

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

A SECOND CHANCE FOR THREE

Christa Tomlinson

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

A SECOND CHANCE FOR THREE

By Christa Tomlinson

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

Photo 1: A dark haired man lounges in bed, his thumb rasping over the well-trimmed scruff of his beard. He's relaxed, bare chested and only wearing sleep pants that sit low on his hips, revealing his toned, flat abs. But he's still wearing his wire rimmed glasses as he peruses the work he's brought with him to bed.

Photo 2: Two men stand outside in the rain. They hold each other in a tight embrace, the hard muscles of their bare arms straining as they cling to each other. Rain dampens the longish black hair of one of the men, drops trickling down his neck and leaving goose bumps in their path. The other's lips are slightly parted, maybe hoping for a kiss from his lover in the rain.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Two years ago, X stopped his friend Y from accidentally killing himself (apathy, starvation, prescription meds, drugs, etc.—up to you) following the reported death of Y's (military, mercenary, CIA, special ops, journalist, etc.) lover Z overseas. X took Y into his house and X and his pet(s) have helped Y piece his life back together. X held Y as he mourned and watched as Y finally began to smile and enjoy his work again. X and Y have been part-time lovers for the last few months, but X fears he is not enough for Y to be completely happy.

However, now Z has escaped from whatever hellhole prison he was in and is at the door, waiting to reclaim Y. X knows he should let Y go, that Y and Z still love each other. But how can X and pet(s) bear to let the man they have come to love go? Y has loved Z for many years—Z is his heart and inspiration—but X has become his rock. Z's dreams of returning to Y kept him alive, but how does Z feel when he comes home after two years of worrying about Y to find him in the home of another man?

Request: Lots of past and/or present angst/emotion/grief/doubt. If X and Z didn't know each other before, then enough time needs to pass for them to get to know each other. No instant-love. Feel free to have Y & Z break X's heart, as long as they make it better. One or more pets. HEA/HFN for all three men, but not without working through their problems. I love epilogues.

About the pictures: The man on the bed writing in the first picture is X. The two wet men in the second picture are X and Y. Z refused to have his picture taken until he recovered. Or maybe his work made him camera shy. I don't know. It is up to you to convince him otherwise, if you can. Or try to take one when he isn't looking. Good luck with that.

P.S. Their names don't have to start with X, Y, and Z.

P.P.S. I envision this as a contemporary book, but if you really want to, feel free to make it sci-fi—overseas can become another planet or space and the pet(s) can be something alien but cuddly.

Sincerely,

Jean Reads

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: artists, photographers, menage m/m/m, friends to lovers, grief, hurt/comfort, slow burn/UST, reunited, men with pets

Word Count: 24,437

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Chapter 1

Rob held the phone up with his shoulder, so he could have his hands free to go through papers. The dial tone echoed in his ear multiple times, but he didn't hang up. He'd been trying to get a hold of one of his clients, Tyler Evans, for days now. It was getting down to the wire. Tyler was a metal sculpture artist who had a commissioned piece for Brooks Corp. due in a few days. Rob hadn't heard from him to set up delivery of the sculpture. And that worried him. The owner of Brooks Corp. was temperamental and demanding. Rob knew he'd be angry if he didn't get the piece on time.

Rob sighed when the phone rang for the sixth time. The voice mail was about to come on and he didn't want to leave yet another message that wouldn't be returned. But this time when the ringing stopped, he was greeted with Tyler's live voice instead of a recording.

"Hello?"

Rob sat up straight in his chair. "Tyler. I've been trying to reach you."

Tyler's voice came across the line, slurred and vacant sounding. "Yeah I uh... I couldn't... didn't want to talk."

Rob frowned. "Are you okay? Did something happen with the Brooks piece?"

"What? No, it's finished."

There was a pause, and Rob heard what sounded like Tyler taking a drink.

"I think... I remember finishing it. It's Cole."

"Cole? Why? What's going on?" Cole Bryant was Tyler's boyfriend of several years. He was currently on a photographic tour of South Korea.

"He's dead."

"What?" Rob shot up out of his chair, blood rushing from his head. He didn't know if it was because of his sudden movement or the news he'd just heard. Cole wasn't just Tyler's boyfriend. He was Rob's best friend since college.

"He's dead," Tyler repeated. "Someone from the State Department came by four days ago and told me he died."

Rob braced a hand on the desk, still lightheaded, just barely able to process what he was hearing. Then it clicked. Four days. Tyler had been suffering through this on his own for four days. He pulled himself together. “Tyler, put down whatever you’re drinking. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Don’t worry about it. I think I’m going to sleep finally. I took... something so I could sleep.”

Rob panicked as he realized Tyler had probably mixed sleeping pills and alcohol. “Ten minutes. I’ll be there in ten minutes, Tyler.”

Rob hung up and ran down the stairs. He took them two at a time, his heart pounding. He wanted to keep Tyler on the phone, but with the way he planned to drive he’d need to focus on the road with both hands on the wheel. As he grabbed his keys off the hook by the door, his two dogs perked their ears up, but for once he didn’t stop to say goodbye or grab leashes to have them along.

Rob drove through the dark streets of Conroe, Texas, trying to stay as calm as possible. But his hands gripped the steering wheel hard, and his stomach was clenched so tight it ached. He didn’t know the full story on what happened with Cole, but even if he were dead, he couldn’t let Tyler follow him. Not like this. Cole wouldn’t want that. And neither did Rob.

He pulled up in front of the loft building where Cole and Tyler had an apartment. He didn’t bother going into the garage or trying to find paid street parking. Stopping right in front of the doors, he got out, uncaring if he got a ticket. With all of the nervous energy flowing through him he was tempted to take the stairs, but the elevator could get him to the floor faster. Once inside, he jammed a finger at the number seven, and then waited impatiently as the doors closed and the elevator rose.

Rob looked at his reflection in the doors. His dark hair was a mess from running his hands through it, and he was impatiently tapping one foot. He didn’t do anything to stop the movement. Once the elevator came to a stop, he slid out before the doors were all the way open. There were only three apartments on this floor. He ran to the door at the end, banging his fist on it so hard he knew the neighbors had to hear it.

“Tyler! Tyler! Open the door!” Rob’s furious pounding didn’t get an answer, and he was too terrified to just stand there and wait. Knowing Tyler’s propensity for forgetfulness, he figured there had to be a spare key around

somewhere. Rob lifted up the doormat but there was nothing. He stood and ran his hand over the top of the doorframe. Nothing. His panic and fear tinged with desperation now, Rob looked around again. There had to be something there. The small metal sculpture of a frog that was next to the door caught his eye. This was his last chance. The door was solid metal so he couldn't kick it in. If there was nothing hidden in the frog, he would have to waste time finding the landlord to get the key.

Rob knelt down in front of the frog. The metal was cool and heavy in his hand as he picked it up, searching for any places that might hide a key. His hand touched a piece that moved. He kept probing, pushing that piece down. Rob slid his fingers into the opening that appeared, and his fingers touched a key. Relief swamped him, making him sweat, but he got the key out and opened the door.

Inside, the apartment was quiet. The loft was a large open space. The only completely closed-off areas were the bathroom and the darkroom that Cole built. It was quick and easy for Rob to look around. No television. No music. And no Tyler. Rob noticed a nearly empty whiskey bottle on the floor in front of the couch, the last dregs spilling out onto the gray throw rug. Halfway between the couch and the large interlocking metal screens that blocked off the sleeping area, a glass lay shattered on the painted concrete floor, the shards sitting in a puddle of amber liquid. Rob raced around the metal screens and found Tyler.

He was lying facedown across the foot of the bed, legs hanging over the side. Rob shouted his name as soon as he saw him, but Tyler didn't move. Rob sat on the bed and rolled Tyler over. "Tyler. Wake up." Tugging Tyler onto his lap, Rob patted him on the cheek a few times, but Tyler still didn't stir. Rob didn't hesitate. He hauled Tyler up further and smacked him hard across the face. "Wake up!" Tyler's eyes blinked open slowly. They immediately fell shut again, but he spoke, his words even more slurred than they had been on the phone.

"Rob... what are you doing here?"

Rob didn't answer. He was trying to get his phone out of his pocket. It was hard to do so while holding up Tyler's weight with one arm. His body was hard with muscle from carrying and working with large pieces of metal, but Rob managed to do so and dialed 9-1-1. When an operator came on the line, he explained what happened. "Should I make him vomit?"

“No, sir. Get him to the emergency room. And if you can, bring what he took.”

Rob was scared to let Tyler go, but he eased him back onto the bed so that he could check the bathroom for whatever he might have taken. He found a bottle of prescription sleeping pills open on the counter. He didn't know how many had been in there before, but it was empty now. Shoving the bottle into his pocket, he ran back out to Tyler. He heaved Tyler out of the bed and onto his feet. Keeping one arm around his waist, Rob held Tyler's other arm across his shoulders and walked him out of the apartment. He talked to Tyler, forcing him to be as awake as he could on the trip down to the car and across town to the hospital. Thankfully, emergency room staff met him at the doors with a stretcher, so he didn't have to half-carry him any further. Rob handed over the empty pill bottle and followed close behind the rushing staff until they stopped him, directing him to the waiting area.

Rob went over to the vinyl benches and sat down. He dropped his head into his shaking hands, all the emotion and adrenaline from the past hour draining away. He felt sick, like he was either going to pass out or lose his dinner, but he forced himself to take in several deep breaths. Eventually his hands stopped shaking and his stomach settled. Rob slouched down in the seat, throwing an arm across his face. He'd done everything he could. Now all he could do was wait.

Chapter 2

Tyler turned his head from staring at the wall when he heard the door open. It was Rob. He started to push himself up to a sitting position, but he still felt sick and lethargic, so he stayed where he was. Rob came over and pushed the button to raise the bed. Metal scratched across linoleum as he pulled a chair up next to the bed.

“How are you feeling?”

Tyler shrugged. “Here. Embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. You were hurting and made a mistake.”

“Did I? If Cole’s not here I’m all alone. And maybe I didn’t want to face that.”

“That’s not true. You have friends—”

Tyler cut him off. “Friends, sure. But no one close. No family. And Cole...” His voice broke. Tyler looked down at the pale blanket covering him. He couldn’t tell if it was light gray or dingy white. “Cole was my everything.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Tyler rolled his head to look at the ceiling. It was just like any other ceiling you’d see in public buildings. White squares with irregularly shaped black dots, each square enclosed by connecting metal frames. Tyler stared at one of the panels, his attention locked on one of the circles that was darker and bigger than the others. “I opened the door to some guy in a suit. They told me Cole was on a boat that sank off the coast of South Korea. No survivors. All bodies swept out to the Sea of Japan, so I won’t even have anything to bury.” Tyler blinked, momentarily losing sight of his dot. He’d said the words, but they still didn’t register. His brain just threw up a wall whenever he tried to think about what happened to Cole.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Tyler looked at Rob. “I’m sorry. I know Cole was your friend before he ever met me.”

Rob shook his head, his gray eyes somber behind silver wire-framed glasses. “Not just because of that. I’m your friend too, Tyler. You shouldn’t have tried to go through this alone.”

Tyler didn't respond. He just looked back at the ceiling. It didn't take him long to find his dot. Rob was quiet for a few moments too before he spoke again.

"They'll discharge you after a few hours of observation just to make sure everything is out of your system."

Tyler gave up on staring at the ceiling. He needed to think about what had to be done when he was released. He cleared his throat. It was sore from the tube they'd used to pump his stomach. "That's fine. You were calling me about the Brooks piece, right? I need to take care of that."

Rob looked surprised for a moment, and Tyler gave a hoarse laugh. "You're surprised I remembered? Me too."

"No. I'm surprised that you think that's important right now. Let me take care of that for you."

Tyler shrugged again. He didn't really care. "I guess that's what agents are for, right?" Rob reached out and put a hand on his arm. Tyler felt the weight of it, but it was just one more thing that didn't register. Nothing did.

"We'll get through this, Tyler."

Tyler went back to looking at the ceiling. He wasn't sure he wanted to get through this.

Tyler let Rob handle as much as he could of the discharge process. His grief and near OD made him feel like a zombie whose head was wrapped in a hundred cotton balls. He didn't have the energy or the motivation to handle business right then. Once they were out of the sterile building, Tyler felt like he was bombarded with the light and smells and sounds of the world. He knew it was ridiculous to think that the rest of the world had ended just because his had, but all the stimulation was still a shock.

He followed Rob over to his car and got in, relieved when the door closed, blocking out some of the noise. Rob was silent as he started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. That was fine with Tyler. He didn't feel like talking. He barely paid attention to the drive, until he noticed they were passing the exit that led to his and Cole's apartment.

"Where are we going?"

“To my house. You can stay a few days with me. You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

Tyler looked at Rob once, then went back to staring at the window. He felt like he should protest, he wasn’t Rob’s problem to take care of. But pained emotion rose up from his chest, closing off his throat and making it hard for him to speak. He settled on a stilted thank you, continuing to stare out the window.

“It’s nothing. Cole would want me to look out for you.”

They didn’t talk the rest of the ride to Rob’s house. When they arrived, Rob finally broke the silence. “You know my dogs are well behaved, so they won’t jump on you. But they’ll want to get reacquainted with your scent.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind. I’ve always liked them.”

Rob led Tyler into the house. His two dogs came scampering forward, nails clicking on the stone floor. At his command, they halted and immediately sat. Rob nodded, and Tyler went forward, holding his hand out. They sniffed at his hand and pants legs for a few moments before sitting again and watching him. Tyler looked back. One of them was an Australian Shepherd with large, gray-blue eyes and mottled gray patches decorating her long white fur. She tilted her head to the side as she stared at him and let out a little whimper.

“What’s her name again?”

“That’s Nancy. The sleek sort of Whippet-looking guy is Rocket. Both of them are mixed breeds.”

A memory clicked in his head of Cole asking why he’d named the dog Nancy, and his laughter when Rob answered it was because she was the first lady of the house. Tyler could picture Cole’s imperfect but beautiful smile, his teeth bright in his tan face, laugh lines around his dark green eyes. He pushed the image away. He wasn’t ready to think of Cole’s smiling face. “I remember.”

Tyler held his hand out, and Nancy came forward. She nuzzled under his palm, and he stroked over her head. “She’s sweet.” He would have smiled if he had it in him. But he didn’t. He felt like he was frozen, only able to get his muscles to obey his brain’s commands by focusing on the task. His mind still shied away from the news about Cole. Yet somehow, at the same time, it was all he could think about. Rob spoke, and he realized he was still stroking the dog, while he stared blankly at her fur.

“Do you want to eat anything?”

Tyler shook his head. “No. If I could just lie down that would be... great.” That was a lie. Nothing was great, but what else was there for him to do? He followed Rob out of the kitchen and down the hall to a spare room. Nancy went with them, walking next to his side. Tyler followed Rob into the room and just stood there, listening through a fog as Rob reminded him where the bathroom was.

“Can I bring you anything?”

“No. I’ll just lie down.”

“Alright then.”

Rob went to leave and called Nancy to him. The dog looked over her shoulder at her master, then back at Tyler. She stayed put. Rob called her again, but Tyler raised his hand. “It’s okay, she can stay.” Rob hesitated, but eventually he closed the door behind him and left.

Tyler stayed there, standing in the middle of the room for some time, before he forced himself to take off his shoes. He laid down on the bed, still dressed, his knees tucked to his chest. He heard Nancy settle on the floor next to the bed, giving a big sigh as she relaxed. The room grew quiet, leaving Tyler with nothing to do but listen to his thoughts. He only had one. Cole was... gone.

Rob went to his study. Tyler was a wreck. He wasn’t going to be able to handle any business for a while. Rob didn’t particularly want to either. He’d take care of only those items that were pressing before he grieved. Picking up the phone, he made the calls necessary to change the plans for the delivery of the sculpture for Brooks Corp. Then he contacted his other clients and let them know that he’d be unavailable for a week. When he was finished he hung up and sat at his desk. Resting his elbows on the desktop, he bent and held his head in his hands. He couldn’t believe Cole was gone, just like that. He needed more information, but he knew Tyler was in no condition to give it to him.

Rob had been friends with Cole since college, when he’d taken a beginner’s photography course. He hadn’t taken the class because he wanted to be a photographer, but because he knew he wanted to be an agent for artists. He figured learning a little about the different mediums would be to his benefit. Cole had been the TA for the class, and Rob had noticed him immediately. Cole was a free spirit, always ready to grab his camera and head out for the next

adventure. He specialized in action shots, traveling the world to capture images of bull runs, surfing and hang-gliding. He wasn't reckless in the situations he chased after, but he never turned down a challenge. And the photos he shot were beautiful.

They'd struck up a friendship, but even though Rob had been attracted to Cole, he'd never tried for anything more. Although he'd known he was gay since high school, he wasn't out back then and had yet to be in a relationship with a man. Cole had been a great friend and was one of the first people Rob had come out to. They'd stayed friends after college, with Rob eventually becoming Cole's agent. Now he was gone, leaving Tyler behind. Tyler, whom Cole had met and fallen in love with.

Rob had instantly understood what attracted Cole to Tyler. He was Cole's opposite in every way. Dark where Cole was blond, quiet next to Cole's exuberance. Tyler was the typical artist, lost in his own world. He had an air about him that made you want to take care of him. To do things like make sure he remembered to eat when he was holed up for hours with metal and a blow torch, working on his sculptures. As wild as Cole was, he needed that in his life. Cole wanted to care for someone. He'd wanted someone who would be an anchor for him, someone that he could come home to.

Nevertheless, Cole had been worried. Worried that he couldn't take care of Tyler while satisfying his own need to jet off on photo tours across the globe. Rob had encouraged him to talk to Tyler about it, to find out what he was looking for in a relationship. Apparently, whatever they'd discussed suited them, because they'd started dating seriously, and Rob had watched as they'd fallen in love. Watched from the outside. He was in their lives as Cole's friend and agent. He'd signed Tyler as a client as well and eventually they'd become friends too. However, he was still on the outside.

None of that mattered now. Cole was gone, and Tyler had almost followed him. He could barely process that he had lost one friend. He didn't want to think about losing them both. Rob folded his arms on the desk and sank down until his forehead rested on them. Cole, his vibrant, amazing friend was gone.

Chapter 3

Five days later, Tyler was still at Rob's house. He didn't care where he was really. He had a place to lie down and think about Cole, and that was all that mattered. He got up to take care of his body's needs or to let Nancy in when she whined at the door, but that was it. Rob forced him to down sports drinks and soup. Tyler did it only so Rob would leave him alone. He didn't feel any thirst or hunger. It took so much concentration to make himself swallow that he was exhausted every time. Once he'd taken a few sips of whatever it was that Rob was offering him, he'd lie right back down. Nancy was usually in bed with him, her body heat keeping him warm.

Tyler lay there, Nancy softly snoring at his side. He didn't sleep much. He just dozed, dreaming of Cole each time. Most times when he woke, the pillow beneath him would be damp, so he knew he cried in his fitful sleep, but tonight he couldn't even manage to escape into those short snatches of rest. There was a storm outside, and it was keeping him awake.

Normally whenever Tyler was having trouble sleeping, he would take a prescribed sleeping pill. He'd found himself taking them a little more often while Cole was on this latest tour. After the incident earlier that week, however, he figured he probably shouldn't take any of them for a while. At the next crack of lightning, he got up, telling Nancy to stay as he left the room. She was such a calm dog that the early winter storm didn't bother her at all.

Out in the hall, he hesitated. He didn't think Rob would mind if he wandered around his house, but he didn't know what he wanted to do. He wasn't interested in watching TV, and he doubted he'd be able to concentrate on a book. Tyler thought for a moment that he should go home, but it was late, and his car wasn't there.

Besides, he wasn't ready to go back to the home he'd shared with Cole. Being in their space without Cole while he was on one of his trips had always been hard. At least then he'd had the security of knowing that Cole would be home soon. Now that security was gone. The second he'd received notice that Cole was gone, that apartment had ceased to be a home. It was just a space with furniture and clothes.

Another bright flash of lightning and rumbling thunder brought him out of his head. He was still standing in the middle of the hallway, his feet cold on the

hardwood floor. Tyler started to turn and go back to the guest room, but he felt an irrational flash of anger at that room. He didn't want to be in there. Looking down the hall to his right, he noticed Rob's door was only partially closed. Tyler approached it quietly, not really sure why he was doing so. He tried to stay quiet when he pushed the door open, but he must have made a noise, or maybe Rob wasn't asleep either, because he immediately turned over, sitting up when he saw Tyler standing there.

Rob rubbed his eyes. "Tyler. Is everything alright?"

"It's the storm."

"You're afraid of the storm?" Rob asked with confusion in his voice.

Tyler huffed a slight laugh. "No, but it's keeping me awake. Sleeping pills are out, so I got up to roam around. I saw your door was open and..." He trailed off, still not sure why he was in Rob's room.

Rob sat there, watching him across the dark space. He lifted the covers, a silent invitation for Tyler to join him. Tyler hesitated. Then he walked over and slid into the bed. Rob pulled the covers over him, and Tyler was immediately warmed. He lay there on his back, staring up at the ceiling. The room filled with sharp white light, thunder rumbling around the house just as he forced his mouth open to speak. "I miss him."

Rob didn't say anything, and Tyler assumed he hadn't heard him over the thunder. He didn't know if he could get the strength up to say the words again. Saying that he missed Cole was admitting out loud that Cole was gone. However, Rob answered, interrupting his thoughts.

"I know. So do I."

It grew quiet again. What else was there to say? There was nothing in his head but Cole. Everything he could think to say about his lover made his chest ache, made him cold again. He didn't think he would be able to breathe if he talked about Cole. Besides, nothing he said would bring him back. So he stayed there, silent. He could tell that Rob was still awake from the sound of his breathing.

After a while Tyler turned to face Rob, who was lying on his back. It was dark in the room, but the moon shone bright enough for Tyler to take in Rob's dark hair and familiar profile. Tyler turned more fully on his side. When he did, Rob turned his head to look at him. He stared at Rob. Tyler felt cold and frozen, like icy waters were going to rush over his head and drown him if he didn't

reach out to hold onto something. Leaning forward, he kissed Rob on the lips. Rob returned the kiss for the briefest of seconds, before he jerked back.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” Tyler flopped onto his back, pressing his forearms over his eyes. “Jesus. I’m sorry, I don’t know why I did that. I wasn’t coming on to you, I swear. I just...” he trailed off, not knowing what to say. He sat up, throwing the covers off. “I’ll go back to my room.” A hand on his arm stopped him.

“Don’t go. I know you weren’t coming on to me. Grief... grief affects us in all kinds of ways. You probably just want contact with someone who shares your grief. That’s okay.”

Tyler looked back over his shoulder. Now that Rob was sitting up, the light from the moon was behind him, so Tyler couldn’t really see his face. He made a sound that would have been a laugh, but it was too bitter to fall into the category of sounds normally reserved for joy. “So you’re saying I need a hug?”

“Basically. Lie back down.”

Tyler slowly lay back down. This time he lay on his side, facing away from Rob. Rob pulled the covers over him again. After a moment, his arm went around him. Tyler stiffened slightly. He’d meant it when he said he wasn’t coming on to his friend.

“Relax. You’ve been completely alone through all this. Cole was my friend too. My best friend. Let me comfort you.”

When Rob didn’t do anything other than hold him, Tyler did relax. There was nothing sexual to Rob’s touch. The heat of his chest behind Tyler warmed him some. His chest still ached with cold. Nothing would change that. He didn’t *want* anything to change that. He held that cold close to him because somehow, it made him feel closer to Cole.

The storm started to fade away, the lightning not as bright, the time in between the flashes of light and thunder growing longer. When Tyler closed his eyes he saw Cole as he always was. Smiling, in a T-shirt and cargo shorts, a camera around his neck. Finally he fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Tyler woke up the next morning to weak sunshine lighting the room. He looked out the window and saw there were still low-hanging clouds in the sky. He lay there for a moment, surprised that he'd slept the whole night through, but after nearly two weeks of not sleeping, his body must have taken over, forcing him to get the rest he needed. He was alone in the bed, the spot next to him cool. Rob must have been up for a while.

Tyler got up and left Rob's room. He stopped in the hall bathroom before he headed into the kitchen. Rob was there, sipping from a steaming mug of coffee. He was dressed for work. A pinstriped button-down and gray slacks were neat and ironed on his tall frame. His longish black hair was brushed back from his face, his light beard trimmed and neat. The wire-framed glasses that he always wore were on his face. Cole had joked once that they made Rob look like a sexy professor.

There was a plate of toast and bacon on the granite bar top next to a bottle of orange juice. Rob turned when he came into the room, but Tyler looked away. He was embarrassed about last night. He felt slightly guilty for sleeping with Rob, even though nothing had happened.

“Good morning.”

Tyler returned the greeting and took a seat at the bar. “I should probably get out of your way and go back... back to the apartment.”

“Do you want to go back?”

“No. Not really. But I don't want to be in your way. You've probably got stuff to do.” Tyler finally looked at Rob. “And I shouldn't have come into your room like that. I'm sorry. You probably think I'm the most disloyal boyfriend ever.”

“Stop. I don't think you're in the way, and I definitely don't think you're disloyal.” Rob calmly drank his coffee. “Like I said last night, grief makes people do strange things, and there's nothing wrong with seeking comfort from someone you trust. So if you need to stay here for a while longer, that's okay.” He paused. “But I'd like to see you start taking care of yourself.” Rob pushed the plate of bacon and toast towards him. “Eating would be a good start.”

Tyler looked down at the food. “I'm not hungry.”

“That might be true. But you’re going to get sick if you don’t eat.”

Tyler stared at Rob for a moment, but he only watched him with a steady gaze. Tyler finally reached out and took a piece of bacon. When he took a bite, he noticed the glimmer of a smile in the gray eyes still watching him.

“You’d also probably sleep better if you got out of the house, maybe go for a walk.”

Tyler stopped chewing. He didn’t think he was ready for that.

“Take the dogs. Nancy is really attached to you. She’d love for you to take her on a walk.”

Tyler swallowed the last bite of bacon. “I can’t.” He thought fast for an acceptable reason. “I don’t want to lose one of your dogs.”

“Nancy will come back to your side, and she’ll herd Rocket along. All you have to do is whistle if they get too far. You can whistle, right?”

“Yeah, I can whistle,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Tyler, it’s okay to grieve. Just don’t neglect yourself.” Rob poured a glass of orange juice and pushed it over to him, along with a piece of toast. “Eat, get a little exercise each day and you will get through this.”

Tyler eyed the toast and juice. He knew Rob was right. Lying in bed day after day wasn’t doing him any good. Tyler picked up the toast and took a bite. “Alright. I’ll go for a walk,” he said after he swallowed. “Any other instructions?”

“Yes. Eat lunch too. There’s sandwich meat in the fridge.” Rob turned away to rinse his mug. “I’ll take you to get your truck when I come home from work if you want.”

“Yeah. I guess I should be able to get around if I need to. Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Rob turned back around to face him. “Don’t worry about it.”

Tyler was glad that he’d borrowed a pair of rubber boots from Rob. The ground was muddy in places from the storm last night. He’d taken the dogs out for a walk in the open field that ran along the road, away from Rob’s house. Rob didn’t live in the country, but the location was rural enough that there was only a two-lane road with very little traffic. The area was dominated by trees,

the houses on half-acre lots rather than the postage stamp-sized yards common to most of suburbia.

Tyler walked with the dogs, no plan for how long he would stay out in mind. He figured when he got tired, he'd turn and go back. Rocket darted ahead, but Nancy mostly stayed close to him. He reached down and scratched her behind the ears as they walked. She was a really sweet dog. He'd never had a pet of his own, but he liked the way this one seemed to have attached herself to him.

Tyler took a deep breath of the rain-washed air. Even though he was outside, walking around, he knew he was still hiding from the world. He just wasn't ready to really face life without Cole. Wasn't ready to go back to the home they'd shared. As long as Rob was gracious enough to let him stay, he intended to do so.

Tyler picked up a stick and threw it. Rocket took off after it, Nancy loping after him. Rocket got to it first. Once Nancy caught up, the two of them tussled over the stick. Tyler watched for a moment before he whistled. Nancy immediately stopped and headed back towards him, herding Rocket along, just as Rob had said she would. Tyler waited for them. Once they'd reached his side, he turned back the way they'd come. He'd been outside enough for one day.

Rob looked out the window of his office. He'd told Tyler not to feel bad for their brief kiss last night. Unfortunately, he was having a hard time following his own advice. He'd been attracted to Tyler for a long time, and when he felt those lips pressed against his, for one crazy second he'd kissed him back.

The guilt he felt for that small kiss was probably blown way out of proportion. It was just that he loved Cole, and feeling attraction to his dead friend's lover was about as low as he could get. Even though he honestly didn't believe Tyler would have tried to take it any further, Rob knew he'd done the right thing in ending the kiss as quickly as he had. Tyler was clearly lost and hurting. The kiss had been nothing more than someone in pain seeking comfort from a friend. It was just best not to confuse their relationship during this awful time of grief for them both.

Chapter 5

Three months later, Tyler still hadn't gone home. He didn't appear to want to, and Rob liked having him there. So neither of them mentioned Tyler leaving and he just... stayed. Tyler was working through his grief, as was Rob. He knew it was harder for Tyler. Losing a significant other was probably the hardest thing for a person to suffer, so while Rob still encouraged Tyler to eat and go for walks, he understood that sometimes Tyler just wanted to hole up and be alone with his grief. Those were the hardest days for them both. Thankfully, they were becoming fewer and farther between.

Rob looked at Tyler in the moonlight. He was currently in bed, lying on his side and facing Tyler. They had often shared a bed these past few months. Nothing ever happened between them—it wasn't like that. Tyler had admitted that he hated sleeping alone. That's why he'd had the prescription for sleeping pills. Now that Cole had passed, it was even harder for him to rest. So as a *friend*, Rob let Tyler sleep with him on occasion. With the exception of a brief hug when Tyler was having a hard night thinking of Cole, they never touched.

But tonight, Rob wasn't thinking of anything but the fact that there was a beautiful man in his bed. A man that he was attracted to. Before he could stop himself he reached out and touched Tyler on his bare arm. Tyler rolled to his back and looked at him. There was enough light that Rob could read the questioning expression on his face. But Rob didn't say anything. If he spoke... He couldn't put words to what he was about to do. It would make it too real if he did.

He leaned forward, going slowly, giving Tyler enough time to move or leave the bed if he chose. He didn't. Rob brushed his lips across Tyler's. Once. Twice. Tyler still didn't move. Rob pressed their lips together and felt Tyler kiss him back. Easing into it a little more, Rob lightly traced his tongue over Tyler's lips. Tyler's lips parted, his hand coming up to rest on Rob's shoulder. Feeling Tyler's hand on him brought Rob out of the sweet fog of arousal he was letting himself drift in. He jerked back.

“Jesus. I'm sorry.”

Tyler looked confused. “Why are you sorry?”

Rob ran a hand through his hair. “Because you trust me, and I just took advantage of that trust. You're here for comfort from a friend, I didn't have any right to do that.”

Rob got up, not wanting to talk about his poor judgment anymore. He left the room, closing the door softly behind him. Rob headed straight for the living room and dropped down onto the couch. "Jesus," he swore again. He couldn't believe he'd done that. He had no right. But Tyler had been so warm, so at ease as he rested, curled up next to him. He hadn't been able to resist. He was crazy for starting that, knowing that Tyler, that *both* of them were still healing. Hell, he was crazy for letting Tyler sleep in his bed so often. He should have known something like this would happen eventually. Lately, whenever Tyler joined him, Rob found himself lying there beside him, fighting an erection. Fighting the desire to reach out to Tyler in the dark. Tonight he'd failed on both accounts.

He hung his head in his hands, ignoring his current erection. He wanted... he wanted to go back in there. Tyler was in his bed. He'd been receptive to his kiss. He could be making love to him right now. Rob clenched his fists. He could be, but he wasn't. There was no way that was a good idea. Rob sighed and got a blanket from the chest that served as a coffee table and settled down on the couch for the night. After what had just passed, he knew he couldn't sleep with Tyler anymore.

"Hey."

Rob tossed his keys on the kitchen counter. He'd just come in from work. "Hey." He wasn't surprised that Tyler was there waiting for him. They needed to talk about what happened the night before. He headed over to get a drink from the fridge. Tyler's voice sounded behind him while he stood in front of the cool air from the open refrigerator.

"Why did you leave last night?"

Rob closed the door, but didn't turn around. "I told you why. I had no right to take advantage of you like that." He heard Tyler come up behind him.

"You weren't. I would have said something if I didn't want you to kiss me."

Rob turned around to face Tyler. He'd lost some weight, but his body was still naturally solid and strong. Tyler hadn't bothered with a haircut in a while so his soft brown hair tumbled down over his forehead. He was beautiful. Beautiful and sad. The sadness was still deep in his dark eyes, in the lines surrounding a mouth that never smiled. "You're still healing from losing Cole, Tyler. You don't need me confusing things for you."

“But you wanted to kiss me.”

“Yes. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't want to.”

“So you wanted to kiss me. And I wanted to kiss you. Tell me again why you left?”

Rob sighed and set the bottle of juice down. “Tyler, you're not really recovered from losing Cole. I don't want you while you're still hurting. Still sad. That wouldn't be fair to either of us.”

Tyler looked down. “I may never completely get over losing Cole. This might be the only way you get me.” He turned away. “I understand if that doesn't sound very appealing. I wouldn't want to get involved with anyone like me either.”

Rob lightly grasped Tyler's arm and turned him back around. “That's not it.” Rob took a deep breath, prepared to admit the truth of how he felt. “Tyler, I do want you. I've wanted you for a long time.”

Tyler stared at him, surprise evident on his face. “How long?”

“Years, Tyler. Years.”

Tyler ran his tongue over his lips. “You never said anything.”

“Of course not. You were with Cole. I respected that, and I love you both.”

“But now Cole is gone. And I'm still here.”

Rob swallowed hard. “You're still here.” He pulled Tyler into his arms, staring into his dark eyes. Tyler didn't resist. He leaned further in, until Rob felt the warmth of him against his chest.

“I'm still here,” Tyler repeated.

Rob nodded, pulling him closer. Their lips met in a kiss just as soft as the one last night. Tyler's eyes fell shut, his body relaxing completely against Rob's. Rob took advantage of that permission, licking into the mouth beneath his. Tyler returned the kiss, their tongues meeting and softly rubbing together. Rob stroked down Tyler's back until he grasped his hips. Rob was already hard and when he pressed Tyler's hips against his, he felt that the other man was in the same state of arousal.

Passion flared between them, the kiss going from gentle and sweet to hot and intense. Rob's fingers tightened on the slim hips in his grasp, Tyler's arms tightening across his back. Tyler moaned and Rob's body grew even harder. He

didn't think he'd ever be the one to cause Tyler to make that noise. Rob pulled back enough to walk them out of the kitchen. Tyler's fingers slid into his hair, tugging him back down into their kiss. They made it down the hall, still kissing, Rob leading them to Tyler's room.

Rob lay Tyler back on his bed, coming down on top of him. He kept kissing Tyler, his lips, his jaw, his neck. Tyler's skin was warm beneath his lips, his breath soft as it washed over his skin. He moaned again, his head arching back into the pillows to give Rob more access. Rob groaned at Tyler's passionate responses. He pushed Tyler's shirt up, placing kisses across his chest and flat stomach. Rob dipped his tongue into Tyler's belly button at the same time that he opened his jeans. Tyler's hips jerked up off the bed slightly, giving Rob just enough room to tug the jeans down. Tyler let out a desperate-sounding moan when Rob gripped his cock, his fingers coming up to dig into Rob's back.

Rob held himself braced on the bed with one hand, as he stroked Tyler with the other, pumping him, feeling him grow slick against his palm. Tyler's hips arched off the bed again, moans sliding from between his lips over and over. He whispered that he was about to come. Rob leaned down and pressed their lips together, kissing Tyler through his climax. Rob stroked him faster, enjoying the way Tyler rubbed his hands over his back as he came, his body trembling beneath him.

When Tyler came down from his release he opened his eyes and looked at Rob. Rob watched as Tyler took a deep breath then reached for his still-closed jeans. Rob grabbed his hand, staying his movements. "Not today."

Tyler looked confused. "What?"

"I don't want you while you're sad."

"I told you—"

Rob shook his head, cutting him off. "No. I don't believe that. I know losing Cole has been devastating, but I believe that you can heal and become yourself again. I'm willing to wait until that happens." He leaned down and kissed Tyler lightly. "When you're working again, when I see you laughing, then come to me." Rob got up from the bed, turning to leave the room. Tyler called his name.

"Rob."

He turned back to see what he wanted.

"You're really going to leave me?"

Rob shook his head again. "I'm not leaving you, Tyler. I'm waiting for you."

Chapter 6

The next morning Tyler sat on the couch in Rob's living room, thinking about their conversation yesterday. He missed Cole, everyday. But that didn't mean that he had to stop living himself. Maybe he *could* start a new life. He thought about Cole and how he'd lived his life with such exuberance. He knew deep down that Cole wouldn't want him to be this sad shell of himself forever. Cole would be pushing him to get up, to find intriguing pieces of metal and create. And he wouldn't want him to be alone.

Tyler looked outside. He hadn't gone for a walk in a few days, and he hadn't worked in months. He didn't have his tools there to try and sculpt anything, but getting out of the house could be a good place to start rebuilding his life. He got up, whistling for Nancy and Rocket.

Outside, Tyler walked through the tall grasses of the field on the side of the road. It was spring in southeast Texas, which meant that the wildflowers were in bloom. There were even a few patches of bluebonnets scattered around. The occasional car passed by, and a few birds swooped overhead. Other than that, Tyler and the dogs had the area to themselves. Nancy was trotting alongside him, Rocket a few paces ahead.

Nancy suddenly stopped, her ears pricking forward as the rest of her went still. Tyler kept going, knowing the Aussie would catch up, but when he looked back Nancy was heading towards a thick-trunked tree off to the right. He stopped to let the dog explore for a moment. He watched as she trotted up to the tree, tail low and wagging. Whatever was there must not have been a threat. After a few moments of watching her sniff around, he called her back to his side. "Nancy! Here!"

The dog took a few steps towards him, but then circled back to the tree. She was clearly agitated, giving sharp little barks. Tyler finally just went to see what had caught her attention. He heard the whining first. When he was close enough, he saw a tiny black puppy shaking in the grass. Tyler patted Nancy on the head, and she calmed and sat.

Tyler knelt down and held his hand out to the puppy. He gave it a minute to get up the nerve to come forward and sniff his hand before he tried to pet it. Once it did, he stroked a palm over the puppy's back, feeling the softness of its fur. The dog wiggled under his arm, paws coming up to rest on his thighs.

Tyler's heart melted, as he looked down into soft, black eyes. He picked the dog up and saw it was a boy. Tyler knew he couldn't leave it out there alone. Cradling the little puppy in his arms, he whistled for Rocket and headed back for the house.

"Nancy found him hiding beneath a tree. He wasn't wearing a collar and there weren't any other dogs around." Tyler watched as Rob held the puppy, looking him over. "Would it be alright if I kept him?"

"We should take him to the vet make sure he isn't chipped first."

Tyler felt a beat of disappointment that the dog might have an owner looking for him. "Oh yeah. I didn't think of that." He took the black dog back and held him to his chest.

Rob reached out and scratched the floppy ears. "But if he's not, you can keep him."

Tyler held the wriggling dog up to his face. His apartment didn't allow dogs, but he'd worry about that when the time came for him to leave Rob's. Besides, he'd probably want a new place anyway. He'd just make sure to find one that was pet-friendly.

Chapter 7

“No chip. And my clinic hasn’t received any notice to be on the lookout for a lost black Lab.”

Tyler had taken the dog to a nearby vet to be checked for a pet microchip and general health. He held his hand up to let the puppy lick him while the vet worked. “I haven’t seen any posters around either.”

The vet continued to look the dog over, having to hold him still as he wriggled all over the exam table. “Looks like we have a case of an irresponsible owner. Or it might have been someone who let their dog breed and then couldn’t find homes for all of the puppies. Black dogs are usually harder to place.”

Tyler shook his head. He hated to think of things like that happening, but he knew it was an everyday occurrence.

“So are you keeping this little guy?” The vet tugged at the puppy’s big paws. “Not that he’ll be little for very long.”

“Yep. I’m keeping him.”

“Great. Looks like he’ll be getting a second chance at having a good life.”

Tyler looked at the vet. “Looks like it.” He picked the dog up off the exam table. “I guess if I’m keeping you I should give you a name.” He looked the black dog over. “Can’t be anything typical like Shadow or Midnight. I’ll have to think of something slightly more original.”

“You named him Sirius?”

Tyler smiled. “Yep.”

Rob looked at him over his shoulder as he turned the steaks to sear them on the other side. “Like the radio station?”

Tyler assumed Rob was joking, but just in case he wasn’t he explained. “No. Like Sirius Black from Harry Potter.”

Rob looked down at the puppy energetically chewing a toy in the middle of the kitchen floor. “I know. I was just teasing. Red is a good color for him,” he said as he gestured at the new collar Tyler had bought him.

“Thanks.”

“So. Three dogs in this house.”

Tyler looked at Rob. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I’m fine with it.” Rob smiled. “As long as you’re the one doing the house breaking.”

Chapter 8

Tyler drove out to the junkyard, Sirius on the seat next to him. For the past three months, Sirius had gone everywhere with him. The Lab was growing into a big, gangly dog with huge paws and long legs. He fit right in with the rest of the pack. Nancy taught him proper behavior, while Rocket played with him until his almost boundless puppy energy was exhausted, and although Tyler had indeed been responsible for the house training, Rob had helped as well.

Tyler stopped and went around to open the passenger door. Over the past few weeks, the owner of the junkyard had gotten used to him coming there with his dog, so he let Sirius out to run around, while he looked for parts.

Tyler was working again. Rob had gone with him to get his tools from the space he rented and helped him set up a workshop in the garage behind his house. He was still staying with Rob, so it just made sense to have all of his tools and supplies nearby. He'd started off easy with just a few small sculptures. He hadn't kept any of them. Instead he'd donated the small angels to the hospital. However, now he was ready to work on a large piece. It wasn't commissioned by anyone; it was something he was envisioning for a collection that he could show. When he'd told Rob about his plans, Rob had smiled and said he'd start making the arrangements for a showing.

Walking around with a flatbed, Tyler found several pieces that he liked. Heavy gloves protected him from cuts as he dug through the piles of scrap metal. Sirius trotted alongside him, sniffing at everything he selected and laid on the flatbed.

When he felt like he had enough to create something along the size of what he had planned, Tyler headed back to the front to have the metal weighed so he could pay. He smiled, a frisson of excitement running through him as he waited. The feeling was familiar, reminding him of how he'd always felt at the start of a new project. That encouraged him. If he was feeling excited, looking forward to feeling the heat of a blow torch, then maybe he could still create art that others would enjoy.

Twenty minutes after paying, Tyler was back home. He'd taken Sirius into the house before unloading. The Lab was still too much of a rambunctious puppy to be safe around sparks and sharp metal. In the garage, Tyler looked at what he'd brought in. He had a mix of new and recycled junkyard metals. He

thought the juxtaposition of the bright, smooth sheet metal with the warm and rusted parts would be an interesting contrast. Tyler pulled on his gloves and flipped down the visor to his welding mask. He was ready to get started.

Rob came in to the house to the smell of smoke. He followed the acrid stench back to the kitchen. There he found Tyler scraping something from the bottom of the pan into the trash. "Smells delicious."

Tyler jumped slightly at the sound of his voice. He gestured with the pan, an embarrassed look on his face. "I tried to cook us fish, but I burned it."

"I see that. And I smell it."

Tyler's face turned red, but he laughed. "Shut up. I tried."

Rob stood there surprised for a moment. This was the first time he'd heard Tyler laugh in months, but he didn't draw attention to it. "You did try. And I appreciate it." He headed over to the fridge. "Since you're scraping that, we can have something quick and easy. How about grilled cheese and tomato soup? I'll make the sandwiches and heat up the soup. You make a spinach salad."

"Don't trust me around the stove?"

Rob gave a sideways glance to the still smoking pan.

"Would you?"

The laugh came again. "Nope. Not in the slightest."

Tyler and Rob worked together to prepare their dinner. When they were done, they sat down at the kitchen table together to eat. While the two men talked, the dogs munched on their kibble in their corner. Tyler was still excited about his new project. Most of their conversation was him explaining the way he intended to form sharp blades into different structures. There would be three, *Beginning*, *Middle*, and *End*.

After dinner they moved to the couch in the living room. They turned the TV on, but didn't pay it much attention. It was Rob's turn to talk about work. He'd signed two new artists that he thought would make a big wave once their work got some exposure. They watched the dogs as they talked. Rocket had finally gotten tired, but Sirius still wanted to play. He kept nudging and jumping on the older dog until Rocket finally turned around and nipped at Sirius's scruff. The black Lab let out a high-pitched bark, jumping back in surprise. Tyler laughed and called the dog over to him.

Rob watched Tyler as he smiled and scratched Sirius behind the ears. Tyler looked up and caught him staring, but Rob didn't look away. "It's good to see you laughing again," he quietly remarked.

Tyler looked down at the dog awkwardly trying to climb into his lap. "Time and Sirius have helped." Tyler looked back at him, his dark eyes serious. "And you."

Rob reached out and lightly traced a finger along the soft stubble on Tyler's jaw. "I'm glad."

"For a long time I really thought that I wouldn't laugh again. But having you to lean on through losing Cole helped so much. Too bad I'm still living in your house, like the house guest who won't take a hint and leave."

Rob smiled. "There are no hints for you to leave." He took his hand away from Tyler, not wanting to make him nervous or think that just because he was working and laughing like Rob had asked that they had to be intimate. But even without his fingers running over Tyler's skin, tension grew between them. He could see it in the way Tyler looked at him before his eyes flicked away, a flush warming his cheeks. Rob himself felt the heat of arousal, but he didn't say anything. If they were to take their relationship beyond just friends, it would have to be Tyler who made that decision. And apparently he wasn't ready to make that decision tonight.

Tyler ended the moment by gently pushing Sirius off his lap. "You are too big to be a lap dog," he teasingly scolded the Lab. They both laughed at Sirius's forlorn expression and went back to their earlier conversation.

Chapter 9

Tyler stood in the middle of his bedroom. A week had passed since he'd burned the fish, and Rob had told him he was happy to see him laughing again. He'd seen it in Rob's face that the other man remembered what he'd said Tyler had to do before they took things any further. But then he remembered what Rob had said. He would wait for Tyler to go to him.

Was that what Rob was waiting for? For Tyler to make the first move? A rush of emotion for Rob went through Tyler. Rob had been such a good friend to him. He always had been. He'd gone above and beyond what any friend could be expected to do, and Tyler was grateful for it. But it wasn't just gratitude that Tyler felt for Rob. The other man was attractive. He was different from Cole, with his dark hair and gray eyes and quiet demeanor. Tyler knew that that quietness didn't mean that Rob was shy or weak in any way.

Rob easily took control of every situation, easily getting things to progress smoothly whenever necessary. His job as an agent suited him. He was able to wrangle the often flighty creative types under his umbrella and handle all of their affairs so that they didn't have to be starving artists. Tyler knew he appreciated the way Rob ran his own dealings, and his strong, steady personality had drawn Tyler in until he wanted to be closer to Rob than just friends.

Tyler looked at his closed bedroom door. He hadn't shared a bed with Rob since the night of their aborted kiss. They'd both agreed that it was best if they didn't do so, now that their attraction was out in the open. He knew that if he went to Rob now, Rob would know he wasn't there just to sleep. Was he ready to make that move?

Deciding that he was, Tyler gave Sirius a goodnight scratch behind his ears and left the room. He walked down the hall and stood outside Rob's bedroom door. Tyler hesitated for a few moments before he knocked. "Come in," he heard from the other side. He opened the door and went in to see Rob sitting on the edge of his bed. Tyler closed the door behind him, but didn't go any further into the room.

"Hey." Tyler left it at that, not sure what to say.

"Tyler." Rob didn't say anything else.

Tyler cleared his throat. Clearly Rob wanted him to start the conversation. "I've laughed. I'm working. And now I'm here. Are you going to reject me again?"

Rob got up from the bed and walked over to him. He didn't say anything until he was right in front of him. "I was never rejecting you. Just waiting until you were ready. Until we were *both* ready." Rob cupped Tyler's cheek, tilting his head back. "Are you ready, Tyler?"

Tyler ran his tongue over his lips in a slightly nervous gesture. It went without saying that he hadn't been with anyone besides Cole for a very long time. "Yes. I'm ready."

Rob brought their lips together in a gentle kiss. Tyler parted his lips, letting Rob in. Strong arms went around him. Tyler pressed close to Rob, feeling the solid warmth of him against his body. He tilted his head back, giving Rob access to whatever he wanted. Rob took advantage, trailing hot kisses up and down his throat. When Rob reached the spot behind his ear, Tyler shivered. Rob laughed softly, his warm breath blowing over Tyler's skin.

"Is that a sensitive spot?"

Tyler nodded, shifting restlessly against Rob. They were both in thin pajama pants, and Tyler could feel the rigid length of Rob's erection pressing against him. Rob licked him behind his ear, making Tyler shiver again.

"Let's see where else you're sensitive."

Rob grabbed his hand and tugged him over to the bed. Tyler sat down, settling on his back at Rob's gentle push. Rob straddled his hips, leaning down over him. He cupped Tyler's face again before he kissed him. Tyler lay there beneath Rob. He felt safe and cared for, as Rob softly kissed him, their tongues lightly dancing together. Rob whispered to him through their kisses, making sure he was okay as he touched him. Tyler nodded permission as Rob caressed his chest. He sighed a "yes" as Rob stroked over his hip. And he moaned in response to Rob sliding his hand into his sleep pants, asking if he could take them off.

He lifted his hips at Rob's direction, helping him get them down his legs. When they were off, Tyler tugged Rob down until he lay against him. He moaned again at the weight of Rob on top of him. Tyler brought his legs up, wrapping them around Rob's waist. Their kiss deepened, Tyler stroking his hands over the breadth of Rob's back. Rob began moving his hips, rubbing their shafts together. His voice sounded rough and husky in Tyler's ear.

“I like the way you feel beneath me, Tyler. I’ve waited to feel this.”

Tyler unlocked his legs from around Rob’s waist so he could push his sleep pants off too. “So have I.” When they were both naked, they continued to kiss and rub against each other until they were both moaning and gasping. Tyler’s skin was hot, his cock slick and hard. Rob was the same. Tyler knew it because he couldn’t keep his hands off his lover. He touched Rob everywhere. His hair-roughened chest, the muscular strength of his thighs and ass, and his shaft, strong and throbbing in his grasp, the head silky wet. Tyler wanted to feel it inside him. He arched up, breathing out Rob’s name.

Rob understood what he was asking, because he rose up and leaned over to the night stand. He got out a condom and lube, then came back to prepare them both. Tyler flinched slightly as Rob eased a slick finger inside him. He relaxed, knowing Rob would make sure he was ready. Rob took his time, easing that finger in until he brushed against his prostate. Tyler shivered again, his fingers clenching on Rob’s forearms.

“Looks like I found another sensitive place,” Rob said, the hint of a smile in his voice.

Tyler tried to nod, but he couldn’t. Instead his head arched back into the pillows, as Rob kept stroking over that spot, slipping another finger in to join the first. It felt so good, sending tingles racing along his spine. By the time Rob pulled his fingers away, Tyler was writhing beneath him, his chest heaving. He was definitely ready.

Rob lay on top of him. Tyler spread his legs to make room for him, biting his lip as he felt the heat of Rob’s cock against his ass. He felt Rob reach down between them to grasp his cock. Tyler stroked along Rob’s forearms as he pressed the broad head of his shaft against his opening, seeking entrance. He gasped when Rob pushed inside him. Rob stopped.

“Okay?”

Tyler swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes. Don’t stop.” He pulled Rob down to him. Rob kissed him once before murmuring against his mouth, “I won’t.”

He pulled back then pushed forward again, reaching deeper this time. Tyler moaned, his eyes falling shut. Rob’s thick length stretched him, his weight on top of him making him feel better than okay.

“Tyler... you feel so...”

Rob didn't finish his sentence. He was breathing hard, his skin damp with sweat beneath Tyler's palms. Tyler understood, because he couldn't speak either. Rob pulled back, his cock dragging along all of the sensitive nerve endings inside Tyler. He slid back in slow and deep, making pleasure spark in Tyler's fingertips and low in his belly. He moaned, his legs coming back up to wrap around Rob's waist again. His toes curled, fingers pressing deep into Rob's back. Rob groaned, the low sound of it vibrating against Tyler's skin where Rob's face was pressed to his neck. Tyler pushed his hips up, and Rob's hand slipped beneath him, cupping his ass.

Rob started moving faster. His thrusts were still steady, reaching deep inside Tyler. As they increased in speed, the heat and passion spiked between them, until moans poured from Tyler in a constant stream. He reached down to grasp his shaft, stroking himself in rhythm with Rob's movements. Their orgasms were coming. Tyler could feel it rising in his shaft, could feel it in the way Rob pulsed inside him, his movements losing some of their smoothness. A soft curse slipped from Tyler. Rob leaned down and kissed him harder and more insistently than he ever had before. He groaned into Tyler's mouth.

"Come for me, Tyler. I need to feel that. Feel you."

Tyler stroked himself faster, his cock stiff and his balls aching. Finally, he came in a burst of pleasure that left him breathless. His skin tingled, and his body tightened around Rob, who held him as he moaned and writhed his way through his release. When his body eased, he swallowed hard and looked up at Rob. He hadn't felt anything like that for so long. Rob kissed him once.

"Still okay?"

Tyler nodded. "Still... yes. I'm okay."

Rob kissed him again, this time leaving their mouths pressed together, their tongues entwined as his hips pumped his own climax. Tyler lay beneath him, holding on to him, relishing the fact that he'd managed to make calm, steady Rob Miller shudder and curse with pleasure in the dark of night.

Tyler curled onto his side, away from Rob. After a moment, Rob brushed a kiss over his shoulder.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes. Just thinking about Cole."

Rob was quiet for a moment. "Do you feel guilty?"

Tyler turned to his back and looked up at Rob hovering over him. "No. Not like that. Just... I guess moving on with you means that I've finally accepted that he's gone."

Rob stroked Tyler's hair back from his forehead. "Are you sure you were ready?"

Tyler didn't hesitate to answer. He knew that he was, and he wanted to make sure Rob knew it too. "I was ready. And I'm glad it was with you."

Chapter 10

Rob headed up the walk to the small gallery that was hosting Tyler's show tonight. His phone buzzed just as his foot hit the first step. He took his phone out and saw it was a text from Tyler.

Are you almost here?

Rob smiled as he texted back.

I'm walking up the gallery stairs right now.

Tyler was anxious for this showing. Rob had done his best to keep him calm, but from years of working with artists, he knew that Tyler wouldn't relax until the doors were open to the public, and he got the first feedback from viewers.

He opened the door and saw Tyler standing there with his arms crossed. He was chewing on his thumbnail, his entire body tense. When Tyler saw him, relief eased his clenched jaw and he dropped his arms from around himself. He met Rob halfway.

"You're here."

Rob stroked a hand down Tyler's back, feeling how tense he still was. "Did you doubt I would be?"

"No. Just... it's better that you're here."

Rob dropped a kiss on Tyler's temple. He'd been with Tyler every step of the way during the six months it had taken to create this collection. It had come out beautifully and looked amazing, with the stark, white backdrop of the gallery surrounding it. Tyler hadn't used subtlety with either the names or the designs.

Beginning was made up of curved blades that swooped and danced around each other, before ending up entwined at the top of the piece. *Middle* had blades that were thicker and welded together in intricate interlocking patterns. Tyler had used more of the older, rusted pieces of metal for that one. *End* was the most spectacular. The blades were all so sharp and bright, it almost hurt to look at them. None of the blades in *End* touched or connected at all. Instead they exploded out in a burst of steel and iron that dared you to try and touch it. He'd already noticed some of the people who were working the show reach out to it, but none of them risked the pain that getting too close to *End* would cause.

Tyler had actually ended up with four pieces. *After* was a small sculpture. Its blades rested on a base of melted, lumped-up old metal. The blades were all shiny and new, twisting up in fragile curls, almost like smoke. Rob had looked at that one often. He understood what Tyler's collection represented, *After* in particular. Seeing that piece, small and delicate compared to the others, told Rob how Tyler felt about his life after losing Cole. Rob knew he had to tread lightly or he would hurt that vulnerable piece. Hurt Tyler. That was something he would never do.

Next to him, Tyler took a deep breath. Rob looked up to see the gallery owner, Terese, coming up to them. She was a woman of average build, with light brown hair pulled back into a low ponytail. Gold-framed glasses accented her naturally tan and freckled face. She smiled at them as she approached.

"Are you two ready?"

Tyler took another deep breath. "I'm ready."

The showing was over. It had been a success, just as Rob knew it would be. All three of the big pieces sold. A wealthy patron named Bradford Thomas swooped in and paid an exorbitant amount to have *Beginning, Middle and End* together. Rob had taken advantage of a free moment to purchase *After* for himself. He planned to gift it to Tyler later. He didn't like the thought of that piece going to anyone else's home.

Tyler had also received several offers for commissioned work. Rob would look those over later. Right now he looked around for Tyler. They needed to settle with the gallery owner before they went home. Rob spied Tyler over in a dark corner. Tyler looked over his shoulder as he approached, but then went back to staring at the ground.

"Hey. You alright?"

"Yeah." Tyler finally turned and faced him. "Thank you, Rob."

"For what?"

"For everything. For putting this together. For being my agent. For bringing me back to life." He paused and looked down. "For being with me. Thank you."

Rob moved closer. He cupped Tyler's cheek, lifting his face until they made eye contact again. "You don't have to thank me for any of that." He leaned forward and kissed Tyler gently. He wanted so much more from Tyler than his

gratitude. But he didn't know if he had it, and Rob was afraid to lose what he did have with Tyler by pressing him for more. So he swallowed back the words that he wanted to say, deciding instead to just focus on celebrating this night.

“Come on. We'll join your hipster, artsy friends for some micro-beers.”

Tyler laughed. “You might not be an artist, but you're just as hipster and artsy as the rest of us. Especially with those wire-rimmed glasses. All you need is a beret.” Tyler linked their fingers together. “Let's go.”

Chapter 11

A year later

Rob sat on the couch, enjoying a peaceful evening. Rocket and Nancy were sleeping on the throw rug in front of the fireplace. Sirius was busy chewing on a piece of pig ear. Tyler lay across the couch, his head in Rob's lap as they watched a movie. It was a perfect evening. Well, almost perfect. There was something on Rob's mind, and it was keeping him from fully enjoying the night. Tyler poked him in the side, and Rob looked down at him.

"This looks like an ad for Gay Quarterly Magazine. All we need is for the fireplace to be lit."

With a complete lack of any build-up, Rob blurted out what was on his mind. "Move in with me."

Tyler smiled, a little bit of confusion on his brow. "I already live here."

"True. But I'd like it if you shared my bedroom with me. And maybe let go of your apartment."

Tyler rolled over and looked up at him. He didn't say anything for a long time. Rob's heart beat hard as he waited for his answer.

"I'd like that."

Rob smiled and pulled Tyler up and into a kiss. Tyler came up further to straddle his lap. They continued to kiss, the touch of their lips sweet and familiar after a year and a half of being together.

Rob slid his fingers into Tyler's hair, pushing him back slightly. There was something else he wanted to say, and it was beyond past time he said it. Tyler looked down at him with a small smile on his mouth, his dark eyes sparkling with happiness. Rob wondered if Tyler knew what he was about to say. Rob cleared his throat. "Tyler I—" The doorbell rang, interrupting him. Rob cursed, and Tyler groaned.

"Neither of us is expecting anyone. It must be a vacuum cleaner salesman."

Rob laughed and pushed Tyler off his lap to go answer the door. His hand on the doorknob, he looked through the peephole. What he saw had him immediately yanking the door open. Rob couldn't bring himself to say anything. He just stared, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. He heard Tyler coming up behind him.

“Just tell him we already have a vacuum cleaner.”

Rob turned to look at Tyler. He wanted to warn him, to ease him into what was on the other side of that door, so Tyler didn't experience the shock he just had, but he couldn't find the words. Tyler's smile faded, a worried expression crossing his face.

“What's wrong? Who is it?” Tyler stepped around him to look out the door. He went stiff, his body rocking back on his heels. “Cole?”

Rob finally snapped out of his shock when he saw the blood draining from Tyler's face. He grabbed him by the arms and shook him. “Tyler, don't pass out.”

Tyler shook his head hard once. Then he made a strangled noise that was a mix of anguish, joy, and surprise. He tore himself out of Rob's grip and launched himself at the man still standing silently on the door step. “Cole!”

Tyler couldn't believe what he was seeing. But when he wrapped himself around Cole, he felt the solid reality of his body and knew he was really there. “Cole. How? They told me...”

“I know. But maybe we can discuss this inside? I'd like to sit down.”

When Cole spoke, tears came to Tyler's eyes. Cole looked different. He was thinner, much thinner, and his face looked exhausted instead of happy and confident as it used to. But his voice. His voice was the same, the voice that Tyler loved. Tyler pulled Cole into the house. Into the living room where he and Rob had been just moments before. Rob took Cole's small bag from him and sat in the armchair.

“How?” he asked again. Tyler shook his head. “Never mind, I don't care. Just... I can't believe you're back!”

Cole looked at him, a smile tugging at his mouth. “And that makes you happy? Or sad? I can't tell with the tears.”

Tyler laughed and ran a hand over his face. “You know it makes me fucking crazy happy.” Cole reached for his hand and tugged him close. Tyler laughed again as he fell against his chest. He stayed there, wrapped in Cole's arms, listening to his heart beat against his ear

Rob stood up to give the two a moment alone. "I'll get you something to eat. You're skin and bones, man."

Rob was warming up some of the leftover lasagna when he heard someone come into the kitchen behind him. He knew it was Tyler.

"Rob." Tyler cleared his throat before he went on. "I hate to ask you this when you've already done so much for me, but can Cole and I stay here tonight? It's already late, and you know the apartment hasn't been lived in for a long time."

"Of course." Rob continued fixing the plate. He couldn't look at Tyler just yet. It was awkward. He'd just had Tyler in his lap, kissing him and about to confess his love. And now Tyler's boyfriend, who they'd thought dead, was back. Sitting on that same couch. It was too surreal. And of course he felt guilty.

"I'm sorry."

Rob finally turned around and went over to Tyler. "Don't be. It's a miracle to have my friend back." He cupped Tyler's cheek, leaning forward to give him one last kiss. He knew he wouldn't get the chance again. "I know who you really belong to." A look he didn't know how to read flashed across Tyler's face, but he turned his back to it. He couldn't deal with Tyler's emotions just then, not if he was going to hold it together in front of Cole.

He went back out to the living room and gave Cole his food. He listened to Cole tell the rest of his story. He had been on a boat, but that boat had been captured by North Korean forces, not sunk in a storm. Because the United States didn't negotiate with terrorist demands, and that boat shouldn't have been in North Korean waters, they'd put the story out about the boat sinking. They didn't want the incident creating an international storm that might lead to escalated actions around the world. It was only through quiet, clandestine dealings that Cole and the others had gained their release.

Rob listened, joy that his friend was returned and guilt at how he'd betrayed him mixing in his head until he had a world-class headache jabbing at his temples. He didn't say anything, not wanting to ruin this reunion. And when the time came, he left Tyler and Cole to go to bed together while he went to his room. Alone.

Chapter 12

“Best shock I’ve ever received in my life. It’s wonderful to have you back.” It was the next morning. Cole and Tyler were preparing to leave. They’d packed up all of Tyler’s things, which were thankfully all in the spare room. That kept any questions from being asked. Tyler’s work tools were already in the back of his truck.

“It’s good to be back. I can barely believe that I am.” Cole looked over at Tyler saying goodbye to the dogs. “Thank you for taking care of him,” he said, holding his hand out.

Guilt burned Rob’s face. He wanted to come clean with his friend, but now wasn’t the time. And Tyler should have the right to tell his lover everything that had happened. So he just shook his friend’s hand before pulling him into a tight hug. Tyler came over.

“Thank you for taking care of Sirius. I promise I’ll have things figured out so I can take him with me in just a few days.”

Rob fought to keep from clenching his jaw. He didn’t want to keep hearing thanks and gratitude from these two men. He felt like shit, but he wanted more than that. He wanted... Rob cut the thought off. It didn’t matter what he wanted. Cole and Tyler were together again, and he was just the friend who was there to help. He closed the door behind the reunited couple, unable to watch them drive away from him.

Chapter 13

Cole watched Tyler. He was sitting on the couch, sketching out plans for a new sculpture. He'd been home for two weeks. Cole was glad to be out of that hut where he'd been starved and occasionally beaten for two long years. He was happy to be home. He'd already bought a new camera to replace the one that had been confiscated. He didn't anticipate any problems in resuming his career.

His personal life, on the other hand, looked like it was going to need some work. There was a distance between him and Tyler that had never been there before. He had his suspicions as to what was causing it, but he hadn't brought it up yet. Cole had never been afraid of tackling any challenge before. He'd jump right in the path of a charging bull if it meant getting the best shot, but he was afraid of the conversation he needed to have with his lover.

Tyler got up and went to the kitchen area for a drink. Cole took a deep breath and joined him. When he came up behind Tyler, his boyfriend stiffened rather than relaxing back into him like he used to. Cole forced himself to address the situation, rather than hiding from it like he had been. He kissed Tyler on the shoulder. "Talk to me."

Tyler turned to face him, but he didn't quite meet his eyes. "Talk about what?"

"About why you tense up whenever I approach you. About why I've been home for two weeks, but we still haven't made love."

Tyler looked at him for a moment before his eyes skittered away. "I..." He looked back at him. "You haven't exactly tried to be close to me."

"I know. And I know why I haven't. But I'd like to know what's holding *you* back."

Tyler shook his head. "No. You first."

"It's still surreal being back home. I honestly thought I would die there. When I was stuck in that hut, sitting on a dirt floor day after day with nothing to occupy my mind, all I thought about was you. I missed you so much. And I felt guilty. If I hadn't been determined to run off chasing the next great shot, that wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have been in the situation I was in, with you at home grieving my death. And now that I'm back I'm so fucking happy. But I still feel guilty."

Tyler frowned. "I don't care about any of that. I told you from the beginning I would never stop you from doing what you loved. I never blamed you for any of this. I'm just happy to have you back. It's what I wanted more than anything. But while you were gone..." Tyler paused and took a deep breath. "While you were gone I was with Rob. As a couple."

Cole clenched his jaw, swallowing hard. He'd suspected as much when he found Tyler living with his best friend. It hurt to finally have it confirmed, but he forced himself to relax. "I know. And I understand. I was dead, Tyler. I never expected you to stop living because you thought I had. Rob is a good man, a good friend. If I could have chosen someone for you to be with, it would have been him."

Tyler looked away again. "I've been feeling so guilty. You were suffering in a goddamn prison while I moved—"

"Don't. Don't worry about that. Just be with me now." Tyler stared at him for a long moment before he nodded. Cole pulled Tyler close against him. He felt Tyler's heart racing between them, matching the rhythm of his own. He kissed Tyler deeply. Having his lover in his arms again really confirmed that he was home. Cole gripped Tyler tightly. He kissed his way down his neck, nipping at his skin. Tyler gasped, his head falling back. Cole looked at him, at his beautiful lover, letting it wash over him that Tyler was his again. He tucked his fingers into Tyler's jeans and pulled him around the screens to their bedroom.

Maybe their first time together after two years apart should have been tender, but it wasn't. Their hands frantically removed clothes. Fingers dug hard into muscles. Every kiss was rough and fast, their breathing harsh each time they broke apart. They fell naked on the bed together, Tyler's legs squeezing Cole tightly as he settled between them. They touched and kissed, rough and wild, finesse the furthest thing from their minds.

Cole pulled away from his lover to retrieve what he needed. He watched Tyler beneath him, hips curling up, his cock moving stiffly against his stomach. Cole cursed, quickly kissing Tyler before he moved down to take his lover into his mouth. Tyler's fingers tangled in his hair, his hips pumping up once, but then Tyler pulled him away.

"No. I want you inside me, Cole."

Cole groaned, sliding back on top of his lover. He reached down, slicking them both up with lube before pressing inside his lover. Cole began moving,

stroking deep again and again. Tyler encouraged him in demanding whispers, his hips rising to meet each of his thrusts. Later would be the time for slow, prolonged lovemaking. Right now their bodies moved together quickly, straining to reach the pinnacle of pleasure that had been denied to them for so long.

Tyler came first, crying out Cole's name, his body squeezing him tight. Cole watched Tyler as he came. His lips were parted on a gasp, his eyes closed and face flushed. He'd missed seeing this so much. Cole sped up his thrusts even more. When he went over the edge, it was with an exhilarating mix of physical and emotional pleasure. It felt amazing to be inside Tyler once more, and he was indescribably happy that he'd been granted the chance to do so. He gripped Tyler's shoulder, needing to be anchored to his lover in this moment. And when he came down, Tyler was there, holding him tighter than he ever had before.

Chapter 14

“I miss Sirius.”

Cole looked up from his computer. He was going through images of some test shots he'd taken with his new camera. “You should go and see him. Maybe bring him back for a few days. I don't think the landlord would pitch too much of a fit over that.”

Tyler got up from the couch. “That's a good idea. I'm gonna stop by the store and get him a chew toy. You need anything?”

Cole arched a brow. “My appetite might have changed after two years in captivity, but I don't think I'm ready to start eating kibble.”

Tyler laughed, coming over to kiss him goodbye. “Funny. I was planning to swing by the drug store. They carry dog toys too, you know.”

Cole laughed too, squeezing Tyler's hand. “I know. Bring me back some of those hot chips I like.”

Tyler drove down the two lane street that led to Rob's house. It had started raining while he was in the store, but he was still going to see Sirius. They'd just have to play inside instead of going for a walk like he'd planned. He didn't think Rob would mind. Looking at the clock, he realized Rob might not even be at home. That was fine, he still had a key. He kind of hoped that Rob wasn't home. They hadn't really talked since Cole had returned, and he wasn't sure if he was ready to have that conversation or how it should go.

But when Tyler turned into the crushed-shell driveway, he saw that Rob was indeed home. He was outside, shirtless while chopping wood. He didn't even stop when Tyler pulled in. He just kept going, swinging the axe, splitting piece after piece. Tyler grabbed the bag with the chew toys he'd bought for the dogs and got out of the truck.

He headed over to Rob instead of going inside the house. “Rob, what are you doing?” he called out over the rain and thudding of the axe. Rob didn't turn to look at him when he answered.

“Splitting logs for the fireplace. It needs to be done.”

“I don't think it needs to be done right now while it's raining. You're gonna have to let the wood dry out.” Rob swung the axe again, but this time he left it

embedded in the stump. He stood there with his back to Tyler. Rain trickled down his neck, making his dark hair stick to his skin. Tyler's heart pounded. His brain told him to get back in the truck and leave, to see Sirius another time, but he ignored it and stepped forward, putting a hand on Rob's arm. His skin was warm despite the cool rain that fell on them both. "Rob you should get inside."

Rob spun around, grabbing him by the upper arms. His grip was strong but not painful. Tyler looked up into gray eyes bright with intense emotion. Rob walked him backwards, pushing him up against a tree. He didn't say a word, he just leaned forward and pressed their lips together in the hottest kiss they'd ever exchanged.

Without thinking, Tyler kissed Rob back. He dropped the bag, wrapping his arms around Rob. Rob groaned, his grip tightening, pulling him even closer. There was desperation and hunger and passion in Rob's kiss and touch, and Tyler responded to all of it. When Tyler realized what he was doing he tore his face away. "What are you doing?"

"I miss you," Rob said as if that was answer enough.

Tyler had to look away. "Rob, I know we should talk about what happened between us."

Rob gripped his chin, forcing him to look at him again. "You're here now so let's talk. I miss you. And it's killing me that I want you so much when you're my best friend's lover. My best friend who just came back from the dead." Rob paused, a muscle clenching in his jaw. "But I can't help it. I miss you."

He leaned in, and Tyler's breath caught in his throat, thinking that Rob was going to kiss him again. But he didn't.

"The night Cole came back I was just about to tell you that I loved you. I still do." Rob trailed kisses down his neck, kissing his shoulder. "I had your body, Tyler, but I wanted more. Tell me you felt something more for me than just gratitude and friendship."

Tyler pushed Rob away. "Don't do this. I can't answer that question."

"Why not?"

"Because Cole is back and I love *him*. It doesn't matter what I felt before."

"It matters to me."

“Why? Are you going to try and take me away from him? Because I wouldn’t leave him. And that would make you a shitty friend.”

“You don’t have to tell me I’m a shitty friend!” Rob shouted. “Every time I reach out for you in the night or think about what it was like to kiss you, or even remember bringing you a goddamn sandwich while you worked, I’m reminded what a shitty friend I am! I love you but you belong to my best friend. I think that makes me just about the shittiest friend any guy could have.”

Tyler knew everything Rob felt. His sadness and guilt and longing were clear in his eyes and voice, but there was nothing he could do about that. He was with Cole. They would both have to move on from the relationship they’d shared.

“Rob, I’m sorry. But...” Tyler trailed off, he couldn’t think of what to say. He just looked at Rob. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, before he turned around and left.

Chapter 15

Cole looked up as the door opened. Tyler came in, completely drenched. “Whoa, did you play with Sirius out in the rain?” Tyler didn’t look at him as he answered.

“No. I didn’t see Sirius.”

Cole got up. “What’s wrong? What happened?” Tyler pulled away, refusing to look at him.

“Nothing. I’m going to take a shower and get cleaned up.”

Cole noticed Tyler’s empty hands. “Did you bring my chips?”

“Oh, I forgot. They’re in the truck. I’ll go down and get them later, okay?” Tyler left, heading into the bathroom without waiting for a response from Cole.

Cole stayed in the living room, listening to Tyler get in the shower. After the water had been on for a few minutes, he got up. He took the wet clothes Tyler dropped on the floor and put them in the washer. Then he went and sat on the bed to wait. Tyler came out with a towel around his waist. He stopped as soon as he saw Cole.

“You go off to see Sirius. You come back soaking wet from the rain and tell me you didn’t see your pup. And you didn’t bring my chips. I know you’re spacey, Tyler, but you’re not that bad. Tell me what happened.” Tyler pulled on a pair of sweats before he said anything.

“It’s Rob. He...”

“He what?”

“He told me he loved me.”

Cole sat silent at that. Of course it was something with Rob that had caused Tyler to react like this.

“Look, I know he’s your friend, and I don’t want to cause an end to your friendship. Maybe it would be best if you went to get Sirius, and I’ll just get another agent.”

“What did you say to him?”

Tyler’s brow creased in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“What did you say when he told you he loved you?”

“I told him that I loved you.”

“You didn’t tell him how you felt about him?”

“No, it doesn’t matter.” Tyler huffed out a clearly frustrated breath. “Why are you asking me this?”

“Do you love him?”

Tyler’s face turned red. He didn’t say anything, and that was answer enough. Cole stood. “You don’t need to worry about changing agents. I’ll go talk to Rob.” He stroked a thumb over Tyler’s lips. “It’ll be alright.”

Rob sat on the couch staring at a blank TV. He’d showered and changed into dry clothes after putting the wood he’d chopped under a tarp. He’d probably just made the biggest mistake of his life. Like Tyler had said, it didn’t matter what their feelings for each other were now that Cole was home. He could excuse the relationship he’d had with Tyler before, when they’d thought Cole was dead, but to do what he just had was inexcusable. He wouldn’t be surprised if he’d just lost the friendship of both Tyler and Cole.

It was a dumb move, one he knew he shouldn’t have made. But after sitting at home alone for weeks, going around and around in an endless cycle of grief at losing Tyler, guilt for being with him and happiness that Cole was back, he’d snapped. Things with him and Tyler had ended so abruptly he hadn’t yet processed it. One minute they were happy together and the next he was gone. He missed Tyler, and he was so damn frustrated he didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t have him because he was his best friend’s lover. He didn’t even *want* Tyler to leave Cole. But he didn’t want Tyler to leave him either.

Rob groaned. This was pointless. He wasn’t ever going to be with Tyler again, so he needed to just accept it. He should have handled things better when Tyler showed up in his driveway. Rob promised himself that if Tyler would speak to him again, he would apologize and let him know that they could go back to their friendship and working relationship from before.

When a knock came at the door he wasn’t even surprised. He got up and went over to open it, expecting to be greeted with Cole’s fist. Cole was standing there as expected. His hands were in his pockets, so at least he wasn’t about to be sucker punched. “Cole. I know why you’re here. And I want to say I’m sorry. I was way out of line.” Cole cut him off before he could go any further with his apology.

“We have a problem.”

He paused, and Rob waited with his stomach clenched in fear. This was it. His closest friend was about to tell him that Tyler loved Cole not him and to stay out of their lives.

“I love Tyler. You love Tyler.” Cole paused again, taking a deep breath. “And he loves us both.”

Chapter 16

“Maybe I should leave.”

Rob looked away from the coffee he was pouring. “Are you crazy? Tyler just got you back. Why the hell would you do something so stupid?”

“Crazy.” Cole laughed and scrubbed his hand over his face. “Sometimes I wonder if I am crazy for thinking I can just plug back into my old life. And sometimes I think I’m crazy when I lie awake at night, unable to sleep with all of the stuff in my head, lying there still so I don’t wake Tyler.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t want to burden him with that.”

Rob brought the coffee over to the kitchen table and sat down. “Tyler loves you, and it almost killed him to lose you. Literally.”

“What?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“When he first got the news from the State Department, he holed up in your apartment alone for four days drinking. And he nearly overdosed on sleeping pills. That’s how he ended up here. I went over there and got him to the emergency room. Then I brought him back with me to keep an eye on him. It was months before he was anything like his former self.”

Cole scrubbed a hand over his face again, harder this time. “No. He didn’t tell me that. Guess we both have things we haven’t communicated to each other.”

“You guys need to talk. If you have problems readjusting to life here, that’s fine. Work on them, get counseling, do whatever you have to do. But don’t leave him. That would be the most selfish thing you could do.”

“He misses you.” Cole nodded at the three animals asleep on the floor. “And the dogs.”

“I... we miss him too. He’s welcome to come and visit anytime.” Rob cleared his throat. “And like I said I know I was out of line. What happened today won’t happen again. I know things are over between us.”

“They don’t have to be.”

Rob jerked in surprise. Coffee sloshed over the rim of his mug, burning his hand. He shook the hot liquid off and wiped his hand along his pants, uncaring that he was staining the material. "What do you mean, *they don't have to be*?" he asked.

Cole pushed his mug around. "When you're a prisoner, you don't have time to do anything but think. So that's what I did. I thought about life. A lot. How if I made it back home, I would live my life the way I wanted, without worrying about little things or what society might think of me. Life is too short and too precious for that."

"That makes sense. I can see why those thoughts would be on your mind." Rob laughed a little. "Not that you ever thought all that much on what people thought about you before. But what does that have to do with things not being over with Tyler and me?"

"Well Tyler loves us both. Why should he have to choose one of us to be with? Life is about being happy and being with the people you love. Why can't he be with us both?"

Cole looked at Rob as he sat there stunned. He knew he'd just dropped a massive bomb on his friend, but calm, steady Rob recovered and made up his mind quickly.

"He'll never go for it."

"I think between the two of us, we can convince him."

Tyler heard the door open, but it was the sound of clicking nails on concrete that brought him around the bedroom screens into the open living area. "Sirius?" His dog barked at the sound of his voice and ran over to him. Tyler knelt down to hug the black Lab, letting Sirius give him a few doggie kisses before he looked back at the front door. Cole hadn't just brought Sirius with him. Rob was there too, Nancy sitting quietly by his side. Rocket was sniffing around the furniture. Tyler slowly stood. "What's going on?"

"We need to talk. All three of us."

Tyler tangled his fingers in the fur on the scruff of Sirius's neck. "Talk about what?"

Cole approached him, while Rob stayed standing in front of the door. "We need to talk about the relationships you have with me and with Rob."

"I don't have a relationship with Rob. That ended when you came home, Cole. You know that." Tyler saw the hurt flash across Rob's face, but what was he supposed to do?

"Would you have ended that relationship if I hadn't come home?"

"No. But you did, so why are we discussing this?"

"I told you that I was beyond glad to be home and to be with you again. But that doesn't mean that I'm happy about disrupting the life you built for yourself." Cole took his hand. "So what I'm suggesting is that you stay with Rob."

Tyler's eyebrows shot up. "What? Are you dumping me?"

"No," Cole answered quickly. "You'll still be with me."

Tyler yanked his hand away. "Are you crazy? I can't be with you both."

"Why not? Many cultures allow relationships with more than one partner."

Tyler put his hand up to stop Cole. "Just stop. Spare me the lecture about the polyamorous societies you've seen in your world travels."

"Open relationships and polyamorous relationships are more common here in the United States than you might think."

Tyler cut his eyes at Cole. "Are you going to make me sit down and watch an episode of *Sister Wives* next?"

"No. I have a feeling that wouldn't help."

Tyler looked at Rob. "Are you on board with this craziness?"

Rob finally came forward, Nancy following. "I love you, Tyler. I told you that not three hours ago. I meant it, and I want to be with you. Just like we were before."

Tyler gave a humorless laugh. "That's not exactly possible."

Rob smiled. "Maybe not exactly like before, but I know I don't want to lose you or what we had together."

Tyler looked back and forth between Rob and Cole. "I don't understand what you're suggesting. I stay with you Cole but go out on dates with Rob?"

"No. Rob and I are thinking that the two of us move in with Rob. That way we'd all be together. You wouldn't have to be separated from either of us or from the dogs."

Tyler crossed his arms over his chest. "Seriously? We move in with Rob and I get to date both of you." He shook his head in disbelief. "Where would I sleep? Rob only has one spare bedroom, so someone is going to have to share. Won't that be awkward?"

Rob cleared his throat. "At first, yes it will be awkward. But eventually we'll get things settled and figure out what works for us all."

"Eventually?"

"Give it three months, Tyler. If after three months you don't feel like it's working, you can choose who you want to be with."

"What if I choose neither of you?"

Rob and Cole shared a glance. "If that's your choice then we'd accept it. But I know that I hope you won't decide that way. And I'm sure Cole feels the same."

Cole wrapped an arm around him. "Tyler, do you love me?"

"Yes. You know I do."

"And do you love Rob?"

Tyler didn't answer for a moment. That was something he hadn't admitted to himself, let alone Rob or Cole. Now he would have to do so in front of them both. He looked at Rob, seeing the tension in the hard line of his clenched jaw. Tyler knew that his answer meant a lot to the other man. "Yes. I love Rob." Rob visibly relaxed, coming closer and taking Tyler's other hand.

"Then give us a chance. All of us. You, Cole, me, and the dogs. The four of us miss you. Nancy most of all."

The Aussie shuffled around a bit when she heard her name. Tyler looked down into the dog's sweet eyes. She came over, nuzzling under his hand. He stroked her head then looked back up at Rob. "That's really low, using the dogs to try and convince me."

Rob smiled. "I know. But I'm willing to do whatever it takes. Come on, Tyler, give us a chance. What do you have to lose?"

Chapter 17

Tyler couldn't believe it. He was back at Rob's, this time sharing the spare bedroom with Cole. When they'd told him of their plan to all live together, he'd looked at them like they'd lost their minds, but Rob and Cole had managed to convince him. Now he was all moved in. His workspace was set up again in Rob's garage. Cole was moved in too. The small half bath had been turned into a temporary dark room for him until they figured out something more permanent.

As far as sleeping arrangements, he was sharing the spare bedroom with Cole. He'd made that decision, and Rob hadn't said anything against it, but it was awkward. He and Cole hadn't been intimate since they'd moved in a week ago, and his interactions with Rob weren't even close to being lover-like. Tyler just felt... awkward. He felt like if he were with Cole, he'd be flaunting it in Rob's face, and if he were with Rob, Cole would think he was cheating on him. So he kept a distance from both men. He knew that wasn't helpful for the way he knew Rob and Cole were hoping things would develop.

Tyler heard a car pull into the driveway as he put everything away for the sandwich he'd just made. He looked outside and saw it was Rob. He was tempted to take his snack back to his bedroom, but avoidance wouldn't help either of them. Tyler stayed put. When Rob came in through the kitchen door, he'd just finished eating. "Hey, how was work?"

"Good. I arranged a collaborative exhibit for three artists. How was your day? Did you make much progress on that commissioned piece?"

"Yeah, it's coming together."

Rob smiled. "I like this."

"What?"

"I like coming home to you, talking about our days in the kitchen like any other couple."

"But we're not like any other couple. We're in an odd threesome where you share me with another man."

"Not exactly. I wouldn't say that I share you, since you haven't let me touch you since you've been back."

"Rob, you know what I mean."

“I do. But that doesn't mean I don't want to kiss you.”

Rob moved in, trapping him against the counter. Tyler could have moved, but he didn't. He let Rob lean down and kiss him. Rob's fingers slid into his hair, holding him still as he deepened the kiss. Tyler moaned as Rob pressed against him. After several soft, delicious kisses, they separated. Tyler ran his tongue over his lip as he looked at Rob.

“I missed this Tyler. Missed having you in my arms. Missed the way you moan so softly when I kiss you.”

Tyler didn't protest at all when Rob pulled him back for another kiss. Until he heard the kitchen door opening for a second time. It was Cole, back from his run. Tyler abruptly ended the kiss, pushing Rob away from him. He turned to face the sink, listening as Rob and Cole calmly greeted each other. But he couldn't be calm about being caught kissing one boyfriend by another. He was shaking, unable to look at either man. Cole finally spoke to him, asking if he was alright.

“Yeah. I'm just going to take the dogs for a walk.” He stepped around Rob and left the room, still refusing to make eye contact.

Cole watched Tyler grab the leashes and leave the room. “He is wound so tight.”

Rob sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. “He is. We all are actually. That's the first time he's let me touch him since we decided on this.”

“He's put up a wall between us too.” Cole sighed himself. “This won't work if we can't make him comfortable enough to really give it a chance.”

“If it doesn't work out, he might decide he doesn't want to be with either of us. Are you willing to take that risk?”

“I'd risk anything to make Tyler happy.” Cole looked at Rob. “Are you committed to this? This is really what you want?”

“Yes. As long as all three of us are happy with the arrangement. From the way Tyler reacted to you walking in on us kissing, I'd say he feels guilty about being with either of us.”

“He shouldn't. I don't feel any jealousy. Do you?” Cole asked.

“No. But Tyler doesn't know that.”

Cole looked out the window at Tyler's figure in the distance. “I'll figure out a way to make him see.”

A few nights later, Tyler and Cole were preparing to go to bed. Cole was already lying down. Tyler joined him, and after kissing Cole good night he went to turn on his side, but Cole pulled him back.

“That’s all I get—one kiss?” he asked with a smile.

“I can’t. Not with Rob just down the hall.”

“We can’t put our sex life completely aside, Tyler.”

Tyler looked at Cole for a moment, lying there calm, while he was tense and unsure of what life held for them. Cole reached for him again and he snapped. “Well, you should have thought of that before you came up with the brilliant plan for us all to live together! I don’t know what the hell my place is with you two. Am I with you, with Rob, or both? Are you guys going to make a calendar to see who gets me on Tuesdays and Thursdays and who gets me on the weekend? This is ridiculous!”

“I just want you to be happy, Tyler. And if that means I share you with someone that you love, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“I’m not happy! I’m confused and uncomfortable.”

Cole threw the covers back and got out of bed. “Fine then. Let’s go.”

“Are you kidding me? We’re going back to our apartment in the middle of the night?” Cole tugged him up.

“No, we’re not going back to our apartment. That’s not our home anymore.”

“So then where are we going?”

“To Rob’s room.”

“Why?”

“Because his bed is bigger.”

Tyler let Cole pull him along, completely confused and frustrated with the whole situation. Cole knocked on the door, pushing it open after Rob immediately answered. Rob was sitting up in the bed.

“I heard you guys coming down the hall. What’s going on?”

“Tyler is confused as to who he’s with. So I figured the best way to show him that he’s with both of us, is for him to sleep with both of us.”

Tyler jerked his hand away. “What?”

“Relax, I don’t mean like that. Just for us to share a bed. If we sleep together, maybe that’ll help us grow a little closer.”

“Makes sense to me,” Rob said as he lifted the covers, but Tyler didn’t move. Cole stroked his back.

“You know, most guys would jump at the chance to have two lovers.”

Tyler snorted. “Stop watching so much porn.”

Cole laughed softly. “All I’m asking you to do is lie down and sleep with us. That’s it. But if you really don’t want to, you can take the bed in the spare room, and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

Tyler stared at Cole in the near dark. He didn’t need to clearly see his boyfriend’s face to know he meant what he said. He could hear the sincerity in Cole’s voice. If it really bothered him, Cole would let him sleep alone.

Tyler thought about it. He wasn’t really bothered by sleeping with the both of them, as long as all they did was *sleep*. Taking a deep breath, he crossed the room to Rob’s bed. He crawled onto the mattress, Cole following him. Rob rearranged the pillows so they each had one while Cole pulled the covers back up.

Neither Rob nor Cole touched him. Still, after he settled down, Tyler admitted to himself that it felt good to be between his two loves. If he wanted, he could reach out and touch either of them, and he knew they would take him into their arms. Tyler didn’t make that move, but just knowing he could, that both of them were there for him felt good. He took another deep breath, released it slowly, and let himself fall asleep.

Chapter 18

“Do you really think this can work?”

It was late at night. Cole had left the bed so he wouldn't disturb the other two with his tossing and turning. Rob had come out and joined him on the couch a few minutes ago. “I don't know. But I don't know what else to do.”

“Tyler does seem a little more relaxed now that we've been sharing a bed these past few days.”

“Good. I was really hoping that would help him see there won't be any jealousy from either side.”

“Looks like it's working. But what about you?”

Cole looked at his friend in the low light. “What about me?”

“You still seem pretty tense. And sometimes you look like you're a million miles away.”

“Maybe I am. Or at least, however far it is to North Korea.”

“Still thinking about what happened,” Rob asked.

“Yeah. Two years of captivity won't be easy to forget.”

“Maybe it'd be good for you to talk about it with someone. That might help you move past whatever is weighing on your mind.”

Cole made a noncommittal noise. He didn't really want to *go see someone*, but he did want to talk. “You've got two working ears.”

Rob smiled. “I'm not a licensed listener, but I'm here for you, if that's what you want.”

Cole thought for a long moment. “You know when I was a captive, I thought about Tyler every day. Like I said, there wasn't really anything to do but think. But he wasn't the only person I thought about.”

Rob looked at him, his brow raised.

“I thought about my friend, who I've known for a long time. Who's been there for me as a friend and helped me with my career. And I couldn't help but wonder if the feelings I thought I'd picked up on from my friend were real or just in my head.”

“I assume the friend you’re referring to is me.”

“Might be kind of awkward if it wasn’t,” Cole answered.

“And I assume the feelings you’re talking about are the ones I had for you in college.”

“Yes.” Cole looked into Rob’s gray eyes. They’d been close for a long time. Could they grow closer? “You never said anything.”

“You know why I didn’t. I wasn’t ready to come out. But I always appreciated the way you were there for me through it all when I did.”

Cole nodded. “Are those feelings still there? Or is it just appreciation and friendship now?”

Rob had to laugh at Cole asking if he didn’t feel anything but appreciation and friendship. That was a change from the way things had been previously. “I definitely still appreciate your support. And of course you know you have my friendship.” He paused. “There might be more.”

Cole smiled. “Might?”

Rob looked at his friend. His face had filled in again, though there were a few more lines than there were before. But the green eyes still sparkled with mischievous humor, the shaggy blond hair falling across his forehead making him look just as carefree as ever. Rob was glad that Cole was back and even happier to share his home with him. Could he even hope that Cole would be interested in something more? That would be something that would majorly change the dynamics of the relationship they were already trying to build. He finally answered Cole. “Yes. Might. That’d be something we’d need to talk about.”

Cole smiled again. “So then let’s talk.”

Chapter 19

Tyler turned off his blow torch. He'd been at it for hours, working right through lunch. Now he was starving. He flipped up the visor to his welding mask and looked at the clock. Not yet five o'clock. Rob wouldn't be home from the office yet, and Cole was out of the house too. Tyler couldn't wait for one of them to get home and make dinner.

He took off his leather workman's apron and headed into the house to order a pizza. Sirius padded after him. The dog had matured enough that he was able to settle down and nap in the garage while Tyler worked.

Tyler ordered two large pizzas then went to shower while he waited. He was dressed, toweling off his hair when all three dogs barked at the ringing doorbell. Tyler went to answer it. He smiled at the delivery guy's greeting, but it was what he held in his hands that really made him happy. The lanky young man opened the insulated case, and the smell of tomato sauce and melted cheese drifted to his nose, making his stomach rumble loudly. Tyler paid the pizza man quickly, who laughed as he counted back his change. Rob pulled up just as the delivery guy was heading down the walk.

Rob came in and put his briefcase and keys down on the entry table. "Pizza? I had chicken breasts thawing in the fridge."

Tyler scrunched up his nose, carrying the boxes to the kitchen. "I wasn't going to cook it. At least not without burning it. And I was too hungry to wait. I worked through lunch."

"Again?"

Tyler smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, again."

"Where's Cole?"

"He went to the hardware store to get what he needed to close off his section of the garage for his dark room." Cole did most of his work digitally, but he still liked to develop some of his prints.

Rob slid an arm around Tyler's waist. He accepted it, leaning into his embrace. When Rob dropped a kiss on his cheek, Tyler turned his head and kissed Rob on the mouth. Tyler smiled at Rob's surprised expression, but he didn't say anything. He just took the pizza boxes to the counter and got out plates. By the time he got drinks and napkins on the table, and Rob got the dogs

fed, Cole was home. He came in, saw the pizza, and asked if Tyler burned the chicken. Rob laughed while Tyler just rolled his eyes.

Tyler looked around the kitchen as they ate. The three of them conversed with ease, going over their respective projects. The dogs were at their feet, hoping for scraps to fall to the floor. Tyler had to admit that it was nice being there with Rob, Cole and the dogs.

All three of them still slept together, but Tyler hadn't been intimate with either of them. He wasn't sure how they were going to handle that, but in other ways he was adjusting. An easy balance had been established between the three of them, and Tyler no longer jerked away when one of them touched him. He hadn't thought that this arrangement would work, but it was starting to look like it might.

Later that night, Cole lay in the bed he shared with Tyler and Rob. It was a big bed, but a California King would be even better. Or maybe something custom. He could build the frame, but a mattress would have to be ordered. He wondered if that were possible. Tyler sighed and turned from one side to the other, so that he was facing Cole. "Are you okay?"

Tyler sighed again. "Just can't fall asleep tonight. Don't know why."

Cole pulled Tyler into his arms. Cupping his face, he brushed his lips against his lover's. "You should be in a carb-induced coma after all that pizza you ate." Tyler laughed softly, and Cole leaned forward to kiss him again.

They were in the middle of a soft, quiet kiss when Tyler jerked slightly. Cole opened his eyes to see what was wrong. He saw Rob behind Tyler, propped up on one elbow, his head resting on his hand. His other hand was on Tyler's hip, slowly stroking back and forth. Tyler pulled back and looked over his shoulder at Rob.

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"I was already up."

"Oh."

"You don't have to stop," Rob said as he looked at Cole. Tyler looked back at him too. He shifted on the bed, clearly uncomfortable. The comment had been directed at Cole, but Tyler answered.

“No, we were just going to sleep.”

Cole arched a brow. “Were we?” He locked eyes with Rob as he pulled Tyler into another kiss. Tyler gasped sharply, and Cole paused for a moment. He would stop if it really made Tyler uncomfortable to kiss in front of Rob, but Tyler didn’t pull away or ask him to stop. So Cole kept going, running his tongue over Tyler’s bottom lip before stroking inside. Cole’s eyes were still locked on Rob’s. He didn’t miss the way Rob’s jaw clenched as Tyler moaned into Cole’s kiss.

Rob lowered his head and dropped a kiss on Tyler’s shoulder. Cole saw him hesitate just as he had, waiting for any protest from Tyler. When he didn’t, Rob kissed his way along Tyler’s shoulder, up his neck, to the sensitive spot behind his ear. Tyler shivered, and Cole finally closed his eyes. He reached down, smoothing his hand along Tyler’s body until his fingers met Rob’s. Tangling them together, he pulled Rob closer. The balance on the mattress changed slightly as Rob scooted in tighter behind Tyler. But things didn’t go any further. Tyler pulled away from their kiss.

“I think I can sleep now,” he said breathlessly.

Cole let him go without complaint, and Rob scooted back again. Obviously Tyler wasn’t ready to be any more intimate than a couple of kisses and caresses. He looked at Rob for a moment before he lay back down. Both of them respected Tyler’s decision, but he didn’t think any of them would be getting much sleep.

Chapter 20

“I hope this has been helpful. Maybe therapy would have been better.”

It was another late night. Cole and Rob were again talking things over in the living room. They'd snuck out a few times over the past two weeks. Cole had told the entire story of his captivity, with Rob listening patiently to every word. Now Cole's story had come to an end.

“No, this was good.” Cole looked at his friend. Thoughts of his long friendship with Rob and his calm steady demeanor had helped him get through several rough patches during his two years in that hut. A small part of him had loved Rob for a long time, but that love had been one of friendship. Now he wanted to take those feelings to a deeper level. So as was his nature, he went after what he wanted. “Besides, you can't kiss your therapist when you're done with your sessions.”

Rob looked surprised. True, he'd admitted that he had feelings for Cole, but they hadn't discussed it too much after that first conversation. Cole figured he'd moved a little faster than Rob expected, but like he'd said, he no longer believed in putting off what he wanted. Life was too short and fragile to take those types of risks.

Rob cleared his throat. “We've been friends for a long time.”

“And I can't think of a better way to build a family,” Cole answered. “We all care about each other. I don't see why there should be a boundary between us. I don't want to just be your friend, I want to love you too, if you'll give me that chance.” He reached out for Rob, tangling their fingers together.

Rob cleared his throat. “I've been thinking about this a lot.”

“And?”

“And I think it sounds pretty amazing.” He smiled, squeezing Cole's fingers. “We just have to convince Tyler—”

“Why are you two always trying to convince me of something?”

Chapter 21

They both turned around at the sound of Tyler's voice. Cole spoke up first. "What are you doing up?"

Tyler came around to stand in front of the couch. "Do you guys really think I would sleep through both of you leaving the bed night after night?"

Rob held his hand out. When Tyler took it, he pulled him onto the couch between them. Tyler looked at Cole.

"I understand that you needed to talk to someone, Cole. I just don't get why you didn't talk to me."

Cole stroked a palm over Tyler's thigh. "I wasn't trying to exclude you. It's just that a lot of what I wanted to discuss was about you. That makes it a little hard to have an objective conversation. But I promise that I will share my experiences with you, if you want to help me bear that burden."

"I do. You know I do. But right now I want to know what you two were just talking about. Don't try to convince me of anything. I can make up my own mind about what I want."

Cole cleared his throat. "I don't want two separate relationships. Mine with you and Rob's with you and never the two shall meet. I want us all to be together. No separation, no jealousy. Just the three of us, loving each other, in one equal relationship."

Tyler looked at Rob. "And is this what you want too?"

"You know I love you, Tyler. And Cole, I've had feelings for him for a long time. But I pushed them aside, first because I wasn't ready to come out, and then because he was with you." Rob grasped Tyler's hand, brushing his thumb along his wrist. "But you're the center piece in all this, Tyler. The one bringing us together. What do *you* want?"

Tyler took a deep breath. He needed to commit and make a decision. He'd been lying there in bed, thinking how he had a golden opportunity dropped into his lap. He loved Cole. He loved Rob. And crazily enough, they were willing to be in a serious polyamorous relationship, so he could have them both. It would be foolish of him to pass this up. He just had to be brave enough to take what he wanted and trust that the three of them could make this work. Tyler looked

into their eyes, first Rob's then Cole's. Gray and green, both filled with hope and love, for him.

"I know that I don't want to lose either of you. Both of you have my heart. Cole, your passion for life inspires me. Even when I thought you weren't with me. It was thinking of you pushing me to create that helped get me working again. And Rob, you brought me out of the darkest spot in my life. You *saved* my life. I'll be forever grateful to you for that. But it's not just gratitude I feel for you. I love you, Rob and as much as I love Cole, it hurt me when I had to leave you. Having you both feels a lot like I'm having my cake and eating it too, but I don't care. I'd be crazy to pass up the chance to share my life with two men who both mean the world to me."

Cole grinned. "Good. I've never understood the point of having cake if you aren't going to eat it."

Tyler laughed. Shaking his head, he leaned in to kiss Cole. "You're amazing." He pulled away to kiss Rob next. "You both are."

Rob's fingers slid into his hair, keeping him close. "*You're* amazing. You know this won't be easy. We'll fight and have awkward moments as we figure out how this is going to work. And people are going to talk and judge us."

"I don't care. I have both of my loves with me, and that's all that matters."

Rob smiled and kissed him again. Behind him, Cole's fingers slid under Tyler's T-shirt, caressing his side. Tyler shivered as Cole's warm breath brushed the back of his neck. "Shouldn't we figure things out first?"

"Like what? Who cooks and who cleans? We already know you're not going to be doing the cooking."

Rob and Tyler both laughed. Tyler's laugh turned into a soft moan as Cole sucked a kiss onto his neck, his fingers dipping into the waistband of his pajama pants. The position he was in was slightly awkward. He shifted, trying to get more comfortable.

Rob took note and scooted back on the couch until he was against the armrest. He stretched one leg out along the couch and put the other foot on the floor. Then he pulled Tyler to sit between his spread legs, his ass cradled between Rob's thighs. Rob grasped Tyler's chin and tilted his head back, leaning down to kiss him. At the other end of the couch Cole slowly pulled his pajama pants off.

Tyler moaned into Rob's kiss as the heat of Cole's mouth slid down his shaft. He'd never felt anything like this. Two pairs of hands caressing him, two mouths kissing and pleasuring him. The pleasure was so intense Tyler found himself gripping the hair of both of his lovers. His hips arched up, seeking more of the hot wet suction of Cole's mouth on his cock. He was open for all of Rob's kisses, letting him control the deep, slow tempo of licks and soft bites. He shuddered as Rob's hand smoothed across his chest, a thumb brushing over his nipples.

Cole released him with one last lick across his cockhead. He kissed his way up Tyler's body until he felt the roughness of his beard and the softness of his lips brush his cheek. Rob lightly grasped his chin, turning him away from his kiss and into Cole's. They kissed for a long moment before Cole stopped and went to kiss Rob.

Tyler watched the two faces above him as they came together in a soft kiss. He'd been with them both, so he wasn't surprised that it was Cole who first grew more aggressive, bringing a hand up to grip Rob's hair. But it was Rob who broke away first.

"As comfortable as this couch is, I don't think it's the right place for this."

Cole and Tyler both laughingly agreed. The three of them got up and went back to the bedroom. Tyler was already naked, so he stood there watching as Rob and Cole both stripped down. He was nervous, and both men sensed it. They came over to him, their warm palms stroking soothingly down his back.

"We're only doing this as long as everyone is comfortable. If you want to stop at any time, Tyler, just say so."

Tyler nodded. Taking a deep breath, he wrapped an arm around Cole, and tugged Rob down into another kiss. Cole moved behind him, kissing along his shoulder. His fingers lightly traced down his stomach and pelvis until he grasped his cock. Tyler gasped, rocking up on his toes. His cock pressed against Rob's belly, and he groaned and pulled him closer. Cole kept stroking him while Rob kissed him. Tyler moaned, circling his hips up against Rob's, then back onto Cole's. His skin tingled with so much stimulation that he was hovering on the edge of orgasm.

They soon ended up on the bed. This time, Cole sat with his back against the headboard. He pulled Tyler onto the bed, on his knees facing him. "This alright?"

Tyler nodded. It was definitely alright. He bent and took Cole into his mouth. Cole hissed, his fingers sliding into Tyler's hair and holding on tight. Tyler sucked him slowly, licking along the thickness of his shaft and closing his lips over the head. He'd always loved pleasuring his man in this way. He looked up and saw Cole with his head pressed against the headboard. His eyes were open, looking at Rob who was behind Tyler.

Tyler felt Rob's hand on his ass, rubbing him softly. The bed dipped as Rob changed position. He bent to run his lips along Tyler's ass, pressing kisses to his skin. Tyler moaned around the thick shaft filling his mouth as he felt Rob's tongue teasing at his entrance. He didn't know if he would be able to survive where this was going. He was already about to explode.

After several long wonderful moments of Rob tonguing him everywhere on his ass and between his legs he shifted again. Rob rose up as Cole leaned over to the nightstand. He grabbed lube, but before he tossed it to Rob he took the time to check with everyone.

"Do you both want to do this? We don't have to go any further if someone wants to stop."

Tyler looked over his shoulder at Rob then at Cole. "No. I don't want to stop."

Cole tossed the bottle to Rob. Then he pulled Tyler into a kiss as Rob took care of the preparations. It wasn't long before Tyler's eyes were drifting shut, a moan escaping him as Rob eased inside. Cole cupped the side of his face, whispering against his mouth.

"Does that feel good, Tyler?"

Tyler nodded yes, biting his lip as Rob slowly stroked in and out of him.

"It looks beautiful." Cole kissed him again. "You're beautiful. You both are."

Again Tyler nodded, the sweet, drugging pleasure swirling through his body making it difficult for him to think, let alone form words and talk. Tyler opened his eyes and took in Cole sitting in front of him. He was still hard, his cock standing up against his belly. Tyler leaned back down, sucking him once more. He timed his movements to Rob's, moaning and moving his mouth in rhythm with Rob's slow thrusts. Cole caressed his face, telling him it felt good and encouraging him to keep going.

Rob's hand slipped around from where it gripped his thigh to take hold of Tyler's cock. A deep groan rose up from his chest as Rob pumped him. He was insanely hard, his sac tight and his cock throbbing. Tyler couldn't help it. He took his mouth away from Cole. "I'm about to come," he gasped.

Rob sped up both his strokes in him and on his cock, while Cole pulled him up into a wild kiss. Tyler's orgasm rushed up his shaft and he let go. He came in Rob's hand, crying out both of his lovers' names. Tyler shuddered and writhed, both of his men touching and kissing him everywhere until his body was so sensitive from all the stimulation he nearly screamed.

His lovers eased back on their touches. When he'd calmed some, Tyler reached for Cole's shaft. He pumped him swiftly, working him to the edge. Cole came with a deep groan, his head pressing back into the headboard, fingers tightly gripping Tyler. Before Cole was finished, Tyler felt Rob speed up his thrusts, pumping into him hard. A whispered curse came from him before he gripped Tyler just as tight as Cole, groaning his way through his own release.

Tyler lay there between them, his body still humming with arousal. It felt amazing, to give both of these men that he loved so much such deep pleasure. And the way they touched him, both with love and passion, while his name was on their lips, Tyler knew that his feelings were returned.

Tyler snuggled between Rob and Cole. He rested with his head on Cole's chest, Rob's leg tossed over his. "For our first threesome, we didn't do too shabbily," he said in a nonchalant tone.

Cole laughed, and Rob dropped a kiss on his hair. "We'll have plenty more time to practice our technique. We'll score a perfect ten in no time," Cole joked.

The three of them laughed again. When they quieted, Tyler reached for their hands, twining his fingers through theirs.

Tyler smiled softly at Cole. "I thought I lost you forever, Cole. I grieved for you for a long time. Then with Rob I figured out how to live again." He turned to look into the steady gray gaze of the man who had become his rock. "And Rob, it hurt, but I was ready to give up the life I'd made with you when Cole came back." He squeezed their fingers. "I never would have thought that I'd

have a second chance with you both.” He leaned up to kiss each of them. “But I’m very glad that I do.”

The End

Author Bio

I love to write stories that are emotional and lovely, with sex that is integral to the characters' romantic arc. My stories involve straight couples, curvy couples, gay couples, interracial couples... I write them all. I feel the same as many others; love is love and everyone should have their story told.

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