

A black and white photograph of a street lamp in a winter park. The lamp is a classic, ornate design with a glass globe and a decorative metal arm. It is covered in a thick layer of snow, which has also accumulated on its top. The background shows a snow-covered path lined with trees whose branches are heavily laden with snow. The overall scene is serene and evocative of a quiet winter day.

**Bright like a
Thousand
Memories**

Gabrielle Morgan

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

BRIGHT LIKE A THOUSAND MEMORIES

By Gabrielle Morgan

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 close-up of two young men, dressed for cold weather in coats and scarves. They're kissing, eyes closed, arms around each other, oblivious to anything going on around them. The taller one on the right has dark hair that appears fluffy and windswept. The other man, who smiles into their kiss, is blonde, wavy locks swept forward, sporting a couple days' stubble and wearing glasses. They seem to be completely lost in their kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Back in high school, they used to be close friends. Sure, their friendship had been kind of intense, but that's all they'd been. With the start of college, they went to schools in different cities. They tried to stay in touch, but their lives kept them too busy and after a few years, it got down to the occasional e-mail.

Which is why they were both surprised when, almost a decade after they'd last seen each other, they found out they'd be working for the same firm. It was funny how easy it was to go back to the way they were. Their friendship soon turned as strong as it used to be. The problem was, the intensity that had once confused them was back in full force, and now they were both old enough to recognize the feeling they'd only ever felt toward each other.

A lighthearted story with a strong sense of friendship would be appreciated. No BDSM please.

Sincerely,

Ellie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: emotional hurt/comfort, family, friends to lovers, friendship, reunion, sweet/no on-page sex

Word Count: 20,716

BRIGHT LIKE A THOUSAND MEMORIES

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January 2015

Cale isn't embarrassed by the way he lets his iPod dictate the rhythm of his walk to work. If he's listening to pop, he tends to bounce along at a faster pace than if he's listening to something gentle and soothing. Sometimes he dances along as he walks, or at least bobs his head to the beat of the music.

He finds that it's a great way to get into a good mood at the start of the day. Since he has a thirty-minute trek to work, it also makes the time go faster. He enjoys himself on these strolls, sometimes the only time he'll have to himself all day. Which is why he's never given in and started taking the subway, even if it would mean he'd have more time to sleep and not have to trudge through the frozen hellscape of a New York City winter.

Of course, he does have to be careful to never listen to anything angry or depressing on these treks, because if he does, he knows he'll be in a terrible mood for the rest of the day. He saves his heavy metal tracks for when he's *already* had a bad day and needs a way to let off steam without punching some asshole in the jaw.

Cale gets lost in his music, which is the point. He doesn't notice the busy streets around him when he has his headphones in and his music at the top volume it can go without rupturing his eardrums, and he likes it that way.

Which is why he startles badly enough to nearly end up in the middle of one of those streets when someone touches his shoulder while he's waiting at an intersection two blocks away from the office. He stumbles, tripping over the curb. A cab dodges around him, blaring its horn, and for half a second, he is utterly convinced he's going to die. He wonders if he'll actually see his life flash before his eyes before he does.

"Whoa!" he hears over the dying notes of Katy Perry's latest hit. A firm grip takes him by the elbow, steering him back to the relative safety of the sidewalk, and he stands there for a moment, shaky and wide-eyed and undoubtedly even paler than usual.

When he feels like he can breathe again, he tears his headphones off and spins around, a long rant already forming on his tongue about city safety and

not bothering strangers for directions when they clearly have *better* things to be listening to and just what the hell is wrong with you, anyway, sir?

Except the words die an immediate death, lost in the back of his throat forever, because he recognizes the bright blue eyes staring back at him, sparkling in amusement. The morning sunlight catches on familiarly tousled dark hair, and for a moment, Cale is suddenly ten years younger, facing his best friend as they say good-bye for the last time in a busy airport terminal.

“Jesse?” The name comes out on an exhale, quiet enough that the cars speeding by could rob the sound altogether if the man before him wasn’t standing so close.

Maybe he’s still in the street, Cale thinks, and this is his life actually flashing before his eyes. Except it can’t be, because this man looks different, older than the Jesse St. John who lives in Cale’s memory.

“Cale Matthews, as I live and breathe. It *is* you.” Jesse finally takes his hand away from Cale’s elbow, presumably because he’s no longer in immediate danger of becoming a roadside pancake, and he shoves his hands in the pockets of his coat.

“*Jesse?*” He says it louder now, a demand, but Cale doesn’t know exactly what it is he’s demanding. An explanation, at the very least. His heart, he realizes all at once, is still pounding, and it doesn’t feel like the adrenaline from his almost-accident making it do so.

“It’s good to see you, Cale,” Jesse says, his smile softening. “I wasn’t actually sure it was you at first, you know? But you and your music... some things never change.”

And some things, Cale knows, do. “You were... I thought you were in Oregon.” Wasn’t it Portland Jesse had mentioned in one of his last e-mails? Mind reeling, Cale tries to remember the last time he even received an e-mail from Jesse. A year, at least.

“I was,” Jesse says with a nod. “This is my first full day in New York, actually. I’m consulting on a couple of projects, and then hoping to set up shop here permanently. The West Coast is great, but I’ve missed being out this way.”

Cale gives an incredulous laugh. “New York City is a far cry from the mean streets of rural New Hampshire,” he manages to quip, happy his heart is starting to settle and he’s back on more even ground. Unexpected ground, but solid underneath him, at least.

“Well, yeah, but it’s a lot closer than California and Oregon.” Jesse grins and shrugs again. “Besides, I couldn’t turn down a project from an accounting firm in the Big Apple. It wouldn’t be career suicide, necessarily, but it would still be damn stupid.” He kicks Cale’s shoe with the toe of his boot. “And hey, what about you? Last I heard, you were still *in* rural New Hampshire.”

Cale flushes. He hasn’t exactly advertised his move to anyone outside of his family, not wanting to jinx it, but it’s probably high time he started letting people know that he was no longer working (or living) in his hometown. “It was sort of an accident. Bad day at work, client from hell, you know. I got home, got drunk, and sent my resume to a few high-end firms in big cities.” His flush deepens, and he ducks his head. “I actually got several calls, but Logan & Wade offered me a pretty amazing package.” He startles at Jesse’s sudden laugh.

“Logan & Wade, no shit? That’s where I’m heading right now for my meeting.”

Cale blinks at him. “You’re kidding.” His stupid heart stutters in his chest, and he tells it very firmly to stop whatever it is it thinks it’s doing.

“Not at all.” Jesse laughs again, a sound that Cale finds himself liking quite a lot. He hasn’t heard Jesse’s laugh in over a decade, and it’s changed to something richer and deeper than Cale remembers. “Man, what are the chances?”

“A zillion to one, at least.” Cale feels his mouth turning up into a smile of his own. Jesse is *here*, and damned if that isn’t the most amazing thing to happen in a long time. “Well, this is obviously fate. You better not run away without hanging out at least once before you go.”

“I’m not planning on running anywhere,” Jesse promises, his eyes warm. “Hell, what are you doing tonight?”

Cale’s original plan was to crash on his too-lumpy sofa and start a Battlestar Galactica marathon on one of the last free weekends he’ll have before tax season gets going. “Nothing I can’t cancel,” he says.

“Good. Give me your address, I’ll come kidnap you and force you to show me the sights worth seeing.”

Cale isn’t about to admit that after six months in the city, he’s barely seen any of those sights himself. “You buy me food, you’ve got a deal.”

“Done.” Jesse’s grin flashes again, and he nods in the direction of the street. “Now let’s get going before you die of hypothermia.”

Until that moment, Cale didn’t notice he was shivering in the January air. And, he realizes as he glances at his watch, he also didn’t notice the time passing, because he’s now ten minutes late. *Shit*. He sighs, shooting Jesse a rueful look that makes Jesse laugh again.

Well, he’s hardly the only person who occasionally shows up late to the office, even if it’s never actually happened to *him* before. *Worth it*, he decides, a little giddy.

And when Jesse slings his arm across Cale’s shoulders and smiles down at him as they cross the busy intersection, it’s like the last ten years never even happened.

May 2004

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me for sunny SoCal in a few months.” Cale sighed, not allowing himself to look over at his best friend lying next to him on the bed, because he was afraid he might cry if he did.

Jesse nudged his shoulder gently. “Hey, if there were any good architecture and design schools in New Hampshire, I’d totally stay and bug you for the rest of your life. You’d never get rid of me. Who am I gonna cheat off of on exams now, huh?”

“Oh, I see what I’m good for.” Cale glared at the TV screen because it was easier than glaring at Jesse, who’d just make a stupid face to get Cale to laugh. An explosion on-screen made him wonder what movie he’d even stuck into the DVD player. For the life of him, he couldn’t remember. “Anyway, you still have finals to get through.”

“Don’t remind me,” Jesse groaned, throwing an arm over his eyes dramatically. Cale knew it was all for show, because Jesse was a lot smarter than he let on. He’d ace all his exams, and then he’d be gone, onto bigger and brighter things.

“Hey, Jesse?” Cale asked, quieter than he intended. Now he did turn to face his friend, and found Jesse’s bright blue eyes peering at him from underneath his arm. When he saw whatever expression Cale was wearing, he turned onto his side and grew more serious.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Do you think we’ll still be friends in, like, four years or whatever? Living across the country and everything... and I mean, it’s not like you can afford the plane tickets to fly back home for break.” Cale himself was only going as far as UNH, in Durham, and he kept having to remind himself that even that was lucky. His parents could have insisted on him staying local.

Jesse snorted. “Like I’d want to go home anyway,” he said bitterly. Cale knew he’d been counting down the days to when he turned eighteen and could get away for a long time now. “But yeah, man, ’course we will. Like I’d let you get rid of me that easy.”

Cale nodded, wanting to believe him, wanting to make Jesse promise, except he knew what that would sound like. It’s just, Jesse was his best friend, one of his *only* real friends, and if that made him act like a pathetic wimp or whatever, well, *whatever*.

“Okay,” he finally said. Jesse rolled his eyes at him and grinned, and they both turned back to the TV and failed to pay much attention to whatever it is they were watching.

January 2015

It’s snowing when Cale finally wraps up for the day and leaves the office. Today felt longer than it should have, with too many glances at the slow-moving clock. Cale isn’t proud of himself for that, but it’s not worth berating himself over at this point. He’s just glad that if any of his clients or coworkers noticed his distraction, they were nice enough not to say anything. Even Peggy, the intern who decided on her first day that they were destined to be BFFs because they were both closet sci-fi geeks, was unusually quiet compared to normal, obviously sensing his strange mood.

Cale sighs, wrapping his scarf (a fluffy knitted thing his mom sent him after the first big snowstorm hit) more securely around his neck. He digs out his iPod and lets it go to shuffle. James Taylor’s voice starts crooning to him, and he nods. Acceptable for his current mood.

It annoys him that this feels like such a big deal. It’s just a night on the town with his best friend, who, granted, he hasn’t seen in a decade and hasn’t even spoken with beyond e-mail in years. But it shouldn’t be a big thing.

Except... except that Cale missed Jesse. Fiercely. *Desperately*. Those first two years at college, it felt like he was missing a piece of himself. It hurt, every time he stopped long enough to think about it, so he never let himself stop. He worked his ass off and took extra classes and held two jobs and joined clubs and didn't let himself stop and breathe long enough to remember that something was missing, until finally, *finally*, it stopped hurting quite so much.

They talked a lot back then, of course, or they tried to. But with their equally crazy schedules, and a whole country between them, it was hard. And then it just got worse from there, with internships and jobs and financial struggles. And the less they talked, the more distance there was between them, the more the ache of missing Jesse started to go away. Eventually, it was easier to let the memory of him fade into background noise.

Abruptly, Cale realizes he hates himself a little for that. It should never have come to that. Maybe they were a little too codependent in school, but they were *best friends*. Having Jesse in his life at all, even so far away, should have been more important than moping about the stupid little ache in his gut that came from missing him.

And now Jesse's back, and Cale doesn't really know what to expect, or how to handle it. He's a different person than Jesse will remember, and he has no doubt that Jesse's also changed after so many years. What if they don't fit like they used to? What if *knowing* they don't fit is worse than forgetting about him altogether?

Cale stops walking, blinking at himself, and then shakes his head. No, nothing could be worse than forgetting, or relegating Jesse to just another part of his past. Jesse deserves better than that. Their friendship deserves better. And Cale refuses to believe they can't get some part of it back.

"I can't believe you've been here six months, and you've never gone to see the Statue of Liberty," Jesse says, laughing as he nudges Cale's shoulder. They're both leaning against the railing of the ferry, and it's cold, cold enough that Cale can see his breath for long moments after every exhale, but he doesn't mind it so much with Jesse pressed in close against his side.

"I haven't had a lot of time," he defends, weakly. He's had plenty of time, just no motivation.

"Uh huh." Jesse quirks a knowing eyebrow at him, and Cale ducks away, feeling himself flush. The blushing thing is already getting to be a habit around

Jesse, and Cale doesn't much care for it. He thought he outgrew that phase a long time ago.

"Anyway, you're the architect, isn't it your job to travel around and visit cool sites?" Cale asks.

"Yeah, *buildings*," Jesse replies, sticking his tongue out at Cale like they really are kids again. "And I don't actually get to travel as much as I want to. We studied out of books in school, just like everybody, and most of my last jobs were all around the same area." He releases a slow breath. "Let me tell you, going into practice on my own, and not for a big firm? Not easy. But it's worth it... means I'm free to go where I want, and I have the rep now to back me up. I actually made it to New York because of a big recommendation from my last client."

"So what are you working on for Logan & Wade?" Cale has been curious ever since he mentioned his meeting this morning.

"Not sure I should say, if they haven't made it common knowledge among the underlings..." Jesse laughs at the outrage that passes over Cale's face and holds his hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay, but you didn't get it from me. They've acquired a new office building in Manhattan. It's pretty big, lots of room for them to expand, but it needs some work, someone to get the interior sorted out and looking nice and swanky, you know? Guess business is going pretty good." Jesse frowns. "I'll actually be working with a small team of independents, which'll be interesting, I guess, but not what I'm used to."

"Still great for the resume," Cale says absently, rolling this new information around in his mind. "Huh." Transferring to Manhattan will mean Cale losing his daily walks—there's no easy way to commute from his apartment in Brooklyn to any part of Manhattan without using the subway—but it has the potential to be a great move for the firm. "*Huh*," he says again.

"Hey," Jesse says, nudging him again and knocking Cale from this train of thought. "We're just about there. Pretty cool, huh?"

She was impressive, Cale had to admit. His gaze slid from the statue as they neared Liberty Island to the man standing next to him, and he had to smile at the excitement that lit Jesse's face. She was impressive, he thought again, but not as fun to look at as other things.

October 2001

Cale was fourteen, and he hadn't ever had a girlfriend. Until today, he'd never thought about having a girlfriend. It never even occurred to him that a girlfriend was something he should want. His dad would tell him it was because he spent too much time with his nose buried in a book, probably. That was usually his answer to why Cale didn't want to do "guy" things like play baseball or learn how to fix the family car.

The only reason Cale was thinking about it at all now was because of Jesse. Because he'd seen Jesse that afternoon, behind the bleachers with Tara O'Keefe. Which was such a cliché, Cale almost wanted to make fun of him for it, except that would mean acknowledging that he'd seen Jesse with her at all.

He didn't know why, but he didn't really want to admit that. Maybe because it had made his stomach feel weird, or maybe because he'd stared at them for a lot longer than he should have. Jesse wouldn't care, he was pretty sure... actually, Jesse was more likely to ask how it had looked, or start bragging, or something. But Cale still felt funny about it.

It wasn't like *he* liked Tara. He didn't even know her outside of Mr. Emerson's geography class. But if he acknowledged it, he was a little afraid Jesse would start asking Cale if *he* wanted to make out with one of the girls behind the bleachers. And Cale didn't know how to tell him that no, actually, he didn't.

He had other things to be worrying about, like Friday's big test and the release of the newest Star Trek movie coming out soon. He'd have plenty of time for girls later.

But if Jesse cared about girls *now*, Cale didn't think he'd understand that reasoning.

He sighed, flopping back on his bed and staring up at the ceiling. Today was as good a day as any to start getting used to being on his own, he guessed. If Jesse had a girlfriend now, he'd obviously want to spend his free time with her. Cale didn't even blame him, really. That's just the way it worked, right?

It still sucked, though. He wouldn't admit it out loud, and especially not to Jesse, but it sucked a lot. Cale *liked* having a best friend, and he wasn't ready to lose that yet.

Stupid girls.

Digging around in his backpack, he yanked out his math homework, figuring he might as well get something done while being annoyed at half the planet. Anyway, he liked math, and maybe it would make him feel a little better to be doing something he was good at and actually understood.

He was just getting started on the third problem when the window just past the end of his bed slid open. He sat up, pushing his glasses up and blinking as Jesse tumbled in. “Um.”

“Dude, I thought you were gonna wait for me outside the gym,” Jesse grouched, straightening up and dusting off his dirt-streaked jeans. “Isn’t today comic book day?”

“Well, yeah, but I thought—”

“And don’t we always go to get new comics on comic book day?”

“Of course we do, but you—”

“So come on, already!” Jesse let himself fall onto the bed, bouncing a little as he kicked gently at Cale’s shin.

Cale took a second to rearrange everything he thought he’d just worked out in his head. “Okay then,” he managed, a little hesitantly. Then he grinned. “By the way, you better be careful or Mrs. Jones is going to call the cops on you. Don’t think she hasn’t noticed you scaling the house like some ridiculous ninja, she sees *everything*.”

Jesse waved away the concern like he would a fruit fly. “Yeah right, what’s that old hag gonna do? She’s all talk.”

Cale shook his head, amused and resigned in equal measure. Anyway, Jesse was probably right.

A few minutes later, they set off on their bikes for the comic book store downtown, and Cale forgot all about his concerns regarding Tara O’Keefe.

January 2015

“So listen,” Cale says, putting his drink down so that Jesse won’t notice the way his hand is trembling just the slightest bit. “For the sake of honesty, I should tell you that I’m gay.” He says it all at once, and he’s proud that he doesn’t stutter or hesitate over the words. “It’s not a secret here, and I didn’t want you to find out and then think I was hiding it from you.”

He *has* been hiding it from Jesse, technically, ever since he figured it out his sophomore year of college. (No one ever said he was quick on the uptake with relationship stuff, okay?) But if they're going to start over again, or try to anyway, there shouldn't be secrets, not like that. And if it's a deal-breaker...

Jesse looks startled at first, blue eyes wide and mouth opened in a little "o" of surprise, but then his face clears and he laughs. And then just... keeps laughing. Something in Cale's gut turns cold at the sound, and his heart clenches. Laughter was not in the top ten reactions he was hoping for, no matter how nice a laugh it is. He clenches his hands in his lap underneath the table, trying not to hate himself for the way he can feel his face already burning.

It takes a moment for Jesse to notice, and then the laughter dies and he's reaching across the table, leaning over as far as he can to squeeze Cale's shoulder. "Hey, no, I wasn't laughing at you, man. Just the situation. Don't look like that, I *hate* it when you look like that, it makes me feel all guilty for shit I haven't even done."

Cautiously, Cale peeks up and finds Jesse watching him with genuine warmth. There's a soft pat on his shoulder before Jesse leans back, shaking his head.

"I was just laughing because it's ironic, or something, I don't know. I came out my first full day in California. God, that was the best feeling."

Cale pauses and tries to let that sink in. "You... you're *gay*?" he demands, when the shock of it fails to dissipate.

"*Oh yeah.*" Jesse shrugs one shoulder, obviously trying for careless and missing the mark completely. It makes Cale have to hide a smile in spite of himself.

"But I thought... I mean, in high school? You were practically a Casanova once you discovered girls." Cale can't wrap his head around this. He's wondering if it's all some trippy dream, and Jesse is actually still in Portland or California or God knows where but definitely not *here*.

"Well, yeah." Jesse looks down at his food, then sighs and meets Cale's eyes again. There's a self-deprecating shine to them that Cale's never seen Jesse wear before. "Look, everyone already saw me as the town charity case, 'cause of my mom or whatever. I didn't want to be town freak, or the town fag, too. I don't know what it's like back home now, but we weren't exactly rolling in queer people back then, you know? So I tried to ignore it. It was just easier to hide."

“Even from me?” Cale doesn’t mean to say that, wishes he could take it back as soon as it leaves his mouth and Jesse looks away again.

“You were the only good thing I had, Cale. I was scared.” The words are said quietly, but they roar in Cale’s ears like thunder.

There was a time he had thought of Jesse as fearless. He never seemed scared of anything, and the idea of him being afraid of *Cale* of all people...

“Anyway, you didn’t tell me, either,” Jesse says, sliding his gaze back to Cale too slowly, like he’s afraid of what he’ll see. It makes Cale’s chest go uncomfortably tight again.

“I didn’t even know until halfway through college,” he mumbles, the heat rising to his face again. God, maybe he needs to see a doctor about this chronic blushing. It can’t be healthy.

But it makes Jesse smile again, the tight lines leaving his mouth, and that relaxed warmth reentering his eyes. “I don’t even know why that surprises me, actually.”

Cale feels his lips quirk up as well. It feels good to smile about this. Like a weight he hadn’t even known was still sitting in his belly is suddenly gone. “So it’s... we’re okay?” he asks, just to be sure.

Jesse’s grin moves slow but sure across his face, and he nods as he takes a long sip of his drink. His eyes meet Cale’s again, and they’re bright and happy when he says, “We’re awesome.”

It shouldn’t be that easy, Cale thinks, but somehow it *is*. Over the next week, he sees Jesse constantly.

On Tuesday, Jesse saunters into his office with an impish grin and a wink to Peggy (who actually *meeps* a little, fumbling the coffee she’d been putting on his desk, and Cale will definitely give her hell for that later), and drags Cale out for a late lunch.

On Wednesday, he shows up at Cale’s apartment in the evening with pizza, a six-pack, and the newest Marvel movie bootlegged onto a DVD.

On Thursday, Cale actually takes half a personal day so he can go with Jesse to scout out potential offices available for rent. (Jesse doesn’t even have an apartment yet, still staying in a hotel while he starts work on his two projects, but that doesn’t stop him.)

On Friday, they stay up way too late catching up on everything they haven't gotten to during the rest of the week, and both of them wind up falling asleep on the couch and the recliner until the wee hours of Saturday morning, when they go out to a diner for the greasiest breakfast they can manage to find and then make the trek to Central Park, which Jesse still hasn't seen.

And it really is just that easy. Like the last ten years never happened, or maybe happened in some alternate reality.

"I don't get it," his sister, Caitlyn, tells him over the phone when he mentions this to her on Sunday. "Isn't this a good thing? Why do you sound like it's the end of the world?"

"Because..." Cale scrubs a hand down his face, fingers going under his glasses so he can rub at his eyes. "I don't know, okay? It just... it shouldn't work! We're not the same as we were back then, and it shouldn't work! I guess I just..."

"You're waiting for the other shoe to drop, huh?" Caitlyn phrases it as a question, but she sounds knowing. Only four years older than Cale, and she *always* thinks she knows more than he does.

Although in this case, okay, maybe she's right. A little.

"I guess," he sighs.

"Well, look, if you want my two cents, which you obviously do because you never call me and yet here we are, you're totally over-thinking this," she tells him in that no-nonsense tone she has. "You're right, you've both changed, which means maybe this time you'll be smart enough not to run away from each other. You guys were the BFFiest of BFFs, it was actually a little disgusting. I mean, you were even worse than me and Maggie, and we've been friends since we were in diapers. And that doesn't just disappear, okay? Obviously. So stop worrying and just enjoy the fact that you finally have a friend in New York. Which you've been needing for a while, bro."

Well, fair enough, he thinks grudgingly. "Thanks, sis," he says, and if it comes out a little bit snippy, chances are she deserves it for one reason or another.

"Anytime," she replies cheerfully. "Give that dork a hug and a smack from me. I'll give your love to Mom and Dad."

"Thanks," he tells her, more honestly this time. Then, before she can hang up, he adds, "Hey, um, don't. Well. Don't mention this to them, okay? About Jesse being here. They worry enough, and they don't... well. I'd appreciate it."

“Of course,” she promises, her tone gentle enough to make Cale want to hit things. “I get it.”

“Thanks,” he replies, though it just sounds repetitive now, and hangs up with a sigh. He takes off his glasses and rubs at the bridge of his nose. There are some battles he just isn’t ready to fight.

July 2006

“What on earth do you mean, you’re gay?” Cale’s mother demanded. It was all very dramatic, with the hand fluttering to her chest, and the gaping mouth, the wide, tear-filled eyes and the suddenly pale complexion.

Cale sighed from his seat at the kitchen table. Across the kitchen, leaning against the counter with his arms folded over his chest was his father, whose face was wiped clean of all emotion. “I mean that I’m gay. I mean that I don’t want you setting me up with Mrs. Logan’s granddaughter for the dance at the town fair because I don’t want to date girls. I mean that I like guys, that I want to date guys.”

“Since *when?*” his mother asked shrilly. She spun to face her husband. “Ron? Don’t you have anything to say?”

Cale’s dad gazed at him for a long moment, and released a slow breath and said to Cale’s mom, “Sherry, are we even really that surprised?”

Cale snorted quietly. That was rich, because *he’d* been pretty surprised. Cale had never particularly cared enough about relationships in general to figure out his attractions one way or another, but he’d always assumed that someday he’d find a nice woman willing to put up with his eccentricities. The idea of men never occurred to him until he’d been making out with one at a crazy frat party he never should have gone to in the first place.

His mom still looked deeply upset. “This is that St. John boy’s fault,” she decided abruptly, eyes flashing. Cale tried to ignore the way his heart seized up at the name. “He was always bad news, sneaking in through your window and filling your head with all kinds of nonsense. He did this to you!”

Okay, now she was being ridiculous. Cale had never thought of his parents as particularly closed-minded, but apparently at least his mom drew the line at her only son preferring to fuck men. Good to know. “That *St. John* boy has a name, one you’ve had no problem using over the years until now. And you liked Jesse well enough when we first became friends.”

“Well, of course we did, because he was the first real friend you actually managed to make on your own!” she cried. “But he was always too wild, no parents willing to rein him in, and clearly...”

“Jesse and I haven’t seen each other in two years,” Cale said, cutting her off before she could make herself sound even stupider. “And we barely talk. I didn’t even realize this was a thing until this year. So before you go tossing blame around, consider the facts first, okay? I’m sorry you’re unhappy about this, I am. But I’m not going to hide it, and it’s not going to change, so if you want to still be a part of my life, you’re going to have to accept it.”

It was probably the most articulate he’d even been while standing up to his parents about anything. It also didn’t make much of a difference, in the long run. Three days later, Cale boarded a bus back to Durham, six weeks earlier than planned. At least he figured he could work for the rest of the summer and make a little extra money for food for the upcoming semester. It would be better than being in that house for one more minute.

February 2015

Jesse asks only once about Cale’s family back home, and seems to realize very quickly that it’s a sore subject, because he lets it go at Cale’s noncommittal answer and doesn’t bring it up again.

He never mentions his own family, which isn’t all that surprising since there’s only the one member, and as far as Cale knows, Jesse and his mother have been estranged since the day he turned eighteen and left for the airport and California and college.

It’s Caitlyn who breaks the news to him, because apparently no one back home has been able to find any of Jesse’s current contact information to get in touch with him. “She went in her sleep, they think,” Caitlyn tells him quietly. “Maybe a stroke. She was... she’d been trying to sober up, you know? She’d been going to church since last year, and she seemed... I don’t know, regretful. She was trying, she really was. Anyway. Jesse needs to make arrangements, and there’s a will. If you could at least have him call the office. Benjamin is the executor, and he’s been going a little crazy trying to figure out where to find Jesse. I told him I’d see what I could do, but not that I knew where he was.” Which had to be driving Caitlyn crazy, since she didn’t like keeping even minor secrets from her fiancé.

“I’ll talk to him.” God, Cale doesn’t want to talk to him. There’s no way to know how Jesse will take this news, and it shouldn’t be coming from Cale, but then, who else is there? Some nameless police officer, or a lawyer at the other end of a phone?

“Thanks, Cale,” Caitlyn says. “I’m really sorry to drop this in your lap, he just didn’t leave any forwarding information, and…”

“He’s still getting settled here. I don’t even think he’s started forwarding his mail from Portland yet.” Cale *knew* that was going to bite Jesse in the ass. “It’s just bad timing. I’ll take care of it, it’s okay.”

They hang up with subdued good-byes, and Cale sits at his desk for ten minutes wondering what the best way to approach this would be. He and Jesse are supposed to be meeting tonight for Friday night drinks at Cale’s favorite bar, but Cale doesn’t think this is something that can wait any longer than it already has.

He makes a few phone calls, reschedules the rest of the day’s meetings. He’ll have to put in a full day tomorrow, which he was hoping to avoid, but it’s okay. Some things are more important.

With a quick e-mail sent off to his boss letting him know he needs a few hours personal time, he grabs his coat and scarf and bag and heads out.

It’s bitterly cold outside, so Cale opts for a cab to Jesse’s hotel. Hopefully he’ll be there, although it’s mid-afternoon and he probably has other things to be doing. Like apartment hunting, or working on his project plans at the coffee shop three blocks away. Exploring the city. Eating a late lunch somewhere.

Okay, Cale admits the chances of Jesse being in his hotel are rather slim, but at the moment, he doesn’t have the heart to text him and find out. And okay, maybe a part of him thinks it would be nice to delay the inevitable conversation if Jesse *isn’t* around.

He’s been here enough times now that he has the room number memorized, so he doesn’t bother having the front desk call up, just snags an elevator up to the ninth floor and veers right. Cale spends every step down that hallway trying to decide what to say, but he still hasn’t figured it out by the time he’s knocking on the door near the very end.

Against expectation, Jesse answers almost immediately, his eyes bright, a smile already spreading across his lips when he sees Cale standing there. It slides right back off when he takes in the expression on Cale’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Cale swallows. “We should... can I come in?”

Jesse blinks, then nods, too fast, and steps aside to let Cale through. “Course, man.”

It’s a nice setup Jesse has here, for a relatively low-end hotel room in the middle of Brooklyn. Comfortable bed, a large desk by the window, even a halfway decent view, or at least one that allows for some natural light to get in. Cale takes a seat at the desk, absently noting the impressive quality of the sketches that are spread out there. He closes his eyes as Jesse sits across from him at the end of the bed.

“Cale?” Jesse prompts, when he finds it too difficult to say anything.

He takes a deep breath. “It’s your mother,” he says, rougher than he intends because his throat tries to close up around the words.

Jesse looks startled at first, and then his knuckles go white when he fingers dig into the comforter. “Is she okay?” he asks, but the tone of his voice tells Cale that he already knows the answer.

Cale shakes his head, the movement jerky and awkward-feeling. “She... three days ago, they’re not sure... they’ve been trying to contact you, but...” He clams up, because every sentence is just going to keep going like this, trailing off because he doesn’t have the words, really, doesn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry, Jess.” The nickname slips out unintentionally; he hasn’t called Jesse that since that last day at the airport.

“Yeah,” Jesse mutters, voice gruff. Abruptly, he stands up, pacing away toward the door, fingers dragging through his dark hair, then catching in it, pulling. Cale wants to pull it away, soothe the hurt he can see in every line of Jesse’s shoulders, but he doesn’t know how. “*Fuck!*” Jesse yells, spinning around and picking up the thing closest to hand—the hotel directory binder—and throwing it as hard as he can. It hits the wall and drops to the floor with a *thump* and Cale is already up and moving before his mind even registers the change.

“Jesse,” he says softly, and he slides his arms unhesitatingly around his friend just as Jesse starts to crack.

“I can’t—” Jesse starts to say, his voice breaking before he cuts himself off, hands fisting in the back of Cale’s coat. “I don’t know why I even—”

“Shh,” Cale murmurs. “I know. I know, but she was still your mom, Jess,” he whispers. “God, of course you’re upset.”

Jesse lowers his head until his face is buried in Cale's shoulder, and his grip is almost painful now where it's pressing against Cale's spine, but Cale doesn't let go. He stays exactly where he is, murmuring soft words of comfort as Jesse begins to tremble, and then when the trembling becomes full shudders, and then when those turn into gasping, heaving sobs that sound like they might break Jesse in half.

Cale holds him, feels like he's trying to hold him *together*, and when the sobs finally begin to taper off, minutes or hours or days later, Cale leads Jesse back over to the bed, lowers him gently on top of the blankets.

Jesse apparently still goes out like a light after an emotional breakdown, because he's already curling into the pillow, legs drawn up until he's practically in a fetal position and breathing evening out in steady increments. Cale gives in to the urge to run a hand through Jesse's hair, the way his mom used to do for him when he needed a comforting touch. Jesse murmurs something unintelligible, and Cale pulls away. He'll go to that coffee shop, he thinks, and bring back something warm for Jesse to have when he wakes up.

Except that as he's drawing back, Jesse reaches up and snags his hand. "Stay," he whispers, a sliver of blue peeking out from behind his mostly closed eyes. "Please?"

Cale doesn't even have to think about it. He toes off his shoes and drapes his coat over the nightstand. Jesse slides over just enough for Cale to be able to lie down comfortably, and then he immediately burrows right into Cale's side.

It's nothing new, not really. There were plenty of times when they were teenagers that one of them needed to be the emotional support for the other, and this was the easiest way to do it. Who cared if it maybe wasn't normal? It was *their* normal, and just like so many other things Cale is discovering, this obviously hasn't changed with time. They still fit together like puzzle pieces.

He curls an arm around Jesse's shoulders, drawing him in even closer, and they fall asleep between one heartbeat and another.

December 2002

"Jesse?" Cale whispered into the darkness of the room. His arm moved up as Jesse took a breath, and he felt the exhale ruffle his hair.

"Yeah?" Jesse asked, speaking as softly as Cale because if Cale's parents heard them, there'd be hell to pay. Jesse wasn't supposed to stay over on school

nights, unless it was a really bad day at his house, and never without permission from Cale's mom and dad.

Not that that ever stopped him.

"Is it stupid of me to be so mad?" Cale asked. He couldn't see anything in the pitch-dark, but he squeezed his eyes shut anyway, like that would somehow help him deal with Jesse's answer.

"Nah." Jesse reached over—with the arm not currently trapped underneath Cale—and rapped gently on Cale's forehead. "I'd be mad too. Actually, fuck that, I *am* mad. Nobody messes with you except for me, and I'm allowed." Cale could hear the teasing smile in his voice, and inexplicably, it made him feel better. "Anyway, even if it was stupid, which it's not, you're allowed to be stupid about feelings sometimes. Everybody is."

There was a long moment of silence between them, and then Cale giggled, muffling the sound in Jesse's shoulder. "Ms. Grossman told you that, didn't she?"

Jesse snorted, but he was laughing too, albeit silently. Just enough for Cale to feel the tremor of it against him. "Who was the moron who thought a school counselor would be a good idea for me, anyway?" he said grouchy.

"Well," Cale told him, still smiling against his friend's shoulder, "next time you see her, tell her thanks for me, anyway."

February 2015

Most of the arrangements can be handled over the phone, but some things need to be done in person, like the reading of Ms. St. John's will. Cale offers to accompany Jesse back to New Hampshire, but Jesse turns him down with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"It's getting into your busy season," he says, not unreasonably. "You need to be here."

Cale gnaws on the inside of his cheek, wanting to argue but knowing he has no good arguments. "Okay, you're probably right," he finally sighs. "But just... if you need anything, call, okay? Day or night, I'll be in a car and on my way to you."

Jesse ducks his head. "You're a good friend, Cale," he mumbles. When he looks back up, his eyes have regained at least some of their warmth. "I promise

I'll call if I need a knight in shining armor, okay? And when I know the date of the funeral..."

"I'll be there," Cale says. "No question." Even if Jesse told him not to, he'd be there.

"Okay." Jesse releases a slow breath, and slings his duffle over his shoulder. "Okay." He nods, then steps in close enough to throw his free arm around Cale's shoulders in a hug. "Thank you."

Cale's arms tighten around him in response, before he manages to let go. Jesse gives him another not-really-there smile, and climbs onto the bus. Cale stays until it finally pulls away ten minutes later.

November 2000

The St. John residence wasn't really in the bad part of town (Cale privately thought there wasn't any such thing as a *bad part* of his town, just the parts that were a little poorer than the rest), but it was right on the line, which was obvious by the peeling yellow paint on the house, the dirty windows, the cracked shingles he could see on the roof. He rang the bell a second time and wondered if maybe he should have just waited until school tomorrow to give Jesse his notebook back.

The door opened before he could leave, though, and a woman with stringy blonde hair pulled back in a messy ponytail peered out at him. Her shirt was hanging over one shoulder, and looked like it had seen better days, and her blue eyes were bloodshot and squinting in the sunlight.

"What do you want?" she demanded. Her voice wasn't at all like Cale expected. It was light and clear and not raspy at all.

"I, um. Is. Is Jesse home?" Cale asked weakly.

Maybe this was the wrong house? He didn't think so, Tommy Bartlet had seemed pretty sure when he'd seen Cale scoop Jesse's notebook off the floor after the fight, but Tommy wasn't always the brightest bulb in the box.

The woman he was facing huffed. "Yeah, he's home. Jesse!" she yelled into the dark house before turning back to peer at Cale again. "You a friend of his?"

Cale didn't know much about Jesse beyond his last name and that his handwriting for his biology notes was incredibly messy. "Um. Yes," he said anyway, not entirely knowing why.

She nodded. “Good. Boy needs a friend or two.”

It sounded remarkably like what Cale’s mom said about him when she thought he couldn’t hear her.

There was a clatter from behind the door, and then Jesse’s face appeared, hard and suspicious, blue eyes (eyes just like his mom’s, except instead of bloodshot, one was ringed with a dark bruise) glinting. He looked Cale up and down, and then told his mom (in a surprisingly gentle tone), “Thanks, Mom, I got it. You can go back to sleep.”

He came fully onto the porch and closed the door as his mom vanished back into the depths of the house, then turned to face Cale.

“What do you want?” he asked, in a tone eerily similar to his mom’s when she’d demanded the same thing. “Come to finish what Michaels started?”

Tim Michaels was the junior Jesse had been fighting. Cale didn’t know what had started it, but since Tim was a football player, two years older, and a lot bigger, he was pretty sure it was already finished. He didn’t say any of that.

“No, uh.” He dug around in his book bag and yanked out Jesse’s battered notebook. “You dropped this, um, after. I just. I thought maybe you’d need it for homework or, or something? Anyway. I just came to drop it off, I’m sorry if I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s fine,” Jesse cut in, taking the notebook. His eyebrows were furrowed as he flicked through it, like he expected all the notes to have vanished, or some sort of mean drawing, or who knows what. “Listen, next time, just don’t come here, okay? I can... look, here’s my phone number.” He ripped out a piece of paper and scribbled down some digits before handing it over to Cale. “If it happens again, just call me and I’ll come grab my stuff, or wait till school. Just, don’t come here. It’s not... you just shouldn’t.”

“Okay,” Cale said quietly, secretly thinking, *next time?* with a certain kind of horror for Jesse. He pushed his glasses up, more to give his hands something to do than because they were falling down his nose. “Um. My name’s Cale, by the way.”

Jesse gave him a funny look. “I know. We have geometry together.”

They did, but Cale hadn’t realized Jesse knew that. He didn’t seem to pay a lot of attention to anyone.

“Right,” Cale said, feeling dumber by the second. “Well, I won’t come here again, I promise. But, if you wanted to, to study or something, um. You can

come over to my house? Anytime. My sister has her friends over every day, my parents won't mind."

Now Jesse looked baffled, but Cale didn't think it was a bad kind of baffled. There was maybe even a tiny smile hiding around the corners of his mouth, if Cale squinted hard enough.

"Okay, cool," Jesse said, shaking his head like he couldn't believe what Cale was saying. Cale couldn't quite believe it either, but now that it was said, he was determined to stick with it. "I'll do that, maybe. Sometime. Thanks."

February 2015

The following Saturday, Cale is awake and in a rental car well before the sun is even up, on his way back to New Hampshire for the first time since Christmas.

Traffic is light, but the roads in some areas are pretty icy, so he takes his time driving. He tries to plug in his iPod, but nothing seems to fit his melancholy mood, and eventually he gives it up as a lost cause and enjoys the quiet of the morning.

Around eight o'clock, two-thirds of the way into his six-hour drive and most of the way through Massachusetts, he stops for a McDonald's breakfast and calls Jesse.

"How you holding up?" he asks as soon as Jesse answers the phone.

"Like shit," Jesse admits with a deep sigh that speaks of at least a couple sleepless nights. "How's the drive?"

"Could be worse. I should've remembered to reroute around Worcester. Are they ever going to finish construction?" He belatedly remembers that Jesse won't have much clue what he's talking about, unless maybe the bus took that route. "Anyway, I should be there a little after ten, as long as the traffic stays decent."

"Good, that's... that sounds good," Jesse says on another sigh. "God, I can't wait to get out of this town."

It's a well-worn phrase of Jesse's, but it doesn't hurt to hear it now the way it did in high school, when Cale thought he himself would be in that town forever. Now, he knows, they'll be leaving together, and ending up back in the same place. "Has it been that bad?" he asks anyway.

“I guess not,” Jesse finally acquiesces after a few moments. “Everybody’s been nice enough, although they’d have to be real dicks not to be right now, right? But this place... man, Cale, I *hate* this place. There’s nothing for me here, never really was except for...” He trails off, but Cale can finish the sentence well enough on his own. *Except for you.*

“It’s just a couple more days,” he reminds Jesse quietly. A couple more crappy days, of course, but still only a couple more days. “Have you seen my parents or Caitlyn at all?”

“All of the above,” Jesse responds. “Caity... man, I never would’ve believed it was her, Cale, except she saw me, walked right up to me, punched me in the arm and called me an asshole.” He laughs. “It was great. We had dinner together and reminisced about all the ways me and you used to torture her and her friends.”

Caitlyn hadn’t mentioned that when Cale spoke with her, but it sounds like something she’d do. He’s suddenly fiercely grateful to have her for a sister.

“As for your mom and dad... they stopped by the house with a casserole. They tried not to look like they were doing some unpleasant chore, but I don’t think they were too thrilled.”

“I’m sorry,” Cale says. “They don’t... they blame you for me being gay, God knows why. It’s stupid, but.” He’s avoided telling Jesse that up until now, and he *hates* saying it over the phone, but Jesse used to get along with Cale’s parents, and he deserves to know why they’ve turned on him.

Unexpectedly, Jesse laughs a little. “Yeah, I thought that might be part of it. It’s fine, Cale. Really.”

It’s not, and eventually Cale is going to make an issue of it with his parents again, but for now, with Jesse, he lets it go. Jesse has enough going on without Cale dumping his own issues on him as well.

They hang up when Cale finishes his pancakes and orange juice, and Cale allows himself one more big stretch before climbing back into the car. He (well, his spine, mostly) hates driving for long periods of time. But the sooner he gets going, the sooner he’ll get to Jesse. That’s worth needing to pop a couple ibuprofen for.

Cale knows that his first stop should probably be his parents’ house, but he’s not here for them, he’s here for Jesse, so he drives straight to the St. John

residence instead, parking in the street because the driveway is full of cracks and potholes he doesn't really trust the rental car to handle well.

He's barely even out of the car before the front door opens and Jesse ambles out, hands shoved in the pockets of his coat. It's cold, Cale's breath is misting in front of him as he locks the car, but Jesse doesn't look too fazed by it. He leans against the porch railing, waiting for Cale to climb the worn steps before he pulls Cale into a hug.

"I know I said you should stay home, but I'm really fucking glad you came," he says. His voice sounds like sandpaper, worse than it seemed over the phone, and Cale clutches him tighter for a long moment.

"What time do we need to be at the church?" Cale asks when he finally pulls back.

"Service is at two, I'll have to get there by one just to make sure everything is set." Jesse sighs, running a hand through his already-tousled hair. It's wet, probably from a recent shower, and some of it stands up in messy clumps that Cale itches to smooth back down.

"I'll go with you," he says, and reaches up to press a hand over Jesse's mouth before Jesse can argue. "You need a friend there. I'm going with you."

Jesse rolls his eyes, but Cale sees the relief in them anyway.

They go into the house. Cale looks around curiously; he's only been inside a handful of times, and not at all since Jesse left town. The place, he realizes, hasn't changed at all. He's willing to bet that if he took the stairs up to Jesse's room, he'd probably see the same blankets on the bed and the same posters on the wall. There's no clutter. Jesse's mom was never one to collect much besides liquor bottles.

Jesse leads him into the kitchen, and here is where Cale finally sees the boxes. Some are labeled, but most aren't. The counters and drawers and cabinets around him all stand empty, aside from a few staples Jesse must have picked up to keep himself fed during the past week.

"I'm donating everything," Jesse tells him, opening the refrigerator to pull out a bottle of water, which he tosses to Cale, and a can of ginger-ale for himself. "Might as well. The house is paid off. There's a real estate agent coming tomorrow to see about selling the place as fast as possible."

Cale nods. None of this surprises him. Why would Jesse keep it, after all? "I took Monday off, so you have me to help out till then, with packing or whatever, as long as you don't mind me crashing here for a couple nights."

Jesse sighs. “Cale...” He shakes his head, but Cale can see the tiny, grateful smile he’s trying to hide. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did,” Cale says. Jesse meets his steady gaze, and finally nods, because he gets it.

And that’s that.

His parents are the first to arrive at the church, because of course they are. Cale sighs when he sees them, his mother’s long black coat and perfectly styled hair, his father’s dark suit and that buzz cut that has never changed in all the years Cale can remember except to go steadily grayer. They don’t see Cale at first, their heads bent together as they speak in hushed tones

“You should at least say hi to them,” Jesse bends to whisper to him, warm breath ghosting across Cale’s ear and making him shiver. “If I can manage it, you can. I know you still see them at holidays.”

He does, but it’s not exactly comfortable, and Cale honestly isn’t even sure he would bother if not for Caitlyn. Still, he nods. Jesse squeezes his shoulder, and Cale lets that bolster him as he makes his way down the long aisle to greet them.

“Mom, Dad,” he says, keeping his tone soft.

“Cale!” His mother blinks, surprised. “I didn’t know... but of course you’d be here.” Her eyes shutter. Cale knows she’s wondering how long he and Jesse have been back in contact, if it was just for this funeral or if Cale’s been lying to them all along. He doesn’t offer an explanation, and she doesn’t ask.

“It’s good to see you,” he says to them both, kissing her cheek and shaking his father’s hand. He’s an adult, and he’s spent years now practicing civility toward these people. Still, it hurts. He misses the way things used to be with his parents, his mother’s long hugs, and the way she would kiss his forehead and make him promise to call whenever he went away, whether for a few days or for two months of summer camp or for the first couple semesters he was at school. Before he became a complete disappointment.

“You too, son,” his father says, clapping him on the shoulder. Now Cale is the one to blink, because that’s more than he usually gets nowadays. “I suppose you’ll be sitting with Jesse for the service?”

Cale nods, wondering if this is somehow a trick question, or a trap. “He doesn’t have anyone else,” he says quietly, although he doesn’t need to justify himself.

His father only nods. “There was no mention, if there would be a gathering afterwards or not.”

“A small one, at Doc’s,” Cale relays. Jesse hadn’t wanted to, but when Caitlyn gently told him that there were in fact people in the town who would mourn the woman they’d recently been getting to know and wouldn’t just be looking for a new source of gossip, he caved, only drawing the line at people coming to the house. Doc had called to offer up his diner for the afternoon, and Cale suspected his sister was behind that as well.

“We’ll see you there, then,” his dad says with another nod, and gently steers Cale’s mom into a pew as other people start to trickle into the church.

Cale keeps close to Jesse after that, as he greets people and thanks them for being there. He tries to keep out of the way, but some inevitably notice him and come over to say hello and ask how he’s doing and how New York is treating him. Cale wishes they wouldn’t. It’s not the appropriate time, and he wants to focus on Jesse and making sure he’s okay.

The church isn’t full by any stretch of the imagination by the time the service starts, but there are more people than Cale would have expected, and some of them have genuine sorrow on their faces. Maybe Caitlyn was right about Ms. St. John trying to turn things around for herself. Obviously the town, never the most accepting of places, must think so to some degree.

Jesse takes his seat in the front pew, and immediately fixes Cale with an imploring look, as though he’s going to go back on his word and sit somewhere other than right next to him.

There’s a deep hush as the pastor stands, and even before he begins speaking, Jesse is reaching over. Cale takes his hand without a second thought. Jesse’s grip is hard, and Cale is pretty sure there will be imprints where his fingers are holding too tightly later, but that doesn’t stop Cale from noticing the way he’s trembling.

Cale’s heart breaks for him, for the way Jesse is obviously trying so hard to be strong and to hold himself together even now, when no one could fault him for breaking. He squeezes Jesse’s hand even tighter, scoots a couple of inches closer, and listens to a stranger dissect the life and times of the only family Jesse ever knew.

No, Cale corrects himself. Maybe the only blood-related family Jesse ever knew. But not the only *real* family.

Family is what you make of it, after all.

There are lines of strain around Jesse's eyes by the end of the day, lines Cale isn't used to seeing there. They return to the St. John residence well after the sun has gone down, and Jesse immediately falls onto the couch, throwing an arm over his eyes.

"Can we go home yet?" he asks, sounding rather pitiful.

Cale sits down beside him, his hand falling to Jesse's knee and rubbing gently. "Not quite yet. Soon." It's been a long day for Cale, too, with providing as much emotional support as he could, and with the strangeness of his interactions with his parents (which only got weirder at Doc's), but he can't even imagine how Jesse must be feeling right now. "At least it's over, right?"

Jesse sighs. "Yeah." His arm migrates to the back of the couch, and he turns his head to look at Cale. "Thanks again for being here. I'd've lost it without you there." He looks tired, but his eyes are wide and clear, warm and steady. Something in Cale's chest flips.

"Where else would I be?" he asks, trying to play off the brutal honesty with a shrug and a tiny smile.

"I'm just..." Jesse shakes his head, and then moves closer so he can wrap his arm around Cale and tug him against his chest. He buries his face in Cale's shoulder and sighs again. "I'm really fucking glad I found you again."

"Me too," Cale says, and if his voice sounds tight, if his throat tries to close over the words and his eyes sting suspiciously, well, no one else needs to know.

Because his parents request it, Cale visits them for dinner on Sunday night. Because they don't tell him not to, he brings Jesse with him.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Jesse asks in the car. It's a bit late for him to be wondering, since they're already halfway to the Matthews residence.

"Yes," Cale says decisively. "We've been working our asses off today, we both deserve a fresh, home-cooked meal. Besides, they know I came here for you. If they weren't okay with it, they'd have told me." Which is probably true. He hopes.

Jesse snorts. "Yeah, okay."

But as it turns out, Cale's parents really do know him that well, because when his mother opens the door and sees Jesse standing beside him, she doesn't so much bat an eye, just offers a small smile and ushers them both inside. From the entryway, Cale can already smell the lasagna and garlic bread, a meal she'd always made especially for Jesse when they were teenagers, because it was his favorite. And when he steps into the dining room, he can already see that there are four place settings all laid out.

Inexplicably, Cale finds that he has tears in his eyes, and he turns away to hang his coat in the hall closet and surreptitiously wipe them away. When he reaches to take Jesse's coat, he finds him watching Cale with a too-knowing glint in his eye. He gives Cale a warm smile and squeezes his shoulder as he walks by, calling out a hello to Cale's father.

Cale takes a few more seconds to steady himself, and then turns to follow Jesse into the kitchen.

It's a strange night, because it's *good*, even without Caitlyn there to act as a buffer the way she usually does for Cale during holidays. His parents are open and cheerful, asking Jesse about his work, asking Cale about New York. His dad cracks jokes with Jesse about the government and sports, and his mom tells Cale she's sending them both home with a couple casseroles because she's sure neither of them eat right in "that damn city."

It's surreal, is what it is, and Cale can't help feeling like he's stepped into the Twilight Zone. Or into a time machine.

After dessert, Cale begins clearing the dishes himself. When Jesse tries to help, he glares him into submission. "You, sit," he orders. "You've done enough work today."

Today was furniture day, and they'll both be feeling it later, but Jesse did most of the heavy lifting himself, dragging everything out to be loaded into a U-Haul rental bound for the Goodwill. Which was probably fair, since he'd been the one to decide he didn't want to wait the extra day for the truck the Goodwill offered to send, but Cale still feels a little guilty for letting him do too much.

Cale takes the load into the kitchen and begins washing on autopilot, losing himself in the rhythm of rinse, soap, scrub, rinse, repeat. He doesn't even realize anyone has joined him until his mother takes a clean dish from his hand and begins drying it. Immediately, he feels all the awkwardness that's been missing all night return in full force, but it seems to be all him, because she's

smiling and humming softly under her breath as she sets the first plate aside and begins drying another from the rack.

“Mom?” he finally ventures, when the silence becomes completely unbearable and his confusion is threatening to make him explode.

She glances over at him, and he sees that her eyes look suspiciously bright. Clearly, she’s not as unaffected by whatever is going on tonight as she wanted him to believe. Somehow, that makes Cale feel better. She sets the plate aside, and her hands clutch at the countertop as she looks away again. “I’ve been watching you this weekend.”

Cale blinks. “Um.”

“I think I understand, now,” his mother continues. “I’ve spent so long being angry and frustrated and not understanding *why*, and I just never stopped to consider that you deserve to be happy.”

She turns back to him again, and even with tears in her eyes, she looks so earnest, all of a sudden. “Cale, you deserve to be happy, and you *are*. You are, you’re happier than I’ve seen you in so long, even at a time like this. He makes you so happy, and I can’t... I want you to have that. And I want so much for you to be able to share your happiness with us.”

She’s outright crying now, and Cale blames that for how long it takes him to catch up to what she’s saying. About being happy. About how he’s happy *with Jesse*. “Mom, we—” *We’re not together*, he means to say. Means to even laugh about it because it’s just... it’s not... *they’re* not...

But the words stick in his throat, because this is the moment he’s been waiting for. For years now, this is something he’s dreamed of having again: his parents’ acceptance. Their love, given unconditionally the way it used to be.

How can he tell her it happened because of something that exists only in her imagination?

“Mom...” he says again, helplessly this time, and then she’s throwing her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder and telling him she loves him so much, and she’s so proud of him, and she’s so sorry, and all Cale can do is cling back like he hasn’t done since he was a kid.

The reasons don’t matter. Not even a little bit. Not now. He’ll set the record straight the next time he sees them. It’s just... it’ll be easier that way.

April 2007

Trying to explain to his roommate that he didn't think he had a "type" was an exercise in futility. Cale sighed, listening to Diego go on and on about his cousin, who was apparently in town for a while, definitely gay (Diego claimed it ran in the family, but Cale didn't think that *gay* was a genetic inheritance), and exactly Cale's type.

"For the last time," Cale started, fed up, but Diego steamrolled right over him

"Boy, if you don't have a type that is tall, pretty, and with just a smidge of bad boy mixed in, then I am actually a flying elephant, okay? You have a type. Own it." Diego rolled his eyes. "You're going out with David, and you're going to like it."

Which is how Cale met David Ortiz, who was, as promised, tall, with an olive complexion, dark hair cropped close, toffee-colored eyes, and a wide, bright smile. In spite of himself, Cale found himself thoroughly charmed halfway into their first date, and they hit it off so well that they'd already scheduled a second date before the first even ended. Followed by a third, and a fourth, until suddenly Cale realized he was in an honest-to-God relationship.

And even though Cale didn't think he was particularly good at being a boyfriend (mostly because he'd never tried it before), their relationship worked. It was *good*.

And even when it ended, it wasn't because they had a big fight or one of them had cheated or even because they were no longer compatible. David claimed it was because Cale always seemed to have something—or someone—else on his mind. Even if it wasn't true, David apparently didn't do well competing with his own imagination.

"It's my own issue," he said, pressing a kiss to Cale's temple. "You're a good guy, one of the best. I just need to feel like I come first for a while, you get me?"

"I get you," Cale assured him, but he still felt perplexed. He genuinely liked David, thought he could maybe even fall in love with him if given enough time to nurture the thing they'd been working on for the past six months. He wanted badly to know what David was sensing that made it seem like Cale was holding back, because maybe then he could fix it.

Cale thought of Jesse then, in spite of himself, and he found himself wondering how he might have handled this situation. Jesse'd always had such finesse, and his relationships (as far as Cale could tell) had always ended on *his* terms. Cale suddenly wished he could pick up the phone and call him, and with it came that usual twinge of deep regret that usually made him stop thinking of his once closest friend as quickly as possible.

He sighed, giving David a hug because it certainly wasn't *his* fault, anyway.

Even years later, he never could figure out what it was that David had broken up with him over, and none of his other relationships seemed to last long enough to give him any clues.

February 2015

The problem is, Cale can't stop thinking about it. After he leaves his parents' house with Jesse, it rolls around in his brain like a marble, disrupting every other thought process that tries to pop up and knocking them over like dominos.

Why did his mom think they were together? How did they act around each other that could have led her to such an odd conclusion? Obviously she'd *suspected* before, but she'd been so sure in the kitchen that it was true. Was it just because some part of her still blamed Jesse for turning Cale gay? Was this the logical conclusion that stemmed from that line of thinking? God, did his *father* think the same thing? But he must have, because he was acting just as strangely as Cale's mom. Or maybe *he* was the one to convince *her* of it... he'd been strange at the funeral, while she was still acting like Cale being there was a deliberate ploy to offend her.

There are too many questions, none of which lead to any answers that make sense, and the longer Cale worries at it, the more annoyed he gets. He doesn't even realize his hands are clenched white-knuckled around the steering wheel until Jesse reaches over to poke him in the arm.

"What's up?" Jesse asks.

Cale has to unclench his teeth and swallow hard before he can answer. "Nothing," he finally manages to get out.

"You're looking pretty pissed for *nothing*," Jesse says mildly. He frowns. "I thought things went okay back there. Did I miss something?"

“No.” It comes out too sharp. Cale is not an angry person by nature, and he doesn’t like feeling this way. He takes a deep breath, and forces himself to relax his grip on the wheel as he releases it. “No,” he repeats, more calmly this time. “Just... weird. I don’t know, it’s nothing. Things went surprisingly well.”

Jesse watches him for a long moment as Cale takes the turn that will lead back to the house. “Just waiting for the other shoe to drop, then?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Hell, maybe it’s even true, Cale thinks. It’s hard to trust in a good thing when it comes to his family these days. Tonight could have been a fluke.

Jesse lets it go, and they make it back to the house without further incident.

But Cale still can’t stop thinking about it, his mother’s words ringing through his dreams and bouncing around in his memory all day Monday.

He makes you so happy.

I want you to have that.

The latest Cale can get away with staying on Monday is six o’clock, and even then, he knows he’ll be dragging pretty badly at work tomorrow. But it’s worth it; he and Jesse get most of the rest of the house cleared out and donated to various places, including the women’s shelter two towns over. Cale thinks Ms. St. John would have approved of her things helping other women in tough situations, and Jesse seems downright flabbergasted by the hugs he gets from the people running the place that day.

Jesse also meets with the Realtor one last time, who tells him that she’s really quite capable of handling the details, and he’s welcome to head home and let her contact him if she needs anything for the sale of the house.

“At this point, you’ve done all the heavy lifting,” she says with a shrug, brushing her thick auburn hair over her shoulder. “I wish you’d left some of the main furniture for a bit, since showing a furnished house is easier than showing an empty one, but I can make it work.”

Jesse glances at Cale, who shouldn’t have a say in these proceedings at all, but he still nods because he thinks Jesse needs someone to take the reins on this one for a while. It’s been a rough week for him. “If the lady says you’re good, you might as well get back to New York. We still need to find you an apartment, not to mention the projects you have waiting on you.”

With an overly dramatic groan, Jesse gives in. The Realtor leaves, and Cale orders a pizza, which they eat in Jesse's room, sitting cross-legged on the floor with the box between them serving as a makeshift table, and drinking the last two bottles of water from the fridge.

Cale notices Jesse is looking around, presumably cataloguing all the differences now that the room is bare. He wonders what it feels like for him. Cale's family has always lived in the same house, and his room is still there for the taking whenever he wants it. Even when he and his family weren't on the best of terms, there was a sort of comfort in that.

Jesse ends up being the one to say something, before Cale can figure out how to ask. "I feel guilty. It's so goddamn stupid, but I actually feel guilty."

Cale tilts his head. "About what?"

"About... not feeling guilty, I guess. Fuck, that makes no sense, does it?" Jesse laughs, a self-deprecating little sound, and shakes his head. "I'm not gonna miss this place at all, y'know? And I don't feel bad about selling it. God knows Mom wouldn't want me to be a sentimental idiot over it. I guess I just feel like I should care more, or something."

Not sure what to say, Cale can only offer a nod and wait for Jesse to continue, which he does after a few long moments.

"I didn't tell you about the will."

Cale blinks, and sets his pizza aside. "Um. No. I didn't think..." He stops himself from saying *I didn't think there'd be much worth mentioning*, because even in his head, it sounds terrible. "Was it important?"

"Kind of... and weird," Jesse says. It seems like an act of defiance when he takes a huge bite of his own slice of pizza and chews noisily before he keeps going. "She had a trust fund. Not, like, rich-white-dude huge or anything, but a pretty hefty chunk of change anyway. I guess it was from her grandfather, and she never touched it."

"Wow." Cale has a little trouble reconciling his few memories of Ms. St. John with a *trust fund*, which has always sounded like a thing only snooty, overly privileged kids get to claim. "I mean, that's good though, isn't it? You have access to it and everything?"

"Yeah, there were no clauses on it or anything." Jesse shrugs. "I guess, I mean, yeah, it's real good. For my business, for moving to New York, whatever. I could probably live on it pretty well for a couple years. I just didn't

expect it. And she left a note, too. About how she always meant to give it to me. About how much she loved me, and how sorry she was for how bad things were. She said she was fucking *proud* of me.”

As Cale watches, he can see the way Jesse is crumpling, yet still desperately trying to hold himself together, even in front of no one but his oldest friend. His lip is trembling, and there are tears in his eyes that he swipes at almost angrily. “Jesse...” Cale says, already reaching over, but this time Jesse doesn’t accept the comfort. He draws his knees up, hugging them tightly and keeping out of reach of Cale’s support.

“I told her I hated her,” Jesse chokes out. “The last time we talked. She called just before my graduation, and she told me how proud she was then, but I could hear how bad she was slurring her words and I just fucking lost it, you know? I told her I hated her, and I wasn’t letting her ruin my life any more than she already had. I told her I didn’t want to talk to her again. Who the fuck *does* that? I mean, she wasn’t the greatest mom ever, but she was still my mom, and I loved her, I did, I was just so pissed off. And I never... I never...”

Cale crawls around the pizza box and draws Jesse into a hug. Jesse doesn’t resist this time, just sinks into it, clutching at Cale’s arms and shaking with the force of his grief. Warm tears soak into the collar of Cale’s shirt.

“I don’t fucking deserve *anything* from her,” Jesse whispers, long minutes later, his voice still shuddery with sobs.

“She knew you didn’t mean it, Jess,” Cale tells him, because she must have. Jesse lashed out because he cared *too much*, and Cale thinks his mom had to be smart enough to realize that. It may even have played a role in her decision to sober up.

“I’m so mad. I’m so fucking pissed she just... she *left*, before I could tell her I didn’t mean it.” Jesse pulls in a ragged breath, lifting his face enough that he can wipe his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. “God, I’m so fucking pathetic.”

“You’re allowed to be. Mad and pathetic and whatever.” Cale catches Jesse’s eyes so he can make sure Jesse sees how serious he is. “You’re allowed to be, okay? You’re allowed to feel anything you need to right now. I’m not going to judge you, and I’m not going to let you judge yourself.”

Jesse was looking out at the pretty spectacular vista now, and his smile turned softer, almost wistful. It wasn’t a look Cale saw too often on Jesse’s face.

“Man, I’m pretty sure I could just stay here forever,” Jesse said, leaning on his elbows. He closed his eyes and tipped his face back, and for a moment, Cale was struck by how *beautiful* his friend looked, all lit up by the early morning sun and more content than Cale ever got to see him. He swallowed hard, looking away.

“I think eventually I’d miss my family. Also showers. We’d get homesick, you know?” He shrugged, but Jesse was already shaking his head.

“I dunno. Home is where you’re happiest, right?” He opened his eyes, which were blue like the hottest part of a flame in the sunlight, and pinned them on Cale. “I’m happiest right here, with you, right now. So for right now, this is home for me.”

It was the sort of logic Cale couldn’t find a way to counter.

March 2015

“Oh my God, Jesse, you’re being ridiculous,” Cale exclaims, finally fed up. “Weeks! For two weeks now, you’ve dragged me around every single night and on my weekends and you still haven’t found anything. What are you even *looking* for?”

Jesse pouts, crossing his arms over his chest. “None of the places we’ve seen have felt right. It’s not my fault.”

“What are you, *twelve*?” Cale throws his arms up. “I quit. You’re on your own. You found an office space in like two days, but the apartment is what trips you up? Do you want to just keep living in the hotel? I swear, it might be easier for you at this point.”

Jesse sighs, flopping down onto Cale’s couch. “If I could just find an apartment like yours, man, it would be fine. I love your apartment. Why do you think I crash here all the time?”

“And here I thought it was my sparkling personality.” Cale rolls his eyes. “Well, fine, why don’t you just move in here then?” The words are out before he even has time to think about them.

Jesse gapes. “What, seriously?”

“Well, sure.” Cale shrugs, thinking about it. The more he thinks, the more he likes the idea. It would solve a lot of problems for Jesse, and god knows Cale wouldn’t mind the company. They practically live in each other’s pockets

anyway. “I never finished setting up an office, which means I probably never needed one as much as I thought I did, so I’ve got the space. Wouldn’t mind being able to split the rent, either.”

“Huh.” Jesse tilts his head, considering. Clearly warming to the idea, judging by the way his slow grin spreads. “Hell, I already know all about your bad habits. And your music fetish.”

Cale snorts. Like Jesse doesn’t have his own list of bad habits and personality quirks. “So what do you think? We can at least get you out of the hotel. Call it a trial basis, and if you end up hating it here, we can get back to apartment hunting.”

“Okay, cool. If you’re sure.” Jesse’s eyes sparkle, and he seems downright happy now. Thank god, because he’s been moping since they returned to New York and started this ridiculous apartment search. “I wouldn’t mind calling this place home for a while.”

“Good.” Cale grabs his jacket before Jesse can change his mind. “Let’s go rent a truck and get you out of the hotel and that storage locker before they both charge you another week.”

The scary thing is how easy it is. Two guys, even ones with history and friendship like Jesse and Cale have, just shouldn’t work so well, so fast. Even in college, Cale had to grit his teeth sometimes to avoid killing Diego, and they were roommates and friends through all four years of undergrad. Lucas, the guy he shared an apartment with while getting his masters, drove him crazy for two solid years, in the *stupidest* ways that shouldn’t even have been annoying but were.

Cale expects that after a week of living with Jesse, he’ll have to set some ground rules to keep from killing him, because yeah, Jesse may know all his bad habits, but Cale knows Jesse’s just as well. Like his perpetually open toothpaste smearing the bathroom sink, or his inability to *not* leave laundry scattered all over the entire apartment, or his ridiculous aversion to eating the last few bites of cereal or snacks in the cabinets, leaving an almost-empty package.

Cale knew these things going in, and none of them have changed, but somehow, they’re easier to deal with than he expected. Because for every morning that he has to wipe down the counter, or every afternoon he goes

through the apartment and deposits an armful of dirty clothes on Jesse's bed, Jesse is right there cleaning Cale's dirty dishes, or mopping the tracks off the kitchen linoleum from Cale's shoes.

The point is, they balance really well. *Too* well. And Cale can't help wondering how long that's going to last. Surely it can't be this easy all the time?

But one week turns into two turns into three, and March starts winding into April, and it keeps being easy. Even, dare he say it, pretty awesome. Of course there are times Jesse drives him nuts, but never to the point where Cale is annoyed with having him in his space. Never to the point where he wants Jesse to leave.

In fact, he realizes pretty early on that he *never* wants Jesse to leave.

Because the thing is, it's pretty great having someone to go home to, to rant at about bad days or celebrate with when something good happens. Just having someone to watch his favorite TV shows with, who understands his inner geek and doesn't make fun of him for it.

It's just... really nice. Cale keeps finding himself hoping that Jesse feels the same, because he doesn't want Jesse to leave and find his own place. Which is stupid and kind of selfish, but there you go.

If Cale was dumb enough to mention any of this, Jesse would probably grin and roll his eyes and tell him to find a boyfriend, but it's not that simple. It just *isn't*, with his schedule and his quirks and okay, maybe he's tolerably cute, not nearly as dorky-looking as he was in high school, but he and relationships just don't mix. No one can deal with him the way Jesse can.

This thought process is why the revelation that happens during their third week as roommates should not come as any sort of shock to Cale, but as it happens, if he was any more clueless he would probably have to be reclassified as an amoeba. There's no excuse for it.

What happens is this:

Cale comes home from work one day, whistling because it might still be cold as all hell in New York, but officially it's finally spring, and he has The Corrs blaring out through his headphones, and who can resist whistling along to "Summer Sunshine"?

He's quiet when he goes in, because Jesse's been burning the midnight oil on the project he's putting together for Logan & Wade and has been

compensating for it by coming home for late-afternoon naps before dinner. Today is no exception. The difference, though, is that instead of crashing in his own bedroom, on his own bed, Jesse is curled up on the couch. He's on his side, hugging a pillow, knees folded up because the couch is way too short for his long legs.

He's adorable, but that's not what makes Cale's breath catch, or his heart stutter. It's the way his first desire is to take care of Jesse, to pull a blanket up over his shoulders and remove one of the pillows under his head that will leave him with a horrible crick in his neck, to make him a meal that includes actual green things as well as the comfort food Cale knows Jesse loves, and then to curl up beside him on the sofa while they eat and rub his shoulders because Jesse just really looks like he could use a good shoulder rub.

What steals Cale's breath and makes his heart roll over in his chest is that he realizes that he is hopelessly in love with Jesse, and has been for a long time. It's not a lightbulb moment. Lightbulb moments, in his experience, are relatively quiet things. This particular revelation feels like being thrown screaming out of an airplane. It's a free fall, where you feel like you're flying until you realize you left your wings—or a parachute—at home.

Cale doesn't know if he ever even *had* a parachute for this.

He makes you happy, his mother's voice pipes up in his head, and it's probably his imagination, but there's a tone of smugness there now. Like memory-mom knew all along. Like she planted the thought there on purpose, even though Cale is fairly sure this particular revelation has been a long time coming. He rubs at his forehead like that will be enough to dislodge the stubborn memory, but it's not, of course.

Cale's foot seems to move of its own accord, stepping closer to the couch, and Cale has no idea what he means to do, but his hand is rising before he can stop it, and then Jesse stirs and he comes back to himself all at once. Horrified with himself, and with his body and his mind's betrayal, Cale turns and flees into the safety of his own room.

I can handle this, Cale thinks to himself an hour later. It's so stupid that he's still sitting here, staring at a wall, feeling shocky and disconnected and strange. *I can deal with this*, he tells himself again, but so far, it's not proving to be very true.

There's a sound from the living room, Jesse knocking a book off the coffee table as he stretches, and Cale can't help the way his mind flits over a hundred

memories of Jesse stretching, black T-shirt riding up just enough to show off a sliver of gently tanned skin, dark hair sleep-tousled, blue eyes blinking sleepily...

Stop it. Cale's fists clench in his lap, and he squeezes his eyes shut like that will be able to stop the direction his thoughts are taking. *That's your best friend in there, and you will not take advantage of him even in the privacy of your own thoughts.*

He takes a few deep breaths, listening to the rustle of Jesse climbing off the couch. There are a few shuffling steps, and then a knock on Cale's door.

"Hey, you home yet?" Jesse calls around a yawn.

Cale clears his throat. "Yeah. Yeah, just had a headache." He forces himself to his feet, crosses the room to open the door. Tries to ignore the way his heart swoops and dives into his belly when faced with Jesse's sleepy eyes and soft smile. A smile which dissolves when Jesse takes in Cale's appearance.

"Wow, you really don't look good," Jesse says, taking a step forward and brushing a hand across Cale's forehead. "There's a nasty-ass virus going around your office, Logan cancelled a meeting today because of it. Did you take a Tylenol? Drink some water?"

Cale blinks at him. "No... no, I'm not sick, geez." The giggle just bubbles out of him then, completely against his will, when he remembers how he came home wanting to take care of Jesse. God, what a mess. What a pair they make.

Jesse doesn't look all that reassured, probably because Cale sounds slightly hysterical. Or simply crazy. "You sure? I can make you soup or something for dinner."

Stop. Stop trying to take care of me. Not now, Jesse, please don't do this now. "I'm okay, really," Cale says, trying for a smile. "Like I said, just a headache."

Jesse eyes him for a moment, but finally shrugs. "Okay then. You up for dinner?"

"Sure," Cale agrees, thinking, *yes, normal, that's what we need right now.* They'll order from that Thai place Jesse likes, and watch the last recorded episode of *Game of Thrones*, and everything will be just like always. Cale can just ignore this new... development.

Everything is fine. Nothing has to change just because Cale's heart went and got all tangled up with someone it wasn't supposed to.

“Hey, so, there’s a theater nearby doing this cool thing where they show a different classic sci-fi film every Wednesday night,” Jesse says with a big grin at dinner the following week. “Next week is gonna be *Starship Troopers*. I already bought us tickets, figured you’d be down with it.”

“Oh.” Cale swallows the bite of potato he just took; it feels like he’s swallowing it around a boulder. “I, um. Well, Mr. Wade asked if I could work some overtime this week. I may not be able to.”

Jesse stares at him.

Cale fidgets. “It’s just, with the time off I took last month, I feel like I should take the brownie points where I can get them, you know?” Oh god, he just used the time off he took to be there for *Jesse’s mother’s funeral* as an excuse. He’s a slug. He’s worse than that—he’s the chewed up piece of gum on your shoe after it’s been sitting on a baking sidewalk all afternoon.

Jesse clearly thinks so too, because his eyes go horribly blank. “Oh. Yeah. Okay, whatever. We can go another time, I guess.”

“No, you... you should go!” Cale says, mentally kicking himself over and over and over. “Don’t hold off just for me.” *Distance*, he thinks, desperately. *Just a little distance. That’s what we need.*

The problem, of course, is that Cale’s been trying for distance for nine awful days now, staying late at the office, making excuses about client portfolios and overtime and anything else he can think of, and it hasn’t helped. The distance only seems to be exacerbating the problem. The more Cale isn’t around Jesse, the more he wants to be. It’s a physical ache in his chest.

Jesse shakes his head, his expression all twisted with confusion and hurt. Not for the first time lately. “Okay, whatever, man.”

Cale takes another bite of a dinner he can’t taste and tries to decide just how much he hates himself right now.

The answer, he decides when Jesse leaves the table without a word a few moments later, is quite a lot.

It continues like this for another week, until most of Cale’s interactions with Jesse have been reduced to terse hellos as they pass each other in the morning, usually *sans* eye contact or smiles or friendliness of any sort at all.

It’s bad enough that Cale’s work begins to suffer, and Mr. Logan actually calls him into his office to ask Cale if everything is all right, or if he’d like to

take a few days personal leave if there's something going on at home. Which, while very kind of Cale's boss, is certainly not a highlight of his week.

Cale knows things can't continue like this. The distance isn't helping; he's miserable, and willing to bet that Jesse isn't faring much better. Something needs to change, and Cale spends hours trying to figure out what to do.

"I've never seen you so mopey before," Peggy says, poking him in the arm. It's Friday night, and they're sitting at the counter at Clyde's, Peggy with her virgin strawberry daiquiri and Cale with his tasteless beer, watching a baseball game on the overhead television that neither of them really cares about.

"I'm not mopey, for god's sake," Cale mutters, even though he definitely is.

"Come on, boss, you're hiding out in a bar with your favorite intern because you don't want to go home because your uber-sexy roommate also lives there and you're afraid you might accidentally jump his bones. You're definitely mopey." Peggy rolls her eyes, tossing a big mass of dark curly hair over her shoulder as she turns to fix him with a *look*.

Sometimes, Peggy reminds Cale eerily of his sister.

"You know, you really weren't supposed to know any of that," Cale says, eyeing her suspiciously. "You're like the ninja intern of doom. Are any secrets safe around you?"

"Nope. But it's mostly just because I'm smarter than you. And also you have, like, the worst poker face I've ever seen in my entire life." Peggy winks at him and goes back to her drink, clearly knowing better than to push. Cale decides Peggy really is one of his favorite people.

On the heels of that thought—because the universe obviously hates him—comes the sound of a throat clearing beside him, and Cale's whole body seizes up. *No, come on, please don't do this to me*, he thinks with a desperation he already knows is in vain. Slowly, he turns to face Jesse.

In the low light of the bar, Jesse's eyes appear darker than Cale knows they are, but nothing can block the terrible blankness in them. Anger, Cale could deal with. Coldness he would deserve. But this... this cuts him to the bone.

"Jesse..."

"Wow, when you said you couldn't go over my project with me because you would be in the office all night, this isn't the office I thought you meant," Jesse says quietly.

His eyes flick over to Peggy. Cale doesn't even have time to check her reaction, because half a second later, Jesse is already turning away. Cale, who was rooted to his seat from the moment he heard Jesse behind him, finally manages to stumble up off the stool, reaching out.

"No, Jesse, wait..."

Jesse dodges his grasp, shoulders hunching as he hefts his canvas bag higher on his shoulder. He doesn't meet Cale's eyes as he says, "It's okay, Cale. Stay. Enjoy your beer. I'll pack a bag and find a hotel for the night. I'll move out this weekend. It's fucking stupid for you to keep hiding from your own damn apartment just to avoid me."

Before Cale can stutter out any kind of reply, Jesse turns away again and walks out of the bar, vanishing into the night while Cale stands frozen.

May 2003

Cale stormed into the house, slamming the door closed with enough force to rattle his mother's mug collection on the opposite wall. It belatedly occurred to him to be very grateful she wasn't at home, before the anger clouded his thoughts again.

"Stupid goddamn piece of crap lying *asshole!*" he yelled, throwing his backpack at the wall because it was the closest thing at hand. He thought it would have been better if it was breakable. The dull *thump* it made when it hit was hardly satisfying.

Caitlyn came in from the living room, leaning against the doorjamb with her arms crossed and eyebrows raised. "I don't think I've heard you swear like that... *ever.*"

"Go away," he growled at her. His fists clenched when she only laughed.

"Come on, who's got you so worked up?" she asked him. "My nickel's on Mr. Gunthrow—guy is a dick, and you've been working your butt off for your grade all year. Or Jesse."

Immediately, Cale felt his whole body go bowstring-tense, and he wanted to throw something again. He closed his eyes, trying to find some semblance of calm before he destroyed his family's whole kitchen.

"Ahh." Caitlyn nodded, like his reaction made perfect sense. "First best friend fight, I understand." When Cale glanced at her, she'd straightened up and actually looked a little concerned.

“Hardly,” Cale muttered, because he and Jesse had lots of arguments before.

“First one that matters,” she replied with a shrug. “Believe me, your little tiffs before hardly ping the scale. Can I ask what it was about?”

“No,” he said, too fast. But he didn’t want to talk about it, he didn’t want to *think* about it. Because it meant a broken promise, it meant different states and different schools and different *lives*, and that hadn’t been the plan until this morning after Jesse met with his guidance counselor and came out looking contemplative and hopeful and a little bit guilty.

And all at once, Cale felt guilty too, because it wasn’t like he couldn’t understand why Jesse wanted this.

It’s just... Cale didn’t really have other friends. And that promise Jesse had made him, that they’d stick together through college, maybe even find a way to be roommates... Cale had been clinging to that. Now that he had one, he *liked* having a best friend. He liked having *Jesse*. Three years since they first became friends, it still felt new and amazing to him, and sometimes he couldn’t believe that he and Jesse hadn’t been best friends their whole lives. The idea of going back to that lonely time before he had Jesse in his life was unbearable.

And yeah, maybe in college, he’d find a few people to look past his social awkwardness and make some new friends, but that wasn’t the point. He didn’t want new friends, he wanted the friend he already had. He didn’t want things to change.

It wasn’t fair.

Nor, Cale admitted to himself, closing his eyes against the frustration of it all, was it fair to hold Jesse back just because of Cale’s own insecurities. Jesse was amazing, he could do anything he wanted and he’d be the best at it. He deserved that.

“Hey,” Caitlin said, coming up to him and wrapping an arm around him in a way he usually would have blushed and ducked away from with a scowl. This time, he leaned into her because she was all he had. “Whatever happened, you guys’ll get past it. Friends fight all the time, and sometimes it sucks, but the good ones? The best friendships that last the longest? Those are worth it.”

“I know,” Cale said, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. Still, he was already itching to get on his bike and ride over to Jesse’s; throw pebbles at his window until Jesse came outside and let Cale apologize.

If they only had two summers and senior year left before Jesse disappeared across the country, Cale realized he wanted to make the most of it.

April 2015

“Boss?” Peggy says quietly, and Cale startles when her hand touches his arm.

He blinks, and her concerned gaze wavers into focus. “I...” He trails off, without a clue of what he might have meant to say, before he realizes that Peggy is holding out his coat. His tongue feels too thick, all of a sudden, glued to the roof of his mouth.

She nods towards the door, giving him an encouraging smile. “Go on. I’ll get the tab, you can pay me back. Hurry up!”

Which reminds Cale that while he’s been standing here feeling like he’s been hit by a particularly vengeful train, Jesse’s probably already halfway to the subway station and out of Cale’s life.

“Shit. *Shit*,” he says, his limbs coming back to life all at once. He throws his coat on haphazardly and races out the door, almost crashing into a group of five heading inside. He doesn’t even remember that he didn’t say good-bye to Peggy until he’s a block away, but he thinks she’ll forgive him.

He has no plan. Cale always has a plan, always, but right now, he has nothing beyond *get to Jesse* and *fix this*. His heart is pounding, fear and adrenaline and something he doesn’t want to name, and he doesn’t even feel the bite of wind on his face although he knows there was a cold snap today and it’s below freezing right now.

On a good day, Jesse’s long legs eat up the sidewalk like its nothing, and when he’s upset, Cale knows that stride lengthens considerably as he tries to walk off his feelings. The chances of Cale being able to catch him normally wouldn’t be very good, but he’s flat-out sprinting now, and the subway station is still two blocks away when he finally catches sight of Jesse’s flyaway hair and hunched shoulders and dark coat.

“Jesse!” he calls, buoyed by relief before remembering that Jesse is really angry at him—with good reason—and he still doesn’t have a plan for fixing that.

Well, screw having a plan. His first plan is what brought them to this, isn’t it?

Jesse stops, but he doesn't turn. He looks like he's bracing himself, and Cale stops behind him, breathing hard as he reaches out to touch Jesse's shoulder. It's tense beneath his fingers, but Jesse doesn't pull away. He doesn't move at all, in fact.

"*Jesse*," Cale says again, and this time it's imploring. "Come on, look at me."

Finally, Jesse turns, just enough to look over his shoulder at Cale. His eyes are shadowed beneath the fringe of dark hair, and his mouth is twisted unhappily. "What," he says, no inflection in his tone at all.

"I'm sorry," Cale says, but he knows even before it's out of his mouth that it's not enough, not even close.

And sure enough, Jesse's face just shuts down even more. "Great," he mutters, and now he is pulling away, turning like he's going to continue on to the subway, and Cale can't, he *can't* let Jesse go. His fingers slide away from Jesse's shoulder, down his arm, and he snags his hand. Jesse's hand is freezing, but Cale doesn't care. When Jesse tries to pull away, he just holds on tighter, tugging Jesse back around to face him.

"Wait," Cale pleads, desperation roughening his voice.

Jesse sighs, but he turns back. "Cale..."

Cale doesn't let him say anything else, and he doesn't let himself think about what he's about to do before he's already doing it, stepping right into Jesse's space, curling his hand around the back of Jesse's neck and pulling him down, pulling himself up, letting the chasm of space between them fall away until their lips are brushing, then touching, then pressing. Jesse inhales sharply, stealing Cale's air, and Cale lets him gladly. And when Jesse's hands find Cale's hips and drag him closer, gripping nearly tight enough to bruise, Cale lets that happen too, because it feels so good. Being here, pressed against Jesse as though it would kill him to step away, feels right in a way nothing ever has.

It only lasts for a few perfect moments before Jesse seems to realize what's happening, and he pulls away. Cale tries very hard not to whimper at the loss, but he takes some small consolation in the fact that Jesse's hands don't move. Jesse's eyes, meanwhile, are very wide as they search Cale's face. He tries and fails to speak, then clears his throat and tries again. "That was a hell of an apology."

"I don't want you to move out," Cale says, and it comes out breathless.

He's glad it's dark out, because maybe the streetlights won't give away his horrendous blush. But the words, at least, are finally coming easier. After that first sentence, the rest spill out of him in a torrent, weeks of pent up emotion gushing out of him almost faster than he can keep up with. "I never wanted that, Jesse, that's the *last* thing I want. I don't think I could handle it if you left; having you there is the best... no, having you in my *life* again is the best thing in the world, and that terrifies me. I didn't handle it well when you left for California, and I tried to forget about you after because it hurt, and believe me, I *know* how awful that was of me, I get it. But I have you back now and you *can't leave again*, do you hear me? You're not allowed to, whether or not you want this... *whatever* this is or not. I'm not letting you walk away. I'm sorry I got scared and tried to put some distance between us, that was really stupid, but you have to forgive me."

Jesse's eyes are glinting now, an amused twitch to his lips that should maybe offend Cale a little but only fills him with relief, the weightless kind that makes him feel like his head is spinning. "And why do I have to do that?" Jesse asks, his tone warm and fond and everything Cale has been missing for weeks now.

"Because," Cale tells him determinedly, even while the spinning feeling gets worse, "I think it counts as extenuating circumstances when a man realizes for the first time that he's been in love with his best friend since he was fifteen years old."

This isn't a movie, so there's no dramatic music at the declaration, nor does it feel like a great weight has been lifted from his chest like the clichés would have him believe. But time does seem to slow and then stop for one breathless moment in which they stare at each other, all cards on the table for the first time.

And then Jesse laughs. Cale knows all of Jesse's laughs, has quantified and itemized every single one in the time they've known each other, but he's never heard this one before, this laugh that sounds like a mixture of relief and disbelief and something else, something pure and bright and all-encompassing in its joy.

This time, it's Jesse who kisses him, leaning down and capturing Cale's mouth even though they're both smiling too wide for it to work well. It doesn't matter; it's perfect. It's *them*. And when Jesse pulls away this time, it's only so he can rest his forehead against Cale's, bringing one hand up until his fingers

are brushing Cale's cheek. He's still smiling, but it's softer now. "God, Cale," he whispers. And then, "I'm really glad you finally caught up."

Cale blinks at that, and when his brain kicks in and he realizes what Jesse's saying, he falls into his own helpless laughter. Jesse nuzzles at his cheek, smiling against his skin, and Cale wraps his arms around him and holds on as hard as he can.

He has no plans of letting go anytime soon.

August 2004

Manchester Airport was crowded and noisy, which were two things Cale hated, on top of the fact that he was tired from the drive and this was one of the worst days of his life.

So basically, everything sucked.

But he pasted on a smile when he looked at Jesse, because Jesse looked nervous and overwhelmed, and he didn't need Cale's issues bogging him down any further.

"You'll call me when you get there, right?" Cale asked.

Jesse nodded. "Course I will. And you, send a text when you get back home so when I land, I can check that you didn't drive into a ditch somewhere."

Cale rolled his eyes, but dutifully promised. Then they stood awkwardly for a moment, neither wanting to admit that this was it. End of the line. No going back.

It was Jesse who finally spoke, his voice rough. "I'm really gonna fucking miss you."

Cale nodded, trying to ignore the burn behind his eyes. "Me too. But we'll keep in touch. It'll be okay. And you're gonna do great in SoCal. Just think of all the hot beach babes, yeah?" His smile felt like a twisted parody.

"Yeah, sure." Jesse rolled his eyes, then hefted his bag higher on his shoulder and sighed. "Okay, I gotta go or I'm gonna miss my flight." He gave Cale a half smile of his own and held out one arm.

Cale stepped into the embrace easily, holding as tightly as he dared for as long as he could get away with it before thumping Jesse on the back and

stepping back, still fighting back the wetness in his eyes, hoping Jesse wouldn't see it. "Be safe, Jess."

"Yeah. Take care of yourself, Cale." Jesse gave him a sad little wave, and turned to step into the security line. As the agent checked his ticket and ID, he glanced back over his shoulder at Cale.

Cale swallowed hard, tried to make his smile as genuine as possible, and waved good-bye.

He stayed in that same spot long after Jesse had disappeared, long after the agent started giving him strange looks. He stayed until the flight board told him that Jesse's flight was gone, and then he stayed a little longer because it was easier than facing the long drive home without him.

September 2015

Cale's been to JFK Airport a few times, and every time, he hates it even more than the last. Living in New York has made him mostly immune to noise and crowds, but airports always feel suffocating and horrible.

This time, though, it doesn't seem quite so bad. Maybe it's because he's not flying alone, or maybe it's just because nothing has really seemed bad in almost six months. (Sometimes, lately, he wonders if it's possible for people to die of an overabundance of happiness. He certainly hopes not, but then, it wouldn't be a terrible way to go.)

"You look like you're having weird thoughts again," Jesse says, bumping Cale's shoulder as they grab their carry-on bags from the security belt and start making their way to the right gate.

Cale sticks his tongue out, because Jesse always makes fun of him for the random places his mind goes, and this is one he doesn't feel like sharing until he's sure it won't give Jesse too big an ego boost.

"So what's the first thing on our agenda after we land?" Cale asks, although he's the one who mapped out most of their itinerary. He has no doubt all of his careful planning will be shot to hell if Jesse has his way, but it's the thought that counts, and anyway, he kind of likes it when his plans go off-track. With Jesse, it always turns into an adventure.

Jesse gives him a smile that cannot be termed anything but salacious. "I'm going to get you into the hotel room, strip you down, throw you on the bed..."

and burrow under the covers and sleep for at least twenty-four hours.” He winks.

“Aww.” Cale pats him, laughing when Jesse ducks away with an unconvincing scowl. “My poor baby, all work and no fun lately. No wonder you were itching for a vacation.” Jesse certainly has earned both the vacation and the sleep, working on three big projects simultaneously, with two others in discussion stages, and dealing with Cale whining about all the changes at Logan & Wade now that their new office building is taking shape in Manhattan. Some downtime in London will be good for him, and it has the added bonus of being a place they’ve both wanted to visit since they were teenagers.

“That’s not the only reason,” Jesse says, and there’s nothing wicked in his expression now. His eyes have gone deep and dark and serious, and he tugs on Cale’s hand, bringing it to his lips and pressing a kiss against the gold band there, the one Cale still can’t stop rubbing his thumb against with a thrill of delight at least twelve times a day.

“I know,” Cale says softly, smiling up at Jesse, heedless of the people pushing past them in the busy terminal.

The spell is broken only when the pre-boarding announcement comes over the intercom, but later, as they sit in the plane waiting for takeoff, Jesse takes his hand again, lacing their fingers together over the armrest.

Cale’s never been a fan of flying, can’t stand the way his heart jumps into his throat every time the plane hits even a tiny pocket of turbulence, or the way he goes so tense during takeoff and landing he feels like he’s going to snap.

Today’s different though. For the first time, he’s actually excited about flying.

Today, with his best friend, his partner, his *husband* at his side, he feels like he can do absolutely anything.

“Hey Jesse,” he says softly, leaning over so he can rest his head against Jesse’s shoulder.

Jesse presses a kiss into his hair. He’s turned into the giant sap he always accuses Cale of being, Cale thinks fondly. “Hmm?”

“I’m really glad I found you again.”

Jesse and Cale, best friends forever. For real, this time.

The End

Author Bio

Gabrielle Morgan started writing when she was six years old, and she never stopped. She has dabbled in everything from poetry to travel journaling, but she has a preference for fiction, and a deep and abiding love of fantasy and the supernatural, especially when there are love stories mixed in. She stumbled into the M/M romance genre by accident, and has been happily creating a warm and cozy home for herself there ever since, as she works up the courage to finally start sharing her stories with the world at large. When she's not writing, she spends as much time outdoors or having adventures as her schedule will allow. She currently resides in Massachusetts, where it will be snowing one minute and tropical the next and the only thing you can bet on is that you will never know which is coming.

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