

THE
TROLL
WHISPERER

A photograph of a man lying on his back on a bed with white linens. He is shirtless and wearing white briefs. He has a red heart tattoo with four swords on his chest and a large black tribal tattoo on his left arm. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. A silver laptop is open on the bed to his right, and his hand is resting on it. The background is a plain white wall.

SERA TREVOR

THE TROLL WHISPERER

Oscar Lozada is repulsive, and he likes it that way. His apartment is always a wreck, he works at a sewage plant, and he's an abrasive jerk to just about everyone. The only thing about him that isn't gross is his smoking hot bod, because he realizes no one will have sex with him unless he at least keeps up with that—it's not like his personality is going to work for him in that department. And he looooooves sex—hot, nasty, anonymous Grindr sex. The last thing he's looking for is a relationship.

In his spare time, Oscar likes to troll people on the internet. One night, his friend sends him a link to a video of this weird but hot dude named Noah, who dresses up like a nurse and whispers medical exam questions to the viewer—it's some weird thing called ASMR, apparently. Oscar has a great time trolling poor naïve Noah, and he figures that will be the end of it.

But the very next day, he runs across Noah in the laundry room of his apartment complex. Noah has just recently moved in, and he is even hotter in real life. He's a nice guy, too. Disarmingly nice. *Dangerously* nice, even. Oscar just wants to get in and out of Noah's pants as quickly as possible, because he doesn't do relationships.

Right?

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE TROLL WHISPERER

By Sera Trevor

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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THE TROLL WHISPERER

By Sera Trevor

Photo Description

Photo 1: A macho guy with black hair and a scruffy face stares derisively into the camera. He's wearing a tank top that shows off a couple of tattoos and a nice body. His mirrored sunglasses make it hard to tell if the expression on his face is a malicious sneer or a mischievous smirk.

Photo 2: A nice-looking young man wearing a jean jacket. He has soft brown hair and soulful brown eyes, which are directed bashfully away from the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

[Photo 1]

People who don't know me tend to think I'm arrogant, and the ones who do, think I'm a bastard. I just like to think I'm making the most out of life.

A while back a friend of mine showed me some videos on YouTube made by these people who pretended to be doctors and nurses and kept whispering. And yeah, I did some extensive trolling, which I think is perfectly normal.

Imagine my surprise when I realized that my new next door neighbor is the same guy as on the videos. Aside from being a weirdo he's kinda hot and I'd like to have a private relaxation session with him.

So, I'll just play nice long enough to get in his pants, because that's all I want. And the trolling? There is no way he'd ever find out about that and it wouldn't matter anyway, because it's not like I'm falling for the guy.

Right? Right.

[Photo 2]

I just moved into my first apartment. After leaving Jehovah's Witnesses I've been on my own. Becoming an ASMRtist has helped me with that and I love making YouTube videos.

Because of my background I've never had the chance to do that, especially with another man.

My next door neighbor seems nice and I think he could be a part of my new life.

No cheating/other partners, no paranormal.

Sincerely,

Mah

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: blue collar, dirty talk, humorous, first time, toys, multicultural, hurt/comfort, drug and alcohol addictions and use, emotional growth

Word Count: 40,661

THE TROLL WHISPERER

By Sera Trevor

Chapter One

Oscar reeked.

He never showered after he was done working out. He liked walking home in a muscle shirt, gathering the appreciative stares of the men and women who'd like to fuck him and the straight dudes who wished they could get the kind of bod he was rocking, only to recoil in disgust when the smell of Oscar finally hit them. It was hilarious. The fact that it was a hot day only made it better. He'd gained an additional layer of sweat; he was practically shining with it now. Flies circled around him. It was delightful.

He reached his apartment building, swinging his gym bag over his shoulder as he walked past the leasing office. He was just about to make his way upstairs when Aneisha, the property manager, came tearing out of the office, jumping over a shrub to intercept him. He would have run, except his gym bag was really heavy. Besides, Aneisha ran fast; it was particularly impressive because she was wearing pumps and a pencil skirt. She blocked his path, waving a paper in his face.

"Here it is!" she said, forcing it into his hand. "You can't say you didn't get it." She called out to an older woman who was walking past. "Maria! Do you see me giving Oscar Lozada, the current resident of apartment four-two-four, this notice that he has failed to keep up his rental property in clear violation of his leasing agreement?"

"Yes, I do," Maria said, shooting Oscar a dirty look.

Aneisha turned back to him, her dark eyes gleaming with triumph. "You have sixty days."

"Or what?" Oscar asked.

"Or we start the eviction process."

Oscar laughed. "Oh please. You have been threatening me with that from the day you got this job. You don't have the balls."

"Oh, I have balls. I have *plenty* of balls. Upper management are the ones who lack balls in this situation, but they're behind me this time. I told them it should be thirty days—"

"—but they have a hard enough time keeping people in these shitty apartments as it is," Oscar interrupted. "And I pay my rent on time. Besides, the old property manager never had a problem with me."

“The old property manager was a worthless sack of shit, which is why he got fired.” She flicked the paper. “I mean it, Oscar. Clean it up, or pack your things.” She wrinkled her nose. “And get your nasty ass in the shower.” She turned and started back toward the leasing office.

“That’s not very professional, you know!” Oscar shouted out to her. “You’ll never get promoted with that kind of attitude!”

Without turning around, she flipped him the bird.

Oscar crumpled the paper and threw it on the ground. This whole eviction thing was annoying, but at the same time, it was kind of funny seeing Aneisha so worked up. If he were straight, he’d probably find her cute. He started back up the stairs again. If she was going to throw such a fit about it, he could clean it up just enough to get her off his back. It wasn’t that bad.

He pushed open the door, which was met with resistance because his pile of full garbage bags had fallen over. He threw his gym bag over the mound; once his hands were free, he grabbed two of the bags. He took them to the dumpster beside the leasing office so that he could wave them in front of the window on his way. Aneisha rolled her eyes. Oscar went back upstairs and grabbed a couple more. There! He could clean up; he’d already started. That only left six more bags. They were in the kitchen, though, so he’d get to them later.

Oscar waded into the apartment, shutting the door behind him. Even with the pile of garbage bags gone, there was still garbage on the floor that had managed to leak out. Something crunched under his foot. It was fine, though; he just wouldn’t take off his shoes. He headed to the kitchen; the big protein shake he’d had at the gym had filled him up mostly, but he was still a little hungry. In the cupboard, he found a pack of ramen noodles and a bag of potato chips. He looked around for a bowl he could nuke the noodles in, eventually spotting one in the sink. After a brief assessment, he decided he probably couldn’t extract it without causing a dirty dish avalanche. He unwrapped the noodles and just munched them as they were. With the noodles in his teeth and the chips under his arm, he opened the fridge and grabbed a six-pack. His phone buzzed; probably a notification from Grindr, but he didn’t feel like going out. No, tonight it would be just him and his computer.

He deposited the six-pack and the chips by his mattress, which sat on the floor. Still holding the noodles in his mouth, he pushed some dirty clothes onto the floor until he found his laptop under the laundry heap. Once he had it, he removed the noodles from his mouth with one hand and grabbed a beer with the other. He laid back in the little blanket nest he’d made for himself.

When he opened his browser to check his email, he found a message from his friend Jeremy.

Check out this guy. Lololol what a fucking weirdo.

Oscar clicked on the link. It brought him to a YouTube video of a really cute guy in a nurse's uniform. He was looking straight at the camera, whispering about how he was going to give the viewer a medical exam. So far, it didn't seem weird. It actually seemed kind of hot. The guy wasn't ripped, but he wasn't doughy either, and definitely not fem. Still, there was this sweetness about him. That didn't normally do it for Oscar, but his soft brown hair and puppy-dog brown eyes were just goddamn adorable. His lips seemed so full and soft. He even had a little scruff, which Oscar liked. Oh yeah, he would definitely let this dude give him a medical exam. He stuck a hand in his pants in anticipation.

But it did not go the way he expected. He just went through a normal doctor's exam, just as if Oscar had gone in for a physical. He did it all very softly and crinkled a lot of things. After the first five minutes, Oscar looked at the progress bar; this thing went on for another twenty fucking minutes. He skipped around to see if he ever took off his shirt or something, but nope, just thirty minutes of asking about medical conditions and pretending to take his blood pressure.

Jeremy was right. This guy was indeed a weirdo. But it wasn't a total waste of his time. He laced his finger together and popped them. This guy was ripe for trolling.

The guy's user name was, *NoahASMR*. The description of the video read:

Hi! My name is Noah. I have really enjoyed watching other people's ASMR videos, so I decided to make one of my own. It's a nurse role-play. I am new to the ASMR community (and to the Internet in general!) so please go easy on me. :)

Oh man. That was a straight up invitation to troll him. This guy needed Oscar to toughen him up for the wilds of the Internet. Oscar Googled ASMR—apparently it was this weird thing where people got tingly from listening to quiet sounds. It was emphasized several times that this was not a sexual sort of tingling.

He logged on to one of his YouTube sock puppet accounts, *up4it*.

hi, loved the video. ur rly cute. ;) I couldnt hear u, tho. If u make another one, could u talk louder?

Oscar browsed around the Internet and did some casual trolling until he got a response from Noah. He fired up his mommy sock puppet, *bettermommy*, and suggested on his favorite parenting board that women who don't breast-feed should be jailed for child abuse. That escalated quickly. He stayed and argued until everyone was whipped into a frothy frenzy. The wonderful thing about the parenting board was no matter how extreme he got, there was always at least a dozen other people who completely agreed with *bettermommy*. She had gained kind of a cult status as a mom who just told it like it was. With all the agreement she got, it was hard to tell that Oscar was the troll. He wondered how many of them were also trolling. Not many, he expected.

From there, he went to a small conservative Christian message board and spammed it with gifs of hardcore gay fucking. He did it until someone finally banned him, which took an amusingly long period of time. You'd think they'd be quicker on the draw; he did this at least once a week. He used Tor, so they couldn't touch him unless they just stopped accepting new members, but they wouldn't do that. The word of Christ had to be spread. So they rent their garments and gnashed their teeth, calling out for their mod to save them. Someone actually suggested that it might be the work of Satan himself. Oscar got a laugh out of that. What a bunch of loons. But when you had an entire thread dedicated to the homosexual agenda and their plans to convert children, that's what you got. Hell, he was sure some of them were masturbating while they typed their outrage. *You're welcome*, he thought.

When whoever was at the helm figured out how to wield the banhammer, he headed over to Reddit and signed into his religious sock, *faithsetsofrees*. He got on r/Atheism and offered to pray for their salvation. Man, they were easy—soon they were all scrambling to prove to each other that they were unholy than thou. He sprinkled in a few religious arguments—stuff that had already been hacked to death, but they somehow felt compelled to play out the same script every time. Some people called him a troll, but that didn't stop them from commenting. It never did.

He headed back to YouTube and was psyched to see that Noah had replied.

Hi! I'm glad you liked my video, but I'm afraid speaking louder would defeat the purpose. This video is meant to invoke an ASMR response. ASMR is a physical reaction to quiet sounds that invokes a sense of pleasure and relaxation for some people. Speaking louder would not "trigger" that response. :)

Well, Noah was certainly a well-spoken guy. He decided to up the misspellings for maximum irritation.

Im defenitely feeling the pleasure. ;) Srsly, tho, i cant here u. i like it when cute boyz get loud. ;) ;) ;)

Noah responded almost immediately.

I'm sorry, I think you're confused. Speaking softly is the point of this video. I cannot speak louder or else it would not be an ASMR video. If you read the other comments, you will understand that I am being complimented for my soft speaking voice.

Oscar typed back:

Well, thats just there taste, mine is diffrent. I want to kno what ur voice sounds like loud.

Noah responded:

It isn't just a matter of taste. It is the definition of ASMR. Here is a link to a website that can explain it better.

He included a link to Wikipedia.

Oscar typed back:

Duh ino how to google

There was a long pause.

I'm sorry, I'm afraid I'm the one who is confused now. :) If you already have searched for the term, then why are you asking me to be louder?

Oscar cackled to himself and took a large swig of beer. He could just picture Noah sitting at his computer, his brow growing more and more furrowed as he tried to puzzle out what was happening.

I already told u, I like cute boyz who are loud. Ur cute. Now I want u loud.

There was an even longer pause this time.

I didn't make this video to provide sexual gratification.

Well now u tell me. Too late, already came. Thanx for the boner! bye.

Oscar laughed again. He checked on some of his other troll bait while he waited to see if Noah would respond to that. While he was waiting, he checked

on his long-con trolling over at a pick-up artist website. He was particularly proud of this project. He had done his time in the forums under the name, *allthepussy*, playing along with everyone, not saying anything too outrageous (although he would have had to go really over the top to stand out among these assholes). He'd done it for two whole months. Once he had been accepted into the community, he began to post about a revolutionary new technique he'd figured out: since smell was the most primitive of all human senses, all a guy had to do was casually touch a woman's nose on their first encounter and she'd go crazy with desire. He posted from a few other accounts testifying that it really did work, and slowly but surely, other guys began chiming in that they, too, were getting mad pussy from bopping women on the nose. He figured they either actually tried it and got the drink in the face that they deserved and were too embarrassed to tell the truth, or they were the type who never tried any of the magical "pick up" techniques and just liked to say they did. Oscar read a post by this one dude, *alphamale1974*, who bragged that he had banged three chicks in one night with this technique. Oscar laughed so hard beer came out of his nose.

The night could have ended there. It might have, if Oscar hadn't cracked open a fourth beer. He couldn't get Noah out of his increasingly buzzed head, so he made a new YouTube sock—*ASMRFan567*—and commented with that.

Hi! I really liked your video! I can't believe it's the first one you've ever made—you're a natural!

Noah was still online, apparently, because he answered almost immediately.

Thank you so much!

Oscar wrote back:

Please don't let guys like up4it get you down; he's just trolling you.

Oh, I've heard of "trolling." :) I won't let him bother me. He must be a very sad person to spend his time upsetting others.

Oscar grinned. He typed gleefully:

Oh yes. Very sad. Hey, do you take requests?

I hadn't considered it yet, but certainly!

Good. I was wondering if you would maybe take some peanut butter and spread it on toast. I think the knife against the toast would be an awesome trigger.

Well, it's not really what I had in mind, since I want to focus on nurse role-play, but I'll consider it. :)

Great! And when you're done, could you smear that peanut butter all over your chest?

A long pause.

I don't think that would make a very good ASMR trigger.

Yeah, I know, but it would be kind of hot. I bet if I licked it off of you, I could make u loud.

There was not much of a pause this time; he caught on quick.

You are in violation of the Terms and Conditions of YouTube, and I will be flagging your comments as inappropriate and reporting both of your accounts.

Awww. U mad? :(

No response. Oscar finished his beer and let out a belch of triumph. Well, that had been fun. He was feeling pretty sleepy. He opened his favorite porn site to jerk off before going to sleep. He found a good video of two guys going at it in a locker room. He spat in his hand and began to stroke himself. Halfway through the video, he paused it and clicked back over to Noah. He was looking directly at the camera, as if he were really in front of Oscar. With his left hand, he pushed play. "Hi, my name is Noah," the video of Noah intoned softly. "I will be taking care of you today." Oscar rewound it and played that part again as he moved his right hand faster. He kept doing it until he came with surprising force.

He wiped the come off of himself with a sock from the floor, which he threw right back where he got it as soon as he was done. That still left him sticky; he really ought to take a shower. He waded through the laundry to the bathroom, turned the tap on the shower, and stripped while waiting for the water to get hot. Being dirty was fun, but at the same time, a nice hot shower felt pretty good. When he was finished, he got out and sniffed the towels until he found the one that was least moldy. They all smelled pretty bad. He took stock of his laundry situation; it was dire. With a deep sigh, he resigned himself to a terrible fate:

Tomorrow would be laundry day.

Oscar slept until eleven. It was a luxury he'd been enjoying since he'd started working graveyard shift, but as of Monday, he was back to the early shift. At least he had Saturday and Sunday off again; having his days off in the middle of the week always felt weird. He woke up a little fuzzy; he wanted a cup of coffee, but his kitchen thwarted him again. He had no clean mugs, no way to clean them with a full sink, and his coffee pot was too nasty even for him. Goddamnit, he was going to have to wash some dishes, too. He spent most of his time cleaning up other people's shit at the sewage plant—the last thing he wanted to do on his day off was clean up his own.

He stacked the dishes on the counter and went to work. After thirty minutes, he finally had enough cleared to make a cup of coffee. When his head felt less fuzzy, he liberated his laundry basket from the dirty clothes that had buried it. He piled a more reasonable amount in and began his trip to the community laundry room. The bright light of the sun made him squint—looked like it was going to be yet another disgustingly perfect day in paradise. He took the basket to the laundry room, dumped the clothes on the folding table, and then headed back for more, making five trips in total. After loading his laundry card with forty dollars, he returned to begin the ordeal. He claimed four washers and was about to take the last one when he heard someone come in the door. Normally he would have just taken it anyway, but he happened to turn around to see who he would be pissing off today.

It was Noah.

Oscar dropped the laundry basket in surprise. Noah immediately put his own down and crossed the room to Oscar. "Here, let me help you with that." His voice was louder this time, but it still had that sweet quality that Oscar had masturbated to last night. He panicked for a second, but he quickly realized how stupid that was. There was no way Noah could know it was Oscar fucking with him last night.

Noah finished gathering the clothes. "Should I just put them in the washer for you?"

Oscar just stared at him for a moment, his mouth hanging open. It felt unreal, as if a character had popped out his television set. "Uh, yeah, sure."

Noah surveyed the rest of the machines. "Looks like I'll have to come back later," he said as he loaded Oscar's clothes into the washer.

"No!" Oscar said, surprising himself. This was strange and embarrassing and probably the worst idea he'd ever had, but hell, if Matt Bomer popped out

of his TV, he would definitely try to fuck him. Why should this be any different? “No, you can have this one.”

“That’s very considerate of you, but I’ll just come back later.”

“No, it’s cool—I mean I already have laundry in the other machines, so it’d be a dick move on my part to take the last one, right?”

Noah looked again at the washers, then around the empty room. “Are you using all of them?”

Oscar rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh, yeah, I guess I got behind on my laundry.” He felt himself blushing. What the fuck? He never blushed, because he was never embarrassed.

Noah arched his eyebrow, but he looked more amused than disgusted. He retrieved his basket from across the room, placed the clothes in the washer, and added the soap. He was about to put in his laundry card, but Oscar stuck his own in. “Here, it’s on me. I put like forty dollars on this thing.”

Noah smiled. Christ, he had dimples. *Dimples*. “Are you this nice to everyone, or am I just lucky?”

“You’re lucky,” Oscar said. Now it was Noah’s turn to look a bit flummoxed. He retreated with his basket to the other side of the room, pulled out a textbook that he had carried at the bottom of his laundry basket, and began reading. Oscar didn’t want to come on too strong, so he sat at the other end of the room. He just watched Noah for a few minutes. Noah took out a notebook and a pen and began to take notes. In between notes, he would put the pen in between his lips, nibbling at the end with those plush lips...

Thankfully, his phone buzzed just then. He welcomed the distraction. It was a text from Jeremy.

U want to go drinking tonite?

Oscar texted back.

Not with u. u left me with a \$75 tab last week when you left with that skank. Pay up dickface or fuck off.

Jeremy responded:

Better a dickface then having actual dicks in my face.

How is that an insult? i love dicks in my face.

Why dont u suck mine?

As if i would let ur diseased dick anywhere near me. ur a walking std.

There was a long pause in which Oscar definitely did not sneak another peek at Noah. His phone buzzed again.

How about I pay u \$30 and ur drinks are on me?

Deal.

Cool. see u tonite.

He put his phone back in his pocket and contemplated his next move. This was going to be a challenge. A laundry room was not a sleazy nightclub, and neither of them were drunk. They were also not exchanging messages on Grindr. Those were the two primary ways Oscar got laid. He was pretty sure Noah was gay, but he decided he'd better test it before he went further. He took off his tank top and threw it in his remaining pile of laundry. The movement caught Noah's eye. Oscar stretched his arms up, displaying his toned, tattooed body. Noah's pale skin turned bright pink; he put his nose back in his textbook but kept looking up, his gaze scurrying away quickly each time as his face grew even redder. Well, that answered that question.

Where did he go from there? He should probably start up a conversation. "So," Oscar said. "What are you studying?"

"Biology one-oh-one. I just started at San Diego City College."

"Oh yeah? What are you majoring in?"

"Nursing."

Of course he was. "So, are you new to the area?"

"Yes, actually. I'm from New Hampshire."

"Wow. That's a long ways away."

"Yes," Noah agreed. "Are you from here?"

"Yup. Born and raised in San Diego."

"This area is beautiful," Noah said.

"Yeah, I guess, but you guys have those trees that get all colorful and shit in the fall. Must be nice to live somewhere where things actually change. Nothing changes here."

The conversation petered out after that. Oscar thought over what he had learned. New to San Diego, new to college, new to the Internet—what else was

Noah new to? He casually examined Noah's clothes. He wore khakis and a polo shirt, despite it being ninety degrees outside. He was very polite and well-spoken. He was as far away from home as he could manage while staying in the United States, and he was also living in a cruddy apartment which suggested no parental support. Ex-fundie, Oscar decided. Or maybe Mormon. Was he out of the closet yet?

Oscar took out his phone and played a game while Noah studied for a little while longer. Eventually, Oscar's wash finished. He took the wet laundry and piled it into the dryers. A few minutes later and Noah's wash was done as well; he put his clothes in one of the dryers, too. They both stood beside each other, a little closer than was necessary. Oscar breathed in; Noah smelled very faintly of Pine-Sol, but it wasn't overwhelmingly chemical. Just nice.

When he had finished loading, he stuck his hand out to Noah. "I'm Oscar."

Noah took his hand, his skin surprisingly rough. "Noah," he said. "It's nice to meet you."

Their hands lingered together for a few moments. Noah broke the grip first and retreated, returning to his studying. Oscar considered him. Yes, this was definitely a mutual flirtation, but where to take it from here? His gaze lit upon the vending machine in the corner. Inspiration struck him. He crossed the room and purchased two Snickers bars.

Casually, he sauntered over to Noah. "Here," he said, offering the candy. "Brain food."

Noah smiled shyly as he accepted it. "Thank you."

Oscar went back to his seat, feeling triumphant. This was going well, but he still couldn't think of a subject for conversation. They'd already covered the weather. He ate his Snickers bar and threw the wrapper in the trash, like a good boy. He returned to his seat and got out his phone again; maybe there would be another opportunity to talk when the laundry was finished.

Eventually, Oscar's dryers buzzed. He put on a T-shirt from the dryer before beginning to fill the basket, making sure to take his time. If he left now, Noah might not be there when he got back. Should he ask for his number now? Or would that scare a barely out fundie too much? Fortunately, Noah swooped in and saved him from having to decide. "Aren't you going to fold those?" he asked.

Oscar looked down at his basket. "Oh, I'll fold them when I get upstairs." Which was a lie. He didn't fold his clothes, generally.

“You really ought to fold them right away,” Noah said. “Here, bring them over to the counter.”

Oscar did as Noah asked. Noah plucked out a T-shirt and gave Oscar a little grin as he lay it smoothly on the table. He pinched two places on the shirt and crossed his arms over each other. When he uncrossed his arms, the shirt twisted in a blur of motion, and then suddenly it lay folded neatly on the table. The whole thing had taken about five seconds.

“Whoa,” Oscar said. “How did you do that?”

“It’s simple.” He took out another T-shirt and handed it to Oscar. “Just lay it out as I did before.” Oscar did. “Now pinch the corner of the right collar with your right hand. Imagine a straight line down, then cross to the other side. Pinch it there with your left.” He could have just pointed to the points, but he put his hands on Oscar’s instead, guiding them where he wanted them. The touch gave him a chubby. Maybe Noah wasn’t completely new to this whole gay thing. Good. It would make things easier.

“Cross your right hand over your left,” Noah continued, guiding his movements. “Now uncross your arms.”

Oscar did. The shirt flipped, and he grinned.

“Lay the shirt on the table, fold it in half, and you’re done.” Noah reached across Oscar to the laundry basket and pulled out another shirt. He handed it to Oscar. “Why don’t you try?”

Oscar accepted the shirt and laid it out on the table. He didn’t get it quite right now that Noah wasn’t guiding his hands, but with a little practice, he got it down. In the meantime, Noah folded his jeans, shorts, and even his underwear.

“I have a job cleaning houses,” Noah mentioned casually. “I also do some light chores, like laundry. I could do yours for ten dollars a week, if you wanted. Strictly under the table, of course.”

“Yeah, sure,” Oscar said. “Sounds good.”

“Great.” Noah flashed his smile again. “You can bring them down to my apartment every Saturday. Just leave me the soap and your laundry card. You can pick them up in the afternoon.”

So now Oscar basically had a weekly invitation to Noah’s apartment. He tried to play it cool, but on the inside, he was cheering. He’d just scored a ticket to Bone Town. “Cool,” Oscar said. “What’s your apartment number?”

“Two-twelve, in building two. It’s down by the pool.” He nodded toward the other dryers. “Do you want to bring another load over?”

They finished the second load and piled it in the basket; when the clothes were nice and folded, a lot more could fit in it. Oscar took it upstairs. He put the clothes carefully in the drawers of his bureau. Since most of his clothes wound up on the floor, the drawers were mostly empty. He went down to get the next couple loads, which Noah already had halfway done. It took several trips, but they got it done pretty quickly.

Noah helped put the last of the laundry in the basket. Noah gave the clothes a pat with one hand, which happened to land on a pair of Oscar’s underwear. “There you go.”

Did he expect Oscar to pay him now? “I don’t have any cash.”

“The first fold is free,” Noah said. “Besides, I had help.”

Oscar pulled out his phone. “Why don’t we swap numbers so I can see when you’re around?”

“I don’t have my phone on me.”

“No prob, I’ll just text you.”

After Noah gave him his number, Oscar had to think of what to text him. He could stick with a “yo,” but that seemed like a missed opportunity. He’d think of something later. “All right, got it.”

“Good.” Noah put his textbook and folded clothes in his own basket. “See you next Saturday.”

Oh yeah. Oscar planned on seeing him. All of him. Preferably on his knees. Or hell, with his cock level to Oscar’s face. He wasn’t lying about loving dick in his face—it was the best. Something about Noah made his mouth water more than usual. Maybe it was the Pine-Sol thing. Very exotic.

He went back to his apartment, which now smelled a little better. He felt so inspired that he even took down a few more bags of garbage. When he entered the apartment again, it seemed... better. Except for the black spots on the carpet. And whatever that goo was on the wall. And the kitchen mold. And the cockroaches who, now deprived of their garbage homes, had scuttled under the refrigerator.

Okay, so it wasn’t exactly the Ritz, but he could clean up. No problem.

He sat down on his beanbag chair and took out his phone, hesitating as his fingers hovered over Noah's number. He did so much time pretending to be other people that when it came time to say something for himself, he had nothing.

Sup, it's Oscar was what he went with. It wasn't exactly Tolkien, but it'd do. He almost pressed send, but he paused and added a smiley. Noah liked smileys.

He'd hoped he'd get a response right away, but Noah left him hanging. Oscar shrugged it off. Didn't matter if he responded or not—he'd see him next week. Meanwhile, Oscar had the rest of the day to fill before he met up with Jeremy. He decided to hit the gym, maybe get a burger afterward.

Several weight circuits and one extra greasy double cheeseburger later, there was still no response from Noah. He met up with Jeremy; the bar was in walking distance, which was one of the reasons it was "their bar." He checked his phone so many times that Jeremy eventually got annoyed and asked him to stop chasing cock on Grindr. Oscar had to put his phone away after that. He drank a little more than he should have, but managed to stop himself from going overboard. He stumbled home, his balance not improving from all the phone checking he was doing. Still nothing.

When he got upstairs, he stripped down to his shorts—fuck, it should be illegal for the weather to be this hot. He usually just threw his clothes on the floor, but paused this time. After retrieving his phone from his pocket, he put the clothes in the empty laundry basket. He made his little blanket nest, which smelled much nicer than usual, and then grabbed his laptop. Because he was a little drunk (no, really) and for no other reason (no, *really*), he viewed Noah's video again. Something very close to shame came over him when he thought about his trolling. But he didn't feel shame. Not ever. He decided he was done with that the moment he left home six years ago. Regret. That's what he felt now. That was allowed.

He watched Noah's video a couple of times; his eyelids began to droop. Time to call it a night. After shutting the laptop and putting it aside, he took one last look at his phone. Still no Noah. This was definitely not bothering him, he told himself firmly. Still, he put the phone by his pillow when he laid his head down. He was just about to drift off to sleep when the phone buzzed.

Hi, Oscar. It was nice to meet you. I look forward to getting to know you better. :)

A very goofy grin came over his face. Should he text back? No. Oscar was cool. Having sex with Noah was definitely something he wanted to do, but it wasn't like he was desperate for it. He could get sex any time he wanted to.

But because he was drunk, and because he was tired, and because he was lonely (which was something he could only admit to himself when he was drunk and tired), he did text back.

yeah, m2. Hope u sleep well.

What a dumb thing to say. But Noah texted back immediately.

You too. Good night.

Oscar put down his phone and drifted off to sleep at last. He slept really well, too. That was a rarity.

Chapter Two

Oscar's alarm woke him up the next morning at six a.m. He had a raging headache and a mouth so dry and nasty that he felt like he'd licked his bedroom floor. He hauled himself out of bed, had a breakfast of coffee and cereal, and then headed out.

He took the 209 to Point Loma—a gorgeous peninsula on San Diego's west coast. People came from all over to marvel at the beauty of the sparkling ocean, the bleached beaches of Sunset Cliff, the dignified Old Point Loma Lighthouse, the swaying palm trees: the full paradise experience. If you looked at Point Loma on a map, it looked like a limp dick.

Smack in the middle of all that loveliness was the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant—all of San Diego's shit came through there. That always tickled him. It might even have been what lured him there—the plant was unseemly and an uncomfortable subject of conversation, just like he was. And why not go mucking around in the sewers? It beat sitting in an office and slowing dying of paper cuts, and it sure as hell beat “bettering” himself in college.

He pulled up to the plant and made his way inside to the locker room. Jeremy was already there, which was surprising. Oscar was sure he would be late. It wouldn't be the first time. When he saw Oscar, Jeremy managed a woozy smile. “Hey, bro.”

“You look like shit,” Oscar observed.

Jeremy laughed. “Yeah, well, what else is new?”

Actually, when he wasn't hungover, Jeremy was pretty cute, in a gangly sort of way. He had shaggy brown hair and long, lean limbs. His eyes were the brown of a nearly healed bruise. His smile had an inherent goofiness that he could never quite get rid of, in spite of all the things he'd been through.

They changed into their uniforms—black pants, a shirt, and a bright-orange hazard vest. They'd wait until they got to their destination to accessorize their ensemble with a lighted helmet, waist high rubber waders, and thick black gloves. They would be inspecting sewers today—it was one part of the wastewater management process that Oscar didn't have proficiency in; his boss, Bob, decided he ought to learn it.

They headed out to a street in Old Town to resume where they had left off last Thursday. They would be inspecting the sewers, looking for cracks and repairing what they could. They got some annoyed looks from commuters who were forced to waste several precious seconds of their day moving around the orange cones they'd set up. No one appreciated what Oscar did, but without the wastewater department, all of these assholes would have to make their important phone calls and drive little Timmy to school while ankle deep in raw sewage. What Oscar did was goddamn noble, but try explaining that to potential dates. Good thing Oscar never went on any.

They opened the manhole cover. Even though they were out early, the day had already started to heat up, which made their gross job even grosser. Oscar and Jeremy climbed down. Their boots hit the ground with a splash. The smell was even worse than usual. Jeremy and Oscar switched on their lights and stared grimly at the task ahead of them.

“Do you remember when Mrs. Aldridge told us in the eighth grade that we needed algebra to make anything of ourselves?” Jeremy asked. “On days like this, I sure do feel like solving for x .”

“Mrs. Aldridge was a fat, old grump who wasted her life trying to teach little shits like us,” Oscar said. “I wouldn't say solving for x helped her much, either.”

Jeremy laughed at that. “We should get moving.”

The wall was too low for them to stand up completely; they had to crouch. The ceiling and the walls were shimmering with cockroaches. These weren't shy, polite cockroaches like the ones who visited Oscar's apartment for tea and crumpets. No, these suckers were bold, and why shouldn't they be? Oscar was the pest here, interfering with their perfectly nice sewer home. Nevertheless, he had a job to do, so he brushed them off to see if there were any repairs that needed seeing to. Jeremy followed behind him, doing the same.

A few rats scurried toward him; he paused to let them pass. He liked rats. They were cute and highly intelligent. Most people were too prejudiced to realize the first, and too ignorant to know the second. A constant stream of water ran over their boots, filled with the sludge that was flushed down toilets and washed down drains. It all flowed back to Oscar's plant, where he would scrape the worst off the top, take the rest of it in, treat it right until it was suitable again, and release it back into the world, where it would sink into the ground, or join a river, or evaporate and wash back into the gutters as rain, and

of course, most importantly, make life in the city livable. All water was wastewater. That's what people didn't get. And it all came back to him, one way or another.

They finally reached the next manhole, which had been opened for them.

"How is it down there?" Bob called down to them.

"It's hot as balls, and we're standing in sewage," Oscar called back. "It's not great, Bob."

Oscar could almost hear Bob rolling his eyes. "The walls, Oscar. How're they looking? Do you guys need any sewer mud?"

"Yeah, send it down."

Bob lowered the bucket full of wet cement down the manhole. Once Oscar got a hold of it, Bob tossed down their sitting boards and trowels, too. Oscar handed one board to Jeremy. They wedged their boards along the wall so they wouldn't have to sit in sewage while they worked.

"So you get laid last night?" Jeremy asked.

Oscar didn't want to tell him that he'd been waiting like a breathless teenager for a text from his crush, so he said, "Yup."

Jeremy shook his head in admiration. "I am so jealous. Why can't there be a straight Grindr?"

"There's Tinder."

"Not the same, man. Girls just aren't as down with the random NSA fucking. I'm starting to think I'll never get laid."

"What about that girl last week?" Oscar asked. "The one you went home with?"

Jeremy looked embarrassed. "We didn't actually have sex. I guess I passed out."

Oscar snorted. "Bet that made breakfast awkward."

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "Kind of. We ended up talking for a little while."

"Talking? About what?"

Jeremy shrugged. "Dunno. Stuff."

"So are you going to see her again?"

“Fuck no!” Jeremy held out his fist for a bump. “Bros before hos and homos, right?”

That had always been their mantra. No relationships. Oscar had spent many drunken nights sneering at the idea; Jeremy sneered with him. That was a sucker’s game. The prize was getting tied down, and who wanted that? Suckers, that’s who. Better to be on your own—maybe with a friend or two. They were always in total agreement on this.

Oscar returned the fist bump. He went back to his work; there was a particularly wide crack in the wall in front of him. He slathered on a heaping glob of sewer mud, sealing it. “What’s her name?”

“Crystal.”

The crack Oscar had been working was smoothed over good now, so he moved on to the next one. “You should call her.”

Jeremy turned his head in surprise, shining his light directly into Oscar’s face. “I should?”

“Get that fucking light out of my face,” Oscar said. “You’re blinding me.”

Jeremy did as he was told. They worked in silence after that. It was pretty hard to talk in the sewers. All that sewer vapor went straight to your head.

They called it quits around eleven. Then it was back to the facility, where Oscar worked on the sludge digesters for the rest of his shift. Just as he was about to head home, Bob approached him. “I’d like to see you in my office.”

Oh, Jesus, not this shit again. “Sure.”

Once they got there, Bob shut the door. After Oscar took a seat in a chair in front of the desk, Bob sat down and looked at Oscar for a moment, his fingers drumming on his potbelly. “You know what this is about, don’t you?”

“I have a pretty good guess.”

“Right. So we’re speaking strictly as buddies right now. Boss mode is off. Understand?”

Oscar gave him a grudging nod of acknowledgment. He liked Bob, but he would prefer that he keep boss mode on. When boss mode came off, he started spouting some seriously irritating bullshit.

Bob reached into a drawer and pulled out a packet of papers. “Here’s the application to Grossmont Community College for their Wastewater Associate’s

Degree program. I've already filled it out for you. They just got a huge grant for the program, and you qualify for several scholarships, which I have also filled out the applications for."

"You can't just do that," Oscar sputtered.

"Of course I can. I'm your boss. I have access to all your info."

"I thought boss mode was off!"

"Yeah, well, it wasn't when I filled these out." He slid the papers across the desk.

Oscar crossed his arms and glared. "I told you already, I don't do school. I think my GED would have clued you in on that."

"Don't think of it as school," Bob said. "Think of it as certificate training, only more intense. You always ace those certificates."

"Why do you want me to go so bad?"

Bob sighed and rubbed his head where his hair had been, once upon a time. "You're twenty-four years old. You've been here since you were eighteen. You know every machine and process in this facility like the back of your hand. Now, if I were in boss mode, I'd say I want to promote you."

"I'd make a terrible supervisor."

"You'd make a great supervisor. You don't tolerate crap from anyone, and everyone's a little afraid of you."

Oscar uncrossed his arms. He picked up the papers and flipped through them. Bob really had thought of everything. "I don't know."

Bob raised his hands in exasperation. "So you're going to keep on doing what you're doing, force me to take in some kid straight out of college who knows jack shit about how this all really works, and put him in the job that I want for you? Don't do that to me, Oscar." His voice softened a little. "More importantly, don't do that to yourself."

He almost had him there, before he got in on that betterment shit. "I'm fine where I am. I don't need the hassle."

"Look, you're a kid. I get it. And don't give me that look," he said when Oscar shot him the stink-eye. "You *are* a kid. You think you can go on living your life just the way it is, but things change when you get older. You've gotta lay down the groundwork now if you want that change to be for the better. What if you want to start a family?"

Oscar scoffed. “Oh please. How likely do you think that is?”

“What?” Bob said. “The gays have families now! Maybe you get married and your husband wants a cute little girl from China, and you’ve gotta say, ‘No, honey, we can’t afford it because I can’t be bothered to take a few goddamn courses that I already know most of the material for anyway.’”

“Okay, first off? I’m never getting married, and I will never, *ever* have kids. And secondly, maybe my hypothetical husband is a doctor or some shit, so I won’t even need to keep this stupid job.”

Bob laughed. “Never gonna happen, Oscar. You love it here.”

Oscar scowled. “No one loves sewage.”

“But you do. You love the process, same as me. You love taking what other people think of as waste and transforming it. It’s a weird thing to love, but here we are.” He shook his head. “Why you can’t apply that passion to your own life is a mystery to me.”

“There is nothing wrong with my life,” Oscar snapped.

Bob rolled his eyes. “Boss mode back on. Go home, Oscar.”

Oscar didn’t have to be told twice. He stopped by the drugstore on the way home to get a twenty-four-pack of Corona. He needed emergency provisions if he was going to make it through the week.

Oscar was not excited for Saturday morning.

He most definitely didn’t care whether or not he had too much laundry—what did a normal person’s week’s worth of laundry even look like? Whatever, it didn’t matter. He also did not debate about his outfit. That would be ridiculous. He just put on a muscle shirt with large armholes that not only displayed his tattooed deltoids and killer biceps, but also his taut torso. The jeans he chose just happened to be the ones that hang off his hips at the sexiest angle. He gave himself a quick look in the mirror before he left. Everything looked good. His black curls looked just the right amount of tousled, and his recently acquired diamond earring gave him some class. His only imperfection was his crooked nose from where it had been broken, but that wasn’t really even a flaw; it gave him character. Satisfied, he picked up his laundry basket and headed for Noah’s at the ungodly hour of nine a.m. on a weekend, which was when Noah told him to drop it off.

Noah answered the door on the first knock and smiled when he saw Oscar—like, really smiled. Those dimples were in full display for him.

Oscar resisted the urge to smile back. *Cool*, he reminded himself. *Keep it cool*. “Sup,” he said. “Here it is.” He held out the laundry basket.

Noah accepted it. “Great. I’ll drop it off at your place when I’m done—what was your apartment number again?”

“No,” Oscar said quickly. He didn’t want Noah anywhere near that black hole. “No, I’ll just come get them whenever. Text me.”

“Give me a couple hours.”

“Cool.”

Oscar went back to his apartment. That had gone pretty well. He played Call of Duty for a little while, trying as hard as he could not to get excited. Excited was the opposite of cool. He didn’t want to blow this.

Exactly two hours later, he got a text from Noah saying his laundry was done. Oscar made himself wait ten minutes before responding. In spite of all his effort, he couldn’t help but bound down the stairs with a certain spring in his step, because the train to Bone Town had left the station.

Oscar knocked on the door and then leaned one arm casually on the wall to give Noah a good, long look at his bod. Noah opened the door, already brandishing the laundry basket. “Here you are.”

Oscar was confused by this development. He had thought Noah would invite him in to get the laundry. “Uh, thanks,” he said, accepting the basket.

Noah stepped through the door and locked it. “I’ve got to run—I’m going to miss my bus. My uncle is taking me out to lunch.”

Oscar was stupefied. “I thought you were from New Hampshire.”

“I am, but my uncle lives here,” he said. “I’d love to chat, but I really do have to go. Good-bye!”

With that, he rushed away. Oscar stared after him dully. The train to Bone Town had derailed. Had he even been on it in the first place? He shook himself out of it. Fine. *Fine*. He stomped up to his apartment. He didn’t need him. He could get anyone he wanted, whenever he wanted. He fired up Grindr, but for some mysterious reason, no one nearby was looking for a BJ at eleven a.m. on a Saturday morning. He hauled out his bong and took several big hits, which sent him into a coughing fit. As the coughing faded, his muscles relaxed. He went

back to his game, still feeling disappointed, but hey, maybe he'd have another shot at him later. They had arranged for weekly laundry days, after all. But then again, the longer someone was around Oscar, the less likely they were to want to sleep with him. Oscar should probably just give up. It had been a dumb idea anyway.

Five hours later, his phone buzzed. He finished his toke before taking the phone out of his pocket. It was probably Jeremy, wanting to go out. But it wasn't Jeremy. It was Noah.

Hi. Sorry for running out on you earlier. I really had to catch that bus—my uncle made a reservation so I had to be on time. I was wondering if you would like to come over for dinner tonight?

Oscar sat straight up in his beanbag. The train to Bone Town was back on track! He wrote back immediately.

Yeah, cool, what time?

Around six?

OK. C U then.

He actually laughed out loud at his sudden luck, but his laughter quickly died. He was high as balls and reeked of weed, and Noah didn't seem 420-friendly. He had two hours, though. A cold shower would do wonders, for both the smell and to bring him down a little, so he headed to the bathroom. He obviously couldn't wear the outfit he'd picked out before, but then he realized with despair that he'd set the laundry down in the living room. All of his clean clothing smelled of smoke now, too. Plus thinking was real hard at the moment. He stood naked in the middle of his living room, trying to force his fuzzy brain to think. At last, a solution came to him:

Febreze.

Yes. That was the solution to all his problems. He grabbed the bottle that he'd bought when Aneisha had first started getting on his case. It had never been used, but no time like the present! He picked out an outfit and sprayed it down. Then he decided he might as well spray the rest of the clothes. Actually, the whole apartment could use a good spritzing. Besides, it was fun; the mist was so light and swirly and made this awesome noise. He spritzed the beanbag chair, the carpet, his blanket nest in the bed—even the garbage bags. It was only when he started coughing that he remembered there was a reason that you

couldn't Febreze your way to cleanliness—that shit was just as bad a stink if you used too much of it. He knew that usually, but—well, high as balls. He pried open the windows and turned on the ceiling fan. At least the pot smell had lessened.

He glanced at the clock; he still had another hour and a half to kill. He decided to take a walk to clear his head and air himself out a little. The worst of the heat had left the day. He was still pretty high; it made everything seem both clearer and farther away, like he was looking at the world through a telescope. As he walked through Hillcrest, he took in the smells of the restaurants he passed, the chatter of the people on the street, the short bursts of music coming from cars that passed by. A cool breeze wafted over his skin. Palm trees swayed. Everything seemed so... nice. He tried to imagine how Noah saw all of this; after all, it was new to him. Oscar never really noticed these things; maybe he should pay more attention.

When he passed by a liquor store, he decided to stop in and grab a bottle of wine to take to Noah's. That seemed like it would be a nice thing to do. By then, it was time for him to head back. He was a little early, but whatever. He knocked on the door.

Noah answered almost immediately. "Hello! Please come in." He was wearing a green apron over a checkered short-sleeved button-down shirt and a pair of dad jeans. It was about the dorkiest outfit Oscar could imagine.

Oscar stepped inside and looked around. The apartment was laid out the same as his—an open floor plan with a living room in the front, kitchen in the back, and a small dining area beside it. The bedroom and bathroom were off to the right. Other than that, their apartments had nothing in common. Noah had real grown-up furniture; it all looked secondhand, but he had a couch and an armchair. There was a quilt draped over the back of the couch—probably an attempt to conceal how threadbare it was, but it didn't really succeed. A small TV/VCR combo sat on a stand in front of the couch. A couple of posters of New England landscapes in cheap frames decorated the walls. This was a shitty apartment trying very hard to be something better.

Oscar cleared his throat. He held out the wine bottle. "I, uh, got this for you."

"Oh!" Noah's smile was a little too wide as he accepted it. "I don't actually drink a lot of wine, so I don't have a corkscrew."

Well, shit. That had gone down like a lead balloon. Oscar gestured vaguely at the door. "I could go get one—"

“No, it’s all right,” Noah said quickly. “I got beer for us.”

“Okay, cool.” This was not off to a great start. He developed a sudden interest in his own flip-flops; he probably should have trimmed his toenails. They looked kind of nasty.

Noah dipped his head until he caught Oscar’s gaze. “It was very thoughtful,” he said with a smile. “Thank you.”

Oscar smiled back.

Noah gestured to the dining area. “Please, have a seat.”

Oscar sat down in one of the chairs at the dining room table while Noah went back into the kitchen. The table was set for two with mismatched dishes. Oddly, there were two wine glasses, but Noah said he didn’t drink wine. In the center of the table, there was a bowl of chips and a side of salsa. Oscar helped himself while Noah busied himself with dinner. “Smells good,” Oscar said. “What’re we having?”

“Enchiladas.” Noah opened the oven door. The warm, familiar smell of spices and tortillas filled the room. “I practiced earlier this week, and it didn’t turn out too well. Hopefully, I got it right this time.”

Practiced? As in, he planned this meal? Specifically for Oscar? Oscar shifted uncomfortably; he didn’t know what to make of that. Of course, he was thrilled Noah was into him, but this seemed a little too into him for his comfort.

Noah put the pan on the stove to cool. After he took off his apron, he sat down across from Oscar. He jumped up again almost immediately. “I forgot our drinks!” He hurried to the fridge and pulled a bottle out of the fridge. When he set it on the table, Oscar saw that it was a 40 oz of Miller Light. Oscar was about to ask where his was, but then Noah started to pour some into his wine glass. He was too baffled to say anything. Who drank beer in wine glasses?

The beer immediately began to foam up. “Oh no!” Noah gasped.

“No, it’s cool,” Oscar said. “Look, I’ll show you a trick.” He stuck a finger in the foam; it began to subside. Oscar looked up at Noah, who was looking at him as if—well, as if he’d just stuck a finger in his drink during dinner. He hastily removed his finger. “I bathed today,” he offered weakly.

Noah shifted his expression into something more neutral. “Right.” They fell into an awkward silence for a moment.

Oscar reached across the table for Noah's glass; he took the beer bottle in the other. "Here—you've got to angle the glass." The beer flowed smoothly, only foaming a bit at the top.

Noah's cheeks had flushed a light pink. It was a good look on him. "Thanks," he said, rubbing his neck. "I don't have much experience with drinking."

"Conservative parents?" Oscar guessed.

Noah snorted. "You have no idea."

So Oscar had been right. Move over Sherlock Holmes—Oscar had cracked the case. It wasn't really any of his business, so he didn't press further.

Noah took a sip of the beer. "So what do you do?"

Crap. This was not a great pre-dinner conversation. "I work in wastewater management."

Noah cocked his head. "Wastewater management?"

Oscar cleared his throat. "Yeah, you know, like sewers and stuff."

"So you're a manager at the sewage plant?"

"Wastewater," Oscar corrected. Jesus, he sounded like Bob. "And I'm not really a manager. I—you know, manage the wastewater." Oh for Christ's sake, this was ridiculous. "I work in sewage. I clean up the waste and treat the water."

Oscar waited for him to crinkle his nose in disgust, but Noah merely looked thoughtful. "I was just reading about famous epidemics in history class, and so many of them were caused by the lack of proper sewage disposal. If you think about it, modern life is only really possible because of our sewage systems."

Oscar blinked. Of all the responses Oscar thought he might receive from Noah, that one had never crossed his mind. "Yeah, exactly," he said, a little bewildered.

"So are there really alligators in the sewers?" he asked with a grin.

"Oh yeah, loads," Oscar said, grinning back at him. "We ride them sometimes. We've got special saddles and everything."

Noah laughed; they both took another drink. The silence was warmer this time. "I'm going to go check on the enchiladas," Noah said after a moment. He deemed them ready to serve and brought the pan over, setting it on a hot pad on

the table. He served Oscar first, and then himself. They chatted as they ate; mostly mundane stuff like how Noah was liking the city, what sorts of things he was studying in school. Oscar even talked a little more about his job, which would disgust most people (especially over dinner), but Noah seemed to find it fascinating.

“So how did I do with dinner?” Noah asked when they were finished.

“Really good. I haven’t had home-cooked enchiladas in a long time. My mom used to make them all the time when I was growing up.”

“You don’t visit often, then?”

Oscar tensed. “Not recently.”

Noah pressed his lips together and looked down. “I’m sorry if I hit a sore spot.”

“It’s not sore, exactly,” Oscar said. “It’s just—complicated.”

Noah gave him a sad smile. “Well, the subject of family is both sore and complicated with me as well, if it makes you feel any better.”

Oscar looked down at his empty glass; his pot buzz was gone, and he was going to need way more beer to get through a conversation about family. “Is that why you moved out here?” Oscar asked. “To get away from them?”

“Yes.” He paused. “They’re Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Oscar thought about it. “Oh yeah, the knocking-on-doors guys. Not cool with the whole gay thing, huh?”

Noah froze. Wait—had Oscar totally misread the situation? “I mean, you are, right?” he asked.

Noah was pink again. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I’m gay. I’m sorry, I’m just not used to saying it out loud.”

Oscar felt a flood of relief. This whole day had been embarrassing enough already. “Yeah—it takes some getting used to. They didn’t react well, I’m guessing.”

“Actually, I don’t know how they reacted. I just left them a note saying I was leaving the church, and then I got on a plane and moved out here with my uncle.”

“And they haven’t come looking for you?”

“Once someone leaves the church, you aren’t allowed to have any contact with them. I wasn’t even supposed to be speaking with my uncle, but before he left, he gave me his e-mail address. I started talking to him via e-mail, and he said he’d help me if I ever wanted to leave.” Noah paused. “I did leave a note for my sister, Rebecca. I hope she’ll reach out one day. She’s the only one I really miss.”

“So you lived with your uncle for a while?”

“Yes. He helped me get my footing while I decided what to do with myself.”

“Are you out to him?”

“I’m working on it.” He fiddled with his fork. “I think he’ll be all right. He left the Jehovah’s Witnesses years ago, and his new church is very accepting. I just didn’t know how he would feel, and I wanted to make sure our relationship was on solid footing. I went directly from school to work for my family’s carpentry business, so I feel really unsure about navigating anything that isn’t church related.”

“What, did you live on a compound or something?”

“No, nothing like that,” Noah said quickly. “We weren’t isolated from the world. It’s more like our world was... filtered.”

“How’s that?”

“I wasn’t allowed to read or watch things that were deemed ‘worldly,’ and I wasn’t supposed to associate with anyone not in the church. My sister and I went to public school, but we were supposed to keep everyone else at a distance.”

Oscar blinked. “You didn’t have friends at school?”

Noah smiled sadly. “No, I did. I just couldn’t ever hang out with them.”

Oscar tried to imagine that, but it was too baffling to even contemplate.

“Of course, I had friends in the church, too,” he said. “But it was always difficult for me. I knew I was... different from a pretty young age. I only vaguely understood what being gay meant, but I didn’t even dare ask questions—not even of myself. I finally started seeking information in my sophomore year; my parents restricted me, but they didn’t think to ban me from the library. I was allowed to go there alone.” He affected a lighter tone. “I eagerly awaited each new issue of *Men’s Health* in the magazine section every month.”

Oscar had no idea what to say to any of that. “Wow, that blows” was what he eventually came up with.

Noah shifted in his seat. “This is sort of a depressing topic, don’t you think? Why don’t I clean up and get our dessert?” Without waiting for an answer, Noah gathered their plates from the table.

Well, that had been a boner killer. This is why he didn’t date; feelings were too complicated if you just wanted to fuck. Noah returned with two chocolate cupcakes on paper plates. He put one in front of Oscar and then sat down with the other. Oscar noticed that Noah’s had a birthday candle.

“It’s my first birthday,” Noah explained. “Jehovah’s Witnesses aren’t permitted to celebrate them. I know it seems kind of silly, but I’ve always wanted to blow out a candle.” He took the book of matches he’d brought with him and struck one; it crackled into flame. He brought the match to the candlewick until it was lighted. With a flick of his hand, he put out the match.

The two of them sat staring at the dancing flame for a moment. Noah made to blow out the candle, but Oscar stopped him. “Wait—aren’t we going to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ or something?”

“You really don’t have to,” Noah said. “I feel silly enough as it is.”

“No,” Oscar insisted. “If we’re doing this, we should do it right.” He cleared his throat and began the birthday song. He felt stupider with each note, considering how crap he was at singing. His voice cracked at the high note when he got to Noah’s name, but he soldiered on because of the look on Noah’s face—an expression halfway between embarrassment and real joy at finally hearing a birthday song. It broke Oscar’s heart a little.

There was a moment of silence after Oscar finished the song. “Well, aren’t you going to blow out the candle?” Oscar said gruffly.

Noah puckered his lips and blew out the flame. Smoke swirled in front of Noah’s face before finally dissipating.

“So did you make a wish?” Oscar asked.

“Yes.” Noah got up from his seat. He reached out for Oscar haltingly, as if he were afraid Oscar would jerk away. When it became clear that his touch was welcome, Noah kissed him—no tongue, just a gentle pressure of his lips against Oscar’s. Oscar immediately got to his feet so that he could sweep Noah into a real embrace. Noah was still tense in his arms, so Oscar held back a little, keeping their kisses shallow. After a few minutes, Oscar felt Noah give in to it. Their kisses became deeper and more intense.

Oscar steered them toward the couch, giving Noah a little push until he landed on it. Oscar had his own clothes off in minutes; no one got naked faster than Oscar. Noah just gaped at Oscar's naked body. Oscar grinned; he always appreciated a rapt audience. He leaned down to kiss Noah again, pushing forward until Noah was lying on the couch with Oscar on top of him. Oscar pulled away from the kiss to unbutton Noah's jeans, which drew out a strange keening noise from Noah.

Oscar paused. "Okay?" he asked.

Noah nodded his head vigorously. "More than okay," he said, laughing a little. Noah fumbled with the buttons of his own shirt, but Oscar batted his hands away. The short-sleeved button-down shirt Noah wore was incredibly dorky, but Oscar was really into it now—it had a lot of possibilities. He unbuttoned the top button, then paused before going after the second, and then the third. He snaked a hand inside Noah's shirt and flicked a nipple. Noah bit his lip and moved into the touch. *Sensitive nipples—good to know.* He unbuttoned the fourth, sliding his hands in to caress Noah's sides, his thumbs brushing against Noah's nipples again. By the time he finished all the buttons, Noah was a panting, writhing mess. Oscar congratulated himself at a job well done. He finished the task he'd started earlier, pulling the jeans from Noah's legs and tossing them aside.

When his pants were off, Noah sat up to shrug off his shirt. He pushed Oscar with surprising force, kissing him fiercely as he switched their positions. Oscar was now on his back with Noah straddling his hips. Oscar thrust upward, grinding their cocks together; Noah moaned into his mouth and thrust back. They kept at it until Noah pulled back abruptly, supporting himself on his hands to keep their bodies apart.

"Need to catch my breath," he said.

"Sure, no problem." Oscar was panting himself. He ran a hand over Noah's shoulder, then down his back. Noah's eyes were screwed shut. Oscar didn't like that. "Open your eyes," he murmured.

Noah shook his head. "If I look at you, I'm going to come," he said.

Now *that* was a compliment. He took his hands off of Noah's skin and laced his fingers behind his own head. He could wait. They had all night.

When Noah had calmed himself sufficiently, he gave Oscar a brief kiss on the lips, then moved downward until he was level with Oscar's cock. He took it in his mouth and shoved his head downward—then pulled off with a sputter.

Oscar raised himself up on his elbows. He tugged at Noah's shoulders. "Come here." Noah moved back up until they were face-to-face. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say that you've never done this before."

Noah didn't turn pink this time; his face was a full red. "Yeah."

Oscar gave him another kiss. "Hey, it's cool. Don't worry about it. How about I go first and show you how it's done?"

Noah nodded his assent. They shared one more kiss before Noah lay back. Oscar moved over him, taking a moment to drink in the sight of him. There was very little hair on his chest—just a dusting of faint curls around his nipples, then a bit at his belly that trailed down to his crotch. He had a nice body—not as toned as he generally liked his partners, but there was something appealing about the softness his hands encountered as he moved them over Noah's chest and stomach. He took Noah's rigid cock in his hand and stroked it—lightly, since he knew that Noah was already on the edge. "Fuck, you're gorgeous," he said, just to see if he could get that face to flush even more; it worked. "I can't wait to get your dick in my mouth."

Noah gasped. He shut his eyes and dug his nails into his own thigh. Oscar smirked as he lowered himself to Noah's cock. He started with Noah's balls, lapping at them until they were wet and then moved up to grasp the base of Noah's cock. "Open your eyes." It was a command, and Noah obeyed. "You don't have to get the whole thing in your mouth right off the bat. You can take your time. Start with a lick." He demonstrated, running his tongue over the head, tasting the salty precome that was leaking there. He licked down to his balls and back up again.

When he glanced up at Noah, his eyes had fluttered shut again. Oscar decided to let it pass. "Then you can take in the head." He did so, giving it a little suck. He pulled off again and began to move his hand. "You can work the shaft with your hand and just keep the top in your mouth—it'll make me come either way." Oscar demonstrated for a few minutes while Noah moaned and writhed beneath him. Oscar popped off again. "Of course, once you get some practice, you can do this." He dove in for a deep throat, taking every last inch of Noah inside him.

Noah cried out and bucked his hips upward. He spurted in Oscar's mouth, shooting pulse after pulse over his tongue. Oscar sucked it all down; he didn't usually let guys come in his mouth, but he'd make an exception for Noah. When he was finished, he let Noah's wet dick slide from his lips. Oscar sat up

and looked down at Noah; he was an absolute mess. He had both hands fisted in his own hair—Oscar guessed that he might have been trying to stave off his orgasm by distracting himself with a little pain, but no amount of hair pulling was a match for Oscar’s amazing cock-sucking skills. His own dick got harder as he watched Noah pant through the aftermath of his orgasm; Noah’s dick even let out one last little spurt of come. Oh yeah. That was about the hottest thing Oscar had seen in recent memory.

He couldn’t help but stroke himself a little, as he gave Noah the chance to recover. When Noah opened his eyes at last, his gaze went directly to Oscar’s dick. He licked his lips. “Okay,” he said. “I think I’ve got it down. You are a fantastic teacher.”

Oscar laughed. “So you want me to lie down, or do you want to get on your knees?”

Noah let out a moan. Oscar loved this—everyone he hooked up with was so used to the script that it felt almost mechanical, but this meant something to Noah. This wasn’t just sucking dick; this was the culmination of a journey that had lasted years. He quickly diverted his mind away from what Noah must have gone through with his family. He focused on Noah here and now, coming undone at just the thought of getting Oscar’s dick in his mouth.

“I want—” Noah broke off and shut his eyes again. When he opened them, he met Oscar’s gaze straight on. “I want to be on my knees, sucking your—your cock.”

“Sounds great to me,” Oscar said with a wicked grin. He kissed Noah before he stood, making sure to lick deeply into his mouth so Noah could taste the residue of his own come. He got to his feet as Noah sank to his knees. He took Oscar’s cock in his hand and guided it to his lips. Once he’d taken in the tip, he switched his grip to the base and began sucking.

There were a few jerky movements, but eventually he fell into a rhythm. Oscar ran a hand through Noah’s hair, keeping his touch gentle. He did his best not to thrust, but as time went on, he couldn’t help but rock forward a little. “Yeah,” he said in a throaty voice. “Yeah, you are so good at this. When I first saw your lips, I thought about how great they’d look wrapped around my dick, and I was right.”

Noah let out a muffled moan around his cock. Oscar noticed that he’d moved a hand between his own legs. “Is sucking my dick making you so horny that you’re going to shoot your load twice?”

Noah moaned again and sped up his sucking. Right before he was about to come, Oscar pulled out of Noah's mouth. He hauled Noah off his knees and pushed him back to the couch, kissing him as he thrust their cocks together and jacked them with his hand. Noah did indeed come again—just a very thin, little spurt, but Oscar was still surprised he managed that much. Oscar followed soon after, coating their hands and bellies in thick spunk.

Oscar managed not to collapse on top of Noah, but his head did droop until his forehead rested against Noah's as they fought to catch their breaths. Oscar thrilled at each inhale of the scent of recent sex—the salty mix of sweat and come. Eventually, Noah squirmed out from under Oscar and disappeared into the bathroom. Oscar lay back on the couch, awaiting his return. Several minutes passed, and he still hadn't emerged. He heard water running; it stopped after a few minutes, but Noah went straight to the bedroom.

Shit, Oscar thought, unable to stop himself from scowling. Closeted dudes were all the same—all hot and panting for it, then fleeing the moment their dicks were soft. He should have expected as much, but he'd gotten caught up in the moment. Well, he'd wanted to get Noah out of his system. Mission accomplished. He got up and retrieved a paper towel from the kitchen to wipe himself down and then got dressed and knocked on the bedroom door. "Well, guess I'll head out," he said. "See you around."

The door flew open. Noah's hair was wet. He was dressed in sweatpants, no shirt. In one hand he held a wet washcloth; in the other a videocassette.

"You're leaving?" He looked crestfallen. "But we haven't had dessert."

Oscar was taken aback. "I thought you maybe needed some space."

"No, not at all! I just wanted to jump in the shower real quick. I was coming out with this to clean you up," he said, indicating the washcloth. "And then I thought that maybe we could watch a movie, but I couldn't find it because I still haven't unpacked some of my boxes—" He handed the washcloth to Oscar. It was warm. "I'm sorry, I should have given you this first. Or you can take a shower..." His eyes widened. "Oh! Was I supposed to invite you to shower with me? Have I been rude?"

"No, no," Oscar reassured him. Something hard in his heart gave way a little. Goddamnit. So much for fuck and run. "No, it's cool. I'll stay. I just didn't know what you wanted to do. I thought you might be freaked out."

Noah smiled a little. "Ever since I decided I was going to accept being gay and leave the church, I have thought about this day. That was two years ago, let me remind you. And after I moved out here and had my own computer with an

Internet connection, the first thing I did was watch as much pornography as possible. Like, seriously—hours and hours of it. I was more than ready.” He gave Oscar a brief kiss on the lips. “It was perfect.”

In all his life, Oscar didn’t think he’d ever been described as perfect. That gave him feelings he did not feel like having. He handed the washcloth back awkwardly. “I already cleaned up with a paper towel.” Suddenly, he had a moment of inspiration. He put a hand around Noah’s waist. “I wouldn’t mind hopping in the shower with you, though.”

Noah laughed a little. “I think I’m spent.”

Oscar kissed his neck. “Still might be fun.”

Noah dropped his things as they stripped again. They stood under the hot spray of the shower, kissing for the sake of it as they soaped each other up. Oscar never did this. It was a completely different sort of pleasure than the usual race to orgasm. Afterward, they dried off and got dressed. They curled up on the couch with their cupcakes to watch Noah’s favorite movie—*Bringing Up Baby*, an old black-and-white movie about David, a paleontologist, who grabs the attention of Susan, a batshit insane heiress with a pet jaguar.

When Noah first put the movie on, Oscar was sure it was going to be boring. It turned out to be surprisingly hilarious for an old-timey movie. He really respected Susan. In the course of the movie, she stole David’s car; got him accused of theft; tore the tails off his dinner jacket; tricked him into going on a road trip with a leopard; demolished a truck full of chickens; stole *another* car; stranded David in a room naked, which forced him to put on a negligee to escape; got him to assume a false identity; got him arrested; impersonated a gangster to break them out of jail; and for a grand finale, destroyed the dinosaur skeleton that was his life’s work. She had all the makings of an excellent troll. And David still ended up proposing to her in the end.

Halfway through the movie, Oscar ran up to his place to get a corkscrew so they could drink the wine. By the time the movie was over, Oscar had a nice buzz again and Noah was flat-out tipsy. Although Noah had seen the movie dozens of times, he laughed at all the jokes as if they were new, which made Oscar laugh harder. Oscar couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so much. He got chuckles from his trolling, but not the kind of deep belly laughs that leave you breathless and giddy.

When the movie was over, they kissed again, slowly, lazily. Oscar liked the sharp taste of the wine in Noah’s mouth. There was a part of him that actually wanted to stay the night.

But a louder part of him told him he needed to get out. Too much, too soon. He wouldn't be caught in that trap again.

"I've got to run," he said. "Early shift tomorrow." Which was true.

"Okay," Noah replied. They got to their feet and wobbled their way to the door.

Something occurred to Oscar. "I forgot to bring your ten dollars."

Noah laughed. "If you paid me now, I'd feel like the world's cheapest hooker." He put his chin on Oscar's shoulder, his mouth directly against his ear, and dropped his voice to a whisper—the same whisper that he used in his ASMR video. "But if you keep sucking my cock, I'll still do your laundry."

A pleasant shiver ran down Oscar's spine. It seemed like he'd sucked the blushing virgin right out of him. "Sounds like a deal." They kissed again, before Oscar finally wandered out into the night.

He walked back to his apartment building in a daze. He felt like he'd stumbled out of a dream. The blue light coming from the pool added to the surreal feeling. What had happened in there? Was that him? Really? He made his way into his apartment. The door slamming shut behind him startled him awake. He looked at the clock. It was eleven. He had to be at work by seven.

He stripped down to his shorts, dropping the rest of his clothes on the floor. He crawled into his blanket nest and grabbed his laptop. He spent the next hour on Tumblr, defending a post he'd made about how Benedict Cumberbatch was an alien-looking lizard motherfucker. That shit wasn't even trolling—it was the truth. He added another post about how Tom Hiddleston was a terrible actor; he was sure it would bear fruit tomorrow. Then he went to Goodreads and randomly one-starred a bunch of books. He snapped his laptop shut. There. Now he felt normal. He curled up with one of his blankets and hoped he wouldn't dream tonight.

He knew better than to dream.

Chapter Three

Oscar resolved himself to only see Noah on Saturdays for laundry. Anything else would be too much like dating. He caved by Wednesday, when Noah invited him to come over for dinner. It didn't take much for Oscar's resolve to crumble even further. They started seeing each other two or three times a week. Each time, Oscar told himself that it would be the last one—that he'd break it off before he got in too deep. He didn't do relationships, end of story. But he couldn't do it. Every time was amazing. It wasn't just the sex, which by itself was mind-blowing. No anal, which was cool with Oscar. Mouths and hands were all that was needed to coax out some of the best orgasms of his life. Noah was just so eager for it, so filled with wonder every time they kissed and touched each other. It wasn't just getting off. It was something more than that.

And on top of that, they also just had a lot of fun. Noah cooked the most amazing meals for him. He hadn't realized how much he missed not eating shit out of a box or a can until Noah started laying out feasts for him, sometimes with a homemade dessert. They watched old black-and-white movies; they were the only sorts of movies deemed "safe" by Noah's parents, which is why he'd seen so many. Oscar brought down his Wii and taught Noah how to play video games—he was total shit at it at first, but he started to get the hang of it. Noah preferred board games. Oscar didn't even want to know what the guys at the bar would think of the fact that his hot dates sometimes included Monopoly.

No, not dates. Oscar didn't do dates. This was just hanging out. Hanging out with sex. They didn't go anywhere. Nobody knew about them. That made it safe. If it never really started, then it wouldn't hurt so much when it was over.

It was on their seventh not-date that Oscar decided to start spicing things up just a little more. He was on his knees in front of Noah, ravenously sucking his cock. When he could tell Noah was close, he popped it out of his mouth and aimed it at his face. "Come on my face," he panted.

Noah looked down on him. "What?"

"Just blow your load all over my face," he said. He was working his own dick pretty hard at just the thought of Noah's come dripping down his chin.

"But—but what if it gets in your eyes?"

“I’ll aim it at my mouth. Or my chin. Whatever. I just want your come all over me.”

Noah didn’t say anything. Oscar could tell he was losing him, so he dove back in, giving his cock a few more vigorous sucks. “Come on,” he said, jacking Noah’s cock with one hand and his own with the other. “Come on me. Do it!”

With a shudder and a wail, Noah shot his load all over Oscar’s face. It hit him on his nose, cheeks, and chin. His own cock erupted, coating his own stomach with come. He gave Noah’s cock one last worshipful suck, which sent a shudder through Noah, before sitting sat back on his heels and breathing a sigh of contentment.

“I-I’m going to go get you a washcloth.” Noah practically ran. Oscar wished he wouldn’t. He loved being covered in come.

When Noah returned, Oscar was still on his knees. He knelt beside him and tenderly wiped the come off his face, then off his stomach. “Wow.” He laughed a little. “This is something you really like, huh?”

There was a spot Noah had missed on his cheek. He wiped it off with his thumb and stuck it in his mouth. “Oh yeah.”

Noah kissed him on the nose. “Whatever floats your boat,” Noah said. “But maybe we can get you goggles for next time. It would make me feel less anxious about blinding you.”

They got to their feet. Noah took his hand and led him to the bedroom, where they lay down for a little cuddle. Noah laid his head on Oscar’s shoulder, and Oscar ran his hand over Noah’s hair. “So is there anything you’d like to try?” he asked. He was secretly hoping Noah would bring up butt stuff. He was perfectly happy without it, but it would be a nice bonus.

Noah looked uncomfortable. “There is something I want to tell you about, but it isn’t really a sex thing.”

Uh-oh. He had a pretty good idea where this conversation was headed. “Oh yeah?” he asked casually. “What’s that?”

Noah fidgeted. “It’s something called ASMR. Have you ever heard of it?”

Oscar kept his expression as neutral as possible. “No. Sounds like some sort of respiratory disease.”

Noah laughed. “No. It stands for ‘autonomous sensory meridian response.’ Basically, it means when I hear certain things like whispering or other soft sounds, I get this pleasurable tingling sensation—mostly in my head.”

“And it’s not a sex thing.”

“No. It’s like—I just feel really relaxed and happy.” He paused. “It helped me a lot when I was transitioning from my old life. Like a lot of other things, I had no idea there were other people out there who had the same sorts of feelings. There’s a whole community on the Internet devoted to it.”

“That doesn’t sound too weird.”

Noah sat up and gave him a look. “I like to dress up as a nurse and make videos pretending to give people medical exams. Please don’t tell me that doesn’t sound weird, because it definitely is.” His shoulders had tensed.

Oscar sat up as well. “Hey,” he said gently. “The Internet was made for weird shit. And as far as weird shit on the Internet goes, that’s pretty tame.”

Noah relaxed, but only slightly. “I suppose so. It’s just there are some people who give me a hard time about it online.”

Oscar put his hand on Noah’s cheek and turned his face until they were looking straight into each other’s eyes. It was time to tell him the truth. “Anyone who would make you feel bad about something like that is a loser who isn’t worth your time.”

Noah smiled. “You’re probably right.”

Oscar gazed at Noah, who was so kind that he wanted to take care of sick people for a living, and so considerate that he would immediately offer help to some jackass stranger who had just dropped his laundry all over the floor, and so modest that he had no clue how beautiful he was. “I’m definitely right about that,” Oscar said. “Trust me.”

Noah brought Oscar’s hand to his mouth and kissed it. “Are you okay?”

Oscar blinked. “Yeah, of course. Why would you ask?”

“Because the saddest look came over your face just now.”

Oscar looked away. “Just tired, I guess.”

Noah looked as if he wanted to say something, but hesitated. “Do you want me to show you what I do?” he finally asked.

“What? With the ASMR thing?”

Noah nodded.

Oscar wasn't sure what to say. "You don't have to."

"I want to," Noah said firmly. He got off the bed. "Wait here." He walked over to the closet, took something out of it, and disappeared into the bathroom. A few minutes later he emerged, dressed in blue scrubs. A stethoscope hung around his neck, and he held a blood pressure cuff in one hand. He was blushing fiercely.

Oscar was clearly supposed to say something, but he wasn't sure what. "You've definitely chosen the right profession to go into," he said at last. "Cause you look great in scrubs."

Noah laughed. He crossed the room and sat down on the bed. "Do you want me to do to you what I do in the videos?" he asked.

It made Oscar feel uncomfortable. Noah was showing him a lot of trust, which he had already betrayed by pretending to not know this about him. But the only way for Noah to find out would be if Oscar told him, right? And showing him was what Noah clearly wanted to do. "Sure."

"Okay." He shut his eyes. When he opened them again, he was clearly in a different frame of mind. "Hello," he whispered in that same sweet voice that Oscar had heard on the video. "My name is Noah, and I'm going to take care of you."

Oh God, he even said the same words. It was a good thing that Oscar was already spent, because a shiver of pleasure ran down his spine. But this wasn't a sex thing. Noah had seemed very firm on that point. Oscar shut his eyes and let Noah do his thing.

Noah went through the same routine Oscar had seen, murmuring questions he wasn't expected to answer and reassurances for some unnamed concerns. He ran the stethoscope over his chest and undid the Velcro of the blood pressure cuff several times near his ear, but didn't actually attach it to his arm. Oscar actually started to drift off to sleep until Noah stopped. Oscar's eyes fluttered open; Noah's face was right above his. "Well?" he asked. "Did you feel any tingling?"

"I did, actually."

"Really?"

"Yeah." He grabbed Noah's hand and brought it to his crotch. "Right here."

Noah pulled his hand away, laughing. “You are so gross.”

“And you love it.”

Noah’s laughter faded. “I do,” he said, his voice suddenly serious. “Love it.”

Oscar sat petrified in Noah’s loving gaze. Noah leaned in for a kiss; Oscar dodged it.

Oscar got out of bed. “I gotta go—early shift and all.” He gathered his clothes off the floor and started to get dressed.

Noah remained sitting on the bed. “Okay.” He sounded uncertain.

Oscar headed for the door, and Noah trailed after him. “Well, see you later,” Oscar said.

Noah put his hand on the door, preventing Oscar from leaving. “Are we okay?” he asked.

Goddamn those puppy dog eyes. “Yeah, of course.” He gave Noah a peck on the lips. “Just gotta go. I’ll text you later.”

Noah still looked unconvinced, but he removed his hand, allowing Oscar to make his escape.

As he mounted the stairs to his own apartment, he felt the stirring of the dried husk that was his conscience. He should tell him the truth. No, that was a terrible idea—he’d had a chance at it, but once he let Noah go through with giving him the routine, there was no way for him to tell him now. And then there was the whole “L” word up there in the mix. Oscar was pretty sure Noah was the weird one, bringing that up after they’d only been seeing each other for a month. Of course, he didn’t actually say it directly... Maybe Oscar was overreacting. But if they kept going on the way they were, he might hear it for real, and he didn’t know if he’d ever be ready to deal with that.

But if that was true, then why did he keep seeing Noah? What would he do when Noah wanted to take a few steps outside his apartment with Oscar? Like the cockroach he was, Oscar didn’t do well in the light of day.

As soon as he was in the door, he grabbed his bong. Once he had a buzz going, he opened his laptop and loaded Noah’s page. He scrolled until he found the comments he made. He cringed. He was such a dick. Noah was going to find out eventually—not about the comments, necessarily, but he was going to find out that Oscar was actually not a very nice person. And then what?

He deleted his comments. It was probably a terrible idea, because it would draw even more attention to them than if he just left them alone, but whatever—he was high, and he didn't want those comments existing in the world anymore. He closed the laptop and got up to get undressed. After finding his phone, he pulled up Noah's video and plugged in his headphones. He drifted off to sleep listening to Noah's sweet voice. It was almost like being in his arms.

The next Saturday, Oscar cut his time short with Noah in order to hang out with Jeremy, who he'd been neglecting recently. They met at their bar, the Molten Taco. It was the ideal hangout for many reasons. The bar existed for one purpose, which it was not shy about hiding: to get you drunk enough to eat the terrible tacos. It did a damn fine job at meeting that goal. The drinks were as cheap as the decor, which was deeply unoriginal: a few pool tables, a dartboard, a jukebox, some cracked leather booths, and a little concrete patio out back for smoking. All of the regulars admired the Molten Taco for its fierce resistance to make itself at all appealing. There were no tourists here. No locals who had any sense, either, which left the weirdos and the misfits. These were Oscar's people now.

Jeremy and Oscar were sitting out on the patio for Jeremy's fifth cigarette of the night. Oscar hated Jeremy's cigarettes. When he first started smoking, Oscar would grab the pack and toss it—into a trash can, out the window of the car, even into the gutter a couple times, which was something he would never condone normally, given how much crap like that messed with the sewer system. Jeremy never said anything, but the next time they'd hang out, he had a fresh pack. Oscar gave up eventually. It was only the second thing Jeremy had ever defied him on, and he seemed as stubborn about this one as he was the first.

They said nothing as Jeremy puffed away. It wasn't even puffing tonight, actually—he was sucking it down so fast that Oscar could hear the burn of the paper. As soon as he was finished, he reached for another one.

Oscar plucked it out of his hand. "Uh-uh. We have a pool game to finish. Do you really want to find out how Crazy Mike got his nickname? 'Cause I'd be happy to have that remain a mystery."

Jeremy took the cigarette back. Without looking at Oscar, he lit it and stared into the street, as if Oscar wasn't even there.

Oscar watched him for another moment. “So am I gonna have to beat it out of you or what?”

Jeremy finally turned his head. “Beat what out of me?”

“Whatever’s eating you,” Oscar said.

Jeremy took another long inhale. “My mom’s back in jail.”

“Well, shit,” Oscar said. “That sucks, man.” Jeremy’s mom had been in and out of prison since Jeremy was five—mostly drug charges, a burglary here and there. He’d never met his dad, or even knew who he was. Jeremy had been raised by his grandmother, who died when he was twelve. Jeremy was placed in foster care, which was right around the time Oscar and his friends thought it would be hilarious to start picking on him. He’d been such a skinny, weird kid, but he’d never let anyone get to him. Jeremy was tough—not like a blowhard bully, which was all Oscar was at the time. Jeremy had true grit, calloused by the world so hard that there was no way the stings of some middle school jackasses could hurt him.

By chance, Oscar happened to overhear two teachers talking about Jeremy’s situation. After that, Oscar called his friends off. There were limits to how mean he could be. Besides, there was something about Jeremy that Oscar identified with, even when he was tormenting him. It wasn’t until later that he realized what it was: they both had secrets. Jeremy’s secret was his mom. Oscar’s secret was that he was gay. They went from enemies to best friends in the space of a week, which took all of Oscar’s other friends by complete surprise. But Oscar was their leader, and like good soldiers, they all fell in line.

Jeremy gave a half laugh. “Yeah, well, she lasted a full six months this time. I think that’s a record.”

“I thought she had found Jesus.”

“I guess she lost him,” Jeremy said. “He’s probably somewhere in the back drawer with her self-respect and maternal instincts.”

Oscar spat. “Fuck her. She’s a stupid, selfish, junkie asshole, and her dumb ass belongs in jail. You shouldn’t talk to her, man. Seriously. You don’t have to take her calls. You don’t have to see her. You don’t owe her anything.”

Jeremy wrapped one arm around himself as if he was cold. “I know. But she’s my mom. She’s all I got.”

Oscar punched him lightly in the arm. “You’ve got me too, dickface.”

Jeremy smiled a little and punched him back. “Yeah, I know.”

Jeremy kept on with his cigarette, but a little of the tension had left his shoulders. He blew out a mouthful of smoke and gave Oscar an appraising look. “So I told you what’s up with me. Your turn.”

“What do you mean?” Oscar grunted. “There’s nothing up with me.”

“Yeah, there is. You’ve been in a good mood. Like, a really good mood.”

“So what?”

“Oscar,” Jeremy said. “This is you we’re talking about. You are never in that good of a mood.” Jeremy ashed his cigarette. “And you smell like laundry soap.”

Oscar could feel the heat in his cheeks. Good thing that some sad-ass Christmas lights were the only lighting. “I’m surprised you can smell anything with how much you smoke.”

Jeremy refused to be distracted. “Are you seeing someone?”

“No,” Oscar lied immediately. After a beat, he confessed: “Maybe.”

Jeremy gave him one of his goofy smiles. “Cool. Like me and Crystal.”

Oscar felt a little stab of guilt. How long had Jeremy put off dating just because Oscar was allergic to it? “Are you guys maybe dating or for real dating?”

Jeremy shrugged. “I dunno. Just seeing each other, I guess. We just talk and stuff. She’s really cool, though. We should all hang out sometime.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Jeremy paused. “Like, maybe you and your guy and me and Crystal could all go out to dinner or something.”

Alarm bells started going off in his head. Jeremy definitely could not meet Noah—he’d realize right away that he was the dude from that link he sent him. “No!” Oscar exclaimed. Jeremy gave him a funny look. He took a breath to calm down. “I mean, it’s not like that. He’s just some guy I met who does my laundry, and we suck each other’s dicks. We don’t even leave his apartment.”

“Oh.” Jeremy looked disappointed. “Yeah, okay.” He got to his feet. “Maybe we should go finish that game now.”

They went inside. They ended up losing a lot of money to Crazy Mike, but that was okay, because apparently Crazy Mike got his nickname for not

collecting winnings from bets he'd made. Jeremy proceeded to get shitfaced, even more so than usual. Oscar was probably going to have to drag him home. He got out his phone to find an Uber driver, but Jeremy already had his phone out. Oscar tried to take it from him, because he was only going to embarrass himself, but Jeremy pushed him away.

"No!" he slurred, pushing Oscar away. "Gotta call Crystal. She said to call, so 'm gonna call."

Oscar left him to it; there wasn't much he could do to stop him. As soon as Crystal picked up the phone, Jeremy began weeping incoherently. No one at the bar paid any attention; incoherent weeping was a regular occurrence. After he babbled for a few minutes, he held up the phone to Oscar.

"She wanna to talk to you."

Oscar hesitantly accepted the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi," said the woman who was presumably Crystal. "I'm coming to pick you guys up. Wait for me in front of the bar?"

"Sure," Oscar said, still a little taken aback.

Oscar led Jeremy outside, where they sat down at the curb. After about fifteen minutes, a beat-up station wagon pulled in front of the bar. The car was put into park, but left running. The driver got out. She was a tall, skinny woman with wavy hair that hung to her shoulders. It was difficult to tell the color in the low light—not quite brown, but not quite blonde either. Big hoop earrings hung from her ears. Oscar recognized her vaguely from that night at the bar weeks ago. "Hi, Crystal."

"Hello yourself," she replied. "I don't think we were properly introduced the last time we met."

"And yet you still left me with a seventy-five dollar bar tab."

She raised one thin eyebrow. "No," she said. "That was all him. I don't drink." As Oscar absorbed that, she opened the door to the backseat. "Come on, help me get him in."

Jeremy was beyond awareness at that point—not quite passed out but pretty damn close. They got him in. Crystal went back to the driver's side. "So, you coming or not?"

Oscar shrugged. Why not?

"I guess you know the way to Jeremy's place," Oscar said once he was in the car.

“Yup. Where do you live?”

“Close. Just down the street, actually.”

“You want me to drop you off first?”

“No, I want to make sure he gets home okay.”

She raised her eyebrow again. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I don’t know you,” Oscar said. “I mean, I’m sure you’d do a great job, but we have a routine.”

That eyebrow stayed on its perch. “A routine,” she repeated.

“Yeah. I get his pants off and put him to bed, wait until either an hour’s gone by or he’s stopped puking—whichever comes first—and then I prop him on his side with some blankets so he doesn’t choke on his own vomit, in case he’s not done. Then I get a big bottle of Gatorade and some Advil and put them on his bedside table, and then I throw away his cigarettes and his lighter, and then I go home.”

“That seems pretty complicated,” she said. “Have you ever considered just taking him to an AA meeting? That would be a lot easier.”

Oscar scowled. She was one of *those*. “What were you doing in a bar if you don’t approve of drinking?”

“I was chasing down a woman I was sponsoring. Jesus, you really were hammered that night.”

He was about to tell her he didn’t usually get that drunk, but he didn’t want to sound defensive. “So is that what you’re doing with him? *Sponsoring*?”

“No.”

“So you’ve got some kind of savior complex, then.”

“I like him, so I’m helping him out. It’s not complicated.”

“He doesn’t need your pity.”

“That’s great, because I don’t pity him.” She sighed. “Look. I’m not here to scold either of you. I think he needs help, and I’ve told him that. I also told him that I don’t get into relationships with people who aren’t sober, but like I said, I like him a lot, and I’m willing to wait around a little to see if he gets himself together.”

“Right, so you’re going to wave your tits at him until he’s a good boy,” he said. “I bet you can even teach him to sit and stay if you wave something else.”

Crystal didn't act offended. "Interesting strategy," she said. "Immediately alienating people so you don't have to engage with them in a meaningful way. How's that working out for you?"

Oscar crossed his arms over his chest and slumped in his seat, scowling.

They soon arrived at Jeremy's apartment complex, which was somehow even more of a dump than Oscar's. They got him out of the car, each slinging one of his arms over their shoulders. Oscar got his bed ready while Crystal took him to the bathroom to puke. Oscar looked in on them. She tucked his hair back as he vomited, but it wasn't tender, exactly. It was just something someone had to do so he didn't get puke in his hair, and she was the one there to do it.

Afterward, Crystal brought Jeremy over to the bed. Oscar took over from there; she was surprisingly strong for her twiglike build, but he knew Jeremy could get real heavy when he was like this. He lowered him to the bed, took off his shoes, and pulled off his jeans. Oscar fished the cigarettes out of his pocket and stuck them in his own. He arranged Jeremy on his side, as usual. Jeremy mumbled some nonsense and then passed out completely.

Jeremy's apartment was a studio, so there wasn't really anywhere to retreat. The apartment was as sad as Oscar's, but in a different way. It was almost completely empty except for the mattress in the center of the room and an old TV on a stand. There was also an old card table and one folding chair on the other side of the room. Oscar took the chair while Crystal hopped up to sit on the table.

Now that they were in better lighting, Oscar got a much better look at her. She was beautiful. Oscar wondered why he hadn't noticed. Since he was not even remotely into girls, their looks often failed to make an impression on him, but Crystal wasn't just pretty. She was the kind of beautiful that stops you in your tracks on the street—not out of desire, but out of surprise for the reminder that people like that don't solely live on the covers of magazines. Maybe she would have ended up there except for how freckled she was—they peppered her face and arms so thickly, it was like someone scattershot her with chocolate chips. But the more he looked at her he could see something else—pock marks. The freckles kind of hid them and they were pretty faded, but she had a few deep ones on her cheeks and on her arms. She was wearing a low-cut tank top, which exposed more freckles, more scars. The strangest scar was on her collarbone. It was a circle with a cross—not a Christian cross. More like a target, or a compass. It certainly wasn't a natural injury—someone had carved it there. It would be completely inappropriate for Oscar to ask what had happened.

“So,” Oscar said, pointing at the scar. “How’d you get that?”

“This?” She brushed the scar with her fingers.

“Yeah.”

“I carved it there.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I was tweaking pretty hard at the time. I think it was supposed to be like crosshairs—you know, like with a sniper rifle. I was inviting the world to take a shot.”

Her honesty left Oscar flummoxed. It was so personal. Then again, she was just answering Oscar’s question. Since she didn’t seem bothered by his bluntness, he decided to keep at it. “So you were a tweaker.”

“Sometimes. I was more of a buffet drug user—a little of this, a lot of that. I’ve been sober for six years, though.”

Oscar thought about it for a minute. “Wait—you’re like, what, my age? If you got sober six years ago, that means you were eighteen or nineteen. When did you start using drugs?”

“I was about fifteen.”

Oscar didn’t consider himself easily shocked, but *damn*. “How’d that happen?”

“Meth addicted parents, naturally.” She gave him a wry smile. “I’m pretty sure I was named after the drug.”

“Wow,” Oscar said. Not exactly tactful, but he couldn’t think of what else to say.

Crystal gestured at Jeremy. “So how often does he get this drunk?”

“I dunno,” Oscar said. Now that he thought about it, Jeremy had gotten plastered every single time they went to the bar for the last six months. “A lot, I guess. We only go to the bar once or twice a week, though.”

“How much does he drink in general?”

“How the hell should I know?” Oscar snapped. “I don’t live with him, and I’m not his mom. It’s his business, and if you want to know so bad, ask him yourself.”

“I have, but I’m pretty sure he’s lying to me.”

Oscar crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, like I said, I don’t know either.”

Crystal’s eyebrow quirked. “I bet you could make an educated guess.”

Oscar scowled. “Probably a lot.”

“Every day?”

Oscar thought about all the days he was late for work, the circles under his eyes, his shaky hands, and his breath—smoke, for sure, but a sour smell as well. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Crystal nodded absently. She reached into her purse for her phone, exposing more faded scars on her arms. “I’ve got a friend who can take my shift tomorrow. I’ll stay with him. He shouldn’t be alone.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s this shit with his mom. It’s going to eat him alive.”

Oscar gave her a look. “When did he tell you about that?”

“It happened last week.”

“Last week?” Oscar echoed. “He only told me tonight!”

“Sometimes it’s easier to tell someone who hasn’t known you that long,” she said.

And sometimes it’s easier to tell someone who acts like they want to hear it, Oscar thought. There was that conscience of his again, rumbling around. But he took care of Jeremy, didn’t he? Although he’d never once thought to stay with him; it felt intrusive. The situation was clearly a lot worse than Oscar had thought. Oscar had always been shit about taking care of things. When he was a kid, he went through five goldfish and three gerbils.

Crystal slung her purse over her shoulder and stood. “I think he’ll be okay for a few minutes. You still want that ride home?”

“Sure.” He wasn’t sure how he felt about Crystal, but Jeremy’s apartment was the opposite direction from the bar as his place, and he sure as shit didn’t feel like walking.

They didn’t say much on the ride to Oscar’s place. “Here you go,” she said once they’d gotten there.

“So you aren’t going to casually talk to me about seeking treatment for my drinking problem?” Oscar sneered.

“Why would I? You don’t have a drinking problem.”

Oscar gave her a baffled look. “I drink all the time.”

“Sure, you probably drink too much,” she agreed. “But it’s not compulsive for you.”

“How the hell would you know?”

She tapped her temple. “We addicts can sense our kind. You might want to do something about that festering wound, though.”

“What are you talking about?”

She put her hand briefly over his heart. “Here,” she said. “Lance it, drain it, rub some spiritual Neosporin on it, and let it heal. It’ll kill you otherwise.”

That caught him completely off balance. “What the fuck are you talking about?” he asked when he’d recovered. “Has Jeremy been telling you things? Because my past isn’t any of your goddamn business!”

“Jeremy hasn’t said anything,” Crystal replied, cool as always.

“Then how did you—” He stopped, because that would be basically admitting she was right.

Crystal just tapped her temple again.

Oscar was officially done with this conversation. He opened the car door and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He cooled off a little when he was back in the open air. Before he shut the door again, he bent his head to look at her. “Thanks,” he said. “For, you know, whatever.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome, for whatever. It was nice talking with you, Oscar.”

“That’s a flat-out lie,” Oscar said. “Don’t tell me it isn’t.”

She laughed. “Okay, how’s this—I look forward to talking to you in the future. That’s the truth.”

The weird thing was Oscar believed her.

Oscar watched her car disappear down the street. He made his way toward his apartment. His gaze flickered briefly to Noah’s place, but it scurried away. Going to Noah was something that someone in a relationship would do, which he most definitely was not. Still, it felt lonely when he got into his own place. It was a mess again; he had backslid on his efforts to clean up. Old habits were

hard to break; trying to kill his had only given them smelly, gangrenous wounds. He sent Jeremy a text before he got ready for bed.

Hope ur ok, dude.

He didn't know what else to say.

Chapter Four

“Let’s go to the pool,” Noah said one Saturday.

They were sitting next to each other on the couch, playing Mario Kart. Bowser went sailing off the Rainbow Road as Oscar dropped his controller. “The pool?”

“Yeah. It’s hot out, and it’s still the afternoon. The pool would feel nice.” Noah gestured over to Oscar’s laundry basket. “Your swim trunks are on top of the pile there.”

Oscar hesitated. This would be Leaving The Apartment. Was he ready for that step? He decided that it wasn’t *really* leaving the apartment—they’d still be in the complex. It was the same thing as meeting in the laundry room, basically. “Okay,” he said.

Noah smiled. “Great. I’ll go get my suit.”

Oscar changed into his trunks in the living room while Noah went to his bedroom to fetch his own swimsuit. He emerged wearing some truly dorky Hawaiian patterned trunks, but Noah’s fantastic ass was enough to make them seem like high fashion. He was carrying a bottle of sunscreen. “Do you need any?” Noah asked, indicating the bottle.

“Nah, I don’t burn that easy.”

“Then will you do me?” he asked, holding out the bottle.

“Oh yeah. I’ll do you all night long.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “Sunscreen first. Then pool. Then we can do it.”

Oscar took the bottle and squeezed some of the lotion onto Noah’s shoulders. “All night long?” he asked teasingly as he massaged the lotion into his skin. He kissed the nape of his neck.

Noah turned around and kissed him. “Sure, but that would involve you staying the night.”

Oscar turned away. “We got towels?” he mumbled.

Noah looked as if he wanted to say something more but decided not to. “Yeah. In the bathroom.”

They made their way out to the pool. No one else was there. Oscar stepped into the water, keeping his arms up as he got in. It always took him a minute to

get used to the coolness. Noah surprised him by diving gracefully into the deep end. He swam under water until he emerged beside Oscar. Water droplets dripped off his face.

“Diving is against the rules,” Oscar pointed out.

“I know,” Noah responded. “I’m living on the wild side now, though. Who knows what kind of crazy stunt I’ll pull next. I might even tear some tags off pillows later.” He looked at Oscar. “Why do you have your arms up like that?”

“Just taking a minute to get comfortable.”

Noah made a noncommittal noise. He moved as if he were going to swim away—but he abruptly turned and pounced onto Oscar, dragging him under the water. Oscar popped back up with a gasp.

Noah popped up too, looking extremely pleased with himself, and Oscar couldn’t help but grin. He liked naughty Noah. He liked all versions of Noah, really. “Oh, it’s gonna be like that, huh?” he said. He tried to grab Noah, but he slipped away, gliding across the pool as gracefully as a dolphin. Oscar was more of a flail-swimmer, but he caught up eventually and made another grab. This time, Noah let him catch him. They both went under water. Oscar opened his eyes briefly, watching Noah’s brown hair wave above him like seaweed.

They bobbed to the surface again, laughing like they were kids. Oscar splashed him in the face. Noah responded with an even bigger wave. They chased each other around the pool, tackling each other with great whoops and hollers.

Out of the corner of his eye, Oscar caught the whoosh of a sensible gray pantsuit coming straight for them. “Oscar!” Aneisha yelled. “How many times do I have to tell you it doesn’t matter if it’s not after ten p.m., you still have to abide by the noise rules! And what did I say about inappropriate pool behavior?”

“Oh come on, Aneisha,” he said. “That was just that one time!”

Noah moved out from behind Oscar. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” he said, which was ridiculous because Aneisha was three years older than them at the most. “I was the one who initiated the horseplay.”

Aneisha’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Noah?”

He gave her a little wave. “We apologize. I suppose we got out of hand.”

Aneisha’s gaze darted back and forth between them. “So you two are here together?”

Oscar was loving the expression on her face. “Yup,” he said. “Just two neighbors, having a good time.”

She tried very hard to keep her face neutral, but Aneisha had a naturally expressive face. It was what made her so fun to mess with. She focused her gaze on Noah. “My sister wanted me to thank you again for showing her around campus.”

“It was my pleasure. I only started at SCCC in January, so I feel like a newbie myself, but I’m glad I was able to be of service.”

Aneisha looked back to Oscar. “So how’s that cleanup going? We still got roaches in your building, so I’m guessing not too good.” She smirked in satisfaction at Oscar’s mortified look.

Noah gave Oscar a puzzled look. “What cleanup?”

“My apartment’s kind of dirty,” he said. “There’s a pest problem in my building.”

Aneisha crossed her arms smugly. “There certainly is.” Oh, she was enjoying this.

“I can help, if you want,” Noah said to Oscar.

“No, it’s cool. I can handle it.” He gave him a little splash and a smile. “You wanna go inside now?”

Noah grinned back. “Sounds good.”

They got out of the pool. While Noah bent down to pick up the towels he’d left on one of the pool chairs, Oscar made eye contact with Aneisha. He mimed some exaggerated thrusts with his hips in the direction of Noah’s backside. She looked like she was about to explode from outrage.

He stopped as soon as Noah turned back around. He handed Oscar a towel.

“It was nice talking with you,” Noah said to Aneisha. “Tell your sister I said hi.”

She was still fuming, but she managed a tight smile. “I will. I hope you have a nice afternoon.” Her gaze lit on Oscar, the fire of impotent rage burning in her eyes.

“See you around!” Oscar said cheerily.

Aneisha didn’t bother responding. She turned on her heel and stomped back to the leasing office.

“What was all that about?” Noah asked when she was gone.

“She just doesn’t like me,” Oscar said. “She’s always on my ass about something. It’s no big deal.” He goosed Noah. “Speaking about asses, why don’t you get yours inside and out of those trunks?”

Noah laughed. “Sounds like a plan.”

They retreated to Noah’s apartment; Oscar pulled Noah into a kiss the moment the door closed.

Noah laughed a little. “Aren’t we going to dry off first?”

Oscar nibbled at his neck. “Why? I like you wet.”

That earned both a kiss on the lips and a moan. They fumbled to the bedroom, dropping their towels on the floor as they made out. Oscar got his trunks off first. Noah picked up his towel and handed it to Oscar. “Seriously, though—I don’t want my bed all wet.”

Oscar accepted the towel begrudgingly. He expected Noah to take off his trunks, but instead, Noah gave him a quick peck on the lips. “Wait here for me. I’ve got to use the bathroom.”

Oscar obediently began drying himself off as Noah disappeared into the bathroom. When he was reasonably dry, Oscar sat on the bed. He stroked himself a little while he waited. A few minutes passed, and then a few more. He wondered what was taking Noah so long.

At last, he emerged. He was naked and dry except for his damp hair, which was sticking out in all directions. He held two things in his hands, which he set on the nightstand: a condom and a bottle of lube.

Oscar’s cock jumped. He looked up at Noah. “So, uh, what will we be doing with those?”

Noah straddled Oscar’s lap. “What do you think?”

They kissed some more, grinding against each other until Oscar put a stop to it. “We aren’t going to get far if you keep doing that,” he said, panting.

Noah was panting, too. He got off of Oscar and reached for the lube and condom. He pressed them into Oscar’s hand.

“Just so we’re clear, you want me to fuck you, right?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

In lieu of an answer, Noah wrapped his arms around Oscar and kissed the breath right out of him. Noah lay down on the bed as Oscar got on top of him. They kissed and groped for a few more minutes. Oscar put his hand between Noah's legs, rubbing his fingers in the crack of Noah's ass. "You ever had anything in your ass before?"

Noah's skin got a little pinker. "Yes, actually. I've been... practicing."

"Oh yeah?" He really liked the mental image that created. So much so, that he wouldn't mind seeing it in action. "Why don't you show me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do whatever it is you did to 'practice.' I want to see it."

Noah let out a nervous laugh. "Okay," he said. Oscar sat up and moved back a little. Noah reached over to the nightstand and pulled open the drawer. He removed a thin, white dildo.

"You've been fucking yourself with that?"

Noah made another giddy, nervous noise. He nodded.

"Do it for me now," Oscar said. "I want to see how you like to be fucked."

Noah squeezed some lube into his hand and began stroking his dick. After a few minutes, he stopped to put some lube on the fingers of his other hand. He went back to work on his dick with his right hand while his left drifted downward. His fingers moved in a slow circle around his asshole, very gradually pressing inside. It was a mesmerizing sight.

"Fuck, that's hot," Oscar said.

Noah grinned. "Yeah?" he said. "Then you're going to love this." He removed his fingers and reached for the dildo. He got up on his knees, holding onto the headboard with one hand as he positioned the dildo with the other. He took a deep breath, and then pushed it inside him. As soon as it breached him, he let out the most erotic sound Oscar had ever heard; it was not a gasp, not a moan, and not a keen, but somehow a mix of all of those. Oscar was pretty sure he was going to masturbate to the memory of that sound for a long time.

Noah held the dildo in for a moment, and then pulled it back out. He began to push it forward again, making that same unbearable sexy sound as he plunged it back in. He did it again, and again, and again, thrusting his hips in time with the dildo's movement.

Oscar's cock was so hard by now that it was painful. He grabbed the condom and rolled it on himself, then put his hand over the hand that held the

dildo. “Okay, practice over,” he growled. He removed the dildo and tossed it on the bed. “I can’t believe you’ve been doing this without telling me.”

Noah laughed, deep and throaty. “A gentleman is entitled to his secrets.”

Oscar grabbed Noah’s hip with one hand; he lined his cock up with Noah’s still wet hole with the other. Slowly, he pushed inside. Noah let out a wail, grabbing the headboard with both hands.

Oscar stopped. “You okay?”

In response, Noah thrust his ass backward, taking in more of Oscar’s length. Seemed like Oscar was clear to go. He thrust in deep; pleasure ripped through him. He wanted to keep his thrusts slow to make this last, but he couldn’t control himself—not with the way Noah was moaning, and the way he kept moving his hips. He gave into the rhythm Noah set and fucked him fast and hard. The pleasure built to an undeniable crescendo until Oscar came with a great, heaving groan.

Noah was still rocking back on him desperately, fucking himself on Oscar’s cock after Oscar had stilled. Oscar’s cock was way too sensitive to keep fucking, so he reluctantly pulled out.

Noah wailed with frustration. “Don’t stop... so close.”

“Don’t worry,” Oscar managed to pant. “I’m not done with you.” He put his hand on Noah’s hip. “Turn over and lie down on your back.”

Noah did as he was told.

Oscar grabbed the dildo. When Noah saw what he was doing, he moaned.

“Pull your legs up,” Oscar commanded. “Yeah, like that. And get your hand off your cock,” he said, slapping it away as Noah began to stroke himself again.

Noah groaned in frustration, but didn’t move to disobey him. “Please,” he whined.

Oscar pressed the dildo against Noah’s hole, just holding it there for a moment until Noah started moving his hips again. He eased it in until Noah had a good five inches of the toy inside him.

Oscar held the dildo still. He put his mouth close to Noah’s ear. Noah had said that ASMR wasn’t a sex thing, but he wanted to see if he could cross some wires. “*If I whisper like this to you,*” he said softly. “*Will you tingle all over?*”

Noah let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a moan. “Oh jeez,” he gasped. “Yes. *Yes.*”

Oscar eased the dildo out a little before pushing it back in. *“You are a gorgeous mess right now,”* he whispered. *“I must have fucked you real good to make you like this.”* He gave him another thrust, but not as hard as he knew Noah wanted it. Now that he had his own orgasm out of the way, Oscar felt like playing a little, just to see what buttons he could push. He had a couple ideas. *“I wish I could take a picture of you.”*

Noah’s cock jumped. Oscar grinned to himself. Yup, there was a little bit of an exhibitionist in Noah. He’d suspected as much with the whole nurse role-play videos he made. It wasn’t anything he really wanted them to do, but it sure was fun to talk about. *“No, not a picture. I’d make a video of you and put it up on your channel. See what kind of triggers you could get out of your audience then. Like this wet sound of me fucking you with this dildo—bet that would give a lot of people tingles.”*

He gave Noah a moment to get that picture in his mind before reaching for his cock. It took him a minute to coordinate the hand on the dildo and the hand on his cock. He soon got the hang of it. *“Yeah, picture yourself in that nurse’s uniform, trying to go through your routine, except this time I’m behind you, fucking your ass. How long could you keep up that whisper, do you think? Do you think you’d get any nasty comments if you got too loud?”*

Whoops, that had been a little too close to revealing something. Fortunately, Noah seemed most of the way out of his mind. Oscar sped up his strokes. *“Do you think you can come in a whisper?”*

It turned out that he could not. He screamed his orgasm, coming so hard that the come hit the headboard. Oscar was impressed; that was some porn-star shit.

Oscar eased the dildo out of Noah as he panted through the aftermath of his orgasm. He kissed his slack lips; Noah, not surprisingly, was not able to muster much of response. Oscar put the dildo and the lube in the nightstand’s drawer. He tied off the condom and tossed it toward the trash bin by Noah’s desk on the other side of the room. He scored.

After a few minutes, Noah’s breathing started to slow down, but he was still panting. *“Oh my God,”* he said. *“Oh my God. That was—I’ve never—”* Noah ran a hand through his hair, his mouth opening and shutting as if he were searching for words. *“Oh my God”* was all he could manage.

Oscar threaded his fingers together behind his head and smiled smugly. He had fucked the brains right out of him.

Suddenly, Noah rolled over on top of Oscar and began kissing him everywhere. “You’re amazing,” Noah said. “You are so amazing. Do you know how amazing you are?”

Oscar laughed, trying to bat him away. “You’re welcome.”

Noah pulled back, holding himself up on his arms as he looked down at Oscar. “You’re joking, but I mean it. Thank you. When I first realized I was gay, I never thought that—”

Oscar pulled Noah down and broke off that sentence with a kiss. He didn’t feel like hearing about how sad and lonely Noah had been. “You’re here now,” he said. “That’s what matters, right?”

Noah nodded. He curled up beside Oscar, laying his head on his chest. Oscar put an arm around his shoulder. For a few moments, they just breathed. The air conditioning clicked on, blowing cool air onto their sweaty bodies. The afterglow of his own orgasm still buzzed through his body. Oscar couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this good. He could drift in this moment forever.

Noah ran a finger over Oscar’s chest, stopping at the tattoo at the center: a heart, pierced by three swords. “What does this mean?” he asked.

Shit. He didn’t want to go into this now. “Nothing,” he said, willing Noah to let them drift off again.

But of course, Noah couldn’t leave it alone. “You chose to have this permanently inked on your body. It’s got to mean something.”

Oscar ran a hand over his face. Noah, clearly, was not going to give up until he got an answer. “It’s the Three of Swords.”

Noah frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It’s from the tarot. You know, fortune telling cards.”

“And what does the Three of Swords signify?”

Oscar didn’t answer for a minute. “It means sorrow,” he finally said. Why had he told the truth? He could feel himself tensing already.

Noah didn’t press him further about that tattoo, but he drifted over to the tribal style lion on his bicep. “And what does this one mean?”

“It means I bite,” Oscar said, trying to keep his tone light.

Noah laughed. He traced his finger down, past his hip and to his left leg. “I’ve been sort of afraid to ask about this one,” he said, indicating the raven on his shin. “Who are Stephanie and Nikki?”

“They’re my two youngest sisters,” he said. “They both really wanted a tattoo, but seeing as they were ten and sixteen at the time, that wasn’t really possible. So I got it for them.”

Noah smiled. “That’s really sweet. How many siblings do you have?”

“Four. I’ve got one older sister, Alex, and three younger ones: Sophia, Stephanie, and Nikki.”

“Do you see them often?”

“Well, Alex is off at Harvard, so I don’t see her. Sophia started school at Cal State Fullerton two years ago. I see Stephanie and Nikki plenty.” Then he frowned. That actually wasn’t true—not since Dad had semi-retired, handing over most of the day-to-day tasks of the plumbing business he owned. It was easy to avoid him when he’d been working, but now that he was around the house more often, Oscar found it simpler to just stay away. He tried to think of the last time he’d seen his sisters and his mom. Shit—had it really been since Christmas?

“So your family,” Noah asked hesitantly. “Do they know you’re gay?”

Oscar took a deep breath. “Yup.”

“Are they okay with it?”

“Yes.”

Noah frowned. “I thought you said earlier that it was complicated.”

“It is,” Oscar snapped. “And I really don’t want to talk about it, okay? Can’t we just be here and not drag up shit from the past?” Oscar sat up. *Deep breaths.*

Noah sat up as well. “I’m sorry,” he said, touching Oscar’s shoulder. “Please. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s cool,” Oscar said, and tried to mean it.

Noah coaxed Oscar back down again. The air conditioning that had been pleasant before, now felt too cool. As if reading his thoughts, Noah turned down the bedspread and laid it over them. He rested his head on Oscar’s chest again.

After a while, Noah spoke again. “Can I ask you one last thing?” he asked. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Oscar sucked in a breath. “Sure,” he said on the exhale.

“What does the tattoo on your ankle mean?”

Oscar looked down at him. “You noticed it?” he asked in disbelief. No one noticed that one. It was done in white ink; you had to look very carefully to see it. “It’s the Tree of Gondor,” he mumbled.

“The tree of what?”

“The Tree of Gondor,” he said more loudly. “From Lord of the Rings.”

Noah looked surprised. “I didn’t know you liked that stuff.”

“Yeah, well, I was laid up for a long time, and my sister turned me on to it.” He thought of Stephanie, ten years old, sitting by his hospital bed with that big ass book, her voice hesitant at first, but growing stronger as he squeezed her hand...

Oscar felt sick to his stomach. “I’ve got to go.” He rose from the bed and nearly fell over—he felt so light-headed. His gaze darted around the room. Where were his clothes? The living room. Right.

Noah scrambled after him. “Don’t go,” he pleaded. “Please. I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you fucking did,” Oscar interrupted. “I told you to leave it alone, but you had to keep pushing.”

“Leave what alone?” Noah asked, despairing. “I don’t understand. Just tell me what I did wrong.”

Oscar found his shirt and pulled it on. “Where are my pants?”

Noah snatched them off the ground. “I’m not giving them back until you tell me why you’re acting like this.”

Oscar let out a roar of frustration. He stopped for a minute to breathe. “Fine,” he said when he’d calmed down. “You’re right about the tattoos. They all mean something, and it’s very personal. Some really fucked-up shit happened to me when I came out, and I don’t like talking about it.”

Noah’s eyes grew wide. Oscar could tell he wanted to ask a question, but he bit it back. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know.”

Oscar strode forward and swiped his pants from Noah's grip. "Well, now you do." He put on his pants. When he was dressed, he headed for the door.

"Don't forget your laundry," Noah said weakly.

Oscar turned back around. Noah looked absolutely pitiful. He looked like he'd just seen someone murder a puppy. Oscar sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. I overreacted."

Noah laughed a little. "No, it's my fault. It's just that I want to know you, you know?"

That was a terrible idea for so many reasons. "Yeah," he said noncommittally.

Noah walked over to Oscar and put his arms around Oscar's shoulders. "I was going to make us dinner. What are you in the mood for?"

Oscar ducked out of the embrace. "I'm still going to head out. Don't you have finals on Monday?"

"It's just the one. I took the others last week." That despairing look was back on his face. "Now that summer session is over for me, I'll have more free time. We can see each other more."

But they already saw each other at least twice a week. This was getting out of control. "I'll text you," he mumbled. He picked up his laundry and left.

Once he got back to his room, he set the laundry down and immediately went to his computer. While it booted up, he tried to think of some trolling to do; that usually made him feel better when he was in a bad mood. But not a single one of his usual targets seemed appealing. Instead, he searched for Lord of the Rings quotes until he found the poem about the Tree of Gondor. It talked about wanderers, and the promise of hope and rebirth—

He shut the laptop with a clap. It was a dumb quote—at least in regards to him. He'd gotten that tattoo in a brief moment of delusion that there was hope for him. Who the hell was he kidding?

He reached for his bong and was about to take a toke when his phone rang. That was weird, he usually texted with both Jeremy and Noah. He picked it up to see who it was and let out a groan. It was his older sister, Alex. She had been pestering him all week. He let it go to voicemail. Two minutes later, he got a text. He didn't look at it. Another five minutes and there was another text. Then another.

He could turn off his phone, but she clearly was not going to leave him alone. Sure enough, when he looked at the phone, the latest message was:

If you don't respond to me, I swear to Christ I will show up on your doorstep.

He took a deep, long hit from his bong. Once he stopped coughing, he called her back. "What do you want?"

"What do you think I want?" Alex sounded apoplectic. "I have been trying to get a hold of you for the last week, and you keep brushing me off! Are you coming to dinner next Saturday or not?"

"Is it that important?"

"Considering that you have yet to meet the man I'm going to marry, and we're only going to be here for the weekend before we head back to Massachusetts, which makes this your last chance to meet him before the wedding, I'd say, yes, it is pretty goddamn important! Besides, do you remember the last time you went to see Mom? Or Sophia, or Stephanie, or Nikki?" When Oscar didn't give her an answer, she supplied it for him. "Christmas. That's when. They miss you."

"How about Dad?" Oscar sneered. "Does he miss me, too?"

There was a very brief pause. "Yes, of course he does," Alex said. Her tone softened. "Come on, Oscar. I miss you, too. It's been over a year since I've seen you, and I don't know when I'll get the chance to come home again."

Oscar heaved a great sigh. "Yeah. Sure. Whatever."

He heard Alex sighing, too. "Not exactly the enthusiasm I had hoped for, but I'll take it. Dinner's next Saturday at six. Don't be late."

"Cool," Oscar said, although it definitely wasn't. "See you then."

They hung up. Oscar took another hit on his bong, then wandered into the kitchen for a beer. He had no plans to face this night sober.

Chapter Five

Oscar ducked out of his usual Tuesday date with Noah. He said he had plans with Jeremy. That was a lie, but then he decided that it would be an even better cover story if he actually did have plans with Jeremy. He should have contacted Jeremy earlier, but he didn't know what to say. Jeremy had switched shifts to graveyard, so he didn't see him at work anymore. They were close, but the kind of close where you didn't talk about your feelings. Ever. Was he going into rehab? What would that mean for their friendship? They spent almost all of their time together at that stupid bar. Would Jeremy getting sober mean he'd lose him?

Jeremy responded immediately after Oscar texted him. He suggested they meet at the Downspout Diner; they often met there for hangover food. When he entered the restaurant, he really shouldn't have been surprised to see Crystal there, yet he was. They waved him over to the booth where they'd already been seated. A basket of onion rings was on the table. Jeremy had a soda, and Crystal had a cup of coffee.

"Hey, Oscar," Jeremy said with a weak smile.

Crystal smiled and gave a little wave. "Good to see you again."

Oscar eyed her suspiciously as he sat down across from them; he still didn't know how he felt about her.

Nobody said anything for a few minutes. The waitress came by and offered to bring Oscar a drink. When she left, Jeremy reached into his pocket and placed a silver coin in the middle of the table. "It's my first sobriety chip."

Oscar waited for Crystal to say something, like how Oscar should be proud of him or some such shit, but she said nothing. She sipped her coffee, managing to somehow not be involved. She didn't have that nervousness a third party usually had when in the middle of a private conversation. She was just... there.

"Great," Oscar said. "That's... really great." He kept his gaze fixed firmly on the salt and pepper shakers. "So, uh, how many days have you been... you know?"

"Ten." Jeremy laughed a little. "God, that sounds pathetic. It's just been ten days, and I'm already falling apart."

Oscar forced himself to look at Jeremy. “You don’t look like you’re falling apart.” Which was true, sort of. Jeremy always looked kind of busted, but he didn’t look any worse than usual.

Jeremy laughed a little. “Yeah, well, I am. Have been for a while now.”

More silence. Jeremy took a paper napkin and began to rip it into tiny pieces.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Jeremy eventually asked, his gaze still focused on the napkin.

Oscar ran a hand over his face. “I didn’t know what to say, man.”

“How about anything?” Jeremy said, suddenly furious. “Anything at all! I get one text from you, and then you just drop off the face of the earth?”

“Christ, Jeremy, it’s only been eleven days.”

“Yeah, and I’ve been out from work that entire time while I go through detox. I’m on medical leave. Do you even care?”

Oscar was stunned for a moment, but that feeling quickly morphed into anger. “How the fuck was I supposed to know that? We work different shifts now!”

Jeremy blinked. “No one told you?”

“No, because I’ll bet that everyone assumed that I already knew, because you’re my friend, and *you should have told me!*” He gestured at Crystal. “Or you could have had your new not-girlfriend give me a call. She pretty much talks for you right now, anyway.”

Jeremy stood up. The little bits of paper floated off the table like ash. “I need a smoke.” He stormed off.

As soon as he was gone, Oscar rounded on Crystal. “What the fuck are you doing here?” he snarled. “This is none of your goddamn business.”

Crystal took another sage sip of her coffee. Oscar wanted to grab that stupid mug and smash it; he bet that would get a reaction out of her. “I’m here because Jeremy asked me to come,” she said. “He’s afraid.”

Oscar laughed. “Afraid of me? What for?”

“He’s afraid he’s going to lose you over this.”

Oscar got very quiet. Of course, he had been thinking the same thing, but he wasn’t about to admit that to Crystal. “Well, he’s not.”

Crystal didn't say anything to that. "Would you like an onion ring? I think these are the best in the city."

"I know how good the onion rings are," Oscar snapped. "I come here all the fucking time." He took one and munched on it angrily.

The waitress brought Oscar's soda. By that time, he had composed himself a little more. Jeremy was taking a long time. He guessed he was stuck with Crystal a little longer. "So what made you get sober?" he asked. "Did you have some perfect Zen master like you to usher you into it?"

She smiled. "Not really. I had an epiphany."

"What do you mean?"

She put down her coffee mug. "Well, one night I woke up after a real bender. I'd been tweaking for days; you crash after that, and it's pretty intense. I was lying on the floor in this condemned house I was squatting in. Usually, I'd either be thinking about all the terrible things I'd done to get that high, or all the terrible things I'd do to get to the next one, or the terrible things that happened to me as a kid. But that day was different. I was stuck solely in the present moment. Granted, it wasn't a great moment, but I felt like a tether had snapped. I wasn't shackled to the past. I wasn't on a leash to the future. I was simply there. I felt free."

"That seems like a pretty good argument to just be high all the time," Oscar pointed out. "I mean, if only the present moment matters, why not?"

Crystal smiled. "No, drugs are a way to escape the present. The past and the future, too. They don't really work long-term."

"So what, you just quit drugs, just like that?"

"Of course not. It was hard. Real hard. And the things that happened to me still bubble up on occasion. But there's no sense in getting upset when one particular moment is bad, because there will be another, and another, and another. Set yourself up for good moments, and life will take care of itself."

"That's bullshit," Oscar said. "You think the past doesn't matter? Look at you—you're all fucked-up with scars, and you always will be."

"I didn't say it doesn't matter. It just doesn't define me."

"Well, thanks for the wisdom, Yoda," Oscar sneered. "But it's not that easy for the rest of us."

“Sure it is,” she said. “You change a little with every beat of your heart. Embrace that change. Just let go and be who you need to be in the moment, instead of trying to recreate what’s already passed.”

As if on cue, Jeremy reentered the diner. He slid in the booth beside Crystal, his gaze skittering away from Oscar’s. He *did* look rough. Oscar had been trying to deny how bad he’d gotten.

“Hey,” Oscar said. “I’m glad you’re doing this, man. We don’t need the Molten Taco. Their food is terrible. We can come here.”

As soon as Oscar said the words, Jeremy’s whole body language changed. He released a tension that had become so ingrained in him that Oscar hadn’t even realized it was there until it was gone. For a minute there, Oscar was worried he was going to tear up or something. Oscar didn’t think he could handle that.

But he didn’t. He just looked up at Oscar and smiled, his whole face lit up with it. “Thanks, man. That means a lot to me.”

Oscar felt himself smiling back. He hadn’t seen Jeremy look that happy in—well, it had been a long time. “Or maybe we could see a movie. I know you’re on graveyard, so maybe a Sunday matinee or something?”

“Yeah, sounds cool.” Jeremy seemed almost shy.

The waitress returned and asked them if they wanted to order their meals now. Now that the tension had been eased, they actually had a decent time. They talked a little about work, some about video games. Just like normal. Crystal chimed in a few times, but mostly let them talk together. Oscar left the restaurant in pretty good spirits. Then he remember the whole situation with his family, and with Noah. Christ, he was fucking things up again. Crystal’s advice snaked its way through his brain, but he shook it off. She was wrong. The past was with him, etched in his skin. Besides, if he let go of the past, where would he be? He didn’t know how to live anywhere else.

Oscar continued to avoid Noah the next few days. Noah, to his credit, backed off, but Oscar knew he must be hurt. But he couldn’t concentrate on that now, what with the impending family dinner. It would be the first time he’d seen Alex in over a year; she was in Harvard Law School, which is where she met her blue-blooded boyfriend. His mom went on and on about Chad’s many virtues: handsome, charming, intelligent, polite. Oscar hated him already.

He pulled up to his parents' place in Rancho Bernardo, about a half hour north of Hillcrest. It was a nice suburban home, exactly the same as every home surrounding it—cookie-cutter houses for cookie-cutter families. He'd gotten high before he left, just to take the edge off his anxiety, so he felt pretty mellow when he pulled into the driveway. Sophia's car was there; he wondered if she was just visiting or if she was home from Cal State for the summer. He felt a little ashamed that he didn't know.

His mother, Stephanie, and Nikki were out the door and almost on top of him as soon as he got out of the car. Nikki got to him first; she leapt at him with a delighted howl, wrapping all four of her coltish limbs around him. Oscar let out an *oomph* at the impact. "You know, I think you're getting too big to do that anymore."

She untangled herself and adjusted her hat. It was pink and flowered—a weird choice for her. "What, are you some sort of wimp or something?" she teased. "I thought you said you could bench press twice my weight."

"Yeah, but I can't take a barbell to the solar plexus."

His mom got to him next, pulling him into the pillowy embrace of her ample arms. "I'm so glad you came!"

Oscar patted her on the back a couple of times before extracting himself. "Hey, Mom. Good to see you, too."

"Why don't you come around anymore? And what about Jeremy? How is he? What are you two up to that you can't come around and at least say hi?"

"Nothing," Oscar said. "He's fine. I'm fine."

His mom gave him a skeptical look. "You should get a Facebook," she concluded.

Oscar rolled his eyes. The idea of making an online account with his actual name on it gave him hives. "What would I post about? Pictures of interesting things I found in the sewers?"

"Fine, you wouldn't have to post. But then it would make it easier to remind you about things, like your sister's middle school graduation."

Shit. Oscar had totally forgotten. He looked over to Nikki, who was quick to pipe up. "It's okay. It was dumb, anyway."

"Well, never mind all this!" his mom said. "I still have dinner to finish. I can't wait for you to meet Chad. To think, now I'll have two boys in the family."

“Yeah, great.” The weed had been an excellent idea.

“Go inside,” she said to all of them. “Have some appetizers!” She bustled back into the house; Stephanie and Nikki stayed with him.

When his mom was gone, he turned to Stephanie. He didn’t hug her. She was like him in that she wasn’t real comfortable with hugs. “*Mae govannen*,” he said seriously, giving her the traditional Elvish greeting.

She laughed. “Right back at you. So have you finished *The Winds of Winter* yet?”

“Hell yeah, I finished it,” Oscar said. “That was some messed-up shit. Who knew Hordor was Azor Ahai?”

Stephanie shook her head. “That did seem kind of out of left field, but since pretty much everyone else died, I guess it makes sense.”

Oscar took another look at her. She looked different. “Where are your glasses?”

“I got contacts.”

“Have you lost weight?” He regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth. He knew it was a touchy subject.

But she just smiled. He could see that she was actually pleased he’d noticed. She seemed really happy. High school had been tough for her. She had just started community college; maybe it was treating her better. “Yeah. I cut out elevensies and second breakfast.”

“Not elevensies!” Oscar said with feigned horror. “What would Pippin and Merry think?”

Just then, Sophia appeared in the doorway, looking beautiful as always. College was treating her well, too, but then again, life in general seemed to treat her well. “Hi, Oscar,” she said with a smile. “You guys should come inside. I can’t eat all these appetizers by myself.”

Oscar took a deep breath. He could do this. Nikki slipped her hand into his. Oscar smiled down at her. “What’s with the hat?” he asked her.

She grinned at him mischievously and pulled the hat up a little. Underneath it, Oscar saw a shock of blue hair. He laughed. “When did you do that?”

“Yesterday. Mom was so mad; she’s afraid of making it worse trying to dye it back on her own, so she’s taking me to the salon tomorrow.”

Oscar knew he should probably tell her to listen to their mom, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. "I bet it looks great."

She made a face. "But not proper enough for the big dinner with *Chad*, I guess. He's totally lame, by the way."

Oscar laughed. He felt a little stronger. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

They all entered the living room. As Sophie had said, there were appetizers laid out on the coffee table: deviled eggs, chips and dips, even pigs in a blanket. It was way too much for all of them, but Oscar dutifully crammed some of the pigs in a blanket into his mouth. Anything to avoid Alex, Chad, and Oscar's dad, who were standing at the end of the room by the kitchen, wine glasses in hand. Oscar didn't think he'd ever seen his dad drink wine. He was strictly a beer man.

Alex strode forward the moment she saw him. "So glad you could make it," she said a little too loudly as she gave him a stiff hug. Alex was a year older than he was. They looked so much alike that people often mistook them for twins; they would both vehemently correct anyone who held that misconception.

Oscar swallowed his mouthful. "Yeah. Good to see you." And it was, sort of. He just wished it wasn't to meet Chad.

And of course, there was his dad.

If Alex was what Oscar would have looked like as a girl, his dad was what he would look like in forty years. He was still a good-looking man at age sixty-six—he had a little paunch in his belly, but it wasn't too bad, and he still had a full head of black hair, streaked with gray. You'd swear he was at least ten years younger, which would make his marriage to Oscar's mom seem a little less strange. He'd married his mom when he was forty; he'd sworn to live his life a bachelor until he met her. She'd been twenty-six at the time.

His dad stepped forward and cleared his throat. "Hello, Oscar," he said, holding out his hand. His accent wasn't too strong, but it was still there.

Oscar took his hand. To his surprise, his dad pulled him forward, giving him a few hard pats on the back. "Good to see you, *mijo*."

Oscar cringed a little at the term of endearment. He extracted himself. "Yeah, you too," he mumbled, staring at the carpet.

Alex swooped in again after that. "Oscar, I would like you to meet Chad, my fiancé."

Oscar rolled his eyes at the formality of it all. Chad was, indeed, very handsome. He was tall, chiseled, and blond. Very blond. He had the chin of an Ivy Leaguer—square and smooth-shaven. Chad stuck out his hand for a shake. When Oscar took it, he placed his other hand on top of Oscar's and gave his hand three firm pumps before pulling away. "It's so good to meet you, Oscar," he said, flashing him a smile. He had so many straight, white teeth. It was like his whole face was made of those teeth. "Your sister has told me so much about you."

"Like what?" Oscar asked.

Chad frowned a little. "I'm sorry?"

"You said she told you all about me," Oscar said. "So what did she tell you?"

Chad laughed uncomfortably. Alex butted in. "Like about the time you knocked out my tooth with a lightsaber."

"Oh come on," Oscar said. "You were eight. That tooth was already loose, and I believe that the tooth fairy awarded that particular tooth ten dollars for pain and suffering. Besides, you were supposed to be the Jedi Master; I thought you'd have better reflexes."

Oscar's mom emerged from the kitchen. "Dinner's almost ready!" She gave a despairing look at the uneaten appetizers. "Five more minutes. Maybe ten, if you still want some appetizers. Can I freshen anyone's drink?" She looked particularly at Chad.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Lozada," Chad said. "I must say, dinner smells delicious. What are we having again?"

"Enchiladas," she said. "My special recipe."

Chad smiled again. Christ, Oscar hated those teeth. "I'm looking forward to it."

Oscar's mom disappeared. As soon as she was gone, everyone except Chad started cramming appetizers into their mouths. Chad gave Alex a curious look.

"She'll be sad if we don't eat these," she said around a mouthful of deviled egg. Then she swallowed, looking a little embarrassed.

Chad dutifully ate an egg. He took a napkin and dabbed at Alex's mouth. "You've got egg on your face."

They both giggled. Oscar scowled. It was a stupid joke, which meant all the giggling probably indicated that they actually loved each other. Was he going to be plagued with this douche for the rest of his life? Hopefully they'd stay in Boston after they finished their law degrees. He wondered how well Alex fit in with his family.

They all filed into the dining room afterward. His mom had really gone all out; he was pretty sure the plates were all brand new. She ushered everyone around to the seats she'd assigned for them. Oscar, distressingly, was sitting right across from Chad. Once they were all seated, his mom began to serve the enchiladas while the rest of them passed the sides around. At last, they were all seated with their plates full.

There were a few moments of silence as everyone began eating. Chad was the first one to speak. "So Sophia," he said. "I understand you're majoring in business administration. How is that going?"

Sophia brushed some of her hair behind her ear. "Actually," she said. "I've switched my major to art."

There was a moment of shocked silence. Sophia was the Good Daughter. Sure, Alex was the most accomplished; she'd been valedictorian of her high school, scored a shit ton of scholarships, and rocketed directly to Harvard. But everyone knew Alex's story wasn't one of the child of an immigrant, determined to bring honor to her family by being the first to earn a college degree. Alex just had a fierce need to be the undisputed champion at every task she took on; her family had nothing to do with it. Sophia was the one who wanted to please her family. This change of major definitely wouldn't do that.

Oscar looked around the table. His mom and Alex looked mortified. Chad had that stupid smile frozen on his face. Stephanie was shifting in her seat uncomfortably. Nikki looked like she was about to burst into giggles. Oscar guessed his expression mirrored Nikki's the most.

But the person who looked most upset was their dad. "Art?" he said slowly. "*Art?* What will you do with art?"

Her cheeks colored a little. "I'm going to be a painter."

His dad snorted. "And you think this will pay your bills? Change it back, or I'm not paying."

"You can't tell me what to major in," she said very quietly. "I will take out my own student loans. I don't like business, and I won't spend my life doing a job I hate."

Well, goddamn. Oscar was impressed. Those were the most assertive words he'd ever heard from her.

His dad's sneer deepened. "You know what job you will hate more? Cleaning other people's toilets. I have built my business cleaning other people's toilets. I give you a chance to do something different, and you want to flush it away?"

Oscar tensed at that. His dad didn't seem to care that Oscar was "flushed away," but what else was new?

"I have not worked this hard to see my daughter throw my money away on *art!*" his dad continued. He spat the last word out like it tasted bad.

"Why don't we talk about this later?!" His mom's voice had risen several octaves.

Oscar's dad shut his eyes and breathed deeply; in another moment, he seemed calm. "Of course, *mi amorcito.*" He turned his attention to Chad. "So, Chad, Alex says you belong to one of those boat rowing teams?"

"Yes, sir," Chad said, eager to get the dinner back on course. "I've been in the rowing club since freshman year."

"So you are strong, yes?"

"It certainly is good exercise," Chad agreed.

"In my day, I was a boxer," he said. "Good exercise, but not so easy on the body, eh?" He indicated his crooked nose.

"I've always admired boxers," Chad said. "It takes a lot of courage to face another man like that." He turned to Oscar. "Did you box, too?"

Everyone got really quiet. Oscar's nose was crooked, too, but that wasn't the reason. "No," Oscar said flatly. Reminding him of that shit did not put Oscar in the mood to be nice.

Chad looked desperately around the table, aware that he'd stepped on another land mine but was not quite sure what it was. Oscar almost felt sorry for the guy. "So your sister tells me you work in wastewater management?" Chad said, trying again.

"I work in sewage," Oscar said. "No need to pretty it up."

"Oh." Those teeth were nowhere in sight now. Oscar smirked.

"Seems like you and me are in the same line of business," Oscar continued. "We both deal with other people's shit."

Chad laughed way too loud at that. “Ha! Yes, you could say that!”

Alex shot Oscar a warning glare. She knew him too well to think he was trying to be friendly. And she was right.

“The only difference is that my job is honest,” Oscar finished. “Do you and Alex really want to lie for a living? Seems kind of wrong to me.”

And the teeth disappeared again! Oscar was getting good at this.

Alex’s hand gripped her fork so tightly that Oscar thought the sheer force of her rage would bend it. Chad put a hand on her arm. “Babe, it’s all right,” he murmured.

“Actually, it’s not,” she said.

Oscar pushed his chair out and stood up. “Yeah, well, I think I’m gonna get going. Peace out, Chad.”

Alex shot to her feet. “We are having a nice family dinner for my fiancé, so sit your ass back down!”

“Nah.”

“Please, Oscar,” his mother begged. “Why don’t you sit down? You love my enchiladas!”

“I’ll talk to you later, Mom,” he mumbled.

His dad got to his feet. “Look how you upset your mother!” he said, his voice rising. “And your sister, and her fiancé. I won’t have this disrespect in my house!”

“Yeah, I know,” Oscar fumed back. “Which is why I’m leaving!”

Oscar headed toward the door. He glanced at his other sisters. Sophia seemed to have mentally removed herself from whatever was going on. Nikki and Stephanie both looked devastated. “Hey, I’ll see you guys later, okay?” he reassured them. “Maybe we can go to a movie.”

They both nodded. With that, Oscar left. On his way out, his eye happened to catch a picture of him and his dad, playing soccer. Oscar must have been about nine. He was smiling so big that it took up his whole face. His dad was smiling too, his gaze fixed on his *mijo*—his beloved son. His favorite kid.

Oscar grabbed the picture and took it out of the door with him, dumping it in the garbage on his way out. Fuck Chad—fuck him for dredging up shit from the past that Oscar did not want to think about. Fuck his parents for being so desperate to impress him, and fuck Alex for being so perfect. Just fuck them all.

He was halfway in his car when Alex came storming out of the house. He ducked in and started the engine, but he'd forgotten to lock the doors. Alex opened the passenger's side door and parked herself in the seat.

"Get out of my car, Alex."

"No," she said. "Not until you tell me why you're being like this."

"I don't want to talk about it." He put the car into reverse. "You better get out unless you want to come with me!"

"I will, then!" She crossed her arms.

"What, and leave your charming fiancé alone with our crazy family?"

"What did Chad ever do to you?" Alex shouted. "He's a nice guy. He wants to get along with you. He wants to get along with all of you." To Oscar's horror, she sounded near tears. Alex never cried.

Oscar sighed and put the car into park. He gave his face a few rigorous rubs. "You know what Dad said when I came out? Well, he said a lot of things, actually, but he *very specifically* said that if I ever tried to bring a boyfriend home, he'd kick both our asses. So Mom and Dad are never going to fall all over themselves to impress anyone for my sake. I wouldn't even get a boyfriend in the door."

Alex didn't say anything for a moment. "That was a long time ago. He's changed since then. I'm sure he doesn't believe that anymore."

Oscar let out a derisive snort. "Yeah, well, you wouldn't be saying that if he broke your nose."

"I'm not excusing that! But you have to admit, there were some unusual circumstances—"

"I see you still think it was justified," Oscar snarled.

"I have *never* said that," she said emphatically.

"And yet here you are, talking about 'unusual circumstances.'"

"You can't blame him for what happened to you," Alex shot back. "He loves you. If you could have seen how devastated he was when he found out what those guys did to you—"

"Oh yeah, super devastated," Oscar said, cutting her off. "After I almost died. It's real easy to feel bad about that happening to your kid, but he has never once said he's okay with me being gay. Won't even talk about it."

“Have you ever asked him about it?”

“It shouldn’t be on me to ask him!” Oscar shouted. “*He* should come to *me*. Then I’ll know he means it.”

They fell into a bruised silence. “Is there someone you want to bring home?” she asked at last. When Oscar didn’t say anything, she continued. “If there is, I’ll talk to Dad, and I’m sure he’ll—”

Oscar reached over her and opened the passenger door. “Go back to dinner,” he said. “Tell everyone I’m sorry. Tell Chad it was nice to meet him. Tell them whatever you want. Just let me go, okay?”

Alex gave Oscar a long look. “Okay.” Before he could stop her, she put her arms around him and gave him a hug—a real one this time. She got out of the car and shut the door. As soon as she was out, Oscar threw the car in reverse and screeched out of the driveway. He sped all the way home.

Chapter Six

Oscar pulled up to his apartment complex and parked. Well, that had been the shit show he had expected. Worse, actually—having all that crap with his dad and everything else dredged up had him dying for a drink. On top of everything, he was still hungry. He probably should just go over to the Molten Taco and take care of both problems. He got out of the car with the full intention of heading in the bar’s direction, but somehow he found himself on Noah’s doorstep. He raised his hand to knock, but he faltered. Just as he was about to walk away, Noah opened the door.

“Oscar?” Noah said, frowning. “Are you okay?”

Oscar opened his mouth and tried to lie. “No,” he ended up saying. “I’m not. I had dinner with my family tonight.”

Noah gave him an appraising look. “I’m guessing it didn’t go well.”

Oscar let out a despairing laugh. “You could say that. I met my sister Alex’s fiancé. It was a disaster.”

Noah opened the door wider. “Why don’t you come in? I was just sitting down to eat.”

Noah put an arm over his shoulder as he entered the room. Oscar felt himself shaking; it was dangerous to be this vulnerable in front of Noah. Very dangerous.

“Hey,” Noah said soothingly. “It’s okay. Why don’t you sit down and tell me what happened?”

They both sat down on the couch. Oscar didn’t know where to start, so Noah prompted him. “You didn’t like Alex’s fiancé?”

“No, I didn’t, but he’s fine. I mean, I just hate him for dumb reasons.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

Oscar felt sick to his stomach. “It just stirred up a lot of things from my past that I don’t like thinking about. It’s a long story.”

Noah smiled. “I have time.”

Christ. He was going to have to tell him. That’s why he ended up here, isn’t it—because on some level he wanted him to know? He rubbed his face vigorously before he started. “When I was in high school, I met this guy, Ricky.

He wasn't in my usual crew. He was one of the drama kids actually, which is, I guess, why we never ran into each other before. I was sixteen. I'd known I was gay ever since puberty, but I was still in denial. I mean, I was a tough guy, right? So how could I be gay?

"Anyway, Ricky and I, we developed this thing. Okay, it was more than a thing. We were in love—or that's what I thought, anyway. It was very sudden and probably normal teenage shit, except he wasn't out either, so we had to keep it a secret. That probably added to the whole drama of it; we got really carried away. We decided that we'd come out to our parents together, and then to everyone else. I was so fucking stupid about this guy that I didn't care if I lost all my friends. I didn't even care what my parents would think. We were in love, you know?"

Noah nodded and rubbed his back. "Go on."

Oscar took a deep breath. "So I kept my end of the bargain. I came out to my parents. They weren't happy about it. My dad just flat out refused to believe it at first. Then I said I was bringing Ricky home to meet them, and he exploded, telling me I could never drag that gay shit into the house. But like I said, I didn't care what they thought."

He paused. Here came the hard part. "The trouble is that it turned out Ricky actually cared about what his parents thought a lot more than he let on. So much so, that halfway through 'coming out,' he turned it into an accusation that I'd made unwanted advances toward him, which snowballed into straight-up rape." Oscar felt tears in his eyes. He blinked them away angrily. "That never happened," he said, suddenly ferocious. "I know I can be an asshole, but I would never do that to anyone!"

"I know." Noah's voice was soft as he continued to rub circles over Oscar's back. "It's okay."

He was shaking again. He needed to get through this. "Right. So. I was accused of rape. The school suspended me. The police got involved. And you know, all of that sucked, but you know what the worst part was? When I told my dad I didn't do it, he hit me." *Maricón*, his dad had snarled as he hit him square in the face, sending him stumbling to the ground in their backyard. Oscar didn't speak much Spanish, but he knew that word—*faggot*. His father had said it with such rage and disgust that Oscar was too stunned to do anything but sit there in the dirt. He had leaned forward to prevent the blood from running down his throat, just like his dad had taught him in case he ever got hit.

He never thought that his dad would be the one to do it. He'd watched the blood turn into mud in the dirt as his mother screamed, and his father screamed back and ordered his sisters inside as they cried...

He was brought back to the present when Noah put his arm around him. "I'm sorry that happened."

Oscar let out a miserable laugh. "Well, what would you do if you thought your kid was not only a fag, but a rapist as well?" He sniffed, wiping at his nose. "My mom kicked him out after that. She always believed me." It was true. His mom was always there for him, and he couldn't even be bothered not to ruin the nice dinner that was clearly so important to her. Yet another reason to hate himself.

"What happened then?"

"Then I was jumped by my former friends. It was really embarrassing to be friends with a dude who was a gay rapist. I guess they wanted to prove to everyone that they didn't approve." Oscar stopped talking for a moment. This part was hard, too. "They put me in the hospital. I almost died."

Noah's eyes widened with shock. "That's terrible," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"The case was put on hold since I was in a coma and all. Anyway, I didn't die, obviously. After a few weeks, Mom brought me home. The very first night, I heard this tapping on my window. Guess who it was?"

"Ricky?"

"Yeah. I guess he started to feel guilty about that whole framing me thing since it nearly killed me. He wanted to talk. I told him to wait in the yard until my mom went to bed. And then I dialed 911 to report a burglary in progress." He smiled grimly at that. It had been a particularly inspired move. "Fortunately, the police showed up quick. Ricky didn't really have any good explanation as to why he was skulking around the house of his supposed rapist, so he confessed the whole thing. The charges were dropped. Ricky's parents pulled him out of school, and I never saw him again."

Noah took a moment to process that. "What about the guys who beat you?" he asked. "Were they charged?"

"Charged and convicted," Oscar said. "I didn't rat them out, though."

"Why on earth not?"

"Because I didn't want to be gay, a rapist, and a snitch. I just told everyone I didn't remember."

“Then how did they get caught?”

“Jeremy.”

“The same Jeremy you’re always hanging out with?”

“Yeah. He wasn’t there when it all went down—my old friends knew he wouldn’t ever hurt me. I told him not to say anything, but he didn’t listen. He lied and said he’d seen the whole thing. There was a whole bunch of other evidence, too, of course—I mean, we were just kids. We had no idea the kind of power we had—that we could destroy lives so easily. I guess we all got what we deserved in the end.” Oscar wiped his nose with the back of his hand. There. It was done, and he hadn’t even broken down.

But Noah took a hold of Oscar’s shoulders and made him look him in the eye. “There is nothing you did to deserve that.”

“How do you know?” Oscar said. “I was a real asshole in high school. Still am.”

“You’ve never been to me.”

Oscar could only shake his head at that. He couldn’t confess right now. It would kill him.

Noah kissed his forehead. “I’m so sorry. That was a terrible thing you went through.”

“For me?” he said. “Yeah—yeah, it was fucking terrible, but you know what? It was just as bad for everyone else. My friends got put in jail. Jeremy became an outcast. My mom and dad got separated—my sisters were deprived of their dad for two fucking years because of me.”

Oscar felt like a great noxious bubble inside him had just burst. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes so hard that he saw stars, but Noah pulled them away. Oscar made a sound like a car stuttering, and then he started to sob—deep, ugly sobs that wracked his whole body. Noah held him the whole time.

It seemed to go on for a long time. When he was down to sniffles, Noah stood up. “I’m going to get you some tissues.”

Oscar just sat there on the couch until Noah returned, feeling numb. He didn’t even let himself think about any of that anymore, let alone say it out loud. Soon Noah returned, a whole box of tissues in his hand. Oscar took one.

“Crying is awful,” Noah observed. “All that snot drips in your mouth.”

Oscar laughed a little as he dabbed his eyes. “It sucks. That’s why I don’t do it.”

“So seeing your dad triggered all this?”

“Yeah, and the fact that they were so excited about Alex’s fiancé.”

“Did he ever apologize?”

“Oh yeah, loads of times. I didn’t care, though. He showed me what he really thought of me. You can’t take things like that back. And in all those apologies, he never once mentioned that he was okay with me being gay.”

Noah wisely didn’t say anything to that. “What made your mom take him back?”

“Me leaving home, probably,” Oscar said. “As soon as I was eighteen, I was out of there. I think she forgave him sooner than that, but she kept him out because I didn’t want him there. Even after I had physically recovered, I wasn’t exactly what you’d call functional. I just lay there in bed, completely useless.” *Clinically depressed*, was what the counselor had told him before sending him off to a shrink to get a script. Like there were pills that could take away what happened. He flushed them all down the toilet.

“I couldn’t go to school. Mom tried homeschooling me, but I wasn’t a great student. I dropped out instead.” He preferred reading fantasy novels and trolling on the Internet to doing anything productive. “My dad would come by to see my sisters and try to talk to me, but he eventually stopped making the effort. With me, I mean—not my sisters.”

“It doesn’t sound like you ruined their relationships with him.”

“I sure as shit didn’t help. Nikki wouldn’t talk to him for three months. She was only four. She didn’t even know what was happening—just that I was hurt, and I was mad at him. I finally told her it was okay to talk to him, but a part of me didn’t want her to. What kind of psycho wants to take a little kid’s dad away?”

“You weren’t the one who endangered your father’s relationship with her—that was his own fault,” Noah said. “And your mom was right to kick him out. You know that, right?”

When Oscar didn’t say anything, Noah took one of his hands in his own. “Oscar, you’ve probably replayed this whole story in your head so many times that you don’t have any perspective on it. From what you’ve told me, you’ve done nothing wrong.”

Oscar snorted. “Yeah, well, maybe there’s a whole lot of shit I haven’t told you.”

Noah put his arms around Oscar from behind him, pulling him gently backward until Oscar was lying on Noah’s chest. “So tell me, then. I promise I won’t be scared away, unless you punched puppies and beat up old ladies.”

That was probably supposed to get a laugh out of him, but Oscar was too despondent to even try. “I can’t.”

Noah didn’t say anything for a while. He ran his hand over Oscar’s hair. Oscar shut his eyes and breathed the clean smell of him in: dish soap and Pine-Sol, deodorant and dryer sheets. “Okay, so if you aren’t going to tell me your darkest secrets, then I’m just going to assume that they’re as irrational as your belief that loving someone means you deserved to get beaten nearly to death. You’ve gone on and on about your flaws, but you never mention your strengths.”

“What if I don’t have any?”

“So you’ve got modesty covered, then,” Noah said. “And loyalty. Your friends nearly killed you, and you still wouldn’t turn them in.”

“That’s not loyalty,” Oscar said. “That’s stupidity.”

“We’ve already covered modesty,” Noah chided. “Okay, next on the list: loving.”

Oscar actually laughed at that. “Oh, come on. Ask anyone who knows me—I don’t have a reputation for being tenderhearted.”

“What if I asked your sisters? I bet they’d have no problem describing you as loving.”

Oscar didn’t have an answer to that.

Noah continued. “And you loved Ricky. You loved him so much you were willing to throw away your life for him. Which brings me to the next item: bravery.”

That one was especially ironic, considering that right at this moment, he was scared shitless of telling Noah the truth. “I’m not brave. You’re just going to have to trust me on this one.”

“You came out to your parents, which is something I never managed. I just disappeared. I didn’t even come out to them in the letter I left.” It was his turn to sound derisive. “For two years, I said nothing. I knocked on doors, I said the

prayers—for all intents and purposes, I seemed like the picture of pious devotion. I told myself it was just so I could plan my escape, but that wasn't entirely true. I was petrified of what they would say. What they did to my uncle, when he left..." Noah trailed off for a moment. "Well, let's just say it wasn't pleasant. And he wasn't even gay; he just stopped believing. My mom told me to pretend like he had died. We weren't supposed to even speak his name." He paused. "And I left my sister there with them. I didn't even have the courage to give her an explanation. If there's anyone here who's a coward, it's me."

Oscar rolled over. "There's nothing wrong with you," he said vehemently.

"Well, if there's nothing wrong with you, and nothing wrong with me, then I guess we're both perfect and deserve each other," Noah said with the smile.

"I don't deserve—"

Noah cut off his words with a kiss. "What about me? Don't I deserve to be with the guy I want?"

"What if I'm not the guy you think I am?"

Noah pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine. Let's say you're a traitorous, hateful coward. I've been celibate my entire life up until I met you, and you fuck like a porn star. Don't you think I deserve that?"

Oscar laughed—for real, this time. Noah got to his feet, pulling Oscar up with him. "Come on," he said. "Why don't we eat some dinner?"

Oscar sat down as Noah took the casserole dish off the stove. He'd made lasagna. "Perfect timing," he said. "It's cool enough to eat."

He placed the dish on a hot pad on the table before getting plates and silverware.

"You made this whole thing just for yourself?" Oscar asked.

"Yes. It makes for good lunches during the week," Noah said as he laid out the plates.

Oscar shook his head. "How do you think so far ahead? It's like a super power."

Noah laughed. "I wouldn't say a week is particularly far ahead."

It was a simple enough sentiment, but in that moment, it seemed profound. "You're right," he said slowly. "I guess it isn't." It definitely beat looking backward.

After dinner, they curled up on the couch to watch *Bringing Up Baby* for the third time. Katherine Hepburn breezed onto the screen—well, more like she tornado'd onto the screen. “*The love impulse in man very frequently reveals itself in terms of conflict,*” she explained to the exasperated object of her affection. Oscar sneaked a peek up at Noah. Maybe if Noah found out about the trolling, it wouldn't be so bad. This was Noah's favorite movie, after all. Maybe he'd just put his hands on his hips and give him a lecture, after which he would declare his undying love.

Of course, Katherine Hepburn's character never acted out of malice. And she was sure as shit more charming than he was.

After the movie was over, they stood and stretched. “Guess I'll head out,” Oscar said.

Noah put his arms around him. “Why don't you stay the night?”

Oscar laughed a little. “No offense, but I'm not really up for it right now.”

“I didn't mean for sex. Just stay with me.”

Oscar hesitated. That broke a really big rule he had: never, ever, ever spend the night. But Oscar didn't really like rules, right? Why shouldn't that apply to his own?

“Okay,” he said.

Noah kissed him so sweetly that Oscar nearly changed his mind about sex, but Noah broke it off. “Why don't you shower? I'll get our dessert.”

“Dessert?” Oscar smiled. “Sounds great.”

And it did. It really did.

Everything smelled clean.

That was his first thought upon waking. This was obviously not normal, so he startled briefly until he remembered where he was. Sunlight streaked through the blinds; he wondered what time it was. And more importantly, he wondered where Noah was, because he was alone in bed. He heard noises in the kitchen.

He used the bathroom and then went to find Noah. He was standing in the kitchen in his dorky sweatpants, a T-shirt, and his green apron. Why on earth anyone would wear an apron over sweatpants was beyond him, but it was charming. It was more than charming, actually.

It was lovable.

Noah was stirring something in a bowl. He turned when he heard Oscar enter the kitchen. “There you are,” he said. His hair was still wet from the shower he must have taken. “I was wondering how late you were going to sleep. I’m making us pancakes.”

Oscar didn’t say anything. He crossed the room in a few steps and took the bowl and spoon from Noah, setting them on the counter. Noah opened his mouth to say something, but Oscar didn’t give him the chance. He kissed him, starting gently and increasing the intensity as Noah warmed to him. They’d had their share of intense encounters, but something was different this time. They’d been playing before; this was serious. Oscar untied Noah’s apron; they broke apart just long enough to get it off and then they were against each other again, coming together like pieces of a puzzle that someone had at last figured out.

They stumbled back to the bedroom, and then onto the bed. Their clothes slipped off easily, and their bodies moved together just as effortlessly. They’d only been together two months, but they *knew* each other—there wasn’t a word between them as their hands fell into already familiar patterns over each other’s skin. Oscar understood every wordless sound that fell from Noah’s lips; it was like he’d become fluent in Noah-ese. He and Noah reached for the nightstand drawer at the same time. They laughed a little at the way their hands bumped together. Between the two of them, they got the condom out and the lube open. Oscar rolled the condom on as Noah slicked himself; it never had taken Noah long to get ready. Noah lay on his back and spread his legs. Oscar lined the head of his cock against Noah and pushed slowly inside.

It shouldn’t have been possible for the sex to get any better, but somehow it did. They fell into a slow, steady rhythm; they both wanted to make it last. But slow and steady couldn’t last forever—not with how Noah moaned, how his hands moved to Oscar’s ass, urging him forward. Oscar obliged, thrusting faster and faster; he felt like they were dissolving into each other, and Oscar thought briefly *we’re making love* before he stopped thinking at all, and then he was coming with a force he didn’t think possible. He felt dazed, only vaguely aware of Noah kissing him while Oscar was still inside him, surrounding him, making him safe.

It had to end eventually. That angle that Noah had to hold his head to kiss him looked uncomfortable. Oscar withdrew and took off the condom. Noah tried to stand up to throw the condom away and fetch his usual post-sex

washcloth, but Oscar held him back, pulling him completely into his arms and kissing him.

Noah pulled back a little. "I'm all sticky," he protested.

Oscar kissed him again. "There is nothing wrong with sticky every once in a while," he said. "And I don't feel like letting you go yet."

"You're gross," Noah said with a smile.

Oscar grinned back. "And you love it."

"I do."

This time, Oscar didn't protest.

They dozed for a little while, running their fingers lazily over each other's skin. "Do you speak any Spanish?" Noah asked eventually.

Oscar laughed. "What brought that on?"

Noah smiled a little and shrugged. "I don't know. I just feel like whispering sweet nothings to you and thought, maybe, you knew some Spanish ones. It's such a sexy language."

Oscar laughed again. "I don't, really, but my dad was always calling my mom stuff when we were kids. He's so crazy about her, even now." Somehow, it didn't feel so bad talking about him anymore.

"Like what?"

Oscar let out a long breath while he thought. "Uh, let's see. *Corazon*—that means sweetheart. *Hermosa*—gorgeous. *Mi cielo*—my heaven. *Preciosa*—precious." He paused. "Then there's *amorcito*."

"What does that one mean?"

Their gazes met. "My love."

"*Amorcito*," Noah echoed. "I like that one."

They kissed again leisurely for a little while. Eventually, Noah managed to coax Oscar into the shower. Afterward, they got dressed and Noah went back to the pancakes, which he soon had ready for them. As they ate, a couple of troubling thoughts crept into Oscar's head. The eviction. It was in less than two weeks. He hadn't really thought about it; he was bad at thinking about the future, plus he also hadn't cared much. He was ready to make it a nasty, protracted, expensive affair for Aneisha and her bosses, but now he was feeling

like maybe that wasn't such a great idea. There was something else niggling in the back of his brain, too, but he couldn't quite remember what it was.

"I should get going."

"Why? You don't have work, and I don't have school. I've already texted my uncle that I won't be at church today." Noah put his hand in Oscar's. "I thought we could spend the day together. We can spend the whole day inside; we'll pretend like it's raining and the only thing we can do is play games and cuddle. I like all the sunshine in San Diego, but I do miss rainy days."

"I've actually got some things to take care of," he said. When Noah's face fell, Oscar leaned over and kissed him. "For real, this time. I'll come back tonight."

Noah looked relieved. "Okay," he said. "So... Monopoly tonight?"

"Only if it's strip Monopoly."

Noah walked Oscar to the door. "You forgot to bring me your laundry yesterday," he reminded him.

"Shit, you're right. I'll go get that now."

He headed out to the building where his own apartment was. When he got to the bottom of his stairwell, he heard Noah call out to him.

Oscar stopped as Noah jogged over to him. "Yeah?" Oscar asked.

"I wanted to remind you to bring laundry soap." He gave Oscar a helpless little shrug. "It was the best excuse I could come up with to get another kiss out of you."

Oscar laughed. "You couldn't wait five minutes?"

"No." He wrapped his arms around him and they kissed, right in the midmorning sunlight in front of God and everyone. It felt incredibly good.

"Soap," Oscar said when they pulled apart. "Got it."

Noah gave him another quick kiss. "See you in a few." He went back the way he came.

Oscar felt almost high. He turned to mount the stairs—and was confronted by Jeremy, who was standing there in the stairwell, mouth agape.

Shit! He'd forgotten—they were supposed to catch a matinee. What time was it?

“I was just about to leave,” Jeremy said. “I kept banging on your door, but you didn’t answer. I sent you a couple of texts, which you also didn’t answer.” He looked off in the direction Noah had come from. “Guess I know why.”

Oscar’s heart started to race. He’d been found out. But that wasn’t a big deal, right? He’d told Jeremy he was seeing someone, sort of. Hopefully he didn’t get too close of a look at who it was. “I am so sorry,” he said. “I totally forgot.” He glanced down at his phone; sure enough, there were two messages from Jeremy. It was only 10:45, though. “We still have time to catch a movie—”

Jeremy cut him off. “Forget about the movie. Was that your ‘friend with benefits’? Because it seems like you seriously miscategorized that relationship.”

Oscar’s heartbeat started to slow. So he didn’t recognize him. Good. “Well, it changed.”

Jeremy smiled a little. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’m happy for you, man.”

“Thanks,” Oscar said. “Hey, why don’t we get going? We should really get to that movie soon if you’re going to be on time for work.”

“But don’t you need to bring down the soap to him?” Jeremy said. “Then I could meet him.”

He might not have recognized him in the fleeting glance he’d just gotten, but he definitely might if he looked at Noah up close. He’d have to tell Jeremy eventually, but he didn’t feel like getting into it right now. “No, it’s cool,” he said. “I’ll just text him and tell him I had to go.”

Jeremy frowned. “But it should only take a minute.”

“He’ll understand.” He started toward his car. “Come on, man, we’re going to be late.”

Jeremy just stood there. “You don’t want me to meet him.”

“No, I just—” He floundered for words. He was in a relationship now. At least, he was pretty sure he was. He had a boyfriend. He had never had a boyfriend who wasn’t a secret one. “This is new,” he said. “Th-the being in a... you know, a thing with someone.”

“A relationship,” Jeremy finished for him, smiling. Oscar was relieved. Maybe they could have left it at that, but then Jeremy said, “I think it’s really good that you’re moving on from the Ricky stuff. I know that it’s been really

hard for you, but it's been eight years. It's definitely time to start living in the present, you know?"

Bringing up the "Ricky stuff" felt like Jeremy had just ripped off a newly formed scab. To make it worse, he sounded so condescending—like Jeremy wasn't a fucking mess himself. "Wow, you sound a lot like Crystal," Oscar said. "It wouldn't kill you to have a thought of your own every once in a while."

Jeremy looked like he'd been slapped. "Hey. That's not cool."

"No, what's 'not cool' is you bringing up shit that I have specifically said I don't want to talk about. Ever." Oscar narrowed his eyes. "Did you tell her about what happened?"

Jeremy paused. "Well, yeah. I didn't think it was that big of a deal."

"Well it is," Oscar snarled. "That's my story to tell. Not yours. Not anyone else's."

"Look, I'm sorry you feel that way, but it's my story, too," Jeremy said, getting defensive.

"It didn't have to be. I told you to stay out of it."

It took Jeremy a moment to absorb that. "Are you talking about when you told me not to rat the rest of them out? Christ. We were just kids then, but I thought by now you'd realized how fucking insane it would have been not to say anything!"

"You know how many people I've told about your mom? Zero. Because I know better than to spread other people's business around." Oscar brushed past him, going up to his apartment. "You know, I don't really feel like a movie today. I've got shit to do."

Jeremy marched up after him. "No, you don't get to do this," Jeremy said. "I'm not going to put up with your weird mood swings anymore. You don't get to brush me off."

Well, this was new. Oscar and Jeremy never fought. They gave each other a hard time, sure, but that wasn't fighting—that was playing. Sometimes they would get close to the edge of a real argument, but Jeremy would always back down. "What do you mean 'brush you off'?" Oscar asked, his voice getting louder. "I don't brush you off!"

"You do!" Jeremy's voice rose to meet Oscar's. "Every time I dare to disagree with you, you stop talking to me until I cave."

Oscar was flabbergasted. He had no idea Jeremy felt that way. Oscar figured he just always saw reason eventually. Instead of apologizing, Oscar just got angrier. "It's not my fault you don't have any balls!"

Jeremy had looked slapped earlier; now he looked like he'd been punched in the gut. "Fuck you."

"Fuck you, too." Oscar couldn't quite get the key in the door; his hands were shaking.

Jeremy turned to leave, but then he stopped. "It's that guy from the video I sent you," he said.

Oscar froze.

"Yeah," Jeremy said slowly. "Yeah, I thought I recognized him. So you trolled him and then, what, stalked him?"

"I didn't stalk him!" Oscar said before he could stop himself. "It was a weird coincidence." He wanted to kick himself as soon as the words were out of his mouth; now he couldn't deny it.

"And you didn't trust me not to say anything about it. That's why you don't want me to meet him. You really thought I'd betray you, after everything we've been through." Jeremy let out a humorless laugh. "But how could I betray you when I don't have the balls for something like that?"

Their gazes met for a moment, and then Jeremy took off down the stairs. Oscar ran after him, but he tripped, landing face-first on the concrete. When he got up again, his nose was bleeding. He made his way down the stairs as quickly as possible, pinching his nose to try to stop the blood. But Jeremy already had a huge head start. He prayed that Jeremy hadn't noticed which apartment was Noah's, but he went right to it and knocked on the door. Noah opened it just as Oscar arrived.

"Can I help you with something?" Noah asked. The door blocked him from seeing Oscar.

Jeremy thrust out his hand. "I'm Jeremy," he said. "Oscar's friend."

Noah smiled and took it. "Oh! It's really nice to meet you. Oscar talks about you a lot."

"That's funny, because he never even told me your name."

Oscar put his hand on the door, opening it wider so that Noah could see him. "What happened to your nose?" he said with alarm.

“I-I tripped,” he said. He turned to Jeremy, looking at him with as much pleading in his eyes as he could muster.

But Jeremy wasn’t looking at him. “I just thought you might want to meet the guy who introduced you two.”

Noah frowned, looking back and forth between them. “I don’t understand.”

“I sent him a link to your YouTube video,” Jeremy said. “He trolled the shit out of you.” Jeremy turned to Oscar. “What handles did you use again? I think it was *up4it* and another one—one you made just for that occasion. *ASMRfan*, or something like that?”

Noah looked at Oscar, his eyes wide and his mouth slack with disbelief. “That was you?”

“Sure was,” Jeremy said. “Anyway, it was nice to meet you.” He glared at Oscar. “How’s that for balls?” He stormed off.

Noah and Oscar just stood there for a moment, both of them in a state of shock. The blood from Oscar’s nose had escaped from his hands and was dripping on the concrete. “Noah, I’m sorry—” he started.

Noah slammed the door in his face. Oscar immediately started knocking. “No! Noah please—open the door. Please!” When there was no response, his knocking grew more desperate, and his voice became louder. “Noah, please! Open the door!”

“Oscar!” a female voice said. He whipped around. Aneisha stood on the other side of the pool, looking furious. “What is going on?” She noticed the blood on his face. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Oscar insisted.

She crossed her arms. “Did you finally show Noah your true colors and he clocked you one?”

“It’s none of your business!” Oscar roared.

Aneisha narrowed her eyes. “Are you going to stop bothering him, or do I need to call the cops?”

Oscar looked back at the door. It was smeared with his blood. He gave one last weak little knock. “Please,” he whispered. He doubted Noah could hear him.

His shoulders slumped. He turned back to Aneisha. “No.” He wiped at his nose; all it did was smear more blood over his face.

He must have looked beyond pathetic, because her expression actually softened. “Do you need help with your nose?” she asked.

“No,” Oscar said. “No, it’s fine.”

He went back to his apartment. He washed his face off and stuck some toilet paper up his nose. When he wasn’t bleeding all over himself, he took out his phone to text Noah.

Plz talk 2 me. Let me explain.

He waited for a reply. The phone said it was only five minutes, but it felt like forever.

What kind of explanation can you possibly give me?

Oscar typed back immediately.

It was before i met u. I didnt know u were my neighbor.

Noah texted back:

How does that make it better? That just means that your first response upon meeting someone you just bullied online was to try to sleep with him. And you pretended you didn’t know when I told you about ASMR. I trusted you, and you lied to me. That’s something extremely personal to me. I feel so embarrassed right now. If you had come clean earlier, maybe I could forgive you, but you kept that up for weeks, and if Jeremy hadn’t told me, you probably never would have. How can I ever trust you again?

Oscar didn’t know what to say.

He finally typed back:

Im an asshole. i tried to warn u.

No response.

He crawled into his bed, hugging his blankets around him. He just lay there, feeling numb. After some time, his phone buzzed. It was Noah.

I need some time to think.

His face felt wet. Shit. He was crying again. He texted back:

ok

He curled up in the fetal position, surrounded by all of his garbage. For the second time in nearly eight years, he cried.

Chapter Seven

The days blurred together after that. He went to work. He went to the gym, working out for hours just to avoid going home. He couldn't bring himself to talk to anyone; he even avoided the Molten Taco. He bought a case of beer and a shit ton of weed and made sure he was fucked-up for every minute when he had to be home. Beer cans and take-out boxes piled up around him. He had actually made some halfhearted attempts at cleaning up in the previous few weeks, but that effort was quickly undone. Eviction was imminent. He had planned on fighting it, but now he'd decided he'd leave quietly. What was the point?

When he was wasted, he got his computer out and trolled. It wasn't the prankster sort of trolling he usually engaged in—this was vicious, nasty, bile-spewing trolling. He wrote horrible racist and misogynistic screeds; he didn't really mean a word of it, but it was shit like that that got the most vitriolic responses, and that was what he wanted. He was told he was worthless, and evil, and idiotic over and over again. He found that satisfying, because it was the truth. He liked being validated.

He started to ramp up his homophobic rants, throwing out every word that his old friends had screamed at him as they beat him, all the words he was sure his dad thought when he came out—what the whole world thought of him and who he was. A few assholes always agreed with him, but for the most part, everyone rallied to the defense against his hate: queer men and women, defending themselves, and their straight friends and family, supporting them. He read their messages of love and support and he'd cry at their kindness, and at his own viciousness, and at the world that had made falling in love in high school the worst possible thing that had ever happened to him.

He lost track of the days. It was probably a week and a half later when his phone rang. It was early Sunday night, which meant he wasn't too fucked-up yet. He looked at the screen. It was Jeremy.

He could duck the call. He didn't have to talk to him ever again if he didn't feel like it. But honestly, he wasn't even that mad at him anymore. Noah would have found out what a piece of shit Oscar was, one way or the other. Maybe it was best that it ended early. He answered the call. "Hey."

"I'm sorry," Jeremy said immediately. "I really fucked up. Like a lot."

“It’s okay. Noah deserved to know the truth.”

“Not like that. Christ, I don’t know how you can forgive me.”

“You’ve been my best friend since middle school,” Oscar said. It was the first time he’d ever really used the term “best friend,” but it was true. “I shouldn’t have said those things.”

“Yeah, but you just hurt my feelings. I did something way worse.” He hesitated. “Have you talked to him?”

“He’s done with me.”

Jeremy made an angry sound. “I’m such a fucking idiot! I don’t know why I did that. I really don’t.”

“It’s okay,” Oscar said again.

They both sat there in silence for a little while. “This is a dumb question,” Jeremy said. “But is there anything I can do for you?”

Oscar thought for a minute. “Actually, yeah. I’m being evicted on Monday. Could I crash at your place until I find somewhere else? I really don’t want to go to my parents’ house.”

“You’re being evicted?” Jeremy exclaimed. “What for?”

“Failure to keep up the property,” he said. “It’s really disgusting in here.”

“I could come help you clean up. Maybe they’d change their minds.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to stay anyway.”

Jeremy hesitated. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“Yeah. I’ll call you when it happens.”

“Okay,” he said again. “I’ll talk to you later, then.”

Oscar hung up the phone.

An hour later, his phone rang again. It was his mom. Fucking Jeremy—he called her. He sighed and answered. “Hey, Mom.”

“It’s not your mother,” said a male voice. It was the same one that read him stories when he was young and taught him how to play soccer and how to fight. A voice that both laughed uproariously and disciplined sternly. It was the most reassuring voice Oscar knew as a child. It was protective. It was strong.

“Dad?” Oscar said. He hated how young his own voice sounded.

“Yes.”

Oscar shook off that vulnerability. “What do you want?” he asked coldly.

“Jeremy called.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Oscar said. “I’m not coming home, if that’s what you called to ask.”

“That’s not the reason, although you are always welcome.” He cleared his throat. “I’m calling to tell you sorry.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard it. You’re so sorry I got my ass kicked. You’re also sorry I’m your son.”

“I never said that, *mijo*. You put those words in my mouth.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“No. I love you.”

“Right. You love me *except*. Or *in spite*.”

Oscar’s dad sighed. “No, Oscar. I love who you are. All of you.”

Oscar fell silent. It was what he’d been waiting to hear for years. “Alex made you say that,” he said, fighting tears. “Or Mom.”

“Ay, you are so stubborn!” he grumbled. “Just like me and your *abuelo*.”

It was then that Oscar knew he meant it. Tears began to stream down his face, but he managed not to audibly cry.

“I should have said this earlier,” his dad continued. “But I didn’t know what to say. I was an old man even when you were in high school. This world, these times—it’s very difficult for me to understand, but it’s no excuse. And besides, I’m not so good with feelings, you know.”

“Yeah,” Oscar said, laughing a little through his tears. “I know how that is.”

“If you want to bring someone home, he would be welcome in this house.”

Oscar couldn’t hold it back anymore. “I don’t have anyone anymore,” he cried. “Dad, I fucked it up. I fucked everything up.”

His dad waited for Oscar to get a hold of himself. He didn’t bother asking exactly what had happened, which Oscar was grateful for. “Have you apologized?” his dad asked.

“Yeah. He still won’t talk to me.”

“Did you give him the apology he needs to hear, or the one you were comfortable giving?”

That stopped Oscar short.

“You see, that was my mistake. You should learn from it.”

Oscar wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “You’re right,” he said.

His dad snorted. “I had never thought I’d hear those words from you ever again.”

Oscar smiled. “Don’t get used to it.”

They paused for a minute to catch their breaths. That had been an awful lot of feeling sharing; his dad was probably as exhausted as he was.

It was his dad who broke the silence. “You have to think about this eviction too, you know.”

“I can’t move home.”

His dad grunted in approval. “You still have your pride,” he said. “That’s good. But *mijo*, pride can also get in your way. Sometimes you need help. Jeremy said your apartment is just dirty. If we clean it up, maybe they won’t throw you out. And you know you can make this drag out a long time. You pay your rent, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Oscar’s dad laughed. “Oh, they will have a hard time then. You can cost them a lot of money; I’m surprised they have the *cajones*.”

“Yeah, me too.” Aneisha really did have *cajones* of steel.

“But I think your mother would be happier if we just cleaned the place. We could help you.”

Oscar looked around. Part of the wall in his bedroom had turned black with mold. A cockroach scuttled happily through the ankle-deep trash. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s pretty disgusting.”

“I own a plumbing company. You think I haven’t seen disgusting? And you—you work in the sewers! Surely it isn’t as bad as a sewer!” He paused. “It’s not, is it?”

“No, but it’s *my* mess. I’m embarrassed,” he admitted. Jesus, so many feelings today. He didn’t know how much more of this he could take.

“So what? We’re your family.”

“Let me think about it.”

“So stubborn,” his dad mumbled under his breath. “It’s up to you,” he said more audibly. “And no matter what, you will come home to your family for dinner soon, yes?”

“Yeah.” His heart felt about twenty pounds lighter. “Really soon.”

“Okay, then. I will talk to you later.”

“All right.”

They said their good-byes, but right before he hung up, Oscar called out: “Wait!”

Fortunately, his dad was still on the line. “Yes?”

“I love you, Dad.”

Oscar heard something then. It sounded suspiciously like tears. “I love you, too. Always.”

They hung up for real after that. Oscar went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. He felt much better, but he still had a ways to go. Fortunately, he knew what he had to do now.

He shaved and raked a comb through his hair. He gave himself a look in the toothpaste-streaked mirror. Well, he wasn’t exactly ready for dinner with the queen, but at least he didn’t look like a hobo. His eyes were still red rimmed, but not a lot he could do about that. He went back to his bedroom and curled up in bed, pulling his computer onto his lap. He opened the file where he kept track of all his Internet aliases. Their angry little screams were about to be silenced forever. Honestly, he was going to miss some of them, but a big apology required a big sacrifice. He created one final YouTube account: *Oscar_Lozada*.

He took a deep breath before turning on his webcam. “Uh, hi,” he said. Another deep breath. “My name is Oscar Lozada, and I am a troll. Like, a really big one. A multiple platform spanning troll. It’s my hobby, I guess you could say.” He took a look at his list. “Some of the names I go by are *up4it*, *allthepussy*, *bettermommy*, *ridetheretardis*, *faithsetsufree*, *eternalburner*, *wheresurgodnow*, *psychomedulla*, *ignoranus*, *PWMiller52*, *death2fags*, *myscissormemories*, *BobfromCarolina*, *moreammo...*” He paused. “I won’t bother listing all the one-offs, except for *ASMRFan567*. That one I regret the most, for reasons I’m not going to get into.

“So, why this video? Well, I think I’m done with trolling. I know that I’ve pissed a lot of people off—and if we’re going for honesty here, some of you deserved it.” He stopped for a moment; that was really not the direction he should be headed, but goddamn if he was going to unconditionally apologize to some of these assholes. “For the most part, though, I was just stirring shit because I thought it would be funny, or because I was feeling bad about myself. That hurt a lot of people. It hurt someone in particular, and it’s the biggest regret of my life.

“So, yeah, I’m giving this up. I’m posting a link to this video to all my usual haunts. To people who I befriended under some of those accounts—I’m sorry. Although you really should reexamine your life if you found yourself agreeing with someone trying to make the most obnoxious comments possible. To people I lashed out at—I’m sorry. Except you homophobes, ’cause guess what? I’m queer, so let me say one last ‘fuck you’ to you assholes.”

He took a sip of beer. “Okay, so far this is a pretty shit apology, so here goes the real one. I deliberately set out to hurt, shock, and confuse a lot of people who seem very nice. I laughed at you when you were upset. It made my day when I ruined yours. I’m sure that you’ll find it satisfying that my trolling has led to me ruining the best chance at love I ever had.”

His gaze had been shifting around as he spoke, but he made himself look directly into the camera. “My biggest apologies go to you, *amorcito*. I really didn’t know I’d ever meet you. That doesn’t really excuse the fact that I was an asshole, or that I tried to hide it. ‘*The love impulse in man very frequently reveals itself in terms of conflict,*’” he quoted from their movie. “I guess that’s true.” Oscar knew that was a cheap play at sympathy, but he couldn’t resist.

He blinked as his eyes watered a little. Goddamnit, this crying thing was getting out of control. Fortunately, no tears came out. He held out his hands. “So bring on the death threats and whatever else you got. I’ve always believed that you shouldn’t dish out what you can’t take, so come at me, bros. Peace.”

He shut off the camera, uploaded the video, and started posting links. It took a while. The last thing he did was write Noah an email with the link.

Subject line: One Last Sorry:

Hey. So my apology before sucked. I made a video with a better one, which you can see here. I’m being evicted, so you won’t have to see me around anymore.

He tried to think of a good way to end it, but nothing came to him; he was really tired. He pressed send, and then he shut the computer. There was no reason to sit around waiting for hate mail.

He looked around the room wearily. He didn't have the energy to do anything. He would call off sick to work tomorrow. He'd done that approximately five times in his entire career. There wasn't much to do after that. He got up, used the bathroom, and managed a quick shower. It was only nine o'clock, but he was so tired that he curled up in his blankets and fell straight asleep.

He woke up at six thirty to call Bob. He reassured him several times that he had not been diagnosed with cancer before he dozed off again for a few hours. By the time he really got up, it was eleven. He wondered when the sheriff would come by with the eviction notice. He should probably start packing, but like his dad said, he'd have some time. With some trepidation, he turned on his computer and started checking his e-mail. As expected, he had a lot of extremely angry e-mails and comments. He had to smile; some of them were very creative. If he weren't reformed, he'd be taking notes.

What he hadn't expected was the supportive ones. He couldn't believe the first one he read; he figured it was a fluke. But then there were more and more—just an outpouring of compassion and forgiveness that he really didn't think the Internet was capable of. As he was reading, an e-mail came in from Gawker, requesting to interview him. He Googled himself. Reddit was on the case, trying to figure out Noah's identity. Oscar slammed the computer shut. He had clearly not thought through the consequences of his apology.

He got up and ate a few fistfuls of Froot Loops. He checked the computer again. Holy shit, this thing was snowballing. Buzzfeed put up a post: "This epic troll has apologized (and he's gay)! You have to see the video to believe it!" With trembling fingers, he checked Upworthy. There he was: "This Internet troll has apologized for the pain he's caused. Do we have the courage to forgive him?"

Oh no. This was a nightmare.

And worse, there was no response from Noah. No text, no e-mail. He shouldn't feel disappointed; he hadn't done this with the expectation that he'd fix everything. Still, it hurt a little.

At around twelve thirty, there was a knock on the door. That'd be the sheriff. He probably should put on some pants.

But when he opened the door, it was Noah. He had a bucket in one hand and a mop in the other. “I talked to Aneisha. She said she’ll call off the eviction if we can get your place clean in the next few days. Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

Oscar just stared at him stupidly for a moment, unsure of what to say. Noah sighed and put down the bucket and mop. He gave Oscar a brief kiss on the lips. “I was going to forgive you anyway. You didn’t have to make a public spectacle of yourself. It seems like you’ve become an overnight Internet celebrity.”

“Yeah, I know,” Oscar said. “I really should have seen that coming. They might track you down, too.”

“Maybe, but let’s deal with one mess at a time.” Noah moved forward to go inside.

Oscar stopped him by putting a hand across the door. “It’s really bad in there,” he said. “Like, really, really bad.”

“It’s okay,” Noah said. “I’m pretty sure I’ve seen the worst of you.” He kissed him. “And I’m still here.”

Oscar shut his eyes and released his grip. Noah went inside, with Oscar trailing after him.

Noah put his hands on his hips as he surveyed the grotesque scene. “See? I told you.”

“Believe it or not, I’ve actually seen worse,” Noah said. “I’ve been called in on a few hoarder cases. Unless you’ve got a couple of cat corpses stacked in there, I think we’ll be fine.” He snapped on a pair of gloves. “First things first—start taking out those garbage bags. I’ll start on the kitchen.”

Oscar did as he was told. On his fifth trip down, he was suddenly confronted with Jeremy and Crystal. “Hey,” Jeremy said sheepishly, looking down at his feet.

“Hey.”

“I’m sorry I told your parents.”

Oscar put a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “That was the absolute best thing anyone has ever done for me.”

Jeremy looked up. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. I’m talking to my dad again.”

“Wow,” Jeremy said, smiling. “That’s so great.”

Oscar smiled back. “Thanks, man.”

“We’re here to help you clean,” Crystal said, sliding into the conversation. “If you want us.”

“Yeah, sure.” Each time he accepted help, it got a little easier. “Noah’s already up there.”

Jeremy’s smile grew even bigger. “He’s forgiven you? Fucking A, that’s awesome!” His smile vanished suddenly. “He probably thinks I’m a total dick.”

“I think it’ll be fine,” Oscar said. “Come on. Let me introduce you guys for real.”

Noah was more than happy to meet Jeremy under better circumstances, and he gave Crystal a warm welcome as well. He set Oscar and Jeremy on trash duty and brought Crystal into the kitchen with him. After all the trash bags were gone, Jeremy and Oscar started picking up the loose trash on the floor. Halfway through it, Oscar realized that they were going to need some serious help if they were going to get the really hard stuff clean. He took out his phone and called his mom. “It’s Oscar,” he said when she picked up. “Can you come help me clean?”

“Of course we will! Why didn’t you ask sooner? Don’t you know we love you?”

“Yeah,” Oscar said. He was starting to get the picture.

They all arrived soon after, minus Alex and Chad, who had gone back to Massachusetts. His mom swallowed him into a hug first, followed by his sisters. At last, he got to his dad. They just looked at each other for a moment, free from the haze of bitterness and guilt. They moved toward each other at the same time, hugging and clapping each other fiercely on the back. It felt really good.

Noah emerged from the kitchen somewhat shyly. Oscar stood beside him. “Everyone, this is Noah,” Oscar said. “He’s my—” He stopped. Actually, he didn’t know where they stood.

“Boyfriend,” Noah finished firmly.

His mom rushed forward, ready to indulge her insatiable hunger for hugs. Noah untangled himself for a minute to take off his filthy gloves, then returned her embrace. He was a really great hugger. Oscar introduced each of his sisters,

and at last, his dad, who gave Noah a manly handshake. In the middle of all of it, Oscar couldn't help but notice that no one was judging him. The mess was just a backdrop. The only thing any of them saw was him.

He had to shut himself in the bathroom for a moment to avoid embarrassing himself again.

With all of them working, the place was mostly clean in only six hours. Noah called Aneisha up. She strode into the apartment and looked surprised at all of the people there. Noah slipped his hand into Oscar's as Aneisha inspected the place. She reentered the living room. "I don't see any pests here," she said. "You're welcome to stay." Aneisha pointed a finger at him. "Just don't fuck it up again."

"That's not very professional of you," Oscar pointed out with a grin.

Aneisha rolled her eyes, but she was smiling, too.

Relief washed over Oscar. He hadn't realized how much he wanted to stay until that point. Noah must have sensed he was a little overwhelmed because he put an arm around his waist. Oscar felt a flash of panic; no one in his family had ever seen him with a man. But no one seemed to mind, not even his dad.

He didn't notice Nikki creeping up on him until he felt her arms wrap around him, too. His mother saw a hug happening and jumped straight in. Stephanie and Dad kept back since they weren't really huggers, but he saw his dad put an arm around Sophia's shoulder. Maybe his dad had managed to repair two relationships. Crystal and Jeremy were embracing as well. She had said they were just friends, but Oscar sensed that something more was coming if Jeremy didn't fuck it up.

"Let's go out to dinner!" his mom said. "Our treat."

The thought of sitting around in a restaurant with all this love was a little overwhelming. There was only so much a guy like him could take. "I would, but I am really beat. You guys go ahead."

His mother opened her mouth to protest, but his dad stepped in. "Don't pester him, *mamita*," he said. "He needs some time with his boyfriend." His dad had clearly been practicing saying the word with the maximum amount of acceptance and nonchalance. He didn't quite manage it, but Oscar appreciated the effort.

Noah stepped aside so that Oscar could say good-bye to his family. Oscar gave one last hug to Nikki. "Your boyfriend is so cute!" she whispered in his ear before she let go.

Oscar turned to Stephanie, who sucked in a breath and hugged him. “You should come over and watch *Princess Bride* sometime.”

“Sure. We’ve only watched it like forty-nine times. We should make it an even fifty.”

“Bring him, too.”

Oscar felt himself blushing a little at his family being so interested in his love life. “Yeah, sure.”

His dad and Sophia were next. Sophia kept it brief. “I hope I’m as lucky as you in finding my way.”

“Oh my God, don’t say that,” Oscar said. “Please don’t spend the next eight years of your life in misery.”

“A little bit of misery might be good for me,” she reflected. “I’ve been cheerful for so long. I think it will be very luxurious to wear all black and paint my feelings.”

“Just don’t wallow,” Oscar said. “Trust me, it’s gross after a while.”

Last was his dad. He seemed like a new man in Oscar’s eyes—the same man of his childhood, a little bit older and wiser. His dad was looking at him like he was seeing him anew, too. They clasped hands and patted each other firmly on the back. “It’s good to have you back, *mijo*,” his dad said.

“Good to have you too.”

With that, his family left. When they were gone, Jeremy and Crystal approached him and Noah. Jeremy said nothing; he just hugged Oscar fiercely, desperately—the way he had on the day Oscar got out of the hospital. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“Nah, man,” Oscar said. “We’re brothers.”

He dropped his voice a little. “So, bros—but also hos and homos?”

Oscar grinned. “Don’t see why not.”

If Crystal heard that last part, she didn’t give any indication. “That would look nice and clean,” she said to Oscar. “Should heal up fine. I predict a full recovery, especially if you have someone to help change the bandages.”

Oscar smiled. “Thanks, for whatever.”

“You’re welcome, for whatever.” She took Jeremy’s hand. “See you around.” They left. Oscar had a feeling that Crystal would take much better care of Jeremy than he ever could.

That left Noah and Oscar alone at last. Neither of them said anything for a few moments. Oscar knew he should thank Noah, but how could anything he said possibly convey the way he felt? He was about tapped out when it came to emotional things, anyway.

Noah broke the silence. "Pizza and beer," he said. "Then video games."

Oscar was so relieved he nearly fell over. "Yeah. That sounds good."

Oscar vacuumed and Febrezed the beanbag chairs while Noah ordered the pizza. They spent a few hours just hanging out, talking about nothing in particular. It was exactly what Oscar needed.

Around eleven, Oscar asked: "So are we going back to your place?"

"I thought we could stay here."

Oscar snorted. "It's cleaner, but it's not exactly pleasant here. Plus, I sleep on a mattress on the floor. Yours is much more comfortable."

Noah shrugged. "I don't mind uncomfortable every once in a while."

It took Oscar a moment to consider it. It felt like climbing the last stretch to the peak of Mount Relationship. "Yeah," he said at last. "Yeah, let's do it."

Oscar had to remove his laptop from the bed before they lay down. He groaned a little as he considered the mess that awaited him on the Internet. "I don't know what I'm going to do about this Internet thing. I used my real name. That was supposed to be symbolic or whatever. This might get insane."

"I think we should make a video together and explain the situation," Noah said.

Oscar looked at him as if he were crazy. "That's a terrible idea."

"Is it? People are curious right now. They'll keep digging around until they get answers, so why not just give it to them? After the mystery has been solved, they'll move on to whatever new story takes the Internet by storm."

"What if your parents see?"

Noah shrugged. "They aren't too keen on the Internet, and even if they do see, maybe it's for the best. I think I'm finally done with hiding." He kissed Oscar's forehead. "You should meet my uncle."

Oscar squirmed. He could only imagine what he would think of Oscar, now that he'd aired all of his dirty laundry. "So how keen is your uncle on the Internet?"

Noah laughed. “I don’t know, but he’s very keen on forgiveness.”

“Okay, then.”

They were still sticky from the work of the day, so they hopped into the shower together. The steam of the shower and Noah’s hands on him coaxed out a warmth from deep inside him. They dressed in shirts and shorts that smelled of dryer sheets before climbing into a bed made with fresh sheets. As they curled up together, Oscar reflected on his past. The memories that had haunted them seemed as clear as ever, but they couldn’t muddy him the way they did before.

At long last, Oscar felt clean.

The End

Author Bio

Sera Trevor has been a fan of sweet man-on-man loving from probably too early an age. (You know those buttons on certain websites that you have to click to verify you're over eighteen? She would totally click them before she was eighteen. Please don't tell her parents.) She earned a B.A. in English Literature, which was fun, but she was always somewhat disappointed in the lack of hardcore gay sex in the Western canon. Fortunately, the Internet has been more forthcoming in that department.

If you enjoyed The Troll Whisperer, I've written a short story follow-up entitled Pink Wedding. Keep an eye on my Goodreads blog to find out when and how it will be available!

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