



Three
MUSKETEERS
and a
JESTER

MC HOULE

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THREE MUSKETEERS AND A JESTER

By MC Houle

Introduction

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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.

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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.

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THREE MUSKETEERS AND A JESTER

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Photo Description

Two midtwenties tattooed men are in the shower looking up. They hold each other's crotch while grinning at the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See those two? Those are my best friends since forever, they're also both "straight". I've always known I was gay and they've never seen me as anyone other than their third musketeer, no matter who I date. I'm the more reserved of our group and these two are constantly trying to outdo one another in the crazy-dare-department. I usually have to run interference or play judge at some point, but with them, the laughs never stop and they never cease to surprise me.

I've noticed things have been a bit 'different' lately. Not bad, but our dynamics have shifted in some way I can't really figure out. Hottie A (name the boys whatever you want) just got dumped for always putting Hottie B and I first and Hottie B just can't seem to settle in past two dates with any girl. I've got a newish boyfriend who I'm pretty sure I love desperately already, and he's working his way into our group slowly but surely. He asked me the other day if A & B are out yet and how long have they've been seeing each other in "that way". At first I thought he'd gone completely nutters, but now I'm not so sure.

After a particularly dirty dare battle the two ended up in the shower at our apartment together. We have a pretty open door policy when it comes to bathroom politics but I never thought they'd be in there together! What the heck is going on????

Sincerely,

Ann

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: established couple, coming out, bisexuality, tattoos, cross-orientation, wedding, actor, blue collar

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THREE MUSKETEERS AND A JESTER

By MC Houle

Un pour tous, tous pour un

It started with a dare; as it always did.

Chapter 1: Aramis

Jesse Dewitt's long day just got worse when he came home, feeling dirty and smelling of used engine oil, to find five empty pie plates in the sink. The tasty blueberry and lemon pies he'd made with love only yesterday; all gone. He tried to centre himself, but even after a few deep breaths, he couldn't contain his anger.

"Brandon Bradford!"

Bran's face popped out of his bedroom door. "What did I do?"

"You've eaten my pies."

"Not me."

Jesse's glare said, "Yeah, sure."

"I swear I didn't touch your pies." Brandon had a cocky smile on his face. "I'd ask Hanson if I were you."

No way Lloyd ate a whole pie, let alone five. Unless...

"Bran! You dared him? I can't believe this."

"It's just a few pies. Why are you being so anal, dude?"

"You know how important tonight is for me."

Recognition passed over Bran's face. "Shit! It's tonight?"

"Yeah."

Jesse pinched his lips to stop himself from saying something he'd regret.

Brandon slumped with guilt. "I'm sorry. I should have wondered why we had fresh homemade pies."

Jesse rolled his eyes. He'd worked hard on those and made some extra just in case Brandon took some before tonight. He figured Brandon would take a piece or two. He should have known better.

"It's too late now, but could you at least clean the kitchen while I'm in the shower?"

Jesse didn't wait for an answer and made his way to the bathroom. He threw the greasy overalls and his work T-shirt into the washing machine and turned

on the water. He stepped into the shower and let the warm water wash away the disappointment and relax his muscles. He squeezed the back of his neck as water ran down his face.

When his father's cold had turned into pneumonia, Jesse had been made responsible for the family business for the first time. And as if the new responsibilities weren't stressful enough, Jesse had chosen this weekend to invite Felix-Antonin to meet his best friends.

Jesse really wanted it to work out with FA, more than with any other boyfriend before. FA wasn't just incredibly attractive, but he was also strong and intelligent. They'd met when Jesse's car broke down on the freeway, and FA had stopped to help. FA had tried to impress Jesse with his knowledge of car mechanics, and Jesse played the game for a bit. After all, who was he to stop an attractive man with a pride sticker on his car from showing off the great ass God gifted him?

Jesse turned the hot water all the way down, effectively stopping the boner he didn't have time to take care of, though he kept the fantasy in mind for future references.

He dried himself and shaved for the second time that day. Then he put on his cologne and walked into his bedroom.

Jesse had the biggest room, thanks to winning the Dare Olympics of last winter, and the room was immaculately clean. He had painted the walls in a tame beige-brown, with a playful Hello Mr. Mustache bedding set making an accent and a large rainbow flag above the head of the bed. The nightstand, lit by a modern lamp, held a picture of a fifteen-year-old Jesse and his parents and grandparents, and a picture of Lloyd, Brandon, and him from last summer as they jumped into the lake at Lloyd's cabin. Jesse's computer, open on his desk, displayed an inspirational quote wallpaper: "Now, with God's help, I shall become myself," by Søren Kierkegaard. The clothes he planned on wearing were folded on the bed.

And just when he thought nothing could go wrong anymore, he heard a big boom and Lloyd cussing. Though Lloyd had lived in Scotland for only the first five years of his life, Jesse could always discern the slight accent through Lloyd's swearing.

Jesse didn't bother fastening the belt around his waist as he headed back to the kitchen shirtless. Brandon and Lloyd were covered in flour from head to toe, and the viscous contents and the cracked shell of an egg were falling down

Lloyd's slightly long hair and forehead. The kitchen was a mess, but Jesse couldn't bring himself to be mad. Lloyd, ready for war, reached for another egg when Jesse laughed. Lloyd stopped in his tracks, and soon all three of them were laughing their asses off.

Brandon grimaced. "I was going to make you a pie."

They were nowhere near having a pie, but the kitchen was relatively clean when FA knocked at the door. Jesse's stress came back at once. One didn't make a second impression with Brandon, and if Lloyd was more forgiving in this aspect, he wouldn't be shy about telling Jesse everything that was wrong with his choice this time.

And Jesse couldn't really complain; he hadn't been really accepting of Brandon's girlfriends in the past. They'd come into their life expecting special treatment and attention by virtue of being a girlfriend alone. And Lloyd's dates came and went, but they never stayed.

Everything disappeared when FA smiled at him from the other side of the door. Impulsively, Jesse stepped forward, slid his arm around his waist, and kissed him. FA's hug was a bit weak, and a hard box dug into Jesse's back, but the feel of firm lips on his relaxed him.

He stepped back just in time to notice a glance between Lloyd and Brandon that Jesse couldn't interpret, and this alone would have been cause to worry if Jesse hadn't been mesmerized by his boyfriend's presence.

FA acknowledged Lloyd and Brandon. "I didn't know what you guys preferred, so I brought wine and beer."

Brandon frowned. "No flowers?"

FA was taken aback, and Lloyd elbowed Brandon while Jesse glared at him.

"Don't listen to him," Jesse said as he grabbed the bottle of wine. "This is perfect."

Lloyd took the box of beer, and soon he had one open for Brandon. Brandon took a sip but didn't look too impressed. "Not bad."

Brandon was the aggressor, provoking FA to get the most reaction, but Lloyd was mostly silent, the observer, and thus the hardest to win over. Jesse had introduced them to enough friends and boyfriends to see behind the good cop, bad cop routine. Brandon was papa bear—all groans and teeth, feared and fearless—but Lloyd was mama bear, waiting in the bushes ready to pounce at the first sign of danger.

Soon enough, they were hanging out in the living room with their respective drinks. Jesse relaxed, slightly leaning into FA's arms. They shared the futon with Brandon while Lloyd had claimed a spot on the chair. Brandon was on his second beer, drinking from the bottle, and Jesse had his in a beer glass while FA and Lloyd were enjoying the midrange label red wine.

At that point, Brandon and FA had discovered a common love of video games, and Jesse didn't think he could get tired of hearing them arguing their respective game preferences. Jesse didn't know anyone could feel this strongly about the different consoles out there, but it was amusing to watch.

Jesse glanced at Lloyd, who smiled back and jerked his head toward the kitchen. Jesse rose, and FA interrupted his conversation for a closed-mouth kiss. Jesse loved a man who wasn't afraid to be respectfully intimate in front of his friends. Too many of his dates had been afraid to show the slightest sign of attraction in front of the straights.

Lloyd followed Jesse to the kitchen while FA and Brandon resumed their *conversation* like nothing happened.

Jesse's pot roast was almost ready, so he assembled the salad. "Are you going to tell me everything that is wrong with him?"

"I don't know. Are you going to dump him if I tell you I hate him?"

Jesse glanced back at the living room where the guys were still going at it. Anyone who could follow Brandon's leaps in logic and empty arguments without insulting him had to be a keeper. And though Jesse had broken up with men over his friends' slightest dislike of them before, Jesse realized it wasn't the case this time.

"No."

Lloyd smiled and nodded and grabbed a carrot to scrape it. "For what it's worth," Lloyd said after a while, "he seems like a good guy. I haven't seen you this stressed before, and you literally beamed when he got here." He smiled. "This makes me doubly sorry about the pie."

"Don't sweat it. It was all Brandon's fault anyway."

"When is it not?"

They laughed.

Watching Brandon and Lloyd bumping hips and singing horribly along to the radio was distracting to say the least, and Jesse would have been ashamed of his friends' attitude if FA didn't look amused by their childish display.

"They're something else," he said with a smile.

"Tell me about it!"

Jesse didn't intend to keep discussing his best friends when he could use their distraction to say a proper goodbye to his boyfriend. The kiss heated quickly, and Jesse didn't want to let go. Before he could think more about it, he whispered between two kisses, "Your place or mine?"

FA was breathless when he answered. "Part of me wants to have you right this instant, but I also really want to hear you scream my name."

The apartment was warm suddenly.

"Don't want to stake your claim?" Jesse worried the second the words left his mouth.

"Don't need to." He brushed it off. "You're not a prize to be won."

And Jesse just knew. "Your place then."

They kissed again. "I'll be back in a minute." He almost ran to his bedroom while repeating his last words.

Jesse hadn't noticed Brandon following him until he turned around holding an unopened box of condoms.

Brandon smiled with a knowing look. "That serious, eh?"

Jesse nodded. "I think he is the one."

If Brandon was surprised, he didn't let it show. "Expiration date?"

Jesse wanted to roll his eyes, but he knew where his friend was coming from. He glanced at the box, and sure enough, there was still a year to go.

Jesse passed by him and hurried to FA, who was ready to leave. He grabbed his hand and rushed him out of the apartment. As he closed the door behind, Jesse glanced at Lloyd and Brandon, who were giving a thumbs up.

"Are you okay?" FA asked when they reached his car.

"Yeah, yeah, let's just go."

As FA drove to his apartment, Jesse kept glancing at him. If there was something Jesse couldn't stand, it was someone who belittled Jesse's

relationship with Brandon and Lloyd. Brandon's girlfriends did that a lot, and Jesse hated it. FA had made just as much effort tonight as he would have if he were meeting Jesse's parents. He wore a pair of clean dark jeans and Jesse's favourite blue V-neck, the one that made FA's eyes even bluer. His dark hair was freshly cut and his beard trimmed.

The heat tempered on their way to the apartment, but one touch would ignite it again. His hands trembled, and he couldn't stay still. He kept rearranging his clothes and licking his lips. He tingled all over.

He had felt that way once before, and it hadn't turned out well. He'd been seventeen, and he'd let his hormones run the show. He'd given himself to his first love, only to wake up alone. Jesse never heard from him again. He'd felt so used he swore the next one would be the right one.

It wasn't to say he'd been a complete monk in the decade that followed his loss of virginity. Some frottage, a few blow jobs, and a handful of hand jobs—always with long-term relationships. But tonight, Jesse thought he was ready for the next step.

FA was kissing him before the door closed behind them, and as soon as their lips touched, the heat rose. They stopped long enough to breathe before going at it again. Then Jesse pushed him away and touched their foreheads together.

“Je t'aime,” FA said with a low voice before Jesse could speak. “I've loved you for a while now.”

Jesse's heart swelled. There were no words he could say right now, so they kissed again. His breathing grew laborious as he rubbed FA over his jeans. FA urged for more, and his eyes opened wide when he saw the condom Jesse took out of the box while he wasn't looking.

“You sure? I didn't say I love you to get you to bed.”

“I know.”

Jesse kissed him before he could let doubts cloud his judgment. Then FA took his hand and directed him to the bedroom. FA's bedroom wasn't spotless like Jesse's, but it wasn't exactly a mess either. Jesse like to think of it as well lived-in.

FA was everything Jesse wanted in a lover and more. He took his time. He whispered declarations of love and expressions of lust as he kissed, touched, and licked every bit of naked skin he could reach until Jesse was reduced to a

begging man. He was attentive to each of Jesse's reactions. It was nothing like the inexperienced fumbling he remembered.

Jesse grabbed the sheet under him as he let go of the remains of his control; as he let the wave of pleasure transport him to a heavenly sky where it was only the two of them. He lay exhausted and content.

FA rolled to the side and slid his hand into Jesse's. His mind drifted away, and he was about to fall asleep when the mattress shifted. Jesse fell down from his post-coital state, but he needn't have worried as FA came back with a cloth.

FA's care was even more intimate now that they'd made love. He took his time cleaning every part of his body. When Jesse looked at his face, he saw his own love reflected in FA's eyes.

"I stand by what I said. I'll never not love you."

"Me too."

FA cleared his throat. "I know how much love before sex means to you."

It occurred to Jesse that maybe FA was worried too.

"It was a perfect second first time."

FA let out a breath, and Jesse smiled sleepily at him.

When he woke, FA was still beside him and awake. Jesse heard a few morning birds outside, and the natural light was diffused by the dark drapes. "Were you watching me?"

"I only woke a few minutes ago, but you were too cute to be woken."

"What time is it?"

"A bit after eight."

FA snuggled into him, and they lay in bed together. Soon, they would feel the morning's needs calling them, but for now, Jesse was content to hold his boyfriend, the man he loved. He let FA trace his only tattoo: a sword under a calligraphed "Aremis" on his chest.

"When I first met you," FA admitted candidly, "I hadn't pegged you as a tattoo guy."

"Really? And what had you pegged me as?"

FA's smile didn't help Jesse's curiosity.

“Some rich, preppy asshole with a cute face and a broken car.”

Jesse laughed. “And instead you found a struggling small-time mechanic on his way to church. You must regret having stopped now.” Jesse was only half joking; he wasn’t exactly the catch of the year.

“Nah.” FA waved it off, though he looked at Jesse with all seriousness in the world. “It was the best day of my life.”

FA kissed him and then kissed the tattoo.

“Why the sudden interest?” Jesse asked him. They’d seen each other naked before.

“I don’t know. I noticed Lloyd had something similar on his arm, so I guess I wondered if there was some sort of story behind it. That’s all.”

“We each got one when we turned eighteen; Lloyd’s says ‘Porthos’ and Brandon’s ‘Athos,’ like the three musketeers. ’Cause, you know, that’s what they called us all through middle and high school.” Anticipating the next question, Jesse continued, shaking his head, “Believe me, you don’t want to know where Brandon’s put his.” Just thinking about it made him weak in the knees.

“I won’t ask then.”

And though he didn’t ask, Jesse knew the curiosity would eat at him.

“How long have they been together?” FA asked, and the question confused Jesse.

“Eh?”

The words made sense individually. But put together?

“Brandon and Lloyd, how long have they been sleeping together?”

Jesse laughed until he realized FA was serious. “They’re not. Believe me, they’re not. They’re like super straight.”

“Really. I could have sworn...”

“I mean, I would know if they were...” He made the sex sign.

FA nodded like he believed him, but the seed of doubt had been planted in his mind. *They would have told him. Right?*

Chapter 2: Athos

Brandon Bradford sat across from Fanny in the busy café on St John Street. She was chatting endlessly about her college friend Cindy who had just been dumped by her boyfriend. He'd tuned her out somewhere between two rounds of "why men are all assholes". He'd gotten it the first time, but it wasn't his fault Cindy's boyfriend cheated on her.

Brandon got distracted by a text message from Lloyd: a funny text that said, *Help. Keep the Barbie Ken away from me*, followed by a smiley face. Lloyd had agreed to babysit Brandon's niece, and by the look of it, he was having a lot more fun than Brandon.

When he looked up, Fanny was glaring at him.

"Sorry, you're right. Men. Assholes."

She didn't laugh, and Brandon's first thought was that Lloyd and Jesse would have. Instead, Fanny's face took on an ugly tint of red. Anger. Fury. Brandon felt pretty small suddenly.

"It was your dumb friends, wasn't it?"

The café fell silent around them.

"Don't call them stupid. You don't see me calling Cindy names because she's naive enough to believe her cheating boyfriend's 'it will never happen again' crap three fucking times this week."

"Please," the teenager behind the counter said, "take the fight outside."

Brandon heard the teenager's panic in his voice, and he felt sorry for him. He mustn't have been older than sixteen, and a hundred pounds soaking wet. He apologized to the teenager and then followed Fanny outside. The sun blinded him for a second, but he quickly regained his footing. In two long steps, he was next to her.

"What's gotten into you?"

"You've gotten into me," she roared. "I'm telling you something important and all you're thinking about is jerking about with your friend. Well, guess what, big guy? I do not care about the last stupid thing they've done. Jesse blah blah blah, Lloyd, blah blah blah... You see, unimportant."

“I’m sorry? I’m supposed to care about your friends’ chronic man problems, but you can’t bear to hear one bit about my friends?” She didn’t answer, and Brandon shook his head. “You want to know what’s going to happen with Cindy? Her boyfriend’s going to show up with flowers, chocolate, and pretty little excuses, and she’s going to take him back. You know why? Because that’s what they do. He cheats and manipulates, and as long as she refuses to see it, Cindy’s gonna forgive him. And in a month, a year from now, we’ll be back in this café, while you rehash the same problem and the same empty promises that this time it’ll be the last time while I’ll be thinking about Lloyd’s next big role, or how Jesse is saving the world one hungry child at a time, wishing you would care as much about my life as you care about Cindy’s.”

Fanny watched openmouthed while Brandon relaxed his breathing. Finally, Fanny shook her head. “Fuck you, Brandon Bradford, fuck you. We’re through, over. I’m done.”

And just like that, she left.

He hadn’t realized how much it sucked, hurt even, to have his girlfriend dismissing his best friends that way. Lots of people didn’t understand just how close he was with Lloyd and Jesse, what they’d gone through together, and their level of commitment.

He watched her leave and let the realization sink in. In a way, he was just like Cindy; stuck in a pattern where he dated the same type of girls over and over. Not just girls that didn’t understand his relationship with his friends, but girls that didn’t care to try and accept it.

He had to make sure the next girl would be different.

Half an hour later, Brandon arrived at his sister’s small, old apartment. Sometimes, it looked like the place she owned was going to fall apart, especially when it was dark and wet in autumn, or cold and its floor crackling in the winter. His sister was a few years older than him. She had left home at eighteen and got pregnant soon after. Brandon was still in middle school then. Despite some difficult years, Laurel and the children’s father, Sani, had stayed together through good and bad.

Brandon was babysitting their youngest over the weekend while the couple was doubling their oldest’s swimming competition with a romantic getaway.

Luna was an interesting seven-year-old—half tomboy, half little princess. She welcomed Brandon with a “shhh” and a finger on her lips. She wore a

bright-pink tutu, black nail polish, and a torn Superman T-shirt, and she glanced towards the living room.

Lloyd was asleep on the couch in a way that wasn't going to feel good tomorrow. He was snoring a bit, and his face was painted with a childish make-up. Brandon would have bet his friend didn't know about that last part.

"You did this?" Brandon smiled when she nodded, and they bumped fists. "Now go brush your teeth, or your mother will kill me."

While she was gone, Brandon took the time to move Lloyd so he wouldn't have a stiff neck in the morning. He didn't remove the make-up, but he did take a red marker and traced a heart, which was more age appropriate for Luna than his first idea, on Lloyd's forehead.

He put Luna to bed and then sat on the floor in front of Lloyd to watch a movie at low volume. He fell asleep before the credits, his head almost where Lloyd's groin was.

When Brandon woke up in the middle of the night, he had Lloyd's hand in his face. His back and neck hurt like a sonofabitch, and though he should have gone to the guest room, he felt too lazy to rise.

Later, Brandon was awakened again by Luna's sweet laughter and the smell and feel of a marker on his skin.

"You little devil!" he told her.

Lloyd was standing behind her, his face clean of make-up, but the faint trace of the heart was still visible. Brandon grabbed Luna by the waist and turned her upside down. They all laughed though Brandon mouthed "asshole" to Lloyd.

Laurel and the others arrived after breakfast. Luna didn't want them to go, but Brandon promised her he'd come by this week. She asked if Lloyd would come too, and Brandon said "yes" without consulting him.

They arrived at the apartment just in time to see Jesse off to church. They most likely wouldn't see him again until tomorrow, if the last two Sundays were an indication. After meeting Jesse's boyfriend for the first time three weeks ago, and having witnessed the feelings between them, Brandon had been afraid he'd lose Jesse.

Then he started dating Fanny officially, and he'd been the one unavailable.

Suddenly, he wondered what he ever saw in her. Sure she was classically attractive, not too skinny or too fat, with proportional boobs and a nice round ass, blonde hair, and hazel eyes, but she was boring and self-absorbed inside.

“Hey!” Lloyd interrupted his thoughts. “You think you can help me with my lines?”

A week ago, FA had had news of a theater looking for the two leads in their summer play and relayed the information to Jesse, who told Lloyd. Now, he was getting ready for his first leading role. It was a semi-pro play in the Aberdeen Theater. Lloyd hoped he’d be finally able to quit his day job, and Brandon really wanted that for him.

“Sure.”

“So I’m Todd, and you’re the love interest, Taylor. Good?”

They shared a couple of lines until Brandon suddenly realized something.

“Wait. Taylor’s a guy?”

Lloyd sighed. “Yeah, so?”

“Nothing. It’s just... you read the play, right? I mean it’s written here, black on white; ‘and then they kissed passionately’.”

“I know.”

Brandon didn’t even know why he cared; his own reaction was bothering him. He never reacted this way thinking about Jesse kissing a guy. He wasn’t a homophobe or anything. But there was just something about the idea of Lloyd making out with some actor that got to him.

“You gonna be able to do this? Kiss some guy.” Good job making it sound like Lloyd is the homophobe.

“It’s called acting for a reason. If I can kiss Buggy Maggie on stage twice, I don’t see why I couldn’t kiss some dude. Now stop being an asshole and give me my lines.”

Brandon tried to ignore the light-headedness. The room was warm and unsettling. He couldn’t stop thinking about Lloyd and some bodybuilding asshole making out but couldn’t understand why. He tried to concentrate on the words, and when the kissing scene came about, he said the first thing to go through his mind.

“I bet you wouldn’t be able to kiss me, let alone some stranger.”

Brandon didn't know what possessed him to say something like that. There wasn't a dare or a bet Lloyd hadn't met with bravado.

The next thing Brandon knew, Lloyd had his lips against his, asking for entrance, and Brandon was letting him. He grabbed Lloyd's shoulder, not to push him away, but to bring him closer. His whole body woke up. Lloyd tasted like maple syrup and peanut butter from this morning's pancakes.

It was fireworks on Canada Day at Lloyd's cabin, and it stopped all of a sudden. Lloyd took the script from his hand and left the room. Brandon had to find support on the nearest wall.

What the fuck just happened?

A kiss was a kiss, but Brandon figured it shouldn't have felt this good to kiss a man. Sure, Jesse did it all the time, but unlike Brandon, Jesse was gay. Brandon couldn't remember a time he hadn't been attracted to women.

He needed to stop thinking about this. He only reacted this way because Fanny hadn't been the best kisser. *Yeah*, he thought, *must be it*.

He scrolled down his contacts until he found Juliette's number and sent her a text. She replied quickly with *Your place or mine?*

When he arrived at her apartment, she'd sent him another text. *Don't bother knocking.*

He found her half-naked in her bedroom. Juliette was the kind of girl who could be super sweet one minute and the kinkiest the next. Brandon liked her for that. If anyone could make him forget about pancake kisses, it would be her.

And then even her long auburn hair and perky breasts couldn't get him hard enough to fuck her. So he lay next to her, embarrassed as shit.

"I'm so sorry, I don't know what happened." But he did know; Lloyd happened.

"Don't sweat it." She shrugged. "You still got me off, that's more than most guys would."

"It was the least I could do after booty calling you and not performing."

"Maybe your break-up is just too fresh. It doesn't have to be a big deal."

"Yeah, you're probably right." But she wasn't. He could see now that Fanny and him were over before they even started.

“How long have we known each other?”

“A few years, why?”

“And would you say we’re friends? With benefits, but friends nevertheless?”

Brandon nodded, uncertain of where she was going with this. He liked her; she made him feel centred, even when his world was falling apart.

“What I’m trying to say, I guess, is that I’m here if you want to talk. Even if it’s the middle of the night. You don’t have to want sex to call me.”

“Thanks.”

“So, do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Yeah. You jock types never do.” She was silent a moment. “Well, the offer still stands.”

As he exited her apartment, Brandon wondered if he should take her up on it. But then the idea of saying it out loud terrified him.

He kissed a boy and he liked it.

And it wasn’t just any boy; it was Lloyd, his best friend, the second third of himself. He had to get over the kiss; this couldn’t be how their friendship ended.

He stopped at the gym on his way home, and he recognized it for what it was: not a need for training, but an avoidance of home and the awkwardness that was sure to come.

He worked on the elliptical until he was too exhausted to think. He hadn’t trained with this intensity in a long time, and his muscles were tensed when he made it to the shower. Sundays weren’t busy, so he was pretty much alone in the showers. He let the water fall longer than he should.

He was massaging his neck when some guy joined him. Brandon barely noticed him until he spoke. “Hey you’re friends with the short, clean-cut guy, right?”

“Eh, yeah?” Couldn’t the guy see he didn’t want to talk?

“He single?”

“No, sorry.”

“Shame.” He waited a second, and just as Brandon thought he would be left alone, continued: “And what about you? Still with the tall bearded guy?”

“Lloyd? Eh. What? I don’t... we don’t... We’re just friends.” Or at least they were, until this morning’s incident.

“Oh, really...” He made a flirty step towards Brandon.

Brandon heard the beating of his heart. *Boom, boom.* “I’m straight.” It was louder than he expected, but it stopped the guy in his tracks.

“Double damn.”

If the guy said more, Brandon was already gone. The locker room was spinning around him, so he grabbed one of the energy bars he always kept in his bag. It didn’t help. Instead, his mind had returned to the shower, but in his imagination, the guy had him pinned against the wall sharing a breath-altering kiss. And then it was Lloyd who held him, touched him. He could imagine the two of them locked in their small shower at the apartment, stroking each other. He even wondered if he shouldn’t dare Lloyd to it but figured it would be crossing the line.

He forced himself to get back to reality.

He was half-dressed when the guy showed up again, his locker only a few down from Brandon’s. Though he tried not to look, he noticed he seemed somewhat nervous. He was on the short side of tall with a bit of belly. He had a good pair of shoulders and flaming-orange hair cut short. When Brandon dared to lower his eyes, he blushed and turned his back on the guy.

He was spinning and breathless, and his cock woke in interest. It wasn’t a full-blown erection like when he kissed Lloyd, but it sure wasn’t soft anymore. He hurried to dress and was about to leave when curiosity made him walk back towards the guy.

“What made you think we were together?”

“Look, dude. I didn’t want to insult your manhood, okay.”

“No, no. That’s not... I’m not going to bash you or anything. I just want to know.” Needed to know.

“It’s nothing big, really, but you guys are like attached at the hips, right? And I’ve seen your other friend flirt with guys, but the two of you never do, right? So I just, like, assumed when I shouldn’t, sorry.”

Brandon couldn't deny the logic behind it; Lloyd and Brandon had grown even closer in the last few months.

"You look good." Shit, that's not what he meant to say.

"I mean... I remember when you first got here... Lots of determination to get where you are. It paid off." Still sounded a bit gay, but at least now it didn't sound like a come-on anymore.

"Thanks, but I still got a bit to go."

Brandon shrugged it off. "Anyone who says that to you is an asshole."

The guy smiled. He had a pretty sexy mouth. "Well, most guys *are* assholes."

Brandon laughed. *That they were, Fanny would tell you all about it.* "I'll see you around."

Brandon didn't feel any better. He walked across the gym, noticing Bobby the Bodybuilder's smooth stomach as he worked on his arms, Nameless man's round ass when he stretched, and Plastic Sue's boobs bouncing as she ran on the treadmill.

He got to his car more confused than ever. What did it all mean? He'd never noticed guys before, and suddenly they were everywhere?

Was he turning gay? Which was ridiculous 'cause someone doesn't just turn gay. They just are. Or maybe he was just turning crazy.

Either way, he didn't know what to do. He could call Jesse, but that would ruin his date with FA, and Lloyd was out of the question.

He called his sister.

"Hey Sani, is Laurel there?"

"Nah, she's at jazz with Luna."

"Shit, I really needed to talk to her."

"Sorry, man. You can come if you want, she should be back in an hour, and I could use your help fixing the kitchen cabinet."

"Sure. Why not?"

That type of manual work shouldn't conjure pictures of Lloyd. He looked ridiculous with a hammer. Turned out fixing the cabinet reminded him of the time when Lloyd and he had tried to fix the leaking ceiling of their first rat hole.

Needless to say, Brandon was a distracted mess as they worked.

“I kissed Lloyd.” It was out before he could help it, and it was freeing.

“Like kissed kissed him, or like a goodbye peck kiss.”

“Like with tongue and everything.”

“Okay.” Sani grabbed a nail as if it was nothing.

“Just, okay. Nothing more?”

“What do you want me to say?”

Brandon groaned. “I don’t know. Maybe something about how I’m straight, not gay.”

Sani briefly laughed at him. “Yeah, ’cause straight and gay are the only real sexualities.”

Brandon hadn’t really thought about it this way. Maybe it wasn’t as simple as fitting into one little box or the other.

“Look. You like Lloyd. Good for you, man, he’s a good guy. You two are gonna be happy together. Now can you hold the plank straight so I can nail it?”

Laurel and Luna found them laughing to tears over Sani’s unintended innuendo, but couldn’t tear the full story from them. All they got were “straight” and “nail” between laughter, and Brandon thought Sani said something about a green bill in there.

Later, Brandon learned Laurel and Sani had bet a twenty-dollar bill there was something between Brandon and Lloyd.

But by then, Brandon felt better, at peace with the whole thing, and he couldn’t be mad at them. When he got home this evening, he was ready to face the consequences.

Chapter 3: Porthos

Lloyd Hanson waited a few minutes after he heard the door close before he ventured out of his bedroom. This hadn't gone as planned, that's for sure. At least, now that he knew Brandon was gone, he could relax just a bit.

Brandon was being so infuriating, as he often was, and following up on the dare had been as much a reflex as a sudden need. He didn't make it a habit of kissing boys, had never felt that attraction, but he was a dedicated actor unafraid to get out of his comfort zone. He had nothing to prove, at least when it didn't come from Brandon.

There was no reason kissing Brandon should have been anything different than kissing his co-star on stage. The director, a good friend of FA's and a pillar in the Lenkfield LGBT community, had been dubious about hiring a straight guy for the leading role in her play. However, Lloyd had worked with Easton, his co-star, before which made it easy to get into the character. She was quickly convinced by the chemistry between them.

The kiss with Easton had brought nothing of the sexual feelings he associated with kissing a beautiful woman, and there was no logical reason it would be any other way with Brandon.

But what had started as a punishing kiss became something else. Brandon answered with an energy Lloyd hadn't expected. He'd thought Brandon would have pushed him away in disgust. He wasn't supposed to pull him closer. The ground moved from under his feet, and he did the only thing he could do: he fled.

And now he didn't know what to do or think.

Lloyd hadn't seen Brandon in three days, which was mostly his own fault for avoiding him. If he wasn't working at the store, he was at Aberdeen Theatre rehearsing the play. It involved a lot of kissing scenes: some of them with little clothing, all of them with Easton, and none of them evoked the kind of reaction kissing Brandon had. And after, Lloyd would follow the crew to the one gay club in Lenkfield, and he'd leave with the last of them. He was miserable, even he could see it.

On the fourth day, Lloyd had a date planned. He had chosen a small intimate restaurant in Little Italy for his date. It was nice, with dim light and a

friendly staff. A romantic recommendation from Jesse. His date, Paisley, was a pretty girl: thick black hair in locks, brown skin, and big blue eyes, a combination he'd never seen before. He'd met her at the Evergreen Bar, a clear one-night stand with immediate and intense attraction, and she'd been genuinely surprised to hear back from him. Lloyd was too.

In the last few days, Lloyd had met Jesse's boyfriend, got invited to his dad's fourth wedding, and learned that his mum's partner was pregnant. This did awful things to his almost pathological fear of loneliness and abandonment. Soon enough, Brandon would find a great girl, and Lloyd would be the only single one around. So he'd gone outside of his rules and called Paisley back.

She was easy to talk to and had interesting, funny little stories about her firefighter colleagues. She ordered the pizza with fries; he took his with the Caesar salad. She would get along well with the group, he thought.

Dates always made him feel awkward, which was mainly the reason he avoided them like the plague. It dampened the little excitement he'd tried to have about the date.

It wasn't that he didn't like Paisley. He did, but outside of an undeniable chemistry in bed, he didn't seem to feel any differently about her than he did Jesse or his friends from acting classes. He should have refrained from calling her, and she would have gone on with her life. But instead, by calling her, he created feelings and expectations. And he couldn't explain why he could never connect with the girls he "dated", Paisley included, for more than an hour or two. *What was wrong with him?*

They kept the conversation light, but he dreaded the end of the date halfway through reading the dessert menu. They chose a *crème brûlée* to share, but Lloyd regretted it the second the dessert arrived on its heart-decorated plate. More expectations, again.

"You okay?"

He plastered a smile on his face. "Yeah, sure."

He was an actor; he was used to showing whatever emotion was needed.

Lloyd drove her home, and she hinted at an invitation inside. Something he'd normally jump on, but this time he felt less than enthusiastic.

"I like you," she said, "but it's totally fine if you don't want to go further. We had a great night, but that doesn't always translate into a relationship. Just like the chemistry between two people doesn't always stay once you hit the bed."

“Maybe. Though it seems like the story of my life.”

She was silent a moment.

“You know, my high school boyfriend came out as asexual when we were dating.”

“A—what?” Like a plant?

“Asexual. Doesn’t feel sexual attraction. Not to women, not to men, not to anyone or anything. We tried to make it work, but we refused to be non-monogamous, and even as a virgin I knew I couldn’t live without sex.”

“Yeah, me neither.” *Why was he even telling her this?*

“My point is, he was really into women, just not sexually.”

“But I love sex. What does this have to do with me?”

“Maybe nothing, maybe a lot. If we look at the principles of sex and romance, and the fact that my ex is a heteroromantic asexual, I don’t see why the other way couldn’t be possible. Maybe you’re aromantic or something. I don’t know you enough to pinpoint it more. Oh, here, second house to the left.”

Lloyd parked in her driveway. He didn’t know why none of the three psychologists his father had forced him to see, after his mother came out and left for Scotland, ever mentioned something like that. But damn, his mind swam with the new information. Paisley unclipped the belt.

“I guess the question now is whether you want to come up or go home to read on the subject.”

“I think I should leave.”

She nodded. “Okay, well, you have my number, even if it’s just for one night.”

She kissed him near his mouth and left. It gave Lloyd the same prickling down his spine as usual. Some things didn’t change.

After this, Lloyd didn’t think. He went home to research more of this stuff but forgot to take his precautions to avoid Brandon. Lucky for him, he found the apartment empty. He locked the door behind him and lay on the couch with his computer. Like this, even if he got engrossed in his research, he’d hear the key in the door.

Lloyd was about to open the third link, something about cross-orientation, when Brandon planted himself in front of the couch.

“Are you going to keep avoiding me, or are we going to talk about what happened?”

Lloyd panicked and closed the computer. How long had he been home? He glanced at the door.

“I was already in.” Brandon didn’t say anything else while he waited for an answer.

“I’m kinda busy, right now. I really need to learn my lines.” *Liar*. It’s all he’d done the last few days; he knew his part. He also knew damned well Brandon was aware he hated reading on the computer and always printed his manuscripts. But he couldn’t explain any of what had happened, and he didn’t know what to tell Brandon.

He knew it was a mistake as he said it when Brandon stood without a word but a sound that seemed to Lloyd like pure pain.

“So that’s it?” His voice sounded worse. “We’ll just pretend like nothing happened?”

“Brandon.” It shouldn’t be this difficult. “I just—I don’t know what to say, that’s all.”

“You don’t need words,” he said, “but I need to speak, and I need you to listen. Can you do this?”

Lloyd supposed it wouldn’t be too difficult, so he nodded.

But Brandon didn’t say anything.

“I’m here. I’m listening.” He had to resist rising for a hug and comfort.

“We kissed.” He said nothing more.

Was it what he was worried about? That he was gay; that he’d hate him or something. Lloyd would have been angry if Brandon wasn’t fidgeting with terror marking his face.

“It was just a kiss.”

Brandon sat next to him and forced eye contact for the first time.

“But it wasn’t. Not for me. I—It was the best kiss I’ve had in a long time and—you wouldn’t talk to me, couldn’t even be in the same room with me, and I can’t talk about this with Jesse. I mean what kind of dumb dickhead realizes he isn’t straight in his fucking almost thirties, right, and he’ll think—I went to

gay bars, damn it! Got flirted with by men, even, but one kiss from you, and it's like a whole world opening. I don't know what to do. Jesse is going to hate me. I've got all of these feelings bubbling, and I-I don't need you to reciprocate or anything, but I can't lose you, and I can't silence it anymore, I—”

“Brandon.” Lloyd tried to interrupt him, but Brandon kept going about it, and the more he did, the more Lloyd wanted to hit or hug him. “Brandon!” He finally looked at Lloyd. “I can't lose you either.”

Brandon nodded. “So you don't hate me?”

The uncertainty was so unlike Brandon, who was confident about everything. Lloyd brought him into a tight hug, which made it hard to breathe. “I don't hate you, and neither will Jesse, okay.” He used his best imitation of an overconfident, eleven-year-old Brandon. “What's a best friend forever for if not to help you figure things out, forever?”

Brandon laughed in his neck, sending vibrations all through Lloyd's body, and then sat up.

“You're stealing my coming out reaction.”

Lloyd couldn't stop his faint accent from showing up. “Well, someone's got to get you out of the gutter you fucked yourself into. You've got to know we love you, and we'll never hate you.”

“I love you too.”

It sounded a lot more profound than a friend thing. It scared Lloyd; he could deal with breaking some girl's heart, but not Brandon's.

“Brain...” Lloyd hadn't called him that in years. The nickname had first been coined by their math teacher who had a prejudice against jocks and wasn't too happy with Brandon goofing off in class. Lloyd, and more rarely Jesse, had used the nickname because it bothered Brandon. Brain had become a mark of affection by the time they left high school.

Damn what their teacher thought, Brandon was the smartest person Lloyd knew. Sure he was athletic and a hell of a hockey player and people liked to stick him in a dumb jock box, but it was an academic scholarship that sent him to university, unlike Lloyd who barely made it out of high school with his diploma.

“Hey, I know. It's probably just the first time effect anyway, right? As long as we're friends, I'll be fine. Really.”

“Best friends can do anything.” It was another echo from Jesse coming out, but it didn’t stop dread and fear from building up at the bottom of his stomach.

Brandon smiled back at him, and Lloyd wished he could believe their friendship hadn’t changed.

It went back to normal after Brandon’s heart-to-heart. Lloyd stopped avoiding him, and gradually, the awkwardness was gone.

And then it was the premiere. The play was enough of a big deal that a lot of people he knew would be there. He reserved front-row seats for Jesse, Brandon, FA, and his father, who was coming from Toronto just to see him. The normal pre-premiere jitters were building up while Easton and Lloyd were getting ready in the small backstage room.

There was a low knock on the door, and Brandon called his name. Lloyd turned to Easton. “You fine if I let him in?”

Easton shrugged. “He’ll probably do a better job of calming you than I would.”

It was a strange thing to say, like there was something special about Brandon that gave him super calming power over Lloyd. Admittedly it was true, but Easton shouldn’t know that. Lloyd opened the door, and Brandon stormed inside walking like a jock and sounding loud and obnoxious. “Ya gonna survive this shit, man?”

It was a tradition at this point; a deep-seated belief that if Jesse and Brandon weren’t at a premiere, and if Brandon didn’t come in with those exact words, in this exact jocky pretense, the play would be a flop. It was founded in nothing but superstitions, but it worked its magic on Lloyd.

Lloyd was about to thank him but realized that Brandon was fixed on a point behind him. He turned to see Easton butt naked. “Really?” he said.

Easton shrugged, and instead walked up to Brandon. Easton extended his arm, and for some reason, seemed campier to Lloyd while his words were a definite mean imitation of Brandon. “And you think you’re gonna leave the play with your masculinity intact, man?”

Lloyd stepped to intervene, but Brandon didn’t bite the hook. He shook Easton’s hand without missing a beat, though Lloyd noticed the quick glance below and a licking of the lips.

Lloyd came to Brandon's defence. "It's just this thing we've been doing forever."

Just as Brandon spat: "Stereotyping much, *man*?"

Easton stepped back. "Sorry, I just thought you meant about the gay stuff. I'm a bit sensitive today."

Easton had been pretty good when Lloyd had been stressed over certain scenes. He was one of the last of the group to cry homophobia, so Lloyd asked him what had happened.

"Just got into it with my sister again; I talked for five minutes with her husband on a street corner, and suddenly I'm trying to steal him from her. I told her he wouldn't be interested, but she believes us gays live to corrupt the youth and the straights."

That seemed intense and just too much. Ridiculous, really, though it got Brandon flaring.

"Fuck this. Guys like Lloyd can sleep with and discard women all they want and they're a player, good for them. But I come out as bi, and suddenly I'm an unfaithful, sex-addicted slut with no morals. That's bullshit, that's what it is. I'm not any different from two weeks ago."

Lloyd couldn't believe it. If it was someone he knew, he was going to kick their ass. "Who the fuck said that?"

Brandon shrugged with a calmness Lloyd didn't feel. "Some bonehead at the Queer Students' Group. Doesn't matter."

Of course, it did matter. What rights did he have to insult his best mate? But then the director came to tell them it was time, and Brandon bumped fists with Lloyd before leaving the backstage area.

The play was a success, and after a quick speech from their dear director, Lloyd was swept up with congratulations from his dad and his future stepmother, and Jesse and FA. His dad admitted he felt awkward for the first few kisses, but he was really proud.

"If I didn't know better," Jesse told him, "I would've thought you were a real couple."

"You're a really good actor," FA said.

They were holding hands, comfortable with each other, and Lloyd was really happy for Jesse; they were lucky to have found each other. For a

moment, he wondered if he'd be like Jesse one day. The only person who ever looked at him like that was Brandon, and Lloyd didn't want to think about that mess.

“Easton's the great actor. He made it pretty easy.”

“And you choose now to be modest.” Jesse laughed.

Lloyd would have laughed with him if he hadn't heard Brandon's flirty laughter from behind him.

The world stopped around him as he watched Easton casually touching Brandon, and Brandon responding to the flirtation.

He should be happy Brandon was moving on, but instead he got a kick in the guts and his heart crushed to pieces. He could almost hear it break like glass, and he left the room. He felt Jesse's curious gaze on him.

The green-eyed monster ate at him for the next week, and he still couldn't make sense of his reaction. Brandon showed up twice during rehearsal, and it couldn't be more obvious he was here to see Easton. By the end of the week, Lloyd was tired and irritable, and his foul mood hadn't improved by the time he got home after his shift at the store.

Jesse and FA were at home; Lloyd's favourite movie was playing on the TV, but they were too busy making out to watch it. Lloyd didn't bother them. He sat on the chair next to the couch and closed his eyes. He let the well-known dialogue and the background kissing noise send him to sleep.

He woke up, heart pounding, to Brandon calling his name. Brandon had been screaming his name in the dream too, and the memory of it made him dizzy. He wanted to get back to the dreamland. Everything was so simple over there.

Brandon had taken the place left empty by Jesse and FA, excited as a schoolboy. Brandon had always been the most expressive of the three. There wasn't an emotion Lloyd couldn't read clearer than his own. Tonight, his eyes bore an unmistakable gleam.

“You should just tell me about it.” He was surprised to realize he *wanted* to hear about it. Another conflicting emotion to add to the roster.

Brandon laughed, loud and hearty, and Lloyd felt the excitement in himself. “It was—it was—wow, just wow...”

Brandon being speechless, that was a first. He threw his head backward, closed his eyes, and smiled like he won the lottery. Lloyd fought the instinct to reach out and kiss him.

“All those years...” he said. “He brought me to this Italian place, you know, the one Jesse loves so much.” Lloyd nodded, but Brandon didn’t see him. “If I had any doubt I like men, I don’t anymore. And the making out, man...”

Brandon never finished his sentence, and Lloyd’s cheeks tainted with a deep crimson of embarrassment.

“I didn’t think—you don’t want to hear about me and some guy.”

Before he could think, Lloyd moved to the couch and forced Brandon to look at him.

“Do you remember the camping trip to lake St John?”

Brandon nodded. Of course, he did. It had been Jesse who had come out to them only a few days before, and though they thought they handled it superbly—it wasn’t like they didn’t know already—Jesse had still felt the need to bring his own tent to the event. So Brandon and Lloyd had done the only thing they could think of, they jumped into Jesse’s tent. The thing was small, meant for one child, and Brandon was heavy, a mix of muscle and fat, and Lloyd was in his growing spurt, taller than everyone in their class, so they’d all spent the night glued and entangled together. Lloyd still thought of those two nights as some of the best of his life.

“Well, it’s like that. I don’t care if you’re telling me about kissing a girl or some guy.”

“I don’t know, it’s not like Jesse talks about this stuff a lot.”

Lloyd smiled. Jesse couldn’t swear without blushing.

“I figured maybe it grossed you out or something.”

“You did watch the play I star in, right? Or were you just watching Easton?”

Brandon laughed. “A little bit of both, I guess.”

“So you’re going to see your date again?”

“Oh, fuck, yeah, I hope so.” Brandon leaned back again, eyes closed and a small corner smile. “I think he’s the kind of man I could fall for.”

And just like that, the green-eyed monster appeared again.

Lloyd didn't—couldn't move—until he realized Brandon had fallen asleep. Lloyd covered him and kissed his forehead.

Alone in his bedroom, he opened a new subject in a forum. *I'm in love with my best friend, but I don't want to have sex with him*, he wrote, and he had more than ten answers to his lengthy post by the next morning.

Lloyd was still thinking about the answers a few days later when Brandon came back early from his third date.

"He dumped me." Brandon fell next to Lloyd on the couch and arranged himself so that he had his head on Lloyd's thighs. "The story of my life."

Lloyd leaned on the couch. He stayed silent, knowing Brandon would talk when he was ready.

"He thinks I still have a torch for someone else."

Lloyd tensed; he tried to shut up the part of him that was screaming "please be about me."

"Do you?"

"Of course I do, but how am I supposed to get over you if people won't let me?"

Maybe we shouldn't be friends anymore. Lloyd had stopped counting the number of girlfriends who dumped Brandon over his relationship with him. Not having Lloyd in the picture would make things so much easier for Brandon, but just the thought of it... Lloyd would rather die.

"You'll—" *find the right one someday*, he was about to say, but Brandon cut him off by placing a hand on his to stop the caresses Lloyd hadn't realized he was giving to Brandon's defined abs.

Brandon had his eyes closed, and he was breathing heavy. "That doesn't help, you know."

"What?" He should move his hand from underneath, but he didn't.

"Your damned mixed signals. You touch me like that, or you sound all jealous-like, and I think... maybe. But then I've got to remind myself you're not in love with me, and you'll never be. There's like this little light of hope that never dies down, and people, they pick up on that." He sighed. "Maybe we shouldn't see each other for a while. I could move out. Out of sight, out of mind as they say."

“Please don’t.” He grabbed at Brandon, unable to let go, but unable to stop Brandon from rising off the couch.

“You wouldn’t be alone; Jesse would still be here, and he’ll probably bring FA along. He’s becoming quite the d’Artagnan to our musketeers.”

Being alone was the last of his worries; he needed Brandon in his life. “I love you.”

“Yeah, but I’m in love with you.”

“That too.” He didn’t want to let go so much he was shaking.

Brandon leaned down. Head to head. “Let me move on.”

No. “I can’t.”

Lloyd broke the space between them and crashed his lips against Brandon’s. He deepened the kiss, and Brandon pulled him close. It felt so good, and Lloyd wished the kiss would never end. But it did, in a rough, cold shower when he felt Brandon’s hard cock. He hid his face in the crook of Brandon’s neck.

“Maybe you’re right.” It would break his heart, but he had nothing to offer Brandon.

Brandon laughed, but it was hard and bitter. “You’re killing me, you know that?” He moved from the couch, leaving emptiness around Lloyd. “You call yourself my friend, but then you make me hope and crush it. Do you care so little for me?”

Anger, sadness, and heartbreak reflected in Brandon’s eyes while he faced a shaking Lloyd. But fear, desperation and heartbreak paralyzed Lloyd. All of his thoughts stumbled in his brain.

“I’m sorry.” Barely a whisper, but it was all Lloyd could manage without breaking down.

Brandon must have realized his state of mind ’cause his face went soft with concern, and he pulled Lloyd into a hug. Lloyd felt like crying on his shoulder, so he did. They survived hardship before, they would this time again. They were the musketeers after all. *Un pour tous, tous pour un.*

“Talk to me, Porthos.”

Lloyd told him everything, and Brandon listened without saying a word.

“So you’re in love with me, and you don’t like the idea of me loving another man—”

“Or woman. Remember how I hated your exes?”

“Okay, yeah. So you’re a jealous pain in my backside who loves me, but you don’t want to have sex with me. Or any man, really.”

Lloyd nodded, because, really, his mouth was too dry after his tale to say anything now.

“But kissing is okay?”

Yes.

“And cuddling?”

Yes.

“And you don’t think it’s going to change, or evolve? That maybe one day—”

No.

Brandon waited, and Lloyd let him reassemble his thoughts.

“If I asked you, would you give up girls for me? Forever?”

Yes. Oh yes, he’d do anything for Brandon, but it wasn’t about what Lloyd was ready to sacrifice.

“And I suppose I would have to do the same?”

“You were so excited for your date because you thought you’d get to have gay sex for the first time. It wouldn’t be fair of me to ask.”

“But it would be fair for me to ask?” Brandon sounded appalled.

“You’re not the one who’s fucked up.”

“You’re not—”

“I dare you to say I’m not. I want to love you but not fuck you. I want to fuck them, but I can’t love them. I’m selfish, and you should just stay away from me.”

But Brandon didn’t leave; he pulled Lloyd into another tight hug.

“You. Are. Not. Fucked. Up. I love you, and I don’t care who knows it. All that sex stuff, we’ll figure that shit out together, right? Find what works for us, and screw the rest.”

“You mean like an open relationship and stuff?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “We’ll talk about what we want to do, but tonight making out and cuddling my boyfriend sounds like a damn good idea.”

“So we’re boyfriends, now?” It sounded so fucking right.

“Yep. Now shut up and kiss me. I dare you.”

So Lloyd kissed him and forgot all of his reservations. He let Brandon pull him to his bedroom where they held each other and made out until they fell asleep.

And no sex happened at all.

Epilogue: D'Artagnan

Something Old

Felix-Antonin Mercier opened the door to find Jesse, Brandon, and Lloyd, all trying to sit on the La-Z-Boy chair that was too small for them. Their laughter was louder than the TV, and there seemed to be some sort of competition going on, so he didn't bother them. He stopped by the kitchen to put the cheesecake in the fridge.

When he got back into the living room, Jesse was on the ground and Brandon had Lloyd pinned to the chair. Jesse saw him and mouthed "I dare you." So what else was Felix to do if not follow through? He'd known those guys for a while now, he knew how they operated.

Without hesitation, he joined Brandon and Lloyd in their quest for the La-Z-Boy. But there were too many of them, and when Jesse joined them too, they fell to the ground.

When he'd stopped to help Jesse on the side of the road, he was only in for some good action and subtle ogling. Turned out he'd found more than the man of his life, but a whole family of friends that came with him.

And now they were tangled together and laughed till it hurt. Jesse looked at him, and he smiled. They were close, breathing each other's air, and suddenly the world erased around them.

"Marry me." It was out before he could help it.

It wasn't the plan, but he couldn't backpedal now. He waved to his backpack, and Brandon hustled to get the little black box that held two simple wedding bands with each other's names engraved in the inside.

Then there was kissing and tears, and joyous screaming. Lloyd opened the champagne, and Brandon tapped Felix in the back.

"So, two weeks of preparation and organization for nothing, eh?"

"Sometimes it's more about finding the right moment than creating it."

"Yeah?" Brandon said looking at Lloyd, who was pouring champagne in Jesse's glass.

"Tonight's my night, so stick to your own plan."

Brandon was still laughing when Felix joined the kitchen celebration.

Something Blue

Felix looked at himself nervously in the tall mirror of the hotel room. He loved the way the hot pink tie contrasted with the pure white suit. He smiled and puffed his chest. He wasn't vain like Lloyd could be, but damn he looked good. Also, he was happy. Nervous, yes, but who wasn't on their wedding day?

He smiled at his mother when she came in the room. Pride tickled in her eyes as she unnecessarily readjusted his tie.

"You sure you want to do this?" she asked in French.

"Mom." They'd had this discussion before.

For a long time, it had only been her and him, and she'd raised him in a very liberal, very atheist household. Felix didn't know much of his grandfather, but from what he gathered over the years, he'd been a pious Catholic who'd rejected his young teenage daughter after she got pregnant with Felix. So his mom had rejected all of her father's teaching. She once told him that if God didn't want them, then they didn't need God either, so he couldn't really fault her for being reticent.

"Mom, I would have gotten married in the sewers if Jesse asked. But the church is important to Jesse, and Jesse is important to me."

If she couldn't believe this church was different than the one she grew up in, with its unique and proactive stand on equality, maybe she could understand Felix's dedication.

"I just want you to be happy."

"I know." He kissed her on the cheek. "Shall we go?"

Felix slid his arm under hers as he left his old life behind.

Something New

Felix nudged his brother towards the group of kids laughing at a corner of the reception, but Olivier Mercier shook his head.

"They'll laugh at me."

At seven-years-old, Olivier hadn't been too happy about the bright-pink butterfly tie he was forced to wear with his black suit, but he had taken his responsibility as Felix's best man more seriously than expected. Now, he didn't let Felix out of his sight. Felix knew there was more than shyness to it. Before he could talk to Olivier, Jesse kneeled in front of him.

“See the girl there? That is Luna.”

Brandon’s niece waved her arms around as she danced. She was wearing her own coloured butterfly tie, with a light-purple flowing dress over a pair of jeans.

“She’s really nice, and she won’t laugh at you, I promise.”

Olivier glanced up at Felix with puppy eyes. “Can I sleep at your house tonight?”

Jesse squeezed Olivier’s shoulder and waved at Luna with his free hand. “Not tonight, but when we’re back from our honeymoon, maybe you can stay for the weekend.”

Olivier beamed and let Luna pull him to the dance floor.

Meanwhile, Felix grabbed Jesse and kissed him. “What did I do to deserve you?”

Jesse just laughed and kissed him again.

Felix was contemplating escaping the reception early, when the DJ they hired spoke up.

“*Olé Olé!* Please welcome on stage Mr. and Mr. Mercier-Dewitt!”

“I think it’s us.”

Felix groaned but gladly followed Jesse.

“And now, free misses and misters, let’s move next to the platform for the highly anticipated bouquet toss!”

Felix and Jesse held each other with their backs to the crowd. Without leaving each other’s arms, they took the flowers from the DJ.

“One. Two. Three!”

They turned around just in time to watch as Brandon and Lloyd both reached for the bouquet. They bumped into each other, and the crowd moved to let them fight over it. For a moment, they both struggled to take control, and then, in a moment of synchronicity, they both said: “Don’t you dare propose before I do!”

The End

Author Bio

MC Houle is a Canadian writer who fell in love with M/M fiction at fourteen and never looked back. Fluent in both English and French, her interests outside of writing include, but are not limited to: foreign culture and cooking, traveling, science, swimming, and digital art.

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