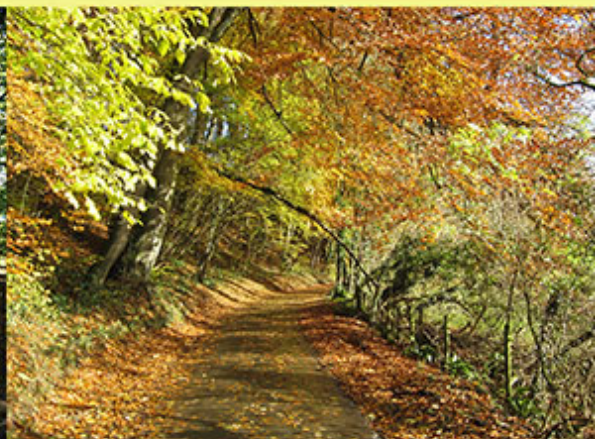


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

# TRUSTING THE FLOP

**S. Allen**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## TRUSTING THE FLOP

By S. Allen

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A man is in midair, back bending over a high jump bar. He is wearing a prosthesis on his left leg just below the knee.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I'm in love with a strong willed man. He is a High Jump Athlete. I hope my love inspires him to fly higher. Btw, I'm a Sports Medicine Physician.*

Please, let our love story to be contemporary with fluff, some angst, humour (if it fits), HEA, age gap (not necessary). Please, no BDSM, no cheating, no public sex.

*Thank you!*

*Sincerely,*

*Yrisa*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** athlete, hurt/comfort, disabilities, grief, death of a secondary character, love at first sight, slow burn/UST, non-explicit

**Word Count:** 13,439

*Acknowledgement*

Special thanks to Yrisa for a great prompt and amazing support!

# TRUSTING THE FLOP

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A steady *beep... beep... beep* slowly pulled Levi from sleep. The irritating noise continued as the fog cleared, and Levi became conscious of the pain he was in. His throat burned, his eyes wouldn't open, his body ached, and his left leg... his left leg felt as though it were being attacked by an entire colony of fire ants. Levi tried to scream for help, but his tongue felt so swollen and dry that he was gagging on it. His body began to convulse in panic.

"Levi, calm down," a voice commanded, but Levi couldn't. He faintly heard the same voice asking a nurse for something, and then he was being pulled back into a heavy, unwanted sleep. Levi racked his brain for something to soothe his fears, and instantly he pictured a pair of warm brown eyes. Levi saw Owen Garrison looking at him and reassuring him that everything would be all right. As he drifted into unconsciousness, his mind lost itself to the memory of meeting the man who owned those eyes.

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*Three days earlier*

Levi had just finished practice and wanted to talk to the doc before hitting the showers. He knocked once on the office door and then opened it, expecting to see old Doc Thomas.

"Hello," a young man greeted.

"Um, I'm looking for Doc Thomas?" Levi couldn't take his eyes off of the man standing before him. He was wearing a blue-striped button-down shirt with the top button undone and the sleeves rolled up his forearms. It was a slim fit that showcased his broad shoulders and narrow waist. His hair fell across his forehead right above his eyes. Those eyes were like a welcoming invitation home. Levi was getting lost in the swirls of soft brown until he lowered his gaze to see the man's smile. It was shy and mischievous at the same time while exposing a dimple on his right cheek. He was adorable in the boy-next-door sort of way, and Levi wanted to ask this neighbor to play in his backyard.

"Hey, did you hear anything I just said?" His new neighbor waved his hand to get Levi's attention.



“If I said yes, would you repeat yourself anyway?” Levi felt his cheeks heat at having been caught staring.

“I’m Owen Garrison, the new doctor. Levi, high jump, right?” After Levi nodded his head, Owen continued. “I read everyone’s files and watched the practice today.”

Levi had immediately caught Owen’s attention out on the field. Owen had gone to observe the team he’d be tending to, but he spent most of the practice watching Levi. He ran each drill with focus and determination. He flew over the bar with a grace that had Owen holding his breath until he landed. Sweat highlighted Levi’s muscles as he stretched, ran, and jumped. Owen worked with athletes every day, but something drew him to Levi. Owen even watched when Levi took a water break and joked around with Anton. Their closeness was evident in the ease of their interactions with each other. Levi had a relaxed, private smile just for his brother. Owen wanted to be the center of Levi’s attention, for Levi to have a smile just for him. He was surprised by the intense attraction he felt toward Levi.

“What did you say happened to Doc Thomas?” Levi asked, bringing Owen back to the conversation.

“He had a family emergency and figured he was close enough to retirement to just do it and not have to worry about when he’d be back.”

“Is everything okay?” Levi had grown close to the old doctor.

“Yes.” Owen walked forward and placed a comforting hand on Levi’s shoulder. “His daughter went into labor early, and he wanted to be there for the birth of his first grandbaby.”

“I’m happy for him. He kept saying how he was going to spoil that baby rotten because that’s what grandpas do. I’ll have to send flowers to the hospital or something.” Levi took a closer look around the office noticing the bare walls and cluttered desk. Sitting on the corner of the desk was a drinking bird toy. Levi tipped its head and watched it bob forward and swing back up and repeat.

“It needs something to drink.” Owen moved his coffee cup underneath the beak so it looked like the bird was drinking out of it.

“I can’t stop watching it.” Levi laughed.

“Yeah, I’m obsessed with perpetual motion toys,” Owen admitted proudly.

“Do you have one of those swinging ball thingies? You know the one that every psychiatrist has on their desk? I’m pretty sure it’s to make their patients crazier with every clink of the balls hitting.”

“Yes, I have a Newton’s Cradle.” Owen chuckled. “And I happen to find the sound relaxing.”

“You would,” Levi teased. “Let me guess, you like the History Channel too.”

“They have very entertaining programming. Can you honestly say you’ve never watched *Ancient Aliens*?” Owen raised one eyebrow quizzically.

“I’m just saying it’s because of aliens,” Levi joked. He was being bold and flirty. It was very out of character for him, but when Owen laughed, that dimple appeared. Levi wanted Owen to always be smiling. His eyes shone and seemed to brighten just for Levi. He would make it his mission to keep this man happy. Levi felt his heart flutter. What was it about Owen that had him so infatuated?

“You’re funny, you.” Owen winked. “I saw you playing basketball before practice today.”

“Oh, yeah. That kid looked lonely, and I remembered not having a lot of friends to play with when I was younger.” Levi had arrived to the practice facility early because he rode with Anton, who had wanted to run extra drills, and Levi did not.

“You didn’t seem to mind he was in a wheelchair,” Owen commented.

“Why would I mind?”

“Disabilities make a lot of people uncomfortable. That kid is my nephew, Parker. I spend most of my free time working with handicapped children, and it seems the biggest obstacle for them to overcome isn’t their disability but how they see themselves. You made Parker’s day by playing with him and not feeling sorry for him.” It had also made Levi a hero in Owen’s eyes. Owen’s heart beat a little faster knowing the handsome athlete was more than his outward appearance. It took a strong character to be accepting and unfazed by people with disabilities.

“He made it easy. I like kids. Maybe if I ever get some time off from training I can volunteer with you.” Levi’s whole life revolved around training. Any free time he did have he usually spent with Anton, talking about training or watching training videos. It would be refreshing to be doing something useful, something that maybe strengthened his heart and soul and not his body.

“Levi, are you in here?” A man walked into the office, interrupting them. He took one look at the pair and smiled. “I see you’ve met the new doc. Did you pull your groin and need it massaged out?”

“No, Anton.” Levi glared at his brother. “What do you want?”

“Just wanted to know your timeline. I’m starving.” Anton shrugged.

“I was going to shower after I finished talking with the doc.”

“Shower at the house, that way I can start cooking while you’re cleaning up.” Anton rubbed his stomach, clearly thinking about food.

“Fine. Go wait in the car. I’ll be out in ten.” Levi always caved when it came to his brother. Anton turned around and headed out of the office.

“What did you need to see me about?” Owen stepped back, remembering he was talking to an athlete under his care and not a potential date. He needed to treat Levi in a professional manner and stop with the soft flirty tone he’d been using thus far. He had instantly felt at ease with Levi and let his attraction to the man dictate his actions.

Levi noticed the distance Owen put between them. His relaxed smile was replaced by the professional mask of a team doctor. Levi sighed and tried to focus on the reason he was there. “My calf is acting up again. I just wanted you to check it out.”

“Have a seat.” Owen gestured to the exam table. Levi hopped up onto the table leaving one leg bent and swinging off the edge. He straightened the other leg across the table as he leaned back, resting on his elbows. Owen ran his hands up and down the calf Levi had stretched out across the table assuming it was the one bothering him. He probed the muscle gently and then kneaded it to ease the tightness he found.

Levi’s calf felt amazing under Owen’s ministrations. He wanted Owen’s hands to rub down the rest of his body, too. Just thinking about Owen’s fingers caressing more than his leg caused a slight shiver to run through his body.

“Did that hurt?” Owen stopped rubbing.

Levi shook his head and sat up closer to Owen. He wanted to cup Owen’s smooth face with both of his hands and kiss him. “Have dinner with me,” Levi blurted out instead.

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know if I’m married or have a girlfriend. A little presumptuous, aren’t we, in assuming I’m interested?” Owen slid his hand behind Levi’s knee and then around and up to his thigh.

Levi interpreted the touch as a good sign of Owen saying yes. He smiled, feeling bold and confident. “You’re right. I won’t know anything about you unless you tell me. What better way to get to know each other than spending time together, you know, like having dinner together? Then you can tell me if you’re already in a relationship and exactly how interested you are in seeing more of me. I’m sure interested in seeing what other muscles you can relax with those magic hands of yours.”

Owen pulled his hands away and took a step back. Levi felt the loss of his touch but he hated to see the frown even more. What had he said? Levi was confused, and never one to mince words, asked, “What’s wrong?”

Owen crossed his arms over his chest trying not to smile at Levi’s ostentatious flirting. Owen wanted to say yes, but he didn’t date for a reason. Owen’s schedule didn’t allot much time for dating, and he wasn’t one to casually date either. He’d had a handful of serious relationships that all ended because they wanted more of Owen’s time, time he couldn’t or wasn’t willing to give them. Owen didn’t know how to convey what he was thinking without providing his entire dating history. “Sorry, I don’t date.”

“Do you eat?”

“Yes, but you don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me.” Levi could be stubborn when he wanted something. It wasn’t very often that he stood his ground, but something told him this man was going to be worth the fight.

“I don’t do casual hookups.”

“Good, because I don’t either. I’m not asking you to suck my dick nor am I asking for your hand in marriage. I want to get to know you. Yes, I’d like us to have a romantic relationship, but if friendship is it, then I’m pretty sure it’ll still be awesome.”

Owen laughed. “You don’t know me well enough to know if I’d be a good friend, let alone a good boyfriend.”

“Sure I do. I can tell you’re smart and driven.” Levi gestured to several framed certificates leaning against the side of the desk. “You’re kind and

generous with your time. And I know you're loyal and protective from the way you asked about Parker."

"How do you know I'm not an alien posing as a human?" Owen teased.

"You're funny, and I know you're not an alien because if you were then you'd be pointing at me and making that weird echoing sound indicating that I'm not an alien too. See, now I know we both like sci-fi movies. That gives us two channels to watch together."

"You make it sound so easy." Owen walked into Levi's personal space. He desperately wanted what Levi was offering: comfortable conversations, evenings watching TV together, someone to come home to.

Levi reached for Owen's hand. "Seriously, would you like to have dinner with me?"

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Levi woke slowly. Everything was muted as if he were wrapped in cotton. Someone was speaking to him, but he couldn't understand the words. He tried opening his eyes, but his sight was blurred. He felt something cold being pushed against his lips.

"Levi, it's an ice chip. It'll help." Levi understood those words and took the ice into his mouth. The relief was euphoric but short lived as his body throbbed in pain.

"Do you remember what happened?"

"Who are you?" Levi rasped out. His lips were chapped, but he didn't have enough saliva to moisten them.

"I'm Dr. Newman. You were in a terrible car accident."

Levi started to shake. "Anton?"

He watched the doctor lower his eyes and shake his head. Levi screamed in denial, not believing his brother could be dead. He felt hands grabbing at him and shouts to calm down, but he couldn't. Again he descended into unconsciousness with the last memory of his brother haunting him.

\*\*\*\*

Levi got into the car where Anton was waiting for him.

"So, you and the new doc, huh?" Anton playfully socked Levi in the arm.

“Maybe.” Levi wasn’t sure how much to say to his brother. Despite their closeness, they never really talked about their romantic relationships. It wasn’t because Anton was uncomfortable with Levi’s attraction to men. It was because they had very different priorities when it came to matters of the heart. Levi was a romantic who longed for a serious boyfriend. He wanted someone to come home to and fall asleep with every night. He wanted to be the center of someone’s world, as much he wanted to dote on that special person, whereas Anton was solely focused on training. There was no room for wining and dining. He’d find a bedmate for the evening and call it good before the sun came up.

“You don’t have time to date. We are gearing up for the Olympics. Every jump, every run, everything has to be our best.”

“I know,” Levi agreed and turned his head to look out the window. The sun was setting, and he wished he could be watching it while wrapped up in his lover’s arms.

“Levi.” Anton’s voice was gentle. “I know you’re lonely. Let’s get through this next Olympics, and then we can see about rearranging things. We talked about buying that old house and restoring it. That’s something to look forward to. I’m interested in running until my legs fall off, but I understand it’s not the future you see when you close your eyes.”

Levi’s jaw dropped. He didn’t think Anton understood or even had a clue to Levi’s innermost desires.

“Don’t look so shocked.” Anton laughed after stealing a quick glance at him before returning his attention to the road. “We’re brothers. I’m pushing you so hard right now because of how hard you’ve worked, and the Games are so close. If it was the beginning of the season, and you weren’t so close to winning gold, I’d tell you to go after your man. All I’m asking is for you to stay focused for just a little while longer. You’ve earned it, and I don’t want these last few years to have been for nothing.”

Levi blinked back the tears threatening to fall. “I love you, Anton.”

“I love you, too.” Anton’s voice was lost behind the screech of tires and metal colliding with their car, causing it to crumple instantly. The windows shattering and airbags exploding were the last things Levi remembered before he lost consciousness.

Levi woke with a scream lodged in his throat. He was choking on it. Hands were on his shoulders, pushing him down. Levi blinked his eyes several times, desperate to see. When a familiar face came into focus, Levi felt like he could breathe again as his panic waned.

“Levi.” Owen’s voice was soft and soothing. “I’ve got you, but you have to calm down. The doctors hoped if you saw a friendly face they wouldn’t have to sedate you again.”

Levi nodded his head in understanding, never taking his eyes off of the man dominating his field of vision. He easily accepted the ice chips Owen slowly fed him. Several nurses and two different doctors made their rounds in and out of his room. He paid them no attention, barely acknowledging them when they asked him a direct question.

“Levi, are you ready to talk to me?” Owen was sitting next to Levi’s bed, still holding his hand.

“I don’t know,” Levi whispered. He had no idea how much time had passed or what to say. All he knew was that Owen was the one thing tethering his sanity at this point.

“Do you want to run away and join the circus?” Owen asked seriously.

“What? The circus?” Maybe Levi really had lost his mind.

“You know, every young adolescent’s escape. Didn’t you ever just wish you could run away from real life and become a lion tamer?” Owen smiled.

“I wanted to ride a motorcycle through rings of fire.” Levi coughed. Owen immediately brought a straw to Levi’s chapped lips. He drew a few sips before Owen pulled the cup away and set it back down on the bedside table.

“You know the next few months are going to be a lot harder than jumping through fire?” Owen’s voice was gentle as he rubbed his thumb across the back of Levi’s hand.

Levi didn’t want to face reality yet. “What if I do it blindfolded with one arm tied behind my back?”

Owen chuckled before answering, “I don’t think there is anything that will change what happened. Do you have anyone who can come stay with you? They should be releasing you next week.”

Levi turned away from Owen. He had casual friends and teammates, but training was the main mistress in his life. He had no one close enough to stay

with while he recovered. He might have asked them to feed his cat while he was away on vacation, well, that is, if he had a cat or ever went on vacation. Anton was who he leaned on when he needed someone. He trusted Anton with his whole being, but now his brother was dead. Levi wished he'd died with him. He was empty without Anton. And currently Levi had no idea how badly he was injured, just that he hurt and was still alive despite not having a beating heart.

“You will stay with me.” Owen didn't ask, simply stated.

“No.” Levi couldn't think of an excuse, so he didn't offer one.

“It isn't up for debate.” Levi could hear the steel in Owen's voice. It was quiet and brokered no room for argument. Levi needed that. He needed someone to look after him. His heart thudded in his chest as he looked over at the kind man holding his hand. Levi saw no pity in Owen's eyes, which only fortified Levi's high opinion of him. The initial attraction Levi felt upon meeting Owen intensified. Would they still have their date as planned? Would Owen even want him after this?

“Let's start from the beginning. Do you remember what happened?”

“I remember driving home with my brother and then waking up here and the doctor frowning when I asked about Anton.” Levi had a sliver of hope that maybe Owen would say Anton was alive.

“You guys were hit head-on by a two-ton truck. The driver was texting and didn't take the curve sharp enough. He crossed lanes, not even realizing it or slowing down for the corner. I'm so sorry, Levi. Anton died on impact.” Owen scooted closer and rubbed his hand up and down Levi's arm, waiting for his reaction.

Deep down, Levi had known Anton was dead. Despite the turmoil he felt, Levi lay motionless in the bed. His emotions warred with his body to lash out and react, to somehow make it not true. Only a few tears slid down his cheek as he looked into Owen's sympathetic eyes. “We can dedicate our circus to him.”

If Levi was going to hold on to the silly circus references to maintain his sanity, then Owen was selling tickets to the show. “It'll be the performance of our lives.”

There was a knock at the door announcing the arrival of Dr. Newman. Owen had already taken a look at the chart and knew exactly what to expect.



“Good afternoon, Levi. How are you feeling today?” the man in the white coat asked.

“Ok.” Levi felt numb. He’d lost his brother and had no idea what to do next.

“That’s good. The surgery went well, and as soon as the swelling goes down, we can start getting you fitted for a prosthetic leg. Luckily, you’re in amazing shape, so the initial physical therapy should go quickly and smoothly. Where are you going to be staying?”

“With me,” Owen answered fiercely. “I’m aware of the care he’s going to need.”

The rest of the conversation muted as Levi tried processing the words surgery, prosthetic leg and physical therapy. “Wait, I don’t understand,” Levi blurted out.

Owen answered, “Your left ankle was crushed. You had a compound tibia fracture. The truck pushed your car down the ravine, and it took a long time to get you out. Unfortunately, they couldn’t save your leg and had to amputate just below the knee.”

“No. That can’t be right. I can feel my leg. It’s annoyingly tingly, like ants are crawling all over it.” Levi looked desperately at Owen. He could see the truth in his eyes. Levi began to shake as he pulled the blanket off and leaned forward to see a bandaged stump where his lower left leg and foot should have been.

“Levi, look at me.” Owen framed Levi’s face with his hands and forced Levi to see him. “It’s going to be okay. I’ve got you. You are not alone. Take a deep breath.” Owen continued to talk calmly and offer reassurances as Levi’s heart rate slowed down.

“There’s my daredevil.” Owen patted Levi’s cheek softly. “There’s a bunch of people coming to talk to you. I know this is overwhelming, but you are not alone. Okay? I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Levi nodded his head and handed his trust over to Owen. Several hours went by and Levi’s future was painfully full of appointments. Owen stood up to leave for the night. He leaned over Levi’s bed and kissed him on the forehead.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Why?” Levi wasn’t trying to look a gift horse in the mouth. He needed the support, and more specifically, he needed Owen. But Levi had to understand why Owen was opening his heart for him. “We just met.”

“I’m here because you need me. Because we were going to get to know each other better anyway. Because I feel the need to be here with you.” What Owen didn’t say was that he admired the quiet strength vibrating through Levi, that he saw the beautiful and fragile heart Levi possessed, and that Owen was determined to protect Levi from experiencing any more hurt than he’d already survived. When he looked at Levi the man, he saw a future with him. “Good night, Levi.” Owen shut the door quietly, leaving Levi to digest what he said.

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The following days passed in a fog. People were constantly entering and leaving, either trying to talk to him or fidgeting with whatever medical equipment he was hooked up to. Levi felt like a weird science fiction creation, a monster. There were tubes running everywhere keeping him fed, hydrated, and only God knew what else. His body was bruised and stitched. Levi could only imagine what was underneath the gauze wrapped up where his leg used to be. Had they transplanted some alien appendage, maybe a tentacle? Yes, it had to be a tentacle with venomous spikes. He was going to be the starring attraction for the freak show: Octopus boy.

He hadn’t spoken at all since that first day with Owen. His mind felt numb, void of any thoughts. None of this was real. He was dreaming, and the less he interacted, the sooner he’d wake up. It was strange because dream-Owen was always there, always patient. The doctors and nurses stopped asking him how he was feeling, and even his teammates and coaches quickly got the hint and stopped coming by, but not Owen. The first day he’d brought a swinging pendulum. It was three connected sticks that would just swing back and forth once put in motion. It was mesmerizing and soothing. Not that Levi would admit it. The next day Owen brought him a large tube filled with colored water. A reservoir of blue water would drip and zigzag its way down to the bottom, and a green drop would wind its way up. And every time Owen would visit, he’d put both toys in motion.

Owen would read to Levi during their visits. Over the past week, he’d already completed one book and was halfway through another murder mystery novel when he stopped midchapter and said, “Enough, Levi. I’ve tried to give you time. I’ve been reading myself hoarse, so you wouldn’t have to sit in silence, but I’m tired, and I’m worried.”

“You can’t stop now. We were just going to find out how she was killed.” Levi’s voice rasped from underuse.

“No. We need to talk about you. Your first physical therapy session is today.”

“No. This isn’t real.”

“Levi, this is very real.” Owen reached over and squeezed Levi’s hand. “Do you feel this? Do you feel me?”

“Of course I do. I need you. You’re the only thing keeping this from being the ultimate nightmare. Right now it’s just a bad dream. Soon though, I’m sure, things will turn around. They’ll unwrap my leg, and then we’ll walk out of here together and go to our home and live happily ever after.”

Owen turned away from Levi trying to hide the tears blurring his vision. He wanted to agree, for this not to be Levi’s new reality. He had watched Levi be a friend to his teammates, a caring brother to Anton, and a kind stranger to his nephew. In what way had Levi deserved any of this? Owen drew in a fortifying breath. “Levi, I need you to try. This is real, not a dream or nightmare.”

“No!” Levi screamed. He took the paper cup of ice water that was always filled and within arm’s reach and threw it at the window. It made a pathetic thump before falling to the floor. Levi had a sudden wish for the cup to have been made of glass, so he could have had the satisfaction of hearing it shatter, of seeing thousands of tiny glass shards fly across the room because that’s how he really felt.

Owen sat there not knowing what to say. He didn’t want to offer false platitudes that everything would be all right, but he sure did want to offer comfort and safety. He wanted to celebrate the life shining in Levi’s eyes, even if those emotions were anger, confusion and denial. They were better than the vacant flat stare Levi had mastered as of late.

“Hi, Mr. Locke. I’m April, and I’ll be working with you today.” A plump young girl introduced herself, completely ignoring the tension in the room. “And how are you doing today?”

Levi continued to stare at Owen. His heart was racing, trying to dissipate the unnamed emotions tightening his chest, threatening to strangle him from within. Everything was so overwhelming. He felt that if he gave name to what he was actually feeling his psyche would crumble, leaving nothing behind but a small pile of rubble representing the kind of life he would never have.

“Well, let’s get started with the basics.” April straightened her pink scrubs and smiled as though Levi had actually answered her. “I’m going to stretch you

out and show you some simple exercises you'll need to be doing regularly to help maintain your knee and hip's full range of motion."

Owen watched the therapist manipulate Levi's limbs. Levi lay there like a doll, doing nothing to help but not stopping her either. When she encouraged him to try it himself, he gave no response or movement.

April blew out an exaggerated sigh and pushed her thick bangs out of her eyes. She settled her hands on Levi's shoulders, trying to make eye contact with him. "Ok, Mr. Locke. I know this is hard, but you have to try. Don't you want to walk again? Don't you want to get better? I see a nice young man over there who seems to want you to get better."

"Get out! Get away from me. You don't know what I'm going through. You don't know how much it hurts, how much I've lost. Get out!" Levi shouted and pushed at April's hands.

April stood tall, taking no offense. "Okay, Mr. Locke. You get some rest, and I'll see you tomorrow. You know you're not the first patient I've had who's a tad resistant." She winked and left the room as Levi began shouting again.

"Levi!" Owen spoke loudly with such authority that Levi had no choice but to quiet down and look at him. "You will stop with this tantrum."

"No!" Levi screamed. The sound pierced Owen's heart. There was so much despair and anguish in Levi's voice. "You don't understand. I can still feel it. It hurts. My leg... and then I look down and it's not there. Nothing is there any more. I hate this. Anton should be here, not me." Levi's voice clogged with tears as he spoke.

Owen went to the bed and pulled Levi to him. Levi struggled against him, but Owen tightened his arms around the sobbing man as he patiently waited for Levi's body to relax and submit to his grief. The flood of emotions drained Levi. He felt as though he were drowning. "Why?" he finally whispered while he was still wrapped in the safety of Owen's arms.

"Why what?"

"Why did Anton die? He was passionate and had this spark of life that inspired me to be a better person. I'm nothing without him, nobody."

"I don't know why he died, but I do know that you are alive and that your brother is happy you are. He loved you. I'm sure he wants the same things for you that you wanted for him. He'd want you to live and be happy." Owen rubbed Levi's back and rested his cheek on top of his head.

“I feel so lost,” Levi admitted while soaking up the comfort Owen freely gave. “I don’t know what to do.”

“One step at a time. You’re going to keep up with your physical therapy and then be fitted for a prosthetic leg. We’ll get you back out on the field in no time.”

“That was Anton’s dream.”

“What’s yours?” When Levi didn’t answer, Owen continued, “You can tell me when you are ready, and then we’ll work on it together.”

Owen’s words felt like a promise. Levi couldn’t confess his dream was to have a family, a home. And at this moment, Owen was the one starring in his dream. Levi closed his eyes and imagined Owen as his boyfriend *walking* hand in hand with him while they discussed what to have for dinner. They’d decide to eat at their favorite deli and order dessert to go. Levi inhaled deeply, expecting to smell the fresh bread being baked but, instead, got a lung full of pungent hospital antiseptic, bringing his daydream to a crashing halt.

“Hey, where did you go? Were you thinking of your high wire act?” Owen teased, trying to bring Levi to a better place.

“Yeah, except I had already fallen and was bouncing on the safety net. Why doesn’t life have a safety net?”

“It does. It’s the people around you.”

“I remember when I first tried the high jump as a kid. I was afraid I’d hurt myself doing the Fosbury Flop. So, in the beginning I did the scissor technique and worked my way up to the Western Roll. After hundreds of jumps I realized the pad was always there when I landed, whether or not I successfully cleared the height. I had to trust when I made the jump backwards that the landing pad would catch me. And that’s when I started using the Flop and became a serious competitor in high jump. Okay, as serious as it could be for an elementary school kid.”

“Do you trust that I’m going to be here for you?”

“Will you go to Anton’s funeral with me?”

“Of course. Close your eyes and feel me here with you right now. I’m not going anywhere.” Owen wasn’t sure where their relationship was going, but he understood the promise he was making to Levi. From the moment Owen watched Levi play basketball with his nephew to their first meeting a few hours

later, to all the heartache Levi had endured in the last few days, Levi was working his way into Owen's heart. Owen wanted to be with this man, albeit under better circumstances, and he was planning on being there for the long haul. He wanted to be Levi's friend, partner, and eventually lover, but if all Levi wanted, needed, was a friend then that's how Owen would stay in Levi's life. But right now, he wanted to be the solid presence in Levi's life: the safety net or landing pad Levi could trust would catch him.

April came back, and Levi worked for her and for himself. Owen had to stop himself from getting up every time Levi winced in pain. He didn't want Levi to have to go through any of this. Sweat beaded up on Levi's forehead as he concentrated on working his body. He repeated the techniques April taught him, so he could sit up in bed and roll over. She finished up the session with desensitizing exercises, aftercare instructions, and massage techniques. Owen paid special attention, so he would be fully competent to take care of Levi's healing leg properly.

After April rolled on the compression sleeve, she explained her plan for their next session. They would be working on mobility out of bed. Levi would learn moving in and out of a wheelchair, standing with the aid of crutches, and walking with the aid of a walker. She explained that it would be extremely important that Levi not depend on the crutches or walker to get around because his body would adjust its center of balance, making it harder for him to learn to walk with a prosthesis once he got it. She bade good-bye with threats of seeing him soon.

Levi laughed at her good-natured playing. "That was a lot harder than I thought it would be and frustrating, too."

"I'm really proud of you." Owen moved to the bed and sat next to him. He rested one hand on Levi's thigh and picked up the book from the table with the other. "Ok, now where did we leave off?"

"We were going to find out if it was Mrs. Peacock with the candlestick."

"I'm leaning toward the escaped mental patient."

"No. It was definitely aliens," Levi said with a smirk. Owen forgot what outlandish thing he was going to suggest next. Levi's face was bright and happy. Owen couldn't help but smile too. He palmed Levi's smiling face and resisted the urge to kiss him. He cleared his throat and began reading. The escaped mental patient did, in fact, kill the girl.

*It should be raining*, Levi thought as they parked in front of the church. The sun shouldn't be shining on the day Levi had to bury his brother. Owen helped Levi out of the car and into the wheelchair. "I can't."

"Can't what?" Owen squatted down in front of Levi.

Levi looked over Owen's shoulder to the small church where Anton's service was being held. "I should be in the casket. How can I go in there and not drown in the guilt? He should be alive, not me. He was vibrant and loved living. He was great at everything and had a thirst to be better. He was kind and loving and..." Levi's voice broke on a sob. "And I'm not. I was always his shadow. I did what he did. I'm nothing without him. I don't know how to live."

Owen palmed Levi's neck, stroking his thumb over Levi's Adam's apple. "Don't you think he'd be proud of the life he did get to live? Do you think he'd want you to give up so easily?"

"No. He told me to be happy. He wanted my dreams to come true."

"Do you think I'd be here with you if I didn't think you were worth it? You and your brother were lucky to have each other, but don't you think it's time for others to get to know you too?"

Levi leaned into Owen's hand. He was right— everything he said. Anton was charismatic and outgoing. He was always telling Levi to loosen up, to let people get to know him the way Anton did. Levi was introverted and shy and found it easier to let Anton take the lead. Maybe it was time for Levi to start making his own way.

The service was well attended by fellow athletes, coaches, and team staff members. Owen and Levi received a few sideways glances at their arrival and close contact. Owen pushed Levi's wheelchair dutifully and touched him in comfort whenever he could. Levi unconsciously reached out for Owen, tightly clutching his hand during the service. Levi declined to speak, not needing to express the private words of love he had for his brother in front of a crowd. Anton knew how much Levi treasured him, and that was enough.

Zack stood and gave the eulogy. It was full of college anecdotes that had everyone smiling through their tears. Zack had been on the college track team with Anton and Levi. He ran hurdles and had quickly become one of their closest friends. Both Levi and Anton stood with him at his wedding and were present for the birth of both his children. After college, Zack didn't pursue track sports any further. He fully embraced life as an adult focused on career and family. But he faithfully kept in touch with the Locke brothers.

“Levi, how are you holding up?” Zack asked, his voice full of genuine concern. “Dumb question, sorry. God, I’m so sorry. Do you need anything?”

“Thanks for asking.” Levi cleared his throat. “I’m in good hands.”

Zack smiled, noticing the hand possessively resting on Levi’s shoulder. “I’m Zack, and you must be the boyfriend.”

Owen shook Zack’s hand. “Owen and not boyfriend, not yet. But I’ll be here with him for whatever he needs.”

“Good. That’s good.” Zack refocused his attention on Levi. “It’s good to see you. I wish it were on better terms, though. We’ll have to make a better effort to stay in touch. I have to fly out tomorrow, but I’ll try to come back out soon.” He leaned down and hugged Levi tightly before leaving.

Levi received lots of hugs, handshakes, and a few baked goods. Apparently, some people sympathized with pie: apple pie, shepherd’s pie, and moon pie cookies. Levi was exhausted by the time they got back to the hospital. It was late, and Owen couldn’t stay. In a few days, Levi was going to be discharged and move in with Owen. He’d given Owen his house key so he could pack some of Levi’s things and have them at his house when he arrived. Levi watched Owen leave and fell into a dreamless sleep.

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Owen pulled into his driveway with Levi sitting in the passenger seat. The drive there was silent as Levi reflected on how much his life had changed in just a few short weeks. Owen had been a solid presence the entire time. He gave support both physically and mentally. He was funny and charming, making Levi smile when he didn’t think he’d ever smile again. He was determined, firm, and encouraging. He pushed Levi forward, demanding his best at all times. The first few physical therapy sessions shredded Levi’s mental and emotional state while he had to relearn how to do basic things. Yes, his upper body was strong, and he was in great physical shape, but relearning how to use those muscles to move him and balance by shifting his weight accordingly was hard.

Levi leveraged himself out of the car and into the wheelchair Owen had unfolded for him. He maneuvered his way up from the driveway and toward the house with Owen walking quietly behind him. The ranch-style house was painted a soft buttery-yellow with white-trimmed windows and a red front door. The door was wide, allowing for Levi to easily make his way inside. Owen



provided a quick tour. To the right of the entryway was an open kitchen that fed into a dining room and ended in a living room.

“This will be your room.” Owen opened the second door down the hallway to the left. “I’ll be right next door if you need anything, ever. Take your time to get situated and whatnot. I’ll be in the kitchen making dinner.”

Levi watched Owen turn away and shut the door. Levi was exhausted in every way. He was definitely in need of a shower to wash off the hospital stench. *Bath*, he amended himself, since he couldn’t stand for a shower. Levi’s jaw dropped when he pushed open the door to the en suite bathroom. It was huge and beautiful. There was a jetted bathtub with white grab bars along the outer edge and the adjacent wall. The vanity had two sinks; one sink didn’t have a cabinet beneath it but a chair pushed in.

Why was Owen’s second bedroom handicap accessible? Parker. Levi remembered playing basketball with the young boy before meeting Owen. Parker had looked lonely bouncing the basketball by himself. Once Levi had volunteered to play with him, Parker had become animated and happy. He played hard and reminded Levi that life should be fun, not just lived by perceived responsibilities. After their impromptu game, Levi had gone through his training regime wondering when jumping had stopped being fun.

Levi sighed, clearly remembering asking himself the question. He used to love jumping. It felt like he was flying, and every time he cleared a new height, it felt like the best accomplishment in the world. He even loved the thud of his back hitting the pad as he landed, forcing the air out of his lungs. It was exhilarating.

Levi turned on the hot water to begin filling the tub. He pulled off his clothes and rolled off the compression sleeve from what was left of his leg. It was still red and swollen. Levi no longer questioned when jumping had lost its thrill and now wondered if he’d ever be able to jump again. Not letting the depression that was inching its way into his thoughts take over, he turned and slid carefully into the warm water and activated the jets. It was heaven. The rumbling water relaxed Levi in a way he didn’t know was possible. He leaned back and closed his eyes as the white noise cleared his head.

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“Stop munching. We’ll eat as soon as Levi is ready,” Owen scolded.

“I’m hungry. Your boyfriend can eat when he’s ready, but I want to eat now,” a young voice whined.

“Parker,” Owen warned.

“He’s here.” A little finger pointed to Levi as he became visible from the kitchen. “Let’s grub down.”

“Where did you hear that?” Owen tried to hide his amusement.

Parker shrugged and shoved a roll into his mouth, waving at Levi.

“Hey,” Owen greeted. “This is Parker, my nephew. I believe you two met before. I forgot I agreed to babysit tonight. Sorry I wasn’t able to give you any warning.”

Levi slowly made his way toward the table, giving Owen plenty of time to make him a plate and set it on the table. The smell wafting up from the plate made Levi’s tummy rumble. Neither he nor Anton were very good in the kitchen, and the hospital meals did nothing to satisfy a true hunger.

Levi ate in a happy food daze, ignoring everything around him. He wiped his plate clean with the end of his roll. He chewed slowly, savoring the last of the gravy. Owen had prepared a simple pot roast with mashed potatoes and carrots.

“Uncle Owen makes the best food ever, huh?” Parker smiled proudly.

“He sure does,” Levi answered Parker but looked pointedly at Owen. Owen blushed at the praise.

“I’ve never met one of Uncle’s boyfriends before. You must be pretty special. Are you nice? You better be nice because my mom’s always saying how Uncle needs someone nice in his life.” Parker waited for Levi to answer.

“Well, I think I’m nice.” Levi looked at Owen and mouthed “boyfriend?” Levi remembered Owen’s comment from the funeral. It had been a bright spot on a truly bleak day. Owen hadn’t put on any pressure or made any assumptions that they were or weren’t more than they were, but he put his claim out there. It made it okay for Levi to feel the flutter of the crush he’d developed for Owen without the expectations or commitment of having a boyfriend. Levi was already dealing with the death of his brother and loss of his leg. Trying to navigate the ins and outs of having a new boyfriend would have been too much. Were they really ready to talk about it? Put a name to their relationship? They had gone through more in the last couple of weeks than most couples would normally go through in the first year of a relationship.

“I’m sorry, Levi.” Owen stood to clear the table. “I told Parker we were just friends.”

“You say that, but you smile when you talk about him.” Parker wheeled himself around the table. “Why don’t you like my uncle?” Parker asked innocently, truly confused as to why Levi wouldn’t be madly in love with his uncle.

“Well, I guess that’s something Owen and I need to talk about.”

Parker shrugged, pacified with the answer for now. “You wanna see my ant farm? Mom says I can’t bring over any of my other pets. But that’s okay. Let me show you all of the awesome tunnels they dig. I tried naming them but they move too fast for me to keep track, so I just call them my underground crew.”

“Parker, why don’t you finish up your homework in my office, and then we can watch a movie before your mom picks you up tonight?” Owen was putting the dishes into the dishwasher. “We can have popcorn during the movie.”

Apparently popcorn was just the incentive to keep Parker from voicing the protest obvious on his face and got him in motion toward the office instead. Levi abandoned the table and went into the kitchen to watch Owen finish the dishes. Owen was wiping his hands dry when Levi entered the room.

“L-Levi,” Owen started, his eyes darting around the kitchen, never settling on one place for long. Levi was taking perverse enjoyment in Owen’s unease. Owen had been so surefooted since the moment Levi met him, and it was a refreshing change to see him vulnerable and human.

“Well, do you like-like me?” Levi teased. “Am I going to have to ask Parker to pass a note in class asking you to circle yes or no? Because I like you. I mean, look at us. We’re pretty much boyfriends in everything except for kisses and title.” Levi put it all out there. If there was one thing he realized after the accident, it was that life is too short. He’d lost the one person who meant the world to him and was thankful he’d been able to openly say how much he loved his brother to his face before he died. Levi was not going to stop expressing his emotions now. His initial attraction to Owen had grown, and with two legs or one he was going to let it be known that he was ready to move their relationship into the official boyfriend category.

Owen cleared his throat before he answered. “I do like-like you, you know this. I don’t want to take advantage of you. You’re going through a lot and I don’t want to complicate things or pressure you into anything. You know I want to help and be here for you and I don’t want you to feel like you owe me or have to like me back because I want you to. And then I pretty much forced my way into your recovery plan and for much of your foreseeable future. I can

keep things friendly and professional if you want. I don't want to make you uncomfortable around me..."

As cute as Owen's rambling was, Levi put him out of his misery by saying, "Shut up and kiss me already."

Owen quickly abandoned the dishtowel he had been nervously twisting in his hands and leaned into Levi's personal space. "Yes I like-like you," Owen whispered before softly touching his lips to Levi's. The kiss started off sweetly, a gentle brushing of lips on lips, until Levi gripped the back of Owen's neck and tilted his head for a better angle. He parted his lips inviting Owen's tongue to play with his.

"See, I knew he was your boyfriend." Parker giggled. Owen quickly ended the kiss, his cheeks bright with embarrassment, but he didn't step away from Levi.

"Is your homework done?" Once Parker nodded, Owen told him to go pick out a movie. He kissed Levi on the cheek and then started making popcorn.

"Hey, Levi?" Parker waited in the living room for Levi to make his way from the kitchen. "Wanna play basketball with me after the movie?"

"I'd love to, but it'll be late, and I'm pretty sure your mom will be picking you up about then." Levi moved himself into the living room. Parker parked himself right next to Levi.

"Okay. How about tomorrow?"

"We need to talk to your mom and uncle about when is a good time."

Parker's smile faded. "Never mind."

"I want to play with you. Remember when we played a couple of weeks ago?"

"It was fun," Parker confirmed.

"It was. We just need to make sure it won't interfere with your school or my physical therapy."

"Oh, okay. It'll be more fun now that you're like me."

"Why do you say that?" Levi asked curiously.

"Because it's way more fun to do things that other people don't think you can do. It makes me proud. I don't need my legs to have fun. I actually feel bad for others who think I'm missing out because I get to experience so much more."

“What do you mean?”

“I hate physical therapy, but Mom makes me go. Uncle even has a work-out room and pool here for that kind of stuff. Uncle explained how it makes me stronger and my body smarter because I can use more of my muscles. Like eating vegetables. They help you grow and be healthy. So I eat my vegetables and do my PT exercises and I’m stronger and healthier than other kids who think that they’re better than me. They might pity me, but I’m happy. I’m not missing out on anything.”

“Well said, Parker.” Owen walked over with a couple of small bowls of popcorn and handed them out.

Parker’s mom rang the bell and walked in just as the credits began rolling.

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After a month, they had settled into a routine. Levi was getting around fairly well to the point of cooking regularly with Owen. At first it was just keeping Owen company, and then Owen began asking Levi to help with little things. He brought in a barstool for Levi to either sit on or lean on, so he’d be at counter height. It began with “can you stir this” and then “will you chop that up,” and before Levi realized it, he was finding recipes for them to experiment with. Levi wouldn’t have guessed he’d enjoy cooking as much as he did. He’d never had a hobby, and apparently, cooking was quickly filling that void. During his downtime, he’d watch cooking shows. When he’d find something good, he’d text Owen the ingredients, so he could pick them up on his way home from work. It was an amazing feeling the first time he made the perfect quiche. He’d used his hands and patience to produce something wonderful, something he could share with Owen.

Owen went to work but was always there for whatever appointment Levi needed to go to. April came to the house twice a week to work with Levi since Owen had a fully stocked home gym specifically designed for physical therapy exercises. On the days she wasn’t scheduled, Owen worked with Levi. Levi was getting stronger and feeling more confident every day.

Then one night, Owen woke to muffled screams and rushed into Levi’s room. “Levi, wake up. You’re dreaming,” Owen repeated over and over again until the nightmare relinquished its hold on Levi.

Levi gasped for air as he clung to Owen. “I was drowning.”

“I’ve got you. You are right here with me.” Owen ran his fingers through Levi’s hair several times as he felt Levi slowly calm. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I was laughing and joking with Anton when there was an explosion. Then I was pulled underwater and Anton was gone. It felt like there was seaweed wrapped around my legs, and I was struggling to get free. Then I realized I was in a tank like an aquarium. I started pounding on the glass, but it wouldn’t break. Anton was on the other side encouraging me. I couldn’t understand exactly what he was saying, but it seemed important. The seaweed had wound itself completely around my body and was edging its way into my mouth, choking me, and then you woke me up.”

Levi shivered. Owen sat up to tuck the comforter around Levi’s body. “Will you lie down with me?”

Owen nodded and scooted underneath the blanket with him. Levi molded his body against Owen’s and sighed contently. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Yes.” Owen rubbed his hand up and down Levi’s back. They hadn’t done anything more intimate than a handful of kisses, and Owen’s body was acutely aware of how close Levi was. Levi became just as aware when his knee grazed Owen’s erection as he snuggled closer.

“Owen?” Levi whispered into the hollow of Owen’s neck.

“Yes?” Owen brushed his lips against Levi’s hair in a light kiss.

“I like you, and I’m attracted to you, but I’m not aroused. I don’t understand.”

“Oh, sweetheart. You’re healing, adjusting, and your body isn’t focused on getting off. I can tell you like me by the way you reach out for me, by the way you look at me. We’ll get to all the physical aspects of our relationship when it’s time. If all we had was sexual chemistry and none of the friendship or partnership we do have, then we wouldn’t have the foundation of a lasting relationship.”

“I like this, being close. You make me feel safe.” Levi was able to voice his vulnerability while cocooned in Owen’s arms. He didn’t have to be strong in the light of recovering or learning to stand on his own, literally. Here in bed, Owen was the man Levi could show his belly to, not the doctor or friend whom he had to prove his strength to. Levi wasn’t sure if Owen said anything else as he fell back to sleep with his mind more at peace than he could ever remember it being.

Levi woke to soft kisses on his face and Owen telling him to hurry and get up before breakfast got cold. Levi stretched, feeling fully rested for the first time since the accident. He hit the bathroom and got dressed before maneuvering his chair into the kitchen.

“It smells great.” Levi surveyed the feast laid out before him.

“I liked waking up with you this morning,” Owen commented before he shoved a forkful of hash browns into his mouth.

“I slept great,” Levi spoke honestly. “I think I might need to share a bed with you every night just in order to sleep.”

“I can accommodate that. I mean, rest is imperative to your recovery, and who am I to hinder that?” Owen smiled and reached over, placing his hand on Levi’s forearm. “I’m going to the center today. Do you want to come with me?”

“Yes. I’ve been wanting to go, and I think I’m finally up to it.”

“Great. Parker will be excited to see you too. We’ll leave in about an hour.”

The center was a huge gymnasium with activities being organized everywhere. One corner was set up with gymnastic equipment and floor mats, while in the adjacent corner a basketball game was underway. There was even a long table off to the side where some sat quietly beading or coloring. Levi saw people of all ages: from toddlers rolling on the floor mats to adults practicing Tai Chi. He saw those with Down’s syndrome, some with various amputations, and many others with obvious and not-so-obvious physical and mental limitations.

“Uncle, Levi!” Parker shouted as he wheeled over to greet them. “Me and my friends, Oscar and Celina, were getting ready to start a game of wall ball.” Parker proudly pointed over to a young boy with a vacant smile and a girl with only one arm. “It’s going to be fun. Did Uncle tell you we found a baby raccoon in the backyard last week? I wanted to keep him, but Mom made us call animal control.”

“That’s probably for the best, buddy,” Levi answered.

“I’m going to make the rounds and then settle into my office. Are you going to be okay?” Owen spoke to Levi. He wanted to kiss his boyfriend, silently boasting of their relationship, but he wasn’t sure how Levi would feel about such a public display.

“I’ll be fine. Give me a kiss before you run off.” Levi smiled as if having read Owen’s mind.

“You make Uncle happy,” Parker commented as Owen walked away. “It’s good. Uncle told me you do the high jump. Are you going to keep doing it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?” Parker innocently asked.

Levi took a deep breath before he shouted out “because I lost my leg” and settled with, “Because things are different now.”

“Well, yeah. Different doesn’t mean bad. It just means harder, and the more work you put in, the better the success is. It’s like, I’ll never walk or jump but my chair lets me speed around, and my arms are strong, and I can do anything, just differently.”

“Jesus, kid. How did you get so smart?” Levi felt his earlier anger at the injustice of his circumstances melt away. He closed his eyes and listened to the laughter and noise of all the people being active around him. He was the one holding himself back. He was surrounded by people who wanted to see him succeed; he just had to believe in himself.

“I’m a genius, I know.” Parker smirked. “Can I come to the track and watch you practice when you get your new leg? Then you can run for me, and when you win the Paralympics it’ll be like I won too.” Parker was getting excited, “Then you can coach a team here, and I can race other people in wheelchairs and win my own gold medal!”

“Whoa, Parker, calm down, one step at a time. Yes, you can come to the track when I practice, and I’m pretty sure your uncle told me there was a track coach volunteering here already.”

“Maybe, but I want you to coach me,” Parker whined.

Levi laughed, “Okay. Let’s go play wall ball, and then you can show me around.”

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Levi was getting his temporary prosthesis today. He had been diligent with his physical therapy and the desensitization exercises. Even though he was able to get around with a walker or cane, he was very careful not to disturb his center of balance. He knew the risks and understood that in the long run it would hinder his ability to adjust to walking properly with his prosthesis and possibly injure his sound leg. It was frustrating still depending on a wheelchair, but Levi knew it would make for a quicker recovery to two-legged travel.



Levi asked Owen not to come to this appointment. He had neglected to tell Owen that he'd be getting his prosthesis, letting the man believe the appointment was for his final fitting, because he wanted to walk up and surprise his boyfriend. Owen had been so supportive and loving. Levi wanted to say "thank you" and planned a special evening, and part of the surprise was for Owen to see him walk for the first time. Levi had included April in his plans. He was grateful she had ended up staying on as his personal therapist. She had a timeline worked out, so Levi could get his new appendage, learn to walk with it, and then nap before his date.

Levi couldn't express the joy he felt when he stood on his own two legs after months of doing without. He took several deep breaths just marveling at the simple task of standing. He grabbed hold of the parallel bars and took his first step. It was wobbly, and now he really understood how using the walker, even infrequently, had altered his sense of balance. He adjusted his hips and took another step and another.

He worked for over an hour on his gait with April before heading home. *Home*. That's exactly how he thought of Owen's house. A courtesy shuttle dropped him off from the outpatient center. Levi still wore his new prosthetic appendage but wheeled himself up to the house and into his bedroom. His muscles were tired, and he wanted to save his strength.

April had stopped by and helped Levi set everything up before Owen got home from work. Levi sat at the dining table with the flicker of candlelight dancing over the food he'd ordered. For a quick minute, he'd thought about cooking but quickly squashed the idea. That would be a feat for another night. Most nights Owen and Levi would cook together, and it had become something that they enjoyed doing with each other. Tonight was not about showcasing Levi's lone culinary skills but for celebration.

Owen arrived home exactly on time. "I'm in the dining room," Levi shouted.

"What's the occasion?" Owen smiled as he walked toward Levi to kiss him hello.

"You," Levi answered. "Will you turn on the stereo?"

Owen went to turn on their favorite jazz station. While his attention was on the music, Levi stood from his chair. "Levi!" Owen gasped in shock when he turned around to find Levi standing on two legs.

“Stay there.” Levi picked up a long-stemmed rose from the table and slowly made his way over to Owen one step at a time. “Surprise,” he whispered as he stepped into Owen’s open arms.

“You’re amazing. I can’t believe...” Owen choked on the emotions welling up. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you. I don’t know if I could have done it without your help and support.” Levi kissed along Owen’s neck, eliciting a groan from Owen. Owen tilted his head as his hands gripped at Levi’s back, pulling him in closer.

“Do you want to watch me walk to the bedroom?” Levi asked with lust-filled eyes.

“Are you sure?” Owen didn’t want to push no matter how badly his body burned for Levi. Levi carefully walked toward the bedroom they shared, leaving a trail of discarded clothing in his wake.

Owen watched Levi walk away, his sexy butt shifting from side to side with each step. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on those round mounds. Owen had been the perfect gentleman despite wanting to ravish the man. They had been sharing a bed since that first nightmare, and Levi was a cuddler.

Owen grabbed the filled wine glass on the table, emptying it in a few gulps before going after Levi. He had been waiting months to be fully intimate with Levi and just needed enough patience to not attack him once he got to the bedroom.

Levi was looking out the window with his pants still on. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his brow was slightly furrowed.

“Levi, there’s no pressure if you have changed your mind.” It was hard for Owen to say those words and mean them, but the way Levi held himself alerted Owen that everything was not good at the moment. Owen had fallen in love with Levi, and there was no way he’d hurt him for selfish gratification.

Levi had been so sure until he was undoing his pants. He had pushed them down, revealing his two very different lower legs. Levi was unprepared for the onslaught of emotions he felt at seeing himself mostly naked with his prosthesis on. He was so excited to be able to stand on his own, but while looking at his body standing, he didn’t feel like a full man. How would Owen see him?

“It’s strange. I don’t look normal,” Levi said, still looking away from Owen.

Owen was shocked to hear Levi’s self-doubt. He had helped Levi take care of his stump, cleaning, massaging, and never once was he disgusted. Levi had

never shown any unease or shame over his disfigurement before. “Sweetheart, I don’t understand.”

“I’m not a full man.” Levi turned to face him. “How can you be attracted to this?”

Owen walked up to Levi and placed his palm over Levi’s heart. “How can I not be attracted to you?” He dragged his fingertips down Levi’s chest and curled them around his hip. “I want you. I’ve wanted you every night when we lay in bed together, every time we kiss, every time I see you. You are whole and beautiful to me. I won’t force you or guilt you into anything. If you want me, you have me.”

Levi shuddered, overwhelmed by Owen’s honesty. “You are too good to me. I don’t know if I deserve you, but I’d be a fool to turn you away.” Levi leaned forward, bringing their bodies together, and kissed Owen with all the passion and emotion he couldn’t put into words.

Owen kissed along Levi’s jaw and underneath his ear. “Let me love you.” He stepped back and waited for the shy smile Levi gave in permission. Owen tucked his hands under the waistband of Levi’s pants and boxers, sliding them down his legs. Levi put his hands on Owen’s shoulders to steady himself as Owen squatted down to pull his pants completely off.

“Sit on the bed,” Owen directed as he took his own clothing off.

Levi couldn’t take his eyes off of the beautiful man standing gloriously naked in front of him. He slowly made his way to the bed and sat down, waiting to see what Owen was going to do next. Owen ran his hands down Levi’s sides, across the indentions of his hip flexors, and settled on his thighs. Owen got on his knees and began removing Levi’s new leg. He set the prosthetic limb carefully to the side and then rolled the liner off, revealing Levi’s rounded stump.

“You are a survivor. This,” Owen said as he gently palmed the healed skin, “does not make you any less of a man.” He bent and kissed the scarred skin while keeping eye contact with Levi.

Levi watched Owen lick along the seam that represented where his lower leg used to be. Instead of feeling sorry for his loss, he felt aroused at Owen’s actions. Watching Owen nip and kiss up his leg toward his straining erection was making Levi pant with anticipation.

Owen ignored Levi’s obvious arousal and kissed his way up to Levi’s lips. He dragged his body along Levi’s until their erections lined up. He framed

Levi's face with his hands, directing the dominating kiss as he ground against him.

"Make love to me," Levi begged with each breath between kisses.

"Yes, baby. That's exactly what I'm going to do to you. Love you."

Owen took his time stretching Levi before carefully sliding into him. He rested on his elbows, keeping his full weight off of Levi. Levi stared up at Owen completely unguarded. He rolled his hips, and Owen began a slow rhythm causing both of them to moan.

"Enough of the sweet. Take me like you've wanted to since the first time we met." Levi grunted as he grabbed Owen's ass, pulling him forcibly into him.

"Oh, yeah?" Owen leveraged up as he pulled almost all of the way out before slamming back into Levi's welcoming body. "You walked into my office sweaty and shirtless, teasing. All your lean muscle on display for me."

Owen lost himself in the feral task of staking claim on his man. They were one, a connection they would share with no one else. Owen worked Levi quickly, hoping he'd reach his climax before Owen's thin thread of control snapped. As soon as he felt the gush of cum cover his hand, he roared out his own release. Owen mustered up enough energy to get them cleaned up before he passed out alongside Levi.

Levi woke wrapped around a very naked Owen. He skated his fingers up Owen's chest and pulled at the hairs between his nipples.

"Hey." Owen slapped Levi's hand softly.

"Oh good, you're awake." Levi kissed along the underside of Owen's jaw.

Owen chuckled and tightened his hold around Levi. "Thank you for... what time is it?" Owen glanced at the bedside clock, noting it was just before midnight. "Thank you for tonight. You are an amazing man, and I'm very lucky to have you."

"I'm the lucky one." Levi fidgeted with Owen's fingers. "You know I could probably live on my own now." It had been on Levi's mind for a few weeks. He wasn't sure how long Owen's invitation to live with him extended.

"Is that what you want?"

Levi shrugged. He wanted to admit how much he enjoyed living with Owen, how much he needed Owen in his everyday life.

“Levi,” Owen spoke seriously, “I need to know what you want.” Owen was close to begging Levi to stay, but he swallowed the words knowing it had to be Levi’s decision.

“I don’t want to leave,” Levi whispered into Owen’s skin.

Owen rolled on top of Levi, tenderly petting the side of Levi’s face. He took a fortifying breath and spoke from his heart. “I am so proud of you. I know we’ve only been together a short time, but in that time you have become my heart. I don’t want you to leave either. I’ve fallen in love with you.”

“I love you, too. Not because you’ve helped me heal, but because of the man you are in here.” Levi placed his hand over Owen’s heart and leaned up to kiss him. They made love tenderly, taking their time to explore each other’s bodies with sweet caresses and gentle touches.

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Levi shook his arms out and walked onto the track. He had gotten his final prosthesis earlier that week, and now he was going to put it to the test.

“Levi, Levi!” Parker cheered his name from the bleachers, smiling and waving his arms wildly. He was seated with his Uncle Owen and a few other kids from the center. Levi had been spending a lot of time there with Owen working with the kids. Levi’s heart always soared after working with them. They showed him that the only limits in life are the ones you put on yourself.

Levi smiled and waved back before he began a slow jog around the track. After a few laps, he approached the high jump. He ran his hand along the landing pad and closed his eyes, imagining himself flying over the bar and landing to see the bar still in place. He did a few practice run-ups before completing an actual jump. He set the height at four and a half feet, a height he knew he would clear easily.

Jim, another volunteer at the center, was watching Levi jump. Jim just happened to be a coach for the US Paralympic team as well. He instructed Levi, helping him to regain the form he’d lost while in recovery. His adjustments came easily as his body remembered. It took at least a dozen jumps for Levi to get the feel and control of the prosthetic ankle and adjust accordingly. With Jim’s help, Levi was able to clear five feet eight inches by the end of practice.

Instead of heading back to the locker room, he made his way to his fan club. Owen immediately stood and kissed Levi in greeting. The kids were playing cards on the bleachers.

“Deal me in,” Levi joked and ruffled Parker’s hair.

“You did great, Levi. Are we still going to play basketball after dinner, or are you going to be too tired? Or maybe we can go hunting for frogs down at the park.” Parker always had so much energy, and Levi loved to watch his youthful wonder.

“We might need to postpone our game until tomorrow, buddy. I might have pushed it a little too hard today.” Levi immediately looked over to Owen and tapped the tip of his nose. “Stop worrying. I’m fine. I just need a long soak in the tub and maybe a massage.” He winked before turning back to Parker.

“Buddy, I don’t think your mom would like it if you brought home any more pets. How’s the ant farm doing? Making any new tunnels?” Just last week, Parker had found an injured baby bird and was currently nursing it back to health. Levi was sure Parker was going to be a veterinarian when he grew up. Owen agreed.

“The underground crew is good. Can I come to your next practice? I like watching you jump.”

“Always, buddy. Look, here comes your mom. Hi, Cathy.” They got the kids loaded into Cathy’s van quickly and said their good-byes with promises of future basketball games.

“Do you want to shower here or go home?” Owen held Levi’s hand as they walked back to the locker room.

“Let me grab my stuff and head home.”

“Honestly, how are you feeling?” Owen squeezed Levi’s hand.

“Great! I’m tired and definitely need a rub down and some serious stretching, but really good. It was amazing to be flying over the bar again. I thought I’d lost the love for it, but each time we raised the bar, it felt like the best accomplishment of my life. You know what I mean?” Levi was giddy at having the thrill of his sport running through his veins. Owen inspired him to fly, to soar above all obstacles and succeed. Levi walked hand in hand with the man who made his heart beat. Levi smiled, feeling like a complete man in mind, body, and heart.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*I want everyone to fall in love and have a happy ending. I've gone to school for many years and have the certificates/diplomas to prove it. Unfortunately, my editing still sucks. Oh well, there are lots of stories that need to be written, and I'm not afraid to do it. BTW, my cats say hello, and thanks for reading.*

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