeteria when a shadow had fallen over his lunch tray. Tucker had been reading his English 101 textbook while choking

down an entirely too dry hamburger, multitasking in the vain effort to get ahead of the mountain of homework that he had yet to get a handle on, when his gaze reached up and froze at the deepest brown eyes that he had ever seen.

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

In the time that it took for Tucker to form a coherent reply to the question, he had already decided how many children he wanted to have with the perfect man before him (two, a boy and a girl), what they were going to name them (Becca for the girl, Jonathan for the boy), whether they would have a cat or a dog (a cat and a dog, because Tucker just couldn't decide between them) and what color house they were going to live in (white with green shutters). Somehow he managed to stutter out something that must have sounded like an affirmative reply, because the gorgeous blond god had pulled out a chair and sat down across from Tucker.

“What are you reading?” He had asked with an infectious grin as he settled his tray full of food in front of him.

Tucker had just opened his mouth to answer when a petite blonde girl had plunked her tray down and pulled her chair entirely too close to the brown-eyed hunk before sitting. “Hey, what are we talking about?”

“Oh hey,” Tucker's dream guy had replied. “I was just asking...” he shot a questioning glance at Tucker.

“Tucker.”

“Yeah,” he said with a grin. “I was just asking Tucker what he was reading. I'm Cameron, by the way, and this is Vivian.”

All of Tucker's hopeful dreams of a few minutes ago had turned to ash in his mouth along with his last bite of unappetizing hamburger as he watched Vivian place a possessive hand on Cameron's arm. He managed to stutter out a polite greeting to Vivian before making a big production of glancing at his watch and proclaiming that he was going to be late for his next class if he didn't leave *right that minute*.

Tucker spent the next several weeks trying to forget broad shoulders and beautiful brown eyes that sparkled when Cameron smiled at him.

It wasn't easy. Tucker went from never knowing that his dream man existed to seeing him everywhere he went. Cameron always smiled and waved at him when he spotted Tucker; Tucker would smile weakly, return the wave and beat a hasty retreat before he could make a return to the foolish daydreams that he had spun when he first met Cameron. The first semester passed painfully slowly before mercifully ending in the middle of December. Tucker spent Christmas break hiding out in his room at his parents' house, and ignoring the occasional erotic dream, that would leave him breathless and aching hard, as he woke in the middle of the night with the memory of teasing brown eyes.

The next semester, things got better and so much worse. Tucker walked into his Psych 101 class to discover that Cameron was going to be a classmate. Intent on ignoring temptation, Tucker took a seat in the very front of the room where few students were likely to sit. Cameron, unaware that he was causing Tucker no end of discomfort, followed him to the front and sat right next to him. By the middle of the semester, the temptation to throw Cameron to the floor and molest him had eased up thanks to a brief romance with a soccer player named Ethan, and he was actually able to enjoy spending small amounts of time chatting with Cameron as they worked together on class assignments. It was during one of those chats that Tucker had let slip that he was looking to get out of the dorms and get an apartment for the following semester. Things with Ethan were hot and heavy at the time, so Tucker had barely hesitated when Cameron suggested that they look for an apartment together.

It had worked out well, all in all. Tucker had admitted before moving in that he was gay, just in case Cameron had missed the obvious signs. Cameron had gone quiet for just a moment, making Tucker nervous that he would somehow run off never to be seen again, before Cameron gave him a dazzling smile and admitted that it didn't bother him so long as Tucker didn't try to make him watch any Lifetime movies. Tucker, who did occasionally watch Lifetime movies, flushed and teased back that he was making no promises. He took great delight several months into their new living arrangement to remind Cameron of that particular conversation when it turned out that Cameron enjoyed those movies as much as, if not more, than Tucker did.

Things with Ethan cooled off sometime in the middle of sophomore year before stuttering to a standstill. Cameron continued to date much of the female population, never seeing anyone more than a few weeks in a row, without it bothering Tucker too much. He and Cameron fell into a solid friendship, and Tucker could even laugh at himself for the earlier infatuation that he had felt for his friend.

Then Cameron met Amy at the start of their senior year. She was sweet, smart, and extremely beautiful inside and out. Tucker hated her on sight, a feeling that Cameron obviously didn't share, since their relationship managed to last five months. Five long, tortuous months of Tucker making excuses to avoid the apartment in case he had to see them cuddling together or worse, listening to them having sex in Cameron's bedroom while Tucker sat in his room just mere feet away. Tucker was forced to confront his feelings for Cameron and realized that they had never really gone away, but instead managed to get stronger the longer their friendship lasted.

With graduation rapidly approaching, Tucker had some tough decisions to make. He started looking into jobs across the country, despite Cameron's tentative plans for the two of them to find jobs in the area and rent a house near their current apartment. While Tucker liked the area that they were living in, he knew deep down that he needed to put some space between him and Cameron. He had even gone as far as to send out a few résumés for some of those faraway job listings during the time that Cameron had been with Amy. Then they had broken up just a few weeks ago, for reasons that Cameron seemed strangely reluctant to talk about, but Tucker was still mulling the possibility of moving away and starting over.

It would probably be best in the long run for Tucker to be away from the object of his obsession. After all, they were going to have to be apart at some point. Cameron would eventually meet the woman that he was going to spend his life with, and Tucker would (hopefully) eventually meet a man that would make him forget all about how Cameron made him feel.

That would have been a great plan, a plan that just might have worked out for the best, if Tucker had just his sexual attraction to Cameron to deal with. The trouble was that his attraction to Cameron had turned into so much more during their three and a half years of friendship.

Tucker wouldn't just miss the little zap of awareness that he felt whenever he was near Cameron. He would also miss the way that Cameron's light snores could be heard across the apartment when he was overly tired, the little snort he made when he was surprised with something funny, the way he bit his bottom lip when he was trying to concentrate while he was reading. Hell, he would just miss coming home to Cameron. Having him listen to how Tucker's day went and being there to hear the excitement in Cameron's voice when he was describing a particularly good day. It was all the little things and everything in between that made Cameron the person that Tucker had fallen in love with. How could he possibly walk away from that?

Tucker was pulled out of his reminiscing by a small noise next to him. He glanced up to see his roommate standing next to the couch wearing a dark blue towel, a few droplets of water, and nothing else. He swallowed so hard that he nearly damaged his Adam's apple while he tried to pry his eyes away from the wet dream that was standing in front of him.

An unsuccessful try, as it turned out. His traitorous eyes refused to cooperate, too busy tracking the slow movement of one particular droplet of water that dropped off Cameron's chin and was now making its way down a tightly muscled chest, gaining momentum as it gathered water from a few other droplets. It worked its way past a shell pink nipple, made its way o-o-oh so-o-o slowly down to his belly button (a rather fine innie with a light dusting of dark-blond hair around it) and just off to the side before sliding into the edge of the terry cloth towel that hovered at the very top of Cameron's groin. He blinked for the first time since Cameron had appeared half naked in front of him, realizing that the dark smudge on the top of Cameron's pelvis was not a smudge but was in fact... "A tattoo? Since when do you have a tattoo?"

"Oh, I got it last week. Do you like it?" Cameron walked even closer until he was just a few inches away and tilted his pelvis towards Tucker, as if there was any doubt where his eyes were now focused. Cameron slowly slid the tip of his finger around the edges of the kanji character inked in black on his skin, causing Tucker's eyes to practically cross from the sudden surge of lust that jolted through his body as he mentally pictured his tongue swiping along the same path that Cameron's finger was slowly making.

“What is it?” His voice was husky as he finally managed to make his eyes obey the command to look away before he slowly lost what was left of his mind.

Cameron opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by the sound of “Bitch” being electronically chirped by Tucker’s cell phone. Cameron leaned over the couch right next to Tucker’s face and picked up the now silent phone. Tucker held his breath as the towel began to slip, wondering if his self-control would hold if that towel managed to hit the floor. To his relief—and slight disappointment—the towel managed to remain precariously balanced on Cameron’s hips.

Cameron checked the screen for the caller ID and smirked as he handed it over to Tucker. “I’m totally telling Kandi that you have her ringtone set to that song.”

Tucker tried unsuccessfully to hold back a nervous laugh as he reached for his phone. Keep it together, he told himself. What were they talking about? Oh yeah. “She already knows. Who do you think changed it?” The phone began to ring again. “Sup?” Tucker answered with half his attention still on Cameron’s lower abdomen and the black character that was inked there. He imagined that if he squinted really hard he could just make out a few stray hairs that were trying to peek out of the top of Cameron’s towel just below the black ink...

“Coming tonight?” Tucker could feel himself freeze like a deer caught in a pair of headlights before he turned to glare at Cameron. No, he did not just sic Tucker’s cousin on him in a vain attempt to force him to go out that night. The slightly guilty look and Cameron’s sudden inability to meet Tucker’s eyes confirmed that yes, he actually did. He was going to have to do some fast talking to get out of this.

“I have a date.” Tucker blurted out the first excuse that he thought would be plausible enough to keep Kandi off his back. Some emotion flashed in Cameron’s eyes and was gone before Tucker could begin to identify what it might have been. Cameron turned and walked into his bedroom as Tucker continued to puzzle over the look that had just passed across Cameron’s face. He almost looked... hurt?

“Really?” Kandi sounded doubtful. “What’s his name?”

Shit. Shit. A name. He needed a name. “Bl-” No, moron. Don’t mention names from characters on *Glee*. Kandi’s bullshit meter would be going off like a bomb. “Brian,” he blurted out. He actually did have a Brian in one of his classes. Brian happened to be totally straight and would not have been in the running as a date even if he had been gay as a rainbow, but Kandi did not need to know that. “He’s in my Sociology class on Friday mornings.”

“So... what are you doing on this date of yours?” He could hear the beginnings of suspicion in her voice.

*Sitting in my apartment, watching reruns of Glee and eating my weight in Ben & Jerry’s ice cream.* He bit his lip and barely managed to keep from blurting that little gem out. “I’m not sure yet. Our plans are a little up in the air right now.” Good, he told himself. No commitment to one particular activity. It would give him more time to think up a good fake date to share when Kandi called and asked the next day.

“Hmm.” The tone in her voice was one of skepticism. Sure enough, Kandi came back with, “We both know that you’re making this up to get out of hanging out so the question now is, do you want to continue with an elaborate lie and then agree to come out? Or do you want to give in now, shut off *Glee* and go get ready?”

“How do you do that?” Tucker looked from the television where his last recorded episode of *Glee* had ended and was now at the menu screen.

“I’m psychic,” Kandi said smugly before admitting, “Cameron texted me a few minutes ago and gave me a heads up that you were being stubborn.”

“I’ll be sure to thank Cameron for that.”

“Well, after you’re done ‘thanking him’, make your way over to Vibe.”

Tucker sighed. “It’s funny how you can make the most innocent comments sound dirty.” He sat up straighter on the couch as another, more terrifying thought hit him. “Wait! What’s going on at Vibe tonight?” He thought that Cameron was dragging him out to a bar. Vibe was a coffee house and was the dead last place he could imagine spending a Friday night at.

“Oh, fun, coffee, karaoke, some conversation. The usual Friday night activities.” Kandi tried to speak faster when she came to the word *karaoke* so that it would hopefully make it past Tucker without drawing attention.



“No karaoke! You know what happened last time.” Tucker tried to make his voice stern.

“Come on, this will be totally different.”

“Name one way that this will be different.”

“There won’t be any alcohol, so therefore the chances of you getting drunk and serenading anyone again will be very slim.”

Tucker pretended to think for a moment. “Well in that case—oh wait, the answer is still no!”

“Yeah, good luck with that. I’ll see you soon.”

“I’m not going, so you won’t—” Three beeps sounded rudely in his ear, signaling that his darling younger cousin had hung up on him.

“I’m not going,” Tucker repeated confidently to himself.

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Tucker stormed into the apartment and slammed the front door shut in fury. He’d known better, he’d fucking well known better, but he had gone to Vibe anyway. The whole evening had gone pretty much the way that Tucker expected it to, with the exception of the karaoke that is. He paused in his fury. No, there was no way that Tucker could have anticipated Cameron getting up on stage and singing. Especially not the song that he chose and the way that Cameron kept his eyes on Tucker the entire time he was singing... Tucker had gotten a jolt from the intensity in Cameron’s eyes that he felt from the top of his head down to his toes. Damn it, why did Cameron always have that effect on him? Every. Single. Time.

It was Kandi’s fault, making him wish for things that he knew better than to hope for. “He’s doing this for you, you know,” she had said to a shocked Tucker as he watched his friend take the stage.

“For me? What do you mean?”

“He mentioned something when he was setting this up about making a grand gesture. He has it in his head that nothing short of a love story to rival Blaine and Kurt will satisfy you.”

“Is that why he’s singing?” Tucker was confused, but there was some emotion struggling its way up his throat. He thought maybe it was hope.



“Not only why he’s singing for you,” she said as the opening chords of a song began, “but also why he’s singing that song.” That was when Tucker recognized the song as *Somewhere Only We Know*, the song that Blaine sang to Kurt when he went back to McKinley in *Glee*. In spite of himself, he melted a little inside and began to believe that maybe, just maybe, his love for his best friend might be returned.

He sat there, unable to take his eyes off of Cameron the entire time he sang. When the song finally ended, Kandi nudged him into leaving his chair and seeking Cameron out. He walked up behind his friend just in time to see a girl from one of Cameron’s classes hug him and mention that she still had the T-shirt that Cameron left at her house a few days ago. That was when his fragile bubble of happiness popped, and he left quickly before he had to see Cameron hanging all over yet another female.

The hurt from seeing Cameron with that girl lingered, pushing heavily on his chest until he thought that he would implode from the pain. He rubbed his hand across his heart, trying to get that stinging sensation to let up a little.

How could he have thought for even one minute that things could be different? What did he think was going to happen, that Cameron would suddenly stand up in the middle of that café and declare his undying love for Tucker? What happened tonight was exactly what he had expected. He had gone to the café knowing that he was going to have to watch Cameron hook up with a girl, and it had gone exactly as it had during the entire time that Tucker had known him. Except for the five months that he had watched Cameron with the ever-perfect Amy, that is. Tucker wasn’t sure, as he pushed the heel of his hand a little harder into the burning in his chest, whether it had bothered him more to see Cameron leaving with random hookups, or if it had been worse to see him snuggled up on the couch with Amy watching movies, while Tucker sat in the corner and tried to pretend that the sight wasn’t slowly killing him.

Tucker sighed. It was time, past time really, for him to put away the ridiculous daydream that lingered in the back of his mind and face the truth that Cameron was only ever going to be a friend. He was straight, and it was time that Tucker forced himself to realize that there weren’t going to be any last minute revelations, that Cameron wasn’t going to have a sudden impulse

to find out what it would be like if he was with Tucker instead of the beautiful girls that he dated. Yeah. It was time to break out those job listings that had been gathering dust for the last few weeks while Tucker had been trying to talk himself into cutting ties with Cameron for the sake of his sanity. A move across the country, in the opposite direction from all this heartache, was really sounding like the best thing for him.

But first, before he did anything else that night, he was breaking out his recorded episodes of *Glee* and a pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. People could make fun of him as much as they wanted for falling back on that crutch when he was upset, but the combination of Kurt with Blaine and his pint of chocolate ice cream was the ultimate in comfort when he was hurting. He had the container of ice cream in one hand and a spoon in the other, and was just getting ready to sit down on the couch when Cameron burst through the door.

"What the hell? Why did you leave without even talking to me?"

Tucker could only gape at his roommate in confusion. Cameron was a very laid back kind of guy, and Tucker could count on one hand how many times he had seen him upset or frustrated. Now Cameron's perfectly styled hair was ruffled, and he had lines of tension bracketing either side of his mouth.

"I had to get back to the apartment," Tucker snapped through gritted teeth and hoped that Cameron would leave it at that. He felt like he had been through an emotional wringer that night, and he didn't know if he could take any more before shattering into a thousand pieces.

Cameron stood in the doorway to their apartment for a few more seconds. Shutting the door behind him, he stalked over to where Tucker stood in front of the couch. "What is it that was so important that you ran out on me? Did you have to get back to your nonexistent date? Oh, that's right. You had to get back so that you could eat ice cream and watch *Glee*, the same as you do every Friday night instead of hanging out with me. And why is it that you would rather hole up in our apartment than spend time with me?"

"I don't want to get into this right now." Or ever. Yeah, never getting into his reasons for avoiding Cameron sounded about right. "I just couldn't stay there another minute."

“Why Tucker? What is so awful about spending time with me that you turn tail and run?”

Tucker shook his head silently, willing the tears that were starting to well up in his eyes to stay put. He didn't think that he could live it down if he cried in front of Cameron. Not now. Not when all his hopeful dreams were laying shattered at his feet.

Cameron stepped forward and grabbed Tucker's chin with his hand gently. “What Tucker? I just need to know. What did I do that was so wrong?”

“You didn't do anything wrong.” No matter how much Tucker wanted to avoid this conversation, he couldn't stand to let Cameron think that he had done anything wrong. It wasn't his fault that Tucker had fallen in love with him.

“Then why?” Cameron took his thumb and rubbed it gently over Tucker's jaw. Tucker closed his eyes and forced himself not to lean into Cameron's touch knowing that if he did, he would lose control and end up pushing his friend away from him forever.

“Was it Lisa?” Tucker's eyes opened in surprise and met Cameron's wide brown ones. “I don't want Lisa. She's in my study group. You have nothing to worry about.”

Tucker struggled to keep up with the conversation. “It's none of my business if you're with Lisa.” He bit his lip, struggling to hold back the words that were bubbling up in his throat. “If you don't want her then why did she have your shirt?” Shit. That so wasn't what he had meant to say. It had come out just a little accusingly, like Tucker was a wronged boyfriend.

Cameron smiled. “Our study group meets at her apartment.”

“Glad that clears that up,” Tucker muttered, now picturing Cameron in the middle of the brunette's bed wearing nothing but a beautiful smile.

“I spilled coffee on my shirt and Matt, Lisa's *boyfriend*,” he said, emphasizing the word, “was kind enough to lend me another shirt to wear home. Lisa was letting me know that she was able to get the stain out of it since she knew that it was one of my favorites.”

“I bought you that shirt,” Tucker said automatically.

If possible, Cameron smiled wider. “I know. It’s why it’s one of my favorites.”

Tucker blinked. “I feel like we’re having two totally different conversations.”

All at once Cameron’s expression turned serious. “Why did the thought of me and Lisa together bother you so much?”

“It didn’t,” Tucker lied unconvincingly. “I want you to be happy,” he continued truthfully. He just left out the part where he wished that Cameron could be happy with him instead of all the women that he dated.

“So if I were to go out later tonight with someone I met after you left Vibe, you’d be okay with it?”

Tucker didn’t mean to growl, he really didn’t, but the low menacing sound came out anyway.

Cameron looked surprised at the sound before he gave his own growl of frustration. “Jesus, Tucker, man up and tell me why that bothers you so much.”

Tucker finally snapped. “Because I’m in love with you, okay? Because watching you strut around the apartment half naked and not being able to touch you is slowly driving me crazy. Because I hate seeing those girls hanging all over you, and I really hated when you were with Amy and I came home every night and saw the two of you cuddling up on the couch or worse, having to sit in my room alone and know that the two of you were together in your bedroom.”

“It’s about time.” Cameron leaned in and kissed him slowly. Tucker froze for a few seconds before his brain kicked in and realized that *Cameron was kissing him*. Really kissing him, just like he’d imagined and dreamed about a thousand times over the last three and a half years.

Tucker pulled back from Cameron reluctantly. “Not that I’m complaining, but what the hell?”

Cameron rubbed his nose against the end of Tucker’s nose and lightly kissed his lips again before resting his forehead on Tucker’s forehead. “You

are about the most clueless man that I have ever met. I have been in love with you for forever.”

Tucker’s mouth dropped open, and his heart felt like it was going to beat right out of his chest. “What? No you haven’t.”

Cameron just nodded slowly.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Come here.” Cameron tugged lightly on Tucker’s hand and sat on the couch, pulling Tucker down into his lap. Tucker settled there like he had been sitting on Cameron’s lap forever and laid his head on Cameron’s shoulder. “I tried to say something many times, but, every time I started to let you know how I felt, you ran from me.”

“When did I run from you?”

“The first day that I introduced myself to you, you practically left smoke trails from your feet.”

Tucker could feel himself blush. “It wasn’t that bad.”

Cameron chuckled. “Vivian actually asked me what I’d said to you to make you run off like that. It took me months to get you to even talk to me without looking like you were going to bolt.”

“Well, hell. I thought I was more subtle than that.”

Cameron tilted his head so that he could look into Tucker’s eyes. “I wanted to get close to you, but you’d shy away every time that it looked like I was going to get close. Then, when I actually got you to agree to move in here with me, I was afraid that it would ruin our friendship if I told you how I felt. You were already with Ethan at that time, and I thought that being friends with you and getting to see you every day was better than not knowing you at all.” Cameron kissed his forehead gently. “Little did I know that my little crush on you would become so much more the longer I was around you.”

“So, are you...?” Tucker trailed off, unsure of how to word the question without offending Cameron. He felt like everything that he thought he knew about his friend was suddenly off-kilter.

“Gay?” Tucker nodded shyly against his shoulder. “No, baby, I’m bisexual. But you’re the first guy in a long time that I’ve noticed that way.”

*Baby.* God did it feel good to hear Cameron calling him an endearment so naturally. “So, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to, a hundred times. When you first moved in and you told me you were gay, I didn’t mention it because you were with Ethan and I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. Then, when you broke up, I tried to casually bring it up in conversation, but you’d just shoot me down and change the subject every time I got close. You’d only let me get so close to you before your guard would come up. I started to wonder if you knew how I felt about you and that was your way of letting me down gently.”

“No! I had no clue. I didn’t want to get too close to you because I thought that you were straight, and I didn’t want to get more attached to you than I already was.”

Tucker felt rather than saw Cameron shake his head as he said, “So much time wasted.”

“So why now?” Tucker held his breath, waiting for Cameron’s answer.

“I found the job listings that you were applying for. All the way across the country. I decided that if I was going to lose you anyway, at least I would know once and for all how you felt about me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think that I could spend any more time watching you go off with other people without letting you know how I felt. I thought that being friends that talked occasionally was better than watching you every day and not being able to be with you.”

Cameron kissed him again gently, slowly sliding his tongue into Tucker’s mouth. Tucker moaned quietly in protest when Cameron pulled back when he would have deepened the kiss. “You never did tell me what you thought of my performance.”

“Why did you do that? Get up there and sing like that, I mean.”

Cameron stroked his hand down Tucker’s back. “I wanted to make a grand gesture that would let you know how I feel about you. I think it’s about time someone made a fuss over you for a change.”

Tucker melted inside just a little bit. Had he ever had someone do anything like this for him before? Not that he could ever remember in his dating history. “I loved the song. I didn’t even know you could sing.”

“Sure you did,” Cameron teased, bumping Tucker gently with his shoulder. “I sing in the shower all the time.”

Tucker groaned. “I try to stay away from the bathroom while you’re in the shower.”

“Aww, were you picturing me naked in there?”

Tucker could feel himself flush red in embarrassment. He turned his face into Cameron’s neck and nodded. His embarrassment wasn’t eased when Cameron whispered in his ear, “That’s okay, baby. You don’t have to imagine it anymore. I’ll be more than happy to show you.”

Tucker let out a whimper at that. He wanted to see that—God, did he really want to see that—but first things first. He took a calming breath and forced himself to ask the question that had been bothering him for the last several weeks. “What happened with Amy? I thought that you were really into her.”

Cameron became quiet, and Tucker had a moment of panic that maybe he had asked one too many questions. He was getting everything that he had dreamed of so, why was he still questioning how it came about? “That’s okay, you don’t have to answer.”

“No, I want to tell you. I just feel like a fool. A few weeks after I started dating Amy, I managed to convince myself that I was over you. I kept up that lie for most of the time that we were dating.”

“So, what happened? You didn’t really say much after the two of you broke up.”

Cameron sighed. “I didn’t really know what to say to you at the time. The last few weeks of the relationship, I knew something was wrong between Amy and me, but I just couldn’t seem to pinpoint what it was. Then, you went out on that date with that guy—Jake, Jason, J- something?”

“John?”

“Yeah, John. I was in a pissy mood after you left for your date, and I just couldn’t figure out why. Amy finally had enough and said, ‘If it’s going to



bother you that much to see him with another man, maybe you should be dating him instead of me.' I didn't think that she was serious, but she must have seen something on my face when I finally put it together in my mind that yes, I was very jealous that you were out with someone else. It didn't take her long to make her ultimatum. Either I moved out and didn't have anything else to do with you, or we were over." Cameron caressed the side of Tucker's face with his hand. "It wasn't much of a choice. There was no way that I could walk away from you. Ever."

Tucker wanted to pinch himself to make sure that he wasn't dreaming. No way of telling if this was just a wonderful dream. Unless...

"Ouch! Did you just pinch me?" Cameron glared at him, but the glint of humor in his eyes told Tucker that he was just kidding.

Tucker settled more firmly in his lap, rubbing his ass against the hardness that was starting to grow beneath him. "I was just making sure that I wasn't going to wake up all alone in my bed."

"What can I do to convince you that you're not going to ever be alone again?" Cameron whispered, his breath warm against Tucker's ear.

Tucker shivered at the sensation. "I can think of a few things."

Cameron's eyes flashed to something just beyond Tucker, and his smile widened. "Your ice cream's melting."

"Oh. I'll have to put it back into the freezer."

Cameron set Tucker gently onto the couch beside him and reached over for the carton. "That's okay. I've always wondered how this flavor of ice cream tastes. Think I'll find out."

Tucker held his breath as Cameron's meaning hit him. He wouldn't, would he? Cameron pulled Tucker's T-shirt over his head, and he instinctively reached his arms above his head to allow the material to pass, shivering as the cool air touched the warm skin of his chest. Then he shivered harder as a spoonful of partially-melted chocolate ice cream was drizzled onto his abdomen. "Oops, guess I should clean that up." Cameron's grin was wicked just before his mouth made its way slowly to the sweet sticky mess on Tucker's stomach. Tucker actually whimpered when Cameron's tongue swept



along the hard ridges of his muscles, licking up a few droplets before using his lips to gently suck the rest of the ice cream off.

“Sweet,” Cameron whispered against his skin, and he reached down with one hand to pop open the button fly of Tucker’s jeans. “Let’s see where else you taste sweet.” One smooth motion took both Tucker’s jeans and his boxer briefs, releasing the silky hardness that had steadily been growing since Cameron had pulled him onto his lap.

“God, Cam,” Tucker moaned as he threaded his fingers through Cameron’s silky hair.

Another dribble of cold wetness ran off the spoon and down over his balls, slowly followed by Cameron’s mouth. Tucker slid up on his elbows to watch as Cameron bathed them with his tongue in long, slow licks before opening his shiny pink lips to suck one ball completely into his mouth. He hummed in appreciation of the beautiful sight, and Cameron echoed it, the vibrations adding an extra tingle to the pressure that was steadily building just behind his balls.

Another wave of cold washed over his body as another drop of ice cream slid over his rock-hard erection. A split second later, a warm mouth engulfed him as Cameron took his cock down quickly to the root with gentle suction, and Tucker squeezed his eyes shut as he fought his impending orgasm. He had waited nearly four years for this moment. He didn’t want it to be over before it had even begun.

He might not have a choice about it ending so quickly though, as the combination of nearly a year of having only his own hand on his cock and now the warm friction of Cameron’s mouth as he began to bob up and down on his erection caught up to Tucker in hot waves of pleasure. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly and flexed his ass as his opening began to pulse, eager for something to touch it. As if sensing Tucker’s need, a warm finger began to rub delicately against his pucker, and Tucker’s hips began to rock back and forth, alternating between the hot suction of Cameron’s mouth and the calloused hardness of Cameron’s finger. With a gasp, Tucker lost the battle as his orgasm pulsed out of him and into Cameron’s mouth in hot, sticky waves.

He was caught in the afterglow, vaguely aware that the wet noise of skin slapping on skin meant that Cameron was taking himself in hand. A muffled groan against his thigh signaled Cameron's release. Cameron rested his head against Tucker's thigh, and Tucker ran his fingers lazily through Cameron's hair as he lay there waiting for the frantic beating of his heart to slow. Finally, he raised his head to meet chocolate brown eyes that crinkled in amusement. "That was definitely worth waiting for."

"I hope you don't think that we're done yet. I still have more ice cream."

Tucker huffed out a laugh. "I think I'm going to need a minute or ten to recover before we do that again."

"Take all the time you want. I'm not going anywhere."

They lay there together for a few minutes. Finally, Tucker gave Cameron's hair a tug to get his attention. "You never did tell me about your tattoo. I know it's a kanji character, but I'm not sure what it means."

Cameron smiled slowly. "It means *courage*."

Tucker caught his breath. One of Tucker's favorite episodes was when Blaine texted the word courage to Kurt because he was being bullied. "Another *Glee* reference? Are you sure you're not a fan?"

"It's starting to grow on me just a little, but I'm actually a big Tucker fan," he teased. Then he continued in a more serious tone, "It seemed very fitting. With you being a Gleek, getting the word tattooed on me made sense, because you give me courage every single day to do things that I never would have dreamed possible."

Tucker felt his eyes beginning to fill up with tears again. "Like the courage to get up on stage and sing?" He teased in an effort to lighten the mood before he became too emotional. "I'm not sure what I'm more impressed with, that you know the term 'Gleek' or that you were willing to permanently ink yourself for me."

Cameron slid up Tucker's body and pulled him into his arms. "Like the courage to finally tell you that I love you."

With that, Tucker lost the battle to control his tears as one salty streak made its way down his cheek. "I love you too."

Cameron gently wiped the tear away. “So, what are we going to do next Friday night?”

Tucker could only laugh as he replied, “Well you haven’t tried every ice cream flavor yet.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Suzanne Simon decided to try her hand at writing when she realized that the stories in her head were taking over her real life and discovered that the voices in her head are much more manageable when on paper. This is her first m/m romance.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# SCRUM

By P.D. Singer

## Photo Description

A heavily muscled, bare-chested man stands in profile in a steamy room, his head turned to three-quarters profile. His chest is slightly furry, his brunet hair long enough to brush his shoulders, his chin cleft, and his features strong. He stares a challenge at the observer through slitted blue eyes, and he's holding a rugby ball.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I am there for every game, eyes focused on one player alone. My heart speeds up as I watch his hair fly and legs pump as he races down the field. My sweat beads and falls down my back in tandem with his the longer the game continues.*

*Today is the day. It's my birthday, and I promised myself that I would gather the courage to introduce myself, to be close for even a moment and who knows what might happen? I can dream, can't I?*

Sincerely,

Melanie

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** athlete, masturbation, slow burn/UST, coming out, sports, rugby

**Content warnings:** vanilla alert, HFN

**Word count:** 10,313

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# SCRUM

By P.D. Singer

## CHAPTER 1

“Big piles of sweaty men.”

Robin’s buddy should be writing ad copy—Sebastian couldn’t have offered a better line to induce a team-sports-hater to come to a club game. Rugby union. “Not rugby league, none of that hoity-toity, stay-halfway-clean play, but scrums, mauls, and rucks!” Sebastian rattled off mysterious terms, half in a trance.

Robin hadn’t a clue, so not a word swayed him toward sitting on a damp hillside watching teams dispute possession of an oddly shaped ball. Until Sebastian handed over an ad. “They have a new player in. Yves Dubois. Played for the Canada under-20s and under-23s. Even if he just coaches, he’ll bring our Barbarians up to the next level.”

“And I care why?” Robin sneered until he got a look at the imported player. Suddenly whatever brought this man to Denver was the most important thing ever, and if that included team sports, Robin was a fan now. The buffest body in North America went with a cleft chin and a challenging stare daring Robin to come watch the manliest sport on the planet. The heat of his gaze might be only for the game, but it still went straight to Robin’s groin.

“Imagine that, covered in sweat, mud, and other men. In public.”

“What time?” He’d be there on the dot. Early. Early with tailgate party food. Early with something to autograph. The paper crinkled in his grip—Robin realized he was rumpling the most gorgeous visage he’d ever seen outside a magazine.

“The game starts at seven.” Sebastian chuckled, as if he’d heard every thought. “Dress warm. April’s still pretty nippy, eh?”

“I have a blanket in the trunk.” Basic winter survival gear in Colorado. Possibly at rugby games too, especially if he needed to throw something over

his traitor groin. If he had to wrap himself head to toe, he could still wipe the drool off his chin with one edge. “Seven. Okay. Um...”

*He’s playing, he’s not looking into the stands for the love of his life, or even the lust of the night. Yves would be looking at what was happening on the field, and he probably was straight as the goal lines.*

But it would be something new for the spank-bank. For the first time since the end of his t-ball career, Robin looked forward to a game.

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The wind would probably take his carefully styled hair straight to chaos, but Robin ran the comb through one more time and added another shot of super-hold spray. Getting the peak just so in the center mattered. A light spritz of cologne was his finishing touch, not that anyone who counted would be coming close enough to get a whiff. The testosterone and sweat rolling off the players would probably choke them both, but Sebastian would be getting the benefit of the perfumer’s art for a few minutes at least.

Robin’s rust-colored sweater would make him easy to pick out in a potential sea of green and white fans. Just in case Yves looked. Yeah, right. Robin grabbed the keys and dashed for the door. Time to get Sebastian and a good seat.

“Let’s put the top down.” Sebastian reached for the roof latch.

“Not today. Too cold.” Not really, but his hair would be in tatters before they reached the main avenue. He ignored Sebastian’s pout.

“I didn’t know you followed rugby.” Robin was a little startled to learn this about his friend. In three years of working together and the occasional Friday afternoon drink, the subject had never arisen. He aimed his Miata down Santa Fe Boulevard, zipping from lane to lane, trying to beat the lights that marred what should be a highway.

“Some. My cousin plays, but I didn’t really get interested until I saw that whiskey ad where the Scotsmen flipped their kilts at the New Zealand team.” Sebastian spoke with fond memory in his voice. “Nothing like responding to a war chant with big swinging dicks.”

Robin nearly rammed a tractor-trailer rig. “And I’ve been missing this all my life?”

“It was an ad!” The high note on “ad” was a clue Sebastian didn’t want to be reading that “How’s My Driving?” sticker from six feet away. “But the game is good—all bulging thighs in shorts, and the players hanging on to each other and shoving around, pouncing on each other.”

“Shorts.” Robin tightened his grip on the wheel. Crumpling his pretty red fenders would ruin his evening.

“Not kilts. Geez, Robin, you’re acting like you’ve never seen a naked man.” Sebastian knew perfectly well Robin had seen naked men—their chemistry ran to friendship, but Sebastian had pointed one or two guys Robin’s way. “And they’re fully dressed, even if their shorts are more like hot pants.”

If Sebastian wanted Robin to pay attention to the road, he should stop providing that kind of visual. Yves with those bedroom eyes, in small, tight shorts?

“This sounds like the gayest game on the planet.” Robin pulled into the stadium parking lot. “You said your cousin plays?”

Sebastian let go of the “oh shit” handle and flexed his fingers. “He does and it is. It’s also widely considered the manliest, so you might not want to comment too loudly on your particular interest. Makes football look like a sport for wussies.”

Football qualified as “savages in hobnailed boots jumping up and down on one another” and was not redeemed by the fine view of muscular asses bent over at the start of every play. Yves Dubois could be the sort of man who’d stuff people into lockers. He could be art, to be admired from afar, and the less one knew about what made him, the better.

“I could introduce you,” Sebastian said.

Memories made Robin go cold. “No. Do *not* introduce me to your cousin. Even if he’s gay. Especially if he’s gay. Every time you set me up with someone, it goes horribly wrong. Remember Steven? Or Kyle?”



“Hey, I thought they were okay! And who knew Kyle would laugh—” Robin cut that short by slamming the car door.

When Sebastian got out, Robin finished making his point. “Just *don’t* introduce me to your cousin or anyone else.”

“Okay, but you’d like him.”

“That’s what you said about Kyle.” Robin glared, force III. “No.”

He collected the blanket and the cooler from the trunk, and followed Sebastian into the stands. Nothing as organized as a program looked available, and the announcer’s voice was half static when he called the teams out to the field. A stream of green and white players, dressed in the promised shorts—small but not tight—and long-sleeved collared shirts emerged. Suddenly the fashion term made sense. Robin refrained from smacking a *d’oh!* on his forehead. Rugby shirts. Of course. And the stripes and colors made the teams identifiable, although certain match-ups might make the field look like a test bar on acid.

The opposing team in red with white flashes on more jersey-like shirts lined up opposite. “Cross-town rivals,” Sebastian supplied. “The Highlanders.”

Not a kilt to be seen, though. Not a problem—even in a group of men that averaged tall and heavy and all dressed alike, Robin could pick out the star player. Yves, with his hair loose and brushing his shoulders, stood squarely in the center of the lineup, noticeably buffer than the men to either side, muscles playing in his thighs and forearms with his slight fidgeting. The referee brought Yves and the other team captain to the center and flipped a coin.

That was the last part of the game Robin truly understood—but it didn’t matter. He watched, entranced, as the men ran, threw, kicked, and hit the turf in clumps. No one wore padding, making Sebastian’s comment about outdoing football for ruggedness terribly apt.

The players reformed in mats of men, bent over and interlocked, shoving, swiping. Yves was at the center of such formations. “He’s playing hooker today,” Sebastian explained, and even so, that told Robin nothing but that at least six other men were touching all that glory.

Yves had his arms over the shoulders of the two men at his sides, and two more supported him from behind. The opposition locked against him from the

front. All told, a dozen men jostled each other, bent at the waist and interwoven. The ball appeared from beneath the heaving thicket—they broke apart and the frenzy began anew. When to shout was easy—scoring happened at goal lines, and snagging the ball away from the other team merited a cheer. The details didn't matter, only that every other man on the field either had his arms around Yves, was tackling him to the ground, or had been captured and brought down by him. The sheer amount of body contact was astounding, and not all of it looked painful.

“Why aren't they doing any forward passes?” Robin could see at least one player who was wide open to catch and didn't have his arms out. The ball shot out of the knot of men contesting possession.

“Against the laws.” Sebastian's comment came without any real attention: he peered over the shoulders of the other spectators.

“This is mayhem,” Robin muttered. “Laws?”

“Certainly. Rugby can't be contained by anything as puny as rules.” Sebastian turned a superior eyebrow on Robin. “They'll have to scrum again, eh?” The irregular shape, not as pointy as a football, made the ball roll erratically, and no one had picked it up when the referee blew his whistle.

“Okay.” Maybe this time Robin would figure out what that was. Oh, it was when a dozen men got to hug up and bend over around Yves. A player fed the ball into the clump, and the shoving commenced.

The red team buckled; the men in green surged over them and down. The players not involved in the scrum dashed to help peel the fallen from the pile, all but one man who stayed down. Yves bent over him, as did the referee. “It's easy to get injured in the scrum.” Sebastian craned to see the fallen player. “I hope he hasn't broken his neck.”

Fuck. But after a moment to regain his breath, the downed Highlander rose to his feet. Yves spoke to him, and he shook his head. The scrum reformed, and the ball ended up in a Barbarian's hands. Not Yves', though he paced the other player toward the goal line. A Highlander tackled him just before the ball carrier flipped his prize at him. Yves went down, the referee tweeted and brought out a yellow card. The tackler headed to the sidelines, followed by Yves' crabby look.

Even without having a clue about the importance of the infraction, Robin wanted that man off the field. Go sit in the sin-bin! How dare he bring down a man loping like a very muscular gazelle? To hell with the game, he was interrupting the poetry of movement. Robin interrupted it himself when Yves took a penalty kick and the scoreboard changed.

“Told you it was exciting,” Sebastian gloated at the half. “Another forty minutes of play, but it won’t be quite so lively, they’re tired.”

Good. Yves looked like he could run forever while the others puffed and panted. A little. In some cases, a lot. A few of the players had guts and receding hairlines. Was this even a semi-pro team? What was a former member of a national team doing in the hinterlands of the sport that had never even impinged on Robin’s awareness, even though he could reel off the names of every local franchise, including the soccer and lacrosse teams whose play he didn’t give a rat’s ass about?

The teams headed to the sidelines, carrying a good chunk of the field on them. No one had more than a few square inches unsmeared with mud and wisps of grass, still mostly brown in mid-April. Yves wiped his cheek with his arm, rearranging the dirt. Lucky dirt, touching him. Robin watched Yves drink, his head tipped back to let the fluid gush from the water bottle down his throat, his Adam’s apple working with each swallow.

Oh, if he could lick that bobbing neck... Robin decided it was a good time to spread the blanket over his lap, even if he missed the padding under him. If he didn’t have such a scrawny ass he’d be a lot more comfortable. More lunges, less running would help, but the big 10K race in Boulder was at the end of May, and he intended to be top in his age bracket, since he was aging up just before the race. If there wasn’t the small issue of breaking his neck, Robin might give it all up for rugby.

Forty more minutes of play under the lights made Robin glad for the blanket but in love with the game, where everyone had to put their arms around one or more of their teammates for half the maneuvers. No one hesitated to reach out, no one commented on the state of play, except to say if it was done well or poorly. “Poorly” was the consensus around them, “Except for that Canadian guy, who knows what he’s doing.” Robin’s pride in Yves grew another five points when he scored a goal.

“No, that’s a try.” Sebastian supplied more terminology. The rest could be hoovered off the Internet.

The game ended, the Barbarians (“Call them Barbos if you don’t want to look like a complete noob,” Sebastian muttered.) outscoring the Highlanders 32–19. “Great game.” Sebastian stood and stretched.

“Yeah.” Robin watched the team at the sidelines. Some of the spectators came to congratulate them, and a few offered paper and pen to the imported star and then to the others. He wasn’t brave enough to join them—would Yves take one look, hear the ping of the gaydar and dismiss him as a hopeless star-fucker? Not taking the chance.

But once he was home, Robin looked up and printed out the Barbarians’ game schedule. One game a week, some as far as Houston, others as close as the stadium he’d just left. And the practice schedule. Tuesdays and Thursdays at a local park.

Anyone could go to a park.

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## CHAPTER 2

Tuesday found Robin doubting himself, Kindle in hand, strolling through Observatory Park. Maybe if he had a dog, he wouldn't look so pathetic marching around looking for a good place to sit and "read".

The team was out and running, in sweats and T-shirts, mostly recognizable for being a wall of men bearing down on him. He stepped aside, letting the team thunder by. Yves brought up the rear of the tight formation, which wasn't moving especially fast, but a tsunami didn't have to move terribly fast either. Robin was pretty sure he could lap them over a short course. Yves' attention was on the men, his eyes assessing, and he didn't spare a glance for Robin. Well, why would he?

The team ran to their practice area, where a couple of older men waited with the bag of oval balls. Robin followed nonchalantly, finding a park bench close enough to see everything. Ignoring the Kindle, he watched their drills with passing and kicking. Yves deferred to the coaches, explaining some skill with gestures and demonstrations only when asked. He took his place in the lineup for a passing drill, and flipped the ball to the men on either side while three of them ran. Good skill to work on—Robin had seen them fumble passes at the game.

If Robin made any passes, he'd fumble them for sure. He didn't get up and run—why would he? Why should he?—when the practice ended and Yves sauntered by, a towel over his shoulder and a gear bag in one hand.

That grin couldn't be for any reason other than a man in prime condition feeling good about a workout. Could it?

The hope of more meaning was enough to bring Robin back on Thursday.

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He still didn't have much understanding of the nuances of the game, although Robin had spent enough time online trying to get the basics that he could at least make sense of some of the overheard chatter. Why the team polished particular skills was clear enough, and they were growing noticeably better—fewer balls hit the ground in passing drills and more balls sailed

through the goal posts with every practice. They'd won an away game in Pocatello, Idaho, and had another game this weekend, in Boulder. Close enough. Robin printed out his ticket and aimed his red convertible northwest up Highway 36.

Without Sebastian.

"Sorry, man," he'd said when Robin asked him along. "Got a date."

Robin would just have to keep a lid on his drooling without any good-natured pokes.

Check on contained drooling—the adrenaline dried his mouth when Yves went down in a pile of behemoths, and brought Robin to his feet to cheer for his goal—no, his try—and the two-point conversion after.

Oh, but the man could run! Charging down the field, dodging, leaping—Robin's every muscle tensed with Yves' efforts. How he hated every man who bound himself to Yves for a ruck or a maul. Whichever it was, Robin wasn't too clear on the difference, but since someone or multiple someones had their arms wrapped around Yves' back or neck, Robin envied them all.

The Barbos had the ball again, and Yves picked it out of the air when the carrier got tackled. Plunging goalward, he still couldn't evade every blue and gold defender bearing down on him. Robin whimpered when Yves went down under a mountain of flesh and didn't care that the ball passed the goal line in another man's hands. Nothing mattered but that Yves get up from the ground.

Getting flattened didn't seem to slow him much; Yves was running and tackling on the next play. He dove after the other player and got dragged a step or two, rising with a smear of mud from nose to shin. If Yves wanted to wrap his arms around Robin's thighs, he wouldn't run away.

The drive back to Denver was a clammy affair—Robin had pelted every step of the match alongside Yves, and if he wasn't covered with mud, the sweat had still dripped down his back to glue shirt to skin. Showering before his run was stupid, but necessary, if not to remove the sweat, then to think of Yves' rippling muscles under the spray in the locker room, and to imagine soaping away the traces of the game. Robin's hands on himself became Yves', and he had to stroke himself to a shattering climax.

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Tuesday found Robin at the park again; he'd found a closer bench and had given up any pretense of reading. He could watch a team practice, and could even note some of the other players. None as gorgeous as Yves, or as memorable, unless it was for the spectacular flubs one made in kicking drills. The ball went all over the field, bouncing unpredictably and apparently it had to hit the ground once before meeting a foot. Yves demonstrated and coached. Did his student appreciate the skill? Or the view?

And—oh man. Lifting drills? Groups of three sectioned off to hoist one of their number into the air, strong hands on thighs in front and butt in back. “Not the shorts!” Yves yelled. “That’s a league lift.”

And a giant wedgie, too. Robin shuddered sympathetically, and hated the men who supported Yves, who gripped his thighs and found their noses scant inches from his groin and ass for his seconds in the air, fighting for possession of the ball. Did any of them value what was so near, or was lifting only a skill to practice?

He should leave now, but hope for another grin, one that might even be meant for him, kept Robin on his bench after the coach’s whistle blew to end the session. Reward and punishment stalked him, as Yves ambled past with white teeth flashing, and OMG eye contact! And a companion. Another player walked with him, chatting. They never broke stride.

Robin cursed himself for a fool and swore he wouldn’t go back Thursday. A vow that lasted until Thursday.

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The team went to Provo, leaving Robin to ache for the imagined falls and tackles and gloat at the score. He seldom had to cringe for the Barbos being on the wrong end of the spread. If he wanted to believe Yves scored every point, two or three or five at a time, he knew better. Robin had seen Yves pass the ball when he didn’t have to, if a teammate could make the try. The manly embraces and backslapping after each success were accolades his Yves deserved, for being a team player, for hauling all of them higher, for making them better. He was popular with the group, too; Tuesdays and Thursdays still brought that passing grin, but more often than not it was in the middle of a conversation about going out for a celebratory beer.

And yet Robin went, every time, hating the obsession and learning to love the game for itself as much as for the beauty of the players. The player. None of the others mattered, except if one or more of the competing team sat in the sin-bin for penalties, thus letting the Barbos humiliate their outnumbered opponents.

He trained for his 10K on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and dreamed of running alongside one particular rugby player, who might be faster than he looked during practice. If Yves couldn't match an average 5:56 minute mile on a hilly course, then there might be one thing Robin could outdo him on, but somehow Robin wouldn't bet on it. The Bolder Boulder was this Memorial Day weekend, and making top ten in the 30-39 age bracket was the only thing that would take the sting out of turning thirty right before the race.

That, or a conversation with Yves. Robin dared not hope for more. And he dared not approach, lest his dreams be shattered when Yves turned away from the hopeless fanboy. Better to sit on his bench and share the wordless communication of joy in the skills.

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"Let me guess what you want to do for your birthday." Sebastian put on his fakest "thinky face". "You could sign up for scuba lessons—"

"Already certified," Robin snapped.

"—or go bungee jumping." Sebastian rolled right over his declaration as if Robin hadn't even spoken.

"Assuming I like crapping myself in public," Robin snarled. If he enjoyed that, he'd already have had a chat with a certain Canadian godling.

"Or go to a rugby game!" Sebastian concluded happily.

"Fuck you." Robin grabbed a folder off Sebastian's desk and considered stomping off in a snit, but then Sebastian would only raise his voice to follow, and then the whole office would be in on this *discussion*.

"I didn't think you liked me that way. My cousin, now—" Sebastian mused.

The heat flared beneath Robin's collar and set his ears on fire. "Shut. Up. Not. Happening."



“Now is that any way to talk to your best buddy?” Sebastian purred. “Especially since he knows what you want most?” Producing an envelope, he smirked, and then waved it just beyond Robin’s reaching fingers. He relented and handed it over.

Two tickets to the Barbarians’ home game. Saturday. Different stadium than the website listed. Closer to home. Yves. Two forty minute periods of watching Yves in motion. Sebastian was the best friend a man could want. “Thanks.” He swallowed hard. “You want to come?”

“Always.” Damn, why couldn’t Sebastian leave an opportunity for innuendo alone? “But yes, I’d love to see the game.”

Why couldn’t Robin stop leaving him openings? “I’ll pick you up three-ish.” He returned to his own desk, tickets clutched tightly. He would have gone to the wrong place, spoiled his own birthday, had his friend not intervened. He’d even put the top down this time if Sebastian wanted. He owned a comb.

And it wasn’t as if Yves would pay attention to anything but rugby.

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At “ish” past three, Robin pulled up outside Sebastian’s townhouse. No one appeared at his honk, so he killed the engine and headed to the door. Sebastian opened it. He looked like hell, splotchy and swollen.

“What happened?” Did he need to drag this wreck to the emergency room?

“Found a wasp,” Sebastian croaked. “So I found the EpiPen, and then I found some Benadryl. This is better than it was.”

*Better* was definitely relative. “Should I take you over to Swedish Hospital, or does your insurance prefer Porter?”

“Don’t need to go in. The swelling’s going down. I own three more EpiPens, a big bottle of antihistamines, and a bed. I’m going to lie down until I feel more nearly human.”

Looking human might take longer—those were some spectacular blotches.

“Do you want me to stay, just in case?” Only for a friend as good as Sebastian would Robin even make the offer.

“No, don’t worry about it.” He waved away the suggestion. “Should have called, but you were already on the road. Go have fun. Happy birthday. Say hi to Yves.” He smiled, a ghastly affair given the state of his face. “Get some birthday kisses.”

“Sebastian!” Jaysus, the man could be a brat! But he looked slightly better than when Robin had come to the door, so Robin was willing to believe his claim of improvement. He got back into the Miata, mulling words his friend had spoken half in jest. Which meant all in earnest. Did Sebastian know something he hadn’t said directly? Or was it all crap?

Fuck it. Today was his birthday. He’d see the man of his dreams play some great rugby, and he’d grow a set. He was old enough to go for what he wanted, and it wasn’t going to happen unless he took a risk or two. At worst he could get his ticket stub autographed, and at best?

Robin dared not think of the best, or he’d never get this boner into the stadium undetected.

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## CHAPTER 3

Now that Robin had a slight idea of what the game was about, he could concentrate on more than the gorgeousness of the star player, who seemed to have switched positions for the game. He stood poised for action in the second row, and didn't participate in the scrums, but damn, could the man run!

Yves had the ball again, and streaked for the goal line, with his straight brows furrowed in effort or concentration, and seemingly aware of everything going on around him. Milliseconds before a red and black blur leaped at him from behind, Yves passed the ball to a teammate in green and white. He went down hard, and Robin missed the score.

But he got up. Why the hell did this team have to be thirty percent larger than the others? Wasn't there some rule, no, some law, about players being humans and not Mack trucks? Entertaining the suicidal thought of dashing out to punch the tackler when Yves limped to the sideline, Robin held his breath until Yves flexed for the coach—Oh Lord, the way the muscles in his thigh rippled—and sat down with a water bottle.

His shoulders were so broad, damn, and his butt barely took up any space on the bench. Did he need some ice for that ankle? Robin would raid a concession stand. Did he need ibuprofen? Where was the nearest drugstore? Robin would buy three brands. An ACE bandage? He'd wrap Yves' damaged leg with his own shirt if need be. But five minutes later, Yves loped back to the field to stand in the front row, and three plays later was in the middle of another ruck. Or maul. Or maybe brawl—they were stamping and kicking and men were on the ground. The ball boinged out of the heaving mass, to be scooped up by a green and white player. He and Yves played keep-away all the way down the field for another try, defenders never quite catching up with the right man at the right time. Robin ran every step with them, not relaxing until Yves planted the ball past the goal line.

*Just don't let him end up face down in the mud again.* A knot grew in Robin's back from mentally pushing the leviathans away from Yves every time he had the ball. Forlorn hope—Yves bit the dirt five more times before

the game ended, 29–24. The teams congratulated each other, and this time anyone who hugged Yves or slapped his back wasn't trying to grind him into the grass. The players hobbled to their respective benches. Yves' face was more dirt than skin, his clothing the memory of green and white, his bare arms and legs disguised beneath a layer of topsoil. He'd bound his hair in a ponytail for the game—wisps stuck out at all angles and the elastic was half out. Fuck, but he was sexy.

Now or never. *I'm a big boy, and all I have to do is get down there before he leaves. Say something. Anything. I can do this.* Why was it so hard to approach a man who looked like he'd been dragged through the hedge backwards, twice, and then run over with a tractor? Robin tried stretching the tension out of his body, arms low and behind him, his head back. He might as well have played the match himself for the physical toll.

And Yves was watching. Robin collapsed out of the stretch. Yves was looking his way, scrubbing at himself with a raggy old towel, and the same challenge he'd offered the camera long ago was now aimed Robin's way. Was that *Back off or come closer?*

Well, hell, if he was going to do something, he might as well, although slinking out had a certain appeal. *For my birthday I want a set of balls.* And that was the gift only Robin could give himself. *Unless Yves wants to fulfill my private fantasies and let me grope his.* Oh no, don't get started on that. *Just go and say one sentence, however lame, and then you can go back to being a slightly obsessed fanboy lurking in the bushes.*

Other people didn't hesitate, pushing ahead of Robin, begging for signatures from the players. "Sign my ticket, please?" must have gladdened the few others who had pens thrust at them. Yves smiled for the fans and scrawled on the proffered stubs, but his glance kept returning to Robin's slow progress. Was the upturn of Yves' lips left over from his clamoring fans, or was it for Robin? His feet weighed a thousand pounds each, as if they'd never run miles through parks and over country roads.

The five steps from the stands down to the sidelines were the longest, hardest steps Robin had ever taken. Longer than the hill climb up the Green Mountain trail. Longer than the last kilometer of the Bolder Boulder 10K.

Longer than mere distance, and harder than the knock of his heart against his ribs. Yves watched him, and Robin forced himself to read some sort of welcome in the man's eyes. He could be just a fan, right?

The eager autograph seekers fluttered away, leaving Yves with his towel and gear bag, finger-combing his now-loose hair into some semblance of order.

"We're heading to the Bonnie Brae," called another man dressed in green, white, and mud. "See you there!"

"In a bit, perhaps." Yves' words were for his teammate but his eyes were on Robin. "After I clean up."

He spoke with a hint of an accent, more French than the Midwest-with-an-eh Canadian Robin was accustomed to. An accent to lick with. An accent to buckle a man's knees. "Say something in French" would be even lamer than the banal phrases Robin was still trying to find in the back of his throat.

"Don't take too long, or they'll close the locker room." The other players left with knowing smiles.

"Call if you need a ride, Yves."

Why was everyone so willing to leave them alone? Not that this wasn't exactly what Robin had dreamed of, but he hadn't expected to get it.

"Thanks, Marcus."

*No! Don't take him away before I've made a thorough ass of myself!* Robin's tongue remained stubbornly tied.

Yves' smile, so confident a moment ago, wavered slightly as the group trickled away, leaving them alone in the stadium with a few straggling watchers and a couple of cleaners with trash bags and poky sticks, stabbing the forgotten cups and hot dog wrappers.

"Great game," Robin finally got out. "Ten points this time, and a lot of assists." That had to be important enough to mention, even if his terminology was wrong.

"Thank you." Yves' smile returned full force. "The team is improving as the season goes on."

“Yeah, they are.” Firmer ground here. “They aren’t dropping things at practice.” *Way to go, dodo, why didn’t you just say “I’m a creepy stalker?”*

“Kicking is improving too. Marcus scored a conversion from thirty-five yards out.”

He had? Somehow Robin had only noticed the screaming afterward. “That was great.” Okay, five sentences out at only seventy percent stupid, and Yves was still smiling, so this was a win all the way around. “Um, if you need to go shower before they lock up...” *Can I scrub your back?*

Yves shrugged. “I need to shower at home. I forgot to pack any jeans.”

He wasn’t reaching for his phone yet, so Robin dared offer. “I could take you...” Where did he need to go? Across town? Back to Montreal? Hawaii? The Miata might have trouble with the Pacific Ocean, but he could charter a freighter... “Oh, and I’m Robin Isley.”

“Would you? Thanks.” Yves swiped at his butt and the back of his legs again and slung the muddy towel into the gear bag. “Yves Dubois.” He put his hand out to complete an introduction he didn’t have to make.

*Eve Doo-bwah.* Robin memorized the accented syllable and shook a hand he’d spent a lot of time fantasizing about. Nothing stupid came out of his mouth, and his knees held, so he counted this a win.

Fuck, the walk to the car and the drive home would need conversation, and Robin had already used up his supply of prepared remarks. Now it was time for freeform opportunities to embarrass himself. “How long have you played rugby?” seemed safe enough, and maybe like he hadn’t tried to find out everything he could about Yves.

“Since I was a boy.” Was Yves as aware of Robin as Robin was of Yves? This steaming, warm assembly of muscle and bone couldn’t possibly be walking a few inches closer than necessary.

“It’s a popular sport in Canada, isn’t it?” A question he knew the answer to already, but it seemed safe. “You played for the national team, right?”

“Yes, in the younger teams. Not the Senior men’s team.” Yves seemed to be looking at some memory—his voice was far away. “An injury reminded me

that I wouldn't play forever, and my fallback field wouldn't wait for one tackle too many. So I 'retired' to a day job and a semi-pro team."

"But you still follow them?" Oh, good, Robin, a *d'oh* question. They were his friends and teammates.

"Canada is playing the US today. They'll win." Yves grinned.

"Probably isn't hard to know who to cheer for." Robin unlocked the car.

"It is hard, though. Now that I live in the US, shouldn't I cheer for my new country?" Folding himself into the tiny sports car, Yves demonstrated that six feet three inches of man telescoped into a space more comfortable for Robin's five feet nine. "The game will be on at the Bonnie Brae. We could watch with the team later."

*We?* Had he heard that correctly? Even if it was just basic politeness, he'd take it. "Then you could explain to me what's going on."

"Then perhaps we shouldn't watch with the team."

"Oh." Robin collapsed in spite of himself. "Okay. Where am I dropping you off?"

"*We* are going to 10th and Downing." Yves looked him full on, his demanding gaze making it hard for Robin to look at anything but the steering wheel. "Not that I wouldn't explain to you, but the team thinks you're a scout, and they should be allowed to think that."

And explanations would ruin the effect. No wonder the other players had been so willing to let him be alone with their star—they thought he had opportunities and money in his pocket for one of their own.

"And what do you think I am?" Robin threw the car into forward, braced for scraping parked vehicles when he heard the answer. *Fanboy. Stalker. Easy target.* Had he left out anything? *Remember to stop at the entrance and not just pull out into oncoming traffic.*

"You're my lucky charm."

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## CHAPTER 4

Hitting the brakes much harder than needed, Robin kept from nosing out into the path of an SUV. “Your lucky charm?”

Yves snapped against the safety harness. The car settled and threw them back. “Exactly. The team has won every game but one this season. They’re the same team as last year, when they won only three.” Yves went silent until Robin had them safely on the street. “The only change in the lineup is me. Except they’re not the same—they work harder now. And we win. I’m not doing it alone—I couldn’t. You come to games—they play with spirit. You come to practice, and they make the effort. They improve.”

“They’re doing it for you.” Robin’s knuckles went white on the steering wheel. “They want to be worthy of you.” *So do I.*

“Perhaps.” Yves rubbed his hand along his own thigh for a moment. A fleck of mud fell off, and he stopped. “But they worked much harder once you came to watch. So I think maybe they do it for both of us?”

“If they’re doing it for ‘the scout’, then they’re really doing it for you.” Robin refused to think of himself as valuable to the Barbarians, whom he didn’t know and who didn’t know him. “But I’m glad they’re doing it.”

“So am I.” Yves gave him that brilliant grin from the practice field, blinding at close range. “I like to win.”

The car suddenly felt the size of a shower stall. “So I should keep coming to practices?” Robin hung on the answer, missing the green left arrow and having to wait for the light to cycle.

“Please. Not just for the team.” Yves’ voice dropped. “I work harder when you watch.”

OMG, was Yves flirting? Robin swallowed hard. “Um, we’re about there. Where am I going?” He followed directions into the parking lot of a high-rise apartment building. “The team will be disappointed if you don’t join them for the celebrations, won’t they?”

“Probably, but they’ll be rejoicing for a long time and the game isn’t on for a few hours. Come upstairs and I can clean up, maybe explain enough rugby



that we can both go without destroying the illusion that you understand the game well.” Yves had to get out of the convertible one leg at a time.

If the top were down, that would be less of a problem next time... If there were a next time. First Robin had to survive now.

An elevator that contained Yves really didn't have enough oxygen in it. Robin tried to breathe normally until they reached the seventh floor, but the closeness of the man stole the air away. The car was intimate, but to go into Yves' home... Robin went for what he hoped was a neutral topic. “Your scrum only pushed the other team over once today. Was that bad?”

Yves unlocked his door to let them into a not-very-lived-in living room, where mathematical rows of magazines populated the coffee tables and tan leather furniture grouped around a cream and tan Oriental rug with teal medallions. “If I'd known you were coming I would have tidied.” Yves dropped his bag in a corner.

If the place was any tidier, he'd have to do without reading material all together. Was he a real neat freak? Possible downside, *whoop whoop whoop*. Robin tried to find a place he wasn't afraid to sit down for fear of creases.

“Pushing the other team over in the scrum at all was very bad. We try to move each other around but not cause a collapse.” Yves set his lips in a narrow line, and Robin predicted scrum drills for someone. “The other team didn't set their scrum well, and we did. We were much stronger.”

Probably not for the Barbos, then. “What did they do wrong?” It all looked alike to Robin during the game, but then, the man he'd been watching wasn't involved in the melee.

“It's easier to show you, if I may.” In his tentative reach to Robin, half the confidence drained from Yves' handsome, mobile face.

But to be touched... The thrill was enough to overcome Robin's caution. Maybe he'd been getting signals, or maybe he was only hoping to get them, but Robin wouldn't start a thing. And if Yves wanted to show him something, he'd allow most anything at all. “Sure.”

Looking down his smeared shirt, Yves shrugged and stripped it away. “No need to transfer the playing field to you.” The muddy garment landed on the

gear bag, but now those rippling pecs and washboard abs were on display. *Don't stare, asshat, he's being polite.*

Yves aligned him with the arm of the couch, bending Robin at the waist and letting him balance with a hand on the furniture. *I'm assuming the position with a half-naked man, and it's not going anywhere. Just pay attention. Just... pay...* Oh fuck, this was hopeless, and Robin's trapped erection complained that there were too many layers of clothes between him and opportunity.

"Okay, you're the loosehead prop, the couch is your hooker, who's the only one allowed to snag the ball out of the scrum. You bind to him and he binds to you."

Sounded kinky. Bound. Bent over, ass out. But this was rugby.

"That means you are holding on tightly." Oh, getting worse. "And now I—" Yves bent over beside Robin and a little to his rear, and draped his arm over Robin's back. Damn it, why did this HAVE to be rugby? "I'm your blindside flanker, and we are on the outside left of the scrum. I bind myself to you—" He placed his hand on Robin's belly. Oh fuck, every non-rugby thought throbbed.

"—the other second rows bind themselves to me, the last man is in a row by himself, and we all push against the opposite team. But if the binding is too high, then all that happens is no traction and we slide and end up packed tight and high."

Yves' arm scraped up Robin's back, and his hand stroked quite impersonally up to Robin's chest, even if his hip and thigh curved around Robin's body. His back and belly were exposed—Yves could have his shirt off in another few inches. *Please, please...*

"This is bad."

*Speak for yourself, buddy. It's only bad if you don't take it further.*

"No power."

Okay, for rugby that was bad. And worse, Yves stood up and pulled Robin's shirt down again.

"But for a properly set scrum, one gets low. Puts the head down, and the shoulder against the meat of the man ahead of him."

Oh Lord. Yves did *not* just say that. But he was demonstrating, his shoulder now against the joint of Robin's thigh and ass, his head low enough to let him look under Robin's belly if he wished. Where he could see the throbbing erection he'd roused, demanding to escape the denim that contained it. *Maybe I could just die now. Or use it.* A muscular arm snaked around behind Robin's thighs. *This is for the game. Nothing more. Down, boy. Down.* Yeah, like anything short of an orgasm was going to deflate him with Yves' head at his side and hand on his hip.

"Lots of power this way." Yves pushed.

Robin went flying onto the couch cushions, and Yves flew with him. Beside him. No, atop him, pressing him into the buttery leather. Pressing the length of his body to Robin's. And—oh Lord, Yves was hard. His length crushed against Robin's ass, just left of his cleft, not quite right—but if he wiggled to rearrange, would Yves get up? Or not? And why would he want Yves to do that anyway, not with soft lips explaining to the nape of his neck that, "This is how you take possession," and hands tight to his shoulders.

Writhing, with Yves' body burning through their clothing, Robin wanted to be possessed. Turning his head enough to see his captor, Robin stroked his cheek against Yves' mouth. "You gonna possess me?"

"If you allow it." Yves brushed his lips over Robin's skin.

As if he wanted anything more. "Let me turn over."

Chest to chest, belly to belly, the glory that was Yves pressed against him now, their mouths meeting and arms tight around each other. Binding wasn't just for the scrum, it was for thrusting his cock against Yves', demanding friction. Yves met him thrust for thrust, tongue probing deeply into Robin's mouth, and there were too many damned clothes in the way.

They tumbled to the floor, clothing flying, and somehow Robin ended up on top, straddling Yves' hips. Too far away to kiss, but the perfect distance to admire lightly-tanned skin with its dark streaks from the playing field, stretched over muscles that rippled with every caress Yves bestowed. Taut quads flexed under Robin's ass, which Yves was gripping with both hands.

Their cocks lay side by side, inviting a comparison that Robin swallowed with both hands, stroking them together. He'd rather look at Yves' face, and

know that the challenge had gone from his eyes, only to be replaced with desire.

“Yes,” Yves breathed, and Robin wouldn’t question, but touch everywhere he was invited to—he’d touch everything he’d dreamed of for weeks. The heat against his palms, the rasp of hair against his balls, even the small pain where Yves dug into his butt a little too hard for the scantest moment—Robin was greedy for everything he could take, everything Yves would give.

Joining his hand with Robin’s, Yves helped him stroke their cocks. The feel of that thick rod pressed against his own needy cock, wrapped in the primality of the hunt and the victory, and a little drowning, too, in eyes of pale blue. He gasped, bringing Yves upright to grip him with a strong arm and press his face to Robin’s chest.

To be wanted by Yves, to be touched, to be jacked, all burst through him in jets of come and the shattering of a fantasy. Still trembling, Robin pulled Yves against him to bury his face in flowing, slightly muddy locks, and stroked, bringing Yves to his own shuddering finish.

They stayed entwined, more comfortably once Yves crossed his legs to make a nest for Robin’s butt, and he leaned against Robin’s shoulder, resting his head in the crook of Robin’s neck. Wonderful but drippy, and Yves’ muddy skin was starting to crackle.

“We’ll mess your rug if we stay here much longer.” The trails on their skins demanded attention. Robin brushed his lips across Yves’ forehead, tasting the salt of the game upon him.

“This rug is a hundred and fifty years old. I’m sure it’s met much worse.” But Yves helped Robin get up, with the same maneuver he’d used to lift his teammate in pursuit of the ball. In turn, Robin offered a hand, to be enveloped and rewarded with a kiss.

Guiding Robin to the shower with one hand on his shoulder, Yves walked them through a bedroom that looked as if the Tasmanian Devil had made the bed and finished with a trip through the closet holding a rake. The contrast with the pristine living room made Robin choke a little, but he didn’t comment.

“I would have had this neat by Tuesday, but...” Yves shrugged.

Tuesday was a practice night. “You were going to make a move?” After all those nights that ended in nothing but a happy flash of teeth?

“You seemed to be getting over that deer in the headlights reaction, so I thought it might be time.” Yves kissed him and shoved him under the shower spray. “But you approached me first.”

They explored each other with sudsy hands, finding crevices and bulges, the firm places and the soft ones. Yves bent to let Robin create masses of foam with the shampoo, and nearly wriggled under his hands. Robin had to nuzzle Yves’ Adam’s apple when he tipped back to rinse, remembering every swallow of sports drink where he’d held the bottle vertically. Tease. The top of Robin’s head only came to Yves’ nose—he had to stand on tiptoe to reach.

Free of shampoo and hard again, Yves took a dollop of conditioner and didn’t put it on his hair. Rubbing it on his cock instead, he turned Robin to face the tiles. “Not in.” But close—Yves settled his erection into the cleft of Robin’s ass to stroke between.

Good, but not as satisfying as in, but without a condom, Robin wouldn’t complain. Not with the man he’d yearned for plastered against his skin. With that friendly reach-around to get Yves’ big hand around his cock, Robin wasn’t about to say a word that wasn’t “Mmm, good.” Not when he was enveloped in strong arms and hands, not when Yves brushed his lips over the nape of Robin’s neck, not when his hips were thrusting with increasing urgency. The water beat on them, but wasn’t as hot as the come Yves sprayed across Robin’s lower back, and scant strokes later, Robin convulsed against the pressure of Yves’ fingers.

Yves lifted him upright and let the water wash his come away, nuzzling the side of Robin’s head. They had to break apart to rinse off Yves’ traces, letting Robin get his first good look at his favorite rugby player in the nude. He scrubbed at a muddy mark on Yves’ leg, watching it drizzle away.

“You clean up nice.” Better than nice. Gorgeous, but Robin was keeping a lid on the gushing. He ran the soapy cloth up and down Yves’ thigh, and felt warm pressure under his arms, bringing him to stand.

“So do you.” Yves bent for a brush of mouths. “Not that you were muddy.”

“Not like—” Instead of explanations, Robin ran his hands over Yves’ biceps.

“So?” That brought an eyebrow. “Strong and lean. Built like a runner.” He investigated how runners’ glutes felt.

“Yeah, I do run.” Okay, he could breathe again: Yves liked what he saw, what he touched. Robin leaned against the wall of man. “I’m in training. Big race this Monday.”

“Really?” Yves shut the water and groped for towels. “You’re running the Bolder Boulder?” He flipped terrycloth around Robin’s back and hugged the water away.

“Yeah.” Should he mention the details, his expectations for himself? Would that seem too much like bragging, and feeble bragging at that, compared to the athleticism Robin had witnessed earlier?

“I thought about running, but had no partner. Maybe you and I...?” Toweling his hair, Yves’ voice went much quieter.

The joy of his starting position turned to ashes. “I’m in the A wave. Even if you qualified, it’s too late to get into anything lower than HH. I’d be done before you ever started.”

“Then I could meet you at the finish line?” Yves emerged from his aqua terry barricade. “You’ll want a dry shirt and some water.”

“You’d do that?” Robin had already asked Sebastian to be the keeper of the keys and T-shirts, but... Could they get along? Could Sebastian refrain from telling every horrible story of Robin’s life while they waited at the finish line? Would they even find each other in the crowd at Folsom Stadium, or would Sebastian be okay with the opportunity to sleep in later? Or would Sebastian flutter his eyelashes? The horrid possibilities danced in Robin’s fevered imagination.

“Sure. Sebastian and I can drive up with you.” With one finger Yves lifted Robin’s chin, which had dropped like the perfect ninny’s.

“You... know Sebastian... Whah?” Words failed.

“He didn’t tell you?” Yves chuckled. “And here I thought you were too proud to lean on connections.”

“Connections?” Half-thoughts flickered *zzzt zzzt* in Robin’s head. The towel dangled from his immobile fingers. “He never said...”

Yves took the towel away and knelt to wipe the drips from Robin’s legs. “I’m the cousin you refused to allow him to introduce.” Sliding the towel between Robin’s thighs, he went on. “I didn’t imagine you refused to let him tell you who the cousin is.”

“He said his cousin played rugby. Lots of people play rugby. And I...” Robin shook himself and steadied with a hand on Yves’ shoulder. “I wouldn’t even let him mention his cousin...”

“Why?” Yves looked up, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“If Sebastian had introduced us, we’d have hated each other on sight, or in ten minutes, twelve at the most.” Or fucked and parted just as fast. “He has a terrible track record.”

“That explains why he kept saying to let you have some time.” With his hands on Robin’s waist, Yves lifted himself to his feet. “But he thinks quite highly of you. Tells me stories about your adventures.” He didn’t release his hold on Robin’s middle. “You have an interesting life. I’ve never gone bungee jumping.”

The groan emerged from somewhere around Robin’s navel. “Only once, and never again.” One of Sebastian’s other introductions had suggested going, and had *not* been sympathetic, to say the least. That’s when Robin had also said “never again” to Sebastian’s matchmaking attempts. He leaned into Yves’ chest, unwilling to let him see the remembered humiliation.

“He said you were smart. And loyal.” Yves bent down for another kiss, which landed in Robin’s hair. “Also skittish, but you seem to have gotten over that.”

“No reason to dodge when I’ve been tackled by a big, sweaty rugby player who works harder when I watch.” Had Yves been dreaming of a Robin he’d known only from another man’s words? That deserved a kiss, and some living up to. Robin drew Yves closer and hung his arms around Yves’ neck. The



reach up was worth every millimeter. “You took a chance doing that with a skittish man.”

“I got impatient, and you’d finally come to me.” His smile was more “worth the wait” than “high damned time”. “And I intend to do it again and again while I get to know you.”

“Okay,” could barely get out of Robin’s throat, but Yves had to get the message from their meeting of mouths. Seeking rather than passionate, Robin nibbled at Yves’ lips to be met with sweet caresses in return, and the sweep of Yves’ hand up and down Robin’s back promised interest.

Sweet kisses wouldn’t fill Yves’ belly—it grumbled. Yves blushed. “I need to eat, and the game... The team. Come with me.”

“Uh...” This was turning into a hell of a first date. Yves shouldn’t be done out of his triumph with the others. “That’s not what you said earlier.”

“We weren’t on kissing terms earlier.”

“True. Let’s go.” Robin went in search of his clothing.

Looking marvelous in a green Barbo T-shirt and jeans, Yves waited for Robin to unlock the Miata’s passenger door.

“Want to put the top down?” Robin was impressed with the way Yves could telescope his legs, but he shouldn’t have to, and his hair would finish drying awfully fast. His own would take a beating, but that was fine, this time. Maybe go with the tousled look for the summer.

“Yes!” That broad grin was added reason to go topless. Robin flipped a handle and opened the car to the sun.

The Bonnie Brae Tavern wasn’t far, just far enough for Robin to get jittery. “I’m going to have to keep really quiet if they aren’t going to twig to me not being a scout.”

Yves nodded thoughtfully. “I’m not certain it’s possible, and we shouldn’t try. If they lie to themselves, that’s one thing. If we lie to them, that’s another. They’re my friends; I want them to like you, and that’s a bad foundation.”

“Very.” But introducing him as a friend would also fly in the face of the way they’d seen him and Yves smile but never speak at practice. “What do you want to do?” He found a slot for the little red car.



Yves turned sideways in the seat and rested his hand on Robin's shoulder. "Remember I said you were my good luck charm?"

"Yeah." The heat from Yves' skin somehow transformed into chills. "What else do you need good luck for?"

Yves sighed. "I'm not in the closet, but neither am I exactly out. They've never seen me with anyone. Nor heard me speak of anyone. There's been no one to speak of since I came to Denver. So the subject has never come up. And I don't want to lie to them by pretending you are no one to me."

"What am I to you besides Sebastian's stories?" *And a couple of orgasms.* Robin didn't reach for his seat belt.

"I don't know yet. I want to find out." Yves stroked his shoulder, each motion demanding Robin turn to look at him. "But I don't want to go in there and have to be wary of touching you accidentally or smiling at you too warmly. I don't want to start off with lies."

"I don't want to start off with a stomping." He could outrun them if he had to, but why should he have to?

"If things degenerate, I'll protect you. We'll leave if it gets ugly, but Robin, they're riding the high of the victory. They've seen me at practice, they bind to me, I bind to them, there's never been a problem. They've had a chance to know me."

It almost made sense. Robin turned to see Yves' pleading eyes.

"I know we're doing this backwards, we should have dinners and runs and long afternoons before I ask you to meet them, but they expect me to come, it's what the team does. I don't want you to leave yet, and I don't want to treat you like just another man. Because I don't think that's what you'll be."

"Why not?" Robin relaxed into Yves' hand.

"Because Sebastian's set-up record with me is pretty good. So far he's been right, and you have been my good luck charm." Yves worked a thumb along the side of Robin's neck. "So this will go well too."

"I hope so." And if not, he could outrun them. Yves seemed pretty confident.

“It will.” But Yves didn’t open the car door until Robin had unfastened the seat belt and reached for the handle.

“Binding on, you called it?” Maybe this wouldn’t last past the tavern door, but Robin would give Yves this much confidence. He slipped his arm around Yves’ waist and snugged into his side. Yves dropped his arm around Robin’s shoulders. Bound, they went in to meet the team.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*P.D. Singer lives in Colorado with her slightly bemused husband, two rowdy teenage boys, and thirty pounds of cats. She's a big believer in research, first-hand if possible, so the reader can be quite certain P.D. has skied down a mountain face-first, been stepped on by rodeo horses, acquired a potato burn or two, and will never, ever, write a novel that includes sky-diving.*

*When not writing, playing her fiddle, or skiing, she can be found with a book in hand. Her husband blesses the advent of e-books—they're staving off the day the house collapses from the weight of the printed page.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# GREAT CATCH

By Megan Slayer

## Photo Description

Two young men are side by side on a bus and appear to be sleeping. The boy on the left wears a sleeveless dark blue T-shirt and a grey visor turned backwards. He has his arm around the boy on the right, who rests his head against his friend's chest, cushioned by a towel or pillow. Their fingers are laced together, holding on as they sleep.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*We have been best friends since elementary school and started fooling around together the summer we turned fifteen. Other than being best friends, I know that we just fool around to have fun. It doesn't mean anything more than that; at least I know that it doesn't mean anything more than that to him.*

*He has always been such a fun and outgoing guy, doing anything for a laugh and never caring about what anybody thinks. Believe it or not, I used to actually be shy before we met, but now I'm almost as outgoing as him. He brings it out in me, I guess. I never thought I'd be good at baseball, but after having played catcher for him so many times in his backyard, I decided to try out for our high school varsity team after he made starting pitcher. (And ha-ha, yes we have heard just about all the pitcher/catcher jokes we can stand.) But like I said, he doesn't care what anybody thinks and we always have a good time together, even when we have to take the boring bus to and from our games.*

*And like I said, I know that we just fool around to get off and have fun, and it's not like we do it every day. Except lately it seems that when we are together, even when we are just hanging out, I can't help but get the feeling that he is looking at me differently than he normally does... Like he is waiting for me to say something or do something. But it's driving me crazy, because I know I want more. But I know he doesn't... Does he?*

*Sincerely,*

*Major English (Laura)*

### **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** high school, barely legal, first time, coming out, friends to lovers, sports, coming of age, homophobia

**Word count:** 9,860

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# GREAT CATCH

By Megan Slayer

## CHAPTER ONE

“Any damn time, Ky.” Jake rubbed his temples and scooted down in his seat. This happened more often than not. The pitching coaches spent forever talking to the pitchers about the next game. Being the star pitcher for the Wildcats meant Kyler got the most attention. Fine by Jake. He was proud of his best friend. Hell, maybe Ky would get a scholarship this year.

Jake stared at the closed door to the locker rooms. Was Ky in there showering? A vision of Ky, soap lathered all over his body and water sluicing down his skin, came to mind. Jake gulped. He shouldn’t have such feelings about Ky—not when there wasn’t a chance in hell they’d be more than friends with strange benefits. He palmed the bulge in his running shorts and fixed his gaze on the door. The moment Ky strolled out, he’d forget the way Ky made him feel and focus on remaining friends.

Except forgetting the one guy he cared about wasn’t going to happen.

They’d been best friends since elementary school and started fooling around together the summer they turned fifteen. Other than being best friends, Jake knew that they just fooled around to have fun. It didn’t mean anything more than that; at least, Jake swore what they did didn’t mean anything more than that to *Kyler*.

Talk about the star. Kyler had always been such a fun and outgoing guy, doing anything for a laugh and never caring about what anybody thought. No one would believe Jake used to be shy before they met, but now he and Kyler competed to see who could be more outgoing. Kyler brought out the best in Jake. Hell, Jake never thought he’d be good at baseball, but after having played catcher for Kyler so many times in Ky’s backyard, Jake decided to try out for the high school varsity team after Ky made starting pitcher. They’d heard just about all the pitcher/catcher jokes they could stand, but they didn’t mind. Kyler didn’t care what anybody thought, and they always had a good

time together, even when they had to take the boring bus to and from the away games.

They fooled around to get off and have fun, and it wasn't like they did it every day. Except lately. It seemed that whenever they were together, even when they were just hanging out, Jake couldn't help but get the feeling Kyler looked at him differently... Like he waited for Jake to say something or do something. It drove Jake crazy, because he wanted more. But Kyler didn't... *did he?*

They'd have to talk sooner or later, if for no other reason than to get things out in the open.

The door to the locker rooms opened, but instead of Kyler, Seth Roberts—star first baseman and legendary at the school for being a player—strolled out onto the parking lot. He loved guys, all guys, and made no bones about staking his claim when he found a guy he liked. He tipped his head back and laughed, then glanced over his shoulder. Kyler followed and laughed just as hard. When Seth gripped Kyler's shoulder, Ky didn't bat him away like he usually did with Jake. No, he left the first baseman's hand there.

Jake's heart squeezed. He knew this would happen—he'd keep his mouth shut for too long and someone else would make a play. Kyler had turned eighteen two months before Jake. He didn't have a girlfriend and didn't really date, except for Homecoming because he'd been matched up with Mallory Blevins. Jake went with Mallory's friend and pretended to have a good time. The whole night he watched Kyler.

Maybe he was an idiot. No one pined over a guy this way. But Jake knew back when he was fourteen which way his flag flew. His phone pinged, signalling a text. Happy Birthday, Jake. The text took some of the sting away. His brother remembered his birthday. So his birthday wasn't until tomorrow. Still, someone remembered.

When Jake looked up from his phone, Seth snagged Ky in a hug. He said something out of Jake's earshot then laughed again. Kyler shrugged, withdrew, and waved. Seth said something else, but Kyler continued walking across the lot towards Jake's truck. He caught Jake's gaze and grinned.

“I thought they’d never let us leave.” Kyler opened the truck door, then plopped his gear back in the truck bed. “Said the Tigers roster came alive and I’ve got to change up my pitches for tomorrow.” He slid into the seat beside Jake. “Do you think my fastball is getting better? I thought it was my best pitch.”

“You could put more thrust behind it, but it’s still hard for most hitters to gauge. I wouldn’t worry about it.” Jake put the truck in gear and rolled through the lot. “Are you coming over tonight? Ventana put new music on the web and I downloaded them. We could have our own listening party.” Jake kept his gaze on the church across the street from the school. If he looked over at Ky, he’d say something he’d regret. *Please come over. Celebrate with me tomorrow. I love you. Shit.*

“Take me home. I’ve got a couple things to do.”

No emotion in his voice, just flat words. Jake swallowed his pride and sped across town toward Ky’s house. Within a few minutes he pulled into the driveway and parked.

“Thanks for the lift. I’m working on my car this weekend. I should have the tranny fixed in time for prom.” Kyler gripped the door handle, but didn’t get out of the truck. He stared at Jake for a long time, then leaned over and kissed him on the lips. “I’ve wanted to do that all day.” Ky winked and got out of the truck.

Jake sank down in his seat and blew out a long breath. Screw it. He’d either have a friend when he finished or he’d be alone. Either way he’d feel better for saying what needed to be said. He opened his door and jogged after Ky.

“Hey.” Kyler grinned. “Can’t get enough of me?”

“No, I can’t.” He grabbed the front of Kyler’s shirt and kissed him. Kyler didn’t pull away, didn’t push, just continued the kiss. Ky opened to him, tangling their tongues and swallowing Jake’s moan. Tingles shot through Jake’s brain and heat settled low in his belly. His cock thickened behind his jogging shorts, and he pressed his groin to Ky’s. He expected no reaction. Ky smoothed his hands over Jake’s ass, pushing their cocks together in a delicious



friction. For the first time, he wanted more than a simple blow job. More than a hand job. He wanted the feeling of Kyler's cock in his ass, connecting them.

When Kyler finally broke the kiss, he panted and brilliant pink streaked across his cheeks. "Wow."

Jake gathered his courage. "Ky, I like you. You're my best friend and I'm sure this will fuck everything up, but I want you." *There.* He'd poured out most of his heart for Kyler to accept or reject.

"Seth said you were crazy about me, but I didn't believe him." Kyler kept their bodies tight together. "Told him he was full of shit."

Jake suppressed a snort. Maybe he was full of shit, too. "Look, I'm tired of the gossip on the bus. I'm tired of pretending what we do doesn't affect me. It does. The more you and I suck each other off, the more my heart gets involved. I'm not a girl and I'm not emotional, but I really, really like you."

"Jake." Kyler touched Jake's cheek. "I've got to go." He pulled away from Jake, then dipped his head and walked into the house.

Jake's heart sank to his toes. At least he knew where he stood. He turned his baseball hat backwards on his head and retreated to his truck. So much for being honest with the one he loved.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER TWO

Kyler stood at the kitchen sink and watched Jake zip down the driveway until the Chevy's red tail lights faded from view. Too many thoughts rushed through his brain. Jake liked him. He sort of knew they had a bond. Most guys didn't spend their free time talking sports and sucking each other's cock, but they did. Christ, the two of them knew each other so well, but hearing the words *I like you* coming from Jake didn't seem real. His cock still tingled from the feel of Jake against his body—hard muscle against hard muscle, cock to cock. The taste of Jake's kiss lingered on his tongue. Boy, did Jake know how to kiss, swiping his tongue along Kyler's teeth, taking control of the situation without being overbearing... just the way Kyler liked. He could still see the pale blue flecks in Jake's eyes. So why'd he freeze up? He'd always been the one to blurt out whatever he felt. He amused people with his outgoing personality, but the moment he and Jake hid from everyone, his confidence turned to nothing.

Jake crawled under his skin and made him think. Made him feel.

Footsteps clunked on the floor behind him. "Are you going to stare at the driveway all night?" His mother, Jane, carried Jesse, Kyler's baby brother, into the kitchen and strapped the toddler into his high chair. "No Jake tonight?" she asked over her shoulder. Jesse squealed and clapped his hands.

"He went home." Kyler scrubbed the back of his hand across his chin then stuck his tongue out for his brother. When Jesse smiled and blew him raspberries, he mimicked the toddler's noises.

"Nice. Don't teach him to make rude noises." His mother chuckled. "Did you two have a falling out?" She opened a box of Cheerios, dumped a few into a bowl, and handed the bowl to Jesse. "Big Brother Number Two went home, big guy." She sat down next to the high chair. Jesse squealed, then slapped at the round cereal and blew another round of sloppy raspberries. His mother turned her attention back to Kyler. "What's wrong? It's Jake's birthday tomorrow. I thought you had plans."

"I did." *Lots of them.* He glanced at his baseball gear. The letter from the coach waited, still tucked in the pocket. He'd planned to tell Jake and his

mother over supper how OSU finally offered him a full-ride, his spot secured due to his grades. Jake had brains, athletic ability, and was a damn fine cock sucker... all of the things Ky wanted to be. But did Jake want his best friend in a romantic way? There was the sticking point. Kyler was supposed to like girls. But the night of Homecoming proved him wrong. Mallory did her best to please him. She swallowed and everything, but the whole scene felt wrong. He wanted Jake there. *To watch?* No, for more. He'd imagined Jake lapping at his balls, staring up at him when he came, and making him feel complete. He pressed his knees together and inched behind the countertop to hide the burgeoning erection. Damn thing reacted every time he so much as thought about Jake.

"Earth to Kyler." His mom knocked on the Formica in front of him. "Are you in there?"

"Yeah, Mom." The weight of his situation pushed down on him. He couldn't talk to Jake. Not yet. He bowed his head. Hell, he hadn't even come out to his family. "Mom? Have you ever struggled with something? You kind of know the answer, but you need to say it out loud and talk it out first?" His hands shook, and he folded them together on top of the counter. "Something really—you don't even know how to say it, but you have to?"

"Well, spit it out. Your brother won't say anything, your dad probably already knows, and I'm always here to listen." She patted the other chair. "What's up?"

He ground his teeth together. His father probably did know. If he was truly the angel or whatever he felt following him, then, yeah, his father probably had an inkling about Ky's orientation. But his father wouldn't care. Kyler pushed his knuckles into the counter. Where the hell should he start?

"I'm gay." *Shit.* He hadn't meant to blurt that out so fast. The tips of his ears burned and his skin itched. Relief and dread washed over him. "I wasn't going to tell you because I was afraid you'd disown me or something." He fixed his gaze on the tabletop. "I'm—confused." *Scared, hurting, and lost.*

"What are you confused about?" His mother squeezed his shoulder. "You like guys. I'm glad you're being honest with yourself. Have you told Jake? He's very cute."

*He's cute?* Not the answer Ky expected, but then again, he hadn't planned to have the conversation with his mother in the first place. Kyler's baby brother tossed a piece of cereal at Ky, breaking the tension in the room.

"Thanks, Rugrat." Kyler nibbled on the Cheerio. He didn't feel much better, not really. "You're not upset? Not going to try to fix me up with a girl anyway?"

Jane's brows knotted then she rolled her eyes. "Ky, as long as you're happy, I'm happy. Oh, by the way, I'd appreciate it if you didn't say the d-word in front of your brother. He likes to repeat everything. New trend he started today. Don't ask, it's a long story, but trust me." She ruffled Kyler's hair. "What are you confused about? Being out? Or maybe about Jake? You don't think he'll stop being friends with you over this, do you? He's a good guy."

"Jake." His heart hammered. *If he couldn't talk to his mom, who could he talk to?* "I'm scared and confused. He's my best friend. We're a strong team." He covered his face with his hands. "And we've... experimented. A lot." He hadn't planned on telling his mother everything, but then again he hadn't planned on coming out. But she made talking so easy. "Did you know?"

"Did I know about you two doing whatever it is you did together? No. Do I care? A little, but if you needed to experiment, Jake's easy on the eyes, and his heart is huge. Tell him you like him. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Plenty. We're on the team together. We already take heat for being friends and our tendency to sleep on each other on the bus." He swallowed hard and faced his mother. "Mom, he says he likes me, too, but I don't think I just like him."

"Then you do." She smiled and hugged him. "Talk to him. I'll bet this will be a lot easier if you do. And if, by some stretch of the imagination, he puts distance between you, your brother and I will do our best to cheer you up."

"Thanks, Mom." His hands shook and his stomach flip-flopped. He knew what he had to do. "Can I borrow the car? I won't be out late."

"You're eighteen. I can't make you stick around and I can't afford to fix your car, either." She slid the car keys across the counter then patted his hand.

“But know I’m here for you if you need me. Just leave out some of the more colorful details.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He rounded the counter and snagged his mother in a hug. He rested his forehead on Jesse’s and blew another raspberry. “Behave and don’t repeat what Momma says.” Jesse afforded him with a sloppy kiss on his nose. “Thanks, Rugrat.”

Kyler stepped into his tennis shoes, grabbed his wallet, and sprinted out to the car. “Give me time, Jake. We’ll sort this out.”

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER THREE

Jake kicked his foot against the bare tree root, swinging the hammock. The stars glittered above him and he noticed none of them. His thoughts centered on Kyler and the mess he'd made of his life. Telling Ky how he felt had been the worst mistake of his life. Instead of accepting him, Ky pushed him away. And the night before the last game, too. Jesus. He massaged his forehead with both hands. He'd have to go inside sooner or later, even if only to check the cut on his cheek.

His father's words filtered through the open windows. "I don't have a son if he's gay. I don't have a son at all."

*Great. No family and probably no best friend. How much better could life get?*

An engine hummed in the distance, then grew louder. Jake tipped his head in the direction of the sound. Few people drove down his road during the daytime. If someone happened down the road at night, they either wanted to be there or they were lost.

Headlights appeared at the head of the drive then came closer. Jake slipped his phone from his pocket and checked the time. *Half past nine. Must be someone lost.*

The car came to a stop in front of the house and Jake wondered who'd come to visit. A few seconds later, Jake's father's bellows filled the air. "You son of a bitch. You fucked up my kid. He needs to be fixed. Boys like girls, not other boys." Light flooded the side yard as a figure sprinted to the side gate, then jumped over it. *Kyler*. Howard raced out the back door toward Kyler and a work boot whizzed past Kyler's head.

"Get out of my house," Howard bellowed. "And take the bastard with you."

Kyler whipped around. "Mr. Lofton, I'm not in your house. Give me another couple minutes and I'll be off your property, but not if you knock my ass out cold with a work boot. Then you'll have to deal with me even longer." He stood within inches of Jake's father. "And if you ever call my best friend a bastard again, we really won't come back."

Jake's mother, Susan, grabbed Howard's arm. "Leave them alone. You threw our son out of our house. Stop before you push him away forever."

"Fuck this." Kyler strode across the lawn to Jake, still seated on the hammock. "Let's go. You don't deserve this." He offered his hand. "We've always got room." When Jake stood, Kyler whispered in his ear. "And we need to talk."

His stomach soured. The last time he talked with Ky, Jake bared his heart and walked away bruised. He didn't want to go there again, but he didn't really feel like dealing with his father's rage, either. Jake sprinted around the house to Kyler's car.

"Want to bring your truck?" Kyler nodded to the garage.

"Can't. Dad confiscated my keys and popped my tires." Jake kept his face in the shadows and hoped Kyler didn't notice the knot or the bruise.

"The hell you say." Kyler climbed into the car and turned over the engine. "Let's go. I hate morons."

Jake slid in beside him. "He's still my dad."

"Your dad is an ass. I'm sorry, but he is, and if he beats you again, I will do more than take you to my house." He shifted the car into gear and sped down the driveway, leaving a spray of gravel in his wake. "He hit you again, didn't he? Don't try to hide from me. I know you better than you know yourself."

"He found a magazine in my room. Gay porn. It's so—I'm fucked up. I really am. I want you and I know you don't want me so I thought maybe if I got my mind off you, I'd—I don't know. I wanted to forget you and I couldn't." He stared out the window. "Ky, tell me the truth. If I don't mean anything to you other than a mouth to suck you off and a friend when no one else listens, then tell me. I'll figure something out until we graduate."

"You're my best friend." Kyler sped across town before he said anything else. He waited until they came to a stop in his driveway, then continued. "No one has the right to beat you up because of who or what you are." He shifted in his seat to look at Jake and gripped Jake's hand. "You're my best friend, and, yeah, we've experimented, but I'm not letting you live on the streets because your family can't accept you. Hell, you were my first kiss."

That little tidbit of information knocked Jake for a loop. He could've sworn Becky Jones had been the first one to kiss Ky. She bragged about it to the entire freshman class. "I'm tired of being in situations where I'm not wanted."

"That's where you're wrong. Mom said she doesn't want to know what we've done, but you've always got a place with us. Right now, I don't think you should be alone." He opened his car door, climbed out, then rounded the hood and opened Jake's door. "Come inside so I can look at your shiner. We'll figure out what to tell Coach and go from there. I've got your back. Always."

Jake sighed and followed his friend into the house. Ky's smile warmed his heart but did little to calm his nerves. Every time he and Ky ended up alone, someone lost their pants. Right now, he didn't have much nerve, either.

Ky's mom waved from her place on the couch. Jesse lay sprawled on his blanket on the floor. "He wanted to see his brothers but ran out of steam instead." She shook her head. "Your dad hit you again, didn't he?"

Christ. Everyone knew about his old man's shit-for-brains attitude.

"Asshole threw a work boot at me." Ky strolled back into the room with a bag of ice in hand. "Here. This will take the swelling down."

"I know," Jake muttered. He rather liked Ky playing the role of mother hen. At least he mattered to someone. But he couldn't shake the feeling of not belonging... anywhere.

"It's your birthday, isn't it?" Jane smiled again. "Get some rest and we'll do something nice tomorrow."

"Thanks." He ducked his head and followed Kyler back to his bedroom. Kyler's mother shouldn't be the one worried about Jake's birthday, should she?

"Boys?" she called. "I don't want to hear a thing."

A rare blush flooded across Kyler's cheeks. "I told her more than I probably should've." He shrugged. "Not ashamed." He closed his bedroom door. "I don't regret a thing we did." He kicked out of his shoes then sprawled on his bed with his jogging shorts tented over his groin. "Here's where we need to talk."



“Don’t worry. You don’t have to explain anything to me. I’ll keep my hands to myself and sleep in the guest room.” Nice to see Ky knew what he wanted. Jake sighed and scratched his head. “I’m not in the mood anyway.” He snorted then sighed. “There’s nothing like turning eighteen and hearing you’re not welcome in your own home.” His eyes stung from unshed tears. “A month till fucking graduation and I’m homeless.”

“Okay, no sleeping in the guest room because I said so.” Kyler sat up and scooted down the bed until he sat on the edge. “You’re not homeless and this won’t be the worst birthday ever. I can screw up plenty of birthdays if you want.” He grinned then tugged Jake into the curve of his legs. “I came out to Mom.” His eyes glittered as he talked. “Told her everything. What we did, what you said and how I reacted like an asshole. She knows about us on the bus. It felt good to tell her the truth. I’m gay. I thought I liked girls, but you were the one guy to change my mind. Turns out, you’re more important than being a guy.” He wrapped his arms around Jake. “You’re the guy. My guy.”

Fires burned in Kyler’s eyes. “Tonight, I want to make you feel hot and wanted.” He placed his index finger over Jake’s mouth. “Because to me, you’re sexy, hot, sweet and so much more. I like you, too, Jake. More than friends. We make a good team. You catch everything I pitch in perfect sync. I’m not me without you.”

“You’re a sap,” Jake said around Ky’s finger. Despite his face hurting from the rendezvous with his father’s fist and the boot, Jake’s spirits soared. Not only had Ky come out, but the feelings were oh-so-mutual.

Kyler tugged Jake forward in a tangle of arms and legs, then rolled Jake onto his back and scrambled astride Jake’s hips. A lock of his dark hair slid forward and he licked his lips. “I might be a sap, but I’m also very, very attracted to you.”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Kyler braced himself on his hands and knees. This was where he wanted to be. With Jake. Someone once told him he'd never find his true love the first time out. Maybe not. They'd had oral sex, but he'd never gone all the way with another guy. He'd sown his share of wild oats with girls. He learned enough from the heterosexual experiences to know girls didn't get his rocks off. Would things be different with another guy, or would things royally suck once he and Jake actually made love? Possible, but he doubted anything with Jake would suck... except for oral sex, and he loved that kind of sucking.

Jake balled his fists. Didn't try to touch him, just stared at him.

"I believe I owe you a birthday present." Kyler rubbed his cock over Jake's groin. "Lots of them." The deep purple and blues of the bruise, along with the inch-long cut marring Jake's cheek, stuck out in the bright overhead light.

"Ky." Jake closed his eyes. "I'm all kinds of fucked up."

"Hush." Kyler rested his forehead on Jake's. "I'll spend the rest of my life making everything up to you, but never ever think you're screwed up. I don't love screwed-up people."

"You love baseball and blowjobs."

"And you." Ky cupped Jake's face and allowed the words to sink into Jake's brain. "Yeah, big guy. I love you. Not just as my best friend, but long term, crazy, over-my-head-and-loving-it in love with you."

Instead of saying anything, Jake's mouth opened and closed. His eyes widened. He brushed his fingers over Ky's temple. Yeah, this was what Ky wanted. He nipped Jake's bottom lip, then pushed the kiss further. Pure adrenaline and desire took over. He slid down Jake's body, kissing and licking his way to Jake's belly. When Jake propped himself up on his elbows, Ky fisted Jake's shirt hem.

"Off. I can't see or taste you with this on." He shoved Jake's shirt toward his neck. "Show me, sexy." He loved his man. So much. Yeah, it was time to take things from playing around to showing Jake exactly how he felt.

Jake wrestled out of his shirt, then flopped onto the bed. He tipped his head back and pinched his nipples.

“So hot.” Ky hooked his fingers in the waistband of Jake’s shorts and boxers. He yanked both items of clothing to the floor, then resumed his place between his lover’s legs. Jake’s cock, long, thick, and with a slight curve, bobbed before him. He licked his lips then flattened his tongue along the underside of Jake’s dick.

“Fuck,” Jake murmured. He rocked his hips and planted his feet on the mattress.

“Let me make you feel good.” Ky sucked Jake’s cock from tip to root into his mouth. He hummed around Jake’s girth and licked every inch of his lover. Each moan and groan spurred Ky on. He slipped one hand between Jake’s ass cheeks and caressed his asshole. The tight flesh puckered under his care.

“Ky.” Jake reached forward, threading his fingers into Ky’s hair. He gripped his lover’s head and set the pace, bobbing his cock in and out of Kyler’s mouth.

Ky wrapped his left hand around the base of Jake’s cock and continued to ease his finger into Jake’s hole. At the same time, he lapped at Jake’s erection. The first taste of precum exploded on Ky’s tongue as Jake fucked himself on Ky’s face, groaning and arching.

Jake’s legs trembled and he tugged Ky’s hair, hard. “So close. Put another finger in my ass.”

Jake’s request knocked Ky for a loop. He liked hearing the catcher tell him exactly what he wanted. Kyler spit on his fingers, then added a second finger to Jake’s hole. He curled his finger enough to touch Jake’s prostate. When he did, Jake tensed, then spurted his seed down Ky’s throat.

Jake’s entire body vibrated, then he sagged into the mattress. His eyes closed and his chest caved with every breath. “Holy shit.” His limp dick slid from Kyler’s mouth and landed with a plop against his lower belly.

Kyler licked his lips, eased his fingers from Jake’s ass, then sat back on his haunches. The times they’d blown each other before were hot as hell, but with

the added dimension of being in love? God, he couldn't wait to make love to his man.

"Come here." Jake rolled onto his side, then sat up. He nudged Kyler onto his back, then pinned the pitcher's arms. "You blow my mind."

"And your cock," Kyler added with a grin.

"That too." Passion burned in Jake's eyes. "This is so unreal, but everything I wanted." He tilted his head and feasted on Kyler's mouth. Unable to hold back, Ky wrapped his arms around his man and kissed with every last drop of hunger in his body. His cock ached, and the scent of Jake snared him.

Kyler broke the connection first. He shoved his jogging shorts and boxer briefs to the floor, then kicked out of his socks.

Raw excitement crackled between them. Jake fisted Kyler's cock in both hands, stroking and caressing. Kyler's vision blurred and his belly flip-flopped. He loved when Jake gave him a hand job. Knowing Jake liked him made the whole action even hotter. He rocked his hips and fucked himself on Jake's hands.

"Don't you dare get yourself off until I get a taste." Jake cupped Kyler's balls in one hand, then engulfed Kyler's dick in his hot mouth. Ky's vision blurred. *Holy hell*. He scraped his fingernails on Jake's shoulders and bounced his hips on the mattress. Nothing else mattered but Jake and the way Jake made him feel. No scholarship, no offer from minor league teams, no experiences with other guys compared to Jake.

Ky wanted to last longer. Wanted to drag the moment out. Not happening. Jake rested on his hands and knees and sucked Ky to the back of his throat. He curled his tongue around Ky's dick, swallowing him deep. Kyler's skin sizzled and all the thoughts in his head fuzzed. He panted, then let go of Jake to slide his hands under his own shirt to pinch his nipples. Every nerve ending in his body came alive. The lust for his man amplified with each thrust into Jake's mouth.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Kyler chanted. He bit his bottom lip, then smothered his mouth behind his arm to muffle the sound. *Shit*. He closed his eyes and embraced the orgasm washing through him. For a moment, he couldn't feel the

mattress beneath him. His body seemed to float on the wobbly, gooey sensations flowing through his veins. He opened his eyes and watched Jake. Everything moved in half speed.

Jake grabbed the blankets and covered their naked bodies before stretching out and closing his eyes; his breathing evened out as the toll of the day caught up with the both of them. Kyler didn't care. They'd been through plenty in a short time. He'd wait a little longer to tell Jake about OSU. He pressed the buttons to set his alarm, then whipped his shirt up over his head and settled beside the man he loved. Warmth spread throughout his body. Love felt good, warm and gooey in his veins, but totally right.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

Jake hefted his bag onto his shoulder. He'd managed to dodge questions from his coach about the bruises. He'd even worked with Ky to make a double play, their third of the season. The scouts watched Ky, like they did every game. He glanced over to where Kyler stood with two reps from an out of state college. Ky smiled and took cards, shaking his head every once in a while.

Jake's heart sank. Memories of the night before bombarded him. Kyler said he loved him. Better than any wet dream, and the blow job still resonated in his soul. Nothing mattered but Ky, and he had no idea if Ky would even be around after graduation. He'd committed to OSU, but Ky hadn't chosen a school yet. From the looks of the scouts, he was still on the fence.

Although he wanted to listen in on Kyler's conversation, Jake stepped onto the bus and took his seat seven rows from the front. He'd brought his iPod and plugged the earbuds into his ears. Might as well drown out the rest of the world until Ky showed up. He flipped through his beat-up copy of Hemingway and stared at the words.

A shadow blocked the light between him and the overhead light. . One of his ear buds slipped from his ear and the book tumbled to the floor. "I thought you read that." Kyler plopped down next to him and nudged Jake into the chilly window glass, then tossed the ear piece onto the book. "Couple more schools wanted to talk to me."

"I saw." Jake yanked the other ear bud from his ear. "You're good. People want good." They wanted the next star to nab a championship. Hell, if Ky played his cards right, he'd be pro in four years. Maybe earlier. The words *I love you* wouldn't mean a thing then. He could hope they'd stay together, but the odds weren't in their favor.

"Those two want great." Ky threw his arm around Jake. "They won't get great." He handed his friend a piece of paper. "I committed."

Jake unfolded the sheet of paper. His brain buzzed as he read the words. *OSU. Freshman class. Baseball scholarship.* They'd both be down at the main campus in the fall. For once in his life, things were coming together. They'd have a future—together.

Kyler tightened his arm around Jake and kissed Jake's temple. "That's right man. You and me down in the big city. I've even looked into an apartment." He rested his head on top of Jake's. "I couldn't break up the team."

"I don't know what to say." He patted his boyfriend's thigh. The dull ache behind his eyes receded, and his mind eased. Things weren't perfect, but he and Ky would be all right. Together.

"You don't have to say anything. Happy birthday, big guy." Another kiss, and right where anyone could see them. "When we get home, I've got one hell of a surprise for you."

Someone behind them whooped and another player thumped the seat. "Get a room."

"Shut up, Pike. You're just jealous." Kyler didn't turn around, instead he settled tighter with Jake. "I'm good right where I am."

"This is the best, if not strangest, birthday yet. You couldn't do more than you've already said and done." Jake cuddled against his man. "I got what I wanted."

"For now. Mom and Jesse went to Grandma's for the weekend. The house is ours," Kyler whispered in Jake's ear. "I've got the lube and enough condoms for a week of sex. I want you to fuck me. Tonight." Jake threaded his fingers with Ky's and snuggled his guy to his chest. "We're going to celebrate all night long."

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When Jake opened his eyes the next time, the bus rolled into the parking lot at the school. His phone buzzed in his hand. At least he'd remembered to grab the phone before his father gave him the boot. He regretted not grabbing his truck keys—not that he had the truck, but still. With the swipe of his finger, he checked the messages. His heart squeezed in his chest. The text came from his mother.

*Dads @ work*

*Tires fixed.*

*Left your truck @ school*

*I love you*

His mother still cared. He grinned. Between the two of them, he expected his mother to stand behind him, even if she was cowering from his father.

Kyler groaned, then unwound his arm from Jake's shoulder. "We're back." He snorted. "Now we've got to figure out how to get home. Mom being gone means no car. Shit."

"My mom came through for us. She brought my truck up to the school." Jake nodded to his truck sitting under the lot light. A lone figure sat behind the wheel. "We're saved. I think."

"Maybe your dad changed his mind?" Ky shrugged. "He probably didn't, but you never know."

The bus stopped and Jake gathered his things, plus Ky's iPod and phone.

The coach stood at the front of the bus. "Next week starts the playoffs. We're strong and have it in us to go all the way. I know you can do it. You've got tomorrow off, then we hit practice hard. Each one of my seniors needs to show those colleges they're worthy of the scholarships."

Jake shook his head. *Coach loved his pep talks*. He grabbed his bag, then trudged off the bus and headed toward his truck. The figure climbed out from behind the wheel of his vehicle. His mom. She folded her arms and kept her head down.

"Mom." He sprinted the last few paces and opened his arm to hug her. Instead of letting him, she ducked away. "Ah, so you're still mad at me." He tossed his bag in the bed of the truck, then thrust his hands into his pockets. "What's the word with Dad?"

"I still love you, Jake." She slipped a wad of money into his hand. "Your dad is very old school. Convincing him you're still his son will take time." Tears slipped down her cheeks. "He told me you're not allowed to come home until you're not gay." Her shoulders slumped. "I had to have your Aunt Cindy follow me up here so I could get home without him noticing."

*Enough bullshit*. Jake threw his arms around his mother. "Thanks for sticking your neck out, Mom. I'll be okay. I love you."



Kyler rubbed the back of Jake's neck and hugged Jake's mom in his free arm. "Thanks for bringing the truck up."

She plunked the keys into Kyler's hands, along with a note. "Be good to my son." She didn't look at either of them when she walked away. Just left them standing there in front of the truck. She climbed into the passenger seat of his aunt's car.

Cindy waved. "Love you kiddo. Get some for me."

The tips of his ears burned. Of all his family, she was the bluntest. Kyler continued to rub the back of Jake's neck, both comforting him and turning him on. "That's shit, you know." Ky kept his hand on Jake, but standing between him and the hood of the truck. "You can't not be gay if you are. It's not a disease."

"I know." Jake sighed. He didn't have much, but his best friend loved him and they'd both be heading off to college together in a couple months. "So." He had to change the subject. "What have you got planned for this party tonight?"

"Plenty." Ky wriggled his eyebrows. "But we'd both better not be able to walk tomorrow." He opened the paper given to him by Jake's mom, then frowned. "You'd better read this."

Jake sat on the bumper and scanned the paper.

*Jake,*

*No amount of screaming or disapproval will get you to change who you are. It shouldn't. You're a bright young man with all the courage in the world. Kyler is lucky to have you in his life as his friend and boyfriend.*

*No matter what your father says, I love you. I always will. You make me proud because you're being yourself.*

*Don't expect a warm welcome from your dad, but know I want you to come home. I love you and will never shut you or Kyler out. Don't make the mistake I made and not follow your heart. Be yourself, be happy, and love whoever you love with your entire heart.*

*Mom*

*PS Happy Birthday, Baby*

Tears blurred his eyes. Mom accepted him, and for the first time in a long time, he understood her a little better, too. She might not have been able to say the words out loud, but they had a quiet kinship.

Kyler rested his head on Jake's shoulder. "We'll go see her tomorrow when your dad's at work."

"Thanks, Ky."

"That's what love does. It understands when nothing else makes sense, and love never quits. Never." He stood, then slipped his hand into Jake's. "Let's go home. I'm tired and I can't wait to get you alone."

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## CHAPTER SIX

Jake drove to Kyler's house, but didn't say anything along the way. His brain whirled with too many thoughts. He'd been tossed out, found a new place to crash, realized his mother still loved him, and found out that Kyler loved him, too. He pulled into the driveway. Instead of Jane's Civic parked in front of the garage, the drive was empty and the house dark.

"Told you Mom was gone. Come on." Kyler jumped out of the truck, then grabbed his bags. He hurried into the house ahead of Jake, flipping on lights along his way. When Jake finally trudged through the door, Ky stood in the kitchen wearing nothing but his boxers and holding an ice cream cake at an interesting angle.

Jake tilted his head, smirking. "Your junk will fall off if you're not careful." He dropped his bag on the floor.

"You'll like it." Kyler walked the cake to the table. "Make a wish."

"I already did. I got you." Jake took the initiative and stuck his hand through the gap in Ky's boxers then wrapped his fingers around his man's dick. "Best present ever."

"Aw. And I have more." Kyler picked up a bag and plunked it down in front of Jake. He handed Jake a box with an envelope on top. "Open. Box first."

"With you there, looking so hot and sexy?" Jake slipped his finger under the tape on the box. He grinned when he saw the CD. A sampler of their favorite songs they'd practiced to during the baseball season. "This is awesome. Thank you." Jake kissed his man hard on the lips. "Love it."

He worked open the flap on the envelope. The lettering on the paper caught his eye. *Teddy's Tattoos*. Kyler had a tattoo of a sunburst on his shoulder with his father's name and the initials of his mom and brother woven into the rays of sun. He'd always admired the tat, but to get one of his own? He wasn't sure what to pick.

"A tat. This is cool." He brushed his fingers over the paper.

“Well, you said you wanted one.” Kyler ground his cock into Jake’s hip. “You’re in mine.”

“How?” He’d seen the thing plenty of times and never saw anything about him in the tattoo.

Kyler turned and grabbed his arm. “Right there.” He pointed to the left side of the tat. Sure enough, Jake’s name wove through the rays. “See? I’ve got my family on my arm. Dad, Mom, Jesse... and you. I had you added a couple weeks ago, and didn’t say anything to keep it secret until it healed. That’s why I kept my shirt on all those times. Didn’t want to ruin my surprise for you.”

Jake touched Kyler’s skin, running his fingers over his name on his lover’s arm. “You’re nuts,” he whispered. He turned away from Ky and sliced the melting cake. “What if we don’t work out?” He put the first piece on the paper plate, then cut a second piece.

“What if we do?” Kyler cupped Jake’s face in both hands. “If my dad taught me anything, it was that nothing in life is guaranteed. Life is short. I’m not going to waste it on the what-ifs. My heart belongs to you. My cock points to you whenever you’re around. I think about you when we’re apart, and I am loving sleeping with you beside me. College wouldn’t be the same without you.”

The things Kyler said made sense, but Jake couldn’t suppress his fear. They were young and time changed hearts. “But—”

Kyler kissed him, keeping the response on Jake’s lips. He then used the fork to shove a piece of the ice cream cake into Jake’s mouth. “You and I were strong as friends before. Yeah, we’ve fought, but we always come back to each other. We understand each other. I’d be willing to bet our relationship is stronger than some of the kids in our class who’ve been dating since the seventh grade.” He slid his tongue over the ice cream on the corner of Jake’s mouth. “You and I have something crazy, special and strong. We’re young, but we’re not dumb. We’ll sort this out. I know it.”

Jake swiped his finger through his melted cake and wiped the ice cream over Ky’s mouth. “I’m not afraid anymore.” He bridged the gap between them and kissed his lover. The walls around his heart crumbled and his spirits rose.

His belly flip-flopped. He tugged Ky closer, nipping and licking his bottom lip. His cock thickened behind his shorts. His skin tingled. They needed to find a bed and fast.

“Your mom won’t be back tonight? Right?” Jake gasped for breath and clutched Kyler. “Don’t want to be interrupted.”

“All night.” Kyler hooked his fingers into Jake’s shorts and led him to the bedroom they shared. Jake knocked Kyler backwards onto the bed. Jake braced himself on his knees and right hand, then smoothed his free hand between their bodies to cup Ky’s erection. He swallowed Ky’s moans. This was the moment he’d waited for. Alone time with no restrictions.

“Got another surprise for your birthday.” Kyler raked his fingers up and down Jake’s back. “Want you to take my virginity. Be my first.” He met Jake kiss for kiss, then spread his legs. “Take me.”

“Don’t have to beg.” Jake scooted off his man and whipped his shirt up over his head. He shoved his shorts and boxers to the floor, then kicked out of his socks.

“I’m all yours.” Kyler wriggled his hips and shucked his shorts. His cock pointed to the ceiling and his abs rippled with each movement. He folded his arms behind his head.

“Better be.” Jake crawled between Ky’s legs and smoothed his hands over the muscles in Kyler’s thighs, then stroked his tongue along the underside of his lover’s cock.

“Fuck,” Kyler moaned. He arched his back and planted his feet on the mattress. “More.”

Jake snorted. He’d barely done anything. He scraped his teeth on Ky’s dick, then sucked one of his balls into his mouth. Precum slid down Kyler’s shaft. He panted and unwound his hands. Ky tugged on Jake’s hair, redirecting Jake’s mouth.

“Get me ready. Suck me,” he demanded.

“Pushy.” Jake engulfed Kyler’s cock in his mouth. Playing around before, sucking on Ky and learning about what made Ky happy, wasn’t like this.

Before had been a game. This was love. This was mind-blowing. This was crazy and scary and totally what he craved. He bobbed his head up and down, rolling his tongue around his lover's length. His nerve endings buzzed and the thoughts in his brain blurred. He moaned, then withdrew from Ky.

"Roll over." Jake swatted Kyler's hip. "It's supposed to be better, hurt less, doggy-style."

"No." Kyler remained in place. "I never told you about the toys. I prepped myself. I like using toys and experimented. No biggie."

The breath ripped from Jake's chest. They'd done everything together. *Toys*? When the hell did Kyler have *time* for toys? He pressed his lips together and stared at his man.

"Jake, I planned for this. I didn't know if I wanted to come out, but I knew sure as shit I loved you. No one else could be my first." He wrapped his hands around his cock and stroked.

For one of the few times in his life, Jake witnessed Kyler's strong façade chip away. The vulnerable young man underneath poked through. Seeing him so honest and raw affected Jake down to his core. Jake slid off the bed and grabbed the bottle of lube and one of the condoms from the nightstand. He wanted to say something snappy about the sheer number of rubbers, but kept his mouth shut. No need to break the tension with a stupid joke. He stood at the foot of the bed and wrapped his cock in the condom. What a strange feeling. The snug latex squeezed him. No wonder some guys hated the protection. One day he'd feel the skin on skin contact with Kyler. One day.

Jake knelt between Ky's legs and folded his lover in half, exposing Ky's ass.

"Jesus, yes," Ky panted. He rested his ankles on Jake's shoulders. "Please?"

"Just a minute." He kept his gaze fixed on Ky while he spread Kyler's ass cheeks open. The tight rosette of his ass puckered and flexed. His cock bobbed and Ky balled his fists. Jake squirted lube onto his fingers, then over Ky's ass. Ky shivered, but didn't flinch.

"Breathe with me," Jake coaxed. He eased one finger three knuckles deep into Ky. "Let me in." He stared into Kyler's eyes. "I'm right here with you."

And talking like he'd made love plenty of times, like he knew what the hell he was doing. *Not quite*. But he had Kyler there to fumble along with him. Always together.

Jake worked his finger in and out of Ky's hole, then added a second finger. Ky's sharp intake of breath, combined with his shudder, made Jake pause. "Too much?"

"Feels like heaven." Kyler rode Jake's hand, getting himself nice and primed. "Take me."

He still wasn't sure about hurting Kyler, but he trusted his friend. If he'd prepped and the finger play was enough, then he'd give in to his lover. Jake stroked himself with his free hand, getting himself to the edge. Butterflies swarmed in his lower belly and fever streaked across his skin. He lined his cock up with Ky's hole, then, inch by inch, he entered his lover.

Ky's lips parted and his eyes closed, his fingernails biting into Jake's skin. "Damn." Sweat glittered on his chest and his nipples puckered. "Don't stop."

"Not a chance." Jake held onto Ky's leg, then wriggled his hips. The heat in Kyler's gaze matched the heat radiating from his body. The intensity of the moment hit Jake over the head. They weren't connected just physically, but mentally... down to their very souls. He gritted his teeth and increased his momentum, thrusting in and out of his lover's ass.

Kyler let go of his legs, then grabbed Jake's wrists. He shook his head and panted. "God, I'm close. Fuck."

"Touch yourself. Jerk yourself off in time with me." Jake grasped Ky's hips and pumped in and out of him. His balls ached and nothing existed, save for Kyler. Seeing Ky wrap his hand around himself once more turned Jake on more and more. "You are so hot."

"You, too." Kyler arched his back and groaned. "Jake."

When he called out Jake's name, Kyler's cum jetted from his cock in thick ribbons over his chest.

"Holy fuck." Jake slammed into Ky and filled the condom with his seed. No way he'd have been able to hold back after seeing his lover come apart in

his arms. Jake wobbled on his knees. The room spun, and he wasn't sure which way was up. The orgasm knocked him off his axis. He collapsed on his man as his limp dick slipped from Kyler's ass.

"Happy birthday, baby." Kyler tangled his body with Jake's and kissed Jake on the lips. "Love you."

How the hell Ky could form not only a complete sentence, but articulate that sentence, blew Jake's mind. He snuggled against Kyler for a long moment, composing himself and what he wanted to say.

"Love you, too." Jake rose up on his elbow and stared at Ky. "I lost my home, but I found my heart. Best birthday, ever."

Kyler trailed his fingers over Jake's temple. "Well, we do have an entire house and all night to play. Shower with me, and then we can go at this all over again."

"Next time, you do me." Jake wriggled his brows. He swatted Ky's hip, then climbed off the bed to toss the used rubber. "Then we switch again."

"Perfect."

Growing up wasn't easy and coming out made things worse, but with Kyler by his side, Jake figured he'd be fine. He offered his hand to his boyfriend and followed Ky to the bathroom. He'd had the best birthday any guy could ask for and the night wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

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## EPILOGUE

Jake stared at his reflection in the mirror. If someone told him ten years ago he'd find the love of his life in high school, he'd have laughed. Now he couldn't see his life without Kyler. He adjusted the collar of his tuxedo, then raked his fingers through his hair. They'd been through plenty of ups in their life—they'd adopted three cats and one dog, both earned their degrees... Ky even tried a couple years in professional baseball—and downs—they'd broken up a couple of times, only to make up after a night apart.

He rubbed his bicep. Three days after his eighteenth birthday, he'd chosen his tattoo. Ky had held his hand and grinned the entire time the tattoo artist decorated his skin with Kyler's name. Jake chuckled. Ten years down the road and still together.

"You two have always been so cute together." She hugged him from behind. "I'm glad my son found you. You've been the anchor to keep him grounded and the best friend anyone could have. I'm proud to call you my other son."

"I think I'm a son-in-law."

She brushed invisible lint from his shoulders, then let him go. "I don't care what you are. You make Ky happy, and that's all I've ever wanted." She offered her arm. "Shall we head down the aisle?"

Jake threaded his arm through his soon-to-be mother-in-law's arm, walked with her to the main ballroom. Friends and family stood to watch him take the fifteen steps to the head of the room where Kyler waited. Kyler had donned a tuxedo, too, and the sharp black accentuated the muscular lines of his body. He folded his hands and fixed his gaze on Jake. A smile slowly formed on his lips, the closer Jake got to him.

Ten years before, Jake admitted his heart's desire. He loved Kyler. He kissed Jane on the cheek, then winked at Kyler's baby brother, Jesse, now a big twelve-year-old, who smothered laughter behind his hand.

"Best day ever," Kyler whispered. "I love you, big guy. So much."

“Love you, too.” Jake linked hands with Kyler, then faced the minister.  
“You’re a great catch. My catch.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*When she's not writing the stories in her head, Megan Slayer can be found luxuriating in her hot tub with her two vampire Cabana boys, Luke and Jeremy. She has the tendency to run a tad too far with her muse, so she has to hide in the head of her alter ego, but the boys don't seem to mind.*

*When she's not obsessing over her whip collection, she can be found picking up her kidlet from school. She enjoys writing in all genres, but writing about men in love suits her fancy best. The cabana boys are willing to serve, unless she needs them. She always needs them. So be nice to Javier or he will bite—on command.*

*She also masquerades under the name Wendi Zwaduk and is published through Changeling Press, Decadent Publishing, Liquid Silver Books, MLR Press, Resplendence Publishing, and Total-E-Bound Publishing.*

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# THE IDIOTS' TANGO

By B. Snow

## Photo Descriptions

1. At the beach, a man with close-cropped hair and the physique of a Greek god hefts a rugby ball. Dark hair dusts his arms, legs, and chest. Another smattering of hair dips from his navel into the waistband of a very small pair of shorts.
2. Two men grapple as they brawl, anger and adrenaline spurring them on. Neither will be the first to give in.
3. A young man with beautiful eyes and a two-day scruff of beard stands on a train platform. His jeans are worn, and his linen shirt is wrinkled but clean. He has a backpack slung over one shoulder, beaded bracelets on his left wrist and a fedora covering his dark hair.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*My two men can't STAND each other. It's not a general dislike and it's not a case where they can avoid each other.*

*Unfortunately, they share a circle of friends and family (though they are not related—more like their cousins were married... incest is NOT the best :P)*

*They met when they were in high school and there seemed to be a bit of attraction despite their vast differences (what those are, is for you dear Author to decide) but something (also Author's choice) happened and they are at each other's throats. Verbal throw-downs, the occasional thrown punch has happened at more than a few shared get-togethers.*

*Dear Author, how can two men who can't stand each other come to realize that the other man is the one person they can't and don't want to live without?*

*Sincerely,*

*Reece*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** enemies to lovers, boys will be boys, blowjobs, cluelessness, bickering, bisexuality, family

**Content warnings:** previous relationships, binge/underage drinking, secondary character deaths, fighting

**Word count:** 40,399

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*Dedication*

Many thanks to Reece, whose photos and prompt didn't just speak to me, they shouted.

# THE IDIOTS' TANGO

By B. Snow

## CHAPTER ONE

The Dimitriou family went to the Edelsteins' house for the Seder that year, which was just weird. Josh would have been just as happy staying at home. No, he would have been happier. His sister roomed with Amy Edelstein at college; they didn't need to hang out during spring break, too, but whatever. He was used to his parents giving his sister anything she wanted. So, he'd get through the evening by stuffing himself with charoset and matzah, and drinking as much wine as he could sneak into his glass. And pretending not to stare at Stuart Edelstein.

Stu. Stupid Stu.

Josh had never met Stu before that night. They went to different high schools, and their parents sometimes hung out because their moms knew each other from work, but this was the first time both families had gotten together. Josh wouldn't have minded if it was the last, too.

Stu and Amy looked like their mother—delicate, small-boned, sharp-featured, wavy dark hair contrasting with pale skin and eyes like green glass. Josh felt like a huge, ugly giant, towering over Stu, who would have been almost pretty if it weren't for his thick, dark eyebrows and noticeable facial hair. Margo kept flicking her eyes over to him during dinner, even though she was two years older. Perv.

The only reason Josh looked at Stu was envy. Shit, every high school boy wanted to be able to grow a beard. Well, no, not an actual beard, that would be gross. But it would be cool to have to shave. Maybe Stu only shaved once a week, not every day, but that was still something, especially for a sixteen-year-old. Josh was still using the same razor he'd bought three years earlier, when he'd been fourteen and optimistic.

Stupid Stu. And Stupider Josh for not being able to stop staring at the five o'clock shadow that emphasized Stu's sharp jawline, thinned out as it got to

his throat, and disappeared completely at his Adam's apple, which jutted out just as angular as the rest of him. It moved as he swallowed, like it was dragging Josh's eyes down to Stu's chest, hidden behind a white shirt and striped tie.

A hand moved over the shirt, picked up the tie. "Do I have food on me?" Stu asked, looking up from his shirt.

Caught. Josh shook his head and grabbed his water glass for something to do.

"What, then? Do you hate my tie? I do. My mom made me wear it. I like yours, though. Where'd you get it?"

Josh shrugged, wishing Stu would stop looking at him. He probably thought Josh was fat.

"You have to know where you got it."

"Well, I don't, okay?" He put the water glass down a little harder than he had to.

Stu blinked at him. "Okay, sorry. Geez." He gave Josh a long look, then turned away to laugh at two younger boys who were flicking salt water at each other with sprigs of parsley. Josh blew out a breath and went back to pretending not to stare at Stu, who made one little girl nearly fall off her chair laughing when he finally managed to hang a spoon from his nose. The spoon fell off when Stu looked over at Josh again. Josh picked up his wineglass and finished off the last few drops just as Mrs. Edelstein brought out dessert.

The flourless chocolate cake was actually really good, way better than that gross sponge cake Josh's mom made every Passover. The kids wolfed down their cake and then were excused, leaving the adults to talk religion and politics over coffee. The girls went up to Amy's bedroom where they'd probably listen to boy bands and squeal over Justin Timberlake. Vomit. Josh followed Stu and the other boys down to the basement, where there was a Ping-Pong table, some exercise equipment, and a TV.

One of the younger boys pulled a Gameboy out of his jacket pocket and the other three crowded around him to watch. Stu looked at the kids, then took two Ping-Pong paddles from a holder on the wall. "Wanna play?" he asked Josh.



“Not really.” But Josh took one of the paddles from Stu, careful to keep their hands from touching. Even Ping-Pong would be better than having to spend one more minute pretending not to stare at Stu.

Stu took a ball out of the holder and walked to the far end of the table. “Do you know how to play?”

“No. I mean, you just hit the ball, right?”

“Yeah, pretty much. We can just practice if you want, we don’t have to keep score.”

“Okay.”

They hit the ball back and forth as videogame music played in the background. Stu was better than Josh, mostly because the Ping-Pong table was in his house, but also because Josh was a little buzzed from the first two glasses of wine. He kept hitting the ball off the table, and every time, Stu ran after it to pick it up and came back smiling, not getting pissed off about it like Josh would have.

And every time Stu bent over to pick up the ball, Josh examined the green surface of the Ping-Pong table, or picked at the edge of his paddle where the rubber was coming loose, or looked over at the younger kids still crowded around the Gameboy. The wine was messing up his head, because normally he didn’t have to force himself not to look at guys’ asses. And if he *was* going to look, he wouldn’t pick skinny little Stu Edelstein to start with.

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They played for what seemed like hours but was probably only fifteen or twenty minutes, because the wine still hadn’t worn off by the time Mr. Edelstein told everyone to start looking for the afikomen.

The little kids all went running off through the house, shrieking. Josh was both annoyed at their noise and relieved that the Seder would be over soon—once that hidden piece of matzah was divided up and eaten, they could get the hell out of there. He wandered down the hall and ran into his mom, who had come downstairs to check on him. “I’m too old for this,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“You’re never too old to look for the afikomen,” his mom said. “And anyway, you’re a guest, so you’ll be polite and start looking.”

“Is Margo looking?”

“Of course! Not very hard, but she’s at least making a show of it.” She smiled and kissed him on the forehead, pulling his head down like she’d had to for the past two years, ever since he’d passed her in the height department. “So start looking, kiddo.”

Josh watched her go back upstairs, then he went into the den and dropped onto a sofa. “Oh, wow, it’s not here, too bad,” he muttered to the empty room.

“Of course it isn’t.”

Josh twisted around to see where the voice had come from. Stu was holding onto both sides of the doorway and leaning into the room at a dangerous angle. “Dad has a few different hiding places. Not here. You want me to show you? I’ll bet you could get ten bucks out of him if you find it.”

“Why don’t *you* find it?”

“I don’t need the ten bucks, My aunt just sent me money for my birthday, which was back in August, but she’s always late, so she adds extra to make it up to me. Come on.” He jerked his head toward the hallway, and when Josh didn’t move, he stepped forward and grabbed Josh’s sleeve. “Come *on*. The sooner we find it, the sooner this can all be over and you can go home.”

It was like he’d read Josh’s mind. Josh shook his sleeve free and got up, then followed him down the hall and up the stairs.

They walked through the kitchen into the living room. Stu went over to the piano and opened the lid, then shut it. “Okay, strike one. Next stop: laundry room.” He darted past Josh, who lumbered after him.

In the laundry room, Stu looked inside the washer and dryer and peered between them, but came up empty-handed and frowning. “Maybe he’s wised up in his old age.” He looked up at the ceiling, biting his lip.

Josh didn’t even pretend not to stare at the dark dusting of hair on Stu’s upper lip and the white teeth sinking into the lower one. Maybe he’d go easy on the last two glasses of wine since his head was still spinning from the first two.

Stu wandered out of the laundry room and back to the dining room, Josh following a few feet behind him. “No one’s found it yet?”

Mr. Edelstein grinned and put his hands behind his head, tilting his chair back. “Nope. I told you it wasn’t going to be easy this year.”

Stu rolled his eyes. “I haven’t checked the really obvious place yet.”

“Go find it, then,” his dad said, snickering.

“I will.”

“Good.”

“Okay!” Stu snapped, then looked at Josh. “Come on, I might need help reaching it.”

“You won’t need help reaching it!” Mr. Edelstein called after them as they left the room.

They walked back to the kitchen, and Stu opened the door to the pantry. “It’s got to be in here somewhere. It’s his third favorite place to hide it. Come on, help me look.” He crouched and began pawing through the lower shelves. “You take the top shelves.”

Josh eyed the pantry. There was no way both of them would fit in there. He looked at the top shelves, trying to see behind coffee cans and cake mix. “I don’t see anything.”

“You might have to move stuff,” Stu said, shoving aside boxes of cereal. “Go ahead, Dad can put everything back later. It’s his own fault if we mess things up.”

Josh put one foot into the closet to get a little closer to the top shelf. As he did so, his calf brushed Stu’s hip. “Sorry,” he muttered, moving back. His heart pounded and sweat sprung up in his armpits. He took another step back, away from the pantry.

“I can’t believe it’s not here.” Stu stood, frowning, then his lips twisted and he laughed a little. “God, he’s going to be smug about this.” He leaned back against the pantry’s doorframe and sighed, tilting his head back and closing his eyes for a few seconds. Then he opened them and smiled up at Josh. “Got any ideas?”

Josh's mind went blank. He thought he'd never have an idea ever again, so he didn't understand why his feet were moving forward, why his hands were coming up to touch Stu's face, or why he was bending down until his lips touched Stu's.

His eyes closed when he tasted a hint of chocolate on those warm lips. Stu's starter beard brushed against Josh's face and tickled his fingers. The next second he was kissing air, his hands were empty, and Stu was three feet away, one hand wiping his mouth, the other clenched in a fist in front of his stomach. His eyes were huge in his face, and Josh cringed, because Stu looked scared.

"Sorry! I'm sorry! I don't... oh, god. I don't know why..." Josh stepped back to put a few more feet between them. "I'm so sorry. I think I'm drunk. Please don't tell anyone."

Stu's expression didn't change, but Josh didn't feel fear coming off of him anymore. "Sorry. I, um... oh, god." He took another step back, then another, and was about to turn and run when he heard shrieks of excitement coming from the other room.

"We found it! We found it!" A stampede of little feet made the house rumble as the younger kids rushed back to the dining room.

"We should get back," Stu said, barely moving his mouth.

"I'm sorry."

Stu didn't respond; he just turned and walked out of the kitchen without looking at Josh again.

Shit, shit, shit.

When everyone had returned to the dining room, the afikomen was ransomed for a couple of dollars and some chocolate. Wine glasses were filled for the third time, but Josh reached for the pitcher of grape juice that the other kids were drinking. All he needed to make the night a complete fuck-up would be to throw up wine all over the Edelsteins' house.

Somehow, he made it through the rest of the Seder without looking at Stu. "Can we go?" he whispered to his mom when the singing started.

"What's the matter, are you feeling sick?" She put her hand on his forehead, then his cheek. "You feel a little warm. We'll go after this song."

And thank God, no long, drawn-out goodbyes. They thanked their hosts, got their coats on, and left the house. The last thing Josh saw before the door closed was Stu sitting on the stairs, biting his lip again and looking pretty pissed off. Josh kind of wished he could apologize again, and kind of wished he could just wipe both their memories, because really, what the hell had he done? What had made him do that?

Well, it really didn't matter. The next time the families got together, he'd probably be away at college, so he wouldn't be seeing them for a while. Maybe not ever again. Josh slouched in the back seat on the drive home and closed his eyes, so tired and weirded out that he didn't know if that thought made him happy or sad.

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## CHAPTER TWO

College was, in a word, awesome. Granted, Josh had only been there for a month so far, but that month had been amazing. Some of the other people on his dorm floor were homesick, and Josh didn't get that at all. He loved his family, but all the freshmen had lived with their families for eighteen years, more or less, and they'd only been away from them for a month! How could they be homesick?

He got along well enough with his roommate, even though Matt was an engineering major, and he'd made a couple of friends with people in his classes. And then there was Nick.

Nick had come up to him on the second day of the semester as Josh had stood in the middle of the quad, map in hand, trying to figure out how to get to his next class. Nick pointed him in the right direction, and then gave him a shove.

"What the hell?" Josh said, utterly confused.

"Just seeing how hard you are to move. Ever played rugby?"

"No."

"You got the shoulders for it. Move some of the weight from your gut to your chest and you'd be unstoppable."

Insulting. And interesting. But Josh hadn't played team sports outside of P.E., when he'd been forced to. He'd always been the big, clumsy kid, and there was no reason to think he'd suddenly developed any athletic ability just because a good-looking guy with dark hair and darker eyes was telling him he might.

"I'm no good at sports," Josh began, wanting to get it out of the way.

"Come to a practice, try it out. If you like it, I'll help you get in shape, but just playing'll do a lot of that for you." He tore a piece of paper out of a notebook and wrote a phone number on it. "Thursdays at four and Saturdays at ten, on the north field."

Josh had gone to the next practice, and yeah, no sudden speed or skill, but Nick had been right about his shoulders and how hard he would be to stop. He

still lumbered, but he could push his way through a line of defenders, even if he did it pretty slowly. After five minutes on the field he was winded, after ten he was gasping for breath.

“You’ll get there,” Nick said. “You’ll build up stamina in no time. Are you even eighteen yet?”

“In November.”

“Awesome. So you’ll keep playing with us?”

Josh looked around at the other players. None of them looked back with disgust at how out of shape he was. Instead, they grinned at him through the grass and mud smeared on their faces. They all had casually muscular bodies: strong shoulders, big thighs. Josh had always wanted a swimmer’s build, but he knew that was out of his genetic grasp. Someone slim like Stu Edelstein could probably—no. He wasn’t going to think about Stu. He was going to think about himself and how a rugby player’s body might be within reach. If he could look half as good as these guys... and if he could play for longer than ten minutes without needing oxygen, well, that’d be good, too.

“Yeah, sure. If you think I can do it.”

The team cheered and piled on top of him until he really could barely breathe, but he didn’t care. Life was great, and college was awesome.

A month later, college was even more awesome. Josh trained with the club four days a week and lifted weights the other three days. He hadn’t lost any weight, had gained some, in fact, but that weight had somehow... *shifted* into the right places. It was like his body was a tube of toothpaste that someone had squeezed in the middle: his waist had trimmed down while his shoulders and legs had gotten bigger. He wasn’t ashamed to take off his shirt anymore. Girls were starting to notice him the way they never had in high school.

“Dude, she was totally hitting on you!” Matt sighed as the girl walked away from their table. “God, look at that ass...”

“She was?” Josh looked at the girl, then back at Matt, who sighed again.

“You are fucking clueless when it comes to women, you know that, right?”

“Hey, gimme a fucking break! This is all new. None of the girls in my high school said a word to me. Except the, um...”

“The fat ones? Yeah, tell me about it. ‘Oh, Matty, you’re so cute!’” he sing-songed. “I got so sick of hearing that word.”

“I didn’t even get ‘cute’, so you can suck it.” Josh peered over the heads of the other students in the cafeteria and watched the girl walk out the door. “You really think she was hitting on me?”

“Yeah, dude.”

“Huh. Should I go talk to her?”

“Uh, yeah! I mean, unless, for some reason, you *don’t* want to get your hands on that body.”

Josh bussed his tray of dirty dishes and left the cafeteria, but when he got outside, he didn’t see the girl anywhere. He did see Nick, though.

“Hey, J,” Nick said. He grabbed Josh’s hand and gave him a bro hug. “You rushing off somewhere?”

“Yeah. Or no.”

“Yeah or no?”

“There was... um. I was gonna talk to someone, but, um, they’re gone.”

Nick threw a conspiratorial arm around Josh’s neck. “Girl problems?”

“Um. No. I mean, not yet. I mean—”

“I know what you mean, J. Been there, done that. Hey, this’ll make you feel better!” Nick tightened his arm and gave Josh a noogie, then let him go and danced away before Josh could retaliate.

“You’re a dick.”

“A big one,” Nick agreed, grinning.

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Josh never did talk to that girl. On his eighteenth birthday, the rugby team took him out to dinner, then over to a teammate’s house for some officially unofficial underage drinking. While the other guys were setting up beer pong, Nick took Josh into an upstairs bedroom and gave him the safe-sex talk and a box of condoms. Josh rolled his eyes during the talk, thanked him for the condoms, then froze like a deer in the headlights when Nick squeezed Josh’s



ass with one hand and cupped his crotch with the other. “Been waiting months for this, bro,” he murmured into Josh’s neck.

“What—what—what—”

“‘Til you were legal. You ever had a blowjob before?” Nick undid the button on Josh’s jeans with one hand and tugged down the zipper.

Josh couldn’t speak. Hell, he couldn’t *think*. All he could do was watch as Nick dropped to his knees, gave him a wicked grin, and then reached into Josh’s briefs, wrapping his hand around the already rock-hard cock there, and when had that happened?

Nick pulled it free from its tight, white confines. “Oh, hell yeah.” He breathed on the head, then sucked it down.

Josh’s eyes squeezed shut, then flew open. No, he’d never had a blowjob. He’d never even had a kiss, unless he counted that horrible time with Stu Edelstein eight months earlier, which he didn’t, and he really, *really* did not want to be thinking about Stu just then. Although... as Josh looked down, watching his own dick sliding in and out of Nick’s mouth, he realized that maybe there was a reason he’d noticed Stu’s eyes and his lips and his Adam’s apple.

Then Nick stopped sucking and started jerking, teasing the slit with his tongue as he moved his hand up and down. Josh’s mind emptied when his balls did. When he was able to think again, he decided there was something to the idea that a man’s brain resided in his dick. He also started to wonder if he was gay.

Nick came back from the bathroom with a warm, damp washcloth and tossed it to Josh. As if he’d read Josh’s mind, he said, “You don’t have to put a label on anything, okay? I just wanna have some fun, and I thought maybe you’d want to, too.”

Nick stripped off his shirt and dropped it on the floor. Josh watched him, remembering how he’d thought a rugby player’s body might be within his reach. Turned out, he was right.

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## CHAPTER THREE

“I don’t want to go to Mexico.” Josh ignored the daggers coming from Margo’s eyes and just slouched in his chair. He repeated what he’d said, in case it hadn’t been clear enough the first time. “I don’t. Want. To go. To Mexico.”

Margo threw up her hands. “So he doesn’t want to go. Whatever. Amy and I will just—”

“We are not letting the two of you go to Mexico by yourselves,” their dad said. “End of discussion.”

“We’re adults,” Margo began, “so we really don’t need your permission to go.”

“No, but you want it.” Their mother came around the counter and wrapped her arms around Margo, resting her chin on Margo’s shoulder. “You know we’d be terrified the whole time that you were gone.”

“God dammit,” Margo muttered.

Their mom laughed, then looked over at Josh. “And you—why on earth would you not want to go on a free trip to Mexico? There’s no drinking age there. There are beaches and snorkeling and clubs and women in bikinis, everything a nineteen-year-old boy could want.”

Josh’s heart rate sped up, but he played it casual. “If our team makes it to the playoffs, we’ll have matches through the end of May. I can’t just desert them.” He didn’t feel the need to mention that Nick had come back to coach them for the last few games of the season.

“I *can’t* just *desert* them,” Margo mocked. “Drama queen.”

Josh’s lip curled. “You wouldn’t understand. You don’t have friends, you have *friend*.”

“Yeah, Amy is my *best* friend, but I do have other friends, jerk. Just because I don’t run around grabbing them and throwing them face-first into the mud doesn’t mean we’re not friends.”

“It’s nice to see how well you understand something that means so much to me—”

“—and this trip means so much to me. It’s the last time me and Amy’ll really spend any time together before I start my job.”

“Oh, waah—”

“Okay, time out,” their mom said, stepping between them. “This seems easy enough to fix. Margo, why not just go in June?”

“Because everything is more expensive then, plus they want me to start as soon as possible—”

Their mom held up her hand. “Josh, could you go in June?”

Aw, crap. “I thought I might get a job and stay at school over the summer.” And spend more quality and/or naked time with Nick. “I can’t take just take two weeks off.”

“So get a job when you get back.”

“They’ll all be gone by then. And besides, I’ve got to keep up with my training.”

“You can get a job here, and train here,” his dad said. “We’d love to see more of you.” He reached out and ruffled Josh’s hair, looking so hopeful...

God dammit. School was only an hour away. Nick could drive up, or Josh could drive down. And they’d have April and May, anyway... “Okay, fine, I’ll go,” he said, sighing.

Margo jumped up and hugged him. “Thank youuuu! I’ll totally owe you! And you’ll love it, we’ll have such a good time.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He peeled her off. “So, what, I’m supposed to be their bodyguard or something?”

“Or something.” Their dad nodded. “I just don’t like the idea of two young girls alone in Mexico.”

Margo muttered, “We’re not young girls,” at the same time Josh grumbled, “They’re decrepit hags,” but their dad ignored their comments.

“If the men down there understand that Margo and Amy aren’t unescorted, aren’t unprotected—”

“You *do* know we’re not living in a Jane Austen novel, right?” Margo said, rolling her eyes.

“—I’d just feel better, is all,” their dad finished.

“So,” Josh began, “how is me being there going to help? Do I get to carry a Glock, in case we’re attacked by drug lord armies?” He pretended to cock and aim a handgun at Margo’s forehead. She smiled sarcastically in response.

Their mom shook her head. “Uh, *no*. No guns. We’re hoping that just having their brothers around will discourage the girls from getting any unwanted attention.”

Josh frowned. “Brothers?”

“Yeah, Stu’s going to come, too,” Margo said. “He’s too little to scare anyone off, but he speaks Spanish and he just finished his first year at Princeton. He’s the brains, and you’ll be the brawn.”

And that was how Josh found himself sharing a hotel room with Stu Edelstein.

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It could have been really awkward. In fact, Josh had done his best to *make* it awkward, by bringing up the kiss on the flight down to Mexico City. “Look, I just wanna get this out in the open,” he said, leaning towards Stu but not looking at him, hoping the noise from the engines would keep their sisters in the row in front from hearing anything. “I’m sorry about what happened before. At the Seder.”

He’d expected Stu to blush or stammer or pretend ignorance. He hadn’t expected Stu to laugh about it.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to bring that up.” Stu shut the book he was reading and smiled at Josh. “It’s okay. That was over two years ago. Amy told me afterwards how much wine you’d had. You weren’t yourself, I get it. So let’s just put it behind us now, ’cause it’s gonna be a long trip if you’re walking on eggshells around me because you think I’m still freaked out or something.” Stu stuck out his hand.

Josh shook it, but Stu’s words swirled in his head. Not yourself? How much would Stu freak out if Josh explained that the kiss was him being more himself than he’d ever been up to that point? If Stu knew that he’d be sharing a

room with a guy who had spent his first two years of college having sex with another guy? Josh probably should have said something, at least to his family, but that would have meant explaining everything, including Nick, and he wasn't sure his parents wanted to hear that their son was sleeping with his rugby coach, even if Nick hadn't been his rugby coach at the beginning. They wouldn't understand the concept of fuck buddies, or if they did, they'd hate it. He knew that his parents hadn't been virgins when they got married, but their mom had always tried to convince them that sex and romance should be linked. Josh didn't want to admit that some of her words had rubbed off on him, enough to make him less-than-happy about Nick sleeping with other guys while he was in town. "I don't have 'boyfriends'," he'd told Josh. "You know I don't like labels."

Josh had hoped that he wasn't the type to be clingy or needy. He *really* hoped his playing wasn't affected by Nick's apparently newfound ability to keep his hands off Josh, but *something* had taken the edge off his game. He'd played so poorly in April that they didn't even get into the playoffs. Josh worried that he'd been subconsciously selfish, tanking the rest of the season so he wouldn't have to stick around school while Nick ignored him.

No, that couldn't be it. Anything would have been better than spending twenty-four hours a day with Stu, Amy, and Margo.

They spent a week in Mexico City, then they took a series of bus rides eastward, stopping once or twice in small towns with colorful markets, snapping photos of pre-Columbian pyramids and finally getting some beach time on the Riviera Maya.

Josh was surprised at how much he wasn't hating it. Amy and Margo kept to themselves as much as possible and, shockingly, didn't complain about anything. He hadn't known that his sister could be so low-maintenance, but she'd taken everything in stride, even keeping them all entertained when the bus broke down on the way to Mérida.

Even Stu was easy to travel with. His Spanish wasn't great, but the locals thought it was cute or something, because everyone seemed happy to help them every time he opened his mouth. Josh had never been that good with strangers, so he would leave everything up to Stu and just try to stay out of the way.

So everything was going pretty smoothly, except that Josh got the feeling sometimes that Stu had some kind of issue with him. Nothing specific, and nothing hateful, just an occasional vague haze of disapproval, like the whole friendly, “Let’s put it all behind us” spiel on the plane had been an act. In hindsight, the speech *had* seemed kind of rehearsed. Not that Josh cared what Stu thought of him... but every once in a while he’d look up to see that green-glass gaze on him. Then Stu would look away, his face kind of frowny. The first time it happened was their first night sharing a room together, when Josh had come out of the bathroom after his shower wearing just a towel. Stu had looked up from his book, made a disgusted sound, then rolled over to face the wall, propping up his book and ignoring Josh. “Sor-ry,” Josh had muttered. “I’ll change in the bathroom from now on.”

“You do that.”

Whatever. It would serve that repressed, snotty little ivy-league prick right if Josh left the towel in the bathroom next time and came out with everything on display and swinging. But he knew he’d get an earful from Margo if Stu whined about it to Amy, and they still had the rest of the trip to get through. So he’d be thoughtful and mature and not wave his junk in Stu’s face every night.

The weird thing was, Stu was fine the rest of the time. Even friendly. He loaned Josh his copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* after he finished it halfway through the trip, and he was willing to hang out with the girls when Josh just needed some time to himself. So, after three days of watching Stu keep his shirt on at the beach, Josh decided that maybe he was just self-conscious about how skinny he was. It was kind of funny, really; Josh envied Stu his facial hair, and Stu apparently envied Josh his muscles.

Or maybe it really just was disapproval. In a club that night, a couple of French girls they were dancing with pulled off Josh’s T-shirt. As one of them swung it over her head, Stu walked off the dance floor and went straight to the bar. Josh took his shirt back from the girl and put it on, then went to talk to Stu.

“What’s wrong?” he shouted over the music.

“That was disgusting.”

“They were just playing around.” He caught the eye of the bartender. “*Un dos equis, por favor*,” he shouted. “Hey, pretty good, huh?”

Stu rolled his eyes. “Great. But don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“It’s only my fifth beer.”

“And your fourth shot.”

Josh shrugged, then let out a huge belch. “You definitely haven’t had enough.” Stu had been drinking as much as the rest of them the first few days of the trip, but after a week, he’d started complaining that the drinking was getting boring. And he was only eighteen. The dude wouldn’t know fun if it danced naked in front of him, wearing a sombrero and playing maracas.

A group of young, stocky Mexican men came over to stand in front of Josh and Stu. One of them, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, said something and jerked his head toward the exit.

“What’s going on?” Josh asked. He looked over at the dance floor, where Margo and Amy were still tossing their hair and shaking their asses. “Are they kicking us out?”

“I don’t think they work here.”

“So what do they want?”

“He said the gay bar is down the street.”

“Really.” Josh thanked the bartender as he paid for the beer. “Ask him how he knows where the gay bar is.” Josh said, throwing an arm over Stu’s shoulder.

Stu pushed him away. “No.”

Josh took a sip of beer, then licked the rim of the bottle suggestively, exchanging glares with the man who’d spoken. “Ask him what his favorite drink is—no, the name of his favorite bartender there.”

“No! Stop it. And no more beer. You’re drunk, and you’re gonna get us in trouble.” Stu reached for the bottle, but Josh kept it away from him.

“Ask him if he wants to suck my dick.” Josh tipped the bottle back, taking a long swallow as he ran a hand down his throat to his chest and stomach.

“Would you just shut up, already? You’re just making them madder.”

“Tell them to fuck off.”

Hawaiian Shirt smiled unpleasantly at Josh. “*Quieres fuck con migo, chica? Ese pinche gringo—*” was as far as he got before the bouncer stepped between Josh and the group of men. He said something to Hawaiian Shirt, who seemed to want to argue about it, but the bouncer spoke in smooth, calm tones and flexed the muscles that were very visible under his tight black T-shirt. After another long, angry look at Josh, Hawaiian Shirt walked away, his friends trailing behind him.

Stu shook his head. “Jesus.” He shot Josh an angry glare. “We’re supposed to be looking out for Amy and Margo, not pissing off the locals. Put down the beer. We’re leaving, before you start an international incident. I’ll go tell Amy and Margo.”

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They walked back to the hotel, Stu looking around them warily, Josh swaying a little, and Margo and Amy’s high heels clacking on the pavement. They’d just gotten to the gates of their hotel when Margo gasped. “Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh FUCK!”

“What?” Amy nearly tripped as Margo came to a dead stop.

“My camera. I left my camera in the bar.”

“It’s gone,” Josh said.

“Fuck,” Margo moaned, putting her hand over her eyes. “I’m such an *idiot*! How could I have done that?”

“You were having fun dancing,” Stu said gently. “You just forgot. It could have happened to any of us.”

“I have to go back and look.” She turned and started walking back in the direction of the bar.

Josh could see that she wasn’t walking quite steadily. Her feet probably hurt from those shoes. Girls could be so stupid sometimes. “You and Amy go back to the hotel. I’ll go see if, by the smallest chance in the universe, someone turned it in.”



“Really?” Margo looked up at him, her face pale under the streetlight.

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll get another beer while I’m at it.”

“No.”

Josh turned to look at Stu. “Excuse you?”

“No more beer. We’ll both go look for the camera and then come straight back.”

“We?”

“Yeah. Do you even know how to ask about a lost camera?”

Josh scowled.

“All righty, then,” Stu said.

He and Josh watched the girls go into the lobby of the hotel, then they walked back to the bar.

“I really could have done this myself,” Josh grumbled.

“I didn’t think you should go alone.”

Josh looked Stu up and down pointedly, taking in all five feet six inches of him.

“I’m stronger than I look.”

“Whatever.”

At the bar, miracle of miracles, the bartender had Margo’s camera. “Give him some money,” Stu muttered to Josh.

“I’m not going to buy back my sister’s camera—”

“No, you’re going to show your gratitude for the honesty of everyone who works in this bar. Now, pay the man.”

“How much?”

“What do you have?”

Josh pulled out his wallet. It was empty, so he turned slightly towards Stu, leaning into the bar, hoping no one would see him taking money out of the pouch he kept inside his shirt. “Twenty pesos.”

“Give it to him.”

“Can you ask him for some change, so—”

“Give it to him!”

Josh did. The bartender thanked him, and then they were on their way back to the hotel. “Well, now I’m completely out of money.”

“You can go to the ATM tomorrow.”

“Let’s go now.”

“It’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Taking money out of an ATM in a foreign country in the middle of the night?”

“It’s only...” Josh lifted his watch up to his face, trying to read the numbers. “One A.M.? That’s pathetic. I thought we were on vacation.”

“We are. We can have fun without being loud, obnoxious Americans who stay up all night partying.”

Josh stopped, swaying a little as he looked at Stu. “How do you fit it all in?”

“Fit all what in?”

“The stick up your ass.”

Stu’s face tightened. “Screw you. It’s not enough that I have to babysit Amy and Margo, now I have to take shit from you even though I’m keeping you from falling on your ass?”

“No one asked you to. My ass is tough. It can take a fall or two.”

“Fine. Go wherever you want. Just give me Margo’s camera. I’ll take it back to the hotel.”

Josh hesitated, then handed over the camera. “I’ll see you back there.”

“No, wait. Where are you going?”

“To the ATM, then maybe find another bar.”

Stu rolled his eyes. “I’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know, you can take care of yourself. But you’re drunk and you don’t speak Spanish and if anything happened—”

“Dude, I’m six two and weigh one eighty. None of these Mayans are gonna jump me, they’re all about four feet tall.”

“Wow, racist, much?”

“No, I’m serious. Even *you* look huge compared to some of the people around here, and you’re little.” Josh reached out and patted Stu on the head. Stu ducked away from his hand. “Sorry about the stick comment, dude. I’m glad you came with on the trip. If it were just Margo and Amy, I think I’d have estrogen poisoning by now.”

Stu shook his head. “Yeah, okay. Let’s go find an ATM and then get back to the hotel. I think there’s a bank a couple blocks over.”

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Between them and the ATM was a group of Mexican teenagers, talking and laughing while Reggaeton blasted out a boom box. “Just smile and say ‘*Hola*,’” Stu instructed. “Or we could come back tomorrow.”

Before Josh could say anything, one of the girls broke off from the group and peered at them as they passed under a street lamp. “Stu?”

Stu’s eyebrows went up, and then he smiled. “*Hola, Esperanza. Que tal?*”

“You know her?” Josh asked.

“You *don’t* know her? She’s one of the maids at the hotel.” He stepped forward and took her hand, giving her a kiss on each cheek. “*Conoce a Josh? Es el ‘otro hermano’.*”

The girl smiled at Josh and then said something in Spanish that made Stu laugh. Josh lifted his hand and said, “*Hola*,” which just made the girl and her friends giggle. Then they turned away from Josh and started talking to Stu, whose every response made them giggle more.

Josh waited for a few seconds, then lost patience. “Can I get my money out now?” he asked Stu.

“Yeah, it’s okay. They’re okay.”

Stu kept chatting with the girls as Josh moved past the group to the ATM machine. That last beer was really starting to hit him, and it took him two tries to put his PIN in right. He got his cash, grabbed his card and the receipt, and shoved everything deep into the pocket of his pants, then headed back to where he'd left Stu.

The girls were still giggling and flirting with the foreigner, but even drunk, Josh could see that the boys in the group were looking distinctly pissed off. He walked up to the crowd of girls around Stu and spoke over their heads. "Okay, thanks, I'm done. Let's go."

Stu glared at him. "I'm having a conversation here, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, and I'm not the only one. You need to stop."

"Stop what?"

"Stop talking to them."

Stu scowled. "I'm just being friendly."

"Not everyone here sees it like that."

"I don't think..." He looked past the girls, past Josh, to all the guys who were watching him. "Oh, shit."

"Yeah."

"So say goodbye, and we'll walk away."

Stu said a few more words, and Josh heard at least one "*adios*" in there, so that was good, but right as they were finally leaving, someone in the group shouted, "*Gringos!*"

Josh wanted to keep walking, but Stu spun around and shouted something back, eyes flashing and his hands clenched into fists, and fuck, what was he thinking? He hadn't shown that kind of fire in the bar when Hawaiian Shirt was being a dick. Maybe he didn't want to look like a pussy in front of those girls, but seriously, didn't he know he was little and skinny and he'd be paste on the concrete ten seconds into any fight?

So Josh stepped up next to Stu, and could this night get any worse, because Hawaiian Shirt guy and his friends pushed through the crowd of teenagers. "Jesus, what do these assholes want?" Josh asked, his shoulder bumping Stu's.

“He asked what we are. Um, fags, or, um, here to rape their girlfriends.”

“Is there a third choice?”

Hawaiian Shirt pulled a metal rectangle out of his pocket, and flip, flip, flip, not a rectangle anymore, but a knife.

“That’s not what I meant,” Josh muttered. “Can you calm them down?”

“I doubt it.”

Stu was dealing with it surprisingly well, Josh thought. Like he was going to stand his ground and fight. Not at all what Josh would have expected. “Think we could make a run for it?” He asked quietly. “The hotel’s just three blocks away, right?”

“Yeah. You ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Then go!”

They turned and ran. Josh heard shouting in Spanish behind them, but he didn’t look to see if they were being followed. If they were, if Stu wasn’t fast enough, they’d have to turn and fight. But Josh saw Stu off to his right, flying down the street next to him, matching him nearly step for step, even with Josh having five inches on him.

They didn’t slow down until they got to the front door of the hotel, where the guard eyed them suspiciously. “Everything is okay?” he asked.

Even though he was panting, Stu grinned. “Exercise. *Ejercicio*.” Josh grinned, too, and cast what he hoped was a casual glance down the street. No one had followed them.

The guard raised an eyebrow, but he let them in. They ran up the stairs to Margo and Amy’s room, dropped off the camera, then went back to their own room, where they burst into adrenaline-and-relief-fuelled laughter.

“Oh, my God,” Stu said, sitting on his bed with his head in his hands, laughter leaking out of him in little hissing bursts.

“I can’t believe you can run that fast,” Josh said when he’d caught his breath. He sank to the floor and leaned against the end of his bed, letting his head fall back onto it. “Thanks for not tripping.”

“You, too.” Stu threw himself back on his own bed. “I can’t believe you’re that coordinated when you’re drunk.” He was still panting from the run.

“My body is a highly trained, um... tool.” Josh lifted his head and watched Stu’s chest rise and fall with each breath he took.

“*You’re* a tool.”

“No, *you’re* a tool!”

Stu turned his head and grinned. Josh grinned back at him. Then he rolled onto his hands and knees and crawled over to Stu’s bed, stopping when he put a hand on the covers.

Stu’s grin faded as his eyes locked with Josh’s. “What?”

“Nothing.” Seriously, what the hell was he thinking? Or really, was he even thinking at all, having moved past tipsy to fully wasted? He stood up and stepped around Stu’s bed in the excessively careful way drunk people move. “I have to whiz.” He swayed his way into the bathroom, where he peed (sitting down for fear of losing his balance and making a mess), washed his hands and brushed his teeth. Then he stumbled back into the room and fell face-first onto his bed.

“Aren’t you gonna take a shower?” Stu asked.

“No. Tomorrow.”

“Okay. Can I use the bathroom then?”

“Go for it.”

Josh lay on the bed not quite asleep as Stu bumped around in the bathroom. Something was digging into his thigh. He groaned and sat up, but he couldn’t get his hand into his pocket while he was sitting, so he stood up, holding onto the wall for support so he could pull out... oh, right, his debit card and the cash from the ATM.

He lay the bills on the bed and wiped his hand over them, trying to flatten them out. There seemed to be a lot of them. Maybe he’d pushed the \$200 button instead of the \$100 button? Wait, no, it had been in pesos... whatever. He didn’t want to carry that much cash on him in case his pocket got picked or they got mugged. But he didn’t want to leave it anywhere obvious in the hotel room, like in his suitcase or in his underwear drawer.

He really needed to put the cash away in a safe place, but the room was starting to spin in slow, soothing circles. Josh's hands felt big and clumsy as he counted through the bills. Stu had long, narrow fingers, elegant, with just enough hair on the knuckles to keep from looking girly. In his mind's eye, Josh saw Stu gracefully pulling money out of his shirt pouch. Fine for Stu; he didn't sweat like a pig. Josh knew it was safer to keep cash in the pouch, but everything in there always ended up kind of damp. Fuck it. He might as well put some bills into the pouch with his passport and a few more in his wallet, and maybe he'd think of a good hiding place for the rest of them in the morning. He lay back down on the bed and was asleep within seconds.

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Margo was so happy to get her camera back that she let Josh sleep in the next day and then brought him a pastry and a bottle of juice when he woke up, grouchy and hung over, at ten o'clock.

"So are you getting up or not?" She waved the pastry under his nose.

"Not." He rolled over and put the pillow over his head.

"Come on, you can sleep it off on the beach. We're just going to lie there and get skin cancer in between snorkeling."

He dragged himself into a sitting position, took the juice from her, and drank it down in a couple of gulps. He thought about going back to sleep, but he saw Stu watching him, looking pissy and judgmental, like he was a second away from telling Josh "I told you so" about his hangover. "Yeah, okay. Gimme five minutes."

Margo left, taking Stu with her. Josh scarfed down the pastry, used the bathroom, then pulled on his swim trunks. He didn't want to take his neck pouch since he'd be shirtless most of the time, but he didn't want to leave it in the room, either, since it held his passport and all his cash. Maybe he could find a place to hide it... Stu might trust the hotel maids, but Josh had more common sense. In the end, he unzipped the lining of his suitcase, stuck the pouch inside, then re-zipped it and put the suitcase back in the closet. The laptop and camera were under some clothes in a drawer—hardly a deterrent, but at least not right out in the open, begging to be stolen. Next time, they

were definitely staying in a place that had room safes. He stuffed his wallet and room key into his pockets before grabbing a towel, slipping on his flip-flops, and leaving the room.

Josh was supposed to watch their stuff while the other three went snorkeling, but he ended up just looping the straps of the purses and Stu's backpack through his arms so no one could steal them and went to sleep, the sun beating down on him. They woke him up a couple of hours later to go to lunch, laughing at the tan-line stripes on his right arm.

After lunch, they wandered around town for a couple of hours, picking up souvenirs since it was their last full day of the trip. "Aren't you getting anything?" Stu asked Josh.

"No, I got enough crap already."

"I mean for your parents. You should at least get something for your mom."

Wow, so Josh was a drunk *and* a crappy son? "I'm gonna get them some duty-free gin on the way back."

"They can get that anywhere. You should get them something local."

"I don't know what they'd like."

"They're your parents. They'll like anything you give them."

"Then they'll like a giant bottle of gin."

Stu shook his head and walked off, leaving Josh to trail behind him and the girls.

When they got back to the hotel, Josh found his credit card on the nightstand. "How'd that get there?"

"Esperanza must have put it there when she was cleaning the room. It was under your bed last night."

"Esperanza?"

"The maid. The girl I was talking to last night near the ATM." Stu opened his suitcase and put a bag of dirty laundry into it.

"Well, crap." Josh put the card back in his wallet. "Why didn't you tell me I'd dropped it?"



“I thought you knew.”

“You thought I left it under the bed on purpose?”

“I guess. I don’t know.” Stu looked at Josh as he pulled out his laptop and started a game. “Aren’t you going to pack?”

“I can do that tonight.”

“Yeah, when you’re falling over. That’ll be entertaining.”

Josh paused the game and looked up, scowling. “What’s your problem, anyway? I get that you’re some kind of prude who doesn’t wanna drink—”

“I’m not a—”

“—but why do you have to *constantly* ride my ass about it?” His hands tightened on the laptop. “Look, I’m drinking here because I can. Once we get back to the states, I won’t be able to drink legally for another year and a half. So please, just... step off. It’s only one more night, okay? God.”

Stu didn’t respond. He just stared at Josh, unblinking, his eyes more than ever like green glass, cold and sharp-edged. Then he turned away and went back to packing, not saying another word until he’d closed his suitcase. “Are you done with that?” he asked, pointing to the Harry Potter book that lay on the nightstand.

“Um...”

“If you’re not, you can take it with you, and just give it to Margo when you’re done. She can drop it at our house the next time she comes over.”

The offer *sounded* nice enough, but Josh felt like he was being criticized for playing games instead of reading. “Um. Okay, yeah, thanks. I’m only a couple chapters into it.”

“No problem.” Stu stood there for a moment, looking like he wanted to say something else. Whatever it was, Josh knew he wouldn’t like it, but better to just get it over with. He hit the pause button on his game. “Did you want something?”

Stu blew out a breath. “Just... I think you might have a drinking problem.”

“Oh, good god. I thought we were done with this conversation.”

“You’re getting wasted. Every. Night.”

“Yeah, it’s called ‘being on vacation’. I’m a big boy, I can make my own decisions about my life.”

“Yes, but—” Stu began, then stopped. Bit his lip. “No, okay, yeah, you’re right. It’s your life.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Do whatever you want.”

“I will. Not like I need your permission or anything.”

Stu narrowed his eyes but didn’t say anything more about it. He sat on his bed and opened the book he’d started reading after he’d finished the Harry Potter.

Josh hit “resume”, then died three times in as many minutes. He couldn’t concentrate at all, and his hands were sweating. Probably got too much sun on the beach. He went into the bathroom and splashed some cold water on his face. He felt a little better after that.

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For the next hour, the only sounds in the room were click of laptop keys and the occasional laugh from Stu as he read. Josh didn’t ask him what was so funny, though. He didn’t care. He probably wouldn’t find it funny, anyway; nerds had weird senses of humor.

He was just about to finally finish the level he’d been stuck on when the girls knocked on the door. Stu closed his book and let them in. Margo sat next to him on the bed and bumped his shoulder with hers. “You’re not even packed yet!” she said, gesturing to the room.

“It’s not gonna take that long,” Josh said, keeping his eyes on the screen.

“I hope not. Come on, shut that thing down and let’s go eat.”

“You’ve been eating like a pig this trip. You’re gonna get fat.”

“Bite me.” She waved her hand in front of his screen. “I can’t help it if the food’s fantastic here. So where do you guys want to go tonight?” She waved her hand in front of the screen again. Josh tried to slap it out of the way, but she was too quick. “Shut it down and let’s go.”

“One sec...”

“Josh doesn’t want to eat,” Stu offered, tossing his book on his bed. “He’s going to drink his dinner.”

“Ha-fucking-ha,” Josh said, saving his game and shutting the laptop. He put it back into the dresser drawer under some T-shirts.

“Shut up, Stu,” Amy said, then turned to Josh. “There’s a taqueria a few blocks away we haven’t tried yet.”

Josh shrugged. “Fine, whatever. Let’s go.”

“Are you going to wear that?” Margo wrinkled her nose.

He rolled his eyes but then kicked them out of the room so he could change. After he was dressed, he tucked his wallet into his back pocket, making sure to fasten the button to discourage pickpockets. When he reached for the door handle, he froze, realizing he didn’t have the money pouch he usually kept in his shirt. Hadn’t had it all day, in fact. He started going through the room, trying to remember where he’d left it. It wasn’t on the dresser or in any of the drawers. He pulled his suitcase out of the closet, but it wasn’t there, either, and he really started to panic until he remembered hiding it. Unzipping the lining of the suitcase, he blew out a relieved breath when he found it right where he’d left it. He slipped it over his head and dropped it inside his shirt, then pocketed the room key and left.

As he closed the door behind him, he heard Amy’s voice from around the corner. “No, listen,” she said, sounding annoyed. “He’s older than you. If he wants to get wasted every night, let him.”

“Oh, so you’re going to drag his carcass home if he passes out? Good luck with that. He weighs two hundred pounds.”

*One eighty*, Josh thought but didn’t say. And it wasn’t like he was fat anymore. If anything, Nick said he could stand to put on a few more pounds of muscle.

“Come on, Amy, he’s got a point.”

Hey, way to stand up for your brother, Margo. Josh scuffed his feet as he got close to give them some warning, pretending he hadn’t heard anything when he joined them.

The taqueria was amazing, the food so good Josh wanted to move in there. Carne asada, black beans, grilled fish flavored with lime and chiles, shredded turkey, all served on little corn tortillas with six different salsas to choose from. Rice and refritos, and shots of clear, colorless tequila.

Stu asked the waiters so many questions about the food that the chef finally came out to talk to him. They gave him a standing ovation. He answered Stu's questions and then sent more things out from the kitchen, stuff that wasn't on the menu, plus a couple of free desserts. Then he set up some complicated flaming drinks for the girls. Stu was freaking out a little ("Are you sure your hair won't catch on fire?") but they managed to down them without any major catastrophes. By the time they left the restaurant, Josh, Margo, and Amy were pretty buzzed, and Stu had the chef's email address and the promise of some recipes.

"God, I'm so full. I need to work this meal off. Let's go dancing!" Margo sang, skipping to the side and twirling more gracefully than Josh would have thought possible, seeing how drunk she was.

"Let's dance!" Amy called out. "Put on your red shoes and dance the blues... bomp, bomp, bomp, let's dance!"

"Can you keep it down?" Stu said. "You're embarrassing me."

"We weren't embarrassing you in the restaurant," Amy said. "That guy liked us."

"Because he could practically see right down your shirt."

"Stuffy Stu," Josh mumbled, and the girls laughed.

Stu glared at him. "Look, all I'm saying is that you might attract unwanted attention."

"That's why you and Josh are here. To protect us. Ah declayah, the menfolk must protect us faintin' violets." Margo fell against Amy, laughing.

"Ooh! Ooh!" Amy straightened up. "I know where we can go where we won't attract unwanted attention!"

"Do tell," Margo said.

"That gay bar. Stu, where's that gay bar?"

“There’s a gay bar here?” Margo’s voice rose to a squeak. “I *love* gay bars!”

“When have you ever been to a gay bar?” Josh asked his sister. Oops. As soon as he heard the words “gay bar”, he’d meant to keep his mouth shut, but the good food and tequila had loosened up every part of him, including his tongue, apparently.

“I went to one with my friend Carl and his boyfriend, thank you very much,” Margo said. “You got a problem with that, Mr. Macho Rugby Dude?”

Josh wondered if her eyes would pop out of her head and actually fall right onto the street if he told her he was gay. She probably wouldn’t believe him, and he didn’t feel like hashing it all out just then. But he could wipe that smirk off her face. “No problem at all. I’ve been to a gay bar once or twice myself.” Like for his nineteenth birthday, when Nick had bought him a lap dance from one of the men who danced onstage in their underwear, and afterwards, all the leather daddies had taken turns spanking him, copping feels in between slaps. He’d been so turned on by the end of it that Nick had barely gotten his hands on him in the back room before he came.

But he wasn’t about to give that much detail to his sister, especially with Amy and Stu there. And he didn’t want to think about Nick and how much things had changed between them. There were plenty of other guys out there.

“Let’s go, then!” Amy said, linking her arms with Margo and Josh. “Where is it?”

Josh raised an eyebrow at Stu. “Yeah, Stu, where’s the gay bar?”

“I don’t know. You were there,” Stu said, apparently thinking that Josh would back him up. “That a-hole in the Hawaiian shirt...”

“I just know what you *said* he said.”

Stu made a face. “Look, he probably just said that to be a dick, and there isn’t really any gay bar around here.”

But there was. The girls made Stu go back into the restaurant and ask the waiters, and he came back with a map drawn on a paper napkin. “I told them we wanted to go because you’re lesbians,” he said, his face bright red.

Amy shrugged. “Whatever works.”

Like the night before, the girls danced while the boys hung out at the bar and watched them. Unlike that night, Josh kept Margo’s camera in his pocket. Also unlike that night, no French girls made Josh take his shirt off. But an Italian man at the bar was practicing his English on Josh and Stu.

“You’re American?” the man shouted over the music. “You look like a Greek!”

“My dad’s Greek,” Josh shouted back. “I mean, his family’s originally from Greece.”

“I can see it in your face.” He smiled and lifted his glass.

Josh tapped his beer bottle against it and took a sip. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stu staring down into his Coke. “You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just really loud in here.”

“Yeah.”

Someone bumped against Josh’s hip—the Italian guy. The man grinned at Josh again but didn’t move away. In fact, he stood there, hip to hip with Josh, watching him as he took another sip of his drink. Okay...

“Paolo.” The man stuck out his hand.

Josh shook it. “Josh.”

The man held onto it a little longer than necessary, and he didn’t introduce himself to Stu. Josh finished his beer and raised his hand to get the bartender’s attention. Paolo stopped him from paying.

“I’ll buy it.”

“Thanks.”

He was a lot older than Josh, maybe even in his thirties, but he was gorgeous, with dark curling hair and huge eyes. Josh was pretty sure he was being flirted with. When the beer came and he felt a hand on his ass, Josh became very sure. He tipped his head back and drank from the bottle, keeping his eyes on Paolo as he licked the rim.

Paolo’s smile widened. “Would you be kind to show me where is the

toilet?” He set his empty glass on the bar. “It’s hard to see the way in this small light.”

“Sure.” Josh set down his beer in front of Stu and pulled the camera out of his pocket. “Here, hold this and watch my beer, I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Stu asked.

“Bathroom.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“You have to go now?”

“No, but I thought—”

“No, stay here, then. Watch my beer, and make sure Margo and Amy are okay. I’ll be right back.” He pushed away from the bar before Stu could argue. When he got to the entrance to the bathrooms, he looked over his shoulder, relieved when he saw Stu still at the bar. Stu looked pretty pissed, but that was his own fault. If he’d loosen up and have beer or two, he’d be having fun like everyone else in the place.

Josh watched Stu get even more pissed when Paolo bumped into him, making him nearly spill his Coke. Paolo made a few apologetic gestures, his hands all over Stu, and Josh started to go back to the bar, to explain to Paolo that Stu was straight. But then Stu would find out that Josh was gay, and maybe that conversation would be better held somewhere else.

A second later, Josh relaxed as Paolo started to make his way across the dance floor towards the bathrooms. Josh hurried down the hall and into the Men’s room, then waited, hoping he hadn’t misunderstood the situation.

He hadn’t. Paolo came through the bathroom door, grabbed Josh by the front of his shirt and dragged him into the nearest stall, then stuck his tongue right down Josh’s throat. Eager hands grabbed Josh’s ass, his legs and arms, palmed his cock, squeezed his biceps and shoulders, stroked his chest and pinched his nipples through his shirt. It was kind of weird, actually, like what tentacle porn might be like, if Josh had ever imagined being the object of tentacle porn. But then Paolo slowed down, his hands coming to rest on Josh’s hips, and his mouth softened. Heat spread out through Josh’s body as he started to get hard.

“You’re so handsome,” Paolo whispered against his lips. “I want to—what is it in English, ‘blow job to you’?”

“Just ‘blow you’,” Josh corrected. “Or give someone a blow job. Either one.” Oh, for fuck’s sake, shut up, Josh told himself. This wasn’t the time for an English lesson.

Paolo grinned. “So, ‘I want to give you a blow job,’ is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Paolo pushed Josh back against the toilet tank while unzipping Josh’s pants and tugging them down just far enough for access. Then he whipped his own dick out, sat on the toilet seat, and went at it.

The cold porcelain against Josh’s ass was distracting, but Paolo knew what he was doing, and it was over in a few minutes, at least for Josh. When Paolo pulled off and stood up, Josh returned the favor, stroking Paolo’s dick while Paolo clung to him, muttering into his ear in Italian. It was really kind of hot, way hotter than that octopus groping he’d done before. Josh started to get hard again. “Fuck, yeah, give it to me,” he growled, thinking maybe he could go for seconds, but at that moment, Paolo jammed himself into Josh’s hand, coming and biting down on Josh’s shoulder to muffle his shout.

Another kiss, a smile, some cleaning up and rearranging of clothing, and then Josh was out the door, ignoring Margo and Amy who waved at him, trying to get him to come dance. He got back to the bar, picked up his beer, which was, thankfully, right where he left it, and drank it down, finishing it just as Paolo got back to the bar.

“Everything okay?” Stu asked. “You were in there a long time.”

“Yeah, fine. I can take over here, if you wanna go.”

“No, I’m good.”

Josh didn’t turn his head, but he could tell that Stu was looking at him; he could feel the suspicion and disapproval radiating from him. He held the bottle upside-down so that the last few drops of beer fell on his tongue, then he lifted it to get the bartender’s attention. “*Uno mas, por favor*. What?” he snapped, wheeling on Stu.



Stu looked around the club like a spy in a B-movie before grabbing Josh's shirt and pulling him down to talk right into his ear. "Are you on drugs?"

"No! Jesus!" He pulled himself free and took a step back. The way Stu had gripped his shirt and breathed on his ear was too much like what Paolo had done in the bathroom, and even though he'd just come, even though Stu was speaking English, even though his accusation was ridiculous, it was still somehow a ginormous turn-on. Josh faced the bar and adjusted himself, trying to think about rugby and vaginas and cold showers, but Stu was right up on him again, his chest against Josh's arm and his warm breath on Josh's ear.

"You could get us all arrested."

"I'm not on drugs! And get the fuck off me!" Before you find out something you don't want to know, he didn't add. He shoved Stu away with his shoulder and took another step back. The bartender set the beer in front of him, and Josh pulled out his wallet to pay, but... What the hell? How did he barely have enough left to pay for a beer? He'd spent a bit on dinner and all that tequila, but still... He handed money to the bartender and left the change on the bar. He'd have to transfer money from his shirt pouch to his wallet; not a great idea to do that out in public, but fuck it. He started to pull the pouch out, but Paolo came up behind him, moving to the music, pumping his hands in the air.

"You don't dance?" he asked, shaking his hips and looking from Josh to Stu.

Stu jerked his chin at Josh. "He does."

Paolo beamed. "Come dance with me, then." He tugged on Josh's wrist. Josh let himself be pulled onto the dance floor. Margo and Amy danced up to them, so Josh shouted introductions, trying to pretend like it was the most normal thing in the world to introduce your sister to the guy who'd just sucked you off in the bathroom. But Paolo was a gentleman, charming the girls and not saying a word about Josh, other than remarking on the resemblance between him and Margo.

Looking back at the bar, Josh could see Stu all by himself, and he felt a pang of annoyance or guilt or... something. Whatever it was, it made him

leave the dance floor and go back to Stu. “Hey,” he said, then drank some of his beer. “Come dance with us.”

“I don’t dance.”

“Sure you do. It’s not like anyone knows what they’re doing out there.”

“No, thanks.”

“We can dance here, then.” Josh took another sip, then put the bottle on the bar and lifted his arms, moving closer to Stu.

“Stop it!” Stu moved away, then looked around, obviously worried.

“Dude, it’s a gay bar. They expect men to dance with each other.”

“I told you, I don’t dance. So just... go back to your *friend* there, before he starts hitting on our sisters.”

“He’s not interested in them.”

“Oh, really?”

Josh turned around and saw Paolo dancing between the two girls. Josh could almost hear their laughter, even over the music. “It’s harmless,” he told Stu. “That’s why straight girls come to gay bars, to dance with hot guys who aren’t going to hit on them.”

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

“I have a few gay friends.”

“Really.”

“What, you don’t believe me?”

“No.”

Josh didn’t know why that should piss him off so very much, but it did. He grabbed his beer off the bar and drank the rest of it in a few gulps, then pulled the money pouch out of his shirt and opened it so he could buy another beer. Or maybe three. Fuck Stu and his endless Cokes.

But all he found, next to his passport, was one twenty peso bill. He dug through the rest of the pouch, but that was it. It was enough to buy him a few beers, but he would have sworn he’d had more money in there.

He must have stared at the pouch longer than he thought, because Stu said, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m missing some money.”

Stu blinked, frowning. “Did you leave it in the room?”

“Maybe. But I thought put more in here last night. After the ATM.”

“Maybe you put it somewhere else.”

“Maybe.”

He got another beer, then went through his wallet again. Nothing but receipts and ticket stubs from the buses and archeological sites they’d visited so far. He stashed the change from the beer in the wallet, then put it back in his pocket and buttoned the pocket to make sure the wallet stayed where it should be. Then he dropped the pouch back inside his shirt.

As he did so, he looked up at Paolo, who had moved away from the girls and was dancing with another man. His hands had been all over Josh... but Josh hadn’t been so far gone that he wouldn’t have noticed the *rripp!* of the Velcro closure on the pouch. In fact, the blowjob had been okay, but not spectacular. The only reason he’d come so fast was that he’d had to limit his jerk-off sessions to once a day, usually in the shower just before he went to bed. If he’d been at home, with a room to himself, he’d start the morning with a nice, leisurely wank to ease into the day, but he couldn’t do that with Stu snoring in the bed across the room. That morning wood didn’t just disappear. Sure, if he waited, his cock would deflate, but it was like that erection lurked in the background for the rest of the day, waiting for some attention. Any blowjob was better than none at all, but Josh would have had to be a lot more turned on than he’d been not to notice that he was being robbed. Besides, he’d seen Paolo’s wallet when he bought Josh a drink; it was full of bills, so he didn’t need to rip off a college student.

“It’s probably for the best.”

Josh looked up at Stu. “What are you talking about?”

“That you left your money in the room. Now you won’t drink so much that you’ll be hung over tomorrow when we have to travel.”

Josh went still, then he narrowed his eyes. “You.”

“What?”

“You took it.”

“What?” Stu pulled back, gaping at him. “No, I didn’t touch it.”

“Well, it’s not here.”

“*Well*, don’t look at me! Maybe you spent it.”

“No.” Josh shook his head. “I had a crapload of cash when I went to bed last night, and I know I put it in the pouch, and now it’s not there. I didn’t buy anything today except lunch and dinner. So where is it?”

“How should I know?”

Josh gave Stu a long look, then he turned on his heel and headed towards the door. Stu ran after him and grabbed his arm, stopping him.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“To the ATM.” He tried to pull his arm out of Stu’s grip, but Stu held on. Well, hell; he really *was* stronger than he looked.

“What’s the point in getting a bunch of money out now when we’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Because I wanna get shit-faced *now*.”

Josh put a little more effort into freeing himself and finally managed to shake Stu loose. “And no, I *don’t* have a drinking problem,” he added. Then he tripped on his way out of the club, barely keeping himself from landing on the sidewalk. So much for dignity. He set off for the ATM, taking a couple of wrong turns before he found it and one more wrong turn on the way back. When he stumbled back into the club, he slapped a twenty peso bill on the bar. “*Tequila, por favor*,” he told the bartender, then shot a triumphant glare at Stu, who just shook his head and looked away.

Josh burned through that twenty, danced until his shirt was soaked with sweat, then spent another twenty on more tequila shots until his stomach rebelled and he had to make a very quick decision: the bathroom, which was on the far side of the crowded dance floor, or the door to the street, which was a few feet away.

The door won. Josh staggered out of the club and threw up in the gutter, then he sat on the curb, his head in his hands, trying to make the world stop swinging back and forth. He spit onto the street a few times, but he couldn't get the rotten taste out of his mouth, and he didn't want to go back inside to ask for water. They'd probably kick his ass for puking his guts out right in front of the club.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there before Margo put a hand on his shoulder.

"Do you feel better now?" She handed him a bottle of water.

"No." He rinsed out his mouth and spat, then drank half of it in a few swallows.

"I shouldn't have made you come with." She sat next to him, away from the vomit. "You haven't really had fun this whole trip."

He shrugged. "It's been okay."

"Do you get this drunk at school, too?"

"Sometimes."

She petted his hair, and he rested his head against hers. "I know we're not that close," she said after a pause. "But we could be, if you wanted. You're not a bratty little kid anymore, and I'm not a bitchy teenage girl anymore. If you want to talk to me, you can. You can tell me anything, and I won't tell Mom and Dad if you ask me not to."

Josh's eyes stung as he sighed. "I'm an asshole."

"No, you're not. At least, not all the time."

"Thanks a lot."

"So do you want to talk?"

"Not really."

"Do you want to go back to the hotel and pack?"

"Yeah." He opened his eyes, but no one else was around except for a few people hanging around outside the entrance to the club, avoiding the puddle of vomit. "Where's Stu and Amy?"

“They’re still inside. He was dancing with some girl when I left.”

“Well, good for him.” Josh’s stomach twisted again, and he swallowed, hard.

“Are you okay?” Margo asked. “Do I need to get out of range?”

“Maybe.” He stood up with a little help, then they made their way slowly back to the hotel. “I’m sorry I fucked up your last night here.”

“It’s okay. I’m getting kind of tired of loud, smoky clubs. I’m ready to go home.”

“Me, too.”

They made it back to the hotel without any more projectile incidents. Josh took a long shower, lying in the tub and letting the water fall on him. At some point, he heard the door to his room open. Probably Stu. Or maybe it was whoever came in and stole his money, going for a second round...

He really hoped it was just Stu because he wasn’t in any shape to fight off burglars, but he left the water running and climbed carefully out of the tub, wrapping a towel around his hips. He looked around for some kind of weapon, but all he could find was Stu’s electric razor. He picked it up, crept to the door, then lifted the razor and swung open the door, shouting, “GAAHHH!!”

“AAAAH!” Stu jumped away from the closet, stumbled backwards, and fell against the wall. His head made a cracking sound when it hit. “Ow! What are you doing?”

“Sorry,” Josh said, sagged with relief. “I thought you were a burglar.”

“Ow.” Stu pushed away from the wall and rubbed his head. Josh took a step forward, but Stu stopped him with a look. “Get away from me.”

“Sorry. I was just trying to help.”

“Why do you have my razor? Did you decide to steal *my* stuff because you think I stole your money?”

“No, I—never mind.”

“Put it back then.”

“Okay, god!” Josh put the razor back in the bathroom and shut off the

shower, then dried himself off. “I don’t want any of your stupid stuff anyway!” he shouted.

“Good!”

Josh wrapped the damp towel around himself again and went back into the room to get his clothes. Stu didn’t look at him; he just dragged his suitcase out of the closet and threw it on his bed as Josh took his clothes into the bathroom to change.

When Josh came back out, Stu had packed up everything in the room that belonged to him. The stuff still on the dresser and nightstand was all Josh’s, except for the Harry Potter book that Stu had loaned him.

“You’d better pack now, too,” Stu told him.

“I will.”

“There won’t be time in the morning.”

“I know! God, quit nagging!”

“Asshole,” Stu muttered.

“I know you are, but what am I?”

“Oh, real fucking mature.” Stu grabbed the book off the nightstand. “I’m taking this back.”

“Go right ahead. I’m too *fucking mature* to read kids’ books, anyway.”

“It’s not a—fine. Whatever.” He managed to fit the book into his suitcase, which he zipped shut and set against the wall. “Are you done with the bathroom?”

Josh fought the urge to be an even bigger dick by saying “no”. He kept his mouth shut and made a sweeping gesture towards the bathroom. Stu went in and shut the door with more force than necessary.

“Fuck.” Josh dragged his own suitcase out of the closet, then he took all of his things out of the dresser and the nightstand, shaking out his clothes and checking all the pockets, looking for the rest of the cash.

He examined every bit of his suitcase, even inside the lining, because he’d hidden the pouch there, but nothing turned up. There was no money in his

toiletries bag or in his extra pair of shoes or in any of his socks, all the places that made sense to hide money in. Maybe someone really had broken into the room and taken it. But then why hadn't they taken his laptop and camera, too?

When Stu came out of the bathroom after his shower, Josh confronted him. "It's not here. So if you didn't take it, then it must have been that maid. She saw me get money out of the ATM."

"It wasn't her."

Josh went on like he hadn't heard him. "But if it was her, then I don't understand why she wouldn't have taken the laptop, too, and—"

"Esperanza did not take your money!"

"How do you know? She could have friends that she lets in, lets them steal stuff from the gringos—"

"She's the owner's niece. There's no way in hell she'd let anyone steal from her uncle's business. And she wouldn't steal, either." His eyebrows scrunched down like black caterpillars fighting. "Quit blaming this on other people. You're the alcoholic who can't even keep track of his own money. You probably put it somewhere and just forgot, because you were so wasted last night. You were passed out on the bed when I got out of the shower."

"So you hid it to teach me a lesson? Got it. Now cough it up."

"I don't have it!"

And wow, Stu looked pretty pissed off, but Josh knew that the best defense was a great offense. "Did you think you could keep me from drinking so much if you took my cash?"

"Why would I do that? It's your life and your health. If you want to throw it away, go ahead. I'm not your mother."

"No, you're not." Josh ran a hand through his hair. "Look, you might as well just give it back. It's not like you stopped me from drinking tonight."

"I don't have it, I told you. And I could care less how much you drink."

"I could care less that you could care less."

"Shut up. You're drunk." Stu climbed into his bed and lay down, facing the wall.



“Maybe you should try getting drunk. Maybe you’d have fun for once in your life.”

Stu sat up and faced Josh. “I have fun. And don’t need to be drunk to do it. And I don’t think letting some creepy old guy grab my ass is fun.”

Josh pushed his face close to Stu’s. “Like I said, maybe you should try it.”

Oops. That was maybe a little TMI. Josh thought about how to play it off, but Stu’s eyes went wide and the silence stretched on a little too long for him to turn it into a joke. And he was a little too drunk to lie when Stu came right out and asked, “Are you gay?”

He wasn’t too drunk to miss the look of disgust on Stu’s face, though. “Yeah, I’m gay. You got a problem with that?” The best defense was a great offense.

“No. Wait, yeah! We’ve been sharing a room this whole time!”

“So? What would’ve changed if you knew?”

Stu opened his mouth, then shut it, then said, “Maybe I would have changed clothes in the bathroom and not made things uncomfortable.”

Josh goggled at him. “Uncomfortable? For who? I wasn’t, uh...” Josh waved his hands around, looking for the word. “...*overcome* by lust from looking at your skinny legs. *Somehow* I managed to restrain myself from jumping you every night.”

Stu didn’t say anything, but an angry crimson flush spread up his neck.

Well, fuck. He shouldn’t have said that. It was true, but just because something was true didn’t mean you had to say it out loud. So what if Stu had skinny legs or pipe-stem arms? It made it easier to share the room with him, actually, since Josh liked big guys like himself, not little, petite, pretty-boys. And especially not straight ones who were ready to jump on the gay-panic train.

But yeah, it had still been a shitty thing to say. “Look,” Josh began, working up an apology in his head, but Stu interrupted.

“No, screw you,” Stu said. “I don’t give a fuck what you think of me, because you’re an asshole. It’s a good thing this trip is almost over. I don’t

ever want to talk to you again once we get home. In fact, I don't want to talk to you anymore at all."

"I'd be happy to."

"What? That doesn't even make sense!"

"Well... Shut up!"

"You shut—never mind! I'm going to sleep. Don't talk to me, and don't wake me up."

"What if the hotel's on fire?"

Stu didn't answer. He flopped down on the bed, facing away from Josh, and yanked the sheet up over his head. He didn't say another word to Josh that night or during breakfast the next morning, or in the taxi to the airport, or at the gate while they waited for their flight.

Josh was glad for the quiet. He wasn't that hung over—a lot of the alcohol had wound up on the street instead of in his body—but he felt sick and miserable anyway. A couple of times he caught Stu looking at him, clearly seconds away from saying, "I told you so," but the words never actually came out. Good thing, too, because Josh might have pulled it together just long enough to punch Stu in the face. If he had to spend one second longer than necessary with that little prick, he'd probably kill him. So when he saw his parents at baggage claim, he wasn't just happy to see them, he was ecstatic, knowing that they would take him and Margo home, and that he'd never have to be in the same room with Stu Edelstein ever again. And this time, that thought made him very happy.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

When Amy Edelstein's wedding invitation came in the mail, Josh checked the "regrets" box on the RSVP card and sent it back, putting British postage stamps over the U.S. one on the envelope. It would've been nice to spend some time with his family, who would all be there—Margo was the Maid of Honor—but he couldn't take time off right at the start of his first professional season. And he didn't want to go all the way from North England to the West Coast of the U.S. just for a weekend. And anyway, it wasn't like he really knew Amy that well. He hadn't even seen her for more than five minutes since that trip to Mexico four years earlier.

Besides, if he went, Stu would bitch at him about drinking too much champagne and then possibly steal Josh's wallet. Thanks, but no thanks.

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Josh hadn't felt too bad about missing Amy's wedding because he'd honestly had the excuse of work. But Mr. Edelstein died right after Josh got home for vacation after his second year in the pro leagues, so there was no way he could get out of going to the funeral. Not that he was even going to try; his mom had the flu, so she told Josh he had to go to the funeral in her place, even though he hadn't really known Mr. Edelstein at all.

Margo had known him, though, and she was a mess, unable to stop crying those first couple of days. She cried as she left the house to go over to the Edelsteins' to do dishes or laundry or whatever needed doing, and she was still crying when she got home.

If Margo took Mr. Edelstein's death that hard, Josh didn't want to think how the actual family was handling it. It wasn't like Mr. Edelstein had been that sick, even. He'd gone into the hospital for what everyone thought would be some fairly routine heart surgery and never made it out of the operating room.

So, Josh shouldn't have been surprised to see Mrs. Edelstein's thousand-yard stare at the funeral, but he was. He stopped right in the doorway of the funeral home when he saw her, shocked at how slack and expressionless her

face was. The friendly, funny woman who had played poker with his mom was gone, and in her place was a still, pale, silent ghost. Up until that moment, Mr. Edelstein's death had been kind of abstract for Josh, but when Margo put a hand on his back, something broke in him as well. He shook his head. "God, she looks like shit."

The words just slipped out. He would have added, "I mean, of course she does, anyone who'd just lost their husband would look like that." In another second, he would have turned around to ask Margo to take him with her the next time she went over to the Edelsteins' so he could help out however he could, because, holy crap, he got it now.

But before he could qualify his statement, before he could turn around, a low, raspy male voice said, "You prick."

Josh spun around. Margo wasn't behind him, wasn't the one who had touched his back. It was Stu. Taller Stu, who barely had to tilt his head up to give Josh a look so venomous that Josh flinched. "Stu, I didn't—"

"*Fuck* you." Stu turned and walked over to his mother, sitting down next to her and putting his arm around her before shooting another glare in Josh's direction.

"Shit." Josh took a step forward, but there was a clear warning in Stu's red-rimmed eyes, and Josh stopped. He turned around and took a seat that he hoped would be out of Stu's line of sight. Margo sat down next to him, and their dad sat next to her. "Where have you been?" Josh whispered to her.

"I had to go get more Kleenex," she whispered back. "Stu said he wanted to talk to you. Did he find you?"

Josh hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah."

"What did he want?"

"He, um... He said to tell Mom to feel better soon."

"That was nice of him."

"Yeah."

After the funeral, he begged off going to the Edelsteins'. "You guys go, pass on my condolences. I'll look after Mom." Thankfully, Margo and his dad

bought it and dropped him at home. He spent the rest of the afternoon bringing his mom soup and orange juice and realizing that trying to never be in the same room as Stu wasn't good enough; he needed to work on never being on the same continent. Every time they met, it ended in disaster, and it just needed to stop.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

“Hey, Mom.” Josh rubbed his eyes with the hand that wasn’t holding his phone, then he rolled over to look at the clock. Four A.M.? *That* woke him up. “What’s wrong?”

“Why would you—oh, no, I forgot about the time difference. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah, that’s okay.” Next to him, Ian rolled over and threw an arm over Josh’s waist. “Why are you calling?”

“I was hoping you could come home for a visit.”

Josh closed his eyes. “You know I’ll be home when the season ends next month, right?”

“Yes, but, um...”

She paused, and that was kind of weird, because his mom was never at a loss for words. Josh pulled Ian’s arm off of his waist and sat up. The cool air coming through the windows wasn’t causing the chill that filled his body. “What’s wrong?”

His mom sighed. “You know my cold that wouldn’t go away? It turned out to be leukemia, and it’s not looking good. I need you to come home. As soon as you can.”

Oh, fuck. No.

Ian had woken up, and sat up as well. “What’s wrong?” he whispered.

Josh shook his head. “Okay, I’ll get there as soon as I can. I’ll get on a flight tomorrow—today, I mean.” He got out of bed and stumbled out of the bedroom, looking around the flat like he’d never seen it before, even though he’d been living there for three years.

“Thanks, Josh. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you until now. I thought I could beat it, and then we’d all laugh about it afterwards. But, not so much, I guess.”

“God, Mom...” Tears burned their way out of his eyes and rolled down his face. He wiped them away as he went into the bathroom, shutting the door and leaning against it.

“We’ll talk when you get here, okay? I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“You’re just—you have no concept—you don’t apologize to someone for waking them up when it’s to tell them you have cancer!” He wiped his eyes, but the tears kept coming.

She laughed, sounding more like herself. “There’s my boy. Travel safe, and I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Mom...”

“It’s okay, Josh. I just want the family to be together. Call me tomorrow when you know your plans.”

“God. Um... okay.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.” The phone went silent, and he fought really hard not to throw it against the wall. Instead, he banged his head on the door behind him, softly, then harder and harder until Ian knocked on the door.

“Josh.”

Fuck. “One sec.” Josh ran some cold water in the sink and splashed it on his face, then dried himself off with a towel, but he still looked a mess. Well, he was going to have to tell Ian anyway. He opened the door.

Ian stood there in pajama bottoms, looking worried. “Tell me.”

“I’m pretty sure my mom’s dying of cancer.”

“Jesus!” His eyes went wide. “You didn’t know?”

“No, no one in my family tells me anything. I’m the *baby*, they don’t want to worry me. Or something. Yeah.” He laughed bleakly, then stepped past Ian and went down the hall to the dining room, where he kept his laptop. “I have to go home. Today. I hope I get there in time.” He sat down and switched it on.

Ian laid a hand on Josh’s back and rubbed gently. “I’ll go with you.”

Josh shrugged off Ian’s hand. “Why would you go with me?” He waited for the computer to boot up—god, it seemed to get slower every day—and as the seconds ticked by and his patience wore thinner and thinner, he realized

that Ian had gone silent. Josh turned around to look at him, but it was too dark to make out his expression. “What?” he snapped.

“I just thought that you’d want someone there for emotional support.”

“The rest of my family will be there.” *Finally*, the computer finished booting up. Josh connected to the internet and pulled up a travel-booking site.

“Yes, but you might want someone there besides your family. And I’d like to meet your mum.”

“No, that’s okay. Really.” Josh typed in the destination and departure date, hesitating over the return date. He scrolled back up to the top of the page and chose “one-way” instead of “round trip”.

“Oh, my god.” Ian pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. “Are you not out to your family?”

“I’ve never actually *told* them I’m gay, if that’s what you mean.” Okay, one-way flights to Portland, leaving that day...

“Well, then I can see how it would be rather a shock for them if you showed up with me.”

The earliest he could do would probably be the one just after ten A.M. He clicked on it. “Yeah.” He entered his credit card information and clicked “purchase”. Okay, that was done. Now to pack, and shit, he’d have to call Simon on the way to the airport. Hopefully the team manager would understand why Josh was leaving in the middle of the playoffs and not fire him outright. He walked over to the closet and pulled out his suitcase.

“Josh.”

“Hmm?” He turned to see Ian still in the dining room, standing next to the table.

“Are you going to tell them?”

“Tell them what?”

“That you’re gay.”

“Yeah. At least Mom. She deserves to know.”

Ian walked down the hall and followed Josh into the bedroom. “You should tell all of them.”



“They’re going to have a lot to deal with. They don’t need me dumping this on them as well.”

“You’re not *dumping* anything. And if anything, they’ll be happy to know you’re with someone, that you have someone to look after you.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not *with* anyone.”

“Uh, hello,” Ian said, gesturing to himself.

Josh glanced at him, then began throwing clothes into the suitcase. “What? It’s not like we’re dating or anything.”

There was a pause, then Ian said, “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not. Wait... you think we’re dating.” Josh stopped packing and looked at Ian, frowning at the hurt he saw on Ian’s face. “Why would you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe being in a monogamous relationship with you for the past four months? Oh, my god,” Ian said, when Josh winced. “I haven’t been in a monogamous relationship for the past four months. How many other guys have you slept with?”

“None,” Josh said. “Um... Hand jobs aren’t the same as sleeping with someone, right?”

“Oh, my god.”

“I thought we were just having really good sex a few times a week! I didn’t know you thought it was something else.”

“Well, I did.”

“You never said anything.”

“I thought it was obvious.”

“Yeah, no, it wasn’t.” Josh finished with the clothes from the dresser and moved to the bedroom closet.

“Are you really that oblivious?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Ian sighed. “All right then. I’ll just come out and say it. I’d like to have a relationship with you. I’d like us to be boyfriends.”

“I really can’t do this now.” He could wear a suit jacket on the plane so it wouldn’t get wrinkled in his suitcase, then he’d have it in case he needed it for... Fuck. He dropped the suit on the bed and sat down next to it, his face in his hands.

Ian sat next to him. “See? You need someone with you. You’ll be a wreck otherwise.”

“No.” Josh wiped his face and stood up. He slipped the suit pants off the hanger and put them into the suitcase, then hung the jacket up again. “I’ll be fine. I don’t need you to come with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“What will you tell your family about us?”

“Nothing.” When Ian just looked at him, Josh shrugged. “What, you want me to tell them there’s this guy in England who really likes my blowjobs? I don’t think so.” He zipped up the suitcase.

“Josh...”

“Look, we can talk about it when I get back. But you have to go now. I’ve... I have to get ready to leave.”

“Okay. I’m sorry about your mum.”

“Thanks.”

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Josh drove the rental car as fast as he could through the rain. He didn’t stop to talk to Margo or his dad when he got home, he just ran right upstairs. His mom looked awful, too thin, with dark circles under her eyes, but her smile was the same. “Thanks for coming home, baby.”

Josh sat in the chair next to her bed and burst into tears. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I would have come home. I would have been here...”

“You have your own life, Josh! I didn’t want you sitting around worrying, not being able to do anything. And you’re here now. So let’s have fun and not freak out, okay?”

“How can I not freak out? Jesus Christ.” He wiped his eyes.

“Taking your mind off of it. Tell me what you’ve been doing. How’s the club? Are they going to renew your contract? Are you still in that apartment with the tiny kitchen?”

“Every apartment in England has a tiny kitchen. And yes, I’m pretty sure I’ll be signed for another season.”

“But what about five years from now? Will you still be playing?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“How have you managed to keep all your teeth?”

He laughed a little. “I wear a mouth guard. Some of the guys on the team take the piss out of me for—”

“They beat the piss out of you? What?”

“No, it’s just an expression. Um, they give me shit for it. But joking, like.”

“My little boy has turned into a huge Brit.” She shook her head, but she was smiling. “Are you seeing anyone?”

Josh looked at the ceiling, then at the bedspread. “I didn’t think I was.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I was informed yesterday—no, today—that I’m in a relationship. Apparently.”

“What’s his name?”

“Oh. Um. Ian.” He let out a shuddering sigh. “I wasn’t sure you knew. About me.”

“I didn’t until just now.” She took his hand. “But I’d kind of guessed. You’ve never had a girlfriend or even talked about girls, not the way your sister talked about boys. Still does. Even as picky as she is, she’s had some boyfriends. And it’s not like girls wouldn’t like you. If you wanted, they’d probably be all over you.”

“Um.”

“What?”

“They kind of are anyway. Even more when I tell them I’m not interested.”

“Nothing a woman likes better than a challenge.” She smiled. “So have you ever really tried to date women? Maybe you’re bi.”

“I’m not.”

“It would make things so much easier—”

“Mom. I’m *not*.”

“Well.” She shrugged one shoulder. “I had to ask.” She settled back against the pillows. “So tell me about Ian.”

Josh shook his head. “Nothing to tell. Just a guy I, uh, hang out with sometimes.”

“Hang out with.”

“Um...”

“You’re being safe, right?”

“Of course! I’m not an idiot.”

“I didn’t say you were. Even though people your age *do* do some idiotic things sometimes. So. He thinks you and he are boyfriends, but you don’t?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing. I mean, he’s okay, but... I don’t really want to be in a relationship right now. I mean, if I get hurt or cut from the team, I’ll have to leave and come back here. So there’s no point in having anything serious with any of the guys I know over there.”

“Guys, multiple?”

“They’re just friends.”

“Hmm.” She raised an eyebrow, then said, “Okay, it sounds like Ian isn’t the one.”

“There’s no such thing as ‘the one’.”

“Oh, Josh, of course there is! Your father is my ‘one’.”

“Really? How’d you know?”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I just did. The only thing we had in common when we met was that we liked games, all sorts of video games and role-playing games—”

“Ew, no, TMI.”

“Not that kind of role-playing!” She hit him lightly on the shoulder. “You know, like Renaissance Fairs.”

“Big nerds, both of you.”

“You know it.” She grinned, and then looked more serious. “But there was just something between us from the first time we met, some connection. We make each other laugh. He understands the things I’m passionate about and is always there with support.”

“What about the things *he’s* passionate about?”

“Well... Your dad isn’t passionate about much. Except me.” She grinned again.

As much as Josh wanted to listen to his mom’s voice, he really didn’t want to hear those details, so he was thankful when she shifted the topic of conversation. “So what are you passionate about, besides rugby? What do you want out of life?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think I’d need to decide so soon.” Tears welled up again and he put his face in his hands. His mother stroked his hair.

“It’s okay if you don’t know. I mean, if you did, I’d love to hear it, but if you don’t, that’s okay, too. You’re still young, you’re still finding your way.”

A few minutes later, his mother gave him a kiss and sent him out of the room, telling him that she needed to rest. When he got downstairs, he snapped at his dad and sister for not telling him, then he started crying again when they hugged him. “I can’t stop,” he said, taking a tissue from the box his sister offered him.

“No one expects you to,” she said.

“It’d be nice not to fall apart in front of Mom, just make her feel worse.”

“She understands.”

Josh hoped that was true, but he was still determined to hold it together when he went upstairs the next day. As he approached his mother's room, he heard her laughing, and the sound lifted a huge weight off of his heart. It was a relief not to have to force a smile. He was about to knock on the door frame, but he stopped when he saw a stranger sitting on her bed. It was some guy with dark hair, wearing faded jeans and a set of those Buddhist beads around his wrist. The shirt he wore looked like he'd slept in it, and from the bit of his face that Josh could see, it looked like he hadn't shaved in a few days. Had a homeless person gotten into the house and wandered into his mother's room? Before he could say anything, she waved him in.

"Oh, Josh, you're awake! You remember Stu Edelstein."

Well, shit. Josh should have recognized that scruff of beard, but the width of the shoulders had thrown him off. Looked like scrawny little Stu had filled out since Mexico. "Yeah. What's he doing here?"

"He's just leaving," Stu said, jumping off the bed. "I'll be back tomorrow," he told Josh's mom. He smiled at her, then walked over to Josh. "Hey, man." He stuck out his hand. Josh stared at it but didn't take it. "Okay, then." Stu walked out of the room.

"No, you wait a minute—"

"Josh." His mom held out her hand to him.

Josh looked between her and Stu, who had turned around and stood in the hallway. He turned away from Stu and went to his mother.

"Why was he here?"

"To spend some time with me, and he came all the way from Thailand, so be nice to him. Look, those are the postcards he's been sending to cheer me up."

"Oh, my god." All his good intentions of keeping it together dropped away. "You told him? You told *him*, but you didn't tell me, all this time? What the hell?" The last thing his mom needed was him shouting at her, so he took a deep breath, trying to dissolve the red haze of anger that had filled his head.

"I didn't tell him, I told Terri, and she just told him I'd been under the weather. But he came right out and asked in one of his emails, and I couldn't

lie, so, yes, I told him. And then after I called you, I emailed him, and he started making arrangements to come back. It took him a little longer than it took you. He just got back this morning.”

“Why... was he emailing you?”

She sighed. “Okay, this might sound a little strange, but Stu and I have been pretty close, ever since his father died.”

A horrible thought struck Josh. “Oh, my god, are you having an *affair* with him?”

“With Stu?” His mother gaped at him for a moment before barking out a laugh. “Yes. Yes, that’s exactly right, I’m having an affair with my friend’s son, who’s even younger than my own, and it’s all taking place right under my husband’s nose. You’ve found me out.”

Josh went hot. “Okay, when you say it like that...”

“No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t make fun. You’ve had a lot to deal with in the past twenty-four hours.” *He’d* had a lot to deal with? Oh, did *that* make Josh feel guilty, so he silently swore to shut up and listen to his mother. “What happened was, Terri was so out of it the first few days after Steve died, and Stu just sort of picked me to vent to, so I let him. He needed to get it all out. And then he just kept on venting to me, even after Terri got past the worst of it. I guess he felt like he didn’t want to burden her with his problems. It’s the same reason I didn’t want to tell you until I had to. You’re my son, my baby, and I’m still trying to protect you, even though you’re twenty-five and can lift a house.”

She squeezed his hand, and Josh felt a little better... until she said, “I noticed some tension between you and Stu just now. What’s that about?”

He shook his head. “Just... he’s kind of a jerk.”

“No, he’s not. He’s a sweet boy.”

“To you, maybe.”

“Well, you should try talking to him. He’s really very nice, and he’s got lots of interesting stories about Thailand.”

“Yeah, I bet he does.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Josh! He’s there for work, not for some sleazy sex tour.”

“Yeah, okay.”

She rolled her eyes. “Just talk to him. Ask him about what he’s been doing. I think you’ll see what he’s really like.”

She changed the subject, asking about Josh’s club and his friends on the team, and they talked until she got tired and sent him away again.

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Josh spent mornings and afternoons with his mother so that Margo and their dad could be with her in the evenings. When his dad got home, Josh would go out for a run or downstairs to lift weights. Margo would usually arrive by the time he’d finished. If Stu was coming to visit, it wasn’t when Josh was around. On his fifth day home, his mom seemed much more tired than the day before. “I can go if you like,” he offered, his chest tight, as the hospice nurse slipped out of the room.

“No, stay for a while,” she said, holding out her hand. He took it. “You know, I don’t mind that you’re gay. I just wish I would have been around longer to enjoy it. Except you don’t really seem like the kind of gay boy who will go shoe shopping or watch Barbra Streisand movies with his mother.”

“Nope. Sorry.”

“You know that all I’ve ever wanted for you and Margo is to find someone you love and who loves you, who will look after you.”

Damn it, no crying. Not now. “Yeah, we know.”

“I think you’d make a wonderful father, though.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“Yes, you would. So think about it, okay? You can always adopt, or hire a surrogate, or who knows what science will come up with in another few years.”

“Yeah.”



She drifted off to sleep, so Josh didn't say anything, just kept holding her hand while she slept. Margo came by around noon and they all had lunch together when their mom woke up, then Josh left when she fell asleep again. Their dad took over from Margo late afternoon, but he came downstairs an hour later.

"She just slipped away," he told them, his voice muffled with tears. "She woke up for a little while and smiled at me, then went back to sleep, and then she was gone."

The funeral was set for two days later. Josh ironed the suit pants and a dress shirt he'd brought.

"Let me do that," Amy offered. She'd been practically living at the house, cooking for them, cleaning up, and fielding phone calls.

"No, you sit," Josh said, eyeing her large belly. "Keep that thing away from me."

She laughed. "You're funny."

"I'm completely serious. Pregnant women scare me."

"Spoken like a true man."

"When are you due?"

"Four days ago."

"Jesus." He looked up from the ironing board. "Seriously, get away from me."

"You're scared of this?" She grinned, wiggling her belly at him. "Scared of a little baby that could come shooting out any second? Don't piss me off, Josh, or I'll aim it right at you."

"Like one of those egg ladies, only much, much more horrifying."

"It's just a baby! Seriously..." She rolled her eyes but laughed, too. "You're so much more fun than you were when we went to Mexico, except for the time you were dancing in that bar without your shirt. I don't know why Stu doesn't see it."

Josh bent his head over the ironing board again. "What do you mean?"

“Every time I mention you, he just gets annoyed. Like he doesn’t know you’re fun to be around.”

“Yeah, well. Maybe your idea of fun and his don’t exactly line up.” Josh continued to iron. He couldn’t care less what Stu thought of him. Tight-assed little prude.

Josh distracted himself from his grief by focusing on how annoying Stu Edelstein was. But at the funeral, he saw Stu in his dark suit and remembered what had happened the last time he’d seen him wearing it. The awful thing Josh had said about Mrs. Edelstein, even though he hadn’t meant it like it had come out. Stu overhearing it. No wonder Stu thought Josh was a dick. Josh wouldn’t have been surprised if Stu had come up to him and said, “Now it’s your father who looks like shit,” but of course, he didn’t. Stu was a sweet boy, his mother had said. A sweet boy everyone trusted with the truth, who sent postcards to a dying woman while her son carried on with his own life, oblivious, a continent and an ocean between him and his family.

Anger and hurt burned inside him as he stared at the coffin. *So* not the time for this, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it. It felt better to be angry than to be so sad that he just wanted to lie on the ground and sob. He dug a tissue out of his pocket and wiped his eyes. As he did so, he saw Stu watching him, saw the pity on Stu’s face, and god, why couldn’t Stu just leave? Get the hell out of his life, out of his family’s life, and leave him the fuck alone.

Stu did stay out of Josh’s way—at the cemetery, and later, at the Dimitriou’s house. Josh didn’t see the Edelsteins leave, and when Margo told him a few days later that Stu had returned to Thailand, Josh felt a relief so strong he had to sit down. And how weird was that? It was almost like he was afraid of Stu, which was too far past ridiculous. Yeah, Stu wasn’t a slender little twig anymore, but he wasn’t nearly as physically intimidating as the guys Josh saw on the field every day. After turning it over in his head for a couple of days, Josh decided that he wasn’t afraid *of* Stu, he was afraid *for* Stu, afraid he’d slam a fist into that angular jaw the next time Stu opened his jerk mouth.

When he got back to England he had a talk with Ian. “I’m not ready to settle down with one person right now.”

Ian sniffed. “That usually means there’s someone else you want to fuck.”

“No, that’s not—”

“Do I know him?”

“There isn’t anyone else,” Josh ground out. “I’m just not ready for a relationship. With anyone.”

“All right, keep telling yourself that. And one day you won’t have anyone. Maybe your Mr. Right was right here in front of you the whole time, but you just couldn’t see him.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Ian stormed off in a huff. Josh went down to the pub and had Guinness after Guinness until closing time.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“You’re really beautiful. How are we even related?” Josh looked at Margo’s reflection in the mirror. The veil contrasted with her dark hair, and she looked luminous.

“You’re not such a bad looking guy,” Margo said, and then her smile fell away.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked away, then turned away from the mirror to look him in the eyes. “God, I don’t want to do this, I know I’m worried about nothing, but... better to get it out of the way before the wedding.”

“This sounds bad. Do you want me to go get Sean?”

“No, I need to talk to you.”

“Me?” Josh shook his head. “Yeah, sure, whatever you want.”

“I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to answer me honestly, no jokes. Okay? For once?”

“Okay...”

“Are you gay?”

“Yes. Didn’t Mom tell you?”

“No. You told her?”

“Yeah.”

“But not us?”

“No. I had to... I figured I’d let you and Dad know later, when it was convenient, but... I couldn’t wait. With her.”

“Yeah, okay, I can see that.” She nodded but still looked pensive.

“Was that it?”

“No.” She fixed him with a look. “Are you in love with Sean?”

“With *Sean*?” He laughed, surprised. “No! God. I’m a little in lust with him, because, come on, he’s totally hot and I’m not blind.” He narrowed his

eyes at her. “Wait, so you think just because I’m gay that I have no self-control and I’ll throw myself on any cute guy I see, including my sister’s fiancé?”

“No.”

“You do. You totally do.” He shook his head. “Nice. You think I would try something.”

“No, I don’t.” She sighed. “But you do kind of flirt with each other.”

“As a joke! You know that, right? I mean, if there was something between us, we wouldn’t act like that right in front of you. We would have the decency and respect to do it behind your back.”

“Thanks, good to know.” But she smiled.

Josh grinned at her. “He’s a good guy. And I’m really impressed that a straight guy is comfortable enough to joke around like that.”

Her smile faltered. “He’s bi.”

“Oh. Huh.” Just for a second, he felt a spark of regret that he hadn’t met Sean first, because he totally would have hit that. But it wouldn’t have gone any further than that. Sean was a good guy, but Josh wasn’t in love with him and never would be, so the spark didn’t last longer than that second. “Well, whatever. That still doesn’t change the fact that he’ll be your husband in twenty minutes. You can trust me not to try anything.” He frowned. “Or do you not trust *him*?”

“I trust him. He tells me everything. He can’t shut up, actually.” Her smile returned, the smile of the goofily-in-love bride, and Josh felt the tension in his chest ease. “He said the same thing as you, that you two are just joking around, and I know he’s telling the truth, just like I know you’re telling the truth.”

“See? So everything’s okay.”

“He also said if he’d met you first, that he would have ‘totally hit that’. His words.”

Josh grinned. “Awesome.”

“Not awesome!” She shoved at his shoulder. “God! I always kind of sneered at girls who were afraid their sisters would steal their boyfriends. I never thought I’d have worry about my *brother*.”

“You don’t have to worry about your brother. It’s just nice to know that I can still turn heads at my age.” He preened dramatically.

“Yeah, twenty-seven is *so old*.”

“So we’re good? No worries on my account?”

“No. I just needed to air it all out, I guess.”

“Okay. And this wasn’t some roundabout way of suggesting a three-way, was it?”

“Ew! No! Josh—”

“Kidding! I’m kidding! Believe me, I’m just as grossed out as you.”

“You’re so weird sometimes.”

“Not sometimes. All the time.”

“True.” Then her expression turned serious again. “So then what were you two talking about at the dinner last night? You were off away from everyone, and it looked really intense.”

“Oh. Yeah, that. Sean has this idea to put together a rugby training camp for some of his patients, kids who are obese. We were talking about exercises and drills and training, and it just brought back a lot of memories from when I started.” Josh sighed. “My whole life changed, just took a one eighty after I started playing.” He hesitated, then said, “I didn’t know I was gay until the captain of our team, um, helped me celebrate my eighteenth birthday.”

“Wait, Nick? Nick was gay?”

“Still is, as far as I know. I haven’t talked to him in years.”

“Wow. I had no idea. I had a huge crush on him, you know.”

“Yeah. You seem to like those dark, handsome types.”

“So do you, apparently, since you think Sean is so hot.”

“Great minds think alike.”

“Amy thinks he looks like Stu.”

Josh’s heart skipped a beat. “What? Sean? He looks nothing like Stu!”

“Yeah, actually, he kind of does. Amy was making fun of me, telling me that I didn’t need to go to Seattle to find a husband when her brother was

available.” She pushed a bobby pin more firmly into her hair. “Of course, he’s not available anymore.”

Josh’s heart gave another jolt, and he went hot all over. He even felt a little nauseated. “Stu’s married?” Something at lunch must have been off. He hoped to god he wouldn’t be sick in the middle of the wedding.

“No, but he’s here with his girlfriend, so they must be pretty serious.”

“He brought his girlfriend to your wedding? Do you even know her?” He could be outraged on his sister’s behalf. Brothers were allowed to do that.

“No, but it’s customary to send out invitations addressed to the person ‘and guest’.”

“It’s still pretty rude.”

Margo stared at him. “No, it’s not. It’s perfectly normal. In fact, it’s a nice way to introduce her to everyone, because the pressure’s off. No one’s going to be looking at her, because they’ll all be looking at the girl in the big, white, poofy dress.”

He tried to return her smile, but he still felt off, and she must have seen it.

“Are you feeling okay? You look kind of pale.”

“I’m okay, I just need to get something to drink.”

Her brows drew together. “You’re not going to get drunk and cause a scene, are you? I still remember that huge pool of vomit in Mexico.”

“No, I just need some water. Are you okay here? Do you want me to send Amy back?”

Just then, the door swung open and Amy stuck her head into the room. “Sorry, sorry, Emma had a TBE and—”

“A TBE?” Josh asked.

“Total bowel evacuation.”

“Eww!”

“Hey, you asked. Anyway, Mark was changing her and he ran out of baby wipes. It was like that scene from Pulp Fiction where he shoots that guy in the car, only imagine that it’s poo instead of blood.”

“EWW!” Josh and Margo both shuddered.

“Yeah. So I was directing the process, staying out of the way so I didn’t get any on the dress, which really is gorgeous, thank you,” she said to Margo, “and it just took longer than usual.”

Margo made a face. “I think I’ve changed my mind about wanting kids.”

“I really might be sick now,” Josh added.

“Oh, grow up, you wusses,” Amy snapped at them. “It’s just baby poo. And you weren’t even there.”

“Thank god for that.” Josh shook his head and slipped out of the room before Amy could mock him again.

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A few minutes later, walking down the aisle to the Beach Boys, he saw Stu leaning over to talk to a woman with long, dark hair. Stu’s hair was shorter than the last time Josh had seen it, but it still fell over the back of his collar, and Josh fought an urge to rub his hand over his own closely cropped hair. As he approached their row, he made sure to keep looking directly forward. The rabbi smiled at him, probably thinking he had stage fright, which didn’t make any sense; it wasn’t *his* wedding. He took his place and looked out at the guests. His eyes flicked over Stu and the girl next to him, who was one of the most beautiful women Josh had ever seen. The dark hair he’d seen from the back framed high cheekbones, huge eyes, and a full mouth, all set in skin the color of espresso. She looked so happy to be there, smiling as she leaned towards Stu and said something that made him laugh. Then her eyes fell on Josh, and she beamed at him. Realizing he was staring, Josh looked away from her, fixing his gaze on the wedding party that was making its way up the aisle.

He held onto one of the poles that supported the chuppah, while two bridesmaids and Sean’s nephew held the other three poles. Josh watched Margo throughout the ceremony, keeping his eyes on her until the world narrowed to her, Sean, and the rabbi. Words, prayers, vows floated past him like smoke, and then there was a *crunch!* when Sean stepped on the wineglass. The noise broke through Josh’s trance, and he cheered along with the rest of the guests.



He cheered again during the reception when Mrs. Edelstein caught the bouquet after Amy and Stu made her join the other single women. "It's for *young* single women, not grandmothers," she'd complained, but she'd looked pleased when it fell right into her hands.

"Go on, get up there." Josh's dad prodded Josh's shoulder as Sean peeled the garter off of Margo's leg.

"Ew, no, I'm not catching a garter that was inches away from my sister's lady-parts."

Rolling his eyes, his dad shook his head, then turned to Amy, who was pushing Stu towards the group of single men.

"See what you can do about Josh, too."

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are," Amy told Josh firmly. "You, too," she said to Stu. "You don't have to catch it, but get up there and look happy so that Margo and your dad and our mom know you're having fun."

"For God's sake, Amy—" Stu began, but Amy caught his earlobe between her thumb and index finger and squeezed. "Ow, ow, fu—uh, ow, stop! All right, fine, I'm going!"

Amy whirled on Josh, but he put his hands up, surrendering. "I'm going, I'm going." He saw Stu's girlfriend with her hands over her mouth, her shoulders shaking like she was trying hold in her laughter.

Josh shuffled up to the back of the group, Stu following him closely enough to make the hair stand up on Josh's neck. "You should go up to the front," he told Stu, stepping to the side.

"Why don't *you* go up to the front?" Stu asked.

"Because I don't have a gorgeous girlfriend waiting for me to catch the damn thing."

Stu raised an eyebrow, turned to wave at the aforementioned girlfriend, then turned back to Josh, who pointed towards the front of the group again, but Stu waved him off. "I'm good."

Jerk, Josh thought.

Sean's toss fell mercifully short of where Josh was standing, but he noticed that Stu didn't lunge for the scrap of satin and lace either. Sean's brother caught it, which Josh took as his cue to walk away.

After the bride and groom made their exit under a shower of birdseed, the guests started to drift out, even though the reception was scheduled to run for another hour. Josh wandered around, accepting congratulations on behalf of Margo, and eventually found himself at the bar. An older man who was there ahead of him ordered two vodka-and-tonics, then looked at Josh appraisingly. "You're the brother of the bride."

"Yes." He stuck out his hand. "Josh Dimitriou."

"Calvin Mortenson. A friend of Sean's parents from Seattle."

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

Josh eyed the two drinks the bartender set on the bar in front of the man, but managed to keep himself from saying anything insulting. If people wanted to get drunk at his sister's wedding, he wasn't going to stop them. Hell, *he* was planning to get nicely buzzed before the evening was over.

"They're not both for me, in case you were wondering," Calvin said, his lips twisting.

"Um..." Any response Josh could give would come out badly.

"Get your drink and then come meet my partner." Calvin picked up the drinks and walked over to a table where some of the parental generation were sitting, not giving Josh a chance to decline gracefully.

Josh shrugged. "What the hell. Another vodka and tonic," he told the bartender.

"Yes, *sir*." The bartender kind of smirked at him. Josh went red, but fuck it. He wasn't going to be intimidated about his choice of drink just then, no matter how cute the bartender was. If Josh wanted a white wine spritzer or even a fucking Cosmo, he'd order it.

He got his drink and thought about going off to a quiet corner, but Calvin waved him over. When he got there, he endured hugs from Sean's parents, who then went to mingle, so he took one of the empty chairs.

“Josh, is it?” Calvin said.

“Yes.”

“This is my partner, Eric Delacroix.”

Eric took one hand off his cane to shake hands with Josh. Josh thought he should make some conversation, polite small talk, but at that moment he saw Stu and his girlfriend out on the dance floor, moving together to some old song. They made a beautiful couple, and Josh’s stomach turned over again. He’d barely eaten anything at the reception because of the earlier nausea he’d felt, so he probably shouldn’t be drinking at all. But maybe the tonic would settle his stomach a little. He turned away from the dance floor and sipped his drink.

“Are you married, Josh?”

“No.”

“Then I expect you’ll soon get nudged towards the altar.”

“Well...” Was he really going to come out to strangers before his own father? Yeah, he was. *These* strangers would get it. “No, I probably won’t, since I’m gay.”

Calvin turned to Eric with a smile. Eric sighed, dug into the pocket of his trousers, and handed him a coin. “We never bet for more than a nickel,” Eric explained.

“You bet on whether I was gay or not?” Josh looked from one man to the other, not sure if he should be offended.

“Not the most appropriate behavior, we know. And we’re sorry.” But Calvin didn’t look too sorry as he held the nickel up in front of Eric’s face before putting it in his own pocket.

Josh shook his head. “It’s okay. But I actually haven’t told my dad yet, so if you could not pass that around, I’d appreciate it,” Josh added. “I don’t want to overshadow Margo’s big day. She’ll beat the crap out of me if I do.”

“Wouldn’t want to upset the bride,” Eric said, smiling. “I really thought Calvin was wrong this time. Usually big, strapping, gay lads go the bear route, but you’re too clean-shaven to fall into that category.”

“I’m not a category,” Josh said, frowning, but Calvin shook his head.

“No, Josh, what Eric is trying and failing, oh, so badly, to say is, things are very different from when we were your age. Without distinct categories like twinkies or bears, it’s sometimes hard to know if a man is gay or not. Right?”

Eric looked at Calvin and said, “Yes, thanks for telling me what I meant.” But he took Calvin’s hand and squeezed it.

“Anytime,” Calvin replied with a smile. He turned back to Josh. “And even when we can’t tell just by looking, it’s not unusual these days for a man to either come right out and say he is, as you did, or, if he’s straight, to say so without taking any offense at the question. It’s such a different world now.”

“I guess I don’t think about it much.”

“It’s nice that you don’t have to,” Calvin said.

“You kids today have it so easy,” Eric added. “Why, when I was young, I had to walk five miles in the snow to get to the nearest glory hole.”

Josh snorted out a laugh.

“But seriously,” Eric continued, “sometimes it’s hard to believe how much the world has changed in forty years. I remember things like the hankie code, and how finely tuned our gaydar had to be in order to not pick up the wrong man.”

Calvin nodded. “There were certain ‘tells’ we all had that just aren’t there anymore. These days I can’t tell the difference between straight and gay theater queens, and don’t get me started on metrosexuals. It’s really very confusing for gay men of a certain age.”

“So how’d you know, then? About me?”

“I didn’t. We like to bet on the sexuality of every attractive man we’re not sure about. This time, I happened to be right.” Calvin lifted his glass in a toast to Eric, who subtly flipped him off.

“How often are you right?”

Calvin turned to Eric. “What would you say, between the two of us? Seventy-five percent of the time?”

Eric nodded. "More if the man's over fifty, less if he's under forty. But yes, that's probably the average."

Josh tipped back the rest of his drink. "Why does it matter, though, if the guy's gay or straight?" he asked. "I thought the point of the gay rights movement was to make that unimportant."

Calvin sipped his drink and then nodded. "Oh, no, absolutely, sexuality shouldn't matter."

"Unless you're trying to get laid," Eric said.

"Yeah, there is that," Josh agreed.

"My point is that we've made gains, but there have been losses, too. You young 'uns—whipper-snappers—" Calvin said with a grin, "no longer need the people-reading skills that we had to have for survival. For example..." He took another sip of his drink and then used it to point at the bar. "You either had no idea that our adorable bartender was checking you out, or you don't care."

"Or maybe young Josh here has a loving partner somewhere that he needs to get back to," Eric said, raising his eyebrows at Calvin.

"No, I don't. He was checking me out?" Josh twisted in his chair to look at the bartender again.

"Yes. So either Mr. Adorable has exceptional gaydar, or he doesn't worry about flirting with straight boys." Calvin shook his head. "Different world, indeed." He took another sip of his drink. "How about you get us two more of these, hm? And take your time with it."

"Um. Yeah, okay. Thanks." He grinned at the two men, and then he got up and walked (casually, he hoped) back to the bar.

The bartender smirked at him again, but this time Josh recognized it as the compliment it was. "What can I get for you, sir?"

"Two more vodka-and-tonics for the gentlemen over there."

"Very good, sir. And for yourself?"

"How about your phone number?"

The smirk got smirkier. "I'm in a relationship."

“Oh.” Well, fuck Calvin and his damn gaydar. “Sorry, of course you are. I, um... I’ll just take a Guinness, then.”

The bartender popped the cap off the beer and set it down in front of Josh before he started on the vodka-and-tonics. “I’m Justin.”

“Oh, um. Josh. Nice to meet you.”

Justin didn’t offer his hand. Probably a food-safety thing, or at least Josh hoped he wasn’t so repulsive that he didn’t even merit a handshake. “My boyfriend’s name is Zach, and I would never cheat on him.”

“No, of course not.” What an idiot he’d been to believe Calvin. He couldn’t snap at an old man, so he decided to let the beer take the edge off the rejection.

Justin looked up at Josh from under his eyelashes. “However...”

Josh froze with the bottle halfway to his mouth.

“Zach and I occasionally extend invitations for friends to join us in... activities.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. As long as those friends understand that Zach and I are a couple and that the activities are just casual fun for all. And safe.” He tilted his head. “Would you like to make some new friends, Josh?”

Josh nodded. “Very much. I’m only in town for a week for the wedding, but might be able to get away for an hour or two of... activities.”

Justin smiled and pulled a business card out of his vest pocket. “Call me. I know Zach will be *very* happy to meet you.”

The card was just a regular business card with Justin’s name and phone number on it. Josh put it into his jacket pocket. “And I’m sure I’ll be very happy to meet Zach, too, especially if he’s anything like you.”

“He’s really not.” Justin set the two drinks on the bar. “But variety’s the spice of life, and all that. Have you ever been tied up?”

Josh nearly spit out the beer. He swallowed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and coughed out a laugh. “No. I guess I’ve been missing out.”

“Oh, you *so* have.”

“Will I get a safe word?”

“Absolutely. Safe, sane, and consensual all the way.” Justin’s eyes moved down Josh’s body. “We’re going to have some fun with *you*.”

Josh laughed, even though he was getting a little turned on. He put his elbows on the bar and leaned forward so he could talk to Justin without being heard, and also so he could hide the way his dick was beginning to perk up. “Give me a preview.”

“Well,” Justin said, his eyes lighting up, but before he could say anything else, the cozy atmosphere was broken by a low, angry voice.

“What. Are you doing?”

Josh turned around to see Stu staring at him with narrowed eyes. The gorgeous girlfriend was gripping his arm, whispering something to him and gesturing towards the dance floor. Stu just stood there, glaring daggers at Josh.

“Can I help you?” Josh asked.

“I can’t *believe* you,” Stu said in that same angry tone. “You’re picking up guys at your sister’s wedding? Do you not have—” He jerked his arm free from his girlfriend’s grasp to gesture angrily, seeming to search for the words. “—any decency at all? Any respect for your family?”

Josh stared at him for a second and then sneered, “Piss off,” and turned back to face Justin, hoping to pick up where they’d left off.

“Hey, I’m talking to you!” Stu snapped.

“So?” Josh spun around to face him. “I don’t have anything to say to you, so—”

“Of course you don’t. So goddamn selfish, doing whatever you want, whenever you want. Don’t you *ever* think of anyone else’s feelings?”

Oh, no he didn’t. That little prick did *not* just bring up Josh’s mom.

Josh knew he should have called his parents more often, should have visited more often. Maybe if he’d been a better son, his mom would have trusted him more and would have told him about the cancer earlier. Maybe there would have been something he could have done.

He knew he'd been a crap son. But he didn't need Stu Edelstein to tell him that.

Josh pushed away from the bar and stepped up to Stu, right into his personal space. He hoped the five inches and fifty pounds he had on Stu would intimidate, but disappointingly, Stu didn't move. So Josh said, quietly but distinctly, "Go. *Fuck*. Yourself." And then he gave Stu a little jab on the chest with both hands, his fingers outstretched and stiff. Just a jab, not a shove, and in fact, Stu didn't move. Maybe he was a little more solid than he looked.

And maybe Josh didn't have a whole fifty pounds on him because when Stu gave Josh a shove, a real shove, it had enough force behind it that Josh had to take a step back to keep his balance. Which was fine. Great, even. If Stu wanted to start a Real-Shove club, Josh would be happy to join.

This time, Josh put his legs into it, and Stu went down on his ass. The girlfriend shrieked and ran over to him, but Stu was up on his feet in a second, his lips curled in a snarl, and he charged at Josh.

Josh almost laughed, because seriously? Stu topped out at about five foot nine, couldn't weigh more than one fifty, and was heading into a scrum with a professional rugby player. Josh caught him easily, and was going to wind his arm through Stu's to hold him still until he'd calmed the fuck down—or to slap him if he didn't—but Stu did some squirming thing, and Josh was left holding air.

Then *ow!* His head snapped to the side as something slammed into his jaw and he saw stars. He swung his own fist in a wide roundhouse, hoping to get a piece of Stu, but *ow!* In the shoulder this time, and *motherfucker*, it was like his arm was being zapped with electricity.

Fuck this shit. He reached for Stu, or tried to, but his arm wouldn't cooperate. He couldn't lift it, couldn't move his fingers. "What the fuck?" Panic amped his annoyance up to rage, so he charged at Stu, who crouched like he was going to duck under Josh's arm. That might have worked if Josh wanted to grab him, but Josh went low, knocking Stu's legs out from under him. Stu landed with a thud. They wrestled on the floor for a few seconds, Josh trying to grab Stu with his good hand. Something cracked across his shin, but he ignored it. Finally, he managed to throw himself on top of Stu, his good arm against Stu's throat.



“Get off me!” Stu hissed, trying to pull Josh’s arm away, but Josh had his weight behind it and couldn’t be moved.

“What the fuck did you do to my arm, asshole? It better not be permanent, or I’m gonna rip your fucking head off!” He put more weight on Stu’s throat, so that Stu couldn’t even hiss anymore. Stu’s eyes went wide, panicked.

Josh froze, and in that motionless second, he heard the screams and yells that had been going on around them. Then hands were on him, grabbing him, pulling him off Stu. He didn’t resist.

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“Are you two insane?” Amy yelled.

“Is that a rhetorical question?” Josh mumbled, holding an ice pack to his jaw. Stu glanced at him, keeping his own ice pack pressed to his throat.

“Shut up,” Amy snapped. “Jesus Christ, Josh, you’re twice his size, you could have killed him!”

“Hey,” Stu croaked. “I’m not that much smaller—”

Amy wheeled on him. “And *you*, Mr. Violence-Is-Not-The-Answer, We-Must-Respect-All-Living-Creatures, what the *hell* is going through that pea brain of yours?”

Stu didn’t answer.

Josh looked past him to what was left of the reception: Stu’s girlfriend, Amy’s husband and baby daughter, Sean’s parents, Calvin and Eric, Mrs. Edelstein, and Josh’s dad. The DJ and bartender were packing up. One of the servers was cleaning up broken glass and spilled wine.

Amy threw up her hands and stalked away. Stu jumped up and walked over to his girlfriend. Josh leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. His arm tingled, the feeling coming back into it, and he could move his fingers again. He wiggled them until he heard an “ahem” sound in front of him. He opened his eyes and saw Justin the bartender.

“So, yeah...” Justin began, not meeting Josh’s eyes. “I’m going to need that card back.”

Well, fuck. “This isn’t me,” Josh said as he pulled the card out of his pocket. “Would you believe this is the first fight I’ve ever been in?”

Justin took the card without saying anything, then, after a few seconds, he sighed. “Actually, yes. That guy basically beat the crap out of you.” He hesitated a few more seconds, and then he handed the card back to Josh. “Okay, keep it. For the *next* time you’re in town.”

“Thanks.” Josh stared down at his dress shoes. They’d gotten scuffed up during the fight.

“Maybe by then, you’ll have your head together.”

“Yeah.” God, how embarrassing.

“Can I make a suggestion, though?”

“Sure.”

“Before you come see us, work out whatever issues you have with that guy.”

Josh looked up. “I don’t have any issues with him. I hate him, he hates me, it all works out just fine.”

“Tell that to that bottle of Merlot.” Justin’s lips quirked. “You should ice your leg, too. You really slammed it against the bar.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Justin left. Josh put the card back in his pocket and looked over at the remaining guests. Stu’s girlfriend was touching his throat with her fingertips while Stu talked to his mother. Amy hugged her daughter tightly while her husband massaged her shoulders. Josh’s dad was talking to Sean’s parents, looking like he was apologizing.

“We didn’t know we’d get dinner *and* a show.” Calvin sat on the chair that Stu had vacated and patted Josh’s knee.

“Yeah, sorry...”

“What happened? One minute, you were chatting up the cute bartender, the next, you were trying to throttle that kid.”

“He’s not a kid, he’s only a year younger than I am. Not even a year. And he started it.”

“You pushed him first.”

“He ran his mouth first.”

Calvin raised an eyebrow. “Sticks and stones.”

Josh scowled. “It was a little more than that.”

“If you say so.” He tilted his head. “So you must know that young man fairly well.”

“Not really. Our sisters are best friends, so I’ve had to put up with him over the years.”

“He’s here with that beautiful young lady.”

“Yeah.”

“But he didn’t like you talking to the bartender.”

“Yeah.” Josh blinked and then shook his head. “No, he’s not gay. He’s got a girlfriend, for fuck’s sake.”

“So then he shouldn’t have a problem with you talking to other men.”

“He didn’t... he thought... Look, that wasn’t it. He just brought up some, some personal stuff from the past, and it pissed me off. I should’ve let it go.”

“Or dive in deeper.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, maybe you should figure out why his words made you so angry. And also figure out why your talking to the bartender made *him* so angry.”

“I know why. Because he thinks I’m a selfish prick, which is true. Also, because he’s a prissy little asshat who doesn’t like to see anyone else having fun.” Josh heard the whiny tone in his voice, but he was too wiped out to really care.

“I don’t think either of those is true.” Calvin handed him a napkin with some writing on it. “Here. If you ever feel like talking, give us a call or email. Just don’t text. We’re too old for that.”

“Huh. I must be doing something right. This is the second threesome I’ve been invited to today.”

“Oh, I wish!” Calvin laughed. “But I don’t think Eric or I could keep up with you at our ages. Although I’ll tell him that the offer is on the table.” He

clapped a hand on Josh's shoulder and then used it to help get to his feet. "Work on your gaydar, or if you don't like that term, then work on being a little more perceptive. All sorts of opportunities might be hiding in plain sight."

Josh shook his head. "I don't know what you mean. I just don't see these things that are so obvious to you."

"You will." They shook hands and then Calvin walked back to Eric, who waited by the door, leaning on his cane. Josh tucked the napkin in the same pocket as Justin's card, and then looked up into his dad's stormy face.

His dad shook his head for a few long seconds, his brows knitted together, then looked around the room despairingly. "Is this what rugby's taught you? To be a thoughtless, brawling idiot?"

Wow. That hurt more than Stu's fist slamming into his jaw. "No." He glared at his dad. "I've never been in a fight before."

But his dad didn't seem to be listening. "We never should have let you go over there. I should have pushed you harder to get a real job, something normal and stable, where you wouldn't be hanging out with hooligans every day—"

"That's not fair—"

"—but your mom insisted." He ran his hands through his hair and shook his head again. "She said you should be allowed to try, to give it your best shot. Those first two years before you had a contract, when you couldn't work legally in England? I thought if you couldn't earn a living, you'd have no choice but to come back. But your mom sent you money every month until you could make it on your own."

Josh went still. "I thought that was from both of you."

"No. I didn't even know she'd done it until later. I figured you were working illegally. She told me after your first season, when your contract was renewed."

"Wow." Josh's head swam with the information. "I had no idea. Thanks so much for the support," he said sarcastically.

“It turns out I was right to worry, if this is how you’ve turned out. A thug.”

“If you think this is helping—”

“You were *fighting*! We certainly didn’t bring you up to behave like that.”

“Excuse me?”

Josh and his dad both turned to look at Mrs. Edelstein, who had approached, unnoticed by either of them until she spoke. “Terri, this isn’t a good time,” Josh’s dad began, but Mrs. Edelstein cut him off.

“Are you implying that Stu *was* brought up to behave like that?”

Josh’s dad ran his hands through his hair again. “No, of course not. You and Steve did your best—”

“Did our *best*?”

Josh thought about telling his dad to stop before he dug himself in deeper, but the part of him that dealt with self-preservation told him to shut up and let someone else get yelled at for a while.

“No, I meant... dammit.” Josh’s dad shook his head. “Look, Anne and I did our best with Josh, but apparently we failed along the line somewhere. I’m not blaming you for what happened today. I’m not blaming Stu, either. I saw who started it.” He turned to glare at Josh again.

Josh closed his eyes again. Maybe this was all a really bad dream and he’d wake up in his room at home, with the wedding still hours off. If that were the case, now would be a good time to wake up. Or now. Any second now.

But no such luck. He opened his eyes when he heard Stu’s voice.

“Mom. I’m going to take Linnea home.”

Mrs. Edelstein’s expression didn’t soften one bit, which surprised Josh. After all, her only son had been the unfortunate victim of Josh’s rugby-enhanced thuggery. “I think that would be best.”

“I’ll go get your coat.”

“No, you take her home, and when you get there, you can spend some time apologizing to her for, for...” She waved her hands around the room. “For whatever you want to call this.”

“How will you get home?”

“I’ll get Amy and Mark to drop me off.”

“All right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me!” she snapped. “Apologize to Josh! Look at the bruise on his face!”

Stu went red. Josh could tell he didn’t want to say even one word to him, let alone apologize.

Before Stu could say anything, Josh’s dad butted in again. “Stu shouldn’t apologize, it wasn’t his fault.”

“*I’m* sorry,” Josh said, standing up. He looked right at Stu, ignoring his dad and Mrs. Edelstein and everyone else who was staring at them. “I shouldn’t have pushed you. Amy’s right, I could really have hurt you.”

“No, you couldn’t have,” Stu said, narrowing his eyes. “I’ve studied Krav Maga and Jeet Kune Do. I was winning that fight until you knocked me down.”

A pulse started to throb in Josh’s head. “I’m trying to apologize, you ungrateful little shit—”

“Well, you’re doing a fucking bad job at it!” Stu yelled.

Josh’s hands tightened into fists, but his dad stepped between them.

“Knock it off, both of you!” he shouted. “Jesus, Josh, what the hell is wrong with you?” His eyes went wide. “Oh, my god, you’re on *steroids*, aren’t you? You have ‘roid rage’!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Josh rolled his eyes. “I’m not on steroids. Can’t a man want to take out the trash without being on steroids?”

Stu’s lip curled and he took a step towards Josh, but Mrs. Edelstein grabbed his arm and pulled him away. “Go home, now,” she told her son in warning tones. Stu shot Josh another angry look, but he left the ballroom, Linnea hurrying after him.

“Thanks,” Josh said to Mrs. Edelstein.

“What for? I’m just as angry at you as I am at him.” She shook her head. “Seriously, what’s going on with you? I thought enough time had passed since

your little spat in Mexico that you could get along again. But it's worse than ever." She looked hard at Josh. "Well? Any explanation?"

"No."

"There's got to be a reason you can't even be in the same room without tearing each other's heads off."

"Ask him. He's the one who's—" Constantly riding my ass, he was about to say, but he couldn't, not to Stu's own mother.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Fine, don't tell me. I *will* ask him, though, believe me. How's your face?" she asked, the change of subject throwing Josh off a little.

"I've had a lot worse. This is a mosquito bite compared to what I get during the season."

"Yes, but you don't expect to get it at a wedding reception. Will you be okay?"

"Yeah. Really, it's nothing."

She smiled ruefully. "Well, I think we've overstayed our welcome. Thanks for having us, Alan, and I understand completely if you never want to see us again."

"Don't be ridiculous." Josh's dad gave Mrs. Edelstein a hug and then did the same to Amy, who had come up to stand nearby. "We've all known each other too long to let our sons' fu—um, mess everything up," he said with an apologetic glance at Amy's baby.

Amy laughed. "Almost had to put a quarter in the swear jar." She turned to Josh and lowered her voice as Josh's dad made googly eyes at the baby. "Look, I know I'm Stu's sister, but until Margo gets back from the honeymoon, if you want someone to talk to, just call me. I saw what happened, too, and you're right, Stu's always had issues with you. Everyone else, he's perfectly calm, but you get under his skin. He probably doesn't even know why."

"It's okay. I'm over it."

“Okay.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do. I hope you’re both over it.” She gave him a hug. “Seriously, text me.” She handed him her card.

“Everyone wants me to call them,” he mused. “This is the third number I’ve gotten today.”

“Everyone knows you’re a fucking mess and they all want to help.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome.”

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The drive home was grim, as were the next few days. Josh overheard his dad on the phone two days after the wedding saying how disappointed he was in himself, how he must have made some terrible mistake in Josh’s upbringing. Guilt rushed into the space in Josh that anger had carved out, and he couldn’t face his dad anymore, at least not then. He ended up changing his return flight and going back to England three days early.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

Josh's phone rang as he was getting ready for bed. "What's wrong?" he asked as soon as he hit the talk button.

"Why do you think something's wrong?" Margo asked in return, her voice sounding as clear as if she were in the next room and not five thousand miles away.

"Because if you were just saying hi, you'd email me, not call."

"Okay, fine. Nothing's wrong, I just have some news. First off, Sean and I are pregnant."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yes, but it's still early, so we're not telling everyone yet. And that includes Dad, so keep it to yourself for another month."

"But you've only been married..." He tried to do the math in his head.

"A year and four months. But I'll be thirty-one in two weeks, so I figured we'd better get this party started."

"Wow. Um. Congratulations."

"Yes, *thank you*, that's the correct response. The other thing I have to tell you is that Dad's been seeing someone."

"*What?*"

"I know. Way to trump my pregnancy news, right?"

"Who's he seeing?"

"He won't tell me. He just says she's very nice and he doesn't want to say anything else yet because maybe nothing will come of it." She hesitated.

"But?"

"But maybe something will come of it. I think he might even want to get married again."

"Really?"

"Yes. He and mom were married for thirty years. He liked being married."

Josh nodded, even though he knew Margo couldn't see him do it. "That'd be okay. Better than being lonely."

"Yes."

"But?"

"But what if he's dating some twenty-two-year-old blonde bimbo?"

"Do you really think he is?"

"No. But I'm going to worry until I find out."

"Don't worry. I don't think he'd date someone like that, not seriously, anyway."

"If it's *not* someone like that, then why won't he tell us?"

"Just what he said, maybe nothing will happen. Huh." An idea sparked in Josh's head.

"What?"

"What if it's someone *we* really like, and then it doesn't work out? He'd feel bad disappointing us."

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, think about it, and don't worry yet."

"Have you talked to him since the wedding?"

Josh sighed. "No. We've emailed."

"Did he apologize for calling you a thug?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"I told him to. It wasn't like you ruined the wedding, we'd already left. And Amy told me that Stu threw the first punch."

"Yeah, well. I shouldn't have pushed him." He was getting worked up again just thinking about it. Which, no, that had to stop. He had to calm down so he could get some sleep before the next day's match.

"Anyway, I hope things are settling out between you two."

"Me and Stu?"

“No, you and Dad. I’ve pretty much given up hope that you and Stu will ever be friends.”

“Only pretty much?”

“Ha.”

“Thanks for bullying dad into apologizing. I felt like crap for a long time, but I think he did, too. Maybe we’ll be talking again by the time he decides to reveal the mystery woman.”

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Josh knew that he was (mostly) forgiven when his dad came all the way to England to see him play. “I really didn’t know,” his dad said after their third straight victory. “You’ve got a gift.”

“That’s our Sherm,” said one of the players, shoulder-checking Josh as he walked by.

“Sherm?”

“Sherman tank,” Josh explained as he dried himself off. “Made in America.”

“They like you.”

“Yeah.” He tossed the towel on the floor and started to dress.

His dad glanced at the other players. “Do they know,” he said in a low voice. “About...?”

“About?”

“That you’re...”

“That I’m gay? Yeah.”

“And they don’t have a problem with... this?” He gestured around the locker room.

“Some of them do. Most of them aren’t scared little homophobic twa—uh, jerks, like they would be in the States. That’s another reason I like playing here. Sid, that guy that just went by? When he found out, he said, and I quote, ‘Rubgy teams are like boy bands. At least one bloke’s got to be gay.’ Total non-issue for him.”

“I’m glad you’re happy.”

Josh stopped halfway through buttoning his shirt. He looked up at his dad. “Thanks. I am. I hope you are, too.”

His dad didn’t say anything; he just pulled Josh into a hug. Josh’s eyes stung with tears until he heard one of his teammates shout, “Get a room, you two!”

He tightened his arms around his dad for a second, then let him go and wiped his eyes, laughing. “Oi, this is my da’, come all the way from the States just to see me play, so shut it, ya wanker,” he shouted in his best North England accent. When the team gave him a cheer, his dad laughed, too.

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“It don’t look good.”

Josh winced as Simon pressed on his knee. “It might just be a sprain.”

“Might be.”

But Josh knew that it wasn’t just a sprain. He’d heard the pop, felt his leg bend at a really bad angle when he hit the ground. He was just glad it hadn’t happened the previous season when his dad had been visiting.

The MRI confirmed Josh’s suspicion. “Torn ACL,” the team physician said. “They can repair it with surgery, but then it’s months of physical therapy and even with that, you may never be one hundred percent again.”

After the physician left the room, Simon pulled out his phone. “I’ll see when they can schedule the surgery. The sooner they can repair it, the sooner we can get you back on the line.”

“No.” Josh shook his head. He’d never looked forward to the day his career would be over, but somehow it wasn’t nearly as scary as he’d thought it would be. Maybe he was ready for a change. “It’s been a good run, literally. But I’ll be thirty this year. We knew I was going to retire at the end of this season or the next one.”

“And we’d also talked about you staying on as a coach. I can call the club right now, get the talks started—”

“Simon.”

Simon sighed. “So you’ll go home, then?”

“Yeah. It’s time.”

“Well.” Simon nodded, clapping a hand on Josh’s shoulder. “You’ll be missed, son, and badly.”

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Josh had the surgery and spent the first few days of his recovery making arrangements to return to Portland. “You can stay with us until you find a place,” Margo told him. “In fact, you can earn your keep by babysitting.”

“I don’t know anything about kids.”

“Well, here’s your chance to learn.”

When he was able to get around without crutches, he started packing up his flat and quickly became overwhelmed by how much crap one man could accumulate in eight years. One desk drawer was filled with photos from back before his phone had a camera. There was one of him standing next to a blond man in a pub. Jeremy? Jack? No, Ian! Josh hadn’t thought of him in years, but he remembered now that Ian had met some German guy and moved to Munich after he and Josh stopped sleeping together.

At the bottom of the drawer were even older photos, including some from that trip to Mexico. Josh, Margo and Amy looked incredibly young as they made faces at the camera, which meant that Stu must have taken the picture. He found more photos of the three of them. Had Stu always been behind the camera? No—there was one of him and Stu at a restaurant, with Josh looking excited over his food, and Stu... Stu looking at Josh and smiling, his eyes crinkling at edges, mouth open like he was laughing. He’d really been a good-looking kid, with those eyelashes and cheekbones and that ever-present five o’clock shadow, even at eighteen.

Josh sighed. What the hell had happened? Could they have been friends if Stu hadn’t been so pissy, so judgmental... oh, yeah, about Josh getting completely wasted every night. God, if he were there now, he wouldn’t be able to stand himself. And then Stu nicking his money to keep him from going overboard yet again... What a mess it had all been.

Josh gathered up the photos and threw them into a box. No point in dwelling on the past. Learn from it, and move on.

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Margo met him at the airport, her son on her hip. “Danny, you remember your Uncle Josh, the big, strong rugby player who’s terrified of tiny babies.”

“I’m not terrified. I have a normal, healthy amount of fear when it comes to babies. Hey, buddy.” Josh reached out one hand to Danny. Danny grabbed his finger and pulled it towards his mouth. “No, you don’t want to do that, kid,” Josh told him, keeping his finger away from Danny’s mouth. “You can only get so clean in airplane bathrooms.”

“Ew,” Margo said. “I’m glad you’re home.” She gave him a hug with the arm that wasn’t holding onto Danny.

He hugged her back. “Me, too.”

They found the right baggage claim carousel and Margo let Josh hold Danny. “And I’m sorry I’m making you ride in a car for a few more hours after you just got off a transatlantic flight, but I’m happy you finally get to come to the beach with us.”

“Oh, boy.”

“Shut up, you’ll like it. It’ll be relaxing. Um, maybe.”

“Why ‘maybe’?” He made faces at Danny, trying to get him to laugh.

“Because Amy invited her family this time, too.”

Josh looked at her. “And by family, you don’t mean her husband and kids.”

“No.”

Josh felt his heart rate kick up and breathed out slowly to lower it. “It’s fine. It’ll be fine.”

“Really? You’re not going to get in another fight?”

“Nah, I’m too old for that shit.”

“Language!” Margo scolded. “Baby in the house.”

“Aw, cra—uh, crud. Better?”

“Yes. So you’re really okay with him?”

“Danny?” Josh frowned at the baby, who was drooling, but otherwise seemed likeable enough.

“Stu!”

“Oh, right. Do I have to talk to him?”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah, fine, whatever. You should ask if he’s okay with *me*.”

“Amy said he will be.”

“Then okay.”

“Mm-hmm,” Margo murmured, taking Danny back when Josh’s suitcase showed up.

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Amy reached up and rubbed his hair when she saw him. “Aren’t you ever going to grow it out? You know, down to your shoulders. You could pose for romance novel covers.”

“Hey, yeah, great idea. I will need to find some kind of work, now that I’m retired.”

“That’s so weird, to retire from a career at twenty-nine. You’re really not going to play anymore?”

“Not professionally. My knee’s shot.”

“So do you know what you’ll do now?”

“No. Maybe see if I can land a coaching gig somewhere. Except rugby’s not that popular this side of the pond.”

“It’s really too bad. About your knee, I mean.”

“Eh, it happens. I would’ve retired the next year or so anyway. Getting old.”

“Shut up, I’m even older than you, and I don’t need the reminder.” But she smiled at him. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re back. We all are.”

“*All* the Edelsteins?”

Her smile went crooked. “He promised not to hit you, no matter how much of a douchebag you’re being.”

“Wow.” Josh shook his head. “He’s still a complete—”

“No, I was paraphrasing. He’s much better than he used to be. And anyway, isn’t the feeling mutual?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Look, it’s only for a few days.”

Josh nodded. “Thank god for that.”

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But Josh’s dad wrecked that plan the first night. “I wanted to have dinner with just you kids tonight, because I have something to tell you.”

Josh and Margo exchanged glances but didn’t say anything, even though Josh could practically see the words, “This is it!” in glowing neon letters over Margo’s head.

“You know I’ve been seeing someone,” their dad said, “and it’s been going well, and we decided the time was right to tell you about it.” He smiled tightly at them.

“Dad, it’s okay,” Margo said. “You know we just want you to be happy.”

“Thanks. I hope you still feel that way—you’ll *both* feel that way—when I tell you that I’ve been seeing Terri. We’re going to move in together.”

“That’s great news, Alan,” Sean said and punched him lightly on the arm. “Seriously great.”

Margo blinked. “Wow.” She huffed out a laugh and then smiled. “You really had us worried for a while. We thought maybe it was some twenty-two-year-old. But Terri—that’s a relief. I mean, more than a relief. That’s good. She’s great.”

“Sorry, who’s Terri?” Josh asked.

“Terri Edelstein,” his dad replied. “We started talking after you and Stu tried to tear—um...” He glanced at Margo. “After you two got into that scuffle.”



“At the reception, I know,” Margo said. “Amy told me all about it.”

“Well. Okay.” Their dad cleared his throat. “Anyway, I took her out to dinner to apologize, then she took me out to dinner to apologize, and well, nearly three years later, here we are. So you and Stu will just have to learn to tolerate each other,” he said to Josh. “Can you do that for us?”

“Oh.” Josh’s head swam with the news. On one hand, it meant he’d probably be seeing a lot more of Stu. On the other hand, Terri Edelstein really *was* great. He couldn’t have chosen anyone better for his dad. “Yeah, of course. I’m happy for you both. That stuff with Stu, that was years ago. And I promise, no matter how much of a jerk he is, I’ll ignore it.”

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“You know Stu’s not a jerk, right?” Margo asked as they sat on the sofa in Josh’s hotel room, watching the sun drop into the ocean while she fed Danny.

“Jerkness is in the eye of the beholder,” Josh intoned.

Margo grinned, but she shook her head. “You’re the only one who doesn’t like him. He’s really a great guy. He babysits for us and volunteers at the animal shelter. And he works for CARE. You know, trying to eradicate global poverty, that kind of thing.”

Josh frowned as his face heated. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, he’s worked for them for years. That’s what he was doing in Thailand, but after his dad died, he asked to be transferred back to Portland so he’d be closer to home.”

“So I’m the jerk, is that what you’re telling me?”

“No. Don’t jump down my throat. I’m just saying, give the guy an extra chance, okay, before you blow up at him? You two got off on the wrong track somewhere. And now that Dad and Terri are serious, you and Stu really have to learn to get along. We’re not going to be one of those families where the siblings hate each other.”

“He’s not my sibling.”

“Yeah, no, he kind of is, now. So do whatever you have to to make it work. Maybe we could have a code word or some kind of signal if he’s starting to piss you off.”

“Like I pretend I’m strangling myself?”

“Yeah, something like that. Only maybe a little more subtle.”

Josh rubbed a finger over Danny’s head. “Do you think Terri—that’s weird to call her that, when she’s been Mrs. Edelstein in my head for so long.”

“I know. She asked me to start calling her Terri a few years ago, but it’s still weird.”

“So do you think she gave Amy and Stu the same talk Dad gave us tonight?”

“Yes.”

“How do you think they took it?”

“Same as us, probably. Amy’s probably thrilled, and Stu’s probably strangling himself.”

“I can do this, you know. Not be a dick.”

“I hope so because tomorrow is the first day of the rest of our lives as one big, happy family.”

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Of course, Josh woke up at three in the morning due to jet lag. He lay awake for an hour, trying to find a comfortable position, but at four A.M., he gave up. He got out of bed and put on his warm-ups, then dropped his keys in one pocket of the jacket, his phone in the other, grabbed a bottle of water, and went out.

He walked along the road until he found a set of steps leading down to the beach. Streetlights cast just enough light for him to avoid the boulders piled up to protect the closest houses from storm swells. He walked down the beach, keeping to the wet sand and taking off his shoes when he came to streams emptying into the ocean that were too wide to jump across. He kept walking until the sky started to pink up. Then he did some stretches and crunches and a couple of yoga poses that the physical therapist recommended.

When it was light enough to see the water, he started back up the beach. The tide was coming in, and walking in dry sand meant it was taking him longer to get back. After he’d been walking for an hour, he thought he’d found

the steps he'd come down, except that none of the hotels up on the street looked familiar. He pulled out his room key, which was an actual key attached to a plastic tag, but the tag only had the room number, not the name of the hotel, which apparently he had completely forgotten. He'd fallen asleep on the drive out to the ocean after Margo picked him up at the airport, and he hadn't paid attention when they'd come back from dinner the night before.

Not like he was in any real hurry to get back, although at some point he'd have to have a slash, and he didn't see any public restrooms nearby. How severe were the laws against public urination in Oregon? He lay down on the cool sand and listened to the waves rushing onto the beach while he thought about his options. He looked at his phone: six A.M. He couldn't call anyone this early. He stuffed the phone back into his pocket and closed his eyes. He'd wait a little longer and then go wandering through the parking lots of the hotels to see if he could find Margo's car, because he remembered what that looked like—a silvery-green Prius with a Baby on Board sign stuck to the side window. Would anyone call the cops on him if they saw him skulking around in parking lots? If they did, at least the police could help him find his hotel. If he really couldn't find his way back, he'd wait until seven thirty and then call. It would mean admitting he was an idiot who didn't pay the slightest bit of attention to his surroundings, but it was better than wandering the beach forever, which was what he probably would have done in that situation when he was younger.

He closed his eyes, and lulled by the sound of the waves, he fell asleep. He was woken by a jingling noise and something cold and wet on his cheek. His eyes flew open, and he got to his feet, startling the dog that had been sniffing at him. "Sorry, pup, you scared me," he said, brushing the sand off his clothes. He held out his hand to the dog. "It's okay. I won't bite if you won't."

The dog stepped forward to sniff at Josh's hand. It was some kind of black lab mix, with short ears that pricked up when someone whistled sharply. It ran off towards the whistle, its tail wagging and tongue hanging out.

"Sorry about that!"

"No problem," he shouted back, squinting against the sun, trying to see who had yelled.

A man in shorts and a hoodie jogged towards him, the dog dancing around him. “Are you okay?”

“Yep. Fine. I was just resting my eyes.” Josh tried to move so the man wouldn’t be so backlit by the sun

The man slowed down, then stopped about ten feet away and pulled off his hood. “Hey, Josh.”

“Stu?”

“Yes.” He didn’t offer any other kind of greeting.

“Oh. Hi.” Way to make an impression, sleeping on the beach like a vagrant. “Is that your dog?”

“Yes, this is Blanket.”

“Oookay.” He held out his hand again, and the dog wandered over to him.

“My niece named him.”

“Emma?”

“Yes.” Stu’s face relaxed little.

Josh turned away from Stu to pet Blanket, who was sniffing around his ankles. “Hey, buddy.” Josh petted the dog for a few seconds before it rolled onto its back, clearly asking for a belly rub. “Oh, look at that. A vicious killer, that’s what you are,” Josh murmured, petting the dog’s stomach.

“Yeah, he’s a terror.”

Josh looked up to see Stu smiling fondly at the dog. He looked back down at the dog, who lay with its paws in the air, clearly in ecstasy.

“Why were you lying on the beach? I thought you were a dead body.”

“Uh, yeah. I woke up a couple hours ago—jet lag—so I walked for a while and then lay down and just fell asleep.”

“Why didn’t you just go back to your room?”

Josh sighed. Time to man up and tell the truth. “I can’t remember where it is. I mean, I don’t know which hotel we’re at. I didn’t pay attention last night when we got in, and it was dark this morning when I went out.”

There was a long pause, so long that Josh gave in and looked up at Stu, who just stood there, looking at him suspiciously. “How much did—no, never mind. We’re staying at the Surfside, and it’s back towards town. I can take you.”

“Thanks. I guess I was more out of it than I thought when we got here yesterday. I completely zoned out.”

“Sure.” Stu clicked his tongue at the dog, who jumped up and ran to him. “Come on, let’s get back. My mom’s making waffles.”

They walked in silence back to the hotel, taking turns throwing a soggy tennis ball for Blanket. Josh tried to think of something to talk about, but everything he came up with sounded inane. Stu didn’t seem to be interested in conversation, anyway; the few times that Josh risked looking over at him, his face was set in a frown. Or maybe it was a pout.

He had to have known Josh was coming to the beach... or did Amy not even bother to tell him? Did she really think the ripping-off-the-Band-Aid method of Stu and Josh meeting again would be better than easing him into the idea? Not that it really mattered. Josh would take whatever Stu threw at him, and he’d be polite about it. He’d be a perfect gentleman for the rest of the trip. It was the least he could do to show Terri and his dad that he was glad they were together.

Breakfast was uneventful, except that Terri really did make the best waffles Josh had ever had. They almost made up for the shock of hearing that his dad was going to sell the house. “We’ve decided that if we’re going to start this new thing, we have to really start it new.”

“We wanted to tell you first, before we put the houses on the market, though,” Terri added.

Amy nodded. “Do you know where you’ll live?”

“We’re looking at lofts downtown, actually. That would be closer to both of our jobs, and we don’t need yards anymore, now that you kids are all grown up. But...” She scrunched up her nose. “...that means we won’t have a lot of room, so whatever you kids still have in the house, you’ll have to move it out.”

“Same for you Margo and Josh,” their dad said. “But Josh, now that you’re living in this country again, that shouldn’t be too hard. And since you’re

between jobs, if your knee can handle it, we're hoping you'll be able to help us with the majority of the packing and throwing out."

"So the waffles were a bribe?" Josh asked, raising his eyebrows at Terri, who raised her own back at him.

"I don't know. Did they work?"

"Oh, hell yeah. I'll *build* you a new place if you promise you'll make them again."

"Note to headquarters." Terri pretended to be talking into her lapel. "Boy can be bribed with waffles."

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After breakfast, Margo ran to the store. "I forgot something we need for dinner tonight," she said, handing Danny off to Sean.

"So this straight thing's working out for you, huh?" Josh asked him, letting Danny play with his fingers.

Sean grinned at him. "I'm still bi, you fu—uh, you eff-head. Da—I mean, darn it, it's hard to clean up your language when you become a parent." He stroked his finger over Danny's wisp of dark hair. "Do you think you'll have kids?"

"No, because *I'm* not confused about my sexuality."

"Oh, *that's* how it's gonna be?" Sean raised his eyebrows. "Okay, then, F-U-C-K-Y-O-U, you A-S-S-H-O-L-E."

Josh smiled sweetly. "I'll see your F-U-C-K-Y-O-U and raise you a S-U-C-K-M-Y—"

"Boys! Language!"

Josh jumped guiltily. "Sorry, Mrs.—Terri."

She laughed. "Oh, your face. I'm kidding! For now, anyway." She tickled Danny, who squealed. "Once he starts reading, you'll have to stop that, too."

"Good luck with that, Sean" Josh said, smirking.

Sean flipped him the bird, blocking it from Danny's view. "Just wait until it's your kid," Terri warned, smiling.

“I don’t think I’ll be having kids.”

“Why not?”

“Um... because I’m gay? Did you not all get the memo?”

“Yes, but it’s different than it used to be.” She smiled encouragingly. “There’s adoption, there’s artificial insemination, surrogacy...”

“You’re up-to-date on all of this.”

“Yes, well.” She shrugged a little. “The topic’s come up in conversation before.”

“Really?” Josh sat up straighter. “You have gay friends who have kids?”

“Something like that.” She patted his arm. “Come on, enough sitting around like slugs. Let’s go down to the beach while it’s still sunny! I’ve got sunscreen for everyone.”

“Your fault for stuffing us full of waffles,” Sean said, mock pouting, but he stood up and swung Danny onto one hip. “I’ll get our stuff and meet you down there.”

“I’ll go get Stu and make him come with. He can’t stay holed up in his room working the whole weekend. Pull the door shut when you leave, okay?” She left, and Josh was about to follow her when Sean stopped him.

“Hey, you still interested in that job I emailed you about?”

“The coaching? Yeah, sure.” Josh brightened. “I thought the program was dead, though.”

“It was, but then my coach decided to finally drag his ass—uh, his bottom home. So now we’re set again. You’ll need to fill out paperwork, let the school district do a background check, but then we’ll be good to start.”

“Hey, thanks, man. I was hoping to get something where I’d run around for a few hours a day. I can already feel myself getting a roll.” He pinched at his waist through his jacket.

Sean snorted. “Yeah, right. You’re anorexic.”

A thought occurred to Josh. “The background check... Are they going to have a problem with me being gay?”

Sean frowned. “Why would they?”

“Just... People sometimes get a little crazy when it comes to their kids.”

“This is Portland, dude, not Tennessee. That shit’s not gonna fly around here.” He shook his head. “Besides, you’re an amazing guy, and the only reason they wouldn’t want you working with their kids is if they’re fucking morons. So don’t worry about it. I got your back on this. Okay?”

Sean looked hard at Josh, and for a second, Josh couldn’t speak. He’d had other people back him up before—Simon, who convinced the club to take a chance on a young American who had started playing only six years earlier. Sid, who’d told the rest of the players to grow up and grow a pair when Josh had come out to them. A family who had always supported him (well, almost always). And now Sean was part of that family, and it shouldn’t have surprised Josh that Sean would help him out, so it must have been jet lag that was making him stupidly emotional.

“Okay. And hey...” Josh didn’t want to say it, but he had to. “I would really like to be drunk to have this conversation with you, but since I don’t drink anymore, I’m just gonna put it out there.” He looked out the window at the beach. “I’m really glad you married Margo. I should have told you when you got engaged, but I never got around to it. So I’m telling you now. You’re, um. You’re like the brother I never had,” he said in a rush. God, emotions were so much harder to do while sober.

“Thanks, man.” Out of the corner of Josh’s eye, Sean rocked from foot to foot, lightly bouncing Danny on his hip, that baby-holding dance that all parents learn. “I *have* brothers, but you’re right up there with ’em.”

“Thanks.”

“Do we have to hug now?”

Josh laughed. “No.”

As they left the room, Josh pulling the door shut behind him, Sean said, “It’s too bad you never bonded with Stu the way Margo did with Amy. They’re like sisters, and he could have been that brother for you all these years.”

His words cut through the warm comfort Josh had been feeling as a result of the waffles and Sean’s kind words. “Yeah, no. That’s just...” He kept his



eyes forward, walking ahead of Sean. Just *what*? What *was* it about Stu that made it impossible to be friends with him?

“Yeah, I know,” Sean said. “It’s weird, though. You two should get along. Everyone likes you both, you’re fine separately, but together, it’s like oil and vinegar. Cats and dogs.”

“...living together, mass hysteria. Yeah, Stu and me being friends would be a sign of the Apocalypse.”

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Back in his room, Josh changed out of his warm-ups and into shorts and a T-shirt. It was so nice to be somewhere that actually got warm and sunny in the summer. Margo had warned him that there might be cold winds, but there weren’t any that day, apparently. He filled up his water bottle and put it in a plastic bag with his keys and phone. Then he slipped on a pair of flip-flops and started out the door, sunglasses in hand, but turned back to grab a rugby ball out of his suitcase. Maybe Sean would want to toss it around on the beach a little.

When he got down to the beach, everyone was already there except for Sean and Danny and Margo, who was still at the store. Stu was reading a book, and Blanket was lying on a towel at Stu’s feet. Stu looked up at Josh, gave a half-hearted wave, and then went back to his book.

Whatever, Josh thought. But Blanket thumped his tail on the sand, and his whole body wriggled as he looked at Josh. “All right, buddy.” Josh sat next to him. Within seconds, Blanket was on his back, snuffling as Josh rubbed his belly. “Some mean dog you got here,” Josh told Stu. He thought he saw Stu’s lips twitch, but he wasn’t sure.

Sean got there a few minutes later and set Danny next to Emma on the towel shaded by a beach umbrella. “All right, men,” he announced. “It is time!”

“Oh, here we go,” Mark muttered.

“Time for what?” Josh asked.

“Time to brave Poseidon’s icy wrath!”

“Um...”

Stu shut his book, dropping it onto the towel as he stood up. “We’re going into the water.”

“Oh.”

“To the waves, bold adventurers!” Sean pulled off his shirt and pounded on his chest with one fist. “Are we not men?”

“We are Devo,” Josh and Stu said simultaneously. They looked at each other, and then Stu snorted and looked away.

“Come on,” Mark said, nudging Josh’s shoulder. “He’ll bug the crap out of you until you go in. You’ll be ready to throw yourself in just so you won’t have to hear him anymore.”

Josh stood. “How cold is it?”

Stu grinned at him, a little evilly, Josh thought. “It varies from year to year, but it’s usually pretty painful.”

“That’s why we run in, duck under once, then come right back out. Before our nuts freeze off,” Mark added in a quieter tone, shooting a look at Terri, who didn’t seem to notice. He pulled off his T-shirt and jogged towards the water.

Stu turned away and unbuttoned his shirt, then pulled it off and dropped it on his book. “Come on, boy!” he said to Blanket, and the two of them ran towards the surf, Sean chasing them and whooping.

Josh watched Stu go, blinking at the surprisingly broad shoulders that tapered to narrow hips. With some effort, he turned back to Amy. “Why do they do this?” he asked her as he pulled off his T-shirt.

She didn’t look up from her e-reader. “It’s their thing. Just look at what you’ve been missing all these years, not being here,” she said in a monotone. “Have fun, see you in thirty seconds.”

He dropped his sunglasses into the plastic bag. “I’m not really dressed for it,” Josh said. Amy did look up then, raising one eyebrow. Her eyes dropped down his body, and Josh held his hands in front of his groin, as if her gaze were literally sharp. “They’re just shorts, not swim trunks.”

“You didn’t bring swim trunks to the beach, why?”

“Because I don’t own any. I have a Speedo, and Margo told me they’re illegal in this country.”

“They would be on *you*.”

“Amy, you’re embarrassing him.”

Amy smirked at her mother but said to Josh, “Margo just didn’t want her hunky little brother being perved on by her best friend. You run and play, now, and I promise to pretend I’m not judging a wet-shorts-contest when you come out.”

“Amy!” Terri frowned at her daughter. “Really inappropriate!”

Josh grinned. “I can be more inappropriate than that.” He wagged his hips at Amy. “Look all you want, baby. Ain’t gonna find a better three inches anywhere.”

Amy’s laughter and Terri’s groan followed him as he walked to the water. He would have liked to run, like the other guys had; he *had* to start running again to burn off the fat that was starting to settle around his waist. But he needed to find a physical therapist to check him out, to let him know when he could put that much stress on his knee, and he had to find one who would see him without insurance, and how much would that set him back?

He dipped his foot into the water, and *fuck*, that *was* cold. But he was a man, so he waded in up to his knees. It wasn’t like he couldn’t afford to pay for a PT; he had a nice sum of money set aside, but until he got some regular work, he’d have to be careful with it, not waste it on—

“HI-YAAAHH!” Sean launched himself at Josh and knocked him into the water. Josh let out what he hoped was a *manly* shriek as the cold water covered his body.

“You dick!” he shouted at Sean. “That’s fucking freezing!” Then he grabbed him, picking him up and dumping him in the surf.

“We are men!” Sean shouted when he popped up, spitting out salt water and beating his chest some more.

“You’re insane!” Josh hopped through the waves back to shore. “How do you stand it?”

“He’s insane!” Mark shouted. Sean tackled Stu, who laughed. Blanket splashed through the shallow waves, barking at them.

“Call me a wuss, but I’m done,” Josh told them.

“I’m done, too,” Stu said, following Josh out of the water.

“Me, too,” Mark said. “Epic shrinkage. I hope Amy’s not expecting anything tonight.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Stu said, picking up his pace a little.

“Party poopers!” Sean shouted from the waves. He stood there for a moment and then started to follow them, but Mark spun around and dove at Sean, knocking him back into the water. He came up sputtering. Mark jumped on his back, pumping his fist in the air.

“I am King of men!” Mark shouted. Sean shook him off into the water, laughing and diving after him.

Josh walked up the beach backwards, shivering, but grinning at them. They looked like seal pups splashing around in the water, their hair plastered to their heads. He turned around and waved at Amy, who was leaning down between Emma and Danny, pointing out the crazy antics their daddies were getting into.

“You okay?” Stu asked as they made their way back to their group.

“Yeah, it was just a little cold water.”

“No, I mean your knee. That’s how you hurt it in the first place, right?”

“No. I mean, yeah, from a tackle, but not like that. I mean, Sean weighs, what, one fifty? And he knocked me into the water, not onto the ground. It’s fine.” But he flexed his knee before sinking down onto his towel.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Terri asked him.

“No. It’s just the first time I’ve gone down since I tore it.”

“Sean should be more careful.”

“Nah, he’s okay. It’s actually a relief to know I can get tackled without getting hurt.”

“Yeah, sure. Men,” she added under her breath, shaking her head.

Blanket shook the water off himself, making his dad, Terri, and Amy squeal, then settled down again on Stu's towel. Stu stood in the sand next to it, running his hands down his head to squeeze some of the water out of his hair.

Josh stared at him, at the water that ran in trickles down flat planes of muscle. The hair on his chest narrowed to a trail over hard abs, and then it disappeared into the waistband of board shorts that hung low on his hips. Stu wasn't built like a rugby player, he wasn't a slab of beef, but he wasn't the skinny kid that Josh saw in his memory every time he thought about him. Josh remembered stick-like legs and scrawny arms in Mexico—god, had that really been ten years ago? The calves visible beneath the board shorts weren't stick-like anymore. The pipestem arms had given way to biceps and deltoids.

As Josh continued to stare, unable to look away, he remembered that dark suit that Stu had worn at funerals and weddings. At the time, Josh had figured it was just well-cut, with padding in the shoulders, but no, Stu had just grown up and filled out. The boy of Josh's memory was gone. Standing in front of him, arms raised and muscles on display like some pin-up calendar photo, was a man. And if Josh had been seeing him for the first time, without their history, his mouth would be watering.

In fact, his mouth *was* watering. Over Stu Fucking Edelstein. Swallowing, he reached into his bag for his phone, then checked his non-existent text messages as he lay on his stomach in order to hide the embarrassing reaction his body was having.

A few minutes later, Sean and Mark came staggering back, dripping cold water. "Hey, you brought a ball."

"Yeah." Josh threw his phone into the bag and sat up, thankful for the distraction. "I know how you like to play with balls."

Sean grinned. "Ah, but you're the one who does it professionally."

"Well, I did." Josh got up and picked up the ball. "I can't run, sorry, but I thought we could toss it around." He looked at the rest of the group. "Anyone else? Mark, Stu?"

"Just the boys?" Amy asked. "Sexist, much?"

"Not at all. You're welcome to join," Josh told her, but she shook her head.

“No, I just wanted to hassle you. Besides, Emma needs to go potty. We’ll be back in a few.”

“I’m in,” Mark said. “I’ll go long.”

“You don’t ‘go long’ in Rugby.”

“We’re not actually playing. You’re allowed to throw it overhand.”

“It feels weird,” Josh grumbled, but he lifted the ball behind his head and threw it like a football. It wobbled through the air instead of spiraling, and Mark had to move in closer to catch it.

“Come on, Stu,” Sean said, nudging Stu with his foot.

“I’m good, thanks.” Stu put on sunglasses and picked up his book again. He scratched Blanket’s head with the toes of one foot.

Josh, Sean and Mark tossed the ball around for a while, Sean and Mark running for it, then throwing it back to Josh, who didn’t move much. Eventually Josh’s shorts dried out most of the way. The sun beat down on him—stronger than it ever was in England, although not as bad as in Spain or Greece—and he thought about putting on some sunscreen.

He threw the ball to Mark, then made a time-out sign with his hands and turned to ask Terri if he could use some of hers, but he stopped when he saw Stu looking at him. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses but his lips were pressed together in a tight, disapproving line, just like they had been in Mexico.

Annoyance, disappointment, and shame washed over Josh before he could work up any anger. What the fuck had he done wrong now? Yeah, he’d put on a few pounds since his injury, and yeah, no one else was wearing shorts that short. But goddammit, if his presence on the beach was that offensive, Stu could just fucking look somewhere else.

Josh grabbed up his T-shirt and put it on, pulling it down over his burgeoning love-handles. He thought about going back up to his room, but he’d been enjoying the beach up to that point. “Terri, could I use some of that sunscreen?”

“Absolutely.” She dug in her bag and tossed it to him.

“Do you need me to help you put it on?” Sean asked with a faux-leer.

His words and tone took away some of the sting of Stu's look. "Thanks, but I'll skip the hard-to-reach places for now."

He threw the ball back and forth with Sean and Mark until Margo came down to the beach. "Everyone ready for lunch?"

"We just ate breakfast," Mark said, flipping the ball back to Josh.

"What's your point?" Margo asked.

"Every time," their dad said, shaking his head. "I put on at least two pounds every time I come to the beach."

"Next time you can get up and play with us, instead of sitting on your a—uh..." Josh caught himself when his dad raised his eyebrows and pointed at Danny.

"Stu, how do you manage to stay so trim on these trips?"

Stu lowered his sunglasses and smiled at Josh's dad. "I try to limit my meals to the stuff Amy makes. She's not as good a cook as Margo."

"Hey!" Terri scolded, poking him in the shoulder.

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They all trudged up to Amy and Mark's room for sandwiches, then lazed around the rest of the day, wandering between beach and rooms. Josh, still feeling the effects of the time change, fell asleep on the beach around three P.M. He wasn't really hungry when it was time for dinner, but he ate a little, because otherwise he knew his stomach would be growling at midnight.

He also ate because Margo and Sean had cooked. And despite what he'd said on the beach, Stu was chowing down, going into raptures with the first bite of each dish.

"Oh, my god, Margo, so good!" Stu said with his mouth full. He closed his eyes and moaned as he chewed. Josh shifted in his chair, keeping his own eyes on his plate.

After dinner, he found out why Stu had been so happy with the meal: Margo and Sean had made all his favorites for his birthday. Margo brought out a cake with a forest of lit candles on it and everyone sang "Happy Birthday". "That's what I had to run out for," Margo said. "I can't *believe* I left them at home."

“You didn’t have to have them at all. It’s getting to be a fire hazard,” Stu said, smiling at her. “But thanks.”

“Make a wish, already,” Terri said.

Stu looked down at the candles like he was putting a lot of thought into it. Then he looked up, his eyes meeting Josh’s for a couple of seconds before he leaned over and blew out the candles.

“No, thanks,” Josh said, waving away the slice of cake that Margo offered him. It looked good and smelled *really* good, but—

“Is it because it’s *my* birthday cake?” Stu asked. The room fell quiet.

Way to make me look like the bad guy, Josh thought as his face heated up. “No! God, how petty do you think I am?” And way to bully the birthday boy. “I just... I have to start watching my calories, is all, now that I’m not playing.”

The tension in the room eased. “Oh, come on.” Sean took the plate and waved it in front of his face. “It’s wafer-thin.”

Josh sighed. “Okay, I’ll have some. Half of that. Thanks.” Sean slid half the slice onto another plate and handed it to Josh. “Happy?” Josh asked Stu, holding up the plate.

“Yeah, actually. And sorry I said that. It just slipped out. Um...” Stu poked at the cake with his fork. “Yeah. I didn’t mean... sorry.”

Wow. “Um. Okay. No problem.” He took a bite of cake so he wouldn’t have to talk anymore. Stu finished his own piece and had seconds, and Josh hated him a little as he thought about the flat abs under Stu’s shirt.

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The next day, Stu left at noon. “I’ve got to do some stuff at home before work tomorrow.”

“All right.” Terri gave him a kiss. “Will you be able to help me pack up the house, or will I have to impose on Josh for the whole thing?”

Stu looked sideways at Josh, then back at his mother. “I’ll come over every night after work until you’re set. But you have to feed me.”

“I think I can manage that,” she said, smiling. Josh’s dad, Amy, and Margo



gave him hugs, and Sean and Mark did the one-handed bro hug with him. Then they all turned to Josh.

“Have a safe drive back,” Josh said. He stuck out his hand, and after a second, Stu shook it. His hand was warm, strong, and bigger than Josh had expected, so it fit neatly into Josh’s hand without getting swallowed up. The last time they’d touched, Stu had punched Josh, and Josh had practically strangled Stu.

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.” Stu jerked his hand out of Josh’s grip after the shortest handshake in the history of the world. He turned away from Josh, opening the car door for Blanket to jump inside, then climbed in and drove off with a wave.

Josh turned around to see Terri frowning at him, her eyebrows drawn together with a line between them. He wanted to defend himself, to say, “It’s not my fault this time!” but he couldn’t say that to Stu’s mother. She’d always take her son’s side, which was only right. But Josh still felt the unfairness of it.

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The rest of them stayed another night at the beach and went home on Monday. Josh and his dad helped Terri clean out her garage that afternoon, and Josh felt he’d earned enough points with her that she’d be on his side if Stu decided to throw anything at him that evening.

Stu showed up in time for dinner, which he spent being pleasant and jokey with Josh’s dad and Terri and monosyllabic with Josh. After dinner, his dad went with Terri into her office to look at real estate sites, leaving Josh and Stu with a stack of cardboard boxes to tape up and fill with books from the downstairs bookshelves.

Josh and Stu went downstairs and assembled the boxes in silence, handing the tape dispenser back and forth, until Stu hissed out a breath. “Goddammit.”

“What?” Josh wheeled on him, his hands in fists. “I swear, I’ve been trying to do everything right and not be rude or trample your feelings or whatever, but if you’re going to complain about the way I fucking tape boxes together, I’ll—”

“No.” Stu shook his head. “It’s not you.” He closed his eyes, wincing, then opened them again. “I wanted to talk to you about this at the beach, but there

were too many other people around, and I know this is going to just... it's going to make you uncomfortable, but I'm going to say it anyway, and you'll freak out, but then it will be out in the open so we can start getting past it."

"What... do you need to get out in the open? Why am I gonna freak out?"

Stu exhaled again. "Why don't we go upstairs and get a drink and then sit down and talk?"

"I don't drink anymore. And I'm fine with standing."

"Um. Okay, then." Stu looked down at the boxes. "After we got into that fight at Margo's reception, I decided to see a therapist for the anger issues that I obviously had. I'd never hit anyone in anger before, and I wanted to make sure I'd never do it again, even though no one's ever made me as mad as you did that day."

"Why *were* you so mad at me?"

"I'm getting to that," he said rather sharply, then looked embarrassed. "Sorry. It's still... Anyway, during those therapy sessions, a lot of stuff came up, and I, uh, saw a pattern in the way I've behaved around you all these years. But that's my fault, not yours. You were just a kid."

"What do you mean? I was twenty-seven. Hardly a kid."

"No, I don't mean the fight, I mean when you kissed me when we were looking for the afikomen. The first time we ever met."

Josh opened his mouth, then closed it.

Stu frowned. "Don't you remember doing that? You were a little drunk—"

"I remember it. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Yeah... This is the uncomfortable part." Stu smiled, but it looked forced. "It was just a stupid teenaged kiss, right? It didn't mean anything."

It had been Josh's first kiss. And it had meant something to him—that he was a clumsy, idiot loser. "You freaked out about it."

"At the time, yeah. But then I started obsessing about it. About you. It's why I was so awful to you in Mexico. Some part of me thought..." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "Some part of me thought that you might kiss me

again when you were drunk, but you never did, no matter how wasted you got, so it made me madder and madder, even though I had no idea why.”

Josh had almost kissed him that night after they’d raced back to the hotel. Stu had been happy. Laughing. Beautiful. Josh had been about to kiss him again and had stopped himself just in time, because Stu wasn’t—

“You’re not gay.” Josh said it like a statement, but the question hung over both of them.

“No,” Stu said, and Josh’s mind went blank, except for a dull, buzzing anger. He needed to leave right now, just walk away, because really, what was the point of this conversation?

“Okay, then. Great talk.” Josh pushed away from the wall he’d been leaning against, took a step toward the stairs, but Stu stepped in front of him.

“No, wait. I need to get this all out.”

Josh folded his arms over his chest. “Go on, then.”

“Okay, look, like I said, it wasn’t your fault. But I was confused for a long time. I even thought that I might be bi, but most men just don’t interest me like that.”

“Most?”

“Well...” Stu’s eyes glazed over for a moment. “There was that guy from Suriname, but he was so gorgeous that no one on our trek could keep their hands off him.” His lips curved up, his cheeks went pink, and that was absolutely *not* a greasy, grinding, talon of jealousy clawing its way through Josh’s gut.

“So you’re just a *little* bi.” Oops. He hadn’t meant it to sound quite as bitter as that.

Stu narrowed his eyes at Josh. “I’m trying to explain, so don’t—never mind. Like I said, guys never really did anything for me. But after a few relationships, I realized that girls didn’t, either.” He shrugged. “So maybe I’m just... asexual or something, because the only person I ever really get worked up about is you, and that’s...” He shook his head. “That doesn’t come out in a healthy way at all. I’ve been angry at you for years, apparently, because of this

stupid, juvenile... *thing*, which I know is pointless and really kind of masochistic, because you barely tolerate me and you don't find me the least bit attractive. I've been an idiot, looking for the worst in you, pitching a fit at the reception when you were flirting with that bartender, because of my issues. *My* issues." He laughed. "I mean, all that time I spent in the East trying to find enlightenment, trying to understand the universe, and I couldn't even understand myself and what was right in front of me."

Josh couldn't believe the words that were coming out of Stu's mouth. It had to be a joke, some kind of prank, but—

"I thought I'd be over it by now," Stu continued, "but, um. I guess I'm still working on it. I know I've made it hard for us to get along like rational human beings. But one of these days I *will* get past it, and then someday we'll be able to laugh about it. So. Okay." He let out a breath. "Let's pack up these books, shall we?" He turned to the bookcase and started pulling out books.

"Wait!" Josh shot a hand out onto the bookshelf in front of Stu's face. "No, you can't just... drop a bomb on me like that then pretend like nothing happened!"

Stu dropped the books into a box and turned to face Josh. "Look, I said I was sorry."

"No, no, actually, you *didn't* say you were sorry. You said you had issues."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. I'm *sorry*. Is that better?" Stu glared at him.

"No." Josh took his hand off the books but moved closer to Stu. "You're not over it? You still... you're still, what, hung up on me?"

Stu rolled his eyes. "Yeah. A little. Fine. Is that what you wanted to hear? I was doing okay until I saw you at the beach. You're incredibly hot, but I manage to keep from jumping you because I kept telling myself that you're kind of a dick." His face got a pinched look. "Except you're not. I thought you were, I pissed you off so that you would be, but you're... *okay*. I know you don't want to hear that stupid little Stu Edelstein, the prude with skinny legs, still has a crush on you, so can we be done now?" He spun back to face the bookcase. "Oh, look, my Harry Potter books." He pulled one of them off the shelf and looked at it. "I haven't read them for—hey!" The book fell to the floor as Josh grabbed his wrist. "Let go." Stu pulled at his wrist, but Josh held

on. Stu glared at him, his eyes dark under angry brows. “Let go, now, or I’ll *make* you let go,” he said in a low, dangerous tone.

Maybe he meant it to sound like a threat, but the growl in his voice made Josh’s whole body vibrate. He pinned Stu’s wrist back against the bookshelves and then leaned against him, pressing Stu’s body into the bookshelves as well.

Stu’s chest pushed against Josh’s as he took a deep breath. “If you don’t let me go in the next three seconds, I’m going to—”

With his free hand, Josh grabbed Stu’s hair with the finesse of a caveman, grabbed and held on as he kissed him. He had three seconds to lick Stu’s lips open, to taste the inside of his mouth, to enjoy the scrape of Stu’s five o’clock shadow against his own, to slide one leg in between Stu’s and feel his heat before Stu used Krav Maga or Jeet Kune Do or whatever to break Josh’s hold on him, punch a hole through his chest, rip out his spine, and shove it down his throat.

Any second now, Stu would bring his knee up and wipe out Josh’s balls, then slam a fist into his face just like before. Josh knew it was coming, had to be coming, but he couldn’t stop kissing him. He couldn’t stop sucking on Stu’s tongue or pushing his ass back into Stu’s hands.

He did stop when Stu moaned into his mouth, when he remembered that he was bigger and stronger than Stu, and maybe the reason Stu hadn’t punched him yet was because he couldn’t move, because Josh had trapped him between the bookshelves and his heavy body. Josh pulled back, opened his mouth to apologize as Stu stepped around him and then gasped when Stu shoved him back against the bookshelves and started sucking on his neck.

His head spun as Stu pushed harder against him, knocking books off shelves as he grabbed at Josh’s shoulders and head.

“If you’re fucking with me...” Stu muttered against his throat.

The scents of rosemary and mint floated up from Stu’s hair, and Josh ran his hand through it. It was finer than he’d thought it would be, and whoa, when had he ever thought about Stu’s hair?

Josh opened his eyes and looked at Stu, who’d been the source of so much irritation for so many years. Stu, with his stupid, gorgeous face, his stupid

ripped body, his stupid kindness and humor and whatever else he had that everyone who wasn't Josh liked about him. And especially those stupid green-glass eyes, currently hidden behind closed eyelids.

And that's when Josh realized that he'd been an idiot for years, too. When Stu hadn't been in front of him, angry and snappish, he'd been in the back of Josh's mind, keeping him from becoming seriously interested in any other men by being shiny and tantalizing while still wildly out of reach.

No longer out of reach. If Stu were any closer, he'd be inside Josh's skin.

"I'm not fucking with you." He caught Stu's head and leaned down to kiss him again when footsteps pounded down the stairs.

"What's going on down here?" his dad shouted. "If you two are fighting again—Josh! You let go of him right now!"

Josh jerked his hands away from Stu, but Stu still leaned into him, his arms around him. "Um..."

"Alan, we're not—"

"Oh." Comprehension spread across Alan's face. "Oh, my god." He cleared his throat. "I'll... just be upstairs. If you need me. I mean, not that you would need me for... Okay, then." And he fled back upstairs.

"Well, I think that wins for Most Awkward Family Moment," Josh muttered.

"You can touch me again," Stu said. "Although I'm not sure why you want to."

Josh put his arms around him again. "Because I've been an idiot, too. And I wouldn't have known, if you hadn't gone first." He bit his lip. If Stu had the balls to admit his crush on Josh, Josh had to at least try to find the words.

"When I met you, you were everything I wasn't—cute and smart and outgoing, and I was a big, boring lump." Stu frowned and opened his mouth, but Josh went on. "I don't know why I kissed you except... I had to. I just remember that I had to. So I did, and it was just like everything I did at that age—bumbling and clumsy and a failure. And of course you pushed me away, because what cute, smart, straight boy wouldn't?"

Stu seemed to understand that Josh needed to get it all out, too, because he didn't interrupt.

"So," Josh continued, "I guess I put a chip on my shoulder when it came to you. If I could convince myself you were an ass, then that would mean I dodged a bullet. And whenever you *were* an ass, that just cemented that chip more firmly in place." He stroked a hand over Stu's hair. "I wrapped myself up in a nice little... cocoon of anger whenever I had to be around you. It kept me safe. It kept me from trying to kiss you again."

Stu laughed a little. "Thank god. I thought I was masochistic or something, to have a thing for someone who hated me so much."

"Maybe you could tell I didn't hate you, subconsciously. But I've got to tell you, I've thought of you as an ass for so long that it still hasn't really sunk in that you aren't."

"Same here."

"Thanks." Josh smirked, but his humor faded when he said, "I really did hate you at Margo's reception. You were there with your girlfriend, flaunting your heterosexuality, which pissed me off, and then you said I'd treated my mother like crap. But you were right. That's why I got so mad."

Stu pushed away from Josh and stepped out of his arms, far enough away so he could look at him. "What? When did I say *that*?"

"Just before the fight. You told me I was selfish, that I never think of anyone else. You were right. I should have called Mom more. And come home more."

"Oh, my god, no." Stu shook his head. "That wasn't about your mom; she was so proud of you. She sent everyone articles about your team. That was me being a dick. I called you selfish because you weren't paying attention to *me*. God, I didn't even know what was coming out of my mouth."

"Oh. Oh." The weight of guilt that Josh had been carrying around dropped away, although some of it had disappeared when his dad told him about the money his mom had sent him. "But you were there with your girlfriend. Who was gorgeous."

"Who I ignored once you started flirting with the bartender."

“Huh.”

“Yeah.”

“So what do we do now?”

Stu didn’t answer, but he looked down at Josh’s mouth.

“Works for me,” Josh said, tumbling Stu to the ground so he could stretch out on top of him and kiss him some more.

“Ow!”

“Sorry!” Josh rolled off him. “I didn’t mean to crush you.”

“It’s not that. I’m lying on a book.” Stu rolled off the book and onto Josh as footsteps came pounding down the stairs again.

“Stu, are you okay? I heard you say ‘ow’. What’s going—oh!” Terri’s eyes went wide. “Alan said—but I didn’t think you’d ever—ah.” She shut her mouth with a snap, then smiled overly brightly. “I’ll just leave you to those books.” She started back up the stairs, then came back down. “Do you need condoms? Because Alan and I—”

“Oh, my god, no, Mom, please do *not* say anything else.”

“No, sweetie, we’re not using them—”

“La la la la, I’m not hearing this!” Stu said, sitting up and plugging his ears.

“No, I mean, we don’t *need* to use them, because...” She shook her head. “No, what I meant was, we want you two to be safe.”

“LA, LA, LA, LA—”

“We’ll be safe, Terri, we promise.”

“Okay, Josh. I’m counting on you, since you have more experience with this sort of thing.”

If Josh could have plugged his ears and joined Stu in his chorus of “la la las”, he would have, but thankfully Terri said, “Okay, way past time for me to not be here,” and ran up the stairs.

“Is she gone?” Stu unplugged his ears.



“Yes.”

“Can you Obliviate me?”

“What’s that?” Josh grinned and pulled Stu on top of him. “Is it something kinky? Because—”

“No, it’s a Harry Potter thing. Why don’t you know that?”

“Because I’m not a nerd.”

“Bite me,” Stu said, but he smiled when he said it. “I remember loaning you *Prisoner of Azkaban* in Mexico, and then I got pissed off at you when you accused me of stealing your money and I took it back.” He winced. “Stu behaving badly. Did you ever finish it?”

“No. And I didn’t read any of the other books because you liked them, and I thought you were a jerk.”

“I was a jerk.”

“No. Well, okay, maybe a little. But not more than me.”

“Well, I can’t be with a man who hasn’t read Harry Potter. So, you can borrow them. Starting with PoA, unless you want to start from the beginning.” He found it on the floor, among the books that they’d knocked off the shelves. “There, next to you,” he said to Josh.

Josh sat up, guiding Stu to sit on the floor between his legs, and picked up the book, which had something sticking out of its pages. When he flipped it open, he found a twenty peso bill. No, there were seven twenty peso bills. “Well, fuck me sideways.”

Stu blinked at the money. “Holy crap. *That’s* where you put it?”

“How did I...” Josh closed his eyes and tried to go back to that night. “I remember thinking I should hide it somewhere, and it was all folded up from being in my pocket. I must have thought that putting them in the book would flatten them out.” He opened his eyes and looked at Stu. “You haven’t opened that book in ten years?”

“No. I didn’t have time to re-read them like I’d done before college. And... that one reminded me of you. A big, macho nineteen-year-old who didn’t have time for kids’ books.”

“Yeah, I was a jerk.” Josh closed the book with the money still between the pages, then crawled over Stu again, nuzzling against his neck. Stu’s arms went around him, but not as tight as before. He reached down and ran a hand up Stu’s thigh. “I can’t believe it’s been there all this time. I really thought you took it.”

“I told you I didn’t,” Stu said sharply.

Josh looked at him. “I know, but—”

“What the hell?” Stu pushed off of Josh and stood up. “I’m not a liar. I wish I *had* taken it to stop you from drinking yourself sick, but I would have told you if I did.” He kicked a cardboard box out of the way and started towards the stairs. “I’m done for tonight. I have to get up for work tomorrow, so I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Wait, what just happened?” Josh jumped up and went after him. “Why are you so mad?”

Stu stopped halfway up the stairs and shook his head, frowning down at Josh. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I should have known we couldn’t just go from being at each other’s throats to being... whatever this was just now.”

The past tense scared Josh almost as much as the resigned look on Stu’s face. “No, come on, don’t leave.” Panic raced through him. It was ridiculous, but Josh had the feeling that if Stu made it to the top of the stairs while he was still angry, a wall would come down between them again, the same one they’d been hitting their heads against for ten years. He had to say something to make it right, but his mind was racing in neutral and not getting anywhere. “I’m sorry if I said something wrong—”

“You think I’m a liar.” Stu turned around and took one step down the stairs.

“No, I *thought* you were. That was me being an idiot. Remember, when we were idiots? We’re not doing that anymore, right?” His heart thudded as Stu took a really long time to answer. But eventually the tension went out of Stu’s shoulders.

“Yeah. Fuck.” He shook his head. “It’s going to take a while to break old habits.”

Josh let out a relieved breath. “Tell me about it.”

“Do you really think this has any chance of working?” Stu asked, gesturing between them.

“After everything we just said, after that kiss, you think it doesn’t?” Josh countered. Stu still looked unsure, so Josh climbed the stairs, tugging Stu down to sit on a step. Josh moved up and kissed him, then pushed him gently onto his back as he trailed his mouth down Stu’s chest and stomach.

“We can’t do this here,” Stu said, but the words came out breathy, and when Josh moved lower, his hips rocked up. “Seriously, my mom or your dad—”

“There’s no way either of them are coming down those stairs again, not until we both come up, fully dressed.” He flicked open the top button on Stu’s jeans.

“Josh...”

“We’ll be fine, as long as we don’t make too much noise.”

“Yeah, okay.” Stu’s whole body went slack. Too slack, so Josh undid another button and licked under the waistband of Stu’s boxers.

“Oh, fuck!” His hips came up off the stairs again.

“That’s more like it.” Josh undid the rest of the buttons and tugged Stu’s jeans down, then shoved his shirt up and licked across his stomach.

Stu’s hips jerked and he clawed at the stairs when Josh reached into his boxers and wrapped a hand around his dick. “Wait, wait...” His chest rose and fell as he clenched his teeth.

“What’s wrong?” Josh asked.

“Nothing, I just...” He shook his head.

“Do you want to stop?” And kick me in the guts while you’re at it, he thought but didn’t say.

“No. But I don’t want you to have these great expectations and then... be disappointed.”

Stu Edelstein, always so sure of himself, backing down? Josh didn’t like

that at all. “Haven’t you heard the expression, ‘Any blow job’s a good blow job’?”

“Yes, but—”

He grinned. “Then shut up, and let me do my *job*.”

Stu exhaled. “Okay.” He dropped his head back and lay spread out on the stairs like a sacrificial virgin. Normally, Josh wasn’t one for drama—or virgins—but Stu seemed more resigned than scared. Like maybe the blow jobs he’d had in the past *hadn’t* been good.

That thought made Josh start to feel some performance anxiety. What if they had no sexual chemistry? That kiss had taken his head off, but if that’s as far as they would get, would they be able to become friends? Or would they go back to taking swipes at each other, only meaner and sharper because sex made everything more complicated?

Maybe it would help if he stopped fucking *thinking* about it and just *did* it. They were on their way to being mature adults; they could deal with the fallout if and when it happened. He leaned down and rubbed his face against the fur on Stu’s stomach, back and forth, then dipping his nose into Stu’s pubes and taking a deep breath. He kept his hand loose around Stu’s dick, waiting until he felt it swell and Stu started breathing louder.

“Josh—” he said in a shaky voice.

“Yeah, just like that.” He started moving his hand, up and down, a little bit at a time, then bent and licked at the dick that was firming up nicely. He sucked it into his mouth, earning a broken whine from Stu. He kept mouth and hand slow, but Stu’s hips were starting to rock, and Josh hummed when Stu’s hands landed on his head.

His own dick was trapped in his pants, so he pulled off just long enough to get them open and one hand on himself. Then he went back down on Stu, whose hips snapped up, forcing his dick into Josh’s throat, which, okay, yeah, now he was giving Josh something to work with. Josh stroked him with his mouth, thinking that he could keep everything moving at a nice, even pace, show Stu he had some skill in this area, but when he looked up, Stu was staring down at him, his mouth open, his eyes wild. Josh might have still been

able to handle that look, but Stu's fingers tightened in Josh's hair and his hips jerked up again, and Josh was lost.

He moved his head up and down, sucking hard, working his own dick with his left hand, his heart pounding in his ears, the sound mixing with Stu's moans. Stu was rocking into his mouth, then suddenly the hands in his hair were pulling him away.

"Stop, Josh, I'm gonna—"

Josh launched himself up the stairs to lie half-on Stu, grabbing both of their dicks in one hand and kissing the words and breath out of Stu's mouth. Stu threw his leg over Josh's, dug his fingers into Josh's ass, thrusting into his hand a few more times before his body tightened. Then he was bucking against Josh, wailing into Josh's mouth. His come shot up between them and over Josh's hand, and the hot wetness of it sent Josh over the same edge a few seconds later.

"Fuck," Stu panted.

"Yeah," Josh agreed. He pushed his hips forward, squeezing his hand to get the last drops out, and Stu's eyes rolled back in his head.

"Aaaah, you're gonna kill me," he moaned, his head falling back again onto the stairs. But he didn't look like a sacrificial virgin anymore. He looked like a fucked-out, debauched wreck, and Josh's entire being flooded with satisfaction. It was *his* come on Stu's stomach, *his* saliva on Stu's dick, *his* stubble that had left beard-burn on Stu's face.

Josh kissed him again. "I don't think you qualify for asexual." Then he pulled his hand away and wiped it on his underwear as he dragged himself into a sitting position.

Stu laughed weakly. "What did you do to me?"

Josh blinked at him. "Uh, that's called a blow job." He frowned. "I thought you said you'd been with guys."

"I have been." He propped himself up on his elbows.

"Did they all suck at giving head? Um, so to speak?"

"No. They were great. But..." Stu shook his head. "It was never like that. I've always felt like I was outside looking at a porno or something like that.

Never... a part of what was going on. Linnea said I was afraid of intimacy. That I couldn't let down my walls enough to really trust anyone else."

"Linnea. She was the one at Margo's wedding."

"Yeah."

"She's a moron."

"No. She was smart enough to cut me loose after that fight. I think she figured it out, way before I did."

Josh stood up, carefully. "You're drenched. Stay there, I'll bring something to clean you off." He made his way down the stairs to the bathroom, where he found a washcloth. He wiped himself off, rinsed it out, and brought it back to Stu, who used it to clean himself, a vague little smile on his face. Josh had never seen him so relaxed. It unnerved him.

"Was that just something you needed to get out of your system, so you could be done with all this?" He'd meant to sound casual, but his tone edged into needy.

Stu looked at him. "Do *you* think we're done?"

Josh opened his mouth to joke the question away, but something stopped him. Maybe it was the way Stu was looking at him, completely open, no judgment. Time for Josh to be open, too. "*I'm* not done. Not by a long shot."

Stu smiled. "Me, either."

A little thrill of happiness ran up Josh's spine. "What are we going to tell everyone?"

"I don't think we'll have to tell them anything." Stu got to his feet and pulled up his jeans, then buttoned them before taking the washcloth off back to the bathroom.

"But your mom and my dad will pitch a fit." Josh called after him. "And Margo and Amy are going to freak out for sure."

Stu came back, he stepped right up to Josh and pulled him into an embrace. "No, they won't. They're not as big of idiots as we are. They've probably known for years."

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## EPILOGUE

“Where’d you learn to dance, anyway?” Josh asked as Stu led him into some kind of turn.

“When I was in Japan. Ballroom dancing is huge over there.” Stu hummed along with the music for a while, then said, “You look very handsome in that tux.”

“Thanks. So do you. But you told me that back at the hotel.”

“Yes, but what I didn’t tell you, because we were running late, is that it makes me want to rip it off you and fuck you against the wall with those pants down around your dress shoes.”

Josh shuddered. “Jesus, Stu. Don’t say that here—”

“Prude.”

Josh snorted. “You’re never gonna let me forget that, are you?”

“No.” Stu looked up at him, smiling wryly. “And don’t let me forget what I was like back then, either.”

“I’d like to forget *all* of that—”

“—but then we’ll be—”

“Dooooomed to repeat it,” Josh said along with Stu. “Yeah, I know. But for the record, I’m not being a prude. I just don’t think it would be polite to get a full, raging hard-on in the middle of the dance floor.” He nudged his swelling dick against Stu’s thigh.

“Did someone say raging hard-on?” Eric grinned at them. He couldn’t move much due to his hip, so he and Calvin swayed in the middle of the dance floor as other couples orbited them. Josh hadn’t realized they’d moved within earshot of the grooms. He stepped out of Stu’s arms and took his hand instead.

“What did you think of the ceremony?” Calvin asked.

“It was nice,” Josh replied.

“Liar.” Stu smirked. “I saw you wiping away a tear.”

“Yeah, all right, I cried a little. So did you.”

“Yeah, but at least I have the balls to admit it.” He smiled at Calvin and Eric. “It’s always wonderful to see two people in love get married. And it’s great that you get to tie the knot legally in your home state. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I never thought I’d live to see the day,” Calvin said. “Congratulations seem to be in order for you two as well. I take it you’ve worked out your issues? Did you ever find the root of the problem?”

Stu and Josh exchanged a look, then they both said, “Him,” as they pointed at each other.

Calvin laughed. “Well, good. If it’s too easy, it’s not worth doing. How long has it been now?”

“Just hit the four-month mark last week.” Josh squeezed Stu’s hand. Stu squeezed back.

“Any wedding plans in the works?”

“It’s not legal in Oregon,” Stu said.

“But it will be someday.”

“We’re thinking about it,” Josh said.

Stu looked at him. “We are?”

“Um...”

“It looks like you still have a few things to work on,” Calvin said.

“Tell me about it,” Stu muttered theatrically. Then he asked, “How about you? You’ve been married...” He looked at his watch. “...almost three hours now. Do you think it’ll last?” He grinned at the two men.

Calvin looked thoughtful. “Well, we’ve only been together for forty-one years. We might need a bit more time to work out all the kinks.”

“Or work *in* all the kinks.” Stu and Josh must have looked confused, because Eric explained, “I have quite the collection of vintage leather porn.”

“Ah.” Josh nodded. “Calvin’s a lucky guy.”

“We both are.” Smiling, Eric leaned in to kiss Calvin. Other couples came up to offer their congratulations, so Stu and Josh moved away.

“Do you think we’ll ever have what they have?” Stu asked, pulling Josh close again.



“A collection of vintage leather porn?”

“Yes, that’s *exactly* what I meant.” He snickered into Josh’s neck.

“Then, yes.” Josh looked at him. “You already have my collection of vintage leather porn, and you always will.”

Stu’s eyes went wide. “Oh.” He smiled at Josh. “Well. You have mine, too.”

Over the previous four months, Josh had learned that green glass could glow with warmth. He didn’t think he’d ever get tired of it. “And if we ever act like idiots again,” he told Stu, nuzzling his hair, “we’ll do it together.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*B. Snow found her way into the magical world of writing by way of fanfiction, and original characters began banging on her brain several years ago. If she can conquer her chronic procrastinitus, she may get that banging written down someday. In the meantime, you can read her short stories in Cross Bones from Dreamspinner Press and in Dorm Porn 2 from Alyson Books.*

*Originally from the west coast, B. Snow and her husband now live in the Atlanta area, sharing a house with two very bad cats who are just lucky they're so cute.*

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