

A silhouette of a person's head and shoulders in profile, looking towards the right. The background is a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise with a large, glowing sun partially obscured by a vertical structure, possibly a street lamp. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by yellows, oranges, and dark silhouettes.

Lisa Henry

The Dreams
You Made in
the Dirt

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE DREAMS YOU MADE IN THE DIRT

By Lisa Henry

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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 these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may 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.

This story is 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.

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THE DREAMS YOU MADE IN THE DIRT

By Lisa Henry

Photo Description

Two men embrace against a dark background. They stand, heavily shadowed, one in front of the other, chest to back, with arms entwined. They are tender, but at the same time appear desperate and vulnerable.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

MC1 (maybe eighteen to twenty years?) grew up hard in a dysfunctional family in a small remote community. His mother is gone and no one will say what happened to her. His father has always been abusive physically and emotionally. No one has ever stood up for him. He is smaller than average, making him a target for torment, but has had to learn how to fight for himself. He has the soul of a healer—naturally gentle and empathetic—but has learned not to trust as any time he has given himself emotionally he has been smacked down. Despite the way he is treated, he has never been allowed to leave and has nowhere to go as he has no education, money or friends/family to fall back on. When his father finds out MC1 is gay (not that he has had a chance to act on it), MC1 is bashed and left for dead miles from home.

MC2 (maybe twenty-eight to thirty-two years?) is a loner who has his own demons in his past (maybe ex-military/ex-con?). He is a natural alpha—protective and dominant. He finds MC1 and cares for him as he heals. Contrary to his promise to himself to stay detached, he feels a pull to MC1 and hates the sadness and despair in the eyes of his charge. He fights himself and MC1 as he finds he badly wants to earn MC1's trust. Who knows what can happen after that?

They are both capable of so much if they can find the right balance. I see the opportunity to have some emotional, hot scenes as they each give in to their natural instincts.

I'd love a HEA for these two battered souls.

Sincerely,

Mel

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: first time, hurt/comfort, military men, abuse, homophobia, age gap

Content Warnings: violence

Word Count: 24,205

Dedication

To Mel, for the awesome prompt. And to my beta readers,
Aniko, Tracy, and J.A.

And to Elizabetta, my wonderful editor!

THE DREAMS YOU MADE IN THE DIRT

By Lisa Henry

Chapter One

In that split second as he watched the glass in the windscreen fracture like a spider's web, Cole knew one thing for certain: he was going to die. He'd survived a tour in a country where people tried to kill him on a daily basis, and now he was going to die in a car accident. How prosaic. How fucking absurd.

Then, just when he was sure the car was going to flip, it stopped, wedged sideways in the ditch. Cole, suddenly nursing a lapful of skittish dog, took a moment to make sure he was still in one piece.

"Well, fuck," he said to Tessa, and she whined.

He climbed out the passenger's side door, helped Tessa do the same, and then pulled his phone out of his pocket to find it was warning him he had a low battery.

Shit.

He quickly searched the web for a local tow company, hoping the phone wouldn't die before he could place his call. Holding his breath and massaging his sore hip—must've knocked it somehow—he waited for someone to pick up.

The wait seemed interminable.

"Lawson's Towing."

"Hi," Cole said. "I'm out on... shit. I'm outside Dingo Creek, on the road to the old McCann place, do you know it?"

"Yeah. That's Henley Road," the guy said. He sounded young.

"I need a tow," Cole said. "I'm in a ditch."

"You need an ambulance?"

"No, just the tow."

"Okay. What's your name?"

"John Cole," Cole said.

"Colt?"

"Cole." He spelled it out.

The guy repeated it slowly.

“Listen, my phone’s about to die,” Cole said, and then realized with dismay that it already had. He shoved it back into his pocket then leaned down and scratched Tessa’s ears. “Could’ve been worse. It could’ve died ten minutes ago.”

It took half an hour for the tow truck to arrive.

Half an hour of getting bitten by mosquitoes and sandflies as the sun settled lower on the horizon and the shadows of the gum trees stretched out across the road.

John couldn’t have been more glad to see the tow truck if it’d come with a dining car attached.

“Hey,” he said when a skinny guy, no more than a kid, jumped down from the passenger’s door.

“Hey.” The kid wore a trucker cap pulled down low, and hunched his shoulders over as he walked. “You John Cole?”

“You see anyone else crashed along here?” Cole asked.

The kid looked up, and Cole caught a glimpse of blue eyes in a pale face. “No.” Then he ducked his head again and fiddled with his clipboard.

The driver’s door to the tow truck swung open, and a man climbed out. He was big. Muscular once, maybe, but that muscle was turning to fat now. He was wearing the same cap as the kid: LAWSON TOWING. The man’s boots crunched on the dirt as he strode over toward Cole’s car.

“Don’t mind the kid,” the man said. “Dumb as fucking dog shit.”

Cole glanced at the kid, but the kid didn’t react to the insult.

“Paul Lawson.” The big man stuck out his hand.

Cole shook it. “John Cole.”

“What’s the trouble?” Lawson asked, nodding at the car.

Cole smelled the beer on his breath.

“Swerved to miss a roo,” Cole said. “Overcorrected and ended up in the ditch.”

“Shit,” Lawson said amicably.

The kid set the clipboard down on the edge of the road, then jumped down the muddy verge. He crouched down in front of Cole's car and peered underneath it.

"Lucky you didn't roll it," Lawson said.

"Yeah," Cole agreed, although he didn't feel exactly lucky at the moment.

"Your dog okay?" Lawson asked.

Cole leaned down to scratch Tessa's ears. "Yeah, fine."

Down in the ditch, the kid straightened up. "Axle's busted."

"I figured," Cole said.

"I can fix that for you," Lawson said. "You got insurance?"

"Yeah." Cole watched as the kid clambered out of the ditch, wiping his hands on the back of his thin jeans.

Lawson threw the keys of the truck at him, and the kid caught them.

Cole moved Tessa out of the way as the kid got the truck into position. Then the kid slid down into the ditch again and hooked the winch up. Cole watched as his car was pulled slowly out of the ditch and onto the tilt tray of the tow truck. The kid clambered up with it when the winch stopped, securing it.

"You got luggage or stuff you need?" he called down to Cole.

"Got a few bags in the boot."

"We'll get it when we get into town," Lawson said. He held out his hand, and the kid threw the keys back down. "Only got the one hotel. Don't know if they'll take the dog."

"I don't need a hotel," Cole said. "I'm heading to the McCann place."

"Harry McCann's place? That's been empty for a while." Lawson rubbed his blunt fingers through his stubble. "You something to do with the old quarry opening up again? Don't tell me someone actually bought the place."

"Harry was my uncle," Cole said. "And I'm actually here to try and sell the place."

"Huh," said Lawson. "Well, good luck."

Cole could tell he didn't like his chances.

Neither did Cole.

In the truck, Cole sat with Tessa on his lap.

The kid was sandwiched between him and Lawson. He gripped his clipboard tightly, his knuckles white.

The truck roared into life.

Cole's thigh rubbed against the kid's as they drove toward Harry's house. Denim against denim.

Cole stared out the window.

Tessa wriggled in his lap, trying to climb all over the kid.

The kid squirmed when she shoved her muzzle in his face and rasped her tongue up his cheek. Cole turned his head just in time to catch another glimpse of blue eyes, and a mouth open in a joyful smile.

That smile vanished as soon as the kid saw him looking

“So,” Cole said, to make conversation, “the quarry’s opening again?”

Lawson's hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Sent a surveyor out last month. Waste of fucking time and money if you ask me.”

He sounded pissed off enough that Cole might have thought it was his time and money being wasted.

“It would bring jobs to the town again, wouldn't it?”

Lawson snorted, as though Cole had said something stupid. Cole turned his head and stared out the window again, wishing the ride was over.

After they dropped John Cole off at the old McCann place, Aiden and his dad headed for home. It was close. They were neighbours, almost, except John Cole probably didn't know that. Aiden was still thinking about him when they got back to the towing yard.

And his dog. That was a friendly dog.

Aiden dragged the gates shut after the truck, then looped the chain through and locked it. Most times he didn't bother to lock the yard—they were far enough from Dingo Creek that they didn't get much trouble—but he didn't want to risk anything happening to John Cole's car. Last time a car had got damaged on site, the insurance company had refused to pay because they said the yard hadn't been secure.

Aiden's dad still got angry about that.

Aiden watched the truck rumble through the yard, gears grinding. It turned toward the garage.

Aiden cut through the yard, through the maze of rusted-out car bodies. He met his dad at the garage, and scrambled up into the truck to collect the clipboard and paperwork.

His dad banged on the side of the truck. "Hurry up!"

Aiden climbed down again. "Do you want to get the car unloaded tonight?"

"Football's starting."

Aiden nodded, and fell into step behind his dad as he headed for the house. "Maybe I can help work on it tomorrow?"

His dad shot him a narrow look. "Maybe you can shut the fuck up."

Aiden clasped the clipboard to his chest and followed his dad up the stairs into the weatherboard house.

His dad headed straight for the small lounge room. The television blared into life. The light from the screen illuminated the lounge room and the end of the hallway. Aiden headed down the hallway to the kitchen, the roar of the stadium crowd following him.

The house was dark.

Aiden wondered where Mike and Stu, his older brothers, were. Mike had said something about going into town to visit his girlfriend, so maybe Stu had tagged along. Aiden flicked the kitchen light on, but there was no note on the table, so he didn't know if he was supposed to make dinner for them or not. It was almost seven o'clock though. If they weren't back yet, maybe they were staying overnight in town.

Mike was twelve years older than Aiden. Stu was eleven years older. They both took after their dad. Aiden had seen pictures of their mother—she'd divorced their dad and taken half his money and fucked off—and she'd been a thin, pinched, red-headed woman. Neither Mike nor Stu had red hair, and they were both as broad across the shoulders as football players. They looked like their father.

Aiden didn't take after their father. He took after his mother, his dad's second wife. He was smaller than his brothers. He had his mother's dark hair

and blue eyes. He'd been waiting on his growth spurt since he was fourteen, and he was pretty sure by now that it was never coming.

Aiden washed his hands at the kitchen sink, scrubbing them to get the grease off. Then he filled a pot and put it on the stovetop for the vegetables. He took the sausages out of the fridge and put three in the pan. Two for his dad, and one for him. Mike and Stu could cook their own whenever they turned up.

Aiden smiled at the ridiculousness of his own rebellious thought. As if Mike and Stu would do that!

He hummed to himself as he worked. Some song he'd heard on the radio. He didn't know what it was called. Mike had that app on his phone that would tell you, but he hadn't been around yet when Aiden had heard the song playing.

Aiden was saving up for a phone.

The lid of the pot rattled. Aiden removed it, then tipped the frozen vegetables in.

From the living room, the football commentator got louder and louder as someone almost scored a try. Ended with a howl when the player was forced back. Whistles blew and the crowd roared, and the couch squeaked as Aiden's dad shifted.

An ad break.

Aiden got a beer from the fridge and took it down to his dad.

"Took you fucking long enough." His dad took the beer without looking at him, and used the corner of his shirt to twist the cap off the bottle. He flicked the cap onto the floor.

"I'm making dinner."

"Hurry up. I'm starving."

Aiden escaped back to the kitchen. His stomach growled as he turned the sausages in the frypan. His dad wasn't the only one starving.

He looked at the clipboard on the table, and at his painstaking handwriting. John Cole. Underneath where Aiden had written the name, the man had signed. He had a nice signature. All the letters flowed together and Aiden couldn't distinguish them. Also, a running writing J didn't look like a normal J. But then Aiden had always sucked at reading and writing.

He turned the clipboard over, embarrassed, and tried not to think of the way the man's leg had rubbed against his in the truck.

The water in the pot was boiling again. Aiden drained the vegetables then scooped them out onto a plate. Put two sausages beside them, and grabbed a knife and fork. Took the plate, and another beer, down to his dad.

His dad grunted at him.

Aiden returned to the kitchen and ate his own dinner: a sausage in bread, smothered in tomato sauce. Just how he liked it.

When the whistle sounded for halftime and the ads blared, Aiden went and collected his dad's empty plate. His dad got up and went for a piss, then stopped in at the kitchen on the way back for a third beer.

Aiden did the dishes.

When the football started up again Aiden headed for his bedroom, his stomach twisting a little in anticipation. Forty minutes until the end of the game. Forty minutes until his dad moved from the couch again.

Aiden only needed five.

“What is this? What the fuck is this?”

No no no no no.

His dad wasn't supposed to be in here. Wasn't supposed to see.

Wasn't supposed to wrap his blunt fingers around Aiden's throat and slam him into the wall so hard that his spine lit up with pain and he howled like a dog.

“What the fuck is this?” His dad shoved the magazine in Aiden's face. “What the fuck is *wrong* with you?”

Even if he'd been able to speak through the pain, through the tears, and through the fear that threatened to choke him, Aiden wouldn't have been able to find the words.

Cole was woken by the sounds of a revving engine. Adrenaline coursed through him. He was halfway out of bed before he realised what he was doing. It took him a moment to shake sleep off and make sense of his surroundings.

In the distance, the sound of the engine was already fading.

Cole sat on the edge of his bed, the covers flung back, resting his elbows on his knees. He stared at his hands in the gloom, and waited for his heartbeat to rediscover its regular rhythm.

Just a truck.

Tessa whined.

Cole stretched. "You need to go outside, girl?"

She whined again.

Cole stood and padded out to the back door. He opened it, and Tessa darted outside. She stood there in the moonlight, her hackles rising.

"Go on." Cole yawned. "Hurry up. I'm not gonna stand here all night because you suddenly heard a possum."

She loped away.

Cole let the screen door swing back. He flipped the kitchen light switch, but nothing happened. That was no surprise. The electricity company had told him they'd have the power on today. Lying bastards.

He stretched, and his stomach growled. He'd had a can of cold spaghetti for dinner, shared with Tessa, because he'd brought a bag of non-perishable groceries from home. Mostly because it seemed like a waste to leave them there, when he'd just end up buying the same things for twice the price when he got to Dingo Creek. His sister Deb had reminded him he was going to Dingo Creek, not a third world country, but fucked if Cole could see the difference so far.

He'd called the electricity company last week, and they'd promised the power would be reconnected by the time he arrived. All they had to do was flick a switch somewhere, but apparently that had been too difficult for them. So fuck them, and fuck his cold spaghetti dinner eaten in the dark. And fuck Cole too, for moaning about it when he was too lazy to bother go and check if the old generator in the shed was still there.

He'd eaten his cold spaghetti, thrown musty smelling sheets over dusty ones in the bedroom, and gone to bed.

Until the revving engine had woken him, anyway.

Cole leaned in the doorway and peered outside. Where the hell was the dog? How far was she going for a piss? Once the electricity was on, he'd get his power saw going and put a damned dog door in.

Shit. He hoped she didn't run too far. Maybe he should have put her on a leash and walked her outside.

He grabbed the torch off the kitchen counter and headed outside.

The ground was cold under his bare feet.

"Tessa?" He whistled. "Tessa?"

Great. His first night in his new place and he'd already written his car off and lost his dog. Lucky he wasn't superstitious, or he'd fuck off back to Brisbane in a heartbeat. Well, if he still had a car.

"Tessa!" He shone the beam of the torch around wildly. "Come on, girl!"

Rustling.

Cole turned the beam onto the thicket at the end of the overgrown garden. Tessa scrambled through, something dark held in her teeth.

"What've you got?" Cole held out a hand, hoping to hell it wasn't a possum or a rat. Because he hadn't unpacked the soap yet. "Drop it. Drop it."

Tessa dropped it.

It was sticky and wet, but it wasn't an animal. It was... fabric? Cole turned it over. It was a cap. LAWSON TOWING. And it was covered in blood.

Tessa beamed up him.

"Where'd you find it?" Cole asked. "Show me. Fetch?"

Tessa bounded off through the bushes again, with Cole hurrying after her.

As long as Aiden lay still, it didn't hurt. He was cold, more than anything.

Then a warm nose was nuzzling around his face again, and a dog's tongue was lapping at him. The beam of a torch dazzled him.

"Holy shit!"

Aiden's body screamed when the man lifted him, but he wasn't sure any sound came out but a strangled whimper.

"Don't die, kid."

He was trying.

He tried to tell the man he was trying as well, but he couldn't remember how to make words. It was so much easier to close his eyes and drift away. It didn't hurt so much when he drifted away.

“Okay,” the man said later. Much later, maybe, because Aiden couldn't see the stars anymore. He could see flickering candlelight instead, illuminating faded wallpaper with tiny little yellow flowers on it. “I don't have a phone, and I don't have a car. So please don't fucking die on me.”

Aiden tried to follow the path of the little yellow flowers all the way to the ceiling.

“What I have, kid,” said the shadow looming over him, “is a cheap-shit first aid kit. So that's gonna have to do for the moment, okay?”

Aiden couldn't keep his eyes open.

“Shit,” the man said. “Shit.”

Cole flipped the switch on the generator, holding his breath.

Come on. Please, please, please let this work. Please let Harry's dodgy DIY interlock kit still work. Please let it not blow up in his face, literally.

The generator spluttered into life.

Then, the torch jammed under his arm, Cole left the shed and fought his way through the crepe myrtle toward the fuse box. Who the fuck planted a tree so close to the fuse box? Probably someone who didn't think anyone would be fucking around in the fuse box at 2 a.m.

He flipped the breaker switch, then forced his way free of the crepe myrtle. He hurried up the back steps into the kitchen, and flicked on the light switch.

The bulb buzzed as it came to life.

“Fuck, yes!”

Something was going right at least.

Cole filled the kettle from the tap in the sink, and plugged it in.

The fridge smelled bad, but Cole threw the ice packs from his first aid kit into the freezer.

Then he headed for the bathroom, to see if there was anything useful there. He found bandages and Betadine, neither of which would be much use if the kid was bleeding internally.

Cole checked his watch. 2:17.

Dingo Creek was probably a forty minute walk. Could he afford to leave the kid for that long? Shit. Could he afford not to? The kid needed a hospital.

He put his phone on charge. Maybe he'd get some reception once he got it charged. Then he could call for an ambulance instead of having to walk for one.

He took a knife from the kitchen and returned to the bedroom.

The kid was still bleeding all over his sheets.

"Hey, kid," he said, leaning over the bed. He lifted the hem of the kid's T-shirt and cut it with the knife. Then ripped the fabric all the way up to the neckband. He sawed through that, holding the blade away from the kid's throat. "My name's Cole. Remember me?"

The kid's chest was still moving up and down. Cole felt his stomach carefully, not entirely sure what he was feeling for, but hoping he'd pick up on it if there was something out of place. The kid moaned and flinched, his eyes flickering.

"Can you tell me if it hurts there?"

"Hurts," the kid whispered.

"How bad?"

He didn't answer.

"Okay," Cole said. He felt the kid's ribs. Something shifted, and this time the kid cried out and tried to roll away. Cole held him still. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

Tears ran down the kid's face.

"Okay," Cole said. "What I'm gonna do is get you cleaned up, and then I'm gonna call the ambulance."

The kid made a high-pitched noise.

"You need the hospital," Cole told him.

The kid shook his head. "N-no!"

"Not gonna argue with you," Cole said. "You need a doctor, and I'll bet your dad's worried about you."

"No," the kid murmured. He lifted a hand, and closed his fingers around Cole's wrist. "Don't tell him."

"He'll be worried about you," Cole said, dread settling around him. "He'll want to know what happened."

“He knows,” the kid whispered, one eye wide in his bloody face, the other swelling shut. “He did it.”

Chapter Two

The kid fell into an uneasy sleep around about three. Cole sat on the floor, leaning up against the wall, and watched him. He stretched his legs out across the doorway, shifting them every now and then to keep Tessa out. Didn't want her jumping on the kid.

When the darkness eventually began to soften into grey pre-dawn light, Cole climbed to his feet. He flicked the bedroom light on, and checked the kid's injuries again. He seemed to be breathing better now.

"It's okay," Cole said, not sure if the kid even heard him or not. "I'm looking after you."

When he was done, he turned the light off, pulled the door shut, and ushered Tessa down the hall into the kitchen.

He rearranged the few groceries he'd brought from home, then unzipped his first aid kit on the kitchen table and spread it out. He found a blister pack of codeine pills that hadn't expired yet hidden in amongst a nest of crepe bandages. Rubbed the scar on his thigh absently as he turned the pack over in his hand.

He wondered if the kid had been telling the truth last night. If his father had flogged the shit out of him. Cole wasn't sure he could trust anything the kid had said—pain fucked people up—but he couldn't think of a reason he would lie about it.

Cole made a coffee. As he tipped the water into the mug, he heard the sound of an engine.

The same one as last night.

He sat on the back step with the mug in his hand, and watched as the tow truck roared down the narrow road behind his property. In the daylight he had a better sense of the lay of the land. His property was set on a slight incline; from the back steps, the yard sloped away to the tangled row of bushes and the collapsed fence that marked his boundary line. Behind that was a paddock that was probably owned by the government. Certainly it had no other marks of ownership on it. It was unfenced, untended, and bristled with clumps of tall grass. The road ran through on the other side of that, disappearing over the slight hill. If Cole remembered his map right, it was the road that led from Lawson's Towing down to the disused quarry.

Cole watched three men stalking around in the paddock, stopping every now and then as though to get their bearings.

Must've been drunk last night. Maybe they'd come out to see if the kid was still lying there. Maybe they'd woken up full of regret and wanted to check he was okay. Or maybe they just wanted to make sure they'd covered their tracks.

He twisted his head to look up at the kitchen bench. His mobile phone was plugged in and charging, but he didn't know what sort of signal he'd get out here yet.

Cole sipped his coffee and watched as the three men eventually gave up the hunt. They climbed back into the truck and roared off back toward the tow yard.

Cole scratched Tessa's head, set his cup down on the top step, and sighed. Time to check on his guest again.

Aiden didn't want to open his eyes.

To open his eyes was to acknowledge he was awake. To acknowledge he was awake was to acknowledge that it was real. He hadn't dreamed it. His dad had hurt him.

Really hurt him.

Aiden shifted slightly, and pain flared. He held his breath until it passed, and then realised he was blinking at the ceiling through the one eye that actually opened.

He let his breath go slowly, easing the pressure on his chest.

He felt curiously empty, as though the physical pain was taking up all of the space inside him usually reserved for emotion.

He wasn't scared like he'd been the night before. Like he'd been his whole life.

He wasn't even surprised.

Just empty.

He listened to measured footsteps creak down the hall, followed by the click-click-click of a dog's claws. He heard rattling next, the clatter of cutlery and crockery. A few minutes later, the whistle of a kettle.

Aiden watched the little yellow flowers on the wallpaper climb up toward the ceiling. He blinked when they shimmered, then kept his eyes closed for a little while. Maybe a long while.

Then the footsteps returned and the door opened.

Aiden kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to talk. Didn't want to explain.

He moaned at the sudden sharp sensation of cold against his side. His eyes flashed open. At least, his good eye did.

"Just changing your ice pack," John Cole said.

Tears filled Aiden's eyes. He raised a hand to brush them away, and was distracted by the tape on his fingers.

"Broken," John Cole said. "You remember what I told you last night? You need a hospital, kid."

"Aiden," Aiden whispered.

"Aiden. My name's Cole."

"No hospital." Aiden tried to make a fist, but his fingers wouldn't bend.

"Give me one good reason," Cole said.

"The hospital will call the police," Aiden said. "If the police come around, he'll kill me."

Cole clamped his mouth shut on whatever reply he'd been going to make. Then he shook his head slightly.

"Please," Aiden whispered. He saw the indecision written all over the man's face. "Please."

Cole only shook his head again, and left the room.

Aiden lifted his hand again and traced his broken fingers lightly across the yellow flowers on the wallpaper. Behind the flowers, twists of greenery rose toward the ceiling. Like a beanstalk Aiden wished he could climb.

Tears spilled down his cheeks, hot paths of pain and shame.

He wished he had the courage to run away, like his mum had.

But she'd been so clever.

So clever and so pretty and so unlike anything else in his life.

When he was a kid, Aiden used to pretend his mother was something from a fairytale. Maybe because she told him those stories, or maybe because he wanted to think she'd been compelled to escape, and that even Aiden's love couldn't hold her to this grey, bleak world. She was like the princess who discovered Rumpelstiltskin's true name, or the selkie who had found her skin again. One day, when his father didn't have the power to hold her against her will anymore, she was gone.

That was what he imagined, anyhow.

Aiden's childhood had been made from fantasies.

He was the youngest prince. The smallest, the weakest, but secretly, the smartest.

He had wicked stepbrothers.

Well, half-brothers.

And not wicked, exactly. Just older than him. Sometimes mean, but mostly Mike and Stu didn't pay him any attention at all. So long as he shut up and kept out of their way.

It was better to pretend that he was some poor Cinderella, slaving away in rags, but knowing that something good would happen just because he deserved that in his life. Better than acknowledging the truth: sometimes life was just bad. It was easier to pretend than to face the reality that nothing would ever change.

But the worst of all his fantasies, the most dangerous, was the one that Aiden could never share with anyone: that a handsome prince would rescue him.

God.

His dad had been so mad. Spittle flying out of his mouth, spraying Aiden's face. Shouting and screaming, and hurting him. His dad had dragged him out of the house, to the truck. He didn't remember much else. The thrum of the engine reverberating through him as he lay with his face on the cracked vinyl seat of the truck. His dad still yelling, still swearing. The way the truck lurched from side to side, because his dad was too drunk to be driving it. The sudden realisation that they were heading for the quarry, even though the quarry was off limits. His dad's bellow of rage when he saw the gates were padlocked shut.

After that he remembered the stars, and the dog.

And he remembered Cole telling him not to die.

By morning, the fuel in the generator had run out and Cole switched the breaker back to the mains supply. Which, incredibly, was actually connected now. Only a day late, which had to be some sort of oversight on the part of the electricity company. Cole was sure it was official policy to fuck people around for longer than that.

Then Cole checked his phone to find he had some sort of signal at least.

Power and mobile phone coverage. Things were looking up, if you didn't count the injured kid lying in the bedroom.

He dialled his sister.

"Hey, John. Are you at Uncle Harry's? I can't really talk long. I'm at work."

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling you."

"Are you okay?" Deb's voice sharpened.

"Yeah. It's not me. Look, this guy, he got bashed and he doesn't want to go to hospital, and—"

"John, take him to the hospital."

"I don't have a car."

"What do you mean you don't have a car?"

"That's a whole other thing." Cole rubbed his hand over his face. "Listen, Deb, can I send you some pictures or something? And you can tell me what to do?"

"I'm telling you what to do. Call an ambulance."

"Deb, c'mon. Can you just take a look at him?"

"Can I just take a look at him via fucking telephone?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Jesus Christ, John. Let me at least get into the on-call room first."

"Aiden?"

Aiden blinked his eyes open.

"I'm going to take some photographs," Cole said, holding up his phone. "My sister's a doctor. She's going to take a look at them."

Aiden nodded, and let John draw back the sheets.

Aiden closed his eyes as John photographed him, embarrassed to be lying there in nothing but his underwear, covered in ugly bruises. He kept his eyes closed as Cole held a conversation with his sister.

"About six hours," Cole said. Silence. Then: "Okay, I'll check."

Aiden tried not to flinch as he felt Cole's hand on his abdomen, prodding gently.

"That okay?" Cole asked.

Aiden murmured his assent.

"No," Cole said into the phone. "I think it's just the ribs, and the fingers, the black eye, and a fuckload of bruises." He snorted at something she said. "Yeah, I have seen worse."

Aiden opened his eyes.

"I've got codeine," Cole said. He tugged the sheet back up. "Yeah, I know." A sigh. "I know!"

He lowered his voice. "I will. If anything changes, I'll call the ambulance. Okay. Okay. Thanks. I'll talk to you later. Bye." He ended the call and put his phone in his pocket.

"You've seen worse?" Aiden asked him in the sudden silence.

"Yes."

Aiden didn't know how to respond to that. He wished he hadn't asked. Cole was his rescuer. A part of Aiden wanted him to be pure somehow, untouched by violence. Even the witnessing of it. Dumb. He was just being dumb. Because Cole was a big guy, a tough guy, and those were the guys who knew. They were the ones who were unafraid of violence because they were never on the receiving end. Big guys, like his dad. Like his brothers.

He could imagine Cole drinking beer with them.

Imagine him laughing when his dad said he was dumb as dog shit, and flicked cigarette ends at his face to make him jump out of the way.

"I was in the army," Cole said. "Cavalry."

“Like with horses?”

Cole snorted. “More like tanks.”

“Sorry.”

Cole laid a palm on his forehead. “Anyway, I got out. Spent a while pissing my savings up against the wall, and here I am.”

“Why’d you come here?”

“This was my uncle’s place. Turns out he left it to me. I was gonna spend a few months here, do the place up for sale or something.”

Aiden nodded slightly, but it was difficult to listen. He was drifting further away every time he blinked. Cole’s palm was cool against his forehead. It was nice to be touched. It hurt a little, but that wasn’t Cole’s fault. Cole was big, but maybe Aiden didn’t have to be scared of that.

“Anyway.” Cole sighed. “Stuck here until the car gets fixed now.”

“Mmmm.” Aiden closed his eyes. “The man who used to live here. Harry. He was your uncle?”

“Kind of. He was married to my aunt. They divorced when I was a kid, but he still remembered birthdays and Christmas. He left this place to my sister and me. He didn’t have any family of his own.”

“He was nice,” Aiden whispered. He opened his eyes again. “He said hello if he saw me going up to the quarry.” He swallowed. “Even though I wasn’t supposed to go up there.”

“What’s at the quarry worth seeing?”

Aiden shrugged. “I liked it there. I used to play there. I pretended it was Tatooine. You know, Luke’s planet in *Star Wars*.”

“You like *Star Wars*?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Cole said.

Aiden felt a smile spreading over his face. It ached.

“Before you crash out again, do you need to piss?”

That killed his smile. Made him conscious of the pressure in his bladder too. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I’ll get a bucket or something.”

“No, I can...” Aiden pushed the blanket back, but the second he tried to lift his head off the pillow he was overcome with dizziness. “Oh.”

“Stay there.” Cole put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll get a bucket.”

When Cole got back with the bucket, Aiden was bright red underneath all the bruises that were starting to flower on his face.

“Can you sit up? Or roll over a little?” Cole winced in sympathy as Aiden shifted onto his side. His expression tightened, and he moaned. Cole got a hand behind his shoulder to help him. “Take it slow. You’re okay.”

Aiden squeezed his eyes shut.

“Okay. I’m just gonna... I’ll hold the sheet out of the way, and the container in place, if you want to, um... aim.”

“I’m sorry,” Aiden whispered. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Aiden,” Cole said firmly, regretting his own awkwardness. The kid had probably taken his cue from that. “Open your eyes. Okay. Can you get your underwear down or do you need help?”

Aiden screwed up his face as he shoved his underwear down.

“I was in the army, remember?” Cole said. “You’ve got nothing I’ve never seen before.”

Seeing, though, was a hell of a lot different from getting a container under the kid’s dick and making sure it stayed there while he pissed.

“Plus your sister’s a doctor,” Aiden muttered. His eyes were closed again, but his mouth was pulled into a grim smile.

“Right.” Cole laughed, surprised at his unexpected display of humour. “So that makes it all totally legit.”

“Right,” Aiden whispered, eyes resolutely shut.

The sound of his urine trickling into the plastic container was probably the loudest sound in the world. Cole tried very hard to keep his gaze on the stream, and not Aiden’s dick. The stream was clear; no blood. That was good.

Aiden shifted back, shoving himself back in his underwear and flinching as he did so. His eyes flashed open.

“Okay?”

“Got kicked, I think. In my balls.” He scabbled for the sheet with his taped fingers.

“Icepack,” Cole said. “And you’ll tell me if it gets worse, right?”

Aiden nodded.

Cole rose, holding the bucket at arm’s length. “I’ll get you some codeine too.”

It had been a long time since Cole had looked after anyone.

Aiden slept, mostly. He woke up in the afternoon long enough to piss in the bucket—a process that still seemed as mortifying to him as it had the first time—then ate a few spoonfuls of canned spaghetti. Heated up, which was at least something. Then he slept again.

Cole started to get the house in order.

He’d been in Iraq when Uncle Harry had passed away. His mum and Deb had come out for the funeral, and packed the house up. They’d taken the photo albums and Harry’s scant few valuables. Everything else had been boxed up and left, because they’d intended to come back again. That had been right before Cole’s mum had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

These things happen in threes, she’d said. She’d been counting Harry’s death, her own diagnosis, and her next-door-neighbour’s grandson, who was battling leukaemia. The kid had survived. Cole’s mother hadn’t. Cole had made it home in time to see her, which she’d thought was a blessing. He hadn’t. She’d been so destroyed by the cancer, carved out from the inside, that months later, Cole was still afraid he’d never be able to forget that thin, haggard creature who wore his mother’s face in all his memories now. Superimposed on every one.

He’d tried to tell Deb, tried to explain it in a way that didn’t sound so fucking selfish, but maybe there was no way to explain it. Maybe it was just selfish.

“*Oh, fuck you!*” Deb had shouted at him. “*This isn’t about you and your PTSD and wanting to neck yourself or whatever the fuck it is you dream about! This is about our mother!*”

They'd both been pretty fucked up after the funeral.

Coming out to Dingo Creek was supposed to be a fresh start. A place to get his head together while he got used to being out of the army. While he got used to his mother's death. A project to keep him busy, to keep him from brooding, and maybe walk away with a bit of cash if he fixed the house up and sold it. Not like he'd get rich flipping a house in Dingo Creek, but if the quarry was really reopening, there might be people looking for places.

It was a good little house. Post-war. Solid. The original wooden stumps had been replaced with steel posts. The only termite damage was at least thirty years old, and superficial. Cole was mainly concerned about the roof. He hadn't had a chance to check it out yet, but he hoped it was in good condition.

It was still full of Uncle Harry's gear. Most of it boxed up for charity, with the boxes labelled in his mother's neat writing: *Clothes. Books. Pots + pans. Records.* Cole was tempted to dig through the records, except what were the chances he'd find anything other than Slim Dusty and Charley Pride? And what would he play them on, even if he did?

He found an old radio that worked, and listened to music and occasional bursts of static while he cleaned and Tessa got tangled up in his legs. He didn't want Aiden to recover from his injuries only to succumb to some exotic disease found in the scum in the bathroom tiles.

Aiden was problematic.

He was none of Cole's business, and the last thing Cole wanted was to get stuck in Dingo Creek sorting out someone else's problems, but, fuck him, he wouldn't let Cole hand him over to anyone whose job it was to help. No hospital, and no police. Which meant he was Cole's problem, whether Cole liked it or not.

Shit.

Cole looked at his phone on the kitchen table.

He should just call the police and be done with it.

Except, hadn't he promised?

Actually, he was pretty sure he hadn't.

But hadn't the kid's trust been betrayed enough?

Sure.

But again, not Cole's problem.

He sighed and tapped his fingers on the scratched surface of the kitchen table.

"What?" he asked Tessa. "What the hell do I do with him?"

Tessa looked at him with her head at an angle, and her ears cocked.

"Your fault," Cole muttered, and reached down to scratch her head. "You found him."

Her tail thumped against the wall like a heartbeat.

Chapter Three

At first, Aiden had been scared that Cole would call the ambulance or the police, or his family. He tried to stay awake to listen for vehicles approaching the little house, but couldn't. He slept a lot. He had scary dreams. Sometimes the only thing that saved him was Cole's hand on his shoulder, gentling him awake to take his temperature and give him more codeine.

Aiden lost time. He wasn't sure if it was hours or even days. Mostly, he was too tired to hold onto his fear for long.

In the night, Aiden dreamed of the quarry and woke up panting, twisted in the sheets. It was still dark, although the night was beginning to soften into greyness. His skin prickled. His heart pounded.

When the door squeaked on its hinges, Aiden was afraid it might be Cole. He would be embarrassed if Cole heard him, but also secretly glad to have his company.

Instead, Tessa sidled into the room. She stuck her nose in Aiden's face.

Aiden closed his eyes and ran his fingers through the course hair around her neck.

"Had a nightmare," he whispered to her.

It had been years since he'd dreamed of the quarry.

The quarry had been Aiden's favourite place once. It was where his imagination flew free and all the stories he knew—from his mum, from the television—came to life. The quarry was a desert island full of pirates and Aiden was their leader. It was an African savannah where lions stalked their prey and Aiden stalked them. It was the harsh surface of Tatooine where Aiden fought Sand People and Sith Lords.

Then, after his mum left, his dad had gotten a lot worse. Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe his mum just hadn't been there to deflect his dad's temper anymore. Whatever it was, suddenly Aiden had to bear the brunt. Once, when his dad had caught him at the quarry, he'd dragged him home and taken a belt to him. It had been vicious. Aiden had never seen his dad so out of control. He had been so wrapped in rage that Aiden's screams had only driven him to greater violence. Aiden didn't remember now how it had ended—whether he'd passed out or his dad had gotten tired, or if Mike or Stu had stopped it. He

could only remember his dad yelling—the spit flying from his contorted mouth—that Aiden had been told to keep away from the quarry. He'd been fucking *told*. Every shouted word accompanied by another vicious blow of the belt. The pain had been so intense that Aiden, screaming and begging, had seen white.

His bum and the back of his legs had been so badly bruised that he'd missed two weeks of school.

He'd never forgotten that terror, that pain.

He'd never gone back to the quarry.

He'd never defied his dad again. At least, he'd never meant to. But when it was something inside of him, something that he couldn't separate from himself any more than he could untwist the strands of his DNA and start again, Aiden didn't know how to make it right. How to make himself right.

He'd never wanted to be that terrified kid again.

Except he'd never stopped being that kid.

He was that kid right now, tears running down his face while Tessa tried to lick him clean.

“Gross,” Aiden whispered, but didn't push her away.

It felt too nice to know there was another living creature that cared.

Aiden had nightmares.

Cole, trying to sleep on the lumpy couch in the front room, heard them. For a moment those sounds—low noises of helpless panic, rising like a whine—took him straight back to his own nightmares, straight back to Iraq. Then he heard Tessa's claws clicking as she went to check on Aiden.

“I've got a friend who trains service animals,” Deb had said. *“I can get you a dropout.”*

“The last thing I need is an animal.”

“If you can't get out of bed to feed yourself, maybe you'll get out of bed to feed a fucking dog.”

Which, stupid as Cole had thought it sounded, had actually worked.

There was no way in hell Deb would have trusted him to head to Dingo Creek on his own without Tessa. She was still convinced, Cole knew, that one

day he'd just open a vein or sling a rope over a beam or something. Just because he'd dreamed about it. Dreamed about it so often that it became this insidious idea that crept into the back of his mind even when he was awake.

Just a dream, he'd thought a hundred times, unable to tell if he was relieved or not.

But you could make it real, a voice had started to whisper back.

His head had been fucked back then.

Still was, probably.

Cole climbed to his feet. He scrubbed his knuckles over his scalp. He crossed to the bedroom door and listened for a while. He heard Aiden murmur something, and then the answering thump of Tessa's tail.

Cole rapped on the door and pushed it open further. "Aiden, you okay?"

"Yeah."

Cole flicked the light on.

Aiden raised a hand to his eyes, flinching.

"Sorry. Do you need the bucket?"

Aiden grimaced. "What time is it?"

Cole squinted at the clock on the bedside table. "Almost five."

"What day is it?"

That took Cole a moment. "Tuesday."

"Oh." Aiden dropped his hand and blinked at Cole. "I think I want to try walking to the toilet."

"Okay. But you'll lean on me and we'll take it slow."

Slow wasn't the word.

Their progress was interminable.

Cole couldn't imagine it had even taken Harry as long to make the short walk, his lungs ruined by emphysema in his final months. Aiden was in obvious pain, and kept one hand on the wall to steady himself, but he smiled proudly at Cole when he made it to the small bathroom.

"Don't get cocky, kid," Cole said, wondering if Aiden would pick the *Star Wars* quote. He released his elbow at last.

Aiden's smile grew.

"I'll be right outside." Cole dragged Tessa out by the collar.

A few minutes later the toilet flushed, and Aiden shuffled into the doorway.

"Coffee?" Cole asked.

Aiden followed him into the kitchen.

"I used to get up early all the time," Cole said, flicking on the kitchen light.

"In the army?"

"Mmmm." Cole checked the kettle and filled it. He stifled a yawn, then opened the back door for Tessa. "Got out of the habit though. Feels good though, to be up at this hour. Waiting for the dawn."

"I get up early," Aiden said. "I make breakfast for my dad and Mike and Stu. They're my brothers."

Cole rattled around for a couple of clean mugs. "Is it just you and them?"

"Yeah." Hardly more than a whisper.

Cole picked up a teaspoon and wiped it on his sweatpants. "You want to tell me why your dad bashed you?"

Aiden paled underneath his bruises. His gaze flicked to the open back door.

"No," Cole said firmly.

"Wh-what?"

"No, you're not going to run out of here. I don't think you could, even if you tried, but you're not going to try, okay?" Cole prised the lid off the tin of instant coffee he'd brought from home. "Just tell me why you won't go to the police."

"He'd..." Aiden swallowed. "He'd *kill* me."

God, but Cole wished that were an exaggeration. It was hard to imagine anything that could make a man angry enough to hurt his own child so badly, but something had. Cole couldn't imagine living with fear like that, but it was so real, so palpable in that moment, that Cole couldn't even try to tell Aiden that he was wrong, and that he needed to go to the police.

Because your dad needs to be in jail.

Because if you let him get away with it, nothing will stop him from doing it again.

To you, or to someone else.

Because you won't be safe as long as he's free.

“Okay,” he said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. “If that's your decision.”

Aiden nodded, not meeting Cole's eyes.

Cole spooned coffee into the mugs.

It was Aiden's decision, and he'd abide by it. Until he could talk him around, at least.

Somehow, over the next few days they fell into a routine. It felt dangerous to Cole, how easy it was.

Cole would wake up each morning to the sound of the radio in the kitchen, and to the clatter and clink of Aiden making breakfast. Cole would wander out to the kitchen and lean in the kitchen doorway, and wait for Aiden to see him and flash him his shy smile.

After breakfast, Cole would get down to work, knocking out the tiles in the bathroom or stripping wallpaper in the back room, or whatever job he felt like tackling that day. Aiden would offer to help, and Cole would refuse. Instead he'd go and work alone, while Aiden kept Tessa out from underfoot, and brought him coffee.

Cole liked Aiden's company.

There wasn't a single moment when it changed, when Cole looked at Aiden and he'd been suddenly transformed into something new. Aiden was still bruised, still hurting. He was a *victim*. Which is why Cole felt like a total prick for staring as Aiden crossed the living room floor on Thursday afternoon wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants.

“You want a coffee?”

Cole, taking a break from the renovations, tried not to focus on anything except his face. “Are you having one?”

“No. But I can make you one.” Aiden's smile was shy and proud at the same time.

God. Cole had no doubt that Aiden would do it; he seemed like the sort of person who would always put others first. But how much of that was his

generous nature and how much had been flogged into him from an early age, Cole had no idea.

“Maybe later.” Cole shifted up to make room on the couch. “Sit down.”

Aiden sat, and immediately had a lapful of dog. “Hey, Tessa.”

“Traitor,” Cole told the dog. He reached down beside the couch to retrieve the book he’d started earlier. It was one of Harry’s books; the cheap cowboy pulp novels that Cole remembered had once been sold on racks in supermarkets and service stations everywhere. He showed Aiden the cover. “There’s a whole box full of them in the back room if you want to read one.”

“I don’t read much,” Aiden said.

Something about the sudden defensiveness of his posture made Cole realise that Aiden’s “*I don’t read much*” was really an *I can’t read much*. He remembered what Paul Lawson had said: “*Dumb as fucking dog shit.*”

Aiden stood up again. “I think I’ll, um, I think I’ll go and have a rest.”

“Aiden?”

Aiden turned, looking wary and hopeful at the same time.

“If I say shit that makes you uncomfortable, that’s only because I don’t know you, okay? I’m not doing it on purpose.” Cole spread his hands. “You can talk to me, you know.”

Aiden nodded. “I know.” Colour rose in his face. “Um, thanks.”

He left the room.

Aiden stared into the small spotted bathroom mirror and relearned the planes of his face. The swollen cheek. The puffy ridge of his jaw. The black eye that was open properly for the first time in days. He wondered if he’d ever look the same as he had, or if the beating had altered him forever. If, even when the swelling and the bruising faded, it would still be somehow written across his face.

“You okay in there?” The door squeaked open.

“Yes.” Aiden moved back from the mirror. From a few steps away his reflection, spotted and discoloured, looked like an old sepia photograph of some boy who’d lived and died a century ago.

“Hot water should be working again now,” Cole said. He turned on the tap in the sink. The knuckles of his right hand were grazed and oozing blood. The water turned pink.

“What happened?” Aiden asked, his heart pounding a little faster. Suddenly imagining Cole’s fist impacting against his skull, bone on bone, the skin splitting.

“The valve wouldn’t turn at first. Took me by surprise when it did.” Cole turned off the tap and wiped his hand on his shirt. “Worth it for a hot shower.”

“You should put something on it,” Aiden said.

“Hey, I’m in charge of the first aid around here, okay?” Cole’s smile belied his serious tone.

“Okay.” Aiden grinned and flushed. Couldn’t understand how Cole made him feel so embarrassed, just by smiling at him. “*You can talk to me, you know,*” Cole had said. Aiden wondered if it was true. He wanted it to be, except he wasn’t good with talking, and he didn’t have anything anyone wanted to hear anyway. But he trusted Cole enough to try. “Once, one of Dad’s pig dogs got torn up and Dad wouldn’t take him to the vet. I looked after him.”

Cole frowned slightly.

Aiden’s face burned. “Um, I said it because we were talking about first aid...”

“Oh, right!” Cole’s mouth quirked in a smile. He sat down on the edge of the bath and held his hand out. “Have at it then.”

Aiden’s courage grew. He took the antiseptic from the counter beside the sink and unscrewed the lid. He dabbed some on a cotton ball and took Cole’s hand in his own. It was warm. Large. Blunt fingers curled around Aiden’s hand, the contact making him suddenly breathless. He studied Cole’s knuckles. They were cross-hatched with old scars. Tried to think of what it meant those hands had done, not just about how good it felt to have Cole’s palm pressing against his own.

Aiden shifted closer, conscious that another step would bring him into the triangle between Cole’s knees.

His throat was dry.

“When, um, when my mum was hurt, I looked after her too.” Aiden didn’t know why he’d said that.

“Where’s your mum now?” Cole asked, screwing up his face as Aiden swiped the antiseptic across his knuckles.

“She left.” Sometimes Aiden dreamed of the places she might be. He’d always thought she was beautiful enough and clever enough to move to a city and just shine, but part of him was afraid it wasn’t true. Maybe she wouldn’t shine at all in a city. Maybe, in all that light, hers wouldn’t seem so bright.

“Where’d she go?”

“I don’t know.” Aiden dropped Cole’s hand and moved back. He felt cold suddenly. Dizzy. A wave of nausea hit him, and he fought not to throw up. “She packed her bag and she left.”

“Did your mum get hurt a lot?”

Aiden swallowed. “Um, sometimes. When he was drinking. When she made him angry.”

Cole flexed his hand. He frowned up at Aiden. “And you made him angry too, right?”

Aiden took another step back. “Yeah,” he whispered.

Cole exhaled heavily. “What’d you do, Aiden?”

“There was…” The words died in his throat.

“There was what?” Cole’s gaze caught him and held him, and refused to let him hide.

“There was…” Aiden drew a deep breath and tried again, even though he was scared. So fucking scared. “There was a magazine.”

Aiden had found the magazine at the side of the road. Like it had been thrown out of a passing car or dropped from heaven or something. It had rained since the magazine had been dumped there. A lot of the pages had swollen and not dried right again. When Aiden had found the magazine it hadn’t rained in days though. It had been hot and dry, and the sun had bleached the pages that were exposed.

It wasn’t like Aiden was in the habit of picking up rubbish from the side of the road. It was just that he’d kicked the magazine when he’d passed it, and exposed a page that hadn’t been erased by the weather, and all of a sudden he’d seen.

There was a picture of a man giving another man a blowjob. A close-up of his face, his mouth stretched wide and tears running down his face as though it was something terrible.

It was.

Aiden knew it was.

He hadn't wanted to touch the magazine, but he'd been compelled. First though, he'd looked up and down the road to make sure there was nobody else around who might have seen him. Then he'd picked the magazine up and shoved it down the front of his jeans. It wasn't until it was resting against his skin that Aiden had suddenly realized it might be filthy in more ways than one—that it was probably the sort of magazine that a man had jerked off over—but by then it had been too late to worry about it.

Aiden had taken the magazine home and hid it under his bed.

He'd been so careful, never to let anyone see it.

For *months*.

Until five nights ago when his dad had barged into his room and caught him.

Once he'd started, Aiden told Cole everything.

He only stopped talking when, in the rush to get the words out, he forgot to breathe. He was overcome with dizziness, and with regret. Not just for what he was, but for being too weak to keep his secret and for forcing Cole to look at him differently. He turned away and staggered slightly. Pressed his hands against the wall to stop himself from falling.

"Hey." Cole's breath was warm against the back of his neck. He put his hand on Aiden's shoulder, his touch gentle but firm. "Don't panic."

Aiden shuddered. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead to the wall.

"Breathe," Cole said. "Just breathe."

Aiden nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Cole squeezed his shoulder, warmth radiating from his touch. "I would never hurt you, Aiden. Not because you're gay. Not for anything. You're safe here."

You're safe.

You're safe.

You're safe.

Aiden would have given anything for it to be true.

Chapter Four

On Friday morning, Cole closed Aiden's bedroom door and called Lawson Towing. Got someone called Mike. Aiden's brother, he remembered.

"Oh yeah," Mike said when Cole gave his name. "You're staying out at the old McCann place, right?"

"That's right."

"You finding it okay?"

Cole thought of how he'd watched Paul Lawson and his sons checking through the scrubby grass in the paddock at the back of the house, and wondered if Mike was really asking if he'd found Aiden first.

"I like it," Cole said. "It's quiet."

Mike was silent for a while, his breath sighing down the line. "You ringing about your car?"

"Yeah. Any idea how long it'll take to get fixed? I'm running out of groceries."

"Shit," Mike said. "Gonna be another week, at least. Still waiting on the parts. But I'm heading into town later for a few hours if you want a lift."

Cole might have even warmed to such neighbourly generosity if he hadn't seen Aiden's injuries and knew what sort of man his brother was. What sort of life Aiden had lived so far.

"That'd be good." The moral high ground was for people with food in their kitchens.

"I'll pick you up in about twenty minutes," Mike said.

"Thanks." Cole ended the call.

"Aiden?"

Aiden struggled free of sleep, coming up for breath through the layers of his dreams that lay on him as soft as muslin. He blinked at the ceiling, his fingers finding those faded yellow flowers on the wallpaper without conscious effort. He turned his head toward the door. "Mmm?"

Cole sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm going into town to get some groceries and stuff."

"Okay." Aiden drifted for a moment, then frowned as awareness caught him. "How?"

"Mike's giving me a lift."

Aiden felt himself crumple, like a dry leaf too close to a flame. Fear twisted inside him, building quickly. He struggled to sit, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"Hey," Cole said. He shifted, and bedsprings squeaked. He reached out and put his hand on Aiden's shoulder. "He doesn't know you're here, and I won't tell him, okay?"

"Promise?" Aiden asked, the weight of the word on his chest making it difficult to breathe. He was unworthy. He had no right to make that demand of Cole, when Cole had already done so much. "Because if he finds out," he said, his throat aching, "he'll tell Dad, and Dad'll come and get me, and—"

"And nothing," Cole said firmly. "He's not going to find out. I promise, Aiden."

I promise, Aiden.

Aiden couldn't remember the last time someone had promised him something, and it hadn't been a threat. *You do that again, and I promise you'll regret it.* He tugged the sheet up over his lap. "I'm sorry."

Cole squeezed his shoulder. "What are you sorry for?"

"Everything." The heat from Cole's touch seemed to grow, spreading from Aiden's shoulder into his bloodstream. Travelling to every corner of his body. "For putting you in this position. For freaking out all the time."

"You don't need to apologise for anything."

Aiden searched his gaze. That rush of heat translated suddenly to a rush of hope. He leaned toward Cole before his fear could catch him.

"Can I just..." The whisper died as his lips brushed against Cole's.

It was a fraction of a second. It was a lifetime. Aiden forgot to breathe.

Cole pulled away, bringing his hand up.

Aiden flinched back.

“No.” Cole’s eyes were wide. He reached out and touched Aiden’s jaw. “Don’t be scared.”

Aiden was terrified. He was suddenly less afraid of Cole beating him down for daring to kiss him than he was of the alternative: that Cole *wanted* him. The expectations of that were dizzying. Aiden had never... he hadn’t done *anything*.

“Don’t ever be scared of this,” Cole said. He tilted Aiden’s head gently. This time it was Cole who leaned in.

Aiden closed his eyes.

A thousand different sensations. Heat. Electricity. Pressure. The pads of Cole’s fingers brushing his jaw while Cole’s lips touched his own gently. Then, something new. Aiden’s breath huffed out of him as Cole’s tongue brushed against the seam of his mouth. He made a strangled noise.

“It’s okay.”

Aiden felt Cole’s mouth make the shape of the words. He opened his mouth a little, and jolted with surprise as Cole’s tongue touched his.

The kiss was over before Aiden even had a chance to catalogue each competing sensation. He kept his eyes closed as Cole pulled away, grateful when Cole ran a hand through his hair and encouraged him into an embrace. Aiden rested his forehead on Cole’s shoulder, his face turned toward his throat. He hid his embarrassment in their closeness.

Cole rubbed circles on his back. “You okay?”

“Mmmm.” As long as he didn’t need to make eye contact.

“Good.” Cole exhaled heavily. “Okay, Mike’s going to be here soon. I won’t let him in the house. Do you want anything when I’m in town?”

Aiden shook his head. He straightened up again, unable to meet Cole’s gaze. Plucked at the sheet lying across his lap instead.

“Okay.” Cole rubbed his knuckles gently across the top of Aiden’s hand. “You’re safe here, remember?”

Aiden kept his gaze down. He nodded. “I remember.”

Safe, but still scared.

Mike Lawson looked like his father. He was a big guy. Built like a front rower. Sandy hair, freckles, eyes squinting against the sunlight, and a prominent chin with a dimple in it. If Cole hadn't known he was Aiden's brother, he wouldn't have believed it.

They shook hands. Mike had a good grip.

His gaze slid off Cole's face and over his shoulder.

Right into the living room and to the closed bedroom door.

Tessa barked from behind the door.

"Dog's not real friendly," Cole lied.

Mike rubbed the back of his hand, as though remembering an old scar. His face split with a grin. "Used to have one like that."

"I'd offer you a drink, but I've only got tap water."

Mike grinned. "Guess we'd better hit the road then."

"That'd be good." Cole followed him outside.

He pulled the door shut and locked it, then followed Mike to his car. It was a Holden ute, an older model but still in good condition. It was covered in dust. The seat covers were ripped.

The trip to town took about twenty minutes.

Mike talked about his girlfriend, his place on the local football team, and the best waterholes nearby for fishing.

"You staying around for long?"

About as long as it took to get his car fixed.

"I dunno. I want to sell the house if I can. It's in a good position if they're reopening the quarry."

"I guess." Mike fiddled with the radio for a moment. "You reckon anyone would move all the way out here though? Even if there were jobs?"

Cole stared out the window. "Probably not."

"Nobody comes here," Mike said. "You're born here, and if you don't get out after school, you die here too."

Cole thought of Aiden, bleeding in the paddock behind the house. His stomach clenched as he realised how close Aiden had come to dying, without

ever having left Dingo Creek. Without ever having lived. He thought of Aiden's kiss: so shy, so tentative, and at the same time the bravest fucking thing in the world. Cole had seen breathtaking daring like that before, in Iraq. It manifested in a different way, but it was born in exactly the same place. It was the reckless courage of a man who thought he had nothing left to lose.

It was brilliant. It was dazzling. It was also heartbreaking.

"Get out or die here," he said. "Are those the only options?"

"I reckon they are," Mike laughed.

In that case, Cole thought, Aiden needed to get out.

"You had any trouble since you moved in?" Mike asked, squinting into the glare as he drove.

Cole's gut tightened. "What sort of trouble?"

"I dunno." Mike shrugged his big shoulders. "Anyone hanging around or something."

"Haven't seen another soul," Cole lied, and frowned at the view as they arrived in town.

Dingo Creek was a main street; hot, faded bitumen overlaid with a thin shroud of red dust. Three large hotels occupied three different corners where the main street met the highway, their wide wooden verandas and decorative fretwork recalling a more prosperous era. Two of the three hotels had boarded up windows. On the fourth corner was a bank. Three empty shopfronts marked the place between the bank and the supermarket.

"Meet you back here at noon?" Mike asked.

"Sure. Thanks."

Cole wondered what the hell he could do for two hours. The slowest grocery shopping in the world maybe.

Cole remembered visiting Uncle Harry a few times. He must have been eight or nine the last time. They'd visited a park by the river, and went riding quad bikes at one of Harry's mate's properties. They'd come into town every day to get chocolate milkshakes. He didn't remember Dingo Creek being so run down back then. He thought the hotels had all been open.

Cole went to the bank first. Drew some money from the ATM, and looked at his balance. The numbers on it still meant nothing to him. His half of the

inheritance. His mother's money, sitting in his bank account on top of the money he'd got for his tour of Iraq, where he'd seen people die. Where he'd killed people. And now, he was living in his dead uncle's house. Cole was a fucking parasite these days. A leech, or a tick, or some corpse-fed worm, growing fat on the death of others.

Kissing a boy who was black and blue with bruises, whose ribs creaked when he moved. Kissing a boy who'd stared death in the face as well.

It surrounded him.

For a moment, standing in the shade of the ATM vestibule, Cole was paralysed by the thought.

Shit shit shit.

He shook it off.

No. He wasn't doing that anymore. Wasn't falling into the traps that his thought patterns set for him. He'd talked about it with his psychologist, with Deb, and mostly with Tessa. Stupidly, it was Tessa who listened best. She might not have had the temperament to become a certified service animal—she was too bloody bouncy for that—but she had the right stuff where it counted. She'd got him through some bad nights, and she could do the same for Aiden.

Cole stuffed his money and receipt into his wallet, and headed for the supermarket.

He suddenly wanted to buy his girl the biggest steak he could find.

Aiden sat on Cole's back steps and looked out beyond the overgrown yard to the paddock behind it. The paddock where his father had left him to bleed to death.

Aiden didn't know if the ache in his chest was from his ribs, or if it was something that went deeper.

Tessa, her head resting on his knee, gazed up at him.

"We don't go to the quarry," Aiden whispered to her, turning his gaze that way. "That's not allowed."

He let his mind drift as he stroked her head.

He closed his eyes.

He'd been happy, once, playing in the dirt. Following the roads carved out by the excavators. Throwing rocks into the pits. Splashing through the mud.

Just a dirty, filthy quarry, but it had been the blank slate of his imagination. It had been his world, before his father had forbidden it. His fear of the quarry ran bone deep now, but it hadn't, not always. It had been his sanctuary once. Ruined because of his father's temper, the whipping with the belt. Ruined because of the black water.

Aiden's heart raced, and he jolted awake.

He blinked down at Tessa.

Black water.

Where the hell had that come from?

"It was raining," he whispered.

Tessa whined.

"Raining," Aiden said. He frowned, but the thought had already gone and Aiden had no idea what, if anything, it had even signified.

Tessa stood up and stretched, digging her claws into the kitchen linoleum. Then she tensed, her ears pricking, and Aiden heard the sound of an engine.

Mike's ute. He'd know it anywhere.

Aiden climbed to his feet, wincing in pain and slapping a hand over his ribs. He closed the back door and moved as quickly as he could into the bedroom. Tessa followed at his heels. Aiden closed the bedroom door and leaned against the wall. He breathed shallowly as he heard boots stomping up the front steps.

Cole, he thought, smiling despite his fear. Making as much noise as he could to warn him they were back.

"*Quiet as a mouse*," his mum had whispered to him a hundred times when he was little. When his dad was drunk and angry. When Aiden's mum had given him a pillow and his teddy bear and put him in his bedroom cupboard. Sometimes he'd even fall asleep there, and the next morning he'd wake up in his bed again, not knowing how he'd gotten there. His mum was magical like that.

If he closed his eyes he could see her. Wearing her favourite blue sundress. The one that flared out when she spun around. Dark hair, like his. Pale skin, too, but the resemblance stopped at the physical. He wasn't smart like her.

Wasn't brave. Would never—*never*—stand up to his father like she had. Would never have the courage to run.

He just wished she'd taken him too.

Aiden bowed his head as tears stung.

Quiet as a mouse.

He listened as Cole and Mike spoke. He couldn't make out the words, but their tone was friendly enough. Aiden traced the flowers on the wallpaper, and waited.

Quiet as a mouse.

Listening.

He heard the creak of the front stairs.

The squeal of the front door.

Mike's laugh.

“See ya.”

“Thanks, mate.” Cole's answer. “See ya.”

The roar of the ute's engine.

The crunch of tyres on dirt.

The *thump thump thump* of his heartbeat.

He kept his eyes closed even as Cole opened the bedroom door.

“Aiden? You okay?” Cole's voice was low, his breath warm against Aiden's cheek.

Aiden opened his eyes.

“Aiden?” Cole leaned one hand against the wall. Lifted the other one as though he was going to touch, and then thought better of it. He put his other hand against the wall.

He was so big, so strong, but Aiden wasn't afraid of him. It felt good to stand here, Cole's hands on the wall on either side of his face. Could have felt threatening, but it didn't.

“I'm okay,” Aiden said, his breath quickening. He tilted his jaw upward, pushed himself up onto his toes, and brushed his lips against Cole's.

“Aiden.” Cole pulled back. “That’s not why you’re here.”

“I know.” Aiden swallowed.

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“I kind of do.” Aiden squirmed against the wall, resisting the urge to push himself against Cole’s body. Rub against that unyielding wall of muscle. Shit. His dick was hard. Cole only had to glance down to see. Did it matter if he saw? Maybe it was okay to be turned on by him. But another part of Aiden thought an erection was something he had to hide. Something that only ever happened at the worst possible time, and would give away his shameful secret. “That’s not why I kissed you though.”

Cole raised his eyebrows. “Why’d you kiss me then?”

“I wanted to.”

Cole stared down at him.

“Did you want me to?” Aiden asked.

Cole’s mouth twitched. “Pretty sure I could have stopped you if I’d needed to.”

“Yeah,” Aiden breathed. “Pretty sure you could.”

He kissed him again. This time Cole’s hands came off the wall and gripped Aiden’s hips. Gently at first, and then his fingers dug in. He held Aiden against the wall, and took control of the kiss. He pushed his tongue into Aiden’s mouth, and Aiden closed his eyes again. He shivered. It was... weird, feeling someone else’s tongue inside his mouth. Not just a brief touch, like their first kiss, but something deeper, something exploratory. And then, just when Aiden was afraid it was *too* weird, Cole pushed his knee between Aiden’s legs and brought it up firmly. The sudden pressure against his dick and balls was electric. It lit him up from the inside. Aiden gasped and—shit—*whimpered*. He lifted his hands to Cole’s shoulders and gripped him tightly. Didn’t care about Cole’s tongue inside his mouth anymore. Just opened his mouth wider to him, let him go where he wanted. Even pushed back with his own tongue.

Aiden probably... probably wasn’t a good kisser.

“Shit.” Cole pulled back suddenly. “How old are you?”

For a moment Aiden couldn’t remember. “Um, eighteen.”

“Birthday?”

“February the second.”

“Year?”

“Nineteen ninety-six.”

Cole laughed suddenly.

“What?” Aiden stared up at him, wide-eyed. His dick was throbbing in his borrowed sweatpants.

“Ninety-six,” Cole said. “Shit, please tell me I wasn’t in high school then. No. Still primary school. Just.”

Aiden tightened his grip on Cole’s shoulders. “Can we... um, can we...?”

“You want to come?”

Aiden’s face burned.

“Told you, Aiden, you don’t need to be scared of this, not ever.” Cole ground his thigh against Aiden’s balls. “You want to come, then you just tell me.”

Aiden’s heart was about to burst through his chest. “Can I?”

“Fuck, yes.” Cole ran a hand down Aiden’s abdomen, pressing his palm against his aching dick. “Let me just...”

Aiden watched in astonishment as Cole dropped down onto his knees.

Oh Jesus.

No way.

No fucking way.

Cole peeled Aiden’s sweatpants down, and wet his lips with his tongue.

“Cole, I—” Then, shuddering, hips jerking, Aiden came before Cole even touched his cock.

Right in his face.

An hour later, Cole was still grinning about it.

“I actually take it as a huge compliment,” he said, turning the steaks in the pan.

Aiden, sitting at the kitchen table, was a particularly stunning shade of red.

“I mean it,” Cole told him. “It was hot.” He stepped over to Aiden’s chair and put a hand on his shoulder. Rubbed the back of his neck with his thumb, and warmed at the way Aiden leaned into his touch. “We’re good, Aiden. We’re still good.”

He hoped it was true.

Chapter Five

“Aiden? Aiden?”

He was awake, but he wasn't. Not if he could hear his mum.

Aiden shivered in the darkness.

It was raining.

Not now.

Then.

It was raining then.

“Aiden?”

“Mum?”

Beside him, Tessa whined.

That strange world between asleep and awake slipped away like water, and Aiden couldn't hold it. It ran between his trembling fingers and dripped away into nothing.

His mum had never been here. The echo of her voice was nothing but his imagination. He was in Cole's house, with Tessa beside him. Cole would be asleep on the couch in the front room. In the morning, Aiden would hear the old house creaking as Cole started moving around and know it was time to get up.

His mum had never been here.

She'd gone.

She'd left without him, and Aiden had run to the one place where he'd ever been truly happy: the quarry.

It had been raining.

He'd had a stick in his hand. He'd leaned out over the pit, over the black water. Almost hooked it. Almost.

He had it.

Then his dad had caught him there.

Dragged him home. Screamed at him. Beat him. Flogged him with his belt.

He wasn't allowed to go to the quarry.

He'd been fucking *told*.

What to do with Aiden?

That was the million-dollar question.

And it probably would have been a hell of a lot easier to answer before Cole had complicated things by trying to suck his dick.

“Jesus *fuck!* Are you fucking kidding me?” Deb didn't beat around the bush when Cole phoned her on Saturday morning. “You are in no fucking condition to be getting into a relationship with anyone, and—”

“It's not a relationship.” Cole listened to make sure Aiden was still in the shower.

“Oh, bullshit! You saved his life, John. You white-knighted your way into his life, of course he's fallen for you because of that, and now you're taking advantage.” She drew a sharp breath. “And, to make things even worse, when it inevitably ends badly, you'll both be more fucked up than you were before. You might not think it's a relationship, but what about him?”

“I wasn't going to get involved...”

But he'd been involved from the moment he'd stumbled across Aiden in the paddock, hadn't he? Already emotionally involved, because it hadn't just been Aiden lying there. It had been Smithy and Newbie too. Smithy, who got sent home to get fitted for a prosthetic foot, and Newbie, who got sent home in a coffin. Newbie hadn't been new, of course. He'd been in longer than Cole. Just what else did you do with the surname Nguyen? Fuck. Cole missed him. Missed that quick smile and evil sense of humour. Even missed waking up with that dickhead blaring *Thunderstruck* right in his ear. Didn't seem right that he could just be gone, just like that. It didn't make sense. Not then, and not now.

Deb sighed. “But you *are* involved, John.”

“Yeah.”

“Look.” She sighed again. “I don't know what to tell you. He must have *someone*, right?”

“I don't know.” Cole rubbed his forehead. “I don't think so.”

The pipes squealed as Aiden turned off the water.

"I gotta go," Cole told Deb.

"Okay." A pause. "Look after yourself, John. Please."

"I will. You too." Cole ended the call and shoved his phone back into his pocket. Then got back to stripping the wallpaper in the back room. It was mouldy in places, and stained with decades of cigarette smoke in others. Cole took his time with it, shifting the boxes of books and other crap while he worked. Not the most efficient way to work, but what did it matter? He was stuck here as long as it took to get his car fixed.

As long as it took to figure out what to do with Aiden.

Aiden found him working about twenty minutes later.

"I brought you a coffee."

Cole sat down on a box of books. "Thanks."

"And biscuits." Aiden set the packet down, and sat on the floor and drew his knees up. "I like these."

Cole hadn't had an Iced VoVo in years. He'd bought them, he supposed, because they reminded him of school holidays spent here at Uncle Harry's place. Iced VoVos and lemonade. Maybe buying the biscuits had been an attempt to reconcile the past and the present; to remember that once this house had been filled with life and laughter, and he'd loved it here, when he was too young to know that it was a tiny house outside a depressing dead-end town with nothing going for it.

Or maybe he'd bought them just to watch Aiden lick coconut off his lips.

"Is there a charity shop in town?" he asked, to distract himself from Aiden's mouth. "Maybe I should phone someone to come and pick up all this stuff."

"I don't really go into town."

"You don't?"

Aiden shook his head slowly. "I used to, for school. But I dropped out when I was fifteen. Sometimes I go in with Dad if he needs help to carry stuff, but mostly I stay at home."

"Shit." Aiden's world was impossibly small-drawn. Cole ached for him. Wondered what it was like to have nobody on your side. "No other family? No friends?"

Aiden couldn't meet his gaze. "No."

"What about your mum?"

"I don't..." Aiden frowned. "I don't know where she went."

"So what happens when I leave?" Cole asked in a low voice.

Aiden shrugged. "I don't know. I guess... I guess I'll go home."

"Home?" Cole couldn't believe his fucking ears. "Are you shitting me?"

Aiden flinched away.

Cole was stabbed with guilt. "Hey." He lowered his voice again, trying not to panic him. "Hey, I'm sorry. You took me by surprise. Why would you go home, Aiden?"

Aiden didn't answer.

"Because let me tell you, anywhere is better than going home."

"He didn't mean it," Aiden said. "He was drunk, that's all."

"He didn't mean to beat you half to death?"

"No," Aiden whispered. "He just went too far. That's all. Just too far."

"Aiden..." Cole shook his head. "Jesus, how far is too far?"

"I can take a beating."

"You shouldn't *have* to."

Aiden stood up suddenly. His blue eyes blazed. "But I do! I do have to!"

Then, before Cole could even think how to respond to that, he ran.

Aiden didn't get far. Only down the back steps into the overgrown garden. To the back fence. Leaned on it, even though he wasn't sure it would take his weight, because his ribs were killing him now. He stared down into the paddock, then at the road that led up to the quarry. As he watched, a white Land Cruiser headed down the road, churning up dust. There was some logo on the side of the door that Aiden couldn't make out.

Maybe the quarry would re-open after all.

Maybe Cole would sell Harry's house for a nice profit.

And maybe Aiden would never see him again.

He hunched over, his stomach hurting.

He knew what Cole was trying to tell him. That he should just leave home. People did that all the time. His mum had. But Aiden didn't have any money, and he wasn't smart enough to get a job. Even labouring jobs, the sort of jobs Aiden could do, they wanted more than a Year Ten education. A failed Year Ten education. He'd told Cole he didn't read much, which was a less embarrassing way of admitting he couldn't read much. He'd been diagnosed as dyslexic when he was nine, and struggled through six more years of school before he could finally quit. Failed every class along the way as well, except manual arts. Anything where he got to use his hands instead of books was just fine. He even took art one year, and impressed his teacher with the sculptures he made from the bits and pieces he found around the wrecks in the yard, but he'd still failed the written exam and the essays. Mostly because by that time he didn't bother handing anything in.

"Dumb as dog shit," his dad always said.

Dumber, probably.

"Hey."

Aiden closed his eyes as Cole found him. He straightened up as Cole put his arms around him from behind. Felt so fucking good to be held like this. Sunlight bathing them, because they were standing right out in the open. It felt reckless. It felt almost fearless.

"Remember I said I'd say the wrong stuff?" Cole put his chin on Aiden's shoulder. His stubble scratched his ear. "I'm sorry if I upset you, okay?"

"I'm not upset at you."

"I meant what I said." Cole tightened his grip. "If anyone deserves a beating in your family, it's your fucking father, not you."

"I know that." Aiden opened his eyes and looked up toward the quarry. "But where else could I go?"

"Anywhere."

Aiden didn't think that was true. He didn't even know how to start doing that.

Pack a suitcase like his mum had, and...

Pack a suitcase.

Rain and black water.

Aiden shivered.

Could he really run? Further than he'd run before? It would have to be. Further than the quarry, where he'd played out all his dreams. Slid down the hills of gravel in clouds of dust, "*Look at you!*" ripping holes in his shorts. Fought pirates and dragons and Sand People. Shouted and bellowed and sang where nobody would hear him. Made all his dreams there, just like his mum always said he could. Hadn't they both escaped into their stories? Into their imaginations?

He remembered her hosing off his filthy legs before letting him back into the house.

"Are you mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"I'm covered in mud."

"Are you sure that's mud? I thought you were covered in the dreams you made in the dirt."

After that, sometimes Aiden would look at the black lines of dirt under his nails and smile. Back then, he hadn't been afraid of going to the quarry. Back when it was his special place. Back before everything changed.

The thought of men working at the quarry again made him sick, somehow. Unsettled. Afraid.

"Cole." He turned in Cole's embrace and looked up at him. His eyes were dark and serious. "I want to do everything."

"What do you mean?"

Aiden's face blazed, but he pushed the words out. "I want you to, to, um, to fuck me."

Cole lifted a hand and stroked his cheek. "Why do you want that?"

"For when you're gone. To, um, to remember what it's like."

Cole's eyes widened. "Aiden, I'm not leaving you here."

Aiden drew back. "You're not?"

"Oh, Jesus, no!" Cole's voice cracked. "I'm taking you home with me. And not, not *for* anything... I mean, I'll take you because you're a good guy, and

you need to be somewhere safe. You can get a job, make some friends. You can stay with me as long as you need.”

“Do you mean that?” Aiden asked, unsure how he found the breath to make the words.

“I mean it.”

This, *this* was another dirt-made dream.

The one where he went to the city.

The one where he had a job, and friends, and someone like Cole.

Aiden hadn't dreamed anything like it when he was a kid. It was such a small dream, a *modest* dream. At the same time it was more wildly fantastic than any dream Aiden had ever had about space battles and lightsabers and Sith Lords.

It seemed like the sort of dream it would be incredibly dangerous to put his hope in.

“Will you come with me?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Aiden said.

He wanted it to be true, even though he thought it would never really happen.

So Aiden wanted to do everything.

It had been a long time since anyone had offered himself up like that to Cole. Not as trustingly as Aiden had. Because it was all about trust. Aiden was painfully fucking innocent, and the fact that he'd offered himself up to Cole, to do *everything*, was intoxicating and terrifying at the same time.

Cole wondered what Deb would advise, then realised he knew. He didn't call her to confirm, because, fuck it, he wanted Aiden as well. It had been months since he'd gotten laid, and a hell of a lot longer since he'd been with anyone whose name he cared to remember. He didn't think he'd ever been anyone's first.

That night, he sat with Aiden on the living room floor, and they worked on the jigsaw puzzle they'd found in one of the boxes in the back room. Windmills and tulips.

Aiden was gathering the edge pieces together, into a pile beside Tessa. Tessa snuffled at them, going cross-eyed when she lifted her snout again and one was stuck to her nose. Aiden rescued it, then stretched out on the floor on his stomach and began to work on a patch of tulips.

“Earlier,” Cole said, “you said you wanted to do everything.”

Aiden froze.

Cole rested his hand on the small of his back, rubbing gently. “I don’t want to embarrass you, but I need to know what you know.”

Aiden turned his head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean there are plenty of ways to have sex without penetration,” Cole said.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Like, um, like what you were going to do earlier? The blowjob?”

Cole grinned. “That’s a good one, yeah.”

His smile seemed to bolster Aiden’s confidence. “I want to do that again, too. But I did mean penetration as well. If, um, if you want to.”

“I do want to,” Cole said. “But we’re not in a race here. We’ll get there when we get there.”

“You don’t want to do it tonight?”

“No.” Fuck. Cole was pretty sure he was going to hell for that lie. He ran his hand up Aiden’s spine, under his loose T-shirt. He liked the way that Aiden’s muscles shifted under his touch as he shivered. “Not a race, remember? Anyway, we’re going to need some supplies from town.”

“What supplies?”

Not just innocent. Ignorant. Dangerously ignorant.

“Condoms,” he said. “And lube. Gonna need both of those. With lube you can improvise a bit, but you never do it without a condom, understand?”

“I’ve never been with anyone.”

“And I’m clean,” Cole said. “But you don’t take my word for that. Don’t ever take anyone’s word for it.”

Aiden flushed. "Okay," he mumbled, and looked away.

"Hey." Cole rubbed his back a little harder. "What's going on in your head?"

Aiden sat up, wincing a little. "Do you think I'm dumb? I don't mind if you think I am."

"I don't think you're dumb, Aiden," Cole said. "I think... I think you've been isolated. I think you're a guy who really needs to get the fuck out of this place."

Aiden's face was solemn. He chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, drawing Cole's gaze. "Why do you call yourself Cole and not John?"

The question was so unexpected that Cole was taken aback for a moment. Then he grinned. "Habit. That's what I was called in the army. Well, my mates called me Kingy."

"Kingy?"

"Old King Cole," Cole said, and rolled his eyes.

Aiden smiled.

"Which worked fine," Cole said, "until a guy called King actually joined our unit, and then it got confusing. First he was Prince, because we already had a king, and eventually he became Symbol, and then the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. *Way* too long for a nickname, and way too complicated. Eventually we just called him Elvis and were done with it."

Aiden turned a puzzle piece over in his palm. "Last night, when you were sleeping, you had a bad dream."

"I get them sometimes."

"Me too." Aiden flushed. "Not like... not like yours, I guess."

"You don't have to go as far as Iraq to get bad dreams."

Aiden closed his fingers around the puzzle piece. "I know."

On Monday morning, Aiden helped Cole shift the boxes out of the back room and stack them in the hall. Then they prepped the walls for painting. Cole did most of the work because he didn't want Aiden to strain anything. Aiden taped the skirting boards, then used a screwdriver to lever open the first tin of paint. He jostled the tin and ended up with a pool of white paint in his lap.

“Shit,” he said.

Cole threw an old towel at him. “Try not to get it on the floor.”

Not a rebuke, Aiden realised, but a request. “I’m gonna need new pants.”

“Hurry up then. Who else is going to talk to me while I paint?”

“While *we* paint.”

Cole snorted as Aiden left the room. “And put those pants in the laundry tub to soak. We’re running out of clothes!”

Aiden wished he had the guts to yell back and ask how that was a bad thing, but he didn’t. Holding the towel over his sweatpants to keep the paint from dripping, he made his way gingerly to the bedroom and stripped off. He balled the sweatpants up, then pulled open the dresser drawers.

Cole had claimed the top two drawers for his stuff. It wasn’t organised, exactly, just everything all shoved in. Shirts and pants and socks and underwear all mixed in together. The other dresser drawers, Aiden knew, were empty. Harry’s stuff was boxed up. Aiden had thought that maybe he should liberate some of it so he didn’t need to borrow Cole’s clothes, but most of the boxes smelled of mothballs, and the thought of wearing a dead man’s stinky mothball clothes was gross. And Aiden liked the idea of wearing Cole’s clothes. Of smelling like Cole.

He reached into the drawer and found a pair of sweatpants. He lived in those because Cole’s jeans just slid right off his arse. He tugged them free, dislodging a rolled up plastic bag that had been jammed in the back of the drawer. Aiden opened it.

A box of condoms, and something that was in a tube like toothpaste, but Aiden figured was lube. It took him a while to confirm it by reading the label. Too many long fucking words. Aiden unscrewed the lid and squeezed a dab out onto his finger. Felt cold. Not as slimy as he’d thought, but smooth. It smelled okay, and didn’t taste of anything much at all.

Aiden put it back where he’d found it, then pulled on the sweatpants. He checked his shirt was okay, then went out the back and put the paint-stained pants and towel in the laundry tub like Cole had asked.

When he returned to the back room, Cole had started painting.

Aiden joined him.

“Careful you don’t stretch too far,” Cole said.

“Okay.” Aiden tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but kept thinking back to the stuff in the drawer. “Cole?”

“Yeah?”

“How come you said you needed to go into town to get condoms when you’ve already got them?”

Cole froze for a moment, his arm extended. Paint dripped from the roller down the side of his hand. He stepped back at last, setting the roller down in the tray. “Because I don’t want to *push*, okay? I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Aiden’s breath caught. “You haven’t.”

Cole studied his face for a long moment. “And I don’t want to let you down.”

“You wouldn’t,” Aiden whispered.

Cole smiled slightly and shook his head. “Those are some heavy expectations right there, kid. Not sure I’m ready for them.”

He bent down to pick up the roller again, but before he turned away Aiden saw his smile vanish. He had the feeling that Cole wasn’t talking about sex anymore, that he was talking about something much bigger, but he didn’t know how to ask.

They painted for a long time in silence.

Chapter Six

When he got back from hanging out the washing on the sagging line at the side of the house, Cole found Aiden making dinner in the kitchen.

“Smells good,” he said.

“It’s just an omelette,” Aiden said. “And it’s just cheese and chives.”

“I bought chives?” Cole raised his eyebrows. That seemed pretty bloody unlikely.

“There’s a bunch growing under the water tank stand.” Aiden flashed him a shy smile.

“Huh.”

Cole headed to the toilet.

When he got back to the kitchen, he leaned in the doorway for a while. Aiden had the radio turned up to some song Cole didn’t know, and was moving to the beat as he stood over the frying pan. He had his back to Cole.

He looked good relaxed like this, with his guard down. He moved well, his muscles loose. Not tense. Not hunched over like he was always expecting the next blow.

And maybe Cole had been underestimating him this entire time. Maybe, instead of encouraging him to remain cautious and small-drawn, Cole should have been helping him stand taller.

Cole closed the distance between them, startling Aiden when he slid his arms around him. “Smells good.”

“You already said that.”

Cole nipped at his earlobe. “This time I was talking about you.”

Aiden’s broad smile almost eclipsed his blush.

The omelette did smell good though. Cole’s stomach rumbled.

Aiden tapped the spatula against the side of the pan. “Cole, did you always know?”

“Know what?”

“That you weren’t right?”

Cole tightened his grip. "What do you mean, I'm not right? There's nothing wrong with being gay, Aiden. Anyone who tells you different is just an asshole."

Aiden leaned back against him. "Oh."

"But, yeah, I guess I always knew. Not like one of those kids who tells his parents when he's five that he's going to marry a boy when he grows up, or anything. I wasn't that self-aware. But it was no big shock when I figured out I liked boys. I was about thirteen, I think."

"Did you tell your parents?"

"Not for a while." Cole almost smiled at the memory. "And not because I thought they'd take it badly. I just didn't want to talk about sex with my parents. *Ugh*"

"They weren't angry?"

"No, mate, they weren't angry." Cole pressed a kiss to the side of Aiden's neck. "They were good people."

Aiden turned in his embrace, his eyes wide. "Are they..."

"My dad died in a car accident when I was fifteen. My mum passed away a few months ago. Cancer."

"I'm sorry." Aiden laid a hand against his cheek.

"Don't be sorry. I was lucky. I know I was." He'd never known it more acutely than with Aiden, who still wore the fading bruises his father had given him.

God, he couldn't even reconcile this Aiden with the kid he'd seen that first night. That furtive, awkward kid with his hat pulled down and his clipboard clutched to his chest. Cole had hardly noticed him that night. Maybe because Aiden hadn't wanted to be noticed. But maybe also because Cole had taken his cues from Paul Lawson. Thought the kid was stupid, forgettable. He hadn't bothered to look any further.

But Aiden was so much more than that.

So much better than anyone knew.

Cole really didn't fucking deserve him.

Lucky for him that he was a selfish enough prick to take him anyway.

Aiden felt Cole's dick digging into his hip. So big and hard that he didn't know whether to cheer, or to panic and run. He decided to lose himself in their kiss instead. Kissing was good. Kissing was better than good. It wasn't even a little bit weird now. Strange, the difference a few days could make.

But then, wasn't that always the way? If he could push through his fear today, it was probably his dad he had to thank for it. It wasn't that long ago that Aiden had thought he was dying, that his dad was killing him. So he wasn't going to be scared of this. And maybe that was a strange place to find his courage—in that pit of black fear still boiling away at the core of him—but Aiden didn't care.

He reached back and shoved the frying pan off the front burner of the stove.

"Our omelette's not done yet," Cole teased, his words and his breath hot against Aiden's mouth.

"Fuck the omelette," Aiden said. He pulled Cole's head down, forcing their lips together again. "I'm not hungry."

Cole's laugh shook both their bodies.

"Please," Aiden said, holding Cole's face between his hands. "Can we?"

"I don't want to pressure you into this. You don't *owe* me."

Aiden owed him everything, but that's not what this was about. "But I want to. Please. I want to."

Cole kissed him. "Okay." He moaned. "Fuck, okay."

Aiden grabbed him by the hand and pulled him through the house and into the bedroom before he could change his mind. He was overcome by his own recklessness, by his burning need to do this now, and to know what it was like at last. He wanted to have it in the past already so he didn't need to squint at a magazine again and try and puzzle out the mechanics of the act. Aiden was tired of fear and speculation. He wanted *knowledge*. He wanted to do everything.

Turning around when they entered the bedroom, Aiden was worried Cole would refuse him again.

"I'm not scared," he whispered, trying not to choke on the lie. Then: "Is it going to hurt?"

Cole stepped toward him.

“We’re just going to touch for a bit,” Cole said. “Nothing will hurt.”

Aiden was afraid, but not afraid enough to run. He wanted this. He’d wanted it for years, and now he wanted it with Cole. Cole was bigger than he was, muscular, but Aiden wasn’t afraid. Cole had saved him. Cole wouldn’t hurt him.

Alright, *this* might hurt, but it could be good, too, couldn’t it? The men in the magazine had sure seemed to like it. And who would do it, really, if it weren’t any good?

He sat down on the bed, his gaze flicking from Cole to the drawer where the condoms and lube were stashed.

“Can you breathe okay on your back?” Cole asked in a low voice.

Aiden nodded, and shifted up on the bed. He lay on his back. His chest was still tight, and pain stabbed through him every time he breathed too deeply, but it would be easier than on his hands and knees, he guessed.

“If anything hurts, or if you just need to move, just tell me.”

Aiden nodded again, and swallowed. It didn’t seem to help his dry throat.

Cole put a knee on the bed and leaned forward. He slid his hands up underneath Aiden’s T-shirt and across his abdomen. It was ticklish, and Aiden didn’t know whether to laugh or to moan as Cole turned one of his hands and dipped his fingers under the elastic waistband of Aiden’s sweatpants. Aiden’s breath caught and his face burned. Stupid to be embarrassed. His dick had been hard since Cole had touched him in the kitchen. Since forever, actually. They both knew it. Still, he couldn’t help squirming.

“Take it easy,” Cole murmured. He moved his hands up Aiden’s sides, pushing his shirt up. Aiden lifted his arms to allow Cole to drag the shirt over his head. Then Cole shifted back, taking his weight off the mattress so that he could stand up and take his own shirt off.

He had a tattoo on his chest, over his heart. Some sort of crest or shield that made Aiden think of the knights and the princes from the fairytale stories his mum had told him, but was probably something to do with the cavalry. Knights and horses, Aiden thought, or kings and tanks.

Cole, his eyes dark, unbuttoned the fly of his jeans. He hooked his fingers over the waistband and shoved his jeans and underwear down. His dick was bigger than Aiden’s. Not longer by much, but thicker. It was hard not to be

intimidated by it, and not immediately panic about how much it would hurt when Cole actually fucked him.

Cole leaned over the bed again, and tugged Aiden's sweatpants down. Then he crossed to the drawer to retrieve the plastic bag. "You want to stop at any time, you'll tell me, right?"

Aiden managed to nod. Cole climbed onto the bed beside him, and Aiden reached up and traced the tattoo with his index finger. Then he flattened his hand against it and felt Cole's heartbeat reverberating against his palm. "Please, Cole."

"I've got you," Cole said. He pressed his own hand over Aiden's. "Just relax."

Cole could not afford to fuck this up. If this was a disaster, where would that leave Aiden? Totally fucking friendless and alone. Aiden had enough in his past to be terrified of. Cole didn't want him to be afraid of his future as well.

He liked Aiden.

No. That was the wrong word.

He *loved* Aiden.

Cole laid a trail of kisses down Aiden's chest and tried not to remember how much he hated that word. *Love*.

"*How do you know you love someone?*" he'd asked his dad when he was kid.

"*Huh. That's a tricky one. I suppose you know you love someone when you want to make them happy.*"

It was as good an answer as any, Cole thought. The word didn't have to come laden with expectations. It didn't have to be difficult. It didn't mean forever, or a commitment. Love could be as ephemeral as a single breath. That didn't make it a lie.

But it could also be something enduring.

Cole held Aiden's gaze as he reached for the lube. He lay beside Aiden, propped up on his left elbow. He moved his right hand down to Aiden's arse, fingers exploring him, and making sure that every clinical instruction—*Legs*

apart. Relax. Bear down—was softened by a gentle touch, a murmured assurance, a distracting kiss.

Aiden grew more and more restless under Cole's ministrations, his dick hardening and his hips jerking. A flush spread across his chest, and down to his abdomen. The muscles in his thighs bunched and released as he shifted his legs and scrunched his toes.

"Not a race," Cole reminded him when he whimpered.

Aiden's forehead creased as Cole scissored his fingers. He twisted his fingers in the sheets. "Cole!" His voice rose and trembled, uncertain.

Cole stilled his fingers. "Tell me."

"I'm okay." The pulse fluttered in Aiden's throat. He swallowed. "You've done this?"

"Yeah. But we can stop."

Aiden bit his lip. "Don't want to stop."

"Okay." Cole kissed him gently. "Just breathe for me."

Aiden nodded and swallowed again. He closed his eyes as Cole began to press his fingers deep inside him again, doing his best to relax right up until Cole pegged his prostate. He gasped, shocked, his eyes flashing open and his body trying to jerk off the mattress.

"You like that?" Cole asked him.

Aiden was wide-eyed and shocked. He probably had no idea what that even was.

Cole pegged him again, and this time Aiden gasped and shivered with pleasure. His dick twitched. "Oh. Oh, *wow*."

Cole almost laughed at the expression on his face. The penny had dropped: Aiden had suddenly figured out how it might feel good to have something up his arse. Smiling, he removed his fingers and climbed between Aiden's legs. He ran his hands up them, careful of the faint, mottled bruises. His touch made the fine hairs on Aiden's thighs stand up.

Cole shuffled forward on his knees, his aching cock bumping against Aiden's arse.

"You don't have to be scared of this," Cole said.

Aiden nodded, and tilted his hips up.

Cole hooked his arms under Aiden's legs and shifted him into position. Then he reached for the condoms. Tore one open and rolled it over his cock. Tried not to come just from that. He spread lube over the condom, then leaned forward, rubbing the blunt head of his cock in the cleft of Aiden's arse until it notched into place against his entrance.

"If you need to change position, or you need to stop, you tell me," he said, holding Aiden's gaze.

"Yes," Aiden murmured, fear and lust battling for dominance in his eyes. "Promise."

Cole pushed forward.

Aiden groaned, every muscle tightening.

"Breathe," Cole gasped. "Breathe, Aiden."

Aiden whimpered, squeezing his eyes shut.

He was so tight and hot. Cole pushed forward slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, waiting until Aiden's muscles fluttered and eased every painstaking step of the way. He could hardly bring himself to look at Aiden, whose face was screwed up in a grimace.

"Aiden?" Cole gasped for breath. "Talk to me."

Aiden opened his eyes. "Don't stop." His mouth twisted.

Shit.

Cole bottomed out inside Aiden. He held himself there, Aiden clenched too tightly around him. He nudged Aiden's chin with his own, and Aiden turned his face toward him. They exchanged an open-mouthed kiss, while Aiden made small unhappy noises.

"Breathe," Cole reminded him.

Aiden shifted restlessly. He lifted his legs and hooked them around the back of Cole's, opening himself more to the penetration. Cole felt the moment that he relaxed. If the pain hadn't vanished entirely, it had at least become manageable.

Cole pulled back a little, then pushed back in. Aiden jolted as Cole's cock hit his prostate.

“That’s it,” Cole said. He worked a hand between them, wrapping it around Aiden’s dick. Shit. He knew how quickly this kid could shoot. It wouldn’t take long at all to get him hard again, and to get him off.

“Cole,” Aiden gasped. “Cole!”

Cole pulled back, then pushed in again. He tried to jerk Aiden’s dick at the same time, but fuck that. He needed to find his own rhythm.

“Fuck, yes.” He said, as he felt Aiden’s hand pushing between them to take over. “That’s it.”

Cole braced his hands on the mattress, and began to thrust slowly. He rolled his hips a little on each thrust, loving the way Aiden jerked whenever he hit his prostate. They kissed again, Cole swallowing Aiden’s surprised little gasps.

In the hot, sweaty place between their bodies, Aiden worked his hand furiously.

Cole began to thrust more quickly, Aiden’s heels digging into his thighs. Pulling him closer, deeper, each time. Aiden’s pale skin was flushed with exertion. Blotches of red stained his cheeks.

“C-Cole!” he cried out, tensing suddenly, and then coming. He shuddered, and then sagged back into the mattress. Aftershocks made him twitch.

Cole thrust twice more, a part of him surprised he lasted that long after watching Aiden come apart, and then he came as well. Face buried against Aiden’s neck, he came.

In the silence, he listened to Aiden’s rasping, shallow breath.

Then he remembered his ribs, and rolled off him. He wiped Aiden’s hair back from his sweaty forehead. “Shit. You okay?”

Aiden surprised him with a smile. “I think I’m gonna be sore in the morning.” Then he laughed at the look on Cole’s face. “I meant my ribs, but, um, *yeah*.”

“Cheeky,” Cole said, relieved. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He peeled the condom off. “Okay, I’m going to get rid of this, and then maybe have a shower. You want to join me?”

Aiden nodded, his smile suddenly shy. “Yes, please.”

Yeah, Cole thought, as he padded toward the bathroom. He wanted to make Aiden happy.

As happy as Aiden was making him.

That night they shared the bed.

Aiden stole glances at Cole.

Then, when Cole's even breathing told him he was asleep, Aiden shifted carefully onto his side and stared.

Cole rolled onto his side as well.

They were magnets, pulling toward one another.

Aiden ached to reach out and touch his face, like a blind man trying to recognise a friend, but he didn't want to wake him. Didn't want it to be weird or awkward. He wanted this moment to last a lifetime.

In this moment, between asleep and awake, everything was perfect.

"Look at you!" his mum said.

"Are you mad?" Aiden whispered, half afraid of her answer.

"Why would I be mad?"

Aiden's chest ached. He couldn't help himself anymore. He reached out and touched Cole's face in the darkness.

Chapter Seven

Aiden liked waking up with Cole in the bed.

Wednesday morning was the second morning in a row it happened.

It was the warmth that Aiden liked the most. Cole's arms around him, his big hands splayed over Aiden's skin. Aiden's head tucked against Cole's chest. Cole's legs twined in his own. And, most often, Tessa jammed up against the back of Aiden's thighs, radiating heat like a furnace. Sheets that smelled of sweat and comfort, and dog.

Cole shifted, drawing one hand back from Aiden's flank. Sliding down the hollow of his hip instead, under Aiden's sweatpants. His blunt fingers drawing goosebumps along Aiden's abdomen. Tracing lower then, through the coarse hair. Then he curled his hand around Aiden's dick.

Aiden moaned, and pushed his hips forward.

Waking up like this was perfect.

Tessa snorted and shifted, then jumped off the bed.

Aiden lifted his head and blinked at Cole.

Cole smiled at him, eyes still bleary with sleep. "Good morning." He squeezed Aiden's hardening dick.

"Good morning." Aiden rolled his hips, then pulled away. He put his hands against Cole's shoulders and pushed him onto his back. Then he climbed on top of him, his breath shuddering out of him as Cole's cock dragged against the inside of his thigh.

Aiden shoved his sweatpants down, then did the same with Cole's. He licked his hand, and closed it around Cole's dick.

Rubbing off against each other like this was good. Better than good. It was fucking awesome. It was hot and close and slippery, and Aiden loved it.

He lined their dicks up and pushed forward. He moaned, and Cole moaned too. Aiden kept one hand on their dicks, keeping them in place. He leaned his weight on his other hand, over Cole's shoulder. Brought his mouth close to Cole's so they could kiss.

"Your ribs okay?" Cole asked between teasing nips.

“Mmmm.” Aiden’s breath hitched as he shuddered.

Cole moved his hands to Aiden’s arse, digging his fingers into his muscles, pushing him forward harder. Aiden moaned as he picked up the pace, then froze as pain stabbed through him. He slapped a hand to his ribs, his breath wheezing out of him.

“Aiden? Shit.”

“I’m okay.” As long as he didn’t move he was okay. Or breathe.

Cole shifted, rolling so that Aiden lay on his side on the mattress, and holding him close so that nothing jarred. “Your ribs?”

“Yeah.” That sharp, stabbing pain had short-circuited all his pleasure. His dick wasn’t hard anymore.

“We should bandage them up,” Cole said. “I’ll get you some more codeine.”

“No, don’t go yet.” Aiden didn’t want to be left alone in the bed. “Sorry.”

Cole reached out and brushed Aiden’s hair back from his forehead. “What are you sorry for?”

“Killing the mood?”

“The mood’s only fun if we’re both in it.” Cole rubbed his thumb along Aiden’s jaw. “So, what do you want for breakfast? Bacon and eggs? You’ve probably figured out by now that all I can cook is bacon and eggs.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Cole’s entire face lit up when he laughed. His body shook with it.

Aiden’s joy was quieter, slower. It warmed him from the inside that he’d made Cole happy, even if it was only for now, for this most brief moment in time. It seemed like the sort of moment he would want to remember for the rest of his life.

They were low on groceries again. Cole phoned Mike. He felt dirty doing it, with Aiden watching quietly from the kitchen table. His false cheeriness left a sour taste in the back of his throat.

“Yeah, that’d be great,” he told Mike. “I’ll see you then.”

He ended the call.

"I'll work on the bathroom while you're gone," Aiden offered. "Finish knocking the tiles out."

"Don't." Cole crossed over to him, and leaned down and kissed the top of his head. His scruffy hair tickled his lips. "Fuck the tiles. They can stay, in all their orange glory. If anyone actually buys the place, they can fix it themselves."

He wanted to go home. He wanted to take Aiden home.

"Okay," Aiden said. "What do you want me to do? I could do some more painting."

"No. I don't want you painting. Not with your ribs." Cole rubbed the back of Aiden's neck. "You can work on the jigsaw puzzle."

Aiden snorted, but he didn't argue. He finished his breakfast, washed the dishes, and retreated to the bedroom the moment he heard the roar of Mike's ute coming down the road.

"You getting much work done?" Mike asked, peering around Cole into the house.

"A bit, yeah." Cole pulled the door closed.

They walked toward the ute.

"What about the yard?" Mike asked. "I've seen them home improvement shows. You gotta make the yard look nice too. Bathrooms and kitchens and yards. Those are the big things."

They were also the things that would suck your profits dry before you'd even sold the place.

"Yeah, but I still don't know if this place'll even sell so I don't want to throw too much money at it. Maybe I'll clean the yard out a bit, but I won't be putting in a fucking gazebo or reflecting pool or any shit like that."

Mike laughed. "What the fuck is a reflecting pool?"

"Mate, I don't even know."

Mike laughed again.

Cole climbed into the ute.

He hated the idea that if he hadn't known about Aiden, he might have liked Mike. Might have considered him an okay bloke. Maybe even a mate.

“Dad’s got an excavator back at the yard,” Mike said as they headed toward Dingo Creek. “I can bring it over on the weekend if you want. Dig that spinifex out.”

Cole smiled to cover his unease. The last thing he wanted was Mike spending time at the house. “Let me finish up on the inside first.”

Mike glanced at him. “You want a hand with that?”

Shit.

He knew.

He fucking knew.

“Nah.” Cole scratched his cheek. “I kind of like working alone, you know?”

And he figured Mike could make of that whatever the hell he wanted.

“Less distractions,” Mike suggested.

“Yeah.”

Maybe he didn’t know.

Cole tried to hold onto that thought, because he didn’t really want to think about the fucking alternative.

Aiden was making a cup of tea when he heard the car. His gaze went automatically to the back window. There had been a few cars and trucks heading up to the quarry today. Not exactly a steady stream, but more traffic than that old road had seen since before Aiden could remember. Then he realised, with a jolt, that the car he heard wasn’t on the quarry road at all. It was coming from the front of Cole’s place, not the back. And it wasn’t Mike’s ute.

Aiden hurried into the living room and peered through the window.

It was Stu’s car. The one he’d been working on for months now. The ’86 Ford Falcon. Last time Aiden had seen it, the car had been on blocks still. Now it had shiny new mags.

Aiden stood trembling by the window as the car pulled up out the front of Cole’s house. Stu climbed out of the driver’s side, and their dad hauled himself out of the passenger seat. Aiden’s blood ran cold.

They must have known that Cole was in town with Mike.

Which meant they were here for him.

He moved as quickly as he could, making sure the front door was locked—hoping the back door was, because he wouldn't have time to get to it to check—and hurrying into the bedroom. Tessa followed him, ears pointed and alert. Aiden closed the bedroom door, and stood there, wishing it had a lock. Why didn't it have a lock?

Stupid.

His dad and Stu wouldn't break in. They wouldn't.

He heard their voices as they approached the house.

Heard the creak of the front steps and the rattle of the front door.

"I'll check round back." Stu's voice.

Oh god. Please. Please let it be locked.

Aiden squeezed his eyes shut and leaned his forehead against the bedroom door.

Quiet as a mouse.

"Locked!" he heard Stu yell out. The words floated through the kitchen shutters, through the thin walls of the old house, and Stu might have been standing right beside him.

Aiden swallowed. Tried not to whimper.

A sudden crash of shattering glass, and Aiden's heart froze.

"Jesus, Dad!" Stu's voice was half aghast, half amused.

"I know he's in there! Aiden!"

The front door rattled.

Oh shit. He'd broken the window beside the front door. He'd be able to reach in and unlock the door.

A part of Aiden wanted to break down and scream for forgiveness now, before it got worse. The rest of him knew it couldn't get worse than it already was. What would his dad do? Kill him twice as hard? He shoved a hand over his mouth to stop himself from making a sound. Tears slid down his face.

"Aiden!" The front door crashed open.

"Dad!" Stu called. "Fuck. *Dad!*"

“Aiden! You get your fucking arse out here now, boy!”

Aiden pushed away from the bedroom door. He stumbled over to Harry's cupboard—some of Cole's clothes hung in there now—and wrenched the door open. Wouldn't do any good, probably, but he needed to hide. He huddled on the floor of the cupboard.

Tessa tried to climb in with him.

“No,” he whispered. He couldn't trust she'd stay quiet. “No, sorry, girl, no.”

He tugged the door shut, wishing there was some way to hold it closed. Then drew his legs up, and buried his face in his hands. Waited for his dad to find him.

To kill him.

“Dad! Come on, Dad! He's not here. He must've run off.”

“He couldn't have fucking run off!”

“How bad was he?”

“Bad, alright? Fucking bad.”

“You sure? You were pretty drunk when we got home.”

“Aiden!” his dad yelled. Boots clomped down the short hallway. “Aiden!”

Aiden covered his head with his arms and squeezed his eyes shut. Tried not to rock back and forth.

Tessa growled lowly.

The bedroom door was pushed open.

“What the fuck—”

Tessa growled again, the noise reverberating like thunder. Snapped and snarled, and then yelped suddenly.

“Fucking dog!”

Her yelps became whimpers.

Aiden wanted to cover his ears.

“Mike said he locked the dog in because it was aggro. He's not here, alright, Dad? He's not here.”

Aiden dug his fingers into his scalp and tried not to scream.

“What the *hell*?”

The front door was open. A window was smashed.

Cole, loaded with grocery bags, spun around to look at Mike, but he was already driving away.

Fucker.

Cole dumped the grocery bags in the dust and leapt up the shallow front steps. “Aiden!”

Shit. The bedroom door was open too.

“Aiden!” His voice cracked.

Tessa hobbled toward him, whimpering. Then she stopped and cowered, her ears back, her body lowered.

“Tessa.” Cole dropped to his knees. “You okay, girl?” He ran his hands down the foreleg she was favouring. She yelped, then licked his face apologetically. Cole petted her head. “Where’s Aiden? Where is he?”

Tessa limped toward the cupboard.

Cole stood up and followed her, his heart in his throat. He wrenched the doors open, sagging in relief when he saw Aiden peering up at him. “Aiden!”

Aiden dropped his head again.

“Are you hurt?”

Aiden shook his head.

“Come on, come on out.”

Aiden hunched over further, and suddenly Cole realised why. The acrid smell of urine rose in the air. Aiden had pissed himself.

Cole squatted down and held his arms out. “Come on. Put your arms around my neck.”

Aiden shook his head again. Muttered something into his arms.

“Come on,” Cole said firmly. “You need a shower, then I need to check Tessa’s leg properly.”

“Is she okay?” Aiden’s voice wavered, and then he started to cry. “Couldn’t. Couldn’t get out and help her. Even when they left, I couldn’t!”

"It's okay. Arms around my neck, come on." It was difficult to keep his voice even when Cole wanted nothing more than to punch a fucking wall. Or any fucking Lawson that wasn't Aiden. He had to keep calm for Aiden. Because someone had to be in control.

He gave Aiden an encouraging smile as he leaned toward him. Aiden's arms slipped around his neck. Cole hooked an arm under Aiden's knees and lifted him. Murmured an apology when Aiden knocked his head against the closet door. Carried him to the bathroom.

"I'm sorry," Aiden whispered when Cole lowered him to his feet.

"Not your fault." Maybe if he kept saying it, one day Aiden would believe it. Cole leaned into the shower and turned the water on. "Get under here, okay? You gotta clean up."

Aiden stripped his shirt off and shoved his pants down. The bright red blush extended down his face and spread through his chest.

Cole curled his fingers around the back of Aiden's neck and drew him close. Pressed their foreheads together. "Tell me they didn't hurt you."

"Tessa scared them off."

"Good." Cole squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then released him. "Okay, you get in the shower, I'll go check on her."

Aiden stepped under the water, tugging the old shower curtain closed.

Cole stepped outside the bathroom. He leaned on the wall and drew a deep breath.

Fuck.

They'd been in his fucking house.

It took him a moment to swallow down his rage. He rubbed his forehead. "Tessa? You okay, girl?"

She wasn't in the bedroom where he'd left her. She wasn't in the living room or the spare room either. Cole was just starting to worry when he crossed in front of the open front door and saw her rooting around in the grocery bags.

"Tessa!"

She latched her jaws around the plastic-wrapped sausages and scarpered away. Hardly limping at all, with the right incentive.

“At least let me take the plastic off!” Cole called after her, but she was already skittering around into the back yard. “Fine, but don’t fucking eat it!”

He gathered up the rest of the groceries and took them inside to the kitchen.

He shoved the perishables in the fridge, and left everything else on the table. Then pulled out his phone and called his sister. It went to her message bank.

“Deb, it’s John. Listen, I don’t think I can wait for my car to get fixed. Things have kind of escalated with Aiden’s family. Any chance you can come and get us, please? I’m about to call the police, and I think once that happens the shit is really going to hit the fan.”

Aiden sat underneath the shower, his head bowed, the spray hitting the back of his neck.

Like it was raining.

With Aiden’s left heel blocking the plughole, the shower slowly filled with water. Aiden rested the palms of his hands on the top of the shallow pool and wiggled his fingers to make the water dance.

He was clean now, but still ashamed that he’d wet himself in the cupboard. Jesus, he’d never even done that when he was a kid. But he’d never been alone then. His mum had been there, getting between Aiden and his dad. Protecting him. Today, there hadn’t been anyone.

Except Tessa. And she was hurt as well.

Aiden hated that he’d never stood up for himself.

Never stood up for his mum.

Maybe when they got to the city, Aiden could find her.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply until the sudden dizziness that hit him had passed.

Then, with the shower running cold, he climbed to his feet and let the water drain away. He turned the taps off and reached for a towel. He dried himself off, grimacing as he noticed Cole had taken his dirty clothes. It felt good that Cole looked after him, but at the same time he was embarrassed that he needed looking after.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and padded out to the kitchen.

Cole was making coffee.

“Is Tessa okay?”

“Gorging herself on sausages,” Cole said, indicating the open back door.

Tessa sat in the dirt, her tail swishing back and forth as she licked out the bottom of a Styrofoam tray.

“She won't eat that, will she?”

“Nah. She's not as stupid as she looks. Or acts.” Cole's smile faded. “Listen, you should get dressed. The police are coming.”

“The police?” The blood drained from Aiden's face.

“Aiden, he needs to be stopped, you understand?”

“Um...” Aiden cleared his throat. “Well, the police won't be here for hours, will they?”

The nearest police station was two hours away in Kallingurra.

“That's the lucky thing,” Cole said. “They're already here.”

“Here?” Aiden felt like he was suddenly standing on a precipice.

“At the quarry,” Cole said. He shrugged. “I don't know why.”

And that's when Aiden remembered. He took a breath, dizzy. Stumbled, and put his hand against the wall to catch himself. Opened his mouth and let the words fall out before his screaming mind could stop them:

“Because that's where he dumps all the bodies.”

It was raining.

Then, and now.

The clouds had rolled in from nowhere while Aiden had sat on the couch and shivered, and Cole had talked to the police on the phone. A few hours later, when dusk was falling, the detectives turned up on the doorstep. Their faces were grave. Their shoes were caked in mud from the quarry.

“I got home from school,” Aiden told them over the hiss of static in his skull, “and he said Mum had run off to the city. Just like his first wife did. And I went into their room, and her things were gone.”

He could still remember that feeling: like a punch to the stomach.

Gone.

Gone without him.

“I was crying, and he got angry when I cried, so I went to the quarry.”

Cole held his hand, and didn't seem to mind when the detectives saw.

Aiden frowned and stared at a threadbare patch on the carpet. “I was playing. It was raining. There's a big hole there. There's always water in it, even in the dry. That afternoon it was full of black water. I was throwing rocks in, and stirring up the mud at the edge. That's when I saw the suitcase.”

It had appeared through the black water like some sort of misshapen sea creature trying to breach the surface. Aiden had been scared, before he realised it was just a suitcase. He'd taken his stick and hooked it. Aiden had reeled it in, his heart pounding at the thought of the treasure he was going to uncover.

He'd dragged it out, muddy water streaming from it.

He'd imagined it full of gold bars that would gleam when he flung it open.

Except nothing had shone. The suitcase had been full of clothes. Muddy clothes. Pants and shirts and women's underwear. A sundress that had once been blue.

Aiden, eleven years old, had stood there for a long time not understanding.

Stubbornly not understanding.

Clutching his mum's sundress, he'd stared into the black water. A part of him refusing to understand, and a part of him just waiting for the water to reveal her to him as well.

And then his dad had been there.

Furious.

Murderous.

And somehow everything that had happened at the quarry had been buried underneath the pain of the vicious beating he gave Aiden that night.

“I forgot,” he said now in the silence that followed his revelation, his voice wooden. “How could I *forget?*”

Dumb as dog shit.

The detective with the moustache cleared his throat at last. "The ah, the remains found on site do appear to belong to a woman."

Aiden clicked his fingers, and Tessa came and sat by him. Put her head on his knee and thumped her tail on the floor.

"Mr. Cole said your father assaulted you as well," the detective said.

Aiden lifted his head and met the man's gaze.

"Aiden," Cole murmured.

"I can do it," Aiden said. He didn't know where this strength came from. From Cole, maybe, and from Tessa. But also from inside him. From that kid who had never been able to stand up to his dad before, but now finally got his feet under him. The kid who was his mother's son. "He found me with a gay magazine. He kept hitting me. Even when I was on the ground, he didn't stop."

The detective's jaw tightened and he nodded.

"He was drunk," Aiden said. "I think maybe he forgot the quarry gate was locked since the surveyors had been back. I think he was probably taking me there too."

How the fuck was he holding himself together right now? Cole's hand in his, and Tessa's head on his knee. Those were the only things anchoring him, Aiden was sure. Them, and the memory of his mum.

Hadn't he fought monsters a thousand times before, with the dirt of his dreams trapped under his nails?

"Cole?"

"What?"

"Cole, when can we leave? I don't want to stay here anymore."

"Whenever you want," Cole said, and squeezed his hand again.

In the end, the police drove them back to Kallingurra, and Cole booked a hotel room there. He had worried there would be a problem with Tessa, but the lady who owned the hotel agreed to turn a blind eye. It helped that she was married to one of the detectives.

Cole phoned Deb from the hotel.

"Well, this is a fine fucking mess," she told him. "Are you okay?"

“Yeah.”

“Is Aiden okay?”

“The police arrested his dad.”

“I asked if he was okay, not if he was safe.”

“I don't know. He's...” Tougher than Cole would have been.

“More fragile than you?”

“I am not fragile.”

“It's an observation of your mental well-being, John, not a threat to your masculinity. Calm the fuck down.”

“You calm the fuck down.”

She ignored that. “So I've taken some personal days. I'll be in Kallangurra by tomorrow evening.”

“Shit.” She'd have to drive through the night to manage that. “Drive safe, please. We're okay here for now.”

“I'm sharing the driving with Matt.” And sighed when his silence spoke for itself. “Matt, who I've told you about heaps of times. Matt, who you've met. Matt, who I'm living with.”

Cole rubbed his tired eyes. “I've been a shit brother, haven't I?”

“For the most part,” Deb agreed softly. “Welcome home.”

“I'll see you tomorrow,” he said, his throat aching, and ended the call.

That night in the hotel room, Aiden had a nightmare.

His mother crawled out of the black water, a pale, dead thing with dark shadows where her eyes should be, and grasping, claw-like hands, and Aiden had run.

Afterward, when he woke up, it was to find Cole's arms around him.

She'd been so pretty, a fairytale princess, that it seemed like the worst betrayal in the world to make her into some grotesque dead thing.

“In my nightmares, I'm in a truck,” Cole said with a sigh. “Just a truck. And the worst part is, I know exactly what's coming. Except I can't open my mouth. All I need to do is tell them to stop the truck, but I can't. I just sit there,

listening to Newbie and Elvis argue about some shit music Newbie's blasting on his iPod, and I know we're going to hit it any second now, but I can't open my fucking mouth."

"Is it every night?" Aiden asked him.

Cole was quiet for a while. Then he said, "No, not every night. Not anymore."

"Will it get better?"

This time Cole didn't hesitate to answer. "Yes. I promise." He put a finger under Aiden's chin and tilted it upward. Kissed him so gently that Aiden hardly felt it, although he was filled with warmth. "I promise, Aiden."

And Aiden was strong enough to believe him.

The End

Author Bio

Lisa likes to tell stories, mostly with hot guys and happily ever afters.

Lisa lives in tropical North Queensland, Australia. She doesn't know why, because she hates the heat, but she suspects she's too lazy to move. She spends half her time slaving away as a government minion, and the other half plotting her escape.

She attended university at sixteen, not because she was a child prodigy or anything, but because of a mix-up between international school systems early in life. She studied History and English, neither of them very thoroughly.

She shares her house with too many cats, a dog, a green tree frog that swims in the toilet, and as many possums as can break in every night. This is not how she imagined life as a grown-up.

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