

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**GIVE AN INCH**

**K.D. Sarge**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## GIVE AN INCH

By **KD Sarge**

### 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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By KD Sarge

## Photo Description

A young man in a beanie lies on a couch, a gray-and-white kitten asleep on his chest and a black-and-white kitten exploring. He smiles at them.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*The court settlement left me with enough money to buy a house as isolated from other people as I could get. I vowed I'd never let anyone close again and spent my days fixing the place up and trying to forget.*

*Then a feral cat dropped her litter in the shed out back and disappeared. I couldn't leave newborn kittens to die, but a city boy like me had no clue how to care for them. Thank goodness for Google. Supply list in hand, hair tucked under a hat that shadowed my face, and eyes covered by glasses, I dared to venture into town.*

*I met him (picture) at the local feed store. I guess he's not into watching the news, since he didn't seem to know who I am. He helped me save the kittens. He's dyslexic, which he thinks makes him stupid. He's far from that. He's kind and gentle, and he's starting to slip under my barriers. Starting to make me crave his touch. But how can I bare my body to him after what they did to me? What they made me?*

*Sincerely,*

*Tully*

P.S. No shifters or vampires or cheating. I like dark offset by sweet. On page sex, especially frottage, appreciated

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** celebrities, mild depression, men with pets, PTSD, learning disability, blue collar, past injuries, scars, small town, hurt/comfort, chronic pain

**Word Count:** 17,647

# GIVE AN INCH

By KD Sarge

The house was all Marlow had hoped for. Far from everyone—he couldn't even see another house from his unless he went upstairs and looked out of the back bedroom's window—and solid, but in need of lots of cosmetic work. The barn was full of old tools and odd junk and a few things that maybe worked, and there was enough clear space to pull his Jeep in and close the doors. From a distance, the farm looked just as it had the first time Marlow saw it—abandoned for years. But inside, it was safe and mostly comfortable.

The quiet was astonishing. Creepy, at first. Marlow kept expecting a stalker-fan to jump out of the bushes, or a helicopter to come thumping in bearing a paparazzi with shouted questions. But it didn't happen. After a few weeks when his only visitor was a stray cat, skinny everywhere but her pregnant belly, he started to relax and to leave table scraps near a shed far from the house. He didn't want a cat.

Sometimes Marlow went on the Internet, and occasionally he played soft music from his laptop through the speakers he'd put around the house. But gradually he stopped doing that, and all he heard was the wind and the rain or the few birds that were around in the tail end of winter. The cat kept its wary distance, and he did the same. Mostly the place was dead quiet and empty, just the way he liked it.

One day the cat wasn't fat anymore. Marlow put out a little more food and hoped she and the kittens would move on once the kittens were old enough. He suspected that might not be how kittens worked, but he didn't bother to look it up. As long as he didn't see the kittens, he didn't have to do anything about them.

Marlow's luck, of course, did not work like that. Give an inch, the saying went, and they take a mile.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thanks to dim lighting and dark glasses, Marlow stumbled walking into Wilson's Feed and Supply. Pain shot up his bad leg as he flailed for balance. A hand caught his arm, steadying him.

“Easy now,” said a voice. Hand and voice came from a man about Marlow’s age, smiling gently. He had brown eyes and white teeth and a sack of feed or something on his shoulder that looked heavy. Despite that, when he let go of Marlow he kept his hand near, just in case. In case Marlow found himself unable to stand at all?

“All right?” the man asked, still ignoring the bag.

Marlow hadn’t spoken anything but muttered curses in over a month. *Thank you* and *I’m fine* collided in his mouth. “Thinfin,” he said.

The man’s smile didn’t waver at Marlow sputtering incoherencies at him. “Take your time,” he said, and his hand stayed near Marlow’s arm. “I’m Pax, and I’ve got all day.”

“Put that down!” Marlow ordered and finally felt his face flush. Pax’s smile widened.

*Don’t run*, Marlow told himself as the guy tossed the bag on a display of others he was building. *Don’t run, it only gets worse if you run.*

“There, sir.” The guy turned back, still smiling. “I’m Pax. How can I help you?”

“I have a list,” Marlow said, pulling the paper from his pocket. Let Pax treat him like... like he was simple. Whatever. If it got him done and out sooner... but the guy stepped back and finally his smile faltered.

“I’ll... get you someone,” Pax said and turned away. A woman—a teen—sat behind the cash register, her nose in a magazine. “Lisa! Can you help this list?”

“Get him to read it to you, Pax,” the girl said. “I’m busy.”

The back of Pax’s neck, all Marlow could see of his skin, flushed red. Marlow cursed under his breath and wished he could just melt into the floor, just slip between the cracks and vanish but then—“Kittens,” he blurted. “I need to take care of kittens.”

“Oh!” Pax turned with relief. “Formula? Bottles?”

“Yes.”

“This way, sir.”

With Pax to help, Marlow filled two baskets quickly. The feed store had everything he needed, including a heating pad so he could take his own back. Pax carried everything up to the register.



The girl's nose was in an Entertainment Weekly magazine. Marlow held himself back from twitching.

"Find everything you needed?" she asked, punching numbers into the old cash register without looking. She didn't look at Marlow either—she held the magazine with one hand and glanced from it to Marlow's selections.

"Yes, thank you."

Pax set the last can of formula on the counter and gave Marlow a nod and a smile before he moved off. By the time he reappeared with another big bag on his shoulder, the girl had put her magazine down to bag Marlow's purchases. "That'll be forty-three dollars and seventeen cents," she said.

Twice what he'd anticipated. Marlow cursed himself for being cheap and handed over his card instead of the cash he'd gotten from the ATM. The girl slid the card without looking at it, picking up the magazine instead. The machine beeped and printed, she tore off the slip and shoved it and a pen at Marlow. He signed his scribble—and she turned the card to compare the signatures.

"Have a nice day, Mr.—" Her eyes widened, shot to his face.

Marlow snatched the card, grabbed his bags and scurried, almost running down Pax in the doorway as the girl squealed behind him.

"I loved you in *We Were Mighty!*"

Safe in his Jeep, Marlow tried to calm down before driving, but then Pax came running out of the store so he revved the Jeep and took off. Thanks to the GPS on his phone and no cars on the road, he survived the trip back to his house. Even safe inside, though, he didn't have time to fling himself down and shake—he had to get milk into the kittens. Start breaking down and he might not stop, and the Internet said kittens must be fed on time or they might starve. Marlow threw the bags on the solid-wood kitchen table and went for his laptop to get the directions.

In the safety of the old kitchen, Marlow worked fast, heating water to boil everything, layering brand-new towels into a box, opening and sorting everything. It wasn't until he put the bottles in boiling water that he realized he was missing something.

Nipples. He had no nipples for the bottles. Hadn't he bought—yes, he remembered grabbing the package. A moment of frantic digging and he came up with the receipt—he'd paid for nipples. He'd paid for a heating pad too, but

it wasn't in his packages. God, he'd probably left the bag! Run out in a fit of cowardice and now—

Someone banged on the door. Oh god, hide, what—he had lights on, he couldn't hide, they'd know—

“Mr. Marlow!” a voice called. “Mr. Marlow, it's Pax from the feed store.”

Oh fuck. Stalker fan. The sunglasses had fooled him, but now—

“Mr. Marlow, I've got your nipples!”

A yelp of laughter and panic escaped Marlow, and he yanked the door open. There stood Pax, bag in hand and a bicycle on the ground behind him. Pax's gentle smile spread across his face as he held out the bag.

“You missed this, sir, and I knew you'd be needing it fast.”

“Did you—ride your bike here this fast?” Stupid question, Marlow. How else had he got there? “In the dark?”

“I went cross-country,” Pax said. “I know all the trails. And it just got dark.”

And now he'd have to ride his bike home in the dark. And he—Marlow cursed himself for a rude fool.

“You should—come in. Sit down. I'll get you some water.”

“Wouldn't mind a sight of these kittens,” Pax said. Marlow stepped back and waved his first guest through the door.

“Let me just—get these boiling.” Marlow pried open the package of nipples and dumped them into the water. Three bottles, four nipples. Whatever. He poured a glass of water from the pitcher in the fridge and set it in front of the stranger sitting at his kitchen table, then he dumped the towels back out of the box and put the new heating pad in the bottom.

From the box in the warmest corner of the kitchen came a tiny protesting mew.

“Uh oh,” Pax said with a grin. He went to peer into the box. “Holy—how many?”

“Nine.” No wonder that cat looked like she'd swallowed a football.

“And they're all still alive?” Pax whistled softly. “Hey there, wee one, no gnawing on your brother now.” He reached into the box and brought out a tiny orange fluffball. “Aren't you the bold fellow?”

*Mew*, said the kitten, flailing weakly in the palm of his hand. From the box more plaintive cries answered. *Crap*, they were all awake, and the bottles weren't ready, and the page had said if they wore themselves out looking for food—Marlow grabbed the tongs and pulled a bottle from the pan. Formula, cool water, test it, nipple—nothing was coming through the nipple!

“You have to poke a hole,” Pax said. He put the kitten back in the box. “Do you have a pin?”

Tiny wails of hunger rose from the box.

“A pin?” Why would he have a pin? “I don't sew!”

In the box, kittens called in despair. They were going to die; they were all going to die because he was an idiot, god, a pin—

“Scissors? Small knife?”

“Scissors!” Marlow lunged for his manicure kit. Hell, those would be disgusting, but—he stuck the pointed ends of the scissors in the still-boiling water.

After much foolery, Marlow finally got milk coming out and the nipple in the kitten's mouth. The kitten mewed, and milk dribbled down its chin. “Drink it, fool thing!”

“How old are they?”

“Two weeks? I think,” Marlow said. More milk dribbled as the kitten struggled. “He's really bad at this.”

“Babies learn,” Pax said. “Eventually.”

“If they live that long,” Marlow said, glancing into the box of weakly searching, wobbly creatures. How would he feed them all?

Pax picked up the tongs, and much faster than Marlow had managed he had a bottle made and a kitten in hand. As the tiny beast struggled with the nipple in its mouth, Marlow thought less milk dribbled down the thing's chin. Maybe that one was getting a meal.

In the box, seven more hungry babies mewed as they searched for food.

“The problem is it's a two-hand job,” Marlow complained. “If I were an octopus I could take care of them all!”

“If we both were,” Pax said with his slow smile. “Likely it would still be a two-tentacle job.”

Eventually Marlow's bottle had gone down five milliliters, and he thought at least half of that had gone into the kitten. The website had said don't feed them too much, that they'd start inhaling it. Apparently tiny kittens were incredibly dumb. He put the first kitten down and picked up another. A few minutes later, Pax did the same.

"Fifteen minutes a kitten," Marlow thought out loud, "and nine kittens. That's two hours and fifteen minutes to feed all of them once, and they're supposed to be fed every three hours. It—I can't."

"Maybe they'll get faster," Pax said. "As they get better at it, you know."

"Maybe," Marlow agreed, looking over the box again. The five that hadn't been fed yet were getting less desperate. That was bad. It meant they were wearing themselves out.

"They don't all need a full meal right now, right?" Pax said, switching out kittens again. "What's important is they all get something?"

"Yes." Marlow's kitten had gotten most of three milliliters. He put it down and grabbed another. The first two had fallen asleep. That meant those two were satisfied, right?

"Come on, baby," Pax murmured to his kitten. "Eat. Eat and grow."

At last, all the kittens were fed and sleeping. Marlow looked at the clock and shook his head.

"An hour till you start over," Pax said. "I can stay and help, but I sure wouldn't mind some dinner."

Oh! He'd come straight from work. Of course. Marlow had never had a "real" job, but that didn't mean he'd never worked. Making movies wasn't all buffets and hanging out in your trailer.

"Thanks. Sure." Marlow got up and put the bottles in the refrigerator. He took two meals from the freezer. "Would you like meatloaf and mashed potatoes or sweet-and-sour chicken? I have more in the other freezer if you want."

"I'm fine with either, thanks."

Marlow stuck the meatloaf in the microwave first, thinking Pax seemed more like a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy. "Would you like some coffee?" he asked, remembering a little more of his manners. He really had been alone too long.

Or not long enough. Dumb cat.

“If these littles are going to be so demand-y,” Pax said, smiling into the box of sleeping fluffballs, “coffee would be good.”

“Ah. Right.” Marlow started the coffee pot and then found a couple of coffee mugs in the pile in the sink. Ew, it was really getting out of hand... well, no time like the present. Especially when doing the dishes meant he didn’t have to sit and not-stare at the stranger in his kitchen as they waited on human food and the re-animation of hungry kittens.

Marlow washed the mugs and then a couple of spoons. Then forks. As he put a clean plate in the rack, Pax’s chair slid across the floor.

“Where are the dish towels?” he asked, coming to stand beside Marlow.

“You don’t have to.”

“I know.” Pax put a hand on a drawer pull. “This one?”

“I—maybe. Not really sure.”

Pax pulled the drawer open. “Yep. So you haven’t lived here long? I heard the place was sold months back.”

“I’ve been here a couple of months. Just not settled in.”

“Two years ago my mom had a dishwasher put in. Had to put it where the silverware drawer had been. I still grab for that drawer sometimes.”

“Habit is a powerful thing,” Marlow said, washing faster. Pax chuckled and started leaving the last thing rinsed in the rack until Marlow had finished something else. Marlow got through all the mugs before Pax’s food dinged. “Meatloaf is yours,” he said, turning away to the coffeepot. “There’s sugar here and cream in the fridge.” He poured his own mug and left it black. It was going to be a long night. He’d need all the help he could get.

Pax scraped his dinner out of the little plastic tray and onto a plate. He took his coffee and the plate to the table, *tsked*, and brought it back to the counter. Went back, moved the box of kittens onto a chair, careful of the heating pad cord, and then got the dishcloth and wiped the table off. Then he took the mug and his plate to the table. And then he went back and got silverware and napkins and set the table for himself and Marlow.

“Don’t forget to start your chicken,” he said.

Right. He had to eat. Protein, the doctor said. Be sure to get lots of protein and plenty of variety. Lots of vitamins and minerals to make him strong. Right.

When the microwave dinged again, Marlow scraped his food onto a plate too and went to the table, dreading a silent meal but dreading even more the need to talk.

Outside it started to rain.

Weather. One could always talk about the weather, right? “I guess it’s about to turn to spring.”

“Yep.” Pax smiled. “Another few weeks and there will be baby everythings all over the place.”

“I’d wondered. It seemed odd for that cat to have kittens in winter.”

“Cats can’t predict the weather any more than we can. Even odds we’d have had the melt by now, and she’d be in good shape.” Pax poked at his food but didn’t get any on his fork.

“Is it not cooked enough?”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. Just—never had any meatloaf but Grandma’s that Mom makes too. This doesn’t taste much like it.”

Marlow tried not to compare his meal to the sweet-and-sour chicken he used to get delivered from The Bamboo Palace. There was no comparison, really, just an odd suggestion of washed-out flavor, a pale shadow on a cloudy day. “You don’t have to eat it. I have...” What did he have? Anything that wasn’t frozen? “Do you want a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

Pax’s head lifted. “Did Mrs. Svensen bring you her peach preserves?”

“...yes?” There had been a basket. It held knitted somethings and a jar of orange-colored jam. Marlow hadn’t tried it.

Pax grinned and stood to put his plate on the counter. Marlow did the same and went looking for the basket. By the time he came back, Pax had found the bread and the toaster.

“Mrs. Svensen’s preserves win the state fair about every year,” Pax said as he shoved the lever down. “Once I climbed her tree to get her cat down, and she gave me a slice of bread with preserves. After that I used to toss fish heads in her tree so her cat would go up and I could rescue him.”

“How enterprising of you. Did it work?”

“Got my ears boxed for tossing fish guts in her tree!”

“Served you right,” Marlow said, but he couldn’t help grinning.

“Worth it,” Pax said as the toast popped up. “Totally worth it. She gave me another slice after, to stop me crying.” The smell of sunshine—or just really yummy peaches—filled the old kitchen as Pax twisted the two-piece lid off the canning jar. “I like butter on my toast,” he said as he spread golden preserves across a slice, “but not with Mrs. Svensen’s preserves. It’s just a distraction then.”

Pax took Marlow’s wrist and turned his hand over, put the toast in it. “Try it,” he said.

This... could not be peaches. Marlow didn’t care for peaches, and this was amazing, so it couldn’t be peaches. Pax chuckled and turned to the second slice of toast. “Mom says Mrs. Svensen’s an angel or a devil, because no human could make peaches taste that good.”

“She... seemed nice.”

Marlow bit into the toast again, and it was smearable sunshine. He could swear the jam danced on his tongue, subtle and nuanced as the best wine, sweet and tangy and divine. Pax grinned, nodded, closed his eyes and bit into his own toast.

One slow savored bite at a time, they devoured half the loaf of bread and most of the small jar of preserves, standing at the counter with the toaster oven before them like an altar to some pagan god. The only thing that stopped the consumption of the entire jar was a tiny mew from the kitten box.

“Oh crap,” Marlow said, lurching across the kitchen. “I have to boil the bottles again.”

“I’ll do that,” Pax said. “You make more formula. Any chance of sitting on some padding for the next round?”

“Living room. I have a nice big couch. I’ll be right back.” Marlow slipped through the door into the hall, closing it behind him. Muttered some swear words as he limped quickly to the far door and the largest room in the house. Quick, be quick—he had to pause to remember where the light was, but once it was on, he moved faster. Gathered up the dirty dishes and stuffed them in the remote basket on the entertainment center. Rolled his blankets and pillows into a ball that he stuck in the closet under the steps. Stuffed all the clutter and garbage on the coffee table into a bag to deal with later. Dusting would only make things worse, though, so he left it and lurched back down the hall, leaving the light on and both doors open.

Pax took the kittens. Marlow brought the bottles and the formula. The living room looked frumpy and smelled musty to Marlow, but Pax didn't seem to notice. He set the box of kittens on the coffee table and looked for an outlet to plug the heating pad into while Marlow found another light to turn on. Pax took the black kitten from the box and sank into the couch with a sigh. Marlow handed him a bottle and got his own kitten. He took the chair as Pax settled his kitten on his thigh.

"Hey, I think he's better at it!" Pax said, stroking the back of the kitten with one finger as it worked frantically. "Look at him go!"

"This one hasn't got the knack yet," Marlow said, pulling the nipple from the kitten's mouth as it tried to gnaw on it.

"Aw," Pax said. "Keep trying, little one, you'll get it!"

Marlow and the kitten kept trying. Frantic mews rose from the box, proclaiming the desperate hunger of the kitten's siblings as two persons of the wrong species and sex tried to do what one momma cat had handled so well. Marlow wished he'd left more food out for her. Maybe if he had, she would have tried harder to come back.

"Hey, done already?" Pax asked as his kitten's chin wavered down to rest on his knee, releasing the bottle. "Is that okay?" Pax asked Marlow. "He only had a little bit." He held up the bottle.

Oh. Right. Damn. "You have to help them... go potty." Oh, god. *Go potty?* What was he, five? "Evacuate, I mean. They can't do it on their own yet."

"Okaaaay," Pax said, looking doubtful. "How does that work?"

Marlow passed on his Internet-gained knowledge about massaging the little creature's bum until something came out. Pax made a face, but he pulled a rag from the kitten box and did his duty until the kitten did his. Then he settled the kitten with the bottle again and made soft encouraging noises at it as it fed.

Maybe he was so considerate of Marlow's idiocies because he wasn't so bright himself?

Didn't matter. He was helping, and if he hadn't brought the nipples, hadn't stayed to help—well, Marlow might have lost the whole litter. And maybe more. He was in no mental state to withstand the guilt of having caused the death of nine tiny dependent furballs.

"Thank you," Marlow blurted. "For staying. Helping." God, had he just forgotten how to talk?



“Worth it,” Pax said with a grin as he traded in his sated kitten for a mewling one.

Marlow was on his second kitten before Pax spoke again.

“So did you ever do anything like throwing fish guts in a neighbor’s tree?”

“Oh, no. I just... sat around watching television a lot.”

“Well, it saved you a beating anyway.”

No. Not really.

Two kittens later, Pax yawned. “Excuse me! Sorry. Long day.”

“Those bags looked heavy.”

“Yeah, and so were all the rest.”

“I guess you don’t get used to it?”

“Naw. Might, if I were there more, but Mr. Wilson only takes me a day or two at a time. Today his oldest boy had an early game over in Buckner County.”

“Ahh.” Kittens. Without Pax’s help, tiny helpless kittens would die. “Well, you’re welcome to sleep here. In between feedings, I mean.”

Pax chuckled. “We’re both going to be sleeping right here,” he patted the couch, “for a day or two, I think.” He looked around. “Got a phone? I should call my mom before she starts worrying.”

“Oh. Of course. It’s...” Marlow looked around. He had a phone. Carly had insisted. What if something happened, and the Internet was out or he couldn’t get to it? She thought he was going to the Australian outback, the way she acted, but she’d insisted he get a phone, so he’d done it. He just wasn’t sure where he’d put it.

He tried to set the kitten aside to get up, but the little thing dug tiny needle-claws into his thigh as the bottle was withdrawn, and he gasped in pain instead. Pax waved his free hand.

“On second thought, it can wait till these vicious mites are done eating,” he said with a grin.

Well, that would give Marlow time to maybe remember where he’d last seen the phone. He sank back into the couch. Pax yawned again.

“Oh! Sorry. Would you mind maybe turning the TV on? I don’t want to fall asleep and leave you all the work.”

“I don’t... have TV. I mean, I have a TV. I don’t get anything. There’s no cable.”

Pax laughed. “Yeah, no, not out here. Guess nobody warned you, huh?”

“That wasn’t on the list, no.”

“So what was on that list?”

“Huh?”

“The list of things they warned you about. No cable wasn’t on it, but what was?”

“Oh, uhh...” Marlow tried to think of something that wouldn’t be offensive, but since most of the comments had been about *survival back in BFE* and *rednecks with guns and beer*, he couldn’t sort through them for something inoffensive. There had to be—

“To have a phone,” he blurted. “What if I fall? It could be months before someone came and checked on me.”

“That seems like common sense anywhere if you live alone. Once my mom went to visit my cousin for a week. Second day, I was getting coffee with my eyes half-open, tripped over the dog. Thought for sure I’d broken my leg for a bit, but it just hurt pretty bad.”

“I thought it was good advice too, so I did get one. I just can’t remember where it is right now.”

“Don’t do you much good that way,” Pax drawled with his slow grin.

“I suppose not.”

“Anything interesting on that list? Watch out for wild dogs? Beware of Sasquatch and the chupacabra?”

“Chupacabra?”

“Vampire thing, attacks goats. Supposedly. Mr. Barger swore he saw one in with his sheep a couple months back, but we figure it was just a wolf pack got a stray. They get hungry in deep winter.”

“My god, wolves?”

“Wolves,” Pax said. “Even hungry, they don’t generally attack people, you know. Mostly they go after what they’ve always eaten—deer, maybe rabbits in slow times. I saw one out back of my house last month. Gorgeous creature. Can understand why people make up so many stories about them.”

“What—is there any other wildlife I should be aware of?” Marlow asked.

“Bears, here in another month. Wouldn’t worry about them too much, nor the wolves, unless you’re going out in the woods. Stay close to the house and the worse you’ll likely have is raccoons raiding your garbage. Which is a hassle. You might want to get locking cans. The ones you have are saying ‘buffet’ to the likes of them.”

“Locking cans.” Yes, he’d want to get locking cans. Raccoons carried rabies, didn’t they? And other things? “Raccoons carry rabies, right?”

“Most things can, but it’s not much of a problem. Hottest part of summer, rabies is more likely. You’ll want to be careful.”

“Definitely.” Marlow looked around for a notepad, but he still had a handful of kitten so there was no point. “Notice anything else in your ride up?”

“I don’t mean to find fault—”

“No, I need to know. I really don’t want my garbage spread everywhere.” Little late for that, wasn’t it? When your garbage was a headline story in three tabloids in one week...

“Be careful of fires. People come out in the boondocks and figure they can have a fire if they want, but it’s drier than it looks. We haven’t had enough rain in years.”

“I hadn’t planned on setting fire to anything.” Anything or anyone he might want burned was still in California.

“Good,” Pax said. “Oh, and the barn. It’s been there a while, and it’s been years since it got any care. You might have someone take a look and see if it’s still safe. Especially since you’re keeping your car in there. I help Mrs. Carlton with her carpentry sometimes—she’s careful and smart. I can get you her number.”

“Yes. Definitely.” Marlow shifted the kitten to the side—he/she was pretty good at the bottle now and wasn’t disturbed—and grabbed the notepad from the side table. Under it was the phone. He set it on Pax’s leg.

“Oh sure, now I don’t have a hand free...” Pax complained.

“It will probably still be there in half an hour. How many kittens to go?”

“Too many,” Pax said with a grin into the box from which desperate mews still rose. “Naw, not too bad. All that noise is coming from three seriously hungry little dudes. Or dudettes. Have you sexed them?”

“Sexed—no?”

“Doesn’t matter till you get a chance to breathe and name them, I guess.”

Pax traded his fed kitten for a hungry one. “If we stick to the same order,” he said, “they’ll get fed on the right schedule.”

“Whereas if we mix them up, some will be fed an hour apart and some three. Right. Good thinking.”

Pax chuckled. “Nobody ever said that to me before.”

“So we should try to remember the order.” Marlow set his fed kitten in the box and grabbed the notebook because remembering wasn’t something he was good at anymore. He wrote down the order he’d taken kittens, then Pax’s. “Okay.” Marlow set the notebook aside and grabbed the next-to-last mewling kitten. The last cried plaintively, alone and unsatisfied. Pax made a face.

“Hold on,” he said. He leaned over and adjusted Marlow’s hand so he held both bottles, and put his kitten on Marlow’s knee. Then he went to the kitchen and was back in moments with the third bottle. He took the last unfed kitten from the box and sat on the couch. “That’s better,” he said. “I couldn’t take any more of the poor thing’s crying.”

“Yeah,” Marlow said into the blessed quiet. “Definitely.”

“Are they both managing all right? Need adjusting?”

“Nope, I think they’ve got this.”

“Cool.”

Silence fell, broken only by the sound of rain falling outside the house. On Marlow’s knee one kitten started kneading, tiny, tiny claws not even long enough to get through his jeans so he only felt the smallest of pokes. In the chair Pax yawned again.

“Not sure that coffee is going to do the job,” he said.

“Well, you could probably fall asleep. All the kitten needs is your hand, right?”

Pax chuckled. “That’s what my ex-boyfriend said.”

“Good reason to make him an ex,” Marlow said, thinking of being used and dragging his mind back from it by petting the kittens on his knee.

“Oh, that wasn’t it.” Pax shrugged. “Yeah, he could be a jerk, but a guy like me has to take what he can get. Naw, he moved into the city. Wanted to find himself. I guess in the city nobody cares if you’re gay.”

“Some cities, some neighborhoods, yeah,” Marlow agreed. “Not always and not everywhere. And they can turn on you. Us.” *Shut up, Marlow!*

Pax looked up, just glanced at Marlow, happy, hopeful, and appreciative all in one look. Marlow felt himself flush. Pax petted the kitten with one gentle finger, and it let go of the bottle, burped, and dropped its head to his knee. Pax laughed softly.

“Someone’s done.”

“An hour until we start again.”

“Yep. Would you mind if I took a shower? I’m kind of highly aware of all those sacks of feed I carried today.”

“Oh, sure—I mean, that’s fine. I’ve got—” One kitten had nodded off. The other had moved to trying to chew on the nipple. Marlow pulled the bottle away and adjusted the kitten, tried again. “Bathroom’s right there,” he nodded at the door. “There’s clean towels. I can find you something to put on.”

“Great.” Pax stood to put his kitten in the box then shrugged out of his jacket to toss it on the chair. Sat back on the edge of the chair to untie his—hiking boots? Probably called work boots here. They looked good and solid and protective of one’s feet. Marlow kept his head down, petting the drowsing kitten and the one still eating, but he couldn’t make his eyes stay where he wanted. So he saw when Pax stood again and stretched, and his shirt rode up to show the edge of a six-pack with a treasure trail Marlow suddenly wanted to lick.

“Just come in when you want,” Pax said and walked away.

*Come in and deliver the clothes*, he meant. Surely that was what Pax meant. Marlow sat there telling himself that, holding to it as lust swirled through him. He’d thought he was over that. He’d thought that part of him was dead and gone with the rest of him.

It didn’t matter. Casual comment or sexy invitation, Marlow didn’t care. He was only going to go in and deliver clothes. And he’d do it with his eyes closed. He’d lived there for months—surely he could walk into the bathroom with his eyes closed.

If his eyes and dick would listen, anyway.

*Remember last time*, he warned his rebellious body parts. *Remember what happened? How much more do we want to lose?*

Marlow's body wasn't listening. His imagination jumped in on the wrong side of the struggle, picturing Pax standing nude in the clawfoot bathtub that was also the shower. It supplied details Marlow hadn't even noticed noticing, like the play of muscles in Pax's arm and back as he raised a hand to shove his wet hair from his face. Marlow imagined water dripping from Pax's hair and running in rivulets down the lines of his back... his slow grin as he turned if Marlow were to accept the invitation, soapy bubbles streaming down Pax's chest to dampen the hair there then dancing over his flat stomach to find more hair leading—

Marlow put the kittens in the box as the water started running in the bathroom. He grabbed his phone.

Death threats in his Twitter notifications. Perfect. Marlow read a few then went on to Tumblr where the looser character limit let people get more creative, and the “anon” feature gave them courage. He read about how he should have died, how they wished he had died, how he should just go ahead and take care of that. Some sent maps to nice high bridges. One lovely soul wanted to see him “raped to death with a plumber snake.” Well, that was certainly an image. Just for good measure, Marlow checked in on his favorite tabloid.

Oh, look. An in-depth issue. *Dimpled and Depraved*, the title screamed even on his phone screen. *How America's Boy Next Door Gay-Seduced His Way to the Top*. And, oh, that was new. Now he'd supposedly seduced the fucking pool boy—the one who'd fucked his fiancé in his bed—as well as three more deflowered gay-sex virgins. Two were no-talent heartthrob has-beens Marlow had never touched and never would have touched, and one was a baby-faced innocent he'd never even met. Marlow wished them good luck rejuvenating their careers on controversy. They were going to need it when the adoring public turned on them.

And to finish off any hints of lust lying about, Marlow hit his bookmarks for the story that had been on the TV when he woke alone in the hospital.

“He made me think I was gay,” Kameryn sniveled to the sympathetic reporter, hands folded as if praying forgiveness. “He did... *things*...”

Yes, of course, Marlow James, evil gay predator. That was why he wasn't going near Pax. Marlow closed the app, locked the phone, set it down on the table gently. Then he got up and found sweatpants and his baggiest T-shirt. He walked into the bathroom and put the clothes on the hamper and walked out without a glance at the bathtub or the clear shower curtain.

In the living room, Marlow gathered the bottles and took them to the kitchen to boil again. The big clock above the stove read ten o'clock. Two feedings down. At least a week to go. If he held two bottles in one hand, four shifts—no, five—no. He'd spend more hours feeding kittens than not feeding kittens for days yet. Sooner or later he'd fall into one of his coma-sleeps for fifteen hours, and the kittens would die.

No. He still needed Pax's help. Marlow couldn't save the kittens without Pax's help.

Marlow cleared the basket-stash and the rest of the dirty dishes from the living room and stacked them next to the sink for later washing. He pulled out a few safe DVDs—*Legally Blonde*, *Firefly*, *LOTR*, and a few others. A good variety of good stuff and nothing anyone had even thought about casting him in.

Marlow looked at the chair he'd been sitting in. There was a reason he never sat in it. He looked at the cleared couch and angled the chair to face the TV. Put his heating pad in it and draped the throw to cover it. He set the end table next to the chair and the remotes on the end table, then he went to make more coffee.

As he came back into the living room, the water shut off in the bathroom. Marlow looked over his arrangements then moved the end table to the side of the chair closer to the couch and dragged it forward a little. He moved the coffee table full of sleeping kittens sideways, so there was a sort of wall of flimsy furniture between the chair and the couch.

Pax came from the bathroom, barefoot and tousling his hair with the towel. He looked at the arrangements and smiled as his eyes fell on the movies. "Oh, hey, the extended editions!" He dropped the towel to his neck to pick up the *Lord of the Rings* boxes. "Awesome! These should keep us occupied until the kittens are having kittens."

"That... was my thinking," Marlow said, sitting in the chair. Pax's face and voice held not even a hint of disappointment. Maybe it hadn't been an invitation. Good.

A grandfather clock stood in the far corner of the room. Pax frowned at it.

"Maybe twenty minutes till they wake up again," Marlow said.

"You cleaned up the bottles?"

"We didn't put the formula in the refrigerator, so we can't re-use it. I re-boiled the bottles so we can make more." Marlow sighed at the thought of leaving his heating pad again. "Actually, we should probably do that now."

“I’ll be right behind you,” Pax said, heading back for the bathroom. He did appear shortly in the kitchen, though, now without the towel but with Marlow’s phone in his hand and a frown on his face. “Sorry, I’m an idiot,” he said. “How do I make a call?”

“...It says ‘swipe to unlock’.”

“Right, sorry.” Pax looked sheepish. “Wasn’t sure what it would be unlocking. Don’t want to unlock your car by accident. Or the basement, and let the monsters out.”

Monsters in the basement. Marlow cast a glance at what the realtor had called the “cellar” door, but that was silly. The skeletons were in the closet, not the basement. Well, mostly they were spread all over the tabloids, but—

“Okay, still lost,” Pax said cheerfully. “Though that’s a lovely beach picture. Where is that?”

The house was gone in the settlement; Marlow would never stand on that deck again and stare at the ocean. Damn it. Marlow had loved that house, every corner and beam of it. “California,” Marlow said, taking the phone. “Hit the button that looks like a phone, and it will take you to the phone function.”

“Go easy on me, Mr. Marlow. My mom’s phone still has a dial.”

“Sorry,” Marlow said, dropping his eyes to the formula. “And it’s just Marlow. It’s my first name.”

“Marlow.” Pax grinned. “I always—I mix things up. Sorry.” Pax frowned at the phone and pushed numbers slowly, then held it to his ear. “Hi, Mo—oh. Sorry, Mr. Kammeyer. Yes, this is Pax again... I know. Yes, it’s a bit late for me to be out. I was just calling Mom so she wouldn’t worry... yes, twenty years of getting it wrong... seven six two. Going down. I’ll remember... Thanks, Mr. Kammeyer. Have a good—oh sure. I can do that. Give me a call when you think it’s time... Yes, sir, but I’m that dolt who’ll forget, so give me a call if you will.” He grinned. “You know my number. Have a good night, Mr. Kammeyer.” He frowned again at the phone. “How do I—”

“Push the red button to end. Push the back button to get back to the keyboard.” Don’t be an ass, Marlow. Pax had kept him from falling when he couldn’t *walk*. He had no call getting short with the man for not knowing how to operate a smartphone that had been in his hands a much shorter length of time than Marlow had had legs to walk.

Even if he started the count from the second time he learned to walk.



“...nine... seven... six... two...” Pax muttered, pushing numbers slowly. “Hi, Mom! I’m fine... I’m sorry. I’d have called sooner, but we couldn’t find the phone... No, Mom, it’s not plugged in! It’s one of those cell phones that have movies and games and stuff on it... I’m helping with orphaned kittens. Marlow came to the feed store to get supplies and we’re bottle-feeding them... Yeah, around the clock for... probably a couple days?” He looked at Marlow, raising his eyebrows.

“Probably.” Marlow had enough crap on his cell phone to make him swear off men forever. He could resist Pax for a few days if that’s what he had to do to save the lives of nine kittens.

“Yeah, the old Dunn place. Yeah, that’d be great. Oh, and some food, Mom. Please? Make a big pan of your shepherd’s pie?”

Oh crap. Let one person in and he brought more. Give an inch, as the saying went...

“Great. Thank you. I love you, Mom! Oh—I don’t know. Hold on.” He held the phone out to Marlow. “Can you tell her the number?” He flushed. “I’ll just mess it up if you tell it to me to tell her.”

Marlow winced and took the phone. “Hello.”

“Hello, new Pax-friend,” a light voice said. “May I please have the number at which I can reach my fly-by-night son for the next few days apparently?”

Marlow’s mind went blank but mercifully only for a moment. He reeled off the number. The voice laughed in his ear.

“You city-folk and your area codes. I’m five miles away as the crow flies. Now, do you have any allergies I should know about, so I don’t put something you can’t eat in this reward for kitten-saving shepherd’s pie?”

“Uh... no, ma’am, thank you.” He should tell her not to worry about it. He had food. But Pax didn’t like his food and was being very gentle about getting other food, and Marlow’s mouth was watering already at the thought of a homemade shepherd’s pie. The thought of homemade anything, of something not made in a factory. He’d been fine for months, but now—

“You’re welcome,” Pax’s mom said. “May I say good night to my son?”

“Right.” Marlow handed the phone back to Pax as the first desperate mew came from the living room. Crap!

“Hi, Mom, love you, gotta go, the kittens are awake!”

“I miss Tom Bombadil,” Marlow said some time later, when the kittens were all fed. Pax cocked his head. “You haven’t read the books?” Marlow asked.

“I’m... not much for reading,” Pax said. Marlow remembered *just get him to read it to you* and flushed.

“There’s a whole section after they leave the Shire, where they’re in the Old Forest,” Marlow said. “They get in trouble with the trees being—well, a little more alive than they’re supposed to be. Tom Bombadil saves them. Then they run into the Wights, and Tom Bombadil saves them again and goes most of the way to Bree with them. I understand why PJ didn’t include it, but I still miss it.”

“PJ?”

“The director. Peter Jackson. Some fans call him PJ.” And some friends. And some who weren’t really either, but whatever.

“Ahh.”

“I don’t care if Strider never washes his hair,” Pax said later. “He’s still hot.”

“Manly stubble,” Marlow agreed.

The smart thing would have been to sleep when the kittens slept, maybe taking it in turns to be sure the humans woke up when the kittens needed them. But when the blackness outside turned to a deep, charcoal grey, Marlow only noticed because he was putting another disk in the drive.

“Another grey day,” Pax observed. “Perfect for watching movies and cuddling kittens and taking a couple naps.”

“Yep.” Marlow was used to catching most of his sleep in naps. “Do you want some more coffee?”

“Love some, but I better not. I’m not sure my stomach can take it.”

Yeah. Marlow could understand that.

“Mom will probably bring food in time for lunch. Got anything for breakfast?”

Marlow waved at the kitchen. “More frozen dinners.”

Pax made a face Marlow wouldn’t have seen if he hadn’t been up. “I’m sorry,” Marlow found himself saying. “I don’t cook.”

“I do if you have anything to cook!”

Marlow shook his head. “I really don’t. I meant to just fill in with the frozen meals, but when I ran out of fresh stuff, I just kind of... didn’t go buy more.” He’d been eating frozen meals for months just because he didn’t want to go to a grocery store.

Well, he’d been right. Look what happened when he went to a feed store!

“Well, maybe...” Pax flung himself out of the couch. “Wow, that’s not easy to get out of. Too comfy. Let’s see what you have in these frozen meals.”

Pax worked a miracle. He took peppers from one meal, frozen eggs and sausage from a couple more, mashed potatoes from a box, and combined them with at least half a stick of butter he found in the fridge, and turned it into terrifyingly delicious food. Or maybe Marlow had been eating microwaved meals for too long, and just the act of frying the food made it delicious. Whatever the case, by the time the kittens woke again Marlow had eaten his largest meal in months and just wanted to curl up and go to sleep, so he sat in the corner of the couch and that was just what he did.

He woke to Pax shaking his shoulder. “I hate to wake you,” Pax said, “but Mom brought food, and I thought you’d like some before I ate it all.”

He was dressed in his own clothes again, Marlow had time to notice before Pax waved a plate in his face and Marlow snatched it as the most delectable aromas caressed his nose. Pax laughed and vanished as Marlow dug in, coming back a minute later with another plate and two glasses of milk in one hand. He set one in front of Marlow.

“I guess you needed the sleep,” he said. “You should count yourself lucky I woke you up. I had to tell myself a bunch of times I’m not the kind of man who eats all the shepherd’s pie before my friend wakes up to have any.”

“Oh my god, this is good.”

“Mom’s shepherd’s pie is famous across half the county. Or so the neighbors tell her when they happen to come calling when she bakes it.” Pax picked up the remote. “I remember where the movie was when you dropped off,” he said, sending the movie skipping backward through scenes.

“You don’t have to. I’ve seen it.” God, the food was good. Marlow wasn’t sure he’d ever had anything so good.

“I won’t mind watching it again,” Pax said and kept going. “Oh, right. Disk change.” He leaned forward to sort the boxes on the coffee table.

“The kittens!” Marlow blurted. Pax grinned.

“You slept like a rock. I just propped the bottle in your hand and took the other two. Two feedings now. It’s not efficient ’cause they still try to chew on the bottle, but it worked.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“Like a disk and a half.”

Wow. Marlow hadn’t slept that long at once in... well, months.

“Now that you’re awake, though...” Pax got up and flopped onto the far end of the couch. “That chair is really not very comfortable.”

“It’s really not.” Marlow pulled his legs under him, ceding half the couch to Pax. Under the edge of the blanket on the chair, the heating pad peeked out. Marlow wondered how Pax hadn’t noticed it, realized he must have. At least he hadn’t said anything.

“You can stretch out,” Pax said. “I don’t mind.”

“Maybe in a minute,” Marlow said, swinging his legs to get up. Pain stabbed his hip and he swore, falling into the arm of the couch as he clutched it.

“Whoa,” Pax said, setting things on the coffee table with a clatter. “How can I help?”

“No,” Marlow gasped. Oh crap, quit acting like... come on. Pretend there’s a camera. Paparazzi. Smile. Marlow took a deep breath and straightened himself out, smiled. “Just... a cramp from moving too fast. I’m all right. Thank you.” Slowly, stretching as he’d been told in physical therapy and ignoring the pain as he’d been told not to do in PT but had to do, Marlow got to his feet and took short, limping steps toward the bathroom. Pax didn’t watch him go; his eyes were on the TV.

In the bathroom, Marlow let the swear words out, found his pain pills and swallowed one, washed his face and brushed his teeth and pondered how very badly he needed a haircut. When he could walk almost normally, he went back to the amazing, delicious food Pax’s mother had brought.

“I love this,” Pax said as he passed. “When Legolas does his machine-gun arrow thing. Ah ha, disk one. Put it in the wrong box.”

“Yeah,” Marlow agreed, sinking back into the couch. “And he’s so damn pretty doing it.” Warmth caressed Marlow’s hip, easing the abused muscles there. Pax had moved the heating pad from the chair to Marlow’s end of the

couch. He'd even paid attention to the placement of the pad, so it was under Marlow's bad leg now as it had been in the chair. Marlow closed his eyes for a moment of heartfelt gratitude, opened them to see Pax bent over the DVD player right in front of him and thought about a blow job of heartfelt thanks.

Pax wore jeans now, tight jeans.

Marlow closed his eyes again and thought of Kameryn, naked and inviting, hiding malevolence behind his sunny smile.

"Eat your pie," Pax said, cloth brushing cloth as he moved back to his end of the couch, "before I do."

"Mine," Marlow said and forced a smile as he picked up the food. "No takebacks."

It really was delicious. Pax's improvised breakfast had reminded Marlow what food could be. The shepherd's pie was like a visitation from another, better realm.

"You boiled the bottles again?" Marlow asked since most of the detritus of kitten-feeding no longer lay on the table. His slow cooker was there, though, with water in it, and a saucepan submerged in the middle. He frowned at it. Carly had insisted he needed one, but he wasn't even sure if he'd taken it out of the box.

"Bottle warmer," Pax explained. "I boiled the bottles and refilled them and put them in the fridge. And I set the stove timer. When it goes off, we put the bottles in here," he pointed at the saucepan, "and it should get the bottles warm before the kittens wake up. The pan will keep them upright."

"That's pretty smart," Marlow said. Pax's cheeks warmed.

"You keep saying that," he said with a chuckle. "Makes me wonder about you." In the kitchen, something beeped. "Uh oh," Pax said. "Bottle time." He got up, but when Marlow started to move Pax waved him back. "Eat while you can. All I have to do is grab the bottles."

Because he'd prepared, as Marlow hadn't quite managed to do each time. Marlow shook his head and watched Pax walk away and thought again about a blow job of appreciation. Like many bicyclists, Pax had a fantastic ass, and probably a really pretty—

Marlow shook his head, turned his eyes to Orlando Bloom as Legolas. Orlando Bloom was a much safer sight than Pax's ass in tight jeans and almost as good to look at.

“There’s enough shepherd’s pie to last through dinner,” Pax said, coming back with three bottles in his hands. “And Mom bought some fixings, so I can make a decent breakfast.”

“I... should have been awake. To say thank you.”

“She understood,” Pax said, putting the bottles in the improvised warmer. “She said to tell you she would have stayed to help feed kittens, but she has a job over at the Newman farm today.”

“I’m glad she understood, but I probably should have got up to meet her.”

“Naw,” Pax said, making himself busy with the movie boxes. “I realized after I asked her to come that you’ve gone to a lot of effort to be alone out here with your frozen meals and keep out signs. Best not to be dragging a whole lot of folks in to meet you.” He glanced up. “So, you know, since it’s from the outside world, I’ll understand if you don’t want that pie...”

Marlow wrapped a protective arm around his plate. Pax chuckled.

“So you’ve never been on your own before?” he asked, dropping into the wingback chair. “I mean, I’m not judging. I’m twenty-five and I’ve always lived with my mom and likely always will. But I can cook dinner. And mostly keep raccoons out of the garbage.”

“Where I lived, there were restaurants,” Marlow retorted. “If I was hungry, I bought food.”

Pax raised his hands in surrender. “Not judging,” he repeated. “Mom says winter’s last gasp is on the way, and it’s going to be nasty. She said I should ask if your furnace is still lit and remind you to bring in your seedlings.”

“The furnace doesn’t work,” Marlow said. “I’ve been using the fireplace, but I don’t have a lot of wood left. Didn’t think I’d need another load.” His eyes fell on the kitten box. “If we run out, do you think they’ll be all right with just the heating pad?”

“Oh yeah. And so will we. We can... take the couch into the kitchen and run the oven or something if we run out of wood.”

“Smart,” Marlow said just to see the way it made Pax smile. He *was* smart. Why was he so sure he wasn’t? “Do you call Mr. Kammeyer instead of your mom often?”

“Not every time!” Pax said with a flush and a laugh. “If I dial fast, I can get it right. I know my own number! I just jumble it up sometimes. Especially if I think about it.”

“Were you ever diagnosed with a learning disability?”

“Yeah.” Pax was arranging the movie boxes again. “I’m disabled to learn because I’m dumb.”

“You’re not dumb.”

Pax smiled at him. “That’s nice of you to say. But it’s not such a big deal. I just stay home, take jobs where I can, look after my mom sometimes since she looks after me all the time. I don’t mind. I see it like your scars on your neck. They’re just one thing about you. Other stuff is you’re smart, cute, fun to talk to, kind, generous... along with all that, the scars just aren’t a big deal, right?”

Maybe, except Marlow’s scars were proof of far more stupidity than Pax could claim. A mew from the box saved him from having to answer. Pax grinned.

“Showtime! Or nearly. Need anything before we’re stuck here for another hour?”

“Turn the movie on,” Marlow requested. *And no more talking*, he didn’t say. Damn. Why did Pax have to think he was cute?

The silence lasted through three kittens, two in Marlow’s lap and one on Pax’s knee.

“How would you feel about moving that stuff,” Pax eventually said, waving at the furniture along the wall by the fireplace, “and bringing in a lot of firewood? Not sure we’ve had a blizzard since you came—it’ll be pretty nasty, and we won’t want to be going outside for wood. Especially not when it’s letting all the heat out, opening the door.”

“Sounds like a good idea. We can do that as soon as all the kittens are passed out.”

“Don’t mind doing it alone,” Pax said. “I do a good bit of hauling and chopping wood, so I’m used to it.”

“I’ll help,” Marlow said. He had some walking issues, sure, but he could walk. And carry wood. Been doing it most of the winter, hadn’t he? Pax didn’t need to treat him like he was incapable.

Silence fell for the duration of another round, three more kittens.

“Pippin and I have a lot in common,” Pax said as the hobbit in question took the *Palantír* from Gandalf’s bed, “but I don’t think I’d do that!”

“The *Palantíri* have a magic,” Marlow said. “His inclination toward mischief didn’t help, but it’s not all his fault.”

“I’m glad. I really like Pippin.”

“I’m more like Boromir.” Wandering around complaining, saying everyone else was doing it wrong, then dying.

“Tempted by the strength to save the world?” Pax asked. “Horribly wounded and still fighting to protect the young hobbits? I could see that.”

“Boromir fails.”

“Pretty sure he knew he would, too, but he still thought it was worth doing.”

“I got my scars in a car wreck,” Marlow growled. “I wasn’t protecting anyone.” God, his sweet little Porsche Boxster wrapped around a fucking tree...

“Before we figured out how to talk about our feelings,” Pax said, “my ex-boyfriend and I used to shoot each other with BB guns.”

“...Wow. Okay. I think... yeah. Not as deadly as drunk driving but... yeah. That’s pretty close. You could have lost an eye or something.”

“Yep,” Pax said with a chuckle.

Oh hell. First Pax said he was cute, now he insisted on thinking Marlow could be heroic. And he couldn’t just dive into his phone for reminders of how stupid and naïve he was—his hands were full of kittens.

It really didn’t help his frame of mind that Denethor reminded him of his mother, especially in that robe so like her favorite coat.

Moving furniture was so much easier with someone on the other end. When the kittens were fed and asleep, Marlow and Pax made quick work of making room for the wood, threw down a couple of old blankets to protect the hardwood floor, and went outside.

The rain had turned to snow. It drifted down in big fluffy flakes, but Pax pointed to the west where the clouds were dark and scary-looking. Marlow took the hint, and they got to work.

Moving wood was easier with help too. Pax and he took turns, one carrying while the other worked the doors and the stacking, but on Marlow’s third time stacking wood into Pax’s outstretched arms, a log shifted as he grabbed it, and the whole pile quivered. In that instant he saw the rabbit, huddled small under



the pile and close to his foot, and he knew she must have babies in the hollow under her or she would have run. He caught the log and pushed up, but the pile and gravity resisted.

“Drop it, Marlow!” Pax warned, stepping back. He only saw the pile. “Let go!”

“Bunnies!” Marlow protested like he was five not twenty-five, and fought gravity like he could win.

“Hell!” Pax dropped his load, grabbed one log and stuck it into the pile as a lever. The rabbit crouched, wide-eyed and flattened out over her den. The pile shook. Marlow held it while his hip screamed in protest and his shoulder cramped, and Pax shoved a few more split logs into place to protect the rabbit babies. Then Marlow let go. Some wood clattered, but the rabbit hunkered safely over her young as Marlow lurched away swearing, tripped over a dropped log and yelped pain as he fell.

“Fuck!” Pax blurted. “Are you all right?”

Marlow’s left side spasmed, knotting pain from knee to shoulder, and he curled up with a faint, breathless scream. No, stretch, had to stretch it out oh fuck it hurt it—

Pax scooped him up, clutched Marlow to his chest, and got him into the house and onto the couch.

“What is it?” he demanded. “Marlow! Did you break something? How can I help?”

“Nose spray,” Marlow gasped. “Bathroom!” Pax ran.

God fuck shit hell fucking hell shit come on breathe relax it shit fuck just a damn cramp fucking god it hurt fuck breathe make it relax—

Pax came running with the prescription bottle. Marlow blocked a nostril and inhaled while Pax pulled the heating pad from under the pillow and put it on Marlow’s bad hip. He ran his hands over it gently while Marlow counted, waiting on the medicine. Twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven—his muscles went limp and Marlow sagged into an exhausted puddle on the couch.

“Jesus!” Pax yelped, lunging for the phone on the coffee table.

“I’m all right,” Marlow whispered, all the energy he could summon. Pax turned back, phone in hand. “Honest,” Marlow breathed. “I’m okay.”

“You better not be being brave,” Pax snarled, and set the phone down. He bent to pick up the prescription inhaler that had fallen from Marlow’s limp fingers. “What... I mean...”

“Leftover damage from the accident,” Marlow whispered. He could have volume or he could have sentences. He couldn’t have both. His body had used up everything in the spasms. “If I overdo... I get muscle spasms. Which overdoes it by a *lot*, so it... just feeds back and feeds back.”

“Must have been one hell of an accident.”

“Yeah.”

“And the medicine? That was—should you even be conscious?”

“It’s not a narcotic,” Marlow breathed. “It kind of... dulls communication between my muscles and my brain. Breaks the feedback loop.”

“You swear you’re all right?”

“Pinky promise,” Marlow breathed and Pax laughed.

“Okay. Be right back.” He walked away. Marlow lay there and thought about his pain pills in the bathroom, but he’d have to take the stronger stuff and then he’d probably sleep again. Pax had managed the kittens for two feedings already, but that was no reason to make him do it some more. Especially since Marlow would probably be so limp he couldn’t even hold a bottle in his sleep.

A door closed and Pax came back, shedding his jacket as he did. “Can I pull your boots off?” he asked Marlow. “They’re dripping.”

“Please. Sorry.”

“It’s your floor you’re dripping on.” Pax threw an afghan over Marlow then tugged at his boots. When the boots were gone, he tucked the afghan around Marlow’s feet. “Time for more movie?” he asked. “Or do you want some lunch? Or both?”

Marlow wasn’t hungry, but he needed to eat. Protein for muscle repair! Or something. “Both would be great.”

“Cool.” Pax ruffled his hair. “Boromir.”

...*idiot*, Marlow thought but didn’t say. It wasn’t funny when Pax called himself names all the time.

In moments, Marlow had more delicious food in front of him, a cup of coffee, and a hot guy helping him sit up. He tried to push that thought out of his

head, but he couldn't ignore Pax's hands when Pax's hands were actually on his body. Nope. No way.

Well, why should he? He couldn't imagine Pax whining he'd been seduced by the Evil Gay Predator, either.

That didn't mean anything. Marlow had never dreamed Kameryn would turn on him like that. Because he was stupid and trusted people.

"I'm good," Marlow growled, and Pax stepped away.

"Awesome," he said and sat in the chair with his own leftovers, coffee, and the remote. In the kitchen, the timer went off. "Whoops," Pax said and got back up to fetch the bottles and put them in his improvised warmer. He settled himself again and started the movie.

Crap. Better eat and caffeinate quickly. Marlow sat crumpled in the corner of the couch until he could find the energy to push himself up farther. Another pause for rest, and as another awesome fight scene rattled on, he reached for the plate and put it on his knee. Coffee—

"Here." Pax didn't even look at him, just moved the end table with one hand from its role as flimsy barricade back into a useful piece of furniture. He stretched for Marlow's coffee and set it on the end table, now close enough Marlow could reach it with only a little effort.

"Thank you."

Pax shrugged. "I love this count of theirs," he said. "This is where you can see they've really become friends."

"When they start sniping at each other again? Yeah. It's great."

"Is it like that in the books?"

"Yes, they have the same contest in the book."

On the TV, Aragorn spoke Elvish. Pax frowned at the subtitles, his lips moving as he tried to read. Marlow frowned too and read it out loud.

*"Charge!"*

Why couldn't Pax read? He wasn't dumb, no matter how many times he said he was.

In the kitten box, someone stirred. Pax grinned at the box then at Marlow.

"Eat fast!" he said, waving his fork.

Priorities. Marlow went for the coffee first.

As expected, in minutes Marlow and Pax were both feeding kittens again.

“We should go ahead and name them,” Pax said. “How about after the Fellowship?”

Marlow snorted. “So that one would be Aragorn, because he’s always first? Even if he’s a she?”

“Sure. It’s still a good name. And the one you have there is Legolas. His fur’s almost the right color. And the other—sort of long-haired, that works for Gimli. But we can’t name one Boromir, that’s you.”

Marlow rolled his eyes. “So what then?” he asked. It didn’t matter what they were named. Did it? Did kittens come when called? “Elrond? Galadriel? The gaffer?”

“Arwen. The all-white one is Arwen.”

“...Nice.”

“And this poor fellow,” Pax put Aragorn back in the box and pulled out the smallest of the litter, a wee grey tabby kitten with a white face, “is Frodo—after Weathertop. He’s going to recover, just like Frodo did, with a little help.”

“From Elrond the Wise,” Marlow said, nodding his head to Pax. Pax laughed.

“Actually, Frodo, you might be in trouble,” he told the kitten.

“In the books, Frodo never completely recovers. That’s why the elves take him to the Undying Lands.”

“This Frodo is going to recover,” Pax said, settling the kitten on his knee. “Aren’t you, little Bagginses?”

Marlow shook his head and traded out kittens. “And these orange tabbies?”

“Merry and Pippin. It’s not going to be easy to tell them apart.”

“Sam?”

“The black and white. He’s usually cuddled up to Frodo here.”

“So the solid grey kitten is Gandalf before the Balrog?”

“That, or Gandalf the White fell in the fireplace.”

Marlow snorted.

“Aren’t we glad there aren’t thirteen kittens?” Pax asked. “Fili and Kili, Ori, Dori, Nori, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, Balin, and Dwalin, and especially Thorin Oakenshield.”

“Show-off,” Marlow grumbled. “How many times have you watched those movies?”

“Actually my mom read *The Hobbit* to me when I was little.” Pax grinned. “Then I made her read it to me about ten more times. We tried raising rabbits once, and all the rabbits were named after dwarves. Mom tried to sell Dain of the Iron Hills to Mrs. Kerry for Sunday dinner, and I had such a fit.”

“So somewhere there’s a big rabbit-mound where Thorin is King Under the Mountain?”

“Mom said they went back to Rivendell.”

Marlow burst out laughing. On his knee, Merry or Pippin released the bottle to complain about the shaking. The other kitten never paused.

“So she read you *The Hobbit*,” Marlow asked, “but not *The Lord of the Rings*?”

“She said I should read that for myself,” Pax said, his eyes on little Frodo on his thigh. He petted the tiny creature with the very tip of his pinky finger, and Marlow wanted to kiss him.

“Why can’t you read?” he blurted instead. “You’re not dumb. You’re not.”

Pax shrugged, petting the kitten. “I can. It just... takes forever. It’s hard to sound stuff out, and if I stare too long it starts moving and—”

“Oh my god,” Marlow blurted. “You’re dyslexic!”

Pax blinked at him.

“Dyslexia. Seriously, no one ever thought of that?” Marlow lurched to get up, but he still held Merry and Pippin. “That’s why you mess up your phone number! You know the numbers, but you get the order wrong. Right?”

“I’m pretty bad at math too.”

“It’s hard to do math if you’re not sure what the numbers in the problem are.”

“What’s—dilexia—if it’s not another word for dumb?”

“Dyslexia... It’s a learning disorder. It’s... I don’t know, it’s a thing where your brain doesn’t multi-task well or something? I had a friend who had it, and

he had to have his scr—his papers printed on colored paper so he could read them easier. It's not a vision thing, but the colored paper still helped. Certain fonts are easier to read than others too." Marlow waved an impotent hand at his laptop. "If these two gluttons would get done, I'd show you."

Pax put Frodo Baggins in his hand and got up, got the laptop, and set it on the coffee table. Marlow typed with one hand and a lot of mistakes.

"*Dyslexia*," Marlow said, reading what popped up first on Google. "A learning disorder characterized by difficulty reading. Very common. More than 3M US cases per year. Chronic. Can last for years. Consult a doctor for medical advice. Sources: Mayo Clinic and others." He scanned the search results for help articles. "Oh, hey. Kindle." Marlow set the laptop on the end table and used his now-free hand to dig in the couch cushions.

"Kindle?" Pax asked.

"It's Amazon's e-reader," Marlow explained, asking himself why *would* Pax know? He didn't have any reason to care about different ways to read. He thought. Marlow's fingers found the edge he was looking for, and he pulled his kindle case from the depths of the couch. "I keep it there," he explained defensively. "This is where I read."

"I've heard some people read books on their phones," Pax said.

"This is better." Marlow followed the directions on the webpage to make the font bigger, change it to something more readable, and even change the background color. Then he flipped through his library to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, opened it to the first chapter, and turned the Kindle to Pax. "Now."

"A Long-Expected Party," Pax read the chapter title. "That's—*The Hobbit* starts with An Unexpected Party!" He bounced on the couch and squeezed Marlow's arm. "*When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End...*" Pax read slowly then covered his mouth. A soft sound that might have been a squeal escaped around that barrier as his eyes shone. He reached to point at the words as he read, careful not to touch the screen. Then he grabbed Marlow's arm again and squeezed and bounced on the couch, all the while his eyes were glued to the Kindle. He went on reading, his voice growing more breathless as he went. Marlow grinned.

"It—how do you get the rest?" Pax asked.

Marlow had wanted to be sure Pax would see the difference, would be able to read, so he'd made the font so big that the screen only held a few sentences.

Now Marlow turned the “page.” Pax read more, bounced in his seat, squeezed Marlow’s arm. Marlow grinned wider.

“How much—” Pax began, cut off. Asked again in a whisper. “How much for one of these?”

Marlow told himself it was time to let go of some of his embarrassing Kindle addiction. “I have an old one you can have,” he said. He’d still have his first one, and this one. “And you can borrow e-books from the library just like—”

Pax grabbed his neck and kissed him, a quick peck of joy and gratitude, a brief brush of lips that stretched time like the Matrix. Against the window, snow swirled. On the TV, men fought. On the couch Marlow sat frozen, the warmth of Pax’s touch lingering on his lips.

“Oh hell,” Pax breathed. “I shouldn’t—oh hell.” He slid his fingers across Marlow’s cheek and into his hair, gripped his neck gently and kissed him again.

Marlow could have pushed him away. He could have turned his head. He could have done lots of things, but what he did was lean into Pax’s kiss.

So soft, so breathtaking... Pax kissed him thoroughly, tenderly, with an intoxicating joy. Marlow drowned in a wash of passion and couldn’t care. So sweet, so gentle, so hot...

*No...* Marlow panicked and pushed at Pax’s shoulder. Pax pulled away, studied Marlow’s face a moment.

“Sorry,” he said, and Pax gathered himself and little Frodo and went back to the chair. He sat turned toward the TV, relaxed and pleasant and looking for all the world like he hadn’t been on the couch making Marlow’s toes curl ten seconds ago.

“You don’t—don’t have to thank me for the Kindle,” Marlow said. “I’m not using it.”

Pax tilted his head to look at him and winked. “That was only the first kiss,” he said. “The second was purely because the first was so good.” He sipped his coffee and watched the movie. Marlow thought to check on Merry and Pippin, forgotten in his lap.

Both were asleep, undisturbed by the goings on of the humans. Marlow traded them in for two hungry kittens. At least they were all getting onto the schedule, and there was a lot less desperate mewling. If Marlow never heard another kitten’s distress in his life, he would call it a happy thing.

Marlow arranged Arwen and Gandalf on his leg. Pax held Frodo to his chest with one hand and took Sam out with the other, settling the new kitten on his knee with the bottle while he cuddled Frodo.

“Mom says love helps us grow,” he said with a tiny embarrassed shrug.

“It’s science,” Marlow agreed, his eyes on the kittens as he tried to get them both eating properly, but Arwen kept trying to suck on Gandalf’s ear. “Touching releases endorphins, reduces stress—there’s a reason having pets is good for you. Apparently studies show that seniors with pets live longer.”

“Makes sense.”

Silence fell except for the movie. Marlow looked out the window and saw blank white. Just looking at it made him shiver. Pax looked over his shoulder. “Oops, time to get the fireplace going,” he said. “Can you hold one more bottle for a bit, or should I wait till Master Gamgee is done?”

“I can take Sam.”

Pax handed over the bottle then the tuxedo kitten. The tiny ball of sleeping Frodo he kept, and went to bend over the fireplace. Marlow tried not to look, but really Pax had a marvelous ass, curvy and inviting, but still tight enough to bounce a quarter off. Marlow thought he was glad he didn’t have any change, then had to fight down hysterical and inappropriate laughter.

Then the situation got worse, because Pax went to one knee and started talking to the kitten. “You’re all right, Mr. Frodo,” he said softly. “Just need to get this fire going so we can keep you nice and warm. Then we’ll get you growing nicely. Maybe make you some po-ta-toes, hmm? Fish and chips? I bet you’d be like Gollum, though, and just want the nice fish un-scorched.”

Oh god, if he was going to be so *fucking* adorable... damn it, Marlow, don’t even think about fucking!

He could go for his phone. Pax wouldn’t say anything, and who cared if he did? Marlow could use his own phone in his own house any damn time he wanted. He could be careful, so Pax didn’t see what he was looking at, just to avoid awkward questions.

Not that Pax could read it.

By the fireplace, the monologue went on, Pax talking to a week-old kitten about how he was going to take care of it while he built a fire one-handed, his other hand curled protectively around Frodo. Marlow snatched up his phone. Twitter mentions...



Just words on a screen, written by strangers. Pax was *here* and reassuring an orphaned kitten. Marlow went on to Tumblr, but it was the same. Strangers with nothing better to do than kick someone because the media said they should. They knew nothing of what had really happened. It was sad, really. He could feel sorry for them.

“Eee!” Pax squealed. “That tickles! That is not the way to Rivendell, Frodo Baggins!”

Marlow hit the interview, but his mind started comparing Kameryn to Pax. How fake Kameryn was, with his bleached hair and careful cut and perfect styling to make him look like he woke up looking that good. Marlow ought to know the array of hair products, self-tanners, toiletries, and even tailors it took for Kameryn to feel up to going outside his door. Even his T-shirts were fitted by a seamstress.

*He only looks nineteen because of botox, he wanted to tell the journalist. He’s twenty-six. The Midwest accent is fake; he’s from Palm Springs. His real name is Ernie Taylor, and he fucking drugged me and put me in my car to die so he could inherit with the pool boy!*

“And then we’ll get one more log,” Pax told Frodo the Kitten. “We want to make a good fire that will last, so we’ll get one big log to keep the heat coming.”

Marlow took a deep breath. It didn’t matter. No one would ever believe him—everyone knew child actors grew up crazy. But he could at least be sure that Kameryn wouldn’t keep the money; he wasn’t smart enough to hold onto it. The pool boy would leave. The car was gone, the house would be gone, and Kameryn would end up a washed-up, washed-out, surfer-boy has-been, who’d know he could have been married to one of the biggest stars in Hollywood if he’d kept his damned hands off the pool boy.

“Well, actually, you’ll be warm enough in my pocket,” Pax said to Frodo, “but I like being warm too.”

Pax was so different from Kameryn. Pax was honest. Kind, but honest. From his dyslexia to his orientation, everything about Pax was right out in the open.

Well. Marlow kind of doubted that all Pax’s neighbors knew he was gay. He’d even said...

So he came out to a stranger he’d known for a few hours?

“You do know who I am!”

Pax looked over his shoulder. “Pretty sure I’ve seen every movie you’ve made. Still didn’t think it was you when you walked into the store—what would Marlow James be doing here?” He turned back to the fireplace.

“So you think I’m rich,” Marlow said. Damn. God damn—

“Lisa said you lost it all to the lawyers.”

Oh god. Pax knew. Somehow he’d decided Pax didn’t, but he did know. It hurt, somehow, more than the strangers—

“If you knew about me, why did you come?”

“I wouldn’t have intruded if you hadn’t left the bag,” Pax said. “Don’t figure you’ve got less right to privacy because you’re a movie star.”

Well, that alone made him different from half the planet.

“Then why did you come in?”

“To help with the kittens.” Pax rose carefully, little Frodo cuddled to his chest. “I came for the kittens, and I stayed for the kittens.” He winked at Marlow as he sat in the chair. “Any evil gay seduction would just be bonus.”

Marlow could have groaned at the heat running through him. Pax *wanted* to be seduced.

“Sorry,” Pax said. “You probably don’t think all that mess is funny. But I can see it’s all made up, so it’s funny to me that anyone would believe it. You’re no more evil than Mrs. Svensen. And you’re a hell of a lot cuter.” He grinned. “Which kind of makes it a shame that you’re no evil seducer. I really could go for some evil gay seduction.”

Marlow snorted. “About the only thing the stories get right is the gay part.”

Pax made a face. “I swear I’m not making a move on you again, but would you mind sharing the couch? The rest of the county is behind, but spring has sprung in this chair at least.”

“Oh. Of course.” Marlow curled up in “his” end of the couch, careful of the three now-sleeping kittens. He should put them back, but they were almost as good a barrier as the coffee table.

“Would you hand me Sam?” Pax asked when he’d sunk into “his” end of the couch. “Don’t want to keep these two apart.”

“Of course.” Marlow handed over the kitten, and his fingers brushed Pax’s. Also he was down to a two-kitten barricade. This could be bad. He should send Pax home. If he could feed three kittens at a time then—his eyes rose to the window where snow danced wildly. He could hear the wind over the running horses on the TV, too. He couldn’t send Pax home on his bike in that, and he couldn’t drive Pax because the two of them in the Jeep—and also the kittens. Should not leave the kittens.

He’d just have to resist. When the Twitter mentions weren’t helping, and he was so angry at everything he’d lost, and Pax was *right there* explaining the movie softly in Frodo’s fluffy little kitten ear.

“That’s Legolas,” Pax said. “He’s hot. Just wait. When the movies are over, I’ll read you the books. You’ll love them—they’re all about you!”

Oh god. Could the man be any more adorable? Little Frodo was out like a light, but Sam was nosing about, so Pax leaned back on the couch to give him a less-steep surface to explore.

What the hell was he afraid of anyway? Pax couldn’t betray him if Marlow didn’t trust him. Didn’t love him. If Pax did turn on him, the worst it could be was one more deflowered supposed-virgin, and at this point, who the hell cared?

Pax made encouraging noises at Sam as the kitten climbed up his chest. Frodo lay curled in the hollow of his shoulder, and could there be a more attractive quality in a man than being a trusted sleeping spot for wee creatures?

It was fate, Marlow acknowledged. First the kittens, then the snowstorm—it was fate and as inevitable as spring. Sooner or later, Pax would kiss him again. And he, Marlow, would lean into it. Again.

Marlow put Arwen and Gandalf back in the box. He took the bottles to the kitchen, thinking of Pax’s hands on him again. He felt warm but shivered at the thought of the next kiss. It would be deeper, hotter... Marlow washed the bottles and put them on to boil, wondering if Pax would come and press him against the sink and kiss him and then—he took a deep breath and made another batch of formula. Pax came into the kitchen, but he didn’t come to Marlow; he walked to the coffee pot.

“I want more coffee,” he said, looking at the half-full pot, “but my stomach will really not thank me.”

“How about some cocoa instead?” Marlow asked. “Since we’re getting in the holiday spirit again, apparently.” He waved at the snow-washed windows. “I’ve got some brandy to add some kick to it.”

“I drink just about never,” Pax warned, “So you shouldn’t give me alcohol unless you want to hear me sing as much of *Guys & Dolls* as I still remember from the year I was Nathan Detroit. It’s probably a lot, and I don’t just sing the songs written for my range.”

“We’ll give you one drink,” Marlow said. “Maybe.”

“Do you need any help?”

“Not really. If you want, go get pillows and blankets from the closet under the stairs. I haven’t been upstairs since I moved in, practically, so I don’t think making up a guest room is an option.”

“Pfft,” Pax said, heading for the living room, “sleep. Who needs it?”

When Marlow returned to the living room with the spiked hot cocoa with perfectly melted marshmallows, he saw Pax had been moving furniture. The couch faced the fireplace now with the TV to one side and the coffee table with the kitten box on the other. He’d also... made a blanket fort? One of the old scratchy blankets now hung from the hooks that held mounted fish above the fireplace, draped back over the couch.

“Your windows are drafty,” Pax said. “This will help keep the heat in since we probably didn’t get enough wood to keep the fire this big.”

A roaring fire, cocoa with brandy, and a blanket fort. And Pax. Marlow fought a whisper of panic with the zing of anticipation.

“Makes sense,” was all he said, pushing the end table with his foot. “I found a tin of butter cookies.”

“Yum.” Pax took a mug and a cookie and settled into his end of the couch. Marlow took his end and wondered how to get Pax to come closer after he’d been such a fool last time.

It was Pax. Straightforward honesty wouldn’t put him off. Marlow couldn’t quite manage to get “Come kiss me” out, so instead he said “We’d be warmer if we sat together.”

Pax looked at him, that same glance from earlier of happy appreciation and cheerful lust. “We sure would,” he said, moving down the couch until his side touched Marlow’s. “Hi.”

Marlow snorted. “Hello.” His body shifted into higher gear at Pax’s nearness. Months without touch piled up until he ached to have Pax’s hands on him, but the damn man just sat there grinning at him.

“Can we try that kiss again?” Pax asked finally.

“Please,” Marlow breathed. Pax brushed his hand across Marlow’s cheek, into his hair, fingers cradling his neck as he ever so lightly pressed his lips to Marlow’s. Whisper-soft, so tender, taste of cocoa and brandy...

Pax pulled back, not very far. “I’ve had a crush on you,” he breathed against Marlow’s lips, “since *Dream of Empire*.”

“That was—I was fourteen!”

“I was fifteen, so it’s not too creepy?”

“I’m not Mulligan.”

“No.” Pax kissed him, just a brush of lips. “Funnier,” another kiss, “smarter,” brush of stubble against Marlow’s cheek, “kinder...”

He could believe—he could almost believe Pax, but his history said—Marlow pushed it from his mind, grabbed a handful of Pax’s hair and kissed him hard, a mashing of lips and tongue, deep and needing. Pax kissed back, his other hand rising to Marlow’s neck.

“Not the scars!” Marlow gasped.

Pax wrapped his arm around Marlow. His lips brushed Marlow’s cheek; teeth nipped his jaw on the unscarred side. Marlow stroked Pax’s back, touching, savoring, grabbing handfuls of the back of his jeans.

“God, Marlow,” Pax groaned, the sexiest thing Marlow had ever heard. He leaned, pressing Marlow back into the couch. Reflexively Marlow stiffened. Pax pulled back.

“Okay?” he asked as Marlow fought panic.

“I’m sorry,” Marlow blurted. “Sorry—”

“You got a right to change your mind,” Pax said, moving to get up. Marlow caught his arm.

“Want me to stay?” Pax asked.

“Stay.”

Pax put his arm around Marlow again. Marlow leaned into him. Pax was so solid, so real and there... he turned his head to nuzzle the side of Marlow’s face, and Marlow melted into him with a gasp.

Pax leaned back, pulling Marlow on top of him.

God, yes, right on top of Pax's nice hard package—Marlow wriggled and Pax groaned.

“I'd go slow,” he gasped. “Swear I would, but you—”

Marlow grabbed Pax's hips and ground against him.

“Sweet holy...” Pax gasped, grabbing Marlow's ass as he thrust up against him. “Oh hell, oh—”

Marlow nipped Pax's lip, sucked down his gasp. Straddled Pax's hips and rocked. Pax panted, grabbed frantically, guided Marlow's ass as he thrust against him. “Oh god, oh god...”

Marlow planted his hands on Pax's chest and lifted himself, dragged his crotch slowly up the hard shaft in Pax's pants. “*God...*” Pax gasped. Marlow did it again, and Pax arched into him with a groan.

This. Pax under him, flushed and gasping, lip between his teeth—Marlow wanted this, more of *this*. He wriggled side to side, massaging Pax's dick with his own, and oh god, he wanted—

“Pax,” he breathed, “can I suck it?”

“Can you?” Pax blurted with a breathless laugh. “*Will* you? Please?”

Marlow ground against Pax again. Pax gasped and lifted. Marlow nipped his throat, kissed his neck, blew on his chest through the shirt. He rubbed the heel of his palm over Pax's cock as he nosed Pax's shirt up from his waist. Underneath was toned muscle. Marlow followed a line with his tongue, and Pax's abs quivered.

“Oh my god...”

Marlow remembered well the treasure trail peeping above Pax's jeans. He tangled his fingers in the hairs and tugged lightly.

“Please...” Pax moaned.

Marlow squeezed him through his pants. Tongue-fucked Pax's navel while unsnapping the jeans.

“Holy fuck...” Pax gasped.

Of course Pax wore tightey whiteys. Marlow mouthed him through the cloth.

“Fuck!” Pax thrust into the touch, and Marlow was done playing. Wanted the cock, wanted it *now*. He tugged at the briefs, careful of the treasure beneath, and when Pax's lovely rosy cock sprang free, Marlow kissed it.

“Hnnnggghh...” Pax said, grabbing fistfuls of the couch. Marlow took a firm grip of good stiff cock and stuffed it in his face.

“AHH!”

Marlow wrapped his lips around his teeth, then clamped his jaw and pulled back slowly. He looked up at Pax, but Pax had his eyes closed, head pressed into the couch, panting “fuck fuck fuck” at the ceiling.

Marlow swirled his tongue around the tiny knob where shaft met head. Pax groaned so deeply Marlow felt it in his mouth. He sucked Pax down again as he palmed Pax’s balls, ran a light finger along the seam. Brushed his fingertips along the soft, secret skin behind. Pax let go of the couch, grabbed his own hair and whimpered. Marlow squeezed his shaft tighter, right where he’d have put a cock ring if he had one.

Fuck yes, he wanted to make Pax moan all night.

Marlow swirled his tongue over the head, played with Pax’s balls, stroked the skin above his prostate. Pax moaned, panted, writhed. Did he know? Did this not-so-experienced not-virgin have any idea what Marlow was about to do to him? Marlow pulled back, let that sweet cock pop free for a moment.

“You come in my mouth,” he growled in case innocent Pax thought that was rude. “I get to taste you.”

“Oh god—” Pax panted. “You—AHH!”

Marlow sucked him in, relaxed his throat and took Pax all the way. Pulled back, sucked in, moved with Pax’s writhing to fuck his mouth with Pax’s pretty cock, and as he moved faster he pressed his thumb in a tiny circle behind Pax’s balls.

“Ah ah ah god ah aahhh—” Pax grabbed Marlow’s shoulders, let go and clenched his hands in Marlow’s shirt. “Ah god ah I’m—oh oh fu—AAHH!” Pax thrust upward. Marlow pulled back enough to take Pax’s cum on his tongue as that sweet cock pulsed. He swirled it in his mouth, swallowed, let Pax’s cock slip from his mouth and kissed it. Pax lay there, sweaty and panting, his body quivering and his dick hanging out. Just beautiful.

“Fuuuuck,” he groaned, opening his eyes. “Oh my *god*, Marlow, I am so fucking *seduced*. You—” He grabbed Marlow’s shoulders, pulled him up. Kissed him. “Your turn,” he said, tugging at Marlow’s pants.

“No!” Marlow shoved away, landed on his bad hip on the floor. Curled sideways around the pain. “Sorry!” he gasped at Pax’s surprised face. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Pax tucked himself back into his underwear. “Dude, whatever. Anything you want or don’t want. Not going to complain.”

“Are you even human?” Marlow demanded.

Pax laughed and lay back. “Come back up here,” he said. “Keep your pants on. I don’t care. I just got the most amazing blow job from the hot guy I’ve been crushing on for ten years, who also showed me how to read *The Lord of the Rings*. You think I’m going to complain I didn’t get *more* amazing sex?”

“I would,” Marlow muttered, picking himself carefully off the floor.

“You’re silly.” Pax moved over, lying on his side to give Marlow room to lie beside him. He tugged a blanket off the back of the couch, careful of the tent-blanket draped there. “Get in here or I’ll get your heating pad.”

“Ooh, scary threat,” Marlow grumbled, thinking that might be a good thing. His hip hurt, and pain shot up and down his side at random. But he lay down beside Pax and let himself be pulled close and tucked under the blanket. Pax nuzzled his ear, kissed his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“For what?”

“Making jokes about what happened. It’s got to really suck, having the world believe that shit, having people you trusted turn on you...”

“You’re not my therapist,” Marlow growled.

“Still sorry shitty things happened to you.” Pax kissed his cheek again. “Blame the afterglow of one hell of a blow job. And hit me if I snore.”

“Kittens in maybe twenty minutes.”

“Fuuuuck...” Pax groaned. Marlow chuckled.

“Sure you don’t want to get off?” Pax asked. “That is one impressive boner poking my hip. I’ll do whatever you want—blow job, hand job, lie still while you hump my leg or a cushion or—”

Oh god, yes, Pax’s hands. Except—Marlow tugged, Pax rolled on top of him. “Yeah?” he asked, his hands in Marlow’s hair. Marlow tried to wrap his legs around Pax’s hips but his bad leg wouldn’t go. Whatever. “You hump me,” he said, grabbing handfuls of Pax’s sexy, bouncy ass. “Please.”

“Hell yeah,” Pax said. He kissed Marlow, lips and tongue and teeth, and rocked his hips. Cock pressed to cock, and he was getting hard again, hell



yes... Marlow squeezed and tugged, Pax rocked harder, faster. God yes, needed this, needed the pressure and the rhythm, the friction, needed yes... god, *needed...*

Needed *more*. Needed skin, and touch, and mingling sweat, and—"Pax," he breathed, god yes, faster, harder, more, yes, "Pax, I've got... got scars. I want—but scars. It's—"

"Don't... care," Pax grunted, bodies slapping together. "Don't care... Marlow..."

"But—"

Pax *stopped*. Threw the blanket over their heads and kissed Marlow hard in the darkness beneath. "I don't care," kind gentle Pax growled. "I don't fucking care. And I can't see you now, so you can not care. What the fuck?"

"I almost lost my dick," Marlow blurted. "I—I only have one testicle, and my cock is all scarred and—"

"Would it hurt you," Pax interrupted, "if I peeled off your pants and fucked you into next week?"

Oh god. Against Pax's hip, Marlow's cock twitched at the question.

"I got a condom in my wallet," Pax said, blowing across the scars on Marlow's neck. He kissed the scars and Marlow shivered. "Packet of lube too. It's all I got in my wallet, but I got what I need to fuck you till you can't remember your own name let alone those assholes who hurt you."

"Oh god..."

"Can I fuck you, Marlow?"

"*Will* you? Please?"

Pax growled and kissed him hard. "Be right back," he said and slipped out of the bottom of their blanket tent within a tent.

"Undo your pants," he ordered from out there. Marlow's hands shook but he obeyed. Pax tugged at his pant legs. Marlow wriggled; his pants vanished. Marlow shivered and shoved his underwear down. Those vanished too, and he lay there quivering. Pax slipped back in and his bare chest brushed Marlow's leg. Pax was gloriously nude.

Marlow couldn't stop shaking. Pax pulled him against his chest.

"Shh," he whispered. "We don't have to. We can—"

“Want to,” Marlow gasped. “Just—really need—”

“Okay,” Pax said and kissed his cheek. “Now.” His hand cupped Marlow’s crotch, fingers lightly touching, exploring. He wrapped his hand around Marlow, and Marlow’s hips jolted upward. In the darkness Pax chuckled. “All in working order,” he breathed and lay on top of Marlow. God yes, sexy chest and abs and sweat and heated shaft pressed against Marlow’s thigh... Marlow touched; at last without barriers he touched Pax’s shoulders and back and chest and arms and ass.

“Now,” Pax said again, pulling on Marlow’s good leg to lift his knee. His hand slid down the back of Marlow’s thigh, brushed his cock, oh god, down past his one lonely ball, and then a finger stroked Marlow lightly and then slipped slowly inside. Marlow whimpered.

“Okay?” Pax asked, his hand stopping.

“Yes, go, yes, oh god yes...” Marlow clung to Pax, chanting encouragement and passion as Pax finger-fucked him, deeper, faster, his hand cupping Marlow’s ass and oh god, yes, fuck, yes, thicker, another finger for more friction and Marlow’s hips rocked in rhythm, needing it more, more friction, more feeling, “Yes, Pax, yes, more...”

“Hell yes,” Pax said, and the fingers disappeared. That sweet cock poked at Marlow, but Pax hesitated.

“Please,” Marlow moaned. Pax thrust slowly inside and Marlow stiffened.

“Okay?”

“Fuck,” Marlow ordered. “You promised, fuck me till—”

Pax swung his hips, buried himself in Marlow.

“YES!” Marlow pulled his knees higher as Pax moved, took him deeper, god yes—

“Fuck, Marlow,” Pax groaned, drawing slowly back, slamming home, so slowly back...

“Yes, fuck Marlow,” Marlow panted. “Fuck Marlow, fuck hard.” This. The touching, the broken whispers, the skin and sweat and breathlessness... “Fuck Marlow harder.”

“God,” Pax gasped, fucking. Deeper, more, yes, more, harder, faster, Pax fucked so good, so deep Marlow could taste him, god yes, deeper harder faster yes faster harder...

“Gonna—”

“Yeah—” Pax wrapped his hand around Marlow’s cock where it bounced on his stomach with the slapping of their bodies. “Come on,” he breathed, pumping. “Want to hear you... come on my fingers... taste you...”

“Oh *god*,” Marlow gasped and came, spurting helplessly, and Pax threw back the blanket so Marlow could see him lick cum off his fingers.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Marlow breathed.

“You’re hot.” Pax slipped out of Marlow and lay carefully on top of him, hot and sweaty and still gloriously nude between Marlow’s legs. He twitched the blanket back over them.

“Kittens,” Marlow said. “Any minute.”

“Fuuuuck...”

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*KD Sarge writes for joy and hope, and works for a living. She has tried her hand at many endeavors, including Governess of the Children, Grand Director of the Drive-Through, and Dispatcher of the Tow Trucks. Currently KD loves her job at a private school for children with autism. Past accomplishments include surviving eight one-year-olds for eight hours alone (she lasted about ten months), driving a twenty-foot truck from Ohio to Arizona by way of Oklahoma, and making a six-pack of tacos in twenty-three seconds. Writing achievements include the Weightiest First Draft Ever, as well as eleven other, much lighter, completed novels. She has somewhere between five and ten universes under construction at any given time, writes science fiction, fantasy, steampunk, smut (in many genres), and means to one day undertake a cozy mystery. A widow, KD lives in Arizona with her biological daughter, her Internet daughter, two cats, a dog, and the ghost of a hermit crab named Bob.*

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