

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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# AN ADVENTURE IN BEGINNINGS

Alex Whitehall

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## AN ADVENTURE IN BEGINNINGS

By Alex Whitehall

### 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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An Adventure in Beginnings

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## Photo Description

A fit older man with a full head of short, silver and steel hair sits naked in an old fashioned tub. His piercing dark eyes stare toward the camera and his lips are in a firm, flat line with a touch of sadness in the corners.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Today is the three-year anniversary of my wife's death. I married her right out of high school and she gave me two children. I loved her dearly and miss her every day. So imagine my surprise when I find men catch my eye. There's nothing wrong with looking of course but that's all I'll expect to do. I don't do the bar scene and I'm not into one night stands. If only there were some men closer to my age...*

*Sincerely,*

*Issa*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** first time, coming out, disabilities, men with pets, over age 40

**Word count:** 11,677

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**By Alex Whitehall**

Tyler rinsed the soap off his shoulders. Water droplets clung to his short gray hair, then dropped, tickling down his back.

“Another year without you, Emily.” His words echoed in the bathroom. Hollow. One last handful of water to catch the last of the suds and he stood, swiping the towel off the nearby toilet seat. “Gretta and her boys are doing well. Max is just as crazy as ever, but he’s a good husband to Gretta, and a good father. We don’t always see eye to eye, but...”

He trailed off as he dried himself and stepped from the tub, wrapping the lavender cloth around his waist, more out of habit than need. No one else lived in the creaky old house anymore. Just him and Moriarty, the cranky old cat Emily had taken in. He and the cat never really got along, but they’d come to a truce since Emily’s passing. Moriarty didn’t attack as long as Tyler remembered to feed him.

Speaking of which... Tyler traded the towel for jeans in his bedroom, and then headed down to the basement, where the cat’s food dish and litter box were kept, to dole out the daily offering. Moriarty sat perched on his cat tree, monitoring his work. “All ready for you, your highness.”

Moriarty meowed, then hopped from his spot and ambled to the food, giving it a sniff. When he didn’t attack, Tyler figured it was a job well-done and headed back upstairs to finish getting dressed. Just a polo today. An anniversary he never wanted to celebrate. “I was thinking fish for dinner tonight. What do you think, darling?”

He huffed a laugh at himself and skimmed a hand through his hair. “You’re probably thinking Gretta’s right and I need to get out more if I’m still talking to you after all this time.” He sat on the bed to pull on his socks and slippers. “You know I’ve tried. It’s just hard for an old man like me. I know you didn’t want me to be alone, but I’m not sure you meant...”

He sighed. He couldn't blame this on his wife. She'd always been open-minded and free-spirited. He'd loved that about her. She would have only patted him on the shoulder with a laugh and explained, "It just means you're bisexual, darling."

He'd had to look it up. Well, not exactly *look it up*. More like stumbled upon it in his browsing. That was how he'd seen the first image. A man splayed out on the bed, dick hard, muscles firm, eyes closed in pleasure. He hadn't been able to look away. And the quiet voice that had worried him as a teenager had spoken up again. The voice that Emily's love had made inconsequential. It was back.

Bisexual. Thankfully, the Internet was a wellspring of information. And porn. And potential hookups. But who wanted a fifty-three-year-old man? All the men looking for men that he'd seen wanted someone between twenty and thirty-five. A tad younger than him.

"I think you may have been the only one for me, Emily dear."

He headed downstairs to throw some milk and cereal in a bowl for breakfast while he read Saturday's paper. More bad news, of course. But an ad at the bottom of one page caught his eye.

"The Queerest Beef & Beer You've Ever Seen! Come join us and help raise money to update the local LGBT center. Eat, drink, and be very merry!"

Pictured were two cows knocking mugs together, along with a phone number, date, times, and an address. It was that night and a fair price. And taking place at the fire hall five minutes away. "You telling me I need to get out more, Em?"

"Meow."

He glanced over at Moriarty, who cleaned his paws by the door and stared back, unimpressed.

"Well, I guess it can't hurt to go out this one night."

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Outside the brick fire hall, a colorful rainbow banner hung, welcoming guests to the beef and beer. The parking lot was fairly full, but Tyler tucked his Jeep Wrangler between a Ford Taurus and a Saturn; one with an “Out and Proud” sticker, the other with a bright yellow equal sign clinging in the rear window. He was in the right place.

Or the completely wrong one.

Either way, he followed the markers to the side door where a woman with bright red hair was selling tickets. “How many?”

“Just one.”

“And are you interested in entering the raffle for two bottles of local red wine? One ticket is a dollar, or six tickets for five.”

“Sure, I’ll take the six tickets.”

“Excellent. That’ll be twenty-five dollars.”

She took his money and handed him six tickets and a pen to write his name on each half that would go in the mix. Once he’d added them to the giant bucket she provided, she directed him down the hall to the dining area. It was one giant room with tables lined in rows and covered in white linens. At the front, three large tables were burdened with food and drink, one just with the stars of the evening.

It was already cluttered with people, mingling and talking, sitting and eyeing the tables of food, and generally having fun. And young. They didn’t make him feel old, but the age curve was closer to thirty than fifty, that was certain. He took a deep breath and scanned the tables, trying to find a place to sit. Maybe there’d be others who came alone and he could strike up a conversation.

He ended up next to a woman with short black spiky hair, a tattoo trailing down her neck and under her T-shirt, who was knitting.

“Hi!” She beamed up at him, barely even pausing in her knitting. “I’m Danny.”



“Tyler.” He offered his hand, which she shook with a surprisingly firm grip. “May I sit here?”

“Sure. Did you come alone too?”

“Yes.” He was distracted by her knitting for a moment. Emily had tried knitting once. It hadn’t gone well. This young lady obviously had no problem. “I guess not many people don’t bring a friend.”

And why hadn’t he thought to invite Rick or Stewart? Or even Jenna. She would have probably enjoyed the night out. Of course, it all came down to the cause of the fundraiser. He wasn’t sure how his friends would react to him attending this type of function. He hadn’t wrapped his head around it, yet, and he didn’t want to have to explain himself to his friends.

“Yeah. My friend was supposed to come with, but picked up a nasty bug from her kid, so we figured it’d be best if she bailed. I’m not complaining if it got me your company.” She winked. And when he blushed, she laughed. “Aren’t you cute?”

He smiled, still flustered. He hadn’t expected to get hit on by a woman here. Though the more he watched her, he wasn’t sure she was a woman. She had delicate features and slender hands. She was soft. But she sat with her legs slightly spread, and her chest was noticeably flat beneath the shirt. “I think I’m completely out of my depth, is what I am.”

Danny laughed again. “First time at an LGBT event?”

“Yes. I—” He hesitated. She didn’t need to know his whole life history. “I’m just realizing some other parts of myself, I guess.”

She grinned, broad and toothy. “It’s never too late.” Her head perked up and twisted toward the front where more dishes were being served, then she carefully folded up her knitting and shoved it in the bag she stored under her seat. “Food’s about to be served. They call each table up at first, then you can go back for as many servings as you want.”

“Thanks. The last beef and beer I went to just had waiters bring food around to the tables. But I like this, and I like that they have something aside from beef and beer, too.” He chuckled. “As odd as that sounds.”

“Not at all. I’m sure our stomachs appreciate it at least!”

They chatted a little longer before the intercom came alive. “Thank you all for joining us tonight in raising money to update our LGBT center. Tonight’s donations will go toward getting some newer computers for the kids to use, buying some furniture to replace our well-loved stuff, and some additional educational materials. Your presence here not only helps us update our center, but it also bonds the community that we are focused on helping. Thank you for coming! Rebecca, our staff leader, will be around to indicate when each table can go enjoy the feast. And be sure to save a little room, because Takes the Cake has donated some of their Strawberry Delight and Choco Heaven cupcakes for dessert. Enjoy!”

The noise in the hall grew raucous as the tables of people started filing past the buffet to fill their plates. Some people spoke over the noise, but Tyler and Danny sat silently, waiting their turn. There was still plenty of food left when they were allowed to go up, and the nearly empty platters were refilled. The buffet was amazing. And when they got back to the table and ate, it was just as delicious as it had been varied.

While everyone munched, the noise died down to a more comfortable level as people talked with neighbors while eating. Danny had a funny story for everything and told them one right after another, keeping Tyler chuckling into his meats. She’d obviously led a very interesting life already. And as much as he’d enjoyed his life, it didn’t compare. Or maybe she was just a good storyteller. Either way, she made a good dinner companion.

“Stop,” he said, still chortling over her last tale. “I want to go get refills.”

“Good! It’ll give me a chance to shut up and eat.” She grinned at him. He shook his head and headed to the buffet.

He paused to slop some macaroni salad on his plate and noticed that the line was curving around a man grabbing some slices of roast beef. From the

side all Tyler could see were broad shoulders, a muscular body gone soft with age, and a head full of steel-gray hair. Then the man shifted, reaching for the meatballs, and Tyler saw his face—broad, too, and tough, like he'd spent most his days outdoors, but curled into a smile at the edges of his lips.

He must have felt Tyler staring, because a breath later, he was looking up and Tyler was trapped in his pale blue gaze. His heart thumped noisily in his chest, but he couldn't pull away from those eyes. They studied him a moment, then wrinkled at the corners as his smile widened. "Hi."

"Hi." And still they stared at one another. At least Tyler was staring. He cleared his throat, forced himself to look away—and looked right back again. "Hi." He winced. "Great food, huh?" He winced at that too, but it was better than repeating greetings.

"Beef and beer. Can't go wrong." The man held out his hand. "George."

His hand was rough and strong and sent a flush of heat through Tyler's chest. "Tyler."

The touch lingered a long moment, then they released. "Did you need to get to the meatballs, or are you just as surprised as I am to find another guy here our age?"

"Definitely that." He laughed and rubbed his free hand through his hair. "Although the meatballs do look good."

"Well, I won't interfere between a man and his meat." Before Tyler could reply, George took the cane that rested against his far hip and used it to move out of the way. But he didn't go far.

"Thank you." Tyler busied himself with getting the meatballs. George shuffled over and seemed to look over the options. "So, um, do you— wow, this is going to sound lame—but do you come to these things often?"

George laughed, a deep rumble that drew Tyler's eyes back up to him. He was sure it was just the lights, but damn if George's handsome blue eyes didn't sparkle with joy. "I've come to some of the center's events, yes. I don't make a habit of hitting up beef and beers though. You?"

“No, I haven’t been to one in five years. And this is my first time... um... doing anything with the center.”

They moved farther down the table, ignoring the people who shuffled around them as they made their very slow progress. George favored his left leg and used the cane in the right hand. If it hurt him, he was good at hiding the pain, or else he’d gotten used to it. “So what brings you out here this time?”

“I saw the ad in the paper this morning and I... I thought it’d be a good idea to get out of the house today.” They shuffled forward a few steps in silence, then hit congestion. Tyler cleared his throat. “Today’s the... My wife died. In 2004. Three years ago today.”

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry.” George focused on spearing some pickles onto his already-full plate. “How long were you together?”

“Since we were eighteen. So, a long time.” Tyler cleared his throat again. “So you’re involved with the center?”

“Yes. Donate what I can, mostly my time. The kids like hearing my war stories. And I think it makes them grateful they weren’t gay in the seventies.”

“So you’re...” He coughed. “I didn’t want to presume, just because you were here.”

George stopped and turned to face Tyler. He stood straight, only leaning some of his weight on the cane, and his eyes were fierce. “Yes, Tyler, I’m gay.”

Tyler flushed. “Okay.” George waited a minute, but Tyler didn’t have anything to add. At least until George turned and started moseying down the length of the table again. Then he blurted, “I may be too.”

George glanced back, one steely eyebrow arched. If he was going to reply, Tyler didn’t give him a chance. “I loved my wife very much and I never looked at anyone else while we were together,” he rushed out. “But since... since... Well, men have caught my eye, I suppose.”

George nodded, as if that made sense. “Not before?”

He sounded like he believed Tyler, and that let him relax a little. A smile reminisced on his lips. “Once I saw Emily, no one else could make my eyes wander.”

“She was a lucky woman.” George turned and shuffled forward a bit more, eyeing the sides on display.

“I was a lucky man. But now. Now, I guess I’m trying to figure things out.” He laughed, desperately uncomfortable. “I’m sorry for blurting all this out. I just, well, you’re the first guy my age...”

“Who’s gay?” George finished with a chuckle.

“Who I thought might understand.”

George stopped browsing and looked over his shoulder at Tyler, the humor slipping from his face. He nodded. “Would you like me to join you at your table?”

His breath caught. He nodded, then added, “Not if I’d be stealing you away from someone.”

“My friends will understand.” George smiled. “Where are you sitting?”

He pointed out Danny, then they finished filling their plates and Tyler made his way over to his seat while George explained the situation to his friends and gathered his things. Tyler set his plate down, glanced up to George, then down at his own plate before he sat. It was ridiculous, but Tyler had butterflies. It warped him back to high school, when he’d first asked Emily to dance. But this was a man, a grown man, and it wasn’t a dance, it was just conversation.

“You a’right?” Danny asked.

“I, uh, someone’s coming over to sit and talk with me. Not that you aren’t a wonderful dinner companion,” he quickly added. “I just met, um, George. He’s my age.” His eyes flickered up to where George was leaning over, talking to his people.

“And cute. *Rawr.*”

“That’s *not* why I invited him over.” But he was blushing like the liar he was. It wasn’t the only reason he’d invited him, although he couldn’t deny it played a part. “I need to talk to someone my age who might understand. Help me.”

Danny smiled, as if *she* understood. “I got ya, Tyler, don’t worry.”

When George arrived, Danny introduced herself, then scooted her chair over to give them more space as she turned back to her food. Tyler refused to blush, but he couldn’t quite meet George’s eyes either. “Thank you for coming over.”

“My pleasure. Though I must say, all my friends think we’re flirting.”

That brought Tyler’s gaze up, and when he met George’s, the other man smiled. Tyler’s heart seized, then thumped loudly as it restarted. He opened his mouth to reply, but his brain hadn’t gotten the memo, so he just sat there like a cave for flies. George’s smile softened, tender, maybe even pitying. “Is that all right with you?”

“Yes.” His voice cracked like puberty. He cleared his throat. “Yes. That’s fine.” He glanced down at his plate, picked up his fork and poked a meatball before he looked up again. “So you just came with friends?”

“Just friends. Lucy and Olivia have been together for...” He chuckled. “For longer than they’d want me to tell a stranger. Might reveal their ages, after all. And Marcus and Luke met twenty years ago, although they’ve only ‘been an item’ for about ten. Rebellious youth and all.”

His own youth had probably been the opposite of rebellious, but he nodded. He’d known guys—and girls—like that. Straight or gay didn’t matter in that regard. But that hadn’t answered the question Tyler really wanted to know about. “And you’re single? I mean,” he added, “I’d be surprised if you don’t have someone.”

“Then prepare to be shocked, because I’m single. I had someone for a long while, but he passed away... a long time ago. Since then it’s just me and my foster dogs.”

“Foster dogs?” Tyler asked because he wasn’t sure if he could come up with anything else.

“Yes, I foster for No Bull, a bulldog adoption group. But I didn’t come over to talk about my pets, did I?”

“No.” He glanced down at his plate and speared a meatball. “I’m not sure... what to say.” He shoved the morsel into his mouth and chewed.

“Well, if you have any questions, I can try to answer them. Or I can introduce you to people who could. I can just plain introduce you to people in the community—I’d be glad to keep you company if you decide to visit the LGBT center.” George spread his hands wide, encompassing whatever Tyler wanted it to encompass. Then he picked up his own fork and prodded at the pile of sliced beef on his plate.

Tyler swallowed. “I guess I don’t even know where to begin, really. I’ve known the same people for a long time. I guess I just need to get out there and meet new people.”

“The center would be good for that, although there tend to be more kids there than anything.”

“Well the guys our age who go must not be any good if you turned them down.”

The words were out of his mouth before his brain had time to censor it. But George just grinned and laughed, and if Tyler was right, he saw a bit of color in his cheeks. “Thanks, but I think you’re assuming far too many positive things about me. Maybe I wasn’t good enough for them.”

“I find that hard to believe. You’re kind and sexy—” He cleared his throat to be able to choke out the next words. “What’s not to like?”

George chuckled. “Well, thank you, but I am a stubborn git, too. But if it’s too soon for you to meet groups of people, I can introduce you to my friends in smaller numbers.”

Tyler nodded, getting it. “Thank you, but you can just tell me to stop my inept flirting, you don’t need to pass me off onto someone else.”

George looked up from the meat he'd been piling into a roll, one eyebrow quirked. He studied him long enough that Tyler looked down to his own plate rather than meet that intense gaze. "Flirting?"

"Ineptly, obviously." He shoved a forkful of macaroni salad into his mouth so he could choke it down. Or just choke. He was remembering why he'd never been particularly social before. Emily was by no means the life of the party, but she could guide him around and he'd happily followed, shining in her shadow. It was why he'd waited three years despite being so lonely.

"Maybe not," George said. For a moment the silence was profound, even in the hall full of chatting diners. "Like I said, I'm stubborn. I marked you as too classy for me and refused to even consider you'd look at a guy like me."

That shocked him into raising his gaze. George was still smiling, but the turn of his lips was soft, as if it was hard to keep going. But he met Tyler's eyes and Tyler met the smile, helping it grow. "Well, I'm looking. If anything, I need a friend, George. And you seem like you'd be a good friend." He swallowed. "At least."

"A friend I can be."

The topics segued into safer territory after that. No talk of being gay or meeting people, just normal conversation. Eventually even Danny joined in. She was witty and dry and made them both laugh, although he didn't miss the wink she gave Tyler when she excused herself to leave for the evening.

Still, it gave Tyler a chance to learn about George. He'd joined the army young and had been in Vietnam, where he'd injured his knee. It had healed well, but had forced him out of the army, so he started in farm work. He said he liked being under the sun, and Tyler could see that about him. He belonged outdoors. George had retired from the farm when his knee finally gave out, and now he worked at the local Tractor Supply.

"Not a glamorous job, but it pays the bills. And they let me sit on a stool when I'm behind the register. Plus, I know my shit." He winked. "Pun intended."



Tyler laughed because George inspired that in him. It had been too long. “A job’s a job. My work as an architect keeps me busy. Can you even imagine sitting at home being retired?”

“Hell no!”

They both laughed at that. Eventually, one day, they’d be too infirm to really do their jobs, but they were young still. If it hadn’t been for work, Tyler didn’t know how he would have survived after Emily passed away. He probably wouldn’t have. But work kept him from rattling around his house, even if it meant dealing with annoyed clients and peevish designers.

After the raffle drawing—neither of them won—they sank back into conversation. But eventually the evening ended, and the workers cleared the buffet and started moving the tables. Tyler startled from the conversation and saw George looking around just as surprised. “I guess it’s time to go.”

George nodded and glanced at his watch; his eyes widened. Then he stood and grabbed his empty dinner plate. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

They dumped their plates and pulled on their coats—George was wearing a jean jacket, perfect for the soft cool of late September—then headed to the lot. “Where are you parked?”

Tyler glanced around the mostly empty lot and pointed out his Jeep. Wordlessly, they began journeying over. After the noise of the fire hall, outside seemed tranquil, despite the traffic noises. Tyler broke the silence. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Sitting and talking with me.” Tyler pulled the keys from his pocket and clicked the unlock button.

“No need to thank me for that, but you’re welcome.” They strode the last few feet. “What are you doing Monday night?”

Tyler froze with his hand on the door handle. “After work?” He paused, trying to think if he had anything and came up empty. “Nothing.”

“Would you like to grab dinner somewhere? We can continue our conversation. Or we can eat in, if you’re nervous.”

“Nervous?” he asked... nervously.

George just gave him that winning smile. “If you have any questions you might not feel comfortable asking at Burger King.”

“Oh.” He sighed with relief and disappointment. It was far too soon, and yet he couldn’t help wanting for George to make him nervous. “Wait, Burger King? No offense, but I’m sure we can find somewhere better.”

“Wherever.” George rolled his eyes. “You want to go or not?”

Tyler wet his lips and nodded. “A pizza parlor just opened on Walnut by Chester Street. If you like pizza. We could meet there.”

“Sounds good. Can you make six?”

“I can.” He pulled the latch and swung open his door.

“It’s a date. See you then.” With no other word, George turned and headed to the lonely Jetta sitting in the far corner of the lot. Tyler barely noticed. He was too busy trying to stop his heart from pounding wildly.

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It wasn’t so much a date as two guys getting together to eat pizza and talk. It was like any other night out with friends. Mostly. Dinner at the burger joint (*not* Burger King) was the same. Laughing, talking, and an undercurrent of sexual attraction. At least on Tyler’s end. George was easygoing, funny, and honest. But Tyler wasn’t sure he was interested. Being nice didn’t mean anything.

And then, after the Asian bistro...

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

Tyler laughed, because George always walked him to his car. “I *can* manage on my own.”

“I know.” But George followed him over anyway. That’s when Tyler saw they were parked next to one another, and he grinned.

“Well played.”

“I thought so.” George reached over and slid his hand into Tyler’s. Tyler jerked in surprise, but gripped his hand when George made to pull it back. “Too fast?”

“So this was a date?”

“I said it was.” They stopped at the Jeep, and George stepped closer, leaning his weight on his cane and smiling up at Tyler. “You didn’t think it was?”

“I thought you were joking.”

The glint in George’s eye gave away that he was about to tease Tyler. Tyler’s heart leapt in his chest.

“I never joke.”

“You joke all the time! It’s your best trait.”

George laughed. “Really?”

“Really. I’d like someone in my life who makes me laugh.” And then he took the plunge. He leaned forward—and down just enough to be familiar—listed his head to the right, and brushed his lips over George’s. It was a chaste kiss. At least it started that way. Then George parted his lips and Tyler took his welcome for what it was. And for a moment they kissed in the parking lot of the restaurant.

George pulled away first, licked his lips, and crooked his smile at Tyler. “So the hand holding was a good move?”

Tyler chuckled. “I think so.” A burst of noise startled him out of the cocoon he’d felt wrapped in, although a quick glance showed only a noisy bunch of kids walking down the sidewalk. He sighed and returned his attention to George.

“Afraid to be seen kissing a man?”

That wasn’t what he wanted to be thinking about. He was still reeling from the knowledge that he’d actually kissed a man. And part of him felt young and

reckless and wanted to lean down and kiss him again. To feel the rough scrape of their chins brushing. But he answered George's question, fighting through the swirl of emotions to be honest. "A little. Maybe not so much afraid, as..." He laughed breathily. "It's like going on a rollercoaster. It's terrifying and uncertain, but that doesn't mean I won't enjoy it."

That description lit George's eyes and tweaked the corners of his lips. "I like that answer."

"Good." Tyler breathed. "So, tomorrow's Saturday." George grinned knowingly, but made Tyler actually say it. "Would you like to get together tomorrow? As a date."

"I would. Are you up to coming over to my house? I could cook dinner for us."

Tyler's heart tripped over itself. There was an offer lying in those words, more than just dinner. But maybe it was just a promise of a languid kiss good night, and not... something else. Either way, he wouldn't know if he didn't reach out and grab what he wanted. Much like the kiss, he took the plunge. "Yes."

And was rewarded with George's grin blossoming even larger. "Excellent!"

There was a shuffle to get paper so George could write down his address. And then was the moment they would go their separate ways for the night. Only Tyler wasn't getting in his car and George wasn't moving. His heart thumped. George reached up, slid his hand behind Tyler's neck, and guided him down for another kiss.

"Good night, Tyler."

"Good night."

George's smile was mellow and pleased as he turned and headed to his car. Tyler got into his own, slid the key in the ignition, and let the engine roar to life.

It was a good night, indeed.

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George's white rancher had dark green shutters and a sizeable yard with a low metal fence surrounding the back, obviously for the foster dogs to run. As Tyler pulled into the driveway, the sunlight glittered off the windows and a curtain over a front window moved. He parked the Jeep and took a deep breath before killing the engine.

He'd replayed their last kiss in his mind since yesterday, the feel of George's fingers against the back of his neck, and the raw passions it evoked. If he hadn't suspected his interest in men before that, it would have awoken him to the startling realization. Now he was certain. He took another deep breath and got out of his car.

The front door opened as he stepped on the porch, and George stood there, weight resting on his cane, his lips curled in a smirk. A short-legged bulldog sat at his feet on a leash, his entire butt wagging with his short excuse of a tail. "Hello. Come on in."

"Hello. Thanks. And is this Rufus?"

"Yes. He still tries to sneak out open doors, so I like to put the leash on. You won't mind him running around, will you?"

Tyler stepped inside and closed the door behind him, kneeling down to let Rufus sniff his hand. "That's fine." He laughed when the dog licked him, entire butt still wiggling. Tyler stood. "How are you?"

"Good. Spent the day woodworking. How about you?"

"I met with Gretta for brunch," he admitted. "And then she dragged me shopping with her. Her husband Max hates shopping and I just like spending time with my daughter."

"That sounds like a nice way to spend your day." They headed into the kitchen, where a casserole sat on the stove top. "Do they know..." George paused as he pulled down two plates, then glanced over his shoulder and studied Tyler's face. "Do they know you're dating?"

“I really hate how blunt you are sometimes.” He inhaled. Exhaled. “Gretta knows I’ve been seeing someone. She’s been pushing me to get out more for a while. My son Tom is struggling with the idea of me—well, I suppose of me ‘moving on.’” He shook his head. “But no, I haven’t told them it’s a man I find myself dating. I know I’ll have to, but...”

He didn’t know how to finish that sentence, but George did it for him. “It’s a lot. I understand. Come on over and show me how much ziti you want.”

“Just like that?”

“What?”

“It’s okay, just like that? I was expecting... I guess I figured you’d be offended.”

George chuckled and reached over, grabbed Tyler’s hand, and pulled him closer to the stove. “Two kisses is a lot to take a giant leap on. Now come on, how much do you want?”

They dished out the pasta casserole, found room on their plates for salad, and filled drinks before settling at the table. Rufus, freed from his leash, was always underfoot, but they both survived. Then he took up begging.

“How old is he?” Tyler nudged the two paws off his lap with his elbow.

“Old enough to know better, but we don’t think his previous house had much use for rules. He’s about seven, though you wouldn’t guess it, would you?”

Tyler chuckled, ignoring the pouting dog staring up at him. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t had a dog since old Bonkers died my first year in college. I never felt like I was home enough, and now there’s Moriarty.”

“He doesn’t like dogs?”

“I’m not sure.” He laughed. “I’m not sure he particularly likes *me*, let alone a dog. Emily found him and took him in. I think she needed someone to coddle after the kids left. And he only really ever let her do that. He and I have more of a truce.”

The food was good, but it was the company that made dinner so enjoyable, as cliché as that sounded. As bad as a line from one of those romantic comedies Emily always watched. He winced at the thought of her.

“Something wrong?”

“No.” Aside from thinking of his wife while courting a man. “No, just... thinking.”

George nodded. “So, how is that couple from Hell you’ve been working with?”

Tyler groaned. “Still hellish. I can understand them wanting everything just right for their home, but they changed their opinion—and the design—on the back porch three times this week. Thankfully we’re not far enough along for it to be a major issue, but I’m starting to think they believe they are the only project we’re working on.”

“What?” George mocked surprise. “You’re not there just for their beck and call?”

“Unfortunately for them, no. I told my boss if they called me again I wasn’t going to answer. He told me they’d just call again or leave a message.” Tyler grinned. “I told him that technology is very confusing and that message might just get deleted.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“Not much, he was too busy laughing. He knows I was one of the first in the company to start working with the computerized visuals program.”

“You must be tech-savvy then.”

“Well...” He laughed, brushing a hand through his hair before slicing off another bite of ziti. “If I sit down and focus on learning it, I’m good. But otherwise not so much. Gretta got me a computer for Christmas two years ago and the only time I use it is when she is forcing me to video chat with her or to check e-mail. The grandkids use it more than I do.”

“More than I’ve done. But I was never good at sitting down and wasting the day staring at a screen.”

“No television?”

George snorted, grinning. “Watching *NCIS* is not wasting the day.”

They talked through dinner, walking Rufus, and then washing up the dishes—Tyler insisted on helping. Once everything was in the drying rack, George leaned against the counter, resting his leg, and watched Tyler finish drying his hands and hang up the towel.

“If you have some time, we could watch a movie. Or go out and see one. Or would you prefer bowling?”

Tyler shrugged, stepped closer, his breath catching in his throat. George smiled, reached out to hold Tyler’s hips, then pulled him forward so they were flush. It forced the air from Tyler’s lungs, but his own hands found themselves resting on George’s biceps. Warmth flooded his front, the heat from George, from their proximity, and from the feeling of a man’s penis pressed against him, even with the clothing between them.

“Not bowling then,” George said.

Tyler shook his head. “I’m good with staying in and watching a movie.”

“Good.” George tilted his head up and Tyler leaned down to meet his lips. Tomato and basil and the slide of warm tongue. He shivered when George’s hands grazed upward, staying outside of his shirt but teasing his skin with the barest touch. The kiss melted, transformed, took many shapes until it finally was just the flutter of lips like butterflies.

“So. Movie?”

George kissed his chin. “What do you want to watch?”

“What do you have? Something we won’t have to pay attention to?”

George chuckled, his breath washing over Tyler’s lips. He slid his arms so they encircled Tyler, keeping them snug before he scraped their chins together. “And what do you have in mind instead?”



His heart pounded, his head was dizzy, and his body tingled. “I was hoping for a few more kisses.” He demonstrated, letting the kiss linger lightly across their lips. “If that’s okay.”

“More than okay.” He slid his arms down to Tyler’s hips, gently separated their connection there, then drew the fingers of his left hand down Tyler’s arm before clasping their hands together. “Shall we?”

He grabbed his cane and led Tyler down the hall into a simply furnished den. The walls were a dusty green, with plain gray curtains and white blinds over the windows. The centerpiece was the extra-large brown leather couch and the television it was aimed at. Rufus had already run in and curled up on his doggy bed, his big brown eyes watching them.

They went over to a cupboard and George opened the doors, revealing two rows of DVDs and four of VHS tapes. “This is everything. From *The Hunt for Red October* to *Grosse Pointe Blank*. Just don’t tell Marcus and Luke about that.”

Tyler snorted. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Film snobs.” George shrugged. “So what’s your poison?”

Tyler scanned the titles, then grinned and slid a DVD off the shelf, flipping it in his fingers to show George the cover. He grinned when George rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t have expected this here.”

“*Love, Actually* is good.” He snatched it from Tyler and headed to the TV. “And for that, we’re watching it.”

“Good. That’s why I picked it out.”

George made a big production of huffing and complaining, but he was smiling the entire time. He slid in the disc, grabbed the necessary remotes, then joined Tyler on the couch. It was a big couch. They could have easily sat on opposite ends and not been anywhere near each other. But what was the fun in that? Tyler had plopped himself smack-dab in the center and George fit himself right beside him.

George flicked through the opening sequence, made sure the volume was loud enough, then hit play and slid the remotes onto the glass-topped coffee table. George settled back, nestled his shoulder against him, and laid his hand on Tyler's thigh. Tyler's chest tightened, his heart thumped in his chest, and then he covered George's hand with his own.

On the screen, lives unfolded. Weddings were celebrated, deaths were mourned, and romances were shattered. And people met. Tyler kept his eyes on the screen but dragged his fingers against the back of George's, the tips gliding between his digits until they were interlocked. George turned their hands, twisting his so their palms met. Tyler could feel the rough calluses as George traced fingers over skin. The touch was light; it tingled up his arm to his chest and drew his eyes down. Their skin was contrasted by roughness, years in the sun, and the abuse of life.

Hands that had built. Hands that had fed. Hands that might have killed. Tyler hadn't asked about George's time in Vietnam, he'd just listened to what he'd been told and heard the pain as George explained his knee injury and the long journey to heal. George wasn't an army man, although he'd served proudly. Working the earth, handling animals, building those calluses, that was George.

He lifted their hands to brush his lips against George's knuckles, then lowered them and turned his head. Their lips met, a brush, a kiss, and then George was sliding his free hand along Tyler's neck, turning their bodies so they could press closer. Lips, hands, chest. The kisses dropped from his lips and trickled down his jaw to follow his throat to the cotton-blend that covered his torso.

As the rough of George's cheek stroked up his neck, Tyler kissed his temple, then ear and finally mouth again. They kissed, and touched, and sometimes even watched the movie. Hands wandered, but by the time the credits rolled, they were both still dressed. At least once the shirts had been pulled back down.

"Did you enjoy the movie?"

Tyler chuckled and tucked his head against George's shoulder. "I think I enjoyed it even more this time than the first time."

"Oh?"

He nodded, then sat up, pulling George up with him so they were once again sitting side by side. "It was a nice evening."

George winced. "But?"

"But I should probably be going." He tucked his hand behind George's neck and pulled him forward for a soft kiss. "But maybe this week you could come over and meet Moriarty."

George smiled, and it was worth all the butterflies in his stomach just to see that.

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Against all odds, Moriarty *liked* George. Not that George was unlikeable, but Moriarty tended to look askance at anything Tyler brought home that wasn't food. He wasn't sure if it was a good sign that the cat liked George, but Tyler didn't really believe in signs anyway, so he decided to take the cat's approval as confirmation that he was doing right.

Not always easy, but right.

Gretta had stopped by one evening without calling first, so she met George. She'd glanced between them, a smile lighting up her face, and kept her mouth shut. At least while George was there. She'd called her father the next morning to gush how happy she was that he'd found a new *friend*. Emphasis hers. He'd asked, and she'd said it was a little odd to think about her daddy with a man, but she just wanted him happy.

And George made him happy.

Of course she told Tom, who had called, flustered and uneasy. Tom wasn't as excited as Gretta had been—who would be?—but he'd begrudgingly admitted he was glad Tyler had someone to keep him company.

Tyler wasn't sure he'd blushed more in his entire life as he had during those conversations, but once they were done, he almost fainted in relief. He'd expected drama and arguments, and he'd gotten acceptance, each in their own way. He told George about it the next time they got together, over shrimp scampi which Rufus begged ruthlessly for.

“So none of the kids mind?”

“It appears not. For the most part. Tom'll come around. I think he'll like you.” He swallowed. “If you want to meet him.”

“I do. Gretta was very nice. I liked... seeing your family.” He chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. “I love the family I've made, but there's something special about relatives, even if they drive you crazy. Maybe it's because they drive you crazy and you still stick around. Or maybe not. I don't know. Don't mind me.”

“You don't have any nieces or nephews?”

A cloud covered George's face. “My sister died in childbirth along with the baby. So no, no family.”

Tyler nodded. He'd known that most of George's family had distanced themselves when he'd come out, but it made his chest ache to think that he'd been alone all those years.

“Not blood, at least. I'm godfather to all of Lucy and Olivia's brood. All five. And I get to play at Uncle George there. And Great-Uncle George too, now.” The sun broke out over his face. Maybe he wasn't as lonely as Tyler had thought. Maybe he was only as lonely as Tyler had been these last three years.

“Congratulations.” He lifted his glass of milk and they clinked in a toast, then broke down laughing.

After dinner Tyler headed toward the living room for their usual couch session, but George caught his hand in the archway. He turned back, brow raised, and found George smiling like the Cheshire cat, a glint in his eyes.

“What?”

He stepped forward and pulled Tyler to him until they were divided only by cloth. “I thought you might like to see more of the house.”

Thank God he was in good shape, because if not, that would have stopped his heart. “Yeah?”

“If you want.”

“I want.” Suddenly he nothing but wanted. All their previous evenings together had kept them dressed, hands wandering under shirts and over crotches, but never further than that. He’d been grateful, he had. But he was also curious. He slid his free arm around George’s waist and relaxed into the heat of his body.

George chuckled. “It’s hard to show you the rest of the house like this.”

“Spoilsport.” But Tyler released him, stepping back just far enough that George could turn and head down the hall, drawing him along with his hand.

“Bathroom,” he indicated with a tip of his head, although Tyler had already seen it. “Spare-room-slash-office-slash-weight room.” Another tip. “And my bedroom.” He used his cane to push open the door.

A queen-size bed captured the focus of the room, with two large dressers flanking it on either side. It was covered in a navy blue comforter, folded back to reveal off-white sheets and two pillows, although one had a dent where George slept. Tyler appreciated the dark, relaxing colors and the complementary wood.

But part of him could only think how he’d never slept in a bed with someone besides his wife in over thirty years.

George squeezed his hand. “Would you like to come in?”

He did, but he couldn’t move. He was frozen on the threshold, staring at the bed, clamped on George’s hand. Words died before his brain could even form them. Was he betraying his wife? Their marriage? What had he been thinking, starting something with George?

“Breathe.”

He gasped and tore his eyes from the bed to George, who leaned his cane against his thigh so he could cup Tyler's jaw. He brushed his thumb over his chin and lips, then settled it, stroking his cheek. "It's okay. Let's go back and watch a movie."

A movie. As if he could just forget the expanse of cream sheets and the vision of George lying there, his tanned skin a heady contrast. And skin that didn't see the sun finally exposed to Tyler's eyes as they revealed themselves to each other. As if that thought could be forgotten.

No more than he could forget his wife's apple-scented skin and the tickle of her nails when she trailed them down his back. Her flowing brown curls that she'd let age naturally, even when it looked ridiculous—by her account. Or her soft kisses.

Lips sealed over his. Soft with a hint of sharpness, the gruff of skin shaved several hours ago. Stunning blue eyes held him. George. He inhaled, capturing a new scent in memory with the kisses. Woody. An apple tree, he thought to himself and smiled, breaking the kiss with a tremulous laugh. He swallowed. "I don't want to watch a movie."

"But it's too soon." It wasn't a question, but uncertainty lingered in George's expression. Tyler shook his head.

"It's a lot. But we should at least go sit down, you're going to hurt your knee like this."

George nodded, letting his fingers slip away from Tyler to grab his cane. He turned to head back to the living room, and this time it was Tyler stopping him. He tugged George's hand until he turned around, then Tyler led George into his own bedroom. His heart was pounding in his chest, but it relaxed when George sat on the bed, the tension draining out of his shoulders as the weight left his leg. "You'd think after all this time I'd know when I've pushed it too long. Shouldn't have taken Rufus on that walk today."

"If you hadn't, he would have been bouncing as high as the dinner table in his excitement." He sat down to George's left and slid his hand from his thigh down to his knee. "How bad does it hurt?"

“Just an ache. It already feels better just taking the weight off.” George folded his hand over Tyler’s and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you.”

“Go on, lie back.” He gave a nudge with his shoulder, then sank to the floor so he was kneeling at George’s feet, one hand still on his knee. He gave it a squeeze. “I’ll rub the tension out of it.”

George studied his face, searching for something, then he nodded, inhaled, and leaned back on the bed with a deep exhale, lifting his hand off Tyler’s. And then George was stretched out before him like an offering, the bulge in his jeans more noticeable from this position. Tyler swallowed and yanked his eyes back to his own hand on George’s knee and forced himself to rub the joint and massage the surrounding muscles.

George sighed and hummed when he hit a particularly sensitive spot, and so he proceeded to ease out the ache there. Tyler also sighed as the tension slipped away. This felt familiar. This he could do. Slowly his eyes rose from where his hands worked, up the long stretch of thigh to the even more prominent bulge and then to George’s hands fisting the cloth of his shirt over his stomach.

“It doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“No,” he grunted. “Feels good.”

“Good.” He stopped the massage and just smoothed his warm hands over the joint for a moment. Then he breathed. And slid his hands up George’s thigh, lightly working the muscles as he went until his hand cupped crotch, and George’s eyes flew open.

“Tyler?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his thumb along the ridge of the pants, dragging his fingers a little farther up so his palm pressed in, and grabbed the zipper with his pointer and middle finger. Before he could think, and before George could speak, Tyler pressed in the heel of his hand and dragged the zipper down.

“You don’t have to—”

“George.” Tyler cut him off, undoing the button of his jeans as distraction. “My heart is pounding. I’m terrified. But I’m also pretty hard and I—” He choked. On air. On terror. On want. “I’ve been dreaming about tasting you and I... I think I can handle this.”

George’s hand covered the fingers slipping into his pants. “As long as you’re sure.”

It was ridiculous, but because he wasn’t *on* the bed, sharing the bed with someone else, everything seemed okay. “I’m sure. Can we...” And damn if asking wasn’t harder than just doing. “Lift your hips?” George did and Tyler tugged down his jeans and underwear to midthigh. And after that, he could look at nothing but George’s package.

Of course it wasn’t the first dick he’d seen. If he hadn’t before now, the Internet would have shown him that. But it was the first, aside from his own, that he brushed with his fingers, circled with his hand, and stroked. George moaned and thumped his hands against the mattress, inhaling deeply. Tyler thought he was going to say something, but when no words came, he slid his hand back down, mesmerized by the feel of another man’s dick in his hand, the heat and the colors and the smells.

He leaned forward, letting his breath tease over the heated skin before he inhaled, taking in the aroma. His hand worked, the skin sliding beneath his touch, George’s dick hardening with each stroke. When he looked up, George was staring down at him, his hands bunched in the covers, his eyes dark with pleasure. “Want to come up?”

He didn’t so much answer as lean down and swipe the width of his tongue against the tip of George’s dick. The flavors burst across his taste buds, pretty much what he expected them to taste like—but he was surprised by how much they turned him on. He pressed the heel of his free hand into his crotch and wrapped his mouth around the head, his hand giving little strokes to the base.

George groaned and Tyler let a little more slide into his mouth, his tongue pressing against the head to keep it from moving too fast. It *tasted* good. It *felt* good. It filled him and made his dick fill just as much. He let his tongue slide



under as more fed into his mouth until he hit his hand and the natural thing seemed to be suck his way off.

“Dammit,” George breathed. “It’s been a really long time since...”

When he reached the head, gravity pulled him back down. George inhaled sharply. Tyler fell into a rhythm, the rush of flesh in his mouth hypnotizing as he applied the same tricks he’d always loved done to him. George groaned and grunted in pleasure until his one hand finally released the cover and tried to grip Tyler’s short hair.

“I’m gonna come if you don’t stop.”

He dragged his lips over the sensitive skin when he pulled off and looked up at George’s pupil-blown eyes and parted lips. Tyler licked his own swollen lips and smiled, a decision made. “Okay.”

He sank back down, sucking in George’s dick as far as he could take it.

“Jesus,” George cursed. It wasn’t long before he shot in Tyler’s mouth. He tried his best to swallow, but it surprised him and some dribbled out and back down George’s dick. An embarrassing slurping noise cleaned that right up, though, and he let the dick go to beam up at George.

“Proud of yourself, aren’t you?” George didn’t sound the least bit disappointed.

“Yeah.” He cleared his somewhat raspy throat. “I am.”

George grinned. “Now will you come up here?”

He wanted to. His one hand still cupped his crotch, interchanging between rubbing and pressing. But he couldn’t. His legs trembled at the thought of being in the same bed. It was fantastically stupid, but he couldn’t move.

Maybe George saw that on his face, because he sat up, pulled his pants on enough to not trap him as he gingerly sank to the floor in front of Tyler. His grin wasn’t all evil, but Tyler knew he was in trouble when it crept across George’s face. Then he was being pushed to the floor and George was undoing his pants and pulling him out.

And then it was wet heat and groaning and embarrassing noises that urged George on.

When he was younger, he would have been embarrassed with how quickly he shot. Now he just enjoyed the rush of pleasure. George swallowed with more grace than he had, and Tyler was staring dizzily up at the ceiling, a silly smile plastered on his lips. At least until George leaned over and kissed him, swirling their flavors together.

Then it was bliss. He gently pulled them apart and guided George to lie to his left so the weight would be off his bad knee. “Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary.” George propped his head on one arm to peer at Tyler’s face. “That okay?”

“More than.” He leaned over and kissed George’s nose. “But I was saying thanks for coming down here. I... It’s hard to imagine being in bed with someone else after all these years.”

George didn’t look thrilled about it, but he nodded in understanding and slid an arm around Tyler’s chest. “Not even for the cuddle after?”

Tyler sighed, shaking. “Sorry. Not yet.”

George kissed his cheek. “It’s all right. I’ll be honest, I wasn’t expecting a blow job.”

Tyler laughed and closed his eyes. “You just taste so damn good. I couldn’t help myself.”

They snuggled together and rested in the post-coital bliss for as long as their old bones would bear them lying on the floor.

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It was sunny and October only hinted at its arrival with a slight bite in the air. Still, a gorgeous Saturday. So when George came over after working the morning shift, Tyler suggested they go for a walk. The other man gave his knee a rub, then nodded, and they headed out, taking full advantage of the sidewalks that stretched through the suburban town.

“So I was wondering,” Tyler said once they were a few blocks in, “if you wanted to come over next weekend.”

George raised a brow, eyes focused ahead as he thought about the date. “Yeah, I don’t see any reason why not. Is there something special about next weekend?”

“No. Yes. I...” He huffed. “I invited the kids over next weekend, too.”

“Oh.”

Tyler reached over and held George’s hand. “You don’t have to meet them if you don’t want. I just thought you might. And you said before you’d be okay with it. But if it’s too soon, I understand. I just... Hell, we’re not getting any younger. And I...” He choked on the last words. He cleared his throat, but his mouth still wouldn’t take form.

George stopped, pulling on Tyler’s hand so he turned and they were facing one another. “What?”

His mouth flopped like a grounded fish until he gave up and shut it. Took a deep breath, wishing George wasn’t watching him so intently. As he exhaled, he realized he wasn’t going to be able to say it yet. So he started with something else entirely. “Well, you’ve met Gretta already, so I didn’t think it’d be a fuss or anything and then they’d know I’m serious. Because I am. Serious.”

There. He’d said it.

George smiled and started walking, tugging Tyler along. “I’d like that. Them meeting me and knowing we’re serious about each other.”

Damn if that didn’t set his heart pounding. Possibly in relief. “Good.” He breathed. “Good. So how was work?”

“Tiring,” George groaned. “The idiots working the night shift stocked half their shit wrong so we had to take care of customers and reshelve everything. I’m not sure who thought cat treats and horse treats went side by side—they don’t. We have an equine section. Why would you not put them there? And

that was one of the less idiotic choices they'd made. I'm glad I have tomorrow off. I think I'll spend the day being a major grump."

Tyler laughed. "I think you earned it. I'd invite you to spend the night, but I know you need to get home to Rufus."

"Thanks. Maybe after next week, we can introduce Rufe and Moriarty and see if they can put up with each other. Then I can spend the night at your place sometimes."

"I'd like that. Not that your house isn't nice," he hurried to add. "And yours doesn't have all those damn steps to worry about."

"We'll figure it out as we go," George said, but Tyler could feel him leaning more weight into their handhold. "But we should probably head back. I think this morning wore me out more than I thought."

They turned and headed home. Thankfully it wasn't far, because with each block, George's grip on his cane turned whiter and whiter and the tension in his lips and shoulder increased. Tyler tried distracting him with stories, and it worked for a little, but by the time they could see the house, George wasn't responding so much as grunting in pain.

Inside, he collapsed on the couch with an exhausted huff and abandoned his cane to rub his knee more gingerly than Tyler had ever seen him. His jaw was tense as he worked, his hands barely touching as if he was afraid to dig into the soreness like he usually did.

"What can I do?" Tyler asked.

"Have a heating pad? Usually heat helps everything relax and stop firing off these damn pain flares. Dammit." He frowned, one hand on his knee, the other going back to dig into his lower back. "Sorry about this."

"Jesus. Don't be." He watched George rub the two points and asked, "I have a heating pad, but would a hot bath help?"

George nodded, fighting a grimace.

"I'll get it set up, you stay here and... We'll figure out how to get you up there. Maybe piggyback style."

Normally that'd get a laugh, but George was focused on his leg. Tyler took the steps two at a time to the tub and started the water as hot as he thought George could take it. Then he tried to figure out how to get him up there. Maybe they should use the heating pad and bring him upstairs later. He sure as shit wasn't going to be able to carry him up bridal-style. He was strong, but George was dense muscle. Plus, stairs would not be a good idea. He could just imagine the two of them taking a tumble back down. Maybe piggyback was the best way. It would take the weight off his knee at least, although if the pain was spreading, it might not help.

While he debated, he tossed in some scented soap Emily had kept around that was meant for relaxing and soothing. It couldn't hurt. Though it almost made him smile with how *gay* it all seemed. But he didn't think George would be laughing right now. He filled the tub, almost scalding, and headed back downstairs, figuring the water would cool by the time they got George in.

George was still on the couch. Although the pain was obviously still there, the intensity had passed if his expression was anything to go off. "How's it feeling? I ran the tub, but are you up to getting there?"

"Yeah." George nodded, rolling his ankle. "For a hot soak I could probably crawl up on my own."

"No need for that. On my back or put your weight on me, it's a pretty wide stairwell."

"Can your back handle me? I don't want both of us laid up."

A fair point. Then he watched another twitch of pain streak across George's face. "I think I can do it."

Giving rides to a slight wife and young kids was nothing like hoisting a grown man on his back. Plus, George could only wrap one leg around his waist while the other gripped with its thigh and hung awkwardly down. Once he was secure, Tyler walked—hobbled—to the steps. He grabbed the banister and gathered his strength. "Good?"

"Yes. You sure about this?"

“Yes.” Tyler lurched up the first few steps, then found a plodding pace the rest of the way. Once he was moving, it wasn’t too bad. He definitely had the strength to get to the top, although he worried once or twice about his balance.

But they were successful. And then it was just a hop—with no actually hopping—down the hall where he deposited George, somewhat gently, on the toilet seat. Thankfully he was still in the habit of putting the top down so Moriarty kept out of it. George grunted.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” George nodded and began undoing his one shoe, so Tyler dropped to his knees and undid the other. Between the two of them, they undressed George without making him stand and got him into the tub and sitting.

“Shit, a towel.” Tyler popped down the hall to the linen closet, then returned, hanging the towel on the rack beside his. He stepped back, unsure if he should stay or go. Undecided, he leaned against the doorjamb and watched George ease back in the tub, his face relaxing into an expression of bliss. “Better?”

“Much.” George sighed and moved just enough to rub his knee under the sudsy water. “A heating pad would have worked, but this is beyond better.”

“I’m glad.” Tyler studied George. He still rubbed at his aching leg, but the tension in his shoulders had practically vanished when he hit the hot water. Tyler inhaled the scented bubble bath mix. He didn’t know if it made him relax, but it did give him the courage to push off the wall and cross the distance to the tub.

George didn’t open his eyes, just smiled and raised his near hand from the water to prop it on the tub lip, fingers curling toward the ceiling. Tyler sat on the floor facing him, his left arm on the rim. His hand slid easily into George’s, tickling the bubbles off his palm. George rubbed his slick thumb over the back of Tyler’s hand, absently tracing the veins and tendons. “Thank you.”

Tyler smiled, turned over George’s hand, and leaned forward enough to kiss his knuckles. “You are very welcome.”

For a while, they sat in silence, their hands speaking for them in brushes and strokes, painting in water and bubbles. Then George opened his hand, spread it wide, and captured Tyler's. "So. Next weekend?"

"Yes?" Had George changed his mind? Tyler studied the soft smile and tired wrinkles around his eyes. Surely he wouldn't be smiling if he were about to back out.

"You're ready for it?"

"Yes." He shifted their hands so they were holding on to one another. "Are you?"

"I am. I was wondering if you'd like to join me at Sunday brunch with Lucy and Olivia tomorrow."

Tyler leaned down, scuffing his lips against knuckles once again. Hands meant for working. Hands meant for building. Maybe even hands for building their lives together now. "I would."

"Good." George turned his hand and cupped Tyler's jaw, lifting his head, while George leaned forward and met their lips in a kiss. They fit together.

Hands for building. Lips for kissing. Yes, they fit together.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Alex Whitehall may have grown up, but still wants to believe in magic—fairies, wishes, and things that go bump in the night—as long as it has a happy ending. Since none of that seems to exist in real life, Alex creates make-believe worlds where suffering is stopped, passions never cool, and the leads always end up happier than they started. When not writing, reading, riding horses, working, running, reading, working, and being social, Alex is sleeping.*

## Contact Info

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