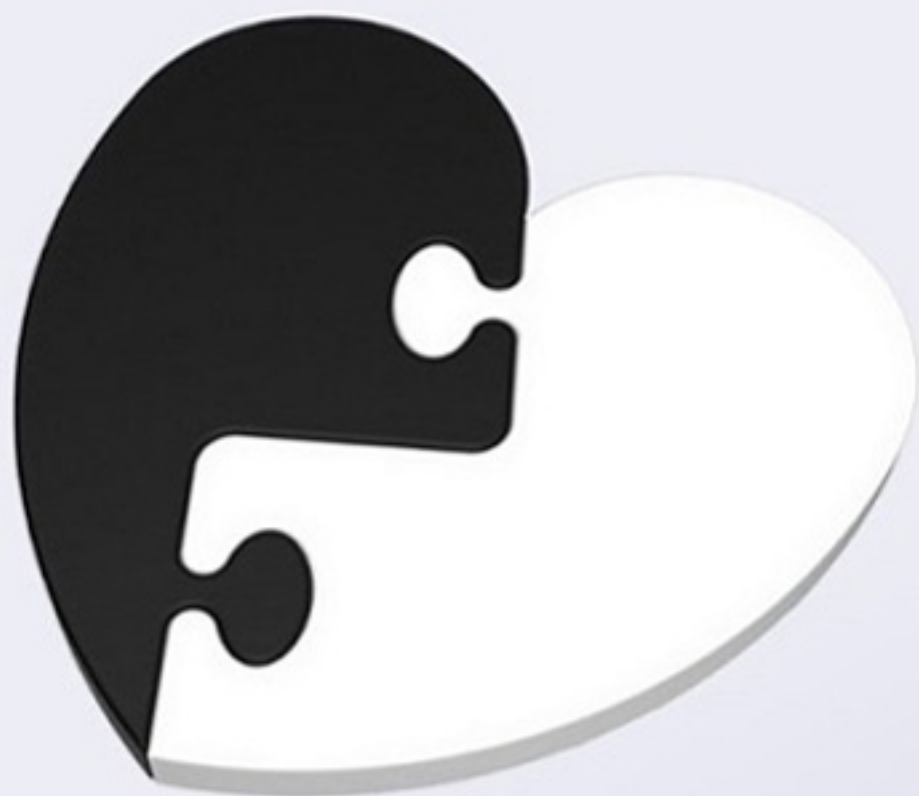


# **Merger of Equals**

*LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES 2013*



**Liz Winters**

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## MERGER OF EQUALS

**By Liz Winters**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, 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.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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By Liz Winters

## Photo Description

A color sketch of two young men passionately embracing and kissing in front of floor-to-ceiling windows in a modern office building. The taller man with unruly black hair has the button of his pants undone and is shirtless, exposing dark, scarred skin. The shorter man has bleached-blond, immaculately-styled hair, pale skin, and is fully dressed in trousers, button down shirt and tie. Both men's eyes are closed as they are lost in the moment.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I'm the son of a corporate tycoon who wants me to take her place one day. I just want to finish college and strike out on my own, but Mom won't hear it, so I'm doomed to spend my entire summer behind a computer screen.*

*Anyway, here I was late last night after a long day of crunching numbers when my mom's receptionist—a short blond guy who can't be much older than me—walks in and asks if I want anything to eat. I swear that guy's got a fifteen inch stick up his ass, always about the business, always proper and neat. He never shows any emotion. Never even smiles.*

*Out of pure nastiness, I send him out on a food chase. After he's been gone for about forty minutes I'm getting kind of hungry, so I step outside to check if he's back. He's not, but something on his desk catches my eye. A cute little drawing of a bunny. I shift the papers aside to get a better look and that's when I see it: a drawn picture of him and me kissing. He's got me down in detail, including all the ugly scars on my body. It's signed with his name, so he must have drawn it.*

*I didn't know what to do, so I snatched the drawing in panic when I heard the elevator ding. I don't know why I took it—I don't even know if I'm into guys—but I've been staring at it whenever I have a spare moment.*

*Dear author, can you help me? What do I do?*

*(Both these guys have a past. I figure they've had enough of hardship. Please give them a HEA or a HFN—no BDSM between them, no paranormal, please ^.^).*

*Sincerely,*

*Erica*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** businessmen/lawyers, sweet no sex, abduction/kidnapping, hurt/comfort, coming out

**Content warnings:** off-page deaths of background characters, off-page child abduction, discussion of past child abuse, discussion of past sexual abuse

**Word count:** 23,809

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Of all the deceitful, conniving, underhanded things his mother had ever done, this had to be the worst! Jordy ground his teeth as he stood in front of his mother's imposing glass and stainless steel desk, having received a summons he'd been in no position to refuse.

"Mother, you're being completely unreasonable. I've been planning this trip for months!"

"Without consulting me," she interjected.

"I'm nearly twenty-one years old. I hardly think I need to consult you about my summer vacation plans."

"On this point, at least, we agree. You hardly think. Exactly how were you planning to pay for this European adventure?"

Jordy stared at her, silently fuming.

"Let me guess. You were going to charge everything to credit cards that are yours in name only, just like you did the plane tickets. And you didn't think it was appropriate to tell me about these expenses in advance?"

"It's not like you can't afford it," he replied sullenly.

"That is not the point."

"What's the big deal? I'll pay you back when I get access to my trust fund."

"If you get access to the trust fund."

"Why wouldn't I... ?" Jordy narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't dare!"

"I suggest you don't tempt me. I have the right to delay your access to that fund, and that's exactly what I'll do if you continue to behave like an irresponsible, petulant child. You know damn well you can't just take off on a

tour of Europe without giving me sufficient notice. Even if I didn't need you here this summer, I'd need time to make the necessary arrangements."

"Did it ever occur to you that I didn't tell you precisely so that you wouldn't have time to make those arrangements? I'm too old for this now. It has to stop sometime."

"Too old? What does age have to do with anything? Have you forgotten—?" she stopped abruptly and Jordy figured she must have seen the painful grimace on his face. As if seeing his father shot dead before his eyes was something a son could ever forget.

Unable to look at her, he glanced to his right, where his eyes met those of his mother's executive assistant, Ken. The weasel who undoubtedly combed through all of Jordy's credit card statements and must have brought this to his mother's attention. The man—and it was hard to refer to him as such, because he couldn't be much older than Jordy—wore his usual uniform of a two-button, single-breasted suit, over-starched shirt, and the obligatory muted tie. He stood ramrod straight, every single one of his bleached-so-blond-as-to-be-almost-white hairs perfectly in place, awaiting his boss's command. His face was as blank and impassive as always, but when their eyes met, Jordy was sure he saw a glimpse of pity. Rather than endearing Ken to him, it only pissed him off. He was fine. The last thing he needed was the pity of some glorified gofer. He shifted his eyes back to his mother, who looked uncharacteristically chagrined.

"You can't expect me to go through the rest of my life followed by bodyguards," he said quietly, his anger draining away. "It was a fluke. It's not going to happen again."

"You don't know that. It's too big a risk," she argued weakly.

"It's a risk I'm willing to take, and you have to let me. I'm traveling with friends. It's not like I'll ever be completely alone."

"I'll tell you what," she relented, "I'll call off the bodyguards if you agree to stay here for the summer. If you're who-knows-where in Europe this summer I'll be worried sick, and I can't afford the distraction."



She stood and walked up to him, reaching for his hand. It was the equivalent of carefully plucking at his heartstrings. Jordy knew that virtually everything his mother had done since the day he was born was for his benefit. He owed her a great deal, and he knew she, of all people, had had enough worries and heartaches to last several lifetimes without him adding any more.

“The past aside, I need you here at Ryder Corp., Jordy. I believe this merger we’re working on with Kronar will be the best thing for both companies, but I need hard data to substantiate my gut feeling. You have a good head on your shoulders, and after listening to me all these years, I know you understand our strengths and weaknesses. I can’t oversee everything myself, and who better to confirm the due diligence than my own son? I hope someday you’ll be sitting behind this desk, and there’s no better way for you to show everyone your merit than by helping with the merger.”

“Merger! What a joke!” Jordy pulled his hand out of hers, his ire rising again. “I still don’t understand why you’re even considering this deal. You know Kronar isn’t interested in a merger. He just wants to take Ryder Corp. over so he can cherry-pick our best assets and toss away the rest.”

Jordy couldn’t believe it when his mother had first mentioned she was considering Kronar’s merger overtures. He had thought she was a savvier businesswoman than this, especially given how hard she had worked to make Ryder Corp. the company that it had become. Had he had an equivalent interest in the company’s success, he would have offered a stronger protest. As it was, though, he had a secret agenda to start his own business, which would be much easier, if post-takeover, there was no place for him at Ryder.

“Morten Kronar is a typical man,” his mother waved her hand in annoyance. “All he thinks about is control. He doesn’t understand that in order to maximize the value of both companies, we have to use finesse. While you, hopefully, confirm my hunches on the business case, my job will be to make Morten understand that as strong as both our companies are, they each have a strategic weakness. Each company can fill in the other’s void, increasing the value of the whole, but only if neither company is made to feel like the weaker

link. I have to make him see that in business, as in life, you can achieve more when partners come together as equals.”

Jordy rolled his eyes at his mother’s naiveté. He’d heard her talk about how equality was the backbone of her successful marriage, but he wondered how much of that equality was real and how much was caused by a natural tendency to idealize the husband who died trying to protect their only son. And even if his parents’ marriage had been completely egalitarian, that was a relationship between two people in love. Jordy seriously doubted the same approach would work in business.

“Do we have a deal? Will you stay here this summer and help me steer through these merger discussions?”

Jordy took a deep breath, but the refusal wouldn’t make it past his throat. Resigned, he hung his head. “Yes, Mom, I’ll stay.”

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Ken’s quick glance at the clock told him it was just shy of seven o’clock. The office was quiet. It was Friday and most Ryder employees had thrown in the towel around six, leaving to blow off steam after what had been an exhausting week. With the merger moving full steam ahead, many of them would also spend parts of their weekend hunched over their computers, reviewing documents, crunching numbers, populating spreadsheets or preparing slide decks for presentations. For now, though, there were only two of them left: he and Jordy Ryder.

Jordy’s exemplary work ethic had surprised Ken. He’d seen the younger man’s animosity when his mother informed him that instead of bumming around Europe with his friends all summer, he was expected to stay in New York to help her with the merger. Jordy’s reaction had led Ken to believe that the son would do only the bare minimum to satisfy his mother’s condition. He fully expected Jordy to stroll in after nine, take long lunches, and skip out no later than five, surfing the web or chatting with his friends while actually stuck in the office. However, nothing could have been further from reality.

Once he accepted his fate, Jordy became a model employee, setting an impressive example for the entire staff. He showed up early, earlier even than Ken, and more often than not, stayed late as well. More impressive was the fact that his work product was always timely and impeccable. Even Jordy's mother, Rowena, had been surprised and Ken was duly impressed, except when this work ethic interfered with Ken's family plans.

Ken sighed and looked longingly out the window. He had hoped to take Nessa to the park that evening, taking advantage of the longer summer days, but it was already close to her bedtime and Jordy was obviously planning a late night.

Ken frowned at the wall that separated Jordy's office from his own. Despite the fact that he was finished with his work, he couldn't go home. When Rowena Ryder left for her business trip to Japan, she'd asked Ken to shadow Jordy at work, fully aware that the request would result in extensive overtime for her assistant.

"Can you make arrangements?" She had asked, always considerate of his special circumstances.

"I can." Ken replied simply. His boss would have understood if he could not, but he knew this was important to her and his overtime pay would more than cover the money he'd owe his college-aged neighbor for spending time with his father and sister and making sure they had everything they needed. It helped ease his conscience that both his dad and Nessa loved Kathleen.

"Good. I know it's an imposition, but I feel better knowing he's not alone here after hours," Rowena glanced down to hide her guilt-laden face.

"He's your only son and you worry. I'll be glad to stay. Of course, I can't do anything after he leaves the office."

"I know," she said curtly, a flush spreading up her neck. Ken instantly realized that despite her promise, Rowena had not terminated the private security firm who had kept watch over Jordy since his return home. They did so from a discreet distance once he went away to college, but they were always there, just in case. "Please don't say anything to Jordy. His privacy is

completely protected. They tell me nothing about what he does. They're just there to make sure he's safe."

"You can count on my discretion," he assured her. While he felt sorry for Jordy, Ken owed his loyalty to Rowena.

Privately, Ken thought Rowena was being too overprotective, and he found the idea that his presence in the office after hours gave her any sense of security downright comical. Although he was four years older than Jordy, he was shorter and smaller, with no athletic ability and limited self-defense training. Asking him to watch over anyone was like appointing a Chihuahua to guard dog duty. Still, Rowena had asked and he owed her way too much to even consider refusing. So every night this week he'd stayed a few minutes longer than Jordy. The younger man communicated his resentment through glowering looks, but Ken had no choice, so he simply affixed his professional blank mask, ignored the visual daggers, and remained at his guard post.

He had hoped Jordy would take pity on the both of them and leave earlier on a Friday night, but since that didn't look likely, Ken picked up the phone to let his family know not to expect him for dinner.

"Another late night?" Kathleen answered, and Ken was relieved she was already at their apartment without him even having to call her. He knew exactly how lucky the three of them were to have Kathleen living on the same floor. She was far more dependable than most girls her age and genuinely seemed to like them, which meant helping them was more than a paid chore.

"I'm afraid so. I'm not sure when I'll be back, but you don't have to stay until I get there," Ken informed her regretfully.

"Oh, I know. Your dad said the same thing. I'll leave after Nessa goes to bed. We're having chili cheese dogs for dinner, and I picked up a new movie out of the machine at the drugstore. It's rated PG and no violence."

Ken smiled at the way Kathleen anticipated both his concerns and his family's needs. "Chili cheese dogs, huh? Sounds like I'm missing out."

He actually didn't care much for chili cheese dogs, but they were Nessa's favorite and made a frequent appearance on their dinner rotation. It was an easy meal that his father and sister could handle even without Kathleen's help.

"You sure are," Kathleen said brightly. "Here's Nessa."

"Why do you have to work late today? It's Friday," his sister complained.

"I know, Nessa, but I will be home all weekend. And when this big project is done, I'll take a few days off and we'll do something fun," he cajoled.

"You promise?"

"I promise. And I'll tell you what, I might even be able to bring you something tonight."

"A bunny?"

"Is that what you'd like?"

"Yeah, I want a bunny. A real cute one!" she demanded.

Ken couldn't help smiling, and he wasn't the least concerned about finding a pet or toy store open late on a Friday night. Without having to say it, he and Nessa both knew he'd been offering to draw for her. She loved his drawings, and the walls of her room served as a gallery of his work.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do. Can I talk to Dad?"

He could hear Nessa carrying the phone to their father, who would likely be in his usual chair by the wide-open window. He liked to sit where he could feel the breeze on his face and listen to the sounds of the neighborhood. The window went up as soon as temperatures warmed in the spring and stayed up until the fall chill turned to outright cold. Hating to be cut off from the action, his father had refused to have a window air conditioning unit in the living room, even during the most sweltering New York summer heat. Ken finally put a unit in Nessa's room, and during the worst heat waves, he bunked down on the floor in her room at night. Whether in his bedroom or in the living room, however, their father was never far away from the open window.

"Hello, Son, they still working you hard over there?"

“A few more hours overtime, that’s all. How are you feeling today?”

“I could complain, but what good would it do?” his father gave his standard reply. “It’s no worse than usual.”

“Should I call Doctor Abramovitz to get you some more pain pills?”

“No! They’re too expensive and they dull my senses, which is the last thing I need. I worked a little with the clay today. It’s getting easier.”

“That’s excellent!” Ken swallowed past the lump forming in his throat. “I can’t wait to see when I get home... I need to go now, though,” he added after a moment of silence.

“Okay, kiddo. Be safe on the way home.”

Ken hung up and quickly wiped off the moisture that had collected in the corners of his eyes. It pained him to remember how much his father had lost in the accident that took Nessa’s and Ken’s mother. The responsibility of taking over as the head of the family weighed heavily on Ken, but his father’s burden was even greater.

Desperate for a distraction, Ken reached down into his messenger bag, pulling out his pencils and portfolio. He had always loved sketching and once had hoped to go to art school, but that would have been an extravagance even before the accident, and was absolutely impossible after. In a way, it was good that Ken had never gone down that road, because he couldn’t miss what he never had. Besides, there was little money to be made for most new artists, and his family needed him to bring in a good salary in order to make ends meet.

Ken did what he had to do without any resentment, especially after he landed the job with Ryder Corp. He knew with his minimal education he could have just as easily been a file clerk, or a receptionist at his best friend’s hair salon, or something even more menial and less lucrative. He didn’t love his job the same way he loved sketching, but he was damn grateful to be working for a demanding but respectful boss, and he took pride in his work. He satisfied himself by sketching in his spare time, except this week, when he’d had nothing else to do as he waited for Jordy to finish working and go home.

The top page in his portfolio was a sketch that was the embodiment of his fantasies. He'd managed to finish it the previous night, and in a moment of sheer vanity, even signed the piece, only belatedly realizing that by doing so he'd lost all ability to disassociate himself from the potentially incriminating image. He loved the picture, though, and even looking at it made him blush as his imagination inevitably leaped beyond what he could see on the page. This, however, was not the right time for those kinds of thoughts. Ken shoved the picture under the papers on his desk and took out a blank sheet, selecting the pencils he'd need to draw the bunny.

Forty-five minutes later he was done with his sketch, but still had not heard anything from the office next door that would indicate Jordy was close to finishing up for the night. Ken's stomach rumbled and he realized it had been nearly eight hours since either of them had eaten. This wasn't unusual. It seemed Jordy got so engrossed in his work he simply forgot about the basic necessities, leaving it up to Ken to remind him. Ken wondered if this was the real reason Rowena had asked him to stay and then decided that it didn't matter. The overtime pay was the same no matter what. He set his pencils aside, stood, and walked to the office next door.

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"It's getting pretty late. Would you like me to order dinner?"

Jordy glanced up, only partially surprised to find his mother's assistant and resident spy in the doorway to his office. It seemed while she was away, she had assigned Ken the task of keeping track of Jordy's comings and goings. He still managed to get to the office before Ken most days, a point of personal pride, but there hadn't been a single evening when Ken hadn't outlasted Jordy.

"I can order something from the Deli, or some Chinese food, or Indian?" Ken proposed in his officious tone.

Jordy had almost been ready to wrap things up for the night, but the opportunity to make Ken run all around the city to bring him a meal that fit his exact specifications was too tempting to pass up. He felt slightly evil as he began listing the various items he wanted from his favorite restaurants, which

he knew were out of delivery range and would require Ken to traverse a large swath of Manhattan during the typical Friday night rush. Then he remembered that Ken had hardly let him out of his sight the entire week, and his pity evaporated.

Ken committed Jordy's requests to memory without even having to write them down. Jordy would have been impressed, if it wasn't so annoying. He was pleased to see Ken's brows draw together in distress.

"It's late, and it may take me a while to get all that. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer something from restaurants around here?"

Jordy frowned with annoyance. It was the uptight assistant's job to do his mother's bidding, no questions asked, and in her absence Jordy felt he deserved the same.

"If I'm not mistaken, you're still on the clock at overtime rates, so the length of time shouldn't be a concern. And if it's your own stomach that concerns you, just get something for yourself first and eat it as you're getting the things I requested. Or is this too much of a challenge for you?"

Jordy deliberately baited Ken, hoping to provoke the other man into losing his cool, but Ken remained annoyingly calm. The only hint of emotion he displayed seemed more like disappointment and dismay than anger, and even those were so fleeting Jordy couldn't swear he'd actually seen them.

"Of course not, I'll be back as soon as I can. I keep some snacks for emergencies in the refrigerator in my office. There's not much—just some carrot sticks, hummus and a couple of apples, but please help yourself if you get too hungry while you're waiting," Ken offered and stepped out of Jordy's office, heading for the elevators. Jordy heard the telltale ding and the sliding noise as the doors opened and closed, and then the office fell into an eerie near silence.

He'd often been the first one in the office in the mornings, but he quickly discovered that things were different at night. All through the week, Jordy had been bothered by Ken's hovering, but only now that he was alone did he realize how much comfort he'd subconsciously derived from the other man's



presence. Noises and sounds that he'd never noticed before set his nerves on edge.

He knew the building was guarded and secured, and that no unauthorized person could enter after business hours, yet for the first time in years he felt vulnerable and regretted asking his mother to call off the bodyguards. It hadn't been easy to live life knowing that someone was being paid to watch his every move, but there was a time when that knowledge was the only thing that helped him overcome the paralyzing fear and leave the safety of their home. He thought enough time had passed for him to conquer his phobia. Clearly, he'd been wrong.

*It's okay. You're safe. No one can get you here, and they'd have no reason to even if they could,* he told himself silently, forcing himself to slow down his breathing and decelerate his anxious heart. He wasn't a scared, scrawny kid anymore. All the hours he'd spent with physical trainers and martial arts instructors had given him the body and skills to defend himself against any future would-be kidnapper. And yet, despite all that, Jordy felt a trickle of cold, fear-fueled sweat roll down his back. Reluctantly, he admitted that his mother had been right: he still wasn't ready to be alone.

It finally occurred to him that this must have been the reason his mother arranged for Ken to stay after hours, and that none of the fear he was now experiencing would have been necessary had he simply allowed Ken to place a delivery order for food. *Karmic payback's a bitch. That's what you get for being an asshole!*

Eventually he managed to calm himself enough for his hands to stop trembling and returned to his spreadsheet for distraction and escape. When Jordy next looked at his watch, Ken had been gone for forty minutes and Jordy's stomach was rumbling with complaint. He ignored the hunger pangs for another five minutes, but then decided to take Ken up on the offered snacks to help him avoid a headache and indigestion.

He only intended to take the offered food, but when he walked into the other man's office he couldn't help looking at the top of the desk. Predictably, Ken's work papers were stacked in neat, organized piles, but in the center of

the desk lay some color pencils and a detailed drawing of a bunny. It was a very cute bunny with dappled gray and brown coloring, sitting in a flowery meadow and munching on a dandelion leaf. The subject matter was oddly juvenile, but Jordy couldn't deny that Ken had talent and pulled the paper forward to take a closer look. There was another sketch underneath, and the image was shocking enough to cause Jordy to take a step back.

“What the fuck?” he asked aloud, even though there was no one to hear or answer. Cautiously, as though afraid that the subjects of the second sketch might suddenly spring to life off the page, he stepped forward again to peer at the drawing.

The sketch was of him and Ken, both of them drawn so well there could be no doubt as to their identities. Ken was wearing dark trousers and a light purple dress shirt, his hair immaculate as always. Jordy was only wearing dark dress pants and even those were partially undone, while his hair was drawn longer and wilder, the way it had looked before he started working at Ryder Corp. for the summer. In the sketch, he and Ken were locked in a passionate kiss in front of the floor to ceiling windows in his mother's office. The drawing was vivid and much too detailed. Ken had gotten every inch of Jordy right, down to the various ugly scars that marked his upper body. Jordy felt both repulsed and attracted by the drawing. His stomach churned, but he was shocked to realize that he was also growing aroused, and that was more disturbing than anything else.

He was still staring at the sketch when he heard the elevator ding announcing Ken's return. For a moment, he was paralyzed with indecision. He knew he should simply push the bunny sketch back in place and pretend he never saw the other picture, but he feared that in doing so he'd ensure that he'd never see it again, and somehow, oddly, that wasn't an option. He quickly grabbed the sketch and returned to his office, shoving the paper into a folder that he hastily placed inside his briefcase. He grabbed the mouse and put his laptop to sleep, not caring that without saving first he risked a crash that could wipe out much of the evening's work. He was in the process of slipping the laptop into his briefcase when Ken appeared in his doorway.

“I’m sorry it took so long. Traffic... are you leaving?”

“Yes, I’ve done all I can for tonight. I’ll get back to it tomorrow morning,” Jordy explained.

“But what about your food?” Ken was incredulous.

“I’ll just take it with me,” Jordy said, holding out his hand for the bag. “Is that all mine, or did you bring something back for you too?”

“Um, I did pick up something for me, but it’s right on top,” Ken reached in and withdrew a take-out container. “I am really sorry for the delay...” he tried to apologize again.

“It doesn’t matter. You still saved me a trip. Well, I’ll see you Monday.”

“See you,” Ken said, still sounding extremely surprised.

“You don’t have to bother coming in this weekend. I’ll be working from home. Have a good weekend,” Jordy said, taking the food bag from Ken as he passed him on his way out.

“I’ll call for a car for you,” Ken said behind him as Jordy waited for the elevator.

“Fine, I’ll wait in the lobby.”

On any other night Jordy might have argued that he’d take a cab home instead, but he was shaken enough, both by the fear he’d felt earlier and now by his reaction to the sketch, that he longed for the ride in a quiet limo rather than with an artificially chatty cab driver.

He waited in the lobby like a cat on a hot tin roof and darted into the car as soon as he saw it pull up. He was tense the entire limo and elevator ride back to the apartment, a tension that did not ease as he kicked off his shoes in the elaborate entryway and ran up the internal staircase to his room, avoiding their live-in housekeeper, Cara.

In his room, behind the door he’d slammed shut, Jordy threw himself on the bed and the dam finally broke. His body shook with deep, agonizing sobs. He didn’t want to remember, but memories came flooding in anyway. He

could feel all of it: the fear, the pain, the humiliation, the anger, and the desperation, all more clearly than he'd felt in years. He cried in frustration, knowing that this might never really be over and forgotten, that a trigger could come at any moment out of things that were completely innocent, like a quiet office, or a simple drawing. Eventually he grew tired, but his mind still raced so he went to the en suite bathroom and swallowed the sleeping pills he hadn't touched in months, then returned to his bed and waited until he drifted off into a chemically-induced slumber.

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Ken couldn't understand Jordy's rapid departure until he went back to his office and realized that the sketch he drew of the two of them together was gone. He cursed himself for stupidly leaving it on his desk, albeit hidden by the sketch of the bunny. Ken could well imagine what had happened: Jordy had gone into his office to snoop, and it wouldn't have taken him long to discover the drawing. What Ken couldn't understand was why Jordy had taken it. Why had he rushed out of the office instead of confronting Ken about it? The possible explanations he came up with were all bad. Either Jordy planned to show the sketch to his mother to convince her to fire Ken, or he'd try to use it to blackmail Ken.

Ken was panicked, but there was nothing he could do. With a heavy heart, he packed up his things and called the car service to take him home. It was a perk of the job he tried not to abuse, but this night he was too preoccupied to navigate the New York public transport as vigilantly as would be prudent given the time of night. As the car whisked him home to the tiny apartment in Queens, another thought occurred to Ken: Jordy may have simply been scared!

It was impossible to work at Ryder Corp. without hearing rumors about how overprotective the CEO was of her son and why. Ken was human, so he'd found accounts of the abduction: of Rowena's husband's being shot dead when he tried to stop the kidnapper; of Jordy's ultimate escape, weeks later; and of the way he provided information that led the police to not only capture his kidnapper, but also to bust up a huge pedophile network. Thankfully, none of the articles detailed exactly what had happened to Jordy while in captivity,

and the police had found enough other damning evidence that the perpetrator pled guilty without need for a trial or Jordy's testimony, but it didn't take a genius to imagine what the perverted men did with a thirteen-year-old, helpless boy. Ken saw confirmation of some of his suspicions in the building gym, where Jordy often worked out wearing only gym shorts, unconcerned about revealing his numerous scars.

Ken could easily imagine that a drawing of a man he barely knew and intensely disliked holding and kissing him could frighten Jordy or, at the very least, bring up some horrific memories. He buried his hands in his face, feeling profound regret and berating himself again for foolishly leaving the sketch out in the open. It took a few moments outside his apartment before he was finally able to compose himself enough to face his family without giving away just how awful his evening had been.

He hardly slept that night, tossing and turning with worry, imagining Jordy's demands that Rowena fire him. It wouldn't be an unreasonable request. A mother should fire an employee who made her son afraid and uncomfortable. But Ken needed the job too badly to simply accept termination. He would have to try to explain that the picture was innocent, just a man with a crush drawing out a fantasy. He'd somehow have to convince the both of them that he'd never act on his thoughts, and that he'd never draw anything like it again. He would even offer to take another position, one that would place him far away from Jordy, so the younger man would never have to see him. It would mean a pay cut, but it was better than losing the job completely.

Ever since he became Rowena Ryder's assistant, he'd been dreading the day he would lose the position. After all, he got the job through a stroke of good fortune that was simply too good to last forever. He had been working as a temp on an office cleaning crew and had been assigned to the executive floor of Ryder Corp. It was late and all offices but Rowena's had been empty. Ken couldn't help overhearing her curses, and out of habit, he offered to help. It was sheer luck that he happened to have the exact skills needed to fix a presentation Rowena's temporary assistant had thoroughly botched up, which

she happened to need first thing the following morning. After he'd fixed the file, at her request he and Rowena shared a take-out meal and talked. She told him about her son, who had just left for his first year at Princeton, and she got him to open up about his family and their dire situation. By the end of the night, she offered him a job as her executive assistant.

*"Ms. Ryder, I appreciate the offer, but I don't really have the right experience for that kind of a position," he pointed out.*

*"I didn't have the right kind of experience to lead a company once upon a time, but I managed to do it, and do it well, anyway. You helped me tonight, which tells me you have the skills I'm looking for, and I like you. I've gotten far in business following my gut instinct, and my gut tells me you're the right man for the job."*

*"Even if I was, I don't have the right clothes to work as a CEO's assistant, and I couldn't afford them."*

*"Say no more," she pulled out her wallet and gave him a card of a personal shopper at Saks Fifth Avenue.*

*"Paulette will make sure to get you everything you need and she'll put it on my account."*

*"But I won't be able to..."*

*She held up her hand firmly to stop his protest.*

*"This is a gift from me. Whether you stay at Ryder Corp. or leave, you'll have the clothes you need to find a similar position elsewhere. It's a gift for helping me tonight. No strings attached. Now, how much notice do you need to give to quit your current job?"*

Ken had felt overwhelmed, but he'd been smart enough not to try to give back the golden ticket he'd just been handed by a CEO of the leading PR firm in New York City. He showed up at Saks and allowed Paulette to select his new wardrobe and to arrange for an updated haircut at the store's salon. Nessa hardly recognized him when he came home with multiple bags filled with suits, shirts, belts, and socks. His father frowned, muttering something about

soul-sucking corporate devils, but knowing their financial situation, he hadn't tried to talk Ken out of taking the job.

Ken and Rowena got on well from the start. With her backing and through his diligent efforts to learn everything he didn't already know about assisting the CEO, he also soon earned the respect of the rest of the staff. He took his job seriously and made every effort to anticipate Rowena's needs and exceed her expectations to earn every penny of his generous salary, but he was always aware that in the corporate world no one was indispensable, least of all an assistant. He'd heard Rowena speak about Jordy often enough to know that if she had to make a choice between Ken and her son, there would be no contest.

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Jordy woke up with a dry mouth and a thick tongue and not particularly well rested, though if he'd had nightmares, the drugs had ensured he couldn't remember them. Two glasses of water only partially alleviated his condition, so he headed down to the building's gym to sweat out the remainder of the medication. He ran flat out for thirty minutes on the treadmill and did a corresponding thirty minutes with weights, followed by a shower back in his own bathroom and a full breakfast prepared by Cara to his exact specifications.

The food finally made him feel better, at least physically. Back in his room, he took out the sketch he'd stolen and felt sick over the whole debacle. Ken must have seen what happened immediately after Jordy left, and Jordy had no idea how he'd explain his actions, especially since he still didn't fully understand them himself.

He wasn't as affected by the picture as he had been the first time he'd seen it, but he couldn't deny that it stirred up feelings in him he had tried his best to suppress. He had the phone numbers of several therapists who would have made themselves available to talk to him, even on the weekend, but in that moment he wanted to speak with only one person.

"Cordie, something happened last night and I need to talk to you. Can you come over? Like right now?" he asked when his best friend answered her phone. She must have heard his desperation because she agreed to come

immediately, and twenty minutes later they were both in his room. They sat side by side on his king-size bed, their backs resting against the massive upholstered headboard.

Cordelia Lesnig was of average height with a trim, athletic body, pale ivory skin and an elf-like elongated face that was set off by straight, shoulder-length, black hair. She and Jordy met on the first day of first grade at the private school for the over-privileged children of Connecticut-dwelling Manhattan executives. At the time, Jordy thought she was a magical creature, and he hadn't changed his mind since, except about the nature of her magic. He no longer believed she was a pixie or a fairy, but he knew well enough that she was the only one who could lift his spirits when he descended into those dark places that he desperately fought to leave behind.

Except for his time in captivity, they had always been together, nearly inseparable. They were both only children of their respective parents, and felt as close as siblings. Jordy knew their parents hoped they would eventually grow into more than friends, and under different circumstances perhaps they might have, but they'd been too young to contemplate such things before he was abducted, and afterwards the idea of being loving and intimate with anyone was too difficult for him to contemplate. He wouldn't have wished his broken self on the girls he hated, much less on the one who had always been his better half. He played the overprotective brother/friend when she started dating other boys, but it was only to keep her out of the clutches of self-absorbed jerks. Jordy had backed off when she'd found the first guy worthy of her attentions, and every decent guy since, including her current boyfriend, Thomas. For his part, Thomas understood the unbreakable Jordy-Cordie bond, and seemed to hold no grudges when Cordelia flew to Jordy's side whenever he expressed a need.

“What’s wrong, Jordy? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“Not a ghost,” Jordy shook his head. “Just a bad reflection, maybe. I don’t really know.”

“I’m a little lost. Why don’t you tell me what this is all about?”



Jordy reached over to his nightstand for the sketch and handed it to her. She contemplated it for a moment, and then abruptly turned, sitting cross-legged on his side to be able to see him better.

“What is this? Who drew it? Is it real?” She peppered him with questions.

“I don’t know what it is, exactly. I found it on my mother’s assistant’s desk. It has his signature, so I assume he drew it. That’s him in the picture with me. But nothing like this ever happened, and I have no idea why he drew it.”

Cordelia frowned, looked back down at the sketch, and then glanced at him dubiously.

“I think it’s pretty obvious why he drew it. He’s got the hots for you, dummy! Has he said or done anything?”

“No!” Jordy’s head snapped violently from side to side. “And I never did anything to make him think... I mean, I don’t think I did... I mean, I’m not attracted to him... I mean I wasn’t... I mean...”

“You don’t really know what you mean, do you?” Cordelia spoke gently. “Are you attracted to him?”

“No! I’m not... that way. I can’t be.” He reached for the drawing and returned it to the nightstand, face down.

“Can’t be what? Gay?”

Jordy looked away, but didn’t try to resist when she reached for his hand. Cordelia could be extremely tactful or extremely blunt, depending on which approach she deemed better suited for the occasion, but she was never deliberately cruel, and Jordy knew she wasn’t trying to hurt him. He hadn’t expected her to challenge him like this, though.

“Since you’ve been back, you’ve always avoided talking about your attraction to people, boys or girls. I know it’s a sensitive subject, and I never wanted to push, but...”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t!” Jordy insisted.

She let out a small, exasperated sigh.

“Then why did you ask me to come here? Why did you show me the sketch? I thought you were finally going to open up. There’s nothing wrong with being gay.”

Jordy turned to look at her with horror-filled eyes. She reached for his other hand and squeezed both tight.

“What happened to you, it was sick and wrong, but not because you were a boy and the...” she paused, “It was because you were just a kid, and it was done against your will, not because of the genders.”

Jordan’s eyelids slammed shut. Behind them, he saw the room that had been his cell, illuminated only by a few rays of light filtering through the gaps between the boards that covered up the window and prevented his escape or any contact with the outside world. He remembered the restraints; the creak of the door that announced a new visitor; the vile, acrid odors that permeated the air even as he shut his eyes to dull his senses. He remembered the devices they used and the things they forced him to do. Worst of all, he remembered the one who had been gentle, who coaxed but never forced, the one who wasn’t technically raping him because despite his best efforts Jordy couldn’t hide his reaction, and they both knew he had enjoyed the things that man did.

“Jordy, hey Jordy. Are you with me? Come on. Should I call someone?” Cordelia’s worried tone brought him back to the present.

“I’m okay,” he said slowly, “or at least as okay as I’ll ever be. I’ll never be able to forget, will I?”

“Maybe not. Certainly not if you never do anything to replace those awful memories with some good ones. Jordy, you can’t spend the rest of your life alone. I can’t even imagine how difficult it must be for you, but you have to try to make a connection with someone, to let yourself fall in love.”

Abruptly, he shifted his feet to the floor, stood and began pacing, his hands repeatedly clenching into fists.

“You think it’s just that easy, huh? Fall in love, fall in bed, and shazam!—Jordy’s cured!”

“I never said it would be easy...”

“It’s not going to happen, all right? Don’t you get it? I’m damaged. Falling in love is for normal people, not for someone like me. And even if I could fall in love, it’s not a one-way street to the cure, is it? Someone would have to fall in love with me too.”

He walked up to the window and looked down at Central Park. It was a beautiful summer day and he easily imagined happy couples strolling or picnicking down below. That was their reality. It would never be his.

He felt her come up behind him and allowed her to wrap her arms around him. She rested her cheek against his back.

“You have no idea how easy it is to love you, Jordy. I’d bet everything I own there have been dozens and dozens of people who’ve crushed on you, if not outright fallen in love with you over the years. You just need to open your heart to one of them. And based on that sketch, I know just the guy!”

Jordy pulled himself out of her embrace, frightened by the surge of excitement he felt at her pronouncement. He could not let this happen, and yet he knew that once Cordelia got something in her head, it was almost impossible to dislodge it. The only option was to go on the offensive.

“Why?” he turned around and pointed his finger at his friend.

“Why what?”

“Why would you assume I’d even consider it? I’ve never been interested in men!”

“Jordy...” she had that look of pity on her face that he hated so much. The look that said she thought a village somewhere was missing its idiot and he’d be the perfect candidate for the job. “I’ve never seen you look twice at a girl, except to note if the clothes she was wearing were from this season or last. You even comment on handbags!”

Jordy started, but could not deny the truth of her statement.

“Straight men don’t pay attention to stuff like that,” she added, as if he wasn’t able to infer her meaning.

“They do if their best friend is obsessed with fashion and fills their heads with a bunch of useless information,” he defended.

“No, they don’t,” she stated firmly.

“So that’s it? One wrong interest and my sexual preference is set?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Of course that’s not it. There’s a lot more. But you don’t really need me to spell it out for you, do you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I do, since you seem to know me better than I know myself.”

“Finally! You finally admitted it!” she said triumphantly.

“What? I didn’t admit to anything!”

“You admitted I know you better than you know yourself. Now just do what I tell you, and everything will be fine.”

“Like hell! Let’s assume, only for the sake of argument, that I am... open-minded. I’m not saying I am...”

“I know, I know. Just get on with it.”

“Why would you push me towards the first guy who showed interest, some stranger you don’t even know? I’ve vetted every guy you’ve ever dated!”

“Often without my consent, and sometimes against my wishes!”

“Maybe, but it was my job to look out for you, when you were too ga-ga to do it yourself.” He started feeling better, suspecting he’d just stumbled on a perfect way to derail her plans. “This guy has, like, zero personality. He’s as stiff as a nail, hardly ever cracks a smile. And he’s my mother’s assistant. How would that look? Not that it matters, since regardless of how he may or may not feel about me, I’m definitely not interested in him.”

“Uh-huh. Right. That’s why you took the sketch. Because you’re not interested.”

“You’re changing the subject. Why don’t you answer my questions?”

Cordelia bit her lip and he knew he had her! She only ever did that when she was at a loss for a counterargument. Then her face brightened and his fell.

“I’ve got it! I’ll stop by your office Monday at lunchtime. I haven’t seen your mother in ages, so I’ll pop in to say hello, and that way I’ll meet him. Then I can judge for myself if he’s as unsuitable as you claim he is.”

Jordy started to protest but she held out her palm to stop him.

“Save it. We’re having lunch Monday and that’s final. Now, Thomas and I were going to go to a concert in the park this afternoon. Would you like to go with us?”

Jordy looked back out at the park. It was tempting to tag along with Cordelia and Thomas, if only so he could get away from that sketch, but he didn’t want to interfere with their plans. Besides, she would only pick on him, something he didn’t need.

“No thanks,” he waved towards the door, “you two lovebirds have fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve got work to do. Say hello to Thomas.”

“I will. Bye, Jordy!” She came up to him and lifted to her tiptoes to give him a soft kiss on the cheek. “I only want you to be happy, you know.”

“I know. Now go, before you get any other crazy ideas.”

“Okay. See you Monday!”

She left, but the lightness she’d brought with her stayed behind along with the subtle scent of her perfume. Jordy tried to tell himself that he wasn’t looking forward to Monday except that, as he picked up the sketch again, he had to admit that he kind of was looking forward to it after all.

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Ken thought he'd managed to hide his distress all weekend so as not to worry his family, but after Nessa went to bed Sunday night his dad asked if he was having trouble at work.

"Not really. Things are just a little stressful right now, with everyone so focused on this big project."

"I know you're working very hard for us, and I wish there was something I could do to help. It shouldn't be like this. You shouldn't have to bear so much responsibility. I can tell how heavily it weighs on you."

"I don't mind, Dad. Really, I don't. In fact, I love that we're all together."

"Well, if the job gets to be too much, quit. We'll manage somehow," his father tried to sound convincing, even though they both knew they could never manage without Ken's income.

"If it ever gets to be too much I will, but you know I like my job. Sure, it's demanding, sometimes more than others, but it's fulfilling too, and Rowena is a great boss."

"I just hate that you can't live your own life because you have to take care of us. Instead of spending all your time working and here with us, you should be out with your friends, or a boyfriend."

Ken winced as his dad's offhand comment found its mark, but he kept his voice neutral. "I go out as often as I want to, but I also like spending time with you and Nessa. Now would you stop trying to get rid of me? You'll give me a complex."

He carefully sidestepped the boyfriend subject and though his dad probably noticed, he didn't push Ken to discuss it. Instead, he returned to his seat by the window and started working the clay again while Ken prepared lunches for the following day. As he made sandwiches, Ken couldn't help but think about how the car accident seven years before had changed all their lives forever.

At the time, his dad had been an artist on the verge of success, his paintings finally selling at modest prices at a trendy Manhattan gallery. Ken's mom had held down an office job throughout their marriage, carrying the family medical

benefits and earning enough to pay for life's necessities, while her husband struggled for a breakthrough in the art world, and the investment was finally starting to pay off.

Other women might have complained through the years, but she never had. Growing up, Ken remembered always being happy and feeling loved. What their family lacked in wealth, they made up for in other ways, so Ken had never felt deprived.

When Ken turned thirteen, his mother announced she was pregnant, and with Nessa's arrival, the three musketeers became four. It took Ken a while to adjust, but he soon grew to love the little sister who hung on his every word and gave him sunshine-filled smiles. And then, a month after Ken's eighteenth birthday, a horrific car crash reduced their number back to three.

Ken wrapped the sandwiches and placed them in the fridge, wiping a tear as he did so. He still missed his mother every day; they all did. The years since her death had not erased the memories or the pain. It was somewhat easier now, but Ken didn't believe they would ever get over their loss, especially not his father.

As if he knew Ken was thinking about him, his dad carefully packed up the clay and rose from his chair, reaching for the cane that hung from the back rest. "Time for me to turn in. And you too!"

"Yeah, Dad. I'm almost ready. Lunches are done."

"I could hear that," his father acknowledged. He began shuffling towards the bathroom, his stiff-jointed movements making him seem far older than his years. He knew the apartment so well, he hardly needed the cane. He was halfway down the narrow hallway when he paused and half turned back. "I don't tell you often enough how proud of you I am, Son. I don't know any other eighteen-year-old kid who could have stepped up the way you did, or one who would have stuck around as long as you have. I'm sure your Mom is really proud of you too!"

Ken smiled and then, remembering his dad couldn't see his expression, said, "Thanks! That means a lot."

“Don’t stay up too late. You’ll get too few hours of sleep as it is,” his dad admonished before disappearing into the bathroom.

After yet another restless night, Ken arrived at the office at his regular time and did his best to maintain his professional facade even though his heart was pounding wildly and his palms were damp and clammy. For the first time all summer, Jordy was not there before him, but if anything, this made Ken even more nervous. As the day wore on, his muscles began to feel like a macramé plant holder he’d seen hanging off his elderly neighbor’s fire escape—at once stretched taut and full of knots of various shapes and sizes. Jordy and Rowena came in together, but Jordy had remained in his office, and Rowena gave no indication that anything was amiss even as she debriefed him on what had gone on at the office in her absence.

“Thank you for your diligence, Ken,” she told him, seeming entirely sincere. “I appreciate you keeping a close eye on everyone, especially Jordy. And I really appreciate your willingness to work overtime last week.”

“Please don’t mention it. It was no trouble,” Ken had muttered, his normally pale cheeks coloring. Rowena wouldn’t be cruel enough to say nothing if Jordy had told her about the sketch, which meant that Jordy had kept quiet. Ken should have felt relieved, but his tension simply mounted as he contemplated how else Jordy might use the drawing.

Right before noon, the decibel level outside Ken’s office unexpectedly dropped. He was about to investigate when he heard an unfamiliar female voice in Jordy’s office.

“I can’t believe you’ve been back for weeks and we still haven’t had lunch. I’m so glad you finally let me pull you away from the desk. Just let me say Hi to your mom. I haven’t seen her in ages.”

In seconds, a pretty, porcelain-skinned, dark-haired girl walked into his office with Jordy in tow. She threw one glance at the closed door to Rowena’s office before making a beeline for Ken’s desk.



“Hi, I’m Cordelia Lesnig. My family and the Ryders are neighbors in Greenwich. I’d just like to poke my head in and say hello to Mrs. Ryder. Is she available?”

Ken swallowed to lubricate his drying throat and glanced at his desk phone, which showed that Rowena was using her landlines.

“Just a second. Let me check,” he said formally, grateful for the distraction that allowed him to avoid looking directly at Jordy. He pressed the intercom between his and Rowena’s office and waited for her to pick up.

“Ms. Cordelia Lesnig is here to see you. Do you have a moment?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll be right out.”

Ken frowned. Ordinarily Rowena preferred to have him show her visitors into her office. He couldn’t think of a single person who had caused Rowena to meet them halfway, other than her son. But then, if Cordelia was the girl next door, then perhaps Rowena thought of her as a kind of a daughter, or maybe a potential daughter-in-law? Ken tried to subtly evaluate Cordelia and flushed for the second time that day when he realized she had him under close scrutiny as well.

*Was this the way Jordy planned to ambush me? Ken wondered. Maybe he told his girlfriend, and she was here to ensure that Rowena knew exactly what kind of a man she had hired to assist her?*

Any further speculation was cut off by Rowena opening her office door.

“Cordie, how are you? It’s so good to see you!” she exclaimed as she swept the younger woman into a warm hug. “How are your parents? And school?”

“Everything’s just fine. Mom and Dad are in Europe for the summer, and I’m working on my pieces for my thesis exhibition. It’s very exciting, but scary too. I’ve been busy, but not as busy as Jordy claims to be. I practically had to beg him this weekend to agree to have lunch with me today. Would you like to join us?”

“Much as I would love to, I’m afraid I have a previous engagement. Isn’t that right, Ken? By the way, Cordie, this is my assistant, Ken.”

As Rowena made the introductions, Ken’s frown deepened. He knew for a fact that Rowena had no lunch plans this day. After all, he had been the one to keep her schedule open on her express instructions.

“Hi, Ken. Nice to meet you. Jordy’s told me so much about you. Would you like to join us for lunch in Rowena’s stead?”

Alarms began going off in Ken’s head. Whatever Jordy had told her, it could not have been favorable. Ken felt nothing good could come from accepting this invitation.

“No, thank you. It’s very kind of you, but...”

“You should go. I know for a fact you worked really hard last week and you deserve a nice lunch out. Besides, this will give you and Jordy a chance to get to know one another,” Rowena unexpectedly encouraged. Ken’s back stiffened. The situation was highly suspicious. He didn’t know what exactly was happening or why, but he instinctively wanted nothing to do with it.

“I’m sure Ms. Lesnig and Jordy don’t need a third wheel at lunch.”

“If that was the case I wouldn’t have asked. You must come!” Cordelia enthused.

Ken looked around his small office, trying to find a task that might save him from this forced interaction. The fact that Jordy looked equally unhappy with the plan only confused him more.

“Please, Ken, I insist. You truly deserve this.”

Ken didn’t know if Rowena’s phrasing had been intentional, but she’d hit a button that made it impossible for him to refuse. However miserable the idea of this lunch made him, after what he’d done the previous week, he certainly deserved it. He gave a curt nod and almost winced when Cordelia clapped in victorious delight.

Ken was reserved and wary on the way to the restaurant, but Cordelia skillfully manipulated the conversation and was quickly able to overcome his

defenses. She directed the conversation like a magician wielding a wand, guiding it this way and that with impeccably timed questions and comments designed to extract the information she desired. Ken was aware of her tactics, but he was also helplessly swept up in her charisma.

Halfway into the lunch, after neither Jordy nor Cordelia mentioned the sketch, Ken began to relax. Jordy hadn't said much at all, but Ken couldn't sense any malice. Whatever his reaction to the drawing, Jordy seemed intent on keeping it to himself.

By the time their waiter was clearing the dishes, Cordelia knew more about Ken than most of his good friends, though he only shared the basics about his home life. They talked about work and hobbies, and when he'd reluctantly admitted his interest in drawing, she explained that she was in the Masters of Visual Arts program at the Columbia University School of the Arts, and hoped to have a career in furniture design. Ken was envious of her opportunities, but she was far too charming and vivacious for him to be resentful.

If the lunch had been Rowena's attempt to get her son and Ken to bond, it had been a dismal failure. Jordy hardly spoke throughout the meal, preferring to sulk silently over his food. His discomfort visibly increased when Ken talked about drawing, but still he said nothing. This would have bothered Ken a great deal had Cordelia not provided a perfect distraction. And then, suddenly, Cordelia looked at her watch and gave a horrified gasp.

"Look at the time! I was having so much fun I got carried away, and if I don't leave right now I'll be late for my appointment with my advisor. Jordy, be a doll and take care of the check?"

Before either Ken or Jordy could say a word, she was out of her chair and breezily kissing them both on their cheeks before rushing out of the restaurant. The two men were left staring at each other in a stunned silence that grew more awkward with each passing moment. Jordy finally looked away, trying to catch the eye of their waiter to request the check.

“I’m sure he’ll be here shortly,” Ken finally said when Jordy’s visual search yielded no waiter. He was still scared, but the tension was killing him and he decided to stop avoiding the elephant in the room.

“While we wait for him to come back, I want to apologize for what you found in my office Friday night. You were never meant to see that.”

“I figured,” Jordy muttered, avoiding Ken’s eyes. “Why did you draw that?”

“I often draw things I see in my head, but this was stupid, reckless. It will never happen again.”

“But why me?” Jordy pressed. “I’m not...”

Ken narrowed his eyes. Was this the problem? Did Jordy believe Ken was somehow trying to make him into something he wasn’t? Ken had suspected for a while that Jordy was gay, but had never had any confirmation. Maybe he’d been wrong, or maybe Jordy still hadn’t accepted that part of himself? Regardless, it was just another reason for Jordy to be uncomfortable with the drawing.

“Like any man, I have fantasies, and since I *am* gay, mine are about other men.”

“It doesn’t matter if they’re gay or not?”

“They’re fantasies.” Ken shrugged.

“Well you shouldn’t be... fantasizing... about me.”

Ken noted Jordy shifting uncomfortably in his chair. The younger man’s discomfort was rolling off him in waves that Ken was sure could be felt by all the other restaurant patrons.

“Okay. I’ll stop.”

“Just like that?” Jordy looked up at him abruptly and with suspicion.

“Yes. I can control who I think about. You asked me to stop, so I’ll stop. I would have never done anything about those thoughts anyway, except

drawing. Like I said, I never wanted you to find out, to make you uncomfortable in any way.”

“So you’ll just... stop?”

“Yes.” Ken kept his tone firm in response to the incredulity in Jordy’s voice. Jordy snorted, unconvinced. “Look, part of a fantasy is the mystery. It’s easy to think about someone who’s practically a stranger. Now that we’ve interacted, shared a meal...”

“Spending time with me makes me less desirable?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean? And why are you always so freaking calm? We might as well be talking about the filing system instead of your secret sex drawings!”

Ken flushed. He kept his eyes trained straight ahead, certain that people at nearby tables had overheard Jordy’s complaint. He’d been prepared for humiliation, just not anywhere this public. It would have been easy to let his emotions get the better of him, but instead Ken took a deep breath, trying to absorb some of Jordy’s excess frustration. He’d seen similar reactions when his father had first learned to cope with the limitations of his disabilities, and he knew the best he could do was to remain calm in the face of the storm.

“I can’t help what happened in the past. All I can do is apologize and make sure it doesn’t happen again. And I’m calm because I have few options. You have every right to be angry with me. I accept that. I don’t have a corresponding right.”

Jordy calmed down and looked positively sheepish.

“I don’t have the right to be angry. You haven’t done anything to me. I went into your private office and snooped around. I saw something that I was never meant to see. And to make matters worse, I stole it!”

“I don’t care about that. But... did you destroy it?”

Jordy shook his head.

“What do you plan to do with it? Your mother knows I’m gay, but if you show her the drawing she’ll probably...” He was too superstitious to finish the sentence.

“She wouldn’t do anything. She’d understand, especially if you explained it the way you did just now. But she’ll never see it. I’ll bring it back for you tomorrow.”

“If you do, you can watch me shred it. Then you’ll know for sure no one else will ever see it.”

They fell back into silence. Their waiter materialized to see how they were doing and disappeared again when Jordy requested the check. A nagging thought took root in Ken’s mind. It wasn’t exactly a good time for this discussion, but he knew he might never have another chance.

“Why do you dislike me so much? Is it because I’m gay?” he finally blurted out.

“I...” Jordy had been about to protest, but stopped. He thought a moment before he spoke again. “No. I didn’t even consider that before Friday. I just... well... you’re just always so competent and professional, and you obviously live and breathe Ryder Corp., like my Mom. I see how much she appreciates that and how much she trusts and depends on you. Sometimes I get this feeling that all I do is disappoint her.”

“That’s just not true! You couldn’t find a mother who’s prouder of her son. She’s always talking about you, how someday you’ll be running Ryder Corp.”

Jordy sighed and Ken stopped, then tried a slightly different approach.

“To be honest, before this summer I assumed you were an overprivileged, spoiled rich kid, undeserving of all her praise. But I was wrong. I’ve watched you, and you work really hard. You know what you’re doing and you add value. You may not be ready yet, but someday you’ll easily step into your mother’s shoes.”

“Right, thanks,” Jordy said with more resignation than appreciation. Their waiter brought the check and Ken had time to consider Jordy’s response as the other man pulled out his wallet and extracted a credit card.

“Obviously I’m missing something,” Ken said when the waiter left to scan the card.

“Look, she and I both know I could take over Ryder Corp. someday. But Ryder Corp. was hers and my father’s dream, not mine.”

Ken sat back, stunned. Knowing how much Rowena had sacrificed to build up the company, all for the benefit of her only son, he wanted to rage at Jordy for being an ungrateful selfish brat. But then he wasn’t completely unsympathetic. As far back as he could remember, from the moment he’d shown a talent for drawing, everyone had compared him to his father and talked about him taking over his father’s legacy someday. At the time, he was flattered by the comparison, but if he were to pursue art as a career now, he’d want to be more than just his father’s shadow, however difficult that might be.

“What’s your dream?”

“I want to start my own business, with Cordie. She’s an amazing designer, but she has no head for marketing or finance. With her talent and my brains, I’m sure we could make a go of it.”

Ken let his imagination take him to a boutique storefront displaying quirky, one-of-a-kind furniture pieces, the kind only the very wealthy could ever afford. He had been impressed by Cordelia’s passion when she talked about her designs, just as he was now impressed by Jordy’s drive to achieve independent success.

“Why couldn’t you do both? Rowena isn’t ready for retirement yet. I’m sure if you shared your idea with her, she’d be open to continuing at Ryder while you built up your venture with Cordelia. Eventually you’d have people running the business for you, and you could have the helm at both companies.”

Jordy looked at him, and for the first time Ken saw absolutely no contempt in his expression. He felt a tiny flutter in his belly that he immediately tried to quash, but his body wasn’t cooperating.

“You’re the first person besides Cordie who not only heard me out, but didn’t tell me I was crazy to consider going out on my own. Don’t you think I shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth and just fall in line at Ryder?”

“The Trojans didn’t look their gift horse in the mouth, and where did that get them? Everything about Ryder makes sense for you, but just because it makes sense, doesn’t make it right. It would have made a lot more sense for my father to take on some menial job instead of painting, but my mother wouldn’t hear of it even as she carried the financial load for our entire family. She used to say that only the lucky few hear the call of their destiny, but those who do should follow their inspiration.”

“I’m sorry about your mom. I should have said that earlier, when you were telling Cordie. I know how hard it is to lose a parent.”

“Thank you, and I’m sorry about your dad too,” Ken ventured, hoping the mention of Jordy’s father wouldn’t bring up too many traumatic memories. Fortunately, Jordy seemed to be fine.

The waiter brought back the check and Jordy signed for the meal and tip, graciously accepting the waiter’s thanks.

“Guess we’d better go,” he said, and Ken thought he sensed a slight reluctance, which made his stomach flip again.

They stood up and headed for the exit, walking out onto the crowded Manhattan sidewalk. Ken felt the urge to grab Jordy’s hand, which he stifled by balling his fist and shoving it into his pants pocket. Despite the rough beginning, the lunch turned out to be a success, and he wanted nothing more than a repeat experience.

“Your mother mentioned she wanted us to get to know each other, and we’re off to a decent start. Maybe we could have lunch together again? It would be nice to have someone my age to talk to. Most of the younger staff don’t want to hang out with the boss’s assistant.”

Ken wasn’t concerned when Jordy did not respond immediately, because he could tell the other man was evaluating the proposition.



“Okay,” Jordy finally replied. “An occasional lunch would be nice, and it would make Mom happy.”

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Jordy tried to focus on the spreadsheet displayed on the computer screen, but his eyes kept darting to the clock as it slowly moved past two o’clock. He was distracted by a powerful mix of emotions about the charity reception he was scheduled to attend with Ken. Usually his mother handled such high-profile events herself, but on this particular afternoon she and other Ryder Corp. executives were meeting with their counterparts at Kronar in an attempt to smooth out some merger glitches, so neither she nor any of the company vice-presidents could be spared to oversee the reception.

“All the details have been seen to by the events team. You’re there just to show the client that we value their business,” his mother said when he expressed reservations about attending the function.

“How will they get that impression if you send the most junior of employees to represent our company?”

“I’m not sending a junior employee. I’m sending my son!” his mother dismissed his concerns.

“But I don’t know anything about this event or this group. What if I mess up?”

“Ken will give you a primer beforehand and he’ll attend with you. He’ll be your right hand man and will give you any information you need in real time. And before you say it, he’s not going as your babysitter. He would have gone with me too, and done exactly the same thing. I know our clients better than you do, but even I can’t remember all of the pertinent details, while Ken somehow manages to maintain an encyclopedic knowledge of them and has near-instant recall.”

Jordy knew that he’d been outmaneuvered. His mother had silenced all his reasonable objections before he could even voice them. He couldn’t tell her that there was another reason why he didn’t want to go to the gala with Ken.

Even though it was a business function, Jordy worried it would feel too much like a date with a man who'd taken up residence in Jordy's fantasies.

He and Ken had been having lunch together at least twice a week, and they were getting to know one another quite well. In fact, after only a few weeks, Jordy was sure Ken knew him better than anyone except Cordelia. This wouldn't have been a problem if Jordy had been able to keep his feelings for Ken confined to friendship, even a warm friendship. That, however, hadn't been the case.

Although Ken promised he wouldn't destroy the sketch when Jordy returned it after their lunch with Cordelia, Jordy had also secretly made a copy of the drawing just in case, and found himself staring at it every night. He found it disturbingly exciting, and while he resisted at first, eventually he'd started touching himself as he imagined their passionate embrace. At first, he did his best to ignore the implications of those acts, but eventually he acknowledged that he wanted more than friendship from Ken, and that desire terrified him.

To Jordy's frustration, Ken kept his word and never again even hinted at any feelings for Jordy beyond friendship. He'd gotten over Jordy far too quickly for Jordy's taste, especially given the equally rapid change in Jordy's own feelings in the opposite direction. It seemed their roles had reversed, and Jordy felt at a distinct disadvantage.

“Ready to go?”

Jordy looked up at the sound of Ken's voice. He had to work hard to keep his admiration off his face. When he'd first met him, Jordy thought the dress shirts and ties made Ken look too stiff, but now he had to admit that Ken wore his professional clothes well, his body accepting the slim-cut style he preferred with no need for alteration. Most days, Ken shed his suit jacket immediately upon arrival, so Jordy didn't have a lot of time to admire the total package. Now, however, Ken wore the full ensemble. He wore a suit that Jordy had only seen a couple of times, obviously his best, and the way he looked in it almost made it too difficult for Jordy to stand up. With a deep inhale through

his nose, he managed to calm himself. He stood, reaching to pick up his suit jacket from where it was hanging on the back of his chair.

“I’m nervous.”

He would have never admitted this to Ken before, but now he felt comfortable enough to know the confession wouldn’t be used against him. Ken didn’t need to know exactly what he was nervous about.

“No need. You look amazing and I’ll be right by your side to make sure you know who everyone is and what you need to say. I’ve done this many times for your mother.”

“She told me. I know I’m in good hands with you,” Jordy said and then quickly turned away, using the effort to shrug on his jacket to hide his embarrassed flush.

Although the Plaza was within walking distance of their offices, his mother had insisted they take the car, worried that the late July heat would cause them to appear less than crisp at the start of the event. Jordy didn’t mind, but as he and Ken shared the back seat he found it difficult to ignore Ken’s hand, which rested on the seat between them, and he wanted to reach over and cover it with his own. He knew his thoughts were inappropriate and completely adolescent, but this was the first time he’d ever allowed his attraction for another guy to take hold, and he didn’t know how to control it.

Things became a little easier once they reached the Terrace Room at the Plaza. Although they were among the early arrivals, there were still enough other people there to distract Jordy as Ken explained who everyone was and steered Jordy towards the woman who hired Ryder Corp. to organize the event. Ken and Jordy knew his mother had called in advance to explain why she would not be able to attend, so Ken needed only to make the introductions. He then stood at Jordy’s side, smiling pleasantly but only participating in the conversation when called to do so, letting Jordy take the spotlight. Between his mother and Ken, Jordy was well prepared for this encounter, and his success in charming the woman boosted his self-confidence. Being sure of Ken’s solid support helped ease his nerves as well.

For the next several hours, he and Ken mingled among current and prospective clients, mostly limiting their conversation to the fundraising effort that was the goal of the afternoon, and only subtly slipping in reminders that Ryder Corp. organized the event. By the end of the event, Jordy was tired of talking and smiling, but he had business cards from several prospective clients and he basked in the glow of Ken's approving smile.

"You're a natural! Rowena could not have sent a better ambassador to represent Ryder Corp. She hardly could have done a better job herself. Those women were tripping over themselves to give you their business and the men weren't far behind," Ken praised.

Jordy beamed. He'd been growing tired, but upon hearing Ken's assessment he felt lighter than air.

"Let's celebrate! My first big event as the company's representative and I managed to get through it! You have to help me mark the occasion."

"You did more than just get through it. You sailed through it! Watching you was a thing of beauty."

"I couldn't have done it without you. So what do you say? What should we do? We need a drink!"

"You're not twenty-one yet," Ken pointed out. Jordy frowned. He had thought Ken's suggestion that they stick to sparkling cider during the reception was because they were there to work, but now he wondered if it was just that he thought Jordy was too young and immature to handle his liquor.

"I have an ID that says I am."

"But it would not be in Ryder Corp.'s best interest if someone checked and that ID turned out to be false. Or worse yet, if someone published a picture of Jordy Ryder drinking in a hotel bar following a charity fundraiser," Ken explained calmly. "I suppose we could have a soda."

"Oh, no. I am not going to celebrate with a soda. My place is just down the street, and there's no one to check ID's or take pictures. You have time, right?"

It was seven o'clock on a Friday, and Jordy knew he was being presumptuous, but then he'd seen Ken stay at work much later on other Fridays.

"I could come over for a drink. Let me call my family to let them know I'll be late."

Jordy left to use the restroom to give Ken some privacy for his call. Afterwards, it took only a few minutes for them to reach the Ryders' apartment.

"It's been weird staying in the city the whole summer. We haven't been to the Connecticut house once. Mom and I have both been too busy with the merger. I suppose now that I'm graduating, there's really no reason to keep it. Mom should sell," Jordy opined in the elevator.

"Have you shared that with her?"

"No. I just thought of it now. You think I should?"

"I think she's holding onto the house for you. She wouldn't make a unilateral decision to sell your childhood home."

Jordy glanced at Ken, hearing the message between the lines. "For a couple of years, it was the only place I felt safe. But I don't need that giant security blanket anymore. I guess I need to let Mom know. Hi Cara, I'm home. And I brought a friend," Jordy called out as they stepped into the apartment.

"Hello, Jordy. Should I fix you something to eat? Oh, hello Ken," Cara said as she appeared from around the corner. Jordy knew he shouldn't have been taken aback by the fact that Cara and Ken knew each other. After all, they both worked for his mother, and it would have been natural for them to meet. Nevertheless, he found their familiarity unwelcome, especially when Cara hugged Ken warmly and asked about his family. He knew it was selfish, but he had hoped he wouldn't have to compete for Ken's attention in his own house.

"We've been grazing on hors d'oeuvres all afternoon, but maybe something light? What do you think, Ken?"

“Please don’t trouble yourself, Cara. I’m really quite full,”

“It’s no trouble. I’ll make pasta primavera, enough for you to take home, too.”

“Really, that’s unnecessary,” Ken tried to protest, but she walked back in the direction of the kitchen. “I’m sorry. I tried to stop her.”

“It’s all right. It’ll be nice to have dinner together. What are you drinking?” Jordy strode over to the antique cabinet that had been retrofitted to hold not just the liquor, but also the refrigerator and ice maker.

“I’m not picky, but I’m also a lightweight. A glass of wine? White, if you have it.”

Jordy surveyed the inside of the wine fridge and pulled out a bottle.

“Sauvignon Blanc?”

“That’s perfect,” Ken smiled with approval. Jordy uncorked a chilled bottle and poured. His fingers tingled where they touched Ken’s as he handed him the glass.

“To your first successful client event,” Ken toasted, holding up his glass. They clinked and drank the wine. Jordy motioned for Ken to step further into the apartment, leading them into the entertainment room where they made themselves comfortable on the plush, oversized sofa that faced the large screen TV.

“This room isn’t in your mother’s usual style,” Ken commented with a small smirk.

“No, she did this so I’d have somewhere to hang when I stayed in Manhattan, though she does use it for her Academy Awards parties.”

“She likes having you nearby. She misses you when you’re away at school.”

“She tells you that?”

“She doesn’t have to. She’s much calmer and happier whenever you visit.”

“She worries too much,” Jordy glanced down into his wineglass with a frown.

“She’d tell you she could never worry enough.”

“She needs to let me grow up!”

“She has no problem with that. It’s not your age or maturity level that concern her. You know that,” Ken reminded Jordy pointedly and Jordy felt ashamed. “My father is older than I am, yet I worry about him as much as your mother worries about you.”

“Why? You mentioned he was in the car accident with your mother when she died, but you never said what happened.”

Ken sighed. “I try not to talk or think about it too much. Even after all these years, it’s still painful. It’s even worse for him. He’s still in physical and emotional pain every day.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“I know and you’re not. If you had asked me a month ago I probably would have changed the subject, but we’re friends now, and something like this shouldn’t be a secret between friends.”

Ken took a deep breath and began sharing his story. Jordy’s heart twisted into painful knots as he listened to Ken recount how a truck driver, who fell asleep behind the wheel, veered into oncoming traffic and hit his family’s car head on. His mother, the driver, was killed on impact. Ken, who had been sitting behind her, somehow escaped with only lacerations to his lower body. His little sister, next to him, was the only one who suffered nothing but whiplash. Glass and jagged car parts sliced his father’s face, blinding and scarring him. His left arm was crushed and partially severed, and had to be amputated below the elbow. These, along with numerous internal injuries, kept his father in the hospital for weeks.

“My mother’s sister flew out from Sioux City to take care of Nessa while Dad and I were in the hospital. Fortunately, I was released the next day and I was over eighteen, so there was never a question of anyone taking Nessa away

because Dad was incapacitated. My aunt helped as much as she could, but then she had to go back to her own family. She offered to take us back with her, or at least Nessa, but Dad needed to stay in the hospital and I couldn't let my sister be taken away from us."

Choked up, Ken paused to wipe a few stray tears. Jordy slid over and put his arm around Ken's shoulders in an effort to provide some comfort.

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea. We can stop talking about it."

"It's okay. I just... It's been a long time since I allowed myself to think about it all."

Ken's hand shook violently as he took a sip of his wine. Jordy set his glass down before reaching out to take Ken's glass and placing it alongside his. Thinking only of Ken now, Jordy took his friend's hand into his own.

"It's okay. It's all in the past. You made it through the worst of it, and you found a way to provide for all of you."

Jordy was hit with a sudden clarity. For the first time, he understood Ken's position. He was the head of his family, the provider and the caretaker. All the responsibility rested on his shoulders. No wonder he took such pains to be professional at work. Given his home situation, he couldn't afford to lose his job. He had to prove his worth to Rowena and the rest of Ryder Corp. every day. Had Jordy been standing, he would have reeled at the unfairness of it. No one so young should have to bear such a heavy burden.

"At first we had life insurance from my mom, but even while dad and Nessa were still covered by her medical insurance, bills ate through the money quickly. Because I was an adult at the time of the accident, my hospital bills weren't even covered."

"What about the other driver? Didn't his insurance pay?"

"Not immediately, and I got some bad advice. Neighbors told me we should sue, so I hired a lawyer, but as it turned out my mom had some alcohol in her system. She was under the legal limit, but the other insurance argued that she contributed to the accident. They threatened to stretch out the case, to



bury us in depositions and discovery requests, to basically make our lives miserable unless we took their lowball offer. Dad was in no position to decide, so it fell to me, and we were so desperate for money... In retrospect, I should have waited. Our family would have made sympathetic plaintiffs. Instead, I caved. After the lawyer took his cut, the remainder barely made a dent.”

Ken was morose and Jordy suspected that he still felt as guilty over the decisions he made seven years ago as Jordy did about his father dying in an effort to stop his kidnapping. It was stupid and pointless. Neither one of them had options at the time, and there was no way to undo what had been done. Jordy desperately wanted to make Ken see this.

“You were only eighteen! You did the best you could,” he protested, thinking back to how immature he had been three years prior. There was no way he could have dealt with what Ken had had to deal with when he turned eighteen in the middle of his first semester of college.

“I was old enough to make mistakes that will have repercussions for the rest of our lives. The lawsuit was just one. I also sold all of my Dad’s paintings. Right before the accident, he’d had his first solo show at a gallery in Manhattan, and people were starting to notice his work. When the gallery owner heard about the accident, he offered to buy Dad’s paintings. I thought he was doing it to be kind, and the offer seemed good. I actually thanked him for his generosity. At the time, I didn’t realize how large the hospital bills would get, how much therapy Dad would need even after he was released from the hospital. I wasn’t thinking about the cost of daycare, or Nessa’s college tuition.”

*Or your own*, Jordy added silently. He knew Ken only had a high school education, but not because he wasn’t smart enough to go to college.

“Anyway, the gallery owner who bought them capitalized on the fact that Dad would never paint again, and he cornered the market. They’re so much more valuable now. I wish I had been smart enough to hold on to one or two.”

“Ken, no one could have known. The art world is so fickle. This man took a gamble that paid off, but it could easily have gone the other way.”

“I suppose. Sometimes I wish it had, just so I could have fewer regrets. It’s nice to read about his paintings being sold at auction from time to time and the critics have been very effusive. Too bad they hadn’t had their eyes open before the accident.”

“So your dad stays home with your sister while you work?” Since he knew nothing he could say about the paintings would actually make Ken feel better, Jordy tried a distraction.

“He stays home, period. He hardly ever goes out. His disabilities are bad enough, and the scars make things worse. He says he can feel people staring at him when he goes out. In theory, he could do some things, even blind with only one hand, but in practice... He misses my Mom, he misses his art... But he’s still a good father to Nessa and he does what he can around the house. The disability checks help. And he just started working with clay, sculpting. It frustrates him, but I think it’ll be good in the long run. I just wish...”

“You’re doing everything you can,” Jordy said with absolute certainty. Over the last month he had begun to see Ken in a new light, and this evening his eyes were finally fully opened. He couldn’t believe not so long ago he thought Ken was an uptight, kiss-ass lackey. Discovering how wrong he’d been was almost physically painful.

“I could never do enough. Every time I look at him, I think about how different things would be if we had had enough money for plastic surgery, so at least the scars wouldn’t be so bad, or if we could afford a seeing-eye dog, or more therapy.”

Distressed, Ken leaned over and buried his face in Jordy’s chest. Once, Jordy’s instinct would have been to shove Ken away. Now, however, he just pulled him closer, offering as much comfort and silent understanding as he could.

“Ken, you’re a good person and you’ve done, you keep doing, everything you can for your dad and your sister. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Your Mom says the same thing. I see a lot of her in you. She’s a remarkable woman, and she raised a remarkable son. You’re so much more

than just the pretty little rich boy everyone was expecting. You have talent, and drive! I saw that as soon as you started working this summer, and that's what fueled that crush. I knew it was completely inappropriate, but I couldn't help myself."

Jordy knew Ken wasn't trying to hurt him, just the opposite, but the reminder that this wonderful guy once had feelings for him, that Jordy forced him to abandon, was singularly unpleasant. Too late, Jordy realized that he wanted Ken. Not just physically, though to his shock that was an aspect of it, but to share their successes and burdens. Only thanks to his stupid knee-jerk demand, Ken no longer wanted him.

"Were you really able to, you know, stop? When I asked you too?" Jordy asked softly, hanging on to a thread of hope. Even though a confirmation would crush him, he needed to know. "Ken?" he asked when a minute later he still hadn't received a response.

"No," Ken finally said cautiously. "I tried, but no, I couldn't, not completely. I swear I haven't drawn anything else, though, and I'm trying not to be obvious. Was I too obvious?" he asked, pulling away and turning his face up to Jordy's. "Are you angry? I'm sorry. I promise I'm not a threat."

In that moment of insecurity Ken seemed years younger, and Jordy felt his protective instinct rise.

"I know you're not. It's okay. To be honest I was surprised when you seemed to just turn your feelings off, and disappointed."

"Disappointed? But I thought..." Ken's furrowed brow conveyed his confusion.

"I know." Jordy frowned too, wishing he could be less awkward in communicating his feelings. He got the idea that it might be easier to show Ken what he meant instead of telling him. "Do you mind coming up to my room? I want to show you something."

"That may not be the best idea," Ken hesitated.

“I know you won’t try anything,” Jordy said confidently. “Besides, I’m bigger and stronger, and I’ve got Cora. If anything happens to me she’ll drown you in pasta sauce.” He was thrilled to see that his joke coaxed a small smile from Ken.

“Okay.”

Ken went up the stairs gingerly, lacking his usual confidence. He paused in the doorway to Jordy’s room, his eyes sweeping the unfamiliar area before he finally walked in. Jordy closed the door behind them and walked purposefully to his nightstand, picking up the paper that lay on top. It was a copy of Ken’s sketch.

“I know I asked you to stop thinking about me, but ever since that first lunch, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. I made a copy of your drawing because I couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing it again. I look at it every night and imagine what it would be like.”

“But you said you’re not gay.”

“I know. I didn’t think I was. I’m still not sure. Maybe I feel this way because of what those men did? I don’t understand it. I do know I’m not really attracted to women. I’ve kissed a couple of girls. It was okay. Not disgusting, but nothing special. I haven’t kissed a man since...” He hung his head, leaving them both to contemplate the circumstances of those kisses.

“A true kiss wouldn’t be like those others must have been. It would not be forced. If you and I kissed, you would be in control.”

“You make it sound so tempting.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not why I came up here.”

“I know, but I’m pretty sure it’s why I asked you up here. I keep thinking about it, and I would like to try...”

Jordy set the drawing on the bed and closed the distance between them until they stood face to face, almost close enough for their bodies to touch. Jordy felt Ken’s radiant body heat and his own rising excitement. He waited for Ken to do something, but Ken was reluctant.

“It has to be you, Jordy. You need to initiate it. Show me what you want.”

“I don’t know what I want.”

“You don’t have the words to describe it, but your body knows. Show me.”

Jordy wanted to, but fear kept him frozen in place. His mind was in turmoil. He had only done this once before. The men who had used him when he was a boy sometimes forced him to kiss, but those had been brutal, bruising experiences that churned Jordy’s stomach. But there had been one who had been gentle and sweet. At first, Jordy had been resistant, like with the others, but eventually he gave in. Afterwards he had hated himself for that weakness, even as the memory of what he and that man did had aroused him again.

The recollection forced Jordy’s hand. He had to know if this would feel the same. He placed his hands on Ken’s waist and lowered his head until their lips met. The kiss was soft and hesitant, but also tender and welcome. Ken’s warm lips yielded under his. Jordy tasted the wine and a hint of the appetizers Ken had eaten at the reception, and his nose filled with a faint mixture of Ken’s sweat and deodorant. He pulled Ken closer and his kiss became firmer, drawing a sigh from the man in his arms. Then he felt Ken’s hands on his shoulders and the lips beneath his became more demanding. Jordy felt light-headed, giddy with excitement and something more. His thoughts faded and he gave himself over to his senses, falling headlong into the amazing rush.

Reality intruded as Jordy’s phone beeped and vibrated, signaling an incoming text. He and Ken sprang apart and exchanged nervous looks, both surprised at having been so carried away. Jordy was frustrated, but the moment was over anyway, so there was no point to ignoring the interruption. He pulled out the phone and looked at the screen.

“It’s Cara. Dinner’s ready.”

“We should go downstairs.”

“Yeah, but,” Jordy reached out to grab Ken’s elbow.

“But?”

“Can we come back up here after dinner? Please?”

Ken evaluated him with keen eyes. "I'd like that."

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Ken had no idea what to expect as they returned to Jordy's room after dinner. Their kiss had been amazing and magical, but Ken didn't want to be disappointed by expecting another. He needn't have worried. Jordy initiated contact as soon as the door to his bedroom closed behind them. Their second kiss was as wonderful as the first until Ken lifted his hands to capture Jordy's face, causing Jordy to step back abruptly.

"I'm sorry," Ken said. Jordy's face was painted with fear and something nearing revulsion, which made Ken sick to his stomach with dread. "I shouldn't have... I didn't mean to..."

Jordy was staring at him, wide-eyed with terror. His breaths were shallow. His hands were shaking. His whole body shuddered when Ken took a step towards him and he backed away until he reached the wall and could retreat no further. Ken wanted to reach out and comfort him, but he knew that could make things even worse.

"I'm so sorry, Jordy. Please forgive me. I'll go."

He left the room, closing the door behind him. He couldn't just leave Jordy alone in his room though, experiencing a mental crisis. When he reached the bottom of the stairs he sought out Cara, knowing that the housekeeper had been hired for more than her domestic skills.

"Jordy isn't feeling well," he told her, unsure of how to explain without completely betraying Jordy's confidence. "Is there someone we can call besides his mother?" He knew Rowena would drop everything to be with her son, but he didn't want to take her away from the merger talks unless he absolutely had to. No, that wasn't it. He simply did not want to have to tell her that he had been the one sending her son into a panic.

Cara was already dialing the phone. "Cordelia? This is Cara. Jordy may be having an episode. Ken said Rowena is at a business meeting and... Yes, he's still here... Okay, I'll tell him. I'll have tea ready when you get here. Thank you."

Cara hung up the phone and filled a teakettle with water before placing it on the stove.

“She’s on her way. She should be here within twenty minutes. She asked if you could stay to explain what happened.”

Ken nodded. He owed someone an explanation, and based on everything Jordy had told him Cordelia was very discreet. He called his father to explain that he’d be even later than he initially thought, and then waited in the living room.

Cordelia arrived promptly, with her boyfriend in tow. She quickly made the introductions and then asked Thomas to wait in the media room while she spoke with Ken and went up to see Jordy.

“What happened?”

“We kissed, at his request. Nothing more, I swear. It was fine at first, but then I touched his face and he got scared, terrified.”

“It’s not you, Ken. He’s been through therapy, but some things still trigger those memories. He’s not really in control of his reactions,” Cordelia tried to explain.

“It’s fine. I mean, it’s not fine that he has these episodes, but no harm done to me. I just wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Okay, good. I’m glad you understand. And I think you will be able to help. You said he requested the kiss?”

Ken nodded. “I even waited for him to initiate it. I promised him he’d be in control, and he was. I stopped as soon as I sensed his distress.”

Cordelia bit her lip. “I know it seems bad now, but this may actually be a good thing. We have to go up to see him. Would you carry the tea?”

“Are you sure I should go with you?”

Cordelia was already striding towards the stairs, ignoring his hesitancy. Cara appeared with a teapot, three cups and a plate of cookies on a tray, which she handed to him as if she knew what had been in Cordelia’s mind. Ken took

the tray and followed Jordy's best friend upstairs. She knocked on the bedroom door.

"Jordy, it's me. Can I come in?"

No audible response reached Ken's ears, but Cordelia opened the door anyway and stepped inside.

"Jordy? Oh, Jordy, honey!"

She rushed into the room. Thoroughly alarmed, Ken followed quickly behind her. Inside, Jordy had squeezed himself into a corner. He sat on the floor with his knees pulled to his chest and his arms wrapped as far as was possible around his legs. He rocked back and forth, and although his face was half-hidden, his back shook with silent sobs. Once again, Ken felt sick for having provoked such a reaction. He set the tea tray down on a desk and stood back to watch Cordelia minister to Jordy.

She approached him carefully, reminding him in low tones who she was. Even so, he flinched when she first touched him, trying to shrink away from her but having nowhere to go. She slid down to the floor and sat next to him, leaning on him, whispering. Ken felt completely helpless and wondered if his presence wasn't doing more harm than good. He was about to leave when Cordelia gave him a look that rooted him in place.

"You're safe, Jordy. It's just me and Ken here, and we're not going to hurt you. Ken didn't mean to scare you. He didn't know to ask."

Jordy let out a heart-wrenching whimper. Ken took a step forward, and then another, until he was sliding to his knees in front of Jordy and Cordelia. She reached for his hand and then placed both his and hers over Jordy's. She looked at Ken, indicating with her eyes that he should speak.

"I'm sorry, Jordy. I didn't know. I never meant to hurt you. I never would!"

Jordy let out another whimper, but he lifted his head to look at Ken.

"I'd never intentionally hurt you," Ken told him directly in a reassuring tone, willing Jordy to believe him.



“We brought tea. Want some?” Cordelia asked. Ken rose to get the tray when Jordy gave a small nod. He brought it over and placed it on the floor next to them, pouring out three cups. Cordelia handed one to Jordy before picking up her own. His hand trembled slightly as he took it, but he managed to bring the cup to his lips and took a swallow.

“Ken told me what happened. It was very brave of you to want to try a kiss,” Cordelia mentioned conversationally. “It sounds like it went pretty well, too, until Ken touched your face.”

Jordy shuddered and Ken felt as if he’d been punched in the gut.

“Did it remind you of something bad?” Cordelia prompted.

“Some of them used to grab my face and head, to force my mouth open and...” Jordy closed his eyes, unable to continue speaking, though it was obvious his thoughts sent him back to the time he was in captivity.

“I would never do that. I would never force you to do anything.”

Jordy looked up at Ken. “I know that. In my mind, I know that. But I still couldn’t stop. I’m sorry. I should have never started this today. I wanted so badly to see what it would be like. I should have guessed I’d mess it up, behaving like the freak that I am.”

“You’re not a freak!” Ken and Cordelia admonished in unison.

“I don’t think you’re a freak at all,” Ken continued. “I understand. To this day, I don’t like to sit in the back of a car behind the driver. I know it’s not the same, but...”

“It kind of is,” Jordy said. He released his hold on his knees and sat up straighter. “That accident was just as traumatic for you.”

“Maybe not quite as traumatic.”

“I still have dreams, and flashbacks. The dumbest things can set them off. A certain touch, like tonight, or sometimes even a sound or a scent. How can I ever have a relationship when I’m like this? Who wants to be with someone they always have to treat with kid gloves?” Jordy directed his accusatory question at Cordelia.

“I’m used to treating people with kid gloves,” Ken said quietly. “My dad needed that after the accident. I don’t mind, and I’d like to help.”

“I’m not a charity case, or a project. I don’t want you to be with me out of pity.”

“I wouldn’t be helping you out of pity. Just the opposite. I’d be doing it for entirely selfish reasons. I’m the one with the crush, remember?” Ken kept his tone calm but firm.

“You had no idea how messed up I was when you developed that crush.”

“I knew some of your background, and I haven’t learned anything since to make me change my mind.”

“Has Jordy told you what happened?” Cordelia asked Ken.

“A little, in general.”

“Maybe if you told him more... Not necessarily today, over time. Don’t push Ken away just because you’re scared, Jordy. You can’t assume people will reject you or hurt you. You have to give someone a chance.”

“Please give me a chance.”

Jordy’s glance shifted between Ken and Cordelia uncertainly.

“We can just keep talking, as we had been. We don’t have to touch.”

“I think you probably don’t need me here anymore,” Cordelia said, shifting to rise, “but Thomas and I will stay downstairs for a while, just in case, okay? You two need to talk.”

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Ken and Jordy didn’t disagree, but for a long time after she left the room neither of them could think of anything to say.

“Is it okay if I sit next to you?” Ken finally asked and moved to the spot next to him when Jordy nodded.

“I meant it when I said we don’t have to touch, but could I hold your hand?” Ken followed up tentatively.

Jordy still didn't say anything, but slipped his hand into Ken's.

"If you want to tell me what happened, I'm here to listen. But it's up to you. It doesn't have to be today, or at all."

"You should know everything. It's only fair. You need to know what you're getting into."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jordy realized the inherent assumption that their relationship would continue in some form.

"No one knows exactly what they're getting into at the start of a relationship. I don't need to know everything at once."

Ken's acceptance gave Jordy courage to continue. He wanted to tell him anyway, so slowly, haltingly, he revealed the full terror of what he had suffered at the hands of the sick bastards who had kidnapped him and forced him to satisfy their perverse needs.

"For a while after I came back, I didn't want to leave the house. I felt dirty, and I thought no one would want to have anything to do with me. I didn't want people staring at me and talking behind my back. I was scared, too. Mom hired tutors, therapists, and physical trainers. They all lived in the house with me, along with the housekeepers and bodyguards. She was there too, most of the time. She practically ran the company from the house.

"The only other person who came to see me was Cordelia. I didn't want any other visitors. She's the one who finally convinced me to start going out more. Eventually, I went back to school and completed senior year with the rest of my class. I even played tennis on the school team, but I couldn't participate in any sports where there was a chance of someone touching me..."

"You're an incredibly courageous man. Nothing that happened to you is your fault, and it certainly doesn't make you dirty. You were incredibly brave just to survive this ordeal, and you did even more. You escaped and gave the information the police needed to bring these perverts to justice, helping other boys avoid the same fate. You're a hero!" Ken said emphatically.

“Hardly. You saw what happened earlier. Sometimes I get frightened by a noise or my own shadow. I don’t need to be a hero. I just want to be normal, but you saw what happened tonight.”

“You are normal, and courageous. Not many people could go through what you went through and still keep going. You went back to school, went to Princeton University. You joined Ryder Corp. and today you charmed the people at the reception so much we probably will get a few new clients. You’re incredible!”

Jordy shook his head. “None of it means anything if my whole life I keep freaking out the way I did tonight.”

“You won’t. You simply haven’t had a chance to conquer this fear yet. I can help you. We’ll go slow. We’ll take teeny tiny baby steps.”

“Why would you want to do that? You deserve a normal boyfriend. Someone who’ll take care of you for a change, instead of yet another burden. You deserve that, after everything you’ve been through.”

“My family is not a burden, and neither are you. Let me worry about what I deserve. I happen to think I deserve to be with a gorgeous son of a corporate tycoon.”

Jordy smiled, recognizing that Ken was teasing. He considered Ken’s statement, and felt a stirring of hope.

“You’re serious? You really want to try? Do you realize that I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to do more than kiss you? Hell, I don’t know if I’ll be able to even do that without freaking out.”

“I guess I’m a gambler. I’m willing to take that risk. Besides, I can see what kind of a man you are. You do not just accept limitations and give up. At one point you didn’t think you’d leave your house, but look at you now.”

“That took two years!”

“I’m a patient man.”

“But...” Jordy hesitated. “You have needs that I won’t be able to...”

“I’ve never had a boyfriend,” Ken said flatly. “When I was in high school, I fooled around with a couple of guys. We kissed; exchanged hand jobs; that’s it. After the accident, I didn’t have time or money for dating, and I was too scared of STDs to just have casual sex. My dad and my sister depend on me—I can’t afford to get sick. I’ve been taking care of my own needs for a while, and wasn’t expecting that to change.”

Jordy felt bad for feeling so elated at hearing about Ken’s experience, or lack thereof. In a way, they would be starting off on even footing. And Ken obviously didn’t lie about his patience if he hadn’t been with anyone in seven years. Still...

“You shouldn’t have to wait. And you’re assuming I can get over this. What if I never do?”

“I think that’s unlikely. Let’s cross that bridge if we come to it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I was pretty happy when we were just getting to know each other as friends. The kiss was an unexpected bonus. Maybe we could try that again someday?”

There was something in the way Ken spoke, wholly without expectations, that made Jordy feel safe enough to make an unexpected suggestion.

“I’d like that a lot. Maybe we don’t have to wait for someday?”

“Are you sure?”

Jordy didn’t blame Ken for being reluctant. Rather than answering with words, he moved until their lips met for a brief, sweet kiss.

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Ken couldn’t have been happier when he discovered that Jordy was interested in him and was open to starting a relationship. He was under no delusions that helping Jordy overcome his fears of intimacy would be a quick jog around the park, but he believed all good things were worth the wait.

Once they made their decision, Ken and Jordy spent as much time together as they could. They remained professional at work, but as often as possible they had lunch together away from their co-workers' prying eyes. When they weren't working on the merger they could be found at Jordy's place or, more frequently, at Ken's apartment. Ken was relieved that Jordy didn't mind hanging out in their small place in Queens. His one request had been that he be allowed to purchase a larger TV for them, complete with surround sound, which made their living room feel like a movie theater. Ken started to object to the extravagance when the system was delivered, but seeing the delight on his sister's face made him swallow his pride and accept the gift graciously. He was even more pleased later when his dad actually left his seat by the window and for the first time joined them to watch a movie, commenting how the clear sound and bass vibrations made him feel like he was part of the action.

Ken had been concerned about how Nessa and his father would react to his bringing home a boyfriend, but even before the entertainment system arrived he saw that there would be no problems. His sister found Jordy as fascinating as Ken did, and fortunately, the eleven-year-old girl didn't trip any of Jordy's triggers because from the start she clung to Jordy closer than Ken was able. He would have been jealous, if he didn't see how good all the perfectly innocent physical contact was for Jordy. His father must have sensed it as well, and probably more, because he never once made any derogatory comment about Jordy's lack of artistic talent or his fascination with business and finance.

"He seems like a good boy who cares for you and brings a smile to your voice. What else could a father wish for his son?" was all he said when Ken, dying of curiosity, finally asked his opinion. The approval thrilled Ken, but what made him even happier was that his relationship with Jordy seemed to release something in his father that had been locked up since the accident. His dad started to put more effort into sculpting, and while his pieces were small, some of them were quite extraordinary. Even Cordelia agreed when Ken had sneaked out with one of the small pieces to show her. She, in turn, borrowed the piece to show her professor, who was astounded to learn that it had been created by a blind artist who sculpted using only one hand. He was convinced that if Ken's father could make enough pieces and some in larger scale, he

could talk a gallery owner into organizing a show. It took every bit of resistance Ken had to keep the news from his father, but the last thing he wanted to do was to apply undue pressure, so he simply rejoiced as his dad continued to create.

Ken's favorite moments were the stolen ones, when he and Jordy were alone in either of their rooms. They talked a lot, often in whispers, and laughed over childhood escapades. They kissed and Jordy slowly grew used to Ken's caresses, so that eventually he not only tolerated being touched, but actually enjoyed it. Ken always made sure he pre-announced his actions, giving Jordy complete control. Even with these precautions, there were setbacks. Jordy would sometimes unexpectedly freeze up and they would have to back off. Ken was fine with this, since they always managed to talk through the fear, which he was convinced was the only path forward. He sensed that Jordy was often frustrated with the slow progress, but Ken knew a faster pace wasn't possible. More than anything, he wanted to avoid causing Jordy more pain, so he soothed Jordy's impatience and tried to keep them on a slow course. Sometimes it wasn't so easy.

"You smell so sexy today," Jordy said, nuzzling at the spot on Ken's neck beneath his right ear.

"Stop it. I can't possibly," Ken's protest was diminished by his pleasurable sigh.

"You can and you do. It's driving me crazy," Jordy's hand drifted to the buttons on Ken's shirtfront and he began to push them through their holes.

"Jordy!" Ken warned, struggling to keep a cool head as his boyfriend pulled his shirt and undershirt out of his waistband and slipped his hand beneath the fabric to caress Ken's stomach.

"I've been wanting to do this for a while now," Jordy confessed, kissing his way along Ken's neck and jaw. "Let's take these off," he suggested, pushing the T-shirt up to reveal more of Ken's torso. Ken tensed, feeling extremely self-conscious.

"Slow down! We should wait."

“Why? Don’t you like this?” Jordy slipped his hand higher and tweaked Ken’s pebbled nipple. Ken let out an involuntary moan.

“You know that’s not it,” he stammered. “It’s just, that we’re going too fast.”

“We’re not. I just want to touch you. To feel your skin against mine.” Jordy placed his lips over Ken’s immediately after he stopped speaking to keep him from arguing. For a while, Ken allowed himself to get distracted, but when Jordy pushed the shirts up higher, he snapped to.

“Jordy, I should go. This isn’t the right place or time. It would be too easy for us to get carried away here.”

“So? Let’s get carried away,” Jordy ground his hips against Ken, drawing a groan from his boyfriend.

“You’re not playing fair. We can’t. Not tonight.” For once, Ken wasn’t just worried about a setback for Jordy. He was extremely self-conscious about his body, convinced that when Jordy saw him out of his clothes, he’d rethink his decision to date.

“Why not?” Jordy pulled away with a grimace. Ken was used to this reaction. Often when he didn’t get his way, Jordy regressed to the mindset of a thirteen-year-old only child. This was harmless, and more than anything he found it amusing. It was Jordy’s regression to a terrified kidnap victim that Ken feared and wanted to avoid.

“Because when we’re alone and worked up like this, it’s too tempting to go too far. And I know that seems like a good idea, until it isn’t. If we’re going to try taking our clothes off when we’re together, we shouldn’t be so isolated.”

Jordy hugged himself in frustration. “So what? You want me to call Cara and Mom? You want them to monitor?”

“No, of course not. I just think it would be better if we could be somewhere where there are more people. How about a dance club? Guys take their shirts off all the time in clubs.”



Ken frowned before he even finished his sentence. A club had been such a stupid suggestion. Jordy wasn't ready for a place where he would be grabbed and jostled by a bunch of horny men. That could send him into a regressive spiral far worse than anything they could do privately in Jordy's room. And more to the point, Ken wasn't ready to have his boyfriend grabbed and jostled by a bunch of horny men. He'd have to think of something else. He scanned the room looking for ideas, and he found the perfect one when his eyes landed on a picture of Jordy taken in the summer.

"How about the beach?"

"Oh," Jordy contemplated. "Sure, that would be great. We can go to our house in the Hampton's Saturday."

Ken wasn't sure the two of them alone at the Ryders' house in the Hamptons was any better than in Jordy's room, but at least it gave him a couple of days' reprieve.

Jordy picked him up Saturday morning in a chauffeured car, thoughtfully taking the seat behind the driver. Ken was anxious, but he was determined not to show it. In contrast, Jordy was very relaxed, even excited. As they got closer to the beach, however, Ken sensed Jordy's growing tension.

"We don't have to do this if you're not ready," he reached across the seat for Jordy's hand and squeezed it.

"I'm ready," Jordy said, though he didn't sound it. "It's time. We've been seeing each other for weeks."

"We're not on any timetable."

"I know, but the longer we wait... I'm ready. I really am ready!" The trademark Ryder stubbornness and determination crept into Jordy's voice as they pulled into a driveway of a house.

"Okay, then let's go."

Ken reached for the handle and opened the car door, stepping out into the warm, bright August day. The sun was still making its way to its zenith and

Ken felt the cool breeze blow off the ocean as sea gulls soared and squawked overhead. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the salt-laden air.

Jordy emerged from the car right behind him and held his hand out for the picnic basket, which their helpful driver extracted from the trunk of the car.

“We’ll call when we’re ready for pickup. Shouldn’t be more than a few hours,” Jordy said, slipping the driver an overly generous tip to make sure the man could afford a nice meal at one of the nearby restaurants while he waited.

“Thank you, Mr. Ryder. You gentlemen have a nice day,” the driver replied politely before getting back behind the wheel and leaving them alone in front of the Ryder beach house. Ken stared up at the house, almost modest by the neighborhood standards, but still at least ten times larger than his family’s apartment. Jordy walked up to the door and unlocked it, motioning for Ken to follow him inside.

“Can you get some fresh ice while I find a blanket and some towels?” Jordy asked, pointing Ken towards the kitchen with his chin and handing him the picnic basket.

“Sure. Don’t forget the sunscreen, unless you’d like to see what I look like as a lobster.”

“That sounds kind of cute. Don’t tempt me,” Jordy leaned over and gave Ken a quick kiss before departing down a long hallway. He was back with an armful of blankets and towels by the time Ken replaced the warmed freezer packs and partially melted ice with fresh supplies from the kitchen.

“We should probably change now,” Jordy said, some of his earlier confidence gone.

“We don’t have to change. We could just take our shoes off and walk barefoot in the sand,” Ken suggested.

“Your pants will get wet,” Jordy pointed out. Despite the temperature, Ken was wearing long pants, albeit ones made from a lightweight cotton fabric.

“It’s just water.”

Ken tried not to steer Jordy one way or another, but he wasn't really sure which of them was more nervous about stripping down to their swimsuits. Jordy thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Let's do it. It's why we're here. If we don't do it now, we'll have to wait another week before we can come back."

"Okay. Remember, it's no different than the gym. I'm perfectly happy to look and not touch," Ken tried to put Jordy at ease. "And for what it's worth, this isn't easy for me either."

His fingers fumbled with the buttons of his short-sleeved shirt. Jordy stepped forward and reached out to help.

"I've been waiting a long time for this. You're always covered up."

"Unlike you, I have nothing to show off."

"Let me be the judge of that."

Jordy undid the last button and parted the shirtfront, pushing it back and down Ken's shoulders. Ken shivered, uncomfortable under Jordy's close scrutiny.

"I could probably add a little bulk if I tried, but there's not much I can do about the pale skin. I'm afraid the O'Mahers don't tan well."

"Shush. You don't have to change a thing. You're perfect just as you are."

Tentatively, Jordy reached out to run his hand over Ken's chest and down to his ribs.

Ken flushed. "One of us is perfect, and it's not me."

"You know I'm not perfect. You drew all my scars."

"Your scars are as perfect as the rest of you. Wait till you see mine."

"My scars didn't used to be so 'perfect'. It's only the plastic surgeons my mom hired that made them tolerable. And even now..." Jordy reached for the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it up in one swift move that doubled the size of the bulge between Ken's legs. He only just managed to remember that it was too risky for him to run his hands over Jordy's magnificent chest the way

Jordy had over his. He kept his arms down, hands curled tensely, his eyes bulging with appreciation.

“Wow!”

“You’re the wow,” Jordy took a half step forward, and then another, and then abandoned all caution and closed the distance between them, pulling Ken into his arms and mashing their lips in a hot, searing kiss. Even if he’d wanted to, Ken wouldn’t have been able to stop his cock from hardening. He nearly panicked, until he felt a corresponding reaction from Jordy. If this was a mistake, it was a most delicious one, as both men opened their mouths and allowed themselves to taste the other.

Ken knew that they were walking a tightrope and that at any moment a small touch could send them toppling over, but when he felt the warmth of Jordy’s hands on his back, he couldn’t help reaching up to touch Jordy as well. His fingers gently traced the sinewy muscles and ridged spine, and the spots where Jordy’s skin had healed over injuries in distinct knots and furrows. He relished this opportunity to explore his boyfriend’s body, but it was nothing compared to the jolt that coursed through him as Jordy’s fingers slipped under the waistband of his pants and trunks and moved lower over the curve of his ass.

Ken’s cock throbbed with approval, but his brain set off a warning alarm. He knew from past experience that Jordy sometimes let his physical urges override his reservations. While this was enjoyable for them both, sooner or later they would go a touch too far and the resulting setback could be far worse than proceeding at a slow, steady pace. Ken had fallen into this trap before, each time desperately hoping that maybe Jordy would finally be able to conquer his fears, but he’d been disappointed every time, and he didn’t want to be disappointed again. Reluctantly, he broke the kiss and took a step back, taking Jordy’s newly freed hands in his own.

“Maybe we should take a dip in the ocean to cool off a bit?”

Jordy’s confusion gave way to resignation.

“That’s probably a good idea, though I wish...” he grimaced instead of finishing his thought.

“We’re doing fine,” Ken interjected. “We’re together and happy. Isn’t that all that matters? Do we have to be just like other guys, jumping into bed barely knowing each other’s name?”

“You’re right. I just wish we were taking it slow by choice, not by necessity.”

“For me it is by choice, so pretend you’re humoring me. I like that by the time we’re ready to be fully intimate, we’ll know each other better than most other couples. I love just cuddling and talking with you.”

“I like that too,” Jordy admitted. “I think I’ll like it even better out there on the beach. Time to take off those pants!”

Jordy unbuttoned and unzipped his cargo shorts and let them fall to the floor. Underneath he wore loose swim trunks that came down to his mid-thigh and were still half tented in the front. Ken reluctantly followed Jordy’s example. He worried how Jordy would react at seeing his pale, scarred, skinny legs. He relaxed a bit when Jordy had no reaction at all, beyond teasing him about the prudish knee-length of his swim trunks.

“Are you even gay, wearing something like that? We’re gonna have to go shopping, and soon!”

“Shut up!” Ken laughed. “You should appreciate how privileged you are. This is the first time anyone other than my family has seen me out of long pants in eight years.”

Jordy instantly became serious. “I do appreciate it. A lot! Probably more than you realize.”

“What do you mean?” Ken was surprised by Jordy’s somber tone.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s like what Mom keeps saying about Ryder’s merger with Kronar. In a partnership, no one wants to be the weaker link. I always thought I’d be the weak link in any relationship. That’s why I never even wanted to be with anyone. But with you, it feels like we both have

something to contribute. We both make each other's lives better. Does that make sense?"

It made perfect sense to Ken. He'd always felt that, given his background, he'd never be good enough for someone like Jordy. Now he knew that what Jordy needed and valued was patience, understanding, acceptance, and love, all of which Ken could offer in perpetuity without limits. And their having suffered through similarly tragic circumstances meant that they could communicate on a level few other people could ever understand.

"Yeah, I totally get it. No one else would have been able to convince me to do this, but I know you understand how difficult it is to conquer a phobia, and how important. And since you've come so far already in defeating your fears, the least I could do is tackle this one."

Ken glanced down at his legs and cringed. He usually tried to avoid seeing them, since they always made him think of Frankenstein. But then, it wasn't as though the rest of his body was any great prize, and shockingly, Jordy didn't seem to care.

"I think you're beautiful, inside and out."

Ken rolled his eyes, but grinned. "You need to get your eyes examined."

"My eyesight is just fine, thank you very much. Haven't you heard? Beauty's in the eye of the beholder. And I'm beholding a beautiful man."

"All right, all right, enough," Ken said, flushing again with embarrassment. "We want to spend some time on the beach, right?"

They set up the blankets, towels and picnic basket as close to the water as they could while still avoiding the incoming waves. Then they took their time applying liberal amounts of sunscreen to each other's bodies and then, somewhat awkwardly, ran into the water to hide the obvious results of their ministrations. They worked up an appetite while swimming and wrestling, and returned to the blanket to towel off and eat lunch.

"It's really amazing out here. I wish I could bring my dad and Nessa. I bet they'd really love it, or at least Nessa would."

“Why not bring them? The beach is pretty private and if your dad minds the occasional beach walkers, he could have complete privacy on the deck.”

“I don’t know,” Ken hesitated, though the idea was very tempting. He knew his sister would be over the moon at the prospect of going to the beach.

“We could stay for the whole weekend, make it a party. My mom could come too, and we could ask Cordie and Thomas. It would be a great way to introduce the families.”

Jordy looked so pleased with the idea, Ken couldn’t say no. He was, however, still filled with trepidation.

“Convincing my dad to leave the apartment will be a Herculean effort.”

“We can always let Cordie do it. I swear, that girl could sell sand in the desert. She just doesn’t take no for an answer when she really wants something her way.”

“We shouldn’t complain. If it wasn’t for her, we wouldn’t be together right now.”

“That’s true, I have to give her credit for shoving me in the right direction, although I was pretty fascinated with that sketch without any help from her. It’s entirely possible that eventually I would have worked up the courage to talk to you about it even without her interference. Maybe.”

Ken grinned. “All the same, I’m glad she was there to give you that shove,” he said and leaned in for a kiss.

“So what do you say? Family beach weekend?”

“I think Cordelia is not the only one with a talent for sales.”

“She taught me everything she knows,” Jordy smirked.

They re-applied the sunscreen and only then did they finally lie down. They determined it was safest for both of them to lie face down, initially just letting their hands entwine between them. Soon Jordy was shifting closer to Ken, hooking his ankle over Ken’s. Ken turned onto his side, supporting his head on his bent arm as he raked over Jordy’s amazing body with his eyes. He

threw caution to the wind and shifted so that he was half-lying on top of Jordy, pressing his lips against the sun-warmed bronze skin of Jordy's back.

"I love you, and I love being here with you like this," he told Jordy in a husky murmur, moving his lips to a ridge of scarred skin and tracing it with the tip of his tongue.

"I love you too, and I especially love this!" Jordy echoed. In a split second, hardly aware of what happened and how, Ken was on his back with Jordy hovering above him as he dipped his head to pull them into a deep kiss. Ken knew they were being reckless, but in that blissful moment, he just couldn't bring himself to care. Setback or no setback, he knew he and Jordy would make it through any obstacle in their path, together.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Liz Winters loves to write about relationships between men, be it in M/M romance or gay lit for adults and young adults. She was first drawn to the genre through fan fiction and is still finishing her last fan-fiction epic, but with her husband's encouragement, she has also moved to original fiction. Her original fiction m/m romance novella, Handle with Care, and her gay erotica short story, Lakeside Reunion, are both available as ebooks on Amazon and Smashwords. Her first LGBTQ YA novel, Beneath Angel's Wings (writing as E. Summers,) will be released in July 2013.*

*Liz spends her days in a corporate cubicle and much of the rest of the time writing. She writes character driven stories (except for erotica, where the stories have an entirely different driver) and likes her characters slightly flawed, because it makes them more interesting. She is forever trying to learn how to be less wordy, but the lessons don't seem to stick.*

*She's also a movie and TV junkie, loves to read, and adores traveling with her husband of fifteen years.*

## Contact & Media Info

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