

Genie in a Beanie



Indra Vaughn

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

GENIE IN A BEANIE

By Indra Vaughn

Introduction

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

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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Photo Description

A black-haired man with darkly stubbled cheeks is sitting down, holding a baby up to a man standing close and leaning slightly forward. This man is blond and wears a knitted beanie. The baby tugs on the blond man's beard.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The catalyst to bring these two men together is twofold: the baby in the picture and the hat the one man is wearing. The baby isn't either of theirs (but it can be anyone else's you want it to be—no single lovelorn dads please). And one of the men is a knitter who became well known for his blog and designs.

How did they end up starting a campaign to knit for charity? And, show us how they connected along the way.

I say no single lovelorn dads please because I'm tired of overly sweet stories where a gay dad is all alone, caring for a baby and falls in love. But I do like men who are proud knitters. I'd like something different, and that means not overly sweet. A balance between sweet and dirty is fine with me :)

There are no sexual limits or relationship limits on this couple, whatever else you'd like to add, or whatever direction you'd like to take this couple in is fine with me.

Sincerely,

Cole

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: teaching, enemies to lovers, magic users, humorous, knitting

Word count: 16,305

Dedication

A great big thank you to Silly Goose, who as always did a brilliant job wrangling my commas and holding my hand. I literally couldn't wish for a better writing companion.

Big round of applause to the organizers of this event too. I can't even begin to imagine the amount of work that must go into this. Thank you for giving me the chance to take part.

Cole, thank you for the letter. It turned out a little sweeter than I meant it to, but I hope you still enjoy it regardless. And finally, I don't know if I should be proud of or apologize for that title...

GENIE IN A BEANIE

By Indra Vaughn

There wasn't anything particularly extraordinary about Sable. It was a coffee shop like any other, if you didn't count the rows of shelves with secondhand books for sale. The rack on the far wall filled with handmade beanies in every cheerful color imaginable was a bit odd maybe, but it added to the charm of the store. David liked it, anyway.

As always, when he opened his doors first thing in the morning, rain or shine, David swept his gaze over the interior: the comfortably worn-in couches, the clean counter to the left, the coffee machines waiting to start huffing and puffing their brews. And, as always, when he opened his doors first thing in the morning, rain or shine, David heaved a happy sigh. Yanking the hat off his head, leaving his blond hair free to roam in staticky wisps, David stepped into the warmth of his shop. He may not have had much in this world, but he had Sable.

And he had Max. Well, maybe not had in the exact meaning of the word, but David was able to set his watch by Max's arrival, and there was no point in denying, after all this time, that it was the highlight of his day. At one minute to seven the milk jug stood at the ready, waiting to be steamed, and at seven exactly, Max stepped inside. The winter sun was bright out, and he took a moment—giving a welcome opportunity for David to look his fill—to let his eyes adjust to the mellow light inside.

Instead of walking up to the counter straight away, Max hesitated. His dark beard was shaved very close to his skin today, which was a little unusual. When Max overcame whatever made him waver, the thin, dark shadow showed a red flush underneath. Just the cold, David figured.

“Morning David,” Max said. He cleared his throat. “How are you?”

“Good, you?” The familiar trigger of nervous anticipation ran deeper today, and without waiting for an answer, David went on. “Your usual?”

“Uh, sure.” Max glanced toward the wall with the beanies. “You make those yourself, don’t you?”

Didn’t David just. With an added pinch of spice. “Softest beanie you’ll find.” During the entire year Max had been coming into the shop, Max hadn’t mentioned David’s beanies once, but that was still no reason for his stomach to swoop like it anticipated a drop on a roller coaster.

“Right. Well, this might be a bit of an odd request, but—”

David had been reaching for the milk jug and dropped his hands on the counter instead. The flush on Max’s cheeks deepened. God, the guy was so cute it was unreal.

“Go on,” David said, when it didn’t look as if Max would.

“I have this—” With an exasperated noise, Max yanked his messenger bag around, opened the flap, and pulled out a ball of yarn.

“Oh my God,” David said, automatically reaching out. Max dropped the yarn in his hands and it felt exactly as soft as it looked. The blue was vibrant and dark, with little flecks of lighter shading speckled through, like moonlight reflecting off a dark, deep ocean. “This is beautiful.”

“Yes, I thought so.” Max looked away again.

“Where did you get it? I’d love to find some more of this kind of yarn.” David let a loose thread slip through his fingers, and when he looked up, he caught Max staring at his hands.

“Oh. Um, my sister sent it to me. I told her about you. Your shop, I mean. And your beanies. She tried knitting a long time ago and had all this yarn, so she sent me some of it. When I saw this I immediately thought—” Max bit his lip and fell silent.

“You want me to knit you a hat from this?” David asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“Um... Yes. If it’s not too much trouble. And I’ll pay you, of course,” he added in a hurry.

“You’ll do no such thing,” David said. Oh, he’d knit Max a hat all right. “And I’ll make sure you get exactly what you wish for.”

Famous last words.

It wasn’t as if David had thought about the hat he’d made for Max at all, or often, or very often, in the weeks that followed. There might’ve been a strange predatory pride in seeing Max wearing the hat, but David didn’t feel the need to examine that feeling. Very much. It was still a huge shock to the system when a month later, after three days of not seeing him at all, Max walked into Sable with a very small baby in his arms. There was no hesitating on the doorstep this time; with quiet but purposeful strides he crossed the floor and put a fist out clutching a very familiar-looking beanie. David hesitated in his knitting—whenever the shop was empty and he had time, he sat down to work on his hats—and gave Max a confused glance.

“You have some explaining to do,” Max said, when David apparently failed to react the way Max expected. Holding up the hat he hissed, “What kind of magic is this?”

Oh shit.

David’s heart began to thud, slow and almost painful in his chest, and he bit his lip, letting the *rickety-tick-tick* of the knitting needles fill the space.

He had never talked about his... gift to anyone apart from his nana, but she’d had it too so that didn’t count. By the way Max’s dark eyes were blazing, David didn’t think he’d have much choice this time. With an impatient huff, Max carefully sat down on the comfortable couch beside David. This was the closest they’d ever been without a counter between them.

“I wouldn’t call it magic per se,” David began, trying to stall for time.

“Jesus Christ.” Max put an ungentle hand on the half-finished beanie David was working on, which only narrowly escaped losing a row of stitches.

“Hey,” David snapped, a little annoyed. “What—” Whatever else he was going to say died a silent death because Max was right in his space smelling

every bit as good as David always imagined. That was probably a slightly inappropriate line of thought since those beautiful dark eyes were large and... was that anger? Yes, very likely, anger.

“I know there’s something going on because ever since you—” Max gritted his teeth and lowered his voice when the wrapped up blanket-burrito stuffed in the crook of his arm squirmed. “Just explain to me why I suddenly smell of sour milk, dirty diapers, and no sleep.”

Oh, God. The baby was because of the hat? David started to feel a little faint. “Good thing it’s Christmas break then, I’m guessing?” David tried weakly.

Max did not look amused. “Tell me what’s going on.”

One last try. “Well you see, Max, when a man and a woman love each other very mmm—” Even one-handed, Max was pretty strong and agile. Not even bumping the baby, he hauled David in by the neck of his shirt.

“I’m gay,” Max hissed, making David’s heart leap. Part of David’s silent suffering had stemmed from his suspicions that Max wasn’t. “I’ve never in the entirety of my existence been near a vagina, so don’t even imply—”

“Technically when you were born—”

“Shut. Up.” That was one step too far by the look of things. The anger faded from Max’s face and suddenly he looked nothing but bone-weary. “I don’t have time for you to be an asshole. Does this have anything to do with you?”

David’s insides squeezed into a nauseating knot of tension. “Ah. Uh... Yeah, probably.”

“Explain. Succinctly,” Max hastened to add when David opened his mouth. “I have exactly half an hour before she wakes up and needs a bottle.”

“Okay. God, just don’t punch me. I have very delicate features.” For a split second Max tilted his head to the side as if he might agree and David ruthlessly squashed the solitary butterfly attempting to burst to life in his stomach. “I need you to suspend all disbelief for a sec—minute.”

“All right, disbelief suspended.” The baby squirmed a little and Max shifted her into a more comfortable position in his arms without taking his eyes off David. Damn it, that should not make the guy look more attractive.

The ocean-blue beanie hung limply over Max’s knee and David should really... yeah. He reached out and snatched the beanie away before Max could do so much as blink.

“Wh—”

“I can grant wishes,” David blurted out. Max’s mouth closed, opened, closed again. David considered what he could add to that to make it sound less genie-in-a-bottle.

“I beg your pardon?” Max said quietly, and oh hello, there was that faint British lilt showing its rare cadence.

David sighed. There was no easy way of doing this. Either he was going to get punched in the face, or Max was going to think he was a lunatic, leave here, and never come back. Or both, and in that case David would just take the punch, thank you. Months upon months of unrequited lust would do that to a person. He looked down at the small baby’s rosy cheeks. She couldn’t be more than a week old, maybe two. What a mess. David owed Max the truth, and then it would be his to do with as he pleased. It had been Max’s wish, after all.

David took a deep breath and looked down at the beanie in his hands. His fists were clenched around the fabric and he forced himself to let go. “It’s something that runs in my family. Or ran, since I’m the last of the Cheverons. It’s been petering out anyway. Nana was a lot more talented than me. My moth—” Max looked impatient again, so David figured this wasn’t the time for family history. “Anyway. While knitting these beanies, I add a little bit of... power I guess, for lack of a better word, to the yarn. It’s nothing life-changing.” One of Max’s eyebrows rose pointedly and David looked down at the baby. “Or... Uh. It shouldn’t be, anyway. It’s not like suddenly someone can become President just because they want to while they’re wearing the hat. But, you know, a bit of luck here and there. Ten dollars in your wallet when you most need it, or a bus right on time to get to a job interview. That sort of

thing. It only works once, and I have no control over why or where.” Ever since Nana died, he could see glimpses of those wishes, no more than a second or two, but he’d never had the chance to tell her about that. She’d died five years ago, when he was barely twenty. He’d been on his own since then.

Risking a careful glance at Max’s face, David saw him run his hand over his eyes and up through his black hair so it stuck up in little spikes. He looked like he dearly needed a good night’s sleep.

“Okay,” Max said wearily. “Not that this doesn’t sound all kinds of crazy, but I’ll go with it. If it’s supposed to be nothing life-changing, then how do you explain—” He looked down at the little baby girl but the “this” didn’t come. Instead, he said, “You wouldn’t believe the things that have happened to me over the last month. I’ve won the lottery.”

“What?” David squeaked, and Max sent him a murderous look when the baby whined. A look that said you wake her, you take her. David kept very still.

“Not millions, mind. Twenty grand, which is about nineteen thousand, nine hundred and ninety-five dollars more than I’d ever won before. Especially since this time I hadn’t bought a lottery ticket.” Max closed his eyes and swayed a bit in his seat. It looked like he was about to topple over any minute. David thought about offering him coffee, but Max was already talking again. “That was the first one. I was at the checkout in the grocery store thinking, God I could do with a bit more cash this month. That’s when I pulled out this lottery ticket instead of my wallet. So what the hell, right? I cashed it in. Twenty thousand dollars, David. I tried to make them take it back but they wouldn’t.”

“That... shouldn’t have happened. I mean, it’s never happened like that before.” Not that David knew of anyway, and he guessed if people started winning the lottery after they’d been to his shop, sooner or later it would’ve reached his ears. Next to him the baby startled a little but Max bounced her lightly and she went back to sleep.

“Believe it or not, that was just the beginning. Three days later I had to get up really early for work, it’s ridiculously cold out, and I was vaguely wishing for spring—”

“Oh God,” David groaned, hiding his face in his hands.

“And when I come home there are tulips in front of my house. Tulips, Dave. In November.”

Dave. A shiver inappropriately ran down David’s back. “I’m, uh, sorry. About all of it.”

“Oh no, there’s more.” Max scrubbed a hand over the dark hair on his cheek. “Two weeks in, I slip down the steps at the university and my ankle hurts so badly I’m ffff—” Max glanced down at the baby, who was starting to stir. “Near tears. I limp to the nurse’s office to see if I need to go to a doctor. I’m in so much pain I can barely breathe. I take off my shoes, and it’s already swelling and turning purple. I’m convinced something’s broken and I’m swearing because I have a 5K race I’m supposed to be running the next day. The thought has barely entered my brain when the swelling starts to shrink. I kid you not, it starts to disappear before my very eyes. I thought I was going insane, and of course by the time the nurse gets there the injury is completely gone. She didn’t say anything, but I could see she was thinking I was just trying to get out of work or something.”

As Max was talking, David’s breathing became more and more labored. None of those things should’ve been possible. Even his grandmother had never been able—nor would she have ever wanted—to do something on that kind of scale.

“And that’s just the big stuff.” Max was becoming angry again. “At first I didn’t notice, but I found myself saying, every single day over the space of a month, well wasn’t that lucky. After the ankle thing, I began to wonder, when did this start? And you know what? It all leads back to the day I started wearing your hat.”

“Look, I kn—” David began, holding out a hand palm up, but Max wasn’t even looking at it. He was staring at the wall, his anger twisting into something

darker, less pure, something mean that probably sprouted from the embarrassment over the tears that gathered in the rims of his eyelids.

“And then I woke up three days ago to this.” Max held up the baby, and on cue she woke. The wail was harsh and loud—Jesus, who knew they could be so loud—and David flinched. Max rose to his feet, lifting her to his shoulder and bouncing her gently like he’d been doing it for months instead of days.

“I’m so sorry,” David whispered. His heart hurt. He’d never meant for this to happen, but that was a meaningless sentiment and growing old fast. “It wasn’t supposed to go like that. I... I admit I worked with a bit more purpose on your hat since you asked for it, and—” Hadn’t he just. “I guess something made it more powerful. Maybe—”

“I don’t care,” Max yelled over the crying and the baby cried louder. Max’s face flushed red. He leaned over David, consequently stopping him from getting up. “I don’t care how sorry you are, how well you meant. I think you’re a creep for meddling with people’s lives like that. It’s unwanted and it’s... it’s disgusting, is what it is.” Max snatched his beanie back from David’s hand and held it up. “I want you to undo this.”

“Undo,” David repeated. He was reeling from Max’s words, their hooks jabbing sharply into his lungs. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Max said. “What if this is someone’s baby, David? What if this is someone’s baby and she’s now with me. What if her mom and dad are out there and they’re—” Max couldn’t even finish the sentence, he seemed to choke on air, and buried his face in the little bundle of blankets.

Fuck. David rose to his feet, eased past him. “It won’t be like that.” He couldn’t be sure though, could he? Not one hundred percent. But still, there was no way... “It doesn’t work like that. The—the power doesn’t take from someone else, it just... offers what’s due. But I don’t understand.” David hesitated. The baby’s cries had subsided into a miserable whine and Max was already easing toward the door. “You must’ve wanted... You must’ve wished for her.”

“I had a vague thought right before I went to sleep that I wished my sister could finally get pregnant and stop with those IVF treatments. That’s all. A baby for my sister, who lives six thousand miles away.”

David felt awful and lightheaded as he clung to the back of one of the threadbare sofas. We offer free shipping probably wouldn’t go down well and was most likely impending hysteria talking. “Burn the hat,” he said. “But think carefully before you do, because it will undo everything.”

Max was standing by the door, his face split between the dimmed glow inside the coffee shop and the bright winter sunlight outside. “I never wished for this,” Max said, his bottom lip wobbling. “I never wanted anything like this.” And with that he was gone, the silence ringing sharply as the door closed behind him. It was a shame knitting a hat for himself never worked, since David felt worse than he ever had in his entire life.

The lunchtime crowd wouldn’t allow him to wallow. Endless cold weather brought with it the need for comfort drinks, and David spent a good two hours pumping out everything from mint chocolate mochas to orange and ginger tea. A stream of people came and went, occupying his comfortable slouchy couches, and David felt a sick sort of relief that no one went near his display of beanies by the far wall.

Odd, how that worked. It must’ve been some vibe he was sending out because usually he sold one or two of them during lunch.

At last, the shop emptied enough for David to pick up the knitting he’d stuffed behind the counter after Max left. The half-finished beanie felt limp and brittle under his fingers, like he’d been clutching it for hours with sweaty palms. No good would come from this yarn now; it was ruined. With a sigh, he pulled the knitting needles free and dumped the yarn in the trash. A real pity, for the green color was dark and lush, and it would’ve made a lovely, warm hat. Before the yarn left his fingers, a scene flashed before his eyes like a daydream: an old lady calling for her cat to come inside. David blinked it away. He didn’t want to know.

David's hands shook when he stuffed the needles in his knitting basket. What if Max's hat wasn't a one-off? What if it had happened before? Instead of helping people, what if he'd been ruining lives? He couldn't ask Nana, and his parents had died when he was five and were no more than an abstract memory. David was on his own in this as well as everything else.

In absentminded habit, David went about his afternoon routine of clearing tables, washing out the coffee machines, and moving secondhand books to their rightful places. He refused to believe he'd been doing something bad all along. If things had gone terribly wrong, he would've heard about it before. There was nothing like that in the family lore, either. Nana had always told him their gift was a harmless one, but that didn't matter: people would prosecute regardless. The memory of his six-year-old self on her lap came to mind, his chunky little hands warm under her dry ones as she guided his knitting needles. That's why you can never tell anyone, my dear, unless it's someone you love very much. Because, and she'd winked here. Because love is the most powerful magic of all. David had suspected for most of his life that she was a bit of a closet romantic

His fingers went lax and he dropped a mug into the sink. It bounced but didn't break. It hadn't even crossed his mind not to tell Max about his gift, but what was more, the reason Max's hat acted so oddly must be because of David's long, inextinguishable crush.

David groaned and buried his face in his hands. Max had been coming into Sable before going to teach at the university for a whole year now, and David had lusted after him from day one. Every morning he showed up at seven apart from Fridays, when he'd come in for the afternoon to grade his papers. By the second week, David had memorized the lines of Max's back, the sweeping curve of his shoulder blades through his shirts, the way the sun would bring out a faint sheen of ginger in his otherwise dark hair. By the second month, he was hopelessly, terribly, lost. Quietly pining became his default setting as he made cappuccinos, sold threadbare Agatha Christies—or bought them back, often the same copies—and knitted beanies in his downtime.

Well, he made more than just beanies. David had a successful knitting blog on the side, after all, and without sounding bigheaded, some of his patterns were the most sought after online. But it was the beanies that held the power. David had tried with scarves and mittens but that never worked. Nana could pour her well-wishes into anything, but not so David. He figured since his gift was less than hers, it had something to do with the hat being closer to the brain where the wishes came from.

In the afternoon lull David opened his laptop and clicked on New Post. There was no sense in picking up his needles when he felt like this. With the way his luck was going, he'd probably send someone off with a hat that made a war break out, family lore or no. But even the words for a new blog post wouldn't come. David couldn't stop thinking about Max. Was he was burning the hat? And what would happen to the baby if he did? It made him feel like crying, so he couldn't imagine what it must be like for Max.

It wasn't as if he ended up waiting long to find out. Max stepped into Sable the next morning, looking so much worse than he did the day before that it took David a full ten seconds to work out he was on crutches. Max's hair stuck limply to his skull, his face awfully drawn. Those usually striking dark irises looked watery in their red confines, and a stab of heartrending concern made David move from behind the counter.

"My God," he said, crossing the shop in three strides. "Come sit down. What do you need? A doctor, a—" That was when he noticed the large cast extending from Max's foot to just below his knee. "Wh—"

"I did it," Max whispered, voice so faint David had to lean in to hear him as he sank down into the nearest chair, wobbling precariously on the two crutches before his ass landed in the seat. "I burned it."

"Oh, honey." The endearment was out before he could stop it, and while David wanted to put a hand over Max's shoulders really badly, he feared those crutches. "I can't—I can't tell you how sorry I am." There was no one else in the shop; the morning rush over and the lunchtime crowd hadn't arrived yet, so David sat down kitty-corner from Max. "I wish I could do something to help you."

“I don’t need more of your kind of help, do I?” Max grimaced when David sucked in a sharp breath and leaned away from him. Sighing deeply, Max rested his forehead in his hand. “Actually, I came here to apologize. I said some terrible things to you yesterday. It just all became too much, and then what you were saying sounded so crazy but there was no other explanation and—”

David heard him swallow and, screw the crutches, he deserved a good kick in the balls if he’d made Max look like that. While Max’s anger and his terrible words had hurt David yesterday, it was infinitely more painful to see him so defeated. David reached out and squeezed Max’s free hand that lay limply on the table. For a second Max froze and then he yanked his hand away. David tried not to feel the sting.

“So you burned the hat,” David coaxed. “Then what?”

“I... I did it late yesterday evening and then I... I held her really tight. All night, I held her tight, and when I woke up she was... she was—”

“Gone.”

Max nodded. “It’s for the best, obviously. I can’t care for a baby, and she was never mine to begin with, but that doesn’t mean—”

“That it doesn’t hurt.” Max nodded again.

“I woke up with my left foot in this damned cast. A dozen other things too, all stuff I hadn’t even realized. Blocked shower drain, dead car battery, and an empty bank account, obviously. Times have been a bit rough, and—” Max let out a shuddering breath and hid his face behind his hands. “Apparently my roommate didn’t go on a long family visit. He moved out a month ago. I found two late payment notices on my kitchen table and a note to vacate the apartment by the end of the month if I can’t pay immediately.”

“Oh shit, Max, I’m—”

“Don’t say you’re sorry again. Just, don’t. I’m doing my best not to think this is your fault, but I’m not being very successful. If you hadn’t given me that hat, all of this would’ve happened anyway. But I would’ve been able to

deal with it one thing at a time and now it all just—” Max heaved another great sigh, the way someone might do after a good cry, and reached for his crutches. “I don’t know why I’m even telling you all this. I’m still so furious with you.”

“Where are you going?” David demanded, rising to his feet as Max struggled to his. David’s fingers itched to reach out and help him, but he didn’t.

“Why do you care?” Max closed his eyes and visibly reined himself in. “To the bank. I’m going to ask them for a loan so I can pay my medical bills and extend my lease until—”

“Is it a nice place?” David interrupted. “The one you live in now, I mean.”

Max laughed, the sound a little harsh. “It’s a shithole. It’s one of the reasons why I couldn’t care for—” Max looked away again. The baby was going to be a sore spot for a while yet.

“Then give it up and come stay with me.”

Max whipped his head up and teetered on his crutches before he found his balance again. “What?”

“I—” Okay, maybe he hadn’t thought that through. “Well, it sort of makes sense? I mean, I have a house that’s way too big for just me. It’s been in my family for a long time and now I’m the only one living there. So, you could basically live there too without ever bumping into me.” Max wasn’t smiling but his scowl seemed marginally less intense. The dark scruff on his face was thicker than David had ever seen it and, God, he should not be thinking about that right now. “What I mean to say is, I feel responsible, and I want to help. Even if it’s just until you’re back on your feet.” Max and David simultaneously looked down at the cast. “Literally.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know you teach,” David said softly. “I know you like your coffee sweet and milky apart from Fridays when you have to stay awake to slog your way through those essays or whatever the hell it is you’re always grading. I know

you laugh at some of the things your students write. I know—” David stopped himself. It was likely Max already thought David was weird, no need to add fuel to the lunatic fire by showing his crush. “Here.” David moved to the counter and scribbled his address on the back of a business card. “Come by tonight and have a look. If you don’t like it, or if you take offense to bodies in the attic, you can always say no.”

Max didn’t say anything, but he accepted the card with a slight smile, and David watched him hobble off.

Max didn’t show up that night. Or the next one. In fact, he didn’t come into the coffee shop for the rest of the holiday break, and it wasn’t until David got all his regulars’ orders wrong that he knew he had to do something.

The office in the back held all his sales records for the store. There was a separate file for the knitted stuff. It didn’t take long at all to track down Max’s paperwork, and his last name.

David closed the shop after the lunch crowd left, got in his car, and drove to the university. Would they just tell him where Max was? Or was it confidential? But Max was a TA; it wasn’t like it could be a secret he worked there. Parking in the visitor’s parking lot, David left behind his tricolored hat, scarf, and gloves, zipped up his coat to hide the hoodie underneath, and quickly ran his fingers through his perpetually wispy pale hair. He checked the side mirror. It would have to do.

A quick search online had told him Max was into art history and archeology, so that was the building he approached. “Could you point me in the direction of Mr. Cotton’s office please?” he asked a student thundering down the stairs. David attempted to project I totally have a right to be here. The girl frowned at him, but it was more a confused sort of frown so David stood his ground.

“Mr. Cotton?” she began and then her face cleared. “Oh, Max. I don’t know if he’s in. I haven’t seen him today, but I could check his office if you like.”

“No, that’s all right,” David quickly said. “It’s sort of an informal visit.” The girl’s eyes began to twinkle and David found himself blushing.

“Of course,” she said. “Up the stairs to the right, the office at the end of the corridor.”

“Thanks.” David tried to walk quickly rather than escape like the devil was on his heels.

The first knock had no effect and David felt his heart sink. If he wasn’t here, David could always come back some other time, but where was the line between concerned citizen and creepy stalker? It was entirely possible Max was absolutely fine and had decided to start drinking coffee elsewhere. It wasn’t like David could blame him if he had. As he turned away, David’s feet felt heavy with disappointment. This would be it. The end of something before it ever began, something he would never quite get over. One last try, he thought, and knocked again.

This time there was a scramble behind the door, a soft “fuck”, and a crash. David remembered Max’s crutches and all sorts of terrible scenarios filled his mind. Without thinking, he pushed open the door, ready to call an ambulance if he needed to, only to be faced with Max trying to rise to his feet from a clearly slept-on couch.

“Oh fuck, it’s you,” Max said, sinking back and covering his face. “You scared the life out of me.”

“Have you been... sleeping here?” David demanded. Max made a sharp cutting move with his hand, and David quickly shut the door behind him.

“What are you doing here, David?” Max asked. He sounded even more exhausted than he looked. There was a badly hidden suitcase under an old mahogany desk. The couch was one of those typical old leather things you saw in gentlemen’s libraries, with a stiff straight back and golden buttons. Most likely even more uncomfortable than it looked.

“I just... I was worried. I guess I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

Max laughed and spread his hands, indicating the old office, the books and papers, the boxes David hadn't noticed before. "I am the king of my castle."

"Were you evicted?" David asked gently and Max's face twisted. "Then why didn't you—"

"Come and live with you? Because that wouldn't be weird at all. How did you find me?"

"Google. And Maxwell Cotton? Really? Could your name be more British? Never mind. Look, you can't stay here. If you won't take me up on the offer to stay with me, at least tell me how else I can h—"

"Don't even say it," Max yelled, slapping his hand on the desk, sending a stack of papers flying. "You've fucking done enough!"

"All right," David said, suddenly tired of the hostility. "Your life sucks, you're going through a hard time, I made it worse. I get it, okay? I'm trying to help now, that's all. So here it is again: you have my address if you need a place to stay, but if you want to lose your job as well as everything else, by all means, sleep in your office." David turned on his heel and left, not even managing to feel a little satisfied by the look of shock on Max's face.

Living with Max turned out to be surprisingly easy. There was the odd occasion when David was so deliriously tired in the mornings that he forgot he no longer lived alone in the old Victorian, and Max found him wearing nothing but a pair of ratty boxers while staring at a dismally empty fridge. Apart from that, they rarely ran into each other, and when they did, it was friendly if a bit restrained. David was going to have to do something about that. After caffeine.

"You really can't survive on cereal alone, you know." David jumped and turned—wearing pajama bottoms for once, thank goodness—as Max stepped into the kitchen, hands full of plastic bags. The cast on his foot had been replaced by one he could walk on, so he hobbled around without crutches these days.

Six a.m. on a weekday and the guy had gone grocery shopping. “Muh,” David said.

“The rent you’re charging me is ridiculously low,” Max replied as if a valid point had been made. He looked a little sheepish, which was strange. “I mean it barely covers electric and water use for a place like this I’m sure, so I thought this was the least I could do. And I know I’ve been an asshole to you in the last week.” He hadn’t been, really. David just hadn’t seen much of him, but maybe that avoidance had been deliberate on Max’s side.

Becoming more and more awake with every item Max unpacked, David gaped as the counter filled with eggs, bacon, milk, tomatoes, bread, and a bunch of fruit. “You really don’t have to,” he began even though his mouth watered and Max grinned like he recognized it for the blatant lie it was. This was such a turnabout from the slightly mean Max that David had been confronted with in the coffee shop and at the university that he felt completely and unfairly blindsided by the little dimple that appeared in Max’s right cheek. The urge to press his tongue into it couldn’t be normal. Who on earth wanted to lick someone’s face? But there it was, a deep pucker just above the scruff of Max’s beard, just begging for some attention.

“Well?” Max stared at him as if waiting for an answer. He rolled his eyes when David just blinked at him, and smiled. “I asked you how you like your eggs.” Jesus, that smile.

“Lovely. I mean, uh, sunny-side up. There’s really no need—”

“I know,” Max said, ducking away to grab a frying pan. “I want to, though.”

“Okay.” A little bewildered, David sat down on one of the barstools at the island and settled in to watch Max cook in his kitchen. It wouldn’t hurt to open the shop an hour late just this once.

Once two overly-full plates were put down on the island, Max sat down too. “So tell me more about these magic beanies of yours.”

David nearly choked on his fried tomato. “There’s not that much to tell, really,” he said when he recovered. “My family descends from a long line of

Cheveron witches. There's even a record of one being burned at the stake in Belgium centuries ago. I think that's why they moved over here. The talent watered down over time until this convoluted way of fulfilling small wishes was all that was left. Nana was good at it. My mom, I have no idea. Mom and Dad both died in a car crash when I was five. And I was an only child, so I guess the magic dies with me."

"Oh my God." Max leaned over and put his hand over David's just like David had done in the coffee shop. "I'm so sorry."

"It's, uh, okay. It was a long time ago and I loved living here with Nana." David stared at their hands. Max's was a point of dry warmth that centered all David's attention. What on earth was going on? "What about you?"

"Nothing magical about me," Max said. He was smiling again when David looked up, the little dimple just wanting to be kissed. I wouldn't be so sure about that, David thought as he felt the warmth from that smile wash over him.

"I meant," David said, cheeks flushing, "what about your parents? They still around?"

"Yes, both of them and my sister still live in England. I moved here to go to college and never went back, really."

"Why's that?"

Max looked away as he pulled his hand off David's. "I lived with someone for a long time. Through college and then after. By the time we broke up I had a house and the TA position. I'm still working on my PhD and... Well, I decided to stay. Before you came along I had started to doubt the wisdom of that decision, though."

David blinked at him, because what the hell. "So, you had a house together?"

Max shrugged. "The mortgage was in my name but until we broke up, we shared the cost. That's why I pretty much lost everything when he moved out. I had to sell in a hurry and ended up trying to cover costs for a house that wasn't mine anymore while paying rent for a shithole."

“Well, that’s all behind you now. You can stay here for as long as you like, I mean it. It’s just me here anyway.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. I know I was horrible to you after the whole hat thing. I don’t even know why you’re being so nice.”

“You weren’t horrible for the entire year you’ve been coming into the shop.”

“So it’s my patronage that impresses you.”

“Well that too, I guess.” Damn it, when had David reverted to his sixteen-year-old self with all this blushing? “Anyway I can forgive any horribleness after that with the things you’ve been through. It was mostly my fault anyway.”

“No, it wasn’t. And don’t think I haven’t noticed you stopped knitting beanies. You should start again. You were doing a good thing.”

An unexpected thickness blocked David’s throat. He had stopped, and it was hurting him inside, but he felt he couldn’t risk knitting more wishing hats until he knew for certain what had gone wrong. He’d cast on stitches for a pretty pink hat a few days ago, but put it aside. Knitting beanies for himself never affected anything, but even the maroon brim he’d started for himself last night had freaked him out and he’d tucked it away half finished. “You think so?”

“I know so. In fact, I’m sure there’s a better way to get your beanies to the right people than selling them from your coffee shop.”

“There is?” David looked at Max with surprise. He hadn’t wanted to sell them online before because he liked knowing who they went to.

“Hmm,” Max said, eyes narrow as he stared at David. “Yes. Give me some time and I’ll think of something. Are you working late tonight?”

“No, I close up at seven on Mondays. Why?”

“Maybe we could watch a movie together.” There was an odd look on Max’s face as he added, “I’d like to get to know you better.”

David knew he was gaping wide-eyed at Max but he couldn't help it. "Yeah," he said. "Sure. We could. Do that." He slid off his barstool. "I hate to dine and dash but I've got to go open the shop."

"That's fine, I'm not due at work until ten today. I'll see you tonight, though." Max grabbed their plates and stacked them on top of each other, gently touching David's back as he squeezed past on his way to the dishwasher.

"Yeah," David said, turning toward the stairs to go grab his shower, the touch zinging up his spine like an electric current. "Until tonight."

The entire day, David felt the ghost of that touch. Hours upon hours he spent going over their morning in his mind. It even came as a complete surprise to find himself sitting in a comfy chair knitting away at the salmon pink beanie he'd put aside, during the afternoon lull.

Blinking like he'd woken up from a nap, he stared at the wool in his hands. The soft yarn in a simple knit stitch would make someone a lovely hat. Maybe he'd even put a pompom on top. Would he sell it, though? Look what happened last time he let his mind wander over Max while he knitted. He closed his eyes and fingered the yarn. A good quality Merino wool. A young woman finding her keys, a rush of relief, her being on time for... David blinked his eyes open and smiled. He kept on knitting. The hat would be safe with her.

There wasn't time to finish the beanie, since David had to prepare for the monthly knitting club meeting that he was hosting in Sable the next evening, so he took the half-finished hat home with him.

Home, where Max was waiting in the living room, two candles burning on the coffee table. He sat cross-legged on the couch facing the television and patted the seat beside him.

"Have a good day?" he asked.

"Sure." David eyed the space beside Max. "I'm just gonna wash off the coffee smell. I'll be right back."

“I like the coffee smell,” Max said, “but okay.”

The shower felt good but still left David unsettled. If he didn't know any better, he'd think Max was trying to seduce him, and God, that thought turned his insides into something hot and liquid. It was unlikely though. Over the span of one year Max had never shown any interest. Maybe Max was just trying to make up for how angry he'd been when he'd found out about the wishing hats.

And yet. Max kept passing him food until David thought he'd explode if he ate any more. His glass never went empty, and there was far more accidental touching going on than strictly necessary. About halfway through the movie, Max didn't even bother removing his thigh from where it pressed against David's.

It was almost a relief when the credits began to roll. David felt so strung out he feared he'd jump off the couch if their fingers accidentally brushed in the popcorn bowl one more time. Turning to say good night and thanks for the movie, he found himself nearly nose to nose with Max.

“You have really pretty eyes, you know that?” Max gazed at him.

“What?” David croaked, leaning back as far as the couch allowed him.

“Hmm, very pale blue. Very rare. I guess it's that light hair of yours. Look, I meant to ask you—” When Max reached out a hand, David squeaked and sprang to his feet. The back of his leg hit something and David turned around. It was his work bag, the salmon pink beanie's yarn spilling out.

The breakfast that morning, the unexpected friendliness, the small seemingly meaningless touches... oh God. Oh no. David turned away from Max and covered his face with his hands. “Fuck,” he said very quietly, and then once more, with feeling, “Fuck.” He didn't even have to be knitting specifically for Max anymore to affect him.

“Hey.” David could hear Max rise to his feet. “What's wrong?” A soft hand landed on his shoulder and David startled, arranging his face in something neutral before turning. Max was standing very close.

“My contact lens got stuck,” David lied. “It’s fine now. What were you gonna ask?”

“I was just wondering if you’d let me take you to dinner tomorrow n—”

“I, uh, can’t.” David edged around the coffee table toward the kitchen. “I have the knitting meeting at the shop tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Max stared at David, his dark eyes unreadable. “Yeah, no problem. Some other time then.”

David tried not to see the disappointment on Max’s face as he turned and escaped up to his bedroom.

The next morning, David crept silently down the stairs thinking he’d skip the kitchen entirely, just collect his bag from the living room and go to the coffee shop. Half expecting Max to be waiting for him, David tiptoed into the living room. It was empty, all the remnants of their movie night tidied up. Part of him felt bad for sticking Max with the cleanup again, but he couldn’t deal with thinking about any of that right then. It wasn’t until he was pulling up the security gate in front of Sable that he recognized the niggling feeling in his gut as disappointment. As disconcerting as it was, the way Max had suddenly been acting toward him was... pretty amazing.

Luckily, the morning rush was so busy it blended neatly into the lunchtime crowd, and David didn’t have a chance to worry about anything but ringing up books and making coffee until the afternoon. The pink beanie still sat in his bag, and, after he made sure he was all by himself, David pulled it out. Closing his eyes, he took a careful breath and waited.

The girl, her keys, her rush to an appointment. David couldn’t see what it was for, and after that the girl faded away. He blinked, closed his eyes, tried again. The same thing happened. Sighing, he stuffed the half-knitted hat away and moved to the wall that held all the other ones. Every single one held nothing but a mundane wish, and only the one. Relieved, he reached to hang the last one back on the rack.

“What are you doing?”

David startled and dropped the hat. “Jesus,” he breathed, seeing it was Max. He picked the beanie back up and hung it away. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“You’re the one sniffing knitted goods, not me,” Max said, but his eyes were smiling. “Listen, I wanted to clear up what happened last night. I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable, I just...” With a puff of breath, Max ran out of steam. Like a deflating balloon, David saw the confidence rush out of him and he had to stop himself from putting an arm around Max.

“It’s, uh, okay,” David said awkwardly. “I had a good time. You want some coffee?”

“Yeah, to go though. I can’t stay long. I have a class in forty-five minutes. I just wanted to make sure we’re okay.”

“We’re okay,” David said. He hoped it was true.

“Good. Great.” Max didn’t look like he thought it was all that great but he took the coffee anyway.

“It’s on the house,” David said when Max reached for his wallet. Max laughed, but it sounded terribly sad.

“Yeah, no, I don’t think so. You’ve done enough for me already, just take the money.” Definitely not okay, then. Without another word, David accepted the cash and watched Max walk toward the door. As he turned on the step, half-in, half-out of shadow, David was reminded of Max standing there the last time with a baby on his arm. What had happened to that child? Was it like she had never been born to begin with?

“If you’re not too tired after your meeting tonight,” Max said, eyes fixed somewhere over David’s right shoulder. “I have an idea for your magic beanies.”

“Okay,” David croaked. “I’ll see you then.”

Max smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "That hat," he said so softly David had trouble making out the words. "It really did take all my wishes away when I burned it, didn't it?"

Without waiting for an answer, Max turned and left, leaving the door to fall gently into its lock.

David's entire body ached with tiredness after the knitting club, so he wasn't entirely disappointed to find the living room and kitchen lights off when he arrived home. During the meeting, he'd cautiously finished his maroon beanie, clutching it every five minutes to check, but no wishes had filled his mind. It had seemed safe enough. Technically he should eat something; his stomach had passed complaining loudly and moved onto vague nausea hours before, but he couldn't dredge up the energy to make and consume food. Instead, he dragged himself up the stairs toward his bedroom.

When Max moved in, David had given him the choice of any of the four remaining bedrooms in the house, and Max had chosen the one closest to the stairs. It wasn't the biggest, but it did have its own bathroom and a cozy alcove with a padded bench that looked over the street from its bay windows.

Out of habit, David glanced inside and saw that was where Max currently sat, surrounded by books, laptop perched on his thighs. Their eyes caught as Max lifted his head, noticing the movement or maybe feeling David's stare.

"Uh, hi." David faltered in his steps, but went to move on. Part of him wanted to talk to Max. He knew they had to get past this awkwardness before it became a chasm they couldn't bridge, but the bigger part of him was a jumbled mess of confusion. Of embarrassment and attraction and hopeless, terrible guilt.

"David, wait." Out of the corner of his eye, David saw Max scramble to his feet ungracefully because of the walking cast. The laptop precariously teetered over his legs before he caught it and set it on the floor. One of the books tumbled down anyway, spewing papers everywhere, but Max paid it no heed.

“I was—” He stopped in the doorway, opening it further and lifting his eyes to rest on David’s face.

They were such pretty eyes. Lashes lush and long, the bottom ones such that they curled against the fragile skin underneath. They were almost enough to make David forget about that strong nose and that handsome, enticing scruff on his cheeks. You really couldn’t go wrong looking at Max’s face.

“I’m sorry,” Max said. “Are you terribly tired? We don’t have to talk now, if you don’t mind.”

I don’t mind, David thought, but what he said was, “What did you want to talk about?” Max took his lip between his teeth, released it, and leaned against the doorframe.

“The idea I had. For your beanies. But another time is fine.” He started to turn away, hand already on the doorknob. “Good n—”

“No, it’s okay. You’re right, I’m exhausted but talking to you would...” David swallowed and looked down when Max’s eyes found his again. “I think it would be nice.”

There was a slight pause, one with meaning even if David couldn’t discern it. “All right.” Max stepped aside, holding the door wider. “Come in.”

That wasn’t what David expected. He’d thought they’d go down to the kitchen maybe, where Max would keep his hands busy by making food. He always seemed to know when David hadn’t eaten. Instead, the bedroom door closed behind him, wrapping the both of them in an atmosphere of companionable harmony. A soft, orange light, from a lamp that hadn’t been there before, filled the room, and only then did David hear the gentle music coming from the laptop: mellow jazz tones that seemed to relax the tension in his head and neck.

“I have a spare sound system,” David said. “If you want to hook up your laptop to that, you can. It’ll do the music justice.”

Max was leaning against the wall by the door, arms crossed. He shrugged one shoulder. “I never play it loudly. It’s mostly to drown out other distracting noises while I’m working on my dissertation.”

David glanced down. A bunch of complicated looking titles adorned the books spread all over, words like *Elite Mastaba* and *Dendrochronology* jumping out and meaning absolutely nothing to him. David blanched a little, wondering how he could’ve imagined being anywhere near this guy’s league. “You’re busy,” he began, but Max shook his head.

“Have a seat. I can do with a break.”

David wondered where to sit. The alcove was covered with papers and books, as was the desk chair, which only left the bed. It felt awkward but David decided to pretend it wasn’t and perched down on the edge of the mattress.

“One of my professors is very involved in charity,” Max began. “She said something the other day that got me thinking. Have you ever tried selling your beanies on a bigger scale?”

“No, never. I like to see people come in and buy them. I have a website with other knitted goods. It does pretty well, but it’s mostly the patterns I design that sell on it. It’s not to make money, it’s just something I love doing.”

“Yes.” Max pushed away from the wall and strode over to the alcove, shifting stuff around until he could sit again. “I can see that. And it’s just the hats that carry your, uh, gift?”

“Yes. I can’t attach it to anything else.” David had an idea what was coming, and he felt the last of his energy drain out of him. “Look,” he said, but Max didn’t. He was tapping away at his laptop. Before David could say anything else, he rose to his feet with it, limped over, and sat down beside David on the bed.

“This is what my professor was talking about.”

On the screen a page opened, a big header on top with a whole row of charities underneath, but the biggest space was taken up by the words Knit-A-Wish. David's eyes opened wide. He was suddenly painfully awake.

“Did you tell her about my beanies?”

“No, of course not,” Max snapped. He sighed and checked his temper. David wondered about that, about why Max was obviously trying to do something for him while the tension between them felt so sharp. It wasn't thick like it could be cut by a knife so much that it teetered on the edge of it, and at any moment it could either tip into irreversible hostility, casting them back into the waters of strangers, or it could turn into something else entirely, something just as dangerous but infinitely more exciting.

“Okay,” David lowered his voice, aiming for soothing rather than antagonizing, willing to straddle the balance a while longer. “Then what is this?”

“Every winter hundreds of kids go cold because they don't have scarves or hats or sweaters to keep them warm. My professor is looking for volunteers to donate handmade knitted goods, anything at all but of good quality, and then she will be distributing them to the children most in need. Wouldn't that be perfect? Imagine the difference one small wish could make to these kids.”

The idea warmed David from the inside out, but... “I don't know,” he softly said.

“You're worried about the effect.” Max sighed and closed the laptop, setting it on the carpet by his feet. He turned to David. “What happened to me was a fluke. You can't give up your gift because of that. It wasn't your fault, and if anything, a child's wish is going to be much more innocent than a grown-up's, I should think.”

“I don't know about that,” David said dubiously, and to his surprise Max laughed. A deep throaty sound like he was beyond tired, too.

“What's the worst that could happen? They'll suddenly find a pair of tickets to Disneyland in their lunchbox?” Max waited to go on for so long that

David looked up. His eyes were soft and seemed to linger on David's mouth. "Or maybe they'll find an actual lunch in their lunchbox."

"Okay," David breathed, feeling something give way inside him. "I'll think about it. I'll definitely donate scarves and mittens and anything else you think would be good, but I'll have to think about the beanies."

"That's all I ask." When David stood to leave, Max followed. "David?"

"Yes?" He hesitated with one hand on the doorknob, startling a little to find Max standing very close behind him. Max's hand came to rest on his shoulder, breath tantalizingly hot against David's neck before he turned him around.

"I just... I really want to kiss you. Do you mind?" Max stepped into his space, and before David could do anything, Max threaded his fingers through David's hair, fingertips meeting at the back of his skull.

The kiss was hard, but gentled immediately when David didn't pull away. Impossible warmth pooled in his belly, an irresistible urge to wrap his arms around Max making him do just that. It felt so good he began to tremble, a fine tremor that shook his hands and Max's shirt clenched in them.

"Shh," Max breathed sweetly against his lips. "Please don't be upset. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—" He closed his eyes and sighed, a watery smile curling the edges of his mouth. "Please don't punch me. I have very delicate features." Max looked terribly sad despite the smile when he moved away, but David yanked him back and held him tight.

"It's not you," David said, eyes prickling dangerously, because fuck, this was exactly what he feared all along. One minute, he begged silently. Just hold it together one minute and then you can go fall apart in your own room. "It's not your fault. It's not you. I'm doing this. I want you so badly—I've been wishing for you so badly—that I'm doing this to you."

"What?" Max gently untangled from David's grip but held him at arm's length, hands wrapped tightly around David's biceps. His voice was tight, like he was trying to keep his frustration at bay. "What are you talking about? If you want this so badly, then why do you keep pushing me away?"

David's lips still tingled from their kiss. He pressed his fingertips to his mouth and closed his eyes. This was going to hurt. "Because I don't know how far this—this power reaches, all right? I just don't know anymore." Everything was out of whack. Did it now affect Max just from being near David? His gift had never been particularly strong, but that didn't mean it couldn't change. With age for instance, or with... attraction. Love, a small voice whispered, but he blocked it out. He couldn't think of this as love, because surely to lose a love before you had the chance to truly find it was the cruelest thing of all. "It's not supposed to work on myself, but I made a hat for me tonight and it—" He broke off, unable to finish the thought, a deep, nauseating sense of shame churning in his empty stomach.

The hats had never worked for David before, but maybe he had just never wanted anything badly enough until now. "I don't know how much of this is you, or how much of this is me pouring something more than just a little wishful thinking into a ball of yarn. There's no way to know for sure that you aren't feeling like this because I want you to."

"Oh." David opened his eyes in time to witness the moment of comprehension as his words sank in. Max's eyes blinked away and a second later his hands fell off David's arms.

"Yeah. Oh." It was hard to swallow and David's chest burned as he took a step away. One more step out of this room, five steps to his own bedroom. Just hold on. "So now you know why."

"I'm s—" Max began but he still wasn't looking at David. There was an awful noise, something between a choked cry and a sob, and David realized it came out of his own mouth.

"Don't you dare." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Don't you dare apologize to me. This is all my doing, it's not on you."

"You don't know that. You can't know that." When David opened his eyes it was to Max staring at him with an oddly intense look. David wanted so badly to reach for him, to rub the palm of his hand against the grain of that lovely dark scruff. In his mind, he'd traced the lines of Max's face so often

that it felt like his fingers already knew the pattern of his cheekbones, his jaw, his mouth. A phantom touch.

The sigh that escaped him shuddered with regret. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? I can’t know that it’s not, either.”

Life settled a little, after that. David destroyed the maroon hat in the backyard on the day Max was out to have his cast removed, but he didn’t feel any relief. It took David a week to stop avoiding Max in the kitchen in the mornings, and while Max appeared guarded sometimes, it seemed to be because of lingering embarrassment rather than fear that David might turn him into a toad or something. They still didn’t fit back into their former pattern, nervous energy grating like a wrongly placed needle on a record, and David lacked the courage to right it.

In the end, Max—waiting in the kitchen one morning when he should’ve left for work already, damn it—cornered David by the coffee machine. He hijacked David’s mug and made him sit on a barstool by the island, taking a seat beside him.

“We’re going to talk about this,” he said, sliding the coffee out of reach when David grabbed for it. “Tell me the real reason behind your fears.” This was it. Nowhere to go from here.

“Talk?” David laughed hollowly. Never mind talk, he hadn’t allowed himself to think about this in over four years. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Try,” Max said, voice low. He reached for David’s hand on the counter but stopped short by two inches. “Please, I think I need you to try.”

David believed him. Max had the right to understand, to come to terms with what had happened. David owed him more than once over, since he’d still stayed after... everything.

“Okay.” David scrubbed his palms over his face and then dropped them back on the counter. Keeping his eyes cast down he began to talk. “Five years ago I dated a guy, Joey. He was very much in the closet and—” David

swallowed, closing his eyes. God, this hurt. “It wasn’t... I wasn’t in love with him, but I did like him a lot. I never told him about the beanies, but—Joey struggled. With who he was. It made him nasty at times and it all came to a head one day. He told me, he told me—oh God.”

David’s hands shook and Max did cover them then. Like he knew what was coming, he squeezed David’s fingers and said, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s what I thought at the time, but now I’m not so sure. I mean, I wasn’t in love with him, I know that, but what if—” David took a deep breath. “He said it was me. He said I made him want... unnatural things. That he didn’t want to do those things with anyone else. That it was me. He said other terrible things too. He—” Of its own accord, David’s hand lifted to his cheek where a dark bruise had once sat for nearly two weeks. He aborted the move but—judging by the way Max’s eyes darkened—not in time to hide the implication. “We broke up after that, obviously. Right after Nana died, too. That’s when I opened Sable and... stopped dating.”

“Oh, Dave.” Max sighed, and then, “What does it mean? Why did you call it Sable?”

“Stash Acquired Beyond Life Expectancy. It’s a knitting thing.”

“That’s... rather heartbreaking, actually.”

David laughed softly. “You haven’t seen my yarn stash.” He sobered up, his stomach aching. It had been years, but David knew, even then, the idea had taken root, like a poisonous vine, shutting him off from anyone who showed the least bit of interest in him. It was why he never approached Max, never bothered to find out if he was gay or not, in the entire year he’d been coming into the coffee shop. “I was so mad at Joey at the time, but what if he was right?” The air in David’s lungs seemed to thin and he gasped. “Oh, my God. Max. What if... what if it was me. What if I’m a—”

“You’re not,” Max said fiercely, squeezing David’s hand so hard it ached. He didn’t care, it was something he could blame the tears on. “You’re not a monster. This guy was deeply troubled, and no matter how bad he felt about

himself, he had no right to take it out on you like that. You didn't do anything to him, Dave. Just like you didn't do anything to me."

"We still don't know that."

"I do." Max gave David's hands a rough shake to make him look up. "I do," he said, quiet and sincere, like he really believed it. "You didn't do anything to me." The corner of his mouth quirked and that little dimple made an appearance. "In fact, I'd argue you didn't do nearly enough to me, but I really have to go to work now. Just, promise me you'll think about it. Think about all the—" Here Max blushed furiously, an entrancing sight David hadn't witnessed before. "All the crushes you've ever had, and if any of your beanies ever affected those. And if they haven't, think about what the difference was between the ones you made for those people, and the one... the one you made for me."

Love, David thought and he blinked in surprise. He opened his mouth, but Max was already on his feet, grabbing his bag, and muttering about how late he was. They stared at each other awkwardly for a second, and then Max was gone.

The monthly Tuesday knitting club meeting went well. David managed to get everyone out of Sable before eleven and had a list of names in his back pocket of those who'd donate knitted goods to Knit-A-Wish. Even though he was hungry, David was more than a little tired so he made his way straight home.

The light was still on in the kitchen, and that's where David went. On the island lay an open box with an untouched cold and congealed pizza, and Max was sitting behind it on a barstool, staring at his hands.

"What's the matter?" David asked, dropping his bag and walking around the island separating them. "Did something happen? Are you okay?"

Max lifted his head and blinked, looking a little dazed but not upset, and David relaxed. He was about to take a step back, but Max reached out and grabbed his hand before he could make it very far.

“I’m fine,” Max said, smiling. “My sister called. She’s pregnant.” He rubbed his thumb over the palm of David’s hand, then let it go.

“Okay,” David said slowly, flexing his fingers by his side. “That’s great but—” He glanced at the forgotten pizza. “Why are you sitting here half in shock like it’s your—” And then it dawned on him. “You think it’s her.”

The smile on Max’s face became beatific. “Yes,” he whispered. “I think I got a little future glimpse of my niece. A fluke, thanks to your hat.”

“I don’t know if that has anything to do with it, Max,” David said gently. He knew how much the disappearance of that baby had weighed on Max, but it wouldn’t be right to let him think this way. If it turned out to be a boy, he’d be devastated. “I mean, when you burned it, all the wishes were undone.”

“No, I think you’re wrong. Burning the hat set everything to rights. It undid all the wishes I shouldn’t have had in the first place and it straightened out the faulty baby wish. I know my sister’s pregnancy isn’t due to your gift, I’m not saying that, but I do think it will be the same girl. It makes sense since I was thinking of my sister and the baby girl somehow ended up with me.” Max smiled up at David. “You’ll see. It will be her. And you know what else? Burning the hat may have undone the extra stuff, but it never undid my original wish.”

“Which was what?” David asked. He could see the logic of it, sort of. Or maybe that was just—hah—wishful thinking.

“When I stepped out of Sable and put that beanie on my head for the first time, I thought, I wish I could get to know him better. You, I mean. And I did, didn’t I? Just in a bit of a roundabout way. There’s no magical hold over either of us, Dave. I liked you before you gave me the beanie, and I think—” Max swallowed and looked away, his gaze falling on the pizza. “Oh. I completely forgot about that. I ordered you a pizza because I figured you’d be hungry and I forgot to close the lid when Lizzie called. I’m sorry, it’s all ruined now.”

“Who cares about the pizza,” David bit out, frustrated, because he’d really liked the direction Max’s thought process had been taking. “You were saying that you liked me before the beanie.”

A mischievous glint appeared in Max's eyes. "Did I say that? Gosh, I can't remember."

"You asshole," David breathed, but it came out on a huffed laugh. Dizzy relief made his entire body heat up. "I've liked you for a whole fucking year, did you know that? For an entire year I pined after you."

"And in that year you never once knitted a beanie for yourself?" Max was looking at him shrewdly.

"Well of course I did, but—"

"And not once did I suddenly fall at your feet under some kind of spell, did I?"

"Uh, no. Obviously not."

"Even though you liked me so very much." Max's eyes twinkled, the infuriating dimple just asking for a kiss, and David suspected he was going red to the roots of his hair. Damned complexion.

"Clearly my mistake in judgment, because did I mention you're an asshole?" God, who was he kidding. David had never been this in love with anyone in his life and he doubted very much that he ever would be again, gift or no gift.

"I don't think you mean that." Max rose to his feet and stepped into David's space, backing him into the counter without touching him. "I think your judgment is rather good." He tilted his head to the side, narrowing his eyes as he considered David. "A bit paranoid maybe, at times. And an awful cook. Have I mentioned that? It's a good thing you make a mean coffee because—"

"Oh my God," David said, trying to push past Max. "I'm going to bed." He didn't mean it, he felt giddy with where this was going, but at the same time something had to give. Either he was going to leave now and jerk off until his palms grew blisters or—

"Mm." Max stepped in front of David again and put both his hands on the kitchen cabinets behind him, boxing David in. "That's a good idea. I'm right

behind you, but first—” The kiss wasn’t unexpected, but it still came as a surprise. Max’s lips were a soft contrast to the bristle on his cheeks, his tongue a wet heat that entered David’s mouth and shot straight toward his gut. It was an instantly deep kiss, no exploring necessary, and when Max put his hands on David’s thighs, he aided the lift onto the counter with a little hop.

“Jesus Christ,” he moaned when they broke for air. David had his legs wrapped right around Max, and he could feel how hard they both were through their jeans.

“Too fast?” Max asked, his dark eyes huge and dilated.

“Mm-mm.” David shook his head and rubbed his hands over Max’s biceps. Something occurred to David then. “I can see them, you know. The wishes, I mean. Flashes and images, very briefly. With the one I made for you I couldn’t see a damn thing. I figured it was because you gave me the yarn, but that wasn’t it, of course.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No.” Warmth flooded his cheeks and David looked down to where Max’s hands still rested on his thighs. Loose, now, relaxed, no longer gripping. And nice hands they were: blunt fingernails, lovely, long fingers, and broad strong palms. “It was because your wish involved me.”

“Is that so,” Max’s voice lowered, a seductive prowl from his mouth to David’s ear. “I can think of a wish or two right now.”

“Oh, God, me too,” David said hoarsely, flushing red for a whole other reason.

“Bedroom, then?” Max asked softly.

“Fuck yes.” David hopped back off the counter, because, while mmm-hot, right now he wanted to be on a soft surface and as prone as possible. “But shower first.”

“Okay,” Max said and David didn’t imagine the pout, did he?

“Join me?” he asked and Max began to grin.

David felt more aroused than he'd ever thought possible. The strain in his groin was almost painful. With a fleeting thought, he hoped his sheets were able to stand up to the assault of his fists clutching and tearing at them. Screw his powers, if there was anything gifted in this room it was Max's mouth. Unaware—or more likely rudely uncaring—of the delicious agony he was putting David through, Max dragged his lips over David's nipples.

They'd passed that way ten minutes before already, and David had been quite ready at that point for it to be a good-bye kiss, a so long, on to better pastures. Excruciatingly slowly, Max's mouth had mapped all of him, from his nipples to his hips, to his knees to his toes, until David's skin felt stretched taut, until he felt so hot he felt fevered. And when finally, finally, the tip of Max's tongue had dipped into the slit of his precome-leaking cock, David had sobbed with relief. Embarrassing as the sound had been, he'd not been able to help it. Apparently Max was into torture rather than deliverance of pleasure, because that one excruciating touch of tongue was all David had been given.

Unhurried, Max had begun his upward trail, tonguing the skin around David's belly button, kissing the rise and fall of his rib cage. With no concern for David's raggedly uneven breathing, he'd leisurely kissed his way back up, sucking hello again to the tight nubs on David's damp chest.

David strained against Max's mouth, words piling up but dissolving in the heat there before he made them clear. A good thing surely, since David vaguely suspected they'd be no more than pathetic pleas.

It wasn't as if anything was stopping him from guiding Max where he wanted him. His hands were unbound, his arms were free, and yet he writhed against the bed like he'd been chained there. It made no difference. When Max lifted his head and those dark eyes fell on David, the hurricane hunger in them pinning him down, he may as well have been. He wouldn't make Max do anything he didn't want. He wouldn't rush him, he would never. He'd take what was offered, and he'd be painfully, pathetically grateful for it.

“Are you okay?” Max asked, and it took a moment for the question to realign into something that made sense. David’s brain was sluggish with lust.

“No,” he said. “Yes. I don’t know.”

Max’s dark eyes softened and he reached to stroke the hair from David’s forehead. It was sticking against his skin, and God, how long had they been doing this? “I’ll make it okay,” Max whispered. A promise. “I’ll make it good.”

“I know you will, I know. Max.” Suddenly the words wouldn’t be held back anymore; they burst from David’s mouth, his back arching off the bed, his hands coming up to frame Max’s face. “Please.” He wanted to feel Max against him, the weight of him, the reassurance that he was really there. “Please.”

“I’m here,” Max said, lowering himself down, skin to slick skin, hot breaths mingling as his mouth closed in on David’s. They kissed, open-mouthed and famished for it, until Max wrenched away, gasping. Just like that the weight of him was gone again, and David’s eyes flew open because he couldn’t stand it. Not teasing again. He needed. He needed more.

Max was braced over David on his hands and knees. He looked down between them, their stiff cocks touching politely like two foils before a fencing match. “No need to warn me,” Max said, and David blinked at him, stupid with desire. Before he could ask, Max clarified, “Just come in my mouth.” David groaned, head falling back limply into the lush pillow beneath his head. There was no teasing now, no more roads being kissed into his skin. Max’s mouth closed on David’s cock like an overheated, wet fist, only better, infinitely, excruciatingly better. David shouted out at the sudden assault of feeling after being deprived for so long. His thighs trembled against Max’s shoulders until he gave up the fight against gravity and let them fall open.

It didn’t take long at all after that, since Max’s nose buried itself in the light curls hugging the root of David’s cock on the second pass down as if he was already familiar with the length and thickness of it. The buildup started in David’s toes—or not started, since it felt like something had been building for

weeks now—and they curled like his feet were being tickled. Then his knees locked up so his legs stretched out, the quads on his thighs bunching thickly.

Max must've felt it was coming because he wrapped a fist around the base of David's cock and started to jack him off wetly, sucking hard on just the tip. The sensation doubled, tripled, and overloaded. The muscles of David's ass clenched, and, warning needed or not, David couldn't have stopped the, "Now, now, oh God, Max, now," that ripped from his mouth. He lurched upright and held onto Max's head, not to force him deeper or away, but just because he needed to hold on to something before he flopped back onto the bed. Max sucked him through it, not stopping until David's right leg spasmed. Pressing his forehead against David's thigh, Max caught his breath for a second and then kissed his way up again. Oral fixation, David dimly thought, but that was all his brain was capable of.

"It was a tough decision," Max murmured, his wet mouth dragging over David's exposed throat. David accommodated limply, spent, rolling his head to the side so Max could work his way up all the way to David's ear. With a breath that shuddered just a little too much to be completely controlled, Max settled over David's outstretched body, his hard cock sliding nicely into the groove of David's hip.

"What was?" David finally managed, and Max's chuckle was a husky vibration around his earlobe.

"Whether I wanted to suck you off or have you fuck me." Max laughed gently when David groaned at the thought, his flushed but wrung-out cock twitching feebly against his thigh. It was mostly the unexpectedness of it, since David hadn't thought Max would want it that way. Not that he would've objected one bit, but this... To have Max spread out beneath him, opening up and taking him in, just like his mouth had done, but tighter, hotter, sweeter...

The thought sent a frisson of excitement through David's entire body, stomach curling again with want. He thought of the slow, almost unendurable detour Max had taken to get him off.

Pulling himself free from the soporific post-orgasm clutches, David pushed at Max's shoulders, who rolled over willingly. "In how much of a hurry are you?" he asked.

Max's mouth tasted of David's come, tongue still slick with it, and David had just about forgotten what his question had been when Max said, "Sometime tonight, that's all I'm asking."

"Hm." David sat up, straddling Max's hips, and smiled. It had the desired effect because Max's pupils dilated, his hands clutched David's hips, and his breathing became shallow and fast. "Roll over."

Max's eyebrow showed the unspoken already? but he obeyed without a word. The nape of Max's neck was still wet from the shower, releasing the sharp mint tang of the by-now-familiar shampoo. Once Max was lying on his front, David took a seat on the back of his thighs. Bracing one hand on the mattress, he lifted his cock—not hard yet, but already showing signs of renewed interest—and nestled it between the globes of Max's ass cheeks before leaning forward and kissing the back of Max's neck.

"I'm going to kiss you all the way down," David said in Max's ear. "I'm going to work some of that tension out of your shoulders, and then, if you've no objections, I'm going to rim you." Max turned his face into the pillow and made a noise that didn't sound much like objection. "That'll have me hard in no time, and then I'll fuck you any way you like."

"My God, love. I didn't peg you for a dirty talker."

David blinked. "I wasn't," he said, a bit astonished. "I was just telling you what I was thinking."

"You have no idea, do you? What you do to me." Max stuffed his arms under the pillow and hugged it to his face. His voice came muffled, but amused, when he said, "Go on then. What are you waiting for, a permission slip?"

"Do I need one?" David straightened, caressing Max's shoulders, feeling out the muscles and where they were the tightest.

“No,” Max said, and it came out with a shudder that David could feel in his fingertips. “You have carte blanche.”

And wasn't that something? To have come so far, from barely acquaintances to almost enemies to friends to this. With all the issues in between, they'd arrived at implicit trust. David had to press his open mouth against Max's shoulder blade and breathe through an admission that was not only too soon but too serious to spill on a hormonal high. Since his mouth was tasting impossibly smooth skin, David figured he may as well keep going. He traced the jut of the blade with his tongue, he kissed every protruding vertebrae lightly, he tongued the slight sheen of sweat out of the dip of Max's lower back.

There was a very quiet but elongated moan that spilled from Max when David put his hands on Max's ass and spread it. The muscles clenched tightly beneath his fingers. With both hands, David levered Max up until he was on his knees, face still pressed into his precious pillow—although now he was gripping it in a stranglehold rather than hugging it close—and then David sat back to admire the view.

“Dave,” Max pleaded, his voice high, and while he'd rather have looked a little longer, David leaned in and pressed his tongue to the very end of Max's tailbone. The breath shuddered out of both of them, David the first to recover. He put one arm over Max's back to steady him, and used his free hand to spread him wide. Without wasting any more time, David licked him—slowly, because David hadn't forgotten his teasing just yet—from his balls all the way to the top of his tailbone.

When he passed over Max's entrance, the shout was abrupt and strangled, like it had startled Max, and David pressed a grin into the swell of Max's ass cheek.

“Don't laugh at me,” Max growled, although it sounded more breathless than angry.

“I'm not laughing, honey. I wouldn't do that. I'm just thinking how good this is gonna be.”

“You know you don’t have to, right?” Max looked over his shoulder. His cheekbones were bright red, and already his forehead shimmered with sweat. “It’s only our first time together, you know.”

“Oh, I know. And I’ll stop if you tell me to, but trust me,” David rubbed his palm over Max’s ass, the globe hard under his hand, “this isn’t a hardship for me.”

Max turned away again. “Okay.”

David waited but Max said nothing else. “You want me to stop?” Max shook his head into the pillow. “Say it.”

“Put your mouth on me,” Max ordered hoarsely, and David did as he was told.

For the first thirty seconds David took it easy, giving Max as well as himself a chance to adjust to this peculiar intimacy. When Max began to rock gently back and forth, seeking friction on his cock that just wasn’t there, David hooked his thumb into Max’s hole and licked around it. Gently twisting, he worked the muscle, and small, gasping noises began spilling from Max’s throat. These little involuntary sounds were what made the blood rush painfully fast to David’s groin, and he cursed himself for not thinking ahead.

“I’ll be right back,” he murmured, the breath of sound tickling Max’s ass, causing Max to shiver, full-bodied and convulsively.

The lube was in the bedside table, but David kept his condoms in the bathroom. Catching sight of himself in the mirror above the sink, he almost laughed. Wrecked he looked, with his hair a mess, his mouth red and spit-wet, and his eyes sparkling like blazing sunlight on a lake. It wasn’t a bad look.

The image of his own flushed face fled his mind when he stepped back into the bedroom. Max had shifted onto his back and was lazily fisting his own cock. “Anyway I liked, isn’t that what you said?”

David nodded, couldn’t do more than that, transfixed with the beautiful and obscene sight of Max’s cock appearing and disappearing between his own

fingers, and Max grinned like he knew it. “Well then, come over here,” he said and lifted his knees to his chest.

David knee-walked onto the mattress, throwing all inhibition to the wind. Max had nice calves, thin at the ankles but quickly widening with the thick bulge of muscle. It’s where he put his hands to push Max’s legs up further, and spread them wider so he could kneel in between, the inside of his thighs pressed to the outside of Max’s hips.

“It’s been a while since I’ve done this, so you’ll have to tell me how I’m doing.” David leaned forward and kissed his way up Max’s chest, their cocks brushing.

“I’m sure you’ll be great,” Max said and David grinned at how breathless he sounded, how affected.

“At least I’ve come already,” he murmured, mouthing along the scruff on Max’s jaw. He lifted his head and stared into Max’s eyes. From this close, he could see specks of green and turquoise in those black irises. “So I can make it last as long as you need me to.”

“Jesus Christ.” Max surged up and gripped the back of David’s skull, kissing him fiercely. “Stop talking and start doing.”

“As you wish,” David whispered, and sat back. Making quick work of the condom and lube, David pushed his forefinger into Max’s ass without warning. Max threw his head back and moaned, the long line of his throat a beautiful extension from this angle, an arrow pointing upward between the two dark circles of his nipples. David rubbed a hand over Max’s belly, the coarse hairs below his navel tickling his palm. “You ready, honey? Or do you need more?”

“I’m ready,” Max said, reaching between his knees and pulling David forward so he could hook his legs over David’s shoulders. David lined up, held his breath, eased against the resistance until it gave, and let the breath out as the swollen crown of his cock breached Max’s body.

“Oh love, that’s good.” Max clutched at David’s shoulders. “Oh, more, come on.” David wouldn’t be rushed; there would, after all, only be one first

time. The hand bearing his weight into the mattress shook, but the one holding his cock as he eased into Max was steady.

David took in Max's face, his slightly parted mouth, his flickering eyelids—like he wanted to keep them open but they wouldn't cooperate—the way he clung to David like he was a lifeline. It made him feel momentarily overwhelmed, like it was all too much in one go, like Max had been right and they should've stuck to hand jobs for their first time in bed together rather than plunge into this abyss of contrasting feelings. Hot flesh and cold sweat, sweet breaths and salty lips, hard muscle under velvet skin.

Only then, David sank in all the way and everything aligned. David's balls rested satisfyingly against Max's backside, his shoulders fit neatly in the crook of Max's knees, his cock throbbed as deep as it would go inside the tight confines of Max's body. Max's eyes flew open like he felt it too, like he'd given up on his final struggles as well. Impossibly, David sank deeper. Max reached up for him and David maneuvered Max's thighs around his waist so he could be held close.

Max clutched at the back of David's head and pressed their stubbled cheeks together so they rasped. "This is so much," Max whispered as his thighs tightened around David's waist. "There is so much I want to say to you."

"I know," David said, his heart beating adrenaline around his body so he felt high. "I know, honey."

"I can't stop thinking about you. When I dream about you it's the best, and when I have nightmares about you they are the worst... But this isn't the time." Max yanked at David's hair, forcing him up far enough so he could kiss him. Just as abruptly he broke away. "So fuck me, Dave. Fuck me like you promised."

David did, slow and languid, hard and fast, but for a long, long time, because promises were things that should be kept.

THE END

Author Bio

In 2008 Indra Vaughn packed up everything but the kitchen sink... no, that's a lie. She left everything behind apart from her books and moved from Belgium to Michigan.

She now lives in the suburbs of Detroit with her dog who thinks he's a toddler. Indra's professional background is in Nursing and Chinese Medicine, but she prefers to spend time making up stories about mysterious men and their unrequited love.

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