



ALL OR NOTHING

C. J. ANTHONY

2014 M/M Goodreads Group Love's Landscapes Story

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

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By C. J. Anthony

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.

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Photo Description

The photo is a typical candid shot of two men posing for a camera, in a darkened room, perhaps at a party or a bar. They are shirtless, showing off well-maintained “bear”-style physiques—ripped muscles and hairy chests, and faces with stubble. One man is younger, with short dark-brown hair, and the other man is older, with slightly graying hair and stubble. They are both leaning into each other, heads touching. The younger man has his arm around the older man’s waist, and the older man has his arm around shoulders of the younger man.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Look at us. You’d never believe what it took to get us to this moment. I’m older than he is and it just was a HUGE stumbling block. Add in that I’m successful and established and this cub is just getting started, and well, I didn’t give him a chance. I didn’t believe he was ready to commit, thought it was a temporary thing for him. He’s a persistent thing though, and was looking for love. Tell the story of how we got here, together, happy and secure.

Please no rape, cheating or ménage. We need that HEA!

Sincerely,

Kevin

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: age gap, bears, businessman, college, friends to lovers, massage therapist, over age 40, slow romance

Word Count: 24,766

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John put the Jeep in park and cut the engine. In the quiet, music and laughter floated through the air. He glanced into his rearview mirror at the scene behind him. The neon sign “Mac’s Shack” glowed softly above the surf shack-themed bar built of wood weathered by the salty ocean air and roofed with fake straw thatching to complete the look. Small lanterns were strung up along the outside, lighting up the space as the sun slowly sank into the coast behind the bar. Men spilled out of the shack and onto the large outdoor patio—some paired off, some in groups of three or four or more—all chatting and laughing and drinking. Most of the pairs were obviously intimate—whispering in each other’s ears, touching an arm or a leg—and the few who had already moved beyond the flirty-touchy stage were swallowing tongues, with humping and grinding soon to follow.

The chalkboard sign by the front door read: “Welcome, Bears of Irvine!” complete with a cutesy bear face drawn next to the word. John groaned as his fingers jiggled his keys, itching to just put them in the ignition, turn the Jeep around and go back home.

The only thing stopping him was his friend Mac—yes, Mac of Mac’s Shack. Mac had called or texted him every day this week, reminding him of the party tonight and of John’s promise to come. A result of the lunch they’d had at the beginning of the week when, unfortunately, one of the topics of conversation had been John’s nonexistent love life.

“Goddammit, John, you’ve got to get off your ass and get laid! The only way to get that asshole Ian out of your system is to fuck him outta there—repeatedly.” This was Mac’s sage advice. John winced.

Mac shook his head. “Christ, I can’t believe you’re gay. Okay fine, you don’t have to fuck on the first date. But you’re never even going to have a first date if you don’t get out there and meet someone!

“This Saturday. The Shack. It’s our first bear get-together of the year, and I promise it’s going to be real chill, like a happy hour. All the guys are really low-key, down to earth. It’s a fun group and a lot of ’em are our age or

roundabouts.” Mac winked at him. “I better see your ass there, or I’m going to hunt you down and drag you there myself.”

John groaned. Mac was the unofficial “social director” of a local online bear group. Mac was a naturally boisterous guy and always looking for a good time, so he was a natural fit. It also didn’t hurt that he just happened to own a bar to hold said “social events.”

“Don’t groan and grouse, I’m serious. I’ll come pounding on your door if you don’t—”

John had finally agreed, just to shut him up. He knew Mac was right, he needed to get out there and meet someone new... he just didn’t know how to go about it. At forty-five, he felt too old for the “thump-a-thump-a” dance clubs that, frankly, he’d never really enjoyed that much in his youth. And normally, he didn’t really go for these types of “social gatherings” either, because no matter how “chill” it might be, it was all still a meat market, everyone sizing each other up for one reason only.

John’s phone buzzed and the screen lit up.

Where the fuck are you?—Mac.

John rolled his eyes and opened the door to climb out of his Jeep. It was nine o’clock. He could go in, make an appearance, have a couple of beers and still be home before the eleven o’clock news.

He’d barely walked in the front door before he heard Mac’s loud whoop. “Johnnie! Son of a bitch, you made it!”

Several men standing nearby turned to check out the object of Mac’s excitement. John caught quite a few pointed stares, raised eyebrows and leering smiles as they gave him a once-over and apparently liked what they saw. John ignored them all and focused on Mac, who was barreling toward him.

Mac was a husky guy whose years had expanded his middle and grayed his hair, but he was still the bawdy, garrulous, “always up (in more ways than one) for a good time” guy he had been in his younger years. His long, gray hair hung to his shoulders, and his skin was a dark bronze. His uniform Hawaiian shirt—blue with white and pink flowers tonight—was unbuttoned, showing off his small belly and the gray pelt of fur covering his chest. Khaki shorts and flip-flops completed his look.

He drew John into a quick hug, ending with a hearty slap on his back that had John choking down a cough. "Can't believe you really came!"

John frowned at him. "I didn't think I had a choice, did I?"

Mac scoffed. "You are always in charge of your own destiny, Johnnie."

"Bullshit."

Mac threw his head back in a bark of a laugh. "Yeah well, you're here, and about damn time!"

John just shook his head with a grudging smirk as he handed the guy at the door a few bucks for the cover. Mac kept his hand on John's shoulder and drew him further into the bar. "We got a good crowd tonight. Everyone's real friendly. Lots of guys our age, too." He winked at John. "Oh, but ya gotta lose the shirt. Give it to me and I'll stash it behind the bar for you."

"What? I am not taking my shirt off!"

"It's a beach party, John. Let loose a little. Be at one among your fellow bears. Do you see anyone else with their shirt on?"

John glanced around quickly and realized every other guy in the place was bare-chested, shirts tucked into their waistbands, if they had a shirt at all.

"You're still wearing your shirt."

"But I am still proudly displaying my chest. And it's my place, I can do whatever I damn well please. Now, off with the shirt. I've seen what you got under there, Johnnie boy. It's a shame to be hiding all that. Come on." Mac was motioning impatiently at John's shirt with his fingers.

John was mortified. Muttering under his breath, he closed his eyes and quickly tore his shirt off, flinging it at his friend. Mac gave a loud wolf-whistle and laughed at him. Mac took his shirt and leaned into his ear. "Now go mingle, you hot, sexy, old man." He gave John a swat on the butt and then headed off to go welcome another large group of men streaming in the door.

John glanced down at himself uncomfortably, feeling his nipples tighten at the light breeze flowing through the bar. He stifled the urge to cross his arms over his chest to cover himself. Without looking at anyone, he headed straight for the bar, ordered a beer and then swallowed nearly all of it down in one gulp. His head immediately felt fuzzy, and he told himself he'd better slow down. He had drunk two beers down pretty quickly before he left the house, to put some

liquid courage in him, and now this made number three. He was a typical social drinker—a glass of wine or a beer now and again—but he hadn't thrown back beers of this quantity and speed since he was in college.

Casually leaning against the bar, John finally allowed himself to survey the crowd. One quick glance showed... no one he was immediately interested in. There were bears of all shapes and sizes there, a few that could have potential, but none that really wanted to make him leave the bar area yet. A small group of younger bear cubs congregated in the corner, which surprised John, as Mac kept stressing this gathering, was mostly "older guys like him." Not that forty-five was "old," per se, but these young cubs looked like they were barely legal. He was disgusted to see some of the older men blatantly salivating over the baby cubs, with some of the young studs just eating up the attention. At his age, John had never understood being with a guy so much younger, well aside from the obvious. Sex only took a relationship so far—like to the next morning. Then what? Although he had known a few May/December couples that made it work.

Shaking his head at the ridiculousness, he turned back to the bartender to order another beer.

"Mr. Mattheson?"

Startled to hear his name, John turned to the voice. *Who the fuck knew me here?* One of the younger cubs from across the room was standing next to him, so close their arms were almost brushing. The boy was tan and dark haired—everywhere, from the short cropped hair on his head, to the dark, sexy eyebrows, the heavy scruff on his jaw and chin, and the oh-my-God smattering of dark fur covering his perfect pecs and well-chiseled abs. A sculptor could not have done better. And he was smiling right at John—not in that leering, I-want-to-eat-you way, but in a sincere, happy-to-see-you kind of smile. A damn gorgeous smile, John had to admit. His mouth dried up and he had to swallow a couple of times before he could speak.

"Yes?"

Gorgeous boy's smile got even wider. "I knew that was you! You probably don't remember me, but my family used to live down the street from you. I'm Mark Kincaid?"

Mark Kincaid... *holy fuck!* Little Marky Kincaid? The kid who used to ride his bike down their block and wave when John was out working in the yard? Who used to deliver their paper? Jesus Christ... and he had grown into *this?*

John was truly mortified now to realize this man he was ogling no more than a minute ago was the little pip-squeak kid who'd once lived down the block from him.

John was speechless while his mind tried to put all this together. Mark's smile turned shy.

"It was a long time ago. My parents moved us out of the neighborhood when I was sixteen."

"Ah... yes. I remember now." John finally croaked out. "The Gardners moved in to your house." He frowned as he processed numbers. The Gardners had a baby right after they moved in, and the kid was eight or nine now? So if Mark was sixteen when he moved and it'd been nine years, that would make him... twenty-five? Oh Lord, he was still a baby. A very, very hot, very hairy, very *manly* baby.

Luckily, the bartender walked up before John's head exploded. He turned and asked for another beer. Mark handed over the empty bottle he was holding and ordered another as well, and also handed over a twenty. He looked back at John.

"This one's on me. If that's okay?"

Oh God, now he was buying him a drink! He was never going to get rid of him now. And what did that mean? It had been so long since he'd been in a bar with the intent of meeting someone. In his day, accepting a drink from someone was the equivalent of agreeing to a blowjob in the back room.

"Uh, thanks... Mark, but that's really not necessary."

"No please, I'd really like to."

The bartender arrived back with their beers, and it was too late anyway; the guy had already taken Mark's money. John grabbed his beer and threw back about half of it all at once. Vaguely he remembered his previous plan of not drinking any more, but he was losing track of how many beers he'd had. He thought this was maybe four? Or was it five? Regardless, he resolved this would definitely be his last one.

Whew, it was getting very warm in here. He was glad Mac had made him take his shirt off. Mark was still standing there, sipping his beer and smiling—again. Did the kid ever do anything else but smile?

"So, um... where did you move to, Mark?"

“Long Beach.”

John nodded politely. “Nice neighborhood?”

“Yeah, but the scenery wasn’t as nice.”

“Really? I’ve been there a few times. It’s beautiful, as I recall.”

Mark blushed and leaned in closer to John so he could speak quietly. “None of our neighbors were as hot as you. I had such a huge crush on you growing up. That’s why I used to ride my bike past your house so much, especially when you were outside mowing the lawn. With your shirt off.”

Oh God. John grabbed his beer bottle like it was a life preserver and swallowed the rest down in one gulp.

John shifted his head, eliciting a groan that made him cringe. It took his brain a second to catch up to the fact that the deafening noise came from him. Why was someone pounding a hammer on his head? Oh, wait... the pounding was inside his head. He groaned again and opened an eye. He recognized his sheets, and his nightstand and the framed photo of Paris on his wall that he’d bought at that gallery last year. Okay, so he was home, in his own bed. He swallowed and licked his lips. His throat was so dry it was like sandpaper. He sighed at the glass of water he spied on the nightstand and forced his head up slowly. When he realized that wasn’t going to be enough, he shifted his upper torso up to a sitting position, fighting against the protesting of his head. He saw the bottle of aspirin next to the glass of water and wondered if he’d need the whole bottle. He hadn’t felt this bad since college. How much had he drunk last night? That was the last time he let Mac twist his arm into going anywhere.

As he swallowed a couple aspirin and gulped down the water like a drowning man, he heard faint whistling from the... kitchen? He froze. Someone was in his house? Oh God, what had happened last night? Did he bring someone home? Frantically he tried to sort through the hazy pictures in his brain. He remembered talking to Mac when he came in, he remembered standing at the bar, he remembered... Mark. And then... nothing was coming up after that. Mark was the last person he remembered talking to. Mark who had lived down the street... oh God, Mark who was *twenty-five*. He tore through the comforter and the sheets that covered him. Okay, he still had his boxer shorts on, not that that necessarily meant anything. His clothes were

neatly folded on the chair across the room. He leaned his head over the side of the bed, ignoring his stomach's sloshing around, threatening to heave its contents up. There were no condom wrappers. *Shit, oh God, please don't tell me we didn't use anything.* Every muscle in his body groaned and ached as he flung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, but that could be from simply passing out in such an awkward sleeping position. He definitely didn't feel like he'd been fucked, though that didn't mean he didn't... *oh God...* fuck Mark. Although if he was having trouble remembering what happened last night, he doubted he had been in any shape to be fucking anyone.

Slowly he got up and shuffled around the room, grabbing a T-shirt and some sweats and putting them on before he did the walk of shame to the kitchen.

The scent of eggs and bacon assaulted him as he made his way down the hall, and the turnover of his stomach almost caused a pit stop in the bathroom. He braced his hand against the wall and waited his stomach out until it settled before he continued on.

Mark was in the kitchen whistling and moving around the stove. At the bar were two plates and two glasses of orange juice. John stood for a moment, surveying the scene, before pulling himself together and striding confidently over to the bar. He made it, but his whole body protested inwardly.

Mark looked over and smiled. "Hey you're up! How are you feeling?"

"Um..."

Mark laughed. "Food's almost done. Get some protein and grease in you and you'll be feeling good as new. Did you take the aspirin?" John nodded. Mark waved a spatula toward the stove. "I hope this is all right. I just knew you'd probably need something in your stomach, and I know the last thing you feel like doing with a hangover is cooking."

John nodded again. The pops and cracks of the bacon cooking in the skillet filled the awkward silence as Mark stirred the eggs in the other pan.

John drowned in the embarrassment he felt about... well, whatever he'd done last night. But he knew he couldn't bury his head and ignore it. "Listen, Mark, I... well... I want you to know, I don't generally make a habit of drinking like that. I haven't done that in ah... well it's been too many years to count. Let's just say I was much younger."

Mark smiled gently. “Hey, no problem, I get it. I know it was your first night out after Mr. C. leaving, and you were nervous.”

John blanched. “How do you know about Ian?”

“You told me.”

John covered his eyes and groaned loudly. “Oh, please tell me I was not blubbering my sad story on your shoulder.”

Mark laughed. “No, nothing like that. Actually I was the one that asked about Mr. C. I remember him living with you. He was pretty hot too, but I was always a little disappointed when he was out doing the mowing and not you.”

Ian Carpenter—“Mr. C.” to the young Mark—and John had been together eleven years. They’d met at some charity event, for cancer, maybe? Or something for children? It was so long ago, the details were already faded in John’s memory. John had been there representing his firm, and Ian had been a doctor at UC Irvine Medical Center. Despite the hundreds of people there, they’d seemed to keep running into each other every time they’d turned around. When Ian had suggested a nightcap, John had agreed. They’d spent the next two hours at a quiet cocktail bar, talking. Two days later, Ian had called and asked him out to a gallery opening of a friend of his, and that’d been it. Three months later, they’d realized they’d been spending so much time together, the natural next step was for Ian to move in with John.

They’d been a perfectly matched couple—two very good-looking, uber-successful, professional thirty-something men, with similar likes and dislikes. And after eleven years together, John had assumed that was how the rest of their lives would be. They’d been “comfortable.” So comfortable they’d been able to finish each other’s sentences and thoughts, and exist on conversations such as “pass the salt” and “can you pick up the dry-cleaning today?” Sunday mornings had become passing sections of the paper back and forth between each other without a word spoken between them.

Then one day, out of the blue, Ian had come home and said he had a job offer at Mass General in Boston—and that he had already accepted. At the time, John had been blind-sided and started to argue that he couldn’t just quit his job at the firm and move to Boston. As the empty silence had seeped in, he’d suddenly realized Ian didn’t want him to come with him. And when his next feeling had been relief that he didn’t have to move to Boston, he’d realized they had reached their end. After some time and space and grieving for what

he'd thought he'd had with Ian, he'd realized that maybe he hadn't fought harder for Ian because he'd known things hadn't really been working for them. They hadn't for a long time, in fact.

Mark brought a plate over and then squinted at John as he carefully placed it in front of him. "You don't remember us talking about Mr. C.?"

John shook his head sheepishly. "I'm afraid I don't remember much from last night. I..." He swallowed hard to get the courage up for the next part. "I don't remember even coming back here. I'm sorry, but I have to ask. Did we—?"

Mark saved him from uttering the words. "I slept on your couch last night." John breathed out a huge gust of relief.

"Not that I am not interested, believe me." Mark set the plate down in front of John before pausing to look him straight in the eye. His eyes were steady but glittering with a mischief and desire that stirred something in John. "But I would never take advantage of someone who was drunk or unaware." Mark turned back to the counter and filled another plate of food for himself. He came over and sat down at the bar next to John and finished his story. "Mac couldn't leave the bar, so I offered to bring you home since I knew where you lived." He winked at John. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind if I stayed on your couch. I just wanted to make sure you were okay this morning." He held his hands up. "I promise, I'll be out of your hair as soon as I eat and clean up."

John smiled in grateful relief. "You don't have to clean up the dishes; I can handle that, especially after all you've done. You went above and beyond, giving me a ride home and then staying here to make sure I was okay. And making me breakfast."

"No problem, really, I was glad to do it. Oh, and Mac said he would swing by later and pick you up so you could get your Jeep. It's still at the Shack. Unless you need your car sooner? I'd be happy to take you over there—"

John shook his still-pounding head. "I don't think I'm in any shape to drive just yet. I need more coffee and a long, hot shower. And more aspirin."

There was silence as they ate. John snuck a glance at Mark as he took a drink of his orange juice. He remembered the kid who'd ridden his bike down their street and found it hard to reconcile that skinny, lanky kid with the man sitting next to him.

"So... how are your parents? Are you still in Long Beach?"

“Mom and Dad are still there. I moved back to Irvine. I’m going to UC Irvine part-time, trying to get my business degree. The rest of the time I work at the Redwood Therapy Clinic as a massage therapist.”

“So, which do you want to do? Business or massage?”

“Both, I guess. The plan is to open my own massage/spa salon someday. I figure the business degree will help with that.”

John had to admit he was impressed. The boy had a plan and was building toward it. “Sounds like a solid plan. Good for you.”

The pleased smile that broke across Mark’s face flashed John back to the night before, at the bar, when Mark had first approached him. At least he remembered that part of the evening. That smile was pretty unforgettable. John let his gaze linger on Mark longer than he knew he should before he snapped his attention back to his plate, hopefully before Mark noticed. No doubt Mark was incredibly sexy, but he was also way too young for John. They were in completely different places in their lives.

When they’d finished eating, Mark again offered to clean up the dishes, but John waved him off. An awkward moment passed.

“Okay, then I should probably get going—” Mark started.

“Sure, sure, of course.” John ushered Mark toward the door. “Thanks again for last night. I really am quite embarrassed—”

“No problem, Mr. M., we’ve all been there before. Don’t sweat it.”

John cringed at the moniker that fell from Mark’s lips. As if it wasn’t already obvious how much older John was than Mark, Mark’s nickname from childhood opened the wound a little wider.

“Mark, considering you dragged my drunk ass home last night, and God knows what else you might have witnessed, I think you can call me John.”

Mark grinned. “All right, John.”

John opened the door, and Mark was just ready to step over the threshold when he paused. He seemed to be mulling something over, and he was biting his lip as if he wanted to say something.

“Would you like to grab some coffee sometime? Or dinner?”

John’s eyebrows rose. Coffee could maybe be construed as a “friend” invite, but dinner straddled the line into “date-territory.” Did Mark mean a date? Or just as friends?

"I hope it's not too forward or whatever, but I'd really like to see you again, John."

John's stomach churned up his breakfast. Okay, well that settled the debate pretty quickly. "I'd like to see you again," generally meant one thing. His mind reeled as he tried to figure out exactly how to let the kid down gently.

"Uh, actually, it's a little soon after Ian... and well, I'm so busy at work right now..." John took a breath. "I honestly only showed up last night to appease Mac. He was going to come drag me out there if I didn't show up."

Mark's expression sobered as he nodded and looked away for a moment. John expected him to turn and leave, but instead, he looked John straight in the eye one more time. "Well, I think you're pretty terrific, John. If your schedule ever frees up, give me a call." He handed John a business card. Then he trotted down the steps and got into the old blue Honda Civic that was parked in John's driveway and drove off.

John glanced down at the business card. "Mark Kincaid, Licensed Massage Therapist, Redwood Therapy Clinic." Scrawled above the clinic's phone and address info were Mark's personal cell phone digits. He closed the front door and detoured through the kitchen on his way to his bedroom, intending to pitch the card. His hand hovered over the trashcan, but something wouldn't let him throw it away. So he turned and tossed it in the small dish on the stand by the front door where he kept his keys and other miscellaneous notes and reminders.

Three hours later, he found himself looking at it again as he stood, jangling his keys and waiting for Mac to pick him up. He shook his head and reached for it, intending to again throw it away, when a loud car horn sounded twice outside. John set the card down again and headed out the door before Mac annoyed all of his neighbors with what would become incessant honking if John didn't show up immediately.

After John got in and buckled up, he looked over to see Mac still sitting there, grinning and chuckling at him like the cat that swallowed the canary.

"What?" John asked, annoyed.

"How you feeling this morning, big guy? Did you wear that boy out? Break him in real good?"

John's face flamed. "Mac!"

Mac cackled as he put the car in gear and took off.

"I did not touch that... kid. At least, I don't think I did. He said he slept on the couch."

Mac's face fell, and he gave John an exasperated look. "You mean to tell me you had that young, juicy, grade-A piece of prime beef served up to you on a platter, and you didn't fuck the shit out of him? Where have I failed you? Are you switching teams on me?"

John frowned at Mac. "You are a crude old man, you know that? First off, I am not looking to just 'hook up.' And that is all those young guys want, especially from some old guy like me. I remember that age—"

"I am not a crude old man, you asshole. And neither of us is old, well, at least not in years. Just because we're a little grayer doesn't mean the plumbing is dead. Or, at least mine still works. After last night, you better get checked out. You might be ready for the old folks' home." Mac shook his head in disbelief.

"My plumbing's not *dead*, I just want more than sex or a quick fling. There's nothing wrong with that."

"No, but you just got out of a long relationship. Take a break. Live a little. Have some fun before you jump right back into ho-hum-picket-fence-boring."

John sighed. He loved Mac, and they'd been friends forever, but this would never be a topic they would see eye-to-eye on. In the twenty years he'd known Mac, the longest relationship Mac had ever been in was... actually John couldn't ever remember Mac being in a relationship with anyone. He'd talked to him about it many times, but Mac was perfectly happy with his life as it was, and he'd finally convinced John that they just needed to agree to disagree on the topic. They had different opinions on what they wanted in life when it came to love and sex, which was why it was ludicrous Mac was now trying to convince John to change his view.

"The whole discussion is irrelevant, anyway, Mac. I was in no condition to do anything last night. Hell, I don't even remember getting home!"

Mac laughed again. "Hell yeah, you were three sheets to the wind. What happened, man? I don't think I've ever seen you that wasted."

John hid his face in his hands. "I don't even know. I had a couple beers at home, then a couple more at the bar..."

"And three Jaeger shots."

“Three?” John exclaimed.

“That I know of.”

John groaned. “How badly did I embarrass myself?”

“You stripped naked, climbed on top of the bar and did a round of the hokey pokey.”

Mac exploded in laughter at the look of pure horror on John's face. They had reached the Shack, and Mac pulled next to John's Jeep and cut the engine of his car, still shaking so hard from laughter he could barely breathe. He pounded John on the back as he tried to catch a breath.

“Oh God, the look on your face!” He had to restrain another round of giggles. “I'm *kidding*, John!”

“You son of a bitch.”

“It's too bad you didn't do that. You need to let loose sometime, Johnnie-boy. But no, I tried to keep tabs on you, and I never saw anything inappropriate. You just got a little more social, played some pool, chatted with some of the guys. With your little boy cub right next to you the whole night. He never left your side. It was so cute.”

“Why did you let him take me home?”

“He said he was your neighbor. Which, by the way, why have you been holding out that you have such hot, studly neighbors? All I ever see when I come to visit you is that cranky old bag that lives across the street from you. Oh! Did she finally kick the bucket and he moved in?”

“No!” John growled. “Mrs. Bradsaw is still there. Mark used to live in my neighborhood about ten years ago. With his parents. When he was fifteen and delivered my newspaper. He used to have a crush on me.”

“Oh. Oh my. God!” Mac wheezed with laughter as he tried to form words. “Oh, that is so precious!”

John sat there, silently seething at his friend. Mac finally got himself calmed down and started digging for his phone.

“Well, I think the guy still has that crush on you, Johnnie-boy.” Mac fiddled with his phone, pushing buttons until John felt his own phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out to see Mac had sent him a picture from the night

before. He and Mark, both shirtless, still at the bar and posing with an arm around each other.

“I look plastered.”

Mac chuckled, “Yeah, you’re pretty trashed. But he looks pretty happy. And you both look pretty damn hot together.” With all humor gone, Mac paused. “Give him a shot, Johnny. If it makes you feel better, take him out for a meal first before you fuck him. Have a little fun with the young cub while you’re still young enough to enjoy it.”

John just shook his head.

John spent the rest of the weekend as usual—grocery shopping, catching up on laundry and other cleaning around the house. He couldn’t stop his thoughts from wandering to Mark though. Every time he grabbed his keys, he saw the business card with Mark’s number. Every time he picked up his phone, he was reminded of the picture Mac sent him. He’d even pulled the picture up twice, his finger hovering over the delete button each time. The picture was still there; he couldn’t seem to erase it just yet.

When he went into his garage to get the lawnmower out, he balked, remembering Mark as a young teen riding his bike past his house, a seemingly innocent childhood thing to do at the time. Now knowing why Mark rode past his house so often made his stomach twist uncomfortably. *Good God, man, get a grip on yourself. He’s twenty years younger than you!* John kicked himself internally and put a mental block in his brain, locking the boy down in the “insane and impossible” folder of things to never think about again.

Happily, that seemed to help. Monday, he went back to work and let himself get drawn into his work and the day-to-day grind—he was the CFO at a small, but national financial firm based in L.A. John’s life had a routine, and he liked it. It was comfortable: get up, get breakfast, coffee, shower, go to work, come home from work, exercise, eat dinner, watch some ESPN or the news and go to bed.

For working out, he’d turned one of the spare rooms into a small gym with a treadmill and a weight bench. A few nights a week though, when the weather was good, he would come home from work, change and head out for a run at one of the many Irvine city parks. There was one not far from his house that had a great running trail and was fairly quiet and peaceful in the evening. It was

the perfect way to shake off the stress of the day and the commute and unwind, to stretch out his muscles and get some fresh air with his exercise. Thursday was one of those nights, and as he was standing by the trail doing some last minute stretches before starting off, he was surprised to hear a familiar voice along with the pounding footsteps behind him.

“John!” He turned to see Mark quickly approaching, shirtless again, but this time with a fine sheen of sweat covering him that made John’s mouth water.

Mark smiled wide as he slowed his run down to a stop in front of John. “I thought that was you!” Every word was punctuated with a heavy breath from the exertion he’d already expended.

John swallowed hard and forced himself to respond. “Hello, Mark. How are you?” It was a lame response, but he was surprised at seeing Mark again so unexpectedly.

“I’m good. Long day of classes and work. Thought I’d get in a run before dark. Looks like you had the same idea?”

John nodded.

“I remembered this park from when I was younger. My parents and I used to come here a lot when we lived in Irvine.”

“Yep, it’s a beautiful park, one of the best in Irvine. Great running trail too. Do you run here a lot? I’m surprised I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I try to get here as much as I can. My schedule fluctuates because of class and work. Like, last semester, I had a lot of evening classes, so I usually ran in the early morning. This semester, I have morning classes, so I’m running in the evening.”

John sighed inwardly. *Great.*

“I just got started. You want to run the trail together?” Mark’s smile was so hopeful and sweet, John couldn’t bring himself to say no. Besides, there was only one running trail, so they were bound to catch up to each other eventually.

“Sure, if you promise not to leave the old guy in the dust.”

Mark’s eyes drifted down John’s torso with a look that made John feel naked even though he was wearing a loose tank top. “I’ve seen that six-pack you’re packing under there. I don’t think you’ll have any problem keeping up at all.” He winked at John and took off jogging. John’s whole body heated up at his comment, but he took off to catch up.

John ran at his typical speed, and Mark kept up. If he was keeping his speed down for John, it didn't show. Mark seemed just as winded as he did when they stopped about an hour later. John ran through his cool-down stretches, feeling the pleasant burn and ache he always felt after a good solid run.

"That was great, thanks, John. It's nice running with a partner."

John found himself grinning at Mark. "I've never run with someone before. It was nice." And he really meant that. He was surprised at how comfortable it had been running with Mark.

"There's a great café across the street. They have coffee, but they also have healthy smoothies and energy drinks. I usually stop on my way home. If you're not in a hurry to get somewhere, would you like to go with me?"

John stopped his hamstring stretch and stood to look at Mark, tongue-tied.

Mark held up his hands in a surrender motion. "Just as friends, I swear, nothing more."

John knew he would feel like a heel refusing after that statement, so he agreed.

A few minutes later, they each had a smoothie and were sitting down at one of the small patio tables outside the café. It was quiet this time of night, not a lot of people strolling by on the sidewalk.

John took a sip of his drink and hummed as the cool flavors coated his tongue. "Mmmm, okay, you were right. The Mango-Pineapple-Orange is delicious."

Mark smiled cheekily. "I'm always right."

John raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Well, this time, I'll say yes. 'Always,' however, remains to be seen."

Oh crap, did he just flirt with the boy? Mark sipped his smoothie and looked out at the park across the street, as if he were contemplating something. John chastised himself and vowed to be more careful of what he said and how he said it.

"So, what was up with calling yourself an old man back there?"

Mark was looking at him earnestly, waiting for a response. John found himself caught off guard, not expecting that question.

John snorted. "Because I am. I'm hardly twenty-five anymore."

“You’re not old. You’re only what? Late thirties?”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere, young pup.”

Mark scowled at the nickname.

“Forty-five,” John finally admitted.

“That’s still young. Especially with how you stay in shape and take care of yourself.”

Silence passed as John prayed the subject would die.

“That’s the real reason why you said no when I asked you out the other day, isn’t it?”

John took a breath and looked Mark in the eye. Did he feed the boy a lie or tell the truth? He truly liked Mark—he seemed to be a great kid, decent and honest—and with those big brown eyes staring back at him so earnestly, he opened his mouth but changed his mind a split-second before the words came out.

“No, really... I’m just not looking for anyone right now. I swear.”

Mark nodded. “Okay. I won’t push.”

John smiled gratefully. “Thanks.” Mark’s face clearly showed his disappointment, however, and John felt guilty. “I enjoyed the run though.” He tipped his smoothie cup toward Mark. “And the smoothie. I’m always looking for more friends.”

It took a few seconds before a smile started to tug at Mark’s delectable lips. “Okay,” he said quietly. “I can do that.”

The next week, when John went back to the park for his usual run, he caught himself looking for Mark. He was about halfway through before he saw Mark running a short distance ahead of him. Running behind him, John’s eyes couldn’t help but appreciate Mark’s strong, broad back and shoulder muscles as they worked in perfect, sweaty precision, and how they led down to his sculpted, round ass muscles that pumped in unison with firm, toned thighs and calves.

John felt his cock start to respond and fill, and he groaned inwardly. *No, no no! He’s twenty-five, he’s twenty-five, he’s twenty-five*, John kept repeating to himself, trying to make his body behave.

“John?”

John's eyes flicked up to see Mark running in place and looking back at him. “Hey, Mark.” He smiled weakly.

“I heard a voice behind me but didn't realize it was you.”

Oh shit. John didn't realize he'd been talking out loud. “Just mumbling to myself, I guess.”

Mark seemed to accept that, luckily, and they continued on, running the rest of the trail together. As before, they stopped for a smoothie afterward.

Mark talked about his week and classes, and he mentioned his friend Greg had invited him out with a bunch of their friends to one of the local gay bars the coming weekend.

“Well that sounds fun,” John encouraged.

Mark made a face. “Nah, I'm not going.”

“Why not?”

“This week really did me in. I worked extra hours at the clinic and had big tests in Econ and History to study for. I'm fried. I just want a quiet night on the couch with some TV. I'm really not that much of a party guy. Greg and the others rag on me a lot for it, but I'm a few years older than most of them, you know? And I work a full-time, physical job. Most of them work part-time campus jobs. They've got more time to study and still party. I like to go out once in a while and let off some steam, don't get me wrong. But I guess I'm more of a homebody at heart.”

John nodded, impressed yet again with the young man. Everything he said or did constantly surprised John.

This time, before they parted, they exchanged numbers in their phones and set up a regular appointment, two days a week, to run together.

As the next few weeks passed, their scheduled evening runs became John's favorite parts of the week. He enjoyed Mark's company, and it was nice to interact with someone who wasn't a coworker. He realized how insular his world had become since Ian had left, with his days spent at work and his evenings and weekends—sans the occasional lunch or dinner date with Mac—spent mostly alone. What he had with Ian may not have been perfect, but it had been nice always knowing there was another warm body “there,” to converse

with or go somewhere with. His time spent with Mark was beginning to make him realize how much he missed friends and companionship.

They were sitting at the café after one of their runs when John's phone beeped out the chime of a text message. He checked it quickly and shook his head with an exasperated smile.

"Everything okay?" Mark asked, concerned.

John smiled. "Yeah, just another text from Mac, reminding me again of the birthday party he's throwing for himself this weekend. In case I missed the other four texts he sent me this week."

Mark chuckled. "Hey, I'm going too. I guess I'll see you there."

John raised his eyebrows. "Does he send you daily texts?"

"No," Mark said with another laugh. "He posted a general invite to everyone on the Bear group."

John groaned. "I don't know why that surprises me. He talked like this was going to be a small barbecue in his backyard for a few friends. I should have known better when he said he was holding it on the beach behind the bar. That man is the P. Diddy of Irvine."

Mark nearly choked on his smoothie.

At least this time, John thought, he would be more careful with his alcohol intake and not need Mark—or anyone else—to bring him home.

Or so he thought.

The front door banged against the wall as John hop-shuffled into his house, one arm around Mark's shoulder, while Mark had one arm around his waist, helping to support him.

When John had arrived at Mac's party in the late afternoon, it was already in full swing. Men congregated in groups all over the beach. The grill and food tables were set up closer to the Shack itself, where of course, the drinks were being served. A volleyball net had been set up further down the beach. Mac was in his glory, ruling over the whole event from a large throne parked by a small bonfire. He wore a pale blue Hawaiian print shirt, unbuttoned to reveal a coconut-bra stretched across his wide chest. Below that, he wore a grass skirt and flip-flops. Topping the whole ensemble off was a fake silver costume crown.

Shaking his head, John headed over to wish his friend happy birthday.

“Please tell me I don’t have to kneel before you and kiss those big stinky feet, Your Royal Highness.”

Mac let out a loud hoot of laughter and jumped up to embrace his friend. “Johnnie-boy! Welcome, my friend! And no, only the young virginal pups have to kneel before me.”

“You’re a crazy motherfucker, you know that?” John grinned good-naturedly at him.

Mac, one arm still around John, led him away from the crowd surrounding his makeshift throne. “Your young cub is here.” His lips stretched into a Cheshire Cat grin. “So, how’s it going with you two?”

John wrenched himself away from Mac’s arm. “He’s not ‘my’ young cub. I keep telling you that. We’re friends. Running companions, that’s all.”

Mac just rolled his eyes heavenward.

“Mac...” John warned.

“I’m not saying anything more. Except that you need to *get laid!*” He gave John a good slap on the ass. “Now get out there and mingle and have some fun.”

John headed to the food tables and dished up a plate of food, grabbed a beer and headed to some blankets spread out on the beach. He had just sat down and bitten into his hamburger when Mark came and sat down next to him with a plate of food.

“Mind if I join you?”

His mouth full, John waved at the space next to him. “Sure, have a seat,” he said after swallowing.

“You were right, Mac sure knows how to throw a party.”

John rolled his eyes and nodded. “God forbid Mac let any good excuse for a party go by.”

They ate in companionable silence, chatting between bites. Eventually some of the other partygoers joined them, including several of Mark’s younger friends.

“So, you’re the hot neighbor Mark was telling us about!”

John flushed. "We used to be neighbors, yes."

The guy flicked his eyes down John's body and back up, smiling approvingly at what he saw. He turned to Mark. "He is a walking wet-dream, Marky. You must have had a round-the-clock boner growing up!"

Mark's expression darkened, and he shoved at the guy with his foot. "Shut up, Kevin!"

Kevin just laughed as he rolled over on to his side and pretended to be hurt. Mark's other friends roared and also ribbed Mark. Mark didn't say anymore, but his face was nearly purple in embarrassment. When the conversation moved on to another topic, Mark leaned closer to John. "I'm sorry about that," he said quietly. "Kevin's a douche."

John just smiled. "It's okay. We all had crushes when we were young."

Mark looked like he was going to say something else when his friends started to get up, and they pulled on his arm.

"Come on, let's play some volleyball."

"I call dibs on Mark."

"Hot neighbor guy, you can come too."

And that's how John found himself in front of the volleyball net, shirt off, sweat rolling down his back and face, bumping and serving and spiking and—happily—holding his own against the mostly younger guys. Until he landed on his left leg awkwardly and crumpled to the ground in agony. He knew it was a leg cramp, but unlike any he'd had before, it wasn't going away. It seized up and was not letting go. He had to have Mark and another guy help him up and over to the sidelines.

Mark pressed and poked John's calf, assessing his injury. "You've got a really tight knot there. You'll be fine once it loosens—"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I'd better head home." John was mortified at having to bow out with a muscle cramp while all of the young guys had already turned back to the game. He just wanted to get out of there. Except when he tried to stand, the pain was excruciating. As he tried to hobble to an upright position, grimacing, Mark pulled an arm around his waist to steady him.

"You're not going to be able to drive. Let me take you home."

John groaned in frustration but wasn't in any shape to argue.

After Mark helped him inside and kicked the door shut behind them, John motioned toward the living room. "If you can just help me to the couch, I'll be fine—"

“The couch won’t work, you need to stretch out. Your bed will be more comfortable for you.”

“No, really it’s okay—”

Mark turned his head to look John in the eye. He raised his eyebrow, but said nothing. Instead, Mark carefully guided John down the hall and into the bedroom.

“Okay, sit down slowly and roll over onto your front and stretch out.”

John felt clumsy and awkward but finally managed to lie down on his stomach.

“I’m going to straighten your leg out now.” Mark’s voice was low and soothing.

“Unghf!” John grunted in pain into the comforter until, finally, the leg was straight. His leg felt hot as the muscles grabbed and pulled until he wanted to bend the leg up again to try and make it stop.

“Sorry, but that’s great. You’re perfect. Now just stay there like that.”

He heard footsteps and then noise coming from his bathroom.

“What are you doing?” He lifted his head up to see Mark coming out of the bathroom with a bottle of something in his hand and a large fluffy towel.

“I’m going to massage that knot out of your leg and get the muscles to calm down, so you can move your leg and be rid of the pain.”

“Oh you don’t have to do that—”

Mark had been fitting the towel under his leg, to cover the comforter, and he stopped to look down at John. “Licensed massage therapist here, remember? Be quiet and let me help you.” Mark grabbed the bottle he had set down on the nightstand. “You are stubborn, aren’t you?”

“Sorry,” John mumbled. He felt shame for forgetting about Mark knowing massage and thinking Mark just wanted to get John in his bedroom. Not that his leg would allow much in the way of sexual maneuvers anyway, right now.

“We’re just lucky you had this bottle of massage oil in your medicine cabinet.”

John closed his eyes. That bottle was probably about five years old, if he remembered right. He had bought it to try one Valentine’s day with Ian, but Ian

hadn't really gotten into it, and all that had happened was they'd both ended up oily and messy. Did massage oil have an expiration date?

"Just lie there and relax," Mark murmured. "The sooner you can get your muscles to relax, the better you'll feel."

First, John felt Mark's cool, dry, fingertips pressing and squeezing right where the pain was. It felt so good; Mark's fingers on his skin felt phenomenal. He could even feel the pain easing slowly. In contrast to Mark's cool touch, John also felt his warm breath on his skin as he leaned close to John's leg. Tiny sparks of sensation rippled up through his leg and his ass to his spine and his groin.

All at once, his touch was gone. John bit his lip to keep from protesting, but he soon felt the dip of the mattress as Mark kneeled on the bed with one knee. He heard the cap of the oil open and shut, and soon his whole calf was bathed in warm, silky wetness. Mark added his touch to the oil, working slowly and methodically up John's leg. Starting above the ankle, he rubbed deep into John's leg, working the warm, soothing oil into the muscles.

John couldn't restrain the moan that escaped his lips this time. The leg cramp was gone, replaced by other, much more pleasant sensations. Mark continued massaging John's leg, up past the sore calf muscle and into the thigh, gently but firmly working those muscles with a lighter touch than he had used on John's calf.

His whole leg sizzled from the touch of Mark's fingers, and he groaned again when Mark stopped.

"Don't stop," he felt himself murmur as he lay there contentedly, his eyes closed.

There was silence from Mark for a few seconds before he felt the heat of Mark's body leaning over him.

"Do you want more?" Mark's voice whispered over John's ear, and he nearly shivered from the sensation.

"Yes, please," John breathed out.

Mark's body shifted behind him again, and he felt the oil on his other leg. Slowly and carefully, Mark showered that leg with the same attention he'd given John's other leg. His movements went higher and higher, teasing what was hidden under the fabric of John's shorts but stopping short of touching John's ass.

John's cock was definitely responding, enlarging and throbbing painfully as it remained pinned under his body.

Mark left John's shorts on but poured another palmful of oil and continued on to John's back. Starting at his lower back, he rubbed and kneaded the muscles up his spine and out to his upper back and shoulders.

Mark straddled John's body, a hot, weighty thigh on either side of him.

John sighed in bliss. His body felt supine and electric all at the same time. It had been so long since another man had touched him, and even longer since he had been touched so sensually like this. He and Ian, by the end, were barely kissing each other goodbye on the cheek anymore, much less anything like this. In fact, Ian's touch had never felt like this to his body.

"...*you need to get laid.*" Mac's words rumbled through his brain, and as if to agree, his cock twitched underneath him. He shifted his hips upward in response, causing his ass to brush the front of Mark's shorts. Mark was undeniably hard, and John had to clamp down on the desire to rub his ass up against him harder. *Fuck.*

John's brain tried to be rational through the lusty haze filling up his thoughts, but lying there half-naked with another beautiful half-naked man on top of him, his rational side quickly lost the battle. *Fuck it*, he thought. Maybe Mac was right. Of course, he still wanted a long-term partner. But in the meantime, what was wrong with a little sex once in a while? Especially with a very willing partner right there at his fingertips.

Mark had stopped his motions. Both hands came down to the comforter on either side of John's shoulders, holding his torso up—just barely—from touching John's.

"Did you like that?" Mark's voice was throaty and deep in his ear.

"God, yes. You're amazing. I can't even move. You could do anything to me right now."

Mark leaned up and cocked his head to get a better look at John's face.

"That's a loaded offer."

"I'm serious. Fuck me if you want. Anything."

"Anything?" Mark's dark furry brows furrowed over his dark eyes.

"Anything." John moved his hips against Mark's to punctuate his invitation.

Mark ground against him, pinning him to the bed.

“I don't want to fuck you, not right now.”

Now it was John's turn to be surprised, as he looked into Mark's eyes.

Mark grinned. “I want to take you out. On a date.” Then he leaned forward and captured John's lips with his, sealing their deal with a hot, sensual kiss.

Dazed, John just lay there as Mark got up from the bed and went into the bathroom. He heard water running, and then Mark walked out, wiping his hands on a towel.

He walked over to the bed and crouched down so his face was level with John's. “I didn't do any of this today to get in your pants. I just wanted to make you feel better.”

He placed another light, gentle kiss on John's lips and then bounced upright. “Lay there for a while and keep the leg relaxed. Then take a hot shower. I would take it easy tonight, and if it's still sore later, you can ice it to dull the pain.” Mark was heading out of the bedroom when he paused and twisted his head to look at John over his shoulder. “And Wednesday night, seven o'clock. I'll swing by to pick you up for dinner.”

John waited until he heard the sound of the front door closing before he let out a frustrated groan.

“He turned down *sex* with you? For a date instead?”

“Yes.”

Mac threw up his hands. “I'm done. You two are apparently made for each other.”

John had stopped by the Shack to talk to Mac the next day. He swirled his beer bottle around on the wooden table, lost in thought.

“I still think I should call him and cancel.”

“For fuck's sake, why?”

“He's so young...”

Mac sighed. “Do you like him?”

“Well, sure, he's a nice guy, has his head on straight, knows what he wants and is going after it. But he's still in college.”

“He sounds like such a bum. These radical young kids today! Working a job! Going to college!”

“Mac...” John growled.

“Listen. It’s one date. One dinner. What harm will it be to go, to give it a try? Date him for a while; see if you guys can make it work. You might be surprised.”

John was still conflicted when his doorbell rang Wednesday night.

When he opened the door, he was surprised to see the fully dressed version of Mark standing there in a crisp, clean polo shirt and khakis. John realized most of the times they’d been together had either been running or the beach parties when Mark was usually in shorts and no shirt. He looked even more handsome in clothes, if that was possible.

Mark smiled at him. “Hi,” he said.

“Hello, Mark.”

“You look great.”

John had gone with a casual button-down shirt and cotton trousers.

“Thanks, you too.”

As they walked across the driveway to Mark’s beat-up car, John wondered if he should offer to drive, then immediately kicked himself for the thought. Mark’s car had been good enough to give him a ride when he was drunk and injured, it should be good enough to take on a date. He waited patiently while Mark ran around to the driver’s side and then opened the passenger door from the inside, since that was the only way it would open. And he made sure he pulled hard on it when he closed it, as that would be the only way it would shut securely. A sense of *déjà vu* crossed over him as he remembered the old beater he drove in college having a similar issue. His smile lasted only a second when he also remembered how long ago that had been—and then he just felt old.

Mark looked over at him. “John? Are you okay?”

John shook himself out of his head. “Yes, I’m great.”

“You can still back out if you want. I’ll understand.” Mark looked nervous.

John tried to smile reassuringly. “Of course not.”

Mark’s whole face eased when he smiled.

“Do you like Italian?”

“Love it,” John replied enthusiastically.

The valet gave them and the car a condescending look at the restaurant, but other than that, no one seemed to give them a second look.

The restaurant, La Bella Rose, was fairly new in Irvine, and John had not had a chance to try it yet. It was patterned after the small inexpensive trattorias all over Italy. The décor was simple and clean, nothing overly fancy. The menu had basic traditional Italian dishes at affordable prices.

The waiter arrived and offered to recommend a bottle of wine.

“Yes, please—”

“No, thanks—”

Both John and Mark spoke at the same time. Then they both apologized at the same time. The date was off to a smashing success of awkwardness.

“I’m okay with just water, please,” Mark addressed the waiter before turning to John. “But please, John, order anything you’d like.”

“Well if you’re not drinking, I hardly need a whole bottle. I don’t think either one of us needs to see me inebriated one more time.” Mark smiled knowingly.

John ended up ordering a glass of wine with his dinner and the chicken marsala. Mark ordered spaghetti with the house marinara sauce. At first, John assumed Mark had simple taste buds until he realized the spaghetti was the cheapest thing on the menu. Then he felt bad for the bottle of wine faux pas and for ordering a more expensive dish than Mark.

When the waiter asked about dessert, John immediately declined, and when the bill came he tried to figure out how to offer help. He watched as Mark looked at the bill then seemed to be fumbling in his wallet longer than necessary.

So John quietly tried to reach for the bill, but Mark would not have it.

“I asked you out, John.”

“I can pay for my half—”

“No,” Mark said firmly, and so John let it drop. Mark finally put some bills in the leather portfolio the waiter had left and looked visibly relieved when the waiter came to pick it up.

On the way home, John relaxed and realized that he'd actually had a great time with Mark. Not that it should have been surprising since they'd been getting along so well up to this point. Dinner was really no different than their after-run smoothies at the café.

But, as they pulled up to his house, John got nervous again. Would Mark expect to be invited in? Did he *want* to invite Mark in? His cock woke up at that idea, so John knew immediately it would be a bad idea.

In the end, Mark solved the problem for him. He walked John up to his door, and they paused as Mark saved John.

"You don't have to be scared, John. I won't ask to come in."

"Scared?"

"Your knee was bouncing in the car the whole way home." Mark smiled at him. "Just tell me you had a good time. But be honest."

John found himself smiling as he contemplated the question. Honest would be easy. "I did have a very good time tonight, Mark."

Mark's grin broadened, lighting up his whole face. "Good. So did I." He leaned forward and kissed John, caressing his lips confidently but not forcefully. "Good night," he said softly when they broke apart.

"Good night," John whispered as Mark walked back to his car.

They made plans to go out again the next week. John knew he was going to have to work late, so he told Mark to meet him at work.

He was just finishing up when his assistant Marjorie walked into his office with a quizzical look on her face. "There's a very hot young man outside asking for you."

John smiled. "Tell him I'll be right there."

"Well no rush, slutty Sally from down the hall already sniffed him out and is barking all over his tree."

John's face paled, but he didn't look up at Marjorie.

"But I'm guessing," Marjorie drawled slowly as she watched John carefully, "that he's probably not going to be interested in her, is he?"

Still refusing to look at her, John shuffled papers around on his desk. "I have no idea," he muttered.

“Oh my God, John.” Marjorie quickly stepped over to John’s desk, sitting down in the chair across from him. “Please, don’t tell me you hired a male escort!”

That made John’s head snap up. “For fuck’s sake, Marjorie!” He threw a file folder full of paperwork down on the desk with a hard slap. “Why the hell would you say that?”

She shrugged. “Well, he’s young and cute, obvious arm candy. Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s great you’re finally going out again after Ian, and your personal life is your private life, but... well, do you think it was smart letting him come to the office?”

John closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “He is not a male escort. I did not hire him for anything.” John’s face flushed as it usually did when he was about to blow up. After ten years of working with him, Marjorie knew the signs.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. So who is he? Are you interviewing him for an intern position I don’t know about?”

John sighed heavily. “We’re going out to dinner. On a date.”

Marjorie’s eyes popped and her mouth dropped open before she quickly composed herself. It was too late, however; John saw the shock on her face.

“How did... I mean, where—?”

“It’s a long story,” John interjected. “I met him at one of Mac’s parties.”

“Well, then at least he’s over twenty-one,” Marjorie murmured. She immediately slapped her hand over her mouth and looked at him with wide eyes. “I’m sorry, John.”

He groaned and covered his face with his hands. “For the record, he’s twenty-five. Oh, but it gets better.” He paused and peered at her through his fingers. “He used to be my neighbor down the street when he was fifteen. He had a crush on me at the time.”

Marjorie’s eyes danced and her cheeks puffed out as she bit her lip to keep the giggle in.

“Go ahead, let it out,” John said wearily.

She finally let a small giggle escape. “Oh that’s so... adorable.”

John uncovered his face and leaned back in his chair. “I look ridiculous, don’t I? With someone that young?”

She cocked her head and smiled slowly at him. They had worked together for the entire ten years John had been at the firm, and had been through a lot together. They were more friends than colleagues, and that was the only reason they could have this conversation now.

“Do you like him?”

“He’s really working hard to make something of himself. He works full-time and goes to college. He’s getting a business degree so he can have his own business someday.”

“That’s great,” she said slowly. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

He sighed. “I don’t know. I think... maybe I could. But Christ... what if everyone who sees us together thinks I hired him for the evening? Or that he’s just my mid-life crisis?”

Marjorie reached out and placed her hand on his. “If you like him, if he’s worth it, then it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.”

John mulled over Marjorie’s words as he closed down his computer and locked up his office for the night. She was right. It shouldn’t matter what anyone else thought. But he still couldn’t get over his initial reaction when she had thought Mark was an escort. Shame and embarrassment—which only embarrassed him even more. He pivoted to see Mark sitting quietly in one of the chairs by Marjorie’s area, Sally still fawning over him and talking his ear off. He looked bored and annoyed but was putting on a polite face and pretending to be interested in whatever she was saying. He looked up at that moment, and the beautiful happy smile that stretched his face when he saw John swept all thoughts of his and Marjorie’s conversation out of his head. John found himself grinning back instinctively. Mark stood up as John approached.

“Hi, Mark. Sorry I took so long.” *And sorry you got stuck with her*, he tried to say with his eyes.

“No problem. I was a little early anyway.”

Just as John was about to usher Mark out of there, the office door next to his opened and he heard a familiar female voice call his name.

“John!”

He froze as he turned to acknowledge his boss Walter Cannon and Walter’s wife, Lois.

“Is Walter making you work over too?” She rushed over and gave John a quick hug.

“Oh, you know he’s a slave-driver. Lovely to see you, Lois.”

Lois stepped back to stand beside her husband. “I came by to kidnap this one and make sure he didn’t work through dinner.”

Walter smirked. “Yes, so concerned about my well-being. It’s really just an excuse for us to go to her favorite sushi place.”

Lois hit Walter playfully on the arm as they bantered back and forth. They teased each other, John laughed dutifully, and when all chatter died out, John suddenly remembered Mark was still standing there next to him. There was an awkward pause as John saw Lois’s eyes flicking back and forth between him and Mark. She finally extended her hand to Mark. “Hello, I’m Lois Cannon.”

Oh shit, John thought. “I’m sorry, uh, this is Mark, my da... dearest nephew. Mark, this is my boss and his wife, Walter and Lois Cannon.”

Mark was perfectly polite, shaking both Walter’s and Lois’s hands, and there were the required echoes all around of “so nice to meet you.” John caught a disappointed glance from Mark but guiltily ignored it to stay focused on his boss and his wife.

They ended up leaving together with the Cannons, riding the elevator down to the lobby of their building, where they finally split up—the Cannons going on to the parking garage and John and Mark out to the street level. The restaurant they had picked was just a couple of blocks up the street, so they walked. Silently, with a huge force field of tension between them. John felt like a heel at the lie he’d told Lois and Walter. When he opened his mouth and those were the words that came out, he’d surprised himself as much as he had Mark. While they walked, he kept trying to come up with an apology, but everything sounded like the complete shit it was, because there really was no good excuse.

The street noise and traffic saved John from saying anything, but he knew once they got to the restaurant, his time would be up.

Once inside, the hostess seated them and handed them menus. Mark didn’t even touch his, so neither did John. “Mark, I’m so sorry—”

“Are you not out at work?”

No, John wanted to say, but he couldn’t lie. “I am out—my boss and most of the people I work with know.”

“Then what was that? Why was I your ‘nephew’ instead of at least a friend?”

“Because you were dressed nicely and you’re good-looking and Lois would have seen right through the ‘friend’ label, picking up that we are more than that.”

“*Am I more than just a friend?*”

John didn’t know how to respond.

“I’m going to ask you a question again, and I want the truth this time. The real reason you didn’t want to go out with me originally was because of my age, wasn’t it?” Mark was calm, but the hurt showed clearly in his eyes.

“Not the only reason... but yes, it was one,” John said quietly.

“Why does the age thing have to be such an issue? We get along great.”

“We do, but...” John trailed off. “How do I know you’re not just looking to fulfill your boyhood crush?”

Mark looked truly affronted and shook his head. “I like you, John. A lot. I like the *you* I’ve gotten to know these past weeks. You’re not just a crush to me anymore. I was just a silly kid then.”

“And you’re still young, Mark. Even I played around in my twenties; everyone does. I’m not looking to be just some fling for a few weeks or a month. I’m too old for that. Been there, done that and all that nonsense. I want someone steady, someone looking to get serious. We’re at different places in our lives. You’re still in college and just starting to build your life. Which, I greatly admire your ambition for. You know what you want and you’re going after it. You won’t want to be stuck with the stodgy old guy. You’ll tire of me and move on.”

“No I won’t. You just said it yourself, I know what I want.”

John sighed wearily. Their waiter walked up at that moment.

“Good evening, I’m Jason, I’ll be your server tonight. Can I get you both started with something to drink?”

“Two Coronas, please.”

“Certainly. I will just need to see your son’s ID first.”

John reacted before he could stop himself, his mouth turning down in a grimace and his face flushing hotly with embarrassment. All witnessed by Mark, whose eyes were trained on him. When he dared glance at him, he saw the pleading intensity on Mark’s face literally die out right before him. His eyes were dull as he suddenly stood from the table.

"No need," Mark said hollowly. "I'm not staying." And then he stood up and walked out.

John stewed all weekend, moping around his house. He kept replaying the whole situation, wishing there was something he could have done or said better to avoid the ugly conversation it had turned into. *You could have just never gone out with him at all* was his brain's answer. And he couldn't disagree. He had made the whole mess all by himself.

Sunday, his insistent, buzzing phone woke him from an unintended nap on the couch.

"Hello," he answered fuzzily without even checking who it was.

"Well, you're alive at least. Where the hell are you?"

John frowned at Mac's accusatory tone. "At home."

"That's funny, I thought you were supposed to be at Ginny's."

Ginny's? *Oh shit!* He and Mac were supposed to meet up for brunch at their favorite diner at eleven. He whirled around looking for the clock on the wall. It was one o'clock.

"Dammit, I'm sorry, Mac. I completely forgot and fell asleep on the couch."

"Kinda early for a nap, old man."

John sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. "Well, I didn't get much sleep last night. And before you even say anything, it's not what your dirty mind is thinking!"

"All right, all right. So what's going on?"

John told him everything that had happened with Mark. Mac cackled when he was done.

"I can't believe Marjorie thought you'd hired a male escort!" He set off on a fit of laughing again. When he calmed down he got serious.

"Well you already know my opinion of the whole situation. That's what happens when you try to have a relationship. Better to just fuck 'em and be done with it."

"So yeah, maybe it wasn't the best time or way to let the boy down. But if you can't get over this age difference thing then isn't it really for the best? For

both of you? Better to just cut the cord now before both of you get tangled up in a bigger mess. Young cubs' hearts are like stretchy rubber bands—by next week, he'll be good as new and on to someone else.”

“I know.” Yet, somehow, that thought didn't make John feel any better.

Monday, Marjorie was in his office first thing, wanting to know all the dirt on Mark. He got more of a sympathetic response from her than he did from Mac.

“Oi. You really introduced him to Walter and Lois as your nephew? Oh, I'm so sorry, John. I feel responsible.”

“You? You're not responsible. My big fat mouth is the one responsible.”

“I know, but that whole talk we had beforehand, and me assuming he was an escort.” She cringed. “It made you sensitive about his age.”

“But Marjorie, you were right. The waiter assumed he was my son, for Christ's sake!”

“For what it's worth, John, I don't think Walter or Lois would have thought anything of it. They would have been happy for you. Anybody who knows you would, and anyone else... well, who cares what they think?”

John didn't see Mark for two weeks. He still went to the park to run, but Mark was never there anymore, so he figured Mark was trying to avoid him, which disappointed John. Then again, who could blame him? If the situation were reversed, John would probably do the same thing. But he really wanted to talk to Mark, so he decided to switch running days and, sure enough, caught Mark walking into the smoothie café just as John was starting his run.

He jogged over to the café and found Mark sitting at a table inside by himself. Taking a deep breath, he approached.

“Hi, Mark.”

Mark glanced up at him, “Hi,” he said curtly.

“Can I sit down for a moment?”

Mark gestured to the other seat at the table but didn't say a word.

“I've been hoping to catch you, but I haven't seen you on the trail. I guess I can understand if I'm the last person you want to see right now.”

Mark remained silent.

"I'm so sorry for the other night. You have no idea how sorry. I should have been more honest with you from the beginning. And I shouldn't have introduced you as my nephew. That was ridiculous. My boss and his wife are great. I don't know why I said that."

"And you probably shouldn't have gone out with me."

John's lips turned down. "And I probably shouldn't have gone out with you," he affirmed. "I have enjoyed the time we've spent together though. And I hope it's not strange if I ask if we can get over this and still stay friends? I've really missed running with you."

Mark was silent for a long time, and John started to brace himself for the "no" that was inevitably going to come out of Mark's mouth.

"For the record, you're still wrong about me," Mark finally answered. "Just because I'm young doesn't mean I act and think like everyone else in my generation. That would be like saying all of your generation just wants to settle down and get married. I think Mac destroys that stereotype—weekly."

John's eyes widened, and he couldn't hold in the laugh. "Very true."

"But, I can be man enough to accept your feelings." Mark's lips stretched upward—not one of his full, face-splitting smiles, but it was enough to ease John's nerves.

Mark reached out his hand. "I can do friends."

John smiled in relief and reached out his hand. They shook on it, John ignoring how firm and warm Mark's hand felt in his.

John absently swirled the bottle of his beer around in the wet condensation circles it made on the bar. He was at the Shack, waiting to have dinner with Mac, who had been called to the back room for some kind of beer emergency. He glanced across the room to where Mark was sitting at a table with another very good-looking guy about the same age. They had come in while John was sitting here waiting, and both he and Mark had acknowledged each other with a wave and a smile. It had been three weeks since their agreement to stay friends, and so far John was relieved that it was going well. They were back to their normal running routine and smoothie shop visits. They were able to talk about what was going on at work, or how the Dodgers had totally gotten creamed by the Mets last weekend. Normal friend stuff.

They hadn't ventured into talking about their love lives yet, but John was happy to see Mark out with someone. He and the guy he was with seemed very comfortable and friendly with each other. John was glad to see Mark smiling and laughing so much.

"Excuse me." John swiveled in his seat. The man trying to get his attention was a little shorter than John and balding, with soft features. He was neatly dressed in a casual short sleeve button up shirt with the top button undone, khaki shorts and brown leather loafers. He squinted at John with an anxious smile. "You wouldn't happen to be Dennis would you?"

John raised an eyebrow. "No, I'm sorry. Not Dennis."

The man sat down in the empty seat next to him. "Well his picture was different but you do look a little like him so I thought maybe... sometimes people use old pictures on their profiles. Sorry. I'm Ray, by the way."

John nodded at him. "I'm John. Nice to meet you."

"Dennis and I met on queerharmony.com. We've emailed and talked and exchanged pictures; we've just never met in person. So I'm a little nervous."

"Ah," John said. Ray opened his mouth again to say something else but thankfully was interrupted by another man.

"Ray?"

"Dennis!"

Ray stood up and they gave each other a quick hug. Ray introduced Dennis to John and then the two men slipped off to a table across the room. John didn't think Dennis looked much like him, but maybe if he squinted there could be a slight resemblance. They both had graying hair, although Dennis's was whiter. They were both about the same height and build, though Dennis was not as fit as John.

Mac finally showed up and they sat down at a table and ordered food. "I saw you talking to that guy at the bar. Someone you know?"

"Huh?" John's head snapped around. He had been watching Ray and Dennis and missed Mac's comment.

Mac nodded at the couple.

"Oh, no, just met them tonight." He took a deep drink of his beer. "They met on queerharmony.com. Tonight is their first date, I guess you could call it."

Mac snorted. “Oh God, *‘We help you find forever love.’*” He mimicked the website’s ad headline in a deep voice. The cheesy tagline was usually accompanied with warm and fuzzy pictures of two good-looking men enjoying a walk hand-in-hand on the beach, smiling and canoodling with each other.

John glanced at the couple again. “Well, they look like they’re getting along pretty well.”

“They can pretend they’re ‘looking for love’ all they want, but I guarantee in the back of their minds they’re really asking themselves ‘how big is his cock’ and ‘how fast until we can go back to his place and fuck’.”

John rolled his eyes. “As always, you are ever the true romantic.”

Mac paused mid-chew and shrugged his shoulders. “What? I speak the truth.”

John was restless when he got home. It was not unusual for him to be home alone on a Friday night, and normally he enjoyed passing out on the couch and relaxing from the long workweek. Tonight, for some reason, he just couldn’t relax.

He tried watching a movie and lost interest. He tried reading and couldn’t stay focused. He took a walk through his neighborhood to try and work off some of the excess energy, but that didn’t work either. Finally, he pulled out his laptop and decided to check mail and surf around the internet.

He checked into his Facebook page to find the top entry in his feed was from Ian’s wall. Ian had changed his profile to “In a Relationship.” There were several photos of him and another respectable-looking, bookish man, similar in age. The man was tagged in the photos as Andrew Quentin and according to his profile he was a professor at Harvard. Most of the pictures of he and Ian together were typical poses for Ian—standing next to each other, a slightly awkward smile on both their faces. But there was one where they both had an arm around the other’s waist and big happy grins, and another of the two of them actually kissing. This surprised John, as Ian had never been a big fan of PDA or touching in public. It wasn’t even a fear of being gay in public; it just wasn’t in his nature, period.

As John scrolled through the many congratulatory responses on Ian’s wall, he was surprised at the feelings that flashed through him. There was a bit of sadness, some regret, but overall he mostly felt happy for Ian, glad that he had

found someone who obviously made him happier than John did. He also realized that he didn't miss Ian all that much. He thought of all the time spent with Mark and how comfortable he was with him, and how much he enjoyed the companionship of another person. And then there was Ray and Dennis. He'd watched them surreptitiously the whole time he'd been at Mac's. The pair chatted and laughed and smiled—a lot. Occasionally, Dennis reached over and casually touched Ray's arm or hand. Despite what Mac wanted to believe, they looked happy. And they were still there when John left, talking and lingering over beers, long after their meal was over. They certainly looked like a successful match to John.

He eyed the ads on the side of his Facebook page. As usual, there was one for queerharmony.com. His finger moved slowly across his track pad and then with one quiet click, a new window opened in his browser.

The screen went white and the words, "*Welcome to the final step on your journey to love,*" floated in red over a gauzy white background. The couple walking along the beach emerged from the white fog next. The words, "*We help you find forever love,*" faded into view, along with, "*We're all about building meaningful, long-lasting relationships.*"

There were some more sappy platitudes as he scrolled through the site's intro spiel. Then, "*Let's get you started on your journey*" popped up. Below those words was a full explanation of their "tried and true" process.

Well, what the hell, John thought. And he clicked on the big blue "Sign-up now" button.

Tuesday, John sank gratefully into the plastic chair at the smoothie shop. The heat was high today, even for Southern California, and he and Mark had really had to push to get through their run. Mark was up at the counter getting their smoothies, so John pulled his phone out of his pocket and turned it on. Immediately it chimed seven times.

"Whoa, somebody's popular," Mark said as he sat their drinks on the table and sat down.

John blushed but didn't say anything.

"Everything okay? If you have a business emergency and have to go, that's okay."

John looked at Mark sheepishly. “No, it’s not an emergency. I... I signed up with queerharmony.com.”

Mark’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t say anything condescending, so John continued. “I met this couple at Mac’s who met through the site, and it was only their first date, but they looked like they were having a good time, so... I thought, why not? I figured it would take a while, but I’ve been getting pinged with matches like crazy.”

Mark swallowed before giving John a smile. “That’s great. Have you met any of them yet?”

“Mostly I’ve just been messaging and emailing. But I’m meeting one guy for drinks on Friday night and another for coffee Saturday. You don’t think I’m crazy?” John asked hesitantly.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to meet someone,” Mark said quietly.

John smiled gratefully. “I haven’t told Mac yet. He’ll give me so much shit.” He told Mark about Ian dating someone.

“Is that why you’re doing the website thing?” Mark asked.

“Yes and no. Actually, I don’t mind that he’s found someone. I’m glad for him. So, then I was like, well why can’t I meet someone too? It feels like time.”

Mark just nodded but didn’t say anymore on the subject.

John was encouraged by all of the interest he was getting online but soon discovered the meaning of the old adage, “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you meet your prince.” Turned out not everyone quite matched their profile.

Wendell was completely charming in email form. In reality, he had a gap between his front teeth and a lisp. Not that the Captain America T-shirt he wore on their date and the fact that he still—at 43—lived at home with his mom, helped matters. Although he *was* an entrepreneur—he did own the comic book store he talked about incessantly.

Garrett was sex on legs and had a British accent that John could listen to all day long. He also dealt in authentic “antiques” from the motherland that, well, weren’t necessarily “authentic”—unless China had suddenly become part of the British Commonwealth. He also was prone to long-winded rants against the Queen and the British government that put John to sleep.

Jerome was near bald, muscled, tan, dressed neatly and was the most polite, gentle man. John imagined him helping little old ladies across the street. Until he said he was a card-carrying member of Leather & Tackle—one of the most hard-core BDSM clubs around.

Then there was Bob, who showed up to their date looking nothing like his picture. Well, he would have looked like his picture if his toupee hadn't come loose in the breeze on the way to the restaurant he and John met at for coffee.

Mark doubled over in laughter as John recounted his date with Bob. "Did you tell him?" Mark finally got out in wheezing breaths.

"I didn't want to. But after five minutes I couldn't take it anymore. So I tried to discreetly tell him. He was thankful, but he didn't even seem embarrassed! Instead, he just launched into a whole discussion of the botched hair plug job he'd had and how hard it was to find a toupee that looks real. I wanted to tell him he'd better keep looking."

Mark broke out laughing again, and John had to chuckle with him.

"I had no idea it would be this difficult to meet someone normal!" John just shook his head. He had been on QueerHarmony for three months. And had been on tons of first dates, but no one had stuck yet.

"Thinking of calling it quits?"

John sighed. "Nah, not yet. I'm probably just expecting too much, too soon."

Mark grinned at him cheekily. "Well, you know what they say—sometimes you have to kiss a lot of frogs..."

John rolled his eyes as Mark chuckled. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think they need to change their website motto to that." He gave Mark a sincere smile. "Thank you, by the way."

"For what?" Mark asked.

"For letting me prattle on about my bad dates and for listening without judging me. It's nice to have someone to talk to." John had finally told Mac what he was doing and had heard nothing but negativity and ribbing ever since from his oldest friend.

Mark's smile got smaller on his face. "Well, that's what friends are for, right?"

When John got home that night, he showered and changed. Settling back into the couch with a beer and the remote, he grabbed his iPad. Sighing, his finger hovered over the QueerHarmony app. In the end, he clicked it and signed on to check his hits for the day. The longer he'd been on the site, the less and less frequent his matches and requests were becoming. Tonight he had four. Two of them got immediately deleted just from their messages, one actually made it to John checking out his profile before he got deleted. Number four made John pause though.

Message from: Alastair Humphrey.

Hello, John.

My name is Alastair. I am new to QueerHarmony and am still feeling my way around here. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I scrolled past your profile pic several times. Something made me keep coming back to it, though. I was pleasantly surprised by your profile, and that doesn't happen much around here. I've had some really awful, hideous dates. What is the point of that two-hour long questionnaire we had to fill out and the profile we put up if no one ever seems to pay attention to them? Did I say I liked playing naked chess in the rain? Or that I'm into dressing up and going to Renaissance faires? No!

Uh oh, are our messages monitored on here? The powers that be running this site may have me kicked out for not toeing the party line before you even read this.

If not, I really appreciated your honest and straightforward profile. If you don't mind a plain and vanilla straight arrow kind of guy, I'd love to hear from you.

Alastair Humphrey

P.S. After rereading this, I don't want to give the wrong impression. I'm not that "straight" of an arrow, obviously. I promise I'm just as bent as everyone else on here.

John smiled and laughed. He clicked over to Alastair's profile. He was right; his profile was very quick and to the point. He was in finance, like John, an accountant at a major firm it said. He had salt and pepper hair like John, perfect white teeth and a big smile, and adorable crinkle lines by his eyes when he smiled.

John switched back to his messages and started typing out a response to Alastair.

For two days they emailed back and forth. On the third day they stayed up for hours Skype chatting—text, not video. And on the fourth day they met for dinner.

Alastair had picked the restaurant, a lovely French restaurant that John had not had the chance to try yet. When John arrived, he was relieved to see Alastair looked exactly like his profile picture. And his personality was exactly the same as it was in their emails and chats.

Alastair ordered a bottle of wine and recommended the foie gras as an appetizer. “It’s to die for.”

John found he was exactly right. It was exquisite, as was everything else about the evening. The food was delicious, the conversation stimulating. They had many laughs as they compared their previous “dates of disaster,” as they began to call them. They stayed so long they nearly closed down the restaurant. Afterward, as they both walked to their cars, it was Alastair who spoke first.

“Well John, dare I say it, but I think maybe our streak has ended?”

“Streak?”

“Of disastrous dates.” They had reached the parking lot, and Alastair reached out to take John’s hand. “As much as it pains me to eat my words, I think that damn site may have finally found a perfect match for me.” His eyes were dancing as he looked at John.

John smiled back at him. “I think it may have,” he whispered.

“Phew,” Alastair made an exaggerated swipe of his brow, as John laughed. “Does this mean you will agree to see me again?”

“Of course,” John said.

Alastair leaned in and gave John a quick dry, peck on the lips. They agreed to talk soon.

After John got home, his phone buzzed with a text from Alastair.

I just wanted to say again, what a lovely evening I had John.

John smiled. *Me too*, he texted back.

The next week, as he told Mark all about his date with Alastair, he couldn't help the smile creeping over his face.

Mark stayed silent until he was done, nodding and smiling where appropriate. "That's great, John. I'm glad you've finally met someone just like you."

Something about Mark's words niggled in his brain, but he ignored it. "Well, we've only been out twice, but I think it might be promising."

As they went their separate ways after finishing their drinks, John watched Mark walk away and suddenly realized that Mark never said much about his personal life. He wondered if Mark was still dating that guy he'd seen him with at Mac's. Mark only ever talked about his job and his classes. Occasionally, he did something on the weekend with his friends. John would have to chat with him about that next time. He realized his own dating life had begun to monopolize their conversations.

It wasn't until he was in his car and putting the key in the ignition that Mark's words came back to him—"I'm glad you've finally met someone just like you." John cocked his head. What had Mark meant by that?

Two days later when he and Alastair met for dinner again, he found himself distracted all evening. Watching Alastair, he guessed they did look a lot alike, but that was just because they were both in their mid-forties. John was a little more fit than Alastair, but not by much. They both worked in offices, in the business world. They both had similar tastes in food and wine.

"John."

John pulled himself out of his head. Alastair looked at him bemused with an eyebrow raised.

"Three dates in and I'm boring you already?"

John smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, no, of course not. Um—"

"Would you like to share the tiramisu for dessert?"

John wasn't a big fan of tiramisu, but it was Alastair's favorite dessert, as he'd ordered it both of the other times they'd been out. "Sure, that'd be great."

For their next date, John took the lead and invited Alastair to Mac's for dinner.

“Mac’s Shack?” Alastair wrinkled his nose at the name, as John pulled into the parking lot.

John grinned. “Yep, it’s not fancy, but it’s a great little place, and the food’s good. Mac, the owner is my best friend.” Every date so far, they’d gone out to some of the best, highest-rated restaurants in the Irvine area, and while John enjoyed those places, he also sometimes enjoyed a good burger and a beer once in a while too. Plus, he wanted to introduce Mac and Alastair.

Alastair gave the place the once over when they walked in. John guided them to a table in the corner, and Alastair swiped his finger across the tabletop when he sat down. “Has this place been visited by the Health Department?”

John tried to laugh off his comment as if Alastair was being humorous. “Mac has never had any violations. He runs a good place. It may not be *Le Petite Fleur*, and there may not be any *coq au vin* on the menu, but the food is good.”

Alastair pulled one of the plastic menus out of the wire menu holder on the table, handling it with two fingers.

“Everything is good,” John repeated himself as he nodded at the menu. “I recommend the California burger with guacamole. The Hawaiian Luau burger with pineapple and sweet sauce is also delicious.”

Alastair didn’t say anything, just continued to peruse the menu.

“Johnnie boy!” Mac’s booming voice carried across the bar. He sidled over with two beers and sat them down on the table in front of John and Alastair.

John stood up and gave his friend a hug and then Mac waved him to sit down. Mac sat down in the chair next to John while Alastair looked distastefully at his beer. Hoping Mac didn’t notice, John rushed into introductions. “Mac, this is Alastair Humphrey. Alastair, this is Mac Crenshaw.” They both shook hands politely. John saw Mac giving Alastair the once over and knew he would get an earful from Mac later.

“Thank you very much for the beverage, but I don’t really drink beer. Do you have any red wines?” Alastair actually pushed the beer toward Mac with his finger. Mac just stared at him, clenching his jaw. “Hey, Cass, need a glass of our finest mer-lot over here,” he bellowed out to the bartender. John wanted to cringe at Mac’s purposeful mispronunciation of merlot, knowing he was just being obnoxious, but he was thankful Mac was keeping his comments to himself for now.

Mac turned his attention to John. They did the typical quick check-up on their lives since they'd last talked.

"How's Mark?" Mac asked. "Haven't seen him in here in a while."

"Really? He's fine. Busy, I think, but he's good."

The waiter came over and Mac stood to leave. "Well, Alastair, it was good to meet you. Take good care of my boy here." He leveled a serious look at Alastair before continuing. "Enjoy your meal, and let me know if you need anything."

Alastair ended up ordering the fish and chips, and asked the waiter exactly how the fish was prepared. Their young waiter looked at him blankly. "Um, just like it says on the menu: beer-battered and fried."

Alastair wrinkled his nose but didn't say anything else. After the waiter left, he looked suspiciously at John. "Who's Mark?"

John arched his eyebrows in surprise. "Mark is the young man I run with. I told you about him, remember? He used to live on my street when he was younger."

"Oh, yes, that's right." His tone dialed back the accusatory stance a few levels. "The boy."

"Well, he's twenty-five, hardly a boy..."

"That's nice of you to let him run with you. I have a niece and nephew around that age. I never know what to speak to them about. The age gap is so vast. And kids today are so flighty. My niece graduated college and moved back home with her parents and my nephew has decided to become a perpetual student. He's switched majors so many times, it's ridiculous."

"Actually, Mark has a pretty level head on his shoulders. He's working, going to school, doing it all on his own. He wants to own his own business someday. And he's actually very easy to get along with."

"I tried another dating site before QueerHarmony and I got nothing but young men trolling me, wanting to hook up! With me! I was twice their age, for heaven's sake. How ridiculous would I look gallivanting around town with a child on my arm? Like some sugar daddy."

"Well, not all young men are looking to hook up..." John's voice faltered when he realized that this conversation had turned into him defending Mark against all of the same arguments he had used when he'd decided not to date Mark.

Luckily, their food came at that moment, and they both fell silent. Alastair picked through his fish and chips, only eating about half of his plate.

Afterward, when John dropped Alastair off at his house, he apologized. "I'm sorry that you didn't enjoy yourself tonight. I just thought something a little more casual would be a nice change of pace. And I wanted you and Mac to meet."

Alastair waved him off. "No, you're right. It's good to broaden my horizons, expand my palate once in a while. I was just never much for bars. Really, though, I did have a good time because I was with you." John didn't believe him, but when Alastair leaned over to kiss him, he kissed him back.

For their next date, John invited Alastair over to his house. He cooked a nice meal—and served wine, not beer. After they settled in on the couch. John turned on the baseball game but noticed Alastair nodding off a couple times. So he tried flipping through channels, but they couldn't really find any movies they could agree on. John finally left it on the history channel when Alastair seemed to come alive at some civil war program. Soon it was John who struggled to stay awake. When it was over, John shut off the TV. He scooted closer to Alastair and they kissed. John put his hand up to Alastair's neck, rifling his fingers through his hair then trailing his thumb along Alastair's jaw. He and Alastair were in agreement about taking things slow, but they hadn't done anything more than chaste kisses and holding hands. He thought it was time to try taking things further.

Alastair's lips were warm, but he pretty much let John take the lead, not pushing for anything more. He placed his hand awkwardly on John's bicep. John felt the weight of his hand but... that was all. Not that that was a bad thing; he remembered it wasn't all flash and fireworks with Ian either. They had grown into their attraction eventually.

John leaned in more to Alastair, pushing him against the back of the couch. Alastair pulled away. "Oh... my." He smiled at John and stroked John's cheek. "This is lovely, darling."

"Would you like to stay tonight?" John asked.

"Oh, you know I would... I have an early morning meeting though. I should probably go home tonight."

John thought Alastair seemed a little relieved when John didn't try to entice him to stay anyway, but he let it go. John walked him to the door. They kissed goodnight and made plans to see each other Friday night.

Friday night, Alastair had to cancel their date to work late, so they rescheduled for Saturday afternoon. With an evening to himself, John went for a run and then came home, showered and ordered Chinese takeout. He watched a movie and then flipped over to watch the eleven o'clock news before heading to bed. He could barely keep his eyes open.

“Our top story tonight—firefighters have been battling a huge fire in the Irvine area, at the University Town Center apartment complex on Stanford...”

John's head popped up. Mark's apartment was in that complex. He leaned forward and turned the sound up on the TV.

“...We're still gathering information, but what we know as of right now are that several of the apartment buildings have been completely destroyed. Firefighters are still battling the blaze, and there are believed to be two fatalities so far. Of course, no names are being released until the victims' families have been notified...”

John's heart started hammering in his chest and his body went cold. *Mark... Oh my God, no.*

Wait, he's probably fine. Maybe his apartment wasn't even one of the damaged ones. It's Friday night. He probably wasn't even home.

John fumbled for his phone and called Mark's number. It went straight to voicemail. Again, it didn't have to mean he was in trouble...

John jumped off the couch, grabbed his keys and wallet, and slammed the door behind him.

All the way over to Mark's apartment, he chastised himself. *This is ridiculous. He's probably fine. You're not going to be able to get close to the fire anyway. No one there will be able to tell you anything.*

John parked his Jeep on the street as close as he could get to the barricades that were set up. As he looked up in awe at the sheer size of the flames still burning and the amount of damage there was, a lump formed in his throat. *Dear God, please let him be okay.*

He got out of the Jeep and ran toward the fire. There were people and firefighters everywhere, all of them yelling directions and orders. One important fireman yelled at him to stay back and that he couldn't come through, but as soon as he turned his back, John slipped past him and the barricades.

He frantically searched through the crowds of people. A lot of residents and spectators were milling about. Some had blankets around them. Some were sitting on the grass with oxygen masks over their faces. Some had an emergency person assisting them. No sign of Mark anywhere, though.

As he pushed on, he saw the guy Mark had been sitting with that night at Mac's. He was standing with a blanket around him and a breathing mask that he kept taking off. Another young man had his arms around him and kept kissing him on the temple. John paused at the sight. He had thought Mark and the man were dating.

He approached the men. "Is Mark—?"

The boy with the breathing mask took it off again and gestured.

John followed his motion and saw Mark, sitting on the back of an emergency vehicle, also with a breathing mask on. John let out a huge exhale and rushed over.

"Mark! Mark, are you okay?"

Mark looked up at him with surprise. "John—" He paused to let out a hoarse cough.

John put a hand on his knee and tilted Mark's head up with the other. There were smudges of soot all over Mark's face, and he used his thumb to wipe some of the black ash away from Mark's cheekbone. "I saw the fire on the news. They said there were fatalities, and I... I just had to know if you were okay."

"I'm fine." Mark turned his head and another rattling cough came out of his throat. John sat down next to Mark and put his arm around him. "The fire started in the apartment next-door to ours. Clark, Kevin and I were able to get out in time, but our place and all of our stuff is completely gone."

"Clark and Kevin?"

Mark pointed to the two men John had just talked to. "Clark, my roommate, and Kevin, his boyfriend."

"Oh, Clark's your roommate."

Mark looked at him blankly. "Yeah."

John smiled sheepishly. "I saw you at Mac's with him once, having dinner. I just assumed you two were together."

Mark laughed, which actually came out as a croaking noise. A female EMT heard him and whirled around. "Sir, you shouldn't be talking. You need to keep the mask on, get some clean oxygen into your lungs." Mark put the mask back on, and John spoke to the EMT. "Is he okay? Does he need to go to the hospital?"

"Not if he keeps that mask on. He just has a little smoke inhalation. Once his breathing is better, we'll release him." She patted Mark's leg and then turned to go find someone else to help.

It was three hours before Mark was released. John stayed with him the whole time. Once Mark was cleared medically, there was paperwork and questioning by some officer from the fire department. At one point, a woman from the Red Cross also stopped by with bottles of water and asked if they needed anything.

"Do you have someplace to stay tonight, or would you like us to set you up somewhere?"

Mark's face went blank. "Ummm... I don't know—"

John jumped in before he could finish. "He's staying with me tonight." The woman nodded, handed them a contact card and a pamphlet, and moved on.

Mark looked at John, exhaustion starting to settle in his eyes. "Thanks, John, you don't have to—"

"It's no problem, Mark. I'm just so glad you're okay." He smiled gratefully and placed his hand on the back of Mark's neck, rubbing gently. John didn't know where it was coming from, but he had this need, this urge to touch Mark. He supposed it was just the adrenaline of the potential life-and-death moment that had just happened. Mark sighed and closed his eyes momentarily. "My spare room is yours for as long as you need it," John murmured.

When they were finally given the all clear to leave the premises, John put his arm around Mark to guide him toward his Jeep. Mark was dead on his feet. "Come on," John said softly. "Let's get you home. A nice hot shower and a warm, soft bed, and you'll be good as new."

They'd only taken a few steps when Mark pulled away and started fumbling in the pocket of his shorts. "Got to get my car. I'll follow you."

John frowned. "Mark, I don't think you're in any shape to drive. We can come back and get your car tomorrow."

Mark was insistent though, and John couldn't change his mind. He looked at John bleakly. "My car's the only thing I have left." John's heart twisted for the kid, and he relented. John followed behind him the whole way to make sure Mark didn't get in an accident. Luckily, John didn't live far, and the streets of Irvine at two in the morning were fairly quiet.

Once at his house, John got Mark settled in the guest bathroom with towels. Then he made sure the guest bedroom was set up and headed off to his own bedroom to find some clothes for Mark to borrow.

He was just walking in to the guest bedroom with a pile of clothes when Mark walked out of the bathroom, naked except for a white towel wrapped low and loose on his hips. John couldn't help but take in Mark's broad, still damp, hairy chest with a beautifully inviting dark treasure trail leading to what was hidden under the towel. John's cock started to pulse inside his jeans and he tried to keep himself in check.

As soon as Mark saw John, he pulled the towel up a little higher. They both stared at each other in surprise for a moment, before John held out the pile of clothes in his hand. "Here, I got you some clean clothes to wear. You're close enough in size to me that they should fit well enough for now."

Mark smiled. "Thanks, John. I truly appreciate this so much."

John set the clothes down on the bed. "Like I said, no problem. I'm happy to do it. Now, get some sleep. If you need anything else, don't hesitate to ask, although I think you know where everything is." He winked at Mark and then left the room.

John went into his room and got ready for bed himself, but despite the late hour, he couldn't fall asleep. He was too wired, his brain having trouble shutting down, and after tossing and turning for an hour, he finally got up. Walking quietly past the guest bedroom so as not to wake Mark, he went to the kitchen. Settling on a mug of warm milk, he wandered through his house, ending up by the sliding door that led out to his back deck.

He stared out at the inky darkness, the moon and a few stars the only illumination. It looked so quiet and serene; he slid the door open and went outside, stretching out on a lounge chair. It was still warm enough to be comfortable in not more than his sleep pants.

As he lay there, he tried to analyze the thoughts drifting in his head. How worried he'd been when he heard about the fire. How scared he'd been for Mark. How he'd rushed over there to find him, without even a second thought. And the overwhelming relief when he'd seen Mark. *But that's normal. He's a friend; I would have done the same thing if it were Mac.*

Then what of the need to constantly be touching him, to feel his warm, electric skin under his? When he first saw Mark sitting in the emergency vehicle, he'd wanted to crush him in his arms and hold him tight, but he'd restrained himself for fear that Mark would be uncomfortable. That kind of hug was a "more than friend" gesture. But the touching—he wanted to be in constant physical contact with him. *No, that was all just overreaction to the fact he'd almost lost Mark. That has to be all it was, right?*

Then what of his body's reaction to seeing Mark in the towel? *Natural reaction.* But no, John knew it was more than that. He'd never gotten that excited so quickly with Alastair.

Admitting that last sentence was like the tumbler of a lock clicking into place, resulting in a whole Pandora's Box of feelings and emotions opening suddenly within him. No matter how much he had been trying with Alastair, deep in his heart he knew Alastair was never the one. None of the guys John had seen or dated from that stupid site lived up to what John was looking for. None of them sparked his heart even one tenth of the way Mark did. Every quality Mark possessed was exactly what John wanted: He was smart. He was kind. He was funny. He liked many of the same things John did. And yet he was still different enough to challenge and excite John. Why had it taken John so long to see and accept it? Why had he been such a stubborn old fool?

But he's so young.

I don't care, John's heart answered back.

What happens when he grows tired of you and leaves?

John's heart was silent at that one. But really, was love ever a sure thing? Wasn't that what it was all about? Taking a leap? It was all a risk. He and Ian had been together for so long, and it hadn't stopped Ian from leaving.

As John headed back to his room, he hesitated in front of the guest bedroom, placing his hand lightly on the door. So many emotions swirling inside him were starting to fall into place. With all that had happened tonight, this wasn't the time, but soon—once John had his heart completely sorted out—he would have another talk with Mark.

John stepped back to continue down the hall when he noticed the faint crack of light under the door. Frowning, he took a chance and opened the door slowly. The light was the moon shining in from the window. And silhouetted against the window was the figure of Mark. He had drawn the curtains and blinds aside, and was leaning against the window, one arm up above his head, forehead pressed against the glass.

“Mark,” John spoke softly. “Are you okay?”

Mark stood away from the glass as he glanced back at John. “Yeah. Just...”

“Couldn’t sleep either?”

Mark sighed. “I crashed for a while. Then woke up, thinking... Now, I’m too anxious to sleep, I guess.”

His heart, bursting with the freedom he was now finally giving it, propelled him into the room to stand next to Mark. He reached out and gently rubbed Mark’s shoulder.

“I’ve never been through something like that. I was so lucky I got out in time. What if—”

“Shhh... Don’t talk like that,” John whispered, as he stepped closer and put his whole arm around Mark’s shoulders, pulling Mark closer to his body. “Just concentrate on the fact that you’re okay. You’re alive and well.”

Mark leaned his head toward him, and John ran his fingers through Mark’s hair, gently stroking and scratching. He leaned down and placed a kiss on the top of Mark’s head. It felt natural and right, and he didn’t want to stop. He could feel Mark visibly relaxing from his soothing caresses, and before he knew it, Mark had shifted further into his embrace, placing both hands loosely around John’s waist.

John instinctively pulled him closer, craving the feel of his warm body against his. He drew his fingertips up and down Mark’s back. Up and down... up and down... light as a feather. His intent was to keep Mark relaxed, but he was surprised to feel shivers run down Mark’s spine.

Moving his hand up to Mark’s neck, he stroked there, and carded his fingers through Mark’s hair. It was meant to be a massaging motion, but Mark let out a groan, and his eyes fluttered shut as his head lolled backward. “John,” he whispered.

“It’s okay. You’re okay,” John answered hoarsely.

Mark's eyes opened, and John found himself looking right into his eyes, drowning in their beautiful, deep, dark depths. With one hand still on the back of Mark's neck, he used the other to rub his thumb against Mark's bristly stubble. John felt the heat bloom through his body as he imagined that wonderful bristle rubbing all over his body.

John's thumb moved on to rub slowly over Mark's lips. Mark's breathing picked up as he simply stared up at John. A feeble voice somewhere in his mind warned him, *You shouldn't do this. Mark is upset; he's been through a traumatic experience.*

The hammering of his heart in his chest drowned out the voice until that was all John could hear. As if in slow motion, John leaned down, tipping his head. When their lips touched, John literally felt something snap in himself, blood rushing everywhere, bringing him out of the slow-motion haze into a present of need and want and desire. The hand on Mark's neck gripped his head, and John kissed Mark, long and slow and deep. A guttural sound came from Mark's throat, but John continued kissing his lips, twisting his tongue with Mark's and tasting him, and oh, he tasted so sweet.

John let out a muffled moan himself and finally broke away from Mark so he could breathe. Mark had clutched John even closer to him during the kiss, and now their chests and hips were pressed together. John's cock was rock hard and trying to search out Mark's, through his pajama pants. He could feel the barest whisper of Mark's hard length in his pants, and a shiver went through John.

He didn't know who did what next, just that they were kissing and clutching bare skin and sighing and moaning. John did remember he was the one who sunk his fingers into Mark's biceps and physically turned and walked him back to the bed. Mark fumbled backward on to the bed, with John following him down, nearly crushing Mark for not wanting to stop touching him. They both groaned, Mark uttering a hoarse "fuck."

John loved the feel of their chests pressed together. Ian's chest had always been smooth, save for a few stray hairs, and he had forgotten how amazing it felt to have another hard and hairy chest under his. But he heard Mark's exclamation, so he leaned up quickly on both arms.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," he whispered.

John stared down at Mark, and his eyes seemed black as they shone with raw want and desire and something else they'd have to talk about later. Right now, John couldn't wait anymore. He wanted to go slow and cherish Mark's beautiful body, but his own body had other plans. He stroked his hands all over Mark's chest, especially at his nipples, twisting the small buds to attention. Mark arched and writhed, egging John on.

He bent his head and captured one of Mark's nipples in his mouth, licking and biting until it was red and hard. "Jesus, John," Mark breathed out just before John switched to give the same attention to Mark's other nipple, eliciting a raspy growl that went straight to John's cock.

He felt the wet spot on his pajama pants and knew he had to have Mark soon, or he was going to explode. He continued a trail of frenzied wet kisses down Mark's stomach. When he got to the waistband of Mark's pants, barely containing a very large bulge, he didn't waste time. He pulled them down and off Mark's legs so Mark was completely naked in front of him, and holy hell, was he a sight to behold. John almost forgot what he was doing as he took in the view. As his eyes settled on Mark's cock, his memory came back, and he kneeled back down. Mark's cock was not quite as long as John's, but it was definitely thick and heavy and strong. John imagined what it would feel like to have it inside him, and he had to pause and grip his own cock and balls firmly for a moment to keep from coming.

He licked all the way up Mark's cock and circled the head before taking what he could in his mouth, causing Mark to cry out and fist John's hair hard. John breathed in Mark's scent deeply as he licked and sucked and tasted Mark's cock. God, he tasted amazing. He would have continued until Mark came down his throat, but he needed to feel Mark's body around his own cock more.

John's mouth let Mark go, and he shifted over Mark and the bed to the nightstand, when he remembered this wasn't his bedroom. Crap, he didn't want to stop and go back to his. He rummaged in the drawer and finally came up with a nearly empty bottle of lube and one lonely condom. According to the date, it was still okay. *Thank fuck*, John breathed.

He poured the lube on his fingers and made quick work of opening Mark up. Mark was shifting his hips upward and babbling something nonsensical. When John couldn't wait anymore, he put the condom on, lubed himself up and kneeled over Mark. Mark pulled his legs up, and John slowly pushed himself in.

John nearly blacked out with the feeling of Mark's body gripping him and taking him in. It had been so long since John had felt this—no, scratch that, it had never felt like this with anyone else. The heat and the warmth enveloped every inch of him, and he cried out, nearly falling over Mark but catching himself with his hands.

Finding himself face to face with Mark, he paused in concern. Mark's eyes were closed, and he was biting his lips. His neck muscles strained with effort, and his breathing was labored.

“Mark,” John whispered. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

Mark opened his eyes, and John had never seen him more vulnerable or more beautiful.

“God, no, I just... oh fuck... never felt like this... John.” Mark reached up and gripped the back of John's head tightly, and brought him down for a searing, explosive yet incredibly tender kiss. When they broke away, chests heaving, John touched his forehead to Mark's.

Then he started moving slowly, stroking in and out and reveling in the feel of their two bodies together. Although John wanted to savor and enjoy this moment, their need ramped up quickly, and soon their slick, wet bodies were moving against each other harder and faster. The room filled with curses and grunts and the sound of the bed shaking under them. Unexpectedly, Mark cried out and arched his back, crushing his cock between his and John's body as it pulsed and exploded without any other touch.

John felt the warm wetness between their bodies and lost it as well, burying himself so deep in Mark, he didn't think he could ever get out. Nor did he want to.

John collapsed on Mark in pure exhaustion, his whole body still trembling. Mark, under him, stroked his trembling fingers gently through John's hair.

Eventually John had to move. He pulled out and sat on the bed in a daze, still shaky, as he disposed of the condom in the wastebasket next to the bed. He grabbed his discarded pajama pants and wiped himself and Mark off. Then he climbed in bed next to Mark, who was still lying on his back. He traced his fingers through Mark's chest hair and up to his jaw. Mark swiveled his neck and they looked into each other's eyes, neither wanting to spoil the moment with words.

John woke up from a deep sleep the next morning and stretched, smiling happily at sore muscles that hadn't been sore in a long time. Without even opening his eyes, he reached out for Mark and found nothing but cold, empty sheets. Opening his eyes, he looked around, but the room was empty. The bathroom door was open and the light wasn't on, so Mark wasn't in there. John forced himself to get up and pad into the kitchen, thinking maybe Mark was starting breakfast, although from the time on the hallway clock it was noon, which would actually make it lunchtime. After the late night and little sleep they'd had last night, he was surprised Mark was already up.

But the kitchen was quiet. No smells of coffee or food lingered.

Then he saw the yellow piece of notebook paper on the counter.

John,

Thanks again for letting me stay last night, but I think it's probably best if I find somewhere else to stay. My friend Eric has a foldout couch; he'll let me crash until I get things sorted out.

Mark

John collapsed on a stool as he processed Mark's words. Why would he leave? And without saying anything? Last night had been amazing, and he knew Mark felt it too. John bolted into his bedroom for his phone.

He called Mark, but it went to voicemail. He texted him but got no response.

He took turns pacing the living room and calling and texting. He left message after message: *Mark, we need to talk. Please call me back.*

After an hour, the niggling doubts started creeping in—you knew he'd do this, one night and he's moving on. No, John wouldn't believe that. Mark always said he wasn't like that. He was the one who wanted John in the beginning, and John had been the one pushing him away. Mark's note made no sense. There had to be something else going on.

John let another half-hour pass before he had to do something. He had almost lost Mark in the fire last night and now... now that he had finally figured out what he wanted, he was not going to lose him again.

He read the note again. He was going to stay with his friend Eric, but he didn't say where that was. John tried to think. Finally he remembered Mark

mentioning Eric. He lived in the Harvard Manor Apartments, just off of California Avenue. Mark had told this entire convoluted story about helping his friend Eric move in while it was raining.

Half an hour later, John was driving down California Avenue. John knew it was probably ridiculous, driving around the apartment complex parking lot looking for Mark. But sure enough, at the last building, he was rewarded. Sitting in a space outside was Mark's beat-up blue Civic.

John parked and walked up to the building. He got lucky, and a resident happened to be coming out so he could get in without buzzing the intercom. Inside the front door, he found the tenant listing on the mailboxes. There was an E. Johnson in Apt. 8. He didn't know Eric's last name, so he took a chance and headed up to number eight.

At the door to Apt. 8, he took a deep breath before knocking. He didn't even have to ask if Eric or Mark lived here, because Mark himself answered the door. He looked shocked to see John on the other side.

"How did you find me?" he asked incredulously.

"I remembered you had a friend named Eric that lived in these apartments. And then I saw your car out front."

Mark looked down and frowned.

"Now that I've admitted to being a crazy stalker, can we please talk?"

Mark cocked an eyebrow. "You realize how weird that sounds?" Then he sighed and stood back from the door to let John in.

"Let me explain about last night—" John started.

"No, John, I don't want to hear it. I can't. I can't listen to you say it was a mistake. And I can't stay with you if you think we're going to be some kind of friends with benefits thing, because I can't do that. Not with you. It hurts too much." His last four words were quiet, and John was stunned into silence.

"I should have stopped you last night, I knew that. But it felt so good, kissing you and touching you. I figured it might be my one chance. I didn't realize how painful it would be this morning waking up in your bed, knowing you didn't really want me, that it was going to be all awkward now. I got up and went into the kitchen and Alastair called. I didn't answer, but I heard the voicemail he left you. Calling you 'darling' and saying he'd see you later. My heart was ripped out of my chest."

John swallowed thickly. He hadn't even looked at his voicemail this morning.

"I've been patient. I told myself I could be your friend, that I could wait it out. When you started going out with all those ridiculous guys, I sat there and listened to your stories and stayed on the sidelines until you could look up one day and see me, 'til you would get over your bullshit issues about our age difference and about me being young. I thought that day would come, and it would all be worth it. But now you have Alastair. And I don't know what last night was to you, but I won't be just a casual fuck. It's either all or nothing. And I can't hear you say 'nothing' to me right now."

Mark turned his back to him, and John felt his eyes getting wet.

The room was silent as John tried to find his words. In the end, he chose one.

"All," John said calmly.

Mark spun around. "What?"

"What if I said I wanted it all? With you. What if I said I'd been a stupid fool, and I'm sorry? I saw the news report about the fire, and this fear came over me I'd never known before. I prayed the whole drive there, 'Please, God, let him be okay.' And the reason I couldn't sleep last night? Before I came to your room? It was because all I could think about was you. That was when I realized how I truly felt about you. I was going to tell you this morning, but then we got a little distracted last night, and you were gone when I woke up."

Mark's eyes were wet now, and he looked shell-shocked. His arm twitched like he wanted to move, but he stayed in his spot across the room. "What about Alastair?"

John blushed. "Well... I didn't even know he called this morning until you told me. I never even thought to check my machine." John looked at his watch. "And he's probably at Café North right now waiting on me, and I couldn't care less."

"I will not be introduced as your son or your nephew."

"Would it be okay if I introduced you as my boyfriend?" John held his breath and watched Mark. He wasn't responding, and his face was passive.

And then, Mark's lips edged up, slowly stretching across his entire face in the most beautiful smile John had ever seen.

“Yeah, I think that would be okay.”

Epilogue

John looked down at the framed photos sitting on the table and frowned when he came to one. He picked it up. “Why is this picture included?”

Mark wrapped an arm around John, the metal rings on their left hands clinking as his arm covered John's. “Because that's the night we met.”

“But I was wasted! Look at me—I could barely form a smile. Besides, the first time we met was when you and your parents came to Ian's and my Fourth of July party. We even found a picture of it, remember? When we were going through those boxes in my attic—”

“Seriously? You want to put up a picture of you and me when I was nine?”

John looked at him for a second. “Yeah, we probably don't want to do that.” John sat the picture down. “Can I at least burn this in the bonfire tonight?”

“You can, but it won't matter. I have a digital version on a flash drive hidden away where you will never find it.”

“Damn modern technology,” John grumbled.

“Besides,” Mark said. “That was the best night of my life.”

“Schlepping an old drunk guy home?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “No. Finding you there that night. And then getting to talk to you. I was so excited you remembered me.”

“And I couldn't believe this smoking hot, ripped, sexy man in front of me was the same little boy who used to deliver my newspaper.”

Mark groaned. “Yeah, ‘I used to have a crush on you when I was fifteen’ is probably the worst pickup line I could have ever chosen.”

John laughed but then sobered again as he looked at the picture. “Thank you,” he whispered solemnly.

Mark, still with his arm around John, cocked his head so he could look at his face. “For what, sweetie?”

John's throat got so choked up, he had to take a minute before he could form words. “For not giving up on me. For waiting me out. For loving me.”

Mark buried his head against John's shoulder blades. “Oh, baby. Thank you for giving us a real chance,” he murmured against John's neck.

John had been such an idiot in the beginning, and it had taken him ridiculously long to admit his feelings for Mark. But ever since he had... the last three years had been the best of his life. Finally, he knew what real love and partnership was. Mark made it so easy, because he was always just... there. Whenever John had a bad day at work, or traffic made him cranky, or something in the world let him down, Mark was there to catch him and love him. And John did the same for him, or at least he hoped he did. He certainly tried.

Things hadn't been easy the last three years. It had taken some adjustment on John's part to begin living with someone with an erratic college schedule, but he'd never been prouder than the day he watched Mark graduate. Mark was now focusing on the next part of his plan—to own his own massage clinic. That was going to take some old-fashioned sweat and determination, but John was going to be right there beside him, helping in any way he could.

There had also been issues with family and friends. Well, actually, their friends were all really supportive of them being together. Mark's family, on the other hand, took a little bit longer to come around. He and Mark had only been together "officially" for a couple of weeks when he took John along with him on a visit to his parents for dinner. They were puzzled at first but cordial when they recognized John from the old neighborhood; glad to see him again while in their minds trying to figure out how and why Mark had brought him to their house.

"Mark, I thought you said you were bringing your boyfriend with you?" Mark's mom had inquired, confused.

Mark smiled wide and reached for John's hand, entwining their fingers together. "I did. John and I are together now." The shock on his parents' faces that morphed into stony disapproval was probably not helped by the fact that Mark also kissed him on the cheek.

He and Mark ended up not staying for dinner, and there was not much communication on either side for several months. They were shocked and appalled that Mark was dating someone their own age, and that John, twenty years older than their beloved son, really loved and wanted to be with their son. The knowledge that Mark had already moved in with John only made the situation worse, never mind the fact that the two men had been friends for months before that. It took some time and many awkward dinners before Mark's parents finally started to come around. Now, everything was great, and John was so glad.

The situation had been the cause of some pain and discord between the two of them as John felt horrible for breaking Mark apart from his family. He threatened to break up several times, but Mark was strong and determined. He was not going to let anything come between the two of them.

Mark's unwavering devotion to him and to their relationship left John constantly in awe, and made him strive every day to be worthy of that devotion. He didn't know what made Mark believe in them so strongly, but damned if he was going to question it any more.

Not surprisingly, Mark had been the one to pop the question six months ago. John would have been happy forever with the way things were, but it was so important to Mark. John teased him frequently about being the first of his friends to "settle down and get married," and Mark's answer was always the same—"Damn straight. I am not letting you get away."

Mark trailed a line of kisses down the back of John's neck and he laid his head back on Mark's shoulder, sighing contentedly. Mark drew John's whole body into his tighter, and John groaned as their hips met. Mark's decadent mouth headed up John's jaw to his ear, kissing and nipping, and causing John's body to flush with heat all over.

"Where the hell—oh for fuck's sake, you two!" Mac's abrasive voice cut through their moment, and John sighed in frustration. Mark just laughed, burying his head in John's back again and wrapping his other arm around John.

"You've got a hotel room later for that. Right now you've got a hundred guests waiting to see you cut the damn cake."

John threw his head back and laughed. "All that time you were telling me to get laid and *now*, you're telling me I can't!"

"Well, you darn fools went and got married. That's what happens—no more sex. Why the hell do you think I'm still single? Now, come on, I let you have this stupid reception here, the least you could do is go enjoy it."

Mark and John pulled apart and John walked over to his oldest friend. "I do thank you, Mac, for all of this." They did the bro hug and a slap on the back, and though he would deny it to his grave, John saw tears shining in Mac's eyes.

"Just be happy," Mac said.

John reached out and took Mark's hand in his, and they smiled at each other.

“We are,” he said.

“Are you ready?” Mark asked him. “All or nothing?”

“All or nothing,” John replied, grinning.

And they walked out the door of the Shack, hand in hand, to the beach and their waiting friends and cake and champagne, and the rest of their lives.

The End

Author Bio

C. J. Anthony started reading and writing at an early age. She attributes her love of reading and romance to her mother, who not only taught her to read but also made countless trips to the library lugging piles of books home for her to read. She loved getting lost in the people and places and adventures she found in books, and it wasn't a far jump to start writing her own stories, early childhood tales about flower families and travelling to the moon with her best friend.

She recently was inspired to try writing again, this time with tales of beautiful men in love speaking to her and wanting their stories to be told. C. J. has always believed in true love and HEAs, even if there is angst and pain along the way—life is never perfect, after all, but everyone deserves a happy ending and someone there to catch them when they fall.

When she's not writing, she spends most of her time juggling a day job and freelance design work on the side, enjoying music, movies, spending time with friends and, of course, reading.

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