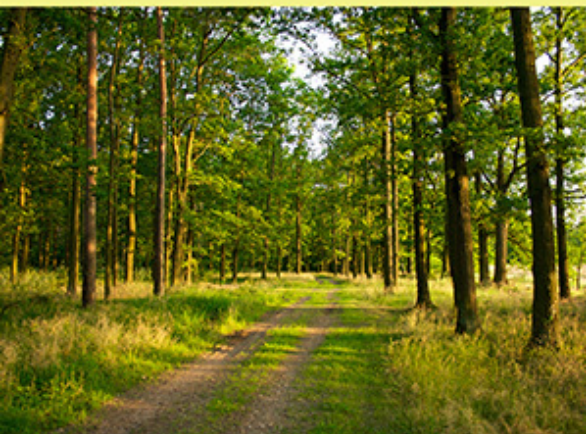


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

SECONDARY BREAK

Megan Linden

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SECONDARY BREAK

By Megan Linden

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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SECONDARY BREAK

By Megan Linden

Photo Description

The photo shows a man lying on his stomach under a car, possibly a truck. We can only see him from his waist down, but he's shirtless and he has dirty jeans and boots on. There's a screwdriver on the ground next to him. The man is outside, in the background there are trees and the sun is shining.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm not from around here. Where I come from no one welcomes you to the neighborhood, no one knocks on your door and brings you cookies, no one fixes your truck out of the goodness of his heart, no one even looks you in the eye for fuck's sake.

But I'll admit, I like it here.

I like the fresh air and the quiet and I really like my neighbor—the one in the tight jeans with the great ass under my truck.

Sure, he's too damned friendly, too damned helpful and too damned honest to be real.

But fuck it, I like him, actually... I more than like him and that's the problem...

I'm hoping for two alpha males and a HEA, maybe a hint of the forbidden, but not too much angst and of course lots of sex!

Thanks a bunch

Sincerely,

A.J.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: ex-cop, coaching, basketball, coming out, high school, small town, meddlesome family

Word Count: 13,175

Acknowledgements

Thank you, A.J., for a great prompt! I had fun writing the story of these guys and I hope you like it.

Big thanks to Cala Jane, my faithful beta reader, and to my LOR editing team, Julie and Averin—you made my story better and I learned new things while working with you.

And of course thanks to the LOR Mods for working so hard to organize this event!

SECONDARY BREAK

By Megan Linden

Chapter One

The harsh sunlight was coming through the windows, illuminating the yellowish wallpaper on the wall Zack was currently staring at. The room used to be a guest room and the wallpaper probably started out stark white, with small flowers printed every five inches or so. Now all the furniture was covered in drop cloths, just like the floor, and Zack stood in the middle of the room, hands on his hips, as he looked between the wall and the supplies at his feet.

He was supposed to start the renovations on Monday, but he just couldn't sit around doing nothing any longer. There was a big possibility he would go insane if he spent another day in front of the TV, so he decided Saturday was as good as Monday to begin his work.

The doorbell rang downstairs. Zack wasn't expecting any guests, but he had a bunch of surprise visitors through the last week and a half since he'd arrived in Pomerane, Texas, in his father's old truck. It could be literally anyone who lived around here.

He didn't even think about how he looked, in his old jeans and a tank top fried at the seams, until he opened the door and came face-to-face with the Hot Neighbor, Evan. Zack blinked and stared at him for a few seconds before he noticed Evan hadn't come alone. The woman by his side was around mid-fifties, quite tall, with an impressive braid reaching all the way down to her hips.

And, just like every woman Zack opened his door to lately, she was holding a silver baking pan.

"Good morning and welcome to Pomerane!" she said, thrusting the pan in his direction.

Zack knew the drill by now. All but one of the welcoming visits went the same way: greetings, food, an up-and-down look and an attempt to see behind him into the house. When Zack's manners would kick in, he'd invite the guest for something to drink and then spend between fifteen to fifty minutes answering questions about himself. By the third visit, he almost wished his neighbors would team up and come over together, but the mental picture of the living room filled with a few dozens of people asking him question after question kept that wish at bay.

The only visit so far he had honestly enjoyed was when Evan came over to introduce himself on Zack's first day in Pomerane.

"Good morning, thank you." Zack forced himself to smile at the lady before glancing at Evan and back. "And thank you for the pie." Apple pie, he could tell from the smell. His favorite. The word had gotten around. "Would you like to come in?"

The woman grinned at him and there was something familiar about that smile, but Zack couldn't place it immediately. "We would love to," she said and stepped in after he moved aside. "My name is Victoria Simmons." Zack's quick glance at Evan didn't go unnoticed as she nodded. "I'm Evan's mother."

That explained the familiarity. "It's nice to meet you, ma'am. I'm Zack Baynes. Please, sit down." He gestured towards the couch and armchairs in the middle of the living room. "Something to drink?"

"Water, please," Mrs. Simmons said as she sat down on one of the armchairs.

Zack turned to Evan who still stood next to him. He was quiet and it was the complete opposite of how he acted the three times Zack had met him before.

"Would you like something?" Zack asked and when Evan's eyes found his, he felt the now-familiar tug in his chest that only got worse when Evan smiled at him.

"Water would be great."

"I will be right back."

By the time Zack returned to the living room with drinks and pie, Evan was seated on the couch, listening as his mother whispered and gesticulated wildly. They looked alike now that Zack could see them like this. They shared the same smile, similar coloring—dark hair, tanned skin—and an expressive way of talking. The first time Zack talked with Evan, he almost had to dodge Evan's flailing limbs. He smiled at the memory as he put the glasses and plates on the coffee table between the couch and the armchairs.

"You didn't have to do that, that pie was for you," Mrs. Simmons said as Zack sat down on the couch, but Evan had already picked up his plate.

"I'm glad you did," he said and shoved a piece of pie into his mouth quickly.

Zack chuckled. "I'm glad I did, too." He turned to Mrs. Simmons. "I don't mind."

There was a bit of small talk next—about the weather, the town, and Zack's first impressions of the area. It went about the same as the other visits did and Zack waited for the interrogation to begin, but Mrs. Simmons surprised him.

"I've heard you were a basketball player once," she said and Zack raised his eyebrows. He knew, of course, that people talked, and the news about him was probably in high demand since he was the only newcomer in Pomerane lately. But the basketball thing? That was what got her attention?

"That's overstating it, I'm afraid. I went to college on a basketball scholarship and played at school, but I've never gone pro."

She waved her hand. "That's still better than the rest of the town."

Zack looked between her and Evan, hoping one of them would start making sense soon. "I'm sorry?"

"Start over, Mom," Evan said after he swallowed another bit of pie. He didn't notice his mother's chastising look.

"Well, Mr. Baynes, I'm the principal of the local high school and I would like to ask if you'd consider coaching our girls' basketball team."

Zack stared at her without blinking and tried to find some evidence that she was joking.

"She's serious," Evan said, but when Zack turned to him, he just shrugged. He didn't get to say anything else before his mother spoke again.

"There aren't a lot of basketball players around here. It's all football, all the way." She waved her hand. "Boys play, girls are cheerleaders, and the whole town goes to see every game. But some of the female students came to me and asked for a team. And I thought I would have to tell them no, since the boys' coach can't take on another team and there's no one else around who would do this. Bringing someone from out of town is impossible on our budget. Then I heard about you." She pinned him with her stare. "You're our only chance to make the team happen."

"No pressure," Zack muttered before he could stop himself. It was insanity. Sure, he'd never really stopped playing—he used to play pretty regularly on the NYPD team and he shot some hoops once or twice since he got on his feet after the surgery—but coaching a high school girls' team?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mrs. Simmons nudging Evan with her foot.

“For what it’s worth,” her son started after a sigh, “these girls are really committed. My niece is one of them and I know some of the others. They shouldn’t give you any problems.”

Zack wasn’t immune to Evan’s dark eyes, but he still thought it was a crazy idea. “These are teenagers. Of course there’d be problems.”

Mrs. Simmons shook her head. “If they misbehave, we will drop the team.”

“I have never worked with teenagers before,” Zack tried again. It was surprisingly difficult to tell her no.

“You caught murderers for a living, Mr. Baynes. Teenagers aren’t that bad.”

Zack looked between her and Evan again before lowering his gaze onto the plate in his hand. There was one more thing, one that was the most likely to make her withdraw the offer. He wasn’t used to talking about it, though.

He squared his shoulders and met her gaze again. “There’s something else. I’m a private person and I don’t volunteer this information often, so I’d ask you not to share it, but I’m gay,” he said, inwardly surprised by his even tone. “I imagine it might be a problem for some parents or staff.”

Mrs. Simmons scoffed. “This is the twenty-first century, Mr. Baynes.”

And we’re in a small town in Texas. He didn’t say it out loud, but she must have seen it in his expression, because she shook her head and jutted her chin out a bit.

“We’re not homophobes around here. Besides, you wouldn’t be the first gay teacher in our school.” She gestured at Evan. “My son works there, too, teaching computer classes a few hours a week.”

Well. If Zack needed a confirmation—and he told himself he didn’t—that would be it. He looked at Evan, who tried to look neutral, but the tips of his ears were red, and he avoided Zack’s gaze as he put his plate down.

“Besides, this is a girls’ team,” Mrs. Simmons continued as if nothing happened. “I’m fairly sure some of the fathers would be relieved that their daughters’ handsome coach was gay.”

“Mom!” Evan’s protest was instantaneous and he seemed to forget about his embarrassment. “You can’t say things like that, it’s insulting.” He turned to Zack. “I’m sorry for—”

“I’m quite capable of handling my own apologies, Evan,” his mother cut in. “I am sorry, it was out of line. I didn’t think.”

Zack nodded, acknowledging the apology. He heard much worse numerous times and it was still better than what he had expected. “It’s all right, I understand where you were coming from.”

“Yeah, from—” Evan started, but his mother interrupted him again.

“Evan.”

He closed his mouth but crossed his arms against his chest. It looked weird to Zack, who somehow had already gotten used to Evan’s constant smile and ease.

“I apologize again for my thoughtless comment,” Mrs. Simmons said. “But the original question still applies. Will you consider my offer?”

Just tell her no. This is ridiculous and you’re not here to coach a freaking basketball team. Just tell her no.

Zack put down his plate. “Okay, I will consider it.”

Chapter Two

Evan couldn't believe it actually worked. He knew his mother had the crazy ability to make everyone do her bidding, but he had thought she would finally meet her match in Zack Baynes. Evan shook his head as he watched her go down the street and when he turned to the house they just left, he saw Zack standing on his porch steps, staring after her with a half-contemplative, half-surprised expression on his face. Evan hesitated since he already felt they intruded on Zack's day, but he couldn't resist walking back to him.

"Don't feel bad, she does that to everyone," he said with a shrug.

Zack turned those blue eyes on him and Evan swallowed. He wanted Zack from the first moment Evan looked out from his kitchen window and saw the guy in a sweaty tank top carrying a box into the empty house next door. He wanted him even more after he went over there and introduced himself that first day, working hard to get a real smile out of Zack and feeling incredibly proud when his lips finally twitched.

But hearing Zack say he was gay... Well, that just made things really complicated for Evan. A part of him was overjoyed while another part concentrated on not getting his hopes up yet.

"She's good." Zack's voice brought him back to the present.

Evan put his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Yeah, me and my sister always say she could become the President, if she decided to run."

Zack nodded. "I could see that."

"Seriously, though. You'd really think about her offer?"

"I don't have a choice now." Zack shifted his weight and put his hands on his hips. "It's just weird. Who would ever pick me to take care of kids, you know?"

Evan knew it all too well. "I get it. I thought the same thing when I started last year." He snorted. "And I had even less choice in the matter than you do."

Zack nodded and smirked. "Did you have any?"

"I had a say in picking the hours."

It made Zack laugh and Evan felt ridiculously proud of that. He knew Zack wasn't much older than him, but with Zack's usual grim expression and gray hair at his temples, up until now he always looked much more mature.

“I don’t have any experience with teenagers. My nephew is three, so he’s not that scary.” Zack hesitated. “Well, different scary. And I don’t stay alone with him—ever.”

“Like I told you, one of the girls is my niece and she’s reasonable. She shouldn’t act out. They really want to have a team.”

Zack gestured for Evan to follow him into the house and Evan was immediately relieved to hide from the heat in the shadow of the hallway.

“And there’s really no one else who could do this?”

Evan winced. “Football, man. Half of the town’s male population would be happy to work, or even volunteer, as a football coach. But everything else...” He shrugged. “All the other sports are second fiddle at best and nobody wants the gig. Not to mention that the pay is shitty. I wouldn’t even call it a paycheck, really. More like allowance money.”

“And your mom knew from the rumor mill that I’m not looking for a job, so she realized I don’t need the money.” Zack didn’t seem bothered by it. He was just stating a fact. “Iced tea? Or more water?”

“Iced tea would be great.” Evan watched Zack go and noticed for the first time that he favored his right leg. *Injured in the line of duty*, the rumor mill went. *Former homicide detective who came here for a long overdue vacation*. Evan called bullshit on the vacation part, but he understood wanting to get away somewhere else when your life got flipped. He had once hidden in the online world for a while, but most people who needed a break just changed cities, or states, or even countries.

Zack returned from the kitchen, handed Evan a glass, and gestured for him to sit on the couch.

“How do you handle weather like this?” Zack downed half his glass in one go and settled in the armchair. Evan felt a pang of disappointment he hadn’t sat down on the couch next to him again.

“We tell ourselves to close our eyes and think of Texas.” Evan grinned at Zack’s snort. “Other than that, A/C, pools, and probably messed up conditioning as well.”

“Dammit, I miss New York.”

Zack was probably going for a light tone, but Evan heard the underlying wistfulness. “Were you born there?”

“Yeah, I lived there my whole life.” Zack drank the rest of the iced tea and Evan had a second to admire the line of his exposed neck. He took a sip himself to get rid of the sudden dryness in his mouth. “I didn’t even leave for college. What about you? Did you ever leave?”

Evan shook his head. “No. When my plans to join the Army fell through, I stayed. Didn’t go to college, went through the whole”—he waved his hand—“antiestablishment phase or whatever.” Seeing Zack’s raised eyebrows, he chuckled. “Nothing scandalous, I promise, officer.”

“Detective,” Zack corrected before wincing. “Never mind now.”

Evan wanted to ask approximately three hundred questions, but he didn’t think it was a good idea, seeing Zack instantly slump in the chair. “Nothing scandalous, I promise, *sir*,” he said instead, light and teasing. Flirting, he knew how to do.

Zack snorted again. “As long as it’s nothing I would have to take my handcuffs out for.”

A wave of heat ran through Evan, one that had nothing to do with Texas weather. “Well, if you put it like that...” He held his voice, fighting the grin. “I’m sure I could think of something.”

They dissolved into laughter and Evan watched as the grim lines on Zack’s face smoothed out, replaced by laugh lines around his mouth and eyes. He looked happier than Evan had ever seen him.

This was the moment Evan realized his crush had just become worse.

Chapter Three

Zack spent most of the weekend tearing down the wallpaper, cleaning the walls and painting them light blue, while his mind was going a hundred miles per hour over Mrs. Simmons's offer. He was probably crazy to even consider it, but he also knew he needed something to do and it was just a matter of time before he would run out of things to fix or renovate around the house. Unless, of course, Zack just tore it all down and rebuilt it, but he didn't think Karen, his sister-in-law, would be happy about him demolishing her old family home. *It'd still be better than teaching a bunch of teenagers how to play basketball*, he thought, and the whole dilemma went back to square one.

The only thing that could distract Zack from mulling it over and over in his head was thinking about Evan, which he tried to avoid as much as possible. Sure, Zack found the guy incredibly hot, and Evan's flirting was fun, but it wasn't New York where Zack could have mostly anonymous sex with whatever hot guy he would find in one of the few discreet bars he visited from time to time. There was nothing anonymous or discreet in Pomerane, Texas, and Mrs. Simmons's claim that they weren't homophobes wasn't worth much. Even if no one would hate him for being gay—which Zack seriously doubted anyway—they would all know, and the mere idea made him want to run and hide, which pissed him off in turn.

Evan was fun and hot, and Zack wanted him. But he didn't want him enough to put up with that. He felt too exposed even *telling* Mrs. Simmons about his sexuality. He had no interest in *showing* anybody anything.

Since Zack had promised Mrs. Simmons he would go check out the school, he found himself in Pomerane High School's gym on Monday morning. He was surprised by all the memories that brought with it.

He had spent countless hours playing ball as a kid—in school gyms, on the courts, shooting hoops in his own front yard. Zack's mom would say in exasperation that the ball was glued to his hand and Zack's dad would nod and say it was good he was so dedicated to something, so willing to work hard. And Zack did work hard, because he loved it.

Ultimately, it earned him a scholarship to a college he would have never made it to otherwise, and he played there for four years. Realizing he wasn't

good enough to play pro was a bitter pill to swallow, but Zack pushed through. During his senior year the team won the state championship, and he applied to the police academy the day after his graduation.

Zack still played and he'd been the captain of the NYPD team for almost five years, because he had never stopped loving the game. But there was something missing from it now or something holding him back that wasn't there when he was still in high school and the whole world was open to him whenever he was out on the court.

Looking around the empty gym in Pomerane High School, Zack wished for a split second to be back there—back when everything was easy even if it didn't feel like it. He had never regretted joining the NYPD and he loved his job, but basketball was the first big dream he had to let go of and it was hard not to wonder what could have been. Somehow it didn't have that crushing pain that came with wondering the same thing about his career as a detective.

"Mr. Baynes, it's good to see you."

Zack turned to see Mrs. Simmons with a young girl nearly her height. As they walked up to him, he could see the family resemblance. *It had to be the granddaughter.* She had dark hair tied high at the back of her head, a slim figure, and a smile that made Zack think of Evan before he caught himself.

"Ma'am."

Mrs. Simmons put her hand around the girl's shoulders. "This is Melissa, my granddaughter," she said, confirming Zack's guess.

"It's nice to meet you, sir," Melissa said, smile still plastered on her face. "Thank you for doing this, it really means a lot."

Zack glanced between her and her grandmother. "Nice to meet you too. But there's nothing to thank me for yet. I didn't make any decision."

"Oh." Melissa's smile disappeared and her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, I thought—"

"Hey, Mr. Baynes hasn't said no yet, either." Mrs. Simmons squeezed her shoulder before looking at Zack. "Right?"

Zack knew when he was being played and the two hopeful faces staring at him right now told him that loud and clear. He had to give it to Mrs. Simmons, she didn't pull any punches. It should piss him off, but somehow it just... didn't.

He nodded. "Right."

Zack was still going back and forth on the offer as he walked home, but every jumbled thought left him at the sight that greeted him. Evan was lying on the ground, half-hidden beneath the truck on the side of Zack's driveway. He was shirtless and in well-fitting jeans, and Zack's dick twitched as he breathed in deeply. He wanted to catch Evan by the ankles, drag him from under the truck, and drop on top of him on all fours before pressing their bodies together and diving in for a kiss.

Zack swallowed and shook his head. He mentioned his car issues when they talked on Saturday and Evan offered to help, but Zack just waved him off. Now Evan was lying there half-naked.

Get a grip, Baynes, Zack told himself to snap out of his fantasy. For a moment he forgot he was on the street, out in the open for everyone to see him, to see *them*. For a moment he forgot every reason he came up with over the weekend to stay away from this.

"I told you, you didn't have to do that," Zack said after he wet his lips and rolled his shoulders. He stepped closer to his truck and put his hands on his hips, telling himself not to put them anywhere else.

On anyone else.

Evan jerked, obviously not noticing Zack before. He got out from under the truck and stood up in one smooth motion, making Zack groan internally. Seeing Evan like this, with his naked, sweaty chest, his hands dirty to the elbows, and his face flushed and smiling—all of this was a test of Zack's willpower he was pretty sure he was going to fail. It made him want to give up the fight right then and just reach out and touch.

He dug his fingers deeper into his hips.

Evan seemed oblivious to his struggle as he shrugged with an easy grin. "And I told ya I wanted to."

Zack couldn't believe he was actually starting to blush right now. He just hoped Evan would take it as a flush from the heat. "I appreciate it," he said, his voice low, and he saw Evan's eyes drop to his lips and look up again.

"I like fixing things."

Zack should walk away. He should thank Evan and then hide in his house, take a cold shower or jack off, or both. He should put some space between them before the sizzling heat exploded.

He did neither of those things.

“Let me at least offer you lunch as a thank-you.” The words left his mouth without his conscious input and he had to look away from Evan to get a hold of himself.

“Fixing your car is a thank-you for considering the coaching job.” Evan lowered his voice and a shiver ran down Zack’s back. “There’s no need to thank me for a thank-you.”

Zack nodded. He refused to feel disappointed. It was better this way. It was good that Evan took a step back.

“I’d love a glass of something cold, though.”

Not really backing off then. Zack nodded and gestured Evan to go first.

The moment Zack stepped into the hallway, the front door shut behind him and he was pushed back against it. Evan crowded him, his chest brushing against Zack’s and his face close enough to Zack’s that their noses almost bumped into each other.

“I’m pretty sure I’m reading this right,” Evan said, voice low as his eyes flicked between Zack’s lips and eyes. He wasn’t really touching him yet, hovering just so. “Tell me anyway.”

Zack exhaled shakily and he watched Evan licking his lips as if he wanted to taste Zack’s breath on them.

“You’re not reading this wrong.”

Zack barely finished the sentence before Evan’s lips were on his, claiming his mouth and licking inside right away. There was nothing soft about that kiss and Zack grunted in surprise, but it soon turned into a moan as Evan got a hold of Zack’s hips and pulled him closer. Zack ran his hands up Evan’s chest and shoulders before he gripped him by the neck and nipped at Evan’s lower lip.

“There’s a bed upstairs.” His voice was low and breathless, and he had no idea why he had even hesitated to let it happen before.

Evan pulled back and the heat in his eyes made Zack start to sweat as if he was under the midday sun.

“Come on then.”

Zack moved without hesitation.

Chapter Four

Evan barely noticed the scent of the fresh paint and the wreckage of a house in repairs as Zack led him to the bedroom. He was too busy staring at Zack's back and ass, the way his jeans clung to his long legs. Evan wanted to lick him all over, to take his time and make Zack lose his mind. *Maybe another time.* He knew he wouldn't be able to go slow now.

Zack took his shirt off as soon as he entered the bedroom and Evan plastered himself to his back. He inhaled the scent of sweat and the faint remains of aftershave as he buried his nose in the side of Zack's neck. He gripped the sides of Zack's tank top tightly, barely restraining himself from ripping it off.

"Fuck." Zack almost stumbled forward, but he managed to recover. He put his hands on Evan's clenched fists at his sides.

Evan licked a line from his neck to his ear. "That what you want? Fuck?"

Zack dislodged Evan's hands and turned to face him, hands going straight to Evan's zipper. "You have a different idea?"

Evan had trouble forming a coherent thought with Zack's hands so close to his growing erection. "Not really. This first, though," he managed and then leaned in to lick Zack's lips before slipping his tongue inside.

Zack stiffened for a moment and paused, unresponsive to Evan's kiss, but before Evan could back out, Zack seemed to snap out of it and kissed him back. He abandoned Evan's zipper to circle his arms around Evan's waist and pull him closer. They were both breathing hard when they parted and Evan went immediately for Zack's tank top, tugging it off. His breath stuttered when they pushed closer and naked skin met naked skin. The hair on Zack's chest tickled lightly but underneath it was a wall of solid muscles, and Evan bit down on Zack's collarbone to stifle his moan. All the things he wanted to do to Zack's body ran through his head as Zack dug his fingers into Evan's back.

"Get naked," Evan murmured as he made himself pull back, and he reached down to his half-opened jeans without looking away from Zack. He watched him undress as he pulled off his own clothes and when they were both naked, Evan took a calming breath to stop himself from jumping Zack. He ran his hands over Zack's chest, up and down, before pushing him back until he fell on the bed.

Zack lay down and went to roll onto his stomach, but Evan grabbed his knee and stopped him. “No, stay like this.” He kneeled between Zack’s spread legs on the bed and ran his hand from Zack’s knee over his inner thigh, feeling the muscles trembling under his touch. He didn’t reach Zack’s cock, moving his hand to the other side of Zack’s leg where two scars stood out against his pale skin. One was a gunshot wound, the other right next to it—a surgical cut. Evan brushed his thumb over them before looking up at Zack’s face. There was still heat in his eyes, but there was also a wariness of sorts, as if he didn’t know what Evan’s reaction to the scars would be. As if they could have made Evan change his mind about wanting him.

“I want to do so many things to you.” Evan leaned over him and rested his weight on the elbows on both sides of Zack’s head. There was no way he would stop because of some scars.

Zack shifted under him and they both inhaled sharply as their cocks brushed against each other.

“Like what?” Zack asked, hooking one of his legs over Evan’s.

Evan grinned down at him and nipped at his chin. “Fuck you, for one.” He kissed Zack’s jawline. “Ride you.” Another kiss. “Suck you down.” And another. “Make you lose your mind.”

“Ambitious,” Zack said, but he tightened his grip on Evan’s sides.

“I told you I like fixing things.” Evan’s lips brushed against Zack’s as he talked. “But what I love the most is taking things apart and seeing how they work. What makes them tick.”

Zack turned his head to the side. “You only play with broken toys?”

“No.” Evan nipped at his jawline again and pushed his hips down to rub against Zack. “I play with those that interest me.”

“Good.” Zack suddenly hooked both his legs over Evan’s and rolled them over to be on top. “Let’s play, then.”

The kiss was like an attack from both sides, neither willing to give ground. There was no more playfulness, just a frantic race to get each other off. Zack shifted his weight and reached one hand between their bodies to grab both their cocks and Evan moaned at the hard tug. Thank God their cocks were leaking already, easing the friction.

Evan sucked a mark on Zack's skin, low on his neck, as he felt his orgasm building. His thighs trembled, and he clutched the back of Zack's neck. "Oh, God."

He came hard, thrusting his head back against the pillow and moaning as Zack tightened his grip and pushed Evan closer to the border of pleasure and pain. Zack followed him over the edge after just a few more thrusts, and Evan's shaky breath caught in his throat at the sight of Zack's blown-wide eyes. His come spilled between their bodies right before Zack fell onto Evan.

Evan felt spent and languid, mind blissfully silent as he ran his fingers over the back of Zack's neck. Zack's weight on him was grounding and warm and Evan enjoyed it as the high of the orgasm changed into the slow buzz flowing through his mind.

In the end Zack rolled off and Evan turned to lie on his side. He wanted to spread out over Zack's body, keep them together as close as possible, but he didn't know if Zack would like that. He settled for putting a hand on Zack's chest.

Evan didn't realize he was holding his breath until Zack glanced at him with a lazy smile. He exhaled and grinned back.

"Told you your plan was too ambitious," Zack pointed out, and his tone was more relaxed than Evan had ever heard it.

"Not *too* ambitious." He smirked. "I just need some time."

Zack looked at him for a long moment and the doubt started creeping up at him. Evan wasn't used to feeling unsure anymore. He let that go years ago and wasn't looking forward to going back. But with Zack, he wasn't sure what to expect and while it was a part of his charm, it also left Evan with questions.

Finally Zack raised one corner of his mouth in a crooked smirk. "I guess I have some of that."

Evan leaned into him, resting half on top of him and ignoring the mess on their bodies. He kissed Zack slowly, no traces of fighting left in either of them. Zack let him in and allowed him to explore, sighing quietly when Evan finally drew back.

"Let's make the most of it, then."

Chapter Five

A few days later, Zack decided that sometime after he arrived in Pomerane, he apparently had lost his goddamn mind. Not only did he accept the offer to coach the girls' basketball team, going from an outsider to a member of the high school faculty, but he also started sleeping with a guy who was both his neighbor and, technically, his coworker.

He was certifiably insane.

But Zack would probably be more worried if he wasn't having so much fun along the way. The girls turned out to be really into the game, and they knew how to handle a ball. After the first practice Zack went home, sat down and actually designed a detailed plan that would help him push them forward, complete with notes on each of the players, a list of basic maneuvers to start with, and a three-month plan of regularly scheduled skill tests. He got so into it, he would have spent the rest of the night working on the plan, if Evan hadn't come over for dinner to distract him.

Evan. The other reason Zack was going crazy and, if he was honest with himself, probably the bigger one. The guy was seriously messing with Zack's head, making him forget he wasn't supposed to be so open, he wasn't supposed to let his guard down. Years of conditioning as a cop in New York City and mostly hiding his sexuality made him want to run in the opposite direction, made him paranoid and worried, and probably too snappy with Evan sometimes. But then Evan would grin at him, hook his foot around Zack's ankle under the kitchen table during dinner, or slide from the couch to kneel between his legs, and Zack would forget to be careful.

"What are you thinking so hard about?" Evan circled his arms around Zack's waist from behind and Zack almost dropped the plate he was washing. He put it down carefully. He was getting too relaxed if he didn't see Evan sneak into the kitchen.

"The team." Zack didn't feel bad for offering only half the truth. There was no way he was going to talk about the other half and he was pretty sure Evan wouldn't get it anyway. To someone willing to be openly gay in a small Texas town, Zack would probably seem overly cautious. A coward, even. And since Evan seemed to be liked and accepted, he might not get how different it could be in more than just theory. In theory, every gay man knew how bad things could get. In reality, some were luckier than others.

“*Mhmm.*” Evan brushed his nose between Zack’s shoulder blades. He’d listened to Zack going on and on about the second practice during dinner. “Planning on the WNBA already?”

Zack snorted, turned the water off and dried the sink. “Not yet.”

Evan pushed one of his hands under the front of Zack’s T-shirt. “State championship maybe?”

“I’m focusing on the accuracy of the passes for now,” Zack said dryly, turning in Evan’s embrace. He could feel his cock stirring just from that simple contact.

“Boring.” Evan hooked his fingers through loopholes in Zack’s jeans. “Dream bigger.”

Zack put his wet hands on Evan’s ass and pulled him closer to rub their groins together. “I can show you—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence.”

Zack smirked at him. “Whatever you say.”

Evan raised one eyebrow. “Oh really? Whatever I say?” He leaned in closer, his breath warm against Zack’s cheek. “How about we try that in bed?”

Evan’s whisper made Zack’s cock go from interested to aching in record time and Zack could only nod. He didn’t want to fight it. Evan was incredibly, ridiculously hot and he made Zack come harder than he ever had before. He seemed to know every trick to take Zack apart. Zack didn’t even know he had some of the kinks Evan discovered in him.

“Lie down.” Evan pushed him towards the bed when they entered the bedroom and then shook his head when Zack went to take off his jeans. “No, leave them. Lose the shirt.”

Zack pulled off his T-shirt and stretched over the mattress. He watched as Evan tilted his head to the side, looking over his body as if he didn’t know where to start.

“Turn on your stomach.”

Zack obediently rolled over. He let out a sigh. Following Evan’s instructions was easier when they weren’t face-to-face, but he still glanced over his shoulder just to see what Evan was up to.

“I’m getting naked,” Evan answered the question Zack didn’t ask. “I’m going to climb you and rub myself all over you. I will rub my cock against your jeans-covered ass and I will want to push inside you, but I won’t be able to.”

“Just take them off of me.” Zack pushed his hips up in invitation. “Take them off and then you can fuck me.”

Evan climbed onto the bed behind him and settled over Zack’s thighs, forcing him down. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“I can think of a few places.”

Evan huffed a laugh into the back of Zack’s neck. “Shut up.” He bit him lightly as he ran his hands down Zack’s back.

That was another thing with Evan. Sex could be fun and there was no rule that said they couldn’t bicker while they got each other off. Zack had never had that before and he liked it. He liked it a lot.

He arched his body up, not enough to dislodge Evan, but enough to make him tighten his grip on Zack’s shoulders and push him back against the mattress.

“Lie there and enjoy.”

The assault Evan launched on his body was more than enjoyable. He licked a path down Zack’s spine and up again, dragging blunt nails over his skin at the same time. Evan’s hard cock rubbed against his ass and Zack had never been so frustrated to wear jeans in his entire life. He had to clutch the pillow under his head as he buried his face in it. He tried to muffle the sounds he made, but Evan tugged hard at his hair.

“Let me hear you.”

Zack moaned and closed his eyes. The sound was ridiculously loud in his ears. His senses were overwhelmed by the way he was reduced to just taking it, experiencing everything without giving back. The faint scent of Evan on the pillow and stronger smell of their sweat in the air, the sounds they were making, the weight of Evan on top of him—all of it made Zack want to explode out of his skin. His erection was painful against his zipper, but he didn’t move to open his fly.

Finally Evan lost his patience too. He left another line of kisses along Zack’s spine, and when he reached his jeans, he paused and sat back. “Okay, off. Get them off.” He pulled away from Zack and shoved his jeans and boxers

down. After kicking his pants off the rest of the way, Zack reached for lube and condom from the drawer next to the bed before handing both to Evan. A moment later Evan was back on top of him and Zack moaned into the pillow at the feel of naked thighs against his and a hard cock brushing so close to his hole.

“God, look at you,” Evan murmured behind him, shifting back and pushing Zack’s legs up until he kneeled on the bed. Zack trembled as he imagined himself on his knees with his face smashed against the bed, naked and open. He tightened his grip on the pillow.

Evan stretched him fast and hard and Zack had trouble breathing as he choked on another moan. Any lingering embarrassment flew out the window as he pushed back on Evan’s fingers. “Fuck me already.”

“I can’t hear you.” Evan twisted his fingers and Zack’s entire body trembled.

He turned his head to the side. “Fuck me already.”

Zack didn’t need to repeat himself again. A moment later Evan pushed into him in one hard shove and only Evan’s tight grip on his hips kept Zack in place. Zack moaned as he started to push back, and soon they found the rhythm that suited them both and led them to the edge. Zack came so hard he got light-headed, and from the way Evan slumped over him, pinning him to the bed once again, he wasn’t the only one.

Zack couldn’t move and he knew he would be sore as hell tomorrow. He wiped the sweat off of his eyebrows with his thumb and smiled as he felt Evan’s thighs tremble against his in the aftershocks.

Sure, Zack might be certifiably insane now, but the perks were definitely worth it.

Chapter Six

Evan often wished he wasn't so easy to read, especially around his older sister. Jessica could drag everything out of him. All she had to do was glare at him in her special way, and he spilled his guts as if he didn't have an off switch.

He still tried to resist every time.

"It's nothing, Jess."

"No 'nothing' would've made ya look like that." She was preparing lunch and had dragged him into the kitchen to "help." Melissa was upstairs talking to one of her friends, and Trevor, Jessica's husband, was glued to the football game on TV. "You haven't stopped smiling for weeks now."

"I'm a happy person." Evan kept his eyes on the tomatoes he was cutting.

"Do you want me to guess?"

"God, no."

"Don't say His name in vain, Evan," she warned and sighed. "The reason's online or real?"

Once upon a time, the question would have made sense as he'd spent almost all of his waking hours in front of the computer screen. It hadn't been like that for years now, except when Evan was under deadline for one of his freelance projects, but apparently it wasn't long enough for Jessica to forget. And it looked like forever might not be enough for her to stop rendering anything online as not real, but Evan didn't want to pick that fight again, so he just shrugged.

"Not online."

Jess took the cut tomatoes from him and tossed them in the salad bowl. "Is it a guy?"

Evan shuffled his feet. He could feel himself getting red. "Yes."

That made her pause and look up at him. "Really?"

"Really." He leaned on his elbows on the counter. "But it's new and I don't know what's going to happen, so don't go tell anyone, okay?"

"Oh my, it's the new guy, right? Coach Baynes? Mom told me he's gay."

“*Shh!*” Evan glanced back at the kitchen entrance, but it was empty. “He’s not broadcasting it and even you shouldn’t know. Mom was supposed to keep it private.”

She pointed at him with her knife. “Family *is* private.”

“Not when it’s someone else’s business. Melissa’s family, but she’s also one of his students and if she talked, the whole school would know.”

“So he’s hiding? And you’re okay with it?”

Evan sighed. Okay might be too strong of a word. “He’s not hiding exactly. He had no problems telling Mom when he thought it might make her back off. But Zack’s... private. He’s used to no one knowing. At his old precinct only his partner knew.”

Jess shook her head. “Sad way to live.”

Evan couldn’t argue with that. He’d never wanted to live in the closet, wouldn’t know how. Being out hadn’t always been easy, especially when he was a teenager, but the alternative was impossible to even consider.

“I think he just needs time to adjust,” he said in the end. It had been almost four weeks since their first kiss and Evan had already seen the difference. Zack was more relaxed, happier, and he tensed up less and less. Sure, it was just a beginning, but a hopeful one.

“For your sake, I hope you’re right.” Jess came up to him and hugged him sideways. “You’re obviously happy, so at least some things are good.” She put her chin on his shoulder and grinned. “Tell me everything.”

Evan made a token protest, but he knew from the start where they would end up, so he didn’t fight it too hard. Soon he was telling her the whole story and when he did, there was a now-familiar buzzing under his skin—the one he felt whenever he thought of Zack, one that made him realize he would be in deep trouble if his hopes for the two of them didn’t pan out.

It was late afternoon by the time he got home. All the talking about Zack made Evan miss him and he didn’t waste any time before going over to Zack’s place. He was supposed to work on the back porch railing today, so Evan circled around the house, only to pause in his steps when he noticed Zack. He was shirtless and sweaty, his abandoned T-shirt tossed onto the ground a few feet away. The tan he gained over the last few weeks gave his skin a healthy

glow. Evan had wanted him from the start, but now he could tell that when Zack first arrived in Pomerane, he had been too pale. The lines on his face had just begun to smooth out. Today, in low-hanging jeans, without a shirt, and with a hammer in his hand, he looked like a wet dream. A healthy wet dream.

“Are you just going to stand there and stare?” Zack didn’t even turn around. Damn his detective instincts.

Evan stepped closer. “It’s good to stop and admire the view from time to time.”

Zack turned and put his hands on his hips, something Evan noticed him do a lot. Right now, with Zack looking like this, it made Evan hot all over. He would be perfectly willing to just drop to his knees and suck Zack’s cock on those stairs, but he knew Zack would never go for it.

“Admiring is all you’re going to do?” Zack smirked and for a second, Evan was tempted to try it anyway. To reach out and take what he wanted right here and now.

He pulled off his shirt instead. “No.” He passed Zack closely enough for his arm to brush against Zack’s chest and went up the stairs, heading to the house. Evan was already hard, from the fantasy, from the way Zack looked, from the sensations of that brief touch. He hoped Zack would follow him right away.

And he did. Evan was tackled from behind even before he could reach the couch and they stumbled onto the carpet, Zack shifting to cushion their fall. They were both sweaty and Zack’s skin was warm under Evan’s hands as he turned around to pull him closer. Zack kept their kiss slow, but the roll of his hips articulated his intent clearly—they were not getting up before they both came. Evan was fine with that.

He leaned in to lick Zack from his collarbone to the jaw, tasting sweat and heat—and Zack. Evan hummed with satisfaction, but he still wanted more. He moved lower as he kissed and licked Zack’s torso and stomach, his chest hair tickling Evan’s lips and nose, until Zack dragged him back up for a hard kiss. They rolled over and Zack pulled back enough to unfasten both their jeans and bring their cocks together to rub against each other. The smell of their sweat and desire was thick in the hot air and Evan gasped as he clasped his hands on Zack’s shoulders. He moaned when Zack gripped both of them and started jacking them off.

The orgasm hit Evan hard. His thighs didn’t stop trembling even when Zack’s body pinned them down after he came. Evan stared at the ceiling

without blinking and it took Zack rolling off of him to bring him back to the world.

They lay side by side and they turned their heads to smile at each other. Their breathing was still getting back to normal and for once, Evan didn't feel the need to fill the silence. He was happy to just stay here like this.

Chapter Seven

Zack let the team hit the showers and started gathering his things. Compared to last week's tense practice, caused by the huge fight Diane and Maria had a few hours before, today's practice went smoothly. Zack was very grateful for that, since all the years as a NYPD detective didn't prepare him for trying to settle a fight between two teenage girls. He'd done all right, he supposed, considering there was no blood on the court to clean up, but he wasn't looking for a repeat any time soon.

"Coach?"

Mako stood a few feet away from him, biting her lip like she had done the first few times he had her do free throws. She had already changed her clothes and her short hair was wet from the shower.

"Something wrong?" *Please say no, please say no.* He was looking forward to heading home and eating dinner with Evan.

Mako took a deep breath and looked back at the door before facing him again. "Can I talk to you for a moment? It's... private."

Zack winced internally. He had no idea what he was doing. Why the hell would she come to him?

But she did, for whatever reason. And he couldn't send her away. He nodded and pointed to a seat before sitting down next to her. "What's going on?"

She clasped her hands on her lap and started cracking her knuckles. Her nails looked bitten down. She didn't talk for so long that Zack leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs to see her better. She glanced at him for a quick second before closing her eyes. "I think I'm a lesbian."

Her whisper made Zack freeze, his head suddenly a mess of emotions. Most of it was worry about Mako mixed with anger at the world over the way she had to say it, frightened and tense. He tried to ignore the gnawing doubt at the back of his mind making him wonder why she said it to him and not someone else. He felt bad for thinking about himself when it wasn't about him at all. It was about Mako.

"Okay," Zack said after too long of a moment, scrambling for something to say. "It's okay. It's okay if you are."

Mako opened her eyes and they were wet when she looked at him. “Is it?” She brushed off a tear that fell with the back of her hand. “Is it really?”

Zack was not the one to talk to about this. He couldn’t tell her everything was going to be fine. He couldn’t tell her not to worry. Someone else would reassure her, tell all the white lies she needed to hear now, and Mako would feel better for a bit. She would find out the truth later on, but she would be able to hope for a while longer. She wasn’t going to get that from him.

“To me, it is,” he finally said. “And it should be to you. It’s okay to be who you are.”

Mako brushed off another tear and looked back down at her lap. “It won’t be okay to everyone.”

Zack took a deep breath. “No, it won’t,” he admitted quietly. “I wish I could tell you differently, but I can’t. There will be people who won’t be okay with this.”

She nodded, biting her lips again. “What do I do?”

Zack looked down at the floor. He thought about the years in college when nobody cared and the years on the NYPD when nobody knew. He thought about where he was now—renovating an old house, sleeping with Evan, doing this, right here. “You live your life the best way you know how.” Zack winced as soon as it left his mouth. He sounded like he was reading from one of the cheap motivational posters hanging in his old precinct. “Nothing you do or say will ever be okay with everybody,” he went on after he looked up at her. “People won’t like your opinions, your successes, your career choice. And some of them won’t like that you’re a lesbian.” He shrugged. “Don’t seek everyone’s approval or you’ll end up miserable, lesbian or not.”

Mako snorted at that and she pulled out a tissue. “Miserable lesbian.” There was a hint of a smile on her face now and Zack counted it as a big win. He rolled his shoulders as he sat up straight.

“Don’t be a miserable lesbian, then,” he told her dryly and she nodded as she cleaned her face.

“Good advice.”

“You came to the right place.” He meant that as a self-deprecating joke, but she just nodded again.

“I did.” Mako rolled the used tissue into a ball in her hand. “I liked how you handled the drama last week. You were calm and everything. But I still didn’t

know how you'd react to, you know..." Mako waved her hand in front of herself. "But Melissa told me about you and I decided to try. Thank you, by the way. I really needed that."

Zack tensed again at the mention of Melissa. "What did she tell you about?"

Mako bit her lip as she glanced between him and her lap. "You know. About you being gay?" She whispered the last part, but she might as well have shouted, judging by the effect it had on Zack. He blinked a few times, stuck in his seat and not knowing how to react.

"I'm sorry," Mako went on. "I know it's private and I shouldn't—"

"It's fine." Zack's voice sounded weird to his own ears, but Mako seemed to calm, so maybe she didn't notice. "I understand. I'm just surprised."

Mako nodded quickly. "We know it's really not our business. Melissa said she overheard her uncle and mom talking. She just tried to help me. And she didn't tell anyone outside the team, if that helps."

It didn't, not really. Zack knew it wasn't going to stay that way for long. But he nodded. "Okay."

She stood up and Zack followed. For a second she looked as if she was considering hugging him and he regretted not staying in his seat, but then she just saluted him like the whole team had come to do after every practice. "Thanks again."

Zack offered her a weak smile, thoughts scrambled once again. "Good luck."

He watched Mako go and when she disappeared, he grabbed his backpack and headed for the door as well. He needed to have a serious conversation of his own.

Chapter Eight

Evan lay on the couch watching a documentary about the code breakers from World War II, when someone knocked on the door. He stumbled from the couch and ran his hand over his chest to get rid of all the crumbs his chocolate cookies might have left.

He smiled at the sight of Zack and moved aside to let him in, but quickly noticed something was wrong when Zack walked past him without a word or a smile. He looked like the Detective Baynes Evan first met weeks ago.

“What happened?”

Zack paused next to the couch and put his hands on his hips. His face was a blank mask and his shoulders were tense, and Evan realized he had never seen Zack pissed off before.

“I just had a very interesting conversation,” Zack started. He didn’t look at Evan for longer than a second at a time as his gaze traveled all around the room. The room he had already been in many times before.

Evan chanced a step closer. “Okay?”

“With Mako, one of the girls on the team.” Evan nodded. He had heard about every girl on Zack’s team and recognized all the names. “Turns out she thinks she’s a lesbian.”

Evan raised his eyebrows as he went over to the couch. He’d rather sit down but with Zack still standing it didn’t seem right, so he leaned against the backrest. “Did someone do something to her? Is she getting bullied?” Evan hadn’t heard anything about it, but he had no classes with Mako and Melissa acted weird last time he was at Jessica’s, so he didn’t talk to her much.

Zack shook his head. “No. She’s just figuring stuff out, she barely told anyone.”

“And she told you?” Evan smiled. He knew that a teenager confiding in a teacher was a huge show of trust. “I told you you’re doing fine with them.”

Zack snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. “She told me because she knew I was gay.”

Evan stared at him and Zack stared back. For a long while neither of them said anything. Evan didn’t know what to say. It was obviously the reason Zack

was upset, but why...? Evan didn't—Then the realization hit. "You think I told Melissa about us?" he asked, incredulous.

Zack took a deep, shaky breath. "She overheard you when you were talking to your sister."

Shit. He thought he was careful when he and Jess were in the kitchen, and anytime he checked, there was no one around. Still, Melissa had snuck up unnoticed.

It explained the looks she gave him afterwards when they ate. She knew he was gay, but she had never heard of him having a boyfriend. And for that boyfriend to be her coach... It had to be quite a shocker.

"Shit, I'm sorry." Evan understood Zack's reaction now. "I thought me and Jess were alone and she wanted to know what's"—*Making me so happy*—"up with me lately."

"Dammit, Evan!" Zack's shoulders dropped and he slumped onto the armchair.

Evan sat down on the edge of the couch closest to him. "Jess already knew you were gay." At Zack's narrowed eyes, he shrugged. "My family doesn't really keep secrets from each other."

"Well, apparently."

Evan felt a flare of anger at Zack's snappy tone. "Hey. I get you're upset, but it's no one's fault. Except Melissa's for eavesdropping and then blabbering to her friends."

"She thought she was helping Mako," Zack said as he stared at something behind Evan. The door, maybe. "I'm not angry with her."

"Who *are* you upset with? Me?" Evan's stomach tightened and when Zack didn't protest, it tensed even more. "I didn't do anything wrong. I just had a conversation with my sister."

Zack closed his eyes and hid his face in his hands. "I know." His voice was muffled, but loud enough for Evan to hear and breathe out in relief. He didn't want to be mad at Zack and he was fine with the careful and slow way they were progressing, but no one would make him feel ashamed of himself. No one would shut him up and tell him what he could and couldn't say.

"So what's wrong?" Evan wanted to close the space between them and touch Zack, but he just curled his hands into fists and stayed put.

“I don’t know what I’m doing!” Zack got up so fast Evan pulled back in his seat. “It’s insane. I spent the majority of my adult life basically in the closet! I can deny it, tell myself I was just being careful, but it doesn’t really matter, because the truth is, I was hiding the fact that I’m gay.” He shook his head. “I got so used to it, it’s just a reflex now. I don’t even think about it, it’s just what it is. I’m not broadcasting much of anything, so why would this be any different, right?” Zack cracked his knuckles and Evan winced at the sound.

“My plan was to come here to rest and figure my shit out, whatever that meant. There was no need to make friends or anything. Definitely no reason to tell anyone I’m gay. My life wasn’t going to suddenly be perfect—I did lose my career after getting shot after all—but it wouldn’t be bad. At least I’d be left alone and able to avoid my family’s worried looks.” Zack rubbed his forehead. “And then I come here and—” He chuckled but there was no joy in his voice. Evan tightened his fists. “And there are all these well-intentioned people, and my neighbor is hot and flirting with me, and it looks like my plans for solitude may not work out after all. And your mom, Jesus Christ!” Zack closed his eyes for a few seconds. “No one should ever offer me any kind of teaching position. I’m horrible with children, I’m terrified of children. But somehow—and I still don’t know how—I say yes. Now I have a bunch of teenagers depending on me, and fighting with themselves, and crying, and coming over for advice when I can’t even figure out my own shit!”

Evan wanted to go over to Zack, throw his arms around him and hold him close. But as he watched Zack pace around his living room, Evan knew he wasn’t done yet.

“How am I supposed to tell a sixteen-year-old girl everything will be okay when for all I know, it may not be! And what kind of role model am I, if I still freak out when people find out I’m gay?”

“The kind she chose.” Evan cut in, because he couldn’t hold it in any longer. “It’s not for you to decide if you’re worth it. They decide. And she did; she decided you’re worth it. If you were such a terrible human being as you seem to think you are, Mako wouldn’t have come to you, whether or not you’re gay.”

“I wish she came to you,” Zack admitted suddenly, sitting back down. “You’re so—You should be the role model for her, you’d know what to say.” He looked up at Evan. “God, you’re so open, so happy, so... unafraid. She should have come to you.”

Zack's last words were a whisper, but they still packed a punch right to Evan's gut and he couldn't sit still after that. He dropped to his knees right before Zack and clasped his hands on Zack's thighs. "She made the right choice. You care about those girls a lot and you're compassionate even if you don't believe that. You don't sugarcoat things and whatever you told Mako, I'm sure it wasn't a rainbow-colored story she would doubt anyway."

Zack stared right at him and Evan could clearly see the connection they had since the beginning, the pull that drew them together. Now he noticed something else as well, hopefully something more. It made it easier to keep talking. "When I was fifteen, my family told me there's nothing wrong with being gay, most of my friends didn't have a problem with it either, and I thought I was the lucky one. I'm the one who made it unscathed. Then when I was seventeen, I went to my guidance counselor and told her I wanted to join the Army."

Evan didn't realize he tightened his grip on Zack's legs until Zack covered his hands with his own, brushing his thumbs over Evan's fingers. "She told me about Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Stupid, I didn't even think to check, you know? Why would I? Anyway, she was nice about it, tried to be helpful. She told me I could still get in, if I didn't tell anyone the truth. She told me it was my choice." Evan swallowed a gulp in his throat. He hadn't thought about it for years, nothing more than a brief pang of what if. But telling it now brought all of the betrayal back. "It was my choice, to be me or to make a dream come true."

Zack leaned down and rested his forehead against Evan's. "I'm sorry."

Evan took in a shaky breath. "I promised myself I would always be me. Nobody will make me feel ashamed of who I am."

Zack gave him a sad smile. "Good."

"That doesn't mean I'm not afraid of anything, though," Evan admitted and he pulled back a little to get a better look at Zack. "I'm afraid of heights and small closed spaces. I'm afraid of letting people down. And I'm..." He turned one of his hands and threaded their fingers together. "I'm afraid I'm falling in love with you and you'll just get up one day and leave without looking back."

The silence that followed Evan's confession was almost unbearable. They stared at each other and Evan tried to decipher something from Zack's expression, but there was nothing on his face. Nothing. Evan went cold. He needed to get the hell out.

Before he could move, Zack's fingers tightened over his and kept them close.

"I'm afraid of loud noises now, they remind me of a gun firing," Zack said slowly as if he had to think on every word. "I'm afraid the world's really as terrible a place as I learned on the job. And I..." He tightened his grip on Evan's fingers again. "I'm afraid I'm going to screw this up, because I've never been in love before and I have no idea what to do."

Evan grinned and leaned in for a kiss. It was tentative at first, but it grew stronger, hotter, and by the time they separated, their lips were puffy and red. When Zack pulled him closer, Evan relaxed completely against his body with a happy sigh.

He was where he wanted to be.

Epilogue

It was his team's first official game and Zack didn't care it was a friendly match with the only other school in the county with a girls' basketball team. He was still worried.

"I think it's cute you're so nervous." Evan grinned at him from the driver's seat. "But you need to keep it together for the team's sake. The way Melissa tells it, they think you're the guy who wouldn't blink during a tornado. Nothing fazes you."

"Well, we both know better." Zack almost vibrated in his seat. "Besides, I survived a tornado, this is worse."

Evan laughed at that and Zack lost a bit of the tension in his shoulders. It was crazy how responsive to Evan his body was, but right now Zack was grateful for it.

"Your fear of teenage girls is still hilarious," Evan told him as he backed the car into Zack's spot in the school parking lot.

Zack slapped his shoulder. "Shut up."

"How do you fake it with them all the time?"

"Through sheer stubbornness and refusal to show fear," Zack said after they got out of the car.

Evan bumped their shoulders together. "NYPD taught you well."

"They almost prepared me for this."

As they walked towards the school gym, Zack looked around, cataloging how many people had come. It seemed they were going to have a full house tonight. His team had to be freaking out in the locker room.

"Good thing I have my VIP seat secured," Evan said, looking around as well. "Front row and everything."

"The bench is even closer than the front row." Zack smirked. "Benefits of dating the coach."

Evan looked him up and down and nodded. "Yeah, he has his moments."

When they got to the gym, Zack pointed Evan to their bench and headed for the locker room.

“Coach coming in,” he announced as he swung the doors open, waiting for any protests from behind the lockers that were shielding the girls from being seen from the entrance. Cheers greeted him instead, so he crossed the room and came face-to-face with the team.

All eleven girls were dressed in their new uniforms that the school finally came through and ordered. It was the first time Zack saw them like this and something in his chest tightened at the sight. This was his team.

“Looking good, ladies,” Zack told them, getting chuckles and shaking heads from most of his players, and a “Hell, yeah!” from Diane. He grinned. “Ready?”

“Ready to puke,” Maria offered.

“I’ll make sure to put a bucket under the bench. Don’t puke on the floor or you’re polishing it every week till the end of the school year.” He looked around. “But seriously, this is it. You go out there and have fun. It’s a friendly match, remember that. Especially you, Diane,” Zack pointed at her. “Keep your elbows to yourself.”

“The gym will be full, right?” Mako asked, biting her lip. She had become more relaxed after she came out to her classmates, but she still got nervous in big groups.

Zack nodded with a grin. “It already is. A lot of people came to cheer you on tonight. Enjoy the fame!”

Mako groaned. “Oh God.”

“It will be fine. It’s okay to be nervous. Hell, I’m nervous.” Evan told him not to admit it, but Zack decided a little bit of honesty wouldn’t hurt.

“Yeah, right.”

“Hey, this is your first time playing and my first time coaching. We’re in this together.”

They still didn’t look convinced, but Diane clasped her hands. “Come on, group hug.”

The team swarmed around him and Zack would never admit it to anyone, not even Evan, but being in the middle of this little group’s hug? Definitely helped to calm his nerves.

“Okay, let’s do this thing!”

By the time the last quarter came, Zack's voice was hoarse and he hadn't sat down for even a moment. With five minutes left, Pomerane was losing 62 to 66, but the team looked determined to keep fighting. He shouted directions, but it seemed like they didn't need them, falling into maneuvers they practiced again and again.

When Melissa scored three points with a beautiful shot, the whole gym cheered. Evan jumped to his feet and shouted with the crowd, standing right next to Zack who couldn't take his eyes off the court.

"They got this," Evan murmured to him and Zack nodded, but his heart was beating so hard, Evan could probably hear it and call him a liar.

A moment later Diane scored and it looked like they were in the clear, until the opposing team ran a fast break and scored as well. With less than a minute left in the game, Pomerane was still down by one point.

Then the miracle happened. Mako was pushed to the ground and the referee called a foul, which meant two free throws for Mako. Zack could see she was terrified as she felt all eyes on her. He watched as she bounced the ball three times before lining up the shot.

She scored and the crowd cheered right along with Zack and Evan. The teams were tied and they still had one shot left.

Mako gripped the ball tightly to her chest and Zack could see her lips moving as she was getting ready. He chuckled.

"What?" Evan glanced at him for just a moment.

"Miserable lesbian." Zack nodded at Mako and tried to calm his heart at least a little. "Remember, I told you the story. Now she's using that as a motivational tool. Works wonders most of the time."

Before Evan could comment, Zack shushed him as Mako lined up her shot. This was it. This was their chance.

The ball flew through the air and made it into the basket.

They won.

Zack stood frozen for a moment, watching as the players stormed Mako in celebration. Then he jumped in the air and grabbed Evan in a crushing hug as they both shouted with excitement. The crowd around them cheered and Zack could barely hear anything with all the noise, but Evan put his lips right against his ear.

“You did it!” he shouted. “I love you!”

Zack wanted to respond in kind, but the team surrounded him and tugged him away from Evan, pulling him in the middle of the overjoyed mess of teenage sweaty limbs, so he only managed to look at him from above the girls’ heads and mouth “I love you too” to Evan.

From the answering grin, Zack knew he heard him loud and clear.

The End

Author Bio

Megan Linden is one of those people who dreamed of being a writer since they were a little kid and then didn't do anything about it for years. Then as a teenager she was introduced to fandom and... well. She fell head first into it and never looked back. At some point she decided to try writing her own characters in her own stories. And that's where she is today.

Her debut book, Running Off the Edge, was an AllRomance bestseller. Her second, Open Endings, was nominated in the Best Military category in the Goodreads M/M Romance Group Member's Choice Awards 2014.

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