

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

BOUND BY A RED THREAD

Ann Anderson

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

BOUND BY A RED THREAD

By Ann Anderson

Introduction

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

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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

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Photo Description

A young man, around nineteen, leans against a brick wall, wearing a red, sleeveless, half-zip hoodie with the hood up and the zipper pulled down. His arms are crossed, and his arm muscles are large. His face is tilted slightly towards the camera, with an unreadable look in his eyes that goes with the blank set of his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Do you see this guy? He's The Worst. Truly. Literally. He's a hot jock, yeah, but he's also a bully. A very, very terrible bully. He calls non-jock guys fairies. He kicks students. He yells at teachers. He even beat his ex-girlfriend. He's about to get expelled. He's about to get kicked from the football team. He's a school enemy, hell, even every kid's enemy. He's the most useless specimen I've ever seen.

His notoriety is widespread. Many bad rumors circulate around him. Mostly bad—the rest just seem like a sick joke gone overboard. The most sickening rumor about him is that he's actually being sold by his own father as a prostitute. I mean, cliché much, right?

But then one night when I was on my way back from a sneaky yet steamy rendezvous with my friend (with benefits, of course), I saw him in a narrow alley near a red-light district. With some man's cock in his mouth, no less! And whoa, if he wasn't skilled. I was glued in my spot until he was done—I even forgot to hide myself. What surprised me was that he got some big money for it! So the rumor that he was a prostitute was true, after all?

But then, after the man was gone, I saw him spit on the ground with clear distaste on his face. And then our eyes met! In that instant I could see his

pained, sad anger as clear as an aquarium. And just in that fleeting moment, the red string had tied me.

What do you think I should do? What do you think he would do to me? Should I stay away? Or should I be one of those mainstream heroes, destined to be with him? Oh God, please not the latter. I'm sane, gay, and ordinary enough to be a hero for a problematic school jerk. Well... but maybe a blowjob like that could make me reconsider... if his fist didn't get me first.

Sincerely,

Ayu

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: high school, barely legal, non-explicit, bullying, homophobia, hopeful

Content warnings: mention of child abuse/prostitution/dub-con, no HEA/HFN

Word count: 12,854

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CHAPTER ONE

Owen strolled down the street, the crisp autumn air raising gooseflesh, but it wasn't enough to take away the warm, happy glow of satiation. Streetlights illuminated the sidewalk while casting alleys in shadow, but the silhouette of someone on their knees before another was clear in the darkness. Owen didn't want to interrupt anyone during their happy time—he'd have been pissed if anyone disturbed him when Mike had been sucking him off—but that didn't mean he couldn't sneak close. He might be eighteen but he was still a guy, and the thought of seeing someone, preferably someone male, giving a man a blowjob was an opportunity he knew he wouldn't find easily outside of porn.

Trying to hide in the shadows, Owen crept closer, eyes widening in delight as he saw it was another male sucking off the guy, who was currently saying some pretty lewd things. Slipping closer, staying just out of sight of the men, Owen froze in terror when the man giving the blowjob pulled back, revealing his face.

Holy hell, that's Kurt McAllen. Owen didn't know what to do. Part of him wanted to run—but another part, kind of perverted and sadistic, wanted to see Kurt, the douchiest douche in their town, pleasuring another man.

A harsh grunt drew Owen's eyes back to the man being serviced, and he watched as the man stepped back, tucking himself in as he chuckled and patted Kurt on the cheek. Kurt scowled, holding out his hand, and Owen swore his eyes nearly fell from their sockets as the man handed over a large clip of bills. The man walked away, not even looking to see if anyone had watched the little show he'd put on. Kurt spit on the ground and then shoved a finger down his throat, retching up the come he'd been forced to swallow.

It was a horrible sight, and Owen really wished his smarter side had won out. Even his perverted-sadistic side was sickened by what had happened and

was currently happening. Then Kurt looked up, and Owen felt his heart lurch as their gazes met.

There was a look of horrible, resigned wretchedness etched into every pore of Kurt's face. His lips wet and red, his eyes filled with water; whether they were tears of shame or disgust, or from the vomiting, Owen didn't want to know. Sure, he, like everyone else at his school, wanted to see Kurt taken down a peg—but this wasn't what Owen would ever want anyone to experience.

Then, as if realizing who was looking at him and what had just been witnessed, Kurt's eyes hardened, lips thinning in a scowl that had terror scratching at Owen's bones. He really should run. But before he could move, Kurt was on him, shoving him back into a wall.

"You didn't see anything," Kurt snarled, lips pulled back and baring his teeth. The smell of come and vomit filled Owen's nose, making him gag.

"See? What was there to see? I haven't seen anything except the night sky and the town," Owen babbled, even as his mind replayed Kurt's head bobbing. And was he a sick fuck or what for wondering what it must feel like, Kurt's lips on him? And Kurt wouldn't spit in disgust, he'd swallow, begging—

Owen winced as his body was slammed into the wall, his head spinning when the back of his skull connected with rough brick.

"You'd do well to remember that, pussy." Kurt spat at his feet, and Owen really wished he hadn't done that; they were new shoes.

Kurt pushed him, hard, a farewell reminder before he walked away with his shoulders hunched and hands buried in his pockets—his whole body screaming "I dare you to fuck with me." Owen kind of wanted to chase after him, to hold Kurt and tell him it would be all right.

Then he slammed his own head into the wall. "Get a grip," he grumbled. "You're not a superhero, or any kind of hero. He's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

Owen raised a hand to his head, gingerly touching the knot he could feel forming. Hopefully, his mom wouldn't notice. A vibration in his pocket had Owen digging out his phone, groaning as he saw the text from his older sister.

Mom's freaking. Where are you? Do you need the cops?

Sighing, he rubbed at his eyes—because, really, his sister was a cop, and if she thought he was in trouble, she would send the whole department after him. She was scary like that.

Fine. Just got sidetracked. Be home soon.

He hit send, hoping...

Right. Sidetracked ;)

Owen groaned, shoving his phone back into his pocket before pushing away from the wall, heading towards home and the ridicule of his sister and the worry of his mother. He couldn't wait until this year was up. Then, he'd be off to college without the two females of his family breathing down his neck. Plus, there was always the chance to meet other gay guys and experience what everyone had to offer.

Deciding to keep that thought close to his heart—it would help get him through AP Calculus—Owen strode home, his gaze occasionally flickering down alleyways, wondering if he'd see Kurt down one. He wasn't sure if he was expecting to see his schoolmate having sex or waiting to jump him. He was glad when he made it home unscathed.

School was hell. Monday mornings weren't fun to begin with, but having to worry that he might be pushed into an empty classroom and beaten made it worse. Kayla, his best friend in the whole wide world, kept giving him the stink-eye every time he glanced furtively over his shoulder. It finally came to a head during their fourth period study hall, when he was finally beginning to relax.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Owen said quickly, too quickly.

Kayla merely quirked her eyebrow, fingers starting a slow, soft tapping on the desk, which she'd turned to face his so they could "work" together.

It took all of twenty seconds before he was spilling some of what he'd seen. He wasn't stupid enough to reveal everything. "I saw one of our classmates having relations in an alley."

Both her eyebrows stretched towards her hairline. "Really? Do tell."

Owen groaned at the lascivious grin she gave him. "Can't."

"Oh?" She leaned forward, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. "It must be someone everyone knows if you're not willing to spill the 'who'. I'll let you keep that secret, but there's something else you're hiding."

Swallowing around the small squeak that he knew was trying to escape as Kayla leaned forward, Owen glanced around, wishing something would happen. Zombie apocalypse, alien invasion, heck, even someone pulling the fire alarm would be good, but nothing. Looking around to see if anyone was paying attention—no one was—Owen finally grumbled out the one part of last night's encounter he could spill.

Kayla stared at him blankly.

"What?" Owen leaned back in his seat, arms crossing defensively over his chest.

She sighed heavily, hand covering her eyes as she seemed to gather herself, then looked at him. The very air in his lungs froze as her gaze made him feel like prey. "I know you think I can understand everything you say, what with your penchant for talking with your mouth full of food, but I cannot understand what you say when you mumble under your breath in such a rush."

"Oh." Owen cleared his throat, moving back to where he'd been before whispering as loudly as he dared, "There was money involved."

Kayla nodded, settling back in her seat. "If I guess who it is, will you tell me?"

“No!” Owen looked around, grinning sheepishly at the annoyed look the teacher shot their way. Sheesh, it wasn’t like anyone else was being quiet. “I can’t.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Kayla said with a smirk, inspecting her nails. “Because you’ll give it away whether you want to or not.”

“Not fair,” Owen whined, slumping across the desk, using the chance to poke her in the stomach. She swatted his hand away.

“Oh, please, like you don’t use your knowledge of my weaknesses to your full advantage.”

Owen let out a pitiful sound he would swear he never made. He was glad when the bell finally rang, freeing him from the terror that was Kayla.

“See you at lunch,” Kayla said as she slipped her backpack over one shoulder and strode from the room.

“See ya.” Owen was about ninety-five percent positive that if she didn’t hang out with him, Kayla would be prom queen in a heartbeat. He was glad she was his friend.

Shouldering his own bag, Owen headed down the hallway, dodging around slow-moving bodies and those who stood in packs right in the middle of the hallways. He made it into his class with a minute to spare. Nabbing a window seat, Owen settled in, pulling his English notebook out and flipping to the last page he’d been writing on. At the moment he was plotting what he could possibly do as a career choice. He had five items on his list, and none of them were anything he’d actually want to do.

The usual noise of the classroom settled into a hush, and Owen looked up. He swallowed the sudden rise of bile as Kurt stormed into the room, snarling and cursing at anyone in his way. When he looked around the room, Owen tried to slouch in his seat, praying he wouldn’t be seen. His prayers went unanswered as Kurt’s eyes narrowed on him. Kurt shoved one of the girls aside, sneering at her when she gasped, before claiming the seat right next to Owen. Didn’t matter that there was already someone sitting there; Kurt just

looked at the guy and he was gone, moving to the opposite side of the room, where everyone else was suddenly jostling for a spot as well.

The unlucky trickled over to the window side of the room, giving Kurt wary glances and sending pitying looks to Owen, who was still frozen in his seat. When the teacher came in, his hair spiked in every direction, glasses slightly skewed, no one was talking. Mr. Barton didn't seem to notice as he chattered happily about starting the Shakespeare unit.

Owen ducked his head, staring unseeing at the page before him until Mr. Barton called his name for attendance. It took a couple of tries before his throat was clear enough that he could speak without squeaking. Some of the kids in the class chuckled, but he ignored it, resolutely keeping his eyes on the paper before him. He was terrified that if he looked up he'd meet Kurt's glare, and he really didn't want to die yet.

Apparently Mr. Barton did want to die. He finished attendance with a flourish and began handing out *Romeo and Juliet* packets.

"Now, you'll each work with a partner. The person sitting next to you will do just fine, and I expect—"

"No." Kurt's voice cut across Mr. Barton's instructions like a shot. Owen had been terrified by the thought that he'd have to work with Kurt on a project; now he knew he'd be going it alone, and his shoulders relaxed.

Mr. Barton turned slowly, the papers he'd been handing out still clasped in his hand. Owen noticed that there was a slight tremor as Mr. Barton looked at Kurt. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

Kurt snorted, his fist slamming into the top of his desk as he sat forward, his gaze flaying their teacher. "You're an English teacher. I thought you'd have a better grasp of the English language. 'No' means I won't do what you want. I'm not working with this pussy," he jabbed his finger towards Owen, "and certainly not any of these other fags."

"Mr. McAllen, you'd do well to remember that you're in my classroom. I've given you instructions, and I expect you to follow them unless you have an actual reason not to." Owen wasn't sure who terrified him more at that

moment, Kurt or Mr. Barton. He was beginning to think Mr. Barton was winning in the scary department, because the teacher had a tic going in his jaw that Owen had seen once on a mean drunk when the man had charged his sister.

“I don’t need to take this shit,” Kurt snapped, rising.

“Sit down.” Mr. Barton’s voice whipped out, and Owen could swear he saw the room darkening. Several of the other students sitting between Mr. Barton and Kurt looked ready to slide beneath their desks and hide.

Kurt moved around his desk, heading towards the classroom door. “And what are you going to do if I don’t?”

Mr. Barton put himself between Kurt and the door. “Sit down, Mr. McAllen, or I’ll have to notify the principal.”

“Ooo, I’m so scared,” Kurt sneered, shoving past Mr. Barton and wrenching the door open. “That turd won’t do anything to me.”

Mr. Barton’s face had gone bright red. He stormed over to the wall, jabbing his finger into the button to activate the office speaker.

“Front office.”

“It’s Barton. Tell Mr. Stevenson that Kurt McAllen has left my classroom and is roaming the halls,” Mr. Barton huffed out, his whole body trembling.

Owen had to wonder if Mr. Barton was trembling from anger or fear. Few teachers dared stand up to Kurt. When he got really pissed he was liable to throw desks or shove teachers out of his way, and sometimes he’d get physical with other students. At least now it was certain Owen wouldn’t have to work with Kurt.

The rest of the class period was more subdued, no one wanting to upset Mr. Barton more than he already was. The guy looked as if he might have a heart attack if anyone stepped one foot out of line. Even if Owen couldn’t understand half of what was being read, he still tried to answer when Mr. Barton called on him. It was *Romeo and Juliet*, so it wasn’t that hard to wing it.

Once the bell rang, Owen scooped up his stuff and made a beeline for the door, like every other student—but Mr. Barton caught him before he could leave.

“Owen, can I speak with you for a moment, please?”

Owen groaned but turned, walking over to the teacher’s desk. He glanced longingly at his classmates as they filed out of the room, talking in whispers about what had happened. Kurt was known for leaving his classes, but he’d never left one this early.

Once all the other students were gone, Mr. Barton’s sigh set Owen’s alarms screaming. “Owen...”

Oh, this is not good. Owen chanced a peek over his shoulder, wondering what the odds were that he could pretend someone had called his name and then make a dash for the door as if answering them.

“I’m sorry to say this to you,” —Owen groaned. He’d missed his chance—“but I can’t have you working by yourself on this project. It would be unfair to you, and unfair to your classmates, if I made a group of three. This project will be a big part of your final grade, and as much as I hate to say this, you do have to work with Kurt McAllen on this project.”

Owen opened his mouth to interrupt, because this was beyond unfair. His mom could clean his mouth out with soap all she liked, he’d repeat the phrase until someone let him out of this nightmare—but Mr. Barton’s raised hand forestalled him.

“I know. It won’t be easy, and I’ll understand if not everything can get done, but both of you have to contribute to this project and present it. And I will know if you do everything yourself or ask one of your other classmates for assistance. I’ll be speaking with Mr. McAllen’s father after school today, so everything should be worked out by tomorrow’s class. And I know I shouldn’t be asking this of you, seeing as it is your senior year and I’m sure you have other things on your mind, but I would appreciate it if you can try and find out what is going through Mr. McAllen’s mind to have him acting the way he is.”

Owen was sorely tempted to blurt out that it was probably because Kurt was prostituting himself—but he kept his lips firmly sealed, counting down from fifty, hoping he'd be free before he reached zero.

“Here's a hall pass.” Mr. Barton handed over one of the small yellow cards. “If it gets too bad, let me know. There's only so much more the school can tolerate before Mr. McAllen is expelled.”

Nodding, afraid he'd say something he really didn't want to, Owen took the pass and rushed from the room. He nearly bowled over a freshman, who yelped in terror. Owen smiled apologetically, but he was in a hurry. He slowed his pace when he saw some teachers loitering in the hallway, eyes focused on stragglers as the bell rang. Owen flashed his hall pass, handing it over when one of the teachers asked for it. They nodded, handed it back, and Owen hurried to his locker, changing out his books and grabbing his lunch. Scuttling down the hall, Owen made it to science just as the teacher was beginning the lesson. Wincing, because Ms. Yule could be vicious to anyone late, Owen tapped on the glass so she'd unlock the door.

The scowl she cast him had him flushing, embarrassed as she snapped the door open, standing before him like some avenging angel. He really needed to do something else with his time other than compare people to supernatural creatures.

“And why, Mr. Daniels, are you late to my class?” The raised eyebrow could rival Kayla's.

Fumbling, Owen dug out the pass he'd shoved into his pants pocket, handing it over with trembling fingers. “Mr. Barton needed to talk with me after class and it went a bit longer than he thought.”

“Of course he'd try to take any blame that lays with a student onto himself. Hurry up, and remind me after class to change your absence.” She turned sharply, heels clicking as she moved back to the front of the class. Owen quietly shut the door behind him and scurried to his seat, sinking into his chair as Ms. Yule stared at him.

“As I was saying before we were interrupted, today you'll be working with your partner on Punnett squares. I expect you all to follow the directions and

work quietly.” Her gaze narrowed at a group of cheerleaders giggling in the corner. Their mouths snapped shut, but there were still muffled giggles. “I also have some extra credit sheets up here for when you’re finished. If you have any questions, I expect you to come up and ask them.”

Owen looked at the packet before him, his lab partner looking at her own.

“How do you want to do this?” she asked.

“You can take the first two pages and I’ll take the last two?”

“Deal.”

Owen flipped to the third page, grimacing when he realized they were double-sided. It was a good thing he and Angie worked so well together; otherwise, this could be a lot more difficult.

The class period passed in relative silence, the occasional jock or cheerleader earning a harsh reprimand from Ms. Yule. When there were about five minutes left, Angie volunteered to take their finished packets to the front after Owen filled in the final answer. He watched as she walked up and gave Ms. Yule a bright smile, earning one in return from the usually cranky woman. Angie picked up two of the extra credit pages, setting one in front of him when she arrived back at the table.

“How do you do it?” Owen questioned, amazed that Ms. Yule still had a slight curve to her lips—until one of the jocks laughed, pushing his lab partner out of his seat. They earned detentions for that.

“It’s easy. Be quiet, do your work, do it well, and tell Ms. Yule on occasion how much you enjoy the class and her teaching style.”

“That’s it?” Owen asked incredulously.

Angie looked at him, and Owen had to wonder if all women went to a class early in life teaching them how to give him that particular look. “It’s called being nice.”

“Do you mean it?”

“Being nice?”

“What you say to her?”

“Of course.” Angie snorted, eyes rolling. “I enjoy biology. It’s a career path I’ve been thinking of pursuing.”

“Yeah?”

Angie sighed and put her pencil away, stuffing the extra credit page into her folder and slipping it into her backpack. “Yes, really. Is it so unbelievable that I would enjoy science?”

“Uh, no.” Owen blinked. He was confused. He’d been genuinely curious.

The bell rang, but Angie continued to sit, eyeing him as if he were some new species. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. Did you think I sat next to you in our shared science classes through the years just because I thought you were pretty?” He batted his eyelashes at her, but she just snorted again.

“You really think I’m good at science?”

Owen wasn’t really sure where this was going, but it was obvious someone had told her she sucked. Probably her mom. That woman could terrify a lion. “Yeah, I—”

Owen and Angie startled as a fist slammed into their table. They turned, staring at Kurt as he glowered at them. Ms. Yule was at the front of the classroom, watching them with obvious worry. Owen would be worried, too. He’d heard about the time Kurt had nearly set the woman on fire, even if there wasn’t any proof.

“You’re coming with me.” Kurt grabbed Owen’s wrist, the grip bruising as he tugged.

“All right, all right.” Owen grabbed his bag, clutching at the extra credit sheet at the last moment as Kurt dragged him from the room. Kurt shoved everyone out of their way as he stormed down the hall, heading towards one of the school doors.

Owen really wanted to protest leaving the building, but one glance from Kurt had him biting his tongue. He looked around for anyone who might help—but everyone had turned their heads, moving in another direction as

quickly as they could. Even some of the teachers looked away, those who weren't staring at him with obvious dismay. It didn't help that Kurt looked like he could slam his fist through their heads with his bulging biceps, or that he was the star of the football team. Everyone knew that even if he was an ass, the coach would still try to get him out of any trouble.

The door leading outside slammed against the side of the building, and Owen found himself suffering the same fate. He swore but quickly shut up as Kurt got in his face.

“What the fuck did you tell her?”

Owen cowered, eyes wide as he looked for some form of escape. “Tell who, what?”

“What did you tell that fucking bitch? That slut of yours.”

Now Owen was really confused. “Who?”

Kurt growled, shaking him. “Your friend. The blonde. Kayla.”

“I didn't tell Kayla anything. And she's not a slut.” Owen lashed out, surprised when his foot actually connected with Kurt's knee and the bully released his grip. “Don't call her that.”

“Or what?” Kurt crowded him, hands pushing into Owen's shoulders, keeping him pinned when all he wanted to do was slide down the wall.

“Or this.”

Kurt fell to the side with a howl, clutching his side where Kayla had planted her foot. She held her foot over his crotch when he moved to stand.

“I wouldn't do that. Now, why don't you tell me why you're attacking my friend?” When Kurt didn't answer, Kayla pressed her foot down, stopping only when he winced.

“It's none of your business, bitch. Fuck! Stop!” Kurt grabbed for her foot as she put all her weight down, and Owen had to feel sorry for the guy. That had to hurt.

“Try something else.”

“Fine,” Kurt spat. “I wanted to know why you were staring at me. I thought he’d said something.”

Kayla snorted, moving her foot away, but standing ready. “Everyone stares at you, especially when you make such a spectacle of yourself by storming from a classroom just because you have to work with someone else on a simple project. And what would Owen have told me—Oh!” She turned to Owen. “Him?”

“Shit,” Owen whispered, watching as Kurt’s face turned a mottled red.

“You fucking told.” Kurt reached for Owen, but Kayla kicked his hand away.

“He can’t hide anything from me. And he didn’t tell me who he’d seen, you did.” Kayla turned a calculating look towards Kurt.

Oh shit, Owen thought. He’d seen that look on Kayla’s face before.

“You’ll help Owen with his assignment,” Kayla said, arms folded over her chest.

“Or what?” Kurt finally rose, eyeing Kayla warily. *Smart man.*

“Or I’ll tell everyone the rumors are true.”

Kurt stiffened and Owen had to ask, “What rumors?”

Kayla did her eye roll and sighed heavily. “That his father’s pimping him out.”

“Wha—”

“Shut up!” Kurt was breathing heavily, hands clenched at his sides as he glared at Kayla. A lesser woman would have been killed. Owen wisely took a step behind Kayla.

“I never heard that rumor,” Owen mumbled, a bit upset that he hadn’t. He was supposed to be the one that knew all the gossip. Well, he usually knew it after Kayla told him. She was scary with her ability to know things.

“It’s not one I thought should be spread,” Kayla supplied, eyes still trained on Kurt.

“Who told you?” Kurt demanded, taking a threatening step forward, and Owen took a step back, giving Kayla more room to swing if needed.

“Rumors usually have more than one person spreading them,” she said, not backing down.

Kurt sneered but backed down.

Holy hell. Owen wondered if a zombie apocalypse was going to occur, because he would never have believed Kurt McAllen would step away from a fight.

Kayla nodded and turned, grabbing his arm and dragging him towards the door. “Remember, you’ll work together on any homework assignments where you’re in the same class—and you won’t hurt Owen at all.”

Kayla didn’t wait to hear if Kurt would answer, shoving Owen before her into the school and herding him down the hallway until they rounded a corner.

“Uh, thanks?” He knew Kayla was mad at him; he just wasn’t sure what he’d done.

She rounded on him, lips pinched tight as she scowled at him. “‘Thanks’? I just stood up to Kurt McAllen, probably one of the toughest—and meanest—guys at our school, and you say ‘thanks’?”

“Uh...” He stopped as Kayla wrapped herself around him.

“I’m terrified and hungry. You owe me a cheesy pretzel.”

“Deal,” Owen whispered, stunned by the fine trembles running through Kayla. He sometimes forgot how scared she could get, especially when she stood up to people. He held her close for a moment longer, then pulled back, giving a dopey grin. “Let’s go get you that pretzel. I’m starving.”

CHAPTER TWO

The rest of the day passed without any more incidents. It was mildly disconcerting after the morning he'd had, but Owen didn't want to push his luck—so he left everyone alone, kept his head down, and left school as soon as the final bell rang. He waited for Kayla by her car, glad they worked together at the same place and that he could bum a ride when they worked after school.

It was five minutes before he spotted her, with Kurt skulking behind her. He swallowed against the unease clawing up his throat, hoping Kayla wasn't blackmailing Kurt, because he was about one hundred percent sure that he'd be the one sporting bruises and broken bones if Kayla pushed too far.

“Ready?” she asked, unlocking the car and throwing her bag in the back.

“Uh... sure?” Owen kept an eye on Kurt as he climbed into the passenger seat, having a mild freak-out as Kurt climbed into the back and slammed the door a bit too forcefully. Kayla didn't say anything about it, so he didn't, either.

“Anything else happen today?” Kayla cast him a sidelong glance as he shook his head. “You sure?”

“Yep. Nothing eventful happened today. Nope, nothing.”

Kurt snorted and Owen turned, staring at Kurt as he glared out the window. Kurt's hand cupped his chin as his breath fogged up the window.

“So, uh, what's going on? No offense, but I feel like I'm in the car with an angry tiger.”

Kayla laughed. “He's coming with us to work. We're going to see if the manager has an open position.”

“I don't think—”

“Mark and Ashley quit last week. I think Walt will be more than happy to have a big, strong high schooler to help out.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Owen grumbled, slumping in his seat.

Kayla gave him an indulgent smile and turned the radio on. It wasn't long until they were both singing along to every rock song that came on. Owen even threw in a few air guitar moves, throwing his head around when a particularly good riff came on. When they pulled into the parking lot of the local movie theater, Owen was in a good mood, grinning from ear to ear.

"You two are weird," Kurt snapped, scrambling from the car as if it were on fire.

"You just say that 'cause you're jealous," Kayla taunted, locking the car once they were all out. "Come on, Walt will want to meet you before hiring you."

Kurt grumbled under his breath but followed along obediently, face pulled into a frown as he trailed Kayla. Owen had to wonder if he needed to bring out his rusted karate skills. He hadn't taken a class in three years, and he wasn't sure he'd remember anything if he needed to defend himself or Kayla. Hoping for the best, he hurried after the two, nearly tripping over his own feet as he rounded the car. Luckily neither had noticed.

The theater smelled like popcorn as they entered, but it only took a few seconds before Owen couldn't smell it anymore. After working at the theater for almost three years, it was no wonder he could no longer smell the popcorn very well. Kayla had been working for Walt almost five years, volunteering for the first two, and she said she couldn't smell it at all unless she took a week off. Mitch, an older gentleman who looked like he'd be better suited in a nursing home, gave them a wobbly smile, raising his trembling hand before his gaze drifted back to the magazine he'd been reading.

"Hey, Mitch. Walt in?" Kayla asked as she strode past, giving the old man a bright smile.

"In his office," Mitch said, his voice almost too soft to hear.

"Thanks." Kayla strode away from them towards a closed door.

With nothing else to do, Owen slipped around Kurt, heading towards the locker room where their shirts were kept.

“Where are you going?” Kurt asked, fingers hooking the collar of Owen’s shirt.

Owen choked for a moment, looking to Mitch for help, but Mitch just looked at them with a fond smile. “I was going to get changed for work.”

Kurt growled behind him and tugged at his collar, forcing Owen to either stop struggling or risk ripping his shirt. He liked the shirt too much to have it damaged by an overbearing asshole.

“Fine, I’ll stay until Kayla gets back.” Owen refused to turn and look at Kurt, instead folding his arms and staring at Mitch.

Mitch sighed, staring at them with distant eyes. “Ah, young love. I remember when I was about your age, courting my wife.”

Owen spluttered. “What?” Okay, if they didn’t have proof, no one could say his voice had gone up into a soprano register. “No. Nuh-uh. Not us.”

“Really?” For an old guy, Mitch could give that disbelieving look just like Owen’s mother.

“You think I’d want to be with this faggot?” Kurt snarled, stomping towards Mitch and looming over him.

Mitch didn’t look impressed. “That’s no way to talk about Owen. I understand it’s still not accepted, but one of my granddaughters is a lesbian, so I won’t condone such language from you even if you are scared someone will find out your secret, young man.”

Owen choked on his tongue, but he couldn’t resist peeking over his shoulder. He had to turn away, biting his lip to stop the laugh bubbling up, because by the green earth, Kurt looked confused. Like he didn’t know whether he should be angry or shocked.

Walt’s voice drew Owen’s attention as he walked from the office trailing behind Kayla. “I don’t know, Kayla. I do need the help, but you can’t expect me to just hire one of your friends on the spot. He’ll need to show me a Social Security card at least, and a driver’s license or some other form of ID. You know the drill.”

“Come on, Walt, it’ll be fine. Right, Kurt?” Kayla looked at them, daring Kurt to disagree.

“Yeah, whatever,” Kurt grumbled, crossing his arms, which flexed his biceps, which, Owen had to admit, were intimidating and hot as the noonday sun.

And Kayla was smirking at him. *Shit*. If Kayla thought he had the hots for Kurt, she’d do everything in her power to try and hook them up—even if Kurt was a douche.

Deciding to make his retreat before Kurt blew up at Walt, Owen ran to the changing room. He was slipping into one of the theater’s shirts and stuffing his own onto a hanger just as the door opened and Kayla sauntered in, looking too smug for anyone’s safety.

“What did you do?” he asked, dutifully turning around when she reached for her work shirt.

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh. I know that look. You did something,” Owen accused, tempted to turn around with his eyes closed so he could give her his “I’m being serious” face. The memory of the last time he did that stopped him before his muscles had even bunched to turn.

“Does it really matter?” she asked innocently.

“Depends on what you did.” Owen was terrified, and he knew Kayla knew it.

“Well...” The word rolled off her tongue, hanging teasingly in the air between them, wrapping around Owen until he thought he’d have to scratch himself to make the feeling evoked by that one word go away. “Mitch may have mentioned how it was sad that young lovers had to hide their attraction from the world, and how it was obviously putting strain on your and Kurt’s relationship, and how he wondered if I hadn’t dragged Kurt along to fill a vacancy because I was being such a good friend, and wouldn’t it be great if Walt hired Kurt so the two of you could have some time together without the

world throwing its hatred at you two. And I may have mentioned that I agreed with Mitch.”

By the end, Owen was staring at Kayla like she'd grown five extra heads, never mind that she hadn't told him he could turn around. Thankfully, she'd already pulled the shirt down when he turned around. “What?”

She just grinned at him and flounced from the room. Yep, she definitely could have been prom queen if she wasn't so busy destroying his life. He was sure now that Kurt would wait until it was dark before killing him. The guy obviously *wasn't* gay, even if he was servicing men in alleys, and it was clear from Kurt's attitude that he didn't want to be thought of as gay.

He slunk from the changing room and was taken aback by the sight of Kurt... not smiling, but not frowning either. There was a bit of resignation to the slump of his shoulders, but he didn't look too put out by the turn of events. Owen really wondered what Kayla had said to make Walt hire Kurt and to make Kurt behave for an interview, no matter how short it had been.

Giving up, because someone in the universe had decided that he just couldn't win today, Owen headed over to the group congregated around Mitch at the ticket booth. It looked like they were explaining ticket sales to Kurt.

When Owen drew close, Kurt looked at him. Owen did an about-face, deciding his time was needed cleaning the concession stand and making sure everything was stocked. Didn't want any of the Monday regulars upset if they couldn't have their favorite candy.

Most of the night went by without incident; there was only one small hiccup when Kurt got angry at a moviegoer for calling him slow. Kayla had quickly smoothed the situation over, and Owen wondered, aside from being a good employee, what she had planned. They'd taken Kurt with them for dinner, buying him a burger and fries, even though he said he wasn't hungry. He'd glared at them, proclaiming he wasn't a charity case, to which Kayla had said, “I know. Which is why you'll pay Owen back when you get your first paycheck.”

Owen wasn't going to demand payment—he paid for Kayla's meals all the time. But he nodded, stuffing mozzarella sticks into his mouth so he didn't

have to say anything verbally. Kurt still terrified him even if they were almost acting like friends. When their reliefs came in, Owen felt exhausted, and he still had homework to do. Luckily, most of it was easy to do and wasn't due until later in the week, but the hour before bed would be spent working.

Stretching after he'd gotten changed, Owen headed out to the car, shivering slightly in the evening chill. There was a small crowd gathering for the last few shows of the night and Owen didn't want to be caught in the throng, so he decided to wait outside until the crowd thinned out. He'd just pulled out his science extra credit sheet when he spotted movement. Looking up, he froze as Kurt stomped towards him, a scowl etched into his face.

“Say one word to anyone else, I don't care if it's your mother, your father, or some dammed priest, and I'll break your bones. Got it?”

Owen nodded, terror clogging his throat. Snorting, Kurt turned away, storming out of the parking lot and towards the area of town Owen had seen him in the previous evening. Oh, Kayla was going to be pissed. As if he'd summoned her, Kayla exited the theater, a self-satisfied grin stretching her face, until she saw Owen standing by himself. Her steps didn't falter, but they did gain force, and Owen wondered if there was anywhere he could hide.

“Where is he?”

“Don't know,” he said while pointing in the general direction Kurt had headed.

Kayla just sighed, unlocking the car as she rounded it to the driver's side.

“Why do you care so much, anyway?” Owen asked as he settled into the passenger seat, hugging his backpack as if it would shield him from the storm he was sure was coming.

Glaring at him, Kayla started the car, waiting until the current song ended before she muted the radio and buckled herself in. Owen quickly did his own seatbelt, glad for it when Kayla peeled out of the parking spot and gunned it towards the end of the parking lot where a lone figure seemed to be walking with a purpose.

“Because he’s my cousin, but my parents hate his dad, so they refuse to help,” she gritted out, and Owen groaned, because if family was involved, Kayla would do almost anything to help them. It was why she always stuck by Owen. She considered him family, even when he knew he was being stupid.

Kayla rolled down Owen’s window as she pulled alongside Kurt, nearly giving both occupants of the car whiplash as she slammed on the breaks. “Get in the car.”

Kurt sneered at her and began heading away from the road.

Kayla threw the car in park before jumping from the car. Sighing, Owen put the parking brake on before turning the car off, unbuckling himself, and moving out of the car. Kayla was currently screaming at Kurt, and Kurt looked like he was ready to throw a punch. Knowing Kayla’s mom would freak if Kayla came home with one hair out of place, Owen stepped in front of her just as Kurt swung.

“Fuck!” he shouted as he felt the pain erupt in his nose. He could taste blood on the back of his tongue and knew it wouldn’t be long before it would be coating the front too. He gingerly cradled his face, glaring at Kurt, who looked... upset? Didn’t matter, Owen was now officially pissed.

“What the hell is your problem? I know she’s pissing you off by ordering you around, but that’s no way to treat her. Hell, she got you a job at a good place. What do you need money for so badly that you have to sell yourself?”

Owen’s panting breaths filled the air, and he realized belatedly that he might have said too much. Bracing for another fist to his face, Owen was confused when Kurt just turned away, jogging across the ground before disappearing amongst the buildings.

“Did I do something wrong?” Owen asked as he turned to look at Kayla, who was eyeing him with respect. *Oh, ye of little faith.*

“I’m actually impressed you decided to get injured.” She smacked him upside the head. “But don’t do it again.”

“Ow! I’m injured here.”

“Yes, and I could have deflected the blow if you hadn’t stepped in my way.” She gave him her best disapproving look before pulling him into a hug. “Thank you, and please, please don’t tell anyone he’s my cousin.”

“What is wrong with your family?” Owen pulled away, moving back to the car. He hoped he didn’t get too much blood on the seat.

Kayla snorted, following after him and getting in the car. “Don’t you mean, what isn’t wrong with them?” She sighed heavily as she turned the key. “It’s a long story, but to make it short, my parents had a falling out with his parents over money, so my parents disowned his parents and called them pariahs of the family. Kurt wasn’t that bad when we were little. I don’t know when it happened, but he became withdrawn at school, and then he wouldn’t talk or play with me.”

“Ah.” Owen remembered the time when he’d first met Kayla. She’d been curled up beneath a tree, cheeks streaked with dried tears and a decidedly put-upon look on her face when he’d approached her. But there’d been something that had forced him to keep bugging her until she’d finally sat with him at lunch, and they’d been inseparable ever since.

“Yeah. I don’t know when it happened, but he became kind of violent. It was little things. If someone demanded he do something, he’d snap. Now, though, it’s every little thing.” There was a heavy pause before she continued in a whisper, “I think his dad’s been prostituting him out for a lot longer than anyone could guess. If only I’d known.”

She cursed, and Owen wanted to let her rage, but he knew it wouldn’t do her any good. She was better when questions were asked. It gave her something to focus on. “How could you have known? When did the rumors start? And, if you’re cousins, why are you so terrified of him?”

She shot him a look for the last question. “You do realize what he did to your nose, right?” Then Kayla thought for a moment, before sighing, her hands loosening their death grip on the steering wheel. “You’re right, for once.”

“Hey!”

She grinned at him. “I couldn’t have known. Wouldn’t have even thought of it until I heard the rumor over the summer. I tried to investigate, but we were always busy at the theater, and my parents forced me into that college prep class. I still should have investigated sooner.”

“Hey,” Owen said softly, reaching over to chuck her under the chin as she drove, “better late than never, right? Besides, now that you know the problem, we can do our best to help him out.”

“Why would you want to help him? For me, it’s because he’s family, but you...”

“Hey, now.” Owen pretended to look offended. “I’m your family, and while I wouldn’t jump in to save your parents when the apocalypse occurs, your family is my family. And you know I can’t stand to see you upset. It’s no wonder people question if I’m really gay, given the amount of time I spend catering to your needs.”

Kayla laughed, just like he knew she would, and they settled into the silence of the car.

CHAPTER THREE

Owen dragged himself into school the next morning, wishing he could turn right around and crawl back into his bed. His head throbbed. Well, it was more his nose, but he could feel a headache coming on. Which is exactly the reason he had told his mom not to worry his sister by calling at ten thirty the night before, but would she listen? Nooo, because listening would be the sensible thing. Letting him go to sleep would also have been sensible, but no one had wanted to do that.

He couldn't get much further into bemoaning his fate, though, because Trisha Holland sidled up to him. If he was remotely acquainted with her this would have been okay, but she was *the* cheerleader, and having her walk next to him was close to terrifying. Almost on the same terror level as Kurt McAllen. Almost.

“So, is it true?”

“Huh?” *Very eloquent, Owen.*

Trisha rolled her eyes at him. “You know... about Kurt?” Her voice lowered to a whisper when she said Kurt's name.

“Uh... What about Kurt?”

“Yeah, what about Kurt?”

Owen *eeped*, glad that Trisha's shriek of terror drowned out the less than manly sound.

Trisha gave a strained laugh before pretending one of her friends was calling her and making a quick getaway. If Owen remembered right, she used to date Kurt, until she'd said or done something Kurt hadn't approved of; or maybe Kurt had been his usual douche-y self. The rumors said he'd hit her, and not anything like a light, or even hard, smack across the face. Nope. Rumor was that it had been a closed fist, right in the nose, kind of like what Owen had experienced last night. He wondered if it was a thing with Kurt, going for the nose?

“Why were you talking with her?” Kurt growled out, body tense as he crowded into Owen’s space.

“Dude, relax. I didn’t tell her anything,” Owen said, trying to slide along the wall away from Kurt, but Kurt just followed him.

“Bull.”

“Look—” Owen *eeped* again as Kurt’s fist slammed into the wall beside his head. *That has got to hurt.*

“Listen, you little pansy-assed faggot, I don’t want you in my business or spreading it, got it?”

Owen nodded his head, swallowing against the dry fear that choked him. “Yeah, sure.”

Kurt sneered before stepping back, shoving a kid out of the way as he stormed down the hallway, snapping at some of his teammates when one bumped into him. By all that was green, Owen really hoped Kurt wouldn’t show up to their English class, or to the study session Kayla had told Owen he would be hosting at his house after school—just him and Kurt. Could his day get any worse?

“Mr. Daniels, I’d like to see you in my office.”

Owen turned, wondering whom he’d pissed off, because there was no reason going to the principal’s office would be a good thing. And it wasn’t. Apparently, one of the teachers had decided to try and save Owen by informing the principal that he’d been taken out of the school by Kurt.

A day late and a dollar short. Owen snorted to himself at the thought. He had to sit through almost all of his first period class listening to a lecture about how it was his responsibility to stand up to anyone bullying him, and how he needed to inform those in a position of authority when he’d been pushed into doing something he didn’t want to. Teachers were there to help. Owen tuned out after that, giving the occasional nod in hopes that it would speed things along, but it didn’t. It seemed the principal had been waiting a while to give this speech to someone, and apparently Owen was the only one who’d ever shown a pulse after the first few minutes.

When he was finally released there was no point going to his first period class, since the bell would be ringing in fifteen minutes. Instead he headed towards the bathroom, nearly screaming in terror as he was grabbed by the back of his shirt and hauled into an empty classroom. He found himself connecting with a wall—and he was kind of getting tired of bodily meeting all these walls when none of them had even taken him out on a date first—as Kurt snorted into his face.

“What did he want?”

“Who?” Owen blinked, trying to figure out what was going on, and did Kurt really think shaking him would get him some sort of answer? “The principal? He wanted to lecture me about bullying and how I need to stand up for myself.”

Kurt seemed to relax, and Owen wondered what he’d thought had been discussed, but his tight grip on the front of Owen’s shirt didn’t slacken.

“Um, so, are you going to let me go now? I kind of have to pee, and the whole scaring me thing isn’t helping.”

Kurt gave him a look of disgust, releasing him and stepping back, almost as if he expected Owen to take a leak right then and there. Rolling his eyes, Owen left the room, more than a little unnerved when Kurt followed him. When he trailed him into the bathroom, Owen wondered if he’d even be able to piss at this rate.

“What do you want?” Owen sighed, going to the farthest urinal, angling his body so he could have some privacy, because even if Kurt scared the shit out of him, he really needed to pee.

Kurt rolled his eyes and unzipped his pants. “You’re not the only one Mother Nature talks to.”

“Dude, really?” Owen asked, talking to the wall because he really did not want to piss off Kurt when he had his privates hanging out.

The sound of shuffling drew Owen’s attention, dragging his curiosity to the fore. He peeked over his shoulder, wondering what his level of comfort was—definitely somewhere in the negative digits—and there was Kurt standing at

the urinal next to him. Looking for all the world like it was normal for him to be standing so close to another guy when there were so many options available that would have put a lot more space between them.

“Are you trying to freak me out? Going for a new level of bullying since you’ve already broken my nose?” Owen asked, wishing his bladder would hurry up and finish because he was practically squirming with how uncomfortable he was feeling. He would swear he felt the heat radiating from Kurt. He could also feel the glare he knew was directed at the back of his head.

He was glad when his bladder was finally satisfied, quickly tucking himself away and zipping up before skirting around Kurt, still refusing to look *there*, even if he was tempted. Owen had just finished washing his hands when Kurt came up beside him, looking decidedly uncomfortable. Owen debated the merits of running from the bathroom screaming like a little girl, but his thoughts were stalled when he heard Kurt mumble... No, he couldn’t have heard that right.

“What?”

Kurt glared at him as he washed his hands, flicking his wet fingers in Owen’s face, smirking when Owen sputtered and grabbed for a paper towel to scrub across his face. That was a stupid idea because he bumped his nose, and that hurt. He cursed, throwing the paper towel away in a huff, because, really, this was getting to be a bit much. Then he noticed that Kurt looked uncomfortable again.

“I said I was sorry,” Kurt finally spat, storming from the bathroom. Owen winced as the door smacked into someone, but whatever protest the person on the other side of the door would have made was cut off as Kurt shouted at the guy.

Owen shook his head, deciding he must have hit his head, because there was no way this was his life right now. Then his mind reminded him he’d be seeing Kurt after school, at his house, and he could only hope Kurt had something better to do.

Owen groaned to himself as he realized that, no, Kurt didn't have anything better to do than come to his house as Kayla had dictated—with the homework, no less. He grumbled to himself about wonders never ceasing and stormed up the front steps. His nose and head were throbbing, and all he wanted to do was down some aspirin, crawl into bed, and not move until he stopped aching. Unfortunately, Kurt didn't seem to understand body language—more likely he chose to ignore it—as he followed Owen into his house.

Not that Owen really cared, but he couldn't help glancing over his shoulder every once in a while as he led Kurt into his house, watching Kurt's reaction to the place Owen had grown up in. Kurt didn't appear to be impressed, but he also didn't show any disdain. There was a mild curiosity that quickly disappeared anytime Kurt noticed Owen watching him, but, for some reason, Owen found it promising. For what, he wasn't sure.

Owen led the way up the stairs to his room, pushing the door open and flinging his backpack onto his bed. He jolted as Kurt's bag flew passed his head, landing with a thump next to Owen's. Owen turned, meeting Kurt's smirk with a frown. He really didn't appreciate being scared in his own house. It wasn't as if there was anything he could say, though, so he turned back around and continued into his room, booting up his computer and turning on his music. He glowered when Kurt snorted at his choice of classical music.

“It helps with studying,” Owen said, feeling as if he had to defend himself.

“Sure. Pussy.” Kurt smirked at him, bulging arms crossed over his chest.

Owen sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Listen, I understand it's natural for you to say that, but if my mom, or sister, come home and hear you saying things like that, they'll probably wash your mouth out with soap. Or my mom might put you over her knee. As much as I'd like to see that, I don't want you to lash out at my mom, which I'm sure you'd do, because then my sister would be forced to arrest you. She'd convince my mom it would be in your best interest to press charges, which leaves you going to jail, me without a partner for this project, and the football team without their star player. Though

I'm sure there are several people at our school who'd be more than happy to see you behind bars becoming someone's bitch."

"You think someone could make me their bitch?" Kurt snarled, getting right into Owen's face. "I don't think so, you—"

Owen briefly wondered if he'd lose the hand he'd just slammed over Kurt's mouth. "Look, I know my parents aren't home at the moment, but you really shouldn't—What the fuck?"

Owen yanked his hand back, staring at his hand as if it had been splashed with poison. He glared accusingly at Kurt. "You licked me."

"You put your hand over my mouth," Kurt said with a shrug. "Next time, I'll be sure to bite."

Owen huffed, slumping down next to his bed as he glared at Kurt. Grabbing his bag, Owen dug out their English homework, ignoring the way Kurt settled next to him. Their shoulders nearly touched as Kurt moved, dragging his bag over and pulling out a thick folder. Owen pretended he didn't see the way Kurt's way-too-big biceps flexed, or that the muscles in his legs strained against the dark jeans he wore when he shifted, getting comfortable as he dug out his homework.

"What do we need to do?" Kurt's voice snapped Owen out of his perusal of the other's physique.

"Huh?" And didn't Owen feel all kinds of stupid for that intelligent response. "Haven't you read the packet?"

Kurt just looked at him, and Owen realized with a small coil of something low in his gut he would never admit to feeling around Kurt that there were tiny flecks of green and hazel in Kurt's blue eyes and that his short hair wasn't just any plain brown, but more like warm, dark chocolate. Shaking himself—maybe he needed to have an early meeting with Mike—Owen turned his gaze away, focusing on the packet he'd dug out.

"Mr. Barton wants us to pick one of the plays—not *Romeo and Juliet*, because he feels there's too much information out there about that story line—and come up with some ideas of how the plot can be found in today's culture.

We have to have a decision by the end of next week, along with a general list of ideas. If more than two groups pick the same play, then Mr. Barton will decide who has the best grasp of the play's general concepts and tell the other groups to pick a different play."

"Seriously? That's such bullshit," Kurt grumbled, flipping through the packet even though Owen knew he wasn't reading it.

"That's the reason why he's given us the deadline. It's so if we have a good idea, and those groups struggling with their initial play can have a chance to pick a different one and go from there."

"Right. Still doesn't make any sense to me. So, which play are we going with?"

Kurt folded his arms, attention fixed on Owen. Owen had to shift around a bit as those muscles flexed, settling a notebook over his lap—he was some kind of masochist, he just knew it. "Well, I was thinking something along the lines of *The Taming of the Shrew*. It's the only play by Shakespeare I've ever been able to actually read without using some kind of translator, and my sister really liked the play, so we could always pick her brain for any cultural references."

"Why am I here, again? Aside from the fact that Kayla has threatened me?"

"Because we both have to present our idea to Mr. Barton and we both have to work on this project. He'll know if I did it all and just had you rewrite it."

"How the fuck is he going to know?" Kurt gnashed his teeth, and Owen wondered why Kurt had to be so confrontational about everything.

"For one, it's highly likely you won't use the same language I would. And if you take something I've written and put it in your own words, it will still be my idea and the parts of the project will flow too smoothly together."

Kurt blinked at him, wearing a look that said he thought Owen was stupid. "Isn't that the whole point of doing a project with someone else? To make sure the parts flow together?"

Owen bit his lip, trying not to laugh. “No, the point of this kind of group project is to make sure that the work is divided equally. There’s bound to be differences of opinion and writing style.”

Kurt snorted, but he raised the packet and actually appeared to look through it. “What’s it about?”

“Huh?” Owen was caught off guard, and he was not staring at Kurt. The way his head was tilted to the side as he read, the way his mouth moved slightly as he processed the words. Owen felt screwed, and not in the nice, fun way, but the “holy hell, I’m lusting after a douche” kind of way.

“The story, about the shrew.”

“Oh. Oh! Well, it’s about this woman who most call a shrew because of the way she acts and—” The standard ringtone of Owen’s phone cut him off.

Sighing, Owen dug it out of the front of his backpack, checking the caller ID and wondering why Kayla was calling him. Usually she texted. Glancing at Kurt, Owen gave a shrug before flipping his phone open and pressing the send button.

“Hey, Kayla.”

“Did he show up?”

Owen chuckled softly. “Yes, and it’s so good to hear from you, too.”

He heard Kayla snort. “Good. Don’t let him harass you. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, and don’t forget, we have work tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mom,” Owen chimed, grinning widely at the playful growl from Kayla. “See you tomorrow.”

He closed the phone and set it aside, noticing that Kurt was staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

“What?” Owen asked.

“Why was she calling?” There was an undercurrent of strain, but Owen wasn’t sure why.

Owen shrugged his shoulders. “Just wanted to check that you’d made it and to remind me that we have work tomorrow.”

Kurt snorted and rolled his eyes, turning his attention back to the packet. Gnawing on his bottom lip, Owen decided to drop any questions he might have and went back to explaining the story and how they could use it for their project.

CHAPTER FOUR

The past month had been going smoothly for Owen. Kurt was still being a douche, but he seemed to have calmed down somewhat, and Kayla was always giving Owen looks that he chose to ignore. Owen couldn't help but wonder if there weren't some way he could help Kurt. He knew it was stupid, but he actually... kind of... liked Kurt. And he hated watching Kurt walk away towards the part of town where Owen had first learned his secret, whether it was after they finished work at the theater or—Owen had agreed to help Kurt in all his classes—after going over homework.

Pushing all thoughts of Kurt from his mind, Owen maneuvered the hallways with Kayla, neither saying anything as they headed to study hall. The normal buzz of chatter filled the space around them. If Owen hadn't been trying so hard not to think about Kurt, he probably would have missed hearing a group of cheerleaders start talking about him.

“Lauren, I saw Kurt in town the other night.” Owen's steps slowed, and he ignored the lifted eyebrow Kayla cast his way even as she slowed her steps as well.

“Ugh, I don't want to talk about him.” Owen glanced to the side, spotting Lauren, head cheerleader and most likely to be prom queen, scowling at one of the girls beside her. Everyone knew she'd been pissed ever since Kurt had turned her down last year, and she was always looking for something nasty to say about him.

“I think you'll want to hear this though,” the girl persisted, a smirk twisting her lips. “I saw him with a man.”

“Oh?” Owen froze as Lauren gave the girl a once over, and for some reason, Owen felt his blood beginning to heat. “Do tell.”

The girl giggled, using one of her hands to toss her hair over her shoulder in a move that had Kayla snorting beside him. “He was with some fat, old man, and I swear they went into some building together, but this wasn't normal because the guy had his arm around Kurt's waist.”

The other cheerleaders gasped, and Owen felt himself flushing in anger at the satisfied smirk pulling across Lauren's lips. For some reason his mouth moved before his brain as he turned to Kayla.

“Did you hear about Lauren? That cheerleader?”

Kayla gave him an amused look, and Owen realized they must have stopped walking, but raised her voice to match his as she said, “What about her?”

“I heard she was caught beneath the bleachers with two of the wrestlers, but not just any wrestlers.” He leaned towards her, pretending to drop his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Twin Pimple-Faces.”

Kayla chuckled, and there were a few other students who'd heard and were already whispering. Everyone had given the two fattest, ugliest guys on the wrestling team the nickname of Pimple Face, since both of them were covered in large, nasty pimples, but the real kicker that made everyone avoid the pair was the fact that they rarely seemed to bathe and tended to walk around with food stains covering their clothes. Owen heard a sharp intake of breath and turned, spotting Lauren's red, splotchy face twisted into a grimace.

As she pushed through the crowd, the heels of her shoes clicking harshly against the floor, Owen wondered if he'd gone too far. Students were parting, forming a circle around them as Lauren stopped in front of him. Her head tilted imperiously as she looked him over like a dead bug on her plate.

“What did you say, you little faggot?”

Owen could see her fingers flexing, the long nails looking sharp as they moved through the air. “What are you talking about?” He decided feigning innocence was his best course of action. He could feel Kayla's hand wrapping into the back of his shirt, as if she could somehow pull him away from the confrontation.

He knew he was going to be slapped, and that those nails would hurt, but part of him whispered to stand still and accept it. After all, he really wasn't the kind of person who would spread such vicious rumors, even if the look in Lauren's eyes said they might be true. Just as he was tensing, a large hand

gripped Lauren's wrist in a bruising grip, causing a gasp to escape between her lips. She jerked, turning to see who would dare stop her. Owen felt his eyes widen as he saw Kurt standing there, a scowl darkening his face as he stared at the two of them.

"And what do you think you're doing?" Kurt's voice was low, sending a fine tremor along Owen's spine.

Lauren tried to wrench her wrist away, but Kurt only tightened his grip. "I was going to slap the fairy for insulting me," Lauren shouted, and Owen thought he heard teachers trying to get through the crowd. Kayla's hand tugging at the back of his shirt was a second indicator that they should leave.

"Don't call him that," Kurt said, using his grip on Lauren's hand to shove her away, causing her to stumble into the girls she'd been talking with earlier. He turned to Owen then, grasping the back of his neck before leading him through the crowd, snarling at Kayla when she tried to follow.

Owen nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Lauren shriek, "What are you? His fag buddy?" Owen trembled, wincing at the tightening grip pushing harshly into sensitive skin. He didn't think his mother would approve if he came home with bruises on his throat. Kurt didn't seem to hear her, or, more likely, ignored her.

No one else called after them or followed them, and Owen quickly found himself shoved into an unused room with Kurt looming over him. There was a sense of *déjà vu*. Then the memory of the day after Owen had discovered Kurt's secret flashed across his mind. He vaguely wondered if this was how Kurt dealt with everyone who upset him, because Kurt was clearly upset. Though angry might have been a better word as he grabbed Owen's shoulders and slammed him into the wall.

"What the fuck were you doing?"

Owen winced as spittle hit his face, but he squared his shoulders as he snapped back, "Teaching Lauren that she can't just say things."

"And what business is it of yours?" Kurt snarled, his nose bumping Owen's.

“Well, we’re... not really friends, but at least we’re not strangers, or even mere acquaintances.”

Kurt didn’t say anything, just snarled again as he used his grip on Owen’s shoulders to force him to his knees, his face a breath away from Kurt’s groin.

“Do you want to know what strangers, acquaintances, and fucking friends do to me?” Kurt was panting, his hands trembling where they dug into Owen’s shirt. “They force me to my knees and demand I take them out and suck them until they come. They used to fuck me,” Kurt’s fingers jabbed harshly into the fabric covering his shoulders, and Owen could feel the nails digging into his skin as Kurt flexed his arms, “but I realized that bulking up made them less inclined to try that. Do you want to be on the same level as them?”

Owen gasped as Kurt clenched his fingers hard, dragging Owen’s upper body closer. Owen raised his hands, bracing himself on Kurt’s hips as he stared up at the guy he’d become at least a little comfortable with over the last few weeks. “No,” Owen gasped out, because he didn’t want to take from Kurt, didn’t want to force Kurt to do anything he didn’t want to. He wanted to fill Kurt up, to give him everything he could want, even if he was still too young to really understand what that meant.

“What do you want me to do?” Kurt choked out. For a moment, Owen was confused. Then he saw the fragile spark in Kurt’s eyes, and he unconsciously tugged on Kurt’s hip, dragging the other man down to his level.

When they were both on their knees, Owen wrapped his arms around Kurt, holding him close as Kurt trembled, breaths hitching as he sucked them in. Owen didn’t understand why now, why here, but he continued to hold Kurt, allowing Kurt to hold him like a life raft.

The bell signaling the start to the period rang shrilly through the room, but Owen didn’t heed it. He just hugged Kurt closer when he tried to jerk away. It was odd, and it was strange, but something had broken—and Owen knew it wasn’t just something in Kurt, because Owen had never felt so protective of another person in all his life. Not even Kayla.

Shivering as Kurt heaved lungful of air in and out, dampening Owen’s shirt with the force of them, Owen realized he had no idea of what to do. But,

if for no other reason than he was holding him at the moment, Owen vowed that he'd help Kurt climb from the hellhole life had put him in. Someway, somehow. By the Green Lady, he was so screwed.

THE END

Author Bio

Ann Anderson is an odd little duck who lives in an odd little pond in an odd little place. It's a place filled with words, a pond filled with ideas, and a duck without enough time to listen and write them all down. Ann loves the usual reading and writing, but she also enjoys playing videogames when she can spare the time and isn't working or torturing her cats.

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