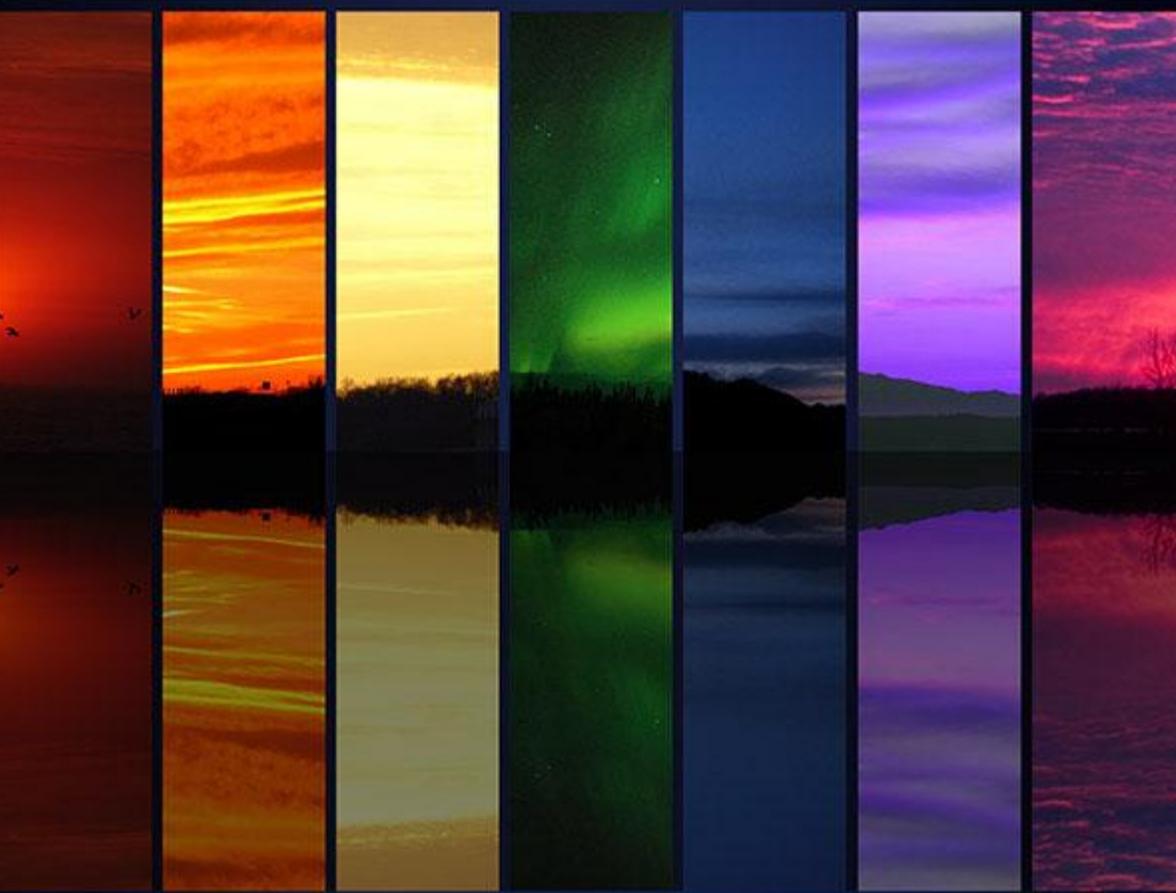


# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## FROM THE ASHES

Leah Miranda

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## FROM THE ASHES

**By Leah Miranda**

### 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

Two men sit on the wet ground, at the bottom of a ravine, with smiles on their faces. One man is leaning against the other while they hold hands, their arms outstretched as if they are about to take flight. They look happy and worry-free, and completely at ease with each other.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Insecure, self-conscious, shy, geeky, clumsy. In other words a walking disaster.*

*It is the only way I could describe myself. My past boyfriends didn't help any with their constant criticism and belittling comments about my person.*

*So you can't be really surprised that I have given up finding my knight in shining armour.*

*But I have never taken into consideration the one beautiful man, who is so far out of my league that it is not even funny. He became the only source of my self-esteem.*

*But when he started acting suspicious all my insecurities came back full force.*

*Please give us a HEA. I love him too much to lose him because of a misunderstanding.*

*\*\*\*No cheating, threesome or BDSM. Otherwise, get as creative as you like\*\*\**

*Sincerely,*

*MrzoroChan*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, sweet no sex, anxiety disorder, humorous, businessmen/lawyers, writers

**Word Count:** 17,570

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Thanks to Gillian, Debbie, Ren and Shayla for taking the time to help me whip my story into shape. To the wonderful LL Author's Support Group, for their encouragement, support, and humor (because sometimes all you need is a good laugh to get you through a rough writing spot). Last but not least, to my family for all the love, tears, and laughter we've shared in good times and bad. You guys make every day worth living.

# FROM THE ASHES

**By Leah Miranda**

Winter in the city was a drab and dreary affair, even more so when mountains of dirty snow competed for sidewalk space with aggravated natives dodging and cursing the herds of tourists who move too slowly for their fast-paced New York life. Space was always at a premium, even among pedestrians.

Noah's third-floor apartment, which he shared with his best friend, was in a five-story building with a handsome limestone façade and classical stone corbels that hold up the bay windows on one side. It was narrow, but had a deep lot, and was squeezed incongruously between a tall, more modern condo building and an even taller, wider apartment block (more posh, Ben would say), manned by a doorman and a security guard. Their apartment looked tiny in comparison, dwarfed as it was by its gigantic siblings.

They compensated by painting the walls white and draping sheer curtains on the windows, which Noah tied back every morning to let as much light in as possible. The floor-to-ceiling column of bookshelves that dominated one wall were also white, to coordinate with their white kitchen cabinets and counters, which Ben said occasionally blinded him when the light hit them just so, but Noah liked things that matched. He conceded that a white couch was just asking for trouble yet vetoed Ben's attempts to talk him into buying a dark sectional for their small living room. They ended up compromising on a cream, leather couch that he forbade Ben to eat on.

It was starting to look a little institutional, even for Noah, so he grudgingly allowed bold splashes of red and yellow here and there at Ben's insistence, though they were mainly things that could be easily replaced on his whim, namely pillows and artwork.

Noah sat on the window seat, his attention split between the project in his hands and the rain lashing against the double-paned glass. He hoped it would be enough to melt some of the snow that had piled and piled relentlessly over the long winter months. He was tired of hearing Ben complain about walking on slush.

"I'll stop by the cleaners on my way home. Do you need anything from the store?"

Noah looked up from the scarf he was knitting and gave Ben a smile. “I think I’m okay. You’ll be late if you don’t hurry up, and then Daddy Bill will have smoke coming out of his ears again.”

The other man snorted. “Bill always has smoke coming out of somewhere, whether I’m late or not.” He straightened up from where he was peering in the fridge, fixing the dry erase board that had slid down when he brushed up against it.

Noah put down his yarn and stood up to stretch. He admired his friend’s navy suit and examined his own threadbare sweatpants with a self-deprecating smirk. The elastic was nearly gone and they had an annoying habit of sliding down whenever he walked, so he’d taken to folding the top and rolling it twice to secure them. Ben, the fashionista that he was, spared no expense on his clothes, and it showed. He looked very handsome and lean in his tailored two-button suit jacket. His tie—a novelty, cow-print one he occasionally wore as a strange homage to Noah (who had an unusual affection for the creatures)—would have looked ridiculous on anyone, and no doubt would earn him a mild reprimand from his father. He wore it so confidently and so matter-of-factly that he made it look good. Noah doubted he could pull off such a look himself. He hitched his pants up so he wouldn’t trip over them as he walked towards Ben.

“You always work hard; you’d think he’d ease off on his nagging once in a while,” he said, holding out Ben’s messenger bag for him.

Ben just rolled his eyes. He shrugged on his coat before turning to Noah with a smile.

“Vietnamese okay for tonight?” he asked, grinning when Noah returned his smile.

“Saigon Grill?” Noah loved the Grill’s sea bass with spinach dumplings, but it came with a staggering price tag and he was reluctant to let Ben spend that much money. Ben seemed to have read his mind. He hooked an arm around his shoulder and shook him gently.

“Stop worrying about how much it costs, seriously.”

Noah laughed. He often wondered how it was that Ben knew him so well. He would have loved to have had him as a friend back in high school. As it was, a sickly, stick-thin, slightly effeminate boy like him—who was constantly outshined by his athletic older siblings—barely had anyone to hang out with

besides the chess club people, and he hadn't even known how to play chess. Still didn't.

Ben looked up at the cat-shaped wall clock ticking along above the hall table and grimaced. "Definitely have to get going, Princess. The evil lawyer-father is bound to be breathing flames by now."

Noah handed him an umbrella and opened the door for him, wondering what Ben would do if he gave him a gentle kiss on the lips. He gave himself a mental kick to erase the suddenly domestic scene in his mind. He knew Ben saw him as a brother, and despite Ben being attracted to a wide variety of men, he'd never showed any interest in Noah as anything but a friend.

He wouldn't describe himself as handsome. His aversion to public spaces guaranteed a paleness acquired from spending too much time indoors, and he was far from model-level attractive with his short height. Not that he was doughy, but he certainly wasn't sculpted either. He'd never be able to compete with the men his friend preferred. Still, he couldn't stop himself from leaning in to kiss Ben's cheek.

"I'll see you later." Ben gave him a salute before walking out.

Noah went back to the window seat and leaned against the window, giving Maisie, his seven-year-old orange tabby, a cuddle when she jumped up on his lap. He let her rub up against his face briefly before propping her up so she could rest her white paws against the glass. He traced raindrops sliding down the glass while he kept an eye on the pedestrians down below. The sidewalks were flowing with umbrellas bobbing and weaving their way up and down the streets, but he made out Ben's tall form in the crowd easily. He chuckled at his friend's purple, polka-dot umbrella, shaking his head in amusement.

"He's so good to me, Mais. I don't know what I'd do without him."

Maisie meowed before wiggling away. Noah picked up his scarf again, already counting down the hours until Ben came home.

\*\*\*\*

The pre-war apartment building was tucked up on a quiet street between Union Square and Gramercy. What it lacked in creature comforts—the tiny elevator was claustrophobic enough to make even the hardest of people pull their hair—it made up for in location. It was a stone's throw away from Barnes & Noble (really the only store he'd willingly go to), and if he took a Xanax beforehand, he could occasionally be persuaded to meet Ben in Madison Square Park for a short tête-à-tête dinner.

It had to be a late dinner, too, with Ben having to work overtime to make up for his tardiness that morning. Noah didn't care. The late hour meant fewer people and less chance for him to embarrass them both with a panic attack.

He hunkered down on the park bench uncomfortably, wondering if it made him look more or less threatening to the couple who'd been eyeing him for a while from where they sat cozied up a few benches away.

"Hey there, oh creature of the night!"

Noah jumped. Ben was making his way towards him quickly, chuckling when he noticed Noah's nerves.

"One of these days, I'll keel over from a heart attack if you keep sneaking up on me like that," he scolded.

His friend just laughed and wound an arm around his shoulder as they made their way out of the park. "Okay, so the Grill is out of the question, obviously, as it's all the way Uptown. How do you feel about Korean?"

"It's not crowded, is it?"

"Would I ever take you somewhere you can't handle?"

Noah gave him a look. Did he really need to remind Ben about that BBQ place on 23rd?

Ben paused, thinking. "Yeah, okay. Never mind. Clearly not one of my most brilliant ideas," he grimaced. Neither one of them would ever forget the spectacular way Noah had lit out of that place, like he was on fire—nearly getting run over in his desperation to escape that madhouse.

"But this place is quiet, I promise."

Ben took him to a non-descript building with a stern-faced doorman and an elevator just slightly bigger than the one at their apartment (it could fit six people, if they were willing to get personal). Noah wasn't sure of the place at first, but was pleasantly surprised when the doors opened to a dim, casual place. They were quickly seated by the window as the place was nearly empty, and Noah could almost pretend they were on a date. He looked at Ben over the glow of the candle.

"So far, so good," Noah teased, his shoulders starting to relax.

Ben laughed. "Well, I'm glad to see you have faith in me."

They shared a quiet laugh. *This is nice*, Noah thought. He felt mellow from the anti-anxiety med he took earlier, and the ambiance was quite soothing. It

felt safe in the low light, with just him and Ben in their little nook. Quiet strains of Korean pop serenaded them as they looked over the menu. Noah winced at the prices. Why anyone would willingly pay that much money for some poor cod's sperm sac was beyond him.

Ben looked at him knowingly. "Order whatever you like. This is my treat for you getting out of the apartment, okay?"

They ordered appetizers to share between them, and for the main, Noah decided the dumplings were a safe bet; they were both affordable and something he liked. He knew Ben hated it when he got hung up on the prices. He just didn't feel comfortable having other people spend so much money on him, and frowned when Ben added *go-deung-uh gui* to his order.

"Jesus, Ben, I don't want a mackerel half the size of my fist for twenty dollars! It's just too much money."

"You've been craving fish all week, so I figured it's about time you got your fish. And it's my fucking money I want to spend. And I want to spend it on you."

"I don't like the idea of you wasting your money on me. It makes me uncomfortable," Noah insisted. He didn't like feeling inadequate around Ben, or having Ben think that he was taking advantage.

Ben took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm himself. This was an old argument between them.

"Noah, you are my friend. I want to treat you once in a while. Who else would I spend my hard-earned money on, other than on the people I care about? And why are we arguing over food? Let's save that for if I buy you a house or a car."

Noah couldn't say anything to that, not without upsetting Ben even more, so he just nodded and turned to look out the window.

They were silent for a while, and Noah realized he was probably coming off as ungrateful. He turned back to Ben with a small, conciliatory smile. He hated it when they argued.

"Thanks," he said.

"Hey, no problem." Ben gave him a slight smirk in response. "You worry about the littlest things, though."

Noah kicked Ben under the table, and then tried to make out it was an accident. Ben grabbed Noah's leg and pinched him on the thigh.

“Ow!”

“Keep your dangerous limbs to yourself, or pull back a bloody stump,” Ben threatened, but the grin on his face undermined his serious tone.

Noah huffed and glared at him accusingly, rubbing his thigh to ease the sting. Ben didn't look apologetic in the slightest. He just sat there, with that same grin, wagging his eyebrows comically. Noah shook his head in amusement. Whether he wanted it or not, he had to admit that Ben had a way of making him laugh.

The food arrived, and the conversation turned to mundane things. Noah soaked it up. He watched his friend, his blond hair like burnished gold in the candlelight. A wave of melancholy swept over him, as, for the hundredth time, he resigned himself to the truth that this was all Ben would ever see them as. He would only ever allow them to be friends. Noah rubbed a hand against his chest to ease the ache.

“...So he says to me—Noah? You okay?” Ben asked with concern.

Noah took a deep breath. “Huh? Oh yeah, I was just—you know, thinking about my deadline,” he explained.

The other man scoffed and waved a hand in dismissal. “You always make it on time. I just realized, I don't even know what you're writing now.”

*And you never will*, Noah thought. Not when the story was so suspiciously about them.

He reached across the table and put a hand over Ben's.

“Thanks. Thank you, Ben. I don't know what I'd do without you.” He gazed at him earnestly, trying to convey his true feelings.

Ben shook his head, looking uncomfortable as he slid his hand away to reach for his wallet. “You're my best friend, practically my *brother*. No thanks needed.”

Noah nodded tightly and excused himself to go to the restroom while Ben dealt with the check.

Passing the restroom mirror, Noah took a moment to study his reflection. He'd seen Ben eyeing their waiter, and the man looked just like Ben's type—tall and dark-haired with a little meat on his bones. Noah, despite Ben's valiant attempts at getting him to eat more, looked ready to tip over from the slightest breeze.

He left the room feeling despondent, even more so when he caught sight of Ben chatting up their waiter with obvious interest. And why wouldn't he? The guy was gorgeous. Noah dug his nails in his palms to stop his train of thoughts. His sister was always getting on his case for putting himself down. It was a hard habit to break.

Ben quickly stood up as Noah came closer. If it was his goal to unobtrusively slide the slip of paper he was given in his pocket, he failed abysmally, but Noah pretended not to see.

\*\*\*\*

A few nights later and he couldn't pretend anymore. Not with the rhythmic banging of the headboard against the wall, or the orchestra of grunts and moans serenading him from next door. He turned over and mashed the pillow harder against his ear, trying to block out the rising crescendo of, "Oh! Oh!" going on in Ben's room, and only partly succeeding.

"Fucker," he whispered with uncharacteristic venom. It didn't help that he was aroused as all hell.

Noah tossed the pillow away in anger. He wasn't going to get any sleep anytime soon. Refusing to give in to the insistent thrum of arousal coursing through him, Noah stomped out of his room and into the darkened living room. Maisie sat on her climbing post, watching him with eerie, golden eyes.

"Might as well get some work done, huh?" he said, stroking his cat gently when she joined him at his desk.

He turned on the antique banker's lamp he inherited from a great aunt and looked at the mess of papers, all filled with copious notes about his new book.

It was usually easy to immerse himself in another life when he was sitting in front of his computer. He was another person, in other circumstances, doing things he would never do in real life. Ben had asked him at the restaurant what he was writing, and he wondered what Ben would say if he found out that he was writing about them. It was a memoir loosely based on the trials of being in love with your best friend and the damning cliché of it remaining unrequited. He'd thought of giving it a happy ending many times, but it didn't seem right. And so here he was, as stuck in writing limbo as he was in his personal life.

The noise in Ben's room had died down a few minutes ago, but Noah didn't get up. He sat at his desk and stared at the blinking cursor until it was all he could see, and still the words wouldn't come.

There was a spot on the floor just off the bedroom hallway that always creaked no matter how carefully you stepped on it. Noah tensed when Ben cursed behind him.

“Fucking stupid, loud floor! Probably needs a hammering.”

“*Not as loud as you,*” Noah wanted to say. He kept quiet and resolutely didn't turn to look at the other man.

“Hey, I hope we didn't keep you up.”

Ben was equal parts saint and asshole, Noah's sister had always said. He wasn't sure which one he was being now.

“Couldn't sleep anyway.” He wrinkled his nose at the scent that assaulted him, wondering if it would be gauche to suggest a shower.

“Hey listen, I thought we could go up to the Vineyard next weekend. It's my mom's birthday, and she's been saying she doesn't see you enough.”

A weekend away sounded good, even if Noah was still a little miffed with his friend. Certainly, Noah was equally fond of Ben's family as they were of him.

“Okay. What should I get her?”

“She's always loved your chocolate mousse cake. I wouldn't say no to some peanut butter cookies, either.”

Noah couldn't help but laugh, despite his earlier mood. “It's not your birthday.”

“Do I need to wait for my birthday to get some cookie goodness?” Ben pouted, though he didn't really have to wait for anything, because Noah would give him whatever he asked for. Maybe. Within reason. Okay, he didn't think he was desperate enough to be a yes-man, even for Ben.

He deliberately kept his eyes away from Ben's half-naked body, feeling embarrassed and upset for some reason.

“We'll see.”

Ben got to his knees in front of him (boy, did that make a nice picture) and batted his eyelashes, making Noah laugh again. He was always amazed at the way Ben could make him get over a snit, whether knowingly or not, and he was more than willing to return to their status quo by deliberately putting Ben's infuriating exhibitionism out of his mind.

“Get up, you idiot. You look ridiculous.”

“I will, but only if you promise me cookies!” Ben bargained, grabbing a chair leg for balance when Noah tried to push him away with his foot.

“Okay, fine. Fine! Just stop giving me those goo-goo eyes. It looks scary on you.”

Noah nearly toppled out of his chair when his foot was grabbed, Ben making a claw out of his hand in obvious mischief.

“No, don't you dare! Benjamin!” He howled out a laugh, trying to yank his ticklish foot away from those torturous fingers, and failing.

Ben had tears in his eyes from laughing so hard. His face had a ghostly blue look from the computer glow and his hair was sticking out in clumps, but Noah thought he looked good. He gave another yank, and his foot came free with a jerk that sent his knee up, hitting Ben on the chin. This caused them to go into fits of laughter again, until they were both lying on the floor breathless.

“Give me cake, or give me death,” Ben panted.

“That could be arranged.”

Noah rolled on his side. It felt good to joke around with Ben like this. He could almost pretend it was just the two of them in the apartment, goofing off. He moved to snuggle up to Ben's side like he had any right.

“You know, it's rude to keep people up with your noise at this ungodly hour.”

They both turned around to see Ben's date scowling at them from the hallway. He gave Noah a disdainful look before turning his attention to Ben. The light was poor, but Noah could still see the dark bruise on his neck. His mood soured.

“Wow, with the way you talk about your friend, I thought I had some competition. But I don't have anything to worry about, do I?” the other man sniped in a fake whisper.

Noah could feel himself flush in embarrassment. No longer comfortable being in the same room, he quickly stood up and grabbed Maisie. He ignored Ben and the other man and slipped around them, not meeting their eyes as he nearly ran to his room. The door's lock latched noiselessly, all but drowned out by the pounding in his head. He didn't think he was having an attack, even with the loud, racing thump-thump in his chest and the shaking he tried to control, but he fumbled for the orange prescription bottle on his nightstand anyway.

He could hear them arguing outside as he pet Maisie's fur almost hypnotically, willing his heart to slow. The slam of the front door made him jump and tighten his hold on the squirming cat. She hissed at him in displeasure.

"Sorry," he whispered, not sure whether he was apologizing to her or to Ben. He tried to ignore the knocking on his door, muting Ben's pleas to open up with his pillow until he quieted down and the apartment was silent again.

\*\*\*\*

Breakfast the next day was a somber, awkward affair. Noah found himself tiptoeing around the apartment and trying to quietly put down his mug on the cold, granite countertop, but then realized he was acting guilty for something he hadn't done.

He slammed the pan on the stove with some satisfaction. In a rare show of pettiness, he also loudly rattled the silverware, cursing under his breath when the drawer closed on his thumb.

The toast had just popped up when Ben slunk his way into the kitchen and sat with slumped shoulders on the barstool.

"Noah—"

Whatever he wanted to say was drowned out by the shrill whistle of the kettle, and Noah remained turned away. He busied himself with preparing his tea and buttering his toast, deliberately chewing loudly to muffle the sound of Ben's voice. It was childish but made him feel better.

Ben sighed and came around the counter to put his hand on Noah's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know he'd be such an asshole. Besides, he had every reason to be worried. I mean, look at you," he pointed out.

"Yeah, look at me... a very short and scrawny scarecrow."

Ben gave him a disbelieving look. "You're just the right height to put your head on my shoulder when we're watching movies on the couch. And you've always been thin, it's genetics. Supermodels would be jealous of you."

Noah pulled away.

"What?"

"You're so clueless," he accused Ben.

“So clue me in, then.”

They were less than a foot apart, but Noah felt the distance between them like an ocean. Cluing Ben in on what was really wrong wasn't something he was comfortable with, and all this talk about his appearance was starting to make him discomfited.

“You know how I feel about strangers in the apartment. I don't feel comfortable being around people I don't know,” he accused instead.

Ben rolled his eyes. “You don't feel comfortable around people, period. Stop making excuses about strangers and shit, because we both know you're one antisocial bastard.”

He gave Noah a shrug, obviously trying to find a way to say what he was thinking delicately, but clearly failing. “Look, I know you can't help it when you have panic attacks, but you should have some exposure therapy to desensitize yourself or something. Just go out there and immerse yourself in a crowd—that sounded way better in my head—but you can't possibly enjoy being locked up in the apartment all day.”

Noah wasn't sure where this was coming from, but Ben had been increasingly insistent about him going out lately. For instance, Ben had bought tickets to Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater a month ago without consulting him, and it upset him. He didn't go, of course, and Ben was equally upset when he had to find someone else to go with on such short notice. However, whatever guilt Noah felt for letting Ben down was quickly forgotten when Ben apologized for not asking him first.

“Actually, I do enjoy being in the apartment all day. It's safe here, it's familiar. I don't have to worry about my heart jumping out of my chest when someone looks at me funny, or worry about the crowds squeezing me in.”

“The City's not one giant mosh pit with hordes of people just waiting to swarm you!”

“Ben, really—”

Ben stalled him with a hand.

They were now standing opposite each other with the island between them, and Noah thought it ironic. He felt that there would always be something to separate them, whether it was his illness, or his unrequited love, or even this blocky, white island, and Ben would always find a way to drag Noah across to his side kicking and screaming.

“Noah,” Ben said soothingly, hands out in front of him as they both stood there, staring at each other. “Noah, I want you to have a life outside of this place. I want to do things with you, to take you to restaurants, to the park. I want us to see plays or musicals and laugh at silly paintings that don’t make sense at the museum. Do best friend things together again.”

Noah could feel himself tearing up but he swallowed it down. He didn’t want Ben to see him as even more weak than he already did.

“I want-I want-I want,” he mocked. “It’s nice of you to plan my life for me with what you want. What about what I want? I want to stay home and watch bad sitcoms on TV and laugh at their terrible jokes. I want to play board games and video games and sing bad karaoke with my best friend.”

“Look around you!” Ben yelled, whirling on the spot and gesturing wildly. “Everything here in this place is what you want. I can’t even feel at home in my own apartment. And you know what? I can live with that, because it makes you comfortable. But I can’t live with the fact that you’ve become a hermit, while life goes on outside.”

Noah looked at him in disbelief. “You know why I can’t be in crowds.”

He couldn’t believe that Ben would forget something he’d have to live with for the rest of his life. He still heard the screams of panic when he was alone in bed at night, still smelled the smoke, felt the heat creeping closer.

Ben looked at him with sympathy, but he took a deep breath and plowed on. “I can’t say that I know what it feels like, but what happened at the club wasn’t your fault, Noah. It’s time to move on. She’d want you to move on.”

“No, you don’t know what it feels to be trapped in a burning building, suffocating in smoke and trampled by panicked people. You can’t possibly understand what it feels like to be the one who survived, when my sister didn’t.”

He wouldn’t give Ben the satisfaction of seeing him cry so he left his cold breakfast and turned away, preparing to spend the rest of the day locked up, as Ben would say, in his room. Ben stopped him.

“Don’t you want to let go of the fear? To go out there and experience things other people do? Meet someone and go out on dates? I just want you to find the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. Being in here all the time isn’t good for anyone. You’re lonely.”

Noah let the tears fall as he walked away.

*"How do you know I haven't met him?"* he thought.

\*\*\*\*

They didn't see each other for the rest of the weekend and well into the following week. Noah hid out in his room when his friend was home, though Ben seemed to be going out of his way to remain AWOL anyway. He'd left shortly after their fight and didn't come home until late Wednesday afternoon to take Maisie to her vet check-up, and to drop off a small box of scarves and hats that Noah had knitted for the LGBT homeless youth center uptown.

After the door closed, Noah crept out of his room and perched on his window seat, watching Ben walk down the street.

This had been the longest they hadn't talked since they'd known each other. Noah could admit to himself that it was driving him crazy, but he wouldn't be the one to budge. It was hard to keep up his resolve, though, when he lay in bed at night, knowing there was no one in the room next door.

Now he looked around the empty apartment with new eyes. The walls were white, broken up with only splashes of color from paintings Ben had acquired sometime during their cohabitation. He liked it this way. White was a simple, clean color, and it made the place look bigger than it really was. On the other hand, Ben hated it. He hated the way it showed scuffmarks when accidentally kicked, or when something leaned against it that would rub off on it. He always thought it looked sterile and cold, and had at one time come home with paint chips he wanted to paint the walls with. Noah had put his foot down. If he was the one home all the time, he didn't want to be stuck with a color he absolutely didn't want, and he wouldn't be able to decide on any one color, anyway. He'd won that battle and the white had stayed.

Despite Ben's initial complaints that he wasn't allowed to eat on the couch or put his feet up on the glass coffee table, he did a good job of following house rules with minimal fuss.

Noah's shoulders slumped. All around him were things he'd accumulated to make himself feel safe and comforted. Ben's things were few and far between, hidden in his own bedroom because Noah claimed they clashed with the decor. He realized that he always got his way and that Ben, despite living in the same space—and even paying more rent—was the one who compromised the most.

Okay, so maybe it was time for him to be the one to give in, after all. Time to meet Ben halfway.

“Right,” he said with resolve.

He looked at the time. It was another two hours before Ben finished his volunteer work at the shelter, and while Noah had been there a handful of times, he never lingered longer than it took to drop off donations, and he never, ever went alone.

He had time to whip up some reconciliation cookies, and maybe cook one of Ben's favorite dishes for when he came home—if he came home. Noah shook the thought from his head.

The cookies were cooling and he'd just slid the ziti in the oven when the front door opened. Ben was clearly not expecting him to be in the kitchen because he stopped warily, as if he thought that Noah would bolt.

“Hi,” Noah greeted shyly. “There's still fifteen minutes before dinner's ready. You have time to change and wash up if you like.”

Ben slowly closed the door behind him. He glanced at Noah but didn't say anything, just turned away to hang his coat in the closet. Noah fidgeted. “There's a new episode of *Grimm* I recorded last night. We can watch it while we eat.”

He gave Ben a small smile, but Ben didn't see it, and walked past without a word. Well, dinner suddenly seemed like a bad idea, if Ben wouldn't even look at him for longer than a few seconds.

Noah was tearing up a paper towel, debating whether to turn the oven off and retreat back to his room in defeat, when Ben emerged from his room in sweats and a shirt. The timer sounded and Noah hurried to take the pasta out, his hands shaking so much he nearly dropped the pan. Ben took it from him and set it on the counter with a quiet click.

“It's nothing fancy,” Noah excused nervously, using a rag of paper towel to mop up the dots of sauce that had dripped onto the floor. Ben took the rag from him gently.

“It smells good,” he said. He reached for a cookie and broke it in half, offering to share it with Noah. A relieved whoosh of breath escaped him. He accepted the half a cookie.

“Is it okay to have dessert first?” he asked.

Ben chuckled. “It's always okay to have dessert first. Who could say no to peanut butter cookies?”

Noah shook his head in amusement. "It clearly won't be you."

"Clearly not. Mmmm, my favorite!" Ben wiped his lips, dropping crumbs on the floor.

Noah looked at the mess, but didn't say anything. It wouldn't do for him to get upset over something as silly as crumbs when he and Ben had only just started talking to each other again. Still, the urge to sweep up the mess was strong. He hated crummy floors. He looked up to find Ben smiling at him.

"I'll clean it up before your head explodes," he told Noah.

"Don't worry about it," Noah said, not really meaning it.

Ben knew him too well, though. He just shook his head and grabbed the vacuum before Noah could protest some more.

That done, Noah dished up and set the food on the coffee table, while Ben turned on the TV. It wasn't often they ate in the living room, but it was one concession Noah had no problem making, as long as they sat on the floor and not on the couch.

"Which episode are we watching?" Ben asked as he sat down next to him. He arranged the green bench cushion they had purchased for sitting on the floor more comfortably.

"It's the latest one—the one with Wu. I think he's going to find out about Nick being the Grimm."

They were silent for a few minutes, both busy eating and watching the show. Noah had missed this when they weren't talking. He wasn't too much in denial to admit that Ben was right, and he hated the idea of being left behind. It was only a matter of time before Ben moved on without him.

"Oh come on!" Ben complained. "I can't believe Nick and Frank would just leave him in the dark like that! What the hell?"

"Yeah, they should tell him."

Noah fast-forwarded past the commercials, and for a few seconds only the sound of Ben's fork scraping against the plate filled the room. But then Ben turned towards him and asked, "You would tell me though, right? I mean, if you had a deep, dark secret like that. You wouldn't keep it from me?"

"Not that I'm the Grimm or anything, but yes, I'd tell you if I was, just so you wouldn't think you were crazy if you suddenly started seeing monsters everywhere."

Ben snorted out a laugh, but didn't say anything else as they turned back to their show. Once or twice Noah had to stop himself from leaning against him. He would have done so without hesitation in the past, but now he felt awkward and was still feeling the weight of the angry words spoken between them.

"How about you? Will you tell me if you have a deep dark secret?" Noah asked when they were putting the leftovers away.

Ben paused from where he was scraping a plate to nudge Maisie out of the way. She was hovering around the garbage, hoping for scraps.

"I suppose. Like, you tell me yours and I'll tell you mine. Though I think mine would be pretty mundane."

"I don't think secrets are ever mundane. They've got to be pretty scandalous if a person's keeping it a *secret*," Noah pointed out. He was almost sure that Ben knew his.

They were quiet for a while, concentrating on cleaning the kitchen. Ben wandered over to the couch and began flipping channels. Noah joined him. They sat on opposite sides, both having claimed their own corners a long time ago, but they both had a habit of stretching out their legs to meet in the middle. Noah tucked his feet up between Ben and the couch.

"I still can't believe they left Wu hanging like that. What kind of friends are they?" Ben grouched.

"Maybe they thought he was better off not knowing?"

"How? He checked himself into a psych facility. Would it be better for him to think he was crazy than let him in on the secret?"

Noah hugged a pillow closer. "I don't know. Maybe Nick thought the price of knowing was higher than not. Maybe by not telling Wu, he was protecting him from becoming involved in his world."

"Some protection!"

"Everyone who's known so far has been in danger one way or another," Noah reminded him. "Besides, maybe Nick is worried that he'll lose a friend if he told him."

Ben tilted his head to stare at him. "Maybe Nick should give him the benefit of the doubt. He could just as likely strengthen their friendship even more."

Noah had the strange feeling they weren't talking about the show anymore. He wasn't sure if he was comfortable with it or not.

“Their friendship is riding on a lot of maybes.”

Ben didn't have anything to say to that, so they both turned back to the movie they were watching. Maisie joined them at some point, snuggling up to Ben with a purr. Noah watched them with a smile and made himself more comfortable on the couch, letting the low noise of the TV wash over him.

Eventually, Ben reached for Noah's leg, and Noah wriggled deeper into the cushions as his friend massaged his foot firmly, occasionally sweeping up to his knees before sweeping back down in a soothing caress.

He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until he was shaken gently and he looked up to see Ben's face in shadow. The apartment was dark.

“Time for bed, sleepyhead.”

“What time is it?” Noah asked, untangling himself from the blanket he didn't remember draping over him and sat up, yawning. Ben mussed Noah's already messy hair, and Noah pushed him away.

“It's nearly eleven. Come on, I'll even tuck you in and read you a story if you want.”

“Ha ha.”

Ben grinned at him as he made his way unsteadily into his room. The cat was there on top of the blankets, but she jumped down when they came in. She clambered up the shelves in the corner to look at them from the top of the tallboy, her tail flicking back and forth.

“Is she going to be staring at you the whole night?” Ben asked. “Because, damn, that's creepy!”

“She'll get bored eventually and come down. Just don't close the door all the way.”

Noah slid under the blankets, chuckling as Ben pulled the cover over him and smoothed it, pulling it right up to Noah's nose. He started making cooing sounds, like one would for a child, which set them both off into giggling. Noah sighed contentedly, rolled on his side, and burrowed deeper in the warm sheets. Ben sat on the edge of the bed and started running his hand up and down Noah's back. Noah smiled over at him and let Ben push him closer to sleep.

He was drifting off, between that strange state of being awake and asleep at the same time, as Ben leaned closer.

“Good night,” he whispered, but Noah couldn’t resist the pull of sleep anymore and he didn’t hear. He could have blamed his imagination for the kiss on his forehead, too.

*Noah knew something was wrong when he started to see smoke coming out from behind the stage. The band had stopped playing, and stage crews were rushing behind the curtain with an urgency that didn’t bode well. He was just edging towards the restrooms where his sister had gone when a loud shout cut through the heavy din of chatter.*

*“Fire!”*

*The crowd went wild immediately, making a mad dash to the exit as fire started to lick along one side of the curtain, spreading fast and making its way up to the ceiling. Noah pushed against the panicked mob just as he saw Emily come out of the women’s room. She quickly realized what was wrong and struggled towards him when she saw Noah a few feet away, but the press of bodies pushing and shoving around them made it hard for her to take his outstretched hand.*

*Noah was dragged farther away and lost sight of his sister.*

*The noise was horrendous, everyone was yelling as a loud whoomp, followed by a few smaller explosions as the fire finally reached the bar, echoed above their heads. A ceiling beam crashed down somewhere behind him, and he was being crushed as he lost his footing and nearly got trampled on. Another series of explosions amped the frenzy as everyone fought to get out.*

*Noah felt something hot on his back as embers from the burning ceiling rained down on him and he yelled—*

*“Noah!” Ben yelled back.*

He woke with a gasp, wide-eyed and unsure where he was until Ben’s worried face registered in his mind.

Ben sat on the edge of his bed and peered down at Noah. “Take deep breaths. That’s it. You’re okay.”

Noah let himself be comforted as he came down from his nightmare. He could still hear the echoes of screaming and feel the heat against his face, though he was unsure if the latter was a remembered sensation from the fire or embarrassment from being caught screaming in his sleep again.

Ben’s fingers caught on the scar where he was rubbing Noah’s arm. Noah wasn’t sure how he got out of the club relatively unscathed. A small, uneven

scar on his arm from someone's ring was the only physical sign of his ordeal, but he hadn't healed on the inside. He pulled away from Ben, not needing another reminder of that night.

"You want to talk about it?" Ben asked him.

"Not really. It's the same thing as usual, anyway."

He could see that it was just past midnight, and though he knew he wouldn't be getting anymore sleep, he didn't want to be alone. He also didn't want to ask Ben to stay like he was a little kid still afraid of the bogeyman under his bed. Ben needed to get his rest so he could go to work in the morning.

Ben gave him a long, considering look before pushing him away slightly. "Scoot over. I don't think I can walk back to bed without falling asleep in the hallway," he said nonchalantly.

Noah obediently made room for him until they were pressed together. He felt the bed dip at his feet, and he shifted to make a small furrow for his cat between them.

"This is cozy," Ben yawned.

Noah murmured an assent then turned to face his friend. "Just don't squish my cat."

"I won't. Good night."

Eventually, Ben's breathing evened out and his snores cut through the silence.

Noah lay awake beside Ben, afraid to go back to sleep. He hugged a pillow tight as he waited for dawn.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sunday night was a quiet one in the apartment. Ben had left earlier in the evening to attend a company party, with promises to be home before Noah went to bed, but Noah waved him off and told him to have fun. He turned down the lights and sat in front of his computer, filled with purpose. Maisie came over and draped herself on the keyboard. He gave her a quick pat and moved her onto his lap as he fought off a yawn.

Ben's date from that night weeks ago hadn't made a second appearance, but he had taken someone else to this party. Noah could hardly stand it, despite encouraging Ben to do so. He was honest enough with himself to admit that he

should have been at Ben's side tonight. He'd said as much to his mom when he spoke to her after Ben left, but if he wanted a sympathetic ear to commiserate with him, he'd picked the wrong person.

"What are you going to do about it?" she'd asked. "You're either going to live life knowing that you let him go without a fight, or that you fought to keep him at your side. Which one will it be?"

He let her talk, railing at him with equal parts encouragement and scolding, before promising her that he was still her child and that yes, the blood of his warrior ancestors ran in his veins. She, in turn, gave him the number of a therapist cousin when he insisted he wouldn't be comfortable airing out his dirty laundry to a stranger, after she'd urged him to see a professional for help. As it was, just looking at the string of contact information scribbled almost illegibly on a piece of paper made his knees shake. He picked it up and put it down, picked it up again and looked at it for a long time, thinking up different ways of how it'd never work. He was mentally making up a list of reasons he shouldn't call, when his phone buzzed.

*Shoot me now X\_X.*

*Can't be that bad,* he texted back.

*They just served d 'amuse-bouche'. Leave it 2 Bill 2 find d most pretentious catering service in town.*

*I thought being pretentious was a given, what with lawyers & all.*

*Hey, watch it you!*

Noah shook his head in amusement. He could just imagine Ben sitting at the big boys' table, surrounded by his father and the senior partners of the firm. He would be hiding his cell phone under the tablecloth, his knee jiggling up and down, while pretending to listen to the conversation. Fifty-fifty chance that his father would be glaring at him, too. Bill hardly missed anything, especially when it concerned his youngest son.

*Bill's giving me stink-eye lol :D*

*U can behave 4 ur mom tho, ryt?* Noah asked, though he knew Ben would behave for no one. His mom was more likely to cheer his misbehavior on, anyway.

*Nah, she's trying 2 figure out how to leave early, too. Brb.*

*Ok.*

Noah gave Maisie a scratch, already missing Ben. The therapist's phone number was still staring up at him so he flipped it over. He pretended not to feel guilty.

The phone rang again just as he was getting a drink.

"You don't have a sudden need for me to be home, do you? Like an emergency or something?"

Noah sighed. "We had this talk already, Benji. I can't keep faking emergencies to get you out of things, or your dad will start to think I'm even more of a lunatic than I really am."

"If Dave Perry's wife tells me how delightful it is to know a gay man, again, I will throw her out the window. She wants me to go have lunch with her begonia society, Jeeeeesus!" Ben's voice echoed strangely. Noah wasn't sure where his friend was, but then he heard the loud rush of water in the background.

"Are you hiding in the men's room again?"

"You should see this place, it's got a couch."

Another rush of water sounded, and another, followed by the banging of a door. He heard the hand dryer go off and gave in to the sigh he was holding in.

"Ben—"

"Okay, can I just be honest?" he asked, cutting Noah off.

"Fine, be honest."

"I'd rather be home watching cheesy Hong Kong flicks with you, than be stuck in this boring grown-up party and feeling like a little kid again."

Noah was charmed, wishing Ben was home, too, but he also knew how important it was for Ben's career to attend these social gatherings.

"It's only for a few hours, and you know your dad loves to show you off," he said, knowing it was true. Despite Bill's strictness, he really was fond of his son.

"He's been asking about you. He and Mom both."

"Tell them I said 'Hi', and stop hiding. The sooner you go back out there, the sooner you can leave."

They said their goodbyes and Noah went back to his desk. He sipped at his wine while he looked at his computer screen, his gaze drifting down to the paper he'd turned over.

“What do you think, Mais? Can I do this?”

He gave in to the urge to look at the phone number again before reaching for his cell. His mom was right. He needed to do this for himself and for Ben. Before his confidence could leave him, Noah took a deep breath and dialed.

\*\*\*\*

Ben came home very late, hours after the dinner party ended, reeking of alcohol and tobacco smoke. He crept into Noah's room with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop and knelt on the floor next to his bed with a thud that made Noah wince.

“Noah,” he called out.

“Shut up, idiot. It's three in the morning, for heaven's sake.” Noah sat up to turn on the light and felt a small surge of satisfaction when Ben shied away like a vampire. He took in his friend's rumpled appearance.

“Good grief, Ben. How can you go into work like that?”

“'ll be fuhhn. Jus-jus lemme close muh eyes for a sec, yeah?”

Noah already knew he'd be too sick to even think about getting up in a few hours, so he reached over and pushed Ben's jacket off his shoulders, trying to haul him up on the bed. Ben followed compliantly, clumsily attempting to unbutton his shirt and kick his shoes off until Noah was forced to take over. He didn't think it would be like this when he imagined taking Ben's clothes off. He was out of breath by the time he managed to wrestle him under the covers.

“Next time, I'm leaving you on the floor,” he muttered.

He turned to face the other way, aware of Ben's heat behind him. Noah was dozing when the bed shook slightly and Ben pressed up against him. Ben had always been affectionate with him, and though Noah himself was more physically distant and not likely to be touchy-feely with Ben, his friend had no qualms about wrapping his arms around Noah, like he was doing now.

Even knowing that, he still felt uneasily aware of how strange it was to be lying in bed with his best friend—the man he was in love with and had no chance to be with.

“You smell goooood. Next time, go to the party with me and we’ll get waaaaasted,” Ben giggled. He huffed a breath in Noah’s ear and giggled again. Noah elbowed him in the stomach.

“You smell like a pig. Go to sleep already,” he hissed.

Ben hummed in acquiescence and Noah let the silence lull him back to sleep. He was finally on his way to drifting off when Ben rubbed his nose against his shoulder and said, “I love you, Noah. Why can’t you love me, too?”

He stiffened, breath caught in his throat, unable to think what he should do. Ben was drunk, though. Surely he didn’t mean what Noah heard him say? The effects of the alcohol he’d consumed had finally caught up with him, as his breathing evened out and he started snoring. Noah disentangled himself and sat up, staring at Ben in disbelief.

“You love to make my life that much more complicated, don’t you Ben?” he asked. Ben huffed in his sleep and moved to lie on his back, the white undershirt he was wearing twisting around him uncomfortably. Noah pulled at it to straighten it out.

“Will you wait for me, Ben? I need you to be patient with me for a little while longer.” He didn’t expect an answer now, and surely Ben would have forgotten about this when he woke up, but Noah knew it was all up to him now.

He lay back down, but sleeping was the furthest thing from his mind. Noah listened to the radiator turn on with a few banging noises and whistles, Ben’s quiet snores joining in chorus behind him. He squirmed around restlessly, trying to find a comfortable spot, but soon realized he wouldn’t be getting any rest until he could say what he wanted to say.

“I’m in love with you, Ben,” he whispered, half-afraid that saying it out loud would jinx him, but also relieved to finally be able to give it a voice. Saying it made it seem more real and unable to be denied. Ben’s snores abruptly stopped with a sudden intake of breath, and Noah froze, his eyes wide. He waited a minute to see if his friend woke up, but Ben just snuggled closer and put an arm around his waist. His snores resumed seconds later and Noah breathed out in relief.

Thursday couldn’t come soon enough.

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Three days later and he was being ushered into a room with rich yellow walls and large windows, waiting for Philippa to return from where she was schmoozing with his mom out in the waiting room.

Philippa was his second cousin on his mother's side. Noah remembered her as having big hair and big glasses, and a penchant for smoking behind their grandparents' garage in middle school. She still had the big hair, but was minus the glasses, and the cigarette smoke had been replaced by incense so pungent it made Noah's eyes water. She had her office on the tenth floor of a concrete and glass building within spitting distance of Wall Street; Noah wasn't quite sure whether the location was fortuitous or deliberate.

Her office faced southeast, so he busied himself watching the ferries on the river as they crossed back and forth between the Manhattan and Brooklyn before disappearing out of view.

Noah made himself comfortable on the plush gray couch and picked up one of the throw pillows so he could have something at hand to fiddle with once the session started.

He didn't have to wait long. She came in with a huge smile on her face just as he started to second-guess himself, and sat down on the overstuffed leather chair across from him.

"Hi, Noah. I'm so glad to see you again."

She was just as cheerful now as she was as a teen, which was the opposite of what he'd thought a therapist would be. Philippa brought her legs up sideways on the chair and opened her Hello Kitty notepad to a blank page.

"I can't say I'm happy to be here, but it's good to see you, too," he said.

"I don't think anyone's ever happy to see a therapist. How's Ben?"

He was surprised she asked. The last time she saw Ben was at his sister's funeral six years ago, and they had barely spoken at all. He wasn't aware that she'd remember him.

"He's good. Working for his dad's firm. Um, so how are we going to do this?"

"Well, you probably feel awkward, since we are related after all, but don't think too much on it, okay? Just say what comes to mind. This is only our first meeting and I want you to feel at ease."

Noah took a deep breath and nodded. He wasn't quite sure where to start, so he let his gaze roam around the office, slowly losing his nervousness. He took another breath of the vanilla and clove incense and let it soothe him until he could recline on the sofa, more relaxed than before.

Philippa watched him quietly, her gaze kind and patient.

"I need your help," he blurted out. "I want-I want to stop being afraid of crowds. Ben wants me to go back out there, but I can't, and I feel like I'm letting him down."

"And do you feel like you're letting yourself down?"

"Sure. I hate myself for letting it get this far."

Now that he'd made a start, he let it all pour out. He told her about his sister and the fire and of being trapped in the club with a panicked crowd, and although it was something that she already knew, as everyone in his family did, she couldn't possibly know what it had done to him and to his friendship with Ben.

"I'm tired of leaning against Ben. He must be so sick of me depending on him so much."

She let him talk until he ran out of words, shaking and teary-eyed, yet at the same time strangely relieved. He told her things he hadn't told anyone, not even Ben. Philippa leaned forward to pass him the tissue box and patted him on the knee.

"Ben's opinion matters to you a lot. Are you doing this for him or for yourself?"

Noah thought about it. He could admit that Ben was the reason he was doing this, but there was a part of him that wasn't happy with where his life was going and he'd managed to ignore it until now. The thought of having Ben think he was more trouble than he was worth was terrifying, even more so when he realized that he wouldn't be able to run after Ben with the way he was now.

"I am doing this for me. I love Ben and I'm selfish enough to want to keep him."

"What does Ben think about all of this?"

"He doesn't know I'm doing this, but I know he'd say it's been a long time coming."

He told Philippa about the night he had Ben in his bed, and told her about his hope that Ben had meant what he said, but that he was also afraid it didn't mean what he thought it did.

"He's frustrated with me, and I think he's at the end of his rope. He told me he loves me. He said it while he was drunk so I can't really believe it." He clutched the pillow tighter, fingers catching on the silk ruffles. He wanted to tear them out in annoyance with himself.

"I don't really know if he meant it or not. What if he just loves me like a friend?" he thought aloud. He didn't know what he'd do if that were the case.

"That's going to be something for both of you to discuss. He obviously cares for you very much."

Noah's phone buzzed but he ignored it. He and Philippa spent the last ten minutes just catching up on family gossip, letting him wind down from the session. He was surprised how comfortable he felt talking to her, and grateful when she said he could call her anytime.

"Whether it's as your therapist or your cousin, it doesn't matter," she said as she walked him to the door and gave him a hug.

His mom was waiting in the reception room and she, too, embraced him.

"Ready to go, Sweetheart?"

"Yeah, let me just check my phone." He fished it out of his pocket and smiled when he saw who it was.

*I'll get pizza. U pick the movie?*

*W pineapples? he texted back.*

*Ok, pineapples.*

*Great. I have perfect movie in mind.*

*C u later.*

Noah followed his mom out to the car, looking forward to movie night.

\*\*\*\*

Ben hadn't said anything about his drunken confession, and Noah wasn't in any hurry to bring it up. So he pretended nothing earth shattering had happened, and Ben was none the wiser.

Nor did he tell Ben about Philippa or the sessions he was having on Thursday afternoons, planning to surprise him when he was more confident to be outside on his own. Maybe he'd visit Ben during his lunch break or meet him out for dinner. Noah hadn't felt this excited and empowered in a long time, and even though his fingers still shook at the thought of being immersed in a crowd again, he found he liked it. He felt high from the adrenaline.

He and Philippa kept in contact outside their sessions. She had recognized that Noah was the type to keep things inside him, only letting people see the surface, so she tried to encourage him to open up a bit more, by talking about what he was passionate about. They talked about his story, the things he knitted for the Center, his cat, and most importantly, they talked about Ben.

Sometimes they reminisced about their childhood, when they used to go to their great-grandparents for vacation and get chased around by angry goats. Other times Philippa listened to him cry as he talked about his sister, and his guilt for having survived when she didn't.

He felt guilty for not confiding in Ben, too.

*It's for a good cause. Ben will be so surprised and excited when he finally finds out,* he reassured himself.

"What's on your mind?" Ben asked one night, after dinner had been cleared and Noah wandered off to work on a new blanket.

He paused in counting rows to answer. "What do you mean?"

"You've been quiet lately. Is everything okay?"

Noah picked up his knitting again, watching Ben hang on the couch's armrest upside down. His shirt rode up as he stretched, and Noah jokingly threw a balled up piece of paper at him. It bounced off his stomach.

"Someone's been letting himself go," Noah teased.

Ben sat up quickly and glared at him. "I have not been letting myself go. These abs are made of steel!" he protested, throwing the paper back at Noah. He stretched on the couch with a groan and pointed at Noah accusingly.

"So, what's wrong with you?"

Noah shrugged and kept on knitting. He had about a dozen things wrong with him, but he was pretty sure they weren't the problems Ben wanted to know.

He'd been distracted the whole week, thinking about Philippa's coming assignment for him. She wanted to meet him for a rendezvous as some sort of exposure therapy, though she reassured him that it would be brief and that he could choose any location he wanted. Noah agreed to meet her at Barnes & Noble. Now he was waiting for her callback so they could discuss what time.

"Oh, I've just decided to put my story aside for now. The more I try to force myself to write, the less the words come," he excused.

"I guess whatever works, yeah? I still don't even know what it's about."

"And I'm not telling."

"Not even a hint? Oh, come on!"

Noah hadn't really put his story aside, but he couldn't tell Ben that. In fact, recently he'd been motivated to write something more positive, because his book-self was on a journey of self-discovery, just as he was. It was both exciting and terrifying.

"Nope, not even one hint," Noah said, laughing at the faces Ben made at him before putting aside his work. Ben tried to grab him, which he avoided, nearly tripping over the rug as he hurried off to the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror while he washed his hands. He'd always been thin, but up until recently he was bordering on gaunt. His weekly appointments with Philippa made him feel healthier, and he was eating more. He felt light, yet at the same time grounded. His eyes were brighter than they'd been for a while, and he was sneaking some workouts on Ben's treadmill during the day. Noah liked the feeling.

He stared at his reflection in satisfaction. Perhaps once he was more confident, he could sit on a bench in a park somewhere and soak up some sun. He didn't like seeing his pale hands next to Ben's tanned ones.

Noah stepped back into the living room, still with a smile on his face.

"I recorded the new *Grimm* episode. Want me to make popcorn while we watch it?" he asked as he sat down next to Ben.

"I think I'll go to bed early. I'm not really in the mood for Nick and his damned secrets." Ben got up without another word and walked to his room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Noah watched him go in confusion, feeling like something had happened while he was in the bathroom, though he couldn't think what it was. He shooed

Maisie off the coffee table and noticed his phone blinking green against the polished surface. He thought he'd left it on his desk before going to the bathroom, but he could be mistaken. He checked his messages and realized that Philippa texted him.

*Meet you @ BN around 2pm. Wear something sexy. <3 Phil, it said.*

\*\*\*\*

Ben was oddly distant in the days following, and any attempts to coax him into a conversation longer than five minutes were met with resistance. Noah didn't know what was wrong, but chalked it up to his work and the recent overtimes he was clocking in.

He was distracted himself.

Philippa had called that morning to confirm their appointment for the afternoon, and he was on pins and needles. He walked around the apartment restlessly, unable to concentrate on anything for very long, so he called it quits, packed up his knitting, and soaked in the tub.

He was up to his nose in bubbles when his phone rang. Cursing, he stood to grab it, nearly slipping on the puddle he made, and saw that it was his cousin.

"Hey, change of plans. Is it okay if Hank comes along?" she asked.

Hank was a young man interning at her office. He and Noah hit it off the last time he went to see Philippa, bonding over a mutual love of books, though their preferred genres differed greatly. He reminded Noah of Ben, if Ben was more excitable, into fantasy RPGs, and decidedly less gay.

"Yeah, I guess that's okay. Maybe I can convince him to finally give Jim Butcher a try."

"You can certainly try, but the boy reads nothing but dragons and elves," she laughed. They chatted for a few more minutes. All the while, Noah was dripping on the floor and shivering. Philippa finally let him go.

The time seemed to crawl on endlessly. He busied himself with his story, his mind racing over the possibilities of where it was going and where it might end up, until he was so worked up that he couldn't stay seated anymore. Concentration shot, he wandered over to Ben's room. He didn't intend to snoop, but the door was open and he peeked in, noticing Maisie was on the bed. He and Ben didn't condone her getting on the furniture, but she took advantage whenever either of them weren't looking. Noah guessed they were at fault, too,

since they didn't enforce it and he even sometimes let her sleep on the bed with him.

"You're a brat, aren't you?" Noah asked her as she flicked her tail at him.

He shoed her out and was about to follow her, when he noticed the new picture on the dresser. Ben had an assortment of them, some of his family and mostly of the two of them together, but this photograph was new and one that Noah hadn't seen before. He sat on the bed as he looked at it, wondering when it was taken and how he didn't even notice Ben take it. It was a black and white photo of Noah sitting on his window seat, looking down, presumably, at the crowds below. The raindrops on the glass he was leaning on made a somber backdrop for the solemnity of his pose.

He had never felt so lonely as he did until he looked at the picture of himself, and wondered if this was how Ben saw him as well.

His phone's alarm started to make a ruckus. He smoothed the sheets and walked across the room, giving the picture one last glance before closing the door behind him.

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In retrospect, the anticipation was worse than the actual trip. The five-story bookstore across from Union Square Park was two blocks away from their apartment and one of the few places that Noah could go to with minimal fuss and anxiety, though he took his anti-anxiety medication before stepping out of his front door. There was no use borrowing trouble, and he felt like he made the right choice when he crossed Park Avenue and ended up in the throngs of people wading through the controlled chaos of the Square's Greenmarket.

"Jesus, it's like the Apocalypse," he mumbled, dodging fellow pedestrians and scaffolding supports, fighting the growing panic and the sensation that the sidewalk was getting narrower.

He spotted Philippa waving at him and hurried to her in relief. She grabbed his arm and led him to a small alcove just past the revolving door, shielding him from sight as he got his breathing in order. Hank appeared beside her with a small smile.

"Took your sweet time getting here. We were starting to worry you wouldn't make it," he said.

Noah straightened up and peered over their shoulders. The market was in full swing behind them.

“I forgot the farmer’s market would be open today. I would have picked a different day if I’d known.”

Philippa patted him on the shoulder. “Rate your anxiety for me, from one to ten.”

He took a deep breath. His heart was still pounding a rapid staccato drumbeat in his chest, and his head felt squeezed in and too small a room for his brain. Noah wiped his clammy, trembling hands on his jeans. Beneath all that was the rush of adrenaline that made his knees go weak and, oddly, want to ask for more.

“I feel like I’m about to explode, but I’m a five right now. I took a Xanax before I left,” he explained, rubbing a hand against his chest. His heart was calming and no longer felt like it was going to beat its way out onto the sidewalk.

“Okay, that’s alright. Whatever it takes to get you here,” Philippa replied, though Noah knew her goal was to get him out and about without needing to use the medication as a crutch. He wasn’t sure what to feel about that.

“You ready to go in?” Hank asked.

They made their way inside without a word, and it was just as crowded in there as it was outside. Noah led the way to the escalators up to the children’s floor, where he liked to hide. There were no chairs or tables there, but people often sat on the floor against the wall and Noah liked to sit in the corner where the picture books were shelved. It was mostly quiet in the mornings, only picking up pace when the schoolchildren got out of school. Noah found that he didn’t mind their company. He liked to listen to the younger kids try to read their one-syllable-word books.

He sat on the dark carpeted floor and the others followed suit, the three of them in a loose circle by the corner shelves. They people-watched for a while before Philippa turned to him with a question.

“So, you haven’t run away screaming yet. How does this place make you feel?”

A toddler waddled by with a book nearly as big as her. Noah watched her with a smile on his face.

“I love all these books; I wouldn’t mind living here or in a library. They make me feel content.”

“Kind of crowded downstairs, though,” Hank observed.

Noah nodded as he scratched his back against the wall. A group of preschoolers were giggling nearby as their chaperone read them a story about dinosaurs.

“Yeah, that’s why I come up here. Not too many people.”

They talked about unimportant things for a while, though Noah knew that the other two were observing him as well. He usually didn’t come here this late, preferring to be gone before the kids got out of school and the afternoon crowd got thicker, but Philippa had morning engagements and couldn’t fit him in until after lunch.

An employee trundled by with a cart stacked high with books. Noah could see a group of teenaged girls huddled around a small table in the Young Adults section, and their discussion was getting loud enough to make him feel uncomfortable. He jumped when Hank nudged him.

“Focus, Noah,” Philippa told him. She moved to block his view of the arguing teens. Noah released the grip he didn’t know he had on his shirt and nodded to let them know he was alright. The employee finally ushered the group away before returning to his cart, giving them a suspicious look.

Philippa ignored the man and tucked her legs under her. “Maybe in a while we’ll go down to the café. How does that sound?”

The café was on the first floor. Noah never lingered too long there, and didn’t know if he could sit there with all the noise and the people around him.

“I don’t know,” he said hesitantly.

“Five minutes, that’s all. You might even surprise yourself and stay for longer,” Hank coaxed.

Philippa nodded in agreement. “Remember why we’re here.”

He did remember, but the theory of slowly coming out of his comfort zone was a little harder to practice and he was starting to doubt himself. He didn’t want to lose his composure in his favorite store, aware that he would never feel safe here again if he did.

“Okay, let’s do it now before I change my mind,” he said as he hauled himself up.

He dodged a stroller on the way to the escalators, nearly missed a step as the stairs moved and gripped the rail in fright before regaining his footing. He

surveyed the scene below him as the escalator steadily made its way downstairs.

The main floor was packed. One long wall held busy cashiers with waiting lines that snaked around the display tables and shelves. They competed with the idle browsers and serious shoppers and the coffee shop that claimed the back corner behind the escalators, which Noah and his companions made a beeline for. There was none of the hush of a library and even Hank looked overwhelmed with all the noise. He tapped Noah on the shoulder before urging him to an empty bistro table in a much calmer corner, dragging a third chair over so he could sit between Noah and Phil.

“What’s your rating right now?” Philippa asked Noah as soon as they sat down.

He looked around with wide eyes. Someone bumped his chair from behind and he scooted closer to the table, feeling its edge press up against his chest. He could see the blinking cashier lights on the far wall and hear the buzz of conversation around him, but the café was separated from the rest of the bookstore by an iron railing that seemed to be the divide between chaos and calm.

“An eight, definitely an eight,” he told them. He rubbed his hands together to try to get some warmth in them.

Hank excused himself to get them hot chocolate and, Noah quickly switched seats with him. Putting his back against the wall, so he didn’t have a direct line of sight to the crowds anymore. Then he did the breathing exercises Philippa had taught him to slowly calm down.

Philippa gave him a few minutes, by which time Hank had come back and they quietly sat with their drinks.

“How do you feel about all of this?” she finally asked.

“Crazy. Overwhelmed. Can’t believe I’m doing this, but I haven’t run out of here screaming yet, so I guess I’m good.” Noah didn’t admit that the urge to bolt out the front doors was as strong as it was when he’d seen them from the escalators.

He took a sip of his hot chocolate and burned his tongue. That little bit of pain gave him something else to focus on.

“I consider it a success,” Philippa told him. “You are here and, as you’ve said, you haven’t left. Would you be willing to do this again?”

Noah wasn't sure he could do it again, but he was in it for long run.

"Just promise that you'll let me pick the place, yeah?" he asked. The last thing he needed was to be dragged somewhere he didn't want and feel boxed in.

"Of course! We go at your pace."

Philippa's phone rang and she excused herself to answer it. Hank tried to engage him in a conversation about books; Noah slowly relaxed as they made fun of each other's preferred genres and trash-talked those they both disliked.

"Sorry to run out on you, but I just got an emergency call from another client," Philippa said as she came back to gather her purse. She gave Hank strict instructions to make sure Noah got home safe and bent down to give Noah a brief hug, promising to call him soon. He gave her a weak smile.

"Or you can call me whenever you want to talk."

"Okay, I'll see you on Thursday," Noah told her.

As they watched her walk away, Noah wondered how he could also leave, without making things awkward. Hank moved his chair closer and gave him a knowing look.

"You want out of here really bad, don't you?"

Noah could feel heat creeping up his cheeks, but he didn't disagree.

"I'm ready to lock myself in at home and pig out on Ben & Jerry's," he confessed.

Hank leaned his chair back and studied him quietly for a few seconds, making Noah flush even more under the scrutiny.

"I've always been curious what motivates a person to face their fears. Why are you doing this?"

Noah shrugged, "I don't want Ben to leave me behind, and I'm tired of being a wimp."

Hank leaned close to put a hand over his. "Just the fact that you're doing this means you aren't a wimp. It makes you strong."

"Noah?"

He turned to see who had called him and was surprised to see Ben standing there with a frown on his face.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

His friend held up the bag he carried. “It’s a bookstore. I bought a book. Who’s this?” he asked, giving Hank a suspicious look.

Noah raised an eyebrow, unused to Ben’s rudeness but introduced the two men anyway.

Hank stood up to shake Ben’s hand. “Hey man, Noah’s told me lots about you.”

“Funny, he’s never once mentioned you,” Ben said. He gave Hank a tight smile, though he shook his hand anyway.

Hank sat back down, and he and Noah looked at each other uncomfortably while Ben loomed over them.

“So, done for the day?” Noah asked his friend. He pushed the empty chair closer to Ben, but he waved it away and remained standing.

“Yes, and I thought I’d get that new Dresden book for you on the way home. Imagine my surprise,” he said, giving Noah a sarcastic smile.

Noah looked over at Hank, but the other man just shook his head and shrugged. He gave Hank a smile as he grabbed his jacket and stood. This sudden sullenness from Ben was highly unusual and he had a feeling that it had something to do with him.

“Thanks for the company. I’ll see you next week?” he asked.

“Yeah man, good job today. Call me.”

Ben took a step away when Noah tried to reach for his arm. “There’s no need to interrupt whatever it is you’re doing. I’ll see you at home,” he told Noah. He walked away without waiting for a reply. Noah couldn’t believe it.

“Dude, definitely not unrequited,” Hank whispered to him.

“What?”

He could just barely see Ben from behind the racks of bargain books, and he knew that if he didn’t catch up, whatever it was that had Ben in such a mood would only get worse.

“If your friend could glare me to death, I’d be six-feet under by now. You better catch up or Romeo will think you chose me over him,” Hank laughed, shooing him away.

Noah stood there for several seconds, not really believing it. He looked over his shoulder in time to watch Ben walk out the doors and quickly put his jacket on, hurrying to catch up. Getting out of the store was just as much of an obstacle course as it had been coming in. Plus, he had to dodge customers with non-existent grace, earning him dirty looks and curses, but his attention was focused on only one thing. This time, his anxiety had nothing to do with the crowds. Only with catching Ben and clearing the air between them. He couldn't let Ben's misunderstanding of the situation go on.

Ben was standing at the curb, waiting for the light to turn. Noah darted around the group of loiterers in front of the bookstore and just barely managed to reach him. He squeezed between the other pedestrians right before the crosswalk light turned green and snagged Ben's arm.

"Hey, wait up."

He kept pace with his friend as they crossed the street, but tugged him to a stop as soon as they got to the other side.

Noah pulled Ben to the side so they wouldn't get trampled on and peered up at him. "What's the matter with you?"

"Remember that conversation we had before about secrets?" Ben asked.

"Okay, no answering a question with another question."

Ben huffed in frustration. Another wave of pedestrians walked by, and Noah drew them both further away from the street corner.

"First there's a Phil, now there's a Hank, too?"

Noah frowned at Ben in confusion. "What? How do you know about Philippa?"

"Who's Philippa?"

It was now Ben's turn to be confused. He looked down at Noah with his mouth open and a furrow on his forehead. They stood there staring at each other for a good minute before Noah realized how silly they were being.

"I've been seeing a therapist," he finally confessed.

"A therapist? For what?"

Noah thought Union Square was hardly the place for such conversations.

"It's a long story. Come on, let's go home and I'll tell you all about it," he said, linking arms with Ben as they made their way down the street. Ben looked

bewildered, but he pulled his arm away to wrap it around Noah's shoulder instead and brought him close.

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The walk home was quiet but not uncomfortable, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Noah was almost giddy with anticipation and alive with an excitement he hadn't felt in a long time. If he had any doubts that going to therapy was something he could do, being close to Ben and having him hold him like this erased any of it. They stood at another curb to let the cars pass by and Noah took the opportunity to look at Ben, digging his chin lightly into his friend's shoulder to get his attention.

"There's a good explanation for all of this, right?" Ben asked him.

"Definitely. Whatever you thought was going on back there, you're wrong, and I'll explain everything in a little while."

Ben gave him a small, hopeful smile that he returned with a bigger one. He wrapped his arm around Ben's waist as they crossed the street and made their way two more blocks to their apartment. By now, the clouds had grown darker and the light flurry of snow that had been falling all afternoon turned heavier, the flakes big and sticky enough to start accumulating on the ground.

Noah's hair was soaked and his hands were cold and stiff by the time they made their way inside, where it was warm and the air thick with the overwhelming scent of laundry and spices. They opted to take the narrow stairs up to their floor, bypassing the single, claustrophobic elevator that made everyone in their building nervous.

"Let me make hot chocolate while you change into something dry," Ben offered as soon as the door closed behind them.

Noah hung up their coats and gave him a grateful smile.

"Thanks, I'll hop in the shower real quick. I'm frozen."

The water took a while to warm up in the shower, so Noah turned on the ceiling heat lamp before taking his clothes off. The warm air raised goose bumps on his skin, but it felt good. He watched steam curl up over the shower curtain and decided it was warm enough.

He'd just started to rinse off when Ben knocked on the door and announced that their drinks were ready.

"I'll be right there!" he called out.

Noah hurried to put his clothes on, shivering as he stepped out into the hallway. The lights were turned down low, and by the time Noah sat down on the couch, Ben had started a fire in their rarely-used fireplace. He waited until Ben joined him before reaching for one of the steaming mugs on the coffee table.

“I’m surprised you didn’t burn the kitchen down,” he teased.

Ben shot him an offended look. “Hey! You know perfectly well that it could have happened to anyone!”

Noah laughed and shook his head, remembering the near disaster of Ben’s attempt at cooking hardboiled eggs a few months ago. His friend had gotten distracted by a book and let the water boil and evaporate, until the eggs exploded and shot the lid off the pot several feet away. Noah had looked on in horror as he watched Ben use a tea towel to grab the pot off the burner and the towel caught on fire. They’d had to stomp on the burning rag to put it out, while the smell of charred eggs filled the air and the smoke alarm went off, adding to the chaos, until Ben finally climbed up on a chair to remove the wailing alarm.

“The fire department had to come because the neighbors complained of the smell,” Noah reminded him, bursting out in renewed laughter. Ben joined in.

They lay helplessly on the couch for several minutes, struggling to get their breathing under control, and Noah was relieved to see Ben laughing and joking with him again.

“So, you ready to tell me what’s going on?” Ben asked after they had calmed down.

Noah nodded and twisted in his seat so he could look at Ben. His friend did the same, knocking their knees together. Noah didn’t know where to start. He’d wanted to surprise Ben, but that idea had backfired on him, and now that the chance for him to come clean had come, he was nervous about what Ben would say. Noah rubbed his hands together and took a deep breath to steel himself. Ben leaned close to stop the nervous tapping his fingers had started doing unconsciously.

“You said something about a therapist,” he coaxed Noah, giving him an opening.

“Okay, yes, my mom recommended Philippa—she’s the crazy cousin who came with that biker dude to Emily’s funeral, remember? Anyway, she’s a therapist and I’ve been seeing her for the past month.”

Ben was silent, but he took Noah's hand in his own and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

"She's helping me with my anxiety, and today was some sort of exposure therapy I had to go to, as part of the program."

"Oh," Ben said quietly, as if he'd just realized something that made his world go round again. "So Phil is Philippa? I read that text you got, but I swear I thought it was your mom and that's why I looked at it," he said. Noah put two and two together.

"Phil is a girl, yes. She met me at the bookstore today, with Hank, but she left early. He's her intern."

He watched Ben think about what he'd just told him, and couldn't help but smile when Ben's face lit up.

"I didn't interrupt a date?" he asked.

"Nope. He doesn't even swing our way, and he's not my type."

Ben let out a relieved sigh, then, as if he couldn't help himself, "So what's your type?"

"Someone with blond hair and blue eyes, who probably needs glasses but is too vain to admit it. Someone who gets all my jokes, even the lame ones, and has put up with me for years with unbelievable patience."

He gazed at Ben as he spoke. When he was done talking, he let the silence hang between them. Ben cleared his throat and rubbed a hand against his cheek—a nervous tic.

"I wasn't really drunk that night," he confessed.

It took Noah a while to figure out what he meant, and when he did he blushed.

"You weren't?" Noah asked, feeling faint.

"I was a little tipsy, but I knew what was going on. I heard everything you said."

Ben scooted up the couch until he could sit side by side with Noah, their thighs touching. He wound an arm around Noah's shoulders and tugged at him so that Noah could lean against him, but Noah felt embarrassed so he resisted.

"It's okay, you know. I'm glad," Ben told him, still trying to tug him close. Noah laid his head on his shoulder stiffly, not sure what to say.

He watched the flames flicker in the fireplace, and the eerie shadows they cast, while Ben gently rubbed his arm until he relaxed against him.

*To hell with it*, he thought. Ben was one of the reasons he was going to therapy, and he suddenly wanted Ben to be part of the process, too. He owed him that much. Ben had been with him every step of the way, so why not be part of his recovery as well?

“You’ve inspired me to do therapy. I miss all the fun things we used to do together,” he said. He felt Ben nod against his head.

“Yeah, we used to go to Bryant Park and watch the concerts all the time,” Ben reminisced. He pulled away slightly to look at Noah. “I’m so proud of you.”

Noah’s eyes misted up and he hugged Ben with heartfelt enthusiasm. He let out a shaky, relieved sigh when he felt Ben hug him just as tightly.

“My next appointment is on Thursday and Mom takes me. Would you go with me next time?”

Ben cupped his face and beamed at him. “Of course!”

He hugged Noah again and laughed almost giddily. Cupping Noah’s face in his hands, Ben leaned in to give him a small kiss. It made Noah’s lips tingle and the hair on his arms stand on end. It was the briefest kiss, but it meant the world to Noah.

“Just so we’re clear and there’s no doubt about my sobriety, I’m telling you again.” Ben paused to make sure he had Noah’s fullest attention. “I love you,” he whispered.

Noah’s world tilted and righted itself again with that declaration. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what Ben saw in him, but at this moment he felt he was the luckiest man in the world.

“I love you, too,” he told Ben with a smile.

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Noah was the happiest he’d been in a long time. After all the years they’d known each other, it was funny now to feel so shy and tentative. It tickled Noah to see Ben as careful as he with this new dynamic between them.

Now it was Thursday, and Ben sat next to him on the long, padded bench in the waiting room, holding his hand while they waited.

“How about we grab a bite after this?” he asked, leaning down to give Noah’s shoulder a quick nuzzle.

Noah had discussed with him the importance of exposure therapy as part of his recovery, and Ben was eager to suggest they go to dinner dates and frequent, quick visits to the grocer a block away from their apartment. He promised Noah he’d be with him every step of the way, and Noah found himself getting so caught up in Ben’s enthusiasm that he offered to meet him for lunch the following week.

He loved being able to plan dates with Ben, and with continued therapy he could see them even going to a play or two, which they used to do before his trauma.

“Okay, what are we in the mood for?”

Ben raised an eyebrow in question. “Vietnamese good?”

“Mmm, more than good.”

They were debating the merits of where they could go when Philippa stepped out of her office and made her way towards them. Noah introduced her. Ben quickly stood up and shook her hand.

“Nice to see you, Phil,” he said, giving Noah a small, knowing smile at what was becoming their private joke.

“Ben! What a surprise! I guess Noah finally told you he’s been coming in to see me,” Philippa beamed. She quirked an eyebrow at the possessive hand Ben laid on Noah’s waist and gave them a wink.

“He has,” Ben confirmed, “and I’m here for moral support.”

They chatted for a while before Noah followed his cousin back into her office and sat on the loveseat. He pretended not to notice the curious look Philippa was giving him as he made himself comfortable against the seat’s arm.

“Sooo,” she said leadingly. She waggled her eyebrows at him, making him laugh.

“So, Ben knows. He found out about the Barnes & Noble thing and thought I was meeting Hank on a date!”

They both giggled at that. Noah went on to tell her about their budding relationship.

“We’re going out for lunch after this,” he announced proudly. Philippa smiled, clearly very happy for him.

“You’re probably sick of me asking, but how does that make you feel?”

Noah sat back against the pile of pillows with a smile. He usually took a while to answer her, but this time he answered confidently and right away.

“I feel great! I never thought I’d say it but, I haven’t felt this alive in a long time.”

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Ben had a big smile on his face when Noah came back out. He held Noah’s jacket out for him before taking his hand as he led the way to the elevator.

“Did I tell you that I’m almost finished with my story?”

“You never tell me anything about your story,” Ben groused good-naturedly.

They stepped out of the building and into an unseasonably warm March day, and Noah could see steam come up from the subway grates on the street. Most of the snow had already melted as well. He linked his arm with Ben’s as they walked down the sidewalk, already looking forward to spring and their upcoming trip to visit Ben’s parents.

Noah snuggled up to Ben. “Well, it’s about this boy who’s in love with his best friend, and—”

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### *3 Years Later...*

The crocuses were poking their heads out of the snow, and Noah knew that spring was at hand. He couldn’t wait to look out the kitchen window and see the daffodils’ cheery yellow heads blooming among the red tulips after a long, hard winter. He wanted to plant roses around the patio so he could enjoy their scent while he worked on his new story. Ben and his readers were constantly asking him for a sequel, and Noah had finally caved in and started working on one, which was inspired by his long road to recovery and the early years of his relationship with Ben until their commitment ceremony six months ago.

He gazed into the backyard as he took a sip of his cocoa and dreamed of his new garden. Arms embraced him from behind, and Noah laughed as Ben blew a raspberry against his neck.

“Dollar for your thoughts?”

Noah leaned back against him with a smile. "I think the saying is 'penny for your thoughts'."

"Nah, we're talking inflation here, Baby."

Ben turned him around in his arms and gave him a long kiss before pulling away.

"Are you going out?" Noah asked as he watched his partner put on his jacket.

"Just to the hardware store. I need to get paint for the bedroom."

Since buying their home four months ago, their days were occupied with renovating most of the rooms, and they were almost always covered in dry wall cement and carpet remnants. Now, the master bedroom was almost finished, and Noah could see paint chips of different shades of white peeking out of Ben's pocket. Noah let out a rueful sigh before reaching for his own coat.

"I think I better go, too, or you'll come home with more white paint than we'll know what to do with."

Ben frowned at him. "How hard can it be to pick a color like white?"

Noah just shook his head. He pulled out his own stack of paint chips from the drawer and handed them to Ben, who looked surprised.

"That's very blue," he told Noah as he shuffled through the selection.

Noah couldn't hold his laughter in, realizing how ironic it was that Ben was the one to balk at colors. He grabbed Ben's arm for support. "Blue's your favorite color."

"Yeaaaaah," Ben said slowly.

Noah sighed and shook his head as he showed the other man a design catalogue that had come in the mail. Noah chose the blue because he found a shade similar to his favorite shirt that once belonged to Ben.

"White's boring. I don't want a boring color in our bedroom. Look at how nice this one is," he said, pointing out pictures that he'd book-marked.

Ben studied the pages quietly for several minutes. "So you're saying that you don't want white? Because white gets me excited," he told Noah seriously.

Noah scoffed and poked his stomach. Ben poked him back, and they tussled briefly in the kitchen before Ben trapped him against the fridge.

“All this talk of paint is turning me on,” he grinned.

“Benjamin,” Noah warned. It wouldn't do for them to get sidetracked or the day would go by with them having done nothing productive.

Ben gave him a hangdog expression, but he did step away to put his shoes on.

“You sure you're okay with blue? Because I can live with white walls if that's what you want,” he asked Noah. And Noah knew that he was telling the truth, but this was all about a fresh start in the home they bought together. They were living their lives as best friends and partners without the past dragging them down, and the only way to go was forward.

“I'm sure,” he said firmly. “I think the office could use yellow walls, too, don't you think?”

“Maybe we'll put sliding doors in there. Then you could see the garden while you're on the computer,” Ben told him as they settled in the car. “We should build Maisie catwalks throughout the house. Hahaha, catwalks... get it?”

Noah smiled at him fondly. He and Ben made for a good team, and he could see them living in their house for a very long time. He looked down at his list and wrote “patio furniture” on it; after all, they had a housewarming party to plan.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*I live in a small town in New Jersey (no Jersey Shore jokes, please) where—although there are officially four seasons—it is cold three-quarters of the year, and the weather forecast could turn on a dime.*

*Besides a love of reading, I also love to crochet, watch baseball (I'm a rabid Yankees fan) and garden. I can't resist a good bargain when it comes to plants and am automatically drawn to the garden centers whenever I'm at the hardware store. On that note, I also can't resist yarn.*

*Although I have been writing fan fiction for several years, my participation in this year's Love's Landscapes event will be my first published work, and I hope to participate in many more to come.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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