

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

COMING OUT OF THE STORM

Laura Mathews

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

COMING OUT OF THE STORM

By Laura Mathews

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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Photo Description

A double amputee lies on his back, one man supporting his head and shoulders as another stands between the vee of his thighs, fucking him. Beneath the veneer of sex, the scene feels contrived and the intimacy broken, chipped and cracked by a lack of a personal connection.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The man on his back is my friend—no, my best friend, and I love him. He brought me here for moral support.

Seeing him with these men is hot as Hell, but it's also breaking my heart.

We were together when he lost his legs in a war that didn't belong to us. Since we returned, he always seems ashamed of any physical contact, and I have to hide the depths of my feelings for him. Now some kinky porn studio has offered him money for a couple of films, and he's going to use the proceeds to get the prosthesis he desperately wants, thinking that being able to walk again is his only path to happiness.

Help me make him accept and return my love. Help me show him that I'd always love him no matter what.

Comments:

I didn't use names so the author could choose them. I want this to be a love story, but the raunchier the better, and I particularly want at least one sex scene within the context of one of the porn movies the cutie on his back has agreed to make. The POV of the friend in love is really important too; I don't mind if there are several POVs, but his is a must.

Sincerely,

Gabbo

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: interracial, military men, slow burn, fetish for hire, friends to lovers, disability, ménage scene, sex industry

Word Count: 11,230

COMING OUT OF THE STORM

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One

“What’re you doing here?”

“It’s Friday.” The porch light comes on, flooding the darkness with light. Andre blinks against the sudden brightness, eyes watering after fourteen hours on the road, the last two surrounded by the dark moonless night. Looking at his watch, he checks the time. Quarter to ten, not so late that Billy should’ve written him off as a no-show. “I told you I’d be here today.”

“Yeah, well, lots of people have said lots of things.” Billy cuts a fast glare towards his lap. “Found out most of ’em are lies.”

It’s been a little over nine months since Andre’s seen Billy—nine months, one week, and three days, to be exact—and of all the reunion scenarios that he’s played out in his head, this ridiculous awkwardness was never on the list. Most of the fantasies ended with smiles and kisses and sex. After he told Billy he loved him, that this, *them*, was it for him... then there’d been sex. Copious amounts of sex. “Look, Billy, I—”

“Will.” Billy interrupts.

“Will? Will, what? Will I come in so the nosy old bat across the road doesn’t call the cops and report the scary black man for loitering?” Andre takes a step closer to the door. He figures there’s only one way to play this: ignore the unholy level of tension building between them and act like nothing has changed. And hold off on all game-changing declarations of feelings. Obviously, there will be no sex tonight. Dammit. “Sure, man, thanks for the invite.”

One corner of Billy’s mouth quirks. After the less than stellar welcome, Andre counts the small reaction as a win.

Billy slumps into his chair. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

“Nope. Got a bag in the car. Your place or a hotel, doesn’t matter to me where I crash at night.” It’s a lie. His choice would be here, preferably in the same damned bed as Billy. “You ain’t shakin’ me loose.”

“Jesus, fuck.” Billy glances across the street and frowns. He maneuvers his chair back and opens the door wider. “Get in here. Mrs. Olsen really will call the cops on you.”

He slips by Billy before the man can rescind the offer and heads straight for the living room. Dropping down on the sofa, he says, "So, Will? What's that about?"

"That's my name, yeah?"

"It's always been your name. And in fifteen years, this is the first time I've heard *you* use it." He's heard Billy's mom and dad use it, their teachers and the Army recruiter who sweet-talked them into joining up. But never Billy himself. "Matter of fact, you used to ignore anyone who did use it."

"Everything's changed." The air surrounding Billy reeks of bitterness and betrayal. "*I've* changed, Dre. Way too much to be arrogant, cocksure Billy Westerson anymore. I left that man in the sandpit."

"Billy, no—" Andre starts, then stops abruptly. Billy might have a point. At least about having changed. The last time they'd been together, their world had literally exploded into a haze of smoke and sand. Andre had come out the other side covered in grime, skin torn by shrapnel and oozing blood.

Billy had lost his legs.

Both of them were luckier than Rodriguez, who'd died in a personal version of hell. The roar of the fire had done nothing to drown out his pleas for help.

Dragging a hand over his head, he asks, "Are any of us the same?"

Thumping a hand against his left thigh, Billy snaps, "I've got no legs. You've got something to trump that?"

Anger burns through Andre. It'd taken days to shake the scent of fire and smoke, of blood and charred flesh. He still wakes up some nights with the sound of screams ringing in his ears, the scent of blood and smoke so real he gags. Swallowing down his rage, he whispers, "I came through that day with you."

"Yeah, I remember." Billy stares pointedly at Andre's legs. "You *stood* right there and watched them evac me out."

Andre can't form a reply, at least not one that won't lead to an argument. Instead, he asks, "It's late and, I've been on the road all day. Can I stay here tonight or is it a Motel 6?"

"How long?" Billy asks.

"How long what?"

“Your leave, Dre. How long is your leave?”

“Not on leave.” Andre shakes his head. Without Billy there, he’s got no desire to stay in. “I didn’t re-up, I’m done.”

“What the hell were you thinking? You were halfway to a pension.”

“What was I thinking?” Andre forces himself to not look at Billy’s stumps. “I was thinking that I stood there and watched my best friend get evac’d out.”

Apparently the words leave Billy just as speechless as they left Andre. A full minute passes, sixty slow ticks of the second hand, then an alarm clock sounds from a room at the end of the hall. The buzzer keeps repeating in a steady, mocking beat, making the strained silence more oppressive.

“That’s for me, time to get to work.” Billy swings his chair around in a wide circle and starts rolling down the short hallway. “You can take the couch for tonight. Blankets and an extra pillow are in the bedroom closet, top shelf.” At the door closest to the living room, Billy looks over his shoulder and adds, “Tomorrow will be soon enough to figure out what to do with you in the long-term.”

After the door shuts behind Billy, Andre huffs out a frustrated breath. Nothing is the way it’s supposed to be. There was nothing to prepare him for the utter helplessness shining in Billy’s eyes. Not in the letters or the emails he received while he was still in the desert, nor in the frequent texts or the one phone call since he arrived stateside.

Instead of Florida, it feels like he’s landed in the Twilight Zone.

He’s always hated that fucking show.

The sound of a moan pulls Andre out of sleep. At least, he thinks it was a moan. Yawning, he lies still and listens. If Billy’s hurting, he’s gonna say to hell with things like boundaries and personal space. When he starts thinking he imagined the noise, another rumble echoes off the tile floor.

Now that he’s awake, there’s no mistaking the moan for what it is. And it has absolutely nothing to do with pain.

“Uh, *fuck*, oh...” The babble breaks into another raspy whimper.

The murmurs tumbling down the hall are everything that Andre had hoped to hear tonight. Erotic and wanton.

Except he wanted to be the one to make Billy sound so damn needy. Wanted to have Billy beneath him, writhing on his fingers—and his tongue, and his dick—and begging for more, for *anything*.

Closing his eyes, it's easy to pretend that Billy is doing this for him, that he knows Andre is listening. That he *wants* Andre to hear him.

Andre slips a hand into his boxers and squeezes his dick, massaging himself to full hardness. His strokes are stuttered, hindered by the dryness of his hand. The friction is almost too much to be pleasant, but his breaths match the rhythm of Billy's words and grunts, and he loses himself in the fantasy.

He drags his thumb across his dick, spreading precome over his glans, then trips the edge of his nail over the slit. The muscles in his thighs tremble and, shoulders pushing down into the couch cushions, his back arches.

Words want to spill out, answers to all of the shit Billy's muttering. *Yes* and *please* and *fuck, Billy*. He bites down on his lip to hold them in, and the tang of copper explodes over his tongue.

It's not enough. Release is flittering out of reach. His dick is hard and balls are pulling up and... He wants—*needs*—so much more. He pushes his other hand beneath the sheet and cups his balls through the thin worn cotton of his underwear, his fingers dancing over his taint.

When he hears Billy say, "Come on, you know you want to," arousal spirals down Andre's spine, slamming into his balls. Pulling on his dick with tight strokes, he comes.

The lethargic high of release lasts only seconds. Only until he hears Billy whisper, "Yeah, just like that, Edward."

Andre's on his third cup of coffee when the sun comes up, on his second pot when Billy wheels into the kitchen wearing nothing but a pair of low-slung cargos. It's the first real look Andre gets of Billy. The changes in his friend have him spluttering a mouthful of hot coffee through his nose.

The scars, the weight loss, the hard glint in Billy's eyes and stiff set of his shoulders. It's like looking at a stranger. He wonders if there's any of his fun-loving friend buried beneath the crusty shell of a man sitting in front of him.

Reaching for a coffee cup, Billy frowns. "You alright?"

“Yeah, just didn’t...” Andre stops and shakes his head. It’s not like he can actually tell Billy he didn’t imagine that Billy’d look like five miles of bad highway. He’s not that much of an asshole. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Liar.”

“Didn’t sleep well.” It’s not a lie, and as long as Billy doesn’t ask him *why* he didn’t sleep well, it never will be a lie.

Adding enough sugar to make Andre wince, Billy asks, “Couch that uncomfortable?”

“Nah.”

Billy looks at him and arches a brow. “Well?”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Andre says, “Some nights, sleep is elusive.”

“Uh huh.” The way Billy drawls the word out, Andre knows the conversation isn’t over. Billy drains his coffee and immediately refills his mug. “Start another pot and I’ll throw together some bacon and eggs, yeah?”

Finally, Andre thinks, something familiar. Billy’s caffeine addiction has been running strong since their junior year in high school. Having Advanced Chem first period had forced them both to actually be awake before the morning bell rang. “Roger that.”

He’s measuring scoops of coffee grounds when Billy says, “Didn’t think you’d be one to lie to me, Dre.”

“You thought it well enough to be surprised that I showed up when I told you I would.” And, okay, that came out a little more tart than he’d expected. Having Billy accuse him of lying fucking *hurt*, goddammit. Plus, when he’s honest about it, he is lying by omission. And that is embarrassing. “And I’m not lying to you. I spend more time awake at night than I do asleep.”

The kitchen fills with the scent of bacon and coffee. It’d be a perfect combination if Andre felt the least bit comfortable. As it is, his skin is crawling with the need to clear the air. Or escape. Escape is really sounding good.

“I was afraid,” Billy says, turning strips of crispy bacon out onto a paper-towel-lined plate. “I didn’t know what to expect from you, and I couldn’t have stood pity. I’d have wanted to slam the door in your face.”

“When have I ever pitied you?”

Billy flashes a grin and for a second, Andre sees the man he grew up with. “Prom, Amanda Eckerson and her campaign to make me straight.”

“Point,” Andre replies, snorting a soft laugh. “Haven’t thought about her in years.”

“She works at the VA. Saw her every damn day ’til they cut me loose.”

Andre releases another chuckle. “How’d that reunion go?”

“Oh, fuck off.” Billy cracks a half dozen eggs into the skillet. “Seriously, why no sleep last night?”

The heat of embarrassment burns Andre’s face. “I, uh, woke up and heard you with your man.”

“My wha... *oh*.” Billy looks away, focuses all of his attention on the electric skillet. It puts Andre on alert. No way scrambling eggs needs that kind of undivided attention. “Who?”

Wary of what’s coming next—because, really, how does Billy not know who?—Andre says, “Edward?”

The tips of Billy’s ears turn a deep red. “Edward isn’t... I mean, yeah, I don’t have a man. Who’d even want me now?”

Andre has the answer to that. He wants Billy. But deep in his gut he knows now isn’t the time to throw that into the mix, not when Billy would see it as a sympathy fuck. Instead he asks, “Who the hell is Edward, then? ’Cause from where I was, it’s more than a passing acquaintance.”

“That’s a long story.” Scooping the eggs onto two plates, Billy waves a hand towards the fridge. “There’s juice in there, if you want.”

“Billy?”

“Will. No one calls me Billy anymore.”

“Whatever.” As far as Andre is concerned, *Billy* is who he’s always been, *Billy* is who he’ll stay. Digging the orange juice out of the refrigerator, he looks over his shoulder and asks, “Edward?”

“Dammit, man,” Billy growls. “Can’t you let it go at least until after breakfast?”

“No, not after I spent half the night thinking Edward was the reason you didn’t want me here last night.” He sets the juice down harder than necessary. “I actually thought about skipping out and finding a damn hotel at zero-five this morning.”

“Yeah, and after I tell you who he really is, you’ll haul ass so fast, you won’t even slow down ’til the Georgia line.” Spittle flies from Billy’s mouth, and his face is a rictus of self-loathing. He pushes away from the table and starts heading towards the archway leading into the living room.

If Andre wasn’t so pissed, it’d break his heart. But he is pissed. Hellfire mad in a way he hasn’t been in months. “I ain’t never cut out on you, and fuck you for assuming I will now. Fuck you really hard.”

In a flat monotone, lacking all of the venom of moments before, Billy asks, “You want to know who Edward is?”

“Yeah,” Andre says, mulish and ignoring everything in him screaming to just let it go. “I wanna know.”

Without looking back, Billy says, “He’s a freak who likes getting off by watching me fuck myself with a dildo while I rub my stumps. It’s not very glamorous but it pays the fucking bills.”

And then he wheels away, leaving Andre slack-mouthed and scrambling to make sense of it all.

“Well that went well,” Andre mutters when he hears the pipes creak and the shower start. “Fuck.”

Busy work. He needs something to keep him occupied until Billy ventures out again. Otherwise all he’s going to do is keep kicking himself in the ass for pushing it.

“Can’t ever leave shit alone, can you, you damned idiot.”

Clearing the table, he scrapes the ruined breakfast into the garbage can and stacks the plates in the sink. Kitchen set to rights, or as right as he can get it until Billy finishes up in the bathroom, Andre rummages through the cabinets. They still need to eat breakfast.

More than twenty minutes later, Andre has all of the fixings for stuffed French toast lined up on the counter. He’s just waiting on Billy to show his face. He doesn’t have to wait long.

Shower damp, Billy stops in the archway. “You’re still here.”

“Still haven’t had breakfast.”

Some of the wariness fades from Billy’s eyes. “So you’re gonna eat all my food then split?”

“Thought I’d make banana, peanut butter French toast, and then go grocery shopping.”

“Staying, then?”

Andre licks his lips, rolls his shoulders in an uneasy shrug. “Not running out, even if I did make an ass of myself.”

“That’s you, alright. Andre Jackson, master ass and best friend.” Billy spins his chair around, heading towards the hall.

“Where are you going? I’m not cooking all this just for me.”

“Need to move some shit around. It’s not proper for you to sleep on the couch when I’ve got a perfectly good second bedroom.”

Dipping the first sandwich into the egg batter, Andre grins. “Yell if you need help.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just don’t burn my house down trying to cook.”

Burn the house down, indeed. They both know it was Andre who taught Billy how to cook. “Whatever you say, *Billy*.”

“Just for that,” Billy’s voice bounces off the tiles, sounding strong and slightly amused, “you can make supper tonight too.”

Andre can’t stop the small grin from exploding into a full blown smile.

Two

After two weeks, Billy starts believing that Andre is really going to stick around. He's done everything in his power to push Andre away, and the damn fool just keeps boomeranging right back to Billy's side. Billy'd be lying if he said it wasn't nice, almost comforting, to know that someone has his back again.

Looking across the living room, Billy comes close to frowning. Andre looks like he's about to squirm out of his skin. "Spit it out."

"What?"

"Whatever's got you dancing, Dre." He does frown now. Andre's never been one to hold back when there's something he wants to say. "You're making me nervous with all the bopping back and forth. And, in case you're wondering, you still don't have any rhythm."

"Got more than you've got, cowboy."

"Nice try at the redirect. But, yeah, still a fail."

Andre sighs and drags a hand over his head. "You get disability pay, right?"

"Yeah, twenty-two hundred a month." He has a feeling about where this is going. Andre hasn't mentioned Billy's evening activities since that first morning, but his face pinches every time Billy's reminder alarm goes off. "Why?"

"I'm here, taking up space and eating your food. I've got more than enough saved up to cover my share of shit until I find a job."

Billy arches a brow and waits.

"Between us we can cover all the bills and your meds and appointments, right?" Andre cuts a fast look down the hallway. "Quit. We'll make it work."

For everything that he's lost, for every dream that is now little more than dust in the cosmos, there are certain things he'll never be. A charity case is at the top of that list. "I'm not working to meet my bills, not like you're thinking. Yeah, you kicking in with groceries has been a help, left some extra for me to funnel into savings. But the twenty-two a month keeps the lights on."

"Then, why?"

“You see a prosthetic around here?” Billy waits until Andre shakes his head. “You won’t either. My benefits are a ninety/ten split. No prosthetics until I can pay my ten, and my ten? It’s a hell of a lot more than I’m gonna raise on twenty-two a month.”

Andre’s brow furrows. Billy can practically see the man puzzling things out. “Why wasn’t everything covered? That’s a combat disability.”

“Yeah, um,” Billy stammers. “The VA has a backlog. Like, a forever huge backlog.”

Andre snorts and points a finger at Billy. “You skipped out before they actually released you.”

“I took the life management classes,” Billy says. It’s a weak argument, and he knows it. “But, yeah. Signed the medical separation, every waiver they put under my nose, and then realized...”

“That you fucked yourself over.” Andre slumps back, slouching down against the couch. “Jesus, Billy, really? You couldn’t ask some questions before flying off half-cocked?”

“Have I ever?” Billy waves his hand through the air. “It doesn’t matter now. I did it and it’s over.”

“How much?”

Billy doesn’t even pretend to misunderstand the question. “More than I’ve got and more than I’ll borrow.”

“Jackass, that doesn’t answer the question.” When Billy remains silent, Andre pushes to a stand. “Go put a fucking shirt on, I’ll be back in thirty.”

“What?”

“I need to get out of the house.”

Getting out sounds great, especially to somewhere besides the VA or the grocery store. Except the last time Billy went to the store, he’d ended up breathing into a paper bag, overwhelmed by the feelings of exposure and vulnerability. “Don’t see what that has to do with me.”

Andre starts working his feet into his shoes. “All I’ve got is my bike and you won’t let me help you into that jacked-up truck of yours. Gonna hit up the rental car place and then *we’re* taking a ride.”

“I’m not going.” No way. Not now, not when having a fucking breakdown means Andre will be there to see it all. “Don’t waste money on a rental.”

“Billy...”

“No.” Billy winces. That single word held a fuckton of fear. “You don’t know what it’s like. Being under a microscope, not knowing what the reactions are gonna be.”

“You trust me?”

“It’s not about if I trust you or not, Andre. It’s about everybody out there,” Billy waves his hand distractedly towards the windows, “and all of the people I don’t know.”

“I’ve got your back, no matter what.”

Billy snorts and shakes his head. “You’re gonna stand between me and the world?”

“If that’s what it takes. I’ll also stand between you and yourself. Lean on me. Trust me to be there. I won’t let you fall.” Hand on the doorknob, Andre gives Billy a pointed look. “So, thirty minutes and then I’m dragging your ass out no matter what. Be dressed or go ugly. I don’t even care.”

“The mall?” Billy looks at the sea of cars and frowns. A fully-packed mall. No way does he want that amount of pity tossed at him ever, but especially not all at once. “Seriously? What about somewhere, I don’t know, less full?”

“I need clothes, man. And the Apple Store is in there. You know how much sand is in my iPod after twelve months in the desert? So, yeah, no, we’re not going somewhere *less full*.”

“Dre...” Anxiousness crashes through Billy. This, the mall, the visibility, is something he’s gone out of his way to avoid. Heart racing, he says, “Come on, let’s find somewhere else.”

“Nope.” Andre shakes his head, a rugged determination showing in his eyes. It’s the same look Billy saw more than once on missions. “You’re just gonna have to suck it up, buttercup. We’re shopping here, and we’re shopping now.”

Billy blinks, the apprehension replaced by confusion and then, after he replays Andre’s words, irritation. “Did you just call me buttercup?”

“Indeed.” Andre locks Billy’s wheelchair in place and does a deep, playful bow. “Your carriage awaits, my—”

“If you call me princess, I’m gonna punch you in the balls,” Billy interrupts. With practiced ease, he shifts from the car seat to his chair. “And, for the record, you’re a fucking asshole.”

“And you’re a goddamn drama queen.” Andre turns and starts walking away, calling out, “You better get that chair in gear before you get left behind.”

Billy spends the next two hours moving from shop to shop to shop, buying shirts and shorts and underwear. He even picks up socks before he remembers just how unnecessary they are. It’s not until they’re on their way out that he realizes that if anyone was staring at him, he didn’t notice it. He’d been too busy trading insults with Andre to worry about the strangers surrounding them. It was wonderful and fun and *wonderful* to be out and doing nothing. “Stupid grunt,” he mutters under his breath, glaring at Andre. “Stupid, perfect grunt.”

A smirk curls the edges of Andre’s lips. “What was that, *princess*?”

“Said I’m hungry,” Billy lies, fully aware that Andre knows he’s lying his ass off too. “You feeding me or not?”

“I don’t know. Shopping and now dinner, then you’re probably going to want to go to a movie and the next thing you know, this becomes a date.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Billy laughs and flips Andre the bird. “Burgers, Dre. Time for burgers.”

Checking the traffic, Andre changes lanes. “Five Guys it is then.”

Billy grins, the idea of asking to go see a chick flick fluttering around in the back of his mind. It’d be worth sitting through an hour and a half of hell just to watch Andre’s mouth fly open at the suggestion.

Three

During the day, they've fallen into something close to normal. They bitch, they bicker, they laugh. The only thing missing from this domestic bliss is the intimacy. Every day, many times a day, Andre stops himself from stealing a kiss, or copping a feel. Whenever he gets too close, Billy flinches away and the next ten minutes are spent in an awkward silence that leads to stuttered babbling. The only person Andre's seen Billy let close with any amount of grace is old Mrs. Olsen who lives across the street.

Of course, she came bearing a plate of homemade cookies, a bowl of potato salad, and a platter of fried chicken. Andre would've let her hug him too.

While the days may be normal, the nights are anything but. They've exposed a side of Andre that he isn't sure he likes. Lying in a dark room every night and listening to his best friend talk one client or another into creaming has to be one of the most fucked up, creepastic things he's ever done. The fact that he's been stroking his dick to the cadence of Billy's words is something he's still ignoring. He's pretty sure he's going to end up in a special level of hell just based on the last three and a half weeks of his life, damn everything else he's ever done.

He vows every morning to not give into the temptation once the sun goes down. Then he'll hear Billy talking, catching a word here and a word there, and his dick perks up, filling and leaking and *aching*. After that, it's a freefall dive off a familiar cliff.

It's a cliff he's inching closer and closer to right now, with the low and breathy echo of Billy's whispers carrying gently into his room. It's not the usual murmurings, nowhere near Billy being seductive. But Andre's body has been trained, and between the darkening sky and the echo of Billy's hushed voice, it's game on.

Just as he's pushing his hand beneath the sheet, Billy's voice rises and, for the first time, Andre can hear him without straining. "I don't know about that. Webcams and shit is one thing. What you're talking about, that's long lasting. There's no controlling who sees it."

Andre realizes Billy's on the phone, apparently with his boss, and circling the living room, every pass bringing him close to the bedroom door. The bedroom door that Andre left open on purpose, so he could eavesdrop on Billy and pull one off before letting sleep drag him under.

“Fuck,” Andre mutters softly, curling his hand into a tight fist. “This shit is completely out of control.”

“Movies, Mark. You’re talking movies.” The tone in Billy’s voice makes Andre cringe. There was a time when that level of exasperation was a prelude to a ridiculous amount of cursing and, if you were close enough and kept pushing, a thrown punch or two. “What’s the payoff? If it’s high enough I might, *might*, consider it.”

Fucking money. More than once Andre’s been ready to scream the house down over Billy’s fricking pride and refusal to take the help being offered.

He hears Billy whistle and then say, “That much? Really?”

And in that moment, Andre knows that whatever this Mark person is asking, Billy’s going to agree. The idea of it chaps his ass more than he figures it has any right to.

He’s proven right when Billy’s next statement is, “I’ll see you tomorrow at zero-nine.”

They’re sitting in the living room with a basketball game on the big screen, a quartet of empty beer bottles littering the coffee table, and two cold ones open and leaving water rings. The silence is oppressive, clinging to Andre’s skin like a tangible thing.

He has the urge to ask Billy where he’d disappeared to earlier, just wanting to see what level of honesty he’d get. Instead, he says, “Thought I’d do ribs on the grill tonight. Good for you?”

Billy grabs his beer and starts peeling the label. “Yeah, whatever you want is fine.”

“Uh huh.” Andre takes the beer out of Billy’s hand and sets it on the table. He waits until Billy looks away from the floor and looks head-on at Andre, and then asks, “What’s eating at you?”

“Did you mean it?” Worry and guilt, a hint of self-disgust, plus a tiny seed of hope. They’re all easy to see in Billy’s eyes, in the tight pull of muscles of his shoulders and the straight-line set of his mouth. “I might be in over my head on something and I need to know if, when you said you weren’t gonna cut and run, no matter what, you’ve got my six, I need to know if you meant it?”

He meant it. He just can't guarantee a favorable fallout once all is said and done. Not after spending a never-ending day alone with all of his thoughts occupied by what Billy *might* be doing. "I meant it."

"Okay, good." Billy scrubs his hands over his thighs, pulling his cargos high enough for Andre to see a tiny slip of skin. "I, uh, I expanded my contract at work today."

Here we go, Andre thinks. He takes a swallow of beer to hide his grimace. "And?"

"If I can pick up a couple more contracts like this one, it'll be enough to cover the deductibles on both prosthetics."

"Okay." Andre drains his beer, resists the impulse to grab Billy's and drain it too. "What's it gonna cost you?"

"Nothing I ain't given up before," Billy says. "I'll go grab my contract, you can read through it and see if you're still on board."

He's rolling away before Andre can say another word. Goddammit. This thing has Billy on edge, and that in turn is making Andre short-tempered and foul-mouthed.

Because, really, Billy won't let Andre touch him but Andre's pretty sure the contract will be all about Billy doing a fucking porn vid or five. All for the sake of a pair of legs.

It's not a fair trade. No matter how many angles Andre comes at it from—and with the hours he lost thinking about it today, he's pretty sure he's covered *all* of the angles—he'd rather Billy told this Mark asshole to fuck right off and just leave the legs at the VA.

Legs don't make the man. It's a statement he's made more than once since taking over Billy's guest bedroom. He doubts the damn fool will ever believe him.

Grunting, Andre pushes to a stand and goes to the kitchen. No matter what Billy has dragged them into, they still have to eat.

Andre looks from the grill to Billy and, pointing the grilling fork at the papers clasped in Billy's hand, asks, "That it?"

"Yup," Billy says, rolling closer. "You putting sauce on those ribs?"

“When it’s time.” Andre stabs the slab of ribs and deftly flips it over. “You gonna tell me what that contract says before I read it?”

“Maybe we should wait ’til after dinner.”

“Maybe you tell me what the hell you got us into while my hands are otherwise occupied.” They’ve traded enough slaps and punches over the years for it to be a legitimate request. Andre closes the grill lid and turns. “Now, contract for what?”

A pink hue tints Billy’s cheeks. “The company I work for has another department, one that pays out higher for specific gigs.”

Andre arches a brow. Damned if he’s going to make this easy on Billy.

“I’ve got a bit of a following. I mean, I’m always booked. I could make more if I opened more slots up.”

The roundabout way Billy’s explaining things tells Andre just how uncomfortable the situation is making him. “That what the contract is for? More slots?”

“No.” Billy drags a hand over his face, then up and over his scalp. Andre follows the movements with his eyes. He misses Billy’s sandy brown hair and the way it’d curl over Billy’s forehead when he’d get sweaty. “It’s for a video.”

“A video?”

“A, um, couple of super-short skin flick kinda things.”

Andre reaches out and, before his fingertips reach Billy’s shoulder, Billy rolls his chair back. He huffs a short, sardonic laugh and says, “How in the hell are you gonna pull off a skin flick when you can’t bear being touched?”

“They’re strangers.”

Andre blinks once, then once again. He wonders if he needs more or less beer in his system for that to make any kind of sense. “Huh?”

“Strangers, Dre.” Billy moves in closer to Andre, determination written all over his face. Andre would be amused if the stakes weren’t so high. “They didn’t know me before. They won’t be looking for anything now.”

Opening the grill top, Andre starts slathering sauce on the ribs. He doesn’t have an immediate comeback because, goddammit, what Billy said makes sense. Same way as when he first owned up to wanting dick instead of pussy, Andre had looked for it outside his usual haunts. The problem is, having Billy

pushing him away hurts. And if he wants any hope for more in the future, that has to be dealt with now. "If I want something from you, I'll tell you."

"I know."

"We've lived in each other's back pocket since we were fourteen."

"I *know*."

Andre gives Billy a hard look. "Do you? 'Cause, seriously, I never realized how much I touched you until you started backing away from me."

"And I never forgot," Billy replies. "Your hand was on my shoulder when the bomb went off. It was the last thing I remember feeling."

Andre closes his eyes, thinking back to that day. Billy's right. They were both a few steps behind Rodriguez, and Andre had just pushed Billy in front of him, thinking they needed to pick up the pace. In hindsight, it could've looked like he was saving himself, using Billy as a shield. "If I'd've known, I'd have never..."

"I know. When I truly think about it, and especially now that you're here, I know you'd have never deliberately set me up for this."

He's not sure he wants the answer, but he has to ask the question. "And before I got here, when I was still in the sandpit?"

"There were days..." Billy stops and, his head tilted back, releases a broken sigh. "Sometimes I'd wish this on you and then immediately take it back, because I would *never* wish this on you. I wondered why it was me. Then I'd think about how close one of us came to being Rodriguez and losing my legs seemed like such a small thing.

"Then there were days when I hated you. Hated you like I've never hated before. Can you even understand that, Andre? Deep in my gut, like hell on fire, *hated* you. And now you're here and acting like everything is fine and, man, I look at you sometimes and I remember hating you for letting this happen to me." A single tear slides down Billy's cheek. "I don't know how to make that up, how to even begin to apologize to you for it."

Warily, Andre steps close to Billy and rests a hand on Billy's shoulder. As he feels the tension bleed out of Billy's frame, he curls his fingers in, squeezing gently. "Billy."

Billy snaps his head up and back, staring at Andre.

“I had days I hated, too.” It’s the first time Andre’s given voice to the feelings that ate at him for months. “Hated not having you there, hated you for being a step in front of me. Hated myself for being thankful it wasn’t me. The situation brought out the worst. Us being apart... that just made it easy for the bad shit to take hold. You hearing me?”

“Five-by-five, Dre. Five-by-five.”

Andre squeezes Billy’s shoulder one more time and then steps back to the grill.

“So, we’re good?”

“We’ve never been anything but good.” Andre opens the grill top and frowns. There’s been too much bloodletting; he almost fucked up a perfectly good slab of ribs. “Now go get me a damn platter before these things burn.”

After dinner, when Andre’s elbow-deep in soapy water, he looks at Billy and asks, “Did you already sign it?”

“Yeah. Three scenes, all for short video clips for the website.” Billy dries a plate and stacks it on the counter. “Did one scene today, too. Wanted to make sure I could work with the guys.”

Guys. More than one. A flare of jealousy lights in Andre’s gut. “Oh. Okay, then.”

He washes the rest of the dishes, and wipes down the counters in silence. It takes that long for him to rein in the desire to snap Billy’s head off. The idiot. “If you’ve already made the move and tried it on, whataya need me for?”

“I need you there with me. Just, you know, for support.” Billy shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know that I can do it again, but I definitely can’t do it alone.”

That’s all the opening Andre needs to let his annoyance spill out. “Then *don’t* go back. Jesus, God, Billy. I’ve told you we can do this. Some-fucking-how, we can pull it out. Call them right now, tell them all to kiss your lily white ass and move on.”

“I can’t do that.” The words are whispered, but laced with the hardheaded resolve that’s all Billy Westerson. “I gotta be there in the morning at zero-eight, need to leave an hour before that. Either you’re at my side, or you’re not.”

Like he'd be anywhere else. "Am I driving or is another car picking you up?"

"They'll send a car," Billy says. "It's in my contract."

Andre rolls his eyes. Fucking contract.

Four

Twenty minutes after arriving, Billy disappears behind a closed door for make-up and a list of other shit Andre didn't catch. It leaves Andre to find an out-of-the-way spot so he can be *supportive*.

A man approaches—shorter than Andre's six feet, pudgy but not fat... ordinary in a way that makes him completely unremarkable—and steps right into Andre's space. "You're Will's friend, right?"

There's no graceful way for Andre to blow him off. Shaking the offered hand, he says, "Andre Jackson."

"Mark Smith." Mark waves a hand towards the set Billy abandoned Andre in front of. "It'll be another hour or so before we're ready to shoot. You interested in a tour?"

Fuck no, Andre thinks. He'd prefer to give Mark the finger, and then steal Billy away. Instead, he pulls up the politeness his grandma drilled into him and forces a smile. "Thanks, but I'll just hang out here. It's close to the coffee pot."

"You sure? Not many people have the chance to see behind the scenes."

Andre takes a step back. Mark reminds him of the worst kind of used car salesman. Then again, it may be that he was predisposed to dislike the man from the first word. Either way, much longer in his company and Andre's going to be looking for the exit sooner rather than later. "I'm good."

"Did you meet Kurt and Steve?"

The two dudes Billy's doing the scene with, one of them just as bald as Billy—Kurt, if Andre picked the names up right—and the other working a high-and-tight that would pass Army standards. For the hot second he spent with them, they seemed like stand-up guys. "I did."

"Yes, well." Mark bounces on the balls of his feet. "If you're sure..."

"I'm sure." Andre smirks as Mark nods and takes a step back. A rattled Mark is actually kind of amusing. "I told Billy I'd be here, and here is where I'll stay."

Mark opens his mouth, but before he can say 'boo', someone calls him to the other side of the set. Andre's thinking about sending his unknown savior flowers as a thank you.

Looking around, he sees a metal folding chair leaning against the wall. He nods once. A cup of coffee and that chair, he'll be set for the rest of the morning. At least he will as long as he avoids looking at the goddamn sex sling hanging from the ceiling.

A sex sling. Jesus, fuck.

They're not using the sex sling. Andre's caught between disappointment—because, seriously? *A sex sling*—and relief. That's an image of Billy he doesn't want doggin' his dreams.

Not that he wants the scene playing out in front of him invading shit he associates with Billy either. He doubts he'll ever be comfortable with having full Technicolor memories of Billy getting fucked by someone else.

It's not as intimate as he had expected. The cameraman circles the trio, leaning in and obviously focusing on Billy's cock and then shifting to film where Steve's cock is splitting Billy's ass or where Kurt, kneeling between Billy's stumps, is jacking his own dick. It takes the edge off of the scene, adds another level of separation between Andre and Billy and the fact that Billy's getting sexed up by a stranger, a passing acquaintance.

And for all the distance the cameraman creates, it does fuck all to keep Andre's body in check. His breathing speeds up, matching the heavy thud of his heart as it hammers against his ribs, and his cock slowly fills. Even with all of the distractions, seeing Billy needy and wanton is captivating.

Sweat dots Billy's oiled skin, trailing over his chest in tiny rivulets, and the precome pushing out of his slit glints in the bright overhead lights. Andre wants to step into the middle of the action and touch, learn the feel of Billy with his fingers and his lips. He wants to spread Billy's thighs wider and take Billy's cock into his mouth, sucking and slurping until he's overloaded with the taste and scent of Billy.

Then Billy cants his head, turns away from watching Kurt, and looks at Andre. It's like being caught in a web, locked in place by the weight of Billy's stare.

And all of the levels of separation vanish and Andre is *right there* with Billy.

Billy opens his mouth, his tongue darts out and swipes over his bottom lip, and, his fingers curling against the arm Steve has wrapped around his torso, he comes.

Andre does the only thing he can. He flees.

Through the studio and the offices, until he's pushing the door open and stepping out into the heat of a Florida summer day.

He tips his head back, closing his eyes against the sun, and sucks in a deep breath of humid air. Slowly, the tension seeps out of his muscles. It's quickly replaced by a stomach-churning embarrassment. And a feeling of helplessness. Because he's sure he just managed to blow all of the trust he'd managed to rebuild with Billy.

What a goddamn clusterfuck.

Five

The car ride home is made in total silence. Billy doesn't expect Andre to say anything, not after the way he ran out of the building earlier. But, he's realizing, there's a mile of difference between expecting something and having the actuality of it shoved down your throat.

He's man enough to admit that he's skin hungry, in want of a touch that isn't fueled by medical necessity or overflowing with ideas of what he *used* to be. He almost lost himself in it during the first video shoot. Dre was his back-up plan, his anchor.

And it damned near pulled him under. Looking away from Kurt, seeing beyond the stage set and meeting Andre's gaze. All it did was throw a huge spotlight on the fact that the wrong man was touching him. Not a lover, not even someone he could claim as a friend.

He'd been ready to call a halt to the whole fucking thing, to finally do what Andre'd been asking, begging him to do for weeks. Then Andre took off, moving like the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

Watching Andre run out on him hurt in a way that not even losing his legs had. And it proved that he was in this alone, that he had to do whatever was necessary to survive.

Billy doesn't know what he wants more: to hurl insults at Andre or to tell the driver to pull over and kick Andre's dumb ass to the curb. Both have their merit. He opts to keep his mouth shut, refusing to have this shouting match in front of a witness. It's a trial of his most basic instinct and by the time the driver is pulling the car into his driveway, words are begging to spill out.

He makes it. Barely. Just as the door snicks shut, he wheels around on Andre and demands, "What the fuck, man?"

Andre leans against the door and shrugs.

His continued silence just pisses Billy off even more. "Why'd you go?" he asks, downright demands. "If I disgust you so much that being in the *same building* as me made you run, why did you go? Better yet, why are you even here?"

Andre pushes off the wall and takes a step towards Billy. He still won't look Billy in the eye. The bastard. "You don't disgust me, Billy."

“That’s what your mouth says. Your actions, though, they’re screaming a whole different line.” Billy rolls his wheelchair wide around Andre, stopping in front of his bedroom door. “You tried your best to get me to *not* go, then bailed as soon as you thought I wouldn’t notice. So really, why don’t you do us both a favor, and get the fuck out while I’m in the shower.”

“Is that what you want?”

“It’s not about what I want, that much is obvious.” Billy drags a hand over his scalp. “I don’t want anything from you that you can’t give without reservation. And seeing as—”

“I can give you a fucking lot without reservation,” Andre snaps, cutting Billy off midsentence. “You’re the one with the rules and the walls and the goddamn guilt complex.”

“You left me,” Billy shouts. “I asked you to be there and you *left*.”

Andre raises his head slowly and finally, fucking *finally*, looks Billy in the eyes. The raw emotion, the anger and hurt swirling in the brown depths makes Billy suck in a fast breath. “You think I left because you disgusted me?”

“Why else would you cut and run?”

“That bastard was fucking you, Billy. His hands were all over you and, fuck me sideways, but you sure as hell weren’t looking like it was bothering you.” Andre curls his hands in tight fists, swipes his tongue over his bottom lip. “You wanna know why I split? Because I was, *I am*, jealous. You’re supposed to be mine, not someone else’s. Especially not when it’s some jackass you barely know doing you in front of a camera.” Andre releases a broken huff and then softly says, “I couldn’t watch someone else have what I want.”

Billy shakes his head. That’s the last thing he anticipated hearing, not now, not after knowing each other for so damn long. “I wanted you when we were fifteen, and you wanted to be friends.”

“Things change.”

“Things change, yeah, but how many people know someone for half their life and then all of a sudden decide it’s something special?”

“Things change,” Andre repeats, voice sharp as any KA-BAR Billy’s ever carried.

“Not that much, Dre.”

“Is it that much of a change? Good, bad, and ugly... it’s been the two of us.” Andre drops down to a crouch, reaches a hand towards Billy, not touching but close enough for Billy to feel the warmth hovering over his stump. “We’ve been *together* for years, in all the ways that count, and you damn well know it.”

Mind whirling, Billy takes a page out of Andre’s book. Without another word, he pushes into his bedroom and closes the door behind him.

The shower is Billy’s second in less than an hour. The one at the studio was hot, almost to the point of scalding, in a bid to wash away more than the oil they’d slathered all over his chest. This one is just warm enough to create an oasis for him to get lost in, do nothing but sit and think.

Just like when they first met, Andre has managed to turn Billy’s world upside down with just a few words. Only this time it’s a lot more than the meanest-looking kid on the basketball court picking the new white boy for his team. It’d been a year later when their relationship found boundaries and definition. Billy’d finally worked up the nerve to make a move, and Andre had shot him down in flames. Gently, but still. Shot him down with a speech about friendship versus hook-up and how there was no way a hook-up would last, not like a friendship would.

Billy hadn’t been looking for a hook-up, but he settled for the friendship.

And now the jackass was offering everything that Billy wanted, all that Billy gave up thinking about years ago. Billy needs to know why. Why now, why not before, when he had more to offer in return.

Billy wonders if it’s that, the guilt of him losing his legs that brought all of this on. Turning off the water, he decides that’s the first thing he’s gonna ask Andre.

Minutes later he’s rolling down the hallway, shower damp and with his cargo shorts sticking in all the wrong places. He comes face-to-face with Andre, the jackass, ready to walk out the door, his damn duffel bag in hand. “So much for things changing, huh?”

Andre slowly turns around and leans against the door. He keeps a tight grip on the duffel bag. “What?”

Billy cants his head towards the duffel. “Looks to me like you’re skipping out.”

“Give me one damn reason why I shouldn’t go,” Andre snaps. “You’ve done nothing but push me away since I got here and if you think, even for one hot second, *if you think* I’m gonna stay just for you to pull away again? Fuck you. I lost you once. I’m not setting myself up for a second turn on that dance floor. Not when this time you’re fucking *choosing* to do it.”

Andre turns back to the door, wraps a hand around the knob. And suddenly, Billy knows exactly what *things* changed for Andre.

Because if watching Andre almost walk away is this much of a punch in the solar plexus for him, then standing by as Billy was chopped out, covered in blood and legless, must have been like a death blow to Andre.

“Stay,” Billy says softly. They’ve got some talking to do, probably more than a few shouting matches to have. None of which can happen if Andre walks out that door. Louder, Billy repeats, “Please. Stay.”

Time slows down and then finally, *finally*, Andre drops the duffel. “Don’t fuck with me, Billy.”

Hope, warm and tingly, explodes in Billy’s chest. Lips quirking into a grin, he says, “Never in a way you won’t appreciate.”

“Jackass.”

Tempering the ridiculous giddiness in his voice, Billy says, “Stay, Dre. Stay with *me*.”

Andre picks up his duffel and retraces his steps back towards the guestroom. He stops beside Billy and drops a hand to Billy’s shoulder, squeezing once. “Yeah, Billy. I will.”

Six months later...

Kicking the door closed behind him, Andre rushes into the kitchen and starts unloading the grocery bags. By his figuring, he has twenty minutes at the most before Billy’s gonna be walking through the door, his discharge papers from therapy in his hand.

It’s something worth celebrating. And that’s just what Andre has planned. A light supper—cold shrimp salad and a crusty loaf of bread, dessert if they’ve the mind for it—and then, if everything falls into line, the one thing they’ve denied themselves.

By some unspoken agreement, sex was pushed out of the way until everything else was settled. At first because of Billy and his stubborn need to be a stand-up guy and fulfill the contract, and then just because. Because Billy was going to therapy day in and day out, and Andre was enrolled at UCF and had shit like lectures and papers and fucking calculus homework.

But mostly because they were both enjoying the build-up, the teasing and the playing and the loving that let them learn each other in these new roles. It's not as if Andre's still in the guest room. There'd been hand jobs and frottage, and one blow job so intense it'd left Billy babbling about changing his religion. And every intimacy, every night they spent talking and touching and feeling their way through this, every morning they made breakfast together, had coffee and watched the sunrise, Andre found pieces of the Billy he remembered, but mostly, he fell for the man Billy is now.

All of it's been right and perfect and helping add to the foundation that is, as far as Andre is concerned, what their forever will be built on.

He slides the salads into the fridge, the bread onto the table, and then heads towards the bedroom, sure he has enough time to jump through a cool shower and into something that doesn't reek of a day's worth of humping all over campus.

Except he doesn't have time. The rumble of Billy's truck hits him before he steps into the bedroom. He stops and, going for sexy, leans against the hallway wall.

The supper, the leaning, the planning. It's all a wasted effort.

Billy storms into the house, a sheaf of papers in his hand and a broad grin on his face, and, before Andre can mutter out *hello*, Billy drops his keys and the handful of papers and pushes into Andre's space, pinning Andre against the wall with his body.

He rucks up Andre's shirt with one hand, fingers tripping lightly over the sensitive skin of Andre's waist, as the other wraps tight around Andre's wrist. His lips trail over Andre's neck, and then Billy is ravaging Andre's mouth.

The kiss lasts *forever*, until Andre's lungs are burning and desire is spiraling down his spine and his dick is straining against the hard press of his zipper.

As soon as Billy pulls back, he sucks in a deep breath of air and then moans, low and raspy and fucking broken. "Billy."

Billy grins and, mouth dragging against Andre's neck, says, "Hope dinner can wait."

"Jesus, fuck. Even if it couldn't, it will now." Because, *goddamn*, the whole fucking kitchen could burn before he'd willingly let this end. "Bedroom."

"Too old to fuck me against the wall?"

Andre grunts, seriously contemplating trying it. But then shakes his head. Not today, not their first time. Not when he doesn't want to be rushed. Pushing off of the wall, he says, "Tomorrow, maybe. Bedroom tonight."

"Holding you to that, Dre," Billy says, tugging Andre down the hallway. "Up against the wall, on the chaise out back, the bed of my pick-up at the beach."

Andre bites back a groan, pretty sure he came a little from just the images of Billy spread out and begging on the chaise they've spent too many nights making out on. He's tempted to change directions, to take Billy outside and fuck him in the burning orange light of the setting sun, the possibility of someone watching be damned. Pushing against Billy's shoulder, he growls, "You're a menace."

"Bet you aren't saying that when you're riding my cock."

And, hello, *fuck*. Billy just cut to the one fantasy that Andre indulged in when he was surrounded by sand and at his lowest. There is absolutely *nothing* he can say to that except, "Yes."

Then they're standing by the bed and Andre strips Billy's shirt off, makes a move towards the snap of Billy's cargos, Billy's hands are right in there, returning the favor, tugging at Andre's shirt before running his hands over Andre's chest and leaning and mouthing kisses into Andre's skin.

Tilting his head back, giving Billy more room, Andre laughs softly. This heady combination of friend and lover has been taunting them since the very beginning, and he'd been too stupid to realize it for what it was.

He taps at Billy's prosthetics with his foot. "Off, and then on the bed." And when Billy just stops and looks at him, a dare to do more fluttering through his eyes, Andre lands a fast slap to Billy's ass and says, "Now."

"Demanding fucker."

"Comes with the rank," Andre retorts, happy enough to see that Billy is fucking listening and that, after working his prosthetics off, he shimmies out of his shorts too.

Billy reaches out, tugs Andre down beside him. He works the buckle of Andre's belt loose and then starts working down the zipper of Andre's denims.

They're laughing and teasing, it's all nothing but friendly fun, and then Billy's hand grazes the head of Andre's dick and the amusement bleeds into *yes, now, please.*

Not breaking the silence, Andre leans across Billy and grabs lube and a condom from the bedside drawer. He holds them up and arches a brow.

"You sure?"

"That I want to ride your cock? Oh, yeah."

Billy's eyes go dark, and Andre's pretty sure he's fixing to get fucked to within an inch of his life.

Anticipation raises goose bumps over Andre's arms. Finally, after all of the months of war and reconnecting, Billy's months of therapy and his first semester in college... *finally.*

Billy pulls himself up the bed, sits with his back against the headboard, and, watching Andre, he opens the lube and lets it coat his fingers in slick. "Come on, it's time to take a ride."

Andre straddles Billy's thighs, raises to his knees and cants his hips. The first cold touch of a lubed finger has him grabbing the headboard, his head dropping to Billy's shoulder as a moan bubbles out. "More."

"Easy. We're nowhere near done," Billy whispers, rubbing a hand over Andre's thigh. "I'll get us there."

He opens easy under Billy's touch, and when he's begging and pushing back on the thick bunch of three fingers, he looks down, watching as Billy uses his free hand to roll a condom over his dick.

Billy grips Andre's hip with one hand, steadying Andre as he slowly leans back, taking Billy's cock in.

Andre rides the stretch and burn, relishes in the feeling, cataloging the differences between reality and fantasy. When he's seated in Billy's lap, he murmurs, "Oh, *yes.*"

"Now, Dre." It's all the warning Andre gets. Billy pulls Andre down hard, bringing their bodies clashing together, and all thoughts of slow and gentle, of romance and sentimentality fade away.

Like a fire reaching flashpoint, the need, the desire consumes them, leaving behind hot and rough and wanton. Two men moving on instinct after denying themselves for too long.

The room fills with the scent of sweat and sex, the sound of skin slapping against skin.

"Billy..." It's a plea or curse, a demand or a promise. Andre doesn't know which.

"Yeah," Billy says, huffing the word hot and wet over Andre's skin, sounding like he knows exactly what Andre meant. "Fuck, yeah."

Then Andre grinds down, and a hand wraps around his cock, and, "Jesus, fuck," he comes.

He clenches his muscles, rocking his hips in slow, tiny circles until Billy tightens his grip on Andre's hip and, with a soft grunt, finds his release.

Leaning forward, Andre presses his forehead against Billy's and grins. "So, huh."

"No shit."

"Should pro'lly get up and get us a washcloth." It sounds good, he just isn't sure his legs will actually support him yet.

"Bottom drawer." When Andre arches a brow, Billy shrugs. "Figured we'd get around to this eventually. Stocked the come rags in the bottom drawer."

Pushing to his knees, Andre waits until Billy reaches between them and grabs the base of the condom, then he pulls himself off of Billy's lap. "There's a joke in there about always being prepared, you know."

"Thought those jokes centered around lube and butt plugs."

Andre snorts and shakes his head. He's in love with an idiot. Grabbing a rag for himself, he tosses one to Billy.

"Think dinner is ruined?"

Andre glances at the time. Not so long as to be completely ruined but a fuck of a lot longer than he'd thought. "Salad might be soggy."

Billy wrinkles his nose. "PBJs?"

"Or pasta." Andre pulls on a pair of boxers, tosses the two washcloths into the laundry basket.

Before Andre can offer to hand Billy his prosthetics, Billy slides from the bed into his chair. He looks across the room and, wiggling an eyebrow, says, "Race ya."

Andre watches Billy roll out of the room. A ball of tension and worry that he's been holding on to since *that* day breaks loose. They're finally coming out of the shit storm they fell into in the desert and finding solid ground again.

And they're doing it together.

"You comin' or not?" Billy's voice pulls Andre out of his wanderings. "I'm hungry, and you put the peanut butter on the top damn shelf."

Grinning, Andre heads to the kitchen. "Quit your bitchin', princess. I'm on my way."

The salad might be lost, but the shrimp are easily rescued. He lets the sound of Billy's voice wash over him and starts putting together the stuff to make a quick shrimp pasta. It's worth the effort, if for no other reason than to avoid having peanut butter and jelly for supper.

Billy drags a hand over Andre's back. Andre leans in and brushes a kiss over Billy's lips, snatching the loaf of French bread off the table when he turns back to the stove.

When Billy moves in beside him, close enough that their bodies touch with every movement, Andre knows that everything really is gonna be just fine.

The End

Author Bio

Born and bred on the Florida coast, Laura Mathews is a beach bum cleverly disguised as a mom, an educator, and a slave to her cat. She considers flip-flops to be appropriate for all occasions, arguing for sport as entertaining as college football, and nothing to be more perfect than the scent of fresh coffee on the morning ocean breeze... except, maybe, the icy tang of a margarita on a sweaty summer night.

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