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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 8

## Table of Contents

<b>Love's Landscapes</b> .....	3
<b>The Hate Game</b> by Hennessee Andrews (contemporary, alpha male, enemies to lovers, humorous, spanking).....	6
<b>He Didn't Have to Be</b> by Tracey Michael (contemporary, gay for you, friends to lovers, homophobia, violence).....	46
<b>A Heart of Klondike Gold</b> by E. Davies (historical, blue collar, miners, enemies to lovers, slow burn).....	80
<b>The Heartbeat Under A White Coat</b> by CR Guiliano (contemporary, grief, hurt/comfort, in the closet, prior abuse).....	127
<b>High Five Dive</b> by Adrian Fridge (futuristic, light BDSM, enemies to lovers, interracial) .....	166
<b>Hinori's Journey</b> by Victoria Zagar (fantasy, science fiction, interspecies, m-preg) .....	194
<b>His</b> by Jack L. Pyke (contemporary, abduction, captivity, dub-con, extreme BDSM) .....	237
<b>His Heart Belongs to Daddy</b> by Harry K. Malone (contemporary, BDSM, Daddy/boy, age gap) .....	306
<b>His, No Matter What</b> by S.J. Lenox (contemporary, homophobia, college, reunited, incest)... ..	383
<b>I Spy Pecan Pie</b> by Anna Birmingham (contemporary, pie, cowboys, pie, lighthearted, pie, slow burn) .....	437
<b>If At First You Don't Succeed</b> by K.C. Faelan (contemporary, geeks/nerds, humorous, hurt/comfort, BDSM) .....	475
<b>In A Whole New Light</b> by Marie L. Nickett (contemporary, friends to lovers, gay for you, sweet/no sex) .....	537
<b>In the Flesh</b> by Jae T. Jaggart (paranormal, shifters, dark romance, horror/violent elements).....	568
<b>In Your Veins</b> by S.J. Eller (contemporary, hurt/comfort, angst, detailed description(s) of drug use)	606
<b>Want more?</b> .....	656

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance Anthology*

## Volume 8

### Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 8.

### Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

### Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

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## Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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# THE HATE GAME

By Hennessee Andrews

## Photo Description

Two men stand in front of an arched window. They are holding hands, shirtless, adoration for each other in their eyes. What is held behind their gaze, the emotion the camera cannot capture, is the intense feeling of hate one model has for the other. They may be each other's worst nightmare, but anything is possible, and they just might discover their sweetest dream.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Can you see the caring smiles on our faces and the love in our eyes? Yes? Well, that's bulls\*\*t!*

*We are models and it's our job to fake emotions. To tell you the truth, I hate his guts. He is arrogant, violent, smug, and manipulative. What's there to like? And why do I keep bumping into him everywhere I go? He's my worst nightmare! ... or maybe my sweetest dream?*

*Cheers!*

*Sincerely,*

*Elly*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** alpha male, enemies to lovers, humorous, male models, spanking, verbal banter

**Word Count:** 13,942

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# **THE HATE GAME**

**By Hennessee Andrews**

## Chapter 1

“You have to be kidding me,” Chase Woods said under his breath when he caught a glimpse of Heath Marcum on the opposite side of the room.

Heath stood there, chatting with the photographer, all smug and full of confidence as he flipped up the collar of his button-up shirt. His dark brown hair was wild, styled in an “I care not, but I’m fucking fabulous” sort of way. And what was up with his gleaming white teeth? Average people didn’t have teeth that damn white.

Infuriating, that was Heath with a capital-damn-I. Chase tried to get his irritation under control, but made a mental note to have a chat with his agent later. This was the third photo shoot in the last month where Heath was modeling as well. Chase couldn’t seem to get away from the guy.

“Ah, look what the cat dragged in,” Heath drawled with a hint of southern sarcasm.

And that was the other irritating quality about Heath. That damn accent! Hours and even days after being around Heath, Chase caught himself using certain phrases, or drawing out his words like the guy. Damn, would the madness ever end?

“Heath, uh, I thought you were sort of past the puberty stage,” Chase said and motioned to his chin, as if the guy had a zit rearing its ugly head there.

“Fuck!” Heath immediately touched his face and hurried to the nearest mirror.

*Dumbass.*

Chase was city from his attire to his intellect. He was well educated, but found modeling a more lucrative use of his time than sitting behind a desk reviewing stock portfolios. Some of the hottest brands requested him—well, until Heath came along. As far as Chase could see, Heath wasn’t all that and a bag of chips. Sure, he was gorgeous and well put together, but the guy was crass and rather rude. Heath was also a conceited, Dapper Don sort of dickhead. What was there to like?

Not far away, Heath was studying his reflection. Chase shook his head and wished the shoot was over with already. After receiving a quick pep talk from the photographer, Chase headed toward the dressing room, bumping into Heath on the way.



“Funny guy,” Heath said sarcastically and punched Chase in the arm.

Chase resisted the urge to rub the area. Heath was also too physical, and whether he meant it to or not, the punch stung. Instead, Chase tried to ignore Heath, shook his head, and continued to walk on by. The sooner this day was over, the better. Again, Chase wondered about the forces at work. Why advertisers lately liked the two of them together was anyone's guess. They were complete opposites. Heath was a little brawnier in the chest area, with thicker pectorals and nearly black hair. His skin was a golden bronze, hinting at his inner sun-lover. Chase, on the other hand, was on the lean side, muscular and well-defined, but not nearly as solid as Heath. Chase's skin was also lighter, he realized—about four shades lighter, in fact. The height difference was more than obvious as well. Heath was taller by more than three inches. They just didn't fit together.

After Chase dressed in the Italian suit with a white starched shirt underneath, he sucked in a deep breath and prayed for the strength to do his job and not get distracted by Heath's mouth. Heath always had something to say, whether anyone wanted to hear it or not. He was also verbally abusive in his tone and liked to jab Chase as much as possible while on set. Chase didn't understand why he did it, but suspected Heath tried to rile him in order to make Chase look like an amateur and steal upcoming jobs. Either way, Chase vowed to not let Heath get to him. He'd grown accustomed to his lifestyle, and if Heath for one minute, believed he could steal work from him, he had another think coming.

“All right, places,” the photographer, Joe Santory, barked. He was an all-business sort of guy and liked to get his shots, and get the hell out of the studio, for a shot of alcohol most of the time. Joe had an affinity for the hard stuff, but it didn't seem to affect his work. He was one of a handful of the most sought-after photographers in the industry.

The set resembled the boardroom of a Fortune 500 company. A large mahogany table set center, with brown leather high-back chairs surrounding it. A fake bottle of whiskey and two tumblers were placed at the end on a silver tray. The background mimicked a high-rise view of a city below.

“Heath, you take a seat at the end of the table. Chase, you sit adjacent to him on the right. I want a shot with the city scene as a backdrop.”

Chase took his place, and the set coordinator hurried to his side and fussed with a tie before wrapping it around his neck. She unbuttoned the top of his shirt, and allowed the tie to hang haphazardly and loosened against his chest.

“You two are in the middle of negotiations. It has been a long fucking day,” Joe said as he took light readings and adjusted his camera. He motioned for a crew member to move an umbrella light and took another reading with his meter. “A lot of money is on the line, and this deal needs to be closed. Heath, you’re the man with all the cards. You’re cocky and sure this deal will go your way. Chase, you’re in a tough spot, and don’t like what has been set before you.”

Chase nodded, agreeing with Joe’s last statement wholeheartedly. He took a casual posture in the chair and rested his elbows on the armrests.

Heath grinned and raised a brow. “I always like to be on top,” he said with amusement dancing in his dark eyes.

“Now, Chase, you’re exhausted, and Heath will offer a drink. Hold a document up off the table a little and look at it with disgust.”

That won’t be hard to manage, Chase thought, and left the scowl he knew was already on his face.

“All right, we’ll shoot a series. Get into character, and go with your gut based on the instructions I gave you,” Joe said and unhooked his camera from the tripod. “And go.”

Chase had worked with Joe a few times and knew he didn’t like to continue to give instructions. Joe liked to get his models into character, and allow the story to play out with him moving and capturing the scenes.

*Click, click.*

Heath began slowly pouring whiskey from the bottle. He grinned as if amused by his role. Chase glared as he looked at him, allowing Joe to catch a few shots. They continued with the scene. Heath leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table while scratching his jaw with his thumb and forefinger. Chase shifted in his seat. He leaned back casually and appraised Heath with a raised brow.

*Click, click.*

“I can see you’re falling into your role nicely,” Heath said and put his glass to his lips. His eyes twinkled with enjoyment. “Could it be you really despise me?” He sipped his drink and stared into Chase’s eyes.

Chase couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at his lips. It was a wry kind of smile, the type not meant to be affectionate. “How’d you guess?”

Heath leaned back with his drink in hand, taking on an authoritative yet relaxed posture. "I don't believe you hate me. Secretly, I think you have the hots for me."

Chase rubbed his eyes before clasping his hands together on the table in front of him and sitting upright.

*Click, click.*

"You're an arrogant asshole, Heath," Chase stated in a whisper and chewed his lip with irritation.

"Fucking brilliant. I love it!" Joe shouted and continued to move around the set, firing off shots.

Apparently, their roles were matched perfectly for this shoot. The love/hate emotions that bounced back and forth between Chase and Heath pleased Joe. The man was in a fury, kneeling, standing, hurrying around, firing off shots, and motioning for them to continue.

"You say the sweetest things, Chase," Heath said and sipped from his glass again. "I just don't understand what there is about me that's not to like." He paused and poured himself another. "I mean, I'm drop dead gorgeous. I have a body built for sinning—"

Chase waved his hand, stopping him. "You're a conceited dick." He reached for his own glass, suspecting it to be colored water, needing to quench his drying throat. A burn tickled his tongue, and he realized the bottle wasn't a mere prop, but rather the real thing.

Needing to curb the anger and the desire to choke Heath, Chase downed the glass and thumped it back to the table. The entire time, Joe captured each moment.

"Good shit, huh?" Heath asked and wet his lips before partaking again. "Joe only buys the best."

Chase wasn't a whiskey drinker, but he enjoyed the burn that raced down his throat to his stomach. "It'll do."

"So, uh, I was thinking," Heath began as he wrote on a piece of paper in front of him, glancing up every couple of seconds as he doodled. "Me, you. My bed. Later." He slid the note over to Chase.

Chase picked it up and read it.

---

*I'd fuck you so hard and good you'd become addicted to me.*

Below his statement were two stick people. One was bent over a bed and the other stood behind him with a long dick in its hand.

Chase crumpled up the paper and tossed it to the side.

"Fucking great emotion!" Joe shouted.

Chase felt his nostrils flare. The only thing he would become addicted to was the glorious time spent not seeing Heath... at all. Heath seemed pleased with his reaction and chuckled. He began to write on another piece of paper. It was then Chase reached for the bottle to pour himself an extra drink. His hands begged to wrap around Heath's neck and squeeze instead.

Lights continued to flash from the strobes in sync with the camera. Chase barely noticed, keeping in character with Joe's instructions, and probably more so given the history of hate he had for Heath. *I'm so going to get lit later.*

Heath seemed pleased with his latest creation and slid it across the table with a wide smile on his lips. Chase rolled his eyes and lifted the edge of the paper, curiosity getting the better of him.

*My dick, your ass.*

Below was Heath's third-grade artwork of a rounded butt with a penis pointing toward it.

Again Chase crumpled it up, with a little more force and irritation this time. "Won't ever happen," he said, and thumped Heath between the eyes with the ball of paper.

"Aw, come on, baby," Heath said in a sickeningly sweet southern drawl. He leaned back and propped his elbows on the arms of the chairs and raised his hands. "It's just sex."

"I'd rather jack off, but thanks," Chase replied as he grabbed the glass of whiskey and gulped it down.

"Hot damn!" Joe shouted and placed his camera at the end of the table. "I got what I needed."

Heath grinned and glanced over at Chase. "I didn't."

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

Heath enjoyed today's shoot more than any he'd been to in a while. Underneath his cocky smile and false bravado, though, he hated the fact that the one man he desired most despised him. Being a model wasn't an easy line of work. And while deep down he had his insecurities, he couldn't let them be known. Advertisers didn't want to see weakness in their spreads. They wanted confidence.

Confidence was the one trait Heath lacked. He tried hard to keep in his role, but like today, it was a difficult challenge. He was a gay man, but mostly had been called for jobs depicting tough men in high positions. He had to bring all of his ammo with him, and continually give himself pep talks during each and every shoot.

The problem with his act was the fact he could no longer differentiate between the real Heath and the one everyone wanted to see. Was he really a conceited dickhead? He pondered the thought as he slid on his jeans in the dressing room. Well, he decided, he did have the panache for being a dick, even off camera. And in a so-so sort of way, he had to be a little arrogant, given his profession. Either way, he hated that Chase thought so, but secretly knew the guy sort of enjoyed his banter.

*One day, Chase. One day, you will be mine.*

While Heath had been talking with Joe after the shoot, Chase darted off, dressing and leaving before Heath could catch up to him. Heath had it bad for Chase, and had since they first met a year ago. Over the past few months they had worked together quite a bit. Heath had made it a mission to break Chase down, one piece at time. Sooner or later, Chase would realize how insanely attracted to him he was. Currently, Chase wouldn't admit it, but someday he would.

Heath finished dressing and headed out. He fished his phone from his pocket and called his agent. He had caught wind of an upcoming job for a well-known men's underwear company. The campaign was aptly named "Show Your Colors". The CEO of the company was not only gay, but knew he had a market for his brand with the right advertising. From what little Heath had heard, the shoot required a loving gay couple. Well, acting couple that is, and he wanted the job.

"Hey, Tony, how's my favorite straight guy?" Heath teased.

"I, my friend, am fabulous. I just got a call from Joe about the shoot today. He's fucking thrilled," Tony replied.

"Awesome," Heath said and pumped his arm in celebration. Joe wasn't the easiest photographer to please. Kudos like those would only help Heath's career.

"So, what can I do for you besides take twenty percent?" Tony laughed.

"There is a job for that underwear campaign in a couple of weeks," Heath said as he slid into his car.

"It's as good as yours, my friend," Tony replied. "I've already been in touch with them."

"Are you kidding?" Heath asked, feeling a wide grin overcome him.

"No, sir, I don't kid. Well, not about jobs anyway."

"Ah, man, that is great news, but I have a request."

"Sure, anything," Tony replied.

"Get Chase Woods the other spot."

Tony snorted over the phone. "I don't represent Chase."

Heath leaned back in his seat. "Twenty percent says you do right now."

"Okay, okay," Tony said with a growl. "You're lucky I've worked with the ad team before. Otherwise, I wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of making it happen."

"You're the man who gets shit done," Heath said as he merged into traffic. "I like that about you."

"I'm not making any guarantees. All I can do is make a suggestion to them. That's it," Tony warned. "And by the way, why do you want Chase? I thought you two were mortal enemies. Is there something afoot I need to know about?"

"No, except for the fact I want to fuck him."

Tony coughed over the phone, obviously mid-drink of something. "Oh, geesh, I didn't need to know that!"

Heath chuckled. "You asked."

"Damn, man, you can't say shit like that to me and not expect me to spit my soda everywhere. Fuck, what a mess. Gotta go," Tony said and cut off their conversation.

Heath continued to laugh and tossed his phone into the passenger seat. He really got a kick out of aggravating Tony. Poor guy. He made the next right and headed toward his apartment building in the heart of the downtown district. It wasn't much, but it was strategically located for work that was in the city, and also to a club or two.

Heath hated going home to an empty apartment, though. Secretly, he desired a mate. Random trysts here and there did little to satisfy him. He also had to be careful, not wanting to wind up in some sort of exposé. While he wasn't famous yet, Heath was slowly becoming known more and more with each job he landed. The upcoming underwear spread would do well for his image, and also his heart if Tony could get Chase in as well.

After parking, Heath trudged up the long flight of stairs to his apartment with multiple locks on the door. One couldn't be too careful in the area he lived in. The money was coming in more and more all the time, but not enough to afford better accommodations at the moment.

Once inside, he stared at the cold, redbrick wall opposite him. Sparse seating and an open floor plan put everything on display with the exception of his tiny bathroom. Heath had positioned the big screen so that he could watch from the couch or his bed. Most times, his bed was the preferred spot.

After a quick shower and a call for takeout, Heath settled on his bed with his Chinese cuisine. He flipped on the television and only casually watched. The device was more or less company, distracting noise to the solitary life he was actually leading. He chewed his lo mein thoughtfully, thinking about the day and Chase. Damn, the guy was gorgeous. Chase's green eyes mesmerized him, sucked him in whether they were glaring or smiling at him. Most times, any look Chase offered him was in the form of a glare, which, by the way, was the hottest look the guy possessed. Maybe that was the reason Heath goaded him so much, because his eyes were fucking sexy as hell when filled with hate.

"All that emotion," Heath whispered to no one but himself and took another big bite. A long noodle hung from his chin and he slurped it up, wiping his chin afterward. "How I'd like to have one night with him."

It would happen, and Heath was certain of it. Behind Chase's hateful stare was a hint of interest. Chase could pretend all he wanted, but the truth was their attraction for each other was growing with each encounter. Hate and love—the feelings seemed so opposite, but in truth they were really the same to a degree. Both were led by strong emotions, and it could be hard to differentiate between

the two when affairs of the heart were concerned. At least, Heath felt that way where Chase was concerned. If Chase only passively disliked him, well, Heath would know he wasn't interested at all. But since Heath knew he stirred deep emotion in Chase, well, game on. Chase could lie to himself, but secretly he wanted Heath as much as Heath wanted him, and maybe more so.

With his meal finished and boredom settling in, Heath got comfortable in his bed and flipped through the channels. He supposed he could go to a club for a while, but dismissed the thought. Wednesdays were notoriously as boring as his apartment. Only the hardcore drinkers or desperate seemed to venture out for some reason. He was neither, but did enjoy a hearty drink from time to time.

"Not a damn thing on worth watching," he complained and tossed the remote to his side. He stared up at the ceiling, not yet sleepy enough to go to bed, but tired enough that he didn't have the energy to get up and put a movie in the DVD player.

He lay there and thought of Chase and the shoot that day. He smiled and recalled how riled Chase got when he slid him those notes with his silly artwork on them. The look on Chase's face was priceless, and also sexy as hell. The best part was when Chase had thrown the wad of paper at him. *Mmm*, he thought, *such fire and spirit*. Yeah, he'd like to divide and conquer that ass.

Outside of desiring Chase so much his balls hurt at times, Heath was attracted to more than just the physical. Chase was intelligent and worldly, quite the opposite of himself. Heath was just a country bumpkin that had had a stroke of good luck and landed the right job at the right time. Hell, Heath had never even been out of the country.

Born and raised in Tennessee, Heath couldn't shake the accent, although he tried. Tony advised him to keep that part of him, citing that it helped when wooing advertisers, especially female clients. Everything was an act, all designed to get his way, or rather, their way. Money was the object, and only lately had it begun to roll in with significance.

The money was great, especially for a guy whose other option was working in a factory back home. Heath didn't complain and reveled in his growing riches. But he wanted more, needed more. Each time he saw Chase, Heath was reminded of what he wanted desperately, but had yet to obtain.

His cell on his nightstand buzzed, and he reached for it. "What's up, Tony?"

"Friday night you have a party to attend, courtesy of the advertisers from the shoot today. They got the preliminary, unedited images earlier, and were thrilled."



“Wow, that’s great news,” Heath replied, more excited about the opportunity to see Chase again than anything.

“Boy, you’re going places. Schmooze your ass off. These people are big names with lots of connections.”

“Are you coming?” Heath asked. He really liked to have Tony with him at functions like this.

“No, you’re on your own. I have a meeting out of town.”

“Fuck,” Heath whispered. He was small town, a fish out of water. The only part of his occupation he was really good at was on set. Talking and ass-kissing wasn’t something he enjoyed doing.

“You’ll be fine. Don’t worry.” Tony tried to reassure him.

“I think we need to renegotiate our contract, Tony.”

“Have I ever let you down?” Tony asked and chuckled.

“Not yet, but hell, my mouth can get me in oodles of trouble.”

“Just rub elbows for a while. Put on your award-winning smile and kiss ass like you enjoy it.”

“Fine. I’ll be there,” Heath grumbled.

“I’ll email you the address and particulars. Get some sleep.”

Heath clicked his phone off and chewed his lip.

The text message alert on his phone chimed and he almost didn’t look at it, but decided he better.

*BTW, Chase is in.*

A smile crept across his face. That little bit of info would help him get through the week and the party on Friday. Heath knew he couldn’t let on that he knew about the upcoming shoot, and hoped Chase didn’t know the particulars, like the fact Heath was the other model for the project. Some things were better left to be a surprise.

“Oh, Chase, you sexy thing you,” Heath whispered, snuggling down deeper into his fluffy pillows, and closing his eyes. He could see Chase’s expressive gaze and the way his plump lips looked when he chewed his bottom lip. Chase didn’t realize, but that sexy act sent a jolt of blood rushing to Heath’s dick every freaking time. How Heath would love to bite that lip for him. Yeah, he’d nibble on it all right, as well as every inch of his delectable body.

With the stress of the day behind him, Heath allowed his mind to fantasize about how hot his first encounter with Chase would be. Heath knew well every inch of Chase's chest and abs since that shirtless spread they'd worked for a jeans manufacturer a few weeks back. Chase was nice and lean, with defined muscles and a sprinkle of dark hair that led south below his waist. Heath had imagined on more than one occasion seeing Chase nude, and even more times he'd imagined how Chase would look bent over his bed naked.

The urge to stroke his dick hit Heath like a fast-moving taxi in rush hour traffic. His cock strained in his formfitting boxers, begging to be touched. Heath would rather Chase's hand do the work, but since that wouldn't happen tonight, he slipped his own hand into the stretchy cotton underwear. Gentle strokes began while he imagined Chase's nude body and brought his cock to full attention.

"*Mmm*," Heath softly moaned and tugged. Inside his mind, Heath was nipping Chase's neck, slowly making his way down to his chest. Chase moaned and fisted Heath's hair in his hands. Heath flicked his tongue over his hard nipples. Heath teased and laved the erect flesh, stopping to gently bite and pull back the tender nub in his mind.

"Oh, God, yeah," Chase groaned and caressed Heath's face. The tender touch of Chase's hand furthered Heath's desire, propelling him on, as he kissed down Chase's abdomen to the soft curls that surrounded his prick.

Heath began to stroke himself with a little more vigor as his mind continued to feed him erotic images. He dared to guess what Chase kept hidden, but suspected he carried an adequate-sized dick, perfect for Heath's mouth to wrap around. And wrap around it he would. He would suck Chase into a fucking dreamland if he ever got a chance.

*Mmm*, nice and wide, Heath decided, based on his mind's interpretation of Chase's size and girth. He sank his mouth around Chase's pole, teasing with his tongue, almost tasting precum on his taste buds. He began to suck with more enthusiasm, pulling soft cries of pleasure from Chase's mouth. The moment was dreamlike as energy pulsed, firing off the desire that Heath knew well zinged between them. Chase hissed and ran his hands through Heath's thick locks, gripping tight, channeling pure lust with every pump of Heath's mouth.

Before he could continue into hotter scenes, Heath's release burst forth, coating the inside of his boxers and making his stomach a sticky mess.

"Damn, it has been too fucking long."

\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3

“Okay, here’s the deal,” Chase said and paused when he noticed his flamboyant friend already allowing his eyes to wander to men in the banquet hall. “Hey, snap out of it.” He flicked his fingers in front of Nate’s face.

“I’m here. Okay, I promise I won’t let you down,” Nate said and nodded enthusiastically. “Can I take a sneaky peek here and there? Pretty please?”

Nate was a good friend, but unfocused as hell. They had become friends after a blind date. There was no love connection and never would be. Since that time, Nate was Chase’s main source of support, a trusted friend, even though Nate leaned toward the extreme from time to time.

This was a rare occasion for Nate to be dressed so normal, so male. Chase chuckled and patted him on the arm. “Okay, sneaky peek all you want, but when a guy named Heath comes around, you better be my bitch.”

“Ooh, your bitch?” Nate teased with a quirky grin on his face. “Honey, I aim to please.”

Chase closed his eyes and fought back the laughter welling inside of him. Nate was funny without trying. Really, anyone who cross-dressed and could walk in a pair of stilettos had to have a damn good sense of humor. “Right. Save that for your date later.”

“Mmm, look at the ass on that,” Nate said with a purr in his voice and pointed.

“No pointing.” Chase scolded him and Nate pouted. “Come on. Let’s make an appearance and get the hell out of here as soon as possible.”

Chase wasn’t big on functions like these, but he could network with the best of them. This was a good place to meet those who’d hired him, and also ensure further photo ops in the future. So, yeah, this was a critical part of being a model.

As they walked, Nate behaved, only passively staring from time to time. Chase’s goals in bringing Nate along were to put off Heath, aggravate him a little, and maybe see how jealous he could get. *Did I just think that? Nah, I don’t want to know if he is jealous. Do I?*

In an instant, Chase felt troubled. He hated Heath, despised him, and hoped he got hit by a fast-moving bus, or maybe a taxi full of clowns. He thought to

himself and chuckled. *A taxi full of clowns? What a decidedly disturbing, yet humorous, image.*

“Ooh, champagne,” Nate squealed and snatched a flute from a silver tray the waiter held out for him. “Honey buns, would you care for some?”

Chase snorted and rubbed his eyes. This was going to be one crazy night.

A half dozen introductions and handshakes later, Chase stood by a window, looking out over the city lights on the horizon. The sun had begun to set and the city was coming to life with twinkling lights of various colors and sizes. He loved the view, and would rather be alone on a rooftop with someone he connected with while sharing a bottle of champagne than rubbing elbows with advertisers. But that was the nature of the beast, and he had to participate in the entirety of the modeling world, not just the parts he enjoyed.

Nate had said he needed to powder his nose ten minutes previous and had yet to surface. Chase's agent approached and introduced him to the Italian designer of the suit he wore for the shoot earlier in the week. Chase smiled and made small talk, all the while remembering his manners and trying not to seem in a hurry to get out of the place.

High class and formal attire flowed through the hall. This was business at its finest, and money scented the air. Women sparkled with expensive jewelry and extravagant dresses. Chase himself wore a suit, but had forgotten his tie. He really hated the things and was sort of glad he'd forgotten. Instead, he left his collar unbuttoned, going for a sophisticated and casual look. Heck, he was a model. He decided he could have done worse.

Still no Nate and Heath had made his appearance. Chase rolled his eyes. Even from as far away as he was, Chase could hear the twang of Heath's loud voice. “Where in the hell is he?” Chase muttered under his breath when Heath waved from across the room.

*Fuck, he saw me.*

Chase had a little time, judging by all the handshakes being exchanged with Heath. As usual, Heath seemed to wow the fuck out of them, and smiles abounded. How he really hated that guy. So why was he watching him so intently? He turned around to gaze out over the cityscape. He should be out shaking more hands and kissing babies, but he really wasn't in the mood. All day he'd felt odd, and it got worse when Heath arrived.

Realizing his anxious feelings stemmed from Heath, Chase got control of his attitude, deciding to put on a smile and woo the fuck out of money. His

livelihood depended on gatherings like this, and he couldn't afford to mess it up.

A half an hour went by, and Chase had basically introduced himself to everyone in the place. Two women old enough to be his mother invited him home with them, and one blatantly grabbed his crotch. He had to admit, he wasn't expecting that. Across the room, Chase could see Heath coming his way and internally groaned.

Before he could wonder about Nate's whereabouts, Nate patted him on the ass and slid up next to him. "Hi, love. Miss me much?"

"Did you fall in?" Chase had to ask. By his last estimate, Nate had been gone nearly an hour.

"Better," Nate said and grinned widely. "I met a cute guy and we may or may not have found the janitor's closet."

Chase shook his head and chuckled. "You're such a slut."

"Jealous?" Nate snapped back.

"Hardly," Chase replied and noticed Heath closing the gap. "There he is."

"*Mmm*, can I take that to go?" Nate stared at Heath and wet his lips.

"No!" Chase barked, and Nate looked at him with a quizzical expression.

"Uh, huh. So you hate this guy? *Pfft*. Whatever. You want to fuck him. I know it."

"No, I-I don't," Chase stuttered and shut up when Heath was within earshot.

"If you don't, I will," Nate said in singsong voice and put on a smile when Heath walked up.

An immediate hum of energy pulsed through Chase's body when Heath grinned at him, and he hated it. When Heath wasn't running his mouth, spilling out tactless sarcasm, he was quite a sight to behold.

"Chase, you look dashing," Heath said with his signature sarcasm, and gave him an appraising look from head to toe.

"You too. I didn't realize one could hide their tail and horns so effectively. Kudos," Chase replied quickly, and Nate giggled next to him.

"Hi, I'm Heath, Chase's future boyfriend." Heath extended his hand to Nate.

Nate smiled. "I'm Nate, and get in line, honey."

With that said, Heath let out a loud, obnoxious laugh. "I kind of like this guy, Chase."

Chase put his arm around Nate and pulled him close. It felt odd and he tried to dismiss the feeling. Nate was a friend, not a lover, and while he could act for the camera, real life was a different story. Nate played along and wrapped his arm around Chase's waist.

"So, Nate, what kind of work are you in?" Heath asked with amusement evident on his face.

Chase didn't know what was so humorous, but he played it off. Now, if Nate was dressed like he normally was, Chase might understand.

"Sales," Nate said and looked up at Chase.

"I see," Heath said with a purr and sipped from his flute. He turned his attention back to Chase and grinned with that irritating, smug, quality Chase despised most. "So, uh, tomorrow night. Me. You. Dinner?"

Nate snapped his fingers and became indignant. "Excuse me? I believe I told you to get in line, not ask my boyfriend out with me standing here."

Heath laughed with enthusiasm, deep and throaty, loud enough that heads turned to see what was so funny. "Oh, my." He held his stomach and tried to contain his amusement. "If y'all think I'm buying your act, you're mistaken."

"What is that supposed to mean? There is no act," Chase snapped back.

"Yeah, there is no act!" Nate said, acting wounded. He hugged Chase around the waist.

Heath nodded and wet his lips with sickening slowness, eyes leveled with a cocky expression. "Chase, do you hold all your boyfriends with such non-affection? Look at yourself, limp wristed, barely making contact. It's almost like you're posing for an awkward prom picture."

"For your information, cocky boy, we're not much on PDA," Nate chirped before kissing Chase on the cheek.

*Wow, weird.*

Chase wasn't expecting Heath to see through their act. Damn, this sucked. A waiter walked by and Chase snatched another glass of champagne and immediately gulped it down. He could feel perspiration already beading on his temples. Was it that hot in there?

“Excuse me, lovebirds. I have a couple more introductions I need to make,” Heath said, giving them another quizzical look and a grin before walking away.

“*Mmm*, break me off a piece of that,” Nate whispered.

Chase elbowed Nate in the ribs. “Trust me, he isn’t worth your time.”

Nate turned and chuckled. “Yeah, probably not, but he is most definitely worth yours.”

“I don’t think so,” Chase replied and set down his empty glass. “Stay out of trouble while I’m gone.”

“Okay, honey buns,” Nate teased, and Chase rolled his eyes.

Chase walked with long strides, heading for the men’s room. He was hot and all out of sorts. Tugging at his collar, Chase wished for an arctic breeze to blow through the room to help cool him. Must be the champagne, he thought, and felt better as he pushed through the bathroom door.

Once inside, Chase approached a sink and cranked on the cold water. He splashed water over his face, wishing he was anywhere but there. He still couldn’t understand how Heath saw through their act. Was he holding Nate limp wristed? Chase had to admit, holding Nate felt strange, sort of like hugging his kid brother for pictures when he was younger.

Nah, Heath was just bullshitting. The guy wasn’t that fucking intuitive, Chase decided, and shut off the water. After grabbing a handful of paper towels, he dried his face while closing his eyes, and prayed for the strength to make it through the remainder of the evening.

An all-too-familiar voice drawled, “Someone once said ‘The essence of lying is in deception, not in words’.”

Chase froze, slowly removing the towels from his face. He swallowed hard, nervousness making the heat return in a tidal wave. “John Ruskin, but I’m pretty sure you didn’t know that,” he said, once he had his composure.

Heath beamed. “Maybe, maybe not, but my act is better than yours.”

“Damn, you are so full of yourself. How do you have room in your body for your entire ego?” Chase asked and tossed the damp paper towels into the trash.

Heath smiled with his cocky little grin, the one he seemed to get when he felt at an advantage. A quiver rolled through Chase’s stomach and he tried to ignore it. When Heath stepped closer to Chase, Chase backed up a step, feeling

more anxious than ever before. They were alone, in the men's room, and the look in Heath's eyes was a mix of humor and determination.

"I love the banter, Chase. Each time you speak negatively of me, you give yourself away."

Chase stepped back again as Heath continued to approach. "*Pfft*, I don't know what you're talking about."

Heath grinned, now a few inches away, and Chase was out of places to go. He bumped against the wall and Heath stopped, appraising him for a moment before skimming his tongue over his bottom lip. "I think you do."

"You are invading my personal space," Chase replied. He felt a little out of breath, but it wasn't because he was claustrophobic.

"Am I making you nervous? Or is it that I'm turning you on?" Heath asked, closing what was left of the gap between their bodies.

Chase wanted to shove Heath away, but didn't. His body buzzed with little shocks. The proximity of their bodies was so close he could feel Heath's heat radiating off him. Chase swallowed quickly, trying to hold his ground. "Neither. And you're wrong about me and Nate. We've been dating for a few months."

Heath chuckled low in his throat, the sound stirring Chase deep in his groin. "So uh, I guess you two have an open relationship then. Lucky me. I ran into Nate and a bus boy earlier, coming out of a janitor's closet while zipping their slacks."

Heath grinned triumphantly and Chase knew he had been busted. Words couldn't dig him out at this point. His anger and frustration propelled him to push Heath back a step. Heath laughed with pride and quickly grabbed Chase's wrists, shoving him back to the wall.

"Busted," Heath said and pushed his body hard against Chase. He leaned close to Chase's ear, his hot breath sending a jolt of awareness pinging throughout Chase's body. "That's so cute. You wanted to make me jealous."

And there was Heath's mouth rattling again.

"Fuck off," Chase said with a growl and struggled in Heath's hold.

"Why do you fight the attraction between us?" Heath asked with a more serious expression now.



Chase stared into Heath's dark eyes, and for a moment he got lost in them. *How did he answer that? There was no attraction between them.* His semi-erect dick said otherwise. God, how he really hated the guy. "Don't flatter yourself."

It was then Heath pressed his lips firmly to Chase's. Tilting his head, Heath angled his mouth and forced his tongue between Chase's lips. A soft moan vibrated unexpectedly from Chase's throat, and between the hate and the rage he was feeling, desire tamped down the fire in his gut. He reciprocated, overwhelmed, giving back with intensity. Their tongues collided, swept together in a sensual dance. Heath's mouth was hard against his, demanding, and taking what he wanted. Why did Heath stir such deep emotion in him? And why did it feel so fucking good to be at his mercy?

Heath slowed, teasing with his tongue, pulling back a little to trace Chase's mouth. Chase took a shuddering breath and opened his eyes when Heath stopped. Their eyes met, noses touching. Heath rasped out a shaky breath and squeezed Chase's wrists. "I knew you wanted me."

Chase growled, his anger boiling out of control, and used all the energy he could to break free of Heath's hold. "You're a fucking asshole!"

Heath stood shocked for a moment and wiped his mouth with his fingers. Slowly a grin curved over his lips. "Does the truth hurt much?"

"Go to hell," Chase replied and pushed past him, leaving in search of Nate and the nearest exit.

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## Chapter 4

It had been two weeks since Chase had seen Heath and he was on the fence about whether he was happy or bothered by the fact. So far, his wish had come true and he was having second thoughts about wishing such. But damn, the guy was so obnoxious, so infuriatingly handsome, and so sexy with his sarcastic charm until Chase thought he'd go mad just thinking about him. And why was he worrying about such nonsense anyway? He asked himself that question as he readied for the shoot less than two hours away. The dream spread, the moneymaker, the image-propelling ad of his career was literally right in front of him.

Thoughts of Heath did nothing more than internally rile him, replays of the scene in the men's room with Heath a distraction. That was something Chase didn't need at the moment. He continued to shave and directed his thoughts to a more positive note. Nervousness rose a little when he realized just how big his upcoming day really was. A whole new world could open up for him, taking him from small time to big time.

He rinsed his razor and set it aside. Staring into the mirror, he gave himself a small pep talk. "Don't blow it."

Chase's stomach churned and growled, but he didn't dare eat for fear his anxiety would bring it back up. He settled for a cup of coffee instead, and sipped it as he pulled a pair of jeans from his closet. Walking out and into his bedroom, he tossed his jeans to the bed and sat down. Why wouldn't Heath's image leave his mind? And why couldn't he stop thinking about him?

*This was getting ridiculous*, he thought, rubbing his eyes with irritation and confusion. After he had left the party with Nate, he made the mistake of telling his friend about what happened with Heath. Since then, Nate had bombarded him almost daily with talk of the guy, encouraging him to go for it. Chase shook his head. That would be a monumentally stupid idea. Heath was a self-absorbed ass, not capable of thinking of anyone but himself. The thought of having any type of relationship with him, well, it was ridiculous, because Heath had made it clear he was in it for sex, and sex only.

Chase wasn't one to indulge in his desires, quick flings or otherwise, especially not with someone in the industry. No, falling into bed with Heath would be a big mistake, and one he'd be reminded of a lot, judging by how often they were on the same shoots.

“Damn,” Chase whispered, annoyed at himself for allowing Heath to bother him. This wasn’t like Chase. He didn’t lose control. He didn’t fantasize about men he’d rather punch than look at. “What an infuriating asshole.”

He stood up, placing his coffee cup on the dresser, and reached for his jeans. He shoved each leg in with annoyance, knowing he needed to shake it off. The upcoming shoot was to be a depiction of a loving couple. The only emotion Chase could convey at the moment was frustration. Maybe he needed a drink to calm his nerves, he wondered, then decided against it. Where was all of this coming from? Was it because the break he sought from Heath happened, and he wasn’t happy about it after all?

“Ridiculous,” he said out loud as he pulled a shirt from a hanger and jerked it over his head.

After slipping into his loafers, Chase brushed his teeth, checked the time, and headed out. He looked forward to a nice brisk walk, anything to help ease the emotional battle taking place in his mind. Jogging down the stairs, he relaxed a little, the exercise getting his blood pumping.

### *Focus.*

Outside, a cool spring breeze blew on his face, and the bright sunshine lightened his mood. He squinted and shielded his eyes, looking for a cab to hail. People moved efficiently around him, all heading to jobs of their own. Horns honked, cars and buses zoomed by. He smiled and inhaled a deep breath of crisp morning air. Waving his hand and whistling caught him a cab, and he slid in the backseat, giving the address of his destination as he did so.

The cab lurched forward, the driver honking his horn, trying to merge into traffic. Rock music lightly played on the radio. Chase tapped out the beat on his leg while he stared out the windows as buildings raced by. The distractions helped ease and wash away his anxiety. His mind went blank as colors melded together in a steady stream.

### *It’s going to be a good day.*

Fifteen minutes later, the cab stopped in front of Chase’s destination. He pulled out his wallet and paid the driver, giving him a nice tip as well. After he got out and the cab zoomed away, Chase looked at the entrance of an old, but renovated building. The property hinted of architecture from the thirties, with tall arched windows, a white stone façade, and intricate designs on the exterior. Large steps led to a landing with tall pillars and neatly trimmed trees in large box planters. He took a deep breath and started up the stairs. *Break a leg.*

After meeting with the photographer and editor for the shoot, Chase was directed to a room to change into the company's apparel. He shut the door behind him, surveying the rack of underwear in the middle of the room. A small chaise of gold with a paisley design set on the far wall, with an ornate expressionist painting above. Gilded molding encased the angles of the room, and an oversized Persian rug completed the décor.

According to the photographer, multiple shots would be taken in front of the large cathedral window in the main room. Various colors of underwear lined the rack, some with stripes, others with pop art, while others were solid, including a pair of tighty-whities.

Chase kicked off his shoes as he unbuttoned his shirt. Apparently there was a shooting order, he realized, when he noticed another rack of underwear on the opposite side of the room, lined up accordingly. He tossed his shirt onto the chaise and unfastened his jeans, wondering who he'd be paired up with for the shoot. As he bent down to untangle his foot from his jeans, he heard the door open and close. He continued with his task, suspecting the other model had finally arrived. Being in various states of undress with other models was the norm, so he didn't think much of being bent over, slipping his jeans off.

When a hand connected with his ass, slapping hard enough to make him lurch forward, Chase stumbled and turned. "You have to be fucking kidding me!"

Heath grinned, casually walking to the opposite side of the room while he pulled his T-shirt over his head. "Hello, lover."

*This isn't happening.*

"I'm not your lover," Chase said with hate in his tone and glared. His ass was on fire.

"I don't see why not," Heath said. His wide chest was bare, and his fingers were unbuttoning his jeans. "You're single. I'm single."

"And you're an asshole," Chase replied and turned to the rack of underwear.

Damn, his ass really hurt.

Heath shucked off his shoes and jeans. Chase tried not to look, but found his gaze veering in Heath's direction. Underneath, Heath was well, wow, Chase decided, yet tried to ignore the guy's amazing washboard abs, the defined pecs, his hard nipples, little cute nubs of flesh. Chase always figured him for a boxer-brief sort of man, and closed his eyes while trying to wash away the image of the navy fabric hugging his thick, muscled thighs.

*How fucked up is this?*

Chase flipped through the underwear, although he didn't need to. The designer knew his size, they were all the same size, and in freaking order. *Gah*, he shouted in his head. Maybe he should seek modeling jobs in a different country so he could get away from Heath.

It wasn't fair, not by a long shot. Chase couldn't understand why he was so attracted to a guy he hated so much. Why should such a conceited dick have it all?

"I'm still holding out for dinner with you," Heath said and blatantly spoke as he shoved his briefs down, causing Chase to look in his direction.

In front of him was Michelangelo's masterpiece. Toned and fit from head to toe, Heath's body commanded his attention. Thick hips and muscled thighs made him look ready for battle in a kilt on a Scottish highland. The only thing he was missing was the fair skin and, obviously, the kilt.

*No, no, no!*

"See something you like?" Heath asked, unabashed by his nakedness, standing with hands outstretched, begging for Chase's eyes to drink him in.

"Uh, no." Chase lied and averted his gaze. He pulled the first pair of briefs from the hanger, nervous about taking his last article of clothing off.

Heath was waiting. He stood proud with arms now crossed over his chest. His prick hung, not affected by the cool air or sizzling heat zinging through the room. Chase felt a quiver in his sack and prayed to whatever gods had the power to tamp his stiffening dick down. Turning his back to Heath, Chase shoved down his briefs, stepping out of them before tossing them to the chaise with his clothes. He could feel Heath's eyes watching him.

"Stop staring at my ass," Chase said and bent over to put on the first pair of underwear for the shoot.

"You have a cute little mole on your butt," Heath said, snickering behind him.

Chase was mid-thigh with the briefs. "Do not!" He turned his head to glare at Heath.

Heath was smiling with his head cocked to the side. "Do too."

Looking down, Chase of course couldn't see his ass, but was curious to know if he really did. "Oh, fuck this." He gave up and finished covering his anatomy with a pair of patriotic underwear.

“Stars,” Heath noted, and pulled his first pair from the rack, striped red and white. “I’d like to put a stripe in your star.”

“Damn, is everything about sex with you?” Chase asked and worked to keep his mind from conjuring images.

Heath stopped and scrunched his brows together, apparently deep in thought. “Huh, well, sometimes I think about food. At times, I think about food and sex.” He laughed. “Hot combination.”

“Bacon and grits?” Chase asked with sarcasm.

“Actually,” Heath started, and stepped into his striped underwear. “I prefer whipped cream.”

Thoughts of Heath’s stiff prick coated with whipped cream immediately flashed in Chase’s mind.

“You know, foreplay is really underrated,” Heath said and snapped the elastic band.

“I’m not even going to ask,” Chase replied, averting his gaze once again and starting for the door. He was asking for all he was receiving by engaging in conversation with Heath to begin with, and that’s not what he wanted.

“No need. I’ll tell you anyway,” Heath said, following Chase out the door. “Of course, at times, I like to just get to the good stuff. You know, bodies banging together, skin slapping, cum dripping.”

“You’re still an asshole,” Chase said, borrowing Nate’s singsong tone.

Heath stopped Chase at the end of the hall, grabbing his arm and turning Chase around to face him. “Don’t act like you haven’t thought about it. About us together.”

“I don’t.”

Heath grinned and licked his lips. “Baby, I grew up in an area where a poker face can make or break you. My parents played cards every Friday night. I caught on to the tells that people give when they’re bluffing, and you, you are bluffing.”

“Nice, so now if your modeling career fails, you have a fallback as a hustler. Too bad you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. I don’t think of you at all. Well, except for the few moments I envision you getting hit by a taxi full of clowns.”

Heath raised a brow and snickered. "Now that I can believe."

"Uh, we sort of have a job to do here. Are you done boring me with redneck life?"

"Ah, and there it is again!" Heath sounded triumphant. "When you try to deceive, your lips sort of quiver on the left side."

"Do not," Chase argued, and felt his lips tremble.

"Oh, yeah."

"Whatever," Chase said with an irritated huff and headed to the main room where the staff was waiting.

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Multiple shots were taken from different angles with Heath and Chase in various shades and styles of underwear. During it all, Heath worked to break Chase down, one sexual innuendo at a time.

The more Heath talked, the harder it seemed for Chase to retain his focus. They were supposed to be a loving couple, standing in front of a window while holding hands, filtered with natural light. God, Heath loved when Chase got into character. Chase was looking at him with adoring eyes, a sweet smile on his lips. Together they stood in standard-issue white briefs, the basics. The sunlight highlighted the green in Chase's eyes, giving him an angelic look, but Heath knew otherwise. Underneath his soft portrayal, Chase was wicked, delightfully so, with a sharp and sarcastic tongue that drove Heath insane with desire.

A long beep and a flash of an umbrella light brought Heath back to the present. For a moment, he had gotten lost in Chase's eyes, far away on a tropical beach with white sands, waves gently rolling in, leaving thousands of bubbles in its wake. And for an instant, Heath could almost hear the sounds of the ocean creating a romantic backdrop for them.

*Click, click.*

"Don't grin like that. You look like a cartoon character," Chase said, keeping a sweet smile on his face while holding Heath's hands.

"How should I look at you?"

Chase snorted, still smiling affectionately. "I hate you."

"Liar." Heath felt a natural smile replace his forced one. In front of him was the guy who owned his heart and didn't know it. The sad but true tale of it all

was the fact Chase would deny any kind of inkling of a feeling in return. Chase had convinced himself that Heath wasn't worth his time or his affection, tossing him away like yesterday's garbage.

Well, Heath had news for Chase. He was, in fact, the man Chase was seeking, but didn't know it. In no shape or form was Heath about to change to earn Chase's attention, but rather, he was going to be himself, win Chase, devil be damned.

"Lucky for me, this shoot is almost over," Chase said, grinning in a way that was almost sickening.

"You don't know what you're throwing away, Chase." Heath became serious, hurt by the care-not attitude Chase portrayed.

"I think I do," Chase replied, putting on a pleasant face for the camera. God, the camera loved him.

"No, you don't." Heath gripped Chase's hands tighter in his.

Chase's effervescent grin faded a little as he struggled to break free. "Yes, I do. I'm not a one-night stand. I'm not a good fuck because I'm available. I'm not an in-between until something better comes along. I'm not even a friends with benefits kind of guy."

Heath felt his lips tug into a wide grin. "I know."

"I'm not a conquest—" Chase stopped and stared at Heath. "What did you say?"

"I said I know," Heath repeated and rubbed the backs of Chase's hands with his thumbs.

Chase looked confused, unsettled. His eyebrows pulled together. His lips pursed like he wanted to speak, but the puzzled look in his eyes told the tale. Chase was speechless.

"Have dinner with me. Tonight," Heath whispered with the photographer firing off shots and the staff struggling to hear. No doubt they had listened to every word he and Chase had exchanged since the shoot started.

"I need a little more affection," the photographer said, interrupting the moment. "Maybe a kiss as well."

Heath placed his hand on Chase's cheek, adoring the shocked and nervous expression in his gaze. Pulling their clasped hands up, Heath rested them against his chest, never taking his eyes off Chase. Heath leaned closer,



searching for any kind of reaction. "You heard the man. I'll need to kiss you now."

Chase stood motionless, lips slightly parted, with uncertainty in his stare. Heath deliberately brushed his lips over Chase's, barely touching the surface. Around them, the room had gone quiet, eerily still with only the sound of the camera. Heath gently flicked his tongue out, skimming Chase's bottom lip, and caught the faint sound of a groan from Chase.

"Have dinner with me," Heath said again, lazily brushing their lips together.

Chase nodded, their noses gently rubbing. His eyes were wide for a moment. The green color of them was mesmerizing Heath.

Heath cheered inside and took a shaky breath.

"Now kiss me," Heath whispered, pressing his lips firmly to Chase's.

At first, the kiss was slow, tentative, and unsure. Heath could feel their skin touching, heat radiating, and prayed his dick wouldn't happily pop up and introduce itself. He squeezed Chase's hand, allowing a soft moan of pleasure to hum between their mouths.

Chase raised his left hand and ran his fingers through Heath's hair before clutching a wad and thrusting his tongue into Heath's mouth.

Fireworks abounded behind Heath's eyelids, and his heart beat erratically, joyfully.

"Fabulous!" the photographer shouted, and the crew whooped and hollered around them.

Chase smiled against Heath's mouth for a brief moment. He groaned, clutching Heath's hair tighter, the kisses becoming more urgent. Dear God, Heath chanted in his head, a triumphant euphoria making his skin tingle. They had an audience but he didn't care. He was too happy to give a damn, and gave into the moment, seized it.

The clicks of the camera and hushed, whispering voices evaporated. No one else existed, no one was there. Heath was consumed by the moment, lust fueling his kisses. He needed to kiss Chase everywhere, anywhere. Breaking their kiss, Chase grunted his disapproval and softly gasped when Heath trailed kisses down his neck, stopping to suck his tender flesh.

"I suddenly have the urge to masturbate," the set coordinator's soft voice cut through the room and laughter abounded.

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“I love it!” shouted the photographer, clicking multiple shots in seconds.

The camera quit making noise and soft chatter filled the hall. Heath moved back up Chase’s neck and gently kissed his lips. “I believe the shoot is over,” Heath said, and Chase nodded, opening his gorgeous eyes to stare at him. They were smiling, bright and lust-covered, hinting of enjoyment.

“We’ll, uh, we’ll leave you two alone,” the set coordinator said and giggled as she walked away.

Heath and Chase stood locked in the moment, uncaring about the world around them.

“So, uh, where can I take you for dinner?”

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## Chapter 5

Heath tossed his keys on a table and shut the door to his apartment behind Chase. "It's not much, quite lonely at times," he said.

Chase looked around, noting the quiver in his stomach hadn't bothered to go away. Never in his wildest dreams would he have ever believed he'd be with Heath anywhere, let alone his apartment. He gazed at Heath, searching for the hate he had always harbored for the guy, and it wasn't there.

"You realize I'm not as big of an asshole as I portray," Heath stated, matter of fact in his tone. "A year ago my only option was factory work. College wasn't a goal, not that we had the money for such things."

Chase swallowed, nervous about what was to come, but also regretful perhaps, always seeing in Heath what he wanted to believe. Heath's dark hair was still a little wild from Chase's hand, making him look even sexier than before. His dark eyes were sincere, with no hint of sarcasm or conceit.

"I'm—"

Heath waved for Chase to stop before he continued. "I don't need your sympathy or anyone else's. I worked myself out of a bad situation, and for that, I'm proud." He smiled and walked toward Chase. "I've gone from a small-time country hick to a model making a name for myself. Sure, that kind of pride goes to my head every now and again. At times, my charm is a little rusty, maybe even in need of a tune-up. I'm loud, obnoxious, too rowdy, and I'm as wild as they come. Inside, though—" He stopped to chuckle. "Inside, I have a heart of gold, one that yearns for life, for happiness. It had been lonely, and then I met you."

Chase felt heat rise in his cheeks, remembering their first introduction. Wow, that wasn't the most pleasant of experiences.

Heath snorted, as if thinking back, amused by his recollections. "I hated you from the instant we met, but honestly, would have given my soul to the devil for one night with you."

Wow, Chase thought, unable to believe what he was hearing. This wasn't Heath. Heath was obnoxious, sarcastic, covering up his true feelings with bullshit words and tactless remarks.

“Of course, it didn’t take me long to realize I truly didn’t hate you. I envied you and over time fell for you,” Heath said, close now, his fingertip grazing Chase’s jaw. “And I believe you feel the same.”

Chase started to object, but closed his mouth. Heath’s hand on his face felt right, it belonged there. But he had to pause, collect his thoughts, and organize his feelings. He’d hated Heath for the better part of the year, wishing to be away from him, while secretly hoping to see him.

“The hate game. That’s what I’ve called the game we have been playing. And now I’m tired of playing. It has been great foreplay, but I want more, need more. I need you.”

Cocking his head to the side, Heath grinned with devilish flair, leaning in slowly, taking his time, and making Chase want to scream for him to hurry up already. “Here’s the thing, lover. I’m truly, one hundred percent a cocky asshole, and I hope you can see past all my hang-ups to give us a try.”

“Us?” Chase whispered, choked up with emotion, uncertainty rushing through his mind while blood pulsed to his groin, causing his dick to stir.

“Don’t lie to yourself or to me. We both know there is a fine line between love and hate. Underneath the act, we’re wildly crazy for each other. You know it, and I know it.”

Rational thinking was becoming harder the longer Heath lovingly stared at him. His words were an aphrodisiac, heating Chase from the inside out. Then it occurred to him, and it was an interesting revelation, everything that he hated about Heath was everything he sort of enjoyed. Was in fact all their banter nothing more than foreplay? Could a relationship built on hate turn to a fulfilling union?

“You’re thinking too hard, and where I come from, that means—”

Chase smiled and interrupted. “Let me guess. I should just let go, follow my heart?”

“No, actually I was going to say that where I’m from, it means you’re either constipated or a little slow.”

Heath grinned, bright teeth shimmering while Chase wrinkled his nose with irritation.

“And there’s that mouth of yours. And your Hillbilly 101. And—”

Heath grasped the front of Chase's shirt and pulled him roughly against his body, cutting off Chase's words with his mouth. Chase fought his hold, simmering over Heath's statement.

*What an ass.*

"And then there's your fire, something I love most about you," Heath said between kisses, tugging Chase to follow.

"You infuriate me," Chase replied, pulling at Heath's shirt, yearning to be closer, free of clothing.

Heath laughed, pulling Chase to the bed. They landed hard, hands seeking to free their bodies of the material separating them. The bed felt like a cloud, all soft and fluffy under Chase's back. Heath's body pressed to his felt especially divine. His hard muscles flexed as he moved, positioning himself over Chase.

Kissing became erratic and sloppy as they fought against the clothing between them. Heath sat back, jerking his shirt over his head. Chase stared, amazed by the perfection greeting his eyes. Thick bands of muscle lined Heath's abdomen. His sun-kissed skin looked like finely woven silk that Chase's hands begged to touch.

The cocky smile Heath possessed only furthered Chase's desire, the truth slamming into his gut. Chase needed Heath, yearned for his affection like no other person he'd ever encountered. His fingers touched Heath's chest, tracing the contours, alive with wild sensations traveling and pinging in his toes. Chase lifted when Heath grabbed the hem of his shirt, allowing him to take it off. Heath dipped his head down and flicked his tongue over Chase's sensitive nipples.

"I've dreamt of this," Heath said with a raspy tone, kissing and sucking Chase's tiny nub of flesh.

All Chase could do was give in and revel in the attention. It had been ages since he'd been touched, so long since his needs had been met. He inhaled a deep breath, feeling Heath tug at the button on his jeans. Awareness of what was to come made him quiver.

Heath tugged and pulled, stopping to shuck off Chase's shoes, all the while keeping a cute grin on his face, and dimples evident in his cheeks. And then Heath was there, at the point most in need of attention, gently lapping at the head of Chase's cock, tickling the slit with his tongue.

Arching his back, Chase hummed and fisted the comforter on the bed. Blood raced through his body, exhilaration making his skin tingle. He writhed and moaned, giving in to the moment, allowing his heart to soar with the sensation. Heath sucked him hard and fast, humming up and down the length of Chase's prick.

"Heath," Chase called in a whisper, unable to form a full sentence. Bright lights flashed behind his lids, all coherent and rational thinking nothing more than a faint memory. Blood rushed south, pulsing at the point where it was needed the most, leaving his brain in a drunken, euphoric stupor.

"That's it, call my name," Heath said, sounding out of breath, and resumed his task, leaving Chase almost boneless and at the verge of release.

"Heath, no, oh hell. I'm going to blow!" Chase shouted and felt his skin begin to sweat.

Heath stopped, rising slowly with pride in his smile. He teased the head of Chase's cock with his tongue, prolonging what bubbled like a volcano ready to erupt under the surface. Heath was enjoying himself and Chase was held at his mercy, needing so badly to let go.

"Don't tease me," Chase said and ended with a growl. His muscles were bunched up, tight with excitement.

"Beg for it," Heath said, lazily swiping his tongue up and down.

"Are you serious?" Chase asked. His cock was hard as steel, aching, fucking hurting!

Heath chuckled with pride. "Beg me, lover."

"Fucking suck it off already!"

"*Mmm*, you're so damn hot when you're angry."

"Jesus Christ, Heath!"

Heath plunged down, sucking Chase hard, beckoning the blood to pulse to the tip. His hand slid under his sac, gently rubbing the soft flesh. Chase's head fell back and he bucked his hips, flexing his ass, stomach muscles, gearing up and... heaven.

A loud moan erupted from Chase's lungs, satisfaction washing over every inch of his body. Heath pumped his cock, letting go with his mouth.

"Come for me, lover."

Extreme joy and ecstasy held Chase's body tight, cum erupting from his prick as shuddering spasms took over. Heath climbed over Chase, straddling his body. He kissed him, humming while he did so. Chase held his eyes closed, enjoying how good he felt, how good it felt for Heath to be the one to bring him to this high.

Gentle kisses swept over Chase's throat. Heath's scent enveloped him. It was distinctive and rich, clean like fresh rain. He held Heath, allowing his fingertips to drag down his back, desire building again with more fervor than before.

"You're an asshole," Chase rasped and began to open the fly of Heath's jeans.

"So I've heard." Heath laughed and rolled to his side, working his jeans down to his ankles.

Chase got on his knees and leaned over, his rear directed toward Heath. He took Heath's dick in his hand while Heath kicked free from the denim. He needed to taste Heath. Everything about Heath excited him, made Chase desire him. It was the perfection of his body, the way he carried himself with such confidence, and especially the cocky nature of his tongue, ripe with sarcasm and witty charm. Everything he hated, he loved.

Heath moaned when Chase took him all in, feeling his throat tense as the head bumped the back of his mouth. Chase was overwhelmed with lust for the guy—body and, surprisingly, soul. They were opposites, salt and pepper, oil and water, yin and yang. There was nothing they held in common except their careers, but Chase didn't care, seeking only the pleasure they could create together as his head moved up and down.

"Is it too soon to say I told you so?" Heath asked with a groan.

"Yes," Chase replied, pumping Heath's cock with his hand and mouth, determined to drive the guy out of his mind.

Heath caressed Chase's back, humming from the pleasure, stopping to give a tender slap to Chase's ass. Chase grinned, trying to maintain his amusement. He pushed Heath's boundary, the small band of muscles between his scrotum and tiny puckered hole, making him cry out and wiggle from the buildup.

"Damn, lover. Your mouth is awesome," Heath purred.

Abruptly, Chase stopped and sat back.

Heath chuckled, apparently expecting the reversal. Chase smiled with adoring eyes and slid off the bed, retrieving his underwear and stepping into them.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Heath shouted and sat up. His eyes were wild, bulging open wide.

“I’m leaving,” Chase said and reached for his jeans.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.” Heath pointed to his hard and erect cock, disappointment crinkling his brows. “Look at my dick!”

Chase glanced at the bobbing member, smiling softly, enjoying the hell out of himself. “Huh, looks like you have a big problem.” He put one leg, then the other into his jeans and pulled them up.

“Oh, hell no.” Heath hopped off the bed and stalked toward Chase. “We are going to finish what we started. If I have to, I will bend you over my legs and spank your bratty ass.”

“Bratty?” Chase asked, amused by his choice of words. Heat rose in his groin, loving the banter.

“Yeah, bratty and fucking spankable. You will get your ass back in that bed. Now.”

“And if I don’t?” Chase asked and reached for his shirt.

“That’s it,” Heath barked and jerked Chase to him. “Damn, I want to spank your ass, fuck you, and then love you until we fall to sleep.”

Chase flipped the end of Heath’s dick with his fingers. “Interesting. Tick tock.”

Heath grinned wide, jerking the shirt from Chase’s hand. His chest expanded, cock sticking straight up. Grabbing Chase by the arms, Heath turned him around and pushed him back, making short work of removing his jeans.

“Don’t move.” Heath growled, walking around the bed to his nightstand and pulling out a condom and bottle of lubricant.

Chase watched, elated by the thought of their bodies joined. A tremble shook him as Heath rolled the condom over his thick length. His breathing hitched, and he felt his puckered hole tense up. Heath was everything he wanted, and didn’t. In a not-so-charming sort of way, Heath had touched him, no matter how hard Chase had tried to deny the fact. Somewhere underneath his



calm demeanor, Chase harbored a need for a guy like Heath, and he suspected he always had.

“On your knees,” Heath said, moving to the end of the bed while stroking his glistening prick.

Chase complied, feeling his dick twitch with excitement. Peering over his shoulder, Chase admired Heath. He was strong and confident, virile, with a body built for sinning. Chase admired him, hated him, and longed to be joined with him.

A bite of pain radiated out, and Chase took a deep breath, beckoning his muscles to relax. Soft kisses peppered Chase's back, causing him to sigh and smile. The tough and pushy side of Heath's personality had taken a back seat, leaving a gentle lover behind. His lips felt like velvet on Chase's skin, wonderful and luxurious.

Chase felt his body relax and Heath eased in. They both moaned in unison. Heath wrapped his arms around Chase's chest, holding him as his hips moved gently. Chase rocked on his knees, exhaling the breath he had been holding. He hadn't dreamt of this, would have sworn it would have never happened, and here he was, overjoyed by the fact, loving each and every stroke Heath delivered.

The moment was surreal, but deep in his heart Chase knew it was right, perfect while being imperfect. They grunted their satisfaction, sweat beading on their foreheads. Heath impaled Chase stroke after stroke. Soft and gentle gave way to lust, pushing their bodies a little faster, seeking more.

Chase cried out as the momentum increased, Heath's hips pounding against his ass. Chase loved feeling the raw emotion channeling from Heath, the overwhelming need in him to please, to push their bodies to complete ecstasy.

Heath's hands gripped Chase's hips tight, controlling the movement, pulling when he pushed, their bodies slapping together. Heath growled, pumping harder, faster. Chase felt the bed move, finding a steady rhythm.

A slap from Heath's hand stung Chase's ass cheek, morphing into sublime pleasure. Another slap, followed by another, caused Chase to wail, overcome with the various sensations pinging through him.

Not normally a physical person, Chase was learning much about his desires, secrets he never knew he had until now. Stronger and larger physically, Heath was in control, and Chase found himself enjoying it, wanting more.

Heath stopped and angled Chase's head to the side so he could kiss him. Chase felt his toes curl when their mouths connected. Searing heat rippled through Chase's body, and he knew without a doubt, he had fallen for Heath as well.

"I have this overwhelming urge to fuck you so hard you'll never forget I was here," Heath said, roughly flipping Chase to his back. His chest flexed with intent, hands grasping Chase's ankles and shoving Chase's knees to his shoulders.

Chase quivered, unable to move if he'd wanted to. One part of his mind screamed for his control back, while the other side yearned for the domination.

Heath wet his lips as he stared down at Chase. Anchoring his feet on the bed, Heath lifted, putting more pressure on Chase. He resembled an athlete, all muscled perfection, with sweat glistening on his body. Moving his hands to the back of Chase's knees, Heath teased Chase's bud, barely piercing in before retracting.

With a forceful grunt, Heath shoved inside of Chase, the impact causing Chase to whimper. "Yeah, I love being on top," he said, inching back and pounding inside again.

It was wild, rough, overwhelmingly so, as Chase struggled to breathe between crushing thrusts of Heath's hips. The bed swayed with force, smacking against the stone wall, loud clanking a backdrop to Chase's cries of pleasure. He was full, Heath's cock thick and long, stretching him, pushing his boundaries.

"Fuck yeah!" Heath shouted, his hips pumping hard, sweat dripping off his face and onto Chase's chest. His breaths were coming fast and he shuddered, grunting as he flexed his hips, relentlessly pounding against Chase's ass.

Chase felt his eyes roll back, inundated with the feeling, the emotions swimming in his mind, and the submissive state he was in, yet loving the release of his control. All he could do was hold on, riding the waves of bliss, knowing he'd never be the same again.

"Yes," Heath drawled, plunging deep and grinding his hips against Chase's rear, creating a new and wildly pleasing sensation. He pulled out, releasing Chase's legs and growling while gently stroking his cock. Falling to his back, he motioned for Chase to straddle him. He grinned, positioning his body, cock straining, thick and ready. "Ride me, lover."

Chase climbed over, squatting above Heath's prick, the tip brushing between the cheeks of his ass. Inching down, Chase inhaled deeply, being filled completely by Heath. He moaned, fingertips digging into Heath's stomach.

Heath cupped the cheeks of Chase's ass, lifting him slightly. "Get ready to ride, boy." His thick accent tickled Chase's ears, raw and raspy, deep and demanding. Heath pumped his hips, getting extra momentum from the bed, cock gliding in and out of Chase's bud.

The bed squeaked with disapproval and Chase's legs trembled. "Dear God," Chase moaned, feeling his prick hard between his legs, bouncing up and down, slapping on Heath's stomach. His skin was wet, droplets of sweat racing down his chest and forehead. He began to strain, his legs not accustomed to such a vigorous workout.

"You were made for me, Chase," Heath said between grunts, relenting and pulling Chase down, giving his legs a much-needed break. He guided Chase's hips, pushing and pulling him back and forth, his cock wiggling in Chase's ass.

"Fuck." Chase moaned, lightheaded, the friction creating a wild feeling. He was out of breath and panting, heart racing, blood pumping, adrenaline skyrocketing.

"Come here, lover." Heath beckoned Chase, wrapping his hands around Chase's neck when he leaned over.

Their lips crashed together, tongues immediately thrusting in each other's mouths. Heath held Chase tight, breathless between kisses, grunting as he resumed, gentler this time.

"It feels so good to be inside you, Chase," Heath admitted and stilled, holding Chase down, his cock firmly wedged deep inside Chase.

Chase nodded between kisses, wanting to race to the finish line. "Fuck me, Heath. Don't stop and get all mushy on me now."

Heath chuckled as he pushed Chase off and rolled to his side. "Come here," Heath whispered, pulling Chase's leg and turning him to his side. "I guess I have yet to fuck the sarcasm out of you," he teased and wrapped his arm up under Chase's leg, opening him wide.

Positioning his prick at Chase's rosebud, Heath entered him swiftly, tugging Chase's leg further up. Chase hummed and reached down, feeling Heath's dick stretch his muscles, entering him with long and purposely slow thrusts. Heath

wrapped his other arm around Chase's neck and pulled Chase to his mouth, breaths coming hard and fast.

Heath kissed Chase over and over, seeking air in between. Hard muscles and wet, sweat-drenched skin slid together effortlessly. Chase hummed. He could sense his cock building, Heath's prick tickling his prostate, each ridge and every thrust pushing Chase to the summit. He grabbed his erection and began pumping it from base to tip.

Heath stilled, holding Chase tight. He grunted and heaved his breaths, growling as his release took him. "Fuck," he rasped, squeezing Chase harder, his hips gently moving his pulsing prick in and out of Chase's ass. "Come for me."

Chase couldn't hold off any longer, so keyed up that his cock was ultrasensitive to his own touch. He let go, crying out as Heath pumped his semi-erect cock deep in his ass and stilled. Chase quivered, all ticklish and satisfied. With a trembling hand, Chase entwined his fingers with Heath's that were draped over his hip.

Thinking about the past year, Chase had to smile as he curled up next to Heath. The intensity between them was wild, the sex hot. Where did they go from here? Chase wasn't certain, but was sure it would be one hell of a ride. Not sure what to say at this point, Chase smiled, knowing no better words were necessary to express his heart than the ones he was about to say.

"I hate you," Chase said, squeezing Heath's hand.

Heath chuckled, reciprocating with his fingertips. "I hate you more."

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Hennessee plots by day and writes by night. Her creativity seems to be at its highest when the world around her slumbers. As a mother of two, she is prone to fits of insanity, random babbling, and answering her own questions. She has an affinity for things that go bump in the night, mythology, ancient religions, and history. Geeky to the core, she loves to laugh, goof off, and make people smile, while interjecting crazy historical facts that often makes her husband roll his eyes.*

## Contact & Media Info

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# HE DIDN'T HAVE TO BE

By Tracey Michael

## Photo Description

A black and white photo accompanied my prompt. A blond man, early twenties, is being kissed by a taller, dark-haired man, also in his early twenties. Behind the men, there are small white festival tents and trees.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*He didn't have to do it, but he did anyways. He's like that. It's one of the many reasons why he's my best friend. What did he do?*

*He kissed me.*

*In front of everyone.*

*They say actions speak louder than words, and with just one kiss... he silenced every one of his jock friends in true Griffin style.*

*The only downside now is that I can't stop thinking about his lips pressed firmly to mine, and just how right it felt. I've never really thought about Griffin in that way, after all, he's straight, but now I can't stop thinking about him period. And sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I catch him watching me in a way that makes me wonder if he can't stop thinking about me too.*

*Griffin is my past, my present... Is he my future too?*

*\* I'd just like a good contemporary, friends-to-lovers, GFY theme. There can be as little or as much angst as you want as long as Griffin, the dark haired one in the picture, and unnamed blonde get their HEA, which is a must. The background appears to be like a town fair or something of that nature. You can use that setting as a part of your story or make one of your own; I'd just really like this moment to be the catalyst.*

*Sincerely,*

*Runell*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** gay for you, friends to lovers, violence, bullying, college, homophobia

**Content Warnings:** brief description of a violent attack

**Word Count:** 8,606

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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# **HE DIDN'T HAVE TO BE**

**By Tracey Michael**

## Chapter One

The door to the dorm room crashed open, then slammed shut. "Griffin! Look!"

His best friend and roommate lay sprawled across his bed with his feet hanging over one side and his head over the other. A textbook sat open on the floor. Griffin rolled to the side with his eyebrows raised. "Must be something good if you're smiling like that."

"The music department is hosting a music festival!" Toby dove onto Griffin's bed to kneel beside him, waving the flyer in front of his face. "And there's a contest! Winner gets to be on stage with Dark Heart!"

"You know I can't read that with you waving it around, right?" Griffin said.

Toby stopped throwing his arm around and handed the flyer over. While Griffin looked at it, he climbed from the bed to go to the mini-fridge in their room and pulled out a bottle of water. Excitement made it too hard for him to sit still. "Want one?" Toby asked, holding the bottle out.

Glancing up briefly, Griffin nodded. "Yeah, thanks."

Tossing the bottle of water on to Griffin's bed on the way by, Toby sat down and stretched out on his own bed before bouncing back to his feet. "I'm going to volunteer to help set up."

Griffin handed the flyer back and rolled onto his stomach. He looked to be focusing his attention on the book in front of him, so Toby quieted. His best friend might not look like a nerd, but he hid it well. From the distance, it looked like he was reading his chemistry book.

"I'll help. Sign me up, too."

"What?" Toby had been zoning out, debating on doing his math homework or reading a chapter of his history book. Both were due in two days, and both were not what he wanted to be doing.

"I'll help," Griffin repeated. "The basketball season will be over and classes will be finishing, so... why not?"

"Sweet! Thanks."

"No problem. Now get over here and quiz me on these vocab words, would ya?"

“Okay. Then maybe you can help me with my calculus.”

“We can start. I have to meet Wendy later,” Griffin said.

“Deal.”

\*\*\*\*

“Griffin, you okay?” Wendy asked.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What are you thinking about so hard?”

“Maybe nothing.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know if anything did. I heard some of the guys in the locker room earlier, ragging on someone. They shut up when I walked around the corner. Toby would tell me if they were giving him shit, right?”

“I seriously doubt it, Griffin. Toby’s not the tattling type, and that’s what he’d call it. Why do you think they were talking about him, besides the fact that they shut up when you walked in?”

“They said blond, and something about a musical fairy.”

“That doesn’t mean it was Toby.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry for being distracted.”

“Then make it up to me,” Wendy said with a wicked grin.

“I think I can handle that.” Griffin rolled over to cover Wendy’s body with his own. His mouth melded with hers, putting an end to his worry and all conversation.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

After Griffin left to hook up with Wendy, Toby left for the pool. He was too restless to sit and study. There shouldn't be anyone else swimming that late, so he wouldn't be disturbed. Laps through the warm water always made him feel better, more centered.

He envied Griffin and Wendy. They were happy and a good match. Toby liked her. She let Griffin be who he was without trying to change him.

Toby wanted that. *Someday*, he told himself.

Stripping down to his swim trunks, he piled his clothes on the bottom row of metal bleachers then dove into the water. He kicked his legs behind him while his arms sliced through the water. He could feel the tension leaving his body with every lap he made.

After fifty laps, Toby swam to the ladder and climbed out. Surprise had him pausing mid-step. His towel and clothes were missing from the bottom of the bleachers. Resignation rounded his shoulders as he started moving again.

He looked around. Color floating on the surface of the chlorinated water caught his eye. His shirt, wind pants and towel were soaked. The shirt would be ruined, but the towel would survive. The pants, he didn't know. As soon as he got back to the dorm, he'd throw them in the washer. Toby slipped back into the water and fetched his things, then got back out. He wrung everything out, but even then, they were too wet to be any good.

Leaving the building, Toby trudged across the campus. "You look a little wet and cold, Simmons. I thought fairies flew everywhere," a voice sounded from behind him, a voice he knew all too well.

"Yeah, but then who would the big, tough guys like you harass?" Toby shot back.

"Are you mouthing off? Someone's feeling brave tonight. Maybe I should teach you not to fuck with me."

"You could, but then you know Griffin would be pissed. Can't have your best center pissed at you, now can you? What if he quit the team? How would your season end then?"

"Fag, watch your ass. Sooner or later, Griffin will get tired of you holding him back," Brock said.

Toby kept walking, not bothering to respond. His friendship with Griffin was solid. No way would his best friend get tired of him. But, even as he thought it, a little voice in the back of his head nagged the question, was he holding the one person who meant the most to him back?

When Toby met Griffin, they were in middle school. Mr. Proctor paired them up as science lab partners.

"I'm Toby."

"Yeah, I heard Mr. Proctor say that."

"It's nice to meet you."

"Sure, sure."

They didn't talk to each other much those first few days. Toby had been shy, and a little intimidated by the guy sitting beside him, while Griffin had a loner personality. On Friday of that first week, Toby wore his Foo Fighters graphic tee. Griffin had eyed his shirt, curiously. He finally asked Toby if he was a fan. Toby had enthusiastically said yes. Dark, shaggy-haired Griffin had nodded in approval. They talked the entire period about bands they enjoyed and hated. The teens agreed on most of their choices and harassed each other about some of the others.

"My dad got me tickets to see Green Day tomorrow night. You wanna go?" Toby asked.

"Yeah, I wanna go. Let me check with the parents. You got a cell number?" Griffin said.

Toby wrote down his number on a piece of scrap paper and watched Griffin stuff it in his pocket. The bell rang and both boys stood up. As Toby stacked his books, one of the kids who sat behind them came by and swiped the books off the table. Papers went flying and books crashed to the floor with a *thud*.

"You're such an asshole, Church," Griffin said as he bent over to help pick up the scattered schoolwork.

"Thanks," Toby said, averting his eyes from his new friend. "If you don't want to be seen with me, I understand."

"Don't worry about me. I don't care what other people think."

"Okay," Toby mumbled, his gaze still downcast.

"Hey."

“Yeah?”

“Don’t let them get to you. There’s nothing wrong with you.” Griffin stood up and grabbed his backpack from the desk. “I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know about the concert.”

They had a great time at the concert. Hanging out after school and during lunch became a regular thing. The bullies backed off Toby with Griffin around. Toby talked his buddy into going out for the basketball team when he saw how much Griffin wanted to. Barring sickness and swim meets, the blond sat in the stands for every one of the taller boy’s games. Griffin returned the favor and attended all of Toby’s swim meets that he could.

In high school, the two had most of their classes together, and when the time for college came, they applied to the same schools. Griffin was offered basketball scholarships to some schools they hadn’t tried to get into, but he turned them down, not willing to leave his best friend behind.

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## Chapter Three

“Get up! We’re gonna be late!”

Griffin grumbled and pulled the blanket up over his head. “Go away. It’s too early.”

“I’m going to leave without you.”

A minute later, Toby left his roommate in bed and headed for the park where the music festival would take place. Excitement had his feet moving fast across the campus. Dozens of people were milling around the park when he arrived. A table was set up with the majority of the people surrounding it.

“Thank you all for coming!” A professional-looking woman stood behind the table with her hands waving in the air. “We’ve divided you into groups, some setting up, some fetching supplies and one floating group to assist anyone who needs it.”

The group leaders stood away from each other and started calling out names. Toby headed for the woman who called his name. He would be part of the supply runners.

Two hours later, sweat matted his hair against his skull as he hauled a tent across the midway. His shirt stuck to his back.

“Hey, it’s the swimming fairy,” said a familiar, unwelcome voice.

*Not today. I’m too tired for this.* Toby closed his eyes. Brock was nothing more than an overgrown bully.

“What are you doing here, Simmons? I don’t think Barbara is scheduled,” Brock said.

“Stereotype much?” Toby asked.

“You mean you don’t love Barbara. I thought all you fags loved her. Oh, wait. I know. You’re a Cher fan.”

“Beat it, Brock. I don’t have time for this today.”

“I don’t think so. I’m kinda enjoying myself.” Brock walked over and knocked the folded-up material from Toby’s hands. “Pick it up.”

Toby scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed. “Just go away.”

“I said, pick it up.”

Toby bent over, intent on getting the tent and walking away. *Don't react.* As soon as he had the bulky load picked up, Brock knocked it from his hands again. The group behind him laughed as if it were the most hilarious thing they'd ever seen.

"What's going on here?"

*Oh shit. Griffin.*

"Nothing. We're just talking to your buddy," Brock said. "How can you stand to hang out with him, Griffin? He's gonna make you gay, just being near him."

"You know, Brock. I knew you were kinda dumb, but I didn't think you were that stupid," Griffin said.

"Who needs brains when you can play ball like I can? C'mon. Leave the fairy and come hang out with us," Brock said.

Griffin walked up beside Toby. "I gave my word that I'd help here."

Brock rolled his eyes and curled his lip. "Next thing you'll be doing is dating him. You'll see. If you don't get away from Simmons, you'll be kissing dudes like he does."

He shrugged. "I think it's too late for me. Oh god! It's bubbling up inside me!" Griffin's eyes widened right before he reached for Toby. In the next second, their mouths were pressed together. Toby kept his body rigid, as his eyelids fell closed. He'd wanted to die laughing when his best friend started pretending to freak out. Now he didn't feel like laughing at all. The world had shifted on its axis.

"You are done on the team, Griffin. I always wondered if you were hiding being a queer. Now I know."

Toby pulled back from Griffin and watched, horrified, as the jocks walked away. "Oh my god, Griffin! *What* did you just *do*?"

"Nothing, Toby. Forget about it." Griffin looked pissed when he turned and left him.

He licked his lips and immediately wished he hadn't. The taste of his best friend lingered. Toby could have gone his whole life without knowing Griffin's flavor.

*Okay. It doesn't matter. He was proving a point. Nothing more.*



Toby shook it off and went back to work. Getting everything ready for the festival pushed the incident from his mind.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Four

*Way to go. What were you thinking?*

Pulling his cell from his pocket, Griffin sent a text to Wendy. *Have to talk to you.*

Her response was quick. *What's wrong?*

*Something happened. I'll explain everything when I see you.*

*Okay. Love you.*

He dropped his phone back into his pocket. Griffin stomped to the organizer's table and asked for his assignment. The girl manning it gave him directions to the group he was supposed to be in.

He fought for calm on the way over. It pissed him off when anyone messed with Toby. Teammates, people who were supposedly his friends, made it worse. How long had it been going on?

The group's leader put Griffin to work as soon as he walked up. Keeping busy meant he didn't have to think—think about what he'd done.

The tents and tables went up with everyone's help. Banners flew between posts and trees, blazing with colored advertisements and eye-catching pictures. At some point, enormous speakers, strategically placed, came to life with music. Toes tapped and booties shook while voices sang along. The atmosphere changed from arduous work to a party-like camaraderie.

The organizers sprang for pizza and sodas for the volunteers. As soon as Griffin could get away, he went to find Wendy.

"There you are."

"What's going on, Griffin?" Wendy asked. "I've been worrying since I got your text."

"Can we walk?"

"Sure." Confusion dominated her face.

Griffin took her hand and started in the opposite direction of the festival site and the dorms. "Do you remember our talk the other night about Toby?"

"Yeah... Did something happen to him? Is he okay?"

“He’s fine, I guess. I caught the guys from the basketball team giving him shit.”

“Oh, no. What did you do? You don’t look like you’ve been in a fight.”

“No. Worse. I think I’m going to get kicked off the team. I mean, the season is over and it’s my last, but still...”

“Why? What did you do?”

“I kissed him, right in front of the entire team.” He watched as her mouth fell open. She was about to explode. “It didn’t mean anything, Wendy! I just got so pissed when they told me his gay was going to rub off on me. I didn’t think.”

He waited, but she didn’t say anything. She’d closed her mouth. Her face was carefully blank. “Say something.”

“I don’t know what to say, Griffin. I’m proud of you for taking care of your best friend. But I also don’t believe that it meant nothing.”

“I’m not gay. I don’t care about Toby in any way but friendship.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all you’re gonna say?”

“I told you, I don’t know what to say. What? You want me to scream and yell and break up with you?” She snorted. “I love you, Griffin. I really do. But I don’t expect us to last forever.”

*Huh?* That was news to him. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her. He mentally made sure his chin didn’t drag the ground. “What do you mean?”

“Griffin, do you love me? Be honest,” Wendy asked.

“Well, I—Maybe?”

“Of all the times I have said the words to you, never once have you said them back.” She raised her hand, stopping him from saying anything. “I don’t want you saying them just because I called you on it.”

He winced. “Then why do you stick around?”

She shrugged and smiled. It wasn’t a forced smile. “Because I like being with you. We are good together.”

Griffin started walking again. “I like being with you, too. I wish I could say the words, ya know?”

Wendy hooked her arm through his. "I do know. That's why I haven't complained."

They walked in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Griffin didn't regret his actions, but he didn't look forward to the fallout either.

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Toby stood stock-still under the steaming hot spray of the shower. His hands were braced above his shoulders, against the slick tile, as his head hung down. Who knew tents were so heavy? The sticky, tight feel of his skin swirled down the drain as the water washed away the sweat and grime. Given the odd time of day, the showers were blessedly empty. Even so, he'd lingered as long as he dare. Straightening, Toby lathered his body and washed his hair to squeaky-clean. He shut the water off and grabbed a towel. With his tired eyes closed, he scrubbed his hair with the towel.

"Fag."

Pain exploded through his nose and the rest of his face as he fell backward. The back of his skull connected with the tile, the sound of it echoing through the shower. Black clouds drifted across his vision, like a gathering storm covering the sky. Toby fought not to pass out as he rolled onto his side and spit out the blood flowing from his nose.

*I gotta get outta here.*

Terror that whoever attacked him wasn't finished gripped his being. Toby watched the news. He saw the horror stories on the internet of gays being beaten to death, but he'd never had to deal with it. Griffin kept the haters at bay. *Griffin*. Toby couldn't let his best friend see him like this.

He managed to get to his hands and knees and started crawling across the floor. His vision wavered with the motion, making him sick to his stomach. Halfway to his pants, where his cell laid stuffed in the pocket, Toby couldn't hold back the nausea anymore, and threw up all over the floor in front of him. The violent retching was more than his head could handle, and he slumped to the floor.

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## Chapter Five

The sharp, burning scent jerked him from the dark oblivion. With the waking, came pain radiating all over his head.

“Don’t try to move, son. An ambulance is on the way.”

Toby peeled his eyes open. The shadow above him wouldn’t come into focus. He blinked once, twice, and waited for his vision to clear.

“Coach.”

Toby recognized the man kneeling over him from going to Griffin’s basketball games.

“Do you know your name, son?”

“Toby Simmons, sir.”

“That’s good, Toby. You just lay here until the ambulance arrives. Do you remember what happened?” The older man turned away, speaking to someone over his shoulder.

“Someone punched me while I was drying my hair. I remember falling backwards, and my head bouncing off the tile.”

“Did you see who it was?”

“No. My towel was covering my face.”

“Okay, then. The ambulance is here,” Coach said.

A rattle and the sound of plastic wheels on tile killed Toby’s head. He cringed as the noise grew louder before stopping beside him. After the EMTs settled him onto the gurney, they wheeled Toby to the ambulance and took off for the hospital.

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Griffin and Wendy were heading back toward the dorms when his phone rang. He groaned when he saw his coach’s name on the display. “I guess I don’t have to wait to get kicked off the team. It’s a good thing this is my final season.”

Wendy slipped her hand into his and squeezed.

“Hi, Coach,” Griffin said.

“Hey, Griffin. I need the emergency contact for Toby Simmons. Do you have it?”

“Why?” Griffin’s wide eyes met Wendy’s as he frowned. He started walking faster, dragging Wendy along with him. “What happened to Toby?”

“I found him unconscious in the showers. Someone broke his nose. I’m pretty sure he’s got a concussion, too.”

“Shit! Where is he?” Griffin asked. The burn of anger and panic spread through his chest almost doubling him over.

“On the way to County. Son, do you have a number for me?” Coach said.

“I’m his family.” Toby’s family turned him away once he became legal. Griffin’s family treated Toby like he’d been born to them, so the impact hadn’t bothered him much. When they were accepted to the same college and had to fill out the forms, Toby put Griffin’s name down as the emergency contact. “I’m almost to my car, sir. Thanks for calling,” Griffin said. He hung up and shoved his phone into his pocket. “I gotta get to the hospital. Toby’s hurt.”

“What happened?” Wendy asked.

“Someone broke his nose, and Coach says he has a concussion,” Griffin said.

“I’m coming with you,” Wendy said.

“It might be late when we get back,” Griffin said.

“I don’t care.”

Griffin and Wendy picked up the pace to get to his car. They climbed inside, started it up and peeled out of the parking lot. Thankfully, the hospital was close by.

The two hurried into the emergency room and straight to the nurse’s station. “Toby Simmons,” Griffin said.

“Are you family?” The nurse behind the desk asked.

“Yes.”

“Just a minute, please.” She left the desk and walked down the corridor. A few minutes later, she came back and pointed Griffin in the direction of the curtained off area.

“I’ll wait out here,” Wendy said.

“Okay. I’ll be back,” Griffin said.

“Take your time, Griffin.”

The more steps he took toward Toby’s room, the angrier he became. This was his fault. If he hadn’t kissed Toby in front of everyone, they might have left him alone. *Please let him be all right.*

Griffin pushed the curtain out of the way and looked at his battered best friend on the bed. His eyes were closed, so Griffin tried to be quiet. He sat down in the hard plastic chair beside the bed.

About thirty minutes after Griffin sat down, a nurse ducked inside the curtain. “I need to wake him up.”

“Why? He’s hurt,” Griffin said.

“He’s got a concussion. He has to be awakened every hour for the next twelve hours,” the nurse said. She touched Toby’s shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. “How many fingers do you see?” She held up three fingers.

Toby blinked a couple times. “Three.”

“Do you know what year it is?”

“2013,” Toby answered.

“Good.” She turned to Griffin. “We’d like to keep him overnight, unless he has someone to watch him during the night.”

“I’ll watch him.” Griffin offered.

Toby rolled his head to the side where Griffin was now standing. “What are you doing here?”

“Coach called. How are you feeling?” Griffin asked.

“Like someone used my head for a piñata,” Toby replied.

“You’ll have to wake him up every hour and ask him questions,” the nurse said.

“No problem,” Griffin replied.

“I’ll get the papers and something for your friend to wear home.” The nurse disappeared behind the curtain.

“Who was it, Toby? I’ll kill ’em,” Griffin gritted out.

“I don’t know,” Toby said.

“Why are you protecting them?”

“I’m not. I didn’t see who it was. I had a towel covering my face,” Toby said.

Griffin’s temper seethed under the surface. If he ever found out who... “All right.”

“How bad do I look?” Toby asked, reaching up for his face.

“Well, you won’t be as pretty anymore,” Griffin joked.

The hospital released Toby a while later. They put him in the front seat while Wendy climbed in the back.

“We’re here. Wait there. I’ll come around and get you,” Griffin told Toby. Wendy crawled out of the backseat and stood beside the passenger door of Griffin’s car.

“Okay,” Toby agreed.

Wendy opened the door for Griffin.

“I can walk, you know,” Toby told them.

“I know. But your eyes are swollen, and I’d hate for you to trip over your own feet. I don’t want to take you back to the hospital for a cast.”

Griffin and Wendy walked with him back to the dorms, and settled in Griffin and Toby’s room. Wendy kissed Toby’s forehead, and then Griffin’s cheek before she left them alone.

Every hour, on the hour, Griffin woke Toby up and asked him basic questions. By the time dawn arrived, both men were grumpy and exhausted. At the twelve-hour mark, they passed out in their beds to sleep most of the day away.

When he woke, Griffin called the coach to let him know what was going on. Relief appeared to roll through the coach when he asked about Toby. He even offered help, should him or Toby need anything.

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“You sure you’ll be okay?” Griffin asked, picking up his duffel.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Toby said from his reclined position on the bed. His chemistry book lay open across his lap, and a tablet beside his leg. “I’m just going to work on the vocab, and then maybe I’ll make myself something to eat.”



“Okay. I’ll be back after class,” Griffin said.

“Cool. See ya later,” Toby said.

Griffin walked out of their room, and Toby watched him until the door closed. This scenario had happened hundreds of times over the years they’d been friends. So why did this time feel different—off? Five minutes passed before Toby realized he was still staring at the closed door. His nose ached, as did the lump on the back of his head. He reached for the bottle of pain reliever and took three. Studying for his chemistry test didn’t seem to be a good idea when he couldn’t focus. He ditched the studying for a nap.

*A few moments later, Griffin walked into the room and dropped his bag by the door. His long strides brought him to Toby’s bedside within seconds of the door closing. The look on his face was hungry, a look Toby never expected to see meant for him.*

*“I forgot to kiss you good-bye,” Griffin said softly. His mouth pressed against Toby’s in the next second.*

Toby’s heart started to pound in his chest. He sat straight up in bed, his pulse still racing, and memories of Griffin’s kiss still lingering on his mind. He couldn’t help but compare dream Griffin’s kiss with the real one from a few days before. What could have possessed his best friend to lock lips with him in front of the basketball team?

He lifted his hand to trace along his lips. Toby swore they tingled from the visceral contact. He sighed. Why did he have the feeling his life was about to become more complicated? Because his best friend’s scent still lingered in his senses. Because he couldn’t stop thinking about how sexy his best friend’s ass looked in his wind pants when he left.

Over the years they’d been friends, Toby could count on both hands the times he’d seen Griffin without clothes. Then, it hadn’t fazed him. He didn’t see Griffin as anything but Griffin, his best friend, and that included never checking out his ass.

*Wrong. On so many levels. My best friend’s ass is off-limits.*

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## Chapter Six

"You want me to order us a pizza tonight?" Griffin asked from behind him.

Toby sat at his desk, poring over some make up work from the classes he'd missed. He turned in his chair to look at the other man. *Did Griffin just look away?* "Do you mind? I'm struggling to get through this calculus."

"Do you want some help? I will, after I order our dinner," Griffin offered.

"Yes."

Griffin laughed, and picked up his cell to call for pizza.

*Had he always had that dimple?*

Toby took a minute to watch him talk. Griffin smiled at something the person at the pizza shop said, and Toby's heart gave a little flutter.

*Stop staring. You have homework up the ying-yang.*

Toby turned back to the open book on his desk, and picked up his pencil. He wrote out the example, trying to make sense of it.

"Okay. Pizza will be here in a half hour to forty-five minutes." Griffin dragged a chair across the small room, and flipped it around to straddle the seat. "Whatcha got?"

Sliding the book over so Griffin could see, Toby pointed to the example on the page. "This."

Griffin started explaining, and Toby listened. Toby learned better when hearing a lesson, as well as seeing it worked out repeatedly on a whiteboard. With him missing a week's worth of classes, he couldn't make heads or tails out of the assignment in front of him.

The patient voice, soft and close to his ear, made concentrating more difficult. A whisper of hot breath glanced off his cheek, and Toby shivered. If he turned his head, just a little bit...

*No, no, no.*

*Pay attention!*

Griffin's hand touched his forehead.

Toby jerked back. "What are you doing?"

His best friend frowned. "You shivered."

"I did not."

"Is your head hurting again?" Griffin asked.

"Calculus always makes my head hurt." Toby gave Griffin a lopsided grin.

"Let's take a break. Pizza should be here any minute."

"I'm gonna hit the bathroom before it gets here."

"Okay."

Toby slid from the chair and circled around the back to head out of their room. Just before the door closed, he looked back over his shoulder. He shouldn't have lied to Griffin. No, not a lie, more like a half-truth. Toby needed a minute to get his body back under control. Going to the bathroom was the best excuse he could think of.

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Griffin forced his head not to turn and watch Toby leave the room. Watching his best friend was becoming alarmingly frequent. He told himself worry was the cause of his rapt attention.

He heard the door close, and his rigid body relaxed. He stood up and stretched out his stiff muscles. The scent of Toby's cologne lingered in his nose.

His cell rang from across the room. Racing over to grab it before his voice mail picked up, Griffin cleared his throat before answering. "Hello?"

"Pizza guy is here asking for you."

"Thanks. I'll be right down."

Griffin welcomed the distraction from things about Toby he should not be noticing. Snatching his wallet from the dresser, he left their room. He ran downstairs, paid the delivery driver for the pizza, and dodged eager, hungry looking faces on his way back up to his room. Food, then more calculus—the fun-filled night of a college student.

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## Chapter Seven

*Knock, knock.*

"Can you grab that, Toby? It should be Wendy," Griffin said from between the open closet doors.

"Sure." Toby slid from the bed to walk across the room. His eyes widened as soon as he opened the door. He let out a wolf whistle. "Damn, Wendy."

"You're so sweet," Wendy said, stepping inside their room. She twirled in a circle, grinning from ear to ear.

"Griffin's gonna swallow his tongue." Toby grinned back.

The closet doors closed behind him. He turned his head to look over his shoulder. His best friend dressed in a suit happened at funerals and weddings, and once a year, the basketball banquet. Toby's mouth went dry. He blinked and shook his head. "Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?" Toby teased.

"I saw that," Wendy whispered, close to his ear.

Toby jerked his head around to flash wide eyes at her. The lack of anger on her face was a confusing afterthought. "You didn't see anything. Please, Wendy?"

"What are you two whispering about?" Griffin asked.

"Nothing." They spoke in unison.

"No. That didn't sound guilty at all." Griffin chuckled as he neared them. "You look beautiful, Wen."

"You guys better get going. You don't wanna be late," Toby said.

Griffin held his arm out for Wendy to take and steered them toward the door. "I don't know what time we'll be back, but I have my key."

"Have a good time!" Toby shoved his hands into his pockets and watched them leave.

Walking to his desk, he sat down and opened his World History book. After ten minutes of reading, and realizing he had no clue what he'd read, Toby stood up.

*Maybe a walk will clear my mind.*

Grabbing a light jacket from the end of his bed, he left the dorm room. He pulled it on as he made his way down the unusually quiet halls. Many of the students in their dorm had to attend the banquet, so less people roamed about. He stepped outside, smiling as the breeze hit his face. It was refreshing after spending hours in his room catching up on homework. The bandages had come off of his nose, and the bruises were mostly faded.

He took off through the quad, towards the area set up for the music festival that coming weekend. Toby was beyond excited. He and Griffin had been to countless concerts in their high school years, and they always had a blast. With the new awareness of everything Griffin, those memories took on a new look in his mind. As hard as he tried, Toby couldn't beat the feelings for his best friend back, the emotions inside him were stronger than his will. He didn't want to fall for the brunet basketball player who'd been with him for every major event in his life. Complications, awkwardness, and resentment would ruin their friendship eventually. He'd lose the person who meant more to him than anyone else in the world.

The soft strumming of an acoustic guitar caught his attention as he neared a group of trees. Curiosity drew him closer to the sound. His eyebrow raised when he recognized the song as one of Dark Heart's most popular ballads. Whoever was playing had some serious talent. Toby wandered quietly across the grass and through the trees. He found a dark head bent over the guitar, playing, oblivious to everything around him. The man had one long leg stretched out in front of him, and the other bent at the knee.

Toby lowered himself to the ground beside the man, and closed his eyes to listen. So absorbed in the music, his eyes popped open when it stopped. Striking blue eyes met his, and Toby gave a small smile. "I apologize for intruding. I couldn't help myself."

"It's cool."

"You can keep playing. I won't bother you. I'd just like to stay and listen, if that's okay with you," Toby said.

"I'm Drake. You're welcome to hang," the other man said.

Toby's smile widened. "I know who you are." He blushed and looked down.

"You weren't going to say anything?" Drake's tone was dubious.

"I assumed if you wanted to be recognized, you'd be playing in the middle of the quad instead of hidden among the trees."

“What’s your name?”

“Toby Simmons.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Toby Simmons,” Drake said, with a smile. “You look like a man with a lot on his mind.”

“I do?”

“I saw you sit down. What were you thinking about?”

“How my life is balancing on the edge of a cliff, and with just one stiff breeze the wrong way, I’ll lose everything I hold dear?”

“That’s pretty heavy for someone so young.”

“You aren’t much older than I am,” Toby said.

“Tell me about him.”

“How do you know it’s a him?” Toby laughed, but the sound held more surprise than humor.

“Are you going to keep dodging my questions?”

Toby sighed, and pulled a blade of grass from the ground in front of him. “My best friend, Griffin, did something a couple of weeks ago that threw me into chaos.”

“What did he do?” Drake asked, laying the guitar beside him.

“He found some guys harassing me, and he kissed me in front of them to shut them up.”

“Whoa... Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve never thought of Griffin that way, but now it’s all I think about. I notice everything—the way he smells, what he’s wearing, and the sound of his voice. I remember the taste of him whenever I close my eyes,” Toby confessed.

“Is he gay, too?”

“No. Absolutely not. He has this really great girlfriend, Wendy. They’ve been together for a couple of years now.”

“You need to turn your feelings off before you don’t have a best friend anymore,” Drake said.

“Yeah. How do I do that, though?”

“You find a distraction.” Drake suggested, moving closer.

Toby swallowed hard. “What kind of distraction?”

Drake lifted his hand to mold it around Toby's neck. He added a little pressure, pulling Toby closer. “The hot, available kind.”

Drake angled his head, and pressed his lips to Toby's. Featherlight touches grew to sips until he felt the slick, hot tongue seeking entrance into his mouth. His heart raced in his chest as he leaned forward for more. His hands landed on Drake's thighs for balance.

*This is all wrong. The taste is all wrong.*

Toby sat back, ending the kiss with Drake. “I'm sorry. I can't.”

Drake shrugged and turned to pick up his guitar again. “It's all right. You're a good looking guy, Toby. I had to try.”

“Well, I can cross one thing off my bucket list, anyway,” Toby said, ruefully.

“Oh? What's that?” Drake asked, positioning his fingers on the neck of his instrument.

“Kissing a really hot lead singer.”

Drake laughed, as Toby hoped he would. “So, what are you going to do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You're in love with your best friend, your *straight* best friend.”

“Pretend. Hide it.” Toby sighed. “Die a little inside.”

They talked between random musical segments played on Drake's guitar. Toby sang along with the songs he knew.

“You have a decent singing voice,” Drake said.

“Thanks.” Toby blushed.

The moon hung high in the sky as he walked back to his dorm. He'd made a new friend tonight, complete with a cell number loaded in his phone. It turned out to be a good night.

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## Chapter Eight

Hundreds of people wandered around the festival. Music pumped through the speakers, and voices sang along. Toby followed behind Griffin and Wendy, weaving through the sea of bodies.

"The concert will be starting soon. How close do you want to be?" Griffin asked them.

"As close as we can get," Toby said.

"What he said," Wendy agreed with a grin.

Griffin nodded. "Okay."

Griffin tried to ignore the nagging in the back of his head telling him something was wrong. Toby had changed in the last few weeks, but even more so in the last few days. On the other hand, maybe it was he who had changed. His relationship with Wendy had certainly become different. Affection still remained, but neither of them pushed for more than hand holding and chaste kisses. They spent most of their time these days talking... usually about Toby.

"How's this?" Wendy shouted over the music, stopping about ten yards from the stage.

"This is good," Toby yelled back, grinning.

Griffin bounced on the balls of his feet. The group on stage now played rockabilly, amping up the excitement in the crowd. He took Wendy's hand and twirled her around, dancing with her in the small area they'd claimed for the three of them. The band finished up, leaving the stage to clapping, cheering, hooting and hollering.

"Everybody welcome Dark Heart!"

The emo-rock band strutted out under a thunderous applause. They wore huge grins, and waved to the gathered fans.

"All right! First thing. We've got a winner to announce!" the lead singer said into the mic.

The audience went wild for a half a minute before quieting again.

"Toby Simmons, come on up!"

Griffin turned to grin at his best friend. "Go!" He cheered louder than anybody as Toby made his way through the bodies in front of him. His grin



turned down into a frown when Toby walked across the stage and got a hug from Dark Heart's lead singer.

*That was weird.*

Even stranger was the way he leaned in to Toby's ear. Griffin watched his friend nod, give him a flirtatious smile and walk to the mic.

*What the hell?*

The song began, and Griffin recognized it as their most popular ballad. People all around him began swaying with their significant others, but he stood mesmerized. Toby sang along with the band. He could have been one of them; he sounded so good.

Across the expanse, his eyes met Toby's. Every word his best friend sang was like a sucker punch in the gut, stealing the air from his lungs.

When the song ended, Griffin shook from head to toe. Toby hugged the singer again, and got acknowledgment from the other band members.

"Give it up for Toby!"

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause. Toby exited the stage, but didn't rejoin Griffin and Wendy. Griffin watched him go.

He turned to Wendy. "I have to go. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. Go." She smiled. "Good luck."

Griffin kissed her cheek and took off running, weaving through the people blocking his way. Somewhere along the way, he lost sight of Toby. Moving in the direction his best friend appeared to be heading, Griffin looked around. He spotted him entering their dorm and began running to catch up.

*Thank god for being in shape!*

"Hey!" Griffin said when he burst into their room. He stomped across the floor to wrap his hands around the smaller man's biceps. "I don't know what's going on with you and that lead singer, but he can't have you. You're mine."

"Wha—"

Griffin slammed his mouth to Toby's. He thrust his tongue between the slightly parted lips, and kissed Toby for all he was worth. He poured all the mixed-up emotions flowing through him into the kiss. He relaxed his hands and moved them up to cradle the back of Toby's head.

A moan, and then a whimper broke the spell, and he pulled his mouth away. Griffin leaned his forehead against the other man's and attempted to catch his breath.

Seconds passed before Toby shoved him away. He looked furious. "What the hell is wrong with you? Are you insane?"

Yep. He was pissed.

"No. Maybe. Probably." Griffin lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck. "I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

"How I felt about you. Not until I saw you making eyes with that guy," Griffin said.

"Drake? I wasn't making eyes with him. He's just a friend. What business of yours is it anyway?" Toby asked.

"You were. I saw you. I was there, remember?"

"Your imagination was working overtime. I love you, idiot!" Toby's eyes went wide as he slapped a hand over his mouth to mumble, "I didn't just say that."

"Oh yes, you did. And I'll be shit if you're taking it back." Griffin grinned. He couldn't help himself.

"Stop smiling! It's not funny!" Toby sank down on his bed.

Griffin walked over and knelt on the floor in front of his best friend. "You've been my best friend since the day we met. I've loved you all these years as my best friend. Today, seeing you on that stage, hearing you sing those words to me... I felt every single one of them, right here." He lifted his hand to pat his chest.

"What are you saying, Griffin?"

The look in Toby's eyes broke his heart. He had to fix this.

*It's now or never.*

"I love you as more than a friend, now." Griffin swallowed. "I think I have for a while."

"You can't. You're not gay."

"No, I'm not. But yes, I do."

“You do?”

Griffin saw a glimmer of hope in Toby's eyes. He lifted his hand and cupped his soon-to-be lover's jaw. “Mmhmm. I just need you to be patient with me.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “I'm sorta new to all this. I've never been in love with a guy before.”

“What about Wendy?” Toby asked.

“Wendy wants to be a bridesmaid or best woman at our wedding.” Griffin smirked as Toby's eyes widened.

“W-wedding? She's getting a little ahead of herself, isn't she?” Toby snorted. It was the cutest sound Griffin had ever heard.

“I think it's a chick thing.” Griffin laughed. “But I told her she could, if, and when, you marry me.”

“Um. Okay.” Toby smirked. “Maybe Drake can sing at our wedding.”

Griffin growled and leaned in to be nose to nose with him. “No.”

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Toby laughed and fell back on the bed. “This has to be the weirdest day ever.”

Griffin pushed his knees apart and straightened to lean over him. Beautiful brown eyes looked down at him with something Toby never thought he'd see from the man he'd known most of his life. “Weird good, or weird bad?”

“Weird good, definitely.” Toby stared into the eyes of the man above him. “Are you sure about this?”

“I think so. Maybe I should kiss you again, though. You know, just to be absolutely sure,” Griffin said.

Toby nodded. “I think that would be a good idea.”

Griffin lowered his body on top of Toby.

Toby could feel the hard lines of Griffin's body against him, and forgot to breath. It was even worse when Griffin's warm lips brushed over Toby's and coaxed them open before his tongue swept in for a taste. His hands rose from the bed to weave through Griffin's hair as his hips pressed up. A soft moan rumbled in his chest at the contact. He could feel Griffin's cock rubbing against his.

*Oh god...*

Griffin rocked over him, causing warm friction against Toby's shaft. Toby couldn't hold back an eager whimper, or stop his legs from closing around the hips pressed to his. Griffin's steady rocking, and the rise and fall of his own body, brought him to the edge of orgasm. He curled his fingers in the other man's hair as his body shuddered hard.

Griffin's groan vibrated against Toby's chest as he, too, climaxed. Griffin lifted his head, panting for breath. He looked down at Toby with a slow, lazy-looking smile. "Can we do that again?"

Toby's body relaxed as he started to laugh. "Anytime you want."

Griffin rolled off Toby, pulling him into his side. "That was incredible."

"I love you, Griffin." Toby closed his eyes and sighed happily. Now that he could say the words aloud, he planned to say them often.

"I love you, too."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Epilogue

Toby's arms were crossed loosely over his chest as he leaned in the doorway, staring at the man he shared his bed, apartment and life with. Griffin's towel-clad hips swayed back and forth. He hummed Dark Heart's song under his breath while he dug through his sock drawer. One year later, and the sight of his mostly naked body could still stop Toby in his tracks.

He turned his head in Toby's direction, a smile lighting up his face. "What are you doing?"

"Staring."

"Like what ya see?" He gave his hips a dramatic shake.

"It's okay." Toby shrugged, hiding his smile.

A rolled pair of socks bounced off Toby's chest. "Ass," Griffin said.

Toby chuckled and straightened from his position. He strode across the room to stand in front of Griffin. "I love everything about you. The package has definite perks, though."

Toby lifted his hand and slid his index finger down the center of Griffin until the towel blocked his way. He watched Griffin shudder, and his smile widened.

"You're such a tease," Griffin said.

"If your parents weren't going to be here any minute, I'd show you how much of a tease I'm not," Toby said.

Griffin grinned. "Later." He leaned in and took Toby's mouth in a scorching hot, toe-curling kiss. When he pulled away, Toby knew his eyes were dazed as he struggled for a ragged breath.

"Maybe if we're quick..." Toby suggested.

"No. Later." Griffin stepped back. "Go. Get. I need to get dressed."

"Oh. I came up to tell you the steaks are on the grill."

"Okay. I'll hurry."

Toby turned to walk back out of the bedroom. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

"Toby," Griffin said.

---

“Yeah?” Toby looked over his shoulder with an eyebrow raised.

“I love everything about you, too.”

Toby's heart thudded hard against his ribcage. Griffin was his past, his present and his future. “Hurry up, or we'll be ordering pizza, and then your mom will move in to feed us.” He shot a wink over his shoulder as he disappeared around the corner. His life was damn near perfect now, and would only get better with Griffin by his side.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Tracey Michael is the pen name of Tracey Steinbach. Her three children call her Mom or Mama. Tracey has been married for over twenty years to a man who's broadened her horizons. He introduced her to NHRA Drag Racing in 1997. She's been a fan ever since.*

*Tracey has an eclectic taste in music, enjoying everything from country to hard rock. Def Leppard is her favorite rock band.*

*Tracey enjoys watching Disney cartoon movies, action/adventure, and romantic comedies. Castle is her favorite TV show.*

*She loves watching NFL Football. Go 9ers and Saints!*

*Tracey has been an avid reader since her teen years. She started writing, seriously, after her first short story was accepted for an anthology in 2011. Reading books for a living had always been a dream of Tracey's. She often jokes that she writes to fund her reading habit.*

## Contact & Media Info

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# A HEART OF KLONDIKE GOLD

By E. Davies

## Photo Description

Two bearded men, one in a knitted cap and the other in an insulated undershirt, hold each other in bed. They look like they are about to kiss.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*These two men traveled to the Klondike during the Alaskan Gold Rush in hopes of striking gold. What they found... was each other. Please tell me their story.*

*Please include the scene depicted in this photo at some point in the story.*

*No insta-love, cheating, or ménage and must have a HEA. I would really like to see enemies to lovers here but not required... and lots of sexual tension is preferred.*

*Sincerely,*

*Heather C*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** blue collar, miners, store owner, enemies to lovers, slow burn, Klondike

**Word Count:** 18,650

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



## A HEART OF KLONDIKE GOLD

By E. Davies

It seemed nigh-impossible for Edwin Brooks to be taking in the sight that lay in front of him. His mind could scarcely comprehend it, as simple as it was: the wooden buildings of Dawson. Muddy streets stretched out before him, and the shoddy boat beneath him seemed primitive compared to the luxuries that he knew awaited him after the long journey to reach the city.

About a hundred other crudely made boats had recently arrived or were going to land soon, and a crowd had gathered at the beach to greet the new arrivals. The sight of a proper city was so unfamiliar that Edwin briefly wondered if he'd remember how to order at a restaurant or get shelter at a hotel, or even shop for supplies.

The crowd's raised voices made him flinch. Though the lake crossing from the Bennett tent camp was short, the tent camp he'd left had been rough and not altogether friendly during the long winter of 1897-1898. He'd been one of the first to leave the camp as soon as the ice broke, and they could cross the lake to Dawson.

The Northwest Mounted Police were a familiar sight by then—just about every prospector had run into them at one point or another, checking to make sure everyone had supplies. So many of those who hadn't been turned back by the Mounted Police for not having enough supplies had either turned back on their own or died. The law-keepers stood on the beach, supervising as men unloaded supplies. Crates, bags, and sacks of goods were strapped firmly to boats and had to be piled up, then carted into town one at a time.

All Edwin could think as he stepped onto the beach and hauled his boat ashore was, *please, God, let me never see another skeleton.*

In the ten months since the gold rush had begun, he'd had ample time to consider that he might have been making a mistake. The first steamships had arrived from the Klondike in his own home city of Seattle with the news of the discovery of gold, and he'd received word from a childhood friend, Albert, that he'd split a claim with him if he was willing to put in an honest year's work on it.

Now, Edwin was ready to get to work. He was sweating in the early summer heat, though hauling goods was no trouble. Moving them all for months across the roughest trails mankind knew had toughened and hardened his hands. He was bearded, and his hair was shaggy, and he hadn't had a shower or relaxing bath in a long time.

"Supplies! Get your supplies at Northern, right down the street." A young man who didn't look like he'd ever seen the prospecting creeks was yelling from the edge of town, where the wooden buildings started to spring from the ground. This was not Seattle.

"Walt don't need no one advertising for him!" someone else yelled, but one of the Mounties approached the heckler and things quieted down.

One bag at a time, Edwin piled his belongings on the shore, then hauled his boat ashore. He had to find a place to store the boat that day since he had no doubt the prices of lumber were going to be high with everyone looking to build a cabin of their own. Maybe he could rent a place in town for the first week, until he started to get some gold dust out of the claim he now shared with Albert.

"Hello? Excuse me, sir," he addressed the Mountie who was overseeing the chaos.

"Yes?" the man answered, taking in his appearance. He must have looked a sight to the authority figure, after fighting for his life through wilderness, rapids, and mountains for so many months. His clothes had been torn and repaired too many times to count.

"I know a man here in town, Albert Carson. I'm looking for him. What would be the best way to find him?"

"Place an ad in the paper, or make inquiries at the bars," the clean-shaven man advised him. "I'm not familiar with an Albert, but the population has been swelling. If you visit the station when the rush is slower, we can check the records. Welcome to Dawson."

"Thank you kindly," was all Edwin could say. It looked like he'd have to find a hotel for the night, at least. Since he'd have to buy supplies, find Albert, and figure out where his claim was, he'd better get a room for a week while he was at it—and fast. Men were arriving by the boatload and setting about to find accommodations.

He'd been one of the first to leave the Bennett tent camp, but not the first to arrive here. Boating wasn't his strongest suit—really, he'd just been grateful

that his boat had stayed afloat as he crossed the lake. He'd had the winter to talk to the other men in the camp (and a very few women) who knew more than he did about constructing boats, and he'd started building as early as possible to make sure it would be waterproof. At least it had served him in that capacity, if not with haste.

"Klondike!" he had heard someone yelling from behind him as he landed, and he was answered by a few other ragged yells before they quieted under the watchful eye of the police. That was a welcome change, too—the officers' presence. Dawson City would treat him better than Skagway and the cesspits that lay between decent towns and the gold fields.

"Help move your possessions?" A deep-voiced man with a greased mustache gestured at his boxes and bags.

"I'll help! I'll help, sir. I'm faster than him." Another guy—cuter, younger, more eager-looking and with close-cropped blond hair sticking out from beneath a narrow-brimmed hat—approached at a trot. "And I can get you a room. He's barred from Bonnie's hotel." The look this young man gave him promised perhaps a bit more than help moving his possessions.

Oh, but Edwin's heart felt like it rose within his chest with relief. Of course there were other men like him up here! Surrounded by men, who doubtless outnumbered women by a good twenty-five men to every lady here, he'd had little doubt this would be the case, but he hadn't dared hope for more than finding a great prospecting partner. Seattle... was a different town.

"I'll leave you two to live within your means," the first man said, a hint of scorn in his voice as he moved off to another boat that was being pulled ashore.

Edwin's eyes widened as he glanced after him.

"Don't mind him. Roy's the meanest drunk, but I think he's mostly bitter. I'm Charlie."

"Edwin," he answered, and reached out to firmly shake hands. He didn't want what he thought Charlie might be offering along with the hotel room, as lonely as the last year had been, but a friend in the city might be handy for as long as he ended up staying here. Hopefully, that wouldn't be long. He was eager to prospect.

Charlie shrugged bags of navy beans, rice, and flour onto his shoulders with ease, then reached for his clothing sack. "The rest will be safer on the beach," he advised. "Basic supplies like this are the priciest."

“Are you certain?” Edwin glanced at his bags. There was a certain amount of honor involved in being on the trails together with the same group of men, women, and children—even tens of thousands of them—but here?

“Positive,” Charlie told him. “Law is kept here, and the Mounted Police will stay within sight. We have to go *now* to get you a room, though. It’ll be damn near impossible to rent a hotel room or even a run-down cabin if you wait much longer.” He pointed down towards the beginning of the muddy street. “That’s the hotel there.” He seemed sincere, which swayed Edwin’s mind on the matter.

“All right.” Edwin nodded and shouldered the heaviest and most valuable of his bags. He had so little compared to how much he’d left with, that he figured a second load would get everything into his room.

Walking down the muddy street with Charlie, he smiled at the sight of horses around. They passed the boy who was advertising supplies at Northern, two women with tight corsets lingering around the outside of a bar, and a group of men who seemed to be haggling over the lumber in a makeshift boat.

“I’ll need lumber,” he realized aloud, his plans suddenly returning to mind. He had to find Albert, buy lumber, and haul it to the claim, then build a cabin. He’d try to find someone who knew Albert today. Tomorrow, he’d need enough supplies to live there for long enough to hopefully get some gold dust and build up his pantry for winter.

“Walt’s store’s the best-supplied, but he charges the most. Might be able to find some for less from the men coming in. Take their boat lumber, offer them less and fix it up yourself,” Charlie told him, sounding a little out of breath. “Walt owns the Northern there. One of the Klondike Kings, they call him.”

Edwin nodded. “Can you handle that load?” he asked, nodding at the bags Charlie carried.

“I’ve been hauling loads like this all winter while you were playing cards in camp,” Charlie retorted with a grin. His shoulders were narrow, but he had enough muscles that Edwin could believe it.

Edwin chuckled and didn’t comment upon the way Charlie’s cheeks were flushed with exertion. Instead, he pointed up at the wooden building looming up before them as they tromped through the well-churned mud of the main street of Dawson City. “That the hotel?”

“It is indeed,” Charlie confirmed, shouldering his way through the doorway so he didn’t catch the corner of a bag and rip it open. “Mary?”

“Another new one, Charlie?” Mary greeted from behind the crude entrance desk of the hotel. Edwin wondered if this was the biggest hotel here—or the only one. It was possible Charlie ran a scam by steering travelers to the expensive hotel and taking a cut of the proceeds, but... he hadn't seen any alternative accommodations.

“Edwin here's looking for a room. I told him you might have a few left.”

“You're a lucky one, Edwin,” Mary marveled. “This is my second-to-last room. If you'd walked a bit slower...”

Edwin swallowed hard. *I need to take it. No time to check for other places to stay.* “I am, then. I'd like to stay for a week. Do you think that will be time enough to gather supplies before I find my claim?” he addressed Charlie.

“If you're quick to the store today or tomorrow.”

By the look of the sun, he had a few hours of daylight left to find food—proper food, at last! Perhaps he'd best shop for supplies today while the armada of boats still crossed the lake. “All right. A week, then,” he requested with a polite smile.

“Certainly. Five dollars, or a third of an ounce of gold dust,” she requested, and he handed over some of the precious few dollars that he had left. He'd heard already that most people here traded in gold dust, not dollars. “Here is your key. Charlie can show you to your room. It's the corner room, Charlie.”

Charlie nodded, shifting the bags on his shoulder and looking at Edwin. “This way.”

Edwin picked the key off the rough-hewn board that served as the counter and nodded his thanks. *At least I still remember how to be polite to a lady.* “Much obliged, ma'am.” He followed Charlie to his room, the familiar feeling of exhaustion starting to settle in. It was difficult to process all the noise and interactions and speed of the city, even a small city such as this, after so many months in the wilderness.

Opening the door to the sight of a simple bed, desk, and chair, he had to smile. A mattress at last... a real mattress. Edwin had never been so grateful for the sight. He didn't care if it was stuffed with pine needles.

“Edwin?”

He glanced at Charlie.

“We should hurry and pick up your other load,” Charlie prompted him as he set down his bags, then pushed his hat back to keep it in place. “And I know a safe place to store your boat, if you want to keep its lumber for your cabin.”

Edwin nodded, letting his bags thump to the ground and turning around to follow Charlie back towards the lakeside. Emerging from the building to the muddy, busy streets again made him cringe at the noise, but he quietly walked, eyeing Charlie now and then.

“Please do not mistake this for any sort of question of your character,” he addressed Charlie as they reached his bags, still safe on the shore where he’d left them. “I merely wondered what you hope to receive from this. You provide so much help to a greenhorn unlikely to repay you tenfold yet...”

“A dollar and your goodwill,” Charlie answered simply. “Dawson is a small enough town that I value every friendship I may form over a shared load.” He picked up about half of the remaining bags, then cradled the crate that contained the remaining foodstuffs in his arms, waiting for Edwin to pick up his goods, too.

“Very well. You have more than earned both,” Edwin told him. What sort of goodwill did he mean? Surely just friendship?

They were both quiet as they walked back to the hotel with the remainder of Edwin’s goods, though Edwin cast a few sneaky glances at Charlie when he thought him not to be looking. In return, he was certain he felt Charlie looking at him when he was distracted by the sights of a main street, horses and carriages, and even a few children scampering around back of a building.

When they reached the room, his question was answered. Once he’d closed the door and set down the remainder of his bags, Charlie arranged his own bags around the room and set the crate aside, then straightened up.

“How long a year has it been without the company of others such as us?” Charlie asked, searching Edwin’s eyes with a bright-blue gaze that seemed to see straight through him. He reached up to take off his hat and run a hand across his blond hair before setting it in place again, then wiped his face with his arm.

Edwin saw Charlie taking a quick glance up and down him, too. He knew he presented an interesting sight for a man like Charlie: his own patched clothes stretched tight around the muscles he’d developed since he’d bought the shirt back in Seattle.

Edwin hesitated, then shook his head slightly. "Long enough, but I doubt I seek what you offer."

"I understand," Charlie murmured with a small a frown. "Only a dollar, then. You will not be disappointed in this town if you know where to look."

Edwin nodded now, handing over a dollar. The warmth of Charlie's palm against his fingers gave him a moment's pause before he pulled himself together again. *I came all this way to make my fortune, not to get involved with a man, even such a handsome one... and certainly not for just a night.* "Thank you for your help, Charlie."

Charlie nodded and tipped his hat slightly, then let himself out of the room. Once he was gone, Edwin locked the door, marveling at the simple metallic click that meant safety and privacy in a room of his own for as long as he liked.

He sank onto the bed, resting his elbows on his knees and putting his forehead in his hands. For months, he'd dreamed of what he might do when he arrived in the gold fields, but now that he was finally there, and he'd beaten the odds, memories of his old life in Seattle returned.

Edwin still remembered sitting on the edge of another mattress, much like this, after he'd determined to change his life and escape the too-small city. He wasn't much for the bars and theaters, but when he did try to visit them, *he* had always been there. Edwin had even briefly resorted to nerve tablets to overcome the nervous anxiety and exhaustion that overcame him after each sighting.

Louis had been young, restless, and excitable, drawing the calmer Edwin out of his shell. He had also been more knowledgeable on matters of the body, which was particularly useful when it came to the bed they shared. He had enchanted Edwin for over a year, utterly fascinated him in mind and body until he abruptly called it off one gloomy April morning. Edwin might never know why, and thoughts of it had been absent during his trek.

The news of the gold rush had been welcome then. Edwin had abandoned his job as a store clerk for the prospect of finding his fortune and escaping his past at the same time.

Perhaps being in the unfamiliar wilderness with no reminders of the domestic life he had once enjoyed with Louis had been restorative. Now that he'd reached the Paris of the North, filled with Parisian fashions and theaters and saloons (and likely more that he had not yet discovered), his old city life was returning to him.

That determined Edwin's choice on how to spend the remaining hours of his day. He carefully hid the money he'd leave in his room, bringing only enough to cover some food, clothing, and lumber and stowing some extra cash closer to his body. He used the small bathroom to brush his teeth, changed to a shirt that was a little cleaner than the rest, and dusted off his cowboy hat and settled it on his head. It was time to discover what Dawson had to offer a prospector on his way to find gold.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Albert?"

Edwin was convinced that even in a town as small as Dawson had been before the gold rush began in earnest, it could not possibly be his childhood friend dressed immaculately and serving behind the counter of Northern.

"God save me, is it you, Edwin?" Albert's youthful face concealed his true age of twenty-five, just a few months older than Edwin. When it was lit up with such joy, he seemed even younger.

They approached each other for a tight hug that spoke of the years that had passed, Albert reaching up to rub his palm over his own eyes for a moment. "By God, I thought you would never answer my offer."

"I merely came here in lieu of telegraph," Edwin joked with a broad grin, letting go of Albert and standing back to take him in. "I accept, of course."

Albert clapped his shoulder, beaming as he gestured around. "Whatever supplies you need, I will keep aside unless you plan to buy them today?"

"Is there a cabin at the claim site already? Lumber seems the most urgent," Edwin nodded. "Food next, and clothing and tools for panning and mining."

Albert still seemed overwhelmed as he nodded. "No cabin yet. I set aside a stock of lumber and tools already, but I have had little time to build, occupied as I am here."

"You work here, then? Why work for another man when you have a claim?" Edwin asked, his mind reeling. Come to think of it, there were plenty of able-bodied men here in town who rightfully could have been prospecting at this very minute.

Albert's face fell. "Gold is harder to find here than advertised. I have worked for others to find out how to mine it, but I lack the strength to dig the claim myself. I earn a steady wage working here until I can find a partner to work the claim."



Edwin frowned. That obviously meant him, and Albert's bad fortune hung over him ominously as he answered, "Will you be able to show me what work remains to be done?" Albert did look less apt to mine than to hold a glass and a cigarette.

"I hoped we could meet at the restaurant tonight to discuss an arrangement," Albert told him. "But I can sell you supplies immediately since they will scarcely last until the next shipment arrives."

Another clerk behind the counter—bearded, with intense brown eyes and thick, muscled forearms—cleared his throat. Edwin glanced over, realizing that a lineup of men waiting to purchase supplies had already formed. "Tonight, then," he promised, not wishing to further delay Albert from his work during this busy time. "Which restaurant?"

"Across the street, near Bonnie's hotel," Albert told him. "I will be free to meet at five."

Edwin nodded. "God bless you," he bade, then walked around the store to view the goods and prices. As he'd expected, prices were high, but he hadn't expected them to be this high. Lumber that he might have paid ten dollars for cost over a hundred dollars here, and beans that were a few cents a pound could cost fifty cents here.

He might have to change his plans to dine royally in town. His heart raced as he realized that some people had to be rich enough to easily afford these prices... and the expensive Parisian goods in other stores. He'd seen bottles of champagne cracked open in another saloon he'd passed by where men were wearing imported garments. Gold wasn't as hard to find as Albert seemed to be implying, then.

Edwin picked up a few basic foods and some new clothing, then brought the items to the counter to pay. He nodded his greeting to the other clerk, trying not to focus on how much more he was paying for these things than he would have anywhere else. "Northern living has its downsides, doesn't it?" he tried to make conversation.

The clerk grunted a response while Edwin dug his money out of his pocket. This one was much less friendly, but more attractive than Albert. Nothing against his friend, of course, but he'd never felt attracted to those boyish looks.

This man was far more within his own tastes: about as tall as him but stockier, built like a man who worked in the woods. A lumberjack, perhaps?

His muscles showed in the way the fabric pulled across his chest and upper arms. He was bearded like the other working men here, and his eyes were watchful. His full lips were pressed together in thought, and Edwin unconsciously licked his own lips.

*It's been too long, but settle down. It'll be much longer still.* "Expensive, that is," Edwin clarified, still trying to win over any sort of a response.

"You can pay the prices here, and be sure you're getting flour without grubs, or go down the street and take your chances," the clerk told him, his voice suddenly booming through the small wooden building. Edwin cursed his luck—this must be Walt, the owner himself. "My store has never overcharged anyone."

Edwin couldn't afford to make enemies on his first day. "I didn't—I didn't mean—"

"Three dollars and forty cents, if that's not too steep a price for this kind of quality," Walt cut him off. "You can pay your new partner there." He stepped out from behind the counter to talk to a man who was gesturing for assistance with the sacks of flour.

As Edwin paid, biting his tongue, Albert glanced around to make sure Walt was out of earshot, then leaned in to murmur, "I have more to tell you tonight, when I can."

With this promise, Edwin tried to let go of the minor incident. He walked back to his hotel room to arrange his food and take a proper inventory of his possessions. Everything he expected to need was in his bags, so he spent his afternoon bathing and lying on the mattress in his hotel room. No wonder they called this city the Paris of the north! All it lacked was electricity and indoor plumbing like new homes in his old city had.

After shaving, Edwin trimmed his hair a little with a knife, neatening himself up. He wouldn't look like a proper townsman yet, or perhaps ever, but he'd look more decent now until he could find a barber. It was nearly sundown, so he headed outside. He made a mental note to check his pocket watch, which he hadn't had an opportunity to check against a proper town clock in so long now.

When he arrived at the restaurant, he glanced around before spotting Albert already seated at a table across the room.

"Over here," Albert called out, and Edwin nodded, making his way around other tables of men and the few women gathered over food and whiskey. God,

for a sip of whiskey again! He must have looked half-starved, because Albert laughed and told him, "Rosie will be here shortly to take our orders."

"I'll eat whatever you're having," Edwin answered.

"Twenty-five cents for clam chowder and a large glass of beer," Albert told him.

"Oh, yes," Edwin grinned, rubbing a hand across his smooth face. It felt chillier in the room without the beard he'd just shaved off, but for early June, he couldn't complain. He knew the winter would be far colder. "Clam chowder! I haven't eaten like that in so long."

"Did you arrive overland?"

Edwin nodded. "If I'd known how treacherous the path would be, I would have saved another month's wages and paid for a steamship fare."

Albert winced. "I've heard many tragic stories," he told him. "I didn't expect you to drop everything and arrive immediately. I didn't even know if the message would arrive."

"You're my dearest childhood friend," Edwin answered with a shake of his head. "Your friend—I can't remember his name, with the red beard—sought me out at work and gave me your message. He told me... you'd said to tell me that Dawson gold was discovered, that you'd bought out his half-claim and would give it to me, if I would supplement your work."

Albert nodded. "That's more or less the story. He was my prospecting partner for the last year. He left Dawson a rich man and promised to send another partner he trusted as much as I trusted you, if he could not find you."

"I am glad he took the time to find me!" Edwin smiled.

Rosie, a modestly dressed woman clearly named for her rosy red cheeks, came up to their table. "Hello, gentlemen. Albert, the usual order?"

"Yes, and the same for him," Albert nodded. "Thank you, as ever, Rosie." His eyes lingered on her face for a few moments. Edwin recognized that look from their schoolboy days.

"Anything for you," Rosie answered cheerily and headed off to give the cook the order.

Edwin raised his eyebrows, and Albert nodded slightly. They didn't need to exchange further words in public, particularly with the lady in question so close by.

"I hope you did not leave your heart with anyone?" Albert inquired in turn, looking worried. "As I said, I did not wish for you to depart at an inconvenient time."

Edwin glanced at the table for a moment. He hadn't wanted to bring up Louis. Even though it was an unspoken fact between them that his desires did not lie in women, Albert had always taken care to inquire after his personal life—a fact he appreciated more deeply than he could ever say, given that the trial of Oscar Wilde had made most people's heads shake over headlines just two years before he had left Seattle. "Actually, departing as soon as possible was best. I found myself... a bachelor again, not long before the arrival of the steamer."

"Oh." Albert frowned, then nodded. "You, perhaps more than I, will have an easy time of it here."

"So I have been told," Edwin nodded. "I'm not seeking attachments deeper than friendships at the moment, though... just gold," he confidently added. "And on this subject, did you have an even split with your partner? Why did you remain here?"

Albert sighed and gestured around the room with a broad sweep of his hand. "Gold dust blows away in this town. I've never been one for savings, you know that."

*Oh, Albert.* Edwin shook his head. He could find a fortune and spend it all on penny candy, whiskey, and Sears catalog goods.

"Walt! Come in, come in, sir," he heard someone calling out from near the doorway and turned to take a look.

At the sight of the very same bearded man he had unintentionally insulted just a few hours ago, Edwin cringed, but he knew what he had to do. "One moment," he requested of Albert and stood, approaching the man slowly to let him see Edwin before he got to him.

"Oh, the boy who thinks he can have the world for free," Walt greeted, his eyes hardening warily. "If you're here to complain about the price of clams, the lake's that way."

There was a burst of laughter from nearby tables. Even though Walt didn't seem to be approaching any table in particular, each seemed to be making a little space and acting agreeable in case he should choose to sit there. It seemed he was little more than a gold-dusted star of the town, then.

"I came to offer an apology. My comment was quick and rash, and I do not wish for it to reflect on my character or that of my prospecting partner," Edwin told him, keeping his head high and meeting Walt's eyes. "I have no doubt your goods are of high quality and worth the price, particularly given the costs and dangers of transporting them here. I was simply used to Seattle prices." *I hope that apology is well-worded enough to placate him.*

"A fine attempt at a reconciliation. A Seattle boy, are you?" It was hard to read what Walt thought. His beard seemed to hide the finer expressions twisting his mouth, and his eyes were calculating and not altogether friendly. "What did you do?"

"Yes, sir. I was a clerk."

"Like your prospecting partner. I hope you have better luck than him. He's a fine man to work for me, and rest assured I do not judge him by the company he seems to keep. Even those from Seattle."

Edwin bristled. "Do you have something against the city which would make you flee from it to the furthest corner of the earth and also insult its citizens?" he retorted, losing his conciliatory tone in favor of standing up for himself. If this golden man of Dawson thought he'd push Edwin into begging for forgiveness, he was wrong.

"Only the quality of man it produces, one prone to unfriendliness and a sense of entitlement to others' good graces," Walt told him.

"Then rest assured I do not judge your store by its foundation, either," Edwin retorted, aware that they were attracting attention. "The prices may be fairer than all else."

Walt's cheeks flushed with annoyance, and he reached up to fidget with his hat, then rubbed a hand across his face. "Very well. Let us keep our own company, boy. Good day, Albert."

"Agreed, sir," Edwin nodded and moved back to the table while Albert raised a hand slightly to wave in return.

There was silence for a few moments as Walt walked out of the restaurant before murmurs of conversation began again. Edwin kept his eyes on the table for a minute, waiting until all seemed more or less back to normal before he glanced up at Albert.

"I can scarcely believe you to be the same man I know," Albert murmured with a wondering shake of his head. "Regardless, your words are not unfounded, despite your unfamiliarity with him."

Edwin nodded. He would expect to hear that about the sort of man who attempted to extort more than a reasonable apology out of him and insulted him underhandedly at the same moment, but he did not wish to endanger Albert's employment. "I hope he is fairer in hiring matters."

"He is," Albert nodded. "He speaks truthfully when he says he will not judge me for my... association with you." He seemed sheepish to even speak the words.

"Well, when I take the rest of the gold from our claim, I will return to Seattle and stay out of that unruly beard of his," Edwin muttered.

Albert was startled into a laugh. "Staying out of his hair before then would be best, too. When we need to purchase supplies, I can take care of it."

Edwin nodded, despite the combative part of him that wanted to duke it out verbally with Walt again and show him just how wrong he was about "Seattle boys" (*men*, he thought indignantly—Walt had added another insult to injury there despite only looking a decade or so older than him).

It didn't take much to forget the argument when food arrived, and he enjoyed hot clam chowder and cold beer for the first time in months. He paid a few extra cents as a special thanks to Rosie for bringing him an extra-large portion to celebrate his first meal in town.

After they ate, Albert showed him along the wilderness paths to the claim site, letting him see the creek where he'd panned, the digging and sifting done to date, the map he'd drawn of the site, and the secret cache of lumber and tools he had on the site. They shook hands and swore on a fifty-fifty split of the profits from everything found at the site, and that Albert should support them and purchase supplies by working at the store as Edwin constructed the cabin and started digging up the ground while they could in the summer.

They had to pick their way back through the trees in the evening, using Albert's knowledge of the area and Edwin's knowledge of the wild to find the path, but when they got back to town, Edwin was prepared to enjoy a long, deep sleep in his hotel room. Walt's disapproval, and the enemy he might have made, scarcely registered in the face of the excitement of the next day and the riches that he could feel in the ever-frozen ground under his feet.

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A hard week of working from dawn until dusk yielded a structure that Edwin felt he could live in quite easily. The cabin was a bare, cramped, one-

room structure, but it had a roof and a door. There was no way he wanted to buy windows and carry them all the way out here when they could so easily be broken and let in the natural elements.

He'd have to spend time later that summer on building a proper cabin with another room, a stove, and insulation for the harsh winters, but for now, he had somewhere to move to after his stay in the hotel was up. He was sure going to miss that mattress, though.

Hauling his supplies to the cabin took much time from Edwin's morning. To make matters worse, once he was inside and he'd unpacked his candles and matches, he realized that he was running quite low on them. He'd bartered some food for more matches at the winter camp, but accidentally losing a bag on the trail had meant he was without candles for a while. Edwin didn't want to wait for Albert to be finished with work to purchase candles, because it would be dark by then.

*It's been a week. I should be safe enough,* he reasoned as he emerged from the trail into the Klondike wilderness and made his way through the district of low-rent slums that he was fortunate enough to be avoiding and the red-light district immediately above it. The city looked like it was overflowing with new residents now: every hotel room was full; every cabin near the city rented; every room within it rented by at least one person. The bars were overflowing, and business was booming in Dawson.

When he found his way to Northern, he drew a breath before walking in. The same stale scent of hay, grain, and metal met him inside, and he saw Albert behind the counter... and Walt. There were at least ten other men crowded into the small store, and the shelves seemed far more bare.

"Ah," Walt spoke up as Edwin approached the counter with candles, matches, and a few other necessities. "Seattle boy. How are the northern woods treating you?"

Edwin gritted his teeth, meeting those deceptively pretty, brown eyes with his own calm gaze. According to the rumors he now knew from listening in on restaurant conversations and making conversation with others, Walt rarely prospected anymore. This made his muscular build surprising. For a man who held a fortune, physical exercise was usually optional. Walt still wore that slight smirk on his face that made Edwin want to knock it off.

He set down the candles and set the bag on the counter, glancing at the shelf of clothing nearby while he counted to five. The only clothes remaining were

winter clothes—a few knitted caps, thick undershirts, and gloves. “Very well indeed, sir. And yourself?”

Walt raised his eyebrows, counting the candles with a quick flick of his finger and writing down the total on his receipt pad. “Well, thank you. Plenty of men envy my... claim. One brazen greenhorn has built a cabin—or what he thinks passes for one under cover of night—along the very edge of his claim, against mine, but no matter.”

“At least you have a claim worth envying,” Edwin said in an airy enough tone that it could be mistaken for a compliment on the quality of his site, even though they both knew it was a slyer insult than that. Walt’s gaze met his, and Edwin couldn’t look away, the sparks of enmity crackling in the air between them.

“A discovery claim is worth its weight in... oh, you know,” Walt chose to answer with a smile hidden in his thick stubble, almost beard-length now.

Instantly, Edwin felt jealous, as he knew he’d been meant to. The right thousand feet of creek could yield a fortune in gold—which, he supposed, was why Walt was a big name in this town. Well, Albert’s partner had left without finding any mother lodes, so Edwin would start panning for one tomorrow. It wasn’t like he didn’t have time to spare, with Albert supporting them. Edwin cast a quick glance at Albert, who was studiously focusing on serving customers.

“That’ll be a dollar twenty-five,” Walt added when Edwin didn’t respond. “Or would you like the price in gold dust?”

Edwin dug coins from his pocket, picking out exactly enough, then slapped them lightly on the counter. The hollow thunk of them hitting the wood counter beneath his palm was his cue to draw his hand back, but just before he could, Walt’s fingers covered his own as he reached out to take the coins.

He paused as he felt those warm digits brushing against the backs of his knuckles, his breath catching for a moment as he glanced back up. Walt’s fingers were callused like a working man’s, and they felt gentle, which was a sign of danger, given their current relationship.

“Don’t push your luck, Seattle boy,” Walt advised him in a quiet murmur, then flicked his hand away from the counter with his middle finger and picked up the coins, dropping them into his drawer. “Next.”

Edwin’s head spun as he emerged into the smells of the street—restaurant odors, horse manure, and a lady’s perfume. He blinked against the light, then



shouldered his bag of supplies as he set off to trudge back into the woods. It would be a good, long walk back to town and would eat up most of the rest of his day, but now he was set to live in the woods with only occasional fresh supplies.

With Albert staying in town and him working by himself, it was going to be lonely, but he was used to being alone after the last year's trek. He only needed his own company and that of the wilderness, sort of like the great poet, Walt Whitman, with whom he liked to think he had a lot in common, except for the ability to coherently write about his experiences with nature.

By the time he finally reached his and Albert's claim, the crude cabin looming into view through the hillside, he breathed out a sigh of relief. Home was here now. Here, he only needed to worry about God's creatures, great and small, and perhaps the occasional prospector wandering along the creek in search of an unclaimed site. He couldn't help but wonder if Walt was his new neighbor, but it seemed like too much of a coincidence. Nevertheless, he resolved to check out the claim posts of the site next to his and see if Walt's name was engraved upon them. Edwin had yet to see anyone working on the claim, but he'd heard them, and he hadn't been within sighting distance along the creek yet. He'd chosen to build higher up the hillside and stick to the wooded area in the hopes of not building on top of a gold lode.

Living in his new, crudely made cabin was nowhere near as luxurious as his week in the hotel had been, and he was going to miss having the luxuries of a hotel, but this place was his very own. Technically, he shared it with Albert, but he doubted that his friend—now a city man with a taste for caviar and whiskey rather than cold creek water and campfire beans—would spend much time here. Despite the downgrade in sleeping accommodations, he slept solidly and with a smile on his face. Tomorrow, he'd find his first gold.

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The months-long trek to the Klondike was worth it all the moment Edwin found his first flakes of gold. Dressed in his old, painstakingly repaired shirt with the sleeves rolled up, boots, and trousers, the summer heat bore down on him, but the creek water was still cold.

His boots slipped against the round stones underneath the water, and his hands were muddy from sifting through the silt, tightly gripping the bowl he used to separate gravel from gold.

When he was left with three small flecks of gold, his breath hitched in his throat. This was the ticket to his freedom—to financial security, perhaps to a life in New York or further afield, where life was better for men like him.

As gently as he could, he poured the remaining flakes and finer grit and sand into a tin cup to be picked through later, trying not to focus too much on them. A little gold dust was a good sign, but men brought ounces into town to be exchanged, not three flakes.

He'd enjoyed the moment, but hard work was at hand now. He had to try to trace the flakes back to a lode—a vein of gold running in the ground leading to the creek. Edwin hardly noticed time passing as the morning crawled on, and he panned what felt like entirely too much river rock and water. He was endlessly grateful that the journey had given him more strength than he'd ever had before, or his arms and thighs would have felt worn out far more quickly than they did.

By lunchtime, he thought he had figured out where the gold had been coming from, so he stood up, wiping his hands on his pants and stretching to get the knots from his back. A tonic for his muscles would have been welcomed, but he'd make do with something herbal if he could find it. He'd learned two or three herbal remedies from other travelers, though he had yet to test them.

As he glanced up the hillside towards the forested area where his cabin lay, Edwin scanned for pine trees with fresh green boughs that he could bring with him and strip during lunch. He found one, but in the process, his gaze fell upon the posts that marked the end of his claim and the start of the next miner's. That was downriver, and the direction of the claim he'd thought might be Walt's.

He trudged the few hundred feet towards the post, then squinted at the plaque.

The first few words caught his eye: *Walter Kennedy*.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed out, the word more than justified by the gravity of the situation. He had to be far more careful around Walt in the future. If this was his discovery claim, he'd discovered the creek and he had a thousand feet of it to sluice and mine at his leisure. Perhaps this was his main money-making source. Making Walt nervous about his fortune's security wouldn't do. He had to be friendly.

It was only after he'd cut off a bough, and proceeded back to his cabin to light a fire and cook a meal while stripping the bough, that another thought

occurred to him. Walt must have already known that this claim belonged to Albert—and if he'd met Albert here, that would explain how Albert had become employed by him. That meant Walt knew where he was, and he hadn't taken any further action to antagonize Edwin. The quiet words Walt had spoken about not pushing his luck rang in the back of his mind, though.

"Seattle boy."

Edwin startled, gripping his knife firmly and starting to raise it as he stood, then let out a quiet breath and lowered the weapon as fast as he'd raised it. "Hello, Walt." The man looked devilishly handsome and at home in the woods. Edwin hated him a little more.

Walt's stubble was growing out into a beard that was a light, but rich, brown. He had short, scruffy hair and a wide-brimmed hat on. His clothing looked cleaner and newer, though his shirtsleeves were rolled up and revealed those strong forearms that still looked like they could crush granite. The top few buttons of his shirt were undone, and a small amount of chest hair peeked out from the V-shaped opening. His face had the faintly reddish tint of sunburn on swarthy skin. He was stocky and handsome in all the ways Edwin would normally admire.

Instead, Edwin gritted his teeth. He folded up his pocketknife and pocketed it, then set aside the branch. "Can I help you?"

Walt nodded down towards the creek. "Saw you panning. You've got guts."

"What do you mean?"

"It'll take you about a decade to take out all the gold in the creek if you're working by hand."

Edwin shook his head. *He thinks I know nothing of prospecting.* "Have you managed to import a dredge already?"

Walt raised an eyebrow, then shook his head. "No. But steam or fire would still work better."

"I know," Edwin insisted, trying to keep his tone from being too heated. "I'm trying to find a vein first."

Walt nodded. "You have patience, then. Your partner's old partner, Tom... he didn't. He dug around a lot until he got lucky. I did much the same. I've got a steam system working to thaw the permafrost, though, and a sluice always running."

"I've never heard it." Edwin shook his head. "Well, I have heard some sounds, but I could never be certain what caused them."

Walt explained, "It's set up around the bend in the creek. This stretch is a lot dryer."

"Well, I work with what I have." Edwin shrugged. "And Tom worked hard enough—he got enough out—that I heard he's set up now. It's my turn and Albert's turn."

Walt rubbed his chin and nodded. "I thought you might be fleeing here for other reasons," he said, clearly testing the waters with this comment.

Edwin shifted his stance, making it clear by his posture that Walt was crossing into dangerous territory. "Like what?"

"Oh, nothing illegal," Walt assured him, though he seemed to have a hint of a satisfied smile about him with that answer. Whatever he'd been looking for, he'd gotten it. "But I came to warn you to be careful. There are a lot of thieves in these parts. Keep your knife close. Gun, too, if you have it. If you strike gold, you'll need them."

Edwin frowned. "I was never told that," he admitted. "I will. Appreciate the advice, sir. Just common thieves, not ones you know?" *Why am I still addressing him that way? We're both equal men when we're in the creeks with a sluice box.*

"The ones you're watching for now are unknown to you. Watch out for the other kind, too. And Walt will do."

"So when will I stop being 'Seattle boy' to you, Walt?" Edwin decided he was on safe enough ground to grin. He wasn't sure what to make of his answer.

"When you stop being one," Walt told him and turned his back, trudging off to his own claim. "Good luck with that," he added, not turning back to glance his way. It was an oddly cold ending to the encounter, and Edwin let out a long sigh of relief, trying to stay calm and not fire back a heated retort. Walt seemed like he was testing Edwin's patience deliberately, but he wouldn't give Walt the satisfaction of snapping at him again.

He put his frustrated energy into stripping the bough, which would become part of his bed frame when he built it. The needles would be boiled in water to make a tea for relief of joint and muscle aches—his own elixir of sorts.

After a meal and some of his pine tea, he felt restored and ready to get to work. Whenever he thought of Walt now, the same half-crazy, desperate desire

to prove him wrong sprang up within his belly. He needed to best Walt in the mines and in the gold buyers' shops now that he'd made his reputation as one with a grudge against the unreasonably wealthy Klondike Kings who endeavored to make a profit from those who had flocked to the area after them.

The rest of his day was spent furiously digging placer gold holes, searching for promising ground to light a fire upon that night. When he found a hole that yielded some small amount of gold, he decided to start there. Tom had stripped the claim land almost bare already and had dug up as much gold as he could from the other side of the site, but he'd never dug around in the area close to the border of his claim and Walt's.

Edwin could quickly understand why—the noise from Walt's claim could leave a man feeling inferior. Constant grinding or hissing, the hisses and rushes of water, the yells of men's voices relaying instructions and discoveries... it all quickly grated on his nerves. He tried his best not to feel too inefficient. Every prospector had to start this way, he reminded himself. A steam mining system would come later. In the meantime, he would sweat for his gold dust.

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If Edwin had thought he sweated to earn his gold, it was nothing compared to Albert's poor skill. While he had gained weight and strength in the years since they'd seen one another, his childhood friend seemed to have grown skinnier and more accustomed to fine dining than hard work.

When Albert cursed and told him, "Sorry," for the dozenth time that morning after spilling gold flecks back into the river, Edwin sighed.

"I can see why Tom kept you in town, friend," Edwin told him. "You aren't well-suited to this work, are you?"

Albert looked ashamed as he shook his head. "For a man with his name on the claim, I have little to offer."

Edwin nodded. "You do well working for Walt, though." Albert had an odd expression on his face, so he added, "What troubles you about that?"

"Nothing," Albert admitted. "Just, supplies for this endeavor are more expensive than I remembered."

"A hundred dollars for lumber to build a sluice that will last all summer, or a dollar on a fine supper that will be gone tomorrow?" Edwin reprimanded him.

"I'd rather the supper."

Edwin shook his head. *He's not the same as I remember. I think his brief life of riches has softened him. Briefer still it will be if I can't find gold swiftly in this creek.* The weight of the work of two men had settled on his shoulders, but he accepted it gracefully.

"I don't think I should waste my time off work walking here to bring you assistance," Albert said and followed up with, "merely supplies."

"That would be best," Edwin agreed. "Your wages earn enough for supplies, and within two weeks, I expect to be bringing gold dust back to Dawson."

Albert grinned. "Two weeks is little time after so long waiting. Best of luck," he wished Edwin and leaned in to clap Edwin's back in a brief hug. "I will walk back now, I think. I have tasks of my own now that Walt has paid me. Oh. My apologies."

"For what?"

"Mentioning his name."

"He isn't the Devil." Edwin rolled his eyes, but he kept his voice quiet. The claims were close enough, and the water carried voices easily. "His name is not forbidden to any tongue."

"Nor to your mouth," Albert murmured, but Edwin did not grasp his meaning, and he let it go. "Good mining," he wished his friend.

As he watched Albert begin the walk back to town, Edwin didn't yet know that he would see few other people for some time, except men mining and working at a distance along the same creek. Most other claims seemed to be worked by two or more men, sometimes by six or seven at once. Some ran steam systems together, while others took shifts watching the night fires to thaw the ground.

Meanwhile, his own week was spent in fitful sleep shifts, checking and stoking the fire with scraps of wood that weren't fit for building, and as few large logs as he could manage while keeping the fire's intense heat burning.

When morning came, Edwin set about digging out as much thawed earth as possible. He knew his summer had to be spent extracting as much dirt as he could so that he could sift through it when it was too cold to dig up more. In the winter, it would be still colder and impossible to process, so there was a narrow window of opportunity now. He needed funds to live, though, so he processed as much as he could with the help of the sluice and the river water.

The week's work yielded a hundred dollars' worth of gold or so. It was just a few precious ounces, but still more than many claims ever saw. Little else of interest occurred except a persistent dream that seemed to tell him to continue on the course he'd set. In it, he would always be inches away from finding the mother lode of gold, only to give up; in the morning, he would wake full of determination to start fresh that morning and continue this quest for as long as it took to hit pay dirt.

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Edwin had nearly run out of dehydrated potatoes and baking soda when he decided it wasn't worth waiting for Albert to come meet him. He had been absent from the mining site for some time now, and Edwin was worried that something may have happened to him. Besides, he needed supplies now, and he needed to compare money to see whether either of them owed one another—Albert's wages versus the gold he'd extracted so far.

He was only half a mile out of town when he met Walt walking out, his eyes alert and a frown furrowing his brow.

"Seattle boy," Walt greeted him, but he had something urgent in his eyes that caused Edwin not to walk straight past him.

"Back for another round of sparring? That's a sport now, you know. You might be better off seeking your fortune there," Edwin commented.

Walt paused, then shook his head without bothering to retort. "Remember what I told you about looking for unexpected betrayals?" When Edwin nodded, he said, "I believe it would be best to register your claim under your name. I've seen how hard you have been working for the past week."

"Albert would never betray my confidence," Edwin said simply.

A nostalgic smile curled the corner of Walt's mouth. "Suit yourself, Seattle boy. Your inexperience shows in some areas."

Edwin shouldered past him on the trail, brushing against Walt as he moved by. The brief, solid contact of another body, even one to whom he felt hostile, was strange after so many days in the wilderness with only rocks, branches, tools, and dirt under his hands.

When he reached Dawson, Edwin headed immediately to Northern. Albert was not there, so he visited him at his home. Upon finding him there, he entered and sat, trying not to stare at the stove and bed. Those were amenities to him now.

They quickly evened out their money—Edwin had made much more than either of them had expected, so he shared some of the gold dust.

“By the way, since I am working the claim every day, we should travel to Forty Mile and add my name to the claim,” Edwin nodded.

Albert hemmed for a moment and leaned back. “It will take a while to travel, and my days off are few.”

“Are you working for Walt today?”

“No, but...” Albert hesitated.

“Anything you can tell an old friend?” Edwin coaxed.

Albert smiled. “I’m seeing Rosie later today.” That explained why he seemed to be dressed up even fancier than usual. Edwin had just assumed that he was going out on the town to enjoy some show at an opera house or theater.

Edwin straightened up in his chair and smiled. “Well, why didn’t you say that? I’ll take my leave, then.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Albert assured him but stood up nonetheless. “I didn’t wish to cause you any... reason for envy.”

Edwin laughed. “You need not concern yourself,” he told Albert. “I am married to my sluice box!” They shared a moment’s laughter before Edwin added, “But I’m glad for you.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you next week, I’m sure,” Albert assured him.

Before Edwin knew it, he’d been politely ushered out to the street again. He shook his head and headed to the store to pick up supplies with the remainder of his gold dust, thinking about everything that had transpired that day.

The trudge back to his camp provided plenty more opportunities for thought. Walt’s words were haunting him now. He knew that, technically, he could be found trespassing on Albert’s property, but a quick visit to Albert would clear it up if anyone came to check claims. Others could not trespass, and he had never spotted any thieves working his mines in the night. Perhaps Walt was just trying to make him feel paranoid and cause him to lose more sleep. By now, it seemed a real possibility.

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Several weeks full of solitary work and sweat (and a few unkind thoughts about his childhood friend) later, Walt showed up at his camp again. By then,



Edwin had had just about enough. He'd had weeks of fretting about Walt, wondering what he meant and whether it could hint at any harm to him. Now, he was showing up on his claim again?

"I think you should stop seeing me." Edwin decided to flatly address Walt, hoping to cut off any further conversation. Walt's laughter was not the response he expected. He furrowed his brow, an angry outburst ready to come out any moment, before Walt cut him off with a raised hand.

"I apologize. As much as I would enjoy another tirade from you, Seattle boy, it may be difficult not to see you given our proximity."

"Your claim is—"

"That one and half of this one."

Edwin honestly didn't know what he meant for the first few moments. He stared at him, then just shook his head. "You will have to be clearer in meaning."

Walt waved a hand at the land behind Edwin. "Albert has decided that city life suits him better. Rather than let him disappoint you, I offered to immediately purchase his half of this claim. I know I should have consulted you first, but... I assumed it would be better than being left without a partner."

Edwin sat down heavily on the log by his campfire site. *Albert? He's out?* After Edwin exhausted one hole completely of gold, the wealth had slowed. Had Albert decided that it wasn't profitable enough? Was he bored? Was he trying some fancy trick?

"Due to the complicated situation, I have arranged to visit Forty Mile with him tomorrow, preferably with your company, if you are agreeable to the situation. The registration will need to be changed."

Edwin shook his head slowly. "No—yes, I mean. Forty Mile. I can visit." No exposed gold at the moment meant he could leave the site safely without worrying about thieves. "Why did Albert... leave?"

For perhaps the first time since they'd met, Walt's expression was soft, even sympathetic. "For the past few weeks, I suspected it would happen. He has been occupied with city life and all its pleasures. Particularly of the female variety."

*I should have known.* "Men and their vices," Edwin muttered—by which, of course, he meant other men. The ones who courted and married women, who felt true affinity to them and a desire to raise a family with them and wished

their time be taken up by them. He had never been like that, and he had not even felt that way about men.

All he wanted was someone who wouldn't leave him.

"Every fucking time," Edwin muttered, then stood up, trying to shake it off. "My... new claim partner, then." He held out a hand.

Walt returned the handshake firmly, then reached out to touch his shoulder. "I will work this claim with you for the next week or so, see where you are. I can bring in some of my equipment. If you operate it while I'm in town, I assume we can come to a similar fifty-fifty arrangement as you held with Albert."

"I'd rather..." Edwin started, then trailed off.

Walt jerked his chin. "Be direct."

"I'd rather a partner who is present with me. I want someone to stay with me," Edwin admitted. He cleared his throat, then shifted on his feet. "It's... a lot of work. Even with equipment, work will go much faster with two. Though... I understand if the store takes up time."

"My hope was that the extra profits from this claim would cover the cost of hiring another man to work as a clerk at the store," Walt admitted. "That would free me up to accompany you in this. I plan to hire a man tomorrow. This is where I started, and working here is... what I enjoy most." Walt sank down to squat by the fire, which was scarcely needed in this heat except for producing cooked meals and tea.

"Why run the store, then?" Edwin could hardly believe they were having a civil conversation after having exchanged barbs at arm's length for so long.

"Good way to invest my gold. Smarter than most other ways."

Edwin nodded. "Makes sense, I guess." He resisted the urge to make a remark about fleecing new prospectors for their gold.

"I'll let you be for the day, then," Walt told him. "Meet us at the store at eight. Albert said he'd get up early." He looked dubious.

Edwin cracked a grin. "At least that hasn't changed." He rose to his feet again, assessing Walt for a moment before holding out a hand. They might never like each other, but they could be cordial to one another.

"Pleasure to properly meet you," Walt said as he shook Edwin's hand. His callused palm instilled Edwin with confidence that he'd be far more reliable as

a claim partner. If they didn't kill each other, they could easily get twice the gold out of this ground.

"And yourself. See you at eight," Edwin answered.

"Don't be late, Seattle boy, or this claim's mine." Walt dropped his hand and walked off, leaving Edwin watching him for a few moments. He didn't think Walt was serious, but then... he could well be. He wasn't going to take any chances.

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It turned out that Albert and Walt were both on time, as was Edwin. They didn't exchange much conversation on the journey to Forty Mile. Edwin couldn't blame Albert for not wanting to be stuck in the middle of the barely concealed bitterness between Walt and himself, though he'd expected more chattiness out of him.

The registration seemed confusing at first since they had to transfer it from Albert's name to split between Edwin and Walt, but it turned out to be little trouble. It was more relieving than Edwin had expected to be officially a half-owner of the claim on the title as well as in practice, though he had hardly expected it to be under these circumstances. They reached town in time for supper.

As they approached Main Street, Edwin looked at the other two. "I'm eating in town," he told them. "Would either of you care to join me?"

"I can't." Albert shook his head. "See you, friend." Before Edwin could really respond, he was hurrying off down the street.

"Well," Edwin murmured and gazed after him. "Must have a pretty girl waiting."

Walt didn't react to that comment, just shook his head. "I have plans. I can highly recommend the fresh fish at the saloon 'round the corner, though."

"Sure about that? I might test that out," Edwin told him.

Walt nodded. "Don't sleep in tomorrow, Seattle boy. It's an early morning of hauling ahead of us."

*Stay calm. We're working together now.* Edwin gritted his teeth, then let out a sigh. "Sure. I won't. Tomorrow, then." After Walt walked off, he made his way to the restaurant and saloon Walt had told him about to try the fish and enjoy a drink on the town.

The bar was even more crowded than most in this town with men of all kinds—some dressed in their finest clothes, while others were in patched shirts with suspenders about as dirty as they could get. The cleaner ones were more common, though. Most of the townsmen wore a good hat or had nicely trimmed hair and mustaches. Only the prospectors seemed to have beards.

Edwin self-consciously rubbed a hand across his face, then moved for a table. When a young man came over to take his order, he asked for the fish dinner and a pint. As soon as he left, Edwin hardly had time to settle back in his chair. “Hello, friend.” Edwin heard a voice that he recognized from somewhere.

He glanced up, then smiled at the fresh-faced, blond man in front of him. “Charlie. Hello.”

“Mind if I join you?” Charlie was holding a pint of his own beer.

“I’d be pleased to have you.” Edwin nodded his thanks as he was promptly brought a beer, then sipped it. “How has the summer treated you?”

“About as well as can be expected. The rush is slowing, but people are leaving, too. They always need help with their bags. And even the ones staying here need my services sometimes.”

Edwin felt uncomfortable at the open discussion of what else Charlie did, so he cleared his throat. “Glad it’s going well for you.”

“What about you? Struck it rich yet?” Charlie asked, good-natured enough.

“Just about. Took out more gold than I thought my first few weeks, but it’s slowed. I just got a new prospecting partner, though. He bought my old partner’s half of the claim, and he has more equipment. Not hydraulics, but just about as good as you can get up here, he said.” Edwin sighed, thinking of the learning curve. If it would save the back-breaking labor of digging up ground, though, he was in favor of it.

“Who’s your new partner?”

“Walt Kennedy... *the* Walt Kennedy.”

Charlie whistled softly and leaned back in his chair. “You must have done something right.” Then, something seemed to click in his mind, and he straightened up again. “This old partner of yours, who was he?”

“Albert Brown. He works at Northern.”

“Oh, I know Albert,” Charlie murmured, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. “Mm.”

Edwin knew enough to know when something wasn't right. "Yes?" he prompted. "I sense you may have heard something I should know."

"No, no," Charlie said quickly—too quickly. "Well, I'm glad for you that you're working with Walt. The man's bad luck with others does not extend to his finances. He's a charm for everyone else." He glanced over to a man who had walked in, then back to Edwin. "Work beckons. I'll let you enjoy your supper in peace," he said.

*That's a mystery in itself, then.* Edwin nodded. "See you around, Charlie." When he'd left, he shook his head, settling back to think and wait for supper. Even by the time he'd finished and headed back to his modest cabin, he could hardly imagine what was meant by all these riddles—Albert's sudden abandonment of him and the claim, his unwillingness to speak to him, Walt's friendlier demeanor but apparent bad luck, and something that Charlie knew. If it meant gold for him, he wouldn't question a thing.

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The next morning was at least as full of work as Walt had promised, if not more. They had to dig to entrench the steam pipes, set up the fires to heat up the water and produce the steam, and set up a bigger sluice, since Walt told him they'd be digging up more dirt than they'd know what to do with.

For the most part, Edwin followed Walt's lead. His skill and knowledge showed in every metal pipe he twisted together with expert hands and each tidbit of information he left Edwin about why he was doing certain things. He still couldn't imagine exactly how to work all of this machinery, but he planned to watch Walt at work so that he'd learn how to do it himself.

There was something undeniably attractive about the man, especially when he was shirtless in the heat, sweat droplets trickling down his spine as his muscles flexed while they lifted, carried, and positioned equipment. Edwin hated himself for being so attracted to the man he most disliked, but a morbid fascination led him to take more glances than he needed to. His intention was not impure, but it wasn't strictly pure either, so he tried to put it out of his mind.

"Does this take the gold out much faster?" he finally asked Walt as they took a break to drink some cool creek water and splash it over their foreheads. The early July heat was getting to him more quickly than Walt, so he was glad that Walt had decided to have a break before Edwin grew sick from the heat.

"Night and day."

“Well, I was turning up plenty of gold by hand,” he told Walt, his chest swelling with pride. *My claim's a good one.*

“But then it dried up?”

*How did he know?* Edwin frowned.

“You’re green. You think there’s a nice, juicy vein of gold that runs from the creek clear up to the hill. You think it’s just a matter of digging along the vein, pulling out gold all the way.” Walt wore a small smile and an air of disdain as he shook his head. “It ain’t what they advertised in the outfitters’ down in Seattle, boy. It’s scattered all around. You have to blast it all up. Water jets are our next step. Spray it all down.” Walt scooped water and let it run down his chest and back until he was cool.

Edwin bit his lip and glanced around the property. What if Walt was wrong?

“I’ve dug up half a dozen claims in this area. Three turned up nothing. One had a bit. One had placer gold only. Then there was mine, right next to this one. I know the gold in this hill,” Walt told him. “If you want half of nothing, go ahead. But, you could listen to me and get half of a lot more.”

Edwin finally sighed, wiping his wet hands through his hair. “Fine. I don’t know what possessed you to take this over, other than the desire for more shiny dust in your pockets, but I concede that you know more about this hillside than I do.”

“Only that?” Walt laughed. “This hill? All the goddamn world and the living I’ve done, and I know more about this hill, huh? You must think very little of me to think I’d be seeking more gold when I already have enough.” He stepped out of the river and shook his torso like a dog to flick off water droplets.

Edwin hesitated and shrugged, shaking water off his hands into the river before stepping out, too.

In a flash, Walt turned on him and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, pushing him until his back was to the creek, his feet in the water. It was no real threat, the bottom being as shallow as it was and the current barely there, but the action was still a shock. He hadn’t driven Walt to harsh words or blows yet.

Edwin’s heart was pounding as he was held in place more by Walt’s fierce stare underneath furrowed brows than by his fist. “What—”

“You know nothing about me. It’s safe to say you should never assume anything about me, boy,” Walt said, speaking slowly and clearly as if trying to

rein in his own temper. "Learn to appreciate a good thing when it stares you in the face." The hair along his forearms rippled as his muscles tightened. Then he hauled Edwin forward and away from the river before letting go, turning, and walking back up the hill towards the steam pipes.

Edwin stumbled forward, keeping his balance and staring after the broad-shouldered, stocky man. He felt almost sick to his stomach. Had he truly driven Walt to rage by implying that he was in this claim for the money alone? It was true, wasn't it? It wasn't like that was a bad thing—they were all there for gold.

The rest of the day was quiet, as was the rest of that week as Walt began to show Edwin how to keep the steam flowing and the ground thawing, how to dig up the dirt most efficiently, and how to sift for even fine gold particles. Each night, well before sunset, he'd trudge back to town for the night, and Edwin would be left with the oddly disquieting silence of the woods around him, only the sounds of miners a few miles away, felling trees or shouting in the early evening, breaking the silence.

Rather than feeling energized each morning, he felt anxious and restless until Walt arrived. It took him a few more days before he realized that he was used to the company now and being alone was unsettling. Walt's presence was spoiling him, and he was sure Walt would leave him any day now and return to work at the store. They spoke no more of the incident at the creek.

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Not long after dawn one morning, as the short northern summer started to draw to a close, Edwin heard Albert's voice hollering his name. He dropped his shovel and hurried up the hillside towards the trail and the cabin. Walt didn't seem as surprised as he was, and he didn't follow.

"Albert," Edwin called when he was close, then ducked around the cabin to find Albert waiting there for him. "Hello."

"Edwin, my friend." Albert was dressed in good clothes and looked comically out of place in the woods. "I have news."

*A baby? A marriage?* Edwin nodded to encourage him to go on.

"Well..." Albert took the hat off his head and started to turn it about in his hands, a particularly nervous mannerism Edwin remembered. "I, er... an apology, first. I will have made right with God only once I have admitted to you that I was not a good friend."

"You have always—" Edwin tried to reassure him, frowning. He stopped when he saw Albert hold up a hand.

"In more ways than you know, I do not deserve you as a friend. The gold dust... well. Gold fever struck me. It drives a man mad," Albert emphasized. "I cannot stay here any longer."

*At the claim?* "Oh." *Up north.* Edwin rubbed a hand across his forehead. "Oh, I see."

"I leave today."

"Today?" Edwin exclaimed, unable to help the strength of his response. "I—I had no idea."

"My deepest apologies," Albert sighed, then shook his head. "I must be off to pack. I will write," he promised, "or send a message by wire when they put in service next year."

Edwin didn't know what he could do except reach out to hug Albert. In a few sentences, his only friend in the North—the man he'd come north for, who had seemingly become a stranger over just a few weeks—had changed everything. "Is that why you sold the claim?"

"Among other reasons."

Albert looked guilty as he pulled back from the hug, so Edwin assured him, "All is forgiven. Where will you go?"

"Chicago. I will start a new life," Albert told him with a smile. "I have saved enough to return a richer man."

Edwin reached out to take his hand and squeeze it. "I hope you find your dreams in your new life."

"And you." Albert nodded. "I can think of no one who deserves it more than you. I hope you find what you most need and what you most desire."

Edwin shook Albert's hand, then leaned in for another quick, tight hug. "We will meet again," he promised.

"We will." Albert drew back, then raised a hand to wave. "Good-bye for now, Edwin."

Once Albert disappeared from sight altogether, Edwin lowered his hand from waving and settled down on the log by his cooking fire. Now that Albert was gone, what kept him here? The gold fever alone. He would put all the strength he had into finding gold to earn Walt's respect and the dust he needed to restart his own life.

"He's gone, isn't he?"



Edwin hadn't even heard Walt approach, but he stayed seated. "Yes," he murmured back. *Pull it together. Time to get to work.*

"Condolences," Walt said, walking up behind him and squeezing his shoulder momentarily before sinking down to sit on the log next to him.

Edwin didn't protest or stand up like he normally might have, just turned his head to glance over at Walt. "Did you know?"

"He quit yesterday and told me he had to go. I thought he might have told you earlier, but..." Walt trailed off with a small sigh. "Glad he did now, at least."

Edwin shook his head. "They never tell you why. It's always just... somewhere else to be." *Oh, fuck, no. I'm not going to spill my guts to the man who hates me.*

After a long few moments of watching him oddly, Walt reached out to bump Edwin's arm with his fist. "Hey, let's take the rest of the day off and walk to town. I'll take you for dinner."

This wasn't what he'd expected to hear, but Edwin nodded. After meals of potatoes and rice, beans and salted pork, it was always a rare luxury to have supper in town. Even if Walt was feeling sorry for him, it was an excuse for a free dinner.

"All right," Edwin agreed, straightening up. "Let me change my shirt."

Walt nodded and waited as Edwin went into the cabin to change into a cleaner shirt, at least, then accompanied him along the trail towards town. They both knew the route by heart but pretended to be focusing on how to get there so they didn't have to make much conversation. The silence between them was comfortable, perhaps for the first time in the months they'd worked together.

When they finally reached the edge of town, it seemed closer to the creek than ever. New cabins and buildings had gone up around the edges of the town since Edwin's last visit, and he'd given up trying to figure out who anyone was. The population was simply too great now.

"I need to have a word with one of my men at the store," Walt told him. "You go on and wait for me." He gestured at the restaurant across from Northern, and Edwin nodded.

As he walked in, a woman greeted him and found him a table. He already planned to have the clam chowder, but he waited for Walt to join him.

It was little surprise to him when he saw Charlie approaching the table, but Edwin still smiled. *Still kicking around, then. He must make a fine living here.* “Hello.”

“Edwin,” Charlie nodded. “Hello. How goes the search?”

“It goes well. Walt has taught me steam thawing, and we are making remarkable progress,” Edwin smiled. “And yours?”

“I never come up dry,” Charlie told him, leaning against the table. “I heard that Albert left on the ship today.” Edwin frowned and folded his arms, and Charlie sighed. “Sorry. That was hardly a soothing compress.”

“Not really,” Edwin agreed. Because his curiosity was piqued, he couldn’t help but ask, “So, last time we met... what was that about Walt?” He glanced at the doorway, then Charlie. “If honor permits you to share.

“He would not like it,” Charlie told him, sliding a little closer on the table. He needed no more encouragement, though—the glint of good gossip was in his eye. Charlie leaned down to murmur, “They had a public disagreement. Walt told Albert that his morals were slipping, that he was going to cheat a good man and a good friend if he continued on this path. He demanded that Albert give you justice and admit to God what he’d done.”

The story hardly seemed plausible, but it would at least explain how Walt had ended up with the share so suddenly. “What was Albert going to do?” Edwin murmured back.

“My guess—your name was not on the share. He could have claimed everything on the land for himself.”

Edwin’s cheeks heated with indignation. “Albert wouldn’t—” he spoke up loudly.

“Great men have done worse for less,” Charlie told him, his voice still soft. It made Edwin go quiet as he started to remember Walt’s subtle words. They hadn’t been threats at all—perhaps they had been warnings. Walt had seen this entire situation unfold from the first moment he’d arrived.

Edwin finally just shook his head. “Thank you. I had no idea.”

“Walt would never have told you. He gave up a year’s wages for that claim, simply so that Albert couldn’t take that dream from you,” Charlie told him. *And before we started to extract that gold, he didn’t know how much there was. There could have been nothing there,* Edwin added. *He could have given that up for nothing.*

Edwin didn't bother to ask how Charlie knew all this. In any city, those who knew the most were women and occasionally men in Charlie's line of work. He felt almost sick again now that he realized how much Walt had given up and how unlikely it would have been for Walt to ever tell him. All this time, he'd thought Walt conniving, not concerned. Walt was too good of a man to boast of what he had done. "Thank you," Edwin said again, quietly.

When Walt entered, Charlie stood up straight again. "Come to town more often, and I can show you the sights," he offered with a smile. "You would be surprised how much has changed since your arrival."

"I will remember your offer," Edwin promised. "Good-bye, Charlie."

Walt sat down once Charlie had left, cast a glance after him, then looked at Edwin. It was clear that he thought that interaction had been far different from the reality. Perhaps he even wondered if he was being tricked into anything.

"I know what he does, and I have no interest in it, but I won't judge him for it," Edwin told him outright. "He is a good man." He had swiftly decided not to tell him what he had heard from Charlie. Embarrassing him would not be kind.

Walt settled again, his shoulders sinking. "I know him. What I've heard would seem to confirm that. I spoke about supplies with my men at the store. I have some reserved for us to carry back to the claim."

"What sort?" Edwin asked, quickly distracted by the news.

"Tools to help insulate the cabin for the autumn. The summer months are nearly gone. With both of us working together, we can ready it for winter next week, or the week after, in perhaps three full days."

"Only three days?"

"Or four," Walt nodded, and Edwin laughed. In response to the laugh, Walt's lips curled up in a smile that warmed his face and made Edwin's stomach churn with pleasure.

"You seem confident, but I will believe you in this as in everything else," Edwin agreed. Conversation quickly turned to the details of how they would protect the cabin against the elements, and Edwin noted that, from the way Walt spoke, he intended to stay there. Edwin fell asleep dreaming of the close companionship that winter might bring.

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The familiarity of weeks passing in Walt's daily company seemed entirely good, and Edwin paid little attention to his complacency. To his mind, the

man's newfound respect for him was long overdue. Now that they found themselves conversing over work and sharing tidbits of knowledge about the land or the creatures upon it, life was far more comfortable. Walt occasionally checked on the men he'd hired to work on his discovery claim who stayed in that cabin, but they seemed far more self-sufficient in their knowledge of the job, to Edwin's shame.

If Edwin suspected that Walt thought as much of him at night, when Walt walked back to town to check up on the store after work most evenings, and Edwin slept in the rough cabin, he never said. Nor did Walt try to bring up the subject of Albert's absence. Nonetheless, they were perhaps as open and agreeable to one another as they ever had been when the accident occurred.

Edwin didn't even see it coming as he grabbed the steam valve handle to pull it open, gradually releasing the pressure from the steam driven to the hole from the boiler on Walt's property so they could dig up the thawed earth. It was no different than he had done many times before, but their conversation had him thinking about matters other than his job.

"If I could travel to another city," Walt mused over the question Edwin had posed, "I suppose it would be... New York City."

"Why?" They both waited for the earth to thaw enough for digging.

Walt made a huffing sound that meant he didn't like the way Edwin made him think about his answers. By now, Edwin knew it wasn't a serious threat. "Life there is about as different from here as possible, and it's on the east coast. I don't know anyone on that coast."

"Fair enough," Edwin agreed. "I have often thought of moving there," he admitted.

"Well, I'll let you know if I plan to move there," Walt told him. "A train from Vancouver to Montreal would be slow alone, and splitting a sea passage south from Montreal would be more tolerable with you than an unknown stranger."

"I'm glad I'm more tolerable than a stranger if New York life beckons," Edwin laughed as he gripped the handle to release the steam again. This time, the wind direction had changed. It was blowing the wrong way, meaning that a cloud of near-boiling steam would scald him directly with no chance of escape. He'd only realize it later, but as he twisted the handle, the last thing he was aware of was a gust of cold wind against his face, the hiss of released air, and

then... impact, and a warm body atop his own, and a sharp rock pressing into his spine.

Edwin grimaced at the sensation and jerked upwards, reaching under himself to cushion his back. The move pressed his body against Walt's, his mind spinning. Walt hadn't hesitated for a moment to throw himself atop Edwin and cushion him from the steam.

The sensation was most strange for Edwin—the man he'd more than once harbored a secret momentary desire for was suddenly far closer to his personal space than he ever had been, and he didn't mind it at all. Their chests pressed together through thick shirts, and Walt's gloved hand still rested atop his shoulder, their faces scarce inches apart. Walt had shaved last week, but already, his stubble grew in quickly, and Edwin could have sworn he'd felt the scrape of it against his cheek during the impact.

With the danger behind them, Walt pushed himself to his feet again and offered Edwin a hand. When Edwin was foolish enough to take it, Walt pushed him back down to the ground and stood atop him with a foot on either side of his legs, fury in his expression.

"If you cannot hold a conversation and concentrate on avoiding death or disfigurement, we will not talk from this point on, you idiotic Seattle boy!"

Edwin pushed himself into a sitting position, which made Walt take a step back to avoid having Edwin's face in his own private parts—as much as Edwin occasionally thought he would not mind that. "I didn't mean to."

"Of course you would not mean to, and then I would be responsible for your foolish actions," Walt snapped, but he offered a hand again, and this time, he pulled Edwin to his feet and brushed a hand quickly across his back to clean off twigs and dirt particles that his clothes had picked up from the ground. The touches felt sinfully good to Edwin, and he tried to see them as the touches of a good friend who was concerned about his safety.

"I'm sorry," he told Walt honestly, reaching out to take his arm. "I am."

Walt took a breath and let it out, then slowly shook his head. "As am I. You are new to this. I ought to have watched you more closely." Now that Walt mentioned it, he hadn't made eye contact since the conversation about moving had begun.

"Why weren't you watching?" Edwin inquired. "What made you lost in thought?"

Walt hesitated, then sighed, watching the pipes cool down. "I was thinking of what it would be like to move. I would leave everything I knew, unless I were lucky enough to have a companion like..." he hesitated again.

Edwin raised his eyebrows.

"Like you," Walt finished.

Edwin had not expected this answer. "Oh," he murmured, then smiled slightly. "I would be honored. If my time to leave this godforsaken territory is the same as yours, we can travel together."

"I did not wish to ask directly," Walt admitted, but he was smiling a little now. "It seemed impudent for one without a monopoly on your attention like Rosie had on Albert."

Edwin laughed, quashing the uncomfortable feeling that rose within him. *Don't let him discover me.* "I have no one with such a monopoly, so I am free to make such a contract. Furthermore, since the contract was made *before* any future monopoly, it will remain valid for longer," he assured Walt with a playful slap of his back.

Walt stumbled for a moment but laughed, too. "Cunning. Then I shall promise the same in return, friend."

*Friend.* The word held all the significance Edwin could have imagined that it, and several other words, could hold. To his knowledge, Walt had never referred to his having another friend in this town, and his reputation was such that Edwin knew he was unlikely to have any in secret.

In return, now that Albert was gone, Walt was the only one Edwin would count as a true friend. Even if they hadn't spoken at length about many matters, they constantly discovered new topics of conversation but did not try to rush into them all at once. There was a sense of having a lifetime to converse—except, perhaps, during this stage of their prospecting.

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Once Walt deemed it best to switch to building, in case an early frost should catch them by surprise, two days passed in a flurry of activity as they worked in tandem to insulate the cabin with the best materials available from nature and a sense of determination. A well-insulated space was life or death in the Klondike, and neither of them wanted to risk anything else.

They both slept on the floor in sleeping bags, since the bed and rudimentary furniture had to be moved outside while they worked. They still changed

separately and did not speak much in the mornings, but Edwin was comfortable with the routine.

On the third day, they spent the full day insulating the floor. Only when the sun set did they stop to carry the furniture inside, and they had to shrug on sweaters and hats. Even in this autumn month, a bitterly chilly night haunted them after the heat of the day.

Walt grunted once the furniture was in place, tugged at the knitted cap on his head, then looked around. "Looks like my first cabin did, a year or two back." Moments where he spoke of his past were rare, so Edwin stayed quiet to hear what came next. "I shared it with a man named Will. He left and took more than his share to gamble not even six months later, but those first six months..." Walt trailed off, sinking to sit on the bed frame.

Edwin came to sit next to him. "I had someone leave me once, too. Never offered a reason, really. When you asked what I was running from when I came here... that was it."

Walt sat just inches away, his shirt soaked with sweat and clinging to that defined, barrel-like chest. He looked like a statue, but the words that came from him were poetry.

"We're found all over, aren't we? Not in the big cities, but in the tiniest towns at the edges of the earth. We push back the corners of the map," Walt told him, his husky voice all that Edwin could hear in the silence of the cabin. He glanced over to meet Edwin's gaze from so close, not moving back or standing. "We don't just run away, though. We run *to*."

"Run to what?" Edwin felt compelled to ask, his lips parting. Walt's eyes wouldn't look away from his. The air between them felt too thick to cut with a knife, and the prospect of moving away seemed like walking through molasses.

"You tell me," Walt murmured. "You came here as one of many. What drove you?"

Edwin didn't have time to carefully choose his words. "I sought gold, of course. But I think I found it, regardless of how much this claim gives us."

Walt seemed to consider his answer carefully, then nodded. "I thought I struck gold twice. Only the second time, it left for Seattle and took my profits from the first time. I've been a lot more careful since then. I didn't wish to find gold a third time until I was certain it would last a lifetime. I find myself... willing to make that a certainty now that I know the way that other men in Seattle think."

“What way is that?”

“Open. Trusting. Honest to a fault, but willing to admit fault,” Walt murmured. “Edwin, you are not your mother city.”

“And you are not what the rumor-mongers said, Walt.” *I hardly know what to do. This isn't a ruse, is it?* Edwin doubted it, though. The honesty was in the way Walt's steady hands fidgeted against one another.

Edwin embarked upon the most significant journey of his life, with perhaps the greatest risk, when he reached out to take one of Walt's hands, soothing it from fidgeting by wrapping his own around it. “A lifetime would be easy to spend in your company.”

Walt's hands went still, and he watched Edwin's expression. “When I saw you with Charlie...”

“You were jealous.” Edwin made sure his tone was not one of accusation, but a simple statement of fact.

It took tremendous effort for Walt to put aside his pride and nod. “I was,” he admitted. “But then I realized... I hadn't made a claim.”

“I would give you the right,” Edwin said, his own voice a husky whisper. Walt's body was strong, his spirit stronger, but his heart was the iron that sealed the deal. Edwin's attraction was impossible to ignore any longer, and from Walt's words, the older, gruffer, even wiser man was apparently feeling the same.

“And I you.” Walt watched him carefully, their hands still clasped, then leaned in to press the first kiss in so many months against Edwin's lips, and Edwin's eyes fell closed. The warmth of Walt's lips stoked the fire of need within him, and Edwin quickly reached to run a hand along Walt's side, then across his back as their lips caressed one another's.

Edwin's touch was returned, as Walt's hands broke free from his to run up along his arms then squeeze his shoulders. He sank back against the sleeping bag on the frame, letting Walt shift until his weight blanketed him. They were both acting impulsively, and neither of them seemed to give a care to any other concerns as Walt leaned down over him.

For a near-stranger of whom Edwin knew so little, he trusted Walt completely. Perhaps it was because his past lover was a man he'd known the full history of, yet he had known nothing of his character until he had



left. Walt had shared little about himself, but the parts of Walt that Edwin knew, he counted far more valuable than any reciting of biographical facts.

Edwin raised his arms, crossing his wrists above his head. Walt had him completely helpless, and a far lesser man would have taken advantage of the moment. Instead, Walt leaned down to cup Edwin's cheek with a hand, running his thumb along it before gently pressing another kiss to his lips.

They had as much time as they pleased and as many nights as they could spare together to explore, but that didn't stop Edwin wanting to do so now. It had been a while since Edwin had first felt the attraction, even if it had originally manifested as an intense urge to shy away from being vulnerable once more.

"Edwin," Walt whispered, which made him open his eyes. The scruff across his face made for a gorgeous, lightly bearded look now, and Edwin resisted the urge to touch Walt's face in return.

"Yes?"

"Since Will left... it's been months. Over a year..."

"For me, too," Edwin assured him. "Since Louis left me."

Walt nodded. "But you're certain about this?"

"Let me lay my claim, too," Edwin told him, his voice low. He certainly didn't wish to startle Walt off, after all.

The appeal worked, and Walt smiled, his gruff exterior cracking once more to show the softer side of him that so rarely shone through. "Of course." He kissed Edwin again, their mouths open, and the tips of their tongues starting to tease each other once more.

Edwin had never known such heat. The past times he fell into bed with someone seemed cold in comparison to the intensity with which he wanted to see them naked against each other, wanted Walt to kiss him and caress him and fuck him with the same tender, skilled care he showed in everything else. To have those gentle hands around him forever was a privilege.

Now, Walt focused on unbuttoning his own shirt and then Edwin's, sliding them off one at a time. Between clothing items, he pressed more kisses to Edwin's lips, then to his neck and chest. He started to tease elsewhere, his tongue flicking across the skin of his collarbone and the top of his shoulder, the sensitive parts of his throat, and behind his ear.

Edwin moaned before long, losing track of his thoughts in favor of his senses. He was unable to resist reaching out to wrap his arms around Walt's bare back before unfolding them to run down across his skin until his fingertips caressed the rounded cheeks of Walt's bottom. What a fine one it was, too.

"Nnh," Walt breathed in return, so Edwin caressed and even squeezed lightly, kneading the muscled flesh before letting his fingers trail down to Walt's thighs. His hands slipped further up as Walt scooted down the bed frame and Edwin frowned.

Walt's purpose quickly became clear. The burn of hair bristles against his chest felt just fine after his hot breath ghosted across Edwin's nipple, followed by the dart of his wet tongue and then supple lips.

"Oh, God," Edwin groaned his approval, gazing down at the sight of that weather-beaten face paying such close attention to him. Walt kept teasing and tormenting that nub of flesh as every fiber of his body started to heat up, the nervous tension flooding him. A half-hysterical need for release was close at hand, especially when Walt switched to the other nipple, then lapped his way down his torso and back up to kiss him again as he slid their pants off.

They couldn't get naked fast enough for Edwin. He gazed down Walt's body, admiring it anew once no clothes covered it. The addition of his erect penis to their heated situation matched Edwin's own body's response, and as their cocks brushed together, even more nerves seemed to send a small electric shock through him.

Walt's stifled groan told him that he'd noticed that, so Edwin reached between their bodies to wrap a hand around both of their erections at once, slowly thrusting his hips up against Walt's body and gazing into his eyes to enjoy each little reaction to the movement. The way the skin around Walt's eyes crinkled with pleasure and his lips tightened spurred Edwin on to thrust against him two or three times more, until their skin felt too hot and tight.

Walt wet his fingers, wasting little time now in reaching between Edwin's legs to press up inside him. Edwin willingly responded by opening his legs further, still lazily thrusting against the sensitive flesh held against his own and enjoying the rush of heat this produced within him. The late summer night suddenly felt like the heat of midsummer day within him, and he knew he had to be sweating already.

Walt's other arm tenderly wrapped around him like he was protecting him, and he was watching Edwin's expression for signs of pain. Instead, Edwin only

felt pleasure, eager for something thicker and less flexible than the fingers currently ensuring his comfort.

When Walt drew his fingers out, Edwin's breath caught. His heart still hammered within his chest, but the intensity of his desire to make his mark on this man—a man who had turned out to be his long-sought fortune—overcame any nerves.

Moments later, Walt gently unwrapped his fingers from around their cocks and reached up to kiss them, and Edwin's heart could have melted at the move. Walt noticed the effect that had had and smiled, taking hold of his own cock and wetting it some more.

The hot, thick tip pressed against his opening and quickly slid into Edwin, and Edwin let out a breath, his eyes fluttering closed briefly. It was a strange sensation after all this time, but he had hardly realized how much he craved it until now. The wait had been worth it, even if only partly intentional.

"Oh, you feel..." Walt trailed off, his words seemingly escaping him once he was fully seated deeply inside Edwin, completely filling him.

Edwin grinned, then wrapped his hands around Walt's hips. "Come on, Walt."

"Don't push your luck, Seattle boy," Walt murmured, but the playful return of the nickname that had long incensed Edwin only made him smile now. He set himself into a slow, careful rhythm at first and then sped up, his hips thrusting in measured, deep motions.

Every time he pushed inside, Edwin felt a burst of pleasure deep inside, somehow under his own cock. He felt like he was swelling even further, the sensation always uniquely erotic. "Perfect," Edwin breathed out, opening his eyes again to watch Walt's muscled body at work.

His forearms were braced against Edwin and the bed frame, his stomach and buttocks rippling with each thrust. The sight almost made Edwin spill over the edge of pleasure instantly, but he held out for at least a short while longer before he couldn't help himself. The tipping point was when Walt's broad palm started to stroke his cock in time with the thrusts, adding to his pleasure until he could think of nothing else but Walt inside and around him.

"Walt," he breathed in warning, wrapping his arms tightly around his new partner as he clenched around him, his entire body giving the signal that Walt was his own for life. He threw his head back against the sleeping bag, his groan

loud and guttural. His cock spurted his passion with vigor and coated both their stomachs as it settled and softened, and his involuntary twitches and clenches had stopped.

It took just moments more before Walt followed with his own orgasm, his expression contorting in such genuine, bone-deep pleasure that Edwin momentarily lost his breath at the sight. His lips parted and those intense brows furrowed as he saw the same pleasure that Edwin himself had just had. He kept thrusting hard inside Edwin until he was done. His own body released the mark of his passion within Edwin, filling him with warmth and the satisfaction of their mutual bond—a bond forged of sweat, blood, and honesty from start to finish.

“Oh, Christ, Edwin,” Walt panted as he tried to catch his breath.

Edwin grinned, waiting as Walt’s cock slipped out of him and nestled between his thighs. “That was better than any scale-weight’s worth of work here,” he murmured.

Walt breathlessly grinned in return, resting his weight upon Edwin as their sticky, hot stomachs pressed together. “From both sides of the scale, I agree.”

They didn’t say much more for a few minutes, each of them recovering from the sky-high bliss they’d experienced together, but Edwin didn’t miss the way Walt wrapped an arm around his shoulders to keep him close. In return, he kept an arm around Walt’s waist. The easy comfort of sharing a bed came as a far lesser surprise than he ever could have anticipated.

At last, Walt murmured, “We’ll bathe in the river tomorrow, before dawn.”

“Naked?” Edwin teased.

“Do they bathe clothed in Seattle?” was Walt’s retort.

Edwin laughed, the happiness that radiated from every part of his being settled deep in his heart. “They don’t slip away to the woods for trysts in Seattle.”

“They’re missing out on the best part of life, then,” Walt murmured, and the sincerity beneath his words made Edwin release a breath with contentment.

Edwin nodded. “Let’s not tell them. Don’t want everyone rushing up here again.”

Walt made a quiet sound of agreement.

“Besides,” Edwin whispered, catching Walt’s attention again with the quieter tone, “they could never hope to strike it as rich as us.”

Walt squeezed Edwin against him and nodded once. “God finally blessed us. If I’d only known what it would take...” He went quiet.

They shared a comfortable silence for a few more minutes, watching each other in the flickering light from the candle that burned upon the table.

Edwin just smiled back at him. “Work to be done. Get the candle?”

Walt grumbled but lifted himself enough to blow a quick, hard breath across the room. The candle flickered but didn’t go out.

“Guess your candles are too high-quality,” Edwin teased.

A laugh rumbled in Walt’s belly but he lightly pushed Edwin’s shoulder. “Impudent as ever,” he scolded, blowing again. This time, the candle went out, and he settled down again in the darkness, drawing the roomy sleeping bag around their bodies until they nestled into it together.

“That’s why you fell for me, though,” Edwin murmured. He could feel Walt smile.

“Work to be done tomorrow,” Walt told him. “Go to sleep, Edwin.”

Edwin squeezed Walt and settled in his arms until his cheek was pressed to Walt’s strong forearm. “Good night.”

Walt murmured back, “Sleep well. May tomorrow bring riches.”

As he drifted off in Walt’s arms, Edwin could hardly have cared less what tomorrow brought; tonight’s new claim was all he could think about. With a man like Walt at his side, they could weather rich or poor soil, winter storms and frost, and the heat of August days. If Walt someday left this corner of the map, Edwin would follow, and he was certain that the reverse would be true. For him, that was enough.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*I'm E. Davies, and I focus on writing hot M/M erotica and erotic romance. My stories range from alien fantasy erotica to sweet holiday romances. Everything has an erotic twist, so you don't have to worry about my stories "fading to black" when the going gets good!*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# THE HEARTBEAT UNDER A WHITE COAT

By CR Guiliano

## Photo Description

Jordan is lonely and in the closet thanks to a painful past and prior abusive relationships. Here you see him thinking, wishing he had someone to love in his life. Despite the chance to meet someone, he is scared. Afraid that no one will want him after all that he has suffered.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*This is Jordan. He is a Physician's Assistant (PA) working in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at the Children's Hospital. Jordan is a sweet and caring man. Given that he works in the NICU, he is surrounded by women. They are his best friends and they are always trying to set him up on dates. Unfortunately, those dates are with women. You see Jordan is not out. He has been hurt in his life. Friends have betrayed him. He has been in abusive relationships. Yet he longs to have someone special to call his own. One co-worker of Jordan's is Susan. Susan is a lesbian and her gaydar goes off whenever she and Jordan work together. Susan and her wife Michele have a friend that just might fill the lonely place in Jordan's life. Susan decides to ask Jordan if he is open to a date with a man, and he finally feels relieved to come out to someone at work.*

*Martin is truly a good guy. He is an Advanced Practice Nurse Practitioner (APRN) working as a counselor to physically and emotionally abused children at a free clinic. Martin has been divorced from his wife for two years. He has done the bar scene and is over it. He is tired of being alone and just wants to find someone special to share his life.*

*Susan and Michele are close friends with Eva and Jake. Jake and Martin are BFF's and work together at the free clinic. The women devise a plan to invite both men to a dinner party. But when Susan approaches Jordan with the plans, he is nervous and intimidated to meet Martin surrounded by Martin's friends. This causes Jake to explode and say that Jordan can't be good enough for Martin.*

*How can we get these two nice guys together? Cause when they meet the sparks will fly...*

*Sincerely,*

*Melissa*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** deep feelings, grief, hurt/comfort, in the closet, instant attraction, medical personnel, prior abuse, switch, tragedy

**Word Count:** 13,707

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



# **THE HEARTBEAT UNDER A WHITE COAT**

**By CR Guiliano**

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## Chapter 1

Jordan looked up from the stool he was perched on to see his friend and one of the NICU nurses, Susan shuffling in, hiding a yawn behind her hand. "Who did you piss off to be on the night shift?" He smirked at her, and then chuckled softly when she glared at him.

"No one. Michele and I are trying to buy a house, so I'm taking on extra shifts and she's working overtime. I damn sure hope it's worth it. We never see each other!"

With a small smile, Jordan just shook his head at her. It was going to be nice working with Susan; they got along great. He only wished he wasn't so envious of her relationship with her wife, Michele. He'd met Michele a while back at some function or another, and could easily see what a wonderful couple they made. Sometimes, he wondered if he'd ever find someone to love that much. "The Sherman twins are going to be released tomorrow morning."

Susan nodded, and went to look at their charts. Jordan went back to his notes on tiny, little Emily. He'd been called in early by Dr. Conrad when Emily had taken a turn for the worse. They'd managed to stabilize her, but she was still critical. Dr. Conrad had gone home and admonished Jordan to call him if there were any changes, good or bad. Jordan looked over at the miniscule baby girl.

So far, he'd never lost a patient, but it was very touch and go with Emily. He wasn't sure how he was going to handle it if she didn't make it. Jordan tended to get really attached to his small patients, and if the baby girl didn't survive, he was going to take it really hard.

"You okay?"

Jordan jumped when Susan spoke. She was right next to him and had laid a hand on the small of his back. He gave her a weak smile. "Yea, just worried. She's not doing as well as I'd like." Susan would understand how much Jordan worried about all his patients. She did too. That's why Jordan liked working with this staff at the Children's Hospital. They all cared so much for the littlest patients, the ones struggling to just begin their lives. It bound them together, made them friends, if only at work. Jordan's thoughts turned back to how lonely he was, despite having those friends. Part of it was they knew he was single and liked to set him up on dates. The problem? They were dates with

women and Jordan didn't have the courage to say he wasn't attracted that way to the female gender. He had his reasons for keeping quiet and not revealing why he wasn't out, something else his friends didn't know.

Susan moved away to continue working on the twins' paperwork in preparation for their release and Jordan went back to watching Emily, monitoring her oxygen levels, pulse, and updating her nutritional intake so he could administer her next feeding. Most of what he was doing could be done by Susan or one of the other NICU nurses, but Jordan wanted to be close in case there were any problems.

He had breakfast with Susan right after their shift ended, enjoying her company. Once, while they were chatting, Crystal, another nurse came up to them, trying to engage Jordan in conversation—about another date setup. He declined, like he always did, stating he had out-of-town friends coming in. It was a lie, of course, but there was no way he was going out on a date with a woman. He tried to be as nonchalant as he could and was relieved when Crystal seemed to accept his excuse. When he turned back to Susan, he couldn't help notice the thoughtful look on her face, but she didn't say anything and they resumed their interrupted banter.

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Jordan walked down the grocery aisles, feeling lonelier than ever as he shopped. He probably wouldn't even be here if he hadn't nearly run out of everything at home. He caught himself darting his gaze around, and tried to stop being paranoid. It had been three years since he fled his hometown, ran from Brolin and his violence. His ex-boyfriend didn't know where he was and Jordan was pretty sure Brolin wouldn't bother searching for him. Not after all this time. Time that didn't seem to wear down Jordan's fear, or the nightmares that still plagued him occasionally.

He grabbed only what he needed and headed for the checkout. Errands were a chore and he kept them to a minimum, always anxious to get home. He'd purposely rented a house near the hospital he worked at, so he wouldn't have a long commute. It cut down on the time he was vulnerable, or at least felt exposed. Stupid, really, but it kept him sane. He made his way home, unloaded the groceries, and locked up his house for the night.

He made himself a small meal, then showered before going to bed. Sleep never came easy and he lay there, his mind wandering. He missed his folks, but he couldn't face them. Not even now. They still lived in the small bungalow

he'd grown up in, north of Miami, but Jordan hadn't been home since he'd fled Hallandale Beach to get away from Brolin. He sometimes wondered if they thought about him, wondered where he was—worried for him. He'd been too ashamed to seek them out after the abuse he'd suffered. They'd never approved of any of his boyfriends, and didn't really understand his sexual orientation either.

His chest ached when he thought of Shelly and Farrah. He'd thought they were friends. Close friends. Hell, he'd thought of them as his best friends. That was until they figured out he liked guys. The disgust on their faces, and the slurs still haunted Jordan. His mind went back to the first boyfriend he ever had. Senior year of high school, and Tyler. A boy Jordan had thought he'd spend the rest of his life with. Except Tyler decided Jordan wasn't enough for him and had cheated—repeatedly. Jordan had been devastated by the betrayal, which had prompted his coming out to Shelly and Farrah. That breakup was probably the reason he'd fallen into some of the bad relationships after that. His self-esteem had taken a brutal hit.

But Brolin was the worst. Abusive, controlling, arrogant—and stunningly beautiful. Jordan had fallen fast for the man, Brolin's initial charms drawing him in, until he *owned* Jordan, body and mind. That's when things had changed, for the worse. Jordan had been so confused over the shift in Brolin's demeanor that he'd been unable to cope, or defend himself. The first time Brolin slammed a fist into Jordan's body, he'd been stunned. The subsequent ones had taught him fear. Where he'd gathered the determination and courage to leave, he didn't know. Maybe he was just tired of being a punching bag.

He sighed and turned on his side, jabbing the pillow into a more comfortable lump. He wished the memories would fade, or better yet, disappear altogether. But his nightmares were testament to the hold they had on him. He had to admit, they weren't as bad as they'd been when he first moved away, for which he was thankful. He just wished he could replace them with new memories, happy memories. Replace the pain with love. He only hoped, if he did meet a man he was attracted to, that he could trust again.

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## Chapter 2

“You look beat.”

Susan gave her wife a peck on the cheek on her way by, shucking her coat and scarf and hanging them over the small sectional in their living room. “Yea, it was a long night. The Sherman twins are going home today, we admitted two more premies, which are doing well. But Emily isn’t. Jordan was in all night, keeping watch over her.” Susan glanced at Michele, her wife watching her closely. “What?”

“I can hear something in your voice when you mention Jordan.”

Susan sighed and walked up to her wife, circling her waist in a hug. Michele hugged her back and guided her to the couch to sit.

“What’s going on?”

“You remember me telling you how some of the other nurses and PA’s like to set Jordan up on blind dates?” Michele nodded, pulling Susan into her side and holding her. “Well, I think they are doing it wrong. I swear, Michele, the man is gay. My gaydar tingles every time I’m around him.” Susan leaned back to stare at her wife when Michele gave an inelegant snort.

“Hon, you do realize there is no such thing as ‘gaydar’, right?”

Susan leaned back into Michele’s side again and sighed. “Maybe. But I can’t help thinking he’s not interested in women. I mean, he’s always declined with one excuse or another when anyone tries to set him up. What straight man does that?”

“Maybe he just isn’t into blind dates? Or maybe he’s just timid. I mean, he was awfully shy at that last holiday function we attended.”

“True, but I really don’t think the man dates. Gaydar aside, he seems lonely. He could be in the closet. We know a few men like that. Unwilling, or unable to be open about their sexuality. Look at Jake’s best friend, Martin. He was even married to a woman for a while.” Susan knew Martin’s marriage had ended about two years ago. Their friend Eva had mentioned that Martin and Josie had divorced. The circumstances were sad, Martin hiding his sexuality and trying to fit into what his conservative parents wanted from him. Eva had even said that Martin was happy there had been no children, especially since Martin’s ex had been devastated by the divorce. But Martin, being the kind man he was, still

kept in contact with his ex-wife. Susan didn't comprehend that, but to each his own, she supposed.

"You know, we have a dinner party coming up in a few weeks. Jake and Eva will be there. I wonder if we can talk Jake into bringing Martin and if your friend would be willing to come?"

Susan startled at Michele's idea. But the more she thought about it, the better it sounded. Martin wasn't dating anyone at the moment that she knew of. She almost giggled out loud when she thought of the gossip that traveled between her and Michele and Eva. She was pretty sure Jake would be annoyed by it since Martin was his best friend, and Jake was very protective of Martin. If she didn't know better, she'd think Jake was into Martin, but he was as straight as they came, and dating Eva.

"That sounds like an excellent idea. You call Eva and run it by her. I'll approach Jordan. I'll have to be discreet since he could be straight, and just shy, or obviously in the closet."

"Yea, be careful. First, I don't want him being mean to you if he's straight and gets angry and second, if he's hiding, you can't let anyone know. You don't want to inadvertently out the man."

"He won't be offended if he's straight. He knows all about us and is fine with it. But I'll be careful. I don't want to hurt him. He's a sweet man."

Michele hugged Susan and then pulled her from the couch.

"Let's take a nap. I've got an early day tomorrow and could use the rest and you are obviously exhausted."

Susan didn't argue. With all the extra shifts she'd been putting in, she was beyond tired. She'd wait to hear what Eva thought and talk to Jordan the next time she had a shift with him.

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## Chapter 3

Jordan shot up in bed, his heart racing, sweat dripping from him, his eyes darting around the dark. Another nightmare! He was getting so tired of them. He was safe now; no one from his past knew where he was. He turned when he heard his cell phone go off, and figured that's what had woken him from his dream. He was thankful, actually, until he saw the number displayed. "Hello?" Now his heart was racing for a different reason.

"Dr. Caruthers?"

"Yea. Yes, what's wrong?" Jordan cleared his throat, his voice raspy from sleep. He only hoped the hospital calling didn't mean that Emily was in trouble. Even a week later, she was still critical. At this point, they were just waiting for her to be strong enough for the heart surgery she needed to repair the hole in her left ventricle. Jordan tried to keep up hope, but every day she seemed weaker than the one before and he wasn't sure she was going to survive to have surgery.

"We have an emergency. Can you come to the hospital?"

"Sure, what's the emergency?" Jordan was kicking his covers off even as he spoke, digging around for something to throw on so he could get out the door. He only lived about five minutes from the hospital, so could get there fast. He really hoped it wasn't Emily. Sometimes it sucked to be on call, but he'd do anything for the health of his patients.

"Dr. Marsh just delivered a set of triplets. They've been admitted to the NICU, and she wants an immediate consultation on their status."

Jordan couldn't help the relief that Emily wasn't the emergency, but wanted to roll his eyes at being called in because Dr. Marsh demanded it. Dr. Bailer, the Neonatal Resident that worked overnight was more than capable in assessing newly admitted infants, but it was a known fact Dr. Marsh didn't trust residents or interns. She wasn't going to be happy that he was coming, since she distrusted PA's even more. But then his mind went into doctor mode and told the hospital attendant he'd be right there. He was not fond of Dr. Alice Marsh. She was haughty, bigoted, opinionated, and felt that all the PA's were there just for her convenience anyway. Jordan's only run-ins with the OB-GYN were unpleasant, to say the least. He dropped his phone on the bed and hurried to get dressed. No time for a shower. He grabbed his wallet, phone, and keys and headed out.

Once he arrived, he hurried to the NICU only to be stopped at the door by Dr. Marsh. He'd expected it, but was still annoyed.

"Where is Dr. Conrad?"

Jordan gritted his teeth, forcing himself to be professional. "He was unavailable and I'm on call. I'll be assessing the triplets." The scowl he got had Jordan getting angry, until he saw Susan come up behind the doctor. She smiled at him, rolled her eyes behind Dr. Marsh's back and it helped Jordan release the tension he was holding.

Three hours later, Jordan had determined the triplets were fine, if tiny. Their hearts were strong, though he put all three on ventilators to help their underdeveloped lungs get enough oxygen. He and Susan monitored the tiny infants for another hour. The babies blood oxygen levels were low, but within normal. Much to Jordan's relief and surprise, Dr. Marsh accepted Jordan's assessments and left. He stretched on the stool he was perched on and smiled over at Susan. As always, they'd worked like a well-oiled machine, and he was thankful she was here.

"Come on. I think the triplets are fine for now, and we can grab some breakfast. My shift ends in another hour."

Jordan nodded. He'd already checked Emily and he was hungry. His own shift didn't start until six tonight, and he planned on going home to get a few more hours of sleep. He knew he probably looked like death warmed over. He placed the chart he was making notes on back on the end of the incubator of Parker baby #3 and followed Susan out of the NICU to the elevators that would take them to the cafeteria.

Once they settled at a corner table, he noticed Susan staring at him intently. "What?" She'd never been so focused on him before and he squirmed a little at the scrutiny. Good friends they may be, but Jordan never let anyone get *too* close to him. He had so much baggage and shame he couldn't allow it.

"Jordan, how come you don't date?"

Jordan's heart flipped in his chest, dread making sweat pop out along his hair line. This was so not a conversation he wanted to have. He tried to act as casual as he could, shrugging his shoulders, and avoiding Susan's eyes. "No particular reason. Just busy, I guess." God. That sounded stupid even to Jordan's own ears.

"I think I have an idea. I think it's because people have been trying to set you up with the wrong... gender."



Susan had lowered her voice, nearly whispering the last word. Jordan's stomach turned. It seemed Susan was a lot more astute than he'd given her credit for. He could feel his face flaming and he swallowed around a lump in his throat. He'd been so lonely, scared to let anyone know about his orientation, images of his past haunting him. But if Susan guessed, maybe it would be a relief to at least have one person, one friend, know that he preferred men. "How..." Jordan paused, clearing his throat, his eyes darting around to make sure no one was near them. He took a deep breath. "How did you figure it out?" He glanced up at Susan to see a warm smile on her face.

"Oh, sweetie. I'm a lesbian. It isn't too hard to know another of my kind, though Michele is convinced that gaydar doesn't really exist."

Susan's light laugh calmed Jordan like nothing else. He should have known Susan wouldn't have a problem with him, since she was gay herself. He gave her a small smile. "Well, you're right. I, obviously, have no interest in any of the dates others have tried to set me up on." That was an understatement.

"What if I told you that Michele and I are having a dinner party in a couple of weeks and we'd like you to come? We have a friend... a male friend, who will be there."

"Really?" Jordan wasn't sure what he thought of that, but the fact that someone was willing to set him up with a man, instead of a woman, had him a little excited. And nervous. "I don't know, Susan. I mean, I won't really know anyone but you there and he'll be surrounded by his friends. I'll have to think about it." Susan reached over and patted Jordan's hand, still smiling at him.

"You do that. Think about it and let me know. Martin is a great guy, and happens to be an APRN and works with abused kids over at the free clinic. You'll have a lot in common."

Jordan nodded, and they changed the subject, chatting about work and Susan and Michele's house-buying plans.

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## Chapter 4

Jordan absently fiddled with his dinner, his mind too occupied with Susan's proposal. He wanted to go, but he was scared. Susan had shown him a picture of Martin on her phone, and *good Lord*, the man was stunning, with blond, sun-streaked hair cut stylishly, a light shadow on his jaw and the most amazing blue eyes Jordan had ever seen. He was laughing in the photo and there were sexy crinkles around those big eyes, and his smile was to die for. He was out of Jordan's league, he just knew it. He didn't handle rejection well, and what if Martin didn't like him?

Susan said Martin was a good guy, worked at the free clinic. Would that mean he was nice? That if he wasn't into Jordan, he'd let him down easily? He was so lonely. What did he have to lose? And if he continued to cower under his fear, he was never going to find someone to relieve that loneliness. Never find someone that actually cared and didn't use him like all his past relationships. He'd never quite understood why every boyfriend he'd had seemed to think he was some kind of submissive and enjoyed getting hurt. Jordan didn't consider himself submissive at all, and certainly didn't like pain. But no matter what he'd said, they did what they wanted.

Shame swamped him as he thought about what he'd endured, how he'd let it go on and did nothing to stop it. What kind of man allowed that? Was he a coward? Or did he just not like confrontation? Jordan didn't really know anymore, having been subjugated for so long under violent and domineering men. He sighed, picking up his plate of uneaten food and dumping it in the trash. He'd been resolute when he fled his hometown, determined to make a life for himself here. And he'd done it. He had a great job, a house of his own, even if it was rented. Paid his bills, was kind to others. Now, to have what he wanted, he was going to have to be unwavering again and gather his courage. Shake off his past, and remember that he had a lot to offer a man, if he found one worthy enough to trust.

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“You think they'll hit it off?”

Susan looked over at Eva, her bright red hair shining in the sun. Had she not been so in love with Michele and married her a couple of years ago, she would have made a play for Eva. She was adorable in a fiery, pixie sort of way. Of

course, it would have never gone anywhere since Eva was very committed to Jake. Michele was convinced they would eventually get married, if Eva could handle Jake in the long run. He could be so arrogant sometimes. It definitely made Susan and her wife glad they preferred women. "I think so. Jordan is very sweet, and cute, for a guy."

Eva laughed at Susan and she gave a wry grin at her friend. "Not that my opinion means much. But I do know he's lonely, and in the closet. I know Martin understands that." Eva sobered quickly and a small frown marred her smooth forehead.

"Yea, but Martin has worked hard to be out and has finally come to terms with being gay. I'm not sure he'd be attracted to a man that hides his sexuality."

Susan nodded, understanding that. "I agree, but I think all it would take for Jordan to be comfortable in being out is having someone who really cares for him. I have the funny feeling he's been treated badly in the past. He's timid. Not shy timid, but scared timid. You know what I mean? I mentioned Martin to Jordan, and he seems, well, excited but really nervous." Eva nodded and looked thoughtful.

"I know Martin has been lonely too. Jake has tried to set him up a few times, but the dates haven't worked out for one reason or another. Not that Jake knows many gay men, but he tries. He's very devoted to Martin."

Susan grinned at Eva's disgruntled look. "Still feeling jealous over their relationship? You know Jake loves you, right? It's just that Martin is his best friend and he's known him longer. You have nothing to worry about. And if we can get Jordan and Martin together, maybe that will give you more time with Jake." Eva grinned again at Susan and she gave the redhead a wink. Susan had never been much into the whole matchmaking thing, but she hated that Jordan was so unhappy, and it sounded as if Martin was in the same boat.

"I'll talk to Jake. I'm not sure what he's going to think."

That was all Susan could ask for. Eva wasn't as close to Martin as Jake was, or she'd suggest Eva talk to Martin herself. She knew Jake would have his opinion. He always did when it came to Martin.

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## Chapter 5

“No way! Why would you think it’s okay to set Martin up with some shy guy that’s in the closet?”

Eva sighed at Jake’s outburst. He was being unreasonable. “Look, I know you are protective of Martin, but really, he’s a grown man. He can make the decision himself. And you know as well as I do, that he’s been lonely lately. You, my dear, are not a substitute for a man he can call his own. You aren’t his boyfriend!”

Eva was annoyed. It was one thing to be protective of Martin, but entirely another to try and make decisions for his friend, especially in the romance department. “He has his own life, ya know. You can’t run it for him. Give Jordan a chance.”

“If he’s scared just to meet Martin, then he’s not good enough for him.”

“Jake, that doesn’t even make any sense. Just because you don’t have a shy bone in your body, does not mean every man has to be like you! Jordan is sweet and handsome and lonely. Just like Martin. They may just hit it off. You don’t know. Has Martin even ever told you what his type is? Or do you just bulldoze your way through his desires and pick any man *you* think would be good for him?” Eva watched Jake turn away from her. “Yea, that’s what I thought. Look, we’re going to Susan and Michele’s dinner party, and we’re going to ask Martin to join us. Susan and Michele are expecting him and Susan will bring Jordan. It won’t hurt to let them, at least, meet each other.”

Eva ignored Jake’s scowl. Her boyfriend was just going to have to suck it up and realize that Martin deserved someone whether that took away time from their friendship or not. She suspected that was the problem. Jake didn’t want any lover Martin might have to interfere with his and Martin’s close friendship. She sighed as she picked up her cell phone to call Susan.

“Jake’s being a dick about it, but I want you to invite Jordan. Despite Jake’s obnoxious attitude, Martin has a way of making people around him feel comfortable. I’m sure that’s why he is so good at his job. If they don’t hit it off, they will at least become friends and from what you told me, Jordan could use a gay friend.” Eva heard Susan’s chuckle over the phone.

“I’ll say. Poor man is surrounded by women trying to pair him off. That would make any gay man want to hide in a closet.”

Eva laughed and they chatted for a while before hanging up. Eva went to find Jake and stopped to see him on the phone.

"I don't know, Martin. I've never met the guy, but Eva says that Susan thinks the guy is okay."

Eva stomped over and pulled the phone from Jake's hand. "Martin? Don't listen to Jake. Susan says that Jordan is sweet and cute, and you know Susan wouldn't say something like that unless it's true. Even Michele likes him, and she's a hard person to impress. You know that."

"It's okay, Ev. I know Jake. I'll be happy to come and meet this Jordan."

Eva gave Jake a smug grin and handed the phone back to him. "He's fine with it, so you need to be fine with it." She walked away to get ready for work, ignoring the rest of the conversation between Jake and Martin. As long as Martin agreed to come, that was all she needed. When she reached her desk at work, she dialed Susan to let her know that Martin would be there.

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Susan knew that Jordan was scheduled to work tonight, which is why she'd signed up for another overnight shift. She smiled when she saw him walk in, his head down like he was thinking hard. "Hey, you." She watched Jordan startle and look up at her and was surprised at the circles under his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, yea. Just not sleeping well."

There was more to it, but Susan wouldn't pry. It really wasn't her business and she was pushing the envelope by setting Jordan up on a date anyway. "Okay, if you say so." She could hear the skepticism in her voice and it was apparent that Jordan caught it too.

"No, really. I'm fine. These weird hours are just playing havoc with my sleeping cycle."

Susan nodded and went to work, thinking it would be a good idea to bring up the dinner party a little later, when Jordan was more alert. The hours went by, Jordan being unusually quiet, even for him. He wasn't ignoring her exactly, but he wasn't really engaging either. She pulled him aside a few hours later, and insisted he go to the cafeteria with her. She sat him down, ignoring his small smile at her manhandling. "Okay, I wanted to let you know that Martin will definitely be at the dinner party and I expect you to be there too." Jordan stared at her, enough that she felt a blush at her demanding tone.

“Well, do I get a choice in this matter, or are you going to drag me there in chains?”

Susan leaned back abashed, at first thinking Jordan was offended, until she saw the sparkle in his dark eyes and his mouth quirking. “You shit!” Jordan’s laugh eased Susan’s guilt that she was pressuring Jordan into this meeting. “I’m sorry. I just care about you, Jordan, and I hate seeing you lonely.” Susan reached across and patted Jordan’s hand and was shocked again, when he quickly turned his hand over and gripped hers tightly and glanced around surreptitiously.

“I’m nervous, Susan. Look, I know you figured out that I’m... well, you know. But you don’t know everything and why I’m as apprehensive as I am. I can’t talk about it, but just know that I appreciate you doing this for me, and I will be there.”

Susan could feel her heart going out to this young man who seemed so lost. She knew she was one of those people that liked to save others. That was why she became a nurse. But Jordan? He was special. There was just something about him that brought out the nurturing in her. Michele would think it hysterical. “No worries, Jordan. You don’t have to tell me anything unless you want to. I’m glad you are going. I think that Martin is just the guy for you. And Michele and I’ll be there if you feel overwhelmed, all right?” Jordan nodded at her, squeezed her hand, and then let go.

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## Chapter 6

Jordan fixed his tie, groaned, and yanked it off again. He'd not had this much trouble trying to dress for a party in a long while. Of course, past boyfriends had dictated what he wore, and it sure as hell wasn't a suit. He stared at himself in the mirror. He'd finally caved and taken an over the counter sleep aid for several days and gotten some much needed rest. The circles under his eyes were gone and he wasn't as pale as he'd been. He'd managed to drag himself to the barber and gotten his hair cut too.

He finally gave up, shoving the tie in the dresser drawer and slamming it shut. He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt to help relieve the feeling of being stifled. His heart was beating much faster than normal, and he couldn't help the perspiration that slicked his skin. He almost felt like he needed to take another shower, but he didn't have time, or he'd be late to the dinner party. Satisfied he looked the best he could, he grabbed his phone, wallet, and keys. He'd gotten Susan's address from her when he'd let her know he'd come.

When Jordan pulled up to Susan's duplex, he noted only one car parked on the curb in front of her house and two in the driveway. The old Toyota he knew was Susan's, and the Honda was her wife's. The big Escalade he didn't recognize, but then there was no reason he should. It could even belong to the people who lived in the other duplex. It was a sweet ride, though and he wondered if it belonged to this Martin guy. It was much nicer than the smaller Explorer Jordan was paying for. He exited his car, his nerves jumping and made his way up the walk. He hesitated right before taking a deep breath and knocking.

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"Relax, Jake. Damn, you're like a pit bull." Martin adored his best friend, but sometimes Jake could be a big pain in the ass, and not in a good way. When Martin had found out about this little setup of Eva, Michele, and Susan's, and the invitation, he'd actually been excited about it. He still was. Jake, bless his misdirected heart, couldn't seem to find a man that Martin was compatible with. Hell, Martin wouldn't even be accepting the blind dates Jake liked to set him up on if he wasn't as lonely as he was. He honestly hoped the women had better taste.

He'd tried the bar scene, to find his own man, but it had been a complete waste of time. He just wasn't wired for the whole hookup, one-night stand

scenario. He wanted a boyfriend. Someone to love and build a relationship with. Maybe even get married and adopt or surrogate a few kids. He wanted the fucking white-picket-fence life he'd not had with Josie. Thinking of his ex-wife made him want to cringe, the guilt swamping him, the epically bad decision and farce still bothering him even after two years.

When he'd ended his marriage, his parents had been unhappy. When he'd told them *why* he'd ended it, they'd been surprisingly okay. Martin had never expected his conservative parents to accept him being gay. That's what had pushed him into marrying Josie in the first place. But the only anger they had was him deceiving them for so long, and hurting Josie, by not only marrying her, but when he divorced her as well. He kept in touch with Josie, though it was hard. His ex-wife hadn't gotten angry with him for lying to her. No, Josie had been shattered at what she thought of as betrayal, but had blamed herself. It had taken a few talks to convince Josie she hadn't *turned* Martin gay by not being woman enough for him.

"Martin, care for another drink?"

Martin turned to smile down at Susan. He'd always liked the petite woman, ever since Eva had introduced her and her wife, Michele. For that matter, Susan's marriage was an unconscious model for what Martin wanted for himself. These two women were happy. Happy in their skin, happy with their lives, and happy with each other. It was so easy to see the love between them when they looked at one another. That's what Martin wanted. "Sure." He accepted the glass of wine, but was determined not to drink too much. He didn't have work for the next three days, but since he wasn't much of a drinker to begin with, it really didn't matter.

"So, are you sure Jordan's going to come?" Martin had to admit to himself, he was getting a bit anxious. Susan had confided in him when he'd first arrived that Jordan was a bit gun-shy and to be gentle with him. Well, Martin, unlike Jake's obnoxious ways, was always gentle. Sometimes, he thought maybe that was what turned a lot of men off. He wasn't the big, rugged he-man they were looking for. Big, sure, but more like a gentle giant. He had to be in his line of work. Abused children were skittish, and his size was intimidating. But he'd learned, if he stayed calm and quiet, listened well, and hunkered down on the floor at their eye level, the kids opened up, many feeling safe with him. Protected. And they were. Martin would never let anything happen to his young patients.

There was a knock at the door when Susan opened her mouth to respond to his question.



“Yes.”

They both laughed as Susan started towards the door to answer it. Martin saw Jake headed that way too, and grabbed him by the upper arm. “Whoa, there, buddy. I honestly don’t need help meeting a guy. Why don’t you go get Eva a drink while I get to know Jordan?” He gave Jake a smile and a push towards the back of the duplex. Susan and Michele’s place was small, so they’d opted to have the party in their backyard. The weather was beautiful and the cool breeze coming off the coast was perfect.

When Martin turned back around, he nearly swallowed his tongue and almost dropped the glass he was holding. Jordan was not cute! *Jordan was fucking gorgeous!* He almost chuckled out loud when it occurred to him that a couple of lesbians wouldn’t really know gorgeous on a guy, at least not as far as attraction anyway. Christ, why hadn’t Jake ever picked up on it being this kind of man that pushed all Martin’s buttons? Martin held a snort, because Jake never bothered to ask, that’s why.

He waited as Susan guided Jordan to him, watching his every move, thrilled at the smaller, thin size of him. His dark, almost black hair looked soft and Martin was itching to run his fingers through it. He could tell Jordan had dark eyes, but he wanted to gaze into them, see if he felt as if he could fall into the smoldering depths. He wanted to taste those rosy lips and flawless skin. He could feel his body responding, his dick on board with Martin’s thoughts. But with Susan’s words in mind, he sternly made himself relax. No need to scare the man to death with his lust.

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When Susan answered the door, Jordan gave her a small, nervous smile. He almost laughed when she grabbed his hand and yanked him inside before shutting the door behind her. Jordan had never been to Susan’s place before and looked around. He didn’t get far when his gaze was caught by a tall, devastatingly handsome man standing a few feet away. Jordan’s mind almost short-circuited when he realized... this was Martin.

*Oh, holy shit, but Jordan wanted to climb the man!*

He could already feel his face heating at his thoughts as Susan led him over to Martin. The closer he got, the more stunning the man became. And tall! Jordan didn’t think he’d ever met a man that towered over him like that. When they stopped in front of Martin, he had to tilt his head slightly just to look into the man’s eyes. And, he’d been wrong. He’d thought they were blue from the

picture Susan had shown him, but they were more an aqua color, green swimming in the blue depths. Susan was saying something, but Jordan's heart was beating so fast, all he heard was the blood rushing through his ears.

"I can see I'm not needed."

Jordan barely acknowledged Susan walking away he was so mesmerized by Martin's gaze. "Uh, hi." Jordan gave an embarrassed laugh. God, he was nervous. But when Martin smiled at him, he was struck mute. A beautiful smile surrounded by deep dimples. Jordan's stomach flipped. He'd been prepared to be disappointed, but that was far from what he felt at the moment.

"Hello, Jordan. It's so nice to meet you."

Jordan found himself relaxing at the low, quiet voice Martin had. He smiled and held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, too." Martin's hand was large, and swallowed up Jordan's smaller one. His shake was firm, gentle, and warm, and Jordan really didn't want to let go. His stomach flipped again when Martin laid his other hand on top of their clasped ones, holding on for longer than was required. He didn't know what else to say, and felt a sharp letdown when Martin let go.

"How about we go have a seat and chat?"

Okay, Jordan could do that. He followed Martin to a chaise lounge in the living room, his eyes riveted on the way the man's slacks hugged his ass. *Nice!* His nerves jumped again when Martin patted the cushion next to him for Jordan to take a seat. It would be incredibly rude, and embarrassing of him to sit on the chair to his left, so he sat where indicated, but left some space between them. That he wanted to just straddle the man's lap wasn't something he could do. And, despite the overwhelming attraction, Jordan was still a little wary. He didn't know Martin. He'd been attracted to Brolin too and look how that turned out.

"So, how did you get wangled into this? Susan threaten you?"

It took Jordan a minute to realize Martin was joking, his sea foam eyes twinkling and Jordan laughed, relaxing further. He shook his head, feeling his face heat. "No, um, she sort of figured out I like men... and, um, here I am." Jordan watched Martin's face, his eyes soft and his smile warm. He'd been instantly attracted, his physical reaction intense, but the more he saw, the more he wanted to see.

"I'm glad Eva asked me to come. You're nothing like the guys Jake likes to hook me up with, and I mean that in the best way."

“Did I hear my name?”

Jordan turned to see another handsome man enter the living room, followed quickly by a pretty redhead. He assumed this was Jake, though he'd never met him. He only knew Susan and had met Michele at a couple of hospital social events. He suddenly realized he was leaning away from the intimidating man, right into Martin's side. He held in a gasp when Martin put a comforting arm around his shoulders, drawing him in closer and scowling up at the new arrival.

“Back off, Jake. You're scaring him.”

Jordan wanted to fall into a dark pit right there. How humiliating was it for the man you'd been invited to meet figuring out you were so timid? “I-I'm fine.” Jordan bit his lip, frustrated at the stutter and angry that he seemed so cowardly, and sat up straight, putting a little space between himself and Martin, though the large man kept his arm over Jordan's shoulders and since it felt—protective, he wasn't going to shrug Martin off. It was just that Jake reminded him of Brolin, dark, brooding—aggressive. He wasn't prepared for the look of shock on Jake's face, or the punch on the arm the redhead gave Jake, glaring up at him.

“I'm sorry. I didn't realize.”

“Butthead.”

Jordan almost laughed at the fiery little woman as she frowned up at Jake, but did calm down a bit when Jake sat down and held out his hand.

“I'm Jake, Martin's best friend. We work at the free clinic together.”

Jordan tentatively shook his hand, pulling away quickly without seeming rude. “Jordan.” He'd not moved that far from Martin, and had to stamp down the desire to snuggle back into the man's side. He should be embarrassed, feeling so needy. But he didn't. For that matter, he scooted a little closer, and held a smile when Martin gave him a gentle squeeze.

“Since Jake is such a moron and didn't introduce me, I'm Eva.”

The redhead—Eva—had sat down on the arm of the couch and Jordan shook her hand as well. “Nice to meet you both.” Jordan almost sighed in relief when Susan walked in. As much as he was enjoying Martin's company, he didn't like being the center of attention, especially when they all knew his preference. He'd never been in the closet until he came here. He figured, if he hid his orientation, maybe he wouldn't draw the kind of men that he'd experienced before.

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“Come on everyone, dinner is ready.”

Jordan didn't move as Jake and Eva followed Susan out of the living room. When he went to stand, Martin stood with him and squeezed his shoulders again, and then trailed his large hand lightly down Jordan's back. A shiver of desire raced down his spine in the wake of that touch and when Martin leaned down, close to his ear and whispered low, his whole body shuddered.

“Don't mind Jake. He's a bit overprotective of me. I really like you and he'll see that.”

The barely there kiss on his neck, below his ear, made goose bumps break out over his skin, his heart race, and lust fill him. He wanted to turn and capture Martin's lips in a passionate kiss, but held himself in check. He'd only just met the man! Martin slipped his palm from Jordan's back and turned towards him. He held out his hand and Jordan grasped it, blushing as Martin led him to the backyard. They were close, their bodies almost touching and Jordan's heart was pounding against his ribcage. He looked up to see Martin smiling down at him, those dimples popping. What was it about this huge man that set Jordan at ease?

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## Chapter 7

Jordan was having a really fun time. He couldn't remember when he'd laughed so much. Of course, it might be partially from the three glasses of wine he'd had. He could feel the buzz, and knew he was inebriated, but he didn't care. This was the first time he'd been able to let go, be himself, and he was going to savor it. It helped that Martin was so attentive and kind. He never left Jordan's side and Jordan was learning that Martin was funny, interesting, and very intelligent. All hot buttons for Jordan. Not to mention the physical attraction sizzling between them that had Martin almost obliterating Jordan's self-control. He couldn't believe how much he wanted the man.

"Seriously, I've never seen anyone as devoted to the infants as Jordan."

Jordan blushed at Susan's admiration. "I'm just doing my job." He mumbled the words, trying to be modest. He didn't handle compliments well, having rarely been the recipient. He continued chatting when Susan's cell phone went off. Apologizing, she left the backyard, entering the house to take the call. When she returned, it was obvious something was very wrong, her face pinched and pale. Her gaze zeroed in on Jordan and his stomach clenched. She motioned for him to follow her and he stood, a bit unsteady until Martin's hand was on his elbow, supporting him. Intent on finding out what had upset Susan, he didn't pay much attention to Martin accompanying him.

He followed Susan into the house and stood in front of her, noticing for the first time the tears that made her brown eyes glassy. "What's wrong?" Dread filled Jordan, his mind racing for any reason that would have Susan nearly crying. Michele joined them, placing her arm around her wife.

"That was Courtney. She's on night duty tonight. Jordan... we lost Emily."

Jordan's whole body jerked at Susan's announcement and he could feel his legs giving out. Emily? Tiny little Emily was gone? He felt strong arms go around him, and he clung to Martin as the man picked him up. He barely heard the exchange between Martin and Susan.

"A bedroom, Susan? Someplace I can take him?"

"Sure, follow me."

Jordan felt himself lowered to a bed and he curled up on his side. Vaguely, he was aware that Martin had saved him from embarrassment, but all he could

think about was the loss of Emily. God, they'd tried so hard to save her! Tears stung his eyes and he blinked repeatedly, trying to stem them. Crying wasn't going to bring her back. Her parents' faces swam behind his vision, their worry and sadness as their tiny daughter struggled to survive. They'd lost their baby girl. Jordan's chest hitched, and he fell under the sobs that tore through him. He hadn't known he'd react like this, but couldn't stop the deluge of grief that overcame him.

"You have him, Martin?"

Jordan suddenly found himself engulfed in warm, strong arms, and he turned to bury his face against Martin's wide chest. If he wasn't hurting so bad, he'd be mortified at his actions. He just managed to keep the wail inside him from escaping. It was so unfair! She'd never had a chance, would never grow and thrive. Love and be loved. Wear dresses and ride a bike. Nothing. Jordan wondered if he was taking this so hard because he was not a religious man. He didn't believe in heaven or hell, so it would never cross his mind that Emily was now in the clouds, tucked up there with God.

He didn't know how long he cried, his fists tightly clutching Martin's shirt, holding on for dear life. When he'd finally settled into hard hiccups, he tried to pry his hands from Martin's shirt. "I-I'm sorry. I think I r-ruined your s-shirt." His voice was raw and raspy, the sound thick with emotion, the hiccups hard and painful.

"Don't worry about it, babe."

Jordan leaned back to see Martin's face. The big man's gaze was so caring, so concerned that Jordan leaned up and kissed him. Martin didn't kiss back right away, but when Jordan wrapped his arms around Martin's neck, Martin responded, his lips firm and tender. He pulled Jordan close and Jordan clung to him, deepening the kiss and pressing for entry into Martin's mouth. He opened for him, and Jordan swept in, needing to taste, needing to feel, to wash away the numbness of Emily's death with something life affirming, something primal.

Jordan growled in frustration when Martin slowed the kiss and then broke it.

"Jordan. Babe, this isn't right. I won't take advantage of you in this state."

Jordan jerked away, the rebuff stinging and stumbled to a standing position. The alcoholic haze was long gone, but his mind was still muddled, his thoughts unclear. He needed to go home. Ignoring Martin, he straightened his clothes,

and walked over to the bedroom door. He turned back to see Martin sitting up, his face blank. That surprised Jordan. Martin had been so animated, so caring and kind all evening, but now he showed nothing. No emotions at all. "Um, thanks. Good-bye." He turned away and made his way to the bathroom he'd used earlier in the hall. Shutting the door and locking it, he surveyed his face. His eyes were red-rimmed and sunken, his face pale, cheeks covered in tear stained tracks, his lips puffy from the kissing.

Jordan rinsed his face with cold water, hoping it would lessen the redness around his eyes and wash the tears from his cheeks. Taking a deep breath, he left the bathroom and went back into the living room. Susan was on the couch with Michele wrapped around her. Jake was in the chair, Eva on his lap. The low whispers ceased when he entered the room. He ignored everyone and focused on Susan. "I'm going home. I'm sorry for ruining the evening." Susan stood and walked to him, hugging him tightly.

"You didn't ruin the evening, Jordan. I'm sorry about Emily. I know this is hitting you hard. Will you be okay?"

Jordan remained stiff until Susan let go of him. He didn't want to break down again, and it was a close call with Susan's arms around him. What he wanted was Martin's arms, but that wasn't going to happen. Despite what Jordan had seen earlier, it appeared Martin didn't want him back. He didn't want to admit that Martin was being a gentleman in turning his advances down. Jordan was in no condition to be engaging in sex, and certainly not in a strange bedroom at his friend's house. His shoulders slumped heavily. He just wanted to go home. He was not on call for the next few days and planned on spending the time in bed, hiding from a world that would let little Emily down, including himself.

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?"

Susan's concern was nice, but he really needed to escape. He could feel the others all staring. "I'm fine. I'll see you later and thank you for inviting me." Jordan took Susan's hand and gave it a squeeze before he turned and left the small duplex. He made his way to his car, his steps jerky. Unlocking his SUV, he climbed in, slammed the door, and laid his head on the steering wheel for a moment. His throat felt clogged and his eyes were still stinging with unshed tears, but he needed to get home before he lost it again. He placed the key in the ignition and started his car. He gave one last look over at Susan's place to see Martin in the doorway watching him. He'd really thought there might be

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something with the big man, and maybe there still was once Jordan could get past losing one of his patients. Losing his first patient.

He drove away, the numbness of before taking over.

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## Chapter 8

Martin sat in his sedan outside Jordan's house after having Jake take him home in Jake's Escalade. He didn't bother telling his best friend he planned on coming here, knowing Jake would probably not approve. But he needed to know Jordan made it home safely. God, he felt like such a dick, rejecting Jordan the way he had, but it was the right thing to do. No way was Jordan in the right state of mind to be intimate with Martin. Not while hurting over his first patient that had died. Susan had told him that, along with Jordan's address. She knew he was going to check on Jordan. Jordan's Explorer was in his drive, if parked a bit crookedly.

Martin could see a light on in what he assumed was the bedroom. He could see Jordan's shadow behind the curtains moving around. Satisfied Jordan was safe and not wanting to get caught hanging outside his house, Martin left. He had been really surprised at how much he liked Jordan, and how much he wanted him. No man had ever captured his attention like the lithe PA. Susan hadn't been lying when she said Jordan was sweet and after witnessing his meltdown over Emily, he knew Jordan felt deeply. He idly wondered what it would be like to have such intense emotions directed at him.

He ignored his phone beeping while he drove, knowing he had at least three text messages and one voicemail from his best friend. He knew Jake better than Jake knew himself and wasn't in the mood to listen to his friend's diatribe regarding Jordan. Eva had told him privately about Jake's comments on Jordan, and Martin was sure that Jake would be telling him that Martin didn't need the drama that being with Jordan would entail. That wasn't Jake's decision to make. Somehow, Martin was going to see Jordan again.

As time went by with no word from or about Jordan, Martin was thankful for the distraction that work provided him. It didn't stop him from thinking of the sexy young man, but it helped. Jake had ranted for a couple of days, then dropped the subject when Martin finally told him to stop talking about Jordan. Jake wasn't being mean, but certainly negative, insisting that Martin could do better than Jordan. Martin didn't want to do better than Jordan. He wasn't sure there *was* better than Jordan. Not for him.

He'd spoken to Susan a couple of times, but her schedule had changed enough that she'd not bumped into Jordan in a couple of weeks, and didn't see that changing anytime soon. She didn't have his phone number, always talking

to him at the hospital when they worked together. He'd been surprised she had his address, but apparently, Jordan had let it slip during one of their conversations. Martin had found himself driving by Jordan's place, sometimes parking to watch the house, and feeling like an idiot.

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Jordan kept busy, working through his pain of losing Emily. He'd spoken with Dr. Conrad and was given the details, not that he really wanted to hear them. Dr. Conrad had been kind, knowing this was the first time Jordan had lost a patient. His words had been comforting and Jordan appreciated it. He'd also been thankful not to have seen Susan in the last couple of weeks. Not since his despicable meltdown at her house. He didn't know if she was avoiding him or maybe just giving him space to process the grief.

And... his mind was on Martin more than he'd expected. He'd finally accepted that Martin hadn't really rejected him, just... postponed the intimacy until Jordan was ready for it. Jordan believed he was, but he had no way of getting ahold of the other man without going through Susan or showing up at the free clinic. And, as he hadn't seen her, and didn't feel like dropping in unannounced at her duplex, he was out of luck, because there was no way he was going to interrupt Martin at work. He also didn't think, after the scene he'd caused, that Martin's friend Jake would like them seeing each other. Despite the time together, Jordan was still wary of Jake. He just seemed too much like Brolin for him to be comfortable around him.

He was also preoccupied about his ex-lover too. There'd been a dark sedan hanging around his house lately, and that's what Brolin drove. His fear had ratcheted up knowing the man that had caused him so much fear and pain might know where he was and was stalking him. He wasn't sure what he'd do if Brolin showed himself or tried to get to Jordan. He was no match for his much larger ex-boyfriend, though Martin was a lot bigger. That's why Jordan couldn't figure out why he was so attracted to Martin. There was just *something* about him that called to Jordan.

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## Chapter 9

Martin watched Jake frown at him and sighed. They were out having a beer together, and as usual lately, Martin was quiet, his mind preoccupied.

"You might as well call Susan and see if you can meet up with the man."

Martin stared at his best friend in surprise. Jake had been so adamant about Martin finding someone new, he hadn't expected this. "What changed your mind?" Jake shrugged at him, dropping his gaze.

"It isn't hard to tell you're... smitten over the guy. I still think you can do better, but it's obvious you're not going to let this go... let him go. I just hope you aren't making a mistake pursuing him. He's not bothered to contact you. Seems that should tell you something. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

Martin choked down his frustration with Jake. "He doesn't have my number or address, Jake. How's he supposed to contact me?" Martin chose to overlook Jake's comment on him getting hurt. If his friend had any sense, and knew him, he'd see that missing Jordan was hurting him.

"He knows Susan. He should know he can get ahold of you through her."

"I've talked to Susan. She hasn't seen him since her schedule changed. He doesn't have her number either."

"Yea, maybe, but he knows you work at the free clinic."

Martin groaned at Jake's arguments. "Maybe he doesn't want to just show up. Did you think of that?" Martin ignored Jake's huff of irritation. "Just drop it, Jake. You're right; I'm smitten. I want the guy, but I'm not going to go all stalker on him." A twinge of guilt hit Martin, knowing he'd been doing just that. Driving by Jordan's house, parking outside and watching.

"Then maybe you ought to just show up at the hospital. After all, you know where he works too. You want him? Then go get him!"

Martin gave Jake a speculative look. He'd thought about that, but had been reluctant. But as time went by, it looked as if that was the only way, or at Jordan's house since that was less obvious than his place of work. He'd given his number to Susan, just in case she ran into Jordan, and made sure she knew to give it to him.

He didn't even know if Jordan was still interested, or knew that Martin was. He could guess that after Jordan's emotional breakdown at Susan's place, he

might be too embarrassed to come find Martin. Well, Jake was right. If he wanted Jordan, he needed to go to him. At least to see if the man was still interested in starting a relationship.

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Jordan's heart raced seeing the dark sedan parked two doors down. Instead of pulling into his drive, he accelerated past the vehicle, hoping whoever was inside didn't see him. He'd wait until the car was gone before he'd go home. No way did he want Brodin getting his hands on him. He was certain the man would kill him.

He parked at the grocery store, but stayed in his car. He couldn't stop his body from shaking, and punched the steering wheel in frustration. God, how he hated being such a coward! He'd just gotten off his shift, and wondered how weird it would look if he just went back to work. It's not like they'd turn away the help. He had just turned the ignition back on when his cell phone buzzed. Curious, he grabbed it off the seat and checked the screen. Unknown number. He ignored it since he never answered those. A few minutes later his phone beeped indicating a voicemail.

He punched the button to listen to the message and couldn't help the relief in hearing Susan's voice.

"Hey, Jordan. Hope you don't mind, but I got your number from HR. Shhhh, don't tell anyone."

Jordan grinned at the laugh he heard. He missed Susan.

"Anyway, I wanted you to know that Martin has been asking about you. I think the guy is still interested, if you are. I know you're probably pretty shook up over what happened, and maybe even embarrassed. But you don't need..."

The voicemail cut her off and Jordan frowned at his phone. He ended the message and his phone buzzed in his hand, startling him. The unknown number again. He answered, hoping it was Susan. "Hello?"

"Hey you! I'm so glad you answered! I left you a message, but it cut me off."

"Yea, I just heard it."

"Oh, okay, well, anyway, I wanted to tell you not to be embarrassed. No one thought less of you for being so upset. It took Michele almost all night to calm me down and I wasn't as close to Emily as you were. Are you okay, Jordan?"

Susan's concern for him was touching. No wonder she was such a good friend to him. "Yea, I think so. I mean it still hurts, but I'm better. So, Martin's been asking about me?" Susan's laughter rang through the phone and Jordan felt the heat of a blush, even if she couldn't see it. He was such a dork.

"Oh, yes. He asks about you every time I talk to him. Do you want his number? He told me I could give it to you."

Jordan's stomach flipped in excitement. "I do. Can you text it to me?" His face was flaming, but he wasn't going to lose the opportunity to contact the big man. He still wanted him. Was still very much interested. He just hadn't known whether Martin was as well.

"I can. You go get him, tiger!"

Jordan gave an embarrassed laugh, talked to Susan for a minute more then rang off. By the time he turned his car off again and unbuckled his seatbelt, the text came through. Taking a deep breath, he dialed the number.

"Sheahan here."

"Martin?"

"Jordan! I'm so glad you called!"

Jordan couldn't help the goofy smile that crossed his lips. Just hearing Martin's low, sexy voice was doing funny things to him. "I'm sorry I haven't before. Susan just gave me your number." Jordan didn't know what else to say. It sounded so... desperate... to tell Martin he wanted to see him again.

"Jordan, where are you? I want to see you."

Well, it seemed Martin had no problem saying what Jordan found so hard. "I'm parked at the grocery store. Honestly, I didn't want to go home because there's a black sedan sitting outside my house and I'm afraid it's my ex." Jordan had never told Martin or anyone about what he'd gone through with Brolin. He wasn't sure what Martin was going to think, but was puzzled over the funny sound that came across the phone. Like a strangled groan.

"Jordan. That's me. I'm sitting outside your house. I saw you drive by, but figured I'd be taking the whole stalking thing too far if I followed you. I'm so sorry I scared you."

Jordan wanted to be angry, but the shame and apology in Martin's voice was enough to keep him from exploding. Martin didn't know about Brolin, so there was no reason for him to think he'd frighten Jordan. "It's okay." Actually,

when Jordan thought about it, it was kind of sweet that Martin wanted to see him so badly that he was hanging around outside Jordan's house. "I'm coming back. Just wait for me."

"Okay. I'm really sorry, Jordan."

"I'll see you in a few minutes." Jordan hung up, but took just enough time to save Martin's number in his phone before starting his car and heading out of the parking lot. He made it back to his place faster than he thought and parked in his drive. When he got out of his car, Martin was getting out of the sedan and walking towards him.

Jordan's stomach flipped again at how very sexy the man was. He had regular clothes on, jeans and a blue button-up shirt that matched his eyes that Jordan could see even from this far away. But it was the white coat he was wearing that had Jordan's attention. Jordan had been attracted to many doctors and male nurses in those white coats, not that he'd ever done anything about it. Jordan was still wearing his own as well. He sucked in a breath when Martin came up to him, wrapped his arms around him, and squeezed him tight. Damn, but that felt good!

Martin released him and without a word, he led the larger man to his door. He would have been curious what Martin was going to think of his home, but was too turned on to care. The moment the door shut, Jordan shoved Martin against it, pulled his head down and crashed their lips together. He'd been wanting to kiss the man for ages. Much to Jordan's surprise, Martin went pliant under his assault, letting Jordan lead. No lover had ever done that, and it thrilled Jordan that Martin submitted like that.

Desperate to feel skin, Jordan yanked at Martin's clothes, shedding the white coat and letting it fall to the floor before attacking the buttons on Martin's shirt. The low groan of arousal from the man went straight to Jordan's cock, making it thicken and throb. Jordan gave an inelegant squeak when Martin palmed his ass and lifted him, urging him to wrap his legs around him.

"Bedroom... bed."

That Jordan had reduced Martin to monosyllables was more than he expected, but the thought was quickly erased when Martin's lips were back on his. The kiss was passion filled and Jordan finally had to break it to breathe. He pointed towards his bedroom door, even as he buried his face in Martin's neck, inhaling deeply and licking the stubbly skin.

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Somehow, they made it to the bed, and Martin laid Jordan down gently, following with his much larger body, covering him and kissing his face and neck. Jordan waited to see if he would panic at being restricted under Martin's bulk, but all he felt was overwhelming desire. His need for Martin was staggering. He started pushing and pulling to get the bigger man naked, and almost growled when Martin stood up. His protest was quickly stifled as he watched Martin remove his shirt, toe off his shoes, and then strip from his pants, briefs, and socks.

Jordan was panting at the exquisitely muscled body before him. Martin was fucking glorious! He zeroed in on the man's erection, the skin tight and red, one thick vein pulsing and the slit leaking. Jordan's mouth watered and he scooted forward to take hold of that engorged cock, his nether region clenching in anticipation.

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## Chapter 10

Martin's whole body flushed when Jordan grabbed him and wrapped his lips around his cock. Watching himself slowly sink into the wet heat nearly had him coming right then. He gritted his teeth, staving off his orgasm. He wanted to come with Jordan, not before. Gently, he carded his fingers through Jordan's soft hair, holding him steady and rocking his hips, sliding himself in and out of the man's luscious mouth. God, Jordan felt perfect and it was driving him insane!

His balls beginning to tingle, he carefully pulled from Jordan's mouth and held in a smile at Jordan's groan of protest. "You're wearing too many clothes." He wanted to see Jordan, touch his skin, kiss every part of him, and pleasure Jordan as much as Jordan was pleasuring him. He watched as Jordan divested himself of his clothes, his skin milky white and flawless. Martin's cock twitched when Jordan pulled the last piece off and stretched out on the bed, nude as the day he was born. Much to Martin's gratification, Jordan was well-endowed for being such a thin man. Martin dove, capturing his soon-to-be lover's prick, sucking it to the back of his throat.

Jordan cried out, curling in and grabbing Martin's head, holding him as he thrust forward, his legs bending to plant his feet on the mattress, giving him leverage to go deep. Martin didn't mind as he buried his nose in the trimmed hair cradling Jordan's erection, and swallowed around the hard length in his throat. Jesus, the man even smelled wonderful, the musky scent ratcheting Martin's need even higher. He sucked, licked and gently dragged his teeth along Jordan's length, reveling in the mewling and groans coming from the younger man.

"Stop! Stop, I'm too close!"

Martin let Jordan's length go with a loud pop and caught Jordan's hazy, lust-filled gaze. He could hardly believe how much he wanted this man. He lunged upward, grabbing Jordan and flipping them so the smaller man was on top of him, capturing his lips and sharing Jordan's taste with him. He rocked upward, dragging their erections together and moaned along with Jordan. He broke the kiss, panting heavily. "I want you inside me." The shock on Jordan's face almost made him laugh. Being as big as he was, most men just assumed he was a top... exclusively. But Martin liked to bottom with new lovers, though he was more than willing to switch if they continued the relationship.



“What?”

Martin smiled at Jordan's confusion. “Do you not top?” He'd had a few lovers that didn't, especially liking smaller, more effeminate men. Men who like to bottom only. But something was telling him that it was important to give himself to Jordan. As he watched, Jordan's face lit up, his smile breathtaking.

“I've never had the opportunity.”

Martin wasn't going to pursue that comment right now, but maybe later, after Jordan learned to trust him, the smaller man might tell him why that was. “Then I'm pleased to be your first.” Jordan's reaction was all that Martin hoped for as the man suddenly devoured his mouth, before pulling back and yanking open the drawer to his nightstand. Within seconds, Jordan had lube and condoms in hand.

Martin's heart thundered as Jordan slicked up his fingers and he spread his legs wide, giving Jordan full access to his ass. Jordan's brown eyes were nearly black with lust, his breath coming in rasps as he leaned forward to circle Martin's hole. Carefully he inserted one finger, Martin moaning at the sensation. Too afraid of missing anything, he kept his eyes open and watched as Jordan prepared him, Jordan's other hand slowly stroking his own cock which was an angry purple. Testament to how turned on Jordan was.

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Jordan was so aroused with his fingers buried in Martin's ass that he could hardly breathe. His gaze kept bouncing between Martin's face and where his fingers entered the man. That Martin was allowing him to top him was something he'd never thought would happen. He'd been prepared to have Martin fuck him, but this was so much better! He curled his fingers, searching...

“Oh... *fuck!*”

Jordan grinned widely at Martin's reaction to him stimulating his prostate, the big man's hips bucking and Martin quickly grabbing his own dick, squeezing to stop from coming. Never had Jordan had a lover respond so completely, holding nothing back. Ignoring his own dick, he leaned down to kiss Martin, thrusting his fingers deeply within the man. He worked his way down, kissing and licking until he reached Martin's swollen erection. He licked the head, Martin shuddering at the sensation. He gave it a slight suck before removing his fingers and opening a condom with shaking hands.

He was nervous, but not enough to stop what they were doing. He didn't want to hurt Martin, but by the way the man was panting, he was pretty sure he'd prepared him well. He rolled the condom on, covered it in lube, and then looked up at Martin. "Face to face?" He didn't know if Martin was comfortable with that position, since it was so intimate. All Jordan's past lovers had always held him down and taken him from behind, usually locking his arms behind him as well. Only Brolin had ever fucked him face to face and that was so the man could hold onto Jordan by the neck while he rutted inside him, nearly choking him.

Martin's answer was to spread his legs wider and draw up his knees, holding onto his thighs, opening himself fully to Jordan's taking. He scooted forward, lining himself up with Martin's glistening hole, then watched Martin's expression as he slowly sank into his body. The bliss that came over Martin's face was enough to tell Jordan he was doing it right. Once buried to the hilt, he stilled, his cock throbbing along with the thundering of his heart. Martin was tight and hot, and felt incredible surrounding Jordan's length.

"Move, babe."

Jordan didn't know what to think of the endearment again, but when Martin let go of his thighs and wrapped his long legs around Jordan's waist, Jordan grabbed the big man's hands, twining their fingers and stretching them above Martin's head, holding them tightly and began thrusting hard and deep. Martin curled his fingers around Jordan's, tightening their hold and matched every thrust, his leaking cock mashed between their bodies. Never had Jordan been so close to another man, so connected. His heart tripped, the intimacy overwhelming him. When Martin started groaning and gasping, Jordan sped up his thrusts, shifted slightly and then cried out when Martin's channel clamped down, the rhythmic clenching throwing Jordan headlong into his orgasm, even as Martin shot semen between their bodies.

When Jordan's climax ebbed, he slumped down, burying his face in Martin's neck and waiting for his heart to slow and his breathing to ease. Martin relaxed his legs, letting them slide down until they were tangled with Jordan's. He pried their hands apart, Jordan's fingers stiff, and wrapped his strong arms around Jordan's shoulders, and caressed his sweaty back. Once Jordan could breathe again, he reached between them, the back of his fingers dragging through the cum on Martin's stomach, to hold the condom as he carefully pulled from the big man's body. He was amazed at the load stretching the latex. He didn't think he'd ever come that much.

“Nice.”

Jordan relaxed at Martin's teasing.

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## Epilogue

Jordan lay stretched out on his bed, drained, his body covered in sweat and come, Martin looking down at him with a smug smile. "Pretty pleased with yourself, aren't you?"

"I so fucking am!"

Jordan chuckled. Three months, and still he and Martin were going strong. He'd finally told Martin about his past and with that confession, finally feeling as if he could get over it. Martin had moved in with him just last night, and they'd been celebrating in their favorite way, by making love. Jordan didn't think there was a position they hadn't tried at least once, and though he especially liked it when Martin came inside him, his lover had a thing for pulling out and coming all over Jordan's body. When he'd asked about it, Martin had gotten a bashful look on his face and mumbled something about liking to mark Jordan. Martin also liked it when Jordan topped, a position Jordan would never tire of.

Jordan didn't think he could find a more perfect man. Kind, generous, funny, sexy as hell, strong, confident... the list went on and on. But it was when Martin told Jordan he loved him, that Jordan finally knew he'd found the happiness he never thought he'd have. He gazed up at Martin, his lover sitting next to him, naked except for his white nurse's coat. Okay, Jordan felt a blush steal up his face, apparently, he had a little kink in him. He reached out and Martin dropped down next to him, giving him such a tender kiss that Jordan's eyes stung.

"I love you."

The whispered words never failed to make Jordan's stomach flip. He turned on his side and laid his head on Martin's chest, listening to his heartbeat. A heartbeat under a white coat... and all his. "I love you, too."

## The End

## Author Bio

*CR Guiliano is an avid reader which logically morphed into the love of writing. She writes in many genres, but is most happy writing the love between two men (or more!). She makes them work hard for their HEA and considers herself an expert in angst. CR finds her favorite form of writing is in serials, where she can continue to write about characters who have captured her heart and hopes have captured her readers as well.*

*You will usually find CR cuddled up to her laptop creating stories to entertain, inspire, and bring your emotions to the surface. CR has a huge warren of plot bunnies that is growing every day and can't wait to fill out each story idea and share them all with her readers.*

*CR was proudly nominated in the Goodreads Best Anthology Nominations and was thrilled to be included with the many talented writers from the same Anthology.*

*CR is a committed advocate for the GLBTQ community and does her best to change society's attitudes, one mind at a time.*

*You can learn more about CR Guiliano and her stories at the following locations and feel free to drop her line as she loves to hear from anyone interested in her or her writings.*

## Contact & Media Info

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# HIGH FIVE DIVE

By Adrian Fridge

## Photo Description

Shirtless man standing in front of a classic car holding a wrench and work gloves. He's both sweaty and grimy with a towel on his shoulder and a tool belt at his waist.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*See him? That's Evan. He runs the auto repair shop down the street. He's also my brother's best friend and my arch-nemesis. He's so smug and full of himself. Just because he's got a great smile and the body of a Greek god doesn't mean he's all that. We've been feuding for as long as I've known him. We can't get closer than five feet before going toe to toe, trading insults and snarking at each other. Oh, he infuriates me! I hate him... don't I?*

*You may have free reign over this story just as long as there is an HEA. Feel free to go all out. Turn it into a paranormal/shifter/sci-fi/cowboy/BDSM/whatever story if you want. I like everything. I especially love humor in my stories.*

Sincerely,

Jenni Lea

## Story Info

**Genre:** futuristic

**Tags:** mechanic, scientist, light BDSM, bullying, enemies to lovers, interracial

**Word Count:** 10,437

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## HIGH FIVE DIVE

**By Adrian Fridge**

Just my luck to have my ship stall in the middle of an interspace throughway. I punched the wheel, releasing all the expletives I knew, before sighing and sending out a distress signal. All the other ships swerved around me and honked as though I did this on purpose. I gave them the middle finger.

While thankful I didn't stall out in the depths of space, drifting into a dark abyss, this ranked high on my 'you have to be fucking with me' scale.

Still, there was the matter of dragging the thing to the nearest cleat on the side of the guard tower. Sweaty and more irritable by the minute, I peered over at the fold in time-space that made up the throughway, a circular doorframe that shed months of travel between Earth and Mars. Not that six hours didn't feel like shit too.

I opened the hood to see if it was a burnt engine. Nothing. I saw fucking nothing out of place. The sides were scratched up from my descent through the atmosphere, but no holes to be found either. I should have shelled out cash for a cab rather than pay for the fire-retardant paint.

My fingers traced the dents before reaching for my sun-burnt nose, the visor a barrier to the sweet relief that would have brought me. Earth was where my parents had raised me, a place where I could overindulge in the fresh, unfiltered breeze as the sun, bright and unregulated, beamed through the irregular shaped clouds. Or at least that's what I did my week back from school, turning a shade of brown darker in the process. Four years away from Earth, and I never ceased to get sentimental. I'd hauled my ass to the colonies because of the full scholarship to Mars University, but the vacuums of space—they were maddening. I didn't care to stay longer than absolutely necessary.

The tow vehicle came, and the screen on my windshield popped up with a blue humanoid face. "Instructions, please."

"Which is the nearest repair shop near Mars?"

"That would be Station 1123."

I nearly gagged on the thought. "How much of a detour is the second nearest?"

“An extra two hours.”

I held back a second wave of expletives. “Fine. Take me to Station 1123.”

I grumbled as I accepted this further inconvenience. It wasn't the desegregation that bothered me. No, I could mingle with the trouwans without mocking them for being aliens or lizard people. I wasn't racist. My problem was with a very particular human who worked at this very particular station who was the last being I wanted to see in my current state of affairs.

There was no avoiding it unless I wanted to spend even more time in the pits of the cosmos. Outside my window, the light of distant stars spread out into infinity. It was nothing compared to staring over the horizon at a cozy town, lines of double-story houses held together by wood and willpower. My brother's wedding had been held at a stylish, but aged, stone church, the roof pointed upward like it was trying to pierce the sky, built hundreds of years ago before the Space War, before the Biotech Revolution, before Earth became that little blue dot my professors called rural middle-of-nowhere as they lectured about the industrialization of Mars.

At the far wall of the repair shop on Station 1123 was a gleaming spaceship the size of a house in the trendy shape of a dildo, the underside of it opened up as mechanics worked their magic. One of them started coming down from a harness—the repair shop's owner. Him.

Evan Mitford. Tall, dark, and jerkass. My brother's best friend and my worst tormentor since we were five years old.

“Oh,” Evan chirped as he wiped his greasy shirt on his face, looking less like he was sweaty from labor and more like someone doused him with oil for a cover shoot. “What's the special occasion?”

I pointed at my ship like I was pointing at a dead fish I didn't know what to do with. I'd bought it at a secondhand shop with my meager stipend, and it'd been nothing short of reliable for the longest time. It was a hybrid car-plane small enough to get me around the city, and it was meant to handle interplanetary travel. Or so I thought.

Evan whistled, exaggerating his motions as he said, “What'd you do, Clark, depress it to the point of attempted suicide?”

Getting angry with him was like pouring fuel on the sun. I breathed in and out before asking, “Can you fix it?”

Evan wagged his brows. “Sure, I'll need a few hours to investigate first. It might be something simple or it might be your lucky day and I could scrap it.”



Bile rose in my throat. Oh how I wanted to nick the smugness off his chin.

He was a bigger fake than my brother, always sweet to my parents, always friendly with my brother. He was a golden boy to everyone, but to me, he was a life-sucking black hole when he got the chance. Knowing him, he'd fix my ship and then, for the fun of it, plant something in it with the sole purpose of making my life hell.

Evan turned his attention to inspecting the ship, pulling up the hood and leaning over in a suggestive way, like he wanted my gaze transfixed on his ass. Baggy uniform or not, he was like the flavor of anti-freeze: delicious if you're into risking death. The fluorescent lights that dangled overhead flooded the shop with a bright white illumination that, while great for finding mechanical flaws, highlighted the human ones as well. My flaw was I *wanted* to drink his anti-freeze.

It made me hate him even more. When my brother, a professional male model, suggested Evan quit working at the auto shop, he refused on the grounds he'd drive all the other models out of business. It didn't stop him from doing the occasional shoot. And I owned every single fucking picture.

His blue eyes were focused on me now, dimples growing with his smile. "Where'd you find this? Behind a dumpster?"

I smiled right back at him. "No, it is a dumpster. A very touching life-affirming story if you ever want to hear it."

Evan shook his head with a tsk. "I'd say it's a tragedy."

A loud beep came from my right and I realized I didn't pay the tow fee. I shoved my credit card under the red light scanner and the beeping stopped. The vehicle left the shop and I grunted.

"How the fuck am I going home now?"

"You want a replacement ship?"

I glared at him, not sure whether to trust that smirk of his. "Not from you."

Evan pouted, an affect he ditched after his reply. "This is why all your friends live in petri dishes."

"Says the guy whose only relationship has ever been with his dick."

"It's an open relationship."

My heart slammed into my throat. "Look, can you repair this or not?"

Evan tapped his fingers against the metal, his attention fixed on the interior grime. He may have been a horrible person, but he was an excellent mechanic. It didn't take a genius to figure out the car parked outside this shop was his, its red polished hide decked out with lights, tails, and arrogance, the interior made from the highest quality parts. It must have been a minute of me waiting before he responded. "I can't promise you anything until we run it through some tests, but based on the model I'd say it's something faulty with the wiring. Probably non-repairable."

"Your optimism is assuring."

Evan ran a hand through his short and wavy black hair, complementing his tanned beige skin as he gave me his prize-winning smile, full of teeth ready to be punched. "Clark, it'll be no fun if you're dead."

I eyed him intensely, a part of me wishing he'd burst into flames if I concentrated hard enough. "Are you saying you can't fix it?"

"Disregarding how much it looks like you abuse it night and day, improper wiring is the leading cause of ship explosions. You're lucky it only stalled."

My face contorted in disgust. "I can't afford a replacement. I probably can't even afford the repairs. I'm fucking screwed."

That fucking smile again. "Hey, maybe I could give you one of the spare ships I've been working with on the side. Perks of childhood acquaintance."

"Why should I trust you? If memory serves me well, that cupcake you gave me for my tenth birthday was made of wax."

"That was a joke. Jeez, you're holding a grudge over that?"

"Then there is the fact that you used to go into my room and randomly hide my shit in other parts of the house. I still don't know what happened to my favorite toy airplane."

"Hey, that one was easy. I put it in the attic on top of some boxes."

"I looked in the attic. Like three times. It wasn't there."

Evan put his hands up. "That's not my fault."

"You put tacks in my sleeping bags and glue to the rims of my hats. You threw my socks into the dryer so they'd shrink, and you cut holes in all my gloves. And there was that time you filled every bottle I owned with mayonnaise."

"Oh grow up, those were funny pranks."

“Right, because it’s all fun to you. Even the time I ended up in the hospital because you slicked the floor around my bed.” I pointed to the scar, a dark brown line that started behind my ear and crept two inches up the side of my head. “And then you make fun of me for having crooked ears.”

Evan’s frown creased every part of his face. “What do you want me to say? I’m sorry?”

“No,” I said with resignation. If my ship was a hazard, I’d find a way to get another. Somehow. Without giving him a chance to gloat about it later to Mom and Dad: look how wonderful I am, I saved your son’s life. “I don’t want anything from you. That’s what I’m saying.”

I left the shop without waiting for his response. I didn’t want to waste any more of my life on him.

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But I couldn’t exit Station 1123 without some form of vehicle. I decided on a taxi service on the other side of the station, situated next to a dive bar whose smell seduced my stomach. Figuring since I didn’t need to drive anymore, I may as well drink my tension away.

Upon entering the dive, I counted four trouwans sitting at the bar, none of them interested in my presence as they conversed among themselves, and two humans seated at a table near the back. Otherwise the place was empty.

I walked over to the bartender, youthful and spritely, probably working here part-time to pay some bills. I couldn’t guess trouwan gender from appearance, so I’d taken on the habit of casually asking.

“Use she,” the bartender said with a wink, her eyes a bright yellow with black iris, the pupil a white vertical slit. It went well with her shiny green complexion, the scales of her oblong head smooth and glossy. “The name’s Gable. What will you have?”

I leaned over the counter, trying out my friendliest smile. “The cheapest thing you have, on the rocks.”

Gable giggled. “You sure about that?”

“And the menu please.”

I seated myself at the counter, examining the orange-and-blue decor, the walls spotted with hanging photographs and carvings done by previous patrons. The menu came on a tablet with a single page of options. I ordered the signature burger and was handed a glass of something that stung my eyes.

My wristband flickered on, the thin plastic band glowing white. I pressed on it and a screen appeared in my palm. Lucas had finally responded to my text about being home late.

It simply said: "You've been evicted."

Lucas wasn't the best conversation partner, but he could have been less of an ass about breaking up. A tremor went through me, making me want to curl up and sleep for the next week. I sipped at my drink. It was bitter and burned through my nose, down my throat and all the way to my stomach, leaving a trail of acidic aftertaste. I coughed and rubbed my eyes.

"Told you," Gable chirped.

"Seems appropriate," I said once my voice was back. "Shitty day."

"Sounds rough. What happened?"

"On top of being stranded here? I've just been thrown out by my boyfriend of two years—through a text."

"Ouch." Gable scrunched up her face before pointing to my drink. "That one's on me."

I half-smiled. "Shit, if I knew that I'd have ordered something less toxic." I gulped more down anyway. "Worst part," I said with tears in my eyes, "is this was my longest relationship to date. With a trouwan no less. We've been going through a rough patch the last couple of months, and there was more sex than actual dating." I sucked in some air as I stared down my empty glass. "Is it wrong if I'm angrier that I got evicted than the fact that we're over? It's like, thanks buddy for not giving me any notice."

"What was the reason for it?"

I shrugged as I was handed my second drink. "Me never having any time for him. Him never appreciating my work. Me disliking his drug habits. Him disliking my uncleanness. Most likely it just came down to his parents. They hate humans, think we're degenerate animals. I suppose it was about time they interfered." Gable silently watched me as I took another sip of the fire. Shuddered. "Sorry, was that offensive?"

"No, just thinking. My friend wanted to get engaged to a human, and both families freaked out."

I snorted. "My cousins are serpopobes. Can't fathom that we're actually the same species. They think *Serpo sapiens* is just a fancy term for lizard-people. Doesn't compute that we're biologically compatible."

Gable shook her head in disgust. "It's a shame."

New patrons entered the bar and I was left to my own thoughts as Gable busied herself with them.

The confrontation with my cousins was always a struggle. It's like they could smell I was dating someone and wouldn't stop until they knew the details, especially now that my brother was married and I was labeled the poor soul missing his other half.

"It must be so sad now that your twin is out of your life," one had said to me at the reception.

To which I responded, "We stopped being conjoined during gestation."

"I can't believe he's married now. Do you have anyone special back in University?"

"George," I said with full confidence.

My cousins waited in anticipation, waiting for me to elaborate.

"George is the name of my experimental control group, a dish of mold I keep for comparison." My cousin's faces dropped as though I hit them with cold water. I smiled and continued, "George doesn't get along with my lab partners, so I have to tend to them myself. George tantrums by killing most of itself off. And I'm here on vacation, so I have no idea if George will still be around by the time I get back."

One of my cousins excused himself politely while the other looked like she wanted to punch me.

"This is why you're still single!"

"He's single because he kills everyone with boredom," Evan said as he appeared out of nowhere as though his Clark-Harassment sensor had gone off on the other side of the hall.

"It's all the aliens," my cousin said with a scowl, crossing her arms. "So glad it's illegal for them to be on Earth, but Clark is surrounded by them. I wish those lizard-people would just leave us alone. Go back to Alpha Centauri. Stop causing us problems."

"That would make a great blog," Evan said as he nudged me with his elbow. "You can call it: Stop Breathing My Air."

It was one of those few accidents in time and space when Evan and I agreed on a topic.

Just great. I was back to thinking about Evan. Why did he have to embed himself into every memory I had?

I kept myself from rolling my eyes by taking yet another gulp of my drink. Either it was starting to taste less awful or it had burned all my taste buds off. Gable was back to me.

“So anything good going for you at all?” she asked with a smile.

I hesitated to respond. “Getting a Masters in Xenobiology. It’s sort of a big deal in understanding evolution.”

Gable kept smiling as she rubbed a clean glass down to serve another patron, her enthusiasm forced as I watched her try to come up with a response. Her eyes lit up as she said, “Oh! I have a friend who has a friend who’s doing Zoology as well.”

I snorted as I welcomed her attempt, the drink easing my nerves as my body temperature rose. The burger came and I finally understood why the dive smelled so great. The seitan patty absorbed all the signature juices, the consistency meaty with just a hint of nuttiness. I devoured it, then started picking at the fries, nursing my second glass of fire-piss as I watched the television overhead go on about some celebrity at some game.

A commercial came on, an elaborate sequence to advertise perfume by use of a dancing shirtless man. Whoever produced it must have said, “I’m going to slather you in oil. Then we’re going to make it look like you’re dripping your sweat into the bottle. We’ll call it Essence of Water. It’ll be so gay your gay brother will watch it and cringe.”

A camera click came from across the room. Then a series of footsteps.

“Oh my gosh,” said one of the humans. “I’m sorry if this is intrusive, but are you...” she giggled at her friend, “are you Clarence Waters?”

There was always a part of me that wanted to smack these people, but then there was that equal part that ate up the attention. When I first got accepted to Mars University—on my own merit—there were a few who were convinced I was my brother and followed me around incessantly. The rumor was started by none other than Clarence, who’d shaved his head, patched on a fake scar, and stole my clothes, becoming my very own doppelganger. He claimed he needed people to think he’s secretly a genius so he’d get more interviews. Or whatever crap he was churning those days. Even after the University publicly disproved the rumor, some photographers stayed on me, selling my face as his whenever they were low on integrity.

I flashed my Clarence-like smile. "Some call me that."

"Your hair," the other one commented. "I like it better this way."

"And the scar," the first one exclaimed as she went to prod it. "Are you bringing it back?"

I nudged my head away from the finger, merely shrugging. His fans knew of his fake scar. What they didn't know was that I had an authentic version, and it hurt like a fucker to get.

They swooned, jumped up and down, took some photos with me, got a signature, and frustrated the bystanders. The usual.

I heard an exaggerated gag come from behind me. "Am I the only one who can tell you apart?" Evan said as he draped his arms over the women's shoulders. "This is Clark, Clarence's twin. He's the one with the bigger nose and pointier ears."

I growled a bit as my two fans excused themselves, faking some pretense to leave the dive. "You forgot to tell them the Tooth Fairy isn't real either."

Evan took a seat beside me, sniffing my drink and wincing before he ordered himself a glass of water. "Do you want to know how I found you?"

"A sixth sense for bothering the shit out of me?"

"This bar is next to the only taxi service on the station. When I heard the squeal of dying dreams, I knew I'd find you here."

"Aren't I the lucky one." I finished my second drink in one pull, exhaling with a grunt as my eyes watered up again. Evan had been the best man at Clarence's wedding, winning everyone's praises with his nauseating speech about the power of friendship—and alcohol, for the laughs. Then, continuing with his professed selflessness, he had to get back to Station 1123 several days early due to some big meteor incident. They drank his bullshit act and puked it all over me the rest of the week.

"I came to tell you, you forgot all your crap in your ship."

I knew I forgot something. I was feeling way too light after fleeing the shop. I rubbed my temples as I let out a long groan.

"And also that you shouldn't tailgate after your brother's popularity. He'd have more work if you didn't go around ruining his reputation with your ugly mug."

In the past this would send me into a spiral of self-loathing: me, making my precious twin's life harder. Oh the self-pity. Because in no way had Clarence's escapades made my reputation into that thing my classmates laughed about behind my back. No matter. I was on full scholarship at a prestigious university working in a lab under a media starlet of a professor due to my own efforts. Sure, the hours weren't great, and my work was consuming, but I had purpose. I was driven. I could afford to look like I woke up on the wrong side of an angry bear.

I blinked, the haze from the alcohol clouding some of my thoughts. I ordered a glass of water, chugging half of it down before turning to Evan. "He's quitting modeling."

Evan's eyes widened. "What?"

And I laughed. "He's becoming an actor. He made the decision yesterday. He and his wife will be starring in some film in the upcoming year. I don't need to drag him down when he's doing a fine job of it on his own."

He gulped down the rest of his water. "He should keep doing what he's good at."

"Which is making people believe he's something that he's not. It's perfect."

Evan's face softened into something strange for a second. Was that sadness? The only thing I ever saw him sad about was not having enough mirrors to check himself out in. "Is that why you two don't hang out anymore?"

I shrugged. "I'm in school and he's a pop icon. Our schedules don't exactly mesh."

Evan sniggered. "How is school, by the way? Xenobiology, was it?"

Of all people, *he* remembered. Well then, I didn't mind if I bored him with my life story.

"University is fucking insane. It's five minutes of being a mad scientist and seven hours of waiting to see if maybe, just maybe, the mad shit I attempted worked out correctly. Ninety-nine percent of it fails miserably. Repeat several times. Spend the next five weeks analyzing that shit. Write a half-dozen papers. Realize somewhere in the middle that two and two are making seventeen, and I'm back to the start." I laughed as I casually circled my finger along the rim of my glass. "This is why my social life revolves around two things: my peers and my mold. Both spoiled carbonated blowholes who refuse to cooperate the second they get a little uncomfortable."



From the side of my vision, I caught Evan staring blankly at me, shaking his head. "Don't know why you continue doing it, then again, my job is its own brand of insanity." He turned to me, his palm going to his forehead. "Do you have any idea how many people insist the best way to travel is to install software with artificial intelligence? They don't want to think for themselves and then I have to act as mechanic and psychologist to get any work done."

I knew a lot of vehicles these days could think for themselves, even had personalities, it was part of an initiative to secure autopilot systems for intergalactic travel. Never imagined they'd be a problem to handle during repair... wait... did Evan and I just have a heart-to-heart?

Evan lifted his empty glass, the bottom of it parallel to his eye. "You know, Clark, you don't look half-bad through here."

I raised mine, mirroring him. His head was far smaller through this looking glass, kind of distorted near the edges. "Hmm, you look exactly the same."

Evan batted his eyes. "Why thank you."

My band flashed as another text went through. I winced.

"Who's that?" Evan asked.

"My boyfriend... ex-boyfriend." Evan eyed me weirdly. I couldn't place it, so I clicked to see what Lucas wanted now. "Great. Not only has he kicked me out, but now he says he put my stuff into boxes and mailed them to my lab." I rested my head on the counter. "Jeez, at least you have the decency to let me grab my things."

Evan's hand landed on my shoulder and I fidgeted. Either my sense of time was off or his hand stayed there far past the 'I'm patting you for comfort' phase. He lowered his head to my level. "Did you love him?"

I choked out a laugh. "I wanted to. But it's really hard keeping a relationship going when you're both in the closet about it."

"Everyone knows you're gay."

I opened my band's interface, pulling up Lucas's photo. Evan exhaled like he was a deflating air bag.

"That's him?"

"Yup."

"I always knew you had bad taste in men. You have worst taste in trouwans." He left a tip for the bartender as he started to walk, but not before he turned around to say, "Better hurry back. I have boxes."

With little left to lose, and alcohol not helping one bit, I was beginning to reconsider the anti-freeze option.

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The door to my lab clicked as I swiped my finger over the keypad. Good thing the University kept its doors open late and outfitted every lab with couches for those of us who needed to crash between long experiments. Or for those like me who had nowhere else to go.

With neither a ship nor apartment to call my own, I was at a loss for how to feel. Tired. Cranky. The beginnings of a hangover, possibly.

I flung my bags to the floor, groaning with the residual aches from the long trip back from Earth. I'd have to do laundry if I wanted any fresh clothes. Who knew when my boxes would arrive?

As much as I had hoped I would pass out the second I hit the couch, I was unable to rest. I fumbled through the data stored on my wrist device, thinking if I should watch funny videos or read up for the class in the morning. Instead I clicked through the photo gallery.

I had taken a lot of pictures at the wedding, many that Evan had photo-bombed, sneaking his face in behind people or doing something outlandish in the background. I sighed. Even while making the stupidest of faces, he was still loved by the camera. The guy was made to be photographed.

There was one photo of him I always kept ready. It was the one he took for his modeling resume, back when he wanted to prove to Clarence it wasn't hard to be a model. Indeed, the blowhole didn't even try in this one. He had someone at the repair shop snap him in front of what they'd been working on that day, a ship of classic design, brought over by the gal at the modeling agency he wanted to impress.

Topless, his tan, waxed chest was crusted with sweat and motor oil as he held a wrench in one hand and his work gloves in the other. His tool belt hung over his scuffed jeans while a hand towel hung over his shoulder. Worst of all, his expression was a perfect smolder—lips puckered, eyes narrowed—while his body turned three-quarters to the side, giving just the right angle for both the breadth of his chest and the curve of his ass.

I imagined all sorts of things I could do with that ass as I stroked myself, giving myself the sort of comfort I wished I could share. As I wiped myself with a tissue, I dreaded the thought of Evan discovering what I used this photo

for. I'd never hear the end of it. He'd get it engraved on my tombstone—his picture on my gravestone.

I threw the wristband to the other side of the couch, his picture fading from my palm. There were more important things to think about. If only I could think about them.

I gritted my teeth as I crawled over to pick up the band again and call Clarence. I needed to talk to him even if he was on his honeymoon.

"What's wrong?" Clarence asked, his voice sleepy.

"Did I wake you?"

"It doesn't matter. What happened?"

It was nice speaking to the one person who gave me the least bullshit, ironic considering Clarence thrived on it elsewhere. I rubbed at my teary eyes as I explained the situation.

"Shit, man. Where are you now?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "In the lab. It's the only place I have left unless they take that away too."

"Hold on." There were murmurs in the background, Clarence conversing with his newly wed wife. "We can lodge you for a few days at our apartment while we're away but I think you want something more permanent." More background conversations. "Oh right, thanks Viola," he sounded like he was smiling. "Evan told me he's been having a difficult time finding a replacement roommate once his current one moves back to Earth. He needs to fill the space quickly, and I'm sure he'll be thrilled to help you out."

Suspicious didn't begin to describe what this sounded like. I'd told Evan I was kicked out, and he said nothing about it. This may as well be another trap to make a fool out of me. "It's okay. I'm not desperate. I just needed to vent a bit."

"Don't be stupid. This is perfect. Stop acting like Evan is out to get you."

Said the guy who believed every one of Evan's tricks. It was like that time in middle school when Evan told Clarence I should get checked for face-eating bacteria when my acne started, or in high school when he warned Clarence that the muscles in my legs would atrophy because I was sitting so much at my desk doing homework. Not to mention that time when I was moving to University and Evan scared my brother so much that Clarence called Mom, who then had

to cause a whole scandal at Lucas's apartment, all because Evan claimed Mars was infested with bed bugs.

"Thanks for the tip, Clarence. I'll see what I can do."

"Oh shut up. I'm calling Evan and you will at least see the apartment before you turn it down."

I grunted out a sarcastic thank you, holding back my bitterness as we said good night. If he was getting involved, it'd be only more trouble if I refused.

There was no way for my life to get any worse, which made me remember George. I checked on my mold samples. Still alive. Then I checked the rest of my petri dishes. Blooming like it was springtime.

I heaved out a sigh of relief. My lousy day was nothing that hours of mind-numbing analysis couldn't solve.

The next morning I was cramping in all my joints, but I had fleshed out a solid paper I could show to my professor, long overdue on my end. I went through the motions of going to classes and taking notes, even made small-talk with my classmates without exploding when they asked me about mid-semester break.

All that was left was to contact Evan and get it over with.

"I see," he said over the phone, his tone tinged with satisfaction. "I don't know, though. They have a strict no-zombie policy over here."

"Don't worry, there's no brains of substance for me to feast on."

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Central got its name because it was the center-point of Mars colonization, and any neighborhood outside of it always made me nervous. The high level of urban development meant Central was the safest, and its combination of human and trouwan technology meant it boasted great buildings such as Mars University, a giant spiral structure nearly touching the air shield, capable of withstanding a sudden eruption into space and of keeping its thousand or so inhabitants sustained for several years in the aftermath.

The neighborhood Evan sent me to, on the other hand, was on the fringes of the colony. The South Bridge loomed overhead, the highway packed with commuters to one of the five connecting space stations, including Station 1123.

As I waited in the rising elevator, I got a good view of the speckle of old buildings, many over a hundred years old, made of connecting pods, all

identical and all capable of surviving independently thanks to their clunky safety air locks and bulbous oxygen and water tanks. The slightly newer complexes such as Evan's were less restrained, with more aesthetic compartments and their emergency systems smaller and tucked between the walls. Development around here was slow, so it made the prices cheaper.

The elevator opened to a narrow hallway, the sides of it curved outwards. I was relieved when Evan appeared to give me a tour. To the far left was the living room. The first entry in was the kitchen. The second a little bathroom. The two doors at the far right were bedrooms. Everything was cramped tight, stuff packed into every available corner, and the room that would be mine contained a bed and dresser that had to be pulled up into the wall or else they took up all the floor space. This was newer construction and didn't consist of an all-in-one pod with retractable kitchen, bathroom, and living quarters. Even the seals connecting the rooms to the hallway were barely noticeable.

I went in slowly, checking my feet, checking the door and ceiling. I ran my hands along the wall, then around the bed frame and mattress, opening and closing every drawer.

"So, yeah," Evan said with a grin. "Sasha left this morning. It's hard to find people who come recommended, so if you can afford the rent, I'll be happy to sign you up."

Happy to sign me up? What was he pulling? "How come I had to find out about this through Clarence? Am I not good enough unless *he* recommends me?"

His gaze was fixed on mine even as he fiddled with the plastic seal of the doorframe. "It's complicated, but since you're already here, I think it'll be worth your time."

I blinked, unsure of how to answer that. He had to be playing stupid. "Ah, but, you missed the part that I don't trust you. And the part that I don't want anything from you. Have I been too subtle about it? Oh sure, let me sign up now. Then I'll find cups of water littering the outside of my room or an air-horn taped behind a door. You'll draw dicks on my face. Paint over every mirror. Stick ass cream into the soap dispenser. Why else would you want me to live with you?"

"Would you ever notice me otherwise?"

What kind of question was that? He was serious about it too. I'd been stuck between Clarence and Evan like a third wheel on a hover car. I had no choice

but to pay attention to him. He had that look like when he used to come over and Mom was baking. He'd stare at the oven as though it were withholding gifts from him, and when Mom would take out her brownies, he'd jump at the chance to eat one, even if it was still burning hot. I was the brownie, and I was burning with fury.

It started in my ears and singed down to my pelvis, to 'why does that turn me on' land. There were so many things I wanted to do to him, but I lowered my head, slowly breathing in and out.

"Something tells me you're better off shoving your cock into an electric socket."

"Sounds tempting, but first I need to be able to pay the electricity."

I burst out laughing. The tension had coiled so deep in my chest that I couldn't help going mad. It was too surreal for me to take seriously anymore. Fucking Evan causing me nothing but headaches. "You know what, tell Clarence this is nice and all, but I'd like to compare it with other options first."

"What options? It's all the same unless you live in Central..." to which I coughed and he started laughing, "Damn, man, you got in good with that dick of yours."

"Not good enough, it seems."

"Well, you'll be glad to know this place has its own charm." He put his hand on the wall, caressing it like a cherished possession. "I'd choose it over those gaudy towers any day."

"They're very functional."

"They don't have anything I can't offer."

I could have sworn he meant it personally, but why did it matter to him what I thought? In fact, why was I even considering this proposition? A day ago I wanted nothing to do with him, and now we'd be roommates? Was I really that desperate?

Evan crossed his arms as I prodded the mattress, letting the silence simmer. With Lucas gone, I had no excuses, no 'oh sorry, it'll make my boyfriend jealous if I'm living with another dude.' This wasn't a bad apartment either. The price was affordable, and the commute wasn't long. The only catch was Evan, and, damn, he was a catch.

“You know what,” I finally said, finding myself at a loss, “Fine. I’ll do it—just to prove you wrong. And when I regret it in the morning, I’ll just put it down as another reason why you’re the bane of my existence.”

Evan’s prize-winning smile was back. “I’m flattered I matter so much.”

“Sure. If that helps you sleep better at night.”

He got out the contract for the apartment, a three-month lease that could be extended if necessary.

I signed it, shaking my head the whole time. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Evan pat me on the back. “You’ll believe it when you get the bill.”

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Minutes later we were in the kitchen going through his liquor collection in celebration. Some of the bottles were too expensive to be anything but gifts. I opted for the beer in the fridge instead. I made him drink it first, in case it was something foul, and when he didn’t convulse in agony, I took a sip myself. He had good taste.

We sat in the living room with our beers, the silence palpable. What were we supposed to talk about now that we lived together? Evan turned on the television, and I didn’t have to wonder for long.

It took a week before our schedules aligned again. Evan’s work hours started before I awoke, and my lab hours ended after he fell asleep. It was a surprise that nothing jumped at me from the fridge or fell on me when I moved my furniture, but it was unnerving knowing someone was around whenever I wasn’t looking, using the soap or shifting the location of food containers. It was almost like living with a ghost. If that ghost was also complaining to me now about restocking toilet paper.

I never realized he could get so wound up about small things like hair in the sink or crumbs on the floor, and it was... hilarious. The more he yelled at me, the more I laughed. The more expletives he showered me with, the more I glowed with pride. If it was this easy to get him fuming, I had a whole list of things to add.

“Are you even listening?” Evan whined. “Because I will throw you out.”

I held my stomach, trying to calm myself so I could give a coherent response. “After all the effort you put into getting me in? I don’t think so.”

Evan clenched his jaw, pushed his hand through his hair, and spun in a circle before beginning his pace around the room for the thousandth time. "You're not taking this seriously at all."

"I've had a house cleaner do it for the past two years." I lounged in the recliner. "It's not a skill I possess."

"You're going to have to learn."

Evan sounded like he was pleading with me, and something about it turned me on. I needed to have a long talk with my dick about what it chose to be attracted to. "You're in luck. I settle for no less than a B."

"You mean A."

"Be pleased to know I stopped being a straight-A student. It's maddening. I ace tests with 50s when the average is a 42."

Evan eyed me up and down. "How'd you not go insane?"

"I already went there and back. I've settled on luke-mad."

His gaze met mine. "Can you, in your luke-madness, remember to change the toilet roll next time?"

"Tough job, but I'll consider it."

After that began a week of him leaving notes everywhere, asking me to do this or that. The first couple of days I sucked it up and did my best to follow his instructions, but then the notes started to get more involved, asking me to do the laundry for both of us or having me wrap a lunch for him.

I knew he was seeing how much he could take advantage and I had to put a stop to it. He wanted me to grab his suit from the dry cleaner? He'd have to help me restock on my condom supply.

Of course, when I found the condom package the next day, I had no choice but to get to the cleaners. Which made me wonder what sort of game we were playing now. So upon receiving his next note about washing dishes, I told him he'd have to make me a sandwich and buy me flowers first.

And he did.

That weekend we were back to sitting in the living room in silence.

"So..." I began, not really knowing where to take the conversation I thought we should have.

"Did you ever get those boxes from the ex?" Evan said instead.



I nodded. "It's officially over between me and Lucas."

"Then why'd you need the condoms?"

My head swerved to stare him down. I didn't take Evan for stupid. He should have known I asked out of spite, but his expression said something else. Like he was upset. What was his problem? "Are you bothered by sexual relations between humans and trouwans?"

His eyebrows shot up. "What? No."

"Because you're acting awfully sensitive about my sex life."

Evan glared at me. "You're an idiot."

"You're not denying it."

"There's nothing to deny when the claim is absurd. I'm not a serpophebe."

"You do realize that's what they all say, don't you?"

Evan closed the gap between us, not a difficult feat when he'd sat at arm's length away. "I don't care who they sleep with," he said, so close I could feel his breath on me. "They could have human-trouwan massive orgies for all I care. It's you..." His voice trailed off as though I had to fill in the blank.

"Me? What do I have to do with this? Don't get me tangled in your politics."

"You," he repeated, "are the densest being I have ever had the misfortune of falling for."

Before I could verbalize a response, Evan's arm was around my waist. A second later, his lips connected with mine. A lightning bolt travelled through my spine as my hand threw itself into action, smacking him across the cheek. Evan cried out and leaned away.

I expected his face to wrinkle into a snarl, but instead he just gazed at me with wet eyes, scanning me slowly as his cheek reddened. "Did that make you feel better?"

I blinked, all my anger turning to a cold spray. Did it? My palm still tingled from the impact. There were days I dreamed of punching him, but it was to stop him from being so satisfied at ruffling my mood. The more he succeeded in aggravating me, the bigger his ego grew. Except I finally snapped.

The cold spread through my veins. It wasn't fair. I wanted him; worse, I wanted him to want me. This had to be an elaborate trick. If I answered him,

overwhelmed with emotions and pleading for forgiveness, his sad puppy-dog eyes would disappear and he'd point at me, laughing. "You're so easy," he'd say. "It's why I keep you around."

The more I thought it over, the more the air grew heavy between us. Evan's eyes watered as his gaze fell to the floor. "I guess I deserve this. I'm sorry, Clark. I never meant to make you hate me so much."

"I don't hate you." It left my mouth faster than I could stop it.

"Then why do you never notice me?"

"What kind of question is that? You'd been involved in my life for over seventeen years. It's only been the past four that I haven't seen you practically every day."

"And yet no matter what I do, you've never seen me as anything more than your brother's friend."

"What do you want from me?" I croaked. "Are you saying you want to be with me? How can I believe a flirt like you?"

"You think I'm playing with you?" Evan leaned in close again, his eyes wide and dilated. "I've never given as much of myself to anyone as I have with you. Your attention is the only kind that fills me with any meaning, and I've spent my entire life making sure you remembered me, for better or worse."

He may as well have thrown a bomb at me. Was Evan not the irredeemable douchenozzle I'd pinned him as all those years? The worst best news of my life? I shuddered as I grabbed at the cuff of his shirt. "What's with the confession all of a sudden?"

"If I intend to keep you, I have to pay a price."

All this effort to dig into my brain, and he had me. I wanted his poison. I wanted this to be real. But I wasn't going to make it easy. "Be with me?" I lifted up my middle finger, making sure I got it right at his face. "Be with this."

Evan took hold of my wrist as he licked up my finger, his eyes fixed on mine the whole time, "—and maybe more?"

It was hard to conceal my reaction. My dick was straining against my pants, and Evan was just as hard. I knew I'd regret this, but my logic was fucked. I was jumping off a cliff, and if this was how I was going down, I wanted him down on me.

I unzipped my pants with my free hand and Evan, not without a knowing smile, dropped to his knees without another word. This I could get used to.

Evan lowered my pants, pulled down my boxer-briefs, and nuzzled his lips against my erection. I couldn't say I was displeased. I bit my lip to hold in my moan as Evan's tongue licked up my shaft and swirled around the head. Our eyes met for a moment and he grinned, the glint in his eyes making me wary of having him so close to my balls as he cupped them, squeezing suggestively, the pressure somehow both pleasurable and menacing, before he swallowed my cock like a snake with its prey.

With his wet lips expanded around my girth and his cheeks hollowed out, his mouth gave the perfect amount of suction to drive me mad. He bobbed his head up and down the length, my vein-studded skin gleaming whenever he pulled off to suck at the head. I was going to lose it if I let him go at this pace.

“—No.” I took his chin into my hand, knowing this may be my only chance to get what I wanted out of him. “I'm not letting you take over. Strip and get on my bed.”

My cock swayed in the cold as Evan licked his lips and smiled again before he stood and pressed past me to the narrow hallway.

I dropped my clothes, staring at the sight in front of me. Evan was nothing short of professional as he precariously sat on the edge of my bed, naked, his hand gliding up and down his cock—fat in the head and curved to the left. And he knew he looked the part too. It made me want to smack him again, which only made me harder.

In my wallet was a condom and one-use lube packet I kept handy. If I could make Evan squirm for once, I'd tumble down every black hole.

I closed in on him, the force of my palm against his chest sending him down the mattress. He bounced slightly, his expression full of lusty curiosity as I rolled the condom on myself, squirting the lube generously over my taut cock. He grinned and lifted his knees up. At least we were in agreement.

But I wasn't going to play it his way. I looped my arm under his right knee, twisting him to his side as I aligned my cock with his ass. I could have been generous and stretched him first, but he'd use the opportunity to bring things back to his pace, and that would be no fun for me. I pushed my tip at his hole, getting ample satisfaction as his face contorted, his eyes squeezing tighter and his mouth opening wider as I breached the entrance, sliding further and further inside him.

“Yes,” I hissed as I leaned closer, “You like my cock buried up your ass, don't you, you filthy cum receptacle.”

“Yeah,” Evan said firmly, completely confident in his statement. He arched himself up, his mouth meeting mine. I grasped the back of his neck, his tongue hot and firm against mine as his ass tightened around my cock.

Then his head dropped back to the covers and I perched his leg on my left shoulder, my weight on my right elbow as I pumped my hips, ramming my cock against him until all he could do was make unintelligible sounds and thrash against the sheets. One of his hands found his cock and he tugged at it, the purple-pink tip giving out a drop of pre-cum. I thrust harder, my own cock yearning.

“Clark,” his voice cracked as his eyes welled up and dripped as he tried to blink the wetness away.

I lifted his head again, my kiss as erratic as my thrusts. Within my undulating motion, my pelvis seared and sparked and sent out a surge. I grunted and grabbed Evan’s hair, keeping him close as I pounded through my orgasm. The friction from my chest seemed to help Evan find his own release, and his voice vibrated through me as a hot stream hit my belly.

I dropped to the bed with a thunk, heaving for air as my pulse pounded in my ears. Evan rolled over, draping his arm over me, mumbling something. I wiped the itchy drops of sweat off my brow, acutely aware of the cum on my stomach and the used condom on my cock.

As much as I despised any sort of cleaning, this had to be taken care of or else the cum would congeal into super glue between my hairs. I groaned as I forced myself to roll off the bed, fighting the intense urge to pass out. At least when I was with Lucas, I had reason to run to the shower. Trouwan cum was like lava and then it congealed into super glue.

Evan was already out of it, his lids half closed and his stupid grin loosening. He was startled by my movements, his hand reaching out to grab mine. “Where you going?” he slurred.

I pointed at myself. “To wash the gift you left behind.”

Evan snorted as his tension eased and he waved me away.

Yeah, he had it easy. Bastard.

The steam felt nice against my skin as I flushed the condom and stepped under the rush of water. I lathered the soap and scrubbed from my neck to my toes, my muscles sore from the unexpected exercise.

I still wasn't sure what any of this meant. I didn't go around having one night stands, and I surely didn't want my brother's best friend to be my first in that regard. It didn't help that Evan was a crier in bed. My chest thumped as I found myself staring at the mildly yellow tiles. What in the universe did I get myself into?

Before I could answer myself, the bathroom door opened, sending in a quick chill before it closed again. Evan's shadow hovered inches from the curtain as he pulled it to the side, his eyes soft and pleading as he looked me up and down.

"Bored already?" I asked, wondering what he wanted.

Evan stepped inside the shower stall, his chest compressed to my back as he strained to fit. The shower was made for one person at a time. It was worse than being cornered.

He planted his face to the crook of my neck, inhaling me as his hands roamed the front of my body.

I exhaled slowly. "You just love making things inconvenient for me."

"I love you."

I closed my eyes, the steady tap of water drowning out the rapid beating in my chest. Those three words never felt sharper, amplified, echoing through my veins. Every part of him that touched me sent shivers through my spine, coaxing my cock into stirring once more. He had me so wound around his finger, I'd forget to breathe if he asked me to. But love?

There were fantasies I had where we stood like this, exchanging sweet nothings. They never culminated in declarations of love.

"Did I leave you speechless?" He kissed up my neck, sucking at it so hard it'd bruise for certain. His hands reached for mine, gripping them, twining the fingers tight. "You're just too adorable when you're agitated. Did you know your nose turns pink when you're embarrassed or enraged?"

My nose twitched. "I should smack you again."

His cock grew firm and pushed against me. "I'd like that."

And my heart didn't know which way to pump blood anymore. I needed air. I needed to break free of this spell. I needed him to stop feeling so intoxicatingly good against me.

"I love you," Evan repeated, this time louder. "I've loved you since the day we met."

I sighed. Love was not the right word for what I felt that second. Love was steeped in sweetness and compassion. This meant much more. I could finally show him how I felt about this long pursuit of his, of his need to be obsessed over. He wanted obsession? I'd fill his days with so much of me, he'd forget the rest of the universe. I took his hand and folded it over my cock.

"You're going to deeply regret seducing me."

He groaned in my ear. "Clark, you have no idea how long I've waited for you to say that."

"Uh huh," I merely acknowledged his charming reply. "Your ass is going to memorize the contours of my dick."

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A month into living with Evan, of digesting that we were potentially now dating, I could finally say I understood him better.

There were days when I was absorbed in University work and I'd find his face taped to my books, his photos over my diagrams. I had to encrypt my computer so he'd stop making himself my wallpaper. Confronting him only ended up in hot, angry sex, after which he wasn't a bother for several days.

In response, I had him wear an ear tag that said, "Property of Clark Waters." It was supposed to be a one-day joke, but he was so proud of it that it became his most prized accessory.

The one thing that did end successfully, however, was that one time I got really angry at him for hiding my tablet with all my lab notes. I ended up going to a kinky sex shop and asking the clerk for the most torturous device they had. It was ridiculously too sadistic even for me, so I didn't get it. Instead I found a strap-on and my mind did a somersault. That night I cuffed Evan to his bed—cuffs I had bought previously to keep him from wandering into my room at night after I found out he had the key to my door lock—and attached the strap-on over his underwear. He was confused at first, but once I lubed up the dildo and got myself naked, he was fiercely regretted hiding my things.

"This," I said as I aligned my ass with the dildo, "is what you're missing out on every time you interfere with my work."

And I rode that dildo to orgasm, watching Evan's contorted face as his own appendage got no love that night. After that he treated all my University-related stuff like it was made of uranium.

Today he had something to show me back at the shop. Unfortunately, I still didn't have a ship, so I had to take a taxi over.

He was a hot mess, every inch of him caked with grime, but he was smiling as he wiped his hands on an equally grimy towel. "Remember how I said your piece of shit ship belonged in a dumpster?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I don't think that's how that conversation went."

"Well," Evan said as he pushed his hand through his hair, the ruffle of it reminding me of what he looked like post-sex, "I was planning on disassembling it and selling off the scrap to buy you a new one, but in the process I found the skeleton and exterior to be in recoverable condition—" his smile spanned the width of his face, "—so I ended up gutting it and installing more reliable parts from a different model."

He took my hand and led me over to where a white sheet was laid over something wide enough to be a ship. When he stripped the sheet off, he raised his hands in victory. "It's like your old thing but less of a disgrace."

I blinked slowly, letting the image sink into my head. That was my ship alright, but shinier and less like it was about to break in half.

Evan opened the hood to show off the insides, all brand new, without a spot of dust on them.

"How'd you afford this?" I asked as my finger glided over the curves of the engine.

"It was a bit out of budget, but I plan to downsize the apartment."

I stared at him in disbelief.

He looked at me all innocently. "After Sasha left, I was planning on doing it anyway. I didn't actually expect to fill the room, let alone have you live with me. Seems like the extra room is unnecessary again."

I wanted to be angry, but it served me right to buy into his plea for a roommate. He'd would have said anything to keep me around. Besides, the ship really did look good and it could use some breaking in.

"The backseat converts into a bed," Evan said with a wink, obviously thinking the same thing.

I exhaled and considered this a draw. I took Evan and kissed him, disregarding the looks from the other employees or customers. There was a

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picture snapped, a picture I'd find looming online in a few hours. It only served as motivation to kiss him more fervidly. Let everyone know he was mine.

"Lucky day to get stranded in space," I whispered.

**The End**



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## Author Bio

*I entertain people with stories. When I'm not writing, I'm out looking for new sources of inspiration. I love adventures, no matter how big or small, and I'm always up for trying something different, perhaps even kinky. I have a Bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering even though I'm really pursuing a career in writing, editing, and other publishing related fun stuff. I even volunteer my time at an indie bookstore.*

*Previous works include: [Roaming Canisters](#).*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# HINORI'S JOURNEY

By Victoria Zagar

## Photo Description

An androgynous man stands with a curved blade in hand. He is clearly a warrior who treasures grace and beauty as much as the art of war.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I am from a race that is both masculine and feminine in one corporeal form. Our life's journey determines which traits end up being dominant. Please tell my story and how I find my perfect partner. I ask that the setting be sci-fi/fantasy and that my MC is a warrior, anything else goes.*

Sincerely,

Venecia

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy, science fiction

**Tags:** hurt/comfort, prison/captivity, interspecies, coming of age, warrior, m-preg, masturbation, spacemen/alien

**Content Warnings:** violence, death of non-main characters

**Word Count:** 14,488

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Thank You*

Special thanks to Anna for fantastic editing. I really appreciate all the time the event volunteers have put in to make Love's Landscapes happen.

*Author's Note*

Hinori's tribe considers the use of gendered pronouns to be highly disrespectful. Therefore, Hinori uses singular *they* to refer to others, as is the custom in the Naha'i culture.

# **HINORI'S JOURNEY**

**By Victoria Zagar**

## Chapter One

### *A Chance Meeting*

I sat amidst the underbrush, listening to the soul of the Mother-Father as They moved through the life force of every living thing. I had to break my fast soon; the hunger eating away at my belly was a sign that I had come too far and too fast on my Journey.

I felt the pulse of the deer as it drank from the stream. The sound of rippling water covered my footfalls as I approached the beast. I watched its majesty as its great antlers dipped into the water. A shame to kill such a creature, but the Mother-Father understood that some things must be done. The Naha'i, blessed by Their strength, have been allowed to live on this planet in harmony with life. We give back what we take as much as we are able, but these few years have seen a thinning of the wild beasts that roam these forests.

I slit the beast's throat with one deft motion of my honed hunter's knife. A warrior kills in one motion. We do not take pleasure in torture or torment, but do what needs to be done with as little suffering as possible.

I ate the meat raw, blood running down my chin and across my small breasts. I did my best to keep it out of my blond hair, which was braided down my back in the traditional style of the Naha'i. I could not risk a fire amidst the dry underbrush, especially so close to habitation. The Oracle had sent me to spy on a newly built settlement called Nemway Two as part of my ritual Journey into adulthood. I intended to do so without being detected. Unsettling rumors had spread about the people who called themselves the Nemway, saying that they did not honor the Balance and instead split themselves into groups based on gender.

If the Mother-Father placed this strange village in our world, They must have had a reason, no matter how unusual and single-minded the villagers might turn out to be. The Oracle insists we learn as much about these people from the north as possible before deciding whether they constitute a threat to us.

My meal complete, I washed in the stream before crossing. It would not do to have Nemway Two's tamed beasts smell the scent of blood on my lips. I crawled up the small ridge upon which the village sat and watched with awe and fear as the people went about their business. The settlement was like

nothing I'd ever seen. The buildings were shaped like domes, made out of steel like my blade. The people wore tight clothing like a second skin, blue for some and pink for others. They wore strange sticks attached to belts at their sides. Odd devices—not living, yet moving without life force—transported people about the village so that they did not have to walk.

How strange the Nemway were, I thought, and how sadly separate they seemed from one another. Those clad in blue were clearly their warriors. The Nemway in pink were the nurturers, walking the streets with children at their sides and babes in their arms. The two groups seemed at odds with one another, arguing over trivial matters as I watched. I was surprised I could even understand their language, but it was a relief to know I would not have to learn new words.

As I lay in the brush watching them communicate, it seemed almost as though they were speaking a different language from one another. I learned that the two groups were referred to as “male” and “female” from signs on a building. I wondered if perhaps there had been some split in the holy Mother-Father deity to create such a species.

To the Naha'i, one being is both of these two tribes. I am both “male” and “female.” I cook, I hunt, I mate, I clean—if I achieve Balance, I will be able to bear children or father them. The people of our tribe have always been this way—one body, two souls with the purest Balance of Mother-Father. Some lean more one way than the other, depending on their life's work, but equity has always been the key to the Naha'i way of life. To swing one way or the other too strongly is to surrender one's self to savagery or vanity according to the Oracle. To cut off one half of our deity is to throw away a part of one's self.

I watched a young male leave their steel dome. They seemed to be concealing their actions. Their jet-black hair was longer than that of the other males, hanging around their neck instead of being shorn down to the roots. I watched this person with interest as they snuck out of the village.

I backed down off the grassy ridge where I lay, and followed their trail. They made no effort to conceal their tracks. I was able to follow the male for several miles until I reached a ruined village. The disaster looked fresh, the smell of smoke and death heavy in the air. My heart sank as I recognized it was one of our twinned villages.

The Naha'i are spread across the world, our different tribes rarely coming into contact except for the occasion when one tribe needs to trade. In that case,

the villages form a bond. In this instance, the people of Vastet needed water. Their well had dried up, so we gave them barrels of water and wine until they could find a new water source. In return we had received several fine blades, one of which I carried with me as a gift from the Oracle.

The youth stood looking over the remnants of the village, watching the scene with hesitation. They looked down at the ground before kicking up dirt, and running down the hill. They searched the ruins of homes, clearly looking for something. I wondered if they were some kind of scavenger, looting the homes of the dead for personal profit.

Disgusted, I stepped forward from my hiding place, and walked down the hill. I stood behind the youth and waited for them to sense my presence. They turned around and regarded me with shock, falling back and crawling across the ground.

"Explain your actions," I demanded, drawing my knife and brandishing it as I took up my battle stance.

"Please don't hurt me! I didn't do this! I swear!" The youth backed up against the remnants of a stone wall and realized further flight was impossible.

"What happened here?" I sheathed my blade, keenly aware of the effect it was having on the person before me. They seemed different from the other males of their group. While I would have expected a warrior to stand and fight, the youth backed down as though they were defenseless before my might.

The young male seemed to visibly deflate, like a beast releasing its dying breath in defeat. "My people—they sent an envoy here. They were trying to understand how you live like you do. We didn't know there were other people on this planet!"

"What do you mean, 'live like we do'?" I asked.

"You're weird. You have no gender roles. My people saw this as a threat, I guess. Our society is highly segregated into male and female. Each person has their own role to play." The youth shook their head, as if confused by it themselves.

"What defines gender to your people?" I sat down on the charred ash, trying to make sense of the youth's words.

"Um..." The youth struggled to explain. "It just *is*. Everybody has their assigned role at birth. Women give birth to and raise children. Men fight and carry out heavy labor. That's how it's always been."



“I ask you again; what happened to Vastet?”

“We made a mistake. We tried to introduce our way of life to your people. We tried to give you roles—to separate you in ways we understood. You resisted, and this was the final result. Your people went down without much of a fight. Our weapons are superior to anything you have.” The youth’s violet eyes were filled with regret. They hung their head. “My people—the Nemway—think they did the right thing. That’s why I came here. I had to know why this tragedy occurred. I didn’t know any of you survived.”

“What is your name?” I asked. I filed away the information on gender, Vastet’s fate, and the youth’s culture. The Oracle would be most interested in my findings, no doubt.

“Mateo Nivera,” the youth said. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Hinori, child of Hibaka and Avalor. I am not from Vastet. I hail from Grathador.”

“There are more of you?” Mateo’s eyes flashed with hope and they got to their feet. I held out my hand and gripped Mateo’s, steadying the youth until they found their balance. “Where is Grathador?”

“It would not be wise to tell you,” I said. “The Nemway are clearly a threat.”

“You might be right.” Mateo sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just curious about you. I wanted to learn more, but then war broke out. If we’d just stayed out of your business, everything would be all right now. It’s all my fault. I wanted to learn, but others used me in order to foist their ideas on your people.”

“You should return home. Tell nobody about me.” I was calm, but firm. I had realized that the Nemway meant us great harm, and knew I had to return to the Oracle as soon as I could.

“I’m not going back,” Mateo said with a look of disgust. “I’m done with them and their society. I don’t want to be a man. I don’t feel right when I’m holding a gun or learning to kill. Something inside me protests against my role. Mother says it will pass, but I’m not so sure any more. I’m nineteen years old—how much more will I change? I don’t want to hide who I am just to get through life.”

“The Mother-Father has granted you the capacity for Balance,” I said, feeling sympathy for Mateo. “Do not be afraid. You have been blessed.”

“What?” Mateo regarded me with curiosity. “I don’t understand.”

“The Mother-Father is our deity. Only They can change the balance of gender in a person. The Naha’i teach that in order to be at peace, one must strive to be both aspects of our god. There are no roles cast by society, only those desired by the individual.”

“That sounds like heaven.” Mateo smiled for the first time since I had met them. “How can I become one of you?”

“Nobody has ever joined the Naha’i in living memory,” I said, trying to let Mateo down gently. I felt compassion for the youth, lost as they were in the world and feeling at odds with society. I realized the isolating nature of Mateo’s life. Perhaps that’s why I offered the youth something nobody else ever had. “That doesn’t mean you cannot consult the Oracle. They decide the fate of our village.”

“You’re going to let me come with you?” Mateo asked, their eyes widening until they looked like the sixth moon Venetia, purple and full. They accented Mateo’s hair, and in that moment, I realized the youth was attractive to me. I understood then that maturity was indeed upon me, along with the desires the twentieth year of our lives brought. I knew I had to be careful with those feelings, and keep them in harmony, or the core of sexual aggression would destroy my Balance and send me down a path of madness.

“Yes, you may come,” I said. “On one condition.”

“I’ll do anything.”

“You must tell the Oracle everything about your people. Any question the Oracle asks, you will answer to the best of your ability. Is that understood?”

“Yes, of course,” Mateo said, eyes shining with relief. I knew from that expression that Mateo did not seek to harm me; indeed, they seemed completely non-aggressive. I could only say that I trusted Mateo, charmed as I was by the kindly youth’s words, and equitable nature. There was wisdom on display in Mateo that I had not witnessed in the Nemway’s color-coded village.

We moved quickly through the brush. I took point, skilled as I was in cutting away the branches with my blade. Mateo followed, never far behind. Their eyes seemed to bore into me. I wondered what the source of Mateo’s curiosity was as we travelled towards Grathador.

“We should make camp,” I said, after several hours of silence. Mateo looked to be beyond exhaustion, their body less toned than mine despite being a part of the aggressive masculine tribe within the Nemway. I built a fire. Mateo slumped down beside it, seemingly grateful for the warmth.

“Aren’t you cold?” Mateo asked, regarding me with a questioning stare to which I could only shrug. “You’re barely wearing anything.”

“I am comfortable this way,” I responded. “It is you who look ill at ease.”

“I hate these jumpsuits,” Mateo said, pulling at the stretchy blue fabric.

“So remove it.”

Mateo blushed, a furious crimson spreading across their face. “I—I couldn’t do that!”

“Why not?” I was genuinely curious at this point; nothing less than a straight answer would do. I watched Mateo wrestle with the question across the fire from me, clearly locked in debate with themselves.

“You would see me naked! In our culture, that’s just not done.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Why not?”

“The men—most of them hunger for the women, and sometimes each other. They would never keep their sexual appetites to themselves if everyone walked around naked. It would be obscene.”

“Because their sexual attributes would be on display?” I tried to wrap my mind around such an unbalanced culture and shuddered. Only one who had given themselves over to the most extreme aggressive savagery would ever think about sexual congress without consent. It was proof to me that the Naha’i and the Mother-Father were right and that the Nemway had arrived to show us the follies of such a gendered culture.

“Exactly.” Mateo shivered, and I sensed it had little to do with the cold they felt.

“Such a thing would never happen in my tribe,” I said. “It would take an extremely unbalanced individual to carry out such an act, and they would be banished.”

“How do you deal with it, then? Sexual desire, I mean?” Mateo blushed again, but I sensed their curiosity outweighed their embarrassment. “I mean, you do have sex, right?” Mateo looked at my no doubt quizzical gaze and laughed. “You mate, then? Procreate? You must have offspring, right?”

“The ability to bear offspring is limited to only a few; those who have mastered the Balance and embraced both sides of their being in the true spirit of the Mother-Father. We call this the Quickening. Few ever achieve it, and so our

numbers are small. As for mating, we are allowed to express physical intimacy with whomever we choose, so long as both parties consent. Bearing offspring is limited to a Promised couple—one who has made a vow before the Mother-Father to embrace Balance and one another for life. In practicality, this vow is usually made after it is discovered one partner's womb has Quickened. Some sterile couples Promise out of a desire to commit, however."

It was Mateo's turn to look at me with a strange expression. It was as if they were seeing me for the first time. "You have a womb?"

"As you know, the Naha'i is a society based around equality. We do not separate ourselves as you do."

"But we segregate ourselves because we have different body parts. You're saying you have both male and female body parts—that you're intersexed?"

"I do not know that word," I said, feeling most uncomfortable. I am not particularly known for my vanity, but at that moment, I felt like some kind of animal being dissected out of callous intrigue. "I would ask that you refrain from your curiosity for tonight. We must rest."

"I'm sorry," Mateo said. "I didn't mean to pry."

I felt somewhat guilty as I ended the conversation and laid down on a pile of sticks and leaves. The poor youth had only been driven by the desire for knowledge; who was I to rebuke them? Was it the knowledge of their species' sexual hunger that frightened me? I consulted the Mother-Father in silent meditation and realized I had been acting in a most unbalanced way—defensively at best, like a tiger sizing up its enemy to sink its teeth into later. Mateo was not my foe, and they deserved my compassion, alone in the world as they were.

I heard quiet sniffing across from me, and realized Mateo was crying. My sense of guilt intensified. I sat up, climbing out of my makeshift bed silently, using my hunter's ability to close the distance between us without alerting Mateo.

"Mateo," I whispered. "Why are you crying?"

"Leave me alone," Mateo sniffed. "It's none of your business."

"I shouldn't have shut you out. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm embarrassed, scared and a long way from everything I know, asking the most stupid questions. Your body is none of my concern."

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“You simply wanted to learn about my culture,” I said. “That is no crime. You have done more to bridge the gulf between our peoples in one day than the Nemway have since they moved south. It is to be praised.”

“You think so? You—you’re not offended?” Mateo wiped their eyes, and rolled over to look at me. Their face was red, and blotchy against pale skin, Mateo’s eyes bloodshot from crying.

“Not at all. What I said was a breach of the Balance. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Mateo said, their breath hitching as they tried to get their emotions under control.

“It’s okay,” I hushed, feeling tender emotions towards the youth in anguish before me. I leaned down, and caressed Mateo’s cheek. “You’re not alone. We’re both a long way from home. We each have much to learn.”

I stayed beside Mateo until they fell into a quiet doze. I returned to my makeshift bed, and quickly fell asleep, exhausted by the day’s events.

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## Chapter Two

### *Culture Shock*

“Hush,” I said, covering Mateo’s mouth. Their eyes snapped open, but they understood the threat, laying still and pretending to be asleep while I took care of the intruders. I drew my knife and merged into the shadows, counting the people before me. Six of the males from the village stood in a ring, surrounding our camp. We were hopelessly outnumbered and I had no idea what kind of weapons they were carrying. They looked like much larger versions of the black sticks I had seen holstered at people’s belts in Nemway Two. I knew I had to be cautious.

I made an intentional snapping sound by stepping on a twig. Ducking down into the bushes, I suppressed a cry of surprise as a beam of light erupted from the stick, illuminating the forest as it flew towards its target. One of the males screamed. I smelled the sickening stench of burning flesh. I realized the stick was deadly, its light capable of searing skin and muscle alike.

“You idiot! You hit Luke!” The males shouted amongst themselves, obviously confused and outraged by their mistake.

The males rushed over to the spot behind me where Luke lay bleeding to death. I felt sorrow over the murder I had indirectly been a part of, but I pushed away the urge to weep for a person’s death and instead focused on my survival.

With the villagers distracted, I hurried back to Mateo’s side. Mateo followed me without comment, being careful not to stumble or make noise as I led them into the forest.

“Not so fast.” I felt a stick pressed into my back and knew that if the Nemway fired, I would die instantly. I dropped my knife in defeat, realizing that to keep myself and Mateo safe meant giving up the fight and going with the villagers. Another male stepped forward and took my knife. They leered at me, eyes on my breasts with obvious hunger. I turned my gaze away from them, ashamed for the first time of my own nudity.

“Move!” The stick poked into my back again and I stepped forward. I thought we would have to walk all the way back to the village, but we were led to a clearing where one of the mysterious transportation devices sat hovering a few inches off the ground. I feared riding the lifeless object but realized I had

no choice as I was pushed onto it and forced to sit. They tied me to the steel chair and did the same with Mateo, who sat with their head lowered, unable to meet my eyes. They looked ashamed and disappointed. I wondered if shame was an emotion these males invoked in everyone, though the same hunger they had showed me was not apparent when they looked at Mateo. Instead, their expressions spoke of anger and disgust. I feared for Mateo at the Nemway's hands.

The machine moved with a sickening lurch, and I vomited on myself. Our captors made sounds of disgust and pulled to a stop. They untied Mateo and threw them a rag.

"Clean it off. Hurry up!" I realized with shock that the "it" they were referring to was me, as though I was some kind of object for their amusement. Mateo took the rag and wiped me down. If Mateo was disgusted, they did not show it as they cleaned me off with near tender care. Mateo took the rag and hurled it at the ringleader of the males. I could not suppress a smile as the ringleader made disgusted noises before tossing the rag off the side of the machine.

"Get back in your seat, Mateo!" said the male who had leered at me before. They aimed their gun at Mateo and I realized there was no chance of escape. I shot Mateo a sympathetic glance and they surrendered, sitting down and allowing themselves to be tied up once more. The machine lurched again but I was ready for it that time. Whatever food and water was in my body remained in my stomach.

At the next stop, we remained tied to our chairs while the males ate and drank. They forced water into our mouths from a flask but left us hungry.

"Would you cover up its tits? I'm getting distracted over here." The ringleader ambled closer, throwing a blanket over my chest. I was actually grateful for the relief from the stares and spent the rest of the trip in slumber, trying to ignore the nervousness that came with riding the floating machine.

I woke to darkness and found myself in the village. I was being prodded to wakefulness by the butt of the weapon as another male untied me. I got up and followed them, knowing there was no chance of resistance with so many others close by. The steel was awkward to walk on and hurt my bare feet, but comfort was not on the minds of the people who held us prisoner.

"Take 'em to the lab. Dr. Garvin will be more than happy to take a look at the she-male." The male laughed. I winced at what seemed like an insult. I bit my tongue to counter any retort I might have made.

“What about Mateo?” The male looked at the ringleader for advice. “He’s one of ours.”

“He needs hormone treatments. His mother says he’s been acting out of whack for a while. Little sissy needs to learn how to be a real man. Let Garvin fix him.” I shuddered, barely understanding most of the words that came out of the males’ mouths, but comprehending their tone just fine. They planned to harm Mateo, perhaps more than me. I cringed at the thought of them changing a single thing about the kind, compassionate youth that had dared to attempt understanding of my people.

I was pushed towards a door, sure that I was going to be forced into it, when the door opened of its own accord. I wondered if a person controlled the doors or whether it was a lifeless machine like the one we had rode in on.

The room beyond was full of things my eyes had never seen before and which I did not understand. Glass bottles sat on shelves, filled with various organs. How they stopped them from putrefying, I did not know, but it made me sick to see them separated from their bodies. These were no animal organs, but those of people. Having witnessed our healer dissect a cadaver, I knew what the inside of our bodies looked like, and it was vastly similar to the line-up of specimens on the wall.

I fought down my nausea and instead concentrated on the male milling about like he owned the place. The male’s hair was shorn down to the roots like the others, but they sported facial hair that looked vastly out of place on the bald head. The male I guessed to be Garvin wore the same blue clothing that Mateo had referred to as a jumpsuit, and was only distinguishable from the others by the way their green eyes regarded me with no emotion. Whereas the others had expressed desire or disgust, this being was completely empty on the surface, their gaze revealing no shred of humanity whatsoever. It chilled me to the bone. I wondered if this Nemway was even capable of feeling. I knew we would not live long under this person’s care. I feared for Mateo.

“Put them in here.” A glass cage sat along the far side of the room. The male walked over and pressed numbers on a device. Part of the glass slid aside and we were hustled in, the glass sliding shut and sealing completely. I wondered how we would breathe in this tight atmosphere, but fresh cool air was blowing in from somewhere and my immediate concerns that this was some kind of killing chamber were dispelled.

Mateo shuffled to the back of the glass box and slumped down against the wall, looking defeated and distraught. I knelt down beside them, placing my



hand on their shoulder in a supportive gesture. Garvin had a conversation I could not hear through the glass cage with the males who had brought us in before dismissing them.

"It's going to be okay," I said, with a confidence I did not feel. Mateo didn't buy my words, my voice shaking and echoing back to them in the glass chamber.

"Garvin is a madman," Mateo said. "He's the monster I've been threatened with since I was a child. He fixes people who don't match this society's gender norms. They come back... different."

"I won't let them harm you." I felt a protective force swell inside me as if I was protecting a family member.

"You can't stop him, Hinori. Garvin has free rein here to do whatever he wants. As long as he fixes the Nemway's problems, the people turn a blind eye to his methods." Mateo pulled their knees up to their chin, making themselves as small as possible.

I soon saw why Mateo bundled up as the glass slid open and Garvin walked in holding a long, sharp object that held some kind of liquid in their hand. Garvin walked over to us, a twisted smile on their face as they knelt down beside Mateo.

"Leave Mateo alone!" I yelled with the full force of my warrior heritage behind me. That shout had been known to chase away a pack of wolves, but Garvin was not deterred.

"Shut up, freak, or I'll simply kill and dissect you this instant. I'll make Mateo watch as I carve you up. That'll make a man out of him." Garvin smiled as I backed away, defeated. Mateo looked up at me with eyes of terror as I stepped back and let Garvin close in.

I felt like such a failure as a warrior. I had never backed away from a fight in my life, but for the first time in recent memory, I was afraid. I explored the emotion as Garvin sank the needle into Mateo's arm. I swore to myself if the liquid was poison, I would wrap my hands around Garvin's throat and squeeze until the life departed their body. Such a monster deserved to be a sacrifice to the Mother-Father. They would take Garvin's soul and banish it to the Seven Hells, where those who committed acts of pure evil were banished for eternity.

The injection seemed to have no immediate effect. Garvin backed off, admiring their handiwork.

“We’ll see what happens when I give you a megadose, Mateo. Satisfy my curiosity, and I’ll let you out of here.”

“I’ll never do what you want,” Mateo said, eyes shining with defiance that made me feel ashamed.

“You can’t fight your body’s desires. Soon you’ll be like a dog in heat and nothing will stop you from embracing your true nature. Fuck the freak, and I’ll let you out of here.” Garvin smiled as they left, the glass door closing behind them before I could regain my will to snap the beast’s neck.

“Hinori, I want you to listen to me.” Mateo’s voice was clear and measured, the voice of a person who had accepted their fate and decided to take the only way out. “If I ever turn on you, I want you to kill me.”

“Don’t ask that of me.” My words surprised even myself. I realized the bond between Mateo and I was stronger than I had previously realized. “I will not take your life.”

“I would rather that than the alternative. I would rather die than become a monster. I have seen myself. I know who I want to be now that I’ve met you. I won’t let them take that away from me.”

I edged closer to Mateo, hoping to pull them into my embrace but Mateo pushed me away roughly. “No. Keep your distance. I don’t know when the changes will occur.” I saw the conflict in their eyes as Mateo bowed their head. Out of respect for Mateo’s wishes, I took to the furthest corner, sat down, rested my head on my knees, and allowed myself to fall asleep.

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## Chapter Three

### *Fighting Desire*

Garvin returned next time with a guard beside them. I realized Garvin had understood the threat I presented. Garvin would not make the mistake of coming alone again. I stood little chance unarmed against a Nemway with a light stick.

Mateo was changing, much to their own personal terror. Thick black stubble was breaking out on their chin, and they were afraid to catch their reflection in the mirrored glass for fear of seeing the change in themselves. Mateo would not let me come close or touch them.

I woke to find Mateo naked, standing up against the wall. Tears rebelliously rolled down their face as they stroked their hard cock. I pretended to be asleep in order to give Mateo some privacy. I remembered the way the males' eyes had roved over me. I did not want to do the same to Mateo, no matter how magnificent I thought their body was.

Mateo's body was mostly a mirror of mine on the outside, only with thick tufts of body hair and a much larger cock. They were lanky, with a flat chest and stomach but without large hips like I have. Legend has it that our people once delivered their children naturally and that wide hips were conducive to this process. Modern Naha'i lack a birth canal, so our children are delivered surgically by the healer. I have small breasts for feeding my offspring but nothing the size of the females in Nemway Two.

I heard Mateo come and fought the stirring of my own cock with meditation. I sensed the Mother-Father in Mateo and realized their equilibrium had been restored—for now. I opened my eyes as if waking and walked over to them as they were pulling their jumpsuit back onto their shoulders.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I don't know." Mateo's voice was deeper in pitch and sounded like that of a stranger, even to them. "I'm scared, Hinori."

"I know. Let me help you." I put my hand on Mateo's shoulder. They did not shove me off, but came to my arms willingly. Mateo rested their head on my breasts, and I stroked their soft hair, giving comfort the only way I could.

"If you wish it, I will snap Garvin's neck," I said, the urge to protect Mateo overwhelming me.

"He would kill you," Mateo whispered. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I can't bear to see you suffer either."

"You should... back off," Mateo said. I felt their cock stirring against my leg and fought the urge to give in to my desire. To do so would be a violation of Mateo's rights, taking advantage of them when they were unable to resist. To do such a thing would be a violation of everything I believed, but I cannot say I did not both desire Mateo and feel the need to comfort them by becoming the one to take away Mateo's pain. To have Mateo inside me—our bodies and souls becoming one—was an image I was fighting to keep under control. I had to protect Mateo. I was determined to find a way.

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The next day had Garvin seeming annoyed and nervous as they opened the glass door to give Mateo another shot. The enforcer stood beside Garvin as I sat by uselessly.

"Do you feel a man's desire pumping through your veins, Mateo?" Garvin smiled and lifted Mateo's chin in an intimate gesture that made me feel sick. Garvin reached down and fondled Mateo's cock through their jumpsuit, smiling as it responded to their ministrations. Mateo thrust upwards into Garvin's hand, Mateo's mind lost to a haze of need. It was all I could do not to throw myself at Garvin in homicidal rage, whether it was a suicidal act or not.

Mateo whimpered as Garvin stopped, chuckling as they left the chamber. Sweat was breaking out on Mateo's forehead, and they reached down, fondling their own cock until they came. I didn't even grow hard, so sickened was I by Mateo's suffering.

"Mateo," I said softly.

"Stay... away," Mateo said. "I can't control it. I'm losing everything."

I was calm as I stood up and walked over to Mateo, ignoring their protests. Mateo's pulse was hammering against me as I pulled them close. I was worried their heart would burst. Mateo's cock was already hard again. They whimpered in frustration, grinding against me. Their mouth surrounded my nipple, tongue swirling as it became hard in Mateo's mouth. Mateo's other hand squeezed my other breast and I had to remind myself that conscious thought was necessary at that moment.

“Mateo, stay with me. Can you listen to me while I talk to you?”

Mateo withdrew, letting go of me. I felt a loss where their warmth withdrew and realized what I was about to ask was right, was an act of Balance—of desire and protection in harmony.

“Mateo, I am happy to give myself to you, if that’s what you need.”

Mateo shook their head forcefully no, even as their hand pushed aside my loincloth to expose my hardening cock.

“It’s okay, Mateo. I want it too. Don’t be afraid. We’ll get through this together.” My voice was barely a whisper, and Mateo nodded their consent. I captured Mateo’s soft lips in a gentle kiss, which they made deeper, probing my mouth with their insistent tongue. I let Mateo in, let them have whatever they needed of me in order to be safe and sane. I was frightened of Mateo’s aggression, yet I could not deny their hand on my cock drove me to the edge.

“Not yet,” I whispered, knowing that if I came then, the rest would most likely hurt. “Inside me.” I stripped off my loincloth and coated Mateo’s cock with my spit. I straddled them, taking control and carefully lowered myself down onto Mateo’s hard shaft at a speed I could take.

Mateo whimpered, pinned down beneath me, and it wasn’t long before they came, Mateo’s seed spilling inside my ass. The sensation was more than pleasurable, and I crossed a line, able to forget for a moment that we were both prisoners submitting to a cruel master’s desire. I came on Mateo’s chest, seeing white before coming back to myself and grim reality. I slipped off Mateo’s cock and tried to ignore the tears that spilled down Mateo’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Mateo rasped.

“Don’t be,” I said, brushing the tears away from Mateo’s cheeks. I was filled with a warm tenderness for the being sitting beside me, and a fierce urge to protect Mateo and care for them no matter what. Even if we were to spend the rest of our lives in the cage, I was determined to give Mateo whatever they needed from me.

What Mateo really needed was freedom. I knew as I looked out through the glass at Garvin’s wicked smile, I had to find a way out soon—before Garvin got what they wanted and ended their cruel experiment.

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## Chapter Four

### *Escape*

I can't say how long we were at the "lab," as the males had called it, but I gave myself to Mateo whenever they needed it. They seemed to retreat into themselves, never talking to me outside of mating. I grew lonely in our cage and spent much of it sleeping. My waking hours were spent meditating or watching the lab outside the cage, waiting for a moment when Garvin would slip up and offer us an opportunity for escape.

That day came eventually, as all things must. I was ready to take it. Garvin came without an enforcer, but with a light stick clasped to their belt. I feigned sleep and waited for Garvin to relax. I regret to say that breaking Garvin's neck between my hands was one of the most satisfying things I've ever done. If there was a beast to be delivered to the Seven Hells, Garvin was it, but the act I committed was still murder. A warrior must mourn even a monster according to the rules of the Naha'i, but I could not shed a single tear for Garvin.

Mateo took a moment to respond before looking at Garvin's corpse with an expression of pure hatred. I pulled Mateo to their feet and led the way, taking the light stick from Garvin's belt. I didn't know how it worked, but I hoped the mere sight of it would be enough to make any who opposed us think twice.

We hustled through the lab and out of the front door, which helpfully opened for us. People milled about, going about their everyday business. A female caught sight of our near-naked bodies and cried for help. I held up the light stick as the sun blinded me and the townsfolk backed away. It was long enough for my eyes to adjust. I led Mateo to a nearby machine, hopped on board and tried to work the controls. The machine veered hopelessly into the crowd and towards the lab.

"Mateo, I need you!" I yelled. Mateo seemed to come to their senses and took the wheel, averting disaster and steering the machine out of the village. Flashes from light sticks sped past our heads as we ducked while the machine dived into the trees. Mateo focused on the task at hand and expertly guided the machine through the undergrowth until we lost the enforcers. They seemed not to follow, and I wondered why.

As the machine ground to a halt, I looked at Mateo with an unspoken question on my lips. I did not understand why the machine had stopped, and I needed Mateo to explain it.

“Fuel cells are empty,” Mateo said, kicking the machine. “It’s useless now.” Those were the last words they said all day as we proceeded on foot. I missed having my knife to cut away anything growing in our path, but we were able to duck most of the overgrown branches.

We made camp for the night. Mateo wordlessly gathered wood for the fire, then slumped down in front of it.

“Mateo, if you want to talk—”

Mateo shook their head, disgust at themselves apparent in the way they moved. Mateo’s shoulders seemed permanently hunched, their self-worth at an all-time low. I wondered about the battle Mateo was fighting inside and knew I had to leave them alone to make their own path through the darkness in their mind.

I slept fitfully. Mateo came to me in the dark, hands roaming over my body in silent question. I let Mateo have what they needed then let them rest in my arms once it was over. I loved the way I felt when Mateo was close to me, but it scared me that they did not speak. I wanted to talk about what we had done and tell Mateo it was okay—that I was not hurt by them in any way—but it was impossible. When I spoke to Mateo, it was like addressing a wall. Perhaps it was easier for Mateo to process their captivity in silence. All I knew is that I wanted them to speak more than anything.

I picked berries and hunted with my bare hands. It was good to have a full stomach again, and it lifted Mateo’s spirits as well. The next few days were spent in quiet companionship as the chemical poison receded from Mateo’s veins and returned them to a more familiar shadow of their former self. Mateo stopped coming to my bed, and I realized I missed their body close to mine.

We were closing in on Grathador when Mateo said their first few words. As we finished making camp, Mateo sat by the fire and watched it burn. I sat across from Mateo and watched them with admiration. I felt warmth glowing in my veins every time I looked at Mateo. I knew something was changing inside myself as surely as it was changing inside Mateo.

“I’m sorry.” Mateo’s words were barely audible, but I knew they were more than the wind when they continued. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” I said. “What I gave was yours to take, Mateo. I gave myself to you willingly. I have no regrets and I would do it again in a heartbeat if I could keep you safe.”

The sound of Mateo sobbing made me look up. Tears streamed down their face as Mateo buried it in their hands.

"I'm so ashamed. I wanted you. I loved every moment of it. I'm so sorry..."

I stood up and circled the fire. It broke me apart to watch Mateo blaming themselves. I wrapped my arms around Mateo and drew them close to my chest.

"I wanted you too," I whispered. "You were my only light in the darkness. You gave me hope. The thought of losing you—I couldn't bear it. If you had died, I would have lost a part of myself." The truth tumbled out of me. I worried I'd said too much and burdened an already heavy soul.

"You can't mean that," Mateo said. "I'm a freak. Look at me. I'm hideous. I'm not a man, but I'm not a woman either. I'm disgusting. I'm—" Mateo paused as he realized he was describing me as well as himself. "I didn't mean you..."

I took their face between my hands and stared deep into Mateo's eyes. "Un-Balanced people like the Nemway could never define beauty. They have no idea that the one person they labeled a freak is the most beautiful being I've ever seen in my lifetime."

"You don't mean that." Mateo pulled away with renewed sobs. "You're the beautiful one. I'm nothing compared to you. Look at me."

"I am looking at you," I said. "What I see is the purest Balance of the Mother-Father. What I see is a soul who yearns to be free. What I see is the person I love." I leaned forward to kiss Mateo, eager to show them with my lips if my words could not convince them. It was different from anything we'd ever experienced, slow and gentle, soft and sweet instead of desperate and bruising. I let it go on as long as Mateo needed. We only parted reluctantly for breath. I felt like I was flying, my soul soaring as I expressed my feelings.

"I love you too," Mateo whispered. "I wanted to die, but the hope inside wouldn't leave me as long as you were there."

"I will remain by your side for as long as you want me there."

"Always," Mateo said, eyes shining with love. Mateo kissed down my body. I let them take control, knowing they wanted to make things up to me and understanding that Mateo wouldn't be content until they felt they had done so. My knees almost buckled as Mateo took my cock in their mouth. I let myself



cry out at the sweet warmth of Mateo wrapped around me. Mateo moved their head while my hands caressed their hair, loving every moment of pleasure Mateo gave to me.

Mateo pulled themselves away. I felt a moment of despair as the feeling of ecstasy left me, but I let myself trust Mateo as they stood and kissed me. I could taste my own seed on Mateo's lips and feel my erection rubbing against Mateo's leg as I gasped into the kiss.

Mateo pulled back and seemed to be the shy young male I'd met in Vastet once again.

"I wondered if you might take me," Mateo said. "I want you to have my body."

"I would love to have you, if that's what you desire."

"Please, Hinori." Mateo's voice was a pleading whimper. I smiled and headed to a nearby tree, pulling some leaves from it. I crushed them until their sap coated my hands. I rubbed the liquid along the length of my shaft and coated my fingers with it before returning to Mateo.

Mateo looked at my fingers with a shy, sweet smile, and I was lost. I gently pressed a slicked finger into their ass, watching Mateo's face for any hint of pain, but there was only a low moan of pleasure. I added another finger, stretching them until I was sure Mateo was ready. I pressed my cock against Mateo, slowly pushing inside until I was all the way in. I let Mateo adjust to me before thrusting in and out. I reached around and grasped Mateo's cock, pumping it in time with my motions.

We were one being, bound together in the way the Mother-Father intended. I knew I would lay down my life for Mateo. I knew I wanted to spend my life with Mateo. I knew I wanted to bear Mateo's children and raise them to be kind, gentle people who never judged others. Our souls were bound in that moment, and I knew I never wanted to be apart from Mateo again. Mateo was my Balance.

Our rhythm intensified, and I knew I was close. I gasped as I fell over the edge, spilling my seed into my beloved. Mateo came into my hand with a cry and slumped on the carpet of leaves beneath us. I wrapped my arm around Mateo and drew them close. I kissed Mateo's neck and down their back, marking every spot with loving lips until Mateo laughed.

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“That tickles!” Mateo said, and I laughed along with them, loving the sound of laughter on the lips of the being I held most dear. We soon fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, unfettered by the memories of the time we’d spent in captivity, because we knew we’d always have one another, and that was all we would ever need.

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## Chapter Five

### *Grathador's Demise*

The tree houses nested high up in the limbs of ancient oak trees signaled our homecoming. As we crossed the final ridge before the tree-lined valley that was Grathador, however, I knew something was wrong. The village was too quiet. Something in the way the wind blew through the branches of the trees was all wrong. The Mother-Father was signaling a discordance in the Balance, and it made my body tremble to feel it.

“What’s the matter?” Mateo asked, aware of the change within me as my ears pricked up and I ducked down behind a bush. Mateo squatted beside me. He saw the machine first, concealed beneath a pile of branches.

“The Nemway made it here before us,” I said. “That is why they did not pursue us.” I watched in horror as one of my people lowered themselves down from a tree. They wore the clothing of the Nemway females; the pink jumpsuit all wrong on their body. The signs and sigils of a warrior were gone. Horror spread through my veins as I realized the Nemway must have spread their way of life here like a virus.

“We will track them,” I said. “Follow me.” Mateo fell into step as I emerged from the brush and began to track the person leaving Grathador. We followed them to a watering hole, where they took a bucket and began to fill it with water.

I emerged from behind a tree, sneaking up on the Naha’i until I was within speaking distance. As they heard my approach and turned, I recognized the face of Melan, a youth that the Oracle had said showed promise to take their place one day.

“Hinori!” Melan regarded me with a shocked expression. Melan’s warrior braid was untied, hanging around their neck in blonde ringlets. Some kind of face paint accentuated their lips and eyelashes. They looked older than their fifteen years. “How was your Journey?”

“Do not ask me about my Journey when something is so clearly wrong,” I said, stepping forward. Melan took a step back towards the watering hole. “Tell me what is going on.”

“The Nemway have come and shown us a new way of life. They have brought amazing technology to us.” Melan twirled in their jumpsuit, their

vanity obvious. "The Nemway said they wanted me to be beautiful. Their women gave me this makeup and said I can join their tribe, but only if I cast savagery aside and cover my body."

"Melan, this is against our very nature. What of your Balance? What of the teachings of the Mother-Father?"

"Such superstition is outdated, Hinori. You always were old-fashioned. The Nemway's technology can make our lives easier, if we let it."

"We are warriors! We do not rely on machines that have no soul!" I lost the temper I had fought for so long to keep in check and stepped forward. I was heartbroken for Melan, but most of all I was afraid. Afraid for my people, and what I might become in a world that no longer wanted me or my warrior principles.

"Hinori." Mateo seemed to sense my pain, stepping forward and placing their hand on my arm. "Melan is but a victim of a greater scheme. I am sure the Nemway came here to convert your people to their way of thinking. We must go to your leader and try to organize some kind of resistance."

"Of course. We must meet with the Oracle." I nodded, my rage subsiding. "Melan, tell nobody you have seen us."

"Okay," Melan said. "You won't get to the Oracle so easily. The Nemway are holding him in the Meeting Hall." They grabbed the pail of water and headed back to the village. I watched Melan go with pain in my soul. No wonder the Balance in Grathador had seemed so wrong. Melan was even referring to people with gendered pronouns. To speak of the Oracle in such a way was nothing less than the greatest disrespect. It frightened me to my very core that the Naha'i had abandoned their values so easily.

"You're shaking." Mateo slipped their arms around me and rested their head on my back. I took comfort and reassurance from the fact that the one person I needed the most was at my side. If Mateo could resist a lifetime of the Nemway's rules, my people surely stood a chance against their gendered brainwashing.

"Reaching the Oracle will be dangerous," I said, climbing to higher ground and looking out over the village. Nemway males kept the village under guard, light sticks at the ready should intruders come to derail their plan. I hoped that meant there had been some kind of rebellion against the Nemway's scheme.

"Let me help," Mateo said. "I know my people. I know what they want: control. They want to own people and recreate them in their image, like gods. I

can pretend to have had a change of heart. They've wanted me to change for a long time. They won't be able to resist the notion. While their defenses are down, we can take out as many of them as possible."

"No," I said. "It's too dangerous. I won't allow you to risk your life. You're too precious to me. If I lost the one sane person left in this world, I would surely fall to madness."

Mateo smiled, and I felt the Balance swirl within me, offering me new ways of looking at the situation before us. I smiled as an idea struck me; one that was both quick and nonviolent.

"We surrender," I said. "Grathador does not have a jail, so they will most likely take us to where the others are being held."

"Sounds like a plan." Mateo took my hand and led me down into the village. All eyes turned to the two semi-naked figures in the midst of a sea of pink and blue. It didn't take long for the Nemway males to aim their light sticks at us. I followed Mateo's lead, putting my hands in the air with open palms. A light stick was thrust at my back, and I stepped forward through the archway into the great oak tree.

We were led down into the roots of the tree, a place we usually used for storing food since it was cool beneath ground. I saw the Oracle and Healer Mathara under guard along with some youths I knew from around the village. They looked awkward in the Nemway's gendered clothing, each having been assigned an arbitrary gender color based on whatever the Nemway considered their best guess.

We were ordered to sit on the ground and we complied. Jumpsuits were thrown at us, blue for Mateo and pink for me. I looked at the suit with disgust until a light stick was thrust at me. I was forced to shed my warrior's loincloth and put it on. The stretchy suit clung to my body like a prison. I felt like my skin couldn't breathe. The guards relaxed and went back to their duties, leaving us unattended except for one bored and somewhat elderly guard who sat in the corner, light stick held on by a shoulder strap. They wore a blue jumpsuit that fit poorly in all the wrong places.

"Hinori!" The Oracle seemed both overjoyed and unhappy to sense my presence. "Another one as well. This one is dear to you."

"Oracle, it is I. This is my dear friend, Mateo Nivera. Mateo, this is the Oracle, ancient seer of our tribe."

“Mateo, are you Nemway? You smell different from the others, yet I sense Balance within you.” The Oracle’s voice was high-pitched and flowed from their lips like song. I have always loved the sound of our seer’s voice, and was in awe of the things the Oracle can sense without sight.

“I was born with the Nemway, but I reject their ideals,” Mateo said. “I don’t identify with their strict gender roles. I don’t want to live in their box any longer.”

“I sense much anger and sorrow from you, young one. You must hone that emotion into Balance. The anger will not leave you until you accept your true self.”

“I do accept myself,” Mateo protested.

“Yet you still hold onto a piece of Nemway ideals. You believe you are flawed.”

Mateo looked around, conscious of all eyes upon them. “With all due respect, Oracle, I don’t want to have this conversation right now. There are more pressing matters to consider.”

“Indeed,” the Oracle said. “Our very way of life is at stake. The Nemway will not be satisfied until we fit inside these colored suits in both body and mind.”

“How should we proceed?” I asked.

“The Nemway will not be swayed. They are afraid of us and what we represent. Our very existence threatens their social hierarchy. Nothing short of war will drive them from our lands.”

“We cannot fight a war with so few. Vastet has already been destroyed.” I hung my head, sensing defeat in the air. “I fear we are lost, Oracle.”

“Every soul is lost at some point on their Journey,” the Oracle said. “The truth lies within you. If the Mother-Father wills it, Balance will return to this land.”

I felt the Oracle’s words were useless. For the first time, I felt the Oracle had no more idea of the future than I had. “We have to do something. We cannot sit and hope that Balance will be restored by itself. I am a warrior. I will fight as long as my body draws breath.”

“Sit down and shut up,” the guard said. I sighed and slumped down in the corner. Mateo curled up next to me as I slipped into a restless slumber.

I stirred at a noise in the room. I opened my eyes and took in the sight before me, mentally preparing for a fight.

The Oracle and the other Naha'i were snoring soundly. The guard in the corner was asleep. A Nemway female stood before us, dust on their face and sadness in their eyes. The person bore a certain similarity to Mateo, and I realized there was a familial connection.

"Mother, why are you here?" Mateo asked, uncertainty in their eyes. "I won't change. I can't change. I tried so hard to be what you wanted me to be—"

"It's okay, Mateo. I understand. Gralm told me you were sent to Garvin. I feared you might die there. He is cruel beyond measure. I'm sorry you had to endure that."

"Garvin's poison could not change me. I can only be myself. What I am is something the Nemway fear. I am a being with both genders. Can't you see, Mother? When I'm with Hinori, I feel alive. I feel welcomed. I feel *right*."

Mateo's mother hung her head. "Then perhaps this is your destiny. You must always do what you feel is right." They reached down to their belt and unclasped a light stick, handing it to Mateo.

"Mother... why?" Mateo looked up at their mother with confusion. "This is—"

"A weapon? Indeed. Mateo, the truth is that I never wanted my role either. The thought of staying at home and bearing children for a man scared me. In the end, it turned out that I loved you more than I could have imagined, and that eased my sadness, but I still wished every day that I could have had the freedom to choose my own life."

"You still can. Fight with us," Mateo said.

"I am too old and set in my ways to change now. I can't fight against the system I've known my whole life. I wouldn't know how to live without it."

"So learn." Mateo stood and faced off against their mother. Mateo's mother shook their head, their decision clearly already made.

"You must carve out your own path, Mateo. I can't join you." They turned away as noises approached from upstairs. "I wish you luck, my child." Mateo's mother hurried upstairs, leaving us alone in the dark.

Mateo turned over the light stick in their hand, clearly upset. Mateo turned to me, but I could only sit in silence. Mateo's decision had to be made by

themselves. I could not decide the path Mateo would walk, only hope that they would choose to remain by my side.

There was a scream from upstairs and the guard jolted awake. "Stay here," the male ordered, rushing upstairs.

Mateo stood. "We have to make a move." There was certainty in their gaze. "Even if we only flee for now. We can regroup and return later."

I stood and followed Mateo. The others came up behind us, the Oracle guided by Mathara. We climbed the stairs and walked out into the village.

I was ill-prepared for the sight that greeted us. Two dozen or more naked bodies hung from trees at the ends of ropes. The victims' hair was braided just like mine. The guards didn't even notice us, so shocked as they were by the dead and the dying still jerking at the ends of their ropes. A Nemway female screamed at the sight, and children of both races wept openly.

"Is this some kind of execution?" Mateo asked, their eyes wide with horror.

"No," I said. "This is suicide, a sacrifice to the Mother-Father. These people could no longer stand to live this way and have given their lives back to the deity that made them in hopes that Balance might be restored." The sight brought tears to my eyes. I forgot for a moment that I was standing in the midst of my enemies. All I could see were the shadows my people's bodies cast as they swung from the end of ropes in the half-light of dawn. A ritual blade fell to the ground before me. I knelt and took the offering from the dead with pride and a silent oath to bring back the Balance.

"Hinori, we must go," Mateo insisted, but I shook my head.

"No. The time for flight has past. We must stand and fight."

"I know how you feel, but we cannot match the Nemway's firepower. We must go!" Mateo half-dragged me away as we ran into the brush. My body moved of its own accord, my mind still trapped in the village with the hanging souls. My friends had chosen a path of sacrifice. I had to fight for them. I had to protect the ones who remained.

I paused momentarily. Mateo stopped as the others went on ahead. Mateo pulled me into their arms, holding me tightly, and the tears came easily. I sobbed on Mateo's shoulder as they soothed me.

"We will return, Hinori, I promise. When the time is right, we will come back and fight." Mateo held me until I stopped crying, then took my hand and



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led me to the makeshift camp the others had made in an overgrown part of the forest. I slept fitfully, my mind straying back to my home and the identity I stood to lose should the Nemway win. I slipped my arm around Mateo, pulling them close. My anchor to the world kept me from sacrificing myself to the Mother-Father. As long as Mateo needed me, I would never leave them behind.

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## Chapter Six

### *Appeal To The Nemway*

I woke and made my way down to the stream that ran behind our camp. I stripped off the hideous jumpsuit and dipped into the cool water, enjoying the sensation of being exposed to the air. I washed myself thoroughly, cleaning away all traces of dirt that stained my body. Mateo watched me from a distance, afraid to approach after the previous night's events. I beckoned them over, and Mateo came to me. Mateo's hair was wet, and it left trails of water down my chest as Mateo sucked on my nipples, caressing my breasts with their tongue. Their hand reached below the water and grasped my hardening cock, teasing it as Mateo kissed my mouth.

I pulled Mateo onto the shore, and we ducked into the brush. I pinned Mateo to the ground, running my fingers down their flat chest and over their nipples. Mateo looked up at me with a wistful expression as they caressed my balls and reached toward my ass. Fingers probed at my entrance. I gasped as they breached the puckered opening. I reluctantly pulled away and found some of the leaves, spreading the sap across Mateo's cock before I straddled them in earnest. I loved the feeling of Mateo's cock inside me. I wanted to prove it to them. I moved down, staring into Mateo's eyes as I filled myself up with Mateo's shaft. They moaned beneath me, letting all doubt and fear seep away into the day as we slowly worked ourselves up. I touched my own breasts, caressing my nipples as Mateo played with my cock. We came at the same moment, our bodies and souls synchronized with one another.

We lay in the brush, living for the moment. I had sensed something was wrong the moment I had invited Mateo over and now I saw the anguish in their eyes unclouded by desire.

"I have to go back to Nemway Two," Mateo said, their expression dark. "I have something I must say to all of them."

I realized they would brook no argument; Mateo's mind was already made up. "I'll come with you."

"No, this is my burden. I won't drag you into this. I expect I shall die delivering my statement, but I shall be free at last. I will not let the Nemway choose a gender for me. That's my choice alone. The Oracle was right; I still don't accept myself and I won't be able to unless I tell the Nemway the truth."

“Your burden is mine as well. I will not let you face this alone.” I pulled Mateo close, afraid for them once more. I would not let anything happen to Mateo as long as I was still alive. Mateo would deliver their statement and live no matter what.

“Hinori—”

“I love you. If you go, I go.” I put my foot down, and Mateo dropped the argument. I suspected part of them wanted me to come so that Mateo would not have to deliver their speech alone.

“Okay then.” Mateo smiled. “I was thinking we could steal a vehicle from Grathador.”

“A what?”

“A vehicle. Like the one we stole from Nemway Two.”

With plans made, we spoke to the others, who claimed they would be fine on their own. Stealing the “vehicle” was easier than I had thought it would be; with the guards busy cutting down the bodies of the sacrificed Naha’i, they were distracted, and we took off with the machine before anybody noticed we had returned to Grathador.

We sped through the forest at top speed. Mateo was an expert pilot and took us safely beneath low-hanging branches. Mateo had an intense look in their eyes that spoke of their will for the task ahead. I knew what Mateo was attempting was akin to the sacrifice of the Naha’i, but I had promised to stand by their side and I would see my vow through until the end. Mateo was my love, my mate. My Promised. If I had any say in the matter, and I would never leave them alone, even if it meant my death.

We passed the remnants of Vastet, and that only served to bolster my will. Mateo was trying to save the Naha’i in the only way they knew how, with an appeal to the Nemway’s hearts and minds. I applauded their courage and kindness even as I feared for their safety.

Reaching the outskirts of Nemway Two, Mateo set down the machine, and we proceeded on foot. I had dressed in the bottom half of the jumpsuit so as not to alarm the Nemway on sight, but I had insisted on keeping my knife close by. A warrior dies with weapon in hand, and I had promised myself I would have that much at least.

A crowd started to gather as we reached the village square. Mateo climbed up on a metal stage and pulled me up behind them. Mateo yelled down to the

crowd to bring their families and listen to what Mateo had to say. Soon the crowd filled the square, and Mateo nodded. I placed my hand on their shoulder and squeezed, offering my support to Mateo's brave venture.

"I returned to this place to say one thing," Mateo began. "I returned to say that you are lying to yourselves. This entire way of life is a sham perpetrated by those who want to keep power in their hands."

The crowd murmured. I kept my hand on the hilt of my knife, ready to draw it and strike at a moment's notice should any being threaten my beloved.

"How many of you can really say you completely believe in the roles you are given? How many can truly say that you have never desired to step beyond the boundaries of your gender and experience the other side?"

"It's not natural!" a female yelled. "If God wanted us to fight, we wouldn't be able to bear children!"

"That is a lie," Mateo said. "I have met a person—no, an entire race of people who do just that. The Naha'i are proud warriors and gentle parents, bearing the burden of their young and hunting for food. They know the fierceness of battle and the beauty of compassion. What you are trying to do is destroy that! While we stand here, the Naha'i are becoming extinct because you are afraid of what they represent!"

"A man who is not a man is nothing but a freak!" a heckler cried.

"Then I'm proud of being a freak." Mateo stood with their arms open wide. "I'm not a man. I'm not a woman. I'm something else. I don't even have a name for it, but I've accepted that this is who I am. No chemicals or experiments can change that. You made me believe that I was the problem, but you were wrong. You're the ones who can't open your minds. You're so set in your ways, so color-coded into the binary of blue and pink that you don't see that when the two come together you get purple. This is who I am and I won't be ashamed of it any longer!"

The audience started to turn, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the situation erupted into a riot. It only took a spark of light from a light stick to set the crowd on fire. A female went down in a pool of blood from a poorly aimed shot. The mob started to climb onto the stage. I drew my dagger and stood in front of Mateo, determined to protect them.

"No," Mateo said, turning. "I am your equal. I will fight at your back until the end." Mateo drew their light stick, firing into the mob that threatened to

overwhelm us. Nemway villagers fell back onto the crowd, slowing their advance, but we were outnumbered and outgunned. A light beam skimmed my head, and I felt a slight burn where it had cut me. I bathed myself in the blood of the villagers, even as I cried for the murder I brought down upon them. Tears streamed down my face, cutting through the dirt and blood that soaked me. I cried for the death I brought. I cried for Mateo, who was doomed to die. I cried for the life we had lost together. I cried for the children we would never have. Finally, I cried for myself, so that the warrior within was tempered by the love and sorrow of a mother's dirge for their child. For I knew, in one terrifying realization, that Mateo's seed had Quickened inside me. I carried Mateo's child inside my womb. I connected with the soul inside me and felt the life force of our unborn child as I screamed a warrior's battle cry and sank my knife into another Nemway villager.

It was at that moment that something extraordinary happened. The sky seemed to split asunder. The crowd stopped moving towards us and looked up at the great hole in the clouds where a large black object sank down towards the ground. It was bigger than anything I'd ever seen, a giant metal monster that landed just outside Nemway Two.

The black machine opened up and people emerged. I noticed as they entered the village that they wore black armor. They were not segregated as the Nemway were, however; I spotted a female with hair shorn to the roots, carrying a light stick.

The Nemway retreated, and I was glad to see that most of the wounds I had inflicted were non-fatal. A villager tended to their wounds, and I was grateful. I pulled Mateo to me in order to check that they were not hurt, and was grateful to see Mateo was unharmed.

The villagers looked at the newcomers as though they were gods. Some even fell to their knees, to which the black-clad people laughed.

"You don't need to bow to us," their leader said. A booming voice came forth from the person's small stature, and the bowing villagers stood.

"Who are you?" Mateo asked.

"We are humans, just like you. We came to find you. It has been many generations since the colony ship Nemway lost all communications with Earth. It took over two hundred years to find the location of your crashed ship and send a rescue mission across space." The leader looked over the people with distaste. "We have been watching you since we arrived in orbit three days ago.

We do not like what we have seen. This type of hyper-gendered behavior has been seen with other colonies as well, and it always ends in disaster. We think it occurs due to the colony's need to survive and procreate, but it is not acceptable in today's Earth society."

"What's going to happen to us?" A young female stepped forward with doubt in their eyes.

"This was never your intended world to colonize. We do not inhabit worlds that already have life. Therefore you will pack up this village—along with Nemway One up north—and we will return you to Earth, where we will assist you in merging back into society."

"We won't give up our home!" A male stepped forward, and I recognized them as one of Garvin's enforcers.

"You are outnumbered. Any who resist will spend time in the brig, barring special dispensation to stay. Pack your things and prepare for evacuation." The leader's words were absolute as they walked away from the uproar of the crowd.

Mateo dropped the light stick and slumped to their knees. "They might not allow me to stay. I can't leave you, Hinori. I won't!"

"We must negotiate with these people," I said. "Let me speak with them." I strode down towards the leader and took them aside.

"You must be one of the Naha'i," the human said, looking me over. "Explain your situation."

I explained everything, leaving only a few details out, as I used a cloth I was handed to wipe the blood from my body.

"A ship has been sent to Grathador to evacuate the humans there and deprogram any cultural contamination. I am very sorry for what has happened to your people."

"Mateo Nivera is my partner," I explained. "Can they stay?"

"That is up to him," the human said. They beckoned Mateo over, and they ran to my side. I knew I could tell Mateo about the child, but to chain Mateo to this place because of new life would have been cruel. If Mateo wanted to leave, I would raise our child by myself. I loved Mateo enough to let them go if they needed to, though I would mourn for my lost love the rest of my days.

"Nivera, do you wish to stay on this world?" The leader clapped Mateo on the shoulder, and Mateo met their gaze with firm purple eyes.

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“Yes, absolutely,” Mateo said. “I don’t want to return to Earth. I have a home here. I belong with Hinori.” I felt joy overwhelm me as Mateo leaned in and kissed me.

“You will have to sign some paperwork and then you are free to stay. I would recommend you return to Grathador as soon as possible to avoid the unpleasantness that the denizens of Nemway Two might give you.” The human summoned another of their crew, who prepared the prerequisite paperwork. Mateo took a pen and signed their name with no hesitation whatsoever.

“Understood,” Mateo said. “Let’s go home, Hinori. I have much to learn about the Naha’i if I am to become one of you.” They took my hand, and we strolled off into the underbrush, eager to find out what had become of Grathador.

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## Chapter Seven

### *Promised*

We walked all the way back to Grathador. The humans had confiscated the Nemway's technology as part of their scheme to return my world to the way it had been. I felt uneasy on the journey home. A part of me was frightened that my pregnancy would scare Mateo away, but another part of me knew Mateo deserved to know I was having their child. I thought about it long and hard, wondering if Mateo's reaction would be positive or negative.

"Mateo. Stop. I have to talk to you." I paused and Mateo stopped as well. Mateo slumped down on a fallen log. I sat beside them, thinking carefully about my words.

"You want me to return to Earth, don't you? You think I would be better suited there." Mateo shook their head. "I want nothing to do with Earth. I feel like I belong here. You're the only person who has ever accepted me for who I am. I don't want to lose that."

"I don't want you to leave," I said, breaking into a smile. "Mateo, I think I'm carrying your child."

"What?" Mateo nearly fell off the log. They reached over and placed their hand on my belly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I felt true Balance as I fought. Our child reminded me that I am a mother as well as a warrior. That I am a protector as well as a fighter, a female as well as a male."

"You can feel it? Wow." Mateo's eyes sparkled with wonder, and I embraced Mateo with open arms. "A child? I can't believe it. I thought you said only some of your kind could bear children?"

"Only those who achieve complete Balance can undergo the Quickening, yes," I explained. "It's because of you, Mateo. You mirror me. You show me the perfect image of what I am meant to be. It is only because you found your Balance and accepted it that I found mine."

Mateo was lost in thought for a moment and bit their lip. "How do you deliver this child, exactly?"

"The healer performs surgery," I explained.



“Oh.” Mateo laughed. “Silly me. I thought maybe it came out of the other end.” Mateo grinned. “Oh my goodness. I’m having a child!” Mateo whooped out loud, scaring the birds out of the trees. Mateo burst into song, their voice the most beautiful thing I had ever heard. I embraced Mateo, pulling them close to me and kissing Mateo deeply.

“I love you,” I said. “Will you become my Promised one, Mateo? Will you stay by my side for the rest of our days?”

“Yes,” Mateo said, their voice choked with emotion. Mateo started to cry tears of joy and embraced me so tightly it hurt. Mateo picked me up and spun me around in the forest. I loved the joy painted on their face. Mateo deserved to be happy, and now, here they were, truly content. We had achieved our Balance, together. It was as the Mother-Father had intended when I set out upon my Journey.

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Grathador was a place of celebration when we arrived. All traces of the Nemway were gone including their technology, which had been destroyed and carted off by the humans. Grathador was once again its natural self, restored to the proper Balance. The world was at peace. Young Naha’i danced around a fire and shared tales of their Journeys and legends of the Mother-Father. Things were back to the way they were meant to be.

I saw Melan sitting on a rock, outside the circle of celebration. I left Mateo’s side for a moment, going over to Melan and sitting down beside them. Melan was crying, and I put my arm around them.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “This is the way it has to be. You must find some semblance of Balance, and you will.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Melan said. “My faith is weak. The Oracle says I must undertake my Journey soon, but I’m not sure I will succeed.”

“You are welcome no matter what,” I said. “Not everybody gets to complete their Journey. As long as you commit no crime, you will never be banished.”

“Your Journey changed a whole world. The Oracle said so.”

“It was nothing like I expected. The Mother-Father will guide you. That is the purpose of the Journey. You will see soon enough. Why don’t you join the celebration, Melan?”

“Perhaps later. Right now I don’t feel like I can. The Oracle said my Balance has been disturbed. I’m so confused.”

“You will find your way, little one,” I said. I bid Melan farewell and stood up.

I took Mateo's hand, and we headed to the Oracle's shrine. I couldn't stop smiling as I thought about the future. What had seemed so grim just a day ago was now spread out before me in infinite beauty. Grathador was magnificent, and Mateo could sense it too, their eyes wide like two saucers. The firelight glowed in the reflection of Mateo's eyes, and I realized how incredibly beautiful they were to me.

We made our way through a bead curtain and into the Oracle's shrine. Precious gems lined the walls of the grotto, a natural cave that existed below the village and was considered a sacred place. The Oracle sat in the center, awaiting our arrival.

“You have Quickened.” The Oracle smiled. “I feel the Balance in you both that has sparked new life. Are you to be Promised?”

“Yes,” Mateo said. “I want to spend the rest of my life with Hinori.”

“You will become a Naha'i, young one. Are you content with allowing the Mother-Father into your life? The way of the Naha'i is both warrior and nurturer. Are you willing to accept both aspects of yourself equally? Once this is done, you can never go back. The Naha'i do not dissolve their Promises.”

“I am ready,” Mateo said. Violet eyes sparkled with maturity and joy. Mateo had gone on a Journey along with me, growing into adulthood as I had, and now, Mateo was ready to forge a Promise. So much had changed in such a short time that I was awestruck by it.

“There shall be a mighty celebration,” the Oracle said. “Offspring are rare here, especially in ones so young. Congratulations to you both.”

“Thank you,” I said. I took Mateo's hand and led them outside. We started up the steps at the base of the tree that led to our tree house, my home that was now ours.

“So what's involved with the Promising ceremony?” Mateo asked.

“You just saw it. You accepted and have been Promised to me for life.” I smiled as Mateo processed their shock.

“Wow, you don't beat around the bush, do you?” Mateo laughed. “I'm married. I can't believe it.”

I laughed, the sound foreign to my ears but infectious. I embraced Mateo and led them to our home, where we undressed as darkness fell. I reached for

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Mateo's cock as they stripped out of the jumpsuit for the last time, throwing it in the fire. Mateo turned to me and we kissed, taking our time to explore one another on our Promised night. Mateo rubbed their hand across my womb in reverence for the life that grew there before proceeding to pleasure me in every way they knew how.

We had all the time in the world.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Victoria was born in the United Kingdom but emigrated to the United States at age 21. She's bisexual, happily married, and still shouts in a British accent. She lives with her husband in Pennsylvania where she spends a lot of time playing and talking about video games, especially Japanese role-playing games.*

*Besides the Culture Wars series, she is the author of Wings of Destruction, a short m/m asexual romance novella contracted with Less Than Three Press. She loves to write about all colors of the rainbow and celebrate love wherever it may be found.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# HIS

By Jack L. Pyke

## Photo Description

Two men spoon together on a white mattress with blue swirls. One man (the Dom) wears nothing but black work boots as he shapes the other man. The Dom is caught kissing at the sub's neck whilst the sub holds onto the Dom's hand. The Dom looks fully sated; the sub, with eyes closed, shackles around his ankles, and a soft smile, looks fully claimed. Both look completely at ease. Tattoos circle the sub's navel.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*He offers such a pure, unfettered submission to the man strong enough to tame him; he's the best thing that ever happened to this powerful (read: spoiled) Dom. Still... even the best of Doms aren't infallible, and this one almost lost his beautiful boy. He straightened his head out quickly enough, but by then his boy wasn't quite so forgiving. If his stubborn sub is so damn resistant to reason, drastic measures are called for... right? What choice does a desperate Dom have but to resort to a tiny bit of kidnapping, and a wee touch of restraint and, well... I'll let the author decide what else it'll take to get them to their HEA.*

*Please no cheating or third parties, and a HEA is a must. Beyond that, author, push our boundaries as far as you dare. And yes, you may take that as a challenge.*

*Sincerely,*

*Kim Alan*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** BDSM, medical profession (psychiatric), visual arts, fetish, abduction, captivity, tattoos, reunited

**Content Warnings:** dubious consent, extreme BDSM

**Word Count:** 25,438

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Dedication*

To Kim Alan and her exceedingly tempting photo and Dear Author letter. It was stunning. And thanks as ever to my dark content editor, Vicki Howard, my BDSM consultant, Dilo Keith, and all the hardworking people at the Goodreads M/M Group who put this all together.

**HIS**

**By Jack L. Pyke**

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## Chapter One

Daniel rested against the doorframe as he watched the two men work quietly in the confines of the private room. The hustle and bustle of voices across the psychiatric corridors and floors around him said visiting time was nearly over, although the tiredness in his body had already called quitting time for him ages ago. Yet with the late evening sun filtering through the window onto the younger man's face, Dan couldn't find the mind to disturb the quiet of this particular room.

Sitting there, neither of the two men spoke. Occasionally the scratch of pencil would drift over as the younger of the two men changed to a lighter shade of colour, his shift of pencil seeming as willing to change with the soft shadows that moved across the room. He sat with a sketch pad on his lap, leg drawn up, a glance flickering over every now and again to the older man who sat on the bed. That same scratch of pencil on paper was echoed by the older man, along with the same level of concentration, but where one artist worked a sketchpad, the other took to a child's colouring book. Crayons were exchanged for pencils, an experienced sweep of an artist's hand for nothing more than scribbles and scratches. The younger man didn't seem to mind. He was caught watching the changing lifelines on the older man's face, and his pencil would map each different route that he was given to follow.

Like so many visits before, frustration started to set in the older man's eyes, and the colouring book cried it out as a light blue colour became black, the tip of the crayon leaving dark imprints that dug into the food tray angled across his bed. The drawings and paintings over the psychiatric unit mapped the older man's decline, how the fine detail to landscapes had dwindled down to paint by numbers, then picture book colourings where blacks and greys were the only colour to the world. The signatures beneath the latest offerings were the younger man's, both ability to mirror talent, signature, and hazel-eyed look of the older man more than showing their relationship.

Father and son. Although time had done a good job of reversing those roles over the years and left the son doing nothing more than watch a child play out his frustrations.

"Enough." The old man folded his arms, then let his anger settle on the view outside of the windows. "No." His Scottish accent came in thick with just that



one word. Dan had often had difficulty translating, even when the older man's son had offered scraps of information on how to do just that. But the "no" carried the same sting it always did.

"Mr McKendrik," said Dan, calling over quietly to the younger man. "Time."

The soft hazel colouring to his eyes caught the sunlight as Tom looked over and nodded. He put his sketchpad aside, then started tidying his father's things away. When he was done, he leant over and kissed gently at his head. "No. Not now, Faither," he repeated quietly, the Scots just as heavy on that last word, then he took time packing his own things away. His sketchpad went in a canvas folder, pencils slipped back into a specially made cloth that he could wrap up into a bundle once done. But one particular haggard HB pencil had its own slim, wooden case. It always came with Tom, and was put out at the beginning of every visit, next to his father's crayons. His father never picked it up, and Tom would slip it back into his case once visiting time was over, that same frowned look of the son becoming as frequent as the father's refusal to touch the pencil.

Tom looked after himself almost as much as he took care of his father, and it showed as he moved now. He had two years on Daniel himself, putting Tom older at thirty-four. Tanned and with the contours of his body disguised beneath loose jeans and shirt, Tom's look was also brought from earlier years spent hiking both high and lowlands, giving him that extra little bit of muscle tone. Dan's had been spent training for the stresses and strains that came with working in nurse psychiatry, but he preferred the freedom and the weathered look of Tom's to his any day. There was strength there in the slightly older man, in his body, but a flick up of a look from his sketchpad of a night as his time was disturbed carried most of his heat, and it was a heat that would have Dan on his knees every time he saw it.

With everything packed away, Tom came over and cast one last look back over his shoulder before pulling the door to behind him. "Who's on duty tonight?" he said, the strong Scottish lilt easing into almost zero accent. Dan held back a smile. Tom could chase the BBC crying back across the borders with his impression of Received Pronunciation, kilt in tow, if he'd ever wear it. A use of a softer blend of the two accents, English and Scots, could also come into play, his ability to slip between different styles a mood enhancer of its own. Dan had spent many a night privy to a softer blend of accent that was reserved solely for long nights spent in bed, Tom's breath running along the back of Dan's neck and bringing an addiction all of its own.

"Nick's on," said Dan as they headed down the hall towards the nurses' station. A discreet brush of hand came against his. That was Tom's touch: a claim in the work place, albeit quiet, but definite. "I've just got to finish up here," said Dan, needing to return it but unable to as the corridor started to fill with patients and relatives. Tom's dad wasn't under his care, but seducing a client's named relative and primary carer could still look awkward and unprofessional to those who wanted to cause trouble. And some did, especially when pound signs could be earned. "If it's okay with you, I'll meet you at yours."

"You have a lift sorted?" Tom's glance at the bustle of bodies around them said he understood his touch not being returned, but there were moments when gentle reminders were given to show Dan that he was Tom's. Although his touch was very much controlled now as he held the door open for Mr Carson and his daughter to pass them by.

"I've got the changeover paperwork to handle," said Dan, once they were out of earshot. "I'll be another hour yet. I need a shower before I leave too."

Tom shifted his art folder from one hand to the other, letting Dan go first. "Take care." The concern was clear enough as Tom glanced back down into the psychiatric unit. "I'll make sure something's on—"

"A kilt, Mr McKendrik?"

"—to eat," said Tom, giving him a raised brow, and Dan buried his smile. It was something he shouldn't be bringing up and Tom's look let him know that.

"You know," added Tom, causing Dan to try and let the image go of seeing Tom in nothing but a kilt. "Management really needs to get this shit sorted with staff leaving. Upping their wages would be a damn good place to start."

"Shush, please. I told you that in confidence," said Dan, giving him a warning glance. Then his stomach groaned and Tom eased off.

"Food," said Tom, patting Dan's stomach. "You need food, boy."

Dan nodded. "Hot, with lots of meat."

Tom gave a wicked smile as he glanced back over his shoulder and winked at Dan. "Meat it is."

"Tom?"

"Hm?" he called back as Dan scratched at his head. "Have you managed to book this weekend off for the Edinburgh job?" added Dan.

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He got a nod as Tom reached his van. "I'm working Saturday morning, though, so lunch? Here? Before I go?"

Dan would have preferred to have been going with Tom to the Torture Garden and catch something to eat afterwards at the hotel, but... He glanced around the car park, grateful it was empty, then frowned briefly behind him. *Lunch in a psych unit.* "Heck. The art of romance is dead up here, I see," he said, only to have Tom chuckle at him again.

"My home, Kershaw," called Tom. "And make it quick. You need a reminder, I think."

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## Chapter Two

Tom threw the peelings from the potatoes onto the coal fire and listened to the hiss as damp skins hit hot flame. His home was one of the few that still had coal fuel. There was always the option of central heating, but he'd been brought up with coal fires, and it was the one thing he didn't feel there was any need to miss. Although his elder brother's habit of sitting there licking at the coal was the one memory he did want to try and bury.

In tune with the peelings baking on the fire, the roast made hissing noises from the oven and Tom gave it one last basting before slipping it back in. The tidying around was done and beers were cooling in the fridge. Over the years, Tom had watched Dan take care of his father plus handle all of the roughness that came with working in an understaffed psychiatric unit. He'd made it clear enough from the beginning that Dan wasn't expected to then come to his home and start looking after him too. Tom wasn't the type to need his every footstep followed and picked up after.

A key twisting in the latch had him tilting his ear in its direction. "In the kitchen," he called through to Dan, reaching into the fridge and pulling out two beers.

"Smells really good." Dan padded in from the hall. His long coat was already off, and he'd paused to hop around and take off his trainers. "We could have had this at mine." Dan winced. "Well, your other place."

After putting the beers on the unit by the stove, Tom went over and waited for him to finish shaking off the winter chill. For the past ten years, he'd rented out his father's bungalow to Dan, although they'd only been dating for nearly five years now, give or take a few weeks. The trip up from where Dan had lived in Birmingham had seemed too long, so the offer of a halfway house had been put forward. Tom had never claimed a penny of rent off Dan in all those ten years, not with Dan also caring for Tom's father at home, too, but nobody needed to know about the no-rent policy. He'd convinced himself at first that it was just to help out with Dan's living costs, and he'd made damn sure that the arrangement was kept as platonic as possible, but it had killed him not to touch Dan for so long due to work complications. That wasn't an issue now, not in private.

"Let me see," Tom said quietly.

Dan frowned for a moment, then tugged his jumper over his head and let it drop onto the radiator. He did the same with his T-shirt, and Tom caught the bruise on his left shoulder. It sat close to a tattoo of a snake that curled around the upper arm. Tom brushed the back of his hand against the bruise, wincing.

“From the seclusion room?” he asked gently. It was where patients could go if life got too stressful. But Dan also had to put them there if they didn’t have the sense to see it was a safe place to rest their heads.

“Just a standard takedown with a patient in his bedroom,” said Dan, quietly. “He thought someone had stolen his change.”

“Shaun?”

Dan nodded, not breaking patient confidentiality. Tom had been there often enough to know who caused the most threat. A takedown meant physical restraint, with Dan and other staff taking Shaun to the floor and calming any internal chaos Shaun would have been going through. Dan was good at his job, and Shaun didn’t mean to cause any physical damage, but it meant that Dan took a lot of hurt in the crossfire.

“Anything else I need to know about?” he asked gently. He followed the swirls of a tribal tattoo that curved over one of Dan’s hips. The ink itself ran a tantalising path around to his ass cheek, and Tom traced a lazy path over the material to Dan’s jeans instead, knowing each twist and turn of the ink as it hid almost playfully beneath the covering.

The sound of a clasp and zip being undone drifted over, then jeans and boxers came off. Both were then toed aside, leaving his full nakedness on display and Tom quiet as he witnessed it. The tribal tattoo marked Dan’s left ass cheek, claiming the flesh, and Tom brushed a hand over it, loving the toned feel under his touch. Dan’s soft sigh came over as Tom traced the small of his back, catching the smooth dip of dimple as he looked for any more physical signs of stress. No bruising darkened his hips or sides, and as Dan glanced back, Tom brushed a kiss at his shoulder. “You look tired,” he said to Dan, eventually.

Dan seemed to fight back a yawn as his hand found Tom’s. “More than, Sir,” he said just as quietly, then Tom felt the softest kiss feather-play his lips. “I’m back on at six in the morning,” Dan breathed against him.

Tom traced a touch down to Dan’s cock and brushed the back of his hand along the length. “In this state?” His dick was semi-interested, swelling to a

nice *good to be home, Sir, size*. A Prince Albert piercing ran through the underside of the penis shaft, the thick captive bead just asking for chaining to a post somewhere. A play along it won a soft sigh. Then as Tom withdrew his touch, Dan eased down to his knees.

“Yours, Sir.”

Tom ran his hands through Dan’s hair. “Thank you,” he said, then waited for Dan to find his feet again.

“How was your day?” mumbled Dan, now level with Tom and moving in close, both hands now finding Tom’s. Tom kissed at his cheek, loving all of Dan’s nakedness and how he pressed into his fully clothed form, stirring more heat.

“Good, boy.” It was a distracted reply, barely spoken as he backed Dan up to the long kitchen table. A hand on Dan’s shoulder made sure he eased down, and eyes and body relaxed as he fully stretched under Tom’s watchful gaze.

Tom let the anticipation play, every whip and chain scenario questioned in a gentle gaze, offer of a seductive smile, and a drift of hand that moved down to a hard cock. Table-play meant serious one-on-one time; Dan knew that.

Rope came from the cupboards, thin blue Shibari rope chosen specifically to show Dan’s lighter skin tone. Tom hadn’t been to any specific classes to learn the art of rope bondage; the rope was simply another material to paint onto the canvas, this one being the only canvas that would ever matter. Rope to this body came as naturally as paint to palette. Tonight he needed it simple. Three turns around each thigh, then with Dan more than willing to ease the flat of his feet onto the table, three layers around each ankle. Knotting each thigh to heel, it made sure Dan kept those knees bent and his cock and balls on full display. He was already enjoying his rope time, shifting against it and letting the rope breathe out just how much he wanted to feel the burn of play. But a shake of head discouraged him from reaching down and stroking at his length. Instead more lengths of rope were looped around the table legs, then slipped around each ankle to ensure Dan would keep himself open, no matter what was done tonight.

Hands came next. Another length of rope went through a hook on the floor that Tom had screwed down by the table when he’d come home. As Dan offered his hands above his head, Tom leaned in for a kiss, albeit an upside down one, and one that tasted of all the winter wonderland outside. Giving a grin, Tom bit slightly at Dan’s lower lip, loving the taste.

“Fuck, Sir,” groaned Dan as Tom lifted his head slightly, allowing Dan to kiss and nip at his throat.

“You asking, or demanding?”

“Asking...” Another bite came at Tom’s throat. “Always. Please.”

Giving a final kiss at his lips, Tom then pulled back and bound Dan’s hands above his head.

Dan always had a habit of playing his body down, blushing at how Tom sometimes liked to watch him writhe naked on the bed. As always, Dan seemed able to play even light and shadow to his advantage, how it ran over his body, shading each muscle and bringing heat to life depending on the angle he writhed within. Tom followed shadow and muscle now, letting a lighter touch trace from Dan’s jaw, over his pecs, all to come to rest on the flat of his stomach just above where Dan’s cock wept in anticipation.

A shift of stomach muscle came under his touch as Dan tried to tilt his hips up and push his cock against Tom’s hand. And when he failed, growls of frustration had Tom finding a small smile.

“It keeps you still for a reason. Make sure you do just that,” murmured Tom, watching Dan’s body cry out for more, feeling it under his touch.

Inches from where his hand lay, the Prince Albert piercing seemed to shift on the head of Dan’s cock, asking in its own way to join in the kink. Tom flicked hard at it, watching Dan jolt as the thickness of the ring was forced to move inside him.

“Fuck,” groaned Dan.

“Looking good there, boy,” said Tom, flicking it again so Dan’s ass shifted and ground into the table. “Although,” said Tom, pulling back, “not exactly the reaction I need just yet. Cool it down.”

“Huh?” Dan’s head was up off the table, trying to trace Tom’s movements as he went over to the cupboard and pulled out a black case. Taking a chair with him, Tom set the case on the seat as he took position between Dan’s legs, eyeing up the view. As he eased some thin latex gloves on, Dan let out a soft—

“Christ. Please.”

“Please?” Tom picked up some antiseptic wipes, and another jolt ran through Dan as Tom wiped his cock clean. Dan knew the signs of what was to come. “Safe word, boy. What is it?”

“Monday, Sir.”

It still made Tom smile. Mondays were enough of a passion killer for everyone, it was fitting Dan would opt for that. “Are you pussy enough to call it before I’ve even started, Brummie?” Dan was Birmingham bred, so that made him a Brummie in Tom’s eyes.

“The machine? You’ve got it, haven’t you, Sir? It’s not medical play tonight?”

“No, it’s not medical play. And you’ll know when I’m ready to use the equipment,” he said quietly, picking up a blueprint with a drawing he’d stencilled on carbon paper. Tonight wasn’t about doctor and patient, it was about lover on lover. Gently easing the print into place on Dan’s cock, he rubbed gently over it, loving how Dan’s cock danced under the pressure. Skin was already damp, and the drawing itself transferred over with next to no effort.

“Practice as well for the Edinburgh job too, Sir?”

“Not quite,” he murmured, his concentration set.

“Please...” breathed Dan.

“Seems your favourite word tonight, boy.” Tom smiled, and after resting the blueprint to one side, he studied his work.

The single link to a chain matched the four others he’d ringed around Dan’s cock over the years. Each ring had a specific significance, with tonight’s being no different. All links were small, discreet, not quite circling Dan’s cock in true collared fashion. That would come next year. A touch of petroleum came next, just a slight sheathe to cover the link, although from the soft groans and moans off Dan, anyone would have thought he was being fully lubed and was about to be jacked off to high heaven.

“Calm it,” said Tom, quietly, as he reached back into his case.

The shader tattoo machine was already set up. Usually a liner could be used, but for an ink job this small, and on the cock in particular, the shader offered less trauma to the skin. The final touches to the ink machine were set up, and he leaned down, only to have Dan tense and hiss before the needles touched skin.

Tom kissed at the base of Dan’s cock. “How many times have I inked you here, boy?”

“Four, Sir,” mumbled Dan.

“How many times have I inked your body in general?”



“Eight,” Dan mumbled quietly. “Hip, ass, around the navel, arm...”

“Did you trust me with each of those?”

“Fuck, yes.” Hips arched up into his kiss, and he feathered a light touch on Dan’s inner thigh. Then as Tom flicked the machine on, allowing the coils to work the needles, vibrating slightly in his hand, he pressed the flat of it against Dan’s cock, letting him feel the vibration.

“Christ, yes,” drifted down from Dan, and he gripped the ropes, pulling hard, angling his hips up so his cock shifted against the tattoo machine, the needles missing his scrotum by inches.

The needles looked worse than they actually were, coming out a good three and a half millimetres. But resistance from Dan’s cock and a very careful hand would see it kept safely within the dermis. Tom knew his craft, especially when it came to marking Dan—always when it came to marking Dan.

Dan seemed to naturally calm and control his body, knowing Tom needed him to be still now. Then as the first touch of the needles came, Dan bit into his shoulder, groaning.

“All that fancy art training, Sir,” breathed Dan, adding a chuckle, “and, Christ—if only the father could see the son work his art now.”

Tom grinned as he wiped away excess ink, then held Dan’s cock. The dancing it was doing wasn’t helping.

“Please tell me I’m not the only one who gets hard having you tattoo their dick,” groaned Dan. “It’s embarrassing, Sir.”

“No. It’s not embarrassing: it’s you, and I love how you react,” said Tom, now well into shading the link, “and despite popular belief, I don’t ink that many cocks. A few dickheads, but not that many cocks.”

“Only mine?”

Tom shifted his touch, gently tugging at Dan’s balls. He didn’t have to do that, but he liked the look of Dan’s heat too much to let his cock soften. His dick didn’t need to be hard for the ink job, but—“Only you,” he mumbled, and it was almost lost to the soft vibration of the tattoo machine.

Dan was back to bruising his arm, eyes screwed shut as he was left panting on the table. Tom kept flicking a look up to him, keeping a close watch for any stresses that said it was beyond even his pain-pleasure levels. Dan looked more than fuckable, but Tom controlled his own need. The change from jeans to

loose jogging bottoms was done to deliberately take into account just how much he needed to keep a cool head and unconfined cock. One slip into the sub-dermis of the skin and major damage would be done. So Tom controlled his breathing and kept a very steady hand and heartbeat with how the needles played his sub's cock.

"Done," he said eventually, easing back and looking at how the links almost joined together. He kissed just below the artwork and Dan groaned and writhed into the rope.

"Happy anniversary for next month," Tom murmured quietly, knowing this had to be done early to really enjoy their time together in a few weeks, "and all the soppy shit that comes with it."

"Fuck." Dan was still hard as he writhed into the rope, now given full permission to move. "Love the soppy shit that comes with this, Sir," he breathed. Eyes were still screwed shut and a heavy blush touched his cheeks.

Tom cleaned away his things, making sure he took care of Dan's cock first, grinning at how he was lost to the havoc riding his shaft in the wake of the needles. The petroleum jelly would make sure he healed quicker, as would a good ink job in the first place. Then Tom eventually settled back between Dan's legs and took in the full view.

He had a thing for a fine ass, and Dan's offered such a pale and toned ride—a gorgeous small tight hole, any offer of finer hair shaved away. Tom swiped his thumb against the sensitive hole, watched it shiver, then eased in with a finger, not stopping until he was knuckle deep. He made it hard, fast—quick, his fingering hitting prostate and ensuring Dan fought and cried on the table.

The redness around Dan's cock tattoo would be driving him wild to reach down and touch, to soothe, but the need to come would also have him stroking roughly along the shaft, overruling all sense for a recovery without trauma to the skin—hence the rope, and how they were doubled at every turn to stop him playing. Tom would let him come, eventually, but it wouldn't be through any touch to his cock.

One finger became three, and Dan shouted Tom's name, forcing Tom to cup his own cock.

"Sir... fuck. Please. Let me come."

He pulled his touch free, forcing out a grunt off Dan, then Tom gripped at Dan's hips and dragged his ass a little more over the edge of the table. No

condom needed, Tom eased his jogging pants over his hips and teased his tip against Dan's hole, loving how the thickness tapped to gain access to such a tight muscle. Not waiting on ceremony, he pushed in, feeding his cock through all of that first resistance that Dan's ass offered.

Dan was tight, slipping over Tom's cock like the tightest silk—the ultimate return bondage, and Tom took him hard down to the root, now up on his tiptoes as he ground in deep.

“Christ, fuck me hard, please,” cried Dan.

Tom gripped onto Dan's balls, using them to pull him in as he took him rough. With each hard slap of hips into ass, the table tried to scramble away in protest under the onslaught.

Dan shouted a warning, stomach muscles crumpling in as the first traces of his cum added its own paleness to his stomach. Seeing it only made Tom fuck him harder as he cried his name, making sure the remainder of the cum was fucked out of them both with no touch to Dan's cock.

“Fuck... fuck,” cried Dan, back arching.

Breathing hard and fast, Tom came down on Dan, his cock still deep in his ass and crying out its own release deep into him.

“Sir?”

He looked to see Dan watching him. His breathing was just as heavy, just as hard, and Tom kissed, then licked at the pull in of Dan's pale stomach muscles. Whatever his sub was going to say was given up as he dropped his head back on the table, groaning out contentment. Tracing a gentle touch up Dan's thigh, Tom then found a towel that came from his case next to him and started to towel them both dry. He kept his cock in Dan for as long as possible, loving the feel of being in him, before he then regretfully eased out and started untying him.

He took his time, pausing while tasting Dan's lips, or gently biting at his hip, an inside thigh—it didn't matter where, so long as Dan knew that where he lost the safety of the rope, Tom was still there.

“Kay,” said Dan after he was pulled up to sit on the table. “That was... kinky.” He scratched at his hair, roughing it up some more, sounding as though his head was in bed already, he just needed his body to follow.

“Exhausted?” whispered Tom, moving in to kiss at his neck. Dan rested against his shoulder and nodded.

“So bad, Sir.”

“Hm? All taken here too, huh?” He brushed the back of his hand over Dan’s cock, again catching the piercing and making Dan jolt a touch. As he did, a bite came at Tom’s shoulder, causing shivers.

“Mm,” breathed Dan. “Fully spent, sore, and more than taken.”

“Then let’s say, if I asked you to go and choose a riding crop, you would feel the sting from it a little more across your inner thighs now?”

A hand found Tom’s neck as Dan eased away a touch.

“The kilt comment?” said Dan.

Tom pursed his lips, nodded, then saw Dan try to bury a chuckle.

“What have I asked you not to do?” said Tom.

“Ask about the kilt. Not in public, not in private.”

“And what did you do?”

That hand on his neck slipped down to Tom’s side, all to join the other and start gently digging and pulling at Tom’s ass. He was asking for mercy.

“I tried to go kink in kilt.”

“Aye,” said Tom. “You wanted to go kink with the kilt.”

“Go fetch the riding crop, should I?” Then there was the softest chuckle.

“Problem?”

Dan stopped palming at Tom’s ass. “Maybe now’s probably not the best of times to mention what I’ve got you, Sir.”

Tom smiled and kissed at his shoulder. “The art of romance... You’ve got another kilt, haven’t you?”

Dan shook his head a little too quickly, then—“Wouldn’t do that. I mean, it’s our anniversary, not just a special time to spoil the sub, but—”

“But?”

“But buying one is just showing how much your ass is in my thoughts all day, is all, Sir. Surely you can’t punish me for having you constantly in my thoughts?”

Giving a sigh, Tom eased back a touch.

“The crop?” said Dan.

“The biggest one you can find. Maybe accompanied by a gag. Anything just to—”

The heat of a kiss stopped him, and Tom returned it, pulling Dan in, tongue fighting tongue as he gripped at his hair.

“Thank you,” breathed Dan against his lips. “For always showing how romance isn’t dead, true rough Scot’s style.”

Tom let his kiss turn gentle. “Always, boy,” he said quietly. Whether Dan was angry, sad, or just downright playing up this sexy part, mercy could be so easily won from the best. The soft smile there in Dan’s eyes called every Dom out within fifty paces on that flaw too. And with Tom...

He caught the soft growl coming from Dan’s stomach. “We eat first.” He looked him up and down, also catching the “gotcha” fire in Dan’s eyes. “Then I might just find the biggest butt plug to go with that crop,” he added coolly.

Dan tried to make his smile fade, but his whisper of *Promise, Sir?* was still caught there in it.

“You think you’ll enjoy it once I turn my hand to punishment?”

Dan eased away from the cheek quickly enough and pushed off the table. A kiss found Tom’s mouth again despite the punishment that was coming up.

“Gonna miss you this weekend, Sir.”

Tom slipped an arm around Dan’s waist. “I’m back Sunday evening.” He gave a heavy sigh. “Sunday morning, if I can.”

Dan nodded, then pushed away a touch. “I have ways to welcome the weary back.” The look lowering his eyes as he traced down Tom’s body was already listing them.

“Aye?” Tom raised a brow. “Then come tell me about them, lad, and I might just make it a small butt plug.”

A shine came to Dan’s eyes. “Well...”

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## Chapter Three

Having allowed a good few days for the redness on Dan's tattoo to ease, come Saturday morning, Tom woke on the settee with his arms wrapped around Dan. Content that he was healing as he should, Tom pulled Dan's nakedness snugly into him, loving the ass-to-groin contact. Last night, a quilt had been dragged down from upstairs just before they'd settled down with a movie. Dan was exhausted from the heavy work week, but that wasn't obvious this morning. From the flicker of flame in the hearth, Dan had already been up at some point to get the fire going. In the distance, the sound of a coffee machine bubbled away, and the fresh smell of coffee beans added to the familiar scent of the fire. After hanging up his tattoo machine for paint and airbrushes, it was always the same when he worked body art at different venues away from the tattoo studio. Despite Tom not needing it, Dan made sure that the day was started off with fresh coffee and a fried breakfast as the warmth of the fire was taken in.

The alarm hadn't gone off yet, but he had that feeling that it was due. He still had half a morning's work to get through at the tattoo studio before heading to Edinburgh. Dan wasn't due in at the psychiatric unit until dinnertime, so for now it was just good to feel Dan against him for as long as possible before work took them both away.

Dan was awake too. He'd been awake for a while now, but both seemed unwilling to disturb the quiet of the morning and the distance it would bring.

Giving a soft sigh, Dan eventually eased around, making sure Tom found his back with how his body came down and blanketed his. A sleep-filled kiss touched Tom's lips a moment later.

"Morning, Sir," mumbled Dan, his hands sneaking under Tom. It was a distracted greeting as bodies started a quiet bump and grind greeting all of their own.

"Morning, bonnie bairn," he murmured back, hands sliding down to Dan's butt and encouraging a little more contact as he pushed and pulled at his toned ass.

Dan sucked in a breath, head bowing as he dipped his hips hard into Tom's. "Say that again, Sir," he said quietly. "Please."

He did, and kisses traced down his neck, to a nipple. "I'd like to touch you, Sir."

Tom smiled. "You're already doing that, boy."

Dan kissed lower, and Tom stretched his body as a kiss then came at his shaft. The softness of a brown gaze found his. "One for the road," he said quietly, then a rough bite came at Tom's inner thigh, Dan taking time to stake his own claim as his hands slipped under Tom's ass, almost lifting him up into the hunger.

Tom found the softness of Dan's hair, just stroking through it. "You're still on restricted touch because of the ink job on your cock a few days ago—" *Christ*. A hand massaged his balls as the fine wet silk to Dan's mouth slipped over his tip. "You're too sore," he managed to mumble, back arching into the slow burn slicking his cock.

His dick thudded against his abs as Dan looked up. The same kiss went to Tom's stomach where pre-cum mapped his own need, then another kiss came at the root of his cock. "All you this morning, Sir." Fingers traced down to Tom's ass as a nip went to his sac.

"Christ." Tom eased an arm over his face, almost hiding from the heat that rushed up from his groin. Dan worked long strokes down his shaft, occasionally swiping his thumb over the slit to catch the pre-cum. But it was how he brushed fingers against his hole, just suggesting at the intrusion, that had Tom groaning. He didn't bottom often, usually hating how long it took his body to get used to having a cock in him. Dan knew that, and kept his touches just to enquiring nudges against him, ones that had Tom gripping at the arm of the settee and fighting the need to flip Dan over and fuck him senseless.

"Still hurts to touch my cock, Sir," said Dan, and Tom heard the smile that played across his sub's lips. "I need it gentle... slow. But not until tomorrow."

"Tease me, boy?" Tom shifted to his side, making sure Dan went with him and stayed there level to his cock. He took control, a grip to Dan's hair making sure he stayed still for every hard pace he gave into his sweet mouth. The position gave a gorgeous view of his cock slipping between lips, and Tom continuously wiped at Dan's cheek, feeling him take what he had to offer. It wasn't a time to play around, and Dan met every hard taste with a grip to Tom's balls. Tom came hard and lost track of how Dan swallowed everything he had to give.

After a few moments, Tom came down enough to realise that Dan had eased up level to him and was coming in for a kiss.

He claimed one before Dan touched down. "Morning, bonnie bairn," said Tom softly, tasting himself. "I can't touch you until tomorrow," said Tom, giving a gentle nibble at Dan's ear. "But I will." He made the promise clear enough. "Then I'll fuck you until you can't cry out my name."

Dan pulled his body in closer, seeming to want to disappear inside and really mess about. "Say that again, Sir," he murmured. "Please."

The alarm clock beat Tom to it, and they both chuckled, Dan now dropping his head to Tom's shoulder.

"I'll lay some items out by the bed for you to use tonight," said Tom, kissing at Dan's shoulder. "Love how you touch yourself when I'm not here, Dan."

Dan seemed to shiver. "Let me come, please?" And he seemed to draw closer, wrapping his arms around Tom and saying how he needed to come with how his hard shaft rode Tom's thigh.

"Sore cock, Dan. Leave it alone, or I'll give you another sore ass to match it. C'mon." He smacked at Dan's ass. "I need to get to work. I'll be back in time to pick you up for the psych unit and go grab some lunch. I need to let my faither know I won't be here."

"I'll get your case packed."

Tom frowned at him. "It's already done. But can you sort out my personal art case for this afternoon?"

Dan eased into a smile. "You're going to stay around long enough to do some drawings with him?"

Tom nodded.

"You wouldn't be stalling for time, now would you, Sir? I mean, you do want to go to Edinburgh tonight?"

Tom stole another kiss. "Less of the cheek," he murmured, although there was a truth to Dan's words. He really didn't want to miss home tonight. Dan made leaving hard.



## Chapter Four

Any thoughts of lust were knocked and bumped out of Dan by the time they reached the psychiatric unit at dinnertime. Tom's van wasn't the most comfortable of rides, leaving Dan rubbing at his ass as he climbed out. Tom had picked the van up on the cheap, needing the space in the back for his art supplies, both for his personal use and those needed at the tattoo studio.

Tom had pulled around the back of the psychiatric unit, avoiding the staff car park and whoever might be watching. He knew Tom hated hiding what they had as much as he did, but give the staff half an inch, and they'd make damn sure his job would go out from underneath him for sleeping with a client's son. Being gay didn't come into it, but seemingly buttering up the son to get at the father's inheritance would see someone stick the knife in somewhere. So they kept to parking around the back, away from the main staff and relatives' car park.

"I'll go and see to the staff changeover," said Dan, shutting the van door, then reaching over the bonnet and passing Tom a bag with some sandwiches. Neither of them were fancy eaters, just a simple ham salad sandwich, some Coke, and a few bags of crisps, and they were happy.

Tom took it off him, then ducked back in the van and pulled out his art case; he'd leave from here in an hour.

"You manage to get free," said Tom, now looking over the van, "try and find me."

Dan nodded. "The ham and tomato are mine. Don't let your father get hold of them." Checking he had his beeper on and that it was working, he headed on in after winking at Tom.

Baz, his shift manager, was in the staff room, already running through the change of shift, and Dan took the medication sheet off him and started to thumb through it.

"We've got three clients on fifteen minute checks," said Baz, finishing up writing on the board. "No rest for the wicked, eh?"

"Heard that," said Dan, and he smiled over before making his way to Chris McKendrik's room. Dan had clocked on early, so he had a few minutes to spare before he started his rounds upstairs.

The art equipment had already been set up but Chris didn't seem interested, looking a little on edge. His back was pressed against the wall, watching Tom as he picked up the sketchpad off the floor.

Giving a frown, Dan went in. It looked like Chris had knocked the pad away. "How's it going, Mr McKendrik?" He flicked a look at Tom.

"Said you'd keep him out," said Chris, arms folded, gaze not moving from Tom. "He needs to get out. Not want him here."

"It's Tom," said Dan, keeping his voice calm and friendly but aware of just how quiet Tom had fallen. "You remember Tom, don't you, Chris?"

"Not my Tom." Chris pointed to the door, and Dan looked back with a frown. "That's Tom. He's a good boy." Nobody stood by the door.

Tom wouldn't look at either of them. He'd been lost so many times now in his father's eyes, his gaze said he didn't know the old man sitting there anymore than the father knew the son at that moment.

"How about I get you a drink, Chris?" said Dan, gently. "I can throw in some toast too, if you're hungry?"

"Not hungry. Tired. Need sleep." Chris pointed at Tom. "He has to go when I need to sleep. You said so."

"It's okay, Faither," said Tom, finally glancing back. "I didn't mean to stay so long, I—" His mobile phone cut him off, and he tugged it out of his jeans, holding up his hand in apology to Dan. Dan was already cringing. There was a firm "No mobile phone" policy for a reason. And in reply, a shout went up from another room, followed by Baz's call of "I got it."

Tom winced another apology, then he came over, mouthing, "Five minutes. Just keep an eye on him for five minutes with my art material, yeah? This one's about the venue tonight."

Tom knew the no-phone rule better than anyone, and with it being left on, it showed Tom's concentration was slightly off track with going away for the weekend.

Chris seemed to sense it, watching Tom's every move and following his footsteps out of the room, even craning his neck to make sure he was gone, then—"Toast?" he said to Dan, a smile lightening up his big face. "Cut into squares?" He counted on his fingers. "One, two, three, four. Four squares." He tried to count backwards and frustration set in his eyes when he found himself stuck on three.

“Four squares,” said Dan, giving a smile. “Coffee or juice to wash it down?”

“Juice. Black with currants.”

“Okay, bud, blackcurrant it is. I’ll—” His beeper went off at his side and, after giving a glance down and catching the code, he shifted from Chris’s room and made it up to the second floor. In Shaun’s room, Baz was on his knees behind Shaun, trying to get him to choke something out. Two other staff members had already made it in there, and Dan turned two more away now there were enough on scene.

“He’s chewed the protecting covering off the pipe in the bathroom,” said Baz, quickly, flicking a look over.

“It’s nontoxic,” said Dan as the call came up that the ambulance was on its way. He went on through to the bathroom and picked the pieces up. Everything here had protective covering to stop this, but you couldn’t put protective covering on protective covering. By the time he made it back into the main room, Shaun had calmed down a little, his face not looking so red.

Dan went over and crouched by him. “It’s okay, mate.” Sweat covered the younger man’s face. “We’re just going to get you looked at over at the hospital and—”

“Wankers,” cried Shaun, before choking again. “Some wanker’s taken my coins. I keep them safe in there.”

Dan wiped the blond hair from Shaun’s face, the heat obvious under his touch. “I know, I know.”

Paramedics pushed their way through into the room, and Dan moved out of their way.

“I’ll go with him,” said Baz. “Can the rest of you fill in your end of the paperwork?” he said quickly, stepping out of the way when a wheelchair came in. Dan nodded. “He’ll need an X-ray,” said Baz, his gaze going between him and the paramedics. “Get in touch with the named relative too, and let them know he’s being taken to hospital.”

“Will do,” said Dan, handing Baz the plastic bag with the bits.

He remembered Chris’s toast and juice at the last moment and cut back to the staff room. The paperwork came first, then a call to Shaun’s named relative. A fax also went to the hospital in question, just noting all of Shaun’s medication.

With life settling a little more, Dan put some fresh bread in the toaster and finished making the juice. A coffee for Tom came next, just to make sure he had something warm before he left. They were lifted onto a tray; then he headed back for Chris's room.

Again talking drifted over, and Dan eased in, grateful to see Tom back in the room and talking to his dad. Tom always came back no matter how much it hurt, there was always that patience there, that understanding that Tom could walk in on a different day, and Chris would know exactly who he was.

Yet when Dan saw them, Chris was shuffled further up into the corner, knees pulled up tight as he wrapped his hands around them, hugging them closer.

"Chris?" he said, going over. "Are you okay?"

"Out, he needs out now," said Chris, not taking his gaze off Tom. Tom was crouched by the bed. With the covers pulled up, he was looking for something under there.

"Didn't lost it," Chris said quickly, head banging gently against the wall. "Told him. Gave it Good Tom. Good Tom took it."

"Took what?"

"Faither—" Tom gave a hard sigh, tossed the covers back into place, then got to his feet. "Where...?" He shrugged, looked at his dad, then wiped a hand over his face. "Where have you put it?"

"Tom?" Dan rested the tray on the bedside unit. "What's gone on?"

Tom flicked a look over but didn't really see him, more through him as he moved Dan aside and took hold of his art case. Half of it was already on the bed, the rest of the spare paper and crayons he'd brought for his father messing up the covers and causing Chris to scurry further into the wall.

"Tom?" Dan pulled at his jacket only to find Tom pull away.

"He lost it," mumbled Tom.

"Lost what?"

"*The pencil*," snapped Tom, going back to the bed and ramming his things in. "Fuck's sake." The zipper closed on the art case. "Five minutes. I needed him watched for five minutes, Dan."

Dan glanced at the bed and noticed he hadn't seen the pencil that was always tucked away in the slim wooden box. "Chris," he said quickly, going

over and shifting the covers about. Tom's dad had used it through the years for special occasions: Tom's birth, Christmas holidays, days at the beach. He'd given it to Tom when he'd felt his mixed dementia slipping in, and Tom had taken over, only using it on special occasions too, the last being the sketch of the link that was tattooed to his cock. "What did you do with the pencil, Chris? You didn't chew on it, did you?"

Chris shook his head. "Tom," he said, coming out from under the covers he hid beneath. "Gave it Tom. Told Tom's mum that little Tom—"

*"There is no fucking little Tom, Dad."* Tom gave a groan, tugging the art case off the bed. "I'm Tom. I've always been Tom. I—"

Chris was suddenly off the bed, not looking as though he meant to go for Tom; Tom just stood in his way. Dan saw the signs as soon as the older man shifted, and he managed to catch Chris by the arm. As Tom came in to help, Chris cried out, swinging a fist at Dan.

"Fuh—" The thump of fist caught another target, and Tom was forced back a step now it split his lip. "Shit."

"Has to get out," shouted Chris as Dan tried to keep him still. "Get him out."

"Tom." As he put a hold around Chris that soaked up his struggles, Dan's heart went out to Tom seeing his split lip. "Wait outside. Okay? I need—"

*"Out, out—out,"* cried Chris over and over again.

"Tom, please."

Tom gave Dan and his dad the strangest look, then wiping at his lip, he turned away and left.

"Easy, easy," soothed Dan in Chris's ear. "He's gone. You're on your own, and in your own room. See?"

Breathing heavy and almost clinging onto him, Chris nodded, although his gaze never shifted from the door.

"Tom," said Chris, now edging back towards the bed. "Gave it little Tom. Wouldn't listen. Wouldn't just listen."

"Okay, okay," said Dan, helping him back onto the bed. After waiting for signs that Chris's breathing was returning to normal, he took hold of the tray and gave Chris the toast and juice. "Hungry, right?"

Chris nodded, just the once.

"Okay," said Dan and he laid them out. "We don't usually bring food into the bedrooms but—"

Chris gave a huge smile. "Dan said it's okay for me."

He nodded and returned the smile, seeing him relax a little more. "I'll check back in a minute. I just need to see if Tom's okay. Then find his pencil. What we don't do is hurt people who visit, though, do we?"

"Accident." Chris nodded, but he was already lost to the first bite of his toast as he sat there munching slowly at it. "Sorry."

"You need to say that to Tom, okay?"

"Sorry, Tom."

Dan gave a small smile. "When he's here, Chris."

"Oh-kay," but that was lost to how he took a long drink of juice. Giving a frown, Dan glanced back to the door. After heading out into the corridor, he went over to where Tom stood resting against the nurses' station. "Hey," Dan said quickly, seeing how he rubbed at his head. "Let's get you into the medical room and—"

Tom pulled away as he tried to take a gentle hold on his arm. "Five minutes," said Tom. "I asked you to look after him for five minutes. I asked—"

"There was a call out," said Dan, not understanding why Tom shifted away from his touch.

"There's always a call out, there's always—" Tom went to snap something else, then seemed to lose his thread of anger, looking more torn as he wiped more blood from his lip. "He lost it, Dan."

Dan needed to ease the hurt playing in Tom's eyes, both from taking the blow and the loss of the visual history surrounding both pencil and case. "We'll find it," he said quietly, but his concentration was more on the cut. "Your dad doesn't know what he's doing. You know that."

Tom shrugged. "But he does like the occasional dig. It's why I never leave him on his own with my artwork. *You* know that and..." He bit it back, looked away. "Five minutes, Dan," he said eventually. "I only asked for five minutes of your time."

"You have it 24/7," he said quietly, but then he was suddenly aware that Baz was watching them from behind the nurses' station. "I'll find the item that was taken and get it to you as soon as possible, okay, Mr McKendrik?"

"McKendrik." Tom frowned a touch, something working there in his eyes, then—"My name's fucking Tom. It's been Tom to you for the past ten years, or do you have problems remembering as soon as you come here too? How fucking convenient, that. Well run along, then; go sort your priorities out. I'll hide out in the car park until you need me to nurse your wounds, shall I?" Saying nothing else, Tom turned and headed for the exit, leaving Dan frowning, then shifting to follow. "Hey—"

"Dan." From over by the nurses' station, Baz shifted his head towards the staff room. "A word, please."

His heart sinking, Dan was forced to change direction and follow Baz through to the staff room. Tom had understood. Over all of the years Dan had been working here, Tom had understood the complications of falling for a patient's son. Dan had meant no disrespect. In fact, *Mr McKendrik* was the agreed safety address that would warn Tom staff was around. That had been the first time that Tom had ever given any indication that he had an issue with keeping their relationship private and away from work. But then today had been the first time that his father had hit Tom, and it seemed a sharp reminder for both of them. It's what he'd seen in Tom's eyes, not hurt for Tom himself, but the fear that this is what happened here sometimes. Dan knew his safety worried the hell out of Tom, and part of him was gutted that for the first time when Tom had been caught in the crossfire, he hadn't been there to brush the back of his hand over the hurt he'd seen. Calming Chris down had been the priority. Any other time, any other moment, Tom would have understood that, but with the loss of the pencil and its case...

"Take a seat," said Baz as the door shut. The staff room was empty and Dan made his way over to the leather settee and sat down.

He frowned at Baz. "I thought you went to the hospital with Shaun?"

A chair was pulled over from the table and Baz sat down by him. "Dr Stanshead went with him," he said, rubbing at his eyes. "She owed me from a few weeks back."

"Ah," said Dan, easing back and closing his eyes.

"Dan—"

“About Tom, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be,” said Baz, “it gets tough on relatives and we’ve both known Tom a long time. He doesn’t snap easy. What happened?”

Dan told him and Baz frowned. “Are they both okay?”

Dan nodded, but it was all he could manage.

“I heard that Chris had lost something, too. What was it?”

“Tom’s pencil. The one in the wooden case.”

“Oh...” said Baz, and he fell quiet for a good few moments. “We’ll do a search, see if we can find it, yeah?”

“Chris said he gave it to little Tom,” said Dan, wiping a hand over his face, but not finding the courage to ask Baz just what else he’d heard.

Baz raised a brow. “We don’t allow children into the unit.”

Dan nodded and Baz sighed heavily. “Okay, c’mon, let’s go take a look. We’ll see if Chris has calmed down and can remember. Then we’ll make sure young Mr McKendrik is really okay. I think you need to know that more than anyone.”

Dan looked at him sharply, but Baz was already over by the door. “None of my business, Dan,” he called back over his shoulder. “It’s not even this unit’s business. You’re damn good at your job.”

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## Chapter Five

Dan looked down at his mobile phone as he sat outside Tom's. Baz had given him a lift during dinner time break. A part of him had hoped that Tom had cried out of going up to Edinburgh, but seeing no van sitting there on his drive now, Dan closed his eyes, his grip tightening on his mobile phone.

*C'mon on, Tom. Call.*

The frustrating part for Dan was the pencil. If Tom had stayed around for just a few minutes, just popped into the room next to his father's and spoken to Mrs Johnson's daughter...

Lizzie had been sitting in there talking to her mother, and conversation had drifted around to Lizzie's youngest boy. Dan had taken her to one side and asked if she'd seen Chris at all. He'd got a nod, then Lizzie had pulled the slim wooden case from her handbag.

"Said my Thomas should have this," she'd said, and Dan had bit back a sad smile. Lizzie never brought her little boy with her, but she was always talking about him to Chris, how he was into drawing matchstick men. So true to his words, Chris had given the pencil to little Tom, albeit at the expense of hurting his own. "I was going to find Chris's son," Lizzie had added afterwards. "I remember Tom mentioning that his mother had bought it for his father just before she'd left them."

Lizzie had handed it over with every apology going for not getting it back sooner. Since then, Dan hadn't been able to call and let Tom know, not with how his rounds had been delayed. He thought, maybe hoped, that Tom would have called him, but since his phone had remained quiet, Dan had come over to Tom's house, hoping to catch him here. There would have been no peace of mind for Tom not having found it; for the past ten years he'd brought it with him on his visits to his father, not so much for his father to use, but just his quiet reminder that he wouldn't leave his dad like his mother had when the dementia had really set in.

But as Dan got out of the car and looked at Tom's house, even Tom's fully shuttered windows seemed to want to deny the rest of the world's existence.

Giving a sigh, he stopped by the front doorstep and looked down at the slim wooden case he held in his other hand. For the trouble it had caused, the pencil slept safely enough, its gnarled edges still just as gnarled. Dan smiled, running

his fingers over it. He'd seen Tom take this out only a few times over the years, mostly sketching some of the BDSM positions Tom had put him in.

Slipping the mobile phone under his arm, he then reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. After a moment, he used it to blanket the pencil. Tom had left, and he marked the loss the only way he knew how.

His artistic skills were probably closer to Chris's: no higher than a kid colouring a book, but he'd drawn the single link to a chain, shading it the best he could, finishing it off with the single message:

*Missing, link...*

Him and Tom, they were parts of the same chain, and it meant he felt Tom's hurt no matter in which city or within which bed he tossed and turned.

He left the slim case just inside the porch. The door was always kept open for the morning paper, and making sure it was shut behind him, Dan turned away and tugged his phone free of his arm.

Even though the phone was quiet now, Tom was due to call around seven and let him know that he'd arrived and was about to start work. There were a number of reasons why Tom hadn't answered Dan's calls; just like with the psychiatric unit, Tom could be working: setting up at the venue, talking to clients, working body art, which is why they had these designated times to talk to each other. And Tom had never missed one of those calls in all the years he'd known him.

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## Chapter Six

The call came in the early hours of Sunday morning, jolting Dan awake not long after he'd finally managed to find some peace in sleep. Hearing the familiar ring tone, he instantly eased the bedcovers off him, flicked the lamplight on, and picked up, as panic hit. "Tom?"

A lot of commotion came through on the other end: the heavy bass of music, laughing, talking—breathing—

"Tom?" he tried again, his finger going into his ear and his raised voice setting off a neighbour's dog.

There was more laughter, Tom's, then—"Letting you know I got here." Dan frowned as the merriment died from his voice, then looked at the time that flashed on his bedside unit. "You're a bit late doing just that," he said quietly.

"Aww," said Tom, but it was cut off as he spoke to someone else on the other end. "Yeah, beer. Thanks, Ian."

Dan eased his knees up, feeling the chill a little more now. Ian?

"Work," said Tom, now obviously back with him. "You know what it's like, right? I was distracted."

"Tom—"

"I'll be back Sunday night, about eight." Thoughts drifted back to how Tom had said he'd try and make it Sunday morning. "I'm drinking with some friends," added Tom as if catching on to his silence, but the slurred voice and lack of him not giving a shit about how he had walked and not phoned to talk was clear enough.

Rubbing at his head, Dan pushed away the niggling concerns that edged in. "Sir, how's your lip? I—"

"Tomorrow," said Tom, and he even sounded like he was already where he needed to be as he laughed and spoke to someone on the other end, then—"If you can manage it, be at my house when I get back, yeah? Wear an overcoat if you have to."

And that was it; the line went dead, leaving Dan staring into the light of the bedroom.

The second call came just a few hours later. Rubbing tiredly at his eyes, Dan reached over and picked up. "Tom?" he managed. The daylight outside was enough to lighten the shadows in the bedroom. "That you?"

"Who the fuck else are you expecting to call at this hour?" Something else was said from the other end, some shouts, a hand over the phone, a muffled "Fuck you," then—"you still there?"

Dan stilled in the covers, now fully awake.

"Dan."

"I'm here. What's going on?"

"Good. Who the hell were you expecting to call, Dan?"

Dan frowned. "Look, Tom—"

"Yeah. Forget it." Again the line went dead. Again Dan was left staring down at the fading light on the screen.

Not managing to catch anymore sleep after that, Dan shifted through Sunday a little numb. Close to eight p.m., he made the walk around to Tom's a little slowly, for the first time with hands dug in his pockets and hating the hard bite in Tom's voice. The calls last night had been out of the blue, with Tom fully aware that Dan had an early morning shift to get through. It's why Dan hadn't been able to go up to Edinburgh in the first place. Now he just needed something decent to eat, a warm bed, and for Tom to snap out of this shit and talk.

Up ahead, Tom's detached house was in darkness, and Dan made his way over. The pencil case still slept in the porch, a newspaper helping keep it warm. Dan picked both up and went inside, putting the newspapers and wooden pencil case on the table before flicking on the lights. The kettle came on first, then two mugs were pulled out and heaped with coffee. Dan needed coffee. Letting the kettle boil, he padded on through to the living room and switched the TV on. One of the padded chairs took his weight and Dan pulled his legs up under him, settling in. Tom was due back soon, but he hoped he could pinch a few moments first just to catch up on some much-needed sleep.

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He woke to the cold of the room and chill biting at his arms. The TV had settled into a movie, the late night sort that only the drunk would be awake to watch, and it forced Dan to give a long stretch. Checking his watch, he frowned and glanced around.

“Tom?”

His watch touched close to one, Monday morning, and the quiet of Tom's house called it out too. Giving a rub at his eyes, Dan went over to the bay window and shifted a blind. The drive sat empty, a light dusting of snow showing a virgin touch free of tyre tracks. Giving a scratch at day-old stubble, Dan then sorted through his pockets, looking for his phone.

Thumbing at a few buttons, he saw there'd been one missed call around ten and Tom's number flashed up. Flicking a look out at the empty drive again, Dan pressed call. It rang for a few minutes, then—“Hello,” said a voice.

The female voice caught him off-guard.

“Hello,” came the same voice again.

“I—” He paused. “Is Tom there? I'm Dan.” It sounded like such a stupid reply, but it was all he could manage.

“Dan?” She sounded just as confused. “Oh, Dan. Tom's boyfriend. I'm Linia. Linia Morgan.”

Dan frowned. She'd said that as though he should know it. “Is Tom there?” *Why is Tom there?* “He called and—”

“He's staying here tonight.”

“I'm sorry?”

A cough was given. “He's... he's at mine for the night. Just for tonight.”

Dan couldn't get his head around the conversation. “Why? Who are you?”

“Linia Morgan. Look,” a tired yawn was given, “sorry I missed you earlier. Just wanted you to know that Tom was here, and he's safe.”

“Why the fuck wouldn't he be safe?”

“He had too much to drink. That's why.” And he eased a touch, hearing how she sounded about as happy as Dan felt. “He'll call in the morning.”

“He should have called tonight.”

“Not my problem. That only happens when he walks out of venues like the one last night.”

“He *what?*”

“Long story. One I'm too damn tired to go over again now. Sorry I didn't catch you earlier. Listen, I need to sleep, Dan. I'll get him to call you in the morning.”

“Hang on. Wha—” That was it, she was gone almost as quickly as Tom last night. Dan was left shrugging into the night, his hand and phone dropping a little too dejectedly down by his side. He needed to know what the hell Tom was playing at.

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Dan ignored his mobile phone, for the third time, as it went off on the table. He sat in Chris's bungalow, staring down at his uneaten breakfast, happy just to chase the odd, few malted wheat around the bowl and also ignore how it was now nearly lunchtime. He'd left Tom's shortly after Linia's call this morning, with the walk home the safest choice for all concerned. He didn't want to be there when Tom decided to finally drag himself back home.

After that, the hours seemed to bleed through a drip as he waited for work to roll around come lunchtime.

The other two calls he'd missed, he assumed came from Baz. The first had been to ask if he'd cover a later shift today. He'd texted yes, but only if Nick, another colleague, could come and give him a lift. He didn't want the walk today. The calls after that he knew would just be letting him know the pickup time, but he already had a rough guess that Nick would come over during lunch break, so ignored the phone altogether. He hadn't had much luck with phones over the weekend, and he was a little sick of looking at it.

The “safe” call from Linia had wound him up no end last night. He'd be the first to know if Tom was laid up in some hospital anywhere. Tom was Chris's named relative, and he carried a card with him to let emergency crews know that the psychiatric unit was to be contacted if he was hurt in any way.

And that's what pissed him off. The safe call seemed to put him firmly in his work place: always the staff member looking in on a family, with Tom's bite of:

*Wear an overcoat, if you have to.*

And just what had Tom's lesson been by using Linia? Had it come on the back of:

*Who the fuck do you expect to be calling at this hour?*

Dan groaned and threw the spoon in the bowl. That was a damn stupid thought; Tom was pure male on male. Pure male on male solely on him. And he knew Tom better than that: he wouldn't play games like this. He just hated the

hell out of Tom for putting the doubt there. For not bothering to pick up the phone and—

The sound of a horn drew his attention, and his anger missed a beat thinking, *Tom*. But seeing Nick's Ford Fiesta through the window sent life back into a weighted grey, and Dan picked up his work bag from the table and made his way out. Baz might have just caught on about his relationship with Tom, but Nick had known for a while.

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Monday rounds at the psychiatric unit took on a calmness to it that Dan couldn't shake into him. Night staff said they had a calm night last night, and it showed. Most patients were in the midst of waking, eating, and going to recreational games or classes when Dan got there.

He was the only one who seemed out of place, and he hated the people for it as they breezed by, smiling. He'd played cards with Duncan, but hadn't felt the cards under his touch; he'd thrown a few bowls with Aimee, but hadn't heard the balls strike hard against each other; then he'd spent an hour talking to Shaun over a conversation he couldn't piece together now. Where even the evening meal rush seemed sedate, his own irritability saw Dan slip into the staff room with Baz just to escape reality for a while.

Baz and his team usually took care of the downstairs floor, where Chris's room sat, leaving Dan and his team in charge of the upper floor. But to keep faces constant and not break routine, both teams sometimes swapped over halfway through the month to keep up with patient familiarity.

After packing his uneaten tea away and ignoring the frown Baz gave him, Dan made his footsteps slow as he moved away from the safety of the staff room. It hadn't helped that Chris had fallen just as quiet too. The old man knew something was wrong, that something in his life was missing, but he just couldn't quite put his finger on what. It had gotten to Dan eventually, enough to call a time out yesterday as he took a walk outside the grounds.

Yet as he neared Chris's room, and the soft sound of the old man's voice filtered over his footsteps, Dan paused outside of Chris's door, giving a frown at how lively he sounded. The door had been left off the latch, Chris long since not allowed a key to lock his door, unlike some of their other clients.

After Dan eased the door open, he caught the soft hazel tint of eye colour off Tom as he looked over. Tom's gaze was soon back with his father as he

eased up out of his chair and kissed at his father's head. "I'll be back in a minute, okay?"

*Right*, thought Dan. *There you are. Why, happy afternoon to you; and by the way—fuck you.*

He'd obviously missed the note saying Tom was back. He'd also missed the memo on Tom visiting, and how Tom and his father had made up over the pencil incident. It was a kick in the balls for Dan. The reminder of being staff, of being on the outside looking in, overcoat hiding his face—not even worthy of a decent fucking phone call from his lover.

*Bastard*. Dan turned away and left them to it.

"Hey." A hand on his arm tried to make him look back. "Hang on—"

"Working," snapped Dan, not looking back and pulling away. "Book a fucking appointment at reception. Y'know, my receptionist to yours, no overcoat fucking needed." Pushing through into Mrs Johnson's room and catching Tom's frown, he gave Tom the fuck you finger.

"Dan. Thank you."

The sincerity behind that made Dan pause and frown back.

"For the pencil," said Tom, quietly. He'd caught the sun despite the winter chill, making those forest eyes shine a little more. The cut to his lip still shone through, and the need was there to instantly ease a touch over it and take away the sting. *Fuck*, thought Dan.

"But mostly for the note," Tom added. "I loved the note."

Dan kept his nod brief. "No overcoat needed when it was delivered either."

"It was a shit comment," said Tom, face creasing slightly. "I was—"

"A fuck?" said Dan. "Glad we agree." And he stopped Tom when he went to say something else, the hurt over being put in his work place still stinging deep. "Regarding personal items like your artwork, I recommend that you leave valuables at reception in future. Or not bring them at all. You're less likely to upset yourself, your father, and other residents that way. And please take note of the no mobile phone use in here in future too. There are clients who risk fits and seizures from anything that is outside of their comfort zones."

"Dan—"



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He let the door shut behind him and was pissed off at how closing it didn't take away an ounce of the anger or hurt of Tom just walking back unscathed into his reality like that.

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## Chapter Seven

Tom watched the door shut behind Dan, leaving him alone in the quiet of the corridor; then he looked away, tensing his jaw. He'd deserved that, and a whole lot more. Digging his hands deep in his pockets, he headed back into his father's room.

He'd missed the first call to Dan purely because he wasn't in a good place to talk, that and Linia had kept his ass run ragged with body art. The call he did manage to make? He'd just started drinking, and catching Dan asleep, he'd had that sexy sound of just coming out of a deep sleep, and it had riled him how easily Dan had found sleep after what had happened. It hadn't helped with the second call, when Dan had asked who was calling. Who the hell else *would* be calling at that hour?

Add all of that to the fear over Dan getting hurt?

Despite the fear over the physical abuse to Dan at work, Tom wasn't the sort to ask him to walk away from it. This was Dan's career choice, and he was good at his job. Being his Dom, Tom then just made sure he was looked after in every sense when Dan came home. He'd just gotten so used to seeing the bruises themselves that seeing someone physically hit out with Dan there had been a real kick between the balls. All staff there was good enough to stem any risks pretty quickly, and without an audience. Yet Dan had slept on that night. Tom had been as scared as hell for him, and Dan had slept on.

Saturday night up in Edinburgh had been one disaster after another. Too much to drink at the Torture Garden saw him walk away from the body art jobs Linia had lined up for him, and he'd gone to the hotel to try and sleep the anger off. That's when he'd made the second call to Dan, and a hotel porter had tried to get in on the conversation and give him all of his eighteen years' worth of advice. Tom had shouted, the porter had cried, and then the hotel had revoked his stay.

He'd slept in the van that night, then had been dragged over to Linia's when she'd tracked him down to see why he'd cut and run from the venue. Another half-hour lecture on why a cut lip wasn't exactly what she wanted from artists on her book hadn't helped lift the dark cloud either. He had to remind her that she'd borrowed him from someone else's books for tonight, and he was just standing in, even though he was having great difficulty just standing up at that

precise moment. Linia liked her control, even down to what was painted on the body. If she could hold the brush, she would have done.

He didn't drink often, not that heavily, and Linia hadn't been too impressed with it either, confiscating his keys and taking him home. Maybe she would have been better off letting him risk the journey home, because when one of Linia's brothers had come over and sat drinking with Tom, then decided to say how sick he was of British parliament ramming down his throat how same sex couples should be allowed to get married, Tom had gotten into a drunken brawl the likes of which he'd not let rile him since school. He didn't fight that often either, and it had pissed him off with how easily he'd lost his temper.

Linia hadn't called in the police, but she had taken his phone. Dan was all he'd thought about, and the one time he really needed to call, he hadn't been able to. He'd had enough of being away, pissed off, and on his own when he knew he needed just to talk to Dan now. Shutting down and backing away from everything when it really hurt wasn't going too well for him, and whoever had suggested it helped in the first place needed screwing to the wall in Tom's eyes. Tom's brother had paid his way out of any responsibility to their father; his mother had just walked one day and hadn't come back. Tom had done no better himself, then realised it just hurt more when he did walk, especially away from Dan. So after the fight, he'd just... had another drink, then another, maybe followed by another. Come seven Sunday night, he'd crashed on her sofa again.

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It hadn't surprised him that Dan hadn't picked up his call earlier today. Dan was right: he'd been a fuck, but he'd seen that long before Dan had called it.

"Tom," said his father as he went on through to his room. "Didn't you bring *The Scotsman* with you?" His father was sitting in the chair Tom usually took, almost signifying a switch that put Tom back in his teens on the bed as he watched his father flick through his latest drawings. These days were few and far between lately, his father having last asked about *The Scotsman* over a month ago. He didn't even remember losing the pencil or splitting his lip in the crossfire.

Tom eased onto the bed and looked towards the door. He'd given up bringing his laptop and letting his father catch the news from *The Scotsman*. He'd usually sneak in and borrow Dan's from the staff room if need be.

"No," said Tom, watching the intensity on his father's face and loving how the lines changed shape with each sketch that was taken in.

A tut came over followed by the flick of paper. "No matter." A gaze settled on his. "What's wrong?"

"Hmm?"

"I know that look. And the cut lip says you've been fighting."

Looking down, Tom bit back a smile. He missed this; being known in his dad's eyes. "Nothing," he said quietly.

"Your face tells a different tale, boy." Another flick went at the sketch pad. "So too does your drawings. What's—" He waved a hand at the pad. "What's this?" He turned it over and held a drawing up. On the paper, shadows covered the pencil case as it sat there on the kitchen table, but it was blacked out almost to the point of non-existence.

"Bad weekend," said Tom, wiping a hand over his face.

A steady gaze flicked up at him. "A good woman would cure you of that."

Tom reached over and took the pad off him. They'd done the gay talk fifty thousand times over. His father's reaction mostly accepting, sometimes saying Tom just needed a decent woman to shake him out of it, but always forgotten by the next visit.

"Yeah, Faither," he said quietly, putting the sketchpad away. "A good woman."

"I forget."

As he went to stand, a hand gripped his arm, and Tom jerked slightly, looking at his dad.

"Don't forget, lad." A tear fell. "Black." A look went to his picture, then it found him again. "It's going black, lad. Do you feel it, too? Do you miss the links that bring back all the memories?"

Tom eased his grip away, then crouched by his father. No. He'd made damn sure over the years that he'd remember the links and keep the memories. "You need to get some sleep," he said gently. "Tired... you're looking really tired, Faither."

His father eased into a smile. "I am, lad. Do you mind?"

Tom shook his head and took the slippers off his father's feet. After helping him out of his dressing gown, he pulled back the covers and watched as his father settled down.

“Do you want the light out?” he said, as he stopped by the door.

“No, lad. It’s dark enough in here.”

Giving a frown, Tom looked at the bright light through the window, then shut the door behind him.

He made it out to the courtyard a few moments later, then pulled out his mobile now he’d managed to charge it up.

*Talk?* he thumbed in.

He gave it a few minutes to see if there’d be a reply, then frowned when nothing came back.

“C’mon, baby. At least hear me out now.”

The sound of a car pulling up onto the gravel courtyard took his attention, and Tom stepped away from the entrance seeing a young couple get out. He gave a nod, recognising Lizzie and her husband. After they’d gone inside, Tom stopped by his van’s passenger side and pulled something out.

Looking down at what he held, he gave a soft smile. “Know you, Kershaw,” he said quietly.

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## Chapter Eight

After finishing a hard shift and finally making it to the bungalow, Dan finished drying up the coffee mug and put it to sleep on its hook next to the others lined up by the kettle. With the tea towel thrown onto the unit, he padded barefoot through to the living room, rubbing tiredly at his eyes as he went. His shift had run into another long one, with barely enough time to chase his own ass after he'd seen Tom at the unit.

He counted himself lucky the psychiatric unit was within walking distance. A drive to and from work in this state would have him yawning his way through knocking over a few pedestrians, saying *Ah, s'cuse me, thought you were Tom, mate*. No doubt Baz would be questioning whether he'd opted for pinching a few happy pills in order to get him through the past few days.

Instead the full offer of comfort from Chris's bungalow was on order tonight, and he slumped down on the settee, taking the remote from the table with him and flicking the TV on. The news threw up the latest debates on Scotland's independence referendum, and living on the borders of bonnie Scotland, yet the not so bonnie backstreets of Gretna Green, he'd had enough of hearing about it.

Scottish independence.

Dan snorted a bitter smile and wiped a hand over his face as he dropped his head back into the cool of the leather settee. The chuckle he gave was far from happy, and he screwed his eyes shut, letting the quiet of the bungalow creep up on the tiredness and hurt.

Scottish Tom and all of his finely shaped ass had all the independence he needed now; no politics, no bullshit or backwards debates that ranted on for hours in Parliament, no overcoats... just quiet. He knew Tom's house mirrored the bungalow, where winter bit at the fingertips and gloves were the only option to keep the bitter at bay, even indoors.

Dan closed his eyes and shut it out. Hell, it seemed to have worked for Tom.

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Dan couldn't even tell what woke him, he just knew the chill was gone from the living room, leaving warmth wanting to drag him back under for a few more hours. Warmth was unusual for the bungalow, but heat blanketed his

body, and the softness of a cushion was under his head. A wall lamp over on the corner cast a soft light that chased long shadows and danced with them over the walls and furniture. He'd kept the old beaten settee and matching chair when he'd moved in. After ten years, he still hadn't had the time to decorate the old-man feel to the place, just like his dating before he and Tom became serious was only half-hearted attempts at company, with not being able to get close to Tom. But here, echoes of tobacco could still be caught in the leather he lay on, and if he listened hard enough, he still swore he'd hear the tap of a pipe on a table to clear it out for use. He hadn't had the heart to change a thing. Somehow it didn't seem right, not with who this place belonged to.

A look at his watch told him it was getting on for *you should have moved your ass into bed hours ago* o'clock, and he stretched into the warmth of the quilt, content enough to leave his cold bed as just that. Settling back down, he closed his eyes to how he didn't want his day to start all over again.

Quilt.

Easing up, Dan pushed the thickness down his body and let it rest in his lap, staring hard down at how the softness curled up a little too comfortably there. Then the lamp took his attention.

He'd gone to sleep in darkness, sitting up, and damn well knew the cold had been biting at his fingertips and nose as he'd sat there content with feeling it do just that. He'd felt so much of it lately as he'd waited by the phone, he wore it like a second skin. Only now...? Life was thrown back into a warmth he didn't want to feel.

"Fuck." Tossing the quilt aside, he was up, then heading into the kitchen. The darkness going on outside the back door agreed that it was too goddamn early in the morning for any decent soul to be walking the streets, but the folded up tea-towel on his unit suggested a different sort. Dan grabbed the handle, opened the back door a touch, then slammed it shut.

"Fuck," he snarled out, making sure the lock was set in place as dogs barked disgust at the break of usual quiet. Kicking at the door, then grabbing at his toes and biting a cry as he danced the hurt away, Dan added a few more curses, then hobbled over to the table.

He hadn't seen it at first, but from the windows, silver light fell on one item that sat there on the old table.

Giving a frown, Dan picked up the piece of paper.

The single link was shaded and drawn to such precision that the close-up acted more like a microscope showing all of the imperfections in the metal despite its obvious strength. Writing circled the link and Dan felt his heart slip.

*Missed, link.*

“Christ.” He closed his eyes for a moment, then screwed the paper up and threw it towards the bin. Standing there staring at it for a moment, he then went over and picked it up before heading off to bed.

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Dan had been awake for a few hours, just watching the light ease away the darkness on the walls. He hadn't slept much all night, and that coldness was back biting at his shoulders.

Living on the Scottish borders hadn't exactly been his choice for working his ass off in private psychiatric care, but after graduating with his degree and then moving into the nursing programme, he'd taken a week's trip to Edinburgh, then spent most of his time with a few friends, roaming the backstreet pubs to celebrate moving to the next stage in his career. He'd regretted being the British student who had thrown up in the streets, but it had been needed. On the fourth or fifth day, and having fallen in love with the Scottish accent, he'd taken a trip to Gretna to check out the new psychiatric facility they were building just a few acres back from Gretna Golf Club. The unit was private and had been state-of-the-art back then. It had taken one cheeky smile to win him a look around the basics.

And those basics had run him smack bang into one Tom McKendrik.

Dan closed his eyes, his grip tightening on the pillow.

Tom had been visiting that day too, seemed he'd been visiting there ever since Chris's mixed dementia had worsened. Chris McKendrik was usually under the joint care of Tom himself and the local nursing home just a few miles away in Carlisle. But when times were at their most chaotic and depression hit the dementia hard, Chris would be booked into the psychiatric unit for a few months to handle the darker periods. That's how it had been for the last ten years, Chris spending up to six months out of the year playing pinball between the psych unit, the care home, and the few rare occasions, at his home here, where Dan slept. Tom stayed close; he was always close.

Dan frowned as he let his gaze wander around the bedroom. Tom had offered him his dad's place just a few months after Dan had started



volunteering at the psychiatric unit. He'd shifted training on the nursing programme up to Scotland too, and Tom had said it would cut down on travelling time to and from Birmingham if he made it a permanent move. Dan had agreed. Against all professionalism, he'd agreed, even though he knew full well that the main reason for taking the offer had been because he'd fallen for Tom from the offset. They'd both just kept their distance, especially with Dan's training moving up a few gears.

Now, part of knowing this was Chris's home hurt to the core, how Dan had let himself become so deeply involved with his son, the whole family. But there, at that deeper level there was a part that didn't hurt, that just wanted to hold on to how right everything felt.

Or how right it *had* felt.

Giving an unsteady sigh and pushing away the creeping coldness, Dan eased the covers off and headed on into the bathroom. The alarm hadn't sounded yet, and another part cursed at how his body was still set automatically to Tom's, even though he wasn't here.

He kept the shower short, then set his mind to changing his shift at work to avoid Tom for a few days. He needed time out to think now too.

The walk to work took him thirty minutes, just a left at the end of Rosebank Court, through to Victoria Avenue and right onto the B721. He bypassed Gretna Golf Club and a few more lanes, but the walk helped clear some of Tom's bruises.

Baz was already there in the courtyard of the psychiatric home, and Dan gave him a wink then paused, hearing his mobile let him know he had another message. He winced, flicking a look over at Baz as Baz tapped the *Turn Off All Mobile Phones* sign by the entrance. He waved over, watching Baz head on in, then he thumbed at the message box.

*Talk?*

He clenched his jaw. Same message as yesterday.

No. He didn't want to fucking talk. Not yet.

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Tom turned the engine off to his van and stretched into the morning sun. The clouds had decided to shift their moody ass and let the sun through, giving his bare arms some much needed warmth. He'd managed to sneak away from

the tattoo studio for lunch, which gave him about an hour's visiting time with his dad. His visits at the psychiatric unit were no doubt going to get more frequent, even Baz seemed to offer a raised brow as he came out from the psychiatric unit with his cigarettes in hand. But he needed to talk to Dan, and as Dan seemed to be ignoring the hell out of him, he had to take what he could, when he could.

"Lunch again with your father, Tom?" said Baz, nodding over as he took a smoke. "We'll be setting you up with a room the way you're going," he added friendly enough, and Tom offered a smile.

Seeing Dan come out with Shaun, the cigarettes in Shaun's hands suggesting he was after some smoke time too, Tom let his smile fade. Instead, he opted to look away as he reached them, now a little caught out with Baz and Shaun in between them.

"Shaun," said Baz, seeming to sense the awkwardness from all sides, "you were out with me this morning, and now you're dragging Dan out too?"

Blowing smoke through his nose now he'd lit up, Shaun offered a grin. "I'm trying to see if he'll let me inch closer to the gate so I can leg it out of here."

"In your pyjamas?" said Baz, looking Shaun up and down, and the ease to Dan's smile held Tom in silence as he witnessed it.

"I've got my jeans and T-shirt on underneath." Shaun paid Tom no notice. "As soon as I'm around that there corner, I'm de-clothed and off, mate."

"You'll need shoes for that," mumbled Tom, and Shaun rolled his gaze at him. "Always someone around to spoil the fun."

Baz patted Shaun's shoulder, then, flicking a look at Dan, he pushed on by and went inside.

As Shaun took long breaths in off the smoke, Tom dug his hands deeper into his pockets, trying to find a way to broach this without going in feet first. "Dan, can we—"

"No." Dan looked every bit as uncomfortable talking with Shaun there as he indicated with a flick of his head for Shaun to go back in.

"Already?" said Shaun.

"There's plenty of room to hide out in the back gardens," said Dan, opening the door. Then he flicked a look at Tom. "Stay out of the bungalow whilst I'm there," he said flatly. "I'll start paying you rent at the end of the month."

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“That isn’t needed,” Tom said gently. “That place is yours as long as you—”

“Yeah. Whatever. C’mon, Shaun,” said Dan through his words. “Let’s get you out back.” And Tom was left staring at the door, grinding on his jaw as Dan closed it behind them.

Giving a look back to his van, Tom gave a hard sigh.

This was getting him nowhere fast.

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## Chapter Nine

Dan hadn't managed to change his shift, but as the texts, calls, and midnight visits had eased from Tom over the past few days, he'd forced relaxation a little more. Tonight helped too, with how he'd managed to finish on time at eleven. Baz had also sent out a huge cheer to mark that he was clocking off too; he was back on at six. A while back, though, Dan had managed to book two free weekends off for his and Tom's anniversary. This was the first. He'd nearly called it off, not wanting to wallow in the silence. But his body was ready to call it quits even if his mind was still willing to hide—

*Not hide.*

Turning his collar up as he made his way down the courtyard in the darkness, Dan pushed that away. Hide. Maybe he was; he was certainly throwing more into work lately than he should. But being back at home, even now, kept his footfalls on gravel slow and heavy, in no rush to get there. It was part of the reason why he'd decided to walk tonight. The half-hour journey would probably last more like fifty minutes, but at least the warmth in the air kept everything else at bay.

A car pulled alongside, jolting him slightly as the window wound its way down. "You sure you don't want a lift, Dan?"

"No thanks, Baz," he said, glancing down.

"Okay, see you Monday," called Baz. He was older, touching his late forties, but it didn't show as his boy-racer side kicked in. It took only a few moments for him to reach the end of the road up ahead, the yellow indicator on his car signalling right as brake lights barely blinked. Then lights and the sound of his car engine disappeared into the darkness.

The quiet calmed Dan, only the sound of his footsteps on concrete went with him as he reached the end of the road and took the right turning. The small lane it took him into would eventually lead him to a crossroads, then past Gretna's golf course.

Only one more car passed him by, and Dan stepped aside to give it room as it slowed down, then sped back up again. He always used his High Visual Jacket, which was just as well considering just how dark it could get in these lanes. Again, lights disappeared into the distance as Dan hitched himself up over a gate and into a field that would cut his journey by half. Dangerous in the

dark, but he'd taken this route for the past ten years and knew it by heart. Cows and sheep used to graze here, but the recession had hit everyone hard. The little farm over the back had gone out of business, leaving the field itself free for corporate gain. Long grass had been cleared and the dirt under his feet cried out the latest housing development patch.

He soon found the opposite gate and hitched himself over. It took him close to the turning for the B721 and the golf course, but not quite in any part of Gretna that had street lamps.

A look to the left made sure no traffic came from there, then as he glanced right, he frowned as he caught the van that slept on the side of the road.

Tom rarely let his van out of sight, always pulling it onto the drive of a night and making sure none of his equipment was stored in the back. The stereo would come out and a lock would be clipped around the steering wheel just to make sure wandering minds would have a job on their hands stealing the ride. It was in contrast to his house and how he'd leave the porch door open for the newspaper delivery.

After checking the road again, Dan then went over and made the driver's side his first stop.

Nothing.

"Tom?" he called into the darkness, having seen the keys inside. That was even more damn unusual.

What if Tom had been involved in a crash? Dan slipped his phone from his pocket as he went around to check the bonnet. No dents kissed the front. In fact, as he went around to the back, there was nothing to say damage had been done there either. That just left an electrical fault, and Tom's patience didn't extend much to waiting on the roadside for breakdowns.

But the keys were still in the ignition, the house keys attached to it too.

He thumbed Tom's number, then pressed call. The phone on the other end started to ring, and Dan pulled it away from his ear, not quite understanding why the silence of the night was cut in two with the ringing of Tom's mobile phone from behind him.

"Tom—"

Something hit his back hard enough to push him into the back door of the van, jolting his ribs a touch and nearly punching the wind from him before he'd even had chance to turn around.

Then a strong grip came at the back of his jacket as a voice whispered—

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“Calm it down, boy.” Tom made sure Dan found the floor, the hold on his leather jacket controlling the fall and making it look more violent than it was. Dan’s cry still carried that startled fear into the night, and Tom quickly shifted down, easing a knee into Dan’s back, then pulling the cuffs from his own pocket. “Easy, easy.”

“What the fuh—” Dan put up a good struggle, trying to twist around, kick out—shout loud enough to alert people beyond the golf course if Tom didn’t move quickly. Hands were wrestled behind Dan’s back then cuffed, before Tom shifted and pulled out a gag. Slipping the gag into place sent the night into muffled grunts and groans as dust and dirt was disturbed on the road.

He knew he didn’t help issues when a white silk blindfold sent the world even darker for Dan. The blindfold had been kept long for a reason as a tug on the knot and a pull under Dan’s arm had them both up on their feet.

Before Dan could push back, Tom made sure he kissed the van again, shifting in quick behind him, but placing his body side-on to stop any kickback between the legs. A rough grab at his hair made sure Dan got the message that this wasn’t a game, as Tom then forced his head against the cold and damp of the van. “Hush,” he said sharply.

Dan stilled, but only for a second or two before kicking off his struggles again. Tom opened the other door and pushed all of his fight inside. Dan landed on his side and Tom caught his legs, forcing them up. He’d pulled out some ankle cuffs just before he nearly caught a boot in the ribs. Pulling back a touch, he caught hold of the assault before it touched down, diffusing the damage as he then cuffed one ankle, then the other.

Another shove on Dan’s ass made sure he was far enough into the van to shut the door, then Tom locked it and headed back around to the driver’s side. After easing in, he flicked the engine into life, his glance at the dashboard seeing the struggle had only lasted a few minutes. Then the road had his attention as kicks and muffled cries came from behind.

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Ten minutes later, the van slid up onto his drive, and Tom killed the engine. From the flickering light and chuckles coming from the window next door, Max and his girlfriend were watching TV, the sound clear enough from the

drive. They had no children, and it showed. A BMW sat next to Kaylee's soft top convertible, both owners so wrapped up in their own worlds that life didn't exist beyond their nights at the gym, health shakes, and early morning runs. That left Mr Jefferson off to the left. Touching eleven, he'd be heading off to bed and switching on his sleep apnoea machine. Nothing would be heard past his own Darth-Vader breathing, that and the stray pull out of the oxygen pipe that sent a huge whistle into the night. A car pulling up at this hour wouldn't be out of the ordinary for either household as Tom had picked Dan up many a time at this hour after work.

The unusual part would come with pulling into the garage, but setting the garage doors to open would be a specific sign to Dan.

Once he'd pulled the van inside, then got out and smacked on the side of the van to stop the abuse coming from inside, Tom closed up behind him, then went on into the house. The stereo came on first, nothing too loud, but enough to hint at routine. Then leaving the lights on, he let the garage take every ounce of his attention as he passed back through his kitchen. A door to his left just off from the kitchen had been left open deliberately, but that was ignored for now.

Thumps and bumps met him as he made sure the lights were flicked off in the garage, the undeniable sound of boot pushing out panel and leaving slight dents crying out Dan's abuse. The van stood there and took it, occasionally shuddering, but otherwise a silent witness that held its cargo happily enough.

After waiting for the next boot off Dan to hit home into the side panel, Tom tugged both back doors open.

Dan seemed to anticipate it and kicked out, albeit blindly. One foot caught Tom's hip, winding him a touch, but it had been a blind hit, just scuffing hipbone with the side of a soft trainer. Grabbing the ankle cuffs, then pushing down to keep the feet as still as possible, Tom picked out the keys to the cuffs from his pocket and flicked one lock free.

Dan fell quiet. He seemed to sense that the cuffs were being undone, and he could kick and put the boot in twice as hard with both feet now free. Snorting a smile, Tom grabbed at the collar to his jacket and dragged him out.

The instant his feet touched the garage floor, Dan went to twist around and knee Tom where it would really hurt. But fighting against the distress in Dan's breathing, Tom slipped a knife from his pocket, exposed Dan's throat with a pull of hair, then ran the blunt edge along the entire length, just tracing the side of his windpipe. It was only a kid's toy knife, a good replica, but Dan didn't need to know that.

Dan instantly stilled, only his heavy breathing kissing the garage.

Which was how Tom needed it. Keeping the grip tight on Dan's hair, the knife stilling against Dan's throat to allow a comfortable arm-hold that exposed the soft curve, Tom made sure Dan took very careful steps out of the garage, into the kitchen.

The door next to the pantry still stood open, and Tom forced Dan through, then down a set of stone stairs. Lights here had been kept low for a purpose, and Tom found life instantly calm as he stepped into familiar surroundings.

Dan didn't have that luxury, so Tom made it quick. A nudge at the back of the knee more than encouraged him to move, and Tom made sure he went over to the wall. A choker chain was tethered to a thicker, longer security chain just a few inches away, just above Dan, and Tom grabbed at it, then let it fall into place around his neck. Dan was already trying to pull away, but the chain was kept short to quell everything but the huffs and grunts that would come out in the next hour or so.

He pressed his body in close, making sure Dan was pushed face-first back into the wall, then after tugging the gag off, he smothered a hand over Dan's mouth to stop his obscenity. He'd also found the knot of the blindfold, forcing Dan's blinded gaze up as he came close to his ear.

"Two things are going to happen tonight," he said heatedly, and Dan stopped struggling, trying to tilt his ear. "One." He forced Dan's head back against the wall. "You're going to learn to close your mouth and open your ears when I say I need to talk to you." Tom eased back a touch, the grip at the back of Dan's head easing, all to drift down his throat. "Two. When I'm done, I'm going to say sorry for what I've just done, and all of the shit I've put you through over the past few days. I'm hoping you'll let me say sorry my way, but for now, you learn to behave."

Dan went to shout out something and Tom shook his head, snarling, "No." He forced Dan's head back against the wall. "That's not you listening, is it?"

"Humph." There was a swear word in there, Tom could hear it, and he gave a hard sigh.

"Fair enough. The hard way, Dan."

Tom had everything he needed already laid out. A thicker collar, nestled on the unit, came first, one that sat on top of the choker around Dan's neck. It wasn't quite a posture collar, but it was one that would more than hint this was



a training session. As he culled Dan's abuse with a hand smothering his mouth, Tom flicked at the clasp to Dan's trousers, then inched them and his boxers off his hips a touch to expose his ass.

"Humph."

"Shush," said Tom. He needed both hands free for the next part, and as soon as he released his hold on Dan's mouth, he set his jaw, tensing, hearing the abuse roll free.

"Knife? You used a fucking knife? For fuck's sake, a fucking knife..."

He let the anger play, as he pulled a butt plug out from the electro kit open on the unit. Slicking the slim model up with lube, Tom rubbed it against Dan's exposed ass. Dan went very quiet, very quickly, but only for a fraction of a second, before he snarled and writhed, now trying to shift his ass.

Closing his eyes just briefly, Tom kissed at the back of his neck.

"Goddamn it, Tom," snarled Dan, the anger there in his voice, also in his body, as he tried to pull away. But as Tom slipped his free hand around Dan's hip, then eased Dan's shirt aside to stroke at Dan's cock, the butt plug slipping gently at his ass, the swelling in Dan's cock won another kiss off Tom.

"Yeah," snarled Dan, the hurt there more in his voice now. "Well fucking done. You getting me hard never was the problem, you fuck. You get a kick out of forcing it now?"

"Shush, shush, shush. I'm not here to hurt you." Exchanging lip for nip on Dan's neck, Tom effortlessly eased the slim butt plug in, just the tip first, then through the resistance of the tight muscle until it rested root deep in him.

Dan was up on his toes, body pressed hard into the wall, groaning out "Fuck," then crying out as Tom kept a slow pace along his cock, even though Dan tried to hide by pressing his body into the wall.

"Tom, for god's sake. Please."

Pulling back, Tom reached up and messed with something on Dan's collar. With not replying to him, Tom's silence had Dan calling him all the fucks under the sun. But the multi-wire-cord hooked up to the quad electrode on the butt plug was already in place and set up to react to the collar for this exact reason. Because the moment Dan started on another round of abuse over just why he wasn't going to listen to a thing Tom had to say, it was punctured by—

"... ah—ah—"

Tom eased back, watching as Dan danced the sudden volts that rode his ass.

The vibrations from his own vocal chords met with the collar, then kicked the voltage into gear in his ass, the louder his cry, the higher the voltage. Nothing too severe, just enough to distract thought from sensation.

“Ah... fuh—fuh—” Dan was reduced to soft groans, writhing there against the wall. Silence didn’t allow much of a respite and gave him the softest ride in his ass as a constant low pulse came every few seconds. It was enough to keep his cock hard, but also to remind him he was here to listen, nothing else.

Even with his hands cuffed behind his back, there was the risk Dan would pull the multi-wired cord free. After taking hold of some rope, Tom wrapped it around Dan’s waist, making sure he threaded it through Dan’s handcuffs. Hands were pulled to the side, away from his ass and the hope of pulling out any wires; then they were tied firmly into place. A quick shift of hand, Tom found Dan’s cock, at first palming the head and piercing—the Prince Albert had been changed to a full captive ring, which Tom loved. He twisted—played it—ensuring his touch had Dan writhing, as well as the combination of collar with butt plug in his ass. Then as he jacked him hard enough to force him onto his toes, Dan cried out, forcing another shock up between his legs.

“Fuh—” he tried to say, only to find he couldn’t.

Satisfied, Tom left his cock alone, then lengthened the chain tied to Dan’s choker. He couldn’t afford to leave Dan on his feet for this. Pulling Dan’s boxers and trousers back up over his ass to help keep the butt plug in place, Tom gave a nudge at the back of his legs to encourage Dan to find his knees, still facing the wall, but all done to ensure he wouldn’t fall and strangle himself in the rush. Wires were safely allowed to shape Dan’s butt as his trousers forced them close to the toned curves of his ass. The thin strips of red and blue cord escaped out of the trousers themselves, and Tom nodded, making sure he didn’t get too lost on the image of having Dan bound and on his knees. This wasn’t about sex.

A stroke went to Dan’s hair as Tom eased to his feet and soft moans and groans filled the studio, most times still broken by a defiant cry as Dan knelt there, riding the volts running his ass.

“Yeah,” said Tom. “You get that attitude out of your system, boy. Then we’ll talk. Until then, you stay on your knees.” He turned away and headed over to his work desk and the latest sketches he’d been commissioned to draw. With the angered grunts getting wilder as Tom walked away, Tom then sat and

opened his sketchpad and set to work, leaving all the heat over there to grunt and groan against the wall.

The angle of the desk allowed him to keep an eye on things so Dan didn't come to any harm, and a timer kept him company, one he made sure he kept his eye on as much as Dan.

Dan still writhed and twisted as he faced the wall, hips occasionally digging into the smooth plaster to escape the kickback in his ass against his own cries, others, sometimes just to grind hard into the wall, giving every sign his sub was trying to ease a serious ache between his thighs.

Tom was content to let him try and do both. They both knew there wouldn't be any release for Dan until he cried all anger and frustration out of his system. It remained to be seen just how long that would take.

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It took longer than Tom thought it would, and a deep part of him loved Dan's determination and will. He wasn't here to break him, just let him cry the hurt out of his system. Flicking a look over, he eased his pencil down and started packing away his sketchpad before giving a long stretch in his chair. Dan now sat against the wall, having groaned his way there a few moments ago. Panting came heavy, pained, but even that seemed done so as not to set the collar off on a higher voltage. For now, he squirmed where he sat, head back against the wall, eyes still hidden in the white silk blindfold, a swipe of tongue over lips taking away the perspiration dampening his body. Visible under the hem of his jacket, his shirt had long since been tugged free of his jeans, exposing part of his cock. The hardness there was full, swollen, looking painful—pissed off. Pissed off, but in desperate need of release.

Palming at his eyes for a moment, Tom eventually pushed out of his chair and made his way back over.

Crouching down, he made sure Dan found blinded focus with the grip that went under his jaw. "You ready to hear me out now, or do you need something bigger in your ass, boy?"

Dan went to speak, even opened his mouth, but with muscles set tensing in his jaw, he shook his head, showing he'd had all he could take, the air blown out hard as nostrils flared and called out the anger and tension in his body.

"The collar will stay on whilst I untie your feet. Kick out again, I'll put you back here with a bigger plug in your ass. Clear?"

Harder breathing, a short, sharp nod was given.

“Good.” Tom undid the foot cuffs after slipping the key from his pocket. Dan kept his body rigid and Tom kept a wary glance on him as he made sure circulation returned. He helped Dan find his feet, then let him take some water from a bottle that went back onto the table once finished. It still left both collar and choker in place, hands bound at his side, and the butt plug in place with the threat of a charge if he spoke. Dan knew it, and the way he squared his body on to Tom said he was biding his time to bite back, nothing more. Which was fine by Tom. He needed Dan to listen; he didn’t want him to break.

With the silk blindfold also still in place, Tom stepped up and kissed at Dan’s lips, just a gentle brush of lips against lips, nothing more. The tenderness behind it had Dan jolting as though his collar had kicked into life. Tom smiled sadly. He loved the blinded look on Dan, where gentleness became as much a torment as whip on skin, especially when it wasn’t expected.

Tom hooked his thumbs under the blindfold and eased it off Dan’s face, letting the fine silk eventually drop to the floor.

The look in brown eyes as they instantly levelled on Tom was all his, every ounce of anger, hurt, and the need just to understand—but also not give a damn in the same breath—it was all there in that single, locked-on look. Dan went to snap something out, but a jolt in his ass stopped him and his frustrated cry only won him another.

Shaking his head, Tom denied him any attention and looked away.

As he did, Dan came in, forcing Tom to back down a step as Dan’s hard breath on his face snapped out *I can’t do anything but listen, you fuck. So speak, and make it fast before I fucking hit you.*

Tom still kept his gaze away, his look now on the far wall.

Dan snorted air hard through his nose, then followed and saw what kept Tom’s interest. When he did, Tom finally gave Dan all the attention he needed.

The confusion creasing Dan’s brow was obvious. Brown eyes took in one wall, then another, then, twisting around slightly, another and—

Dan went to speak, his face screwing up a touch, but it wasn’t the collar that stopped him this time as he looked back at Tom.

The walls had been stripped bare a few days ago, given a fresh white coat, making the perfect blank canvas. But after that...

Sketched to such fine precision around them, six links made a huge border around the studio walls. Each link came with a single word, followed by a floor-to-ceiling painting behind it.

“Scotland” etched its way around the first link, then “Greymere” graced the second. Country and home; where they’d first met, then where they’d spent their first night together: here. The image behind each link captured the place, day, and time of year of each meeting, snow in the one then effortlessly blended into fallen autumn leaves of the next. The third cried “Grief”, marking the year Dan lost his father. A life-size sketch of Dan and his dad sitting on a bench claimed its rightful place for that link; then the fourth moved back into winter in true “Edinburgh” fashion. It had been the first year Dan had seen Edinburgh Castle alive at night during Hogmanay, most other New Year’s Eves having been spent back in England with his father. The castle itself was caught in an array of fireworks despite its moonlit setting. But where there should have been crowds of people, and there had been hoards of people that year, only two had been drawn sitting on a hillside with their backs to the two onlookers watching them now.

The fifth link that Tom had let his gaze wander to, softly called “Burn”. It caught Dan naked and bound mid-heat as he’d arched on the kitchen table, taking the fifth anniversary link to his cock just over a week ago.

That left the upcoming sixth year. Tom didn’t need to look to see Dan’s confusion. Etched in the silver-grey of the chain was the single word:

*His?*

No picture sat behind, just a shaded area of fog that seemed to move and twist with the shadows and light of the studio. It hid the answer to the question being asked.

“My faither taught me a valuable lesson,” said Tom, quietly, and he glanced around the paintings, finally resting on the lack of art in the last. “Blackness,” he mumbled. “How there’s nothing worse than having the tools in your hands, to only then be confronted with a black pit where memories should have been.” Tom managed a shrug as he looked at the fog. “It’s what frustrates him, Dan. How having all the tools there in front of him won’t bring back the missing links and the memories those links spark.”

He looked back to find Dan watching him.

“It scares the life out of me, how I can draw every moment we’ve spent together, but when it comes to looking at life without you...” Tom found the

last link, the black mist behind it. "That's all I see." He frowned. "I lost sight of us for a moment, but only for a moment, how a fight over a goddamn pencil cost me you." He gave a sigh. "I wanted to say sorry. That I know I hurt you, that I needed some time out that turned out to be such a bad idea. I just needed you."

Dan started to say something, then frowned angrily when the electro kit kicked in, making him wince and dance. Tom again shook his head, this time going in close, then untying the rope at his side. Letting the rope fall to the floor, he kissed at Dan's throat, then moved behind him, pulling out the keys to the handcuffs and unlocking them.

Dan rubbed at his wrist, finishing by tossing the cuffs to the floor, but when Dan went to pull the collar off and stop the kick in his ass, Tom backed Dan up against the wall, giving a slow shake of head, his hands slipping into Dan's and taking them high up above his head.

Lips now to neck, Tom kissed gently, earning a hiss off Dan.

"Let me say sorry," he mumbled against the curve of Dan's throat, nipping gently at the skin. "Let me take you down to the floor..." He kissed his way up to Dan's ear, feeling the body beneath take heavier breaths, body now pushing against body. "Let me tie you up, fuck you until you have nothing left," he whispered. "Then let me take you to bed. Christ, Dan, I've missed just holding you in the aftermath."

He released Dan's hands, now resting his palm flat just next to them. Dan was hard against his hip, so fucking hard; it matched Tom as he pulled his own body in closer, cock brushing against cock through the thickness of jean on the bare flesh of Dan's exposed dick as it topped Dan's trousers.

Bodies were already there, moving, grinding, wanting what came naturally; yet in that moment where he knew he needed to take Dan down to the floor, Tom cooled all heat, just breathing against Dan's ear. Waiting.

After a moment, Dan slipped his hands back under Tom's, locking fingers with fingers. Permission... granted.

Tom frowned, dipping his head into the curve of Dan's throat, and he let out a soft breath against his damp skin. "Thank you," he mumbled, quietly.

His own touch drifted down Dan's arms, over the play of jacket, to his sides, then Tom inched Dan's jeans off his hips, finishing by digging his palms and a rough grip into Dan's ass cheeks. "Fuck," mumbled Tom, sick of missing

this as he pulled him in and crushed hips against hips. "Missed you, boy," he said, tracing a hand down and taking out the butt plug. The wires came off next, leaving everything resting on the unit by them, except for the collar around Dan's throat. Tom kissed at it, then at the tender throat just above it. "So sick of having to miss you."

A soft groan came from Dan. Allowing the smallest frown to creep in, Tom tugged him away from the wall.

"Strip."

The stillness in Dan's levelled gaze stayed with Tom for longer than usual, almost a challenge, Dan's breathing giving all of his fight, life. Then making it slow, he unfastened his jacket and slipped it from his shoulders. As it fell to the floor, the buttons on his shirt came next, but a slight crease of brow also crept in. The shirt was eased off his shoulders next, and as it landed on the floor, Tom let his own look darken seeing the new bruise on Dan's upper arm.

The teeth marks were clear, leaving the beginnings of the bruise around them.

Tom went in, brushing the back of his hand against the mark. "Anything else I need to know about?"

Quiet, then after a moment, Dan shook his head.

Tom kissed at the bite, then, hand resting briefly on Dan's hip, he took him away from the wall and made a slow circle around him, taking in every shift and change of light on his skin, fingers marking his route on Dan's ass.

Satisfied no more damage had been done, Tom came nose-to-nose with Dan and he let his touch trace down to Dan's cock.

Dan looked away, the anger still there in his eyes a touch, and it caused Tom to kiss at his jaw as he stroked hard at his cock, once, twice. The third won a groan, then Dan looked down at Tom's hand playing his cock.

"Knees," said Tom, quietly. "You find them, boy."

It killed Tom when it came. The ease with how Dan knelt, hands in his lap, grace and decadence found so easily in the drop of his head to chest, Tom saw everything here he could still so easily lose and it battled with how he wanted to claim back everything that was his.

## Chapter Ten

“Hands behind your back.”

Dan heard the command, and fighting everything from lust to anger, he complied, easing his hands into position. He didn't look up—he couldn't, not yet. All life was caught and frozen around him, on the walls, in the words, the drawings—the touch belonging to the man who now cuffed his hands, then in the soft voice that went over what happened at the weekend. He thought that being ignored by Tom had hurt, but the impact of being known, of being seen and remembered, it cut so much deeper.

He knew why Tom had needed his time away. This was Dan's career, and he saw the stresses and strain on families play out every day. He also knew that time out sometimes didn't help. Everybody had their flaws and breaking points; it angered him more that Tom had felt as though he'd needed to walk over admitting he needed to break, then getting caught up in the drink and not finding a way to call when he'd needed to find his way back. They'd been together for so long, home should have been Tom's first stop, not his last. It shouldn't have taken all of this for Tom to finally open up and allow himself to bleed. Or maybe it had needed this: for it to really hurt before he could heal.

Use of the knife had made sure he had every right to walk away. Yeah, he knew Tom, too, how it had been done to ensure pure focus was given to blinded steps, no fight, no resistance, not in the garage where damage could really be done if they had fallen over. And those garage doors going up and the oil needed to the left hinge had proved beyond a doubt where Dan had been taken, but it still scared the life out of him. Tom had still scared the life out of him with the intensity of all of his “Please, just listen.”

It left Dan needing to trust the sub in him, the Dom in Tom. He needed to see the Dom, let himself respond and use the trust he had with Tom to help him erase the hurt and mistrust that had been caused elsewhere in their life.

Black work boots on wood moved away from him, and Dan glanced up to see Tom slip his own T-shirt over his head, then off his shoulders. He wanted to squeeze his own cock seeing it, seeing him down to just jeans and work boots, the relaxation of tension in those shoulder muscles was more than obvious now Tom had been given permission to breathe his natural role. This was Tom. This was them.



He came back with a chain, some fine blue rope, and a strong metal ring, the latter he screwed into the floor just a few feet away. The hook to the chain went over the metal ring, then Tom came and knelt in front of Dan. A moment later a breath brushed against his ear.

“The piercing in your cock.” The bite at his ear had Dan fighting to get a hold of his cock and just ease the bleed of pre-cum he felt dampen his abs. “You had it done for a reason. Remember?”

Dan caught his breath as a finger hooked inside the captive ring he wore in his tip. Tom knew where to hit hard and fast. A twist came, gentle, then a tug quickly enough to the other side had Dan up and jerking his hips forward, crying out as his tip wept in true *fuck yes, there*, fashion.

Tom rose up with him, chest against chest, his crush into Dan's balls and stopping him from easing back down. Tom had added the crush and cold metal of the chain to his balls, and it had Dan groaning as metal was ground against his scrotum.

Dan doubled over. As he did, a bite came hard at his neck, the grip on his balls and twist of piercing of his cock making sure he stayed still as Tom bit and marked at his leisure, marking... claiming...

“Please,” breathed Dan, tasting sweat on his lips.

“Back to your favourite word, I hear, boy. Good start,” murmured Tom, kissing at his jaw. Then all touch was withdrawn as he unhooked the thin blue rope from his belt. The chain now slept in Tom's lap for a moment as another grip went to Dan's balls, tugging them to the full and making him cry out. Tom knew his art well, wrapping the silk tight around the base four times before knotting it, forcing out a grunt from Dan. Palming came at how the ropes defined the full shape of his sacs, fuelling the need to close his legs and shield against the onslaught. But hands were tied firmly behind his back and Tom wouldn't let him close his legs.

Then as Tom picked up the chain that ran away over to the metal rung, he went still as the fine hook was attached to the piercing in his cock. He felt it slip over, the thickness of the hook screwing for a moment with his tip as the coldness brushed against it.

“Fuck.” That was a little louder and a ghost of a smile haunted Tom's lips hearing it.

This was what the piercing was for. Keeping him chained by the cock. There never were any idle threats to any of Tom's words. Dan couldn't shift his

gaze, how the hook slipped around the captive piercing, leaving the chain to fall down his cock, over to the rung screwed into the floor. The chain itself wasn't thick, just this thin collection of links that shifted the piercing in his tip, making Dan ease out a breath.

Tom was in again, wrapping the rope around his balls, but this time catching the chain and making it so if he felt any tug would come on his balls before his tip.

"Christ," mumbled Dan.

Tom found Dan's cock, and Dan tried not to squirm as he played the length so teasingly slow. Any movement from Dan's hips would come with a tug on his balls, and the look shining there in Tom's eyes wanted just that, to hear him cry out.

"Bastard," he hissed, and the smack of hand came at his cock, making him double into Tom.

"Bastard... who?"

Dan was left shivering against Tom, and he screwed his eyes shut, trying to control it. "You, Si—" he nearly snarled the "Sir", biting back anger as heat raced his body. Tom was back stroking at his cock, biting gently at his ear. But on those last words, a grip came to his hair and Dan's gaze was forced up level with Tom's.

The demand of entry into his mouth was heated, Tom's tongue clashing with his, making the rules, ensuring he followed the play as the strokes on his cock heated up between his thighs. Dan cried out into the kiss as his rutting of hips forced a hard tug on his balls. "Fucking bastard," he groaned.

"No. Not my name," said Tom, hiding a smile as he pulled back. Shifting slightly, a finger now hooking around the D-link in Dan's collar, Tom took him face-first down to meet the chain kissing the floor. A third hook was set in place and was hooked over Dan's D-link ring on his collar, keeping him doubled and on his knees.

He groaned, not realising Tom had moved until he felt a single tail whip cut across his ass.

His cry was instant, then lost to another cut across his ass that had him dipping his hips to escape it. Two more hits, then another, soon followed by the crush of hands into stinging cheeks, it forced the whip lashes to slipstream out of focus in that moment. The tug on his balls was constant, and kept him grounded as his own dodge of the whip shifted the hook in his captive ring.

Tom knelt behind him, and the threat of his cock was there, pushing against the material of his jeans and into Dan's ass as his hips were gripped, pulling him back. Tom rode him like that for a while, just torturing body and mind with the gentlest of tugs at his body. But because of his chained cock and balls, added hurt exploded from his groin outward. Dan bit back his cries and downright refused to cry out how he needed to be fucked now.

"Holding back on letting me hear that pleasure, boy?" A finger breached him first, just the one, slicked up from the pre-cum off Dan's own cock. Then fingering came hard and fast. Two more fingers had him writhing, shifting his hips to meet the ferocity and willing the pull on his balls to hurt more, so his body hurt more, just—"More."

Panting hard, Dan was left swearing on the floor as the touch withdrew. His knees had inched fully apart to allow the deepest penetration without even realising, a beg in its own right, and Tom denied it. He would deny it. A kiss came at his ass cheek, then, hearing the sound of a zipper, he arched when the tip of Tom's cock demanded access to his ass.

"More?" breathed Tom, sounding out of breath, need and heat there in the constant grip-release of finger digging into his hips, how the hold threatened to pull Dan back as Tom forced everything he had forward into him. "Let's see if we can extend that vocabulary of yours a touch, boy."

The tip pushed in, forcing a cry out of Dan as every muscle in his body tensed, then instantly relaxed, allowing Tom to take him root deep.

"My name, boy, what is it to you?"

"Fuck." Dan bit at the chain to stop himself crying it out, and his silence brought him the hardest fuck into his ass before Tom held himself in root deep again.

"Not my name, boy. What is it to you?"

His groan made sure he took more hard fucks up into him, then he grunted at the sudden loss of Tom's cock. Hands drifted over his ass for a moment, drawing trails in the fine perspiration. Another kiss came where one had played, fingers instead gently brushing against the hole where Tom's cock had rough-played.

"Still holding out on me?" breathed Tom.

Dan shifted into the dirt, into the touch playing against his ass. "Please."

"Please who?"

Again he denied the Dom his title and the touch withdrew. As Tom stood, the rattle of chain came from overhead.

The sound was distinct: a ceiling hoist, and Dan tried to pull his hands free and stroke at his cock knowing what that signified.

A gentle push came at Dan's hip, enough to encourage him to lie on his side. Hands were untied from his back, then when another tug encouraged him onto his back, his hands were taken above his head and cuffed to the metal ring. Awkward considering the chain ran down through his collar, over his body, and kept his cock chained and balls hurting.

All of that tension was added to as he saw the leg spreader chained to the ceiling hoist. Tom pulled it down, then taking the leather cuff, he slipped it into place around one of Dan's ankles, then the same care and attention came to his other. It spread Dan's legs wide and left his ass on display to Tom. Tom took it all in, his gaze running from ceiling hoist, down to between Dan's thighs, all to rest on Dan's gaze, and the look there in Tom's eyes...

Dan groaned.

Tom gave a simple tug on the ceiling hoist and Dan's ass was lifted up off the floor, now resting snugly against Tom's groin. The chains rattled in applause with being allowed to watch Tom stake a full claim.

Only Dan's shoulders touched the floor, the hoist's angle kept low to the floor to account for how his cock and balls were still bound by the chain running up over his body and through his hands.

Tom nestled into place, tracing touches down Dan's legs. His stroke to his own cock came with a cocky smile, Tom's *now you'll cry my name, boy*, then as he gripped into Dan's hips and pulled him into his lap, the hard grip said exactly the same.

"Fuh—" Dan started to cry out.

Tom's thick cock breached him hard and fast, forcing him more onto his shoulders and making him writhe as he arched his body. The threat was there with a vicious tug on his balls each time he tasted Tom, then as a hand took his cock, matching the rough pace in his ass, Dan stopped all fight, now just taking everything Tom had to give, crying out how much he loved taking everything Tom had to give.

Slaps of hips against ass punctuated the scramble of dirt as Dan rode the heat in his body, the shockwaves from the brutal pace were felt as high as his shoulders as hands were able to do nothing but hold onto the metal ring.

“Fucking come on, boy.” Tom made sure Dan found the tips of his shoulders. “Cry my fucking name.”

Still he refused, biting back the sir tag despite his balls hitching high and crying out the need to call enough and come despite being bound.

In reply, his ass hit the floor hard, leaving Dan panting heavily and fighting confusion as he tried to figure out just when Tom had left his ass alone and released the ceiling hoist. The chains to his leather foot cuffs were taken off the hoist, leaving cuffs still around his ankles but now free as he tried to scramble back and find some comfort on the mattress Tom always kept down here. A hard pull on his balls warned him to keep still when the chain on his balls was pulled to the full, almost making it really hurt. The rope was untied, then the hook taken off his piercing just before another hand into his balls made him try to close his legs with how circulation rushed back into his groin.

“Easy, boy,” breathed Tom. But Dan had been pushed too far, his hips now punching up, demanding more, wanting—“Fucking more.”

A hand under his jaw kept him still.

“Calm. Down.”

Breathing heavily, finally giving a smile, he eased up, kissing at Tom’s lips. “Please. Fucking finish it. Sir.”

Something changed in Tom, all control now drawn to a single point. Dan found he was caught in a tussle that ended up with a mattress beneath his ass. Tom sat behind him, and an arm was around Dan’s neck, a hand on his cock.

“Need to come, boy?”

“Sir, fuck yes, please,” breathed Dan, trying to find some footing with his heels and push his hips up to allow his cock to play in Tom’s hand. The moment he did, a smack came at his tip, forcing him to cry out and close his legs. “*Bastard*,” he shouted.

Kisses came at his neck, then hard bites, then a harder grip on his cock that jacked him off hard enough to make him shift and writhe into the hard pace. “Fuck... fuck.”

“Come on, boy.”

He couldn’t hold back anymore and Dan came, every muscle in his body stretched to the full as he arched up, his cock pushed up into Tom’s touch for the last time, tip fully exposed. Cum hit his abs and he forgot the basics of breathing as Tom stroked each stream out of him.

“Christ, Christ...” mumbled Dan, nearly crumpling in on himself as he came down. He let his head drop back onto Tom’s shoulder, all of his weight taken by Tom. Talk was impossible, breathing and getting air back into his system being the basics now.

Tom was still hard, his cock full and digging into the small of Dan’s back.

Dan squirmed slightly, feeling it, loving the feel of how Tom pushed his own need back in order to take care of his. “Let...” mumbled Dan, at first just seeing the ceiling come back into focus. “Let me go.”

Dan sought the comfort of the mattress as he was laid down on his side. Tom came down, shaping him from behind. The question was there, just when had Tom taken his boots and jeans off, but he struggled to find the words as he shivered into the comedown.

Tom eased away, then the sound of boots being slipped back on and him walking into the distance drifted over. A moment later, the sound of heating kicking into life drifted over, Tom always preferring a cool place to play, then he found his natural spot behind Dan again. Hands were un-cuffed, then an arm slipped just above Dan’s hand, almost offering to shelter his head where Tom’s body failed to.

Dan locked his fingers in Tom’s and closed his eyes. Gentle kisses came at the back of his neck, Tom’s hard cock still demanding attention, but all control, with lust held so carefully in check to allow Dan to calm.

“Sorry, Brummie,” mumbled Tom against his throat. “I mean that.”

“It’s okay,” he murmured back, then let a smile creep in, “although you could have just kissed me and said sorry, y’know?”

“Hmmm,” said Tom, shifting behind him as if to ease the ache in his cock. Dan bit back a groan with how he loved the feel of it digging into his ass. “Thought about that,” mumbled Tom, “but kissing up here usually comes with two options, and it looked like you wanted to go Glaswegian Kiss on me. I didn’t fancy a headbutt.”

Dan choked a chuckle. “Said the guy who kidnapped me at knifepoint.”

A hand snaked his waist, pulling him closer. “I know I scared you. But you could have stopped me. You knew it was me. I would have listened. And in my defence, the knife was fake.”

“Fake?” he choked. Then Dan let his hand rest against the arm around his waist. He “could have” stopped it, but hadn’t. He knew that too and tried to

bury how he hadn't wanted Tom to walk away. Dan had never once said stop. Giving a sigh, he stretched his body to the full before letting life rest again. "That link drawing on my table was damn sweet."

Kisses still laced the back of his neck, but Tom whispered another apology. Giving a sigh, Dan turned over and eased on top of Tom. The cut lip was still visible, and he brushed his thumb against the hurt, easing out his own hurt on a sigh now he was able to touch Tom. A gentle kiss replaced where his hand played, then another.

Tom offered a smile, hands brushing distractedly at Dan's hips.

Taking hold of some discarded rope, Dan eased up so that he straddled Tom's hips. Keeping his gaze on the lust lowering those hazel eyes, he took hold of one of Tom's wrists, wrapped the rope around it, then brought the other in, again wrapping the rope around that one. No knot was tied, the Dom in Tom always respected, but Dan let Tom's hands rest against his chest, then he leaned down and kissed at his lips, loving having how all of this control was here with him. Giving a glance over to the last link on the wall, where no drawing sat behind it, to the word "*His?*" etched into the finely drawn metal with obvious flaws, Dan pulled Tom up, then eased his bound hands over his own head, down his body, to rest on his ass.

"Yes," he mumbled, kissing at Tom's lips again as he found his cock. "You're mine all right, Sir."

He made the ride slow and easy down onto Tom's cock, and Tom's hands instantly came up, tracing Dan's back, the rope grating skin in his wake.

Tom held on, marking, claiming at Dan's throat, whispering Dan's name, and all the quietest sorries that came with it as he was taken.

Breathing heavy, arms resting on Tom's shoulders, Dan smiled, then kept his whisper so light. "Or a kilt, Sir."

Tom mumbled something against his throat, all the need to take control buried in that sigh, barely, as he let Dan ride him. "Hm?"

Dan lifted Tom's gaze up to meet his. "Or you could have just worn a kilt for me, Sir."

Tom's chuckle was so soft, then suddenly lost to how he gripped at Dan's back, biting into Dan's shoulder, all to bury how his orgasm tore through his body. "Fuck," he breathed. "Might have to bring in a discussion about that," he managed, still caught in the rush. "Maybe wear it just the once."

“Just the once?” Dan raised a brow.

“Aye, lad. Just... the once.”

**The End**



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## Author Bio

*Jack L. Pyke blames her dark writing influences on living close to one of England's finest forests. Having grown up hearing a history of kidnappings, murders, strange sightings, and sexual exploits her neck of the woods is renowned for, Jack takes that into her writing, having also learned that human coping strategies for intense situations can sometimes make the best of people have disastrously bad moments. Redeeming those flaws is Jack's drive, and if that drive just happens to lead to sexual tension between two or more guys in a D/s relationship, Jack's the first to let nature take its course.*

## Contact & Media Info

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# HIS HEART BELONGS TO DADDY

By Harry K. Malone

## Photo Description

A well-muscled man in a leather shirt and leather cap sits astride a motorcycle. He has one hand on the throttle, and with the other he's holding a second man in place on the seat. The second man is naked except for a pair of black boots. He's leaning against the biker, his eyes closed in bliss.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*That's me with my Daddy.*

*Yes, my Daddy is younger than me. Yes, people usually mistake our relationship roles when he allows me to discuss them. I'm older, taller than my Daddy and I love to bottom. I came out of the closet later in life, always wanting for someone to take care of me the way my Daddy does. Sometimes I step out of line but I need my Daddy to keep me in line. He helps me find the right balance, sometimes with toys or discipline. Could you please tell our story, give a glimpse into our daily lives?*

*I'd prefer a contemporary setting. Bikers a plus!*

*Sincerely,*

*SheReadsALot*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** BDSM, Daddy/boy, flogging, age gap, men with children, businessmen, over age 40

**Word Count:** 25,348

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Dedication*

For JSS, who may not understand but always supports.

# **HIS HEART BELONGS TO DADDY**

**By Harry K. Malone**

## Chapter 1

Oliver was watching *The Colbert Report* when Olivia let herself into the condo on Friday night. He'd told her she was welcome to come over any time, and though he'd hinted that she might call first in case he was busy, it warmed his heart to think that his twenty-one-year-old daughter still wanted to be around him, especially on the weekend.

"Pops!"

Oliver heard her keys clang against the crystal dish in the entryway and then the thud of two shoes hitting the marble tile. A moment later Olivia appeared in the doorway to the den.

"What are you doing home on a Friday night?"

"I could say the same thing to you." Oliver pointed the remote at the television to pause the show. "Your social life so sorry these days that you have to spend your weekends with your old man?"

Olivia made a face at him and plopped down on the plush sectional. She wiggled a blue silk throw pillow out from behind her. "Actually, it was a pity checkup. I knew you'd be alone, and I said to myself, 'Olivia, a good daughter hoping for a nice inheritance wouldn't spend her Friday night having drinks with hot guys when she could be sitting on the couch with her father, the shut-in who hasn't seen the outside world since you were born.' That's what I said to myself, so then I came over to check on you."

Oliver pointed the remote at her and hit the mute button, but it didn't work. "I am not a shut-in."

"When was the last time you went out?"

"Olivia, I was at the office for eleven hours today."

"Da-ad." She rolled her head to the back of the couch. She'd pouted the same way as a child. The difference was that back then it was to get something she wanted for herself, and now it was to get something she wanted for him. "I just want you to be happy," she said, reaffirming Oliver's belief that her heart was in the right place.

She was a good kid, even if she was more meddlesome than her mother. "I *am* happy. I like watching Stephen Colbert. He makes me happy." She raised an

eyebrow in disbelief. "Really," he insisted. "Go out. Do dumb things. Screw up your life. That's what you're supposed to do in your twenties."

"I thought I was supposed to get a job and act like a grown-up."

"God knows you don't seem to be doing it, so I was thinking maybe I'd just encourage the debauchery from now on."

"Can I tell Mom you said that?"

Joanne, bless her, would die. She firmly believed their daughter was adult enough to get a job and start paying her own way, but at the same time she had a hard time accepting that Olivia drank alcohol and had sex. Not that Oliver particularly wanted to imagine Olivia as a sexual being either, but he was more of a realist than Jo. "No. Go on. I mean it. Get out of here."

"All right," Olivia sighed, pushing herself up from the couch. She came over and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll be back after last call."

"You're sleeping here tonight?"

"That okay?"

"Yeah, of course."

Olivia usually only stayed with him when it was a special occasion, like his birthday, or when she thought he'd be down in the dumps. She technically lived with Joanne, but she'd spent the final months of college bouncing between friends' apartments. Since her graduation a few weeks earlier, Oliver and Joanne had gone days at a time without seeing her.

From behind the sofa, she dropped an iPad into his lap. "Golden Match, Dad. Check it out."

"What's Golden Match?"

"It's a dating site for seniors. See ya."

As Olivia trotted back to the foyer to put on her shoes, Oliver tossed the iPad aside. He tried not to be affronted, since she really had the best of intentions. Most kids probably cringed at the idea of their dad dating, and she'd been trying to play matchmaker for him since she was fifteen. It was sweet, even if she persisted on calling him geriatric and earnestly believed that the Internet was the place to meet quality men.

Once he heard the front door open and close, he turned Colbert back on.

“I want you to kneel down beside me, right here, like a good boy,” Martin instructed. Adam crawled on his hands and knees to his place beside the dining chair. “Open up. Good boy!”

Adam resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was averaging about fifty “good boys” in a night with Martin, only half of which were actually deserved. Most of the time he was just doing what he was told, tasks so easy they shouldn’t have warranted any praise. But he couldn’t really complain. Martin was good in bed, generous with his time and money, and he seemed to really care about Adam.

Adam let Martin feed him bite-size pieces of food by hand, and when the plate was empty, Martin studied it. Adam knew he was trying to determine if it would be okay to order Adam to lick it clean. Adam wasn’t sure if he wanted to do it, but he hoped Martin would demand something from him, tell him to do something that challenged him. But after a moment, Martin rose from the table and took the dishes into the kitchen.

*Why didn’t you ask me to do that?* Adam shifted slightly on his knees. His lower back was starting to a cramp.

“It’s bedtime,” Martin announced. “Go brush your teeth and wash your face. Get undressed and pick out one toy.”

“Only one?”

“Only one.”

“But we haven’t done anything tonight, and it’s so early!”

“Don’t complain, or I’ll spank you.” Martin sounded too nervous to actually carry out the threat. “Be a good boy, and I promise I’ll fuck you any way you want.”

Adam heaved a bratty sigh, rose to his feet, and trudged up the stairs. Martin’s house had four bedrooms, three of which were bigger than the living room in Adam’s apartment, and one, on the ground floor, that served as the master suite. Martin didn’t like playing in there, so he kept the room at the top of the stairs for Adam. He’d let Adam choose the paint colors and linens, and he’d stocked the dresser with a variety of toys for discipline and pleasure. The walk-in closet held a partial wardrobe of clothes in Adam’s size, so Adam never had to worry about bringing an overnight bag or hurrying home in the morning. As it was, he hadn’t been to his apartment in three days.

The promise of a good fucking had him hurrying through his business in the attached bathroom. He tossed his clothes in the hamper and padded into the

bedroom. He stood at the dresser, contemplating his options. If Martin was only up for one thing tonight, the best option was probably a flogger. Martin had a steady hand, even if he wasn't the most intuitive at using the thing, and if Adam selected the brown one made from ostrich, the longer falls might curl nicely around his lower bits. It would get him more fired up than that spanking Martin had threatened him with.

Even if Martin had carried out the punishment, it wouldn't do much for either of them. Martin never spanked hard enough or with consistent enough aim, and Adam always squirmed and zoned out before the pain could meld into pleasure. No matter how many hits he promised, Martin would inevitably give up after only a few and complain that his hand hurt. So it was much better to go with a flogger, something to make things more enjoyable for both of them.

Adam laid the ostrich flogger on the bed and braced himself against the one empty wall in the room, his feet spread wide. When Martin appeared a few minutes later, he chuckled in satisfaction.

"I love seeing you look ready for me. Makes me hard." Without peeking, Adam knew Martin would be loosening his tie and opening the top button of his shirt. The sight of Martin coming undone always got to him, but often in their scenarios he wasn't in position to see. By the time they'd finished whatever game they'd been playing, Martin would be naked.

"I love making you hard." Adam tensed slightly as he heard the first whoosh of the flogger moving through the air. The tips touched him, flicking gently at first, but by the fourth stroke, they crackled against his skin. By the sixth, they made him feel itchy, and he wanted to call for a time out to stretch his back. By the tenth, he just wanted the scene to be over.

But he kept quiet. It wasn't that he couldn't speak. That had never been part of their arrangement. It was that Martin was so obviously into it that Adam couldn't bring himself to ruin the moment. And it paid off, eventually. When Martin tossed the flogger aside and manhandled Adam to the bed, it definitely paid off.

Martin took him, hard and fast, reaching all those places inside that needed tending to, all the places that the flogging and the discipline at dinner couldn't reach. As Martin's orgasm drew nearer, he growled, "Who's your Daddy?" and Adam cringed, but he was too close to the edge to argue.

"You are."

Their shared groans echoed throughout the house.

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## Chapter 2

Golden Match had an option for men seeking men to browse and post profiles. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. For one thing, any dating service in this day and age that didn't market to the gay community had bad business sense. For another, Olivia was a thoughtful girl. She would have vetted the site before suggesting it to her old man.

To appease her, Oliver created a profile. It took a lot longer than he anticipated, and he found himself overthinking every answer to the questions he was asked. By the time he finished, his profile no longer sounded like the same Oliver Wasserstein he'd known for fifty-four years, but he hoped he came off as sophisticated and intriguing.

Around ten his home phone rang. Figuring it was Olivia, and hoping she wasn't in trouble, he picked up.

"Why are you answering your phone on a Friday night?"

It wasn't Olivia. It was worse. It was her mother.

"Why are you calling me if you don't think I'll answer?"

"Liv told me to check on you. She said you looked especially sad tonight."

"I am *not* sad!" Sometimes it felt as if the two of them lived in an alternate reality. "I'm just watching television!"

"Oh, Oliver."

He hated how she said that. *Oh, Oliver*, the way she'd frowned at him when he'd announced he was quitting his job and starting his own business. *What a terrible idea, you sad little man*. Maybe Joanne never said that exactly, but she didn't have to. It was all in how she said his name.

"What about you?" he wondered. "Why aren't you out?"

"I am. Ted and I are at Santorini's with some friends. Why don't you come join us for a drink?"

"I'm tired. I was about to go to bed."

"Are you sure?"

He was half-tempted to give in. He could change quickly and drive to Santorini's in less than fifteen minutes. He could have a cocktail, say hello to

Joanne's husband Ted, and it wouldn't be a dreadful way to spend the evening. It wouldn't be thrilling, but at least he'd have a chance to socialize.

Unless it was a setup.

"Which friends?"

"Maggie and James," she said, understanding his trepidation. "Nobody single. Nobody gay."

"I don't know about that. James definitely wants a three-way." Jo snorted into the phone. "Are you at the table with him right now?"

"Uh-huh."

"How does he look? Does he have the face of a man who wants to shake up the sacrosanct marital bed?"

"All right, Ollie, we'll see you soon." She hung up on him.

Oliver groaned and stretched and went to find a change of clothes.

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Things always looked different in the harsh light of day. Adam awoke, needing to use the bathroom, but he couldn't because Martin's arms were wrapped tightly around him. He nudged and wiggled, but Martin only snored and squeezed harder.

Adam hated being spooned.

"Martin?" He nudged Martin with his hips. "Martin, I have to get up. Come on."

Martin snuffled awake. "What? What time is it?"

"Come on, let go of me." He could see freedom at the edge of the mattress, only a few inches away. "Martin." He stretched his torso forward while kicking backward at Martin's shins. Once liberated, Adam stretched and worked out the kinks in his neck. "I hate it when you do that."

"Sorry."

After showering and dressing, Adam found Martin downstairs in the master bathroom. He had a towel wrapped around his waist and shaving cream smeared across his face.

Adam sat on the spacious countertop between the two sinks. "What are we going to do today?"

Martin ran the razor up his throat to the jaw line. "I was trying to figure out if I should tell you to go home and get some chores done, or if I should tell you to stay here and help me with mine. I need to go grocery shopping. Do you feel like doing that?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Well, I want to make sure I'm not forcing you to do things you don't want to do."

"Isn't that your job?"

"To make you do things you don't like?" Martin gave him a worried look through the beard of shaving cream.

"Not just anything I don't like, but things that are for my own good, even when I don't want to do them."

"But isn't it so much more enjoyable when we're doing something we both want?"

Adam thumped his head against the mirror. They weren't even having the same conversation. Adam was thinking about nutrition, exercise, and money management; Martin was truly convinced Adam liked crawling around on his hands and knees and eating food out of Martin's hand.

Adam sighed and watched the man shave. Martin's salt and pepper hair was still wet and sexily rumpled. His chest was wet, too, and Adam liked how furry it was. Martin was so distinguished, such a man's man. Except when it came to taking care of Adam.

They'd met at an instructional class on rope play at an adult store. There had only been five other people in the class that night: one unattractive, unhappy couple who barely acknowledged each other's existence; one young couple who blushed and giggled at everything the instructor, Master Kimodo, had said; and one single, studious woman who took pages and pages of notes. Adam had approached Martin after the class, and they'd gone out for a drink and hit it off.

In hindsight, the fact that it had been Adam who approached Martin was probably a sign. Adam had done all the driving in their relationship, despite the fact that Martin was supposed to be the one in charge. He'd offered Adam guidance with job interviews in the few weeks since graduation, and he never hesitated to buy Adam things and give him spending money. But he was generally clueless about the role he had pledged to fill in Adam's life.

“We’re not very good at this.” Adam figured that sounded nicer than putting all the blame on Martin.

“We’re new to it.”

“I’m not sure it’s working for me.”

“So let’s talk about it. Isn’t that what Master Kimodo said? Communication is the most important thing?” Martin splashed some water on his face and wiped it off with a towel.

“You’re a sweet man. A wonderful man.” Adam realized he was beginning a breakup speech. He hadn’t planned on ending his relationship with Martin, but now that the words were starting to tumble out of his mouth, he knew it was the right thing to do. “I don’t think we’re giving each other what we need.”

Martin leaned a hip on the counter and took one of Adam’s hands in his own. He laced their fingers together. “We’re just figuring out the dynamic, that’s all. We’ll get it. We just need time.”

Adam slid his hand free. “Martin, you’re a bad Daddy. And not,” he rushed to add, “‘bad’ in a sexy way.”

“Damn it, Adam, it’s not me who’s the problem. You’re a rotten boy. I can never tell what you want, and you don’t listen. You don’t even seem to enjoy listening. What’s the point of me trying to give you guidance if you aren’t receptive?”

“Receptive?” Adam guffawed. “Receptive? I feel like all I do is bend over for you!”

“You love it!”

“Yeah,” Adam sighed, sliding off the counter. “I do. But everything else is a mess. I think I should go.”

Martin let him get halfway out the bathroom door before he called, “If you think you’re going to find someone who’s willing to give you everything the way I did, you’re younger and dumber than I thought.”

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### Chapter 3

Light. Bright light. Glaringly white, hot light shining directly on his face. Oliver groaned, rolled over, and pulled the pillow on top of his head. But the pillow was made of bricks, and it nearly crushed his skull. He threw it off, groaned again, and rolled onto his back, squinting at the sunlight streaming through the parted curtains.

*I will never drink that much again.* A hollow promise if ever there was one—he'd probably pledged the same thing a hundred times since he was a teenager. But this time he meant it.

It wasn't his fault. It was Joanne's, for dragging him to Santorini's the night before. If he could stay away from her, he could stay away from booze, and then he'd be able to walk the straight and narrow. Well, the narrow, anyway. He'd never wake up feeling like this again.

He was thirsty and needed to pee, but he could hardly move with the room spinning so fast. He let out another self-pitying groan.

His cell phone on the nightstand chirped with a text message. Oliver glanced at it briefly, hoping it was Jo, so he could hurl insults at her for what she'd gotten him into. If she could just resent him for their past history like a normal woman, this would never have happened. But, no, she had to be so open-minded, so content to share a daughter with her gay ex-lover. Always inviting him out to parties to show him off. *This is my daughter's father. The queer one. Isn't that neat?*

Okay, maybe Joanne had never said anything to that effect. And maybe she only invited him places because she worried he was a workaholic with no social life. Maybe she was a great woman, one of three women he had ever and would ever love—his mother, Joanne, and Olivia—and the only woman he could ever imagine being a parent with. Their relationship had crashed and burned in a matter of months, but as friends and parents, they'd been going strong for over twenty years.

Too bad he'd have to kill her.

He picked up his phone.

*R u coming 2 brkfst?*

Oliver had to read the message aloud to understand it, and by the time he'd done that, there was another message waiting to be read.

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*Pancakes.*

Why Olivia thought it was necessary to text him when they were in the same house was beyond his comprehension. The condo was big, sure, but not so big that she couldn't come down the hall and knock on his door. Unless she thought he had someone in bed with him and was avoiding the room to spare them all the embarrassment.

*Dad, come on.*

At least she was using full words now. Oliver tried to sit up. It took a few attempts, and he was sweating by the end of it, but eventually he was upright. He phoned her.

"Morning, sunshine," Olivia greeted him. "How was *The Colbert Report*?"

"Your mother told you."

"Now, Dad, there's no judgment. I said to myself, 'Olivia, how would you want Dad to react if you'd tied one on last night?' And the answer was that I'd really like it if someone would make me breakfast."

"Pancakes for a hangover?"

"Pop, we've got company. Gotta feed them something."

"Company? Christ." It was bad enough to let his daughter see him out of sorts, but no way was Oliver Wasserstein going to allow guests to witness his morning after. He rose swiftly to his feet and made it all the way to the closet door before he regretted it. He gritted his teeth, picked out a clean shirt, and went to the bathroom to freshen up.

By the time Oliver made his entrance, Olivia was holding court in the dining room. A few pancakes remained on the platter in the middle of the table, along with a half-empty pitcher of orange juice and, to Oliver's chagrin, a nearly empty bottle of 1995 Perrier-Jouët.

"You couldn't use something cheaper to mix in?"

Olivia smiled at him through a mouthful of pancakes. He recognized the glaze in her eyes. It was the telltale sign that she had a mimosa buzz. He supposed he should be more upset about that than which brand of champagne she'd used to get there.

"Aren't you all starting a little early?" He helped himself to some fresh fruit and a glass of orange juice, sans booze. "Who are you all?"

“Dad, you remember Wendy.” Olivia gestured at the young woman seated to his left. Oliver had seen her quite frequently this last school year. He guessed she was Olivia’s current BFF. “And this is Doug and Adam and the one we call Boom-Boom.”

“Good morning,” he greeted the gaggle. “Did everyone stay here last night?”

“Yes,” Olivia replied. “Well, everyone but Adam. He came over this morning.”

“I presume that you were home at a reasonable hour?”

“Before you.”

“Oh, you heard me come in?”

“We sure did,” Boom-Boom answered, sending the table into a fit of laughter.

Oliver cringed. The childish part of him wanted to turn to Olivia and say, *Well, you told me to go out! See what happens when I listen to you!* But he was, after all, in his fifties and much too old for such outbursts. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, “I apologize if I woke you.”

“Not at all, sir,” one of the young men answered. “We’re the ones who should be apologizing. We obviously intruded on your privacy.”

The one called Boom-Boom snickered again, though Oliver couldn’t imagine why. He preferred the good manners of the young man who had spoken.

“Remind me of your name again, son?”

“Adam, sir.”

“Adam, please call me Oliver.”

The kid gave him a toothy smile.

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Olivia’s dad was hot. Not hot in the older man kind of way. He was hot, like hot enough to be a model, hot enough to be on the cover of a magazine, George Clooney-esque, age-defyingly hot.

But he was a mess.

When Olivia said he would be joining them, Boom-Boom had whispered to Adam that Oliver had stumbled home drunk in the wee hours. Now that Oliver

was sitting at the table, his tardiness for breakfast, his pallid complexion, and his bloodshot eyes all gave away what he'd been doing the night before. It was as if he was trying to efface his hotness with his hangover. His skin looked dry, the wrinkles standing out proudly. There was a bead of sweat on his brow line. He was probably struggling not to hurl onto the pancakes Olivia had made.

Adam didn't know Olivia very well. They'd only recently started to run in the same circle, because Adam was roommates with Boom-Boom and Boom had once dated Wendy, who was close to Olivia. Adam knew Olivia had stayed in his room at their apartment a lot while he was at Martin's. He'd only been invited over this morning because everyone felt sorry about his breakup.

When the others finished breakfast, they pushed back from the table and scattered to get dressed and head down to the beach. Adam left with them, but once bedroom doors were slammed shut, he doubled back to the dining room, where Oliver was still contemplating a piece of grapefruit.

"I wouldn't try it," Adam cautioned. "I'd stick with a banana."

"No pancakes to fill the stomach and help flush out the toxins?"

"I can't imagine syrup will taste very good coming back up."

Oliver made a funny noise. "Did you go to school with Olivia?" Adam nodded. "Were you pre-med?"

"No, sir, communications."

"So you just learned about hangover cures as a side hobby?"

"Better than through firsthand experience." Adam clamped his mouth shut. He hadn't meant to be so cheeky, insulting the man in his own home.

"I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself." Oliver rose from the table and dropped his napkin on his plate. "Enjoy my house."

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## Chapter 4

It wasn't hard to find a date through Golden Match. A perfectly reasonable sexagenarian in Saint Petersburg responded to Oliver's profile and agreed to drive the distance to Tampa to meet.

Oliver suggested that Paul come to his house, so they could have a drink while deciding where they wanted to eat dinner. In retrospect Oliver realized it wasn't the smartest or safest thing to do, but Paul didn't raise any objections to the plan.

He arrived promptly at eight, while Oliver was still scrounging to find clothes to wear. With Olivia banished and the maid off duty, there was no one to answer the door. Oliver hurried down the hall in his socks and unbuttoned shirt. He looked like a crossover between *Cocoon* and *Risky Business*.

He opened the door to Paul, who grinned at his state of undress. "This looks promising." Paul stepped into the condo, slammed the door behind him, and shoved Oliver against the nearest wall. Before Oliver could speak, Paul's mouth latched onto his neck and left a mark that Oliver would have to explain at the office on Monday. Satisfied, Paul turned his attention to Oliver's mouth. He tasted like stale coffee. He pushed his hips into Oliver's and ran his hands under Oliver's shirt.

"What about dinner?" Oliver managed to ask.

"Screw it. Let's screw instead."

Oliver thought about it for a half-second before giving in. He took Paul into his bedroom, where the man stripped out of his jeans and flip-flops.

"I can't do hands and knees," Paul warned. "Knee replacement surgery. Standing okay? Or face to face on my back?"

Paul wanted Oliver to fuck him. Oliver ran a hand through his hair. It wasn't that he wouldn't, or couldn't, but he'd at least have liked to have been given a choice. He reached into the nightstand and pulled out a condom.

"Are you positive?"

"No. You?"

"No. I get tested every year."

“All right then.” Paul lay down atop Oliver’s comforter and spread his legs wide. He reached down to fondle his balls. “Let’s do this.”

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Oliver looked down at his Tag Heuer. His date for the evening, Simon, had been going on for a solid ten minutes about his kitchen remodel, without any awareness of Oliver’s complete and utter disinterest in the subject. When you could have whatever you wanted in your house, it wasn’t that exciting to get a designer’s discount on cabinetry. And when you could hire someone to take care of the details, you didn’t have to waste your time wondering if the glass tile backsplash clashed with the quartz countertop.

Or waste your date’s time, when he had to listen to you debate the matter.

Oliver took another sip of his cabernet. It was a nice vintage, impressive for the tiny wine bar Simon had suggested. After his “date” with Paul, Oliver had hoped that his meeting with Simon would turn out the same. In fact, he would have no problem if all his Golden Match dates turned into casual sex, though Olivia and Joanne would certainly have frowned upon that. They needn’t worry; Simon seemed intent on getting to know each other first.

As he gazed around the bar in boredom, Oliver spotted one of Olivia’s friends. It took a moment to remember the name—Adam, the one who had chastised him for drinking too heavily. Pots and kettles, it seemed. Adam was laughing loudly and waving around a wine glass of his own. There was no good in being a father if Oliver couldn’t put the younger generation in their place every now and then.

“Would you excuse me?” he interrupted Simon. “I see someone I know. I’m just going to say hello.”

Adam didn’t see Oliver approach, and he jumped when Oliver touched his arm. He looked guilty, and Oliver felt a thrill of victory rush through him. “Oh. Hi. Oliver.”

“Hello, Adam. Enjoying a drink?” He couldn’t help punctuating his consonants a little more than was necessary.

Adam narrowed his eyes. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I’m enjoying *one* glass of wine with my friend Skip.” The friend in question lifted his glass in acknowledgment. “Skip, this is Olivia’s dad, Oliver. Oliver, Skip.”

“Hey, man, nice to meet you,” Skip said. “Olivia’s a great girl.”

Yes, she was. And what he did in front of her friends reflected on her. He suddenly felt like a cad for intruding.

“So, Oliver,” Adam asked tartly, “how many glasses of wine have you enjoyed tonight?”

“Enjoyed? None. I’m going to the restroom. Nice to meet you, Skip.”

He fled. This was why he didn’t go out, and the stupid website and its stupid users who took an interest in him had made him forget, had given him confidence that he knew how to handle social settings. He knew that when he was Adam’s age, he’d owned the world, like Adam, but for the life of him he couldn’t remember how he had pulled it off. All he knew how to do now was make a fool of himself. Adam and Skip were probably laughing at the dumb geezer who’d thought he could catch their attention.

He splashed a little water on his face and reached for two paper towels to dry it. The door creaked open while his face was covered, and when he lowered the paper towels to toss into the trash, Adam was standing behind him.

“I’m sorry,” Adam said.

Oliver turned to face him. “For what?”

“For being rude.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry. I interrupted your evening.”

“How much have you really had to drink tonight?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m on my first glass. You?”

“I never drink more than one,” Adam declared. “I don’t like losing control.”

In spite of Adam’s snotty attitude, Oliver felt himself smiling. Twenty-one and so adult. Fresh out of college and thinking he had all the answers figured out. Maybe he hadn’t owned the world when he was Adam’s age. Maybe he had just been foolish enough to think he had.

“The thing is,” Adam continued, “it’s not really enough for me to be in control of myself.” He took two steps closer. “Do you know what I mean?”

Nowhere near a novice to the game, Oliver knew exactly what Adam meant, what Adam wanted. As much as Adam was a snot-nosed punk, he was also gorgeous and polite—well, at first, anyway—and his confidence was arousing. Oliver licked his lips but only realized he’d done it when he caught Adam looking.

*This is Olivia's friend, he told himself. You can't.*

"No, I don't," he said coldly. "I run a multimillion dollar business that I built from the ground up. When I go out, I like losing control. It feels freeing to clear my head and not worry about anything for a few hours."

*Except doing things men my age shouldn't be doing to men yours.*

"You mean like being reckless?" The way Adam held his gaze, it wasn't a question so much as a suggestion.

Oliver's heart quickened. He caught his breath. He only had to say the word "yes," and he and Adam came together for a searing kiss.

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Oliver's kiss was more timid than Adam expected, and it took him a second to realize Oliver was letting him set the pace. He backed Oliver against a wall, next to the paper towel dispenser, and kissed him more forcefully. Oliver was no dead empty mouth—he met Adam's intensity—but it was clear Adam was doing the driving.

Adam pulled back to catch his breath and took the opportunity to study Oliver. This close, he was more handsome than Adam had first realized, and there were no exposed capillaries in the whites of his eyes, no pallid, dry skin to give away his inebriation. He was freshly showered and shaved, his eyes bright, and his salt and pepper hair impeccably combed. Adam couldn't resist giving it a fluff and ruining the perfect style, which prompted a little cry of outrage from Oliver. But Adam didn't apologize. Not with words.

Instead, he slid to his knees.

"Oh, fuck," Oliver groaned. "Right here?"

"Right here." Adam carefully undid the button and zipper on Oliver's fancy linen pants. He found Oliver's dick inside a pair of skin-colored silk boxers and brought it out. It was red and thick, beading with fluid, ready to be savored and lavished with attention.

"What if someone comes in?" Oliver's voice was shaky.

"Let's see how fast we can do this." Adam swallowed as much of Oliver's cock down as he could. He heard Oliver let out another groan.

They weren't caught. Oliver came in just a few minutes, and Adam licked him clean. They tidied themselves up, washed their hands, and rearranged their

hair and clothing. Then they looked at each other, awkwardly. Adam's heart was racing in his chest. Now was the moment he needed Oliver to take charge, to tell him what a good job he'd done and to make everything okay.

"May I buy you a drink or something?" Oliver offered. "To get the taste out of your mouth before you go back to your—Jesus, was that your boyfriend?"

"No," Adam corrected. It was difficult to maintain eye contact when he was feeling so confused. "Just a friend. And I really meant it when I said one is my limit."

Oliver nodded. "I guess then..."

Adam could feel his heart sinking. He wasn't the kind of person who participated in public sex acts. It meant something that he wanted Oliver so badly, that he was willing to be with Oliver in the middle of a bathroom, that he had taken such a great risk. But Oliver didn't even care. It was probably just one in a string of indiscretions in his life. He was old enough, after all. He'd probably been around the block more than once. He'd probably committed to a life of non-monogamy long before all the homos starting jumping on the gay marriage band wagon. And now, well, if Adam were Oliver's age with Oliver's looks and wealth, he wouldn't keep someone around after a hasty blow job either.

The way out of this was to downplay it. "It was my pleasure, really, but we can't tell anyone, and we certainly shouldn't do it again."

Adam thought he saw a tinge of disappointment in Oliver's eyes, but it was probably his own wishful thinking.

"Right," Oliver quickly agreed. "Olivia."

"You should go back to your table. I'll head back to Skip, and we'll both act like nothing happened."

"What about the next time we run into each other?"

For a moment Adam foolishly thought Oliver was asking for seconds. But, no, Oliver was worried about his daughter finding out what her father was up to. He needn't be. "Have no fear. Olivia and I aren't really that great of friends anyway. You don't have to worry about running into me again."

Adam strode out of the bathroom before Oliver could respond and hurt him any further.

## Chapter 5

Adam didn't go home that night. Boom-Boom texted that some friends were coming over, and Adam feared that Olivia might be in the crowd. He couldn't see her now. Not because he was ashamed of what he'd done with her father but because seeing her would just remind him that Oliver didn't really want him. No one really wanted him. He was a boy adrift.

He returned to the bar after the bathroom encounter, rinsed away the taste of Oliver with his remaining Malbec, and looked at Skip. Before he could really think through the consequences, he put a hand on Skip's hip and asked, "Do you want to get out of here?"

Now he was leaning over the sink in Skip's bathroom, looking at himself in the mirror. He wasn't an especially attractive man. His teeth were too big, his nose too long, and his hair never held its style in the Florida humidity. His body was okay—he certainly worked on it as much as he could to make up for what nature hadn't given him—and between that and his smile, he'd gone further than most people who looked like him probably could have. It didn't hurt that his ass was made of two perfect globes of flawless alabaster skin.

Skip had never shown any interest in men before, but he'd left the bar without any fuss. Maybe he'd always kept his preferences quiet, or maybe he was feeling curious. Either way, he lived alone and had a king-size bed. It would give Adam a safe place to get some rest.

Adam had thought about having sex with Skip before, as he'd thought about every man he met, but it had never been more than a fleeting idea. He would never have expected Skip to want it, for one thing. And Skip was about fifteen years younger than Adam preferred.

But it would take Adam's mind off Oliver. And it would alleviate the tension that sucking off Oliver had caused.

He turned off the bathroom light and padded into the bedroom.

"Hey," Skip greeted him sleepily. Adam slid between the sheets next to him. "Are we really going to do this?"

"Are you going to be okay with it?"

"Yeah. I think so."

Skip didn't know what he was doing. Adam could tell it was his first time with another man. It should have bothered him, the way he had to coach Skip through every step, but it didn't. It actually made the process more enjoyable—which was a good thing, because there weren't many fireworks anyway.

Afterward Skip reached for Adam, his eyes shining with affection and wonder, and Adam felt an intense, immediate need to flee.

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"I can't believe this is your house," Simon said as they sat down to breakfast.

Oliver resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Simon had said the same thing at least four times the night before, and while Oliver enjoyed it when people admired his home, it got a little stale when they couldn't move beyond the wealth.

"Do you have a vacation home and all that?"

"I live in Florida. Where would I need to vacation?" Oliver dug his spoon into his grapefruit. "When I go on vacation, I rent places. It's less hassle than maintaining some house year-round, and it encourages me to see different parts of the world, rather than going to the same place year after year." Not that Oliver traveled much these days. Work and sleep, spend time with his daughter, watch TV, and work and sleep again. At least Olivia was enjoying all the money he made. He certainly wasn't.

"Where was the last place you went?"

Oliver had to think about it. He remembered a ski lodge, hot chocolate, and a young ski instructor named Jean-Michel. He'd had to lie repeatedly to Ted and Jo that week so he and Jean-Michel could steal time together without Jo's nosy intrusion. For one lust-crazed minute, he'd thought he and Jean-Michel might have really had a thing, but it turned out the ski instructor also had a wife and baby in town.

"Chamonix, for skiing."

"Is that in Europe?" Oliver nodded. "I'd love to go to Europe," Simon sighed dreamily.

"So why don't you?"

Simon took a sip of his espresso and looked up at Oliver through fluttering eyelashes. He probably thought it made him look sexy, but to Oliver he looked

like a man who didn't realize his best days were behind him. "Never had anyone to take me."

Oliver wasn't about to issue an invitation. He had enough trouble in daily life with people sidling up to him to capitalize on his wealth and generosity. This Golden Match profile was supposed to give him a chance to meet people who liked him, not his money. It was his fault for bringing Simon home in the first place, but Oliver didn't particularly like being in strange houses. And last night he'd needed a palette cleanser after the inappropriate blow job he'd received from Adam.

Too bad Simon's skills were nothing compared to Adam's. Their encounter left Oliver itching for a rerun with Adam instead of making him feel ready to move onto something new.

"I need to get to work soon," he announced, pushing up from the table.

"It's Sunday," Simon protested. "You have to work on Sunday?"

"Yeah, well, how do you think I pay for the European vacation you're trying to con out of me?" He saw Simon's shocked face and realized he'd probably spoken too harshly, but he didn't care. He hustled Simon through his breakfast and out the door. Simon didn't ask when they could see each other again.

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By the time Adam got back to his apartment, the sun was already beating down. It was another summer scorcher, the kind of day when all the women would wear their hair off their necks and all the men would strip out of their shirts. Adam suspected Boom-Boom would scheme to let them into his parents' house, so they could enjoy the giant swimming pool in the backyard. If Boom-Boom's parents were still in Tampa, they'd have to make other plans; Boom had been thrown out after his mom found him doped up on Ambien and walking around the house like a zombie.

One of their friends probably knew someone with a boat. If they could get out on the water, they could at least catch a breeze.

But first Adam needed sleep. Then a shower.

He left his flip-flops by the front door and went barefoot down the hall to his bedroom. He slid his shirt off as he opened the door. Olivia was lying in the center of his bed, face up, snoring lightly. She was wearing a twisted pink camisole that nearly exposed her left breast. She wasn't wearing any pajama bottoms.



Adam eased the door closed quietly and headed back to the living room. Boom was sacked out on the couch. Adam gave him a gentle shake.

“Hey. Someone’s in my room. Why are you sleeping out here?”

“Wendy and Pablo hooked up in my room.”

“So they kicked you out?” The need for sleep was becoming a pressing concern, and Boom-Boom’s use of the sofa put a crimp in the plans. “Why didn’t they just go home and hook up in one of their own beds?”

“I don’t know, man. The moment felt right?”

Adam surveyed the living room. Nearly empty bottles of alcohol overturned, dishes of leftover food that had grown hard and crusty, throw pillows tossed haphazardly in every direction. He tried to imagine the scene last night, as their friends got so drunk that they couldn’t even make it home to have sex in private.

A public bathroom was one thing, but your friend’s bed?

“Fucking savages, all of you. I don’t know what to tell you, but I need sleep, and you gave away my bed.”

“You told me it was okay.”

“Back when I was dating Martin and had somewhere else to stay.”

Boom-Boom yawned. “Sorry, ace.”

“Fuck you, Christopher.” Adam turned back to the short hall that led to the bedrooms.

“What are you doing to do?”

“She can either wake up and go home, or she can share with me. I don’t care, but I’m getting sleep one way or another.”

Once inside his room, though, Adam couldn’t bring himself to make Olivia do either of those things. She looked too content and too vulnerable for him to disturb. He stood, mesmerized. If anyone caught him watching her, Adam would probably have been called a creep. But it wasn’t like that. Even stripped down to her panties, Olivia didn’t do it for him. Rather, it was the fact that she shared many features with her father, except that on him they looked rugged and masculine and on her round, soft, and feminine.

One blow job. One round of oral. That was all, and Adam couldn’t stop thinking about Oliver.

He hated himself for ever telling Boom-Boom it was okay to let other people stay in his room. He hated Olivia for using his bed when she probably had a fucking suite in Oliver's massive condo. Mostly, though, he hated Martin for ruining everything, for not being strong enough to control him, for causing Adam to wind up in the situation where he now found himself.

Martin wasn't the answer. Adam and Martin had been drawn to each other as a result of common interests, and in the time they'd spent together they had served as mutually convenient partners. But Martin wasn't the one.

A romantic at heart, Adam still believed there was someone out there who was right. Someone who would teach him, punish him, support him, love him unconditionally, even when he talked back and put up a fight. Someone who told him the impulses, the needs he felt weren't wrong or sick because he felt them, too. Someone who treated Adam like a treasure. Someone whose face took Adam's breath away.

Olivia's phone was resting on the nightstand. Even in its off mode, it emitted a siren song that made him pick it up. It had a four-digit passcode. Adam decided that he could try to open it, but if he didn't succeed in one minute, he would have to call it a wash.

Olivia's passcode was 1-1-1-1. He got it on the first try.

Adam didn't look through her pictures or text messages. He scrolled through her contacts until he got to *D*. He repeated the number quietly a few times, to make sure he had it memorized, set the phone down again, and sneaked out before Olivia awoke.

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## Chapter 6

Like most Sundays, the office was deserted. It was unsurprising, since only a few people had keys, but on occasion some executives, in fear for their annual bonuses, ditched their families and church services to get in a few more working hours. On days when Oliver was also present, he tried to make sure he bought them lunch to show his appreciation.

Today, however, it was just him and several emails. In reality they could have waited until Monday, but Oliver would only spend the rest of his weekend worrying about them. Better to come in and take care of things now, so that his mind would be free to—what? Watch television alone? Maybe Liv would want to get dinner at that Mexican place she loved so much.

The ringing of his office phone jolted him. Alicia usually turned the phones off promptly at six on Fridays, so any calls they received on the weekend went straight to voicemail. On Monday mornings, there usually weren't any messages. Everyone who really needed access to Oliver over the weekend had his cell number or sent him email.

"Oliver Wasserstein," he said automatically as he answered.

"Hello? Oliver? This is Adam. McPherson. You know, from... the bathroom."

Oliver looked at the phone he was holding to make certain he'd heard right. "Hello, Adam. Is there a reason you're calling me at the office? Are you planning to do business with us?"

"The office?"

"Yeah, the office. Where did you think you were calling?"

"Um, nowhere, never mind."

Oliver leaned back in his black leather executive chair. Adam's voice sounded a little higher over the wire, and all his fumbling made him sound younger than he had in person. Less sanctimonious, more charming. As much as Oliver enjoyed listening, though, Adam had made it clear that their encounter was a one-time affair.

"You were very specific about not contacting each other again, Adam."

"I know, but... I was wrong, okay? Sometimes I make mistakes. It happens. Especially..."

“Especially what?”

“Especially when I don’t have anyone looking out for me.”

It wasn’t difficult to hear the plea in Adam’s voice. How tedious. First Simon’s adulation, his barely masked desire to live out his own Cinderella fantasy, and now the little lost boy who wanted to be schooled. This was what happened when Oliver ventured out. This was why it was better to stay home alone.

“I already have a child,” he said curtly, “and I’m busy working right now. So if you don’t have anything else to say—”

“Damn it, Oliver, shut up and listen to me!”

He sat up quickly. “I’m listening.”

“It wasn’t my imagination in the bathroom. We had a connection.”

Flashes of Adam’s wet, hot mouth on Oliver’s cock sent shivers through him. Inside his khakis, he began to harden. “It was great,” he had to concede.

“That’s why we should do it again.”

“Adam,” he sighed, “you were the one who said you didn’t think that was a good idea.”

“Because I thought that’s what you wanted to hear. Was it?”

Oliver imagined Adam pulling away from him with an obscene smack. Adam rising to his feet and turning to take Oliver in another kiss. Instead of pushing Oliver out the door and back to Simon, agreeing to come home with him. Giving Oliver the chance to recover and then taking him, slow and steady.

“God no. Why did you think that?”

“You were on a date.”

“So were you.”

“He wasn’t a date. Just a friend. I told you that. You need to listen better.”

For a reason unbeknownst to him, Oliver’s dick responded to Adam’s tone. “I’m listening now.”

“I want to see you again.”

“I...” Did he want to see the kid again? Hell yes. Did he want to feel once more the way he’d felt in the bathroom? Absolutely. But there were ethical

considerations. He wasn't certain that being with someone his daughter's age—someone who was friends with his daughter—was an acceptable thing to do. And he'd meant it when he said he wasn't interested in having another child to worry about. Olivia was enough trouble for any parent.

“What?” Adam asked distractedly. He was obviously talking to someone else. “No, I'm—shit. I have to go, Richard. Please think over what I've said.”

The call ended. *Richard?* Oliver let himself wonder about that for a moment before returning to his work.

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Although Joanne had never said so directly, Oliver knew she thought having a gay ex-lover in her social circle made her edgy and sophisticated. She liked that it served as a “fuck you” to conservative types. While Ted was less thrilled to have his wife's ex-lover constantly around, he had no particular gripe with Oliver, and he'd been a wonderful stepfather to Olivia, as engaged as Oliver and Joanne. Oliver could find little fault with Ted, other than how boring he often was, and so their unconventional trio were often found in each other's company. It was no problem.

The problem was that this dinner at their house was a fact-finding mission. Joanne had only invited him so she could ask how the dating was going. What Oliver didn't want to tell her was that the dating was not going. The dating was intruding on Oliver's ability to watch TV.

Fortunately, he only had time to tell Jo an edited version of his meeting with Paul over a glass of scotch before Olivia and her gang of merry misfits burst into the McMansion and interrupted the quiet adult evening they'd planned.

The gang included Adam. Oliver kept his eyes on Olivia and his drink, but he could feel the young man's gaze, steady, unashamed, unafraid of being noticed by the others.

“What are you guys doing here?” Joanne asked.

“We were going to get some pizza, and I said, ‘Why would we eat pizza when Mom's got all that great food she bought for Pop?’ and Wendy said it's been a long time since she's seen Ted because he was out of town last time we were here, so I said, ‘Let's all go over there.’ But Adam said, ‘No, we shouldn't interrupt their dinner party,’ because Adam's an upstanding guy like that, but I said, ‘Guys, Joanne loves to entertain guests.’ So here we are.”

Joanne did not look as though she loved entertaining unexpected and uninvited guests, but she wasn't the type of woman to turn people away. Especially not her daughter. Oliver could see her maternal side kick in, and with some resignation, she set her scotch down on the table and rose gracefully to her feet. "Well, I suppose I'd better heat up some more food." As she passed Oliver, she brushed him affectionately on the shoulder and murmured, "We're not done talking."

"I'll help you, Mom," Olivia offered, "since it was my idea and all. Ted, shouldn't you get your guests some drinks?"

"Charming kid," Oliver said. "Impeccable manners."

Olivia grinned at him and trailed Joanne.

Ted went to the small bar that was installed in a corner of the living room. "Wendy, what are you having tonight?"

"What are my choices?" Wendy asked with a vixen-like smile.

Ted smiled, too, clearly enjoying her flirtation. "Why don't you come over and see?"

That left Adam alone with Oliver. He took the seat Jo had vacated.

"Hello, Oliver. You look well."

"Thanks. So do you."

"I'm sorry we interrupted your dinner. I tried to convince them it was a bad idea, but—" From across the room, Wendy gave an artificial titter. "Well, you can see how eager they were to come here."

"To be honest, you're saving me." He leaned conspiratorially toward Adam. "I was supposed to spill all about my last date."

Adam smirked. "All?"

"Maybe not all. Probably not the bathroom scene."

They shared a smile that was interrupted as Ted and Wendy returned with drinks in hand. Ted offered Adam a glass of something clear and sparkling. "It's just seltzer. Wendy said you're not big on drinking."

"Drinking and riding a motorcycle is a very bad combination."

"You have a motorcycle?" It was incongruous with the picture Oliver's mind had painted of Adam: buttoned up, formal manners, teetotaling. But maybe it went along with giving blow jobs in public bathrooms.

“Well, a starter one, anyway. I’m saving up for something more powerful.”

“I rode a little when I was in college,” Ted chimed in, and they were off on a conversation about bikes that Oliver could barely follow.

He excused himself and peeked into the kitchen, where Jo was giving Olivia a lecture about responsibility. Olivia, with the same look of outrage that she’d had when she was four and had to go to bed while the summer sun was still out, turned to her father.

“Please tell her she’s being unreasonable!”

“Liv, you have a college degree, and no job or money,” Joanne reminded her. “If it weren’t for your father and me, you wouldn’t have a place to live. Your friends are too wild. You guys go out every night, partying, and guess what, little girl? The summer won’t last forever. Come September, you’re out of here. So you’d better have a job and an apartment by then.”

“You can’t do that to me! I’ll just stay with Dad.”

Jo shot him a warning look. Oliver knew he wasn’t supposed to intercede. “Dad’s throwing you out, too. You think he wants your friends hanging around, drunk, while he’s trying to get a love life?”

“Trying?” Oliver repeated, but neither woman was paying attention to him.

“You know what, Mother? You’re a real hypocrite. First it was Dad, then it was Ted. Have you ever stood on your own two feet?”

“Olivia—” Oliver started, but Joanne cut him off.

“Stay out of this. I can defend myself.”

He threw his hands up and backed out of the room. There was no real cause for alarm. The two of them fought heavyweight every chance they could get, but they also spoke on the phone every day, took vacations together, and shared jokes no one else understood. It was a mother-daughter thing.

Oliver ambled around the house. He wasn’t interested in talk of motorcycles or in watching Wendy and Ted’s May-December flirtation.

“Are you avoiding the crowd?”

Oliver turned from the picture window in the front room to see Adam, leaning with ease against the archway. With his arms crossed in front of him, he looked the image of cool. In that moment, Oliver could absolutely see him on a motorcycle.

“Or are you just avoiding me?”

“You told me to keep away, Adam.”

“I was wrong.”

“I don’t think you were. I think you were absolutely right. I had no business getting involved with one of my daughter’s friends.”

“We’re not really friends. I’m just roommates with Boom-Boom.”

“Boom-Boom,” Oliver repeated. “And weren’t you with a guy named Chip the other night? What’s with your little circle? Doesn’t anyone have a regular name?”

“Skip,” Adam corrected, a smile quirking up the side of his mouth. “Boom-Boom’s real name is Christopher, but somebody started calling him that sophomore year as a joke. It’s supposed to be his stripper name. I guess it stuck. And Skip—well, his real name is Scott Keith Peterson, but Olivia started calling him Skip. She said he should wear sweaters tied around his neck because he’s so preppy and uptight. Skip hates it, but it’s fun to torture him, you know?” He shrugged.

“I’d have thought that was you. The preppy, uptight one.”

“Me? Nah. I’m a country boy on a bike. Anyway, without a daddy around, I’m hardly uptight.” Adam took two steps forward, out of the safety of the bright hallway and into the dangerous half-light of the front room. Oliver took a step back on reflex. “That’s why I need to see you again. My life is a mess, and you’re going to help me get it in order.”

“I am?”

“Yes. I’ve decided.”

“Oh, you’ve decided? Like you decided to blow me in the bathroom? And to send me on my way afterward? Is that what you do? Make unilateral decisions?”

“No, see, that’s why I need you. I do the wrong thing when I’m left to my own devices. I make bad choices.” He reached for Oliver. “That was chemistry in the bathroom. Don’t tell me you didn’t feel it.”

Oliver wouldn’t lie.

“Let me prove it to you.”

“How?”



“Tonight, after this, what are you doing?”

“I—”

“Let me come over and show you how we belong together.”

“How will you do that?”

“We’re gonna fuck like my mama lives two states away.”

Oliver’s mouth went dry. He had to swallow to be able to form words. “Not that I don’t like that plan, but...”

“But nothing,” Adam growled. “Ten-thirty. I’ll be on your doorstep. Don’t disappoint me.”

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## Chapter 7

As he drove his Ninja toward Oliver's house with the wind and the engine drowning out the sounds of the world around him, Adam replayed their conversation in his mind. He couldn't believe he had spoken to Oliver with so little respect. He couldn't believe Oliver hadn't tried to punish him for it.

And he really couldn't believe that, in spite of not being taken to task, he still wanted Oliver—badly—and that he was racing toward Oliver's house to satisfy this urge that he couldn't seem to shake. Oliver hadn't even called him "boy."

He left his bike in a corner of the guest parking lot and popped off his neon green helmet. He shook his hair out, knowing that it would be its usual combination of frizzy, flat, and sweaty, thanks to the weather and the helmet. The building probably didn't have a general use bathroom where he could check on his appearance before going up to Oliver's, so he'd just have to hope that Oliver would accept him as he was.

He was let into the building by a bored-looking doorman and rode the elevator with anticipation. How should he play it when Oliver answered his door? Should he drop to his knees right away and show what a perfect submissive he could be? Or should he wait, demurely, for Oliver to tell him what he wanted? Although when he'd made the decision to drop to his knees in the bathroom, Oliver had enjoyed it. Maybe he should do that now. He still hadn't decided on a course of action by the time he reached apartment 801 and banged the sleek silver knocker.

A small, dark woman answered, and Adam was immensely grateful he hadn't pulled off his clothes in the elevator and arrived at the door naked.

"You must be Adam," the woman said in an unidentifiable island accent. "Please come in."

She escorted him into the spacious kitchen, where a buffet of meats, cheese, and bread had been laid out. "Something to drink?"

Adam set his helmet down on an empty stool at the counter and eyed the spread. Surely the woman knew they'd both come from a dinner party? This must have been part of Oliver's plan for him. Maybe he was going to practice feeding Adam before they moved to anything else. Or maybe they were going to do something so athletic that they'd need plenty of fuel to keep their strength up. "Um, what do you have?"

“Anything. How about lemonade? I’ll get you a glass.”

“Offer the man a real drink for crying out loud,” Oliver called as he entered the room. The woman glared at him a moment before turning her attention to the double-door refrigerator. While her back was turned, Oliver mouthed, *I’m sorry*.

So the food and the maid were not part of his plan. Huh.

“Sanaa, I see you’ve met Adam. And decided to empty out the refrigerator. You know I was at Jo’s for dinner, don’t you? Adam, this is Sanaa. She’s in charge of the house.”

Adam’s eyes narrowed. Something about the way Oliver said it, Adam could tell he wasn’t just placating the help. He took the bottle of Red Stripe Sanaa offered him and gave her a nod of thanks. He held it politely until she turned away and then set it on the counter.

Sanaa turned her attention on Oliver. “You eat all of this, you hear? I don’t want to see any leftovers tomorrow.”

“There’s enough for five people.”

“Adam is a growing boy.” The way she said it, with a benevolent smile, it didn’t seem like a criticism of their age difference. “Just look at him. So skinny. He needs a good meal. So you eat before you do anything with him, you hear?”

Adam could practically see the hearts in Oliver’s eyes. “Okay, I promise.” Oliver leaned down—she was at least a foot shorter—and she gave him a kiss on the cheek. She waved to Adam, collected a purse from near the espresso machine, and left.

“I’m really sorry,” Oliver said once again. “She stayed late today to do her own laundry, and when I told her someone was coming over, she insisted on putting out food for you.” He gestured to the spread. “Please help yourself.”

Although Joanne had fed them a nice meal, it seemed rude to turn down what Oliver, via Sanaa, was offering. Adam selected a ciabatta roll from the stack of bread and filled it with a few slices of ham and a mild-smelling white cheese. Sanaa had even put out little pots of mustard and mayonnaise, and he spread a little of the spicy, seeded mustard on his roll. No squeeze bottle with electric yellow goo in Oliver’s world.

“Not that I’m not grateful, but aren’t you supposed to be the boss? Shouldn’t you be telling her what to do, not the other way around?”

Oliver shrugged sheepishly as he put together his own sandwich. "I guess I've just learned that things go more smoothly when I do what she says."

Adam thought about that as he ate his sandwich. He wasn't certain if it boded poorly for what was to come between them. What if Oliver turned out to be another Martin? But Oliver had an allure that Martin had never had.

"You like rope play?"

Oliver choked on his food, coughing and sputtering. He stole Adam's Red Stripe and took a few sips, coughed a little more, and finally dabbed a napkin on his mouth to compose himself.

"Jesus, kid."

"That a no?"

"That's an 'I don't know, and what the hell kind of question is that five minutes after you show up?'"

Adam set his sandwich down. "I'm sorry. I thought we were here to fuck."

"We are." Oliver held Adam's gaze for a charged moment.

"Then shouldn't we figure out how we're going to do it? Our preferences? Communication is the most important part, you know."

"And here I thought the dick in the ass was the most important part." Oliver took another drink of Adam's beer.

Adam grinned at him. Adoration, that was what he was feeling. Complete adoration. Oliver might have been a little surprised by Adam's forthright attitude, but he wasn't intimidated by it. And he was funny.

"See, and I thought for you it was the mouth-on-dick part," he returned.

Oliver shrugged, his smile growing. "How will I know until I have a point of comparison?"

Sandwiches suddenly didn't seem all that important. It was much, much more important to make sure Oliver had lots of time to do a comparative study.

"Hey, Oliver, you know how she said we had to eat everything? When does she work again? Is she coming back tonight?"

"No."

"So what do you say we skip to the fucking and eat later?"

Oliver's face had a look that Adam couldn't interpret. For a moment Adam held his breath, certain he'd exerted too much control, gone too far. He feared Oliver would be upset at his gumption, even as he wondered what it would be like to be reprimanded by Oliver.

Oliver took another swig of the Red Stripe. The bottle was nearly empty now. "Kid, you've got *chutzpah*, I'll give you that."

"Is that a problem?" Adam didn't like how defiant the question came out. Damn it, he was going to ruin everything by not being a good boy.

But Oliver's grin returned, catlike this time. "Nope," he said, pulling Adam toward him, "not at all."

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There was a moment in the middle of their coupling when Oliver let go of their cocks, when it would have been natural for him to turn Adam over. But instead they looked at each other, their breath mingling in the intimate proximity of their faces, and Adam confessed, "I really want to be inside you. Is that wrong?" Oliver responded by kissing him fiercely.

There was another moment when Adam stopped treating Oliver like a beloved object, let himself go, and ordered Oliver to change positions without asking nicely. When he had Oliver bent forward over the mattress, their feet braced on the floor, he gave Oliver's rump a few smacks. In that moment, something clicked. Oliver nearly came right then, and Adam laced their fingers together and entered him with renewed vigor.

They chased their orgasms, Adam arriving there first but willing to see Oliver to his own finish line.

Afterward, they lay side by side, sated but exhausted. Eventually they began to talk, at first congratulating and thanking each other and then turning to more intimate subjects.

"So what's the story with Olivia?" Adam wondered. "Did you not come out until later in life?"

"I went to college in New York. I spent my early twenties there." Oliver didn't talk much about what it had been like when he was Olivia's age, mostly because political and social circumstances were so different now. "I left right around the time they came out with the test. It was getting too hard to deal with reality. In those days, we went to a funeral every week."

"I'm so sorry. I can't even imagine."

"No, you can't. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad that people your age have it so much easier, but there's no way you can ever understand what we lived through. My roommate got arrested one time."

"For what?"

"Technically? Lewd and lascivious conduct. In reality? He and his boyfriend kissed on the street, and a police officer happened to see them."

"Are you serious?"

"Mm-hmm." That was a story Oliver had never even told his daughter. "After that, I decided I couldn't do it anymore. I came home, here to Tampa—"

"Because Florida's always been known for being so much more socially progressive than New York."

"I know, but at least here I had a support network of friends who weren't dying by the dozens."

"Straight friends."

"High school friends. I started the company, and tried to build a different life."

"And you tried to be a dad."

"Not tried."

"Yes. Sorry." Adam rolled onto his side and stroked a hand over Oliver's flank. "It's obvious how much you love Olivia."

"I never imagined being a father when I was growing up. Especially not while I was in New York."

"How did it happen?"

"Joanne. We'd been friends for a long time before I left, and we were again when I came back. We were both lonely, and we had a crazy fling. She wanted a family—a husband and kids, the whole thing. We had Olivia, but I knew I couldn't do more than that."

"And you stayed friends?"

"It was a lot easier after Ted came along," Oliver admitted. "But yeah. Jo's one of the great loves of my life."

"What about all those friends you came back to?"

“Huh?”

“Well, I don’t know you very well, but you seem... solitary.”

Ordinarily a comment like that would have led Oliver to send his bedmate packing. As it was, he turned his head away from Adam’s touch. “What the hell do you know?”

“I know that if I had your good looks, I’d treat my body better.”

Oliver snorted. His body was old, gray, and saggy. Adam’s had the tautness and glow of youth.

“And if I had your money and influence, I’d do a hell of a lot more than sit at home alone on Friday nights getting drunk.” When Oliver looked at him in surprise, Adam explained, “Olivia might have said something once or twice.”

Oliver wasn’t ready to address what some twenty-year-old saw as his personal problems. “What about you? What’s your story? I guess you’re perfect then?”

“I just broke up with this guy who was about your age. Martin Hinsdale.”

“Martin? I know Martin.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Tampa’s social elite didn’t have a very big roster. Oliver’s company was larger and had more influence than Martin’s, but they networked in the same circles. “Why on Earth were you with a guy like Martin? He promise you a job or something?”

“Interviews, none of which panned out. Still looking for a job.”

Oliver wasn’t in the habit of throwing his money and power around, but he still heard himself extending an offer he hadn’t even made to Olivia. “If you need a job, I can get you one at my company. You can start tomorrow.”

“No thanks.” Adam threw a leg over Oliver’s middle and straddled him. “I don’t want to be a kept man.”

“Of course not.” Oliver couldn’t help grinning at their positions. “You liked topping me.”

“Well, yeah.” Adam pinned Oliver’s arms over his head. “You seemed to need it.” He leaned down and planted a kiss on Oliver’s lips. It was tender and spoke of Adam’s age. Mostly because his kissing didn’t feel cynical or ironic.

“Christ, what does it say about me that I liked being fucked by a kid?”

“I am *not* a kid.”

“You’re a hell of a lot younger than me.”

“Emotionally I have my shit together.”

“What shit?” Oliver challenged with a smile. “You just said you have no job and no money.”

“And nowhere to live half the time. Olivia’s always staying in my bedroom. You’re right, I got nothing.”

Oliver didn’t like the way Adam was frowning. His teasing had clearly rubbed a raw spot. “You got a lot more than nothing. You have your looks. Your youth.” He sighed. Even if he could overtake the young man, it felt good to be pinned by him. There was no reason to pretend otherwise. “You appear to have the ability to hold me down and make me do what you want.”

“You like that, don’t you?” Adam asked, with a gleam in his eye.

“Yeah.”

“Me too. It’s so weird, too, because...” Adam gave Oliver’s wrists an experimental push into the mattress. He rocked his hips forward.

As much as Oliver liked what he was doing, he wanted to know what Adam really thought. “Because what?” he prompted.

“Because I thought I wanted it the other way.” They were quiet for a moment, looking at each other. “It seems so obvious how you can be happy.”

“I’m not happy?”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think so. I saw that guy you were at the bar with. He was too clingy and too old for you.”

“Maybe I like men my own age.”

Adam didn’t say anything directly, but he bit his lip and looked at where their pelvises met, where Oliver was semi-hard.

“And you think you can make me happy?”

“I don’t know,” Adam admitted, “but you should at least let me try.”

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## Chapter 8

It was a magical summer. Before meeting Oliver, Adam would never have believed he could take the lead in a relationship, but instead of feeling frustrated that he had no guidance of his own, he plunged into his role as Oliver's protector and master, his shepherd and caretaker, and found in that role a tranquility—and, yes, arousal—he'd never before experienced.

They met frequently, though often late at night when Oliver's especially long workday had ended. And Adam's shorter one, now that he had a lousy entry-level position at Wasserstein Enterprises. Adam tried to ensure their relationship was more than just meeting for sex, but with Oliver's busy schedule and their secrecy, it was difficult to go on real dates.

When he caught Oliver sneaking a pill before bed, Adam demanded an explanation. Oliver told him he was working on his cholesterol, his doctor's orders, and Adam upped the stakes by suggesting a light fitness regimen. Oliver countered with the proposal that they join a gym together, so Adam could monitor his workouts and so they could meet in public without suspicion.

"Because people from your world and people from mine so often belong to the same gym," Adam said sardonically. It was a lost battle. Oliver paid their membership fees. Adam could have ordered him not to, but if he wanted Oliver to exercise and if he wanted to be with Oliver, it didn't seem like such a bad idea.

There was also the issue of food. They spent a few lazy weekend afternoons together at Oliver's place, where Sanaa always greeted Adam warmly and without judgment. On days when Sanaa wasn't working, Oliver tried to play host by offering Adam food and drink. His meals were nothing like Sanaa's, and a few weeks into their relationship Adam decided he needed to intervene.

"While I completely appreciate that you always try to feed me," he said, striding to the kitchen island, "I absolutely forbid you do this anymore." He gestured to a bowl of tortilla chips beside a smaller one of guacamole. "Fried." A dish of fried plantains was next. "More fried." And finally a plate with two cupcakes, decorated with fanciful icing, which were obviously purchased from an expensive bakery. "And artificial sugar. This is not a lunch." He pointed a finger at Oliver. "It's time to clean up your diet, Ollie."

"I'm sorry." Oliver cast his eyes downward.

“Don’t be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry about.” Adam prodded his chin up with an index finger. “You were trying to give me a treat, I get that. It was very sweet of you. We’ll eat this today, and tomorrow you’ll leave instructions for Sanaa to buy healthier groceries. And you’ll start drinking less alcohol.” Adam gave one final gesture toward the liquor cabinet.

“How much less?”

Oliver’s brow was furrowed, his eyes expectant. The question was not, as it could have been, a sign of complaint. Oliver was asking so that he could be sure to get it right. He was so good at listening to Adam, and it thrilled Adam to have someone waiting so patiently for his verdict.

“How about we say you’re limited to drinking with me?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Adam closed the distance between them. “God, I love it when you say that,” he murmured before capturing Oliver in a kiss.

“It is so wrong,” Oliver purred. Adam could feel Oliver’s hard shaft pressing against his thigh.

“I know, but it’s so good, too, right?”

Oliver nodded into their kiss. They made out lazily, until the kiss naturally faded. “Can I ask you something? I’m not questioning the rule—I just want to know. The drinking thing? Why is that such a thing with you? Because I don’t actually drink that much. I’m not an alcoholic or anything, and I never drive.”

Adam plucked one of the fried plantains from the dish and ate it. Greasy or not, it was delicious. He gave an “mm” of approval, stalling for time. He knew he was more sensitive to alcohol consumption than a lot of people, especially people his own age. Extra-especially people his own age who lived in his apartment and who were the daughters of men he was sleeping with. And he knew that it sometimes raised questions for others, who were left to wonder if he had health problems or if he was some kind of uptight Christian.

“It was my dad.” He couldn’t look at Oliver while he talked about this. “I guess it wasn’t anything traumatic or anything like that. He didn’t die and never killed anybody, you know? Although he did hit me and my mom more when he was drunk, but he wasn’t totally abusive. He just... always drank. After work until he went to bed, and the drunker he got, the meaner he got. Sometimes he’d be a fun drunk, and I remember when I was a kid loving those moments. He’d

sing songs with me or play games, and we'd laugh and laugh. But mostly he was mean. And even when he was fun, he'd try to drive me places, and I'd always feel this knot in my stomach. Because my mom always said not to go in the car with him when he was like that, but if I said no to him, he might turn mean again, and then it would be my fault I ruined the moment." He reached for another plantain. "I don't want to be around that kind of loss of self-control ever again."

Oliver pried the plantain from his fingers and pulled him into a hug. Adam resisted—he didn't need sympathy about his dad, and anyway, it wasn't Oliver's job to ease his burdens—but Oliver uttered a soothing *ssh* and held him tighter. He wouldn't let Adam refuse the comfort.

Adam buried his face in the crook of Oliver's neck. It smelled like the expensive cologne Oliver wore, something Adam's dad would never have smelled like. Oliver's arms around Adam were strong and confident, and it occurred to Adam that Oliver was very capable of playing the dominant role in their relationship. He just chose not to.

"I thought I was supposed to be the one helping you," he murmured.

"See, I thought we needed each other."

Adam looked at him. Yes, he needed Oliver. He needed Oliver to let him have control. He needed to know that Oliver was strong enough to give it, that Adam wasn't just taking it from someone too weak to refuse. He hadn't understood that about their dynamic before.

"Yeah," he agreed. "It's mutual." He wiped his eye, although he hadn't actually shed any tears, and mentally shook off the moment. "You said you had something to talk to me about?"

Oliver heaved a sigh and ran his fingers through Adam's unruly hair. "Joanne finally gave Olivia the boot, and I know she's going to ask if she can live here full-time."

"What are you going to say?" Adam didn't think Oliver would actually kick out his own daughter for his sake, but if Oliver let her move in full-time, it would be a lot harder for them to see each other. It wasn't like they could meet at Adam's apartment, where a bunch of drunks hung out every night.

"I'm not sure. What should I tell her? What do you want me to do?"

Adam bit his lip. This was a precarious situation. Whatever the nature of his power exchange with Oliver, interfering with someone's child was a different

beast. Especially when Oliver had twenty-plus years of experience at being a father and Adam had none.

One thing he'd gotten very good at in his new role was thinking before speaking. His job was to ensure that Oliver made the best choices for his life. As much as Adam wanted to have Oliver all to himself, wanted to hear Oliver say that Adam should move in and that it was time for Olivia to grow up, kicking her out of the condo would not be the best choice for Oliver. He loved her. He was a devoted father. He'd regret it if he said no to her, and eventually he'd come to resent Adam.

"I think you have to figure this one out on your own."

Oliver stalled by eating a few of the plantains. As concerned as Adam was for Oliver's continued cardiac health, he leaned forward and licked Oliver's fingers clean. Oliver held another plantain out for him to eat, and as soon as it was in Adam's mouth, Oliver kissed him.

"I don't think there's a good answer to this," Oliver said.

"Someday we'll live together, and we'll plan our schedules together, and I'll know everything you do at every minute of the day, and our families will know about us and be okay with it. But we're not there yet."

Oliver gave him a hopeful, dopey smile. Adam didn't need to ask if he liked that vision of the future.

Later, as Adam sat astride Oliver's hips, setting the pace, he felt a tinge of vulnerability that came and went and that, he had learned from a few discussions in an online forum, was normal for someone new to his position. Not his physical position—as much as he loved fucking Oliver, it felt great once in a while to ride Oliver this way. No, it was his emotional position that occasionally concerned him. This was his first time being a master, a dominant, a daddy. He didn't even know what to call himself. He sometimes wondered if Oliver really wanted things this way, or if he was just going along with it because it was fun to have a younger lover, and he'd do anything to keep Adam.

"Why me?" he asked as Oliver thrust up to meet him. "Why do you let me do these things to you?"

"I don't know. I just get off on it. So do you."

"Do you think that makes us freaks?"

"If it does, I don't care. It's better when you're around. I'm better when you're around."

Oliver's eyes were brimming with emotion, and something inside Adam wanted to surge into him, to fuse them physically and spiritually, but it was Oliver who was inside him.

"Take me faster."

They rolled so Adam was on his back. He lifted his legs and held his knees as Oliver thrust harder, faster, deeper, and finally came with a deep-throated exclamation and a stupefied red face.

A moment later, Oliver propped himself on his elbows and looked down at Adam. He carefully combed his fingers through Adam's hair. They shared a grin.

"I love you," Oliver said.

Adam touched his cheek. The idea that someone so handsome and smart, so wealthy and powerful could find pleasure in someone as mundane as him overwhelmed him. Made him feel blessed. He was beginning to understand that as much as Oliver needed their relationship, Adam needed Oliver's trust. That was where he could find the solace he'd been seeking for so long: in the faith Oliver had in him.

"I love you, too."

"I know I'm talking down the road here, but I wonder what you have planned for your life. Do you want to be married? Have children? Is this—the way we do things—something you think you'll want to do when you're my age?"

"I never imagined myself married," Adam admitted. "That seems really weird to me, that legal obligation."

"I guess not everyone is interested in something long-term."

He heard the disappointment in Oliver's voice. "It's not that. I just think people should be together because they want to be, and when they don't want to be together anymore, they shouldn't. You shouldn't be in a relationship because the law says you have to. You should be there because you're in love. I think that's much more meaningful. As for kids? Not really interested. What about you? You ever think about adopting another one or something?"

"I have Olivia. I'm pretty set in that department."

"I guess we're a match."

"Adam, I could buy you a condo. Then we could have somewhere to be together in private."

"So you've already decided to let her move in?" It was hard to understand why, on the heels of their first declaration of love, Adam felt disappointment curling in his belly.

"She's my kid."

"You can't buy me a condo. For one thing, that's the same as telling everyone about us, and anyway I'm not in this for the money. It's important to me that I earn my own way in the world."

"You let me get you a job."

"Only because I'm actually qualified for it, and I don't answer directly to you. And you know it's not that great of a job."

"Nope," Oliver agreed. "The life expectancy of people in that position is about a year and a half, I'm told. But it'll give you time to find something better." He stifled a yawn. "I guess I could buy her a condo, but..."

"But you want her to learn responsibility and self-sufficiency, and you don't want to piss off Joanne," Adam finished for him. "I understand, I really do."

"So I tell her she can move in here, but I give her a deadline to find a job, and I help subsidize your rent in the meantime." He shot a beatific smile in Adam's direction. "So you can get your own place without feeling bad about it. It's only fair for me to contribute to your rent, if I'll be sleeping there, too."

Adam let out a laugh. "Baby, you don't have to do that. And you don't have to buy my love."

"I'm not trying to buy your love. I'm just... trying to get all this right."

"Get us right? You're doing fine. I think we're doing fine."

"We are," Oliver agreed. "You and me. But sooner or later, there's everyone else." He flipped onto his back and kicked his legs out.

"Talk to me," Adam instructed. "Communication is key, remember?"

"It's just that... I don't want to be five years down the road and still squeezing you in between meetings or pretending not to watch you at the gym. I don't want you to be my dirty little secret."

Adam hadn't felt like a dirty little secret until Oliver said it. "I'm not. Am I?"

"I don't want people to think you are."

"How can they think that if I'm a secret? Is that a logic puzzle or something?" Oliver groaned in response, so teasing was not the way to handle the moment. "You're pretty worked up for someone who just had an orgasm."

Oliver nodded. "I feel frustrated that there are no good answers here. I wish you would just tell me what to do, so I didn't have to think."

"You know I can't. Not on this issue."

"I guess I understand."

Adam couldn't decide what to do about Olivia, but he could help Oliver stop thinking about it for a moment. "Okay," he declared, "on your knees. Let's go."

"I really can't go again so soon—"

"I gave you an order." He poked Oliver in the side. "Come on, move it, and would you have a little faith in me? I know your recovery time."

As Oliver scrambled onto his hands and knees in the middle of the bed, he gave a sorrowful look over his shoulder. "I have a lot of faith in you. I'm sorry if I made it seem as if I don't."

"I know you do." Adam kissed his shoulder blade. "I think ten spanks should do it. Get the demons out. Help you clear your mind."

"Sir? May I say something?"

"What is it?"

"Would you try the flogger?"

Adam pressed his cheek to Oliver's back, his arms winding around Oliver's torso. They'd bought the flogger, even attended an instructional class in Orlando, where no one would know them, but thus far Oliver hadn't been ready for it.

"God, yes. Yes, we can try it."

He found the flogger at the back of Oliver's second dresser drawer, behind a stack of cashmere sweaters and next to the leather restraints they'd used on the Fourth of July. (The fireworks had been great, at least inside the bedroom.) He

brought the flogger back to the bed and stroked through the falls. He didn't look at Oliver, feigned casual disinterest to build the anticipation, but he knew that if he did peek, he'd see Oliver looking hopeful, expectant, a little afraid, but also full of trust.

"How many?" he asked. Because as important as mouth-on-dick was, or flogger-on-ass, communication still mattered.

"Ten." Oliver sounded like he was in a good mindset for this.

Adam had been right that this was something he needed. He imagined a day when Oliver would come home from work and beg for a flogging right away to shake off the drudgery of the office. If they could ever figure out where "home" was going to be. He moved to the other side of the bed, near Oliver's backside. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He skimmed the flogger across Oliver's back, letting him feel the coolness of the leather. The instrument itself was nothing to be feared. It was all in how Adam used it, and funnily enough, Adam wasn't feeling any pressure about his performance. He'd taken the class, watched videos, practiced at home—but more importantly, he knew Oliver. He'd know Oliver's limits without Oliver telling him. Probably before Oliver knew himself.

"I'm not doing this to hurt you," he reminded them both. "I'm doing this to help you clear your head. I'm going to start now." He raised his arm back at the elbow and flicked it forward. The flogger barely touched Oliver's skin, enough to tickle but not hurt. "That's one. How did it feel?"

"Like not much. Can you do it harder, please, Sir?"

Warmed by Oliver's sincerity, Adam struck again, this time with a little more force. Oliver grunted as the falls thudded against his flesh. "That's two."

"Oh my God!"

It was Olivia.

Adam turned and caught sight of her crashing into the door frame. Oliver scrambled toward the pillows, pulling the sheet over himself as he yelled for her. Adam stumbled around until he found his pants and jumped into them. Meanwhile Olivia made it out the door and was screaming as she ran down the hall.

"Shit, shit, underwear!"



In a panic Adam threw his own boxer briefs to Oliver, and once they were on, Oliver ran toward the door.

“Pants!” Adam warned him. No way was Olivia going to want to see them in less than full clothing. He handed Oliver his pants and took the opportunity to give Oliver’s ass the swat he hadn’t been able to give with the flogger. “It’ll be all right.” He kissed Oliver’s forehead. “Go talk to her. I’ll clean up in here.”

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With his heart rattling around his chest like a caged beast, Oliver headed down the hall. He hoped Olivia was gone and that he never had to talk to her about what she’d walked in on. It suddenly seemed so very stupid to him—the younger lover, the secret rendezvous, the experimenting with BDSM. Stupid and embarrassing. Why couldn’t he have just met someone nice on Golden Match like she’d wanted?

Oliver found Olivia in the living room, pacing and gesturing wildly as she muttered to herself. “Liv—”

“How could you, Dad?” she turned venomous eyes on him. “He’s practically a child!”

*He just looks that way, but he’s more adult than I am,* Oliver wanted to say. He didn’t, though. She wouldn’t understand.

“And what was he doing with that thing? That’s just—that’s—”

*Sick.* She might as well have said it. The word hung in the air between them. A few months ago, Oliver might have found himself pleading for her understanding. He might have tried to explain, to make her understand.

Five minutes ago, he didn’t think there was anything less than natural about what he and Adam did. They were adults, it was consensual, and Adam was right that sometimes Oliver needed to clear his mind. Usually from worrying about Olivia.

Right now, though, getting flogged by Adam didn’t seem natural. It seemed shameful. But it also seemed like something she shouldn’t get to know about.

“It’s private. It’s intimate. And it’s my choice.”

Had he been in the room, Adam would have been proud.

Olivia, however, was unimpressed. “Your choice? Your *choice*? To... what? Have someone young enough to be your child treat you like garbage? Or were you pretending to be an animal or something gross like that?”

“He does not treat me like garbage,” Oliver said harshly. “He’s taught me more about myself, more about life, than I’ve learned in the past forty years. I respect his wisdom.”

“Dad, he’s brainwashed you. I don’t know how, but he must have. Do you know what Pablo says about him? He says Adam ran away from home. His parents don’t even know he came here to school. He’s probably just desperate for money, and you’re rich and horny and gay, so you’re the perfect target. You can’t honestly think he’s into you. Pop, he’s using you.”

Her words gave Oliver pause.

In his split-second of hesitation, Adam appeared in the doorway. Oliver knew Adam saw the doubt in his eyes, heard the silence when Oliver should have been leaping to his defense. Adam shook his head in disbelief. Oliver had never seen him so utterly uncertain.

Olivia turned on him. “I can’t believe you’re fucking my dad! Fucking gold digger!”

“I’m not,” Adam said with the desperation of a convicted man.

“Pablo says you got a job at Wasserstein. Did you give him a job, Dad? Did you give him a job for sleeping with you?”

“I—”

“What the fuck! You wouldn’t give *me* a job! I can’t believe this! I have to get out of here.” She lowered her head, as if she couldn’t even bear to look him in the eye, and Oliver’s heart nearly broke. She shoved past him.

“Olivia, wait—”

“Let her go,” Adam said, taking his elbow. “You can talk to her when she calms down.”

Oliver yanked his arm free. “Don’t fucking tell me how to talk to my kid!”

“Don’t fucking yell at me!”

“Why not?” And then Oliver said the words he regretted before they were all the way out of his mouth: “It’s your fault, isn’t it?”

“Is that how it is? You’re going to blame me for this? You’re picking her over me?”

“This isn’t about picking anyone over anyone else,” Oliver tried to backpedal, but Adam was no more interested in reasonable conversation than Olivia had been.

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“Yeah, it is, Oliver! And the thing is, I’m the only one picking you. I’m out of here. I can’t believe this.”

Adam fled down the hall to the bedroom, probably to collect the rest of his clothes. As he watched Adam go, Oliver heard Olivia quietly sneaking out the front door.

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## Chapter 9

On nights like this, Adam was grateful for his Ninja. He rode south on 41 to the interstate, then across the bay, back north through Saint Petersburg, and across the bay once more before heading to his apartment. By the time he arrived, the sun was beginning to set, and he wished he'd stayed out long enough to watch it sink under the water.

With his helmet in his hand, he trudged up the stairs to their entrance. He doubted Olivia would be there. He'd probably never see her again. But he was worried the others might be, and he wasn't up for conversation any time soon. Especially not with people who gossiped about him behind his back.

Maybe he hadn't come from money like they all had. Maybe he had gotten out of Tennessee the first chance he'd had. Florida, with its abundant coastlines, had seemed like an exotic paradise. He hadn't realized how much he'd miss the Smoky Mountains or how awful the swamps could be in the summer. He couldn't have predicted that he'd fall in with a bunch of spoiled brats and, too soon, come to take their privilege for granted, just like them.

He should have been able to foresee that everything he took for granted, everything that wasn't really his, would eventually be stripped away from him.

*My name is Adam McPherson, and I ruin everything.*

He opened the front door and stepped into a messy but empty apartment. He tossed his helmet on the sofa—because who the hell cared if he put it away properly now?—and rushed into his bedroom. He plopped face down on the bed.

The reality was that Oliver was the one who ruined things, not him. Oliver was the one who was too much of a pussy to stand up to his own daughter and tell her to respect him and his life choices. Oliver was the one who looked between Olivia and Adam and chose Olivia.

*And why shouldn't he? She's his daughter.*

In reality, Oliver had done no wrong. He'd just been caught off guard, as had Adam. No one expected to have a perfectly normal moment of naked flogging interrupted by someone's nosy daughter. Why the hell had Olivia burst in like that, anyway? Even if she thought Oliver was single, did she think he never jerked off? Never took showers?

The problem was boundaries. Olivia had none. She trampled Oliver's, and she had tested Adam's repeatedly by crashing in his bed. Like her father, Olivia could have benefited from someone taking her over their knee.

For the second time that summer, Adam was alone. He'd never spank Oliver again. He'd never get to hold Oliver afterward. And the pain of that realization was so much worse than his breakup with Martin, because this time Adam had let himself step outside his comfort zone. He'd played a different role, and he'd foolishly thought he'd risen to the occasion. But since it had only taken a matter of seconds for the whole thing to unravel, it was clear that Adam had never really had control over anything. Not his relationship, not Oliver, not even himself.

*Be the change you want to see in the world*, a voice in his head chanted. He silenced it. He was done with his crusade. Let the world crash and burn.

He hoped his hypocritical, immature, judgmental frenemies would turn up soon. He wanted to punch Pablo in the face and then maybe get drunk with him.

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"I just can't figure out which is weirder, you know? That you like younger guys or that you're into freaky shit. I probably should have guessed about the freaky shit. I mean, it's always the quiet ones, right? That's what they say, anyway."

"Liv, honestly?" Oliver rubbed his right temple. "I've had enough. If you're going to keep mulling over my sex life, could you at least not do it out loud?"

"That's what she said." She slurped her frozen margarita. "Yeah, sorry. I guess it's weird for you, listening to me talk about how it's weird for me."

"A lot of children walk in on their parents having sex when they're young. That's how they learn about the birds and the bees." Of course, that myth of childhood development didn't ordinarily involve flogging. Or sodomy. Or thirty-year age gaps between Mommy and Daddy. "If you need therapy or something, just tell me, and I'll pay the bill."

Olivia put her hand on his. "Dad, don't be so serious. I said I was scarred for life, but I was probably just exaggerating."

"No, you were probably right." Oliver pushed his fork around his enchiladas. He'd ordered them because Adam wasn't around to worry about the

fat content of all that melted cheese, and the first few bites had been delicious. Now, though, they were unappetizing. “There was a moment when you were three, when your mom first started getting serious with Ted. The three of us sat down to talk about whether Ted should adopt you, and I should bow out of your life.”

Olivia’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

Oliver gave a rueful smile. “You could have had such a normal life. Just Mom and Pop. Not Mom and Pop and Pop’s fuck buddies.”

“Pop, you never had fuck buddies around me when I was a kid.” She blinked a few times, then squinted. “Wait a second, were you, like, abstaining because of me?”

Once they’d made the decision to raise her together, all three of them, it had seemed silly that they’d ever worried. But at the time, Oliver had been terrified Joanne would wake up one day, angry at him, and take him to court, using his lovers as evidence of why he’d be a terrible father. He’d gone for a long time without sex or companionship. It hadn’t seemed like much of a trade-off. Olivia was more important.

She still was, he reminded himself. And she was here, at this Mexican restaurant, talking to him. She hadn’t stopped answering his calls. She was going to move in, and Oliver was going to help her get a job. This, now, with her, was all that mattered.

When the waitress came around, Oliver told her to take his still-full plate away. He paid the check while Olivia finished slurping her drink, and then they walked outside together. The sun was still out, and there was a gentle gulf breeze blowing. It was the perfect summer evening.

“I think I’m going to go home and turn in,” he told her. “Are you going out?”

“I thought I was supposed to be in early on weeknights if I wanted you and Mom to keep up my allowance.”

Oliver shrugged. “I won’t tell.”

“Do you want to come?” She stopped walking and turned toward him. “I’m worried about you, Dad. You should come out and blow off some steam.”

He couldn’t help the snarky laugh that escaped him. “With your friends? What am I going to do with a bunch of twentysomethings?”

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“Try not to have sex with them?” Olivia gasped. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe I said that.”

“You’re just telling the truth. All the more reason for me to stay home. The last thing you need is me stealing more of your friends.” He pulled out his wallet and handed her two twenties. “Have fun, kiddo.”

Olivia didn’t make any overture at refusing the money. She never did. She gave him a hug, told him she loved him, and skipped toward her car.

Oliver waited a moment to watch her leave. He felt as if he was sending her out to do the living for both of them.

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## Chapter 10

Sanaa had always been wonderfully discreet, something Oliver valued in her more than her ability to keep his house clean. In fact, he was willing to overlook the little line of dust powdering the baseboard in the master bathroom because she kept him well fed, made certain his dry cleaning was taken care of, and never once said a word about the men who came into his home.

She also kept her trap shut when men didn't, and given Olivia and Joanne's frequent poking and prodding, Oliver appreciated that, too.

But something changed that August. Sanaa maintained her performance of her duties, but she and Oliver didn't have their special chemistry anymore. And she never came over to use his washing machine. He wondered if she'd given up on having clean clothes or if she had given up on him. Maybe she resented having to clean up after Olivia now, too. It wasn't as if Oliver had offered her a raise, and he'd basically doubled her workload, given Olivia's tendency to leave messes in her wake.

One night as Sanaa was wrapping up a dish of cold salad made from quinoa and black beans, still following Adam's dietary plan, Oliver approached her.

"Hey, Sanaa, before you go, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Her hands froze over the Saran wrap. "Of course."

Oliver looked across the kitchen to where Olivia was eating cereal. He didn't want to put Sanaa in a position to have to talk about Olivia while the girl was in the room, but sending Liv away was tantamount to telling both of them he knew she was the problem.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Liv, why are you eating? Aren't we doing dinner at your mom's?"

Olivia shrugged. "She said we were having fried shrimp, and I asked myself, 'Now how's that going to go down after living here and eating healthy for the last month?' Not very well, I don't think. So I thought I'd eat before we went over there."

"She'll be upset if you don't eat."

"No, she won't. She just wants to show off the new toys they got. It's not a real dinner party. We won't even be sitting at the table."



“All right.” Oliver thought to himself, *whatever*, but he wasn’t going to start talking like a millennial. “Can you give me a sec to talk business with Sanaa?”

She pushed her stool back, scraping it loudly on the tile floor. Before she got two steps away, Sanaa put her hands on her hips and cleared her throat. Olivia rolled her eyes but picked up the cereal bowl and brought it to the sink. She cleared the room.

“How did you...?”

“I’m sorry. I have no right to treat that child that way, but she needs some discipline. She has no respect for you or your nice home.”

Oliver squeezed her shoulder. “Getting her to put dirty dishes in the sink is more than fine. I just wanted to know if you and I are okay. You seem a little... distant lately. I never see you anymore.”

To his surprise, she beamed. “It’s Marco. I’m always with him.”

“Who’s Marco?”

“He’s my boyfriend.”

Did everyone have a boyfriend but Oliver? The way Sanaa said it, she didn’t sound embarrassed to use the term, despite the fact that she was in her forties. Maybe “boyfriend” was more universal a label than Oliver realized. Was that what Adam had been? His boyfriend? They had felt more like lovers.

He didn’t want to think about Adam. He’d been waiting with butterflies in his stomach for the day they ran into each other at work, but it hadn’t yet happened. And Olivia never casually mentioned him in the course of describing her social activities anymore.

“You’re seeing someone?” He tried to remember the last time she had been involved. It had been a while. “That’s wonderful. Do I get to meet him?”

Her smile widened. “I want everyone to meet him.”

Oliver didn’t mean to make the moment about him, but he could feel his face falling. How utterly simple it must have been for her. When she was in love, she told people. When she wanted to see her boyfriend, they made plans and went out. This guy, Marco, had probably never had to sneak into a hotel on a Wednesday night after a board meeting ran late. And what a night that had been, too. Adam had been on fire. The memory was as delicious as it was painful.

“Mr. Wasserstein,” Sanaa whispered, laying a hand aside his cheek. She rarely touched him—kissed his cheek hello and goodbye, yes, but rarely a touch with the hands. And she only called him by his last name in the most awkward moments of their interactions, like when she’d asked for a raise in her third year. “Why don’t you call him?”

Oliver glanced over his shoulder to see if Olivia was lurking. “I can’t. Besides, he made it clear he wants nothing to do with me.”

“You are such a handsome man. My God, if you weren’t gay, I’d ask you to marry me tomorrow.”

She didn’t mean it. She was only showing concern. But in her lilting accent, the proposition sounded nice.

“You just want a green card,” he teased. “So do you have a date tonight?”

Sanaa nodded. “We’re going to that movie. The one with Julia Roberts.”

“A tearjerker? If he’s willing to see that with you, he must love you.”

“What’s not to love?” She gave his cheek one more pat. Her ebony eyes radiated with sympathy. “Will you be all right?”

Oliver shrugged and reached into the refrigerator. After months of eating healthy food, fried shrimp didn’t sound that appealing to him either, but eating might calm his nerves. “You go have fun tonight,” he told her. “Someone should.”

Sanaa clucked her tongue but left anyway. Oliver poked a fork through the quinoa. He heard Olivia come back into the kitchen. Her footsteps stopped on the other side of the open refrigerator door.

“What?” he asked testily.

She pushed the door closed and looked at him. “What about Mom’s?”

“Not going,” he managed to say through a mouthful of food.

“I thought you might decide that.” Quietly, she placed an iPad on the counter nearby. “Recon-dot-com, Dad.”

He put the bowl of quinoa down and picked up the iPad. “What’s Recon-dot-com?”

Olivia shook her head. “Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Once Olivia left for Joanne's, Oliver pulled up the website in question. On the home page were images of men trussed up in harnesses, men in leather pants, men with cod pieces. Olivia was still pushing him to have an active social life, it seemed, only now she'd given up trying to interest him in the silver set. He couldn't help but think this was her way of telling him she accepted his kinky preferences.

Why now? What was the catalyst for this turning point? And why was he blessed with a daughter who quietly supported her father's desire to be spanked, when he'd been so rotten that he'd let her go unemployed for nearly three months before finding her a job?

Oliver wiped a tear from his eye. She was a damn good kid.

She had bookmarked several other sites: one for men seeking daddies, one community for fetish discussion and support, a service for houseboy employment. He had to snort at that one. First of all, "employment" was probably being used in the loosest of terms, and if he were to find another younger man, one who sought shelter in home in exchange for domestic services, he'd be stripping Sanaa of her duties. And that would never fly.

Besides, Oliver wasn't certain he wanted another younger man. He browsed the profiles on the site. They were all twinkies looking for sugar daddies. Olivia had tried, but she'd gotten it backward. Where was the website for someone older like Oliver to find his younger daddy?

There probably wasn't. Adam was one in a million.

*And look at all the trouble that got you into.*

Really, he had lucked out. The fallout from their relationship could have been so much worse. He could have been socially disgraced, embarrassed at work, or sued for sexual harassment. Adam could have tried blackmailing him.

Just because Adam hadn't, it didn't mean it couldn't happen with someone else.

Better to stick with the familiar, someone his own age. Someone into sex without a relationship that could get messy and make things difficult.

Oliver saw a familiar face in one of the profiles on the daddy-lover site. It was Simon, his would-be Cinderella from before Adam had come along. Simon's second profile picture featured him on his knees, his hands held above his head by leather restraints. Oliver grinned. Simon had seemed fairly vanilla

during their last encounter, but maybe that was because of the website through which they'd met. Maybe if Oliver contacted him through this one, Simon would show his true colors.

In his profile, Simon had listed himself as one hundred percent passive. Suppressing his disappointment, Oliver decided he'd have to learn to work with it. Being submissive to Adam had only weakened him. It had made him dependent upon some child who knew a hell of a lot less about the world than Oliver did. Listening to Adam had not been good for Oliver.

His newly muscled body begged to differ.

Simon had also listed his safe sex practice as "ask me." That gave Oliver pause. He and Simon had played safe—he hadn't given Simon the chance to ask for otherwise—but was Simon running around town, barebacking with anyone with a fat wallet? The man was old enough to know better. Oliver certainly was.

Maybe he and Simon could avoid sex until they knew each other a little better, at which point Oliver could demand to see test results. In the meantime, there were still other ways they could play.

Simon hadn't been so bad. He'd left in a huff the morning after, but if he was still on the market, maybe he'd agree to give Oliver another shot.

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For the fourth time that night, Adam's phone chirped with a text message. Boom, whom they were now to call Chris, was as insistent that Adam join him for drinks as he was about the name change. He said it had been too long since Adam had moved out of their apartment and that Adam would like his new work friends. They were, apparently, much less obnoxious than their college friends had been.

Adam put the phone down on the coffee table he'd bought at a garage sale. He'd stripped it and restained it himself, and it didn't look like a cheap garage sale find anymore. It matched nicely with the sofa, his one big splurge on a credit card. Although it had cost him a significant chunk of his paltry earnings from Wasserstein Enterprises to put together his new apartment, it had been worth it. Going home to a place that belonged to him, and only him, was wonderful at the end of a long day.

Chris texted him again. Although he'd changed a lot since he'd gotten a nine-to-five, Chris maintained his joie de vivre—and his ability to dole out peer

pressure. In this message, he assured Adam they were going to a bar that had an extensive mocktail list and that they'd be home by eleven.

Adam couldn't help smiling at that. He texted his regrets and promised that he'd have dinner and virgin drinks with the new colleagues soon. Tonight, however, he had other plans.

At nine the door buzzer went off. That was the other advantage to having his own apartment: being able to invite over guests. He opened the door to a man in a tight blank tank top and baggy jeans.

"You Adam?" the man asked as he muscled his way across the threshold. "I'm Tom."

"Yeah, can I get you something to drink? I've got water, orange juice—"

"Let's fuck." Tom shoved Adam onto the couch and tore at his fly.

"Oh, sorry, do you mind if we go in the bedroom? The couch is new, and I—"

"Keep your mouth shut, boy." Tom silenced him with a brutal kiss. His meaty paws wrapped around Adam's wrists, pinning him in place.

Adam managed to break away from the kiss to ask, "What did you just call me?"

"You heard me, *boy*."

He frowned as Tom sucked on a spot on his neck. "You're Tom? BigBoy77?"

Tom abandoned the fragile skin on Adam's neck with one final Hoover. Adam was certain to have a purple mark there. "Yeah. Why?"

"You IMed that you wanted a big, strong daddy?"

"Come on, kid, we were just talking. If you want to be my daddy, why don't you fight for it?" As he pinned Adam down again, Adam began to worry that this could escalate beyond a case of mistaken sex roles. He fought to push Tom off but only succeeded in freeing his legs. He twisted his head to the side, so at least Tom couldn't kiss him.

"You said you were a lost bottom in need of guidance! Get off me!" Unable to push Tom away, he used his smaller size to slide out from between Tom and the cushions.

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Tom sat on the sofa, rubbing his giant hand over his face, looking dazed. “What the fuck, kid?”

“I am not a kid,” Adam told him coldly. “I am not fighting you for control. If you’re interested in listening to me, doing as I say, then we can continue in the bedroom. But if you’re just here to hold me down and take advantage of me, you can leave.”

Tom laughed unkindly. “You are seriously fucked up.” He stood to leave, taking a moment to right his clothing. “If you think anyone is going to take you seriously when you look like that—”

“Get out. Just get out.”

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## Chapter 11

When Simon had suggested the same wine bar at which they'd had their first date, Oliver had vehemently protested. He did not want to relive his bathroom encounter with Adam. Instead, he'd decided to test how far Simon's sugar boy tendencies would go by taking him to a dive bar, the kind of place where men like Oliver and Simon knew to keep quiet about who they were if they didn't want any trouble.

The bartender looked foreboding in a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off, a hat that read "Stand Your Ground," and a mean glare at everyone in the joint except the bottle blonde seated on the last stool. But he poured a healthy dose of bourbon into the two drinks Oliver ordered, and the taste of such strong alcohol after weeks of taking it easy did a lot to chase away Oliver's discomfort. Next to him, Simon drank just as fast. By the second drink, Oliver was loose enough that he no longer thought the bar was a bad idea. By the third, he was loose enough that he and Simon were touching in ways that caught the attention of the other patrons. By the fourth, he was loose enough to realize it was time to go.

"Can you call me a cab?" he slurred at their redneck host.

The guy tugged his cap down on his head. Oliver wondered if he kept a gun behind the bar. Probably. "I think that's a good idea. Why don't you wait outside for it?"

"He hates queers," Simon whispered. He dropped his head on Oliver's shoulder. "Oh boy, what if we die tonight?"

"We're not going to die," Oliver said with one eye on the bartender. He tried to give a convincing smile. "He's my brother. He doesn't drink very often."

If anyone believed him, the illusion was shattered when Simon groped his ass on their way out.

"Why did you bring me there?" Simon complained once they were in the relative safety of the parking lot. "That place is awful!"

"Maybe I have a death wish." Oliver looked at Simon. Simon's hair was really short, nothing like Adam's mop of curls that sometimes fell over his face, and his nose turned up where Adam's protruded straight and long. Proud, like

everything about Adam. By contrast, Simon seemed to be shrinking from sight. "I just wanted to see if you'd have an adventure with me."

"I like adventures."

"You do? You want to go on another one?" A reckless idea began to take shape. He could ensure once and for all that Joanne and Olivia would never again pity him. He could show Olivia just how over Adam he was. Show off his new toy. "Let's go to my ex's house."

"Your ex? Who is he?"

"She," Oliver corrected. "She's having some party tonight because she got a new pool table or something. You want to go?"

"I like pool." Simon took a small bottle out of his pants pocket. He uncapped it and held up to his nose. Covered one nostril and sniffed. "Want some?"

Oliver watched Simon's eyes grow bleary. Forget the European vacation. Simon would probably ask Oliver to take him to the White Party. Weren't they too old for that kind of shit? Adam would have thought so. No, that wasn't quite right. Adam had never made Oliver feel too old. He just thought Oliver should treat his body and mind better.

"Adam would definitely not approve of poppers."

"Who's Adam?"

Oliver grabbed the bottle. "Someone who's not here."

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The party was in full swing by the time they arrived, but Joanne said nothing about their tardiness. She also said nothing about Oliver's state of inebriation, mostly because he didn't give her a chance.

"Don't worry, didn't drive," he assured her before she could start in. "Cab cost a fucking fortune." He pushed Simon into her entryway. "What do you think of my new friend?"

"Oh, Oliver," she said with a shake of her head. Then, ever the gracious host, she turned to Simon. "I'm Joanne. Welcome. Everyone's in the rec room. I'll show you guys the way up."

They followed her to an extra room on the second floor that had been created under one of the peaks from the roof. For as long as she and Ted had



lived in the house, the room had been a giant empty space. Oliver didn't know what had prompted them to finally furnish it, but he appreciated that they had turned it into an adult playground. Or a G-rated one, anyway. The room wasn't tricked out with restraints and a Saint Andrew's cross—although, if it had been, the party might have been a little more exciting.

Still, this was better than Joanne and Ted's usual parties, at which everyone had to sit around making conversation. Now there was a pool table under the chandelier, and near the window was a media center with the biggest television Oliver had ever seen. Against one sloping wall was a bar, where Ted, Olivia, and an assortment of family friends were gathered. Oliver held his breath, but he didn't see Adam in the crowd.

"This looks very nice," Simon told Joanne.

"You're clearly doing all right," Oliver agreed. "I'm going to stop paying you alimony."

"You never paid me alimony," Joanne reminded him.

"Maybe I should have. Maybe I should have paid all my exes alimony. Apparently, I'm hard to live with."

Simon found this funny and started to laugh, but he stifled it when he saw Joanne's pinched face. "Oh, Oliver," she said again. She led them over to the bar.

"Hey, Ollie, what are you having tonight?" Ted greeted him.

Since he already had Joanne's disapproval, there was probably no harm in further provocation. "Him," he replied, pushing Simon into the crowd.

Olivia's eyes nearly bugged out. "Pop, you want to introduce your friend?"

Oliver put his arm around Simon, but his brain faltered. "This is... my good friend... uh..."

"Nice to meet you," Ted piped up, extending his hand. "I'm Ted."

"Simon."

"Simon, right," Oliver muttered. Why had he been thinking Samson? Nothing about the man standing next to him cried out "brute strength," even if Simon's stature was roughly equal to his own.

They passed some time at the bar, making conversation and trying Ted's new recipe for pisco sours. After a while, the group separated into different

camps, some starting a game of pool. Oliver and Simon found themselves near the television set, where Wendy connected a karaoke machine. Shooting a coquettish smile at Ted, she insisted they all sing. She went first. She chose a contemporary song Oliver had never heard, the chorus of which was about being twenty-two. Each time she said the words, she looked pointedly at Ted.

Oliver watched this unfold with a mixture of curiosity and resentment. Wendy and Ted had flirted for as long as he could remember Olivia bringing Wendy around, but it seemed to have reached a fever pitch that summer. And yet their body language said they were still frothing with sexual tension, that they hadn't yet crossed any lines.

He turned to look at Olivia, who was singing along and clapping her hands. She didn't seem to reserve any particular judgment. Joanne, who was draped on the arm of Ted's plush chair, gave her husband a nudge. Ted looked at her to confirm, and she nodded. He rose to his feet and started dancing with Wendy. It wasn't the kind of out-and-out rutting that Olivia and her friends did, but it wasn't the kind of dancing fathers did with daughters, either. They were flirting and touching, right in front of Olivia and Jo, and everyone in the room was laughing and cheering them on.

The resentment bubbled up into fury. His family had never once made him feel different for being gay, but he could see no other reason why Wendy and Ted were permissible while he and Adam weren't. Unless it was because he and Adam had actually crossed that line. But that wasn't just about sex. Wendy bumping her hips into Ted—that was just sex, and somehow it was more okay than the love Oliver had shared with Adam? Adam, who made him feel whole, made him feel desired, after all the years Olivia and Joanne had urged him to find someone who made him feel that way? And for what had he turned it down? For this?

He stormed over to the bar and poured himself another drink.

When the song ended, Ted called for something from his generation, and Olivia said there was a CD of hits from the 1960s and '70s. Unless Ted was going to respond by singing "Young Girl," Oliver was no longer interested. He tuned out and sipped his drink. He tried to imagine what the party would be like if Adam were present. Adam would have frowned at all the drinking, and Ted probably would have thought he was stuffy. Well, Ted was stuffy. And Adam had been right. The hangovers weren't worth it, and Oliver felt more energetic when he watched what he ate and drank. But Adam wasn't here. He probably

hadn't even been invited. He'd probably been pushed out of his social circle once Olivia told everyone the boy had been sticking it to her dad.

Poor kid. Oliver hoped he hadn't lost all his friends. That was probably unlikely, since Adam was so handsome and confident and had accomplished so much in his young life. People looked up to men like that. Wanted to be around them.

Oliver recognized the first strains of a song by the Guess Who and immediately sought out Jo. Once upon a time, they'd loved the band. They'd gone to a concert and made out a little during it. It was the first time Oliver had kissed a girl.

Joanne must have been flashing back to the same memory. Their eyes locked, and she gave him an affectionate smile. She held out the microphone. "Come on. You know you want to."

"Yeah, Dad," Olivia chimed in. "It's your turn."

Oliver set his drink down and found his way back to them. He accepted the microphone, but something about Wendy and Ted's carefree display, combined with all the alcohol he had imbibed and the melancholy of the song, caused his mood to crash. He wasn't angry anymore. He didn't feel a sense of outrage or injustice. He was just sad. Profoundly sad.

He'd lost the best thing that had ever happened to him, and now he was stuck at this dumb party with the gray-haired guy whose name he couldn't remember.

By the end of "These Eyes," Oliver was sitting on the floor, lost in his own world. He didn't even notice that Simon had left.

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Adam's phone chirped again, and while he appreciated Chris's persistence—it made him feel important, after all—he was annoyed to be getting messages after midnight. But, since he was awake, he looked at it.

It wasn't Chris. It was Olivia.

The text message simply said to call ASAP. It could have meant that Olivia was drunk-texting him, goading him into the big showdown that had never really happened after his breakup with Oliver. He wouldn't put it past her. And he really wasn't in the mood.

He rubbed his right hand over the soreness on his left wrist. Stupid fucking online hookups. Adam was majorly striking out in his quest to find someone new. At least he hadn't gone back to Martin, though. He couldn't, not now that he knew how much being the one in power excited him. He still wasn't certain if it was a lifelong change or something specific to his relationship with Oliver. If the online hookups didn't sort out soon, he might never know.

Another text message. This one said, *Call please. It's important.*

Adam sighed. He hadn't realized how much he'd appreciated being away from the drama of his college friends. The prospect of getting pulled back in filled him with dread.

*See? I don't want to fix their lives. I'm not a control freak. I just liked helping Oliver be the best man he could be.*

"What is it?" he asked wearily once Olivia answered.

"Look, I know you and my dad broke up, and you're probably shackled up with someone new right now."

"Not even close."

"You're not? Why the hell did you move out on Boom then?"

"Uh, because I thought you'd never want to see me again? They were your friends more than mine. I thought you'd convince them all to dump me." Adam glanced around his apartment. It was much smaller than the place he'd shared with Boom—Chris—but it was tidier and in better condition. "Besides, it was time for me to stand on my own two legs. After all, wouldn't want to mooch off the wealthy forever, right?"

"Adam, look, I know I said some things that weren't very nice."

"Nope, they sure weren't."

"You don't have to be a dick about it."

"How do you want me to be, Olivia? You took over my room all the time and never paid rent, and when you weren't there, you were crashing your dad's house and abusing his generosity. Meanwhile, I was trying desperately to get some privacy with the man I loved because we couldn't be at either of our houses. Because of you."

"He's my *dad*, Adam. I wasn't abusing his generosity."

He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He wanted to make sure he explained this right, as he'd likely never have another chance to say it. And because he suspected Olivia would report it all to Oliver.

"I know he's your dad. He loves you first. If he has to pick between you and anyone else, you're going to win, every time. I wasn't asking for it not to be that way. But you say you love him, and you take all his money and all the things he buys you, and maybe I did, too, but the difference was that you expect it. If he'd been poor and couldn't offer me a job and didn't have an awesome place to live, I still would have loved him. And if he'd been rich and never given me a dime, I still would have loved him. I know you and Wendy and Pablo think I'm hillbilly trash, and maybe I am, I don't know, but I was never, for one minute, trying to get anything from your dad other than his love. Can you say the same?"

Olivia didn't answer, and Adam worried he'd gone too far.

"I'm sorry you saw me flogging him," he added sincerely. "I can imagine how weird that must have been."

"I needed brain-bleach."

"I wasn't hurting him. He likes it."

"Yeah, I don't really want to know, okay?" She sighed. "I felt lied to. By both of you."

"We did lie to you," Adam admitted. "I'm sorry for that. We just—we were figuring our relationship out, and we needed privacy to do that. And then after we figured it out, I guess we thought you wouldn't understand."

"You could have at least tried me."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. Did you say this to him?" Adam wondered. "It might be better for him to hear it. Since, you know, we're not really friends anymore, and it doesn't really matter."

"Why aren't we friends anymore?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?"

"I'm sorry I was such a bitch. If it makes you feel better, I hate Pablo, too. I think he's a douche."

In spite of himself, Adam cracked a smile. The line between Pablo and Olivia's insults was a little fuzzy to him, but he appreciated her attempt to distance herself. "Is this a drunk dial? Because you sound really sober."

"No, actually, I called because of my dad."

Adam's heart stopped. Oliver was dead. Oliver was in the hospital. Oliver was in love with someone else. There were many possible reasons why she'd call about Oliver, and none of them were any good.

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“You really love him?” she asked. “It wasn’t just a sex thing?”

“I’m not going to lie. We had mind-blowing sex.” She let out an *ewww*, and he laughed sadistically. “But, yeah, I loved him.”

“Still?”

He didn’t like admitting it, but he would always love Oliver. What had Oliver said of Joanne? She was one of his great loves. Oliver was going down in history as one of Adam’s.

“Yeah,” he told Olivia. “I still love him. I probably always will.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s still in love with you, so could you come to my mom’s house? It got kind of messy over here. We could use your help.”

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## Chapter 12

The first thing Oliver thought when he awoke was, *Sun, oh fuck, the sun, why is it so bright?*

The second thing was, *Didn't I swear I'd never do this again?*

The third, as he rolled onto his side and felt a gentle hand stroking through his hair, was, *Who's that?*

He opened his eyes. He was in his bedroom, with no idea how he'd gotten there, and next to him, like a dream come true, was Adam. In shorts and a T-shirt, his hair freshly washed and not yet gone wild. Adam gave him another caress.

"Good morning," he said softly. "Do you need something for a headache?" Oliver nodded. Adam reached behind himself for a glass of water and two tablets that were on the nightstand. He helped Oliver sit up enough to drink and wiped Oliver's chin when he dribbled. "Do you think you could eat a little something, or do you need to throw up?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking care of you."

So simple. Oliver needed taking care of, and Adam was there to do it. Why wasn't every morning like this?

"Olivia?"

"She's in the living room. She's ready to talk whenever you are. She's the one who called me last night."

"I was at Jo's," Oliver remembered.

"Yup, and apparently you had a meltdown while you were singing 'Killing Me Softly.'"

"The last thing I remember was 'These Eyes'."

"What can I tell you, babe? Apparently you gave a whole concert." Adam tipped his head. "Were you singing about me?"

Oliver nodded. "How'd I get here?"

"Olivia and I brought you home in her car."

“So she’s not—you and she are okay?”

“I’m going to warn you now,” Adam said with a lopsided smile. “When she comes around all the way, she’s going to be awful. I’m talking bad jokes and tasteless Christmas gifts. I can see she’s going to think it’s hilarious to tease you about the age thing. And the kinky sex thing.”

Oliver couldn’t keep up. He snuggled into Adam and pillowed his head on Adam’s lean thigh. “Simon?”

“Who’s Simon, baby?”

“No one. Wimpy little bottom. Good poppers, though.” Adam’s hand in Oliver’s hair stilled. “Are you mad at me for getting drunk and using club drugs?”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m not mad at anyone. I’m disappointed in both of us. That fight—”

Oliver sat up quickly, then clutched Adam in silence until the room stopped spinning. “That fight was my fault. I should never have let you walk out.”

“I made you feel like you had to pick between me and Olivia. I never should have put you in that position.”

“You didn’t,” Oliver argued. “You were more than understanding about the whole thing. I was the one who made you feel... well, I didn’t make you realize how precious you are to me. That’s on me.”

Adam cradled his face. “See, I thought I was the one who didn’t make you realize how precious you are to me. You know what we have here? This is a serious case of mouth-on-dick preventing communication.”

He was joking. He was here, in Oliver’s bedroom, comforting Oliver after his thoughtless night of drinking, and instead of passing judgment or scolding or making Oliver do penance for their breakup, he was holding Oliver and making jokes. Oliver had no idea what he’d done to deserve such good fortune.

“You’re probably right. We can’t let mouth-on-dick prevent us from communicating. I am, however, more than okay with dick-in-ass preventing mouth-on-dick.”

“Well, come on now, sometimes they can happen together.”

Oliver looked carefully at Adam. Enough joking. There were things he needed to say. “I tried to get over you, but it didn’t work. Everyone wants a sugar daddy.”



“Everyone who? I had a couple of dates, and all they did was try to convince me I hadn’t yet realized my full potential as their suck pig.”

“You would look really hot in a harness.”

“I’m not a slave. I’m not a brat. I’m not a big, nelly bottom in need of stuffing.”

“Then what are you?”

Adam turned serious eyes on him. “I hope I’m yours. And I hope you’ll let me help you sort all this out.”

Oliver felt awash with relief and happiness and anticipation. He didn’t have all the answers. Liv was coming around, but what about Joanne? And how would he and Adam manage work? What about the living arrangements they’d fought over? That all still needed to be sorted out.

But they could do it together. Because as much as Adam wanted to be his, he wanted to be Adam’s.

“And you’ll stuff me?” he teased, a little bit hopefully, to break the tension.

“I’ll definitely stuff you.” Adam leaned down to kiss Oliver, and it was just as Oliver remembered: sweet and unassuming, but also full-bodied and fiery. “Mine,” Adam growled. “Tell me you didn’t try to belong to anyone else.”

“Nobody, Daddy. I belong to you.”

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## Epilogue

*One year later*

“Champagne for Pops,” Olivia announced, handing Oliver a glass. “And champagne for Step-Pops.” She produced another glass from behind her back and stuck her tongue out while offering it to Adam.

He gave her a smile in return and accepted the glass. “Thanks, Step-Brat.”

Oliver had mastered the art of checking in with Adam in public. He looked discreetly from the glass to Adam and back again. Adam gave an equally subtle nod that said he could drink it. He deserved a glass in celebration, and Adam would make sure neither of them had more than one or two tonight.

“So,” Olivia said, “I was thinking to myself about this big occasion, and I wondered, ‘What could someone in my position do to help her Pops celebrate?’ And then I realized on my measly entry-level salary, not too much.”

Adam rolled his eyes. Some things never changed. “Let me guess. Then you realized your Pops didn’t need anything from you but your love and affection? Or maybe you made him a card decorated with macaroni?”

“No, stupid, I’m trying to tell you something real.”

“How would we ever know that? Everything gets lost in the miasma of bullshit.”

“Children,” Oliver warned, “play nice.”

Adam grinned at Olivia. They knew Oliver enjoyed the occasional reminder that he was the patriarch of their unusual clan, even if he was patriarch in name only. Olivia still had him wrapped around her finger, and Adam usually had him wrapped around other body parts.

“So I argued for a raise and got one. You can stop my allowance now if you want, Dad.”

Adam was speechless. Oliver’s money was his own, and he could give as much to Olivia as he wanted. The only time Adam intervened was when he knew Oliver didn’t want to fork over but felt manipulated into it, and then he’d only interject to remind Oliver that Olivia would love him no matter what.

But ending her allowance was a big deal. They’d brokered a tidy little agreement after Oliver and Adam had reconciled. Olivia sublet Adam’s

apartment, and Adam had moved into Oliver's condo. Olivia maintained squatter's rights to come and go as she pleased, as long as she never entered their bedroom without knocking. And if she heard or saw something she didn't want to, Adam was fond of reminding her, it was her fault for being a meddling brat.

The arrangement had forced Olivia to get serious about finding employment and trying to stand on her own, which had pleased Joanne. Adam had offered to pay Oliver an amount equal to what he'd paid in rent on the apartment, but Oliver had been upset to learn that all of Adam's savings had gone into his new home. He wouldn't accept rent from Adam, and he insisted that Adam's paychecks go to his student loans and his motorcycle fund.

Adam's birthday was next month. Oliver thought he was going to make a down payment on a new bike, but Adam planned to use the motorcycle fund to get Oliver riding lessons and a license. And his own helmet, so they could ride together.

"Daughter, I would be happy to stop giving you an allowance. We'll put the money in savings for you instead, just in case."

"In case I get fired?"

"In case you want to buy a house someday," Oliver corrected.

Olivia looked properly chastened. Adam glared at her, tipped his head toward Oliver. She, too, had mastered the art of nonverbal communication. She glared back, but rose on tiptoes to kiss her father's cheek. "Thank you, Pops. You're the best. Really."

"You're welcome, kiddo. I'm proud of you."

"Maybe by the time you're thirty, you'll actually be out on your own," Adam teased.

"Maybe by the time you're thirty, you'll actually look old enough to be with my dad. Oh yeah! I said it!"

"Liv!" Oliver scolded, glancing nervously around.

"Don't worry, Ollie." Adam slung an arm around Olivia's shoulder. "Anyone listening will see we're just one big, happy family." He pinched her bicep, and she shrieked and jerked away, sloshing champagne to the ground.

"It's looking good here tonight," Ted said as he and Joanne joined the circle. "I wasn't expecting this many people."

"It's like everyone in Tampa is here," Joanne agreed. She kissed each of them hello on the cheek.

Adam looked around the ballroom. Joanne wasn't exaggerating. He recognized a number of his former Wasserstein coworkers, many of whom he was eager to catch up with after nearly seven months in his new position at a biotech company. And then he spotted one familiar face he wasn't excited to see.

Martin Hinsdale caught him looking and waved. He started to walk toward them.

"Shit."

"What is it?" Olivia asked, craning her neck around him to spy.

Martin made his approach slowly, offering them a wave. "Hello, Oliver, thank you so much for the invitation."

Oliver acknowledged him by lifting his champagne glass. Adam was proud of his poise and dignity. It was true that many business acquaintances had been invited to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Wasserstein Enterprises, but excluding Martin from the list wouldn't have raised many eyebrows. Oliver had invited him because he was a good guy.

Martin said polite hellos to Joanne, Ted, and Olivia before turning his attention to Adam. "It's been a long time since I've seen you. What are you doing here?"

Adam opened his mouth but wasn't sure what to say. It wasn't that he and Oliver were closeted, but how could he explain his relationship with Oliver to the man who'd once made him spit-shine his shoes?

Martin was perceptive enough to figure things out. "Oh, I see. Well, Oliver, I wish you luck. This one, he never listens, he never does what he's told. You've taken on a giant headache."

Oliver gave Adam a look that said he was begging to intervene. While they often corrected the assumption that they were just friends (or, worse, uncle and nephew), they never spoke about their power-exchange dynamic in general company. And now that they had friends online and at the leather club, they knew they didn't need to talk about it. It wasn't weird or wrong—just private.

But this was different. Oliver was insulted on his daddy's behalf, and Adam could see it was paining him not to say anything. He gave a small nod.

“That’s really strange, Martin,” Oliver mused. “I never noticed if he listens or obeys. I guess I’m too busy getting spanked to pay attention.”

Ted choked on his champagne, forcing Joanne to whack him on the back. Adam thought he heard her murmur something about getting with the times.

Martin licked his lips and tipped his glass in Oliver’s direction. “Well played, Wasserstein. Well played.” He excused himself.

“Did he believe me?” Oliver asked. “I don’t think he believed me.”

“I cannot believe you just said that to him.” Joanne sounded, if anything, proud.

“Freaks, all of you,” Olivia grumbled.

“But you love us.” Adam leaned close to her, puckering his lips comically, and she shoved him away with a laugh. “All right, Oliver. You’re the host of this party. You can’t stay in the corner all night. You’ve got to make the rounds.”

“Only if you’ll come with me.”

Adam grinned. It was one thing to be out, but parading a much younger lover around like arm candy at a company function was a big move. When they’d planned the party, they had decided Adam would come as Oliver’s date but that Oliver would not go out of his way to introduce Adam as such.

“Come on,” Oliver urged. “All these old men with their younger trophy wives, and I can’t have you on my arm?”

Oliver offered his hand, but Adam shook his head. He put out his elbow instead, and Oliver rested a hand on it. Holding Oliver, supporting him physically and emotionally, it felt right. They walked into the crowd, arm in arm, together.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Harry K. Malone is a native of the Chicagoland area, where he has lived in nearly every neighborhood as well as several suburbs. Since he doesn't have a human significant other, the city remains the one great love in his life. Harry has been writing stories about unconventional relationships and families since he was a child. When not writing, he enjoys watching sci-fi, playing video games, listening to NPR, and hanging out with his cat, Khan. Harry is proud to be a part of Chicago's vibrant LGBTQ community.*

## Contact & Media Info

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# HIS, NO MATTER WHAT

By S.J. Lenox

## Photo Description

The young man, his defined chest bared and jeans hanging loosely around his hips, stares out from the picture. From beneath the shadow of his sweater's hood his eyes glitter, dark and enticing but troubled. His hands are clasped behind his back, as though he's trying to stop himself from reaching out to grab something or someone.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I'm both nervous and excited about my big brother attending my college graduation.*

*I've always looked up to him, but something changed when I was about thirteen. He'd gone away to college and came home for Thanksgiving. Any lingering doubts about my sexuality vanished. It had just been a few months, but somehow he looked very different: older, hotter, more sophisticated.*

*I know I shouldn't feel this way about my brother, and I swear I've tried to stop thinking of him in that way. But no guy I've been with has measured up to him. I haven't seen him since before I started college, but I'll never forget the way he looked at me that last time. It gave me hope that he might feel the same for me.*

*This weekend, I'm going to find out.*

*{Please no BDSM, violence, or abuse. Prefer contemporary or urban fantasy, but please no shifters or vampires. Angst is always welcome, and please feel free to crank up the heat as high as you dare. While the boys should hook up (at least) once, whether they decide to pursue any kind of sexual or romantic relationship in the end is up to you. Thank you!}*

Sincerely,

C.M.

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** incest, reunited, long time coming, homophobia, college, businessman, family drama, angst

**Word Count:** 20,715

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



# HIS, NO MATTER WHAT

By S.J. Lenox

Adam Keene watched those winking droplets of water trail down the hard chest, and wondered what the slick, taut skin would taste like on his tongue. He swallowed. Maybe it would taste like honey, the golden color of the skin reminding him of the syrupy, sticky spread. Sweet and earthy, he'd bet the flavor would curl around his tongue and saturate his senses, leaving a lingering aftertaste he'd savor for days.

His hands itched to reach out and touch the slabs of firm muscle, to stroke the dusting of damp hair over the nicely defined pecs. His riveted gaze followed the trail of dark hair lower, he also wouldn't miss the opportunity to run his fingers over the ridges of the tight abs as he explored down.

Adam took a step closer, already imagining what he'd do after he tugged free the white towel precariously draped around those lean hips, when a big hand suddenly gripped at the front of it, barring the tantalizing view.

"Morning," Patrick's deep voice rumbled. His hand clutched at the towel as he tried to secure the tuck that'd slowly come undone under Adam's anticipatory gaze.

Reluctantly, Adam tore his eyes away from the view he'd been enjoying and looked up to greet the owner of the body he should never have been caught ogling.

Late morning sunlight shone brightly through his bedroom window out into the hallway, picking up the blue in Patrick's inky hair, the almost steely shade of blue dull in comparison to the dark, swirling indigo of the thickly lashed eyes staring at him inquisitively. Adam realized he was taking too long to respond.

He cleared his throat, trying to clear it of the husky roughness of sleep and surreptitiously angle his body away, hoping Patrick wouldn't notice the bulge growing in Adam's pants—although if he did, maybe he'd chalk it down to morning wood.

"Morning," Adam greeted, curving his mouth up into what hopefully looked like a casual smile, as if he hadn't just been close to attacking Patrick's glorious body with his hands and mouth.

“Didn’t think I’d see you this morning.” Patrick grinned.

Adam shifted uncomfortably with an answering little laugh as Patrick’s smile went straight to his pants. The white, steam-dampened door caught his eye as he tried to look anywhere but at the nearly naked man directly in front of him.

“My sleep’s been all outta whack since exams started,” Adam explained. “Are you done with the bathroom?”

“Yeah, go right ahead.”

“Thanks,” Adam replied. He hastily took up the opportunity for escape and slipped into the bathroom, trying his best not to sneak a last peak. He sagged against the door as it clicked shut and absently rubbed at his right arm. The area tingled hotly from where it’d brushed up against Patrick’s warm, damp skin in Adam’s haste to leave the awkwardness in the hallway. Well, awkwardness on *his* part. After all, it was normal to make small talk with the half-naked man you catch in your hallway—wasn’t it?

It was the blatant, panting perusal and hardening erection Adam had subjected him to that was cause for embarrassed panic. His dick throbbed in disagreement. As he had come to do in the stressful frenzy of the last month, Adam ignored it, and flipped the lock and pushed off the door. He peeled off his clothes and headed straight for the refuge of the shower. Steam quickly billowed out of the glass door as he turned on the water and stepped under the spray.

Adam sighed and rolled his shoulders as water, hot enough to melt away the first few layers of skin, sluiced over him, easing his tense muscles.

He’d forgotten Patrick had returned for the weekend. When Adam had returned home late last night to find Patrick waiting for him, Patrick had nearly been brained with a backpack full of textbooks. Tall and broad-shouldered, he’d melted out of the shadow of the porch, stalking toward Adam as though Adam was some juicy prey he’d like to skin and wear.

The last thing Adam had been expecting, his mind overloaded with a frantic montage of serial killers, was a pair of arms to wrap him up in a tight embrace. Adam tensed, ready to aim a swift kick to any part of his attacker’s body he could get when he heard his name being called in that deep, all-too-familiar voice.

*Shocked* was too mild a word to describe his reaction. Adam froze, sagged, tensed and pushed against the hard body holding his. He stumbled back, his

eyes wide as he took in the man before him. No doubt like a fish, his mouth had opened and closed wordlessly as he tried to process whether his over-squeezed brain was playing a trick on him for shits and giggles after he'd put it through the ringer of a week of exams, or if Patrick was really standing on his doorstep.

The worried, blue gaze and the firm hand that reached out to squeeze his had been all too real. Patrick was really back.

It wasn't until after Adam shakily let them both into the house and settled Patrick into his old room that Adam got the reason for Patrick's return. Barely sparing a glance at the bed, harder and bigger than the one he'd left, or the empty gray walls, devoid of any personal touch, Patrick explained the reason for his sudden return home.

Apparently—and Adam still had a hard time believing this—Patrick hadn't wanted to miss Adam's graduation—four years of hard work was nothing to sneer at. Still in a state of disbelief, Adam had pointed out that it wasn't as if he were graduating top of his class in Aerospace Engineering or something, it was just Business, and even if he got top grades—which he hadn't been embarrassed to admit he did—he was surprised Patrick had come home after all this time for *that*. Even their mom wasn't bothering to attend, Adam had tossed, wincing inwardly when Patrick's expression darkened, whether at the mention of Jane Keene or at her absence at her son's graduation ceremony, Adam wasn't sure.

Too late in the evening to demand detailed answers to all the questions swirling inside of him, Adam had returned to his room confused, happy and exhausted.

Confusion because, *seriously*, after nine years? And happy, because despite Patrick having left Adam behind like some used condom in the alley after a rough quickie, he'd still come back. For Adam.

The exhaustion... well, that had been plaguing him since he'd gotten up at what felt like the crack of dawn to spend a day cramming at the library in preparation for his last exam, the one he'd just come stumbling back from. There was nothing like the tense, overloaded-with-stress atmosphere that hung heavily over campus to really invigorate a body.

So yes, it was no wonder he'd woken up this morning with no recollection of last night's late night reunion until he'd nearly molested his brother in the hallway.

His *brother*.

Adam groaned and scrubbed his hands up his face and through the tangled wet mop of hair that desperately needed a cut again.

It had been bad when he'd last seen Patrick, that Thanksgiving all those years ago, but Adam had a feeling that these next two days would be a whole lot worse.

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At thirteen years old, Adam had just barely figured out he was gay when he started having thoughts about Patrick. Very *unbrotherly* thoughts.

At the time, he had lived every pubescent boy's nightmare trying to hide, explain and deal with a constant raging erection and flushed face, except it seemed to only be constant around Patrick.

The relief Adam had felt that day, toward the end of summer, when Patrick finally left for college several hours away, was like the neighborhood and the nearby national park had been lifted off his narrow, scrawny shoulders. He had expected his feelings for Patrick to fade, for him to start noticing instead, the gangly, awkward boys whom he shared the locker rooms with, who strutted nakedly around, proud of their changing physique, and totally unaware of the gay guy in their midst.

That hope had been quickly dashed when he realized he was comparing every bulky arm and narrow chest to Patrick's and finding them, and all their other bits, severely lacking. And then came the long days of missing Patrick, of rushing to his room after school to tell him about his day only to find the room empty and loneliness suffusing him.

He had hoped that what he was feeling was a product of imprinting, since as a kid he'd always tagged after his brother. Horribly shy, he hadn't been one to make friends easily; even now he could count all his friends on one hand. Patrick hadn't been ashamed of Adam and his clinginess either, unlike what he'd heard of the other kids in his class and their older siblings. Like a duckling, he'd followed Patrick everywhere he could, and tried to everywhere he couldn't. Since the death of their father by the hands of a drunken trucker, the family of four rapidly shrunk into a family of two. Though still with them, their mother, Jane Keene, not particularly warm to begin with, after the death of her husband, had drifted even further away into the twittering, gossiping bosom of her church group.

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*Nine Years Ago*

5:42 p.m. Adam flicked his gaze back to the red screen and watched distractedly as bullets rained through his body. Barely glancing at the file of his mission results, he slid his thumb downwards, pressing to continue. Back from the dead, he cocked his gun and raised it as he stealthily scanned the tunnel, and charged ahead for the fifth time in an hour. Minutes later and he faced the same viscous, red liquid dripping down his screen. He tossed the controller onto the couch beside him and sank back into the cushions. There was no point. He hadn't been able to focus on anything since he'd gotten up and called Patrick early this morning to confirm his return for Thanksgiving. Adam's insides relived the melting they'd received at Patrick's soft laughter, affirming that he would definitely be on Adam's doorstep no later than six, traffic and weather permitting.

Only months had passed since Patrick had left for college, but Adam felt each and every one of those days down to the minute. Loneliness seemed to be constantly gnawing on his insides and though he had friends—okay, *a* friend—nothing could seem to fill the void his brother left. Adam spread his arms and dropped them back onto the couch on either side of him with a heaving sigh. Thirteen years old and his shyness had now nicely evolved into a case of extreme awkwardness. Some people were just blessed.

Adam pulled his eyes away from the broken antique metal clock—time must have moved backward three centuries ago—and picked at the dark bangs poking him in the eyes. It was definitely time for a haircut. His hair, already mop-like in its usual state, was growing into something that made him resemble Cousin Itt—wearing a wig.

The sudden knock at the door followed by the click of the lock disengaging had Adam jumping off the couch and racing toward it. He opened the solid oak door. Adam's happiness bubbled over and hitched at the sight on his doorstep. Hotter, and somehow looking more mature than when he'd left only a few months ago, Patrick's wide, full smile sent butterflies fluttering low in Adam's stomach.

"Adam!" Patrick greeted enthusiastically. "Shit, you've grown!" he said with a warm laugh, as he stepped forward to grab the young boy in a tight hug.

Adam flushed, the deeper tone of his brother's voice and the hard chest pressed against his cheek seemingly new to him. He wriggled, the warmth he felt had to be from his joy at seeing Patrick again, and tried to ignore the

stirring inside. He laughed in agreement to his brother's exclamation. After all, he *had* grown... even if it wasn't by much.

The hug was over all too soon. Adam hid the sharpness of his disappointment and accepted the hair tousle, moving out of the doorway to let his brother inside. Eyes glued to Patrick, it wasn't until his brother motioned to his side that Adam realized there was someone else there.

The bright smile Adam hoped to have to himself all weekend suddenly turned on the blond standing closely at Patrick's side. "This is Jason," Patrick said, resting his hand on the slender stranger's—Jason's—shoulder.

"Jason, this is Adam."

"So, you're Adam." Jason stepped forward. "Your brother talks about you non-stop." He grinned lopsidedly, holding out his hand.

Adam smiled faintly and mumbled a greeting, pumping Jason's hand once before dropping it. He noted that Patrick still hadn't moved his hand off the guy's shoulder.

"Patrick, you're here," Jane Keene greeted, stepping out from the kitchen. Her thin body was wrapped in an apron, dusted with flour, as she tried to wipe the excess off her hands with a dishtowel she promptly pushed back into the apron pocket. Adam hadn't seen his mother quite so domesticated in a while.

"Hey, Mom." Patrick bent down to give the petite figure a quick hug and kiss, uncaring of the puffs of white settling on his dark coat. "I brought Jason, the friend I mentioned."

Jason quickly stepped forward to greet Jane.

"Come on in," she said, lifting a cool, soft hand to quickly shake Jason's outstretched one. Her topaz eyes, exactly the same shade and shape as her younger son's, except lacking their warmth, took in the young stranger standing in her entranceway. The ear piercings, tight black jeans and tattered sneakers didn't go unnoticed.

Jane turned back to Patrick and gestured upstairs. "I already took out the air mattress for you. You'll be fine in Patrick's room, won't you, Jason?" she asked absently, already turning around to head back into the kitchen without waiting for a reply.

"That's fine with me, ma'am," Jason replied, undeterred by his cool reception.

“Dinner will be ready in an hour,” Jane’s voice called through the kitchen.

Adam watched his brother lead Jason upstairs with their bags and tried to shake off his disappointment. Of course Patrick had made new friends in college. Had Adam really expected Patrick to sit in his room all day, hating himself for leaving Adam behind, only going out to attend class. Adam didn’t like the answer he had for that question.

He slid back onto the couch and picked up his console to boot up the stage again. In an effort to keep his mind off the unfamiliar twinge in his chest, he started up his game again, this time intending to reach Mission Seven. It was okay; his dark, rather cruel good looks were needed here to save the day. He *did not* keep an ear cocked to the floor upstairs.

Not a scratch on his expensive tailored suit. Adam nodded in satisfaction and crossed his arms across his wide chest as he stepped into the freight elevator. The thick metal doors closed on the scene of carnage left in the silo. There was something to be said about saving the day.

“New game?” Patrick asked with interest as he dropped onto the space next to Adam on the couch. The love seat, as always, seemed intent on living up to its name, the soft, springy cushions dipping toward the middle when more than one seat was in use. Adam slanted toward Patrick, his shoulder and bare arm resting against his brother’s warm, solid one. Adam resisted the urge to rub against it.

The heat of Patrick’s skin was swiftly replaced by cold air and again that sense of disappointment as Patrick leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees to watch the TV screen avidly. Jason, Adam noted, dropped to the ground, sitting extremely close to Patrick’s legs, his back resting against the arm post.

Adam started up the next mission and shifted uncomfortably, trying not to notice Jason’s hand occasionally touching Patrick’s ankle.

“I borrowed it off a friend.” His one friend, Steven, seemed to be the only guy lacking more interpersonal skills than Adam. A zealous game player, Steven had been lending Adam his favorite games ever since their stilted bonding session over a truly perfectly timed pavement kiss—Steven, not Adam—and an assist to the infirmary. So far, they had progressed to more than five word conversations, although their topic hadn’t widened further than which game Adam needed to try next.

Adam paused the game and held out the controller. "Do you want to have a go?"

"Boys, dinner's ready," Jane announced, stepping into the room. She eyed the screen with disapproval. "You shouldn't be playing so many of those violent games." She sniffed with distaste.

Adam placed the controller onto the table and clicked off the TV with a mumble. It wasn't the first time he had heard Jane's censure. She seemed to disapprove of many of the things Adam and Patrick did, never mind that aside from their gaming tendencies—and the occasional spats—they always tried their best to make her happy.

"How about I show you how the game's really played, later?" Patrick challenged cockily, with a conspiratorial wink, his dimple flashing.

Adam snorted, some things hadn't changed. He filed into the dining room after the older boys, a happy smile on his face.

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Adam excused himself and waddled to the bathroom full of turkey, stuffing and eight other kinds of dishes that only made an appearance during this time of year. He didn't think he'd be eating again for the rest of the month. His stomach gurgled, and apparently having decided that the overstretched waistband of Adam's straining pants would make a good second dessert, promptly sealed itself around it trying to swallow it through his skin.

Adam pulled at his pants, fighting against his stomach. Scratch that, *the rest of the year*.

Adam returned to the dining room, ready to veg out in the living room with Patrick, as was their tradition in dealing with the aftermath of Thanksgiving. He faltered as the table, set for four, came into view, and with it, the sight of Patrick's very masculine hand reaching for Jason's. Shock filled him as he tried to process the sight of Patrick's thumb stroking the back of Jason's smaller hand. The gesture, glaringly intimate and tender, had Adam reeling as he realized what it was he was seeing. Patrick and Jason were together. *Together* together.

As though sensing him, Patrick turned to look over his shoulder. Adam dimly noted how quickly Patrick's hand released Jason's to drop back to his side innocently.

"Hey, there you are. Mom wants to know if you want anymore? I think I've eaten enough to make it through to Christmas, though," Patrick joked.



Adam gave a negative shake of his head and turned toward his mother, not looking at Patrick. "Thanks, Mom, the food was great. Do you need help with clean up?" When his mother declined his offer to help, he turned on his heel and headed upstairs, needing the solace of his room.

*Patrick's got a boyfriend*, Adam repeated to himself tonelessly, and then, *Patrick's gay*.

Adam couldn't believe it. Had Patrick always been gay? Why hadn't he told Adam? Okay, so he hadn't told Patrick he himself was gay yet, but still... Was Adam not trustworthy enough to tell? The questions continued to swirl around in him unanswered. He had to talk to Patrick.

Amongst all this, Adam couldn't ignore the small flare of happiness at the knowledge that his brother wouldn't find Adam's desire for the same sex disgusting. He hadn't told anyone yet, but he figured it was only time before someone noticed. He already knew from firsthand experience that kids had an unnatural knack for ferreting out what was different and making sure they would suffer for it.

Adam stiffened at the sudden thought of anyone finding out he had the hots for Patrick. His body felt icy as he imagined what everyone would say, what his mom—what Patrick—

Adam nearly doubled over, queasy to his stomach. *No*, he wouldn't say anything to Patrick. He couldn't.

The abrupt knock and swift opening of his door had Adam sitting up, tensed.

"Hey, you okay?" Patrick asked, his long legs eating up the distance from the door to Adam's bed. He stopped in front of Adam, his dark brows knitted together as he looked down at Adam in brotherly concern.

Adam swallowed, pasting a smile on his wan face. He patted his stomach. "I'm good—think I just ate too much."

Patrick didn't look too convinced. "You sure?"

Adam stood up and brushed past Patrick, needing some space. "Yeah, I—" Adam broke off, staring down at the big hand suddenly wrapped around his thin wrist, halting his escape to his desk. Long, tanned fingers tapered with blunt, square nails, the slightly roughed calluses of his palm burned into Adam's skin. He swallowed, unbidden; he wondered how they would feel stroking his body. Small shivers broke out on his skin; his breath hitched then puffed out shallowly from the images crashing through his mind.

“Adam?” The tense worry in Patrick’s voice jerked Adam back from the reel of entwined limbs, bare skin and fevered hands.

“Sorry,” Adam said breathlessly. His tongue darted out trying to moisten his suddenly dry lips. He looked up to find Patrick’s eyes focused intently on his mouth, the black swallowing the deep indigo.

Patrick reached out to sweep an errant brown lock from Adam’s temple, the pad of his finger running reverently down the side of Adam’s face to his jaw. Adam’s heart pounded, every part of his being focused on the trail of sensation. Patrick’s warm hushed breath caressed Adam’s cheek, the smell of pastry and sweet potatoes faintly brushing up against his skin.

“Hey, ready to go?” the question snapped through the room, jolting them apart.

Adam stumbled back, his calves hitting the bed. Despite the cheerfulness in his voice, the quickly concealed, dark frown and the rigidity in Jason’s postures as he stood in the doorway made it clear that he knew he had interrupted something. *Something that definitely shouldn’t have been happening.* Adam tensed, his gaze dropping intently on the dark green carpet as Jason’s cold gaze swept over him.

The sound of Patrick clearing his throat filled the tense room. “Adam’s not feeling well. He said he’s going to stay here.”

“All right, we’d better get going before they close,” Jason said stiffly, spinning on his heel.

“We’re just going to go pick up some stuff at the store. Won’t be long,” Patrick explained to Adam, a strained expression on his face as he looked from Jason’s retreating figure back to Adam. Adam opened his mouth to ask Patrick to stay, to explain to Adam what had just happened—so Adam could explain what happened, but he couldn’t get the words out. He could do nothing but watch as Patrick turned to hastily follow after Jason.

Adam collapsed onto his bed, his knees giving out as soon as Patrick left. He squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head into his hands, unable to sort through the turbulent mass of emotions inside of him. Confusion, desire and shame battled it out, each trying to swallow him whole as he thought back to what had just happened. His fingers brushed against his cheek. He could still feel the heat of Patrick’s fingers there.

Adam curled his fingers tightly against his palm, the bite of pain from his nails digging into the soft flesh doing little to settle the anxiety eating at him.

What he felt for Patrick was wrong. He'd known that the moment he had started having these feelings for him, but he hadn't realized until now how much having them could screw up everything. Patrick didn't need a little brother who imagined kissing him, touching him—who was *in* love with him.

Adam grit his teeth and steeled himself as he came to a resolution when the muffled sound of low, arguing voices drifted in through Adam's sealed window. Confused at the disturbance coming from so close, Adam climbed over his bed to the other side, looking through the glass to find the source.

The voices were coming from directly below him. Adam looked down, barely making out the dark figures of Jason and his brother. Under the deeper shadow of the small orange tree, where moonlight could still peek through the full branches, he saw the smaller figure savagely tear his wrist from the other's grip. Adam tried to move away from the window, not wanting to watch a lovers' argument, but he couldn't get his body to move. He watched as someone, he wasn't sure who, hissed an angry response, then the tall, broad figure pushed the slighter one into the trunk of the tree and kissed him furiously.

Before Adam could wrench his eyes away from the painful sight, the sound of the backdoor crashing open cracked through the still of the night.

"You disgusting, dirty filth!" his mother screamed, her voice shrill and furious as she stormed out of the kitchen door into the garden, the light from the interior pooling out onto the yard.

She stabbed a shaky hand at her eldest son and his companion, "How dare you bring your sickness into my house!" she hissed furiously. Her hand jerked back to violently fist at her side.

Jane's small shoulders shook with rage, her spine tight enough to snap as she sprayed vitriol at the shaking, young figure. "You're vile! Sick, if you think your abominable—"

"Please!" Patrick interjected pleadingly, his voice sounded painfully young and shaky. "Please, it's not like that." He gestured desperately behind him, the rest of his words low and lost to Adam's hearing.

"Don't you dare spout that evil—"

Patrick tried again, stumbling forward. His voice hoarse with entreaty, "Mom—"

The sharp crack of Jane's hand, hard across Patrick's face, wrenched through the stillness of the night air. "Get out," her voice, hard and cold as ice, sent tremors down Adam's spine. "Get out of my house."

"Mrs. Keene," Jason protested, trying to step out from behind Patrick. Patrick held out his arm, halting him. Adam couldn't catch the words Patrick said to him, but Jason rendered a worried, searching look at him before he turned to walk away from the raging woman.

His form rigid, Patrick glared coldly at the woman he had called Mom for the last eighteen years. Adam couldn't even begin to imagine what Patrick was thinking as he stepped around her and stalked back into the house, his footsteps thundering up the stairs.

Adam scrambled over his bed in a panic. He tripped over his feet as he tried to rush out of his room to intercept Patrick. He stumbled through Patrick's doorway to find him furiously shoving the few personal items and extra clothing he had left behind in his move to college into a big black duffle.

"Patrick?" Adam called tentatively, his voice wobbling. His heart throbbed with more pain than his thirteen-year-old self knew how to bear.

Patrick looked up, the violent jerking motions of his hands pausing. Pain bloomed through the rage frosting his hard eyes.

"I'm sorry, Adam. You shouldn't have had to hear that," he said stiffly. He tore his eyes away; jerking shut the zipper of the bag, and slung it onto his rigid shoulder. He bent to pick up the overnight bags next to the door as he walked out.

"You're coming back, aren't you?" Adam choked anxiously, his voice small. "Patrick?"

Patrick stopped; his shoulders drooped before Adam's overwrought gaze. He gave a small, sharp shake of his head. "Sorry, Adam." Without turning around, he was down the stairs and out the door before Adam realized what was happening.

Adam stumbled down the stairs of the ominously quiet house, and rushed out of the house onto the lawn in time to see Patrick toss the bags into the backseat of his car where Jason waited in the passenger seat, facing forward resolutely.

Patrick slammed the back door shut and bent to pull open the driver's door.

“Patrick!” Adam yelled, tears streamed down his face as he tried to step around his mother’s coldly raging form, but she held him back, her arm unrelenting.

Patrick looked up, the overwhelming pain in his dark eyes threatening Adam’s ability to stay standing. He looked back at Jane, his eyes hardening to black ice. Adam shook, his breath coming out in hitching gasps as he watched Patrick slide into the driver’s seat and start the ignition. His heart shattered as the car disappeared down the road from view.

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### *Present Day*

Adam pulled himself from the horrible memory seared into his head and picked up the bar of soap. He scrubbed hard, as though he could clean himself of the vile words his mother had thrown out that night, and made himself concentrate on the routine motions. He refused to let his mind relive the way he had shattered when their mom had thrown Patrick out of the house that night. Told never to return, Patrick had left and done just that.

Shortly after, their mother had torn apart Patrick’s room, ripping out every last piece of Patrick that he had left behind in his haste to leave, until not even a shred of him had been left in the house.

Adam shuddered, quickly rinsing the soap from his skin. He hated thinking back on that night. In the end, he needn’t have agonized over his desire for Patrick ruining their relationship. His mom had done that for them and more. If he had known then that he wouldn’t see Patrick again, would he have made the decision to lock away his feelings, would he have pulled Patrick down for a kiss uncaring that Jason was barging into his room?

Adam shook his head; it was moot thinking that way. It always was. What had happened in the space of less than an hour that night had happened, and rehashing it wasn’t going to change the outcome. He’d realized he’d fallen in love with Patrick, and just as effectively, lost him.

Adam cringed, this was sounding worse than the gothic novel he’d studied in the English Lit class he’d been forced to take.

Adam realized he’d stayed in the shower for too long as the dark recollections stormed his usually calm morning shower ritual. He swiftly turned off the water and dried off. The erection he’d been sporting earlier, he noted, had flagged during his happy trip down memory lane.

Adam slung the damp towel around his waist and swiped up the clothes scattered on the floor to dump in the hamper on his way out. The fragrant scent of eggs and onions assailed him as he opened the door, his stomach growling appreciatively.

He hurried back to his room and rummaged through the pile of clothes he'd dumped on the side of his desk sometime earlier that week. He pulled out something that—his accompanying verified sniff confirmed—was clean, and quickly dressed to head downstairs.

"Smells good," Adam called out as he turned toward the kitchen. He stopped short as he reached the arched entranceway. A nice, firm ass atop a set of long lean legs encased in soft black jeans greeted him. He felt his cock twitch back to life.

"Hey, you're just in time," Patrick said as he stretched up, turning around to reveal the two plates in his hand. "Had a hard time finding these, I thought they were above the dishwasher?"

"Oh, yeah. Mom, uh, rearranged some stuff," Adam explained, wincing inwardly as Patrick's now cold, sterile room flashed to mind. He stepped forward to grab a pair of glasses from their new place on the shelf next to the fridge. "Water?"

"Yeah, thanks." Patrick set the plates next to the already found, and set out, cutlery, filling them each with half of what he'd whipped up in the pan.

Adam placed the filled glasses onto the table next to each respective place setting, appreciatively eyeing the colorful bits of pepper, onion, what looked like potato, and something else peeking through the soft, fluffy pile of eggs.

"Go right ahead." Patrick grinned, gesturing with his fork to the bottle of ketchup that had been set on the table to Adam's right. "If I remember right, you don't like anything that's predominantly eggs unless it's drowned in ketchup."

Adam grinned sheepishly. "Still the same," he admitted. He wasted no time in dousing his plate with the syrupy, red condiment until it resembled something out of a horror movie. Satisfied, he swapped the bottle out for his fork and dug in.

"Mish hoo ood," Adam moaned around the mouthful he'd managed to fit in his mouth. While he'd been cramming for exam after exam, he had survived on junk and takeout since their mom had left for her fortnight-long, spirituality-

finding retreat with her friends several days ago. The first taste of real home-cooked food had Adam almost delirious.

Patrick paused, his fork halfway to his mouth as he took in Adam's euphoric expression. "I'm glad you appreciate my attempts at domestication," he chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "If it weren't for this, I'd still be living off instant noodles. Although, since I learned to make this during sophomore year, my recipe stockpile has managed to get bigger... somewhat."

Adam swallowed, his throat tightening as he watched Patrick chuckle ruefully. Lines, where previously there hadn't been any, fanned out from the corner of his dark blue eyes, matching the new tiny grooves creased around Patrick's wide, full mouth. They caught Adam's eyes, reminding him of all the years they'd spent apart, years that had added their touch to Patrick's face.

Adam looked away with a pang and quickly demolished what was left on his plate. He didn't look up again until he was finished.

"You must have really needed that," Patrick said with a cocked brow as he polished off his own plate.

Adam shrugged and grinned, as though inhaling every meal was the norm for him. "You're a good cook."

Patrick laughed and the sight had Adam wishing he had food he could busy himself eating again. The uncomfortable knot of *something* swelling up in his stomach next to the rapidly consumed breakfast—lunch—made him aware, all over again, of just how much he'd missed that smooth, low sound.

Adam pushed back from the table and escaped to the sink with his empty plate and glass in hand.

"Guess that means I'll be cooking this weekend," Patrick joked as he stepped up next to Adam, setting his own used dishes in the sink to give them a perfunctory wash before placing them, and the used pan and utensils, into the dishwasher next to Adam's.

Adam shuffled back as Patrick brushed against him. Heat rose to his cheeks as Patrick's bare torso flashed to mind before he could stop it. He had to get a grip on himself. He wasn't thirteen anymore. Hadn't nine years taught him any self-control? The weekend loomed before Adam, uncomfortable and awkward. The thought of two more days of this had him wincing. He turned toward Patrick, resolute in his desire to have things be as normal as possible.

"You know I make a mean fried rice," Patrick continued, completely unaware of the turmoil going through Adam. "And a really good beef and broccoli with fungus."

"*Fungus?!?*"

"Yeah, it's this black wood ear—*Let's* just say fungus never tasted so good," Patrick quickly concluded at the look of horror Adam could feel on his face.

"How about, I trade you a meal of *fried rice*—no fungus, black or otherwise, necessary—for a meal of my famous grilled cheese sandwiches?" Adam bartered. He swallowed the sigh of relief at the dissipation of the tense atmosphere. He didn't think he'd ever say it, but *thank God* for fungus.

"Deal."

They quickly cleaned up the kitchen. Adam finished up and placed the ketchup back in the fridge as Patrick wiped down the table and cleared away any remnants of breakfast.

Patrick set the towel down next to the sink and dried his hands on the dishcloth hanging by the side before checking his watch. "Should we go grocery shopping later? There's not much else in the fridge, and I'll need some ingredients for tonight's dinner... Unless you can somehow make one of your famous grilled cheese sandwiches without any cheese, or bread?"

Adam frowned. "Yeah... I don't think that'll be possible—they'd be a lot more famous if I could though. Guess we're going grocery shopping."

Patrick grinned. "Great. It's twelve-fifty right now, so how about we head out around three? I've got a bit of work I need to do, but after that I'm all yours."

*Ha! I wish.*

Adam opened his mouth to answer with a more appropriate response when the jingle and buzzing of a phone call coming through cut in first.

They both turned toward the source of the noise, Patrick reaching out to swipe his phone from the counter. He glanced at the screen and frowned. "Sorry, I gotta take this," he apologized, already turning to leave the kitchen.

"Hey, Tim..." Adam heard him greet as Patrick disappeared upstairs. He sagged against the sink as the soft nick of the door being closed whispered



down the stairs. Adam rubbed his chest in an effort to dispel the tightness there and expelled a sigh. *It was going to be a long weekend.*

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Adam turned from his position, half in and half out of the closet, toward the door, sensing his brother's presence. He swallowed, instinctively clenching at the items of clothing he held in both hands. If he hadn't known his brother didn't have a streak of vanity, Adam would have thought Patrick leaned against his doorjamb *just so* to perfectly showcase his tall well-built frame. Adam's eyes zeroed in on the sharp, defined muscles outlined on the arm resting against the wall, wondering if Patrick could bench-press him.

"Wow, it hasn't changed all that much, has it?" Patrick said with no small amount of wonder, looking into Adam's bedroom.

Adam had yet to move from his position as he watched Patrick step into his bedroom and compare the changes to the bedroom of the thirteen-year-old kid brother he'd left behind nine years ago.

"Macro-economics, huh?" Patrick noted. He appeared impressed as he scanned the titles on the spines of the textbooks piled haphazardly on Adam's bedside table. Patrick sank onto the bed, seemingly categorizing the changes to the décor. The walls had never been covered in various posters, but in place of video games strewn haphazardly around the room were various articles belonging to a young man. Among the pairs of worn, tattered shoes shone a pair of new shiny dress shoes, a standard interview and job-hunting pair.

The sight of Patrick on his bed had Adam finally releasing the items in his hands and stumbling out of the closet. "Sorry about the mess," he said, toeing aside a pair of pants he was still contemplating whether to take with him or not.

The sight of the black suitcase hidden between the end of the bed and the desk in the corner seemed to have caught Patrick's eye. "You're packing?" He asked, tilting his head at the half-filled suitcase.

"Yeah, I'm supposed to be leaving next Saturday." Adam flipped close the suitcase lid so Patrick wouldn't see how little progress he'd made. He'd hoped to have at least a little of his clothing sorted while he waited, but his mind had decided to spend the time more productively elsewhere. Three guesses as to where.

Patrick swiveled around to stare at Adam. "You're leaving?"

Adam nodded, half-kicking and dumping what he could pick and scoop off of the ground onto the floor of his closet. "One of the jobs I applied for before grad offered me a position. I'll be working for their branch in Seattle."

Adam couldn't quite decipher the look Patrick gave him in response. "Hmmm," Patrick said. "Seattle's pretty far from here."

The uncomfortable tightening in his chest returned. "Yeah, it is." This town was the only place tying him to Patrick now.

Adam tried to momentarily push the depressing thought from his mind. He grabbed his keys from where he'd left them on the desk and turned to the door briskly. "Anyway, should we head out?"

Patrick frowned but stood up to follow. "Sure, let's go."

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Adam locked the front door and followed his brother to the unfamiliar blue car. Its presence in the driveway had somehow gone unnoticed last night. "Did you drive here?" he asked, sliding into the passenger seat.

"It's a rental I picked up at the airport. I left my car in Raleigh."

"Raleigh," Adam echoed, pained at how easily it fell from Patrick's mouth. For years, he'd had no idea where his brother had been living, if he was still in the same country or even alive. For at least some of the time he'd stayed out of contact, he'd been half a day away. Adam refused to think on what that meant.

"You're living in Raleigh?" Adam tried to ask casually.

"Yeah, I've been there for the last two years," Patrick answered; unaware of the turmoil he was causing Adam. "I was in Denver for three years before that. I got offered a job there after graduation."

"Congratulations on graduating," Adam said softly.

He flushed, realizing how stupid he must have sounded, and clamped his mouth shut. He turned to look out the window and grimaced, biting back a groan. *Stupid! Why had he said that?* ...Except, he wanted *someone* in the family to congratulate Patrick on his achievement. God knows, it wasn't as though the last four years had been a breeze for Adam.

The warm, smooth sound of Patrick's chuckle rolled through Adam, slightly lessening his need to throw open the car door and toss himself out.

“Thanks. A couple more days and I’ll be saying the same to you... and you’ll be leaving for your job not long after,” Patrick reminded. The corner of his mouth pulled up fondly. “My kid brother, all grown up.”

Adam blew out a breath. “I’m not a kid,” he argued, unfortunately sounding frustratingly petulant.

They turned into the supermarket’s parking lot and slid into the first available parking space not too far from the entrance. The engine rumbled to a stop as Patrick pulled the key from the ignition. Neither moved to get out.

Patrick turned to face Adam with a quirk of his lips.

“Guess not,” Patrick said softly, running those fathomless eyes down Adam’s form. Adam resisted the urge to shift in his seat as fluttering broke out in the pit of his stomach.

“Your hair’s still like a kid’s though,” Patrick joked, fingering the long, messy strands slightly curling around Adam’s ear and down his neck. His rough fingers trailed down the lock, his knuckles brushing against Adam’s neck, teasing the rapidly beating pulse there. Adam’s breath hitched, every nerve focused on Patrick’s touch.

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Patrick couldn’t stop himself from touching the soft skin that had been tempting him from the corner of his eye throughout the drive. The fluttering heartbeat under his knuckles set his own heart pounding, enticing him to lean forward and have a taste, to see if the creamy skin was as sweet as it looked.

The sharp shrill of a car horn broke through the tense anticipation. Patrick reluctantly dropped his hand and, pasting a smile on his face, turned to get out of the car. The sound of the traffic and the parking lot was harsh and loud in comparison to the muffled cocoon of the car’s interior. Patrick took a deep breath, trying to get his head straight as Adam exited the vehicle.

They briskly walked into the cool interior of the supermarket in silence.

Patrick dropped the packet of raspberries into the cart, and tried to remember what was on the grocery list he had left on the counter next to the fridge, instead of focusing on the distracting figure trailing behind him. He realized that he wasn’t doing such a good job of it when the carton he dropped into the cart next to the bunch of bananas turned out to be a tub of packaged tofu. He shook his head and placed it back on the shelf, before giving in to the

urge to glance over his shoulder. He found Adam distractedly picking at grapefruit.

Patrick suggested that they head on to the next section, turning away as Adam startled and nodded, following after him.

Determined not to forget something on his already forgotten list, Patrick ended up filling the cart with more than enough food to see them through the weekend. Adam probably wouldn't have to go grocery shopping for the rest of his time at home. Patrick's jaw clenched. *Shit*, he still couldn't believe their mother didn't have the decency to make an effort to attend her youngest son's graduation. Not only that, she wouldn't even be there to see Adam off for Seattle. Patrick wondered why he was even a little surprised. It wasn't as though she had always been a model of maternity.

Patrick had been furious when he had found out from an old acquaintance that he'd bumped into in Raleigh, that their mother wouldn't be attending Adam's graduation. It was one thing to not attend Patrick's—there was no way they could go back from what had transpired that night on Thanksgiving—but to not even show up for Adam's when it was four years coming, was something else all together.

Patrick had swiftly asked for the Friday and Monday of the graduation ceremony off. His boss hadn't been too pleased, considering the huge project they were currently trying to acquire. However, the invaluableness of Patrick's skill and knowledge had meant, a quick, if grudging, assent when it really came down to losing Patrick for a few days or indefinitely.

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Adam balanced the eggs on top of the box of cereal and snack foods, their corners jutting out haphazardly, careful to cushion them with the loaf of bread and roll of paper towels. He eyed them warily before stepping back to let Patrick maneuver through the thick throng of weekend shoppers ahead of him. The faint sound of his name being called had Adam pausing.

"Adam," the voice repeated, sounding rather familiar the closer it got. Adam swiveled his head, scanning the aisle in attempt to find the source. Although not as tall as Patrick's six foot one, Adam's still tall height meant he could catch the sight of heads, unfamiliar and bobbing, parted as a dark head, somewhat familiar, advanced through.

"Knew it was you," the slender figure declared as he sauntered up to Adam, his usual disarming grin dangling from the corner of his wide mouth. It figured

that if the crowd's swift parting had been for anyone, it'd have had to be for Oliver. Trust him to induce a reaction in even the most mundane of places. Dressed in a dark leather jacket opened to a tight white T-shirt and a pair of mustard jeans, fitted in all the right places, Oliver knew how to make the most of his assets. He topped the outfit off with a thin scarf and his trademark scuffed combat boots, the chunky heels adding an extra inch to his shorter height.

"Oliver," Adam greeted warmly. "You're back."

"Holland wasn't as fun as I thought it'd be," he said with a shrug. Adam took it to mean that the guys over there hadn't been to Oliver's liking.

"Because it's a lot more fun here?" Adam asked skeptically.

Oliver snorted. "You've got a point there."

"I did miss those brown eyes, though," he said softly, faint sadness momentarily reflecting in his gray eyes. It was gone as quickly as it had come though, his usual joking flirtatiousness quickly sliding back into full-force.

He slid up closer, those slate gray eyes running appreciatively down Adam's body. "I hear you're graduating on Monday."

Adam nodded, leery of the Cheshire grin slowly slicing across Oliver's air of innocent inquiry.

"You know," he drawled, looking up at Adam through his lashes coyly. "I think a present is in order." He gave a nod of his head, as though he was thinking it over and deciding that that had to be the case. He reached up to fiddle with the sleeve of Adam's T-shirt. "Presents are *really* important." His dark head gave another decisive nod. "Especially *big* presents you'd get dirty—" he paused, flicking a meaningful glance to Adam's crotch. "...unwrapping," he finished huskily, his innuendo loud and clear enough to leave the aisle in no doubt as to what the present might entail.

Adam couldn't help himself, he full out laughed. It was just like Oliver to unashamedly churn out horribly clichéd innuendos, regardless of the time, place or location.

"Seriously though, how about a drink at my place tonight? We can catch up, it's been a while... I've missed you."

Adam shook his head, his eyes softening. What they'd had had ended not long after it started, and he wasn't going to go there again. "Sorry, I'm busy this

weekend—” He looked over his shoulder to find Patrick stonily watching the byplay from the end of the aisle where he’d been waiting for Adam.

At Adam’s sudden frown, Oliver turned and caught onto Adam’s source of silence. “Mmmm, with him?” he asked, his interest clearly perking.

Patrick seemed to have enough of waiting. “Um, sorry. I gotta go,” Adam said distractedly, as Patrick turned and left.

Oliver reached out, grabbing Adam’s wrist. “You sure?” he asked.

Adam turned back, torn between wanting to hurry after Patrick’s retreating figure and not wanting to just run out on Oliver. “Sorry,” Adam said, and they both knew it was for more than Adam rushing off. “It was nice seeing you again though, Oliver.”

Oliver smiled resignedly and released Adam’s wrist. He stepped back and seemed to get a hold of his usual carefree demeanor as his wide grin returned. “Well, if you’re allowed out, you know where to find me,” Oliver called out blithely.

Adam rolled his eyes and waved his hand in parting, ignoring the teasing farewell as he tried to maneuver through the throng of people and shopping carts suddenly barricading the aisle.

By the time he found Patrick at the cashier, a third of the groceries had already been loaded onto the conveyor belt. Adam reached out to help with the rest, noticing the hardness of Patrick’s jaw and tense profile. Unease slid through him when his offer to pay was met with a cold, tight look.

“I’ve got it,” Patrick said, his words clipped. The protest died in Adam’s throat.

Items bagged and paid for, they headed back to the car. The drive home was tense, Adam’s tentative attempts at making conversation met with stony silence.

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Patrick piled the last of the bags of groceries onto the small kitchen table and the two of them began the laborious task of putting away the various items. Patrick grabbed several cans and stalked to the pantry, leaving Adam fiddling with the top of the milk bottle.

“Uh, thanks for all this,” Adam said quietly, catching Patrick’s attention. He glanced up through his lashes at Patrick, his expression cautious and worried.

Patrick paused in the act of stacking the canned tomatoes and took a breath, hating how unreasonable he was being. "It's all good, didn't want you resorting to instant noodles after I leave." He looked away and resumed sliding the cans to the back of the shelf. He felt like a dick, his stony mood obviously hurting Adam who had no idea what had brought it on. But *fuck*, when he'd seen that scrawny, flashy guy sidling up to Adam and touching him in that familiar way, he'd known instantly that there was something between them.

Hell, everyone within a ten-foot radius of the two had to have grasped that. Even worse though, was the easy way Adam had taken those looks and touches, as though they were nothing new to him. Patrick's blood boiled unreasonably. He knew it was jealousy, there was no other name for that dark churning in the pit of his stomach, and the need to wrench Adam away from that guy and keep him safely tucked away somewhere.

*Somewhere* meant anywhere other than here. *Far from here*. From *her*.

Patrick shuddered at the thought of what their mother would do if she found out her other son was gay as well. It was obvious she didn't know it yet if Adam was still here—and Patrick didn't think she'd have changed *that* much in the last nine years to know and not care—but it was only time, especially if Adam was that, for lack of a better word, *defenseless*, in public. Patrick turned back to the table and caught Adam's attention, his expression harsh and serious.

"Adam, you know I'm not judging you," he said, ignoring Adam's frown of confusion. "But you can't flaunt your relationship with your boyfriend like that in public." Patrick ignored the shock on Adam's face and continued, "You know what it's like." *What she's like*.

Adam's face twisted. "Of course I do," he said darkly as he forcefully yanked open the refrigerator door and slid the milk onto the top shelf. The tension seemed to drain out of him, his shoulders losing their rigidity as he paused then turned back. "Don't worry, Mom doesn't know," Adam said, resignation in his voice. "Besides, I'm leaving soon, and I doubt I'll be back much," he added.

He picked up the bags of chips. "And Oliver isn't my boyfriend."

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Relief at Adam's words flashed clearly across Patrick's face. Adam didn't let himself think that a small part of it might have been at him not being with Oliver. There was no way Patrick's black mood had had anything to do with

jealousy. He stuffed the chips in the basket on the lower shelf and left a bag out on the bench for later snacking.

Another thought had Adam frowning at his brother. "How did you know I'm gay?"

Gay. That word, spoken in this house, had Adam inwardly wincing. Caught up on the uncomfortable feeling, Adam missed Patrick's look of unease.

"Patrick?"

"Gay-man superpowers?"

Adam barked out a laugh at the serious answer. "*Seriously?*" He snorted. "You mean gaydar, right?"

Patrick shrugged and handed over a carton of eggs. "One man's gaydar is another gay man's superpower."

Adam snickered and placed the eggs in the refrigerator next to the milk. "*Right.*" Adam tried to keep the lightness in his tone at his next words. "So, does your supposed superpower help you out in Raleigh?"

Patrick fielded the pack of bacon and block of cheese across the table. He didn't seem ill at ease at Adam's question. "It sometimes goes on the fritz. Guess it's hard to keep it working smoothly if I hardly ever use it. Work's got me so busy these past few months, I'm starting to think I should bring a sleeping bag to work."

Adam tried not to think about the relief Patrick's answer brought.

They made quick work of the rest of the groceries.

"Oh yeah, I nearly forgot," Adam suddenly exclaimed, closing the pantry door on the last item. He turned and left the kitchen to disappear up the stairs, leaving Patrick to stare after him in confusion.

"Look what I found in my stuff earlier," Adam said excitedly as he rushed back into the kitchen. He brandished the thin square case in his hand, holding it out like a trophy. The way Patrick eyed the case warily—a dubious, dark brow cocking up as he read the title—had Adam grinning.

"Thought we could do with a rematch," Adam proposed challengingly, his eyes sparkling.

Patrick paused, looking from the game to Adam's eager face and back again. A broad shoulder lifted up in a cocky shrug. "Why not?" He smirked. "I guess I didn't teach you a good enough lesson last time."



Adam snorted derisively, his answer a roll of his eyes.

Adam loped upstairs to retrieve the console while Patrick retrieved two sodas from the fridge for their gaming session. High atop boxes of junk and old memorabilia, stacked on the topmost shelf, nestled the old PlayStation. Adam reached up and swiped at the box, grunting when he only managing to coat his fingers in dust.

The sudden heat pressed up against his back had him frozen in the midst of reaching for the box again. The cool, dry air of the wardrobe became hot and charged all too quickly as Adam remained rooted on the spot unable to do more than dimly note the growing cacophony in his head at Patrick's proximity.

"Here, let me." Warm breath rustled through his hair as a pair of solid arms brushed against his outstretched ones, rubbing against the sensitive hair that dusted there. Adam's nostrils flared at the spicy scent of Patrick as it enveloped him, his brother's movements doing nothing to reign in the caress of musk and soap.

The unmistakable caress of a large cock sliding against his ass as Adam sank slowly back down onto his heels had his toes curling, his heart pounding like crazy. Adam clenched his buttocks involuntarily, seared by the heat flush behind him.

He held his breath, his body humming and buzzing. Disappointment was sharp when Patrick stepped back with a puff of dust motes, the ancient boxed console in his large hands. Adam shivered at the sudden absence of heat. Surreptitiously trying to shift the seam of his jeans now digging uncomfortably into his excited cock, Adam turned back around reluctantly to face his brother, his hands strategically hanging in front of him. He hoped his face, and cock for that matter, showed nothing of his response to Patrick's closeness.

"I came to see what was taking you so long."

"Thanks," Adam mumbled hoarsely. He cleared his throat. "Shall we go?" He tossed calmly over his shoulder, walking briskly out of the closet toward the door.

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Hours and a stack of old unearthed games later, Adam and Patrick found themselves jeering and shouting at the two figures circling each other viciously on the flat screen. What had started as a short, friendly battle of tactile memory

and dexterous thumbs on the couch had rapidly spiraled into a six hour, all-out war on the floor, as close to the scene of action as possible. Far from the meal they had planned at the beginning of the day, dinner had been a lavish affair of ham sandwiches and potato chips, washed down with enough soda to fuel another round of tactical strategizing.

Adam furiously tapped on his controller, his reflexes punching in combinations faster than he could think them up.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, what the hell!” Adam hissed, his brow furrowed in tense concentration. The ache in his tightly clenched hands had been lost to him a couple of hours ago. Adam slashed downwards with his sword, spinning around to avoid Patrick’s spinning drop kick.

He swore as his character sustained serious damage from a surprise-backhand body-spike combo. Grimly eyeing his rapidly deteriorating life bar, Adam looked away in disgust as his character was thrown to the ground with a dirty combination.

“Does anyone know how much of an asshole your gaming alter-ego is?” Adam muttered darkly. He slid a glare to the teeth baring, hunched over gargoyle that had morphed from his usually nicely cool and collected brother. It had always been like this—regardless of who you were to him, when Patrick had a console in his hands, nothing mattered except his opponent’s total annihilation.

Patrick’s gleeful whoop and victorious howl had Adam quickly turning back to the screen to see his character lying broken and defeated in a heap on the arena floor.

Adam threw back his head in frustration. “How are you beating me?!” he groaned. The glimpse of Patrick’s satisfied smirk from the corner of his eye had Adam snapping back up as he turned to glare at him.

Something in Patrick’s smug snicker had suspicion flashing through Adam. “You asshole. There’s no way... You’re cheating, aren’t you?” The answering quirk of Patrick’s lips all but confirmed it. “Bastard!” It was one thing to cheat outside, but it was sacrilege to cheat inside this house. Adam tossed aside his controller and narrowed his eyes menacingly at his cheating brother.

“Now, now,” Patrick soothed, holding out his hands placatingly. His amused, entertained laughter as he tried to roll away from Adam’s furious swiping had Adam growling low in his throat.

*There was no way he was going to sweet talk his way out of this.* Adam saw an opening as Patrick nearly slid on his own controller and lunged. “You—!” Adam growled, his words cutting off as he landed hard against Patrick’s chest.

The hard heartbeat against Adam’s faintly smarting cheek pounded loudly in his ear, his own ricocheting as Patrick’s scent once again enveloped him tightly. The hard thigh under his hand flexed, shifting slightly. Time seemed to slow, every nerve in Adam humming, strung tight, as he slowly moved his eyes upwards. The top button of Patrick’s plaid shirt was undone, revealing the beating pulse at the bottom of his throat. Adam swallowed and continued his progress; not pausing to nip at the pulse, no matter how much his teeth ached to.

Dark stubble that would no doubt be rough rubbing against Adam’s tender skin peppered his sharp jaw, framing the hard slash of Patrick’s mouth. The firm lips, parting slightly under Adam’s trapped, hungry gaze, compressed quickly back into a tense line. Unable to stop himself, Adam leaned forward to capture the fuller bottom lip between his teeth, tugging gently. Patrick’s quick draw of breath had his lips softening and parting. Urged on by the warm breath brushing against his tingling lips, Adam leaned in, connecting against the warm, soft mouth. He sighed against it and pushed forward, seeking. His tongue flicked out, swiping against the slightly parted seam, the hint of Patrick’s taste already causing his head to spin.

All of a sudden, the suppressed desire unfurled like wildfire, burning up the last of Adam’s faintly protesting principles. Hungrily, he sought out the mouth, his tongue demanding and persistent. When it looked like Patrick was going to respond, strong hands suddenly clamped onto his shoulders, yanking him back.

“Sorry, Adam,” Patrick said quietly, his voice shaky from his heaving chest. He looked away. “I can’t.”

Adam scrambled backward, shame and disgust at himself flooding him violently. He stumbled to his feet and dashed upstairs before Patrick could look back at him in disgust. He closed his door to the sound of Patrick calling his name.

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“Shit!” Patrick swore, hurling the controller by his side at the couch furiously. The anger drained out of him as quickly as it had come, replaced by bitter, painful resignation.

He had always loved Adam. It hadn't been hard; the quiet, wide-eyed boy who'd trailed after him had always made it ridiculously easy to do so. Maybe that was why, without him noticing, it had evolved into something deeper and far from familial, until that day he hadn't been able to look at Adam's sweetly inquisitive face without wanting to kiss him, to touch him and burn him up.

*It would have been almost bearable, he thought, if he hadn't realized Adam had begun to look at him in the same way.* At first, it hadn't seemed possible, he'd disregarded the long looks and hasty glances, putting them down to nothing more than sibling adoration, but the more he tried to ignore them the more painfully aware he became. So much so that those last few months before his move had been hell.

He'd left for college, hoping the new surroundings and hectic timetable would put to rest the anxious feelings churning inside him, but he found himself looking forward to Adam's calls, squirreling away amusing things he'd seen or heard during the days to tell Adam, just so he could hear the soft laughter.

When Thanksgiving was just days away, Patrick panicked, realizing that if he returned home, with him and Adam alone in their respective bedrooms upstairs, even if his mom was in the house, he'd do something he'd regret. So he'd invited the guy whom he'd drunkenly kissed at a party, and who had somehow turned out to be a good friend. Jason had been surprised at the sudden invitation, but nonetheless happily accepted it.

He'd known taking Jason home with him that Thanksgiving had been a mistake, especially when he'd arrived home to Adam's eager, joyous face. With that wide smile, framed by the two flashing dimples and big, liquid-brown eyes shining through the mop of coffee-colored hair, Adam had been totally unaware of the turmoil he was already stirring up again in Patrick.

The breath had caught in Patrick's throat, and he realized with a sinking feeling that the guy behind him wouldn't make any difference. He'd tried though; he'd pulled away quickly from Adam when they got too close, concentrated on the man at his side, and planned on talking to Jason after Thanksgiving about taking their relationship further.

But then *that moment* had happened, up in Adam's bedroom. He'd been so close to screwing everything up, ruining it all, when Jason had walked in. There was no doubt he'd known exactly what he'd interrupted and so Patrick had no other choice than to go after Jason, even though turning his back on Adam's wide-eyed and confused, pained look had been excruciating.

When he'd reached Jason out in the yard, no amount of desperate explaining could have shielded him from the truth in Jason's horrid accusations, slicing icily through him. Furious at himself, at his actions and Jason's words, before he realized it, he was pushing Jason up against the old orange tree, claiming his mouth in an angry kiss. The resulting scene with his mother was bitterly seared into him.

When he had walked out of that house with what little possessions he could find among the things he'd left, quickly stuffed into his bag, Patrick had planned to stay away for good.

Adam was just hitting the cusp of his teenage years, and he hadn't needed Patrick's dark, churning hunger or Jane's vile hatred shaping them. Patrick had known that once he left, his mother would burn every last shred of his presence and convince herself she'd only birthed one son, and from the unrecognizable furniture and walls in the coldly empty room he'd slept in the night before, he'd been right.

It had to have been painful for Adam, but at least he wouldn't have had to deal with his mother's bitter vitriol every time Patrick came home. And as naïve as it sounded to him now, he had desperately hoped that whatever Adam had felt for him was a phase. Something he'd grow out of without Patrick's presence in his life.

Those first months cut off from Adam had been excruciating, but he hadn't let it sway his determination, and Jason had been there, trying to help. Patrick had tried to make it work, but both hadn't been able to push aside what had happened. In the end, they had decided it was best to end things. Jason had cut all ties after that.

Patrick didn't blame him. On top of that night, suspecting the guy you liked harboring feelings toward his own brother—anyone would have run, and run fast.

Patrick shook his head. Nine years later and nothing had changed. Patrick did have feelings for Adam, and he was still Patrick's brother.

It was still *wrong*.

Patrick shook his head in an effort to dispel the bleak thought and ran shaky hands down his face. His fingers stilled at the wetness on his lips. His tongue flicked out, swiping at it. The heady taste of desire and hunger bloomed on his tongue. *Adam*.

The tentative knock on his door had Adam hastily scrambling up from where he'd flopped onto the bed after running away from Patrick. He'd spent the last several minutes metaphorically castrating himself for throwing himself like a fool at Patrick. *Of course Patrick would have been disgusted and repulsed by him*, Adam thought despairingly. The shattering Adam had felt when Patrick pushed him away was still sharply slicing up his insides. He hadn't even been able to *look* at Adam.

Adam groaned. Just because Patrick was gay, didn't mean he was willing to indulge Adam's twisted desire. Even if for a moment there Adam had been certain Patrick was going to respond. Adam snorted at himself derisively, *no wonder Patrick had stayed away*.

The knock sounded again, firmer this time.

Adam hastily scrubbed his face and straightened his clothes as the door swung open. Patrick stood there, the expression on his face unreadable.

"I thought we could both do with one of these," Patrick said, the two opened beers in his hand stretched out in a peace offering.

"Thanks," Adam said quietly, accepting it. He avoided looking at Patrick as he took an icy bottle.

The bed sunk down as Patrick lowered himself onto it next to him. "Didn't think you'd ever get old enough to share one of these with me," Patrick commented offhandedly, his voice normal in contrast to the mess slamming inside of Adam.

Adam snorted halfheartedly. It seemed he'd only grown up on the outside.

Silence ticked by.

"Listen," Patrick began. "About before..."

Adam tensed. "Don't," he interjected. He couldn't have Patrick telling him it was wrong, or that he thought it was a joke. His lower lip trembled. He stretched out to set the bottle of untouched beer on the windowsill next to his bed.

Patrick frowned, setting his own bottle on the bedside table with a soft *clink*. He turned to face Adam, his expression resolute.

"About before," he began, again persistently, his voice hard. "It shouldn't have happened. We're family." He looked intently at Adam's profile, pain etched on his face. "You're my kid brother. It's wrong. You know it's—"

Adam pushed off the bed angrily, his hands fisting with fury. "What?" he yelled, face flushed with anger, "It's *disgusting? Sick? Twisted?*" He flung the harsh adjectives out; ignoring that way Patrick flinched back. "So what? So fucking what!"

*It wasn't like he wanted this!*

He rounded on Patrick, his usually liquid-brown eyes coldly snapping fire. "I don't care if it's sick, if it's so fucking wrong!" He threw his hands out, shoving at Patrick's broad shoulders as hard as he could. "Do you think I *like* feeling this way?" His chest heaved from the violent outpour of emotion, his eyes glittering. "Do you think I *want* to want my brother to *fuck me?*"

Patrick's continued silence—*he wasn't so keen on talking now was he*—only further fueled Adam's rage. Ignoring the warning glittering dangerously in Patrick's narrowed eyes, Adam shoved at him again, enjoying the dark sense of satisfaction at Patrick's grunt.

He felt his mouth twist into something akin to a grin and sneered. "*Fuck. You.*"

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Patrick snapped, grabbing the sides of Adam's angrily flushed face, he crashed his mouth hard against his brother's. Anger and resentment for himself, for Adam, and for the unfairness of the whole situation poured out through the rough, biting kiss. The faint metallic tang of blood only heightened the dark cocktail of emotions raging through them.

Adam pushed back roughly, bruising his lips against Patrick's, his mouth, teeth and tongue battling it out fiercely. Need and rage seemed to consume them as Adam's hands twisted into Patrick's hair, yanking hard on the dark locks.

Patrick wrenched an arm around Adam and crushed him flush against his chest, yanking him onto his lap. He pulled his mouth off Adam's swollen lips, and scraped his teeth along the side of the flushed jaw to where the frantic pulse hammered rapidly, pounding in time with Patrick's throbbing, straining cock. Unable to resist, he nipped at the pulse with enough force to leave a mark, *his* mark. Dark satisfaction curled low in Patrick's stomach as he fingered the dark red bruise blooming on the soft skin.

Adam arched up with a moan and ground his cock against Patrick's own painful erection, showing his approval. It didn't appear to be enough though as

Adam began impatiently tugging at Patrick's shirt. He managed to rip open the first few buttons. They pinged off the near wall and furniture, and rolled onto the ground unheeded. The remaining buttons joined them as Adam yanked harder, finally baring Patrick's chest.

Patrick shivered, unable to hold back his moan at the bite of pain as Adam scraped his nails down Patrick's middle—hard enough to leave faint pink trails down the taut skin, before reaching the waistband of Patrick's pants. Before Adam could tug open the fly, Patrick rolled him over and pinned him under his heavy body, watching the way Adam's nose flared and his eyes blinked wide as Patrick covered him.

"Don't think you're the only who gets to have fun," Patrick growled as he fisted the hem of the offending T-shirt, and savagely yanked it up and over Adam's head, baring the pale chest. Trembles danced across the unblemished skin. Smooth and narrow, it was perfect.

Patrick reached down to snap open Adam's fly with urgency. He bared his teeth in satisfaction when Adam eagerly lifted his hips, urging Patrick to hurry when he shoved down the jeans and underwear. Quickly divesting himself of the rest of his own clothing, Patrick slanted his mouth back over Adam's, blanketing the tightly strung body. Heat from the other male singed him, the sensation of the hard, dripping cock urgently grinding against his stomach driving Patrick wild.

Patrick unsealed his mouth from Adam's and dipped down to press hot, open-mouthed kisses down Adam's neck. He stopped only long enough to tease the frantic pulse at the base of Adam's throat, before trailing his mouth down lower to taste the quivering chest.

Patrick could feel the tension and anticipation humming through Adam as he progressed downwards, stopping at a flat, brown nipple. He reached up and flicked it lightly with his thumbnail. Adam hissed in pleasure, moaning Patrick's name.

"You're sensitive here, aren't you?" He looked up to find Adam's heavy-lidded gaze on him, desire slashing across the tautness of his cheekbones as need glittered in the dark brown depths. Patrick had to remember to breathe as his body responded to Adam's blatant arousal.

Wanting to hear more of Adam's cries, he dipped his head back down to take the tight bud of Adam's nipple between his teeth. He pulled at, biting down gently and curling his tongue around one hard nub and then the other



until he felt Adam's hands tugging at his hair and his voice calling out incoherently.

Patrick gave the reddened nipple a gentle kiss before withdrawing. He braced himself on one elbow and reached his other hand down toward the crisp hairs tickling his stomach, zeroing in on the source of the hard heat digging into him. When the wet tip hotly kissed the palm of Patrick's rough hand, he angled his hand down and gripped the shaft tightly. The cock in his hand pulsed as he stroked and squeezed it. He settled into a slow, hard rhythm as Adam's hips pumped demandingly against him. He wrung a strangled cry from Adam as he swirled his thumb over the sticky tip and he pressed down onto the slit.

"Please, Patrick," Adam begged with a sob, his knuckles flushed white as they fisted the bedding under him.

Patrick pushed up and leaned forward to press a hard, fevered kiss against Adam's mouth, his own breathing harsh. "Lube?"

"T-top drawer," Adam panted. When Patrick took too long to find the inconspicuous bottle hidden among the junk, Adam leaned over and dumped the entire drawer on the floor. The small blue bottle rolled out from beneath a magazine.

Patrick snatched up the lube and snapped open the lid. Hands fumbling a little, he managed to squeeze a generous amount onto his fingers and palm. Adam's wide, excited eyes were glued to the movement of that hand, trembling with impatience. Satisfied with the amount he'd poured out, Patrick tossed the bottle aside and took a deep breath, making a forceful effort to slow down his heaving chest and cantering desire—if he didn't get a hold of himself now, he wouldn't even make it inside of Adam.

Patrick leaned down again and pressed another kiss to Adam's lips. His tongue swept into the parted mouth, seeking the hot, sweet taste of Adam. Adam jolted against him as Patrick wrapped his hand around Adam's straining cock once more, the lube cold against his heated skin. It quickly warmed up under a couple of short, sharp strokes. Patrick gave the swollen, weeping head a teasing flick of his thumb before progressing downwards toward his real destination.

Adam moaned against Patrick's mouth as Patrick's slick hand moved down his shaft at an agonizingly slow pace. When he reached the base, he gave the cock a teasing squeeze then worked his thumb lower along the seam of Adam's balls, exploring the soft skin there.

Patrick felt Adam tense beneath him when his thumb made contact against Adam's hole. He pushed up to watch Adam's face as he rubbed against the puckered opening and circled it with light strokes. Dark-winged brows knitted down as Patrick tested the tight rim, probing at it as it nervously quivered under his thick, insistent digit.

Adam's breath expelled in a *whoosh* as Patrick's thumb slid in, thick and unyielding. He rubbed his thumb against the sensitive skin, trying to get it to relax against the unknown intruder. When it was no longer biting down quite so tightly, Patrick replaced his thumb with two fingers and scissored them in the hot channel, stretching and softening Adam's hole.

"Fuck me, Patrick. Please!" Adam gasped. His head thrashed to the side as his hands fisted the sheet beneath him. His hips bucked up, his puckered hole voraciously sucking Patrick's fingers in deeper.

Unable to wait any longer, Patrick slid his fingers out from the tight heat and reached for the bottle of lube, dumping more of the slippery liquid into his palm. Shakily, he gripped his cock and pressed it up against the tight opening. He looked down at Adam, drinking in the hunger and need glittering in the wide, deep brown eyes.

There wouldn't be any going back from this.

"Are you sure, Adam?" Patrick asked, his voice shaky with need. He wasn't sure how he'd be able to stop if Adam said no at this point, but he knew he wouldn't be able to go any further either without hearing it from Adam.

"Yes, yes!"

That was all he needed. The room seemed to hold its breath as Patrick pushed forward. Adam whimpered, his breath hitching as Patrick pushed past the initial resistance and the head of his cock pushed in. Slowly it gained inch by inch.

"Christ, you're tight," Patrick groaned. Adam's body clamped down tight on Patrick's cock as it slid home.

Patrick paused, reveling in the tight heat enveloping him as he waited for Adam's body to adjust to the intrusion. He stroked his hand up and down Adam's trembling side soothingly, all the while resisting the animalistic urge to snap his hips back and surge back in.

Under him, Adam wriggled his hips tentatively, gasping at the sensation of Patrick filling him.

“Adam,” Patrick growled, low and urgent. He watched tightly as Adam bit his lip and carefully moved his hips again, testing. Patrick could see the myriad of expressions flickering across Adam’s face as his body adjusted. The tightness around his eyes slowly dissolved, and then he was rocking his hips against Patrick’s urgently.

Patrick growled under the undulating of Adam’s hips, his eyes narrowed. Adam’s movements were pushing his control to the limits. Patrick grabbed Adam’s knee and pushed it high onto the smaller man’s chest, angling his lower half upwards. Unable to hold back any longer, Patrick pulled back and slammed back into the hot hole. He had meant to go slowly, but he couldn’t manage to stop the wild snap of his hips as he speared Adam. In and out he drove, all thoughts in his head consumed by the fire licking throughout his body.

The gasps of pleasure and hitches in Patrick’s name as it left Adam’s parted lips only drove him on. Patrick angled his hips up, seeking that rough knot of tissue as he pounded into the young man beneath him. When Adam’s swallowed cry let him know he’d found it, he concentrated on hitting it over and over with every stroke.

A hoarse cry ripped out of Adam as he arched up tight and crashed over the edge. Adam’s hole clamped down tightly on Patrick’s almost-bursting cock, pulling him over the edge with him.

“Oh fuck, Adam,” Patrick bellowed. All his muscles simultaneously tightened under his skin as he threw back his head and painted Adam’s insides white.

Sound returned first, the soft panting of a body well-spent and satisfied. Then Patrick’s vision was full of the warm, pliant body lying beneath him and then those familiar brown eyes. Reality and what they’d just done slammed into Patrick in the same moment it did to Adam if the sudden tension and rigidity of the body beneath him was anything to go by. The panic staring back at him had him pulling out before he realized the effect of his jerking action on the body still tightly gripping him.

Patrick swore at Adam’s wince of discomfort. “Fuck, Adam—I’m sorry, we shouldn’t have, *shit*, I shouldn’t have—”

“Hey.” Adam’s hand was steady as it gripped onto Patrick’s shaky arm. “It’s no big deal.”

Patrick let out a shaky laugh. Disgust at himself—that he’d lost all control and let it get this far—burnt like acid and had him snapping back harshly. “*Like*

*hell!*” He shook the hand off and scrambled off the bed, running shaky hands through his hair. “Adam, you’re my *brother* and I just fucking *screwed* you!” his words ended on a yell.

Patrick waited for Adam to grasp the severity of the situation, for him to look at him with accusation and revulsion—but it didn’t come. Adam blew out a breath and turned away to swipe at the ground. His hand came back up with the ruined shirt. He proceeded to clean himself up indifferent to the hysterics necessary in this situation “Like I said before, it’s no big deal. It’s not like we’re not both adults.”

“You’ve got to be—”

Patrick cut off as Adam threw the balled up shirt at him, hitting him in the stomach. Adam glared. “Look, isn’t it fine if we both wanted it. I asked you to fuck me and you did.”

Patrick felt the fight and hysteria drain out of him as he stared at Adam’s closed, hard expression.

He dropped the shirt onto the ground and came back to sit on the bed, facing Adam. “You know it’s not that easy, Adam.”

“Why the hell not? It’s not like anyone else is here and will know what we’re up to. I wanted it, and it looks like you did too.” The look he slid down at Patrick’s still glistening, spent cock had Patrick shifting as blood pooled in his cheeks. Adam wasn’t wrong though. “So what can it hurt?”

Patrick opened his mouth to answer, but all the words of reason and common sense got stuck somewhere in his throat, where they lodged, thick and uncomfortable.

Adam looked away at Patrick’s beseeching look. When he turned back again, wariness dimmed his usually warm brown eyes. “I told you before that I wanted this,” he gestured to the bed, “and it—we—were really good—weren’t we?”

Patrick sighed. “Yeah, we were great,” he answered softly, unable to blatantly lie and make it less than what it had been. Sex with Adam had been amazing—better than anything he’d had before. What did that say about him and his previous relationships?

“So why can’t we just go with it for now? You’re only here for another day, Patrick, then you’ll be gone again, and then I’m leaving.” The flash of uncertainty and imploration in his eyes belied the easy tone.

As if it would ever be that easy. It was already difficult as it was—even now Patrick itched to haul Adam back up against him and show him how much hotter it could get between them.

“It’s not like I’m asking for forever. It’s only the weekend.”

And Patrick knew right then that for all his shaky morals and earlier protestations, he wasn’t going to be able to say no.

“Maybe it won’t be so good the second time ’round.”

Patrick growled and crushed his mouth to Adam’s in answer to the mused comment. He pushed Adam back down onto the bed and proceeded to show him that that was clearly *not* the case.

And it *was* hotter.

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“Adam,” Patrick groaned, as he tried to brace his feet steadily on the wet shower floor on either side of Adam’s knees.

Adam circled his wet palm over the angry purple head, studying the way the erect cock twitched and jumped up at him, barely fitting in his hold. “No wonder it hurt so much last night,” Adam murmured. He shifted his knees slightly, feeling the slight twinge of pain throb dully in his ass. The burn as Patrick had entered him last night had given away to something so pleasurable it had been almost painful.

The cock in Adam’s hand seemed to bob in agreement. Adam gave a small shake of his head, pulling his attention back to the task at hand. The sticky drop oozing from the tip begged to be tasted, and Adam wasn’t going to deny himself. He stroked his thumb over the slit and popped it into his mouth, sucking at the salty fluid. The spicy taste of Patrick unfurled on Adam’s tongue, curling low in his stomach.

It wasn’t Patrick’s chest, but Adam was right, the taste did remind him of sweet, earthy honey—but with a kick of heat. Adam hummed in appreciation. Without an ounce of thought to the torture he was putting Patrick through, Adam licked and sucked his thumb with pleasure.

After wanting for so long, the small taste wasn’t enough. He needed more. Adam popped his thumb out of his mouth to run his hand down the shaft. He gripped the base of the swollen erection jerking impatiently in front of his face and looked up at Patrick through his lowered lashes. Adam grinned saucily and dropped his head, enveloping the pulsating bulb into the wet heat of his mouth.

Patrick hissed, his fingers carding through Adam's wet hair. Adam could feel Patrick's dark, intense gaze on him as he bobbed his head lower. He let rough hands, tangled in his hair, guide him, the sharp tugs an indicator of when he'd found a particularly sensitive spot.

"Christ, Adam. Your mouth—" Patrick panted. The rest of his words were swallowed when Adam's tongue circled the tip teasingly, and then laved at the sensitive skin where his shaft met the underside of the head.

The soapy scent of Patrick's skin, damp and musky, hazed Adam's thought process. Adam sank his head lower to take the cock deeper into his mouth. He mapped out the hard shaft, tonguing the silky skin and running up the veins and around the head. As his mouth moved back up, he tightened his forefinger and thumb around the base and pumped them up and down, adding to the wet sensations of his mouth. It would also help with what he was going to do next.

Adam curled his lips around his teeth and swallowed Patrick's cock as far down as possible until his lips rested against his fingers, the curly pubic hairs tickling his nose. He paused and swallowed, waiting for his mouth to adjust. Above him, Patrick bit off a harsh groan.

Adam began tentatively bobbing his head up and down Patrick's cock, his other hand reaching up to grip Patrick's hip. Up and down he slid, his finger and thumb twisting around the base before moving down to roll Patrick's heavy balls in his palm. He lifted his head until only the soft helmet of the cock sat on his tongue and gave it a long, hard suck, reveling in its taste and feel, before swallowing the whole shaft again. Adam shifted his hips, his own hard-on becoming painful with its desire for release.

Patrick groaned, his fingers tightening in Adam's hair. "Adam," he gasped, the name almost an entreaty. Adam could feel the trembles running across Patrick's body, the desperate tensing of strong thighs in front of him. He ignored the warning tug on his hair and instead moved his hand up to clamp firmly onto Patrick's hip. He tugged Patrick closer and sucked as hard as he could. Patrick seemed to get the message because not a moment later, his mouth was filled with gushes of warm, salty cum.

Adam's throat worked, trying to swallow up as much of it as possible as the cock in his mouth pumped and jerked. It finally stopped, giving a small twitch. With a plop, Adam released the still hard prick and sat back on his haunches, cum he'd been unable to swallow dripping from the corners of his mouth down his chin.

Adam looked up with satisfaction. Patrick stared down at him, his breathing harsh, and skin pulled tight across his high cheekbones. Adam didn't even have a chance to react as Patrick suddenly hauled him up, and swiping at the cum on the sides of Adam's mouth, hotly crushed his lips to Adam's. His tongue dived in, unrelenting, as it curled around Adam's and licked their combined tastes from the insides of his mouth. Patrick's hand seemed to sear the skin there as it palmed the base of Adam's head and angled it toward Patrick's ferocious kiss.

Adam's moan was swallowed under Patrick's insistent mouth as he gripped Adam's own painful erection. Adam shifted up onto his toes and unlocked his lips from Patrick's to clamp them over the junction between Patrick's neck and shoulder and pulled at the taut skin there, anchoring himself as his hands dug into Patrick's shoulders.

Adam whimpered as his hips surged into the hand working his erection. Every part of him ached to come, he was so close, but he needed something more. As though reading Adam's mind, Patrick let go of Adam's head and reached back to run his fingers over the tight rim between Adam's tense cheeks. There was that slight burn again as Patrick pushed his fingers in, but it was gone as quickly as it had come as Patrick stroked over the knot of hidden flesh. Pleasure seared through Adam. Patrick's fingers stroked in tandem with his hand pumping Adam's cock and Adam knew he couldn't hold off much longer.

He felt his balls draw up tight and hard against his body and instinctively sank his teeth into Patrick's shoulder as his cock erupted, spilling burning, thick cum all over the fingers gripping him.

Adam released his mouth from Patrick's shoulder and slumped against the hard chest as his knees threatened to give out on him. He was dimly aware of Patrick's hardening cock against his hip, but Patrick seemed to be in no rush to do anything about it as he reached for the soap in the dish behind him. Adam sighed contentedly as the aftermath of his release tingled through him while Patrick gently washed him off.

Patrick turned off the water and handed Adam one of the towels as they stepped out of the shower.

"Thanks." Adam grinned as he took the proffered towel. He deliberately took his time drying, slowly rubbing the towel through his wet hair as he watched Patrick slather the lower half of his face in puffs of white foam for his morning shave. He ran his eyes appreciatively down the broad back, taut ass and strong columns of Patrick's legs, lazily taking it in, as he was unable to do

so yesterday morning. His eyes moved back up to meet Patrick's in the misted mirror.

"Enjoying the view?"

Heat pooled in his cheeks but it didn't stop him grinning unabashedly at having been caught. "Just comparing it to the impressive earlier one I had from below." The flush that worked its way up Patrick's neck had Adam unable to resist teasing him a bit more. "Now if you'll let me take a closer look..."

Patrick laughed and flicked a blob of shaving cream at him. "You're damn insatiable. Get out."

Adam dodged the second flick and laughed, avoiding the white blob on the floor behind him as he backed toward the door. "Okay, okay I'm out." He threw his towel into the hamper on the way out, giving Patrick a jaunty view of his ass. "Don't take too long."

Adam would have never imagined he'd be waking up next to Patrick, stiff and sore after an intense night of sex. When he'd made that proposal to Patrick last night, he'd been tired, tired of pretending, of resisting. So he'd asked for the weekend and stoically refused to let Patrick in on how terrified he was of reverting back to their old relationship for their remaining day together.

He'd been stupid to think that once would be enough. When Patrick had agreed... Adam didn't think anything would ever compare to the relief and joy he'd felt at that moment. Now though, in the light of day, that relief felt fragile. A part of him couldn't help holding his breath while he waited for Patrick to call a sudden stop to all this.

So, more than insatiable, Adam wasn't going to waste an opportunity to be with the man he loved.

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Finally dressed and in the kitchen—after more fumbling and heated kisses when Patrick had sauntered back in the bedroom sans his own towel—Patrick lifted out four slices from the bagged loaf of bread and popped them into the toaster. He turned and leaned back against the counter, watching as Adam rummaged around the fridge looking for the butter.

Adam had a hard time remembering what exactly he was supposed to be doing when he could feel Patrick's heated gaze on him. His skin was starting to prickle again, and although they'd both just come not long ago, he could feel his body sit up and prepare itself for round two. He swallowed; *there was no way they were going to do it again so soon.*



Finally locating the bright yellow tub right in front of his eyes, he swiped it from the shelf and placed it on the table, ignoring Patrick's amused, knowing smile. Thankfully, his accompanying search for the peanut butter and jelly had him locating them instantaneously without a stray thought of naked skin.

Adam gathered the spreads and turned toward the table, only to stumble back a step when Patrick stalked up to him. The jars were taken from his hands and placed back on a shelf behind him. Adam swallowed as Patrick's eyes narrowed, the blue hardly visible around the dark pupils. There was no mistaking that look.

"You know," Patrick drawled, running his finger under the collar of Adam's T-shirt. He lightly caressed the skin there as he advanced closer. "It's not fair that you were the only one who got a taste this morning." He flicked his eyes down to the front of Adam's pants, where the outline of Adam's growing erection pressed eagerly forward.

Adam shivered as Patrick's tongue came out to lick at his lips, the action almost obscene following his words. Adam panted, rooted to the spot. He couldn't stop his body leaning into the big hand running down his chest even if he wanted to. His T-shirt did nothing to muffle the heated touch. Patrick reached under the hem, and trailed that torturous finger along the waistline of Adam's pants, caressing the soft skin there.

His hot breath teased Adam's ear, "I think before breakfast, I want to have a taste of something else first."

Adam whimpered, trying not to swallow his tongue at Patrick's words. Adam could only follow as Patrick angled his body, guiding Adam toward the table and pressed him against it. Patrick stepped back to run his eyes over Adam's form, his gaze a scorching caress. Tightly coiled anticipation hummed through Adam as Patrick divested him of his T-shirt. He watched, eyes glued to every movement of those long fingers, as Patrick reached for his fly and snapped it open. His breath caught in his throat as Patrick knelt down and pulled at the zipper, slowly unveiling his prize. Adam's erection throbbed and pushed up against his underwear, his hips rolling forward of their own accord.

Adam's eyes glued to the dark head at his crotch.

"I don't think I'm the one insatiable," Adam stammered as Patrick leaned forward. *Ah, fuck.* Adam shuddered as Patrick mouthed his erect cock through the dark, damp underwear and sucked against the hard shaft. His dark eyes danced up at Adam, silently laughing at Adam's comment.

The thin layer of material didn't seem to provide any barrier at all, if anything, the roughness of his underwear heightened every movement of Patrick's exploring tongue.

Adam braced himself against the table and surrendered to Patrick's mouth. He wasn't even aware of his jeans being pushed down until the rough denim sat in a puddle around his ankles. His underwear followed their descent as Patrick hooked his thumbs into the waistband and pulled them down, releasing his cock from its damp confines.

Hard and dusky, his cock jutted out angrily from the nest of dark, wiry hair as it sprang free.

Patrick seemed too intent on taking his time, on drawing out the torture to Adam's cock as he curled one hand onto Adam's hip, his other trailing a finger up the straining shaft. When Adam thought he could take no more of the studied delay, Patrick leaned forward and ran his tongue over the weeping head, laving the sticky fluid. His moan of appreciation was already threatening Adam's ability to remain standing when he curled his tongue around the head and sucked hard, pushing his tongue against the sensitive slit.

Adam cantered his hips forward and tried to push his cock in deeper, seeking more of that wet heat. Disappointment wrung through him when Patrick released Adam's cock to give him a gentle, but stern, slap on the butt.

"Be good," Patrick reprimanded.

Adam whimpered and nodded, the smart of the slap only adding to his heightened state. *Good*, he could be good. If it meant Patrick not stopping the torturous pleasure, he'd be a fucking boy scout.

Adam had barely taken in Patrick's satisfied smirk when he lowered his mouth back onto the shiny head and engulfed Adam's cock in one smooth descent.

"*Shi—t*," Adam gasped. His fingers dug into the smooth wood of the table behind him—the only thing holding him up at this point.

The long, pulling draws on his cock seemed to suck out what was left of conscious thought. He felt Patrick's hands dig into his tight buttocks, and then Patrick was guiding Adam in and out of his mouth. Adam took the cue and thrust deeper into Patrick's mouth as the clever mouth sucked and nibbled at his erection. He felt his balls draw up and the warning tingle start when Patrick suddenly released him.

“What—?”

“Get on the table,” Patrick demanded, roughly. It was obvious from his harsh expression, and the bulging vein on the side of his neck, that this was far from over.

Already on the edge, Adam was hasty to obey. He fumbled as he tried to escape from the confines of the underwear and jeans caught around his ankles. The few seconds it took to free himself seemed to take forever and then he was flinging them aside and sweeping the forgotten tub of butter to the side as he hoisted his ass onto the tabletop. The smooth wood was a cool balm to his heated skin.

“Put your feet up and spread yourself.”

Adam was glad for his pleasure-addled state, because he didn't think he would have been as hasty or eager to follow Patrick's words otherwise, as he pulled the soles of his feet up onto the edge of the table. The small flicker of self-consciousness was pushed aside as he wrapped his hands around his knees and splayed them, spreading himself on display to Patrick's hungry, dark stare.

His breath came out in shallow pants as he waited under Patrick's perusal. His erection bobbed against his taut stomach. It tingled from the sudden cool air after being enveloped in the wet heat of Patrick's mouth where it strained to return to.

“You're right, the view's pretty spectacular from down here,” Patrick said with a quirk to his lips. Adam wondered if this was payback for his earlier teasing as he gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to beg.

Patrick moved forward to run a rough finger down the shaft and along the seam of Adam's tightly drawn-up balls. The finger was replaced with a thumb as Patrick palmed one of Adam's balls and moved the thicker digit over the seam again, pressing a bit harder. Adam's breath hitched as it trailed down lower, pressing against the sensitive sliver of skin between his balls and his anus. He arched up into the hand in an effort to direct it fast to his eager hole.

“Patience,” Patrick admonished sternly, his voice rough with barely suppressed desire. Adam glared back but managed to still his hips.

Patrick's scent filled Adam's head as he leaned into Adam and reached for the tub of butter tottering dangerously on the edge of the table. The sound of the lid snapping off had Adam's head jerking in its direction. He wondered if his own face was as deeply etched with hunger, like Patrick's was, as he watched

Patrick scooped out a big knob of the soft, greasy spread. The yellow butter glistened as he rubbed it between his thumb and fingers, warming it up and coating his fingers with it. Tense with anticipation, Adam clenched his ass instinctively as Patrick reached for him. He had to force himself to relax—and breathe—as Patrick teased the tight, resisting hole.

A hoarse cry gurgled from Adam's throat as Patrick leaned forward to swallow Adam's cock down to the base as two of his fingers pushed through the tight ring of muscle, penetrating Adam sharply. The talented mouth bobbed and sucked in time to the thrusting fingers, playing him like a harp.

Before the varying flicks of Patrick's tongue, the speed and pressure of his mouth and fingers could have Adam incoherent; he moved lower and sucked one heavy ball, and then the other into the warm cavern of his talented mouth.

As though sensing Adam's inability to handle much more, Patrick leaned back, placed his hands on Adam's buttocks and stroked the soft skin as he spread the cheeks. Adam felt himself twitching under Patrick's heavy-lidded scrutiny. He knew the sight must have been obscene, the shiny butter smeared over his rim and his hole clenching and unclenching, slightly loosened from Patrick's earlier fingering.

"Looks delicious," Patrick murmured as he leaned forward and licked at Adam's entrance, penetrating the soft ring. Adam moaned as the tongue speared him and then Patrick's hand was on his straining cock. He pumped the swelling shaft, flicking his wrist at the head before sliding down back into the hard, fast rhythm as his tongue fucked Adam to and over the edge.

"Patrick!"

Adam's mind went white as he came.

Aftershocks rippled through him, his sensitive, overloaded cock giving the occasional jerk amongst the copious amounts of pearly cum it'd sputtered over Patrick's hand. Adam somehow pried his stiff fingers from where they had, no doubt, left a myriad of bruises, and toppled backward, dropping his weak arms over his eyes. The rapid beat of his pulse roared through his head as his body twitched.

He felt Patrick place a gentle kiss onto his inner thigh and then onto the soft cock still gripped in his hand, and then Patrick was wiping him off with his discarded shirt. He let himself be pulled up and opened his eyes as Patrick pressed a kiss to his forehead.

Patrick's eyes crinkled down at him. "I think I'm ready for some breakfast now."

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The kitchen cleaned up, an extremely late lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches with soup, a change of shirts for Adam—no way was he wearing the sticky one he had picked up off the floor—some cold toast and a tub of butter tossed in the bin later, Adam lay on the couch with his head on Patrick's solid, warm lap. They watched a rerun of an old comedy, Patrick's hand stroking over Adam's hair gently. Adam leaned into the big comforting hand; he didn't think Patrick even realized he was doing it.

The clattering and buzzing of Patrick's phone where he had left it last night on the coffee table startled them both. Patrick picked up the phone, intending to silence it when caller's ID flashed on the screen. He frowned.

"Sorry, I've got to take this," Patrick apologized. Adam moved, intending to leave the room to give Patrick privacy, when Patrick's hand tightened against him. *Stay*, he mouthed.

Adam gave a small nod, settling back onto Patrick's lap.

"It's a Sunday," Patrick grumbled at the caller, his annoyance clear. He huffed out a breath, running his hand through his hair. "Yes... yes, I read the info you sent over... No, I..." he trailed off, glancing down at Adam with an unreadable look. "Okay... Okay, give me a call when it's finalized."

Adam looked up as Patrick disconnected. "Is everything okay?" he asked, his brow creased in worry.

"It was just work," Patrick explained, his attention already back to the show as he guided Adam's head back down on his lap.

They spent the rest of the day watching TV and making love.

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Adam slipped off his T-shirt and climbed into bed, waiting for Patrick. He'd spent all day avoiding the issue, but come tomorrow, Patrick would be leaving. Patrick hadn't brought much for the weekend, and his intention of leaving straight after Adam's graduation ceremony was clear by the packed bag sitting next to the door. All of Patrick's toiletries and clothes, except the ones he'd be wearing tomorrow, were neatly zipped in the carryall.

Adam tried to hide his unease as Patrick walked into the bedroom, his chest bare and pants hanging loosely around his hips, revealing more skin with each

roll of his hips. Adam knew that the chances of him seeing Patrick again after tomorrow would be slim to none. This weekend, for all the happiness it gave him, felt more like a true parting than that time nine years ago.

Despite all the intimate knowledge of Patrick Adam had gained, he knew about as much about Patrick's life as he had before Patrick had come back—that is to say, hardly anything at all. That wasn't to say he hadn't gleaned anything at all from the things Patrick had let slip, but how would knowing Patrick liked to cook Chinese food, that he liked shopping around the markets for a various odd, unknown ingredients, help him when Patrick left? Adam couldn't very well stalk out all the Asian supermarkets around Raleigh.

Adam had avoided mentioning anything about the future after tomorrow, and Patrick hadn't been all that open about his thoughts on it either. Adam slid a look at his phone, sitting innocuously on his bedside table, the alarm waiting to go off tomorrow morning. If he slid through his contact list, he'd find Patrick's number, so it wasn't as though he couldn't get in touch with him if he wanted to, but how were they going to go back to being brothers—did he even know how to, and if he couldn't do that, and he couldn't be Patrick's lover, where did that leave him?

One thing seemed to be clear though, this—*whatever it was*—would be over come tomorrow, because it just wasn't possible to expect a future from a doomed relationship.

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Patrick flicked off the light and closed the door, moving toward the bed. While he'd come back after intending to stay away permanently, never had he imagined this happening. Oh sure, he had *imagined* being with his brother—being with *Adam*—but his dreams had been the product of nothing more than starving, unfilled desire for his younger brother, and what Patrick had thought he'd be like today. Not one of them though, could compare to the real thing he'd finally gotten into his arms.

He slid into the worn, soft sheets and reached out, gathering Adam to him. In the dark of the night, with only the moonlight barely able to peek in, Patrick kissed the man he had loved all his life. His heart throbbed as Adam unhesitatingly kissed him back, tasting of yearning and love. Patrick stroked the dark locks from the glittering gaze and pulled himself on top of the younger man, bracing him between his arms. He trailed tender kisses along Adam's forehead, one on top of each delicate eyelid, and then down the column of his

slender nose to his mouth, He nibbled at the soft lips, and when they parted instinctively, delved in. The kiss was long and tender, full of everything he couldn't say.

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Adam reached up and winded his arms around the back of Patrick's neck, drawing the mouth deeper against his. Adam felt his heart break apart anew; this would be the last time.

The knowledge that this would be the last time cut sharply through him. Adam's desperation at their time left together transferred into the kiss as it deepened, flooding with urgency. Adam rocked his hips up against Patrick's and released his arms to run his hands down Patrick's back, up his sides and down his arms. He tried to remember every detail—the roughness of the smattering of hair on the wiry forearms, the grooves of taut muscles across the broad back—everything he could squirrel away for a lifetime without this again.

Without Patrick.

After so much lovemaking, Adam's body opened willingly to Patrick's preparing fingers. When Patrick finally slid home, Adam felt the final piece of his heart shatter. He held tightly to his brother as they rocked together, unable to stop the sob that broke out of him as they crashed down from the peak.

Patrick rolled to the side and pulled Adam's silently shaking form tight against him, stroking the dark head while he murmured soft words of comfort.

All Adam could hear was good-bye.

\*\*\*\*

Adam checked his reflection in the bathroom, blindly scanning over the puffy, dark shadows and wan skin. His haggard appearance barely registered as he replayed the events of the weekend over and over again in his head, not allowing even one detail to escape. After the ceremony today, Adam wouldn't likely see Patrick again. His heart shattered anew thinking that he wouldn't be able to kiss those firm lips or wake up next to those warm blue eyes again. Grossly oversleeping this morning, they had rushed out of the house with barely enough time to shower, let alone share a last kiss. As it was, Patrick was sitting somewhere in the audience with still-damp hair.

The echoing shout of the ceremony coordinator and tapping of hurried shoes down the corridor filtered into the restroom. Adam pushed away from the sink.

Unable to do anything about the solemn expression on his face, he stepped out of the restroom and fell into step with the other students of his graduating class as they ambled over to the entryway in an excited chatter of nervous voices and laughter. The sea of excitement and joy on the other students' faces were a huge disparity to the heartbreak on Adam's solitary one.

Adam stepped into line woodenly; he barely flinched when the coordinator manhandled him into his correct place, her sharp nails digging into his arm. The music signaled the start of the procession, and then he was filing out. His eyes darted around the audience as the sea of students were paraded to their seats. *There*, to Adam's left, in the section of seats closest to the stage, sat Patrick, beaming down at him, pride evident in his strong features. Adam's lips curled up into a smile in response; at least Patrick was still here for now.

Adam kept his eyes on Patrick through the entire procession as he filed after the student in front of him. He made it to his correct seat without incident and sat down, unwilling to let his eyes wander from Patrick for more than a moment. The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur.

\*\*\*\*

Adam stood up as the band began playing the final march, his eyes seeking the familiar face among the crowds of happy well-wishers. Where Adam had last seen him, to his left, second row from the front, now stood a lone, empty seat.

Pain, sharp and agonizing sliced through Adam, nearly bringing him to his knees. Blind to the concerned student next to him, asking him if he was okay, Adam bit back a sob and stumbled as he tried to get out of there without falling apart. The hall seemed to rapidly confine itself as Adam pushed through the swarm of other people's relatives, family and friends, his chest tightening with every step.

*Just get home. Then you can fall apart.*

Adam didn't know how he made it, but he got through the doors and out into the fresh air. He didn't stop as he stumbled down the steps toward the bus stop. Although Patrick had driven them here, and Adam had planned to take the bus back, he had thought he'd at least get to say good-bye. He might have begged Patrick to stay, gripped onto him and cried and cursed and made a fool of himself, but at least he'd have gotten one last look, one last touch.

He clenched the side of the railing of the cement steps and swiped at his nose as he lifted his head toward the car park. Next to the pedestrian crossing,



under the tree, Patrick had parked his rental... Adam blinked. *Patrick's car was still there.* And it wasn't unaccompanied. A tall figure in dark dress pants and a charcoal pullover stood next to the car, talking on his cell phone.

As though hearing the commotion of the crowd swarming out of the hall, Patrick looked up, his gaze connecting with Adam's. He lifted a hand in a small wave his smile wide.

Adam didn't think. His hand released the railing as he stumbled forward and ran down the stairs, barely remembering to look both ways as he rushed across the road. He stopped short in front of Patrick, his breath coming out in short, sharp pants from the mad dash.

Patrick disconnected and slipped his phone into his pants pocket. He smiled at Adam, his gaze warm. "Congratulations," he said softly.

Censure and confusion lined his brow as he huffed. "What are you—? I thought you left." His tone betrayed the pain still tight in his chest.

"Without saying good-bye?" Patrick frowned.

Adam looked away. *Yes*, that was what he had thought. Patrick's hand came up to cup the side of his face.

"I told you I wouldn't miss my little brother's graduation for the world, and I meant it," Patrick said, with a tender look. "I was so proud of you walking up there."

Adam swallowed. He wanted more than brotherly pride. He wanted... he just wanted *more*. Adam kept his eyes down, unable to meet Patrick's clear gaze. He was afraid he'd start sobbing and begging him not to leave him again if he did, and those deep blue eyes saw everything, they stripped Adam raw.

"Adam," Patrick's soft voice curled around him. "Adam," Patrick intoned again. The intimate timbre of his voice was too much. Adam tried to swallow around the tightening of his throat as his vision wobbled. He was not going to cry. He grit his teeth and refused to let Patrick see he was too close to falling to pieces. Patrick must have noticed though—hadn't he always?

Patrick groaned and gathered the younger man to him.

Adam couldn't help the shudder that ran through him as Patrick enveloped him against his chest. The familiar heat and smell of Patrick seeped into his skin, calming the ache in his chest. It felt like home.

So caught up in Patrick holding him again, Adam almost missed Patrick's words.

"I don't know how I'm going to be able to leave you alone for a month," Patrick said, his voice tortured. He pressed his face into the dark hair that hadn't been able to be tamed, even for such a serious occasion. "The first time was hard enough."

Adam's head nearly clipped Patrick's as it shot back. "A month?"

"I'm sorry I had to rush out at the end of the ceremony." Patrick grimaced. "That was my boss again—he's the one who's been calling me all weekend." Patrick laid his hands on Adam's shoulders and stepped back, the look on his face hesitant. "I told you I work for a firm in Raleigh, right?"

Adam nodded.

"I was going to say something when you told me you're moving there, but there've been a few issues, so I didn't want to say anything until it was finalized and I was certain. I mentioned to you before how busy work's been—it's been hell because they've been trying to free me up for this contract. It's for a big project in Seattle—and they want me to head up the production team." He paused. "If all goes as scheduled, I'll be there in a month."

"Seattle?" Adam echoed dimly.

Patrick nodded, the smile that had had Adam almost swallowing his tongue halfway through the explanation dimming as Adam frowned back at him in confusion. "You're going to be in Seattle? *You're going to be in Seattle!*"

"I'm going to be in Seattle," Patrick confirmed. He almost stumbled back when Adam leapt against him to fling his arms around the back of his neck. Adam felt Patrick's arms tighten around him as he buried his head into the crook of Patrick's neck; *this wouldn't be their last time together*. "That's if you're willing to wait for me. It might take longer."

Adam laughed into the dark hair tickling his nose. "Stupid." A month might be long, but compared to the time it had taken them to get here, it was going to be nothing.

Patrick pulled back but kept his arms circled around Adam's waist. "You proposed a weekend, but I only got one day. Though I think it's clear that that would never have been enough." The wry smile left his mouth as his arms tightened. "You know, even if I wasn't being transferred, I would still have made it to wherever you are, Adam. I wasn't going to let you go a second time. I love you."

Adam's heart hitched. He took in the fierce expression and the love reflecting so brightly in those deep blue eyes that refused to let him go and he

felt that ever present tightness in his chest slowly unravel and dissolve into the still, warm air, carried away by the excited chatter indistinct in the background.

He'd been in love with this man for nearly a decade, and though it had never been easy—and it probably still never would be—he knew right then that it had always been worth it.

It would always be worth it.

“I love you, Patrick.”

“You're mine,” Patrick growled low, pressing his mouth against Adam's.

Adam sighed, melting into the kiss. *Yes*, he thought. *His*. No matter what, he'd always been his.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*S.J. Lenox started creating her own stories at a young age after devouring everything in her small-town library and needing more of that spine-tingling, gut-clenching, butterfly-inducing feeling that comes from a good book and a happily-ever-after.*

*Writing is, and has always been, her favorite outlet for the steamy, sweet, painful, and funny situations the people who share her headspace charge on through on a daily basis. It also helps when it gets a bit too crowded up there.*

*These days when she's not busy trying to make enough to up and explore the world several times over, she can be found painting, baking or dreaming up hot, thigh-clenching romances—either that or watching actions, old and new and wondering how she can work a good explosion into her next work.*

## Contact & Media Info

*S.J. Lenox would love to hear from all her readers.*

[Email](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# I SPY PECAN PIE

By Anna Birmingham

## Photo Description

A lean and muscular man with dark hair and tattoos on his chest and shoulders stands in a large bucket. He is naked and soaping himself all over, paying particular attention to his crotch.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*See him? That's Justin. He hasn't been working here long and I've been too shy to approach him so far. Since I do all the cooking here on the ranch I only see him at mealtimes and I've been trying to find out what he likes so that I can make it especially for him. I have some great friends here who are surprisingly encouraging and open minded. They've been trying to help me out (without being too obvious of course, which of course means they are being ridiculously obvious). They mean well, but I might be better off with less "help".*

*Justin is very sweet and always polite, he was definitely raised well but I have a feeling he's been on his own for a long time, too long. I don't know his story, but his eyes just look so sad sometimes and it breaks my heart. I think he might be interested, but I know sometimes I can seem intimidating. I've always been taller and bigger than most of the other guys here and being that I'm also the cook, most people don't know really know what to make of me. It kind of keeps me from approaching guys I'm attracted to and I don't want to make the same mistake with Justin. It's not like a get a lot of chances to meet many available men and Justin is someone special, I just really don't want to screw this up.*

*We've been dancing around the attraction for a while now (at least in my own mind) and I've been working up my courage to see if Justin wants to spend some time with me away from the ranch. I finally have a whole "date speech" planned and I head out the back door, around the barn and what do I see? Justin in all his wet and soapy glory. Needless to say, I forgot my speech.*

*Can you help me with what happens next? I need your words to help me work up my courage through some clumsily romantic moments that may not always work out, but where I have the best of intentions? One of my biggest*

---

*weaknesses is Justin's voice, his husky southern drawl does me in every time he opens his mouth.*

*Culinary shenanigans, a big guy who likes to bottom and the dirty talk are encouraged. An HEA would be a huge plus because these guys deserve it.*

*Thank you!*

*Ann*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** cowboys, lighthearted, pie, slow burn, misunderstandings, pie, overly helpful friends, pie

**Word Count:** 13,246

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Acknowledgements*

Firstly, a big shout out to my wonderful beta readers - Jane, for all your great 'picky ticky' advice, how to speak cowboy and endless encouragement, and to Ren, for everything Alabama, lessons on accents and being a very useful petrol-head (or whatever you call it in the South...) Thanks also to Ann for a fabulous prompt and introducing me to Justin. And finally to all the organizers of Love's Landscapes. Y'all do a great job!

# I SPY PECAN PIE

**By Anna Birmingham**

Our eyes met over a chicken pot pie. It was a damn good chicken pot pie, and I should know. I made the thing.

The eyes were gray, clear, beautiful and belonged to a man I had never seen before.

“Who’s that?” I elbowed Bessie as we returned to the kitchen.

Bessie shook her head with a chuckle. “I wondered how long it would take you to notice him.”

Putting on my best innocent look, I said, “What do you mean?”

Bessie just rolled her eyes and brushed some flour off her powdered cheek. “His name is Justin. He started yesterday.”

“Oh... okay.”

She watched me, waiting. She knew me far too well. That was the problem with someone knowing you since you were in kindergarten.

“So... where’s he from?”

Bessie smiled. “Alabama.”

“And what’s he doing out here in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere?”

Bessie frowned and pointed at me. “Watch your mouth, Duke. You may be big, but you’re not too old for me to smack your butt.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sorry. So how did he end up here?”

“Don’t know, honey.” Bessie shrugged and tied her hair more firmly into a bun. “You’ll have to ask the boys.” Then she busied herself cleaning up the pots and pans. I knew that was all I would get out of her for the time being.

I’d lived and worked on the M&M Ranch with Bessie and her two sons since I had left school around fifteen years ago. She was like a second mother to me, and I loved her to death.

So, Justin. I sneaked a look back into the dining room to watch him eat his dinner with the other half dozen or so ranch hands. My eyes slid over his



profile, taking in the short dark hair, elegant eyebrows, and sexy scruff on his cheeks. He looked lean and muscled. It was hard to say how tall, since he was sitting down. Either way, he was gorgeous and totally my type, which was kind of amazing. We didn't get many new faces under the age of fifty around these parts. I'd guessed he was in his late twenties but would need a much closer inspection to be sure.

Justin must've felt my eyes on him because he turned towards the kitchen and caught me staring at him. I pulled back sharply, embarrassed to have been caught gaping like a fish.

"Fuck," I mumbled under my breath. A split second later, the sting of a dish towel bit into my leg.

"Language," Bessie said.

I cursed again, silently this time. She may have been pushing sixty, but Bessie had the best goddamned hearing in Texas and a deadly aim with her dish towel.

The sound of heavy boots and several chairs scraping loudly over the wooden floor in the dining room drew my attention. I could hear the murmur of conversation as the ranch hands moved about.

"Duke!" a deep voice hollered. "Where's my supper? These dirty dogs have eaten all the pot pie. Get your pansy ass out here and feed me now!"

I smothered a grin, picking up the second pie I had made that afternoon and carrying it in to the dining room.

Bessie's sons, Mac and Mike, were sprawled in their seats, identical blue eyes twinkling in amusement. I put the new pot pie in the middle of the old oak table and let them dig in.

"You took your sweet time. I nearly passed out from starvation over here." Mike spooned out a huge helping. He began shoveling it down, moaning in pleasure.

"You can take a second to breathe you know," I said. "You're such a Neanderthal."

"Bite my ass. Damn, this is good. So when you gonna marry me, huh, Duke?"

"Nah, Duke's gonna marry me. Aren't you?" Mac winked and leaned over to pinch my ass.

The other ranch hands didn't blink an eye, since they were more than used to our goofing around, but I didn't know how Justin would take it. I'd been trying to avoid looking at him during this little exchange, but saw his eyes widen as Mac groped my ass. My heart sank, and I really hoped he wasn't going to turn out to be another homophobe. We'd seen a few of those around here, and they never worked out well. I batted Mac's hand away with a frown, figured there was no need to make the new guy nervous if being around a gay guy freaked him out.

Mac and Mike were as straight as the day is long. Both of them had been married for years and had five kids between them. Despite their own busy personal lives, it didn't stop them from ragging on me about my preferences twenty-four/seven.

You'd never know it to look at me. I guess I can be pretty intimidating to folks who don't know me. I'm over six-foot-four and carry a lot of muscle. Some people say I look like Wentworth Miller on steroids, only not quite as good looking. That figures.

Justin sat in silence, a concerned look on his face. I knew I should be trying to make him feel more comfortable, more at home. I sure didn't want to get in trouble with Bessie and the boys for scaring off the new employee. Crossing over to his side of the table, I gestured down at his empty plate. "Want some more?"

His eyes flicked up to mine and hovered uncertainly. "Er... no... thanks."

A hint of his husky southern drawl came through in those three words. His voice was like honey dripping off warm buttered toast. I've always had a weakness for strong southern accents; they do something unmentionable to my insides and make me squirm. I held his gaze and considered trying to get him to talk more, but then changed my mind. I nodded and turned away quickly, clearing my throat, not wanting to be caught staring again.

Mike and Mac nudged each other with a grin as I picked up the first empty pie dish and strode back into the kitchen. I had a feeling that those two would read me like a book.

Bessie was standing next to the sink as I dunked the dish in the water for her. "Everything okay out there, Duke?" she asked me.

"Yeah." I leaned on the counter, staring out the window at the sun setting over the far distant horizon, trying to gather my thoughts as Bessie fluttered around me.

Bessie had known I was gay from around the same time that I started to work it out for myself. She insisted that she just picked up a vibe from me one day, but I'm not so sure I believed that. I figured she must've found my compromising collection of pictures featuring Johnny Depp. A half-naked Johnny Depp.

A heavy hand on my shoulder made me jump.

Mac leaned in close and whispered in my ear. "I spy someone with a crush."

I smacked him in the gut with the back of my hand. "Don't be stupid," I scoffed.

"Uh-huh." Mac gave me a knowing look. He cocked his head back at the dining room. "You should go talk to the new boy out there. He might bat for your team. Stranger things have happened."

"Oh please. Just drop it. No way would someone like that want a fuckup like me."

I saw Bessie twist her towel around, ready to strike. I held my hands up in defense. "Sorry! Slip of the tongue."

"Yeah, I know exactly where you'd like to slip your tongue," Mac said, grabbing the spare dish towel out of my hands.

"Shut the f... just shut up, okay?"

Mac flicked the towel over his shoulder and backed towards the dining room. "Let's go test the water, shall we?"

"Mac... What are you gonna do?" I asked warily.

Mac grinned and winked. "Just leave it up to me."

Yeah, like that always worked so well in the past. Mac, Mike and I had all gone to school together, back in the day. I'd had several relationships on and off over the years, but the boys always seemed to feel that I could use a little help in that department. Sometimes they were right, but usually they were more hindrance than help and I feared that this would be one of those occasions.

"Justin!"

I cringed as I heard Mac bellow as he re-entered the dining room.

"Rookies have to dry up the dishes before dessert. Ranch rule. Get your scrawny ass in there now!"

I heard the scrape of a chair as Justin obeyed without comment. I shot a concerned glance at Bessie, who gave me a reassuring smile. It did nothing to settle the slight churning in my guts. I wanted to find more out about Justin, sure, but I didn't want my friends trying to fix me up again. It was getting way beyond embarrassing.

Justin appeared in the doorway leaning his shoulder against the door frame. "You need help, ma'am?"

He was taller than I'd imagined, probably just over six feet with long, lean legs and a narrow waist. He looked in good shape, which was nothing unusual with all the physical work ranch hands did, but something about Justin pressed all my buttons. I couldn't stop looking at him, and I hoped that it wasn't creeping him out.

"Over here, honey," Bessie called.

He gave me a quick glance and moved to stand next to Bessie, picking up a wet pot to dry.

"You settling in okay?" Bessie asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," Justin replied. "Everyone's been real helpful."

"Ah, that's good to hear. Sometimes the boys can be a little hard on you new folk."

"No, they've been good. So far, at least."

I started to gather together the cherry cake I had made for dessert, trying not to listen in on the conversation, but who was I kidding? I wanted to join in, to say something, but I sensed that Justin was somewhat nervous around me.

"And how about our Duke here? He been feeding you well?" Bessie glanced over her shoulder and winked at me. I glared back.

"Uh... sure, ma'am," Justin said, not quite meeting my eyes.

"Good, good. He really is the most marvelous cook. Don't know what we'd do without him. And he doesn't just cook, you know—he takes care of all the trucks too. There's not one thing with wheels that our Duke can't fix. 'Course he's useless with the animals, but you can't have everything, can you?"

"Uh... no, ma'am," Justin replied, looking a little shell shocked.

I wondered how soon I could get him out of here, then strangle Bessie with her own apron.

“So how about you, honey? You’re from Alabama, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Montgomery.”

“So what brings you to our little part of the world?”

“I... needed to work. The friend of a friend of a cousin knows Mike. They heard y’all were looking for some help over the summer.”

I closed my eyes and let his sexy drawl just wash over me. If ever there was a voice to turn me on, that southern accent did it to me in spades.

“Duke. You okay?” Bessie asked sharply.

I jumped as I realized I had been standing still, holding the cake, eyes shut. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” I looked down at the cake. “Better get this in there before there’s a mutiny.”

Bessie nodded and turned back to the task at hand, which was interrogating Justin. “So did you leave anyone behind in Montgomery? Wife? Girlfriend? Sweetheart?”

I slowed my stride as I left the kitchen so I could hear his response.

“No ma’am. No one.”

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I didn’t get the chance to talk to Justin until later that evening. Once all of the nighttime chores had been done, several of the hands would relax on the front porch with a beer or a cigarette and chat about life, the universe and whatever random farm gossip came to mind.

I sat on one of the steps, leaning against the railing post. I drew deeply on my cigarette, watching the smoke spiral away into the night sky as I exhaled. I loved nighttime in Texas, everything so quiet and still with the vast nothingness of huge landscapes stretching out before us. I didn’t usually talk much, just listened to the general chit-chat. I enjoyed the company of the others, but never felt like I had much to contribute.

As new blood, Justin was clearly the main topic of conversation, the guys wanting to know everything about him—dirt and all. He answered their questions happily, but I couldn’t help feeling that he was being deliberately vague sometimes. I had to wonder why. I did learn that he was an only child, had no girlfriend and loved horses. A ‘country boy from the city’ he called himself, loving nothing more than riding out in the middle of nowhere for miles and miles.

I couldn't help but grimace and shake my head at the last comment.

Mike caught my gesture and laughed. "Yeah, our Duke here doesn't even ride, do you, Duke? Scared of horses."

I narrowed my eyes at Mike, but he carried on regardless. "Probably a good thing too, look at the size of him! You'd have to pity the poor filly he tried to mount, but then you don't mount many fillies these days, do you, Duke?"

The rest of the guys chuckled, and I rolled my eyes at Mike's lousy joke, more than used to the jibes.

Justin seemed to miss the double meaning, but looked at me oddly all the same. "Really? You live on a ranch and don't ride?"

I blinked. "Uh... yeah. Haven't for years. Got thrown when I was sixteen and busted my arm up pretty bad." I held out my right arm and showed him how I couldn't fully straighten it. "Shoulder's fucked up too. Only muscle holding it together."

"Wow, that sucks," Justin said.

"Yeah and that's why he looks like Rambo too, or so he tells us," Mac said with a grin.

He was partially right. I had to keep in shape to stop my shoulder from popping out, but Rambo I wasn't. Not quite, anyway. I shrugged. "It's life. I fix the food, I fix the trucks. Pays my way and at least the damn trucks go where I tell them."

Justin took a swallow from the bottle of beer he was holding, a ghost of a smile on his face. "Sure 'nuff."

I nodded and looked away, tapping some ash off my cigarette. When I turned back, Justin was still watching me, his gray eyes gleaming in the dark. I was curious as to why he hadn't questioned the filly remark from before. He didn't seem comfortable around me, lacking the easy conversation he had with the others. So I could only assume that the hints at my personal preferences made him uncomfortable. At least he was good eye candy, and that would have to be enough.

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I didn't see much of Justin for the next few days, and when we crossed paths we barely spoke a word to each other. He was busy learning the ropes on the ranch and was usually off in the fields or the barns. On the rare occasions

when the hands had some free time, they disappeared off into the nearest town, taking Justin with them. I was usually invited to go along too, but never felt the need. There were always chores to be done on the ranch, and I preferred to be busy. Mike and Mac tried to persuade me to hit the bars, but to be honest I was tired of the local scene. Beer was cheaper from the liquor store and I couldn't dance, so what was the point?

\*\*\*\*\*

A few mornings later, I was out in the garages, working on an old pickup that had decided to start belching out brake fluid. It was a hot and dusty day in early June, and I stripped down to my oldest wifebeater and dirtiest pair of jeans.

I was lying on the floor, underneath the pickup when I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see a pair of denim clad legs framed in the garage doorway. From the strange tension in the air, I thought I knew exactly who the unexpected visitor was.

"Duke?"

Fuck, even the way he said my name sounded sexy.

"Gimme a sec." I blew out a calming breath and finished tightening the bolt above me. Job done, I slid out from under the pickup, looking up at Justin as he came into view. I couldn't see him too well as he was silhouetted against the bright sunshine behind him, but I could tell that he was wearing a cowboy hat.

He stepped forward and looked down at me lying on my back on the dirty floor. Our eyes met briefly, and neither of us said a word as I scrambled to my feet, brushing the dust from my ass. I could see his eyes trailing over my bare arms and shoulders, which were no doubt disgustingly filthy and covered in oil and other truck muck.

"Hey," I said.

Justin cleared his throat before speaking. "Howdy."

"Can I... help you?"

"Uh, yeah." Justin took off his hat and combed his fingers through his dark hair, once again avoiding my face. "I may need some help with my Chevy. Gets stuck in second gear sometimes and I can't figure out why. D'you think you might look at it for me—if you got time?"

Justin stuck his thumbs into his front pockets, hands framing his groin. I struggled to drag my eyes away from such an alluring sight.

“Duke?”

I realized I had been staring at him again and hadn't answered his question. Chevy. Second gear. Fuck. I nodded quickly. “Sure. I can check it out after lunch. This thing shouldn't take long.” I tipped my head back at the rusty old pickup.

“Great. Thanks.” Justin started to back away.

I tried to think of something to say to keep him there for longer, but I failed as usual. “Yup,” I said as he turned and left, disappearing back into the Texas sun.

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Once the pickup was fixed, I took a quick shower and went back to the main house to help Bessie with lunch.

Lunch was always a scrappy affair at the M&M. Bessie and I usually just threw a load of food on the table and the hands who were within riding range popped in as and when they could get there. I would line up giant hunks of fresh bread, cheese and ham slices alongside a huge potato salad and whatever else I could manage to rustle up. Jars of pickles and jellies helped to fill the old wooden table. Sometimes there would be some leftover cake or pie from the previous night, and when I was feeling generous, or had the time, I'd whip up a batch of fresh-baked cookies.

That day, the sound of heavy footfalls outside announced the first arrivals just before noon, Justin and Mac among them. All the cowboys removed their hats as they walked in, hanging them on pegs next to the door. No hats at the table. That was one of Bessie's few rules in the house. And no swearing—in her company at least.

The hands swarmed around the table and immediately began to argue over seats and who would be sitting on the squeaky chair with the wobbly leg. I watched Justin take a calculated look around the table.

“Hey! Do I spy some left over apple pie?” Mac said happily.

Quick as a flash, Justin sat down on the chair nearest said pie. He grabbed the biggest slice and forked a huge piece into his mouth, eyes closed, moaning in pleasure.

The other hands snickered as Mac narrowed his eyes and pointed a finger at Justin. “You're walking on thin ice, Rookie.”



Justin looked at him in amusement and winked.

I hid a grin behind my hand. It took a brave man to get between Mac and pie.

Mac simply rolled his eyes with a sigh and sat heavily in the seat directly opposite Justin. He started to pile his plate high with food. "Looks like I'm gonna have to up my game," he muttered, shooting a stern look at Justin. "No respect in this damn place anymore."

I could barely keep the smile off my face as I watched Justin eat. "You like pie, huh?" I asked him.

"Mmm hmm," Justin murmured, mouth full. "Reminds me of home."

Mac glanced over at where I was still lingering in the doorway. "You should put an order in with Duke over there. He makes some pretty damn fine pies. He'll whip up something especially for you... if you ask nice," he added with a grin. "Right, Duke?"

I nodded slowly. "Guess I could. What's your favorite?"

Justin picked some of the pastry off the top of his remaining pie before replying, not looking at me. "Don't really mind. I eat most things."

"Oh come on," Mac said. "You gotta have a favorite! Everyone has a favorite."

Justin hesitated for a moment longer, then said, "Uh... pecan pie I suppose. If I had to pick."

"Mmm, yeah." Mac smacked his lips. "Haven't had one of them for a while, have we, Duke?"

I tore my eyes away from the sight of Justin eating, throat moving as he swallowed. Damn he was luscious. I wanted to lick him all over.

"Duke?" Mac repeated, eyes darting between me and Justin with a pointed look.

Pecan pie. I could do that. I nodded. "I'll check the stores, see what I can do."

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After lunch, Bessie and I washed up, and the cowboys all disappeared out onto the ranch. I changed back into my dirty work clothes and headed towards the barns where the cars and trucks were parked. I hadn't told Justin a specific

time, but I figured I could probably work out which truck was his by a simple process of elimination. I could have a quick look over it before Justin got there. I wondered how much his truck would reveal about him. Some people painted their personalities all over their vehicles, whereas others didn't even hang up an air freshener.

As expected, I found Justin's truck easily as it was the only Chevy—the only truck in fact—with an Alabama plate. It was an old C10 pickup, not in bad condition, but I had seen better. A quick look around revealed an Auburn University bumper sticker, plus a few team stickers in the back window—including one for the Baltimore Ravens and another for the LA Kings. Interesting. I checked the door, as vehicles were rarely locked on the ranch. Sure enough, it was open, so I popped the hood and leaned into the depths of the truck to take a closer look.

“Hey.”

I jerked in surprise as I heard Justin's voice behind me, narrowly avoiding bumping my head on the hood.

“Hey.” I stood up and swung around to face him, but not before I'd caught his eyes lingering on my ass. I doubted he was checking me out, but I brushed my ass self-consciously anyway.

“You found it then?” Justin said, gesturing at his truck.

“Yeah, the plates kinda gave it away.”

Justin nodded, not smiling and still not quite meeting my eye. I had to wonder what the hell that was all about. He seemed so... awkward. Detached almost. I couldn't think why he wouldn't like me. I wanted to make him smile, have him joke around with me the way he did with Mac and the others, but I didn't know how. Maybe helping him with the Chevy was a way to find out what was going on in his head. Build bridges, so to speak.

“You, uh, want to show me the problem?” I asked.

“Sure. Thanks.” Justin stepped forward, and we both leaned under the hood. It was the closest we had ever been. I could feel the heat and nervous energy.

“Uh... Probably best if you drive it for me, so I can hear what's going on. Can you bring it over to the garage?” I asked Justin as I pulled a rag from my pocket to wipe my hands on.

“Yeah, okay. No problem.”

He opened the passenger door for me, and I slid in. Justin climbed in on the driver's side, closed the door and finally looked over at me, I mean *properly* looked. Our eyes met and held for the first time since chicken pot pie night. Being in such a confined space with him was definitely having a funny effect on my insides. I felt something sizzle between us as we locked gazes, but wasn't entirely sure what it was. Lust and attraction on my side, sure, but Justin? He was hard to read. Fear? Attraction? Loathing? Who knew. I'd never been great at reading other people and often had to have things spelled out for me, which was probably why my relationship history had been so dismal and why Mac, Mike, and Bessie felt the need to help me out so often.

Justin drove us carefully to my garage, while I listened to the creaks and grinds of the transmission. I got him to back the truck in so I'd have the benefit of sunlight on the engine.

"Thanks for this," Justin said, removing his cowboy hat to thread his fingers through his hair. "I'd better get back to work."

"Sure," I said. "I'll try to get it done in the next few hours. Supper time maybe."

He touched his hand to the brim of his hat, then left. Once again, I was alone. Alone and confused.

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I didn't expect to see Justin again until the end of the day, so I was surprised when he appeared in the garage shortly after four o'clock.

The afternoon had gotten so hot, and my T-shirt was so filthy, that I'd flung it off. I was dressed only in my dusty old jeans and boots. I stood up from under the hood to greet him.

"Hey. Think I'm nearly finished here," I said.

Justin smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes, which were skimming over my bare torso. "Great, thanks. Appreciate it." He took off his hat and cradled it to his chest.

"Wanna test her out?" I said, turning to grab the keys off the work bench. I dangled them in front of Justin, encouraging him to take them. Our fingers brushed as he held out his hand, and the keys fell to the floor with a dull thud.

"Oh! Sorry..." I said.

"I'll get them..." said Justin at the same time.

And just like a cheap comedy act, we bumped heads as both of us reached to pick up the keys.

“Shit!”

“Fuck!”

“Dammit. Sorry,” I said again, reaching down to finally grab the keys, my other hand rubbing the bump on my forehead.

Justin looked a bit dazed and was prodding a red spot on his temple.

“Hey, you okay?” Before I could stop myself, I’d reached out to smooth my fingers over his skin.

Justin jerked back, eyes wide. “What’re you doing?” he snapped. He grabbed my wrist with a strong, work-weathered hand.

“I... uh... sorry.”

“Are you messing with me?” Justin growled, his eyes hard, a frown creasing his brow. His hat dropped, forgotten, to the floor as his other hand formed a fist. For a split second, I thought he was going to punch me.

“What? Messing? What do you mean?” Now I was even more confused. I’d never seen him like this before.

Justin glared at me for a moment, then shut his eyes. He gave a deep sigh and dropped my hand. The tension visibly drained from him. “Oh fuck, I’m sorry,” he said, face full of concern. “Here you are, doing me a big favor and I...” He shook his head again.

“What?” I asked, realizing that this was more than just some little thing. “Is everything okay?” There was a story here, maybe even a novel. I would bet one of Bessie’s turkey dinners on it.

“Yeah. It’s fine. You just... remind me of someone. That’s all.” His face darkened, and he stepped back from me.

Even I could sense that that wasn’t a good thing. I propped my hip against the workbench and folded my arms, wishing I had my shirt back on, knowing that being half dressed probably wasn’t helping anything. I had to wonder what had happened in Justin’s past to make him so wary of me—or of the person who looked like me.

Justin stooped to retrieve his hat and ducked his head. “It’s not your fault,” he said. “It happened years ago. I shoulda gotten over it by now.”

Not knowing what else to do, I opened the small fridge I kept in the corner of the garage and pulled out two cans of cold soda. I popped the tops and held one out to him. He took it and tipped his head back, draining half in one go. I did the same and caught him watching me, a wry smile on his face. "You know, you look like that dude in the Diet Coke ad."

I snorted; soda fizzed up my nose and dribbled down my bare chest. I coughed, eyes watering, and brushed at my chest with my hand, no doubt making the mess even worse.

Justin laughed, those fabulous dimples flashing in his cheeks, his dark mood clearly having disappeared as fast as it had come on. "Wanna take a quick walk?" he drawled, inclining his head at the door. "I figure I owe you an explanation as well as an apology, and it's as hot as fuck in here."

"Sure," I said, following him outside curiously. I wondered where he was taking me and what he needed to say.

We didn't go far, just to a small tree-lined corral behind the barns. Justin sat on a shady patch of ground and leaned against a tree. I leaned against the other side, the bark biting into the bare skin of my back, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I took another swallow of my drink and waited for him to speak.

Justin stared off into the distance and drank the remains of his soda, crushing the can between his hands and dropping it on the grass. "It was about six or seven years ago, I hadn't been out of college long. I'd gone to a club with a couple of friends back in my home town. I'd forgotten how small-minded some people could be. We were messing around, probably making more noise than we should and definitely drank more than we should. So, this one guy decides that I was looking at him a bit funny, I wasn't, but y'all know how some folks can get once they get an idea in their heads. Told me to stop eyeballing his ass or he would 'teach me a lesson'. We tried to ignore him but he was being such a dick, getting up in my face and calling us all sorts of shit. We decided we'd had enough and left, but we got jumped. They'd waited for us."

Justin undid the top two buttons of his shirt and pulled it apart to reveal his left pectoral. The edge of a tattoo came into view. "See this?" His finger dragged over a rough scar in the middle of the ink.

I inhaled sharply and moved in closer, wanting to touch his skin myself, but it wasn't the time or place. "Is that...?"

"A knife wound? Yeah. Fucker stabbed me. Missed my heart by an inch."

“Jesus.”

Justin nodded. “Got another on my arm too, only that one didn’t nearly kill me. Hurt like a bitch though.”

“Did they catch him?” I asked. “The guy who did this?”

Justin laughed bitterly. “Hardly. No other witnesses. No one saw him again. Funny how that happens.”

“And this guy, I remind you of him?”

His eyes flickered over me. “Sorry, but yeah. Same height, same short hair and pale blue eyes. When I first saw you in the dining room, took me a couple of seconds to realize you *weren’t* him.”

“No wonder you looked at me funny,” I said.

Justin shrugged. “I know. Sorry.” He buttoned up his shirt again and pushed off his hat so he could lean more comfortably against the tree. He flung an arm over his eyes against the sun. “Needed to get out of town after that. Get away from everything. Needed a change of scene.”

“Where’d you go?”

He lifted his arm and squinted at me through one eye. “California.”

That would explain one of the bumper stickers on the Chevy, at least. “And now you’re here?”

“Uh-huh. Here is good. Love the open space, the sky, the animals. People aren’t too bad either,” he drawled. He turned to me again and shielded his eyes. “So what’s your story, Duke?”

I scooted forward from the tree to lie down, rolling onto my side to prop my head on my hand so I could watch him. “Me? Not much to tell really. It’s kinda boring. Dropped out of school in tenth grade ’cause of my busted arm and shoulder and been here ever since.”

“You never finished school?”

“Nah. I was out for weeks. Got so far behind with not being able to write, I never caught up again. Didn’t see the point. I was never book smart.”

“And you don’t ride?”

“Hell no. Horses are too damn unpredictable.”

“And what about the cooking? Never met a guy who could cook as well as you.”

I bit my lip, feeling absurdly pleased. I picked at the dried grass in front of me, shredding it in my fingers. "I dunno, guess it's a kinda like fixing a car in a weird way. You don't need much imagination. Follow the rules and you get the results. Simple."

"I guess I can understand that," Justin said, looking down at me, his eyes soft and his face relaxed.

He made a beautiful sight at that moment. The sunlight dappling though the trees onto his face, the sultry summer breeze ruffling his hair. I wished I could stay there all afternoon, watching him, talking about random nonsense, but when I looked at my watch I realized I needed to get back to the house to start prepping supper. I sighed reluctantly, "I gotta go. Duty calls. You ranch boys take a lot of feeding." I stood slowly, looking down at him lounging at my feet. Justin's eyes followed me as I towered above him.

"Yeah, I should go too," he said, pushing himself up and brushing the dirt off his ass. "Thanks again for fixing Dolly."

I raised an eyebrow. "Dolly? You call your truck Dolly?"

Justin winked. "Yep. She's my girl."

I shook my head and stooped down to pick up the abandoned soda cans. "Whatever. See you at supper."

"You can count on it." His eyes flicked over my bare chest and arms once more. "Hope you're gonna clean up first..." He gave me one last smile and turned to stride away, hands in his pockets.

I watched him until he disappeared round the corner of the barn. It had been great to spend a bit of time with him and talk, but I realized that I still didn't know if he liked me. Or if he was even gay.

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That night I made pecan pie. Lots of pecan pies. Yes, I'd done it for Justin because I wanted him to think well of me, and I didn't care what the others made of it.

"Well what do we have here?" Mike said as I put the pie on the table in front of them all. "Do I spy what I think I spy?" He cocked his head at me with a grin.

"You made this?" Justin looked up at me, a small smile on his face.

"Yup."

“Wow, thanks. Looks amazing.”

Mike leaned over and handed him the knife with a flourish. “Guess you’ll be calling first dibs, huh?”

“Damn right. It’s mine, all mine.” Justin grabbed the plate and pulled it in front of him, arms wrapped around the dish.

“Hey!” Mac smacked his arm. “Step away from the pie.”

Justin flipped him the finger.

I watched in amusement as they bickered like school kids, happy for Justin, that he seemed so comfortable with the others.

“Duke,” Justin said. My eyes caught his, and he smiled at me. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Justin cut a big slice of pie and then reluctantly passed the dish on to Mac, who dove in with relish.

“You gonna sit? Eat with us?” Justin nodded at a spare chair opposite him.

“Nah.” I shook my head. I never ate with the others, usually grabbing a bite to eat with Bessie as we cooked the meal. I didn’t feel it was my place somehow. “I’ll have some later, if there’s any left.”

“Don’t count on it,” Mac said, voice muffled by the pie in his mouth.

“I’ll take my chances.”

“You sure?” Justin said.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

I gathered a few empty plates up and stacked them, ready to take back to the kitchen. Justin watched me as I moved away, a small smile on his face but his eyes a little sad.

Bessie glared at me as I entered the kitchen and dropped the plates in the bowl. “What you playing at, Duke?”

“What?”

“In there.”

“What? Playing? Who’s playing?”

“Not you, clearly. Why didn’t you sit with him and eat some pie?” Bessie put her hands on her hips and looked at me like I was still twelve years old.



“Huh?”

“Oh Duke, you’re so clueless. You shoulda stayed in there with that boy. He wanted you to.”

“He was just being nice... hang on, were you listening?” I pointed at her accusingly.

“‘Course I was. I know you made the pie for him. And he wasn’t just being nice, he likes you.”

“I don’t think so. He just feels bad ’cause of something that happened earlier, that’s all.”

“Oh! Y’all have a lovers’ quarrel?” She grinned wickedly.

“Bessie!” I said in exasperation. “No. Just a misunderstanding is all.”

“Well, get your butt back out there!”

I grabbed a towel and started to dry some of the wet dishes stacked up next to the sink. “No. It would be too weird. I never eat with the guys.”

Bessie threw her hands up in frustration. “Oh for heaven’s sake, Duke. You really can’t see it, can you? I worry for you, I really do.” She continued to mutter to herself as she rolled up her sleeves and viciously scrubbed at the dirty pots.

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Later that night some of the hands gathered on the porch as usual. I sat in my regular spot on the steps, blowing smoke rings up into the inky black sky, listening to the crickets chirping and the low murmuring of voices around me. Justin wasn’t there. I figured maybe he had other plans or needed some time alone. Funny how on a ranch this size, getting time alone always felt like a struggle.

I closed my eyes and just let my mind wander. It drifted back to that afternoon, when we sat under the trees. The things we’d talked about and the way Justin looked at me, all relaxed and content. Had there been more to it than I’d first imagined? He was so gorgeous and clearly a smart guy, I struggled to believe he would be interested in someone like me. Especially considering what had happened to him. The odds were definitely not stacked in my favor, and I’d never been a big risk taker.

But maybe Justin was worth taking a risk over. There was just *something* about him that drew me to him constantly. Maybe I just needed to get him alone

again and talk things over, preferably away from the ranch. Perhaps go out for a beer or something. I'd have to think how to word it so it didn't sound like I was asking him out on a date or anything.

I saw a shadow move towards the porch and realized Justin was coming over from the bunk house. He'd clearly showered and changed since supper and was still looking a little damp around the edges. And as sexy as hell. My pulse increased just from seeing him walk, with that long, easy stride. Fuck, he made me nervous. I couldn't think, and I needed to clear my head. I ground out my cigarette and disappeared back into the house before he got within speaking distance of the porch.

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A few days passed before I got the opportunity that would change my life forever. If I'd known it at the time, I would have planned it much better.

The hands had all been away on a round-up which took them out to the cattle in some of the most distant pastures. I hadn't seen several of them, Justin included, for three days. It was always a riot when they came back, with all the constant clamoring for decent food, hot water, and proper showers to wash away the days of dirt, grime, and other filth.

Bessie was preparing one of her famous turkey dinners. I decided to bake the biggest pile of chocolate fudge brownies ever seen. They smelled delicious and it was all I could do not to scoop one up and eat it straight out of the pan. I couldn't resist a little taste of the fudge frosting though. I ran my finger around the edge of the jar and sucked it clean, before putting it back on the table. With a little time to spare while the brownies cooled, I decided to track down Justin.

I'd been acutely aware of his absence over the past few days, something that had never happened to me before. I'd never missed any of the other guys like this. I'd thought about him a great deal, mostly late at night when I was hunkered down under my blankets, alone in the dark with only my imagination and my hand for company. I had started to wonder if he would stay on here after the summer was over. He seemed to belong here, like he'd always been here, and I would sure miss him if he left. The three days had given me time to think and I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to say to him.

It was just a shame I never got to actually say it.

I left the house and headed towards the craziness of the bunkhouse, but as I walked around the corner of the barn I came to an abrupt halt.

Holy fuck. There, all naked and soapy, was Justin.

He was standing in a large bucket, washing himself down. The late afternoon sun made his wet skin gleam like burnished gold. My eyes devoured his body, lingering on the hard contours of his torso, the tattoos on his chest and shoulder. And his cock, oh man, I couldn't look away. He pulled on it as he washed, soaping himself between his legs and around his balls. Justin had his eyes closed so he didn't see me watching him. He had me drooling like a fool and he didn't even know it. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, and my mind went numb. What the hell was I doing there again?

I palmed my own cock through the front of my jeans. I was as hard as a rock, and I knew that I would be jerking off to this image for the next few weeks. I could just imagine that perfect cock sliding into me, filling me up.

It took me a moment to realize that Justin had stopped moving, and my heart stuttered when I noticed his eyes locked onto me. Oh crap. I didn't know what to do; I had been caught fair and square. It was pretty damn obvious what I'd been doing.

He smiled slowly, and my stomach dropped into my boots as Justin lowered his eyes to take note of the hands covering my crotch.

"Enjoying the show?" he asked, raising an eyebrow and slowly soaping his cock again. A sensuous slide up and down, up and down.

I panicked and quickly slipped back around the barn, out of sight. Fuck. I couldn't believe I had been so obvious. He probably thought I was a complete pervert. I sighed and hit my head against the barn with a clunk. How was I going to get out of this one?

"Duke."

I cracked open an eye to see him standing in front of me, a towel wrapped hastily around his waist.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Wait... what?

"You're sorry?" I asked in surprise.

Justin dropped his eyes. "I shouldn't have baited you like that. I'm sorry."

"Hey, no. That's fine. You're very fine. I mean, it's fine. Whatever." My mouth was dry, and I stumbled over my words, trying to think of anything other than mauling him to within an inch of his life.

Justin grinned, a dimple flashing in his right cheek. "You think I'm fine?"

I caught my breath, not wanting to believe what he was implying. I had to assume he was just messing with me.

“No... Yes! Uh... no, not really... kinda. Fuck! I don't know what I'm saying.” I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head away from him. “It's good to see you back... Look, I'll leave you alone. I didn't mean to watch you, I'm sorry.” I pushed away from the barn wall and started to move away from him.

Justin's hand shot out and grabbed my bicep, spinning me back around to face him. “Where are you going? And why have you been avoiding me?”

“I haven't.”

“Yes you have.”

“I haven't, not really. I just thought you needed some... space.”

Justin stepped a little closer so that our bodies were almost touching. His hand was still firmly holding onto my arm. “I do need something, but I wouldn't necessarily call it... space.”

I licked my lips and watched as his eyes followed every movement. “What would you call it?” I asked in a whisper. Hoping, longing. I wanted to believe that this was real and he was as attracted to me as I was to him.

Justin ran his hand up my arm to cup my jaw, stroking his thumb over the stubble on my cheek. His eyes glowed as he leaned forward and finally, finally, touched his lips to mine. My whole body tensed and shivered as he kissed me. His lips were soft and warm, moving slowly, coaxing me to respond. I couldn't help myself and I groaned as he licked across my lower lip. My hands snaked around him to grab at his towel-covered ass, hauling him tight against me.

“Mmm, you taste like chocolate,” Justin murmured against my lips. I felt him caress my bare arms, grabbing at my muscles. His hands dipped under the short sleeves of my T-shirt to knead my shoulders. “Oh your arms... Fuck, Duke,” he moaned.

I grunted and pushed away from the wall to swing him back around, shoving him against the wooden slats before diving in for another kiss. This time I didn't hold back, plunging deep into his mouth, devouring him. He tasted dark and sweet and highly addictive. I couldn't get enough. He gave as good as he got, squeezing my arms, attacking my mouth, breaking for a desperate breath before diving back in again. We writhed against each other, panting and gasping. No way was he messing with me; I could feel his hard erection under

the towel and felt his fingers pulling at my belt buckle. This was very real and getting out of control fast. I wrenched my mouth away with a moan, leaning my forehead against his. "We can't do this here."

"I know," Justin rasped. His gray eyes were as dark as storm clouds, and I could feel the lust pouring off him.

"Come with me." I grabbed the front of his towel and dragged him to the garages where I had worked on his truck. I knew that there was a strong work bench in there, which I was hoping would come in more than handy.

It was hot and dusty inside the garage, but I didn't care. Dust be damned. As soon as we were inside, Justin ripped his towel off and grabbed my hand, shoving it against his throbbing dick. "Touch me, goddamn it," he growled, attacking my mouth again.

I grasped his cock tightly, stroking the head with my thumb, savoring the feel of his hot and beautiful flesh. Justin bucked into my hand and slammed me back against the wall, scrabbling at my jeans. He pulled them down roughly, and my own erection popped free, straight into his hands. I groaned as he started to stroke me, each movement sending delicious shivers through me. "Wait, wait!" I gasped.

"Can't wait," Justin moaned, reaching further to stroke under my balls. "Been thinking about this for far too long." His fingers inched a little further back, tantalizingly close to my opening.

I shivered again, wanting him in me, like all the nights I had fantasized about him. "I want you to fuck me," I murmured against his mouth. "Right now."

Justin shuddered and pushed me against the work bench. "You got condoms?"

"No," I said with a deflated sigh. It wasn't like I had expected this when I'd left the kitchen.

"We'll have to compromise," Justin said. He pushed me to sit on the work bench and stepped in close, spreading my knees with his thighs and bringing our naked groins deliciously close. My jeans gathered by my ankles so my feet were trapped together. I couldn't wrap my legs around him, but I quite liked the feeling of being a little vulnerable, spread open, at his mercy.

He rubbed himself against me, and we both moaned, the bumping and sliding driving me crazy. Justin squeezed both of our dicks together, and I had to brace my arms behind me to stop myself from toppling over.

“Kiss me again,” he demanded. His other hand cupped the back of my head, and he leaned his weight into me as I struggled to hold us both up.

Justin growled in frustration as I started to slip down away from him, so with a quick sweep of my arm, I cleared a space behind me on the work bench. Boxes and tools flew through the air and clattered onto the floor. I collapsed back heavily onto the hard wooden surface, Justin falling down on top of me. My hands squeezed his perfect ass as he rutted against me. “You feel so good,” I grunted.

“Not half as good as you,” he breathed, sliding his hands down my arms, pulling them up and pinning them above my head. He shifted back a little to look down at me. “Fuck, look at you.” He licked a trail across my chest, up to my shoulder and then bit into my bicep. “You have the sexiest goddamn arms I’ve ever seen. I can’t stop touching them.”

I closed my eyes and let him do what he wanted to do, that voice just washing over me. It was all good with me. More than good. “Please don’t stop.”

He didn’t. He continued to rut against me, pushing me closer and closer to the edge until I couldn’t hold back any more, pleasure exploding out of me and pulsing over my stomach. A sharp curse from Justin told me he had reached his own peak too.

\*\*\*\*\*

We both needed a thorough wash down after that. Justin retrieved the bucket from outside the barn, and we soaped each other down slowly, lingering over each ridge and dip of muscle, washing away the spunk from our bellies and the dirt and grease from my back. Justin’s eyes sparkled as I paid extra attention to his softening cock, running my hands gently down over his lower stomach and between his thighs.

“Why don’t you eat with us?” he said suddenly.

“Huh?”

“At meal times. You never eat with us. You always disappear back to the kitchen.”

I shrugged and sat back on my heels. “I don’t know. I never have. Guess there’s always something to prepare, or chop up or something, so I never feel I can. Doesn’t feel right, somehow.”

Justin brushed his hand over my short hair. "You should, you know. Bessie too."

"Maybe," I said.

"No maybe. We're all family here."

A smile pulled at my mouth. "And the family that eats together, stays together?"

Justin laughed and put a finger under my chin, pulling me to stand. "Yeah. Something like that."

"You still see your family? Your real family, I mean?"

Justin slid his damp arms over my shoulders. "Sometimes. My folks are older and kind of old-fashioned I guess. Lived in the same house for forty years. Rarely go out of state. They don't understand why I've chosen to do what I do."

"What, ranching—or men?"

"Both." He leaned in to kiss me. "Or ranch men. Double win."

"I'm no ranch man."

"Are too. You live on a ranch and you're a man." He smoothed a hand down my torso to grab my cock. "Well, you definitely feel like one to me."

I grinned and slid my hands around behind him, squeezing his ass. "Guess what you feel like."

"See! I knew there was a sense of humor in there somewhere."

I narrowed my eyes at him, but Justin paid no attention to my glare, pulling me close to bury his face into my shoulder. "You should smile more often."

"I do smile," I said into his hair.

"Not enough."

"I'm too busy to smile."

"You're full of shit."

"I know."

Justin pulled me closer, and I could feel him sniff my skin. "We're having brownies tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Thought so. You gonna eat with us this time?" His lips tickled my neck as he spoke, his breath caressing my ear.

"Maybe."

"What you doing after?"

"Cleaning up."

"I'll help. And after that you're coming out with us to hit the bar. I'll buy you a drink. Okay?"

I sighed and pulled back so I could look at him. I couldn't deny him anything right then. Plus part of me really wanted to go out with him. "Okay."

\*\*\*\*\*

That night, I finally went to the local bar with the other ranch hands. We all piled into one of the pickups, several of us hunkering down in the back. Justin sat across from me, and I watched him out of the corner of my eye as we bounced along the rocky track. His cowboy hat was obscuring most of his face, but I could tell from the set of his jaw that he was smiling to himself. He looked happy. That thought made me happy too, and I found myself grinning like an idiot. I loved that we had a secret and no one knew about us. Although, I had no doubts that our hookup wouldn't be a secret for long. It was hard to keep anything a secret on the M&M with Bessie and the boys around.

Justin must have felt my eyes on him, as he lifted his head and caught me watching. He gave me a quick wink which made me grin even wider and shift where I sat on the truck bed. I wondered how long it would be before I could get him alone again.

The Cactus Cantina was only about three miles from the ranch. Close enough to walk back should the designated driver decide that he didn't want to be designated after all, which happened more often than it probably should. It was typical of so many bars in Texas, simple and basic, but did good beer.

Mac, Mike and a few of the others grabbed some beers and headed for the pool tables at the back. I sat on a stool at the end of the bar and raised my finger to get the attention of the bartender. He came over with a smile.

"Howdy, Duke," he said, leaning across the bar to shake my hand. "Don't see you in here often. How you been?"

"Good. You?" I was embarrassed that I couldn't even remember his name when he so clearly knew me. Tim, Ted, or something similar... In my defense it had probably been at least a month since my last visit.



“Yeah, so-so. Your fellas drink well, so always good to see them.”

I nodded. “Good.” I was useless at small talk. I never knew what to say. “Uh... can I get a Bud please?”

“Make that two. On me.” Justin slid onto the stool next to me, his knee brushing against mine. “Howdy Todd, how’s it going?” he said to the bartender.

Todd grinned wide and popped the caps off two bottles of Bud. “Better now you and the boys are here. Takings will be up tonight.”

“Glad we could help.” Justin took the bottles and passed one to me, saluting Todd with it. “Cheers.”

Todd chuckled and moved away to serve another customer. Justin turned to me and raised his beer. I watched his mouth around the top of the bottle, knowing what that mouth felt and tasted like. I couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like wrapped around another part of me. I watched his throat move as he swallowed.

Justin had to know damn well what I was thinking as he held my eyes the whole time, downing half the bottle in one long, slow move. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth when he broke for a breath, a sly grin creeping across his face.

I swallowed, having not taken a single sip of my beer. I wriggled on my stool and rubbed my sweaty palms over my thighs.

“Put your tongue back in, Duke,” Justin murmured, his eyes sparkling. “You’re dribbling on the bar.”

I blinked and actually looked down at the bar to check. Justin laughed.

“Fucker,” I said with a frown.

“Yep. I am,” Justin said, his eyes dropping to my crotch. “And don’t you forget it.”

A rush of heat made my cheeks go warm. I punched him on the leg, which just made him laugh again. He swung around on his stool to watch the growing crowd of cowboys at the pool tables.

“Do they know?” he asked quietly, inclining his head at the others.

“Know about what?”

“You. Liking guys.”

I twisted my bottle on the bar, making wet circles with the bottom of the glass. “Yeah. Never talk about it much, but it’s kinda obvious I guess. Mike and Mac have known for years—since school. Rest of the guys? Yeah, they know I hook up with a guy sometimes.”

“And they’re all okay with it?” Justin looked surprised.

I nodded. “Sure. I know some folks might take objection, but not the guys who work with us right now. They’re good. I mean, none of their business who I fuck, right? No more than it’s my business who they fuck.” I paused before taking a small sip of beer. “Some of them have real shitty taste, though.”

Justin snorted and wiped his mouth with his hand again.

I smiled and risked leaning in a little closer. “What about you? They know about you?”

Justin shrugged. “Maybe. Like you, I don’t talk about it much. Past experience tells me that most people are fine, but you do run across the occasional asshole who feels they need to make a point. With or without a knife... You never know how people will react, so I figure it’s usually better to play it cool for a while. The twins have figured me out though. It’s not like I’ve been subtle with them. Plus I’ve asked way too many questions about you.”

“Me?”

Justin’s eyes roamed my face. “Oh yeah.”

Heat flooded my cheeks again, and I dropped my eyes as I struggled to look at him. “What did they say?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Justin drawled and leaned even closer to push against me with his shoulder.

I enjoyed the contact for a moment before he pulled away, watching me. Our eyes locked and I saw heat flare in his. I was overwhelmed with the desire to kiss him, to feel those warm lips on mine again. My eyes dropped to his mouth, and I bit my lower lip as I imagined leaning in and pressing against him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Justin murmured.

I dragged my eyes away from his mouth and found him staring at me, desire written all over his face. I cleared my throat and turned away. *Later*, I promised myself, we could do that later. For now, I would enjoy the sweet torture of sitting close but not touching.

We drank in silence for a few minutes until a loud cheer pulled our attention to the pool tables at the back.

"You play?" Justin asked, gesturing with his bottle.

"Occasionally." I shrugged.

"Well come on then!" He grabbed my bicep, but I resisted.

"No, it's okay. You go, I'll watch."

"Duke, come on!" He tried to push me off the stool, but I still had the weight advantage.

"No, really. I'd rather stay here."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Duke?"

"Honest. I'm happy here with my beer." I raised my bottle at him. "You go play."

Justin sighed in resignation. "Fine. But I'll be back." He deliberately grazed his knee against my thigh as he slid off the stool and went to join the others. I settled back to watch and relax with my beer.

\*\*\*\*

I didn't notice anything amiss until the first glass broke.

I spun around from where I had been leaning on the bar, lost in my thoughts. I stood up quickly when people started to shout and instinctively hurried towards the noise.

"What the..." Todd moved from behind the bar in a flash and followed me over.

"Shut the fuck up!"

I heard Justin's furious voice before I saw him. His fist was raised and he was struggling against the restraining arms of Mike and Mac. "Let me go," he growled at them.

"Nuh-uh," Mike said. "Calm it down. Right now." Justin tried to thrash against him, but Mike held him tight.

"He's a fucking idiot," Justin snarled. "He deserves it."

"Yeah maybe he does, but he's not getting it from you. You wanna end up in a cell?" Mac said evenly.

Justin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he spotted me through the crowd. Our eyes locked and held. After a couple of seconds, I could see the fight drain out of him. I nodded at Mac who dropped his arms from around Justin, who instantly pulled away, shaking his hands to release the tension.

It took me a moment to notice the other guy being restrained. He was someone I vaguely recognized as working at another local ranch. Shorter than Justin, he was heavily built and probably outweighed him by a few pounds. The guy was snarling at Justin, the veins standing out on his neck. He spat at Justin, missing by a mile, but it spurred Todd into action.

"You. Out now," he said, pointing at the man who was still spitting and fuming. "Not having that behavior in my bar. Boys?" he added, gesturing at the door. "Y'all care to assist?"

The cowboys holding the other man nodded and dragged him towards the door. He didn't go without a fight, his feet scrabbling on the floor as he tried to stand, cursing all the way as he spewed all kinds of names at Justin.

Once the man had been evicted, I turned back to look at Justin. He was leaning against the pool table watching me, his hand in a fist pressed to his mouth. He still looked angry, but also seemed somewhat awkward—embarrassed almost.

I moved closer and stood in front of him, hands on my hips. "What the hell was that all about?" I asked in a low voice.

Justin didn't say anything, just shook his head and broke eye contact to look down at the floor.

I noticed several of the hands eyeing me curiously, but didn't think much of it until Mac came over and clapped me on the shoulder. "You okay, Duke?"

"Me?" I asked in surprise. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why shouldn't I be? Nothing to do with me."

Mac chuckled. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Drama and excitement over for the time being, the hands moved to resume their game of pool. Justin pushed away from the table and strode across the room to pick his drink up from the window ledge. He shoved a hand into the back pocket of his jeans and raised the bottle of Bud to his lips with the other. Mac watched him for a moment before leaning in close to my ear. "You might wanna have a word with your boy about this later," he said.

I dragged my eyes away from Justin to look at Mac. "What? He's not my boy."

Mac gave a quick laugh and patted my shoulder again. "You play your cards right, Duke, he damn well will be."

\*\*\*\*\*

I watched as Justin finished the game of pool he was playing and headed to the bathroom. I downed the last of my beer quickly and followed him, waiting outside the door of the bathroom until he reappeared.

"Justin."

He spun around at the sound of my voice, clearly still a little on edge.

"Everything okay?" I asked, touching him gently on the arm. "What happened in there?"

Justin speared his fingers through his hair and looked at me somewhat sheepishly. "Think I made us public is what happened."

"What? How? Why?"

"Three very good questions." Justin looked around at the people moving back and forth, then grabbed me by the arm. "Let's go outside. I could use a smoke."

I nodded, leading him down a dark corridor and through a side door into the parking lot. Once outside, I put one of my cigarettes in my mouth, lit it and passed it over to him. "Thanks," he said, sucking in deep before blowing smoke up into the night sky.

I lit one for myself and leaned against the wall next to him. "So?" I encouraged.

"Guy was a jerk."

I laughed. "Yeah, I gathered that. But you were acting crazy."

"Maybe a little. You sure you wanna hear this, Duke? It's not nice stuff."

"I can handle it. I'm a big boy," I said. "So come on. What'd he do?"

Justin leaned his head back and shut his eyes. "Nothing... yet. But he'd said plenty. Saw him watching you at the bar. Heard him say he was surprised they let you in here. 'Fags and queers taking over the world', he said. Went on a rant about some other shit too, calling you all sorts 'a names, saying you were some

dumb hick freak whose Mama probably dropped you on your head. Mac told him to shut his mouth, but the guy didn't give a shit. Guess I saw red." He grimaced and took another draw on his cigarette.

"So you decided to defend my honor?" I asked with a smile. The insults didn't bother me. I'd heard worse.

Justin huffed out a laugh. "Yeah. S'pose I did." He rolled his head to the side and looked at me, his dark eyes twinkling, reflecting the light from the neon bar sign above. "Said a few choice words back at him too. Hope you don't mind."

"Nah. You defend away," I said, a warm fuzzy feeling growing in my stomach.

"Good," he said, tapping ash off the end of the cigarette, before shifting to look at me again. His throat moved as he swallowed, watching me. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat. You don't deserve that shit. Told him as much too."

My breath caught at the look in his eyes. He cared about me. This gorgeous cowboy with the sexy dimples and killer smile cared about me. I dropped my barely smoked cigarette and ground it out under my boot before leaning in and cupping his face in both hands. Eyes on his lips, I lowered my head and kissed him long and slow, trying to put all my emotions into that kiss. I felt Justin flick his own cigarette away before running his hands up my arms to grab at my shoulders. I lost track of time as we stood there, making out in the semi-darkness like teenagers, mouths moving across jaws, nipping at lips and sucking at necks. The world disappeared and it was just me and him, me and Justin. My hands dropped away from his face to grab at his ass, pulling him tight against me. Justin's arms wound around my neck and our kisses deepened, turning wet and messy as our breathing started to get more labored. I groaned and broke the kiss reluctantly before we did anything too indecent or clothes started falling off. Justin buried his face into my neck and pulled me even closer, rocking his hard crotch against mine. "Can we go home now?" he murmured against my skin. "Please?"

I was about to respond when the heavy slam of a door, followed by whistles and catcalls, pulled my attention away from the man in my arms.

"Well, what do I spy here?" I heard Mike say in a sing-song voice.

"I knew it!" another voice said. "You owe me fifty bucks, pal."

"Ew, Duke. Put him down!"

“Ignore them, Justin. You get yourself some tail.”

“Guys, bus to the Loveshack leaves in two minutes!” That was Mac.

The good-natured heckling made me smile. To say we had been outed was an understatement. I cracked open an eye to see the guys from the M&M all heading back to the pickup, laughing and shoving each other, the sight of Justin and I together clearly not bothering them in the slightest. At that moment, I couldn't have loved my extended family any more. I pulled away from Justin to see him biting his lip to hide a smile. “You okay?” I said.

“Yep,” he replied. “Haven't been more okay for a long time.”

“Great.” I ran my hand down his arm to entwine our fingers together. “Come on then,” I said, walking backward, pulling on his hand. “Let's go home.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The slide of hands over my backside made me jump. I hadn't seen or heard anyone come into the kitchen, but I would've recognized those hands in a blindfolded lineup.

“Mmm,” Justin murmured, his arms encircling my waist from behind as he pulled me tight against him. “Something smells good. What is it?”

I leaned back into him, enjoying his touch while keeping my sticky hands away from his shirt. “Pumpkin pie.”

“Oh yeah. Love me some pumpkin pie,” Justin said, leaning around to poke at some of the ingredients on the counter. “What's this thing?”

I elbowed him in the ribs. “It's a nutmeg. And keep your damn hands off it!”

“Fine. Jesus.” Justin jerked his arm back and pulled me close again, sliding one hand under the front of my T-shirt to caress my lower belly.

“And what the hell are you doing here? Shouldn't you be off wrestling bulls or something?”

Justin laughed and rested his head on my shoulder, watching me mix up the ingredients in the bowl in front of me. “Yeah, but I'm on a break.”

I scoffed. “Break? Ain't no such thing this time of year.”

It was branding and castrating season at the M&M, one of the busiest times of the year—a time when the work got even dirtier and more strenuous than

usual. The days were still hot and dusty and everyone got somewhat agitated. But not me. Not this year. Solely due to the fact that it was late fall, Justin was still on the ranch and showed no signs of leaving in the near future.

“Okay, so I’m running a quick errand for Mac. Thought I’d drop in and say ‘hi’ on my way through.” Justin leaned in closer and kissed me under my ear.

I closed my eyes and felt myself melt under his touch. Even after several months, he still had the ability to make me weak at the knees with a single kiss.

“Afternoon, boys!” Bessie’s bright voice made us both jump guiltily, even though our relationship was common knowledge on the ranch. Shirking duties was a different matter though. Bessie busied herself tying her apron around her waist and started clattering amongst the pots and pans.

Justin pulled away from me reluctantly and turned to lean on the counter, giving me a wink as he did so. “Hi Bess. What’s for supper?”

Bessie gave him a stern look. “Nothing, if you keep distracting my boy here.”

“I think you’ll find he’s actually *my* boy,” Justin said with a grin.

Bessie’s face softened as she looked over at us. She shook her head, chuckling. “Well, guess that’s true enough. But much as I love you boys, get your cute tush out of my kitchen, Justin. We got work to do. So do you.”

“Anything you say, ma’am.” Justin saluted her and pushed off the counter. “Later, Duke. Looking forward to that pie. And the rest...” And with a sharp slap to my ass, he was gone. Fucker.

“You look happy,” Bessie said a few moments later.

Her words made me start, and I realized I had been staring at the door after Justin. I looked at her and smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“Good.” She nodded. “It’s about time. He looks happy too. You look happy together. Warms this cynical old heart of mine.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh please, you’re no more cynical than I am straight.”

Bessie giggled. “Hush your mouth, Duke, and make your damn pie.”

I took a sharp breath and swung around to point at her accusingly. “Damn! You said ‘damn’!”

“Oops. So I did. Silly me.” Bessie gave me an impish smile and moved away to open the fridge, carrying on with her food preparations in silence.



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I turned back to my bowl and continued mixing everything together. Bessie was right, we were happy together. Justin had a way of making me feel good about myself again, and I guess I gave him the support and stability he never felt he had before. And the smoking hot sex didn't hurt either. We worked, it was that simple.

And besides, I did make the best damn pie in town.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Anna Birmingham lives in the UK with two young children and an ever-despairing husband (“are you reading about buff gay guys again??”). She loves all things American and has a soft spot for southern accents and cowboys. She has written stories for two previous ‘Don’t Read in the Closet’ events on Goodreads and has also had a couple of short stories published by Dreamspinner Press. The plan is to write more, but the problem is finding the time between family commitments and all the reading about buff gay guys...*

## Contact & Media Info

*You can contact Anna via email.*

[Email](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

By K.C. Faelan

## Photo Description

A tall, dark-haired, young man has pulled down his leather pants in a bathroom and is frantically splashing water over his legs. The image is a gif of Ross from the show *Friends*.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*My boyfriend and I have always played it safe, but recently we've tried to experiment with some of the more extreme aspects of the sexual realm. Well, extreme for us. Unfortunately, things haven't always gone our way. We're both a little awkward and geeky, but we like to flirt with "danger" (as long as it's safe). For instance, our scene with chains turned into a giggle-fest because they were too cold. And don't even get me started on what happened when we tried exhibitionism.*

*Now, here I am trying to get into my brand new leather pants because I'm supposed to be playing the role of Dom, while my boyfriend is all tied up in the bedroom. I can't exactly go out there like this.*

*Please help us find our way in this brave new world, but make sure we have fun along the way.*

*\*\*\*I envision this story describing some interesting scenes where these two figure out what "does" work for them. However, I'm pretty open for anything. You can make this as wild or tame as you like as long as it keeps a certain level of comedic charm. These two are in love and trust each other, so I don't have any issues if they want to try a threesome (or more) or other playfulness. But mostly, you can just take this in any direction you want. Have fun!*

*Sincerely,*

*Lisa T*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** chef, firemen, geeks/nerds, humorous, hurt/comfort, injury, cross-dressing, spanking, BDSM

**Content Warnings:** one chatty brat, topping from the bottom

**Word Count:** 20,232

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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Finally, the last thank you goes to my Muse. For without her inspiration, this story would have never been written.

**Brand Names Used:** Amazon.com, Star Wars Franchise, YouTube, Zinfandel

# **IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED**

**By K.C. Faelan**

## Sunday

Evan stood stark naked in the middle of their well-lit bathroom holding up a pair of sleek, black leather pants. He examined the backside closely, then flipped the pants around to check out the front with its zipper and snap. Julien had great taste when it came to picking out Evan's clothes and this time was no exception. But how the hell was he supposed to get into these? He was already rock-hard, and he doubted very much the zipper would close over his swollen cock.

"I left some baby powder for you on the counter," Julien called from where Evan had left him tied spread eagle to their wrought iron bed. "Don't forget to put that over everything and the pants should slip on easily enough. At least that's what the clerk told me," he assured Evan with a complete lack of believability.

Something about Julien's tone suggested that Julien didn't believe what the clerk said any more than Evan did, but he may as well check it out anyway. Padding over to the counter, he reached for the deceptively innocent pink and white baby powder container. Twisting the lid, he aligned the holes then lifted the bottle to his nose, and sniffed. Tiny particles of powder flew up his nasal passage, tickled the insides and promptly made him sneeze. Wrinkling his nose, Evan set the container back down. Julien could think again about him putting that all over his prick. He was *not* going to end up smelling like a baby's bottom. Besides, Julien wouldn't enjoy sucking his cock if it was coated in the stuff, especially not with his exceptional sense of taste. There must be something else he could use, something that wasn't so... perfumey. Draping the leather pants over his arm, Evan walked out of the bathroom. Crossing the hall to the bedroom, he stopped in the doorway. "I'll be back in a minute."

Julien lifted his bleached-blond head from the pillow. "Where you going?"

"To the kitchen." Evan turned away. "Hang on."

"Like I'm going anywhere," came Julien's muttered reply.

A short hallway led to the living room of their two-bedroom apartment, and from there Evan made his way to their small but tidy kitchen near the front door. The kitchen was Julien's territory, and Evan happily stayed out of his way. It contained just about everything Julien needed to practice his cooking skills and to create amazing meals for the both of them. When they were

apartment hunting, Julien squealed in delight at seeing the kitchen furnished in the fifties style he loved so much, right down to the O'Keefe and Merritt gas stove. He'd insisted they weren't looking any further and they *must* rent this apartment.

The kitchen was usually kept in pristine condition with everything in its place. But Julien was in shelf-paper-changing mode, and their dinnerware and cooking supplies from the pantry were sitting on the tile counter, abandoned where they lay when Evan grabbed Julien and hauled him off to the bedroom for some surprise rope bondage.

Julien had been dropping hints over the past couple weeks that he wanted to be tied up and ravished by a leather-clad Dom. A couple days ago, he'd presented Evan with the leather pants, and Evan was more than happy to grant Julien's wish. Now, he just needed to figure out a way to get into them that didn't involve smelling like a baby.

Turning his attention back to the kitchen, Evan continued to scan over the items. Then he saw it, just what he needed, the dark green bottle of olive oil sitting next to the sink. There was more than enough for his purposes. He cleared aside some of the dishes on the counter and set down the leather pants.

Pouring the oil in his palm, he liberally coated his legs front and back. It was cool at first when it contacted his skin, but warmed up as he spread it around. The dark hairs on his legs plastered down, moving in whichever direction he stroked his leg with the oil. He wanted to make sure the pants slid on easily, so he coated both legs a second time. Saving the best for last, Evan drizzled a line of oil along his thick shaft and gripped his cock, twisting his palm to cover every bit of skin. God that felt good. Pouring more oil into his palm, he reached down and cupped his balls, massaging the oil in well. A low groan left his throat and his eyelids slid shut. Why had he never thought of using olive oil? He pumped his cock with long smooth strokes and gave a quick twist over the head.

"Hurry up, I'm getting bored," called Julien. "What's taking you so long?"

Evan snapped open his eyes. "Just a minute," he shouted.

Adding more oil to his palm, Evan rushed to finish slathering oil on his ass and behind his balls. Setting down the bottle, he screwed the lid back on and washed his hands. Now, it was time to see if his idea worked. Braced against the kitchen counter, Evan lifted his left leg and pointed his foot, sliding it into the leg opening. Once he had the left pant leg pulled up to his knee and his foot



had appeared out the bottom, he inserted his right foot into the other leg and pulled. So far, so good.

The leather gripped Evan's well-oiled legs as he shimmied, wiggled, and pulled. Reaching the bottom of his ass, Evan vigorously tugged at the back waistband and jumped in place. He rocked one hip and yanked the waistband and repeated the move on the other side. Evan let his breath out in relief. He finally had the pants drawn on all the way. Peering down, he saw his stiff cock and heavy balls escaping out the zippered opening and smiled. Julien would love to play with them like that, but first he needed to get them inside. Pulling out the front of the pants with one hand he cautiously pushed his balls in with the other and winced. It was going to be a tight fit, but it'd be worth it. He sucked in his gut and drew the top snap together, clicking it closed. Cradling his cock with his palm, he gently maneuvered it inside. He washed his once again oily hands, then, with infinite care, zipped up the front. He gave a quick glance at his reflection in the microwave door and ran his fingers through his dark hair, smoothed it down, and left the kitchen.

Heading back to the bedroom, Evan couldn't wait to see Julien's expression when he walked into the room. Evan knew he wasn't a muscleman, but he was proud of his body, with a toned six-pack and sculpted arms. He was sure Julien would drool when he saw how the leather hugged Evan's muscular legs and firm ass.

Evan stopped at the open bedroom door. He must have been gone longer than he thought because Julien lay fast asleep, his always unruly blond bangs once again falling in his eyes. His full lips were parted and his chest rose gently as he breathed. The rope stretched Julien's arms tautly over his head exposing his light brown pit hair, and his long, pale legs were stretched far apart. Toned thighs framed Julien's vulnerable, shaved balls. Evan's eyes rested on the nipples he loved to bite, wringing cries from his boyfriend. Julien didn't have a defined six-pack, but he didn't carry any extra weight either, thanks to his fast metabolism and a light workout routine. Evan's eyes wandered over Julien's narrow hips and trailed down to his cock, which, despite Julien falling asleep, lay hard against his belly, the foreskin pulled back and exposing the very lickable head.

Careful not to shake the bed, Evan leaned over and pursed his lips, blowing a soft stream of air over Julien's cock and balls. Focusing his eyes on Julien's face, Evan bent closer to Julien's cock to lick it, and that's when he saw it; Julien's mouth twitched. Evan drew upright and smacked his hand down hard

on Julien's thigh, hard enough to leave behind a rosy glow on the fair skin. "You're not asleep," Evan said, amusement coloring his voice.

Julien gasped and opened his eyes. He grinned. "Fooled you though, didn't I?"

Crawling onto the bed, Evan threw a leg over Julien's body and straddled his hips. He ground his groin into Julien's stiff prick. "So what happens to brats that pretend to be sleeping?" Evan ran his hands up Julien's abs to his chest and lightly brushed his fingers over and around Julien's nipples.

Julien arched into Evan's touch. "They get their nipples pinched," Julien said, his grin spreading.

Grabbing a nipple between the finger and thumb of each hand, Evan tweaked and pulled them until they were pointed peaks. "And what else?"

"They get used and fucked." Julien bucked his hips.

Leaning down, Evan planted a hard kiss on Julien's lips. A whimper escaped Julien, and he pressed his lips back eagerly in answer. Evan ran his tongue between them and Julien opened willingly, letting Evan explore every inch of his hungry mouth. Without letting go of Julien's nipples, Evan rocked his hips and pinched the already erect nipples tighter and tighter. He didn't stop until he drew from Julien's throat a long, loud whine that vibrated up into his own.

Evan broke the kiss and brought his lips to Julien's jaw. He nibbled his way along it, taking small sharp bites, and Julien squirmed and panted beneath him. He worked his way down Julien's neck to his collarbone and then back up, searching for the pulse point. The vein beat beneath Evan's lips, and he gave it a slow lick. Opening his mouth, he gently sucked over the spot, then without warning, sank his teeth deep into the pale skin hard enough to leave a bruise. He gave a vicious twist to Julien's already sensitive nipples, and Julien arched his back. His loud cry rang past Evan's ear, making Evan groan and his dick grow harder.

Sitting up straight, Evan trailed his hands over Julien's chest where he admired his mark and the pink flush creeping up Julien's neck. Rising to his knees, Evan said, "Now, you're going to suck my cock." His fingers found the top snap and popped it open. Julien's eyes tracked his fingers as he took the zipper's tab and pulled it down in a long drawn out tease. He'd barely gone half way when Julien screwed up his face and sniffed the air.

“Wait.” Julien strained his neck towards Evan’s crotch. “What’s that smell?”

Evan’s fingers paused. “What smell?”

Squinting his eyes, Julien stared up at Evan. “Take off your pants.”

“Take off my pants?” Evan said, raising his eyebrows. “Shouldn’t I be telling you what to do?”

Julien shook his head. “Something smells funny, just take them off.”

Evan unzipped the front carefully, hooked his thumbs in the waistband and pushed the pants off his hips. “Is that good enough?”

“All the way off.”

Evan swung his leg back over from Julien’s body and crawled backward to the edge of the bed feeling for the floor with his foot. Skipping the strip tease, Evan stepped out of the legs and let the pants drop.

“Come here,” Julien said, motioning with his head.

Evan climbed back up on the bed and kneeled, the mattress sinking under his weight.

“Closer.”

Now they were getting somewhere. Evan brought his cock near Julien’s face. He was so glad he hadn’t used the baby powder.

Craning his neck toward Evan’s groin, Julien took a long inhale and scrunched up his nose. “Oh my god, you reek!” Julien jerked back his head as far as possible. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Evan’s stomach clenched. Ouch, that hurt. He’d showered, he couldn’t possibly smell.

“What on earth did you use?” Julien asked, his brows a deep furrow, his upper lip drawn back in what could only be described as a sneer.

“What? You mean to put the pants on?”

“Yes,” Julien spat out.

Evan shrugged his shoulders. “Regular olive oil.”

“Olive oil? Oh, please, don’t tell me,” Julien said, his tone sarcastic. “You don’t mean the olive oil sitting on the counter next to the sink waiting to be thrown in the trash before I was kidnapped and tied to the bed. *That* olive oil?”

“Well, yeah. That’s the only olive oil I saw.” Evan thought back for the slightest clue he might have missed about the olive oil but came up blank. Now his cock had given up all interest in whatever games the evening could possibly hold. “What’s the big deal? It seemed okay to me.”

Dropping his head back on the pillow, Julien stared at the ceiling and sighed. “Why didn’t you use the baby powder?”

“Because I didn’t want to go around smelling like a baby’s bottom, and because I thought you wouldn’t like the taste.” Evan crossed his arms over his chest.

Julien turned his head towards Evan and raised an eyebrow. “So you’d rather go around smelling like road kill?”

“What do you mean, road kill?” Evan scowled. “It’s not bad, it’s just olive oil.”

“Bad? Bad?” Julien’s voice rose. “It’s worse than bad. No one valuing the contents of their stomach would use rancid olive oil, and you can certainly forget about me sucking on your rancid oil-coated cock.”

If Evan’s cock hadn’t already lost interest during Julien’s dramatic outburst, that statement was a death sentence.

Julien glared at Evan and jerked on the ropes restraining him to the headboard. “Untie me and go take a shower. I’m not getting near you until you remove all that... that... carrion-eater-attractant off your body. And be careful, I don’t want any of it contaminating my skin.”

Evan’s shoulders dropped in disappointment, and he reached down to untie Julien’s hands. He’d gotten excited when Julien mentioned he wanted Evan to play the Dom. But now, Julien had burst his balloon in more ways than one.

Once his arms were free, Julien pinched his nose, sat up, and shooed his other hand at Evan. “Go on, I can untie the rest,” he said, his voice nasally. “Take the leather pants with you and you’re going to have to change the sheets, I’m not touching them.”

Shaking his head, Evan collected the pants from the floor and marched off to the bathroom. Spicing up their sex lives was not going to be as easy as he’d thought.

## Monday

The *Star Wars* theme played on Evan's phone. He absentmindedly patted around for it on his desk as he scanned the coding on his screen. He checked the message and read:

*Julien: Hey. I'm sorry about what I said yesterday about your cock. I love your cock, I love it a lot. It's thick and gorgeous, and I love the way my mouth feels wrapped around it. But it was the smell. I felt sick. I'm sorry.*

The corner of Evan's mouth quirked up. Julien was harder on himself than Evan could ever be.

*Evan: It's okay. I understand.*

*Julien: Do you forgive me?*

*Evan: Always, babe.*

*Julien: So, I've been thinking, since yesterday didn't work out so well, I had another idea. I can drop by your work, and we can take a quick trip to Leather Gods to find something we both like. What do you think?*

*Evan: Sounds good. I'll take a longer lunch since I got in early.*

*Julien: Sweet! \*smooches\* I'll see you in thirty. Love you, E. Bye!*

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A bell jingled lightly over Evan's head as he pushed in the door. Julien hurried in past him and halted. "Don't you just love the smell of leather," he said, taking a deep inhale. He turned to Evan, blue eyes bright with excitement.

"I'm going over there," Julien said, pointing at a wall display filled with rows of paddles and floggers in a multitude of different sizes and materials. He scurried off, weaving around the freestanding racks of leather cuffs, collars, gloves, and leashes. Evan watched him go, then strolled over to the opposite side of the store. He wanted to check out the items in the glass display case.

The man behind the counter could've been a walking advertisement for *Ink Magazine*. Every inch of the clerk's exposed skin was covered with tattoos,

except for his head which sported jet-black hair with a brilliant-blue streak, and his face, which contained numerous piercings.

“Hi.” The clerk gave Evan a friendly smile. “Welcome to Leather Gods. If you have any questions or want to look at anything, I can help. My name is Max, by the way.”

Evan gave Max a quick smile and a nod. Turning his attention to the case, he let his eyes wander over the contents. It contained all manner of leather and metal restraints and rings lying side by side. Evan had no clue where to begin. He ran a hand through his hair and down the nape of his neck. “Actually, I’m not quite sure what I’m looking for yet. I thought maybe something constraining or something that might cause pain.”

“Is it for a beginner or more experienced user? We have something like this here for those who are into pain.” Max reached under the counter and placed a large banded object on the countertop.

Evan picked it up. Numerous metal rings were linked together by a black leather strap along one side.

“It’s called the Gates of Hell,” Max informed him. “Some customers consider it a chastity device, but I’d say it’s more for the pain, because your orgasm would range from very uncomfortable to quite painful depending on the size you chose.”

Evan’s stomach clenched. Not exactly what he was looking for. He wanted to give Julien a little of the pain he desired, but not that much pain. “What do you have for beginners?” he asked, setting the item back down.

Max bent over again and gathered a few more items, placing them on the counter. He returned the Gates of Hell to its neighbors.

“This,” Max lifted a black leather ring with silver snaps, “is a simple cock ring. As you can see, it has snaps so you can tighten or loosen it as much as you want.” He placed it in Evan’s outstretched palm. “What’s nice is it can be worn for a fairly long period of time, since it’s adjustable.”

Evan nodded. He liked that idea and was sure Julien would to. “I like it. What’s next?”

“This here is what we call a beginner’s chastity device. It’s for those who aren’t quite sure they like the idea of being locked into a metal or silicone one but would like the feel of a device wrapped around their cock and balls.”

Evan took the leather chastity device from Max's hand and turned it this way and that. It had two rings, one larger, one smaller, both with snaps. The two were attached with another strip of leather that curved over the end of the smaller strap and fastened on the bottom of the smaller ring. A small D-ring was fastened to the tip.

Evan pointed at the D-ring. "Is this for attaching something?"

"Yes," Max nodded. "You can attach a leash or, if you flip the device over and fasten only the small ring around the balls, you can attach weights to it." Max reached back into the case and pulled out several black bags of differing sizes. "These are the weights. They're used for ball stretching or cock and ball torture when you get into the heavier weights. But you'd probably be better off with the lighter weights until you decide that ball stretching and CBT are something you enjoy, because that can get painful."

Evan hefted each weight in his hand. This might be something Julien could enjoy, and Evan would be able to control how much weight and pain Julien received.

He glanced back over his shoulder to find Julien bent over near the paddles, eyes closed with faint "ooh" and "ah" noises escaping his puckered lips as he spanked his own ass with a wooden paddle drilled with holes. He was drawing a few customers' attention, but then, Julien would enjoy that. Evan snorted and turned back around.

Putting the weights back on the counter, he said, "Could you hold the cock ring and weights for me for now?"

"Of course," Max answered, setting them on the back shelf. "Is there anything else you're interested in?"

Evan turned the beginner's chastity device over in his hand. "I'd like him to try this on to make sure it fits before I decide to purchase it. Can he do that?"

Max nodded. "Yes, it's fine."

Evan raised a skeptical brow. "But if we don't want it, it goes back on display..." He let his unspoken question dangle.

"We sanitize them with bleach before we put them back out."

"In that case, I'd like him to try on the leather chastity."

"No problem," said Max. He pointed at two dressing rooms with small louvered white doors at the back of the store.

“Thanks.” Evan took his find and headed over to Julien who was still engrossed with the impact items.

“Hey babe, how’s it going?” Evan asked, running his hand down Julien’s arm.

“Look what I found,” Julien said, reverently. “It’s made of elk hide.” Stretched across his palms was a black and green flogger. The strips were about a half-inch wide and cut at an angle at the tips. Each of the strips had a semi-glossy side and a rough side. The handle was wrapped in the same color leather in a diamond pattern. Julien raised the flogger up to Evan’s nose like an offering. “Doesn’t it smell amazing?”

Evan leaned forward and inhaled the rich, spicy scent of the leather. Just the fragrance of it could calm his nerves if he was having a bad day. He ran his hand over the length of the strips, the smooth, cool texture gliding beneath his palm.

“What do you think?” Julien’s eyes shone as he searched Evan’s face.

Taking the flogger from Julien’s hand, Evan reached around him and placed it back on its hook. He wasn’t ready to try anything like that yet, no matter how much Julien wanted him to.

“I think,” he said, putting his hands on Julien’s shoulders and turning him away from the display, “we’ll try something I found.”

“What is it?” Julien twisted his upper body around to peer behind Evan at the floggers again.

Evan steered him toward the back of the store. “You’ll see once we get in the dressing room.”

Julien’s gaze jumped from the floggers to Evan’s face, “Will it hurt?” he asked, his tone hopeful.

Evan nodded. “From what the clerk said, it sounds like it could get painful if I used the heavier weights.”

Julien widened his eyes at Evan’s words. “Ooooh,” he breathed. He dipped out from under Evan’s hands and rushed off toward the dressing rooms, pulling open one of the doors and letting it slam shut behind him.

Evan chuckled. Julien loved pain, but never pestered Evan over his reluctance to give it to him. Just thinking about hurting Julien, however, made Evan’s stomach knot, even when Julien wanted it. But Evan was willing to



work on his hesitance, and hopefully when he built up his ability to control what was happening, he'd be able to make Julien happy in this way. In the meantime, he was going to take it slow.

Stepping inside the room Julien had entered, Evan locked the door. It wasn't a large room, big enough for no more than three people, and minimally furnished. One side had a narrow full-length mirror, and a wooden bench stretched across the length of the opposite wall. The doors were short and could easily be looked over if someone happened to walk by. He supposed that was on purpose, considering what kind of shop it was.

Julien stood in front of the mirror watching him. "What'd you get me?" he asked licking his lips.

Evan took a seat on the bench in front of Julien and pointed at Julien's *Star Wars* board shorts. "Pull down your pants."

Julien broke out in a grin and yanked down his pants, his cock already standing at attention as it popped free.

Grinning, Evan flicked his finger hard against the head, the thud of contact sending a pleasant vibration through his finger. A yelp and sharp intake of breath greeted his ears.

"Ready for action, huh?" he asked.

"Yup, ready when you are." Julien contracted his muscles so his cock jumped up and down.

Evan chuckled. "You're too hard. I don't think I can get this on you. You'll have to go down."

"And how am I supposed to do that?" Julien cocked an eyebrow at Evan. "I'm in a dressing room, in a leather shop with my lover, and he's going to be wrapping his hot hands around my cock to fasten on a leather toy. How can I not be excited?"

"I suppose we could talk about other subjects," Evan offered.

"Oh, like what, exactly?"

"Well..." Evan thought, then a grin split his face. "How about we talk about your mother?"

Julien scrunched up his nose and stuck out his tongue. "Ew! Just ew! That is so inappropriate. I think I'm going to be sick, and I just had the most delicious lunch."

“Yeah, what?” Evan slid his hands slowly up Julien’s sides, lifting his black, Millennium Falcon T-shirt.

“Butternut squash soup.”

Lowering his head, Evan licked a slow trail upwards from the top of Julien’s pubes to his belly button. “Is that all you had?” he asked, running his tongue in long strokes over Julien’s smooth skin.

Soft panting filled the dressing room.

“I, um... oh, god,” Julien whispered.

Evan grinned to himself. He swept a final strip over Julien’s stomach, stopping at Julien’s navel. He pointed his tongue, swirling and fucking the small hollow until Julien shuddered beneath his hands. Evan pulled back. “I asked, is that all you had for lunch?”

Julien stared at Evan, his pupils dilated, his face flushed. He took a few deep breaths. “I, uh... a portabello sandwich, I had one of those too.” He wet his lips, watching Evan closely.

“I hope you left some for me.” Evan ran his hands up and down Julien’s warm thighs.

“Of course.” Julien gave himself a good shake and regained his composure. “Can I try on my toy now?”

“You still haven’t gone down.”

Julien thrust his hips back and forth, his cock swinging up and down. “Try it on anyway.”

Evan laughed. Picking up the leather chastity device from the bench, he handed it over to Julien.

“What is it?” Julien asked, turning it over in his hands.

“It’s a leather chastity device that also functions as a ball stretcher.” Evan answered. “The clerk said it can go on two ways. I think I have a pretty good idea how to get it on.”

“You *think* you have a pretty good idea?” Julien arched his eyebrows. “I hope you have *better* than a pretty good idea. I value my bits highly, you know.”

“And I value them just as highly.” Evan grabbed hold of Julien’s cock and yanked him closer.

Julien gave a startled yelp.

"You're still hard," he said squeezing Julien's warm cock firmly in his fist.

Evan kept a close eye on Julien's face and slowly pumped his cock. The telltale pink flush appeared, climbing up Julien's neck and into his face. Evan's prick hardened as he watched Julien's soft lips part and his eyelids flutter. He tightened his grip and Julien rocked faster into Evan's fist.

"I'm serious, you need to go down, or else I can't get this on," Evan repeated, his thumb circling over the satiny, leaking head.

Eyes sliding shut, Julien swallowed. "That doesn't help you know," he said, voice low. "You could blow me while you're down there. I'm sure that would do the trick." He gave Evan a weak grin, too busy caught up in sensation.

Releasing Julien's cock, Evan gave it a quick slap. "No, don't think I will."

Julien gasped and opened his eyes.

Evan smirked. He loved teasing Julien. "Okay, hold still. I'm going to put it on."

Unsnapping the rings on the chastity toy, Evan draped the largest one over the top of Julien's cock and balls near the base. There was no way he was going to be able to attach the leather strip that would run over the head of Julien's cock, so he wasn't going to even try.

Well, this certainly wasn't going to be easy, the snaps were on the bottom. He bent closer to Julien's leaking cock, twisting his head almost upside down in order to see what he was doing.

Julien snickered and swayed his hips, slapping Evan in the cheek with his prick.

Squinting up at Julien, Evan growled and wiped away the pre-cum. "Ha ha, very funny. Now hold still."

Evan tried again, yanking hard on the ends until one of the snaps slid over far enough and he clicked it closed. He held Julien's cock out of the way, running his fingers over Julien's nuts and the device, checking for fit.

"Do that again," Julien said, grinning down at him.

"Hold on, one of your balls didn't catch. I'm going to try and poke it through," Evan said, concentrating on his plan. Sticking his fingers through the loop, Evan felt for the escaping ball and grabbed for it. Using his other hand, he

pushed from behind. But the ball shifted in its sack and all Evan pulled... was skin.

"Ow! Be careful!" Julien warned. "I don't know what you're doing down there, but it isn't a tug of war."

"I'm trying to be careful, but I'm having a hard time getting this around everything." Evan unfastened the ring to try again. He wasn't going to let a simple little device defeat him. He was determined to fasten the snaps snugly around Julien's nuts. Maybe he could get the snaps closed if he tried securing them on top and then twisted them to the bottom after he joined it. That way, he wouldn't get a kink in his neck either.

Wrapping the band around the bottom first, Evan brought the ends up around the top and pulled it tighter and tighter until finally, two snaps closed.

"Well, shit." Evan stared at his handiwork. Julien's balls weren't in the ring again. Evan stuck his fingers through the loop, feeling for the balls, only he couldn't get a grip on them. Julien's nuts were having none of it and had fled the scene.

Evan sat back and scratched his head, his lips twisting in thought.

"What's wrong?" asked Julien.

"Sorry, babe," Evan said, "but I can't seem to find your balls. I think they've disappeared."

"What?" Julien squeaked, his eyes widening in disbelief. Shoving his hands down to his groin, he grabbed for his sack. "They're gone," he whispered. "Oh. My. God. You scared them so bad they've fled in fear." His fingers rolled and tugged at his sack in an attempt to get his balls to descend. A small whimper escaped his throat.

"I can't feel them; they've pulled up so high I've turned into a eunuch." He shot Evan a panicked look before continuing his search.

Laughter burst from Evan's chest at Julien's expression. He grabbed Julien's hips and dropped his head onto his stomach unable to control his laughter. Evan's shoulders shook uncontrollably, tears threatening to roll down his cheeks.

"Oh, boy," Evan said, wiping at his eye with the back of a finger as he straightened back up. "I've heard you say some crazy shit, Julien, but that... that has got to be at the top of the list." Evan paused as another wave of

laughter shook his body. "Trust me, you're not a eunuch. You still have your balls, they just aren't down."

"Stop laughing," Julien said, his voice growing louder. "It's not funny. How would you like it if your balls fled in fear? My balls haven't been this frightened since I dove into the icy water at the Polar Bear Plunge my first year of high school."

Loud giggles sounded from the shop floor.

Julien craned his neck over the dressing room door. "It's not funny. One day something like this will happen to you, and you'll remember the time you laughed at the helpless customer who had his balls traumatized with the threat of castration."

He was greeted by a further round of laughter from the customers and clerk.

Evan pinched his lips tightly together to keep from laughing, but he couldn't stop the warm tears from rolling down his cheeks. "Oh, god," he said, wiping away at the tears with both palms.

Julien turned his head away. "Go ahead, have a laugh at my expense," he muttered, his mouth turned down at the corners, his arms folded across his chest.

Evan sighed and pushed himself up from the bench. He gathered Julien in his arms and held on tight as Julien halfheartedly attempted to pull away. Evan gently stroked Julien's hair with one hand. "You'll be fine, babe." He rested his chin on Julien's head. "Start walking around and your precious jewels will drop again." Letting go, he cupped Julien's face in his hands and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "Now, give me the device and pull up your pants. I've got to get back to work, and I want to purchase these, then we can go."

Julien took off the toy and slapped it into Evan's hand. "You aren't seriously going to buy that, are you?"

"Sure I am, and I'll buy some of those weights, too. I think these are great, and I want to try these on you again at home, where we can take our time."

Julien gave Evan the evil eye. "You buy those and you're not trying them on me until you can get them on yourself without a problem. I'm not subjecting my family jewels to strangulation again."

His erection long since gone, Julien yanked up his shorts, slid open the door latch, and left the dressing room. Faint chuckles followed his passage as he

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stalked off to the front of the store. He pulled out his cell phone, pointedly ignoring everyone's looks.

Evan made his way to the register, and Max rang up his purchase.

"You seem to have your hands full there," said Max, looking over at Julien and grinning.

"Yeah, I do. But I'm never at a loss for entertainment." Evan gave Max a wink as he gathered up his merchandise and headed for the door.

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## Tuesday

Evan stared at the paper in front of him. He couldn't imagine anything more monotonous and repetitive than a fix sheet. No wonder Julien quit the software field. Evan removed his glasses, gave his tired eyes a good rub, then settled the glasses back on his face. He was ready to go over the sheet one more time when his phone rang.

"I just had the most awesome idea," Julien said, his excitement palpable.

Evan stretched an arm up over his head and leaned back in his chair. "Oh, what's that?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

"Sexy time video camming. We can do it while you're at work."

Evan frowned. Where did Julien get his crazy ideas? "No, I don't think so."

"Please Evan, it'll be hot," Julien pleaded. "I'm not asking you to go naked, just me."

Evan stood, scanned the area around his cubicle, then dove back down into his chair.

"Do you remember what happened the last time we tried something like this?" he whispered.

"We've never tried to cam at your work before."

"No, I mean the time in the park."

"Oh."

Evan winced at the hysterical laughter erupting from the phone. He frowned. "You wouldn't think it was funny if it had happened to you."

"That was so funny," Julien choked out when he caught his breath. "You screamed like a girl."

Evan remembered that day all too well. He had Julien "I have a cunning plan" Bouvet pressed hard up against a tree as he reamed his ass in a very secluded area of the park. Julien was loud—he was always loud—and Evan warned him several times to keep it down. When he didn't, Evan slowed his thrusts just enough so that it drove Julien crazy. Julien had whined, pushed back his ass and begged Evan to take him harder.

Evan could feel his prick swell at the memory. He loved it when Julien begged.

He remembered how his fingers dug into Julien's hips, so deep they left bruises. Lost in the tight heat of Julien's ass, he'd been oblivious to everything around him. That's when something so cold that he thought it an ice cube, was shoved up his ass. He let out a high-pitched yell (not a girly scream, no matter what Julien said), and fell forward onto Julien, slamming them into the tree trunk. Once Julien got over the shock of Evan's cock being unceremoniously yanked out, he broke into laughter. Evan turned and searched for the origin of the cold object. A soft sneeze near the ground reached his ears, and he looked down. Dark eyes peered up at him from a furred face. A long pink tongue lolled out the side of a salt and pepper muzzle, and at the other end of the large black body, a long tail wagged a greeting.

A dog. A dog that wanted to find out what they were up to. Which meant its owner wasn't far behind. Evan had frantically searched for any signs of the owner. Then, he saw them. An elderly couple soon came into view calling out, "Buster." Even from far away, Evan could see their smiles fall when they noticed who Buster had made friends with. The surprised couple quickly called their dog, and then hightailed it in another direction.

Evan couldn't shove his flaccid cock back into his pants fast enough. He'd grabbed Julien and tried to shove his cock back in too, but it was impossible when Julien was doubled over with laughter. Tears streamed down Julien's face, and his body shook so hard he gasped for air.

Julien snickered, his laughter winding down. "You have to admit it was pretty funny."

Evan's cock deflated. "No."

Julien sobered. "Come on, Evan, that was weeks ago."

"Two weeks, to be precise," Evan corrected, his voice tight.

"Don't be such a prude. You know you like playing these sex games as much as I do. You won't have to do a thing except tell me what to do. I'll do all the work."

Evan was tempted, very tempted. He *did* like to experiment and, even more, he loved ordering Julien around. The idea of doing it over *cam* was hot. He just hated the embarrassment when things inevitably went ass up and not in the good way.

"What about at lunch, when everyone is out? That way you won't need to worry as much. I promise I'll make it worth your while," Julien said in a sing-song voice.



Hesitating a little while longer, Evan finally gave in. "All right. I'll text you when it's lunch."

"Yay!" Julien said happily. "Don't forget! Bye!"

Evan stared at the phone in his hand. He was so going to regret this.

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Evan: *It's playtime, babe.*

He added a winky face at the end of the message for good measure and turned on the vid cam.

Julien's excited face appeared on screen, and he waved. He was already shirtless and leaning against some pillows on their bed, his PC resting on his lap.

"This is going to be so fun. I can't wait to get started. See what I put on?" Julien leaned toward the cam and adjusted the screen so Evan could see.

A set of black clamps sporting a long silver chain between them pinched down tight on Julien's nipples.

Julien tugged on the chain. "It feels so good, E. Wish you were here. I brought some toys out." He held up a purple butt plug and the dildo he loved to use if Evan wasn't around. "What do you want me to use first?"

"Strip, if you haven't already," Evan said.

Julien set the laptop on the bed and leaned back, lifting his legs. He slid his R2D2 boxer shorts off, and his cock popped free, slapping against his stomach. The video wobbled with every shift Julien made on the bed, but Evan still got a good view of Julien's ass when he lifted it off the bed to remove his shorts.

"Stroke your cock, and I want to see your face when you do it."

Julien picked up the laptop and moved it next to his side. "Is that good?" he asked.

"Yeah, perfect," Evan replied, his prick growing hard.

"Should I start?"

"Yes, start now."

Julien closed his eyes and without using lube, gripped his cock.

Evan moved closer to the screen, shifting in his seat as Julien lightly teased his shaft.

“Hold the chain in your mouth,” Evan ordered.

Julien bent his neck down and slipped the chain between his teeth.

“Tug hard, I want to hear you.”

Julien straightened his neck and pulled, his nipples stretched to taut peaks between the clamps. Whimpers escaped his throat.

“Yeah, like that. Stroke yourself faster. Rougher.”

Julien stroked his cock faster and rougher. Clear beads of pre-cum appeared from the tip of his cock and then vanished on the upstroke.

“That’s it, babe, keep going.” If Evan could have jumped through the screen and licked those beads off, he would have. He craved the salty taste and would’ve tongue fucked Julien’s slit to capture the pre-cum before it even made its way to the surface.

“Stop, Julien. Drop the chain,” Evan ordered.

The chain dropped from between Julien’s teeth and Julien opened his eyes. “Did you like that, E?” he asked.

“Loved it, babe, want to lick your cock and suck it. Take it deep down my throat, swallow you all the way.”

Julien’s smile was dazzling.

Evan reached down and adjusted the large tent that had sprung up in his trousers.

“Now, take off the clamps; then, I want you to pinch your nipples until I tell you to stop.”

Julien squeezed his eyes shut, released one of the clips and hissed in a breath through his teeth. He did the same to the next one and cried out. He hung his head and took deep breaths.

“You okay?”

Julien gave a nod.

“If you’re ready, I want you to pinch them, twist them hard.”

Julien nodded again. He took one between the fingers of each hand and pinched. Small whimpers escaped his throat.

“Harder.”

His head falling back, Julien twisted and pulled, and the whine grew louder as it tried to escape his closed lips.

Evan moaned, "That's it, babe, you're making me hard. Imagine me biting them. Do it."

Julien's hands strained to squeeze his nipples harder, his brows making deep furrows between his eyes, his hands shaking. The whine grew and expanded, filling Julien's throat until it broke free and exploded from his lips in a piercing wail.

"You're gorgeous, babe." Evan said, his voice low and rough. "Now, let go."

Julien relaxed, and he let his hands flop to the bed. Soft whines still sounded from Julien's throat as he bit his bottom lip.

"You okay?"

Julien nodded. "I'm okay," he whispered. "What do you want me to do next?"

"Show me your ass. Get yourself ready for me."

The smile Julien shot Evan was brilliant. Offering himself up to Evan was one of Julien's favorite things, and Evan loved it when he did.

Julien moved the laptop toward the foot of the bed and flipped over to his hands and knees. He put one leg on each side of the keyboard. "Can you see my ass okay?"

"Yes. It's perfect."

The snap of the lube bottle sounded, and Julien squirted some onto his fingers. He reached back and smeared the gel into his crack, circling his pink hole.

"Do you like how I look, with my ass in the air? I'm so empty. Need your cock."

Evan shifted to relieve the growing pressure in his pants.

"You're so hot, babe. Now, stick your fingers up your ass. Show me how much you want it. I want to hear you. Beg for it."

Julien slid his fingers up and down his crack and then carefully slid one inside. "Oh god, that feels so good, but I need more." Julien quickly moved up

to two, then three fingers. His breath came in short gasps. "Wish you were here. I'm throbbing and need your cock. Want you to pound me until you come and feel your hot jizz run out my ass and down my legs."

Evan groaned. Julien had such a dirty mouth.

A few light raps sounded on Evan's cubicle wall.

"Evan, have you got a minute?"

Evan's heart slammed into his ribs, and he froze at the sound of his supervisor's voice. The cubicle suddenly grew stiflingly hot. Prickles of heat stabbed Evan's back, his armpits and his chest, rushing up his neck and into his face. Evan closed his eyes and swallowed. Why, oh why?

He couldn't let her see Julien, not like this. Think. Think. Think. He needed to shut the cam off, that's right. He needed to shut it off. He moved closer to block the screen and, in what he hoped was a casual manner, clicked a few keys.

He swung his chair around to face his supervisor, Diane, and forced a smile. "Sure. What can I help you with?" he asked.

"I need you to drop everything and work..."

*"Oooh it feels so good. Can you see? Do you like my fingers up my ass fucking myself? Do you like my ass in the air waiting for your cock?"*

Evan swallowed a loud choke. Fuck. He didn't turn off the sound, only the video.

Diane's eyebrows climbed high under her bangs.

*"I need your cock in me. I love your cock filling me and pounding my ass until I scream."*

Evan's heart hammered a harsh staccato beat, and the blood roared in his ears. He struggled to breathe around the vise-like grip that trapped his chest. The only part of him that moved was his eyes, eyes that searched his supervisor's face for any sign of judgment or condemnation.

*"Ah, ah, ah. Please E, can I come? Please?"*

A silent scream lodged in Evan's throat.

"Get this back to me by the end of the day tomorrow." Diane held out the folder, and waited for Evan to take it.

Evan watched his hand extend toward the offered folder like an entity unconnected to his body. He saw, but didn't feel, his fingers clasp the folder and draw it back to drop it onto his lap.

*"Please, I need to come."*

A subtle twitch tugged at the corner of Diane's mouth, and she nodded toward the computer. "You'd better get back to Julien, he sounds rather desperate." With that, she turned and left the cubicle.

Evan swiveled his chair back around to his desk, the manila folder forgotten in his lap. He dropped his head to the desk with a loud thud. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

*"E, what's going on? Why can't I see you? Did you shut off the video?"*

Thud, thud, thud...

*"Evan? What's that noise? Evan?"*

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## Wednesday

Soft pillows propped behind his back on the bed, Evan strained his ears to follow the sound of kitchen drawers sliding open and closed.

"Are you ready?" Julien called. "I'm not going to bring in the surprise unless you're ready."

"Yeah, I'm ready," Evan answered, as all Julien had asked of him was to clean up, grab a towel from the bathroom, and get in bed. Curious about what Julien wanted to keep secret, Evan watched the door closely.

To his astonishment, in walked Julien—backwards—and next to naked. His white bubble butt led the way until he was just inside the door, where he stopped.

"Tada!" Julien twirled around. "What do you think? Don't you love it?"

Julien's front was covered with an apron that came almost to his knees, and on it, was a photo image of Michelangelo's "*David*," with the bits dangling at just the right height and location.

"That's pretty cool. Where'd you get it?"

"Mother," Julien said. "Remember she went to Italy? Well, she stopped by today and dropped this off. She said she'd immediately thought of us when she saw it."

"Is that the surprise?" Evan asked, a little let down. He was sure Julien wanted sex when Julien told him to get cleaned up.

"Nope! However, *this* is!" Julien waved the small blue bowl that Evan hadn't noticed he was carrying, towards Evan.

Evan sat up on the bed and sniffed in the direction of the bowl. "What's in it?"

"Something I created. Something that is so heavenly it melts in your mouth. It'll make you dream of warm tropical breezes and the sun caressing your skin. This here," Julien pointed to the bowl, "contains my tantalizingly rapturous Tropical Fruit Mousse."

Evan stared at Julien and the dessert in his hand. He could smell the sweet tang of the mousse drifting from the bowl, and he licked his lips, his mouth watering. Fixing his eyes on the bowl, Evan scooted to the edge of the bed and swung a leg over the side.

“Ah, ah, ah!” Julien waggled his finger at Evan. “None of that.”

“Why not? Just a taste.” Evan set his foot on the floor. Zeroing in on his target, he tensed his muscles.

“Evan, no, please,” Julien pleaded, taking a step back.

A wicked grin spread across Evan’s face, and he sprang.

“Noooo!” Julien wailed, his blue eyes growing wide. He spun and stuck out his ass, just as Evan pounced. The bowl wobbled in his grip, and he fought to keep it out of Evan’s reach. “Don’t make me drop this,” he warned.

Evan grappled with Julien for the bowl for a second then wrapped his arms around Julien’s waist. Dragging him back hard against his body, Evan kept a tight grip around his boyfriend. He dropped his face into Julien’s neck and growled, smiling at the shudder that ran through Julien’s body. “As long as you promise I can have some after you get done with whatever you have planned,” Evan whispered, nipping down Julien’s neck to the soft curve at the bottom. Snaking his hands up underneath the apron, he found Julien’s nipples and gave them a rough tweak.

Julien cried out. “No. Please. That’s not fair. You’re trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?” Evan ran his hands up and down Julien’s taut abs.

“Please, Evan, please,” Julien begged.

“*Please*, meaning you want me to continue, or you want me to stop?” Evan teased.

“You’re evil,” Julien whined, at the same time rubbing his pert butt across Evan’s hard dick.

Evan chuckled, reached down, and slapped Julien on the ass.

Julien craned his head around to get a better look at Evan. “You know, if you’d rather spank me, I can go for that.”

Evan grinned and let go. He flopped backwards onto the bed and crossed his arms behind his head. “That depends on how good you are with your plan.”

Julien placed the bowl on the dresser and removed the apron, revealing his ready and eager prick. He picked up the bowl and headed for the bed. “Oh, I’m very, very good,” Julien replied, a seductive swing to his hips making his stiff cock sway with each step as he approached the bed. Holding the bowl in his left hand, Julien knelt on the bed and maneuvered to settle between Evan’s spread legs.

Remembering the cold chains they'd experimented with a while back, Evan asked, "Is it cold?"

"Unfortunately, yes. So you're just going to have to suck it up, buttercup. But, once I get done licking off all this delicious mousse with my hot mouth, you'll be nice and warm." An impish grin played across his face. Julien slapped Evan's thigh. "Lift your legs and spread them."

Evan drew his legs to his chest and wrapped his hands over his knees, pulling them in tighter and apart. He peered between his legs and watched as Julien dipped his fingers into the mousse and scooped some up in his hand.

"Ready?" Julien asked his hand poised over Evan's groin.

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

Julien lowered his hand, and Evan inhaled sharply as the cold mousse came in contact with his balls. If his ball-sack could've gasped, it would have. Instead, it shriveled at the change in the weather and his nuts flew to a warmer climate.

Evan's voice rose to a falsetto, and a grin tugged at his lips. "I think I've turned into a eunuch."

"Ha, ha. Karma's a bitch, isn't she?" Julien said, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

Tilting his hips, Evan pressed his groin into Julien's hand as he massaged on the mousse. Evan closed his eyes, concentrating on the smooth glide of Julien's skillful fingers rolling and playing with his sack. A light tug made Evan's breath hitch, and he let out a faint moan. He spread his legs wider, silently begging for more. Julien worked his way back to Evan's hole, slowly circling the entrance with his finger. Evan threw back his head and whined. Fuck, he loved having his hole played with. He turned into a quivering whore every time.

"Put your feet on the bed," Julien directed. "I need to work on your cock."

Julien took another handful of mousse and worked it over Evan's dick. He didn't glob it on; he used it as he would a lube, a cold, slick lube that smelled as amazing as Julien had described. Evan rocked his hips, his cock growing heavier, his breath growing short and quick. His attention bounced between the coolness of the mousse and Julien's warm hand that slid with infinite slowness over his shaft, only to give a quick twist over the head. Evan thrust his heavy prick up into Julien's fist.



“Oh yeah, do it again, tighter.” Evan sighed. He pumped his hips faster.

Julien laughed and let go. “Nope, there’s still too much fun to be had. That was just the warm up.”

Evan growled in frustration and, for a few seconds, fucked empty air. He lifted his head and watched Julien finish coating his cock with a thick layer of the mousse, taking his time to cover every bit of his skin, especially the head.

Setting aside the bowl, Julien wiped his hands on the towel. “You know, I should take a picture,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

Evan scowled. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Spoilsport,” Julien said, with a teasing smile. He splayed his hands on Evan’s inner thighs and pressed down.

Evan let his legs drop open, giving Julien better access.

Wrapping his fingers around the base of Evan’s swollen cock, Julien flicked his tongue over the head. He sucked the tip into his warm, wet mouth and swirled his tongue around and around the satiny head.

Evan lifted his hips to drive further into Julien’s mouth, but Julien pulled away with a pop.

Julien moaned and ran his tongue over his lips, catching the mousse coating it. “Mmm, so good,” he murmured, his heated gaze locked onto Evan’s face.

Evan panted as Julien slowly descended, mouth wide open so he barely made contact over Evan’s aching prick. Growling in frustration, Evan thrust up his hips, only to have Julien withdraw. Julien could be such a tease. “Go on, suck my cock,” Evan ordered.

With a grin, Julien plunged his mouth over Evan’s cock as far as he could go and bobbed his head enthusiastically. He backed off and stuck out his tongue, smacking the head roughly against it, the impact sending little shocks through Evan’s shaft. Evan closed his eyes and arched his hips. “Yeah, like that,” he moaned.

Having licked off most of the mousse, Julien sloppily slathered on more and dropped down to take Evan’s balls in his mouth.

Julien was right, the mousse didn’t seem as cold now. Maybe it was because of all the friction from the sucking and licking in contrast to the cold mousse, because Evan’s cock and balls seemed warmer. A scratchy spot behind Evan’s

balls drew his attention away from Julien's tongue. "Behind my balls, lick there," Evan urged.

Julien pushed up Evan's thighs and lowered his head further. All Evan saw was the top of Julien's blond head and the feel of his moist tongue flicking over his taint.

"More. Harder. Yeah, right there." Evan said, the licks temporarily easing the itch. "Use your teeth. Yeah, that's better."

Evan knew a lot of guys didn't like teeth used on them. Until he met Julien and his magic mouth, he'd been one of them. Julien had a way of biting over his prick and behind his balls, right up to the point of discomfort that drove Evan crazy. There was something primal about the roughness of it all, and he ended up with mind-blowing orgasms. Even though his cock felt like ground meat, afterwards.

Julien's teeth nibbled behind Evan's balls, soothing the odd scratchiness that was growing there. Evan wiggled his hips, signaling to Julien to drop lower and attack the itch that had intensified on and around his hole.

"My hole. Lick my hole," Evan said urgently, canting his hips so Julien had better access.

Julien pushed Evan's legs up higher, until he was almost bent in half, and licked a trail down to his hole. Spreading Evan's cheeks apart, Julien circled his tongue energetically over the pucker and then stabbed at the hole with the tip, pushing in deeper each time. The itch was soothed at first, but it came back with a vengeance, and Evan dug his fingers into the sheets, holding his breath as Julien's tongue thrust past the tight ring of muscle. He loved it when Julien rimmed him, but this time he couldn't get away fast enough and jerked his hips left and right to avoid Julien's determined tongue.

"Stop wiggling." Julien brought Evan's legs back to the mattress and pressed down hard on his thighs. He returned his mouth to Evan's cock.

"What did you put in the mousse?" Evan asked, staring up at the ceiling and blinking back the tears that threatened to form. He wasn't a masochist, so how could he possibly be hard? Every flick of Julien's tongue made Evan want to jerk his hips away, and he had to fight back a cry when Julien sucked in a ball and rolled it around in his mouth with his tongue.

Julien peered up between Evan's thighs. He wiped his finger over his lips and then sucked the mousse from his finger. "Pureed bananas, mangoes, kiwi,

sugar, gelatin, lemon juice and whipped crème.” Giving a grin, Julien closed his eyes and dove back down. With one long stroke, he licked a strip over Evan’s balls to the tip of his cock. He pulled back and swept another long strip with his tongue, beside it.

“No, really what did you use?” Evan demanded, unable to stop the desperate urge to squirm and escape Julien’s mouth. Every lap of Julien’s tongue was now sandpaper, leaving a trail of fire behind it as he went. Reaching down, Evan grabbed a fistful of Julien’s hair and yanked him roughly off his cock.

“Ow, stop that, you’re ruining the moment.” Julien glared at Evan and batted his hand away. “I told you what I put in it.”

“Take it off, just take it off,” Evan ordered. He grabbed the towel and viciously swiped at the mousse covering his tortured groin. He had never felt anything like it before. Not even when he’d fallen asleep at the beach. When he woke his back radiated heat like an oven; he couldn’t sleep on it for days. But not even that compared to the raging fire and violent need to scratch now tormenting his most sensitive parts.

“It itches so fucking bad, my skin’s on fire,” he yelled, clawing at his skin.

Julien frowned. “Wait, just wait.” He grasped Evan’s wrists and pulled them away from his crotch. “Lie still, and let me see what’s happening.” Picking up the towel, Julien gently wiped away the mousse.

Evan closed his eyes and took slow, deep breaths, concentrating on keeping his hands from reaching down and tearing the towel out of Julien’s hands. Even the smooth fabric scrapped stinging needles over his bits.

“Oh. My. God,” Julien whispered.

“What? What is it?” Evan asked, panicked, shooting up into a sitting position. He bent over as far as he could. “No. No, no, no, no, no.” This couldn’t be happening.

Huge welts covered his swollen genitals and everything was an angry, vicious red. His cock looked like some giant dying sea slug that had washed up on shore. And his balls resembled overripe mushy fruit rotting under a tree. He didn’t even want to see what his hole looked like.

Evan scrambled from the bed knocking over the bowl and barely missing kicking Julien in the head.

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“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Julien called after him, as Evan rushed for the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

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## Thursday

“Whatever it is, it better not be food,” Evan said into the phone, reaching down to scratch his crotch. Since last night, he’d taken so many showers and antihistamines he’d lost count. That helped with the swelling and almost all of the itching, but now he could barely keep his eyes open. The only thing that was saving him from a face-plant onto his keyboard was an unending string of strong black coffees.

“I didn’t know you had an allergy to those fruits on your junk,” Julien said, his voice small. “You’ve eaten all of them before and never had a reaction.”

Evan could practically see Julien chewing on his fingernails as he spoke. He only did that when he was very upset, and right at that moment he didn’t sound like the bright, outgoing Julien that Evan knew.

“Look, babe, it’s over and done with, and I’m feeling much better. We just won’t do that again.”

“What if I tried a different recipe?” Julien asked, his voice tentative. “I’ll skip the fruit and use something more ordinary, like an Irish Coffee mousse. How does that sound?”

Evan smiled and shook his head. That sounded more like his Julien, nothing could keep him down for long. “Sure, I’m okay with that, but just make sure you test it on a small area first.”

“I love you,” Julien said, a slight quaver in his voice.

“I love you, too.”

Not wanting Julien to dwell any longer on something he couldn’t change, Evan switched the topic. “So what’s this new idea you have?”

“It’s hard to explain over the phone so I’ll tell you about it when you get home tonight. I ordered the items off Amazon, and they arrived today. I want to try it out, if you aren’t too tired.”

“Sounds good. Today’s slow, so I might be able to head out a bit early.”

“Yay! Since I only have one class this afternoon, I’ll be home in time to cook dinner. Anything special you want? I can stop by the store on my way back.”

“How about some of that clam and pasta dish I like, with garlic bread and a Caesar salad?”

“The linguine and clams with the garlic, lemon, butter and basil? Nope, it’s easy peasy. What do you want for dessert?”

“You, of course.” Evan smiled.

Julien laughed. “I’m always on the menu, but other than me, what else?”

“What about those little round pastry things with the chocolate and crème? Pity-something or other.”

“*Profiteroles al Cioccolato*. I can make the cream puffs before I leave for class and the rest when I get back. I’d better get started then.”

“Okay. See you tonight.”

“Love you, E.”

“Love you too, babe.”

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After another amazing dinner, Julien showed Evan what he bought from Amazon and told Evan what he wanted to do with it. The conversation did not go as Julien planned.

“I’ll tell you how to wrap me up and what to do.” Julien’s excited smile competed with the Cheshire cat’s.

Evan shook his head, arms crossed over his chest. “No. I don’t think so.”

“It’ll be great.” Julien continued to smile.

“No, babe. Not happening. You’ll wrap me up first. If I decide it’s safe, then I’ll wrap you.”

Julien’s smile vanished, and what Evan called his “puppy dog eyes” appeared.

“Please? I want to get wrapped up.” Julien begged, turning on the puppy eyes full blast.

This time begging was not going to work. “No. I told you I wanted to test this first. If it’s safe, I’ll wrap you. Now, wrap me up.” Evan started to undress.

Julien pouted. “Promise?”

“Promise, babe.” Evan leaned forward and placed a kiss on Julien’s warm lips. That’s all it took for Julien to break out in a grin and urge Evan to hurry.

Now, Evan lay on the bed, contemplating his current situation. He was bound from his shoulders to his ankles in the wrap with strips of black tape running around his body. He wasn't uncomfortable, at least not yet. It reminded him of being in a very tight cocoon sleeping bag, but he failed to see how it could be in the least bit erotic. Julien assured him that he'd done his research and even bought the safety shears to cut Evan out. All Evan had to do was enjoy what Julien planned to do to him.

Julien lifted the scissors, a mischievous grin on his face. He aimed them at Evan's groin and stopped. His smile disappeared and his brows furrowed. He turned his head toward the door and sniffed the air.

"Do you smell that?" He shot Evan a worried glance.

Evan inhaled, not that he could actually smell whatever it was Julien got a whiff of. His sense of smell wasn't as good on Julien's.

"No. What is it?"

"Hang on, I'm going to check."

Placing the scissors on the bed, Julien left the room. Evan heard the patio sliding glass door open and after a moment, slam shut.

Julien rushed back into the room, his face tense, his mouth pulled in a tight line. "I've got to get you out of this." He picked up the scissors.

"What is it?"

"There's smoke coming out of the next building's second story window."

Fuck! A fire.

And that's when they heard the scream of sirens grow to a deafening wail, as a fire truck pulled up outside the apartment complex.

Julien fumbled with the scissors. "Oh, god, I have to get you out."

Shouts and the slamming of doors filled the outside hall. Footsteps echoed down the stairs.

Loud pounding rattled their door.

Evan's head jerked in the direction of the sound.

"This is Firefighter Garrett of the Santa Clara fire department. We need to evacuate everyone, now!"

"I can't get you out," Julien said, biting his lip. His hands shook, and the safety shears slipped from his fingers onto the bed. He picked them up and tried again.

Evan needed to get Julien's attention. "Julien. Julien, babe. Stop. Look at me."

Julien's eyes were as wide as saucers.

Pounding rattled the door again. "This is Firefighter Garrett of the Santa Clara fire department. Is anyone inside?"

"Go answer the door," Evan ordered, keeping his voice calm.

Julien shook his head. "But I need to get you out." He blinked his eyes rapidly, his voice tremulous.

"Julien. No buts. Do it. Now."

Dropping the safety scissors, Julien ran for the door.

Evan could hear a man with a deep voice speaking. "We need to evacuate the building. Do you need help? Is there anyone here that needs assistance in getting out?"

"My boyfriend. He's in the bedroom."

"I'll get your boyfriend. You need to leave."

"No. I'm coming with you. I'm not leaving him."

"You can't stay. Go."

Heavy footsteps followed by lighter ones grew louder as they approached the bedroom.

Evan kept his eyes on the door.

The room seemed to shrink as the firefighter filled the doorway like an avenging angel, except dressed in bright yellow firefighter's gear and minus the wings. The firefighter quickly stifled a smile when he laid eyes on the sight before him and rapidly strode to the bed.

Julien hurried in after the firefighter and picked up the scissors he'd dropped on the mattress. "I'm trying to cut him out."

Evan frowned. "What are you doing here, Julien? You heard what he said—go on, get out!" Evan jerked his head in the direction of the door.

"No. Not without you," Julien said, hair flying about his face.



“There’s no time to cut him out, both of you need to get out, now.” Large hands drew Evan closer to the edge of the bed.

Whoa, whoa. This couldn’t be happening. The guy wasn’t going to carry him out like this, was he? Shit, going naked was better than people seeing what he and Julien got up to. Evan was suddenly too hot, his heart slamming against his ribs.

“Hold on. Wait. Stop. You can’t take me out like this,” he frantically said, trying to catch the firefighter’s eye.

The firefighter snaked one arm under Evan’s upper torso and one under where his knees would’ve bent—if they could’ve bent. “I’m sorry sir, but everyone must leave the premises immediately.”

Without another word, the mattress disappeared from under Evan, and he was hoisted into the air like he weighed nothing at all. The firefighter gripped Evan high and tight against his broad chest with his strong arms.

Fuck. This couldn’t be happening. And what’s with the “sir”? The guy couldn’t be that much older than he was, from what Evan could see around all the gear the guy was wearing. But damn he was strong. Evan knew he weighed at least one-eighty and carrying him like this had to be difficult.

The firefighter skillfully maneuvered Evan through the doorways, without once hitting Evan’s head or feet.

Shit, where was Julien? “Babe?” Evan yelled, and craned his neck around to try and find Julien. He heard the patter of footsteps behind the firefighter.

“I’m here!”

Brilliant amber, red, and blue flashing lights lit the street and buildings. From his position, Evan could see the thick black smoke curling from the second story of the neighboring apartment. He coughed at the smell. As Evan was carried out, he caught a glimpse of some of the residents, and heard their alarmed voices.

“Hi, Mrs. Walker, Mrs. Jacobs,” Julien called.

Oh, great. Their two nosiest neighbors now had gossip fodder for years.

Turning his head to the side, Evan saw they had reached the sidewalk and were headed for the ambulance. An EMT rushed over and helped lay Evan on a gurney that had a *very* hard board with black straps attached to it. Evan strained his neck and watched as the EMT fastened the straps. The first two crossed

diagonally over his chest, and Evan inhaled sharply as the EMT secured them down, the constriction over his chest made him feel claustrophobic. Evan wiggled his body trying to move, but he was bound down tight. Next, the EMT worked his way downward and fastened the straps over his hips, his knees, and finally over his ankles. Evan wasn't panicked, but the loss of control he was now experiencing far eclipsed his embarrassment at being carried out in the wrap.

"Wait. Stop," Evan said, trying to get the man's attention. "There's nothing wrong with me. Just cut me out."

The EMT pushed him inside the ambulance and climbed in after him.

Evan moved his head to follow what the man was doing, but the board pressing against the back of his skull made it hurt when he did. He wanted out.

He tried to keep the irritation from his voice. "I don't know what you think you'll find, but there's nothing wrong with me, and I'm not going to the hospital, so you may as well cut me out."

"I'll do that in a minute, sir," replied the EMT. "I need to ask you some questions first. Name?"

"Evan Marshall."

"Age?"

"Twenty-five."

"Are you on any medications, or have you taken any drugs?"

"No and no. I'm perfectly healthy, and I don't use drugs." Evan winced, and tried to shift his body to alleviate some of the pain from the backboard, but it was no use, the bonds held him tight. The wrap did nothing to cushion his vertebrae from pressing hard into the board. He wouldn't be surprised if he'd have bruises up and down his spine when this was over.

To add to the pain from the board, waves of heat washed over Evan's body, and beads of sweat broke out over his forehead. The wrap only served to trap in his body heat and sweat. It was like an infinite loop, the more heat, the more sweat. He wondered if this was what it felt like for a hot dog tossed on a barbeque. Ha. At least he still had his sense of humor.

Evan tried once again. "Look, I'm sweating like a pig here, and this board is killing my back. Just cut me out, because I'm not going to the hospital."

“All right, Mr. Marshall, I’ll cut you out, but you must remain still. I’ll also need to check your vitals before I can release you.”

“Fine, that’s fine; just get me out of this stuff.”

The man took shears and cut up from his right foot to his shoulder. When he’d finished, he unbuckled the straps, peeling back the wrap and tape like opening a book.

A wave of cool, evening air hit Evan’s overheated flesh, and he inhaled sharply through his teeth.

A look of concern crossed the EMT’s face. “Are you hurt? Are you in pain?”

Evan pushed himself into a sitting position and rolled his shoulders. “Other than the pain from the board? Damn that thing’s fucking hard—no, it’s the air. I’m just cold now.”

“I’ll get you a blanket.”

While the EMT took his vitals, Evan peered out the back of the open door of the vehicle, watching the residents, and Julien, return to their apartments after the firemen’s all clear.

A short while later, Julien returned to the ambulance with a pair of Evan’s cargo shorts and what looked like his “Sexy Nerd” sweatshirt. He saw Evan watching and came up to the door.

“Here, I brought you some clothes.”

“Thanks, babe. You’re a lifesaver.”

Once the EMT had finished, he handed Evan his clothes. Turning his back to the door, Evan pulled on his shorts, zipped them up, and slipped into his sweatshirt.

“I need you to sign this release form,” said the EMT.

Evan reached for the board and pen. He glanced back, and saw Julien chatting with the firefighter who’d carried him out.

Now that the emergency was over, the guy had removed his helmet, and his dark hair was stuck to his head with dried sweat. It did nothing to detract from his attractiveness, however. The guy had to be taller than Evan, even without his helmet, at least six feet three inches. He had a kind face and ready smile for the residents. A few stragglers stopped to give their thanks.

“Are you finished, sir?” the EMT asked, recalling Evan’s attention.

“Oh, yes. Here.” Evan handed over the release form. He walked around the gurney and got out. Julien and the firefighter turned towards him as he stepped down. Evan walked over and wrapped his arm around Julien’s shoulder, gave him a quick kiss on the head then turned to the firefighter, Garrett, if Evan remembered correctly.

“Thanks for carrying me out. That mustn’t have been easy.”

“No problem, that’s my job.” Garrett gave Evan a friendly smile. “How are you doing? Everything okay?” He looked at Evan closely.

The guy had the most interesting eye color Evan had ever seen. It was a green-blue with flecks of gold and a large ring of rust, not brown, circled his pupil. Evan felt himself lean forward to get a better look, and stopped.

“So, are you okay?” Garrett repeated.

“He’s more than fine,” Julien piped up. “He’s just distracted.”

Evan raised an eyebrow at Julien.

Garrett’s gaze bounced between them.

“Yeah, I’m fine, thanks. Although, I don’t think I ever want to repeat that experience again.”

Garrett chuckled, glanced at the ground then shot Evan a grin. “I can’t chat long. Got to get back to work, but I want to talk to you both about something. I wouldn’t normally do this, but I think I should give you my number. I’m concerned that you and your boyfriend might do something...”

“Stupid?” Evan supplied.

Garrett’s stunning eyes pierced Evan. “No, *careless*. I have some experience in what I think you’re trying to do, and I can answer questions you might have if you plan to continue with this kind of play.”

Evan shook his head. “That’s really not neces—”

“Yes, please!” Julien bounced on his toes from excitement and handed his phone to Garrett.

“In case you change your mind.” Garrett punched his name and number into Julien’s cell and handed it back.

Julien couldn’t stop grinning and clasped the phone to his chest like it was the Holy Grail. “Thank you, Firefighter Garrett,” he said, his tone hushed.

Garrett pointed at Julien's phone, but addressed Evan. "Whenever you're ready to talk, let me know."

Julien reached out and touched Garrett's sleeve. "Can I ask you a question before you leave?"

Garrett nodded, "Sure, if you make it quick."

"Do you wear glasses?"

Uh-oh, Evan should've seen it coming, Julien and his eyeglass fetish. "No, Julien, drop it," he said.

"There's no harm in asking," Julien replied. He ignored Evan and peered coyly at Garrett from underneath his lashes.

Garrett darted his eyes between the two, a polite smile plastered on his confused face.

Evan grabbed hold of Julien's elbow and gave Garrett an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that. He can be a brat at times." Evan tugged at Julien's arm, attempting to steer him back to their apartment, but Julien stood his ground.

"Well, do you?" Julien repeated.

"Julien, that's enough. He's got to get back to work."

"No, that's all right, I don't mind answering. Sometimes after a long day, my eyes are tired, and I'll wear them to read. Why?"

Julien gave a soft squeal. "Oh, nothing. I was curious, that's all."

Evan shook his head and caught Garrett watching him intensely with those amazing eyes. Garrett ran his keen gaze over Evan's lips and back up, searching Evan's eyes closely for something—Evan didn't know what—before breaking contact.

Garrett gave Evan a quick smile and pointed at the phone one more time. "Remember what I said." He headed for the fire truck.

"Oh, I will, Mr. Fireman. Oh, I will," Julien said softly.

Evan watched Garrett walk back to his crew. What was that all about? He shook his head and turned to find Julien staring at him, a Cheshire grin spread over his face.

"Oooh. That was some major eye sex going on there," Julien cooed.

"What? What are you talking about?" Evan asked. Julien said some of the strangest things.

Julien's grin grew even wider if that was possible. "He likes you. He really likes you."

"You're imagining things, babe. You're thinking with your other head."

"And you, as usual, are clueless," Julien smirked, placing a kiss on Evan's chin. He lifted his phone and waggled it in front of Evan's face. "You should thank me. I just scored us a hot date with a very hunky fireman."

"Is that where you disappeared to? You went to grab your phone?" Evan asked, waving his hands in exasperation. "Didn't you hear him say we had to leave immediately? You could've waited until everyone was allowed back into their apartments."

"One never knows when it will come in handy, like today," Julien answered smugly. "Besides, I had no idea when they'd let us go back in."

Evan couldn't restrain himself and rolled his eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me. I saw you checking him out just as much as I was."

"Julien, you don't even know if he bats for our team."

"Oh, trust me, he does," Julien nodded. "I have excellent gaydar. Besides, the way he looked at you just now, when you bent over to put on your shorts, I caught him checking out your ass. He turned the most delicious shade of red when he saw me watching him."

"He was checking out my ass?" Evan asked, his eyebrows raising in question. He turned, watching Garrett handle the hoses.

"Ha! See? I knew you were interested," Julien exclaimed triumphantly beside him.

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## Friday

Evan turned the key in the lock and pushed in the door.

Thank god for Fridays—because he felt like one of the walking dead. This week was turning out to be one of the strangest of his life. After last night's escapade with the fire, Evan was too wound up to fall asleep right away, and he needed to get up early for an international conference call. After the call, his supervisor had him drop everything to solve a critical customer problem. Now, he was behind with his work, and all he wanted to do was eat a good meal and veg out watching some totally mindless sitcom. He dropped his keys on the side table by the door, gave a big yawn, and stretched his arms up over his head.

"Welcome home, honey," said a cheery voice.

Evan halted mid-stretch, turned and stared. He wasn't quite sure what he was looking at. It was Julien, but not Julien. His bleach-blond hair was brushed to the side in soft waves. Bright blue eyes gazed up at him from underneath long, fluttering eyelashes, and a faint dusting of blush warmed Julien's cheeks. Red lipstick graced Julien's normally pink lips. And that wasn't the end of it. Evan's eyes trailed slowly downward, taking in the string of pearls around his neck and the white, cherry-patterned dress. The V-neck bodice of the dress hugged Julien's chest, and the wide, pleated skirt that stopped below his knees made his trim waist appear even smaller. Pale stockings with bright-red seams led down to a pair of bright-red high heeled shoes.

"I... oh, wow. I don't know what to say," Evan stammered, lowering his arms to his sides.

"Do you like it?" Julien asked, twirling carefully in place. "Alec and I went shopping, and he helped me pick this out. And look." Julien, his back to Evan, bent over and flipped the dress up over his waist, displaying a bright-red garter belt with matching bright-red lace panties—panties that stretched enticingly over his cute, wiggling bubble butt.

Evan gulped. Red lace panties. How did he know?

Julien straightened, turned, and smoothed down his skirt. As if reading his mind, Julien said, "Remember when Alec said his boyfriend went gaga over his sissy outfit, and Alec gave us a fashion show? I was watching you, and you just about came in your pants. It was great. So I thought I'd surprise you." Julien grinned.

“Um, thanks, babe. I think? But if you knew I liked the panties and stockings, why are you dressed up in something my grandmother would wear?”

Julien's brows drew together, and his lips twisted. Jutting out a hip, he rested his hand on it. “This outfit is a tribute to Lucille Ball, comedic genius of the fifties, who just so happened to be way ahead of her time,” he emphasized with a lift of his chin. “She personified the mid-century household mentality. Besides, you don't think I would come up with a perfectly good idea and not go all out, do you?”

Still not knowing what to make of all this, Evan stuck his hands in his pockets and hunched up his shoulders. “Um, I guess not? Can I ask why?”

“You really don't remember?” Julien said, tapping his bright-red shoe on the floor. “Don't you know what day it is?”

Evan frantically searched his brain. It wasn't the day they met or moved in together, and it wasn't his or Julien's birthday. Fuck. His panic must have shown on his face.

“All right, I'll take pity on you,” Julien said, shifting his weight to his other foot. “It's the anniversary of the first time you told me ‘I love you.’ I wanted to cook us your favorite meal, you know, braised lamb shank in a sweet port wine sauce with rosemary, and mashed potatoes with roasted garlic, and French beans, and broccoli on the side.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, babe, I forgot.” Evan took a step forward, wrapping his arms around Julien and pulling him close. He was just about to kiss him when he drew back. “Uh, I'd kiss you, but you've got,” he pointed to Julien's lips and made a swirly motion, “all that on you.”

“That's okay.” Julien stood on tiptoes and placed a firm kiss on Evan's cheek with his bright-red lips. “You rarely remember dates.”

Evan swiped at his cheek, then reached down and swatted Julien's ass. “Brat. Remind me why I keep you?”

“Because you've never had anyone cook you such fantastic meals in your life, and you'll never find anyone as amazing as me again,” Julien replied with a smirk.

“Mmmm, you've got that right.” Evan cupped Julien's face between his hands and placed a kiss on his forehead. “Do you need me to help or anything?”

“Nope, just change, or watch TV. I'll call you when dinner's ready.”



“Whatever you say, Lucy.” Evan grinned.

Julien stuck out his tongue, turned away, and carefully made his way back to the kitchen.

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Evan had changed his clothes, watched some news, and now waited at the dinner table. The aromas wafting from the kitchen made his stomach grumble. He heard the creak of the oven door open, and a pan slide on the oven rack.

“Need any help?” asked Evan.

“No thanks, I’ve got it,” called Julien.

A moment later, Julien appeared from the kitchen, carrying two plates and making his way cautiously to the table. He gently set down the first plate in front of Evan and the second at his own place setting.

A large succulent lamb shank sat upright in the middle of a pile of garlic mashed potatoes. The sweet port wine sauce flowed over the potatoes and the vegetable medley.

“So what do you think?” Julien asked.

“It looks... suggestive.” Evan turned the plate right and then left.

“Good. I was hoping you’d notice,” Julien said, with a grin. He set the pot holders aside and pulled out his chair to sit down.

Evan poured them each a glass of Zinfandel. “Here’s to us, babe.” He raised his glass in a toast toward Julien.

Julien touched his glass to Evan’s. “Here’s to us,” he said, and raised the glass to his lips.

Evan thought back to the first time he’d talked about food with Julien. He remembered the appalled expression that had crossed Julien’s face when Evan told him he only cooked burgers, sausages, pork chops, and spaghetti, and sometimes pancakes on weekends for a treat. It was one of the few times Evan had ever seen Julien speechless. Soon after, Julien had taken it upon himself to bring lunch for both of them to work every day. The lunches would arrive in colorful paper bags peppered with the *Star Wars* characters Julien loved so much, or if Julien was cooking Asian style, the meals arrived in bento boxes. Later, after Evan had confessed his love for Julien, he discovered that Julien had fallen madly, crazily in love with him at first sight. Julien was determined

to win Evan's heart, and food was his chosen method of seduction. Evan smiled to himself. It had taken Julien a while to convince him they were a good match, but he'd eventually succumbed to Julien's whirlwind personality and mad cooking skills. Now, he couldn't imagine life without his boyfriend.

The delicious aroma of the dinner wafted up from Evan's plate, and he took a deep inhale. He couldn't wait to get started. Digging his fork into his meal, he raised the succulent lamb to his mouth and glanced over at Julien across the table. He halted, staring.

Julien stared right back, his bright, ruby-red lips parted. He lifted a forkful of mashed potatoes dipped in the wine sauce to his mouth and wrapped his lips around it. He moaned, pulled the fork slowly from his mouth, and ran his tongue seductively over his red lips.

"Oh, fuck," Evan whispered, shifting in his chair.

"Delicious, isn't it?" Julien asked, blinking innocently.

"What?"

Julien licked his fork and smirked. "The dinner. It's good."

"Fuck, babe. How can I think of eating when you do that?" Evan reached down with his free hand and adjusted his cock in his pants.

Julien laughed. "Love you too, E." He pointed his fork at Evan's dinner. "Better eat before it gets cold."

"Oh, right." Taking a bite of his lamb, Evan let out a low appreciative hum. The sweet port sauce melded with the tender, moist lamb, blossoming over his tongue, fruity and smooth. God, he loved his boyfriend.

Elbows on the table, Julien peered over his clasped hands at Evan. "You know, it's destiny, kismet, that we were brought together."

Evan raised a forkful of garlicky mashed potatoes to his lips. "Why do you say that?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because I'm the Yin to your Yang," Julien said in all seriousness.

"Are you sure it's not the other way around?" Evan asked. "You're definitely more active and outgoing than I am."

"Oh, I'm sure," Julien nodded. "Mel Gibson would have to proclaim himself gay before I'd haul myself out of bed at dawn to hit the gym—and even then I couldn't be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed before noon."

Evan smiled. "Yeah, you do need your beauty sleep."

"You're damn straight I do."

"You know, I've never been straight."

"And thank god for that."

Evan finished his meal and reached for Julien's plate. The least he could do was clear the table and do the dishes.

"No, let me," Julien insisted, pushing back his chair and tottering over to Evan. Gathering the silverware and plates, he leaned over and laid a kiss on Evan's cheek. "Now, you go watch TV or play some games while I do the dishes."

"Are you sure you don't want any help? Or you could leave it until later," Evan suggested, pulling Julien toward him. He slid his hand up along the back of Julien's leg over the silky smooth stockings, and up under the skirt to Julien's ass, where he gave it a good squeeze. "We can do some celebrating," he said, waggling his eyebrows. He rubbed his hand in circles over the lace panties.

"Yes, I'm sure," Julien replied, a bit breathlessly. "No one can say that Julien Bouvet doesn't give his all in a role. Besides, you know how I can't stand a dirty kitchen. In the meantime, you can think of a suitable way to repay my slaving over a hot stove all evening while you're resting."

Evan laughed, and let Julien go. He watched as his boyfriend turned and sashayed his way into the kitchen. Knowing the lacy red panties were stretched over Julien's tight bubble butt under that dress made Evan rock hard. He couldn't wait to get his hands on that dress and strip it from Julien's body.

Pushing back his chair, Evan got up and headed to the living room. Grabbing the remote from the side table, he settled back onto their brown leather sofa and stretched his arm along the back. He turned on the big screen with a click and flicked through the stations.

*Click*, nope, news.

*Click*, infomercial, definitely no.

*Click*. Ha. Much better.

Evan must have missed this episode of *Friends* because it didn't look familiar. *Oh, hell, this was about leather pants.* Evan smiled. His grin grew

wider, and snickers bubbled up from his chest the further Ross got into trouble. When Ross added the cream, Evan's laughter burst out uncontrollably.

"What's so funny?" Julien called from the kitchen.

"Ross," answered Evan, wiping tears from his eyes. Thank god, he didn't take Julien's advice and use the baby powder.

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The scream ripped through the apartment. Evan's stomach dropped into a nosedive and his heart flew into overdrive. He shot to his feet, skirted the sofa, and rushed into the kitchen where he skidded to a halt.

Julien clung to the counter at an awkward angle, his lips caught between his teeth, his face contorted in pain. Whimpers escaped his throat.

Evan reached for Julien. "Babe, what happened?"

"My ankle. It's my ankle." Deep shuddering breaths shook Julien's frame, as he gripped Evan's forearms for balance.

Evan winced, as Julien's carefully trimmed nails dug into his skin. Moving slowly, Evan disengaged his arms from Julien's grip and stepped close to wrap them around his body.

Julien shifted, and let out a yelp. He hopped against Evan, steadying himself.

Evan combed his fingers through Julien's hair. "Tell me what happened."

"It was the wine sauce."

Evan frowned. "The wine sauce?"

Julien nodded against Evan's chest.

"I wobbled and some dripped off the plate," Julien sniffled. "I was wiping the spot up but missed a different spot. When I turned to put the paper towel in the trash, I slipped on the other spot. I think I twisted my ankle." Julien gazed up at Evan; the pain had brought tears to his eyes.

Evan leaned over and peered down at Julien's raised right foot. It was already swollen and red. "We need to get you to the hospital."

"Not in this!" Julien drew back in horror.

"I'm sure they've seen more interesting outfits than what you're wearing," Evan said, stroking Julien's arm.

“Maybe at Halloween, but I’m not going in this.”

“Julien, we really shouldn’t be arguing about this right now,” Evan said, his voice firm.

“The panties are okay, but not the rest. Please,” Julien pleaded.

Evan brushed aside some blond strands of hair that had fallen in Julien’s eyes and laid a kiss on his forehead. “Okay, here’s what we’ll do. I’ll get one of the folding chairs, then something to wear, and help you off with the dress and other things. Next, I’ll bring the car around to the front and carry you out. How does that sound?”

Julien nodded, his attention focused on Evan and his every word.

“Now, stay here and don’t move.” Evan released his hold on Julien.

“Okay,” Julien answered, his voice small.

Evan made his way to the hall closet for the chair. The evening had started out so well. How was it possible that every kinky thing they tried ended up a disaster?

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## Saturday

Spending a Friday evening in Urgent Care was not Evan's idea of fun, and even less so for Julien. Why did most accidents happen on a Friday night? Urgent Care was already packed with families when they arrived at the hospital, and they had to wait for over an hour before they were able to see a doctor. From there, they had to go to X-ray just to have another long wait. The one good piece of news after all that, was Julien's ankle was only sprained and not broken. But, it was still bad enough that he'd have to keep his foot elevated as much as possible for the next two weeks.

It had barely been twelve hours, and Julien was stir-crazy; consequently he was driving Evan crazy.

Evan sat at the desk in the spare bedroom hunched over his PC and focused on the PowerPoint slide he was creating. The first three slides were completed, but the fourth slide was slow going. He hoped to finish the presentation this evening, once he got over this small hurdle. He detected motion from the corner of his eye and lifted his head. What the hell? Julien crawled in the door on his hands and knees, his right foot encased in a large black boot that contrasted deeply with his light skin, and his ass wiggling provocatively with every motion. Evan followed Julien's path as he made his way to the base of his chair.

Julien looked up and smiled. "Hi."

Evan stared at his boyfriend. "What are you doing?" Evan was somewhat afraid of the answer he was going to get.

"I'm bored, so I thought I'd come visit you." Julien shifted to a sitting position, his legs bent carefully to the side. "You've been working hard, and I think you need a break."

The smile on Julien's face was far from innocent.

Evan crooked an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Yes," Julien nodded. "And I know just the thing. We should have sex."

Evan leaned back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Julien, give it a rest. We've tried something new every single day for the last week. I need a break. *We* need a break," he said, exasperation seeping into his voice.

“But I’m horny, and I’m bored,” Julien whined, gazing up at him from the floor with the expression he’d perfected to get what he wanted. Reaching up, Julien traced a finger down the front of Evan’s cargo shorts and ran his tongue over his lips.

Evan scowled. “Cut it out.” He pushed Julien’s hand away. “I need to get this new product feature presentation done for Monday.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday, you can work on it then.”

“Yes. I’ll be working on it today *and* Sunday at this rate. Besides, you need to keep your foot elevated. Doctor’s orders.” Evan waved his hand at the door. “Go back and watch some TV, play games, or jerk off.”

“I’ve done all that, and I don’t want to jerk myself off.” Julien’s smile faded, then brightened. “I know. How about I stay here and keep you company? I won’t say a word.”

Evan ran his fingers through his hair, tugged at it, then dropped his hands. He sighed. “Fine, as long as you promise not to talk.”

“Okay,” Julien replied cheerfully.

Evan pushed back his desk chair. “Here, take my chair and I’ll get another.” He bent over and helped Julien up by the elbows, like the nurse had shown him. Once Julien was settled, he fetched himself a foldable chair from the hall closet.

“Remember, no talking,” Evan said, giving Julien a stern look.

Julien shook his head and drew a zipper across his lips with two fingers.

He should’ve known that Julien’s answer was far too cheerful and far too compliant. He should’ve also known he needed to be much more specific. Because next thing Evan knew, Julien had scooted his chair up to the back of his and rested his chin on Evan’s shoulder, peering over it.

Evan growled. “That’s enough, Julien.”

No answer.

“Julien, this isn’t working,” Evan said, his voice rising.

Julien didn’t move.

“I can’t concentrate with you acting like this. Go back to the living room.”

The only sound was the soft whisper of Julien’s breath in Evan’s ear.

Evan took a deep inhale and let it out slowly. He couldn't force Julien back into the living room but Julien wouldn't stop until he got what he wanted either. Evan stared at the screen. Maybe he needed to take a break anyway, since he was stuck on that one slide. He turned his head to look at Julien and found Julien watching him intently. Evan stared back into his clear, blue eyes.

So Julien wanted to play. Evan had had enough of Julien's ideas; they'd all been disasters. He didn't want to imagine what might go wrong again if they tried another one of Julien's "cunning plans," considering the way their luck was going.

"Fine," Evan finally said. "If you want to play, we'll play. But," he gave Julien a pointed look, "we'll do it *my* way."

"Yay!" Julien removed his chin from Evan's shoulder and scooted his chair back. He looked like the cat that had just caught the proverbial canary.

Helping Julien into the living room, Evan sat him down on the sofa and peeled off Julien's clothes, being extra careful of his ankle, and then took a seat next to him. "Lay across my lap," Evan instructed.

Julien beamed, and he hurriedly wiggled his way into position over Evan's legs, his cock hard and ready on Evan's thigh.

"I'm going to give you twenty spanks. After each one you will count the number out loud and then say, 'I will not bother Evan while he's working.' Is that clear?"

Julien craned his neck around and looked up at Evan, a huge grin across his face.

Evan waited, eyebrow raised. His hand descended hard on Julien's ass. *Whack!* "I asked, is that clear?"

"Shit! That hurt." Julien scrambled at the sofa cushions to push himself up. "You've never spanked me that hard before."

Evan pressed on Julien's upper back with his forearm, forcing him down. *Smack!* "I said, is that clear?"

"Owww! I said that hurts." Julien wiggled to escape, but Evan grabbed him tightly around the waist and held Julien on his lap.

"I'm going to spank you as hard as I think you deserve to be spanked. You wanted this, but if you think it's too much, and you can't handle it, we can stop right now, or we can continue. Which is it?" A long pause rested in the air. Evan shifted, and lifted Julien's legs to move out from under them.



“Continue,” Julien said softly.

“Hmmm? What was that?”

“Continue,” Julien answered, his voice louder.

Evan lowered Julien’s legs back down. “If you say stop, I’ll stop, and it’ll be over. Understood?”

Julien nodded.

He grabbed a fistful of Julien’s hair and pulled his head back.

Julien gasped, his mouth dropping open.

Lowering his voice, Evan leaned down and whispered into Julien’s ear. “Do you understand?” And he brought his hand down hard on Julien’s ass.

Julien yelped, and his eyelids slid closed.

Evan gave Julien’s head a light shake. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes, I understand,” Julien said, his voice breathy.

“Now, we’ll start.”

*Whack!* The first spank joined the others on Julien’s already heated ass, adding a deeper layer of pink on the once pale skin.

“One. I will not bother Evan while he’s working.”

Another sharp smack snapped down.

Julien’s body jerked. “Two. I will not bother Evan while he’s working.”

Evan ran his palm lightly over the round cheeks, feeling the heat radiate from them. He smiled as he let his hand fall in another ass-flaming swat, and Julien let out a low whine.

“Three. I will not bother Evan while he’s working.”

Evan’s focus narrowed to those sweet round cheeks. He wanted to make those cheeks burn and Julien to remember this spanking for days. Evan rained down one stinging blow after another, and Julien’s body jerked and jumped across his lap. Hot tingling prickles ran through his palm from the strikes. The pink flush on Julien’s ass spread to cover his cheeks, finally blossoming into a brilliant red.

Julien cried out, and he clutched at the sofa after each smarting blow. He pressed his hips down into Evan’s lap, grinding his wet cock into Evan’s thigh and slicking Evan’s leg as he rocked against it.

Evan felt his cock twitch and pre-cum leak from its slit every time Julien cried out, wetting Evan's pants. The weight of Julien's hot body rubbed across his groin, and the friction teased Evan's trapped cock causing it to strain against his shorts in a bid for freedom.

Evan delivered the final swat on Julien's deep-red ass. *Whack!* Evan bent low, straining to hear Julien speak.

"Twenty." Julien counted the last blow in a hushed voice. "I will not bother Evan while he's working." Julien trembled as he took deep, shuddering breaths.

Carefully, Evan lifted Julien's legs and slid out from under them, so he could stand. He rotated Julien into a sitting position and moved between his spread legs. Brushing back Julien's hair from his face, Evan took Julien's chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted up his head. "Are you okay? Is your ankle okay?" Evan scanned Julien's flushed face.

Julien gazed back at him, his eyes moist with tears, and nodded. "Good," he said quietly and gave a faint smile.

Evan ran his hand down the side of Julien's cheek, gently caressing with his thumb, and Julien closed his eyes, pressing into Evan's palm. Withdrawing his hand, Evan unzipped his shorts and pulled them down, releasing his swollen prick and heavy balls. He touched the head of his aching prick to Julien's lips. "Suck my cock," he ordered.

Julien licked his lips and raised his shaking hands.

"Did I say you could use your hands?" Evan asked, his voice sharp.

"No," Julien whispered. He lowered his arms, his eyes searching Evan's face.

"Put them behind your back, hold onto your elbows, and keep your eyes on me. Is that clear?"

Julien nodded, and did as he was told, locking his eyes on Evan.

Placing a firm hand on the back of Julien's head, Evan pulled him back to his groin.

Julien parted his lips. Evan stared, riveted by Julien's mouth as he stuck out his tongue and tentatively lapped at the bead of clear fluid poised on the end of Evan's prick, before backing off and waiting. Evan's breath hitched. Seeing Julien like this, so quiet and obedient, sent a jolt of lust to his cock, and it throbbed, delivering a further string of pre-cum from his slit. "Go on. Don't stop," Evan said, his fingers combing lightly through Julien's hair.

Encouraged, Julien leaned forward. He caught the long glistening strand of wetness in his open mouth and followed it upwards, until he'd captured it all. Julien circled the sensitive head with his tongue and teased the slit, lapping up all of the escaping fluid. He sealed his lips tightly over Evan's cockhead, sucking strongly, while sweeping firmly over the sweet spot under the head. He pulled off and descended to Evan's balls, taking a long slow lick over the tight sack. He engulfed one, then the other, in his hot, wet mouth and sucked.

Evan moaned, and he canted his hips forward. Fuck, he loved having his balls sucked. Who was he kidding? He loved Julien's talented mouth all over his nuts and dick. But as much as he loved it, he wanted something else. He wanted his scent on Julien. Evan grabbed Julien's head between his hands and forced his cock against Julien's face. He ground and rolled his hips, rubbing Julien's face roughly against his groin. A shining thread of pre-cum dripped onto Julien's cheek, and Evan smeared it in with his prick. He let go and dug his fingers into the soft, blond hair, yanking Julien forward. "Suck it," he ordered.

Julien whimpered, and opened his mouth.

Moist heat enveloped Evan's cock, and Julien bobbed his head, his eyes fastened on Evan's face.

"Oh yeah, that's it," Evan said.

Julien whined and moaned as he devoured Evan's cock. He increased his tempo and energetically pulled and pushed his mouth over Evan's shaft, loud slurps emphasizing his actions.

"Faster. Work it, babe." Evan rocked his hips in tempo to Julien's motions. "You like that, don't you?" He pressed deeper.

Julien stiffened and gagged. He jerked his head back, choking.

Evan placed a finger under Julien's chin and tilted up his face. "You okay?"

Julien nodded.

"I want you to take me all the way this time. Do you think you can do that?"

"I think so," Julien said after catching his breath. "I've been practicing."

Evan nodded. "Good." He repositioned Julien's body lower and tilted his head up and back to create a straighter passage. Evan slipped his cock in and carefully pushed forward. The head hit the back of Julien's throat, and Julien let out a garbled choke and drew away. "Tilt your head back and stick out your

tongue. Breathe out through your mouth as I go in,” Evan instructed, gently guiding Julien back into position. “Do it again.” Inch by careful inch, Evan pushed his way down Julien’s throat. The tight throat muscles grabbed his prick, as he pressed forward. “That’s it, babe. All the way.”

Strangled, gagging sounds escaped Julien’s throat. He blinked his eyes rapidly as tears welled and threatened to spill over.

Evan let out a loud groan as his cock slid all the way home. “Oh, yeah, that’s it.”

Julien’s throat contracted around Evan’s cock, and his body shook. He couldn’t stop the tears this time, and they filled his eyes to overflowing.

“That’s it. You’re doing good,” Evan reassured Julien, as he looked down into Julien’s eyes, eyes that had turned red from tears. “Try not to move, but if you need to, pull off.”

Julien strained to hold his position, his body shaking.

“So good, babe.” Evan stroked Julien’s hair, then carefully withdrew.

Julien gasped for air, his chest heaving, spittle flowing from his mouth. A guttural sob broke from his throat, but he looked up at Evan and attempted a faint smile.

Evan wiped at Julien’s tears with his thumb, as Julien caught his breath. “Ready to try again?” he asked, after Julien’s breathing had eased.

Julien nodded, and opened his mouth.

Swollen lips stretched over Evan’s thick cock, and saliva ran out of Julien’s mouth, dribbling over his chin. Tears filled Julien’s eyes and rolled over his flushed cheeks.

His perfect Julien, brought to this incredibly dirty, sloppy, sexy, mess. But oh, he was so freaking hot. “God, babe, love your slutty mouth,” Evan panted, thrusting with short quick strokes. He focused on Julien’s neck, following the path of his cock as it pressed in, making Julien’s neck bulge with its passing. Evan closed his eyes and immersed himself in the feel of his rock-hard cock’s slick slide in and out, the strong throat rings gripping and massaging his prick as he buried himself deep inside Julien’s throat, only to withdraw it slowly.

So tight, so hot. Evan forced Julien’s head to his groin and held it there, reveling in the grasping muscles around his straining cock. “Damn, that’s good,” Evan groaned. Grabbing Julien’s head firmly between both hands, Evan

fucked his mouth. Fast and harsh, he plundered, taking what Julien offered. Evan opened his eyes and looked down.

Julien gazed up at him. He'd long since stopped blinking back the tears, letting them stream down his cheeks to mix with the spittle running from his mouth. He no longer struggled at the invasion of Evan's cock. He gazed at Evan with adoration; he'd surrendered, his body relaxed.

Evan didn't think he could grow any harder, but the sight of Julien letting him do what he wanted, take what he wanted, sent a surge of blood rushing to Evan's groin. The strangled slurps and garbled sucking of his cock taken deep, heightened the pressure in Evan's balls. His heart hammering in his chest, Evan gripped Julien's head tighter and pounded faster. His loud, harsh breathing, and Julien's gagging rang in Evan's ears, and his movements grew erratic, his balls drawing up higher. Evan pulled out just enough to let Julien catch a gasping breath then plunged back in. "That's it, babe. Take my cock," he ordered. "You wanted this. Take it."

He couldn't last—the heat, the tightness, the sounds, Julien's total acquiescence—everything was too perfect. Evan took one last look into Julien's eyes and closed his own. Tightening his fingers on Julien's head, he drove deep into Julien's throat, increasing the speed of his thrusts. The pressure built in his balls, sending him spiraling higher and higher until he shot over the edge. His body stiffened, a primal scream climbing from his toes to his throat demanded escape. Trapped in his throat, it strained for release. Evan's hips jerked forward, and his cock pulsed, spurting over and over as he came deep inside Julien's hot throat. Sparks of light ignited behind his closed eyelids, and blood roared in his ears. His hips bucked until he was drained, gradually slowing to a standstill. Evan gulped in lungfuls of air, his dick softening in Julien's mouth. "Fuck," he managed to gasp out. Evan looked down at Julien who was staring back at him.

Julien waited calmly. His lips, red from the ravishing, still wrapped around Evan's cock, his arms, still folded behind his back. Trails of drying tears marked Julien's flushed cheeks. At some point, Julien had come—the telltale signs of spunk dripped down his chest and stomach to his groin. His flaccid cock rested on his balls between his spread legs.

Evan withdrew from Julien's mouth and tucked himself back in his shorts. He grabbed Julien's discarded shirt and gently wiped the tears and spittle from his face and the cum from his body. He fluffed up a sofa pillow and hooked his arm under Julien's knees, rotating them so that Julien now lay on his side. Evan settled down to lie beside him, drawing Julien in close. He turned Julien's face toward him. "You okay?"

“Yeah,” Julien nodded, his voice hoarse, his eyes still red.

Evan planted a soft kiss on Julien’s puffy lips. “You were amazing, babe.”

Julien snuggled into the crook of Evan’s shoulder and draped an arm and leg over him. “Thanks. I finally did it.” A satisfied smile curled his lips.

“Yes, you did,” Evan said. And so had he. He’d given Julien what he wanted, what he needed. Evan closed his eyes and ran his fingers lightly up and down Julien’s arm, enjoying the feel of his soft skin. The presentation could wait until tomorrow. He’d started to drift off when Julien spoke.

“You know I didn’t think you could do it.”

“What?” Evan asked, pulling back to get a good look at Julien’s face. “Did you plan this?”

Julien pinched his lips together, trying not to smile. “I only planned up to the part of annoying you. I didn’t know what you’d do if I did, but I *had* to try something, because all my ideas sucked.”

“Brat!” said Evan, and he smacked the part of Julien’s ass he was able to reach.

“Ow!” Julien reached back to rub his butt. “I can’t believe how hard you spanked me. I won’t be able to sit for a week.”

Evan didn’t speak for a while. “But you liked it?” he asked quietly, gazing down at Julien.

“More than liked. It was awesome, better than awesome,” Julien replied, nodding his head. Julien stretched, almost hitting Evan in the face, and yawned. He lowered his arm, draped it over Evan again, and closed his eyes. “I think I’m going to order us a flogger from Leather Gods. What do you think?”

Julien’s enthusiasm was contagious, but they needed to slow down and figure out how to play safely. Evan wanted more of today’s kind of play now that he’d finally let his dominant side out, and he definitely knew Julien wanted more of the same. What he didn’t want, was another week like this past one where so much had gone wrong. He certainly didn’t want something worse to happen to Julien, or to himself, nor to see them turn into the latest YouTube sensation. They needed help, and he knew just the man.

“I think maybe we need to talk to Garrett before we go any further.”

Julien looked up at Evan, his eyes wide. “Can we invite him to dinner?”

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“That’s probably a good idea.”

“Yay!” Julien grinned, and he burrowed in closer to Evan’s side. “Everything will turn out great, you’ll see.”

Evan listened to Julien’s breathing slow as he fell asleep. He had to admit, Julien was probably right—everything *would* turn out great. And to think, it had all started with a pair of leather pants.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Many moons ago, with the encouragement of a writer friend, K.C. Faelan wrote her first fanfic story. After a few years, her muse went into hiding, and then suddenly re-emerged, urging KC to write Lisa T's story. It's KC's first time participating in the DRitC event. KC loves men, from the Alphas to the Omegas, and all the pretty boys in between. Intelligence and humor whet her appetite. Toss in a course of UST, a dash of angst, season with fluffiness, and she dives right in. Oh, and don't forget the extra-large side-helping of sex. For dessert, it's HEA all the way. Her favorite flower is the Iris, and her favorite season is Winter. She loves dark chocolate candies, and food often plays a part in her stories, and in the ones she enjoys reading.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



# IN A WHOLE NEW LIGHT

By Marie L. Nickett

## Photo Description

In the first picture, a brown-haired young man is stretched out on a couch, his hands resting on his belly. He is wondering aloud if his best friend—who is sitting on the floor, propped up against the couch—could turn up the heat in the room. In the second picture, his black-haired best friend is now lying on top of him, cradling his head in one hand, and holding a book in the other.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*The picture says it all. Please give these boys a sweet story. All I ask is they are roommates and this scene included in the story. The rest I leave up to you.*

*Sincerely,*

*MsMiz*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, gay for you, college, sweet/no sex, young adult characters

**Word Count:** 11,817

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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## IN A WHOLE NEW LIGHT

By Marie L. Nickett

Nathan March couldn't wait for his terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day to be over.

As he walked home from his second three-hour, "write-no-less-than-250-words-per-answer" exam of the day, all he wanted was to face-plant on his bed, and sleep for the next, oh, fifteen hours or so. Maybe he'd eat three grilled-cheese sandwiches and a bowl of Cocoa Puffs before letting his exhaustion take over, though, because he hadn't had time to eat more than a Mars bar and some Skittles in between exams, preferring to cram in some last-minute studying for the second one instead of eating lunch.

Ah, the healthy eating habits of college boys.

To make his day even better, he felt rain beginning to pelt down his face. He couldn't help thinking that the rain was most likely helping to wash away the brain cells leaking from his ears because of intense overuse. He laughed to himself at the thought, and started to jog the last block separating him from his Holy Grail of the day: the warm, exam-free, *dry* comfort of the apartment he shared with his best friend, Derek.

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As soon as Nathan opened the door of the apartment, the smell of just-out-of-the-oven chocolate-chip cookies greeted him. Putting his wet coat on a hook and dropping his book bag on the floor, he let himself breathe in that delicious scent, and finally allowed himself to relax. He was home, exams were over, and Derek had apparently taken it upon himself to cook for them both tonight. What more could he ask for?

With that thought in mind, he walked down the entrance hall to the small kitchen, where he leaned on the doorjamb, a grateful grin gracing his lips as he greeted his best friend.

"You do know you didn't have to go to all this trouble for me, right?"

Derek stopped cutting bacon slices into smaller pieces and turned to look at him with a raised brow.

“Who said I was doing this for you? Maybe I’m cooking for a hot date, and you won’t even get to eat one bite of all this excellent food I’m preparing from scratch.” Derek turned back towards the counter, but Nathan could clearly see the dimple in his left cheek making an appearance as he struggled not to smile. That little dimple, coupled with Derek’s teasing tone, filled Nathan’s still-cold body with warmth. He couldn’t help using his patented old-school detective voice to answer Derek.

“Isn’t it a happy coincidence, though, that you happen to be making carbonara pasta and homemade cookies, two of my very favourite foods? My Spidey senses are tingling at your feeble attempt at covering the truth, my dear Watson.”

Derek let out a chuckle, and threw a tablecloth that Nathan barely had time to catch before it hit him in the face.

“No shit, Sherlock. Now that you have me all figured out, be a good boy and set the table while I finish up here, please. The pasta’s almost ready, so this bacon’s all that’s standing between us and a damn good meal. Let’s wrap it up so we can enjoy it as soon as possible, all right?”

Nathan gladly did as asked while Derek was putting the finishing touches to their home-cooked meal. He dressed the table and took out two Coronas from the fridge. Then he took care of the cooling (but still smelling-like-a-slice-of-heaven) cookies, putting most of them in their big cookie jar and setting the rest of them on a plate on the table. He couldn’t stop smiling as he did all this, his intention of sleeping like the dead postponed indefinitely in the face of such a great treat from his roommate.

Once he was finished, Nathan took a seat at the table, and took a moment to look at his best friend, who was now serving the pasta in two big bowls. Just being in the vicinity of Derek’s presence put a balm on the strain and stress that his worse-than-average day had put on him. At last, he could put his finals (which had gone well, but had drained all of his energy), his lack of sleep, and every other thing that had gone wrong today behind him.

Sometimes, he wondered what he’d do without Derek there to make days like this better. He hoped he never had to find out.

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Derek Johns mentally patted himself on the back while bringing the hot bowls filled with pasta to the table. Nathan’s good spirits were all the reward he

needed to make his decision to cook his best friend's favourite foods tonight worth it. He knew how much time and effort Nathan had invested in this particular semester of his civil engineering degree (the first one of their fourth and last year of college), and he had witnessed first-hand this morning how his day had gone from bad to worse. Not only had Nathan spilled milk on his T-shirt at breakfast (he'd then promptly woken Derek up to put on one of his, since it was apparently his last clean one), he had also nicked the side of his cheek while shaving (the resulting shout of *Can't one fucking thing go right today?* convincing Derek he'd better get up to do some damage control), and he'd had to come running back to the apartment to get his study notes for his second exam before taking the bus to go take his first final of the day.

Needless to say, even though it had screwed up his plans to sleep in on his first exam-free day of the end of semester, he couldn't hold it against Nate. More than that, he wanted to make sure his friend had a reason to smile once he finished his last two exams of the semester. Hence, all the cooking that ensued.

He gave a bowl of pasta to Nathan and sat down in front of him. After clinking the necks of their Coronas, they dug in and ate their (very tasty, if he did say so himself) pasta in companionable silence.

Once they were finished with the main course and nibbling on chewy cookies, Nathan started up the conversation.

"Thank you so much for this, buddy. I know I've said it before, but your food is just... Wow. I hope you know I'm totally investing money in your hypothetical future restaurant, should you have a midlife crisis and decide architectural design's not what cranks your shit up anymore. Just sayin'," Nathan told him with his trademark toothy grin.

He let out a laugh and shook his head. "How I even manage to stay modest with you around, I'll never know. But seriously, don't worry about it, Nate. At least your day's going to end on a good note, right?"

"No doubt about that," he replied, looking directly into Derek's eyes with a more sincere smile on his lips. "All thanks to you, as usual," he added softly, before clearing his throat a little and forging on. "There's one thing wrong with your statement, though."

"And what would that be?" Derek asked calmly, to mask how the way Nathan was looking at him like he just did always affected him a little. He also wanted to err on the side of safety, because he had a feeling he knew where Nathan was going with this. His best friend had often had crazy ideas on how to celebrate the end of their semesters in the past...

“My day—*our* day’s not over yet, my friend. It might be the great food and the sugar high talking, but suddenly I feel like we have to go out and cel—”

“I knew it. I knew this was coming,” Derek muttered.

“—ebrate! Come on, Derek, you can stop imagining the worst right now. All I’m saying is, we could go to Addiction and have fun, all right?”

Addiction was the go-to dance club for the college crowd, and happened to be within walking distance of their apartment. Drinks were cheap, people were a-plenty and nobody cared exactly *who* you were dirty-dancing with. In other words, this was about the only place they could *both* find potential hook-ups, him being gay and Nathan being straight.

Derek faked a long-suffering sigh, but they both knew this was perhaps the least insane idea of a celebration that Nathan had had in a long time... Which meant he couldn’t *not* go.

“Fine, fine, we’ll go. But kitchen duty is all on you, you hear?”

“Yes, sir! Reporting to duty, sir!” Nathan replied with a mock salute while starting to gather dishes. As he stood up to bring an armful of bowls and plates to the sink, he used his free hand to lightly tap the back of Derek’s neck. “Sorry for being so difficult to resist,” he added with a wink, tugging Derek’s hair a little before making his way to the kitchen sink.

*Well, Derek thought, you have no fucking idea how true that is.*

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As he rummaged through Derek’s drawers to find the dark green sweater he wanted to borrow for the night (more like steal forever, because damn did that sweater look good on him), Nathan wondered what the evening would bring.

Derek and he had perfected a kind of routine, when it came to partying together. When either of them decided to hook up with someone they’d picked up at the club, they always went to their fuck-of-the-night’s place. It was a rule of their own unwritten version of a “roommate’s agreement” (thank you, Sheldon Cooper) that they didn’t bring home any of their one-night conquests.

When he thought about it, it was kind of funny how they treated their apartment as a sacred sanctuary. Sure, they often had friends or study buddies over, but when it came to sex, unless one of them truly had feelings for someone they wanted to get lucky with, they didn’t want to taint their living space with less-than-meaningful memories of mostly anonymous sex.

At least, that was how Nathan interpreted it, and he had always liked it that way. Not only was he able to make sure the girls he hooked up with were safely home, safe with minimal effort; he could also leave before any morning-after awkwardness settled in or any attempts at getting his full name or phone number were made.

Damn if that routine didn't make him seem like a heartless and selfish bastard, though. The thing was—he was very clear with the girls he had one-night stands with that their fling was just that: a one-time thing. He wasn't looking for anything more than sex when he hit the clubs, because he was absolutely sure he wouldn't find his... (dare he think it?) soul mate in these places.

And therein lay the true dichotomy of Nathan March's psyche: yes, he'd had plenty of meaningless sex with faceless girls from clubs (which he was at least honest about), but what he truly wanted and waited for was to find that one perfect person for him, the one who'd get under his skin, the one he'd do anything for. And more than anything, the one he'd finally want to open up his home and, most importantly, his heart to.

Shaking his head at his hopelessly romantic musings (and pointedly ignoring the almost physical ache he could feel somewhere close to his left pectoral), Nathan finally found the sweater he wanted and put it on, folding the one he'd needed to borrow from Derek that morning and leaving it on his bed.

Still a little lost in thought, he walked through the door of Derek's room, only to collide with a wet, half-naked body with a loud thump. Derek's hands immediately gripped Nathan's forearms to get some balance.

"Shit! Sorry man, I didn't even know you were out of the shower," Nathan said, suddenly a little out of breath. He quickly squeezed Derek's hands, before letting them go and stepping back to let Derek go into his room.

Derek readjusted the towel around his hips, then took the smaller towel hanging on his shoulder and started drying his hair with it. "No problem. At least this time, we didn't almost knock each other out, right?" he replied, a crooked smile appearing on his face.

Nathan chuckled as he remembered a similar incident from a few weeks ago. Derek being only an inch taller than him, they'd banged their heads pretty hard the last time they'd accidentally collided into each other.

Good times.

“Which is fortunate, considering we couldn’t possibly get a good buzz while staying sober to make sure we weren’t concussed or something,” Nathan added, rubbing the left side of his chest absentmindedly.

“Amen to that. You’re welcome for the sweater, by the way,” Derek replied, indicating his (soon-to-be-Nathan’s) dark green sweater with a nod. “Suits you better than me, anyway.”

Derek was now picking out clothes from his dresser, taking out a pair of black boxer briefs and socks from the top drawer. The movement made Derek’s muscles stand out, and beads of water traveled down the planes of his tanned back to disappear under the towel around Derek’s waist. For some reason, Nathan couldn’t look away. His hazel eyes were glued to the view that Derek’s glistening skin and towel-covered ass presented.

*Wait, what!?*

Nathan rubbed a hand over his eyes vigorously, and his next words came out of a very dry mouth. “That’s, ah, settled, then. Thanks. I’ll just... leave you alone now, so you can... um, get dressed and stuff. Yeah.”

Derek turned to look at him, little creases appearing between his blue-gray eyes as he frowned. “You okay, Nate? Are you sure you still want to go out?”

“Yes, I’m just... um, eager to go, that’s all,” Nathan stammered, cursing inwardly as he felt the blush coloring his cheeks. “I’ll be waiting in the living room, but you can... you know, take your time.”

Nathan only took a second to wave at his best friend before he fled the room, closing the door behind him.

Once he was in the living room, he sat down heavily on the couch, tilting his head back and covering his eyes with his right hand. Unfortunately, blacking out his vision couldn’t erase what he’d just seen. And not only seen, but looked at. *Noticed.*

He had totally just checked out Derek. His undoubtedly *male* best friend.

Sure, he knew Derek was... attractive. He was straight, but he wasn’t blind. But it was the first time he’d had such an irrefutable physical reaction to the sight of his underdressed best friend. For God’s sake, he had been so fucking flustered he’d had to literally leave the room before things became decidedly embarrassing for him. Because the blood in his body hadn’t just flooded his cheeks, if the bulge in the front of his black pants was any indication.



He couldn't allow himself to linger on what this meant or where this was coming from right now, though, because Derek normally didn't take long to prepare before going out. All he could do was take a deep breath to calm down, and pray that his dick behaved as he thought of dead fish, road kill, and the old lady two apartments over...

\*\*\*\*

Derek adjusted the hood of his coat as Nathan and he hurriedly walked the block separating their apartment from Addiction. The rain had turned into a drizzle, but they'd still become uncomfortably wet if they didn't walk faster than usual to get to the club.

Stealing a glance at Nathan, Derek wondered what had happened to make him so quiet. Once he'd finished getting ready to go out, Derek had found Nathan sitting in the living room, as expected. What was unexpected was his subdued mood, especially since he was watching a hockey game with his favourite team playing, which usually involved lots of whooping, cursing and fist-pumping.

Derek had asked him again if he really wanted to go out, and Nathan had insisted that he did, and that it would be the best way to let off some steam and completely let go of the stress of his demanding semester.

Despite this, Derek knew something else was bothering his best friend. He also knew not to push Nate, as this was the best way of making sure he'd clam up and refuse to talk about what was on his mind. He knew giving Nathan space and being patient paid off, as proven by more than ten years of successfully getting Nate to unburden himself of his problems using this strategy.

In the meantime, it didn't mean he couldn't do his best to distract Nathan.

"Hey, Nate?" Derek took his arm, stopping their fast walk to the club momentarily. "First one at the door of the club gets to choose first batch of shots!"

Derek only allowed himself an evil grin in Nathan's direction before taking off at a run towards their destination.

"Wha—You didn't even count to three, man!" Nathan exclaimed, his fake outrage and returning good humour making Derek's grin widen.

After that, all Derek heard as he took off were Nate's rapid footsteps echoing on the asphalt as he sprinted off and his best friend's gasping laughter as he began to shorten the distance between them.

Mission accomplished.

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The end-of-semester party was in full swing in the club, judging by the heaps of people having fun on the dance floor, or sitting and talking animatedly at one of the many tables surrounding it.

Once he and Nathan were seated at their favourite spot by the bar, they waved at their friend Amy (whom they'd known almost as long as each other), who was bartending that night. Derek watched her work for a minute, before turning to Nathan. He leaned closer to his friend, speaking louder than usual to be heard over all the noise in the club.

"So Nate, since you won the race out there... What's it going to be? Tequila, vodka... Broken Down Golf Carts, maybe?"

Derek started to snicker, and he didn't duck quickly enough to avoid Nathan flicking his cheek. He never missed an occasion to tease Nathan for his hatred of the drink. At their first college party at Addiction, shots of Broken Down Golf Carts had been half-priced (go figure out why), and Nathan had accepted a dare from a girl he'd been hanging around that night to drink as many as he could in a row. He'd then proceeded to leave with said girl, only to throw up on her designer shoes as soon as he'd set foot outside the club. Derek had ended up taking him home, and Nathan had spent most of the night in the bathroom, being sick and cursing Broken Down Golf Carts up and down.

Nathan narrowed his eyes at him, a "I'm-so-getting-you-for-this" smirk forming on his lips.

"Very funny, Derek. So funny, in fact, that I think we're going to start this celebration with... Jell-O shots."

Nathan's eyes sparkled with mischief, and Derek found he didn't even want to argue about Nathan's choice of shots. Sure, he absolutely loathed the tongue acrobatics needed to actually consume the damn shots, as Nathan was well aware of. However, Nathan seemed to have put his worries aside for the moment, so Derek would comply, if only to help his friend focus on celebrating instead of ruminating the night away.

"Bring it on, champ."

Amy finally appeared before them, tying her long blond hair in a ponytail as she smiled at them.

“Hey, guys! What can I get you to get the party started?” she asked knowingly.

“A round of Jell-O shots, please, and your glorious presence, of course,” Derek replied, winking at her. “Seriously, we’ve barely seen you these last few weeks, Ames. We’ve got some catching up to do, young lady.”

Amy nodded in agreement, and started getting Jell-O shots from the bar fridge.

“You’re right. This semester just totally kicked my ass, you know? Honestly, I’d love nothing more than to be able to sit down and chat with you guys, but I barely have time to breathe right now. Rain check?”

“Definitely. We’re not going back home before the twenty-third, anyway, so just call me or Nate whenever in the next week, and we’ll hang out.”

“Awesome! I’ve missed spending time with my favorite boys. I’ll text you this week, and we can figure something out. I’ll get Ash to come, too, just so he can tell you all about my many end-of-semester meltdowns, which he was lucky to live through, let me tell you. Gotta go, but have fun tonight, guys, you deserve it,” Amy finished with a smile, setting a plate of Jell-O shots down on the bar. Derek and Nathan thanked her, and both of them took a small cup before turning to each other.

They raised their shots and bumped them gently together in a toast, both sporting identical grins as they did so.

“To the end of this semester, and a whole lot of doing not a fucking thing until we go home for Christmas. Cheers,” Derek said, raising his cup to his mouth, laughing as he tried to slurp his shot as gracefully as possible.

“Cheers, my man,” Nathan answered, and Derek could only admire his technique as he squeezed the bottom of the cup above his open mouth, the whole shot falling into it neatly and quickly being swallowed. He did look a little red in the face as he did it, though, so Derek figured it must have been more difficult to do than it looked like.

Derek couldn’t help himself; he shamelessly watched Nathan’s throat work, and when his best friend licked his lips as he finished his shot, the burning sensation in his belly had nothing to do with alcohol. He had to look away to try and get a hold of himself before he did something he’d sure as hell regret.

Because it was one thing to have decidedly-more-than-friendly feelings for Nathan, but it was something else entirely to even imagine doing anything

about it. Which he'd never allow to happen, because he couldn't bear even the thought of losing Nathan as a friend if he took that risk.

His stupid heart be damned.

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Nathan was definitely enjoying a pretty good buzz at the moment. Derek and he had taken about five Jell-O shots each, before going out to the dance floor to join a group of friends. This was how they'd ended up dancing (more like jumping around and randomly pumping their fists in the air), letting their figurative hair down and having fun with some of their college friends.

As he swayed to the music and laughed with pretty much everyone around him, Nathan found that even the haze of alcohol couldn't stop him from constantly thinking about his best friend. Or, more accurately, about his newfound and totally inappropriate sexual attraction to Derek.

After racing to the bar, Nathan had decided that it must have been the anticipation of the evening, or the fact that he could suddenly relax and let go of all the accumulated stress of the semester, that had made him react the way he had to his half-naked best friend.

How fucking delusional of him. Because only one look at Derek *fucking licking* the Jell-O out of his cup had made his blood boil, and his imagination had been running wild ever since. Wondering what that tongue would feel like on *his* skin, what it would taste like...

In other words, he was going fucking crazy.

It was as if a dam had broken open in his mind, and thoughts he'd never dared to consider before were now free to roam in his brain and torture him.

Nathan knew these thoughts could lead down dangerous paths, especially as he was even more of an impulsive fucker than usual when he drank. Therefore, he needed to find a distraction. A leggy, long-haired and pouty-lipped distraction, to be exact.

He tore his eyes away from Derek (who was thankfully oblivious to his inner turmoil, and who looked so carefree and relaxed and *fucking hot* as he danced), and looked around the dance floor until he met the eyes of a girl who seemed interested, judging by the come-hither smile she threw his way.

Perfect timing.

He headed her way, and she didn't waste any time when he got close enough to touch. She put her hands on his hips, and looked up at him as they

swayed to the music. Long black hair framed her gorgeous features, and the look in her eyes definitely told him she was looking to have some fun.

As he was taking her hands in his own to put them around his neck, he felt his spine tingling with the sensation of being watched. He turned his head slightly, and caught Derek's gaze across the dance floor. His best friend gave him a thumbs-up and wiggled his eyebrows comically at him, which was his usual way of silently saying "way to go". Nathan could only smile weakly in response.

Nathan felt a hand on his cheek, and before he knew it, the girl in his arms had angled his head down for a kiss. Her lips were soft, and as she pushed up to deepen the kiss, he felt something in his chest constrict more and more.

This wasn't what he really wanted. And while that freaked him the hell out, he wasn't quite drunk or stupid enough to completely deny that simple fact, and give in to the easy out that another meaningless one-night stand would provide him.

He broke the kiss, and gently pushed back the now-confused girl in his arms. He quickly bent down to apologize to her, and he told her that he wasn't feeling well and had to go. She watched him with a puzzled look before telling him to get lost, and walking away without looking back.

He was such an asshole. But at least, he was an *honest* asshole.

That didn't make him feel any better right at this moment, though. Because the second his eyes finally found Derek in the thick crowd, he felt like a giant fist was squeezing his already weakened heart. He tried to dispel the ache a little as he rubbed his left hand over his chest, but to no avail.

Derek was closely entwined with another guy, and clearly enjoying himself, if the predatory look Nathan recognized in his blue-gray eyes was any indication.

His right hand tightened into a fist at his side, and he knew that he had to leave right now, or he'd end up punching the other guy's lights out, or something equally screwed up.

As if on cue, Derek raised his head, and Nathan could only meet his gaze and hope like hell that his best friend was too busy with the motherfucker in his arms to notice his own anguished state of mind.

Even from a distance, Nathan could see a small frown of confusion forming on Derek's face. He quickly waved to Derek, and then shook his head when

Derek started to let go of his dance partner to come over and see him, before turning around and getting the hell out of the club.

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Nathan ran his hand through his damp hair as he took off his coat. It had still been raining when he'd left Addiction, so he had jogged all the way to the apartment. He had hoped the physical effort would help him gather his thoughts and calm the fuck down, but he still felt like a volcano about to erupt, or something equally damaging. And God knew he didn't want to push the metaphor further, because leaving only ashes in his wake would undoubtedly mean hurting Derek, as his best friend happened to be the focus of his restless state of mind.

Intent on steering clear from trouble for the night, Nathan headed to his room and fell heavily on his bed. He looked at the ceiling without moving for a minute, before deciding that shooting things in a video game sounded like a good way to try to relax and concentrate on something other than his muddled thoughts.

He made it a whole two minutes before the memory of how Derek had looked at the club appeared unbidden in his mind's eye. Just thinking of the lust in Derek's gaze as he had danced with another guy (which was *not okay anymore*), of the way his short black hair had looked like fucking sex hair (thank you, rain water)... It all just made him... want things.

He knew he shouldn't, but the liquid warmth he could feel pooling in his belly made it clear that his body had made its own decision. Besides, the fact that it was *Derek* who incited all of these new feelings in him, and not just a random stranger who happened to be a man, somehow... made all the difference.

The fact still remained that Derek was probably closing the deal with that guy from the club at the moment, just as Nathan was kind of... figuring things out (or, more accurately, having the biggest of all wake-up calls/epiphanies/whatever-the-hell-this-was *ever*).

Nathan heaved a sigh, and tried to ignore the ache settling in his chest as he adjusted the controller in his hand and put his attention back to the game.

However, his best intentions couldn't hold a candle to the sound of the front door opening.

Nathan knew he had only seconds to react. He also knew the best course of action would probably be to close the door of his room as noiselessly as

possible and pretend to be asleep. This way, he wouldn't have to face Derek while he was, for all intents and purposes, a fucking emotional wreck.

Unfortunately, Nathan wasn't known for making the best life decisions when he was exhausted, and most importantly, still a little under the influence. Which was why he got up from his bed and walked to the living room, where he leaned on the back of the couch as he waited for Derek.

As Derek came through the doorway separating the kitchen and living room from the entrance hall, he did a little double take upon seeing Nathan, as if he hadn't expected him to be waiting there.

"Hey man. I wasn't sure you'd still be up when I got here," Derek said with a quirk of his lips, propping his back against the wall to face Nathan.

Nathan rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants, and he could only manage a strained smile in his best friend's direction.

"I'm not feeling sleepy at all at the moment, to be honest," Nathan answered, lifting a hand to rub the back of his neck as he looked at Derek. "What about you? Why are you back so early? I mean, you seemed... pretty busy when I left."

"Oh. Um. That wasn't... Well, it didn't work out, that's all. No big deal, you know?" Derek bit his lip, and Nathan could swear his cheeks were looking a little red. "Anyway, I'd had enough fun for the night, I guess. And Ames was still working, and you were gone, so... yeah."

Derek cleared his throat, and raised an eyebrow in Nathan's direction before continuing.

"Enough about me, though. How're you? 'Cause you looked kinda... pissed when you left, you know?" Derek frowned, a little crease appearing between his eyebrows. Which was... fucking adorable, dammit. "Was that girl mean to you or something? 'Cause if she was, I can totally spill a drink on her next time we're at Addiction."

Nathan chuckled, looking fondly at his best friend. He could feel his initial nervousness slowly fade away as Derek's words infused warmth in his body. Because Nathan wasn't so oblivious as to not notice Derek's flustered state as he explained his presence at the apartment. Which probably meant that Derek had actually come back home to check on him, leaving behind a pretty-much-guaranteed hook-up.

That realization boosted Nathan's confidence, and his inhibitions were still lowered enough that he was willing to take a risk on it.

“That definitely won’t be necessary, Derek, because honestly? It was kind of an asshole move on my part to even dance with her in the first place. You want to know why?”

“I’m guessing it has to do with whatever’s been bothering you since before we left the apartment, right?”

“Yep. And just the fact that you could tell—that you can *always* tell when something’s up with me, and that you’re here right now just to make sure I’m okay...” Nathan took two steps forward, his hazel eyes meeting Derek’s blue-gray gaze as he did so. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

The few feet of air between them became electrified as Nathan spoke. Derek’s throat worked as he swallowed hard, his uncertainty at the serious turn in the conversation written clearly on his face.

“Friendship’s a two-way street, you know. You’ve always been there for me, Nate, so I’m pretty damn lucky to have you, too.” Derek tilted his head, searching Nathan’s gaze. “You ready to tell me what’s wrong, now?”

Nathan took a deep breath and nodded.

“Back at the club, I left because I was about two seconds away from punching the guy you were with.”

“Oh, come on.” Derek rolled his eyes, but when he saw that Nathan wasn’t laughing along, confusion clouded his features. “As if... I mean—what are you saying here, exactly?”

“I’m saying that seeing that guy touching you kind of made me crazy, Derek.”

“But... why?” Derek narrowed his eyes at him, apparently still puzzling over Nathan’s answer.

Nathan took another couple of steps forward, putting him directly in front of his best friend. He felt hot all over, and he made sure to keep their eyes locked as he put his hand on the side of Derek’s neck, his best friend’s racing pulse thrumming under his fingers.

“Because he wasn’t me,” Nathan whispered, before crashing his lips on Derek’s.

It took only a second for Derek to respond to the kiss, his hands bunching up the material of his own dark green sweater on Nathan’s chest. They kissed greedily, like the world would stop turning or something if they slowed down.



It was unreal, and intense, and messy, and it felt so fucking good that Nathan wondered how he could ever have wanted anything else.

Which was why he couldn't hold back a whimper when Derek seized his shoulders and pushed him away. Derek's left hand fell to his side, while he passed his right hand through his hair, looking shell-shocked.

"Nathan, this is—I just—I can't deal with this right now. We'll... We'll talk in the morning, okay? When we're both calm and sober."

"Derek, I'm—"

Derek held up a hand, heaving a sigh as he walked past Nathan.

"Just get some sleep, Nate. I'll see you in the morning."

Nathan could only look at his best friend's back as he went in his room, closing the door behind him.

If his vision was slightly blurry as he finally moved his feet to get to his own room, well, he was the only one to blame. And the only one who'd ever know.

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After getting up around noon, eating some cereal and taking a shower, Derek still hadn't seen Nathan around the apartment. He knew Nathan was awake, though, as he had heard him use the shower, rummage in the fridge and start a load of laundry a couple of hours ago.

Derek generally wasn't one to push when it came to Nathan, as he knew that most of the time, pushing his best friend to talk about how he felt had the opposite of the desired effect. At this point, though, he found that he didn't give a flying fuck about Nathan's usual M.O. when things got rough. Even he, Derek Johns, usually the most understanding and patient best friend in the world, had his limits, and he sure as hell had reached them as he tossed and turned in frustrated confusion during the night.

As he put on a white undershirt and jeans in his room, he couldn't help replaying in his mind everything that had happened once he'd gotten back to the apartment. Feeling Nathan's lust-filled gaze on him, and then hearing words he had never in a million years thought that his best friend would ever say to him had thrown Derek for a loop. Adding a kiss (more specifically, *The Kiss He Had Fantasized About For Years But Never Dared Hoped Would Actually Happen*) to that equation... It had been more than he could handle all at once,

especially since he was certain Nathan wouldn't be all that thrilled about it come morning.

In other words, to say he had obsessed about that kiss during his sleepless moments of the night before would be an understatement. He simply couldn't wrap his head around the fact that it had even happened in the first place. It was a punch to the gut, pure ecstasy in his veins and a fucking mystery to solve all at the same time.

This was why he had decided to take the bull by the horns once he got to talk to Nathan. He just couldn't handle not knowing exactly where he and Nathan stood. Therefore, he'd have to take action, for once, instead of waiting for his best friend to muddle his way through his feelings.

One way or another, even though he was scared out of his mind of the outcome, he had to know what the events of last night meant for their friendship. With that thought in mind, he ran a hand through his spiky black hair and down his face, before putting on his reading glasses and reaching for the book he'd started a few days ago.

He left his room and went to the living room to wait for Nathan to make an appearance. As he sat down in his favourite reading spot (on the floor, at the foot of the couch), he took a deep breath and briefly closed his eyes before opening his book, trying to distract himself with its storyline while he waited.

His hands still shook a little as he turned the pages.

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Half an hour later, Derek was about to just go barging into Nathan's room when his roommate's door finally opened. Nathan walked out of his room, wearing gym shorts and a green T-shirt, his tousled brown hair framing his hazel eyes. Nathan's gaze immediately sought out Derek, whose breath caught in his throat as he met his best friend's eyes.

Nathan shot him a hesitant smile, before putting his hands in his pockets and slowly walking over to the edge of the couch. Then, in true Nathan March fashion, he threw himself unceremoniously on the couch behind Derek, rearranging himself until he was lying on his back.

Derek could feel Nathan's body heat as his best friend lay only inches away from him, his spine already tingling at the proximity. He turned his head slightly, until he could see Nathan's features from the corner of his eyes.

“Hey,” he said quietly, examining his best friend’s profile. Nathan’s hands rested on his belly, but the way he absently rubbed the little finger of his right hand belied his otherwise relaxed attitude. “How’d you sleep?”

“Same as you, I guess,” Nathan answered, turning his head towards Derek, who raised an eyebrow. “I mean, I got up around six to have a drink, and I heard you kicking off your covers or something. Paper thin walls, you know.”

“Right.” Even though he felt like he was walking in a minefield, and one wrong move could potentially blow up their entire friendship, Derek knew he had to force the issue and address the elephant in the room. “Nate, about last night—”

“Did you play with the thermostat again? ’Cause I know you have enough body heat to last forever, but unfortunately, I do not... I’m cold... Could you maybe turn up the—oomph!”

Nathan’s next words were completely muffled, because all of a sudden Derek couldn’t handle Nathan’s attempts at diverting his attention with nervous babble one more second.

Which is why he climbed on the couch himself and laid down. Right on top of Nathan.

As in, they were now in full-body contact, from head to toe. Derek’s right hand now cradled Nathan’s head on the arm of the couch, and he was still holding onto his book with his left hand.

This was probably the dumbest and boldest move he’d ever made on anyone (let alone on his *straight best friend*), but Derek wanted to know for sure how Nathan felt about the whole situation, and well... This was a sure-fire way to find out, wasn’t it?

Derek let out the breath he’d been holding for the last few moments, and, without looking at his best friend yet, he focused on how Nathan felt against him (*too fucking good to be true*, he thought, before *really* focusing). Nathan was still as stone, and his whole body had tensed the moment Derek had dropped on him.

*That’s it, I’ve screwed everything up, fuck fuck fuck—*

Nathan’s warm breath against the side of his neck stopped his train of thought as his best friend let out a sigh. He felt Nathan’s body finally relax against his, and when Nathan’s left arm actually *hugged* him closer, Derek

almost let out the one word that resounded in his head at the moment:  
*Haaaallelujah!*

“That’s, um, definitely a way to warm me up I can get behind,” Nathan whispered in his ear. Only a slight tremor in his voice belied his joking tone.

Derek let his book fall to the floor, and he pushed his upper body up with his left arm in order to finally look at Nathan.

“Nate, are you serious about this? Because the things we did that we’d have to put under the rug and forget if this isn’t what you really want are kinda piling up, and I’m...” Derek sighed, and he made sure he could see every tiny gold fleck in Nathan’s hazel eyes before continuing. “I’m scared, man, and I don’t understand a whole hell of a lot of what’s going on, to tell you the truth.”

If Derek thought last night’s kiss had been too much to handle, he now realized that kiss had nothing on the present moment. Nathan was holding his gaze steadily, and his expressive eyes were alive with emotion. There was an undeniable current of... something between them, and Derek truly felt like they were about to fall together off a goddamn precipice, or simply fall apart if they didn’t hold onto each other.

“I don’t—I don’t really know how to explain it, but...” Nathan’s right hand snaked up from between them, and it came to rest on the side of Derek’s throat, Nathan’s thumb gently caressing his jaw line. “I really do want this, Derek. I’ve thought of little else since I saw you in that damn towel last night, to be honest. And I almost feel like I should be confused, and probably try to deny it, but do you know what I realized after I kissed you last night?”

Derek could only shake his head in response, momentarily rendered speechless in the face of Nathan’s confessions.

“I realized that nothing I ever did before has ever felt this right. And even though it’s sudden, and it’s not what I’m used to, above all else... It’s *you*, Derek. It’s as simple and as complicated as that, I guess.”

Derek carded his fingers through Nathan’s hair with his right hand, trying to anchor himself before he spoke up. Because hearing a sober Nathan say things like this was making his thoughts take crazy leaps, to say the least.

“Wow. This is... kind of a lot to take in, you know? I mean, correct me if I’m wrong but... you’re not gay. ’Cause I’m pretty sure I’d have noticed otherwise.”

"I kinda dig knowing that you've been looking," Nathan said, his heavy-lidded eyes telling Derek exactly how much the thought pleased him. "And you're right. I'm not into guys in general, and never have been. You could say I'm... Derek-ally inclined?"

A second passed as Derek was stunned into silence, and in the next, both of them burst into laughter. Trust Nathan to say the most ridiculous things at exactly the right time.

"Or... wait, you're gonna love this one... I'm Johns-ing for you—"

Derek couldn't hold back anymore. Hearing Nathan tease him as he had always done, with the added bonus of Nate being okay with his burgeoning feelings for him, made his heart swell ten sizes in his chest. It also made him tighten his hand in Nathan's hair, and lower his head until his lips touched Nathan's.

This kiss was definitely different from their first, and not only because they were now more or less on the same page as to where things stood between them. His lips gently brushed against Nathan's, their noses bumping together before they angled their heads in opposite directions to accommodate them.

They spent long moments kissing unhurriedly, before Derek broke the kiss to rearrange his body so that he was now fully on top of Nathan. His hands now cradled his best friend's smiling face, and Nathan's arms were wrapped around his waist, his fingers caressing the small of his back through his undershirt.

"Want to know what I'm thinking right now?" Nathan asked him, his husky voice sounding like a siren's call to Derek's ears.

"Yeah, I do."

"I'm thanking my lucky stars for making me get my head out of my ass, because being with you like this? Feels really fucking nice. It feels like... everything I ever wanted, but never knew I could just reach out and grab, you know?" Nathan said quietly, his questioning gaze giving Derek the courage he needed to truly come clean to his best friend about his feelings.

"I know exactly what you mean, believe me." Derek took a deep breath, and he stroked Nathan's cheek with his thumb. "I've been... feeling this way about you for a while, to be honest with you. I'm not sure I can quite wrap my head around it yet, but knowing that you feel the same way... It means a lot to me, Nate."

Nathan looked up at the ceiling, and his arms hugged Derek closer as he sighed. He focused his gaze on Derek again before he spoke.

“God... I’m a fucking idiot, aren’t I?” Nathan shook his head, before leaning up to kiss Derek’s cheek. “I’m sorry it took me so long to straighten shit out in my head, with all these fucking one-night stands... Because looking back? I’ve never felt even an inkling of what I feel now, of what I’ve always felt around you really, for... anyone else.”

“Fuck, Nathan,” Derek breathed out, before meeting Nathan halfway in a scorching kiss. Derek parted his lips eagerly as he felt Nathan’s tongue lick his bottom lip, silently asking for permission. After that, it was a clash of lips, tongues and teeth as they both surrendered to the overwhelming desire coursing through them. It was wet, and hungry, and fuck if it wasn’t the hottest kiss of his *entire fucking life*.

Derek pressed open-mouthed kisses from Nathan’s cheek, down to his jaw, until he could finally bury his face against the side of his throat. As he licked and nipped his way down to Nathan’s collarbone, he felt Nate’s hands trail up his back under the fabric covering it, setting fire to Derek’s skin everywhere he touched.

When he heard Nathan moan in pleasure, Derek thought he was about to explode from the sensory overload. But when Nathan’s hips jerked upwards, and Derek actually felt his best friend’s arousal press against his own, he knew things would get out of control really fast if they didn’t slow down right away.

And, Nathan’s obvious appreciation of what they were doing aside, Derek knew that they both weren’t really ready for anything more than some heavy-duty making out at this extremely early stage in their... whatever this was.

“Nate,” Derek said, as he lifted his head to look down at his best friend. Nathan looked fucking gorgeous, his cheeks stained red and his lips puffy and wet from their kisses. *Enough ogling, get a hold of yourself, Johns!* “Nathan, we have to slow down a little bit. I mean, not that I wasn’t, um, totally into this or anything... Quite the contrary, in fact, as you’ve probably noticed, but... Wow, I’m really rambling on, aren’t I?”

“That you are, my friend,” Nathan replied with a smile, before furrowing his brows a little. “Or, considering the last, um, twelve hours or so... would ‘my boyfriend’ be more accurate? ’Cause I’m sure as fuck not sharing you with anybody, Derek, I hope you realize that.”

Derek’s heart skipped a couple beats at Nathan’s words, and he could only smile down at his best friend and imagine what Nathan saw in his eyes as they locked gazes.

“That sounds pretty damn perfect to me, Nate.”

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Since Derek's door was still closed, Nathan made sure he was quiet as a mouse as he tiptoed out of his room and walked to the kitchen. Once there, he took out the ingredients to make pancakes, which so happened to be Derek's favorite breakfast food.

*Who knew I was such a romantic?* Nathan thought, a slight smile upon his lips.

As he started to mix the ingredients in a bowl, he thought about how the last few days had managed to completely blow out of the water everything he'd thought to be true about what he expected for himself. Until the moment he had finally allowed himself to see Derek in a whole new light, he'd been sure his future included the whole white-picket-fence package: two kids, a dog, a house he and Derek would have designed together, and, most importantly, a wife to complete the picture. The ease with which they'd spent the past three days discovering new things about each other (like how Derek made the sexiest little purring sound when Nathan paid particular attention to that spot below his ear, or how Nathan himself had kind of a lip-biting thing and how a simple press of Derek's fingers to his skin made his heart race) made it pretty clear that the seemingly picture-perfect heterosexual future he'd envisioned for himself before wasn't in the cards anymore.

Now, the mere thought of going back to the way things were before he and Derek started this being-together thing was completely unacceptable to him. Because being with Derek in this new and unexpected and *fucking perfect* way was quickly becoming something he couldn't imagine living without.

Damn if that wasn't equal parts completely amazing and totally fucking scary. Because while he had no doubt that being with Derek was the missing piece of his life puzzle, there were still some things he would have to get used to that he'd never considered having to deal with before now. Like being with Derek... outside the apartment. “Out” in every sense of the word, for the whole world to see.

Well, he would make time to process and take care of his misgivings, because disappointing Derek was one of the things he tried his very best not to do at any given time. He nodded decisively to himself, and took a deep breath to try and appease his quickening heartbeat.

Then he promptly jumped about a foot in the air as he felt strong arms go around his waist. He had been so deep in thought that he hadn't heard Derek approach at all.

Derek wasted no time in snuggling up to Nathan and dropping a kiss on his cheek.

"Morning. Sorry for sneaking up on you, but I do recall you telling me when we were, like, pre-teens or something, that your latent mutant power was super-acute hearing. I'd be really bummed if it wasn't true."

Nathan snorted with laughter, and reached back with his free hand to pinch Derek's side. He then promptly turned his head to give Derek a quick good morning kiss.

"Come on, Derek, you know I'd never lie to you about something so serious," Nathan stated with a cheeky grin, letting go of the whisk in favor of looking at his best friend. "Besides, why exactly would you be so bummed about me not having X-Men-worthy hearing?"

Derek cocked his head, and his blue-gray eyes filled with heat as he appeared to consider his next words. Damn if that gaze didn't make Nathan feel as if his blood was suddenly boiling in his veins.

"Ask me again when it's not ten in the morning, or when we're, ah, in a more... physically involved situation, maybe? 'Cause I could always say I'd be bummed about you not having super hearing if it would mean you couldn't hear a serial killer trying to pick our lock in the middle of the night, but... We'd both know that wasn't really what I was thinking about when I said it..."

Nathan was dying to know what Derek's real answer to his question would be, because it had to be pretty fucking hot and dirty if he didn't dare say it in the light of day... Aaaaannnd he absolutely had to get his mind out of the gutter right now if he didn't want his pyjama bottoms to tent right this instant.

"You..." Nathan shook his finger at Derek, who leaned down and bit it lightly before he grinned at Nathan. "You are a fucking tease, Derek Johns."

"And you..." Derek's arms tightened around his hips, Nathan could feel the air Derek breathed out as he whispered in his ear. "You fucking love it, Nathan March."

Derek let him go, and went to the fridge to take out the chocolate milk. Nathan could only stare at him with his mouth hanging open, and try to control his sudden need to push Derek against the kitchen counter and...



Who said he had to restrain himself?

A slow grin graced Nathan's lips as he stalked towards his best friend. Derek was leaning on the counter, reaching up to open the cupboard to get a glass. *Perfect positioning, really*, Nathan thought, as he put his hands on the counter, effectively caging Derek in the V of his arms.

Nathan leaned forward, pressing the length of his body against Derek's back. Just hearing Derek's sharp intake of breath at the contact sent a jolt of pure heat through his veins.

"You're right, Derek, as usual. But you know what?" Nathan reached for Derek's hands, and tangled their fingers together before resting their joined hands on Derek's navel. "I think I'm not the only one who enjoys being teased."

He punctuated his statement by kissing a trail from Derek's throat to that infamous spot below his ear. He gently nipped at Derek's earlobe, eliciting a sigh of "Nate" from his best friend that made the now ever-present butterflies in his stomach do fucking cartwheels.

Apparently of one mind, they turned their heads towards each other at the same time. Just seeing Derek's blown pupils peering at him from under dark lashes was enough to make him loosen his hold on Derek's hands, allowing him to twist in Nathan's arms.

Derek didn't waste a second. He kissed Nathan hungrily the moment they were face-to-face, bringing their bodies in full contact as he wrapped his arms around Nathan's neck. Nathan's hands roamed up and down Derek's back under his T-shirt, enjoying the feel of the muscles—the same ones that had first caught his eye a couple of nights ago—under his fingers.

At this point, all Nathan could focus on was the non-stop assault on his senses—hearing Derek's quiet moans and the sounds of their kisses, feeling all the ridges of Derek's body pushed against his own, inhaling Derek's distinctive (and addictive) scent—so this was probably why neither he nor Derek heard the door of the apartment open.

However, they definitely couldn't *not* notice a very high-pitched cry of "Oh my fucking God!" and a surprised "Woah!" coming from the entrance hall.

They abruptly let go of each other and simultaneously turned towards the kitchen doorway, where Amy and Ashley were standing.

Nathan would have laughed out loud at their friends' faces if he hadn't been so utterly in shock, and painfully aware of the enormity of the moment. Amy's eyes were about to pop out of their sockets, and one of her hands covered her mouth, while the other gripped her boyfriend's arm. Even Ash, who was one of the most imperturbable guys Nathan knew, looked astonished at what he was seeing, his eyebrows almost reaching his hairline and his mouth opening and closing in a fish-like way.

They all looked at each other in stunned silence for a few seconds, before Amy apparently came to her senses and ran up to Nathan and Derek. She hooked one arm around each of their necks, so that suddenly the three of them were squished together in a hug.

"I love you both like brothers, you know that, right?" Amy said, her voice muffled by their T-shirts. "And that's never going to change, you hear me?"

Trust Amy and her almost-finished psychology degree to know exactly what to say in a moment like this. Nathan let out a shaky breath, and he squeezed Amy's shoulder with his right hand as he closed his eyes briefly in sheer relief at her words. They stood there for a long moment, before Amy loosened her hold on Nathan and Derek, giving them a watery smile as she gave them some space.

Ash came forward, his usual aura of calmness back in place.

"I guess congratulations are in order, then?" he said with a quirk of his lips, putting an arm around Amy's shoulders, and fist bumping each of them in turn. "Good for you, guys."

Nathan had trouble wrapping his head around the fact that Amy and Ashley were reacting so well to stumbling upon two of their best guy friends making out, and he glanced at Derek to see that he appeared to be in the same frame of mind as he was. Nathan figured they both needed something to hold onto right at this moment, so he took his hand, squeezing it in reassurance.

"Thanks, guys. So... you're both okay with this? With Derek and I... being together?"

"Sure. I mean, even as just friends, you two have always seemed like a perfect fit, you know? And what you guys get up to behind closed doors is definitely no one's business but yours, so who are we to judge?" said Ashley, in his usual logical and no-nonsense way.

“That’s... really good to hear, actually,” Derek let out, his voice tinged with relief. Nathan nodded in agreement, a grateful smile gracing his lips as he rubbed his thumb over Derek’s hand.

“How could I ever not be okay with it,” Amy started, her shining eyes fluttering between their locked hands and their faces, “when I’ve spent the last two and a half years seeing both of you go through one-nights stands, looking for love in all the wrong places, and thinking that you both deserved so much better... I couldn’t be happier that you’ve finally found it.”

Amy’s blinding smile almost made Nathan miss the tear that ran down her cheek. Ash caught it with his thumb, just as Amy let out a little laugh.

“It’s a tear of happiness, I swear! And I’m entitled to it, because this is incredible and awesome and everything I’ve ever wanted for you both,” Amy said, her gaze wandering to the bowl full of pancake mix on the counter with a raised eyebrow. “Could that be your infamous pancake mix, Nathan? Because we did come here to see if you wanted to have brunch with us, so... Please say yes?”

Derek chuckled, and put his chin on Nathan’s shoulder. “How about it, Master Chef?” he asked Nathan, his breath tickling Nathan’s ear as he spoke.

Nathan tapped his finger on his cheek, scrunching up his face as if he was truly considering the question.

“Well... I guess that could be arranged,” Nathan stated with a grin, extending his arm towards the kitchen table. “Sit down, guys. Y’all are in for a treat.”

Nathan nuzzled Derek’s cheek before letting go of him to start making pancakes for everyone. As he busied himself with the task, he couldn’t help looking at Derek, Ash and Amy as they talked and joked at the kitchen table.

Maybe he and Derek hadn’t ventured out of the apartment as a couple yet, but having two of their closest friends not only find out about their new relationship, but also accept it without reservations... It made him feel like he was flying pretty fucking high.

If that wasn’t a good omen for their future, well, they’d just deal with the bad and the ugly, and enjoy the hell out of the good. As long as they did it together, he knew they’d be okay.

Derek groaned as he loaded up the last suitcase in the trunk of his car. You'd think they would be away from their apartment for more than a couple of weeks, from the amount of shit they'd packed.

As it was, Derek and Nathan were going home for the holidays, after spending a whole week not doing much more than hanging out with Amy and Ash, cuddling up to watch their favorite movie classics, and making out like the randy twenty-one year olds they were whenever the mood struck. Which was, admittedly, more often than not.

In other words, life was pretty damn good from Derek's point of view.

However, Derek wasn't naïve enough to think that the honeymoon phase of their relationship would last much longer. Being away from the sheltered comfort of their apartment involved some important decisions being made, like how and when they would tell their families about them being a couple. They had discussed the subject at length, Derek analyzing every possible scenario, and Nathan playacting everyone's reactions to work out his nerves and make Derek smile. In the end, though, only time would tell how their parents and siblings would take the news.

Until then, they had about a three-hour car ride to enjoy each other's presence without worrying about people's reactions, and that was exactly what Derek intended to do. That, and the one thing he had been putting off since that fateful morning of confessions on the couch.

A ball of tension settled in his stomach just thinking about it as he sat down in the driver's seat to wait for Nathan, but Derek wouldn't back down. He wanted Nathan to have all the facts as they took this important step of telling their families about the change in their relationship, but most of all, he needed Nathan to understand that he was in it for the long haul, no matter what.

Derek put a lid on his thoughts as Nathan got in the car. His best friend was grinning like the cat that ate the canary as he handed him a thermos full of... something.

"Here. I prepared a little something to keep you warm, since it's kinda cold out today and stuff," Nathan explained, his cheeks coloring slightly as he spoke.

A soft smile appearing on his lips, Derek unscrewed the cap of the thermos to reveal steaming hot chocolate. With a simple and earnest gesture, Nathan had done it again; he had unknowingly made Derek relax, and had thus allowed Derek to enjoy the moment to the fullest.

Putting the thermos in the cup holder, Derek lifted his gaze until he was looking right into Nathan's hazel eyes. He scooted as close to his best friend as he could, before raising a hand to cradle Nathan's cheek.

"Thanks, Nate, I really appreciate it," Derek replied, caressing Nathan's skin with his thumb. "You make it really easy, you know?"

"What exactly do I make so easy?" Nathan wondered aloud, one of his hands coming to rest on Derek's knee as he leaned a little closer.

"To just know that you're the best fucking thing that's ever happened to me."

Nathan let out a breathless gasp, and he lifted his other hand to join Derek's against his cheek.

"Derek..."

"You—You don't have to say anything. I just... I need you to know how much you mean to me, now that you're so much more than just my best friend."

Nathan's eyes widened, the start of a smile forming on his lips. Derek bit his lip and locked his gaze on Nathan's before forging on.

"I love you, Nate."

Time seemed to stop for a second, the both of them just looking at each other in wonder. The next moment, Nathan's beaming smile was all Derek saw before Nathan threw his arms around his neck, hugging him as best as he could across the car's center console (which was as uncomfortable and as fucking wonderful as it sounded).

Nathan's lips were so close to his ear that Derek literally felt every word that came out of his mouth all the way to his toes.

"I know," Nathan said, dropping a kiss to the skin below his ear before ducking back to look at Derek with a grin.

Derek smiled uncertainly, before his mouth dropped open as he realized exactly what Nathan meant.

"Did you just... Han Solo me?"

"If by that, you mean: did I just fulfill one of your favorite Han Solo fantasies, then the answer is yes," Nathan answered cheekily, before bringing one of his hands in front of him to grasp Derek's chin. "I'm going to do you one better, though, because I'm not enough of a nerf herder to wait a whole movie before saying it back."

“I’m so fucking in love with you, Derek Johns.” Nathan leaned forward to kiss his left cheek tenderly, and Derek was officially melting in a puddle of feelings, thank you very much. “In the most non-biblical sense of the word.” Nathan’s lips brushed the tip of his nose. “Since eventually getting in your pants is pretty much all I think about.” Derek barely stifled a groan as Nathan chuckled and pressed his mouth to his right cheek. “But most of all, I can’t imagine what my life would be like without you in it, and I’ll do everything in my fucking power not to screw this up, so that I never have to find out,” Nathan finished, before pressing his lips to Derek’s in a slow kiss that warmed Derek from the inside out. Derek’s tongue traced the seam of Nathan’s lips, and Nathan opened his mouth to let Derek in. Their tongues caressed each other as the kiss deepened, but still they maintained a languid pace.

After long minutes of enjoying the hell out of their unhurried kisses, Nathan and Derek parted to breathe in some much needed air.

As Derek opened his eyes, the sight of his best friend simply took his breath away. Nathan’s dark pink lips formed the brightest smile Derek had ever seen on his face, and his hazel eyes shined with utter happiness as he looked at Derek. It was definitely a vision Derek wanted to remember for years to come. He could only hope his own beaming expression conveyed the same things to Nathan, because Derek was undoubtedly in a state of blissful contentment himself.

Derek leaned forward for one last kiss, before settling back in his seat. As he put the car in drive, Nathan’s fingers grasped his, resting their joined hands between them. They shared wistful smiles, knowing things were about to change as they took the road to go back home for the holidays.

“You ready to roll?” Derek asked, squeezing Nathan’s hand.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Nathan replied, stroking his thumb over the back of Derek’s hand.

Derek couldn’t help but feel like they had just exchanged a sort of promise, and damn if that didn’t make the challenges ahead suddenly seem much less daunting. It gave him a renewed sense of hope for their future, and he couldn’t ask for anything more at the moment.

Certainly not when he felt like he had everything he’d ever wanted, anyway.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*As an avid reader and a hopeless romantic, Marie L. Nickett undoubtedly has a soft spot for heartfelt love stories and happy endings. She has always wanted to give voice to the characters inhabiting her imagination, and she will always be grateful that her muse finally decided to cooperate with her when she discovered the wonderful world of m/m romance. She lives in Canada, and yes, she does love hockey and maple syrup.*

## Contact & Media Info

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# IN THE FLESH

By Jae T. Jaggart

## Photo Description

Three young guys sit on the ground outside a public building. The central figure appears to hold the balance of power. His arms are looped around the other two. He is kissing one on the cheek, their hands clasping, while the other, although part of the group, his arm around the central figure's bent leg, looks lost, distressed. The complexity of the relationships between the three is emphasised by the interlinked hands of the two outer figures.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*See this picture above? I'm the one on the left and the other two are my best friends. It's been taken last month by another friend of ours after a sleepless night while we were waiting for our ride back home.*

*Lately, my best buddies have gotten closer than ever. They exchange furtive glances every time they get a chance; they touch and kiss on the cheeks like there's nothing wrong about it. Not that it is wrong; I just never expected that from them.*

*I think by now everyone knows they aren't as straight as they appeared, but they don't seem to care. What hurts me is that they act like I don't exist even if I'm always right there beside them. I'm slowly becoming invisible and it hurts like hell because I've never wanted anyone more in my life than I've wanted them. I used to feel ashamed that I felt this way toward my best friends. Now, seeing them fall in love right before my eyes, I feel betrayed and jealous.*

*What can I do to make them see me?*

*Sincerely,*

*Shayla*

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** shifters, blood drinking, blood play, dark romance, horror/violent elements, light BDSM

**Word Count:** 12,999

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



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# **IN THE FLESH**

**By Jae T. Jaggart**

## One

“Do you love me?”

The words slid out of Elijah before he could catch them. Haul the fucking things back. Shove them back down his throat.

That no option, he turned his head sideways, let his lashes lower over his eyes.

Yeah, that was it. Post-fuck exhaustion. Post-fuck sentiment. He'd go with either, if they'd excuse and defuse the needy bomb of those words. But instead of turning them back on him, Stas leant over, ran a palm up over his hip.

“Well, well, Mister Cain,” Stas drawled, sardonic, detached as he ever was. Sharp teeth bit into his shoulder. A tongue lapped at his underarm, exposed as it was by Eli's upraised arms, wrists bound by Stas's leather belt and lashed to one of the rails of the elaborate, curving metal of the Edwardian brass bed they lay on. Those white teeth bit at the muscle of his pec, stretched taut. His tongue circled a small brown nipple. As Elijah caught his breath in distracted pleasure, Stas drawled, “Why do you even ask? What's not to love? Of course I love you.”

Of course. *Naturally*. He should have known Stas would answer him as if the whole thing were a joke. Tease him.

Taunt him.

Thank Christ. Because, truly, the man owned him. Knew him. *Got him, in every way*.

Elijah turned his head and stared into Stas's face. Stas's eyes, blue-green as tropical seawater, met his, messy hair dark about his face as he leant over Elijah, a smile catching at his wide mouth. That smile deepened as Elijah's eyes closed, his mouth falling open as Stas's hand found his hardening cock, his thumb stroking over the head before he began to slowly pump him.

Stas's lips nuzzled somewhere beneath his ear. “Tell me you don't have to go out tonight. Tell me that you'll be staying in here, in bed, with me. Tell me that I can pound that sweet arse of yours one more time before we grab something to eat and settle in for another real round.”

Another round of... hell, exactly what Elijah loved. Giving himself over to Stas. Allowing Stas to bind him, use him, abuse him so roughly, so tenderly, that Elijah knew he would never find this with another. Never would want to.

The metal of the buckle clinked against metal as Elijah shifted—moved his hands, strong, blunt fingers curling around the cool metal of the railings above his head. His dark eyes stayed steady on his lover.

Yeah, he could feel his asshole throbbing from the ploughing that Stas had given it. The sculpted, powerful muscle of his back flexing, the pelt of his skin stinging as he shifted, the lines left from the crop still scarlet, most probably. Maybe there would be blood on the aged cotton sheets.

But none on himself. He healed fast. Incredibly fast.

Stas knew it, and took advantage of that fact. They both did.

Whatever Stas did to him, it was scarcely without his consent. That would not have even been possible.

Of their unnatural kind, of their murderous shifter pack, Elijah's was the most vicious, the most violent of the bloodlines. The most deceptive, treacherous and powerful. It was of no interest to either that their relationship was scarcely sanctioned by their pack or its leader.

Neither Elijah nor Stas gave a fuck.

Amongst their kind, Elijah was the only one to play solely by his own rules. Not the packs.

He was also the last of his line.

By his lineage, a killing machine. The others, somewhere in their DNA ancestry, had human blood. That trace of human ancestry had freed them of certain needs—needs that had been traded off in the roulette of genetics, without their intending it, against his kind of powers. Abilities. Abilities that were ruled by vicious cravings. No, not cravings, *necessities*.

His powers required the one thing that theirs did not. They were shifters, yes, but limited to animal form only. His possibilities were fluid, *endless*, but those endless possibilities were fed by the one substance that they did not hunt for.

Human blood. Human flesh, if it got in the way. And if that hunger was left unsated, he'd tear himself and anything or anyone else nearby to shreds to ease it.

Fuck—

His parents would doubtless have been disgusted at his lack of initiative, if he could recall them. They'd died when he was young, and he'd been brought

up in the elegant rough-and-tumble of pack headquarters. He should probably begin a fight for leadership of the Cain clan. He knew he was the only one capable of winning such a battle.

But he was crippled by his junkie's hungers, the jags of amnesia that had kicked in as his shifter powers had. Chunks of time had gone missing, events that had slipped his memory, events he should be able to recall. His first kill, for one.

How the hell could he have forgotten something like that?

It was as if some near-Alzheimer's like amnesia protected him from the worst of his actions.

Maybe it was that weight of disturbance that left him uncaring about the other branches, weaker than his. Or about who commanded all the splintered packs, or didn't. Such things seemed too much like human politics, and he'd seen where power plays led humans in the world they shared.

And yet, their kind? With their abilities, the stakes so high—

If he had any real sense of social responsibility, conscience, about his kind or the human world, he would be fighting for leadership right now. Especially considering that Lee—Stas's father—had been pack leader for Elijah's entire remembered life. And Lee was a piece of shit.

He always eliminated the strongest, most challenging pack members of all the branches. Potential alphas. And those he deemed too weak.

And that was just the shifters. As for humans that got in the way—

Lee was a ruthless, dangerous motherfucker. A shifter, yes, but only into one form. A wolf. Their most basic ability. He was also, in the human world, a Queen's Counsel, a most powerful man in the world of laws and lawyers they moved amongst. A man who had all bases covered. Human and shifter. Wolf by flesh and profession.

"Stay," Stas murmured, against his mouth.

The devil in silken skin, tempting him. Problem was, Elijah's own skin was beginning to telegraph its familiar warning. His muscles tensing, cells jonesing for their special, their very special, medication.

Elijah closed his eyes. "You know that I can't." Already he could feel it: the raw threads drawing up beneath his skin. Crawling, like ants. Fiery, hungry ants. His dark eyes opened on Stas's face to see that his post-fuck laziness had gone. Something far more watchful had replaced it. Elijah frowned. "You know

that isn't possible." Abruptly he dragged at the thick leather binding his wrists, swore under his breath. "Just fucking unbuckle this, okay? I've gotta get out of here."

Stas studied him, that striking face unreadable. His hand had ceased its slow pump of Elijah's cock. Now he moved, sat up and undid the supple leather buckled about his lover's wrists.

As the belt slid away, he lifted one of Elijah's wrists to his mouth. Pressed a kiss to his blood-flushed skin. He stared into Elijah's eyes. "To answer your earlier question once more, Mister Cain... yes, I love you. I love you, and I don't care what that makes me, so, for once, get rid of that goddamned self-loathing, all right? I love you, no matter what you are. No matter what you have to do to survive. You understand?"

Yeah, Elijah understood. He understood that words were easy.

"Uh huh," he grunted.

"Maybe you'll come upon some trace of Vincent tonight—some scent, some marker."

Elijah's eyes, pupils sharply pinned, shot to Stas. He wasn't joking. But there was something behind his seawater eyes, something in the tone of his voice, too casual, as he mentioned the name they had left behind.

Too casual, because Stas did not *do* casual.

His jaw gritted, and he swung out of the bed.

"I doubt it," he flung over his shoulder.

Vincent was lost to them both. To them all. They just hadn't accepted it yet. And some part of his mind, some self-defence mechanism locked there against intolerable pain, skittered away from thinking about that too deeply.

Twenty minutes later, Elijah was out on the street.

\*\*\*\*

*Boom boom boom.*

One earbud fed classic seventies disco into Elijah's ear. The singer was asking the eternal question: did he want to funk?

*Any other time, hell yes.*

The other earbud dangled free, across his thin white top. That earbud beat a slow and steady tattoo against his narrow chest as he strolled up the street.

Appearances, Elijah thought, were about all his mark had to operate on. And right at this moment, Elijah looked fifteen, sixteen max. And if he knew Elijah's truth, that mark curb crawling him right now in the slick imported car would slam his foot down, pedal to the metal, and not stop.

The mark probably thought he was some street kid. Or some lost teen somewhere he shouldn't be. But Elijah was a very, very long way away from either.

*Shifters. So much for the romance of the lycan, the werewolf. For being a member of some graceful warrior band. One with its own code of honour.*

They had no such thing. Instead they were creatures of the most dangerous, vicious kind. Strengths in their bloodlines streamed out past shifting into magic, into clairvoyance. Some of the crazier branches claimed they could speak with the angels.

Uh huh. Elijah was of the firm belief that, occasionally, pack members had shifted themselves clean into delusions and insanity.

He was becoming afraid that he was touched by madness himself. Not in the form of a lack of logic. But those chunks of memory loss could be terrifying.

Time slipped. Hours, days, sometimes weeks, gone. Sometimes Stas would hunt him down, find him holed up in a hotel room in the boonies with no idea of what had happened to land him there. At times, he'd woken up beside a stranger, only to find that stranger had fallen for whomever, *whatever*, Elijah had become in that drift of days, of weeks they'd spent together. And, snapped back into his own consciousness, he'd have no memory of any of it.

Sure, he could shift into animal form. But amongst their kind, he was the only one who could assume any human form he chose. Male. Female. Young. Old. Harder, but not impossible, he could replicate, exactly, the form of a living being, once he'd brushed against them.

No wonder his own identity, *self*, kept slipping from him.

How Stas could tolerate that unforgivable, unknowing, infidelity was beyond him.

He'd damned near turn human to be rid of that blank terror, of that loss of himself, *of centre*.

But right now, he was feeling and living and remembering every screeching, hungry second. So vivid. Nearly midnight, and freezing mid-winter in a thin

jersey top that clung, rain-damp, to his wiry torso, jeans low on his narrow hips, Elijah moved through a fine and haloing drizzle, and paused, turned, and glanced back down along the length of the pavement.

*Hooked now*, he thought, eyeing the sleek, anonymous BMW sedan. *Line and sinker*. The car liquid metallic black and chrome. *Nice*.

His eyes, dark, blank, moved to the man behind the wheel. He had slowed as Elijah had come out of one of the side streets, paused long enough to capture the man. Now he was simply leading him to exactly where he needed.

*Vincent.*

Something about the silent shark-trail of that car slammed that name straight back into the most primal part of Elijah's brain.

Fuck Stas for doing that to him, now of all times.

A flash of Vincent's face, that innocence so deceptively human, filled his mind. Distracted him. Had this been what had happened to Vincent? Something like this? Wrong place, wrong time, wrong guy cruising nearby? And Vincent just walking to try and get his head together? Because that was just the kind of damn fool trusting thing Vincent would do.

Because sure as hell, Vincent was not into any of the shit that Elijah was.

He had no need to be.

Fuck. *Mystery*. Elijah hated it the way a cat hates water.

Vincent's disappearance was a puzzle even vicious-clever, razor-sharp and ruthless Stas hadn't been able to solve. And Vincent had been missing nearly a month now.

Vincent, Stas and Elijah had been a club of three exclusive members. By appearance, at least, the three prime males of their generation. Vincent, the closest to human in their little triad, although the poor kid hadn't realised it.

It had become unspoken pack consensus that he was merely some poor lost bastard, drenched in the scent of their kind yet with a useless sprinkling of its DNA. He hadn't been born to the life.

No. Instead one day—Vincent not even school age—one of the Cains had scented Vincent and his birth family out at a park near the ranges.

Just what games had gone on in Vincent's family tree that caused a touch of Cain blood to be mixed with theirs, Elijah didn't know. Vincent's people had



been deemed too old to be drawn into the Cains' world, their heritage, but not Vincent. He'd been stolen. The terrible cruelty of that act meant nothing to them. The Cains liked to control what was theirs, even if it was damaged, even if it was faulty, defective, a little inferior. Not fit to fulfil its purpose.

And so, Vincent had found himself living at the Gabriel Street house with Elijah, with Stas, with the central, most powerful tribe of the Cain family. As the years passed, did he even remember his own? Elijah doubted it.

But that tribe was dangerous, even with their own. And especially with the weak who did not fulfil the gifts of their DNA.

Elijah, supreme predator that he was, had found himself protecting Vincent from that hostility.

For Vincent had all but radiated scar tissue as his very human weakness became apparent. Wounded. Bloody little scabs everywhere for the others to pick at.

"Poor kid," Stas had drawled once, one afternoon when they'd all played hooky from the Gabriel Street compound. They'd been sitting by St Kilda beach. He watched as Vincent made his way across the grass to them, soft drink can in his hand, smiling. Stas arched a brow at Elijah. "Sooner or later he's going to realise. Know that he's never going to truly be one of us. Not exactly human, not enough Cain blood to do him much good. He can't even *shift*, poor bastard. Just play on the sidelines. Christ knows what they'll end up doing with him. What would you say? Vincent had a great-grandmother somewhere, playing with the wild side?" He laughed softly. "Our kind can be so... seductive. And she was seduced?"

Elijah grunted. Sometimes he wondered if he actually liked Stas. He could be brutally pragmatic. Outspoken. Nor did he want Vincent to overhear what Stas might say next.

How *did* Vincent feel? Half in one world, half in another?

Lost? An outsider, his home no true home at all? His Cain family no family but a tribe of cruel and mocking thieves? Jesus, poor bastard—

Bloody hell, they'd done him no good stealing away his human life.

He studied the crazy, sunny Saturday afternoon mix of humanity passing by them, loving the dirty, circus atmosphere of the place, loving the pretty and the ugly. Stas's eyes shifted over his face. Indifferent to any who might be

watching, he ran the pad of his thumb over Elijah's full lower lip. Elijah parted his lips, took his thumb into his mouth, licked the salt from his skin before releasing it. The heat in Stas's eyes blazed. "What a creature you are. You fuck with their stinking world so well."

Elijah almost winced at his contempt. "Vincent is never going to truly fit with our side, and he can't go back to his—"

"You really are a bleeding heart, aren't you?" Stas taunted, gaze shifting over his face. His eyes grew shuttered. "I wouldn't worry too much. These things have a way of working themselves out."

Elijah scowled, at first at Stas and then at a couple walking past them, openly staring at their intimacy. In challenge, he curled closer into Stas's tall, lean frame as it draped lazily back against the wooden slats of the bench, dark eyes holding them.

The couple looked away quickly and Stas laughed, caught his long fingers in Elijah's hair and pressed a kiss against his mouth.

"Always at war," he drawled softly, breath soft against Elijah's ear. "Always ready for a fight. Even if you're not dressed for it. Such a dandy."

His fingers plucked at the loosely buttoned, patterned silk of Elijah's fitted shirt, so unlike the mundane clothing Elijah wore, camouflage, at university. "Fuck you," Elijah bit out, pushing them away. "And fuck them."

"Eli, Eli... You're such a beauty," Stas taunted against his ear. "Why wouldn't they stare?"

Despite himself, despite his ready anger, Elijah laughed. The man sitting with him on that bench was so much better looking than himself. They'd have stared at Stas anyway. Having that man, so beautiful, dressed like a vagrant next to his elegant vintage threads, Stas currently nipping at his earlobe, and his own cock hardening at it, probably had them staring even more. What would only make it better would be someone foolish enough to complain about their intimacy to his face.

Stas was right. He was always at war. It took all of his energies.

"You're an asshole," he muttered.

"No. But that sounds like fun," Stas said, lips brushing the cropped fire of Elijah's hair before nuzzling against his throat. He lifted his head to eye Elijah coolly, now. "Your little protect-the-weak project. *Vincent*. Keep going with it.

He needs your help more than ever. He's grown so restless. And the others respect you, even if it's total fear. Poor Vincent. *He idolises you.* He really doesn't get that he's living under the same roof as the big bad wolf."

Elijah snorted. "What would you *really* like, Stas? Me as the wolf? Or Red Riding Hood?"

Stas nipped his earlobe hard enough to draw blood. "Oh, easy," he purred. "The big bad wolf. *Always.* Why do you think you turn me on so fucking hard?"

And Stas laughed softly.

Vincent reached them and sat down on the bench. He didn't seem to blink at their closeness, even though they had only begun to show it publicly. Even amongst their kind, their preferences were not fully accepted.

Not good for the bloodlines—for continuing the line—especially since Elijah, so special, was taking himself out of the gene pool with his choices.

Stas glanced over at Vincent as he tilted the can up, drank, his throat working.

"What do you think, Vincent? Isn't Elijah something?" Stas drawled.

Vincent flushed, bloodily, and cut Elijah, then Stas, an awkward, shy, look. Caught off guard, clearly. "Yes. Yes, he is."

Stas studied him, seawater eyes drifting over his flushed cheeks. Like all the Cains, happy to find a soft spot and twist the knife in it. No matter how fond he was of the poor disembowelled bastard. "You say that, and yet... you've never really said, Vincent." He paused, curling lips taking on a cruel slant. He arched a brow, asked idly, "Do you approve of Elijah and me or not? You know that my father doesn't. Nor most of the others. Not that they've got the balls to say anything."

Elijah grunted, irritated that Stas was at the wrong angle to be elbowed in the ribs.

Awkwardly, Vincent shifted on the bench, leaning over his outspread knees, elbows resting on them as he looked deliberately away, profile turned to the choppy grey-blue bay. He was silent for so long Elijah wondered if he were ignoring the question. And then he said finally, "I think you two are beautiful together. *Perfect.*" His voice was husky, that pale skin flushing again, and it dropped a degree, was huskier still as he added, "I think you shouldn't give a shit what the others think. Hell, I don't think you *do* give a shit."

Stas burst out laughing, that casual, impersonal cruelty slipping away as he wrapped an arm about Vincent's muscular, lean shoulders and squeezed him in a rough hug. At moments like that they were truly three, bonded. United against the madness of their lives.

"Screw them," Vincent muttered. "And it's good, you messing with their rules. Shit, their endless bloody ideas about correct shifter behaviour. You think they'd be so free, instead—"

Vincent had begun to laugh with Stas then, too. It had been such a human sound, wonderful, somehow missing the sharper, hidden edges of the rest of their kind.

It had also, Elijah reflected, been the last time that he'd heard Vincent laugh.

The last time he could clearly remember him at all.

Thinking about it now, weeks later, wet night not sunny day—the damp cloth of his scarcely tolerable, too-modern clothing clinging in the midnight drizzle—a knife-blade of a scowl dug between Elijah's brows.

He was never sentimental, but he still had that sole photograph of the three of them together. A study acquaintance had snapped it on a phone while they waited for their lift, a Cain limo—in their case a four wheel drive.

Those were the last of the good days, with all of them at university, mixing in the human world. Playing The Game. Stas was deeply involved in his research. A star in the academic firmament, his interest was in unlocking the secrets of DNA—the codes locked within every cell, every cell a universe. Galaxies of knowledge unfurling for him effortlessly.

Somehow, that interest had come as no surprise to Elijah.

And the masks fell away from the relationship between Stas and himself. No need to hide it, now. From the pack, or from the human world. Or Vincent.

But that had somehow locked Vincent out. Or Stas had. Something in his attitude had changed even before that day. Vincent had become something different to Stas. Just what, Elijah could not have said. But they'd neglected him.

Hell. He'd vowed to protect Vincent. Apparently he'd done a shit job of it.

Which was putting him in a great mood for what lay ahead. *That motherfucker in the Beemer had better surprise him.* That human had better show Elijah his humanity. Some human morality.

Because Elijah possessed neither, and he was angry. And hungered. The barbs of it tearing at his nerve endings. Fuck, he was *aching* for this.

Not a good scenario. He paused again, cut his eyes to the car.

And the driver was pinned by that metallic-sheened gaze. Elijah felt him eyeing him up and down. He was somewhere in his forties, in a sharp city business suit. Not a bad match for the car.

A slight smile drew Elijah's teeth against naturally full lips—too pretty for a male, his jawline clean, delicate.

Elijah lifted a hand, drew it through the thick fall of his hair, flipped the earbuds into one hand, and stuffed them into a jeans pocket as he moved across the pavement to the crawling car. Instead of talking to the occupant, his eyes cut away from the half-opened window and the shadowed driver, to glance at the street sign up ahead. As the man moved to speak, Elijah lifted his eyebrows faintly, shook his head. Trailed by the liquid-black shark of the Mercedes, he moved away and passed two women, one sitting on a brick wall, her thighs heavily tattooed below her mini. The tattoos alone were skin art that should have been framed on a gallery wall.

The thought splintered into his mind and out of it, again, in a split second. The older women splattered him with invective, but he scarcely heard it.

Their turf. So what.

Yeah, he knew it well enough. This wasn't the right beat for picking up boys selling it. Not that he gave a shit. What he was selling couldn't be bought anywhere.

His heart was pounding against his ribs.

This was it. This was... if not the best part, the... foreplay, as some old-fashioned sex manual might put it.

Will he, won't he? Will he ask for it, won't he?

Will he throw the dice in his own favor, or Elijah's?

Because oh fuuuuck, the need was clawing at his nerve endings now. Was this what a human junkie felt like? Ready to kill for the needle in the vein? But he'd hold back, he'd give the guy a chance, *he always gave the guy a chance for redemption*—

If Stas were here, he'd be putting money down on which way it would play out. But then, Stas was a gambler. Inveterate. Degenerate. *Addicted*, as all their barbarous kind were, to one thing or another.

And Elijah's addiction was... *this*.

Christ and every sobbing angel, would the mark confirm what Elijah already knew about human nature, or give him one of those sweet, soft, gentle surprises that he did, truthfully, hope for? Oh, but they came so very, very rarely, those surprises. And the confirmations, sadly, had so much more of a payoff.

One he was ready to kill for, *right now*—

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Scant minutes later and he'd drawn the driver into the shadows darkening a laneway, a stretch of narrow housing. Elijah slipped into the car, lazed back against the leather and gestured to a turning with a flick of his fingers. The mark turned the car down the side street, glossy black paint slipping under the dense midnight canopy of a tree's dripping leaves and shadow as he braked and turned off the engine. No streetlights here. No people. Just quiet houses, flats, and everyone inside just where they should be. The car halted. The headlights switched off.

Mr Slick laughed and put a warm hand on the taut, surprisingly tough, hard muscle of one of Elijah's lolling, spread thighs. He gave a whistle. His fingers tightened a little on that strength and he muttered, "You like to work out, huh? Funny, it doesn't show."

"Yeah. It's a bitch. All those workouts, I never seem to bulk up."

"Looks like you're bulked enough where you need it." The mark smirked, eyes shifting downwards. "And you're young yet. Fifteen candles?"

Elijah laughed. If that was what Slick wanted to believe, fine. Not only was he a complete pervert, he was an idiot. "Roundabout there, yeah. We're big on candles in my family." His eyes studied the man with a blank glitter as that hand worked its way up his thigh. Even in the darkness swamping the car, Elijah could see the sudden blood flush mount his skin and smell the mark's arousal.

It spiked his own need, one for something... bloodier.

That need harshened his voice. "So tell me exactly what it is you want, and I'll tell you what the price is. And your hand can stop right there because copping any more of that feel will cost you as well."

"Nasty little bitch for all that pretty face, aren't you?"

“Uh huh. And they all love it.”

The mark laughed, and his fingers kept moving. Elijah permitted it. For the moment.

Mr Slick gave Elijah a shopping list which he had heard, most probably, since he had never bothered to keep score—couldn't remember really—past a baker's dozen of times already. Not every time a full moon hit. That particular cliché was not entirely true. But on many a full moon, blood spilled. Never his. And Slick was going for all the usual sordid requirements and a little more—a statement that he'd pay more for the pain he'd be inflicting.

Pain inflicted by Slick, that was.

Elijah's eyebrows rose at that.

*Irony.* He loved it. He studied his man.

It was a nice face, a most attractive individual: early, maybe mid-forties, probably a lawyer, a stockbroker, some good-catch professional. Honest eyes. Eyes that told Elijah exactly what was going on in his brain and right at this moment, it wasn't anything pleasant. Something told him the guy wasn't married. No woman in his life. Or man. For one thing, he couldn't catch another's scent on him. No perfume. Sweat. No cologne but the mark's.

What a catch he must look to anyone he played with. If you didn't know he had a taste for torturing underage male prostitutes, a little bloodletting himself, you'd think he was the bee's knees.

Hell, maybe you wouldn't even care about that little glitch if your eyes truly were on the golden prize.

Oh well. He almost sighed. At times, this really did feel like hard work.

His eyes narrowed as if one or two of the items on that list had shaken him back to some form of reality. Namely the pain portion. “You know what—” He glanced sharply through the water-smeared window at a dark, shadowed garden, through bars over unlit windows. Well, this *was* St Kilda. “I don't think I'm interested in doing some of that shit tonight. Some of the crap on that little list of yours. In fact, I'm fucked if I will. So I'll be saying good night now.”

The mark was staring at Elijah as if he'd dropped in from another planet.

*Maybe I have, honey,* Elijah thought. You have no idea—

“What's all this for, you want to push the price up?”

“We hadn't even got to talking money. I told you, I—”

The mark caught one of his upper arms in a bone-hard grip. Slammed him back against the seat. It should have had him crying out in sheer pain. He waited, in a silence the mark mistook for terror.

Mr Slick smirked. "You got in the car. No changing your mind now. You like to get your kicks charging for it, right? Because you're no fucking street kid. So, what I want is exactly what's going to happen."

Elijah struggled again at that and was shoved back roughly, the mark's hard fingers across his slender throat, relentless and pinning.

And yet—

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"No?" Slick challenged.

Elijah slowly, deliberately, lapped at his own fingertips with a wet tongue, ran them down Slick's cheekbone as his dark velvet eyes glittered on the marks and his hand earned a hard slap away at the intimacy of it. *No, they never liked that.*

Degrading acts, yes. Usually involving his own degradation. The ones more interested in their own humiliation, he walked away from. They got to keep breathing. Together with those he classed as merely desperate.

But the others who did not get to keep a heartbeat... intimacy, no. Not what they permitted. Holding Slick's gaze with his wide, dark eyes, he licked the taste of him off the pads of his fingers, tasted anger in that fine sweat, tasted lust.

His eyes half-closed, and like an animal, he rolled that salty, metallic wine on his tongue and caught... fuck, the ragged edges of a dirty, thumbled over memory, a glimpse of a bound kid, underage, hurting, bloodied, *terrified*. The mark's raw pleasure at that grimy image echoed back, through time.

The kid, not dead. Left alive.

Possibly wishing even now he *was* dead. Glimpses of savagery, of the other men Slick had shared him with—

Slick so arrogantly certain that their ragged little toy would never report such torture to the cops. Seems he had been right.

Elijah lifted an eyebrow slightly. There was irony there, now, corrosive as acid. All trace of the scared bored kid playing dangerous games had vanished.



That look riled Slick freshly.

"I'll beat the shit out of you. Forget about recognising me again. You'll be lucky if you can remember your own name."

Elijah stared at him indifferently. "How many times have you done this?"

"What?"

"*This.*"

Slick's head shot around, and he glared at Elijah indignantly, spat the lie out, "Never! Never, you little fuck. But you're begging for it now."

Elijah stared at him for a long, long moment. This was it.

Last roll of the dice. Last chance.

"Screw you," he hissed, and went to grab at the door handle.

The mark grabbed a fistful of his hair and slammed his face into the dashboard. Pain exploded across Elijah's face.

Blood was streaming down from his freshly broken nose. Trickling over his mouth, dripping from his chin.

And the scent of that blood was a key, turned.

Permission. *He had just been given permission.*

The mark had signed his own death warrant.

He didn't have a chance to say anything in reply. Elijah shot forward as fast as a snake and caught him in a grip beyond human. Bones began to fracture beneath his fingers in a split second. Powder. Before the mark could even scream, he had torn into his throat.

And fast. So fast. Before the blood could go anywhere but down his throat.

Elijah hated a mess.

It was his last coherent thought as he drank, chewed, fed the hunger that was roaring through him now—unleashed, majestic—tearing at Elijah's own veins like a junkie's need for his drug. For a brief instant he thought of all the movies where vampires fed so cleanly. Well, he was no vampire, and this wasn't clean.

Intolerable hunger. No choice but to sate it.

They had only been a few blocks away from the compound.

He pulled the car up into the driveway and activated the auto gate opener. The heavy, steel barred wooden gates that pierced the high, brick walled perimeter swung open.

And in the distance, the house waited. Lights glowed behind grimy coloured glass, a heart pulsing there of purple, of primrose. The massively treed, dense garden dripped about it midnight deep: a jungle of scent, of hidden small nocturnal animals, of rich, soaked earth.

Tall and narrow, bluestone with a Victorian wealth of metal lace hanging off the eaves, the deep and shading verandas, the Gabriel Street house was older than any of the buildings around it in this seedy side street. To the casual onlooker, the place looked outwardly decrepit, high, forbidding, with metal-spiked brick walls ringing the property, but the rest was a guess for any onlooker and had been for many, many decades.

Satellite photographs that happened to capture it from overhead for the world to see—on the various services that specialised in such things—gave away nothing. Let the developers stare, and study, and lust after the huge allotment the high walls encircled. Every approach had been and would be rebuffed. The house had secrets above ground and below ground. Truly, every inch of fertile, verdant earth contained magic, mystery and the answer to many, many a question, so many of those questions long, long forgotten in the river of time even as others sprang up like dragon's teeth.

No, the house would never be sold. Selling it would be selling the heartbeat of the Cain heritage.

And what a disgusting thing that was, Elijah thought. Creatures that could steal a child without a second thought. Creatures that had stolen Vincent's human life from him. His real family, *gone*.

Vincent, a near-human child, thrown into the snake pit of Cain politics.

Each branch of the pack was at war with the other, and his own the most vile of them all. Not that Lee did much to keep them in line. No, he believed in divide and conquer.

Some mythic shifter pack. Some dunghill of a stinking heritage.

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## Two

Elijah left the car and its drained cargo in the whitewashed brick double garage. Still, he gave the car's interior a quick check.

Aside from the corpse, immaculate. Wonderful.

That would be taken care of later.

He headed towards the house.

The doors were never locked. Security cameras were trained on every inch of this particular Cain property and, besides, in addition to the bars at the windows, the house had its own inbuilt security system: any one of the occupants within who breathed and had a pulse.

He threw the heavy, glass and lead-encrusted front door open, and dogs bounded out, a rough half dozen, and they poured around him in a liquid, bounding mass, some running down the broad stone flight of stairs and out into the soaking jungle of a garden to inspect and pee in it before storming back to greet him.

Absently, he greeted them, then closed the door, locking them back inside—aware they were overly excited not just by his return but by the smell of the blood on him—and went across the black and white marble chequerboard of a floor to the foot of the stairs. One of his younger female cousins was running down it, only to pause fractionally, narrowed eyes raking him incuriously.

“Eli,” she said sweetly. “The new you’s looking sharp. If slutty is the new sharp.”

He flipped her the bird, amused at her gutsiness, and she flipped it back, disappearing down a corridor. Shouts of laughter came out, briefly, as a door opened, then closed.

Music came from somewhere else in the house. Something nineties, someone howling about fucking like an animal.

Nothing wrong with that. *Even if the singer did sound tortured.*

Nothing wrong with *that* either.

There was a ripple of laughter, and he caught the crystal ring of glasses on the table in the distant dining room.

Elijah looked up the sweep of stairs. Stas was standing up there, on the landing by the top, looking down at him, long, pale fingers stretched out over the cedar railings. His ultramarine eyes glowed between black lashes, his dark hair short, ruffled, jagged.

Elijah paused on the chill marble flooring. He was unblinking in the fierce, dusted light of the chandelier as he absorbed the distant racket of their blood, their family, the clip of the dog's nails on the stone echoing.

For a long moment Stas stared back down at him, expressionless. Taking account.

Unconsciously, Elijah wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He could taste the rust of Slick's blood in his mouth, could taste his shock, his fear.

And that blood had hit his belly, was uncurling through his veins.

He didn't want to be in here when it truly hit his nervous system. Because that was where, and when, the trip truly began. Oh, sweet Jesus, ah yes, *the trip*—

"You're all right?" Stas asked flatly.

Stas was too beautiful, a depraved angel from a church ceiling, soaring. And he was... covered in slaughter, in a junkie's sated flop-sweat. He felt as if he were already sweating that blood out through his pores.

He must stink of it. Like soured rust.

Shoving that thought aside, Elijah nodded blankly, looked about himself as he kicked off his shoes, torn between a wired exhaustion and an awareness that the night was far from over. So many tasks to be done. His skin was crawling with the need of them.

At least it wasn't crawling with the hunger, not any longer.

Reaching for the damp top he'd been wearing, he peeled it from his pale torso and threw it over a shoulder, not giving a rat's arse for whoever or whatever might wander out and witness him. Their kind didn't exactly count modesty amongst the virtues.

He began shoving his mind into gear for what would come.

On autopilot, he made his way across the marble towards Stas, who was expressionless, studying the show, *studying Elijah*, in his current assumed skin, *guise*, the most powerful shifter of them all, the most envied, with an opaque, scientist's curiosity.

*Fuck him.*

"My father wants to see you," Stas said flatly. "He arrived here while you were out."

Elijah's eyes narrowed on him. He halted, staring up. "What the hell does he have to say to me?"

Stas lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "I don't know. But you know my father."

"Yeah, I know your father."

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What a magnificent speaking voice Lee had. Deep, eloquent, persuasive, it was an incredible asset in the courtroom. Apparently, not such an asset when easing silkily across the massive main reception room of the Gabriel Street mansion.

For it was working as well on Elijah as grating metal.

"So, you hunted tonight," their leader said, conversationally. "Tell me, how was it?"

Elijah's black velvet eyes widened fractionally. Lee had tricks galore, but the gentle concern was a new one.

"I found a violent sadist and killed him," he said flatly. "Not exactly a clean trade, but it had to do."

Lee eyed him enigmatically. "Because you choose only to kill the guilty, correct?"

"That's right." Elijah looked away. His bared torso was icy, his skin clammy under the damp denim of his remaining clothing, and he wished he were out of there. "I find them easily enough."

"And it makes you tolerate what you are just a little easier, correct?"

*Goddamn him to hell—*

"Innocence is so important to you, isn't it?"

Elijah could feel a muscle rippling, an impatient cramping spasm running up the length of his calf. He barely restrained his leg from jerking, and ground his bared feet harder into the threadbare antique silk rug. Toes digging into the pile, his control was slipping. *Not good.*

The blood. The blood was working on him, loosening his control, his concentration. "Shouldn't innocence be respected?"

The leader of his pack—a man he could have torn apart, wrenched the leadership from if he wanted it—burst out laughing.

"You worry about the damndest things," Lee drawled. "And any one of us under this roof would kill for your abilities. Even if, like you, it would mean losing our minds along the way. Because you are insane. You *have* lost your mind."

Elijah stared at him and said flatly, "Do you have any idea just how much I despise you?"

Lee spoke as if he hadn't said a word. "We are all so concerned about you. You're such an *asset*, you know. It's one thing for our kind to be so much more than the human scum we deal with... some of us have lifetimes more than they do. Time. *Strength*. Do you know, Elijah, I was actually born onto this earth before Darwin, himself, was a child?" Lee chuckled. "Tell me, what do you think he would have made of our kind? What would that have done to his theories?" Lee smirked, dark eyes shifting over Elijah's bared, narrow torso with an open lust. But not lust for his flesh. Lust for his sheer power. He shrugged. "But you, you are pure blood... We can merely shift into animal form. Powerful, yes, but there is no real gain in that shift... But you, you can take on any form. Become *anyone*. Have you any idea what a thing that is? *What a weapon you are?*"

"Truly?" Elijah said sourly.

"We need to start using that ability, Elijah. Play it to our advantage. Have you never heard of a Trojan horse?"

Lee had skirted around this before, had hinted at just how they might use his pure-blood, tainted gifts. Right now Elijah felt like spitting the last of Slick's blood straight into Lee's face to give him a taste of just what the reality of those gifts was.

Lycan, werewolf, whatever. Lee hunted *as an animal*. Other *animals*. Elijah hunted... the two-legged variety. And that was not good when he had some respect remaining for the human race.

"Yeah, I've heard of a Trojan horse." He stretched just enough to ease his jumping muscles and aching joints. The blood in him was demanding more, *the next phase*. Brutally, he pushed that need down to eye the pack leader with

distaste. "You want to use my skills to gain access to people, locations and information you might not have otherwise, right?"

"Exactly."

Elijah's mouth hardened. "Not happening. Ever. What I am isn't going to be used to turn you a profit. This pack has enough money. Power."

"*There can never be enough,*" Lee said deliberately. "Christ, you are so filled with self-loathing. Our most powerful asset, reduced to a snivelling addict. But addicts only exist in the human realm, Elijah. You are simply a predator. And you'd better start remembering that. *And start paying your way.*"

The rage flared in Elijah, raked along his nerve endings like blades. He saw red. Lee was red, red as blood. And something kicked in, deep inside.

For the first time ever, he saw it. *Getting rid of Lee. Taking over.* He saw just what he would do with their pack and its abilities.

Elijah saw how far he could take it, could take them all—way, way past Lee's narrow set of financial hungers and greed. They had money enough. Lee wanted power merely in the financial and legal world. But the pack was not united, instead deliberately divided by Lee, and they could be as one so easily, with the right words, incentives. Strengthened, not weakened. There could be peace—with a firm hand, yes, but peace, not the relentless elimination of potential rivals. Or the weak.

They could integrate further, without fear, become a real part of the human world, secret maybe, but not seethe with contempt for it—

*Not steal innocent children from their real families.*

That truth slammed into his skull.

It was as if he were seeing all possibilities through a fresh viewpoint, fresh eyes, with a clean, untainted set of ambitions. *And it was wonderful.*

For the first time since Elijah had realised he'd need human blood, not animal, to sustain life, he didn't hate that about himself. It was natural. He was a part of nature. He took only the evil, never the weak, never the pathetic amongst those who were hooked on his seductive, pretty lure.

And that was acceptable.

Yet it only deepened his contempt for the man before him.

He took a step towards Lee, and Lee took a step back without being able to prevent himself. The elegant Italian suit might have been armour enough in a

bout of boardroom politics or in a polite courtroom stoush, but here... Even scented liberally with fresh rainwater and dressed in unstained jeans, Elijah gave off a stench of barely controlled violence, of blood scrubbed out roughly from beneath fingernails, of blood smeared over sharp white teeth.

Of deadly things done to terrible men, of bodies burnt, buried, beyond excavation or evidence.

The unspoken physical threat hung like a stink in the air.

Lee's face hardened, and he eyed Elijah, snapped, "Go. Get out of here. You waste my time. You're tipping over the edge."

"I won't be used," Elijah bit out. "No matter what your damned schemes."

Lee glared back. "Difficult to use a madman. Or a broken addict. And you're right. *That's exactly what you are.*"

And still as Elijah was, his tangling hair, like ragged fire, seemed to stir and move about him as if it were drifting, lifted and stirred by waves of unfelt heat.

From the corner of his eye he glimpsed, leaning against the huge and dramatically carved wooden double doors, still, with arms folded across his chest, Stas, impassive, watching his father. Watching him. Watching them both.

Jesus, Elijah hadn't even seen him come into the room.

*What the hell?*

He felt as if he were being set up. He felt as if this was some elaborate game that they both had the answers to.

*Stas was ever the scientist. The observer. And he was the biggest exhibit in this madhouse.*

"I'm a junkie. A blood junkie. I won't deny that. *But I am not insane. And this.*" He waved a dismissive hand towards the rooms, the house and its inhabitants beyond. "This circus is over. They are not your soldiers, nor your whores, and their games are done. I give you notice now."

Lee merely smiled indulgently. Whatever he truly thought was hidden. Stas said nothing. He just watched with that scientist's stare.

Elijah left the room, shouldering past Lee, shouldering past his lover.

Wanting to kill them both.

And knowing, now, that it was merely a matter of time before he took out one of them. One of them he despised. The other... he loved. But Stas would



not stand in the way of his assuming leadership. The alien clarity he felt told him that.

That belief was only confirmed when Stas followed him out of the room, leaving his father alone to whatever thoughts, whatever plotting, whatever damage control he was foolishly embarking upon.

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Elijah was too exhausted to tell Stas to shove off as he made his way up the stairs, pale fingers dragging through his hair. The curling, sun streaky brown it had been out on the street—for his customer, for the prostitutes, for any witness—deepened with every rough, untangling stroke. Deepened and straightened a little to become a coppery red, cropped short.

And as he moved up the thin, worn carpet he stretched, and his body, his limbs lengthened like thick, heated elastic with that lazy, powerful movement even as he undid the fly on his damp jeans, grunted as he paused, commando beneath them, and roughly dragged free of the denim before it would have to be scissored off him. The jeans were damned near tight enough at that point already, and it scarcely mattered if any of the others saw him in this state.

Out on Grey Street he had been a pretty youth of scarcely average height. Lure. Bait. Now he paced ahead of Stas, naked, damp, unwanted clothes in one hand, his body bulking up, inches taller, near six feet now, stripling muscle filling out broader shoulders, rippling in corded ropes through his arms and flat abdomen, jaw harder, nose straight, mouth still lush but taut now, the column of his neck long but thicker. No teenager, now, instead a man, somewhere around twenty. A blink, and it slid to twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, another blink of those long, dark lashes, and the needle on the dial seemed to slip back years again.

Two decades old. Truly, he, himself, didn't even know.

Stas went to catch hold of him, kiss him, but he pushed him aside roughly, angry at that earlier scene and loathing even the scent of himself. How Stas could tolerate it, he didn't comprehend. "No," he grunted. "Not yet. You know that."

And he should. It was an all too familiar ritual.

Leaving Stas behind, he took a turn and climbed a shorter, doglegged flight of stairs to the small space he used as a bedroom. The others had grabbed the bigger bedrooms.

He supposed he could throw his weight around and gain a suite of rooms. He didn't want one.

He liked the strange security of the tiny space.

The brass double bed almost filled it. A fire burnt in the grate, the pale and curving marble mantle smoked from years of use. The heat the fire generated was like an oven.

Stas must have prepared it, lit it, just after he left earlier.

His damp jeans, the thin top, were thrown into the flames. For an instant, the raging fire died back. In smoky seconds, it revived and ate at the discards steadily.

It was always the same after a kill. To wear the clothes that reeked, even unstained, of blood and death, of decay already setting in, repulsed him. Their disposal was always the first, the most instinctively imperative, task.

Standing naked by the fire, rubbing his hands over his face, he sensed Stas come into the room and arrange that tall frame in the doorway, shoulder propping his weight.

Elijah had just made a declaration of war, but all Stas asked, was, quietly, "It was bad?"

Ah yes, *Slick*. "It was business as usual," Elijah said flatly. "Totally normal. And totally abnormal."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Elijah rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth again, dark eyes narrowed on Stas. *On the son of the pack leader*. Those dark eyes were the only part of his outward appearance he hadn't bothered to disguise for the hunt.

"Call the clean-up crew," he said flatly. "The car is parked in the garage. It has the usual cargo."

Stas tossed his smartphone from one hand to the other. "Already done."

Elijah nodded, his head falling forward a degree. The red silk of his hair fell across his forehead. He stared down at his hands, then threw back his head defiantly, the clean line of his jaw hard. "As I said, 'totally normal', right?"

"Right."

Didn't matter. He was feeling the last remnants of shame he suspected he ever would. He'd never felt shamed by sex, but he had felt shamed by feeding.

Lee had been right about some things, the bastard. And that alien animosity hardened within Elijah.

He welcomed it. This would be the last time, he promised himself, with that strange detachment, the last time he'd ever feel any shame at what he was.

"I've got to get clean," Elijah said, with that new calm.

Stas was silent.

As he stood under the large old-fashioned showerhead, water streaming down hard and hot, he began, for the first time that evening, to shake.

He stretched, and felt a sensation as if his bones were cracking raw in their very joints. There was a scent of blood in the air. Slick's. A clot of the stuff unglued itself from his hair where it had somehow stuck, slid down his white hip, and slithered down the plughole in a swirl of steaming water.

Jesus, his body was aching now. It hurt. It fucking hurt.

And it was only going to get worse.

He looked up, through the glass, the steam, to the mirror above the old-fashioned pedestal basin.

Vincent's face stared back at him. Those blue eyes so wide, so human, so trusting, so filled with love, he realised suddenly. And not the kind of love reserved for friends. Jesus. *Vincent had loved him, and he hadn't even known.*

He stared at Vincent's face, at Vincent watching him back from that mirror. Not his face.

*Vincent's.*

His mind spun. That calm fled. His identity, always so fluid, spilled out as liquid as the water spilling from the shower.

A fresh, unknown thing, *panicked, a scream*, tore at his throat.

And Vincent was gone. The reflection, himself again. His own dark eyes were staring back at him in that glass. Panting, he was thrashing back from that reflection and unaware of it, only dimly aware of the bathroom door crashing open and Stas yelling something. But nothing could wipe away the feeling of Vincent's face, of Vincent's lips under the hands he'd covered that scream with. The reality of Vincent's face. *Nothing.*

“Baby.”

It was Stas, that low, cool voice gentle, ridiculously soothing. Slumped back against the white tile, hands shaking on fistfuls of shower gel Elijah couldn't find the strength to lift to his body, he watched as, naked, the taller, more muscular male stepped into the shower cubicle, closing the glass door behind him.

Without words, Stas reached out, grabbed the bottle of shower gel from the rack and poured a huge glob of the delicious stuff into his hands. Running it tenderly through Elijah's hair and over his body, he lifted Elijah's shaking hands to his face so that he, himself, could scour the blood scent off his skin.

“My predator,” Stas purred, mouthing against one sudsy, soaking ear. “So broken. But strong again, soon. God, you know I'd give anything to stop this pain for you, don't you? I know how much you hate it. I know it destroys you, every time.”

Elijah's eyes shot open at that. He watched Stas's profile as he poured more gel into his hands, more into Elijah's hair, shampooing it with the stuff, lathering his body roughly even as Elijah reached for his toothbrush and scrubbed his teeth with what was left of the gel and foam on his hands.

Anything to get rid of that stink of blood and decay. Anything to replace it with something beautiful.

Christ, the blood had never done this to him before. Pain, yes. *Hallucinations?* Never. *Vincent*—

He shoved that madness brutally away. And even as the water streamed, washed the now-reeking foam away, performing its everyday miracle, he felt the ache in his bones ease and the slow, warm trickle of honey begin.

Trippy, tripping. Delicious warmth—the slaughter having its payoff, the blood, finally, *thankfully*, working its magic.

He was soaring, flying. Throwing himself into that deep, deep well, that endless golden warmth.

He landed back against the tiles, the water streaming down over them both as he felt Stas slide down to his knees before him, his wonderful hands gliding down the length of his body. And it was *his* body now, not one assumed, patched together, *willed*, not some craziness, some insanity glimpsed in the mirror. But *his* flesh.

And then Stas wrapped his fist about his hardened cock, his mouth closing over the head, and Elijah flung his head back and groaned at the exquisite pleasure like an animal.

A strange, uncentred guilt flooded him with an escalating, horrific and wrenching agony that filled his mind and made him cling to the raw sensation Stas was inflicting upon him.

That pleasure was the only anaesthetic available.

He wanted to run from that guilt, but everything in him embraced it as if it were a lover.

“Jesus. Ah, Jesus.” He swallowed, gasped on a rush of pleasure, a rush of pain, and could not hold the words back. “Vincent. Fuck, Vincent, where are you? *Where the fuck are you?*”

For the barest fraction of a second, Stas paused, frozen.

And turning his head, Elijah’s darkening eyes cut through the glass, once more, to the mirror, steamed, yet not steamed enough.

*Vincent’s face there. Watching calmly.*

Vincent’s face. Vincent’s blue eyes, meeting his.

But this time he did not scream. Instead he closed his eyes and gave in to the joy Stas gave him so fiercely. There was nothing else.

\*\*\*\*

It was a ritual. Their beautiful ritual.

Laughing, completely blood-drunk now, blood-high, Elijah fell back against the tangle of bedcovers, the thick quilt at his back like velvet. His water-soaked skin was singing. Drying rapidly in the heat from the fire still blazing in the grate. Naked, he arched his spine, spread out his arms, cropped hair dark with water, soaking into the layers of cotton, of feather down beneath him.

Stas stood by the foot of the bed, hand resting on a brass bedpost. Elijah’s velvet dark eyes took in the lean, powerful muscularity of Stas’s body. His cock had been hard almost from the moment he’d stepped into the shower. He hadn’t come when Elijah had, back in the shower, pumping into his mouth, fingers dragging brutally at his short hair and grasping against his skull. The only solid thing in a world wrenched apart.

And selfishly, Elijah was enjoying the payoff of that restraint. His gaze moved down, clinging to Stas’s thick, hard cock. The precum welling, and the

darkened flesh beaded with the water that glistened over all the muscle and bone, silky skinned, of his body. "Your cock is so beautiful," he murmured, shifting restlessly on the bed and writhing at the sensation. Didn't matter that he'd only just come. His hand drifted down and he lazily stroked himself, already hard. He laughed softly. "Have I told you how much I love your cock, Stas?" he murmured, eyes returning to Stas's seawater ones, while Stas watched the movement of his fist. "Because I do. So much."

For a moment, Stas's usually closed, striking face was entirely open.

He was amused... and filled with lust. "You're tripping. If only I could synthesise whatever fucking chemicals are flying through your bloodstream right now, I'd make millions. Feels good, huh?"

Now, Elijah truly burst out laughing. "So, so good."

"I'm glad, Eli. I'm glad you get something out of this, at least."

Elijah was still laughing, softer now and past thinking. The crash would come later. The crash *always* came later. He turned his head, rubbed his stubbled cheek against the cotton of the quilt, and it felt like silk velvet. Incredible. He gasped at the way his fingers felt, stroking over the head of his prick, slick with himself. His sloe dark eyes turned to his lover. He crooked a glistening finger, beckoned him.

"Fuck me, Stas. Fuck me right now. Before this fades. I love it when you fuck me, and I'm flying. It's so good. It's so fucking good."

Stas strolled over to the bed, took the lube from the bedside table, and tossed it to the bed. He stood, looking down at his lover.

That face, usually so pale, framed by hair like fire, was deeply flushed now.

Stas's blue-green eyes glittered between the inky lashes, water dripping like diamonds from his dark hair.

Elijah watched the movement hungrily as Stas slid a silver band from his ring finger. Elijah, himself, had placed it there long before. Stas arched a brow. "You want it?"

Elijah's tongue slicked his lips. The fingers of his free hand slid up, over the lift of his ribs to squeeze a nipple. "Yes," he muttered. "So much."

"Ask me nicely."

The words were commanding. But that cool voice was roughened. Eyes like black diamonds gripped blue-green. "I'm asking you nicely, *please*," Elijah

muttered. "But if that's not enough, I'm telling you, now. *Do it. Hard. Make me feel it.*"

Stas shivered at that desperation, that demand, and swung himself onto the bed so that he was crouched over Elijah, weight supported on one corded arm as he held the silver ring out to the other man, to his lips. Obediently, Elijah kissed that silver.

It was an Irish ring, a Claddagh. Two hands holding a crown over a heart, the top of the crown pointed. It was something one lover would give to another. Except that Elijah had meticulously filed the point of that crown until it was razor sharp.

And now Stas knelt back a little, and drew that point across Elijah's pale, luminous skin. Glowing like a pearl against the dark, tangled covers, in the soft lamplight, the firelight, his skin beaded sudden rubies down, across and around one nipple. Blood welled and slipped over that pearlescent skin. Elijah groaned, eyes shutting tight, with his spine arching up into that sweet sting.

And it went on. The fine razor slice of that ring, the tender care of Stas's tongue, lapping at that blood. Designs drawn. Each nipple circled, and circled again with that fire, and Stas's fingertip, tracing them. Elijah watching that flushed, intent face through slitted eyes. Blood smeared Stas's beautiful lips now.

Every now and again he would pause, sit back on his heels, and study his work.

At one point he shifted over Elijah, pinning him down as he thrust his engorged cock into his mouth. Elijah could taste his own blood on Stas's flesh. He'd stroked Elijah, the blood designs, himself, smearing that scarlet over his cock. Elijah took him greedily, loving the taste of him, the salt of his precum, the clean, soapy taste of his skin, the metallic tang of his own blood.

And before Elijah could do much more than roll his tongue over the head of his cock and try to draw him deeper, it was cruelly taken from him, and Stas was reaching for the lube.

Elijah shifted, watching Stas as he dragged his fingers through the blood beading in circles, dripping down in lines, across his already healing, sealing, flesh.

Glimmering eyes held his. They were filled with lust. Filled with knowledge. "You're going to kill him, aren't you?" Stas asked flatly.

Flying, drowning in sensation, flesh burning with a hundred points of pain, Elijah looked back at him with perfect clarity. "Your father? Yes," he answered simply. "I am. You have a problem with that?"

Stas smiled very faintly, shook his head. The last droplets of water flew onto the bed, onto Elijah's skin, blended with the patterns he'd drawn and diluted them, ruby into pink. "No. It would only be justice."

"You mean that?"

Stas smiled without humour. "Of us all, he's the biggest monster. Now shut up and let me fuck you."

Fingers covered in blood, in lube, Stas eased first one finger, then another, into Elijah's greedy, waiting body. He opened up to his beloved fast, needing this, his mind gone blank. Needing it all, *now*—

Stas's clever fingers found his prostate and he damned near came, hands coming up to grip his skull, drag his mouth down to his for a hungry, devouring kiss. It wasn't enough. The glide of his tongue, the nip of his teeth, not enough. The fingers in his arse, fucking him, not enough.

"More—" he gritted. "More—"

And Stas thrust that thick, heavy cock, eased with lube, with blood, inside his greedy, hungry body, and his mind was blown.

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It was morning, and as always happened, after the high, the low was a killer. Elijah rolled onto his side, all the better to see the other man. Stas had brought him black coffee. He'd clearly showered again, his skin glowing, torso naked, dark hair arrowing down under his worn, well-washed jeans. He sat in the chair he'd drawn up in the cramped space by the bed, his face almost... wary.

Which set off a hundred alarm bells. Nothing troubled Stas. Nothing that he couldn't better.

Elijah sat up in the bed, yanking pillows up behind him as he leant back against the headrails, registering that Stas must have cleaned him up as he slept. Or rather, as he lay in the coma-like state he fell into after the hunt and the fucking that always followed.

No blood was left on his skin. No semen dried there. No marks from the cutting of the night before.

All evidence, gone. All evidence, bar the look in his lover's eyes.



He didn't bother to reach for the coffee Stas had put beside him. Instead, he ran a hand over his face, the sinking feeling in his gut telling him he wasn't going to like what was coming. "What is it, Stas?" he asked flatly. "Just tell me. We owe each other some honesty, if nothing else. So what's the deal? You don't like what's happening with your father and me? You've picked a new side? Decided that you didn't like being told I was going to kill him?"

Stas stared at him and abruptly burst into a gunfire of laughter that died away fast. "After this... I think you'll know exactly where I stand." He sighed so heavily, so deeply, that his ribcage lifted on a deep intake of breath. Finally he said one word. "Vincent."

There was a long, ugly silence. "Vincent?"

Stas glanced away, only to stare back at him almost defiantly. "You want to know what *really* happened to him? Why he disappeared?" He paused, visibly swallowed, spat out, "*I drugged him*. And then you. What do you think my research has been based on? What answer do you think I was hunting for? I'd developed a serum... I thought with our bloodlines, *his*... fuck, I truly thought that he might be the cure. So human, yet with our DNA. The end to your addiction. Your torture. So I shot him full of it."

*This was not happening.* "You *what*?"

"I drugged him. I drugged you. I handed him over to you, for whatever you... were going to do. You were shaking. You were needing it. Jonesing. About to leave the house, go out, *hunt*. Instead, I gave you... what I thought you needed."

Elijah stared at him in disbelief, and yet knowing. All the endless chunks of memory, gone. Whatever he'd done to Vincent, *gone*—the horror of it tore Elijah apart. "You mean I slaughtered him? I tore into him, just as I did that piece of shit last night?"

"No, I'd thought that but—fuck, Eli. Look in any mirror. *Really* look. You saw it last night. Or allowed yourself to. Look again."

Elijah was shaking his head. But Stas was relentless.

"You absorb the blood of those men you kill. Drain something of their souls, their spirit as well, I think, because with every kill, your transformations are stronger. But I hadn't bargained on what would happen when a shifter of your powers drained a shifter, even a whisper of one. You didn't tear open his throat, Eli. You didn't spill a drop of his blood. No, you wrapped your arms

around him, you kissed him, and... you absorbed him. Day by day. It took almost a week. You two locked yourselves up in here and fucked yourselves senseless. I would have been jealous, hell, I was jealous, I was mad with it, I wanted to kill you both, but you didn't even know who or what you were anymore. You were gripped by one of those goddamn blackouts. But at the end of it, Vincent was gone. Little by little, faded away. By the end, you were fucking a ghost. You want to find Vincent, look in the mirror. You took him. *And he took you.* He stole you, Elijah, just as you stole him."

But Elijah had scrambled off the bed, away from Stas, stood there, staring at him.

"And it worked," Stas said relentlessly. "Tell me, Eli. Have you had a blackout since?" He shook his head. "No, right? And by now... by your old behaviour patterns, you would have lost a few hours here and there. Hit a bad memory and lost a day. *Something*. But no, nothing's happened. You've stayed steady as a rock."

"You sick motherfucker—"

Stas ignored him. "It *worked*, Eli. And that's all that fucking matters to me. Hell, you've even gained the clarity to finally face challenging my damned father. You'll rid the pack of the bastard, thank God."

"Fuck you—"

"It took you long enough. You're the only one that can do it. And taking him out will be a public service."

Elijah was ready to walk out of the room and get as far away from this man as he could before he tore him apart. He'd paced back, shaking his head violently. And even as he did so, he saw Vincent in the mottled mirror set into the old, narrow wardrobe. Watching.

A glimpse. A shake of his head. There. Gone.

But always with him. Now that he had opened that door, *was permitting it*, he could feel Vincent, under his skin. Where he had been, hidden, all this time. And now, at last, Vincent possessed a power he'd never had in life.

*Vincent didn't resent this. Hell—*

*Vincent was welcoming it.*

Stas looked at him, the defiance, the fight suddenly leaching out of him, the light fading from those blue-green eyes. "I never knew, Eli. I promise you, I never knew it could happen like this. I cared about Vincent, too. But I cared

about you more. I know I've done something terrible. *Unforgivable*. Betrayed Vincent. Betrayed you. Destroyed you both, perhaps. I'm a ruthless shit. I always have been. But please, I did it because—Do you still—Do you still love me?"

*Do you love me?*

*Love. The only thing that had ever truly mattered to Elijah. The only thing that had ever mattered to Vincent. That even now, meant that any of them were not alone in this crowded house of monsters. And, himself, the most monstrous of all.*

Vincent stared back at him from the mirror. Elijah stared back at Vincent. Vincent's mouth curled in a smile.

And Stas's voice asked once more, quietly, "Do you love me?"

*Well?* Each asked the other. *Did they?*

The brutal tenderness of Stas, last night, echoed through his cells. The brutal tenderness of the patterns he'd cut, precious, beautiful rubies. The reverence with which he'd tasted Elijah. Always had. The memories brought a rush of blood and his heart beat faster. He remembered that tender kiss Stas had given him at the end, after the blood, after the fucking, as he slid into the darkness...

He must have known he was kissing not just Elijah but Vincent. *Fucking not just Elijah but Vincent.*

*I loved you both*, Vincent whispered inside Elijah's skull. *I loved you both so much. Stas and you, Eli. Wanted you both so much. It tore my heart out, to be on the outside, watching you two, what you had, always, always watching—*

And then, on a whisper, again, Stas, on his feet, close by him and even more desperate now, raw with it, "*Forgive me... forgive me. But please, tell me. Have I destroyed it? Us? Or do you still love me?*"

It was Vincent who turned and tangled his fingers in Stas's dark hair.

Vincent, who Stas stared at helplessly, shields down.

Vincent, who Stas whispered to, *again*, no longer knowing who he spoke to, and in the grip of a sudden terror he'd never shown before, "*Christ, please, do you love me?*"

And for the first time in a long time, Elijah felt at peace. *Whole*. He was made whole by Vincent, and Vincent was no longer alone, no longer weak. No longer on the outside.

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But within, within the flesh. His flesh.

And Vincent's humanity, his steadiness, gave Elijah, so powerful, yet so fractured, a unity he had never had.

A unity he would need to take the pack where it should go. Away from the direction Lee had manipulated it towards, and back to peace, to some kind of harmony both with themselves and the human world.

"Yes," Elijah whispered to Stas, to them both. "*I forgive you. And I love you.*"

And it would be all right. The three of them, always together.

It would be more than all right. It would be perfect.

"Yes," Elijah said again, just before he, before Vincent, kissed Stas. "I love you. I will always love you. *Always.*"

And Stas gave in to him, into them both, into the new and most powerful triad they had become.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*I've been an artist, a web designer, and a really unreliable cook. I love to write wicked hot erotic romance with fiercely passionate, alpha characters, and love tats, film and fast cars. And judging by that last trio, I'm also extremely shallow!*

*I am a huge fan of authors who write those magic books you just can't put down, brilliant comedians (hello Eddie Izzard and Russell Brand!) and spoilers. I'm also a happy history geek and a trivia fiend.*

*I love to hear from readers and can be reached via my blog, Facebook page or Twitter.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

# IN YOUR VEINS

By S.J. Eller

## Photo Description

The black-and-white photograph captures a short, intimate moment. Two men lean over a pool table, holding a cue together. One has short, dark hair and stubble that reaches across his face. Behind him is a larger man, his hair longer. He holds his companion's hand over the cue, guiding him as he presses a kiss to the smaller man's neck.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*How did I get here, with him—it's so wrong... but it feels so right. He's asking me things I want to say yes to, but if I do my whole life will change. I've worked hard for what I have, life's not been easy but I knew which path I was taking and have marched down that road determinedly for years. Yet now I'm questioning everything I think I know about myself. One decision will alter my whole world.*

*These men have an interesting story to tell. I don't mind friends to lovers, enemies to lovers, GFY. I love UST. I don't want alien or sci-fi and do prefer contemporary but don't mind supernatural/fantasy/shifter. I do want an HEA (please).*

*Thank you author, I look forward to my story,*

*Sincerely,*

*Lori*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** blue collar, accountant, addiction drug/alcohol, some darker aspects, hurt/comfort, men with pets, tearjerker, angst

**Content Warnings:** detailed description(s) of drug use

**Word Count:** 18,592

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Author's Note*

A lot went into this. There are a small handful of people who helped me throughout writing this, who encouraged me even when I was afraid to write something so personal. So thank you to all of you, but especially Raevyn and Barb, who have been an indispensable support system. And thank you to Lori for allowing me to take her prompt and run with it.

*Dedication*

To my brother, who fought hard but lost the battle.

To addicts who are struggling or have struggled.

And to the silent victims—the families, friends, and loved ones,  
who never give up hope, even when it seems like the world is  
impossibly dark.



# **IN YOUR VEINS**

**By S.J. Eller**

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## Prelude

They say that if you're not careful the city will eat you alive.

They're right.

A city has a life of its own. Beyond the old, decaying brick walls and the cracked pavement, beneath the bowels of the city, lies a world different from anything you've ever known. The city, with its flawed exterior and broken interior, holds more secrets and lies than any priest—more than any four walls or series of broken-down homes have any right to.

Still, people walk the streets, go down the dark alleyways, and pass the secrets, ignorant to the pulse of the city, the complete and utter destruction that it holds in the palm of its worn hand.

The city, in all its disgusting, but somehow beautiful glory, changes people.

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## Part I

There was never anything quite like the smell of oil and sweat in the morning, or at least that's what Kyle Black had come to tell himself each time he walked out his front door and into the sprawling heart of Cleveland.

His mother thought he was crazy, certifiable even, for leaving the up-and-coming Portland to go to a dying city so far from home. But that's exactly why he did it. After twenty-five years in Portland, twenty-five years of the "up-and-coming", hip scene, he needed a change of surroundings.

Sure, maybe the dilapidated furniture factory next to his apartment complex wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but Cleveland had a certain charm to it. It was just well hidden—very well hidden.

It had only been about a month since the tiring cross-country move, but Kyle had a roof over his head and a job he enjoyed. Working for one of the Big Four was a dream come true—for someone with a MBA in accounting, that is. Funny thing was, he didn't look like the type of guy who could get lost in a series of numbers and thrive under the pressure of a crazy tax season that left most people frazzled. Instead, he had boyish looks that allowed him to pretend he was less clumsy than he really was, as if he could catch a ball with more than just his face. Short brown hair and a baby face went a long way in the world, or it would if he worked anywhere but in corporate America.

His apartment was nice but sparse, just a few leftover boxes from the move scattered in various places, and a linoleum floor, which looked like beautiful hardwood, and gave the impression that he wasn't twenty thousand dollars in debt thanks to loans. It wasn't quite home yet, but it would be, one day.

And the apartment came with one thing that couldn't be bought, a close proximity to all the action Cleveland had to offer. He was just a block away from Cleveland State University, not too far from the Wolstein Center, and literally a walk away from some amazing restaurants and a thriving nightlife. He could even walk to work if he so desired. The apartment was small, quaint, in a good part of a sometimes-scary city—it was all he could ask for in a new start, and maybe just all he could afford, too.

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Like most cities, Cleveland had to be built up instead of out. The building Kyle worked in, and all those surrounding it, displayed that fact perfectly. Most

of those buildings, just like Kyle's, contained rich and lavish offices for the upper-crust of society, putting on a prestigious front for visitors. But Kyle didn't work in one of those offices with a full wall of windows glancing down at the busy city. Instead, he worked among thirty-some other employees in his very own small cubicle, fit with only the essentials—an unfortunate-looking Dell computer, a chair, which looked comfortable but after nine-hour days was more of a torture device, and a small trash can that belonged in a posh bathroom where no one actually used it. The walls of the cubicle were fit with material that he was able to pin papers to, and most of the seasoned employees had pictures of family and cards from holidays past scattered along theirs, while his was mostly bare, sans a list of things he needed to do by the end of the week.

It was all just a statement to Kyle's newness, to his need to still find a place to fit in among all these overflowing cubicles and the noisy chatter of friendships already formed. And maybe even to his impermanence. After all, the city was constantly changing, and everything within it was just along for the ride.

It was Thursday, the end of Kyle's fourth week in the city. The day had been particularly stressful, and it seemed that everything that could've gone wrong did. He'd chosen to walk to work and avoid the traffic, but halfway there the sky decided to open up and tell him just what she thought of his brilliant idea to be "green". Of course, his large, black umbrella was at home, next to the door, in the small bin with his other umbrellas and rain gear.

By the time he walked into the office, he was damp and cold, and really, really not enjoying the feel of water in his socks. He ended up clocking in five minutes late and having to wait until his lunch break to do anything about the *squish-squish* of his feet. The day went downhill from there, with his boss having a near-mental breakdown and a deadline fast approaching with one of the company's top clients. So he took his lunch break an hour later than normal, had two saltine crackers, and came back to work only to have the fear of God put into him by a cranky supervisor who apparently hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, thanks to his two-month-old baby.

Thank God it was Thursday. Just one more day left before he could sit on his couch in his boxers and not have to worry about grumpy bosses, sleep-deprived supervisors, and fast-approaching deadlines.

At twenty after five, he was packing up and shutting down his computer when he looked up and caught two coworkers staring down at him with grins on their faces.

“Kyle, man, you’ve been here for, what? A month now?” Billy asked, the diabolical smile still plastered to his handsome face.

Kyle knew what they were up to. His coworkers had given him all of two days to settle in before they started asking him to go out with them for after-work specials, as they called them. Essentially, it was the time after work when everyone went to a random bar and bitched about the day while having one too many to drink. He’d gone once, and it was an affair he wished he could’ve forgotten, as apparently even top-notch businesses were not immune to a little hazing.

In the end, it was harmless, but he still couldn’t forget how he looked in the mirror the next morning with a stamp from the club pressed firmly into the center of his forehead. He’d worn a hat as long as he could, but when someone at the office noted that a Portland Trail Blazers cap wasn’t only unprofessional, but also scandalous in the home of the Cavs, he’d been forced to take it off and endure the looks of terror and amusement from his coworkers.

He wasn’t looking for a repeat performance, but Billy and Casey, the woman who worked in the cubicle next to him, had other ideas. “You’ve already been initiated, man. It’s about time you relaxed and came to have some fun with us.”

Casey must’ve picked up on his apprehension, because before he could get out a protest, she spoke. “I *promise* there will be no getting you drunk and putting club stamps anywhere on your body.” She looked pointedly at Billy, almost daring him to try something. “Just come out with us for an hour. It’s been a shit day, and we all need it.”

He couldn’t bring himself to argue with her, and their smiles both grew as Kyle nodded his head. “Okay, fine. I’ll be there.”

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The bar was crowded, but Kyle should’ve expected as much, considering it was Thirsty Thursday, a favorite day for Clevelanders and the real hump day. If you made it to Wednesday, you were okay, but if you made it to Thursday night with some drinks, you were golden.

He couldn’t help but groan when he entered the crowded, musty building, only to have Billy hone right in on his presence and wave him over.

“Glad to see you didn’t back out on us, Kyle.” Billy’s tone, as well as his stance, was cocky. He was a nice guy, minus the fifty percent of the time when

he was an asshole. It was somewhat endearing, even if it did make Kyle want to pummel him.

“You’re in for a treat. It was my pick this week,” Billy said, raising his voice over the loud clamber of voices, with a symphony of bottles clinking and a heavy rock beat thumping in the background. “They’ve got great food and awesome beer from the brewery down the street. Make yourself at home.” He patted Kyle on the shoulder before going off to greet some other helpless soul.

A throng of people crowded the bar, each demanding drinks and filling the limited space, leaving Kyle pushed between a stool and two tall, sweaty men. And sure, he liked his men to be nice and tall, with a scent of hard work and masculinity, but between the stale piss smell that came with a bar, the heady note of liquor invading his nose, and the sweat, it was just a bit too much—like a trip he’d much rather *not* take.

He pushed his way to the back of the bar, waving awkwardly to coworkers. Two pool tables were in a small outcropping, the wood paneling aging the bar, and the dim light above the tables just barely gave away a patron leaning across the felt, cue in hand.

The man was tall, tan with dirt caked under the fingernails that were expertly wrapped around the cue stick. His plain white T-shirt was tight around his arms, black gym shorts hanging loose in comparison. Dark brown hair curled down to the bottom of his neck, whispering just slightly around the man’s ears. Whiskey-colored, golden-brown eyes focused on the ball at the edge of the table, looking up to a white ball precariously placed to the left of the pocket, just off to the side enough to make the move seem tricky to Kyle’s novice eyes.

There was precision that even Kyle couldn’t deny as the cue moved forward in a controlled, even stroke; the man’s eyes focused on some imaginary, seemingly magical spot on the white ball. There was a quiet moment of follow-through, and then a soft *clink* as the ball fell into the pocket, or so Kyle assumed. He’d been so fixated on moving his own eyes between the man’s face and his fingers to even notice the ball disappearing.

The man stood up straight, setting the cue on the table and turning to high-five one of the sweaty men from the bar.

“I’m starting to think you’re hustling me, O’Brien,” Sweat-machine said, his voice holding no real accusation, only humor.

“Yeah, yeah. I feel bad for your wife, the way you handle your cue balls makes me wonder about—”

“Hey now, don’t even talk about my balls.” The men laughed.

When the apparent winner turned back around, his eyes caught Kyle’s across the small area, a smile spreading across his lips.

Kyle could feel himself blush under the scrutiny, and he was sure that a vibrant red could be seen even beneath his day-old stubble.

The man walked toward Kyle, his steps sure and his body exuding confidence.

“Dalton,” came the deep, somewhat husky voice, and with it the man—Dalton—extended his hand.

“Kyle.” His own voice was much less strong. He clasped the proffered hand, feeling calluses old and new, the skin worn like leather—a texture that came only from physical labor. Dalton smiled at him again, and Kyle found himself babbling on, “What you did there, that was pretty cool. I mean, I’m lucky if I can hold a stick.”

He nearly cringed at the way the words fell out, a mess of nervousness put into a jumbled sentence. The tension eased a bit, though, when Dalton laughed and shook his head, removing his hand from Kyle’s, reminding him that they had been shaking hands for what was probably longer than strictly necessary.

“It’s not so hard. Here, I’ll show you.” Dalton moved back to the table, picking up his discarded cue and grabbing a small, blue cube, rubbing it against the tip of the cue. Kyle must’ve been standing there frozen, his face painted in shock, because when Dalton looked back up at him, he gave a more relaxed smile that pulled Kyle forward.

“First, let me see what you know already,” Dalton said, handing the cue to Kyle.

“I—uh,” *shit* Kyle continued internally. He grasped at the cue, looking around the room to see if anyone was watching the hot-mess about to happen, but only finding Dalton’s eyes on him.

He let out a breath, leaning forward. The length of the cue was awkward, and he wasn’t sure quite where to put his hand or set the butt of the stick. Someone had set up the table again while they were talking, and the large triangle of multicolored balls seemed like a sure target. Somehow, in between

the time he pushed the stick forward, and glanced at the green of the table, he managed to miss completely. The tip of the cue clipped the green, the stick stuttering against where it sat on his shoulder. One of the balls moved slightly from the impact, but other than that that, the balls kept their taunting formation.

“Fuck,” Kyle muttered, not quite under his breath.

He looked up from the table, expecting to see Dalton laughing at him, or somehow otherwise amused by the ridiculous display he’d just witnessed. Instead, Dalton held the same friendly smile and shrugged his shoulders. “You’ll get ’em next time.”

He came closer to the table, behind Kyle, and pressed himself against Kyle’s back. “First off, you have to make sure you’re balanced.” Dalton pressed his leg between Kyle’s, pushing his legs further apart until they were just over shoulder-width. He urged Kyle’s feet to turn slightly outward, instead of the straightforward they had been on his previous attempt.

“There, much better.” Dalton breathed against Kyle’s ear, heat stroking across his neck.

Next, he reached for Kyle’s hands. “Don’t choke the cue, let it move with you.” Dalton’s arms reached around Kyle, moving his arms so that one was forward on the green of the table and the other was back. “Good, now hold the cue with your back arm.” Even as he gave the instructions, Dalton moved Kyle’s body seamlessly into place. “Rest the cue on your fingers—gently, there you go.”

When Dalton finally seemed pleased with his body placement, his chest still pressed firmly against Kyle’s back, he spoke again. “Now here’s the important part, don’t tense up. You have to be fluid but solid. And look where you want to hit; imagine there’s a bull’s-eye right there, just for you.”

Warm lips pressed to Kyle’s neck, sending a shiver throughout his body that Dalton must’ve felt if the deep chuckle was any sign.

“Now move with me,” Dalton said, his back hand wrapping around the cue and Kyle’s own hand while his other arm pressed all the way against Kyle’s. He leaned in, and Kyle leaned with him, his eyes set on the spot Dalton told him to focus on, and when Dalton stroked forward, cue driving toward the ball, Kyle moved with it, watching as the cue drove into the sweet spot he had picked and caused a clatter of balls to disperse around the green.

“Good, very good,” Dalton hummed.



"Dalton." A familiar voice came from behind them, and Kyle felt the tension seeping back into his body as they turned together toward the source of the voice.

It was Billy, not necessarily looking angry, but certainly not happy either. "You—You two, ah, know each other?" Kyle asked, his voice wavering.

"Yeah, Dalton's my brother," Billy answered, and Kyle could feel Dalton tighten behind him, their bodies still pressed close.

"Oh, shit. Man, I'm sorry." Kyle moved to pull away, but Dalton stopped him, his hand on Kyle's hip.

"Nah, it's all good. I was just showing him how to play some pool, Billy." Dalton finally stepped away from him, walking toward his brother and giving him a hug. "It's good to see you."

Something seemed to change in that moment, and Billy's stern expression eased slightly. "Yeah, it's good to see you too, Bro." He clapped Dalton's back, their embrace strong and weird, considering they were brothers who lived in the same city.

They spoke in hushed tones when they stepped away from each other, Billy's face spelling concern for a moment, and then something that looked a lot like anger, before Dalton held his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "It's okay. Really, I'm doing good." Billy didn't look all too sure of that statement, but managed a smile before looking back to Kyle.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm about to head out, but we'll see you tomorrow at work," he said, gesturing over his shoulder to where Casey stood, purse in hand.

"Yeah, of course," Kyle answered, still confused by the entire interaction, if not the entire night.

"Dalton." Billy again turned to his brother, a somewhat sad smile on his face. "I hope to see you around." He again seemed hesitant with his words, like saying them would jinx him.

Dalton, unlike his brother, was firm in his answer. "Yeah, of course. I'll be in touch."

Billy walked back toward Casey, who waved at Kyle and didn't seem at all confused by the exchange, not like he was.

A few moments had passed when Dalton spoke again, his confidence back and unmistakable. "You want a beer?"

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Kyle wasn't sure how long they had been sitting in a shady corner of the bar, or how many beers Kyle'd gone through (or when Dalton had quietly requested that the bartender switch Kyle over to water instead), but suddenly it was nearly one a.m. and he had a six o'clock wake-up call.

It had been fun, talking to Dalton, *flirting* with Dalton. At some point in the night, Dalton's buddies came over and introduced themselves before heading out, claiming their wives would miss them if they stayed out much longer, when Kyle was pretty sure they actually missed their wives more than anything.

Dalton had asked him a lot of questions, not bothered by the short responses he originally got from Kyle. Eventually, the answers grew, and Kyle was practically telling the guy his life story—about how he was raised by a single mom who kicked ass, and that his older sister was in the Navy, somehow being super-mom all while serving her country.

He talked about Portland, and how coming out in a city known for its quirk wasn't nearly as hard as he had thought it would be at age fourteen, especially since his mom already knew, but refused to clue him in on the matter. They'd laughed when he told Dalton what his mom had said when he finally came out. *"Kyle, sweetie, if there's one thing I've learned with your sister, it's patience. This is something you had to figure out on your own, I only hoped it'd be before you were forty and still a virgin."*

The conversation was nice and easy, but anytime Kyle would try to ask Dalton about his childhood or life in general, there was a change in tone. Dalton would brush it off, or suddenly find another "interesting" topic to ask Kyle about. Still, it had been the best night Kyle'd had in a long time, certainly since moving to Cleveland.

"I hate to do this, but I've got work in the morning." Kyle's voice betrayed his actual disappointment, and Dalton nodded in agreement, giving a half-smile.

"Me too. If I'm late, the boss will kill me."

Dalton walked Kyle out to where he'd parked his car, a single street light peeking over the parking lot and illuminating their steps.

"Do you want a ride home? I mean—" Kyle started, blushing in embarrassment for what it sounded like he was suggesting.

“No, I don’t live far from here. The walk is good for me,” Dalton answered, taking a step toward Kyle. “But I’d like to see you again.” Dalton had Kyle against the driver’s side door now, their chests close enough together to feel the rhythm of their hearts and the inhale of each other’s breaths.

“I’d like that, too.” Kyle looked up at Dalton through half-lidded eyes. He wasn’t sure who moved first, or how the distance dwindled so easily, but the next thing he knew, Dalton’s lips were pressed against his, and Dalton’s eager tongue traced the seam, dancing delicately until Kyle’s lips parted in invitation.

It was a slow, burning kiss, filled with promise and desire. The attraction between them was clear, but with territory still uncharted, and a heavy heart, Kyle pulled back, his hands framing Dalton’s face.

They looked at each other in silence, holding their glances like hands with fingers entwined. “How about tomorrow?” Kyle asked, and Dalton’s smile was all the answer he needed.

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If asked what he thought of fate or destiny, Kyle probably would’ve laughed. It was silly to put his faith in something so frail and intangible, like throwing a coin in a fountain and assuming the cure for cancer would just appear because of his one small action. He preferred numbers. Quantifiable little digits that always made sense. Not like fate or destiny, or God forbid, love.

With Dalton, though, things were different. It wasn’t a simple dance of flirtation or just two guys having fun with each other. There was something more. That ridiculous, intangible thing that made Kyle uncomfortable with romanticized concepts also made him ache when he thought of Dalton. The somewhat mysterious, but incredibly confident man who held Kyle in his hands like a cue, moving him at his will.

The next day they met at a small coffee shop. The place was quiet; a nice departure from the hectic Starbucks he often had to visit at some point during his lunch break just to get through the day. Like the night before, they sat and spoke for hours on end, until finally the petite barista who served them each three cups of whatever random concoction she had magically created had to come up to their table and tell them that the coffee shop was closing for the night.

The pattern continued for well over a week. They would see each other after work, usually grab a bite to eat or take a walk through the busy and thriving

streets of Cleveland. If they didn't see each other, they'd talk on the phone or exchange a slew of ridiculous text messages with enough emoticons to make up for half the teen population. It was absurd and fun and everything that Kyle had not expected to find when he moved to Cleveland.

Dalton had visited his house on two occasions, each time ending in a mess of tongues and hands, clinging to each other. It always stopped too soon for Kyle, thanks to the early mornings that work demanded of him, and oftentimes Dalton had a job site to be on the next morning too. It wasn't perfect, but it worked.

One night, about two weeks after they had met, Kyle picked up Dalton from a bus stop. He'd offered to stop by Dalton's house, made it clear that it was no problem, but Dalton insisted that they meet here and go from there.

Dalton looked good, his black button-up pressed and clearly just washed. He was wearing dark wash jeans that fit perfectly to his body, which Kyle knew from his own hands-on experience was just as cut and muscular as it appeared.

"Turn left here," Dalton directed. He was taking Kyle to a restaurant in Ohio City. It was a little place that specialized in burgers and had the most amazing Cajun fries, or at least that was what Dalton told him.

They parked the car on a side street; the houses lining it were old, their brick facades a deep red. Many of them had little details that gave away their age, like weatherworn wrought iron fences and stained glass windows that the fading sunlight danced off of.

On the outside, the place seemed to literally be a hole-in-the-wall, but with Dalton's hand resting at the small of his back and pushing him forward, they entered the building.

At first it matched its exterior, narrow and a bit dark, but as the waiter led them through the heart of the restaurant and to the back, it opened up into a beautiful patio-like setting. The ceiling was all latticework windows, and in the middle of the room was a spiral staircase, decorated with small candles and flowers all the way up to a door at the top.

It was charming and unexpected, just like the man before him. "Wow, Dalton. This is amazing."

Dalton smiled at him, practically beaming. They sat and ordered, and for the first time since they'd met, Dalton spoke a little of himself.

"This is really great. Do you come here a lot?" Kyle once again threw him a line, a way to easily open up, and as he had become accustomed to, expected

that line of questioning to be turned down, pushed aside like some forgotten bag of trash.

“No, not really.” Dalton paused, staring at his plate as if it would give him words. “I mean, I’d like to. I love it around here. But... well, you’ve probably deduced that I don’t have a car.” An unfitting color of red rose to Dalton’s cheeks with embarrassment, and Kyle reached across the table to squeeze his hand. He had figured as much. Between Dalton walking everywhere and the way he had hinted that it would be best if Kyle drove. “I mean, I have my license... just, you know. Cars are expensive.”

Kyle wanted to say something, to offer more comfort than with just a squeeze of his hand or by rubbing his thumb against Dalton’s palm. He wanted to tell Dalton there was no shame in not having a vehicle, that lots of people didn’t. This lack of confidence didn’t fit the man he’d gotten to know over the past few weeks, not at all. And he wanted to comfort him, make it all better right away. But he didn’t. Instead, he waited, watching the emotions and hesitation dance across Dalton’s handsome, sun-kissed face.

“I just—it sucks, having to ask one of the guys to pick me up every day. And not being able to take you out. That’s not right. I like you, Kyle, I want to take you places, not make you take me there.” Dalton let out a deep breath, looking up at Kyle briefly before continuing. “And construction is hard work. And I don’t mean physically, I mean... I live in fucking Cleveland. Winter in Cleveland and construction do not exactly line up. Sometimes I go months without getting paid.”

Kyle finally stopped him, bringing his hand to cup Dalton’s chin and tip it so that he was forced to look at Kyle when he spoke. “We’re here, aren’t we? Doesn’t matter who drove. And I like you, too. A lot. Let’s just take it a day at a time, okay? I’m not going to ditch you because you’re in construction and work is hard to come by thanks to three feet of fucking snow, or however much you all get around here.”

He smiled at Dalton, and finally the other man seemed to relax a bit. He nodded his head. “Yeah... yeah, you’re right. Sorry. That was stupid of me, to dump all that shit on you.”

“It wasn’t stupid, Dalton. I want you to talk to me.”

Dalton cleared his throat before picking up a fry. “So, what do you miss most about home?”

And the topic was right back to Kyle, away from whatever dark corners Dalton thought he had.

“You mean besides my mom and our dog Lola? The forests. I used to hike through them for hours, just Lola and me. It’s beautiful. And the water... nothing quite like hiking in Portland.”

The mood lightened after that, and between the meal, the discussion, and sharing some amazing milkshakes that would have Kyle coming back to the restaurant, the night only made him more sure that he wanted to pursue something with Dalton—this kind, if somewhat lost and completely silly at times, man.

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There was something different when Kyle came into work the next week. It was a Monday, so as always, people were dragging, but Billy seemed especially drained. His face was pale, the tension clear on his face. And instead of waving good morning to Kyle like he always did, he looked away as soon as Kyle entered the room.

Casey seemed on edge too, but then again, Kyle suspected that was because she and Billy were attached at the hip. How some people were so blind to their “office romance” was a mystery to him, but it was obvious that whenever one was happy, the other seemed elated, and when one was down, well the other was at the bottom of the hole right there with them.

Still, if he had to pick one person to approach, it would be Casey, and after working on finishing a couple of files with her, he finally got up the courage to ask. And by finally, that meant he coughed a few times, kicked around the crunched-up paper at his feet that had missed the trash can, and looked away from her whenever she looked up until she finally said, “What the hell, Kyle?”

But it was an opening nonetheless, and unlike Dalton, he took it. “What’s up with you and Billy? I mean... God, this sounds so stupid when I’m not saying it in my head.” Kyle paused to collect his thoughts and looked up to find Casey with one eyebrow arched and her mouth slightly open, the corner curved upwards, like she was amused by his nervous antics. “Just—Billy’s been avoiding me all day. I went to get coffee earlier, and I swear he hightailed it out of there like his ass was on fire.”

Casey smiled at that before she answered, her voice soft, losing the rough tone that it had had in the past hour of their budgeting discussion. “He’s just struggling right now. I wouldn’t say it’s you.”

“Is it because I’m kind of dating his brother? I mean... sort of, we haven’t really talked about it, but I think we are.” If there was ever a time to hit one’s

head on a desk, Kyle thought that was now, in this moment when words spilled without his permission.

“Kyle, you’re a nice guy. Billy likes you. I like you. But you need to talk to Billy about this, not me.” She said it like it was final, the end of the conversation, and so it was. She picked up the sheet of paper they had scribbled on and looked back at her screen, scrolling through the excel spreadsheet. “So what are we missing? This isn’t adding up.”

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Kyle wasn’t quite... stalking Billy, not in the restroom. He really did have to go, and it just so happened that Billy had entered the same room a minute before. Coincidence, really. And if he had a choice, he certainly wouldn’t pick the men’s room as the place to corner the other man. There was something about urinating that was sacred, not to be disturbed. But hey, shit happens.

Billy was zipping up when he walked in. His coworker stopped halfway to the sink when he noticed Kyle, looking at him in the mirror as if he was going to be sick. Instead, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and proceeded to wash his hands. Rather thoroughly, Kyle noted.

“Okay, I know this is a really... weird time to approach you. But what’s up with you? I know I didn’t get the plague over the weekend, and I even wore that stupid Cavs hat you insisted on getting me.”

Billy turned to him, shaking his hands of the loose water. “There’s just a lot going on right now, Kyle. I don’t expect you to understand.” And his voice sounded as decrepit as he looked.

“Well, what did I do? You don’t seem to have a problem with that guy Joe from IT.” He knew it sounded silly the minute it left his mouth, but it went with the theme of the day, so he let it slide.

“Look... my brother—Dalton, he just... he has some issues, okay?” Billy took another deep breath before continuing, as if urging the air to give him strength. “You really need to talk to him about it, Kyle. It’s not my place.”

“But you made it your place when you decided to blacklist me, man.” Kyle didn’t know where the venom came from in his voice, but he felt it seep into his chest too. Not his place, but yet he put himself there? No.

Billy wouldn’t look him in the eye when he spoke. “Dalton doesn’t do things the easy way. Life wasn’t necessarily hard for us growing up, but he made it hard on himself. Have you even seen where he lives?”

“No,” Kyle replied. It didn’t seem to hit him until then that it was always Kyle’s place they would head back to. He had thought it may have to do with the insecurities of not having a car, but the more he sifted through his brain, the more he realized that Dalton had done everything and anything he could to keep Kyle at arm’s length.

“Just talk to him, Kyle. You have to. You’re a good guy, and I don’t want my brother’s problems to fuck with you.”

Billy stepped around him, running his still-damp hands under the dryer before turning back to Kyle. “But... when you do, just keep in mind that there’s always going to be promises and next times. He’s just not too good at keeping them.”

Kyle stood, confused, until the door of the bathroom shut, and he was alone with just his thoughts and questions.

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That confusion sat in his gut for two days, low and heavy like an unwanted guest that refused to leave. He didn’t want to doubt Dalton’s sincerity, to put him in a place where it felt like Kyle had turned against him. Sure, Dalton didn’t talk about his past, or even much of his present. He wasn’t the most forthcoming with things, but he’d never actually given Kyle a reason to question him. He was private, simple as that. Kyle respected privacy, he did; he just didn’t grow up with it quite the same way. His mother was always so open, so honest, and the tight-lipped Dalton was a conundrum to him.

And now, with Billy’s completely evasive answers, Kyle only had more questions and doubt—that stupid fucking doubt.

It was late on Friday when he called his mother. Still, he knew she’d be up. One of the good things about the time change was that eleven p.m. for him was “curl up at the TV with a glass of wine” time for his mom.

“Kyle! How are you?” He knew from the instant she answered the phone that she was happy to hear from him, even though he had called her on Sunday, like he did every week since moving to Cleveland.

“I’m okay, Mom. Just...” he paused, holding his cell phone tightly in his hand, which for some reason was sweaty, even in the coolness of his air-conditioned room.

“Kyle? What’s wrong?”



Most of the time he wanted to reply *It's nothing*, but she was his mom, and she always knew when nothing was really something. And he'd called her, after all.

"You know that guy I told you about, Dalton?" He heard her give the affirmative on the other end, then go quiet as she waited for him to continue. "Well, I told you I work with his brother, Billy—Yeah, Billy, the one who is dating Casey on the not-so-down-low," he answered her before she could get the question out of her mouth.

"Anyway, that's not the point. The thing is, he was acting really weird this week. Just not himself. So I kind of cornered him—I know, I know, it was a shitty thing to do." His mom huffed on the other line, and he could practically feel her smile through the phone. "But, well, Billy kind of said that Dalton has some 'issues', whatever the hell that means. Then he said I just had to talk to Dalton about it."

"And have you?" Ever the practical one, his mom asked it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"No," he said, his head hanging low as if his mom was really there, scolding him for his silliness.

"Well, then you have your answer, Kyle. You need to talk to him. If Billy didn't want to tell you, it's probably because it's personal, and you have to respect that, Kyle. The only thing you can do is talk to Dalton about this. You're a big boy, all grown up, living on your own. Surely talking to him can't be harder than moving across the country."

At this point, he wasn't so sure of that.

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After finishing the call with his mom, he texted Dalton:

*Want to hang out tomorrow?*

The reply was almost instant, as if Dalton was waiting by his phone.

*Yes! How does noon sound?*

Kyle scanned through his mental calendar, coming up blank.

*That works. Where do you want to meet?*

The response he got surprised him, and he couldn't help but smile when he read it.

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*I'll pick you up at your house.*

Tomorrow, no matter what, he was going to ask the tough questions. Or, at least, he was going to plan to ask the tough questions, and hope for the best.

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Kyle was changing his shirt, again, for maybe the fifth time, when a knock came at the apartment door. He looked to the clock, 12:01 p.m., right on time.

The nerves had been building in his stomach all last night, to the point where they almost swallowed him whole, and he had to get up to take a jog at six a.m., which was practically a sacrilege given that it was Saturday.

He'd showered twice, once after his jog and then again a couple hours later after he'd cleaned his bathroom, bedroom, and kitchen.

Whatever he had on at that moment, a black T-shirt and an old, but well-loved pair of jeans, would just have to work, as another knock sounded, this one more insistent. "Coming," he called, grabbing the jacket hanging over his couch before opening his door.

Dalton was there, a bright smile on his face. He seemed excited, but somehow a bit nervous, worry marring the edges of his lips just slightly.

"You ready to go?" The deep voice broke Kyle from his thoughts, and he found himself nodding, probably a bit like a bobblehead.

"Yeah, you bet. Let's go." He hoped his voice sounded more sure than he felt.

He locked up and followed Dalton out to the parking lot, where a large red truck was parked. "Borrowed it from Kev at work," Dalton said, anticipating the question that had been working its way up Kyle's throat. "But it has to be back by ten. Curfew and all that, apparently Kev's worried about it getting pregnant or some shit."

Kyle snorted as he got into the passenger seat, unable to hold back the smile and excitement that didn't quite mix with the still looming sense of dread.

"Where are we going?" Kyle asked as they pulled out onto the busy street.

"It's a surprise, but I think you'll like it," was the only answer he got before the topic changed, and they were on their way, to wherever and whatever Dalton had planned.

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It was a beautiful day. The sun was high in the sky, filtering through the trees that lined a small town on the outskirts of Cleveland. There were kids throwing footballs, people walking their dogs; it was truly a serene little place, hidden by its close proximity to the city. Almost like a jewel, hidden in a pile of rocks and dirt.

They drove on, past a few other small towns much like the first, until finally there was a thick layer of green lining the roads around them. The trees stretched into the sky, their branches like arms reaching toward the sun. The light flickered down, creating intricate patterns on the thin, paved walkways going through the trees, dancing across the ground in an eager display.

There was a small parking area to the side, just enough to provide a place for visitors to stop without disturbing too much of the natural habitat around it. Two other cars were there when they turned in and parked.

"This is beautiful. Where are we?" Kyle asked, still looking around at the densely packed woods.

"The Metroparks. I know it's not quite Portland, but you said you missed the forests... and well, this is kind of as close as we get here."

"No, this is perfect," Kyle said softly, just barely loud enough for Dalton to hear. He climbed out of the truck and spun around, the excitement overcoming him and blanketing the foreboding feeling he'd had earlier that day. It was temporary, a Band-Aid on a wound, really, but it would do for now.

They began to walk, with no particular goal in mind, just a curious sense of wonder carrying Kyle every step, Dalton following closely behind. They talked quietly, about life, and nature, and how much Kyle loved losing himself in the green and brown of the untouched world. Every once in a while they'd pass another person or two, sometimes walking their dog, or one time even someone on a horse, but ultimately, it was quiet and serene, a secret that the city had held from him.

"When we were little, my dad would take Billy and me out here after dinner a lot, just to walk. He always said it was important to understand your surroundings and appreciate the world." Dalton surprised Kyle with his stories. There was a clear sense of nostalgia, and the memories practically painted portraits in Dalton's words. He hadn't talked of his father before, but it was unmistakable in that moment how much the man meant to Dalton.

"What happened to him? Your dad, I mean." Kyle couldn't keep himself from wanting to delve deeper into this side of Dalton, the sentimental side that was so heavily shielded by his sense of confidence.

“He passed away when I was fourteen. Billy was twelve, then. Car accident... around here, actually.” Dalton paused, looking toward the road that was barely visible through the trees, a sadness settling across his face. “It gets dark out here at night, and sometimes the winding roads are a bit rough, even for people who know where they’re going.” Dalton looked back at Kyle, shaking his head, mostly to himself, before reaching to clasp Kyle’s hand, tangling their fingers together.

“He was coming home, and it was raining pretty hard, but he loved going through the Metroparks, even if it did add about ten minutes to his trip.” Dalton chuckled, squeezing Kyle’s hand and slowing his pace to a near standstill. “Someone from out-of-town wasn’t used to the roads, and they just... collided around a curve. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, really. Dad always said these roads were dangerous.”

Kyle felt his heart thud in his chest, a heavy rhythm that sunk deep into his bones. “Thanks for telling me,” he whispered and was pulled toward Dalton, heavy, tanned arms wrapping around his waist.

“Thanks for listening,” Dalton mumbled, closing the distance between them and pressing his mouth to Kyle’s. The kiss was tender, an exchange of words without any sound. Their tongues embraced, curving around each other as Kyle ran his hand through Dalton’s hair and down to the base of his neck, clutching at the heated skin there.

When they separated, the air between them didn’t seem to move, still holding their intimate exchange in its invisible hands.

“Let’s head back to the truck. I have one more thing I want to show you.” Kyle would’ve thought that words would break the spell between them, cause it to fizzle into nothing, but it didn’t. That thread that now connected them didn’t snap, but held strong.

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The thing that Dalton had to show him was a small beach, deep in the heart of the Metroparks. There was a dock off to the side and a small wall dividing the sprawling grass from the start of sand. It was clear that it was often used for special events, but today it stood mostly empty, a few people passing through on trails leading back into the trees.

“C’mon,” Dalton urged him, grabbing his hand. In his other hand was a small wicker basket, and a red and black plaid blanket was tucked beneath his arm.

Kyle followed him to the edge of the sand, where the cool water had tinged the light brown, leaving it looking almost burned, as if the water had kissed it with fire. Dalton spread the blanket out before settling down in the middle, patting the space to his left for Kyle to join him.

Once Kyle was settled, they took off their shoes, sticking their feet into the soggy sand. For many people, it may have felt gross, having sand outlining their feet and delving in between their toes, but for Kyle it was wonderful, like nature wrapping its arms around him.

“Whatcha got in that basket?” Kyle asked, resting himself against Dalton’s shoulder, their bodies meeting all the way down.

“Ah, that’s our lunch... dinner, linner?” Dalton laughed, pulling the basket to him and opening it to expose the contents.

Before Kyle could say anything, Dalton continued. “Now, I didn’t say I was much of a cook, but these here are some pretty kick-ass PB&J sandwiches, if I do say so myself. Made with premium Jiffy, and spread with Welch’s delectable strawberry jam.” He pulled out the sandwiches, which were in see-through bags. “And here, we have some awesome kettle cooked chips. I didn’t make these, but they are pretty awesome, too.”

Kyle snorted in response. “And how about for a drink?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Well here we have some grape juice, also pretty good. Also, it was on sale, and I’m a man who knows deals when he sees them.”

The laughter continued throughout their “linner”, more stories of Dalton’s childhood emerging.

“And this one time, in Little League, I was so ready to go, you know? Pumped for the game. I hadn’t quite hit my growth spurt then, but I could tell it was coming. But, anyway, here I am, in left field. This monster of a kid, I think his name was Bucky or some shit, comes up and just whacks the ball. It’s heading in my direction, and I practically pissed myself in excitement.” He paused to laugh, shaking his head at himself, a gesture that Kyle had often seen him do. “And the ball is coming. I’ve got my mitt up, and I’m running toward it, and I’ve got this. It’s mine. And the next thing I know I’m getting hit right between the eyes. I fell down, freaking spread-eagle, and my coach came out on the field and told me right then that my baseball career days were numbered.”

It was perfect, the best date Kyle had been on, but in the back of his mind, he knew he still had to keep his promise to himself.

They had just finished eating and were lying back on the blanket when the words slipped out. "Can I ask you something, Dalton?"

"Yeah, of course." The man next to him seemed so relaxed, his guard down, and Kyle hated the feeling he got from knowing he was probably about to screw that all up.

"Well, I was talking to Billy the other day..." Dalton's smile fell with the words, tumbling faster than Kyle had imagined possible. "He um—he said I should talk to you about some things—said there were things I needed to know, but had to ask you about."

Dalton abruptly sat up, leaving Kyle staring at his tense back. "So this is you asking?" Dalton's voice dropped, sadness seeping into his voice, unlike the sadness of earlier when remembering his father. This sadness was different, lonelier somehow. It held no hope, only dread.

"Yeah. I guess I am." It was too late to back down now, so Kyle pushed forward, finding himself looking off across the lake at no particular thing, lost.

"He's right. You do deserve to know. But Kyle, when I told you I liked you before, I wasn't kidding. I do. I just... I don't want to ruin *this*, whatever this is, with my past."

Kyle sat up then, pressing his shoulder back against Dalton's, right where it seemed to belong. "If it'll help me understand you, then I want to know." It sounded clichéd, stupid even, but it was the truth.

"Yeah, okay." Dalton took a deep breath, looking anywhere but at Kyle. "When I was sixteen, I got in with a bad crowd. I did some things I'm not proud of, and I made choices that I have to live with." His fingers closed into a fist at his side, begging to be held, and Kyle grasped on, offering what little support he could, much like at the restaurant weeks before.

"So, I ended up doing drugs. I'm not talking like a little marijuana here or there, I was hooked on some pretty tough shit. I was in over my head. That's what I was." Again, he shook his head, this one much more tight and self-deprecating than any time before. "My life went to hell. And it's not like I had a bad life to begin with. Yeah, I missed my dad, but my mom's a really great person, and Billy was always pretty cool too. I don't know. Somewhere along the line, I just lost all of that."

There were a few minutes of silence before Dalton continued. "I was—am so ashamed, Kyle. I threw away a lot of good things so that I could get my

drugs. Nothing else mattered. It got to the point where all I had was a garbage bag with my clothes, my guitar, and whatever cash I managed to hang on to from odds-and-ends jobs to get some more heroin. And eventually, I even had to sell my guitar.”

Dalton finally turned, pulling their connecting hands into his lap. “I went through so many times of quitting, and thinking that was it. I was done for good. But this last time, I don’t know. I feel like this is really it.”

The earnestness in his eyes cut Kyle to the bone, seeping throughout every inch of his body. Billy had said that Dalton made promises he couldn’t keep, and maybe this was one of those times, but dammit, Kyle wanted to believe him, *needed* to believe him.

“How long have you been clean?” he asked, holding Dalton’s gaze.

“Three months, two weeks, five days.” A small smile crossed Dalton’s face for just the smallest of moments, a sense of pride along with it. “I know it doesn’t sound like much, but it’s the longest I’ve gone.”

Kyle didn’t know how to respond, wasn’t sure quite what one would say to that. He’d never dealt with addiction before; he’d never had to worry about someone falling back into old patterns and destroying themselves, not like Billy had meant with the few words he’d said to Kyle.

When Kyle didn’t respond, Dalton spoke, as if the silence caused him discomfort or pain. “I know it’s a lot to take in. But I’m really working on things now. I love working with the construction crew. They’re great. And I’ve been saving money to get a place—”

“A place? What do you mean?” Kyle interrupted him.

“I’ve been living in this homeless men’s shelter. It’s... it’s not a great place to be. But we get a bed and a small room. I didn’t want you to have to go there, or know that about me. But I didn’t expect to like you as much as I do, and now you have to know.”

“So that’s why you never invited me over and wouldn’t let me pick you up?”

“Yeah. It was shitty of me to keep it from you, but I want to be different with you. I don’t want anything between us to get fucked up by my past, and I sure as hell don’t want you to deal with my mistakes.”

It was all so honest, every word that Kyle heard. There was no denying that Dalton believed it, believed that *this* time was different for him. Kyle just

wasn't so sure if he could do it; potentially risk all he stood for, all he'd worked for, and gamble on this one person. But Dalton was right—they did have something, something Kyle felt was worth that risk. He just had to have a little faith in Dalton, take a leap, and hope for the best.

“Okay,” he said, a smile breaking across his face. “Yeah, let’s do this.” Do what, he wasn’t sure, but whatever *this* was, it held a sort of promise he’d never encountered before, a possibility that seemed so wild. He didn’t love Dalton, not yet, but he could, and that intangible thing that scared him so much pushed him on, for better or worse.

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They stayed out at the beach for a long time, people passing them by in waves. Mostly, it was quiet, peaceful—just them, the water, and the feeling of complete serenity. It was a feeling Kyle wasn’t necessarily used to, completely foreign in how it sat at the base of his spine. It felt a little like sitting on a merry-go-round, spinning to the sound of laughter and joy. Strange, but not unwelcome.

Between kisses they talked, shared little pieces of their lives. Dalton still shied away from some of his darkest moments, that much was clear to Kyle. Though he casually brushed over the topics like he was talking about weather, it didn’t escape Kyle that Dalton’s time on the streets had been a horror, or that he blamed himself for ruining his relationship with his family. When they were on the verge of something that was just too much, bared too many scars, they sat in silence. There were times for humor to lighten the load of the world, and there were other times when humor would only make it seem so trivial and wrong. This was one of those times.

The sun had set, painting a vibrant shade of purple and orange behind the trees and beyond the lake, and finally they made their way to the truck, hands clasped.

The drive home remained quiet, their hands still entwined over the center console. By the time they drove up to Kyle’s apartment, it was nearing nine p.m., and somehow, the past few hours had simply vanished. His concept of time when he was with Dalton had faded, the tick of a clock no longer mattering in an otherwise busy world.

“Time to get baby home to her dad. Better hope he doesn’t greet me with a shotgun,” Dalton said as he turned to Kyle, the streetlight illuminating the smile on his face.



“We wouldn’t want that.” Kyle laughed, squeezing Dalton’s hand once more before reaching for the door. “Do you want me to follow you and give you a ride back?” Kyle asked. He wasn’t sure how far out Kev’s place was, and maybe it sounded a bit like another ploy to try and see inside the four walls that Dalton called home, but mostly he just didn’t want the night to end.

“Nah, it’s okay. It’s a nice night out. I can walk home.” With that, Dalton leaned forward, pressing his lips to Kyle’s. The kiss was meant to be a simple good-bye, but lasted much longer, the tangle of tongues hard to resist when Dalton’s mouth tasted like peanut butter with a tinge of sweetness mixed in.

“Mm, okay. I really gotta go now,” Dalton said as he pulled away, his hesitation loud and clear in every small move.

Kyle went to open the door, and as he stepped out, he turned back, his heart beating a little faster than normal. “Thanks, Dalton. This has been the best day I’ve had since I moved here.”

Dalton nodded in response, and Kyle could still feel his eyes on his back as he walked to the door of his section. The sound of the engine didn’t come until he was inside, out of sight.

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Kyle looked at the clock, stirred from his sleep by a knock at the door. The digits read 12:32 a.m., an ungodly hour for some random guest.

He managed to crawl from the bed, his hair skewed to the left from how he’d slept, the white shirt he was wearing in tatters from years of use. Between his hair, the hole in his shirt that revealed his entire armpit, and no doubt the scruffy look of sleep set in his face, he was sure any guest would flee once he opened the door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. Hold your damn horses,” he grumbled, rubbing his eyes with one hand as he unlatched the lock and pulled open the door with his other.

Dalton stood on the other side, his coy smile doing nothing to hide the desire etched in every line of his body. “I’m sorry. I should’ve called, but I was walking home and—”

He was abruptly cut off when Kyle pulled him into the apartment, turning him toward the bedroom and pushing the door shut with his foot. The latch clicked against the frame, but between the delectable man in front of him and a lock, there was no real competition for his attention.

Kyle led, or more accurately, he pushed Dalton into his bedroom and back against sheets that were rumpled from his own sleep.

He crossed his arms and pulled the shirt from his body, the slow movement purposeful and teasing. When the shirt was tossed somewhere, probably onto his dresser if the sound of pictures falling was any indication, he crawled over Dalton. The man was just staring, practically gaping at Kyle.

“Well? Are you waiting for a written invitation, or...?” Kyle teased.

That was all it took for Dalton. He reached up, his hands digging into Kyle’s hair, the hold tight as he brought Kyle against his chest.

“Mmm, too many clothes,” Kyle mumbled between kisses, spit slick between them and coating his lips.

Their hands met, working in unison to pull Dalton’s own shirt off, then unbutton the jeans. That was a bit harder with two sets of fingers, both trying to dig at the same little space. But somewhere between the door and the bed they’d left their common sense on the floor, likely laying next to another random item of clothing. Efficiency was a foreign concept. It didn’t matter how, as long as it was *now*.

Finally Kyle managed to pull Dalton’s jeans down, the other man’s hips coming up from the bed to assist. A soft thud came twice as Dalton kicked off his shoes, and finally it was just them. Kyle in his stupid plaid boxers, Dalton in boxer briefs that fit him like a dream, molding perfectly to the heavy curve of his cock.

“God, Dalton. You’re beautiful,” he whispered, crawling down Dalton’s body just enough to be able to comfortably lick a line over the hem of Dalton’s briefs. He explored, encouraged by the deep, throaty sounds as he licked around Dalton’s belly button and up to his nipples. He licked the left first, alternating between sucking on it and then biting it lightly, until the little bud stood up, a deep violet color against Dalton’s skin. He repeated the same to Dalton’s right nipple, all the while rolling his body against Dalton’s hip, humping against the firm body.

“Kyle—” Dalton gasped, murmuring words that didn’t quite make sense.

A wicked sense of satisfaction filled Kyle to the core, and he couldn’t help but smile as he pushed himself back down, between Dalton’s now spread legs.

He pushed his face into Dalton’s crotch, rubbing his nose along the outline of Dalton’s cock, and then brushing his cheek against him.

Dalton breathed in loudly when Kyle finally opened his mouth over the fabric-covered cock, licking and sucking through the cotton.

“Please—Jesus. Oh God,” Dalton huffed. “Please.”

Kyle was only happy to oblige. He pulled the fabric from Dalton’s hips, pushing it down just far enough to get to his cock, thick and red, with a drop of precum seeping from the tip.

Kyle moaned at the sight, licking the underside of Dalton’s cock, all the way to the tip where he sucked it into his mouth, pulling the bead of precum forth and savoring it as it hit his tongue.

He looked up, his eyes meeting Dalton’s own desperate gaze, the beautiful color darkened like an ocean. “I’ve got you,” Kyle spoke, his voice hushed. Somehow it meant more than just this and now, but he didn’t give Dalton time to ponder it, as he swallowed him down, slowly taking inch after inch of Dalton’s cock into his mouth.

He gagged as it reached the back of his throat, his eyes watering with the sensation. For just a moment, he pulled back, one of his hands coming up to pull at Dalton’s nipples, while the other cupped his balls, rolling them in his palm. Then, when Dalton was arching up, chanting Kyle’s name like some kind of prayer, Kyle took his cock back in until his nose touched Dalton’s pubic hair. The gagging sensation remained, a burning in his eyes a constant reminder of what he was doing, pleasant and driving Kyle mad.

“Fucking *fuck*, Kyle. Fuck.” Dalton’s hands had long ago found their way into Kyle’s hair, holding it as he bobbed. One hand slid down, over Kyle’s face. The fingers danced across Kyle’s lips, pressing where they curved around Dalton’s cock, and over his cheek, rubbing the obvious shape inside Kyle’s mouth. Then, suddenly, he pulled Kyle back.

“Not yet,” Dalton groaned, pulling Kyle to him. They kissed for a moment more, as if trying to delve deeper into each other than humanly possible. “Do you have one?”

It took Kyle a moment to realize what “one” was, his brain a jumbled mess.

Instead of answering, he reached over them, pulling the drawer of his bedside table open and feeling inside, finally managing to pull out a small tube of lube and a condom.

Dalton reached for the items, but was stopped by Kyle. “No, let me,” Kyle said, sitting across Dalton’s stomach. The click of the cap was loud, even in the noise of their own breathing.

Kyle slathered his hands with the lube, reaching to coat Dalton's cock first. "When I'm ready, I won't want to wait," he said, as if it held the answer to the world's most confusing questions. His hands slipped across the package as he tried to get to the condom, and just when Dalton again tried to help, Kyle put the package to his mouth and tore it open.

"Got it," he whispered, smiling down at Dalton.

Carefully and deliberately, he rolled the condom down Dalton, before reaching back behind himself. He groaned as he pushed the first finger in, circling it around his hole and delving it back in.

He was just pushing a second finger in when Dalton spoke. "Turn around, I want to see." It wasn't a request.

Without removing his fingers, not allowing the pleasure to deaden for a moment, he turned and spread his legs so that Dalton had a perfect view. Almost instantly, Dalton's hands came up and pulled his cheeks apart, further exposing Kyle.

"Keep going," Dalton said, authority present in his voice.

Kyle fucked himself against the two fingers, moaning and aching to reach for his cock. The third finger was overwhelming for a moment, like a heavy weight taking his breath.

"Enough." Kyle obeyed, despite the overwhelming feeling of loss when he pulled his fingers out.

It was seamless, the way Dalton rearranged them. He pushed Kyle to his back and stared down at him, reaching to bring Kyle's legs over his broad shoulders.

It was slow, so fucking slow, when Dalton finally pushed in. Slow and smooth and unbelievably torturous. He reached over Kyle's head, their fingers entwining there. It seemed like hours had passed by the time Dalton was fully seated, their bodies pressed so close that Kyle could feel Dalton's heart pound when he pressed their lips together, practically folding Kyle in two.

The first few thrusts were tentative, like exploring something new, trying to memorize it for another time. Then, eventually, Dalton seemed to break. Gone were his nerves, and in their place was the confident man Kyle had first met. His thrusts were sure, decisive, and every twist of his hips seemed to have some fucking purpose, one that Kyle was sure had to be to drive him insane.

The bed creaked beneath their weight, lightly tapping against the wall at first, then knocking, and finally, pounding. The quake of the steel moved with Kyle's heart, throbbing at a persistent rhythm.

"More, more," Kyle repeated, and Dalton so generously gave. With one small angle of his movement, Dalton hit a spot inside Kyle that lit up the room, driving his vision to a milky white and pushing the sounds of his moans out louder and more scrambled.

Dalton's hand came around Kyle's cock, freeing Kyle to grab at the headboard, careful not to crush his fingers in the haste of their movements.

He pulled once, twice, three times, and Dalton drove in deeper, harder than before, pressing in like he wanted to crawl inside. Kyle could barely make out the shape of his face, just able to see his mouth wide open in a silent scream. That was all it took for him to come, the orgasm seeping through his pores like static, his skin tingling as he painted their chests white.

He wasn't sure how long they stayed there like that, Kyle's legs just barely falling off Dalton's shoulders, Dalton's face pressed into the crease of his neck, heavy breathing the only sound in the room.

"Jesus fuck," Dalton spoke, his voice harsh like he'd had one too many smokes. There was a heaviness around them, a closeness that seemed to stitch them together in that very moment. Intimacy, Kyle decided it had to be. Intimacy like he'd never known before.

He watched, transfixed as Dalton brought his cum-coated hand to his mouth. Finger by finger, he licked Kyle's cum from his hand, looking as if he was starving for it. Then, with a wide smile, he laughed.

"Cherry, Kyle? I didn't take you for a flavored lube kind of guy."

Kyle snorted, his face flushing a deep red. "Shut up. It was on sale."

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## Part II

A sense of normalcy and routine took over Kyle's life. There was a pattern to his days, something reliable and grounded, something to build his life on. For all the times he was told he was crazy for moving to Cleveland, for *wanting* to, it was all worth it. He was making Cleveland his home, but more importantly, he was making Dalton a part of his life.

Most weekends they lazed around Kyle's apartment, alternating between the bed and the couch, somehow finding time to eat in between. In the past two months of taking a chance on Dalton, he'd learned a lot, both good and bad. Good: Dalton made a mean breakfast, a feast. If he woke up before Kyle, and he usually did, Kyle would wake up to the smell of bacon, and come out to have his small kitchen table covered with plates of pancakes, eggs, toast... all the fixings for the perfect start to the day. Bad: Dalton hated doing the dishes, especially after finishing making enough food for both of them and the rest of the complex. Good: He more than made it up to Kyle afterwards, when they once again found their way into bed.

In all, the good outweighed the bad, and little by little, Dalton was becoming more permanent. First a pair of work shoes by the front door, then socks and underwear in the top drawer, next to Kyle's, and finally a toothbrush that magically appeared on the bathroom sink one afternoon.

It was... nice. And somehow, even Billy seemed to be warming up to the idea of having his brother around. There was always a lingering doubt there, clear in the hesitant way Billy would make plans with Dalton or hug him a little loosely. It was obvious to Dalton too; and some nights he'd lay awake, holding Kyle close like a life preserver that had promised safety, until finally he dozed off or got up and left for an hour or two. Kyle never knew where he went, didn't ask. Dalton was the kind of person who just needed space at times, room to breathe and to scream and to let everything out. And Kyle, well, he didn't always understand, but he accepted it.

Before Kyle knew it, the greens and bright colors of mid-summer had faded quickly into deep shades of browns and reds, with hints of yellow curling along fallen leaves. Soon, those too faded, crinkling like aged paper and covered with thin layers of snow, first pristine white, and then darkened and marred by time. With the snow came the holidays, something so consistent and yet so new. Some traditions had made their way to Cleveland, others were left behind,

waiting to be replaced by new ones—new ones to be made with Dalton, Kyle hoped.

He had promised his mom that he'd come home for Thanksgiving. Being new at work put him at the bottom of the totem pole as far as vacation time, and with everyone vying for more free days around Christmas, Thanksgiving was his best bet for a flight home.

Dalton had been working longer hours the week leading up to Kyle's departure, coming in late and leaving early. It was apparently all part of the shifting jobs of construction that came with the winter. With their initial conversation about finding work in the winter months, and those that had followed as their relationship grew, Kyle was wary to ask for details, afraid to put pressure on Dalton when he was already putting so much pressure on himself.

It felt strange leaving at a time like this, when Dalton was uneasy, and Kyle was still getting his footing in the city, but he missed home—missed his mom, and Lola, and their small cottage that always smelled strangely like cinnamon, even in the peak of hot July afternoons.

The morning he left was remarkably ordinary. It was Saturday, too early for even the die-hard joggers to have made their way into the surrounding parks. Dalton got up early, made him a small breakfast, and kissed him greedily over the kitchen sink. The darkened snow had been covered with a new layer, sparkling white in the streetlights and hiding the mess beneath it. A familiar, completely ordinary day.

The drive to the airport was slow despite the clear streets, ice and snow enough to warrant caution. Their hands were clasped over the console, fingers wrapped tightly together. They'd planned it all out ahead of time, or Kyle had, at least. Dalton would drop him off and take his car to work for the next week, and Kyle would get a cab ride back to the apartment when he landed next Saturday morning. Plans normally made Kyle feel more safe and secure, but he somehow felt unsettled as they pulled up to the drop-off line.

Dalton was first out of the car, opening the trunk and retrieving Kyle's bags before he'd even exited the car. His speed wasn't the sign of being eager to get rid of Kyle, but instead, that of someone nervous to say good-bye.

"So this is it," Dalton said, the bags under his eyes telling of the nights he'd come home late, only to toss and turn for hours while Kyle lay awake next to him.

"I'll see you in a week. Don't sound so dramatic." Kyle's tone gave way, not quite emitting the playful tone he'd intended.

They were silent for a moment, the world on fast-forward around them. People coming, people going, the sound of a plane taking off. "I'm going to miss you," Kyle finally said, stepping closer to his lover.

"Me too." Dalton pulled him close, the kiss not greedy like the one earlier that morning, but softer and with more heart.

As it was, time didn't quite stop, and the clock ticked, forcing Kyle to pull back. "See you soon," he said, grabbing his luggage and reluctantly moving toward the automatic doors.

"Kyle," Dalton shouted behind him as the door opened in front of him.

He turned, watching as Dalton leaned against the car, playing nervously with the keys. The minute stretched beyond sixty seconds, and Dalton looked as if he had the cure to all the world's ills, before finally the look fell, and all he said was, "Have a good time with your mom."

He nodded, pushed out of his own daze by the people moving around him, bumping against him as they tried to get inside and out of the cold.

It wasn't until he was on the plane, staring out at the stark, white landscape as it began to soar that he felt a foreign pang in his chest, dizzying and intoxicating and maybe a little bit like love.

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The feeling stayed with him for most of the trip, a shadow that was there even when not in his conscious awareness. But like with most things, it dulled, never leaving but becoming less unsettling and more comfortable, like it belonged.

His mom met him at the airport, her arms opening as soon as he spotted her, wrapping him up tight. The entire drive home consisted of her filling him in on the neighborhood news. Who got a new dog, who got a divorce, who was expecting. Funny thing was, living where they did, their nearest neighbors were actually quite far away. His mom had apparently been attending yoga sessions in the town center, which she highly suggested to him. "I'm telling you, Kyle, I've never felt so young! I didn't even know I could get my leg there."

He buried his face in his hands, biting back laughter. It was good to be back, even better to be greeted by his eighty-pound dog, despite her pushing him back into the snow and getting them both soaked.



"So tell me about Dalton," his mom said later that night at dinner.

Granted, Kyle had already told her about Dalton a few hundred times since they started dating, but if his mom was good at anything, it was pretending she had selective memory, just so she could watch him as he said everything all over again.

"He's great, Mom." He took a bite of her famous (to him), super cheesy lasagna, blowing around it as it scalded his mouth.

She gave him a look, one he knew well. It was all wide blue eyes and an arched eyebrow, which in sum basically said, "*How many times do I have to tell you that food tends to be a bit hot when removed from the oven?*" The look came after she did indeed tell him just that about thirty times.

"And...?" she prompted further. Apparently his age-old bad habit hadn't distracted her from the subject at hand.

"And he's good to me. I feel like he always wants to make me smile and see me happy. Like, I don't know, me being happy is more important to him than anything else." He refused to look at his mother, eyes downcast at the steam coming from the melted cheese. "I think what I admire most about him is how shitty—uh, sorry, rough, his life has been and how he just keeps going. I don't know if I'd have been able to get through some of the things he has. Honestly, I don't think I'd want to."

"How do you feel when you're with him?"

Part of him wanted to answer with a childish, embarrassed groan that sounded a bit like *Mooooom*. But somehow, the embarrassment gave way to a lighter feeling. "Loved." Sure, he could go into detail, talk about how light and free he felt being with Dalton, how excited he was to get to see him at the end of a long day, but even all of those things couldn't quite capture how truly loved he felt. That alone hit him like a ton of bricks, the now-familiar ache in his chest throbbing.

"And do you love him, Kyle?" His mom's voice was soft, patient, and understanding.

"I think I'm beginning to."

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The revelation was still seeping in when he called Dalton that night. He settled against his pillows, staring out at the walls of his childhood room. In the

corner was an old soccer trophy, a few other little tokens of his youth scattered on either side of it. All things he was once so stupidly proud of.

It was ten at night in Portland, nearly one in Cleveland, but recently between coming to Kyle's late and an increase in his walks or whatever he did in the early morning hours, it wasn't unusual for Dalton to still be out. But with each ring of the phone he felt a childish hope that Dalton would answer.

"Kyle," Dalton answered, his voice heavy with what sounded like sleep.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be home yet," Kyle said. He was unable to resist the smile that hearing Dalton's voice brought to his face.

"I wasn't feeling too well after I dropped you off this morning. Ended up leaving work early."

"Are you okay?" Worry was evident in Kyle's tone. He wished he could reach through the phone, across the thousands of miles to touch Dalton, to comfort him.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." The answer was less than firm but left no room for questioning.

They talked for a while longer, Dalton's voice growing heavier with the passing minutes.

"I should get some sleep," Kyle said, more so meaning that Dalton should be the one getting sleep. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay? And Dalton? I miss you."

"Me too."

Kyle put his phone on the bedside table, staring up at the ceiling, then again around the room. He could smell the cinnamon and hear his mom moving down the hall to her room. And in that moment it hit him. Somewhere in between the chaotic days of work, when he was drowning in numbers and reports, and the time he spent with Dalton, things had changed. This place would always be a part of him, but home—that was in Cleveland, with Dalton.

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The days that followed were filled with fun. It was nice to be able to walk aimlessly, not having to worry about cars or other people, and having Lola at his side as he ran through the snow-packed woods made it all the better. His mom had him doing various things throughout the house and outside it, somehow finding someone to visit nearly every day.

In that time, Kyle's worry for Dalton grew. They spoke on the phone every night, but Dalton's voice seemed heavier and heavier each time. It was like the weight of the world was on Dalton's shoulders, pulling him down. And there was nothing Kyle could do, not from Portland.

Wednesday morning was especially busy. The day before Thanksgiving always was. His mom would run around, barking orders about oven temps and prep time. Thanksgiving with his mom was more than just a day filled with food; it was pretty much a forty-eight hour celebration of cooking and eating. With everything going on around him, Kyle didn't think much about not getting a response to his good morning text to Dalton, busy helping with yet another pie crust for the third flavor of pie his mom had decided to make (because she just couldn't pick between apple, pumpkin, and blueberry).

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he grumbled, trying to pull it from his pocket with just his pinkie and his thumb, the rest of his hand caked in batter.

"Shit." He dropped the phone on the crowded table before making his way to the sink to wash his hands.

The phone stopped ringing as he dried them, but started again just as he set down the towel. Whoever was calling was persistent; he'd give them that.

The caller ID surprised him. "Billy?" he answered, his mind busy searching for why Billy would be calling him now, with him knowing that Kyle was in Portland.

"Kyle." There was something in Billy's voice that set off alarm bells, a heavy feeling of dread settling into Kyle's gut.

"What's wrong?" Kyle asked before Billy could continue.

"Listen, I don't know. I don't even know if anything *is* wrong." Billy sounded frustrated, borderline angry, even. "But have you talked to Dalton today? His work called me. Something about him not coming in to pick up his last paycheck the other day. They wanted to know where they could send it." There was a pause, and Kyle was sure Billy was taking the time to collect himself on the other end of the line. "Do you know what's going on?"

Kyle had no idea where to even start. Last paycheck? That made no sense to him. Dalton hadn't mentioned leaving the construction company, or even being out of work for a while... but then again, maybe it did make sense. Dalton's long disappearances at night, the near-constant look of desperation that had settled onto his face.

“Shit. I’ll try and call him.”

Kyle went to hang up, but Billy’s voice stopped him. “Hey Kyle, just remember whatever happens isn’t your fault, okay?” And the distinct click of the line going dead followed.

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Kyle was frantic in his attempt to reach Dalton. Two calls to Dalton’s cell phone, two messages left, five texts, no reply, four more calls, still no answer, and on and on. The sense of panic clouded his judgment, until finally he called the construction company Dalton worked for.

It was the day before a major holiday, but Dalton had always said that construction seemed busiest when all others were quietly tucked in their homes or with relatives. Still, the woman who answered was far too happy in contrast to the dread filling Kyle’s every fiber.

“McGregor and Sons, Vanessa speaking.”

“Yes, hi, this is Kyle Black. I’m, uh, *shit*. I’m Dalton’s boyfriend. Is Dalton on-site by any chance?”

The tone in her voice changed almost immediately, less chipper and more concerned. “Dalton hasn’t been in since early last week, Kyle. We had to let him go for the season. Not enough work for the entire crew.”

A chaotic explosion of expletives went off in his head, some making their way through the phone. “Sorry. I just—can you call his brother or me if you see him?”

“Sure, Kyle. But is everything all right?”

“I don’t know yet. I hope so.”

They ended the call, the new information alarming. He called Dalton again, and again, and again, until finally his mom came in the room, her apron caked with sugar and jam, and took the phone from his hands.

“I went upstairs and repacked your bag for you. I just have to wash my hands, and we will leave.”

Kyle stood stunned as the minutes passed. She was taking him to the airport, despite the mess in the kitchen and his promise to be home, she knew where he needed to be, even when he couldn’t put the pieces together himself.

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The airport was crowded beyond belief. It seemed like everyone was trying to get somewhere, all at the very last minute. A few of the planes heading out to Buffalo and other cities in the Snow Belt were delayed due to weather. By the time he reached the front of the line to purchase his ticket the relief he had felt that they had a place for him on the plane was short-lived, as the flight to Cleveland was grounded for at least another hour, thanks to the stupid fucking snow that Kyle had always found so beautiful.

His mother had left him off a while ago, worry in her bright eyes marring her pale face. He had hugged her tight, grasping on to her shoulders as if she were the only thing keeping him afloat. It seemed true, as he felt himself drowning further and further into his own horrifying scenarios of what had happened to Dalton, barely coming up for breath long enough to call Casey and ask her to call local hospitals.

Finally the plane boarded, and the lengthy trip back home was nothing like the one he took just days before. No, this one was like sitting and waiting to hear the worst news imaginable, or waiting for the blade of a guillotine to fall, all the while watching it dangle just over your head.

Landing in a connecting airport was even worse, anxiety heightened as he sat in the second plane. He wasn't even sure where he was, only that it was still too far from Cleveland, too far from Dalton.

When the pilot finally announced the descent to their destination, the relief mixed with his fear, a combination something akin to hard medicine and even harder alcohol. Dizzying, constant, like he was going to be sick.

He nearly forgot his luggage in an attempt to get out as quickly as possible. Gone was the carefully respectful man who waited for the people in front of him, and he was sure he might feel bad eventually for jumping in a taxi in front of a young couple, but not today.

Kyle gave the cabbie his own address, pulling out his phone. Everything seemed to be conspiring against him—his phone was on two bars of battery, traffic was hell, the drive took twice as long as it should have.

As soon as he was able to, he got out of the cab, shoving a wad of money the cabbie's way and grabbing his luggage before running to the door. Part of him hoped to find Dalton, curled in bed with a bad case of the flu or some other bug that left him out of order, the naïve part, but a part nonetheless.

That hope was quickly dashed when he pushed into his apartment. Everything looked just as he'd left it, with the exception of a couple of extra

dishes in the sink. The bed was unmade, the hamper nearly full. For as much as it looked like it was occupied, Kyle had an eerie sense that it felt unlivid in within the past few days.

He ran out to the parking lot, looking for his car. His stomach dropped when he saw it, snow-covered and clearly undriven. The area around it was barely touched, small animal prints the only sign of life.

It took an irritatingly long time to get the car clear, and it was bitter cold when he got in and pulled out onto the street. He drove around aimlessly for what felt like ages, pressing the brake whenever he saw someone with hair that curled around their ears or had broad shoulders and a steady walk. None of them were Dalton.

After about an hour, he found himself in the parking lot of an old factory, long ago shut down and forgotten. The building had windows that seemed to weep open, the brick a startling contrast to the frost that spiraled around broken glass. The building felt tired and aching, or maybe that was just him looking at the sad, decrepit building and somehow seeing himself.

The sound of his phone ringing shook him from his stupor, a fog of desperation crawling through his mind as he pleaded for Dalton to be on the other end. He didn't even look when he answered, "Hello?" He was sure every ounce of emotion read in his voice like a novel, word after word.

"Kyle." The voice was all wrong. Not comforting and deep, not the voice that made him feel warm and safe.

"Billy."

"Have you heard anything yet?" Billy asked. He sounded as tired as Kyle felt.

"No. I've been driving around, but I haven't seen him anywhere. I don't know what to do." The admission hurt him. Kyle liked answers, liked being able to put things in perfect order that made sense. None of this fit that.

"Okay. Did you check the bar?"

"Yes," Kyle groaned.

"What about his apartment?"

"Fuck. No." It seemed stupid that Kyle wouldn't have thought of that first, but for the past few months, Dalton had practically lived with him. They'd long ago dropped the topic of Dalton showing Kyle where he lived. It didn't seem to

matter anymore, or it didn't at the time. "I—I don't even know where it is, Billy. *Shit.*"

It was a miracle that he even heard the address that Billy rattled off, even more so that he drove there without incident, the ever-present dread thickening, wrapping its heavy arms around him and pulling him tight.

He stepped out of the car, looking at the building and life Dalton was so ashamed of. Unlike the building from earlier, this one wasn't worn from age, but from neglect. Trash littered the small area in front of the house; the door hung open, half off its hinge. Two men stood outside, smoking but not talking to one another.

Kyle approached them, uncaring of the neighborhood he was in, or that it was one that most people avoided at all costs.

"Can you tell me where Dalton's apartment is?"

The men laughed at his question, as if what he had asked was the most hysterical thing they'd ever heard.

"Dalton's *apartment* is up the stairs, second door on the right," one of the men answered. His voice was scarred by smoke, thready and uneven.

The stairs creaked with Kyle's every step. The walls were yellowed, wallpaper folding in on itself, even spiders fleeing the horrendous smell of piss and sweat.

He knocked on the door, unmarked except for scuffs at the bottom where it looked like someone had tried to kick it in. "Dalton. Dalton, are you in there?"

Kyle continued to pound on the door, twisting the handle, surprised when the door drifted open with a wretched screech.

The inside was even worse. Sparse in every way. There was an old card table with dirty plates on it, tilting with the weight. The kitchen area was caked in mold, a small guitar the only pristine thing in the open room. A door was open to the bathroom, a nauseating smell causing bile to rise in Kyle's throat. Finally, he turned, and in a just-hidden corner was a stained mattress, Dalton laying half on it, half off, his arm reaching out across the wooden floor, practically begging for Kyle's help.

He ran to Dalton, calling his name into what felt like a void. Dalton's eyes were cracked partly open, his irises blown wide. The sight was a living nightmare, Dalton's normally tanned face pale. The coolness of the room hit

Kyle suddenly, and he pulled Dalton into his lap, juggling with his phone to dial 9-1-1.

The conversation was a blur, and at one point, he let the phone drop as he held Dalton closer. He was still warm, just barely. His breathing was ghost-like, slow and nearly nonexistent.

"Dalton, baby," Kyle pleaded endlessly, bending forward to kiss Dalton's forehead, closing his eyes tight and willing it all to disappear. "Stay with me, okay? Just a little longer. You can do it." It was like a mantra, on and on. He wasn't sure when the paramedics arrived, hadn't registered the loud clatter of footsteps up the stairs and into the room, or the man's voice telling him to give them room.

The other paramedic pulled him from Dalton, away and further into the corner, the distance stabbing him over and over.

One of them injected something into Dalton, pulling free the band that had been wrapped around his upper arm and carefully avoiding the small pile of items at his side; a stark white cotton ball sitting next to a lighter and a stained spoon among the trash.

They worked quickly, leaving Kyle sobbing in the corner as they situated Dalton's body onto a stretcher, calling out vitals as they went.

The same one who had pulled Kyle from Dalton turned back to Kyle now. "We're going to carry him out now. Are you coming?"

Kyle nodded his head, following them down the stairs and out into a world that suddenly looked different. Gone was the pretty white snow, the calming noises of cars and people talking. Everything was loud and ugly and unbearable. Everything he had worked so hard for, everything he was, slowly slipped through his fingers, and he didn't do a thing to clutch them.

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He didn't remember the trip to the hospital, or when Casey and Billy arrived and told him they'd picked up his car. Time played endless games with him, drawing on impossibly long, the tick of a clock piercing his awareness.

Doctors came out periodically, going to families who would either sigh in relief or crumble in despair. There seemed to be no middle ground, and the pattern continued until finally a doctor approached them and spoke to Billy.

"We have him stabilized. The paramedics were able to administer Naloxone, but it appears that he had ingested some other substances as well,



which caused some problems with his heart. Luckily,” the doctor said, turning to Kyle, “you found him when you did.” It went without saying that if Kyle had been any later, the scene would’ve been different. He was kicking himself for not going there first, not realizing the obvious.

“Do you know what happened?” Casey asked beside him, her hand clutching Billy’s.

“How long has Mr. O’Brien been using?” the doctor asked.

“I don’t know, maybe eight years? Nine?” Billy answered.

“But he’s been—was clean for over eight months.” Kyle was quick to defend, the shock of the day still not quite registering.

“It’s likely that when he relapsed, he went back to injecting the same dose as he was previously using. This is very typical of many heroin overdoses we see. The user doesn’t account for their body’s response. It takes time to build up to tolerating such a high dosage, and when one relapses, their body doesn’t have that same level of tolerance.”

Every word felt so clinical, distant from him and reality. The images of the needle, rolled off to the side, the band around Dalton’s arm, the cracked sound his lips made when Kyle brushed his fingers across them. Pain blossomed in his chest, greater than ever before.

“I—I need to go,” he said to no one in particular, ignoring Casey’s plea for him to wait. His feet ran of their own accord, one in front of the other, until he was gripping onto a bench just outside the hospital, heaving for countless seconds.

“Kyle?” Billy’s hand caused him to jump forward, out of its reach. “Kyle, I’m so sorry.”

He finally looked up at Dalton’s brother, tears painting his cheeks and dripping into the snow. “Please don’t say it,” Kyle pleaded. *Please don’t say I told you so.*

The sadness aged Billy’s face, lines that Kyle had never noticed cracking at the corner of his eyes and across his forehead. “It’s not your fault.” He knew Billy wanted to say more, to let him know that this was just how these things worked, but was appreciative for the effort it must’ve taken to withhold those words.

“What do you want me to tell him if he asks about you?” Billy finally asked.

"I... I don't know," Kyle said before he turned and left.

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Kyle didn't go home. It was useless. He wouldn't be able to sleep in a bed that smelled of Dalton, wouldn't be able to stand in a room that held so many good memories. Dalton was alive; he was going to be okay. As much as that knowledge was welcome, it confused him as well. He knew going into the relationship that there was a risk, that this *thing* they had could all fail at the drop of a dime. But why? Why now? Questions circled, and Kyle had answers to none of them. One of them unsettled him more than the others, ate him from the inside. *What now?*

It was growing late, the sky fading into a dark blue. And Kyle drove. His fingers felt frozen around the wheel, the quiet hum of the engine the only sound he could hear. He didn't know where he was going; he just drove, until finally he pulled up to a familiar area.

The trees of the Metroparks were so still, white powdering their branches as they reached out over the roads. It wasn't green like the last time he'd been here, but this was the place, their place. Kyle walked forward, across the snow-covered beach, staring out at the frozen lake in front of him.

This was where it all started, the undefined thing between them. This was where he realized he could love Dalton one day, and standing there now, it's where he realized he hadn't just started to, he did. Dalton had burrowed himself deep within Kyle's soul, and he was as much in Kyle's veins as the drugs running through Dalton's. Slowly and without warning, Dalton had become a part of him.

But this, a life with an addict, knowing that a relapse could be just around the corner? Kyle wasn't sure that was a risk he could make, wasn't sure that he could put his heart on the line like that again.

He sat on the ground, ignoring the cold that pulsed through his clothes. His phone had ticked down to one bar of battery, just barely clinging to life. He dialed a number he knew well, as if on autopilot.

"Mom," Kyle said once she answered, and without another word, he wept.

When he had finally calmed, his face red and his body numb, she spoke. "Why did you take a chance on him originally?" It was a seemingly innocent question that held a lot of weight. "Just think about it, honey," she said before they hung up.

After a while he spoke into the darkness, "Because some things are worth taking risks on."

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The hospital was busy, post-Thanksgiving incidents galore. It hadn't even registered with him that yesterday had come and gone, and with it, Thanksgiving. He was thankful for many things, but none of them seemed to hold a candle to knowing that Dalton was alive.

The nurse directed him upstairs. The door to Dalton's room was cracked open, a bright light bleeding out into the hall. Through the door he saw Casey, her eyes sunken and her expression sad. She looked up, a small smile lingering on her lips before she quietly walked out of the room.

"I'm glad you decided to come back," she whispered. "He's sleeping. Billy just went to get some coffee and call their mom. He's going to bring her down later. Didn't want her to drive down in the bad weather."

Kyle nodded, unsure of what to say. The warm hand touching his face, forcing him to look at Casey surprised him. "Hey, it's okay." She reached forward and hugged him tightly. "You're allowed to be everything you feel right now. Don't get mad at yourself because you feel angry. Billy learned that the hard way."

Anger... that was the feeling that had crept up on him slowly. Anger at himself for not being there sooner, for not doing more, but mostly, and what Casey was likely referring to, anger at Dalton for doing this—not just to himself, but to them.

"You're a good man, Kyle," Casey said as he pulled away. "I'm going to go see if I can get some coffee with Billy."

She walked off without allowing him to answer. He slipped into the room, his eyes finding their way to Dalton almost immediately. He was still so pale, the shade so wrong for his skin. He had an IV in his arm, the machine beeping every few seconds.

He stood there and stared for a while, until a tired voice came from the bed. "Kyle." It was more of a croak than anything else.

Kyle made his way to the bed, squeezing his lover's cool hands. "I wasn't sure you'd come. Billy wouldn't tell me." The man in the bed was only part of the one Kyle knew and had grown to love.

"I wasn't sure either, to be honest."

He pulled the chair up beside the bed and handed Dalton the cup of water. Everything felt... wrong. It wasn't quite uncomfortable, just off, as if both of them were afraid of what happened next.

"Why'd you do it?" Kyle finally asked.

"I had just gotten enough money to get out of the men's home. Or, I was close to it. And then I went to work one day, and they said they had to cut back on workers. Business was slow." Dalton didn't look him in the eyes when he continued, "I wanted so badly to be something more for you, Kyle. I wanted to be better. I tried for days to find another job. I even applied to fucking McDonald's. Nothing. It seems no one wanted to hire an addict with a record."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I always told you that I never wanted you to be a part of this. My life is so fucked up, but with you it felt like I had a chance."

"You *do* have a chance, Dalton." Kyle's voice was assertive now, the anger curling around the edge of his words.

"I don't know, Kyle. It's just—you weren't here, and I couldn't pull myself up, so I let myself fall."

The beeping of the machine filled the room for what could've been the next ten minutes or the next hour, Kyle wasn't sure.

"Please give me another chance, Kyle. I know I don't deserve it, but I'll go back to rehab. I'll do it for you. I love you."

The words that should've brought him joy only brought sadness. "I love you, too, Dalton," he said, watching the light come to Dalton's eyes, "but you can't do this for me. You have to do it for you. No one else is going to be able to save you from yourself, Dalton. If you go to rehab, you need to do it because it's what you want, not because of me, or your mom, or anyone else."

Dalton seemed stunned by the words, taken aback. Kyle watched him look around the room, anywhere but actually at Kyle. When he did, it was with conviction, enough to reach his voice when he spoke. "Okay. You're right. I'll do it. But you need to know that I'm not going to be perfect. Some days I just get the urge so bad that I want to lose it... I don't know if I'll never use again. I... I'll try."

"That's all I want. We'll figure the rest out." Kyle leaned forward, their lips pressing together. "Let's do this."

## Epilogue

Two years had come and gone since the Thanksgiving relapse. He went into rehab shortly after being discharged. It was a long, tiring battle, one he returned to three more times afterward. Kyle was beginning to learn that what is said about addicts, about always being an addict, was true. Dalton never claimed to be cured, never lied and said he didn't crave his drugs. The local AA meetings helped. At first, he'd go four times a week, then get down to one. That number went up with each relapse, up to five, back down to one, up to six, down to two. When he wasn't able to make AA meetings, he'd go to a NA meeting. A sometimes tiring cycle of back and forth. He was still trying to find a balance, some period of time where he could go but also learn to be strong for himself.

The hardest thing about rehab was also the best. The time apart taught Kyle a lot about himself. In a city so filled with people in desperate need, Kyle questioned a lot of what he had chosen to do with his life. Just a couple of months after Dalton came home from rehab, Kyle quit his job and began going to Al-Anon meetings, desperate to connect with others who understood the struggle of living with someone who has an addiction.

Suddenly, everything had changed. Working for the Big Four wasn't his dream. He wanted to count, to matter and make a difference. He started to work with a foundation in Cleveland that worked to give money to nonprofits and other worthy causes. It was smaller in size, but big in its impact.

Winters were still the hardest. Between the chill of the weather and the lack of jobs, Kyle often watched Dalton struggle. But he stood by what he said; Dalton needed to be clean for himself, needed to fight forward in life because it's what *he* wanted. And that was perhaps the hardest thing—to watch someone he loved suffer, to watch them face challenge after challenge, and only be able to offer his support and love, all the while not making it suddenly all better. That, *that* was hard. But as Kyle had come to learn, the most worthwhile things are often the hardest. Dalton had shown him that each and every time he had a bad day or relapsed and went back to his support meetings, more often and ready to try again.

Kyle came to Cleveland, naïve to the reality of a city, ignorant to the secrets and pain housed within the city walls, but he knew now. Slowly but surely, Dalton was crawling his way up from the depths of the city, out of the hole that had swallowed his life, and Kyle was there at the top, waiting for him to emerge.

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The city changed them, became a part of them—lived within them, and they wore its scars with a sense of pride. Whatever came next, they'd made it this far, and they'd keep going, no matter how dark the path seemed, because within the city are people who love and hate, who cry and laugh—within the city are people, who despite all odds, continue on.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*S.J. Eller is a young author who wrote her first published work in last year's Don't Read in the Closet event. She is from a small town, but has big aspirations and hopes to make a difference in people's lives. In her (not so spare) spare time, she enjoys reading a good book, spending time with her family (especially her dog), and having a good laugh. She is also adept at graphic design and various forms of coding and enjoys a good challenge.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)