

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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## THE FIELD OF SOMEONE ELSE'S DREAMS

Amelia C. Gormley

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

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**By Amelia C. Gormley**

### 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.

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## Photo Description

Two naked young men in a window seat, cuddling. One is leaning back against, and looking up at, the other. The other has his arms wrapped around the one in front.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Matt has always been out and proud and from a very understanding and accepting family. He's never openly flaunted being gay but he's never hidden it, either. Chris has hidden the fact that he's gay since he figured it out and has no intention of ever telling anyone. His family is very closed-minded and narrowly focused on him getting an athletic scholarship to college, like his dad.*

*Both boys end up at the same college together. Chris on an athletic scholarship for baseball, hoping to make it to the major leagues, and Matt on an academic scholarship, not quite sure what he wants to do with his life, yet. When they meet they both begin to question everything they've ever thought they knew about themselves. Can Matt be in the closet for Chris? Can Chris come out for Matt? Can they make a relationship work with so many differences between them?*

*HEA please with no cheating, some angst, and this awesome cuddle scene maybe used as a heart to heart!*

*Sincerely,*

*Shantel*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** homophobia, coming out, twink, hurt/comfort, sports, college

**Word count:** 13,711

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If you'd asked me three months ago, I would have said there was no more thrilling sound on this planet than the resounding *crack* that happens when the bat makes contact with the ball. Even when you're not the one batting, even if you're just standing on base, awaiting your opportunity to run for the next.

It's a heart-stopping, pulse-pounding sound, the deafening shot of a gun signaling the start of a race. It's a sound that is almost always punctuated by the roar of the crowd and a rush of adrenaline. Did it foul? Will I make it to base on time? Will it be a home run? A grand slam?

It is, quite frankly, the only reason I played baseball. For that matter (in my humble opinion, at least) it's the only reason anyone would spectate baseball, the only reason the game exists in the first place. Without it, baseball is minutes upon minutes of tedium with no purpose. All of us, the team at bat, the outfielders, the crowd in the stands, we're all just milling around waiting for that sound to call us to action.

I'd managed to convince myself I was in love with that sound, and why not? I'd spent my whole life hearing my father rhapsodize about it. Most of that speech I just gave—except for the last part—were direct quotes, straight (you'll pardon the use of the term) from his lips. From the time I was old enough to swing a Wiffle bat at a hollow ball or tap a real one off a tee, I'd heard all about the glory of baseball. My family was one of those for whom the national pastime had become a religion. I had quite literally drunk the love of it in with my mother's milk; my parents had decorated the nursery in a baseball motif, with stenciled images of bats and balls and large leather mitts scattered around the walls, the sheets and comforter reflecting more of the same. My first stuffed toy hadn't been an animal of some permutation; it had been a baseball bat.

Funny how three months can unravel a lifetime of indoctrination.

“So when can he begin training again?” My father asked as I tried to push the arch of my foot against Matt’s hand. With just the slightest bit of resistance, I felt my muscles begin to ache and tremble. My physical therapy aide backed off the pressure, frowning, and he looked at me instead of answering my dad’s question.

“You had more strength last week. Did you overdo it?”

I shifted on the padded bench, trying to draw my foot out of Matt’s grasp. “Just, you know, trying to build up strength.”

Matt’s mouth tightened and he darted a quick glance at my father out from under his long lashes. No need to guess whether or not he’d figured out at whose urging I’d overexerted. “Well, what you’re most likely to build up is scar tissue that will permanently impede normal function.”

I suppressed a wince as Matt’s fingers gripped either side of the visible knot in my Achilles tendon and began to massage it firmly.

“Nothing wrong with trying to get around without the crutches for a while,” Dad scoffed, clapping me on the shoulder. Sweat immediately began to bead on my forehead and I had to close my eyes and grit my teeth to try to conceal how much pain Matt’s fingers were causing.

“Oh, sure, nothing wrong with going without the crutches... providing he has no interest in ever walking or running unaided again.”

Fuck. Matt wasn’t even trying for diplomacy this time.

Dad sighed with exaggerated patience. “He’s not some pansy who’ll keel over putting a little weight on a bum ankle. Back when I played ball, I played with sprains plenty of times. Doctors these days don’t seem to get that. You don’t pamper an injury; you find a way to work with it, not let it keep you down.”

The corners of Matt’s mouth went white at the word “pansy”.

“I’m not a doctor, Mr. Boyden.” Only someone as familiar with him as I was would miss the seething venom in Matt’s undertone. “Just a PT aide. But if you would prefer more expertise, I could call Chris’s orthopedist to consult



with you. Or his physical therapist. They'll tell you the same thing. The fact that you ran on your sprains without giving the connective tissues time to heal completely means your joints today are weaker and more susceptible to re-injury. And what happened to Chris wasn't a mere sprain. It was a traumatic injury. A completely ruptured Achilles tendon improperly healed could have him on crutches or using a cane for the rest of his life." Matt leveled me with a flat look. "So, keep your weight off the ankle and use the damn crutches, okay?"

I could feel my dad winding up for a diatribe and jumped in. "Yeah, of course. So, what's been happening on campus while I've been away?"

"Not a lot. I've got a class with Topher Carlisle this term. It's good to be able to hang with him again. Haven't had a chance to do that since high school. Roll over. I'm going to go get an ice pack."

Obediently I flipped onto my stomach and Matt went to grab a clay-filled pack out of the clinic freezer. The clinic was eerily quiet this time of evening; I was the last patient remaining today, because my dad insisted I take the latest possible appointment so he could come with me to my therapy sessions when he had a chance. "To see how I was progressing," which was code for, "to bully the physical therapist into giving me the all-clear."

I took the opportunity to wipe the sweat from my face onto my sleeve, trying not to let my dad see my hand shaking. Fuck, but it hurt when they massaged the tendon to break up the scar tissue. And that fucking cold pack was going to hurt even worse.

"Topher Carlisle." My dad snorted once Matt was out of the room. "I remember when you went to school with him. Biggest fairy in town. Matt hangs out with him? You sure he's not—?"

I turned my face away so he couldn't see my grimace. "Matt's never made a secret of the fact that he's gay, Dad. He and Topher even saw each other for a little while in high school, though it didn't last long."

"What? You're telling me you knew about it, even back then? And you still hang out with him?"

“He’s my friend.” I kept my voice neutral, yawning to try to hint that the subject was tedious or I was exhausted. Whichever would shut Dad up the quickest. “And Topher’s not a bad guy, though I don’t know him very well.”

“Well, he was good in those spring musicals, I guess.” At least he was willing to grudgingly admit that much. “So, why didn’t you tell me about Matt?”

“Because you didn’t need to know. It’s his business and his family’s, not ours.”

“The hell it’s not! I let you stay over at his house.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Boyden. Chris’s virtue was always safe with me.” The polite chill in Matt’s voice was every bit as excruciating as the ache that settled into my ankle when he wrapped the cold pack around it. Dear sweet Jesus, it hurt. It felt like the biting pain when you’ve been outside in the snow too long, when you know you’d better get indoors soon because you’re a few minutes away from the dangerous numb of frostbite settling in.

“Oh!” I felt my dad jump, and couldn’t help but feel a little satisfaction as he began spluttering. “I didn’t— I mean— It’s just—”

“Don’t you need to be getting to work, Dad?” My amusement was short-lived, and mostly I was just tired and in pain.

“Yeah. Graveyard shift this week.” He pushed himself up from the stool he sat on with the same sort of larger-than-life energy he did everything. That’s my dad. A giant. Big. Strong. Powerful. A veritable man’s man. I often wondered how he’d ended up playing baseball when he was better suited to being a linebacker. I was no runt by any stretch of the imagination, but sometimes I felt like I disappointed him because I wasn’t large and towering enough to break tree trunks in half with my bare hands.

“Okay. I’ll see you soon, Dad.” I flinched as he clapped me on the shoulder again and mumbled an awkward goodbye to Matt. Silence filled the empty clinic as I lay there and tried not to complain about the aching cold wrapped around my ankle. Matt didn’t seem to be moving at all behind me, which meant he was probably standing there waiting for something.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered at last, burying my face in my arms. The cold was uncomfortable, but I was starting to adapt, or the pack was getting warmer, and the pain of the massage had faded. Fuck. I tell you, if I had realized how much damage the helmet on a batter sliding into home plate could do to your leg, I would never have played catcher.

I felt Matt’s hand settle between my shoulder blades, a touch just short of a caress. The “just short” part made me ache far worse than the cold on my ankle.

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this.” He took his hand away. “I stand here week after week and listen to his casual slurs and I bite my tongue and I’m just waiting for you to say something and you never do.”

I swallowed and turned my face toward him. “I suppose I should thank you for working the mention of Topher into the conversation. It gave me an opening to let him know he was offending you.”

“That wasn’t exactly the opening I’d hoped you would take.”

“I know, but—” I shook my head, wishing he’d step around front so I could see him. “Still, maybe he’ll learn a little tact now that I made it clear to him that you’re gay.”

His hand pulled away and the loss of its warmth was a new kind of ache. “Yeah, sure. Until I’m out of the room. Then there will just be one fag he’ll be running his homophobic mouth off in front of, unawares.”

“I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to be.”

“I’m not like you, Matt. My family isn’t like yours. They didn’t make an effort to foster an open and accepting environment from the moment they suspected when I was a toddler.”

“No, quite the opposite.” At last, he lifted the cold pack off my ankle and the pain began to dissipate. “Your dad wouldn’t mind seeing you crippled for life as long as it proved that you’re a *real man*.”

“He’s not a bad guy, Matt. He’s just... a product of his upbringing. He doesn’t know any better. He’s a good dad, though.”

Matt grumbled something inaudible before I heard him stalk out of the room with angry strides. I rolled up to sit on the edge of the padded table, my head hung low.

Fuck.

When Matt reappeared, he grabbed my socks and shoe for me. I hadn’t even tried to hop down from the table without his assistance. He was pissed enough at me. He helped me into the huge, boot-like brace and then supported me as I slid down from the table, until I got my weight on my crutches.

“So, where am I driving you to tonight?”

I stood there with the pads of the crutches butted up under my arms and Matt so close beside me that I could smell his cologne and the minty/menthol scent of the therapeutic gel he’d massaged into my mangled tendons and ligaments.

“Your place? Please?”

The hard chill in his eyes softened, and his lips slowly drew up into a gentle smile. His dark green gaze held mine captive as he leaned in and brushed his lips across mine.

“Okay.”

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Matt rented a first-floor bedroom in an old house that had been converted into co-op housing. It was by far the most spacious of the five bedrooms, though being the farthest away from the forced air heating unit, it wasn’t the most temperature controlled. I levered myself onto the bed and laid my crutches aside, hugging my zippered sweatshirt around me while Matt turned on the electric space heaters and patches of warmth began to spread throughout the drafty room.

There was no more natural a caretaker than Matt. He was quiet as he put my crutches next to my side of the bed and knelt down to help me remove the

brace he'd put on at the clinic. My stomach felt tight and heavy, guilt gnawing at me. He deserved better than he was getting from me. He'd deserved better the last time we'd tried dating each other, back in high school; why he'd come back for more of the same, I would never know.

I couldn't apologize again. He'd heard it all before and nothing seemed to change. I couldn't find a way to make myself come out to my family, which meant we could never be *together* in front of my family. I could never invite him to holiday dinners or admit to spending as much time with him as I did. I could never acknowledge him the way he deserved to be acknowledged.

I could never push back against my father's bigoted insensitivity in Matt's defense, much less my own.

"Ready for a shower?" Matt peeled my T-shirt, still damp with sweat from my physical therapy, over my head, gently massaging the back of my neck.

I shook my head, closing my eyes at the touch. "I think I'd rather just go to sleep. I'll never understand how physical therapy can be so exhausting, when I barely even move."

"It's the pain." He reached for my belt, carefully helping me to shimmy out of my jeans without moving my ankle too much. When they were gone, he Velcroed another brace around the joint, lighter and slimmer than the boot I wore when I was out and about trying to be somewhat mobile. "That and the fact that the parts you *are* trying to move really don't want to move because they no longer have the strength to do so, so it requires a lot more exertion for a much smaller result."

"Right." I let him help me to the communal bathroom to brush my teeth companionably beside him, then back to bed. I stretched out, placing a pillow under my ankle as he undressed and slid under the sheets beside me, turning off the bedside lamp. "You're so good at what you do."

He stared at the darkened ceiling. "Yeah, too bad I'm not even sure I want to be doing it."

"So apply to film school already. Before you get stuck in this rut."

“I’m never going to get anywhere doing the Film and Video Production degree here at Grand Valley, except maybe become a producer on some local news broadcast. I need to go to a school recognized for their film program. But if I go someplace else, I lose my scholarship. So I’m kind of stuck.”

My hand drifted across the narrow inches between us, my fingers lightly stroking his wrist. I didn’t really have an argument ready for that. I understood all too well what it meant to be trapped by financial necessity. I’d just started high school when the Great Recession hit, and my parents had lost their jobs. Then we’d lost our house. They had eventually found work, working more hours and making far less than they had before. Their retirement funds had been gutted, and any hope that I’d had of going to college without a scholarship had been completely wiped out. That was when my dad’s dream of me attending school on a baseball scholarship, as he had done, and maybe even being recruited into the major leagues, had become an absolute necessity. I hadn’t lived and breathed a day since the ninth grade when Dad didn’t talk to me about the critical importance of seeing to my future.

“I wish I knew what to say.” I picked up his hand and pulled it to my face, pressing a kiss to his knuckles. “I wish you could get out of here. West Michigan is a waste for you. You should be someplace like LA, at a school with lots of guys who don’t have to hide who they’re dating from their families. You should be with—fuck, I don’t know—someone like Topher. Someone who just lets it all hang out and doesn’t give a fuck what anyone thinks.”

Matt’s hand went still in mine and he abruptly rolled up onto his elbow, looming over me in the darkness.

“You can’t seriously think I want Topher.”

“Not really.” I shrugged. “Mostly he was just the first example at hand. Though, you *did* date him.”

“Yeah, for all of five minutes, by default, because he was the only other out guy at our school and I was all one with the *fuck that* over the idea of going to the Homecoming dance stag or with a girl.”

“You can’t deny he’s pretty.”

That made Matt laugh. “Well, yeah, he’s beautiful, but he’s too much. I may be out and proud, but he turns the flames up a little too high even for me.”

I smiled wistfully at that. The truth was, I was insanely jealous of Topher Carlisle. Not because he’d dated Matt, but because he was just so *open*. Topher hid absolutely nothing, and he didn’t bother to play anything low-key, even if it made others squirm. Our similarities began and ended with our first names and sexual orientation. I’d always hated him a little, just because I admired and envied him so desperately.

“Yeah, well, look at your alternative.” My hand tightened on his. “I wouldn’t blame you if—”

“It’s not to that point yet.” Matt caught my chin, planting a firm kiss on my lips. “I can put up with your dad’s ignorance for a while longer. Maybe not indefinitely, but I’m not willing to give up on us yet. I’m praying you find a way to come out to your family before we hit that stage.”

My throat felt tight. “I am, too.”

“Hey.” His mouth captured mine again, for longer this time. With more intent. “You’re always a wreck after PT. Especially when your dad’s there, because you push it too hard when he’s around. Let it go. Deal with it later, when you’re not so wrung out.”

“Okay.” I mustered a smile, catching him with a hand wrapped behind his neck, lingering in the kiss. His tongue slid across my lips, minty with toothpaste, and I let out a low groan, pulling him down above me.

Matt chuckled when he felt me press hard against his groin, but he was just as hard, his cock lining up alongside mine through the cotton of our underwear.

“Sure you’re not too worn out?” His lips trailed a warm, damp path across my cheekbone to my ear, his tongue stroking inside the rim before his teeth scraped the shell.

I smiled, tipping my head back to give him room to work his way down my throat. My arms slipped around him, my fingers grasping the firm muscles of his back. “Never too worn out for this.”

I rolled onto my stomach, slipping out of my underwear as Matt stuffed a pillow under my hips, and then his solid weight covered me, a whole-body embrace pressing me into the mattress. His lips and breath were warm, pressing kisses over my shoulders and the back of my neck, nuzzling the crease of my armpit, licking down the indentation of my spine.

“You smell good.”

“Well, you feel good.” I sighed into the cradle of my arms, lifting my hips to press up against him. The ridge of Matt’s cock nestled in the crease of my ass and he rocked as he made love to my back and shoulders with his mouth, grinding me against the pillow until I groaned. Surely there was nothing softer on earth than his lips gliding across my spine, nothing more sensual than his tongue and the scrape of his teeth against my shoulder.

“Fuck me,” I whispered, turning to see him over my shoulder. I snagged another kiss, moaning in unison with him the next time he rocked. Puffs of his breath erupted against my cheek and neck as he drew away again.

Those sharp exhalations were a sound I’d come to cherish far more than the crack of a baseball bat connecting with a ball. They were only one note in a veritable symphony, though, the percussion that underscored the tearing of a condom wrapper, the crinkling noise of the rubber unrolling, the slick sound of lube being smeared around...

...My own half-pained whimper as he pressed into me.

Matt’s breathless gasp against the back of my shoulder. “Fuck. Oh, *fuck.*”

Those were the sounds that were precious to me now.

Like I said: a lot can change in three months.

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“*There’s one good thing about hiding it from my parents.*” My seventeen-year-old self had moaned as Matt sucked on the side of my throat. “*They don’t*



*bat an eye when I tell them I'm staying at your place overnight studying for a test tomorrow."*

*"And my parents"—He abruptly flipped me onto my stomach and attacked my back with his mouth—"just don't give a fuck. They know I'm gonna have sex, so they fling me some rubbers and give me lots of safe sex lectures and tell me to be smart."*

*"Aren't you worried they might hear us?" I groaned when his teeth scraped the back of my neck.*

*"Nice thing about having a basement bedroom when everyone else is upstairs. If no one has teased me about the noise I make jerking off by now, I think we're safe. Although, if you were to look above the drop panels there on the ceiling, you'd see I've stuffed the space between the ceiling and pipes with lots of egg-crate foam." He pointed up at the heating vent in the ceiling "I even stuck some in there. At least for now. If we wanna bone once it's winter, we're just going to have to take our chances."*

*"Really?" Curiosity jerked me out of my testosterone lust-haze and I turned my head to peer at him. "When did you do that?"*

*"Last week." His lips were soft against my shoulder. Then my jaw. And finally my mouth. "After you said you wanted to move past hand jobs and the occasional blowjob."*

*"Oh." As far as romantic gestures were concerned, soundproofing his bedroom was a little on the iffy side, and yet I melted. This meant enough to him that he was willing to make certain I didn't walk away from our first time with any reason for shame or embarrassment.*

*I rolled onto my back again, drawing him down above me. He felt so safe; I didn't know the last time I felt safe. I don't think I had, since I'd finally admitted to myself that I was gay. I wasn't sure what I'd do when he graduated next spring and left me alone at Jenison High for another year, with no one here who understood me. Hell, even Topher would be graduating.*

*"I love you," I whispered, lifting my head for a kiss.*

*Matt smiled serenely and reached for the button on my jeans. "Of course you do."*

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I woke in the middle of the night with my ankle aching and a foreboding tension in my calf muscles that suggested I might get a charley horse if I wasn't careful. Beside me, Matt snored softly and I realized I'd forgotten to set out my pain meds and a bottle of water beside the bed like I usually did, so I wouldn't have to get up in the middle of the night. Maneuvering carefully, I reached for my crutches and levered myself out of bed, trying to keep the weight off my ankle.

The space heaters had taken the edge off the chill, but drafty pockets of cold still littered the back bedroom. Tonight the cool felt good; since my injury and subsequent surgery, some nights I woke up sweating fiercely with no idea why. Wrangling myself into a robe felt like too much work, so after I swallowed my Tylenol with codeine, I lurched across the room to its one redeeming feature.

Before winter had set in, the huge bay window with its padded reading bench had been my favorite part of Matt's room. I'd spent a lot of time there after my surgery. In the sunlight filtering through those leaded panes, I'd passed long hours trying to keep up with my school work and figure out ways to explain to my family why I wasn't staying in my dorm room instead. Matt had generously gone along with the fiction that he had temporarily moved upstairs, and that he and his housemates were allowing me to stay in his usual room so he could help me until I got back on my feet, so to speak.

It had been a flimsy story, and I was surprised my dad bought it. I could practically see steam rising from Matt's ears as I'd rambled off the convoluted lie, but he hadn't contradicted me. Past Dad's shoulder, however, he'd given me a look that warned me I'd just burnt one of a very limited number of free passes.

The reasons I hadn't come out in high school had seemed so clear. The only way I was going to be able to afford college without accumulating a

crippling amount of debt was to get a scholarship, and baseball had been my best bet. My dad had hammered home time and again how important it was that I not jeopardize my standing on the high school team, that I do everything possible to get my coach to recommend me to college recruiters. And in the Grand Rapids area—a region dominated largely by the Christian Reformed Church, a denomination so conservative that they only allowed women representatives in their synod in 2008 and they still have individual congregations branching off in protest of that move—there was every reason to believe that coming out could get me driven off the team by my peers, or possibly even prompt my coach to find a reason to exclude me.

The reasons had been clear to me, at least. Matt hadn't agreed. When he'd realized I would never attend prom with him or greet him after class with a kiss, he'd decided he deserved better and had broken things off.

I hadn't blamed him. If keeping my secret made me feel like shit, I could only imagine what it must have felt like for him to *be* the secret.

The freezing cold outside seeped into the alcove, leaching the warmth from my skin as I sat there sipping my water. The reasons I'd had in high school didn't track anymore. I'd already gotten my scholarship. It was unlikely GVSU was going to take it away if I came out of the closet. They'd be more likely to take it away if I wasn't in shape in time to begin training for next season, which was a distinct possibility. The Achilles tendon tear had only been the most traumatic of my injuries when that runner had slid into home, colliding helmet-first with my ankle. All the connective tissue around the joint and even down into the foot was fucked up, and the recovery period could last up to a couple of years.

The chances of me returning to school next year were pretty damned slim. Which was, simultaneously, both the best and the worst argument for me coming out. On one hand, it wouldn't matter to my academic future one bit. On the other hand, where would I go when I couldn't go back to school if I estranged my family?

“Aren't you freezing over there?” Matt's sleepy mumble filtered out from the mass of covers on his bed long before his tousled blond head emerged. I

smiled at the sight of him. My perfect, tall, blond, broad-shouldered Dutch boy.

“Honestly? Yeah.”

“Then come back to bed. Do you need help walking back?”

“No.” I sighed, looking out at the snow-covered lawn in front of the house. It was one of those perfect winter nights when the sky was cloudless, so that the moonlight reflected so brightly on the snow, it could almost have been day. Tendrils of frost were slowly creeping their way inward from the edges of the panes of glass in the bay window. Everything seemed cast in a cold, ethereal glow. “I’m just thinking.”

“Warm thoughts, I hope.” With an exaggerated “brrr” he flung back the covers and dragged a comforter around his shoulders. It trailed behind him like a cape as he crossed the room. “Scoot forward.”

I inched up and Matt slid in behind me, wedging himself between my back and the wall and wrapping the comforter around us both. He grumbled and rubbed my arm nearest the window briskly.

“Jesus, any longer and you’d be an icicle.”

“Sorry.” I leaned my head back against his shoulder, letting his warmth thaw me.

“Oh, did I tell you what Topher said his plans for next summer with Morgan Gardner are?”

I shook my head. “No, you didn’t.”

Matt chuffed a soft laugh against my shoulder. “Apparently Morgan’s family has a house on Lake Michigan near Saugatuck, so they’re going to be spending all summer there. Can you imagine?”

“Saugatuck? That’s a little south of Holland, right?”

“You’ve never heard of it?”

“I remember one time when I was in junior high, my mom wanted to drive down there and tour for an afternoon because it’s supposed to be picturesque, but Dad didn’t know why she wanted to go see a town full of fairies.”

I could practically hear Matt’s eyes roll. “I dunno, sounds like heaven to me. A gay vacation hot spot not an hour’s drive away. Just think about it. Maybe we could go down there sometime when you’re on your feet again. Spend the night at a B&B, eat dinner someplace where no one would bat an eye if I held your hand at dinner or kissed you in public.”

“That sounds wonderful.” I heaved a wistful sigh. “Maybe we can go at spring break. I’ll tell Dad I’m going to Tampa with some friends or something.”

I felt Matt stiffen behind me and realized what I’d said.

“Fuck.” I cursed the codeine for making me thoughtless.

“Is that how it’s going to be?” Matt’s voice was barely audible behind me. “I thought it would be different, us here at college together. That we wouldn’t have to hide. But you still won’t do anything resembling a display of affection in public in case someone you know from high school sees you and spreads rumors back home. And now that’s supposed to go on for another four months until we have to sneak away for spring break? What about the holidays? What excuse are you going to come up with to spend time with me then? Or are we just not going to see each other for the better part of a month?”

“No. No! That’s not what I— I wasn’t thinking when I said that. I’m sorry.”

His sigh sounded bitter, but his arms tightened around me.

“You know, I almost wish playing were an option for you this upcoming season. It won’t be, not that your dad will accept that just yet, but if it were...”

I tried to relax against him again, tried to reclaim the warmth he’d brought with him when he’d sat down behind me. “If it were, what?”

“I’ve daydreamed of walking up to you after a game and kissing you, right in front of everyone. Just tearing through all the bullshit and doing what your teammates’ girlfriends do with them.”

“Then why haven’t you? You had plenty of chances during the fall scrimmage season before I was injured.”

“Because it has to be your choice. I can’t make it for you.”

My throat felt tight and I pulled his hand up to my face, pressing a kiss to it. “I wish you would. I wish you’d just... take that plunge for me.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Doesn’t stop me from wishing.”

His lips brushed the top of my shoulder and he pulled the comforter more securely around us both.

“I love you, Chris. I have since before my senior year of high school. Even after we broke up, even when I tried to date other guys or just fuck around in clubs, I missed you. Wanted you.”

“I love you, too. I just—”

“I don’t need to hear the reasons and excuses. I know them all. And I know it’s easy for me to say ‘just do it, already’ when I live such a charmed life where my family’s acceptance is concerned. I know it’s harder for you.”

I turned my head to try to look back at him. “Why do I hear a ‘but’ coming in this?”

“I don’t know if it’s a ‘but.’ Not completely. I hate the idea of issuing ultimatums, because you know, it’s not like there’s not already enough pressure riding on this decision. But you should be on alert that I’m probably going to hit the end of my tolerance sooner, rather than later. I want to be able to have my *boyfriend* over for Christmas, not just some friend from school. And I definitely don’t want to try to remember some convoluted fiction for how I spent spring break so I don’t reveal that I actually spent it making love to you in some romantic bed and breakfast in a vacation town known to be

popular with queers. I can't deny who I am, and I don't want to deny who *we* are."

"I understand." Jesus. My chest hurt like I'd been punched dead in the sternum at the implied *or else* in that speech. It wouldn't be so bad if he were unjustified, but he wasn't. Not in the slightest.

"Good." He kissed my shoulder again, then nudged me upright. "Come on. It's freezing here even with the blanket. Let me help you back to bed."

Safely back in the warmth of his bed, Matt surrounded me. He engulfed me not just with his arms, but with his entire body, his entire presence.

"I'll give it a few more weeks," he whispered into the darkness as sleep continued to elude me. "Until the holidays. After that... we'll see if I've got it in me to give any more."

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The days spun rapidly toward winter break and I hovered indecisively between my options. Every time I saw my dad I wanted to say something, but the conversation never drifted toward any sort of graceful segue, and each time I tried to steel myself to simply blurt it out my vocal cords froze, locking the words in my throat until they threatened to choke me. No amount of telling myself how much Matt deserved it seemed to overcome that paralysis.

"That's where you're going wrong, baby." His fingers stroked up and down my spine as we lay in bed and I confessed the difficulty to him. He hadn't brought the subject up again after that night when we'd discussed the holidays, but it was on my mind constantly. "You can't do it for me. It has nothing to do with me. This is about *you*, what *you* deserve."

"How can you say that? You made it pretty clear that if you don't stick around, it'll be because you can't have the things you feel you need. So it *is* about you."

"You can't do it to make me stick around. Yeah, I might take off because I need something else, something I can't get in this situation, but that's on me. You need to do it because *you* deserve better. You deserve better than to sit

silently by while your dad casually insults queers without even realizing he's talking about *you*. You deserve better than to always hang in limbo, wondering if you'll still be loved if you dare to be honest. You deserve better than to feel all this pressure to be something you're not."

I rolled away, unable to keep looking at him. Still, he was a solid presence behind me, pressed warm against my back.

"You don't realize what they gave up, when the economy turned to shit and they lost their jobs. How many hours they had to work so we could stay someplace where the schools were top-notch instead of moving somewhere cheaper. Yeah, my dad's an insensitive dinosaur when it comes to opinions on homosexuality, but I can't stand the thought of disappointing him after everything he's done to take care of us. They worked so hard to try to make sure we'd have a good life with every opportunity, every chance to be happy and successful."

"Happy and successful according to whom?" Matt's breath ruffled the hair at the back of my neck, which I'd started to grow out now that it didn't matter how I'd look after I took off my baseball cap. "Does making yourself miserable trying to live a lie count?"

I didn't have any answers for that.

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Since my injury, my professors had been as accommodating as possible to enable me to continue the semester without having to drag myself all over campus. They had allowed Matt to collect my homework, permitted me to submit assignments via email, and made alternative arrangements for quizzes and tests. But there was no avoiding my finals. The week before, I decided to try to attend classes to take advantage of finals prep.

"You're sure you're going to be okay?" Matt hovered fretfully over me as I strapped on my bulky, boot-like brace.

"Of course. You can't help me to every class. You've got your own classes to get to. I can get around. I might be slow and clumsy, but I can do it."



“Yeah, but it’s icy as fuck out there.”

“Yes, and they will have shoveled and salted the hell out of the walkways between buildings. It’ll be fine. And even if I do take a header, the boot will keep me from re-injuring the ankle.”

“But it won’t keep you from cracking your skull open when you hit the ground.”

“Oh, please. I’ll be fine. I’ve got to start getting around soon, anyway. I don’t want to have to go through all the special arrangements for my classes next term. Just drop me off as close as you can to the math hall and I’ll manage.”

The truth was, I was aching to get back to campus. I’d been inactive since the end of September and I just wasn’t used to sitting still that long. Furthermore, with the very real possibility that my baseball scholarship would dry up, I really needed to figure out if there was any point in me sticking around academically. The truth was, of all the possible careers I could imagine myself in, doing something like what Matt did, maybe even being an actual physical therapist, sounded the most appealing. But how could I possibly afford to complete my education, much less do the graduate work required to become a PT, short of taking on a bunch of loans?

Maybe debt was what it would take. It was just so fucking ridiculous that putting my future in hock before I’d even gotten started was the only way to *get* started.

Sighing at the endless churn of frustrated attempts to figure out my post-baseball future, I allowed Matt to help me shoulder my backpack while I balanced on the crutches and then lurched after him out the door.

I got a decent amount of insight that week into just how *unaccommodating* a college campus could be for someone not fully able-bodied, the Americans with Disabilities Act be damned. You’d think after lurching up and down the stairs to my dorm room when I bothered to drop by, the risers of a lecture hall would be no big deal. Actually, it wasn’t so much the risers as it was trying to work my way into one of the narrow rows of seats. Finally I had to concede

defeat and select an end seat in the front row. Almost worse was the stats class with the tables and chairs, or the history class with the student desk/chair combos. Those were a bitch to get into while simultaneously trying to avoid tripping other students with my crutches *and* un-shouldering my backpack to dig my books and notes out.

In the end, it wasn't the ice that got me. It was one of those student desks, and a distracted girl trying to walk and text at the same time. The boot might have helped protect me if I slipped, but it wasn't going to take all the damage of a hundred and sixty pound woman falling over it.

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Had the pain always been this horrible, or had I actually forgotten in three months' time just how awful it had been the first time around? My entire body shook with the effort not to scream or sob as I sat on the exam bed in the ER and waited for someone to bring me some drugs and wheel me to radiology so they could get a look at how much of the repair work had been undone.

My dad sat beside me, grim and silent. I think even he was starting to get that I wouldn't be playing in the upcoming season. If not for his presence I probably just would have cried, the pain was so immense. He wasn't even urging me to be tough or telling me how this wouldn't keep me down long if I just worked harder and refused to let it stop me, and I wasn't sure if that was better or worse. On one hand, it took the pressure off me to reassure him that I would try to get over this as quickly as possible to get back on the field. But on the other hand, his silence felt like a withdrawal, as if he were a kid who wouldn't even acknowledge his favorite toy now that it was broken. He was sitting right there beside me and I felt completely alone.

Did my dad feel I wasn't even worth talking to if I couldn't play baseball? Besides the ties of family, what did we have between us if we no longer had that?

I wish Matt were there. I wouldn't have to be strong in front of Matt. He would understand and he'd know what to say and do. Forget playing baseball,

at this point I was worried that I would never walk without a cane or a limp again.

“Will you say something, Dad?” I had to grit my teeth to talk without groaning.

My dad scrubbed a hand down his face, pulling at the corners of his mouth. “I don’t know how many more hospital bills we can afford, Chris. Those surgeries last time around nearly bankrupted us. Plus all the physical therapy.”

I suspected by the level of pain that another surgery was in my near future and immediately felt sick with remorse for thinking my dad was so shallow that all he cared about was the baseball.

“I know, Dad. I’m sorry.” We had found out in early November when the bills started coming due that most of my care wasn’t covered because my dad’s health insurance didn’t cover sports injuries, and we hadn’t yet reached the \$90,000 deductible for the NCAA’s catastrophic injury coverage to kick in.

The greatest irony of the whole thing was that we might end up paying more in medical bills for an injury sustained playing baseball on a scholarship my parents had insisted I *had* to get than we would have paid for my education without the scholarship.

“You’re not going to be able to play this season.”

“No.”

“If the school doesn’t renew your scholarship, you won’t be able to go back next year.”

“I know.” I tried to move and couldn’t help the whimper that escaped me when even the slightest motion reached my ankle. “I’ll move back home, get a job, go to GRCC part-time, I guess.”

“What if you can’t work?” The scratching sound his callused palm made against his stubble was too damn loud, and the throbbing in my foot so intense I felt sick to my stomach from the pain.

“I don’t know!” I hit the sides of the bed with my fists and couldn’t help but whimper again, louder this time, as the impact jolted my body. “What do you want me to say, Dad? We’re screwed, okay? I’m screwed.”

God damn it. Tears burned my eyes and I couldn’t stop them. Everything hurt so bad and there was nothing. No hope. I was screwed. By the economy, by the educational system, by the national health care system... I was twenty years old, and I’d done everything I could possibly do to give myself a future. I’d studied hard, and I’d trained well and tried to be the best I could possibly be at everything to give myself every possible edge. And yet I had nothing except a steadily-growing mountain of medical bills, and probably another mountain of student loans before it was all over. The years when I should have been putting away money for retirement would be spent digging myself out of debt.

How was anyone supposed to ever be successful under those circumstances?

He sighed and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “It’s okay, Chris. We’ll work it out. I’ll talk to Pastor Rob. The church has funds set aside to help people in bad situations, you know. Maybe they can take a collection for us or something.”

“Oh, God.” I covered my face with my hands, leaning my head back. Fuck it all, where were the God damn pain meds?

The last time I’d been to church with my parents had been right before the elections in November. Pastor Rob had—without outright endorsing any candidate—spoken to the congregation on the importance of voting for the candidates who would most reflect the church’s values, which of course was code for anti-gay, anti-choice, pro-big-business candidates.

I could just see it now, us accepting assistance from the congregation, only for them to begrudge it when I came out of the closet.

“No. Don’t.” I lowered my hands and made myself look at him. My eyes were still stinging with tears, and I couldn’t tell if they were from pain or frustration or fear.

Dad shook his head with a sort of half-shrug, a helpless *I'm-out-of-options* gesture. "I'm not crazy about it either, Chris, but that's what it's there for. That's why people tithe and make offerings."

"Do you think they'd still be willing to help us out if they knew that I'm gay?" I didn't even stop to let myself draw a breath before I asked the question, afraid that if I paused, I'd lose my nerve. As it was, I was winded by the end of it, and my heart was racing. But I had to do it. I had to. Because if I didn't, and Dad accepted help from the church, it would be one more reason for me to feel obligated not to come out.

Better to do it now, when I had nothing left to lose.

I watched the procession of emotions sprint across my dad's face: disbelief was followed by a moment of amusement, as if he was sure I was joking with him. He stopped himself mid-scoff, though, to stare at me, and then it was anger, a shudder rippling through his entire body and his face flushing a deep red. That was an expression I remembered well from growing up, the one that let me know I'd hit the end of his patience.

And then the anger bled away, and in its place was... nothing.

No warmth. No reassurance. Not even recognition. He looked at me the way he would a stranger.

Then his chair scraped against the floor and he was gone.

I let my head fall back against the hospital bed and closed my eyes.

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I had been taken to radiology for an MRI and admitted to a hospital room from the ER by the time Matt got there.

"Hey." He stood in the doorway looking cautious, glancing around—no doubt for my dad.

"Hey." I held out my hand to him, and he crossed the room to take it. The pressure of his fingers around mine felt good.

“I had my phone off. I didn’t get your message until I was done with my final, or I would have—”

I shook my head, the motion exaggerated courtesy of the Dilaudid they had finally shot me up with. The relief from pain had been so immediate and profound that I would have gladly blown the doctor for another shot if the pain came back. I could see how people got hooked on that sort of stuff.

“It’s okay. You had to take your test.”

He cupped my face, his thumb caressing gently under my eye, which was probably no doubt still red-rimmed and swollen. “Pain’s really bad?”

“It was.” I heaved a groggy sigh and tugged him closer. “They gave me something.”

He smiled, looking tenderly amused. “I can tell. Better watch it. Who knows who might walk in?”

“I don’t care.” I pressed my face against his palm. His skin was warm, and the hospital too cold. “It hurts, baby.”

“I know.”

“They think I’ll need surgery again.”

“I’m sorry.” His hand moved, his fingers stroking through my hair.

I squeezed his hand tighter. “I came out to my dad.”

Matt went still.

“You what?”

“I had to. He was going to go to our church, ask for assistance with the medical bills or tuition. And I couldn’t let him. I’d feel like a hypocrite, taking their money when I know most of them don’t even consider me a person.”

“So that’s why he’s not here.” Matt grabbed a chair and pulled it close to my bedside so he could hold my hand again. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Me, either.” I leaned back against the elevated head of the bed, closing my eyes again. “He never even said a word. He just stared at me, and then he

walked out. I don't know if I have a dad or a family or a home to go to anymore. If I can't go to school and I can't work, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"We'll figure it out, baby. Later, when you're not dopey. You can come home with me for the holidays after you're out of the hospital, and you can stop pretending to live in your dorm room. We'll make it work." He leaned over and kissed my forehead as the drugs started to drag me toward sleep. "It'll be okay."

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When I woke up next, it was because my mom arrived. It was after 10 PM, so she must have just gotten off work. Matt sat beside my bed studying and nudged me awake when she walked in.

"Hi, Mom." I tried to lever myself to sit a little more upright in the bed, and Matt set his notes and highlighter aside to help.

"Hi, honey." She kissed my cheek and managed an awkward smile for Matt, which was frankly more than I was hoping for. "Hello, Matt."

"Dad's at work?"

"Yes. He works graveyard the rest of the week." She pulled up a chair on the other side of my bed.

"How bad is it?"

Her knuckles whitened around the strap of her handbag where it sat in her lap. "He's in shock, Chris. What did you expect? We both are."

I swallowed hard against the tight knot aching in my throat. "Is he angry?"

"Yes, somewhat. And hurt. Betrayed. This isn't how we raised you." Her lips quivered and her eyes shone with tears. "I don't understand why you would do this."

"It isn't a matter of why. It's who I am, Mom. Who I've been for as long as I can remember. I don't have a choice."

She cleared her throat, but I could still see how badly her composure was shaken. Normally, my mom was a very warm person. Her cool distance was a bad sign. “I don’t believe that.”

“Really?” Blame it on the drugs, but I couldn’t help but let some bitterness creep in. “When did you choose to like men?”

Matt squeezed my arm in warning and I backed down just as I saw my mom start to work up some outrage. It didn’t matter if I had a point. I didn’t speak to my parents that way, and being confrontational wasn’t going to help.

“Sorry. I’m sorry, Mom. I don’t mean to be snide, but I can’t help the way things are. And I don’t want to fight with you about it. Matt said I can stay with the VanderVeens for the holidays if you don’t want me to come home.”

She bowed her head, her hands fidgeting with her purse strap. I saw her inhale deeply several times, as if she were about to speak, only to exhale again.

There was nothing encouraging in her eyes when she looked up again.

“I think that would be best.” She drew a shaky breath. “There’s a part of me—the part that wants to be perceived as a good mother—that wants to say *of course* you should come home, of course we’ll accept you, of course we want you to be happy. I wish I could do that, Chris. But I can’t. We live by certain beliefs in our family. We raised you to believe those things, too. You’re an adult and you have to make your own choices, but my belief is that what you are doing is wrong, and no matter what love I feel for you as your mother, I can’t condone that. I’m sure you and the rest of the politically correct world think that if I can’t do that, I’m abandoning you. But from where I sit, you’re abandoning us.”

A sob caught in my throat, threatening to choke me. I’d known they wouldn’t approve, but no matter how well I’d known that fact, I still hadn’t been prepared for it to hurt so badly.

Tears tracked down her face as she stood. She didn’t approach the bed to kiss my cheek again.



“I hope someday we can find a way to be a family again in spite of—*this*—but I don’t know, Chris. I’ll call you when I think we’re ready to talk about things.”

When she was gone, Matt slipped into bed beside me and held me while I cried.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered, his lips pressed against my temple. “I’m so sorry.”

“I knew what would happen.” I scrubbed my wet face with my hands, but a new wave of tears started.

Matt’s arms tightened around me. “I didn’t. I think I’d convinced myself that you were underestimating them, that they wouldn’t be as bad about it as you thought they would once they knew.”

“I think I hoped for that, too.” I clung to him and hid my face in his neck until the nurse came and caught us and made him leave.

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It was only a ten to fifteen minute drive from the GVSU campus in Allendale to Jenison, so Matt and I could easily have stayed in his co-op for the holidays and just driven to his parents’ place for Christmas. But between the snow and the fact that I was recovering from surgery and thus even less mobile and in need of more assistance than before, we decided to spend the break at his parents’ house instead. His little brother had commandeered Matt’s basement bedroom after Matt moved out, so we were stuck on the main floor with the rest of the family, which was good since it meant I wouldn’t need to navigate the basement stairs. If I hadn’t been high on pain medication from the surgery, I might have resented the loss of the sound-proofing, which I assumed Matt had left in the drop-panel ceiling, but as it was, there really wasn’t a better time for us to be on our best behavior while staying with his family.

When Matt and I were dating during high school, or even when we were just friends, there would have been sledding and snowball fights and a lot of other winter activity. As it was, I got to prop my foot up and direct the

decorating of the Christmas tree with a mug of mulled cider in my hands, which really wasn't a bad gig. Matt's family did things I didn't think families did any more. They spent evenings around a card table playing board games or Uno or that uniquely Midwestern bastard stepchild of a trick-taking card game, euchre. More often than not, Matt's younger brother was over at his girlfriend's house, so I got to fill in.

I'm ashamed to admit I was pretty glum company. I tried not to mope, but between being set so far back in my healing and the developments with my family, it was hard to maintain a cheerful presence. I'd always gotten along well with Matt's family, and they were more than sympathetic—and even a little horrified—at the way my mom and dad were handling things. They welcomed me as one of their own, and I wish I could say it was enough. Maybe someday it would be, but at that moment I was having a hard time getting past why they needed to do it in the first place.

I actually had a good deal of time to myself, since Matt had to work at the clinic. I was lucky in that when he was around, he was solicitous without crossing the line into hovering. He went shopping with his mom for Christmas presents and the family made their annual pilgrimage to see the Trans-Siberian Orchestra concert, which was sold out long before they considered the need to get a ticket for me. Matt begged off going to see *The Nutcracker*, though, and we had an evening to ourselves in the empty house.

“And what should we do with all this unexpected alone time?” I asked, snagging him by a belt loop and drawing him closer.

Matt laughed, letting me pull him forward. “I'm pretty sure whatever it is, it won't happen with you sitting in that recliner.”

“Oh, I don't know.” I leaned forward, catching the fabric of his shirt between my teeth and tugging it up out of his waistband. “With a little strategic straddling, I think we could work something out.”

“Oh, yeah? Like this?” Matt swung his leg over mine, wedging his knee between my thigh and the arm of the chair, then planting his hands on my shoulders to do the same on the other side, so that he straddled my thighs.

“Exactly.” It was a snug fit, but I didn’t care as I grabbed his hips and pulled them closer so that his pelvis was just about level with my mouth. Smiling up at him, I nipped him again through his shirt, catching a little bit of skin this time as I worked his fly open. Matt gasped, and his hips rolled toward me before he got with the program and tossed his shirt aside. “That’s it.”

It had been nearly three weeks with nothing but a couple of furtive hand jobs since I’d re-injured my ankle, and I was eager for the taste and scent of him. I squeezed and kneaded his ass while I nuzzled his belly, then nibbled around the edge of his navel and made him twitch and squirm when I dipped my tongue inside. His cock bumped my chin as I licked my way down his treasure trail, inhaling deeply, filling my nostrils with his musk.

“Fuck, Chris. Yeah…” Matt’s low groan vibrated along my nerves, and I rolled my eyes to look up at him for a moment, taking in his face in that instant of anticipation before I wrapped my lips around his dick. I opened my mouth and tongued the slit, tasting him, and began to move down.

Which was when the doorbell rang.

“*Shit*,” I hissed as we both jumped guiltily. Nothing like being on the verge of a blowjob in one guy’s parents’ family room to make you feel like you’re seventeen again and doing something illicit. “Ignore it?”

“I’d better not.” Matt made a pained sound as he wrestled his dick back into his jeans and closed his fly. He didn’t bother retrieving his shirt as he jogged through the kitchen to the living room and the front door.

I tipped my head back, rubbing the erection under my sweats absently while I waited for Matt to send whoever it was packing, until I heard his startled voice.

“Mr. Boyden! Um, hi.”

I snapped upright in my chair so quickly I nearly pitched myself out of it. My boner started to deflate in record time. If I’d been agile enough, I would have rushed to the door. I didn’t hear my dad’s low reply, but Matt’s higher-pitched responses filled in the blanks.

“Chris is in the family room. Come in, please, I’ll take you to him so he doesn’t have to get up. He was gonna watch TV while I, um, went downstairs to lift weights.”

That one gave me pause for a second, until I remembered Matt’s shirtless state. He was trying to spare my dad embarrassment; coming out to him was an entirely different proposition from flaunting in his face that he’d walked in on us not two seconds away from a blowjob.

I had to resist the temptation to get out of my chair and stand. There was no reason I needed to greet my dad on my feet or come to attention for him, and every reason for me to stay *off* my feet, but the impulse was there anyway. Every muscle tense, I watched the archway to the kitchen until my dad appeared with Matt behind him.

“Can I get you anything to drink, Mr. Boyden?”

My dad shook his head, his eyes on me. “No, thanks. I just need to talk to Chris.”

“Okay. I’ll be in the basement if you need anything.” He chucked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the stairs and I nodded mutely.

My dad stood there looking awkward and out of place and almost as if he were on the verge of bolting for a moment, before he committed himself to actually stepping across the threshold into the family room and taking a seat on the sofa. He perched on the edge like he might spring up at any second, though, and every so often his shoulders shifted and twitched uncomfortably.

“So, how’s everyone at home?” I forced a bland smile, resolved to keep the conversation neutral until I knew why he was here.

“We’re fine.” He rubbed his forehead as though it pained him. “How did your surgery go?”

*You would know if you’d been there in Recovery like you should have been.* I didn’t allow myself to put that bitter thought into words.

“It went okay. I’m going to take it a lot easier this time around. Not try to push my recovery so hard. I’m going to drop a couple of classes next semester

and try to take the lightest class load I can to keep my tuition down. If I lose my scholarship—which is pretty much a given, since there’s no way I’ll be able to play baseball again for the next year or two—I’ll apply with the financial aid office for a work-study job; they might have positions I can fill without being too mobile. Data entry or something, I don’t know. Between the minimal credit hours and the work-study, maybe I can cover the rest with student loans without going too far into debt.”

I paused to suck in a breath, realizing I’d been babbling. My chest was tight and it was hard to breathe, with my heart racing the way it was and my palms sweating. I swallowed hard, trying to tamp down what felt like a pending fit of anxiety.

“That’s good.” He braced his elbows on his knees, his fingers laced, looking distinctly nervous. It was the first time I’d ever seen my dad look anything less than in charge. Since I was a child, he’d always seemed larger than life, sure, confident, firm, determined. Everything he taught me a man was supposed to be.

It was like looking at someone else, someone I’d never met.

He drew a deep breath. “Your mom sent me with some presents we’d had for you. She thinks it’s best you don’t come over even for Christmas morning or dinner. Not when your aunts and cousins and grandparents will be there. Maybe next year, once we’ve all had a chance to wrap our heads around things. This year, she doesn’t want to risk things getting... awkward.”

Something painful spiked in my chest and I took refuge in bitterness. “What, does she think I’m going to make out with my boyfriend at the dinner table?”

Dad actually *winc*ed, which made me feel immediately guilty. He was trying to be civilized and courteous, despite his discomfort. The least I could do was not needle him, even if I was entitled to my anger.

“She doesn’t know what to think,” he said with a sigh. “Neither do I.”

“I know, I know. It goes against your beliefs...”

“That’s your mother, not me.” He waved the suggestion off. “That’s not what I— I mean, suddenly one day you’re not the son we thought we knew, and that’s not something we’re going to get used to overnight. Chris, this— how long have you been hiding this?”

I scoffed. “My whole life. It’s not something I just decided on one day. Dad, I was in *preschool* the first time Grandpa teased me about which little girl was my girlfriend and how I’d grow up to be a ladies’ man, and he did it right in front of you and you sat there and laughed alongside him. I wasn’t very old before I got the message that the assumed default didn’t apply to me. How many times when we were practicing or when I was in training did you encourage me by telling me not to be a sissy or a pansy or don’t throw like a girl or shake it off when I was hurt, like a *man*.” I gripped the armrests of the recliner, wishing I had the mobility to get up and pace. “By which you meant be a *man* like you, a straight man. I spent my life hearing about pussies and that I shouldn’t be one. Can you *blame* me for hiding?”

He looked guilt-stricken at that, and I wondered if he was replaying in his mind every casual slur and derogatory term for gay he’d ever dropped in my presence and considering how they must have impacted me. Every day for my entire life, he’d been deriding me—*me*, not some hypothetical stranger—and he’d never even known it.

Finally, he lifted his eyes to meet mine. “I would never have said those things if I’d known—”

“You still would have thought them. You believe them, Dad. You believe that anything other than being straight and ultra-masculine is a failure. You see the fact that I can’t just shake this injury off and get back to playing as a failure on my part, and you see the fact that I don’t like women as a flaw.” I scrubbed my hands down my face as my eyes began to burn. “I’m never going to be a *man* by your definition, Dad. A *real* man. I’m never going to be the man you want me to be. And I would apologize for that, except that I shouldn’t have to because I haven’t done anything wrong. No matter what Mom believes.”

He had no answer for that, sitting there with his shoulders hunched, still so different from the man I knew. Watching him, I really wanted that man back, because despite everything, he'd been a good man. Through the loss of jobs and the foreclosure on our house, settling for far less skilled work that kept us in a modest rental but barely allowed him enough time to sleep, let alone be with his family, he'd always been proud, strong, encouraging. He'd done his best for us, or tried to, even when he was in error.

He was ignorant, not evil. A product of a society and an upbringing that taught him to revere all the wrong things.

"I don't know what to say, Chris." He studied the floor again and I was okay with that. I was a little afraid of what I'd see if he looked at me just then. "Back when your mom and I lost our jobs and then the house and it took so long to find work again and then we were barely getting by..." His hands twisted together, clasped there between his knees. "I knew I wouldn't be able to provide for you the way I wanted to. The way I should have been able to do. I had to make you strong. Self-sufficient. Toughen you up the way my dad would have toughened me up, so that you had opportunities and could take care of yourself."

I gave a weary chuckle. "And of course all that's tied in with masculinity for you, isn't it? Gotta be the breadwinner." I deepened and roughened my voice on that last bit, imitating a burly, manly-man tone, which drew a reluctant smile from my dad. "My injury notwithstanding, Dad, I was doing an okay job securing my own future. So if it's any consolation, you succeeded. I can take care of myself. And I'll keep doing so despite the injury, which for the record didn't happen because I'm queer or because I'm not tough enough, and it won't suddenly get better if I were to turn straight and be more macho."

He gave me an outraged look and I met it evenly, reminding him with a lift of my eyebrow of all the times he'd urged me to ignore the advice of my physical therapist and doctors in favor of toughing it out and getting on my feet sooner.

He cleared his throat. "Well. Speaking of your injury, the church is going to help us with your medical bills."

“What? I said I didn’t want—” Now it was my turn to get indignant, my entire body vibrating with it.

“It’s got nothing to do with you,” Dad said sternly. “It doesn’t matter who those bills are for, you’re covered under my insurance, which makes me the party responsible for paying what insurance doesn’t cover. It’s my credit they’ll damage if they go to collections, and I have two more kids to try to get through college. This is about helping the family get by, not about you and what the people at church might think about you.”

His gaze hit the floor again, and then it seemed like there was nothing left to say. He’d be comfortable with who I had revealed myself to be, or he wouldn’t. Mom would reconcile it with her faith, or she wouldn’t. My family would welcome me, or they wouldn’t. It was out of my hands, and this was another way in which I realized I was different from the man I would have been if I had modeled myself after my dad. All my life, he’d kept pushing for the outcome he desired, never giving in, never accepting that he couldn’t make things fine by sheer dint of will.

He was going to have to accept this. We both were.

“Come to Christmas dinner,” he said finally, rising to his feet.

I swallowed, my heart lurching in my chest as that anxious feeling began to creep back in. “What about Mom?”

“She’s hurt and confused. But I think if you’re not there, someday she’s going to feel terrible about it.” His shoulders twitched under his jacket and he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “We’re still a family, and we haven’t been through all we’ve been through to start falling apart now. I can’t promise it will be comfortable, or even that no one will make a scene, but the sooner everyone starts to get used to the way things are now, the better.”

That was a start. “And what about Matt?”

“Well, if you’re already locked into plans with his family, we’ll understand. If not...” I could see the effort it cost him to commit himself to this course. But he did it. Like he always did, once he’d made up his mind to do something. “If you feel he belongs with the family, bring him. Cam’s



having his girlfriend over for pie afterward, to meet your grandparents. It's your call."

He was putting a lot of faith in me, offering me that option. He was trusting me to handle things maturely and responsibly, whatever I did.

But then, he always had trusted me to do that.

I bit my bottom lip and nodded, meeting his eyes. "I'll talk it over with Matt. Decide what we want to do."

He nodded and shuffled again, then headed for the door, squeezing my shoulder as he passed. "I'll see you soon, Chris."

"See you soon, Dad."

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When he was gone, I hauled myself out of the recliner and into the bedroom. Downstairs, I could hear weights clinking, but I didn't disturb Matt. I got ready for bed and crawled in alone, letting my mind wander until I heard his footsteps clomping up the stairs and the shower running. His hair was damp and he smelled like body wash when he finally slipped into bed beside me.

"Was it that bad?" His fingers brushed up and down my sternum as I lay staring up at the ceiling.

"Hmm?"

"Was talking with your dad so horrible that you needed to shut the world out and just go to bed?"

"No, it wasn't—" I sighed, turning to curl into him. "It was hard, but it wasn't awful. I don't know what's going to happen, but I think me and my dad will be okay."

My family was still going to have issues with me, and it was entirely possible my dad's thoughtless homophobia couldn't be cured just by being mindful of who he was talking to. I was still never going to be a lot of the things my dad had tried to make me into.

But I was starting to think that maybe in the ways that really mattered, he'd taught me the right things after all.

Matt drew me closer with a lot of careful shifting, until I lay with my head on his shoulder. I lay there a long time, listening to the drumming of his heart. It was too late now to have sex; his family could be home at any moment. I regretted the lost opportunity, but the cuddling felt good. Someday, we'd be back in Matt's room in the off-campus co-op and I'd be more mobile, so we'd have plenty of time for that in the future.

Now that everything was out in the open, we had time.

"We've been invited to Christmas dinner," I murmured into the skin of his chest.

"We?"

"Yeah. Can't guarantee it will be pleasant, though."

He fell silent for a long moment. "Wow. You know, I never actually considered that."

"What?"

"What things would be like after you came out."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Isn't that strange?" He chuffed a soft laugh into my hair as I let my hand drift along his arm in slow strokes. "I think I always assumed that after they had time to adjust, it would be like my family. That they'd welcome me the way my parents have welcomed you. I never believed they'd truly write you off, but I never thought about what things would be like in-between. The awkwardness and disapproval and all that."

"They might still adjust, but then they might not." I sighed. "Think you can handle it?"

"I don't think I have much choice. You've come this far. Least I can do is ride it out with you."

I tilted my head back, and he turned his to give me the kiss I was seeking.

“I guess we’ll just see where it takes us.” I nuzzled his neck, tightening my arm over his waist. My future looked nothing like it had six months ago. I felt a little cast adrift, unsure where I would wash up. But at least I had one thing to hold onto for now. There was still a lot of uncertainty about what we would face once college was over, but for now it was enough.

We would be all right.

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*Amelia C. Gormley may seem like anyone else. But the truth is she sings in the shower, dances doing laundry, and writes blisteringly hot M/M erotic romance while her son is at school. When she's not writing, Amelia single-handedly juggles her husband, her son, their home, and the obstacles of life by turning into an everyday superhero. And that, she supposes, is just like anyone else.*

## **Contact Info**

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