



full
exposure

A Don't Read in the Closet Novella

AMY JO COUSINS

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

FULL EXPOSURE

By Amy Jo Cousins

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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FULL EXPOSURE

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Photo Description

Two men embrace facing each other. Both are shirtless. One is in leather pants with a newly shaved head. He is pushing the other man's jeans down past his hips.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Almost a year ago I was helping my brother out when his assistant couldn't make the trip to Chicago for a photo shoot. All I was supposed to do was hand him one thing after another, but somehow I ended up all over the cover of [name]'s album with my ass bare. Totally unexpected!

Just like the connection I had with [name]. We spent a week fucking like bunnies (Best. Sex. Ever!), kissing until our lips were sore, and just trying to forget our time together was limited. At least that's what I did. I think he felt the connection too. I hope he did. Oh, I don't know. I mean, it's been almost a year now. It's sad I'm still pining after him! It's just one guy thousands of miles away. Doesn't really help he's a celeb, though. Magazines, TV, radio... There's no escaping the guy.

We exchanged a few emails and chatted on the phone after I came back home, but I stopped answering him. I didn't see the point. I mean, aside from the fact we live on opposite sides of the country, I'm me, and he's... Well, he's [name].

But no matter how hard I try, I can't forget him.

I'm going back to Chicago in a few weeks, and I think I need to meet him. I need to see if I'm just imagining things or if there's still something between us.

Note: Contemporary, humorous and sexy is always appreciated!

Sincerely,

Armi

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: family, geek, interracial, mild dominance, reunited, rock star, switch, tattoos

Word Count: 22,724

Acknowledgement

My eternal thanks to Armi for writing such a fabulous story prompt, to Jill, Misha, Liv, Tamsen, Liz, and Shae for the brilliant beta and CP work, and to that final proofreader who noticed Riley's leather pants magically transformed into jeans mid-scene, and then back into leather again by the end. Those were some damn magic pants.

FULL EXPOSURE

By Amy Jo Cousins

*Everywhere,
Everywhen,
Ever and ever and Evan.*

Long Exposure

“You better not be coming to help me just because you want to make fun of Riley Flood.”

Evan Pak loved his brother. Trusted him to do the right things, always. To look out for his family and his friends and even his silly and self-centered celebrity photo clients.

So Evan lied to his face. “Of course not.”

Of course *yes*.

Obviously he was coming to Chicago for the sole purpose of making fun of a pop star.

Evan wasn't going to do it to his *face*. But come on, who wouldn't jump at the chance to work a cushy job around one of those destined-to-crash-and-burn bad boys for a weekend? The gossip potential alone was astronomical.

It's not like he was planning to sell pics to some sleazy celebrity gossip mag. Please. Evan used more than his fair share of snark and sarcasm, but he wasn't a *jerk*. He simply enjoyed the kind of back-home storytelling that was done over beers at the local about how he totally saw Laura Bush at the tearoom in the original Neiman Marcus in Dallas that one time.

What? The popovers were to *die* for. With that strawberry butter? Yum. And Mrs. Bush was a perfect lady. He had to admire someone who could ooze class with a husband like that.

This photo shoot with his brother had the potential to be way better than that.

Spending his twenties working from home on database management didn't exactly overflow with excitement. Getting fired had launched him into a consultant career that was even more successful than his previous job, but after a few years, Evan had realized that every “What have you been up to?” directed his way was answered with, “Not much. Working, I guess.”

“Working, I guess” was no way to live. Evan didn't want to be the old guy sitting at the end of the bar talking about the good old days back in college, or worse... high school. He wanted to be the guy with the awesome stories about that time he got busted banging the two hot porn stars in the VIP lounge bathroom of some hot nightclub.

That one was still on the bucket list.

If most of his life was going to be boring? Then Evan wanted some exceptional stories to tell about his occasional adventures. And the odds of his coming home from Chicago with one after helping his brother with this rock star photo shoot seemed highly in his favor. He hadn't thought twice before he'd said yes to Tommy. He'd helped his brother out plenty of times in the past. At the beginning of his career, Evan played assistant so Tommy didn't have to pay someone else to do it. But in the past few years, skyrocketing success meant Tommy only called on Evan now because he pitied Evan's isolation on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, living with their dad.

So Evan took short trips from time to time to give Tommy a hand, but he'd never worked anything like this photo shoot. This was the big leagues. The king of the bad boys.

Riley Flood had been the teen sensation who drove his motorcycle into a shopping mall and up the escalators, mall cops in hot pursuit on their Segways. Who dropped trou at an awards show with insufficient tape delay, costing the broadcast a hefty FCC fine. He was one of those commercially huge rock stars about whom Evan would say to his friends, "Yeah, his music sucks, but damn, the guy can sing his ass off. Shame about the attitude." Admittedly his handlers seemed to have gotten better at their jobs, because tales of the reckless stunts and outrageous shenanigans seemed to have died down some in the past couple of years. But Evan figured two days in Flood's company ought to give him a treasure trove of good stories to tell back home.

So, yes. Lying to Tommy was a no-brainer.

Of course, by the time Evan drove up to the Norfolk airport on Wednesday night, flew to Chicago, then figured out how to take the El downtown—because the train came right into the terminal and how cool was *that?!—*things were already going off course.

Flood ditched his team, didn't show up for his flight from LA yesterday. We may be a no go.

"Fuck me." Evan complained sourly at Tommy's text on his cell, as he slumped in the back of the El car. He thumbed on the Call icon. Tommy answered right away.

"Hey, bro."

“Dude, I’m sorry,” he said before Tommy could say anything else. It was only a wasted trip for Evan, but if Tommy was getting blown off for a commission this big, that was a serious blow. “What a dick move.”

Tommy’s sigh was audible. “Yeah, well, we’re just gonna set up and see what happens. Maybe they’ll track him down by tomorrow.”

Time to cheer Tommy up. “I’ll be at the hotel in a half hour or so,” Evan said, pulling a random time frame out of his ass, like he had any idea how long it took to get somewhere on Chicago’s public transit. “Let’s go out for dinner. I found this awesome restaurant where they paint your table with chocolate and fruit and stuff and you swirl it all together with your hands and pick it up to eat it.”

“Bullshit.” But now Tommy was laughing, which was the goal. “You’re making that up.”

Evan sank back even farther against his backpack, which was stuffed with a weekend’s worth of clothes. “Come lick the table with me, bro. And then we’ll find someplace cool and go dancing.”

“The last time I went to a gay bar with you, that dude offered to blow me in the bathroom.”

“I still say you should’ve taken him up on that. What a story, right?” Sometimes Evan couldn’t believe Tommy was his brother. The dude had no sense of—

“I don’t do adventures like you do adventures.” He could practically hear Tommy shaking his head.

“Your loss. Besides, the time before that, that girl with the gay BFF hit on you, and she was hot.”

“That is true...” And he could tell Tommy was in.

The Pak brothers, on the town again. Give him a shower and thirty minutes to give his dad a quick check and deal with any last-minute questions from Gayatri about potential snags over the weekend, and Evan would be ready to take Chicago.

Early the next morning, Tommy was still talking about dinner as they set up the rented warehouse studio space. “...wanted the one served on the tree bark with the pine branch. They burn dried leaves at your table, so it smells like autumn in New England.”

“You couldn’t just go get Korean barbecue like normal people?” Tommy’s favorite makeup artist was arranging her insanely complicated setup on a table against the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking advantage of the natural light. Latonya always gave them shit about how she, the black girl, loved the smoky charcoal, grill-it-at-your-table fun of Korean barbecue while Tommy and Evan, the Korean boys, weren’t interested.

“Molecular gastronomy is where it’s at, baby,” Evan teased, and threatened to hip bump her table.

Latonya’s look said, *You’re a dead man if you do*, and he knew from experience the woman could take down a bridezilla with her whip-smart sarcasm alone, so he didn’t.

“Besides,” she continued archly, strapping on her tool belt of brushes and sponges and tissues like a gunslinger’s belt low on her hips, “I’m just surprised you’re functioning. No hangover today?”

“One time!” It was almost a ritual now, after all his years of hanging out with these two. He threw his hands up in the air anyway, because he liked it when they teased him. “I got stupid drunk one time. I was *nineteen* and I couldn’t believe they let me into that bar, my fake ID was so bad.”

Tommy and Latonya laughed at him, breaking out their imitations of a hungover Evan.

“I’m gonna die. Don’t tell Mommy, Tommy.” Fake moans from his brother, who always nailed this imitation. *“Ahhh, I can’t believe I’m rhyming. Shoot me now.”*

“I smell like puke, don’t I? That guy’s never gonna call me. I think I threw up on him.” Pathetic groans from Latonya, who never let that detail go, damn it.

“You guys suck. It’s been seven years!” Laughing despite the heat in his own face, he gave them both the finger while walking backward toward the door to the hall. He’d never let *that* happen to him again. If he was working with Tommy, he had a two-drink limit per night until the shoot was done. The embarrassment wasn’t worth it. “I’m gonna bring you both black coffee. Or, or... *tea.*”

His most important task of the day was playing coffee boy, and he knew just how effective a threat he’d issued. Neither his brother nor Latonya could make it through the sixteen-hour days on a shoot without regular and constant infusions of fresh caffeine.

“Don’t do it, Evan!”

“Evan, we love you!”

“Don’t forget the keys!”

He mock-stomped out the door of the studio, their laughter following him to the industrial elevator with the giant horizontal doors you had to pull on with a rope to close. The grinding gears that growled into action when he pressed the down button did not inspire confidence. He patted the key ring in his pocket, double-checking because there was no one else renting space in the building, and they’d already discovered cell phone signal strength sucked. While he waited, the giggles he’d kept under wraps in the studio leaked out. *Thank God there’s no one here to catch you laughing at yourself in an empty hall, like a loon.*

Tommy and Latonya had met in college, and Evan was still waiting to show up for one of these impromptu vacation/assistant gigs and find out they’d finally fallen into bed together. There was almost no hint of a vibe between those two, but they were so perfectly matched, he couldn’t stop thinking it would be the solution to Tommy’s terrible taste in women and Latonya’s dizzily long dry spells.

No one should go three years without sex. No one. He suppressed a shudder at the idea, and deliberately declined to do the math on his own celibate state. Not that it was hard to calculate. Whenever he’d last gone out of town for the weekend was when he’d last gotten laid, too. The gay scene on the Outer Banks was *not* hopping. Unless he wanted to drive up to Virginia Beach or down to Wilmington, options were limited. Not in the summer, admittedly, when the roads and restaurants and bars were crowded with tourists. But during the rest of the year, Evan felt like the only under-thirty single guy in Ocracoke, gay *or* straight. Add in the IT-guy geek vibe and the “I live with my dad” conversation stopper, and he was pretty much undateable.

But this... this is Chicago! Hot gay boys are everywhere. You will totally get to fuck somebody this weekend, even if you have to use “I met Riley Flood!” as your in.

Not that Mr. Rock Star was giving any sign of actually showing for this photo shoot. Maybe he thought the record company was dissing him by booking his new solo album cover shoot with a relative newcomer. As famous as Flood was with his band, Evan figured he could have had some kind of photography royalty shooting his pictures. Like... like... Annie Leibovitz or something. Shit. Evan didn’t really know any photographers other than his

brother, who was known for his hyperrealistic images that looked more like paintings than photographs.

Of course, Evan thought Tommy's work would be hot shit on an album cover, and he didn't need a gun to his head to admit the rock star was hella hot. With that wannabe-Jesus hair, dirty blond and wavy, hanging in his face like he hadn't washed it in three days, which should've been gross but was somehow sexy as hell? Add in the deep-blue eyes Evan swore had to be photoshopped and the penchant for wearing leather pants and little else, and... *We have a winner in the Sex on a Stick contest!*

And you will get to stare at him for two days, assuming he shows up sometime before Monday. Working as a consultant gave Evan plenty of flexibility with his schedule, but it didn't mean he could take off for indefinite time frames. His partner Gayatri, who'd also been let go in the purge that pushed Evan into consulting, was taking all client calls for the next few days, but that grace period ended on Monday. Evan would be flying out early Monday morning, rock star or no rock star, and his clients would no doubt have flooded his inbox with "emergency" requests in the meantime.

At the coffee shop down the street, Evan hit the counter for his two trays of hot drinks, the legit one and the one with two large hot teas, paper tags dangling from strings. He looked forward to inducing panic by flashing the tray with the tea and his own massive frozen chocolate/coffee shake. With whip cream. A lot of cream. He elbowed the coffee shop door open and headed back to the warehouse studio, a series of cream puns that would make a teenager proud running through his head.

Jesus. Stop. Not everything is about sex.

But the skinny hips and muscled shoulders of the guy walking half a block ahead of him didn't help ease the distraction. Even hunched over with his hands shoved in his pockets because of the cold—*put a jacket on like a regular person, dude, it's October*—the guy was obviously built like a swimmer. Broad shoulders, narrow waist, tight ass. A faded black, short-sleeved T-shirt clung to the guy's shoulders, exposing arms that were thin but covered in enough wiry muscle to make Evan wish he could see them up close.

Forearm porn. Sigh. That was totally a thing. Evan's thing. Even if the guy in question *was* wearing one of those stupid slouching knit hats that covered his entire head. It reminded Evan of almost every picture of Orlando Bloom he'd swooned over during the *Pirates of the Caribbean* years, back in high school.

Fantasies of Will Turner in an unbuttoned-to-his-waist white shirt and a pirate's long, flared coat kept him occupied until he made it to the warehouse door, where the portico protecting the entryway reeked of cigarette smoke. In front of the door, he realized the keys were in his pocket. After an abortive attempt to stack the trays—clearly a disaster waiting to happen—he was bending down to put them on the ground, when a voice made him jump.

“Which one's mine?”

The gravelly words pushed a gasp out of him as he stood up abruptly, hands still full. “What?”

The lanky guy with the slouchy hat he'd followed down the block was huddled in the far corner of the windbreak, dark sunglasses on, a cigarette clutched between two fingers, arms wrapped around his chest.

Looked like their rock star had made it to the shoot after all.

Evan knew he was staring, knew Riley Flood could tell he was at a loss for words, but really, what the hell else was he supposed to do? Maybe he'd been caught off guard, or maybe it was something about the raspiness of that voice, like the man had been up for twenty-four hours singing the blues in a dark and smoky bar, hips circling as he pulled a microphone into his naked chest, curving his body around the mic like a lover...

Don't be an idiot. He doesn't sing the blues. What he sings barely qualifies as music for anyone over the age of thirteen.

Evan blinked. *Back to real life, dummy, where you're staring at the man like you're a seventh grade girl with a crush on a boy band singer.*

“What?” he repeated, aware he'd already said that, but unable to get his mouth to form any other word.

Dirty blond hair escaped from Flood's hat and brushed his shoulders when he tilted his head and lifted an eyebrow behind the edge of the sunglasses' frame. He stared at the trays of coffee.

As if Evan would obviously recognize him, and also psychically know what to bring him. Or, crap, it probably had been spelled out in a rider to Tommy's contract. He'd heard about that kind of thing for rock stars playing concert venues. Bowls of green M&Ms and a hundred and seven bottles of Fiji spring water, or whatever the next weird demand was.

The casual arrogance of it grated on him, so he was ruder than he meant to be. Which was to say, he should've been polite, period, but sometimes Evan's

mouth got away from him. “These are for the people who showed up on time this morning.”

Oh, shit. His stomach dropped to somewhere in the vicinity of his knees. The man stared at him from behind those impenetrable lenses without saying a word. Turned out words weren’t required to set every hair on Evan’s body on end. Flood crossed his arms, slowly, as if he couldn’t be bothered to speak, but wanted to communicate his displeasure nonetheless.

Message received, O Captain, my Captain.

Which was the wrong joke, even inside his own head, because *O Captain, my Captain* was for people he admired, not jerks demanding a coffee handout after not showing up for their scheduled appointment.

Which you don’t need to rub in for the massive celebrity client, dude.

“Sorry. Kidding. But yeah, I didn’t get you anything. We weren’t sure you were coming.” *Way to recover.*

Flood lifted his bare arms at his sides as if to say, *Here I am.*

He tipped his head down, his gaze over the shades delivering a clear message. *Coffee. Now.*

So, not photoshopped, actually. Damn, those are blue.

All Evan wanted was *in*. But the key was still in his pocket and putting the coffee trays on the ground somehow seemed tacky now, and he couldn’t ask the singer to hold them. *Don’t touch, don’t talk to me, don’t ask me to do anything for you, I have people for that* absolutely radiated off this guy.

Not that any of his people were here, as far as Evan could tell. Which was weird. Then Flood spoke again, and Evan could hardly keep himself from flinching at the tight irritation coating the low voice.

“This is supposed to be a small shoot. Photographer and makeup. No crowds.” Flood’s eyes dipped down, then ran back up over Evan’s body, which made his skin tingle like he’d been stroked. He was shorter than Flood, but somehow he suddenly felt like a walking crowd of annoying hangers-on, all by himself.

Evan flushed, feeling his stupid, betraying face heat up and knowing his cheeks were turning a blotchy pink. “No. It’s just them. And me.”

They both stared at the five drinks he was carrying in two cardboard trays.

“It’s a joke. Sort of.” And now it seemed like the dumbest joke in the world. The need to explain himself burned in Evan’s mouth, so he bit the inside of his cheek until it bled copper tang.

Do not talk about the guy you puked on in the bar and so now you have to bring them tea as revenge for the teasing. Don’t. You. Dare.

“I’ve got a latte for Tommy and a flat white for Latonya. That’s new. Not sure what it is, actually. And my gallon of sugar. Might as well be a Slurpee.” He was babbling now. “The teas were the joke, but you could have one of those if you want, I guess. If you drink. Tea.”

The rock star held out a hand, then beckoned with it, *give*, when Evan didn’t move. Extending one hand slowly, he handed Riley Flood a recycled cardboard drinks tray.

The huff of an impatient breath declared his infinite denseness. Flood lifted a chin toward the door. *Are you gonna open it, or what?*

Evan pressed a hand to his ribs, and steadied himself. This was weird, yeah, but he’d wanted an adventure. He dug the key out of his front jeans pocket.

“We’re up on the fourth floor. The elevator’s a death trap. Just, you know, fair warning.”

Some day he would learn how to stop talking when he was nervous. Maybe he could take a class. *Emergency Zipper Installation – Mouths.*

Inside the freight elevator, he took the tray back from Flood without thinking about it, then had to hand it back again when they made it all the way up the slow, grinding rise to the top floor. Flood was out of the elevator before he could blink, jumping over the bottom half of the horizontal doors before Evan had them all the way open.

“Where are the stairs?” the man muttered as he stood to the side, waiting for Evan. If he’d looked pale before, he was ice white now. And sweating. “Jesus.”

“Scary, huh?” He didn’t get a response, so of course he kept on talking. “I looked at the stairs, but they look like something out of a serial killer movie, so I’m on board the sudden death express, thanks.”

At the studio door, Flood held out his hands again and Evan had a split second of insanity where he almost pushed his hips forward like he expected the man to shove a hand in his front pocket. *God, please.* This whole laugh-at-the-silly-celebrity thing all of a sudden seemed like the worst plan ever.

Obviously a guy didn't end up on every radio and Pandora station in the country without having some kind of charisma.

Some kind of? It's oozing out of his damn pores or something. Making me do stupid stuff like try to get him to feel me up. Evan handed over the trays temporarily and unlocked the door, before holding the door open with his foot while taking back the drinks. Again.

Smooth, dude. Real smooth.

Following in Flood's wake, Evan felt as if he trailed behind a Navy SEAL, or a Mafioso who knew a contract was out on his life—someone looking for threats—as the rock star swiveled his head, examining the bare, open space. Tommy strode over to greet them.

“Hey, man. Tommy Pak. This is Latonya. Coffee? Take your pick,” Tommy offered as he relieved Evan of his burden, because Evan's brother was way cooler than Evan would ever be, and never stuttered around famous people. Evan dropped his messenger bag on the floor in the corner, by the opened cases that had held the lights and reflectors now standing like tall trees around the space they'd draped with fabric for a neutral background. Knowing Tommy, Evan would be hauling everything around to take advantage of the brick walls, the exterior wall of cracked glass windows, or even hauling them up to the roof.

That's assuming they got past these first tense moments, and Flood didn't walk out before Tommy had a chance to get started.

Because some asshole told him he didn't show up in time to get a cup of coffee. Evan kept his back to the room, hoping to remain invisible, or at least not provoke the celebrity client any more.

The words that scratched out of Flood's mouth sounded rusty, like he'd forgotten how to speak out loud between the front stoops and the studio.

“I'll take a tea. I hear that's what the latecomers get.”

Evan whipped his head around. Flood wasn't looking at him, but he could've sworn those words were directed at him. The curl of good humor wrapped around Flood's voice startled him.

The relaxed set to Flood's shoulders and the easy smile on his face were a surprise too. It was as if all the tension had melted out of his body in the past two minutes.

Evan wouldn't have sworn to it as Tommy and Flood started to discuss the shoot—would've assumed he'd imagined it actually—but for a split second, as

Flood pulled off his hat and stuffed it in his pocket, hair spilling onto his shoulders... for a moment, Evan thought he saw the man *wink* at him.

Evan blamed his elevated heart rate for the next hour on that wink.

The hours flew by as Tommy worked through preliminary ideas, trying to meet the objectives set out for him by the record company while not pissing off the talent. Evan always found the whole process fascinating, not the least because it changed his way of seeing things for the time a photo shoot lasted. He saw more deeply into the world after spending time with his brother, and wished he could find a way to keep that beyond-the-surface vision when he was far from Tommy, too.

At lunch, Evan ran out for more caffeine, adding espresso shots to everyone's drinks because he knew they needed it. He didn't look at Flood when he took his order—black coffee... *of course*—but he couldn't help staring at the man's arms, the knobby bones of his wrist that stuck out and looked... *bitable*. Escaping from the rising tension in the room—none of the pictures were satisfying Flood, even though Tommy was delivering exactly what had been discussed by the record company reps in the prebooking negotiations—was sweet relief.

He didn't know how his brother managed to keep his cool while talking to the monosyllabic pop star who did nothing but glare and frown and demand Latonya thicken his eyeliner on every break until he looked like one of those death metal fiends.

He had to put down the coffee tray to wrestle with the door when he arrived at their floor. Leaving it open behind him—someone could take the serial killer stairs to bitch at them if they needed the elevator—he headed for the studio door. A man in a sharply pressed suit stood outside it, phone pressed to his ear. Curt commands snapped out of the man's mouth as he started pacing.

When he spotted Evan, the man ended his call. "I'll get back to you. Someone's here. Finally."

The snottiness in that voice stopped him from just opening the door and letting someone else deal with this guy. *Man, Tommy really needs to not hire me anymore for these gigs. I do not have the right attitude toward arrogance.*

"Who are you?" Evan demanded, stopping in front of the door, but not taking out his key.

"I'm from the record company." The guy violated every possible definition of Evan's personal space in a bid to push past him once Evan unlocked the

door. The reek of his cologne made Evan wrinkle his nose. “Open the door, kid.”

He probably should have, knew he was maybe making things worse, again, with a big deal client. But something about being treated like a flunky just brought out the worst in Evan.

So... he didn't.

He kicked at the base of the door until someone inside shouted they were coming.

“Tommy, I'm outside the door with some guy from the studio who says he's supposed to be in there.” He tried to convey *major asshole, do not like* with his tone. The record company guy's glare said he hadn't done a half-bad job with that.

“Who's outside?” A male voice rose sharply in reply, but it wasn't Tommy. *Flood*. Nerves attacked Evan. He shot off a quick prayer he was doing the right thing. “What's his name?” Flood asked through the door.

Evan eyed the man in the suit and got a scowl in return. He wasn't repeating the question, since the guy obviously had heard it.

“It's Tanner, Riley. Open the door.”

Nobody could misinterpret the dead silence that followed *that* announcement.

“Hang on, kid,” Flood commanded. Evan deduced he was the kid in question. Nice to know his Korean genes were getting him lowballed about his age, for the millionth time. “I gotta figure out where I can get a signal in the fucking building, and I'll have backup here in a minute.”

In for a penny...

“Go over by the window where I stacked the light cases. I got a signal there.”

He waited for thanks or another word about what the hell he was supposed to do, trapped in the hallway with a man in a five-thousand-dollar suit ready to eat him with shark teeth, but there was nothing.

Thanks, Flood. Send Dad my bones, Tommy.

He leaned against the door. The suit paced.

This is ridiculous.

The slow drip of silence, like a leaky pipe meant to drive a prisoner crazy with water torture, filled the hallway until Evan would have sworn he could hear his own heartbeat. Or maybe that was the record exec's, pounding angrily in the vein throbbing in the man's temple.

A crash from downstairs, followed by silence, and then the eventual sound of heavy footsteps pounding up the stairs. A bullet-headed bald man the size of a WWE wrestler emerged into the hallway minutes later, and Evan figured it was a safe guess that both he and the asshole in the suit flinched at the sight. The very large man looked up and down the corridor before walking over to them and flipping Evan a casual salute.

"Go ahead, kid. I got this." A hand like a sledgehammer dropped on his shoulder and pointed him toward the door. Then the guy—security? Personal bodyguard?—moved between Evan and the asshole.

"What are you doing? Get out of the way. You're so fired." Cranky studio man clearly had a death wish.

"I don't work for you. And the man who signs my paychecks says you're not welcome here," the mountain rumbled as Evan ducked behind him and shoved his key in the door. Out of breath and sweaty from the sudden stress of outright conflict, Evan fumbled with the lock, which was sticking of course, because now was the time for all things mechanical to fight with him. "Why don't you wait for Mr. Flood back at the hotel?"

By the time he managed to burst into the studio and slam the door behind him, Evan was panting and his hand shook with adrenaline.

In the middle of the room, Flood stood with his feet spread and his hands on his hips, facing the door like he was the last Spartan in the valley before Xerxes's army.

God, you're such a dork. Even your battle references are from comic books. He didn't know if it was the wide leather cuffs they'd put on Flood earlier, more like vambraces, or the cut of Flood's six-pack abs—*he's so ripped... skinny, but muscled, like a street fighter*—but the stark drawing of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* leapt to mind and wouldn't go away.

Riley Flood was definitely looking for a fight.

Not with Evan, however. "Thanks for guarding the door." Flood looked right at him and nodded, and Evan almost shuddered with the surge of pleasure that crashed through his body at having done something this man liked.

Tommy strolled over and stood casually next to Flood, arms crossed. “You know it’s their dime. If they don’t like what we give them, they’re just going to make you do it again.”

Flood narrowed his eyes, still focused on the door that practically vibrated with the suit’s outrage from the hallway. “Not if we give them something so fucking awesome they can’t say no.”

“They can always say no.” Ever practical Tommy.

Breaking from his battle stance, the singer let his shoulders drop as he hugged himself, as if to ward off a chill that wasn’t there. That seemed to be his natural resting state. “Actually, they can’t. I haven’t signed the contract for this album yet. If they’re dicks, I can threaten to walk.”

“Really?” Tommy sounded surprised. “I thought everything was usually long past that point by the time you guys got to the cover art stage.”

Flood shrugged, wide bony shoulders mesmerizing Evan with their paleness. “We’ve been stringing them along with tiny tweaks and changes for most of a year now. But they didn’t want to delay the release, so everything else kept going. Recording. Promo. Whatever.”

“How’d you manage that?” Surprise sounded more like shock now.

“My mom’s a really good lawyer.” Which sounded like something that should’ve been said in a fond voice, but came out clipped and bitter.

Evan kind of wanted to hear the story behind that tone, but if Flood relaxed and lightened up some when it was only the four of them in the room, his chatty streaks didn’t last long. He jerked his head toward the corner where they’d been working and headed that way, stopping halfway there to come back for the coffee Evan had brought him. His brief smile sent another zing up Evan’s spine.

In that moment, Evan realized he would never be able to use “I met Riley Flood” as a pickup line in the bar, because his stupid, stupid brain had just slipped over the line from *yeah, that dude’s pretty hot* to *how do I get him to smile at me again?* And that kind of feeling couldn’t be used for getting laid or cheap jokes back home.

You’re such an idiot. Over the next hour, he forced himself to stay busy swapping out lenses for Tommy and changing lights, keeping his eyes off the increasingly irritated Flood.

“This isn’t working. Too much ego, man.” On the edge of the room, Evan agreed, but was surprised Flood had noticed. The man struck a mock pose, exaggerated lechery on his heavily made-up goth face, hands raised in the air behind him, wrists crossed like some perversion of a crucifixion. “Everyone come. Worship at my altar.” He dropped his arms with a shrug. “It’s boring. It’s been done a million times. And it sucks.”

Evan wandered over to the catering table. He’d been too intimidated before to grab anything off it, but hearing the man refer to his own album covers as too egotistical made Evan doubt Flood would begrudge him a cookie.

Plus, you already got what might have been a wink and half a smile. You’re totally in with the cool kids. Dork.

Flood hadn’t looked at him at all since they’d started shooting again. Not that Evan was looking for it. But if he’d done good as a guard dog, the appreciation was fleeting.

“It doesn’t—” Tommy started to argue. Evan knew by Tommy’s tone that his protest was pro forma. From what he’d overheard, the record company had given detailed instructions about the end results they wanted to see. That was a level of control that was no doubt chafing Tommy’s ass. He made an effort, though.

“It sucks.” Latonya interrupting Tommy was something new. Evan looked over at the three artists, facing each other in a triangle. “Even you don’t believe what you’re saying, Tommy. Admit it.”

“What would you do, if you had free rein?” Flood tilted his head, watching her.

Latonya took a minute to pace around him, tilting her close-cropped head and staring at him with narrowed eyes.

“I’d wash your face clean and cut your hair short. Buzz it, even.” Latonya told him, decisive now that her expertise was being called upon. She stepped into Flood’s space and he flinched, but Flood didn’t protest when she pushed the tangles of his dirty blond hair back off his face, exposing it to their collective gaze. “I’d make you naked. Vulnerable.”

“Yessss.” The word hissed out of Tommy as he dropped to a crouch. He was staring off into the distance, imagining the result and starting to smile. Flood’s eyes were big in their rings of black, flicking back and forth between the two of them. “Drop your persona. For once. Shoot you without all the glamour bullshit.”

Evan held his breath, waiting to see what Flood would say.

“But not just me,” Flood argued, but nodding, like the basic idea appealed. “Naked self-promo is just...” He sighed. Frowned. “If we can just not, that’d be great.”

“We can get a model in. Someone for you to pose with. Intimate, like a lover.” Tommy jerked his head back and froze in place. Energy crackled from him. After a quiet moment, he asked, “You’re bi, right?”

“Mostly gay, actually. It’s pretty rare for me to hook up with a girl,” Flood said calmly. If he was bothered by the question, he didn’t show it.

Tommy nodded. He might joke around, but even the guy who wanted to blow him in that club didn’t faze Evan’s brother. “Yeah, but most people think you’re bi. And your songs are all, what’s the word...”

Evan’s voice broke in. “Gender neutral. Pronounless.” It was the one thing he’d liked about them. Flood’s songs could always be taken either way, gay or straight or simply open for anything.

For the first time in an hour, he felt Flood’s eyes on him as if he were more than a part of the furniture.

“Right.” Tommy’s grin said he was willing to give the record company the finger if Flood was. “If I had free rein, I’d shoot an album cover that’d make sure everyone knew exactly who you are.”

Evan could picture it. An updated Lennon and Ono, with a naked Flood wrapped around some hot guy. He inhaled sharply and Flood’s eyes zeroed in on him. In an instant, Evan realized he must have spent most of the day half hard, because his dick went all the way to full hard-on in his jeans like the *Millennium Falcon* hitting light speed.

On one of the jumps where something *didn’t* go wrong, that is.

Flood’s gaze dropped to Evan’s crotch when Evan moved his hands reflexively to cover himself, even though the untucked tails of his button-down covered everything embarrassing. He’d never been so glad in his life to be addicted to the slightly preppy look of blue or pink or yellow button-downs over white T-shirts.

Before he had a chance to wonder if Flood could somehow see *through* his shirt to his dick, the singer turned away and started pacing. He tangled a hand in his long hair and tugged hard. “Jesus fuck. They’re gonna kill me.”

Some of the bravado was false then. Not all of it, though, because Evan could see it, the moment Flood decided. His entire body quaked, as if a wave of fear swept over him and left him trembling with adrenaline in its wake.

“Let’s do it.”

Tommy and Latonya swept into action, newly reenergized, voices humming. Evan busied himself in straightening up while the rest of them hashed out details of their new direction. When he looked up again, Flood was shaking his head while Tommy spoke to him quietly in the corner. Their voices tangled inaudibly until Flood’s tenor rose suddenly high and loud.

“I can’t wait. It has to be now. Today.” He shook Tommy’s hand off his arm and strode over to edge of the dark gray fabric with the muted sheen they were using as a backdrop. After a moment’s thought, he spun around to look across the wide-open space to where Evan crouched next to their gear.

“Hey, you. Coffee boy. You’ve got a sweet ass. I need to borrow it.” The for-show confidence rang high in Flood’s voice. He’d committed over the nerves they could all feel, and the truth of that threw Evan off guard.

Admiration for the man’s choices or no, he wasn’t about to come running like a dog to a whistle.

Sheer willpower kept him from flipping their celebrity client the finger he would have pointed at anyone else in the room. “The name’s Evan. And I’m not a model.”

“I don’t give a shit, *Evan*. All I want is your naked back. You look pretty fit.” A smile quirked the corner of Flood’s mouth. “And maybe just a little bit of that ass.”

Tommy was already stepping between them, hands in the air. “Ehhh, I don’t know about using my brother. He’s not—”

“I’ll do it,” Evan overrode Tommy, staring straight at Flood. Because who the fuck was he kidding? There was no *way* he wasn’t doing this.

“Make ’em pay you extra, coffee boy. Models make bank.” Latonya’s grin was fierce. Evan could see this new nickname was going to stick around for a decade or two.

Thank you, Riley Flood.

Evan lifted his eyebrows. “What is it they say, models? *I don’t get out of bed for less than ten thousand a day.*” He started to smile at his own joke.

“Done.” Flood nodded, while Tommy sputtered, and even Latonya looked shocked.

Holy shit. THANK YOU, Riley Flood.

Evan stared, his mouth hanging open embarrassingly wide, when Flood delivered the kicker, the two words that made his raging erection a matter of intense concern. “Now, strip.”

In the corner of the studio, Evan didn’t bother to step behind the privacy screen to pull off his shirt. It wasn’t like he was getting completely naked. Away from the spotlights, the air was much cooler. His nipples pebbled up as soon as his torso was bare. *Great. Nothing says I’m overexcited like pointy tits.* The cold air helped some with the hard-on issue. Enough to give him hope that by the time they started shooting he wouldn’t embarrass himself.

He could hear someone approaching as he folded up his shirt and dropped it on his backpack. Probably Tommy coming to warn him not to drool on his client.

“Oh, hello, secret rocker boy.” The growled words sent a shiver racing over Evan’s exposed skin that had nothing to do with the cool air from outside. *Well, hell. So much for getting rid of that hard-on.* Flood’s leather pants creaked right behind him. Heat radiating off the rocker warmed Evan’s back. “Look at *that*.”

He knew what Flood was seeing, had spent months of weekend road trips and a whole lot of cash working with his favorite tattoo artist in Asheville, after taking more than a year to work out the design he wanted. The dozen straight tree trunks rose from a tangle of roots that ran low across his hips, most of the inked pines tapering off halfway up his back. Only one tree rose all the way up to his shoulder, an asymmetrical form with long-reaching, needled, horizontal branches that wrapped across his shoulders and around his side lower down, too.

“Can I touch it?” The breath behind the words tickled the hairs on the back of his neck.

This was the line in the sand. The dirt. The fucking cement floor of the studio. Whatever. Evan had come to Chicago on a lark, to hang out with his brother and have an adventure and go home with a story to tell about that time he met the famous bad boy singer.

Even in his wildest fantasies, he’d never imagined the man with his bare hands on Evan’s flesh. This was it, the moment where shit got real.

Evan crossed the line.

He nodded, *yes*.

The trail of one fingertip across his shoulders, down his scapula, the groove of his spine, left a line like fire. Each branch of his tattoo lit up as it was traced individually.

“Are they bonsai?” A low rumble from Flood.

“Korean diamond pine.” A gesture toward the heritage from which he mostly felt disconnected.

“Lift your arms,” Flood muttered as he ran his fingers along the branch that wrapped around Evan’s ribs—and hadn’t *that* part hurt like a bitch—to taper into a point under his left pec. In a daze, Evan obeyed, and Flood circled around him like a predator deciding where to bite first.

Blunt fingernails scraped across Evan’s chest, crossing from his ribs to his collarbones and swirling back down again. His nipples were so hard they ached, especially the one with the barbell piercing, and he couldn’t blame it on the cold anymore.

“Listen, Mr. Flood...” He dug deep to be polite to the rock star whose recording company was paying a shitload of money for his brother’s photo skills. *This is not a bar hookup. Watch your mouth.*

“Riley.” Under his breath, like the singer hadn’t even really heard him. Riley didn’t look up, long hair falling in his face, just kept touching and stroking and *petting* Evan while murmuring at him. “This is gorgeous work. Who did it?” He spoke a name Evan had never heard of.

Evan tried to inhale to laugh, but he couldn’t fit any more air in his lungs. He exhaled with a whoosh and shivered when Riley pressed a warm palm against the center of his chest. *I wonder if he can feel my heart racing.* “Riley. No. A guy I like in Asheville. You don’t even have any tattoos.” Words were just spilling out of his mouth now, but his non sequitur didn’t throw Riley off balance.

“I’m scared of needles, but I like looking at tats. Asheville, North Carolina?” Riley made the strangely intimate confession as he tugged on Evan’s shoulder to turn him until Riley could look at his back again. *So warm.* His hands on Evan were like flames. “I played a music festival there once.”

Evan couldn’t imagine it. Asheville was folk rock and bluegrass and gospel. Riley’s music was glam rock with occasional forays into alternative angst-

ridden melodrama. He breathed in the smell of sweat and cigarette smoke. “Really?”

Riley looked up then, lips twisted in a half smile. “I wasn’t always a pop star. I was an actual musician once upon a time, you know.”

For a moment, the man seemed like a real person, so the words slipped out before Evan could snatch them back with his teeth. “Were you any good?”

Riley barked a laugh, and Evan suddenly remembered exactly who it was with his hands all over him. It wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility that one of the biggest rock stars in the country could have his brother blackballed from industry work if Evan pissed him off, current meeting of the minds aside. The sudden acid in his stomach burned.

Making plans to piss off his record company must have put Riley in a good mood, because he simply bit his lip, slightly crooked teeth digging into pink skin, and answered with a straight face. “I was awesome.”

Then he winked at Evan. *Winked*, goddamn it, and this time Evan knew he wasn’t imagining it. And grabbed the tiny barbell in Evan’s right nipple with his thumb and index finger, and twisted.

The zing of pain from that touch raced from Evan’s nipple to his balls like a rocket.

“*You’re* not afraid of needles,” Riley murmured, tapping the piercing, playing with it, as if unwilling to let it go.

Evan exhaled slowly, giving up on getting his dick to go down in his jeans before his lust for the surprisingly tactile celebrity became entirely too noticeable. Everyone would just have to deal. That lust must have distracted him though, because he told the truth before he couldn’t think better of it. “No, I am.”

One dark blond arched eyebrow. *Really?*

He shrugged, uncomfortable now. “My dad says I had a really bad reaction to a shot when I was little. Needles always scared me after that.”

“So why do this?” The skate of fingers against his skin again, setting him alight. Another ping to his piercing made the breath catch in his throat. He could smell the shampoo or soap Riley had washed with at some point, sharp and musky. And cigarettes still, underneath.

“Because I wanted it. And I didn’t want to be afraid anymore.”

“Is that all it took for you, then?” Riley spoke under his breath, as if the question wasn’t meant for Evan at all. “Wanting?”

Evan shrugged. He didn’t know what to say. Wasn’t sure Riley was looking for an answer, even. And that phrase, *all it took*, minimized everything he’d gone through. The hyperventilation and fear and putting it off for years because he was scared. It wasn’t like he thought he’d made it through some kind of horrific battle to get his piercing and his tattoo, but it hadn’t been easy either, and the memory of it anchored him when he was nervous.

He lifted a hand and touched his ribs. He couldn’t feel the tattoo, of course. It had healed perfectly. But knowing it was there had turned into a touchstone for him, easing his nerves.

“That’s almost inspiring, coffee boy,” Riley said, dragging his fingers down Evan’s side one last time. Evan had never been so glad in his life to be naturally slim, because it felt as if Riley paused for a split second on each rib as if counting them, and Evan wanted that touch on his skin for as long as humanly possible.

This is the hottest adventure ever. I am so going to jerk off to this memory until the day I die.

Which was tacky, maybe, but—face it—honest.

Hair and makeup were a hurried rush. Evan’s face wasn’t going to be in the shot, so Latonya didn’t have to do much to him except work the product out of his hair. She wanted it hanging down in his face, not spiffed up in soft spikes.

Cleaning all the base and eyeliner off Riley’s face took way longer, the pile of stained black and beige tissues overflowing the trash can and spilling onto the floor. When the buzz of the clippers kicked in, Evan and Tommy both drifted closer, curious, but she waved them away.

“Go eat something,” she snapped protectively, flicking a hand toward the catering table. *He doesn’t need you two staring at him* was the unspoken message.

When she finally called Evan and Tommy back over, the Riley that awaited them hummed with nervous energy. Latonya’s hand resting lightly on his shoulder might have been the only thing keeping him from bolting out the door.

Riley’s eyes had been arresting before from their color alone. Without his tangled hair to hide behind though, they looked huge. Surprisingly delicate ears laid back against Riley’s naked skull, more evidence of the singer’s needle

phobia in his lack of earrings. The vulnerability Latonya had wanted radiated from Riley's face.

"Jesus," Evan breathed.

"Even *I* don't think I'm God. Not quite." Riley was joking, but Evan could hear the nerves underneath.

Evan struggled to find a not stupid way to express himself. *You're more beautiful now than you've ever been before*, but Tommy beat him to it.

"No one." He circled around Riley, staring at him from all angles. "No one has ever seen you like this. You're gonna blow them away."

Riley's eyes, though, flicked to Evan. Questioning.

Evan nodded.

One slow inhale and exhale while they all waited. Riley pressed his palms to his eyes and then shook himself all over, like a dog shedding rainwater. "Let's do it."

The first half hour they spent figuring out Riley and Evan's precise positioning passed in a blur. Mostly, he felt like a prop as Tommy stage-directed Riley in various poses around him. Like a particularly uncomfortable chair or tall stool, perhaps. His tension—so high at the first touch of Riley's bare skin against his own as they lay on fabric wrinkled like a bedsheet on the floor, then sat wrapped around each other, and finally stood pressed together—melted away into frustration as pose after pose was rejected, Evan the totally silent bystander in this battle to capture something indescribable.

"Two minutes, guys. Changing lenses," Tommy announced. Evan and Riley relaxed enough to separate their bodies by inches. Not far enough to banish the smell of Riley's sweat or let Evan's skin relax from its hyperalert sensitivity to every touch, every bit of radiating body heat.

They stood there, silently.

He had to say something. Had to smash the tension pushing between them like a handsy drunk on a dance floor. He meant it to be something flattering. A compliment about the man's music maybe, if Evan could remember one of his frigging songs, or something about the recent tour.

He was touring this summer, right? He had to be. Everybody tours in the summer, don't they? Fuck, I suck at this. Just don't say anything about his abs.

Because, honestly, that was all he could look at. Looking up to meet Riley's eyes was too dangerous. Every time he did, heat flashed over him, pulsing in his balls and making his breath shallow. So he stared at the man's flat stomach. Skinny. Riley was wiry, like someone who didn't eat enough and smoked too many cigarettes. His chest was almost hairless, but his leather pants rode so low Evan could practically follow the trail of hair from his belly button to the tops of his dark blond pubes.

Jesus. This is not better to look at than his eyes. He was mesmerized by the indented vee of the muscles at Riley's hips, imagining dragging his thumbs down those ridges as far as the pants would let him. *Say something. Say something. But not about his happy trail. Say something nice.*

He sucked in a breath. "You reek of cigarettes." *Shit.* "I mean, I can smell them on you. And obviously you've been smoking, which, you really ought to go outside, you know? It's kind of rude to do it around a bunch of people who obviously think it's gross. I mean, it's not like you're smoking cloves or something that smells good. Or you could get one of those vapor things. You can buy them so they taste like caramel and mint and stuff, which actually sounds kind of gross. But not as gross as cigarettes..." His voice trailed away as he noticed the total silence that had fallen throughout the studio. Somebody had turned the music off and everyone—*everyone*—was listening to him babble.

Double shit.

The pale chest in front of his face lifted, as if Riley too had inhaled suddenly. Evan waited for it, the sarcastic comeback, the totally legit command to go away and not come back unless it was with a model who wouldn't insult the rock star while getting paid thousands of dollars to stand around for a couple of hours with his shirt off.

Riley's chest fell slowly as he exhaled, his breath brushing over Evan's face. And it didn't *reek*. Yes, he could smell the burnt tobacco smoke, but he smelled coffee, too. And something sweet, like Riley had eaten one of the chocolate croissants from the buffet maybe.

"I smoke more when I'm nervous." A short laugh that ripped through Evan like he was paper. Every time, damn it. Every time he braced for the rock star, he got one of these confessions that cut his legs out from under him. When Riley lifted a hand, Evan sneaked a glance in time to see him run that hand over his naked skull as if feeling for the missing shield of his long hair. Riley had

lifted his face to the light coming in the tall windows, his eyes closed as if he were bathing in the faint warmth.

“I talk more when I’m nervous,” Evan admitted, because it felt like one of those moments where he should offer something in exchange.

Riley looked at him now. Smirked. But *nicely*, like he was teasing. “I noticed.”

Evan tried to bite his lips to keep from smiling, but knew Riley could see it. *Sweet Mother Mary and Joseph.*

“Shutting up now.”

“You talk. I’ll smoke. It’ll be okay.”

“Kissing a smoker is like licking the inside of an ashtray.” He closed his eyes. Whispered. “Oh my God. Oh my *fucking* God. Just kill me. Kill me now.”

Even with his eyes closed, he knew exactly how many inches there were between the two of them. *Not enough.* Could feel it when Riley nudged forward with the toe of his boot until his feet bracketed Evan’s. “You wanna kiss me, *Evan?*”

Evan wondered if it ever wouldn’t feel as if Riley were licking his name when he said it. Before Evan could answer or even nod—or fall to his knees and press his face to the length in Riley’s pants, which had been pressed against him for the past hour now—Tommy was back and they were shooting again.

Riley’s body vibrated with tension after another unsuccessful attempt to capture the vibe Tommy had proposed. Eventually, he snapped.

“No. The jeans don’t work. He needs to lose them.” Riley tugged at Evan’s belt as he talked to Tommy like Evan wasn’t there. “This is PG-rated. I’m not trying to show them who I dated in high school. I’m showing them who I fuck now. We want R.”

“Wait.” Evan didn’t mean *wait, no*, exactly. But *wait, I’m not totally sure I want to drop trou in front of a crowd, even if half the crowd is related to me* was a definite possibility. Also, *what kind of R-rated pose are we talking about?*

Even Tommy nodded, frowning but not disagreeing. “Yeah. I see it.”

“Same shot, but more explicit.” More staring at Evan as if he wasn’t quite a person, which was beginning to irk him. The temptation to do or say something

that would make them look at him as the fairly successful programming consultant and sci-fi movie fan he was pulled at him. Not that Riley knew any of that about him. Riley's hand brushing his back kept him silent. "We don't actually show the crack of his ass, because my hand's on it. My finger covering it up, like *in* his crack. But you can see everything else."

His finger in the crack of your ass. With that, Evan was so light-headed from forgetting to breathe, he felt dizzy.

"Less talk about my brother's ass, before I decide this is a terrible idea." Tommy avoided looking directly at Evan, probably thinking the one thing he'd never wanted was to take naked pictures of his brother.

"Wait." Evan kept his voice calm but firm. "What exactly are we talking about here?"

"You can wear one of those cock socks if you want," Riley suggested smugly, humor lighting up his face. "I mean, personally, I'd be way less embarrassed to have my dick out. But maybe that's a little daring for you."

"Evan—" Tommy spoke behind him. His brother knew him, knew Evan had never turned down a dare in his life.

Eyes locked on Riley's midnight blue gaze, Evan unbuckled, unbuttoned, unzipped, and shoved his jeans and underwear to the floor all in one sharp push.

"That's it." Riley's grin was fierce, a fire raging in a blizzard. He didn't look down, as if making a point not to, which was kind of a shame because Evan's dick was worth looking at. "C'mon, coffee boy. Let's shock the world."

"Evan." He wondered how many times they were going to play this game, where Riley distanced himself and Evan made him stop. The singer didn't say a word, narrowing his eyes at the challenge. "My name is Evan."

He already knew Riley was going to give in to him.

Keeping quiet while he waited for Riley to speak, though, their naked chests gleaming with the traces of the oil used to highlight muscles, was the hardest thing Evan had ever done. His heart thumped in his chest like a bird trying to escape a cage.

Riley Flood was still wearing those ridiculously hot leather pants, and Evan was fucking *naked* in front of him.

"*Evan.*" Like he was tasting the name. Riley kept his voice low enough to make his words private. Between the two of them. "Adrenaline's a pretty great high, isn't it?"

Evan didn't have to answer that. He was pretty sure the heat he felt in his face and the way he'd had to open his mouth to breathe answered that question for him.

"Let's crank it up a notch, okay?" Then Riley tangled his fingers with Evan's and drew him back under the lights.

There wasn't a bone in Evan's body that didn't want to go there with him.

Embarrassment about being naked in front of Tommy and Latonya kept him mostly soft, which was fucking great. Evan had still made a point of keeping his back to them until he and Riley were standing in the pose that had been settled on. Evan's left side and part of his back were to the camera, his arm wrapped around Riley's neck and his face tucked against it on the other side. Riley's right arm reached up and clasped Evan's shoulder, fingers gripping hard enough to show, as Riley stared right into the camera lens. That left hand, with the guitar player's calluses scraping his skin, spread wide over Evan's ass, middle finger nestled in his crack like it had found a home there.

Big eyes wide. Fierce. Evan had seen the test shots and knew it was a gorgeous image. Knew too that anyone who had seen his tattoo would be able to recognize it.

I don't care. None of those people are clients. And I don't care. A strange intimacy had developed between them under the hot lights. What Riley wanted *mattered* to Evan. And if Evan could, he would give it to him. Give anything to him.

Right before Tommy was about to start shooting, Riley decided to push the adrenaline one notch higher.

"Hang on." Riley spoke loudly enough to make everyone pause. Evan let go as Riley stepped back. Watched in shock as Riley kicked off his boots and stripped his pants off. He wasn't wearing anything beneath them. *Of course.* "Better."

When Riley pulled them together again, Evan couldn't tell whose heart was pounding harder. He had to remind himself to get a grip. *He's a professional performer. This is just business... art... whatthefuckever to him. He's nervous because of what this might mean for his career. It has nothing to do with having his dick out with you.*

Because he did. Riley Flood's naked dick was pressed against Evan's hip. And Evan *had* looked, so he knew Riley was circumcised and almost pink and that he didn't shave a damn thing.

Something about having that knowledge in his brain... broke it.

Under the cover of having his face tucked into Riley's neck, Evan set his teeth into a tendon running to Riley's shoulder and *bit*. The body in his arms tensed, then liquefied, as Riley draped himself even more closely around Evan.

Evan kept his eyes closed, sweating in the heat of the lights, and flew.

"You ready?"

"Excuse me?" Evan looked up from buttoning up his oxford, finally dressed again in the corner of the studio space. It had taken him a solid fifteen minutes to get his composure back after their shoot, and he wasn't entirely sure words had fully returned to his brain.

Riley looked him right in the eyes. *Don't even try to act like you don't know what's next*. Whatever chattiness he'd had earlier was gone now, as if his energy were so low he'd started shutting down unnecessary functions to conserve it. Talking. Not needed.

They both knew what came next.

From across the room, Evan could feel his brother's stare, warning him off. Reminding him that Riley Flood was a world-famous celebrity with a roving pack of paparazzi stalking his every move and a slew of well-fucked runway-model girls and rock star boys in his wake.

This is out of your league, little brother, Tommy's look said.

And he was right. So right. Evan knew it down to his bones. This man might fuck him or feed him or keep him for the weekend, but would kick him to the curb the moment he got bored, and move on.

With a full-body shiver, he flashed back to that moment under the hot lights, the full length of his naked body pressed against Riley's, sweat trapped between them. The dizzying flash of the camera lights. The press of Riley's hand into his ass, the finger wedged between his butt cheeks. His hidden nip of teeth against the side of Riley's neck that no one else saw, but had made Evan's dick surge against the scruffy pubes of the surprisingly ungroomed pop star.

He pressed his hand against his tattooed ribs. Deep breath.

I know, said the look he threw back to Tommy. *I know, and I don't care*.

"I'll see you back here tomorrow morning. Early." Tommy's voice was stern. The windows behind him were dark. They had worked late into the night.

“No.” Riley slashed a hand through the air, cutting Tommy off. His dark-blue eyes were big in his face, sitting in the shadows of eye sockets that looked bruised with exhaustion. “We’re done. It’s good. You’ll be paid for the full shoot, but I’m done.”

Evan followed Riley out of the room without saying another word.

Snapshots

Thursday night

The energy in the hotel's surprisingly tiny elevator is strained. Evan checks his email—no emergencies, nothing from his dad, always a relief—and finds himself making a joke when Riley stares at him. Evan shoves the offending object back in his messenger bag.

“Are you going to lock up my phone or something, so I don't take your picture and sell it to the tabloids?” Evan asks. In the taxi, Riley had checked in with his WWE-security guy and confirmed the all-clear at the hotel. No record company execs in sight.

“After today, do you think I give a shit about pictures?” Riley's voice is harsh, and his eyes avoid his own face in the mirrored walls of the art deco elevator. His naked skull looks fragile in the greenish light shining through the glass ceiling. “I just made a queer album cover. You think I give a fuck about anything you might do?”

Evan is learning the rhythms of this man, his mercurial swings from mellow calm to excitement to an anger fueled by panic. It is apparently one thing to flirt publicly with bisexuality in drunken moments at clubs or private parties, knowing the public would speculate. It is something entirely different to make an explicit announcement with a naked, holy-shit-their-cocks-are-touching album cover.

Riley's panic is kicking in.

“Maybe.” Away from the cameras and the audience, Evan's own anxiety is evaporating like mist. He leans back against the mirrors, more confident now that he's reading this right. Riley's entire history of acting out reads differently through the lens of a guy going through his teen years in the spotlight, trying to push back against someone else's definition of his whole self. And maybe in his real life Evan would have hesitated, but Evan on an adventure doesn't flinch. “Maybe yesterday you didn't care, because everything was a joke. But you just potentially torpedoed your deal with the record company, so maybe today you care a little bit.”

If he thinks he can push back against Riley Flood on an adrenaline tear, though, he is wrong.

Riley crowds him into the corner of the elevator until the railing digs into Evan's ass. Riley's T-shirt smells of a long day under hot lights. Sweaty. Musky. Evan wants to eat that smell off Riley's skin with his tongue.

"You wanna take a picture of me sucking your cock, coffee boy?"

He shakes his head, smiling. Every time, they will do this. "Evan."

"Coffee boy." Pressing his dick against Evan's until Evan can hardly breathe with wanting Riley on his knees. "Why not? Let's do it."

The faint ping of the elevator arriving at the penthouse reminds him this is his last chance to make demands before he is sucked under the whirlpool of Riley Flood's needy, demanding, overwhelming desires. He hangs onto the one thing he wants, he needs, if this isn't going to turn out to be a night that leaves him a huddled wreck afterward. "Evan." He sucks in a deep breath and stares up at Riley. "Or I ride the elevator back to the lobby and you can suck your own dick."

Riley stares at him, and Evan feels it. Feels the struggle it takes for this man to give in. Feels too how much Riley needs to do just that. They stare at each other until Riley turns away and walks into the hotel suite.

"Come inside. Evan."

He knows what he is getting into. Knows that Riley Flood is going to fuck him. And Evan, who switches in theory, but rarely bottoms, doesn't hesitate to follow.

For what feels like the hundredth time that day, Riley surprises him.

He stops Evan in the dark foyer and pushes the shoulder strap of Evan's bag off his shoulder. The thud of the bag hitting the hard, polished tile is the only sound in an empty, enormous suite that looks like it stretches for miles. No lights are on. The glow from the city skyline is bright enough.

More than bright enough for him to watch Riley run a hand over his skull again.

"I don't want to be in my own head anymore." Riley's eyes are black holes in the dark hotel room, lit only by the glow of city lights through the bank of windows at which he stares. "I need to stop thinking."

Evan lifts his hand to Riley's cheek. Turns his face until they are looking at each other.

“You mean it,” he breathes after a long, silent moment of staring. Riley drops his eyes, tilts his head down. Evan slides his fingers behind Riley’s neck and pulls him forward until his forehead pushes against Evan’s shoulder. Holds him there for a moment before murmuring in that exposed shell of an ear. “Yes. You can stop now. I can make it stop.”

Heat, want, need roar through him like a conflagration. Because Riley wants what he wants and Evan would set him on fire with it.

“On your knees.” Tile aches, but Riley needs that.

Riley drops like his strings have been cut, hands gripping tight at Evan’s knees.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Evan murmurs, running his open hand over Riley’s bare head. Dropping his hand, he brackets Riley’s throat, not tight enough to do anything except pull focus to his grip. “I can do that for you.”

Words matter. Almost more than what he does, the words matter. He will keep whispering to a silent Riley—praise he means sincerely, threats he doesn’t—as Riley opens his jeans and takes his cock out.

He means to make it last, to wallow in the wet heat of Riley’s mouth. To watch as one of the most famous men in the country submits and opens his mouth wide to take Evan inside. Evan knows this will hurt. He is not small and will let himself lose control until Riley coughs and chokes for brief moments, Riley’s eyes always looking up, always on him.

He imagines Riley’s face with the heavy eyeliner from the first part of the shoot today. How that black stain would smear and run with the tears, leaving trails down Riley’s cheeks, and wishes he could see that someday. Knows he won’t. The picture makes him come so hard he cries out in the echoing foyer.

He tugs Riley up and wraps his arms around that slim torso, stroking Riley’s back until they are both breathing evenly again.

They shower in silence, Evan leaving the lights low and taking charge of the washing. He handles Riley’s erection clinically, lifting it to wash but not teasing or even acknowledging its existence. He doesn’t miss Riley’s gasp when he washes him though. He puts his hands on Riley’s back until Riley bends over with his hands against the wall and Evan washes him—ever more intimate, but still not pushing the energy between them deeper into the erotic.

Riley's arms tremble until Evan makes him stand up again. He turns Riley to face him, making him lean against Evan while rinsing under the soft spray.

He pulls Riley away from the windows as they walk through the suite's main room, conscious of a protective urge that doesn't want the man exposed to any more eyes than he's already suffered through today. "We can avoid those."

Riley smiles and lifts his head, the playful trickster returning briefly. He pulls against Evan's hand in his and walks them over to the glass. "No one can see it. It's private."

Evan stands in front of the floor-to-ceiling ocean of glass, the entire city laid out before him like a glittering necklace along the edge of the lake. Riley presses up behind him. The erection they are both ignoring is like a brand.

"Tell me what you want. Tell me and I'll do it," Riley whispers in his ear, hands moving slow like honey up and down Evan's chest, drugging him with his touch. "Anything."

The words emerge without conscious thought as Evan pushes back with his ass, a subtle shift that communicates as well as him bending over to grab his ankles and expose himself. "I like your mouth."

The exhale against his neck might be a laugh. Or a sigh of approval. Riley's mouth moves to Evan's spine and begins a slow fall to where Riley's fingers have found their home again on Evan's ass. The air is cool against the damp skin of Evan's crease as Riley opens him and uses his mouth until the moans bubble up from Evan's belly and spill out into the dark.

He leans against the glass, his breath fogging and fading the view. He is hard again. Reaching back with a hand, he palms the curve of Riley's head, the faintest beginnings of stubble tickling his hand.

In the room where Riley sleeps, the bed is as big as a lake.

He lays Riley on it, facedown, and fucks him like he doesn't matter. Tells him with hands and mouth and words how very much he does. Being used is what this man wants, but Evan will force him to feel valued while he does it.

"You're so good."

The words make Riley shudder beneath him.

Somewhere between the second time he makes Riley come, sucking him off on the wide lake of that bed with half his hand up Riley's ass, and the lightening sky announcing the nearness of the dawn, Riley whispers to him. He is so quiet, Evan could pretend not to hear him.

“Stay.”

He doesn't say anything for a minute. He wonders how this dream state will fare in the light of day. A hand moves in the dark to clasp his own.

“Evan.”

He nods. Riley can't see him. More words are needed.

Only one word, really.

“Yes.”

Friday night

Even a rock star's sexual haze fades after hours of edging and coming and sleeping the sleep of the emotionally exhausted.

“We need to go out.” They are eating on the bed, because crumbs in the sheets don't matter when someone else will change them twice daily if needed. Evan's balls are sore from coming.

He doesn't mind.

“We really don't.” Riley's first instinct is always to push back, argue against any idea not his own. Evan is ready for this. Also, he's feeling significantly less Lord of Fuck Manor in the broad sunshine flooding the room. He is learning that twenty-four-seven domination is not his thing. Right now he needs something normal. A movie marathon. Mini golf. A walk along the lakefront with cold winds scouring his brain.

He hands Riley another cookie. Gives him a look when Riley goes to put it back on the tray. The man doesn't eat enough, but can be tempted with sweets. “Seriously. Your animal magnetism or whatever it is, is fucking with my head. I need some fresh air.”

“So, go.” Riley rolls away from him, pulling the sheet around his narrow shoulders and shrugging. “The door's not locked.”

For the first time, Evan feels like he is dealing with a pouty teenager. He sighs. A man who was never encouraged to set aside his wishes for anyone else's during his formative years can be a total pain in the ass.

“Don’t be a shit.” He keeps his voice firm, which feels strange when he’s trying to bring them back down to earth, to normal conversation, normal activity. Some control must still be exerted.

“Go on. Go. Tell everybody you fucked the rock star. You’ll be famous when that cover art is released anyway. Everyone will be looking for you.”

He knows. It makes his mouth flood with saliva, the anxiety that sweeps over him. His adventures aren’t supposed to follow him home.

“Do you want me to?” He knows the answer is no. Can read the desire for melodrama leaking out of Riley like it’s written in neon on his skin. No answer. Unacceptable. “Do you really think I would?”

A muffled no makes it through the pillows over Riley’s face.

“What was that?” He is annoyed now and needs more than a grudging admission.

Riley whips the pillow to the floor and glares at him. “No. I don’t think you’ll tell anyone.” He pushes himself upright, and then keeps going until he crouches over Evan, knocking him back onto the mattress. “I think you kept that asshole out of the shoot because I asked you not to let him in. I think you took your clothes off and posed with me because I asked you. And I think you’d stay here all weekend and fuck me any way I want, if I asked you to.”

Evan is breathless again. A permanent state around this man.

“Am I right?” Riley demands, sitting on his chest, the soft puddle of his balls on Evan’s sternum damn near the only thing Evan can think about.

He doesn’t have enough brainpower left to lie. Doesn’t want to, in any case. “Yes.”

Evan watches Riley in the mirror, using spirit gum and what looks like fur scraped off an alley rat to give himself a scraggly mustache and chin pubes. Riley has already shown him the YouTube videos he watched to perfect his disguise-making skills as a teenager.

“Huh. If you’d asked me, I’d’ve said you couldn’t ever look anything but fucking hot.” He smiles at Riley in the mirror.

“You’d’ve been wrong.” Riley’s voice is dry. He glues more shavings from a dead rodent to the skin above his upper lip.

“So wrong.” Evan wrinkles up his nose. “I’m not going to kiss you with that shit on your face. Just so you know.”

“I’ll suck your dick with this shit on my face, and you’ll beg me not to stop.” Arrogant Riley is back.

Evan stops breathing. “Yeah, don’t say stuff like that when we’re about to go out in public, okay?” He presses a hand to his suddenly hard dick and exhales slowly.

Riley’s reflected smile is wicked.

“Oh my God. I change my mind. I can be embarrassed.” Riley stops on the curb, heels hanging into the gutter. He is staring at the group of rowdy partygoers wearing Blackhawks and Bulls jerseys preceding them into the large building lit up with blinking neon signs.

“Don’t be such a snob.” Evan laughs. No one is looking at them. Riley’s shaved head and horrible facial fuzz make him unrecognizable, although Evan hadn’t been able to convince him to leave the shades behind, so Riley looks as douchey as the dudebros making him flinch.

“What’s wrong with them?” Riley’s voice rises high. “And why are they wearing such horrible clothes?”

Evan laughs and tugs on his arm, pulling him into the arcade. “You’re such a shit. They’re having fun. Don’t be a party pooper.”

Twisting in his grip, Riley manages to look down his nose at Evan without taking off the sunglasses. “Not wanting to look like an asshole doesn’t mean I’m a party pooper. And who says that anyway? Twelve-year-olds?”

“Come on. It’ll be fun.”

“I doubt it.”

But he lets himself be led forward. This will be an adventure for him. For Evan, it is touching base with his comfort objects.

It is important for him to remember who he is. Getting lost in Riley Flood would be far too easy.

The arcade’s collection of video games is old school. Hardcore old school. After an hour of Galaga and Pac-Man and Defender, Riley forgets about being

in public and the dorkiness of the general atmosphere, shouting at the screen as the red ghost kills his Pac-Man for the third time in a row.

“That fucker has it out for me, I swear. I was going left. Left!” Evan grins as Riley smacks the red ball of the joystick in the direction it is refusing to take his Pac-Man. Hunching over the two-player console, his knees sticking out to the sides, Riley has become an obsessed gamer, refusing to quit until he makes it to the next level.

“I can do it. I can do it. Go, go, no, go left, you stupid... Why am I getting stuck in the corners? Gimme, gimme... Ha! Who’s the scary one now, you fucker?” He cackles maniacally as his Pac-Man eats a Power Pellet, then chases down the nearest ghost and touches him, sending the ghost away to be regenerated.

The next time Riley loses, Evan pulls him away from the console.

“Oh, good. Can we finally get out of here?” Riley tries to pull a sneer back on his face, but keeps looking wistfully over his shoulder at the Pac-Man table receding behind them.

“Nope. Time for bowling,” Evan announces cheerfully.

Riley’s shoulders sag, his back slumps, his stomach collapses, until the man is a walking letter C. “Bowling? I suck at bowling.”

Evan has never spent time with someone whose emotions change so rapidly and with such seeming melodrama. It’s as if Riley is plugged into a socket and someone keeps yanking and reconnecting the plug, firing him up and sucking all the energy out of him from moment to moment.

He tucks an arm through Riley’s and walks him over to the mini bowling alley set off to the side of the main arcade. The volume of screeching buzzers and ringing bells is marginally lower here, and he hopes to calm things down for a bit.

Plus, Riley has just trounced him in every video game they played. Evan spent half his childhood in a suburban bowling alley. His battered ego needs a win.

“Come on. We need to get shoes.” He pulls Riley to the counter where a goth girl sits with a magazine, earbuds in.

Riley hangs back. “Oh, gross. Bowling shoes are disgusting.”

“Get over yourself, princess. You’re wearing them.”

“I’m gonna burn my socks after, though. You better figure out how to turn on that fireplace.”

Two hours later, they wait at the glass-topped counter for the checkout girl to swipe Evan’s credit card.

“I’m keeping these shoes.” Riley’s voice hums with satisfaction behind Evan.

Riley isn’t looking, so Evan rolls his eyes. So much for the ego boost of bowling with the out-of-touch rock star. “You know they’ve been worn by, like, a thousand other people.”

Riley puts his precious shoes on the counter, but keeps a protective hand on them, as if the checkout girl might snatch them back if he lets go. “I don’t care. I’m an awesome bowler. Souvenirs are required.”

“You’re a bazillionaire. You can buy brand new bowling shoes. Ones without other people’s sweat in them.” Evan can’t help it, not sure if he’s serious or just teasing. The man has millions and doesn’t hesitate to flaunt it—Evan doesn’t even want to ask how much a penthouse suite at that hotel costs per night—but now Riley wants to keep a pair of grungy blue and red bowling shoes? And seriously, is Riley just good at everything? He hadn’t expected it to sting this much—hadn’t expected it to sting at all—losing at every game they’d played all night.

The golden boy doesn’t hesitate to push back, though.

“I can’t believe you’re grossed out by this. Wearing other people’s stinky shoes was your idea, remember?” Riley lifts an eyebrow at him in the mirror behind the counter. It’s entirely unfair how hot that eyebrow is on a guy whose shaved head is still ghostly pale compared to the rest of his skin. He should look like an escapee from some postapocalyptic prison world. Instead he looks slightly demonic and entirely too sexual for words. When the tatted-up goth girl returns with Evan’s receipt, Riley pushes cash across the counter and begs with all of that ridiculous charisma until she gives in and lets him get away with his purchase.

They head to the front door of the arcade, sunglasses firmly in place for Riley who let them slip to the table during a run of strikes. Evan doesn’t mind their return for a second, as it means a hard hand wrapped around his upper arm as he leads the way through the dark hallway exiting the building. He keeps talking over his shoulder.

“Yeah, but it’s one thing to wear them for an hour. It’s a totally unnecessary level of grossness to take them home with you.”

“I don’t care.” Riley hugs the shoes to his chest with one arm, smugly. “I’ve recaptured my youth, and these shoes of glory will memorialize that.”

Evan refrains from further eye rolls. “You’re such a weirdo. Now I know you’re a celebrity.”

On the street, they stand under the streetlight and Riley sucks on the back of his neck while Evan hails a cab. He has already decided to make Riley fuck him when they get back to the hotel. After losing at everything, all night, Evan figures Riley can ride his streak of glory to a triumphant finish in Evan’s ass while he lies there and lets the rock star do all the work.

When he announces this in the back of the cab, Riley laughs and kisses him stupid.

Saturday night

Evan spends a half hour searching online and forces Riley to come out with him to an old movie theater that serves pitchers of cheap beer and shows fan favorites while the audience shouts out classic lines at the screen. They sneak up to the mostly vacant balcony and curl up on seats in the front row with their feet on the railing in front of them. He makes Riley drink the mass-produced domestic beer on tap and teases him when he likes it.

“What would the paparazzi say now?” he whispers in the flickering light, the length of his thigh pressing against Riley’s. He gasps melodramatically, then drops his voice again. “Pop Star Drinks Budweiser!”

Riley lifts his chin and tries to look superior. Disguise back on, this is a stretch. “You’re such a dork.”

“Yup.” Evan lets satisfaction ooze from his voice as he leans his head against Riley’s shoulder and wraps his arm around Riley’s leg. Mine. If only for now. “And you like it.”

“Secret, sexy rocker boy dork.” The whisper ruffles his bangs.

“That’s a long nickname.” Evan will hear those words in his memories forever. His plane leaves in thirty-six hours. He is already thinking of himself as partway to gone. “Shut up and watch the movie.”

Pretty Woman is a classic, they discover, because a young Julia Roberts radiates on the screen, emotions flying out of her like a disco ball on fire. Awkward anxiety and joy and outrage and humiliation. Evan is mesmerized.

Until Riley's hand drifts down his inseam.

There is no obvious hand job forthcoming, arm jerking in the dark so the people sitting scattered in the rows behind them can see. Just a slow unzipping and the rub of Riley's thumb across the head of his dick. Slicking precome in slow circles. For an hour.

Evan isn't the only one who knows how to tease and torture.

It is Evan who brings himself off in the end, after riding the edge of desire for so long his bones ache. Riley is still touching him too when Evan curls around Riley's hand, spilling into his palm. Riley licks his hand clean and Evan imagines sinking to his knees and taking Riley in his mouth while whoever cared could watch.

"I'm going to suck your brains out your dick," Evan mutters, readjusting himself in his jeans so he can walk.

Riley puts his sunglasses back on and takes Evan's arm, smiling.

At the hotel, Riley is in a strangely quiet mood, pulling Evan with him to the red velvet sofa with the ridiculous back rising like a stuffed seashell behind them as they lay in front of the fireplace they don't know how to light. Better the sofa than the strange little chairs with the zebra skin seats and the backs made of lacey metal swirls. Evan wonders if they should just lie on the floor on the bearskin rug, as Marilyn Monroe as that sounds, so artsy and uncomfortable is the furniture in the formal living room area of the suite.

But Riley seems content on the couch, lying between Evan's legs, his head on Evan's chest as Evan strokes his back with long, smooth sweeps of his palms.

"How come nobody is here with you? Other than The Rock," Evan asks, nicknaming the security guy who is on call twenty-four seven as far as Evan can tell, although the man never seems to blink at any request. Not that Riley has made any, other than keeping people away from him. Riley hasn't answered his cell phone in days. Evan isn't sure it's even on. He's checked his own regularly, glad for the magic karma keeping his life emergency free. With his father's health, that is never a guarantee and leaving home for long stretches is

anxiety-making. “I would’ve guessed you normally travel with a bunch of people.”

“I do. Did,” Riley answers after a moment. He pauses before continuing. “Have you ever needed, just needed, to get away from everyone you know? Not because they were bad. But just to be able to hear yourself think?”

Evan starts to shake his head no. His problem is being lonely more than needing alone time. But that wasn’t the case once. He smiles at the memory, curling a hand around Riley’s nape. “Yeah. I worked in DC after college for a while. A ridiculous job paying me shit for eighty hours a week. I was so stressed I just took off one weekend. Packed up my roommate’s tent, turned off my phone, and drove into Maryland to a state park to camp out. I wanted to shut everything off, and sitting in the dark, getting eaten by mosquitos, watching my fire die in the rain, did it.”

Riley snorts, fingers spread against Evan’s stomach. “Sounds miserable.”

“Well, at least I wasn’t thinking about work.” He squeezes Riley’s neck gently.

“I’m not really the camping sort.”

“Glamping, maybe.” And then Evan has to explain glamour camping to Riley, and pet him down through a sudden burst of enthusiasm that would have the man kitting them out with gear and a trailer to drive out to the nearest state park before lunch the next day.

Evan is still curious though and Riley’s talkative mood remains, so he pushes for more once they settle back down on the couch. “So you ditched everyone and came here by yourself?”

Riley shrugs. “Seemed like one thing I could do without pissing everyone off too badly.” He laughs shortly. “Wrong, as usual.”

“What were you doing that was pissing everyone off?”

“Making dumb decisions. Going along with the recording company because it was easier than arguing with them. They’ve been pushing me for years to do a solo album. To drop my band.” Riley shakes his head. “They gave me the band. I was just a kid playing the guitar and singing random festivals before they signed me. They put those guys together. Made them play with me.”

“And you don’t like them?” He’s guessing now, unsure of the emotions swirling in Riley’s voice. Fucking this man is easy. Talking to him is hard.

“I wasn’t sure.” Riley lies quiet for long enough that Evan wonders if they are done talking. Then Riley speaks again. “I thought it was just a job, a paycheck, for them. But now I feel bad. Like I did something wrong, leaving them behind. And I miss them. Studio musicians aren’t the same.”

“Can you bring them back?” Evan doesn’t know enough to know what questions are stupid.

Riley sighs. Ducks his face further. “That would take so much arguing.”

This part, Evan understands. Riley loves arguing for fun, but it pains him to do it for real. Sucks the life out of him to stand in front of someone and say no.

“My mom’s always saying she does the arguing for me, but that’s just the stuff on paper.” The fabric of Evan’s T-shirt is warm with Riley’s breath. Damp with something else he pretends not to notice. “They never stop talking to me, all day long.”

Evan hasn’t heard much about Riley’s mom in the past few days. Just enough to give him a picture of a tense woman in a streamlined suit with a cold face. Before he put his phone away, it beeped with email notifications of documents needing signatures and texts with business questions, but never rang with her voice on the other end.

At first, that blank space where family should be made Evan envious, as he answered his dad’s fourth text of the day about how to find Netflix on the Roku again. But after Evan finally returns one of Tommy’s half-dozen phone calls—getting into a long argument about how it will be okay if Tommy can’t make Thanksgiving, really—and then gives in and calls his dad to walk him through changing to the right component channel on the TV so he could watch his shows, the vacant space in Riley’s life is sad, not liberating.

When Evan stops petting him, Riley tenses up again. So he keeps touching him, this fiery, fragile man who would jerk him off in a movie theater, then go back to worrying about disappointing people a minute later. He lets his hands on Riley’s body anchor Riley in the present, with him.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It’s stupid.”

It’s not. “Okay.”

“Can we... just sleep? Tonight?” The question is soft, as if Riley is bracing for denial before the words are all the way out.

Evan tilts his head back in the dark and blinks again and again, swallowing twice to clear the lump in his throat. His voice is rough when he speaks. “Yeah. That’s okay.”

They strip in the dark, dropping their clothes on the floor and crawling into the middle of the big bed where Riley curls himself around Evan's body and hangs on tight.

Sunday, early morning

When Evan wakes in the dark, he is alone in the bed.

Music drifts through the quiet. The first music he's heard in the suite since arriving on Thursday night. He hasn't wanted to ask why. Riley's tangle of emotions around music is beyond Evan's ability to fuck into submission.

He finds Riley sitting at the grand piano in the corner of the sitting room, the lamp lit. He remembers the movie and smiles. Riley's head has tilted at the sound of his footsteps, although he doesn't turn to look at Evan. "Are you having a lonely businessman moment?"

"Doesn't that make you the hooker with a heart of gold?" The twist to Riley's lips isn't entirely pleasant. His melancholic mood has not improved while Evan slept alone in the big bed.

Evan straddles his lap, feet on the other side of the piano bench, and drapes his arms over Riley's shoulders. With the lamp on the piano behind him blocked by his back, shadows cover the man's face in front of him. For a moment, he wishes he could push a hand into Riley's hair and tug his head back until trembles wrack Riley's body.

"What would you pay me to do to you, Riley Flood?" He whispers the words against that mouth, feels Riley's lips open to speak and Riley's breath against his face.

"Everything."

Of course, there is that bearskin rug.

Evan has been meaning to do something dirty on it all weekend.

"Come on." He gets off Riley's lap and tugs him off the bench, leading him over to where the rug lies in all its glory in front of the black marble fireplace. "Get undressed and lie down. Hands over your head." He points to the rug and then turns his back, looking for the switch that must exist to turn on the gas fire.

Behind him, silence. Evan wonders if Riley is in the wrong mood for this kind of play. Any idea that he actually knows this man—well enough to figure

out when he is obsessing over things he can't control—is a foolish figment of his imagination. Three days of sex and hanging out don't make Evan anything other than some guy Riley is screwing to distract himself from his own problems.

He is lying to himself already. The closer he gets to leaving, though, the more important it seems to keep this dreamlike interlude under strict mental control.

Whoosh. The sound of a belt being yanked free. The buckle clatters as it hits the floor. Evan manages to turn on the fire as the whispers of clothing being removed continue. He moves to the bar, looking for a shot glass and something palatable. Whiskey, vodka, gin. Ugh. No.

Port. Yes.

A Taylor Fladgate 40 Year Old Tawny? Hell, yes.

He brings the bottle and the glass back to the naked man stretched out in front of the fire. Takes off his own clothes and kneels next to him.

He presses flat Riley's hands, rubbing his thumbs across the lines in the palms until those long, thin fingers twitch. Love how ticklish he is. Evan picks up the square crystal shot glass with the heavy base and places it in the center of Riley's palm.

“Hold this. Don't spill.” He uncaps the bottle and pours until the glass shimmers with deep amber liquid, full to the brim. Capping the bottle, he sets it aside and turns back to Riley's naked form with a grin. “You don't want to get billed for ruining this ridiculous and kind of creepy skinned animal, do you?”

“So? I'd just pay for it.” Riley is pushing the boundary of being unwilling. But his pulse races in his throat and taking his clothes off was enough to get him hard. When Evan pauses to check in with him—the look that says we can stop—Riley shakes his head no.

Evan sighs and exaggerates his eye roll. “Pretend you're a normal person for a little while? Someone who can't afford to buy another bearskin rug at the drop of a hat. Or pretend you feel bad for the bears.”

“I don't give a shit about bears.” Riley's pout makes Evan want to suck on his bottom lip until it bruises.

Later. Don't start with the danger zones or this'll be over far too soon.

“That's why I said pretend. Now shush.”

“What are you doing?” Evan knows it doesn’t matter. Riley’s skin shines in the glow from the fire, and his erection kisses his stomach, leaving a shiny spot that catches the light. It doesn’t matter one bit what Evan is doing. Riley is in.

“I read about this in a book once.” His cheeks heat as he speaks, because the guy in the book who’d done this had been a lot of things Evan isn’t. Big. Muscular. Experienced in sex play stuff.

And a cop. You’re not one of those either, but it hasn’t stopped you from fucking Riley Flood’s brains out, so maybe lighten up on the comparisons? Improvisation is working out pretty well so far.

He shuts off his mind and lets his body take charge.

He starts by simply looking.

For as much as Riley doesn’t hide from the world, letting himself be seen in all his messy glory, this level of quiet, naked vulnerability isn’t something anyone other than Evan gets from him. His long arms and legs stretch out, muscles barely tensing under Evan’s gaze. Riley’s wrists and hips and collarbone all stick out, as if too large for his skin. A map of veins wraps over the muscles of his forearms, disappearing as faint blue traces the closer they get to his heart.

“What are you waiting for?” Still pushing.

“This isn’t about you right now, so hush.” Evan puts his fingers on Riley’s lips, stopping his words. “I’m going to touch you the way I want. I’m guessing you’ll probably like it, but I’m not doing it for you.”

He is, of course. But Riley gets off on feeling used, and the words are half the magic. Sure enough, Riley closes his eyes and sinks into the white fur, totally submissive. The sight of him, stretched out for Evan’s use and pleasure, makes Evan’s blood warm.

Evan slides his hands up Riley’s shins, ruffling the hair the wrong way. Bone and skin, until he curves his fingers around, behind, and the softness of Riley’s calf muscles give way under his fingertips. He pauses to press more deeply there and gets a groan for his efforts, working on one leg and then the next. Without oil or lotion, heat builds rapidly under his hands. He moves them farther up Riley’s legs to his quads, knowing they are warm and soothing.

He imagines how warm hands would feel on his own legs, rising slowly toward his groin.

Mostly soothing.

Evan smiles.

Like Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*. Seeing the remake had led him to the original. Evan gives in to the impulse—because what’s the use of being a geek if you can’t indulge in silliness? —and sits up to clap his hands together dramatically, and then rub them furiously until they burn. Riley starts at the clap, then opens his eyes, mouth dropping at the sight.

“You’re such a dork.” Riley speaks slowly, finally, the curve of a smile tugging at his mouth.

Evan bites his lip, trying to fake modesty. “You love it.” Lost cause, that modesty thing.

“Wax on,” Riley whispers.

“Wax off.” He wraps his hands around the middle of Riley’s near thigh. The full-body sag of relaxation that follows makes him proud. Happy. He rubs one leg and then the other for a few minutes, enjoying the transition of hairy leg to the barer skin of Riley’s upper thigh. Soft and delicate as he approaches Riley’s groin. He lets his hands slip away, petting the sides of Riley’s ass where the muscle flexes rhythmically.

To tease himself, he’s kept his eyes on Riley’s legs, on the play of light on his skin and hair and bony joints. He hasn’t let himself look higher, a game he lets himself lose happily now as he lifts his gaze and stares openly at Riley’s groin. The tight tuck of his balls under the hard length of him. The tangle of dark blond hair. The slight spread of his thighs, inching apart. Asking.

He doesn’t realize his hands have fallen still until Riley gasps and he looks up to find Riley’s eyes open and locked on Evan. Who has been sitting there for how many minutes now, staring at Riley’s cock.

“It’s not like you haven’t...” Riley trails off at Evan’s look. Shhh.

“I have. But I haven’t looked just for me. I need to memorize all this.” On this, he slides his palms up and covers as much of Riley as he can manage, closing his own eyes to imprint the man on his very skin. Riley is damp, sweating now as Evan touches him, the hardness of him turning to marble in Evan’s hands. The long, slow moan that eases out of Riley’s throat hums in Evan’s balls, his dick, his ass. Not watching is impossible.

Evan opens his eyes.

A pink flush spreads from Riley's cheekbones to his ears, his neck, the pale skin of his upper chest. His back arches off the floor, lifting his belly and pressing him harder into Evan's grasp, begging for his touch.

"I can't." Riley groans the words out. "Gonna spill."

Evan has forgotten his own game. He pinches the inside of Riley's thigh, wringing out another gasp. "Hold onto that glass."

"You know I was just making that up before," Riley says, back arched like a bow. Sweat runs down his temple, his entire body glowing with it. "I don't actually know if anybody can see us. Nobody vetted this hotel. They had me booked somewhere else."

The adrenaline rush curls Evan's toes under his butt. His picture splashed across every tabloid in the country. He won't go home with the story of an unusual adventure, but will be chased there, stalked, gossiped about, and not in the silly way that was almost pleasant when the notoriety was mild and local. That boy from away who met Laura Bush at lunch once. Now, That boy who fucked the rock star.

"Shut up," is all he says. He bends down and takes Riley in his mouth.

"Fuck." The word is seven minutes long by the time Riley finishes moaning it out. The smell of sweet, smoky alcohol floods the room. Evan pulls his mouth slowly off Riley's length, circling with his tongue as he lifts up. He sucks hard at the tip to pull another drop of that sharp tang from inside Riley's body.

He sits up straight and licks his lips.

"You spilled." He runs a hand up Riley's arm until he can grasp the shot glass and takes it from the palm covered in the sticky spill of port wine. Holding the glass in one hand, he uses the other to pull Riley's fingers to his mouth.

He sucks on Riley's fingers like they are his cock. Riley is panting and begging by the time Evan straddles him and uses the condom and lube he'd brought with him from the bedroom. He sinks onto Riley's cock so slowly he can barely breathe, then holds his arms down and fucks him until Riley convulses beneath him, crying out. Riley's softening dick in his ass is still thick enough to burn as Evan strokes himself to orgasm on Riley's chest, eyes locked on the pink flush of Riley's cheeks.

He marks Riley and promises himself he will remember this.

Sunday night

A long, lazy day spent almost entirely in bed. No fucking. But Riley is never not touching him. A hand on his stomach, a foot brushing his leg, a thigh thrown over Evan's hip.

"You can do your work anywhere, right?" Riley asks him at one point, trading half a sandwich with Evan because Riley has just figured out that pâté is liver and that is gross.

When Evan hesitates, taking a giant bite of the new sandwich even though pâté isn't his favorite thing either, Riley backpedals immediately.

"I don't mean, like, forever. I'll be on tour soon, traveling pretty much nonstop. Just, if you wanted to hang out, you could. Visit."

Evan pictures the plane that will land in Chicago in the early hours of the morning tomorrow. Sees himself getting on it.

"I wish."

"The problem is, people here care that you're a rock star."

He knows he can't fix any of Riley's problems. Can't fuck the stress permanently out of his body, or offer any useful advice to someone whose life is galaxies away from his own ordinary existence. But he can't stop talking about things that might make it better, needing to leave this man in a better place than where he found him.

"People everywhere." Relaxation drugs Riley's voice.

"Nah. You should see our local bar back home." He is sitting on Riley, rubbing his back. Describing his life back home feels like telling a story that starts Once upon a time... "There's, like, six gnarly old fishermen sitting there every night, drinking Yuengling and bitching about the good old days. The bartender's got so many DUIs, he rides his bike to work now. And nobody there would give a damn that you'd had ten number one hits."

"Twelve." Half-asleep he might be, but nobody lowballs Riley Flood, apparently. Evan's lips curve as he leans forward to push the heels of his hands up and out from the base of Riley's spine to his shoulder blades, forcing a sigh out of the man beneath him.

"Twelve number one hits," Evan agrees, and presses his mouth to the back of Riley's neck, tasting salt and sweat. "And they wouldn't have heard of any of them."

“Where’s that? Sounds like heaven.” Riley slurs the words, eyes shut, lashes resting against his cheeks as he falls asleep.

Evan sits back on his hips, smoothing his hands against the warm skin of Riley’s lower back. He looks around the grand hotel room, city skyline sparkling through the massive windows. “Far, far away from here.”

He sits next to Riley the man—not Riley Flood, superstar, attention whore, bad boy—and waits for it to come to him. The idea that will turn this magical weekend into something real. Something that will last for more than three days.

You can do your work anywhere, right?

And he could. His clients don’t care where Evan is located, as long as he solves their problems and fixes their screwups when they call in the middle of the night. But there is a reason he lives where he does, and it’s not because he can’t afford to move elsewhere. An old man with intermittent health issues, who taught Evan to ride a bike and bought him ever more complex computer parts when a childhood hobby became a teenager’s passion and a young adult’s course of study. Who was mother and father after the early loss of a beloved wife, never replaced, never forgotten.

There are reasons for Evan’s loneliness and he isn’t foolish enough to imagine they can be waved away.

He pulls the opaque curtains closed before he leaves the room, a fold of hotel stationery on the bedside table for Riley to read when he wakes.

I wish.

I’ll remember you.

Final Prints

Going back home was like stepping out of the wardrobe and back into the real world after living forever and a day in Narnia. Never had Evan so clearly understood those Pevensie kids' resentment of an entire world that refused to recognize how different they were from what they'd been before.

When he turned on his phone as soon as his plane landed in Norfolk, Riley had already texted him. Five times. The flight attendant at the exit laughed when she saw him, because Evan couldn't smother his broad grin.

You're an asshole for leaving without waking me. I hate you.

Then a dick pic.

Don't sell this to tabloids. Jerkface.

Then a giant frowny face emoticon.

Miss you.

If Riley had wanted to hug his bowling shoes to his chest all night, that wasn't anything to Evan's brand new cell phone addiction.

For a couple of weeks, he checked his phone approximately seven hundred times a day, looking for new texts and finding them in furious bursts, between hours-long gaps when Riley was obviously busy. At first Evan responded immediately to every notification, if not any of the calls, needing some distance to hold the loneliness off. One of the perks of working for himself was not guiltily out over texting Riley during conference calls. But when he caught himself sending Riley a picture of the osprey nest at the harbor where his dad volunteered with the ex-Coast Guard guys giving teen sailing lessons, he realized he'd sent three texts in a row to Riley without a reply.

Riley had done the same to him too at some points, if Evan was on a call that ran long, or out for a sail with their neighbors, but the thought floated through his brain nonetheless.

Ease up. You look like a stalker.

He started pacing his replies, always waiting for longer than the gap between his text and Riley's reply to send another text. Until days at a time went by without their sharing any words at all.

It all unraveled exactly as he knew it was meant to, until there was only a thin string left connecting him to those days.

When his dad caught the flu over the holidays, Tommy came home after all, to alternate shifts in the hospital with Evan, who didn't ask what projects had to be canceled to allow this. Somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmas, he realized a week or more had passed without his remembering to respond to Riley's last brief message. He walked through the quiet hospital corridors to the parking lot and turned on his phone again to answer.

He stood for a long time under the starlight, staring at the glowing screen of his phone, trying to do the math on how many weeks had passed since his time in Chicago. Lack of sleep made him stupid, because it seemed like more time must have passed than he could make work on the calendar. Those days felt so very far away. He swiped a few useless words and headed back inside.

Hope you're well. Chaos here. Merry Christmas, in case I'm offline again then.

He didn't read the reply that came almost immediately.

In February, Riley texted him a screenshot of a list of tour dates, the words *Raleigh, North Carolina*, circled by a wobbly red line.

The temptation was fierce. All was calm at home and work again, and the lure of tying himself tightly to Riley's side for another stretch of hazy, erotic days was overpowering. He bought his ticket, but didn't say anything to Riley, unsure how sincere that invitation could possibly be.

Four months. Hardly any words these days. He was pretty sure he'd imagined the intensity anyway.

Two weeks before the Raleigh show, his dad developed pneumonia out of the blue and reentered the hospital, in the ICU this time. Evan moved to a shitty motel down the road, because driving all the way home to sleep in his own bed made every night feel dangerous. He was too far away and restless with it, awake until dawn and too exhausted to function. Tommy worked more and sent money without asking, as Evan cut back on his contracts.

He turned off the Google alert he had set to Riley's name. The ping of his email notifications was constant and draining with news that couldn't matter to him. Not now.

He didn't read about the special intimate concert added at the last minute to Riley Flood's tour until months after it happened, back home with his dad healthy again. The heat of the summer had already faded into warm September nights when he let himself remember and too much wine led to a late-night Google session. One night only on the Outer Banks, Riley Flood had sung for astonished locals, on a soundstage assembled at the last minute on the local AAA baseball team's field. Tickets had been given away by local radio stations, none of them for sale at all, all of the stations broadcasting a request for one nameless person—who would know who they were—to call and ask for the ticket being held under his name.

Gossip blogs and music websites were full of stories about the new, untitled song Riley Flood had sung at the end of the concert. The rock star had gone acoustic, playing without the band he'd brought back to tour with him after recording his solo album. Cell phones had recorded the performance, fans transcribing the lyrics, no one agreeing one hundred percent on every word.

Evan heard them perfectly. Heard the chorus that lingered over a hushed crowd as the music faded.

Ever and ever and Evan.

He searched online and read and read and read. His hands shook and his eyes hurt. His father invited him up for dinner and stopped when the touch of his hand on Evan's shoulder made him shake. Dinner grew cold and was postponed in lieu of alcohol as Evan let the words spill, finally. At last. Making it all real again after so many, many months of telling himself it was only a fantasy.

When he was done, he called his brother.

Evan was definitely going to puke the cinnamon apple oatmeal he'd eaten for breakfast into the massive potted hydrangea in the luxurious hotel lobby.

In the elevator to the penthouse, he tugged at the bright green lanyard with the plastic badge dangling from his neck and remembered what he'd been told.

"They're on high security this time. I don't know why he's putting up with it. It's like he doesn't give a damn at this point. Just shows up and goes where they point him. Like a robot."

Evan didn't think that was all down to him. He wasn't enough of an egotist to think Riley had hit a yearlong mope because he didn't have Evan at his side

to fuck him silly and make him go bowling. But maybe it was a *little* bit because of him. And he *needed* to fix it, if he could.

At the very least, he'd been willing to beg Riley's security giant for some underhanded help and a pass to enter the press suite.

"You get me fired, I'm going take it out on your ass. And I don't mean in the way you like, you hear me?" the bass voice had rumbled through the phone, making Evan wince. "I gotta fucking romantic soul, but a big-ass mortgage too."

He'd thanked the man and packed to return to Chicago, this time without the reassuring safety net of Tommy and Latonya to pave the way. Tommy was at home with their dad, working on a long-term plan Evan could only hope would be needed.

Outside the suite's heavy wood door, he lost his nerve, pacing the thick carpet that kept his presence hidden. Inside the penthouse was both a fantasy and a reality. He remembered his own stupid imaginings of what it would be like to hang out in the background of a Riley Flood photo shoot, making sarcastic remarks in his own head and storing up bitchy gossip for later. The memory made him want to slap himself.

A young, dark-haired woman opened the door and didn't even look at him before ushering him to a seat in a row of chairs along the near wall. Evan didn't sit. Couldn't.

"I am taking a leak. I am not storming out. Fucking relax." The angry voice pushed into the room ahead of Riley's tense shoulders and stiff stride. Evan drank in the sight of him, hair growing out in careless tufts, eyeliner firmly back in place. He wanted to take Riley away and wash him clean, buzz his hair, and make him naked before Evan's eyes. To make Riley feel *seen* again. But that wasn't why he was here.

Baring himself was Evan's task now, not Riley's.

When Riley spotted him standing in the middle of the room, his face drained of any color.

"Back for another weekend romp, are you? Sorry. I'm booked." Riley's eyes were shuttered. Blank. He nodded at the waiting press people bent over their cell phones in chairs scattered throughout the room. "You can wait in line for your quote, if you want it."

He left the room without another word or a backward glance.

So, this is how an unwelcome birthday stripper feels.

Maybe because Riley hadn't raised his voice, or spent more than three seconds shooting him down, the assistant didn't ask Evan to leave. Just shook her head as if rock stars were more trouble than they were worth and headed to the private room from which Riley had exited.

Evan wasn't sure how he managed the next part without anyone looking up and gasping. Surely if the dark-haired girl had entered the room, he would have been out on his ass in a heartbeat. But they didn't and she wasn't, and so when Riley stomped back through the open room to where he was taking interviews, Evan stepped forward to meet him.

Totally naked.

Then people noticed.

"Oh my God, you fucking crazy man." Riley pushed his way through the crowd of people who'd jumped up to surge toward Evan. He could hear the whispers building as people recognized the tattoos on his back. That album had broken records. Everyone in the room had stared at that cover for weeks. Months. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty embarrassed right now." Nothing but the truth there. Evan stared at Riley, wishing he was doing this without an audience, but remembering exactly how big Riley's audience always, *always* was. If Riley could do it for him, he had no business chickening out now. "And everybody knows I'm doing this because I like you, so I guess I'll feel even worse if you leave me hanging here. But I'm pretty sure you know how that feels and I am so, *so* sorry for that."

He wanted desperately to look away, to look at the people standing around him and staring, to look anywhere but at the expressionless face of the man he was pretty sure he'd fallen in love with less than twenty-four hours after meeting him. Waiting for a reply nearly killed him. He wondered if that was how Riley felt when Evan started pacing out his text messages, holding them back like being embarrassed about missing Riley mattered more than *telling* Riley he was missed.

"Everybody take a break." Riley's voice and face were enough to clear the room in sixty seconds without more than a hint of a protest.

When the room was empty, Riley kept watching him, silent. The first move was definitely Evan's to make.

In days of planning, he had never figured out what to say.

“You changed your phone number.” He had tried to call when he’d finally learned about the overwhelming, and public, gesture Riley had made. Finding out Riley’s number was disconnected had almost wrecked his confidence.

“I have to do that pretty often. If it gets out. I usually let everyone know.” Riley looked away, out the windows. Evan recognized the gesture for what it was. Nerves. “I didn’t send it to you.”

“I didn’t notice,” Evan admitted. “Not for a long time. I had to turn off my Google alerts when it all started to get to me.”

He could practically see Riley’s ears perk up at the words. “You set a Google alert for me?”

Evan blushed. But being willing to embarrass himself was part of it. “More than one.”

He didn’t let himself imagine a softening of Riley’s severe face. “My dad was in the hospital. I didn’t find out what you’d done—everything you’d done—until weeks later. Months. That’s no excuse, but I want you to know... If I’d known. If I hadn’t thought it was impossible to believe.” He took a step forward. Stopped himself. “I’d have burned down anything in my way to be there, Riley.”

Riley kept his back to Evan. Pulled his hands up and wiped them across his face. “It was my fault. Such a dumb idea. There were a million reasons you wouldn’t, couldn’t show up.”

Evan’s turn to wait silently for judgment. Riley turned around to face him again.

“I embarrass myself on purpose all the time, you know? Because it’s all bullshit and none of it means anything and who gives a fuck?” Riley’s laugh was bitter, his eyes leaking now, the tips of his ears turning pink. “But that wasn’t bullshit. It meant something and I gave a fuck and when you weren’t there...”

Evan could picture it. The vulnerability it would have exposed for Riley to admit he felt something. Wanted something. The delicate balance of fear and uncertainty it would have taken for him to make a sincere romantic gesture, when everything in him scorned sentiment. The pang in Evan’s chest was an ache he wanted to rub away on Riley’s body.

But first he needed permission to touch him.

“I’m sorry. I want to say that a thousand times, over and over again, until you believe it.” He bit his lip, then pushed out the words. “I know how hard it is to believe in something you think you can’t have. If you can’t find it in you to have faith in me, it’s because I lost faith first. I want to fix that, if you’ll let me try.”

He was pretty sure he was imagining it when Riley walked toward him. Was dizzy with relief at the feel of those thin, strong arms around him, the scrape of jeans against his naked legs the first reminder that he’d just done an incredibly stupid thing. Evan dug his fingers into Riley’s T-shirt and his face in his chest, and gasped for breath. He’d been sure, so sure, in his heart of hearts, that nothing he did would ever make this happen again, and the relief swept out of him in tears he pressed into the fabric.

“You like me, huh?” Never let it be said that Riley Flood couldn’t bounce back in a heartbeat. Evan would wait for each mercurial mood change with pure pleasure.

He breathed in with his face pressed against the skin of Riley’s neck. Sweat, like always during a photo shoot, but clean. Different. “Maybe it’s a bit more than like at this point.”

“Maybe?”

Evan stuck out his tongue, testing. And it was true.

There wasn’t a hint of cigarette smoke on Riley’s skin. “Did you just shower or something?”

“Why?”

“Your skin is sweet, like you just got out of a bath.” He looked up, the corners of his mouth turning up. “Not like a filthy smoker.”

To his surprise, Riley blushed. “I quit.”

“You did?” Evan pulled away to look at Riley more clearly. Riley ducked his inspection like he was embarrassed. More embarrassed maybe than Evan had ever seen him. “That’s great. I’m really happy you’re not going to die of lung cancer. Job well done.”

“I thought I had a good reason.”

Like a soap bubble popping, the idea burst into Evan’s brain, and he knew he was right, even as he fumbled forward with confusion, because it seemed the height of arrogance to say out loud what he knew was true. “You did?”

He wanted Riley to look at him, but Riley ducked his head and pressed his face to Evan's neck. Things would never be predictable with this man, and maybe Evan wouldn't always get what he wanted.

Then he heard the words whispered beneath his jaw and knew he'd settle in a heartbeat for the vulnerability Riley showed him in these small moments.

"Yeah. I have a thing for this guy who thinks kissing a smoker is like licking the inside of a dirty ashtray."

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, snaking his arms around Riley's skinny waist and crossing his hands behind Riley's back. "I wasn't going to make you say it first, you know."

Shoulders shrugged in his grasp. "I don't care."

But he did. Riley cared. He was a sucker for romantic comedies and for the thrill of victory at the bowling alley. He made grand romantic gestures and needed someone who would call him when he was far from home and tell him he was missed.

"I love you. You know that, right?" Evan asked him.

Riley grinned, nodded. Evan thought he was getting the Han Solo *I know* and didn't care.

The loud buzzing kiss on his cheek and secret whisper in his ear were even better.

"I love you too, secret sexy rocker boy dork."

"Come on. I want to meet the old guys at the bar."

Evan looked his boyfriend over from head to toe in the mirror on his bedroom wall. The hair, growing out still, but punched up at the moment in a faux hawk, the ripped jeans that would damn near have allowed Riley to get fucked without taking his pants off, the bare feet—*bare feet*, because there always had to be something underdressed about this man—and smiled. "We can walk there."

"Can we ride bikes?" Riley bounced on the balls of his feet like an excited toddler. "Like we've had too many DUIs to drive?"

"You *have* had too many DUIs to drive," Evan reminded him dryly, passing Riley a fleece zip-up jacket and a pair of flip-flops. That would have to do.

“Yeah, but I was sixteen then. And I didn’t bring the limo. I’m being normal.”

“Put your flip-flops on, Mr. Normal.”

“Do you think your dad will come with us?”

Evan pressed a hand to one eye, staring blearily at the man in front of him. The man he was going to figure out a way to be with, through all the chaos and the challenges, because that was his adventure. The last adventure he’d ever need.

He pictured his elderly dad and the other weekend sailors down the road at the bar in the old train car on the side of the canal.

“Sure, let’s ask him. I can’t imagine a better time.”

Riley put his hands on Evan’s face and pulled him in for a kiss. “Me, neither.”

The End

Author Bio

Amy Jo Cousins lives in Chicago, where she writes contemporary romance, tweets more than she ought, and sometimes runs way too far. She loves her kid and the Cubs, who taught her that being awesome doesn't necessarily have anything to do with winning.

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