



BTW I LOVE YOU

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by Nico Jaye

Free Short Fiction

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CONTENT WARNING: This work contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers.

A DON'T READ IN THE CLOSET EVENT: This story was written as a part of the Goodreads M/M Romance group's 2013 Love Has No Boundaries event. For more free stories and to view the original request letter and photo for this story, please feel free to join the Goodreads M/M Romance group and visit the discussion section titled "Love Has No Boundaries."

PHOTO DESCRIPTION: On a sunny day and surrounded by tall grass, a young man with medium-length red curls and wearing a fitted blue T-shirt embraces another young man with short dark hair from behind. The dark haired man, who wears a dark grey shirt, hugs the red haired man's arm close to his chest. Their eyes are closed, and faint smiles linger on their faces. Their expressions reflect satisfaction and contentment. All is right in their world.

STORY INFO:

genre: contemporary

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Prologue

The afternoon SoCal sun was bright and cheerful two days before Memorial Day weekend. Aidan was walking back to his student housing apartment when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He'd just taken his last final – a hellacious combination of lab and written exam for his upper div Environmental Engineering class – and the day that greeted him upon exiting the science lab was glorious. Provided everything went well, *knock on wood*, he would at last be graduating next weekend from UCLA.

Aidan shifted his backpack to his other shoulder to fish out his phone. When he saw who'd sent the text message, he grinned.

24 hrs until some fun in the sun! check your email. ;)

He glanced up to make sure he wasn't going to walk into a tree like he did last week and, seeing the coast was clear, tapped his screen to check his email.

*To: Aidan Montgomery
From: Jake Everett
Subject: You & Me?
Attachments (1)*

Once the picture loaded, Aidan let out a bark of surprised laughter as his heart warmed at the sight. Grinning, he quickly texted a reply to Jake.

If you're lucky. ;)

Aidan slipped his phone back into his pocket and turned the corner to approach his apartment building. It was pretty standard-issue university housing with that anonymous new construction feel of solid straight lines and whitewashed stucco exteriors. That said, he and his roommate Kai had been lucky to have been placed here and not the Riordan complex, with its less than savory nickname of Rodent Riordan.

He took the steps up to his building two at a time and keyed in the code to buzz himself into the security gate. Whistling tunelessly and feeling much freer now that the weight of finals had been lifted, he made his way down the narrow hallway with its navy industrial carpeting until he reached the similarly navy door to number 203B. As he let himself into the apartment, his pocket buzzed again.

The small two bedroom flat was dark, which made sense since Kai had finished up with his finals on Tuesday and was probably out and about enjoying his hard-won

freedom already. Aidan made his way through the apartment by the afternoon light filtering through the university-issued horizontal blinds and grabbed a Coke from the fridge on his way to his room. After adjusting the blinds to let in some of the sunlight and setting his Coke on his dresser, he tossed his backpack by his desk and pulled out his phone again.

I'm always lucky. x

Aidan blushed and, with a grin, started writing a response.

And I'm packing. Can't wait. See you soon.

Aidan hesitated as he considered saying more. Instead, he typed in his own series of *xoxo*.

It was just easier that way.

He'd thought about telling Jake the four letter word before. Well, he'd felt it often, but what he meant was he'd thought about saying it out loud before. Once, actually, two months ago, and it had been slightly traumatizing as he worked up his courage to do so. But when Jake had intercepted what Aidan might have said – even before Aidan said it – with a kiss, Aidan had backtracked and let it go, returning the kiss and putting off the moment for another day.

As though he could put off the fact that his world secretly revolved around Jake, and he never wanted it to stop orbiting that way, that is.

Damn, it was complicated.

Once their relationship had gotten off the ground, Aidan had discovered that Jake didn't really talk about his feelings...at all, actually, so between the two of them – what with his shyer ways and Jake's proclivity towards more...physical expression – Aidan had grown accustomed to this state of just having to assume that they were on firm ground.

But then Jake would go and do something unexpectedly sweet. And thoughtful. And loving. And make Aidan want to melt into a pile of mushy feelings. Gawd, he was such a girl about this stuff sometimes.

Like that picture Jake had just sent.

The stylized fan art of Batman and Wolverine in a passionate embrace – with locked lips, hands exploring, and tiny little pink hearts floating around them – may have meant absolutely nothing to ninety-nine percent of the population. For Aidan, though, it caused a rush of warmth to blossom through him.

To think that Jake would see that and think of them.

To think that Jake would still remember that night they first met...

Chapter One

The winter night air was still as Aidan sat at his desk in his parents' house. Winter break was awesome and everything now that finals were over for the quarter, but there honestly wasn't that much to do out here in Calistoga on a Tuesday night. Most of his friends from high school weren't around anymore because they had different semester breaks; UCLA, on the other hand, was on the much less common quarter system.

He would never admit it to his parents or his friends, who would just roll their eyes and call him a nerd, but a tiny part of him was actually looking forward to making the drive back to campus at the end of the week. And perhaps a tiny part of him was missing the insanely fast T-1 Ethernet connection, too.

By the light of his small desk lamp, Aidan propped his chin up on his left hand as he clicked around on his external mouse with his right. The heat in the house was off to save energy – or, more specifically, energy costs – so he had on multiple layers, including black gloves with the fingers cut off so that they wouldn't interfere with his typing. He wiggled his toes inside his thick socks and scanned his laptop screen. His browser had tabs open to Facebook – *so predictable, right?* – Twitter, BuzzFeed, Reddit, and Gmail. And nothing interesting was happening on any of them at one in the morning.

He was just about to call it a night when he caught sight of his *The Dark Knight* poster from back when he was a high school senior a few years ago. Even though his dark red hair and blue eyes may have been more suited to playing an anime character – or, even worse, Archie from those old school comic books his mom loved – he'd dressed up as Batman that year for Halloween.

Suddenly wide awake, Aidan crossed over to his closet and started digging around in one of the boxes in the corner. When he unearthed the Batman mask, his face lit up with a mischievous grin. He'd saved his summer earnings to put together this costume, and finding the mask – a full deluxe rubber one that could be pulled over the head and that included everything, right down to the pointy tipped ears – had been the icing on the cake that year.

After fitting it over his head and tugging the edge to ensure it sat properly, Aidan reclaimed his seat at his desk, his eyes bright with the promise of geek humor. With a few keystrokes, he clicked over to Chatroulette and began spinning.

His first spin showed a desk chair and a white wall. *Um, not so awesome.*

His second spin? At least there was a poster on the wall this time. Fluffy white kittens rolling in green grass stared back at him.

He hit "Next" one more time, but when it landed, he reared back and hurriedly clicked to spin again.

While he was just as – *ahem* – big of a fan of an erect dick as the next gay guy, he didn't necessarily want to see one and/or chat with one when he was in his childhood bedroom at his parents' house.

It just didn't feel right when his set of Harry Potter books – relics from his adolescence – were staring back at him from the bookcase.

The next spin landed him on a real live person. A teenaged girl with dark bangs, heavy eyeliner, and a black hoodie stared sullenly back at him. Aidan sat up straighter and was about to type a greeting when he received her message.

Stranger: ugh
Stranger: geek

Then she left.

Frowning, Aidan hit "Next" again. *That was harsh.* He was ready to give up on his admittedly dorky attempt at entertaining himself when he glanced at the screen.

His brows lifted, and Aidan let out a surprised shout. With a grin, he hurried to stifle his ensuing laughter as he rushed to answer.

Stranger: Batman.
You: Wolverine???
Stranger: come here often? ;)
You: lol
You: You might have seen me around as Bruce.
*Stranger: *gasp* letting me in on your secrets already? ;)*
You: You look like a guy w/his own secrets to deal with. :P
Stranger: ain't that the truth

Aidan's gaze lit up, and he leaned forward, his fingers flying as he typed to – *he grinned* – Wolverine. He couldn't see too much of him other than the oversized

Wolverine mask that covered nearly his whole face, but Aidan could make out broad shoulders covered by a thin dark grey T-shirt.

And lips. Beautiful, sculpted lips with a strong chin beneath them.

After Aidan explained that he had his webcam's volume and microphone muted due to the late hour, they continued typing up a steady stream of chat banter about nothing in particular. Looking closer at the chat window, Aidan grew curious about the sunlight that appeared to stream into Wolverine's room.

You: So, uh, this might sound weird, but where exactly are you??

Stranger: why? gonna stalk me and peek in my window? :)

*You: No...maybe...would you like that? *lifts eyebrow**

Stranger: maybe I would... always had a thing for Batman...

Aidan blushed and looked around, even though he knew he was alone in his room. He blushed again when he realized that Wolverine could see his every move and didn't hesitate to call him out on it.

Stranger: looking for something? someone...?

You: Maybe...

After a bit more chatter, Aidan discovered that Wolverine actually was from the U.S., but he was currently in Australia for a year abroad program in some city called Perth. As Aidan made a mental note to Google Perth, his eyes widened at Wolverine's next comment.

Stranger: so...dunno about you, but it's getting hot under here

Stranger: if I can trust you with my secret ID, figure I could lose the mask

Stranger: ?

You: Hrmmm...okay. If you lose yours, I'll lose mine.

You: Besides, you already know MY secret ID.

Curiosity piqued, Aidan reached for his mask at the same time Wolverine reached for his. After peeling off the rubber covering, Aidan tossed it onto his bed and ran a hand through his curly red hair, which was slightly dampened with sweat. It was pretty wild and unruly on a good day, so after some time under the mask, he wouldn't be surprised if his hair were sticking up every which way at this point. *Oh well, too late to fix it now.*

When he faced his laptop again, Aidan made eye contact with a dark-haired hunk. His hair was cropped short, and Aidan could just make out the glint of a silver bar that was pierced across the upper curve of his right ear. His features were even and strong with a defined jawline that swept down to a determined chin. Shining grey eyes glinted at him with good humor. And that mouth. Oh god, that mouth. As

Aidan's gaze returned to the stranger's mouth, those beautiful lips curled up in a little half-smile. Aidan flushed. *Wow.*

Stranger: hello, stranger

You: lol

You: Hi.

Stranger: I'm Jake.

They spent the next hour chatting, and Aidan's eyes went wide when he found out that, even though Jake was from New York and had just arrived in Australia for his year abroad program, he was actually a poli sci undergrad going to school in California. In fact, not only was he in school in California, but he was studying at USC, just across the city and down the 10 freeway.

You: USC?

You: You realize this conversation flies in the face of a hundred years of school rivalry?

You: j/k :)

Stranger: maybe I'm just a spy trying to get insider knowledge

Stranger: y'know...seducing the information out of you with my huge...

Stranger: amount of charm ;)

Aidan bit his lip at the provocative words and glanced at the screen. Jake's smile was playful and not pervy, instead inviting him to share in on the joke. With a quirk of his lips, Aidan typed in his response.

You: ha

You: And who says I'd give it up?

You: ...the information, that is ;)

Stranger: nobody, but a guy could hope :)

Aidan told himself to calm down and that it didn't mean anything, but that didn't stop his heart from beating a little faster when, later on in their conversation, Jake suggested that they exchange email addresses.

As the hour grew late, fatigue took Aidan by surprise, and he smothered a sudden yawn. He was afraid he'd have to cut short their chat, which had veered into a lively discussion about their favorite childhood cereals – his, Corn Pops; Jake's, Frosted Flakes – when Jake mentioned he had to head out for dinner.

You: Yum.

Stranger: very – Thai place

You: Double yum! Hot date?

Stranger: maybe...

There was a long pause, during which Aidan was kicking himself for fishing like that. It was none of his business if Jake had a date, after all. Why did Aidan care? He shouldn't. But he kinda did...

Glancing at Jake's screen, Aidan saw him lift a glass of water to his lips. He watched the smooth movement of Jake's throat as he took a sip. Yeah... Aidan swallowed hard. He kinda did care...

He was about to type a response when the chat window indicated Jake was typing again.

Stranger: j/k

Stranger: no hot date – just going with my roommate. my FEMALE roommate...

Aidan looked at Jake's video screen and caught a half-smile that quirked those full lips. When Jake sent him a wink, Aidan grinned and ducked his head as he tried not to blush too hard. With his fair coloring, though, he was sure he was beet red.

You: Well, hope you have a good time.

Stranger: I'm gonna try

You: Try not to meet any cute boys. :)

Stranger: I think it's too late for that ;)

Aidan blushed his way through their farewells. He couldn't believe he'd said that, but just as unbelievable was Jake's flirty response. As was always the case, Aidan had found it easier to be, well, a little bolder when he was in the privacy of his own room. When Jake left the conversation, Aidan reached for a pen and paper and jotted down Jake's email address before closing the chat window.

After shutting the lid on his laptop and switching off the desk lamp, Aidan pulled off his hoodie, socks, and gloves as he stripped down to his plaid pajama pants and a white T-shirt. With a wide yawn, he caught sight of his alarm clock and was startled to see the numbers 3:02 lit up in neon green. He settled into his twin-sized bed, his hands smoothing over the soft forest green flannel sheets as he found refuge from the chill winter air. As he drifted to sleep, the thought crossed Aidan's mind that it was summertime in Australia.

The next day, Aidan tried to put it out of his mind that he'd chatted with a seriously hot guy last night, but that didn't stop his heart from speeding up when he woke and saw a little red number pop up on his phone's Mail app. Nor did it stop him from feeling a bead of disappointment when it only turned out to be an email from Kai and the other usual array of daily newsletters and digests.

That afternoon, Aidan was grocery shopping with his mom when he saw a display for Frosted Flakes in the cereal aisle. It reminded him of Jake and their late night conversation, and he smiled at the thought of his fellow masked superhero. To be honest, he thought Jake was fun and ridiculously hot, and he wanted to know more. A lot more. He'd been psyched when Jake suggested they exchange contact info, and even though he wasn't usually this forward, Aidan really wanted to continue their conversation. *Maybe I'll email him later.* He grew a little flustered just at the thought.

Dinner that night was his favorite: mashed potatoes, sautéed kale, and his mom's awesome salt-and-pepper roast chicken.

"So do you have all your stuff packed up, honey?" His mom glanced in his direction as she reached over to scoop some more potatoes onto his sister's plate.

"Yeah, I'm almost done." Aidan smiled at her before turning to his right. "Hey, Dad, do you have an extra hammer or something that we could use? Kai and I were thinking we'd put up some shelves, and I figured you might know what we'd need to do it."

His dad, from whom Aidan had inherited his dark red crop, furrowed his brow for a moment and chewed thoughtfully on his bite of roast chicken. "Depending on what you're putting on those shelves, you're probably going to want something a little more heavy duty than a hammer. Why don't we bring that old drill gun when we drive down this weekend? You remember how to use it, right?"

"Yeah, I do," Aidan said, his mind flashing back to doing fix-it projects with his dad around the house and at the family's general store when he was younger. "Cool. Thanks, Dad."

"I wanna come, too!" Alli piped up from across the table. When Aidan shot her a surprised look, she grinned shamelessly. "Justin lives there," she explained with a sigh and a flutter of preteen lashes.

"You're not gonna fit in my bag, squirt," Aidan said to his eleven year old sister with a roll of his eyes. *God save him from his Belieber sister.* "Besides, you gotta keep Mom company while the menfolk are gone," he added with a teasing smile.

"You'll head off to college when you're ready, sweetie," his mom said, a pleased look on her face. He knew they were proud of him for being the first one in the family to go to college, and they would love it if and when Alli made her own decision to do so.

Aidan was amused by the loving look his parents exchanged then. He'd already

worked it out that, considering the nearly ten year age gap between him and his sister, his parents may not have been one hundred percent prepared for that addition to the family. Having a much younger sibling had been...interesting, and when he was growing up, he'd had a hand in helping to raise her and babysit. Even though times could be tough, they'd managed well enough with the quality local public schools and the hard-won academic scholarship he'd earned to attend college. There may not have been any exotic family vacations growing up, but there'd been enough camping in the backyard and drives up to Muir Woods to keep growing kids entertained. They were a close bunch, and, when he thought about it, he knew he'd been incredibly lucky because that meant his coming out in high school had been met with warmth, support, and acceptance.

Aidan took a last sip from his water glass and moved to pick up his plate. "I'm gonna head up to finish packing, okay?"

"Sure, just bring down your bags later so I can load up the car," his dad reminded him.

"Will do. Thanks, Dad." He stood up to clear his setting, then leaned over to kiss his mom's cheek. "And thanks for making the chicken, Mom. As always, it rocked."

Upstairs in his room, Aidan finished packing up his clothes and books. He zippered his duffle bag closed and took a look around. The only thing he had left to put away was his laptop, which should be easy enough to do tomorrow morning.

He realized he'd left his phone downstairs in his jacket, so he decided to take a break and check his email. After logging in, Aidan looked at his screen and bit his lip. Still no message from Jake.

He was debating whether or not to email him now or if it was too soon. Or if that would appear too forward. Or desperate. Or weird.

Then a window appeared in the corner of his screen.

jake.everetto9@gmail.com added you to Contacts. Accept?

A burst of pleasure shot through Aidan as he clicked "Yes." He quickly checked his Gchat contacts and felt another zing when he saw Jake Everett and a little green availability button listed. He debated starting a chat. He gnawed on his lip again. *What would I say?*

Jake: hey Red

The chat window popped up on his screen as Aidan was just deciding on a greeting. He grinned and IMed back.

Aidan: Hey!
Aidan: Red??
Jake: for obvious reasons :)
Aidan: Hrm...
Jake: you don't like?
Aidan: I dunno...
Jake: b/c I do...
Jake: very much
Jake: :)

Aidan blushed and was glad that this time there wasn't a webcam to capture it.

Aidan: Then I guess it's okay.
Aidan: I GUESS. :)
Jake: better than okay... pretty damn adorable if you ask me
Jake: oh wait, you didn't ask me
Jake: did I say that out loud? :)
Aidan: Well, dunno if you said it out loud, but you um...typed it out loud. :)
Jake: haha
Jake: true, didn't SAY it out loud, but thought it out loud :)
Aidan: And I thought it...but didn't say or think it out loud.
Aidan: Until now. :)
Aidan: Whatcha up to? What time is it over there?

Aidan finally remembered to Google Perth. He pulled up a browser window and clicked around, landing on the Wiki entry.

Jake: not much. almost 10am. got a few min between classes, so just checking email and stuff
Jake: but saw you come online and thought I'd say hi...
Jake: so...
Jake: hi :)
Aidan: Hi :)

Aidan knew he had a grin on his face. It was there for no reason at all, and he couldn't lose it if he tried.

Aidan: Fun class?
Jake: eh, it's okay so far. only the first week and I'm still getting used to the new place. ppl are cool, though
Jake: what're you up to?
Aidan: Packing stuff. Heading back to SoCal tmrw b/c the quarter starts next week. Ugh. :(
Jake: awww, but LA's fun, though :) go have some Roscoe's for me

They chatted for a couple more minutes about their favorite haunts in LA before Jake had to sign off and head to class. With a smile lingering on his lips, Aidan skimmed through the Perth entry on Wikipedia, then sent Kai an email about the shelves.

He was still smiling when he took his duffle bags downstairs to leave them in the front hallway for tomorrow's drive down south.

Chapter Two

"Dude, you ready?"

Aidan glanced over his shoulder and saw Kai's familiar form framed by the doorway. Kai lifted his eyebrows. "Geoff's party? Down on Kelton?"

"Party...?" Aidan cleared his throat. "Oh, right. Um, gimme five minutes, 'kay?"

With his hands on hips clad in tight black jeans, Kai rolled his eyes dramatically. "Don't tell me you forgot! I thought I told you we needed to go because Dean would be there. Dean. You know. *Dean*," Kai said with a pointed look for emphasis. He sighed, then gave Aidan a you're-impossible-but-that's-okay smile. "You weren't listening, were you? You South Campus science kids," he said with a comical pout.

Aidan protested. "Hey, I was so listening! Dean, the one from your psych section that you 'can't wait to see naked,'" Aidan said with a slight flush, repeating the words from their earlier conversation verbatim. He could never be as forward as Kai, but somehow, miraculously, their friendship still worked. It was probably because Kai was forward to the point where Aidan didn't have to be. He usually was okay just going along with Kai's shenanigans as long as they weren't gonna land them in jail.

"Uh huh, that's the one," Kai said with a purposeful gleam in his eye. "And if we don't get a move on, it might not happen," he added with a huge exaggerated gasp of horror. He then flashed Aidan a good-natured grin as he drifted back towards his bedroom. "Five minutes," Kai called out.

With one last glance at his computer screen, Aidan went to grab a shirt out of his dresser. He hurriedly stripped out of his ratty sweatshirt and threw on a navy polo. Even though it was late February, the Los Angeles winters weren't ever really cold, so he decided against adding a sweater. He squeezed a bit of hair gel onto his palms and worked his fingers through his impossible curls.

Aidan wondered where Jake was because he was usually online around now. With the fifteen hour time difference, Aidan had become an expert at calculating the time out in Perth, and if it was nine on a Friday night, then he knew it was around noon on Saturday out there.

So...where's Jake?

Over the last two months, they'd been chatting regularly at least once or twice a week. Aidan would check in before heading to class in the morning and say hi if Jake was around; then, when Jake was finished up with classes, Aidan would be up late indulging his night owl routine. They could chat for hours – well into the night – and Aidan was always left wishing they could chat more. He still felt a little thrill whenever he saw Jake's name in his list with the little green button lit. The schedule was challenging, but it worked.

And the challenge, in Aidan's opinion, was so so worth it.

They were friends on Facebook, too, but Jake didn't update very often. Aidan had felt slightly stalker-esque when he'd Googled him, but he hadn't come up with very much info other than Jake's Facebook account and some statistics for high school track and field meets, at which it appeared Jake had competed as a sprinter. So even though they were connected elsewhere, they mainly chatted. And emailed. And, occasionally, Skyped.

He couldn't explain what it was about Jake and their conversations, but they talked about everything and nothing – and anything in between. Aidan knew Jake loved spicy food, and Jake knew he had a preference for Asian cuisine. Jake told him about doing track in high school and some of the shenanigans he and his team had caused during their meets. In the true vein of environmental science geekiness, Aidan even confessed about his attempt at starting his own windowsill garden, which he admitted probably wasn't the most practical thing to do in an apartment in Los Angeles. They shared a secret fascination with unique architecture and, not surprisingly, comic book characters. They found common ground in the most ridiculous things – from loving oatmeal cookies without raisins to growing up with much younger siblings to being amazed by the multifunctional fix-it uses of duct tape. And it was honest, lighthearted, silly, awesome...and slightly terrifying.

Aidan didn't know how this could happen, but he had very quickly grown attached to someone halfway around the world. And it scared him slightly that Jake's was the first name he looked for in his contact lists and the first person he hoped for as a sender whenever he saw a new email.

He didn't know how to explain it, but he just knew he'd grown to want it. Simply talking with Jake and sharing their inside jokes and knowing that Jake would just

get it brought more sunshine to his day.

Is it possible to have a crush on someone you've never met before?

Shaking his head at himself, Aidan bent down to tie on his red Chucks. He did a quick phone-wallet-keys check before heading towards Kai's room.

He didn't know, but he was a little bit afraid of the answer.

"So then, when the girl went up to talk to the prof afterward, Professor Hammer just raised his hand like 'talk to the hand'...! And we were all like 'oh my god!'" Dean's eyes were wide as he mimed the motion.

"Ooooh, burn," Kai said, making a sympathetic noise as he reached over and snagged a fry from Dean's stash. They'd been dating since Geoff's party two weeks ago.

"Yeah, but then we kinda felt she had it coming because she always speaks up in class. Like, always. And the one time she gets asked something, she seriously hasn't done the reading? Like, at all?" Dean lifted his brows pointedly.

"Total karma attack," Kai finished for him, nodding in agreement.

Aidan took a sip of his chocolate shake, savoring its thick sweetness. They were at the nearby In-N-Out with some of their friends for a "last supper" of sorts before Week 10 and major cramming sessions for finals began. He still couldn't believe how quickly winter quarter had flown by.

"Hey, Aidan."

Aidan glanced up and smiled. "Tyler. Hey." He recognized the blond hair and hazel eyes easily. There weren't many majors within the Environmental Science program, so they were all at least acquainted with each other. Tyler Hill, a senior in his Environmental Economics class, was one of them.

"That lecture on Thursday was a real beast, huh? All those graphs and charts," Tyler said with a comical shudder as he adjusted his grip on his tray of food.

"Seriously," Aidan said, making a face. "I must've missed the memo that said we were signing up for a math class."

"No kidding. I can barely draw a straight line, and they expect me to draw graphs in five colors?" Tyler grimaced. He hesitated a moment, then cleared his throat. "You know, I was gonna get together a study group next week if you're interested. Maybe

we could pool all of our resources and figure out what the hell's going on in that class."

The invitation caught Aidan by surprise, but he agreed and gave Tyler his email when asked.

"See ya around," Tyler said, flashing a smile as he went to join his group of friends in a booth by the windows.

Kai cleared his throat loudly and deliberately. Aidan looked at him, brows lifted.

"Someone's got yo' digits," Kai said in a low singsong voice as he drew out the last syllable. What Aidan thought of as Kai's evil grin was spreading slowly across his face.

Aidan flushed. "Oh, c'mon. It's for a study group."

"Studyin'. Smexin'. Same difference," Kai said with a sage nod. He made eye contact with Dean, who answered with his own nod. "Psych discussion," they commented in unison, then shared a cuddle.

"Maybe he wants to 'study' some anatomy together," their friend Bryan said with a suggestive waggle of his blond brows. Aidan just rolled his eyes at the lame joke.

"Or maybe he really is putting together a study group," Martin said calmly with a pointed look of bright green eyes above the silver frames of his glasses. He and Bryan were friends of theirs from a freshman GE writing class they had all had together, where the four of them had all bonded over a mutual admiration of their seriously attractive TA. Unfortunately, Martin ruined the momentary showing of support by adding, "Too bad, though. That boy is hot." Martin was openly staring at Tyler, who Aidan supposed would be considered pretty attractive in that blond California granola-eating way. Aidan thought he preferred darker features himself.

Aidan dropped his forehead into his hands. "You guys are hopeless."

"Aw, we just care, babe," Kai said as he rubbed his hand over Aidan's shoulder. "We care about your love life. We want you to be happy."

"I am happy," Aidan said, lifting his head. He squinted at the guys. "Who said I wasn't?"

"I know, hon, but it's just...you haven't dated anyone since Eric," Bryan pointed out delicately while at the same time jabbing a fry in his direction.

"Eric?" Dean murmured to Kai.

"Film student, sophomore year, very emotional," Kai whispered back. Dean nodded a "gotcha."

Aidan groaned. Did they really have to talk about this? He hated being in the spotlight, especially this increasingly familiar you-should-date-more spotlight. Why couldn't they just talk about Bryan's weekly dating disasters? Or speculate on whatever extracurricular activities would require Martin's roommate to make biweekly trips to Mexico?

"Some of us don't have to be seeing someone every single minute of the day to be happy," Aidan said patiently. His brain picked up on the word happy, and Jake's user pic flashed across his mind. Aidan's eyes went wide, and he shoved the thought aside.

"I know. We just don't want you to, y'know, collect twelve cats and wither on the vine. Or internet line," Kai added after a pregnant pause. His dark eyes were soft with concern, and Aidan knew then that his very astute roommate had picked up on the fact that he'd been on his computer way more than usual in the past couple of months.

Kai was good at calling things like he saw them, which meant he was also pretty brazen since he saw quite a bit. And no matter what, he was always sure to make his point somehow. Aidan sighed, then acknowledged the words with a reluctant smile. "Fine. I promise not to turn into a grape and die a lonely and dehydrated death."

Kai returned the smile. "Good."

"You guys are crazy, you know that, right?" Aidan looked around the table before he turned his attention back to his chocolate shake.

"Yeah, but you still love us," Bryan said matter-of-factly, stabbing another fry in his direction.

Aidan: So I have finals in two weeks. Blech.

Aidan: Then heading back home for break.

Jake: awww... you'll do great

Aidan: I hope so.

Aidan: But yeah...won't be around much for a few weeks. :/

Jake: :(

Jake: yeah, I'm heading up the coast for a bit too

Aidan: Ohhh, jealous! I love the beach.

Aidan: Pack me in your suitcase. :)

Jake: wish I could

There was a pause.

Jake: um...hope this won't sound weird, but...

Jake: I'll miss you, Red

Aidan's heart pounded in double time. It was the first time Jake had ever said something like that. Usually, he was flirty, fun, and sometimes outrageous, but this felt...different. Sweet. Even though he was also feeling the same way, Aidan hadn't been planning to say anything himself because, honestly, he hadn't been sure of the reception. Now, though...

Aidan swallowed hard before responding.

Aidan: I'll miss you, too.

Tenth week and finals flew by in the blink of an eye. Tyler's study group for Environmental Econ actually helped, and it was cool getting to know more of his fellow program students. Aidan discovered that Tyler actually lived down the block from him, so they often walked back from the library together.

Aidan's work-study program helping to maintain the campus facilities – a glorified description for gardening and landscaping – didn't require him to work during the school breaks, so Aidan elected to take the week of spring break off. He splurged on tickets and found a cheap flight back to the Bay Area, where he spent most of the break alternately helping out at his parents' store, making sure Alli didn't burn the house down, and vegging out in front of the television. He spent his evenings catching up with his high school friends, procrastinating on working on his honors thesis, and wondering about Jake's trip up the coast. He wondered what Jake was doing at that particular moment or where "up the coast" he was.

He wondered if Jake was meeting cute guys and why it bothered him so much to think about it.

And then, in the middle of the week, he was left wondering about the way his heart raced when he received a short email from Jake.

*To: Aidan Montgomery
From: Jake Everett
Subject: (no subject)
Attachments: (1)*

*just wanted to say hi
so...
hi :)*

saw this on the beach and thought of you

Aidan opened the attachment, and his face split into a wide grin when he saw a picture of bright red coral against a grainy white sand beach.

Chapter Three

Spring quarter started up, and by week four, Aidan and Jake were back to their once or twice-weekly chats. Aidan really liked Jake, but he didn't know what to do about it. He didn't know if there was anything he *could* do about it.

Especially not from halfway around the world.

It's not like Jake was his boyfriend or anything, and Kai was already teasing Aidan for talking about him all the time. It's just that...so many things reminded him of Jake now. When he was in class and his prof turned around to list something on the whiteboard, he'd remember Jake's description of his bird-like poli sci professor who needed to stand on a footstool to reach high enough to write on the board. When he went out to eat with his friends, he'd want to tell Jake about the amazing paneer masala he'd just had or, even though Jake loved spicy food, recommend to him that he should stay away from the five alarm fried chicken because it had practically burned Aidan's tongue off. He blushed to think of the outrageously flirty thing Jake might say then about whether Aidan's tongue would need some TLC.

Most concerning of all, though?

When Aidan was just out and about doing everyday things, he'd wonder if Jake was online at that moment and if he was missing a chance to chat with him. Was he missing out? Was Jake there? He knew he was hopeless, and the guys had pretty much agreed with that assessment through implication. The thing is, Aidan didn't know what to do with himself or with the Jake situation.

So maybe that's why he said yes when, in early May and just after midterms were over, Tyler asked him out.

They were in the same Chemical Oceanography lab section that quarter and were walking back from class together when it happened.

"You went to New York last Christmas? That's so great! My...uh, friend Jake is from there," Aidan said with a blush. He tripped suddenly on the uneven sidewalk.

Tyler grabbed his arm and kept him from falling. "You okay?" At Aidan's nod, he smiled and let go. "Yeah, it was really amazing. I mean, it was a family vacay, so not all fun and games. Still, for my first time there, it was pretty cool. We went skating in Rockefeller Plaza, we caught a taping of Letterman, and there was snow on the ground and everything."

"Yeah, Jake said things never close, and you can get food delivered at two in the morning. Sounds like heaven for us night owls," Aidan said with a quirk of his lips as he remembered that conversation.

Tyler was silent for a moment as they crossed the street. "So uh...this Jake guy? You talk about him a lot," Tyler said slowly.

Aidan flushed. "Oh, he's just...he's a friend," he ultimately said because...well, he knew that was the bare truth.

"So he's not, um, your boyfriend or something?"

Aidan glanced up at Tyler, who stood a couple inches taller than his own five-eleven. "Nah...uh, he's not. I don't have a boyfriend," Aidan said as he wondered why Tyler was even asking about that stuff. Gawd, he hoped Tyler wasn't gonna try to set him up with someone or something equally awkward like that.

"Then do you want to go out with me some time? Like, on a date?" Tyler's words came out in a rush. His ears turned pink as he smiled at Aidan, and the sunlight reflected brightly off his honey blond hair.

Aidan's mouth fell open. "Uh...what? Like, with you?" Aidan cleared his throat. "I mean, I didn't even know you were..." He trailed off indistinctly, suddenly uncomfortable.

Tyler ran a hand through his hair and gave him a brief smile. "Yeah, well. I don't really advertise it, but yeah. I am."

Aidan was at a loss for words as he processed the new information. "Oh... Okay," he said slowly.

Tyler lifted his brows. "Okay as in...?"

Aidan blinked rapidly as his mind underwent a paradigm shift. Tyler was smart and attractive. And here. As in, physically here in the same time zone as he was. No matter how much he might wish Jake were here, he simply wasn't, and it's not like this online...thing with Jake was a relationship or something. Was it?

Thinking back to what Kai and the guys had been saying for a while about vines – and internet lines – Aidan met Tyler's gaze. His eyes weren't a shining grey, but they were a pleasant enough hazel. *Maybe I should give him a shot?* Aidan took a breath and tried on a hesitant smile. "Uh, okay as in yes. What did you have in mind?"

By then, they'd reached Aidan's apartment complex and were stopped outside the security gate. Tyler's smile was wide when he suggested they do dinner this Saturday and then see a movie.

Aidan agreed, and, as the security gate swung shut behind him, he scolded himself for thinking first of the potential online time he'd be missing with Jake.

The loud report of machine guns and car explosions on the action movie's soundtrack was thunderous, and by the time they left the theater, Aidan was afraid his ears might never hear the same again.

"Sorry about that," Tyler said again with a sheepish smile as he pulled into a parking spot on their street. "That theater usually plays better stuff than blow-'em-up movies."

Aidan shrugged easily. "Nah, it's okay. Didn't really need that left eardrum, anyway," he joked as he got out of the car.

Tyler winced as he locked up the small Toyota. "Ouch. I'll do better next time, promise," he said with a smile.

Aidan returned the smile on automatic, but didn't say anything as they walked towards his complex. Tyler was nice and all, but Aidan honestly wasn't sure if there should be a next time. Their date had been okay, and they'd found something to talk about at dinner so that there weren't too many silent voids. However, Aidan had found his thoughts too often straying elsewhere.

Towards the southern hemisphere, in fact.

Maybe that's why you should give this thing with Tyler a chance, then. Do you

really want to be hung up on a guy eight thousand miles away? Aidan could hear Kai lecturing him as clearly as if his roommate were standing right there.

They reached his complex, and Aidan turned towards Tyler. "Thanks for taking me out," he said with a polite smile. Tyler was a good guy; Aidan just wasn't sure if he was good for him.

Tyler's lips quirked up. "I had a nice time," he said. Tyler searched his gaze for a moment, and then, with a quick smile, leaned in.

The press of Tyler's lips to his came as a shock, and Aidan was hit with warring emotions. His analytical brain registered that the lips ghosting over his own were firm and slightly dry. Objectively, it was a decent kiss with medium pressure and, after a moment, the hint of a tongue flicking across his bottom lip. Aidan didn't part his lips, though, or allow the kiss to deepen because subjectively, he knew he should be feeling more.

Or he should be feeling something, at least.

Ever since the debacle with film student Eric of the mercurial mood swings, Aidan hadn't really dated anyone. Honestly, it had just been him and his hand for the last year, and they'd been in a holding pattern all through junior year thus far.

Translation? As a college student with – *ahem* – needs, he should be ripe for the plucking. Figuratively speaking. However, while the feeling of the kiss was pleasant enough, there was no spark. He felt more anticipation in looking forward to his chats with Jake than he did in this physical moment with Tyler, lips pressed against his. He felt more pleasure in chatting movies or trading everyday banter with Jake or even taking on more serious topics with him like Jake's parents' split or his own responsibilities at home.

And that terrified Aidan.

Tyler took a step back, and Aidan watched him silently, his brain scrambling to process this new information. Tyler's gaze was searching as he sent Aidan a half-smile. "I'll see you in class on Monday."

Over the debate echoing in his ears, Aidan cleared his throat. Gathering his bearings, he summoned up a smile. "G'night."

Somehow, after that, he made it up to his room before the panic set in.

His mind was racing as it tried to grasp what his heart was telling him.

He'd just gone on a perfectly decent date with an attractive, smart, and really sweet

guy. He should've enjoyed it immensely, but instead, he had been comparing it to time he spent with Jake. Time spent online with another person, not even in Jake's physical presence.

And that scared him because holy shit.

Was it impossible now to enjoy other guys? Had he built this thing up with Jake – this undefined, ephemeral, non-relationship thing – into something other guys would never live up to?

How could he have let himself get pulled in this deep?

Because what Aidan's heart was telling him was that he was halfway in love with Jake, and it scared him shitless because (1) Jake was eight thousand miles away; (2) despite their flirtiness, they'd never talked about anything like this; and (3) above all, Aidan had absolutely no fucking clue what he was supposed to do about it.

Chapter Four

Aidan: Hey there, stranger.

Aidan: Long time, no talk.

Jake: hi Red!

Jake: haven't seen you around in a while. missed you last week.

Aidan: Yeah, been busy. Werky McWerkerson and all that.

Jake: aww, I know what you mean

Jake: my bro was complaining to me about his homework

Jake: and I was all "just wait til you're in college"

Jake: I didn't tell him that college has its pluses, too

Jake: like you also meet the most interesting and attractive people there

Jake: ;)

Aidan: ha

Aidan: Actually, I kinda wanted to ask you about something.

Jake: oh yeah? what's up?

Aidan took a deep breath. Then he leapt off the cliff.

Aidan: So...I kinda went on a date last night.

Aidan: Actually, scratch that. I did. I went on a date last night.

Aidan: And it was with a really interesting and attractive guy.

Aidan: And it should have been amazing.

Aidan: But it wasn't.

There was a long pause on the other side. Aidan chewed on his lip as he waited. For all of their flirtiness and confidences exchanged, he and Jake never talked about dating. It was like an unspoken rule that what happened on each side of the world stayed on that side of the world.

Jake: ok

Jake: I'm sorry it didn't go so well...

Jake: but if we're being completely honest, I'm kind of glad it didn't

Aidan blinked a few times at that response before reaching forward to type his own. He took another deep breath to settle his nerves.

Aidan: Okay...see, so that's what I wanted to talk about. I don't think I can handle this...thing. Whatever it is.

Aidan: See, we're being completely honest here, right?

Aidan: I really really like you. Like...really like you.

Aidan: And I don't know if I can keep doing this.

Aidan: I should be able to go out on a date and have a good time and like someone else. But I can't. And it's not your fault. I know it's not. You didn't ask me to feel like this or anything, but I do. And it just really sucks to know that you could be going out on dates, having a good time, liking someone else and all of that stuff, too. And that's your thing, and there's nothing I can really do. I just feel shitty when I think about it.

Aidan: So I think maybe I need to take a break from you. Because I just...really really like you. And yeah...I just need to get over that.

Aidan: Sorry, I know this is way more info than you probably ever needed to know, but I wanted to tell you I don't think I'll be around to chat or...whatever for a while. Maybe a long while.

Aidan held his breath when there was a long pause. His eyes went wide when he saw how much he'd written, but once he'd started, he hadn't been able to stop.

The chat window showed "Jake is typing..." a few times. And then stopped. And then started up again.

And Aidan's heart started, stopped, and started up again in time with each changed signal.

Finally, there came a response, and when Aidan read it, his heart pounded again in double time.

Jake: Red. Aidan. I don't want you to go. And there's no need for you to go, I swear. I feel the same way – about everything and about you. Seriously, you almost gave me a heart attack when you just mentioned your date. I could try not

to feel jealous or anything, but I want that. I want to have a reason and a right to feel jealous of this guy. I never said anything before b/c it's kind of crazy and I didn't want to tie you down or hold you back or whatever. The distance, the timing – I'm not coming back to LA until January, you know. Everything is pretty crazy about our situation. But you're really special and we're smart people. And I think we can make it work. I know I want to try.

Jake: Can you Skype? We need to talk FTF.

Aidan swallowed hard before typing "okay." He went to shut his bedroom door and reached to turn on his speakers. He noticed his hands were shaking a little. They didn't Skype all that often because Jake was in a dorm room with two roommates at his exchange university in Australia. Mostly they emailed and chatted on IM.

Aidan opened up Skype and, with a few clicks, there he was.

Jake.

His dark hair was still short and cropped close, and his grey eyes were deep and fathomless when Jake gazed back at him. The background lighting was low as his lips curved up in a half-smile.

"Hi, Red."

Aidan blinked a few times, suddenly a strange combination of hopeful and nauseous over how much he'd bared himself to Jake. He felt naked and exposed – and not in a good way. He swallowed twice before speaking.

"Hey, Jake," he said, glad his voice didn't sound too shaky. Aidan offered him a hesitant smile. "Um, what about your roommates?" he asked, stalling.

"I threatened bodily harm if they didn't leave."

Surprised, Aidan chuckled at that, and Jake's expression softened.

"So, in case you need to hear it, I figured I could say it out loud." Jake cleared his throat and looked straight at him. "I really really like you, too," Jake said, his lips quirking up.

Aidan felt relief wash over him. "That's good. I didn't really want to run away, but I felt I kinda had to. Self-preservation and all," Aidan added truthfully, figuring he'd already leapt off the Jake cliff at this point.

"Well, you don't have to. We can figure this out." Jake paused for a moment, then rubbed his chin, its firm curve showing a slight five o'clock shadow. "You... You do want to try, right?" Jake asked.

"I think so," Aidan said, his heart pounding.

"So do I," Jake said, his voice firm and his gaze warm from behind his thick dark lashes.

They shared a speaking glance, and Aidan saw so much in Jake's gaze – the plea to trust Jake at this distance and the vulnerability in his trusting Aidan to do the same. Aidan nodded, answering the silent question with a shy smile, and an answering smile spread across Jake's face.

"Okay."

"Okay."

They grinned at each other for another moment. There was a pause, and when Jake spoke next, his voice was deeper. "So...what're you up to this Friday night?" he said with a half-smile and a playful waggle of his brows.

Aidan chuckled at that, the swing of emotions in the last hour enough to make him feel giddy and lightheaded. "I don't know...finding time to spend it with my...boyfriend?" he said, his tone hopeful and his heart in his throat.

Jake's smile was breathtaking. "I like the sound of that."

When Tyler mentioned going out the next weekend, Aidan blushed and told him that he was seeing someone now. Tyler wasn't too devastated by the news and hadn't looked all that surprised when he found out who it was. He mentioned staying friends and keeping up with their study group, to which Aidan agreed.

Aidan felt a little bad about it because Tyler really was a good guy, and honestly, he also could never regret having gone out with him in the first place because, in his own way, Tyler had led Aidan to Jake. That said, Aidan was a tiny bit relieved that the quarter was drawing to a close and Tyler would be graduating this year. No matter that he was still a good guy and they were still on friendly terms – in those early days, it still felt a little weird to know Tyler had been interested in him in that way.

Over the summer, Aidan stayed on campus to earn some extra cash by working through the break. He was also able to take a couple of classes during the summer session that usually filled up too quickly in the regular school year. The campus was generally less crowded during the summer, and LA itself seemed to take a breather from its bustling pace.

And he was able to talk to Jake regularly all throughout.

Ever since that night, Aidan no longer had to guess about whether Jake was on IM or if he'd be around later that day. In addition to still catching each other occasionally on Gchat, they had a standing twice-weekly Skype date: Friday morning LA/Friday night Australia and Saturday night LA/Sunday afternoon Australia. They occasionally had to switch their dates around because of their schedules, but even then, Aidan was grateful simply not to have to second guess Jake's whereabouts all the time. A weight he hadn't been consciously aware of lifted from his chest, and that was amazing. Well, not as amazing as it would be if Jake was there with him, but it was about as good as they were going to get with an ocean between them.

In addition to their growing closer and discovering more about each other, that summer, Aidan also came to learn a few things about himself, among them (1) he should remember to lock his door before their Skype dates; (2) he found pierced nipples surprisingly erotic; and (3) he could no longer claim that he still had his figurative cherry when it came to cybering.

Aidan had never done anything like that before. He'd always thought the idea of it seemed a little weird, but with Jake, it actually seemed...well, pretty normal. Aidan supposed it was because they'd exposed so much of their personal thoughts that baring himself physically felt like a natural progression. It just felt good to share that part of himself with Jake. Actually, it felt really damned good most of the time.

And if that pattern continued well into the fall quarter, then who was he to mess with a damned good thing?

Chapter Five

"Are you seriously going to count down the days like that?" Kai's voice drifted over his shoulder as Aidan drew an X across December 3rd on his wall calendar.

"Yup," Aidan said as he popped the cap back onto his pen. He tossed it back into his pen mug and turned around to grin shamelessly at his roommate.

Kai just rolled his eyes. "You know that's taking it to a whole new level of dorkiness, right?"

"Yeah, but I can't help it. I'm South Campus, and we embrace the dorkdom." Aidan couldn't help pointing out one more thing that Kai was sure to appreciate. His face flamed a little at how forward this would sound, but he decided to play his trump card. "Besides, think of it as a countdown until I finally get some. From something that's not...er...self-initiated, y'know."

Kai eyes went wide, and his lips curved up in that trademarked evil grin. He finally nodded. "Ahhhhh. Yeah, that would definitely be reason to celebrate." His phone chirped, and he pulled it out of his pocket to check the message. "Hey, Jane says she's downstairs. You're still coming on the *Targét* run, right?" He pronounced the word with an exaggerated French accent.

"Yup," Aidan said, walking out while doing his phone-wallet-keys check. When he felt the small lump of his wallet in his back pocket, he couldn't help the little thrill of happiness that shot through him at the memory it produced. He headed downstairs and said hi to Jane as he got into the car. After strapping on his seatbelt, he settled into the backseat and thought back to that day.

When the box had arrived at their apartment three weeks ago just before his birthday, Aidan's eyes had gone wide at the postmark. Jake had sent the package all the way from Australia.

Aidan had cut open the top of the box and pulled out the sheet of paper inside. It was ordinary white printer paper, but on it, someone had drawn an array of pink roses and written a message in a carefree scrawl.

Happy birthday, Red!

Sending you some flowers that will make it across the Pacific in one piece.

Also sending a little something nice for my favorite nice boy...who's also my favorite naughty boy, too. ☺ Can't wait for January.

-Jake

Aidan blushed when he read that. Jake had teased him the first time things had turned a little...physical in their Skype dates. Feigning surprise that evening, Jake had gasped and said, "And I thought nice boys weren't supposed to ask about those things."

Of course, he'd ruined his façade of faux shock when his gaze had turned heated and he'd stripped off his shirt, revealing a defined chest and those delicate silver bars piercing his light brown nipples.

Aidan's mouth had gone dry at the sight. To say Aidan had been surprised by the hardware would be an understatement. To say he'd been turned on...yeah, major understatement there, too.

Before he could become distracted by the memory, Aidan had turned his attention back to the package. Underneath a few layers of bubble wrap, he found a box, and inside that box, he found a smooth leather billfold in an unusual burgundy color. It was classic and stylish and would be the perfect replacement for his ratty old wallet, which he'd admittedly had since his sophomore year of high school. In fact, as he'd

once told Jake in one of their numerous random chats, it was still intact thanks to some small miracle and an unhealthy amount of duct tape.

As he reclined in the backseat of Jane's little white Civic with Jay-Z's "Empire State of Mind" blaring from the stereo, Aidan smiled to himself as he thought about that thoughtful gift. And as he thought about Jake, whom this song reminded him of.

"Oh god, he's got that goofy look again," Kai groaned from the front seat.

Jane flicked her gaze up at the rearview mirror, her eyes mostly shielded by sunglasses, before leaning forward to check for traffic at the intersection. "Yeah, been seeing that a lot these days. And this guy's worth putting your dating life on hold during these prime college years?"

Aidan furrowed his brows. "It's not on hold. I *am* dating him. We're just in different places geographically right now," he explained for the umpteenth time. "Besides, he's coming back to LA in a month. And if he's this amazing from half a world away..." Aidan smiled secretively as he let his words trail off.

Kai twisted around in the car seat to look over his shoulder. His brow was creased with concern. "Babe, we just care about you. Really, with all this time you put into it and the way he makes you feel right now... I just hope he's everything you expect and more." His gaze sought understanding as it met Aidan's.

Aidan's lips quirked up in a small smile. "I think it'll be okay," he murmured, even though the comment stuck in his mind.

Jane, who was now searching for the freeway exit, clearly didn't hear Aidan's response, and her comments seemed to piggyback off Kai's words. "Yeah, no kidding. You guys remember that old guy I met on OKCupid last month? His pic must've been at least ten years and forty pounds ago," she said with a wrinkle of her nose.

With a last quick smile at Aidan, Kai faced forward and launched into a tale of a friend's Grindr meetup gone comically wrong.

As Aidan looked out the window at the passing city streets, he chewed on his lip while letting his thoughts wander. Kai, Bryan, and some of his other friends had been making cautious comments to him for a while now about being careful about his expectations. However, as he insisted, it's not as though he didn't know what to expect with Jake. They chatted often, they had their weekly dates, and he'd seen and heard Jake through Skype for months.

Aidan blushed and felt heat race through him at the memories. Actually, he'd seen and heard quite a bit of Jake, to be honest.

He knew everything he needed to know about Jake. He was smart, funny, thoughtful, and sexy as hell with his slow grin, wickedly glittering eyes, and washboard abs.

The guys were crazy. He knew what to expect.

Right?

He had no idea what to expect.

Aidan reached into his dresser drawer to pull out a shirt, then considered the one he was already holding in his left hand. He finally decided to go with his original choice: his "lucky" shirt, a.k.a. the one that he wore to important things that needed to go well. It had served him well all through finals season since starting college, when it had been loose as a freshman trying to look a little more grown up. Now that four years had passed, he filled it out more, the cotton skimming over his leanly muscled frame. Even though the edges of the cuffs were starting to show a little wear, the sky blue rugby shirt with the navy band across the chest was comfortable and familiar.

And right now he needed comfortable and familiar because Jake was supposed to pick him up in fifteen minutes.

They were meeting in person for the first time, let alone going on their first "IRL" date. He would finally see Jake's gorgeous face without the filter of computers, Internet connections, and time zone calculations.

And he was way more nervous than he cared to admit. In fact, he had hardly slept last night because of nerves...eagerness...anticipation. Whatever word you wanted to label it as.

Aidan pulled the shirt over his head, leaving it untucked over his dark wash jeans. He looped a brown leather belt around his waist and bent to tie on his matching brown Timberland boots. They'd been a splurge two years ago, but, as an Environmental Science student, he'd already had plenty of opportunities to use them out in the field. Taking a look in the mirror, he reached for the hair gel to try to tame his still-damp curls.

What if Jake didn't like what he saw?

It's not like Aidan had lied about his five feet eleven inches, and he certainly hadn't been able to hide his looks and – Aidan blushed – body when they were Skyping.

But...it was still an unknown element.

So much was left unknown, now that Aidan thought about it.

What if they just didn't mesh?

They definitely meshed well in conversation, and that had to count for something, Aidan argued with himself. That had to count for a lot, actually.

It's just that he'd grown so used to their routine, and things were really...well, comfortable. On the one hand, he was dying to see Jake, but on the other, what if the guys were right? What if his expectations were completely out of line?

He and Jake had been talking about their long-awaited meeting for quite some time. Jake had returned from Australia right before the holidays, but flew directly to New York to spend Christmas with his family. Once he got back to LA from the East Coast, though, they would spend the next day...together.

And that day was finally here.

Jake had teased him about greeting him with a kiss even before they'd exchanged words. It brought to mind the dramatics of classic Hollywood, and a tiny part of Aidan had been excited and thrilled by the idea that Jake wanted him that badly.

Now that the moment was upon him, though, Aidan didn't know what he'd do. For all he knew, he might trip on his way to greeting Jake and take them both out before they'd even had a chance to say hi.

His phone buzzed.

Come downstairs, Red – your chariot awaits :)

Aidan took a bracing breath.

Here we go.

Chapter Six

The one on the left looked a little like a penguin.

They were lying on the grass at the Getty Center. After a tour of the galleries and a lively discussion about the unique architectural aspects of the buildings themselves, he and Jake had headed out into the gardens to look at the view of the sprawling city around them and to take a breather on the plush lawn. As they reclined on the beautifully manicured grass, the sky above them was a pale blue, and the mild Los Angeles winter had provided them with some curious cloud shapes to ponder. Aidan watched the penguin drift by and considered how else he might embarrass himself today.

He'd already done more than enough to rank in the top ten of embarrassing days, but he was pretty sure that, with enough time, he had enough nerves to cap off the day by reaching that infamous number one spot, which currently was burned in his memory by a fifth grade play, a cotton ball sheep, and a pipe cleaner tree costume gone absurdly awry.

To start the day, he'd gone downstairs to see a gleaming silver Porsche Cayenne pulled up to his apartment building. As he looked down the street, the driver's side door opened, and Jake emerged. Aidan's eyes popped; Jake had said he had a silver SUV, but he'd failed to mention that it was a freaking Porsche. Aidan stopped in his tracks right outside the security gate. *I'm so ridiculously out of my league here*, he thought as he made eye contact with Jake.

Jake, who was looking like something out of an Abercrombie catalogue, complete with silver-framed aviator shades, dark jeans, and a casual-cool ribbed grey V-neck sweater with a peek of a white T-shirt underneath. Jake, who was pulling his shades off and whose dark, deep gaze was shining in his direction. Jake, who was smiling that heart-stopping smile of his, which Aidan was finally seeing in person and face to face.

Jake, whose heart-stopping smile was directed at him.

Aidan wasn't sure if the smile he tried on then was wobbly, but it definitely felt unsure. Just like he did now that he saw Jake. Jake who drove a Porsche and whose six-foot-one frame looked like he'd stepped off the side of a billboard.

Oh god, what am I doing?

Jake approached him with his arms wide, and it looked for a moment like he might fulfill that no-greeting-just-kiss-me-now promise he'd teased about earlier. Aidan couldn't say if that were the case or not because, quite embarrassingly, he chickened out and leaned to the side, instead giving Jake a hug. "Hi," Aidan murmured shyly as he turned his face into Jake's neck. Jake smelled like clean laundry over the cool scent of the ocean, and Aidan felt himself falling even though he knew that wasn't the smart thing to do.

Smothering a yawn that came courtesy of his near-sleepless night, Aidan watched the penguin cloud drift out of sight as he thought back to that moment. He was kicking himself for being such a wimp and turning away like a goddamned blushing virgin earlier. It's not like he had a chastity belt chained to his crotch or something. It's just...he'd never been in that position before, and he definitely had never kissed or made out with someone upon meeting them. Even in his few WeHo outings with friends, he'd never done anything that reckless.

Then again, nobody had ever been so incredibly thoughtful as to bring him a gift like Jake's, either.

After getting into – *Aidan swallowed hard at the memory* – Jake's Porsche, Jake had reached into the backseat and brought out a small baby blue ceramic pot with healthy green leaves sprouting from the small plant nestled within it. A little white bow was tied around the pot just below the lip. The delicate plant looked slightly out of place in the hands of a man with a piece of metal sticking through his ear.

Jake's gaze sparkled as he held the plant out to Aidan. "This is for you. I figured rather than flowers, you might like a little something to add to your windowsill garden."

Aidan's jaw dropped, and he slowly reached for the plant. Despite his clear interest in environmental issues, nobody had ever brought him flowers, let alone a living and growing specimen. "Thank you," Aidan said, otherwise at a loss for words.

"It's a basil plant, so you can even use the leaves when you're cooking," Jake added with a smile. Then he faced forward, turned the key in the ignition, and shifted into gear like he hadn't just rocked Aidan's world.

And he continued to blow Aidan away all throughout lunch with his intelligence, quick wit, and ready smile. Jake had laughed appreciatively at some of the geek humor jokes that Aidan cracked, and the conversation had flowed between them.

It had flowed between them in between the instances when Aidan spilled water all over the table (twice), kicked Jake under the table, and sent the salt shaker skidding with an errant gesture, that is.

Aidan bit his lip as he watched a cloud pass by in the form of a thought bubble. His clumsiness wasn't usually this hopeless, but it seemed to flourish the more he realized Jake was pretty damned special and Aidan...well, Aidan could only hope he would ever be able to learn the rules, let alone play in the same league.

His gaze darted to the side to take in Jake's profile with its sharp blade of a nose, the defined chin and jawline, and the outline of his dark sweep of lashes. Jake glanced over, and, seeing Aidan's gaze on him, shifted to face Aidan.

"What's wrong?" Jake asked softly.

"Nothing... I..." Aidan faltered, debating whether to say anything. He didn't even know if there really was anything to say in the first place.

"Talk to me, Red. It's just me."

Aidan bit his lip. Better to talk now and get answers than let things go unsaid. "But, see... That's the thing. I know it's you, but you're just so much more...*you* than I expected. And the you that I see and hear and talk to right now is amazing, but then I get worried that I'm not...me enough. Or just not enough in general. Or that the me I am isn't enough. If that even makes sense," Aidan mumbled, his face flaming hot because he knew he must've bungled that explanation and sounded pathetic in the process. Rather than see any pity that might cloud Jake's gaze, Aidan closed his eyes and awaited his judgment.

He was startled when he felt gentle fingers graze against his jaw. Blinking his eyes open, Aidan found Jake's face close to his, his grey gaze warm and affectionate.

"Red, I'll let you in on a little secret," Jake said softly, the corners of his lips curled up in a faint smile. "I think you're pretty special, and I've had a few months to figure that one out for myself. No matter what, I'm still gonna be the same guy you talked to all those nights, and you're gonna be the one I couldn't wait to see every weekend, too. Sure, meeting you, seeing you...touching you is different than what we're used to," Jake said as he reached up to brush Aidan's loose curls back from his brow. "But different isn't bad. In this case, different is kind of fantastic," Jake added as his fingers trailed down the side of Aidan's face to cup his jaw. "I think we could have something really great between us," Jake said with a smile that made Aidan catch his breath. "I think we already might have it..."

Jake's gaze searched his before his lips curved up in a dazzling smile. Aidan's heart hammered in his chest, and his lids fluttered shut as Jake slowly closed the distance between them.

The gentle brush of Jake's lips against his was an awakening.

The earthy scent of the grass beneath them, the slight chill of the breeze that surrounded them, and the rustling sound of the trees in the distance all faded as Aidan's senses zeroed in on his connection with Jake. Jake's lips caressed his, and, when their mouths opened at the same time and their tongues came together in a soft touch, Aidan nearly shivered at the sensations that coursed through his body.

It just felt so unbelievably right.

Even though Jake might drive a ridiculously expensive car and look like some Hollister model, he was still the man with whom Aidan had shared confidences, secrets, and intimacies all these months. Aidan realized that so much of what he'd been worried about since this morning was superficial, and like Jake said, they already knew the important stuff and what truly mattered about each other. They had great chemistry and could talk about anything – that is, when Aidan wasn't hung up on the superficial stuff and letting his nerves and clumsiness get the better of him. Aidan knew he needed to man up and take that leap of faith; after all, it was clear that Jake – gorgeous, smart, perfect Jake – was already prepared to do so.

Aidan pulled Jake closer with newly confident hands and shifted towards him, curling into the kiss. He felt Jake's lips curve into a smile against his mouth before Jake pressed closer, his kiss deepening. Jake's body felt incredible against his, and the soft brush of his fingers caused the nape of Aidan's neck to tingle.

Aidan couldn't say how long they indulged in this kiss – this astonishing, earth-shattering first kiss – but he was pretty sure it was anywhere from eight minutes to eight days. All he knew was that when they finally parted and he was able to blink open his eyes, they were both breathless.

Jake's eyes were bright with incipient desire when he finally broke the silence. His hand traced Aidan's jawline before dipping down to skim his side and settling at his waist. "You feel so good. Honestly, I've been waiting forever just to hold you."

Honesty – that's what had brought them here, and that's what Aidan needed to remember he should always bring to the table. He and Jake had already shared so much through the powers of modern technology; now they just needed to translate that connection to the physical, real world.

Aidan swallowed hard and nodded. Honesty. He could do that. "I kind of can't believe that you're here."

Jake's lips quirked. "I hope that's a good thing."

Aidan smiled back in response. "It's a really good thing."

Jake's eyes crinkled at the corners when he returned the smile. "Good."

"Good," Aidan repeated, feeling silly, but not caring.

After a moment, Aidan leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to Jake's lips.

Jake smiled again. "What was that for?" he murmured, his gaze dipping to Aidan's lips before lifting once more.

"No reason. Just because I can. And, considering how we've spent the last six months halfway around the world, the fact that I can is pretty incredible, actually."

Jake searched his gaze, then leaned forward to press a soft kiss of his own to Aidan's lips.

Aidan smiled when their lips parted. "Let me guess. Just because you can?"

Jake's chuckle vibrated against Aidan's side. "Just because I can and just because you feel so good."

Jake snuggled a little closer, his knee brushing against Aidan's leg. He pressed another lingering kiss against Aidan's lips, and when Jake drew back, Aidan lifted his head with him as he sought those lips that he hadn't had enough of yet. Jake smiled against Aidan's mouth before speaking. "This might sound a little crazy, but do you want to go back to my place? I would love to just hold you, but I thought it might be nice to do it without the damp grass and curious bystanders. I swear nothing has to happen, but I just...I really like holding you close and having you nearby." Jake paused for a moment. "But if you'd rather not, then I...I'll understand," he added hastily with a quick smile.

As Aidan had just begun to take note of the chill of the grass through his shirt, he could see the appeal of moving location. That and, well, Jake's body pressed against his, along with the hardness that was nudging against his own, made for a pretty convincing argument. Aidan smiled mischievously. "And what if something were to happen...?"

Jake's eyes went wide, and he coughed a little. When his eyes met Aidan's, there was heat lingering within that dark grey gaze. He appeared flustered as he tried to respond. "Well, I... Ah, I mean..."

Aidan leaned forward again to press another quick kiss to Jake's lips. Just because he could. "I'm just messing with you," Aidan said with a teasing quirk of his lips. "I think going back to your place is a great idea."

As Jake's gaze lit up and he raised his hand to brush over Aidan's curls tenderly, Aidan understood that this is what leaps of faith were about, and sometimes you just had to take them. You really couldn't hope to win the prize if you didn't put anything on the line.

And he thought that, with Jake as the prize, he just might be ready for that.

Jake's place was enormous.

He lived in a one bedroom flat in Brentwood, and from Aidan's view out of the picture windows of Jake's twenty-second floor apartment, he could make out the waters of the Pacific off in the distance as it sparkled in the mid-afternoon sun. Jake's furniture – from the taupe colored leather sectional to the cream microsuede recliner in the corner – looked incredibly comfortable, but it was a far cry from Aidan and Kai's Craigslist-acquired and hand-me-down furnishings. Aidan scrunched his sock-covered toes nervously against the plush charcoal area rug and began to feel niggles of doubt as to his leap of faith, despite his earlier intentions otherwise.

Even though Aidan heard Jake approach from behind him, he still jumped a little when he felt Jake's hand on his shoulder.

"Everything all right?" Jake wore a concerned smile as he offered Aidan a tall glass of water.

"Thanks." Aidan miscalculated the distance and banged his knuckles against the glass, causing a little of the clear liquid to slosh over the side. "I'm so sorry," he said as he grabbed the glass and swiped at the water on the sides with his other hand.

"No worries," Jake said with an easygoing shrug. "You okay, though? You seem a little jumpy."

"I'm okay," Aidan said quickly. Then he remembered his decision that honesty with Jake really was the best policy and what had brought them this far in their relationship already. So...if he wanted to know, he may as well just say something. He pivoted a little and looked up at Jake. "Well...actually, uh, your place is really nice," he said, semi-stalling as he lifted the glass to his mouth before setting it down on the window ledge.

"Thanks," Jake said with a curious quirk of his lips, his steel grey eyes shining. "It's actually my mom's doing."

Aidan cocked his head. "Really?"

"Yeah, when I was moving out here from New York, my parents came together in a united front to surprise me," Jake said. Aidan remembered talking with Jake about his parents' divorce, and Jake had mentioned that there was actually no bad blood between them. Jake gestured at the posh furniture. "My mom took apartment duty, while my dad took car duty. So, yeah, the apartment kind of reflects my mom's taste, and the car was totally my dad's idea. Think my mom wants to rent out the place when I finish up with school." Jake took a sip from his glass of water and smiled before setting it down on a side table. "Almost four years later and I still can't believe it, but I'm not gonna complain. Honestly, as long as it's a roof over my head

and a set of wheels to get my butt to campus, I'm happy."

It was easier for Aidan to return the smile this time. Oddly, he felt a little better about things just from having the explanation for Jake's seemingly-splashy lifestyle, which was so at odds with the down-to-earth impression he'd had of Jake. Upon hearing Jake's last comment, Aidan breathed a little easier knowing that he hadn't been completely off the mark.

They turned to face into the living room at the same time, and the corner of Jake's lips ticked upwards. His arm hooked around Aidan's waist, and Aidan felt a little shiver of pleasure run up his spine once Jake's warm palm made contact with his side. Jake pulled him in a little closer, and his breath feathered against Aidan's ear as he spoke. "Wanna watch a movie or listen to music or something? I don't really care what we do; I just like that you're here." Jake's lips quirked up as he met Aidan's gaze.

Aidan swallowed hard and mustered up a little courage to ask for what he really wanted. "What happened to holding you close?"

Jake's eyes shone silver-grey, and his mouth curved into a warm smile. "We can do that, too."

"I think I'd like that." Aidan glanced up with a shy smile. "I didn't get much sleep last night," he confessed. "Nerves, I guess."

"No reason to be nervous. It's just me," Jake said with a disarming smile. He bent his head to brush a kiss against Aidan's lips, then reached for Aidan's hand. "C'mon, let's get comfortable. Actually, my sleep schedule's been wack with all of my time zone hopping, so this is perfect. Naps, my dear Red, are highly underrated," he said with a charming grin as he led the way down the hall.

And moments later, as Aidan settled onto the queen-sized bed in his inside spoon position while wearing his T-shirt, boxers, and a pair of borrowed sweats, he had to agree that naps were, indeed, highly underrated. Especially when they were accompanied by the feeling of being held close to Jake with the weight of Jake's arm curled around his waist and his fresh ocean scent on the pillow.

Aidan blinked a few times as he came awake.

The faint light filtering in through the half-drawn curtains suggested it was early evening, and dusk was falling. He guessed it was around six p.m., and his dreamless sleep suggested he'd slept better in the last couple hours than he had in the last few days. With a quirk of his lips, he wondered if that happy fact was thanks to the man

behind him.

Jake's presence beside him had been so thoroughly satisfying. Aidan had felt safe and protected. With Jake's arm a soft and gentle reminder of his nearness as he'd fallen into slumber, Aidan had felt...cherished. It was almost a miracle that a man like Jake – with his model-worthy looks and his counterculture piercings – would be into a vanilla kinda guy like him, but that's what had happened. Aidan had to remind himself again that, as he'd been telling his friends for months, they did already know each other, and they knew what really counted. He needed to stop letting those other things color his judgment, which had long ago already found such kinship with Jake – his humor, his wit, his kindness – through less conventional means.

And, in the spirit of leaps of faith, Aidan was finally ready to believe and trust in that.

Aidan tried not to wake Jake up as he shifted slowly under the weight of his arm to face the other man. Jake's lashes were a thick dark fringe against his high cheekbones, and they flickered a moment before slowly lifting. That dark grey gaze watched him closely, and the corner of Jake's lips lifted.

Those lips...

They drew Aidan's attention, and he traced the full curve and its soft Cupid's bow with his eyes, wishing, as he often had when they'd had their Skype dates, that he could trace it with his tongue.

Then he realized that he could.

Aidan's gaze flicked upwards before returning to Jake's mouth. Without a word, Aidan reached up to cup the back of Jake's neck, and he saw Jake's lips part as he closed the distance between them. Aidan's eyes closed at the touch of Jake's lips to his.

The kiss began as a slow exploration of gentle lips and searching tongues. Aidan curled his fingers into the short soft hairs at the nape of Jake's neck and felt that muscular arm circle around him as Jake pulled him tight against his firm body. Feeling that delicious warmth – so close between the thin layers of his T-shirt and Jake's cotton tank – caused Aidan's heart to race.

Hungry for more, Aidan pressed closer, sucking gently on Jake's tongue as his leg slid over Jake's to curl around his thighs. Jake gripped his waist and silently urged him farther. Aidan went with it, and with their lips still locked, still caressing, still devouring, he found himself straddling Jake's lean hips, his ass pressed against a thickening hardness.

Aidan rocked back, and Jake broke the kiss with a gasp. Jake's eyes opened, and that half-lidded gaze held banked fires that turned the cool grey to molten steel. "So good," Jake groaned.

"Oh god, you too," Aidan said as his hands explored Jake's chest.

Levering himself upwards, Aidan rocked back again and again and felt that gratifyingly hard cock rubbing against his ass. Aidan sat up, putting more pressure against Jake's erection, and trailed his hands down and under the hem of Jake's shirt. Jake watched with a heated gaze and rolled his hips upwards ever so subtly, pressing his dick right up against Aidan. As Aidan explored the smooth skin of Jake's abs, he felt his own cock thicken under the now-oppressive weight of his borrowed sweats.

Clothes. They needed to come off. Now.

Aidan reached behind to grab the neckline of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head in one smooth motion. Aidan had just a moment to catch the hungry expression on Jake's face before he reached for Jake's shirt to peel it off him. Once that tanned skin was revealed to his eager gaze, Aidan's hands immediately went to the silver bars that glinted faintly in the dusky light.

He stroked across them with the pads of his thumbs. The cool metal was a sensual counterpoint to the firm warm skin that it ran through. "These are so hot. You're gorgeous," Aidan murmured, flicking his gaze upwards to Jake's face.

Jake wet his lips with his tongue, and his voice was a rasp when he spoke. "Suck on them."

That sounded like a great idea. Aidan scooted down a little more until he could bend and reach that light brown peak. As he latched on with his lips, he felt Jake's hands tunnel under the waistband of his pants and boxers. Aidan moaned around the metal-embedded nub as Jake grabbed his ass in a firm grip. Moving to the other nipple and supporting himself with one elbow on the bed, Aidan reached down with his other hand to pull his pants and boxers off. When it became clear he wouldn't be able to do it one-handed, he broke contact with Jake's flesh.

"Pants," Aidan said breathlessly. "We need to lose the pants."

Okay, so it wasn't the most eloquent or romantic statement, but considering the amount of blood that had been redirected to the area south of the border, Aidan felt lucky he could string the words together in the first place.

Aidan shoved the sheets and blankets aside, and, after a moment, they emerged naked from a tangle of legs and clothes. He returned to straddling Jake's hips, and

when they made cock-on-cock contact, Jake's groan matched his own. Aidan watched their two cocks sliding against each other and thought he might come just from the sight of that deep pink shaft pressing against his own.

Jake's cock was the perfect complement to Aidan's seven-and-a-half inches. The deep pink color matched his own almost to a shade, and that firm flesh slid inexorably against his own in an intimate caress as though made for that very purpose. That wide head with the slit already leaking a shiny bead of precum made Aidan's mouth water.

Jake licked his palm before reaching for them. His hand was warm and moist as it took their two cocks in a firm grip. He pressed their flesh together in a tight fist before stroking once from base to tip. "Fuck, that's good," Jake groaned.

In response, Aidan experimented with a few shallow thrusts into that fist, his hips finding a smooth rhythm. With a murmur of approval, Jake began moving his hips to rub his own cock against Aidan's, and they were soon thrusting together into that heated grip.

Aidan planted his hands on Jake's waist, and his eyes lifted to meet Jake's smoky grey gaze. A rush of warmth flooded his veins that had nothing to do with the attention his cock was currently receiving. Even though there was hard – very hard – tangible proof pressed against his flesh, he still could hardly believe that Jake was here with him – that they were here, together, sharing the same air and breath and moment.

Considering the odds that had been stacked against them – from the distance to the prolonged separation to his own insecurities – this moment was a small miracle.

Aidan's hands slid up to smooth over Jake's chest, his palms skimming over those metal barbells before moving up to grip Jake's shoulders. He continued to ride Jake's fist with that slow, sinuous roll of his hips like they had all the time in the world.

Because, with Jake back in the same country, the same city, the same bed, they actually did.

Aidan leaned down to capture Jake's lips in a lingering kiss. Their mouths met, and it felt only natural to part his lips and welcome Jake's tongue into him. Aidan reached down with one hand and gently cupped Jake's balls in his palm. Their weight was heavy and insistent.

Aidan felt more than heard Jake's soft gasp. Jake's chest rumbled against his as he murmured against his lips. "A little harder and you're gonna make me come."

And oh god. Aidan may have seen it in 2D before through the glow of his laptop screen, but, as this day had been testament to, seeing and being with Jake amplified the experience of his perfection a hundredfold.

Aidan squeezed a little harder. He was desperate to see Jake come...in person...in the flesh.

With his hand still gripping Jake's sac, Aidan pulled back to watch, his hips stilling as he savored Jake's movement against him. Aidan's gaze alternated between the press of their two cocks and the intense look in Jake's eyes as he reached his finish. Jake's grip was firm as he milked their two cocks with strong strokes. His smoky grey gaze was fixated on Aidan's face, and his breath came in short gasps as his stroking and thrusting quickened.

Aidan felt the exact moment when Jake began to come.

That fiery hot flesh jerked against Aidan's sensitive cock, and those lightly furred balls tightened in his hand. Thick white cum spurted out of the tip of Jake's beautiful cock to land on Jake's hand and belly, and Jake's stroking fist smoothed the hot liquid up and down over their shafts. Jake's eyes squeezed shut as he released a long groan. Aidan drank in the sight of Jake losing himself in the pleasure.

He was incredible. And he fueled the fire in Aidan's blood.

After a moment, Aidan began to thrust anew into that hot grip. "Oh my god, oh my god," Aidan panted.

Jake's eyes slid open, and he looked up at Aidan with pure heat in his gaze. He reached for Aidan's hips and urged him higher. "C'mere, Red. Let me finish you."

Aidan needed a second to figure that one out, but he quickly understood and even more quickly moved higher with Jake's hands guiding him home. With his knees by Jake's shoulders, Aidan had just managed to balance himself with a hand on the sleigh bed's dark cherry headboard when he felt a moist heat engulf the head of his cock.

His eyes rolled back in his head.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh," Aidan moaned. He dropped his head back briefly before his chin dipped forward to meet his chest, his entire body focusing on the sensations swiftly shooting through him. It wouldn't take much more to make him come. Aidan's gaze was hazy with the unbearable pleasure when he finally looked down.

Jake was watching him, and when his gaze met Aidan's, his eyes lit up with wicked

intent. Aidan felt Jake's hands on his ass as they pressed him forward. Jake's sucking was relentless, and his head bobbed rhythmically as he worked Aidan's cock. Jake adjusted his grip on Aidan's ass, and one hand delved between Aidan's rounded cheeks. Jake's fingertips brushed tantalizingly...thrillingly...against the sensitive skin surrounding his hole. Aidan gasped.

"Mmm hmmm..." Jake's affirmation vibrated down Aidan's shaft.

And that, along with the sight of Jake's lips stretched around his flesh...and the feel of Jake's tongue sliding along the ridge of his cockhead, was really all it took. Aidan might have felt embarrassed by how quickly he came if it didn't feel so goddamned good.

"Coming... I'm coming..." He barely had time to say the words before he felt his balls tighten and his cock erupt. He squeezed his eyes shut at the physical agony-bliss of his completion. His orgasm unfurled from his core like a banner, announcing his pleasure with a choir consisting of his groans and moans. Aidan gripped the headboard with both hands and tried not to fly away as the climax went on and on.

He hadn't come like that...well, ever.

When Aidan was finally back on earth, he came to with the awareness of delicate licks and laps that polished and cleaned his ultra-sensitive cockhead. He glanced down at Jake and almost felt like he might need to come again when he saw that pink tongue taking gentle sweeps over his cock. Jake's gaze met his, and a smile of satisfaction spread across Jake's face.

With a murmur, Aidan shifted his body to the side to lie on the bed, and Jake reached for him, pulling him close. They shared a soft kiss, and Aidan found the lingering taste of his seed on Jake's lips surprisingly satisfying.

Like it was a reminder that he was a part of Jake now.

And as their lips parted on that kiss that felt so full of promise for the future, Aidan hoped that he could find a way to be a part of Jake always.

Chapter Seven

Today was the day.

Aidan was incredibly nervous, but he felt like it was the right time. They were celebrating their three-slash-ten month anniversary, and the last three-slash-ten months had been the best time of his life.

Once Aidan took that leap of faith and embraced the changes in their relationship that would take them from online to in person, everything fell into place. They saw each other multiple times each week, and whether they were going out or just studying together, it was incredible just spending time with Jake. Just being with him suffused Aidan with a feeling of warmth and completeness that he finally – finally – was ready to recognize and call...love.

He'd never been in love before.

As soon as Aidan recognized that feeling for what it was, he knew that what he'd had with Eric in sophomore year – well, it bore no comparison to what he had with Jake. He'd never come close to saying the words to Eric, and the emotions he'd felt with him had shifted and varied so often with Eric's moods that Aidan had never felt on firm ground. He realized that what positive feelings he had felt were likely a sense of relief when Eric's mood would reflect caring and passion rather than sarcasm and angst. With Jake, Aidan could know where he stood without having to question it.

Sure, Jake hadn't said the L word yet, but Aidan was pretty sure that Jake's gestures and actions meant he was feeling the same way. And after Jake had done so much to soothe and calm Aidan's doubts and fears when they'd first met, Aidan thought he might be the one to take that leap of faith and say it first this time.

He wouldn't let himself think about what he'd do if Jake didn't say anything back.

All throughout dinner, Aidan tried to pick the right time to say it. It felt like something monumental and important, considering it was the first time he'd be saying those words to someone.

Afterwards, as they were walking along the Santa Monica pier, the sun cast long shadows as it set behind the waters of the Pacific on the horizon. The flowers by the boardwalk were in their first bloom, and the springtime air felt perfect for hope...for beginnings...for love.

Aidan ran his thumb over Jake's knuckles and glanced up at him. Jake met his gaze and smiled as they stopped at the side of the walkway. Aidan leaned his back against the sturdy post of the wooden pier and looked up at Jake.

This. With the glowing sunset and the light ocean breeze sifting through their hair, this was the moment.

With their fingers still laced, Jake's other hand came up to rest on the scarred wood

beside Aidan.

His heart racing, Aidan wet his lips with his tongue and took a deep breath.

"So I have some good news, Red."

Aidan stopped short from saying what he'd planned on saying and cocked his head to the side. "What's that?"

"I got that job at PoliBlogs!" Jake's enthusiasm nearly vibrated the air. "The stuff they do there is so cutting edge, and oh man – I'll get a chance to work with Millie Cointreau! She's like...the godmother of social media activism. I can't wait to dive right in."

Aidan's eyes went wide. That job was Jake's number one choice, and Aidan knew there had been fierce competition for the position. Jake had been through a phone interview, then three different rounds of in-person meetings. "That's so amazing!" Aidan grinned. "I knew you could do it. I just knew it."

Jake nodded, his eyes bright with excitement as he returned the smile. "And you know what that means? I'm staying in LA, too." Jake lifted his hand to trace a knuckle over Aidan's jaw. "Which means more time with you," Jake added softly.

Aidan, who'd just heard last week that he had been accepted into a fellowship program at a water treatment facility nearby, could hardly believe it. A whole summer together – actually, a whole after-college together. He'd tried not to think about what would happen after graduation. He'd known Jake was applying for jobs in SoCal, but he hadn't wanted to pin his hopes on that possibility given the tight job market. Now, though? The fact that Aidan knew with certainty they'd be in the same city indefinitely excited him to no end.

His eyes shining, Aidan looked up into Jake's deep grey gaze...which was closing the distance between them. Jake's gaze was heated as he murmured, "And more time to do this, Red."

The lips that met his were firm, familiar, and wonderful, and the kiss itself was thorough and demanding. As Aidan felt himself getting swept away on the Santa Monica pier, he set aside what he'd been planning to say for another time so that they could share in this physical celebration of Jake's wonderful news.

The right time would come. He knew it would.

Chapter Eight

The soft breeze kept the air a perfect temperature for a lazy afternoon in the sun. The Pacific Ocean glittered a crystal blue as Aidan looked out over the horizon from his vantage point on the beach. They had been in Cabo San Lucas for two nights and would be here for another two, and already he felt cleansed of the stress of finals and schoolwork. It was his first time outside of the U.S., and it had been a magical experience thanks to Jake.

With Jake's encouragement, Aidan had gone snorkeling for the first time, and he had been amazed at the world living beneath the ocean's surface. While he'd taken classes focused on the oceans in the course of his Environmental Science studies, it just blew his mind to see the colors, animals, and vegetation up close and in person. It was almost like the difference between having a relationship with Jake only through the Internet versus having one with Jake when he was here to touch...to hold...to feel.

Namely, while one was satisfying, the other was mind-blowing.

Aidan smiled to himself as his body flushed with pleasure at the memories.

"Alright, that should do it."

Aidan turned at the sound of that familiar voice and saw Jake approaching from the direction of the dive shop. Since he was already certified and knew how to talk the talk, Jake had gone to ask about scuba diving lessons while Aidan had taken the opportunity to take some pictures of the gorgeous blue waters.

Aidan greeted him with a grin and a quick kiss. "Everything good?"

"Yep, they'll be ready for us tomorrow morning." Jake returned the kiss...only it wasn't nearly as quick.

Those soft lips lingered on his, and, after a long while, Aidan broke away, breathless. "What time is our dinner reservation again?"

The wicked look that spread across Jake's face suggested he knew exactly what Aidan was thinking. "Late enough," Jake said with a glint in his eye as he grabbed Aidan's hand.

With pleasure pooling in his belly, Aidan followed Jake along the path through the tall grass that separated the beach from their resort. Life was just so goddamned satisfying right now that he could hardly believe it. If he hadn't logged onto Chatroulette that night long ago...

Aidan couldn't even imagine his life if that were the case.

Aidan reached forward to hug Jake close from behind. At Jake's curious smile over his shoulder, Aidan kissed his cheek and buried his face in Jake's neck. "Thank you," he murmured against the warm skin. "For being so amazing and for taking a chance on a weirdo in a Batman costume."

Jake's hands hugged Aidan's arms close to his chest. "We both took a chance," Jake murmured before lifting one of Aidan's hands to kiss it. "And we both won."

Aidan thought about saying it then...that four letter word that had been on the tip of his tongue for these past couple of months...but Jake then turned in his arms, and Jake's mouth then found his own, and Aidan then lost the rest of his thoughts beyond being close, oh so close to Jake.

Aidan had somehow misplaced the bones in his body. That was the only explanation for this supremely satisfied languor that filled his very being.

Their lovemaking that afternoon had been slow, intense, and passionate. It had also lasted nearly two hours, and Aidan watched by the light of the setting sun as Jake's breaths came deeply and evenly as he slept off his sex exhaustion.

Aidan's fingertips ghosted over the hair at Jake's temples as he took in his handsome features. That familiar face was just so precious.

A rush of love flooded through him as he thought back to all of those shared memories, all of those shared confidences...all of those shared moments. Aidan might not always have the courage to say it – and when he did, it wasn't always the right time – but he felt it so deeply right then that he had to.

Aidan's thumb feathered over Jake's brow as he drank in those well loved features. "I love you," Aidan whispered, his voice barely a breath.

Jake's eyes opened.

Aidan's breath caught in his throat, and his heart began to hammer as it tried to leap out of his chest.

Aidan had been so afraid all this time of what Jake would say back that he'd made up excuse after excuse not to say it. He figured Jake's sweet, loving, thoughtful actions spoke louder than words, so the fact that Jake hadn't said the L word hadn't made Aidan feel uncomfortable about being in love with Jake all this time. But Jake hadn't said it, so Aidan had kept his mouth shut. The few times he'd mustered up the

courage to say it, it had never been the right time to do so.

Aidan's mouth opened and closed a couple of times as he scrambled for something...anything...

Then the corner of Jake's lips lifted in a lopsided smile.

"I love you, too."

Aidan blinked rapidly at those simple words.

Jake loved him.

Aidan was stunned to know that all he'd needed to do was say it for Jake to say it so confidently back. Could it really be that simple and that life-changing? Maybe...maybe it really was. Leaps of faith had taken him so far already with Jake, and he had never let Aidan down. It was when Aidan found the courage to take those leaps that he was able to overcome his doubts and insecurities and see the prize that he had in Jake – to see the reward that came with the risk. And so, with a deep breath, Aidan once more took that leap of faith and told himself that yes...yes, it really was that simple and life-changing.

Aidan felt a rush of love course through his veins, and his body flushed with pleasure. He didn't know what to say, especially with Jake's next words.

Lying on his back with his head pillowed on his hands, Jake offered up an easy smile. "I like it here near the ocean. I think we should find a place near the beach, like in Santa Monica or Venice."

Aidan blinked a few times as his brain processed that. "Um...we should?"

Jake met his gaze with lifted brows. "Yeah. Unless you think it'll be too touristy or something. Maybe we should stick with Brentwood and Westwood."

Aidan almost felt like the conversation was happening above his head, and he was catching only tidbits that fell down to his level. He propped himself up on his elbow as he watched Jake closely. "You...you want to live together?" Aidan asked cautiously, not daring to hope that Jake wanted to take that next step.

Jake sent him a curious look. "Well, yeah. I thought that was a done deal. We're both graduating this month, and with your job at the water treatment lab and mine at PoliBlogs, we're both staying in LA. I could've sworn we talked about this," he added with a furrow of his brows.

Aidan shook his head slowly. "No... I'm pretty sure I would've remembered that."

"Oh," Jake said, frowning thoughtfully for a second. Then those full lips spread into that heart-stopping smile of his, and Aidan's pulse quickened. "Well, I guess we're talking about it now," Jake said with a warm look. "So, Red, do you want to move in together this summer? We can find a place to call our own and fill it with comic book prints and windowsill gardens." Jake's smile was infectious, and Aidan couldn't believe that he could soon see it on a daily basis. He couldn't wait to wake up to it every morning and fall asleep to it every night.

Aidan's lips curved up in an answering smile. "That sounds great. And a place in Santa Monica or Venice sounds great, too."

They shared a moment of perfect accord before Jake reached for Aidan and pulled him close. "Honestly, oceanside or not, I don't really care," Jake murmured. "As long as it has you."

The kiss that Jake pressed to his lips was tender, hopeful, and full of the love that they'd just spoken out loud for each other. Aidan was stunned to realize that the kiss felt no different from the first one that they'd shared on the grass of the Getty with penguin-shaped clouds floating above their heads. The implications of that revelation nearly brought a tear to his eyes as he embraced his destiny and gave thanks for leaps of faith.

And those leaps of faith continued to be rewarded every time Aidan discovered that the kisses he went on to share with Jake would still feel like that – tender, hopeful, and full of love – for many years to come.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A native of San Francisco, Nico Jaye has finally returned home after spending time doing stuff (yes, very mysterious stuff) in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. She thinks reading is awesome and loves that she can hang out night after night with crinoline-wearing debutantes, brawny firemen in suspenders, and werewolf shifters with Scottish brogues. An overall feline enthusiast, she may or may not have a cat named "Nico" from whom she borrowed this pen name. She can be found online chit chatting about cats, popcorn for dinner, spontaneous trips to Iceland, and boys who like boys at any of the following:

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