



*Light
and
Motion*

Natalia Stevens

Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	3
Light and Motion – Information	6
Acknowledgements.....	7
Light and Motion	8
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two.....	21
Chapter Three.....	31
Chapter Four	39
Chapter Five.....	48
Epilogue	61
Author Bio	66

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

LIGHT AND MOTION

By Natalia Stevens

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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Photo Description

A man sits on a hill holding a camera. There is a path behind him. Trees fill the background, and at least a few of them have leaves that are starting to change colors. The man is dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt, and hiking boots. He is wearing a backpack and is looking off to his left.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I live my life through the lens. Have you ever looked at old building in the morning light? It's like they come alive. You can almost see the horse carriages driving past. But buildings I love, it's the couples that get to me. I love my work as a photographer but I've been shooting too many weddings, too many couples in love. The closest thing to "love" I come is the occasional model in my hotel room.

I hope there will at least one scorching hot sex scene. It is not a requirement, but you would really make my day :)

Thank you!

Helna

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: performance arts, visual arts, switch/versatile, humorous, hurt/comfort, reunited, weddings, public activity

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Thank you to the moderators of this event for their patience and hard work in making this event a reality.

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Chapter One

It was a sunny day, a balmy seventy-five degrees outside, not a cloud in the sky. The trees were just beginning to don their brilliant fall colors, but the weather had not yet taken on the chill of autumn. It was a perfect day for just about anything, and Ben was in the middle of a very bad idea.

This thought occurred to him just as his fingers tightened reflexively, and his head hit the wall behind him. He tried to count all the ways this could go wrong. He tried to think of the people that could be just outside the dim, cramped room he had been unceremoniously shoved into. He tried to think of the possibility of any one of them opening the door, unused office though it might be. He tried to think of a lot of things. But his brain was not in the mood for conflicting messages today.

One more time he sternly reminded himself that this was not like him, not professional, not appropriate, not... oh, whatever. The thoughts became rather fuzzy as the blond, curly head of hair that his fingers were currently threaded through suddenly changed position. The hot wet mouth left him, and Ben let out a grunt of frustration, bucking his hips. But then the mouth found his balls and began sucking, first one, and then the other. His brain was again filled with conflicting thoughts; this time it was a war between his cock and his balls, both screaming for attention.

Reason was not going to win out this time. It had been far too long, and he was far too gone. It was all Paul and Eric's fault, he decided. Paul and Eric and their perfect wedding with its perfect kisses. Not to mention the perfect photography (if he did say so himself) documenting all that perfect love. He didn't begrudge his friends their happiness one single bit, but it did make him want a little bit of attention for himself. The thought disappeared quickly, along with the vague lonely ache that accompanied it, as the warm body kneeling before him shifted to nibble on the inside of his thigh.

No, he wasn't going to dwell on something he did not have when "this" was right in front of him. The distant thought that he really, really shouldn't be doing this while he was on a job vanished when strong hands slid around to cup his ass and pull him closer. The mouth moved into the crevice between his thigh and hip. Ben groaned and thrust his neglected cock forward, letting out a strangled cry when one of the hands found him and began stroking. It wasn't like anyone would come looking for him. He had been given an extended break

and banished to the back hall until further notice. Surely no one would be the wiser if he disappeared for ten minutes. He had spent the better part of the morning shooting pose after pose of a bride who became increasingly agitated as several members of the wedding party failed to show up at the appointed time. Even the groom was already thirty minutes late. He had gone through all the poses he could and left the family to deal with their crisis.

He could only check his equipment, back up his photos, and change his lenses so many times. He was antsy and bored. So when six foot two of firm muscle, topped with soft blond curls, sidled up to him and started flirting, well, he was only human. A man has needs, after all, and right then, he needed. He needed so much that he couldn't put it into a coherent thought, but it seemed at that moment that all the answers were about to come to him. And when the mouth returned to his cock and the hands took to stroking his balls with eager energy, Ben decided it was probably better if he just didn't think at all.

Which was why he didn't hear the voices on the other side of the door. And he didn't hear the door click and creak open. Only when the light switched on, and the bride screamed, and the incredibly talented mouth that had been pleasuring him was yanked away with a painful scrape of teeth, did Ben begin to realize that something had gone very, very wrong. Only when his suck-and-go partner had whirled to face the furious bride, did Ben come to his senses enough to register that this was not, apparently, just some random wedding guest to pass the time with.

The errant groom now frantically whipped his head back and forth between the bride and her shell-shocked mother on one side and Ben on the other, the latter remembering at that moment that his pants were still around his knees. He didn't have a chance to remedy the situation, however, because the groom suddenly reared back and punched him in the face.

"You fucking cocksucker!" he screamed, backing away from Ben so fast he tripped over a chair. He recovered quickly, grabbing the chair and holding it in front of him like a shield. "You gays! Trying to shove your ways on everyone else!" He turned to the two women, stumbling over his words. "He just dropped his pants right in front of me!"

Ben almost laughed at the pathetic cover-up attempt and briefly considered pointing out the quite unnecessary observation that *he* had not, in fact, been sucking anybody's cock. But the bride had reached the end of her rope, and gathering her skirts like the heroine in a turn-of-the-century romance, she fled,

her mother close behind her. The groom chased them down the hall of the historical New England Resort Hotel, his loud denials reverberating in his wake. Ben did spare a sympathetic thought for the both of them, but his left eye was throbbing and starting to swell, and his cock was still hard, protesting the injustice of the interruption. A few abortive attempts later, he had his pants back on and made his way down the hall to gather his equipment and go home. No one was going to need a wedding photographer today.

Paul opened the door, took one look at Ben, and pulled him inside, eyes wide. “All right, whose ass am I going to have to kick?” He circled Ben, looking him up and down until he was satisfied that the black eye was his only injury.

Ben snorted. “No offense, but I don’t think you could. He was a pretty big guy.”

“Fine, I’ll take Eric with me.”

“You know, I’d question that, too, but Eric is a lot stronger than he looks.”

Paul laughed. “No doubt about it. My man’s a scrappy fighter.”

He led the way into the living room, waved Ben toward the sofa, and disappeared into the kitchen. Ben sank down, letting the plump cushions envelop him, and closed his eyes. All of the tension of the past few days had drained from him, and he sat like that until he heard Paul’s footsteps and the mugs of tea clinking together. Paul handed him a mug and eyed him critically.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Not especially.”

Paul narrowed his eyes but let the matter drop. Ben used the opportunity to pull a photo album from his bag and place it on the table between them, effectively changing the subject. Paul’s eyes lit up.

“You finished them? You work fast! I was expecting it to take longer. Now how much do we owe you for all of this?”

Ben stared at him. “What? No! Absolutely not.”

Paul gave him an imploring look. “Come on, Ben, you have to let us give you something. You spent hours on these, and this is how you make your living! I mean, I’d appreciate a friendly discount but—”

“Paul, we’ve been friends since our freshman year of college. Anybody who streaks the quad with me in the middle of January gets free wedding photography. It’s some sort of law.” He pushed the album across the table. “It’s also my wedding gift to you. It would be downright rude to refuse it.”

“Don’t argue with him, honey. We can’t afford him anyway.”

Ben looked up. Eric had unloaded his wallet and keys and was making his way across the room. When he saw Ben, he stopped, tilting his head curiously.

Paul put his hand to the side of his mouth. “He doesn’t want to talk about it,” he said in an exaggerated whisper.

Eric nodded. “Mm hmm. I’ll bet.” He climbed into his husband’s lap, winding his arms around Paul’s neck. “What’s this about streaking? Why haven’t I heard this story?”

Paul kissed him lightly. “I don’t like to think about it. I nearly froze my dick off.”

Eric gasped and put a hand to his mouth. “No! Not my precious!” He slid to the floor and planted his face in Paul’s lap. “Speak to me, beloved!”

Paul grinned. “It was a pretty traumatic experience. It might need some resuscitation. A little mouth to—”

“Still here!” Ben said loudly, causing Eric to laugh.

Paul pulled him up and kissed him soundly. “Later,” he whispered. “I will need you later.”

Ben cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” Paul said dismissively, clearly unrepentant. But he picked up the album and opened it. “Oh Ben, these are beautiful!” He turned to his husband. “Didn’t I tell you that we couldn’t trust our wedding pictures to anyone but Ben?”

Eric flipped through the pages and sighed. “Oh you got the one with the umbrella. I love that one!”

They bent over the album together, Paul reaching up to twine his fingers in Eric’s hair. Ben felt a sudden need to study his mug of tea. That pestering, lonely ache that he seemed to feel more and more of late pushed its way forward, but he ignored it. He was not going to be that pathetic friend who always whined about being single. He needed to get it together before Eric noticed and tried to set him up again. He stood suddenly.

“Well, I’m glad you like them. They’re all yours. Are we still on for drinks Friday night?”

Eric disentangled himself and caught Ben by the sleeve. “Oh no you don’t. Sit your sweet ass back down. I need some answers from you.” He waited until Ben was again seated on the couch and leaned forward, eyes shining with amusement.

“So, did you really drag Phillip Johnson into a closet on his wedding day, suck him off, and turn him gay?”

Ben gaped at him. “What?! I did no such thing! Where—How—how the hell did you know about that?”

Eric smirked. “Honey, you forget that I run the busiest salon within fifty miles. I know everything that goes on in this town.”

“But that was only two days ago! And you’re closed Sunday!”

Paul was looking between them, clearly confused. “You gave some guy a blow job at a wedding?”

Ben ignored him, glaring at Eric. “Turned him gay? Really? It works like that, does it?”

Eric held up his hands. “Not my words. It sounds to me like you dragged him out of the closet, not into one. But the word about town is that the wedding is off because the bride found the groom in a closet with the wedding photographer.”

Ben groaned and put his head in his hands. Stupid small towns. This was going from bad to worse.

Eric nestled back up against Paul. “Phillip apparently left town once he realized he couldn’t deny it. It was impossible to, really. The bride saw the whole thing. She said she caught him with his pants down. But he swore that was the first time he had ever done anything like that.”

Ben choked out a mirthless laugh. “First of all, the bride didn’t see much of anything if that’s the story she’s telling. For the record, it was an office, not a closet, and I was not the one doing the sucking. And that? Was most definitely not that guy’s first rodeo, let me tell you.”

Now he had their attention. There was absolutely no way he was getting out of there without a thorough interrogation. Sure enough, Paul and Eric were

looking at him expectantly. Eric gestured at him. “All right, spill. And don’t leave out any details.”

He spilled. The whole sordid story. From the agitated bride to the late groom to the indignity of being left with his pants around his knees. By the time he had finished, he was regretting every word. Paul and Eric were clutching each other in an apparent attempt to keep from falling on the floor in hysterical laughter.

“You’re probably going to want to keep that off your brochure.” Paul laughed. ““Photographer may take advantage of the groom if he’s hot enough.””

“I didn’t know he was the groom!” Ben protested.

“Now that’s something you could advertise,” Eric put in, grinning. ““Will not knowingly screw the groom.””

Ben glared at the both of them. “Thank you so much for your support,” he said grumpily. “Can I go now?”

“Okay, we’re sorry. No, we are. Paul, get the man a drink. Poor guy needs something stronger than tea tonight.”

Paul was back in a few minutes with a bottle and three glasses. He poured a few inches into one of them and handed it to Ben. “It can’t be that bad. How many people could possibly know?”

“My next wedding already canceled,” Ben replied, already on his second swallow. “It’s only a matter of time before this gets out and I have no business. And now everyone will think I can turn a straight guy.” He finished the glass and set it down with a thump. “Forget losing business, I’m going to get my ass kicked if I talk to any man in this town.”

Eric laughed. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. Your mother gave everyone in that salon a detailed explanation of the inherent nature of being gay. Your mom is awesome. Science wins out over gossip. It was beautiful to behold.” He snuggled into Paul’s neck, biting him lightly on the ear.

Ben poured himself another drink. He was halfway through it when Eric’s words sunk in. “My *mother* knows?” He finished the drink in one swallow. “Oh, I am so dead.”

“I don’t know, she did an awesome job of defending you from where I was standing.”

Ben shook his head. “She won’t be defending anything when she gets ahold of me. It’s going to be more along the lines of ‘What the hell were you thinking?’”

“Well, you know...” Eric trailed off and looked at his husband. Paul kissed him on the cheek before turning his attention to Ben.

“It’s kind of a legitimate question, Ben. What were you thinking?”

Ben toyed with his third drink. “I wasn’t actually doing a whole lot of thinking at the time.” He looked up to see Paul and Eric smothering identical grins. He scowled. “Do you think I would let myself be dragged into an empty office for a subpar blow job? I told you before, that guy knew his way around. It was hard to think.”

“Hey, no judgments here,” Paul told him. “We’re your friends. It’s just not like you to hook up while you’re on a job.”

Eric nudged him. “What about that model from New York?”

“That was six months ago!” Ben burst out. He tried to give them his best angry look, but his shoulders slumped, and he settled for gazing morosely into his glass. “And I wasn’t on the job with that model,” he added absently. “It was after the shoot.” He picked up the bottle and splashed more of the amber liquid into his glass. “I’m just...” He trailed off. Even slightly inebriated as he was, he still couldn’t bring himself to admit how lonely he really felt sometimes. “...in a dry spell. It’s been a while, that’s all, and he *was* gorgeous.” He took another swallow, the alcohol slowly creeping up on his brain. He leaned back and closed his eyes again because he suddenly couldn’t look at Paul and Eric anymore, wrapped around each other in their oversized chair. The empty feeling had increased at an alarming rate, and he no longer had the mental capability to ignore it. And now they were no doubt giving him sympathetic looks. Oh, he should never have let himself start drinking.

Paul shifted so that his hand could make its way up to massage the back of Eric’s neck. “You work too hard, Ben,” he said. “You need to get out more, meet people.”

Eric took a drink. “Whatever happened to that guy I set you up with?”

Ben chuckled. “You’re going to have to be more specific. Who haven’t you set me up with? Are you talking about the guy who wouldn’t stop talking about himself long enough to notice I was there? Or the one who thought photography was a cute little hobby but wanted to know when I was going to

get a real job?” That one had really pissed him off. “I have a master’s degree in photography! I studied in Paris for a semester! Hobby, my ass.”

“No, no, no. That stockbroker from New York. You went out with him more than a few times.”

Ben thought for a minute. “That guy? He was all right. We weren’t exactly compatible.”

“What was wrong with him?” Eric asked. “He was gorgeous! And smart, and he seemed nice.”

Ben wagged a finger in his general direction. “Gorgeous and nice are not everything. Not everyone understands the needs of a versatile man, you know,” he said, feeling suddenly defensive. “If I’m just hooking up, I’m happy to do either, but if I’m going to date a person for any period of time, I want someone who goes both ways.”

Paul grinned. “Did I ever tell you that when Ben’s had a few he tends to overshare?”

Eric laughed. “Okay, so he wasn’t your type. But did you at least enjoy it while it lasted? I heard he was no slouch in the bedroom.”

“Ha!” Ben snorted derisively. He waved his glass around, splashing some of the liquid over the side. “That man couldn’t find a prostate with a map and a compass.”

Eric choked on his drink, and Paul burst out laughing. “What did I tell you?” He clapped Ben on the shoulder. “Come on buddy, time for bed. I’ll get you a blanket.”

“No, no.” Ben struggled to stand. “I have to talk to my mother. I can’t imagine what she must think of me.” When he got to his feet however, his knees felt suddenly weak, and his head swam.

“Trust me,” Paul said. “Showing up drunk at midnight would not improve that situation. You sleep here tonight.”

Ben was very tired and dizzy, but he knew it didn’t matter. Paul was there, and he would take care of him. He stumbled toward Paul in a sloppy attempt to hug him. “You’re the best, you know that? Both of you.” He waved a hand toward Eric. “You got yourself a good man. I don’t know why you put up with me. I’m such a loser. Big fat lonely loser.”

Paul eased him down onto the sofa and squeezed his shoulder. "It's all right. You talked me through plenty of pity parties when I was single. I owe you at least one."

Eric smoothed his hair back. "Don't worry, this will all blow over. We've got your back. In a few weeks the gossip will have moved on to something else completely."

Paul pulled the blanket over him. Ben wanted to say thank you, but the couch was so comfortable and the blanket warm. He was tired and was having trouble keeping his eyes open. He dimly heard voices.

"You know," Paul was saying, "he'll be out cold in a few minutes. Then we can make as much noise as we want."

"Yeah? You might just have to catch me first."

Then the warm darkness carried him away, and he never heard Paul and Eric chase each other up the stairs, laughing.

Despite his friends' reassurances, it only got worse. Ben's first clue as to the scope of the gossip came when he stopped by his favorite store the next morning and gave a friendly greeting to the regular checker. It was returned with an icy stare and a polite but decidedly cold response. Two women openly stared at him in the deli section, elbowing each other and whispering. Everywhere he went, he felt as though people were looking at him.

He tried to convince himself that he was imagining at least some of it. The town wasn't that small, and surely his indiscretion couldn't be the only thing to talk about. But then another wedding canceled. Two days later he had received his fourth prank phone call, full of words that Ben had rarely ever heard in the small, predominately liberal college town he had grown up in. Intellectually, he knew there were people in town who didn't like, and tried not to associate with, the small but visible gay community. But he had never had a problem, and he had never felt the need to keep his orientation a secret. He turned his phone off and went about his business, ignoring the looks and pretending that the occasional hurtful words he overheard didn't bother him at all.

He was coming out of the bank a few days later when he was accosted by the obnoxiously loud and chatty bartender from the gay bar in town where he frequently met his friends. Colin clapped him on the shoulder, wrapping an arm around him.

“Hey, Ben, how’s it hangin’?” he asked, laughing at his own joke. Evidently, bartenders were second only to salon owners for knowing the town gossip. Ben pulled out of his grip.

“Wonderful,” he said. “Just great.”

Colin went on, oblivious to the sarcasm. “Nice job, by the way, dragging that one out of the closet. I’ve had my suspicions about him ever since he came to town.” He nodded knowingly. “Sometimes all it takes is an offer to blow them.” He laughed again, and Ben found his patience wearing thin.

“I don’t out people,” he snapped. “And if you’re going to be the biggest gossip in town, you should at least get your story straight.” He turned and stalked off, leaving Colin staring after him.

He stopped at the Main Street Diner for lunch, hoping no one there was caught up on the gossip. He chose a table and was deciding between the beef melt and the cheeseburger when he heard his name.

“Ben! I’ve been looking for you! You’re not answering your phone.”

He looked up to see Jenny, who worked in the florist shop, dropping into the chair across from him. The two of them ended up working the same weddings more often than not and had become fast friends several years ago. He grimaced. “Yeah, well you wouldn’t answer your phone either if you’d been getting the kind of phone calls I have.”

She shook her head at him sympathetically. “Is it that bad? Some people, I swear. I tried to stay out of it, Ben, I really did. I’m not going to gossip about you. But I was working that wedding too, remember?” Ben nodded as she continued. “One of the bridesmaids was repeating the story to everyone who would listen, and when she tried to say that you had been planning the whole thing, I told her off. There’s no way you knew he was the groom. You wouldn’t do that. And who the hell cares what, or who, you do on your break? Bad luck, that’s all it was.”

Ben smiled at her staunch defense. If nothing else, he was being reminded of how much he could count on his friends, and he was grateful. He invited her to lunch and listened indulgently as she chatted about her pregnancy, now in the second trimester, and tried to cajole her into letting him do a maternity shoot.

“You have to, you’ll look beautiful. And it’s not like I have anything else to do right now. Turns out I have quite a bit of unexpected free time lately. The next client I have that hasn’t canceled on me isn’t booked for another two weeks.”

She straightened up suddenly. “Oh! I almost forgot the reason I was looking for you in the first place.” She reached into her purse to withdraw a business card. “I have a friend over at the state parks department who is in charge of their website. She needs some pictures done of one of the campgrounds. I didn’t know if you did work like that or not, but I said I would give you her number.” She handed him the card, looked at her watch, and sighed. “I have to get back. I have deliveries this afternoon. And don’t worry. This too shall pass.” She smiled at him, gave him a kiss on the cheek, and left.

Two hours later found him digging in his mother’s garage. He was moving boxes from one pile to another when he heard the car pull in. A few minutes later, his mother appeared by his side.

“Ben? What on earth are you looking for?”

Ben shifted another box. “The tent. You know, the one Dad and I used to use.”

“I haven’t seen that in years, but it has to be here somewhere. What do you need it for?”

“I took a freelance job. Taking pictures of one of the state campgrounds. I thought I could just go up and camp for a few days to get what I need.”

“That doesn’t sound like your usual type of job.”

“Yes, well, it seems jobs have become a little scarce in the past week. I should probably take what I can get.” He pulled down another box and opened it to take out a small camp stove. He was avoiding looking at his mother, but he could feel her eyes on him. He sighed and turned around. She was regarding him shrewdly.

“You’re losing business?”

Ben sat down on a box and began to inspect the camp stove, ostensibly to make sure it was still in good working order. “You can say it, Mom.”

“Say what exactly? You’re a grown man, Ben. I’m not going to tell you what to do. Or what not to do.”

“But?”

“But your business has an excellent reputation in this town. I don’t understand why you would risk that by doing something so incredibly unprofessional. What were you thinking?”

Ben winced and set the camp stove down. “Momentary loss of good judgment, I guess. I’m sorry if I embarrassed you,” he added softly.

She folded her arms across her chest. “Do you really think I’m worried about what people think of me? I’m worried about you!”

“I’ll be all right. A little public humiliation never hurt anyone. I’m just going to get out of town for a few days. I haven’t been camping since before Dad died. It’ll be nice to—There it is!” He pulled out a long canvas bag and turned around. His mother was smiling softly.

“He loved to take you camping, you know.”

Ben dropped the tent he had just picked up and pulled her into a hug. “The feeling was mutual,” he said. He kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll be back in a few days. I’ll try to find my good judgment while I’m gone.”

She laughed. “See that you do,” she said. “And have a good trip.”

Chapter Two

Ben folded his tripod and leaned it against a tree before scrambling down the mountainside. It wasn't steep, just cluttered with bushes, and he needed the vantage point. The trail had a break in the trees where the cabin came into view, but from the trail, he could only see the roof and porch. He slid a little farther, braced himself against a log, and steadied his camera. He was waiting for the sun to slide a little lower in the sky, which gave him plenty of time to be alone with his thoughts. His work usually involved other people, sometimes a lot of other people. It required him, much of the time, to be outgoing and charming. But at heart, he craved a good quantity of quiet downtime, and he was enjoying the solitude this trip provided.

A few hours later, he was done and headed back to his campsite. He downloaded and backed up his photos, made some coffee, and settled in to read. He had some time before the campground's nature show, which was also on his list. He was just getting into his book when he heard muffled cursing and a car door slam. He looked up and breathed a muffled curse of his own.

In the space next to him was a blue compact car. Sticking out of the back door was the most beautiful backside he had ever seen. Covered with curve-hugging jeans that accentuated every muscle, it was attached to long legs that looked just as good. Ben found himself staring.

The man backed out of the car and stood up, and Ben knew he was going to have a very hard time keeping his eyes to himself. Nothing could make him lose his head faster than curly blond hair, especially when it was accompanied by broad shoulders and a tight ass. Not even the scowl on the man's face could detract from the whole gorgeous package. Ben let his eyes linger until the man turned in his direction. He didn't seem to notice Ben, but it wasn't smart to be caught looking.

The man strode angrily over to the picnic table and began rummaging through a tent bag. From where he was sitting, Ben could see the objects that he pulled out and dropped onto the table. Ben stood and went over to the bag his own tent had been in. He told himself that he was only being neighborly and not trying to invent an excuse to gawk at the stranger up close. He crossed over to the other campsite and walked up beside the man who was still glaring at the table. He dropped two tent pegs beside the ones lying there.

“Could you use these?”

The blond head turned his way in surprise. Ben had clearly caught him off guard. Ben faltered as well when he took in the man’s face up close. He had soft but clearly defined features, full lips, high cheekbones, and bright blue eyes. Ben swallowed and pointed to the table.

“Was I mistaken? It looked like you were short a few tent pegs.”

The man picked up one of the tent pegs. “Thank you,” he said curtly.

“Do you need any help with—”

“No.” And with that one word, he turned his back in an obvious dismissal.

Unaccustomed to such rudeness, Ben stood there, unsure. There didn’t seem to be anything to do except walk away, and he briefly considered taking his tent pegs with him. But that seemed petty, despite the man’s attitude, so he shrugged it off. He was nice to look at but was obviously uninterested in friendly conversation, and was probably straight. Ben put him in the “eye candy only” category and got back to work. It wasn’t like he came up here to pick up guys anyway.

But later, when he was building himself a fire, he caught the man looking. It wasn’t Ben’s face he was looking at so he didn’t know he’d been caught at first, but when his eyes traveled up to see Ben smirking at him, he looked away so fast Ben thought he might have broken something. Apparently, the straight label had been applied too hastily to this guy.

Ben smiled to himself as he continued with his dinner preparation. While he heated up a can of soup, he built a small fire for warmth from the evening chill, but he let it go out quickly and turned in early as he planned to get up with the sun and take advantage of the morning light. Gorgeous blonds aside, he still had a lot of work to do, and he took professional pride in being thorough.

Ben stood, transfixed. He couldn’t move. The sight before him was making it hard to even breathe. He had risen at dawn and continued methodically working his way down the list of things he had been hired to photograph. He was walking up the road and had just passed a grove of brilliant orange and yellow trees when he came upon the view that had him rooted to the ground.

It was a clearing, a small field with the sun streaming from just above the trees. The light blinded him momentarily, and at first he didn’t see the person

standing in the grass. Then his eyes adjusted and the figure came into focus. It was the man he had run into last night, looking better than ever before. This morning, his clothes were skintight. Even from a distance, Ben could see the fabric stretched across his muscles. The man stood, one leg stretched above his head, held there with a hand. He was perfectly still, perfectly balanced, the sun coming from behind to ring him in light.

And then he moved. The leg dropped and swung around as he spun his body, coming to a stop in one tightly controlled movement, his arms unfolding over his head like a flower opening to the sun. He took three steps and left the ground, spinning midair before landing. Ben could see the muscles in his thighs flexing with every step, and his arms circled his body with strong and sure movements. His golden curls shimmered in the light, and the rays streamed past his body like he had just danced out of the sunrise. The man continued to dance, wild and free, to music only he could hear, but his movements held a precision that only accentuated the gracefulness.

Ben leaned against the nearest tree, his legs shaky. He stared, unable to tear his eyes away, and his mind was beginning to imagine those hands on his body. He was breathing hard, and he was hopelessly aroused. The dancer leaped one more time, landed, sank to the ground in one fluid movement, and was still, save for the hand absently rubbing one knee.

Ben didn't move. Even when the blue eyes looked up from the ground and met his own, he held his position. But when the man rose to his feet and began striding toward him, Ben straightened up to meet him. So distracted by the lines of his body, he didn't notice the angry look he was being treated to until the man stopped in front of him.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Ben faltered, trying to tear his mind away from the fantasy it was mired in. “That was...” He took a breath and tried again. “That was...”

“That was entirely none of your goddamn business!”

He reached behind Ben and grabbed a duffel bag that was lying on the ground, his chest brushing Ben's arm in the process. Then he walked away, leaving Ben standing there, still hard and wanting. He slid to the ground and sat there watching the light from the sun dance around the meadow as it climbed higher in the sky.

By midmorning Ben had finished all the campsites he could. So he packed both cameras and the collapsible tripod into their bag and fit it carefully into his backpack along with a sack lunch and two water bottles. Then he set off on the five-mile loop, slowly working his way up the trail. An hour later as he stopped for a rest, he spotted a bright orange leaf, the last one on a small lower branch that had already divested the rest of its leaves. It hung there forlornly, fluttering in the gentle breeze.

He knelt down and pulled his camera bag out of the backpack. He pulled out the tripod and dug through the bag to find his second camera and the lens he wanted. Leaving the bags on the path, he climbed about ten feet off the path for a better view. This probably wasn't a picture the parks department would want, but the lighting through the trees right at that moment was perfect, and he couldn't resist. He pointed his camera at the leaf and adjusted the focal length to blur the background. Intent on his work, the first raindrops were a surprise. Then the sky opened up.

Ben swore loudly and scrambled back up the slope where the rest of his equipment lay open to the sudden summer rain. He knelt in the newly muddied path, rain running steadily down the back of his neck, and tried quickly to repack his cameras. He had just decided that it would be better to grab his equipment and make a run for it when a hand reached down and grabbed his tripod.

“Quick! This way!”

Clad in a dark hooded rain poncho, his Good Samaritan also grabbed the backpack and then turned quickly and ran. Ben scooped up his camera bag and followed. Around the next bend in the path, he spotted a picnic shelter. It was small, the roof extending not more than two feet past the table in any direction. But there was no wind, and the table was dry. Ben set the cameras down gratefully and sank onto the bench. He stripped off his shirt and began using it to soak up the raindrops that covered his cameras. Belatedly, he remembered his savior.

“Thank you,” he said. “I—” He looked up and stopped, realizing that he had again come face-to-face with his surly, antisocial neighbor from the campground. This time, the man didn't look angry or rude, but rather embarrassed.

“It was the least I could do,” he said slowly.

Not knowing quite what to say, Ben simply nodded and returned his attention to his equipment. An awkward silence filled the space between them. Shivering, he pulled his shirt and coat back on and repacked his cameras safely in their bag. Only then did he steal a glance at the other man. His blond curls were slightly damp. He wore a blue shirt that clung to his torso, and Ben was quite sure, probably matched his eyes. Ben shifted and looked down, wishing he had something else to occupy his hands.

“Look, I owe you an apology.”

The voice startled him. “What?”

“For last night. And this morning. I was rude. I wasn’t myself. I was just so... It was just about having to deal with one more person. I came up here to be alone, to get away from... everything...” He trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

Ben gave him a small smile. “Don’t worry about it. Everyone has those days.” He watched as one muscular arm reached up to run a hand through the mess of blond curls. “I noticed that didn’t seem to stop you from checking me out last night, though.” He grinned as the man suddenly dropped his eyes and shoved his hands into his pockets. He scuffed his foot along the concrete floor, prodding dirt away from the base of the table.

“Nothing wrong with looking,” he finally muttered.

“Didn’t say I minded.”

Silence descended again. Ben didn’t mind since he had managed to gain the upper hand this time. He felt emboldened and let his coat drop open, despite the chill. His companion did not appear to notice, but he did break the silence.

“So what are you doing up here on a weekday? Vacation?”

“Working vacation.” Ben indicated his camera equipment. “Freelance work for the Parks Department.”

“So you just take a bunch of pictures and send them in? I think I like your working environment better than mine.”

He seemed genuinely curious rather than overtly dismissive, and it made Ben smile. “Taking a bunch of pictures doesn’t make you a photographer,” he said. “My job is to find beauty where others don’t or to make the viewer see something in a different perspective.”

He moved closer, leaning up against a column and made eye contact, taking in the blue eyes and the soft mouth. “You have to look at the details, things others might miss. And sometimes,” he said slowly, letting his eyes trace the man’s body, “because you’re looking, you get lucky and witness something... breathtaking.” He was rewarded as the other man’s eyes grew just that much wider before he looked away.

Ben stopped, chiding himself. This man clearly didn’t want to be hit on, though the attraction was obvious. And despite the fact that the soft blond curls and the muscles were making his mind wander, he wanted to respect the man’s privacy even more. He took a step back and shrugged in a rather unconvincing attempt to look nonchalant.

“I’m up here for the same reason you are, really. I took this job to get away for a while, be alone, figure things out.”

He was greeted with a raised eyebrow. “And yet that didn’t seem to stop you from flirting with me.”

Ben shrugged again. “Nothing wrong with flirting.”

“Didn’t say I minded.”

Ben smiled and stuck out his hand. “I’m—”

“Wait—” His companion caught Ben’s hand in his own. “Do we have to? I mean, I wouldn’t mind getting to know you better.” His eyes drifted down Ben’s body, and the heat between them spiked. Ben felt himself flush.

“But I tell you my name, and then I’m me. I can’t be anybody else. And I don’t want to be me right now.” He slouched a little, let go of Ben’s hand, and looked at the ground. “Okay, that sounded even more stupid out loud. But haven’t you ever wanted to be someone else? Just for a day, to be someone who doesn’t have to worry about real life?” He looked up to see Ben regarding him curiously and laughed a little. “Oh, I know that look. It’s the ‘why did I have to get trapped in a rainstorm with a lunatic’ look.”

Ben grinned at him. “You don’t look crazy to me. Believe it or not, I know what you mean. Being me hasn’t been all that fun lately either. This somebody else you want to be... Is he just as hot as you?”

“If he is, will you take your shirt off again?”

Oh damn. Ben thought at that moment that he would do just about anything this man wanted. “It’s a definite possibility. But this person that’s not you... Does he have a name?”

He was treated to a gorgeous smile. “You can call me anything you want.”

Ben smiled slowly in return. “Well, with the way you can move your body, I’d call you Flip.”

“Flip? I guess that could work. Only if I can call you Flash.” At Ben’s dubious look, he continued. “You know, Flash? Photographer? Camera?” He paused. “Okay, fine you pick a name.”

Ben laughed. “Flash and Flip? Seriously?”

“Sure.” He moved closer. “Light”—he gestured to Ben’s camera—“and motion.” He brought one arm over Ben’s head and traced it ever so lightly down his back in one graceful move. They were as close as they could be without touching, and Ben found himself so aroused it was intoxicating. He couldn’t take his eyes off this beautiful man who very obviously wanted him.

Flip kept a hand behind Ben’s lower back, not quite touching. He looked around them. The rain had stopped. Then he stepped back and grinned, his eyes dancing. “Now,” he said, “let’s see if you can top this mountain. I mean, you know, get to the top of the trail.” He strode off, turning after a few steps. “Are you coming?”

Ben narrowed his eyes. Oh, he could play this game.

They set a leisurely pace, taking in the fresh smell of the recent rain. Ben stopped occasionally to take pictures. Flip asked him questions about what he was photographing and why, a subject Ben was only too happy to indulge. No one ever asked him about the logistics or the finer points of his art, and it inspired him to hand over his camera and urge the other man to give it a try. It also allowed Ben to circle behind him, using the blatantly obvious excuse of showing him how to hold the camera.

He pressed his body gently up against the firm ass, just barely touching one body to the other. He reached around and adjusted the focus.

“You see,” he said, “from here you can move it in and out—Now, if you’re going to keep laughing like that, you are never going to hit the target. You have to keep it steady.”

“Steady, right.” Flip squared his shoulders and schooled his expression.

“Now,” Ben said softly, pressing his hips ever so slightly forward. “You just point... and shoot.”

The body in front of him stilled—except for the breathing—which was coming faster.

Ben grasped the camera gently but firmly and pulled it away, taking a few steps back onto the trail. “But photography is all about timing, you know. Sometimes you just miss the moment.” He walked off, looking back over his shoulder. “Besides,” he said, “I’m not entirely convinced you can handle my equipment.”

Flip followed him up the path. “Don’t be so sure,” he retorted. “I am definitely up for the challenge.”

They continued up the path, teasing each other with words and touch. Flip kept finding reasons to make contact: a hand on the shoulder, a bumping of the hips, a gentle finger tracing down his arm. Ben’s whole body was burning, the energy between them electrifying. They reached the top, laughing and out of breath.

Ben dropped his pack to the ground and walked around the viewpoint, trying to find the best place to set up his tripod. Flip watched him, continuing their conversation from earlier.

“So you said it’s not fun being you right now. Who would you rather be?”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t have a horrible life or anything. I just got caught in the middle of something. It will blow over.” He unfolded the tripod and set his camera on it. “What are you running from? Owe a bookie? Witness a mob hit?”

Flip laughed. “I assure you, my problems are mundane and of no consequence to anybody but myself. I’m postponing the inevitable, but I just don’t want to think about it for a while.” He grinned suddenly. “Today I just want to be Flip. I’m... oh I don’t know.” He stopped for a minute, thinking. “Okay, I’ve got it. I’m a stripper who came from Southern California to seek his fortune in New York City.” He looked at Ben. “What do you think?”

“It’s a pretty good story. It’s incomplete though. Are you rich? Famous? Have half-naked men waiting on your every desire?”

“I thought that went without saying.”

“Well then, do you do private shows?”

A slow smile spread across the other man’s face. “Well,” he said, “it depends on the motivation given. I am open to an exchange of services.”

Ben burst out laughing. “I don’t think you want an across-the-board trade for that one. You might be reduced to helpless laughter if I tried to strip for you. But I bet I could find something to do for you in return.”

“What, you don’t like to dance? Never been clubbing?”

“I love to dance. I just don’t exactly look good doing it.”

“Now, I find that hard to believe.”

Ben took a break and sat down to join Flip who was already eating his lunch. “All right, fine,” he said. “Scratch that. I look fantastic dancing. Sexy as hell. We can be whatever we want today, right? Just don’t ask me to prove it.”

“Which part? Because you’ve already got me convinced on that second one. So what about you? Who do you want to be today?”

Ben thought as he ate his lunch. “Wildlife photographer,” he said. “I’m a wildlife photographer who travels all over the world. Growing up, I spent my summers in Greece because my grandmother’s cousin lives there.”

“Okay, I’ll give you Greece. But you can’t be a photographer. You just picked a different angle of the thing you really are. Where’s your imagination?”

“I can’t help it! I like my job. It’s a part of me. What if I told you I photograph strippers? Would that be okay?”

Flip laughed. “No, I’m just giving you a hard time. You can be anything you want. If photography is your thing, then go for it. So tell me about Greece.”

Now that Ben could do. Thinking back to childhood afternoons at his grandmother’s house, listening to her telling stories and looking at pictures sent from relatives, he found himself able to weave a pretty accurate story.

Flip took a short walk while Ben shot the rest of the pictures he needed. When he was finished, he found the other man sitting on a stone wall, looking out over the valley. It was such a perfect image, and Ben stood there for a moment, just looking.

“Don’t move,” he said softly.

Flip turned to look at him.

“It’s perfect,” he continued, “you sitting there like that. Can I take your picture? Looking out at the view like you were?”

Flip nodded his assent. Ben raised his camera.

“Is this for your Park portfolio?” Flip asked.

“No, this is just for me.” He paused. “Is that okay?”

Flip smiled. “I’d be honored to be a part of your collection.” He held out his hand. “Should we go? We’ll need to get back before dark. I might even ask you to dinner.”

Chapter Three

Arriving back at the campsite, they agreed to pool their food for dinner. Soup heated, sandwiches made, they sat by the fire, arguing good-naturedly because Flip had suggested sneaking back into the day use area of the park.

“We can’t go in there, it closes at dusk.”

“Aw, come on Flash, where’s your sense of adventure? Haven’t you ever broken a few rules?”

Ben huffed. “Of course I have, I went to college.”

“Well, come on then. We’re just going for a walk. And there’s something I want to do. Call it a bucket list thing.”

Ben eyed him skeptically and then sighed. “All right. Far be it from me to deny you a bucket list item. On the bright side, I’ll get to find out your real name when we get arrested.”

“That’s the spirit.” Flip jumped up and reached for the bucket to put out the fire. Then he held out his hand and Ben took it. Strong fingers slipped between his own and gripped him firmly. They set off and soon reached the gate that closed off the road to the day use area. Flip ducked under it. Ben looked around first before following, causing Flip to laugh.

Ben shoved him. “Don’t make fun of me. It’s been a long time since my rule-breaking days. I’m a straight arrow now.”

“Well damn. That certainly changes the plans I had for the evening.”

“Law-abiding citizen,” Ben said, enunciating carefully. “Law-abiding *gay* citizen.”

“That’s better. Now, don’t scare me like that.”

Flip chose the short trail and they wandered along it in the dwindling light, letting their eyes get used to the dark. Ben finally pulled out his flashlight and handed it over. Flip was checking the side of the trail carefully.

“Here,” he said.

“Is that a trail?”

“It is now. Come on.”

They pushed through the overgrown brush and emerged a short distance later, face-to-face with a waterfall, flowing gently into a clear pond. The pond was open to the sky, and the half-moon reflected off the water. Ben stared at the scene before him.

“It’s even better at night, isn’t it?” Flip was saying. “I just didn’t want any people around. That’s why I wanted to come at night. But the moon makes it pretty amazing.” He regarded Ben. “You’re wishing you had your camera aren’t you?”

“You told me not to bring it!”

“Well, you can’t take a camera where we are going.”

Ben stepped back and folded his arms across his chest. “What do you mean ‘we’?”

Flip just grinned at him and peeled off his shirt. When he started in on his pants, Ben caught on to his intention.

“You can’t be serious.” He bent down to feel the water. “This is freezing! And again, what do you mean by ‘we’?” He stood up again to face Flip and nearly lost his balance. The man was naked. Every perfectly chiseled inch of him, standing there, wearing only the moonlight. Ben swallowed and took an involuntary step forward, one hand outstretched.

“Are you sure,” he said slowly, “that we can’t just go back to my tent? I have a tent. It’s nice and warm.”

Flip smiled at him, but didn’t answer, just stepped to the water’s edge. “I would execute a graceful dive right now, but I think the water is only about three feet deep, so a clumsy jump will have to do.”

He jumped, but there was nothing clumsy about it. It was more of a leap and was as graceful as any dive. Ben wished he could slow the movement down and just watch. He was beautiful, and Ben wanted him so much. After the day they had spent teasing each other, he was more than ready. He felt that he had never been more aroused.

Flip splashed around in the cold water, his expression making Ben laugh. “I told you so.” He leaned forward. “It would be far more practical for you to come out of that water, and let me warm you up.”

Flip pointed a shivering finger at him. “Oh, no. No way. If you want some of this, you’re going to have to get in the water.”

“You’re insane!”

Flip stood up so the water just barely covered his hips and held out his arms. “Seize the day, Flash.”

He looked incredible, standing there in the moonlight. Ben peeled off his own clothes, never taking his eyes from the man in the water, and plunged in. As much as he was expecting it, the cold shocked him, and he almost turned around and crawled right back out, but Flip caught him by the hand.

“Stay under the water, you’ll get used to it faster.”

“I don’t really think that’s going to happen,” Ben said between chattering teeth. “So, how long do we have to stay in here before you can cross this off your list?”

“We’re almost there.” Flip led him to the waterfall, holding out one hand to catch the water. “I think there’s just enough room. Come on.” He climbed onto the rock behind it, letting the water run over his shoulder. “I’ve always wanted to kiss somebody under a waterfall. Have you ever had that fantasy?”

“Maybe I have,” Ben said. “But in my fantasy, I’m pretty sure the water was warmer and there were palm trees.”

“Details, details.”

Ben climbed up beside him. He put his hand on the chest in front of him and traced the muscles with his fingers. When he got to the ribs, he slid his hand around and slowly reached down to cup the firm ass. Flip had his eyes closed, shivering slightly. Ben pressed their foreheads together and pulled the other man’s hips to meet his own. Their cocks brushed together, both hard, despite the cold.

“I was wrong,” he whispered. “This is perfect.”

He stuck out his tongue to trace the lower lip, sucked it in between his teeth, and then captured the whole mouth. Slow teasing gone, they attacked each other, kissing like there would never be another kiss and thrusting hard against each other. Flip reached down to grasp them both in his strong grip. Ben laid his head on one broad shoulder and was suddenly blinded by a bright white light.

“Hey there! What are you doing? This is a restricted area.”

Ben jerked backward, slipping on the rocks, hitting his shin as he fell into the water with a loud splash. Flip slipped into the water behind him, sliding his

arms under Ben's and pulling him up. They stood unsteadily as the blinding light waved around.

“Go on, get out of there!”

As they waded to the edge where their clothes lay waiting for them, they could see the outline of a greenish-brown uniform on a portly man with a mustache. The man pulled himself up to his full height.

“Skinny-dipping is not allowed in any part of the park. You'll have to leave.”

Ben dressed quickly, his clothes sticking awkwardly to his wet skin.

Flip began talking to the disgruntled park ranger in a conversational, chatty tone as if he did this kind of thing every day. “We're sorry sir, but it is the half-moon tonight, you know.” He waved a hand at Ben. “My friend, Stardust, and I were born under the half-moon. So, obviously, we needed to find a pool tonight for the festival.”

The park ranger sighed heavily and muttered something under his breath. “I don't care why you're here. You're still going to have to leave.”

“Oh we're going, we're going. We weren't done, not by a long shot, but we can finish up later.” He nudged Ben. “Can't we, Stardust?”

“You can count on that,” Ben said firmly.

Flip laughed, but was still talking rapidly. “Fortunately, we brought all the herbs with us. You just can't find good nettle root in the wild when you need it.”

The park ranger shone his light in their faces again. “You're stoned aren't you? Look, if you brought drugs up here, I'm going to have to call the authorities.”

Flip heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Drugs again. Another one who thinks we're on drugs. How many times has that happened to us, Star?” He shook his head. “How many times?”

“It's true,” Ben put in, shaking his head sadly. “Why are those of us who simply have a heightened state of reality always accused of chemically altering our bodies? As if we needed it.”

“LIFE!” Flip shouted suddenly.

Ben smothered a grin. “Life!” he echoed.

Flip spread his arms wide. “We are infused with life!” he shouted. “Raise your arms to receive the life!”

Ben flung his arms skyward. “Oh yes, I can feel it. The life force is always strongest at the half-moon.”

They had reached the gate. Flip turned and gave the ranger a little bow. “You are welcome to join us”—he squinted to see the man’s name tag—“Bob. You know, for the ritual herb burning.”

The man gritted his teeth. “Just go,” he said tightly. “If I catch you here again, you will be charged with trespassing.”

They nodded and wasted no time heading across the road to the campground. They arrived back at their campsites, laughing.

“You should have pushed just a little bit harder,” Ben said. “Now I’ll never find out your real name.”

Flip stopped, suddenly serious. He reached up to cup Ben’s face. “No names,” he pleaded in a low voice. “No strings, no expectations. Just you and me and whatever we want right now, in this moment.” He moved closer and touched his lips to Ben’s. “And I want you.”

For an answer, Ben stepped back and held out his hand.

Inside the tent, they shed their clothes. It wasn’t quick and it wasn’t easy and it had them both laughing. But far from killing the mood, it only heightened their lust. And then it was all lips, teeth, and tongue. Bodies tangled, frantic for the release they had needed all day. They rolled onto the sleeping bag, sliding cocks together. It was dark, but touch was all they needed. Ben slid his hand down to grasp them both. Flip brought his hand up on the other side, and they stroked in unison. Ben let out a groan. It was happening too fast. He wanted to take his time with the body before him, but their need was too intense, demanding to be answered.

Ben buried his face in Flip’s neck and thrust faster. His orgasm seized him, and he let the sensation overwhelm him. Dimly, he heard his new lover come with a loud grunt, and then they were still, save for their hard and fast breathing.

They disentangled slowly. Ben reached for a spare shirt to clean them both off. Flip reached for his clothes.

“Won’t you stay?” The words were out before he could stop them, and he kicked himself. He never let himself be so needy, and here he was practically begging. Flip leaned over and kissed him gently.

“I was just going to go get my bedding. One sleeping bag is not enough for both of us.” He kissed Ben again. “That is, if I’m welcome to sleep here?”

“I was hoping you would.”

Another kiss. “I’ll be right back.”

He was back in a few minutes, sleeping bag and blankets gathered haphazardly around his body. He shoved everything into the tent and climbed in after it. Naked again, Flip crawled into their makeshift bed and turned off the flashlight.

They found each other in the dark, kissing slowly and sleepily. Ben let his hand wander up and down, exploring muscles and firm flesh. He continued until he heard slow deep breathing that lulled him to sleep.

Ben woke, feeling rested, if a little cramped and cold. His covers had been pulled down, and there was a head of blond curls nuzzling at the inside of his thigh. They stayed the morning in the tent, and Ben was finally able to take his time. Exploration was slow and thorough and complete until they lay in each other’s arms sated and silent.

In the afternoon, Ben took his camera, and they headed back over to the day use park and up the trail they had taken the night before. Beyond the private oasis they had found was the public swimming hole. There, Ben was able to finish the list of shots he had promised his parks department contact.

This meant he was done with his assignment, but he didn’t want to think about going home. There was time enough to think about that later. Right now he had trails to hike, a river to swim in, and an incredible man in his bed. Responsibilities and worries could wait a while longer. This was all he needed for the moment, and he intended to live in that moment as long as he could.

They spent the day swimming and hiking the short trails. They returned to the campsite to eat and then ended their day lying in the field where Ben had seen Flip dancing in the morning sun. The field was quiet, and the stars were out. Flip coaxed Ben into opening his pants so he could stroke him off in the cool night air. Ben pushed Flip’s shirt up so he could explore a little as he returned the favor.

Ben thought later that they probably should have been grateful that at least they were finished before they got caught this time. But they were told in no uncertain terms—by the same park ranger, much to Ben’s utter humiliation—that they would have to leave or he would have them arrested for public nudity. He did concede to let them stay until morning, but escorted them back to their campsites and told them they needed to be gone by nine.

Ben tried to make lighthearted jokes about being caught yet again, but Flip was moody and withdrawn. So Ben dragged him into the tent and, gently but insistently, pushed him down on the sleeping bag. Flip pulled him close.

“I don’t want this to end yet,” he whispered. “I don’t have to be back for three more days. I was hoping we could have just a little longer. I have to get back to real life soon enough. But not just yet.”

“Don’t think about tomorrow,” Ben told him. “We have tonight. You give me tonight and I can make you forget all about tomorrow.”

Flip lay back, gazing at him, and Ben undressed him slowly, running his hands down Flip’s body, following with kisses, licks and gentle bites. He wanted to touch everywhere, leaving nothing out. He scooted down to the hard, weeping cock and took it in his mouth, sucking hard before settling into a rhythm. He brought him to the edge, then backed off, trying to make it last, his own need rising rapidly as the panting breaths turned to words like “please” and “now.” He let his hand slip down to tease the puckered opening, running his finger around and around it. Flip bucked his hips and pulled Ben off him, causing Ben to look at him questioningly.

Flip reached for Ben’s hand and sucked one finger into his mouth. He swirled it in his mouth and looked at Ben with an unspoken plea. Message received, Ben moved down and took him in again, pressing the now slick finger into his opening. He searched for a minute, probing, until Flip slammed his hands onto the bedding and grabbed the fabric in a tight grip. Ben thought he could come just from being able to cause such a reaction, but he steeled himself and began rubbing firmly as his mouth took up the rhythm again. Done teasing, he drove his finger in hard as he sucked, and Flip’s grunts turned to cries as he came.

“You,” Flip said, after he had recovered sufficiently, “are a nasty little tease.”

Ben laughed. “I didn’t hear you complaining. I might even go so far as to say you like to beg.”

Flip just smiled and climbed on top of him. Ben closed his eyes. It had been a long time since he had felt the weight of a man on him, surrounding him. And this man was rocking back on him with just enough friction. Ben rolled his hips and opened his eyes. Flip was looking at him, a hint of laughter in his sky-blue eyes. “Now we’ll see who likes to beg,” he said, and leaned down to cover Ben’s answering smile with his own.

Ben slept soundly, and then the idea came to him in the middle of the night. He woke early, shaking Flip awake. “Get up, we have to get packed.”

Flip tried to pull him down. “Come back to bed,” he pleaded. “We have a few hours still.”

“No, no we can’t. We have too long of a drive ahead of us. It’s six hours from here to Atlantic City.” He began stuffing clothes into his duffel bag.

Flip sat up, rubbing his eyes. “When I wake up, I’m sure that will make sense. Did you say Atlantic City?”

“Why not? You said you have three days left before you have to go home. I can match that. Let’s go. It’s not that far. In college, we used to make this drive all the time. We’d go down for the weekend.” Ben knelt down behind Flip and put his arms around him, sliding his hands up under his shirt to caress the toned stomach. He planted kisses along his neck. “Think about it. Lights, restaurants, clubs.” He kissed up to the earlobe and sucked on it a little. “And there are things I’d like to do with you that require a drug store, a long hot shower, and a comfortable bed.”

Flip shivered a little and turned to look at him. “You’re serious.”

Ben kissed him. “Seize the day.”

An hour later, cars packed and trip planned, they were on the road, heading south.

Chapter Four

They arrived in Atlantic City by dinnertime. They found the drug store, got some fast food, and ate while sitting in a local Laundromat, washing some clothes. Ben passed the time by sharing stories from college.

“So we had been told that everyone would streak naked across the quad, but we would go two at a time. Paul and I were picked to go first.”

Flip laughed. “Let me guess, you fell for it.”

“What did we know? When we got back, everyone was laughing, and we realized that no one else had any intention of following us. No one in college was outright homophobic, but as the only two openly gay guys in the dorm, we were targeted for pranks more often than anyone else.”

The washer had finished. Flip started transferring their clothes to a dryer. “So you and Paul are both gay and were roommates during the hormonal free-for-all years, but you never hooked up?”

“You mean with each other? No, Paul and I have never seen each other like that. He’s just always been my best friend.”

They chose a nearby hotel, unloaded a few bags from the car, and took turns in the shower. Clean and dressed, Ben lay down on one of the beds to wait.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but he woke up several hours later with Flip next to him, arms wrapped around a pillow. Ben tugged on it until it slipped out of Flip’s grasp and replaced it with his own body. Flip sighed, cuddled closer, and slept on.

Lying there in the arms of this beautiful man, Ben had to remind himself that it couldn’t last. He hadn’t let himself think about it until now, because they had promised each other to just live in the moment. But now he found himself wishing.

It wasn’t smart to be having these thoughts. Flip had never indicated that he wanted anything beyond their few days together. Their whole relationship was founded on lies and wild stories. He knew nothing about this man. And while Ben had found himself becoming increasingly honest about his life as they talked, he knew Flip hadn’t done the same.

Ben had been able to glean that Flip was facing difficult decisions in his life and that he was angry and depressed. He also knew that those things were off-limits. Flip didn’t offer Ben anything but the facade he chose to show.

So he had done what he knew Flip wanted and offered him distraction and a good time. There was nothing else to do. It wasn't like he was getting nothing from the arrangement. On the contrary, he couldn't remember when he had had such a good time. But he had to accept it for what it was.

He turned in Flip's arms and began to tease him awake. Flip was responsive, as always, to Ben's touch, but once he was awake, Ben pulled away and got out of bed. He grinned at his lover's complaints.

"Now, now, I promised you the full Atlantic City experience. And I don't let very many people see me dance. I usually have to be at least a little drunk."

Flip climbed out of bed. "You don't have to be such a tease," he grumbled.

Ben crowded him up against the wall and kissed him. "Oh, I have not even begun to tease you."

Flip melted against him, opening his mouth, inviting him in. Ben almost changed his mind and dragged him back to bed. With great effort, he pulled himself away again. They had all night, after all, and the idea of teasing each other on the dance floor was too tempting to resist.

"Later. I promise." He turned away to look for his wallet. "Now why don't you run down and get the name of a good club from that hot guy at the front desk who couldn't stop flirting with you."

The club turned out to be no better in that respect. Ben had never really been self-conscious about his looks and had never had much of a problem getting attention from men when he wanted it. Then again, he had never gone to a club with a man who looked like he just stepped off the cover of a magazine. Fifteen minutes in and he was starting to feel a little overlooked.

Flip didn't appear to notice or care that he was being ogled. He pulled Ben close enough to be heard. "How many drinks do you need?"

Ben laughed. He was feeling energized already, and the music was getting to him. It had been too long since he had done this. Flip was looking at him, eyes dancing. He slid his arms around Flip's neck and brought their hips together. He bumped him until they were in sync, rocking to the beat of the music.

"For you," he said, "I think I can do this sober."

Flip wasted no time in pulling him into the mass of swirling bodies. He moved with such confidence, smooth and graceful. Ben was mesmerized, as he always was when he saw Flip dance, but this time, he was invited into the movement. He let go, no longer caring what he looked like. He was with someone who would not only accept but also celebrate anything he was or wanted to be.

He turned his back to Flip and moved back against him. Flip wrapped strong arms around him as they continued to dance. Ben could feel him through two layers of denim, hard and insistent against his ass. He pressed back, rubbing into him.

Ben had never felt so wild and free. He had never been this sexual in public before, even though he knew others around him were doing the same thing. Tonight, though, he didn't see or feel anyone else, only the man next to him.

They danced until they were out of breath and then made their way to the bar for drinks. Ben laughed as Flip fended off another eager hopeful and leaned over to him. "How are you ever going to decide?" he asked. "And can I have the leftovers? Some of them might look at me once you leave with the pick of the crop."

Flip leaned over and kissed him long and hard, tangling their tongues together. He pulled Ben close and wrapped tight arms around him. "Does that make it clear who I want to leave with tonight?"

Ben grinned. "What was that again? I'm not sure I caught that."

Soft lips trailed down along his neck and up to his ear. "I said I want you to fuck me."

Ben's knees buckled. He clutched at Flip who just held him tighter. Their eyes met. "Can we get out of here?" he begged.

"I thought you'd never ask."

It was less than a mile to the hotel so they had walked to the club. Now, though, Ben hailed a nearby cab. He couldn't get back fast enough.

Once in the cab, Ben slid his hand across the top of Flip's leg to grip the inside of his thigh. Muscles flexed under his fingers. He rubbed up and down, his hand brushing denim-covered balls.

"You keep doing that, and this is going to be over before it starts," Flip commented. "And I don't want it to be over. I've been wanting you all day."

When they got to the hotel, Ben dragged Flip into the lobby. They made it all the way to the elevator before he had to touch, he couldn't help it. All night he had been thinking about taking this man to bed for more than just a quick fumble in a small tent. He was thrumming with need.

When the doors opened, he pulled Flip into the elevator, pushed him against the wall, and reached for his waistband. Intent as he was on button and zipper, he didn't stop to check if the elevator doors had closed. He had Flip almost all the way out of his pants when he heard shrieking.

Five highly amused college girls stood there, gawking openly. Flip gave them a cheery wave as the doors closed and then pulled Ben's hand back to his cock.

"You know," Ben said, panting, "if I wasn't so horny, I'd be embarrassed by that."

"Never mind them," Flip replied. "We're almost there."

"You're telling me."

They reached their room with no further audience. After fumbling with the key card, they pushed their way inside, stripping off clothes as they went. Flip reached for him, pushing him against the bed.

Despite the obvious invitation Flip had made at the club, Ben turned his back so that Flip's cock nestled firmly against his ass. He'd had that cock on his ass all night, and there was only one thing he wanted right now. He pushed his hips back, making his need clear.

Flip's arms came around him. "I can do that too," he whispered. "Tell me how it feels best for you."

Ben crawled up and gripped the headboard. He looked over his shoulder. He thought at that moment that he would never be able to get his fill of looking at this man.

Flip stood there in the half-light of the lamp, golden curls framing his face and raw desire in his blue eyes. His body was perfectly toned, and his cock jutted out from a nest of blond curls that Ben longed to run his hands through every time he saw it.

Flip crawled up behind him and reached for the bag on the bedside table. He ran his hands over Ben's back and then moved down to tease his opening. Biting at Ben's neck and shoulders, he reached his other hand around to find his

nipples. By the time he'd dug in the bag for the lube and condoms, Ben was panting hard and rocking his hips back. He let out a moan when one slick finger breached him.

Flip stretched him, finding his gland and rubbing it relentlessly, over and over, until Ben could hardly breathe.

Ben felt like every nerve in his body was on fire. "Now!" he demanded.

Flip removed his fingers and entered him with slow steady pressure until he was fully engulfed.

Ben felt the stretch and closed his eyes, breathing slowly. He pushed back and felt strong hands settle on his hips. Then he was being fucked hard as Flip drove into him with powerful, controlled movements. Ben braced his hands against the headboard and met every thrust with his own hips. They faltered for a minute, trying to find the right angle, the right rhythm, but then Flip nailed his gland and Ben cried out. He slammed his hand against the wall. "Harder," he begged, "please!" He was ready to explode. He needed to come; he felt closer with every move. He reached down to take himself in hand, but Flip stopped him and stilled his hips.

"Don't want to come yet," Flip panted. "Switch with me?"

Just the suggestion nearly sent him over the edge. Ben nodded, unable to speak, and a few minutes later, he was sinking into that beautiful, beautiful ass that he'd been dreaming about for days. Heat surrounded him, and he stilled for a moment, fighting for control.

When Flip rocked his hips, pushing for more, he started to move. Slower at first, trying to make it last for both of them. When Flip started crying out with each thrust, Ben lost control. Faster and faster he moved, with Flip's voice egging him on, and he finally came with a strangled sound in his throat.

Flip was still gasping, rocking his hips, and reaching a trembling hand for his own cock. Ben caught the hand and replaced it on the headboard.

"Let me," he whispered. "I've got you."

He closed his hand around the rock-hard, weeping cock and stroked with a firm grip. It didn't take long. Flip collapsed on the bed, and Ben fell with him, still inside. He pulled out, took care of the condom, and wrapped himself around the other man's body, rubbing his back and reaching a hand up into his hair.

“Damn, I’m sorry,” he said.

Flip turned over to look at him. “What? What do you have to be sorry for? That was amazing.”

Ben smiled. “I wanted to last longer, that’s all. It was over too soon.”

They cleaned up and lay back down on the bed. Flip pulled Ben close and kissed him. “Well, you know what they say. Practice makes perfect.”

“Mm hmm.” He was drifting, eyelids heavy. He heard Flip chuckle. Arms came around him, and he fell asleep.

When morning came, Ben woke slowly, stretching and adjusting his pillow. He opened his eyes to the most beautiful sight. Flip was completely naked, and he was dancing, moving his arms and legs in perfect sync. He began making small jumps from one foot to the other, toes pointed. Ben stared for a few minutes, then leaned off the bed to grab his camera bag. When he took the first shot, Flip turned and saw him. He just smiled and continued with his routine.

He started practicing turns, spinning at least three times around before stopping with perfect poise, first one direction and then the other. Standing on his left leg, his right leg stretched out behind him, he bent the standing leg, further and further each time.

Suddenly, his leg buckled, and he collapsed to the floor. Ben sat up quickly, but Flip seemed to recover. He sat up, rubbing his leg. Then, without warning, he punched the wall. His shoulders slumped.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked, rising from the bed.

Flip got to his feet as well. “I’m sorry if I woke you,” he said. He held his hand out, and Ben came to him. Flip stretched a leg out and wrapped it around Ben’s hips. Perfectly balanced, he drew Ben to him.

Ben reached up and cupped the back of Flip’s neck, rubbing gently. “You know, I can be a pretty good listener if you want to talk about it.”

“No. No talking.” Flip leaned forward to capture him in a kiss. He dropped his leg and slid down to bury his face in Ben’s neck. “No talking, please? Just fuck me, okay? Fuck me hard so that all I can feel is you. I just need that. Please?”

“It’s okay.” Ben soothed him. “Come here.”

He pushed him onto the bed and started at the knees, sliding his hands up the inner thigh. With Flip beneath him, writhing with need, Ben gave him all the comfort he could, and in the only way Flip would let him.

“Okay, so what’s wrong with this one?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it. I just have a different way of looking at a subject than this artist does. I would have done it differently, that’s all. I get what the artist was trying to do with the shadows, but it needs more light here.”

After breakfast, Ben had insisted that they spend the day sightseeing. They had seen the sign for the art gallery, and after winding their way up a narrow staircase, they found themselves in a well-lit room with large windows and beautiful displays on the walls. Now, Ben was lingering in the photography section and had taken to analyzing each piece with a critical eye. Flip leaned against a wall, just watching him, occasionally asking questions.

“So do you have your work on display somewhere like this?”

Ben shook his head. “No, I don’t do gallery work. It doesn’t exactly pay the bills unless you’re really good, and it’s hard to break into.” He moved to the next photograph, examining it closely. “Actually, when I was in college, this is what I wanted. To have my art on display. But after school, I started doing personal photo shoots to make ends meet. Then I began picking up some advertising work.”

He gazed rather wistfully at the display. “It’s not like I’m unhappy with what I’m doing. I like my job. But yes, at one time, this was my big dream.”

“Can you do both?” Flip asked him.

“That was always the plan. It’s a lot of work though.”

“You should,” Flip said softly. Ben looked at him curiously.

Flip reached out to run a finger through Ben’s hair. “You are so talented. Life is too short not to do what you really want with it.”

Ben was taken aback. He’d received compliments from his clients, but he had never met anyone who was so confident that his work was good enough to be competitive. He took Flip’s hand and squeezed it.

Later, Ben was delighted to find a good Greek restaurant for lunch. He was even more delighted when Flip tried and loved it just as much as he did. “The

food is the only part of my Greek heritage that I really embrace,” he told Flip. “It’s amazing.”

Flip raised an eyebrow at him. “Reminiscent of your summers in Greece?” he asked, no doubt trying to figure out if that story had any truth to it.

Ben just grinned at him. “Exactly.”

It was after lunch that the mood changed. Conversation slowed as they walked along the boardwalk. At any other time that week it would have been a comfortable silence between them, but now it hung heavy in the air. The only comments that Flip had made were that he wanted ice cream for dinner and that the ocean looked strange in the evening without the sun setting into it.

They made their way back to the hotel. Ben had so many questions on his mind. He wanted to know how the next day would go. Flip had said he had three days, but did that mean he had all day tomorrow, or would he have to leave in the morning? How on earth were they going to say good-bye? And why did they have to? It was on the tip of his tongue all evening. He almost said it so many times: “Can we see each other again?” Or “I want to see you again.” So many ways to say it, but in the end, he said nothing.

Flip was withdrawn verbally, but used every excuse he could to touch Ben. As he had throughout their whole time together, he didn’t talk about saying good-bye, nor did he indicate that he wanted to change their arrangement.

They showered together, rubbing against each other, and then made it to the bed, hard and ready. By mutual, unspoken consent, they made it last as long as they could. By building up and pulling back, flipping positions and stopping when they needed to, they chased back their release as long as they could.

Ben had never felt such intimacy. He had never explored a man in such detail. He had never been able to communicate with only touches and body language, something he thought most couples took years to achieve.

They continued until Flip removed his condom and slid underneath Ben, pulling his knees to his chest. His voice was rough, whether with need or emotion, Ben couldn’t tell.

“Hard. I need it hard. I want to feel you tomorrow. And the next day.”

Ben drove into him, wanting to look into his eyes, but Flip looked away. Ben knew he would care about that later, but at that moment, his need was building fast and he could no longer think. His orgasm seized him and he felt

paralyzed for a moment. Then pleasure washed over him and he sagged, shaking.

He stayed like that for a long moment, then pulled out and tossed the condom onto a nearby towel. Flip was still tense, every muscle straining, and he was stroking himself. Ben covered Flip's hands with his own and gently pulled them away. Then he knelt between his legs and swallowed him down.

Ben licked him and sucked him, putting into it everything he could not say. He buried his face in the tight curls at the base of Flip's cock and moved his hand around to slip one finger inside him. Flip came hard with a loud cry and lay trembling beneath him.

Ben moved up to wrap tight arms around him. They lay sated, exhausted. Flip didn't speak, but tangled their legs together and pulled Ben's head down to his shoulder. Ben knew, in that moment, that he had never felt so loved as he did in those arms. In the morning they would talk, he decided as he drifted off to sleep. This didn't have to be good-bye.

But when he woke, he was alone.

Chapter Five

Ben stayed in that bed wrapped around the pillow, inhaling the scents he felt he would remember all his life: cheap hotel laundry soap, the remnants of sex and *him*, laced with the memory of fresh falling water, and campfire smoke. He lay there until he had no choice but to check out or pay for one more night, a thought he couldn't bear.

He drove home without music, staring at the road ahead, and trying not to think. He slept for two days, rising only for food and bathroom or to stare out the window, cementing memories in his head. He put the photos on the computer and backed them up, but he couldn't bear to look at them. It was a comfort to know they were there, but he knew that looking at them would feel like closure and he wasn't ready. He told no one. That, too, seemed to diminish the memory.

Instead, Ben started going through all his old photographs. The ones he had done just for himself, that he had never considered showing anyone else. Ideas began forming, and he experienced a rush of creativity that he hadn't felt since college. He began spending more and more of his spare time out and about, shooting life where he saw it.

He started booking weddings again, along with senior portrait sessions and the odd maternity and newborn shoots. He had bills to pay, after all, and his friends had been right. The scandal was past, the town gossips had moved on. He fell into his old familiar routine but with a new focus to his life. He found himself rising earlier each day—sunrise and the morning becoming his favorite times of day—to capture the world around him.

Ignoring the way the smell of it brought tears to his eyes, Ben took his tent one day and spent the night in a friend's back field. He rose before the sun and spent hours capturing the meadow waking up: the lightening of the sky, the first rays of light, the progression of the morning glories opening to the sun, and a blue jay that drove him to distraction with its calls until he caught sight of it on a branch. He worked tirelessly on his new portfolio, not really knowing how to explain to his friends why he wasn't as available as he used to be.

"You're working even harder than you used to," Paul told him one day. "I thought we agreed that you don't socialize enough. But ever since you got back from that camping trip, you've been holed up at home with your work."

Ben had volunteered to do production stills for the community theater where Paul was the director. His best friend had then bullied him into lunch and proceeded to grill him about his life decisions. Ben smiled indulgently at him.

“It’s not work to me. And you worry too much. I confessed that I was a little lonely one night after *five* glasses of bourbon, and you think there’s something wrong with my life. You should know better than to take me seriously when I’ve been drinking.”

“Actually, it’s the only time you’re ever really honest,” Paul argued. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to settle down someday, I know you too well. And you’re not going to find love wandering around fields taking pictures of the sunrise—What the hell is so funny?”

Ben stifled his laughter. “You’d be surprised what you can find in a field at sunrise. Maybe not true love. But that doesn’t mean it’s not worth experiencing.” He felt the now familiar pang of sadness that was always there when he thought about his secret affair. His dancer, as he still thought of him even though their time together was over. He still couldn’t bring himself to voice the experience, not even to Paul. It stayed tucked in a corner of his heart, examined only when he was alone.

He again forced himself to push away the ache in his heart and the loneliness that had narrowed to focus on just one person. Even if Ben could find the man, he wouldn’t. He told himself it was because he respected the agreement they had made, but the reason was really the same one that kept him from saying anything before they parted. Flip had made it clear that he didn’t want anything beyond what they had for that one week, and Ben couldn’t stand the thought of being rejected.

But as much as it hurt, he couldn’t regret any part of it. Some things were just meant to be treasured memories. It didn’t make them any less valuable. Ben was nothing but grateful to that beautiful, free-flowing spirit that had touched his life and made him take a different look at himself. The ache would fade, but the memories would mean just as much.

He pointed his fork at Paul. “I’m not going to go throwing myself at just any man who crosses my path. You make it sound like I never talk to anyone. I’ve made friendly conversation with at least a dozen people just today.”

“And you didn’t do anything about that lighting guy that was flirting with you.”

“I wasn’t interested. I’m allowed. And I’m fine. I’ve just been inspired to do something different with my career, that’s all. I’m excited about it. Like you when you get your hands on a new play. Speaking of which, when’s opening night again?”

Finally diverted from Ben’s love life, Paul spent the rest of lunch ranting about the trials of a director who was two weeks away from opening night. He extracted a promise from Ben to have dinner with them the night the play opened. “And go see Eric,” he said as he left. “I’m tired of listening to him complain that he needs to do something about your hair.”

Which was how Ben found himself in front of a mirror with his best friend’s husband running fingers through his hair.

“You need to let me do something about your hair.”

“Why else would I be here? And what’s wrong with my hair anyway? It’s just gotten a little long, that all.”

Eric laid him back over the basin. “Well, that’s why you have me.”

Ben closed his eyes as the water ran over his head. The image of a cold waterfall and wet blond curls filled his head. He let himself be lost in the memory until Eric turned the water off.

“So what do you want?”

“Something different,” Ben told him.

A slow smile spread across Eric’s face. “Really?” He leaned down so his face was level with Ben’s, looking at him in the mirror. “Do you trust me?”

“Not in the slightest,” he replied. “Let’s just say I’m feeling dangerous today.”

Eric picked up his comb and scissors. “So,” he said, “new hair, new direction for your work. What gives? You’re too young for a midlife crisis.”

Ben laughed. “The two of you are such busybodies. There’s nothing to tell. A man can’t make a few changes to his life without his friends thinking there’s something wrong with him?”

“No, we don’t think there’s something wrong with you. There’s just something different about you. Ever since you got back from that camping trip. What happened to you on that mountain anyway? Some sort of spiritual epiphany?”

“I met a blond god,” Ben told him. “He danced out of the sun and kissed me under a waterfall. We made love under the stars. We drove to Atlantic City and fucked each other silly. Then he disappeared...”

Eric was giving him an exasperated look. “Fine, don’t tell me.”

Ben turned the pages of the photo album carefully. Some of the edges were beginning to turn brown. He really should reorganize the photos, put them in a newer album that would preserve them better. He studied the picture of his father, smiling up at him, his arm around a younger version of himself. Lost in memories, he didn’t hear the door, and startled when his mother sat down beside him.

“Been a long time since you looked at those,” she said, resting her head on his shoulder.

Ben closed the album. “Feeling nostalgic, I guess. I miss him still sometimes.”

“I miss him still all the time. Come and help me with dinner.”

He followed her into the kitchen, grabbing the bags of food containers and spreading them out on the table. He rummaged for a few forks while his mother turned on the television and found a news station.

Ben opened the boxes and poked at the contents. “Ah, university cafeteria to go,” he said. “Takes me back to childhood.”

“Yes, well, if you wanted a home-cooked meal, you would need a different mother.”

Ben turned to wrap his arms around her in a bear hug. “I wouldn’t trade you for all the home-cooked meals in the world,” he said. He headed for the fridge to pull out two bottles of water. “Now that lasagna from Antonio’s down on Third Street? For that I would sell you out in a New York minute.”

“Fair enough.” She smiled at him and reached out a hand to smooth his hair as they sat down. “What prompted the new hairstyle?”

“Just trying to live on the edge, Mom.”

She laughed and handed him a carton of food. “My wild child.”

They sat in the comfort of his childhood home, and Ben outlined his gallery plan. “It’s hard to break into, but I think I would regret it if I didn’t try. I

already have interviews with a local gallery and one in Manchester. That's no guarantee, but it's a start."

"Well, they would be fools to turn you down. Your work is gorgeous."

"Says my mother."

"Your mother knows what she is talking about. And I'm not the only one. Everyone in this town knows your name and loves your work. Every time I see Paul and Eric they're still gushing about their wedding photos."

Ben sighed. "Paul and Eric think that the only thing I need is a husband. It's not like I'm against the idea, but they are relentless. I swear they're like little old ladies."

"It's worse than that," his mother told him. "They're newlyweds. Newlyweds can't stand to see anybody single. And you haven't had a steady boyfriend in quite a while. They mean well."

Ben groaned. "Mom, not you too! I count on you to be the one sane person in my life. Please don't start the 'poor Ben' routine. I can't take it."

"Calm down. I was only making an observation. There's nothing wrong with being single. The right man will come along when you least expect it—Ben? What's wrong?"

Ben was frozen, fork halfway to his mouth, staring at the television. A minute later, his fork clattered to the table, and he lunged for the remote, fumbling for the volume button. The image disappeared, and the newscaster's face appeared.

"Dammit!" he swore. "I missed it!"

His mother was looking at him in confusion. "What was so important? What did you miss?"

"I need to see that story!"

"Well, I have a DVR, dear. You can rewind it."

He sat down in front of the television. Eyes glued to the screen, he pushed the rewind button to the beginning of the story. The newscaster's voice cut in abruptly.

"—turning over to our roving arts reporter, Julia Thompson, in New York this weekend for the National Ballet Company's performance of *Giselle*."

“Mike, the National Ballet always draws a crowd and tonight was no different. Tonight, however, patrons got an extra dose of excitement. Entrance to the performance was delayed for thirty minutes because one of the company’s soloists was attacked outside the building.”

They picture flashed on the screen again, the one that had caught his attention and made his heart jump into his throat. It was him. His Flip. It was a professional photograph, probably for the company’s website. His hair was perfectly arranged, his blue eyes looking at the camera, and he was smiling. But all Ben could think about was those blond curls sliding through his fingers, silky and soft. All he could see was kiss-swollen lips and sky-blue eyes, darkened with desire. He forced himself to focus on the news story.

“Caiden Ducay has been with the company for six years and has recently announced his retirement from dancing due to an irreparable knee injury earlier this year. The extent of his injuries from the attack are not known, but he is listed in good condition at Providence Medical Center.”

Announced his retirement from dancing. A million little pieces fell into place, and Ben felt his heart break. Not for himself. Not for the now overwhelming, aching hole that had been in his life since they parted. His heart broke for the man he loved because Ben knew how much that decision would have hurt him. He moved without thinking, gathering his keys and wallet, and turned to his mother.

“I have to go, Mom.”

“But where are you going? Is that man a friend of yours?”

“That man...” He paused. There were no words for the feelings that jumbled up inside him at that moment. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you about it when I get back. Right now there’s somewhere I have to be.” He kissed her on the cheek and was gone.

He drove with dogged determination, his only plan to get to the city. To get to Caiden. He repeated the name, liking the sound of it. It suited him, he decided, and knowing it made everything that happened between them feel more real than ever.

Ben gripped the wheel and tried listening to the music on the radio, but it was too distracting. He had only one focus. All he could think about was the man, himself, and his own need to be there. He needed to be there to pull away

the pillow that Caiden always curled himself against and wrap tight arms around him. To fuck him hard until he couldn't feel and to hold him after, when the feelings returned. To tell him it was okay to talk about it now, and he would be there to listen. He knew a hundred little ways to take care of the man. *His* man. He just had to get there.

It was late when Ben pulled into the city, so he found a cheap hotel. The next morning, he found himself face-to-face with a patient but tired-looking receptionist who really did not want to tell him one more time that she could not give out patient room numbers. And if he were a friend, surely he would know how to contact the family?

Ben sighed in frustration and finally agreed to leave a message that, he was assured, would be delivered to the recipient if he were, in fact, a patient there. It was the best he could do. When she asked his name, however, Ben saw the absurdity of it all. Caiden didn't know his name, and the message sounded ridiculous when he voiced it out loud. But he left it anyway.

He couldn't just give up. He'd driven all this way, risking the rejection that, in the back of his mind, he knew was possible. He wasn't going to leave until he at least had the chance to tell Caiden how he felt. That he didn't want to give up on what they had found together. He may not have had the courage to stop him before he left Atlantic City, but he had been given a second chance, and he wasn't about to throw it away.

Ben waited for hours, getting coffee, checking his voice mail, and passing the time with a word game on his phone. He had already left three messages with the tired-looking receptionist, and he didn't think asking to leave a fourth would go over well. So he walked over to the hospital cafeteria for lunch and waited for the shift change.

Maybe it was because he managed to come off a little more coherent and sane with the new receptionist, but she was friendly, didn't balk one bit at the strange name he gave her, and promised to ring the room for him.

He sat back down, pulled out his phone and settled in, debating with himself over how long he should wait before trying again. Deciding he was in for a bit of a wait, he was intent on his game when a tall man with broad shoulders and close-cropped blond hair approached him and spoke without preamble.

“Who the hell are you?”

Ben startled. “Excuse me?”

The man planted both feet and crossed his arms. “I said, who are you, and why are you sending messages to my brother’s room? What the hell kind of a name is Flash?”

“How did you know...?” Ben struggled to his feet.

“The receptionist said you were the one sending the creepy messages. What do you want?”

“Did you say brother?” Ben took a moment to think, trying to decide how much he could safely reveal. He had no reliable information to go on. He didn’t even know if Caiden was out to his family. He also realized how bad it must look that he wouldn’t even leave his real name. But surely Caiden would know it was him. The big blond was still glaring at him. Ben tried again. “Did he get the messages?”

The man scowled. “He’s been sleeping most of the day. And you didn’t answer my questions, so why should I answer yours? Again, what do you want with my brother?”

Ben could see the family resemblance if he looked closely enough. He tried to look friendlier, less crazy. “Look, I’m sorry. I would think I was crazy too if I were in your shoes. But I swear he will know who I am if you just tell him Flash is asking to see him. It’s completely up to him. If he says he doesn’t want to see me, I’ll leave, no argument. But don’t you think it should be his decision?”

The unfriendly expression didn’t soften one bit, but the man took out his phone and punched at it. Ben listened to Caiden’s brother explain about the messages. “Okay, okay I’m sorry, I was just trying to... of course, you do... I just didn’t think that... All right, all right, keep your shorts on. Be right up.” He turned to Ben. “He wants to see you. Room fifty-five-oh-three. Follow me.”

It was the most awkward elevator ride he had ever experienced. Ben expected to be interrogated, but was treated to a stony silence instead. He exited the elevator after Caiden’s brother, but his long stride and his impatience led him to arrive at the room first. He didn’t hesitate. He pushed open the door and walked in, but when he saw Caiden, he stopped short.

Caiden’s face was bruised, and he had small bandages all over his hands and arms. His hair was matted, his hospital gown was twisted, and he was chewing on one thumbnail. He was beautiful, and Ben’s breath caught in his throat. He stared, all thoughts of what he wanted to say fled his mind, and he

was left fumbling for words. Caiden seemed to be having difficulty finding his voice as well, but he never took his eyes from Ben.

“Alex,” he said, finally, “can you give us a minute?”

His brother scowled. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Caiden sighed. “Fine, stay.” He was still staring at Ben.

“I saw the news report,” Ben blurted out. His mind swirled with thoughts that all threatened to spill out in a jumbled mess. He took a breath and remembered why he needed to be here. “Are you okay?”

Caiden nodded slowly, eyes still fixed on him. “Yeah, I’m all right. The doctor said it’s only a bruised rib and a black eye. The guy got a couple hits in, grabbed my wallet, and took off.”

“I’m glad you’re all right, but that’s not what I was asking about.”

The other man’s expression faltered for the briefest of moments, but it was enough. Ben didn’t hesitate. He crossed the room in two long strides, slid onto the bed, and gathered him close. He held him gently, letting Caiden settle against him so as not to aggravate his injuries. His breath came thick against Ben’s neck. “I’m out,” he said. “I will never be able to dance professionally again.”

Ben reached up to stroke his face. “I am so sorry.”

Caiden slid lower and dropped his head to Ben’s chest, and they fell silent. There didn’t seem to be any need for words. Ben ran his hand up to rub the back of Caiden’s neck and into his hair. They stayed like that until he felt a low chuckle rumble through the body in his arms. “Do you have any idea how many photographers there are in New Hampshire?”

Ben couldn’t have stopped the smile if he wanted to. “You looked for me?”

Caiden pulled away and shifted so he could look Ben in the eye. “I should never have left like that—”

“I should never have let you go.”

Caiden shook his head. “I didn’t really give you much of a choice.”

“I could have said something. How hard can it be to tell someone you want to see them again? I thought you would turn me down.”

“I probably would have,” he admitted. “I’m so... lost right now. I don’t know where I’m going or what I’m going to do from here.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Ben said. He took Caiden’s hand, rubbing lightly across the knuckles. “But please don’t let your uncertainty be a reason to let this pass us by.”

Caiden looked down at their entwined fingers. “And what is ‘this’?” he asked. “What do you want?”

Ben smiled at him. “I want,” he said, “to take you out for coffee.”

“Coffee?”

“Or dinner. Or something. The real you and the real me on a real date. In the real world. Pretty scary, huh?”

“No, not scary. Not if it’s with you.”

Ben wanted so badly to kiss him. He bent down, sliding his hands again into those blond curls he loved so much. Just as their lips were about to touch, Caiden pushed him away.

“Wait,” he said. “I don’t even know your name.” He crossed his arms and tried to look affronted. “You expect to kiss me without even telling me your name?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that ship has already sailed.”

Caiden pointed a finger at him. “Still not fair. You have me at a disadvantage. If you saw the news report, then you know my name.” He turned slightly and pretended to inspect his fingernails. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to kiss anything until—”

“Ben,” Ben said so quickly that Caiden laughed and then winced. He pressed a hand to his side.

“Don’t make me laugh,” he said. “I want to know a lot more than that. But I’ll take the name for now.”

“My name is Ben Maragos,” Ben said. “Now, may I kiss you Caiden Ducay?”

Caiden pulled him down and kissed him. It was soft, but full of longing, and Ben kissed him back an answering promise. They stopped when a throat was cleared loudly and pointedly. Caiden pulled back, glaring at his brother.

“Is there a problem? You’re the one who wanted to be here!” He nudged Ben. “You know, if you slipped me some tongue, we could probably get him to leave the room.”

“I don’t care who you kiss! I’m only being careful here! You were attacked, Cay!” Alex gestured in Ben’s direction in obvious frustration. “Am I supposed to let in just any nut job who wants to see you?”

“No, just this one,” Caiden said, jerking his thumb at Ben, who laughed and climbed off the bed to offer his hand to the man.

“This is my brother Alex,” Caiden said. He turned to look at his brother. “This is Ben. My boyfriend.” He paused, glancing at Ben, who nodded.

Alex shook his hand reluctantly, looking him up and down. “Right. The one whose name you didn’t know until a minute ago?”

“It’s a long story. Maybe someday we’ll tell you how we met. For now, you’re just going to have to believe me when I tell you that Ben had nothing to do with that mugging. Even the police think it was just a random thing. People get mugged in New York. Ben’s not going to hurt me.” He reached out to take Ben’s hand. “He’s exactly what I need right now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Alex, you’ve been here for two days. Get out of here for a while. Go sightseeing, have dinner, catch a movie. Ben and I have a lot of things to talk about, and we really would like a little privacy.”

Alex gave them both a hard look. “You call me if—”

“We’ll be fine.”

He nodded and left, closing the door behind him. Caiden sighed again. “You’ll have to forgive him. He’s feeling a little overprotective. But he’s keeping my parents at bay. If he’s here to keep them updated, they won’t come running. The last thing I need is my mother fussing over me.”

Ben slid back onto the bed, and Caiden settled against him again. Ben leaned down to kiss the top of his head. “So,” he said, “you’re not a stripper, then?”

Caiden smiled. “Yeah, well, you’ll have to let me get back to you on that. I may have to take that stripping job after all.”

“Well,” Ben said, “I am available for any and all rehearsals you need to do for that job. I’ll supervise. Closely.”

“Yeah? You gonna shove money down my pants?”

“I will shove anything you want into your... pants.”

Caiden grinned. “Now that sounds promising.”

Ben slid his hands down over the muscled chest, avoiding the injured area, caressing across the stomach. “Stupid hospital gown,” he muttered.

Caiden pushed his hands away. “Serves you right. It’s not nice to tease an injured man.”

“Who’s teasing?” Ben said. “I can work around your ribs.”

“Right. And the myriad of people who could walk in here at any moment? You going to work around them too?” He closed his eyes as Ben reached his thigh and began pulling up the fabric.

“Oh, so now, all of a sudden, you decide you don’t like public sex.”

“That was an accident! I had no idea that park ranger was going to be there!”

Ben grinned at him. “No, see, one time is an accident. Two times is just careless. But after three times, I think we’ve got ourselves a bit of a kink.”

He dissolved into laughter at the indignant spluttering. Caiden shoved him. “Oh shut up. It’s not like you weren’t there, too. And that last time? At the hotel? That was your fault. You’re the one who couldn’t wait for the elevator door to close before putting your hands down my pants.”

“Okay, fine. No getting you off in your hospital bed,” Ben conceded, but he did lean over for another kiss, opening to the invasion as Caiden returned the kiss with equal vigor.

They raised the head of the bed and lay back against the pillows. Caiden worked his hand under Ben’s shirt to stroke the hair just above his waistline, and turned to tangled their legs together. They talked, unraveling their week together, sorting through truths and lies.

“So what about those summers in Greece?”

“Never been there. I would like to go one day though. It’s a beautiful country, but all I’ve seen of it are the pictures my grandmother used to show me.”

The afternoon wore on and still they talked. About childhood memories and past lovers and vacation ideas. Alex returned, slightly friendlier than before, but soon departed for his hotel room. They talked some more as the shadows lengthened into evening and dinner came and went. Ben told him about his little house and his garden and his small hometown.

Pulling him close, Ben whispered into his hair, “Will you tell me what happened to your knee?”

Caiden leaned into him. “I injured it about six months ago in a fall during rehearsal. I’ve had two surgeries. The last one was several weeks ago. They thought maybe it would heal enough for me to dance again. It didn’t. I can dance, as long as I don’t ever land on that leg and take it easy. But it’s just too weak for the rigors of professional dance.” He sighed as Ben moved to massage the back of his neck. “I have worked nearly my entire life for this career. It’s been a part of me for so long. I never really thought about what I would do if I couldn’t dance anymore.”

Ben kissed the top of his head, burying his face in the curls. “You are an incredible dancer,” he said. “But that isn’t all you are. You can be anything.”

Caiden smiled slightly, and they lay together, talking and punctuating the conversation with slow lazy kisses. Today there was no rush to get in all the touches they could because time was running out. There was no pushing away feelings for fear of getting too close. There were no endings today, only beginnings, and a promise of more to come.

Epilogue

Two years later

“Here it is.” Eric slapped the magazine down on the table. “I got you a paper copy. It came out just in time for your wedding day.”

Ben picked it up, smiling at the picture of Caiden in full pose, one of his favorites. “Look at this, babe. They took the three poses I recommended.”

Caiden scooted over, slid his arms around Ben from behind, and looked over his shoulder. Ben leaned back into him and began to read.

Life after Dance

This month’s *Life after Dance* column interviews Caiden Ducay, a former soloist with the National Ballet Company in New York. Caiden was forced to retire two years ago due to a knee injury.

“It was hard to come to terms with,” he said. “I kept replaying it in my head, asking myself what I could have done differently. It was so sudden.”

These days Caiden can be found teaching at the local ballet studio in the small New England town he now calls home. In a small town, he says, boys in a ballet class are rare. Having a male teacher on staff, especially one who used to dance professionally, encourages boys to give it a try. He also teaches older girls who are ready to start learning how to dance with a partner.

In his spare time, Caiden has taken up acting and doing choreography for the local community theater. He also does the occasional modeling job, the most recent of which features him in a series of photographic artwork entitled “The Dancer.” The series was shot by Caiden’s fiancé, photographer Ben Maragos, and is on display at the Montago Gallery in New York City.

“Are you two still here? Don’t you have a honeymoon to get to? I thought you wanted to get there before dark to set up the tent.”

Ben looked up as Paul collapsed into the chair beside Eric. Eric wrinkled his nose. “Are you seriously still planning on that? You have an incredible two-

week vacation in Greece just waiting for you, and you are going to spend your wedding night in a tent?”

“You’d be surprised at how much fun tents can be,” Ben replied. “And we met at that campground. We haven’t been back there since. Where’s your sense of romance?”

“In a nice comfortable bed where it belongs.”

“You know,” Caiden put in. “It’s entirely possible we won’t be allowed back at that particular campground.”

Ben snorted. “Come on, what are the chances he’s still there? We might have to traumatize a whole new park ranger.”

“Park ranger?” Eric was looking at them intently.

“Oh, now we’ve done it,” Ben said. “Don’t ever make Eric think he doesn’t have the whole story.”

Paul slipped his arms around Eric. “Now honey, let them have their secrets. It’s their wedding day. We’ll get Ben drunk later when he’s not suspecting it. He’ll tell us everything.”

“I haven’t told you yet!” Ben protested. “Some things are sacred.”

“And our relationship with Bob is one of them,” Caiden said.

Ben laughed at the look on Eric’s face and turned to his husband. “Stop torturing Eric. And Paul’s right. I don’t want to set up in the dark.”

They found Caiden’s family and Ben’s mother and said their good-byes. Two hours later they made it to the campground, but they had lingered too long and ended up having to finish the tent by flashlight. Ben leaned against the picnic table, holding the light, and watched with a smile as Caiden tied down the rain flap.

“Do you think we’re in a rut?” he said suddenly.

Caiden tied off another rope. “What?”

“You know. Sometimes couples get tired of each other after they’ve been married a while. There’s no spark left. It’s the same face to look at day after day.”

Caiden straightened up and looked at him. “Ben, we’ve been married for nine hours,” he said dryly.

“Yeah, but I get bored easily.” Ben turned away, hiding his smile. He loved to tease Caiden. His husband always had the right comeback and knew exactly how to banter with him. It also usually led to teasing of a different kind, which was what Ben was angling for at the moment.

Sure enough, he felt those arms he loved so much slide around him and hold him tight. “Bored, huh?”

“Yes, what are you going to do about it?”

“Oh, so it’s my job to entertain you?”

“Well I certainly don’t want anyone else entertaining me. Or you for that matter.”

Caiden smiled. “I agree wholeheartedly. So I guess it’s up to me.” He caught Ben’s lower lip and sucked it into his mouth. Ben slid his hands around and into the pockets of Caiden’s jeans.

“Maybe we had better take this elsewhere,” he suggested.

“You’re absolutely right. I know just the place,” Caiden replied. With that, he turned and strode off. When he reached the edge of the campsite, he stopped and looked back at Ben. “Are you coming?”

“Apparently not,” Ben grumbled, following his husband down the path.

Caiden laughed and took his hand. “Now you see, isn’t this fun? A nice evening stroll around the campground.”

“You’re right. I take it back. You’re not boring. Thrills-a-minute, that’s my husband. I’m not sure I can keep up.”

“I can help you with that, too.”

“Right now?” asked Ben hopefully.

“No.”

They walked for a while. Caiden turned off the flashlight, letting their eyes get used to the dark. Which was why Ben didn’t see the gate to the day use area until they were upon it. Realization dawned.

“Oh, no. No, no, no, no.”

“I am your husband, Ben. I will always take care of your needs. And if you need something fresh in our relationship, I am here to make sure that happens.”

“How very reassuring. I will go and look at the pool. *Look* at it. I’m sure it’s beautiful tonight.”

It was. When they reached the pool, it was more breathtaking than Ben remembered. He slid his arms around Caiden from behind, and they stood there for a moment. Then Caiden bent down, peeled off his pants, and tossed them aside.

“You said there were no sparks.” His shirt landed next to the pants. “I think you need to immerse yourself in something sparkling. It’s even better if it sparkles in the moonlight.”

“Did I say there were no sparks? Because what I meant was that there were so many sparks, I was bored with them. The sparks. Because there are so many. You know?”

“Too late. Take your pants off.”

Ben circled around so he could cup Caiden’s face in his hands. “And this face? I love this face. This is my favorite face.”

Caiden dropped to his knees and began working on the button and zipper. He pushed Ben’s pants down and nuzzled into his balls. “You really need to take these off.”

“Okay, now this is more like it. Now no more crazy talk about immersing anything. Unless it is about immersing my dick inside of you.”

“Mm hmm.” Caiden pulled Ben’s pants and boxers all the way off and pushed his shirt up. His mouth followed his hands, finding a nipple and sucking hard. Ben grabbed the bottom of the shirt and stripped it off. Caiden stood up and looked into his eyes, smiling. He ran his hands down Ben’s chest, leaned in, and shoved hard.

The water was painfully cold, and Ben came up spluttering. But before he could get his footing, Caiden’s arms were around him, holding him up.

Ben turned in his arms and their eyes met. Everything seemed to disappear, and love flowed between them on a current, drawing them together. Ben knew, as he had from the first time he splashed into this pool, that there was nothing he could deny this man. He stepped back and, taking Caiden’s hand, led him to the waterfall. Crawling behind it, he turned to face his husband.

Caiden ran a thumb along Ben’s jawline caressing his face. “I love you, Ben.”

Ben reached up to curl his hand around Caiden’s. “With all that I am, and all that I have,” he said softly, echoing their vows from earlier that day. “I love you, too.”

They came together, the water falling in front of them and the moon glistening off the drops in a perfect union of light and motion.

The End

Author Bio

Natalia Stevens has had stories running through her head for as far back as she can remember. She was raised on a steady fantasy diet with the likes of C.S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, Anne McCaffrey and Piers Anthony. Lately, however, romance has worked its way onto her bookshelf. She believes that anything she reads, good or bad, can teach her something about her writing or herself, if allowed. It is what is unique about literature, how incredibly interactive it can be. The same story can touch different people in different ways. And touching people's hearts is the privilege of every author. Natalia makes her home in Oregon. Though definitely not the first story she has ever written, this is the first of her stories that has been published in a public forum.

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