

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

STRETCHED TOO FAR

Sloan Johnson

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

STRETCHED TOO FAR

By Sloan Johnson

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

Profile view of nude male with double tribal dragon tattoos running from his pecs, up to his shoulders and then down his sides. Dragon tails run along down to the groin.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've never been one for tattoos, but look at that canvas! What makes it so painful is that the body isn't half as beautiful as the soul it houses. Corny, I know, but what can I say?

I joined the yoga class to support my twin sister, who suffered from terrible back pain after a car accident. The beginner's class was led by a lovely lady who knew just how to break through my sister's stony façade. Then one day, we walked in to find him. He taught advanced yoga, but took the beginner class that night because our regular instructor had a sick child at home.

I don't know how I made it through that class, because my heart stopped when he looked at me. I thought I'd sink through the floor when he moved among the students, correcting postures, and when his hand barely brushed across my spine to deepen the arch of my cobra pose, I was just grateful that my pelvis was pressed into my mat so he couldn't see the agonizing boner he'd inspired. But the killing blow came when he stripped off his shirt after class, revealing that amazing ink that flowed like twin serpents down his torso. You can actually feel the goodness radiating from this man. It's in his eyes and in every word he speaks. How can I ever measure up?

Yoga is sensual, so be as erotic as you like. No D/s.

Thank you,

Kezia

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: tattoos, coming of age, sensual, yoga, college, sweet, slow burn

Word Count: 22,415

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Chapter 1

Kyle's breath hitched as he walked past the observation window to the studio where he and his sister were supposed to have their yoga class. Their usual instructor, a middle-aged woman named Nancy, wasn't preparing as she had been every other day when they'd arrived. In her place was a beautiful man curled over on himself in child's pose. With as peaceful as he looked, Kyle didn't dare open the door for fear of breaking the man's concentration. Instead, he watched with rapt attention as the man slid his hands forward until his body was an inverted V, his legs perfectly straight and the tight globes of his ass on display for anyone to see.

Seeing the pose executed so flawlessly was one of the most innocently erotic sights Kyle had ever witnessed. He mentally placed himself in that position, imagining the larger man walking up behind him, gliding his hands along the length of Kyle's spine, grabbing his hips and pulling backward to correct the position.

The man rolled forward with militant command of his muscles until his body made a straight line from his shoulders on the floor to the tips of his toes high in the air. Kyle reached down to adjust himself, afraid someone would catch him watching, fantasizing about all the things a man with that type of muscle control could do to him.

"You are so screwed." Kyle startled as his twin sister's words ghosted across his skin. He reluctantly turned to face his sister, who wore the knowing smirk that'd been far too absent since the accident.

The moment they'd told her she might never swim again, she'd closed herself off from the world. Kerri had always been the sarcastic and witty twin, and Kyle had missed that spunk. That didn't mean he enjoyed being on the receiving end of her bluntness.

"What are you talking about?" Kyle asked, his voice faltering. He couldn't lie to save his life, and they both knew it.

"The sign on the door says our class has been pushed back because Nancy's home sick. I could be wrong, but I'd lay money that that sexy beast is the new teacher," she informed him.

"Yeah? And?" Kyle figured playing dumb was the best course of action.

“And you were all but drooling as you watched him,” she quipped, draping her arm over his shoulder. It wasn’t until she leaned into Kyle’s side that he realized how much her back was bothering her today. “I can’t wait to see how you’re going to get through an entire hour in his presence with a boner.”

Kyle shuddered dramatically. “First of all, what person over the age of sixteen calls it a boner? And second, there’s something very wrong with you. No one in their right mind should even be thinking about their sibling getting aroused.”

“Getting aroused?” Kerri laughed, loud enough that Kyle knew the women a few feet away heard. Kyle clamped his hand over his sister’s mouth before she embarrassed him so badly he could never show his face in their small college town again. She peeled his fingers away and continued with her voice at a more appropriate level. “Seriously, you have got to be the only man who can take something like sex and make it sterile and clinical.”

“Why are we even talking about this?” Kyle glared at the sign on the door of the studio as though it had offended him. He debated telling Kerri to give it a rest for today so he wouldn’t have to deal with her commentary as he struggled to focus on the class. With nothing better to do for the forty-five minutes before their class started, Kyle tugged on his sister’s arm in hopes that a smoothie would buy her silence.

As it turned out, her favorite frozen concoction was only worth about a minute of peace. “Kyle, you can’t deny you were attracted to that guy,” she said without lowering the drink from her mouth. “I piped up when I did, because I was seriously worried you were going to start licking the window if I didn’t stop you.”

“Okay, yeah, he’s good-looking,” Kyle conceded with a shrug. “That doesn’t mean anything other than I’m still living and breathing. Seriously, a blind man could have felt the energy that man exuded.”

Kerri shook her head as she waved him off. “No, it’s more than that. You like him,” she argued.

“Bullshit. I don’t even know him.”

“No, but you want to,” she pointed out. It was true, but Kyle couldn’t tell her that.

He had no desire to jump into another relationship. That didn’t mean he didn’t miss the feeling of a strong man pushing him into the mattress as he

plowed into Kyle's ass. A man large enough to cover him as they lay in a sweating heap, trying to recover from their orgasms. The problem was, Kyle had never been the type of person who could have meaningless sex, and he wasn't in a place where he could give a partner the attention they deserved. That meant he'd been sentenced to lusting after men and then recalling those memories late at night after he knew Kerri was sound asleep.

Kerri pointed at Kyle's flushed cheeks as evidence that she was right. "See, you're probably already thinking about all the dirty things you want him to do to you, all the ways you want him to twist both of your bodies," she teased.

"God, would you figure out what a filter is and get one?" Kyle pleaded.

"Unlikely," she deadpanned before slurping the last of her smoothie. "You should get to class early and introduce yourself."

"And what? Tell him that he's one of the most beautiful men I've ever laid eyes on and ask if he'd be interested in checking out my downward dog?"

Kerri started laughing so hard she nearly choked. "Well, that's one way to make an impression. But I was thinking more along the lines of 'Hi, I'm Kyle. Would you like to grab coffee after class?' and see what he says."

"That sounds like a great way to get my face bashed in," Kyle grumbled. "For all we know, he has a beautiful wife and a minivan full of adorable kids at home."

"No way," Kerri argued. "I'd be willing to bet next month's rent that he's as straight as a rainbow. Seriously, there's no way us women could get as lucky as to have a man like that interested in us."

Kyle didn't bother to point out he'd been paying the full rent on their crappy apartment for the past year. That would only serve as yet another reminder of how much their family had given to help Kerri get the best medical and alternative care possible, all so she wouldn't have to face the fact that her life was never going to live up to her dreams.

Just about the time Kyle admitted he'd run out of arguments, Exhibit A walked through the front door of the gym. He hadn't seen TJ since the night before he'd so gracefully dumped Kyle over the phone, and yet here he was at the exact moment Kyle needed a reminder of why he didn't want to get tangled up in another relationship right now.

"Do you want a really good reason why I'm not going to take your advice?" Kyle asked, relaxing back in his chair as he tried to calm his racing heart. He

cocked his head toward the door, hoping TJ hadn't seen him. "He just walked in the door."

Kerri's eyes grew wide and her face flushed with anger as she spotted the man who'd broken her brother's heart. She'd never been a huge fan of TJ, but she'd tolerated him while they were together. And the fact that Kyle had begged her to come with him to the mall to find a birthday gift for TJ the night of the accident was something Kyle would never forget. She had wanted to stay home and study, but he was so worried about keeping his man happy that he'd pleaded with her until she caved. And less than fifteen minutes later, their lives changed forever.

"No! Kyle Andrew Jeffries, you are not going to use that miserable excuse for a human being as a legitimate reason to keep yourself from being happy," she hissed. "That prick took so much from you already, don't give him your future, too."

"Ker, it's not like that," Kyle protested, slumping forward as he heard footsteps behind him. He prayed Kerri wouldn't make a scene, but now that she'd decided today was the day she returned to her former self, he figured that was unlikely. "You have to trust me when I say I know what's best for my life. Okay?"

"Kyle, it's great to see you," TJ said. Kyle shrugged off the hand TJ had tenderly placed on his shoulder.

He'd lost the right to such intimate gestures when he walked out of Kyle's life in the middle of the night and called the next day to say he couldn't watch Kerri take advantage of him any longer. The jerk had actually gone so far as to accuse Kerri of exaggerating her injuries, just so Kyle would stay home with her rather than spend time with his friends. Even if Kyle could have forgiven everything else, that was a line TJ knew better than to cross. Kyle had made it clear from their very first date that family was everything to him, and that resolution only grew stronger following the accident.

"Don't be like that," TJ whined as he pulled out a chair to sit between the siblings. Kyle shot his sister a look of warning, because he could tell she was about ready to either go off on TJ or kick him under the table. TJ turned his chair to face Kyle, effectively dismissing Kerri. That pissed Kyle off to no end. He knew his ex was doing it on purpose, to show Kerri that he still didn't give a damn about her. Kyle folded his hands on his lap when TJ reached out for him again. "I miss you."

“Yeah?” Kyle scoffed. “Well I sure as hell don’t miss you.” He had, but enough time had passed that he no longer woke up in the night reaching out for TJ. He turned his attention to his sister. “Ker, can you give us a minute?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Kerri sighed as she settled back in her seat.

“Kerri, please,” Kyle pleaded. He knew his sister was worried TJ would sweet-talk him into giving him another chance. He’d done it in the past, but as Kyle had told TJ, he’d managed to commit the unforgivable sin in his mind. He’d never forget how cold TJ had been after the accident. “I know what I’m doing.”

She grumbled as she snatched her duffel bag and yoga mat off the floor. Kyle could tell how much self-control it was taking for his twin to keep her mouth shut. “Don’t forget, class starts in fifteen minutes.”

TJ waited until they were alone to say anything. “Class? Does your sister have you going to Zumba with her?” The longer Kyle sat there, the more he wondered what he’d ever seen in TJ. This disdain wasn’t something new, and it showed just how ugly the other man was on the inside.

“No. If you must know, I’ve been going to yoga with Kerri because it helps the pain in her back,” Kyle shot back. He wanted to kick himself for feeling the need to defend his actions to something he swore didn’t matter anymore, but still he continued. “When the therapist suggested it, she didn’t want to go alone, so I told her I’d do it with her. It’s the least I could do after what happened.”

“The least you could do?” TJ scoffed. “If you ask me, you’ve been doing too much for her since the day of the accident. You treat her as if she’s fragile, and she’s all too willing to take advantage of that.”

Kyle’d heard enough. He shoved back from the table and reached for his own mat. “You know what, TJ? You’re an asshole. You’ve always been an asshole, but I ignored everyone who told me you weren’t worth my time. I put up with a lot from you, but no more. I don’t have to sit here and listen to you talk shit about my family. I won’t put up with it. If that’s all you came over here for, I think we’re done. No, I know we’re done.”

Kyle stormed away and resisted the urge to look over his shoulder to see if TJ was watching him walk away. It felt good to assert some control over his own life. For once, TJ had impeccable timing, because Kyle had almost reached the point where he was willing to consider trying to date again. Almost.

Chapter 2

Kyle was still fuming when he walked into the studio. He hated TJ for accusing Kerri of taking advantage of him. He hated himself for allowing TJ to affect him so strongly. His body hummed with pent-up aggression, which was the exact opposite of what he needed to feel right now. When he saw Kerri sitting on her mat at the front of the room, deep in conversation with the substitute instructor, his irritation somehow managed to grow.

“...there are a lot of things we can do to try to help you.” Kyle overheard the man assure Kerri. “Why don’t you stick around after the class is done and we’ll talk more?”

“That sounds great,” Kerri practically squealed. Kyle half expected his sister to lunge at the man who it seemed had just offered her hope she hadn’t had in a long time. She probably would have if not for her constant state of pain.

Her excitement made Kyle nervous. When Kerri refused to return to their parents’ home for her recovery and therapy, his father had asked Kyle to step into the support role and accompany her to all of her appointments. Too many times in the early weeks and months, he’d seen Kerri latch on to the slightest positive possibility, only to feel even more depressed when the pain didn’t miraculously disappear. Eventually, she stopped believing and retreated into herself. Now that she’d come to terms with her new reality and shifted her focus in school and he was starting to see her personality return, he’d be damned if he was going to let anyone lift her up again only to send her crashing to the ground. He wasn’t going to let Kerri fall under the spell of this man with his molten eyes and sun-bronzed skin. No way, no how.

“What’s all this about?” Kyle asked cautiously as he rolled out his mat next to Kerri’s. His sister glared at him, a silent warning to be nice to her new best friend. That only made Kyle even more wary of him.

“Lance and I were just talking about why I started doing yoga,” she informed him. “He seems to think that, while the classes here aren’t a bad start, I’d be better off working with someone who will be able to focus on my specific needs.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Kyle responded noncommittally. He glared at the man, Lance, trying to figure out what angle he was working. He didn’t look like a

creep looking to scam vulnerable young women out of their money, but looks could be deceiving. The longer Kyle thought about it, the more likely it seemed this Lance character would be the perfect swindler. He was sexy, charming, and had the slightest hint of a dimple on his left cheek. Very few people would think to question a man with such an innocent smile.

“As I was telling your sister, this class is exactly that,” Lance chimed in. “It’s a class for those who are interested in yoga as a good way to get in shape. While it is a great form of exercise, that’s not what she needs.”

“And you think you know what she needs?” Kyle challenged. “Because I have to tell you, we’ve been to more specialists than I can count, tried just about every therapy Kerri’s researched online, and none of it’s helped. Excuse me for being skeptical, but if none of them could get her to the point where she can get out of bed like any other twenty-one-year-old, what makes you so sure you can?”

Lance didn’t seem the least bit affected by Kyle’s argument. He simply sat there slowly breathing in and out, watching with the blank face of boredom as Kyle all but called him a crooked cheat.

When Kyle stopped to take a breath, Lance addressed his concerns. “You have a valid point,” he conceded. “However, had you been here for the beginning of the conversation rather than the end, you would have heard me tell her that it’s entirely possible that she’s as healed as she’ll get. What I’d like to do is sit down with Kerri and discuss her concerns. From there, we’d work on exercises she can do at home when she’s in pain to get her immediate relief, along with private classes to work on stretching and strengthening the muscles.”

Kyle could hear the hushed comments as the room filled with a mix of bored housewives and elderly women, all fascinated by the Adonis at the front of the room. If Nancy didn’t watch out, her job would be in jeopardy when word got out that the new instructor was hot enough to melt steel. He narrowed his eyes on Lance, even angrier now because there was no way Kerri could afford his services, and his parents’ bank account had long ago been drained. In a way, this was even worse because the longer Lance spoke, the more hope Kyle felt. Hope they couldn’t afford, financially or emotionally.

Lance checked the time and stood. As he walked to the back of the room to close the door and begin the class, he patted Kerri’s shoulder. Kyle leaned closer in an attempt to hear what he said to her, but to no avail. He’d simply

have to find a way to rush Kerri out of the room at the end of the hour to protect her fragile emotional state.

The peace and serenity Kyle sought during class never came. Instead, he remained hyperaware of every word Lance said, every step he took around the room correcting the form of class participants. Kyle was jealous of the women he paid extra attention, to the point he wanted to scream at them for their involuntary sighs at Lance's touch on their skin. The only benefit of Lance's focused attention was that it convinced Kyle he was foolish to allow Kerri to get into his head, because the man was obviously straight and very flirtatious.

Kyle followed Lance's instruction and pushed off the floor into cobra pose. He startled as he felt the fire of Lance's palms pulling back on his shoulders. "That's good, but you need to push harder, go deeper into the pose," he instructed. Kyle groaned at the words, thinking about just how deep and hard he'd like Lance to go with him.

He knew if he looked over his shoulder, he'd see Lance straddling his legs, given the fact that he could feel heat radiating between them. Lance's hand slid over Kyle's shoulder blade to the small of his back. "Press your hips into the floor." Kyle did, feeling Lance's fingers digging into either side of his spine. "Now, arch your back. Really work for it."

The rest of the room faded away as Kyle followed every one of Lance's suggestions. He sighed when both hands were once again pulling back on his shoulders before sliding forward. Lance supported Kyle's torso, no longer forcing him deeper, but not allowing Kyle to let go, either.

"You surprise me," Lance admitted as he moved to the next student. Kyle released the pose, his face buried into the mat. Lance guided the class into child's pose, which Kyle was thankful for, because there was no way he could expose the front of his body unless he wanted everyone to see the painful, raging hard-on Lance had caused. Lance's words echoed in Kyle's mind as they entered the cool down phase. Now, he was the one wanting to stay after the class was dismissed, to challenge Lance and find out what he'd meant.

Nancy always ended her classes with a round of applause, congratulating everyone for making it through the workout. Not Lance. He led them through a quiet meditation before quietly excusing the class. The room emptied with eerie silence. There was none of the normal banter or chatter about plans for the afternoon. Without a second thought, Kerri and Kyle both followed the rest of the pack into the hall. They were nearly to the entrance before Kyle shook off the haze and remembered there was something he wanted to say to Lance.

“Wait here, I’ll be right back,” he told his sister, handing her his bag. He stalked down the hall, excusing himself as he passed through the group of women talking, confident in the warning he wanted to issue.

For the second time today, Lance disarmed Kyle and left his brain a pile of mush. This time, it was the full-length view of the tattoo he’d only caught a glimpse of earlier. Twin dragons, their heads with their mouths breathing fire over each hard pec, bodies trailing down the sides of his ribcage with the points of their tails dipping beneath the low waistband of his barely-there shorts. Kyle’s dick stirred, desperate to see exactly where those tails wound, wanting to trace every impeccable black line with his fingers and tongue.

“Can I help you?” Lance asked as he stretched his arms over his head and arched his back. It was as if he knew what Kyle was thinking and was putting on a show for him.

“I... uh...” Kyle cringed as he tried to remember how to form a complete sentence. Lance straightened and reached for his water bottle, which was no better because it forced Kyle to watch his Adam’s apple dip seductively as he swallowed. “Look, I wanted to thank you for offering to help Kerri.”

“But?” Lance stepped closer, close enough Kyle could see the sweat glistening on his bare skin. Kyle reached for the neck of his T-shirt, wondering if there was something wrong with the central air. He couldn’t remember the last time it’d been this hot in the studio, and he obviously wasn’t the only one feeling the heat.

“You can’t do that to her,” Kyle warned. He squared his shoulders in an attempt to not feel so small next to Lance.

“Do what, exactly?” Lance asked. If he took even a small step, he’d be close enough that Kyle could reach out to see if his shoulder-length hair was as soft as it appeared. “The way I see it, I’ve done nothing other than point out what your sister could do for herself that she hasn’t so far. I’m sorry if you think I have some ulterior motive, but I assure you I don’t. I do what I do because I want to help people.”

“That’s great, but at what cost?” Kyle countered. His shoulders slumped as he prepared to lay it on the line for this man he barely knew. “We’re tapped, both financially and emotionally. Our entire family has done everything we can to get Kerri back to where she was before the accident. Our parents have taken out a second mortgage on their house and sold everything they could to pay for treatments that weren’t covered by insurance. I took on a second job so I can pay the rent when our parents said they couldn’t do it anymore.”

Lance tentatively placed a finger to Kyle's lips. "I hear what you're saying, but not everything in the world is about money."

"Of course it is," Kyle protested. "Maybe it's not if you never have to worry about where your next meal is going to come from or whether or not you'll be able to pay the electric bill."

In a bold move, Lance placed his hand at Kyle's hip, keeping him from backing away. "I assure you, it's not. I work for myself. I set my own hours and prices." His voice reverberated through Kyle's body, causing Kyle to wish they were talking about something other than his sister. "If I choose to help someone for no other reason than I feel they need my help, I can."

"But why Kerri?" Kyle's voice cracked as he asked the question. He struggled to keep his libido under control, because the urge to close the gap between them and rub his hard-on against Lance's thigh was strong.

"Because she's wants to get better," Lance responded. "It didn't take a minute to sense that about her. I don't know the details about her past, but I get the feeling that she's competitive, and she's willing to fight to get what she wants, even if her opponent is her own body."

Kyle was out of reasons why it was a bad idea for Lance to work with Kerri. Not only that, but he felt like a tool for silently accusing the man of trying to bilk his sister out of money she didn't have. Also, there was no denying that what Lance was offering was a far cry from those who'd offered Kerri a complete recovery. All he wanted to do was help Kerri manage the pain rather than suffer from it.

"It's up to Kerri to decide whether or not she wants your help, but you should know she's not a fan of charity," Kyle warned him. "If you can get past her pride, it'd be worth a shot."

"Good to know," Lance responded. When Lance stepped back and dropped his hand from Kyle's hip, his absence was immediately felt. Kyle didn't follow as Lance walked to the edge of the room and crouched to grab something out of his bag. Instead, he stood in the center of the room, openly appreciating the sight of Lance's tight backside on display. He stood and turned, holding a piece of paper between his fingers.

"I'd like to talk to both of you about what I offer and what would need to happen, but I do have another class starting in fifteen minutes." Kyle took the business card from him. "Talk to Kerri and see if she's interested. If she is,

leave me a message and we can get together over dinner. If she's not, you can still call me."

Kyle stared at the cardstock, speechless. There was no mistaking the wink Lance gave before turning to get ready for his next class. As Kyle shuffled out of the room, his earlier protests about not wanting to get to know the sexy instructor evaporated.

Chapter 3

When Kyle told his sister what he and Lance had talked about, as well as that he thought it was worth discussing further, she'd been over the moon. She admitted that she'd been worried Kyle had gone to tell Lance to fuck off when he asked her to wait by the door after class. She'd been so excited that she insisted Kyle call Lance immediately to see if he was available that night. She'd been disappointed when Lance informed him that his first free night wasn't until a week later. Kyle bemoaned that fact as well, if only because it gave his twin seven days and nights to make off-handed comments about Lance's perfection.

He'd done his best to ignore Kerri's not-so-subtle hints that she thought Kyle and Lance would make a cute couple. It wasn't until Kyle's bedroom resembled the dig-n-save pile at the local thrift store that he began to wonder if he'd been set up.

"Ky, you're going to have to go to dinner without me," Kerri told him. Kyle stopped what he was doing, panic setting in that Lance would get the wrong idea if it were just the two of them. Then irritation set in. He felt like a tool when he turned to see the pained scowl on Kerri's face.

She was leaning against the doorframe, and Kyle could tell even that was too much for her. When she moved into the room, every step was slow and calculated. Kyle rushed to her side, helping her sit on his bed. "I can call him and tell him that you're not up for it," Kyle offered.

The truth was, he wasn't sure he wanted to leave her on her own as stiff as she was. He knew she'd tried to do too much today and hadn't listened when he tried to get her to take it easy. She was stubborn and swore she knew how hard she could push herself, but it was obvious she either didn't or she simply didn't care. She wanted so badly to be just like everyone else, no matter how much that'd never happen.

"Don't you dare," she warned. "If you do that, I'll... I'll... well, I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'll find a way to embarrass the hell out of you."

"Kerri, I don't feel comfortable leaving you home alone," Kyle admitted. He schooled his features so she wouldn't see how torn he was over whether to stay or go. He refused to think of anything beyond working into a friendship

with Lance, but there was something about the man that intrigued him. “What if your back locks up and you can’t get off the couch? What if you get a spasm and you fall?”

“Then I’ll flail around on the floor with my Lifeline, screaming into the air that I’ve fallen and I can’t get up,” she joked. Kyle glared at her. It was no laughing matter as far as he was concerned. He already carried enough guilt, he didn’t need something to happen to her while he was out having fun. “Kyle, you know I love you, but you can’t follow me around every minute of every day. If something happens, I’m sure you’ll have one hand on the cell phone all night and you’ll answer when I call.”

“Not if I don’t hear the phone,” he argued.

“If it’s really important, I can call back,” she countered, leaning forward to put a pillow behind her back. “And if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll program Lance’s number into my phone and I can try his phone.”

Kyle sat facing Kerri on the bed, debating what to do. It would be nice to get out of the house. A few of his friends still called from time to time, but they’d all grown tired of his excuses and stopped inviting him out months ago. Then again, would Lance think it was a date if Kerri wasn’t there with them? Did Kyle want him to think it was something more than two new friends having dinner together?

He startled when Kerri reached for his hand. “Ky, you’ve done so much for me since the accident, there’s no way I’ll ever be able to repay you.” She held up a hand to silence her brother when he tried to interrupt. “No, I know what you’re going to say, and you need to stop. The accident wasn’t your fault. Even if it had been, I would never blame you because accidents happen every day. They suck, but they’re part of life. Now, I want you to do this for me. I want you to help me get comfortable, give me some pain pills and the remote control, and leave me alone for a few hours. I’m behind on my shows and I’d like to watch them without your commentary.”

Kyle laughed, knowing she was making excuses but appreciating that she was trying to ease his anxiety. “Okay then, let’s get you comfortable so I can finish getting ready.”

He followed her down the hall, discreetly placing himself easily within reach in case she stumbled. Not only did he help her get comfortable in the living room, he set her up with all of her favorite snacks and a small cooler of soda and juice on the floor next to her head. Anything she could possibly need while he was gone sat within arm’s reach.

After a quick shower and shave, Kyle opted for a simple cobalt T-shirt and black jeans. When confronted, he vehemently denied his sister's claim that he'd chosen the shirt because it was the one she said made his eyes seem an alarming shade of blue. "It's just dinner, Ker," he reminded her as he fussed with his dark blond hair. "Nothing's changed other than the fact that you're staying home. I'm going to go and listen to what he has to say so I can come home and tell you. You should be thanking me instead of teasing me."

"Oh, thank you, my wonderful brother," Kerri gushed dramatically. "What ever would I do without you?"

"Now you're just being a brat," he scolded as he grabbed his keys off the marred table near the front door. "Remember, call me if you need me."

"Yes, Mom," Kerri responded sarcastically. She waved her hands toward the door. "Now go, before Lance thinks you're standing him up!"

"Standing him up would imply this is a date. Which. It. Is. Not," Kyle chided as he walked out the door. He drove across town to the small family diner where they'd agreed to meet for dinner. He parked around the corner, not wanting Lance to see him pull up in his late nineties Honda Civic that was so rusty it'd fall apart if a strong wind blew.

From down the block, it was impossible to miss Lance standing inside the lobby of the restaurant, waiting for him. His heart raced, and his disobedient cock twitched as he took in the sight of Lance wearing a white T-shirt under a tailored black leather vest. His mantra that this was not a date was completely forgotten by the time Lance noticed him and held open the front door. If Kyle had his way, they'd skip straight to dessert, preferably at Lance's place since Kerri would never let him hear the end of it if Lance followed him home.

"I thought your sister was joining us?" Lance asked as he placed a hand at the small of Kyle's back, leading him toward the hostess stand.

"She'd planned on it, but she's having a bad night so she decided to stay home." Oh God, did I totally screw up by not telling him that plans had changed?

Lance informed the hostess there would only be two in their party and asked for a booth near the back of the restaurant. If this wasn't a date in Lance's mind, there was no reason for them to be seated away from the other diners, was there? He waited until Kyle sat before settling in across from him.

"While I was looking forward to speaking with her more, I can't say I'm entirely disappointed that it's only the two of us," Lance admitted once the

server had taken their drink order. “Forgive me for being forward, but I like you, Kyle. And unless I’m mistaken, the feeling is mutual.”

Well crap, what am I supposed to say to that? Kyle nearly choked on his ice water. Lance definitely didn’t mince his words. And Kyle did like Lance, but that didn’t mean he was in any position to get tangled up with someone, especially someone so far out of his league, whether for a night or something more.

“Kyle, say something. Your silence is a bit disturbing,” Lance stated when Kyle sat there with his mouth agape. “If I’ve misread you, please tell me and I promise I won’t say another word on the subject.”

“N-n-no, you’ve pretty much got me pegged.” Kyle’s face turned beet red as he caught what he’d just said. He buried his face in his hands, praying for the ground to open beneath him to save him from himself. When he heard Lance mutter something that sounded like “Not yet” in response, Kyle sank lower in his seat. It took a full minute before he could lower his hands. To his surprise, Lance simply sat across the table from him with one arm draped over the back of his booth, patiently waiting for Kyle to relax.

“I’m sorry,” Kyle apologized. “Kerri kept teasing me about this being a date since she wouldn’t be here, and I don’t date, so I got myself all worked up on the drive over here. Oh God, not worked up, I mean I had too much time to overthink everything, and now I’m wondering if this is a date and I’m too dense to realize it.”

Lance never batted an eye as Kyle rambled. With every word, he felt as though he were digging a hole, making sure that no matter how much he might be willing to consider one hot night of sex with Lance, it’d never happen.

Finally, Lance had had enough of Kyle’s nonsensical verbal diarrhea. He reached across the table and stroked his thumb over the back of Kyle’s hand. “Kyle, it’s okay,” Lance assured him. “You were right, this isn’t a date, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m attracted to you and not afraid to admit that. Although, I must say it’s a bit disappointing to hear you say that you don’t date. How can someone so young and vibrant not want to get out there and sample what the world has to offer?”

“What do you mean someone as young as me?” Kyle asked defensively. “You make it sound like you’re some pervy old man and I’m barely legal.”

“Interesting, that out of everything I said, that’s what you chose to pick up on,” Lance observed. “I know that you’re more than barely legal, although not

by much, which means you're nearly ten years younger than I am. To me, the more intriguing tidbit is that you don't date. Why? I'm not saying you shouldn't live life to its fullest or that you should be ready to settle down at your age, but you also don't strike me as the type to troll the bars for one-night stands, either."

Kyle wanted to be irritated that Lance was pressing him on this topic. "I just don't, okay?" Kyle responded with more venom than he'd intended. "I have plenty going on in my life without getting caught up in being responsible for someone else's happiness. I've been there and I'm not eager to do it again."

"You can only be responsible for your own joy in life," Lance said, sounding as if he were reciting one of those cheesy motivational posters that had plastered his high school guidance counselor's office walls. "If you've dated men who expected you to entertain them and keep them content, then I dare say you've dated overgrown boys."

Kyle chuckled as he thought about how apt that description was for TJ, the only man he'd had a long-term relationship with. "You're absolutely right. And that's why I'm happily single now," he lied. "I don't need anyone in my life to complete me."

"As it should be." The waitress returned to take their dinner orders, blessedly ending the uncomfortable conversation. Throughout the meal, Lance asked for details about Kerri's injuries and reminded Kyle that whatever help he offered would be free of charge.

Although it was exactly what the night was supposed to be, Kyle kicked himself for being so blunt about his desire to remain on his own. It would have been so easy for him to simply keep his mouth shut and see where the evening took them, but no, he had to jump to the defensive and push Lance away. When the waitress dropped off their check at the end of dinner, Kyle found himself wishing that the night didn't have to end. It was easy for him to relax as he listened to Lance talk about the benefits of not only yoga, but also guided meditation as a way of healing the body and the mind.

As Lance swiped the check off the table before Kyle could pick it up, Kyle's phone rang. "Hey Kerri, what's up?" he asked, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

"Hey, I don't want you racing home, but I was wondering how late you think you're going to be," she responded, her voice thin and breathy. Kyle's first instinct was to race out of the diner and apologize later, but after the borderline rude beginning of their evening, he couldn't end it on the same note.

“I can be there in fifteen minutes,” he said as he stood from the table. Lance cocked an eyebrow, and Kyle grimaced. Lance understood that something was going on, even if he didn’t know what, and he quickly summoned the waitress to settle their tab.

“Ky, if you’re having a good time, don’t call it a night on my account. I’m fine, really.” Her hiss of breath was audible through the line, and Kyle imagined her trying to get around the apartment on her own.

“We were just finishing up,” he assured her. Lance followed him out of the diner and leaned against the wall, waiting for Kyle to end the call. “Let me just say good night and I’ll be home.”

When Kyle shoved the phone back into his pocket, Lance motioned down the block in the direction Kyle had come from earlier. “Is she okay?”

“She says she is, but the fact that she called me says otherwise. She was adamant that she’d be fine and that I should have a good time tonight,” Kyle told him.

“And did you?” Lance asked as they walked. Kyle cringed at the realization that Lance was going to see his beater, but again, couldn’t bring himself to do anything that could be perceived as rude.

“Other than making an ass of myself, yeah, I did.” Kyle sighed, wishing his life were different, because this was the best first nondate he’d ever had. Hell, it was the best any date he’d had, even though he still swore it wasn’t a date. “Look, about what I said earlier—”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me,” Lance said softly. “Would you like me to follow you to your place? I may be able to help with Kerri, if you think she’d let me.”

Lance had no clue how much those words meant to him. He’d never say it to anyone, but it took a toll on him every time he had to see Kerri in pain. It was a physical pain in Kyle’s chest, a knife twisting, reminding him of the hand he played in her situation. Having help, even for tonight, would be wonderful, but that’d mean opening his home to Lance. Was he up for that?

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” The words were out of his mouth before he realized, but there was no taking them back. Kyle reluctantly offered Lance a ride back to his car and then led him to their rundown apartment complex.

He's only here to help Kerri, Kyle reminded himself as he stepped out of the car. The two walked up the dark sidewalk, neither ready nor willing to address the building tension between them.

Chapter 4

By the time Kyle slid his key into the lock for the apartment, he'd completely forgotten his humiliation over bringing Lance home with him. His only concern was for Kerri, whom they found lying awkwardly on the couch.

"Dammit, Ky! I told you not to race home for me," she scolded him, not realizing that he wasn't alone. "I appreciate your concern, but you could have stayed out with Lance. There's seriously something wrong with you that you'd leave a hot piece of ass for my issues."

"Uh, Kerri," Kyle interrupted before she say could anything else he'd regret. "Lance offered to come with me to see if he could help."

She pushed herself up to look over the back of the couch, and even in the dim light of the television, Kyle could see her cheeks turning pink. "Oh, that was nice," she said meekly. "Do you know what else would have been nice? A little warning."

Kyle led Lance into the living room, and within seconds, he felt like the third wheel. Lance crouched in front of Kerri, asking where she felt the pain and went to work massaging the muscles. Kyle, who'd never been one to succumb to jealousy, had to walk away when he realized he was scowling at his sister, because he wanted those hands on his body. Before either of them could figure out that he was being a pouty brat, he snuck down the hall to his bedroom.

He flipped on the light and stood in the doorway, shocked at the mess he'd left while trying to find something to wear. So much for not trying to impress him, Kyle scolded himself as he started folding the clothes piled all over his bed. Once that task was completed, he moved on to picking up the dirty clothes from the floor.

As he worked, he told himself he was only doing this because it needed to be done, and he wouldn't have time once the fall semester started, even though he knew that was a lie. Kerri was always razzing him about what a slob he was, but it was rare that he did more than tidy the piles and toss dirty clothes in the hamper. He hadn't seen the point in worrying about his bedroom since he was the only person who spent any length of time in there. But now? Now, he was opening to the possibility that a certain someone might eventually want to see more of the apartment than the entry hall and the living room.

Knuckles rapped against the hollow door seconds before it opened. Kyle looked up from the beanbag where he sat sorting through old research materials to see Lance filling the doorway. “Kerri asked me to tell you that she’s going to bed and she’s sorry for cutting our dinner short.”

“Okay, thanks.” Kyle sat there staring at Lance, willing him to make a move because that’d never been his strong suit. He was perfectly happy to sit back and wait for someone else to take the lead, a trait TJ had no problem exploiting. “Is she feeling better?”

When Lance leaned against the doorframe, the hem of his T-shirt rode up just enough for Kyle to glimpse that taunting tail of Lance’s tattoo. The one Kyle knew followed the line of Lance’s chiseled hip and below his waistband. “Yes, she seemed to be. I told her I’d stop by tomorrow after I get done teaching, but I don’t think she should attend classes for a while.”

“Why not? We were told that yoga would be good for her,” Kyle told him. He knew he should stand, but he didn’t trust himself to not reach for Lance’s hand and lead him to the bed.

“And it is.” As it turned out, Kyle didn’t have to usher Lance to the bed. He licked his lips as he watched Lance invade his territory, making himself at home. When Lance sat on the foot of the bed, Kyle may have groaned out loud, but he hoped it hadn’t been loud enough for Lance to hear. He looked up to see a knowing glint in the other man’s nearly black eyes. “The problem is that there are certain postures she shouldn’t be doing, but without someone helping her, she won’t necessarily know which ones. Between that and trying to do too much on a daily basis, she’s doing more damage than she realizes.”

As grateful as Kyle was for Lance’s help, he didn’t want to talk about Kerri while they were in his bedroom. Unfortunately, he couldn’t think of anything else to say, either, so they sat there looking at one another, the sounds of their breathing the only thing to break the silence. Finally, Lance stood, holding out his hand to Kyle.

“Come with me,” he urged. “We’d been having a good time before your sister called. I’d like to get back to that.”

Kyle bristled. There was no bitterness in Lance’s tone, but his words were a bucket of cold water on Kyle’s lust. If he got involved with anyone, this is what their life together would be like. Whomever he chose to open up to needed to understand that Kerri and the rest of their family meant everything to Kyle.

Lance helped Kyle off the beanbag, but rather than release him, he held their hands to his chest. One step was all it'd take for Kyle to give up control, to accept whatever Lance was silently offering him. He couldn't close that distance. He couldn't let Lance think there could be something for them.

When Lance spoke, his voice seemed even deeper. Richer. "Come with me." It wasn't a request. Kyle gave a weak nod, falling back into the role he swore he'd never be in again. He allowed Lance to hold his hand as they walked toward the living room. Lance turned to look at Kyle again, and Kyle could feel the searing gaze over every inch of his skin. "Actually, why don't you change into something more comfortable and meet me out there?"

"Okay," Kyle responded, the single word strained around the lump in his throat. He quickly stripped, feeling exposed even though he was safely behind his closed bedroom door. It was overwhelming, simply knowing Lance was out there waiting for him as he stood wearing nothing but his briefs.

Any other night, he would have reached blindly into his drawers for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt, but he didn't want Lance to think he was a slob, so he rifled through the stacks of clothes for something passable. Lance's voice from the other side of the door hurried him along. "Did you fall asleep?"

"Be right out." Kyle tugged the shirt over his head and checked his appearance in the mirror. "You're an idiot, Kyle," he scolded his reflection. "This isn't a date. You're not going to impress him with sweatpants, so quit trying. Just go out there, see what he has to say and then you can overanalyze everything once he goes home."

"You do know I'm still out here, right?" Lance chuckled and Kyle considered locking the door so he wouldn't have to face Lance again. What was it about this man that turned him into a complete idiot?

"I do now, thanks." Kyle stood with his hand on the doorknob, trying to decide if he was ready for whatever waited on the other side of the door.

He thought back to his freshman year of college. He felt as socially awkward now as he had then. Kerri had always been the outgoing twin, and Kyle was happy to walk in her shadow. That changed when they stepped foot on campus and she wanted to not be "one of the twins" for a while. It had forced Kyle out of his comfort zone, and he'd sat quietly in the student union watching everyone else make new friends, wishing it were that easy for him. Kerri had been so proud of him when he told her that he'd met someone, but that joy quickly faded once she met TJ. You're not the same person you were

back then. Lance is a good man. He's not TJ, Kyle reminded himself before turning the knob.

"I was beginning to think I'd have to storm in there to get you," Lance teased as he ushered him down the hall. Kyle's lower body tensed when Lance placed his hand just above the swell of his ass. "You made it clear to me that you're not looking for a boyfriend, and I know how to respect boundaries. If you change your mind, you'll have to tell me. Until then, all I want to do is show you how to help your sister."

"Okay."

"Lay down on the floor. I'm going to show you a series of poses and make sure you know how they're done so you can help Kerri when her back tenses," Lance told him. Kyle looked around to see that the living room had been completely rearranged while he was hiding in his room. "You probably know most of these poses from class, but when you're working with her, it's imperative that you help her with her form. If you don't, she could suffer another setback, and I doubt either of you want that."

"Okay." At some point, Kyle would prove that his vocabulary was broader than one word. Then again, it may be for the best that words failed him, because he was still on the edge, and he worried he'd tell Lance how much he wanted him.

"Actually, sit up for a second." Kyle obeyed. Lance reached for the hem of his oversized T-shirt, pausing to give Kyle time to object before lifting it over his head. "Too much material gets in the way. Besides, you're too beautiful to hide under yards of fabric."

"Lance..." Kyle wanted to remind him that he'd promised he wouldn't push, but he couldn't find the words with the way Lance so openly appraised his body.

"Trust me, Kyle," Lance implored. He ran his hand down Kyle's arm. "Turn over on your stomach. You need to stretch, otherwise I'll have to come over to help both of you."

This would officially go down in the books as the most bizarre evening ever. Dinner, which seemed eerily date-like, other than Kyle's insistence that it wasn't a date because he didn't want that, and now late-night yoga in the middle of the apartment he'd gone out of his way to avoid anyone seeing.

"We're going to start with cobra. I want you to really pay attention to your form." Kyle thought back to the class Lance had taught, when he'd been

awakened by this very pose. Kyle planted his arms at his sides and lifted his chest off the ground, forcing himself to go slowly and really feel the stretch.

He felt Lance move so he was standing over his legs and struggled to stay relaxed, knowing what came next. Lance placed his hands on Kyle's shoulders, sliding them slowly forward. His thumbs grazed over Kyle's sensitive nipples, bringing them to embarrassingly hard peaks. "That's it. Don't fight it, I won't push you any deeper than you're ready for," Lance encouraged. "Feel the way your chest opens. Take deep breaths, arching further with each exhale."

One hand slid to his back and Kyle forgot to breathe, savoring the feeling of being held by Lance. This time, Lance's hand didn't stop at the small of Kyle's back. He moved lower, resting his palm over the seam of Kyle's butt. "That's great. Now, roll onto your back."

Oh God, no! There was no way Kyle could roll over right now. There was no way he could hide the tent in his pants, and he wasn't completely sure he wanted to. He wanted Lance to see how hard he made him, but want and need were two different things. He needed to keep Lance firmly in the friend-zone.

Kyle took deep breaths as he lay on his stomach, willing his erection to soften. He thought about complex mathematical equations, the disparity of social classes in America, anything he could to get away from the fantasy of Lance pulling the elastic of his pants low enough to take Kyle's cock into his mouth.

He rolled onto his back, reminding himself that the sooner he did, the sooner this torture would be over. All he had to do was hold it together a little bit longer, and then he could walk Lance to the door before jumping into a cold shower. Lance didn't hide his amusement at Kyle's dilemma. No, the man Kyle figured he was growing to love keeping him on edge stared openly at his body as he licked his lips.

"Okay, next we'll move into bridge." Lance stopped to clear his throat. The fact that Lance was just as affected as him was a small comfort to Kyle. He could easily end the suffering for both of them by simply reaching out to Lance, but he couldn't. He wouldn't.

Kyle's legs shook as he lifted his hips off the floor, knowing that he was placing his arousal on display. With Lance kneeling at his side, all the man would have to do would be to lean forward and he could close his mouth over Kyle's dick. He closed his eyes, listening as Lance moved his arms and encouraged him to lift higher.

“That’s it. Keep going. With this pose, you want to make sure you’re not putting undue strain on the neck,” he advised. Kyle didn’t try to stifle the thrill he felt when Lance’s hands cupped his ass, lifting higher, supporting him as he stretched. “You’re a natural at this, Kyle. I’ve seen men work for years and not have the form you do.”

It was likely bullshit, but the words still bolstered Kyle’s ego. He’d never been athletic. He wasn’t sure this qualified, but hearing someone who had complete mastery of his body praise him pushed Kyle to go as far as he could.

It wasn’t until Kyle’s hips crashed to the floor that he realized he’d been allowing Lance to lift him rather than support him. He looked over to see Lance doubled over on himself, his breathing labored and fast. “What’s wrong?” Kyle asked, reaching out for Lance as he sat up. It stung when Lance jerked away from him.

“I’m so sorry, Kyle. I made you a promise and I’m not doing well on following through,” he apologized.

Kyle placed his hand on Lance’s leg, squeezing slightly to force the man to look up at him. “Hey, you haven’t done anything wrong,” he assured him. “You could have easily crossed a line, but you didn’t. If I’m being truthful, I’m having more fun than I ever have in class. I love that you won’t let me slack off and simply go through the motions.”

He paused, waiting for Lance to respond. When he didn’t, he decided it was time for him to push. “Will you help me?” he asked, focusing all of his attention on where their bodies connected. “I’d never admit it to anyone, but this is something I enjoy. My friends think it’s just something I do for Kerri, but that’s because it’s not something I feel comfortable admitting to the world. It’s hard enough being gay in a small town without the added stigma of liking something most people see as feminine.”

That seemed to bring Lance back to the present. He laid his hand over Kyle’s, tracing the same tender circles he had at dinner. “When done properly, there’s nothing weak or girly about yoga. It requires intense control and strength to master the more advanced moves,” Lance said, almost defensively. Kyle wondered how many times he’d had to give that same speech to people in his own personal life. It dawned on him then just how much Lance understood what he was saying.

“Show me,” Kyle pleaded. “Before you leave, teach me one position that’s just for me. Something I don’t need to know to help Kerri, but one that will push me further.”

“Kyle, I don’t know—”

Kyle pressed a finger to Lance’s lips to keep him from denying him what he wanted. After being told for so long that he needed to go after what he wanted, he was, and he wasn’t about to be easily dismissed. He still couldn’t admit his growing feelings for Lance, but this was something they could share. “Please. I saw you the morning you taught at the gym, and it was beautiful,” he praised Lance. “I know I can’t do anything that advanced, but I want to learn. Teach me to be strong and graceful.”

Lance sighed in what Kyle assumed was resignation. He felt bad for playing him this way, but only a little. “Okay,” Lance huffed. “I will show you two poses, but that’s it for tonight. If you still want to work on more advanced techniques, we can discuss that later.”

Kyle’s plan seemed to have the opposite effect he’d intended. Rather than inch them closer to something physical without admitting he wanted that to either of them, Lance had shifted back into business mode. “The first pose is Crow. It’s a great beginner balance pose,” he explained. “To start, you’re going to lie on your back. This isn’t actually part of the pose, but I want you to see how your muscles need to engage before doing anything else.”

Kyle listened as Lance walked him through the pose, wishing Lance would touch him as he had earlier. Instead, Lance sat off to the side, reaching in where necessary while maintaining careful distance. Kyle ignored the way his body was on display as he pulled his knees toward his chest. “Squeeze your knees in toward your upper arms. Do you feel where the muscles are engaging?”

“Yeah,” Kyle rasped.

“Good, now stand and we’re going to do the same thing. You’re going to squat down and place your arms in front of you,” Lance guided him. This time, Lance moved closer. He helped Kyle get into a position that felt completely unnatural and a bit uncomfortable. “That’s good. Now, you’re going to lean forward, lifting your feet off the ground. Don’t worry about falling, I’ll be right here if you appear unsteady.”

Kyle’s arms shook as they supported his entire body weight. Lance counted to five and helped Kyle ease back to the floor. “Back up,” he instructed and Kyle lifted, this time counting in his head. “Good. Again.”

The third time, Kyle felt as if he couldn’t go another second. Lance must have sensed his faltering confidence as he leaned in, whispering words of encouragement with his hand gently resting at Kyle’s hip. “You did well for

your first time. Keep practicing holding that pose for five seconds at a time and eventually you'll be ready to build on the pose."

That sounded hopeful. If he'd done poorly or Lance was simply appeasing him, he wouldn't have mentioned doing more. Would he?

"What's next?" Kyle pressed when their conversation faltered. Once again, Lance sat too far away from him, his body more tense than Kyle had seen him.

"Plow." Kyle snorted at the single word response.

"Excuse me?" He scolded himself for sounding like an immature teenager, but couldn't help the irony of this man he wanted but couldn't allow himself to have teach him a pose called plow. That was exactly what he wished Lance would do to him. Plow into his ass until Kyle couldn't remember his own name.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," Lance said, pushing himself up off the floor.

Kyle reached out to him. "No, I'm sorry. I promise, no more wisecracks."

Lance sat on the edge of the couch this time, instructing Kyle to lie on his back with his hands at his sides. "As earlier with the bridge, you need to make sure you're supporting your body on your shoulders and not your neck. Are you set?"

"Yeah, I'm ready." Kyle felt a sense of peace wash over him. It wasn't only the pose he felt ready to tackle. There was something about the way Lance respected his wishes that made Kyle feel he could get closer to him.

"Now, all you have to do is roll back, making sure to keep your legs straight." It wasn't nearly as easy as it sounded. "If you can, keep going until your toes touch the floor over your head."

Kyle held the pose, gasping when Lance moved to the floor, close enough that his legs touched Kyle's back. "That's great. Don't worry if you can't touch the floor yet, that'll come in time. Now, bring your legs up so you're in a shoulder stand."

This time, both of them muttered curses. Kyle couldn't think of anything other than the bulge pressing into his spine. He closed his eyes tight, otherwise he'd be tempted to look up, knowing that he'd see Lance's face close enough to smell the precum he could feel dampening his underwear.

Rather than take the final step that Lance said he needed to take if they were going to move beyond friendship or whatever this was, Kyle curled his knees to

his chest and rolled to the side. “Thanks. We’ll have to do this again sometime, but it’s getting late.” His words were clipped.

Lance appeared confused and a bit dazed. “Yeah, okay. I should...” He pointed toward the door. “I should be going.”

“Yeah,” Kyle agreed, following him to the door. “Thanks again for... well, for everything.”

He watched Lance walk down through the downstairs hallway. It wasn’t until he could no longer see Lance’s form retreating down the dark sidewalk that he stepped back into his apartment. After turning the deadbolt, he thumped his head against the door, wondering what he was going to do next. His mind and his body were at odds with one another, and he was tempted to do the opposite of what he thought he should.

Chapter 5

Awkward didn't begin to describe the tension in the apartment the following day when, true to his word, Lance showed up to help Kerri. She'd been trying all day to get her brother to tell her what'd happened after she went to bed, but he wasn't about to admit to anything. If she knew how hard it was for him to not press Lance against the door and kiss him before he left, she'd amp up her campaign to get Kyle laid.

He'd spent part of the morning permanently rearranging the living room to make sure there was enough open space to work on poses and routines without having to go to the gym. Kerri'd cocked an eyebrow as she relaxed on the couch, but didn't say a word.

After a quick hello, Kyle retreated to his bedroom with the excuse that it'd be easier for Kerri to focus without him watching over her. It seemed plausible, and that way he didn't have to admit that all he had to do was think about Lance's hard body near his and he'd sport wood. That wound up being a bad idea, because every once in a while Lance's voice would drift down the hall, and Kyle's body took notice. He printed off his and Kerri's book lists for the upcoming semester and grabbed the keys off his desk, needing to get away.

The line at the bookstore had been horrendous, which would have annoyed him any other day, but today it was a relief because it gave him plenty of time for Lance and Kerri to finish up what they were doing so he wouldn't be there when Kyle got home. He knew it was pathetic and weak to run out of his own home rather than face a man he was attracted to. He wouldn't be able to do it forever, but he hoped one day without Lance in close proximity would give him time to remember all the reasons he couldn't give in.

His phone rang as he finished spending more than two months' rent on books and supplies. "Hey Kerri, what's up?"

"Hey, Chickenshit," she greeted him. He groaned, wishing he'd let the call go to voice mail. Not only did she know more than he thought, now he was going to have to listen to her as he hefted all of their bags across campus to the only lot where he'd been able to find a parking spot. "I just thought I'd let you know that Lance is gone. He was hoping you'd be back before he had to go teach, but I told him you had some things going on this afternoon."

"Thanks. You're the best." Kyle breathed a sigh of short-lived relief.

“Don’t thank me yet.” He caught the mischievous inflection in her voice and wondered what she’d done. “I told him to come over when he gets done tonight and you’d make dinner for him. I don’t know what in the hell went on after I went to bed last night, but that man’s twisted in knots over you.”

“And the answer is for you to invite him back to the house?” Kyle protested. He nearly dropped his phone on the concrete as he shuffled all the bags to one hand so he could reach for his keys. “As much as I’d love to figure out what possessed you to do that without thinking to ask me, I have to go.”

He ended the call without giving her a chance to protest. It felt as if the more he tried to resist Lance, the more they were pushed together.

When he got home, he left their books in the car. He simply didn’t have enough hands to grab everything, and he was running out of time to get everything he needed done before Lance knocked on the door.

“Need help with anything?” Kerri called out from the couch. He loved that she always offered, even if they both knew she wasn’t supposed to do any heavy lifting.

“Sure,” Kyle responded sarcastically. “You could call Lance and tell him you didn’t realize I already had other plans for tonight.”

That got Kerri on her feet and moving faster than she had all week. The spurt of energy lasted until she reached the kitchen, where she flopped onto one of the kitchen chairs. “Ky, did he do something to piss you off last night? If he did, just tell me and I’ll have no problem calling to give him a piece of my mind.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Kyle said. He started cleaning and chopping vegetables. His normal fare consisted of piling carbs on a plate, topping it with protein and some sort of sauce, and calling it dinner. He didn’t think that was the type of diet Lance appreciated, so he was going out of his way to make chicken kabobs.

“Then what’s going on?”

“Maybe I’m getting tired of your constantly pushing me to date,” Kyle snipped. His patience was wearing almost as thin as his resistance to Lance. He didn’t like getting short with Kerri, but he truly was sick of her making it sound as if he couldn’t have a full life without sex. “I’m sorry, Ker. I shouldn’t take it out on you, but I do wish you’d let it go.”

Kerri worried her lower lip between her teeth. “Ky, I’m not trying to be overbearing, but there’s no reason for you to always stay home because of me. I

know what you said yesterday, but you have to let go of what TJ did to you. Lance is not TJ.”

“You think I don’t know that?” He took a bowl of vegetables and one of chicken to the table, putting Kerri to work. This dinner was her idea, so it was only fair that she help with the preparation.

“Do you?” she questioned. “Because from where I’m sitting, I think it’d be foolish to let him go because of what your ex did to you. TJ would have gotten pissed that I even called last night, but Lance offered to follow you home to help me. Not all men are assholes, and you’re flat-out stupid if you don’t give him a chance.”

“Out of curiosity, do you have a flouncy little skirt and matching top hiding under those yoga pants?”

Kerri stopped midskewer and stared at Kyle. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I figure if you’re going to be the captain of the Lance cheerleading squad, you should have a cute outfit to go with the job.” He pulled up the recipe on his phone for a pasta salad to go with the kabobs. It wouldn’t be the healthiest meal on the planet, but Kyle needed his carbs almost as much as some people needed that morning cup of coffee. “Believe me, I understand what you’re saying, but I’m not sure I’m ready,” he lied.

“Do you remember what Mom used to say about life as an adult?” Of course he did. It was one of the key tenets of life as far as she was concerned, and she’d made sure all of the kids knew it as well. Kyle nodded. “Now is the time for you to really think about what she said, because she’s right. Life will never happen if you’re waiting for it to be the right time. Sometimes, you have to take that leap and hope for the best.”

Kyle sat next to Kerri while the water boiled, his anger abating. “Okay, so let’s pretend for a minute that you’re right,” he began. “Let’s say I let down my guard and see where things could lead with Lance. Do you remember what it was like when TJ left? There’s something about Lance that makes me think it’d be even worse if he did the same.”

“Again...” She reached for Kyle’s hand. “He’s not TJ. He’s not a selfish, arrogant prick who’s only capable of thinking about himself. If anything, I’d bet he’s a lot like you and doesn’t place enough importance on his own needs.”

Kyle stood when he heard a soft knock on the door. “Ky, just promise me you’ll think about it. Don’t shut him out when it’s so obvious he wants in.”

“I’ll try,” he said. He heard her walk out to their small patio as he answered the door, likely giving them some privacy. “Hey, glad you could make it.”

“Are you?” Kyle was getting sick of everyone questioning him. It was as if he’d somehow proven himself untrustworthy and unreliable.

“Yeah, I am,” Kyle admitted. His heart beat a furious tattoo in his chest as he reached for Lance’s hand and led him to the living room. He sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to him for Lance to sit. “Look, I owe you an apology.”

“No, you don’t,” Lance assured him. It didn’t go unnoticed that Lance was staring at the opposite wall rather than risk making eye contact. “I’m the one who pushed last night. I’d actually been waiting earlier today to apologize to you and make sure you weren’t pissed at me.”

“You didn’t cross the line. I was unfair to you last night,” he confessed, turning to face Lance, hoping it wasn’t too late. “It’s not an excuse, but I want to explain a bit about my past. Hopefully, you’ll see where I was coming from, and just maybe, you won’t decide I’m too messed up to be worth it.”

“That’d never happen.” He said the words with such conviction that Kyle wanted to melt into his side.

Kyle confessed to his complete lack of experience in high school. How excited he’d been when he was no longer the token gay kid in a small farming community once he left for college. Shame rolled in his stomach as he told about attaching himself to the first guy to show interest, and how TJ took advantage of his innocence. His voice hitched when he got to the day of the accident, and Lance didn’t hesitate to pull him close. Shrouded in the safety of Lance’s embrace, Kyle continued. By the time he was finished, Lance seemed angry.

I knew this was a huge mistake. He tried to pull away, but Lance held him tighter. It felt nice to have someone comforting him without being asked. TJ had never done that. Even when Kerri was still in the hospital, Kyle’d had to beg TJ to stay close to him, to keep him from seeing what could have happened replaying in his mind.

There was a long silence, and then Lance kissed him. He kissed Kyle’s temple as he stroked his disheveled blond waves. The brush of those plump lips brushing across his skin left Kyle wanting more than he’d dared dream of for too long. “I hate to break it to you, but TJ wasn’t your first love,” Lance said bluntly.

“Yeah, he was,” Kyle countered. “I’m pretty sure I’d remember if there’d been someone before him.”

“That’s not what I mean. What I’m trying to say is that you might have thought you were in love with him, but it was the notion of love that held you captive.” All it took was one look into Lance’s dark eyes and Kyle began to understand what he meant. “The day will come when you truly fall in love with someone, and you’ll see that I’m right.”

Are you offering to fill that void? It was too soon to say anything out loud, but he could finally admit it to himself that he wanted this. He didn’t know why, but there was no doubt Lance would show him how good love could be. With his arms resting on Lance’s shoulders, he pushed up to his knees, pulling the band holding back Lance’s hair. He’d dreamed of this last night, wanted to feel those silky strands glide between his fingers as they kissed for the first time.

Kyle was more scared than he’d ever been in his life. Closing the gap to press his lips to Lance’s took more courage than walking through the haunted forest when he was ten. He also knew the high of tasting the man who’d haunted his dreams for the past eight nights would rival that of stepping into the clearing after nearly pissing his pants every time teens dressed as zombies and murder victims jumped out at him.

The first brush of lips was tentative and reserved. Kyle had never been the one to make the first move, but true to his word, Lance made no move to take that control away from him. Without considering his position, Kyle licked his lips, which was all the invitation Lance needed. His hands gripped Kyle’s hips, keeping him from backing away when he realized what they were doing and traced his own tongue from one corner of Kyle’s mouth to the other. A moan echoed through Kyle’s mind, but he couldn’t say for certain who it came from.

Kyle nipped along Lance’s jaw as he moved to straddle his lap. Clumsy fingers moved to the hem of Lance’s shirt. This time, Kyle was the one groaning as hands trailed over the rock-hard planes of Lance’s stomach. His cock strained against his zipper, painfully hard. “God, you’re gorgeous,” he sighed before sucking on Lance’s earlobe.

Kyle rutted like a horny teen, certain he could come from nothing more than lust and friction. His senses tingled, sending a jolt to his aching balls. If foreplay with Lance wound him up this tight, Kyle couldn’t even imagine what sex would be like. He needed to back off to gain control, and yet his body

seemed to have other plans. About the time Kyle'd resigned himself to an embarrassingly quick orgasm, his need was doused by a bucket of ice water.

"Kyle, we can't do this." Lance planted his hands in the center of Kyle's chest and pushed him away. In the second Kyle allowed himself to look at the man he'd practically mounted, he swore he saw regret in his gaze.

Fuck that, Kyle thought to himself as he lurched off the couch. He felt the brush of Lance's fingers along his arm and shrugged him off, uninterested in anything he had to say.

"Kyle, wait," Lance called out as Kyle stomped down the hallway like a child who'd just been told they couldn't have the toy they wanted most. "Please, I didn't mean—"

Kyle slammed the door closed, leaning against it to keep anyone from entering. He'd thought Lance had wanted him to make the next move. He'd trusted Lance's words. And now, he'd gone after what he wanted, only to be turned away. Yet another reason to avoid getting mixed up with anyone. Life was much less complicated with an online porn subscription and his own hand.

Chapter 6

Kyle's heart raced as he glanced around the empty studio. He'd been on edge all day, ever since he'd received a text message this morning telling him to meet Lance at eight. Alone. With every passing minute, he wondered if he was the butt of some cruel joke. Lance didn't seem the type, but then he hadn't seemed like the type to push a man away after expressing interest, but it'd happened.

"I'm glad to see you came." Kyle jumped at the sound of Lance's voice. He looked around again, but couldn't see anyone in the room with him. "After the way you ran off the other night, I worried I wouldn't get a chance to make it up to you."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Kyle assured him. Lance stepped into the light and Kyle gasped. He'd admired the man from the moment he laid eyes on him, but tonight, there was nothing left to his imagination. Lance had traded in his T-shirt and shorts for a scrap of spandex that covered and contained the necessary parts, but nothing more. Kyle swallowed hard, trying to find his faltering voice. "I should be apologizing to you. I'm the one who made a pass at you."

Embarrassed, Kyle cupped his hands over the front of his shorts to hide his unwanted erection. He cast his eyes to the ground directly in front of him as he tried to think unsexy thoughts. He'd already been turned down once by Lance, it wasn't going to happen again.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Kyle flinched, wondering how Lance had moved directly behind him unnoticed. He could feel the heat of the larger man's body, close, but not touching him. Goose bumps rose from his flesh as Lance leaned closer, his words gliding across Kyle's shoulder. "I wanted you to express interest, and you did."

"Then why did you make me stop?" Kyle whimpered.

"Because it wasn't time." With those cryptic words, Lance stepped away. Kyle's body sagged, as though he had been somehow supported by Lance's presence. He moved to the end of a mat and crooked a finger in Kyle's direction. "Come."

"Lance, either you want me or you don't," Kyle snipped, rooting his feet to the floor. "I have too much going on in my life to play games."

“I’m well aware, and I promise you, what I have planned is anything but a game.” He snapped his fingers and pointed to the mat. “Just because it wasn’t time then doesn’t mean it never will be.”

That sliver of a promise set Kyle into motion. He came to rest so close to Lance that he could feel every exhale cross his face. He tilted his head back so he could look into those dark eyes, praying Lance couldn’t see the fear lurking in his own mind.

“The other night, you tried to tell me you were ready.” As Lance spoke, he placed his hands on Kyle’s shoulders and slowly turned him. He stepped forward so his chest pressed against Kyle’s back, hands slowly massaging the length of his arms. “I believe that your mind wants me as much as I want you, but you were holding back.”

“I wasn’t—”

Lance’s right hand moved to Kyle’s neck, his fingers tracing a path up to his lips. “Don’t speak. I want you to listen to me.” Kyle considered arguing, but the protest died on his lips. “You want to find someone, but you’re scared. If anything, my observation that you weren’t truly in love with TJ only bolstered your own doubts. You need to learn to step outside of yourself if you ever hope to be truly happy.”

“And let me guess, you’re here to help me do that?” Kyle asked sarcastically.

“I do have a vested interest in getting your body and mind in harmony with one another,” he admitted. Kyle didn’t fully understand what he meant by that, but it was enough to hold his attention. “If you’ll allow me, I can help you. Then, and only then, you’ll be ready to face the future.”

As Lance continued massaging Kyle’s arms and shoulders, he felt every muscle in his body begin to relax, until he was filled with a sense of peace and tranquility. It was as though Lance had managed to hypnotize him with nothing more than the touch of his hands. Conversation ceased as Lance began guiding Kyle through a series of poses.

Cobra. The pose Kyle would forever associate with the first time he felt Lance’s hands on his body. He deepened the pose, arching his back as he looked up to see Lance’s nod of approval.

Down dog. Kyle transitioned his body, momentarily forgetting to breathe as Lance moved behind him. When he shifted his hips, he brushed against Lance’s

erection. He smiled, knowing he could affect Lance, even if he swore it wasn't time. Whatever that meant.

"That's beautiful," Lance praised. His voice was rough with lust, his movements jerky as he ran a hand down the length of his spine. Kyle wondered if the admiration was for his form or his body. "You have no idea what a gift you truly are. That's one of the many things I admire about you, Kyle."

Lance curled his fingers around Kyle's hips, pulling him back as he ground into the cleft of his ass. Kyle considered begging Lance to give him more, but he feared Lance would back away if he broke the spell.

"It's nearly time." The words came off as half promise and half warning.

"Kyle, get your ass out of bed!" Kyle jolted upright, rubbing his eyes as Kerri continued pounding on his bedroom door.

"I'm coming, give me a minute," he yelled back. His hand drifted down his bare chest to a painful hard-on. It wasn't the morning wood he'd gotten used to over the years, this was every ounce of need for Lance that he'd been denied continuing to haunt him.

Kyle managed to find excuses to be out of the apartment every time Lance came over to work with Kerri. It dawned on him the morning after his foolish attempt at seduction that his actions could have affected Kerri as well. She'd only met with him once at that point, but since then, all she could talk about was how much better she felt. No matter how much Kyle still wanted Lance, the combination of his pride and the effect getting involved with him could have on Kerri's healing were enough to send him running.

Now that school was starting, Kyle breathed a bit easier because he had a built-in excuse. He had two semesters until graduation, but only because he'd taken on a heavier course load than his adviser was comfortable approving. There was a light at the end of the tunnel, and he knew the sooner he graduated and got a better job, the sooner he and Kerri could move into a better place. Maybe he'd meet someone in one of his classes who'd provide the needed sexual release without the burden of a relationship. Someone in one of his upper level courses who understood the importance of staying focused a bit longer.

He listened at his door before sneaking across the hall to the bathroom. He was still rock hard, but would suffer through this morning as he had every other morning. If Lance didn't want him, he'd be damned if he was going to rub one

out when that long brown hair and hooded gaze were all he could see every time he closed his eyes. He was too old to pine after someone who didn't want him.

Kyle tipped his head back, allowing the hot water to stream over his face. He closed his eyes, trying to make sense of last night's dream. It felt as though the Lance in his dreams was trying to give him a message, but it was cryptic and Kyle's mind was still too foggy to decipher anything. He yanked on the faucet to turn off the water, shivering as a cold blast of air hit his nether regions.

As he dried off, he heard Kerri talking in the other room, softly enough that he couldn't make out the words. Not hearing another voice, he assumed she was talking to their mother, who still called to wish them a good day on the first day of each semester, the same way she had since they were little.

Kyle grabbed the first shirt his hands landed on in the hamper of clean clothes. He'd never worried about his looks when going to class. As far as he was concerned, the people who chose to speak to him when he looked his worst were the ones who were genuine enough to not be caught up in trivial matters. He was well aware that may have been part of his issue when it came to meeting single men, but it didn't bother him enough to change his views.

"Ky, we have to leave in twenty minutes," Kerri called out from the other room. Kyle checked the time on his phone. Unless there was something his sister hadn't told him, they had at least double that before they had to be on the road. School was only ten minutes away, Kyle had assigned parking in one of the student lots, and neither of them had class for just over an hour.

Rather than argue with her about their morning schedule, Kyle grabbed his backpack and turned out his bedroom light. Soon enough, he'd be done for the day and could lock himself back in his sanctuary.

"Good morning."

Kyle tripped over his own feet. The voice that taunted him in his sleep echoed through his mind. After a few steadying breaths, he dared to look up, only to see Lance sitting at his dining room table looking perfectly smug.

"Uh, hi," he mumbled. "I didn't realize you were here."

"Oh, did I forget to tell you?" Kerri leaned against the kitchen counter, not looking the least bit sorry. She'd done this on purpose. "Lance offered to come over early today so I could stretch before school. Wasn't that sweet of him?"

Kyle eased past her to grab a bowl for his cereal. He cringed when he opened the cabinet and realized that Lance was going to see his guilty pleasure. He had two choices: go without breakfast or pour his bowl of Lucky Charms. Kerri giggled as she plucked a purple horseshoe out of the bowl. “Feeling lucky today?”

“Shut up,” Kyle grumbled. He looked over her shoulder to make sure Lance wasn’t listening in on their conversation. “And thanks, by the way, for the early morning ambush. Don’t think I don’t know you forgot to tell me he’d be here on purpose.”

“If you hadn’t spent the past week running away like a big chicken, I wouldn’t have had to help him ambush you,” she pointed out. “Now, go talk to him while I get ready for school.”

Kyle contemplated standing at the counter to eat his breakfast, but that’d be rude. He sat across the table from Lance, tucking an arm protectively around his bowl.

“Are you done pretending you’re too busy every time I come around?” Lance asked, sipping his coffee. Kyle glared at the mug, his mug, as Lance rolled it between his hands. He didn’t respond right away, trying to figure out where Lance got off being upset with him for not wanting to put himself in anymore awkward situations.

“Didn’t realize I was supposed to clear my schedule in order to accommodate you,” Kyle finally snipped when it became clear he wasn’t going to get anything else from Lance. “The way I see it, I was doing both of us a favor. I thought you were interested, I took the chance and made a move and you turned me down. I figured hanging around while you were working with Kerri would only make me seem even more desperate, and I’m not. I don’t need anyone in my life.”

Lance sauntered over to the sink and rinsed out his coffee mug before placing it in the dishwasher. Somehow, he made Kyle feel like the outsider in his own home. He turned and leaned against the counter, giving Kyle space. With every second that passed, the feelings of inadequacy and immaturity grew.

“That’s how you see it,” Lance conceded, folding his arms casually over his chest. “But that’s only because you don’t have a clear picture. You never gave me a chance to explain why I pushed you away that night.”

“Does it matter?” Kyle stared at the last soggy pieces of cereal floating around in lukewarm milk so there was no chance of him reading something in Lance’s expression.

“Absolutely,” Lance responded firmly. “You’ve decided that I’m not worth the time to get to know. You’ve judged me based on how others have hurt you in the past, because if you do that and you push me away, then you believe you’re maintaining control of your life. Unfortunately, the only thing you’ve done is allow your ex to keep a hold on you.”

“I haven’t even talked to him since that day at the gym,” Kyle protested. He shoved past Lance in the narrow kitchen, sloshing milk onto the floor in his anger. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have better things to do with my day than sit here and listen to you tell me all the ways I’ve screwed up my life.”

Lance reached out, curling his fingers around Kyle’s wrist. “If that’s the way you want it to be, I can’t force you to change your mind.” The typically calm, strong voice faltered, making Kyle feel even worse. “However, before I leave, I will tell you what I came here to say.”

Kyle’s shoulders slumped forward in defeat. The logical side of his mind knew he owed Lance at least this much, but his heart raced, scared of what he’d hear.

“When I asked you to stop, it wasn’t because I wasn’t interested in you,” Lance admitted. “I did it because I respect you.”

Kyle let out an inelegant snort. “Sure have a funny way of showing it.”

“Look at me,” Lance pleaded, crooking one finger under Kyle’s chin. He resisted, but Lance didn’t let go. “I asked you to stop because you deserve so much more than making out on the couch while your sister’s in the other room. You deserve a man willing to take his time with you.”

The wall around Kyle’s heart began to fracture as Lance said everything he used to believe about himself. The hand on Kyle’s shoulder slid around behind his neck and Lance pulled him forward, giving him a kiss that was little more than a brush of lips against his forehead. “I wanted to be that man.”

Without waiting for a response, Lance turned and walked out the door, leaving Kyle standing in the middle of the narrow kitchen, wondering what had just happened. When Kerri came out of the bedroom, she must have sensed that it wasn’t the time to ask questions, because she simply wrapped her arms around her brother’s waist and apologized for butting into his business.

“It’s okay,” Kyle assured her as he smoothed her hair. “He didn’t say anything I didn’t need to hear.”

Now, Kyle had to convince himself that it hadn’t crushed him to watch Lance leave.

Chapter 7

Kyle felt like a prisoner in his own home. Every morning, he awoke to the sounds of Kerri and Lance working in the living room. By the third week of school, he'd started waking up an hour earlier than he needed to so he could eat breakfast and shower before Kerri came out of her room. Then, he'd hole up in his bedroom and work on homework until he heard the front door snick closed announcing that Lance was gone.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kerri asked on the way to school in early October. Kyle reached down to turn up the volume on the stereo rather than dignify her question with a response. He had to admit that she'd held out at least a month longer than he'd expected. "Ky, I hate seeing you this way. Not to mention, it makes me feel like crap because I'm too selfish to tell him to stop coming to the apartment, because he's the first person who's been able to help me."

"Don't," Kyle warned, gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white. "Don't you dare feel bad about doing what's best for you."

"That's rich, coming from you," she argued.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kyle twisted the steering wheel cover in his hands, willing the light to turn green so he could get out of the car and away from Kerri.

She whipped her head to the side to glare at Kyle as if she couldn't believe he was capable of such stupidity. "You really have to ask?" she questioned in disbelief. "You've put your life on hold for almost two years, refusing to admit that you have needs because you wanted to help me."

"And I don't regret it for a minute," Kyle reminded her. And it was the truth. If he had to go back to the days after the accident and decide what to do based on what he knew now about how his life would be, he'd make the same choices. Family was the one thing in life that never went away.

"Well maybe I do!" Kyle couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Kerri seething with such anger. "I absolutely hate that you refuse to do anything for yourself because of the guilt you carry around. I hate knowing that you let a great guy slip through your fingers because of me. I think you're scared. You

were burned by TJ, and it's easier for you to push a good man away than make yourself vulnerable again."

The light turned green and Kyle pressed on the gas pedal harder than he'd intended. The tires chirped and Kerri flinched, clutching the armrest. Seeing her fear, Kyle eased off the gas. He waited until they were safely in the parking lot at the university before continuing the conversation. He turned in his seat, reaching for both of his twin's hands. "Ker, I love you and you know that, but you're wrong," he lied.

Kerri jerked away from him. "The sad thing is, I think you truly believe that." She opened the door, sitting stock still with one foot on the floorboard and the other on the ground outside. "I've let you take care of me for a long time, maybe too long. At first, I told myself it was because Mom and Dad asked you to, but it wasn't. Not really. Everything you've done, you've done because you feel guilty for what happened to me. I think putting your own life on hold is a way for you to punish yourself for asking me to go with you that day."

Kyle couldn't dispute that he felt guilty, because it was true to an extent. If he hadn't begged her to help him, he would have been in the car alone. That didn't mean he viewed helping Kerri as some sort of penance.

Kerri leaned back into the car, firing one final salvo before heading off to class. "I love you, Ky, but I won't keep watching you do this to yourself. I know you well enough to know that you'll keep putting everyone else ahead of yourself, which is why I'm setting you free. I'm going to stay at Amelia's place tonight, so don't bother waiting for me."

The sound of Kerri slamming her door closed punctuated her harsh dismissal. Kyle beat his fists against the dashboard, hating himself. If only he'd stuck to his original decision to stay away from Lance, this wouldn't have happened.

Kyle slogged his way across campus for his first class of the morning with his cell phone in hand. He wanted to call Kerri and apologize to her, but he wasn't sure what he'd be apologizing for. He knew she was upset with him, but didn't feel he'd done anything wrong.

As he entered the lecture hall, he shoved the phone into his pocket. Kerri'd shown more true anger toward him this morning than he'd ever seen. Like any siblings, they'd had their fights, but this time, something was different. He had no doubt she'd meant every word she said, including that she wouldn't be home tonight, and that stung. Their parents had taught them that you couldn't go to

bed upset with someone you love, even when it meant the entire family stayed up late sorting out the issue. He knew that tonight was going to be the night they both broke that rule.

He gave up on class for the day after the first hour of staring blankly at the professor, not hearing a word she said. Someone called out to him as he walked across the green to the parking lot, but he didn't lift his head to see who it was or what they wanted. It didn't matter, because it wasn't Kerri.

Once he was back in the apartment, his footsteps echoed, emphasizing that he was truly alone for the first time in his life. He and Kerri had done everything together. Other than the occasional night out, he'd always known she'd be there. It seemed odd to their friends who didn't understand the bond they shared, but they were two halves of a whole. Much like salt-and-pepper or sugar-and-cream, they were a matched set.

Even when she was in the hospital after the accident, he hadn't felt this alone. That may have been because he'd been capable of little other than punishing himself for putting her there, but it wasn't the same. This time, they were both healthy, and she'd cut the cord that had tethered them to each other since birth.

The dust motes floating in the sunlight streaming through the patio door held no answers to his dilemma, but they held his attention for far too long. By the time he shook off the daze of his morning, the sky was getting dark, and there was still no sign of Kerri. He pulled out the phone to call her, to ask how they could fix this, but found himself dialing a different number.

"Kyle, is everything okay?" He hated that he hadn't talked to his mother in so long that she assumed something had happened for him to actually pick up the phone. They'd squabbled over his preference for texting, and he won every time when he reminded her that he was her son and guys didn't sit around talking on the phone all day.

"Hey Mom, can't I call just to say hi?"

"Well, you could, but you don't," she responded, a teasing lilt in her tone that only made Kyle feel worse. "Now, what's going on?"

Kyle spent the next ten minutes explaining everything that had happened since the day they'd met Lance. She let him purge every worry that had been weighing him down with only the occasional "Hmm" or "I see" to let him know she was still there. When he finished, deafening silence filled the line.

“Kyle, I know you don’t want to hear this, but I think Kerri made some very valid points,” she said calmly after a few deep breaths.

“But—”

“No, listen to me,” his mom interrupted before he could protest. “You’ve taken care of her since you were babies. When she’d cry, you were there before I could even ask what was wrong. The first time I got a call from the principal’s office was in kindergarten when you punched a little boy for pulling her hair. In third grade, you nearly lost your mind when she had her appendix out and spent every waking minute curled up next to her on the couch.

“I can’t tell you the number of times she came to me, upset because she was certain you were scaring off the guys she liked.” Kyle hadn’t known that. He didn’t think he’d done anything to actively keep her from having a boyfriend and chalked it up to people’s ignorance when it came to how close they were. “I told her the same thing I’m going to tell you right now. Both of you worry about the other. Sometimes, that means doing the wrong thing for the right reasons. In your case, it’s always been that you’re so overly protective of her that she can’t be her own person. In hers, it’s that she doesn’t say anything to upset you until it becomes impossible to hold it in any longer. That’s where she is right now. And she’s right. You not only deserve to be happy, but you need to live your own life.”

Kyle should have known better than to call his mom thinking she’d be an ally. The only comfort he found was that she’d never been the type to tell any of her kids what they wanted to hear. If she agreed with Kerri on this, that meant that they were seeing something he didn’t. Or something he couldn’t admit.

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll try calling you back later, but I think I have another call to make right now.” He couldn’t let Kerri go to bed without knowing that he was going to try. He wouldn’t jump right into a relationship, but he’d try to stop pushing people away so he could protect his heart behind the shield of his sister.

“I think that’s a good idea,” she said softly. “I love you, Kyle. I know you probably think we’re all ganging up on you right now, but it’s because we care. Tell Kerri that we’re going to try to get down there for parents’ weekend.”

“I will. Thanks again, Mom.”

He tried calling Kerri four times, each time being sent to voice mail after two rings, meaning she was sending him a message through her silence. On the

fifth try, he left a message. “Ker, you don’t have to hide. I know you weren’t purposely being a bitch, that it just comes naturally to you.” He let out a weak laugh. “I also know that you said what you did because you’re worried about me. Whenever you decide you’re ready to talk, you know where to find me.”

It wasn’t the end to the evening he wanted, but it was all he could do. He lugged his backpack into the bedroom and tossed it toward the desk. He’d deal with trying to get caught up tomorrow. Tonight, he was far too emotionally drained to even think about his assignments. After plugging in his phone next to the bed, Kyle took a quick shower in an attempt to ease the tension he’d been carrying around in his shoulders and back.

When that didn’t work, he stood in the middle of his bedroom staring at the rolled-up mat in the corner of the room. He missed the peace and quiet in his mind he felt when he and Kerri had been going to yoga classes at the gym. She’d quit when Lance started helping her at home, and Kyle hadn’t been able to set foot in the building alone now that he knew TJ was also a member. He didn’t want to give the man another chance to confront him with his failings. Instead, he’d allowed TJ to take away something he’d once enjoyed.

And now... well, now he couldn’t even look at the rubber mat without thinking about Lance. Remembering the first night when Lance opened his eyes to poses he was certain he’d never be able to execute without hurting himself. The way his body buzzed with need like he’d never known before, responding to every touch and caress of Lance’s hand on his body.

With stubborn conviction, he stormed to the corner of the room and held the end of the mat as he flipped it in the air to unroll it. He knew he’d likely pushed Lance away for good with his attitude and avoidance, but this was something he was doing for himself. He rooted his feet to the floor, not only to get his mind and body prepared for the next sequence of poses, but as a way to steady his resolve to do what made himself happy, even if it was only in the privacy of his own bedroom.

Chapter 8

The shower/yoga combination relaxed Kyle enough that he'd been able to sleep, although it was fitful. He woke up to the sound of pounding on the front door and tripped in the tangled sheets as he jumped out of the bed. He made it halfway down the hall before realizing that he was wearing nothing but a pair of white briefs and ran back to his room to pull on a pair of sweats.

"I'm coming!" he yelled as he rubbed his aching hip. He'd hit the ground harder than he'd thought, fueled by a burst of adrenaline that came from someone knocking on his door as if the building was on fire at this hour.

He flung the door open and swore his heart stuttered at the sight before him. Lance, dressed in a bright yellow T-shirt pulled tight across his chest and faded blue jeans. Not his typical attire. The only time Kyle had seen Lance in anything other than comfortable, workout-appropriate attire was the night of their nondate.

"Um... hi... Kerri's not here," he pointed out, although he was relatively certain Lance already knew that. He took the disposable cup Lance offered him and invited the man inside. He'd been at the apartment often enough that Lance made his way through the dark to the kitchen without bumping into anything.

Lance flicked on the light and sat at his place at the small dining table as if he belonged there. Kyle didn't miss the fact that he'd started thinking of that chair as Lance's and promised himself he'd try to figure out what that meant later. Not now, because he was much more curious as to why Lance had shown up at his apartment at five in the morning.

"Forgive me if I sound rude, but why are you here?" Kyle asked, sitting across from him. He needed the distance afforded by a few feet of marred wood. He sipped from the cup, wincing when he realized it was tea, not coffee. That couldn't bode well for the morning, because Kyle hated anything but freshly brewed coffee in the morning.

"I wanted to talk to you, but I knew that I had to break this new routine you seem to have put in place to keep avoiding me," Lance admitted. His words may have implied confidence and control, but his posture seemed closer to defeat or resignation.

"Yeah, about that," Kyle began. His restless hours last night had given him plenty of time to think about the apologies he owed. Admitting to Lance that

he'd been wrong to compare him to TJ was a close second to making things right with Kerri. He'd promised himself he'd call Lance. He even knew what he wanted to say, but none of the words came to him now that Lance was in front of him.

"Look, the last thing I want is for you to think I'm some crazy stalker. You need to know that this isn't easy for me, either," Lance admitted. "I don't make a habit of chasing after men who push me away, but there's something unique about you."

From anyone else, that'd seem like a cheesy line, but Kyle didn't doubt Lance's sincerity. Still, it helped to hear him affirm that helping Kerri hadn't been a ploy to get to Kyle. The thought had crossed Kyle's mind more than once, but he didn't think Lance was that manipulative.

"Why?" Kyle asked sheepishly. Even though he believed Lance, that didn't mean he saw whatever it was Lance seemed to see in him. He was nothing more than an average looking, socially awkward college student with a potentially unhealthy connection to his sister. Not exactly the traits a man as gorgeous and well-spoken as Lance should be attracted to.

"Rather than answer that, I want you to tell me why it's so hard for you to believe I'd be attracted to you," Lance challenged him. He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed casually over his chest as he waited for Kyle to take the bait.

"I honestly have no clue. Besides the fact that you're older and better looking than me, you have your life together. There's no reason for you to keep coming back for more every time I kick you." After having time to rehash every time they could have gotten together and didn't, Kyle realized that even the times he'd thought Lance had pushed him away were for his benefit. Lance had been able to see through Kyle's words and actions to his reluctance.

"You don't give yourself enough credit, Kyle," Lance chastised. "You're a very attractive man, but in your own unique way. You have a kindness and innocence that many mistake for naïveté, but not me. I think you've been hurt in the past by people who didn't care to understand your motivation. The only thing I want from you is a chance. It's all I've ever wanted."

This conversation was far too heavy for this early in the morning on an empty stomach. The only fact that allowed Kyle to ask the most important question running through his mind was the fear that this would be his last opportunity. If he asked Lance to leave or told him he wasn't ready, he knew in

his heart that Lance would walk away. “Then why push me away when I did try to tell you I was ready?”

“Because you weren’t,” Lance countered. Kyle watched him sip his own tea as he waited for further clarification. A cold breeze from the patio door Kyle forgot to close last night sent a shiver through his body. “Even then, I could tell you were driven by the wrong motivation. You wanted to prove something to yourself, and I wasn’t willing to be that man. I care about you, Kyle. Because of that, I wasn’t going to let myself believe you were sincere, only to have you change your mind again.”

“And you think I won’t now?” he challenged. Yes, he’d told his mom, and Kerri in a message, that he was going to try to live for himself, but he knew it was much easier to contemplate change than to take action. He still wasn’t certain he was ready, even if they said he was, so he failed to understand how Lance could think it was the right time for this discussion.

“Actually, I’m fairly certain you will at some point,” Lance admitted. “The difference is, I think you’re in a better place in your own mind now. You want to be happy for yourself, not because it’ll prove a point to someone else.”

Kyle couldn’t take another minute sitting across the table from Lance. He was asking for too much without asking for much of anything at all. He didn’t want a commitment, he only wanted Kyle to say he was willing to give them a chance. Kyle could do that, couldn’t he? The sound of a pot of coffee brewing punctuated the air as Kyle paced around the living room. Lance had given him a glimpse of his own investment in whatever might be building between them, and it absolutely terrified Kyle. If he decided he wasn’t as ready as he thought, he’d wind up hurting Lance. This wasn’t a one-off for the other man, it was a shot at having something real.

He was so caught up in his self-doubt that he didn’t notice Lance step up behind him. Strong arms wrapped around his waist, preventing him from completing another lap around the living room. Kyle tensed, and immediately relaxed back into the warmth of Lance’s body. “You’re overthinking this,” Lance whispered into his ear. When Kyle didn’t struggle to free himself or flinch at the breath ghosting across his neck, Lance leaned in, pressing his lips to Kyle’s flesh. A soft moan escaped his lips and his heart started racing. TJ had never made him feel the way Lance did. Not once in all their time together. That had to mean something.

Kyle tilted his head back to rest on Lance’s shoulder, opening his neck for whatever assault Lance had planned. Teeth grazed along the corded tendon,

stopping only long enough for Lance to run his tongue along the shell of Kyle's ear. "Tell me to stop and I will, but only if you don't want this as much as I do."

To emphasize his desire, Lance ground his hard cock against the thin cotton of Kyle's pants. It took an incredible amount of strength for Kyle to mutter a response. "Don't stop," he pleaded.

He took Lance's hand in his own and led him to the bedroom. The sheets and quilt were strewn across the floor from his earlier struggle. Lance took the lead, kicking aside the sheets as he pulled Kyle toward the bed. "We're going to take it slow," Lance promised. Kyle chuckled, because the fact that they'd gone from nothing to standing in front of the bed in less than an hour screamed anything but slow. Lance cupped his hand under Kyle's chin, tilting his head back until he was staring directly into Lance's lustful gaze. "I mean it, Kyle. I've never been a man who got off on fucking without it meaning anything. That doesn't mean that I have to be head over heels in love before we'll have sex, but there has to be a strong foundation, whether that's friendship or something more. Now, lay down. You don't have class until eleven-thirty today, which means I woke you a few hours before you should be up."

"How did you know that?" Kyle asked as he slid into the bed. He felt naked and wished for the security of his quilt. He wanted to cover himself, to hide the vulnerability he felt.

"The same way I knew you wouldn't be in a hurry to shower and hide out in your room this morning," Lance admitted. Kyle's mouth watered as Lance reached behind his neck to pull the T-shirt over his head, giving Kyle a view of the twin dragons tattooed on his chest. He then toed off his shoes and unfastened the button on his jeans. Kyle couldn't help but stare as he pulled the denim down his hips, revealing more of the dragons' tails. The tails he'd been desperate to find the tip of since the day they'd met. When Lance reached for the sheet and nestled himself into the other side of the bed, Kyle froze. If he moved, he knew he wouldn't be able to resist pulling down the elastic of Lance's boxer briefs so he could trace the outline of the ink with his tongue.

"Your sister loves you, Kyle. She and I have talked about her concerns many times. She felt guilty telling me because, at first, I think she was afraid I'd use the knowledge to manipulate you." Talking about his sister while lying nearly naked was a surefire way to kill Kyle's hard-on. Or at least it should have been, and the fact that he was still hard was a bit disturbing. "When she left you yesterday, Kerri called me. And when you called her last night, she

called again. With a threat on certain parts of my anatomy that I'm relatively certain she meant, she told me to come over this morning."

Lance rolled onto his side and slid close enough to drape an arm over Kyle's torso. The brush of his fingers tracing gentle circles on Kyle's skin lulled him nearly to sleep. Those same fingers dipping below the waistband of his pants to trace his hipbone had him instantly awake again. "Lance, if you want to go slow, you can't do shit like that," Kyle warned him.

Warm, soft lips sucked across Kyle's shoulder. "Does that mean you want me to stop?" he teased.

"Fuck no!" Kyle flinched at how loud his voice sounded in the dark room. "God, please... if you want me, I'm yours, but you can't tease me that way. It's just wrong."

Lance laughed before rolling onto his back with his arms at his sides. Kyle turned to look at him, kicking himself for pushing for more than Lance was ready for. Lance didn't look at him, but he also didn't move away. Kyle watched as Lance stared at the ceiling. He forced himself to match Lance's deep, steady breathing. When he felt Lance's leg tense and relax, he mimicked the action, followed by the same with their arms. Kyle wanted to ask what was going on, but couldn't bring himself to shatter the peaceful mood of the room.

"Roll toward me," Lance instructed, his voice barely a whisper. He reached for Kyle's hand, holding it over his heart as he settled back against Kyle's chest. They had to look ridiculous, with the much smaller man acting as the big spoon, but again, Kyle wasn't about to interrupt. Something was happening between them, and while not overtly sexual, it was the most intensely erotic moment of Kyle's life. "Good, now you breathe out as I breathe in."

They continued this way for what could have been minutes or hours. Kyle had no clue and didn't care. He was hard as steel, but there was something deeper at play between them. The connection Lance spoke of strengthened with every breath. Lance maintained contact with Kyle as he moved away and sat with his back against the headboard. He patted the mattress between his legs. "Sit."

Kyle obeyed, draping his legs over Lance's. When he closed his eyes, he felt the hands he was quickly becoming addicted to dragging him further up the bed. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around Lance's neck, drawing their bodies closer together. Every cell of his body felt connected to Lance in a way he couldn't begin to comprehend. As they continued breathing together, Lance

began gently massaging Kyle's back, starting at his neck. Kyle rocked his hips back and forth in time with their breaths. Need and want warred with relaxation and peace in his mind. He let go and gave himself permission to do nothing but feel.

Lance reached behind his head, taking Kyle's hands in his own before bending forward, guiding him back to the bed. "I told you, we're going slow," he whispered before sucking Kyle's earlobe.

Legs still draped over Lance's, he lifted his head when he felt Lance curl his fingers around the waistband of his pants. "You have a strange definition of slow," Kyle teased, arching his hips off the bed.

Lance didn't answer, other than to offer him a faint smile. Kyle was grateful for the first streams of early morning light peeking into the room, because that look on Lance's face was one he'd hate to miss. Lance worked the muscles in Kyle's legs until he was a ball of putty in the man's hands. A weightless feeling washed over him, and Kyle knew he'd do whatever Lance wanted, if only to keep this connection he hadn't realized he needed in his life.

Lance worked his way up to Kyle's thighs, kneading them into submission. "Every time we're together, I want you to let go, just like you are right now. Let go of everything other than my touch and how that makes you feel."

"Okay." The single word sounded inadequate as a response to the gentle guidance being offered to him, but every nerve in his body was short-circuiting at Lance's touch.

A wet mouth closed around the head of Kyle's cock, and he arched his back, forcing himself deeper between Lance's lips. The hum of approval vibrated around his shaft, threatening to snap the remaining thread of restraint Kyle held on his orgasm. Lance took him all the way to the hilt, swallowing around his head, his throat a tight passage for Kyle's dick.

Lance placed a hand over Kyle's navel, rubbing circles with the palm of his hand. He lifted his hand, and Kyle arched upward, chasing his touch. Peace flooded him when the heat returned to his skin, only to feel the pressure building yet again. Lance repeated the process, each time lifting Kyle higher, searching for the release he swore was about to come.

His sac tightened, and he knew there was no coming down. Lance lifted his head and fisted his other hand around Kyle's shaft, stroking him hard and fast. "Come for me," Lance urged him. "Let go so you can soar."

Kyle screamed as jets of cum streamed over Lance's fist. He wanted to look at the man causing such intense pleasure, but his head felt like lead and he was unable to open his eyes. By the time his cock stopped twitching in Lance's grasp, he felt free.

The next thing Kyle knew, his head was resting on a pillow over Lance's arm. The other man stared at him, smiling as he blinked his eyes. "Holy shit," Kyle muttered. "What happened?"

"Did you enjoy that?" Lance asked without attempting to explain the lapse in Kyle's recall.

Kyle nodded, sliding a hand between their bodies. There was no way he'd be able to make Lance feel nearly as good as he did, but he wanted to return the favor. He ignored the sting of rejection when Lance stopped him. The press of Lance's lips against his helped ease the blow. "There will be time for that later," he promised. "But for now, you need to get some sleep. You're going to need the energy for what I have planned for tonight."

"What happened to slow?" Kyle slurred. Seriously, he'd felt more in control of his body the few times he'd been plastered than he did after one orgasm from Lance.

"I think I proved to you that slow is simply a word." Lance laughed. "And unless you're opposed, I plan on showing you just how slow we can take things without denying ourselves pleasure."

That, Kyle thought to himself, sounded like one hell of a promise. He was no less scared than he'd been before, but as he drifted off to sleep, he knew what he was building with Lance was something so deep he couldn't have imagined wanting it. Lance was a wonderful teacher, and in this, Kyle hoped to be his star pupil.

The End

Author Bio

Sloan Johnson is a big city girl trapped in a country girl's life. While she longs for the hustle and bustle of New York City or Las Vegas, she hasn't yet figured out how to sit on the deck with her morning coffee, watching the deer and wild turkeys in the fields while surrounded by concrete and glass.

When she was three, her parents received their first call from the principal asking them to pick her up from school. Apparently, if you aren't enrolled, you can't attend classes, even in kindergarten. The next week, she was in preschool and started plotting her first story soon after.

Later in life, her parents needed to do something to help their socially awkward, uncoordinated child come out of her shell and figured there was no better place than a bar on Wednesday nights. It's a good thing they did because this is where she found her love of reading and writing. Who needs socialization when you can sit alone in your bedroom with a good book?

Now, Sloan is a tattooed mom with a mohawk and two kids. She's been kicked out of the PTA in two school districts and is no longer asked to help with fundraisers because she's been known to lose herself with a good book and forget she has somewhere to be.

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